

vaccines for the public. The Shining Path movement in Peru became as dangerous as it did because the government of Peru was oblivious to the danger it represented in the countryside and let it gain support (Barnhurst 1991: 82). Had the authorities acted more quickly, the eventual threat to the state would have been much less, and it would not have taken as long for the government to deal with the violence that resulted. The fact that governments find it necessary to deal with terrorist groups indicates that such violent activities can be a threat to the security of a country.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that terrorism can challenge the security of a state under the right circumstances. While there may not be a large number of modern examples of terrorism successfully taking over a state or leading to its dissolution, they do exist. In other cases, terrorism played an important role in setting the stage for successful insurgencies that have led to governmental changes or to other types of important events such as occurred with the fascist movements in the 1920s. At the very least, all countries that are threatened by terrorism have had to divert resources to deal with the resulting problems, which can lead to greater economic difficulties. In addition, a reduction in civil liberties may indirectly result in situations in which the public eventually reacts negatively to government activities and the state is weakened as a consequence. Of course, if terrorist activity is ignored by a state, it can eventually become a major threat that can undermine the security of a state. As a consequence, terrorist groups have to be treated as if they are dangerous since they cannot be ignored indefinitely.

What used to be Yugoslavia can serve as an example of how terrorism, often combined with other factors, can threaten state security. After the formation of Yugoslavia at the end of World War I, the new state faced internal dissent from Croats, Albanians and Macedonians unhappy with the domination of the state by the Serb elite. There were a variety of terrorist attacks by different groups against the state and retaliation by the government in some cases. The end result was a weakened state torn by dissension. When German and Italian troops invaded in 1941, the Yugoslav resistance collapsed, in part, because of inadequate preparation and, in part, because many elements of the multi-ethnic state were unwilling to fight for the new state. Yugoslavia was re-established after World War II but faced continuing dissent from Croats who launched occasional terrorist attacks. Albanians in Kosovo were unhappy with domination by Serbs in the autonomous region. When Yugoslavia was in the midst of a transition from the old system to a more open political regime, the previous strains in the country erupted. Croatia, Slovenia, and Macedonia broke away. Bosnia and Herzegovina was finally able to separate. Montenegro and then Kosovo became independent. Yugoslavia is gone, and the pressures from terrorism and unrest in general that began in the 1920s and which continued in later years helped to set the stage for the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Bosnia and Macedonia have also experienced terrorist attacks and violence that threatened their security after they became independent. Clearly, terrorism can threaten, and has threatened, the security of Yugoslavia and its successors.

NO: the myth of terrorism as an existential threat

Jessica Wolfendale

Introduction

Terrorism is frequently depicted in the media and by political leaders as an existential threat, the overcoming of which requires the use of extraordinary counterterrorism measures, including war and torture. For example, in the years after 9/11, leaders in Australia and the United States described the fight against terrorism as a 'version of total war' (Michaelsen 2012: 431) and claimed that 'no civilized nation can be secure in a world threatened by terror' (De Castella and McGarty 2011: 185). Academics have made similar claims, arguing that terrorists could 'destroy our society' (Goldstein 2004: 179). A 2009 report from the US think tank *Partnership for a Secure America* claimed that 'a nuclear, chemical, or biological weapon in the hands of terrorists remains the single greatest threat to our nation' (quoted in Enemark 2011: 384).

How realistic is this narrative of terrorism as an existential threat? Does modern terrorism really pose such a serious threat to national and international security that combating terrorism requires the use of war, torture, expanded security powers and the expenditure of billions of dollars on homeland security? In this chapter, I argue that the narrative of terrorism as an existential threat does not reflect the reality of terrorism, and furthermore, it plays a significant role in legitimising political, legal and military responses to terrorism that have serious negative long-term consequences on the lives and well-being of thousands of individuals and communities. In some cases, these counterterrorism strategies cause more harm and pose a greater threat to security than terrorism itself.

The existential threat narrative of terrorism

The existential threat narrative of terrorism depicts modern terrorism as an unprecedented and existential threat to international and national security (Neumann 2009). 'Unprecedented' because, according to Jackson et al. (2011), modern terrorism is claimed to be characterised by international networks, driven by 'a fanatical and absolutist interpretation of religion, characterized by a blind hatred and a disregard for concrete political aims' (2011: 165), and terrorist attacks are more indiscriminate and deadly than ever before (Jackson et al. 2011). According to this narrative, modern terrorist groups aim for the destruction of Western society rather than the achievement of specific political goals, and so they are motivated to adopt ever more inventive ways of causing mass casualties, such as the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) (Michaelsen 2012: 439). It is this aspect of modern terrorism that supposedly makes today's terrorists far more dangerous than earlier terrorist groups such as the Irish Republican Army (IRA), which had specific political aims and did not seek to cause maximum civilian casualties in their use of terrorism.

In addition, the causes of terrorism are claimed to arise from 'a pathological outcome of religiosity' (Mustapha 2011: 495), rather than from factors such as poverty, disenfranchisement, political oppression and cultural and social conflicts. For example, the 2006 American National Security Strategy report states categorically that terrorism is *not* caused by poverty, hostility towards US policies or the Israel-Palestine conflict. Instead, the report claims that terrorism is caused by 'keeping old wounds fresh and raw and religious ideologies that justify murder' (Mustapha 2011: 494). Likewise, the Australian Government's 2010 Counterterrorism White Paper claimed that 'the main source of international terrorism today comes from people who follow a distorted and military interpretation of Islam that calls for violence as the answer to perceived grievances' (quoted in Michaelsen 2010: 250).

So the existential threat narrative of terrorism is based on the belief that modern terrorists are part of a global network, are motivated by extremist religious (typically Islamic) beliefs that call for the destruction of Western civilisation, and will attempt to use WMDs to inflict maximum casualties. Because modern terrorists pose a far more dangerous threat to Western states than previous terrorist movements, the argument goes, unprecedented and drastic counterterrorism measures will be required to combat terrorism.

The need for extreme counterterrorism measures is justified in two ways. First, because the terrorist threat is existential, the mere *possibility* (however statistically remote) of a terrorist attack with WMDs might be sufficient to warrant the use of extreme preventive measures – a view sustained by the adoption of an ‘extreme precautionary dogmatism in which the “unknown” is reflexively governed through preemptive action’ (Jackson 2015: 35). Second, if terrorists are barbarian extremists, then strategies such as negotiation and compromise will be ineffective (Jackson 2005: 139) – one cannot reason with religious fanatics. Additionally, given that terrorists are supposedly dedicated to destroying Western civilisation, it is unlikely that they will be deterred by the threat of ordinary criminal prosecution (Luban 2002: 12).

Thus, it follows that to stop terrorism, modern terrorists must be eradicated, a process that might require extreme measures. So the claim that modern terrorism poses an unprecedented and existential threat plays an important role in justifying not only the resort to war, but also exceptions to long-standing prohibitions in international law, such as the prohibition against torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment (Ip 2009: 39).

Criticising the existential threat narrative

The claim that terrorism is a new and deadly threat seems persuasive; the devastation wrought on 9/11 and in attacks such as the 2015 bombings in Paris that killed 130 people seems to provide compelling evidence that terrorism poses an extremely serious and growing threat to our safety. However, once we analyse the claims made in the existential threat narrative of terrorism described earlier, it becomes apparent that this depiction of terrorism is not only false, but also harmful.

Is terrorism really an existential threat?

Several scholars have argued that the depiction of terrorism described previously is based on a false portrayal of the risks posed by modern terrorism (Jackson et al. 2011: Chapter 6; Michaelsen 2012; Mueller 2006; Mueller and Stewart 2012, 2016; Wolfendale 2007). This false portrayal involves several different elements. First, the existential threat narrative portrays terrorism as one of the most serious threats to states and individual security today. But, simply put, there is no compelling evidence that non-state terrorism has seriously undermined or threatened the political or economic survival of democratic states – a fact that holds true even for states such as Israel that have been the target of long-standing and ongoing terrorist attacks. In fact, *state* terrorism and other forms of state violence pose a far greater threat to individuals and communities than non-state terrorism (Jackson et al. 2011: 193–4; Primoratz 2013: Chapter 2; see also Chapter 4).

Second, the existential threat narrative greatly exaggerates the threat posed by terrorism to people’s lives. In the United States in 2001, when nearly 3,000 people died in the 9/11 attacks, ‘three times as many [US citizens] died from malnutrition and almost 40 times as many people died in car accidents’ (Michaelsen 2012: 436). Since 9/11, ‘Six Americans have died per year at the hands, guns, and bombs of Islamic terrorists’ (Mosher and Gould

2017). In comparison, in 2015 alone, '13,286 people were killed in the US by firearms' (BBC 2016).

Globally, the deaths caused by non-state terrorism pale in comparison to the deaths caused by disease, poverty, climate change and state violence (Jackson et al. 2011: 132). According to one study, in 2015 there were 28,352 deaths caused by terrorism worldwide (Jones 2016). In comparison, climate change has been linked to 400,000 deaths each year (Leber 2015), armed violence kills around 535,000 people annually (Small Arms Survey 2017) and over 22,000 children die from poverty *each day* (Shah 2013). Yet the depiction of terrorism as the most serious threat to states means that these and other serious threats to state and individual security are neglected or ignored.

So, for example, the threat posed by climate change has not received anything like the attention given by politicians, academics and the media to the threat of terrorism. Yet the predicted effects of climate change (such as the effect of even a 2° F increase in global temperature) include:

5–15% reductions in the yields of crops grown . . . 3–10% increases in the amount of rain falling during the heaviest precipitation events, which can increase flooding risks . . . 200%–400% increases in the area burned by wildfire in parts of the western United States.

(EPA 2014)

The ongoing impact of climate change is likely to have a devastating impact not only on millions of people's lives, but also on many states' economies, environments and infrastructure. Yet despite the extremely serious and growing nature of this threat (Mooney 2014), the funding, research and political capital spent on meeting this threat is insignificant in comparison with that devoted to fighting terrorism – a trend that is only likely to continue with the Trump administration's censoring of climate change research (Hand 2017).

Finally, in addition to misrepresenting the scale and seriousness of the terrorist threat, the existential threat narrative also misrepresents the motivations and capacities of terrorists. As we saw earlier, in the existential threat narrative, terrorists are depicted as evil masterminds who are plotting to use WMDs to inflict massive casualties (Mueller and Stewart 2016: Chapter 4). But the image of terrorists as evil geniuses does not reflect what we know about actual terrorists and would-be terrorists. Most terrorists in Europe, like those 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' (Mueller and Stewart 2016: 117). In fact, the large majority of terrorist campaigns 'fail within one year and are mostly ineffectual' (Jackson et al. 2011: 132). This is in part because the resources, skills and funding to which terrorists typically have access is nothing compared with the financial, military, police and intelligence resources that states, such as the United States, bring to bear in fighting terrorism (Jackson et al. 2011).

Even the terrorists who committed the attacks on 9/11 – the highest casualty terrorist attacks in history – were lucky rather than diabolically clever: several of the terrorists committed 'basic errors in tradecraft that nearly sabotaged their plans' (Mueller and Stewart 2016: 119). Many terrorists arrested in the United States since 9/11 were acting alone or with a small group of followers, rather than being part of a sophisticated global network (Mueller and Stewart 2016: 92–3), and many were not radical Islamic terrorists at all, but right-wing extremists (Gidda 2017). There is also little evidence that terrorists are plotting to use WMDs or are aiming to inflict more and more high-casualty attacks. Research on the

motivations behind terrorist attacks found that most terrorists aim to hit symbolic targets rather than targets that would cause mass casualties, and that many terrorist groups try to avoid mass civilian casualties because of the effect such attacks have on public opinion (Jackson et al. 2011: 131).

None of this is intended to deny that terrorism is a threat or to claim that states should not take terrorism seriously. Rather, the point is that the existential threat narrative of terrorism grossly exaggerates the scale of the terrorist threat and misrepresents the motivations, abilities and international reach of terrorists. This is problematic not only because it is based on a false assessment of the scale and nature of the terrorist threat. The problem is that this narrative, and the policies and practices it is used to justify, has damaging and even dangerous consequences. Ahead, I explain how the existential threat narrative is used to justify political and military policies that have an extremely destructive impact on communities, individuals and states – in some cases, a more destructive impact than terrorism itself.

The harm of the existential threat narrative

The erosion of civil liberties

In many countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, the immediate consequence of the adoption of the existential threat narrative of terrorism is the creation of new counterterrorism legislation that drastically broadens the powers of police and intelligence services to detain individuals suspected of terrorist activity or of having information relevant to terrorism investigations (Jackson et al. 2011: 229–31; Kostakopoulou 2008: 5–6; Wolfendale 2007: 75). For example, in September 2014, in response to a threat from the militant group Islamic State (ISIS), Australia passed legislation that expanded police powers to detain terrorism suspects without charge and execute search warrants (Farrell 2014).

These new forms of legislation have, not surprisingly, led to the arrest, investigation and detention without charge of many individuals who had no information about terrorism (Friedersdorf 2013). For example, a former senior State Department Official in the Bush administration claimed that the majority of prisoners detained at Guantánamo Bay were innocent of any involvement in terrorism (Friedersdorf 2013). In addition, this legislation has led to the violation of privacy of thousands of individuals whose phone records and email correspondence are monitored and collected by intelligence agencies (see Chapter 15).

The death toll of counterterrorism

Loss of privacy and the risk of some wrongful arrests might seem a small price to pay to protect society from terrorism. However, the following two examples illustrate just how destructive counterterrorism strategies can be. First, the toll of the numerous military operations initiated by the United States and its allies in the so-called War on Terror far exceeds the death toll of terrorism (Rogers 2016b). For example, as of May 2017, the civilian death toll of the conflict in Iraq exceeds 174,000. If combatants are included, the death toll is approximately 268,000 (Iraq Body Count 2017).

The case of Israel and Palestine provides another example of how a state's counterterrorism policies can threaten a community to a greater extent than the terrorism to which the policies are responding. Israeli counterterrorism strategies have included the use of torture (PCATI 2014) and the construction of illegal housing settlements in Palestinian territory

(Human Rights Watch 2014). Counterterrorism attacks on Palestinian communities have killed and wounded hundreds of civilians (Human Rights Watch 2014; United Nations 2007). According to a 2007 report from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Reports, in every year since 2000, the numbers of Palestinians killed has exceeded (sometimes by several hundreds) the number of Israelis killed, and over half the deaths have been civilians. To be clear, I am not claiming that such tactics rise to the level of an existential threat to the Palestinian community. Nor am I defending Palestinian terrorism. Instead, the point is to illustrate that counterterrorism tactics can, in some cases, cause greater harm to a community than the non-state terrorism to which the counterterrorism is responding.

The financial cost of counterterrorism

The existential threat narrative of terrorism has also been used to justify massive funding increases for military operations and for security agencies such as the CIA and the NSA (Mueller and Stewart 2011). In 2016, President Obama requested a budget allocation for \$50.4 billion for homeland security agencies, most notably the Department of Homeland Security. Of that amount, \$36.6 billion is earmarked for 'Preventing and disrupting terrorist attacks' (Boyd 2016). In total, the expenditure of US domestic homeland security in the first 10 years after 9/11 exceeded \$1 *trillion* (Mueller and Stewart 2012: 1). One consequence of such massive spending is that government money is *not* being spent on other crucial areas such as health, education and climate change research.

A further consequence of this spending on security has been the acquisition by US police forces of military equipment, including tanks, Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles (MRAPs) and military-grade weapons on the grounds that such equipment might be necessary to prevent a terrorist attack (ACLU 2014: 3). One of the effects of this militarisation of the police has been the increasing use of SWAT teams for minor police operations such as executing search warrants, which, in turn, has led to the injury and death of several innocent individuals, including a 19-month-old baby (Pow 2014).

The destabilising effects of counterterrorism

The adoption of the existential threat narrative of terrorism has other, harder to quantify, negative impacts, include the continuing damage to the environment, economy and basic infrastructure of countries targeted by the war against terrorism, such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The destabilisation of political power and social stability in those countries has led to continuing turmoil and unrest and contributed to the rise of militant groups such as ISIS (Collins 2014).

This regional, political and social destabilisation is compounded by the portrayal of terrorists as religiously motivated fanatics that are part of a 'global network' governed by al-Qaeda (Bergen et al. 2011). This has led to different non-state groups (such as Jema'ah Islamiyah in Indonesia and Kumpulan Mujahideen, Malaysia) being 'lumped together' because of their identification with Islam, even though their origins, structure, aims and uses of violence are different from each other and from al-Qaeda. Ironically, the depiction of these groups as part of an international al-Qaeda network has 'granted such groups more currency in their ability to evoke fear' (Mustapha 2011: 493), arguably increasing the threat posed by these groups.

This portrayal of Islamic groups has also resulted in *legitimate* political groups and non-violent movements being demonised as 'terrorist' merely because of their identification with

Islam (Mustapha 2011: 495). For example, the Indonesian Islamist organisation Nadhatul Ulama (which has 30 million followers) has actively supported the Indonesian government's anti-terrorism efforts, yet has been portrayed as a terrorist organisation purely because it is a Muslim organisation (Mustapha 2011; Gershman 2002: 64). Once groups are labelled 'terrorist', this not only undermines the ability of those groups to fight terrorism in their own countries; but also makes it harder for such organisations and the governments who support them to counteract the radical versions of Islam utilised by more extreme groups (Mustapha 2011: 495).

The ineffectiveness of counterterrorism

Since the existential threat narrative of terrorism drastically restricts the range of possible counterterrorism strategies, non-violent counterterrorism methods, such as the infiltration of dangerous organisations and negotiation with the leaders of non-state groups, are 'off the table' from the beginning. Yet historically such methods have consistently proven to be more effective in preventing terrorism than military force and tactics such as torture (Jackson et al. 2011: Chapter 10). A 2006 study of evaluations of the effectiveness of post-9/11 counterterrorism strategies (such as increased airport security, military interventions, and political regime change) found that most of these strategies were not only ineffective in reducing incidents of terrorism, some were linked to an *increase* in terrorism (Lum et al. 2006). Yet this should not be surprising; the inefficacy of methods such as torture and 'no concessions or negotiation' policies on terrorism was known well before 9/11. The author of a 1998 article on terrorism criticised the US's 'no concessions' policy because it proved ineffective in deterring several high-profile terrorist attacks (Tucker 1998: 104–5).

Conclusion

States have a duty to protect their citizens against violence, including terrorist violence. But the existential threat narrative of terrorism drastically inflates the severity of the terrorist threat and misrepresents the capacities and motivations of terrorists. As I have argued, contemporary non-state terrorism does not seriously threaten (and never has threatened) the political and territorial integrity of the United States and other liberal democracies (Michaelsen 2012: 438; Mueller and Stewart 2012: 103). Nor does terrorism pose a serious threat to the lives of citizens of those states. Yet the existential threat narrative continues to dominate political, media and academic debates about terrorism.

What defenders of the existential threat narrative have failed to see is that counterterrorism policies enacted on the basis of the existential threat narrative have not only been ineffective in minimising terrorism, but also they have arguably *increased* the threat of non-state terrorism. In addition, these policies have caused serious harm to the lives and well-being of thousands of individuals, and to the economic, political and social stability of many countries. If we are really concerned with the safety and security of the international community, we should, therefore, challenge and confront the harm caused by the existential threat narrative of terrorism.

Acknowledgements

This chapter is a modified version of 'The Narrative of Terrorism as an Existential Threat', previously published in Richard Jackson, ed. *Routledge Handbook of Critical Terrorism Studies* (Routledge, 2016). Reproduced by permission of Routledge.

Discussion questions

- 1 What is the existential threat narrative of terrorism?
 - 2 How does the existential threat narrative portray terrorists?
 - 3 What are the causes of terrorism, according to the existential threat narrative?
 - 4 The threat of terrorism for state security is likely to increase in the future. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why or why not?
 - 5 What are some of the dangers that states could face if terrorism is not dealt with?
 - 6 Why are some terrorist organisations successful in challenging the security of the state, whereas other groups are not?
 - 7 Is the security of India and Pakistan threatened by the existence of terrorist organisations that have targeted them? How great is the threat to these states?
 - 8 Why does the existential threat narrative seem to justify the use of extraordinary counterterrorism responses?
 - 9 If terrorism is not an existential threat, what should states do about terrorism?
 - 10 What are the greatest threats to national and international security today, and how do they compare to the terrorist threat?
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Further readings

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