

IDL 103 Week 1. Assignment essay.

In her lecture, Dr. Donohue suggests that while the use of violence for political ends is thousands of years old, contemporary suicide-bombing and hostage-taking are profoundly modern acts. Do you agree or disagree with this statement, and how would you argue your position? (Please draw on both the lectures and readings for this week to make your argument).

The threat of terrorism is as old as the humankind itself and history has rarely seen the times when the nations of the world lived without the danger of a terrorist attack. However, the long history of terrorism hardly implies that its occurrences should be considered as similar in form over time. In this essay I will argue that the acts of terror which involve suicide bombings and hostage taking are in fact profoundly modern phenomena and reflect global changes in the development of terrorism worldwide. Such changes challenge the old definitions of terrorism and warrant new insights which, while defining terror, should refrain from subjectivity and bias and touch upon underlying causes of modern terrorism.

Laura Donohue argues that definitions of terrorism which we often operate with are flawed with inconsistencies and the concepts are either not broad enough or not specific enough to capture the essence of this phenomenon. Yet, we have to rely on definitions and typology of terrorism in order to adequately distinguish its various types and develop a strategy of fighting against it.

Whether suicide bombing and hostage taking should be labeled old or new phenomena within terrorism depends to a large extent on which definition of terrorism is applied. I would argue that since terrorism is inherently social and political phenomenon, its definition could not and should not be constant over time.

As Dr. Donohue rightly argued, the events of September 11 had a fundamental impact on shaping the new understanding of what constitutes modern terrorism. But even before the tragedy of 9/11 the scholarly community has been searching rigorously for an agreeable definition of terrorism. Boaz Ganor emphasizes that it is the changing and multifaceted character of modern terrorism which calls for a broad and yet very succinct definition of terrorism which would differentiate this phenomenon from liberation movements, guerilla, urban and conventional warfare. According to Ganor, terrorism is “the international use of, or threat to use violence against civilians or against civilian targets in order to attain political aim”(Ganor, 1998 p.5).

Such definition, he asserts, is warranted by a multifaceted nature of modern terrorism and will help to organize and coordinated anti-terrorist actions by the international community and could serve as “the basis and the operational tool for expanding the international community’s ability to combat terrorism” (Ganor, 2002 p. 3) Ganor draws on a multitude of references to opinions about what is and is not considered to be “terrorism” and proposes a multilayered definition which accurately places terrorism within the framework of other violent actions observed in the modern world. Within this framework, the hostage taking and suicide bombing would be clearly distinguished as modern invention of terrorists, not to be confused with other forms of warfare.

John Whitbeck also raises the definitional issues and goes further to contend that there is “no agreed definition of "terrorism," since the word is so subjective as to be devoid of any inherent meaning” (Whitbeck, 2001, p.1). He argues that after September 11 the definition of terrorism became even more subjective as “every recognized state

confronting an insurgency or separatist movement has eagerly jumped on the "war on terrorism" bandwagon, branding its domestic opponents (if it had not already done so) "terrorists"(Whitbeck, 2001, p.3). He further argues that when faced with new types of terror, the United States and the members of the anti-terrorist coalition failed to adequately address the underlying causes of violence and chose a strategy which, according to Whitbeck, lacks both consistency and efficiency.

The question still remains whether we will be able to come up with a definition which would capture the essence of terrorism, help us to fully and objectively understand the phenomenon and, more importantly, provide a roadmap to alleviating the threat of international terrorism. It is clear, however, that the new forms of international terrorism reflect the changing social order and should be defined within a broader social and political framework, free of subjectivity and bias, with an aim of searching for the solution rather than the attainment of specific political and ideological goals.