

Is terrorism a serious threat to national and international security?

[Society](#), [Terrorism](#)



Introduction

The aim of the following essay will be to critically evaluate the existing evidence, which supports the argument for considering terrorism as a threat to both national and international security. The topic of terrorism and the acts of violence associated with it is one that is deeply embedded in the fabric of the late-modern period (Young, 2007), but paradoxically this does not make it an easy concept to define (Bolanos, 2012; Martin, 2012; Hoffman, 2006; Silke, 1996). This largely reflects the different priorities which both national and international organisations have, thereby making the achievement of consensus quite difficult (Senu, 2013).

However, for the purposes of the present study, terrorism will be defined as the systematic use of violence in order to create a general climate of fear in a population and thereby bring about a particular political objective[1].

Although the acts of terrorism are far from a modern phenomenon (Rapoport, 1984), it can be argued that prior to 11th September it attracted little public attention (Hoffman, 2006). Post 9/11, terrorism occupied the forefront of the political agenda and media attention, a trend that is observed to date and one that will not wither away easily in the future, thus the significance of the current essay. Having outlined some of the conceptual debates associated with the definition of terrorism, the following section will present some of the evidence which could suggest that terrorism should be taken seriously and prioritized over any other social problem on both national and international level.

Terrorism as a threat to national and international security

The rise of the threat of terrorist attacks is one that has more recently been linked to the concept of ' world risk society' (Beck, 2002), according to which the shifts from industrial to post-industrial and consumer societies has also had an impact on the risks to which we are exposed (Beck, 1992; Mythen and Walkate, 2006). But even prior to the occurrence of these transformations in the social fabric, terrorism seems to have had a significant impact on the course of world history, particularly in campaigns which can be described as anti-colonial, such as the one in Algeria against French dominance, the Cypriot and Palestinian against British governance (Hoffman, 2006; Lutz and Lutz, 2012). Prolonged terrorist campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan (Tan, 2006), as well as India and Pakistan (Lutz and Lutz, 2011) seem to undermine national security and could pose a serious threat to international security as well, as some of the above-mentioned countries are well-known for their possession of nuclear weapons (Lutz and Lutz, 2012).

The presence of terrorist groups within the borders of a country could also result in passivity of the security services, due to fear of reprisals and campaigns of violence (Lutz and Lutz, 2011). Moreover, prolonged terrorist campaigns and perceived level of threat could also have an impact on the politics of a specific country in the long run (ibid.). The introduction of special anti-terrorist legislation in many of the Western world countries post-9/11 has called for the tightening of borders and reducing immigration, as well as increased target-hardening of potential targets of future terrorist attacks. As a result of that, the ' new terrorism' is said to have become more lethal and

indiscriminate, with the potential to strike occur at any place and time, as a result of the need to sustain the campaign of terror (Lacquer, 2001; Beck, 2002; Enders and Sandler, 2005). As some of the evidence in this section suggest, terrorism in some cases has been successful in changing the course of history and clearly the impact it has had should be neither denied, nor underestimated. However, as the next section of this paper will argue, the threat posed by terrorism is one that should be subject closer examination and the myth of such a lethal and omnipresent enemy should be scrutinized and not accepted at face value.

Common misperceptions associated with terrorism

Contrary to the common perception that terrorism is an ever-present threat to both national and international security, an increasing number of scholarly publications have presented an alternative view, wherein terrorism is presented as a much smaller threat than it actually is (Lustick, 2012; Mueller, 2005; Mueller, 2006; Mueller and Stewart, 2012). Such criticisms do not lack empirical foundation. For example, over the previous two decades, only three attacks classified by the FBI as terrorism have taken place on American soil- the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Centre, the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing and the 9/11. Of the three, the 9/11 attack was the worst terrorist attack which the United States have ever faced, it was unprecedented and was used as a justification of the initiation of a ' war on terror' and the introduction of specialized counter-terrorism legislation, the foundations of which appear to be unstable, as terrorism did not pose a sufficient threat to justify the interventions (Wolfendale, 2007). The unexpected attack, its

modus operandi and lethality all seemed to point in a direction of a brand new phenomenon, which had not been observed before - a 'new' form of terrorism. As it was noted in the previous section, part of the post-9/11 discourse is also the globalization of terrorism, which is claimed to be becoming transnational, another statement which is not based on any sound empirical evidence. Rather, since the 1990s, the nature of terrorist attacks has changed in exactly the opposite direction - attacks perpetrated by terrorists are becoming increasingly localised and the process of globalisation itself is not related in any way to transnational attack trends (Goldman, 2010).

Moreover, the response triggered by the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent 11M (Madrid) and 7/7 bombings (London) is one that overestimated the real capabilities of Al Quada and its scope of operation (Byman, 2006). In fact, for many decades prior to all three of the above mentioned, the West has tended to over-estimate the threats posed by terrorist attacks (Furedi, 2007; Zulaika, 2003). And when such self-fulfilling prophecies do occur, the response is populist, taking into account mass hysteria and using it to construct a discourse which could legitimize an out of proportion response (Jackson, 2005). For this reason it can be argued that terrorism is a functional reality of American politics (Zulaika, 2003: 198), as was the case of 9/11 (Lustick, 2006). Moreover, it is well-integrated into American and Western culture, it feeds from its imagination and arguably, is self-perpetuated (Zizek, 2002). Being transformed into a cultural script, terrorism also receives disproportionate media coverage, even when it fails (Jurkowitz,

2010). The popularity of the theme feed off public hysteria and vice versa, it is larger than life and in the 21st century the threats posed by it (Ferguson and Potter, 2005). This is not to deny the lived realities of terrorist attacks and the devastating impact which they have on societies. Rather, the context in which acts of terror occur should be subject to rigorous and thorough examination. In the cases where the impact of terrorism is associated with overreaction, it would make sense to focus on reducing the latter, rather than leave the matter unaddressed. As Mueller (2005) notes, in the cases where the risk of threats such as alcoholism, smoking and driving are real, it makes sense to induce fear. On the other hand, where there is little risk associated with certain threats, for example, terrorism on flying on airplanes, it would be advisable to create policies which would aim at reducing anxiety and fear, rather than disproportionately increase them. Having outlined some of arguments which suggest that the threat of terrorism can be overdramatized in the Western world, the last section will argue that terrorism is real, yet the recent methods of countering it have been counterproductive.

Conclusion

As this essay has argued, terrorism is far from a new phenomenon; in fact, it has played a substantial part in social history and the resolution of geopolitical questions. Often considered to be the weapon of the weak and an indicator of asymmetric warfare, campaigns of terror have achieved some success in the past, despite arguments for the opposite (Abrahms, 2006). Therefore, it would be a mistake not to acknowledge what terrorist

campaigns have achieved in the past and the ways in which they have undermined both national and international security. Yet, in the post 9/11 environment, the challenges posed by terrorism have been utilised in the creation of counter-terrorism discourses that are counterproductive (Appleby, 2010; MacDonald and Hunter, 2013) and rather than producing a resolution of conflicts, have prolonged them. Although a 'war on terror' has been waged over the past 12 years, it is one that can hardly ever be won and rhetoric associated with it raises unrealistic expectations. Similar to the problem of crime, the problem of terrorism is one that will persist, therefore efforts should be directed towards containing it within reasonable proportions, and reducing the widespread 'culture of fear' which surrounds it. As English (2010) suggests, the over-militarisation of responses to terrorist attacks is not a long-term solution, but the addressing of root causes and underlying tensions is. Such a strategy, as well as the reliance on credible intelligence, is the key pathway which could provide a long-term solution to the problems which terrorism poses to the contemporary era. In conclusion, a careful balance should be found between the acts of terrorism and the real danger it poses to societies. Contrary to popular belief, terrorism is not an international in nature, rather it is a localised and occurs by and large in developing countries (Goldman, 2010) and therefore efforts should be directed towards tackling terrorism where it poses significant risk to the obstruction of social safety and security.

Bibliography

1. Abrahms, M. (2006). Why terrorism does not work. *International Security*, 31(2), 42-78.
2. Appleby, N. (2010). Labelling the innocent: how government counter-terrorism advice creates labels that contribute to the problem. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 3(3), 421-436.
3. Beck, U. (2002). The Terrorist Threat World Risk Society Revisited. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 19(4), 39-55.
4. Beck, U. (1992). *Risk society: Towards a new modernity* (Vol. 17). Sage.
5. Bolanos, A. (2012). 'The ' new terrorism' or the ' newness' of context and change' (pp. 29-35), in Jackson, R., & Sinclair, S. J. (Eds.). (2012). *Contemporary debates on terrorism*. Routledge.
6. Byman, D. L. (2006). Friends like these: counterinsurgency and the war on terrorism. *International Security*, 31(2), 79-115.
7. Enders, W., & Sandler, T. (2005). After 9/11 is it all different now?. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 49(2), 259-277.
8. English, R. (2010). *Terrorism: how to respond*. Oxford University Press.
9. Ferguson, C. D., & Potter, W. C. (2005). *The four faces of nuclear terrorism*. Routledge.
10. Furedi, F. (2007). *Invitation to terror: the expanding empire of the unknown*. Continuum Intl Pub Group.
11. Goldman, O. (2010). The globalization of terror attacks. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 23(1), 31-59.
12. Hoffman, B. (2006). *Inside Terrorism*. Columbia University Press.

13. Jackson, R. (2005). *Writing the war on terrorism: language, politics and counter-terrorism*. Manchester University Press.
14. Jurkowitz (2010) <http://www.journalism.org/2010/05/10/pej-news-coverage-index-may-3may-9-2010/>
15. Laqueur, W. (2001). *Left, right, and beyond: The changing face of terror. How did this happen* *Terrorism and the new war*, 71-83.
16. Lustick, I. (2006). *Trapped in the War on Terror*. Univ of Pennsylvania Press.
17. Lustick, I. (2012) 'Why terrorism is a much smaller threat than you think' (pp. 66-74), in Jackson, R., & Sinclair, S. J. (Eds.). (2012). *Contemporary debates on terrorism*. Routledge.
18. Lutz, J., & Lutz, B. (2011). *Terrorism: The Basics*. Taylor & Francis.
19. Lutz, J. and Lutz, B. (2012) 'The continuing threat to state security'(pp. 61-66), in Jackson, R., & Sinclair, S. J. (Eds.). (2012). *Contemporary debates on terrorism*. Routledge.
20. MacDonald, M., & Hunter, D. (2013). *Security, population and governmentality: UK counter-terrorism discourse (2007-2011)*. *Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis across Disciplines*, 6(2). Available at: http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/53169/1/WRAP_MacDonald_Hunter_CADAAD_2012.FIN%20%281%29.pdf
21. Martin, G. (2012). *Understanding terrorism: Challenges, perspectives, and issues*. Sage Publications.

22. Mueller, J. (2005). Simplicity and spook: terrorism and the dynamics of threat exaggeration. *International Studies Perspectives*, 6(2), 208-234.
23. Mueller, J. (2006). Is There Still a Terrorist Threat-The Myth of the Omnipresent Enemy. *Foreign Aff.*, 85, 2.
24. Mueller, J., & Stewart, M. G. (2012). The terrorism delusion: America's overwrought response to September 11. *International Security*, 37(1), 81-110.
25. Mythen, G., & Walklate, S. (2006). Criminology and Terrorism Which ThesisRisk Society or Governmentality?. *British Journal of Criminology*, 46(3), 379-398.
26. Rapoport, D. C. (1984). Fear and trembling: Terrorism in three religious traditions. *The American PoliticalScienceReview*, 658-677.
27. Senu, O. (2013). Labelling Acts of Terror: A Concern for Modernity. London: LASALA Foundation. Available at: <http://lasalafoundation.org/our-articles.html>
28. Silke, A. (1996). Terrorism and the blind men's elephant. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 8(3), 12-28.
29. Tan, A. T. H. (2006). *South East Asia: Threats in the Security Environment*. Marshall Cavendish International.
30. Wolfendale, J. (2007). Terrorism, security, and the threat of counterterrorism. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 30(1), 75.
31. Young, J. (2007). *The vertigo of late modernity*. Sage.
32. Zulaika, J. (2003). The self-fulfilling prophecies of counterterrorism. *Radical History Review*, 85(1), 191-199.

33. Zizek, S. (2002). *Welcome to the desert of the real!: five essays on September 11 and related dates*. Verso.
34. [1] As defined by Jenkins, 2013: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/588371/terrorism/217762/Types-of-terrorism>