Opinion – Luigi Mangione and the Politics of Violence Labelling

https://www.e-ir.info/2025/02/16/opinion-luigi-mangione-and-the-politics-of-violence-labelling/

ADRIANA MARIN, FEB 16 2025

Terrorism is a concept laden with political, social, and legal significance, yet its definition remains fraught with ambiguity. Despite decades of scholarly discourse, a universally accepted definition remains elusive. This lack of consensus has allowed states and institutions to interpret and deploy the term in ways that align with their political agendas, often at the expense of proportionality and justice. The 2024 case of Luigi Mangione exemplifies this issue. Mangione, motivated by grievances against systemic inequities in the US healthcare system, fatally shot UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson. Prosecutors framed his actions as terrorism under New York's expanded anti-terrorism laws, elevating the charges to first-degree murder with terrorism enhancements. Critics argue that Mangione's actions, while violent, stemmed from personal grievances rather than systemic or ideological motivations aimed at instilling fear or coercing society.

The challenges of defining terrorism are longstanding and politically charged. The 1937 Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of Terrorism introduced key elements still central today: violence or its threat, intimidation, and political or ideological aims. Despite this foundation, debates persist, as terrorism remains a subjective label shaped by social and political agendas. Nevertheless, common features in definitions include violence, targeting civilians, creating fear, pursuing ideological goals, and deliberate intent. While these elements provide a conceptual framework, they remain open to interpretation.

As seen in the Mangione case, the application of these criteria depends heavily on the context and intent attributed to the perpetrator. The political and ideological dimensions of Mangione's alleged actions—rooted in grievances against the healthcare system—invite debate over whether his crime constitutes terrorism or simply targeted violence driven by personal motives.

Social-constructionist theories further complicate the definitional debate by framing terrorism as a political label, contingent on the perspectives and interests of those defining it. Its meaning is fluid, shaped by who applies the term and for what purpose. This perspective is particularly relevant to the Mangione case, where the terrorism label serves not only as a legal designation but also as a rhetorical tool to delegitimise his grievances. By framing Mangione's actions as terrorism, prosecutors reinforce a narrative that prioritises state and corporate interests over the individual's motivations, raising concerns about the politicisation of justice.

Investigators cited a manifesto recovered from Mangione, which condemned corporate greed and systemic inequities in the American healthcare system. Prosecutors argued that Mangione's actions were intended to intimidate corporate leaders and influence public policy, leading to charges of first-degree murder and terrorism under New York's anti-terrorism statutes. Critics of the prosecution contend that the application of the terrorism label in this case is an overreach, highlighting the absence of a broader intent to incite mass fear, a key criterion in many definitions of terrorism. Instead, Mangione's actions appear rooted in personal grievance and frustration with healthcare inequities rather than a calculated attempt to coerce the general public or the government.

Mangione's case reflects the broader politicisation of the terrorism label, which is often deployed to delegitimise specific actors or amplify the perceived threat of certain actions. One must acknowledge that terrorism is not a

neutral or universally defined term, but a socially constructed concept shaped by political and cultural contexts. This subjectivity is evident in the historic labelling of Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress (ANC) as terrorists by the apartheid regime and its Western allies. Mandela's acts of sabotage against state infrastructure, aimed at dismantling an oppressive system, were framed as terrorism despite their broader liberationist aims.

Today, Mandela is revered as a global icon of resistance, underscoring how the terrorism label can shift with changing political landscapes. A similar pattern is evident in the United States, where violent acts by right-wing extremists, such as the January 6 Capitol insurrection, are often described as "domestic extremism" or "insurrection" rather than terrorism. This linguistic distinction minimises the ideological nature of such violence, reflecting systemic biases that prioritise certain narratives over others.

Luigi Mangione's actions were explicitly framed as terrorism due to their perceived ideological context and intent to critique corporate and governmental systems. Prosecutors relied on anti-terrorism statutes to elevate his charges, arguing that his violence was politically motivated, targeting the healthcare industry to inspire systemic change. This framing reflects the expansive interpretation of terrorism laws, which increasingly encompass acts of targeted violence if perceived as ideological. However, this expansive interpretation risks conflating personal grievances with broader terroristic intent, diluting the term's analytical and legal utility. Mangione's note, while critical of the healthcare system, lacked the ideological depth or societal impact traditionally associated with terrorism.

The invocation of anti-terrorism laws in Mangione's case had profound legal consequences, elevating the charges to first-degree murder with terrorism enhancement. Critics argue that this move reflects punitive overreach, prioritising harsh sentencing over proportional justice. Such misuse of counterterrorism laws can divert resources from addressing genuine threats, undermining both justice and public safety. In Mangione's case, prosecuting him as a terrorist undermines his right to a fair trial and risks dismissing valid critiques of systemic healthcare inequities.

About the author:

Dr Adriana Marin is a Lecturer in International Relations at Coventry University, UK. She holds a PhD from the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations and an MA in Terrorism, International Crime, and Global Security. Her research focuses on terrorism, organised crime, and transnational threats, examining how illicit networks impact global security. She specialises in the convergence of criminal and extremist organisations, state resilience, and policy responses.