Since the 9/11 attacks in 2001, terrorism has been a key concern worldwide, with the US leading a War on Terror, and with continued attacks around the world by religious extremists. Are the terrorists simply fanatics to be defeated, or is terrorism a consequence of real global injustices? Can we prevent terrorism without undermining civil liberties?

Political violence has always been a feature of human society, but terrorism as we know it has its roots in the politics of the nineteenth and especially twentieth centuries, as typically small groups of radicals sought to unsettle states and rally support by bombing buildings, assassinating politicians and carrying out other acts of violence. In the period following the Second World War, the main form of terrorism became that of separatist groups or ‘national liberation struggles’ in the colonial and post-colonial world. Most prominently, these included the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), which fought Israel for a Palestinian homeland, and the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA), which fought Britain for a united and independent Ireland. There were formally similar conflicts in Spain, where ETA fought for independence for the Basque country, and in Sri Lanka, where the Tamil Tigers fought for a separate Tamil state. In each case, there was huge controversy about the legitimacy of the campaign, with the groups involved claiming to be waging a military struggle on behalf of their people against the injustice perpetrated by a more powerful state, and those states insisting that the groups were illegitimate or criminal, and not representative of the people they claimed to be fighting for. At this time, the use of the term ‘terrorist’ was disputed, and it was often said that ‘one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter’.

Terrorism today is perhaps even less straightforward. The most prominent terrorist group, al-Qaeda, does not claim a specific territory or make specific demands, and it sometimes appears to be a loose global network of Islamist terrorists rather than an organisation in the traditional sense. Though its leader Osama bin Laden has called for the USA to withdraw troops from the Islamic world, and al-Qaeda terrorists are assumed to be motivated in part by the continuing plight of the Palestinians, their public pronouncements often reflect a more general hostility to the West as such. Notably, however, today’s Islamist terrorists are often born or educated in the West, and have relatively privileged backgrounds, rather than having experienced first-hand the poverty and oppression often thought to lie behind terrorism.

Some argue that Islamism is simply a malevolent ideology, distorting true Muslim teachings, and must be defeated in a battle of ideas. Others insist that it can only be tackled in tandem with the resolution of global injustices. But for others, Islamist terror is best understood not as an alien threat, but as a violent reflection of the ideological uncertainty of the West itself, as demonstrated by Western states’ willingness to compromise civil liberties in the fight against terrorism, undermining freedom, the very thing they claim to be defending. There are many different positions and perspectives in the debate about terrorism and how to tackle it, and each reflects different ideas about mainstream society and politics as well as the terrorists themselves.