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What is Terrorism?

By Jennifer Kenny

What do you think of when you hear the word **terrorism**? Most people will refer to the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Of course, these were horrific attacks especially considering over 3,000 people lost their lives that day. There was no precedent like that before. Unfortunately, though, that is not the only terrorist attack in history. Terrorism has existed in the world for quite a long time.

What exactly is terrorism? Well, there are many different definitions out there. However, these definitions have certain things in common. Terrorism involves extraordinary violence. It is intended to create massive fear and involves a planned attack for a purpose, often against something or someone. Terrorism is meant to have an audience. The differences between various terrorist attacks involve the people, purpose, and how it is carried out.

Terrorism is a technique, it's a criminal activity, and is planned in advance. For example, did you know that the bombing of the U.S. embassy in Kenya in 1998 was planned for 5 years? You can see, terrorism is an act meant to produce fear without caring about human life. The definition of terrorism used by the government of the United States refers to intimidation of the civilians, the influence of government policy by coercion or fear, or trying to change the government by assassination or kidnapping.

While terrorism is meant to be an act of violence to bring about change, it is usually not committed by those officially in the government. Usually, terrorist groups have fewer members than you would think. They want to be dramatic and attract attention by carrying out a bloody act. They hope to gain power and influence because of the act.

The terrorists want to create fear so that leadership will be questioned. The terrorists want an audience such as a rival ethnic group, a religious group, or an entire country. The terrorists want this audience to experience far-reaching fear.

Early in history there were terrorist acts that occurred for religious purposes. Often the belief was that the terrorist would receive a reward in heaven if he died carrying out the attack. The word terrorism, though, really came to be in the late 18th century during the French Revolution. This was known as the Reign of Terror. While the policy was meant to promote democracy, this way of getting rid of enemies to the government made people feel terrified. Since then, terrorism has had a negative meaning. The term terrorism was popular as well in the late 19th century when some Russian revolutionaries were struggling against the tsar's rule.

In the 1960s and 1970s, there were more ideological motivations for terrorism. Feeling the unequal distribution of wealth and power, certain groups wished to overthrow democracies such as Italy's Red Brigades and the Weather Underground in the U.S. Other groups such as the Irish nationalists in Northern Ireland wished to reunite the divided nation.

We have now entered the modern age of international terrorism. Experts consider this phase as having begun on July 22, 1968. Members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine hijacked an Israeli El Al commercial plane headed from Rome to Tel Aviv. This was the first real political hijacking meant for fear and publicity.

Another major terrorist act was a domestic one. It occurred at the Alfred P. Murrah federal building in Oklahoma. White supremacists carried out a truck bombing that killed 168 people.

It is easy to see that there have been many terrorist acts in history. Some are for political reasons, some for economic, and some for religious ones. There have been very specific terrorist acts from antinuclear energy, environmental, and animal rights groups, too. While these may not have the same death toll as the September 11th tragedy, they are still considered acts of terrorism because of the purpose, fear, violence, and audience. For example, some radical animal rights activists will attack labs to halt medical experiments using animals.

Why do terrorists do what they do? To these groups, the individuals carrying out these horrific acts are considered heroes. They feel some

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sort of change must be made in society and that acceptable ways have not been successful. Therefore, they view these acts as the only answer. These terrorists are freedom fighters to the terrorist groups.

Why has terrorism become increasingly deadly? First of all, more have religious motivation. Second of all, access to weapons from guns to chemical weapons has increased. Third of all, suicide attacks have increased where individuals are willing to give their lives to fulfill the job. In 1983, 49 people were killed and 120 injured as a result of a suicide attack at the U.S. embassy in Beirut. The World Trade Center and Pentagon deaths in 2001 were considered suicide attacks, too. Unfortunately, many suicide attacks are meant as pure vengeance.

The future of terrorism creates quite the challenge for modern society. Increasingly there's quite the concern over chemical weapons since there was a nerve gas attack in Tokyo in 1995 and biological weapons since the anthrax scare in the U.S. in 2001. Experts question the ability to produce new kinds of terrorist attacks on the computer, certainly a more unconventional means of attack. While the threat outweighs the true risk, the fear still exists. People become very afraid and change their ordinary routines as a result of these acts.

How can terrorism be stopped? Many counterterrorism organizations have increased safety measures and intelligence. The problem remains that these acts are still difficult to isolate in order to be prevented. Why? Terrorist acts provoke fear, are made of violence, want to prove a point, and need an audience. After that, though, similarities may stop. Each group possesses an individual cause, a diverse following, and a complex plan of action. Therein lays the changing face of terrorism and its challenges.

Questions

_____ 1. Which item would not be included in a definition for terrorism?

A. fear
B. purpose
C. no audience
D. extraordinary violence

_____ 2. Terrorism can be a spontaneous activity.

A. True
B. False

_____ 3. Terrorist acts have only occurred in recent history.

A. True
B. False

_____ 4. When did the word terrorism really begin to be used?

A. Hijacking on July 22, 1968
B. Weather Underground
C. September 11, 2001
D. Reign of Terror

_____ 5. Which is considered the beginning of the modern age of international terrorism?

A. Reign of Terror
B. Attacks of September 11, 2001
C. hijacking of plane on July 22, 1968
D. Oklahoma City bombing

_____ 6. If an animal rights activist attacks a lab to protest the use of animals in medical experiments, would that be considered a terrorist attack?

A. Yes
B. No

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_____ 7. Which has not increased the deadliness of terrorism?

A. religiously motivated acts
B. attempts at peacemaking
C. access to weapons
D. increase of suicide attacks

Explain the main points that need to be included for a definition of terrorism.

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What are the challenges facing experts who are trying to prevent terrorism?

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Has your life changed as a result of terrorism? Explain how.

Pretend you are a newspaper reporter. Write an article on a recent act that meets the criteria for terrorism.

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What fears do you have regarding terrorism? Explain.

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