The prolonged effects of terrorism: A closer look

Vincenzo Bove, Georgios Efthyvoulou, and Harry Pickard

Terrorist violence has a profound influence on social attitudes, including trust in governmental institutions and attitudes towards migration and civil freedoms. Acts of terrorism cause citizens to experience a complex range of negative emotions, including anxiety, anger, sorrow, and a sense of vulnerability and helplessness. Research on the magnitude and duration of these effects may play an important role in efforts to build peace and reduce violence in the world.

We study the effects of terrorism, in particular their duration. Most existing studies track public reactions to terrorism within 3 and 30 days after a single incident. To explore the temporal effects of terror, we rely on a large dataset of uninterrupted, individual-level observations across 6 incidents (three deadly and three foiled). We focus on the ‘first order’ effects, specifically the perceived risk of terrorism and the emotions experienced following an attack, as these drive ‘second order’ effects like policy preferences and mental health.

We analyse responses from British citizens in the Continuous Monitory Survey, from individuals interviewed just before and after three major terrorist attacks: the London bombings (7 July 2005), the Glasgow airport attack (30 June 2007), and the Lee Rigby murder (22 May 2013). Comparing responses before and after these attacks allows us to establish a causal relationship. We assume that the timing of the attacks is unexpected (exogenous) and randomly assigned relative to survey interview times, ensuring a control (pre-attack) and a treatment (post-attack) group. No other major terrorist incident occur within 120 days after the sampled attacks.

Figure 1 presents the non-parametric conditional relationship between the perceptions of terrorism risk and the treatment status. Exposure to a new terrorist attack leads to significant increase in risk perception from 0.52 to 0.75 in the first few days after the attack.

**FINDINGS**

Deadly terror attacks cause heightened risk perceptions and negative emotional responses in the public.

These effects are sustained over time and up to 120 days after an attack.

Large-scale attacks cause a long-lasting shift in risk assessments and emotions, the corresponding effect of smaller-scale terrorism incidents appears to subside within one month.

Overall, the impacts of terrorism do not easily fade away.
Policymakers are likely to confront increased risk perceptions and emotional reactions long after a terrorist attack. Terrorism can contribute to prejudiced attitudes towards out-groups and vulnerable communities, and downstream effects on individual wellbeing and mental health are likely. High levels of anger towards terrorists can result in calls for more aggressive military actions which seek to retaliate against an identifiable target.

Beyond immediate security concerns, policymakers should weigh these psychological and societal consequences when considering their response.

In summary, our study reveals that the impact of terrorism endures long after the initial incident, affecting risk perception and emotions. Policymakers must consider these lasting effects when crafting responses to terrorism, as they influence public attitudes, prejudice, wellbeing, and calls for action. This time-focused perspective is essential for developing effective policies and responses to terrorism.