WHAT MAKES SOMETHING AN ACT OF TERRORISM?

- Broadly speaking for something to be an act of terrorism it must have a political goal (i.e., they seek to change the behavior of a Government).
- What this means is that the “victim” (i.e., the people they target) are not the ultimate victim, but simply a means to affect or influence the policy of a Government.
- If someone does not have a political goal for their actions, no matter how much they “terrorize” the civilian population they cannot be a terrorist.

QUESTION FOR YOU: James Holmes killed 12 people in Aurora, Colorado. He pled guilty by reasons of insanity. Why is James Holmes not a terrorist?

TERRORISM “I KNOW IT WHEN I SEE IT”? WHY IS TERRORISM SO HARD TO DEFINE?

- “One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.” A catchy phrase, but what it is really saying is that because terrorism is political, whether or not you think someone is a terrorist may depend on your view of what they are fighting for.

QUESTION FOR YOU: Are the Sons of Liberty terrorists or Freedom Fighters? Do you think people in Britain would agree with you?

WHEN LOOKING AT A POTENTIAL ACT OF TERRORISM WHAT PARTS OF TERRORISM ARE THE HARDEST TO AGREE ON?

- An important part of any definition of terrorism is violence, force, or the threat of harm. However, many people who engage in terrorism do not use force, or violence. Can they still be viewed as a terrorist?

QUESTION FOR YOU: Tony T, a young male living in Alabama, leaves America to join a terrorist organization. He had met someone at his local gym who talked to him about the benefits of being a member of a terrorist organization and helped him get a plane ticket and arranged for him to meet someone when he landed. When he landed, he was met by this person and that person escorted him to meet with the local extremist organization. While Tony T was there he ran out of money and asked his parents for money to help him buy food and travel around the country. They gave him $500. In this scenario; who is “the terrorist” and why?

- In this case all of the above would be defined as terrorists. Even though many of them only helped, and many of them were not engaged in violence, or threatened force, they are all still facilitating a known terrorist organization. Even the parents.
TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE
Below we will provide you with two scenarios. Which one is a case of terrorism and which one is not?

SCENARIO 1: After becoming increasingly upset about the use of animals in academic research at their university a Psychology Student decided to sneak into the research lab after hours and destroy the computers and research equipment that they believe belongs to the Professor(s) who are engaged in research which (they feel inhumanely) uses animal participants.

SCENARIO 2: Mr. J. V. drives up to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and opens fire on civilians and security staff at the site using an automatic weapon. He kills one security guard and injures 3 civilians. The police arrive at the site and during the firefight Mr. J. V. is killed.

Who do you think is the terrorist?
• Scenario 1
• Scenario 2

ANSWER
Scenario 1. While it may seem unlikely, the first scenario is actually terrorism. The reason for this is that despite being less violent (it involves no harm to people), it does involve a political effect (changing policies about the use of animals in research). Despite the fact that Mr. J. V. clearly “terrorized” people, as it stands we cannot call him a terrorist. This is because at the moment we do not know why he did what he did (although I am sure many will make several assumptions given the target). Without knowing that Mr. J. V. wanted his actions to have a political effect, we cannot call what he did terrorism.

TABLE TALK TAKEAWAY
Defining terrorist is complex but motives matter. If we cannot say for sure that someone wanted their actions to cause a political effect then it is important that we do not apply the label “terrorist.”