

# The nature of Contemporary Terrorism: Selected Features and Statistical Data

Lech Chojnowski <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Management and Security Sciences, National Security Institute, Pomeranian University in Slupsk  
Slupsk - Poland

**Abstract—** The paper presents selected features of contemporary terrorism. It emphasizes the role of a religious factor, which to a large extent determines the specificity of the contemporary wave of this phenomenon. Religion is used to justify the scale and brutality of methods and techniques of terrorist attacks, and also allows to acquire fighters ready to sacrifice their lives by carrying out suicide attacks. The paper also points to other features of modern terrorism: its mediality, internationalization, spread of suicide attacks, lack of terrorist self-limitation in the use of violence, disintegration, on one hand, and attempts to create quasi-state structures (ISIS), on the other, variants of terrorism described by the terms cyber-terrorism and super-terrorism. In the second part of the paper, selected statistical data on terrorist attacks, broken down by their various types that complement the picture of modern terrorism, are cited.

**Index Terms—** religious terrorism, suicide attacks, cyber-terrorism, super-terrorism.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The term ‘contemporary terrorism’ can be referred to the characteristics of this phenomenon observed at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. The beginning of this wave of terrorism is associated with an extremely dynamic increase in terrorist activity, from 929 attacks in 1988 to 16,840 in 2014, which testifies to the dissemination of terrorism as a method used by fundamentalist organizations to solve socio-political, ethnic-national and cultural issues. In the discussed period, new trends emerged, but also previously observed trends strengthened. The tendency of weakening left-wing and right-wing terrorism continued, until almost completely disappeared, while the number of terrorist attacks carried out by Islamic fundamentalists increased dynamically. There has also been a tendency of reaching for terrorist methods by new social movements, for example related to the protection of the natural environment or animal protection.

The landmark events of modern terrorism were the terrorist attacks on the United States carried out on 11 September 2001 by the Islamic terrorist network Al-Qaeda, in response to which

the so-called global war on terror started. Its key element was the military intervention of the United States and coalition states in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), which led to the overthrow of the regimes in those countries. In this way, terrorism has become the cause of extensive military action, in which hundreds of thousands of soldiers from many countries took part.

## II. SELECTED FEATURES OF MODERN TERRORISM

The characteristic features of modern terrorism are reflected in the widely disseminated terms describing this phenomenon, including the religious grounds of terrorism, mediality and internationalization of terrorism, suicidal terror attacks and the lack of self-limitation of terrorists in the use of violence and rape, disinstitutionality and quasi-state structures of terrorist organizations, cyber-terrorism and super-terrorism.

Contemporary terrorism and religion. The most characteristic feature of modern terrorism is its religious background. In the history of humankind, religion and common beliefs played a fundamental role in revolutionary struggles and wars, and accompanied specific waves of terrorism. It is enough to mention the precursor of this phenomenon, which is considered to be the extreme A Jewish organization of the Sykarii, as well as other Jewish organizations functioning before the creation of the State of Israel. An example of Islamic terrorism was the Muslim-dominated Front of National Liberation of Algeria and the Organization of Palestine Liberation, and the Catholic - the Irish Republican Army and its Protestant counterparts.

The connection of religions and cults with terrorism should be considered in two aspects, in which religion: 1) is only an ideological background, and political aims dominate, especially ethnic, national and revolutionary, 2) not only makes ideological background but is also related to goals of terrorist organizations, where the religious imperative dominates, in which religion is the only justification of violence and rape.

The first modern religious terrorist organizations emerged in the 1980s, mainly as a result of the influence of the Islamic



revolution in Iran. Under its influence, the number of terrorist religious organizations increased from 2 in 1980 to 11 in 1992. These organizations were associated not only with Islam, but also with other major religions, as well as various sects and cults. In the following years, the upward trend in the number of religious terrorist organizations was maintained, while the number of organizations of a different nature was declining. In 1995, the religious imperative constituted the basis for the functioning of 46% of terrorist organizations in the world. Also the most serious terrorist attacks carried out in the 1990s and the first decades of the 21st century have at least partly religious motivations, and the last words "Allah akbar" spoken by suicide bombers are a symbolic confirmation of this (Hoffman, 2001, pp. 86-87).

Terrorism motivated by religion assumes more violent forms of violence than non-religious (civil) terrorism, carrying with them a large number of, usually accidental, victims. Differences arise from a different system of values, other legitimacy, other justification and other concepts of morality and worldviews (Hoffman, 2001, pp.90-91). The use of religion in contemporary terrorism on one hand justifies the use of almost unlimited in terms of scale and brutality, violation of elementary ethical and moral methods and techniques of terrorist attacks, on the other, allows to acquire fighters ready to implement them, sacrificing their own lives to obtain privileges for themselves and their family as a result of a martyr's death.

Mediality of terrorism. Contemporary terrorism is a media phenomenon, because it depends on the media's interest. Terrorist attacks are planned and implemented in such a way that interest is obtained. Terrorists have possessed the ability to attract media attention, manipulate it and use it for their own purposes and needs. To achieve that, terrorists reach for new and increasingly drastic ways of influencing the recipients, characterized by various forms of rape and cruelty, for example, public executions of foreign hostages. Terrorists are also skillfully using the so-called new media, identified with the Internet, thanks to which their activity gains wide, even global media publicity. On the other hand, the media, whose success is measured by the number of recipients of their message, are happy to report terrorist actions as well as actions directed against terrorists that attract viewers or readers. By transmitting a very large amount of information related to terrorism, the media unknowingly publicize its existence, which may unintentionally disseminate its ideology.

Internationalization of terrorism. The development and dissemination of social communication means favors a further increase in the internationalization of terrorism. Fundamentalist ideas penetrate the borders of countries, acquiring new supporters in different, even distant countries. The internationalization of terrorism is also favored by the availability (physical and economic) of means for physical movement and freedom of travel, often beyond the control of the state institutions. Thanks to telecommunications, it is easier to maintain links between groups operating in different countries, giving terrorism a network character. The internationalization of terrorist movements and their links with

sponsors requires adequate anti-terrorist actions, forcing states to cooperate in the fight against this phenomenon.

Suicidal terrorist attacks and lack of self-limitation of terrorists. Explanation of the motivation of terrorists who commit suicide attacks by referring to religious fundamentalism, contributes only a little to the understanding of the causes, not only sacrificing one's own life, but also depriving it of hundreds or thousands of other, completely random people. A different approach in this regard is presented by a well-known journalist Thomas Friedman, who in order to explain the phenomenon of suicide attacks adopted a theory of cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance is a state of tension caused by the person having two cognitive elements (ideas, attitudes, beliefs, opinions) that are psychologically incompatible with each other, when the opposite of the other is derived from one cognitive element. The occurrence of social dissonance is an unpleasant feeling, that is why people are motivated to reduce it, as they do in case of hunger or thirst, with the difference that the strength of the latter's motivation is a physiological and not cognitive discomfort. Although the theory of cognitive dissonance is very simple, its scope of application is very large (Pratkanis and Aronson, 2003, p. 186).

According to Friedman, readiness to carry out suicide attacks results from the loss of sense of personal dignity felt by thousands of young Muslims in the Middle East and in Europe. They were taught in mosques for many years that their faith is the most complete and most developed form of religion, and that it exceeds Christianity and Judaism. At the same time the very same young Muslims are perfectly aware that the Islamic world is far behind the Christian West and the Jewish state in terms of development, science, democracy, education etc.

In this way, cognitive dissonance arises, which is the "spark for all their rage". These young people explain the backwardness of the Islamic world by the actions of the West and Israel leaders who have robbed the Muslims of something or who deliberately delay their development. Another scapegoat are some Muslim leaders who 'have departed from true faith, betrayed the Islamic way of life and are held in power by the American government'. For this reason, North America is considered to be the deadliest weapon that destroys religious world of the Islam or at least the world some Muslims would like to build, which is why it must be weakened and, if possible, destroyed (Friedman, 2002, pp. 241-242)

The cradle of suicide terrorist attacks was the Middle East, especially Lebanon and Kuwait, later expanded to Sri Lanka, followed by India, Argentina, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Kenya and Tanzania. The first suicide attack occurred in December 1981 in Lebanon. In the 1980s, there were several attacks per year, mainly in Lebanon. Similar level of attacks persisted in the 1990s. They were carried out mainly in Lebanon, Israel (especially in the West Bank and Gaza Strip), Sri Lanka and Turkey. A noticeable increase began in 2001, and suicide attacks also affected the United States and Europe. The number of suicide attacks carried out in 2001-2005 accounted for 78% of all such events that occurred in 1968-2005. Of the 35 terrorist organizations that carried out such attacks in 2005, 31 (86%) were related to Islamic fundamentalism (Hoffman, 2006, pp.

131-132).

The self-limitation of terrorists observed in the previous period was rejected in the 1990s. As in previous ages of the terrorist activity, attacks were directed against carefully selected objectives, so at the end of the 20th century, they were directed not only against completely random people, but were aimed at its maximization, thus creating a sense of threat to entire societies. This threat is compounded by the ruthlessness of terrorist attacks and their unpredictability, obtained inter alia by relatively cheap and easy to carry out suicide attacks. The aim of intimidation of societies is to bring social pressure on the government to meet the demands of terrorists, and thus free society from the constant feeling of danger.

Deinstitutionality of terrorism. Undertaking extensive anti-terrorist activities hindering the functioning of permanent organizational structures and the network nature of modern societies has contributed to the disinstitutionality of terrorism, consisting in the departure from the hierarchical, quasi-military type of organization towards the so-called unguided resistance, without centralized management and formalized structure, using the tactics of a "lonely wolf", planning and carrying out attacks on its own. Such activities are carried out primarily in Western countries;

Quasi state structure of ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria). Terrorist control over a given territory can lead to the creation of quasi-state structures. An example of such actions is a Muslim (Sunni) terrorist organization formed as a result of a combination of various fundamentalist groups, describing itself as Islamic State in Iraq and Levant. In 2014, it announced a unilateral declaration on the creation of Islamic state (caliphate) in the occupied territories. The organization terrorized the local population, and terrorists identifying with it are responsible for numerous terrorist attacks in various regions of the world, including Europe.

Cyber-terrorism. The development and dissemination of ICT technologies has contributed to shaping a new dimension of the functioning of society - cyberspace, which at the same time became the target of terrorist attacks, defined by cyber attacks, and the whole phenomenon of cyber-terrorism. Generally, it relies on organized, premeditated and politically motivated attacks on information computer systems, their software and databases (Pollitt, 1997, pp. 285-289).

Super-terrorism, or weapons of mass destruction in the hands of terrorists. The increasing ruthlessness of terrorist attacks, reflected in the search for adequate methods, techniques and means of struggle, raises concerns about the use of mass destruction means. In this context, the term super-terrorism appeared and its varieties: nuclear supernatural, chemical and bioterrorism.

Because of its destructive power, weapons of mass destruction pose the greatest threat to national and international security. For this reason, international society has made efforts to completely eliminate or limit its spread. These issues are regulated by numerous treaties and international agreements. Possession of weapons of mass destruction by the state seems to be under the control of its institutions, so taking over it in any form by a terrorist organization would be the darkest possible

scenario. Terrorists breaking the next barriers of ethical and moral nature in search of the growing media of their activities combined with the possibility of access to the components necessary to build some form of weapons of mass destruction, make the threat of terrorist attack with its use become real. Confirmation of the feasibility of such a scenario were the terrorist attacks with the use of war toxic agents (sarin) carried out in 1994 and 1995 in Japan, and the use of biological weapons in the form of sending postal spores of anthrax in the United States after terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.

The use of weapons of mass destruction would require a very good organization, large financial outlays and long-term training of people. When assessing the possibility of using mass-destruction weapons, Jacek Pawłowski formulates the following conclusions (Pawłowski, 2004, pp.38, 41, 73-75, 88-89):

- regarding nuclear weapons: so far it has remained beyond the reach of terrorist organizations, but under certain circumstances, especially in the situation of destabilization and loss of control by nuclear power, the use of nuclear weapons by terrorists cannot be ruled out, but the probability of such a scenario is small;
- in relation to radiological weapons: the so-called "dirty bomb", constructed for example from radioactive waste, is a great weapon for terrorists, because its use would cause fear and panic on an unimaginable scale, but experts reject the possibility of stealing spent nuclear fuel, even if it happened, the thief would die from irradiation before he could construct a "dirty bomb" from stolen waste;
- in relation to chemical weapons: easy accessibility, low price and simplicity of the use of toxic chemicals mean that instead of asking whether a terrorist attack with their use may be carried out, rather questions should be asked when and where it will occur;
- with regard to biological weapons: high efficiency, not only compared to classical means of destruction, but also to chemical and radiological weapons; relatively cheap and easy to produce, the attack with its use is difficult to detect, because the effects become visible after some time; however, difficult and dangerous to use due to the uncontrolled spread of germs; in use for many centuries e.g. by tossing bodies of people who had died of infectious diseases (e.g. plague, typhus, black smallpox); the use of these weapons by terrorists is termed bioterrorism.

### III. CONTEMPORARY TERRORISM IN NUMBERS

From the perspective of the objectives of publications, carried out in the context of terror-ism, statistics of terrorist attacks, especially regarding the longer time perspective, are a useful source regarding the nature and scope of this phenomenon. They make it possible to identify the nature of this phenomenon in the perspective of time in the form of trends or the direction of evolution of its essential features. Demand for such data is particularly increasing in times of a growing number of terrorist attacks. These needs can be met by activity of some of the terrorist research centers that run databases of

terrorist attacks carried out around the world. In their organization, a typology of terrorism is useful, which makes it possible to group numerical data within separate terrorist categories. For the needs of the study, the figures collected as part of the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), conducted by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), operating at the University of Maryland in United States were used (Start.umd.edu, 2016).

The data presented in GTD is based on the concept of a terrorist attack defined as a threat or the actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to achieve a political, economic, religious or social goal, through fear, coercion or intimidation. In order to qualify a given act of violence as a terrorist attack, it should have three attributes: 1) it must be intentional, 2) it must involve a certain level of violence or a direct threat to its use (in relation to persons or property), 3) its perpetrator must be a non-state actor. In addition, at least two of the following three criteria must be met: 1) the attack must be aimed at achieving a political, economic, religious or social goal (state violence and attacks aimed at direct economic benefits are not included in this category striving to introduce deeper changes in the economic system); 2) there must be proof of the intention to use coercion, intimidation or transfer of some other message to a wider audience than only its direct victims; 3) the attack must occur outside the framework of legal combat operations, being in conflict with international humanitarian law, prohibiting the conduct of targeted actions against the civilian population or persons excluded from combat (e.g. wounded and prisoners of war).

The data presented in GTD cover the years 1970-2015, in which the number of terrorist attacks in the world underwent considerable fluctuations. At the beginning of the discussed period, there were 635 terrorist attacks (Table 1, Figure 1). In the next two decades, a strong upward trend was maintained, culminating in 1992 with the number of 5052 attacks. In the next few years, the number of terrorist attacks decreased by more than five times, reaching the number of 929 in 1998 and this level lasted until 2004. In subsequent years, the number of attacks increased, reaching the level of 1992 in 2011. The years 2012-2014 showed a dramatic increase in the number of attacks, to 16840 in 2014. In 2015 this number decreased to 14806. In total, in the years 1970-2015 there were 156 772 terrorist attacks all over the world.

TABLE 1.  
NUMBER OF TERRORIST ATTACKS IN THE YEARS OF TREND CHANGES  
IN THE PERIOD FROM 1970 TO 2015

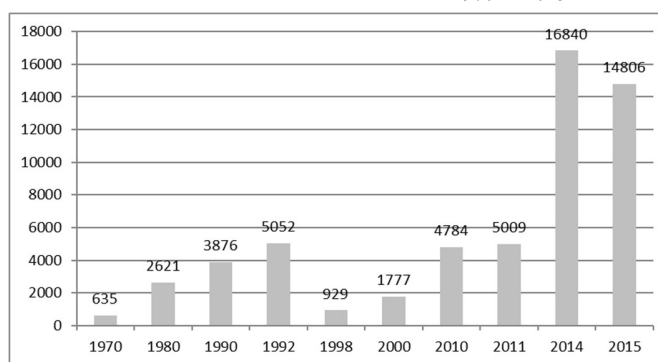
Year	Number of attacks
1970	635
1980	2621
1990	3876
1992	5052
1998	929
2000	1777
2010	4784

Year	Number of attacks
2011	5009
2014	16840
2015	14806

Source: Own study based on: National Consortium

Taking as a basis the regions of the world, in the period 1970-2015 the biggest number of terrorist attacks was observed in the Middle East and North Africa and in South Asia (Table 2). In total, terrorist incidents in these two regions accounted for 50% of all such events in the world. The next places in this list are South America (11.88%), Western Europe (10.22%) and Sub-Saharan Africa (8.57%). The lowest percentage of terrorist attacks was recorded in Australia and Oceania, Central and Eastern Asia and North America.

CHART 1. NUMBER OF TERRORIST ATTACKS IN THE YEARS  
OF TREND CHANGES IN THE PERIOD FROM 1970 TO 2015



Source: Own study based on Table 1

TABLE 2.  
NUMBER OF TERRORIST ATTACKS IN THE YEARS  
1970-2015 SORTED BY GEOGRAPHICAL REGIONS.

No.	Region	Number of attacks	Share in the total number of attacks [%]
1	Middle East and North Africa	40 422	25,78
2	South Asia	37 841	24,14
3	South America	18 628	11,88
4	Western Europe	16 026	10,22
5	Sub-Saharan Africa	13 434	8,57
6	Southeast Asia	10 360	6,61
7	Central America and the Caribbean	10 337	6,59
8	Eastern Europe	4 892	3,12
9	North America	3 268	2,08
10	East Asia	786	0,50
11	Central Asia	538	0,34
12	Australia and Oceania	246	0,16
	<b>Overall</b>	<b>156 772</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Source: Own study based on: National Consortium

Important information about the phenomenon of terrorism results from the number of victims of terrorist attacks (Table 3). Of all attacks carried out in 1970-2015, almost half of them (49.21%) did not cause fatalities, slightly more than 40% of attacks contributed to the deaths of 1 to 10 people, while in less than 4% of attacks, the number of fatalities was contained in the

range of 11-50. In the analyzed period there were 450 attacks (0.29%) in which 51 to 100 people were killed, and 166 events (0.11%), in which more than 100 people were killed.

It is worth noting that the number of deaths per year of terrorist attacks carried out in the 21st century increased more than 9 times, from 3,329 in 2000 to 32,685 in 2014. In 2014, 78% of all fatalities were the result of terrorist attacks carried out in just five countries: Iraq, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Syria. Despite this concentration, terrorism is also spreading to other countries - the number of countries where the number of victims exceeded 500, increased by 120%, from 5 in 2013 to 11 in 2014 (with addition of: Somalia, Ukraine, Yemen, Central African Republic, South Sudan and Cameroon) (Economicsandpeace.org, 2015).

Considering terrorist attacks in the context of their types, in the last 45 years more than 47% of them were bomb explosions, almost 25% were armed robberies, almost 11% of the prominent person's murder, and more than 6% of incidents consisted in taking hostages and making abductions (Table 4).

TABLE 3.  
NUMBER OF TERRORIST ATTACKS IN THE YEARS 1970-2015 BY THE NUMBER OF FATALITIES AND INJURIES

No.	Number of victims in a terrorist attack	Number of attacks by number of:			
		fatalities		injured	
		Number of attacks	% of the total number of attacks [%]	Number of attacks	% of the total number of attacks [%]
1	No victims	76 916	49,21	90 099	57,65
2	1 to 10	63 692	40,75	43 182	27,63
3	11 to 50	6 130	3,92	7 832	5,01
4	51 to 100	450	0,29	821	0,53
5	101 and more	166	0,11	334	0,21
6	Unknown	8 945	5,72	14 200	9,09

Source: Own study based on: National Consortium

TABLE 4.  
NUMBER OF TERRORIST ATTACKS IN THE YEARS 1970-2015 ACCORDING TO THEIR TYPE.

No.	Type of attack	Number of attacks	%
1	Bomb explosion	76 427	47,16
2	Gun assault	40 355	24,90
3	The murder of a prominent person	17 747	10,95
4	Infrastructure attacks	10 054	6,20
5	Hostage taking and kidnapping	9 659	5,96
6	Unknown	5 493	3,39
7	Attack without using a weapon	872	0,54
8	Hostage taking and barricading	871	0,54
9	Kidnapping people	572	0,35

Source: Own study based on: National Consortium

The results of the analysis of terrorist attacks from the perspective of their direct aim, indicate that they were most often directed against: private persons and their property (24.4%), personnel and military infrastructure (14.39%), personnel, equipment and police infrastructure, business activities (11.85%) and personnel and government infrastructure (11.85) (Table 5).

TABLE 5.  
NUMBER OF TERRORIST ATTACKS IN THE YEARS 1970-2015 BY TYPE OF THEIR GOALS

No.	Type of goal	Number of attacks	%
1	Private individuals and their property	40 653	24,40
2	Military staff and infrastructure	23 979	14,39
3	Police staff, equipment and infrastructure	22 235	13,35
4	Associated with business activities	19 749	11,85
5	Government staff and infrastructure	19 736	11,85
6	Transport means and infrastructure	6 553	3,93
7	Infrastructure for the supply of electricity, gas, fuels, etc.	5 577	3,35
8	Educational institutions	4 146	2,49
9	Religious leaders, organizations and infrastructure	4 096	2,46
10	Unknown	3 882	2,33
11	Staff and centers of foreign missions (embassies, consulates etc.)	3 488	2,09
12	Members of terrorist organisations	2 891	1,74
13	Journalists and media (radio stations and television)	2 767	1,66
14	Other*	6 861	4,12

\* Other objectives of the attacks include: political parties (representatives, offices, rallies), airports and airplanes, telecommunications infrastructure, NGO staff, tourists, maritime targets, including port infrastructure, water and food supply, facilities related to abortion (e.g., clinics) and others.

Source: Own study based on: National Consortium.

With over 160,000 terrorist attacks carried out in the years 1970-2015, in more than 48% cases explosives were used, small arms were used in more than 7% of attacks, similarly incendiary measures (Table 6).

TABLE 6.  
NUMBER OF TERRORIST ATTACKS IN 1970-2015 BY TYPE OF WEAPON USED (TOOLS, MEASURE).

No.	Type of used weapon	Number of attacks	%
1	Explosives	81 917	48,56
2	Small arms	56 624	33,57
3	Unknown	12 855	7,62
4	Incendiary	11 947	7,08
5	Melee weapon	4 359	2,58
6	Chemical	321	0,19
7	Other	210	0,12
8	Tools for sabotage	196	0,12
9	Vehicles (without use of explosives)	157	0,09
10	Dummy weapons	56	0,03
11	Biological	36	0,02
12	Radiological	13	0,01

Source: Own study based on: National Consortium

The quoted figures confirm the variable intensity of terrorist activity, as well as its very large diversity, which undoubtedly constitutes an objective conditioning of the problem of unambiguous definition of terrorism.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Contemporary terrorism is identified with the period of the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, in which the use of this method of struggle by fundamentalist organizations, especially

those associated with Islam, has intensified. The religious background makes it take on more violent and ruthless forms, which is manifested by the dissemination of suicide attacks and the refusal of self-limitation of terrorists in the ruthlessness and brutality of attacks that were observed in the earlier period. The dynamic development of globalization favors the internationalization of terrorism, and the network character of contemporary societies gives it a similar character, which means a departure from centralized management and a formalized structure. These features make it difficult to fight this phenomenon.

The intensity of terrorism has changed over time. In the last decades, the smallest number of terrorist attacks took place in 1998, after which in subsequent years the number was growing, with particular dynamics in 2012-2014. The largest number of such events occurred in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia (in total 50%). Almost half of the attacks carried out in 1970-2015 did not cause fatalities, and from the rest, the vast majority caused the death of 1 to 10 people. The most common types of attacks were explosions, assaults with weapons in hand and murders of prominent personages.

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