

Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism:
Why is terrorism a contested concept?

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Introduction.

The concept of terrorism is one of the most widely used yet deeply contested terms within geopolitics. The term traces back to the ‘Reign of Terror’¹, a period during the French revolution, when revolutionaries would engage in such ‘acts of terror’ to further their political gains. These acts (which intended to cause mass hysteria and to send the message of the revolution via fear) included the public execution of over 16,500 citizens², however the “total death toll during the ten-month Reign of Terror rests anywhere between 30-50,000.”³

This definition of terrorism may seem contradictory to the contemporary understanding as overtime, the meaning has undergone a semantic shift, evolving with political and ideological tides. The lack of universally agreed upon definition reflects the term’s subjectivity – after all terrorism, by the very nature of ‘terror’, is an emotive subject. The cliché often cited⁴ to Gerald Seymour, of “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter” stands as a testament to the indefinable nature of terrorism.

This essay aims to explore the contested nature of terrorism by examining the challenges of defining it, questioning its very existence through critical terrorism studies, and engaging with the scholarship surrounding terrorism and the greater study of geopolitics and

¹ Jenkins, J.P. (2025). Terrorism. In: *Encyclopædia Britannica*. [online] Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/terrorism> [Accessed 18 May 2025].

² Britannica (2019). Reign of Terror. In: *Encyclopædia Britannica*. [online] Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Reign-of-Terror> [Accessed 18 May 2025].

³ Mark, H.W. (2022). *Reign of Terror*. [online] World History Encyclopedia. Available at: https://www.worldhistory.org/Reign_of_Terror/ [Accessed 18 May 2025].

⁴ ***Counter-evidence to suggest that Gerald Seymour was not the original coiner of this phrase was too great as to allow for a citation but too lacking to suggest a different author.***

geostrategy – under the null hypothesis of terrorism being less of a fixed concept and more of a malleable label wielded to serve political interests of those in power.

Section 1: Defining Terrorism.

One of the primary reasons why terrorism remains a deeply contested concept is the absence of a universally accepted definition – a reflection of the inherently politicised nature and emotive subjectivity that surrounds both the scholarship and the (inter-)national policy it helps to shape. While there is some consensus on core elements, such as the strategic use of terrorisation and fearmongering to achieve aims, definitions often diverge when observed in detail. For instance, state-centric definitions often emphasise on the role of violence or destruction, yet victim-centric definitions may place higher degrees of focus on the effects on people - both the direct and indirect victims from terror-based warfare.

Efforts to create a universal definition of terrorism, while historically unsuccessful, is a process still ongoing despite some resistance. Instead of a broad definition, the UN has adopted a pragmatic, sectoral approach, developing a series of international legal instruments that criminalise specific acts commonly associated with terrorism. These conventions target particular behaviours, such as the 1970 Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Seizure of Aircraft⁵, the 1971 Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Civil Aviation⁶, the 1997 International Convention for the Suppression of Terrorist Bombings⁷, and the 1999 International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism.⁸ These instruments focus on the nature of the act itself - for instance, criminalising

⁵ Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Seizure of Aircraft. Available at: <https://treaties.un.org/doc/db/terrorism/conv2-english.pdf> [Accessed 2 Jun. 2025].

⁶ Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Civil Aviation. Available at: <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20974/volume-974-I-14118-english.pdf> [Accessed 2 Jun. 2025].

⁷ International Convention for the Suppression of Terrorist Bombings. Available at: <https://treaties.un.org/doc/db/terrorism/english-18-9.pdf> [Accessed 2 Jun. 2025].

the use of civil aircraft as a weapon or the unlawful transport of Chemical, Biological, Nuclear and Radiological (CBRN) weapons - rather than attempting to define the overarching concept of "terrorism".⁹

To compliment this search, Alex Schmid collated over one hundred definitions on terrorism in order to find a consensus on what terrorism truly is.¹⁰ His efforts, to the description of Bruce Hoffman, was all for nought – “Four years and a second edition later, Schmid was no closer to the goal of his quest, conceding in the first sentence of the revised volume.”¹¹ The search for such a definition is continued, as it is theorised to have a positive impact on the legal approaches to the criminalisation and punitive consequences of acts of terror.¹²

The ambiguity surrounding the definition of terrorism becomes particularly significant when applied to individuals or groups who engage in democratic opposition to the state. Executive Order 14188¹³, issued in 2025, was framed as a supplement to Executive

⁸ United Nations (2024). International Legal Instruments | Office of Counter-Terrorism. [online] [www.un.org](https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/international-legal-instruments). Available at: <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/international-legal-instruments> [Accessed 1 Jun. 2025].

⁹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2016). COUNTER-TERRORISM LEGAL TRAINING CURRICULUM 6 The International Legal Framework against Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Terrorism. [online] Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/terrorism/for%20web%20stories/1-WS%20CBRN%206%20modules/CBRN_module_-_E.pdf [Accessed 2 Jun. 2025].

¹⁰ Schmid, A. (2004). Terrorism - The Definitional Problem. *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law*, [online] 36(2). Available at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1400&context=jil> [Accessed 24 May 2025].

¹¹ Hoffman, B. (2006). *Inside Terrorism*. New York Columbia University Press.

¹² Cassese, A. (2001). Terrorism is Also Disrupting Some Crucial Legal Categories of International Law. *European Journal of International Law*, 12(5), pp.993–1001. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1093/ejil/12.5.993>.

¹³ Trump, D. and the White House (2025). Additional Measures to Combat Anti-Semitism – The White House. [online] The White House. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/additional-measures-to-combat-anti-semitism/>.

Order 13899¹⁴ and other recent legislation addressing anti-Semitism and domestic extremism -however, aspects of its application have drawn criticism, particularly in relation to pro-Palestinian activism.¹⁵

In April 2025, the Guardian reported that the Trump administration sought “to cast pro-Palestinian protesters as terrorists – and then use anti-terror and immigration laws to deport legal residents and quell campus demonstrations ...”¹⁶ This raises concerns in the balancing of national security and democratic freedoms as it can be argued that a state using its democratically elected powers against its populace who engage via democratic means is – by the definition provided below¹⁷ – tyrannical and unbecoming of a democratic state. From this perspective the definitional uncertainty underscores the inherent subjectivity of terrorism, allowing for interpretations of the legislation that may suppress legitimate democratic action is not just a reflection of the acts themselves but a reflection of those who wield the power to interpret them - thereby highlighting the need for a universally recognised and consistent definition, to truly understand what terrorism actually is.

¹⁴ Trump, D. and the White House (2019). Executive Order on Combating Anti-Semitism – The White House. [online] trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov. Available at: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-combating-anti-semitism/> [Accessed 1 Jun. 2025].

¹⁵ Anders, C. and Waheed, M. (2018). Anti-Semitism Awareness Act of 2018 | American Civil Liberties Union. [Letter] American Civil Liberties Union. Available at: <https://www.aclu.org/documents/anti-semitism-awareness-act-2018> [Accessed 1 Jun. 2025].

¹⁶ Lakhani, N. (2025). *US intensifies crackdown on peaceful protest under Trump*. [online] the Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/apr/09/anti-protest-bills-trump> [Accessed 19 May 2025].

¹⁷ *This essay defines tyranny as the ‘autocratic form of rule by which the minority oppresses its populace’.*

Section 2: Alternative theories.

Beyond legal and political definitions, academic disciplines have extensively debated and deconstructed the concept of terrorism, further highlighting its contested nature and challenging the possibility of a truly objective understanding. Critical terrorism studies theory goes a step further in contesting the reality of terrorism by questioning its very existence. CTS, which was borne out of the need for terrorism studies post 9/11¹⁸, finds an understanding in the shared consensus that terrorism not an act in of itself, but rather a label applied on acts of violence that have an ideological basis. Its focus, in the critique of terrorism as an act individual, lies within the analysis of national (counter-)terrorism policies as the term may be used, predominantly within the domestic policy field, as a method to delegitimise political opposition and justify state sponsored injustice.

The aim of CTS research is not to establish a ‘correct’ perception of terrorism, but rather to shed light on the dominant views surround the field and ‘expose’ the inherently politicised nature made from employing the term in both academia and policy as its use “implies a political judgement about the legitimacy of actors and their actions.”¹⁹ From this perspective, terrorism is less of an objective reality - rather it is a political weapon wielded by actors within positions of power to manipulate the public’s perception and to maintain state control.

¹⁸ Jarvis, L. (2024). Three waves of critical terrorism studies: agenda-setting, elaboration, problematisation. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, [online] 17(3), pp.463–487. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2024.2356918>.

¹⁹ Jackson, R. (2007). The core commitments of critical terrorism studies. *European Political Science*, [online] 6(3), pp.244–251. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.eps.2210141>.

Evidence of this can be seen through the lens of self-determination movements. The ETA, Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, a separatist group within the Basque Country has been labelled as a terrorist organisation by many countries such as the UK²⁰, the USA²¹, Canada²² and the EU²³. This label, alongside the memories of bloodshed during the Basque conflict, has “left many Basques unwilling to even consider independence.”²⁴ Therefore, one could argue that the designation of Euskadi Ta Askatasuna as a terrorist group has just as high levels of political ramifications than any singular act of terror carried on by this proscribed organisation.

Sociological theories reinforce the idea of terrorism as a "social construction," emphasising that the process of defining terrorism involves interpreting events and assigning causes. This interpretative process, particularly how it is presented to the public, can significantly manipulate perceptions and promote specific interests. Sociologists – such as Professor Mathieu Deflem²⁵ - analyse how individuals are motivated to engage in collective

²⁰ UK Government (2015). *Terrorism Act 2000*. [online] Legislation.gov.uk. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/11/schedule/2#commentary-key-d6f8a84a69c1438da2b350b69e7df3b5> [Accessed 18 May 2025].

²¹ US Department of State (1997). *Foreign Terrorist Organizations*. [online] U.S. Department of State. Available at: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm> [Accessed 18 May 2025].

²² Government of Canada (2014). *About the listing process*. [online] Publicsafety.gc.ca. Available at: <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/ntnl-scrtr/cntr-trrrsm/lstd-ntts/crrnt-lstd-ntts-en.aspx> [Accessed 18 May 2025].

²³ Access to European Union Law (2025). *EUR-Lex - 32009E0468 - EN - EUR-Lex*. [online] Europa.eu. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/compos/2009/468/oj> [Accessed 18 May 2025].

²⁴ Bernhard, M. (2018). *With independence a far-fetched dream, Basque Country activists downsize their ambitions*. [online] latimes.com. Available at: <https://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-spain-basques-20180613-story.html> [Accessed 19 May 2025].

²⁵ Deflem, M. (2025). Professor Mathieu Deflem. [online] Blogspot.com. Available at: <https://deflem.blogspot.com> [Accessed 1 Jun. 2025].

acts of violence for political change, highlighting the crucial role of communication, shared norms, and competing values.²⁶

Alternative theories also challenge traditional understandings by framing terrorism as a method of war. Clausewitz's assertion that "war is politics by other means" echoes in discussions of terrorism as an asymmetric strategy. Groups labelled as terrorists often lack the resources for conventional warfare, turning to politically charged violence as a means of advancing political goals. This blurs the line between terrorism and guerrilla warfare, further complicating the search for a universal definition.

The ambiguity surrounding what constitutes terrorism, state vs. non-state actors, legitimate resistance vs. political violence, only highlights its contested nature. Alternative theorists argue that if terrorism is purely a construct, its legitimacy or illegitimacy is entirely dependent on who defines it while some argue that the act itself carries enough weight to illegitimise arguments

²⁶ Phillips, B.S. (2015). *Understanding Terrorism*. Routledge.

Section 3: The Divide.

While terrorism is frequently and critically explored within academia, the implementation of (counter-)terrorism policies often operates completely external. This divide between the theorists and the practitioners has produced significant gaps in understanding, communication and strategic effectiveness. Far from a symbiotic relationship, the link between the scholarship and the strategic decision making remains fractured – resulting in reduced political efficiency. This rupture not only undermines the ability to make effective national and international policies but also contributes to the conditions in which terrorism flourishes.²⁷

Academics often work within theoretical paradigms, prioritising critique over pragmatism, while policymakers are constrained by electoral cycles, public opinion, and the demand for quick results.²⁸ Jackson best denotes the need for intercommunication in his article on the core commitments of CTS. “It will be the responsibility of both critical and orthodox terrorism scholars to ensure that this [the divide between the scholarship and ‘security officials’] does not occur, but that through rigorous and respectful dialogue the broader field is invigorated and revitalised.”²⁹ However, this may not always be possible as many counter-terrorism practitioners often operate within theatres not publicly accessible, hindering the much-needed dialogue.

²⁷ Matamis, J. (2024). Bridging the Gap Between Academic Research and National Security • Stimson Center. [online] Stimson Center. Available at: <https://www.stimson.org/2024/bridging-the-gap-between-academic-research-and-national-security/> [Accessed 2 Jun. 2025].

²⁸

²⁹ Ibidem [Footnote № 14 – Jackson, R.(2007)]

One clear example of this disconnect can be seen through the lens of the UK's Counter terrorism policy, known as CONTEST³⁰. Prevent, one of the key strategies within CONTEST, has received criticisms from academics and practitioners alike.³¹ People have argued that prevent disproportionately targets Muslim communities, lacks transparency and relies on institutional biases and stereotypes.³² This is furthered in relation to mandatory reporting, which places the legal onus of intelligence gathering on those within positions of trust, such as teachers, nurses and religious leaders.³³ Many members of the public have stated that prevent effectively divides the community via removing the important degree of trust between the public and the public sector.

Without robust academic engagement, governments risk adopting reactive and politically motivated counter-terrorism frameworks that perpetuate social division and delegitimise lawful dissent.³⁴ This weaponisation of the term “terrorist” – often aimed at minority or opposition groups – stems from a superficial understanding of terrorism rooted in short-term security goals, not long-term stability. To bridge this divide, both scholars and policymakers must engage in a sustained dialogue where academic critique is not only heard but structurally integrated into the formation and review of counter-terrorism policy.

³⁰ Gov.UK (2023). Counter-terrorism strategy (CONTEST) 2023. [online] GOV.UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/counter-terrorism-strategy-contest-2023> [Accessed 2 Jun. 2025].

³¹ PreventWatch (2023). About Prevent - Prevent Watch. [online] Prevent Watch. Available at: <https://www.preventwatch.org/about-prevent/> [Accessed 2 Jun. 2025].

³² Versi, M. (2015). Concerns on Prevent Meeting between David Anderson QC and the MCB. [online] Available at: <https://www.mcb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/20150803-Case-studies-about-Prevent.pdf> [Accessed 2 Jun. 2025].

³³ Department for Education (2023). The Prevent duty: an introduction for those with safeguarding responsibilities. [online] GOV.UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-prevent-duty-safeguarding-learners-vulnerable-to-radicalisation/the-prevent-duty-an-introduction-for-those-with-safeguarding-responsibilities> [Accessed 2 Jun. 2025].

³⁴ Amnesty International (2025). UK: Police conduct at ‘End the Genocide’ protest and subsequent arrests are ‘seriously concerning’. [online] @AmnestyUK. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/uk-police-conduct-end-genocide-protest-and-subsequent-arrests-are-seriously> [Accessed 2 Jun. 2025].

Conclusion.

In conclusion, terrorism remains a deeply contested concept due to its political, strategic, and ideological implications. Its definition varies not only across states and institutions but also through theoretical lenses that challenge its very existence as an objective phenomenon. Critical theory underscores its politicised construction, while scholars like Martha Crenshaw reveal its strategic logic as a form of political violence.

From the French revolution to the war on terror, the last two and a half centuries has seen the inclusion of ‘terror’ as a method of warfare, with great strategic implications. Terrorism - for better or for worse - has been extremely effective at achieving aims, which has increased the subjectivity and emotional connotations of terror-based warfare, furthering its reputation as a contested concept.

The contested nature of terrorism is not simply an academic debate - it reflects power dynamics in global politics, where the ability to define terrorism equates to the power to legitimise or delegitimise political violence. Thus, terrorism is less a fixed concept and more a malleable label wielded to serve political interests, both domestic and international. After all, it is irrefutable that one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.

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