

TERRORISM

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WILLEMIJN VERKOREN

A NEW INTRODUCTION

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About the author

Willemijn Verkoren is Associate Professor Conflict Studies and International Relations at Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands. A historian and political scientist with a PhD in International Development Studies, Willemijn has carried out research in countries around the world, analyzing peacebuilding and development approaches in a changing global context, security policy and its legitimization, terrorism and counterterrorism, and civil society and social movements.

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Willemijn regularly publishes in scientific journals and books as well as in popular and professional media. She also maintains the *War and Peace blog*.

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Preface

Terrorism has long been high on the political agenda. Vast efforts and resources have been devoted to fighting terrorism. However, these have so far not reduced the problem. Finding more effective ways to address terrorist violence is therefore a priority. It requires an in-depth understanding of what terrorism is, what drives it, and what the best ways are to counter it. This book promotes such an understanding by analysing terrorism as a form of political violence. It examines terrorism in its context of escalating conflicts between states and non-state actors, or 'violent dialogues', revealing terrorism to be a relational and interactive strategy. It does not occur in a vacuum, but is defined by how actors respond to each other in a dynamic cycle of action and reaction. This approach enables us to draw not only on different strands of terrorism research, which the book does extensively, but also on the wealth of knowledge offered by peace and conflict studies, which so far remains largely untapped in relation to terrorism. This integrated analysis offers students, researchers, citizens, and policymakers a new perspective on terrorist violence and reveals enhanced ways to respond to it.

Why this book?

Terrorism is a rational strategy to attain political goals. It occurs during political conflict between governments and their opponents, in which all sides may adopt terrorist tactics. This political context of terrorism is downplayed in state-promoted analyses, illustrating how struggles over meaning are part and parcel of political conflict. They include a struggle over the term 'terrorism' itself; political actors use it as a label to demonize opponents and obscure their own role in a conflict.

Governments have often portrayed terrorism as an extreme and irrational act aimed at maximum destruction and bloodshed. Thus understood, terrorism defies explanation and can only be forcefully repressed. This influential but incorrect interpretation ties terrorism to non-state actors, especially Islamic ones, and considers their violence an existential threat, requiring extreme measures. The discourse overlooks the growing incidence of far-right terrorism, the continuous occurrence of state terrorism, and the political motivations of violent actors.

As a result of this perspective, terrorism has been securitized: by referring to the severity of the threat, terrorism has been moved out of the political arena and into the security realm. This has enabled exceptional measures that deploy widespread violence, curtail civil rights, stigmatize Muslims, and criminalize dissent as 'radical' and dangerous.

These securitized responses to terrorism have failed to tackle its drivers. In what is known as the waterbed effect, non-state terrorism suppressed in one place resurfaces elsewhere unless its causes are addressed (e.g., Bolland & Ludvigsen, 2018; Cronin, 2009; Daxecker & Hess, 2012). This occurred, for instance, when a military campaign defeated the Caliphate established by Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). When ISIS had to give up its territory, it went underground, while affiliated groups emerged in numerous Asian and African countries.

Securitized counterterrorism has thus been unable to effectively reduce terrorism. On the contrary, it has created a cycle of violence and counterviolence between state and non-state actors (e.g., Cole & Lobel, 2009; Dugan & Chenoweth, 2012; LaFree, 2009; Nevin, 2003). As the decades-long violent escalation between Israel and armed Palestinian groups illustrates, terrorism is not resolved by force alone. Alternative approaches are direly needed, and these begin with a new analysis.

This book develops such an analysis by making sense of terrorism in context. It introduces the reader to academic debates about the meaning, reasons, and solutions of terrorism. When, how, and why has terrorism occurred historically? Under which circumstances do actors adopt terrorism as a strategy? What causes terrorism? Why is terrorism often tied to non-state actors and what are the arguments for and against the concept of state terrorism? How and why is terrorism used as a label to disqualify dissidents? How did the dominant narrative on terrorism come about and how has it led to securitization? What securitized counterterrorist policies have been employed, and with what results? How can terrorism be de-securitized and re-politicized? What may more effective counterterrorist policies look like?

Beyond the divide between mainstream and critical terrorism studies

The book takes inspiration from the field of Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS), which questions the dominant terrorism narrative, including its racialized and gendered features. In addition, it uses more mainstream terrorism research to understand how terrorism has developed historically, what makes actors adopt it, and how effective different responses to it are. Combining both schools of thought, the book bridges the divide between critical and mainstream terrorism research.

In doing so, the book does justice to the diversity of terrorism scholarship. While CTS scholars criticize what they call 'orthodox' terrorism research as a whole, a homogeneous or clearly delineated orthodox field does not exist. Many 'orthodox' publications are nuanced and agree with CTS about the rationality of terrorism, its use by states, and the problematic effects of violent responses. At the same time, the scholarship that has most influenced popular perceptions and state policies is precisely the strand of 'orthodox' research that is most criticized by CTS. As the chapters will show, publications that treat terrorism as exclusively non-state, exceptionally dangerous, apolitical, religious, and decontextualized have shaped counterterrorist measures. It has led to securitized approaches that have overlooked the drivers and context of terrorism and have contributed to violent escalation.

The book aims not only to combine and bridge these existing research traditions, but to take the field a step further. Even literature that treats terrorism as a form of political violence still tends to analyse it separately from the conflicts in which it features. Rarely do publications on terrorism draw on the wealth of available peace and conflict literature. In contrast, this book uses literature on political violence, conflict analysis, negotiation, peacebuilding, and Conflict Transformation (CT), to present an integrated analysis of how state and non-state terrorism interact amid political conflict, and what strategies may further peace.

A further way in which the book adds to existing research is by moving beyond a critical analysis of current counterterrorist policies, as it has been powerfully put forward by CTS. While current literature tends to stop at these critiques, the book explores alternative approaches. In Part III, the book provides a section that is unique in terrorism literature. Its chapters show how measures inspired by CT can offer a way out of the cycle of terrorist and counterterrorist violence, preventing future incidents by tackling the causes of terrorism. Such measures include political negotiation, currently a policy taboo in relation to terrorism, which has nonetheless proven a useful way to transform violent conflicts into non-violent political contestation. They also involve de-escalatory state policies and peacebuilding measures aimed at reconciliation, justice, and the emancipation of marginalized people and groups.

Organization of the book

Part I analyses terrorism in the context of political conflict, describes its history, and explains its occurrence. Chapter 1 explores the main controversies over the meaning of terrorism, including the debate about state terrorism. It discusses the dominant terrorism narrative and its features, including a racialization of terrorism and an inflated threat assessment. The chapter explains the appeal of this perspective and addresses its critiques and its consequences.

Chapter 2 gives an overview of the history of terrorism. It reveals how terrorism has always been part of a violent interaction between state and non-state actors, while states have long sought to downplay their part in it by framing non-state terrorism as irrational, evil, and extreme. The chapter also addresses the relationship between gender and terrorism, discussing how gender stereotypes have led analysts to downplay the active role women have historically played in political violence.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine explanations for terrorism. Chapter 3 focuses on organization-level decision making, analysing why states and organizations opt for a terrorist strategy. It explains why terrorism is a rational choice. States employ terrorism to intimidate citizens into submission at home and abroad. Non-state groups with limited resources and lacking the capacity or opportunity to deploy other tactics, including non-violent activism and insurgency, use it to obtain political concessions. The chapter provides an overview of these and other strategic rationales. It also discusses the role terrorism plays in war, the influence of political systems and policies on the occurrence of terrorism, and to what extent terrorism works.

Chapter 4 continues the search for explanations by addressing the motivations of individuals who become involved in terrorism. It critically analyses Radicalization Theory, which has shaped counterterrorism policy. While an influential strand of Radicalization Theory assumes a linear relation between 'radical' ideas – especially religious ones – and violence, this link remains unproven. Instead, the chapter shows that people are driven to engage in terrorism by a mix of political, economic, and personal motivations, and influenced by the social and institutional context.

Part II investigates counterterrorism policies as they have been deployed since September 11, 2001. By and large, these policies have been securitized in nature, meaning that they reframe a political issue as an existential threat, enabling the adoption of exceptional measures. Chapter 5 describes the Global War on Terror (GWOT) that was launched in response to the

September 11 attacks. The GWOT was both a war and a discourse, tied to the narrative discussed in Chapter 1. The GWOT discourse legitimized violent actions around the world in the name of counterterrorism. Many of these defied the laws of war, claimed numerous civilian casualties, and resulted in a cycle of violence.

Chapter 6 addresses the non-military securitized counterterrorism policies that states adopted after 9/11. With the aim of finding and tackling potential terrorists before violence could be committed, 'pre-pressive' measures were developed that curtailed civil rights, expanded surveillance practices, and decreased the space for civil society. Some states used the GWOT discourse to suppress political opposition and critical voices.

Chapter 7 zooms in on a particular counterterrorism approach, namely Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE), which was deployed in states around the world. Rooted in Radicalization Theory, PCVE interventions focused on the deradicalization of people deemed to be at risk of becoming terrorists. Although PCVE programmes aimed to reduce the breeding ground for terrorism, they largely failed to tackle its roots. Moreover, the securitized features of PCVE interventions led to the stigmatization of Muslims and the criminalization of dissent. Part II finishes by assessing to what extent securitized counterterrorist policies have addressed the drivers of terrorism identified in Part I.

Part III innovatively discusses alternative, unsecuritized approaches that can more effectively deal with terrorism. The chapters draw on the connected fields of CT and peacebuilding, which aim to address the root causes of conflict, including injustice, inequality, marginalization, and political repression. Chapter 8 introduces these fields in relation to processes of de-securitization. It also builds on Chapter 4 in discussing how the individual-level drivers of terrorism can be tackled. In addition to these drivers, the chapter discusses the factors that lead to individuals' disengagement from armed groups. Engagement can be prevented, and disengagement facilitated, through peace education, reintegration, reconciliation, development aid, fairer trade, and better governance practices. Emancipation emerges as a key theme in such a peacebuilding-oriented approach.

Focusing on group decision making, and building on Chapter 3 on terrorism as a political strategy, Chapter 9 analyses the circumstances under which armed groups give up terrorism and opt for a non-violent political path. States can open up such a route by entering negotiations with armed opponents. Although governments are reluctant to do so for fear of rewarding terrorism, they have nonetheless often ended up at the negotiating table. The chapter assesses the debate about negotiating with groups that use terrorism and analyses the lessons learned from past peace processes. The chapter draws on the theory and practice of negotiation and peacemaking.

Finally, Chapter 10 examines how governments and media may de-escalate conflicts and reduce terrorism. Abandoning state terrorism, indiscriminate repression, and 'pre-pression', states may instead adopt targeted law enforcement measures that centre on the rule of law and avoid stereotyping and fear-mongering. The media have contributed to escalation by reproducing prevailing narratives, stereotypes, and threat assessments. The chapter discusses how the media can reverse this role through careful, restrained, and contextual reporting of terrorism. The book ends by linking the policies described in Part III to the drivers of engagement and

disengagement, showing that CT approaches address these drivers to a much larger extent than do securitized approaches.

How to use the book

This book can be read by anyone wanting to better understand terrorism and counterterrorism. It is particularly suited to be used as a teaching resource in university courses. Throughout the book, features are offered to help students and instructors to process the material that is introduced.

Each chapter begins with a set of learning objectives. Chapter introductions also feature a 'spotlight example' – a case study including reflection questions – that sets the scene for the topics to be discussed. Throughout the chapters, boxed features provide additional examples, presenting short case studies from around the world. Other text boxes define key concepts and theories or summarize relevant academic debates.

At the end of every chapter, an exercise is provided to help readers to apply the material. These exercises take the form of a longer case study to which the key debates in the chapter can be linked, ending with a set of questions for individual reflection or group discussion. Finally, suggestions for further reading (books and articles), viewing (films), and listening (podcasts) are offered at the end of each chapter.

Since a key argument of this book is that effective counterterrorism needs to address the drivers of terrorism, tables are provided in Parts II and III that compare the counterterrorist measures we have described to the causes of terrorism, as described in Chapters 3 and 4, as well as to the factors conducive to disengagement from Chapter 8 (see Tables 7.1, 7.2, 8.1, 10.1, 10.2 and 10.3). This facilitates the analysis and comparison of different counterterrorism strategies in terms of relevance and effect.

These approaches and features combine to offer a thorough and readable analysis of terrorism in context, based on a wide range of terrorism and conflict theory and a host of cases from around the globe. The book offers readers both an introduction to terrorism and a novel approach that transcends existing analyses. By engaging with the political drivers of terrorism and addressing the conflicts of which it is a part, this book opens up new ways of understanding and dealing with it.

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Part I

Understanding terrorism as a form of political violence

A hotly debated concept, there is disagreement about what constitutes terrorism. Political actors use the term to disqualify opponents. An influential narrative presents terrorism as an irrational, evil, and extremely threatening phenomenon, used only by non-state actors. In fact, terrorism is a rational political strategy adopted by state and non-state actors alike in a context of conflict.

Part I attempts to make sense of terrorism by discussing the dominant narrative and its critiques, and by analysing its history and causes. As the chapters show, actors have various reasons for choosing to engage in terrorism. Terrorist violence is part of a 'violent dialogue' between state and non-state actors, which also involves a battle of words over who is considered terrorist.

Part I lays the basis for the remainder of the book. Part II discusses the consequences of the dominant terrorism narrative in the form of extraordinary, violent, and escalatory counterterrorist measures. Part III draws on the analysis of causes to examine alternative measures that address the underlying drivers of terrorism to end the 'violent dialogue' and achieve peace.

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Understanding terrorism

Learning objectives

After studying this chapter, you will be able to:

- understand the main controversies about the meaning of terrorism, including state terrorism
- explain why terrorism is a form of political violence
- recognize the 'New Terrorism' narrative, its racialized features, and its critiques
- critically evaluate the threat posed by terrorism
- explain the fear of terrorism and the dominance of the 'New Terrorism' narrative

What is terrorism? Does it make sense to label an organization as terrorist? Can states use terrorism? As this chapter will make clear, these questions are not easy to answer. There is much controversy about the meaning of terrorism and about who is and is not considered terrorist (see Box 1.1).

This chapter discusses the difficulties of defining terrorism, explaining how it tends to be a subjective and political process. It presents a way of understanding terrorism as a form of political violence that is used by states and non-state actors in a context of conflict. In addition, it critically examines the dominant narrative about terrorism as an extreme threat posed by irrational, mainly religiously driven actors. The racialized connotations of this dominant perspective, linking terrorism to Muslims and downplaying state terrorism, far-right terrorism, and other expressions of terrorism, are also discussed. Finally, the chapter compares the actual threat of non-state terrorism to inflated threat narratives and seeks explanations for the widespread fear of terrorism.

Box 1.1 Spotlight example

Designating Hezbollah as a terrorist organization

Hezbollah (or 'Party of God') is a Lebanese Shia Islamist political party and armed group that was founded in 1982 to oppose the Israeli and American military presence in Lebanon at the time. Hezbollah has used terrorist methods that include suicide bombing, assassination, and kidnapping. In 1990, Hezbollah became a democratic political party that has participated in the Lebanese government. However, the group retained its armed fighters, using them to impose its will on the government, fighting in Syria in support of the Assad government, and engaging in armed confrontations with Israel. Hezbollah also has a social wing that provides education, healthcare, and assistance to poor Lebanese.

Although Hezbollah is thus a multifaceted organization, according to its enemies, it is simply a terrorist entity. The US, Israel, and Saudi Arabia were the first to put Hezbollah on their lists of terrorist organizations, pressuring European countries to follow. The European Union opted to distinguish between Hezbollah's military branch, which it banned in 2013, and its political branch, which was left out of its terrorist list. Not all EU members make this distinction, however, with some labelling Hezbollah as a terrorist organization in its entirety. While Germany initially followed the same line as the EU, in 2020 it added Hezbollah's political wing to its terrorist list after renewed pressure from Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the US. Thereafter, Hezbollah supporters could be prosecuted in Germany, were no longer allowed to gather, and were prohibited from displaying the movement's flag.

States' varying choices illustrate not only the complexity of an organization like Hezbollah, but also how political considerations influence the decision to label a group as a terrorist organization.

Do you think it is possible to take an objective decision about whether an organization should be considered terrorist? What are the consequences of being labelled as terrorist?

Controversies about terrorism

'Hebrews saw him as a freedom fighter, but to the Egyptian empire he was a terrorist. What would happen if he were alive today? Drones would be sent after him.' When actor Christian Bale said this in an interview, he was talking about Moses, whom he had played in the 2014 movie *Exodus*. The actor pointed to the ten plagues that had befallen the Egyptians because of Moses, including the killing of every firstborn in the empire. Bale's statements sparked debate on American TV. Some said Moses could not be called a terrorist because he had a just cause: the pharaohs oppressed his people. Others countered that those we today call terrorists also fight for causes they consider just, such as wanting to end Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories (The Young Turks, 2015). The reason there is room for such debates is that there is much ambiguity about how to define terrorism. Numerous attempts have been made to reach international agreement on a definition, but all failed. Every proposal met with opposition from those who were afraid that their own actions, or those of groups they support, might fall under the definition (Bakker & De Roy van Zuijdewijn, 2016).

In a famous speech at the United Nations in 1974, Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) chairperson Yasser Arafat said: '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' (Richardson, 2006, p. 19). The problem with Arafat's approach, of course, is in determining whose cause is just. Political actors will always argue that theirs is the just cause, justifying their violence. Still, Arafat's words illustrate the saying that 'one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter' (Seymour, 1975).

In the absence of an internationally accepted definition, each government and international organization uses its own definition, adjusting it as needed. This makes it possible for actors to exclude their own actions and reserve the term 'terrorism' for their political opponents. As the then-American Ambassador to the United Nations (UN) said in 1972:

there is a vast amount of hypocrisy on the subject of political terrorism. We all righteously condemn it, except when we ourselves or friends of ours are engaging in it. Then we ignore it or gloss it over or attach to it tags like 'liberation' or 'defense of the free world' or 'national honor' to make it seem like something [other] than what it is. (Stohl & Lopez, 1984, p. 5)

A UN working group called the labelling enemies as terrorists a 'proven technique for delegitimizing and demonizing them' (Toros, 2008, pp. 411–412). In 2020, for example, US President Donald Trump tried to get the left-wing group Antifa, whose members had joined the ranks of protesters against police violence, on a list of terrorist organizations, while overlooking far-right groups like the Proud Boys. By contrast, Canada designated the Proud Boys as terrorist after their role in the attack on the US Capitol in 2021.

Applying the terrorist label can have major real-life consequences. In an essay in 1986, Palestinian-American professor Edward Said spoke of the 'essential terrorist'. He did not mean that the terrorist himself was essential, but that as an enemy image it was convenient for governments to gain support for policies. (Said, 1986) Referring to a terrorist threat enables policies that would ordinarily be considered disproportionate or illegal (see Part II). Using the label 'terrorism' can even have the effect of a self-fulfilling prophecy (see Box 1.2).

Box 1.2 Examples

The terrorist label as a self-fulfilling prophecy

In 1994, a rebellion for independence began in the Republic of Chechnya, part of the Russian Federation. Russia responded with widespread and indiscriminate violence. The conflict quickly turned into a bloody war of independence. Initially, the international community criticized Russian attacks on civilian targets, but they became silent on the issue after the 9/11 attacks in 2001. At that time, the Russian government was quick to

(Continued)

label the Chechens, who adhered to a moderate form of Islam, as 'terrorists'. In response, the rebels reframed their struggle as a holy war to attract international jihadist fighters and obtain financial support from the Arab world. The radical Islamic ideology of these supporters was gradually adopted by the rebels. Thus, the accusation that the Chechen insurgents were jihadists became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In Syria, people took to the streets in 2011 to protest against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. Calling the protesters terrorists, Assad responded with force. As the conflict escalated into civil war, the president continued to refer to the opposition as terrorists. A cynical strategy then proceeded to make this a reality: the regime chose to fight mainly against the moderate, pro-democratic rebels, allowing jihadist groups to gain strength. The moderate fighters gradually weakened, creating room for the rapid rise of ISIS. ISIS and other jihadist groups used terrorism on a regular basis, thereby lending credence to Assad's story that all his opponents were terrorists. Meanwhile, the Assad regime itself used terrorist violence on a large scale, including torture and the use of chemical weapons against civilians. Although the Assad regime caused the most civilian casualties, Western countries, driven by fear of terrorism, were only willing to intervene in Syria to fight ISIS, thereby strengthening Assad's position.

Defining terrorism

Terrorism is thus a controversial term. How can we still make sense of it? The more than 200 definitions of terrorism used by governments and international organizations, while all different, have several things in common (Schmid, 2011). Consider the examples in Box 1.3.

Box 1.3 Examples

Official definitions of terrorism

'Premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.' (US Department of State, 1999, cited in Schmid, 2023, p. 25)

'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.' (US Department of State, 2001, n.p.)

'An intentional act which, by its nature or context, is likely to cause serious harm to a country or an organization and which is defined as a criminal offense under national law, when the act is committed with the aim of: (1) seriously intimidating a population, (2) unduly compelling a government or an international organization to perform or abstain from performing a particular act; (3) seriously destabilizing

or destroying the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country or of an international organization.’ (European Union, 2022, n.p.)

The Global Terrorism Database (GTD) of the University of Maryland (2023, n.p.) defines a terrorist attack as ‘the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation.’ To be included in the database, an incident must be *intentional* and must entail some level of *violence* or immediate threat of violence against property or people. State terrorism is excluded. Furthermore, at least two of the following three criteria must be present for inclusion in the GTD:

- 1 ‘The act must be aimed at attaining a political, economic, religious, or social goal. In terms of economic goals, the exclusive pursuit of profit does not satisfy this criterion. It must involve the pursuit of more profound, systemic economic change.’
- 2 ‘There must be evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to a larger audience (or audiences) than the immediate victims.’
- 3 ‘The action must be outside the context of legitimate warfare activities. That is, the act must be outside the parameters permitted by international humanitarian law, insofar as it targets non-combatants.’ (University of Maryland, 2023, n.p.)

Among the various definitions provided in Box 1.3, there is general agreement that:

- Terrorism is the intentional use of violence, often against individuals, but sometimes aimed at infrastructure or buildings.
- This violence falls outside the laws of war because civilians or civic infrastructure are deliberately targeted, or the violence occurs outside a war zone, or both.
- The goal is political or political-ideological. This excludes attacks by criminal gangs and acts driven by personal motives or psychiatric disorders, such as school shootings.
- Terrorism aims to generate attention, fear, or unrest to influence public opinion or political decision making.
- Terrorism can be directed at specific targets, such as political leaders or other public figures, or random targets, such as commuters on a train or visitors to a café. In all cases, the victims of terrorist violence are not its eventual targets, as the violence is intended as a message to a wider public and/or political leaders. As one scholar put it, ‘because one cannot literally ‘bomb the system’, one bombs the symbolic representatives of the system’ (Thorup, 2010, p. 52).

As such, terrorism is a form of violence and not a type of actor. It is useful to underline this point since terrorism is often conflated with a category of actors, as in the term ‘terrorist organization’. Rather than *being* terrorist, however, actors *use* terrorism as a tactic. According to this logic, there is no such thing as a terrorist group – only a group that uses terrorist violence. Acts of terrorism overlap substantially with other types of political violence, often taking

place in a context of civil war (Findley & Young, 2012). Actors use terrorist violence alongside other tactics, such as regular warfare, non-violent activism or political participation, to achieve their goals (Tilly, 2004).

This is why lists of terrorist organizations are problematic. The decision to designate an organization as terrorist is difficult, if not impossible, to make objectively. It reduces multifaceted organizations to one of their tactics: terrorism. Often, such a decision is made for political reasons, and can lead to considerable debate (see Box 1.1). However, it has real consequences. In most countries, it is illegal to have contact with groups designated as terrorist, to share information produced by them, or to wire money to any individual or organization suspected of supporting them. Non-government organizations (NGOs) suspected of terrorist ties have been outlawed. For instance, various countries have prosecuted charities in support of Palestinians living in Gaza as these charities were forced to work through Hamas, the ruling party in Gaza, which features on terrorist lists. However, the fact that the decision to designate organizations as terrorist is political also means that governments can reverse it if it suits them. For example, to reach the 1993 Oslo Peace Accords, Israel took the PLO off its terrorist list.

In sum, calling an actor 'terrorist' is not technically accurate. Labelling people or organizations in this way is a subjective and political choice.

Questioning dominant narratives

Labelling actors as terrorist can have the effect of isolating them from their political context. In contrast, upcoming chapters will make clear that terrorism is best understood not as an isolated occurrence, but within the context of political conflict. It is a form of political violence: violence perpetrated to achieve political goals. Such goals can be concrete policy changes (revoking a law, improving minority rights, stopping immigration, ending a military operation) or systems change (toppling a regime or introducing an alternative system of governance). What is often called 'ideological' usually involves attempts to change systems, such as the creation of a Communist state or a Caliphate governed by Shari'a law (see Chapter 3).

Terrorism is used in combination with other forms of political violence, such as (guerrilla) warfare, as well as non-violent political activity. It does not come out of nowhere but is part of a historical and geographical context, interacting with the violent actions of political opponents. Terrorism is thus part of violent conflicts, in which all sides may use terrorist violence. (Bosi & Malthaner, 2015; Jackson, 2016)

As discussed below, this understanding of terrorism contrasts with a politically influential understanding that depicts terrorism as exclusively non-state and as irrational, a-political, and highly threatening. In studying this dominant discourse and its effects, we draw on a research tradition called Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS). Rather than treating terrorism as an objective reality, CTS analyses the political process of labelling violent acts as terrorism. Critical terrorism researchers also problematize a tendency of some terrorism research, widely replicated in policy circles, to treat terrorism as a unique and particularly dangerous form of violence. (Jackson, 2016; Michel & Richards, 2009)

Questioning dominant perspectives on terrorism is thus a core focus of CTS. Moreover, the field emphasizes the real-world consequences of these perspectives, critically analyses the counterterrorist policies they have resulted in, and the impact of those policies on citizens around the world. CTS has raised important themes (see Box 1.4) that will feature throughout this book.

Box 1.4 Theory

Themes in CTS

- CTS critically evaluates dominant approaches to terrorism, including threat perceptions.
- It draws attention to the racial and gendered undertones of these approaches, and how they are rooted in colonial and patriarchal histories.
- It analyses which interests are served by such approaches and how they have become influential.
- CTS studies the processes of securitization, by which social or political issues are depoliticized and reframed as security threats to justify harsh and extreme measures.
- It takes a human perspective by studying the impact of terrorism and counterterrorism on ordinary people, particularly those who are most marginalized.
- CTS analyses the destructive and adverse effects of dominant counterterrorist practices.

Can states use terrorism?

Since terrorism is a form of political violence, it follows that it can be used by any political actor, including states. Some definitions stipulate, however, that terrorism can only be used by non-state actors. For instance, the US State Department's 1999 definition limited terrorism to acts 'by subnational groups or clandestine agents'. Databases of terrorist statistics, on which much research draws, also tend to focus only on non-state terrorism, with important consequences for the academic field: although most terrorism research acknowledges that terrorism can be used by states, it nonetheless overwhelmingly focuses on non-state terrorism (see Box 1.4). Even governments whose definition does not exclude the state tend to use the term 'terrorism' only to signify violence committed by actors other than the state. Of course, this is a way for them to avoid being accused of terrorism themselves. However, linking terrorism to a certain group of actors clouds the picture. Conflating actors with terrorism prevents us from seeing their other features and their political context.

Although few studies focus on state terrorism, most terrorism scholars, critical or mainstream, do not rule it out. State terrorism has been defined as 'threats or acts of violence carried out by representatives of the state against civilians to instill fear for political purposes' (Blakely, 2007, p. 228). States can take such actions against their own populations or against

citizens of other countries. A distinction has been made between 'limited' and 'wholesale' acts of state terrorism (Jackson, Murphy, & Pointing, 2009). Limited acts are comparable to non-state terrorism, such as bomb attacks, assassinations, hijackings, and kidnapping, and aim to achieve a specific policy goal. The bombing of an Iranian opposition group meeting in Paris by Iran in 2018, and the assassination of Iranian general Qassem Soleymani in Baghdad by an American drone in 2020 are two examples. In the 1980s, the Libyan government engaged in more than 30 assassination attempts outside its borders and several plane and several plane hijackings. It was also responsible for a bomb that brought down a aeroplane on the Scottish town of Lockerbie. (Toaldo, 2013)

Wholesale state terrorism includes large-scale disappearances, illegal incarceration, torture, and mass murder; tactics aiming to terrorize an entire population into submission by discouraging opposition. The first time the word 'terrorism' was used was to indicate this kind of violence: after the French Revolution of 1789, the new revolutionary government proclaimed a rule of terror, or *Terreur*, to safeguard the revolution from its enemies. Executions of members of the former elite, using the newly invented guillotine, were a way to spread fear among the citizens of France to prevent any opposition from developing. Today, countries like North Korea, Myanmar, Afghanistan, and Belarus offer examples of wholesale state terrorism. (Sluka, 2000; Stohl & Lopez, 1984)

State terrorism creates many more victims than non-state terrorism. As Emma Goldman, an American anarchist involved in various terrorist plots, wrote in 1911, 'compared with the wholesale violence of capital and government, [non-state] political acts of violence are but a drop in the ocean' (cited in Carr, 2011, p. xvi). That state terrorism receives much less attention in the literature is related to the state-centric nature of much terrorism literature, and the institutional closeness of some of its authors to governments (Blakely, 2007). Another reason is the unavailability of data. It is difficult to obtain reliable information about state terrorism, which is often done covertly and publicly denied.

Not all scholars agree that state actions should be included in terrorism research. Some mainstream academic texts follow states in rejecting state terrorism as a concept (see Box 1.5).

Box 1.5 Debate

State terrorism

Several objections have been raised against the concept of state terrorism (Hoffman, 2006; Nacos, 2002), each of which has been countered by proponents of the concept (Blakely, 2007; Jackson, Murphy, & Pointing, 2009; Sluka, 2000):

- 1 Victims of state violence are not random as states often target members of the opposition.
 - Counter-argument: States also commit violence against random civilians, whether in bomb attacks, plane hijackings, or massacres. Also, non-state actors often target specific victims. What makes violence terrorism is that the victims are instrumentalized for a greater, political aim.

- 2 Unlike non-state terrorists, states are not looking for publicity, covertly making people disappear or placing them in secret detention centres.
 - Counter-argument: Publicity is not the same as communication. States have their own channels to convey messages and do not have to go out of their way to get media attention. While denial is expressed to the outside world, subjects are aware of what happens when they oppose the state.
- 3 State violence is different because the state has a legitimate monopoly on the use of force.
 - Counter-argument: Not all state violence is legitimate and not all non-state violence is illegitimate. International law prohibits war crimes, genocide, ethnic cleansing, kidnapping, and torture. Historically, the right of non-state actors to use force against repressive governments has been recognized in cases like anti-Nazi and anti-Apartheid resistance.
- 4 No new concept is needed; what is called state terrorism is already covered by other concepts, such as repression, war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity.
 - Counter-argument: *All* terrorism is other things at the same time, such as murder or hijacking. Also, calling it terrorism serves the analytical purpose of helping to understand its logic.
- 5 State violence is different in purpose and method. Where non-state terrorism challenges the powers that be, state terrorism is about maintaining power. The methods can differ because governments have the use of the state apparatus.
 - Counter-arguments:
 - States also commit limited acts similar to non-state terrorism.
 - Wholesale state terrorism may represent the purest and most original form of terrorism. Because of the availability of state resources, this type of violence succeeds best in creating total terror.
 - Non-state actors also commit wholesale terrorism to enforce the status quo, as when rebels use it to intimidate the population of a territory under their control (see Chapter 3).

CTS scholars point out that the exclusion of state actions from analyses of terrorism is not a neutral act. It serves to maintain the narrative that states are victims of terrorism and have no active part in it. By contrast, including state terrorism into our analysis draws attention to the bigger picture in which terrorist attacks take place, as non-state terrorism is often a reaction to oppression and violence by states, and vice versa. Such an analysis also shows that states, even democratic ones, are not immune to abuses of power. (Herman, 1982; Kisangani & Nafzinger, 2007; Herman, 1982)

Aiming to keep an eye on that bigger picture, this book does not rule out state terrorism. Given that we classify violence as terrorism based on the characteristics of the act itself, and not the actor committing it, to do so would be illogical.

A battle of words

Both state and non-state actors claim to use violence to end the violence of their opponent. As such, terrorism is part of a 'violent dialogue' between the state and its challengers (Thorup, 2010, p. 30). However, this interactive nature of terrorism is muddled by an ongoing battle of words. States have rarely used the word 'terrorism' to describe their own actions, preferring to apply the label to the non-state actors that challenged them. Similarly, except for the violent anarchists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who wore terrorism as a badge of honour, non-state actors have avoided labelling their violence in this way, preferring to call themselves freedom fighters, soldiers, or rebels. Terrorism is thus mostly a term applied to *others*. It serves to deny the legitimacy of 'their' violence while affirming the necessity of 'ours'. This is reinforced by the fact that the term 'terrorism' has been accorded a specific, negative content. States take pains to describe the 'terrorist' violence of their opponents as extreme, crazed, and unprovoked, while justifying their own 'civilized' violence as a benign and a necessary response to its threat (see Box 1.6). In this way, 'the state seeks to claim and police a distinction between its own violence and that of others' (Thorup, 2010, pp. 27–28; see also Bhatia, 2005; Erlenbusch-Anderson, 2018).

Box 1.6 Example

Benjamin Netanyahu's take on terrorism

In 1984, Benjamin Netanyahu, then Israeli Ambassador to the US, wrote:

The root cause of terrorism lies not in grievances but in a disposition toward unbridled violence. This can be traced to a world view which asserts that certain ideological and religious goals justify, indeed demand, the shedding of all moral inhibitions. [...] The observation that the root cause of terrorism is terrorists is more than a tautology. (Cited in Said, 1986, n.p.)

After the brutal October 7 terrorist attack by Hamas in 2023, Netanyahu, now Prime Minister of Israel, rejected any references to the context and history of Israeli–Palestinian conflict and occupation as reprehensible justifications of what he considered a barbaric attack on civilization. Netanyahu wrote:

The horrors that Hamas perpetrated on Oct. 7 remind us that we won't realize the promise of a better future unless we, the civilized world, are willing to fight the barbarians. The barbarians are willing to fight us, and their goal is clear: Shatter that promising future, destroy all that we cherish, and usher in a world of fear and darkness. [...] In fighting Hamas and the Iranian axis of terror, Israel is fighting the enemies of civilization itself. Victory over these enemies begins with moral clarity. It begins with knowing the difference between good and evil, between right and wrong. [...] Today we draw a line between civilization and barbarism. It is a time for everyone to decide where they stand. (Netanyahu, 2023, n.p.)

Historically, governments have described terrorism as a moral evil so destructive ‘that even to suggest that it might have context, causes and aims that could be rationally understood was sometimes viewed as a form of moral collusion’ (Carr, 2011, p. xvi). Instead, non-state terrorism is portrayed as irrational, fanatical, crazy, evil, and inhuman, carried out by monsters or animals. For example, members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), which used terrorism in its quest to unite Northern Ireland with the rest of Ireland, were referred to as bloodthirsty ‘monsters’ and ‘dogs’ by their loyalist opponents, the British government, and British media (Carr, 2011; Richardson, 2004). In October 2023, upon launching an offensive on the Gaza strip in retaliation for a brutal terrorist attack by Hamas, the Israeli government called Hamas ‘human animals’. Any reference to the history and context of Hamas’s violence it equated with justification.

Dehumanization often accompanies the use of political violence, as when the Nazis called Jewish people ‘rats’ or when Hutus participating in the Rwandan genocide called Tutsi people ‘cockroaches’. It serves to morally disengage from the enemy, justify violence against it, and silence any debate about causes (Said, 1986; Slim, 2008). However, such narratives are neither inevitable nor irreversible. Sometimes the animal/monster imagery was revoked after people previously designated as terrorists became peacemakers and statesmen. Examples include Nelson Mandela, who became President of South Africa, Menachem Begin, who became Prime Minister (PM) of Israel, and Martin McGuinness, who became vice-PM of Northern Ireland. (Carr, 2011)

A new terrorism?

On September 11, 2001, the deadliest non-state terrorist attack of all time occurred when Al-Qaeda operatives hijacked four airplanes in the United States. One plane crashed in a field, while the other three struck the Pentagon in Washington and the two towers of the World Trade Center in New York. Nearly 3,000 people were killed. It was followed by large attacks in several European cities in subsequent years, shocking and scaring Western citizens.

Influential scholars argued that 9/11 had been the expression of a ‘New Terrorism’ (Hoffman, 2006; Laqueur, 2000; Neumann, 2009; RAND Corporation, 1999). Where previous terrorism had had concrete political aims, twenty-first-century terrorism was said to be religiously driven. Its perpetrators adhered to an extremist form of Islam, referred to as ‘Islamism’ or ‘jihadism’. They were seen as irrational and barbaric. As discussed below, the ‘New Terrorism’ discourse was racialized in linking terrorism exclusively to brown, Islamic people.

‘New Terrorism’ was said to be more extreme, lethal, and threatening than previous forms of terrorism because jihadists saw every non-believer as a legitimate target. The goal of ‘New Terrorism’ was the destruction of democratic, secular societies, resulting in mass violence against random citizens. ‘New Terrorism’ was considered an existential threat to Western civilization, threatening the very existence of the Western way of life. It was viewed as a direct attack on everything the West stood for, such as democracy and freedoms (Amis, 2009; Gove, 2007). This perspective was asserted by George W. Bush, US President at the time of 9/11, who said on the day that ‘our way of life, our very freedom came under attack’ (Bush, 2001a, n.p.), an assertion he repeated many times. His statements were echoed by other leaders as

governments worldwide adopted the 'New Terrorism' frame of reference. For instance, after terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015, President François Hollande called them 'an act of aggression against our country, against its values, against its young people, and against its way of life'. He added that the attacks had been carried out 'because France is a country of freedom, because we are the birthplace of human rights' (Hollande, 2015, n.p.).

Paradoxically, the 'New Terrorism' narrative was not new: throughout history, governments have used similar language to describe actors using terrorist violence against them (see Box 1.7). Moreover, most terrorism scholars dispute the 'New Terrorism' concept, emphasizing the similarities between contemporary and older episodes of terrorism (Copeland, 2001; Duyvesteyn, 2004; Tucker, 2001).

Box 1.7 Examples

Historical references to 'new terrorism'

In 1934, after a terrorist attack in Marseille that killed the French Foreign Minister and the King of Yugoslavia, political and media analyses of terrorism portrayed it as a 'frightful scourge' that represented a major threat to the international order. It was also considered unprecedented and 'entirely new in European public law'. The terrorist was constructed as representing barbarism, chaos, and criminality, whereas states espoused civilization, order, and politics.

In the 1970s, this discourse resurfaced throughout the global North, once more calling terrorism an exceptional, barbaric, and unprecedented threat which was 'making our own world impossible to live in'. At the same time, a contrasting discourse emerged in the global South in which non-state terrorism was seen as a legitimate reaction to state terrorism ('the most dangerous brand of violence, the most often practised at the most comprehensive scale') and as the last resort of the 'desperate, colonised, persecuted and underprivileged' (Ditrych, 2013, p. 228).

After 9/11, the 'New Terrorism' narrative was widely adopted and had far-reaching consequences for the way terrorism was approached. It obscured the political context and causes of terrorism. Few people wondered why the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, symbols of American economic and military dominance, had been selected as the targets of the 9/11 attacks (Kundnani, 2014; see also Chapter 4). Instead, the fight against terrorism was depicted as a war of good against evil. US Attorney General John Ashcroft put it as follows: 'the attacks of September 11 drew a bright line of demarcation between the civil and the savage [...]. On one side of this line are freedom's enemies, murderers of innocents in the name of a barbarous cause. On the other side are friends of freedom.' (Cox, 2021, p. 1460)

Other governments, too, have denied the political agendas behind non-state terrorism. For instance, governments in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria, faced with jihadist terrorism, have portrayed it as driven by an extremist form of Islam alien to the Sahel region and imported by foreign jihad fighters (Barrios, 2021). However, jihadist groups in these

countries are made up almost entirely of local people who cite the failure of their governments to deliver services, state violence, and economic marginalization as grievances for joining (UN Development Programme, 2017b).

The racialization of terrorism

The ‘New Terrorism’ discourse links the terrorist threat almost exclusively to jihadist violence by Muslim perpetrators. As such, it overlooks state terrorism, nationalist/separatist terrorism, far-left and anarchist terrorism, and single-issue terrorism. It also ignores the strong twenty-first-century increase of far-right terrorism by people adhering to White Supremacist, xenophobic, or racist views, often targeting Black, Muslim, or Jewish communities in Europe, the US, Australia, and New Zealand (see Chapter 2).

Increasingly, attacks were carried out in propagation of White superiority and against perceived government compliance with immigration and ‘Islamization’. In the US, jihadist attacks resulted in 62 deaths between 1990 and 2014, while far-right attacks killed 245 people in the same period, excluding the two largest attacks: 9/11 (jihadist) and the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing (far-right) (Parkin et al., 2016). Between 2014 and 2019, far-right attacks in the West increased by 320 percent (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2019). Since around 2016, far-right terrorism has been deadlier than jihadist terrorism in Western countries (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2023). However, far-right attacks by white perpetrators received far less attention from politicians and the media and were less often called terrorism than attacks by Muslims (see Box 1.8).

Box 1.8 Research

Media portrayal of terrorism

Research found that attacks carried out by Muslims were four times more likely to receive media coverage; that reports on attacks by Muslims used more words linked to negative emotions; and that attacks by Muslims were more frequently called terrorism, while those by non-Muslim perpetrators were denoted by terms like gun violence, mental illness, and mass shooting. Attacks by non-Muslims were framed as isolated incidents, whereas those by Muslims were designated as part of a global movement and a systemic threat.

An example are two very similar covers of *Time Magazine*, both with a headshot of a violent offender. The first cover, from 2009, shows Nidal Hassan, a Muslim army psychiatrist who killed 13 US soldiers and injured 30 others at an army base in Arizona. The headline reads: ‘TERRORIST?’ The second cover, from 2011, is a photo of Jared Lee Loughner, a white man with far-right sympathies who shot Congresswoman Gabby Giffords and 18 others in the same state, killing six. On that second cover, the headline says: ‘Guns. Speech. Madness.’ (Coster et al., 2024).

In the public perception, then, the threat of terrorism is linked to Arabs and Muslims. This is rooted in a longer tradition. Postcolonial scholars have pointed out how colonial notions on superior and inferior races lingered after the end of the imperialist era. For instance, Edward Said (1979) showed how Western perspectives on the Middle and Far East were characterized by what he called Orientalism. Orientalism depicts Eastern societies as irrational, sensual, primitive, and feminine, while the West forms their strong, rational democratic, progressive, and masculine counterpart. After the 9/11 attacks, CTS researchers noted how Orientalist and racist notions shaped contemporary discourses on terrorism, linking it to brown, Islamic, and Arab perpetrators, who were portrayed as irrational, barbaric, and destructive. By contrast, state (counter)terrorist violence was depicted as rational, just, and civilized. This perspective overlooked the political motives of those using terrorism and contributed to the blind spot for far-right terrorism (Ali, 2020; Khan, 2023; see Chapter 2).

Furthermore, jihadist terrorism is often designated as international, whereas far-right terrorism is labelled domestic, even though most terrorist perpetrators, whether jihadist or far-right, grew up in the same country where they carry out their attack. This framing has cast Muslim citizens as somehow external and resulted in measures such as President Trump's 2016 'Muslim travel ban' (Ali, 2020).

Another reason for the different treatment of far-right terrorism is that it takes place within a context in which radical right-wing thinking became more mainstream in Western politics. The Trump governments allied themselves with far-right ideas and groups, while radical-right parties grew in nearly every European country, even leading the government in Italy, Hungary, and the Netherlands. Whereas previously such parties were characterized by anti-Semitism and anti-Black racism, in the post-9/11 context they replaced these with anti-Muslim thinking, linked to the fear of jihadist terrorism. Ideas about a Jewish world conspiracy gave way to the theory that mainstream politicians are secretly in cahoots with Arab leaders to 'Islamize' Europe and the US. Conspiracy theories about secret plans to install Shari'a law in Western countries quickly gained ground in politics (Ali, 2020; Kundnani, 2014).

These discourses fed into Islamophobic sentiments. Far-right politicians proposed to ban headscarves, the Quran, mosques, halal food, and prayer rooms in schools. Newspaper commentaries linked Muslims to paedophilia, benefits fraud, illegal immigration, electoral fraud, and gender-based violence (Ali & Whitham, 2018). Mainstream politicians began drawing on this narrative in the hope of gaining some of the votes of the right-wing parties. Public perceptions were impacted as well. For instance, a 2017 survey revealed that one in three Britons believed that Islam was a threat to the British way of life. In the same year, 1,201 cases of violence against Muslims were reported in the UK (Marsh, 2018). In 2024, the EU reported a strong increase in hatred against Muslims (European Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024). In Chapter 6 we will see how this led to discriminatory policies against Muslims.

However, in media and political discourse, far-right terrorism was rarely linked to these political developments. For instance, Thomas Mair, who assassinated the British pro-multicultural and anti-Brexit politician Jo Cox in 2016, was described in the media as a mentally ill loner, even though the slogans he called out while stabbing Cox were taken from the Brexit campaign: 'Britain first, keep Britain independent, Britain will always come first. [...] This is for Britain' (Ali, 2020, p. 590). When Anders Breivik killed 77 people in Norway

in 2011, mostly participants in a Labour Party youth camp, the *Wall Street Journal* initially assumed that the perpetrator was a Muslim. Instead, Breivik wanted to defend Europe against Islamization. Breivik emphasized that mainstream European politicians shared his Islamophobic views (Breivik, 2011).

Breivik's act highlights that far-right terrorism is partly a response to the perceived Islamic terrorist threat. Attacks against Muslims, including the 2019 mosque shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand, have also been motivated by referring to this threat. The post-9/11 climate, with its fear of jihadist terrorism and the influence of the 'New Terrorism' narrative, then, have linked terrorism in our minds to Muslim perpetrators and contributed to the rise of far-right politics *and* violence.

Non-state terrorism: An existential threat?

Another feature of the 'New Terrorism' discourse has been to depict non-state terrorism as a major threat, sometimes even to the point of imminent catastrophe. For instance, the report of a Congress committee investigating 9/11 stated in 2004: 'Terrorism has undoubtedly become the highest national security priority for the United States. [...] The catastrophic threat at this moment in history is [...] the threat posed by Islamic terrorism' (cited in Jackson et al., 2011, p. 212).

In the next chapter we will see that historically perpetrators of terrorism were often painted 'not just as the enemies of a specific regime or social and political order, but as a destructive force intent on toppling civilization into the void' (Carr, 2011, p. 10). In the twenty-first century, this threat narrative became widespread in politics and public opinion. Although the fear of Islamist terrorism had already been a significant and growing issue prior to 2001 (Said, 1986), after 9/11, it became viewed as existential (Wolfendale, 2016). The threat was also considered borderless because terrorism could strike anywhere and with any weapon. Americans and Europeans named terrorism as the biggest threat to their security every year between 2001 and 2020 (Gallup, 2023; Munich Security Index, 2023).

How large is the terrorist threat in reality? Available statistics tend to be limited to non-state terrorism. However, since the threat narrative described above also refers exclusively to non-state terrorism, we can usefully compare the two. Between 2007 and 2024, terrorism fatalities fluctuated between 10,882 (in 2015) and 6,824 (in 2022). In 2023, 8,352 casualties were recorded in 3,350 attacks. In 2024, there were 7,555 lethal victims in 3,492 attacks. Contrary to what one would expect based on the new terrorism discourse, however, very few of these victims were in the West. Of the 137,009 deaths from terrorism between 2007 and 2022, only 885 occurred in the West, or 0.65 percent of the total. Around 95 percent of terrorist fatalities occurred in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia. 98 percent of victims fell in countries with armed conflicts, such as Syria, Somalia, and Nigeria. Whereas Iraq and Afghanistan topped the list of countries most affected by terrorism for years, recently the Sahel has risen to prominence as a hotspot of terrorist activity, with countries like Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali registering growing numbers of terrorist deaths (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2023, 2024, 2025).

Terrible though they are, the number of deaths from non-state terrorism pales in comparison to other causes of death. Globally, 1 million people die from malaria every year, half a million from influenza, and 36 million from poverty-related causes. Between early 2020 and the summer of 2021, more than 4 million people died from Covid-19. In the US, between 2005 and 2015, 94 people died as a result of terrorism, compared to 301,797 deaths caused by firearms and approximately 300,000 from suicide. The statistical chance of an individual in a Western country dying in a terrorist attack is about the same as the chance of being struck by lightning, drowning in the bathtub, dying from a bee sting, or dying while doing DIY projects. In comparison to the image of terrorism as an existential threat to Western civilization, the reality is completely different (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021; Mueller & Stewart, 2021).

So far, then, terrorism has not been a major issue, certainly not outside conflict areas. But what if that changes? Fear of terrorism is partly a fear of the unknown, infused with worries that the worst might be yet to come. What if terrorists have deadlier weapons at their disposal? Especially in the first decade after 9/11, the threat of terrorists using nuclear, biological, and/or chemical weapons was a much-discussed issue. However, this scenario is unlikely for several reasons. First, it is very complicated to acquire such weapons and to use them effectively. Specialized knowledge is required as well as large amounts of expensive and difficult-to-obtain materials. Second, there are significant risks in using these weapons. Something may go wrong during preparation, causing actors to harm themselves. Third, states are unlikely to provide weapons of mass destruction to non-state armed actors because of the risk of losing control of the situation. Fourth, there is little evidence that groups using terrorism have the ambition to use such weapons. The impact of conventional attacks is already significant enough (Clarke, 2013; Weiss, 2015; see Box 1.9).

Box 1.9 Example

The Tokyo subway attack (1995)

To date, there has only been one serious non-state terrorist attack involving a chemical weapon. In 1995, the Aum Shinrikyo cult released the nerve gas sarin in the Tokyo subway, leading to 12 deaths and many injuries. The cult had access to highly modern and well-equipped laboratories, which were better than those of the university, and employed highly educated people. Aum Shinrikyo also had an extraordinarily large amount of money to spend on the development of chemical weapons. Despite these favourable conditions, the group failed to cause a catastrophe. Only one of its many attempts succeeded, and the number of victims was limited. (Eikelenboom, 2007)

Today, the possible use of weapons of mass destruction no longer appears prominently in discussions about terrorism. Nevertheless, the question remains: how do we know that terrorism will not become a bigger problem in the future? Answering this question requires an analysis of the plans, means, and capabilities of potential terrorism perpetrators. Cited statistics about

foiled plots vary widely (Dahl, 2011; Hegghammer & Ketchley, 2023; Nesser, 2024). However, there are indications that the reservoir of unknown potential perpetrators may be smaller than feared. CIA analyst and terrorism expert Marc Sageman said: 'As a member of the intelligence community, who kept abreast of all the plots in the U.S., I have not seen any significant terrorist plots that have been disrupted and not disclosed. On the contrary, the government goes out of its way to take credit' (Mueller & Stewart, 2015, p. 107). The FBI searched for ' sleeper cells' in the US for over 20 years without finding any. Moreover, potential attackers tend to lack the skills to cause significant damage. The people behind thwarted attacks were often amateurs: 'incompetent, ineffective, unintelligent, idiotic, ignorant, inadequate, disorganized, unrealistic' (Mueller & Stewart, 2021, p. 155; see also Sageman, 2008). Supposed terrorist plans are rarely proven in court. About two-thirds of those arrested for terrorism are released without charge; of the remainder, most are convicted of minor offences, such as an expired visa. Many foiled plots involve undercover agents who infiltrate suspicious groups to lure potential terrorists into plotting attacks. In court cases, the involvement of secret agents can be problematic because the question arises of whether the suspects would have acted without their involvement. According to some figures, infiltrators played a role in more than half of the publicly disclosed plans in the US (Mueller & Stewart, 2021; Norris & Grol-Prokopczyk, 2018).

All in all, there is no evidence that, outside conflict areas, non-state terrorism will be a much greater threat in the future than it is now. In African and Asian war-ridden countries, the problem is bigger, although the total number of casualties is still limited compared to those resulting from 'regular' warfare or state repression. If we were to include state terrorism into the analysis, casualty numbers would be much higher, but no reliable statistics on this exist. Whether 'New Terrorism' is more deadly than pre-2001 forms of terrorism is also unclear. Although terrorism casualties have increased worldwide, this is not the case in the West (University of Maryland, 2023).

Fear of terrorism: Explanations and consequences

As we have seen, the threat posed by non-state terrorism is limited, especially outside war zones. How, then, has the narrative of terrorism as a huge threat managed to take hold over people? This section addresses psychological, cultural, political, and economic explanations that have been put forward to explain the fear of terrorism, before discussing the consequences of this fear.

Psychological explanations

Psychologically, fear does not just depend on the number of victims. Fear is often greater when the threat comes from other people, compared to natural phenomena, such as disease. Also, people experience a greater threat from one-time, large-scale events than from structural, permanent problems. Especially in countries where terrorism does not often strike, attacks with few victims can create a lot of fear and impact. Additionally, compared to more abstract threats, such as climate change, the threat of terrorism is easily visualized as attacks yield frightening images. Another factor at play is that people do not handle a

feeling of loss of control well. More people suffer from fear of flying than fear of driving, even though the chances of dying in a car accident are much higher. But in a car, you are the one behind the wheel, and in a plane, you surrender control to others. Terrorism is elusive and uncertain; you never know where or when it could happen, and that makes us feel powerless and afraid. (Bakker & De Roy van Zuijdewijn, 2016; Breckenridge & Zimbardo, 2007; see also Box 1.10)

Box 1.10 Example

The psychological impact of 9/11

In Western countries, anyone old enough in 2001 vividly remembers the 9/11 attacks. People watched all day on CNN as the Twin Towers collapsed, the camera zooming in on people jumping from the burning buildings. The large number of casualties was traumatic, but even more important was the symbolic value of this event. It was shocking that a powerful country, perceived as safe, was hit and that gave rise to a sense of vulnerability.

Cultural explanations

Cultural analyses of Western societies emphasize their difficulty of dealing with risk, accidents, failure, and setbacks. Compared to the past, and to other cultures, there is less trust in the resilience of institutions and the population. According to some, there is even a 'culture of fear': while we live in the safest time and place ever, fear seems to be omnipresent. Periodically, panic arises over a new perceived threat, from 5G radiation to killer bees. Citizens increasingly demand that governments protect them from risks. Politicians respond by taking preventative measures, protecting themselves from criticism if something should happen. However, instead of increasing the feeling of security, these measures give people the impression that there is a great threat. Confronted with threat barometers, concrete barriers around important buildings, security cameras, and intensive controls at airports, we are constantly reminded of the terrorist threat (see Image 1.1). (Furedi, 2002)

Thus, terrorism has become part of our daily lives. Popular culture also plays a role. Popular films, series, video games, and books depict the fight against the terrorism threat. Although there are exceptions, the overall image conveyed in these cultural outlets is that of the terrorist as a non-Western (usually Arab), savage, and brutal villain. To the extent that motivations are mentioned, these tend to be attributed to mental illness or personal revenge. Thus, the portrayal of terrorism in popular culture not only contributes to the continued presence of the threat, but also perpetuates the image of terrorists as non-white individuals without political context. (Croft, 2006; Shaheen, 2001)



Image 1.1 Concrete security barriers near Times Square, New York

Source: Photo by author

Political explanations

Political statements by governments and politicians reproduce the ‘New Terrorism’ discourse. Some use the threat of terrorism to distract the public from other issues or to unite them behind a strong leader. Politicians sometimes intentionally exaggerate it, as when White House spokesperson Kellyanne Conway made up a terrorist slaughter to justify the Muslim travel ban in 2017 (Smith, 2017). For far-right politicians, perpetuating the threat image is a major part of their *raison d’être*. (Winkler, 2006)

Following an attack, leaders use big words, stating that a country’s way of life is under attack from savage terrorists, as President George W. Bush did after 9/11. The Bush administration gave a daily average of ten interviews and statements on terrorism, and Bush himself gave more than 3,000 speeches on the topic. His vision of terrorism became ingrained in people’s minds. (Graham, Keenan, & Dowd, 2004; see Chapter 5)

Meanwhile, non-state actors who use terrorism benefit from the exaggerated representation of the threat. They can use it to raise their profile, promote their cause, and even to claim responsibility for attacks they have not committed. This dynamic creates an interaction between governments and non-state groups, who bid against each other in the use of big words, like card players raising the stakes. (Noordegraaf et al., 2021; see also Chapter 10)

Economic explanations and the role of media

The fight against terrorism creates jobs. Since 9/11, governments have greatly increased the resources allocated to the security sector. There has been a proliferation of private businesses, including military companies and commercial deradicalization agencies. Hundreds of millions of dollars and pounds in research funding were made available to scientists by the US and British governments alone. Many new think tanks were established. Thus, many careers have become entangled with the terrorism threat. (Priest & Arkin, 2011; Rohde, 2013; see also Chapters 6 and 7)

For the media industry, coverage of terrorism has been proven to boost ratings and readerships. Terrorist actions dominate the headlines and news bulletins, confirming the idea that terrorism is a greater threat. Non-state actors involved in terrorism use this attention to achieve their goals; in the words of former UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, they need the 'oxygen of publicity'. The media also tend to reproduce other features of the dominant narrative, including its link to Muslim perpetrators. Furthermore, coverage of terrorism tends to focus narrowly on who did what, where, and how, rather than raising the why-question or exploring the context of terrorism. Research has shown that when exposed to such 'episodic framing', people are more inclined to support tougher punitive measures against individuals suspected of terrorism. In contrast, when watching coverage that gives background, viewers tend to be more in favour of policies designed to address the root causes of terrorism. (Iyengar, 1991; Morgan, 2005; see also Chapter 10)

Consequences

Studies have shown that high levels of fear can lead to mistrust and stereotyping, a lack of nuance, and a preference for strong, action-oriented leaders who offer a simple explanation for terrorism (Brader, 2005). In the aftermath of attacks, fear brings a call for immediate, decisive, and visible measures. It can lead to excessive responses by the authorities, even before the situation is fully understood. Government leaders use this dynamic to their advantage. The image of the catastrophic terrorist is useful for legitimizing exceptional policies, including the use of force and the restriction of civil rights. (Bakker & De Roy van Zuijdewijn, 2016; see also Part II)

Fear and overreaction increase the impact of terrorism. Seeking attention and provocation (see Chapter 3), attackers see publicity, political overreaction, and mass fear as a success. They can make the use of terrorist violence look effective, thereby leading to more attacks. Fear of terrorism can thus become a self-fulfilling prophecy. (Furedi, 2007)

Chapter summary

The question 'what is terrorism?' is not easy to answer. Calling groups or people 'terrorist' is problematic, even though it is a common practice, as evidenced in the proliferation of terrorist lists. Labelling multifaceted actors as terrorists is a subjective and political act. Terrorism is better understood as a form of violence that can be employed by a multitude of

actors, including states. Terrorist violence occurs in a context of conflict and is politically motivated, even though state discourses on terrorism, notably the 'New Terrorism' narrative, downplay this characteristic, arguing instead that terrorists are irrational and only out to destroy.

Actors often use terrorism in addition to other tactics, such as political activism and regular warfare. What distinguishes terrorism from other forms of political violence is that it falls outside the laws of war, often by deliberately targeting civilians, and aims to generate attention or fear to influence public opinion or political decision making. As such, the victims of terrorist violence are not its eventual targets.

Contemporary understandings of terrorism have tended to focus on ideological and religious motivations rather than political ones. Particularly since 9/11, terrorism is often conflated with jihadist violence. The tendency to present radical Islam as the driving force behind terrorism has led to Islamophobia and policies that treat Muslims as suspect. It has also obscured the growing problem of far-right terrorism (see the exercise below).

Another characteristic of the dominant narrative on terrorism is that it is seen as an existential threat to security and a way of life, particularly in Western countries. Even though, outside war zones, terrorism presents a very small risk, nevertheless, its portrayal as an extreme threat is reproduced in political speeches, popular culture, and news media. It has led to a host of counterterrorist measures which have reinforced the sense of danger and even fed into terrorist agendas. In this sense, the narrative on terrorism has characteristics of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Exercise

A US house of representatives hearing on terrorism

On June 4, 2019, US Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez questioned FBI official Michael McGarrity about how the US Government approached far-right and jihadist terrorism. Find the video on YouTube (*'Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Confronts FBI Official Over White Supremacists'*) or read the transcript below. Then answer the reflective questions that follow.

Ms. OCASIO-CORTEZ

We've seen White Supremacist attacks that were clearly domestic terrorism. Experts, in fact, the Acting AG [Attorney-General], Jeff Sessions, even called some of these incidents domestic terrorism incidents. The Emanuel A.M.E. Church shooting of Black Americans in Charleston and the Tree of Life Synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh of Jewish people, those were only designated and charged as hate crimes, not domestic terrorist incidents. Mr. McGarrity, why did the FBI not believe that these incidents were domestic terrorist incidents?

[...]

(Continued)

- Mr. MCGARRITY You're not going to find an actual charge of domestic terrorism out there. If you look at Title 18, right, if you're looking for—
- Ms. OCASIO-CORTEZ Well, it says here that—but at the San Bernardino shooting or the Orlando Pulse nightclub shooting, they were designated and charged as domestic terrorist incidents.
- Mr. MCGARRITY They were charged—I'd have to go back and look—they were charged likely with—if there was a connection to a foreign terrorist organization, it would likely fall under 18 U.S.C. 23A or B.
- Ms. OCASIO-CORTEZ So because the perpetrator was Muslim, they are—doesn't it seem that because the perpetrator is Muslim—
- Mr. MCGARRITY That is not correct. That has nothing to do—
- Ms. OCASIO-CORTEZ —that that designation would say it's a foreign organization?
- Mr. MCGARRITY No, that's not correct. That is not correct.
- Ms. OCASIO-CORTEZ Okay. Can you explain why?
- Mr. MCGARRITY Yes. Homegrown violent extremists, who we—most of the people we arrest in the United States, homegrown violent extremists, self-radicalized, born in the U.S., it doesn't matter what religion—
- Ms. OCASIO-CORTEZ But the Orlando Pulse club shooter meets those qualifications, and he is—you're implying—
- Mr. MCGARRITY He was worked as an international terrorist because he was following, under the definition of how we work home-grown violent extremist cases—
- Ms. OCASIO-CORTEZ But he was homegrown and self-radicalized.
- Mr. MCGARRITY. —how we work homegrown violent extremist cases, under the global jihad, we worked it under international terrorism, that is correct.
- Ms. OCASIO-CORTEZ Is White supremacy not a global issue?
- Mr. MCGARRITY It is a global issue.
- Ms. OCASIO-CORTEZ So why are they not charged with foreign terrorism?
- Mr. MCGARRITY Because the U.S. Congress doesn't have a statute for us for domestic terrorism like we do on a foreign terrorist organization, like ISIS, al-Qaida, Al Shabaab.
- Ms. OCASIO-CORTEZ Could you see how this could create issues and discrepancies with how violent extremism by Muslim perpetrators could potentially, even if it's unintentional, but that there are holes and there are gaps here, not through your fault or any one specific person's fault? It

could be our fault as Congress. But could you see how [...] the way that we are pursuing and charging White supremacy, particularly if they tend to be charged with hate crimes, and where that same type of violence committed by a Muslim extremist could be charged with domestic terrorism. Hate crimes and domestic terrorism are treated and charged— they're different crimes and they could be pursued differently with different resource allocations. Can you see how people would say that these are being treated differently?

Mr. MCGARRITY

Some of the definitions we're using, I think we're talking past each other. But I will tell you from the domestic terrorism side and on the international terrorism side, on the domestic terrorism side, we don't charge—of those 115, approximately 115 arrests we did last year, not all of them were hate crime charges. [...]

Ms. OCASIO-CORTEZ

Okay. Thank you very much. (US Government Publishing Office, 2019)

How do you explain the different treatment of terrorism by people with White Supremacist ideas and terrorism by people with jihadist ideas? Does it relate to the 'New Terrorism' narrative, Orientalism, or Islamophobia? What could be the consequences of the different treatment of how terrorism is perceived?

Further reading and viewing

- Institute for Economics and Peace (2025). *Global Terrorism Index*. The Institute produces an annual report online with the latest statistics on non-state terrorism worldwide.
- *Critical Studies on Terrorism*. An academic journal looking at terrorism from a variety of critical angles.
- Ruth Blakely (2007). Bringing the state back into terrorism studies. *European Political Science*, 6(3), 228–235. A clearly articulated argument in favour of the concept of state terrorism.
- Arun Kundnani (2014). *The Muslims Are Coming! Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror*. London: Verso. An eloquent and scathing critique of UK and US post-9/11 policies in relation to Islamophobia.
- CounterJihad (2016). *Killing for a Cause: Sharia Law & Civilization Jihad*. YouTube [Film]. A short YouTube video that illustrates Islamophobic sentiments in the US and how they are linked to the fear of terrorism. The video claims Muslims are conducting a covert 'civilization jihad' to Islamize American culture, education, and politics.

^uncorrected proof^