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How to define rebellion, terrorism and other violence

By Caspar ten Dam

Profile author

Caspar ten Dam (MA political science) is a conflict analyst and terrorism expert, now doing PhD research at Queens University Belfast on the aims and methods of Muslim rebel movements in collapsed Communist states.¹

He has worked for the Interdisciplinary Research Program on Root Causes of Human Rights Violations (PIOOM) at the University of Leiden between 1998 and 2002. He has been a freelance researcher since then. He specializes in confidential and pioneering research, such as on the Kosovo Liberation Army for the United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention (ODCCP), Terrorism Prevention Branch (TPB) during 1999-2000. He has given multiple presentations on terrorism and related topics, such as at the University of Amsterdam in 2003 and Queens University Belfast in 2006. Most recently he has lectured on violence-values of Chechen and Albanian rebels during the 7th annual CESS conference at the University of Michigan (<http://cess.fas.harvard.edu>) and in Belfast on 15 November 2006.² Currently he is writing a book on *Conceptualizing violence: how to combat terrorism and other atrocities in a post 11 September world* (preliminary title), under contract at Cambridge Scholars Press. The author is available to conduct paid research with possible policy recommendations, for projects or in part-time.

Main argument

One needs to distinguish between universal and temporal phenomena. Since the '30s of the last century those observing and contemplating on revolutions, uprisings, coups d'états and all kinds of violent conflicts have sought to capture these phenomena by concepts that describe their unique or distinguishing characteristics. Given their research interests, perspectives and specialisms they tend to formulate concepts that only describe empirical regularities of specific, historically bounded, temporary and changeable phenomena. They also – often erroneously – perceive particular events as unprecedented phenomena that herald the beginnings of a 'new' era. The so-called 'new war' theorists form a typical example. This myopic fascination with so-called 'new', 'unique' developments while neglecting historical similarities has bedevilled the field of conflict studies for a long time. Adrian Guelke's observation that "the notion that an age of terrorism began in the late 1960s is one of the most common propositions in the literature on terrorism"³ is disquieting. According to *our* definition (see Appendix), terrorism has been with us since the dawn of human history, whatever the fluctuations in aims and techniques across history. The main problem is that many specialists – and many generalists who purport to develop 'universal' conflict theories – mistakenly regard observed regularities as functional, timeless characteristics that need be

incorporated in their *main* definitions. Thus many seek to include in their concept of ‘terrorism’ the perpetrators’ intentions like the creation of fear and media attention, and objectives like the creation of a free, independent or Islamist state. *Yet such motives and goals alter over time.* Or successor organisations may use terrorism (violence against civilians) for entirely different reasons. Thus one is forced to continuously modify one’s *de facto* empirical definition if one wishes to include any new trend within this type of violence: a time-consuming undertaking. It is preferable to reserve one’s main concepts for the formulation of ‘ideal-types’ or *Gedankenbilde* (Weber)⁴ and to regard their real-time, fluctuating manifestations as ‘sub-types’ of phenomena and classify them as such. To the latter category of ‘empirical concepts’ we can easily add other concepts that represent brand-new versions of the same (kind of) phenomena, and drop outdated or virtually concepts (one can alternatively present both old and new manifestations of violence). Thus for the main concept terrorism we can distinguish between transient, evolving motivations and ideologies as sub-types, and label them ‘leftwing terrorism’, ‘rightwing terrorism’, ‘Islamist terrorism’ and so on. The ‘classical’ attempts to construct ‘universal’ concepts combining ends with means and other (potentially) transient characteristics are recipes for recurring disagreement and cumbersome upgrading. We thus agree with Raymond D. Duvall and Michael Stohl:

Motives are entirely irrelevant to the concept of political terrorism. Most analysts fail to recognize this and, hence, tend to discuss certain motives as logical or necessary aspects of terrorism. But they are not. At best, they are empirical regularities associated with terrorism. More often, they simply confuse analysis.⁵

The best approach is not to define terrorists – and other types of violent actors – by what they believe or want (ideology) but by what they do (behaviour). More analysts come to share this view.⁶ This debate can be fruitful even if interpretivists and relativists are right in saying that it involves ‘essentially contested concepts’ (Gallie).⁷ Always strive to separate the universally possible method from the temporarily existing objective.



NB: one can adopt or refer to these definitions, though only when one identifies the author and his copyright, and the location where the original source can be found. When one uses these definitions in any publication, conference or any other setting, the author appreciates it when he is informed of it and/or consulted on it in advance. Be advised that this Appendix (with possible modifications) will be reproduced in the author's final PhD dissertation and several forthcoming publications.

Generic concepts

Aggression: deliberate infliction of physical or psychological pain, other harm or coercion (force) by sentient beings on other sentient beings for whatever end, which may or may not be done through physical force, and may or may not be immoral and illegal i.e. entail the violation of essential, personal and basic human rights in the broad sense (including humanitarian law).

Violence: deliberate infliction of physical pain, other harm or coercion for whatever end which may or may not be lethal, and may or may not entail the violation of essential, personal and basic human rights in the broad sense.

Political violence: deliberate infliction of physical pain, other harm or coercion for whatever end in the public arena beyond the private sphere (yet possibly with private motives) which may or may not be lethal, and may or may not entail violations of human rights and humanitarian law.

Conflict: fundamental disagreement between one or more actors due to opposite aims, interests, needs or grievances that for some reason have been unsolvable, irreconcilable or uncompromisable up to that point in time through either peaceful or forceful means.

Armed conflict: violent confrontation between one or more armed actors with opposite aims, interests, needs or grievances that appear unsolvable, irreconcilable or uncompromisable through non-violent means, or that one or more of the opposing actors have been unwilling to resolve or settle through peaceful means.

Armed actor: any group, party, organisation or entity that for whatever reason carries lethal weaponry for violent use or the threat of violent use.

Armed non-state actor: any private, non-governmental, illegal or unsanctioned group, organisation or entity beyond the control and sphere of the state that carries for whatever reason lethal weaponry for violent use or the threat of violent use.

Armed state actor: any public, governmental, legal or state-sanctioned group, organisation or entity belonging directly or indirectly to the state that carries for whatever reason lethal weaponry for violent use or the threat of violent use, ranging from the police and the military to semi-legitimate and illegitimate groups like pro-government militia's and paramilitaries.

Main types of violent conflict

War: armed conflict with one or more opposing parties fighting in such a way as to achieve complete victory over or utter defeat of the enemy, as evident from the type and scale of fighting methods, tactics and strategies employed.

Interstate or external armed conflict: violent confrontation between the armed forces of two or more states or governments that represent them, due to irreconcilable aims, interests, needs or grievances.

Intrastate, internal, or domestic armed conflict: violent confrontation due to irreconcilable aims, interests, needs or grievances between one or more armed non-state actors and the state, *or* among either state actors in ‘civil conflicts’ or non-state actors in for instance ‘absent states’ and ‘failed states’.

Civil conflict: intrastate, internal, or domestic conflict in which the main opposing parties represent and control populations, infrastructures and other assets sufficient and large enough to fulfil state(-like) functions, signifying a conflict between state, semi-state, ‘partial-state’ or ‘counter-state’ actors regarding their ruling capabilities.

Civil war: civil conflict in which one or more opposing parties capable of state(-like) functions fight in such a way as to achieve complete victory over or utter defeat of their enemies, as evident from the fighting methods employed.

Rebellion or insurgency: armed conflict by one or more non-state, semi-state or alternative-state actors against any entrenched and generally recognized ruler, elite, authority, government, regime or state, for whatever personal reasons (grievance, grudge, greed etc.), particular goal or general ideology.

Revolt or uprising: spontaneous rebellion by individuals or groups of people with little or no planning, instigation or involvement of political parties or other entities (at least not in the initial or early phases), frequently but not necessarily arising from riots and other disturbances.

Insurrection: planned rebellion by individuals or groups of people belonging to political parties or other entities, frequently but not necessarily arising from revolts, riots and other outbursts of violence.

Coup d’état: focused insurrection that attempts to immediately grab and gain control over the reigns of power of the state, frequently but not necessarily characterized by small-scale and speedy operations to capture government buildings and other vital objects.

Main forms of actual or potential violence

Conventional conflict: violent confrontation between state and/or non-state forces whereby at least one side or party attempts to gain physical, visible and stable control of (the enemy’s) territory and fixed objects, as evident from the fighting methods employed, such as – usually but not necessarily – heavily armed forces on or across battlefields.

Unconventional conflict: violent confrontation whereby one or more of the parties do not seek or need to hold (the enemy’s) territory or fixed objects, as is evident from fighting methods such as sabotage, diversion, interference of communications, and so on.

Guerrilla: particular type of unconventional conflict, based on flexible, irregular fighting with hit-and-run tactics ranging from sabotage to ambush without the need to hold on to territory or fixed objects, frequently but not necessarily carried out by lightly armed individuals or small units.

Terrorism: lethal violence without warning of the act for whatever purpose against (groups of) unarmed and thereby defenceless civilians, unarmed off-duty soldiers, policemen and other defenceless noncombatants.

Liquidation, or ‘terrorist assassination’: lethal violence without warning for whatever purpose against selected individuals who in principle are unarmed and unprotected, typically ordinary civilians who cannot defend themselves, afford bodyguards or other security personnel.

Assassination: lethal violence without warning for whatever purpose against selected individuals

ranging from leading politicians and military to other (leading) members of a community, who in principle are able to defend themselves or are protected by bodyguards or other personnel.

Criminality: any violent or non-violent act or activity prohibited and punishable by law, directed for whatever reason – frequently yet not necessarily out of greed – against persons and properties that result in moneys and valuables being taken or earned.

Gangsterism: violent criminality, i.e. any violent act or activity for illegally and illicitly taking, collecting or earning moneys, goods and properties, out of greed or other purpose.

Banditry: specific type of gangsterism that resorts to robbery, plunder, kidnapping etc. for whatever reason by using rebel-like or guerrilla-type tactics, usually though not necessarily in mountainous or other inhospitable areas as those are suited for such tactics.

Brigandry: banditry in the context of rebellion, i.e. a situation in which rebels act like or operate as bandits, resorting to pillage, ransom and other violently criminal acts through guerrilla(-like) tactics.

ENDNOTES

¹ The current title and focus of the PhD research is “The Ways to Rebel: Comparing Chechen and Albanian Insurgents, 1979-2001”. After completion of this research I plan to conduct a broader comparative analysis that includes insurgencies and civil conflicts in Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

² Powerpoint presentations and/or (draft) conference papers are available upon request.

³ Adrian Guelke, *The Age of Terrorism and the International Political System* London/New York/London: I.B. Tauris Publishers/St Martin’s Press, 1995, p.2 (see his endnote 9, which also refers to J. Bowyer Bell’s *A Time of Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1978) as a typical example of such literature).

⁴ Max Weber, “Objectivity” in *Social Science* in: Shils & Finch, *Max Weber: Methodology of the Social Sciences*, 1949, esp. p.90.

⁵ Ganor, *Defining Terrorism: Is One Man’s Terrorist Another Man’s Freedom Fighter?* International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT), ICT Paper on Terrorism 2002, p.10 (source: Schmid & Jongman, *Political Terrorism*, 1984 edition, p.100). Yet in 1983 Duvall and Stohl defined terrorism as “action intended to induce sharp fear and through that agency to affect a desired outcome in a conflict situation”(see Schmid & Jongman, *Political Terrorism*, 1988 edition, p.36), thereby following B.M. Jenkins’ assertion that “fear is the intended effect, not the by-product, of terrorism”(ibid, p.36) - and contradicting their statement on the irrelevancy of motives for the concept of terrorism. After all, the intention to create fear is a motive.

⁶ Thus John Horgan exhorts others to “get rid of all the political rhetoric and see terrorism in its true form: as a criminal method to express a political, religious or other belief. ... By defining terrorism as a method one is able to bypass the fruitless discussion about morality or legitimacy [of any terrorist act] and thereby reach more international consensus [on what constitutes terrorism]”(translated from Dutch). Quote from Hans Steketee, ‘*Terrorisme is geen ideologie*’ - *Terreurdkundige John Horgan over politiek geweld* (*‘Terrorism is not an ideology’ - Terrorism expert John Horgan on political violence*) NRC Handelsblad (*NRC Trades’ Paper*, Dutch newspaper) 17 oktober 2001, p.5. John Horgan was Lecturer Forensic Psychology at the University of Cork, Ireland, and a specialist on political violence. Now he is Lecturer and Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV) at University of St. Andrews.

⁷ W. B. Gallie, *Essentially Contested Concepts* Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Vol.56, 1956, pp.167-198.