



TeachableMoment Classroom Lessons

Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility

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INVESTIGATING TERRORISM: 3 LESSONS

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Area: Current Issues

Grade Level: High School

Topic: Terrorism

Description:

Students consider a range of opinions about what "terrorism" is and what is behind terrorist acts such as the September 11 attacks.

by **Alan Shapiro**

The following lessons ask students to consider a range of opinions about what "terrorism" is and what is behind terrorist acts such as the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

Some may regard these lessons as inappropriate at this time—or even perhaps at any time. They ask, among other things, that students examine the views of Osama bin Laden, a man accused by the U.S. government of multiple acts of terrorism, and to discuss U.S. policies and actions that he and others call terrorism.

We offer the lessons, nevertheless, because we think it is vital for students to gain insight into why some people hate the U.S. so much that they could commit the September 11, 2001 mass murders. Such study, in our view, does not in any way condone such acts. We believe that disciplined inquiry into controversial subjects helps people develop habits of mind essential for intelligent democratic citizenship—habits of mind terrorists abhor.

LESSON 1

1. Ask students to define terrorism in a sentence or two in their notebooks and to give two examples of terrorist acts. They should save what they have written for further consideration at the end of lesson three.

2. Distribute **STUDENT WORKSHEET 1**. Ask students to complete the worksheet in class. It asks students to consider a list of actions and decide whether each is an example of "terrorism." (See [Worksheet 1](#) at the end of the three

lessons.)

(Note to the Teacher: All of the actions listed on the Worksheet have, of course, taken place. Some examples: 1. The bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City; the bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania; 2. The World War II bombings of London, Dresden, Hiroshima; 3. Palestinian suicide bombings in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem; 4. The UN boycott of Iraq; 5. 1983 bombing in Beirut that killed many U.S. Marines; 6. Action of a Japanese religious cult; 7. "Disappearances" and murders by paramilitary groups and police in Argentina and elsewhere in South and Central America.)

3. Divide the class into groups of four to six students to compare responses and to discuss differences in responses. One student should be selected by the group to summarize for the class.

4. Student reports: Where is there agreement? Disagreement?

5. Distribute **STUDENT WORKSHEET 2** for student examination and discussion. This worksheet gives students three alternate definitions of "terrorism." (See **Worksheet 2** at the end of the three lessons.)

6. Once students have read the statements on the worksheet, discuss the following with the class:

- According to the State Department definition, which acts on Worksheet 1 represent terrorism?
- According to Falk, which acts represent terrorism?
- According to American Heritage Dictionary, which acts represent terrorism?
- Do you prefer one definition over the others? Which? Why or why not?

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

Give students **STUDENT WORKSHEET 3**, which includes four statements reflecting an array of views what motivated the terrorist attacks of September 11. The assignment asks students to read the statements carefully, and then to write down and bring to class at least three questions that would help them better understand U.S. policy in the Muslim world and why some people hate the U.S. enough to kill thousands of people. (See **Worksheet 3** at the end of the three lessons.)

LESSON TWO

1. Ask for a dozen or so of the students' questions about what they have read and list them on the chalkboard without comment. Some possible samples:

- What evidence is there that Muslim terrorists want to overthrow any Muslim government?
- Why do terrorists "hate our freedoms" (President Bush)?
- What are the al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy mosques (Mecca)?
- How is the U.S. responsible for any deaths in Iraq?
- Has the U.S. supported Muslim governments in Egypt, Turkey and Pakistan? If so, how and why?
- Will there be future attacks by Osama bin Laden's group?

2. The next step is an analysis of the questions to help students to understand that questions are instruments of perception, that the nature of a question determines the nature of an answer, that some questions are better than others, that question-asking and question-analysis are essential to critical thinking. Have students analyze their questions in terms of the following criteria:

- Do any questions require a factual answer? If so, where might the facts come from?
- Do any questions call for an opinion? If so, whose? If an expert opinion is needed, what qualifies one as an expert?

Do any questions require the definition of certain words before they can be answered?

- Do any questions require the definition of certain words before they can be answered intelligently? How shall we define them?
- Do any questions contain assumptions? If so, are the assumptions reasonable to make?
- Do any questions call for predictions? Whose? Why?
- Can any questions be answered either "yes" or "no"? If so, what follow-up questions might be useful?
- Are any questions unclear? If so, how might they be reworded?

3. Discuss with the class:

- Which questions do we most want answered?
- Which need further investigation?
- Which can we answer ourselves with a bit of research?

Based on the discussion, make a revised list of refined questions that the students should be able to answer after doing some research at home that night. The questions might include:

- Are U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia? If so, why?
- Why would Muslim terrorists want to overthrow a Muslim government?
- Does the U.S. support "repressive Arab regimes" (Edward Said)? If so, why?
- Do Iraqi Muslims die every day because of the U.S.? If so, why?

4. Divide the students into three groups. Assign to each group one question produced by students and class discussion.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

Working individually, students from each of the three groups are to find out whatever they can that might help to answer the question and to bring their notes to class. Sources of information might include newspapers, magazines, books, and websites (a search through such key words as Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Palestinians can elicit much information, though students should be cautioned about such sources and possible reasons for bias and misinformation).

At the next class session each group will meet to share information.

LESSON THREE

1. Ask the three groups to meet with each other to share information they have found on their questions. In each group a secretary might record major points and a reporter be assigned to speak to the class about group findings.
2. Ask each group to reports to the class about what they have learned. Discuss these findings with the class.
3. Ask students to open their notebooks to where they defined terrorism at the beginning of the first lesson. Ask them to revise their definitions in light of anything they have learned and to revise also, if necessary, their examples of terrorism. If students think their definitions do not need to change, ask them to explain in writing why they think so. Collect what the students have written for comment.
4. In conclusion, ask the class:
 - What are our main findings about terrorism?
 - Do we have any disagreements?
 - What questions, if any, need further investigation?

Teachers may want to pursue the subject further through individual and small-group inquiries.

STUDENT WORKSHEET 1

Directions: Mark with a T each item below that you think is an act of terrorism; mark it with an N if you do not think it an act of terrorism; mark it with a U if you are uncertain.

1. Blowing up a government building and the civilians in it.
 2. Bombing a city that has many civilians, but few, if any, soldiers or military targets.
 3. Exploding a bomb in a marketplace, in a department store or on a bus.
 4. Imposing an economic boycott on a country that results in a lack of food and medicine and the deaths of civilians.
 5. Blowing up a barracks full of soldiers.
 6. Releasing poison gas in a subway.
 7. Kidnapping people and then killing them.
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STUDENT WORKSHEET 2

Definitions of terrorism:

"terrorism—: the political use of terror and intimidation"
—*American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*

"Terrorism is premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine state agents, usually intended to influence an audience."

—*U.S. State Department, Patterns of Global Terrorism*

"By and large the term 'terrorism' is used to describe the tactics and methods of the weak, while the indiscriminate violence of the strong is portrayed or glorified under labels such as 'patriotism' and 'national security'.... To sponsor violence against the civilian population of foreign countries is to adopt terrorism as a policy."

—*Richard Falk, professor emeritus of international law, Princeton University*

The latter two quotes appear in Richard Falk's "Thinking About Terrorism," *The Nation*, 6/28/86

STUDENT WORKSHEET 3

Read the following comments carefully. Then write down and bring to class at least three questions which, if answered well, would give you a better understanding of U.S. policy in the Muslim world and why some people hate the U.S. enough to kill thousands of people.

Statement 1:

"Americans are asking, 'Why do they hate us?' They hate what we see right here in this chamber, a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other. They want to overthrow existing governments

in many Muslim countries. such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan. They want to drive Israel out of the Middle East.

...many Muslim countries, such as Egypt, Sudan, Iraq and others. They want to drive Christians and Jews out of vast regions of Asia and Africa. These terrorists kill not merely to end lives, but to disrupt and end a way of life. With every atrocity, they hope that America grows fearful, retreating from the world and forsaking our friends. They stand against us, because we stand in their way."

—President George W. Bush, in an address before a joint meeting of Congress on the September 11 attacks, 9/20/01

Statement 2:

"For over seven years the United States has been occupying the lands of Islam in the holiest of places, the Arabian Peninsula, plundering its riches, dictating to its rulers, humiliating its people, terrorizing its neighbors, and turning its bases in the Peninsula into a spearhead through which to fight the neighboring Muslim peoples.... We—with God's help—call on every Muslim who believes in God and wishes to be rewarded to comply with God's order to kill the Americans and plunder their money wherever and whenever they find it....The ruling to kill Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it...in order to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy mosque (Mecca) from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim."

"The U.S. ...has set a double standard, calling whoever goes against its injustice a terrorist. It wants to occupy our countries, steal our resources, impose on us agents to rule us based not on what God has revealed....If we refuse to do so, it will say you are terrorists. With a simple look at U.S. behaviors, we find that it judges the behavior of the poor Palestinian children whose country was occupied; if they throw stones against the Israeli occupation, it says they are terrorists....Wherever we look, we find the U.S. as the leader of terrorism and crime in the world. The U.S. does not consider it terrorism when hundreds of thousands of our sons and brothers in Iraq died for lack of food or medicine."

—Osama bin Laden, accused by the U.S. of leading a radical Muslim group responsible for the September 11 attacks, the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and the 2000 attack on the U.S. destroyer Cole. The first quote is from 2/22/98, an edict translated by the Federation of American Scientists and published at pbs.org/frontline. The second quote is from a March 1997 CNN interview

Statement 3:

"Around the world United States foreign policy belies the claim that America is the enemy of Islam. In Kosovo, the United States led an intervention to aid ethnic Albanians, who are predominately Muslim. While Russia waged a brutal military campaign in Muslim Chechnya with surprisingly little reaction from Mr. bin Laden's foot soldiers, President Clinton publicly confronted President Yeltsin about Russia's human rights violations. America has been the leading humanitarian donor to Afghanistan.

It's true the United States has supported the Israeli government, but it has also supported Muslim regimes in Egypt and Turkey and in Pakistan, a neighbor and close ally of Afghanistan's Taliban government. Surely all this is evidence that America has not been on an anti-Islamic crusade. On the contrary, America has proved hospitable to an estimated 5.8 million Muslims who claim this country as their own."

—Lamin Sanneh, a professor of history and religion at Yale University, *New York Times*, 9/23/01

Statement 4:

"To most people in the Islamic and Arab worlds the official U.S. is synonymous with arrogant power, known mainly for its...support not only of Israel but of numerous repressive Arab regimes....Anti-Americanism...is based on a narrative of concrete interventions, specific depredations and, in the cases of the Iraqi people's suffering under U.S.-imposed sanctions and U.S. support for the 34-year-old Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, cruel and inhumane policies administered with stony coldness."

—Edward Said, a professor at Columbia University who has written extensively in support of Palestinian rights and self-determination, *The London Observer*, quoted in *New York Times*, 9/29/01

We welcome your comments. Please email them to: lmcclore@morningsidecenter.org [2]

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