

A Fear Management Approach to Counter-Terrorism

Spreading fear is the essence of terrorism. Terrorists exploit fear by terrorising the target audience into concessions. Understanding how feelings of fear influence the way people feel, think and act is therefore an important starting point to explore how individuals and societies can learn how to cope with fear of terrorism. In this Discussion Paper, ICCT – The Hague Research Fellows Prof. Dr. Edwin Bakker and Ms. Tinka Veldhuis MSc explore the dynamics of fear in response to terrorism, and emphasise the importance of integrating initiatives to manage fear of terrorism and reduce its negative consequences into overarching counter-terrorism strategies. It argues that societies can benefit greatly from promoting resilience and a fear management approach to counter-terrorism.

Introduction

Although there is still no single definition of terrorism that commands full approval in academic or governmental circles, most definitions tend to coalesce around the key conception that terrorism is designed to instil fear and anxiety by politically motivated violence¹. Terrorists do not employ violence with the sole intention to kill and wound. Rather, their most prominent ambition is of a psychological nature. By using indiscriminate violence, terrorists aim to instil shock and terror within their target population; to inflict psychological damage far beyond the immediate victims.

Unfortunately, there have been high levels of fear and anxiety in relation to terrorism in a number of European Union Member States in the last decade. In Spring 2011, according to the Eurobarometer, respondents when asked about the two most important issues facing the EU at the moment mentioned terrorism as the sixth most worrisome issue.² Although a number of EU Member States have experienced violent terrorist incidents – most notably were the Madrid and London bombings – the total number of both terrorist attacks and victims of terrorism has been relatively low. Since '9/11' some three hundred fatalities were reported in the EU according to the Global Terrorism Database.³ Although every casualty is one too many, one could argue that these figures do not justify high levels of fear and anxiety for terrorism, in particular when compared to wide range of other deadly threats (think of car accidents) or other forms of violence (rape or murder). In other words, it does not take many attacks or many victims to have a severe impact on society. This makes terrorism such an interesting instrument for small groups who would otherwise never have an audience for their extremist ideas and demands.

Fear of terrorism can impact both individuals and communities and can cause severe disruptions in society. It can provoke suspicion and derogation of 'others', erode trust in governmental institutions, catalyse

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¹ Schmid, A.p. & Jongman, A.J. (1988). *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Data Bases, Theories, and Literature*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books; Kushner, H. W. (2003). *Encyclopedia of Terrorism*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

² Eurobarometer 75, Spring 2011, Public opinion in the European Union. Brussels: European Commission, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb75/eb75_publ_en.pdf.

³ Global Terrorism Database: <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>.



support for offensive counter-terrorism policies and erode social cohesion. Such drastic consequences, however, are exactly what terrorists are after.

As such, the success of terrorism is reflected in its ability to spread fear and trigger emotional and behavioural reactions among its targets. If the reaction is one of lasting psychological distress and of counter-reactions driven by emotions rather than by substantiated consideration, terrorism is an investment worth making. If, however, the targeted society is able to cope with the psychological blow of terrorism in a way that mitigates emotional damage and encourages proportionate, considerate and thought-through reactions, the core purpose of terrorism is undermined.

Whether we are able to deal effectively with the threat of terrorism and the psychological damage it seeks to inflict depends largely on our capability to adapt in the face of severe security threats, and on the extent to which we are able to effectively manage our initial emotional responses to such threats. In particular, those responses of fear and its corresponding behavioural tendencies. Learning to understand and deal appropriately with our emotional reaction to terrorism is therefore an important starting point to develop counter-terrorism policies that are driven by rational considerations rather than rampant emotions.

In this context, the main purpose of this paper is to examine the dimensions of fear and fear-related responses to terrorism and highlight their relevance in comprehensive counter-terrorism efforts. Firstly, we align fear of terrorism with a broader school of thought that analyses fear of crime and its implications for society and security management. We highlight a few dimensions of fear that are relevant in relation to terrorist threats. Secondly, we discuss the suggestion that fear of terrorism might serve as an implicit encouragement for even more acts of terrorism. Subsequently, we explore the concept of (public or societal) resilience and reflect on its relevance in the struggle against terrorism. We conclude by highlighting a few notions that might be relevant when integrating fear management and resilience into overarching counter-terrorism strategies.

Depending on the degree and nature of the threat, the effect of terrorism on fear responses might vary across communities and individuals. Societies that are confronted with continuous terrorist threats respond differently to the next attack than societies in which terrorism is a rare and unexpected phenomenon. In this paper, we do not aspire to analyse the impact of historical and cultural dispositions to emotional responses to terrorism. Rather we aim to highlight a few general principles in the way human beings, both at an individual and collective level, tend to respond to disruptive and threatening circumstances like terrorism, and provide insight into the coping mechanisms that can mitigate the negative emotional consequences of such events. Also, our ambition is not to formulate concrete recommendations for policy officials on how to deal with fear of terrorism. Rather, we aim to offer a conceptual framework that can guide further research and serve our thinking on counter-terrorism efforts. First, however, we turn to the relevance of fear in shaping our responses to terrorism.

The 'Workings' of Fear in Terrorism

Fear and terrorism

In criminology, a large body of research has been devoted to studying 'fear of crime' and its relation to actual and perceived risks⁴. Fear of crime is perceived as a natural and functional defense mechanism against crime, which induces adaptations and behaviours that allow individuals to exert control over perceived risks and encourage them to behave in a responsible, sensible way.⁵ Accordingly, it is well established that fear of crime, which reflects an emotional response, should be distinguished from perceived risk of victimisation, which requires a cognitive judgment of the actual risk.⁶ Although perceived risk of victimisation is one of the most accurate predictors of fear of crime, a major disconnect exists between fear of crime and objective risk assessments.⁷ Levels of fear are generally higher than objective risks and are only weakly related to actual victimisation and crime rates. Yet fear of crime has been related to a range of negative outcomes including

⁴ See for a review Hale, C. (1996). Fear of crime: A review of the literature. *International Review of Victimology*, Vol. 4, pp. 79-150.

⁵ Gray, E., Jackson, J., & Farrall, S. (2011). Feelings and functions in the fear of crime: Applying a new approach to victimisation insecurity. *British Journal Of Criminology*, Vol. 51, No. 1, pp. 75-94.

⁶ Ferraro, K.F. (1995). *Fear of crime: Interpreting victimisation risk*, New York: SUNY Press.

⁷ Skogan, W. (1981). *Issues in the measurement of victimisation*, U. S. Department of Justice. Washington D. C., U. S. Government Printing Office; Hale (1996); Vanderveen, G. (2007). *Interpreting fear, crime, risk and unsafety*. Cullompton: Willan Publishing.



reduced quality of life and well-being, withdrawal from public life, costly precautions, and departure to other living areas.⁸ Over the course of decades, research has given rise to several concrete policy adjustments, like awareness campaigns and neighbourhood initiatives, which have successfully targeted known predictors of fear of crime.

The notion of fear of crime is also relevant in the analysis of fear of terrorism. Foremost, whereas crime is generally not intended to instil fear, terrorism by definition is. This makes understanding fear and behavioural responses to fear even more relevant in the analysis of terrorism. Also, research has shown that the determinants of concerns about crime are similar to those about terrorism (e.g. age, gender, number of household members and education),⁹ which suggests that the factors which predict who is afraid of crime might also point to those more likely to be afraid of terrorism.

This is not to say that fear of terrorism is the same as fear of crime. Terrorism encompasses unique elements that are likely to be reflected in the determinants of fear of it. Terrorist threats are abstract, large-scale and designed to cause as much chaos and drama as possible. They exert existential death threats and convey the notion that violence is random and destruction is imminent. In contrast to crime, terrorism is directed at society as a whole, not at the victim. Yet to some extent the underlying mechanisms causing fear of crime and terrorism might be largely similar and the notion remains that fear of terrorism, like fear of crime, is a socially constructed phenomenon which causes very real consequences, and therefore needs to be addressed.

Complex emotions like fear of terrorism are multidimensional concepts which can be analysed according to several relevant dimensions. In the present discussion, one of the dimensions worth mentioning is *time*. To understand the complexity of fear of terrorism a distinction should be made between immediate fear responses to terrorism (fear after terrorism) and enduring, sustainable fear of terrorism that is not ignited by a prevailing acute threat.

On the one hand, fear of terrorism can be an affective state which is an immediate and automatic response to an acute terrorist threat. Under these conditions, fear is a natural and healthy response which allows people to make accurate and rapid decisions to save their lives. As with other, functional fears like fear of snakes or approaching busses, this type of fear of terrorism can be expected to wear off when the immediate threat has disappeared.

On the other hand, fear of terrorism can be imprinted as a persuasive state of mind, which lingers on long after the actual threat has vanished. In the literature on fear of crime a debate has been going on about how fear is related to other concepts like anxiety and perceived vulnerability, but the issue has not been solved yet. In our understanding, prevailing fear of terrorism says something about levels of concerns and worries that one – or significant others – are victimised in an attack. These concerns are not necessarily related to the actual chance of victimisation. As mentioned before, at least in the West the actual risk of being involved in a terrorist does not justify high levels of terrorism fear.

Here, another dimension of fear of terrorism that is worth mentioning pertains to whether fear manifests itself at the individual or the collective level. Individual fear of terrorism is fairly straightforward; it reflects concerns in relation to one's own safety. Societal fear of terrorism, however, is more complex. Foremost, groups as a collective entity are not capable of experiencing emotions; only individuals can. A 'society' per se cannot be afraid, societal fear can only be observed as an aggregated outcome of fear among its individual members.

Therefore, a relevant distinction is that between group-based fear and collective fear. On the one hand, individuals can experience group-based emotions,¹⁰ which refer to emotions that individuals experience on behalf of their group. For example, research shows that people can experience anger when seeing group members being mistreated¹¹, and guilt when confronted with the group's past misbehaviour.¹²

⁸ See e.g. Hale, 1996; Stafford, M., Chandola, T., & Marmot, M. (2007). Association between fear of crime and mental health and physical functioning. *American Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 97, pp. 2076-81.

⁹ Brück, T. & Müller, C. (2010). Comparing the determinants of concern about terrorism and crime. *Global Crime*, Vol. 11, pp. 1-15.

¹⁰ Intergroup Emotions Theory (IET; Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000; Smith, 1993, 1999)

¹¹ Gordijn, E. H., Wigboldus, D., & Yzerbyt, V. (2001). Emotional consequences of categorizing victims of negative outgroup behavior as ingroup or outgroup. *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, Vol. 4, pp. 317-26.

¹² Doosje, B., Branscombe, N.R., Spears, R., & Manstead, A.S.R. (1998). Guilty by association: When one's group has a negative history. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 75, pp. 872-86.



On the other hand, collective emotional responses can be defined as emotions that are *perceived* to be shared by a majority of group members in response to group-level circumstances.¹³ Group-based emotions are *felt* by group members in response to group-relevant events, while collective emotions are *perceived* by group members. In particular, collective emotions provide a useful framework to study fear of terrorism. In this view, collective fear of terrorism is a common perception that fear of terrorism prevails among a majority or large segment of society. In its aggregated dimension, fear of terrorism as such provides information about how insecure and emotionally vulnerable people perceive society to be.

If unmonitored, perceived collective fear of terrorism can contribute to elevating *real* fear of terrorism, irrespective of whether the perception of shared fear is accurate or not. The sensation that others are afraid might be sufficient to intensify individual experiences of fear, which in turn, through processes of emotional contagion¹⁴, might ultimately spread and strengthen the collective perception that fear of terrorism prevails.

Consequences of fear

Fear of terrorism has been associated with a range of behavioural outcomes. In several studies, elevated levels of fear have been shown to induce ingroup-favouritism, suspicion and stereotyping of other groups, a preference for strong, action oriented leaders, and a need for clear, unambiguous information.¹⁵ After '9/11', fear of terrorism predicted support for President Bush and his security policies¹⁶, and negatively affected U.S. attitudes towards Arab immigrants and people living in the Middle-East¹⁷. In sum, fear of terrorism causes a shift towards dogmatic reasoning which is characterised by "us versus them" thinking, stereotyping, discrimination and a lack of nuance that contributes to harsh, system-defending reactions that might do more harm than they do good. Such responses are automatically triggered in the face of existential threats, and they manifest themselves not only among the public, but also among the media and government. Encouraged by sensational media representation, the administrative reflex to acute threats is often one of strong focus on immediate security measures and aggressive action towards perceived enemies. The public, being similarly startled and anxious, is likely to support – or at least understand – drastic policy responses. As a result, fear of terrorism, both as an immediate response and a lingering state of mind, can make government, media and public susceptible to hyper-emotional overreactions which may ultimately undermine social and political unity and which run the risk of fuelling tensions rather than countering terrorism. Taking it one step further, one could argue that the way in which we (over) react to terrorism constitutes an invitation to be terrorised.

"Invitation to terror"

Analysing the narratives concerning terrorism in the United States and the United Kingdom after '9/11', sociologist Frank Furedi warns for a 'culture of fear'¹⁸ and shows how a "vulnerability paradigm" which has encouraged an attitude of fatalism, pessimism and a dread of terrorism¹⁹. In "Invitation to Terrorism" he describes how a narrative of fear based on the unknown gradually began to usurp the role of empirical evidence and reason in policy-formation. This possibilistic thinking authorises the act of speculation and imagination as a legitimate form of threat assessment.

As a result of what Furedi calls the "Expansion of the Empire of the Unknown" 20 Western society began to see itself as enduringly vulnerable, its members at risk from, rather than the masters of, events. Threat assessments made by political leaders and their officials expose a lack of confidence in the resilience of their own institutions and people. The sense of powerlessness and the preoccupation with the unknown leads to

¹³ See for example Bar-Tal, D., Halperin, E., & de Rivera, J. (2007). Collective emotions in conflict situations: Societal implications. *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 63, pp. 441-60; Kim, J. (2010). *The role of perceived collective anger and fear on policy support in response to terrorist threat*. Open Access Dissertations. Paper 194.

¹⁴ Hatfield, E., Cacioppo, J. T., & Rapson, R. (1994). *Emotional contagion*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁵ See for example Pyszczynski, T., Solomon, S., & Greenberg, J. (2003) *In the wake of 9/11: The psychology of terror*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Skitka, L. J., Bauman, C. W., Mullen, E. (2004). Political tolerance and coming to psychological closure following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks: An integrative approach. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 30, pp. 743-56.

¹⁸ Furedi, F. (2007). *Invitation to Terrorism: The Expanding Empire of the Unknown*. London: Continuum Press, p. 25.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 13 & p. 118.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 73.



suboptimal policy decisions. The ironic result might be that government and public team up with the terrorists by overreacting and responding in ways that ultimately add to the damage inflicted by the initial attack. Thus, we expose society to yet more terrorist attacks, as magnifying the impact of terrorism encourages more attacks. In the words of Furedi, we produce an “invitation to terror”.

Therefore, managing our emotional and behavioural reactions to a real or perceived terrorist threat is of profound importance in the struggle against terrorism. Doing so requires more than improving physical and psychological preparedness for future attacks. Failing to attribute appropriate meaning to terrorist threats – and respond accordingly – can cause a breakdown of democratic principles and undermine societies’ capacity to rise above adversity. Moreover, it could lead to a wider variety of side-effects such as stigmatisation and discrimination of political or ethnic groups associated with terrorism. Overreactions in terms of false allegations, waves of arrests and specific legal or bureaucratic measures against members of such groups could lead to increased polarisation and even (violent) radicalisation. In order to avoid the self-fulfilling prophecy of fatalism, pessimism and a dread of terrorism, societies need to show they are resilient to the potential damaging impact of terrorism.

Promoting Resilience

Resilience as a protective factor

The concept of resilience has its roots in psychology, engineering and ecology, and conveys the capacity of a person, material or biotope to survive sudden shocks. In 1983, psychological resilience was first coined in developmental psychology as a term to describe children’s successful psychosocial development in spite of multiple and seemingly overwhelming developmental hazard²¹.

In a counter-terrorism approach, resilience can be understood as a protective factor that limits the negative impact of terrorism on individuals and on society. In other words, a resilient individual or society shows the capacity to proactively adapt to and recover from disturbances that are perceived within the social system to fall outside the range of normal and expected disturbances, such as terrorism.²² According to Furedi resilience could be regarded as a counter-trend to the dominant narrative of vulnerability in the face of terrorism. Indeed, enhancing public resilience would mean assuring that communities, corporations and countries have the capacity to withstand, respond, rapidly recover, and adapt to terrorist disturbances, rather than being vulnerable targets.

By no means does resilience to terrorism mean that individuals or societies are to be insensitive to the psychological impact of violent attacks. Rather, it means that societies have to develop the capacity to assess and attribute meaning to threats, as well as a set of coping strategies to recover from such traumatic events. Societies that manage to increase resilience to terrorism will make it much more difficult to terrorist to find disruptive return for their effort.²³

Implications for counter-terrorism

We believe that resilience can be a powerful tool in the struggle against terrorism. Here, we aim to highlight a few dimensions on which policy-officials can integrate promoting resilience into overarching counter-terrorism strategies. Prominently, our ambition is merely to highlight the relevance of resiliency in our thinking about counter-terrorism; it is beyond the scope of this paper to offer clear-cut recommendations on concrete policy formulations. We aim, however, to point out that managing fear and promoting resiliency should be key objectives in all phases of a terrorist threat: before, during, and after an attack.

Before an attack, public education and communication can contribute to enhancing individual and societal preparedness for future attacks. Informing the public about necessary steps towards preparation for unforeseen mass emergencies can not only reduce fear, but can also assist in understanding and responding

²¹ Garmezy, N. & Rutter, M. (1983). *Stress, Coping and Development in Children*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

²² Comfort, L.K., Boin, R.A., and Demchak, C. (Eds.) (2010) *Designing Resilience: Preparing for Extreme Events*, Pittsburgh University Press.

²³ Flynn, S. & Burke, S. (2011). *Brittle Infrastructure, Community Resilience and National Security*. Centre for National Policy: TR News 275, July August 2011. www.centerforationalpolicy.org.



appropriately during times of crisis.²⁴ In addition, preparedness for mass catastrophes contributes to enhancing resilience against such traumatic events.²⁵ In the United Kingdom, politicians and experts had regularly warned – especially after ‘9/11’ – of a substantial risk of terrorist attacks occurring in London in the near future. In August 2004, the government distributed leaflets to every household in the country, providing information about necessary precautions and appropriate behaviour in the case of emergency.²⁶ After the London bombings occurred in 2005, research revealed that people who had read the advisory leaflets were less likely to change their behaviour (i.e. alter their travel intentions and avoid public transport when travelling to the centre of London) in response to the attacks than people who had not studied the leaflet.²⁷ These findings suggest that indeed, preparedness can reduce the impact of terrorist attacks and moreover, that sound communication can assist individuals and groups in enhancing resilience to mass trauma.

During an attack, it is important that communication strategies are fully integrated into the crisis decision-making process.²⁸ Comprehensive communication strategies include the supply of corrective, accurate and consistent information. It also includes listening to the public’s concerns and responding accordingly to public anxieties. In doing so, honesty and openness are seen as best practices in crisis communication.²⁹ Openness about risks will promote trust, prevent the distribution of disinformation, and foster credibility of the authorities with both the media and public. Effective communication with the media is key in this respect. The media are the primary channel of communication to the public, and can play an important role in managing the crisis.³⁰

Perhaps the most important challenges in managing responses to terrorism occur in the short-term and mid-term aftermath of an attack. Here the question is relevant how authorities and communities can facilitate effective coping strategies and promote rapid recovery.

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, we have proposed that societies, both at the governmental and public level, can benefit greatly from a fear management approach to counter-terrorism. Comprehensive counter-terrorism strategies do not stop at combating terrorists, but require an integrated and strategic approach that is based on the analyses of what terror is and does to people and how the impact of terror on target groups and the society at large can be reduced.

In order to combat terrorism effectively, societies should complement preventative measures with initiatives that facilitate appropriate responses in the immediate aftermath of a terrorist attack and enhance public resilience against the potential threat of future terrorism. In so doing, a few general thoughts are relevant.

- Although fear of terrorism is an abstract and intangible concept, the attitudinal and behavioural outcomes it produces are measurable and, to some extent, can be changed. With careful effort, fear of terrorism can be identified and measured with reasonable accuracy, to facilitate the development of logical and substantiated efforts to manage our emotional responses and promote resilience.
- As is the case with fear and crime, a disconnect exists between fear of terrorism and the objective risk of victimisation. As a result, it cannot be assumed that targeting – or eliminating – the threat of terrorism will

²⁴ Covello V.T., Peters. R.G., Wojtecki, J.G, & Hyde, R.C. (2001). Risk communication, the West Nile virus epidemic and bioterrorism. *Journal of Urban Health*, Vol. 78, pp. 382–91.

²⁵ Summerfield D. (2000). War and mental health: a brief overview. *British Medical Journal*, Vol. 321, pp. 232-5; Davis, L., LaTourrette, T., Mosher, D., Davis, L., & Howell, D. (2003). Individual preparedness and response for catastrophic terrorism. Santa Monica CA: RAND Corporation.

Rubin et al., (2005); HM Government (2005). *Preparing for emergencies. What you need to know*. Last accessed 20 September 2011; http://www.direct.gov.uk/prod_consum_dg/groups/dg_digitalassets/@dg/@en/documents/digitalasset/dg_176618.pdf.

²⁷ Rubin et al. (2005).

²⁸ See Seeger, W. (2006). Best practices in crisis communication: An expert panel process. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, Vol. 34, No. 3, pp 232-44.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.



lead to a reduction in fear of terrorism. It follows that counter-terrorism efforts should be complemented with initiatives to manage our emotional responses to terrorism.

- A better understanding is required of fear in general, and of fear in relation to terrorism in particular. The same holds for counter-terrorism communication and building resilience (to minimise the long and medium term psychological impact of terrorism).
- Research should focus on analysing the determinants of fear of terrorism. Fear of terrorism might be elevated by, among other factors, the political discourse, by overrepresentation and sensationalisation of terrorism in the media, by lack of trust in governmental institutions, or by poor communication strategies.
- In developing initiatives geared to reduce fear of terrorism and enhance resilience, policy-makers must be sensitive to the unique features of fear of terrorism and to the notion that individuals differ in the way they experience fear of terrorism. Research should reveal the determinants of fear of terrorism at both the individual and collective level, and should provide a foundation to develop comprehensive and coherent response strategies.
- Also, we should keep in mind that fear of terrorism can be rational to the extent that it serves the purpose of encouraging people to take precautions and actions. The objective is not to counter or eliminate fear, but to keep it in proportion to the actual risk of being victimised.

Terrorism may only lose its appeal if terrorists realise they are not able to influence and disrupt society. The capacity of societies to deal effectively with the psychologically damaging impact of terrorist threats, and to bounce back to healthy levels of functioning in the face of danger might prove a powerful tool in the struggle against terrorism.

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