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The White House has recently released a new and updated Counterterrorism Strategy of the United States. The previous such strategy was also released under the Trump administration in 2018. While both have been authored under the same administration, the two strategies diverge radically in how they define their primary threats. The new strategy marks a departure from the post-9/11 consensus that recognised legacy Islamist-terrorist groups as top threats for the US. That spot has now been occupied by the narco-terrorists and transnational gangs, positing illicit drugs as a more serious threat than traditional violent terrorism. The geographical pivot is also significant. While the older strategy had a global and expeditionary posture, pursuing terrorists to their source internationally, the new strategy shifts to a hemisphere-first and homeland-centric posture.

The United States now officially categorises its primary terrorist threats as narco-terrorists and transnational gangs, legacy Islamist terrorists, and violent left-wing extremists.¹ The reordering of these priorities is telling. The strategy explicitly prioritises the neutralisation

of hemispheric threats, placing the disruption of Latin American drug cartels above the containment of Islamist terror groups in West Asia and Africa. Invoking a modern version of the Monroe Doctrine, the document promises offensive action to strip cartels of their operational capabilities through potential kinetic operations, designating them as Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). Remarkably, the new strategy also elevates highly specific domestic opposition like anarchists, anti-fascists, and 'radically pro-transgender' political groups as terror groups. Fentanyl and its core precursor chemicals have been classified as Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), putting public health and narcotics control problems into the same category as chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) threats.²

While the strategy's architects frame this as a long-due alignment of national security resources with pressing domestic and border realities, this reclassification points to a boundary problem. By stretching the definition of terrorism to include profit-driven criminal syndicates and fragmented domestic political opposition, the strategy defies the core logic of what actually constitutes terrorist violence. It underlines a temptation most governments worldwide are likely to fall prey to: the impulse to label any acute challenge that requires public vindication or higher operational priority or extraordinary powers for the state as 'terrorism'. Borrowing from the widening and deepening debate within critical security studies, if every reprehensible act of violence is classified as terrorism, the term loses its analytic utility, risking an expansion of executive power and blurring of lines between warfare, law enforcement, and domestic politics.

The strategy document insists these powers will be used apolitically and criticises previous administrations for the weaponisation of the intelligence community.³ However, the explicit targeting of left-wing political opposition, while not mentioning extremist right-wing groups, betrays this argument. Moreover, this doctrinal shift begs an analytical question: does the label of 'terrorist' accurately describe these newly prioritised actors, or is the term being stretched to acquire extraordinary state capabilities for regular law and order problems?

Defying the Core Logic of Terrorism

To understand why the 2026 strategy is conceptually erroneous, one must return to the core logic of terrorist violence. Terrorism is not simply a synonym for extreme violence, nor is it a catch-all term to be used for threats to public safety. It operates on a very specific, instrumental logic: the use of violence against civilians/non-combatants indirectly to target a government or a broader population.

The most widely cited attempt to discipline the concept is the academic consensus definition by Alex Schmid, which defines terrorism as a doctrine and practice of calculated violence directed mainly at civilians and non-combatants, carried out for its psychological and propagandistic effect on audiences and conflict parties who are distinct from the immediate victims.⁴ The defining feature is not the occurring of violence, but that it is structured indirectly; the victim is an instrument, a message sent through a body, aimed at coercing a third party, usually a government. Schmid goes on to illustrate this point: the assassination of a tyrant by those he oppresses is not terrorism, as the target and victim coincide; a hijacking undertaken purely for escape is criminal but not terrorism, whereas one accompanied by demands on a government becomes terrorism as it is now communicative and coercive.⁵

Noted scholar Martha Crenshaw has long argued that the political effectiveness of terrorism is determined by the psychological effects of violence on audiences. The violence is symbolic. When a traditional terrorist organisation bombs a marketplace, the victims in the market are not the ultimate target; they are merely the messengers. The true target is the state or the public, who are meant to be coerced into a state of chronic fear, thereby forcing a change in political behaviour or policy.⁶

Applying this logic to the newly designated actors under US counterterrorism reveals inconsistencies. For instance, the violence used by drug cartels is for the protection of their commercial interests; neither is it to overthrow the government nor to establish a new religious or political order. Though extreme, cartel violence is largely instrumental to the cause of an illicit enterprise: protecting trafficking routes, punishing rivals and informants, and corrupting or intimidating local officials. Their goal is not coercion of the

US government through a campaign of communicative violence against the American public. To label them 'terrorists' conflates the tactic of terror with the strategy of terrorism, fundamentally misinterpreting the problem.

Similarly, labelling loosely organised domestic political opposition groups like anarchists or Antifa as terrorists stretches the concept to the point where it loses value. While elements within these groups may engage in rioting, vandalism, and localised street violence, their actions generally lack the structured, mass-casualty, coercive violence aimed at systemic political compellence that defines terrorism. As reprehensible as it may be, protest and street violence belong to the domain of public order and criminality, not counter-terrorism.

The Widening and Deepening Debate

The theoretical foundation for understanding this boundary problem lies in the widening and deepening debate that emerged in security studies during the 1990s. Scholars of Copenhagen School argued that 'security' should be widened beyond military threats to include economic, environmental and societal threats.⁷ Whereas scholars of critical security studies argued that security should deepen beyond the state to other referent objects, such as communities or individuals, and that a narrow, state-centric definition missed other sources of insecurity.⁸ Critics, notably Stephen Walt, warned that widening security to include everything undesirable would dissolve its analytical coherence; if security meant anything, it would mean nothing. Security studies as a field would lose the discipline that allows it to distinguish urgent threats from ordinary political problems.⁹ The 2026 US counterterrorism strategy reflects this dynamic inside the narrower field of terrorism studies.

Additionally, the concept of securitisation offered by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver is also relevant here to understand how issues from the realm of normal politics are 'securitised'. As explained by Buzan, securitisation is the process by which a state actor discursively constructs an issue as an existential threat to justify moving it out of the realm of normal politics into the realm of emergency politics. By speaking the word 'security', or in this case 'terrorism', the state grants itself the right to use extraordinary measures, bypassing normal democratic oversight.¹⁰ The state tends to defend such moves, as in the security

debate, by pointing to real harm caused: fentanyl deaths, cartel brutality, and attacks on public figures. But the harm an act inflicts does not establish it as terrorism in any analytically useful sense.

The 2026 US Counterterrorism Strategy serves as a textbook example in how states securitise issues which belong to the realm of normal politics. Border control, drug trafficking, and domestic unrest are priority issues that directly affect the domestic population. However, managing them requires stricter law enforcement, diplomatic engagement with source and transit countries to stop narco trade, and public health initiatives for rehabilitation of those affected. These processes are slow and can take years to show visible results. Thus, states are tempted to label these challenges as terrorism.

Terrorism has increasingly become a pejorative term used by states to seek approval from the public for using extreme measures. The ousting and capture of Nicolás Maduro by labelling him as a 'narco-terrorist outlaw' is a case in point. Under normal circumstances, if the adversary was a cartel in a neighbouring country, enhanced border policing would have been the required steps to respond. However, by labelling the threat as a terrorist organisation, the state attempts to justify deploying military assets, launching drone strikes, freezing assets globally, and monitoring communications, bypassing due process. Normally, rioters and arsonists are to be tried under local prosecution laws. However, if they are labelled as terrorists, they must face the full wrath of the federal intelligence apparatus. By securitising any issue that it wants to be accorded the highest national priority, the state risks politicising the military and intelligence institutions.

The Imperative of Boundary Maintenance

Scholars of terrorism studies have consistently argued for a narrow definition of terrorism, as the term is highly contested and has negative connotations. Alex Schmid's theoretical framework relies heavily on the triad of victim-target-audience. The terrorist act uses the victim as a means to compel the target audience into submission. As has been emphasised, the ends of an act of violence might occasionally be understandable, but terrorism is defined by its inherently illegitimate methods, i.e., the deliberate targeting of

the innocent. Schmid warns that when states expand the definition of terrorism to include any non-state actor, they disagree with, they strip the term of its objective meaning.

By applying the label of terrorism to Mexican cartels or domestic left-wing protesters, the US government has essentially reversed the equation. It is not defining the threat based on the means (indirect violence against civilians), but rather expanding the definition to include actors the government currently finds most politically useful to target. This creates a dangerous precedent where the definition of terrorism can change every election cycle. If a Republican administration has designated Antifa as terrorists in 2026, there exist no barriers preventing a Democratic administration from designating conservative right-wing groups as terrorists in the future. Further, the reordering of threats also affects national priorities. Resources and attention get allocated by contemporary political convenience rather than objective evaluation of threats by severity.

Conclusion

The 2026 US Counterterrorism Strategy represents a doctrinal reconceptualisation that sacrifices long-term strategic clarity for immediate political and operational expediency. By officially designating drug cartels and domestic left-wing political opponents as terrorists, the United States has severed the concept of terrorism from its core logic: instrumental use of violence against non-combatants to indirectly coerce a government.

This boundary problem is not only academic but also has profound real-world consequences. The broadening of the terrorist label is a deliberate act of securitisation, designed to vindicate extraordinary state action in the eyes of the public and bypass the established processes of regular law enforcement. As scholars of terrorism have warned, when a state refuses to maintain a narrow and precise definition of terrorism, the counterterrorism apparatus ceases to be a specialised tool for protecting society from systemic psychological violence. Instead, it devolves into being an instrument of domestic political suppression.

It is important for terrorism to remain a bounded concept to retain its analytical value. The security apparatus of the state must correctly recognise a crime as a crime, a cartel as a cartel, a riot as a riot and respond proportionately. When the boundaries of terrorism are

stretched to encompass every violent act that frustrates the government of the day, it seeks to normalise the extraordinary use of executive power, ultimately eroding the very democratic principles it claims to protect.

DISCLAIMER

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ENDNOTES

¹ White House (2026), United States Counterterrorism Strategy 2026, Washington, D.C., May, [Online: web] Accessed 8 July 2026, URL: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/2026-USCT-Strategy-1.pdf>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Schmid, Alex. "Terrorism - The Definitional Problem." *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law* 36, no. 2 (2004): 375.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Crenshaw, Martha. *Explaining Terrorism: Causes, Processes, and Consequences*. London: Routledge, 2011.

⁷ Buzan, Barry. *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*. Colchester: ECPR Press, 2007.

⁸ Booth, Ken. "Security and Emancipation." *Review of International Studies* 17, no. 4 (1991): 313–326. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20097269>.

⁹ Walt, Stephen M. "The Renaissance of Security Studies." *International Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (1991): 211–239. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2600471>.

¹⁰ Buzan, Barry, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde. *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998.