

# Tackling terrorism in liberal democracies essay sample

[Politics](#), [Democracy](#)



The basic question is not whether terrorism can be defeated; even third-rate dictatorships have shown that it can be put down with great ease. The real problem is the price that has to be paid by liberal societies valuing their democratic traditions. Over the last two decades considerable academic debate has taken place concerning the correlation between differing political systems and terrorism. It has become somewhat conventional wisdom to argue that liberal democracies are disadvantaged, when compared to illiberal non-democracies, in countering terrorism because of institutional constraints that prevent them from responding to terrorism with repression. It appears that liberal democracies have mainly five inherent weaknesses against terrorism: freedom of movement, freedom of association, an abundance of targets, constraints of the legal system and the media. Also democratic societies are particularly vulnerable to a form of violence that incites their governments to overreact and subsequently lose legitimacy, along with their ideology, as will the impact of freedom of the press and other media within liberal democracies.

The first of the four weaknesses is the freedom of movement found in liberal democracies, the growth of private cars, mass tourism and international migration and the ability to move across borders, especially in Europe makes it particularly problematic for liberal democratic states attempting to counter terrorism, as free movement facilitates terrorist activity. There is concern that countries who open their borders to immigrants and political refugees could potentially offer infrastructures to international terrorism. Affordable freedom of movement has facilitated, for instance, the training missions of terrorists.

Over the last two decades there has been a transition process involving the dismantling of former police and tight border controls which had existed in former socialist states and countries such as South Africa. The European investigations post-September 11, 2001 found that many terrorists had supported themselves through organized crime activities such as credit card fraud across nation's borders. By spanning different jurisdictions terrorists attempt to minimize the risk of effective law enforcement. The terrorists behind the September 11 attacks in 2001 planned their crime in Hamburg, received training in Afghanistan, funding from the Middle East and perpetrated their crime in the United States.

The second, weakness that is believed to have undermined liberal states ability to counter terrorism, was the freedom of association found in Western democracies. In most cases the private lives of citizens are not the business of the state and in such cases; terrorists can abuse the freedom of association provided by democracies in conspiracies against the state itself. So important was this that the 61st session of the General Assembly (September to December 2006, New York) met to try and resolve the situation. The report stressed that that any decisions that limits human rights must be overseen by the judiciary, so that they remain lawful, proportionate and effective. However since the terrorist attacks in the US in 2001 both international and European liberal democracies have to some degree or another prevented freedom of association to terrorist-linked groups. For instance, the potential for creating quite wide ranging restrictions was established in the UK under the Terrorism Acts, the Anti-

terrorism Act and Patriot Act in the United States as well as the Anti - Terrorism Act in Australia (2005), placed a much heavier burden on those charged with association with any terrorist organizations.

Nevertheless a number of human right instruments pertinent to freedom of association exist and do provide restrictions that must be adhered to within liberal democratic states: such as the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, in which any interference to freedom association must be prescribed by Law, serve a legitimate aim and be necessary in a democratic society. The third weakness is the abundance of targets in open societies. While we might seek to protect some buildings and infrastructural facilities since the terrorist strategy is not primarily a counter-force but a counter-value strategy this results only in a shift of target selection. In democracies where citizens are constitutionally equal, value is placed on all human life, and therefore almost any group of citizens can be victimized by terrorists to put pressure on the state. For liberal democracies, an ongoing counter-terrorist strategy can be called into question with a successful attack on any public place.

Actions by governments to guard one venue may simply prompt the terrorists to shift to another target. For instance, as early as 2004 following the further hardening of the United States' already hardened targets, such as the U. S. Capitol and New York Stock Exchange it was predicted that al-Qaida would soon go after 'softer' American targets, such as malls and transit systems. Indeed it is arguable that the fortification of US embassies has led to more assassinations and attacks against embassy officials in non-

secure venues. Moreover action to protect officials has shifted focus to business people and tourists, such as in the Bali attack in 2005. Although lower in symbolic value, it is widely believed that these targets could be as high in psychological damage to the country. However in recent years commentators have noted the massive levels of spending in target hardening within liberal democracies although it involves huge costs and so few benefits. The fourth weakness appears to be the constraints posed by liberal democratic legal systems in the countering of terrorism when compared to those systems within non-democratic regimes. Indeed the struggle against terror in the democratic state must be waged within the law using the tools that the legal system makes available.

This is what distinguishes the state from terrorists. The state operates within boundaries of the law as opposed to terrorists whom contravene the law. Traditionally built-in legal restraints protect people in liberal democracies and inhibit taking actions against suspected terrorists. In the past, for instance, restraints on government unwarranted search and seizure have allowed terrorists the freedom to acquire vast arsenals, provided that their actions do not arouse the suspicions of authorities. The right to privacy also makes it more difficult for liberal democratic governments to spy on suspected terrorists without showing just cause. The fifth weakness becomes the essential freedoms enjoyed by the press, television and radio within liberal democratic societies that go some way in enabling terrorist groups to operate. While individual acts of terrorist violence tend to be relatively small-scaled when compared to conventional attacks, the terrorist aim to shock,

frighten and intimidate an audience beyond its physical victims relies on publicity not often found in non-democratic regimes.

It appears that within liberal democracies there exists a symbiotic relationship between the media and terrorism where terrorists provide the media with news that sells, while the media provide the terrorists with publicity. In autocratic states, terrorists have to rely on more primitive forms of message dissemination which are limited in scope. In conclusion we have argued that liberal democracies possess a number of institutional constraints which make counter-terrorism more difficult: freedom of movement, freedom of association, the abundance of targets and the rule of Law and the media are all aspects that impact upon liberal democratic counter-terrorist strategies. However freedom of movement is not simply a by product of liberal democratic political systems, albeit to a lesser degree the forces of globalisation have affected other political systems fight to counter-terrorism. The challenge to liberal democracies is to benefit from the advantages of free movement while at the same time minimising the security threats and facilitate the fight against terrorism within a wider framework of action.

Freedom of association is a long held tradition within liberal democracies and one that needs to be maintained. However, recent changes in legislation that have taken place in a number of liberal democracies to balance this tradition with the requirements of securing the safety of citizens are justified. For instance, within the Australia the proscribing of organisations involves a careful and systematic process. Careful and public scrutiny of proscribed

groups should continue. Targeting hardening of the abundance of targets that reside within liberal democracies is necessary and good practice. Indeed the calling card of many liberal democracies in the midst of terrorist attacks has been “business as usual”, by increasing the amount spent on security this is not the message that is being put across. It is possible that such attempts could be a sign of one liberal democracy attempting to deflect a potential terrorist attack to another liberal democratic state that is without the financial means to protect itself—this is not a long-term policy and can be detrimental to inter-state relations which are so vital in combating transnational terrorism.

Maintaining the rule of Law within liberal democracies is not only beneficial but essential in combating terrorism. It is true to say that operationally liberal democracies come across a considerable amount more obstacles than an autocratic regime. However simply removing these obstacles through emergency measures does not make combating terrorism any easier. In the current climate reversals of long-standing liberal principles can provide ammunition for terrorists. President Obama’s foreign policy that places importance on the abidance of international law will successfully re-orientate the most powerful liberal democracy to a more effective strategy. Finally the free media and the issue of public accountability within liberal democracies infringe upon counter-terrorist strategies. Today many democratic countries, laws or voluntary codes prevent terrorist groups and their supporters from being heard. The media can also be used to counter the terrorists’ media messages, and it is important that liberal democracies implement their own

media plan, although the overzealous use of 'spin' by governments needs to be carefully restrained.