MISOVERESTIMATING TERRORISM

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Introduction

By the standards of an earlier age, terrorism remains a limited phenomenon. That could have changed if terrorists became capable of sporadically launching destruction on a vast scale of repeatedly replicating 9/11. That hasn't happened of course and, fortunately, it does not seem to be in the cards.

While it is not true that 9/11 "changed everything," the tragedy did have a strong impact on language, on how terrorism has come to be understood and explained. First, its apparent incidence has been multiplied by effectively re-defining insurgency as terrorism. Accordingly, the category of "civil war" may be in the process of going out of existence and the same could even happen for much international war. Second, extrapolating wildly from the apparent capacities of the 9/11 hijackers, the threat presented internationally by small bands of terrorists has been greatly exaggerated, sometimes even to the point of deeming it to be existential a process that may be repeating itself with ISIS. This paper examines these issues, and it also assesses the limited importance of the terrorism phenomenon more generally.

Criminal and disciplined warfare, crime and terrorism, and the frequency of violence

When violence is sporadic, it is called "terrorism" if the perpetrators are disciplined and have an ideological or policy goal. It is called "crime" when their goal is financial enrichment.

If their violence becomes frequent and if the perpetrators are disciplined and have a policy or ideological goal, the activity is called disciplined war. This can be either conventional or unconventional depending on whether combat is characterized by tactics that might be called

Clausewitzian or regimental or whether it is characterized by hit-and-run guerrilla (or primitive) ones. If the violence perpetrated becomes frequent, and if the perpetrators are primarily devoted to financial enrichment, the activity is called criminal war, and it is characterized by brigand or warlord bands, or by freebooting or mercenary behavior.[1]

Thus, when either form of violence, disciplined or criminal, becomes continuous or sustained enough, it will look like, and be called, "war." Disciplined combatants generally fight to win, to conclude the conflict in order to return to a safer life as civilians or as professionals in a peacetime army. Criminal combatants, on the other hand, are frequently less likely to want to see the war end because they often are better off in war and face unemployment or a return to criminality in a country that has been impoverished by the very war they have just waged.[2]

The continuum between terrorism and disciplined warfare is central to the discussion in this paper, and it can be illustrated by the writings on guerrilla warfare by Mao Zedong. He distinguished three phases as parsed by Samuel Griffith. The first is essentially defensive and involves setting up rear bases and gaining popular support. Phase 2 involves "progressive expansion" in which dedicated combatants engage in offensive terrorism and sabotage against the enemy focusing on both military targets and civilian ones and putting the enemy under "relentless and continually mounting pressure." This sort of violence employs full-fledged guerrilla or insurgency warfare (also sometimes called partisan or people's war) built around a hit-and-run approach. "The ability to run away," declares Mao, "is the essence of the guerrilla." Finally, in phase 3, the weakened enemy would be engaged, and crushed, by conventional, stand-and-fight warfare.[3]

The goal for those engaged in counter-guerrilla or counter-insurgency warfare is to reverse the process by reducing insurgency activities to more bearable terrorist levels. Similarly, those combating criminal warfare will seek to reduce the frequency of the violence criminal bands commit. When successful, "war" will cease to exist, and any violence and predation that remains will be indistinguishable from ordinary crime.[4]

Shifting definitions: Terrorism and insurgency

If one removes 9/11 from the consideration (which does *not* mean ignoring either the event or its consequences), the number of fatalities committed by terrorists of all stripes outside war zones, has been, with very few exceptions, remarkably low both before and after 9/11.

A country-by-country summary of fatalities from all forms of terrorism for the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia is shown in table 1. There were 3,292 fatalities from terrorist incidents within the United States during the 38-year period covered in the table. However, the 9/11 attacks in 2001 represented almost all of these and most of the rest come from the attack by a domestic (and non-Islamic) terrorist, Timothy McVeigh, on a federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995: 3,140 in total. In all, this generates an annual fatality risk for the period of 1 in 4 million for the United States for the period 1970-2013. The rates in other developed countries in the table are similar. For the period since 9/11, the annual terrorism fatality rate for the U.S. is 1 in 110 million.

One can also focus on the kind of terrorism that really concerns people in the developed world by restricting the consideration to violence committed by Muslim extremists anywhere in the world outside of war zones, whether that violence is perpetrated by domestic Islamist

terrorists or by ones with international connections. Included in the count would be terrorism of the much-publicized sort that occurred in Bali in 2002 and 2005, in Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and Turkey in 2003, in the Philippines, Madrid, and Egypt in 2004, in London and Jordan in 2005, and in Mumbai in 2008.

The vast majority, then, of what is now commonly being tallied as terrorism has occurred in war zones.

Three publications from think tanks have independently provided lists or tallies of such violence committed in the several years after the 9/11 attacks. The lists include not only attacks by al-Qaeda but also those by its imitators, enthusiasts, lookalikes, and wannabes, as well as ones by groups with no apparent connection to it whatever. Although these tallies make for grim reading, for most of the period since 9/11 the total number of people killed by Muslim extremists outside of war zones comes to some 200 to 400 per year.[5] That, of course, is 200 to 400 too many, but it hardly suggests that the destructive capacities of the terrorists are monumental. For comparison, during the same period more people, 320 per year, drowned in bathtubs in the United States alone.[6] Or there is another, rather unpleasant comparison: increased delays and added costs at U.S. airports due to new security procedures provide incentive for many short-haul passengers to drive to their destination rather than flying, and, since driving is far riskier than air travel, the extra automobile traffic generated has been estimated to result in 500 or more extra road fatalities per year.[7]

The vast majority, then, of what is now commonly being tallied as terrorism has occurred in war zones. This is especially true for fatalities.[8] But to a considerable degree, this is the result

of a more expansive application since 9/11 of standard definitions of terrorism, to the point where virtually any violence perpetrated by rebels in civil wars is now being called terrorism.[9]

Thus in a recent book dealing with the Global Terrorism Database they have developed at the University of Maryland, Gary LaFree, Laura Dugan, and Erin Miller note that, although there are a great many definitions of terrorism, most commentators and experts agree on several key elements, captured in the definition we use here: "the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by non-state actors to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation."[10] Similarly, Michael Stohl, after extended consideration, defines terrorism as "the purposeful act or the threat of the act of violence to create fear and/or compliant behavior in a victim and/or the audience of the act or threat."[11]

But, as Carl von Clausewitz has stressed, the whole effort in war is to obtain such goals. In his most famous formulation, "war is merely the continuation of policy by other means" that is, war "is a true political instrument." Or in Mao's words, "politics is war without bloodshed; war is politics with bloodshed." And the means to attaining the goal, stresses Clausewitz, involve using coercion and inflicting fear and intimidation to break the enemy's will, that is, to create, in Stohl's words, "compliant behavior." In battle, says Clausewitz "the loss of morale" is the "major decisive factor."[12] Wars, then, do not involve the annihilation of the enemy, but the breaking of the enemy's will, something that sometimes comes quite quickly, sometimes only after long episodes of attrition.[13]

Walter Laqueur, after considerable consideration over decades, says he has settled on defining terrorism as "the systematic use of murder, injury, and destruction, or the threat of such acts, aimed at achieving political ends."[14] However, as military historian Geoffrey Parker puts it

(perhaps a bit sardonically), "killing people and breaking things" is "the business of the military in war."[15]

After several pages of assessment in his well-known text, *Inside Terrorism*, Bruce Hoffman concludes that terrorism is 1) political in aims and motives; 2) violent or threatens violence; 3) designed to have far-reaching psychological repercussions beyond the immediate victim or target, 4) conducted either by an organization or by individuals directly influenced, motivated, or inspired by ideological aims or example, and 5) perpetrated by a subnational or nonstate entity. He then derives a definition of terrorism as "the deliberate creation of exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in the pursuit of political change."[16]

Unlike Stohl (and perhaps Laqueur), Hoffman presumably means his final definition to apply only to sub-state entities, and his "ideological aims" would presumably include toppling the reigning government, seeking revenge, or encouraging occupiers to withdraw. Like LaFree and Stohl and Laqueur, he does not require that the targets of terrorism be civilian. It is difficult to see, following Clausewitz, how his characterization could not be applied to insurgency or rebellion.

Terrorism thus differs from disciplined warfare not in its essential method or goal, but, as outlined earlier, in its comparative infrequency. In the past, when terroristic violence by substate actors (or elements) became really extensive in an area, the activity was no longer called terrorism but rather war or insurgency. Thus, the Irish Republican Army was generally taken to be a terrorist enterprise, while fighters in Sri Lanka in the 1990s were considered to be combatants who were employing guerrilla techniques in a civil war situation. And what the Vietnamese Communists were doing to the civilian population in the early and middle 1960s,

assassination, ambush, harassment, sabotage, assault, was generally considered to be elements in an insurgent or guerrilla war, not terrorism, because it was so sustained.[17] Insurgents and guerrilla combatants usually rely on the hit-and-run tactics employed by the terrorist, and the difference between terrorism and such wars is not in the method, but in the frequency with which it is employed. The U.S. military saw the distinction in the war in Iraq. In the early days when violence was sporadic, those opposing the American presence were called "terrorists." When the violence became more continuous, they became "insurgents."

Before 9/11, then, terrorism was, by definition, a limited phenomenon. Terrorism has often been called the weapon of the weak. If terrorists, perhaps following the pattern set out by Mao, begin to engage in disciplined violence that is no longer fitful or sporadic, the enterprise has generally been called warfare.

That condition could have changed if terrorists had become capable of visiting very substantial destruction with sporadic attacks. Under that condition, the activity would still be considered terrorism under our suggested approach because it would remain sporadic, but the damage inflicted could hardly be said to be limited. In the early months and years after 9/11, many feared that was going to come about (Mayer 2008, 3; Mueller and Stewart 2016, 13-17). But it didn't. If 9/11 had become typical, had it proved to be a harbinger, it would be reasonable to conclude, as was commonly held in the aftermath of that terrible day, that "everything has changed." However, the tragic event seems increasingly to stand as an aberration, not as a harbinger. Accordingly, it may well be that, as Russell Seitz put it in 2004, "9/11 could join the Trojan Horse and Pearl Harbor among stratagems so uniquely surprising that their very success precludes their repetition," and accordingly, that "al-Qaeda's best shot may have been exactly

that."[18] A decade and a half after the event, 9/11 remains an extreme outlier, scarcely any terrorist act before or since, even those so designated that take place in war zones, has inflicted even as much as one-tenth the damage.

If one wishes to embrace the broader definition of terrorism that had been used before 9/11 but effectively took hold after it, a huge number of violent endeavors that had previously been called wars would have to be recategorized. This would include, for example, the decade-long conflict in Algeria in the 1990s in which perhaps 100,000 people perished. And so would most "primitive warfare," which, like irregular warfare more generally, substantially relies on raids rather than on set-piece battles. This is particularly the case when, as in the widely-accepted LaFree, Laqueur, Hoffman, and Stohl definitions, violence by sub-state or non-state or subnational elements against military targets is not differentiated from their violence against civilians. Indeed, the concept of civil war might have to be retired almost entirely.[19]

The confusion can be seen currently when ISIS is commonly labeled a band of terrorists, even though it occupies territory, runs social services, and regularly confronts armed soldiers in direct combat. In any armed conflict before the current century, that would be called an insurgency.[20] In the civil war in Syria, the United States brands those fighting the government of Bashar Al-Assad to its own convenience: ISIS fighters are deemed to be "terrorists" while those insurgents approved by the United States are labeled the "moderate opposition." Assad himself is more consistent, if equally self-serving: any violent opposition to a sitting government, he says, is "terrorism."[21] Assad's perspective, one that has become increasingly popular since 9/11, would allow us to retire the concept of "civil war" just about entirely.

This process can be taken a step further. Stohl's definition is, in his words, "actor-neutral," and he points out that terrorism, as he sees it, is very frequently committed by states, as well as by "non-state actors" (Stohl 2012). If that element of the definition is adjusted, the entire category of "war," including those of the international variety, could substantially vanish. Almost all disciplined violence with a policy or ideological goal would become terrorism. Indeed, points out military historian Matthew Waxman, in war, "punishment of civilians is a commonly used strategy of coercion."[22]

The definitional issue developed here can be seen in operation in the varying interpretations of the ISIS-related terrorist attacks against civilian targets that killed about 130 in Paris on the night of November 13, 2015. French President François Hollande immediately labeled this an "act of war" that was committed by a "terrorist army" against "France, our values, who we are, a free country that speaks to the entire planet."[23] He is on the same page as an ISIS sympathizer quoted in the *Washington Post* about how to label the attacks, although they disagree on the essential motive for the them: "The brothers launched the attack in Paris to prove that we are a strong state and we can fight our enemies anywhere…Since they are fighting us in our land, we are going to fight them in their lands."

However, suggests the *Post*, ISIS has been in decline in its core area, and appears to have lashed out abroad "to divert attention from its territorial losses."[24] A "strong state" would have engaged France with direct warfare. But ISIS used terrorism instead, the weapon of the weak. As with al-Qaeda after 9/11, this condition will change only if this "terrorist army" can do massive damage with sporadic attacks. Or, in the unlikely event that it is able to generate a mass uprising

by Muslims within the country, its efforts would be taken to have graduated from terrorism to insurgency.

Exaggerating terrorist capacities

Much of the misoverestimation phenomenon thus involves a conflation of terrorism with what has traditionally been called war, particularly civil war or insurgency. In result, the perceived impact and frequency of terrorism have been inflated. In addition, and in the process, the capacities of terrorists have been exaggerated.

Official characterizations of the terrorist "adversary"

In 2009, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) issued a lengthy report on protecting the homeland. Key to achieving such an objective, it would seem, should be a careful assessment of the character, capacities, and desires of potential terrorists targeting that homeland. Although the report does contain a section dealing with what its authors call "The Nature of the Terrorist Adversary," it devotes only two paragraphs to this important concern, and both are decidedly one-dimensional and fully preoccupied with the dire end of the spectrum of the terrorist threat. Within that section, it devotes but two sentences to an assessment of the actual nature of the "adversary" it is so concerned about:

> The number and high profile of international and domestic terrorist attacks and disrupted
> plots during the last two decades underscore the determination and persistence of terrorist
> organizations. Terrorists have proven to be relentless, patient, opportunistic, and flexible,

learning from experience and modifying tactics and targets to exploit perceived vulnerabilities and avoid observed strengths.[25]

In stark contrast, when seeking to describe their subjects, the authors of a set of case studies of terrorists who have focused on the United States since 9/11 chiefly apply different descriptors: incompetent, ineffective, unintelligent, idiotic, ignorant, inadequate, unorganized, misguided, muddled, amateurish, dopey, unrealistic, moronic, irrational, foolish, and gullible.[26]

The inability of the DHS to consider such characterizations even parenthetically in its fleeting discussion of the "adversary" is really quite amazing, and perhaps delusional in its single-minded preoccupation with the extreme.

The nuclear extrapolation

The most commonly embraced method by which it has been suggested that terrorists would be able routinely to repeat, or even top, the destruction of 9/11 would be by becoming capable of setting off an atomic explosion. Because the 9/11 terrorists were successful with box cutters, it has been essentially held, they might soon be able to turn out and detonate nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction.

It was in 2004, in his influential book, *Nuclear Terrorism*, a work Nicholas Kristof of the *New York Times* found to be "terrifying", that Harvard's Graham Allison relayed his "considered judgment" that "on the current path, a nuclear terrorist attack on America in the decade ahead is more likely than not."[27] Allison has had a great deal of company in his alarming pronouncements. For example, in 2007, the distinguished physicist Richard Garwin put the

likelihood of a nuclear explosion on an American or European city by terrorist or other means at 20 percent per year, which would work out to 89 percent over a ten-year period.[28]

Allison's time is up, and so, pretty much, is Garwin's. And it is important to point out that not only have terrorists failed to go nuclear, but in the words of William Langewiesche who has assessed the process in detail, "The best information is that no one has gotten anywhere near this. I mean, if you look carefully and practically at this process, you see that it is an enormous undertaking full of risks for the would-be terrorists."[29]

[The events of 9/11] ... were in many respects clever and well planned, their success was more the result of luck than of cleverness.

Assessing September 11, 2001

To evaluate terrorist capacities, one must also focus on the events of 9/11. Although those attacks were in many respects clever and well planned, their success was more the result of luck than of cleverness. In fact, it is not at all clear that the planners really appreciated why they might be successful. As pilot Patrick Smith points out, it was not because they "exploited a weakness in airport security by smuggling aboard box cutters." Rather, "what they actually exploited was a weakness in our mindset, a set of presumptions based on the decades-long track record of hijackings. In years past, a takeover meant hostage negotiations and standoffs; crews were trained in the concept of 'passive resistance.'"[30]

In earlier decades, and particularly between 1967 and 1972, nearly 200 commercial airline flights had been hijacked in American airspace. Most of these were diverted to Cuba where the hijackers disembarked and the plane was sent on its way back to the United States. In all this,

there were almost no deaths and very little injury, and the total cost to the airlines was some $20,000 per hijacked flight at a time when industry profits were more than $360 million per year. The most sensible policy seemed to be to play along with the hijackers. Accordingly, crew members were sternly instructed that "it is much more prudent to submit to a gunman's demands than attempt action which may well jeopardize the lives of all on board."[31] Some hijackers demanded sums of money rather than trips to Cuba, and the airlines continued to cooperate.

Things changed in late 1973, however. Three armed thugs hijacked a plane and demanded a huge ransom payment. Then, while the airline was scrambling to come up with the money, the extortionists downed 40 small bottles of liquor on the plane and became increasingly erratic, even threatening to crash the plane into a nuclear reactor in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. This threat finally led to the institution of passenger screening which the airlines had previously opposed, fearing a drop in passenger traffic. This measure (combined with a change of policy by Cuba) very substantially reduced the numbers of hijackings. It did come, however, at a high price: at the time, one study calculated that it cost $291,221 for every passenger spared the process of temporarily becoming a hostage. Through all of this, however, basic policy remained the same: crew members, notes Brendan Koerner in a fascinating study of the saga, "were still instructed to offer hijackers their complete cooperation."[32]

It was this policy, and experience, that made the 9/11 hijackings possible. However, the policy was obviously shattered by the 2001 hijackings as demonstrated on the fourth plane in which passengers and crew, having learned of what had happened on the earlier flights, fought to overcome the hijackers.

Nonetheless, apparently completely oblivious to this highly likely prospective development, the 9/11 planners had also been working on a "second wave" hijacking in which the targets would be skyscrapers in Los Angeles, Seattle, Chicago, and New York.[33] This means they didn't appreciate the fact that the attack would make a "second wave" vastly more difficult to pull off, perhaps even impossible, because, as Smith continues, "Any hijacker would face a planeload of angry and frightened people ready to fight back."[34]

Moreover, the planners' mindset continued even *after* the 9/11 experience. They were impressed by new airline security measures instituted by the Americans, but not, it appears, by the crucial change in mindset. Thus, although they judged that the prospects for success in a second hijacking to be low "at least for the short term," they continued to keep the prospect in mind.[35]

In addition, there were many miscues in the execution of the 9/11 plot. Most impressively, Mohamed Atta, one of the ringleaders of the plot and the pilot of the plane crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center, almost missed his flight. As Michael Kenney notes, "9/11 was characterized less by flawless execution than by steadfast, malleable militants practicing slipshod tradecraft." Indeed, "in spite of their training and experience in guerrilla warfare, several 9/11 perpetrators committed basic errors in tradecraft that nearly sabotaged their plans." For example, one called attention to himself by, among other things, insisting on receiving advanced training for flying large commercial aircraft, asking how much fuel a jumbo jet could carry and how much damage it would cause if it crashed into anything, and getting "extremely agitated" when asked about his religious background.[36]

Most important, it appears that Osama bin Laden's strategic vision for the attacks was, like that of the Japanese at Pearl Harbor, profoundly misguided.[37] Impressed in particular by the American reaction to losses in Lebanon in 1983 and in Somalia in 1993, he concluded that this reaction demonstrated "impotence," "weakness," and "false courage." Accordingly, he appears to have believed that the country would respond to a large direct attack at home by withdrawing from the Middle East.[38]

What he clearly failed to understand was that the United States did not withdraw from Lebanon and Somalia simply because of the losses, but because it did not value the stakes very much in those humanitarian ventures. For Americans (and Canadians, Swedes, Belgians, the Red Cross, and so on), peacekeeping is simply not worth many of their own lives.[39] By contrast, the American public concluded from 9/11 that the country's very survival was at stake in the conflict with bin Laden's form of terrorism. Accordingly, its willingness to confront the danger (and to exact revenge) was, as after Pearl Harbor, monumental. Popular support for chasing down the terrorists in Afghanistan, even though there was a prospect for considerable American losses, was exceedingly high, considerably higher than at the beginnings of the wars in Vietnam, Korea, or Iraq.[40]

The result of America's massive and self-destructive overreaction to 9/11 may well lead it to substantially withdraw from the Middle East. Thus, by luck, bin Laden's original goal may be eventually achieved, but not at all in the way he planned it.

Impressively, unlike the Wizard of Oz, bin Laden appears to have remained in a state of self-delusion even to his brutal and abrupt end. The Wizard came to realize that he was a fraud but bin Laden never experienced a similar revelation, continuing to cling to the belief that

another attack like 9/11, or even bigger, might force the United States out of the Middle East.[41]

He thus remained absurdly unfazed that the first such effort had proved to be spectacularly

counterproductive in the respect that it triggered a deadly invasion of his base in Afghanistan and

an equally deadly, long-term, determined pursuit of him and his operatives.

Al-Qaeda's record outside of 9/11

It is certainly *possible*, at least, that a terrorist group, like al-Qaeda on 9/11, could get

lucky again. However, it seems clear that any such events are scarcely likely to become anything

that could be called routine. Moreover, al-Qaeda has never been able to do anything remotely

that spectacular.

Before 9/11, al-Qaeda had launched several terrorist attacks, but even those that

succeeded were laced with screw-ups. Thus, in picking when to bomb two American embassies

in Africa in 1998, the plotters failed to note that the day chosen was a national holiday in one of

the countries, thereby much reducing the casualty count.[42] An effort to send a bomb-loaded skiff

to attack a U.S. destroyer when it refueled in Yemen failed when the skiff sank as it was

launched.[43] A later attempt did damage another U.S. ship, though it failed to sink the ship as

apparently was planned, and the video guy assigned to record the deed for posterity and

propaganda fell asleep and missed the opportunity.[44]

Since 2001, al-Qaeda Central's record of accomplishment has remained rather meager,

even taking into consideration that it has been isolated and under siege. It does not seem to have

done much of anything except issue videos filled with empty, self-infatuated, and essentially

delusional threats. Thus, it was in October 2002 that Osama bin Laden proclaimed,

"Understand the lesson of New York and Washington raids, which came in response to some

of your previous crimes. … God is my witness, the youth of Islam are preparing things that

will fill your hearts with fear. They will target key sectors of your economy until you stop

your injustice and aggression or until the more short-lived of us die."

And in January 2006, he insisted that the "delay" in carrying out operations in the United States

"was not due to failure to breach your security measures," and that "operations are under

preparation, and you will see them on your own ground once they are finished, God willing."[45]

Bin Laden's tiny group of perhaps 100 or so does appear to have served as something of

an inspiration to some Muslim extremists. They may have done some training, may have

contributed a bit to the Taliban's far larger insurgency in Afghanistan, and may have participated

in a few terrorist acts in Pakistan.[46] In his examination of the major terrorist plots against the

West since 9/11, Mitchell Silber finds only two, the shoe bomber attempt of 2001 and the effort

to blow up transatlantic airliners with liquid bombs in 2006, that could be said to be under the

"command and control" of al-Qaeda Central (as opposed to ones suggested, endorsed, or

inspired by the organization), and there are questions about how full its control was even in these

two instances, both of which, as it happens, failed miserably.[47] Even under siege, it is difficult to

see why al-Qaeda could not have organized attacks at least as costly and shocking as the shooting

rampages that other groups launched in Mumbai in 2008 or at a shopping center in Kenya in 2013

or in Paris in 2015. These did not take huge resources, present major logistical challenges, require

the organization of a large number of perpetrators, or need extensive planning.

Over 300 million people are admitted legally into the United States every year.[48] If al-

Qaeda terrorists haven't filtered into the country in potentially damaging numbers, this can't be

because of border security. It must be because they aren't trying very hard or because they are far less dedicated, diabolical, and competent than the common image would suggest.

This remarkably limited record, together with the *Wizard of Oz* conclusion of the ten-year quest for bin Laden, suggest that Glenn Carle, deputy national intelligence officer for transnational threats at the CIA for several years before his retirement in 2008 after 23 years of service, was right in 2008 when he warned, "We must not take fright at the specter our leaders have exaggerated. In fact, we must see jihadists for the small, lethal, disjointed and miserable opponents that they are." Al-Qaeda "has only a handful of individuals capable of planning, organizing and leading a terrorist organization," and although they have threatened attacks, "its capabilities are far inferior to its desires."[49]

Would-be terrorists … are operationally unsophisticated, short on know-how, prone to make mistakes, poor at planning, and limited in their capacity to learn

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Terrorism abroad outside war zones

As noted earlier, words like *brilliant, crafty, imaginative*, and *ingenious*, not to mention *mastermind*, are notable for their absence in the case studies of terrorists focused on doing damage in the United States. But they don't spring to mind all that much when one looks at the situation abroad outside war zones, either.

Kenney has analyzed court documents and interviewed dozens of government officials and intelligence agents in Europe and other Western locations. He finds that would-be terrorists there, like their counterparts in the United States, are operationally unsophisticated, short on

know-how, prone to make mistakes, poor at planning, and limited in their capacity to learn.[50] Another study documents the difficulties of network coordination that continually threaten the terrorists' operational unity, trust, cohesion, and ability to act collectively.[51] The lack of success of terrorists in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and other Western countries mirrors that in the United States. As can be seen in Table 1, the number of people killed by Islamist extremist terrorists in the UK is less than four per year, while for Canada and Australia, it is two in the last decade. Whether the attack in Paris in November 2015, the first major attack in Europe in more than ten years, portends a change from this pattern remains to be seen.

Exaggerations about foiled plots

There has been a tendency to exaggerate not only the skills of the terrorists, but the importance and potential destructiveness of their plots. A *New York Times* article in 2009 was engaging in considerable understatement when it observed, "Since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, senior government officials have announced dozens of terrorism cases that on close examination seemed to diminish as legitimate threats."[52]

In this spirit, the bumbling efforts of the Times Square bomber of 2010 are blithely held to have "almost succeeded," according to John Yoo and Ali Sofan.[53] However, the bomb was reported from the start to be "really amateurish," with some analysts charitably speculating when it was first examined that it might be "some sort of test run" created by "someone who's learning how to make a bomb and will learn from what went wrong with this [one]." Apparently because it is difficult to buy explosive fertilizer, the bomber purchased the non-exploding kind

instead.[54] It is not clear why he didn't use dirt or dried figs for his explosive material, as these are cheaper, easier to find, and will fail to explode with same alacrity as nonexplosive fertilizer.

Similarly, former Deputy Secretary of Homeland Security James Loy has argued that in 2006, terrorists "nearly succeeded in blowing up seven planes crossing the Atlantic."[55] And, on the day of the arrests, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff repeatedly characterized it as "a very sophisticated plan and operation."[56] However, in the evaluation of the CIA, the bombs the London-based terrorist group was planning to make were too small to bring down the airliners anyway.[57] And the widely promulgated notion that thousands would be killed on the ground if the planes were blown up over cities does not survive sensible analysis, for example, an Airbus jetliner that crashed into heavily-populated Queens, New York, in 2004 killed five on the ground.[58]

There were also exaggerated claims about potential destruction when a terrorist cell led by Najibullah Zazi was foiled in its plans to detonate four suicide bombs on the New York subway in 2009. Thus, the attorney general of the United States held that the planned attack had the potential to be "even larger" than the Madrid train bombings in 2004 that killed nearly 200 people.[59] And experts estimated that the attack could have killed anywhere between 200 and 500 people if all four explosives had been successfully detonated.[60] These estimates ignored the experience in July 2005, when two sets of terrorists each attempted to set off four bombs on the crowded transit system in London. The first set killed 52, while the second killed none because the bombs were ill constructed. Presumably, the London bombers could have killed more if, in the first case, the bombs had been placed differently; or in the second, if they had been constructed properly. But because the number of dead is known, it is that number, not an

imagined one, that ought to be the basis of comparison. The train bombings in Madrid in 2004 were very destructive, killing 191. However, this was accomplished by detonating ten bombs, not four, as planned in the New York subway case, and even this death toll is lower than the attorney general's lowest estimate.

Interestingly, however, the plot dreamed up since September 11 that could potentially have caused the most damage was the one in 2006 that aspired to topple the Sears Tower in Chicago. Even if the toppling failed to create the planners' hoped-for tsunami as it splashed into Lake Michigan, thousands would have died, perhaps even tens of thousands, and the damage to the neighborhood would have been as monumental as that to the building. The plotters had no capacity to carry out this colossal deed, however, so their expressed desire is not taken seriously, even though the case is generally known as the Sears Tower plot.[61] Analysts should apply this kind of reasonable reticence more broadly for aborted or foiled plots.

The masterminds

Arthur Conan Doyle invented Moriarty to give his hero, Sherlock Holmes, an opponent worthy of the efforts of the great, if equally imaginary, detective. The counterterrorism establishment has been similarly inclined, as have those responsible for producing such imaginative products as television's *24* and *Homeland*. Early on, officials even invited Hollywood scriptwriters to spin out tales of what the "universal adversary" out there might be up to.[62] Central to this exercise has been the identification of a few evil "masterminds" who were dominating the show. Since it made for good copy, journalists helped spread the word.

In his book *Mastermind: The Many Faces of the 9/11 Architect, Khalid Shaikh Mohammed*, Richard Miniter begins by ominously listing his subject's admitted (or claimed) involvement with terrorist efforts in addition to 9/11. These include the 1993 World Trade Center and 2002 Bali bombings; plots on Heathrow airport, Big Ben, and the Panama Canal; plans to assassinate Bill Clinton, the Pope, and several prime ministers of Pakistan; two efforts to infiltrate agents into the United States; and the plan for a "second wave" of attacks by hijacked airliners on major U.S. landmarks including the U.S. Bank Tower in Los Angeles, the Sears Tower in Chicago, and the Plaza Bank Building in Seattle.[63] Actually, Miniter does not do full service to his subject's claimed scheming: in addition to the plots on his list, KSM declared himself to be the power behind dozens of other schemes.[64]

What is impressive is that, except for the Bali bombings, just about *all* of KSM's many schemes either failed or did not even begin to approach fruition. In addition, the role of the "mastermind" in the Bali case, according to Miniter and others, was simply to supply some money.[65] And KSM's entire role in the failed 1993 effort to bring down the World Trade Center was to wire $660 to one of the conspirators.[66] It is also noteworthy that KSM continued to work on the "second wave" hijacked airplane attack.[67] This suggests that, as discussed earlier, even after the fact, he understood neither the reason 9/11 worked nor the (rather obvious) lesson of the fourth plane. Overall, as a terrorism planner, KSM has a fertile mind but a feeble record of accomplishment, one characterized by fanciful scheming and stunted execution. In this context, 9/11 clearly stands out as an aberration.

KSM's nephew, Ramzi Yousef, who was primarily responsible for the February 1993 truck bomb attack on the World Trade Center, is also widely considered to be a mastermind. Journalist

Simon Reeve repeatedly uses the word to describe him, as do others.[68] Asked if he considered himself to be a genius, Yousef obligingly responded strongly in the affirmative.[69]

The praise (and self-praise) seems to be excessive. As a bomb maker, he was given to splashing acid in his face and starting fires that drew the police.[70] His attack on the World Trade Center in early 1993 did manage to kill six people, but for the most part it was a tragicomedy of errors. Indeed, notes Kenney, one of his main collaborators "became the poster boy for 'stupid' terrorists" by repeatedly trying to claim a $400 refund on the van he and his fellow conspirators had just blown up in their failed effort to topple one of the World Trade Center towers.[71] Moreover, the bomb Yousef put together was not nearly big enough to topple the tower, which was his goal.[72] After that venture, Yousef engaged in a wide variety of terrorist efforts before his arrest two years later. These resulted in the deaths of twenty-eight more people. All but two of these deaths were inflicted by a bomb he created on hire for an Iranian rebel group that was detonated by the group in the women's section of a holy site in Iran. Thus, an examination of Yousef's record as a terrorist during suggests a continuing propensity for viciousness, but scarcely genius or mastermindhood.[73]

Finally, there is Ibrahim Hassan al-Asiri, Yemen's supposed master bomb maker. He is considered an "evil genius" by House Homeland Security Committee Chairman Peter King, while the CIA's Michael Morell has proclaimed him to be a "mastermind," a "master at his craft," and perhaps "the most dangerous terrorist alive today."[74] Thus far, this mastermind's record is pretty miserable.

He was apparently responsible for the attempt by the Yemen al-Qaeda affiliate in 2010 to put bombs on cargo planes, as well as a similar plot in 2012. Both of these were thwarted by

insider intelligence work.[75] He also seems to have furnished the underwear bomb used in a disrupted attempt to blow up a U.S.-bound airliner in 2009. That bomb suffered from a couple of rather unmasterly design flaws, according to the TSA's Kip Hawley: it could not be detonated and was too small to destroy the aircraft.[76] The only one of al-Asiri's bombs to actually explode was placed on the body (probably in the rectum) of his brother, who was standing next to the target, a Saudi prince, when it was detonated. Al-Asiri's brother was blown to pieces, but the prince escaped with only minor wounds.[77]

Overall, then, the record of these supposed "masterminds" abroad is, despite the 9/11 outlier, considerably less than awesome. For some, like Yemen's al-Asiri, it is pretty nearly one of unrelieved fiasco.

ISIS

In 2014, a militant group calling itself the Islamic State, or ISIL, but more generally known as ISIS, burst into official and public attention with some military victories in Iraq and Syria in the middle of the year particularly taking over Iraq's second largest city, Mosul. Former NSA and CIA head Michael Hayden was quick to stoke alarm by proclaiming that "this is quite a dangerous thing that we're seeing unfold here" and applying the predictable comparison: "It's probably not 9/11, but it's certainly in the same area code."[78] And Senators John McCain and Lindsay Graham swiftly declaimed that the group presented an existential threat to the United States.[79]

Actually, the conquest of Mosul was essentially a fluke. The plan was to hold part of the city for a while in an effort, it seems, to free some prisoners. The defending Iraqi army, "trained"

by the American military at enormous cost to US taxpayers, simply fell apart in confusion and disarray, abandoning weaponry, and the city, to the tiny group of seeming invaders.[80]

Cries of alarm escalated substantially a few months later after ISIS performed and webcast several beheadings of defenseless Western hostages, not exactly an act of great military prowess. Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein was soon insisting that "The threat ISIS poses cannot be overstated" effectively proclaiming, as columnist Dan Froomkin suggests, hyperbole on the subject to be impossible.[81] And the media remain canny about weaving audience-grabbing references to the arrestingly diabolical ISIS into any story about terrorism.[82]

However, ISIS had actually separated itself from al-Qaeda (or had been summarily kicked out of the al-Qaeda area code by al-Qaeda itself) because, instead of focusing on doing damage against the far enemy, the United States in particular, the new group was mainly devoted to killing and terrorizing fellow Muslims and neighboring Christians that it doesn't like.[83]

Middle East specialist Ramzy Mardini notes that "the Islamic State's fundamentals are weak"; that "it does not have a sustainable endgame"; that its "extreme ideology, spirit of subjugation, and acts of barbarism prevent it from becoming a political venue for the masses"; that its foolhardy efforts to instill fear in everyone limits "its opportunities for alliances" and makes it "vulnerable to popular backlash"; that "its potential support across the region ranges from limited to nonexistent"; and that the group "is completely isolated, encircled by enemies."[84]

Moreover, to the degree that ISIS, unlike the more wary al-Qaeda central, welcomes fighters from abroad, the group is likely to be penetrated by foreign intelligence operatives. And actually controlling and effectively governing wide territories may well become a major strain. The "Islamic State" is, conclude Jamie Hansen-Lewis and Jacob Shapiro,

extremely unlikely to be sustainable from a financial perspective. Its economy is small

compared to its enemies, its institutions are not conducive to economic growth, and it is

reliant on extractive industries that in all other non-democratic countries foster the creation

of kleptocratic elites …. . Even if it endures as a fragile state, it will be vulnerable to internal

strife.[85]

It is possible it will become vulnerable as well to airstrikes aided by an increasingly alienated

populaton under its control.

The vicious group is certainly a danger to the people under its control, and there is fear

about the potential return of people with Western passports who have joined it. However, as

Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro have detailed, foreign fighters tend to be killed early (they are

common picks for suicide missions), often become disillusioned especially by in-fighting in the

ranks, and do not receive much in the way of useful training for terrorist exercises back home.[86]

It might be added that ISIS videos exultantly show foreign fighters burning their passports to

demonstrate their terminal commitment to the cause, hardly a good idea if they want to return.

In May 2015, an audio message apparently from the leader of ISIS, exhorted "every Muslim in

every place" either to emigrate to join the fight in his territory or to "fight in his land wherever

that may be." There was nothing about training people to return home to wreak havoc.[87] At least

some of those in the small group that perpetrated the Paris attacks of November 2015 may have

done so however, and it is possible the policy has changed in an effort, as suggested earlier, to

bring "war" to those countries fighting ISIS in Syria and Iraq. The returnees may include the plot's

apparent ringleader, now dead, who, earlier in the year, had tried several times to institute

terrorist acts in the area, none of which succeeded.[88] His success in November may have made up for this, but his failure rate still remains high.

There have also been fears about potential homegrown terrorists who might be inspired by ISIS' propaganda or example. Indeed, ISIS could still provide inspiration to death cult sycophants around the world even if it essentially fails to exist. And, as the Paris attacks tragically demonstrate, potential targets for dedicated terrorists, peaceful aggregations of civilians, remain legion. However, as terrorism specialist Max Abrahms notes "lone wolves have carried out just two of the 1,900 most deadly terrorist incidents over the last four decades."[89]

There has also been a trendy concern about the way ISIS uses social media. However, as Byman and Shapiro and others have pointed out, the foolish willingness of would-be terrorists to spill out their aspirations and their often-childish fantasies on social media has been, on balance, much to the advantage of the police seeking to track them.[90]

Limited impact: Assessing the importance of terrorism

With this as background, it might be useful to evaluate the proposition that terrorism actually isn't really a terribly important historical phenomenon at least when one applies definitions that separate it out from insurgency. Accordingly, it might be argued, terrorism scarcely deserves the reaction it has inspired.[91]

There are two classes of events in which terrorism, by itself, does at times seem to have had a direct historical impact: assassination, and in situations where the terrorized have both a low evaluation of the stakes at risk and a low tolerance for casualties.

If political assassination is considered to be terrorism, there do seem to be instances when it has had a notable historical effect. Thus, the murder of John F. Kennedy in 1963 violently removed from office a man who, some people argue, was less likely than his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, to enter and to sustain the Vietnam War. The assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in 1994 in Israel may have had some notable negative effect on the peace process (one of the goals of the assassin), because the leader who replaced him had less prestige and was less politically skillful.

If the terrorized entity has a low tolerance for casualties and a low evaluation of the stakes at hand, relatively small acts of terrorism (that is, violence at the sub-insurgency level) can be important in changing its policy. U.S. forces sent to Lebanon in 1982 and to Somalia in 1992 were engaging in peacekeeping, a venture few Americans considered to be worth many American lives. Therefore, when terrorist bombs in the first case, or a wild firefight in the second (possibly something that could be labeled terrorism), took the lives of a significant number of those forces, American policy shifted and the troops were withdrawn. The phenomenon seems to be general. In 1994, Belgium abruptly withdrew from Rwanda, and to save face urged others to do so as well, when ten of its policing troops were massacred and mutilated early in the genocide.[92] Zionist terrorism may have been influential in impelling the British to leave Palestine in 1947.[93] However, to the degree that it did so, an important element in the process was the British government's low tolerance for casualties in its onerous protectorate duties.

Beyond these kinds of cases, any significant historical impact that terrorism (again, in contrast to insurgency) may have had seems to have derived much more from the reaction or

overreaction it inspired or facilitated, not from anything the terrorists accomplished on their own.

In some instances, a terrorist act has had significant historical consequences because it was opportunistically used as an excuse for, or seized upon to carry out, a policy desired for other reasons. The terrorist act did not trigger or cause these historically significant ventures; rather, it facilitated them by shifting the emotional or political situation, making possible a policy desired for other reasons by political actors. Yet, the policy was no more necessary after the terrorist act than it was before it took place.

An important case in point is the reaction of Austria and Germany to the assassination in Sarajevo in June 1914. It is frequently suggested that the terrorist act triggered, or even caused, the cataclysm of World War I. It seems clear, however, that rather than causing the massive (and in the end, spectacularly counterproductive) Austrian and German overreaction, the violence in Sarajevo more nearly gave some Austrian leaders an excuse to impose Serbia-punishing policies they were seeking to carry out anyway.[94] Similarly, people in the George W. Bush administration who had been yearning for a war to depose Saddam Hussein in Iraq immediately moved into operation after 9/11 in the belief that the attacks by al-Qaeda might have cleared the air sufficiently to allow them to carry out the policy they had been longing for.[95]

Sometimes states react, or overreact, to terrorist events not so much to carry out a preexisting agenda as simply out of rage, fear, or a desire to exact revenge, a process that can often be self-destructive. In 1999, for example, responding to several vicious acts of terrorism apparently perpetrated by Chechens, the Russian government reinstituted a war against the breakaway republic that resulted in far more destruction of Russian (and, of course, Chechen)

lives and property than the terrorists ever brought about. When two American embassies in Africa were bombed in 1998, killing over 200 (including a few Americans), President Bill Clinton retaliated by bombing some of Osama bin Laden's terrorist training camps in Afghanistan, which caused the Taliban-led Afghan government to renege on pledges to extradite the troublesome and egoistic bin Laden to Saudi Arabia, made him into an international celebrity, turned his al-Qaeda organization into a magnet for more funds and recruits, and converted the Taliban from reluctant hosts to allies and partners.[96] Outraged by a series of terrorist attacks and shellings perpetrated by Palestinian forces based in bordering Lebanon, the Israelis moved in with massive force in 1982, and, by the time the forces were withdrawn in 2000, vastly more Israeli soldiers had been killed by harassing Arab attacks than had been killed by terrorists before 1982.[97] And, of course, there was the reaction to 9/11: the number of Americans (much less the number of Iraqis and Afghans) who have perished thus far in the wars triggered by that event now far exceeds the number killed on September 11.

Excessive reactions to terrorism have often led to massive and unjustified persecution, some of it of considerable historic consequence. The Jewish pogroms in Russia at the end of the nineteenth century, for instance, were activated in major part because Jews were perceived by the Russians to be key contributors to terrorist movements at the time.[98]

In addition, regimes have frequently allowed their participation in peace talks to be importantly affected by terrorists. By stating that they will not negotiate as long as terrorist attacks continue, both the Israeli government and the British government (over Northern Ireland) effectively permitted individual terrorists to set their agendas. If those governments didn't want

to negotiate anyway, the terrorist acts simply supplied a convenient excuse for taking that position.

Excessive reactions to terrorism have often led to massive and unjustified persecution, some of it of considerable historic consequence.

Not only have governments often overreacted counterproductively and sometimes self-destructively to acts of terrorism, but so have electorates. In Israel, Arab terrorists have apparently had the goal of sabotaging Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. In both 1996 and 2001, Israeli voters responded to Arab terrorism at the time by obligingly electing to office parties and prime ministers (Benjamin Netanyahu and Ariel Sharon) who were, like the terrorists, hostile to the negotiations.[99]

A considerable body of research suggests that it is important to distinguish terrorism directed at military targets from that directed at civilian ones, an issue discussed earlier, when attempting to assess the effectiveness, and therefore the importance, of terrorism. Page Fortna contrasts insurgencies that do or do not use "terrorism" as a tactic. She defines this as the employment of "a systematic campaign of indiscriminate violence against public civilian targets to influence a wider audience." She finds that insurgencies that do not use terrorism as she defines it, are more successful.[100] Similarly, Max Abrahms finds that terrorists, including those who operate outside a war situation, who target civilians tend to fail in their policy goal.[101]

Conclusions

Although even knuckle-heads can occasionally do damage, there is something quite spooky about expanding the definition of terrorism so that it threatens to embrace all violent behavior that is directed at an ideological or policy goal, about imagining terrorists to be everywhere, about extrapolating wildly to conclude that many are omni-competent masterminds, and about acting like their press agent by flaunting and exaggerating their often-pathetic schemes to do damage. The result has been a misoverestimation of terrorism's importance and impact.

Moreover, the persistent exaggeration of the capacities of terrorists has the perverse effect of glorifying the terrorist enterprise in the minds of many of its practitioners. Marc Sageman argues that to effectively counter terrorism, efforts should be made to reduce the glory from terrorism by treating terrorists more like common criminals, although this would mean, he points out, putting a stop to press conferences in which officials "hold self-congratulatory celebrations of their newest victories in the 'war on terror'." He stresses that to allow officials to "exploit the issue of terrorism for political gain is counterproductive."[102]

Nonetheless the process will likely continue to flourish. As anthropologist Scott Atran muses, "Perhaps never in the history of human conflict have so few people with so few actual means and capabilities frightened so many."[103] Accordingly, the incentives are to play to the galleries and to exaggerate the threat. The postured hysteria generated about the global menace supposedly presented by ISIS is only the most recent example.

Officials seem incapable of pointing out that an American's chance of being killed by a terrorist is one in 4 million per year, and to suggest that terrorism might pose an acceptable risk

(or even to discuss the issue) appears to be utterly impossible.[104] And it took until 2015, nearly a decade and a half after 9/11, before public officials, including in this case the president of the United States, were willing to suggest that terrorism, even that presented by ISIS, did not, as it happens, present a threat to the country that was "existential" in nature, an observation that is "blindingly obvious" as security specialist Bruce Schneier puts it.[105]

Whether that development, at once remarkable and absurdly belated, will have some consequence, or even continue, remains to be seen. Thus, General Michael Flynn, who had recently retired as head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, was given in 2015 to insist that the terrorist enemy is "committed to the destruction of freedom and the American way of life" while seeking "world domination, achieved through violence and bloodshed." It was reported that his remarks, to an audience of "special operators and intelligence officers," evoked "many nods of approval," "occasional cheers," and "ultimately a standing ovation."[106]

Five years after 9/11, journalist James Fallows suggested that Americans have "lacked leaders to help keep the danger in perspective."[107] Despite Obama's almost embarrassingly modest effort, Fallows' observation remains valid today. Thus even the most modest imaginable effort to rein in the War on Terror hyperbole, definitional and otherwise, may fail to gel and the misoverestimation of terrorism will continue apace.

Table 1: Annual Fatality Risks

Hazard	Territory	Period	Total Fatalities for the Period	Annual Fatality Risk
World War II	Worldwide	1939–1945	61,000,000	1 in 221
Cancers	US	2009	560,000	1 in 540
War (civilians)	Iraq	2003–2008	113,616	1 in 1,150
All accidents	US	2007	119,000	1 in 2,500
Traffic accidents	US	2008	37,261	1 in 8,200
Traffic accidents	Canada	2008	2,431	1 in 13,500
Traffic accidents	Australia	2008	1,466	1 in 15,000
Homicide	US	2006	14,180	1 in 22,000
Traffic accidents	UK	2008	2,538	1 in 23,000
Terrorism	**Northern Ireland**	**1970–2013**	**1,780**	**1 in 50,000**
Industrial accidents	US	2007	5,657	1 in 53,000
Homicide	Canada	2008	611	1 in 55,000
Intifada	**Israel**	**2000–2006**	**553**	**1 in 72,000**
Homicide	Great Britain	2008	887	1 in 67,000
Homicide	Australia	2008	290	1 in 76,000
Terrorism	**US**	**2001**	**2,982**	**1 in 101,000**
Natural disasters	US	1999–2008	6,294	1 in 480,000
Drowning in bathtub	US	2003	320	1 in 950,000
Terrorism	**UK**	**1970–2013**	**2,221**	**1 in 1,200,000**
Home appliances	US	yearly average	200	1 in 1,500,000
Deer accidents	US	2006	150	1 in 2,000,000
Commercial aviation	US	yearly average	130	1 in 2,300,000

Terrorism	US	1970–2013	3,372	1 in 4,000,000
Terrorism	Canada	1970–2013	336	1 in 4,300,000
Terrorism	Great Britain	1970–2013	441	1 in 5,900,000
Peanut allergies	US	yearly average	50-100	1 in 6,000,000
Lightning	US	1999–2008	424	1 in 7,000,000
Terrorism	Australia (incl Bali)	1970–2013	120	1 in 8,000,000
Transnational Terrorism	World outside war zones	1975–2003	13,971	1 in 12,500,000
Terrorism	US	2002–2013	33	1 in 110,000,000

Notes

[1] On these distinctions, see also Mueller 2004, 18-20.

[2.] Once the war is over, criminals are likely to return to their predatory ways when they are decommissioned and released among the civilian population. In fact, even non-criminals in a criminal army may turn to crime when they return to civilian life: when most soldiers are, or seem to be, criminals, employers are likely to discriminate against all ex-soldiers as a shortcut method for avoiding the hiring of criminals and other undesirables, a process often exacerbated by the fact that war very frequently weakens economies.

[3] Essence of the guerrilla: Kaldor 1999, 97. Mao's phases: Griffith 1978, 17-19.

[4] Criminal warfare should not be confused with the sort of unconventional, yet disciplined, warfare carried out by guerrilla warriors or by what anthropologists call "primitive" ones. The tactics applied by such unconventional combatants often resemble those employed by criminal ones—a reliance on hit-and-run raids that target civilians and a wariness about set-piece battles. Moreover, as with criminal warfare, such warfare is often waged with limited logistic backup and without much in the way of a well-developed strategy beyond attrition. But unconventional warfare, like terrorism, can actually can be quite dedicated, or disciplined, in the sense that combatants, who have sometimes been trained from birth, often fight with ordered devotion and a willingness to die for their cause or group—or for each other. Keeley 1996, 42-48; see also Lieven 1998, 5, 130, 324-54; Valentino 2004; Mueller 2004. When that is the case, such combat would be considered disciplined by the definitions developed here.

[5] Anthony H. Cordesman, tallies "major attacks by Islamists" outside of Iraq: 830 fatalities for the period April 2002 through July 2005 (2005, 29-31). We have corrected the total for the 2005 London bombings, given as 100 in this source, to 52. Brian Michael Jenkins tallies "major terrorist attacks worldwide" by "jihadist extremists" outside Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, Algeria, Russia, and Kashmir: 1,129 fatalities for the period October 2001 through April 2006 (2006, 179-84). And IntelCenter tallies the "most significant attacks executed by core al-Qaeda, regional arms and affiliate groups excluding operations in insurgency theaters": 1,632 fatalities for the period January 2002 through July 2007. "Jihadi Attack Kill Statistics," www.intelcenter.com, August 17, 2007, 11. For later years, the results would likely be comparable although "war zones" or "insurgency theaters" in, say, 2013 would include Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Nigeria. The rise of ISIS in the next years is discussed below.

[6] Stossel 2004, 77.

[7] Blalock et al. 2007, 2009.

[8] See especially LaFree et al. 2015, ch. 4.

[9] See also Fortna 2015, 552n16. Before 2003, the State Department concentrated on tallying international terrorist events. After that year, however, it changed its definitions so that much domestic terrorism—including much of what is happening in the war in Iraq—is now included in its terrorism count. See National Counterterrorism Center, "Report on Incidents of Terrorism 2005," April 11, 2006, ii-iii. Current numbers, therefore, are not comparable to earlier ones.

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[10] LaFree et al. 2015, 13; but see also 22-23. See also Stohl 1988, 14-15.

[11] Stohl 1988, 3. See also Stohl 2010, 46; Grabosky and Stohl 2010, 5.

[12] Clausewitz 1976, 87, 231, 87. Mao: quoted, Griffith 1978, 26.

[13] On the search for a Clausewitzian "breaking point" in Vietnam, see Mueller 1980.

[14] Lacquer 2003, 238.

[15] Parker 1994, 44.

[16] Hoffman 2006, 40. See original text for full wording of the five points.

[17] Pike 1966, ch. 8. Karnow 1991, 254-55.

[18] Seitz 2004. See also Diab 2015; Mueller 2002a, 2002b, 2003.

[19] See also Fortna 2015.

[20] On this issue, see also Cronin 2015.

[21] "An hour with Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad," charlierose.com, March 29, 2015.

[22] Quoted, Watts 2015, 157.

[23] Vinocur 2015.

[24] Morris 2015.

[25] Department of Homeland Security 2009, 11.

[26] Mueller 2015. See also Mueller and Stewart 2012, 2016; Jenkins 2010, 2011; Byman and Free 2010; Schneier 2007; Brooks 2011; Friedman et al. 2010. On the tendency for street criminals to exhibit the same general propensities, see Mueller 1985, Swanson 2015, Williams 2015.

[27] Allison 2004, 15. Kristof 2004. Allison repeated his judgment in an article published two years later, albeit without reducing the terminal interval to compensate (2006, 39). He had presumably relied on the same inspirational mechanism in 1995 to predict, "In the absence of a determined program of action, we have every reason to anticipate acts of nuclear terrorism against American targets before this decade is out" (1995). For more on alarmism about the atomic terrorist, see Mueller 2006, 45-46; Mueller 2010, 181-83; Diab 2015. On the preference of terrorists for "readily available weapons," see Free et al. 2015, 173, 229.

[28] Garwin: Allison 2007.

[29] Morning Edition, National Public Radio, May 15, 2007. For an extended discussion of the difficulties facing the would-be atomic terrorist, see Mueller 2010, ch. 12-15. See also Langewiesche 2007; Levi 2007; Jenkins 2008; Diab 2015.

[30] Smith 2007.

[31] Koerner 2013, 46-48.

[32] Koerner 2013, 203-12, 216-19, 261-63; Mueller 2006, 152.

[33] McDermott and Meyer 2012, 154, 311. U.S. v. Moussaoui, para. 76-89.

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[34] Smith 2007.

[35] U.S. v. Moussaoui, para. 89. McDermott and Meyer 2012, 241-42, 268.

[36] Kenney 2010, 916-17.

[37] For comparisons of Pearl Harbor and 9/11, see Dower 2010; Mueller and Stewart 2016, 73-75.

[38] Wright 2006, 174, 200. Byman and Williams 2015, 15. Gerges 2011, 85, 90.

[39] Mueller 2011a 175-78.

[40] For data, see Mueller and Stewart 2016, 87; Mueller and Stewart 2015. See also Mueller 2005.

[41] Hirsh 2011. In documents from his lair released in 2015, he argued that al-Qaeda must concentrate on "large" operations within the United States, presumably killing many tens of thousands of people since he notes that even 57,000 deaths in Vietnam did not work. He supplies no detail about how to carry out "this great feat," but he does rather unhelpfully suggest that the group "must mobilize the best efforts and capabilities" for the task. The documents are posted at Will McCants, New Abbottabad Documents, March 15, 2015, jihadica.com/new-abbottabad-documents/.

[42] Graff 2011, 218.

[43] Graff 2011, 252.

[44] Graff 2011, 263.

[45] For sources of these threats and for additional threats, see Mueller and Stewart 2011, 36.

[46] See Sageman 2008.

[47] Silber 2012. See also Sageman 2008, 139.

[48] Carafano and Rosenzweig 2005, 92. See also Mueller 2006, 177.

[49] Carle 2008.

[50] Kenney 2010. See also Brooks 2011; Sageman 2008, 141; Burton 2006.

[51] Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Jones 2008.

[52] Johnston and Shane 2009. See also Graff 2011, 368; Dahl 2011, 624; Aaronson 2013, 202-06, 215-16.

[53] Yoo 2011. Sofan 2013.

[54] Tan 2015.

[55] Loy 2010.

[56] Quoted in Lohmann 2010, 38-39.

[57] Harris 2010, 311.

[58] Puhl 2015.

[59] "Justice Department Oversight—Part 1—Newsflash," Associated Press release, April 14, 2010.

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[60] Hays 2009.

[61] Brady 2015.

[62] Lustick 2006, 171-72. See also Free et al. 2015, 99.

[63] Miniter 2011, 2.

[64] McDermott and Meyer 2012, 310-13.

[65] Miniter 2011, 157. McDermott, and Meyer 2012, 240.

[66] McDermott and Meyer 2012, 47.

[67] McDermott and Meyer 2012, 241-42, 268.

[68] Reeve 1999, 45, 46, 55, 98, 254.

[69] Reeve 1999, 131.

[70] Reeve 1999, 77. Graff 2011, 181.

[71] Kenney 2010, 915.

[72] A structural damage assessment of the 1993 attacks reveals that the World Trade Center towers "were structurally sound" and "suffered no serious damage to their integrity" owing to the "tubular design of the tower and its ability to re-distribute loads to alternate load paths." Ramabhushanam and Lynch 1994, 233, 235.

[73] In prison in 2007, Yousef claimed to have converted to Christianity. Schuster 2007.

[74] King: Friedman 2012. Morell 2015, 309-10.

[75] McClure 2015.

[76] Hawley and Means 2012, 234. Yet, surveying this record of perfect failure on the *CBS Evening News* on March 23, 2015, Scott Pelley provocatively somehow managed to conclude that the Yemeni group was behind "three nearly successful attempts to bomb U.S. airlines."

[77] Friedman 2012. Benson 2014, 320-21.

[78] *Fox News Sunday*, June 29, 2014.

[79] McCain: Buchanan 2014a. Graham: Buchanan 2014b.

[80] Parker et al. 2015.

[81] Froomkin 2014. See also Zenko 2014.

[82] Thus there is the ingenious caper of the editors at the Daily Beast when it published a thoughtful article, entitled, "How ISIS's 'Attack America' Plan Is Working" (Zalkind 2015). The teaser for the article left out the word, "How," cleverly transforming the message of the piece in an effort, presumably, to attract frightened readers and to service their unjustified alarm.

[83] Byman 2014; Byman and Williams 2015, 13-14; Byman 2015, 170-72; Cronin 2015. In contrast, see Morell 2015, 305. For similar disputes between al-Qaeda central and a previous group in Iraq from which ISIS emerged, see Sageman 2008, 53-64; Gerges 2011, 108-112.

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[84] Mardini 2014.

[85] Hansen-Lewis and Shapiro 2015, 152. See also Watts 2015. Shatz 2014; Sly 2014, 2015; Mueller 2014; Shapiro 2013. However, there is considerable disagreement on this issue among people studying it.

[86] Byman and Shapiro 2014b.

[87] Naylor 2015. On CNN, former Homeland Security chief Tom Ridge issued the evidence-free suggestion that tragic killings by an apparent terrorist in Chattanooga had followed a "directive" from ISIS. Smerconish, CNN, July 18, 2015.

[88] Higgins and Freytas-Tamura 2015.

[89] Abrahms 2011.

[90] Byman and Shapiro 2014a. See also Brooks 2011; Benson 2014; Bailey 2014; Gerges 2011, 192.

[91] On this issue, see also Mueller 2011b.

[92] Des Forges 1999, 618-20.

[93] Simon 2001, 43-46.

[94] Concerning the episode, Richard Ned Lebow argues that "the Sarajevo assassinations changed the political and psychological environment in Vienna and Berlin in six important ways, all of which may have been necessary for the decisions that led to war. First, they constituted a political challenge to which Austrian leaders believed they had to respond forcefully; anything less was expected to encourage further challenges by domestic and foreign enemies. Second, they shocked and offended Franz Josef and Kaiser Wilhelm and made both emperors more receptive to calls for decisive measures to preserve Austria's honor and its standing as a great power. Third, they changed the policymaking context in Vienna by removing the principal spokesman for peace. Fourth, they may have been the catalyst for [German Chancellor] Bethmann Hollweg's gestalt shift. Fifth, they made it possible for Bethmann Hollweg to win the support of the socialists, without which he never would have risked war. Sixth, they created a psychological environment in which Wilhelm and Bethmann Hollweg could proceed in incremental steps toward war, convincing themselves at the outset that their actions were unlikely to provoke a European war, and at the end of the crisis, that others were responsible for war. Lebow 2009, 85. Except for the third way in this catalogue, all these apparently necessary consequences deal with emotional or calculated reactions, none of which was a necessary result of the event itself. Because a terrorist gets lucky with a couple of shots in a distant province does not mean that key decision makers are required to shift beliefs or to give in to emotions to embrace policies they had previously rejected.

[95] In like manner, in 2004, Vladimir Putin seized the political opportunity afforded by some Chechen terrorist acts (and by some incompetent policing measures taken by the Russian police) to enhance his control over the Russian political system, something that had absolutely nothing to do with the acts themselves. To say that the acts of terrorism caused this power grab would be absurd; they simply facilitated it.

[96] Burke 2003, 167-68. Byman 2005, 201-03; Wright 2006, 267-68, 287-89, 354. On this process more generally, see Lake 2002. Eager to "do something" about terrorism in 1986, Ronald Reagan bombed Libya after terrorists linked to Libya had blown up a Berlin discotheque killing two people, one of them American. The bombing raid, notes Ray Takeyh (2001), "only enhanced Qaddafi's domestic power and led to his lionization in the developing world."

[97] Similarly, the Indian government massively overreacted to Sikh terrorism in 1984 by attacking the Sikhs' holiest place, the Golden Temple, and by engaging in other excessive behavior. The result was a huge escalation in the conflict. Simon 2001, 186.

[98] Rapoport 2004, 68. On the often deadly and indiscriminate overreaction to anarchist terrorism in the United States and elsewhere, see Jensen 2002.

[99] Shapiro 2013, 257.

[100] Fortna 2015.

[101] Abrahms 2006, 2011b, 2012. Abrahms and Potter 2015.

[102] Sageman 2008, 69. See also Shapiro 2013, 263-64.

[103] Atran 2010, xiv. This fear seems substantially to have lingered over the ensuing years even before the rise of ISIS supplied additional impetus. On public opinion on terrorism, see Mueller and Stewart 2016, ch. 2.

[104] On such issues, see Mueller and Stewart 2014; 2016, 251-57.

[105] Schneier 2015. On this issue, see also Mueller and Stewart 2016, 24-25, 254; Healy 2011. When he was Homeland Security Secretary, Michael Chertoff went one step further, proclaiming the "struggle" against terrorism to be a "significant existential" one carefully differentiating it, apparently, from all those insignificant existential struggles Americans have waged in the past. Harris and Taylor 2008.

[106] Dozier 2015

[107] Fallows 2006.

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