

Essay and Discussion Questions

Terrorism Higher Education Questions

Help students understand domestic and international terrorism through these essay and discussion questions.

Question 1

To what extent is terrorism an effective means for groups or individuals to achieve political objectives? Has the threat from terrorism increased, decreased, or remained steady in the United States? What about globally?

- What is terrorism and why is it so difficult to define? Is there global consensus on the definition of terrorism? Why or why not?
- What makes terrorism different from other forms of violence?
- What motivates groups or individuals to carry out acts of terrorism?
- Where is terrorism a particularly high threat (or ‘hotspot’) today?
- What four broad ideological categories do terrorist groups fall into? Are these rigid categories? Why or why not?
- Using specific examples, highlight the major commonalities that motivate terrorist groups.

Question 2

Evaluate the definitions of terrorism put forward by various departments of the U.S. government. Is one definition better than others? Why or why not? Should the United States continue to treat domestic terrorism differently? Discuss the advantages and disadvantages.

- How are domestic terrorism and international terrorism defined differently in U.S. law?
- How does the U.S. government define terrorism?
- How does the Department of State define a State Sponsor of Terrorism? Assess the extent to which this definition is useful in fighting terrorism.
- How has U.S. action in Afghanistan shaped the ways that the Taliban is categorized by U.S. agencies under definitions of terrorism?

Question 3

Should the media cover terrorists as much as they do—or, indeed, at all? Why or why not? Consider not only traditional news media, such as television and newspapers, but also social media and other forms of new media.

- How is media coverage part of terrorists’ strategy?
- How have terror groups leveraged evolving media to spread their message— in particular television and social media?
- Is it appropriate to use the word “lone wolf” to describe terror attacks in the United States? Is this a fair characterization? Cite specific examples to defend your argument.

Question 4

Why has there been a surge in threats in the United States from white supremacist groups and other far right groups? What do these far-right groups seek to accomplish? Why are these threats increasing? Evaluate the extent to which the United States has the appropriate legal means to crack down on this form of domestic extremism. Provide specific policy recommendations for adoptions by the U.S. Government to help combat such radicalization.

- What factors contribute to radicalization and violent extremism in the United States and other parts of the world?
- To what extent do far-right extremists in the United States influence foreign terrorist groups, and vice versa?
- How does the rise of social media and the internet contribute to the radicalization process?
- What challenges do governments face in addressing terrorist groups that leverage the power of the internet?

Question 5

Evaluate U.S. counterterrorism policy. To what extent might counterterrorism policies that infringe on civil liberties be necessary and justifiable? How should the United States coordinate efforts with partners as part of its counterterrorism strategy?

- What are some of the key tools of counterterrorism?
- What is the difference between counterterrorism tactics and counterterrorism strategy?
- What is the most effective way to address state-sponsored terrorism while maintaining stability?
- What should governments do to make their populations less vulnerable to attacks?
- What terrorism trends have emerged in the post-9/11 world?

Question 6

Assess the extent to which the United States has been successful in combating terrorism since 9/11? How has the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) been used by the United States to fight terror? Provide specific examples. What are some of the key concerns related to the AUMF?

- What is being done to combat terrorism?
- How do terrorist groups get their funding?
- Why is cutting off funding for terrorism so important? Why is it so difficult?
- In what ways have terrorist tactics and strategies changed over time?
- What are some possible reasons for the change in terrorist tactics?
- What is the trend in terms of the cost of conducting terror attacks?