

# **EPISTEMES DISCUSSION PAPER**

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**HOW BIG A THREAT  
DOES TERRORISM POSE?**

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## **Introduction**

During the past fifteen years, the phenomenon of terrorism has dramatically increased in its scale, reaching definitively global attention with September 11 terrorist attacks. With the increase in terrorist activities, also attention and concern for this phenomenon has grown. Many have considered terrorism the major threat of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Terrorism, however, does not pose a big threat. This does not mean that Governments around the world should not be concerned with it. On the contrary, they should try to work in order to limit this phenomenon and minimize its effects. However, as this paper aims at explaining, the attention paid to terrorism has been highly exaggerated and the resources devoted at fighting it have been in part misplaced.

To prove this point, the first two sections of this paper will provide a definition of what a threat and terrorism are. There will also be a rough attempt to identify what should be considered as a “big threat”. The following sections will analyze terrorism and will explain why the threat it represents is not as serious as it is generally depicted.

## **What is a threat?**

According to the Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary, a threat is “a menace of bodily hurt or injury, such as may restrain a person’s freedom of action”. And it is also “an indication of something undesirable coming”. From these definitions, it is possible to infer two major considerations. First, a threat is something actually existing. Secondly, a threat is something near – even though how near remains to be defined. If a threat is “big”, there should be hence no doubt that the scale of the injury it is capable to inflict should be *big*, and that the space and time distance that separates it from its victim should be limited. A “big” threat, therefore, is a direct menace to the very existence of a living being or, alternatively, it is such a menace that the existence of the living being will be drastically different from the one that it would have observed. A big threat, therefore, should be something in the position to either hurt dramatically a state, or to create such a level of anxiety and fear that the daily life of its citizens will have to change and re-adapt to a new, completely different context.

## What is terrorism?

Terrorism is a tactic of conducting warfare.<sup>1</sup> Those that rely on it do so because they cannot launch a conventional war. Terrorism is hence, as professor Samuel Huntington put it by paraphrasing Clausewitz, nothing else than “the continuation of politics by other means by those that do not have other means”.<sup>2</sup> This means that while war relies on effective destruction in order to achieve political goals, terrorism relies on fear (*terror*) of destruction.

In terms of resources and results, terrorism is particularly efficient. Even with limited resources, terrorists manage to have a broad and deep effect on the population they want to hit. As pointed out by Nehemia Friedland and Ariel Merari, “[t]errorism is highly effective in inducing fear and worry, even when the actual damage it causes is moderate”.<sup>3</sup> A terrorist act is in fact not really important *per se*, but it is important because of the fear it manages to trigger in the population of another subsequent, more

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1 Colin S. Gray, *Moder Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

2 See Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the New World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995). See also Ulrich Beck, *La società cosmopolita* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003).

3 Nehemia Friedland and Ariel Merari, “The Psychological Impact of Terrorism: A Double-Edged Sword,” *Political Psychology*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (Dec., 1985), pp. 591-604. On this aspect, see also John Mueller, *Overblow: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, and Why We Believe Them* (New York: Free Press, 2006), p. 26.

disruptive attack.

This paper will limit its attention to the case of Islamic terrorism against Western societies, and in particular to the American one. The argument could be extended also to other societies and to non-Islamic terrorist groups. However, in many cases, what are generally called “terrorists organizations” are actually paramilitary or insurgent groups. The argument may therefore not be appropriate for them.

### **Terrorism does not pose a big threat**

The records of the past years show that terrorists have not been particularly successful in bringing death and destruction. Even in Europe, where, because of a larger Muslim population and particular social conditions, recruitment of would-be suicide bombers should be easier than in the US, there have been only few successful and attempted attacks.<sup>4</sup> The stress should hence be put not on how many deaths terrorism has brought, but on how few.<sup>5</sup> Reality does give confirmation to the definition of terrorism provided in the previous section. Terrorists lack the capability to attack. If one compares their declared goals with their actual accomplishments, their

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4 See Oliver Roy, *Globalized Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

5 This may be also the result of anti-terrorism policies. This aspect will be treated in the conclusions.

record seems in fact quite poor. Professor John Mueller is therefore correct in stressing that there are higher probabilities for an American citizen to be killed by a meteor rather than by a terrorist attack. It is natural to ask why the American Government has focused its attention more on terrorism rather than on falling meteors.

It is possible to trace three main arguments that justify this attention and support the claim that terrorism is a “big threat”. First of all, it can be argued that a meteor will have a smaller “collateral effect” on normal life and national economies than terrorism. The latter, in fact, other than the actual damage it creates, fosters fear and anxiety into the population, making life and economic activities more costly, difficult and uncertain. Life under a constant and impeding threat is in fact impossible. Second, if terrorists acquire weapons of mass destruction, their capacity to bring death and destruction will be increased enormously, and so will the threat they pose. Third, terrorism is only the initial part of a greater strategy organized by a violent ideology, Islamism, in order to attack Western Civilization. Like Nazi-fascism and Communism in the XX Century, Islamism is directly challenging Western democracies, and if not defeated, it will overwhelm them.

The following sections will consider one by one these three

propositions and underline their main fallacies.

### **Argument 1: Terrorism threatens Western life style and its prosperity**

People react to fear, not to risk. So, it is argued, even if the probabilities of being killed in a terrorist attack are microscopic, people may be extremely concerned with this possibility and overreact. As a consequence, the argument goes, terrorism may achieve its goals, and spread mass terror across Western societies, and thus make it impossible for people to enjoy their life, and most important, their freedom. Similarly, terrorism threatens the prosperity produced by Western market-based economies. By creating uncertainty, terrorism reduces the propensity to invest, and may lead to huge fluctuation (and hence to huge capital loss) in the stock market.<sup>6</sup> Because of the relative ease with which terrorists can organize further attacks, the whole social and economic structure of Western societies may be in peril.<sup>7</sup>

A deeper analysis of the subject show that this argument does not give a fair description of reality. First of all, if one looks at the recent events, normal life has not changed significantly, even after September 11, 2001. People are still using air and underground transports; and they are still going

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<sup>6</sup> Ulrich Beck, *Power in the Global Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> For the general argument, see "A World of Terror", *The Economist*, October 17, 2002.

to crowded places such as train stations, restaurants, and clubs. There may have been a decline in these activities due to the psychological effects of the attacks. So far, however, normal life has not changed.<sup>8</sup> Even the stock market has continued to work. After September 11, 2001 shares' prices suffered a significant drop. Yet, as market analyst David Schwartz put it, terrorism has “no lasting effect” on investments and shares. In some cases, terrorism failed to affect trading even in the very short run. When the market closed on July 21, 2005, the London Stock Exchange did not show any significant reaction to the bombings that had been carried out that day across the city.<sup>9</sup>

In conclusion, terrorism has not changed Western societies' daily life. More controls have been instituted, but people are not living like they were in “war”. People do not stock food. People do not observe self-imposed curfew. Movies, theaters, stations, airports, and all the places that terrorists may target are still crowded. Whether this has been due to a moral reaction, as columnist Charles Krauthammer put it, or to the fact that millions of people did virtue out of necessity, as implied by Nobel Prize laureate Gary Becker and distinguished professor Yona Rubinstein, may be debated.<sup>10</sup> The

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8 See Willian J. Dobson, “The Day Nothing Much Changed,” in *Foreign Policy* (Sept-Oct 2006).

9 See David Schwartz, “Don't be terrorized into selling” in London Stock Exchange's (<http://www.londonstockexchange.com/engb/pricesnews/education/interchange/Authors/davidschwartz/terrorized.htm>).

10 See Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment Revisited,” *The National Interest*, (Nov-Dec 2002); and Gary Becker and Yona Rubinstein, “Fear and the Response to Terrorism: An Economic Analysis”,

central point is that, even if people tend to overreact, and terrorism manages to affect the quality of life by increasing costs, it does not change the the general pattern of daily life.

**Argument 2: If terrorists acquire weapons of mass destruction, they will be able to kill thousands of people, and make September 11 look like a small tragedy in comparison.**

The threat posed by terrorism is generally associated with the possible acquisition of weapons of mass destruction by terrorist groups. Al-Qaeda has long tried to obtain these weapons, and if it managed to get its hands on them, its capacity to inflict death and destruction would be enormously increased, putting entire cities at its mercy. This risk certainly exists. However, the threat that it actually represents should be analyzed much more carefully. Without considering the difficulties in obtaining, storing, handling and deploying these weapons – difficulties that may be sufficient to decrease significantly the “WMD threat” – this section will underline the limited effectiveness of these weapons, and explain why the current concern is not actually justified.

First of all, the very term “weapons of mass destruction” is highly misleading. For chemical weapons, killing masses of people in open areas is in fact, as professor Mueller has stated, “beyond their modest capabilities”.<sup>11</sup> When the Japanese religious group Aum Shinrikyo released sarin gas in a co-ordinated attack on five trains in Tokyo's underground, the death toll was quite modest. Only twelve people died. That chemical weapons failed to lead to mass killings in one of the most crowded places in the world, and where conditions for gas effectiveness are much more favorable than open air is telling and should be sufficient to bring the issue of chemical weapons under a more rational perspective. In fact, when perfect conditions are not met, the destructive effect of these weapons are not greater than conventional explosive.

It is possible to draw similar conclusions in regard to biological weapons. Even though they may kill thousands of people (and hence can be considered “weapons of mass destruction”), the difficulty in spreading diseases (unfavorable weather conditions may be sufficient to disrupt any plan), and, more important, the time gap between contagion and consequent death (time during which people can be cured) are such that the effectiveness of these weapons can be put in serious doubt.

This is true also for radiological weapons. As Mueller has said, they

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<sup>11</sup> See Mueller, p. 18

are more “weapons of mass 'disruption' than of mass destruction”.<sup>12</sup> In fact, also their destructive capacity is severally limited by particular favorable conditions. For example, people should not be able to escape from the blast, in order to be fully affected by the radiation and die immediately because of it.

In conclusion, “weapons of mass destruction” do not give terrorists a significantly greater destructive capacity than conventional weapons do. Their effectiveness is in fact subject to so many variables and factors that the threat they pose should be downplayed. Furthermore, it should be added that that obtaining, storing, handling and deploying these weapons is particularly difficult, and so far these difficulties have been sufficient to impede terrorists from acquiring and using them.

**Argument 3: Islamism is the real threat we are facing. As Nazism and Communism, it has declared war on Western Civilization, therefore this “evil” has to be eliminated from its root.**

Last but not least, according to some analysts and observers, September 11 terrorist attacks have marked the beginning of a long war between the West and Islamic fundamentalism. According to the proponents of this position,

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<sup>12</sup> See *Id.*, p. 22.

among them Paul Berman, Eliot Cohen, Daniel Pipes and Norman Podhoretz, the war against Islamism resembles the struggle against Nazi-fascism during the Second World War and against Communism during the Cold War. The Fourth World War (considering the Cold War to be the Third one) is in fact a total war in which the West is fighting for its own values, its freedom and for its very existence.

The proponents of this argument generally add some further consideration in order to make their argument more persuasive. First of all, Islamic radicals can rely on a huge and growing population in the whole Muslim world. Here, the economic, social and political conditions have given rise to a broad and deep frustration that in turn has created the soil for Islamism to take root. This totalitarian ideology aims at gaining control in all Muslim countries, and then at waging war on the West. This is why, as with Nazi-fascism and Communism, no compromise is possible.

As the example of the Bolsheviks demonstrates, when revolutionaries seized power in Russia, they turned the country into the center for world revolution in order to expand their ideology.<sup>13</sup> Nowadays, if Islamists seized power in Muslim countries, they will not get control of a poor and agrarian country, but they would get their hands of the most important resource of our

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13 Niall Fergusson has made this comparison between bolsheviks and Islamists. See Niall Fergusson, "Sinking Globalization," *Foreign Affairs* (Mar-Apr 2005), vol. 84, n. 2.

era, oil.

As for the other two arguments, also in this case there are huge exaggerations. First of all, that the Muslim population is growing is not a peril *per se*. Muslims are divided in different sects (three) among which there is deep resentment. Speaking about “Muslim world” does hence make little if any sense. Furthermore, even if terrorism is a non-state actor, Muslims are still divided across different countries. While these countries tend to agree in denouncing Israel’s policy towards the Palestinians or the American war in Iraq, they have yet to start any kind of serious cooperation. Last but not least, Muslims are also divided across ethnic lines, Persians and Arabs being the most notorious, but only one of the many. It is therefore highly doubtful that “Muslims” can unite and wage a war on the West.

Second, while Nazi-fascism and Communism relied on respectively strong economic and military power, Islamism is so far the flag only of bankrupt or quasi-bankrupt states. In international politics, capabilities still matter.<sup>14</sup> As far as Muslim countries are unable even to feed their own population and to advance to an elementary level of modernity, there does not seem to be a serious reason for concern. Furthermore, even if terrorists gained control of some Muslim states – assuming that the task is easy and

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<sup>14</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, “The Emerging Structure of International Politics,” *International Security* (Autumn 1993), pp. 44-79.

that they manage to keep their power – it is highly debatable whether they would be able to turn these States in the centers for the expansion of their ideology. While Nazi-fascism and Communism prescribed a kind of management of the national economy that, at least in the short run, demonstrated the capacity of bringing some important successes, the application of Islamic principles to economics has brought only poverty and ruins (in Iran, for example, in less than ten years, the national economy has been reduced by almost a third, and the income per-capita has been reduced by a half by the application of Islamic finance).<sup>15</sup>

## **Conclusions**

Terrorism exists, and it is a problem. But like other problems it needs to be addressed properly. In Western countries, the will of few Islamic radicals has been taken as a proof of their capacity to bring the world to an end.

This paper has tried to argue that terrorism does not pose a “big threat”. Terrorists lack the capabilities to strike. This is why they are using relying on terrorism rather than on war. For them it is materially impossible to threaten the existence of the societies they attack. And even if they acquired “weapons of mass destruction” their destructive capacity would not

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<sup>15</sup> Bank-e Markazi-e Iran, *Annual Report*, various issues.

increased significantly. Similarly, Islamism does not seem to conform to what has been defined as a “big threat”. Muslims around the world may have the will to attack the West, but as long as they do not have the resources and capabilities necessary, the risk they represent is not serious. To shoot a bullet one needs a gun, a bullet and the will to shoot. The will alone is not sufficient. Even the claim that terrorism completely change Western way of life, inhibiting citizens from enjoying freedom and wealth has not been confirmed by facts.

That terrorists have managed to carry out only few attacks in the past years demonstrates that their overall capabilities are not particularly threatening. Either Western intelligence or terrorists’ lack of resources have in fact impeded them to accomplish their plans. Terrorism represents a domestic problem. It may create even huge damage (though not permanent) to national economies and societies. And prevention (security controls, governmental reorganization and administrative changes) may be costly. However, Western Civilization and freedom are not at stake.