TERRORISM: A BRIEF HISTORY

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What is terrorism? There are more than a hundred definitions. The Department of State has one, Title 22 of the U.S. Code Section 2656: "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience." The Department of Defense has another, and also the Federal Bureau of Investigation, while the present writer has contributed two or three definitions of his own. But none is wholly satisfactory.

Too much has been made, in my opinion, of the element of "noncombatant targets" in order to define terrorism; there has not been a terrorist group in history that has attacked only soldiers or policemen. And what if a group of gunmen attack soldiers in the morning and civilians at night: Are they terrorists, do they belong to a different category, or do they change their character in the course of a day?

No all-embracing definition will ever be found for the simple reason that there is not one terrorism, but there have been many terrorisms, greatly differing in time and space, in motivation, and in manifestations and aims.

Initial Studies

When the systematic study of terrorism began in the 1970s, it was—mistakenly—believed by some that terrorism was more or less a monopoly of extreme left-wing groups, such as the Italian Red Brigades or the German Red Army or various Latin American groups. (There was also ethnic-nationalist terrorism, such as in Northern Ireland, but it figured less prominently.) Hence the conclusion: Terrorism comes into being wherever people are most exploited and most cruelly oppressed. Terrorism, therefore, could easily be ended by removing exploitation and oppression.

However, it should have been clear even then that this could not
possibly be a correct explanation because terrorism had been altogether absent precisely in the most oppressive regimes of the 20th century—Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. True, there was virtually no terrorism in the very richest societies and the most egalitarian—but nor was there terrorism in the very poorest.

A decade passed and most of the terrorist groups of the Far Left disappeared. If there was terrorism during the 1980s, it came to large extent from small cells of the Extreme Right. There were some instances of aircraft hijackings and bombings (such as over Lockerbie, Scotland), and a few embassies were attacked or even seized (such as in Tehran), but these operations were not carried out by groups of the Extreme Left.

The most deadly terrorist act in the United States prior to September 11, 2001, was the 1995 bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City, carried out by right-wing extremist sectarians. Nationalist terrorism continued (in Ulster, the Basque region of Spain, Sri Lanka, Israel, and some other places), but the Islamist terrorism that figures so prominently today was, as yet, hardly in appearance except, sporadically, in some Middle Eastern countries.

Today, terrorism and al-Qaida, and similar groups motivated by religious fanaticism, have virtually become synonyms, inevitably, perhaps, because most contemporary terrorism is carried out by their adherents. But the temptation to equate terrorism with these groups should be resisted for the simple reason that terrorism antedates militant Islamism by a very long time and, for all one knows, will continue to exist well after the present protagonists of jihadism have disappeared.

Terrorism is not a political doctrine, even though some have attempted to transform it into an ideology; it is, instead, one of the oldest forms of violence—even though it goes without saying that not all violence is terrorism. It probably antedates regular warfare because the fighting of armies involves a certain amount of organization and sophisticated logistics that primitive man did not have.

**Historical Background**

Terrorism appears in the Bible's Old Testament, and there were frequent incidents of political murder, even systematic assassination, in Greek and Roman history. The murder of Julius Caesar, to give but one example, preoccupied writers and artists for the next two millennia. The question of whether tyrannicide (such as undertaken by
William Tell, the national hero of Swiss sagas) was permissible kept generations of theologians and philosophers busy.

There was no total unanimity, but the majority opinion was that terrorism was permissible in certain conditions. When a cruel oppressor—a tyrant—being an enemy of all mankind, in violation of the law of God and human justice, left his victims no other way out of intolerable oppression, commission of a terrorist act was \textit{ultima ratio}, the last refuge of the oppressed, all other means having been exhausted.

But philosophers and theologians were aware even then that there was a grave danger of misusing the doctrine of justifiable tyrannicide, claiming \textit{ultima ratio} when, in fact, there was no justifiable reason for killing (such as in the case of the murder of the good King Henri IV of France) or when there existed other ways to express protest and resistance.

In the meantime, small groups engaging in systematic terrorism over long periods had arisen, such as the secret sect of the Assassins, an offshoot of the Muslim Ismailis, which operated from the 8th into the 14th century from what is now Iraq and Iran, killing governors, prefects, caliphs, and a crusader king of Jerusalem. They pioneered suicide terrorism—their weapon was always the dagger, and since their victims were usually well guarded, the chances of escaping were virtually nil. Even the language they used has survived—a fighter was a \textit{fida'i}, a term used to this day.

Terrorism continued to be active through the end of the Middle Ages into Modern Times, though on a somewhat reduced scale. This was the age of great wars such as the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) and the Napoleonic Wars (1799-1815). And in such periods, when a great many people were killed and wounded on the battlefields, no one would pay much attention if terrorist violence occurred here and there on a small scale.

The High Tide of Terrorism

The high tide of terrorism rose toward the end of the 19th century. Among the main active groups were the Irish rebels, the Russian Socialist Revolutionaries, and assorted anarchists all over Europe and North America. But secret societies were also actively engaging in terrorism outside Europe—in Egypt, for instance, as well as in India and China—aiming at national liberation. Some of these attacks had tragic consequences; others were more successful in the long, rather than the short, run.

The violence of the 19th century terrorists was notable—they killed a Russian tsar (Alexander II), as well as many ministers, archdukes, and generals; American presidents (William McKinley in 1901 and, before him in 1881, James Garfield); King Umberto of Italy; an empress (Zita) of the Austro-
Hungarian monarchy; Sadi Carnot, president of France; Antonio Canovas, the Spanish prime minister—to mention only some of the most prominent victims. The First World War, of course, was triggered by the murder of Franz Ferdinand, the Austrian heir to the throne, in Sarajevo in 1914.

Rereading the press of that period (and also novels by leading writers from Fyodor Dostoevsky to Henry James and Joseph Conrad), one could easily gain the impression that terrorism was the greatest danger facing mankind and that the end of civilized life was at hand. But as so often before and after, the terrorist danger passed, and, as the Russian Bolshevik revolutionary Leon Trotsky noted on one occasion, one minister was killed, but several others were only too eager to replace him.

Contemporary Terrorism

Terrorism reappeared after World War I in various countries, such as Germany and the Balkan nations. Before coming to power, both Fascists and Communists believed in mass violence rather than individual terrorist acts—with some occasional exceptions, such as the assassination of the Italian Socialist leader Giacomo Matteoti.

There was little terrorism during World War II and during the two decades thereafter. This explains, perhaps, why the renewal of terrorist operations in the 1970s and, a fortiori, the appearance of Islamist terrorism were interpreted by many, oblivious of the long, earlier history of terrorism, as something wholly new and unprecedented. This was particularly striking with regard to suicide terrorism. As noted earlier, most terrorism up to the late 19th century had been suicide missions, simply because the only available weapons were daggers, short-range pistols, or highly unstable bombs likely to explode in the hands of the attackers.

It is true, however, that
contemporary terrorism differs in some essential respects from that perpetrated in the 19th century and earlier on.

Traditional terrorism had its "code of honor": It targeted kings, military leaders, ministers, and other leading public figures, but if there were a danger that the wife or the children of the target would be killed in an attack, terrorists would refrain from striking, even if doing so endangered their own lives.

Today, indiscriminate terrorism has become the rule; very few leading politicians or generals have been killed, but very many wholly innocent people have. The term terrorism has, therefore, very negative connotations, and terrorists now insist on being called by another name. When Boris Savinkov, who headed the Russian Socialist Revolutionaries before World War I, published his autobiography, he had no hesitation in giving it the title Memoirs of a Terrorist. Today this would be unthinkable—the modern terrorist wants to be known as a freedom fighter, a guerrilla, a militant, an insurgent, a rebel, a revolutionary—anything but a terrorist, a killer of random innocents.

If there is no agreement concerning a definition of terrorism, does it mean that total confusion and relativism prevail, that one view is as good as another? It is perfectly true that, as an often quoted saying goes, one person's terrorist is another's freedom fighter. But since even the greatest mass murderers in history had their admirers, from Hitler to Pol Pot, such wisdom does not take us very far. Most of those who have studied terrorism and are reasonably free from bias will agree much of the time in their judgment of an action, even if perfect definitions of terrorism do not exist. Someone has compared it with pornography or obscenity, which is also difficult to define, but an observer with some experience will know it when he sees it.

There are no shortcuts to explain why people choose to be terrorists, no magic formulas or laws similar to Newton's and Einstein's in the physical world. From time to time, new insights are offered that do not, however, usually survive critical examination. Recently, for instance, it has been suggested that terrorism occurs only (or mainly) where there has been a foreign invasion of a country. This proposition is true in some cases, such as Napoleon's occupation of Spain or the presence of U.S. troops in Iraq. But a look at the geopolitical map of contemporary terrorism shows that, in most cases, from Sri Lanka to Bangladesh to Algeria to Europe, foreign invasion is not the decisive factor. And even in Iraq, the great majority of terrorist victims occur not among the occupying forces but as the result of attacks of Sunnis against Shiites, and vice versa.

**A Generational Phenomenon**
Does history offer any lessons?

Again, there are no clear-cut answers except in a very general way. Terrorism has seldom, if ever, occurred in effective dictatorships. In the modern world, it appears, ironically, that terrorists take advantage of the freedoms of thought, speech, religion, movement, and assembly offered by democracies. Terrorism is also a problem of failed states in which central power is weak or nonexistent. There was, for example, virtually no terrorism from the street in Franco's Spain, but as his dictatorship was dismantled, it appeared on the political scene. In the Middle East, even mildly authoritarian regimes have put down terrorism without great difficulty—Turkey and Syria in the 1980s, Algeria and Egypt in the decade thereafter.

Terrorism has sometimes succeeded but, at least equally and probably more often, has failed to attain its aims. And in some cases, it has resulted in the opposite of what its perpetrators wanted to achieve.

But terrorism is largely a generational phenomenon, and even if defeated, it may recur at a later date. There is no good reason to expect the disappearance of terrorism in our time. In an age in which large-scale wars have become too dangerous and expensive, terrorism is the prevailing form of violent conflict. As long as there are conflicts on Earth, there will be terrorism.

The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.