

Opinion **US politics & policy**

Drifting definitions of terrorism endanger us all

Donald Trump's threat to outlaw antifa could lead to the criminalising of dissent

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There is a distinction to be drawn between protests and terrorism © AFP via Getty Images

Raffaello Pantucci JUNE 14 2020

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It is tempting to ignore US president Donald Trump's tweets. But his recent declaration that he intends [to proscribe antifa as a terrorist organisation](#) will empower those around the world inclined to see any threat to their power as terrorist.

The US previously designated the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp as terrorists leading to the assassination of a [top Iranian general](#). If America starts considering an anti-fascist idea to be a terrorist group, it would be leaning in a direction that can be interpreted as criminalising dissent. When America leads, others will follow.

There is a distinction to be drawn between protests and terrorism. The sometimes violent American demonstrations after Minneapolis police killed George Floyd are not terrorism. Nor are the violent acts that have been troubling Hong Kong. This does not mean that some individuals are not using the protests as a cover to try to commit terrorist acts. But the overall movements are not terrorists in the same way that al-Qaeda is. Terrorists use violence, but not all public violence is terrorism.

The distinction is confusing when we look beyond rioting. Like his predecessors, Mr Trump has explored [proscribing Mexican drug cartels](#) as terrorist organisations. Yet, they are motivated by money not ideology, and theoretically their supporters include millions of US narcotics consumers.

There is also a growing enthusiasm for proscribing online subcultures as terrorist organisations because of the ideological motivation that the individuals draw from being part of an online chatroom. Yet, there is little evidence of coherent structures, rather these are violent online subcultures that reflect the times in which we live.

The danger in the US letting definitions drift is that others push the boundaries in their own anti-terrorist legislation. The Philippines' new law expands police power to detain and conduct investigations and demand data from telecoms companies, while removing punishment for wrongful investigation. Activists and the opposition [worry](#) that the legislation will be used against them.

Europe is struggling with a definitional problem around the extreme right. How you define far-right political versus extreme right terrorist varies by country. Some states have parties in or near power whose ideological pronouncements are close to those considered terrorist groups in others. This causes practical problems and also raises issues about the way different security forces categorise and respond to extreme rightwing groups.

It is difficult to define a terrorist. The old cliché that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter is not useful. Some of the ideologies or individuals who emerge in terrorist garb move into the mainstream and our own definitions shift over time. The now-ruling African National Congress in South Africa is an example of the former. Afghanistan's Taliban remains a proscribed organisation committing atrocious acts of violence even though a number of states are negotiating with them to find a way to take some political power in Kabul.

Adding an inchoate idea like antifa — a loose constellation of anarchists whose only clear connecting ideology is a revulsion towards fascists — to the roster of terrorist groups whilst ignoring some of the extreme right groups active in the US further clouds this picture. But Mr Trump's threats are giving global authoritarians carte blanche to go after groups they consider dangerous.

Terrorism is useful as a legal term that describes non-state actors using violence against civilians to a coherent political goal. Using it too liberally allows it to be exploited to the detriment of not only free speech and open societies, but also those who are seeking to right genuine wrongs in the world. Violence must be prosecuted but separated from angry dissent.

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