

# Can Terrorism be justified?

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## POINTS TO DEVELOP

1. Incidents of terrorism and definition of terrorism.

Examining the causes and growth of terrorism worldwide.

Differences between terrorist activity and other acts involving violence.

Focus of terrorist violence –innocent people – which is what is unjustifiable.

Terrorism in its fight for rights shows no respect for others' rights – so it cannot be justified.

It is not the only way to achieve an end.

Practically always unsuccessful in achieving its objective, so unjustifiable even on that score.

Terrorism cannot be justified.

Munich, 1972; a dozen athletes of the Israeli Olympic team were kidnapped from an Olympic village and brutally murdered by terrorists. Lebanon, 1982: a suicide attack on the US marine barracks resulted in the death of 241 marines. In May 1990, the Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi, was ruthlessly blown to pieces by a terrorist. More recently we have had the terrorist assassination of Sri Lanka's President and later its foreign minister. The shocking attack on the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001 gave rise to the term 9/11. In Chechnya, a school was held hostage and several innocent children were killed by separatists wanting Chechnya to secede from Russia. In Delhi, a major disaster was averted when a terrorist's bid to bomb Parliament House was foiled. But innocent shoppers were not so lucky in 2005 when bomb blasts ripped through crowded market places on the eve of Diwali. As for Jammu and Kashmir and places like Manipur and Assam, ordinary people there have become chronic targets of terrorists. These are merely a few examples of terrorist activities around the world.

Terrorism is the random use of violence to achieve political ends that inflicts damage on innocent people and property, creating terror or fear in them. An individual who commits violent acts to seek public attention for his cause – which he thinks justifies his violence – is a terrorist.

The terrorists aim at focusing attention on their problem by destroying innocent people besides property. They see themselves as engaged in an 'unofficial war' with political objectives and identify their cause with the fight for human rights. To the terrorists themselves, of course, the means they adopt are justified. However, we would have to consider the causes and the gamut of responses to terrorism before we can agree or disagree with the terrorist' view.

Today, almost every country faces the threat of terrorism in varying degrees. Why has terrorism become so popular a means for achieving ends? Political, economic and social causes can be identified for the mushrooming of terrorist groups.

Political desires and ambitions conflicting with those of the government are expressed through violence so that the government are expressed through violence so that they would be better heard. Growing political unrest and dissatisfaction erupts in the form of terrorist activities as the state itself is seen as the seat of sin and corruption. The constitutions of most democracies provide for equal rights but often these may be denied to one group. Some statutes of the law may not be rightly enforced or enforced at all. Criminalization of institutions leads to a general sense of discontent. To a large extent, it is such a scenario which is responsible for the deterioration of the social and economic conditions. The formation of the social and economic conditions. The formation of terrorist groups then improve the economic situation of 'common people'. Terrorist groups seek political goals through the means of violence. It is again the wish to improve one's lot socially and economically, that drives ordinary persons to terrorism. This is much the case in India.

Mistreatment in homes has also been identified as an important factor. Joining terrorist groups is a way to express individual grievances and private rage. A terrorist, once enrolled in a group, is committed irrevocably to the 'cause', and is held by threats of the group itself.

A genuine cause can, indeed, be identified with a terrorist group or its members but it is rather rare. In such cases, it is a blind, irrational devotion to the cause that spurs terrorists on so that they not only commit violent acts but are even zealous to justify the extreme violence as an adequate means to express private anger.

Terrorists often assume the garb of 'urban guerillas'. 'resistance fighters'. 'revolutionaries' and others. Terrorists, however, unlike the guerilla fighter, do not attempt to totally destroy the enemy regime. They do not seek to demolish political authority in its place; their activities are not outcome oriented. Terrorist

activities overlook conventional distinctions of person and place while guerilla warfare is genuine warfare against a stated enemy.

The randomly executed violence of terrorists puts them in a category different from that of assassins. Political assassins single out as their victims those individuals who are felt to be accountable for alleged misdeeds or for their participation in unjust institutions. While the assassin attempts to remove one office-holder so that he would be replaced by another pursuing more acceptable policies, the terrorist seeks simply to destroy. Terrorist acts may sometimes include assassinations of a person or persons but all assassinations cannot be regarded as terrorist activities.

Terrorists, more often than not, proclaim their killings while the subversive postpones self-identification and bids for recognition. Sometimes, acts of kidnapping and hijacking by a person or persons can be mistaken for terrorist acts. The distinguishing feature is that such person or persons usually demand money as ransom and do not identify themselves with any terrorist group or cause. On the other hand, all these activities may be employed by terrorists for their own ends.

Though the goal of coercion cannot be built into the definition of terrorism, the violence it employs is coercive in nature. The terrorist resorts to sudden violence in order to achieve political ends but this in itself cannot be enough to condemn terrorism, for all violence is not necessarily unjustifiable. A list of situations that might be held to justify violence would include cases of self-defence, preventions of threats to one's own life or others' lives, and protection of individual or collective right to liberty. Violence cannot be condemned outright even if it is a type of force. Force is a common feature of the political system itself and is used by the legitimate authorities to ensure payment of taxes, control of crime, and for upholding law and order. But terrorist violence is deplorable mainly because it is randomly executed and is directed most often at the innocent or ordinary people who are totally unprepared for it.

The terrorists' focus on ordinary people is based on the fact that they are easy to reach and are susceptible to the deadly force. Terrorists hope that the 'spared' innocents would recognize that they might have been the victims of the terrorists' ambitions and so take them seriously. The terrorists ensure greater attention to their problems by targeting the innocent. Terrorist acts are justified by pointing out that the victims are not really innocent, but are threats due to their financial or electoral support to an institution or the state. Terrorists even hold the innocents punishable for their crime of ignoring the terrorists and their cause. But such arguments cannot be taken seriously; any individual has the liberty to extend

support or refrain from extending support to any group or instituting as long as he or she does not intrude upon others' rights and does not act for the deterioration of the society or his country.

The killing of ordinary people raises arguments that identify destruction in wars as similar to that which results from terrorist activities. The comparison is weak, for whereas wars are fought for the sake of protecting the populace at large, terrorist activities serve the interests of a specific group only

Once we denounce the kind of violence adopted by the terrorists, there is not much of a case for defending their act on grounds of morality. Terrorist violence shakes the framework of morality because it amounts to doing things to people without warning, mercy or recourse. It takes away the rights of the people. The members of a terrorist group may be genuinely suffering because of the denial of certain rights by the government or the state. Ironically, they in their turn think nothing of exercising their rights by intruding upon those of the ordinary people.

The problem posed by terrorism is that of achieving effective respect for the basic human rights of the members of one group by the violation of the basic human rights of another group by the violation of the basic human rights of another group. Strictly speaking, rights should not be suppressed for the sake of another. But where rights conflict, their priority has to be taken into consideration; some rights have to be seen as more basic than others. So, it would be more imperative to stop violations of the black population's right to freedom and rights to live in South Africa than to prevent the violation of the whites' property rights. Even if one sympathizes with a terrorist's 'cause'. The sympathy is diluted on the realization that the terrorist does not respect another human being's rights as a human being. The terrorist's violation of the people's right to live is the most serious violation because it attacks the fundamental right of all- the right to live. This right has to be safeguarded even if it means denying the terrorist one of the comparatively less important rights, like the right to expression.

There are rare instances when terrorism can be condoned and hence justified. When the state itself resorts to terrorist activity in the first place, then the terrorists' activities can be justified as a form of 'counter-terrorism'. But again, it is difficult to justify the killing of ordinary people who are as much victims of the terrorist state as the terrorist groups. Terrorism provides legitimization for political repression and hence cannot be defended. Even on the plane of practical reality, it is difficult to justify terrorism as it rarely succeeds in achieving its objective. It is argued that terrorist activities do succeed in acquiring the release of convicted

and imprisoned colleagues and in influencing the behavior of the public. But we can effectively argue against the “success claim” of terrorist activities by pointing out that their basic purpose remains unfulfilled, i.e., their political goals are hardly achieved. There is no indication that damage to persons or property does indeed advance political ends. Terrorists themselves are not unaware that they cannot topple regimes by harming the innocents.

Some people extend the view that the terrorist’s aim is to express support for political outcomes and not really to bring about those outcomes. And so, it is said sometimes no group takes the responsibility for an attack, leave alone present a list of political demands. The terrorists claim to be content that their activity is expressive in nature. But even if it is so, it does not succeed, for it is viewed more as an act of horror that created fear and terror in the people than as the expression of a legitimate cause with which the masses can sympathize. The expressive activity is possible only at very heavy price –the loss of human lives. When the dissatisfied people have other channels like negotiated settlement, non-violent civil disobedience, etc., open to them for expression, their recourse to terrorism cannot be condoned. Nor is it acceptable that they attempt to justify the desirability of their cause by relating it to elimination of injustice.

Terrorists in their quest for ‘rights’ think little of destroying the rights of others. However deeply we study the causes of the growth of terrorism, even understand the motivation behind it, we cannot justify it. Even if we leave aside the moral issues involved, and look at it from the ‘practical’ point of view, we fail to find a justification, for it hardly ever accomplishes its objectives; it merely wreaks futile destruction.