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WHAT IS TERRORISM?

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WHAT IS TERRORISM? The UN High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change defines terrorism as “any action intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or noncombatants with the purpose of intimidating a population or compelling a government or an international organization to do, or abstain from, any act.”

According to Webster’s *New World Dictionary* terrorism often equates with power politics and realpolitik.

Who is a terrorist and who is a freedom fighter?

To cite an often repeated cliché: one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter. The passage of time may cause us to change our opinion of them. We have only to consider the labels applied over time to Nelson Mandela, the “terrorist” and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize (1993); Yasser Arafat, the “terrorist” and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize (1994); and America’s founding fathers—terrorists in the eyes of the British, freedom fighters in the eyes of Americans.

Who is a civilian?

The U.S. troops in Iraq are supported by an army of civilian contractors who provide security, bring them fuel, food, etc., and provide other services. The U.S. occupation of Iraq is overseen, and supported, by the largest U.S. embassy in the world many of whom carry out intelligence activities. Are these civilians or legitimate targets for the Iraqi resistance?

Israel presents a different issue. Except for religious scholars who are exempt, Israelis are drafted into the Israel Defense Force at age 18. Men serve for three years, women for 21 months. Upon completion of compulsory service each soldier is assigned to a reserve unit. Are these reservists, who change from military uniform to civilian clothes in the same day, civilians or military targets?

In the past, intelligence agencies are reported

to have infiltrated consulting firms, charitable organizations, news services, student groups, etc.

What about the rights of citizens of an occupied country?

Under international law, citizens of an occupied country have the legal right to resist occupation by any and all means. Indeed history records with favor the French resistance that fought against Nazi occupation.

Are those who collaborate with occupation forces a legitimate target for the resistance? Does the right to resist occupation grant authority to attack Israeli settlers in occupied Palestine?

An Italian judge ruled in April this year that “militants who attack military or state targets, even with suicide bombers, cannot be considered terrorists in times of war or occupation.”

What about acts of state-sponsored violence?

Former Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson, chief U.S. prosecutor at the first Nuremberg trial, called waging aggressive war “the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole.”

“The same view would later be confirmed by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Far East. It was also confirmed in the detailed judgment in the ‘Ministries Case’ of the Subsequent Proceedings held at Nuremberg” wrote Benjamin B. Ferencz—a prosecutor at the subsequent Nuremberg war crimes trials.

Russia’s war on the Chechens, China’s repression of the Uighurs, the Philippines’ war on the Moros of Mindanao, and the U.S. invasion of Iraq—the supreme international crime—have caused far more death and destruction than that caused by “terrorists.”

And what does the fatwa say about the U.S. invasion of Iraq? In his Nobel lecture, Harold A. Pinter, recipient of the 2005 Nobel Prize for literature, called it “an act of blatant state terrorism.”