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Who decides who is a terrorist?

The Palestinian-Israeli case is the most paradoxical. There, those who fight terrorism are the ones who murder UN workers, indiscriminately bomb civilian buildings and cut off electricity and water supplies to cities. Put simply: in its "fight against terrorism," Israel kills more children than soldiers kills "Palestinian terrorism."



In the aftermath of Hamas' attack on Israel, the hackneyed concept of terrorism has returned to the forefront, with which it is intended, through this accusation, to disavow some and, through the fight against it, to legitimize the actions of others.

At least the press and journalists are supposed to use language in a neutral way, not conditioned by the bias of certain political powers. Let's look at what the dictionaries say. According to the RAE, terrorism is "Domination by terror" or "Succession of acts of violence carried out to instill terror". It is clear that under this consideration we could include many issues that it never occurs to call terrorism in the media.

Let's continue looking, now in the Pan-Hispanic Dictionary of Legal Spanish, prepared by institutions such as the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language, the Ibero-American Judicial Summit and the Association of Academies of the Spanish Language. Here the least self-referential term is that of "[a cto terrorista](#)". And it says that it is the "act that has as its object the death or physical and/or mental injury of any person, or when the purpose, by its nature or context, is to intimidate a population or to compel a Government or an international organization to perform an act or to refrain from doing so". We find ourselves in the same situation, there are numerous circumstances that meet this characteristic.

Let's see [what the UN says](#). Here we find that "Terrorism involves the intimidation or coercion of populations or governments by threat or violence."

In fact, if we were to think about what was the greatest violent act directed against the civilian population with the aim of causing death or physical harm, and carried out to force a government to make a decision, it would clearly be the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And if, as the Panhipanic Dictionary of Legal Spanish says, a terrorist is "anyone who commits or attempts to commit terrorist acts by any means, directly or indirectly and deliberately," then it seems clear that the greatest terrorist in history is the U.S. government and its army causing the millions of civilian deaths with those atomic bombs designed to pressure the government of Japan to surrender.



The conclusion we are coming to is that the status of terrorist is only the subject of a political decision. That is why, for Western political discourse, its leaders and its media, it is indisputable that Hamas is a terrorist group. But Hamas is a terrorist for the United States and the European Union because it is included in the list of terrorist organizations that they themselves have drawn up. It doesn't seem like a very overwhelming argument. It would be like arguing that the football association of the next town is terrorist because in my house we have put it on the terrorist list.

So we are operating with the consideration of terrorism and terrorists simply with the list that has been prepared by the US State Department or the European Union, which, it seems, makes any evidence or trial no longer necessary.

History has shown the contradictions of the classification of terrorism by those in power.

Fifty years ago, [Nelson Mandela](#) was imprisoned for terrorism and was considered a "terrorist" by the U.S. government, to end up as president of South Africa and honored by the entire international community on the day of his death.



Mujahideen against the USSR. Afghanistan was one of the countries disputed between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Soviet troops invaded the country in 1979 to end the regime of Hazifullah Amin, who in turn had overthrown the communist Nur Muhammad Taraki. The invasion sparked a war between the Red Army and the U.S.-assisted mujahideen. The economic and military aid that the CIA provided to this group of guerrillas became known as 'Operation Cyclone', and one of the fighters backed by Washington was named Osama Bin Laden.

The mujahideen guerrillas in Afghanistan, whose ranks included [Osama bin Laden](#), were described as "freedom-fighting heroes" for their work in the war against the Soviet Union. In 1985, then-President Ronald Reagan invited the mujahideen leaders, sponsored and funded by the Central Intelligence Agency, to the White House. The president claimed that "the Afghan mujahideen are the moral equivalent of America's heroes." Once the USSR disappeared, there were too many of these "liberators" and they became "terrorists".

The problem is that, according to renowned intellectual [Eqbal Ahmad](#), "yesterday's terrorist is today's hero, and yesterday's hero becomes today's terrorist." But, in addition, the power of the epithet almost always belongs to the almighty, who at will demonize or sanctify, depending on whether one is at their service or not.

Let's look at another case of an organization that goes from being terrorist to ceasing to be terrorist based on interests. It is the [East Turkestan Islamic Movement](#) (ETIM), an Islamic jihadist organization created in western [China](#) that fights against the Chinese government. After [the attacks of September 11, 2001](#), it was considered a terrorist organization by the United States, the European Union, the United Nations and, of course, China, due to its alleged links to Al Qaeda. In the previous ten years, it had committed more than 200 terrorist acts, resulting in at least 162 deaths and more than 440 injuries

Over the course of the next 20 years, however, Washington's foreign policy priorities have changed dramatically, and the idea of a violent group harassing and advocating secession in China is highly appealing to the United States. A few days after the 2020 U.S. presidential election, the [Trump administration removed ETIM](#) from [the Terrorist Exclusion List](#), citing an alleged lack of activity, even as its Islamist fighters set up camp in Afghanistan and Syria. The Biden administration continued to support that stance. ETIM is no longer terrorist for them, despite the fact that it has caused around a thousand deaths in China since the beginning of its activity and in 2023 launched a car bomb against a group of Chinese teachers in Pakistan.

In the 1930s, the Jewish underground forces in Palestine were regarded as a "terrorist" organization, and rewards of £100,000 were offered for the capture of [Menachem Begin](#), a man who later became Israel's prime minister-elect.

Years later, when the powerful created the State of Israel, the terrorists became the Palestinians, especially the [PLO](#). However, when the Palestinian-Israeli talks began, PLO leader Yasser Arafat went from being a terrorist to being the international leader most often received by President Bill Clinton.

Let's continue with the historical curiosities. George Washington and his troops were considered "terrorists" by the British Empire. Similar qualification to [Gandhi's](#).

Likewise, the elected president of East Timor, [Xanana Gusmao](#), was until then a separatist terrorist in the eyes of the Western powers friendly to the Indonesian dictator Suharto, who had invaded Timor.

With the perspective of time, no one today will doubt the terrorist character of U.S.-sponsored dictatorships, such as those of [Somoza](#) or [Batista](#). Something similar happens with some leaders who easily go from terrorists to freedom fighters in the eyes of the State Department. This is the case of Nicaraguan [Edén Pastora](#), who went from being a Sandinista terrorist to becoming a hero of the anti-Sandinista contras. Let us remember that in his "terrorist" era he fought against the Somoza dictatorship and in his "heroic" phase in the "contras" he waged war against the legitimate Sandinista government that had won a general election.

The case of Bin Laden has already been repeated in the history of friendships/enmities of the US secret services. Several of its "freedom fighters", such as [Saddam Hussein](#) during the Iraq-Iran war, [Noriega](#) in Panama or [Montesinos](#) in Peru, went on to become persecuted terrorists without changing their ideology one iota.

And if we analyze the list of terrorist organizations, according to the criteria of the U.S. State Department, we see that the Irish IRA was not considered terrorist in its times of greatest violent activity, but the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), whose representatives are now deputies, as well as those of the IRA.

While the National Liberation Army of Colombia (ELN) considered itself a terrorist, the countrymen of the founding priest of this organization, [Manuel Pérez](#), paid tribute to him in his small hometown in Zaragoza, Alfamén, after his death of natural causes in the mountains of Colombia. [90%](#) of the [residents signed a letter](#) to give their name to one [of the](#) streets.

The last straw is that two historic terrorists ended up being Nobel Peace Prize winners without renouncing either their struggle or their ideology, [Nelson Mandela](#) and [Yasir Arafat](#), and another, [Mahatma Gandhi](#), was nominated five times.



Nelson Mandela, Yasir Arafat and Mahatma Gandhi

All this has led some media outlets, such as the Star Tribune, to explain why they refuse to use the term terrorism in their reports; This was pointed out by executive member Roger Buoen in an example of journalistic deontology that is not very generalized:

"Our job is not to evaluate the protagonists of our articles, but to describe their actions, their environments, and their identities as fully as possible, leaving readers to draw their own conclusions about individuals and organizations. In the case of the term "terrorist," other words — "gunman," "separatist," or "rebel," for example — may be more precise and less subjective. That's why we tend to prefer these more specific words. We also pay special attention to avoid the use of the term terrorist in articles about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict due to the emotional and heated nature of the dispute."

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Gaza after the hospital massacre

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