

Do people find terrorism more important after major attacks?

November 18 2019



Credit: Francisco Farias Jr/public domain

What is the impact of terrorism? Researchers Jeanine de Roy van

Zuijdewijn and Jessica Sciarone looked at ten jihadi attacks and concluded that there are major differences between European countries.

Paris, Brussels, Nice, Manchester and Barcelona: over the past years, the European Union has regularly been shaken by terrorist attacks. Jihadis were responsible for ten major attacks between 2015 and 2017 alone, and in this period, a total of 361 people died in [terrorist attacks](#). While the chance of being the victim of [terrorism](#) is negligible, such attacks are still extremely unsettling.

Hot topic

But what is the true impact of terrorism? to answer this question, De Roy van Zuijdewijn and Sciarone studied the ten main attacks from the period between 2015 and 2017. Using data from the Eurobarometer survey, they tried to find out how many EU citizens thought that terrorism was one of the most pressing issues at the time. They looked at the figures immediately before and after an attack, to see if there was any difference. They recently published their results in *Terrorism and Political Violence*.

What struck them most was that, on average, the fear of terrorism increased considerably in the period studied, and mainly at the EU level. Whereas at the start of 2015 'only' about 5 percent of Europeans thought that terrorism was one of the hot topics in their country, the figure had risen to around 15 percent by the end of 2017. And whereas at the beginning of 2015 over 10 percent thought it was an important European question, this had increased to almost 40 percent at the end of the period.

Abstract worries

"You therefore see that people consistently estimate the threat to the European Union as higher than to their own country," says De Roy van Zuijdewijn. "That ties in with a famous sociological phenomenon: the more abstract the level, the more worried people are. You see the same if, for instance, you ask people how they are doing and how the world is doing. Many people respond that they themselves are doing well, whereas the rest of the world is not."

The researchers also noticed that different countries respond differently to an attack. After the Paris attacks in 2015, more French people said that terrorism was a top priority in France, whereas Spanish opinion remained more or less unchanged after the Barcelona attacks in 2017. Attacks therefore do not automatically make people more worried. This could be a sign of resilience, but it could also be a form of acclimatisation or resignation. At the EU level, there were fewer differences between countries: the citizens of both the country targeted and other countries remained fairly consistent in their opinion of where on the European list of priorities terrorism should be placed.

Causal links?

"We can't say whether these are causal links," says De Roy van Zuijdewijn. "We took a moment before and a moment after an attack, but the data doesn't allow us to say whether the attack itself caused people's opinions to change." It could be that it was not the fear of terrorism that changed, but people's opinions on other topics such as immigration and climate change instead. The research was about the position of terrorism in relation to other topics. Further research is needed to establish whether there really are causal links.

De Roy van Zuijdewijn believes that this kind of research is important because terrorism is, in effect, a violent form of communication. You are much more likely to die from a fall than an attack, but terrorism is

often high on national and European lists of concerns. "Despite the relatively limited number of victims, terrorists do manage to achieve their goal therefore: attracting attention and generating fear. That's why terrorism researchers say that terrorism is theatre and we are the audience. The reaction of the audience is what determines the terrorists' impact on society."

More information: Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn et al. Convergence of the Saliency of Terrorism in the European Union Before and After Terrorist Attacks, *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2019). [DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2019.1647175](https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1647175)

Provided by Leiden University

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