

Terrorists or Freedom Fighters?

The definition of “terrorism” is open to debate. The U.S. State Department defines terrorism as “an activity that (1) involves a violent act or an act dangerous to human life, property, or infrastructure; and (2) appears to be intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, kidnapping, or hostage-taking.”

Some argue that this definition should be broadened to include acts by the governments of states. They assert that states can sponsor terrorism and perform terrorist acts. For example, they may use force to instill fear in their citizens. Others argue that violence directed against political targets, such as assassinations or attacks on government buildings, are also terrorism.

One question is central to debates about the definition of terrorism—can the use of force ever be considered legitimate (legal) or justified? States have traditionally claimed a monopoly on the legal right to use force or violence. For example, according to international law, states may use force in self-defense against armed attacks.

After World War II, the use of violence in struggles for self-determination and national liberation fueled a new aspect of debates about the use of force—the differences between freedom fighters and terrorists. Newly independent nations and those fighting for independence argued that the use of force to oppose colonial rule or foreign military interventions was legitimate and that the individuals involved were freedom fighters. Yet their opponents labeled them as terrorists.

“All liberation movements are described as terrorists by those who have reduced them to slavery. ... [The term] terrorist [can] hardly be held to persons who were denied the most elementary human rights, dignity, freedom and independence, and whose countries objected to foreign occupation.”

Moulaye el-Hassan, , UN Ambassador from Mauritania, 1986

Critics countered that this argument was misleading, because it failed to consider the issue in its entirety. They argued that the ends could not be used to justify the means.

In the late 1970s, the UN extended the protections of the Geneva Conventions to groups fighting against colonial domination, occupation, or racist regimes, as well as to those exercising their right to self-determination. This change seemed to extend legitimacy to groups other than states to use force.

The worldwide response to terrorism has led many to consider important questions concerning the use of violence. When is violence justified? What is a terrorist? How does a terrorist differ from a freedom fighter? Who decides?

With your group members, come up with a definition of terrorism, and write it below.

Terrorism Definition: