

ISRAEL-HAMAS WAR: HOW AFP IS USING THE WORD TERRORIST

In line with its mission to report the facts without passing judgement, AFP does not describe movements, groups, or individuals as terrorists unless it is in direct quotes or with attribution.

This is a long-standing policy at the Agency and is in line with the editorial policies of other international news agencies and major media, such as the BBC.

It is a rule that applies to the Agency's reporting in all coverage of politically motivated violence aimed at civilians.

The guidelines issued for the coverage of the war between Israel and Hamas are consistent with this long-standing policy.

Although the debate over the use of the word terrorist has resurfaced with the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October, it is an editorial rule that has been the subject of intense debate in the coverage of many other past mass casualty events.

These include bombings by the Provisional IRA in Northern Ireland; the attacks of 11 September 2001 in the United States; the killing of African-Americans by a white supremacist in South Carolina in 2015; the Paris attacks of 2015; the Easter Sunday bombings in Sri Lanka in 2019; and the Christchurch mosque killings of the same year.

AFP does not describe the perpetrators of such acts, past and present, as "terrorists". These include such groups as ETA, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the FARC, the Provisional IRA, Al-Qaeda, and the various groups that carried out attacks in Europe in the last century, including the Red Brigades, the Baader-Meinhof Gang and Action Directe.

This is a rule that we have been steadfast in respecting, even when our own colleagues were murdered.

Taliban gunmen shot dead AFP's senior reporter in Afghanistan, Sardar Ahmad, his wife and two of their children as they had dinner at a Kabul hotel in 2014. The Agency's chief photographer in Afghanistan, Shah Marai, was killed along with several other journalists by an Islamic State suicide bomber in 2018. Freelancer James Foley was kidnapped in 2012 while working for AFP in Syria and was murdered by the Islamic State two years later in a video that was posted online.

AFP reported the details of what happened to its colleagues, but these killings did not influence its policy regarding the use of the word terrorist.

Under its editorial guidelines, AFP will say that a group has been designated as terrorist by a government or an institution. This is the case for Hamas, which has been designated as "terrorist" by the United States, the United Kingdom, Israel and the European Union, among others, and this is a fact we quote in our stories. Likewise, we will quote public figures or other individuals using the term "terrorist" to describe Hamas and other organisations. We will also use the term "terrorism" in formal judicial procedures.

As a term, terrorist is highly politicised and emotive. Many governments brand their domestic resistance or opposition movements as terrorist organisations. Many resistance movements and individuals that were branded as terrorist went on to be embraced internationally and became part of their countries' mainstream political landscape. Perhaps the most famous example was Nelson Mandela.

The Agency has reported extensively on the events of 7 October and the ensuing war, often in graphic and disturbing detail, and continues to do so.

Our duty is to report the facts without fear or favour, and we carry out this mission every day in Israel, Gaza, Ukraine, and wherever else our journalists are deployed around the world.

Eric Wishart, AFP Ethics and Standards Editor

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Press Contact: Coline Sallois – Tel.: +33 (0)6 64 48 80 04 – coline.sallois@afp.com