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IS TERRORISM CRIMINAL ACTIVITY?

Terrorists, despite their political motivation, can be legally classified as bandits or criminals. Within the law, there is no distinction between a terrorist who seizes hostages for a political end and a kidnapper who holds them for ransom. Is there a difference between a child molester who abducts, rape and bury a nine year old alive, and a “terrorist” who abducts and behead an innocent person? Is it a criminal act, terrorism, distinct and separate, or all of the same?

In a very basic sense, all terrorism can be described as the addition of ideology to ordinary crimes of violence such as murder, theft, rape, kidnapping, extortion and so on. Any person or group willing to commit a crime to back up its political (or religious) position can be terroristic. This includes governments as well as guerillas. Terrorism can be exerted from above by governments which use policies of terror to subjugate the public, or from below by criminals who use tactics of terror to attack the establishment.

Not infrequently, the same people get to exercise both forms of terrorism, first using it to bring down an existing government or win power from a reluctant populace, then, forming a new government, which continues to use terror against its citizens in order to maintain itself. This is exactly what Hitler did, using the terroristic Brown Shirts to topple the Weimar regime, then creating the SS terror network to maintain the power of the National Socialist government.

Dictators and totalitarian governments, as terrorists from above, arrogate unto themselves a monopoly on the possession of arms and the use of force. When a state

owns terrorism, all other violence is taboo, and unrest is ruthlessly suppressed. For this reason, governments, which are themselves terroristic, are much less vulnerable to terrorism than governments, which are not. China is an example of such a government today, one which has organized its use of force over a long period of time and made itself almost immune to internal dissent in the form of violence.

The proliferation of “emerging nations” that resulted from the post-cold-war collapse of the Soviet Union has complicated the game enormously by creating an influx of new players, many of them amateurs and all fiercely competitive. Most have moved to the United States. Terrorism from below has become institutionalized as guerilla warfare, and revolution has become a constant theme of the Third World. Governments everywhere, good and bad, are besieged by terrorism, from Northern Ireland to Afghanistan. And now Russia, North Korea, Iran, and China, just to mention a few, secure in their own borders, have the leisure to export terrorism, through instruction, weapons, financial aid, and even occasionally, military troops. Simultaneously, the United States, because of its alliance with anti-terrorists governments and counter-revolutionary forces, has become a major target of terrorist activities.

With these changes, the nature of terrorism, and the way we think about it, has also changed. In recent years, the word “terrorism” has taken on a particular meaning, describing apparently random acts of violence, directed unpredictably at symbolic rather than real targets. The terrorists’ aim, as Secretary of State Condeleeza Rice observed recently, is “to impose their will by force, a special kind of force designed to create an atmosphere of fear. The terrorists want people to feel helpless and defenseless.” Does the violent spouse, burglar, rapist, or child molester make you feel helpless and defenseless?

And so they place a bomb in a crowded department store somewhere, or kidnap a worker in Iraq, or place roadside bombs for Marines traveling through the Afghan country side, or detonate a bomb at a federal government building somewhere in the United States. Since the victims are victims not because of anything they personally have done, but just because of their associations, or even just their locations at the moment of the crime, everyone can identify with their fate. The fear-inspiring question is “Will it be me next time?” What if it were you?