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## The Damascus suicide bombing

**Today's killing of Assad officials raises uncomfortable questions about the meaning and justifiability of Terrorism**

BY GLENN GREENWALD

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In Damascus today, a suicide bomber attacked a meeting of high level Syrian officials and killed several of them, including the nation's Defense Minister Daoud Rajha and the Syrian military's Deputy Chief of Staff, Asef Shawkat, who is also the brother-in-law of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Several reporters covering the region, such as Omar Waraich of *Time* and *The Independent*, have deduced that the suicide bomber was "Islamist."

Needless to say, if such an attack — perpetrated by an "Islamist" suicide bomber — were aimed at a Western government or those of their allies in the region, it would immediately be branded Terrorism and vehemently denounced. One need not speculate about that, as it has already happened. It was called the Pentagon part of the "9/11 attack," where a plane was flown into America's military headquarters. More analogous was Nidal Hasan's 2009 assault on the U.S. military base at Fort Hood, which was instantly branded Terrorism by American media outlets, Washington officials, and a majority of Americans.

Indeed, even if this kind of attack were directed at Western-supported tyrannies in the region — such as, say, Saudi Arabia or Bahrain — the Terrorism label would be widely applied by mainstream Western outlets. In fact, the alleged Iranian plot to kill the Saudi Ambassador — not

civilians, but just this single official from a repellently oppressive regime — was instantly denounced as Terrorism.

But it's extremely doubtful that the term will be applied by Western media outlets to today's Damascus attack. The *New York Times* story uses the term only once, with scare quotes attributing it to the Assad regime: "SANA, the official news agency, described the assault as a 'suicide terrorist attack.'" The *BBC* did the same, referring to the anti-Assad forces as "rebels" and mentioning "terrorism" only when quoting the statements of the Assad government. It's actually inconceivable that any mainstream Western outlet or commentator will call this attack Terrorism.

Beyond the semantics, one already sees, on Twitter and elsewhere, substantial approval being expressed for the attack. *Foreign Policy* Editor Blake Hounshell referred this morning to "#thatawkwardmoment [that awkward moment] when Westerners and secular Arabs cheer a suicide bombing." U.N. analyst Hayes Brown similarly described "that awkward moment in the UN Security Council where Western govts have to stop to think about whether to condemn a suicide bombing." What makes it even more uncomfortable is that the U.S. Government itself has said that Syrian rebel forces have been "infiltrated" — at least — by Al Qaeda, meaning that the U.S. once again finds itself on the same side as its arch enemy, a side that is now using suicide bombs to kill government officials.

I'm not arguing here that this is an act of Terrorism (in general, to the extent the term has any meaning at all, I think attacks on military targets do not qualify), nor am I addressing whether the bombing is justifiable. I'm certainly not calling into question the heinous violence and oppression of the Syrian regime (though I think Western Manichean reporting on the nature of the fighting and the identity of the rebels has been typically and substantially oversimplified). The point here is that we pretend Terrorism has some sort of objective meaning and that it is the personification of pure evil which all decent people (and Good Western nations) by definition categorically despise, when neither of those claims is remotely true.