‘TERRORISM’ AS A METHOD OF TERRORISM

1. DEFINING “TERRORISM”

Since the onset of the “war on terrorism”, increased attention has been given to the very concept of terrorism, to what it means to wage war on terrorism, and to whether “war” is the appropriate response to terrorist violence. Virtually all discussions of these matters take for granted that terrorist violence is a problem, and that if things were going as they should be then such violence would not exist. The debates concern how to best resolve this problem.

We cannot make much headway on the latter question – the ethical question – without delineating our subject matter. And here we find that there is considerable disagreement on the meaning of ‘terrorism’. Often an explicit definition is not even attempted, and when the matter is broached, it is freely admitted that there is no single universally accepted definition of the term – even the various agencies of the U.S. Government are not united. For example, the U.S. State Department takes its definition from Title 22 of the United States Code, Section 2656f(d):

“The term “terrorism” means premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by sub-national groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.” (The term “noncombatant” is interpreted to include, in addition to civilians, military personnel who at the time of the incident are unarmed or not on duty.) [Patterns of Global Terrorism at www.state.gov]

The FBI endorses a definition found in the U.S. Code of Federal Regulations:

“Terrorism is the unlawful use of force and violence against person or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in further of political or social objectives.” [www.fbi.gov/publish/terror/terrusa.html]

And the U.S. Defense Department says something similar:

“Terrorism is the unlawful use of threatened use of force or violence against individuals or property to coerce or intimidate governments or societies, often to achieve political, religious, or ideological objectives.” [www.periscope.usni.com/demo/termst0000282.html]
These latter two definitions automatically make terrorism unlawful, viz., contrary to the laws of whatever country in which the act is committed, though they leave open whether terrorism can ever be morally justified.

Lack of unanimity on definitional matters need not be a problem for rhetorical purposes, but policy-making and scholarship require some sort of definition in order to identify the phenomenon and to justify ascriptions. Otherwise, how can we determine which actions and agents are “terrorist” and which are not? How else can we fashion policies and institute legislation to deal with what some regard as a fundamental challenge to world peace?

To a certain extent, it is arbitrary how one defines any word, including “terrorism”. If we view each of the foregoing definitions as a stipulation about how the word “terrorism” is to be used in a certain discourse by persons in a certain group or agency, then there is no need to quarrel. Such definitions might prove useful insofar as they isolate a concept that has actual instances. But to make points about more widespread rhetorical uses of the term, and the effects of this usage, it is important to discern a meaning of the term “terrorism” that helps us to understand contemporary discourse on the topic. As I argue below, the cited definitions from the U.S. agencies are too idiosyncratic for this purpose, and the following is a better attempt at a reportive definition of the term as actually used.

Terrorism is deliberately subjecting civilians to violence, or to the threat of violence, in order to achieve political objectives.1 Let me refer to this as the “standard definition” of ‘terrorism’. Four things should be noted about it.

First, the occurrence of ‘deliberate’ suggests that the perpetrator is intentionally using or threatening violence to achieve political objectives and are identifying the targets as civilians. Some would insist that the targets are also to be described as “innocent”, but it seems wrong to require that the perpetrator also identifies the targets as “innocents” (as Primoratz 1990 does). But given that the intentions and beliefs of the perpetrator are essential in determining whether the action is or is not “terrorist”, then either requirement might rule out a good number of acts from being terrorist. For one thing, those who act from outrage over perceived injustices may view some civilians as “enemies” deserving of their fate, and not as “innocent people”. For another, harm to civilians might be incidental to the main aim, say, to destroy property, to gain attention, to create an atmosphere of fear, or to provoke a military response, in which case a requirement of “targeting” rules out even the attacks on the World Trade Center towers from being “terrorist” – if we can believe those who say that the strikes were directed at these symbols of American dominance.

Second, it is unclear that this definition implies that terrorism is never justifiable. It might seem to have that implication given the use of ‘civilians’, but I think a separate argument is needed to establish that a given act of violence directed upon such targets is unjustifiable. Definitions that explicitly make terrorism illegitimate by describing it as ‘unlawful’ or ‘illegitimate’ violence make it much more difficult to classify a given action as a “terrorist” act. A definition that avoids this is preferable.
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because a moral assessment can then be defended on an examination of the case rather than being settled by arbitrary stipulation.

Third, the standard definition excludes no kind of person or organization – including a government or state – from being an agent of terrorism. There are serious drawbacks with the U.S. Code’s stipulation that terrorism is “practiced” only by non-state agents or clandestine state agencies, never states. For one thing, it is questionable as a reportive definition since, etymologically, the term’s root “terror” implies nothing about the identity of the agent. For another, historically, the term “terrorism” has been applied to states. Moreover, the restriction to non-state actors is disingenuous. The term “terrorism” has acquired a pejorative connotation, and for better or worse, it has become the term of art in labeling illegitimate methods of political violence. That states can commit criminal acts of warfare has long been recognized, as shown by the emergence of international agreements like the Hague Conventions of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the Geneva Conventions of 1949. Insofar as terrorism is a moral problem of *jus in bello* – and not of *jus ad bellum* – then is a problem that stems from the nature of its victims and the methods, not the identity of its agents.

Fourth, it might be thought that because of its etymological roots terrorism involves the creation of terror, fear, and alarm. While several writers speak of such psychological effects as essential to terrorism, the use of “deliberately” in the definiens of the standard definition once again requires care. Fear and alarm are typically the byproducts of actions that deliberately expose civilians to violence; certainly the paradigm instances of terrorism have had such effects. But if the perpetrator’s aim is simply to cause outrage and to provoke a response in order to achieve political objectives, then fear and alarm may very well be unintended and inessential byproducts of a terrorist action.

Finally, terrorism, so defined, is nothing new; it is probably as old as organized warfare. What is relatively new is the rhetoric of “terror” and the political uses made of it. As I shall now argue, any attempt to craft a proper response to terrorism must first come to terms with the fact that this rhetoric is itself part of the contemporary problem of terrorism.

2. THE CONTEMPORARY USES OF ‘TERRORISM’

While the standard definition is tentatively adopted herein, the proposals offered below are compatible with a variety of definitions, for they are based on two facts about the contemporary uses of the word in mainstream American (and Western) discourse within the statements by government agencies, mainstream media, corporate “think tanks”, and, to an extent, in the educational systems.

The first fact is that the word “terrorist” has acquired an intensely negative connotation in contemporary discourse. Terrorism is perceived as breaking the rules of legitimate political violence, first, by refusing to respect the distinction between belligerents and civilians, and second, by using methods that should not be employed, for example, hijacking commercial airliners or killing hostages. As such, it can be said to violate some of the standard rules of *jus in bello* (rules about the just conduct of warfare), specifically, the principles of discrimination (noncombatants
are immune from attack) and legitimate means (criminal means of warfare are prohibited, e.g., torture, use of POWs as shields, no quarter). Terrorism is viewed as reprehensible because it employs illegitimate means against those who should be immune from political violence.3

The second fact is that viewed from the standpoint of most definitions there is a clear inconsistency in ascriptions of “terrorism”. Just ask yourself; who gets labeled as a “terrorist”? All and only those who commit terrorist actions? Guess again. In fact, the answer depends on where you are and to whom you are listening. If you are tuned into the mainstream U.S. media, or into the various agencies of the U.S. government, it quickly becomes apparent that the term “terrorism” is ascribed selectively. Let’s look at some examples to illustrate this point.

It is generally accepted in the U.S. that those who flew hijacked planes into the World Trade Center towers, or young Palestinians who have turned themselves into suicide bombers amid civilians, were engaged in terrorist activity. But many actions that would qualify as terrorist under most definitions – certainly under the standard definition and under the State Department’s definition – are not typically described as “terrorist”, nor are their perpetrators referred to as “terrorists”. Some of these were committed by sub-national groups, for example,

- the attacks upon civilians in Nicaragua by the U.S. financed “contra” rebels of the 1980s that claimed over 3000 civilian lives;
- the massacre of over 2000 Palestinian civilians by the Israeli-supported members of Lebanese militias in the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps in Beirut in 1982;
- the massacre of civilians by death squads in Guatemala and El Salvador during the 1980s.

If we broaden our scope and examine some of the overt actions committed by states, then there are numerous examples that are not usually labeled as “terrorist” though they qualify as such under those definitions that allow for state terrorism. These include,

- the destruction of Grozny by Russian forces during the Chechnya war in 1999;
- the US invasion of Panama in 1990;
- the US bombing of Tripoli, Libya in April 1986;
- the US naval bombardment of Lebanese villages in the Chouf mountains in October 1983;
- the Israeli aerial and land bombardment of Beirut in the summer of 1982;
- the Syrian army’s attack on the city of Hama in the spring of 1982;
- the Iraqi and Iranian missile attacks on each other cities in the mid 1980s;
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The list goes on and on,⁴ and this is to say nothing about more large-scale campaigns such as,

- the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam and Cambodia during the Vietnam war;
- the Allied bombing of German and Japanese cities near the end of WWII;
- the Soviet purges of the 1930s;
- the Nazi mass murders of civilian populations during WWII;
- the cultural revolution of Mao Zedong in the 1960s.

If we consider the provisions of jus in bello as part of international law, then the U.S. Government has repeatedly used – in the words of the FBI definition – “force or violence” unlawfully “to intimidate or coerce a government, [a] civilian population, or [a] segment thereof”, in order to achieve “political or social objectives”.

State-terrorism can take other forms. For example, there is the institutionalized violence exercised against Palestinian civilians throughout Israel’s 37-year occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The occupation has featured widespread abuses of human rights, including torture, deportation, collective punishment, economic strangulation, destruction of property, confiscation of land, and killing unarmed civilians, actions that are routinely designed to intimidate a civilian population in order to secure political objectives (in this case, control over territory). Yet, this brand of structural violence against civilians is almost never referred to as “terrorism”. The same can be said about the US-led campaign against Iraq throughout the 1990s, including both the bombing of Iraqi technological infrastructure in 1991 and the subsequent policy of sanctions that have led to the deaths of over a million Iraqis.⁵

At the opposite extreme, some actions are routinely labeled “terrorist” that do not qualify as terrorist under the standard definition nor under the definitions championed by U.S. governmental agencies. For example, the U.S. media is replete with references to “terrorist” actions by the Lebanese group, Hezbollah, against the Israeli military in southern Lebanon, or by Palestinians against Israeli soldiers in the occupied territories, targets that hardly qualify as civilians or noncombatants. Apart from the State Department’s unusually strict definition of “noncombatant”, the same can be said for actions directed against the U.S. military, say, the bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen in October 2000, or the bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut in October 1983 (see note 1).⁵

One way to explain, and even justify, the inconsistent ascriptions of terrorism, is to argue that the term “terrorist” has an indexical or egocentric character, essentially dependent upon a speaker’s point of view, much like the word “enemy” or the phrase “the enemy”. No one is an enemy as such, but only an enemy to someone or other, so that when I use “enemy” and “the enemy” I am talking about my enemy or our enemy. Similarly, when we hear people speaking of “terrorism”, in actual practice they are talking about violence directed against “themselves”, or, in first-person terms, against “us”.⁷

Some newspaper editors are up front about this. For example, in an article on the T-word, subtitled “When is it OK to label an event a terrorist act?” (March 21,
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2002), the Public Editor of the Chicago Tribune, Don Wycliff, pointed out that while his paper routinely refers to the attacks of September 11 as acts of terrorism, it withholds that designation from actions in other places where some argue it is warranted. He explained the Tribune’s policy as follows:

“We routinely refer to the attacks of Sept. 11 as acts of terrorism, but withhold that designation from other actions in other places (mainly the Middle East) where some people argue it is warranted. How to justify the difference? Well – and this is just one journalist’s view – the Tribune is an American newspaper written principally for an American audience and owing its existence and independence to the American Constitution. Our perspective is inescapably American (which is not to say it is necessarily the same as that of the U.S. government). Inevitably, as the news of Sept. 11 is reported and interpreted, that perspective is reflected in the product. Indeed, it almost has to be if we are to speak intelligibly on those events to our audience.”

Here we can see, in one article, an explicit admission by an editor of a major American newspaper that the term “terrorism” has both an egocentric character as well as a negative connotation. The best that can be said is that the Tribune, at least, is candid about its selective usage.

Neither the Tribune, the American media in general, nor the U. S. Government, is unique in its speaker-oriented bias; who receives the “terrorist” label depends on where you are and to whom you are listening. The U.S. is not alone in this regard; other countries, including Israel, Great Britain, Russia, India, and Egypt routinely do the same, and so might any state in describing militant insurgents opposed to its policies, for example, the Nazis in describing resistance fighters in the Warsaw ghetto (Herman and O’Sullivan, ibid., p. 261).

Yet, unlike the term “enemy”, it is doubtful that anything in the semantics of “terrorism” warrants the egocentric usage. Even if we do allow it, a problem arises the moment one wishes to ascribe terrorism to certain individuals and groups and, at the same time, make moral claims about terrorism, e.g., that it is an unjust or immoral use of violence. Just as there is no automatic moral taint to being an enemy – many good people have been enemies to someone or other – then if a terrorist act is wrongful, it is not because it is politically motivated violence directed at us. If an action is illegitimate, it is because it possesses some universalizable morally relevant characteristic, e.g., that it violence directed at civilians, or against innocent people, or that it uses improper means, or that it is politically motivated violence, or – from a pacifist perspective – that it is violence. For the purposes of making a moral claim, the egocentric character of the term “terrorism” is irrelevant.

These subtleties of indexical usage and moral relevance are lost upon the general public. As a consequence, the two features of the contemporary rhetoric of “terror”, its pejorative overtones and its egocentric orientation, serve to seriously distort the average person’s conception of who is and who is not carrying out wrongful actions in the world. What’s worse, the distortion is deliberate, not an innocent or accidental byproduct of linguistic usage, as I shall now explain.
3. ‘TERRORISM’ AS A TERRORIST WEAPON

If we are to judge by the actual amount of damage, state terrorism is by far the more prevalent and deadly form of terrorism. The weaponry and organization that modern states have brought to bear in pursuing their ends through violence consistently dwarfs any amount of harm to civilians done by non-state actors engaged in terrorist activity. What is not often understood, is that the rhetoric of “terror” is one of the means whereby states carry out their terrorism.

It is important to understand how this is accomplished. The discriminatory ascriptions of “terrorism” and “terrorist” by the U.S. Government, echoed by the mainstream American media and the corporate “think tanks”, illustrate that there is no real concern with consistency, completeness, and accuracy in their application. Instead these labels are used selectively by governments, their associated media, and their agencies of propaganda, to describe those who forcefully oppose governmental policies. Because of its negative connotation, the “terrorist” label automatically discredits any individuals or groups to which it is affixed, dehumanizes them, places them outside the norms of acceptable social and political behavior, and portrays them as “evil” people that cannot be reasoned with. As a consequence, the rhetoric discredits any individuals or groups that are described as “terrorist”, and thereby,

- erases any incentive an audience might have to understand their point of view so that questions about the nature and origins of their grievances and the possible legitimacy of their demands will not even be raised;
- deflects attention away from one’s own policies that might have contributed to their grievances;
- repudiates any calls to negotiate with them;
- paves the way for the use of force and violence in dealing with them, and in particular, gives a government “freedom of action” by exploiting the fears of its own citizens and stifling any objections to the manner in which it deals with them;
- obliterates the distinction between national liberation movements and fringe fanatics.

The general strategy is nothing new; it is part and parcel of the war of ideas and language that accompanies overt hostilities. The term ‘terrorism’ is simply the current vogue for discrediting one’s opponents, to pave the way for action against them, before the risky business of inquiry into their complaints can even begin. If individuals and groups are portrayed as evil, irrational, barbaric, and beyond the pale of negotiation and compromise, then asking why they resort to terrorism is viewed as pointless, needlessly accommodating, or, at best, mere pathological curiosity.8

Rhetoric of this magnitude is bound to produce results in a context of political turmoil, especially among agitated people looking for solutions. The language of “terror” fosters shortsighted belligerence among those oblivious to its propagandistic employment, while increasing the resentment of those who are so labeled. Far from contributing to a peaceful resolution of conflict, it prepares both types of person for more violence. Moreover, by so effectively erasing any incentive to understand the
motives behind terrorist violence or to critically examine governmental policies, the rhetoric serves to silence meaningful political debate. Those normally inclined to ask “why?” are fearful being labeled “soft” on terrorism, while the more militant use the “terrorist” label to deface the distinction between critical examination and appeasement.

Obviously, to point out the causes and objectives of particular terrorist actions is to imply nothing about their legitimacy – that is an independent matter – nor is it a capitulation to terrorist demands. To ignore these causes and objectives is to seriously undermine attempts to deal intelligently with terrorism, since it leaves untouched the factors motivating recourse to this type of violence. More dramatically, the rhetoric of “terror” actually increases terrorism in four distinct ways. First, it magnifies the effect of terrorist actions by heightening the fear among the target population. If we demonize the terrorists, if we portray them as arbitrary irrational beings devoid of a moral sense and beyond all norms, we are amplifying the fear and alarm among civilians that is generated by terrorist incidents, regardless if this forms part of the political objectives of the perpetrators.

Second, those who succumb to the rhetoric contribute to the cycle of revenge and retaliation by endorsing violent actions of their own government, not only against those who commit terrorist actions, but also against those populations from whose ranks the terrorists emerge, for the simple reason that terrorists are frequently themselves civilians, living amid other civilians not so engaged. The consequence has been an increase in politically motivated violence against civilian targets – “terrorism” under any other name – under the rubric of “retaliation” or “counter-terrorism”.

Third, short of genocide, a violent response is likely to stiffen the resolve of those from whose ranks terrorists have emerged, leading them to regard their foes as people who cannot be reasoned with, as people who, because they avail themselves so readily of the rhetoric of “terror”, know only the language of force. As long as they perceive themselves to be victims of intolerable injustices and view their oppressors as unwilling to arrive at an acceptable compromise, they are likely to answer violence with more violence. The latter would appropriately be labeled “terrorist” if it were directed against civilians for some political objective. But if the perpetrators have given up hope, it would be more appropriately labeled the violence of despair or revenge.

Fourth, and most insidiously, those who employ the rhetoric of “terror” for their own political ends, are encouraging actions that they understand will generate or sustain further violence directed against civilians. Inasmuch as their verbal behavior is intended to secure political objectives through these means, then it is an instance of terrorism just as much as any direct order to carry out a bombing of civilian targets. In both cases, there is purposeful verbal action aimed at bringing about a particular result through violence against civilians. Here, “terrorism” becomes a terrorist weapon and, therefore, part of the problem of terrorism.

In his futuristic novel, 1984, George Orwell described doublethink as “the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one’s mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them”, and he portrayed it as a device for destroying the capacity for independent critical thinking. Something like doublethink is occurring as the result
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of the rhetoric of terror. In condemning terrorism, well-meaning people think of it as something bad and to be eliminated at all costs. But in knowingly sanctioning the use of force against civilian populations in order to achieve this end, they are advocating the very thing they condemn – and this is closer to doublethink that we should ever wish to be.

4. AN EXAMPLE: THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

The paradigm instance of the political use of the term “terrorism” is the manner in which this term has been employed in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Politically motivated violence against civilians has accompanied the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since its inception in the late 19th century. In the first half-century of this conflict, there were numerous incidents resulting in casualties to hundreds of Arab and Jewish civilians battling over the future of British-governed Palestine. Violence against unarmed civilians was practiced by both sides, sometimes with monumental results. Perhaps the most notorious incident occurred in April of 1948 when Jewish irregulars massacred more than 250 Arab villagers from Deir Yassin, causing widespread panic among Arab villages throughout Palestine and precipitating the flight of over 300,000 Arabs from their homes.

After the establishment of Israel in 1948, and the dismantling of large segments of the Palestinian community and the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem, organized struggle against Israel took time to develop among the Palestinian refugees. It was not until after the 1967 War and the occupation of the remaining portions of Palestine that Palestinian resistance fighters began to make international news. In the late 1960s, Palestinian militants, working within groups like Al-Fatah, were described in the international press as “guerrillas”, “commandos”, and “fedayeen” (sacrificers). It was not until after the September 1970 civil war in Jordan, that the Israeli designations of Palestinian fighters as ‘murderers’, ‘saboteurs’ and ‘terrorists’ became more widespread, at least in the western media. This was partly due to notorious actions by some of the militants themselves, viz., airplane hijackings by PFLP members in 1968-1970, and the attempted kidnapping of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics in 1972 that led to the deaths of eleven Israelis and five Palestinians.

It is estimated that over 500 million people witnessed these events on television (Wierinka 1993, p. 43). As another Palestinian spokesman put it: the Munich operation was like “painting the name of Palestine on the top of a mountain that can be seen from the four corners of the earth” (Hirst 1984, p. 311). The Palestinian’s recourse to terrorism succeeded in placing Palestinian grievances and aspirations on the World’s agenda. But, too often, their complaints were lost in the sensationalism of the deed. In the minds of many, disgust with the means outpaced sympathy with plight of Palestinian refugees and trumped the patience needed to understand core grievances. As the 1970s wore on, and various leftwing groups in Europe and elsewhere made headlines with similar sorts of violence, the “terrorists” came to be viewed as a new type of barbarians whose willingness to hijack airplanes, to take hostages, and especially, to carry their struggle into foreign lands, placed them outside the bounds of civilized behavior. When the Reagan Administration came
into power in January 1981, combating this brand of “international terrorism” emerged as a foremost goal of U.S. foreign policy.

Government officials realized that the rhetoric of “terror” had now become a preeminent propaganda device, one that could be used not only to discredit their opponents, but also to obfuscate and to deflect attention away from their own controversial policies. A prime example, relevant to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is a well-known book edited by Benjamin Netanyahu entitled, *Terrorism: How the West Can Win* published in 1986, featured in *Time* Magazine shortly thereafter, and used in political science courses in American universities during the late 1980s and 1990s.

While Netanyahu’s book offers a standard definition of “terrorism”, the editor and the contributors apply the term selectively, and argue that the only way to combat terrorism is to “to weaken and destroy the terrorist’s ability to consistently launch attacks”, even at the “risk of civilian casualties” (pp. 202-205). Very little is said about the possible causes of terrorist violence beyond vague allusions to Islam’s confrontation with modernity (p. 82), or passages of this calibre from Netanyahu’s own pen:

“The root cause of terrorism lies not in grievances but in a disposition toward unbridled violence. This can be traced to a worldview that asserts that certain ideological and religious goals justify, indeed demand, the shedding of all moral inhibitions. In this context, the observation that the root cause of terrorism is terrorists is more than a tautology.” (p. 204)

The scholar can pass off comments like these as pure propaganda – if not a brand of psychological lunacy – but it is significant that Netanyahu’s book has reached a large audience, especially since its contributors include not only academics and journalists but important policy makers as well. Netanyahu himself went on to become the Israeli Prime Minister, and among the American contributors were the Secretary of State George Schultz, U.N. Ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick, and Senators Daniel Moynihan and Alan Cranston, each of whom voiced sentiments similar to those of Netanyahu. The upshot was that a terrorist is portrayed as a carrier of “oppression and enslavement”, having “no moral sense”, “a perfect nihilist” (pp. 29-30), and whose elimination is the only rational means for the West to “win”.

Netanyahu’s book conceals an unspoken agenda. By classifying Palestinian resistance to Israeli policies as “terrorism”, and by portraying “terrorists” as some sort of monsters unworthy of moral dialogue, the effect of his book, if not its intent, is to shift political focus away from the designs, policies, and actions of the Israeli Government in the occupied territories, e.g., its land confiscations, settlement building, human rights abuses, blatant violations of Security Council resolutions – in a word, its slow but steady policy of territorial expansion – towards the more sensational reactions by the Palestinians. Its strategy manifests this logic: *to get away with a big crime, demonize your victims*.11

Netanyahu’s exhortation to violence is advanced under the principle that the only way to deal with terrorism is with counter-terrorist violence. This has characterized the policy of successive Israeli governments since the early 1950s, but the result has only increased the amount of terrorism in the Near East, especially over the past
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quarter-century. For example, during the ten-year period from 1978-1987, eighty-two Israelis were killed in terrorist attacks perpetrated by Palestinians, a rate of a little more than eight Israelis per year, including both civilians and security personnel. Yet, in 1982 alone, approximately 18,000 Arab civilians lost their lives in the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Within the next ten-year period, 1988-1997, the number of Israeli civilians killed jumped to 421, that is, to an average of 42 Israeli deaths per year. During this time same ten-year period, at least 1,385 Palestinians in the Occupied Territories were killed by Israeli security forces (all but 18 of these were civilians). In the first three and a half years since the second Intifada began in late September 2000 approximately 900 Israelis have lost their lives – a rate of more than 250 Israeli deaths per year – whereas about 3000 Palestinians have been slain. Again, the vast bulk of the fatalities on both sides have been civilians.12

Figures like these indicate that Israeli “reprisal” killings of Palestinians have not deterred Palestinian violence directed at Israelis. That most Israelis have died in suicide attacks refutes Netanyahu’s claim that terrorists will rarely engage in terror tactics if the risks to their own survival are too great. They go directly against his argument that “counter-terrorist” deterrence will put a stop to terrorism and protect innocent civilians from terrorist violence. Despite Israel’s policy of retaliatory deterrence, Israelis are less secure today than they were ten years ago, and certainly less than twenty years ago. If any causal claim is to be made, it is that Israeli attacks against Palestinian leaders, institutions, towns, villages, and camps, have only intensified Palestinian anger and stiffened Palestinian resolve. And because honor, and its offspring, revenge, can override fear of death, the average Israeli is in more danger of being harmed by politically-motivated violence than ever before.13

Yet, as the figures show, in terms of sheer numbers the Palestinians have been even more victimized by the rhetoric of ‘terror’. Not only have they lost more people, their entire infrastructures – their political, economic, educational, and medical institutions, their technological and agricultural resources – have been devastated by the Israeli military campaign. Unemployment and malnourishment are rampant, curfews and checkpoints strangle their movement, and increasingly, the last refuge of civilians, their houses, have been destroyed as they watch, or, in some cases, over their heads.

The most devastating uses of ‘terrorism’ in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have been to justify horrific actions by the IDF against Palestinians in refugee camps. In September 1982, for example, after the evacuation of PLO fighters from Beirut, Israeli officials contended that some “2000 terrorists” remained in the refugee camps Sabra and Shatilla in southern Beirut, a claim repeated in the Israeli press. On September 15, the Israeli Defense Minister, Ariel Sharon, authorized entry of what were presumed to be members of the Lebanese militia into the camps that were then sealed off by Israeli tanks. The only resistance they encountered came from a few lightly armed boys. For the next 38 hours, aided by Israeli flares at night, the militiamen raped, tortured, mutilated and massacred over 2000 civilians under the eye of IDF personnel.

As Prime Minister of Israel since March 2001, Sharon, once again, has been able to act on his ambitions, refusing to negotiate with the Palestinian leadership, intensifying settlement building in the West Bank, and adopting an iron fist
approach to Palestinian resistance. After the on-going battles of the Al-Aqsa Intifada led to a rash of suicide bombings in Israel in March 2002, Sharon sent IDF troops, tanks, and helicopter gunships into the Palestinian-controlled areas of the West Bank, vowing to destroy the Palestinian “terrorist infrastructure”. The assault of the Jenin refugee camp in April 2002, was the most devastating attack on a Palestinian population center in the West Bank during 35 years of Israeli occupation. As with Sabra and Shatilla, the Israelis claim to be fighting terrorism, but the principal result has been the destruction of Palestinian civilian property, homes, institutions, and lives.

That the Israeli government could so easily succeed in convincing people that Israel was eliminating the “terrorist infrastructure” of the Palestinians – rather than a good deal of the institutional structure of Palestinian society – illustrates how the rhetoric of ‘terror’ is a causal factor in generating even more terrorism. On one side, the bulk of the Israeli public and the American Congress were led to endorse Sharon’s actions, giving a green light for a continuation of his offensive against “terrorism”, an offensive that continues as I write. On the other side, the flames of outrage and revenge have been fanned, once again, among Palestinians and their sympathizers. The upshot has increased – and will continue to increase – the shedding of innocent blood on both sides, hence, to more terrorism, not less.

5. MOVING BEYOND THE RHETORIC: THE PROPER RESPONSE TO TERRORISM

In the absence of a negotiated settlement, the continuation of tit-for-tat violence between Israelis and Palestinians is guaranteed. This has long been foreseen. Already in 1956, the U.N. Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjöld, informed Israel’s Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, that Israel’s retaliatory actions against Palestinians would postpone indefinitely peaceful coexistence between Israelis and Arabs. Hammarskjöld’s advice went unheeded as successive Israeli governments added retaliation to retaliation, with deterrence offered as the standard justification (Dayan 1968, Netanyahu 1993). As Hammarskjold predicted, the effect has been the very opposite. The journalist, Raymond Close, summarized the situation accurately as follows:

“The state of Israel has been committed for 50 years to a policy of massive and ruthless retaliation – deliberately disproportional. “Ten eyes for an eye”, the Israeli like to say. And still their policy fails, because they have not recognized what the thoughtful ones among them know to be true – that terrorism will thrive as long as the Palestinian population is obsessed with the injustice of their lot and consumed with despair.” (Close 1998)

The United States has edged ever closer to mimicking Israeli strategy in its confrontation with terrorism (cf., the example of the State Department guidelines on dealing with terrorism noted above). Yet, as Close went on to write, for America to adopt the Israeli model would “weaken its leadership position in the world” and undermine the most effective defenses we have against terrorism, namely, “a
commitment to the rule of law, dedication to the fairness and evenhandedness in settling international disputes, and a reputation as the most humanitarian nation in the world”. Former Assistant Secretary of State George Ball argued in the same manner in *The New York Times* on December 16, 1984:

“… let us take care that we are not led, through panic and anger, to embrace counter-terrorism and international lynch law and thus reduce our nation’s conduct to the squalid level of the terrorists. Our prime objective should clearly be to correct, or at least mitigate, the fundamental grievances that nourish terrorism rather than engage in pre-emptive and retaliatory killing of those affected by such grievances.”

Yet, ever since 1981, when Secretary of State Alexander Haig announced that “terrorism” would replace “human rights” as the main foreign policy concern of the Reagan Administration, the U.S. Government has focused its energies on a military response to terrorism while systematically ignoring the grievances that have spawned the recourse to political violence. Edging ever closer to the Israeli strategy, the State Department developed just “four basic policy tenets” for dealing with terrorism:

*First,* make no concession to terrorists and strike no deals.  
*Second,* bring terrorists to justice for their crimes.  
*Third,* isolate and apply pressure on states that sponsor terrorism to force them to change their behavior.  
*Fourth,* bolster the counterterrorist capabilities of those countries that work with the United States and require assistance.

Nowhere does the State Department call for investigating the causes of persistent terrorist violence, or for any sort of policy review. This is surprising given that the State Department is a policy-making sector of the U.S. Government – unlike the law-enforcement agencies for whom these guidelines are more understandable. Its refusal to deal squarely with the political origins of terrorism has led it to adopt a position of dealing with the symptoms while ignoring the causes. The rhetoric of “terror” might not have caused the development of this curious stance, but it has paved the way for its acceptance by the general public.14

There are legitimate ways of responding to terrorist actions without responding with terrorism. Assuming that an act of terrorism is wrongful and intolerable, then attempts must obviously be made to identify, apprehend, and prosecute the individuals and organizations responsible. Yet, any resort to force must abide by the standard provision of *jus in bello*, being careful to target only those for whom one has firm evidence of terrorist activity and, above all, avoiding the kind of “counter-terrorism” that only intensifies hatred and the passion for revenge.

More importantly, steps must be taken to examine and address the causes of persistent terrorism stemming from a given population. Such violence is symptomatic of a serious political problem and feeds on outrage over perceived injustices to an entire people. As long as the members of that population feel they have a legitimate cause worth dying for, and decide that terrorism is the only viable response, then retaliation, coupled with a persistent failure to address grievances, will only
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intensify resentment and hatred. Rather than solve the problem, the parties will be wrapped in an ever-increasing spiral of violence.

To deal with terrorism in a rational manner, we must first remove the obstacles to clear thinking about the problem, always keeping in view the fact that language moulds thought and thought precipitates action. We must recognize the rhetoric of “terror” is itself a political weapon. Its victims are typically civilians whose grievances are ignored and who suffer from reprisals against their communities because some of their members have found violence to be the only way to react in a desperate hope that somehow, someone with enough sense and power will realize that these grievances must be addressed. When this rhetoric succeeds in cutting off rational inquiry into the grievances of entire communities, when it becomes an obstacle to a clear moral assessment of political conflicts, then it only contributes to further terrorism. This is the principal lesson to be drawn from the persistent use of “terrorism” and “terrorist” in depicting the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. If we wish avoid plunging the entire world into a similar cycle of strike and reprisal, then we must learn that the first target in a real “war on terrorism” should be the rhetoric of “terror”.

NOTES

1 Noam Chomsky uses ‘terrorism’ to refer to “the threat or use of violence to intimidate or coerce (generally for political ends)” (quoted in Shafritz 1991, p. 264), and Paul Wilkinson describes terrorism as “the systematic use of coercive intimidation, usually to serve political ends”, that commonly targets “innocent civilians” (Wilkinson 2000, pp. 12-13). See also, Netanyahu 2001, p. 8 which defines terrorism as “the deliberate and systematic assault on civilians to inspire fear for political ends”, and Chasdi 2002, p. 9, who characterizes terrorism in terms of the “threat, practice, or promotion of force for political objectives”. While “civilians” is used more commonly than “noncombatants” in defining “terrorism”, one might suppose that the two terms are coextensional. However, since some military personnel are noncombatants, I will take “civilians” to specify a narrower category that excludes members of a military organization. Here, political objectives have to do with control over certain regions or organizations.

2 The Jacobins first employed the term during the French Revolution, applying it to the actions of the revolutionary government in eradicating its enemies. By the mid-nineteenth century, it was used to signify anti-government activities, for example, the campaigns of Irish dissidents in the 1860s and of Russian revolutionaries of the 1880s (Laqueur 1987, chp. 1; White 2002, chap. 5). That there are no semantic grounds for restricting terrorism to non-state agents is also evident in the most recent editions of the Oxford English Dictionary, Webster’s Dictionary of the English Language, the Encyclopedia Britannica, and the Encyclopedia Americana.

3 The terms “terrorist” and “terrorism” have not always been associated with a negative connotation. While the Jacobins used “terrorist” with a positive connotation, a negative sense was associated with the term in the writings of Edmund Burke (Laqueur 1987, p. 11). Geoffrey Nunberg has noted that “… the word “terrorism” led a double life – a justified political strategy to some, an abomination to others”. The Russian revolutionaries who assassinated Tsar Alexander II in 1881 used the word proudly. As late as 1947, the Jewish Stern Gang in Palestine referred to themselves as ‘terrorists’ and Ben Hecht wrote approvingly of the Jewish “terrorists of Palestine” in their attacks upon British targets in Palestine (Hirst 1984, p. 119).


5 Documentation concerning both cases can be found on the websites of several human rights organizations, including, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Voices in the Wilderness, The
World Health Organization, and the Israeli human rights organization, B’tselem. See also Clark, et. al. 1992. U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright admitted that the sanctions were intended to serve a political purpose despite acknowledged harm to civilians. When asked what she felt about the deaths of 500,000 Iraqui children caused by the sanctions, Albright replied that it was “a very hard choice”, but, all things considered, “we think the price is worth it” (60 Minutes interview, aired May 12th 1996).

6 See for example, the State Department’s Patterns of Global Terrorism-2000 (reprinted in Yonah Alexander and Donald J. Musch, Terrorism: Documents of International and Local Control. Volume 26 (Dobbs Ferry, NY: Oceana Publications INC, 2001), pp. 1-126. In it one finds the Hezbollah attacks on the Israeli targets described as “terrorist” despite the fact that these attacks were directed upon the Israeli military in southern Lebanon (p. 39). Again, the actions of Palestinian groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad are described as “terrorist” even when directed against Israeli occupying forces, whereas Israel’s undercover assassinations of Palestinian figures were not so described (pp. 41-45).

7 Among scholars this has been known for some time. In 1977, C. C. O’Brien wrote: “The words ‘terrorism’ and ‘terrorist’ are not terms of scientific classification. They are imprecise and emotive. We do not apply them to all acts of politically motivated violence or to all people who commit such crimes. We reserve their use for politically-motivated violence of which we disapprove.” (O’Brien 1977, p. 91) Noam Chomsky has repeatedly pointed out that there is a “propagandistic usage” in which “the term ‘terrorism’ is used to refer to terrorist acts committed by enemies against us or our allies” (Interview Number 5 with Chomsky on Znet at www.znet.com.) Similar points are made by Oliverio 1998, chp. 1. Robert Picard writes that it “has become an axiom that terrorism describes acts of violence committed by others, and the similar violence committed by one’s own nation or by those with whom one sympathizes, is legitimate” (Picard 1993, p. 3). See also John Collins 2002, pp. 163-166 who argues that it is essential that the US not define ‘terrorism’ at all, since otherwise the US and its allies would be deemed guilty of terrorism as well. There have been studies that confirm this egocentric usage of “terrorism” in major American media, for example, a study by Brian K. Simmons, “U.S. News magazines’ Labeling of Terrorists”, in: A. O. Alali, and K. K. Eke (eds.), Media Coverage of Terrorism. London: 1991, pp. 23-39. (I thank Erich Schulte for bringing to my attention the indexical character of “terrorism”.)

8 Israel and the Western Democracies adopted the use of “terrorism” in the 1970s to describe those who opposed their policies (see Herman and O’Sullivan 1991, pp. 43-46). During this period, terrorists were portrayed as anti-democratic forces supported by Soviet style communism. In the 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the pro-communist gloss was submerged and terrorists were seen as an expression of radical Islam. In 1999, the Russians themselves began to use the label, calling the Chechnya rebels “terrorists” during the second invasion of Chechnya. Previously, Moscow had identified the rebels as “bandits” Chicago Tribune, Nov. 3, 2002, Section 2, p. 5.

9 See Alon 1980, pp. 68-81, which mentions that the Israeli policy of combating “international terrorism” included the proviso that civilian populations that “shelter anti-Israeli terrorists” will not be immune from punitive action. See also Gal-Or 1994, for a discussion of Israeli policy, and also the earlier study of Blechman 1971. Ever since the early 1950s, Israeli “reprisals” for violence against Israelis committed by Palestinians has routinely resulted in the deaths of more Arab civilians (see Hirst, op. cit., chapters 6, 8, 9, 10, and also, the statistics of B’tselem at www.btselem.org). The same thinking was evident in the U.S. According to a New York Times poll published on September 16, 2001, 59.9% of Americans supported the use of military force against terrorism even if it were to cause the deaths of thousands of innocent civilians.

10 See Khalidi 1971, Part IV; Flapan 1987, pp. 83-109; and Morris 1987, chap. 3. One objective of the Jewish underground during the 1947-49 war between Jews and Arabs was to induce as many Palestinian Arabs to flee from their homes in Palestine as was possible. Through a few well-timed massacres, notably of some 250 civilians in the Palestinian village of Deir Yassin in April 1948, over 300,000 Palestinians fled from their homes, villages, and lands in the areas that eventually became part of Israel, paving the way for the establishment of a decisive Jewish majority in these areas (Chaim Weizmann, Israel’s first president, described this flight of Palestinians, and the forced removal of some 400,000 others, as “a miraculous clearing of the land: the miraculous simplification of Israeli’s task” (Hirst, op. cit., p.143). Menachem Begin, head of the Jewish terrorist group, Irgun, wrote: “Of the about 800,000 Arabs who lived on the present territory of the State of Israel, only some 165,000 are still there. The political and economic significance of this development can hardly be overestimated.” (Menachem Begin, The Revolt, London: W. H. Allen, 1951, p. 164.)
Noam Chomsky wrote of this a decade before: “The Palestinians are a particularly natural target for Western racism. They are weak and dispersed, hounded on every side, but they refuse to accept their fate and melt away, an affront to civilization – not unlike the Jews. They must be despised, or how are we to justify their fate?” (Chomsky 1976).

The estimate of Israeli fatalities is that of the Israeli Embassy in the United Kingdom, at www.israel-embassy.org.uk/webpages/fatal.htm and the Israeli human rights group, B’tselem at www.btselem.org. The figures on the Palestinians are from B’tselem and from the Palestine Monitor at www.palestinenmonitor.org/factsheet/Palestinian_killed_fact_sheet.htm.


“Patterns of Global Terrorism”, available at the State Department website at www.state.gov. The U.S. Government’s refusal to consider causes and possible grievances, much less engage in policy review, has been matched by media trends. In the three weeks after the 9/11 attacks, for example, of the 46 oped pieces dealing with the attacks that appeared in The New York Times and Washington Post, 44 argued for a military response, and only two raised other possibilities (FAIR, “Op-Ed Chamber: Little Space for Dissent to the Military Line”, Nov. 2, 2001 at www.fair.org/activism/nyt-wp-opeds.html). This same tendency has been carried over to the discussions preceding the build-up of war against Iraq. The State Department’s exclusion of any evaluation of policy or examination of causes is echoed in a recent publication from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, To Prevail: An American Strategy for the Campaign Against Terrorism (www.csis.org/press/pr01_69.htm).

REFERENCES


