14.1: What Is Transnational Terrorism?

Terrorism, whether transnational or not, is a highly contested arena. To date there is very little consensus regarding its definition. Disagreements emerge over the purpose and function, the perpetrators, the victims, the legitimacy and the methods and targeting of terrorist actors. Perhaps the most widely accepted attribute of the term ‘terrorism’ is that it is derogatory and a sign of disapproval. Typically, labelling a group as terrorist negatively affects our perception of the group’s legitimacy, legality and how they should be addressed. Therefore, how we differentiate a terrorist group from any other group is important. For the purposes of this chapter, terrorism is understood as the use or threat of violence by non-state actors to influence citizens or governments in the pursuit of political or social change. This is not only a semantic or academic debate; the label gives states considerable power to act and use violence against a group and it significantly guides how a state should act. Wrong definitions can lead to flawed counter-terrorism strategies.

Moreover, as states cannot agree on the definition, they argue over both the nature and the cause of terrorism as well as who can be called a terrorist. With no agreed international law governing state responses, they struggle to work together to remove the threats. According to Acharya (2008), this permits states to act like vigilantes, or cowboys in the Wild West, on the global stage.

Rapoport (2004) divided the history of terrorist groups into four successive waves, each characterised by the global politics of the day. He noted that nationalist and anti-colonial groups emerged with a force at the end of the first and second world wars, while anti-communist and anarchist movements proliferated during the Cold War. Today it is argued that a new, or fifth, wave of modern terrorist groups are both products of and challenges to key ideas associated with globalisation, thereby giving terrorism a transnational character. It is important to note that some terrorist groups in the past had transnational goals, but they lacked the tools of the modern world to widen and deepen their message. Today’s transnational terrorism is seen to operate in many states, utilising the ‘shadow globalisation’ flows of people, weapons and information to further their cause. The causes of this new type of terrorism reflect the deepening of human interconnectedness worldwide. Peter Mandaville (2007), writing on one of the first groups to be designated as a ‘fifth
wave’ terrorist group, Al-Qaeda, argued that their initial success was because they operated a global technology, mythology and ideology. Specifically, it was the mythology of military success against the United States in the form of the spectacular attacks of 9/11 and then drawing it into costly military activities abroad. Combined with the franchise-like nature of their organisation, they were able to claim responsibility for attacks all over the world by financially, logistically and materially assisting smaller groups that affiliated themselves to the organisation. Such affiliations were possible because Al-Qaeda promoted a global ideology that linked local causes together via an image of world politics that presented Muslims worldwide as victims of Western oppression. These components enabled them to function and replicate on a global scale.

Today’s terrorism is therefore transnational in cause, operation and effect. Its essential features ensure its importance within international relations because it represents a whole new security concern for states: the risk of attack does not just come from other states (war) but from mobile criminal groups that move between states and are dispersed globally (transnational terrorism). States perceive this new wave of terrorism as threatening core elements of their sovereignty – their capacity, legitimacy and autonomy within a particular jurisdiction. This all-encompassing threat has led to a range of responses. These have included the creation of new criminal offences, broadened legal definitions of terrorism, the granting of greater powers of detention and arrest, as well as improving funding for state agencies involved in countering terrorism. In light of the transnational elements, states have also sought closer cross-border cooperation between government agencies, most notably in policing and intelligence, in order to prevent the spread of terrorism. States have also reacted to the new threats by seeking to prevent or disrupt the emergence of ideas that might support terrorist violence through antiradicalisation initiatives. These are sometimes referred to as ‘soft measures’. Overseas these include supporting development goals of other countries to facilitate their stabilisation and the production of moderate voices in politics. Within domestic jurisdictions, ‘soft’ counter-extremism policies include placing greater emphasis on challenging particular extreme ideas in schools and universities, monitoring citizens for signs of radicalisation and making illegal the ownership and distribution of material that glorifies violence. These forms of intervention bring the state more directly into contact with the everyday lives of citizens, often regardless of any laws broken. Such efforts demonstrate how terrorism is a concern for human security as well as state security because of the manner in which it affects everyday life.