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Can attacks on a military base constitute "terrorism"?

If attacks on soldiers now qualify, how is it possible to exclude many American actions?

Glenn Greenwald

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The incomparably pernicious Joe Lieberman [said yesterday on Fox News](#) that he intends to launch an investigation into "the motives of [Nidal] Hasan in carrying out this brutal mass murder, if a terrorist attack, **the worst terrorist attack since 9/11.**" Hasan's attack was carried out on a military base, with his clear target being American soldiers, not civilians. No matter one's views on how unjustified and evil this attack was, can an attack on soldiers -- particularly ones in the process of deploying for a war -- fall within any legitimate definition of "terrorism," which generally refers to deliberate attacks on civilians?

The obvious problem with answering that question is that, as [even the U.S. State Department recognizes](#), "no one definition of terrorism has gained universal acceptance" -- despite the centrality of that term in our political discourse. In its 2001 publication, *Patterns of Global Terrorism*, the State Department did define "terrorism" to mean "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets," and in turn defined "noncombatant targets" to include "military personnel who at the time of the incident are unarmed and/or not on duty." Only by accepting that definition (or one similar to it) could the attack on Fort Hood possibly be defined as "terrorism."

But if one accepts that broadened definition of "terrorism" -- that it includes violence that targets not only civilians but also combatants who are unarmed or not engaged in combat at the time of the attack -- it seems impossible to exclude from that term many of the acts

in which the U.S. and our allies routinely engage. Indeed, a large part of our "war" strategy is to kill people we deem to be "terrorists" or "combatants" without regard to whether they're armed or engaged in hostilities at the moment we kill them. Isn't that exactly what we do when we use drone attacks in Pakistan? Indeed, we [currently have a "hit list"](#) of individuals we intend to murder in Afghanistan on sight based on our suspicion that they're involved in the drug trade and thus help fund the Taliban. During its war in Gaza, [Israel targeted police stations](#) and, with one strike, killed 40 police trainees while in a parade, and then justified that by claiming police recruits were legitimate targets -- even though they weren't engaged in hostilities at the time -- because of their nexus to Hamas (even though the [Israeli human rights group B'Tselem](#) said the targeted recruits "were being trained in first aid, human rights and maintaining public order").

Is there any legitimate definition of "terrorism" that allows the Fort Hood attack to qualify but not those above-referenced attacks? The U.S., of course, maintains that it is incapable of engaging in "terrorism," by definition, because "terrorism" is something only "subnational groups or clandestine agents" can do, but leaving that absurdly self-serving and incoherent exclusion aside, how can the Fort Hood attacks targeted at soldiers be "terrorism" but not our own acts?

Just to provide what ought to (but won't) be an unnecessary caveat: whether the U.S. is noble, righteous and good, and radical Muslims are rotted and evil, is completely irrelevant to the issue here. The laws of war and definitions of terrorism apply -- as is true, by definition, for all things that we call "laws" and "definitions" -- equally to everyone, regardless of how good or bad someone is. Nor do any of these issues have anything to do with whether an act is justifiable; many things that are wrong and evil -- indeed most -- are not "terrorism."

Isn't it fairly clear that the term "terrorism" is being applied to what Hasan did due to his religion rather than the acts themselves? Put another way, as ThinkProgress' [Matt Duss](#) [put it](#): "the definition of terrorism is not 'any violence by any Muslim anywhere at any time for any reason'." But that -- along with [the repellent claim](#) that saying "Allahu Akbar" is "suggestive of terrorism," rather than suggestive of someone who is Muslim (obviously the same thing in the minds of the people claiming that) -- is exactly what seems to be driving discussions of this attack. It's likely that there will always be a lack of clarity about exactly what motivated Hasan -- some combination of mental instability, religious fervor and political conviction -- but, regardless of motive, the only way to define an attack on soldiers as an act of "terrorism" is to indict ourselves in the same way.

UPDATE: I don't quite know how to explain this, but [National Review's Jonah Goldberg](#) [actually constructed a cogent argument](#) today, arguing that Hasan's attack cannot be classified as "terrorism" because terrorism is "an attack on civilians intended to strike fear in the non-military population" and "Hasan didn't attack civilians, he attacked uniformed members of the U.S. Army in advance of their deployment to the frontlines." In [a subsequent post](#), responding to angry reader emails, he even explained that it's difficult to classify Hasan's attack as "terrorism" without doing the same with regard to our drone

attacks in Pakistan. More bizarrely still, *National Review's* Cliff May then chimed in to agree that "a terrorist is someone who intentionally targets non-combatants with violence for political purposes. The shooter at Fort Hood, by contrast, was targeting uniformed combatants. In that sense, he was not a terrorist."

That even the fanatical play-acting-tough-guy-warriors at *National Review* are more restrained and thoughtful on this topic than Joe Lieberman reflects just how radical and unhinged the Connecticut Senator is when it comes to anything Muslim.