WHY IS IT SO DIFFICULT TO DEFINE TERRORISM?

by Sebastian Wojciechowski*

1. REASONS

The term ‘terrorism’ is among the most frequently used words. It accompanies us on an everyday basis. It is apparently understood in a similar manner throughout the world, but it is actually interpreted and defined in different ways. "All vogue words appear to share a similar fate: the more experiences they pretend to make transparent, the more they themselves become opaque". Terrorism is no exception to that rule. This has become particularly apparent following the events of September 11, Bali, Madrid and London. Terrorism is characterized not only by its manifold nature and complexity but also by the problem with its definition.

What is terrorism then? How can one define it? Which of the several hundreds of definitions is accurate? Why are they so numerous? The above questions only appear to be easy, or even trivial. They have actually been

* S.Wojciechowski, Head of the Unit of Strategic Studies, University of Adam Mickiewicz in Poznań, e-mail: s.wojciechowski@wp.pl.

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It is a fact that a single, commonly accepted or applied definition of terrorism does not exist, and this is so despite the numerous and manifold efforts undertaken by academic circles, advisory and consultative bodies as well as by individual states and international organizations. It is also difficult to determine the number of definitions of terrorism which already exist. Numerous proposals are made – and the common element is their number: several hundreds. What is more, every year new ones are developed.

The main objective of this paper is to attempt to answer the question of why it is so difficult to develop a single, universal definition of terrorism. Secondly, it presents the arguments to justify the need for such a definition. The following factors should be enumerated as the principal difficulties in defining terrorism unambiguously:

A) Being unable to, or having difficulty in, distinguishing terrorism from more or less related phenomena or processes, such as terror, guerrilla warfare, fight for national independence, irredentism, separatism, etc. The notion of terrorism is frequently applied to describe highly varied attitudes and behaviors ranging from anarchist, or revolutionary ones, to criminal acts. It also happens that the same situation is interpreted either as an act of terrorism or a struggle for national independence, depending on one's political, religious or ethnic option. This may be exemplified by the operations of the IRA or ETA: for part of Irish or Basque nationalists, respectively, they are a form of struggle for independence whereas a majority of public opinion treats them as terrorism. The situation of the Tamil Tigers, Hamas, Kurd or Chechen extremists is similar. Sometimes it is even difficult to determine the borderline between terrorism and struggle for national independence, as emphasized by Alex Schmid, who says that “one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter”.

B) Decision-making centers (e.g. politicians) or opinion-forming circles (e.g. media) intentionally applying the notion of terrorism, terrorist, etc., in order to influence public opinion and to discredit a certain individual or formation, to justify some activity, use a red herring or win popularity. Thus,

the notion can be a tool of manipulation bringing defined political or mate-
rial advantages. This has become particularly popular after the attacks of
September 11. Since then, the authorities of numerous states (the US, Rus-
sia, Israel or the United Kingdom, to mention a few) have been overusing
the terrorist rhetoric. They use it frequently, in particular in the circum-
stances which are particularly important for them, e.g. during election
campaigns.

C) Avoidance of the notion of terrorism/terrorist. In some cases this
concerns the members of terrorist organizations, who do not perceive
themselves as terrorists and use the notion of a fighter, partisan, liberator,
'god's servant', etc. In this way they intend to eliminate negative connota-
tions, as exemplified by the words uttered by one of the leaders of Lebanese
terrorists, Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah: “We don’t see ourselves as ter-
rorists because we do not believe in terrorism. We see ourselves as mujih-
adeen [holy warriors] who are fighting a Holy War for the people”.
There are many more statements like this. One of the few instances of identifying
oneself with terrorism in public were the words uttered by the deceased
S. Basayev, a Chechen commander, who said in an interview for the ABC
TV: “I admit I am a bad guy, a bandit, a terrorist […] but I am fighting for
the independence of my country”.

Another manifestation of conscious refraining from the notion of ter-
rorism or other, related terms, is avoiding them in the organizations' names,
platforms, or propaganda materials. It is a paradox that words such as free-
dom, justice, fatherland, liberation, etc., are frequently used instead of, e.g.
Basque Fatherland and Liberty, the Palestine Liberation Front, etc.

Another way to conceal the connections with terrorism involves social
and charitable activity conducted by terrorist organizations among the local
population, which is frequently highly demanded and received in a very
positive manner. Such activity usually comprises handing out food, setting
up medical aid centers, night shelters, schools, kindergartens, etc. Such
activities have been and are undertaken by Hamas or Hezbollah. Apart from

4 Interview with S. Basajew, "Gazeta Wyborcza".
5 P. Ebbing, R. Fiedler, A. Wejkszner, S. Wojciechowski, Leksykon współczesnych
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fulfilling their lofty objectives, such activities also serve the purpose of winning popularity and recruiting new members, conducting illegal business, expanding their areas of influence or changing their own image. Some organizations set up separate structures for this purpose and are considerably successful. These factors have been among the reasons for the increased popularity of such formations as Al-Qaeda, Hamas and Hezbollah.

D) Taking political advantage of the fact that there is no universal definition of terrorism. The attitude of some states which use this lack of definition to achieve their own goals on the international as well as internal arena is frequently a factor which obstructs the attempts to develop such a definition. Various forms of support granted to various terrorist organizations or using terrorist methods can serve as examples here. This tendency reached an all-time high at the time of the Cold War, when it was one of the manifestations of ideological, political or economic competition for influence. Yet, it is still present now as well, as reflected in the activity of the states accused of supporting terrorism (e.g. Iran, Sudan, formerly Iraq and Libya). Thus, one can speak about the states, which have an interest in the international legal regulations concerning terrorism not being adopted, that this would contradict their broadly understood interests.

E) The attempts to explain the essence of terrorism by means of more or less related notions of ‘radicalism’, ‘extremism’, ‘acts of terror’, ‘terrorist acts’, ‘policies of terror’, etc. They usually describe or characterize only a section, a certain aspect of terrorism while failing to present a comprehensive and accurate essence of the issue. It is a frequent, dangerous and erroneous simplification to equate terrorism with Islamic fundamentalism or other notions.

The definition of a ‘terrorist attack’, adopted by the EU, is such an example of applying a related notion instead of terrorism. This is a classical ‘half measure’ applied under circumstances where there is no commonly accepted solution.

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7 There is a number of other more or less convergent notions, e.g. Islamism, religious nationalism, Islamic fascism, Islamic radicalism, fundamentalist radicalism, etc.
F) Another difficulty that we encounter in our attempts to present terrorism in a comprehensive and thorough manner is its evolution. As time goes by, terrorist organizations emerge or cease to exist, the form of their activity and its assessment evolves, and new types of terrorism arise as exemplified by ecoterrorism, bioterrorism, cyberterrorism or the so-called global terrorism which has recently become particularly significant. The assessment of individuals, organizations, movements and ideas also evolves. “An individual who is perceived as a terrorist today can become a national hero fighting for freedom and independence tomorrow.”

The evolution of terrorism concerns both the semantics of the notion as well as its forms, types and extent. This evolution is influenced by the transformations that take place both inside and around terrorism. They assume various forms. Some authors point to the presence of concrete waves – stages of terrorism which illustrate its changeable formula. All these elements are obvious obstacles in perceiving and defining terrorism in an unambiguous manner.

G) The problems with the definition of the notion can also involve personal ambitions, sympathy or emotions. Sometimes new definitions of terrorism are coined as a result of individual expectations or ambitions of individual scientists or institutions. The assessment of a certain process or event frequently depends upon whether we share similar views on a certain issue, approach or individual, or we are against them. B. Jenkins made an accurate and brief conclusion when he said: “What is called terrorism thus seems to depend on one’s point of view”. So it depends on the degree of our emotional involvement, whether consciously or subconsciously, which is based on various prerequisites, such as religious, ethnic, cultural or political ones.

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8 Scientific or popular studies make references to such notions as: group terrorism, consumer terrorism, agricultural terrorism, etc.
10 The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and its leader Yasser Arafat are an example of this. See: J. Wallach, Arafat w oczach przyjaciół i wrogów, Warszawa 1991.
11 M. Tomczak, “Evolution of International Terrorism”, [in:] The Faces...
It is also related to the representatives of different social groups perceiving the essence of terrorism in different ways. Alex Schmid defines four basic options: academics, who try to maintain a possibly objective attitude to terrorism; authorities, who frequently fall victim of terrorist attacks on the one hand, and who are frequently involved in combating terrorists on the other; society, who either condemns or supports terrorist activity; and the terrorists themselves, who frequently perceive terror as the only feasible form of defending their rights and interests, and of publicizing their demands.

A terrorist attack, and the methods and means of operation applied in the course of an attack can be varied and manifold which is a significant obstacle to successfully defining the notion. They involve an attack on the life or health of one or many individuals, an attempt to destroy a certain object, taking hostage(s), hijacking of a vehicle and many others. To a certain extent, the type of weapon used, divided into conventional, weapons of mass destruction or weapons which make use of cybertechnology, can help categorize the matter. Potential targets for an attack can be divided into personal and material targets, traditional and unconventional ones (e.g. an orphanage), stationary and movable (individuals or vehicles in motion), and the targets of various ranks: politicians, other public persons (e.g. businessmen, artists), ‘ordinary’ citizens, etc.

The doubts, discussions or disputes concerning the notion of terrorism conducted on an international stage, including international organizations, are of fundamental significance. They involve the definition of the notion of terrorism, indicating its components, enumerating terrorist organizations and distinguishing between terrorism and fighting for national independence.

The above difficulties are exemplified by the discrepancies concerning a universal definition of terrorism to be developed by the United Nations. Despite many years of attempts and the development of several hundreds of highly diversified definitions, the international community has failed to

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produce a single, universal, commonly accepted formula. The failure to
develop a single joint attitude has also been influenced by ideological and
political aspects and the problems with differentiating terrorism from fight-
ing for national independence. This found expression in some statements
of Third World leaders. They frequently emphasized that, irrespective of the
form of operation, all ‘liberation’ movements are always described by the
regimes they oppose as ‘terrorist’ ones. The words of the UN ambassador
from Mauritania Moulaye el-Hassan, who observed during a UN debate
that “all liberation movements are described as terrorists by those who have
reduced them to slavery”, illustrate this. Yasser Arafat presented an even
more extremist standpoint when he said: “any people fighting to liberate
themselves from an alien oppression and exploitation have the right to use
all methods available, not excluding force”.15

Later on, nearly until the end of the 1990s, the main obstacle to the
development of a UN definition of terrorism was that some states were
against the adoption of a comprehensive regulation and they were promot-
ing an idea of sector-oriented conventions devoted to various kinds of
terrorism.

At present, the main moot point is not the content of the definition but
mainly the instances when the convention should not apply. This is the area
of conflict between the states who either support or oppose the acts related
to national liberation struggles to be covered by this regulation. Another
contentious issue involves the attitude to state terrorism.

In the opinion of some experts, terrorism escapes an unambiguous
definition as the notion is too comprehensive.16 Every year thousands of
days and hundreds of books on terrorism are published worldwide. When
we type the word ‘terrorism’ in a Google browser we get approximately 50
million results. Louise Richardson stresses that the notion of terrorism is
used so commonly and widely that it has almost been deprived of any mean-
ing. Some behaviors classified as terrorism, e.g. planting of bombs, kidnap-

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16 A. Schmid, Terrorism..., op.cit., p. 376; T. Meisels, “The Trouble with Terror:
The Apologetics of Terrorism – a Refutation”, Terrorism and Political Violence 2006,
no. 18, p. 470.
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Attacks can also represent other phenomena, such as criminal terror. According to Walter Laqueur, a decade-long debate on the typology and definition of terrorism has not significantly contributed to development of the knowledge of terrorism. In his opinion, analysis of terrorism can be conducted even with a minimum of theoretical knowledge, which unfortunately frequently does not produce satisfactory results. Not only is terrorism on everybody's lips then, but apparently everybody is an expert on terrorism. Journalists, commentators, politicians or experts in political sciences, military matters, economics, law, sociology, philosophy, psychology, theology, cultural and international relations, media, logistics, management, etc., are keen to discuss this issue in various meanings and contexts, which expands the field of research even more, and makes it yet more difficult to grasp the essence of terrorism.

K) The fact that there are numerous definitions of the notion even within a single state and its structures makes it more complicated to define terrorism, and simultaneously illustrates the complexity of the matter. The states where different government institutions or agencies apply many different definitions of terrorism are a particular case. The US example is probably the best illustration of this. The US administration has not worked out a single formal definition of terrorism whereas its agencies have. The Central Intelligence Agency was among the first ones to take steps in this direction. For example, in 1980, the CIA assumed that terrorism was: “...the threat or use of violence for political purposes by individuals or groups, whether acting for, or in opposition to established governmental authority, when such action are intended to shock or intimidate a large group wider than the immediate victims”.

The US Department of Justice in turn defines terrorism as “…violent criminal conduct apparently intended: (1) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (2) to influence the conduct of a government by intimidation or coercion; (3) to affect the conduct of a government by assassination or kidnapping.”

18 W. Laqueur in: A. Schmid, A. Jongman, Political..., op.cit., p. 3.
19 Ibidem, p. 32.
20 Ibidem, p. 33.
The Federal Bureau of Investigation (1980) defines terrorism as “the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives. A terrorist incident is defined as a violent act or an act dangerous to human life in violation of the criminal laws of the United States or of any state to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives”.21

The US Department of Defense (1983) applies a very similar definition of terrorism, characterized as “the unlawful use or threatened use of force or violence by a revolutionary organization against individuals or property with the intention of coercing or intimidating governments or societies, often for political or ideological purposes”.22

The examples above do not exhaust the entire array of definitions of terrorism applied by various US authorities (e.g. the US Congress or State Department). Additionally, some institutions modify their definitions as time goes by, or complement them with additional phrases, as exemplified by the statements of the Department of Defense in the definitions from 1983 and 1986, or two different versions applied by the US army (both from 1983).

Another related problem concerns the laconic character, imprecision or polemic nature of many definitions applied. The solution applied by the US State Department can be used as an example here. Terrorism is defined as premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents.23 The term ‘noncombatant’ includes both the civilian population and military personnel who, at the time of the incident, are unarmed and/or not on duty. An act of terrorism was also considered to involve attacks on military installations or on armed military personnel when a state of military hostility does not exist at the site and no military operations are going on, as it was the case in West Berlin in 1986, Athens in 1988 or Manila in 1989.24 Some of

21 Ibidem, p. 32.
22 Ibidem, p. 33.
the above phrases, however, can raise doubts, e.g. ‘unarmed’ or ‘not on duty’. What kind of weapon is meant by – any type? What about the individuals who are on a secret mission – officially they are off duty, yet they are performing a defined task; what about those who are unarmed military personnel, yet who take part in armed operations, etc. The phrase ‘a state of military hostility does not exist at the site’ is also ambiguous as it may be perceived in a different way by the parties.

The above-presented definition of terrorism was adopted by the State Department following the amendments introduced to the US regulations in 2004 in connection with the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004. When compared to the former definition, at present, the words – ‘usually intended to influence an audience’ were removed.

Lack of precision and ambiguous phrasing characterizes the general guidelines of the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC) concerning the future shape of a potential definition of terrorism, which should encompass the following elements:

a) a general statement that the results of international terrorism need to be perceived, taking into account an appropriate perspective;
b) the need to exclude the acts perpetrated for profit or personal satisfaction;
c) refraining from questioning anybody’s right to self-identification and independence, which are treated as an undeniable human right;
d) establishing that the people who fight to liberate themselves from alien oppression and exploitation have the right to apply all methods of operation to ensure that this right is realized, not excluding the right to use force.

The adoption of the above principles by the CTC, however, did not facilitate the development of the definition of terrorism at all, instead the


differences of opinions became even larger due to the controversial character of some phrases. Item ‘b’ is polemical since it cannot be excluded that some attacks or other terrorist operations will directly or indirectly be stimulated by the intention to gain profits or personal satisfaction in a broad sense of the word. A bank holdup, organized by a terrorist organization with the purpose of obtaining the means to continue operation and fulfilling their own financial needs can be an example. Another possible scenario involves spectacular attacks carried out for personal retaliation or in order to win popularity for one’s group or ideal. Items ‘c’ and ‘d’ are also controversial because in some cases it is difficult to differentiate fighting from liberate oneself from alien oppression and exploitation from terrorist activity. The interpretation and assessment can depend on various factors, but in general it coincides with the option we can identify ourselves with. The situation becomes yet more complicated when we assume that we are actually dealing with a national liberation struggle which is conducted by the means and methods classified as terrorist ones. How to approach the statement concerning “the right to apply all methods of operation to ensure that this right is realized, not excluding the right to use force” under such circumstances? There are no detailed regulations to specify what form or method of violence is meant here. This lack of precision leaves (too much) room for interpretation.

The guidelines adopted by the CTC also include a statement that the future definition of terrorism should cover acts of violence against foreign citizens, regardless of their nationality or citizenship, when these acts are organized for criminal reasons but result in a war or conflict. Acts of international terrorism were to include activity initiated by a foreign state against the individuals striving for territorial consolidation or integrity. Controversies similar to those in items ‘c’ and ‘d’ can apply here as well.

Yet another example of polemical and superficial definitions is provided by that adopted by the TREVI group in 1975. It describes terrorism as the use of, or the threat with the use of violence by a coherent group of people for the purpose of achieving political goals (excluding the waging of war).27 A significant issue rises here: does terrorist activity always have to have

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27 International…, op.cit., p. 17.
a political dimension and concern a group of people rather than individuals? The case of T. Kaczyński shows that this definition is incomplete.²⁸

2. THE NEED TO DEVELOP A DEFINITION OF TERRORISM

Since it is so difficult and complicated to define the notion of terrorism, a question arises: why should we have a definition of terrorism and do we need it in the first place?

A) The need for such a definition is mainly practical. In order to establish efficient mechanisms and strategies to prevent terrorism and fight it, it is necessary to realize and understand its essence, nature and range. It will facilitate the appropriate and necessary activity to be undertaken by the states and international community.

B) The definition will be useful in formal and legal terms as legal regulations need to be developed and implemented.

C) Terrorism can be considered to be among the most significant problems in the modern world. It deteriorates the level and feeling of internal and external security. Therefore, it requires a more extensive analysis, not only from a journalistic perspective.

D) A universal definition of terrorism would help in an ultimate explanation of such notions as a terrorist organization. Hamas can be used as an example here: some states (e.g. the US) perceive it as a terrorist organization whereas others (e.g. Russia) see it as an independence movement or a political party.

E) We need to order and systemize our present knowledge of terrorism. Its extensive range reflects a quantitative rather than qualitative approach as many studies compile former observations and do not introduce new elements. There are no analyses which would tackle the essence of terrorism in a concise and clear manner (e.g. the meaning of the notion or its reasons). What is more, the disputes (whether theoretical or legislative) concerning the differentiation between terrorism and partisan movements or national liberation movements have so far not been settled.

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F) The field of research is continuously changing (expanding). As time goes by, different terrorist organizations are set up or dissolve, the form of their operations as well as their assessment evolves, and new kinds of terrorism emerge (e.g. cyberterrorism). There are also other matters, like those related to the influence of terrorism on individual states, persons as well as processes, values or phenomena – for example the relation between terrorism and democracy, human rights, separatism, etc.

3. CONCLUSIONS


The above enumeration includes the features which are taken into consideration in the definitions of terrorism most frequently, for example the element of violence (over 83% of definitions), political nature of operations (65%), but also those which are quite rare, such as the criminal aspect (6%)

29 A. Schmid, A. Jongman, Political...
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or the demands made of third parties (4%). The list contains both the elements which are obvious and indispensable to describe terrorism, such as threat, fear, violence, tactics – strategy, and the elements which are controversial, e.g. the repetitive, serial nature of violence, which can be an element of each terrorist attack but does not have to be.

The selection and frequency of the above indicators is therefore consensual and polemical. In the analysis of the more modern definitions of terrorism (Schmid based his study on those from 1936–1981) it can be observed that the proportions of different components change, as exemplified by the study of L. Weinberg, A. Pedahzur and S. Hirsch-Hoefler. They have analyzed seventy-three definitions of terrorism published in three scientific periodicals: Terrorism (from 1977 to 1991), Terrorism and Political Violence (from 1990 to 2001) and Studies in Conflict and Terrorism (from 1992 to 2001). The starting point for their study was provided by the twenty-two elements identified by A. Schmid. The final result turned out to be rather surprising. For example, category 12 – arbitrariness, impersonal, random character and category 9 – extranormality, in breach of accepted rules, without humanitarian constraints ranked high in Schmid’s study, but were not taken into consideration in the latter analysis at all. It also appears interesting that the definitions published in the periodicals referred to fear and terror (element no 3) considerably less frequently (only 22%) than those analyzed by Schmid (51%). Element no. 5 – psych. effects reactions was also less frequent (5.5% compared to 41.5%).

Regardless of the frequency of a given element, however, it is difficult and complex to make reference to over 20 features, as was the case in the studies by Schmid or Weinberg. Bearing this in mind, we should order the list and limit it to five key issues:

1) Who? – who is the initiator, organizer, sponsor or executioner of the attack/attacks?
2) How? – How was the attack prepared, conducted, executed?
3) Why? – Why has a terrorist attack come about? This is a question about the sources, reasons, motives, etc.

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4) Who/what was the target? Who/what did the instance of terrorism concern? This is a question about the subject(s) – object(s) of the attack.

5) What is the outcome? – This is a question about the consequences.\footnote{See more: S. Wojciechowski, “Selected Issues of the Studies on Terrorism”, [in:] The Modern Terrorism and its Forms, ed. S. Wojciechowski, Poznań 2007.}

It is impossible to find an unambiguous answer to the question of what terrorism is if the considerations are narrowed down to five elements. However, it can order the situation somehow. In this way we will be closer to describing terrorism and its main components which can also provide a starting point for further analyses.