

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WAR & TERRORISM

Not all conflicts are the same. To the casual observer, violence can appear undifferentiated. People disagree, weapons are drawn, and lives are lost. On the surface it looks similar. But a closer inspection reveals important differences that distinguish war from terrorism.

War and terrorism differ significantly in their nature, objectives, participants, methods, and moral implications. Understanding those differences makes it easier to intelligently take a position and confidently defend it.

The following table contrasts the differences between war and terrorism along multiple dimensions.

	WAR	TERRORISM
WHO PARTICIPATES?	War is armed conflict between nation states conducted with the authorization of legitimate governing authorities.	Terrorism involves acts of extreme violence or threats of violence perpetrated by civilians on civilians.
WHAT IS THE MOTIVATION?	Most often war is waged in response to real or perceived threats with the goal of restoring order from chaos.	Terrorism is motivated by hatred for those who differ ideologically, ethnically, etc.
WHAT IS THE PURPOSE?	War often seeks territorial gains, regime change, securing resources, or addressing political disputes between nations. It can be reactive and waged to stop aggression and restore order.	Terrorism is conducted to induce fear, disrupt societal stability, and advance ideological, political, or religious goals. Terrorist acts are typically symbolic, intended to generate public attention, and may not respond to negotiation or diplomacy.
WHAT DOES IT TARGET?	War targets military personnel and infrastructure while using intelligence and diplomacy to minimize harm to civilians.	Terrorism intentionally targets civilians with mass shootings, suicide bombings, high jackings, torture and hostage taking for use as human shields to deter military or law enforcement.
IS IT GOVERNED BY RULES?	War generally abides by rules of engagement, including the Geneva Conventions, to adhere to humanitarian law and avoid inhumane treatment of prisoners of war.	Terrorism disregards all rules of war to facilitate extreme and deliberate acts of brutality against innocent civilians and noncombatants.

IS THERE ACCOUNTABILITY?	In war, military personnel are held accountable for war crimes and human rights violations.	Terrorists are not held accountable to the same degree as nation states in armed conflicts.
IS IT MORAL?	Traditional warfare, when conducted within the bounds of international law and just war principles, can be morally justifiable. It often involves states with legitimate authority, defined objectives, and rules designed to minimize harm to civilians.	Terrorism is generally seen as morally reprehensible due to its intentional targeting of civilians, its disproportionate use of violence, and its lack of legitimate authority. Deliberate harm to civilians, who are not involved in the conflict, is a central characteristic that makes terrorism difficult to morally justify.

The news can be confusing and misleading at times. If you don't know what to believe, check out [this My Faith Votes' article](#) that provides 11 tips to help you discern the news.



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