



Fear Not: A Critical Perspective on the Terrorist Threat in Europe

Thomas Renard

Over the past few months, Europe has been struck by a number of terrorist attacks. In the media, in political discourse, in our daily lives, terrorism is now perceived as being omnipresent. A certain form of collective psychosis is developing within the population, which is perhaps more insidious and dangerous than terrorism itself. This policy brief seeks to offer some arguments to counter the fear of terrorism. It also challenges the idea that terrorism can be itself 'contagious'. Finally, it argues in favour of a measured, comprehensive and inclusive approach to counterterrorism.

A distinct feeling of anxiety has taken root in Europe, as terrorism is increasingly perceived as having become part of our daily life. Following the major attacks in Paris (November 2015) and Brussels (March 2016), the number of 'smaller' incidents has multiplied at an accelerated pace, mostly in France and Germany. The media have extensively reported on these attacks, as well as on other terrorism-related news, such as police operations, arrests, trials and foiled plots.

Taken together, these events and the subsequent media coverage have created a permanent stream of information that exacerbates anxiety. The perceived ubiquity of the terrorist threat has become a new reality for European citizens, which is further reinforced by the security-focused political discourse. The communication of threat levels by the authorities is somehow *institutionalising* – - almost normalising – the threat perception. In Belgium, the threat level has been at three out of a maximum four for months, while France has been under a 'state of emergency' since last November.

Is this the 'new normal', as *The Economist* once asked? Are we confronted with a 'wave of terror', as the German daily *Bild* wondered after the killing of a priest in Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray, France, in July? In the context of a growing collective psychosis, this policy brief aims to put the current threat in perspective, reflecting on the notion of waves in modern terrorism. Following the multiplication of attacks claimed by the Islamic State (ISIS), the brief also aims to explain how terrorism spreads, but also to challenge the somewhat simplistic idea that terrorism could be 'contagious'. Finally, based on the principle that terror must be fought as much as

terrorism, I offer some thoughts to avoid the trap of collective psychosis.

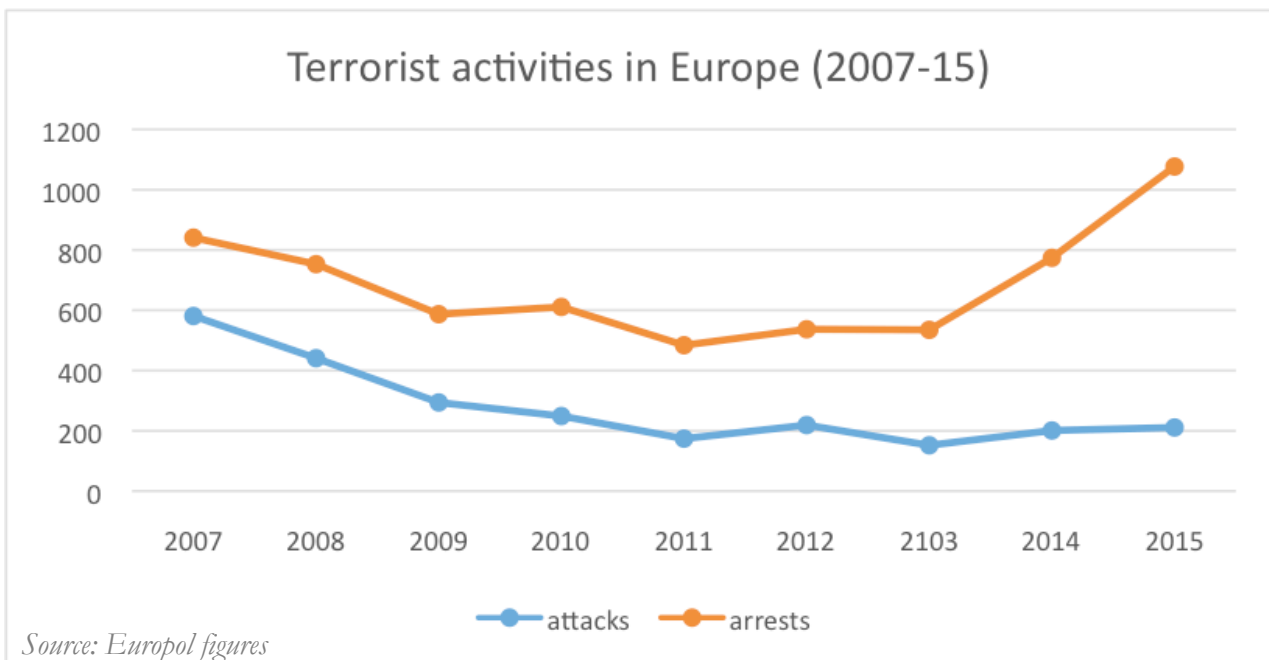
TERROR WAVES

As the fear of terrorism grows in Europe, it is important to determine how real the threat is. A key starting point in such effort is to examine objective figures. According to Europol, the European law enforcement agency, terrorism is indeed on the rise in Europe.¹ There have been 211 failed, foiled or completed attacks last year, which marks a notable increase of 39% from 2013, following a steady fourfold decrease in the period 2007-13. The number of terror-related arrests has boomed as well, reaching 1,077 in 2015, a twofold increase from 2013 and the highest number recorded by Europol since it started publishing its annual assessments in 2006.

Islamist terrorism is largely responsible for this upsurge. Although attacks from jihadi groups still represent a minority of the total attacks recorded, that number is increasing whereas most other forms of terrorism are decreasing (most notably separatism, which has long been the dominating form of terrorism in Europe,

while right-wing terrorism is on the rise again). The trend is likely to be confirmed in 2016. Since the beginning of the year, more than ten attacks across Europe have been attributed to, or inspired by, ISIS. A number of foiled plots have been reported as well. With regard to arrests, a large majority of the arrests made in 2015 was related to Islamist terrorism. This number has steadily increased over the past years, to rise from around 20% to more than 70% of all arrests in Europe.

Europol figures confirm the popular impression that terrorism is rising, while simultaneously highlighting the fact that jihadi activities are still largely contained underground, as indicated by the low attacks/arrests ratio. Zooming out from Europe, statistics from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) indicate that the upsurge in (Islamist) terrorism is in fact a global phenomenon.² The number of attacks — and victims thereof — has increased exponentially since 2011, reaching beyond the 10,000 mark. Terrorism remains geographically concentrated, however, with a majority of the incidents (around 60%) and fatalities (around



80%) located in only five countries: Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Nigeria.

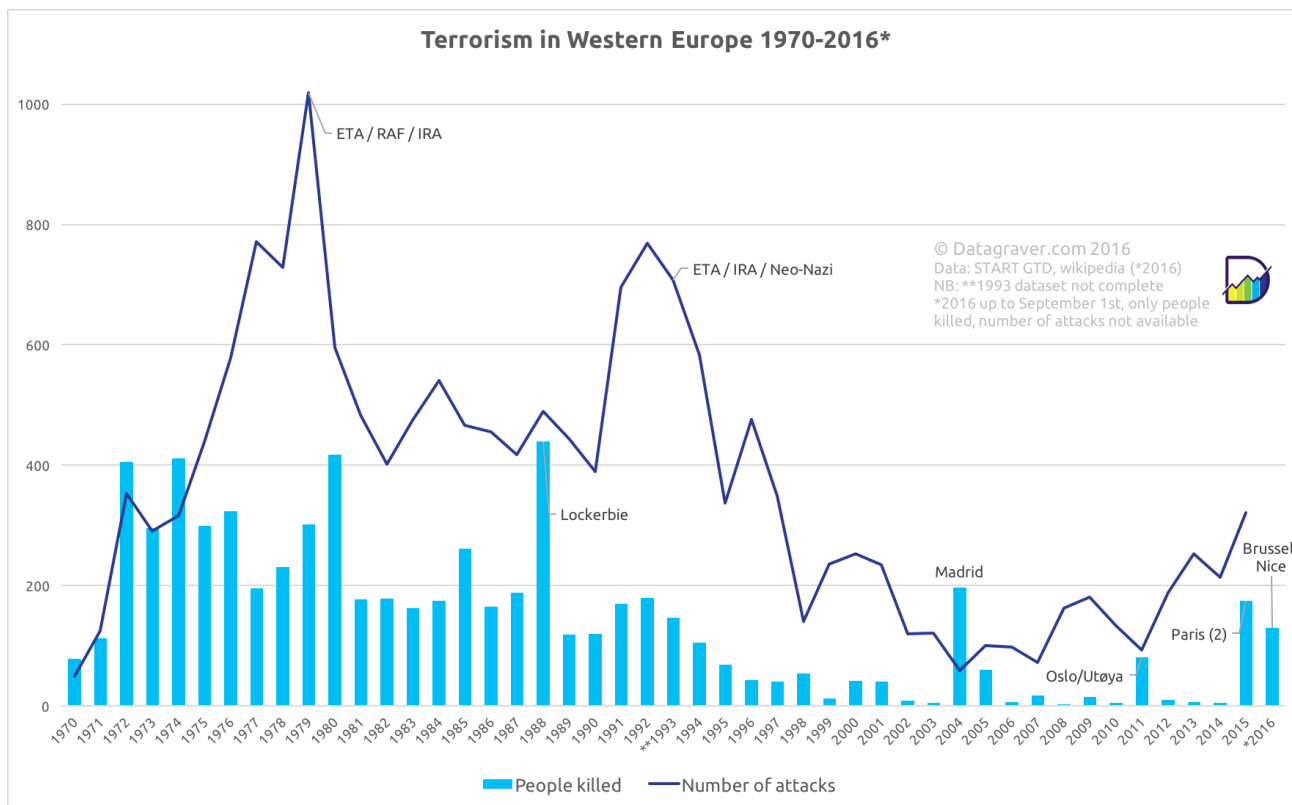
In light of the above figures, it is sensible to speak of a wave of terror, which heightened with the advent of ISIS. However, this wave should be understood as being part of a broader jihadi wave, starting in the early 1980s when a number of Arab mujahedeen coalesced against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. From there and then, the jihad has continued and globalised until now. Islamist terrorist groups were already active in Europe in the 1980s and 1990s, mostly for recruitment and financing purposes. But it is essentially in the 2000s that Europe became an important target of jihadi terrorism, following the rise of al-Qaeda and the so-called ‘global war on terror’, even though the continent had been struck by Islamist terrorism before, notably Algerian groups in France. The current upsurge in violence should therefore be seen as the high tide of this jihadi wave, more than a new, separate wave.

In the current climate of anxiety, it may not be reassuring to read that we are living through a high tide of terrorism. And yet, I make three key observations that put the current threat in perspective and, hopefully, should lessen anxiety. First, this wave of terrorism is far from being the first one. In fact, David C. Rapoport argues that there have been four major waves of global terrorism in the modern era: anarchist (1880s-1920s), nationalist/anti-colonialist (1920s-1960s), new left/millennialist (1960s-2000s), and religious (1980s-).³ There is something cyclical about terrorism and in many regards, the current wave is nothing exceptional historically. True, the current wave of terrorism may appear more violent than its predecessors, notably due to the use of brazen brutality against indiscriminate targets (mostly civilians), and be more diffuse geographically. And yet, the differences between the ‘new’ terrorism and the ‘old’ one are not as clear-cut as some scholars have argued. There is a lot of

continuity in modern terrorism.

Second, Europe has been struck by each of the four modern waves of terror. And despite the recent tragic events, Europe is much safer from terrorism today than it was in the past. Indeed, there were significantly more attacks — and victims — in the last decades of the 20th century than in the first part of the 21st. For instance, according to figures from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), there were more than 1,000 attacks in 1979 in western Europe compared with around 300 in 2015. From the mid-1970s until the mid-1990s, more than 150 persons died every year from terrorism in Europe, while that number dropped to double digits in the following years. Even with the Paris attacks, there were still fewer fatalities from terrorism in Europe in 2015 than in an average year of the late 20th century. Today’s fear of terrorism has more to do with psychology — how people perceive and live with terrorism — than with the actual threat.

Third, if Europe has not collapsed under the continuous assault of terrorism for over a century, it is essentially because terrorism remains a marginal phenomenon. The European police agency Europol estimates that more than 5,000 Europeans have left to join Islamist fighters in Syria, which represents a major challenge indeed for security services when these people return with training and a mission. However, one should not lose sight of the fact that this number represents barely 0.00001% of the European population. In addition, a significant number of these ‘foreign fighters’ are now deceased. Furthermore, the risk of dying from terrorism is also incredibly marginal. Statistically, people have a higher chance of dying from a car accident, or from falling off their bed or a ladder. Left-handed people have a higher chance of dying using a right-handed device than in a terrorist attack. Terrorism is not an existential threat to our societies. It is an embedded risk, a marginal byproduct of modern societies.



IS IT CONTAGIOUS?

One of the striking elements of the recent wave of attacks is the fact that the incidents are seemingly able to take place anywhere, anytime, and to be carried out by virtually anyone. Most attackers did not seem predisposed to wage jihad, but are rather petty criminals with little or no religious background. Perhaps even more strikingly, recent attacks in Europe seemed to echo one another, in an apparent effect of ‘contagion’ as some journalists have put it.⁴ There were a number of similarities in the latest attacks, in the profiles of the attackers as well as in their *modus operandi*.

Creating such feelings of unstoppable, contagious violence is precisely the objective of ISIS’s terror campaign in Europe. For the terrorist organisation, every attack is less an end in itself than a means to achieve three goals: triggering fear, polarisation and over-reaction within the ‘enemy’; transforming the discourse into a tangible reality of violence,

which can then be used for propaganda and recruitment purposes; and eventually stimulating more attacks, by encouraging others to ‘follow the example’.

ISIS has been quite effective at spreading terror. A growing number of European citizens are now scared of terrorism to the point that they adapt their daily behaviour to the possibility of an attack. They change their holiday plans accordingly as well. Meanwhile, several public events have either been modified or cancelled, even when no specific threat has been identified. Fear is now part of our daily lives and that is a major victory for ISIS. As explained in the next section, we should actively seek to defeat our fear, much as we seek to defeat ISIS.

ISIS has also been fairly successful at recruiting members and sympathisers, and thus at spreading its message. The terrorist organisation managed to attract a significant number of ‘foreign fighters’ from across the

globe, around 30,000 according to the Soufan Group.⁵ Among this contingent, more than 5,000 Europeans have joined the group in Syria and Iraq. These figures put ISIS far above any other contemporary terrorist organisation in its recruitment strategy.⁶ More impressive still are the figures of ISIS sympathisers, by which I mean individuals that consume regularly (and further diffuse) the group's propaganda. Although there is little reliable data available, occasional assessments suggest that there are tens of thousands sympathisers on social media alone. A 2014 study identified between 46,000 and 70,000 Twitter accounts used by ISIS supporters, with an average of 1,000 followers each and sometimes many more.⁷ Whereas these numbers are likely to have changed since then, reports from Twitter confirm a continued high level of activity. The social media company is said to delete more than 20,000 accounts every month related to terrorism and violent extremism.⁸

The Islamic State has also demonstrated its ability to inspire attacks, certainly more than al-Qaeda did before. Some of the recent attacks in Europe were conducted by individuals with relatively loose connections with ISIS, according to the principle of 'leaderless jihad' followed by the group. For ISIS leadership, there is clearly a continuum of possible actions, from centrally planned and coordinated attacks, to isolated and spontaneous actions by 'lone wolves'. Between these two extremes, a number of scenarios exist, depending on the number of individuals involved, as well as on the depth of their ties with the organisation, which can be involved to different degrees, either ordering, planning, facilitating (through training or logistical support), encouraging or simply claiming the attack.

Nevertheless, referring to the figures presented in the previous section of this brief, the total number of ISIS-related attacks in Europe remains very low overall, as ISIS has been much less successful in producing attacks than

in creating fear and diffusing its message. In other words, ISIS has been better at spreading terror than terrorism. The media has conveyed the impression, explicitly or implicitly, that attacks can trigger more attacks *by themselves*, in an automated, self-propelling cycle of violence. This perception is not, however, supported by academic literature. A phenomenon of imitation, or 'copycat' is possible – and in fact even likely — under certain circumstances but such acts are committed primarily by mentally unstable persons and remain isolated events. In these cases, furthermore, the label 'terrorism' should not be applied. Individuals that act under pathological impulsion rather than for clearly identified political or ideological purposes are mere criminals, not terrorists.

Beyond pathological cases, it is possible that an attack could motivate other already-radicalised individuals to take action. The 'trigger effect' has long been mentioned in studies on radicalisation and causes of terrorism, as the undefined variable that precipitates an individual's movement toward violent extremism. Such an explanation, however, presupposes a broader radicalisation process, which relies itself on multiple, complex and overlapping factors. In light of this literature, arguing that one attack could automatically trigger another one appears therefore to be an oversimplification, as it focuses on the very last piece of a more complex phenomenon.

What the academic literature does support, however, is the idea that terrorism can be contagious at a broader level. At the strategic level, some organisations may have been influenced in their decisions to adopt terrorist tactics by the actions of other terrorist organisations. Historically, for instance, third world groups inspired the founders of the Red Army Faction (RAF) in the 1970s and there is fear that also today, right-wing terrorism could rise in reaction to the upsurge in Islamist terrorism. At the tactical level, some types of attack tend to be imitated and repeated if they

are considered effective, notably by attracting media coverage. Historically, some ‘innovative’ forms of action have proliferated after their first appearance, such as kidnappings, hostage taking, suicide attacks and, more recently, beheadings.

Competition between different groups could also be seen as contributing to the ‘contagion’ of terrorism. Since the political and media space is limited, terrorist organisations (and cells within them) compete for publicity, membership and leadership. In this context, competition between groups can lead to a growing number of attacks. Regarding the rivalry between ISIS and al-Qaeda, for example, some intelligence officials fear that al-Qaeda could now seek to plan operations in Europe. The last major al-Qaeda operation in Europe was the attack on the editorial team of the French satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015, claimed by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

In sum, the notion that terrorism can be contagious is not without foundation, but it must be taken with caution, not least because such a description can increase citizens’ anxiety and serve the purposes of terror groups.

NOTHING TO FEAR BUT FEAR ITSELF

Terrorism is a serious threat to our Western societies, but not an existential one. History teaches us that it is far from being a new phenomenon and that Europe has been confronted with worse waves before. Furthermore, very few terrorist organisations have ever achieved their strategic objectives. In fact, terrorist organisations have a limited life span of five to 10 years according to David C. Rapoport. In other words, time is on our side.

In this context, our greatest enemy is not ISIS, but ourselves. The danger comes less from ISIS actions than from our own (over)reactions. When a Western government

declares ‘war’ on the Islamic State, it exaggerates the nature of the fight and amplifies societal anxiety. The same is true when a Western parliament adopts measures of exception, discriminatory laws or liberticidal policies.

This is not to say that nothing should be done to fight ISIS. The work of police and intelligence services, as well as of prevention and social workers, is crucial to maintain the risk of terrorism at the lowest possible level. Diplomacy, sometimes backed by military action, is also essential to avoid a terrorist organisation gaining too much power and influence, as ISIS has done in the Middle East. In every area of counterterrorism – from prevention to repression – good practices must be identified and emulated. Resources should also be increased where they are needed, for instance to limit the diffusion of ISIS messages online, and to develop an effective counter-narrative strategy.

More needs to be done in the field of counterterrorism, and European governments have a major responsibility therein. Nevertheless, more attention should be paid to the contagion of fear, perhaps even more than to the contagion of terrorism. Indeed, it is not terrorism that divides our societies, but the fear of the ‘other’. It is not terrorism that hurts the economy, but the fear of leaving our homes. It is not terrorism that endangers our democracy, but measures dictated by fear. The adequacy of counterterrorism policies must be carefully and constantly assessed because some of them may prove ineffective, which is problematic given limited resources. Worse, some measures can even prove counter-productive. The fight against terrorism requires above all to tackle the deeper causes of terrorism, through social, economic, cultural and educational policies, which actually have much less to do with terrorism than with the development of a more inclusive, egalitarian and dynamic society. The

best counter-narrative against ISIS is not a defensive one, as if our values and freedom were under attack, but an offensive one that builds on a positive vision for our society.

The media play a key role as well in the fight against terror. The interdependence between media and terrorist organisations is well known: terrorists need media attention to communicate their message, and conversely, terrorism-related stories feed the media cycle, which further amplifies collective anxiety. Over the past weeks, some media outlets have begun debating various measures aimed at diminishing the publicity their coverage provides these terrorist organisations, particularly in France. For instance, some media have decided to no longer publish names or photos of the perpetrators in order to deny individuals the glorification they are seeking. Such measures will only have limited impact, however, especially if only a small number of media adopts them. A more effective measure would be to encourage and develop a more sober, precise and pedagogical approach to terrorism. Quality journalism is not only about long and fastidious investigations; it is also about deontology (following certain rules) and pedagogy (explaining with simple words very complex phenomena). In contrast, hyper-mediatisation results in the diffusion of rumours, as well as superficial and simplistic explanations, which lead to more anxiety.

Beyond political and media responses, it is in the end every citizen that is battling on the frontline against terror. People can take a number of measures to limit their fear of terrorism. They can seek quality information, in order to better understand the nature of the threat. They can also rationalise the low risk of a terror incident happening to them personally. Above all, they can decide to carry on with their lives without being paralysed by fear, while remaining aware of official warnings.

Refusing to be afraid is, in this context, an act of resistance.

CONCLUSION

The fear of terrorism is now deeply rooted in the popular psyche. Last August, in Juan-les-Pins, France, it took only some firecrackers to create mass panic among people enjoying the evening on café terraces, resulting in 45 injured. In the popular perception, every murder or accident reported in the news becomes a potential terrorist attack. Consciously or not, people are constantly evaluating the terror risk, and adapting their behaviour accordingly, while military and police patrols are an ever-present reminder that some level of threat does exist.

The omnipresence of the terrorist threat is not only constraining our physical and psychological lives, it is also shaping societal perceptions and political debates. But fear is not a good counsellor. Counter-productive measures have been passed as a result of the current security climate. The decision to ban the infamous ‘burkini’ in several French municipalities was not only anti-constitutional, it has also become invaluable propaganda material for ISIS recruiters denouncing French intolerance vis-à-vis Muslim communities. In contrast, more positive ideas become tainted as soon as they are pinned with the ‘counterterrorism’ label. For instance, debates about integration policies or about a ‘European Islam’ have long been necessary for their own sake, but they are now seen through the counterterrorism prism, which will inevitably discredit some of the ideas and actions resulting from these debates.

This policy brief underscores that the current terrorist threat in Europe is very serious, even increasing, but not existential. Jihadi groups cannot defeat us but we can defeat ourselves. For this reason, our response to terrorism must be measured, comprehensive and inclusive. It

must be *measured* by seeing terrorism for what it is: a marginal phenomenon with potentially terrible consequences. Counterterrorism policies must be proportional, non-discriminatory and, above all, respect our own democratic and human principles. Our response must be *comprehensive* by tackling the problem in its entirety, from prevention to repression. And

finally, it must be *inclusive* by relying on a broadened societal project, involving a very wide range of actors, from citizens to media, and from local to national authorities.

Thomas Renard is a Senior Research Fellow at the Egmont Institute, and an Adjunct Professor at the Vesalius College.

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