The T-word: Conceptualising terrorism
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September 11 2001 has put the spotlight on terrorism, and it has been at the apex of the international security agenda ever since. Politicians, lawmakers, scholars and others have been debating the meaning and definition of terrorism for many years. Numerous myths and misconceptions persist on this highly debated issue. With the aid of historical case studies, this article aims to demonstrate how broad a concept terrorism has become. It focuses on its subjective and value-laden interpretation and hence the difficulty of arriving at a universally acceptable definition. The author introduces the concept of ‘colonial terror’, which depicts a distinct form of state terrorism perpetrated during the colonial and post-colonial periods. Like many before her, the author concludes that the definition and meaning of terrorism lie in the eye of the beholder.

There are two ways to approach the study of terrorism. One may adopt a literal approach, taking the topic seriously, or a propagandistic approach, construing the concept of terrorism as a weapon to be exploited in the service of some system of power. In each case it is clear how to proceed. Pursuing the literal approach, we begin by determining what constitutes terrorism. We then seek instances of the phenomenon – concentrating on major examples, if we are serious – and try to determine causes and remedies. The propagandistic approach dictates a different course. We begin with the thesis that terrorism is the responsibility of some officially designated enemy. We then designate terrorist acts as ‘terrorist’ just in the cases where they can be attributed (whether plausibly or not) to the required source; otherwise they are to be ignored, suppressed or termed ‘retaliation’ or ‘self-defence’. (Noam Chomsky)

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Introduction

Following the events of 11 September 2001 (hereafter 9/11) in the United States, terrorism and its ramifications have become a hotbed of scholarly debate. The terrorist attacks of that day obliterated other terrorist incidents of the past.

Many myths were born and persist around this highly disputed concept, such as that terrorism:

- is a new phenomenon;
- is a weapon of the weak;
- is only perpetrated by groupings, deranged individuals or transnational networks; and
- is closely linked to religious ‘extremism’.

This article attempts to refute some of the myths attached to the concept. Furthermore, it aims to demonstrate, with the aid of historical examples and case studies, how broad a concept terrorism has become, focusing on its subjective and value-laden interpretation and hence the difficulty of arriving at a universally acceptable definition.

The origins of the concept

‘Terrorism’ per se is nothing new; in fact, theorists trace the origin of the concept back to the 18th century, when it was popularised during the French Revolution. According to the 1798 supplement of the Dictionnaire of the Académie Française, the words ‘terrorism’ and ‘terrorist’ stemmed from the ‘régime de la terreur’, a period in French history that followed the storming of the Bastille and the uprisings of 1789.

Initially, terrorism embraced a positive suggestion. The Jacobins had used the term ‘régime de la terreur’ in a positive sense when speaking and writing about themselves. Terrorism was designed to consolidate and firmly entrench a newly established revolutionary state by intimidating counter-revolutionaries, subversives and other dissidents regarded as ‘enemies of the people’. The Revolutionary Council (the enforcing agency) commanded wide powers of arrest and judgment which led to the demise of many ‘enemies of the people’ by means of the newly invented guillotine. Revolutionary leader Maximilien Robespierre held the view that revolution and terror had to team up in order for democracy to triumph. He declared that “terror is nothing but justice, prompt, severe and inflexible; it is therefore an emanation of virtue”.

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The French Revolution’s terrorism had two main characteristics. The ‘régime de la terreur’ was neither random nor indiscriminate: its enforcers were highly organised, displayed a systemic approach, and their actions were deliberate. Furthermore, its goal and its very justification were the pursuit and creation of a ‘new and better society’. Terrorism was portrayed as the solution to internal anarchy and external invasion by other European monarchs. Arrests were made on little evidence and people were expelled from France, imprisoned and killed in the name of the revolutionary cause.

In July 1794, the Revolution ‘ate its own children’ and Robespierre and his closest associates succumbed to the guillotine. The reign of terror had come to an end. Thereafter the terminology became synonymous with the abuse of office and power. Terrorists were identified as any people who attempted to further their views by a system of coercive intimidation. It should be noted that in its origins, terrorism was perpetrated by the state. Once the term ‘terrorism’ had been coined, it was employed to describe a variety of acts of violence, even retrospectively. Thus, terrorism is most certainly not a new phenomenon. The overriding feature of the early incarnations of terrorism was that it entailed a gruesome act of killing that was pre-meditated and instilled fear in at least some part of the population.

Following the French Revolution, the agency of terrorism changed from a state actor to sub-national groups, and acts of terrorism took place in many places around the globe. Examples include the ritualistic killing of recently emancipated Afro-Americans by the Ku Klux Klan in the US, a sequence of political assassinations of Japanese prime ministers and government ministers during the 1920s and 1930s, and frequent political murders in India in the decade before World War I.

**Early revolutionary terrorism**

Until World War I, terrorism was by and large regarded as a left-wing strategy. The concept was directly linked to revolutionary change. It was perceived to be a strategy that would ultimately lead to a seizure of political power from the established regime of a state, with the aim of causing fundamental political and social change. This kind of terrorism was a new phenomenon and was distinct from the political assassinations that had been practised throughout history. It was distinct in terms of the roles the terrorists believed they fulfilled and the perceived significance of their actions.

**Case study: Narodnaya Volya**

Narodnaya Volya (The People’s Will), which has been widely described as the first terror rebel movement or the first anarchist grouping, emerged in 1879 and its offspring haunted Russia for more than thirty years. The group understood terrorism as a temporary necessity to ‘raise the consciousness of the masses’. In search of a radical transformation of society,
Narodnaya Volya selected victims for symbolic reasons, for the emotional and political responses their deaths would invoke. The doctrine of the movement involved unusual acts of violence. These were in breach of conventions regulating violence, such as the rules of war, which draw a distinction between combatants and non-combatants. The movement called itself ‘terrorist’ rather than ‘guerrilla’ precisely because guerrilla targets were military and the movement’s were not. Terror was a strategy that could command the masses’ attention, create political tensions and provoke indiscriminate government reaction.8

The anarchists inspired fear in the minds of many Europeans prior to World War I. They were believed to be behind countless attempts on the lives of state leaders between the 1880s and the first decade of the 20th century. Many writers in the late 1800s provided ideological underpinnings to the anarchist movement. For the purposes of this article, it suffices to mention the key influences.

One is Gerasim Romanenenko, who emphasised that terrorism was both humanitarian and effective. It cost infinitely fewer victims than a mass struggle; in a popular uprising, ‘the people’ were killed while the real villains looked on from the sidelines. Terrorism, on the other hand, could be directed against the main culprits. To this Russian writer of the late 1800s, terrorism represented an application of modern science to the revolutionary struggle.9

In spite of justifications and theories underpinning revolutionary terrorism, Marxists disapprovingly referred to it as ‘individual terror’. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels often conflated the concept with force or violence in general. Marx stated that revolutionary terrorism was the only solution to shorten the “agonies of the old society and the birth pangs of the new”.10

The debate on terrorism among Russian Marxists flared up when the Socialist Revolutionaries became involved in terrorist activities around the turn of the century. Like Marx and Engels, Lenin was rather ambivalent in his views on ‘individual terrorism’. He paid tribute to the heroism associated with it, but he rejected terrorism as practised by the Socialist Revolutionaries. Lenin observed that it had been restricted to a group of intellectuals who were removed from the working class and peasants. What he referred to as ‘old-style terror’ made organisational and political work among the people more complicated.11 Lenin thus defined terrorism as ‘single combat’ in contrast to mass action. Terrorist campaigns did not suit his Weltbild because the acts of individual violence “were unconnected with the mass of people”.12

**Terrorism from the right**

Walter Laqueur observes13 that a marked change occurred in the 1920s and 1930s, when right-wing elements became the main perpetrators of terrorism. The German Freikorps
were an example of this new trend. They consisted of ex-soldiers and students claiming to defend their fatherland against foreign and domestic dangers. Among their victims were Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht (famous for the abortive German revolution) and German Foreign Minister Walther Rathenau.

State terrorism: Fascism, Nazism and Stalinism

Fascism and Nazism

There has been much debate about whether fascism, national-socialism and Stalinism are forms of state terror. Depending on where one stands on the political spectrum, Mussolini and his regime of fascism are seen as representing either totalitarianism or a form of state terrorism. Mussolini’s ascent to power was accompanied by the mobilisation and deployment of the Black Shirts, who intimidated and killed political opponents in a similar fashion to Hitler’s Brown Shirts. The fascists introduced the notorious Special Tribunal for the Defence of the State, which, in the 17 years of its existence, passed 47 death sentences. Mussolini also conducted state-sponsored terrorism, supporting the right-wing Croatian Ustasha, who were fighting for the independence of their country. The most infamous operation involved the dual murder of King Alexander of Yugoslavia and the French prime minister, Louis Barthou, as they met in Marseilles in April 1934.

State terrorism became intrinsic to Fascist and Nazi governance. Executed by the ruling party of the respective country, terror was utilised to achieve total control of the country and its people. The Nazis and the Fascists thus created a system of state-sanctioned fear and coercion. For the purposes of this paper it is not necessary to dig deeper into atrocities committed by the Nazis, but the widespread prosecution of Jews, communists and other declared enemies of the state were key to ensuring submission to, and compliance with, the state.

Stalinism

Stalin and his regime of Great Terror denoted another form of state terrorism, which both resembled and differed from that of the Nazis. Like Hitler, the Russian dictator eliminated his political opponents and transformed the state’s police and security apparatus into organs of coercion, enforcement and repression. However, the political, social and economic climate in Russia at the time bore little semblance to that which prevailed in Germany and Italy under the Nazis and the Fascists, who had emerged victorious from a political free-for-all struggle for power. In contrast, by the mid-1930s the Russian Communist Party had been firmly entrenched in power for more than a decade. Stalin’s political purges, which resulted in the death, exile and imprisonment of millions, were thus not launched in a time of war, crisis or revolution.
Case study: Zionism and the question of Palestine

The early history of the state of Israel perhaps best demonstrates the double-edged nature of the concept of terrorism, as the former terrorists became the government of the day and the rhetoric changed overnight. Underlying the Zionist ideal was the return of the Jewish Diaspora to Eretz Israel. Through the 1917 Balfour Declaration Britain committed itself to “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people”. By the time the implications and extent of its commitment became clear, it was too late for Britain to backtrack. Britain soon realised that Jewish security could only be achieved by either appeasing or ‘neutralising’ the Arab population. The International Zionist Organisation was committed to reliance on Britain. But following the first Arab attacks on Jewish settlements in 1920, they established a semi-open defensive force.

The assassination of Lord Moyne by the Stern Gang at the end of the World War II saw Jewish terrorist activity take off. The Zionist revisionist group was the last organisation to describe its activities as terrorist. In July 1946 the bombing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, where the British military headquarters was housed, was the biggest act of terror during this period. The epicentre of British rule in Palestine, including the government secretariat and the headquarters of the British military forces in Palestine and Transjordan, occupied two floors of the southern wing of the King David Hotel (beneath which the explosives were placed). Thus, the attack’s target was neither the hotel itself nor the people working or staying in it, but the government and military officers located there. Ninety-one people were killed and 45 others were injured, including Arabs, Jews and Britons. The bombing still holds an infamous distinction as one of the single most lethal terrorist incidents of the 20th century.

However, the British army declined to describe its attackers as terrorists because of the implication that its troops were frightened of them. An ongoing terrorist campaign led to the British abandoning Palestine in 1948.

Townshend remarks that this turning point in the Jewish terrorist campaign illustrates the difficulty of writing objectively about terrorism, as “even those studies that provide a clear and critical account of the Jewish terrorist campaign stop dead at the point of the British decision to withdraw from Palestine”. He furthermore points out that the subsequent campaign of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) is incomprehensible without an understanding of the aftermath of the British withdrawal from Palestine, during which the Jewish state substantially enlarged its share of Palestine’s land area and the Palestine Arab state collapsed. Many writers categorise this ‘enlargement’ as conventional warfare.

Western (pro-Israeli) writers describe the terror tactics of the Stern Gang as guerrilla warfare aimed at liberating the country from British colonial rule. Keeping in mind that
the PLO is fighting for a similar cause, using similar tactics, it should not be surprising that they call themselves ‘liberation fighters’ rather than ‘terrorists’.

**Struggles for independence and self-determination**

Terrorism again came to be associated with revolutionary objectives in the aftermath of World War II. The Western world used the concept to refer to struggles for independence and self-determination by various nationalist/anti-colonialist groups that emerged in Asia, Africa and the Middle East during the 1940s and 1950s. This form of revolutionary terrorism was also referred to as ethno-nationalist/separatist terrorism. Kenya, Cyprus and Algeria are just a few countries that owe their independence, at least in part, to nationalist political movements that employed ‘terrorism’ against colonial powers.

It is during this period that the phrase ‘one person’s terrorist is another person’s freedom fighter’ was coined. Many newly independent states argued that anyone or any movement that fought against colonial oppression and/or Western domination were not terrorists but should rather be described as freedom fighters. Former PLO chairperson Yassir Arafat explained this position in his address to the United Nations General Assembly in November 1974:

> The difference between the revolutionary and the terrorist lies in the reason for which each fights. For whoever stands by a just cause and fights for the freedom and liberation of his land from the invaders, the settlers and the colonialists, cannot possibly be called terrorist.

During the 1960s and 1970s, terrorism continued to be viewed in a revolutionary context. However, the usage of the concept was expanded to include nationalist and ethnic separatist groups outside a colonial or neo-colonial framework. Groupings such as the PLO, the Québécois separatist group *(Front de Libération du Québec)*, the Basque *Euskadi ta Askatasuna* (ETA, Freedom for the Basque Homeland) and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) adopted terrorism primarily as a means of drawing attention to their respective causes.

**‘Colonial terror’ in Africa**

Historical data shows that the African continent has witnessed a wide array of terror incidents, including the above-mentioned ‘revolutionary’, state-sponsored and state terrorism. Mainstream literature on terrorism in Africa identifies many of the former liberation movements who fought for independence from their colonial
masters as terrorist organisations. Some North American databases on terrorist organisations identify, to this day, the African National Congress (ANC), the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) and Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (Frelimo) as terrorist organisations.

Strangely enough, atrocities perpetrated by colonial forces in Africa and other parts of the world are often omitted in debates concerning revolutionary terrorism. Most of Africa has suffered from prolonged colonial and state-sponsored violence throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. There has been little regard for humanitarian law, and many war crimes have been committed. This author would like to introduce a new concept, which shall be termed ‘colonial terror’. This form of terrorism has historically been employed by state actors (colonial powers) to enforce their will (colonial rule) on indigenous peoples. Hence, ‘colonial terror’ should be seen as a distinct form of state terrorism, perpetrated during the colonial and post-colonial period. For the purposes of this paper, the discussion shall be limited to the African experience.

Eurocentric interpretations of colonial history in Africa depict Africans as ‘wild savages’ only waiting to be ‘brought to the light’ by Western civilisation as espoused by the colonial masters. Often those same colonial masters failed to adhere to the most basic rules of engagement. German South West Africa (now Namibia) provides a grim picture. In the 1880s, the German emperor proclaimed a ‘protectorate’ over its people. In the exercise of this ‘protection’, his representatives signed treaties with local chiefs which the Germans often failed to honour. Chiefs deviating from the ‘contract’ had their land seized by armed colonial forces. In response to the threat of their grazing land being appropriated, the Herero tribe launched a war of resistance. The German emperor retaliated by launching an attack led by Lieutenant-General von Trotha, who had a reputation for brutality. He had previously fiercely suppressed resistance to German colonisation in East Africa. In this instance, he brought an additional 10,000 colonial troops and chased the Hereros into the dry and arid Kalahari Desert. Once von Trotha had issued his infamous ‘extermination order’, German soldiers were ordered to poison the few waterholes in the area, while others set up guard posts along a 150-mile border. They were ordered to shoot any Herero trying to leave the desert. Hence the Herero uprising was stifled by shooting or enforced slow death in the desert from starvation, thirst and disease.23 Hereros who did not die by those means perished in labour camps. Though a controversial statistic, historians agree that most of the Herero tribe was wiped out.

Additionally, the history of Kenya provides a good illustration of the double-edged nature of the concept of terrorism. In February 2005 Kenyans who fought in the Mau Mau rebellion initiated legal proceedings against the British government for alleged human rights abuses. Their application reflected the fluidity of the concept of terrorism.
While the colonial government referred to the Mau Mau as ‘terrorists’, the Kenyan Mau Mau Trust in response referred to the British colonialists as terrorists. Appropriately, the dossier carries the title ‘Kenya: White Terror’. In the 1950s more than 200,000 Kenyan freedom fighters and their family members were detained in camps to force them to abandon their nationalist goals. The dossier goes on to catalogue instances of torture and murder perpetrated by British soldiers and locals under their command. Other documented atrocities include castration and blinding of defiant captives, as well as fatal whippings and rape by British soldiers. The report is based on more than 6,000 depositions alleging numerous cases of human rights abuse. The British, on the other hand, portrayed the Mau Mau as ‘wild savages’ who pillaged, raped and rambled around Kenya, rendering life a living nightmare for the British colonialists.24

Apartheid South Africa was guilty of many instances of colonial terror. During one of the most notorious raids on the Namibian refugee camp of Kassinga in southern Angola on 4 May 1978, South African forces killed over 600 people, most of them women and children.25 South Africa claimed it was fighting a war against SWAPO terrorists, and the operations throughout northern Namibia and southern Angola served to root them out. SWAPO members, on the other hand, referred to themselves as liberation fighters seeking Namibian independence.

The ‘New Left’

A new wave of left-wing-inspired terrorism occurred in Europe in the late 1960s in the wake of the student revolt of 1968. In Germany, the Rote Arme Fraktion (Red Army Faction, RAF, also known as the Baader-Meinhof Group) gained notoriety. The RAF saw itself as the vanguard of exploited and oppressed peoples in developing countries. Terrorism was the only feasible strategy for weak revolutionary movements. The group attacked several banks and killed a number of bankers, industrialists and judges.26 A few acts of terrorism occurred during the 1980s and early 1990s, but the second and third generation of left-wing terrorists had all but disappeared by the mid-1990s.

The largely middle-class Brigate Rosse (Red Brigades) spearheaded Italian left-wing terrorism. The Red Brigades regarded Italy as a bourgeois dictatorship and the language of armed resistance as the only language understood by the ruling class. Within the first ten years of its existence the Red Brigades engaged in some 14,000 terrorist attacks. Attacks on journalists and union officials and the murder of Christian Democrat Prime Minister Aldo Moro alienated many of their erstwhile well-wishers. The Italian Communists showed little sympathy with the terrorists, whom they perceived as harmful to their own political prospects. Both the Italian and German terrorists received logistical help from the Soviet Union through various Eastern European countries. For example, East Germany gave shelter to some of the groupings and assisted them in other ways.27
‘International terrorism’, ‘state-sponsored terrorism’ and ‘state terrorism’

The catch phrase ‘international terrorism’ was coined in the 1980s. In 1981 the American Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, accused the Soviet Union of “training, funding and equipping international terrorists”, and thus the concept of international terrorism was born. Published in 1982, Claire Sterling’s book *The terror network* epitomised the new interpretation of the concept. Sterling sketched a vast, unified global organisation not only inspired but also directly controlled by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). In true Thatcher-Reagan rhetoric the struggle against the ‘evil empire’ was created.

By omitting a definition of terrorism, Sterling managed to incorporate a wide range of groups and incidents in the ‘proof’ of her theory. She minimised the historical, political and doctrinal context of terrorist groups. What she described as the inherent fairness of Western societies meant that the only possible explanation for terrorist action was outside interference, that is, the Soviet Union was sponsoring terrorism in what was then referred to as the ‘Third World’.28


**Case study: Airliner hijackings**

In reference to Sterling’s work, many theorists agree that terrorism took on an international hue during the 1970s, when the onset of airliner hijackings internationalised the issue. The pioneers of hijackings, the PLO, were seen by their nemesis, Israel, and by several Western states as an international terrorist organisation as they were exiled from the land they claimed.

Bruce Hoffman30 dates the advent of modern, international terrorism to 22 July 1968. On that day three armed Palestinians belonging to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) hijacked an Israeli El Al commercial flight en route from Rome to Tel Aviv. Hijackings had occurred in the past, but in this case the Palestinians had hijacked the El Al flight for the purpose of trading the passengers they held hostage for members of their grouping imprisoned in Israel. This incident also differed from previous hijackings in that the origin or nationality of the aircraft mattered: El Al was Israel’s national airline and by extension a ‘symbol’ of the Israeli state. Also, the Israeli
government could not afford to ignore or reject the hijackers’ demands, as this could lead to the destruction of the aircraft and the deaths of all people on board. Furthermore, the combination of a bold political statement and the ‘symbolic’ targeting and crisis led to major media attention. Thus the so-called terrorists discovered that they had the power to awake the media and world opinion, especially when innocent civilians were involved.31

**State terrorism in post-colonial Africa**

During what is dubbed the ‘Red Terror campaign’, Ethiopian dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam gained notoriety for killing thousands during his reign of Ethiopia. Mengistu headed the junta which in a bloody coup in 1974 overthrew the government of Emperor Haile Selassie. The Dergue regime inaugurated its rule by having shot dead sixty senior officials to the emperor’s government by a firing squad. Both the emperor and the patriarch of the Orthodox Church were secretly killed. Early victims also included members of the Dergue group itself. Colonel Mengistu inaugurated his campaign of Red Terror in 1976 by throwing to the ground before an assembled crowd in the capital, Addis Ababa, bottles filled with a red substance. This was supposed to represent the blood of enemies of the revolution, so-called ‘imperialists’ and ‘counter-revolutionaries’. The campaign targeted young people and students suspected of membership of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP). Thousands were murdered in an organised manner. Neighbourhood committees would meet to discuss how to eliminate individual suspects.32

Cold War rivalries facilitated the Dergue grip on power, as it became the main client of the Soviet bloc in Africa. A 1991 Human Rights Watch report33 estimates that at least half a million civilians were killed as a result of the Dergue actions. The Dergue regime was deposed in 1991.

A major point of friction relating to the definition of terrorism in the African context is whether terrorism should apply to the actions of states in the same manner that it applies to the actions of non-state actors. For the purposes of this paper, terrorism is examined from all corners and angles. Thus, human rights violations perpetrated by repressive governments in Ethiopia, Egypt, Zimbabwe and elsewhere should be considered terrorist in nature.

**Right-wing terrorism**

The occurrence of right-wing extremism can best be demonstrated by using the US as an example. The terrorist campaigns of the Ku Klux Klan that were mentioned earlier
indicated the long history of right-wing extremist movements in the US. Initially right-wing extremists were driven by religious and political motivations. Following the integration of Jews in American society after the turn of the 19th century, anti-Semitism became, and remained, a central motivation among right-wing groupings. There are myriad groupings and clans with slight nuances in their ideological underpinnings, but most firmly believe in the superiority of the white Aryan race and want to eliminate or influence all others. While few groups have rejected terrorism and violence in principle, few have engaged in acts of terrorism.34

Over the last decade, paramilitary groups increasingly orientated towards ‘survivalism’ have mushroomed across the US, with their members receiving training in outdoor skills and guerrilla tactics. There are an estimated 800 militias in the US with a claimed membership of over five million people, but analysts consider this unrealistic and believe the number to be around 50,000. The majority belong to the so-called ‘talking’ militias, who are more concerned with opposing anti-gun legislation than with fomenting revolution. However, the ‘marching’ militias are actively involved in violent seditious activities, with the most prominent act of terror being the Timothy McVeigh35 bombing of the Alfred P Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in April 1995.

Many militia groups’ ‘field manuals’ and other literature quote liberally from Christian scripture in support of their violent activities.36 The Turner diaries by Andrew Macdonald is the ‘bible’ for most extreme right terrorists. In fact, Timothy McVeigh closely followed the content of the book when he committed the Oklahoma City bombing. Ultra-right terrorist groups have been enlisting members for a considerable time and have also been stockpiling weapons, partly through raiding armouries and partly through legal purchases. There have been sporadic but numerous attacks.

Right-wing terrorism is not exclusive to the North American domain; in recent years the European Union has witnessed the terrorist pendulum swinging from extreme left to far right. In the former East Germany (formerly known as the German Democratic Republic) an alarming increase in violent right-wing activities has been noted. The attacks are often aimed at foreign workers and asylum seekers. Following the discovery of more than 14 kg TNT, hand grenades and 12.3 kg of explosives in September 2003, German authorities feared the formation of a ‘Brown Army’. It is alleged that members of a Kameradschaft originating in eastern Germany were planning to blow up the Munich Jewish centre during a visit by the German president.37 The suspected attack would have coincided with the anniversary of the Nazis’ 1938 Kristallnacht attacks, when thousands of Jewish targets were attacked and dozens of Jews were murdered.38

South Africa has its very own example of right-wing terrorism. Suffice to mention here the Boeremag and the spate of bombings that occurred in the northern and central parts of South Africa in 2002.39
Terrorism inspired by religion?

Most Western theorists seem to concur that today’s terrorism is by and large linked to right-wing extremism, religious nationalism or religious extremism. The terms ‘religious terrorism’ and ‘religious-inspired terrorism’ raise critical questions, though, for example around whether one actually can measure religious motivation.

Bruce Hoffman suggests that religious terrorism has a set of core characteristics. First, it displays a transcendental function rather than a political one: it is executed in direct response to a theological demand or imperative. Second, religious terrorists tend to seek “the elimination of broadly defined categories of enemies”, ignoring the political consequences of indiscriminate killings. Hoffman also maintains that religious terrorists do not attempt to appeal to any constituency other than themselves. He argues that theories that identify religion as the sole motivation for certain acts of terror display a mono-causal fallacy.

Case study: Hezbollah

To underline the dangers associated with mono-causal fallacies, below is a short analysis of Hezbollah (the Party of God).

Western news reporting often refers to Hezbollah as a gang of terrorists driven by religious motivations. Following the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Hezbollah became a significant force, soliciting widespread public support. The bombing of the US embassy in Beirut in April 1983, the truck bombing of the US Marine and French forces headquarters in the same year, killing more than 300 troops, as well as a spate of hostage takings, may all fit the label ‘terrorist activities’.

However, other campaigns have guerrilla-style overtones, such as attacks on the military positions of the Israeli army (IDF) and the South Lebanon Army. By the same token, if Hezbollah is described as an organisation of terrorists, then certainly the Israeli-led Sabra-Chatilla massacres in 1981, the IDF’s shelling of Beirut and the ongoing attacks on Lebanon at the time of writing also constitute acts of terror.

Hezbollah’s rhetoric has not changed. It is still calling for the total destruction of Israel. What the West refers to as ‘suicide bombings’ (and what some Muslim groupings refer to as ‘martyrdom operations’) have definitely had an effect on the Western psyche and have produced some visible strategic results. For all its messianic overtones, Hezbollah is a political force engaged in a power struggle. The fusion of territorial, ethnic and sectarian impulses in the Lebanese civil war may confuse many analysts as to the real driving force behind this ‘terrorism’.
From concept to definition

The purpose of this section is to highlight the lack of a uniform interpretation of this highly disputed concept. ‘Terrorism’ is a dynamic, highly subjective and mostly Western construct. Over the years it has encompassed many different meanings.

‘Terrorism’ is a concept that traces its roots back through Western political thought. It has come to encompass myriad forms of political violence, such as assassinations, murder, hijackings, repressive government violence, bombings and many more. It has even been retrospectively applied to include acts of violence that happened as far back as the Roman Empire. The understanding of the poly-semantic concept differs, depending whether “one receives the bombs or whether one drops them”.

On a similar note it could be argued that terrorism, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.

In its early revolutionary context, terrorism held positive connotations. A negative underpinning emerged with the onset of various terrorist campaigns at the end of the 19th century. At that time, the concept entailed a gruesome act of killing which was pre-meditated and instilled fear in at least some part of the population. Following the French Revolution, the agency of terrorism changed from a state actor to sub-national groups. Under the Nazis and Fascists and during Stalin’s rule, terrorism was firmly placed at the doorstep of the state again, refuting theories that terrorism was only a strategy of the weak. Following World War II, struggles for national self-determination and independence added to the debate of whether there could be a ‘good’ terrorist.

This was epitomised at the height of the Cold War, when the West suggested that the Soviet Union was a state sponsor of terrorism, unmindful of the fact that its very own foreign policy mirrored a similar classification. Colonial terror entailed a distinct form of state terrorism perpetrated during the colonial and post-colonial period. Following the left-wing revolutionary terrorism of the 1970s, there has been a shift to terrorism that is, at least in part, inspired by religion. Colonial terror, state terrorism and state-sponsored terrorism certainly refute the myth that terrorism is a ‘weapon of the weak’ only.

Many more differentiations are possible, including ‘domestic’ and ‘transnational’ terrorism. In fact, some overzealous scholars suggest that environmental activists, anti-abortionists and pro-choice supporters are ‘terrorists’. This may be a case of choosing the moral high ground.

The concept of terrorism has and continues to encompass many meanings and interpretations. It would be difficult to come up with a conclusive and comprehensive interpretation of its meaning which would not offend some or other constituency. John Whitbeck perhaps best captures the difficulty of conceptualising it:
Terrorism is simply a word, a subjective epithet, not an objective reality and certainly not an excuse to suspend all the rules of international law.45

**And the definition?**

From conceptualisation to definition of the concept: ‘One person’s terrorist is another person’s liberation fighter‘ perhaps best captures the problematic nature of the terminology in Africa. It is not surprising that this aphorism emerged within the context of liberation struggles in Southern Africa, where the colonial powers described the freedom fighters as terrorists. The question of definition becomes even more crucial an issue in the wake of the US and British declaration of a global war against terrorism and the assumption that those countries who did not join the campaign were to be considered terrorists themselves.46

But what defines these terrorists?

There certainly have been many attempts to arrive at a universal definition. Schmid and Jongman47 recorded 109 different definitions in a survey in the mid-1980s, but a present-day study would probably double the number. Definitions range from the highly specific to the overly general. Yet, many Western countries seem to share a common understanding of the types of activities they regard as terrorism and the types of groups and individuals to be categorised as terrorist.48

The international community has been actively seeking consensus on the definition of terrorism for many years. Thirteen separate international conventions on terrorism have been created, each covering a specific type of activity linked to terrorism. Despite UN pressure, broad ratification has been difficult to achieve. The task of creating a comprehensive, binding international convention against terrorism has proved to be a slow and tiresome process, as all fails when the question of defining terrorism is tackled. A major bone of contention is the question of whether terrorism should apply to the actions of states in the same manner that it applies to the actions of non-state actors.49

The closest to a universally accepted definition is perhaps contained in the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 54/110 of 9 December 1999, stating that terrorism comprises “criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes”.50

Defining terrorism has been a particularly difficult task on the African continent. In fact, most legal drafters stay clear of defining terrorism but rather describe an ‘act of terror’ or ‘terrorist activity’. The 35th Ordinary Session of Heads of State and Government adopted the Organisation of African Unity Convention on the Prevention and
Combating of Terrorism (the Algiers Convention) in July 1999. What differentiates the Algiers Convention from others on terrorism is the exclusion of struggles for national self-determination from its definition.

Article 3(1) provides:

Notwithstanding the provisions of Article 1, the struggles waged by peoples in accordance with the principles of international law for their liberation or self-determination, including armed struggle against colonialism, occupation, aggression and domination by foreign forces shall not be considered as terrorist acts.51

Considering the broad nature of what ‘terrorism’ has come to include, it is hardly surprising that decision-makers have failed to come up with a generally agreed and universal definition. There seems to be at least some consensus on what forms of violence are not captured by the concept.

Perhaps the above should serve as a warning to decision-makers not to hurry any decisions pertaining to counter-terrorism strategies. How can one fight something that one struggles to define? Suffice it to say that if one is not careful, one’s own measures may be turned against oneself, as shown by the demise of the revolutionaries at the end of the French Revolution.

Notes

4 Quoted in Hoffman, ibid, p 5.
6 Hoffman, op cit, p 5.
10 Townshend, op cit, p 54.
11 Laqueur, op cit, p 62.
12 Townshend, op cit, p 54.
14 Initially Mussolini conducted state-sponsored terrorism, which involved him giving support to the right-wing Croatian Ustasha. The Ustasha were fighting for the independence of their country. Their most infamous operation involved the dual murder of King Alexander of Yugoslavia and the French prime minister, Louis Barthou, as they met in Marseilles in April 1934.
15 The question arising here is whether there is a numerical threshold for an act of violence or a repressive system to be classified as terrorist. Many theorists maintain that the Fascists created a reign of terror which undermined the parliamentary system in as early as the 1920s.
16 Hoffman, op cit, p 11.
17 Ibid.
18 Townshend, op cit, p 87.
19 Ibid.
20 Townshend, op cit, p 91.
21 Hoffman, op cit, p 11.
22 Quoted in Hoffman, op cit, pp 11-12.
29 For a full account of US interventions consult W Blum, Rogue state, Spearhead, South Africa, 2002.
30 Hoffman, op cit, Inside Terrorism, p 67.
31 Ibid, p 68.
35 Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber, was linked to the Michigan Militia, a 12,000-strong paramilitary survivalist organisation.
36 Hoffman, op cit [WHICH?], pp 110–111.
38 <news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3109966.stm> (20 September 2006).
41 Ibid, p 130.
42 Townshend, op cit, pp 98–104.
43 The US and France withdrew their troops from Lebanon following ‘suicide attacks’ on its installations in the country.