

Things You Should Know:

Terrorist Risks

Ian M. Johnstone-Bryden



Nighthawk





TERRORIST RISKS







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NIGHTHAWK

**• Nighthawk Publishing • Halesworth •
• Suffolk • United Kingdom •**





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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 1-84280-060-4

Published by

Nighthawk Publishing
Monks Farm
Saint James Road
All Saints South Elmham
Halesworth
Suffolk
IP19 0HG
United Kingdom

Published electronically in the .pdf format
By Nighthawk Publishing





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1. Warning

This paper is not an exhaustive treatise on the subject of terrorist risks. It is intended to provide some general information and to help those wishing to begin the process of effective risk management at home or at work. This paper covers the general subject and other papers are available at www.firetrench.com that address more specific issues. It is recommended that the reader makes this paper the starting point, before downloading and reading specific-issue papers.

2. Who is at Risk

The difficulty with terrorist risks is that people totally unconnected with anything relating to a specific group of terrorists can, and do, become victims. A racist Irish terrorist is just

as likely to kill an American, who has just donated money to his funds, as to kill English people.

The bomb can be very indiscriminate and even the bullet can find an unintended target at a crowded location. Even when a terrorist is trying to be most specific in targeting victims, he may not use a logic that anyone else would recognize.

Many terrorists fall in love with their craft and cause death, injury and damage for the thrill of doing it, being no different from any other serial killer. Most terror organizations also indulge in straightforward criminal actions to raise funds. In many cases, that use of crime as part of fund raising becomes more important than whatever motivation set

the terrorists out on their path originally. At least some of the terrorists begin to create a lifestyle much like any other criminal.

The result is that anyone living or visiting an area that is subject to terrorism is at risk to some degree.

3. Global Terrorism

Terrorism is by no means a new phenomena. Various levels and combinations of organized crime, armed political opposition, and religious fanaticism have created groups of people prepared to attack anyone in their path, using terror as an instrument of power.

Terrorism is as old as history and has often extended across national boundaries. Historically this has been relatively localized and

therefore risks have been much easier to estimate.

Terrorism tends to increase when there is no active warfare between nations, thriving in countries where politicians always want to spend the 'peace dividend'. In the uncertainty that followed the ending of the Cold War, or Third World War, terror groups funded by nations were allowed to grow and put down deep roots. During the last decade of the Twentieth Century they were also allowed to link up with other groups around the world, forming an international coalition of terror.

It could be said that a parallel system of states has been allowed to establish itself with the larger groups having their own 'citizens'

and international treaties with other groups.

The result is that everyone in the world is now potentially at risk of terrorist attack.

4. Freedom Fighters

One person's freedom fighter is another person's terrorist. Every terror group will claim a legitimate cause, social, racial, economic, political ideology, or religious belief.

Within every group there will be people who genuinely believe in the 'cause', people of limited intelligence and knowledge, people suffering from personality and mental disorders, and a hard core directing the others, possibly with some completely different agenda to the published justifications for the group. Usually, the last

thing that the group is about is freedom.

Most of the African 'freedom fighters' have been given power and promptly set up a totalitarian state that has oppressed the majority of the population and descended into chaos and corruption.

The Arab 'freedom fighters' have also oppressed their people as soon as they have seized power. The women of Afghanistan were certainly not freed by the Taliban.

The Serbs in Kosovo have been the subject of oppression and genocide by the Kosova 'freedom fighters'.

It is very hard to find any group of 'freedom fighters' that is delivering any freedom other than the freedom of their leaders to exploit their fellow citi-

zens.

5. Object of Terror

The only difference between any group of armed people and terrorists is the level of control over the violence. In war between nations, there will always be collateral damage because weapons systems are never as accurate as is claimed. There is also no control over what happens at the target. An aircraft can drop a bomb on a target that has been assessed as a legitimate military target, the bomb can drop with total accuracy, causing devastation only within the intended radius, but the intelligence could be faulty, or the enemy could have changed the use of land and buildings within the target area. In war between nations, refugee col-

umns fleeing the fighting may become deliberate targets, or be present in deliberately targeted areas. Sometimes, bombing is used to create panic in refugee columns to prevent the enemy reinforcing his front, or withdrawing to prepared positions.

Whatever the motive or the justification, some people will suffer terror in any conflict. However, the terrorist is using terror as a deliberate tactic and as the basis of conflict. There are no civilians or non-combatants to the terrorist. There may be hypocritical claims to be targeting only 'legitimate military targets', but this is a deliberate falsehood. The hope is that the majority will be forced by the minority to surrender to escape the terror. A major element in the terror

campaign is to instil a fear in the target population that may be completely out of proportion to the real threat.

The terrorist cannot win if the target population continues to go about its daily business, resisting destabilization of society. The enemy of the terrorists is a news media that does not give them the oxygen of publicity, the government that resists the temptation to introduce repressive measures that affect the citizens more than the terrorists, the citizen who refuses to be subdued and carries on, taking a few more sensible precautions to reduce some of the extra risk.

6. Estimating the Risk

The nature of terrorism makes this a little difficult, but not impossible.

Generally, the risk to individuals, even when there are widespread atrocities, is extremely small, and lower than the risk of injury from traffic accidents, fires, and accidents in the home.

Over hundreds of years of conflict, as in Ireland, there are some areas that have never suffered a terrorist attack. Deaths from cancer, caused by avoidable triggers, far outstrip deaths from terrorist actions. What is different is perception and shock.

A terrorist spectacular, such as crashing an aircraft into a building, or detonating a car bomb in a crowded street, receives massive news coverage. Scenes of the dying being recovered from devastated buildings appear on film footage with no

regard for the dignity of the victims. Victims, dazed and bleeding, are ruthlessly interviewed by reporters looking for the sensational scoop. If the incident received the same level of coverage as domestic accidents and work injuries, we would rarely hear anything of the events and develop no exaggerated perception of the incidents.

Governments have a difficult line to walk. When a government develops a widespread reputation for gross incompetence, ignorance and sleaze, as in Britain since 1997, it is damned whatever it does, short of resigning. If it distributes advice to the population and implements protective measures it can be accused of creating panic. If it does nothing, or appears to do nothing, it

can be accused of inaction. If it dithers between those two courses, it creates far more fear and uncertainty. If it has already displayed repressive and arrogant tendencies, any anti-terrorist measures that are seen to reduce civil liberty will be strongly questioned and be counter-productive.

For the average citizen it can be difficult seeing through propaganda to the real personal threats. Some risks should be easy to understand.

Anyone walking down a street wearing a fur coat is potentially at risk from 'animal rights' terrorists. Any member of a hunt is potentially at risk from anti-hunting terrorists. Anyone using a church, temple, or synagogue is at risk from 'Islamic'

terrorists.

Some risks are largely invisible. Anyone who has details recorded in a database is potentially vulnerable to any of the multitude of terrorists who may break into those records and see something that offends them. Anyone who makes public personal views and positions is at risk from a terrorist who dislikes those views. That may be obvious if the views are deliberately intended for a wide audience, but they might just be expressions amongst a group of friends in a public place.

We each should know how far we conflict with a particular terror group and that increases, or decreases, our underlying risk from them. The risk is further affected by our

location and the type of work we do. For most of the world population the risk is very small, and can be reduced by a few simple precautions. What we have to avoid is making ourselves prisoners, because that affects our life and assists the terrorist.

7. Reducing the Risks

There are a number of things that we can do to reduce the risks and also to reduce other risks at the same time. Making our homes and work places more secure will protect us against terrorists and other criminals.

Fire precautions protect against all fires, however they are started. Making sure that the people we talk to, or admit into our homes and work places, are who they claim to

be. Varying our travel routes and times is a relatively simple thing for most people to do. Avoiding being alone, particularly at night in poorly lit streets, reduces several personal attack risks. Being observant is effective, both in directly avoiding risk, and in helping police to track down malefactors. Being thoughtful and not leaving luggage unattended directly benefits us, and avoids panic in others who may suspect a bomb.

For an increasing number of people it will prove practical to work from home, thus avoiding the use of mass transit systems and large cities that could be targets of terrorist attack. However, it is not a good idea to work from home simply to avoid attack because

that can so easily develop into a reclusive situation where we become our own prisoners. In the process we may not reduce the level of risk because the chances of an aircraft falling on our home may be as great as the risk of a bomb exploding in our work place or gas being set off in a train carriage or a cinema.

Whatever measures we take should be realistic. There is little point in carrying a gasmask if there is no way of sensing a gas attack, or if the gasmask is not designed to protect against the gas that is actually used. Private transport is generally safer than public transport from terrorist attack, but it could make us vulnerable to greater risks and costs. The best measures are those

that make the least impact on our normal life and form a natural habit. More intrusive measures soon become too inconvenient and are dropped, possibly at the time when we are most at risk.

8. Duration of Risks

War between nations has a definable duration. From history, we can see that few wars last more than six years without some sort of break, however temporary. In recent times, wars have been measured in months, and sometimes days.

Terrorism however can continue for decades and even centuries. Unless every terrorist is removed, the survivors can continue or restart their campaigns. Even if every terrorist was removed,



the idea of terrorism could flare up again with a new generation.

Religious wars can continue for millennia, never being completely extinguished, and flaring up to a new intensity periodically.

The current round of terror includes a coalition of groups that have a wide range of primary objectives between them, having only a desire to create terror as a common ground. Many of these groups actually have conflicting objectives but that has not stopped them working together.

9. Effective Countermeasures

We can each take some steps to reduce the risk that we each face. Some will wish to take much more extensive steps, either because the risk is greater for them, or



because they are naturally more risk averse. The most effective counter measures are for us to become active citizens, participating in the democratic process, ensuring that we are represented by politicians who are honest and competent, listening to our wishes and working with other governments to address the new threat of global terrorism.

The most important measure that governments can take is to operate effective counter-terrorist intelligence services. To be effective, this requires not more intrusive government, snooping on all citizens, but processing effectively and quickly all the information obtained from targeted sources.

One of the great dangers is that govern-

ments will become confused and see the relative ease with which they can spy on every citizen as the solution. That may raise many very legitimate civil rights questions, but the greatest danger is that so much irrelevant information will be collected that it will swamp the intelligence analysts, hiding vital warnings of real terrorist activity.

It should be remembered that recent outrages in a number of countries have followed a series of warning signals that were missed because the analysis was either not done, or not completed in time to take precautions. What is needed is careful targeting and infiltration of known groups and the close monitoring of those groups that cannot yet be pene-

trated.

There is a need for effective sanctions. The 'suicide bomber' is particularly hard to deal with because death holds no terror for the bomber. Therefore, the personal risks which are avoided by other types of terrorist, and which make the act of terror that much more difficult to perpetrate, do not affect the suicide bomber.

This raises many issues because the suicide bomber has a form of religious belief that creates the expectation of eternal bliss for those dying for their cause and the same belief includes vulnerabilities. One of those vulnerabilities comes from the treatment of the corpse. This has been exploited in history but may be difficult for a modern lib-

eral democracy to accept. However, a terrorist who has beliefs that include concepts of contamination and the effect it has on the soul after death might be deterred if there was a certainty that his or her body would be deliberately contaminated after death. That would also require the certainty that capture would include execution and contamination.

This of course is one of the many moral conflicts presented to liberal democracies by ruthless terrorists who would exploit every possible vulnerability in their victims without even pause for thought. In a democracy, many will shrink from taking any action that they see as making them as bad as the terrorists.



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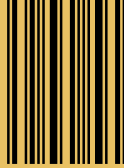
NIGHTHAWK PUBLISHING • MONKS
FARM • HALESWORTH • SUFFOLK •
• UNITED KINGDOM •

ISBN 1-84280-060-4

ISBN 1-84280-060-4



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9 781842 800607