



Terrorism

Learning to live with it

People are surprisingly good at coping with repeated terrorist attacks. In America and Europe, they may have to be

IT HAS been an edgy summer in France. Since the horror of Bastille Day, when Mohamed Lahouaiej Bouhel killed 86 people in Nice, heavily armed soldiers have patrolled the beaches. In late July fanatical Muslims murdered a Catholic priest in Normandy. France remains in a state of emergency after gunmen affiliated to Islamic State (IS) killed 130 people in Paris last November. Next year's presidential election threatens to be a competition over who can sound toughest on terrorism.

Last week Nicolas Sarkozy, a former president, launched his campaign to get his old job back. As well as calling for a national ban on the "burkini", a modest swimsuit favoured by Muslims, he has proposed the detention or electronic tagging of potentially thousands of people who are on a list of Islamist-inspired security threats. If he wins his party's nomination, Mr Sarkozy could be the less nativist of two second-round candidates for the presidency. The other would be Marine Le Pen of the National Front.

Germany, too, remains on high alert after two Islamist attacks and a shooting rampage by a mentally unstable teenager in July. It is boosting spending on its police and security forces. Eight state interior ministers from the ruling Christian Democrat party met on August 18th to back a raft of measures, including restricting dual citizenship for Germans of Turkish origin and

banning the burqa. Some reports suggest that the government will soon advise citizens to stockpile food and water in case of a major terrorist attack.

In America, meanwhile, mass shootings in San Bernardino and Orlando have forced terrorism into the presidential race. In August Pew, a pollster, reported that Americans wanted Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump to spend more time debating how they would protect America from terrorism than debating the economy. Another poll conducted earlier this year asked the 83% of its respondents who said they followed IS news closely whether the group was "a serious threat to the existence or survival of the US". No less than 77% agreed with this extraordinary suggestion.

The age of humdrum terror

September 11th, 2001 has remained an outlier both for its carnage and for its wider impact. Since then, Western security and intelligence services have become good at disrupting complex plots. Civil airlines have become dauntingly tough targets, albeit at enormous cost in money and travellers' convenience. Fears of a terrorist group getting hold of a nuclear weapon have not disappeared. But nor has it happened, despite many predictions to the contrary.

And yet the number of deaths rises, both in America and Europe. Killers have ranged from the "lone wolf" attacker (at-

tracted to the IS brand by its slick propaganda on the internet) to commando-style operations. Almost without exception, targets have been chosen for their vulnerability or cultural symbolism. Whereas some attacks have involved IS fighters who have returned home (something that security agencies have been warning about for several years) most have been the work of local sympathisers, often with social or mental-health problems, who have been nowhere near Syria.

Even when the caliphate is defeated in Iraq and Syria, as it surely will be, the threat to the West seems likely to persist. And the kind of attacks IS encourages are fiendishly hard to prevent. Anyone can rent or steal a lorry and drive it at a crowd. Especially in America, it is all too easy to buy high-powered automatic weapons that can kill scores of people in moments. Neither great planning nor great intelligence is required to carry out such attacks. Even when the perpetrators are on the radar of the police and security services—and by no means all are—there is no guarantee they can be stopped, given the sheer number of potential jihadists.

Thus it seems likely that much of Europe and America will have to get used to acts of Islamist-inspired terrorism becoming, if not routine, at least fairly regular occurrences. The challenge for open, liberal societies is how they should respond to that threat, particularly at a time when popular confidence in traditional political elites has sunk so low. Above all, the danger is of over-reaction.

As a result of the Troubles in Northern Ireland and the actions of ETA, a Basque separatist group, terrorism was consistently deadlier in the 1970s and 1980s than it has been since (see chart). Even then, the chance of being murdered was small. During the 30 years of the Troubles, the annual risk for civilians of being killed in Ulster was about one in 25,000. During the four bloodiest years of the second *intifada*, the annual risk to an Israeli civilian was about one in 35,000. Even in 2001, the likelihood of an American in the United States being killed in a terrorist attack was less than one in 100,000; in the decade up to 2013 that fell to one in 56m. The chance of being the victim in 2013 of an ordinary homicide in the United States was one in 20,000. Traffic accidents are three times as lethal.

Barack Obama was correct when he said earlier this year that the danger of drowning in a bathtub is greater than that of being killed by terrorists. Baths are a one-in-a-million risk. Even if the terrorism deaths in San Bernardino and Orlando were doubled to give an annual death toll, the risk would still be about one in 2.5m. Yet the president was lambasted for his otherworldly complacency.

That hints at the peculiar effects of ter- ▶▶

►rorism. Voters and most politicians treat it as something entirely distinct from other, far greater, risks. As a result, cost-benefit analysis becomes almost impossible.

After the attack on the World Trade Centre in 2001, America threw massive resources at homeland security. On conservative estimates, by 2009 it was spending an extra \$75 billion a year. In a report for the Cato Institute, a libertarian think-tank, John Mueller and Mark Stewart assess whether that spending is worthwhile. Judging it on the same basis as other government spending that aims to mitigate fatality risk, they say it would be justified only if it was thwarting nearly half of 1,667 serious attacks a year. You would have to believe that without the additional security measures in place, America would be suffering four significant attacks a day.

The limits of statistics

But woe betide any politician who suggests diverting money from homeland security to areas where it might save more lives. The first popular response to a major terrorist incident is shock and grief. The second is nearly always that those in power have not done enough. After the Nice attack, one opinion poll found that 67% had no confidence in the government's ability to tackle terrorist threats. Despite the enduring state of emergency and President François Hollande's repeated assertion that France is "at war" with IS, the impression that his government has done too little has stuck.

For political leaders, the calculation appears to be that you can never be seen to be doing too much to defeat terrorism, even if a great deal of the apparent effort is ineffective displacement activity, described by experts such as Bruce Schneier as "security theatre". Much airport security is like that. One team appointed by the Department of Homeland Security managed to get fake guns or bombs past baggage scanners on 67 out of 70 attempts.

Terrorism is a form of psychological warfare against a society. It is supposed to have effects that are utterly disproportionate to the actual lethality of the attacks. Thanks in part to the extensive media coverage that terrorist attacks attract, thanks also to the reaction of politicians who glib-

ly talk of threats being "existential", and thanks too to the security services who, for their own purposes, inflate the capability of terrorists, the perception of risk is typically far higher than the reality.

Compared with other traumatic events, such as natural disasters, terrorist attacks tend to distress people who were nowhere near an incident and who knew nobody caught up in it. That is partly because of the seemingly random nature of attacks. It also shows how disturbing is the idea of an "enemy within". In the case of suicide attacks, the terrorists' fanaticism adds a dimension of horror.

In 2002, at the height of the second intifada, 92% of Israelis feared that they or a member of their family would become a victim of a terrorist attack. Nearly 10% of the population suffered symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A survey of 30 countries in 2011 found that Northern Ireland had the highest rate of PTSD. Fully 15% of the adult population were affected as a result of conflict-related experiences.

That is the bad news. The good news is that, despite the psychological and physical wounds that sustained terrorist campaigns inflict, societies can become inured to them. Dov Waxman, an Israeli academic who studied the effects of the second intifada, found that people can become habituated to repeated terrorist attacks, and live "a semblance of normal life". Research on the impact on the morale of Israelis during the peak period of terrorist attacks (2002-04) has found that their satisfaction with life barely changed. It also compared quite favourably to terrorism-free societies.

As terrorism becomes routine, its capacity to shock diminishes. Gradually, the news media lose interest. One study of four attacks on Israelis in 2002 and 2004, all of which killed between eight and eleven people and injured 50-60, found that the main television channels began to devote less time to attacks and ratings for the news programmes dropped. Politicians also exhaust their capacity for hyperbole and settle for a tone of grim defiance.

Two things, however, may have contributed to Israeli resilience that are less evident in some Western societies. The first was the already strong social solidarity

among Israeli Jews. The second was the relatively high confidence that Israel's security services and political leaders would eventually get on top of the situation.

The building of the security wall between Israel and the West Bank after 2003 showed how far the government was willing to go. The construction of the highly effective wall was a fairly simple solution that impinged little on the lives of most Israelis (though a lot on Palestinians). Governments in Europe and America, faced with a threat that comes mostly from their own radicalised citizens, will struggle to find any acceptable equivalent.

Arguably, they should not even try. The greatest damage that terrorists do is almost always through the over-reaction their acts provoke. Given that this is such an obvious trap, it should be possible to avoid running full-tilt into it. As Messrs Mueller and Stewart point out in another paper, by wildly exaggerating the extent of the threat that terrorists pose, political leaders and security specialists play the terrorists' game by glamorising their squalid enterprise.

Leaping into the trap

Last year General Michael Flynn, Donald Trump's adviser on national-security issues and a former head of the Defence Intelligence Agency, did just that. He described the terrorist enemy as "fuelled by a vision of worldwide domination achieved through violence and bloodshed" that was "committed to the destruction of freedom and the American way of life". That may indeed be how IS thugs see themselves. But why should anyone sensible be so keen to validate their boasts?

To his credit, Mr Obama has consistently warned about the consequences of using hyperbolic language to describe the terrorist threat. In a TV address last December, after the San Bernardino shootings, he explained that success against IS and other terrorists "won't depend on tough talk or abandoning our values, or giving in to fear". Instead, he said, America would prevail by being strong and clever, resilient and relentless. Mr Obama is right. Defeating terrorism depends above all on good intelligence, a degree of stoicism and a refusal to allow it to undermine the principles that open societies are built on. ■

War and peace

Deaths from terrorism



Sources: START, University of Maryland, press reports