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Terrorism

Terrorism is a politically charged concept with no commonly accepted definition. First used of state repression during the French revolution, the term later became associated with indiscriminate political violence by non-state actors. The label “terrorist” has very pejorative connotations and is used by political actors, usually states, to delegitimize their militant opponents. Western legal definitions of terrorism were first formulated in the late 20th century and differ between countries. Social scientific definitions also vary, but share three core criteria: that terrorism has *political* aims, targets *noncombatants* and has a *communicative* dimension. Its symbiotic relationship with mass media distinguishes terrorism from other forms of political violence and makes it a fundamentally modern phenomenon.

Terrorism as such is not treated in the Islamic legal tradition. The root of the modern Arabic word for terrorism (*irhāb*) features in the Qur’an (Q8:60) in the general sense of “striking fear in the enemy”, but *irhāb* never emerged as a distinct conception of warfare or as a legal category (although many Muslim states today have Western-inspired anti-terrorist legislation). However, the rich Islamic legal tradition on warfare considered certain forms of violent activism and certain military tactics as illegitimate.

Classical Muslim jurists distinguished, from a *jus ad bellum* perspective, between three forms of violent activism: *jihād* (war against non-Muslims), *baghy* (rebellion against Muslim rulers; cf Q49:9), and *hirāba* (brigandry; cf Q5:33). *Jihād* was legitimate, but subject to caliphal authorization or specific *casus belli* such as outside invasion. Both *baghy* and *hirāba* were considered illegitimate, but only *hirāba* carried severe sanctions. Rebels (*bughāt*) of a certain number (*shawka*) with a reasonable cause (*ta’wīl*) should be stopped but not punished. *Hirāba* connoted senseless violence by small groups spreading fear in the general population (*al-mufsidun fi’l-ard*) and thus represents the Islamic legal notion closest to terrorism. Jurists often disagreed on the classification of specific militants, notably the late 7th-century Khawarij, as rebels or brigands. The name Khawarij itself thus eventually became a general term for illegitimate militants with a meaning close to “terrorist”.

Jurists also developed detailed guidelines for conduct in *jihād* (*jus in bello*). These rules reflected a concern for proportionality and discrimination and were analogous, though not identical, to those of the Western just war tradition. Fighters should not cause more bloodshed or material destruction than necessary for the achievement of their objective. They should use clean tactics and avoid killing noncombatants, as suggested by the prophetic tradition: “do not cheat or commit treachery, nor should you mutilate or kill children, women or old men.” (Shaybani, *siyar*, 47). Treaties should be respected and prisoners of war be well treated until their fate was decided. Irregular tactics such as abductions, poisoning of water wells, arson, torture and rape were condemned and associated with *hirāba*.

However, not all these prohibitions were absolute. For certain situations, many medieval jurists approved of tactics that violated these principles. This included the use of indiscriminate weapons such as catapults (*manjānīq*) against besieged cities or the launch of night raids (*qatl al-bayat*) in which low visibility put noncombatants at risk. Attacks on enemy armies that used Muslims as human shields (*tatarrus*) were generally permitted. Deception (*khidā’*) was sanctioned if practiced upon non-Muslims who had broken truces. Most jurists (except Hanafis) allowed for the execution of male prisoners of war if the commander deemed it beneficial. The sanctioning of such tactics by at least some jurists,

combined with their occasional use in the Prophet Muhammad's own campaigns, was later exploited by modern militants in their attempts to justify terrorist tactics.

Islamists were latecomers to the modern history of terrorism. Although the "secret apparatus" of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood had carried out bombings in the 1940s, terrorist activity by Islamists only took substantial proportions in the late 1970s, by which time secular militants like the PLO and Rote Armé Fraktion had established the principal methods associated with modern terrorism, such as bombings, hostage-takings, hijackings and assassinations. However, Islamist terrorist activity steadily increased in frequency and brutality, and by the 2000s the majority of high-casualty attacks worldwide were undertaken by Islamists.

The modern history of Islamist terrorism began in 1970s Egypt, where militants attempted a coup in 1973, Jama'at al-Muslimin (al-Takfir wa'l-Hijra) abducted and killed a government minister in 1977 and the al-Jihad group killed President Anwar Sadat in 1981. In the 1980s, Shiite Hizbollah undertook spectacular suicide bombings and hostage takings against Westerners in Lebanon and elsewhere. The 1990s saw extensive use of terrorist tactics, notably by the revolutionary GIA in Algeria and al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya in Egypt, by nationalist Hamas in Israel, Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines, and Lashkar-e Tayyiba in Kashmir, and by anti-Shiite Lashkar-e Janghvi in Pakistan. In the 1990s Sunni militancy globalized, first with GIA attacks against France, then with al-Qaida's operations against America, which culminated with the attacks on September 11, 2001. In the 2000s, al-Qaida and related groups launched mass-casualty suicide bombings across the globe, notably in Bali, Istanbul, Riyadh, Madrid, London, Amman, Sharm al-Sheikh, and Islamabad, but nowhere more than in post-invasion Iraq. The Daniel Pearl abduction in Pakistan sparked a wave of hostage-takings cum decapitations from 2002 onward, especially in Iraq. Chechen militants undertook mass hostage takings of theatre-goers in Moscow in 2002 and schoolchildren in Beslan in 2004. Although Islamists have executed hostages, they rarely tortured, raped or mutilated them. Islamists have not used chemical, biological, nuclear or radiological weapons, but al-Qaida has declared its intention to use, and attempted to develop, such weapons. In 2003 the radical Saudi cleric Nasir al-Fahd issued a *fatwa* sanctioning their use against Western civilians.

Islamist militants usually reject the label terrorist. Instead they view themselves as *mujāhidun* engaged in a legitimate defensive *jihād* against unbelievers. They circumvent *jus ad bellum* restrictions by saying the urgency of the infidel threat and the absence of a caliphate abrogate the need for caliphal authorization and individualize the duty for *jihād*. In the cases where the enemy is Muslim, militants resort to *takfīr* (excommunication) and declare these Muslims infidel. *Jus in bello* principles are sidestepped in different ways. Civilians are denied noncombatant status because they vote, pay taxes, work for the government or may serve in the military. Radical rulings on *tatarrus* or on *qatl al-bayat* are exploited to justify noncombatant collateral damage. Visas are not considered pledges of security because they are issued by illegitimate authorities. Suicide bombings are framed as martyrdom-seeking operations, not self-killing. Mass casualty attacks are justified as a proportional response to infidel killing and oppression of Muslims.

Some have nevertheless embraced the terrorist label. The Palestinian ideologue Abdallah Azzam (d. 1989) wrote "if preparations for *jihād* is terrorism, then we are terrorists." With reference to Q8:60, the Saudi cleric Hamud al-Shu'aybi (d. 2002) ruled terrorism a duty in *jihād*. The Syrian ideologue Abu Mus'ab al-Suri considered "the *jihād* of individual terrorism" a crucial strategic option for today's mujahidin. "*Irhabi*" and "terrorist" are common nicknames on radical Islamist discussion forums on the Internet.

The late 2000s saw a Muslim public backlash against terrorism, partly in reaction to high Muslim civilian casualties. Mainstream Islamic scholars have begun articulating a legal

discourse banning terrorism, and several radical ideologues called for more discriminate tactics. Polls show most Muslims denounce al-Qaida's tactics as terrorism, although many view Palestinian attacks against Israeli civilians as legitimate.

See also rebellion, underground movements, violence and non-violence, excommunication, civil war, coup d'état, Abd al-Salam Faraj, Gamaa Islamiyya, Hamas, Hizbollah, Islamic Jihad, Mujahidin, martyrdom, al-Qaida, revolutions, Umar Abd al-Rahman, Usama bin Ladin, Ayman al-Zawahiri.

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