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Editorial

The Language of Terrorism

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Some readers complain regularly that Post news coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian struggle is biased against Israel. One enduring example, they say, is the description of people or organizations that carry out or sponsor suicide bombings as "militants" rather than "terrorists," the term these readers view as more accurate and descriptive. They say terrorism is distinguished from militancy in that "the aim is to spread fear and to kill, indiscriminately, men, women and children. Softening the nomenclature tends to encourage and legitimize terrorism," as one reader put it. The State Department, they note, **labels** the Islamic resistance movement known as Hamas as a **terrorist** organization and The Post calls it a militant group. They say The Post uses "**terrorist**" to describe Osama bin Laden and the al Qaeda network but not Hamas, Islamic Jihad and their leaders.

These complaints are not unique to The Post. Many news organizations face similar challenges, and a number of them are reviewing their internal guidelines. These are difficult issues, and it is good to be challenged and to think things over. The Post, for example, had no formal guidance on this in its internal style manual until March 2002.

Here is some of what the guidelines now say.

"The language we use should be chosen for its ability to inform readers. Terrorism and **terrorist** can be useful words, but they are **labels**. Like all **labels**, they do not convey much hard information. We should rely first on specific facts, not characterizations. Why refer to a '**terrorist** attack in Tel Aviv' when we can be more informative and precise: 'The bombing of a disco frequented by teenagers in Tel Aviv,' for example. Our first obligation to readers is to tell them what happened, as precisely as possible.

"When we use these **labels**, we should do so in ways that are not tendentious. For example, we should not resolve the argument over whether Hamas is a **terrorist** organization, or a political organization that condones violence, or something else, by slapping a **label** on Hamas. Instead, we should give readers facts and perhaps quotes from disputing parties about how best to characterize the organization."

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The guidance also quotes Foreign Editor David Hoffman: "If the Israelis say they have assassinated a **terrorist**, we should not embrace their **labeling** automatically. We may say he was a suspected **terrorist**, or someone the Israelis considered a **terrorist**, or someone the Israelis say participated in a **terrorist** act. In other words, we should always look independently at whether the person has committed an act of terrorism, whether we know sufficient facts to say he has or has not and what the facts are. We should always strive to satisfy our own standards and not let others set standards for us."

That last sentence is central to the editing process here. The terrorist label is very powerful and the paper takes care in avoiding language that is preferred by one side or another in the Middle East. I don't get mail from readers who say they don't understand what happened in any particular attack. Readers seem able to conclude on their own whether something appears to them as a terror attack.

Using "militant" or "gunmen" with terrorist actions, as many news organizations do, may not be very satisfying. But adopting particular language can suggest taking sides and a diminution of the reporter's invaluable role to report what is seen and said and to not take sides. If Israeli officials describe something as a terrorist act, they are frequently quoted in the paper on that point. By the same token, Palestinians who describe an Israeli missile attack on a Hamas leader that also kills civilians as "state-sponsored terrorism" also get recorded.

Making a general point, The Post guidance also says that "terrorism is real and identifiable, and we can identify it when that is appropriate." When it comes to the Middle East news report, however, that word is mostly used when describing one side's assessment of the other, and usually not in the descriptive voice of a reporter.

Critical readers also attempt to equate the U.S. battle against al Qaeda with the Israeli battle against Hamas. There are, however, differences. Hamas conducts terrorism but also has territorial ambitions, is a nationalist movement and conducts some social work. As far as we know, al Qaeda exists only as a terrorist network. It is composed of radicals from several Islamic countries. The Palestinian resistance is indigenous. Al Qaeda launched a devastating surprise attack on the United States. Israelis and Palestinians have been at war for a long time. Palestinians have been resisting a substantial and, to Palestinians, humiliating, Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza since they were seized in the 1967 war. That resistance has now bred suicide bombers. These are terrorist acts, not to be condoned. But the contexts of the struggle against al Qaeda and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are different. News organizations should not back away from the word terrorism when it is the proper term. But as a rule, strong, descriptive, factual reporting is better than **labels**.

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