Myth and Reality of the Global Terrorist Threat

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Abstract

The media constantly bombard the public with all sort of threats: the terrorist threat, the environmental threat, criminality, immigration and epidemics, without bothering to distinguish, clarify the context, weigh the messages and be responsive on the ultimate effects of their alarms. Not to mention the idea of a great vulnerability to lethal incidents such as terrorist attacks. Yet, both domestic and international terrorist events are in decline. On this subject, the mismatch between public perception and the reality is extreme.

Key words: *Human security, terrorism, weapons of mass destruction.*

1. Overblown threat

Most figures, facts and interpretations of global security and terrorism developed on academic level in recent years have passed unnoticed or have not been transferred to the public discourse. Governments and the media ignore this kind of knowledge and the non-disastrous vision of the current human security that derives from it. They run the opposite view and promote a paranoid way of looking at the matter. Many people, and among them many individuals devoted to human progress and peace, are convinced, therefore, to live in a world ever more dangerous and violent.

The media constantly bombard the public with all sort of threats. *If it doesn't bleed it doesn't lead* has become the creed of news broadcasted around the clock. The final result of this hysteria is the spreading of a sense of powerlessness, if not cynicism and indifference, about what happens in the most unfortunate parts of the earth. Not to mention the idea of a great vulnerability to lethal incidents such as terrorist attacks.

On this subject, the mismatch between public perception and the reality is extreme. Almost everyone thinks of September 11th 2001 as a symbolic event, which inaugurate a new era of global insecurity. But how many – apart from a handful of scholars and insurance companies – care to quantify the temporal diagram of terrorist actions and their frequency and severity in order to measure their real level of danger?

The media censor this aspect. Rarely do they publish graphs that show the real picture, because they prefer to dwell on sales based on the amplification of fears that increase audience and circulation (and spread terrorist propaganda at the same time). Western governments pretend to follow the U.S. in the holy war against the fundamentalist devil and leave the public at mercy of media alarmism, without worrying about providing

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people with serious evaluations of the actual scale of the threat.

A menace that is much smaller than most people think. Because both domestic and international terrorist events are in decline.

Yes, in decline. And not just recently, but for at least 25 years in almost every part of the world. The perception of transnational terrorism as a growing, existential threat to global security is wrong and misleading. This misconception is due to a twofold error of calculation and interpretation.

At the root of this error is the conflation of terrorist attacks properly said on one side, and violent attacks and casualties occurring in warzones, acts not classifiable as terrorist but under the category of "insurgency" on the other side. This conflation is a byproduct of the hysterical post 9/11 media and governmental approach to terrorism. The tragedy did have a strong impact on how terrorism has come to be understood, creating a definitional confusion. "The vast majority of what is now commonly being tallied as terrorism occurs in war zones like Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan. But to a considerable degree, this is the result of a more expansive application since 9/11 of standard definitions of terrorism, to the point where virtually any violence perpetrated by rebels in civil wars is now being called terrorism… Before 9/11, terrorism was, by definition, a limited phenomenon. It was often called the "weapon of the weak" because it inflicted damage only sporadically. If terroristic violence became really sustained and extensive in an area..the activity was generally no longer called terrorism, but rather war or insurgency…" (Mueller, Stewart, 2016).

The terrorism/insurgency conflation has become increasingly popular (Hoffman, 2006: 20-34; Kilcullen, 2010: 35; O'Neill, 2005: 33). Typical insurgency entities like the Hezbollah, Hamas, the Taliban, Nepali Maoists[1] (Khalil, 2013), are currently labeled as "terrorist groups", as well as all players in the Syrian and Iraqis civil war that do not fit into the political taste of a major contender: " the United States brands those fighting the government of Bashar Al-Assad to its own convenience: ISIS fighters are deemed to be "terrorists," while those insurgents approved by the United States are labeled the "moderate opposition." Assad himself is more consistent, if equally self-serving: any violent opposition to a sitting government, he says, is "terrorism." (Khalil, 2013).

This distorsion creates the false impression that the world is awash in terrorism. Moreover, it reduces the reliability of all numbers produced by most databases on terrorist attacks and casualties.

There is a way to generate more trustworthy figures, as shown by two RAND Corporation researchers who tried to disaggregate attacks occurring in warzones afflicted by insurgencies and civil wars from attacks occurring in non-conflict areas. They used the University of Maryland Global Terrorism Database for the quantification of terrorist attacks, and numbers on civil war and insurgency from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program in 194 countries (Ziegler& Smith, 2017).

Figure 1 shows that global terrorist attacks a) decreased drastically and regularly for the 25 years from 1989 to 2014: from more than 4.000 attacks in 1989 to less than 1.000 in

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[1] According to a scholar who makes an (unconvincing) case against distinguishing between the two entities " unlike their insurgent counterparts, terrorists: (a) are less reliant on the simultaneous use of nonviolent methods, (b) apply specifically uncompromising forms of violence, (c) operate with limited community support, (d) are numerically smaller, and (e) do not maintain territorial control.

2004. b) attacks rose dramatically after 2004 reaching almost 17,000 in 2014. The numbers from 2015 and 2016 (not shown) have remained remarkably high, but below the 2014 peak. " It is tempting to surmise from the strong trend upwards in Figure 1 that terrorism is on the rise and that the threat is expanding worldwide. However, this is only part of the story. More than 70 percent of the attacks in the past 10 years transpired in just two regions, both of which have seen extensive insurgency and civil conflict during that time: North Africa/Middle East and South-Central Asia. Most terrorism transpires in the context of insurgency, but to equate the two phenomena is misleading and inaccurate " (Ziegler& Smith, 2017).

Figure 1. *The* researchers proceed calculating the number of incidents outside of places beset with civil wars and insurgencies producing less than 1.000 battle-related death in a given year. Figure 2 shows terrorist attacks between 1989 and 2014 in countries with and without active civil wars.
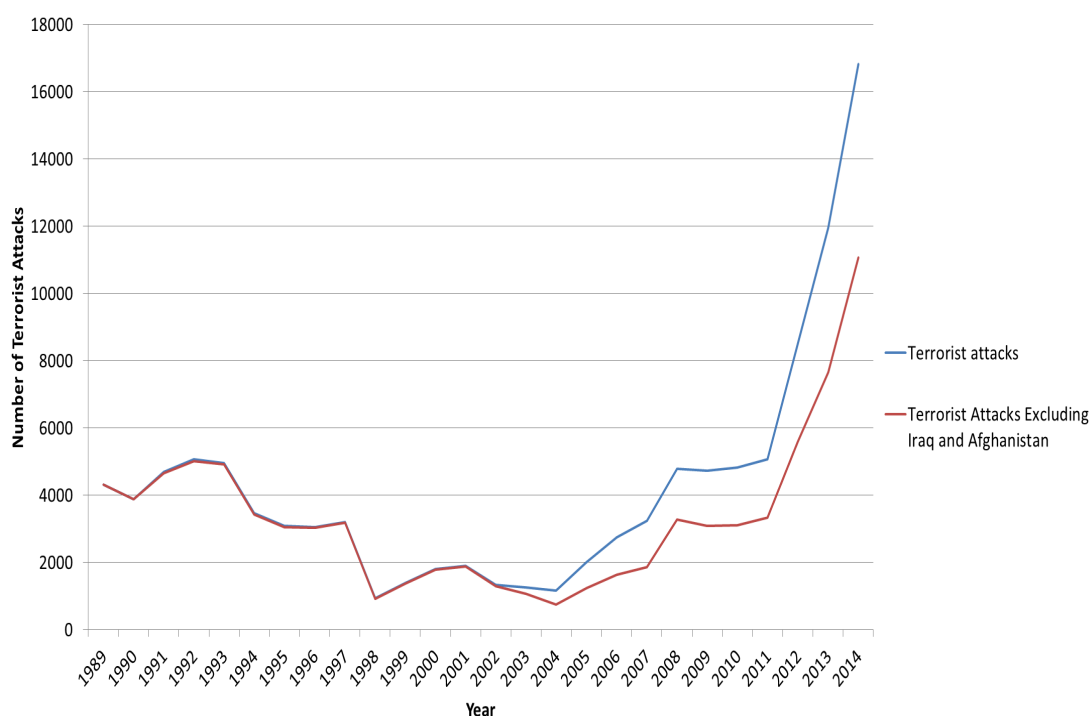
The numbers of this figure show a major downward trend shared by attacks in both zones from the beginning of the '90 to 2004, when it starts a widening gap between conflict and non-conflict countries. Conflict countries show a spectacular increase that until 2014 and coincides with the Arab Spring turmoil, the rise of the so called "Global War on Terror" spearheaded by the United States, and the expanding Western wars – open or covert - in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lybia, Pakistan, Syria, Mali, Yemen.

"The graphics hint at meaningful differences in terrorist attacks since 9/11, when the "Global War on Terror" began, and the years preceding it. And in fact, our models uncovered meaningful distinctions between the eras. While terror-related headlines tend to imply the worst, the truth is much more prosaic. Terrorism since 9/11 is down – and dramatically so – in countries not suffering from civil wars and insurgencies. The majority of terror incidents that have taken place during the global war on terror were linked with insurgencies and civil wars.

While this was still the case before 2001, the association between terrorism and insurgency has grown significantly stronger during the era of the war on terror. Relatedly, outside countries afflicted with these forms of political violence, terrorism has been remarkably reduced since 2002. Accounting for the fact that most terrorist activity takes place within the context of active insurgency, the number of terror attacks since 9/11 is significantly lower than between 1989 and 2001. A country not suffering civil conflict was more than 60 percent more likely to experience terrorism prior to or during the year 2001 than since " (Ziegler& Smith, 2017).

The figure of 3.123 death claimed each year by major terrorist assaults worldwide in 2002-2016 comprises 200-300 lives claimed outside war zones by what Western media consider the most dangerous form of terrorism, the extremist Islam (Jenkins, 2006: 179-184). " That's 200 to 300 too many, of course, but… it is about the same number as deaths from bathtub drowning in the United States" (Mueller& Stewart, 2016). The balance of an Islamic State assault to 10 Western countries, between June 2014 and June 2017, was of 1.676 casualties, 558 each year (Islamic State (IS) Attacks in West, 29 Jun 2014 – 25 Jun

2017). That's 558 too many, of course, but not a number capable to seriously harm a group of countries that can stand, during the same period, an average of around 50.000 annual deaths caused just by road accidents.

2. What is terrorism?

But what does the word "terrorism" actually mean? A universally accepted definition of terrorism does not exist yet. There have been attempts to categorize terrorism for a long time, but still so far no agreement has been reached. Two well-known scholars of the subject published a list of 109 definitions proposed between 1936 and 1981 (Schmid& Jongman, 1988).

While the concept of "organized crime", after a multi-decennial discussion, has today a universal definition, – expressed in Article 2 of the U.N. Palermo Convention of 2000 on transnational crime – the U.N. member states are still at the stage of discussing a definition of terrorism.

In this matter the real deficiency is not, in my opinion, the most frequently mentioned, namely the difficulty in labelling a behavior that for some is terrorism and for others freedom struggle. Or the fact that we are talking about a method of political fight rather than a precise historical entity.

3. State terrorism

The genuine shortcoming in addressing the problem of international terrorism is one that is not mentioned in political and diplomatic discussions because it is too embarrassing: I refer to the problem of state terrorism, which is one of the most deadly form of violence. U.N. member states swiftly label and punish violent actions committed by, so to say, "private" groups, but have never even tried to discuss that patterns of their own behavior that could be considered as acts of terrorism.

Almost all countries would be willing, for example, to accept a definition of terrorism that focuses on the killing of innocent civilians by non-state entities in order to terrorize people and force a counterpart to follow a given course of action. But this definition does not encompass *state* terror and does not protect us from the new Hitler, Stalin or Pol Pot. Neither does it protect us from the repetition of the most horrible episodes of regression in the standards of civilization. Like some war crimes committed by the "forces of good" during the Second World War and the subsequent anti-colonial conflicts. How could we otherwise classify certain actions such as the bombing of cities and villages by a state in response to attacks by guerrilla forces, or simply to keep going at an agonizing enemy? These questions are not extravagant.

Take the case of the incineration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of the Second World War. Even by the standards of the time it was a crime against humanity, which caused the death of two hundred thousand civilians, perpetrated without a serious military motivation.

The proof of this is the disagreement on the use of atomic power by some of the most senior American military officials, including General Eisenhower (Eisenhower, 1999)[2] and

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[2] General Eisenhower, then Allied commander-in-chief, wrote in his memoir: "In 1945 Secretary of War Stimson, visiting my headquarters in Germany, informed me that our government was preparing to drop an atomic bomb on Japan. I was one of those who felt that there were a number of cogent reasons to question the wisdom of such an act. During his recitation of the relevant facts, I

by some of the very scientists who conceived and manufactured the nuclear bomb (http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/*Bombing_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki*).[3]

It is paradoxical that, in spite of the fact that state terrorism represents one of the major threats to the human security, large numbers of researchers and government officials reject the idea that states use terrorism, and that the study of state terrorism is worth of a systematic analysis (Jackson, Murphy, Poynting, 2011; Selde, So, 2004). For them, the only political violence that deserve to be scientifically investigated is the one put in place by non-state, private actors. At maximum, they accept the term "political violence" to classify death coming from individual assassinations, slaughters, kidnappings, disappearances, torture, bombing of public places, and similar acts performed by a state agent: acts that by any measure fit squarely into the category of terrorism.

However, if we try to compare the order of magnitude of the "terrorism from below" with the violence of a state which unleash its strength against its own citizens, we get a yearly figure of 3.123 death against 250.000 for the period 2002-2016. The estimate come from the Center for Systemic Peace, that advance the following evaluation: " The frequency and lethality of "international terrorism" does not appear to have increased much in recent years, and, in any case, remains at extremely low levels when compared with any other form of political or criminal violence…HCTB attacks *(attacks with more than 15 fatalities, ndr.*) have killed more than 43.730 people since 9/11..By way of comparison, major episode of political violence have resulted in an estimates 3,5 million death during the post 9/11 period" (http://www.systemicpeace.org/conflicttrends.html).

One frequent objection to the use of the concept of state terrorism in the field of terrorism studies is of a weberian offspring : states cannot engage in terrorism because they alone have the right to the legitimate use of violence. Supporters of this view forget that the state monopoly of force is legitimate as far as it is carried out according to formal laws. The use of state violence is highly regulated, and "does not include the right to use extra-legal violence against randomly chosen civilian targets – or to commit genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and other such acts " (Jackson, 2011).

Moreover, the state is not the exclusive depositor of the right to use force. Under particular circumstances, international law allows non-state actors to use violence to protect their fundamental rights against repressive states when all peaceful and legal methods have failed, or other states have failed or abstained to intervene. " In reality, Western states and international organizations have a long history of recognizing and even supporting violent non-state groups, some of whom have practiced terrorism, including: the resistance to Nazi occupation; the PLO, the ANC, SWAPO and other UN-recognized movements " (Jackson, 2011).

An international treaty against terrorism that would sanction acts performed by

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had been conscious of a feeling of depression and so I voiced to him my grave misgivings, first on the basis of my belief that Japan was already defeated and that dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary, and secondly because I thought that our country should avoid shocking world opinion by the use of a weapon whose employment was, I thought, no longer mandatory as a measure to save American lives."

[3] Two of the prominent critics of the bombings were Albert Einstein and Leo Szilard, who had gone on afterwards to play a major role in the Manhattan Project, argued: "If the Germans had dropped atomic bombs on cities instead of us, we would have defined the dropping of atomic bombs on cities as a war crime, and we would have sentenced the Germans who were guilty of this crime to death at Nuremberg and hanged them".

states would have the effect of adding up a quite appropriate imputation– on top of that of crime against humanity – to those responsible for an atomic bombing, and to the authors of any act involving indiscriminate massacres of civilians.

What happened in Lebanon in the summer of 2006 is a very clear example of the legal-political asymmetry that impede the reaching of an agreed definition of "terrorism". According to several humanitarian organizations and U.N. agencies, both Israel and Hezbollah committed war crimes during the August 2006 fighting. These confrontations left over a thousand people dead, mostly non-military, and caused a very large destruction of the Lebanese civilian infrastructure.

Human Rights Watch, in particular, condemned both sides for the arbitrary use of force against the civilian population. The Israeli government was blamed for regularly avoiding to distinguish– in its attacks against Gaza, Beirut and other places – between combatants and non. The Hezbollah paramilitary were stigmatized for launching many katyusha rockets on populated areas of northern Israel. Both have also been accused of using cluster bombs in civilian areas. The U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights has uttered the same accusations and has warned violators about their personal responsibility under international law (Arbour, 2006).

But according to today's prevailing views on terrorism, only Hezbollah's behavior could be stigmatized as "terroristic", because they are a non-state entity. Accordingly, the parties can be accused for violating humanitarian law during the war in Lebanon, but only Hezbollah may have committed, in addition to war crimes, terrorist acts.

Twenty-one conventions against terrorism exist and are in force, and some of these are very effective. But they only cover measures designed to protect transportation, and criminalize specific actions of specific groups in specific circumstances, without touching wider spheres of jurisdiction. Most criminal laws against terrorism are therefore largely domestic, enacted and enforced by sovereign states through internal legislation.

4. The political impotency of terrorism

When debating about terrorism, it must be borne in mind that terrorism is a proven strategy of political struggle. Terrorism is a method of action that involves the unrestrained use of violence to spread fear among opponents and the general public.

One of the most common mistakes is to identify terrorism with an ideology, a political party, or as an expression of a given culture or civilization. Terrorism has never been the prerogative of a specific region or civilization. Its indifference to history, anthropology and geopolitics is one of the first features that struck its scholars.

Terrorism is not, and has never been, a monopoly of the extreme left. It has been used quite frequently also by the extreme right and neo-fascists groups. Indeed, its relationship with the most conservative forces is more intimate than it appears at first sight, and is not limited to the existence of right wing terrorist practices along with those of the left. The leftist and anarchist terrorism has regularly "worked" for conservation, because the results of its actions have almost always been the opposite of those intended by its protagonists.

The most important lesson to be learned from the history of terrorism is perhaps that grassroots terrorism, that one that operates at the level of the small political games, rarely hits its targets. Its importance is related to its ability to spur another, much more serious, kind of terror. Let's call it "the great games terrorism", an entity that can have devastating effects.

During the seventies and eighties, the moderate European Left clashed frontally with the leftist extremist groups. One of the strongest arguments used against those groups was that their armed struggle, while bringing no benefit to the popular masses, was of great help to their capitalist counterpart. The kidnapping and murder of the Italian former Prime Minister Aldo Moro in 1978 by the Red Brigades, for example, did not accelerate the advent of socialism in Italy. On the contrary, the incident stirred a conservative reaction that delayed for almost a couple of decades the electoral victory of the Italian center-left.

Terrorism is not an ideological phenomenon. It is a behavior performed by states, groups and individuals to shorten the cycle of the political processes. Terrorist subversion aims at bringing down governments, encouraging uprisings and wars, starting revolutions and counter-revolutions, scaring voters, manipulating other governments and countries, gaining independence and crushing nationalist guerrillas. It can lean to the right or to the left, can be nationalist or internationalist, secular or religious.

But the chances of success of state terror are not the same as those of private terror. When states entered the field of terrorism with their killing machines, the deeds of "bomb-lords" looked almost ridiculous in comparison. The skepticism of the founding fathers of socialism toward terror as a method of political struggle, moreover, was not so much motivated by reasons of principle. The doubt was rather on terrorism as a winning strategy.

Lenin wrote that terrorism could be useful for brief moments, but he believed it to be wrong and counterproductive (Lenin Collected Works, 1971). Trotsky later on insisted that actions of terror, even when they reach their goal, disorient the ruling class only for a short time, and that capitalism as a system, however, does not depend on the existence of a single member of government, and will not disappear only because of his physical elimination (Trotsky, 1911).

The leaders of international workers' movement, therefore, opted for collective action through strikes, demonstrations and even revolutions, but involving the masses. These same leaders never considered violence in itself as a political asset, and consistently refused the idea of "exemplary action" against a single opponent.

Historical events have abundantly proved the validity of the socialist criticism towards terrorist anarchism and individualism. Between the mid-nineteenth century and the outbreak of the First World War there was the greatest wave of political attacks of contemporary age. Between 1850 and 1914 anarchists, ultra-nationalists and simple misfits killed or tried to kill, one at a time, almost all kings, prime ministers and presidents available on the European, American and Japanese stage.

In those times political assassination was quite fashionable. Two Japanese prime ministers were killed and there was even an unheard of attempt to kill the Emperor. Three American presidents - Lincoln, Garfield and McKinley - suffered the same fate. There were multiple attempts to assassinate Bismarck and Kaiser Wilhelm I of Germany. Tsar Alexander II was murdered in 1881. The French President Carnot was eliminated in 1894. The Spanish Prime Minister Antonio Canovas in 1897, Empress Elizabeth of Austria in 1898 and the King of Italy Umberto I in 1900.

If we add to these facts the murder of the Russian Prime Minister in 1911 and a round of attacks on minor political figures in other parts of the world, it is easy to understand why the general public ended up with the conviction of facing a giant anarchic conspiracy aimed up to subvert the established order. Governments and police chiefs, however, did nothing to counter that impression, perhaps because they were aware of the true terms of the question.

Today few remember these facts, and history textbooks contain scant references to the times of the great assassinations. The reason can well be because of their minimal impact on the actual course of events (Chaliand, 2007).

And what about the assassination in Sarajevo of the Archduke of Austria, which according to common knowledge sparked the First World War in 1914? The most respected scholars exclude that it was this event that triggered the conflict. They believe instead that it erupted mainly because of Germany's demand for international status – since it saw its position in world affairs inappropriate to its naval, economic and colonial power - and because of the decision of the Allied Powers not to satisfy this demand (Fischer, 1968).

The war would have taken place even without Sarajevo, because all the major players wanted it to start: sooner or later some accident would have occurred in some part of the continent or in the vicinity - in the Balkans, on the Rhine, in Morocco - and the powder keg would be sparked (Luard, 1988).

So far, almost nowhere in the world have terrorist groups managed to rise to power with weapons in hand. Only after abandoning the armed struggle and evolving into legal movements have they moved closer to power. This differentiates them from liberation armies and guerrilla national movements which in most cases have reached their goals. The method of terror has resulted in temporary changes of the political life, but its overall impact on the course of history has been modest.

Of course, no one can accurately calculate the effects on the subsequent events of the violent elimination of individuals like Napoleon, Lenin, or Hitler in the early stages of their careers. But these are quite hypothetical exceptions. More than sixty prime ministers and heads of state have been killed since the Second World War, but it's hard to think of a single case in which the policies of a country were radically changed as a result of a terrorist attack. There have been, as mentioned above, accelerations or decelerations of the processes in place, but not major reversals.

" Indira Gandhi was killed. Her son Rajiv Gandhi continued in her tracks, and the Indian policy has not changed significantly even after the assassination of the latter. There has been no change in U.S. policy as a result of the assassination of John Kennedy, nor in Sweden after the murder of Olaf Palme. King Abdullah of Jordan was killed by a Muslim fanatic, but Hussein, his nephew, continued his policies. Anwar Sadat was assassinated by a militant of an extremist sect, but Mubarak, in broad terms, carried on his policies on Israel and other issues " (Laquer, 1987).

It can be said that, when acts of terrorism have been effective, they have been so in the opposite direction to that desired by their perpetrators. The most significant outcome of terrorist actions carried out in Latin America during the sixties and seventies of last century, for example, was the replacement of democratic regimes with military dictatorships.

When the targeted governments could not use for their own advantage the public outrage created by a terrorist assault, they started counterterrorism policies extended to a large political spectrum. Very often, these policies have been ferocious. Operation Condor was a campaign of political repression and state terror involving covert operations and assassination of opponents implemented in South America by right-wing juntas with the active support of the US government during the seventies and eighties of last century. Some estimates are that at least 60,000 deaths can be attributed to Condor, against around 1.000 attributable to private terrorism (Rohter, 2014; McSherry, 2002; Morrock, 2010).

5. Not an existential threat

Contrary to what many of its acolytes believe, terrorism is rarely a genuine phenomenon, free from contamination and "pacts with the Devil". The world of terror has always been crowded with provocateurs, secret police and security services that attempt to tinker with the special human gallery they deal with. Terrorist leaders sometimes intrigue with secret agents and accept to do dirty works in exchange for weapons, money and protection, in a game of mutual exploitation that often reaches paradox. Since these are *ad hoc* arrangements between actors who do not trust but despise and fight each other, they often give unexpected effects.

Terrorist factions are not capable of causing great changes on their own. Terrorism has a limited capacity of destructiveness and destabilization. The amount of lethal violence and destruction of goods that these groups are able to implement are modest, and the fear they can provoke is also of short duration.

Todd Sandler and Walter Enders did very accurate calculations of international terrorism losses . They concluded that " for most economies, the economic consequences of terrorism are generally very modest and of a short-term nature… large diversified economies are able to withstand terrorism and do not display adverse macroeconomic influences. Recovery is rapid even from a large-scale terrorist attack…the immediate costs of most terrorist attacks are localized, thereby causing a substitution of economic activity away from a vulnerable sector to relatively safe areas. Prices can than reallocate capital and labor quickly" (Sandler& Enders, 2005).

The International Monetary Fund estimated that the 9/11 attacks cost the U.S economy up to 0,7% in lost GDP that year. These results have been confirmed by other studies according to which " an act of terrorism accounts for a mere blip in economic damage. Economists often point to research showing that after the Madrid train bombings in 2004 and the London subway bombings in 2005, gross domestic product in those countries barely budged and showed little direct correlation to the attacks.

Even in the United States after the Sept. 11 attacks, consumption remained relatively stable, though investment fell. (There have been bigger impacts on places like Bali and Tunisia, whose economies depend heavily on foreign tourism.)

If the stock market can be considered a barometer of economic confidence, it is remarkable to see how quickly it typically rebounds after a terrorist event. In the case of New York, Madrid and London, the market briefly dropped but then recovered, often within weeks. In the case of Sept. 11, the S.&P. 500-stock index returned to where it had been before the attacks just 30 days later " (Sorokin, 2015).

It is also, as we have seen, a matter of definition. When terrorism really spreads out over large geographical areas and begins to cause many casualties and big material destructions, then it is no longer terrorism. It is war, insurgency, revolution or struggle for independence.

If, as has been aptly noted, terrorism is drama, many of its effects should unfold only in the virtual field. But terrorism is not just drama. It can do much more damage when it becomes an asset in the hands of powerful vested interests, holding long range strategies and able to use the hype and fear produced by terrorist attacks to achieve their goals more quickly, or to expand their businesses and strengthen their sway.

Besides traditional right-wing groups ready to satisfy the demand for order coming from communities frightened by accidents in public places and on public transports, there

are military industries and security bureaucracies that rip great benefits from the climate of confrontation and war generated by terrorist activities.

Security agencies are able to deviate towards their strategic interests the institutional reactions to emergencies, taking advantage of the panic that spreads among the general public after a surge of extreme violence. By taking into account the historically perverse relationship between terrorism and its most die-hard enemies (armed forces, war industries, autocracies, police forces and secret services) we can better understand its most recent developments (Curtis, 2010).

Bin Laden and many leaders of Al Qaeda are not monsters. They did not jump straight out of hell with bombs in their hands ready to attack the Kingdom of Good. They are actually old friends of intelligence agencies that have gone out of control and have decided to play on their own (Dreyfuss, 2005). But it is exactly on them that the appeal of neocons and the American war party has been built, allowing the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan and the increase of the US military budget.

Few exaggerations are as implausible as that which defines terrorism as an existential threat to the West. In fact, no single group or even a set of subversive groups is able to destabilize, or even seriously damage, a Western state.

Comparing September 11th to a world war is absurd. For any citizen of the planet, the probability of being victim of a terrorist attack are in the order of one on several million.

6. Cyber terrorism and the dirty bomb

Globally, the victims of international terrorism are a small figure compared to those of civil wars and even road accidents. These facts, however, are considered irrelevant by the proponents of the Third World War, the one on terrorism. According to them, after September 11th we have entered a new era. The era of the possible use of weapons of mass destruction by terrorist groups. The era of cyber terrorism and of the „dirty bomb".

At this point, many questions arise. One may ask, for example - taken for granted the reduced danger of "material" terrorism - if cyber terrorism poses such a big threat. The answer is negative. Cyber terrorism is largely an invention of companies that sell security systems. It all started with the fear-scam of the year 2000, (the Millennium Bug) that was supposed to blow up computer software at midnight on December 31, 1999. A threat that never materialized, but was a multi-billion dollar bonanza for a group of industries.

Cyber terrorism - Joshua Green wrote in 2002 and his words are even more valid today - simply does not exist. No one has ever been killed by a computer. Al Qaeda and its followers have never used computers for destructive activities. Many computer experts agree that it is virtually impossible to use the Internet to inflict death on a massive scale (Green, 2002; Weimann, 2005).

Too much emphasis on cyber terror could detract from other, more serious, counter-terrorist efforts. One of the most respected scholars on the matter, Dorothy Denning, has urged not to compare cyber terrorism to weapons of mass destruction or even to car bombs and suicide attacks. The same scholar warned against inflating the cyber terrorism menace:

" The foregoing evidence shows that terrorist groups and jihadists have an interest in conducting cyber-attacks and at least some capability to do so. Further, they are attempting to develop and deploy this capability through online training and calls for action. The evidence does not, however, support an imminent threat of cyber terrorism. Any cyber-attacks originating with terrorists or cyber jihadists in the near future are likely

to be conducted either to raise money (e.g., via credit card theft) or to cause damage comparable to that which takes place daily from web defacements, viruses and worms, and denial-of-service attacks.

While the impact of those attacks can be serious, they are generally not regarded as acts of terrorism. Terrorists have not yet demonstrated that they have the knowledge and skills to conduct highly damaging attacks against critical infrastructures (e.g., causing power outages), although there are a few indicators showing at least some interest " (Denning, 2007).

All of the above does not mean that computer crime is not a problem. It is a problem, and even a serious one. But it has nothing to do with terrorism and terrorists. Hackers and other cybercriminals cause billion dollars a year of damage to businesses and citizens with their worms, viruses and bombs. But they have no intention to destroy the cyberspace, or use it to procure catastrophic damages.

Hacker groups do not sympathize and do not engage with cyber terrorism, because it would be against their interests to cause mass disruption of the information infrastructure in which they live and prosper with their extortions, scams and thefts.

They do not, moreover, have any access to the "sensitive" systems of the public security sector. "To fall in the domain of cyber terror, a cyber-attack should be sufficiently destructive or disruptive to generate fear comparable to that from physical acts of terrorism, and it must be conducted for political and social reasons. Critical infrastructures, which include telecommunications, electrical power, oil and gas, water supply, transportation, banking and finance, emergency services, and essential government services, are likely targets. Attacks against these infrastructures that lead to death or bodily injury, extended power outages, plane crashes, water contamination, or billion dollar banking losses would be examples " (Denning, 2007).

Compared to the private sector, governments are many years ahead in terms of computer security. The IT security systems of the planet, both military and civilian (armed forces and police and intelligence agencies computers) are not physically connected to the internet. They are not connected between themselves either, because of legal prohibitions and the inter-agency competition.

Even the possibility of a terrorist action against the electronic system that monitors aircrafts in flight – the scary vision of thousands of airplanes out of control - is very remote. Air traffic management systems are disconnected not only from the internet but from any other system, including the circuit of airspace administration. The "electronic Chernobyl" or the "digital Waterloo" may be good excuses to make money by selling useless counter-terrorism gadgets, but do not belong to the realm of credible threats.

One of the most accurate and comprehensive analysis of the cyber terrorism/cyberwar issue carried out in 2012 leaves little room to doubt: " Cyber war has never happened in the past. Cyber war does not take place in the present. And it is highly unlikely that cyber war will occur in the future. Instead, all past and present political cyber attacks are merely sophisticated versions of three activities that are as old as warfare itself: subversion, espionage, and sabotage. That is improbable to change in the years ahead " (Rid, 2012: 5-32).

If most cyber incidents do not represent an additional threat to national and international security, why media and so many private and public leaders exaggerate cyber threats?

The answer is lucrative government contracts. Investment in cyber defense

capabilities grew exponentially under the Obama administration, reaching 19 billion budget in 2017. The "Cybersecurity Market Report" predicts global cybersecurity spending will exceed $ 1 trillion from 2017 to 2021 (Morgan, 2017). Traditional Pentagon contractors own 85% of US critical infrastructure assets and have created their own cybersecurity centers. " The nature of this relatioships led several scholars to suspect excessive, unaccountable spending by the government. Like the "military-industrial complex," this relationship can otherwise be known as the "cybersecurity-industrial complex," the close nexus between the Pentagon, defense contractors, and elected officials that could lead to the unnecessary expansion of cybersecurity spending and a breakdown of checks and balances " (Mok, 2017; Jerry&Watkins, 2011; O'Connell, 2012: 197-198).

And what about the "dirty bomb", a nuclear device that consists of a cocktail of ordinary explosives that causes havoc when detonated? Here we are most certainly talking about fairy tales. The scholars of radiation not paid by the Pentagon, have consistently evaluated that the possible casualties of a "dirty bomb" explosion would be in the order of one or two. The actual victims of this bomb would probably be those caused by the panic generated by news of the explosion (Carter, 2014; Zimmerman, 2004; Rockwell, 2003).

7. Terrorism and weapons of mass destruction

Even the so-called nuclear terrorism is an exaggerated threat. A menace that also begins to show signs of aging, as the first to evoke it was the physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer, the father of the atomic bomb in 1946. According to Oppenheimer, three or four men could have theoretically smuggled single parts of a bomb into New York City and then blown the whole city up. From then on, "the suitcase nuke" has entered the discussion. Experts such as Brian Jenkins began their career more than forty years ago, taking it for very likely that a terrorist attack using nuclear technologies would occur (Jenkins, 1975). Well. We are still patiently waiting.

The chance of an attack by a terrorist group with nuclear weapons is extremely remote. Nuclear technology is complex, and it is not easy, even for a sovereign state, to produce "reliable" nuclear weapons. It takes thousands of scientists, and technologies and materials that cannot be found in supermarkets, as highlighted by the Gilmore Commission (Gilmore Commission, 1999). It also takes years of experiments, because atomic bombs are different from other weapons.

If you want them to serve the purpose, they need to be tested. It is true that Bin Laden was looking for them, but that does not mean that he would have found them. And if he had found them, he also would have had to find a place to try them. In addition, he would have needed a large, secret location to host a team of rebellious scientists, the means to deliver the bomb, etc.

The black market of nuclear materials is also known to be full of imposters and thieves. All cases investigated by the Atomic Agency in Vienna so far have proved to be scams. In the eighties even a metal - the so-called *red mercury* - was bought and sold because it was considered as fissile material. But the real problem was that neither red mercury nor its properties exist. Scammers had invented them out of the blue. Just like the "death ray" and portable nuclear bombs that Italian prosecutor Carlo Palermo unmasked during his "Arms and Drugs" investigation, in the early eighties (Arlacchi, 1988).

And what if a rogue state decided to arm some client country or a terrorist group with nuclear bombs, in order to hit an enemy without revealing the source of the attack?

This is a question I asked myself a few times, but my neighbors at the United

Nations, IAEA officials and scientists, always replied that even the most fanatic autocracy does not make conventional military technology available to other governments or private entities. A powerful state can sell to an ally weapons that are more advanced than the average of those available in the region of destination, but will not share the most advanced armaments with anyone. And if this applies to conventional weapons, it is even stricter for nuclear ones.

In addition, there is the obstacle of the genetic "signature" that is typical of each nuclear device built in each single country. If this device is exploded in any place on earth, current technology allows nuclear experts to trace its origin. Should a government of fools put nukes in the hands of a terrorist group for an attack, it would be immediately identified and would become the target for any resulting international reaction. Therefore, those who encourage these fantasies either do not know what they are talking about or belong to the party of fear and deception.

Now, what about chemical and biological weapons? What is the real risk in terms of a possible terrorist use? The risk is in this case insignificant. These weapons either do not exist at all or, if they do exist, they are unreliable on the battlefield. No serious military strategist would take them into consideration (Meselson, 1991; Panofski, 1998). The only terrorist attack with chemical weapons that has ever taken place was the one in the Tokyo subway in 1995, which caused a huge hype but few casualties.

Independent scientists continue to argue that the use of gas masks is sufficient to neutralize the worst effects of an attack with chemical weapons, and that mass vaccination to protect us from an attack with biological weapons is unnecessary. But this is a huge deal for pharmaceutical companies. They certainly did not like the publication in October 2004 in the International Journal of Infectious Diseases, of a study that confirmed the WHO recommendation about no necessity of vaccination (Zanders, 2004: 9-14).

As for the actual lethality of these weapons, Richard Clarke - the member of the US National Security Council who resigned during the Bush administration - described what happened before his eyes at the White House on the eve of the invasion of Iraq: " What would we do if Iraq used chemical or biological weapons?… We took the issue to the "inner cabinet" of Principals chaired by Brent Scowcroft. … Scowcroft… turned to Cheney (Secretary of Defense). "Mr. Secretary, what would you recommend?" Cheney then looked at Powell (State Secretary) …. "Go on, Colin, say what you think," Cheney urged. Powell shrugged and…said, "I just think chemical weapons are goofy" …

Growing more serious, Powell explained. "Chemical weapons will just slow us down a little. We will batten up the tanks and drive through. I don't think Saddam will use biological weapons because they are not really suited for the battlefield. They take too long. Besides all of this shit can literally blow back on you. And nuclear, I don't think he has nuclear" (Clarke, 2004).

Yet the issue of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction dominates the agenda of international security since a decade. But dissatisfaction with this concept is growing. It threatens to divert our attention from the real weapons of mass destruction, those that produce large numbers of victims every year. These are the conventional weapons together with small arms. The ordinary weapons - rifles, pistols, machine guns - which are more frequently used than bombs and tanks, because of the type of conflicts that prevail today.

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