Stereotypes of Terrorism and National Identity in Syria

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I. Introduction

Member States of the United Nations have no agreed-upon definition of terrorism. This is due to the fact that one state’s “terrorist” is another state’s “freedom fighter.” Yet, the UN acknowledges that the lack of agreement on a definition of terrorism hinders the organization of effective international measures to counter it (UN Office on Drugs and Crime 2006). After examining the extended debate over terrorism, one can state that “terrorism” is a highly politicized word which is embraced by victims, not by perpetrators. Today, “terrorism” is oriented in two directions: One seeks to demonstrate against oppression within a given state; the other protests against a conventional political order over which the

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Western political elite appears to have dominance. When a state exercises physical forces, including violence, torture and terror, it prefers to characterize its acts as necessary measures to insure order and respect for the law (Nagengast 1994: 145-6). One of the essential features of the modern state is its monopoly of physical force to maintain the social order (Weber 1948: 78). Even a democratic state is able to use extreme methods to secure its political ends, and can set up a surveillance system which requires urgent political mobilization (Giddens 1985: 303). The exercise of this principle is not confined to the given territory of the state. It has been suggested that since the 1980s, Western governments have attempted to expand their influence over financial, military and diplomatic areas in international politics by propagating the idea of combatting “terrorism” (Sluka 2000: 30). In the course of applying this principle to international politics, powerful states tend to determine the terms under which their coalition partners can obtain the means and equipment to remove opposition forces (Stohl 1984: 43-54). Such purposeful acts of violence have produced an international hierarchy in which Western democratic states attempt to maintain their monopolistic rights to protect the world against acknowledged evil. The “war on terrorism” is initiated by the United States and its allies, and aims at neutralizing international terrorist groups, including al-Qa’ida, whilst ensuring that rogue nations no longer support terrorist activities.

The “war on terror” creates punishment categories of people and defines these “terrorists” as social out groups. Yet recent situations suggest that those who are labeled the dangerous “other” in society