

## **“Palestine and the discourse of terrorism”<sup>1</sup>**

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The language of “terrorism” suffuses discussions of Palestine, and Gaza. But “terrorism” is not just an objective category or a neutral descriptor of events in the world. As has been shown by a growing body of research (much appearing in this very journal), the labels of “terrorism” and “terrorist” have embedded within them a politics and a deep set of meanings. This essay looks back at how this category came to be constructed, and how the meanings that came to be embedded within it enable it to have certain effects in the world. It examines how Palestine came to occupy a central role within the discourse of “terrorism”, and how “terrorism” came to be seen as almost a synecdoche for Palestine, as the result of a discursive campaign by Israel in the 1970s and 1980s.

As the problem of terrorism became a key site of concern in the 1970s, the surrounding discourse was highly contentious. The very definition of “terrorism” was (and still is) widely contested, with key disagreements centering whether states could act as terrorists, and whether national and anti-colonial resistance movements should be considered terrorist. Although many states sought to make use of this new language to delegitimize insurgent religious and national movements, Israel was one of the first, and most successful, in engineering this strategy. Israel’s interventions into the discourse of terrorism had a very particular aim: not only to delegitimize Palestinian resistance, but to *equate* Palestinian resistance (and sometimes even Palestinian existence) with terrorism. In so doing, Israel

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<sup>1</sup> This discussion draws upon my book *Disciplining Terror*, especially chapter 5, “Terrorism fever”: The first war on terror and the politicization of expertise (Stampnitzky 2013).

aimed to interpellate the “Western world” as their allies in what it would frame as a “civilizational” struggle against terrorism so understood.

One key moment in advancing this approach was the 1979 Jerusalem Conference on terrorism, sponsored by the Jonathan Institute, an Israeli think tank funded by future prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu (Netanyahu 1980). While formally a non-governmental organization, the Jonathan Institute had close ties to the Israeli state. The 1979 conference received significant media coverage and was attended by prominent American experts and political figures, including several members of congress, future president George H.W. Bush, and representatives of think tanks such as the American Enterprise Institute and the Center for Strategic and International Studies, who helped carry these narratives back to the U.S. and publicize them there, and internationally.

The goals of the conference were to awaken the Western world to the problem of terrorism as defined by the conference organizers--- an international network with the Soviet Union at its heart, and the Palestinian cause (along with other anticolonial and nationalist movements) at its front line. Speakers framed terrorism as not just a certain type of tactic, such as irregular violence, or attacks on civilians, as it had commonly been understood previously, but as a global threat aimed squarely at civilization, democracies, and “the West” (Netanyahu 1980; Stampnitzky 2013; Jamshidi 2023). Although this may seem (and indeed was) hyperbolic, it was also effective, so effective that this framing continues to shape how we talk about “terrorism” today. As Pranay Somayajula (2024) has recently written,

“To invoke the word “terrorism” within the conventional bounds of liberal discourse is to bring the debate to a screeching halt. . . There is no spectrum of acceptable opinions, no room for reasonable disagreement when it comes to terrorism. There are only two sides—those who are with the terrorists, and those who are against them.”

The meaning of ‘terrorism’ was thus reframed to be a *civilizational* struggle— the “West” against the “rest.” Rather than simply referring to one side in a dispute, or acting as a label for those who make use of certain tactics, this reframing aimed to make the “terrorist” the “enemy of all.” This occurred alongside a reframing of the “terrorist” as an identity, drawing upon highly orientalist ideas about Arabs and Muslims as irrational and inherently violent.

Part of the effect of the language of terrorism is to accuse those so labelled of engaging in violence irrationally, for its own sake, rather than viewing them as rational actors with political goals. As I have shown previously (Stampnitzky 2013), over the course of the 1970s, terrorism was redefined, from being an “act” that any type of actor (potentially even armed groups one might hold sympathy for, or even states) could commit, to an identity. And once this has been established, we can see the move away from seeing any need to understand terrorism as an act with political or historical causes, and instead something that is simply “evil”, existing outside of history and politics, with the implication is that terrorists commit terrorism *because* they are terrorists. The label of terrorist thus has the dual function of delegitimizing, or even erasing, Palestinian resistance as a legible political project, and legitimating ultimate violence against those so labelled. As Edward Said wrote in 1979,

“Zionism first refused to acknowledge the existence of native inhabitants in Palestine, and when it did , it recognized only native inhabitants with no political or national rights; insofar as these natives claimed rights, the West was instructed systematically in equating the struggle for those rights with terrorism, genocide, antisemitism” (Said 1979).

The discourse of terrorism not only condemns, it produces an understanding of the “terrorist” as irrational, motivated by pure hatred, rather than political, historical, contextual

reasons, who therefore cannot be reasoned with. The label of “terrorist” flattens all those so labeled into a single, inhuman category of actor who cannot be engaged with through ordinary political means, but must only be destroyed. As Tareq Baconi recently noted,

“In his first speech after the attack, the US president described Hamas as “pure evil,” comparing its offensive to those of ISIS; he also [likened October 7th to 9/11](#) and repeatedly referred to [widely discredited](#) claims of brutality to stir up orientalist and Islamophobic tropes in an effort to justify the ferocity of Israel’s response” (Baconi 2023).

We can further see how such an approach easily slides into broader colonial discourses of viewing the other as unhuman, or animal (Megret 2006; Barkawi 2016), as in the label of “human animals” applied to the residents of Gaza by Israel Defense Minister Yoav Gallant.

Not only has “terrorism” come to be almost automatically, even necessarily, attached to any mention of Hamas, but Hamas, and therefore “terrorism”, have been turned into a metaphor for Gaza, and for the Palestinian people as a whole. This has deep consequences for the language most commonly used to speak about Palestine and Gaza today. And insofar as “terrorism” and “terrorists” are conceptualised as evil, irrational, unpredictable violence that cannot be countered through ordinary means, this language has discursively enabled a strategy of wholesale destruction: of “terrorists,” of Hamas, and of all of Gaza, which is equated with the above.

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