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To cite this article: Ian Turner (04 Jun 2026): Defining terrorism in the UK and the proscription of Palestine Action: a critical legal assessment, The International Journal of Human Rights, DOI: [10.1080/13642987.2026.2680567](https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2026.2680567)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2026.2680567>



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Published online: 04 Jun 2026.



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Defining terrorism in the UK and the proscription of Palestine Action: a critical legal assessment

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ABSTRACT

In June 2025, the former Secretary of State for the Home Department ('Home Secretary'), Yvette Cooper, announced that the British government wished to proscribe Palestine Action. The decision to finally proscribe Palestine Action had come when two of its activists had broken into RAF Brize Norton, in Oxfordshire, spraying red paint into the turbines of two Voyager aircraft and causing £7m worth of damage. The UK government has asserted that the proscription of Palestine Action must not deter people from protesting in support of pro-Palestinian groups and/or in opposition to the actions of the Israeli government; the right to peaceful protest is unaffected by the ban. However, since June 2025, about 2000 people have been arrested, protesting the proscription. The decision to ban Palestine Action means that there are now 98 organisations that are proscribed in the UK. What is unique about the proscription of Palestine Action is that, unlike the other 97 banned groups, the modus operandi of Palestine Action is not a commitment to violence against people: they are a direct-action protest group. Should serious damage against property be included in the legal definition of terrorism in the UK, justifying the proscription of Palestine Action?

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 17 February 2026
Accepted 21 May 2026

KEYWORDS

Palestine Action; counter-terrorism; proscription; definition of terrorism; critical legal theory

Introduction

In March 2025, the UK's Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC) decided that the political group 'Palestine Action' had met the legal threshold of proscription, the process whereby groups suspected of terrorism are banned (Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre, 2025). Later, in June 2025, the Secretary of State for the Home Department ('Home Secretary') announced that the British government wished to proscribe Palestine Action (Home Office, 2025b). A draft proscription order was then laid before the UK Parliament, which that Legislature later passed. The government's decision to finally proscribe Palestine Action had come in June 2025, when two of its activists had broken into RAF Brize Norton, in Oxfordshire, spraying red paint into the turbines of two Voyager aircraft and causing £7m worth of damage (Sabbagh, 2025).

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In a tweet, on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter), the UK's current Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, Jonathan Hall KC stated: 'Palestine Action and their cause are strongly aligned to lawful protest activity. Proscription in my view is within the bounds of acceptability, but I think there is a strong persuasive burden on government to demonstrate that protest is not a target' (Jonathan Hall, 2025c). The UK government has asserted that the proscription of Palestine Action must not deter people from protesting in support of pro-Palestinian groups and/or in opposition to the actions of the Israeli government; the right to peaceful protest is unaffected by the ban (UK Parliament, 2025). However, since June 2025: 532 people were arrested, protesting the proscription, in London in August 2025; 425 people were arrested in London in September 2025 and nearly 500 people were arrested in London in October 2025. At the latter demonstration, the youngest person arrested was 18, the oldest 89 (Vinter & Boyd, 2025). The United Nations' High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Turk, has claimed that the proscription is 'disproportionate and unnecessary':

[The ban] limits the rights of many people involved with and supportive of Palestine Action who have not themselves engaged in any underlying criminal activity but rather exercised their rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association ... As such, it appears to constitute an impermissible restriction on those rights that is at odds with the UK's obligations under international human rights law. (United Nations, 2025b)

The High Court of England and Wales seemingly agreed, in granting a judicial review of the Home Secretary's decision, in February 2026: *Rex (Huda Ammori) v Secretary of State for the Home Department*.¹ The proscription of Palestine Action, affecting not only the group's initial members and supporters, but also those subsequently arrested for protesting against the ban, was a disproportionate interference with freedom of expression and assembly, as per Articles 10 and 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).² (The ECHR is applied in UK law by virtue of s.1 of the Human Rights Act 1998.) However, as the British Home Secretary wishes to appeal the decision of the High Court to the Court of Appeal, the proscription of Palestine Action remains.

Banning Palestine Action means that there are 98 organisations that are proscribed in the UK (Home Office, 2025a). These include: groups linked to terrorism in Northern Ireland, such as the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA); Islamist terror groups, such as Al-Qaida and Boko Haram; groups committed to an armed resistance against Israel, such as Hamas and Hizballah; as well as groups committed to a separate Basque state in Southern France and Northern Spain, such as Euskadi ta Askatasuna (ETA). What is unique about the proscription of Palestine Action is that, unlike the other 97 banned groups in the UK, the modus operandi of Palestine Action is not a commitment to violence against people: they are a direct-action protest group. Should serious damage to property, in itself, engage the legal definition of terrorism in the UK, justifying the proscription of Palestine Action?

The UK has a plethora of counter-terror law passed since 2000. A too wide a definition of terrorism in the UK unnecessarily sweeps up people into the terror net, for whom this web was clearly not intended. In July 2025, the UK's Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, Jonathan Hall KC, also reported on the use of the Schedule 7 powers in the Terrorism Act 2000, against Ernest Moret, in April 2023. Hall warned that the definition of terrorism in the UK carried the risk that terrorism powers may be exercised in cases

which fell outside what would generally be considered terrorism (Jonathan Hall, 2025a). Once suspects are enmeshed into the UK terror net, they are subject to extra-ordinary measures. For example, the maximum pre-charge detention period for terror suspects in the UK is 14 days, as per s.43(1) of the Terrorism Act 2000,³ whereas, in England and Wales, the maximum pre-charge detention period, for non-terror related offences, in ss.41 and 42 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, is 72 h. In his annual report on the operation of the Terrorism Acts in 2022, which was first published in July 2025, Jonathan Hall KC also noted that 219 terrorism-related arrests in 2023 represented ‘a material increase on earlier years (190 in 2020, 185 in 2021, 167 in 2022)’ (Jonathan Hall, 2025b). Is this (partly) explained by an overly wide legal definition of terrorism in the UK? It is perhaps no surprise, therefore, that, in 2013, in *Regina v Gul*⁴ the UK’s Supreme Court said: ‘While acknowledging that the issue is ultimately one for Parliament, we should record our view that the concerns and suggestions about the width of the statutory definition [of terrorism] ... merit serious consideration’.⁵ Indeed, the police powers of terror arrest are found in s.41(1) of the Terrorism Act 2000: ‘A constable may arrest without a warrant a person whom he reasonably suspects to be a terrorist’. What is a ‘terrorist’ in UK law? Simplistically, a terrorist is a person who is or has been ‘concerned in the commission, preparation or instigation of acts of terrorism’, according to s.40(1)(b). Terrorism *per se* is not a criminal offence in the UK. Section 1 of the Terrorism Act 2000, which is examined below, is simply a source of the legal definition in the UK. Thus, the police have the powers to arrest someone, as per s.41(1), who has not actually committed a criminal offence. Is this a sufficiently demanding test to deprive a person of their liberty? (Rowe, 2001)⁶

Duties to counter terrorism

For reasons of public safety, special criminal laws dealing with terror activity are justified. I do think people would agree that criminal activity targeted at the state and/or its people should be accorded special status, triggering wider powers of arrest and detention, as well as harsher punishments for those convicted. Following the ‘9/11’ terrorist attacks on the United States, in 2001, the United Nations (UN) Security Council adopted Resolution 1373 (2001). Clause 2(e) obliges states to criminalise the financing, planning, preparation and perpetration of terrorist acts through their domestic laws, including defining appropriate punishments.

Many of the principles identified by the UN to counter terrorism are contained in its *Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy* (2006) which was unanimously adopted by the General Assembly. The strategy is composed of four pillars, including measures to address the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism and measures to prevent and combat terrorism (General Assembly, 2006b). Countering terrorism has not only been the obligation of the international community. At regional level, for example, there is the European Union (EU). The EU calls on its member states to adopt a series of anti-terrorism measures, in its *Counter Terrorism Strategy* (2005). This commits Member States to combat terrorism globally so that European citizens can ‘live in an area of freedom, security and justice’. The strategy is built around four strands: ‘Prevent’, preventing people from turning to terrorism; ‘Protect’, protecting citizens and critical infrastructure by reducing vulnerabilities to attack; ‘Pursue’, pursuing and

investigating terrorists and bringing them to justice; and ‘Respond’, managing and minimising the consequences of a terrorist attack (European Union, 2005). Although the UK left the EU in 2020, these principles are largely reflected in the UK’s strategy for combating terrorism, *Contest: the United Kingdom’s Strategy for Countering Terrorism* (2023), though domestically ‘Respond’ is replaced by the term ‘Prepare’. Contest states: ‘Our work to Prevent people from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism and Pursue terrorists to disrupt their plots is designed to reduce the threat. Our efforts to Protect against a terrorist attack reduce our vulnerability, and efforts to Prepare to mitigate the impact of any attack are designed to reduce the impact’ (HM Government, 2023).

However, crimes of terrorism should not become normalised and/or utilised as means of state repression. There can sometimes be a fine line between acts of terrorism and public disorder, but, wherever possible, terrorism should be reserved for existential threats to state security. Thus, there is a corresponding obligation imposed on member states of the UN, for example, to respect human rights, such as the UN General Assembly’s *The Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms While Countering Terrorism* (2005) (General Assembly, 2006a). Has the UK government ignored these principles, or attached insufficient weight to them, in proscribing Palestine Action? Often a respect for the human rights of the individual is premised on the basis that it prevents terrorism: a disregard for fundamental freedoms in countering terrorism in fact increases the risk of terrorism, thus making states less safe. In reference to the UK’s history of preventing terrorism in Northern Ireland, for example, a former UN Special Rapporteur on Counter Terrorism and Human Rights, Ben Emmerson QC, has said: ‘Human rights-abusive policies increase the presence of terrorism. You only have to look at the recent past in Northern Ireland where internment without trial turned the IRA [Irish Republican Army] from a group with little support into a much larger organisation’ (Bowcott, 2012). Also, one only has to question whether America’s so-called ‘War on Terror’ after the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington, in 2001, made the United States less safe? The extraordinary rendition of suspected Islamist terrorists to Guantanamo Bay, for torture, without the due process of law, surely contributed to the rise of ISIL (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), from 2013, and its public beheading of American citizens, such as James Foley and Steven Sotloff, in Guantanamo Bay style jumpsuits? (Lewis, 2024) Indeed, is Israel’s military response to the murder of its citizens by Hamas on 7 October 2023 – killing about 70,000 Palestinian civilians in Gaza (Graham-Harrison, 2026) – encouraging the further terrorisation of Israel and its citizens? As yet, there is little evidence that the proscription of Palestine Action has made the organisation more hardline and militant, but there is little doubt that the group’s proscription has increased its notoriety: before the ban hardly anyone had ever heard of them (Dodd & Butterly, 2025).

UK counter-terror law: proscription

The UK’s principal counter-terror statute is the Terrorism Act 2000. This legislation outlaws, for example: membership of a proscribed terrorist organisation; supporting a proscribed terrorist organisation; and wearing uniforms and/or publishing images in a public place, suggestive of membership and support of a proscribed terrorist organisation, as per ss.11, 12 and 13 respectively. Membership of a proscribed terrorist

organisation, as well as supporting a proscribed terrorist organisation, are particularly serious criminal offences; the punishments for these crimes were increased to a maximum period of imprisonment of 14 years in s.26 of the Counter-Terrorism and Sentencing Act 2021. (Those individuals who have been arrested protesting the proscription of Palestine Action have invariably been arrested on suspicion of violating the less serious crime in s.13; Metropolitan Police, 2025⁷). Indeed, the potential reach of proscription goes further than ss.11, 12 and 13 of the Terrorism Act 2000, since any action taken for the benefit of a proscribed organisation is deemed to be an act for the purposes of terrorism. Thus, booking a taxi, if done for the benefit of a proscribed group, could be ‘preparation of terrorist acts’, as per s.5(1) of the Terrorism Act 2006 (Independent Commission on UK Counter-Terrorism Law, Policy and Practice, 2025). According to s.5(3), this offence carries a maximum life sentence.

For Palestine Action to be proscribed, the criteria within s.3(4) of the Terrorism Act 2000 must be satisfied: the Home Secretary has the power to ban a group, approved by Parliament, only if they believe the group ‘is concerned in terrorism’. If this statutory test has been met, the Home Secretary must then consider the proportionality of the proscription. Five factors are taken into account when considering the proportionality of a proscription: the nature and scale of an organisation’s activities; the specific threat that it poses to the UK; the specific threat that it poses to British nationals overseas; the extent of the organisation’s presence in the UK; and the need to support other members of the international community in the global fight against terrorism (Home Office, 2025a). Is Palestine Action ‘concerned in terrorism’? First, an analysis of the UK definition is required, which is the purpose of the next section.

Defining terrorism in the UK and its application to the proscription of Palestine action

Section 1 of the Terrorism Act 2000 is the source of the legal definition of terrorism in the UK. In 2007, the then UK Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, Lord Carlile of Berriew QC, undertook a review of the UK’s legal definition of terrorism, offering little encouragement for reform (Lord Carlile of Berriew QC, 2007). Lord Carlile concluded: there was no single definition of terrorism that commanded full international approval; the risks posed by terrorism and its nature as crime were sufficient to necessitate proportional special laws to assist prevention, disruption and detection; a definition of terrorism was useful as part of such laws; the current definition in the Terrorism Act 2000 was consistent with international comparators and treaties; and it was ‘useful and broadly fit for purpose, subject to some alteration’ (Lord Carlile of Berriew QC, 2007). (I explore some of these suggestions for reform below.)

There are three elements contained in s.1, which combined, define terrorism in the UK. First, in s.1(1)(b), there must be the use or threat of action which is designed to influence the government or an international governmental organisation or to intimidate the public or a section of the public. Thus, if the target of the pressure for change is government, then there is a lower bar – ‘influence’ – than that for the public – ‘intimidate’. Secondly, in s.1(1)(c), the use or threat of action is made for the purpose of advancing a political, religious, racial or ideological cause. Finally, in s.1(2), action includes serious violence against a person, endangering life, other than that of the person committing

the action, as well as serious damage to property. ‘Influence’ and ‘intimidate’, in s.1(2), are not required where the use or threat of action involves the use of firearms or explosives: s.1(3). The definition has extra-territorial effect: s.1(4).

It will be recalled that the UK government decided to ban Palestine Action in June 2025 after its activists had admitted to breaking into RAF Brize Norton, in Oxfordshire, causing £7m worth of damage. Does this harm meet the statutory test of ‘concerned in terrorism’, as per s.3(4) of the Terrorism Act 2000? £7m of damage is certainly ‘serious damage to property’, but is one incident of property damage sufficient to proscribe a whole political group? Schmid doubts whether a single act of violence can create a climate of fear to constitute terrorism (Schmid, 2011). Prior to the UK’s government’s decision to proscribe Palestine Action, the UK’s JTAC had reported, in March 2025: ‘In support of its aims the group primarily uses direct action tactics *the majority of which would not constitute an act of terrorism* [my italics] as defined under Section 1 of the Terrorism Act 2000, on the basis that any damage to property is typically more minor. Common tactics include graffiti, petty vandalism, occupation and lock-ons’ (Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre, 2025). However, the JTAC report does reference other destruction of property by Palestine Action, such as the £1m of damage against the defence manufacturer, Thales, in Glasgow, in June 2022 (Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre, 2025).⁸ Combined, therefore – the harms in Glasgow in 2022 and Oxfordshire in 2025 – constitute ‘serious damage to property’, on more than occasion; this element of the statutory threshold for proscription has been met.

Furthermore, is the group seeking to ‘influence’ government or ‘intimidate the public’? and, in doing so, advancing a political, religious, racial or ideological cause? I visited the Palestine Action website to discover the group’s objectives but, since the group is now proscribed in the UK, the content displayed there was blank. Since the Counter-Terrorism and Border Act 2019, it is now an offence, contrary to s.3, to view terror material over the internet. Was I committing a criminal offence in even trying to access the website of Palestine Action, if only to establish whether they were advancing a political, religious, racial or ideological cause? Surely, to presume I was committing a criminal offence, is absurd – I hope. According to other sources on the internet, such as the UK’s JTAC, Palestine Action is ‘a pro-Palestinian group with the stated aim to support Palestinian sovereignty by seeking to halt the sale and export of military equipment to Israel’ (Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre, 2025). This must satisfy the motives of seeking to ‘influence’ government and, in doing so, is for political reasons. Next, is the proscription proportionate? The (then) UK Home Secretary, Yvette Cooper, further justified the ban of Palestine Action thus:

The disgraceful attack on Brize Norton ... is the latest in a long history of unacceptable criminal damage committed by Palestine Action ... Since its inception in 2020, Palestine Action has orchestrated a nationwide campaign of direct criminal action against businesses and institutions, including key national infrastructure and defence firms that provide services and supplies to support Ukraine, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), “Five Eyes” allies and the UK defence enterprise. Its activity has increased in frequency and severity since the start of 2024 and its methods have become more aggressive, with its members demonstrating a willingness to use violence ... The seriousness of these attacks includes the extent and nature of damage caused, including to targets affecting UK national security, and the impact on innocent members of the public fleeing for safety ... The extent of damage across these ... attacks, spreading the length and breadth of the UK, runs into the millions

of pounds ... Palestine Action's online presence has enabled the organisation to galvanise support, recruit and train members across the UK to take part in criminal activity and raise considerable funds through online donations. The group has a footprint in all 45 policing regions in the UK and has pledged to escalate its campaign. (UK Parliament, 2025)

The nature and scale of Palestine Action's activities, the specific threat that it poses to the UK in, say, damaging key defence property, as well as its prevalence across the country, suggests that its proscription is *prima facie* proportionate. (The High Court in *Huda Ammori* disagrees but this is subject to an appeal to the Court of Appeal – see above.) Indeed, Palestine Action is not a disparate political organisation – it is well organised – and the more direct elements of the group employ covert tactics, confirmed by the *Palestine Action Underground Manual* (2023), encouraging the creation of cells (Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre, 2025).

However, should Palestine Action, a group eschewing serious violence, even any violence, against people, be proscribed? Is it 'concerned in terrorism', as ordinarily understood? Indeed, in his report on the use of Schedule 7 powers against Ernest Moret, in April 2023, Jonathan Hall KC also observed that there were no clear dividing lines between terrorism and violent activism or protest (Jonathan Hall, 2025a). He noted that there had been many incidents of ideologically motivated public violence in the UK which could, in principle, have fallen within the definition of terrorism, such as the anti-vaccine violence in 2021. In practice, however, these had not been treated as terrorism. Instead, violent protests and violent activism were dealt with as a facet of public order policing and maintaining 'the King's Peace' (Jonathan Hall, 2025a). Why not here?

The definition of terrorism in the UK and the proscription of Palestine action: a critical legal assessment

In this section there will be a further analysis of the definition of terrorism in the UK, and its application to the proscription of Palestine Action, but from a critical legal perspective. Particular consideration will be paid to the inclusion of property damage in the terror definition. First, what is critical legal theory? Veitch *et al* posit: 'The object of critique is to expose ... contradictions, between the equality that law promises and the vast inequality in the material distributions of wealth ... between the promise of equal opportunity and the reality of discrimination on grounds of gender, race, etc.' (Veitch et al., 2018). There is a diversity of opinion within the umbrella term of critical legal theory: Critical Legal Studies, feminist jurisprudence, Queer Theory, Critical Race Theory, Critical Legal Education, Critical Legal Practice, law and literature etc. (see, for example: Douzinas & Gearey, 2005). But what looms large over all these critical legal perspectives is probably Karl Marx, 1818–1883, and his fellow 'Marxist', Friedrich Engels, 1820–1895. For Marx and Engels, the state and therefore its law were merely instruments of capitalism to oppress the working class and entrench its power (Collins, 1982, chapter 2). Maybe the ban on Palestine Action is merely an act of capitalist self-preservation and the protection of corporate property in particular? Before I assess the inclusion of property damage, I outline other possible concerns with the definition of terror in the UK from a critical legal perspective.

The absence of a ‘just cause’/‘freedom fighter’ defence

The legal definition of terrorism in the UK purports to be ideologically neutral. In the Court of Appeal, in *Regina v F*,⁹ the judge observed:

As a matter of ordinary language, the definition would seem to cover any violence or damage to property if it is carried out with a view to influencing a government or IGO in order to advance a very wide range of causes. Thus, it would appear to extend to military or quasi-military activity aimed at bringing down a foreign government, even where that activity is approved (officially or unofficially) by the UK government.¹⁰

Prima facie the neutrality of the UK definition is to be welcomed. But, from the perspective of critical legal theory, it does mean that a ‘just cause’/‘freedom fighter’ defence is absent. In *F*, therefore, it was no excuse for the defendant to target the (then) tyranny of the Colonel Qaddafi regime in Libya. (Later, in 2011, the UK was even an international partner in military intervention in Libya. The original NATO operation had been to enforce a no-fly zone over Libya and protect civilians but regime change was an unintended – intended? – consequence; see, for example, Alan Greene, 2017.) Relatedly, the UK definition does not make a distinction between civilian and military targets; should freedom fighters who do not target civilians, leaving them in peace, be labelled as terrorists? (see, for example, Schmid, 2004b). In *Regina v Gul*,¹¹ the UK Supreme Court also held that military action by non-state armed groups against an invading power in a non-international armed conflict still constituted an act of terrorism for the purposes of domestic law. This is incompatible with the principles of International Humanitarian Law (IHL). Following *Gul*, Saul observes: ‘All war fighting thus becomes “terrorism”, undermining incentives for non-state actor armed groups to comply with IHL, for there is no longer any difference between attacking civilians or the military’ (Saul, 2014). Furthermore, in International Human Rights Law (IHRL), the right of peoples to self-determination is front and centre of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR) and the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR), as per their respective Article 1s. Following World War II, for example, would countries as diverse as Algeria, Cyprus, Israel and Kenya have been granted independence from their colonial overlords but for the nationalist revolutionary liberation that had ensued? (see, for example, Hoffman, 2017) Would Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress (ANC) have been able to overturn the apartheid regime operated by a white, minority government in South Africa but for the revolutionary freedom that had occurred?¹² Palestine Action and its supporters want to draw public attention to Israel’s genocide in Gaza (as found by the United Nations, 2025a) as well as the UK government’s possible complicity in this atrocity. But, the ‘justice’ of the Palestinian cause is irrelevant to the definition of terrorism.

The emphasis on non-state actors: who is the terroriser?

Although the legal definition of terrorism in the UK does not expressly exclude state and state sponsored terrorism, rarely do we apply the definition to states’ conduct (Walker, 2007). States define the criminal law, so the question arises whether states can commit crime? If terrorism is a crime, then, if states are committing terror, are they acting lawfully? (Schmid, 2004a) Historically, the origins of the term terrorism reflect the aftermath

of the French Revolution – the ‘Reign of Terror’, of 1793 and 1794 – as an expression of state violence (Hoffman, 2017, p. 3). Then, of course, from the twentieth century who can forget the horrors committed by the regimes of Josef Stalin and Adolf Hitler in the 1930s and 1940s: arbitrary killings, enforced disappearances, torture and medical experimentation, slavery etc? Coincidentally, the day I am literally writing this sentence, 6 August 2025, is the 80th anniversary of America dropping a nuclear bomb on Hiroshima. For many on the Left, the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in Japan, in August 1945, which killed an estimated 125,000 people (Samson, 2020), were acts of terror committed by the Americans (Holmes, 2002). In IHL, acts of violence, during armed conflict, whose primary purpose is to spread terror amongst a civilian population, infringe Article 51(2) of Protocol I and Article 13(2) of Protocol II of the Geneva Conventions. Thus, about forty years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in 1986, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled that America had been involved in the commission of acts of terrorism in Nicaragua: *Case Concerning Military and Paramilitary Activities In and Against Nicaragua (Nicaragua v United States of America)*.¹³ This case concerned the armed conflict in Nicaragua, following the cessation of a dictatorship that had ruled the country between 1937 and 1979. America had supported ‘the Contras’, some of whom were loyal to the former dictatorship, in their armed rebellion against the then government, by e.g. training, arming, equipping, financing and supplying the Contra forces. The ICJ held that America’s support for the Contras was in breach of its obligations under customary international law not to intervene in the affairs of another state.¹⁴ The ICJ also found that the Contras had been engaged in acts of terrorism against Nicaraguan civilians, in violation of principles of IHL. In so doing, the court decided that, by producing a manual entitled *Operaciones Sicologicas en Guerra de Guerrillas (Psychological Operations in Guerrilla Warfare)* and disseminating it to Contra forces, America had encouraged the Contra’s terrorisation of Nicaraguan civilians.¹⁵ Indeed, at the time of writing, America and Israel are engaged in armed conflict with Iran. In the absence of America and Israel neither acting in self-defence, as per Article 51 of the UN Charter, nor acting with the approval of the UN Security Council, as per Article 42 of the UN Charter, are these other examples of state terrorism? Thus, rather than the emphasis on non-state actors, such as Palestine Action and its supporters, being labelled as terrorists, maybe the label in the UK should be used more against states, such as Israel and the West supporting it? The ICJ has found against Israel after all, because of its atrocities in Gaza: *Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v Israel)*.¹⁶

The litigants to disputes in Public International Law (PIL), before the ICJ, are states, but in International Criminal Law (ICL), it is the individuals in power, not states, who are tried as defendants. Terrorism is not a distinct crime of international concern within the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) – a proposal to include terrorism was rejected in 1998 because of a lack of agreement surrounding the term (Saul, 2019) – but terrorism can engage the definitions of other crimes within the Rome Statute, such as war crimes and crimes against humanity (see, for example, Saul, 2020, chapter 18). (In 2003, terrorising civilians during armed conflict did constitute a war crime at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in *Prosecutor v Galic*.¹⁷ Here there had included a campaign of sniping and shelling civilians, in violation of Article 51(2) of Protocol I of the Geneva Conventions.¹⁸) Is it any surprise to

learn, therefore, that the ICC has issued arrest warrants against senior Israeli officials? (International Criminal Court, 2024) Again, this is irrelevant to the UK definition of terrorism and the conduct of Palestine Action.

The state has a monopoly over the terror narrative: ‘influence’ v ‘intimidate’

Continuing the critical analysis of the definition of terrorism in the UK, and the emphasis on terrorism committed by non-state actors, there is also the related issue of the state monopolising the terror narrative. The terrorist label bestows considerable authority on the individual doing the categorising (Greene, 2017). For Schmidt, states have the greatest ‘definition power’ (especially in those countries where rulers manage to suppress political opposition, including the television, newspaper and social media; Schmid, 2023). Does this explain why, in the UK definition, the bar for government – ‘influence’ – is lower than that for the public – ‘intimidate’?

For comparison, at the international level, the United Nations’ *Draft Comprehensive Convention Against International Terrorism* (2002) defines terrorism, in Article 2(1), as including ‘to compel a Government or an international organization’. ‘Compel’ is, of course, a higher standard than ‘influence’. This UN Convention is yet to be agreed, because of e.g. international disagreement surrounding the status of freedom fighters. However, the same words – ‘compel a Government’ – have been adopted by the United Nations Security Council, for example, in its Resolution 1566 (2004). (This resolution is non-binding, but it has been endorsed by many UN human rights bodies; Saul, 2014.) Indeed, the European Union even adopts a higher standard than compel: ‘unduly compel’, in Article 3(2)(b) of its Directive 2017/541 on combating terrorism, as does the Council of Europe in its *Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism*, 2005. In addition to ‘unduly compel’, the latter also uses the phrase ‘seriously intimidate’. Is ‘influence’ a too low a standard to constitute terrorism in the UK? In 2007, the then UK Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, Lord Carlile of Berriew QC, undertook a review of the UK’s legal definition of terrorism, as we know. Lord Carlile concluded that ‘influence’ set the bar too low; for terrorism to arise there should be the intention to intimidate the target audience (Lord Carlile of Berriew QC, 2007). And, in 2014, in the annual review of the operation of the Terrorism Acts in 2013, the then Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation in the UK, David Anderson QC, expressed similar concern about ‘influence’. ‘Influence’ had drawn the definition so broadly it could mean political journalists and bloggers were subject to the full range of anti-terrorism powers if they threatened to publish something that the authorities thought may be dangerous to life, public health or public safety, or a campaigner who voiced religious objections to a vaccination campaign on the grounds that it was a danger to public health (David Anderson, 2014). And what about union disputes involving keyworkers, such as doctors and nurses? If these staff went on strike over pay, for example, they would be endangering life. This would be sufficient to constitute terrorism in the UK, too (see Rowe, 2001). However, in 2016, in the Court of Appeal, in *Regina (Miranda) v Secretary of State for the Home Department*,¹⁹ Lord Dyson noted:

Terrorism as it is ordinarily understood is the attempt to advance some political or religious cause not by persuasion but by violence, the endangerment of life etc. To describe a

newspaper writing political stories that ... oppose government policy on vaccination as committing an act of terrorism is to use the word terrorism in a way that bears no relationship to any ordinary understanding of the concept.²⁰

Thus, since *Miranda*, it has been necessary to read in some mental element on the part of the offender, that is, either intention or at least recklessness to engage in terrorism.²¹ So, even where persons are suspected of influencing the government, for political ends, such as doctors and nurses on strike, putting patient care at risk, they cannot be ‘accidental terrorists’ in the absence of either intention or recklessness. That said, in his annual review of the operation of the Terrorism Acts in 2015, David Anderson QC said that, ‘though welcome’, the effect of the Court of Appeal’s interpretation in *Miranda* was ‘limited’ (David Anderson, 2016). The legal definition of terrorism in the UK was still ‘overbroad’, affording Ministers, prosecutors and the police excessive powers (David Anderson, 2016). The law thrives on certainty, especially the criminal law; individuals should not be punished for breaching unclear and ambiguous laws: Article 7 of the ECHR. Is it right, therefore, to proscribe Palestine Action, let alone prosecute protestors in support of it, under anti-terror legislation, when the UK definition, in law, could be clearer and/or less general?

The inclusion of property damage in the UK definition

In particular, I wish to examine the inclusion of ‘serious damage to property’ in the UK terror definition. Property damage is the principal reason for proscribing Palestine Action, it seems. No-one is denying that Palestine Action’s damage to property is criminal (as well as Palestine Action’s broader public disorder), but should it be labelled as ‘terrorism’? In 2007, in undertaking a review of the UK’s legal definition of terrorism, Lord Carlile of Berriew QC ‘[had] no doubt that offences against property should continue to fall within the definition of terrorist acts’ (Lord Carlile of Berriew QC, 2007). But Lord Carlile gave examples of threatening either to explode bombs on the London underground or damage the gas and electricity systems of cities and towns (Lord Carlile of Berriew QC, 2007). Indeed, academic experts on counter-terror law, such as Ben Saul, have doubted the mere inclusion of property damage, especially if terrorism is regarded as a serious violator of human rights, such as the protection of life and security of person. (Saul, 2015; for example, Article 2 of the Council of Europe’s *Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism* obliges states to prevent acts of terror ‘and their negative effects ... in particular the right to life’.) In Australia, for example, acts of terrorism in s.100.1(3) of the Criminal Code Act 1995 include ‘advocacy, protest, dissent or industrial action’ where there is intent to cause serious harm to people; intent to cause serious harm to property alone is excluded.

At international level, whilst there is a lack of consensus surrounding the terrorism/freedom fighter distinction, countries are seemingly united in their condemnation of acts of terrorism where there are especial aggravating factors, such as nuclear terrorism e.g. *International Convention for the Suppression of Nuclear Terrorism* (2005) and the use of explosives e.g. the *International Convention for the Suppression of Terrorist Bombings* (1997). These are qualitatively different to the criminal damage caused by Palestine Action.²² Moreover, again at international level, there is the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1566 (2004). Clause 3 impliedly excludes property damage from

definitions of terrorism, because it is not expressly referenced. Is it any surprise, therefore, that several United Nations' human rights experts, including Irene Khan, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression, and Gino Comero, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association, have urged the UK government to desist from proscribing Palestine Action. They believe that the ban, premised on 'serious damage to property', is at odds with international standards: 'We are concerned at the unjustified labelling of a political protest movement as "terrorist" ... According to international standards, acts of protest that damage property, but are not intended to kill or injure people, should not be treated as terrorism' (United Nations, 2025c).

Prima facie, a critical legal assessment of the definition of terrorism in the UK suggests reform. The implications of this for the ban on Palestine Action are significant. The October 2025 demonstration against the ban on Palestine Action in London, where nearly 500 people were arrested, went ahead despite pleas from London's Metropolitan Police to protestors to call off their demonstration; this was because of policing considerations following a terror attack on a synagogue in Manchester (not London) a couple of days before (Quinn, 2025). Protesting against Israel days after two people from the Jewish community had been murdered was insensitive, if not outrageous. However, with respect, have we plumbed the depths of the UK terror definition that we now expect those whom we label as supporters of terrorism to pack up and return at a more convenient time? That said, is such a conclusion about the need to reconsider the ban on Palestine Action, and by implication the definition of terrorism in the UK, naturally inevitable, since many on the Left have been opposed to the creation of the state of Israel and its subsequent suppression of Palestinians, since Israel's inception in 1948? Are we not locked, therefore, in an entrenched, binary debate, fuelled by those with the 'definition power'? After 9/11, for example, the noted scholar, Noam Chomsky, observed: 'If somebody carries out terror against us or against our allies, it's terror, but if we carry out terror or our allies do, maybe much worse terror, against someone else, it's not terror, it's counterterror or it's a just war' (Chomsky, 2003). Perhaps we should consider a compromise definition of terrorism for the UK to help navigate ourselves out of this conceptual 'impasse'?

A compromise definition of terrorism for the UK?

From what has been said previously, a natural compromise definition of terrorism for the UK must be one that does not include damage to property; if property damage is to be included in the definition, then it should be qualified by an additional harm to people. In the pioneering *Defining Terrorism in International Law*, Ben Saul famously deduced a definition of terrorism 'based on the international community's identification of the underlying wrongfulness of international terrorism' (Saul, 2010). Saul did include property damage but this alone was not sufficient: '(1) Any serious, violent, criminal act intended to cause death or serious bodily injury, or to endanger life, including by acts against property' (Saul, 2010). So, if damage to property is to be included in the UK definition, then it must also include an intent to cause serious harm to people, or at the very least be dangerous to human life. But do we include all human life in this

compromise definition, where property has been damaged? Most of contemporary terrorism is not a fight against the armed forces of an opponent; rather, it is designed chiefly against civilian targets. Schmid says:

A military pilot is bound to adhere to the laws of war and risks punishment if he violates these laws. A terrorist, on the other hand, seeks out civilian targets deliberately, as he sees benefits in not adhering to the rules of warfare. Terrorism is for him a means to his end. In that, he resembles a war criminal who has no sense of honour, no sense of mercy, no sense of fairness, no sense of moral restraint and possibly not even a sense of his acts' illegality. (Schmid, 2011)

If we do include, therefore, property damage in the legal definition of terrorism in the UK, then, at most, the addition of targeting civilians (either in or outside armed conflict), with the intent to cause serious harm or endanger life, is surely an acceptable compromise. One of the justifications given by the British government for the proscription of Palestine Action was the effect the property damage had on national security. Does the harm caused to two Voyager aircraft at RAF Brize Norton endanger life? It is conceivable that this limitation on Britain's defence capability could cause serious harm to civilians, in undermining the country's ability to protect those at risk, but the nexus between the property damage committed by Palestine Action and any subsequent endangerment to life is surely far too remote to be of any consequence. Notably, this redrafting of the UK terror definition would still preclude the direct action of Palestine Action.

Conclusion

From a critical legal perspective, the definition of terrorism in the UK is problematic for several reasons, one of which is the inclusion of property damage. This is the principal reason for proscribing Palestine Action. However, the mere damage to property is insufficient to engage Palestine Action in the UK terror net: damage to property must still be serious. Still, should property damage, however serious, be sufficient, in itself, to constitute terrorism in the UK? I claim not: property damage should be coupled with an intent to cause harm and/or endanger the lives of civilians. If Palestine Action's property violence risks serious harm to civilians, as in the attacks at RAF Brize Norton in June 2025, then this risk is surely too small to be of any significance. Under the reconstituted definition presented here, Palestine Action would no longer be 'concerned in terrorism', as per s.3(4) of the Terrorism Act 2000. The group would still be committing a crime – we would not be condoning their violence – but their proscription and any subsequent convictions of its members and supporters for terror offences would not be lawful.

Notes

1. [2026] EWHC 292 (Admin). There is separate judicial review litigation in Scotland: Siddique (2025).
2. [2026] EWHC 292 (Admin) [138].
3. The maximum pre-charge detention period was increased to 28 days in the Criminal Justice Act 2003 but was reduced to 14 days in the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012.
4. [2013] UKSC 64.
5. [2013] UKSC 64 [62].

6. However, there is an offence of ‘acts preparatory to terrorism’, as per s.5(1) of the Terrorism Act 2006. Does this criminalise the mere act of terrorism in s.1 of the Terrorism Act 2000?
7. The maximum sentence for a breach of s.13 is only six months, but the offence is effectively one of strict liability – see: Lee (2024).
8. However, notwithstanding the violence in Glasgow, Scotland, in June 2022, interestingly the devolved government in Scotland does not believe that Palestine Action has actually met the threshold for being proscribed, it being ‘not close’ to a terror group: Morrison (2025). This means that the national, UK government in London is at odds with their counterparts in Scotland.
9. [2007] EWCA Crim 243.
10. [2007] EWCA Crim 243 [9].
11. [2013] UKSC 64.
12. See, for example, Hoffman (2017, p. 59). That said, during the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela, between 1962 and 1990, the armed wing of the ANC did engage in an indiscriminate bombing of a shopping centre in Durban in 1985, in which five people were killed. Can the ANC therefore claim that they were only freedom fighters? See Schmid (2004b).
13. (1986) ICJ Rep 14.
14. (1986) ICJ Rep 14 [292].
15. (1986) ICJ Rep 14 [292]. America ignored the ruling and used their influence as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council to thwart its further censorship. The irony that, following ‘9/11’, America was at the forefront of the ‘War on Terror’, but had previously been held liable by the ICJ for (indirect) acts of terrorism in Nicaragua, has not been lost on critical scholars, such as Noam Chomsky – see Chomsky (2003, p. 24).
16. <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/192>.
17. ICTY-98-28-T.
18. Interestingly, outside of armed conflict, in 2011, in *Prosecutor v Ayyash* STL-11-01/I/TC, the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) found that a customary law crime of transnational terrorism in peacetime did exist, to prosecute individuals for bombings in Lebanon in February 2005 – see, for example, Saul (2011).
19. [2016] EWCA Civ 6.
20. [2016] EWCA Civ 6 [48].
21. [2016] EWCA Civ 6 [56].
22. A comparison between these UN Conventions and the actions of Palestine Action may not be a fair one, since the former apply only transnationally, not domestically. Article 3 of the *International Convention for the Suppression of Terrorist Bombings* (1997) states: ‘This Convention shall not apply where the offence is committed within a single State, the alleged offender and the victims are nationals of that state, the alleged offender is found in the territory of that state ...’

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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