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Conceptual analysis of terrorism as a political communication tactic

Abstract

Considering that there is no universally accepted definition of the concept of terrorism, based on the analysis of the factors of the phenomenon and three definitions selected based on their relevance, this article proposes a definition applicable to the various types of terrorism, establishing its main characteristics and the criteria inherent to them.

In this analysis, terrorism is approached as a tactic of organized violence, with motivations based on an ideology or a cause that is intended to make visible, so it can be considered as a form of political communication, because it transmits a political message aimed at previously selected audiences, based on a narrative designed to influence and mobilize.

Keywords: Terrorism, political communication, public opinion, extremist narrative

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1. Introduction

The concept of terrorism generates debate because there is no universally accepted definition of this phenomenon. Academics and security organisations have drawn up definitions that differ from one another in terms of the emphasis they place on some of its constituent elements, establishing different characteristics of the phenomenon. Ideally, of course, there should be a consensus that would allow certain events to be objectively classified as terrorism.

In contemporary times, violence applied in a measured and intimidating way to achieve political objectives has been labelled by some as terrorism and by others as necessary and legitimate actions in the context of the national liberation of a people, the struggle to end the oppression of a social class, the defence of the values of a religion, among other reasons.

What is certain is that this tactic, which is given a name with an imprecise meaning, has been used by secular and religious groups, on the basis of different radical ideologies, constituting a method of struggle and propaganda to achieve political or ideological objectives, generating public commotion in the places where the attacks take place.

Among the efforts to try to define it, in the 1980s Schmid and Jongman (1988) stated that terrorism is: *“A method of repeated violent action, inspired by anxiety, used by individuals, groups, or states, (semi-) clandestinely, for idiosyncratic, criminal or political reasons, whereby - unlike murder - the immediate target of the violence is not the ultimate goal. Human victims of violence are chosen from the population at random (targets of opportunity) or selectively (symbolic or representative targets) and are used as generators of the terrorist message. The communicative process between the terrorist (or terrorist organisation), victims (or threatened) and principal targets, based on violence or threat of violence, is used to manipulate these principal targets (audience) and turn them into targets of terror, terrorist demands or attention, depending on whether intimidation, coercion or propaganda is sought”*.

Another definition states that “terrorism is a method of causing anxiety through repeated violent actions that is employed by (semi-) clandestine individuals, groups or state elements for political, criminal or idiosyncratic reasons, and in which the direct victims of violence are not - unlike in cases of assassination or political assassination - the ultimate target” (Horgan, 2009: 50).

This article aims to contribute to the debate and the search for objectivity in the formulation of a definition of “terrorism”, applicable to the different expressions of this phenomenon, as it would be illogical to have a definition for each of its typologies (nationalist, jihadist, eco-extremist, etc.).

2. Terrorism and Political Communication

2.1 Defining terrorism

The concept of terrorism, although frequently used in the media and academic circles, does not have a universally accepted definition that makes it possible to delimit its meaning and scope, which in practice often means that a given phenomenon of political violence may or may not be classified as terrorism, giving rise to controversy over the concept. Evidently, there are cases of attacks that cause great public commotion, in which, given the motivations and organisational affiliation of the perpetrators, there does not seem to be this dilemma when it comes to classifying the event as terrorist.

It is even known that on occasions governments or political groups have called opponents terrorists in order to deliberately denigrate them and demonise their intentions, taking advantage of the absence of a universally accepted definition. Likewise, there are cases where an event or phenomenon is intentionally or mistakenly referred to as terrorist - or is removed from that category - depending on the ideological prism of the observer, i.e. bias.

The concept of terrorism has a negative and pejorative connotation, so that those who use this form of violence do not wish to be called terrorists, nor, unlike the anarchists of the last century, do they perceive themselves as such, in addition to the subjectivity that comes with the name.

The lack of a definition, structured with academic rigour but broad enough to encompass the different expressions of terrorism (whatever its political or ideological purpose), leads to shortcomings in identifying it, studying its nature and designing courses of action to counter it. Even to enhance measures in the context of international cooperation, it would be a facilitator to have a globally agreed definition.

For its conceptual analysis, we must first situate ourselves in the framework of political violence, because terrorist actions pursue political objectives that are related to a cause they promote or a social change they wish to promote. Although it may seem simple, this characteristic feature is decisive for understanding their nature, since common criminals do not carry out their actions in pursuit of a political strategy or to change the established order.

In addition to its political or ideological motivation, it involves the deployment of violence through a method, and can therefore be described as a tactic. Regardless of the specific objective it pursues, be it the national liberation of a people or the world domination of one religion or another, terrorism is a tactic, in terms of method of struggle and also of propaganda, which is gestated in a clandestine manner.

Continuing with the attributes that this tactic would have, it is clear that violence is exercised in a deliberate, even planned, manner. However brutal the results of terrorist attacks may be, in most cases they are the result of a detailed plan, in which the attack is a one-off act of violence to convey a message that vindicates a cause that the terrorists consider legitimate and for which they have mobilised.

At this point, it is worth clarifying that the ends pursued by groups or individuals with this tactic are political or ideological, so that causing terror is not the ultimate purpose of the actions inherent to this method, but rather an instrument used by its perpetrators to amplify their capacity for coercion, considering that generally those who resort to terrorist tactics do not have the means of a conventional army or the strength of a state: that is, it has traditionally been used by extra-state actors from a position of inferiority.

Notwithstanding the above, terrorism can also be exercised by the state, which, unlike non-state actors, has greater means at its disposal to carry out clandestine or semi-clandestine violence in the context of authoritarian regimes, although this typology is not infrequently excluded when it comes to dealing with the terrorist phenomenon and its classifications.

When referring to the term, there is a tendency to confuse instruments and ends, assuming the simplistic assumption that terrorism seeks to cause terror, and as we have seen, it obviously causes terror, but this does not constitute an objective in itself. Fear in society or in the audiences (authorities, social groups, international actors or others) to whom the message is intended to be sent is aimed at bending wills or directing behaviour towards the terrorists' ends.

It should be specified that terrorist action is understood as "conscious and voluntary human acts involving the use or threat of physical violence for some instrumental purpose, often of a political, religious or sectarian nature. Unlike other forms of violence, terrorist attacks are not primarily aimed at neutralising or destroying the victims but at psychologically influencing their direct or indirect bystanders" (Toboso, 2020: 30).

Fear can modify the normal functioning of society, affecting not only the potential victims, but also social groups or the entire population, which can modify their daily lives, such as going to certain crowded places or using public transport.

Terrorist attacks as forms of attacks also have the facet of communicational acts aimed at generating publicity, giving visibility through public opinion to the political or ideological objective to be promoted, attracting the attention of society in general and of the previously defined audiences of the cause in the name of which they are acting. Terrorism is a violent mechanism for communicating yearnings, frustrations, utopias, and the will to change.

Terrorist attacks generate emotional shock, so they have a greater psychological effect than their direct material consequences and are aimed at conditioning the behaviour of audiences. For this reason, the selection of human or material targets is done by looking for those that have a high symbolic value (Molano, 2010: 225-249) or randomly because they are representative of a category.

The analysis and explanation of terrorism from the perspective of social psychology suggests that it corresponds to a method of socio-political influence, which is exercised deliberately and strategically, being possible to make an analogy with the campaigns carried out by advertisers, since terrorists use violence to direct our attention towards certain real, exaggerated, or fictitious problems and to publicise their own objectives and ideologies (De la Corte, 2007: 41-42).

In this respect, terrorists need the media, the press, and the internet, to give their attacks a greater impact, as they aspire to have their attacks publicised and commented on. “Without press coverage, the impact of terrorists would arguably be wasted, remaining narrowly confined to the direct and immediate victims of the attack, rather than reaching the wider target audience. Only the spread of fear and outrage to a much larger audience can earn terrorists the maximum potential influence they need to effect fundamental political change” (Hoffman, 2007: 10). The communicational dimension of terrorism as publicity is unmistakable. “It is a theatre in permanent search of an audience, which serves to shed light on certain debates and in which the victims are reified for the sake of the objects and symbols that are attacked” (Aznar, 2015: 4).

A topic of discussion to establish a common definition is the fatalities of the terrorist action as a central element that qualifies it as such, not in quantitative terms, but in the fact that people are killed as a result of the application of this tactic, but there is no consensus on this point either. According to the United Nations, a terrorist act is one “intended to cause death or serious bodily injury to a civilian, or to any other person not taking an active part in the hostilities in a situation of armed conflict, when the purpose of such act, by its nature or context, is to intimidate a population, or to compel a Government or an international organisation to do or abstain from doing any act” (United Nations, 1999).

In this regard, it should be specified that terrorism is understood as a method of violent actions to condition other actors in a certain direction, based on an ideology and/or a cause, with the central axis being the aims pursued, and where the existence or not of fatalities is not decisive, and it can be classified as a terrorist phenomenon even when there is no evidence of fatalities. On the other hand, the aforementioned United Nations convention places terrorist acts in the context of a situation of armed conflict, excessively limiting its application to such an extent that under this premise we could not consider the 9/11 attacks to be terrorist acts.

Among the wide range of definitions of the nature of the phenomenon, although it includes the allusion to the “non-combatant population”, we can mention the one formulated by Luis De la Corte (2006: 43), who defines terrorism as “a premeditated succession of violent and intimidating acts carried out against a non-combatant population and designed to psychologically influence a number of people far greater than the number of direct victims in order to achieve some objective, almost always of a political nature”.

For his part, Reinares (1998: 15-16) states that it is “a set of violent actions that generate, in a given population group, psychological effects that are disproportionate to their material consequences and whose purpose is to condition the attitudes of that social group and orient their behaviour in a certain direction”.

Likewise, Elorza, Ballester and Borreguero (2005: 43) define it as “a tactic, preferential, although not exclusively political, which consists of the serial and systematic execution of specific violent actions”.

In this respect, there are more than a hundred definitions of terrorism. In a study carried out by Schmid and Jongman (1988), using a questionnaire addressed to experts in the field, it was established that the concept of violence appeared in 83% of the definitions, that of politics in 65% and that of fear or terror in 51%. For this reason, it would not be appropriate to exclude these variables when proposing a definition.

2.2 Proposed definition

On the basis of the above and the three definitions cited above, the proposed definition of terrorism is as follows: tactics consisting of the execution of punctual or serial actions of violence, intimidatory, for political or ideological purposes, in order to influence certain audiences.

This definition derives from it certain characteristics on which there is no consensus in the academic community, but which are recurrent when analysing the definitions in use. These are:

Characteristic	Description
It is a tactic	It corresponds to a method, a covert fighting procedure, which is generally employed on the basis of inferior means.
Involves the use of violence	Involves actions of a violent nature, which are punctual or serial and deliberately executed.
It generates fear	It causes intimidation in society and especially in the groups or categories to which the immediate victims belong. It produces public commotion and psychological effects.
It has political or ideological aims	It seeks to promote a cause, generally associated with a desired transformation at the political level or the establishment of a certain model of society, based on an ideology or the promotion of a cause.
It conveys a message	Terrorist action is communication aimed at publicising a cause and drawing attention to it, using impact, where the audiences are previously defined, with the aim of forcing changes or decisions. The recipients of this "communication", depending on the cause to be promoted, can be political authorities, social groups, international actors and even societies.
It has a double dimension: attack and communication	The execution of violence through attacks represents a form of struggle, i.e., attacks, and simultaneously a form of communication to draw attention to the objective pursued. It should be made clear that conveying the message is more important than defeating the enemy (which is usually not feasible).

Table 1: Characteristics of terrorism

Source: Own elaboration.

Also, in this approach, for a phenomenon to be considered as terrorist, each characteristic needs to meet at least one of the proposed criteria:

Characteristic	Criteria
It is a tactic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secret planning and covert execution of specific acts of violence, by organisations, groups or individual actors. • Secret planning and overt execution of specific violent actions by organisations, groups or individual actors..
Involves the use of violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Threat of use of violence against people, infrastructure, facilities, means of transport, among others. • Execution of violence in a punctual or serial manner on people, infrastructure, facilities, means of transport, among others. • Threats and execution of violence, simultaneously or sequentially, on people, infrastructure, facilities, means of transport, among others.
It generates fear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It attracts attention or media impact, whether in attacks against human or material targets. • Produces anxiety and fear, even if there is no fear of being a victim, whether in attacks against human or material targets. • Produces anxiety and fear of being a victim in people related to a certain category, whether in attacks against human or material targets.
It has political or ideological aims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeks to influence decisions of authorities, state powers or international actors. • Promotes or asserts a claim against the established order. • Promotes or vindicates a cause, political or cause-based. • Promotes or claims a political aspiration. • Promotes or claims an ideology or ideology.
It conveys a message	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It expresses a claim against the status quo and a yearning for a different reality. Seeks to condition certain audiences. • Expresses a claim against the status quo and communicates the will to promote change. Seeks to condition certain audiences.
It has a double dimension: attack and communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action involving the use or threat of violence to inflict harm and communicate a grievance against the status quo, based on political or ideological objectives.

Table 2: Criteria for characteristics

Source: Own elaboration.

The proposed definition is applicable to the different existing typologies of terrorism in terms of the specific forms in which it manifests itself according to the political and/or ideological objectives sought by the perpetrators, i.e. the five types of terrorism in Post’s (2004) classification: 1) social revolutionary, 2) right-

wing, 3) nationalist separatist, 4) religious extremist and 5) derived from specific issues, such as animal rights or environmental defence.

It also includes other forms of terrorism that may arise in the future, as it is a mutable phenomenon. “From its modern origins to the present day, terrorism is a phenomenon that has not ceased to evolve and change. It adapts very efficiently to the signs of the times. That is why monitoring its evolution is so important to differentiate what is truly terrorism and what is not” (Pérez, 2020).

2.3 Political communication and terrorist narrative

The irruption of social networks and people’s immediate access to information has not rendered the “propaganda by the fact” of 19th century anarchist attacks obsolete. On the contrary, it is precisely the virtual environment and also the traditional media that are essential for the perpetrators of these acts of violence, committed under different ideologies, to reach wider audiences, since communication is the central pillar in the actions of terrorism. In this sense, the most recurrent example, but which in turn represents the “best” example of this, is the Daesh organisation and its sophisticated audio-visual production.

The communication deployed by terrorists can be categorised as political in terms of their aims. For Cotteret (1997), political communication establishes the voluntary interaction of a political message from the sender to the receiver, with the intention of pulling the receiver in a certain direction, so that he or she cannot move in any other direction. As mentioned above, terrorism seeks to influence particular audiences.

Evidently, the use of the concept of political communication to describe terrorist activity does not refer to governmental communication or political marketing, but to activism based on a cause, political project or ideology, with the purpose of influencing or orienting behaviour in the recipients of the message.

In the sense of the above, considering that terrorist actions fulfil a communicative function, terrorist attacks produce effects based on the information provided in the media (Toboso, 2020: 115):

- Surprise: A terrorist attack is an unforeseen event that generates fear.
- Confusion: After the attack, confusing, late, distorted or untruthful information.
- High impact: Attacking symbolic targets causes impact.
- Destabilisation: Disrupts all layers of society, with political, economic and social effects.
- Urgency: Demand for immediate information, with the risk of it being generated hastily or recklessly. Information needs to be disseminated through official means that has been corroborated.

Terrorist attacks are violent political actions that, in addition to destabilising, seek to generate audiences, activate them, polarise society and structure a certain discourse, within the framework of a broader strategy, so it is common for terrorist groups to also use other tactics of a political nature, such as hybridising

with movements or parties to achieve their objectives, an example of this being ETA's relationship with Herri Batasuna (Cañete, 2019: 19).

The impact on public opinion and other effects on society are desired by terrorists: even the perpetrators in the framework of their narrative commonly put forward arguments legitimising terrorist activity (De la Corte, 2007: 48):

- Arguments and beliefs that specify and criticise certain social injustices, threats or grievances committed against a reference group of terrorist groups.
- Arguments and beliefs that identify an institutional or social enemy who is held responsible for such injustices, threats and grievances and whose image is devalued to the point of dehumanisation or demonisation.
- Arguments and beliefs that express a positive social identity common to terrorist groups and their reference group.
- Arguments and beliefs that specify the collective goals to which the reference collective of terrorist groups should aspire and that specify the violent activities deemed necessary to achieve these goals.
- Arguments and beliefs that predict a future state in which terrorist groups would have achieved the collective goals set and pursued through violence.

From this narrative, which is common to different forms of terrorism, we can see the importance of collective identity in the motivations of those who deploy violence to make a cause visible, appealing to belonging to a religious, ethnic or social group, among others, as opposed to an enemy who is the cause of the evils, on the basis of which the activists of the cause are mobilised. This discourse is expressed in communiqués announcing attacks, in the speeches of terrorist leaders, in publications on websites and audiovisual content.

For terrorists, it is important to seek social support for their actions, mainly from members of their reference group, and ideally to broaden their support base, so their narrative is often expressed simply, using slogans and rhetorical resources, since their most important theatre of operations is not the physical place where the attacks are carried out, but public opinion and, of course, the enemy responsible for the grievances against which the terrorist mobilisation has been generated.

Finally, it is necessary to point out that the media have a responsibility not to contribute to terrorist aims through an adequate treatment of the news related to attacks and actions of radical groups, avoiding the use of language or stories that show sympathy towards extremists or euphemisms that minimise the facts and even justify them, being more recurrent the occurrence of this situation when it comes to terrorism of nationalist groups that fight from the conception of "oppressed people". The press has an effect on public perceptions, on the processes of violent radicalisation and on the capacity of violent groups to mobilise new activists.

3. Conclusion

This reflection on the concept of terrorism and its characteristics aims to generate a proposal for a definition, from an academic perspective and endowed with the greatest possible objectivity. In this sense, the emphasis is placed on the motivations of the perpetrators, where violence is used as a means of political communication.

Political and/or ideological motivations are the central and differentiating element with respect to other acts of violence, whether terrorist incidents occur in contexts of peace or war, with or without fatalities. Even the legitimacy of terrorist action is not a defining factor because it implies subjectivity and bias on the part of the observer.

Terrorism as organised terror and a method of socio-political influence is aimed at producing psychological effects on certain audiences at the national or international level, as it causes fear, producing an impact on everyday life. In this sense, terrorism is a tactic that involves the use of violence, generates fear, has political and/or ideological aims and conveys a message. Its narrative is commonly associated with a reference collective and the moral justification of violence.

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