

What is Terrorism?

A Lesson Plan

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Share What You Know about Terrorism

- What type of person or group usually commits terrorist acts?
- What kind of person is usually the victim of a terrorist act? Military personnel or civilians?
- Is a terrorist act different from similar acts committed during war? If so, how?

Dictionary Definitions:

- terrorism: The systematic use of terror, especially as a means of coercion
- terror: a feeling of intense fear
- coercion: to make something happen by force or threat

Consider the Following Five Examples of Violent Acts:

- Discuss them using the questions in the box on the next page as a guide.

Oklahoma City, OK



1. In 1995, Timothy McVeigh set off a bomb in front of a federal building in Oklahoma City. The explosion killed 168 people and injured 450. Many of the dead were children and babies, who were in a day care on the second floor. McVeigh was angry at the U.S. federal government for various reasons. He believed gun laws were too strict. He believed the government took too much in taxes. He wanted revenge against the U.S. government for the FBI's killing of 76 people in Waco, Texas.

Baghdad, Iraq



2. In 1993, President Clinton ordered the bombing of Iraq's "Intelligence Headquarters" in Baghdad. He said it was a necessary retaliation for an alleged plot to kill George H. Bush when he had visited Kuwait. Some of the bombs missed their target and landed in a residential neighborhood, killing eight civilians and injuring 12 more.

New York City



3. On September 11, 2001, nineteen Al Qaeda members boarded four planes and managed to crash three of them into key buildings in the United States, killing about 3000 people. The fourth plane crashed into a field in Pennsylvania. Al Qaeda was angry at the United States for its role in the Middle East. Their goal is for governments in the Middle East to run under Islamic religious law.

Marion, IN



5. From 1882 to 1968 in the United States, there were more than 3500 documented cases of white people lynching black people. The white people who did the lynching believed that the black person had committed some crime, but they did not wait for the case to go to court. They took “justice” in their own hands and killed the black person by hanging, shooting, or burning him or her.

South Africa



4. In the 1970s and 1980s in South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC) organized to fight against the white power structure, which kept black people in a constant state of poverty and disenfranchisement. To weaken the white power structure and to gain support for their cause, the military wing of the ANC bombed military and industrial targets. Possibly dozens of civilians were killed.

Discussion Questions

Which of the above do you think are examples of terrorism? Why?

What do the above examples have in common? How are they different?

There is a saying that “One person’s terrorist is another person’s freedom fighter.” Can you imagine how any of the examples listed above could be considered the actions of a freedom fighter?

A judge at the International Court of Justice said that the word “terrorism” has no legal meaning. It is just the word you use to describe the people you disagree with. What do you think of her remarks?

Try writing your own definition of terrorism. Compare it with others.