

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Defining Terrorism: Is There Anything New? A Qualitative Analysis of 470 Definitions

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Abstract: The study of terrorism has expanded substantially since the attacks of 11 September 2001, yet a universally accepted definition remains elusive. Despite extensive scholarly and institutional efforts, the concept continues to be contested and politically charged. This article examines whether contemporary definitions of terrorism represent a meaningful departure from earlier conceptualisations or whether a stable definitional core persists. The paper analyses 470 definitions drawn from academic literature, governmental sources, and intergovernmental organisations using systematic content and frequency analysis. The findings reveal strong conceptual continuity. Core elements include violence or force, political objectives, fear or terror, threat, purposive and organised action, and psychological effects. These elements appear consistently across definitions formulated both before and after 9/11 and closely align with earlier consensus-based studies. Variations in the prominence of secondary elements, such as civilian victimhood, religious motivation, and tactical framing, reflect contextual shifts rather than substantive definitional change. The analysis suggests that the enduring absence of a universally accepted definition stems less from conceptual ambiguity than from the inherently political and normative character of the term terrorism. While full consensus remains unlikely, identifying stable core elements provides a robust analytical framework for research, policy development, and legal analysis. In this sense, the paper shows that little is genuinely new at the conceptual core of terrorism, but that this continuity can now be demonstrated on an unprecedented empirical scale.

Keywords: terrorism definition, supplemented consensus terrorism definition, political violence, content analysis, frequency analysis.

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Introduction

The substantial growth of literature on terrorism, covering a wide range of scientific and geopolitical perspectives, particularly since the post-9/11 era, has still not resolved the persistent challenge of establishing a universally accepted definition of terrorism. In the current international security environment, marked by several high-intensity crises, especially in Ukraine, Israel-Palestine, Syria, Yemen, and other countries, terrorism is not regarded as the most pressing global security threat. Yet it remains a recurring phenomenon that accompanies these conflicts and often serves as a deliberate method of violence within them. As such, it continues to shape contemporary security dynamics in meaningful ways.

Numerous terrorist incidents have also occurred in regions generally associated with stability, peace, and prosperity, particularly in the Western world. It is plausible that other global crises in recent years, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, large-scale armed conflicts, and migration flows, have pushed terrorism lower on the international security agenda. Still, from a strategic security perspective, the threat remains relevant and consequential, likely to the same or even to a greater extent than before.

Some scholars argue that terrorism is not declining but constantly evolving, with its manifestations increasingly visible in the Global South.¹ Statistical sources, most notably the Global Terrorism Database (GTD),² show a significant rise in terrorist attacks in Africa, especially during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. These developments point to shifting geographies, modalities, and actors in terrorism and highlight the need to adapt analytical frameworks to its changing dynamics. This has always been a central difficulty in defining terrorism: its temporal and spatial variations, along with differing ideologies and motivations, are frequently cited as reasons for the absence of a standardised definition. Yet if terrorism is understood as a method used to pursue political goals, defining it should not be an insurmountable task.

Despite this, no universally accepted definition has been achieved. The growing number of terrorist attacks has been accompanied by an even greater explosion of literature. Schmid, Forest, and Lowe note that the volume of publications on terrorism and counter-terrorism, including monographs, chapters in edited volumes, journal articles, dissertations, government reports, think tank papers, conference proceedings, mass and social media content, manifestos, propaganda, and other grey literature, far exceeds what any single scholar can reasonably absorb.³ For instance, Amazon.com lists more than 40,000 books on terrorism, most published after 9/11, while Academia.edu provides access to over 270,000 papers on the topic.

When the same search was repeated four years later, Amazon.com listed more than 50,000 books on terrorism, and an advanced search on Academia.edu yielded 568,826 papers containing the word *terrorism* in the full text and 16,366 with the term in the title.⁴ It is difficult to imagine that a phenomenon attracting such extensive academic attention still lacks a clear, universally accepted definition, whether in scholarly discourse or in international law.

A precise definition has remained elusive since the word *terror* was first recorded in England 1528⁵ and later during the Jacobin regime (Régime de la Terreur, 1793–1794), when it entered Western public discourse. No definition emerged after the 1972 terrorist attack by the Palestinian group Black September on Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympic Games, an event that marked the beginning of systematic academic study of terrorism. Nor did a consensus definition arise after 9/11, which stands as the most significant event in the modern history of terrorism. That attack marked a turning point in both the perception and study of terrorism, triggering a sharp rise in scholarly and professional publications.

Even before 9/11, attempts had been made to create a uniform definition of terrorism. Several leading researchers and the United Nations sought to do so.⁶ In the past two decades, however, these efforts appear to have waned, even as international cooperation in combating terrorism has grown in both scope and depth. Nevertheless, a standardised definition remains absent.

Such a definition may exist implicitly in the broader discourse, suggesting a degree of tacit consensus supported by previous studies and by this research. This article begins with an overview of different perspectives on the contested nature of terrorism and its definition, followed by arguments for and against the need for a common definition. It then presents a review of previous research that sought to establish a standardised definition, outlines the methodology used in this study, and discusses the results of a qualitative analysis of 470 definitions of terrorism. The article concludes by identifying the main constitutive elements of terrorism, proposing a possible definition, and reflecting critically on the state of current knowledge and the reasons why a universally accepted definition has not been achieved, and likely never will be, despite the fact that most researchers perceive terrorism in broadly similar ways.

The article seeks to determine whether contemporary definitions of terrorism offer any meaningful departure from earlier conceptualisations. Drawing on research conducted in 1988 that examined 109 definitions, and expanding the analysis to include 361 additional definitions, it investigates whether the dominant conception of the essence of terrorism has shifted over the past four decades (*Is There Anything New?*).⁷ It is assumed that there have been no fundamental shifts in the understanding of terrorism and that the persistent controversy surrounding the concept itself remains the principal impediment to the acceptance of a universally applicable definition.

The Contested Meaning of Terrorism: Challenges of Definition

Terrorism is a highly contested concept. If this were not the case, a universally accepted definition would likely have been established long ago. Many scholars have examined the problematic nature of the term, and their perspectives are broadly consistent. Jenkins has repeatedly emphasised that terrorism is not only a “pejorative term” but also a “fashionable word” used promiscuously to describe almost every form of violence.⁸ Sloan likewise argues that terrorism is “inherently emotive.”⁹ According to Begorre-Bret, the term carries a strong negative connotation and may be regarded as intrinsically relative, leading to what he describes as a “definitional abstention.”¹⁰ Wardlaw highlights that terrorism is above all a “moral problem,” which he identifies as the key reason why no universally accepted definition exists.¹¹ Jenkins has therefore described the definitional debate as the “Bermuda Triangle” of international discourse.¹² Johns similarly regards terrorism as an “essentially contested concept.”¹³

Other scholars have described terrorism as a “conceptual anomaly,”¹⁴ an “elusive concept,”¹⁵ or an “enigmatic and contested concept”¹⁶ lacking universal agreement despite decades of debate. Building on Griffin, Ceci identifies five principal obstacles to definition: (1) the emotional weight of the term; (2) the extraordinary heterogeneity of the phenomenon; (3) the problem of value-neutrality, namely the notion that terrorism is subjective and inevitably implies moral judgement, often captured by the phrase “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter;” (4) the tendency for definitions to be crafted by those seeking to construct counter-terrorism policies; and (5) the “profoundly pejorative,” stigmatising, and “demonising” connotations of the word, which also account for the reluctance of most terrorists to adopt the label.¹⁷

Laqueur concludes that definitional unanimity is unattainable because no single formulation can encompass the many varieties of terrorism that have appeared throughout history.¹⁸ Bjørge similarly observes that repeated efforts to reach consensus have failed because the label “terrorism” is applied to a wide range of different phenomena.¹⁹ Mahon stresses that terrorism is “multifaceted and ever-changing,” making a universal definition impossible.²⁰ Prominent terrorist incidents of the past two decades, most notably 9/11, have reinforced this difficulty. As Dewi observes, after 9/11 international terrorism became synonymous with radical Muslim groups, reflecting a shift from national to international scope.²¹ Hase’s research further shows that news media disproportionately describe violence by Islamist extremists as terrorism, while rarely applying the label to attacks carried out by right- or left-wing extremists.²² Such selective labelling may reinforce stereotypes and constrain policy responses to other forms of political violence.

Schmid has described terrorism as “the most important word in the political vocabulary.”²³ He later developed the concept of “definition power,” arguing that governments and international organisations find it easier to label certain non-state actors and specific acts of political violence as “terrorist” than to agree on a precise definition.²⁴ For Schmid, the central question is who should possess definition power, meaning the authority to shape public discourse by designating certain forms of violence as terrorism while excluding others. Potential contenders include terrorists themselves, the mass and social media, national governments, the United Nations, and academics.

Building on Schmid’s concept, Sloan argues that terrorism is an emotion-laden term often used as a rhetorical weapon by competing ideological camps.²⁵ Bruce also emphasises the power inherent in defining or failing to define terrorism, noting that “a suitable universal definition remains elusive because different bodies, organisations, and government agencies have different definitions to suit their own particular role, purpose, or bias.”²⁶ The issue of state terrorism compounds the problem, as it has occurred across diverse political systems and historical periods.²⁷ Miller and Feltes argue that excluding state actors from definitions is either arbitrary or politically motivated, reflecting states’ desire to avoid implicating themselves.²⁸

The contested nature of the concept, shaped by history, ideology, political struggle, and power dynamics, hinders the achievement of a unified definition. This definitional uncertainty neither advances scholarly understanding nor contributes to addressing terrorism as a pressing security challenge. Therefore, the following section explains why, despite these difficulties, pursuing a workable definition remains essential.

Is a Unified Definition of Terrorism Necessary?

The absence of a universally accepted definition of terrorism is not merely a linguistic or legal challenge but reflects deeper political and epistemological disputes. The importance of a definition has also been emphasised by the United Nations on 1 December 2010, when the Head of the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate noted that the lack of a universal definition of terrorism posed a significant challenge.²⁹ This challenge is an obstacle to systematically addressing and resolving the problem, although some argue that terrorism is sufficiently recognisable and that insisting on a formal definition is unnecessary.

Hoffman regards terrorism as a predominantly political concept, arguing that the primary analytical task is to identify its objectives, motivations, and purposes, and to distinguish it from other forms of violence. From this perspective, achieving definitional consensus is of secondary importance.³⁰ Paul Wilkinson similarly maintains that the public in most countries is capable

of recognising terrorism when it occurs, making conceptual and empirical differentiation more important than agreeing on a single definition.³¹ Nacos advances a comparable position,³² asserting that people intuitively discern terrorism from other acts of violence, encapsulating her view with a well-known analogy, popularised by Kegley, that terrorism is like pornography: “You know it when you see it, but it is impossible to come up with a universally agreed definition.”³³ Such positions resonate strongly in political arenas, where resistance to a unified definition is often strategic. An objective, universally applied definition would risk implicating state actions, both historical and contemporary, as acts of terrorism. This tension was succinctly articulated by former British Ambassador to the United Nations, Jeremy Greenstock, in 2001. He argued that there was broad consensus on the core elements of terrorism: “What looks, smells, and kills like terrorism is terrorism.” However, he cautioned that conflicts and armed struggles could also be labelled “terrorist” for metaphorical or rhetorical effect, a practice he regarded as highly controversial and inherently subjective. Given the wide spectrum of legitimate viewpoints among United Nations member states, he concluded that achieving consensus on a single, universally accepted definition was unlikely.³⁴

However, leaving such an important security-related issue to individual discretion or intuition would be highly irresponsible. At the national legislative level, and even more importantly at the supranational level, given that terrorism is a global phenomenon, there is a clear need for harmonisation and for a common definition. Such a definition would provide a foundation not only for legal perspectives and punishment but, even more crucially, for the prevention of terrorism worldwide.

Sloan emphasises the same point: “While the topic of terrorism is indeed inherently emotive, the fact remains that one can and must devise objective criteria to study incidents of terrorism in order to suggest alternative responses and policies.”³⁵ Science also requires clear definitions of concepts. Heitmeyer notes that the problems of researching terrorism begin with defining the concept, and consequently with classifying violent activities and their objectives.³⁶ Johns argues that a universally accepted definition of terrorism is unlikely due to the term’s inherently subjective and pejorative nature. Nonetheless, he emphasises the importance of striving for a shared understanding of the defining characteristics of terrorism.³⁷ Saul observes that the term “terrorism” lacks the precision, objectivity, and clarity required in legal discourse. Criminal law, he stresses, deliberately avoids emotive language to prevent prejudice against the accused, and rejects ambiguous or subjective terminology as incompatible with the principle of non-retroactivity. He further contends that only a clear legal definition could lift the concept of terrorism out of its “ideological quagmire.” If the term is to be incorporated into law, it must therefore be defined with sufficient clarity to ensure fairness, rather than left open to the unilateral interpretation of individual states.³⁸

Ganor³⁹ and Gibbs⁴⁰ also argue that without a definition, there can be no serious efforts to combat terrorism or coordinated international action. They therefore stress the need for consensus. Alex P. Schmid, regarded as the leading authority on the question of defining terrorism, is also a strong advocate for a unified definition. He concurs with Ganor’s eight arguments on the importance of such a definition, which highlight that a clear, universally accepted definition of terrorism is essential to facilitate effective international cooperation, close legal loopholes, sanction perpetrators and supporters, delegitimise terrorist organisations, and ultimately reduce the global reach of terrorism.⁴¹

Dean and Yonah Alexander have identified ten factors likely to encourage future terrorism, highlighting the absence of a universal definition as the most significant.⁴² Despite the possibilities offered by a constructivist perspective, particularly the notion encapsulated in the cliché “One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter,” the definition of terrorism appears not only

necessary but also achievable. As Begorre-Bret notes, “without a definition of terrorism, one could neither identify an act.”⁴³ He therefore proposes a typology of terrorism rather than a single, monolithic definition. Sloan also discusses possible types of terrorism, describing it as a psychological weapon, a form of communication, criminality, political warfare, armed conflict, and a strategy in a new type of warfare.⁴⁴ Mahon similarly states that the lack of consensus, combined with uncertainty over whether terrorism should be treated as a traditional or non-traditional threat, creates opportunities for it to be exploited for political purposes, such as the pursuit of power and resources.⁴⁵

Nonetheless, achieving a unified definition remains one of the key challenges in terrorism studies. Schmid, Forest, and Lowe asked experts in the field to identify the most pressing challenge in terrorism studies; of the 46 experts who responded, the majority stated that the most pressing challenge is “finding a common definition of terrorism.”⁴⁶ Although defining political and social phenomena is always difficult, particularly when they are shaped by power relations, this task should still be seen as a key academic and policy priority. It represents the first step in a serious attempt to address this security problem. As Bjørge observes, there is a growing consensus among researchers and governments about the core meaning of terrorism: “The emerging consensus is that terrorism is primarily an extremism of means, not one of ends.”⁴⁷

Previous Research on Definitions of Terrorism

Although debates over definition have existed since the beginning of the systematic study of terrorism in the 1970s, many authors have tried to reach a consensus definition that would give terrorism studies a common starting point, a clearly and consistently defined concept. In these efforts, some achieved more concrete results and a measure of consensus, although such outcomes proved insufficient to secure uniformity, whether within scientific and professional communities or, even less so, among the broader public. The most prominent figure in this regard is Schmid, who, since the beginnings of systematic scholarly study of terrorism, has persistently attempted to bring academic and professional circles closer to agreement on its definition.

Schmid consulted leading scholars in the field of terrorism on two occasions to gather their perspectives. Drawing on their responses to a questionnaire, he developed the “first academic consensus definition of terrorism” in 1984. The questionnaire was sent to 200 experts, and 109 responses were received. These were analysed for the frequency of their constituent terms, leading to the identification of twenty-two key elements. The most frequently cited were violence or use of force (83.5 percent), political motives (65.0 percent), fear or terror (51.0 percent), and threat (47 percent).⁴⁸ The “second academic consensus,” established in 1988, was based on feedback from fifty scholars who reviewed the elements of the first consensus, refining and expanding the definition.⁴⁹

Years of sustained focus on the definitional problem, particularly the first and second consensuses, provided the foundation for Schmid’s “revised academic consensus definition” which comprises ten key elements. It was published in 2011 in the *Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*.⁵⁰ In this version, terrorism is defined through ten interlinked elements that emphasise its dual nature as both doctrine and practice, its political and psychological context, the roles of state and non-state actors, its reliance on coercive violence and fear, and its manifestation as sustained campaigns rather than isolated acts. This represented Schmid’s final major attempt to provide a consensual definition, although he continues to address the issue in later works, including his 2023 ICCT report, *Defining Terrorism*.⁵¹

Other scholars have also contributed to the definitional debate. Crenshaw identified thirteen elements constituting terrorism, which she describes as a specialised form of political violence characterised by deception, limited resources, symbolic civilian targets, psychological impact through surprise and fear, and the pursuit of publicity. It is adaptable to various ideologies, practised mostly by non-state but sometimes also by state actors, and remains a contested concept due to its pejorative use.⁵²

Weinberg, Pedahzur, and Hirsch-Hoefler analysed 73 definitions of terrorism published in 55 articles between 1977 and 2001 in three journals: *Terrorism*, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, and *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*. They found the most frequent elements to be political goal, violence, fear, and threat. Their resulting definition states: “Terrorism is a [1] politically motivated [2] tactic involving the [3] threat or use of force or [4] violence in which the pursuit of [5] publicity plays a significant role.”⁵³

From a critical perspective, Jackson has proposed a “minimal foundationalist” definition that acknowledges the political uses of the term. For him, “Terrorism is violence or its threat intended as a symbolically communicative act in which the direct victims of the action are instrumentalised as a means to creating a psychological effect of intimidation and fear in a target audience for a political objective.”⁵⁴ Jackson argues that such a definition could recast terrorism from an empty signifier, vulnerable to manipulation, into a robust conceptual tool for academic analysis.

Other studies have examined practitioner perspectives. In one such study, the definitions by prominent authors fared extremely “badly” in contrast to definitions that are organisational. Freilich, Chermak, and Simone Jr. asked state agencies to evaluate eight existing definitions of terrorism: three official (FBI, US State Department, and federal statute) and five from scholars (Schmid, Crenshaw, Brian Jenkins, James M. Poland, and Walter Laqueur). Participants were not informed of the source of each definition. The results showed that more than 80 percent of respondents preferred the FBI definition, while over 40 percent selected the State Department’s. Fewer than 30 percent favoured Poland or Jenkins, less than 28 percent chose Laqueur or Crenshaw, and only 11 percent preferred Schmid’s.⁵⁵

Particularly interesting is research that qualitatively compares organisational definitions of terrorism. McCann and Pimley examined terrorism definitions across 46 US state governments and seven federal organisations (the CIA, DoD, FBI, FEMA, FISA/FISC, Homeland Security, and the US government). They found that state-level definitions, rooted in criminal law, were more varied than organisational ones. After 9/11, state definitions increasingly emphasised motivation over threat. Despite differences, three elements, i.e. violence, target, and fear or terror, appeared consistently. The authors conclude that terrorism is a highly subjective crime category, reflecting more about the defining entity than the act itself.⁵⁶

Building on earlier efforts, Bilandžić and Lucić compiled a database of 334 terrorism definitions, including 262 from Schmid’s *Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research* and 72 additional definitions from academic, governmental, supranational, and media sources. Their content analysis confirmed 22 elements previously identified by Schmid and Jongman, and they identified and added nine more. They found that the most common components were violence or force (80.1 percent), political aspect (72.9 percent), fear or terror (53.6 percent), threat (48.4 percent), and psychological impact (39.5 percent).⁵⁷

Finally, Lucić analysed 373 definitions with particular attention to state terrorism, drawing from Schmid's *Routledge Handbook*⁵⁸ and 111 additional sources. She concluded that terrorism is best understood as the organised use or threat of violence intended to spread fear and achieve political objectives through anticipated reactions and broader psychological effects. Six core elements appear most frequently: violence or force (80.2 percent), political objective (72.9 percent), fear or terror (53.1 percent), organised crime (46.9 percent), threat (45.3 percent), and psychological effects (37.0 percent).⁵⁹

Methodology

This research builds on the most recent comprehensive survey study by Lucić.⁶⁰ Ninety-seven additional terrorism definitions were incorporated into the original database of 373, resulting in a total of 470 entries. The creation and expansion of this database were conducted systematically in several stages, ensuring careful selection, classification, and verification of each definition.⁶¹

The core of the database, representing about seventy percent of all definitions or 262 entries as noted in the previous section, was drawn from one of the most authoritative works in the field, the *Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*.⁶² In Appendix 2.1, "250-plus Academic, Governmental and Intergovernmental Definitions of Terrorism," Schmid and Easson presented 262 definitions compiled from a wide range of academic and institutional sources. Lucić subsequently expanded this collection with 111 additional definitions, selected from sources similar to those used by Schmid and Easson, including academic scholarship, security experts, and definitions provided by governmental and supranational organisations. The latest expansion added 97 further definitions, drawn from comparable sources and supplemented by a small number of definitions from credible news outlets. Definitions were added between 2019 and 2025 during the review of various literature and legal provisions on terrorism.

For all 470 definitions, detailed descriptive data were recorded, including the year of publication, author(s), and source of origin. Each definition was also assigned multiple attributes, indicating its type (academic, professional, or organisational), geographical or institutional origin, the country or region with which it was predominantly associated, and whether it was formulated before or after the events of 9/11. This meticulous categorisation enabled systematic analysis and ensured that the database could support both qualitative and quantitative research objectives.

The descriptive portion of the database was supplemented by a second analytical section, produced through a thorough content analysis of all definitions. This analysis identified 33 key elements common to the definitions. The codes, that is, elements of the definitions, were derived from the research of Schmid and Jongman from 1988, with 22 of them already listed in that study. An additional 11 elements were identified from the new definitions that were added. Codes were detected based on repetition across the definitions. To accommodate these elements, the database was expanded with 33 additional columns, each corresponding to a specific element. A binary coding system (0 or 1) indicated whether a given definition included the respective element.

When identifying individual codes within each definition, synonymous and conceptually equivalent terms for each element were used. For example, for the element "psychological effects and anticipated reactions," definitions were also coded as "1" if they implied any form of psychological impact or reaction. One example reads:

Terrorism is the targeted use of violence or threat of violence against an instrumental target through which the primary target is made aware of the danger of further violence, in order to induce a state of intense fear or anxiety in the primary/targeted subject and to elicit a specific political outcome from the targeted subject.

In this case, the phrase “state of... anxiety” corresponds to the category or element “psychological effects.”

Similarly, to identify the element “purposive, planned, systematic, organised action,” certain synonymous expressions and other conceptually related terms were included, such as purpose, organisation, premeditation, and deliberation. In the database, additional terms and phrases were recorded for each element. These were used in the content analysis to ensure that each element could be accurately identified in every definition.

Once all definitions had been coded, a frequency analysis was conducted to determine the prevalence of each element across the 470 definitions. This structured approach enabled the identification of the most common components of terrorism definitions, allowing for the derivation of an analytically robust and practically useful definition of terrorism. The results of the analysis are presented below, and the findings offer a definition that, if we follow Alex Schmid’s logic, represents a kind of supplemented consensus definition. This definition can serve as an important analytical framework for further research, as well as for policy discussions on terrorism. For the purposes of this paper, the database includes not only the source and constituent elements of each definition, but also information on whether the definition was developed within an organisation or originates from scientific literature. In eight cases, it was not possible to determine this classification, and these were therefore labeled as “unknown.” Additionally, the database includes a variable indicating whether each definition was formulated before or after 9/11, given the significance of that event for the development and study of terrorism.

Results

Through content analysis of the database of definitions (N = 470), the following elements were extracted sequentially (Table 1.): El 1 - Violence, Force; El 2 - Political, Policy; El 3 - Fear, Terror;⁶³ El 4 - Threat; El 5 - Psychological effects;⁶⁴ El 6 - Victim-Target differentiation; El 7 - Purposive, Planned, Systematic, Organised action;⁶⁵ El 8 - Method of combat, strategy, tactic; El 9 - Extra normality;⁶⁶ El 10 - Coercion, extortion, induction of compliance; El 11 - Publicity aspect (openly) (audience); El 12 - Arbitrariness;⁶⁷ El 13 - Civilians, non-combatants, neutrals, outsiders as victims; El 14 - Intimidation; El 15 - Innocence of victims;⁶⁸ El 16 - Group, movement, organisation as perpetrator; El 17 - Symbolic aspect;⁶⁹ El 18 - Incalculability;⁷⁰ El 19 - Clandestine, covert nature; El 20 - Repetitiveness;⁷¹ El 21 - Criminal; El 22 - Demands made on third parties; El 23 - Ideological, doctrine, El 24 - Social;⁷² El 25 - Economic;⁷³ El 26 - Religious; El 27 - Revolutionary; El 28 - International; El 29 - State (government) as a subject; El 30 - Mental health; El 31 - Warfare;⁷⁴ El 32 - Communicate/ion;⁷⁵ El 33 - Non-state actor.

Content and frequency analysis of the database revealed that the most prevalent element in terrorism definitions is “violence” or “force”, present in 367 definitions (78.1 percent), followed by “political” or “policy-related objectives” in 329 definitions (70.0 percent) and “fear” or “terror” in 242 definitions (51.5 percent). These three elements reflect the ranking found in Schmid and Jongman’s seminal analysis, with only slight differences in their frequencies. The fourth most common element is “purposive, planned, systematic, organised action”, encompassing notions such as deliberate, intentional, calculated, organisation, and premeditation, and is found in 205 definitions (43.6 percent). Close behind is “threat”, recorded in 202 definitions (43.0 percent),

and “psychological effects” and “anticipated reactions”, which include references to anxiety and panic, appearing in 154 definitions (32.8 percent). “Victim–target differentiation” appears in 130 definitions (27.7 percent), followed closely by references to a “group, movement, or organisation as the perpetrator” in 127 definitions (27.0 percent). The identification of “civilians, non-combatants, neutrals, or outsiders as victims” occurs in 120 definitions (25.5 percent), while terrorism as a “method of combat, strategy, or tactic” is present in 118 definitions (25.1 percent). Elements related to “coercion, extortion, or the induction of compliance” appear in 116 definitions (24.7 percent), and the “publicity aspect”, emphasising openness and the presence of an audience, is recorded in 113 definitions (24.0 percent). “Extra-normality”, defined as actions in breach of accepted norms, lacking humanitarian constraints, or violating prevailing laws of war, is identified in 109 definitions (23.2 percent). Together, these elements deepen the conceptual framing of terrorism by highlighting its actors, victims, strategic dimensions, and deviation from established legal and ethical norms. The remaining 20 elements appear in fewer than 20 percent of the definitions. A full overview is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of Elements Identified in Definitions of Terrorism (N = 470)

Element	Frequency	%
El 1 - Violence, Force	367	78.1
El 2 - Political, Policy	329	70.0
El 3 - Fear, Terror emphasised	242	51.5
El 7 - Purposive, Planned, Systematic, Organised action	205	43.6
El 4 - Threat	202	43.0
El 5 - Psychological effects	154	32.8
El 6 - Victim-Target differentiation	130	27.7
El 16 - Group, movement, organisation as perpetrator	127	27.0
El 13 - Civilians, non-combatants, neutrals, outsiders as victims	120	25.5
El 8 - Method of combat, strategy, tactic	118	25.1
El 10 - Coercion, extortion, induction of compliance	116	24.7
El 11 - Publicity aspect (openly) (audience)	113	24.0
El 9 - Extra-normality	109	23.2
El 14 - Intimidation	89	18.9
El 12 - Arbitrariness	76	16.2
El 29 - State (government) as a subject	73	15.5
El 23 - Ideological, doctrine	51	10.9
El 24 - Social	51	10.9
El 26 - Religious	49	10.4
El 15 - Innocence of victims	44	9.4
El 28 - International	42	8.9
El 21 - Criminal	41	8.7
El 18 - Incalculability	40	8.5
El 17 - Symbolic aspect	34	7.2
El 19 - Clandestine, covert nature	33	7.0
El 31 - Warfare	32	6.8

El 27 - Revolutionary	26	5.5
El 25 - Economic	25	5.3
El 20 - Repetitiveness	21	4.5
El 32 - Communicate/ion	16	3.4
El 33 - Non-state actor	15	3.2
El 30 -Mental health	13	2.8
El 22 - Demands made on third parties	7	1.5

A notable alignment with the findings of the present study is evident when examining previous research (Table 2) on the constituent elements of terrorism definitions, even though the current dataset includes nearly four times as many definitions as those used in the first and second academic consensus exercises on the concept of terrorism. The identification of elements relevant to a potential supplemented consensus definition necessarily relies on multiple analytical indicators. The comparative analysis reveals remarkable stability in the ranking and prevalence of core definitional elements across substantially different sample sizes (N = 109 and N = 470) and historical contexts. Elements such as violence or force, political objectives, fear or terror, threat, psychological effects, and purposive or organised action consistently occupy the highest ranks in both datasets.

Table 2. Comparative Frequency and Ranking of Elements in Definitions of Terrorism N=109 (Schmid and Jongman, 1988) and N=470 (present study)

Frequency		Element	Rank	
N=109	N=470		N=109	N=470
83,5	78.1	El 1 - Violence, Force	1	1
65	70.0	El 2 - Political, Policy	2	2
51	51.5	El 3 - Fear, Terror emphasised	3	3
47	43.0	El 4 - Threat	4	5
41,5	32.8	El 5 - Psychological effects	5	6
37,5	27.7	El 6 - Victim-Target differentiation	6	7
32	43.6	El 7 - Purposive, Planned, Systematic, Organized action	7	4
30,5	27,6	El 8 - Method of combat, strategy, tactic	8	10
30	23.2	El 9 - Extra-normality	9	13
28	24.7	El 10 - Coercion, extortion, induction of compliance	10	11

**The table shows the first 10 elements ordered by frequency in the research of Schmid and Jongaman (1988), the remaining elements are not relevant for this analysis.*

This convergence suggests that these elements form a durable conceptual core of terrorism, rather than being artefacts of a particular time period, dataset, or analytical approach. On this basis, the decision to prioritise these elements was driven not only by their absolute frequency in the current sample, but also by their demonstrated persistence across decades of definitional debate. By selecting elements that are empirically recurrent and historically stable, the study aims to minimise conceptual volatility and enhance the validity and comparability of the resulting definition, according to which:

Terrorism is the organised use of force and violence, or the threat of violence, through which fear or terror is intentionally spread to achieve political objectives based on anticipated reactions and broader psychological effects.

This formulation emphasises both the instrumental and intentional dimensions of terrorism, recognising it as a calculated and organised course of action rather than a spontaneous or purely reactive phenomenon. This supplemented consensus definition, grounded in empirical frequency analysis, reflects the consistent presence of elements across a substantial proportion of definitions in the dataset, providing a strong foundation for further theoretical refinement and potential consensus-building in academic discourse on terrorism.

Although the “victim-target differentiation” element is prominent in both studies, it is not a necessary condition for an act to be characterised as terrorist. There are numerous examples throughout history, both early and recent, in which political assassinations of prominent individuals constitute clear instances of terrorism and convey the message that terrorist groups or individuals intended to send. Certain historical periods, particularly when examined in the context of Rapoport’s “waves of terrorism”, provide strong evidence that in terrorism the victim can also be the target. The so-called “anarchist wave” is widely regarded as the beginning of modern terrorism and is associated with revolutionary terrorism that emerged in Russia in 1880 and lasted for approximately forty years. This era is also referred to as the “golden age of assassinations”, as many prominent political figures were killed during this period, including the Russian Emperor Alexander II (1881), Austrian Empress Elizabeth (1898), Italian King Umberto I (1900), and US President William McKinley (1901), among others.

“Group, movement, or organisation as perpetrator” is also not included as a constitutive element of the supplemented consensus definition, given that terrorism can be committed by an individual, that is, through so-called “lone wolf terrorism”.⁷⁶ For an act to be characterised as terrorist, it does not necessarily have to be carried out by a group. Moreover, as argued by the author and supported by empirical evidence, the perpetrator of terrorism can also be a state, not only a terrorist organisation, as numerous authors have noted.⁷⁷

Although acts committed in terrorism very often target “civilians, non-combatants, neutrals, outsiders as victims”, this is also not a necessary condition for a violent political act to be classified as terrorism. There are numerous examples of terrorism in which the targets are precisely those who represent the state, such as law enforcement personnel,⁷⁸ members of the military, and similar actors; therefore, this element is not included in the definition either.

Although the element “coercion, extortion, induction of compliance” appears in a large number of analysed definitions, it is not separately identified in the definition presented here because its meaning largely coincides with the very common element of threat.

The element “publicity aspect (openly) (audience)” was not included in the definition because not every terrorist act necessarily seeks public attention. While many acts gain publicity due to the nature of the phenomenon, some attacks or threats occur without being publicised. Including publicity as a defining feature would risk conflating the core characteristics of terrorism with a consequential or contingent outcome, rather than an essential property of the phenomenon. Finally, out of the 12 most frequently selected elements in the research, the element “method of combat, strategy, tactic” was not particularly highlighted, given that it was clearly stated that terrorism is a rational tool used by those who employ it, either as a tactic or as a strategy. As such, it is a tool that can be clearly inferred from the proposed supplemented consensus definition without being explicitly stated.

A comparison of 396 academic and 66 organisational definitions⁷⁹ of terrorism reveals both substantial overlap and notable divergences in the emphasis placed on specific definitional elements (Table 3).

Table 3. Frequency Comparison of Elements in Academic and Organizational Definitions of Terrorism

Frequency - Academic and professional definitions (N=396)	Element	Frequency - Organizational definitions (N=66)
78,0%	El 1 - Violence, Force	77,3%
70,5%	El 2 - Political, Policy	71,2%
50,5%	El 3 - Fear, Terror emphasized	59,1%
40,7%	El 4 - Threat	57,6%
34,3%	El 5 - Psychological effects	24,2%
30,3%	El 6 - Victim-Target differentiation	13,6%
45,5%	El 7 - Purposive, Planned, Systematic, Organised action	34,8%
28,5%	El 8 - Method of combat, strategy, tactic	4,5%
22,7%	El 9 - Extra-normality	28,8%
21,7%	El 10 - Coercion, extortion, induction of compliance	45,5%
22,0%	El 11 - Publicity aspect (openly) (audience)	39,4%
18,4%	El 12 - Arbitrariness	4,5%
26,8%	El 13 - Civilians, noncombatants, neutrals, outsiders as victims	21,2%
14,4%	El 14 - Intimidation	48,5%
10,9%	El 15 - Innocence of victims	1,5%
28,0%	El 16 - Group, movement, organization as perpetrator	22,7%
7,8%	El 17 - Symbolic aspect	3,0%
9,8%	El 18 - Incalculability	0,0%
7,1%	El 19 - Clandestine, covert nature	6,1%
5,1%	El 20 - Repetitiveness	1,5%
5,8%	El 21 - Criminal	27,3%
1,8%	El 22 - Demands made on third parties	0,0%
10,1%	El 23 - Ideological, doctrine	15,2%
10,4%	El 24- Social	15,2%
5,3%	El 25 - Economic	6,1%
9,6%	El 26 - Religious	16,7%
5,8%	El 27 - Revolutionary	0,0%
5,6%	El 28 - International	30,3%
16,4%	El 29 - State (government) as a subject	12,1%
3,0%	El 30 - Mental health	1,5%
7,1%	El 31 - Warfare	1,5%
3,8%	El 32 - Communicate/ion	1,5%
3,5%	El 33 Non-state actor	1,5%

At a general level, core elements such as violence and political motivation are highly represented in both types of definitions. “Violence, force” appears with almost identical frequency in academic (78.0 percent) and organisational definitions (77.3 percent), while “political” or “policy-related goals” are also similarly prominent (70.5 percent vs. 71.2 percent). This indicates a shared baseline understanding of terrorism as politically motivated violence.

One of the most pronounced differences concerns the stronger presence of threat, “coercion, extortion, induction of compliance”, and intimidation in organisational definitions and their comparatively weaker representation in academic ones. This can be explained by the different purposes these two types of definitions serve. Organisational definitions are primarily instrumental and operational, as they are designed to support legal classification, policy formulation, security practice, and enforcement. Elements related to threat, coercion, and intimidation directly capture the functional logic of terrorism, whereby violence or the threat of violence is employed in order to force governments, institutions, or societies to act or refrain from acting in specific ways. Emphasising these elements helps organisations clearly distinguish terrorism from other forms of political violence, protest, or crime by foregrounding intentional pressure on decision makers, reflecting a state centric perspective in which terrorism is primarily understood as a challenge to authority and governance. Academic definitions, especially those influenced by sociology or political theory, are more likely to focus on structures, motivations, and contexts, which reduces the prominence of these direct coercive mechanisms without excluding them altogether. It is also noteworthy that the “criminal” and “international” elements appear far more frequently in organisational definitions, which can be explained by their close connection to legal frameworks, jurisdictional competence, and enforcement practices, where terrorism must be clearly classified as a criminal offence and often as a transnational threat. Emphasising criminality facilitates prosecution and delegation of authority, while stressing the international dimension reflects the operational reality of terrorism as a phenomenon that frequently transcends state borders. Academic definitions, by contrast, tend to treat criminality and internationality as contextual attributes rather than core definitional features, which accounts for their lower explicit representation. Finally, the more frequent appearance of “method of combat, strategy, and tactics” in academic definitions reflects scholarly interest in terrorism as a mode of political violence and in how violence is conducted and instrumentalised, whereas organisational definitions tend to prioritise legal qualification and consequences over strategic or tactical characteristics.

We also sought to examine whether there is a difference in the importance of elements in definitions created before and after 9/11. The decision to compare definitions of terrorism formulated before and after 9/11 assumes that this event represents the most significant watershed in the modern history of terrorism, both empirically and analytically. Beyond its immediate political and security impact, 9/11 prompted an unprecedented expansion of academic, policy-oriented, and legal literature on terrorism, fundamentally reshaping research agendas and conceptual debates within the field. This study therefore examines whether 9/11 constituted a definitional turning point specifically, whether the dramatic transformation of the geopolitical environment and the proliferation of terrorism-related scholarship led to a substantive reconfiguration of how terrorism is defined. By systematically comparing pre- and post-9/11 definitions, the analysis seeks to determine whether core conceptual elements were reinterpreted, reweighted, newly introduced, or remained stable despite shifting historical and political contexts. In this sense, the comparison is not merely chronological but analytical, aimed at assessing the extent of continuity and change in the conceptualisation of terrorism following a paradigmatic global event. The result shows that the importance of the three key elements (“Violence, Force”; “Political, Policy”; “Fear, Terror emphasised”) remains the same in the 250 definitions formulated before 9/11 and in the 220 definitions developed after 9/11. Greater differences are observed in the elements “Civilians, non-combatants, neutrals, outsiders as victims” and “Religious”, which became significantly more prominent in definitions after 9/11 than before. The same applies to the element “Method of combat, strategy, tactic”, which was considerably more emphasised in definitions created before 9/11 than in those developed afterwards (Table 4).

Table 4. Comparative Frequency of Elements in Terrorism Definitions Before and After 9/11

Before 9/11 (N=250)	Element	After 9/11 (N=220)
78,0%	El 1 - Violence, Force	78,2%
68,4%	El 2 - Political, Policy	71,8%
54,4%	El 3 - Fear, Terror emphasized	48,2%
43,6%	El 4 - Threat	42,3%
36,0%	El 5 - Psychological effects	29,1%
30,8%	El 6 - Victim-Target differentiation	24,1%
47,6%	El 7 - Purposive, Planned, Systematic, Organised action	39,1%
32,0%	El 8 - Method of combat, strategy, tactic	17,3%
26,4%	El 9 - Extra-normality	19,5%
26,8%	El 10 - Coercion, extortion, induction of compliance	22,3%
26,4%	El 11 - Publicity aspect (openly) (audience)	21,4%
21,2%	El 12 - Arbitrariness	10,5%
16,8%	El 13 - Civilians, noncombatants, neutrals, outsiders as victims	35,5%
15,6%	El 14 - Intimidation	22,7%
9,2%	El 15 - Innocence of victims	9,5%
29,6%	El 16 - Group, movement, organization as perpetrator	24,1%
10,8%	El 17 - Symbolic aspect	3,2%
11,2%	El 18 - Incalculability	5,5%
8,8%	El 19 - Clandestine, covert nature	5,0%
5,2%	El 20 - Repetitiveness	3,6%
11,6%	El 21 - Criminal	5,5%
1,2%	El 22 - Demands made on third parties	1,8%
9,6%	El 23 - Ideological, doctrine	12,3%
9,6%	El 24- Social	12,3%
3,6%	El 25 - Economic	7,3%
3,6%	El 26 - Religious	18,2%
10,0%	El 27 - Revolutionary	0,5%
10,4%	El 28 - International	7,3%
19,6%	El 29 - State (government) as a subject	10,9%
4,8%	El 30 - Mental health	0,5%
8,0%	El 31 - Warfare	5,5%
3,2%	El 32 - Communicate/ion	3,6%
0,8%	El 33 Non-state actor	5,9%

The increased emphasis on “civilians, non-combatants, neutrals, and outsiders as victims” in post-9/11 definitions reflects the unprecedented visibility of large-scale, indiscriminate attacks against civilian populations. The attacks of 9/11 fundamentally reshaped the public and scholarly imagination of terrorism, shifting attention towards mass civilian victimisation as a defining characteristic rather than a contingent outcome. As a result, post-9/11 definitions more explicitly foreground the civilian status of victims as a core element of terrorism. A similar logic applies to the heightened prominence of the “religious” element in definitions developed after 9/11. The centrality of jihadist terrorism in the post-9/11 security environment led to a greater association between terrorism and religious motivation, particularly Islamist extremism. Consequently, religiously motivated terrorism became more explicitly integrated into definitional frameworks, even though earlier academic literature had tended to privilege political, nationalist, or ideological explanations.

By contrast, the decline of the element “method of combat, strategy, and tactic” in post-9/11 definitions suggests a shift away from viewing terrorism primarily as a distinct tactical mode of political violence. Prior to 9/11, terrorism was often conceptualised in strategic terms, as a method employed by weak actors within broader conflicts. After 9/11, definitional attention moved towards actors, motives, and consequences, with less emphasis on how terrorism is operationally executed and greater focus on whom it targets and why.

Taken together, these differences indicate not a paradigmatic change in the core understanding of terrorism, but rather a reorientation of emphasis driven by the symbolic and empirical impact of 9/11, which reshaped which aspects of terrorism were perceived as most salient.

Conclusion

Both the empirical evidence and the perspectives of numerous scholars examined in this study indicate that the concept of terrorism is not as indeterminate as is often suggested. On the contrary, the vast majority of researchers and practitioners approach it in strikingly similar ways. The analysis of 470 definitions demonstrates that several core elements (violence or force, political objectives, fear or threat, purposive and organised action, and psychological effects) consistently underpin the phenomenon and together form a stable conceptual framework for understanding terrorism. These elements appear with comparable frequency in definitions formulated both before and after 9/11, underscoring their enduring relevance across different historical, ideological, and geopolitical contexts.

Despite this considerable degree of conceptual convergence, a single, universally recognised definition of terrorism remains elusive. This absence does not reflect a lack of scholarly rigour or methodological capacity within the legal or social sciences. Rather, it stems from the inherently political and contested nature of the term itself. The designation of particular acts or actors as “terrorist” is deeply shaped by the strategic interests of states and institutions, which may employ the label to legitimise certain policies, delegitimise opponents, or structure domestic and international narratives. In this sense, the definitional impasse is less an analytical failure than a manifestation of enduring political rivalries, normative disagreements, and struggles over authority, legitimacy, and governance.

This brings the analysis back to the central question posed in the title of this study: *Is There Anything New?* Empirically and conceptually, the answer is largely negative. Even when examined through a substantially expanded dataset and across a period marked by profound global transformations, the core understanding of terrorism remains remarkably stable. What is new, however, is the scale and robustness with which this continuity can now be demonstrated.

By confirming, on an unprecedented empirical basis, the persistence of a shared conceptual core while also identifying context-driven shifts in the emphasis of secondary elements, this study shows that definitional disagreement persists not because terrorism is conceptually unknowable, but because it is politically and normatively contested.

Accordingly, efforts to establish a universally accepted definition of terrorism must reckon not only with issues of analytical precision, but also with the socio-political environments in which the term is deployed. In practice, “terrorism” functions as a powerful label embedded in broader dynamics of power, discourse, and control, meaning that conceptual clarity alone cannot resolve its contested status. Nevertheless, identifying durable core elements provides a pragmatic and analytically sound foundation for research, policy development, and comparative analysis. While a single consensual definition may remain unattainable, recognising what is stable, and why disagreement endures, allows for a more coherent, transparent, and reflexive engagement with one of the most complex phenomena in contemporary global politics.

Limitations of the Current Study

Despite its systematic approach and the breadth of the dataset, this study has several limitations. First, although 470 definitions of terrorism were examined, the reliance on frequency and content analysis inherently emphasises the recurrence of elements rather than their substantive importance, even though such recurrence is significant as it suggests a relatively consensual view of their importance. Consequently, the distinction between “core” and “peripheral” elements is to some extent arbitrary and shaped by the chosen analytical framework. Second, although the database includes academic, governmental, and intergovernmental sources, it is not fully exhaustive; certain perspectives and regional variations may remain underrepresented. Third, given the profoundly political and ideologically charged nature of the term “terrorism,” no methodological design can be entirely insulated from the influence of broader socio-political contexts and the dynamics of “definition power.” Fourth, some researchers defined the terms they used as mere synonyms for certain elements, which may be interpreted as an overly subjective methodological choice. It is possible that this would not be replicable if other researchers attempted to repeat the study. Finally, while the findings reveal strong conceptual convergence around several key elements, including violence, political objectives, fear and threat, organisation, and psychological effects, the study cannot resolve the fundamental obstacle to consensus: the strategic and contested use of the term by both state and non-state actors. These limitations underscore that the challenge of defining terrorism lies less in analytical insufficiency than in the inherently political character of the concept itself.

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- 65 This was coded under the element "purposive, planned, systematic, organised action," to which the descriptors *deliberate, intentional, calculated, organisation, and premeditation* were also added.
- 66 This was coded under the element "extra-normality," to which the descriptors *breach of accepted rules, without humanitarian constraints (unlawful), and prevailing laws of war* were also added.
- 67 The descriptors *impersonal, random character, indiscrimination* were added.
- 68 This element assumes that the definition emphasises the innocence of the victims.
- 69 This symbolic aspect/element presupposes demonstration to others.
- 70 The code "incalculability" also includes *unpredictability and unexpectedness of occurrence of violence*.
- 71 The descriptor *serial or campaign character of violence* was added.
- 72 This includes socially motivated cases.

- 73 The descriptor *economically motivated* was added.
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About

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