Inciting fear for terrorism: a critical review of current counter-terrorism policies and how they increase fear

Eva Vriens

Abstract

Is the fear of possible terrorist attacks justified? Do counter-terrorism policies provide a feeling of security or do they lead to more fear? What kind of policies should be enacted to reduce fear? This article reviews studies that address the way in which governments cope with—and sometimes even stoke—public fears. The author's contention is that fear of terrorist attacks is disproportionate. The perceived risk of dying in terrorist attacks is much greater than the actual risk. Therefore, counter-terrorism policies are necessary. Terrorism might be one of the most difficult problems to solve, because, in reality, it is the *threat* of terrorism we fight, and not terrorism itself. The researchers cited in this article are very critical of the way governments deal with this problem. They contend that governments overemphasize the threat and therefore only increase public fears. These researchers suggest a new kind of counter-terrorism policy, in which the main goal is to reduce fear. It is the goal of terrorists to spread fear and panic. Governments should prevent, rather than facilitate, the achievement of this goal.

Introduction to the problem

Fear is an important component of ordinary life these days. Two developments can be seen as having caused this phenomenon to assume such a prominent role. The first of these is the growing ubiquity of mass media. Nowadays, news is everywhere. Because of mass media, we are aware of things happening all around the world. And because increasing numbers of people are reached through both traditional and new formats (i.e., social media) these media have a great influence on defining hot topics. Media stresses problems involving criminality and insecurity, because this kind of news is conducive to developing sensational stories. As a result of that, fear increases in society. Thus, even though criminality and insecurity have actually decreased over the past few years, the perception of these phenomena is one of increasing threats. In an even more extreme form, this is the case for the threat of terrorism. Realistically, such a threat is only very small. But because of all the attention on the possibility of a terrorist attack, people nowadays experience it as an ever-present problem that needs to be addressed (Nacos, 2006).

This leads us to the second major cause of fear, namely public policy, which is the focus of this study. In most democratic countries, governments are acquiring more control over everyday life. For certain areas, like the care sector, public transport and electricity supplies, governments still tend to stand aside and let market forces resolve everything. However, when it comes to security, which is more abstract, citizens are demanding a growing interference of governments. According to Van den Bos (2011), this is because people have put more trust in governments. Laws and regulations on all kinds of subjects are meant to solve problems and create better circumstances. It is seen as the task of governments to allay public fears and to create an atmosphere of safety, especially when it comes to the perception of increased terrorist threats. Terrorism is a scary

phenomenon, because it is unpredictable and goes beyond borders. After having viewed the phenomenon for decades from afar, the Dutch now experience this threat as very real in their own country as well. And many citizens, in all countries, expect their government to effectively deal with the problem (Haubrich, 2006).

Policymaking is a difficult process. Policy designed to fight terrorism has a particularly low probability of being effective. This is because it is the threat of terrorism that needs to be dealt with, not necessarily terrorism itself. Increased terrorism is a global problem. Terrorists intend to create fear. Part of this fear arises as a result of not knowing when and where terrorist acts will take place. Terrorist acts vary from time to time and from place to place, so it is impossible to formulate a uniform policy to combat it. Some policies turned out to be effective, but they are never capable of removing the threat completely (Mueller, 2005).

This essay stresses that public policy only increases public fear. The first aim of counter-terrorism policies is to prevent terrorist attacks. Another goal of counter-terrorism policies is to reduce the fear of terrorism. In terms of this second goal, the measures that have thus far been enacted may be inadequate. Security measures, like increasing the number of cameras, might convey the general message that fear is justified. The perceived risk—and with it the fear—of terrorist attacks could even increase as a result of employing such measures. The chances of terrorist attacks are minimal, but among the population they still are one of the most important sources of fear. In this essay, answers will be sought to the following questions: Is the fear of possible terrorist attacks justified? Do counter-terrorism policies provide a feeling of security or do they lead to more fear? What kind of policies should be enacted to reduce fear?

Public policy as a cause of fear

Higgs (2006) contends that all governments build their power around fear. All animals, including human beings, face fear. Fear in fact has survival value, because it alerts us to threats and danger. For this very reason, people cannot easily dismiss their fears as irrational. Fear is a part of human existence. Higgs states that governments are aware of this fundamental principle, and that they depend on it. It is fear that makes citizens support measures taken by governments. He states that "without popular fear, no government could endure for more than twenty-four hours" (Higgs, 2006, pp. 448).

Higgs goes even further, saying that many public fears arise in large part because they are stimulated by the government itself. Public fear can be incited by the government itself, or arise as a result of real or spurious threats from which people expect the government to protect them. Either way, governments often exploit public fear for its own purposes.

The extent to which any government is able to spread fear depends on its political system. In nations in which one party or one leader rules over its citizens, fear is more often used as an instrument for making public policy than in nations with a democratic system. Yet, no matter what political system is in place, fear works best during periods of war or crisis. During a war or a crisis, people fear for the nation's welfare and survival. Because of this fear, they will be more ready to surrender wealth, privacy, and liberties to the government (Higgs, 2006).

Haubrich (2006) holds a similar view. He stresses that governments try to frighten their citizens by overemphasizing the threat of terrorism. In his view, governments do this because terrorist attacks are usually aimed at governments. The White House, for instance, is an attractive target for terrorists. By bombing the White House, the president, the most

influential person in the USA could be killed, possibly along with his family. If terrorists would succeed in doing that, their message would resonate loud and clear both within the United States and throughout the entire world. Moreover, even in the absence of the president and his family, destroying the White House would strike a symbolic blow against the hated Americans. The same thing could be said about the Netherlands. If terrorists seek to frighten citizens and to fight democracy, the most effective action would be to bomb The Hague. In the Netherlands, all ministries and other essential components of the Dutch national government are headquartered in The Hague. With one attack, terrorists would thus be able to severely disrupt national politics. To protect the government, safety measures have to be taken. For every measure, however, the support of the people is needed. Governments therefore exaggerate the threat of terrorism in order to gain public support.

Fear of terrorism: realistic or not?

Even though current counter-terrorism policies have at times been highly criticized, there is no denying that some form of policy is needed not only to stop terrorism, but also to provide citizens with a sense of security. Especially after the 9/11 attacks, people all over the world are afraid of terrorist acts. Even though the chance of dying in a terrorist attack is very small, it is still one of the most common fears among the general public. Adams (2004) compared risk and fear of multiple death scenarios. Statistics indicate that the number of people injured or killed in road accidents is much greater than the number of people killed or injured by terrorists. For instance, in Israel, between September 2000 and September 2003, 622 civilian Israelis were killed by Palestinian terrorists. For a small country like Israel, this is by no means a trivial number, yet it is dwarfed by the number of traffic

fatalities during that same period (1650). A similar discrepancy exists in Northern Ireland where, during the 25 years during which "the Troubles" were at their worst, twice as many people died in road accidents as were killed by terrorists. Thus far, the 9/11 attacks, in which Al-Qaeda members deliberately flew two commercial airliners into the World Trade Center, a third into the Pentagon and attempted to crash a fourth into the United States Capitol, have been the most lethal terrorist action. About 2800 citizens died during these attacks. This number is shockingly large, and there is no minimizing the tragedy of that fateful day. However, to keep things in perspective, Adams points out that overall about 1.2 million people die in road accidents each year. "This is more than one 9/11 every day" (Adams, 2004).

While it might seem cold and heartless to define risk of dying this way, Adams uses these numbers to make a point about fear. He contends that fear is not a result of the risk of a particular event occurring. The risk of dying on the road is, in fact, greater than the risk of dying because of terrorist attacks. Therefore, he distinguishes between real risk and perceived risk. With road accidents, the selection of victims is highly random. A road accident can happen anywhere and at any time. This gives people the feeling that the chance is very small such an accident would happen to them. One could say that these risks are widely accepted. Moreover, road accidents do not only have a lower perceived risk, the risk is also one that is voluntary chosen. Terrorist attacks, however, invoke fear because terrorists generally choose iconic targets. This increases the perceived risk, because targets are chosen deliberately instead of at random, and because this is an *imposed* risk, instead of a voluntarily chosen one. Moreover, Mueller (2005, p.498) says about this phenomenon that "people tend

to be more alarmed by dramatic fatalities than by ones that cumulate statistically".

Whether the fear of terrorism is relevant or not, the fact of the matter is that it at least *seems* realistic to most citizens. And because "perceptions of public concern are the strongest and most consistent predictor of policy attitudes about terrorism" (Joslyn & Haider-Markel, 2007, p.307), counter-terrorism policies are necessary and will be implemented to reduce fears and increase feelings of safety.

Counter-terrorism policies and their effect on fear

Counter-terrorism policy is still in its infancy. It is only since the 9/11 attacks that most of the world has become conscious of the threat of terrorist attacks. Before, terrorism occurred mostly on a domestic level. For instance, terrorist attacks were part of the continuing conflict between Israel and Palestine. The same applies to the struggle in Northern Ireland between Catholics and Protestants. Bombs and similar weapons were used to fight innocent opponents, but this was part of an internal conflict. Since 9/11, terrorism has become global in scope (Haubrich, 2006). The threat of terrorism for most people nowadays comes from radical groups, usually aimed at fighting Western ideas. People often think of fundamentalist Muslims in association with terrorism, but extreme right-wing groups also participate in terrorist attacks.

Nowadays, it is reasonable for every nation to be afraid of the constant threat of terrorism. There is a growing awareness that a nation's security system might no longer be enough to protect its citizens. Globalization has, in many ways, made the domestic international and this has resulted in the undermining of citizens' sense of security. Security and fear are diametric opposites. Fear is more susceptible of increasing than a sense of security, especially if the threat itself is

unidentifiable, foreign, and not containable by domestic law enforcement. This problem has attained global dimensions, and is therefore difficult to deal with (Haubrich, 2006). In fighting terrorism, nations have to work together. International counter-terrorism policies must be drafted and implemented. Even if such measures do not effectively reduce terrorism, they might at least give people the *sense* that terrorism is being controlled, and this will, by definition, increase general perceptions of security.

After 9/11, there has been a rapid implementation of new anti-terrorism legislation. These policies were aimed at stopping terrorism and ensuring security. Frank Furedi, a British sociologist, criticizes current counter-terrorism policies. He claims that nowadays governments are only concerned with protecting society against terrorism. By constantly stating that the entire country is a potential target and that all citizens are potential victims, governments increase insecurity and fear among their citizens. And if, eventually, a terrorist attack actually does occur, people will easily step into the role of victims. Policy against terrorism, he states, will therefore only lead to a defenseless country. The goal of terrorists is to disintegrate societies by spreading fear and panic among people. Therefore, governments only help terrorists when they continue to stress the realistic threat of terrorist attacks. Thus, people who had already anxiously thought about terrorism, even before terrorist acts occurred will, following an actual attack, experience far more magnified fears. This is exactly what terrorists want (Hameeteman, 2011).

What should counter-terrorism policies look like?

Beatrice de Graaf and Bob de Graaff (2010), both professors at the University of Leiden who study terrorism and counter-terrorism, also claim governments go too

far in stating the importance of anti-terrorism measures. They don't deny that it is the citizens' right to demand safety measures and receive information about urgent threats. But they also contend that this information is useless as long as it is vague or unreliable. In that case, governments must gather more information as soon as possible, but refrain from mobilizing their citizens against a vaguely defined threat. This, according to their research, will only lead to unpredictable and unintentional side-effects.

Moreover, the goal of terrorists is to incite fear among people. Therefore, De Graaf and De Graaff (2010) recommend that governments stop emphasizing the threat of terrorism, which naturally increases the fear of terrorism. They recommend that governments instead do the opposite and put more faith in their citizens again. If people no longer fear terrorist attacks, it will become clear to terrorists that their actions are ineffective. By stopping the uncontrolled flow of rumors and unreliable information, the government will manage to "take the wind out of the sails that keep [terrorists] floating" (De Graaff & De Graaff, 2006, p. 273).

Mueller (2005) also criticizes the current counter-terrorism policies of most countries. He writes that "counter-terrorism policies should focus more on reducing fear and anxiety as inexpensively as possible than on objectively reducing the rather limited dangers terrorism is likely actually to pose" (p. 496). Just like Adams (2004), he compares fears to actual risk. When risks are real, as in the case of smoking, it makes sense to incite fear. However, when the risks are very small, as is the case with terrorism, the fear itself becomes a problem that needs to be dealt with.

Terrorists intend to create insecurity, fear, anxiety and hysteria. Therefore, the goal of the government should be to encourage the opposite

reactions. According to Mueller, policymakers should be more concerned with changing peoples' perceptions. They should stress that extensive fear and anxiety is misplaced, unjustified and counterproductive. In general, risks are a social construct, and it is the *perception* of risk that is more important than the objectively calculated risk. Nevertheless, in dealing with terrorism, policies should pay attention to risk assessment and communication. Mueller suggests that governments could state that only certain, relatively small areas are primarily at risk. Because while terrorists try to make people believe that they can strike anywhere and at any time, they always carefully select their targets. This could be sound public policy, if the benefit from the reduction of fear in the excluded areas is greater than the costs of fear enhancement in the zones defined as being at risk. Another suggestion he makes is that records be published regarding all false warnings made about terrorist attacks. If these kinds of data are published frequently, the credibility of the threat of terrorism might be undermined, and fear might decline.

Mueller even goes one step further in hypothesizing how fear could be reduced by the government. He says that doing nothing after a terrorist attack, or at least refraining from overreacting, is not necessarily unacceptable. Immediately after an attack, short-term demands will arise about policy interventions. On this matter, Mueller says that if politicians wait a while before reacting, they will often find that their current counter-terrorism policies do not need to be changed (Mueller, 2005).

Conclusion

Ten years after 9/11, researchers seem to have new insights about devising counter-terrorism policies. There is an ever-growing awareness that the perceived risk of terrorist attacks is much greater than the actual risk. Almost everyone experiences an exaggerated fear of terrorism out of all

proportion to the actual risk of a terrorist attack. This fear has arisen not only as a result of actual terrorist activity and threats, but also to a large extent because of the attention governments have given to these phenomena. If policies are enacted against terrorism, citizens will think that the threat must be real, and therefore something to be afraid of. Researchers cited in this article therefore all conclude that future counter-terrorism policies should focus more on reducing fear than on preventing terrorist attacks. This could be done by pointing out areas where the chances of terrorist attacks are very small, or by demonstrating how often alerts regarding imminent terrorist attacks turned out to be false. A third option that has been referred to is to do nothing at all.

In short, fear for terrorism is too big, and therefore terrorists are on the winning side. Current counter-terrorism policies only help terrorists by overemphasizing the threat. Governments should change strategies and try to reduce the fear.

Discussion

Policies are often studied under the aegis of the social sciences, which analyze policies in terms of how effectively they deal with given problems. Most researchers cited in this article are sociologists, anthropologists, and criminologists. They thus identified and addressed problems on the societal level of society. While it appears that these disciplines have clearly established that it is fear that needs to be dealt with in stopping terrorism, further research still needs to be done. After all, fear is an emotion that is part of the individual. Psychologists know a lot more about the causes of fear than social scientists, and may therefore better be able to suggest ways of eliminating it. Policies aimed at reducing fear cannot be crafted without the help of psychologists, and therefore the

behavioral sciences have a vital role in this task.

Another critical point of this study is the fact that this phenomenon has only been studied one-sided. Public policies do cause fear, but in a way they also provide a feeling of security. Up until now, most researchers chose one side in this debate. In the future, research should be done to examine this contradiction. What is known is that counter-terrorism policies increase fear and are therefore inefficient. On the other hand, some measures that have been taken do seem to have an effect on preventing terrorism. It should be examined to what extent these counter-terrorism policies provide a feeling of anxiety and to what extent they provide a feeling of security. Only after a comparison of these two, new—and hopefully more effective—counter-terrorism policies can be thought of.

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