

## What counts as terrorism? The view on the Arab street

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"Much of the world's recent political violence can be categorized as terrorism, and all of it a recognisable exemplar of that toxic multi-layered and ultimately indispensable tool. Its employment demands extreme care and discrimination, as well as awareness of its potential for misuse, but the pressing realities of our time force on us the responsibility to make it an instrument of enlightenment and understanding."

*Fred Halliday, Terrorism in Historical Context, openDemocracy.net 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2004*

The majority of the world's citizens - in the Arab world as much as in the West – surely agree that terrorism is a bad thing but can they agree on what terrorism is? Democratic solutions to the question of political violence require an attempt to develop an agreed language by which people can debate these issues across national and cultural borders.

A beginning – which illuminates some issues but also rises further questions – may be seen in the results of a large-scale survey research project conducted by the Center for Strategic Studies (CSS) in Arab countries at the University of Jordan in Mashreq.

The surveys were conducted in collaboration with partner institutions in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Egypt across four samples in each country (national, university students, business, and media). The questions in the surveys addressed relations between Arabs and Western nations, and the issue of terrorism in particular. They demonstrate that Arabs have fundamental disagreements with the West (here defined as the US governments own classification) over what is and is not terrorism.

A major objective in the research was to assess Arabs' perceptions of what constitutes terrorism. This part of the project was designed to elicit a composite definition of terrorism across five Arab countries on both organizations and acts/events. Respondents were asked to give their own views on whether these organizations and acts are "terrorist" or not. A third question specifically addressed the views on the involvement of civilian targets in the case where a Muslim country is occupied.

### Organizations

In respect to "organizations" respondents were presented with the following list of six organizations listed by the United States government as terrorist: Islamic Jihad Movement, Hamas, Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, Hizbullah, Al-Qaeda, and Armed Islamic Jama'a (Algeria).

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they considered each a "terrorist" organization or a "legitimate resistance organization". On average, across country and sample categories, around 90% of respondents labelled The Islamic Jihad Movement, Hamas, al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades and Hizbullah, as "legitimate resistance organizations". The exception here is Lebanon, where a lower but still significant two thirds defined them as "legitimate resistance organizations".

Respondents saw a distinct difference between the organizations listed above and Al-Qaeda, yet still significant numbers across the survey considered it also to be a “legitimate resistance movement”, although the results vary widely from country to country: 8% in Syria, 18% in Lebanon and 41% in Egypt saw it as a “legitimate resistance movement”. In Palestine and Jordan, the figure is around two thirds. In Jordan there is a tendency to define Al-Qaeda as a “terrorist organization” as levels of exposure increase: it was higher for business sample (33%) and higher still for media samples (48%). Generally there is a clear trend among respondents to answer this question with “do not know” or “refuse to answer”. For example, within national samples, 19% in Jordan, 49% in Syria, 27% in Lebanon, 21% in Palestine and 20% in Egypt indicated one of these two responses.

For Lebanon, 54% in the national sample, (62% of university students, 43% in the business sample and 58% in the media sample) defined Al-Qaeda as a “terrorist organization”. Looking at Lebanese national sample data by religion, 56% of Muslims and 88% of Christian respondents defined Al-Qaeda as a terrorist organization. Interestingly, however, both groups defined Islamic Jihad, Hamas, al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades and Hizbullah as “legitimate resistance organizations” (see *table 1* below). This is clear evidence that *the problem of differences of perception between Western countries and Middle Eastern ones is not religious or cultural, but rather political*. If it were cultural and rooted in religion we would have found the definitions given by Muslims to all of these organizations to stand in stark contrast to labels assigned by Christians. But 74% of Lebanese Christians labelled Hizbullah “a legitimate resistance organization”, making the point even clearer that the *key* to dialogue and conflict resolution in Arab-West relations is politics, not religion.

*Table 1*

Percentage of Christians and Muslims in the Lebanese national sample defining organizations as “legitimate resistance”

Organization	Muslims	Christians
Islamic Jihad	98	54
Hamas	98	57
Al-Aqsa Martyrs	98	53
Hizbullah	99	74

## Acts/ Events

The second component of the definition of terrorism is based on a list of fourteen acts or events variously classified as terrorist acts by the United States or other states. They were then asked to classify each as either “a terrorist act” or “not a terrorist act”.

This second method reinforces the findings presented above. The four events listed at the bottom of *table 2* below were labelled “terrorist acts” by less than a quarter of respondents, with the exception of the Lebanese national sample. The theme of these four acts is that they were committed against Israelis and Americans in Palestine and Iraq. In contrast, the first four acts listed in the table were seen as terrorist acts by overwhelming majorities in these samples. The theme that runs through these acts is that they were acts committed *against* Arabs by Israelis and Americans in Palestine and Iraq.

Table 2 below presents the percentage of respondents in national samples by country who labelled these acts and events "terrorist".

<b>Event</b>	<b>Jordan</b>	<b>Syria</b>	<b>Lebanon</b>	<b>Palestine</b>	<b>Egypt</b>
Killing by Israel of Palestinian civilians in West Bank and Gaza Strip	90	97	88	96	91
Bulldozing by Israel of agricultural land and crops in West Bank and Gaza Strip	88	96	83	94	90
US-led coalition operations in Iraq	86	94	64	89	87
Assassination by Israel of Palestinian political figures	84	93	80	94	87
Bombing of UN and Red Cross headquarters in Iraq	48	78	80	36	61
Bombing of housing compounds in Saudi Arabia	46	73	82	28	69
Bombing of hotel in Morocco	50	72	75	30	73
World Trade Center attacks 9/11	35	71	73	22	62
Attacks on Jewish synagogues in Turkey	21	54	59	13	44
Attacks on Israeli civilians inside Israel	24	22	55	17	33
Attacks on settlements in West Bank and Gaza Strip	17	16	42	3	17
Attacks on US coalition forces in Iraq	18	9	28	9	14
Attacks on Israeli military inside Israel	17	5	25	3	9
Hizbullah operations against Israel	10	3	16	2	7

Most of the remaining acts were defined differently by different samples. However, the attacks on the World Trade Center were defined as a "terrorist act" by 73% in Lebanon, 71% in Syria, 62% in Egypt, but only 35% in Jordan and 22% in Palestine.

## Attacking Civilians

Finally, respondents were asked to indicate to what extent they approved of the killing of foreign civilians (including women and children) where those foreign forces have occupied Muslim lands. The *least disapproving* of killing civilians were the Palestinian samples, especially university students. Again, Arab public opinion largely rejects the killing of civilians but there seem to be factors having an impact on Palestinians on this issue. An obvious factor is the Israeli occupation and its consequences for the lives of Palestinians. *Table 3* below presents percentages by sample and country of respondents expressing *disapproval* of the killing of civilians in this scenario.

*Table 3*

<i>Samples</i>	Lebanon	Syria	Egypt	Jordan	Palestine
National	88	85	77	76	64
University students	90	84	77	76	52
Business	93	86	87	85	69
Media	89	81	85	79	68

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