'One person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter'
Written by Jack Whiteley

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Of Terrorists and Freedom Fighters

"However much we may wish it were not so, terrorism has been common throughout history; sometimes, it has even succeeded in bringing about change."[1]

Since the attacks of September 11th, seeking to understand terrorism has become one of the chief pursuits of political leaders, journalists, security forces, artists and academics in the United States and around the world. Wars launched for the purposes of dismantling al Qaeda and other Middle Eastern terrorist groups have now become significant and controversial elements of the foreign policies of many Western states. In part because of these developments, much of the discussion of terrorism that takes place seems almost exclusively informed by the specifics of current events. However, terrorism did not begin in 2001, nor is it confined to extremists in the Middle East; herein lies much of the difficulty in understanding the broad phenomenon, which has been observed in wide-ranging circumstances throughout world history. Often, those who wish to point out the difficulty in defining terrorism like to refer to an old, now-famous quotation: "One person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter."[2]

This somewhat glib sentence can be useful for two main reasons. First, it points out that the motives and the methods of the terrorist may often be separable. Terrorism is a tactical choice: those who employ the tactics of terror can theoretically do so in the name of any cause they choose. It is therefore true that any person justifying himself as fighting for freedom from an unjust authority (i.e. a 'freedom fighter') can make the decision to use terrorism to try to achieve his stated goal. Secondly, the quotation also highlights how defining terrorism can often become a moral issue. As many have noted,[3] the selectively pejorative use of the word in public discourse makes it difficult to arrive at an ideologically neutral understanding of it. This is referred to as the problem of 'value-neutrality.' For example, some accept that, while the use of certain types of violence may be legitimate some of the time, terrorism is not. One of the problems with this definition is that it can easily lead to the false conclusion that the word 'terrorism' should be used as a synonym for all illegitimate, politically-motivated violence. This overly simplistic approach successfully defines neither legitimacy nor terrorism. A definition must be sufficiently broad to encapsulate terrorism's many manifestations; but it must also be narrow enough to prove a useful, analytical evaluation of the subject.

This essay will therefore accept that the quotation's premise is sometimes helpful: perspective is important when discussing terrorism. However, the essay will also take the view that there are in fact certain objective distinctions that can be made which separate the true terrorist from the true freedom fighter. These distinctions exist irrespective of national political ideology or pejorative labels. In short, three existential differences, generally defined, can help to draw a theoretical line between them. They lie first in tactical theory; second, in sources for motivation; and third, in the nuances of the justifications for the actions of each. In the end, it is these distinctions—rather than the quotation's implied similarities—that can perhaps help us get closer to a working definition of terrorism.

A Question of Tactics

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Most theories of terrorism contain an accepted parameter that the word refers to active measures that are employed to induce terror.[4] The debate arises over which tactics can be expressly defined as being for the purpose of fear—this is one of the difficulties in distinguishing between terrorists and freedom fighters. Nonetheless, it remains accepted that one of the more clearly understood principles of terrorism is that it involves the intended targeting of civilians. Terrorist groups do not usually try to disguise these methods. "We do not have to discriminate between military or civilian. As far as we are concerned, they are all targets."[5] The reason for this targeting is to gain publicity for the terrorist cause; indeed, in a great number of cases, this is the terrorist's primary aim.[6] Attacks upon civilians which are seemingly random in nature are designed to heighten the level of fear within the population—the perception being that once civilians are targeted indiscriminately, then every individual person becomes vulnerable. Because of this, the purpose of the tactic is to provoke a negative reaction within a far larger group of people than are directly involved in the terrorist act itself. In this way, this tactic is profoundly different from the targeting of an opponent's armed forces. In that case, the object is to diminish the enemy's military resources to the point where the balance of hard power in a particular area shifts into one's own favour: this leads to the concrete goal of an enemy's surrender and capitulation to one's demands.

With terrorist action, on the other hand, it is only in the extremely rare circumstance that enough civilians can be targeted to have any physical impact on their state's resources.[7] The goal of the tactic is therefore less concrete: a nebulous belief that a fearful reaction to a comparatively small attack will lead to a terrorist's political goals being realised. The general aim becomes to divide the greater part of a society from its incumbent authorities through fear, in order to weaken the powers of those authorities, while making the terrorist group appear strong by comparison.[8] It is for this reason that this sort of terrorism is often referred to as a 'weapon of the weak.' Terror tactics are usually adopted in conflicts where the military capabilities of each side are vastly asymmetrical: a less powerful group of terrorists against a more powerful representation of authority.[9]

However, not all militarily disadvantaged groups in asymmetric conflicts choose to make use of terrorism. Indeed, oftentimes revolutionaries make a careful point of not using it, believing it to be "a measure that is generally ineffective and indiscriminate in its results, since it often makes victims of innocent people and destroys a large number of lives that would be valuable to the revolution."[10] This dichotomy of methods within disadvantaged groups poses an obvious question: why do some groups make use of the tactics of terrorism while others do not?

Differences in Motivation: What Is Freedom?

A number of theories have been put forward to try to answer this elusive question on the sources of terrorism. Most theories do agree upon the fact that terrorists are motivated by more than exclusively political goals.[11] If a 'freedom fighter' is defined in name by his or her singular pursuit of liberty, then a terrorist is defined by a combination of goals, not all of which are rationally political. Indeed, certain personal goals seem either to misunderstand, or to directly conflict with the stated purpose of achieving freedom.

This is partly caused by the fact that most terrorism seems to arise from a context of economic inequalities which are relative. It is the *perception* of deprivation driven by viewing others as prosperous that creates ripe conditions for terrorism.[12] These conditions tend to lead to discontentment with one's personal identity. Terrorist groups that are created offer senses of belonging and camaraderie: a chance to redefine oneself, and to seek revenge upon a broadly-defined, more affluent enemy who is blamed for these poor conditions. How much this enemy's actual direct impact is upon situational inequalities varies significantly in differing cases.

Consequently, these personal goals within terrorist organisations often give rise to 'terrorist myths.'[13] This term refers to the powerful internal rhetoric of terrorist groups, which puts forward a factually inaccurate vision of the world in order to justify terror tactics. Often, this rhetorical myth seeks to prove that the victims and audiences of terrorism deeply misunderstand both themselves and the external world. Due to this, the myth argues, a 'wake-up call'—in the form of a terrorist attack—will ultimately be to their benefit.[14] The terrorist myth is intended to validate the functions of terrorism: to show that the authorities are impotent, create a sense of instability in society, and assert the existence of a terrorist's power. The goals enumerated in terrorist myths are more personal than political; they represent less a fight for freedom, and more a bid for personal renown through power.

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Another observed factor that motivates terrorists in particular, and rarely freedom fighters, is a certain 'ecstatic element' in the pursuit of violence. There has been repeated documentation of terrorists who profess a catharsis when committing violent acts: for them, violence becomes an end in itself.[15] This has certainly been true of groups such as al Qaeda; as Osama bin Laden enumerates—"We love death. The U.S. loves life. That is the big difference between us."[16] This belief in violence for its own sake—a professed 'love' for death—is specific to terrorism. A freedom fighter, as the name indicates, must use violence as a means to achieve liberation from a controlling authority. A terrorist, on the other hand, claims violence is being used for a political purpose, but also can treat it as a tactical goal for its own sake. This is useful in understanding perhaps the most important point in classifying terrorists and freedom fighters: the problem of legitimacy.

Justification versus Legitimacy

The issue of perception noted by the original quotation is a significant issue here: a state which is under attack will almost certainly define those attacks as illegitimate (terrorism), while those attacking it will qualify their actions as justified. The difference in terms between terrorists and freedom fighters seems in many ways to hinge upon the perceived legitimacy of the motives of each. As previously stated, the term 'terrorist' is usually pejorative, while the term 'freedom fighter' often has positive connotations. It is therefore difficult to derive a neutral definition of legitimacy: it remains a social product.[17] Nonetheless, it is crucial to note that the means of moral and logistical support for individuals such as Osama bin Laden has differed significantly from that of individuals such as Che Guevara. Guevara and other successful revolutionaries have often rallied large numbers of supporters comparatively quickly, openly and effectively.[18] In contrast, most terrorist groups recruit small numbers of supporters through the protracted influence of norms: a gradual shift of certain disaffected individuals who are separated from society to an accepted morality of terrorism.[19] The local support networks that terrorists use are often also disaffected, but almost never consist of substantial groups of people willing to actively carry out terror tactics themselves.

It therefore seems plausible that the far wider support base accorded to successful freedom fighters is evidence of the social product of legitimacy accorded them by their supporters. Likewise, terrorists tend to find themselves in such extreme minorities because less legitimacy is awarded to them or their cause by other citizens. This perspective would seem supported by the aforementioned differences between the conflicting, self-interested motives of terrorists and the fundamental liberation-seeking motives of freedom fighters. It is therefore possible to view legitimacy through the lens of how much genuine local support is given to a particular group. True freedom fighters with legitimate reasons for existence are able to recruit widely; terrorists whose goals lack that legitimacy recruit far fewer active members.

In conclusion—there are some similarities between terrorists and freedom fighters, and the quotation stated at the beginning does a good job of describing how the difference in perceptions makes a neutral definition for terrorism difficult. Nevertheless, there are also objective factual differences between the two: these are essential in defining each. As described, the distinctions lie in tactics, motivation and (depending on the circumstance) legitimacy. This essay accepts that within the complex international system, the line drawn between the two can regularly become blurred or difficult to see: nonetheless, this line still exists. The self-interested nihilism that so often accompanies the tactics of terror can be defined without bias to be different from the discriminate violence of the fighter whose sole ultimate cause is freedom from oppressive authority. It is only through seeking to define this difference, and how it influences the multitude of different perceptions of the subject, that we may get closer to objectively understanding terrorism.

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[1] Paul K. Davis and Brian Michael Jenkins, *Deterrence and Influence in Counterterrorism* (2002): 4

[2] Grant Wardlaw, *Political Terrorism: Theory, Tactics, and Counter-Measures, 2nd ed.* (1989): 3

[3] Ibid, 5

[4] *The Oxford English Dictionary*: terrorism, n., gen. "A policy intended to strike with terror those against whom it is adopted."

[5] Osama bin Laden, May 1998 Interview with John Miller of ABC News

[6] Grant Wardlaw, *Political Terrorism* (1989): 76

[7] Ibid, 43

[8] Ibid, 34

[9] Peter Janke, ed., *Terrorism and Democracy: Some Contemporary Cases* (1992): 185

[10] Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (1969): 26

[11] Peter Janke, ed., *Terrorism and Democracy: Some Contemporary Cases* (1992): 186

[12] Fathali M. Moghaddam, *From the Terrorists' Point of View (*2006): 47

[13] Ibid, 85

[14] Fathali M. Moghaddam, *From the Terrorists' Point of View (*2006): 85

[15] For example, see testimony of one Kozo Okamato after the massacre at Lod Airport by the Japanese Red Army,

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in: Grant Wardlaw, *Political Terrorism* (1989): 54

[16] Osama bin Laden, quoted in: Richard Stengel, "Osama bin Laden and the Idea of Progress" in *Time* (December, 2001)

[17] Grant Wardlaw, *Political Terrorism* (1989): 6

[18] Ibid, 46

[19] Fathali M. Moghaddam, *From the Terrorists' Point of View (*2006): 87

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