Terrorism: Complexity of the Concept

Col. Abdullah Mohammed Shadi

Republic of Yemen's Delegate to IMCTC

International, regional and local organizations disagreed on reaching an agreed-upon, accurate and a comprehensive definition of terrorism. Even political, diplomatic, media and social glossaries use various definitions of terrorism that are closely linked to their specific fields. The disagreement regarding the definition of terrorism arises from the political orientation of the organizations that formulate the term.

Difficulty of defining the term:

The United Nations offers a brief definition of terrorism as: "a threat to human life, basic human freedoms, in pursuit of achieving a specific political purpose," while the Arab Counterterrorism Agreement uses a far broader definition of the term, encompassing acts of violence, threat to life, basic freedoms and institutions. Hence, such a definition includes both physical and moral elements of human life, while the political glossary confines its definition of terrorism to the terrorization of people in pursuit of political objectives.

Meanwhile, diplomatic and social glossaries define terrorism as: intimidation by a nation state, group or a political party to make it acquiesce or surrender to certain demands. The International Convention for the Suppression of Financing of Terrorism, signed 1999, defines terrorism as: "Any act intended to cause death or serious bodily injury to unarmed civilian, when the purpose of such act, by its nature or context, is to intimidate a population, or compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act."

While the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) defines terrorism as: "any act of violence or threat thereof, notwithstanding its motives or intentions, perpetrated to carry out an individual or collective criminal plan

with the aim of terrorizing people or threatening to harm them or imperiling their lives, honor, freedoms, security or rights or exposing the environment or any facility or public or private property to hazards or occupying or seizing them, or endangering a national resource, or international facilities, or threatening the stability, territorial integrity, political unity or sovereignty of independent states."

Confusion surrounding the concept:

Dr. Ahmed Alaw was quoted, in June, 2005, as saying: "the US administration has abandoned the term, the (War on Terrorism) and instead used the (Global Struggle against Violent Extremism)." Yet, irrespective of the term used, this type of war is still controversial.

Meanwhile, some experts think that there is a confusion with to regard to the concept of terrorism arising from an inaccurate translation of the Latin word; terror (great fear) being in use nowadays as terrorism. However, a better equivalent for the term in Arabic is "Hirabah" meaning (waging war against society or armed robbery). However, Islamic jurists later on expanded the interpretations of this term in order to apply it to individuals or groups that rebel against Muslim rulers. The Umayyads and Abbasids caliphs and subsequent sultans and emirs had taken advantage of this term against those who disagreed with them or what is currently termed as political dissidents. Thus, experts think that it is imperative to look for a more accurate term that denotes intimidation, in accordance with the Islamic understanding.

Similarly, researchers and jurists have failed to come up with a specific and clear-cut definition of terrorism since the variation in the definitions is tied to politics, culture and intellectual views of those in charge who are concerned with the interpretation of the phenomenon of terrorism.

There is another reason behind the difficulty of finding a clear-cut definition of terrorism stemming from the overlap between terrorism, organized crime and political violence as well as being linked to other disciplines such as political science, psychology, sociology and communications. Obviously, as a result of the disagreement regarding the definition of the concept of terrorism, there are divergent approaches to

counter it. So, some countries may choose conventional methods to counter terrorism through military means, politically if deemed a type of political struggle or other forms of interventions, if they consider it as a psychiatric condition. Yet, others might consider terrorism as a mere media overblown bubble.

The root of the Arabic verb (رهب-rahaba) from which the noun (irhab) is derived, is mentioned twelve times in the Holy Quran and none of its uses include a reference to the meanings used nowadays to denote terrorism. In fact, the root (rahaba) means brutality, force and terrifying of the enemies of Allah based on the Quranic verse: ("And prepare against them whatever you are able of power and of steeds of war by which you may terrify the enemy of Allah and your enemy"). Surah Al-Anfal, Verse: 60.

A deeper look into the definitions:

When we dig deeper into the definitions of terrorism, we must touch upon the study conducted by Alex Schmid, who provides the most important definitions and the frequency of their use by examining 109 definitions of terrorism compiled in an investigative study conducted by a group of prominent academics in the field of terrorism. The findings of the study came as follows: 83% of the defining characteristics include violence and force, which obviously indicate that terrorism involves the use of violent force against others, while the political objective comes second in rank at 65%. This, in fact, represents a clear indication that political groups have a huge political presence and strive to assume the reins of power under an ideological umbrella. 37.5% consider a terrorist action a threat to others, while 32% consider it as a purposeful, planned and organized action. Another piece of statistics in the study suggests that the method, strategy and tactic follow in succession at 30.5% and that terrorism is a violation of socially accepted rules by 30%. Moreover, the study suggests that terrorism relies on coercion, blackmail and incitement represents 28%, while propaganda and publicity, 21.5%, inflicting maximum amount of victims represents 17.5% and finally, reiteration of the innocence of victims represents 15.5%.

The percentages highlighted by Mr. Schmid are gleaned from definitions and concepts postulated by a group of mostly foreign researchers and authors. Likewise, in our overview of a vast number of Arab and foreign

definitions, we found no significant differences compared to Mr. Schmid's conclusions, yet they are not identical.

Arguably, it can be said that there is a great deal of confusion when it comes to the definition of terrorism and finding an agreed-upon definition is not an easy task. This is due to the fact that terrorism overlaps with other various concepts, shaped by political and religious interests that further add to the complexity and confusion of the term.