If only one man’s terrorist was another man’s terrorist

By REUVEN BEN-SHALOM

Following the murder of Private Eden Atlas on a bus in Afula, Hamas spokesman Fawzy Barhoum issued a statement praising the “heroic act of resistance” and calling on young Palestinians to fight Israeli “oppression and terror.”

How can a terrorist call his victims “terrorists”? He can, because the expression, “One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter,” makes them interchangeable, as merely a matter of perspective and agenda.

As Israelis, we tend to oppose this aphorism, but sadly, I believe it is true on the international level. The world has no agreed-upon differentiation between good and bad, or even what should be considered absolute evil.

The Arab League, in its 1998 Arab Convention for the Suppression of Terrorism, put forth a relatively robust definition, but excluded acts carried out by people who felt they were struggling for liberation and self-determination.

So basically, killing Israelis is OK.

I recently posted a question on terror definition on Facebook, and received a range of suggestions, from philosophical, to practical, and from narrow to wide and vague. This experiment demonstrated that even internally we are not in agreement on such a fundamental issue in Israeli life.

Two of my friends posted a link to the Wikipedia definition, which begins with: “Terrorism is the systematic use of violence as a means of coercion or political purposes.” This, of course, describes what all armies do.

On the national level, governments are reluctant to define terror, for they would lose the flexibility that vagueness currently enables.

The Taliban, for example, turned from US backed freedom-fighters against the Soviet Union, to despicable terrorists, but this mutability of terms can be found in many conflicts around the world.

The United States calls its enemies terrorists, but pushes Israel to release terrorists, conveniently calling them “prisoners.”

If the world were truly united in its definition of terrorism, there would be international condemnation of the Chairman of the Palestinian Authority, who continues to praise and glorify the murderers of women and children.

It is a difficult task, but the world must unite behind one definition. The narrower we make it – the wider acceptance we can hope for.

Here is what Dr. Ganor suggests: “Terrorism is the intentional use of violence against civilians, or civilian targets, in order to attain political aims.” It is short, clear, and most importantly – logical.

The problem is that we perceive all political agendas. We can all agree to this – do not target civilians! “Intentional” – because civilians suffer from collateral damage, even when armies are extremely careful and act proportionally, and are sometimes deliberately placed in harm’s way when used by terrorists as human shields.

I spoke with Adv. Ido Rosenzweig, a researcher at the Israel Democracy Institute and Chairman of the Association for the Promotion of International Humanitarian Law (ALMA), who explained that a short definition will not eliminate complex debates on scope and applicability in the international arena.

We will still struggle with issues like state sponsored terrorism and terror funding organizations, such as Hamas’ Dawat socio-economic network.

This is not merely an academic debate but bears practical ramifications. We tend to think that terrorists will always feel free to act without adherence to laws or moral compasses. You can’t reason with terrorists, right? Wrong. They can be influenced.

If, today, attacking a school bus and a military installation are both referred to as terrorism, why not attack the easier target and achieve a better media impact? It seems the logical outcome of a simple cost-benefit analysis.

But if the world were to say: “When you attack soldiers, you are legitimate freedom fighters, but if you kill children, you are despicable, repulsive, and evil terrorists,” maybe they would reconsider.

But rhetoric is not enough. Choosing terror should come with a heavy price.

Freedom fighters and guerilla operatives should be held as prisoners of war, to be released during a prisoner exchange deal or parole. A terrorist, on the other hand, should serve his full sentence, never being eligible for parole or exchange deals.

Israel is perceived as spearheading the fight against terror, yet we are the ones eroding the basic elements needed to succeed.

By releasing terrorists, we contribute to the perception that terrorism is a legitimate way of promoting political goals.

The problem is that we perceive all political agendas. We can all agree to this – do not target civilians! Not bad – but too long, and ambiguous.

United Nations Security Council resolution 1269, from 1999, took a relatively strong position on acts of terrorism and protected better international collaboration, but did not define what terrorism is.

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1566, from 2004, condemned terrorist acts with a description so long, that one ends up feeling that almost any form of violence and aggression is considered terrorism.

The Arab League, in their 1998 Arab Convention for the Suppression of Terrorism, put forth a relatively robust definition, but excluded acts carried out by people who felt they were struggling for liberation and self-determination.

So basically, killing Israelis is OK.

I recently posted a question on terror definition on Facebook, and received a range of suggestions, from philosophical, to practical, and from narrow to wide and vague. This experiment demonstrated that even internally we are not in agreement on such a fundamental issue in Israeli life.

Two of my friends posted a link to the Wikipedia definition, which begins with: “Terrorism is the systematic use of violence as a means of coercion or political purposes.” This, of course, describes what all armies do.

On the national level, governments are reluctant to define terror, for they would lose the flexibility that vagueness currently enables.