Terrorism: What Is It, Does It Work, and Is It Ever Justified?

Fall 2018 / FYSEM-UA 650 / Wednesdays, 3:30-6:10 pm

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Course description: Following the 9/11 attacks, politicians, journalists, and scholars have all engaged in a great deal of discussion about “terrorism.” But what exactly is “terrorism,” and how does it differ from other types of violence or warfare? Is the word at all helpful, or simply a source of endless confusion? If there is something we can usefully call terrorism, why exactly do rebels, gangs, governments, or individuals carry it out? Does it work—that is, do terror tactics help their perpetrators to attain their ends? Or is terrorism always counterproductive? And is terrorism ever morally justified, or must we always condemn it?

To answer these questions, we will examine a range of historical cases of political violence in the modern world, including the “terror bombing” of Japan by the United States during World War II; recent suicide bombing campaigns by various insurgent political groups, including Al Qaeda and ISIS; and several violent episodes in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We will also examine various types of violence in the contemporary U.S.—including school and workplace shootings, violence against women, and police shootings of African Americans—and ask whether these should be considered terrorism.

One goal of this course is to challenge a number of popular myths about terrorism, including the idea that terror tactics are employed exclusively by zealou “extremists” or “radicals.” This course proposes, instead, that terrorism—however morally repugnant—is very often a rational or reasonable strategy of warfare or social control; accordingly, terror tactics have been employed quite frequently by a wide range of political groups, governments, and individuals, including quite moderate and normal people.

Course requirements and grading: Students are required to write seven two-page “response papers” on the assigned readings as well as a short research paper of 8 pages. (Students will choose which weeks’ readings they will respond to.) Each response paper will count for about 8 percent of one’s final grade, so in all these papers will count for somewhat more than half (56 percent) of one’s final grade. The research paper will serve as a final exam for the course and will count for a third of one’s final grade. Students will write this paper during the final weeks of
the course, when we will consider whether certain prevalent types of violence—including school shootings, violence against women, and police violence—are forms of terrorism. Participation in class discussions, including one or two brief oral presentations in class, will count for the remainder of one’s final grade.

Class format: We will roughly follow this schedule for each class session:
• First half (3:35 to 4:50 pm): This period will give students some “food for thought”—in the form of a lecture, guest lecture, video, etc.—that is relevant to the assigned readings for the week.
• Ten-minute break (4:50 pm to 5:00 pm)
• Second half (5:00 pm to 6:10 pm): During this period we will discuss the assigned reading for the week, initiated by one or two student presentations.

Required readings: Most readings for this course are articles or reports that are available on-line, generally through Bobst Library. We will also read lengthy selections from the following three paperbacks: Robert A. Pape, Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism (Random House, 2005); Fawaz A. Gerges, The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda (Oxford University Press, 2011); and Michael Kimmel, Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era, revised ed. (Nation Books, 2017). These books have been ordered at the NYU Bookstore (726 Broadway) and are on reserve at Bobst Library.

Course outline:

Part 1. Introduction

Week 1. September 5. Introduction to the course. (No readings.)

Week 2. September 12. What is terrorism, and is it ever justified?


Part 2. Killing civilians in international conflicts

Week 3. September 19. The U.S. “terror bombing” of Japan

Required reading: Thomas R. Searle, “‘It Made a Lot of Sense to Kill Skilled Workers’: The Firebombing of Tokyo in March 1945,” *Journal of Military History* (2002), Vol. 66, No. 1, pp. 103-133; and


Week 4. September 26. The rise of suicide bombing

Required reading: Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win*, chapters 1-6 (pp. 3-101).

Part 3. The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Week 5. October 3. The “ethnic cleansing” of Palestine in 1948


Walid Khalidi, “The Fall of Haifa Revisited,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* (Spring 2008), Vol. 37, No. 3, pp. 30-58; and


Week 7. October 17. Operation Protective Edge, 2014


Part 4. Al Qaeda and ISIS

Week 8. October 24. Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda


Week 9. October 31. The Road to 9/11 and its aftermath

Required reading: Fawaz A. Gerges, The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda, Introduction, chapters 1-4 (pp. 3-126).

Week 10. November 7. The ISIS insurgency


Part 5. Violence in the Contemporary United States—Is it terrorism?

[This part of the course will focus on school and workplace shootings, violence against women, and police violence in the U.S. Students will explore on-line resources on these topics in addition to the assigned readings. Students will write a short research paper based on their reading and research. More details will be provided as we near this part of the course.]
Week 11. November 14. “Aggrieved entitlement” and school shootings

Required reading: Michael Kimmel, *Angry White Men*, chapters 1-2 (pp. 31-97).

[No class on November 21. Thanksgiving recess.]

Week 12. November 28. Violence against women and workplace rampages

Required reading: Kimmel, *Angry White Men*, chapters 5-7 (pp. 169-278).

Week 13. December 5. Sexual assault on campus


Students’ research papers are due on Wednesday, December 19.