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

Fall 2017 / Wednesdays, 3:30-6:10 pm

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Course description: Following the 9/11 attacks, there has been much discussion of “terrorism” by politicians, journalists, and scholars. But what exactly is “terrorism,” and how does it differ from other types of violence or warfare? Why exactly do governments or rebel groups decide to use terrorism? Does it work—that is, are terror tactics effective or counterproductive? Finally, are terror tactics ever morally justified? To answer these questions, we will examine a range of historical cases of terrorism in the modern world, including the U.S. “terror bombing” of Japan during World War II; recent suicide bombing campaigns by various insurgent political groups; various episodes in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; and terrorism by Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. We will also ask whether the drone attacks carried out by the U.S. in its “war on terrorism” are not themselves terrorist.

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 zealous “extremists” or “radicals.” It proposes, instead, that terrorism is very often a reasonable and effective strategy of warfare or social domination which, accordingly, has been employed quite frequently by a wide range of political groups and governments, including mainstream U.S. and Israeli politicians, in order to achieve their political aims. On the other hand, terror tactics are generally eschewed by governments and rebels when they offer few if any benefits or rewards.

Course requirements and grading: Students are required to write 6 two-page “response papers” on the assigned readings as well as a research paper of 10-12 pages. (Students will choose which weeks’ readings they will respond to.) Each response paper will count for 8 percent of one’s final grade (48 percent in all). The research paper will serve as a final exam for the course and will count for about a third (32 percent) of one’s final grade. Students will write this paper during the final weeks of the course, when we will explore drone warfare by the U.S. government as part of its “war on terrorism.” Participation in class discussions will count for 15 percent of one’s final grade, and a brief oral report in class will count for the remaining 5 percent.
Required readings: Many readings for this course are articles or reports that are available on-line, including through Bobst Library. I will post these (or a link) on the course’s NYU Classes site or e-mail them to you. These readings are followed by an asterisk (*) in the course outline below. We will also read lengthy selections from the following four books: 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); William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (Picador, 2016); and Jeremy Scahill, *The Assassination Complex: Inside the Government’s Secret Drone Warfare Program* (Simon & Schuster, 2016). 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. Introduction to the course. (No readings.)

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


Part 2. Killing civilians in international conflicts

Week 3. 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
Stephen R. Shalom, “The Obliteration of Hiroshima,” *New Politics* (Summer 1996), Vol. 6, No. 1 (this article is only available on-line at [http://www.wpunj.edu/cohss/departments/pol_sci/faculty/shalom/the-obliteration-of-hiroshima.dot](http://www.wpunj.edu/cohss/departments/pol_sci/faculty/shalom/the-obliteration-of-hiroshima.dot)).

**Week 4.** 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.** The “ethnic cleansing” of Palestine in 1948


**Week 6.** The Second Intifada, 2000-2005


**Week 7.** Operation Protective Edge, 2014

Required reading: Amnesty International, “‘Black Friday’: Carnage in Rafah During 2014 Israel/Gaza Conflict.” Please review this report (which includes videos) on-line at [https://blackfriday.amnesty.org](https://blackfriday.amnesty.org).
Part 4. Al Qaeda

Week 8. Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda


Week 9. 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).

Part 5. ISIS

Week 10. The rise of ISIS


Week 11. The strategy of ISIS

Required reading: McCants, The ISIS Apocalypse, chapters 5-6 and Conclusion (pp. 99-159);


Part 6. Research project: Drone warfare—Is it terrorism?

[Students will explore a variety of on-line resources on drone warfare in addition to the assigned readings during this part of the course. Students will write a research paper based on their research. More details will be provided as we near this part of the course.]

Week 12. Drone warfare


Week 13. Drone warfare (continued)


Week 14. Drone warfare (continued)


Students’ research papers are due on [date TBA].

Estimated number of pages assigned each week in this course: c. 75

Writing required for this course: c. 22-24 pages