



Inter-Parliamentary Union
For democracy. For everyone.

Defining terrorism

Challenges and approaches



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Cover photo: Acts of terrorism have the potential to destabilize nations, incite humanitarian crises, and disrupt economic and social stability. © Anadolu via AFP

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I. Foreword by the Secretary General

Parliaments stand at the forefront of the global response to terrorism. As the institutions entrusted with enacting legislation and safeguarding democratic values, they play a critical role in ensuring that counter-terrorism measures are effective, proportionate and grounded in the rule of law and respect for human rights. In this context, the question of how terrorism is defined remains both fundamental and challenging.

Recognizing this, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), through its High-Level Advisory Group on Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism, has sought to support Member Parliaments in addressing this issue. At its meeting held in Kigali, Rwanda, in October 2022, the Advisory Group emphasized the importance of advancing legislative clarity and encouraged the development of a definition that reflects contemporary realities while remaining anchored in legal certainty and shared international principles.

Despite sustained international efforts, no universally agreed definition of terrorism has yet emerged. This absence has contributed to divergent legal approaches, with implications for legislative coherence, international cooperation and the protection of fundamental rights. At the same time, the evolving nature of terrorism requires continued attention and careful legislative consideration.

This publication reflects the IPU's commitment to supporting its Member Parliaments in navigating these complexities. Drawing on international practice, legal analysis and comparative perspectives, it offers a structured contribution to ongoing parliamentary engagement on this important issue.

The definition presented in this document is intended as a guiding proposal to support parliamentary reflection and comparative analysis. It does not seek to establish a binding institutional position, nor does it require formal approval or consensus among all Member Parliaments. Rather, it provides a structured legal framework to assist parliaments in fulfilling their legislative, oversight and budgetary responsibilities in addressing terrorism, ensuring that counter-terrorism measures are effective, accountable and consistent with international law.

The IPU remains firmly committed to promoting peace, democracy and the rule of law. It is my hope that this publication will serve as a useful resource for parliaments worldwide, supporting and strengthening legislative approaches to countering terrorism while upholding the fundamental values that unite the global parliamentary community.



Martin Chungong
Secretary General

Inter-Parliamentary Union

II. Introduction

Terrorism is a phenomenon that has exerted a profound influence on global politics, security and daily life. It is characterized by the systematic use of fear and violence to achieve political, ideological or religious goals. In contemporary times, terrorism not only impacts nations embroiled in conflict but also affects the lives of individuals in ostensibly peaceful regions.

The definition of terrorism remains one of the most contentious and debated. The term “terrorism” is considered to have originated during the French Revolution, particularly during the Reign of Terror (1793–1794), a period marked by widespread massacres and public executions driven by revolutionary fervour. However, the term’s prominence surged following the attacks of 11 September 2001, which spurred extensive investigations aimed at delineating the nature of terrorism.

Terrorism has become a pivotal concern for governments, international organizations and global communities. Acts of terrorism have the potential to destabilize nations, incite humanitarian crises, and disrupt economic and social stability. In response, various international policies and strategies have been developed to combat terrorism, encompassing military interventions, diplomatic agreements and collaborative international efforts. Despite these efforts, a comprehensive United Nations treaty on terrorism remains elusive, and no universally binding definition of terrorism exists. Although UN Member States have endeavoured to complete drafting the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism, which aims to provide a generic international definition, consensus has not yet been achieved.

The threat of terrorism is a global issue. Terrorist groups use many locations to operate their command and control, recruitment, training, active operations, and targeting. Consequently, counter-terrorism measures can only be effective if nations cooperate and reach a consensus on the characteristics and activities of terrorist organizations. A universally accepted definition would significantly advance global cooperation in countering terrorism.

Moreover, terrorism has evolved over time, adapting to new technologies and communication methods. This has complicated its definition, and strategies for responding to it. The advent of the internet and social media has facilitated the dissemination of terrorist propaganda and the coordination of attacks, presenting new challenges for global security.

Understanding terrorism comprehensively is crucial for crafting effective responses and prevention strategies. This entails analysing not just the violent acts but also their underlying motivations, historical context and societal impacts. A unified understanding of terrorism could streamline the implementation of national and international laws, enabling the creation of clear, efficient legislation, and identifying necessary measures to address the threat and protect citizens from its social consequences.

III. Executive summary

This document addresses the continuing absence of a universally accepted definition of terrorism and the legal and practical challenges this gap poses for legislators and policymakers. Divergent national and regional definitions have undermined legal certainty, complicated international cooperation, and in some cases, contributed to the misuse of counter-terrorism measures in ways that raise concerns about human rights and democratic governance.

The absence of an internationally agreed definition has taken on a particular practical significance in the context of binding counter-terrorism obligations imposed on States, which have often been implemented through unilateral and divergent national definitions. Experience over the past two decades has demonstrated that vague or overly broad terrorism definitions are among the most common sources of human rights violations in counter-terrorism practice, given the far-reaching criminal, administrative, financial and security consequences that flow from their application.

The purpose of this document is to support parliamentary reflection by consolidating key elements of the international debate on the definition of terrorism, and by offering a structured framework for consideration. It does not seek to impose a legally binding definition. Rather, it presents a proposed definition of terrorism intended to provide clarity and guidance for legislative and policy purposes.

Based on common elements identified across international practice and legal scholarship, the proposed definition focuses on a narrow and clearly identifiable core of conduct: the intentional use or credible threat of serious violence against civilians or other non-combatants, carried out for political, ideological, or religious purposes, and intended to intimidate a population or coerce a government or an international organization. This approach prioritizes legal clarity and seeks to distinguish terrorism from other forms of criminal conduct or political activity.

To prevent overreach and safeguard fundamental rights, the proposed definition is accompanied by guiding principles and explicit exclusion clauses. These clarify that conduct governed by international humanitarian law, humanitarian and medical activities, and peaceful protest or industrial action should not be classified as terrorism. Such safeguards are essential to ensure that counter-terrorism legislation remains compatible with international law, including international humanitarian law and human rights law, and does not encroach upon democratic freedoms or humanitarian space.

By articulating a carefully circumscribed proposed definition, this document aims to contribute to greater coherence across legal systems, and to support counter-terrorism measures that are both effective and consistent with international legal standards.

IV. International debate on the definition of terrorism

A. History of terrorism

Terrorism has a long and complex history, with roots tracing back to ancient times. The term “terrorism” is considered to have originated during the French Revolution (1789–1799), when the Committee of Public Safety (led by Maximilien Robespierre) exerted political control through violence and terror. This era, known as the Reign of Terror, was marked by mass executions of opponents and those suspected of disloyalty to the revolutionary regime. Fear was used to maintain order and eliminate enemies of the State.¹

Perceptions changed in the 20th century; terrorism began to take on new forms and motivations. World War II and the Cold War introduced new types of political violence and ideological conflicts. During the Cold War, terrorism was used by various state and non-State actors in the struggle for global influence and power. Terrorist groups began operating on an international scale, with transnational connections and support.²

In recent decades, the definition of terrorism has further evolved, with the rise of transnational terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaida, and Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). These groups have used modern technology, such as the internet and social media, to recruit followers, plan attacks and disseminate their ideology. The attacks of 11 September 2001 in the United States marked a turning point in the history of terrorism, leading to an intensification of global security measures and a restructuring of international counter-terrorism policies.

Globalization and technology have enabled terrorist groups to operate more effectively and extensively, further complicating the task of preventing and responding to their acts of violence.

The history of the definition of terrorism illustrates how this phenomenon has changed and adapted over time, reflecting the political, social and technological dynamics of each era. This historical context is crucial for understanding contemporary terrorism and developing effective strategies to counter it.

B. Importance of definition of terrorism³

The Legal Response to Terrorism requires a definition. However, a large number of international instruments refer to the definition of terrorism without clearly and specifically defining it. Some States noticed the importance of international law having a definition of terrorism to ensure an active response to this threat.⁴

The UN General Assembly also stated that the effectiveness of counter-terrorism depended on reaching a generally accepted definition of terrorism. Even though international instruments had failed to include such a definition, this did not create a real legal problem until the advent of Security Council resolution 1373 in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001.

Resolution 1373 was adopted under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which empowers the Security Council to adopt resolutions that are legally binding to all UN Member States. Accordingly, this resolution called upon States to become parties as soon as possible to the relevant international conventions and protocols relating to terrorism, including the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism of 9 December 1999. The resolution also called upon States to take measures that penalized acts of terrorism.

¹ Ahmed Fathi Sorour, *The Legal Response to Terrorism* (Alexandria: Bibliotheca Alexandrina, 2010).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Alexandria was one of the first countries to advocate for the need to define terrorism. President Mubarak suggested this at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg on 28 January 1986. (Ahmed Fathi Sorour, *The Legal Response to Terrorism* (Alexandria: Bibliotheca Alexandrina, 2010).

In light of this resolution, the importance of defining terrorism was manifested in the following:

1. The commitment to take necessary measures to punish acts of terrorism; enabling States to take such measures; and demanding a definition of terrorism. In resolution 1373, Article 2e, the Security Council also decided that all States shall “ensure that any person who participates in the financing, planning, preparation or perpetration of terrorist acts or in supporting terrorist acts is brought to justice and ensure that, in addition to any other measures against them, such terrorist acts are established as serious criminal offences in domestic laws and regulations and that the punishment duly reflects the seriousness of such terrorist acts.” This leaves no doubt that fulfilling the obligation to take necessary legal action against acts of terrorism depends on establishing a comprehensive definition of terrorism. This has not been included in any international anti-terrorism conventions. A definition is yet to be established.
2. Determining the elements of the crime of terrorism according to the principle that one can only be punished for doing something if a penalty for this behaviour is established under the law (*nullum crimen nulla poena sine lege*). In this regard, defining terrorism depends on three important points:
 - a. How the definition of terrorism handles the material and moral elements of the crime;
 - b. How the definition distinguishes between direct terrorism (the physical carrying out of a terrorist act) and indirect terrorism (the phases prior to carrying out such an act);
 - c. The principle of legal security: with regard to specifying the material element of terrorism, some international anti-terrorism conventions just defined the form of terrorism that concerns a certain sector of public interest.
3. Determining the legal definition of terrorism acts as a brake on the introduction of laws, policies and practices that interfere with individuals’ rights and are justified as necessary for fighting terrorism. The definition of terrorism also contributes to determining relevant procedures, and whether special criminal processes should be set up to confront terrorism.
4. Solving many of the emerging problems reflected by scientific and technological development, and other practices. For example, the appearance of electronic technology clearly affected terrorism. Acts of terrorism have also increased lately, which has demanded intensified efforts to define terrorism.⁵

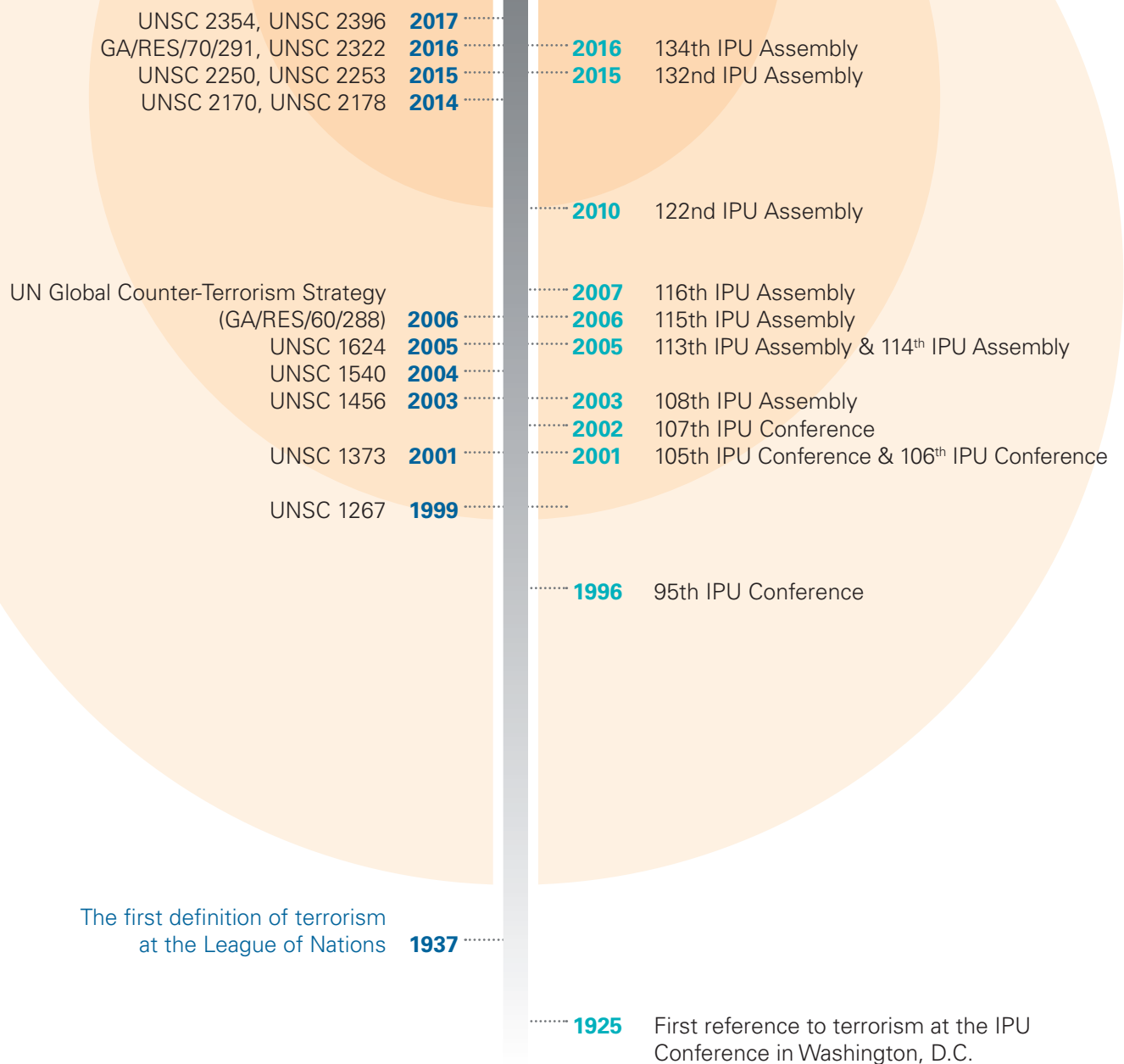
Questions have been raised about particular parts of certain practices, such as: using specific means of terrorization during armed conflicts; and whether people fighting for liberation and independence should be considered as terrorists. This problem increased with the use of excessive military force in confronting some acts of terrorism, and the extrajudicial killings that have transpired. These issues have increased the importance of defining terrorism.

Scholarly analysis has also highlighted the legal uncertainty arising from the absence of a universally accepted definition. Professor Ben Saul, in his study *Defining Terrorism in International Law*,⁶ notes that more than one hundred definitions exist across treaties, national laws and academic works, creating fragmentation and space for political misuse. He stresses that the lack of clarity can enable governments to classify legitimate dissent or resistance as terrorism, underscoring the need for a precise and restrictive international definition to protect legal certainty and human rights.

5 Thomas Weigend, “The Universal Terrorist”, *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, Volume 4, No. 5 (November 2006), 918.

6 Ben Saul, *Defining Terrorism in International Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

IPU-UN JOINT PROGRAMME



C. International efforts to define terrorism

1. Discussions within the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)

At the IPU Conference in Washington, DC in 1925, special attention was given to the exceptional gravity of acts of terrorism. MPs considered the question of State responsibility in the case of criminal acts, thus widening the scope of discussion to include individuals whose actions might be detrimental to peaceful relations between States.

In October 2006, the IPU unanimously adopted a resolution in Geneva on cooperation between parliaments and the United Nations in promoting world peace, particularly from the perspective of the fight against terrorism.

During the IPU Assembly in Hanoi (March–April 2015), a significant resolution addressing the evolving threats of terrorism was unanimously adopted. Proposed by Australia and Belgium, the resolution underscored the critical role of parliaments in combating terrorist acts perpetrated by organizations such as ISIL and Boko Haram. It urged parliaments to leverage legislative channels to implement relevant UN Security Council resolutions, emphasizing the development of cooperative frameworks between State security and intelligence agencies to facilitate information exchange among States.

Additionally, the resolution called for the adoption of a common strategy to counter foreign fighters and terrorist propaganda. It emphasized the importance of combating terrorism in all its forms, in alignment with the United Nations Charter and fundamental principles of international law. It also highlighted the significance of international cooperation among parliaments in the fight against terrorism, reinforcing a unified approach to address these global threats effectively.

Counter-terrorism has greatly concerned the world parliamentary community. Since 1996, the IPU has adopted 12 resolutions related to terrorism, which have all highlighted the need to cooperate with appropriate UN organizations to help implement relevant UN strategies, including the UN Global Counter-terrorism Strategy, adopted by the General Assembly in September 2006. The adoption of this counter-terrorism framework was a milestone in the multilateral counter-terrorism domain that laid the foundations for a comprehensive and integrated response to terrorism at the national and international level.

2. Regional discussions

Following the assassination of King Alexander I of Yugoslavia and French Foreign Minister Jean Louis Barthou on 9 October 1934 in Marseilles, France, an international crisis ensued. This prompted the League of Nations to convene the 1937 International Conference on the Repression of Terrorism, which resulted in the Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of Terrorism. The treaty defined terrorism as *“criminal acts directed against a State and intended or calculated to create a state of terror in the minds of particular persons, or a group of persons or the general public.”* However, as only the British Government of India ratified the treaty, it did not come into force.

On 27 January 1977, the European Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism was adopted in Strasbourg by the Member States of the Council of Europe. The Convention aimed to eliminate the terrorism that had been sweeping through Europe since the early 1970s. However, as it was envisaged that the Convention would establish a legal framework for cooperation between Member States, it was limited to referring to crimes of terrorism listed in other international conventions. It stated that attacking internationally protected people, taking hostages, and using bombs and other explosives to endanger individuals were considered crimes of terrorism, without providing a definition of terrorism.

By contrast, in September 1999, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe recommended that an act of terrorism should be considered as *“any offence committed by*

*individuals or groups resorting to violence or threatening to use violence against a country, its institutions, its population in general or specific individuals which, being motivated by separatist aspirations, extremist ideological conceptions, fanaticism or irrational and subjective factors, is intended to create a climate of terror among official authorities, certain individuals or groups in society, or the general public.*⁷

Furthermore, on 16 May 2005, the Council of Europe opened for signature its [Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism](#) (also known as CETS 196). It posits that the purposes of acts of terrorism might point towards a definition: “Recalling that acts of terrorism have the purpose by their nature or context to seriously intimidate a population or unduly compel a government or an international organisation to perform or abstain from performing any act or seriously destabilise or destroy the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country or an international organization.”⁸ Additionally, Article 1(1) states: “‘terrorist offence’ means any of the offences within the scope of and as defined in one of the treaties listed in the Appendix.” The Appendix refers to international anti-terrorism conventions, such as the [Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Seizure of Aircraft](#) (The Hague, 1970), or the [International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism](#) (New York, 1999).

Similarly, the definition of terrorism within the Organization of American States (OAS) has been the subject of ongoing regional discussions, influenced by the diverse political, social and security contexts of OAS Member States. On 3 June 2022, the [Inter-American Convention Against Terrorism](#) was adopted at the OAS General Assembly in Bridgetown, Barbados. To date, 33 OAS Member States have signed the Convention, 24 of which have ratified it. The main objective of the Convention is to strengthen cooperation among countries to prevent and eradicate terrorism, enhance border security, and combat the financing of terrorism while ensuring respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Although almost all countries in the region have signed the Convention, the level of implementation and adoption of concrete measures may vary depending on each country’s national policies and security priorities.⁹

Other regions have also developed recent legal and political frameworks. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) adopted in 2007 the ASEAN Convention on Counter Terrorism, which promotes regional cooperation in prevention, investigation, and prosecution. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), for its part, has since the early 2000s linked terrorism with extremism and separatism, known as the “three evils.” This conception contrasts with the European approach, which is more focused on fundamental rights, and highlights the diversity of regional approaches to the phenomenon.

3. United Nations efforts to reach a comprehensive definition

The first attempt to issue a general definition of terrorism was made in 1937 by the League of Nations in Geneva. The convention that the League adopted, which included a general definition of terrorism, did not come into force because it did not receive the required ratification.¹⁰

The UN General Assembly decided in [resolution 3034](#) (1972) to establish an Ad Hoc Committee on International Terrorism to thoroughly examine the issue.¹¹ However, the Committee failed to present a definition of terrorism in its reports of 1973 and 1979. In the 1973 report, it became clear that, despite all States criminalizing terrorism, many disagreed on the interpretation of international terrorism.¹² Each State wanted to consider acts of terrorism as violations, while also limiting them to only those acts that affected its national

7 Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, [Recommendation 1426](#) (Strasbourg, 1999).

8 [Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism](#), (last preambular paragraph; Warsaw, 2005).

9 Organization of American States, [Database of multilateral treaties and bilateral agreements](#).

10 Ahmed Fathi Sorour, *The Legal Response to Terrorism* (Alexandria: Bibliotheca Alexandrina, 2010). Attempts to define terrorism.

11 Bibit Van Ginkel, “The United Nations: Towards a Comprehensive Convention on Combating Terrorism” in M. van Leeuwen (ed), *Confronting Terrorism* (Netherlands Institute of International Relations *Clingendael*, 2003), 207–226.

12 The first report of the Ad Hoc Committee on International Terrorism stated that the Committee did not expect to reach a comprehensive definition of terrorism because of the divergence of views among Member States (Cherif Bassiouni, *International Terrorism: A compilation of UN documents (1972–2001)*, (Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2023), preface).

law.¹³ In addition, the exclusion of armed conflicts related to national liberation forces from subsequent discussions about the definition of terrorism did not facilitate a convergence of views.

In 1979, the Ad Hoc Committee's report continued to lack any progress towards defining terrorism. In the same year, however, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution calling on Member States to honour their obligations under international law to refrain from organizing, aiding or participating in any act of terrorism against another State. In 1985, the UN General Assembly adopted [resolution 40/61](#) in which it called for the criminalization of acts of terrorism, regardless of motive. In 1987, the UN General Assembly adopted [resolution 42/159](#), in which it called upon the Secretary-General to prepare a report on the possibility of convening an international conference to define terrorism that excluded peoples' struggles for national liberation from the terrorism debate. The Secretary-General's report included support from a number of States for defining terrorism and convening an international conference on terrorism.

Meanwhile, the International Law Commission intensified its efforts to define terrorism as a crime against peace. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court did not address the crime of terrorism, and neither did the Statute of the International Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. By contrast, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda included acts of terrorism within its jurisdiction, but without defining terrorism.

In 1996, the UN General Assembly adopted [resolution 51/210](#) to establish an ad hoc committee to negotiate several international provisions on terrorism, especially a general instrument on counter-terrorism. The committee attempted to adopt a general convention on international terrorism based on a draft presented by India in 1996 and revised in 2000. A working group was then formed to identify measures to eliminate international terrorism. However, discussions on that issue highlighted a number of political, ideological and legal problems. They included: the absence of a definition of terrorism based on which the scope of the convention could be determined; and the need to distinguish terrorism from acts of resistance against foreign occupation and State terrorism. Certain members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation argued that "State terrorism" should also be within the scope of the convention. As a result, it proved impossible to reach consensus on the adoption of a general convention on international terrorism. Another point of contention was the relationship between the comprehensive and sectoral conventions. Some parties to the discussions wanted the comprehensive convention to go further than the existing sectoral conventions. Others felt that adopting a comprehensive convention might risk losing what they saw as the positive gains of the sectoral conventions.¹⁴

Academic commentary, including the work of Professor Ben Saul, has observed that the principal obstacles to consensus on a UN comprehensive convention are political rather than legal. Disputes concerning the inclusion of "State terrorism" or the status of liberation movements have blocked agreement, despite the existence of a common core of elements identifiable across most definitions. Saul argues that these shared elements – such as intentional violence against civilians or non-combatants with the purpose of intimidating a population or coercing a government – could form the basis of a workable international definition.¹⁵

The international community had so far failed to adopt a general convention on terrorism. But in practical terms, it had also succeeded in confronting some acts of terrorism by adopting 12 international conventions and 5 protocols at sectoral level, in addition to holding regional conferences to discuss the issue.

The difficulties of negotiating and reaching a definition of terrorism raised the question of whether it was warranted to continue efforts towards this goal.

A definition of terrorism is, without doubt, a requirement for adopting a comprehensive international convention on counter-terrorism that provides for cross-State cooperation, especially with regard to extradition. And we certainly need this definition if we add terrorism to the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court.¹⁶ Until an agreement on a

¹³ During the Cold War (1949–1989), similar problems arose.

¹⁴ Ahmed Fathi Sorour, *The Legal Response to Terrorism* (Alexandria: Bibliotheca Alexandrina, 2010).

¹⁵ Ben Saul, *Defining Terrorism in International Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹⁶ Robert Cryer, Håkan Friman, Darryl Robinson, Elizabeth Wilmshurst, *An Introduction to International Criminal Law and Procedure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 287–288.

comprehensive definition of terrorism can be reached, guidelines in international and regional conventions could be used to define terrorism in national legislation.

In July 2005, the efforts of some delegations led to a new ad hoc committee coordinator proposing a preambular text that established: the right of self-determination; and the right to strive for it for those who had been forcibly deprived of self-determination rights. However, the text was not fully supported by any delegation.¹⁷

4. Security Council attempt to define terrorism

In October 2001, the Security Council adopted [resolution 1373](#) under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. The nature of the Resolution raised questions because it allowed the Security Council to exercise legislative powers that were not stated in the UN Charter. This gave the resolution a special nature in the international legal system. The resolution enabled the Security Council to handle the issue of terrorism in general, without including special measures related to a specific case. Essentially, terrorism should be tackled by the UN General Assembly, which can adopt a number of international conventions based on drafts prepared by competent bodies. These include the International Law Commission, or special bodies that include Member State representatives, and whose work is therefore followed by a process of ratification by Member States.

The new legislative powers granted by Resolution 1373 implied an expanded role for the Security Council in keeping international peace and security, in addition to a change in the legislative practices of the international legal system and in the means of establishing its legal bases. Thus, the Security Council developed into an international legislator, judging by the legislative powers it granted itself. The Security Council continued in that direction and confirmed its legislative practice when it adopted [resolution 1540](#) (2004) on the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. In 1994, at a seminar held by the French Society for International Law in Rennes, Mr. Peller commented on the Security Council's power in this context. He confirmed that the Security Council is not an international lawmaker with powers to issue general rules, but only had the power to adopt binding resolutions in individual cases.¹⁸

In [resolution 1566](#) (2004), the Security Council called upon States to cooperate fully in the fight against terrorism, and called upon all States to prevent and penalize criminal acts with the following characteristics:

- Acts, including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death, serious bodily injury or hostage-taking;
- Acts that are under no circumstances justifiable on political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or other grounds, and which are committed to provoke a state of terror in the general public, or in a group of persons or particular persons, or to intimidate a population, or compel a government or an international organization to do or abstain from doing any act, as such acts constitute offences within the scope of and as defined in the international conventions and protocols relating to terrorism.

Subsequently, the Security Council continued to adopt key resolutions that responded to the evolving terrorist threats in the context of ISIL and foreign terrorist fighters. Resolution 2178 (2014) specifically addressed the phenomenon of foreign fighters, imposing obligations on States to criminalize their travel and financing. Resolution 2396 (2017) reinforced border and identity controls, in particular through passenger data systems. Resolution 2462 (2019) focused on countering the financing of terrorism, requiring States to strengthen legal frameworks and financial oversight. Finally, resolution 2341 (2017) dealt with the protection of critical infrastructure against terrorist threats. These measures illustrate how the Security Council adapted to emerging modalities of terrorism, linked to both ISIL and the use of new technologies.

¹⁷ Mahmoud Hamoud, "Negotiating the Draft Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism", *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, Volume 4, No.5 (November 2006), 1032–1043.

¹⁸ As a result of Security Council Resolution 1373 (2001), the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (Vienna) began establishing a guide on international provisions to combat terrorism. This guide indicated that a legal framework for combating terrorism would be possible through States: amending their domestic penal and procedural criminal law; and/or ratifying counter-terrorism instruments so that their provisions have the force of law, as well as amending domestic laws to harmonize them with obligations stemming from the act of ratification.

V. Terrorism in the different regions of the world

A. Basic definition

A definition is a clear and precise description of a thing, concept, phenomenon or term. Definitions establish a common understanding of the defined object, eliminating ambiguities and providing a framework for discussion and analysis. Definitions can vary depending on the context in which they are used. They can be formal, informal, technical or colloquial.

Terrorism is commonly defined as the systematic use of violence and terror to achieve political, religious or ideological objectives. It is characterized by coercing or intimidating governments or societies in the pursuit of goals that are generally political, religious or ideological.¹⁹

B. Main characteristics

The definition of terrorism can vary depending on the context, but generally includes a set of common characteristics. Here are some of the main features often considered in the definition of terrorism:

- Use of violence or threats of violence. Terrorism involves the deliberate use of violence or the threat of violence to create fear and intimidation. This can include acts such as bombings, kidnappings, assassinations and suicide attacks.
- Political, religious or ideological objectives. Terrorist acts are often motivated by specific political, religious or ideological goals. Perpetrators seek to promote their agenda or ideology, or to destabilize a government or social system.
- Intention to cause fear or terror. Terrorism aims not only to cause physical harm to individuals, but also to instil fear in a broader population. The psychological impact is intended to extend beyond the direct victims and affect society at large.
- Attacks on civilians and non-combatants. Terrorists often target innocent people or non-combatants to maximize impact and media coverage. These victims are usually civilians who have no direct connection to the terrorist group's political or military objectives.
- Publicity and media attention. Terrorist acts are typically designed to attract media attention in order to spread the terrorist group's message, and amplify fear and insecurity.
- Non-State actors. While States can engage in acts of terrorism (State terrorism), the term is generally applied to non-State groups or individuals who carry out violent acts for political or ideological reasons.
- Social and political destabilization. One of the goals of terrorism is to destabilize governments and society in general. This can include attempts to provoke regime change, influence government policies, or disrupt social peace.
- Elements of clandestinity and surprise. Terrorists often operate secretly, and their attacks frequently occur without warning, increasing the sense of vulnerability and fear in society.
- Violation of international norms and laws. Acts of terrorism generally violate established international norms of conduct, including human rights and humanitarian laws.

¹⁹ Oxford English Dictionary.

C. Approaches and perspectives

1. Legal perspective

The approaches and perspectives on terrorism are diverse and multifaceted, reflecting the complexity of the phenomenon. The legal perspective provides a framework for addressing and prosecuting terrorism, while academic perspectives offer theoretical insights into its causes and dynamics. Diverse analytical frameworks further enrich the understanding of terrorism by exploring psychological, sociological and political dimensions. Together, these approaches contribute to a comprehensive understanding of terrorism and inform effective strategies for prevention and response.

Legal definitions in different countries

Each country may have a specific legal definition of terrorism. For example, in the United States, terrorism is defined under the Patriot Act, while in Europe, definitions may vary according to the [Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism](#).

- **United States.** Terrorism is broadly defined under the Patriot Act and other federal statutes. The definition refers to premeditated, politically motivated violence, perpetrated against noncombatant targets and typically intended to influence or coerce governments or societies.
- **European Union.** The EU has its own legal definitions, primarily outlined in various directives and regulations, such as the [Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on combating terrorism](#). The EU definition encompasses a range of violent acts intended to intimidate a population, disrupt public services, or influence government policies.
- **Other jurisdictions.** Different countries may have varying definitions based on their legal traditions and national security concerns. For instance, some nations might include specific acts of violence or types of targets in their definitions, reflecting local security contexts and priorities.

International treaties and conventions

The international community has so far failed to adopt a general convention on terrorism. In practice, however (as noted above), it has succeeded in confronting some acts of terrorism by adopting 12 international conventions and 5 protocols at sectoral levels, and holding regional conventions to discuss the issue.

- [International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism](#). This treaty aims to criminalize the financing of terrorism and promote international cooperation in preventing and prosecuting terrorism-related offences. It does not provide a comprehensive definition of terrorism but defines acts of terrorism in the context of financing terrorism, as shown in Article 2.²⁰
- **UN Security Council resolutions.** The United Nations has adopted various resolutions that establish frameworks for counter-terrorism measures, including sanctions, the monitoring of terrorist activities, and the freezing of assets linked to terrorist organizations.
- **Regional agreements.** Regional organizations, such as the African Union and the Organization of American States, have developed their own agreements and strategies to address terrorism within their respective regions.

²⁰ Under [Article 2](#), it is considered an offence to finance any act "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 organization to do or to abstain from doing any act".

2. Academic perspective

The academic perspective explores terrorism through various theoretical lenses and research methodologies to understand its causes and effects. This approach includes sociological, psychological and strategic analyses to understand the underlying causes and dynamics of terrorism.

a) Definitions in security studies

- **Behavioural theories** examine terrorists' motivations, recruitment and group dynamics, focusing on personal, social and political factors.
- **Strategic theories** analyse terrorists' strategic goals and tactics, including violence, to achieve political aims and provoke governmental reactions.

b) Theoretical frameworks

- **Social Movement Theory** analyses how terrorist organizations mobilize support and resources as social movements, focusing on their goals, organization and strategies.
- **Radicalization models** explore how individuals adopt extremist ideologies and join terrorist organizations, focusing on grievances, indoctrination and social influences.
- **Conflict Theory** examines how social, political and economic conflicts, including inequalities and repression, lead to terrorism.

c) Diverse analytical frameworks

Various analytical frameworks provide additional perspectives on terrorism, offering insights into its different dimensions and effects.

- **Psychological analysis** examines mental health issues and focuses on individual motivations and group dynamics.
- **Sociological analysis** examines terrorist network organization, and cultural influences.
- **Political science analysis** assesses policy responses and the impact on governance.
- **Impact on governance** explores how terrorism affects State stability, governance and public trust.

d) Common definitions

- Bruce Hoffman, a prominent academic in terrorism studies, defines terrorism as *"the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in the pursuit of political change."*
- Alex Schmid, another influential theorist, defines terrorism as *"a combination of violence, fear and propaganda, deliberately used to intimidate a wider audience beyond the immediate victims for political gain."*

VI. Conceptual approaches to terrorism

This section explores various conceptual approaches to terrorism, including the debated notion of State terrorism. Rather than endorsing any specific perspective, the aim is to outline existing discussions and definitions within academic and policy debates. Understanding these frameworks provides a broader view of how terrorism is classified and analysed in different contexts.

When analysing conceptual approaches, it is also important to consider legal boundaries, including international humanitarian law, as well as human rights safeguards. Various international instruments have established parameters, such as the Rabat test, which helps distinguish between speech protected under freedom of expression and speech that incites violence. Likewise, exclusion clauses in asylum and refugee law, due process guarantees in the designation of terrorist organizations, and the need for proportionality in security measures are key elements. These aspects serve as normative safeguards to prevent abuses and to ensure that counter-terrorism efforts remain within the framework of international law.

In this respect, Professor Saul's analysis identifies a "minimum core" of definitional elements common to most legal and academic approaches: (1) the commission of a violent act or threat of violence; (2) directed against civilians or non-combatants; (3) carried out for political, ideological or religious purposes; and (4) intended to intimidate a population or coerce a government or international organization. Incorporating these elements into discussions provides a balanced approach which recognizes both the security concerns of States and the need for safeguards against overly broad definitions.²¹

A. State terrorism²²

State terrorism refers to the use of terror by a government or its agents to control, intimidate or repress a population, or specific groups within society. Unlike other forms of terrorism, which are typically perpetrated by non-State actors, State terrorism involves official State institutions and power structures.

Characteristics of State terrorism

Use of violence. State terrorism involves the use or threat of violence to instil fear. This can include extrajudicial executions, torture, forced disappearances, and other forms of physical violence.

Political purpose. Like other types of terrorism, the primary objective is political. Governments use terrorist methods to suppress opposition, maintain control over the population, or undermine and dismantle movements or groups perceived as threats to the established power.

Impunity. A common feature of State terrorism is impunity. Since the acts are committed by authorities or with their consent, the perpetrators are often shielded from justice.

Manipulation of information. Governments practising State terrorism often manipulate information, censor media, and spread propaganda to justify their actions and discredit opponents.

Legitimacy and legality. Governments involved in State terrorism often attempt to cloak

²¹ Ben Saul, *Defining Terrorism in International Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

²² Maria de los Angeles Vargas and Patricia M. Davis, *State Terrorism and the Politics of Memory: The Relevance of the Past*. Michael Stohl, *Terrorism and the State: A Comparative Analysis of the Causes and Consequences of Terrorism*. James M. Lutz and Brenda J. Lutz, *The Politics of Terrorism*. [Amnesty International country reports](#). State of terrorism and Neoliberalism: The North in the South, By [Ruth Blakeley](#) 2009 Publication of Cambridge University Press: 05 June 2012 " *Violence terrorism and justice*"

their actions in an appearance of legality. They may use repressive laws, states of emergency, or special decrees that allow them to act outside normal legal frameworks.

Impact of State terrorism

The impact of State terrorism is devastating for societies. It causes immediate harm to direct victims and creates an environment of fear and distrust throughout society. It can lead to political destabilization, erode trust in State institutions, and generate cycles of violence and repression. The manner in which international law addresses State terrorism is explained in the 2026 report of the Special Rapporteur on human rights and counter-terrorism to the United Nations Human Rights Council.²³

B. Non-State terrorism²⁴

Non-State terrorism refers to acts of terrorism carried out by individuals or groups that are not affiliated with or supported by a State. Unlike State terrorism, which is perpetrated by government authorities or State apparatuses, non-State terrorism is executed by private individuals or organizations with political, ideological or religious motives.

Characteristics of non-State terrorism

Groups. These include terrorist organizations, militias and extremist groups (such as Al-Qaida, ISIL or the Taliban).

Individuals. Lone actors who may be inspired by extremist ideologies or grievances but operate independently of larger groups.

Motivations

Political. Seeking to change government policies, overthrow governments or disrupt political processes (e.g. Basque separatists, anarchist groups).

Ideological. Driven by specific ideologies or beliefs, such as religious extremism or political ideologies (e.g. religious extremist groups, far-right or far-left groups).

Ethnic or sectarian. Targeting specific ethnic, religious or sectarian groups due to perceived grievances or conflicts (e.g. ethnic insurgencies, sectarian violence).

Methods

Violence and intimidation. Use of bombings, shootings, kidnappings and assassinations to create fear and achieve objectives.

Propaganda and recruitment. Using media and online platforms to spread messages, recruit new members, and incite violence.

Goals

Destabilization. Aiming to create instability and undermine existing political or social systems.

Revenge or retribution. Acting out of revenge for perceived injustices or to retaliate against perceived enemies.

Recognition or autonomy. Seeking international recognition, independence or autonomy for a particular group or region.

Impact of non-State terrorism

Non-State terrorism has significant and multifaceted impacts on societies. It results in direct casualties and damage through attacks and bombings, leading to the destruction of property and immediate harm to individuals. Beyond physical destruction, the psychological impact creates pervasive fear and anxiety within affected communities, altering daily life and social dynamics. In the long term, such terrorism can provoke political repercussions, influencing government policies, prompting security responses, and reshaping political landscapes. Societally, it can erode social cohesion, increase polarization, and necessitate heightened security measures. To combat these threats, counter-terrorism strategies involve intelligence

²³ A/HRC/61/52, Annex II.

²⁴ James M. Lutz and Brenda J. Lutz, *Terrorism and Political Violence*. Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* New York: (Columbia University Press, 2006). [Human Rights Watch](#) and [Amnesty International](#): Publications about terrorism. [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime](#): Documents on global terrorism and counter-terrorism efforts. [Europol](#): Insights and reports on terrorism in Europe, focusing on non-State actors.

gathering and surveillance to track terrorist activities, military and law enforcement operations to disrupt networks, and counter-radicalization programmes aimed at preventing the spread of extremist ideologies and reducing recruitment into terrorist groups.

C. Religious terrorism²⁵

Religious terrorism involves acts of terrorism designed to achieve goals based on religious beliefs or interpretations. This form of terrorism is driven by the perpetrators' desire to advance or defend their religious ideologies, often violently. Religious terrorism can be motivated by a variety of religious traditions, including major world religions such as Islam, Christianity and Judaism.

Characteristics of religious terrorism

Religious justification

Perpetrators justify their actions based on religious teachings, texts or beliefs. They may interpret religious doctrines in ways that legitimize violence or extremism.

Sacred goals

The objectives of religious terrorism are often framed as divine or sacred missions. These can include establishing a religious State, punishing perceived blasphemy, or enforcing religious laws.

Exclusivist ideology

Religious terrorists often adhere to an exclusivist ideology that considers their religious beliefs as superior, and seeks to impose these beliefs on others, sometimes violently.

Recruitment and radicalization

Groups engaged in religious terrorism often recruit members through religious institutions or communities, using religious rhetoric and indoctrination.

Impact of religious terrorism

The immediate consequences of violence, such as attacks and bombings, result in direct harm to individuals, leading to casualties and significant psychological impacts. Affected communities often experience heightened fear and anxiety, which can persist long after the events. In the long term, such violence deepens social fragmentation, exacerbating religious divides and fostering sectarianism. Politically, it may prompt government crackdowns, policy changes and enhanced security measures. Additionally, international relations can be strained, especially when terrorist activities cross borders or involve global networks, complicating diplomatic efforts and cooperation between countries.

D. Ideological terrorism

Ideological terrorism refers to acts of terrorism motivated by a specific set of beliefs or ideologies that drive perpetrators to use violence to achieve their goals. Unlike religious terrorism, which is based on religious convictions, ideological terrorism is grounded in political, social or philosophical ideologies. These can be from the far-left, far-right, nationalist, or other non-religious belief systems.

²⁵ Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Terrorist Threat* (London: John Murray, 2006). (Discusses gathering information on terrorist groups and their activities to prevent attacks). Jonathan Fox, *The Politics of Religious Terrorism* (PoliPoint, 2010). Richard English, *Terrorism: How to Respond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Characteristics of ideological terrorism

Motivation by ideology

Perpetrators are driven by a desire to advance or defend their ideological beliefs. This can include political doctrines, social theories or philosophical principles.

Political and social goals

The goals are often related to political change, social reform or establishing a new political order. They can be radical and seek to transform societies according to the terrorists' ideological views.

Radicalization

Ideological terrorists often undergo a process of radicalization where they adopt extreme views, and become convinced of the necessity of violent action to achieve their goals.

Organizational structures

Ideological terrorist groups can have various organizational forms, ranging from loose networks of like-minded individuals to highly organized groups with hierarchical structures.

Impact of ideological terrorism

Similarly to religious terrorism, ideological terrorism also leads to violence, including attacks and bombings. It causes direct harm and casualties, which profoundly affect communities. This harm leads to heightened fear and anxiety, influencing public perception and policy decisions. In the long term, the violence can result in significant political and social changes, such as stricter security measures, and shifts in government policies. It can also exacerbate social divisions and contribute to the polarization of societies along ideological lines.

VII. Proposed definition of terrorism

This section consolidates key legal and conceptual elements discussed throughout this document and proposes a definition of terrorism intended to guide further parliamentary reflection and dialogue. The approach prioritizes legal certainty, alignment with international law, and the protection of fundamental rights.

A. Rationale and guiding principles

The absence of a universally accepted definition of terrorism has created operational, legal and diplomatic challenges for States and international institutions. A functional definition must therefore be precise, limited in scope, and consistent with human rights and international humanitarian law.

The following principles underpin this proposed definition:

- The focus should be placed on violent acts against persons, ensuring that the definition of terrorism retains clear moral and legal significance.
- Definitions must provide sufficient legal clarity to prevent misuse for political purposes or suppressing legitimate political activity.
- The definition should not conflict with the legal regimes governing armed conflict or humanitarian assistance.
- Counter-terrorism measures must respect human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The interpretation and application of this definition should remain consistent with international human rights obligations, ensuring that counter-terrorism measures do not unduly restrict fundamental freedoms, including expression, association, peaceful assembly and political participation.

The application of terrorism legislation derived from this definition should remain grounded in the principles of legality, fair trial and the rule of law, ensuring the availability of due process guarantees and independent judicial oversight.

This formulation deliberately focuses on acts of violence against persons rather than including other forms of harm, such as property damage, economic disruption or cyber interference. While such acts may be serious criminal offences, expanding the definition of terrorism to encompass non-violent or indirect harm risks diluting legal certainty, undermining human rights safeguards, and creating opportunities for political misuse. These other forms of harm may instead be addressed through complementary legal frameworks without expanding the scope of terrorism legislation.

The definition is intended to distinguish terrorism from ordinary violent criminal offences lacking the specific intent to intimidate populations or compel authorities.

This rationale is consistent with international best practice and contemporary legal scholarship, which emphasize that terrorism definitions must be narrowly tailored to the gravest forms of violence in order to safeguard human rights, prevent legal overreach, and reduce the risk of political misuse.

B. Proposed definition

Terrorism refers to the intentional use or credible threat of serious violence against civilians or other non-combatants, undertaken with a substantial political, ideological or religious purpose, with the aim of intimidating a population or compelling a government, international organization or other authorities to act or refrain from acting.

The political, ideological or religious purpose should constitute a substantial motivating element of the conduct, ensuring that terrorism is distinguished from ordinary criminal violence or profit-driven activity.

This formulation reflects core elements shared across international practice, ensuring clarity and proportionality while avoiding vague or overly broad applications.

C. Exclusions to prevent overreach

Exclusion clauses are essential to ensure that counter-terrorism legislation remains compatible with international law, including international humanitarian law and human rights law, and does not encroach upon democratic freedoms or humanitarian space. The definition should be applied without discrimination on the basis of political opinion, ethnicity, religion, nationality or other protected status.

To ensure precision and prevent disproportionate application, the following exclusions are essential components of any balanced definition²⁶:

- **Armed forces in armed conflict:**
The conduct of armed forces during armed conflict whether States or non-State is governed by international humanitarian law and should not fall under terrorism legislation, so as to safeguard the legal distinction between terrorism and acts occurring within the context of armed conflict.
- **Humanitarian assistance and principled relief activities:**
Provision of humanitarian aid, including in conflict environments, must not be criminalized. Measures addressing the financing of terrorism should not impede legitimate humanitarian assistance and related activities carried out by impartial humanitarian organizations in accordance with international humanitarian law.
- **Peaceful protest, advocacy, and industrial action:**
Peaceful demonstrations, advocacy campaigns and labour actions – including those that may involve disruption or minor damage to property – should not be considered terrorism unless they involve serious harm to persons. Civil liberties and political participation must remain protected.

These exclusions support legal certainty, uphold democratic principles, and prevent counter-terrorism frameworks from being applied to humanitarian actors, civil society, or peaceful political activities.

²⁶ A/HRC/61/52; Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism (2026) revised model definition of terrorism.

VIII. Comparative definitions of terrorism

Several of the comparative elements reflected in this annex are consistent with the analytical framework developed in academic and United Nations human rights scholarship, including work undertaken by the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism.

The following table provides a comparative overview of selected definitions of terrorism from international, regional and academic sources. The purpose is purely illustrative, to highlight similarities and differences across approaches.

Source	Definition	Key elements
League of Nations, Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of Terrorism (1937)	"criminal acts directed against a State and intended or calculated to create a state of terror in the minds of particular persons, or a group of persons or the general public"	Acts of violence; aim to create terror; focus on public or groups.
UN Security Council resolution 1566 (2004)	"criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or taking of hostages, with the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general public... intimidate a population or compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act"	Violence or hostage-taking; intent to cause death or serious harm; intimidation or coercion; no political justification accepted.
Ben Saul, Special Rapporteur on human rights and counter-terrorism, revised model definition of terrorism A/HRC/61/52, (2026)	"any serious criminal act [which] intentionally causes death, serious bodily injury, or hostage-taking, where: (a) The purpose of the conduct, by its nature or context, is: (i) To provoke a state of terror in the public or a group of persons; or (ii) To unduly compel a Government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act; (b) The conduct is intended to advance a political or ideological purpose, which must be a substantial purpose; and (c) The conduct, given its nature or context, intentionally causes serious damage to a country or an international organization"	Intentional killing, serious injury or hostage-taking; terrorizing the public or unduly compelling a government; for a political or ideological purpose; intentional serious damage to a country.
Ben Saul, Defining Terrorism in International Law (2006/2008)	Identifies a "minimum core": (1) violent act or threat of violence; (2) directed against civilians or non-combatants; (3) for political, ideological or religious purposes; and (4) intended to intimidate a population or coerce a government/international organization.	Core legal elements; focus on civilians; coercive intent; excludes legitimate armed conflict under international humanitarian law; emphasizes legal certainty and human rights safeguards.

Source	Definition	Key elements
Draft comprehensive convention on international terrorism (working document submitted to United Nations General Assembly by India, 1996/2000)	Any unlawful and intentional act causing death, serious bodily injury, or major damage to property/infrastructure “when the purpose of such act, by its nature or context, is to intimidate a population, or to compel a Government or an international organization to do or abstain from doing any act”	Violence/property damage; unlawful and intentional; intimidation or coercion; includes ancillary acts (planning, financing).
Bruce Hoffman (2006)	“The deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in the pursuit of political change”	Violence or threat of violence; creation of fear; political motivation.
Alex Schmid (1988, updated 2011)	“Terrorism is an anxiety-inspiring method of repeated violent action, employed for political purposes, whereby the direct victims are not the main targets”	Violence + fear + propaganda; intimidation beyond direct victims; political purpose.

Note: These definitions are reproduced for comparative purposes only. Their inclusion does not imply endorsement by this Secretariat or the Organization.

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