

THE TREATMENT OF TERRORISM SUSPECTS AND THE RIGHT TO A FAIR TRIAL: BALANCING SECURITY AND JUSTICE

AUTHOR – SANA PERWEEN, STUDENT AT AMITY LAW SCHOOL, AMITY UNIVERSITY, MUMBAI

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Abstract

The issue of treating terrorism suspects in national security and in the light of the right to a fair trial is a multifaceted legal and ethical issue. On one hand, governments are obligated to safeguard citizens from terrorist attacks, but it is just as important to ensure that the basic rights of individuals are respected, including the right to a fair and impartial trial. Such equilibrium is frequently subjected to trial when dealing with issues of terrorism, where security justifies the utilization of extraordinary interventions, including preventive detention without trial, surveillance, and the withholding of legal rights. This discussion delves into the conflict between the necessity to implement effective measures against terrorism and the protection of due process protections, examining international and domestic jurisprudence. Through the analysis of milestone case studies and court rulings, the research points to the dilemma faced by courts when it comes to weighing national security concerns against ensuring the protection of personal freedoms. In the end, the paper advocates for a balanced strategy that serves both security and justice alike, keeping in mind that the protection of basic rights is part of what leads to overall stability within any democratic nation.

Introduction

The fair trial rights of terrorism suspects pose one of the most difficult balancing tests of contemporary jurisprudence. Although states possess legitimate security interests in countering terrorism, actions that undermine due process and fair trial protections not only breach international human rights norms but can further undermine overall counter-terrorist goals in the long term. As UN Secretary-General António Guterres correctly observed, ensuring respect for human rights in counter-terrorism is “a moral duty, a legal obligation, and a strategic imperative”⁸⁸. This study explores the intricate relationship between security imperatives and

the right to a fair trial, discussing international norms, challenges of implementation, key case law, and oversight systems that influence the way terrorists and suspected terrorists are treated within justice systems globally.

International Legal Framework for Fair Trial Rights

The right to a fair trial is “a fundamental pillar of the rule of law” and is codified in many international legal documents. Article 10 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights stipulates that “everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal”. This fundamental principle has two core elements: courts have to function free from outside control (independence), and defendants have

⁸⁸ “Countering Terrorism and the Right to a Fair Trial”, United Nations Office on Drugs and crime

to be adjudged on evidence alone without prejudice (impartiality)⁸⁹.

These precepts have been further enshrined in binding international covenants. Article 14 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) mandates that fair trial guarantees "must be ensured equally in counter-terrorism cases" and cannot be eroded by special procedures or compromised safeguards. Likewise, Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights contains comprehensive guarantees that are applicable irrespective of charge nature. The fair trial right has several interlinked components: the presumption of innocence, equality of arms between the prosecution and defense, the rights of defense (specifically access to counsel), the right to interpretation and translation, and the right of judicial appeal. Notably, international law holds that certain fair trial right components are non-derogable, that is, cannot be suspended even in times of public emergency or security crises [2]. This establishes an explicit legal requirement for states to enforce these standards even in the prosecution of terrorism crimes.

Challenges to Fair Trial Rights in Counter-Terrorism Cases

The special character of terrorism crimes and the increased security issues they raise present special challenges to rights of fair trial. Among these is the resort to special courts or procedures different from regular criminal justice procedure. International human rights norms underscore that "alleged offenders should be tried only by an independent and impartial tribunal established by law" irrespective of the severity of charges. Nevertheless, some jurisdictions have created special terrorism courts or procedures that could undermine judicial independence. Pre-trial detention is another key area where fair trial rights can be undermined. Prolonged detention without judicial review, commonly

justified by the complexity of terrorism investigations, can infringe the right to be brought promptly before a court. International standards affirm that "all persons detained have the right at any time while they are subjected to deprivation of their liberty to have access to a court to challenge the lawfulness of their detention". However, in practice, terrorism suspects frequently face prolonged detention without adequate judicial oversight. The handling of evidence in terrorism cases creates additional fair trial concerns. Courts have recourse to classified information or intelligence that is not entirely revealed to the defense, compromising the equality of arms principle. Although accepting legitimate security interests, international standards hold that "judges must ensure that the accused has the opportunity to access and test evidence that is presented in their case and to challenge the lawfulness of the evidence and oppose its use". The employment of anonymous witnesses, although at times unavoidable for security purposes, should be weighed against procedures enabling the defense to effectively counter such evidence. Measures taken in court proceedings may also impact upon fair trial rights. The European Court of Human Rights has observed that handcuffs or other restraints employed during court proceedings "can affect perceptions of a defendant and therefore the presumption of innocence". Measures such as these should be "kept to the minimum necessary in the circumstances of the case" in order not to erode this basic principle.

Military Commissions and Special Tribunals

Military commissions and specialized tribunals created to try terrorism cases have proved especially troublesome from the perspective of a fair trial. Amnesty International has found various fair trial abuses in the Guantánamo Bay military commissions, including: - Lack of independence from the executive - Secret evidence against defendants that they cannot effectively oppose - Defendants being excluded from parts of proceedings - Admissibility of evidence obtained through torture or other ill-

⁸⁹"Countering Terrorism and the Right to a Fair Trial", United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

treatment – Severe restriction of appeal rights to independent courts – Disenfranchisement of non-nationals, as only foreign nationals undergo such trials – Restrictions on the right to counsel of choice and the right to act in propria persona⁹⁰. International standards are unambiguous in stating that "military courts must not be used to try individuals in counter-terrorism cases, but rather must be restricted to trying military personnel for military offenses". Ordinary civilian courts, with proper security precautions if needed, can do a better job of offering fair trials that comply with international standards.

Landmark Case Law on Terrorism and Fair Trial Rights

The international and domestic court jurisprudence offers useful information on the interpretation and application of fair trial rights in counter-terrorism cases. The European Court of Human Rights has built rich case law analysing the treatment of suspects of terrorism. In March 2025, the Court ruled against Türkiye in **Mustafa Aydın v. Türkiye**⁹¹, holding violations of Article 6 of the European Convention (right to fair trial)⁹². The Court held that Turkish domestic courts did not give sufficient reasons for the conviction of Aydın on terrorism charges and did not adequately consider the proportionality of the conviction. The case raised issues regarding the abuse of counter-terrorism legislation to harass journalists and stifle dissent in the name of security measures. The European Court has also considered cases on powers to stop, search, and question suspects under counter-terror laws. In **Beghal v. the United Kingdom**⁹³, the Court dealt with the case of a French citizen stopped and questioned at a British airport under Schedule 7 of The Terrorism Act 2000⁹⁴. Such cases pose significant questions

regarding the balancing of security procedures and individual liberties when suspects are questioned without being formally arrested or charged.

In the United States, the 2006 Supreme Court case **Hamdan v. Rumsfeld**⁹⁵ was a milestone on the handling of terrorism suspects. The court heard the legality of military commissions created by President Bush to prosecute detainees at Guantánamo Bay. Salim Ahmed Hamdan, who was deemed an enemy combatant, questioned the legitimacy of his military commission via a writ of habeas corpus. The Supreme Court decided in his Favor, holding that the commissions were unlawful and breached both U.S. military law and international norms under the Geneva Conventions. The ruling emphasized the boundaries of executive power in wartime and reinforced the value of guarantees of fair trial even in counter-terror contexts.

Balancing Security Concerns with Fair Trial Rights

Governments are confronted with the daunting task of counter-terrorism on one hand and the protection of fair trial rights on the other. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime finds that abuse of human rights in combating terrorism threatens to "undermine the very values that states seek to protect – and in doing so, inadvertently fuelling grievances conducive to terrorist violence".

This view acknowledges that honouring fair trial rights is not just a legal requirement but also a strategic necessity in sustained counter-terrorism operations. Proportionality is an important principle in weighing security interests against the right to a fair trial. Limits on certain procedural safeguards can be justified in extraordinary situations, but they must be proportionate to the legitimate interest pursued and should not damage the substance of the right to a fair trial. For instance, although special security arrangements in court may

⁹⁰ "Guantánamo: Military commissions -- Amnesty International observer's notes from proceedings", Amnesty International, (2006)

⁹¹ Mustafa Aydın v. Türkiye, App No 6696/20

⁹² Matteo Piccioli & Maastricht U, "Europe rights court rules Türkiye violated right to fair trial in counter-terrorism case", Jurist News, (2025)

⁹³ Beghal v. United Kingdom, App No 4755/16

⁹⁴ "Guide to the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights", (2024)

⁹⁵ Hamdan v. Rumsfeld, 548 U.S. 557 (2006)

occasionally be unavoidable, they should be minimal to prevent subverting the presumption of innocence.

The independence and impartiality of the judiciary are especially crucial in terrorism cases, where political pressure and security issues can risk tainting proceedings. International norms stress that "judges trying and lawyers defending those accused of terrorist offences must be able to perform their professional functions without intimidation, hindrance, harassment or improper interference". Safeguarding judicial independence ensures that terrorism cases are determined on their merits and not on political grounds or public pressure.

International Oversight Mechanisms

A number of international institutions and mechanisms track and enforce fair trial rights in counter-terrorism scenarios. The Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD), set up in 1991 by the UN Commission on Human Rights, has a key part to play in examining instances of arbitrary arrest and detention. As a thematic special procedure mandate held by the UN Human Rights Council, the WGAD examines and authenticates information regarding detention cases that are arguably incompatible with international norms, such as those involving terrorism suspects. The mandate of the Working Group is deliberately wide in order to enable flexibility in considering different types of arbitrary detention across the globe. It can examine individual cases as well as "situations where the conditions in a country prompt concern over widespread occurrences of arbitrary detention"⁹⁶. In reviewing allegations of arbitrary detention, the Working Group takes account not merely of national laws but also of pertinent international instruments of law, such as Article 9(1) of the ICCPR, which ensures protection against arbitrary arrest or detention. Regional human rights tribunals, especially the European Court of Human Rights, have built rich

jurisprudence on fair trial rights in counter-terrorism cases.

These tribunals act as critical courts to which individuals can appeal when domestic remedies have been exhausted. The European Court's judgments in cases like the latest one against Türkiye offer authoritative interpretations of fair trial rights that influence state practice throughout Europe⁹⁷. Non-governmental organizations also have an important monitoring function. Amnesty International has repeatedly opposed Guantánamo Bay trials by military commission, detailing how these trials breach international fair trial standards⁹⁸. Such campaigning work draws attention to persistent allegations of fair trial violations and puts pressure on states to bring their counter-terrorism policies into line with international human rights norms.

Practical Challenges and Solutions

Enforcing fair trial guarantees in terror cases presents practical issues that need careful solutions. Most difficult among these is the use of classified information. States have good reason to guard against sensitive intelligence, but defendants need enough information to present a proper defence. A few jurisdictions have devised special procedures, including the appointment of security-cleared special advocates who can peruse classified documents on behalf of defendants in confidence. Pre-trial detention of terrorism suspects tends to exceed ordinary limits based on the intricateness of investigations. In order to reconcile security demands with fair trial rights, routine and substantive judicial scrutiny of ongoing detention is necessary. Judges need to scrutinize whether ongoing detention is still required and proportionate as investigations continue. The presumption of innocence can be especially at risk in terrorism cases because of media attention and public fear. Special care must be taken by courts to preserve this

⁹⁶ "Working Group on Arbitrary Detention", Special Procedure United Nations Human Rights Council

⁹⁷ Matteo Piccoli & Maastricht U, "Europe rights court rules Türkiye violated right to fair trial in counter-terrorism case", Jurist News, (2025)

⁹⁸ "Guantánamo: Military commissions -- Amnesty International observer's notes from proceedings", Amnesty International, (2006)

presumption through regulating prejudicial publicity, preventing security measures within the court from suggesting guilt, and making decisions only on admissible evidence and not on generalizations about terrorist dangers.

Conclusion

Treatment of suspects of terrorism for fair trial rights is a pertinent challenge in international counter-terrorism. International human rights law sets clear standards that need to be upheld even in terrorism cases, although legitimate security issues may justify some exceptional treatment. Such exceptions should not undermine the very essence of fair trial rights. International and national court case law increasingly acknowledges that counter-terrorism needs cannot override blanket deviations from established fair trial standards. *Hamdan v. Rumsfeld* and *Mustafa Aydın v. Türkiye* are examples of judicial receptivity to subjecting counter-terrorism initiatives to human rights standards. These rulings affirm the precept that security and rights are neither mutually exclusive objectives nor successive goals but complementary facets of a viable counter-terrorism strategy.

In the future, governments need to keep perfecting their methods so that counter-terrorism efforts honour fair trial rights while successfully dealing with security issues. This entails having independent tribunals, proper legal representation, restricting the use of classified information that cannot be rebutted, and refraining from prolonged pre-trial detention without a review by the judiciary. Military courts and non-independent special tribunals must be replaced by ordinary civilian courts with necessary security precautions.

By maintaining fair trial rights even in difficult terrorism cases, states not only comply with their legal requirements but also enhance the legitimacy of their counter-terrorism efforts and support long-term security. As UN Secretary-General António Guterres has stressed, this is not only a moral and legal requirement, but a strategic imperative for effective counter-

terrorism that respects the values we are trying to protect.

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