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FIGHTING TERRORISM: THE DEMOCRACY ADVANTAGE

Amichai Magen

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Barcelona, Berlin, Boston, Brussels, London, Madrid, Manchester, New York, Nice, Paris, Stockholm, Sydney—over the past several years these and other cities of the democratic West have become places widely identified with terrorist attacks involving suicide belts, rammings by cars or trucks, improvised bombs, mass shootings, or stabbings. Outside the West, meanwhile, groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Boko Haram, and various al-Qaeda affiliates—in the Caucasus, the Arabian Peninsula, Sinai, and parts of Africa—have seized tracts of land in fragile states¹ as homes for “emirates” and “caliphates” whose political ambitions are as vast as they are inimical to the liberal international order.

Offering their acolytes religious purpose, financial gain, sexual slaves, and the unfettered exercise of sadistic violence, jihadists have recruited more than forty-thousand foreign fighters from 110 countries. Of these, about six-thousand have been U.S., Australian, Canadian, or European Union (EU) nationals traveling to the conflict zones in Iraq and Syria, both before and since the ISIS caliphate declaration of June 2014.² With ISIS suffering battlefield losses at the hands of the global coalition against it—the onetime ISIS strongholds of Mosul, Iraq, and Raqqa, Syria, fell in late 2017—security officials across the free world worry that what had been a steady trickle of battle-hardened returnees will now grow into a deluge.

Not surprisingly, these trends have sparked public anxiety and sown fears in many countries that open societies have become the favored targets for both homegrown and foreign terrorists. These fears are not groundless. In November 2017, the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) com-

piled by the Institute for Economics and Peace in Sydney, Australia, found that while terrorism-related deaths had fallen 22 percent globally in 2016 from their peak in 2014 (the year that ISIS exploded on the scene), they were up in Europe across 2014–16 to their highest level in nearly three decades, with 75 percent of the deaths from terrorism in Europe attributable to ISIS.³

Despite this worrisome development, the compilers of the GTI also find that Europe's democracies have been foiling a higher proportion of attacks, thereby forcing ISIS to focus on "lower-level" tactics that involve fewer resources and less planning. Meanwhile, data from a longer term—going back nearly two decades rather than just a handful of years—show that when it comes to terrorism, reasonably high-quality democracies enjoy a vital, and seemingly growing, "triple democracy advantage." That is, such democracies suffer fewer attacks than do other regime types, with a lower rate of increase, and fewer fatalities.

Terrorism is the deliberate use or threat of violence against civilians by a nonstate entity (individual or group) in pursuit of a political or religious goal.⁴ Terrorism—or, more precisely, Salafi-Takfiri terrorism of the type perpetrated by ISIS—is now perceived by people around the globe as the leading danger to their national security. A Pew study published in August 2017 found shares of national publics ranging from 62 percent in Ghana to 88 percent in France—and including 74 percent of U.S. respondents as well as 77 percent of Germans, 74 percent of Indonesians, and 66 percent of Indians—saying that ISIS is the top security threat facing their country.⁵

These concerns have large implications. Even among the world's most advanced democracies, fear of terrorism—often intertwined with worries about immigration, particularly from Muslim-majority countries—is a driver of populist nationalism, support for illiberal alternatives, and heightened danger that civil liberties and the rule of law will be eroded.⁶ If liberal democracies in Europe, North America, and parts of Asia are especially vulnerable to terrorism, moreover, is that not a warning to other countries pondering liberalization that strengthening rights, freedoms, and legal guarantees could be too risky? Will not a more closed society—one that rejects or curtails such liberal-democratic niceties—be better able to defend itself against the terrorist scourge? At the very least, the relationship between regime types and contemporary trends in terrorism ought to be clearly understood in order to promote better risk analysis and counterterrorism policy both at home and abroad.

Regime Types and Terrorism: The Scholarship

Scholarly interest in the relationship between regime type and terrorist incidents goes back to the early 1980s. Spikes of intense interest have punctuated longer periods of neglect. The literature in this area is

consequently fragmented, and has tended to suffer from methodological and conceptual weaknesses.

Most studies, for instance, have an outmoded quality. They tend to focus on intervals drawn from the three and a half decades between 1968 and 2004, with temporal clusterings that bespeak interest in secular, left-wing, and nationalist strains of terrorism—phenomena that have since essentially dissipated.⁷ The most recent major studies are more up to date, but still rely on data that go up only to 2012 at the latest, before the combined impact of the “Arab Spring” and the civil wars in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen could be adequately measured and analyzed.⁸

Moreover, researchers interested in terrorism and those concerned with political regimes have traditionally worked in separate disciplinary realms. Terrorism analysts have often examined either domestic or transnational terrorism, but not both. They have used inconsistent definitions and measures of regime types, and they have tended to treat “democracy” and “dictatorship” as dichotomous variables.⁹ For their part, democracy scholars have so far only scratched the surface of the complex relationship among post-9/11 terrorism, voting patterns, and broader sociopolitical attitudes.¹⁰ The conditions and causal pathways by which terrorist attacks and public fear of jihadist terrorism may fuel democratic decline—or spur democratic resilience and renewal—remain too little studied.¹¹

Still, over the past several decades a pair of distinct and broadly opposing views has emerged regarding the relationship between democracy and terrorist attacks. Inquiry into the relationship between dictatorship and terrorism emerged much later.¹² Most recently, terrorism scholars have caught up with developments in comparative politics, and have recognized that neither “democracy” nor “dictatorship” is a monolithic category. The upshot has been the development of a third view regarding the association between regime types and terrorist attacks.

Until recently, the dominant view had been that democracies were more prone to terrorist attacks than nondemocracies, and that “the more democratic a country is, the more terrorism it should experience.”¹³ Advocates of this view offer three main explanations to support it.

The first holds that liberal-democratic freedoms of association and movement, coupled with due-process safeguards and legal restraints on security forces, make it easier to organize terrorist groups and to plan and carry out attacks. As Martha Crenshaw remarked in 1981, “terrorists view the context as permissive, making terrorism a viable option. In a material sense, the means are placed at their disposal by the environment.”¹⁴ Twenty years later, shortly after the 9/11 attacks, U.S. attorney-general John Ashcroft lamented to a Senate committee that “terrorists exploit our openness.” Mentioning a captured al-Qaeda training manual, he warned that “terrorists are told how to use America’s freedom as a weapon against us.”¹⁵

The second explanation emphasizes mobilization, publicity, and the

susceptibility of elected officials to public sentiment. Terrorists can most easily achieve “strategic influence” in the most liberal democracies owing to the confluence of a free press, which guarantees a wide audience for acts of spectacular violence, and officials who feel intense public pressure to avoid any additional violence.¹⁶

The third explanation holds that electoral competition and institutional design play key roles in explaining heightened vulnerability to terrorism among certain democracies. Between 2004 and 2010, three studies found that political systems with higher levels of political competition suffered more terrorist incidents.¹⁷

Since the mid-1990s, an opposing view has emerged. This view contends that democracy actually has an antiterrorist effect because democratic openness allows grievances to be peacefully and publicly expressed and redressed, which in turn makes it harder for violent, conspiratorial fringe groups to prosper.¹⁸ This logic suggests that encouraging authoritarian regimes and lower-quality democracies to embrace greater openness can similarly help to cut the ground out from under their local extremists before the latter reach the point of mounting attacks abroad.¹⁹ In a twist that may have bred more confusion than clarity, a small number of studies argued that the observed proclivity of terrorists to target democracies was an illusion caused by authoritarian regimes’ underreporting of terrorist incidents.²⁰

More recently, as scholars who study terrorism have taken to seeing political freedom as a matter of degree rather than one of opposite poles marked “democracy” and “dictatorship,” a third view has begun to take shape. Among its pioneers has been Alberto Abadie, who in 2006 suggested that political freedom has a nonlinear effect on terrorism. The relationship that he saw between regime types and terrorism took the form of an inverted U. The idea was that “countries with intermediate levels of political freedom [are] more prone to terrorism than countries with high levels of political freedom or countries with highly authoritarian regimes.”²¹ Following Abadie, in 2013 Erica Chenoweth found that “partial democracies” sustained the highest number of attacks.²² Similarly, an extensive recent study by Khusrav Gaibulloev, James A. Piazza, and Todd Sandler finds that “regime type has an extremely robust inverted U-shaped relationship to terrorism for a global sample,” with the fewest terror attacks occurring in both strict autocracies and full-fledged democracies while “some middle range” of regimes between democracy and autocracy is most prone to suffer such attacks.²³

Trends Since 9/11

It was only after 9/11 that reliable studies covering both domestic and transnational terrorism became possible. This was owing to the development, starting in late 2001, of the Global Terrorism Database (GTD)—

a systematic, open-source database that now records terrorist incidents and casualties globally through 2016.²⁴ Building upon Jørgen Møller and Svend-Erik Skaaning's typology, published in these pages in 2013,²⁵ we can disaggregate regime types well beyond the typical democracy-dictatorship dichotomy into six theoretically grounded categories, and apply the GTD data to each category for the years from 2002 through 2016.

Møller and Skaaning sort democracies into four subcategories based on a taxonomic hierarchy where the more demanding definitions subsume the less demanding ones. In ascending order, the categories are *minimalist democracy*, which includes regimes that fulfill the thinnest Schumpeterian definition of competitive elections; *electoral democracy*, which further requires the maximization of the elections criterion (that is, inclusive, high-integrity elections) but nothing else; *polyarchy*, in the classic sense meant by Robert A. Dahl, which extends beyond elections to cover civil liberties, particularly the freedoms of speech and association; and *liberal democracy*, the most demanding category, which denotes substantive democracy complete with inclusive elections, civil liberties, and the rule of law understood as equality of all persons before and under the law. In addition, autocratic regimes are divided into *closed autocracies* and *multiparty autocracies*. The latter are distinguished from the former by virtue of holding elections that involve more than one party, though these votes are not competitive enough for the regime to qualify even as minimally democratic.²⁶

Even if we put aside for the moment the exceptionally high rates of contemporary terrorism in states that score high in state fragility (as identified by the Fragile States Index), the GTD figures reveal an enormous increase in the number of terrorist attacks globally over the years from 2002 through 2016. In fact, during that period terrorist incidents in nonfragile states worldwide grew by 1,029 percent, going from 1,174 attacks in 2002 to 13,257 attacks in 2016. The number of terrorist events, moreover, rose across all regime types.

The aggregate increase in terrorism is at odds with the decades-long decline in interstate wars, but consistent with the dramatic resurgence of other forms of political violence over the past decade. Globally, the number of "major civil wars"—those involving at least one state actor and causing more than a thousand battle deaths per year—had declined by 72 percent between 1990 and 2003, only to go back up again thereafter: There were only four such wars in 2005, but eleven in 2015. The number of minor civil wars (involving 25 to 999 battle deaths per year) also rose over the same period, with the sharp uptick since 2014 largely driven by the expansion of ISIS and its affiliates, which were involved in conflicts in three countries in 2014 and at least twelve in 2015.²⁷

The scourge of terrorism is real, yet summary data tell us little about the distribution of attacks or the rates of increase in terrorist incidents across various regime types. In reality, the disparity in the internal dis-

tribution of terrorism incidents across regime types is already immense and seems to be getting wider.

A number of insights can be gleaned from the aggregate trends. Contrary to the traditional view, we observe a robust and growing “double democracy advantage” among liberal democracies and polyarchies over the 2002–16 period, and especially since 2007. Not only are higher-quality democracies less prone to terrorist attacks than all other regime types, but the rate of increase in the number of attacks among such democracies is substantially lower in comparison to the rest.

The pattern is maintained even where we exclude any country that is farther than two standard deviations from the subcategory mean, namely the United Kingdom among liberal democracies, and Israel among the polyarchies. This is all the more striking given the already relatively low levels of terrorist incidents experienced by liberal democracies and polyarchies at the start of the measurement period. It lends support to the minority view in the literature that sees political openness and the protection of civil liberties and the rule of law as assets that facilitate the minimization of terrorism through the airing and redress of grievances; the wide scope granted to peaceful political expression; and the resulting lower legitimacy accorded to violent fringe groups.

Broadly speaking, the empirical picture also lends support to Abadie’s “curvilinear” thesis, but with several important new caveats. Countries possessing intermediate levels of political freedoms, on both the democratic and authoritarian sides of the regime spectrum, do suffer the largest number of terrorist attacks and are substantially more susceptible than regimes that are more free (on the democratic side) and less free (on the authoritarian side). These intermediate regimes, it seems, cannot match either the grievance-assuaging and cooptation capacities of liberal democracies and polyarchies, or the brutal, no-holds-barred crackdown abilities of hardened autocracies.

In this sense, simply clearing the minimal “democracy” threshold does not guarantee a country the democracy advantage. It should be stressed that only reasonably high-quality democracies with broad civil-liberties guarantees can expect to enjoy the lowest relative levels of terrorism incidents. Indeed, electoral democracies and (since 2011–12) minimalist democracies have experienced sharp increases in the number of terrorist attacks. A greater frequency of terrorist incidents, therefore, can be expected to follow any decline in democratic quality big enough to drop a country below the polyarchy level.

Although intermediate levels of political freedoms predict considerably higher rates of terrorism than either high-quality democracies or closed autocracies suffer, significant internal differences between minimalist or electoral democracies and multiparty autocracies have emerged in recent years. Indeed, with the singular exception of the most fragile states—Afghanistan, the Central African Republic (CAR), Chad,

**TABLE—RATES OF INCREASE IN TERRORIST ATTACKS
ACROSS REGIME TYPES BETWEEN 2002 AND 2016**

	Liberal Democracy	Polyarchy	Electoral Democracy	Minimalist Democracy	Multiparty Autocracy	Closed Autocracy
2002	125	103	224	222	489	11
2016	338	118	1043	2215	8750	793
Growth	170%	15%	366%	898%	1689%	7109%

Source: Global Terrorism Database, www.start.umd.edu/gtd.

Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Guinea, Haiti, Iraq, Liberia, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen, and Zimbabwe—multiparty autocracies have, since 2012, experienced the greatest absolute rise in the number of terrorist attacks and have become by far the most “at-risk” regime type when it comes to terrorism incidents. Again, the pattern holds even if we exclude outliers such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan.

One possible explanation for the large and seemingly growing vulnerability of multiparty autocracies to terrorism involves the toxic nature of political contestation within this subcategory of regimes. In comparison to closed autocracies, competitive authoritarian regimes provide greater political space within which terrorists and their ideological and financial supporters can organize and mobilize, yet lack the avenues for meaningful political access and expression that even bare-bones democracies have. Whatever opportunities for political contestation do exist in multiparty autocracies amount to a sham, and are therefore ineffective in assuaging grievances and countering extremists' claims to legitimacy.

Another recent development that might be important has to do with closed autocracies. Recall that the “inverted-U” thesis predicts that the fewest terrorist attacks will occur in both reasonably high-quality democracies and strict autocracies. The relative safety of closed authoritarian regimes, in this view, stems from their perceived superiority in denying terrorists organizational and mobilization opportunities, despite grievances stemming from the absence of legally permissible political access.

In 2013, however, terrorism in closed autocracies began to skyrocket. By 2016, the number of terrorist attacks in closed autocracies was 7,109 percent higher than it had been in 2002. This was the greatest relative increase among all regime types (leaving aside the category of fragile states), and came mostly from attacks in Bahrain, Iran, Kuwait, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan, and to a lesser extent from attacks in Djibouti, Eritrea, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Mauritania, and Qatar. As of 2014, closed autocracies were about as prone to suffer terrorist attacks as electoral democracies, and were markedly more prone than either liberal democracies or polyarchies.

Is this a passing anomaly, or the start of a serious trend? It is too

early to say, but the sheer rate of increase is striking. Perhaps closed autocracies will continue to suffer a lower incidence of terrorism than more liberalized ones, but at the same time will be subject to more terror attacks than before, and will suffer more of them than reasonably high-quality democracies endure. The underlying reality may be that closed autocracies are no longer as able as they once were to suppress or coopt violent challengers.

Quite possibly, changing technology is a factor. As communications, encryption, 3D printing of weapons, and virtual currencies advance and proliferate to nonstate actors and individuals, terrorists will find it easier to generate and exploit strategic opportunities, while governments—even harsh ones—will find it harder to stop them. The spike in terror attacks within closed autocracies since 2013 may herald the beginning of such a technology-driven shift.

In the age of smartphones and social media, moreover, authoritarian regimes can no longer so readily hide terrorism by simply failing to report it as such. Outside of an unusual case such as North Korea, individuals living under authoritarianism have more capacity than before to record and broadcast terror incidents. At the same time, at least some authoritarian regimes may be coming to see an advantage in the franker reporting of terrorism, as it captures the attention of international organizations and Western governments and creates a basis on which authoritarian rulers can hope to win favor as potential recruits in the global fight against violent extremism.

Liberal democracies and polyarchies benefit from a sizeable and apparently growing democracy advantage in terms of experiencing fewer terrorist incidents compared with all other regime types. But there is also a third, generally ignored, “democracy advantage” enjoyed only by these reasonably high-quality democracies—one reflected in terms not of fewer terrorist attacks, but of fewer fatalities connected with them.

In the post-9/11 era, the annual number of fatalities in terror attacks has averaged 6.7 among liberal democracies, and 17.8 in polyarchies. In contrast, the average annual number of people killed in closed autocracies—the regime type that the latest scholarship says is virtually equal to high-quality democracy in terms of safety from terrorism—stood at 57.2. That is more than eight and a half times higher than the average death toll across all liberal democracies, and more than three times the figure for polyarchies. Consistent with the data on terrorism incidents, minimalist and electoral democracies sustained higher rates of fatalities (90.3 and 177.4 respectively) than both higher-quality democracies and closed autocracies, while multiparty autocracies suffered the highest average annual losses in human lives (470.4 fatalities per year).

Could this third “democracy advantage”—not only fewer terrorist incidents, but fewer deaths caused by them—be a reflection of the better long-run job that higher-quality democracies do at mitigating the terror-

ism threat? Full-fledged democracy is the most responsive of all regime types to citizens' concerns, few of which are more urgent than the desire for physical safety. Democratic casualty-aversion generates higher rates of life-saving investment in intelligence, infrastructure protection, first responders, social resilience, and specialized medical care.²⁸ Faced with a sufficiently menacing and enduring terrorist threat, in other words, advanced democracies can be expected with time and experience to acquire superior abilities not only to reduce the incidence of terrorist assaults, but also to make such assaults less deadly when they do occur.

Looking to the Future

The dramatic increase in the number of attacks in closed autocracies is a recent trend that signals a potentially significant shift in the future distribution of global terrorism, but it is not the only one. Looking ahead, three additional emerging issues stand out.

As ISIS and al-Qaeda lose territorial control in areas ranging from Iraq and Syria to Sinai, Yemen, and the Sahel, thousands of their fighters seek new sanctuaries. More than 5,600 ISIS members are known to have already returned to their home countries from Iraq and Syria alone, with authorities in 33 states reporting arrivals of fighters in the past two years. These include countries across the regime-type spectrum, notably Saudi Arabia (760 fighters), Turkey (800), Tunisia (800), Jordan (280), Russia (400), the United Kingdom (400), Germany (250), and France (270).²⁹

As the squeeze on existing geographical centers of organized jihadism becomes tighter, intelligence services worldwide are striving to predict where extremist concentrations will appear next. Will it be Turkey and Europe; parts of Africa; Southeast Asia; Afghanistan and Pakistan; or some combination of the above? While returnees present different levels of risk, one thing is clear: Regimes with higher levels of state capacity will be better able to manage whatever problems returnees pose, and should thereby suffer less terrorism than regimes whose state capacity is lower. This too augurs well for the ability of advanced democracies to handle the terrorist threat as its contours change.

This points to a second way in which scholarship on terrorism and regime types can improve: It is time to break the bad habit, too common across the social sciences, of taking the state for granted by ignoring the "statehood" (or state-capacity) dimension of regimes.

This is a serious lapse. If we consider the world's sixteen most fragile states over the 2002–16 period, we see an enormous and growing correlation between state fragility and terrorism incidents. Whereas from 2002 through 2004 the incidence of terrorism among the most fragile states was unremarkable, by 2014 the numbers of terrorist attacks and terrorism fatalities in fragile states dwarfed any of the regime-type groupings (these groupings of course include the sixteen most-fragile states, which

are being singled out here as an analytical category and are not meant to be an add-on to Møller and Skaaning's list of regime types).

In the fragile states, terrorist attacks rose gradually in number between 2003 and 2011. Then they shot upward, owing to incidents mainly in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen, but also in the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Nigeria.

This clustering of terror attacks in a handful of troubled states comports broadly with important shifts in the nature of post-2003 civil wars—what Barbara Walter recently called “The New New Civil Wars.”³⁰ The pattern suggests that future research will need to view terrorism not merely as a singular species of political violence, but as one element in a broader repertory of order-contestation methods that includes not only insurgencies and civil wars, but also efforts by “antisystem” challengers to establish governance configurations, Islamist social-welfare arrangements, and even electoral systems across various tracts of land while rejecting conventional “Westphalian” statehood.

Finally, scholars of democracy and political violence need to turn their attention to risks of decay and decline within the liberal order itself. That contemporary challenges to liberal democracy come from radical Islam and other overtly authoritarian ideologies does not exclude populist nationalism as another possible source of trouble.

Populism focuses on perceived physical, economic, and cultural threats to “the people,” which come from elites and “others,” often construed to include immigrants and religious minorities. Populism tends to see the international realm as a matter of “us” and “them” as well. Populism is antipluralist, treating criticism as opposition to “the people” and their interests. Populism typically traffics in conspiracy theories: If the people and their affairs are in a bad way, it must be because corrupt elites and outsiders (including immigrants) have leagued against them. There are enemies everywhere. Something vast and shadowy is going on behind the scenes. The political system is rigged, and so is the economy. The world is dangerous and hostile. Democracy is a sham, the security organs that are meant to protect us are failing, and the media is lying to us. There is an ongoing crisis, and an apocalyptic showdown between the forces of good and evil is coming.

As its sovereign solution, populism inclines toward support for a “strong leader” who can speak for “the people” and act decisively in their name. What needs to be done is obvious, “no debate about values or weighing of empirical evidence is required.”³¹ Whoever opposes the solution is an enemy of the people and a traitor.

The drift of such a complex of ideas and attitudes is antiliberal. It has the potential to corrode democratic values and institutions, and it can also be toxic to the effective management of terrorist threats. Although the causal mechanisms that link terrorism to democratic decline are less than fully clear, it is not hard to make the case that populist politics can exac-

erbate terrorist threats in democracies, reduce democratic resilience, and lead to the undermining of democratic quality and the rule of law.

To push the idea that society and indeed the world are split into two hostile camps may risk inclining more and not fewer people toward radicalism of thought and deed. Perhaps the greatest success of free societies in their fight against terrorism so far is the relatively small number of recruits that the radicals have managed to gain within the West. Ironically, jihadists and populists share a hostility to pluralism. Both advance a worldview in which “the sons of light and the sons of darkness” are locked in an all-consuming existential struggle that reduces any idea of a middle course or a different way of thinking about things to a delusion.

Perhaps the greatest success of free societies in their fight against terrorism so far is the relatively small number of recruits that the radicals have managed to gain within the West.

By maintaining pluralism and refusing to force individuals with competing civic and religious identities to make sharp choices among them, liberal societies provide potential sympathizers of radical Islam with diffuse but potent “opt-out” prospects that can help them steer clear of terrorism and terrorism-supporting activities. In an important sense, astute counterterror policy should seek to give those involved or potentially involved in political violence strong material and symbolic incentives to shun or quit such involvement. In a pluralist society, an individual may occupy identity and social spaces where competing civic and religious loyalties can coexist, even if in some degree of metaphysical tension. To brand any group collectively as a threat is to constrict such salutary spaces, and thus is poor policy.

Those charged with making political and security decisions in a free society should act on the basis of facts and the accurate assessment of risks. As part and parcel of a strategic counterterrorism posture, leaders must assuage public fears, inspire trust in the values and institutions of the democratic state, nurture unity, and promote hope for a safer, more harmonious future for all members of society. This involves carefully handling intelligence information; supporting law enforcement while simultaneously holding it accountable for wrongful conduct; and signaling to adversaries that society is resilient and united. It also means keeping the public informed about threat levels without destroying trust in the security agencies, sowing panic, or emboldening vigilantism or reprisals against minorities. Just after a terror attack, moreover, democratic leadership requires the skillful balancing of rapid, decisive action and public reassurance with the avoidance of knee-jerk reactions that are likely to prove counterproductive in the longer term.

The populist instinct for antagonism and conspiracy is antithetical to these goals. To stoke public fears, stress internal differences, cultivate a permanent sense of emergency, and encourage aggressive nationalism is to make a real-enough threat into something worse than it has to be.

In an atmosphere of fear and mistrust, the “terrorist threat” can serve as a catchall excuse for stifling dissent and stacking intelligence, law-enforcement, and judicial institutions with loyalists of the ruling party and its “strong leader.” In Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Turkey and Vladimir Putin’s Russia, for example, “terrorism” has come to mean making statements that the government finds disagreeable. Meanwhile, terrorist attacks become excuses for crackdowns on dissidents and antiterror laws are broadened and used as cudgels against independent journalists and opposition politicians.

Terrorist incidents can hand illiberal governments pretexts for the full-blown crushing of political expression and competition. An especially notorious case from history is the Reichstag fire of 27 February 1933. That night, the German parliament building in Berlin went up in flames. Evidence at the scene pointed to arson. A young Dutch Communist named Marinus van der Lubbe was found nearby and arrested for the act. The Nazis under Adolf Hitler (who had been chancellor for slightly less than a month) immediately claimed that the blaze had been the work of a vast conspiracy intent on revolution, and began locking up suspected opponents. On February 28, Hitler persuaded 85-year-old president Paul von Hindenburg to issue a sweeping emergency decree under the powers vested in the head of state by Article 48 of the Weimar Republic’s constitution. Key civil rights and liberties such as *habeas corpus* and the freedoms of expression and assembly were suspended, and the campaign of mass arrests received legal cover. The episode (which some argue was a Nazi ploy from the outset) became the first step in the creation of Hitler’s dictatorship.

More recently, Russian president Vladimir Putin used a handful of Chechen terrorist attacks—including one that killed 41 people on a train two days before the 2003 parliamentary elections and the horrific Beslan school hostage siege in September 2004—to achieve radical centralization. He stripped all provincial governments of power while giving the Kremlin control over security matters and political institutions throughout the country.

Worries about terrorism (let alone actual attacks) give governments incentives to weaken civil-liberties safeguards and make it easier for authorities to intrude into once-private spheres. New powers to surveil, investigate, and “administratively detain” (in other words, to hold people without actually filing charges) can corrode the rule of law.

These capacities, which go far beyond ordinary policing tactics and powers, owe their legitimacy in the public’s eyes to their seeming necessity as counterterror measures. Yet once they are called into being,

temptations to use them against political adversaries will inevitably arise. Surveillance and financial-regulation authorities developed to stop terrorism might become sources of damaging information (the Russian term is *kompromat*) that can be leaked, used as fodder for blackmail, or selectively employed in tax, corruption, or other embarrassing investigations. Laws that ban various “terrorism-supporting” activities can be misused to threaten actual and potential opponents with fines or even jail.³² The inherently clandestine nature of the actors and information involved is problematic, while advancing surveillance technologies add to the difficulty of keeping such state capacities within bounds.

Grasping the relationship between regime types, on the one hand, and the frequency and severity of terrorist attacks, on the other, is essential for both domestic and foreign-policy reasons. Among liberal democracies and polyarchies, the knowledge that preserving and deepening democratic substance enhances safety should help both to refute calls to erode civil liberties and legal safeguards for security’s sake, and to enhance democratic resilience in the face of the long-term struggle against terrorism. Against the background of a global surge in terror covering most of the last decade and a half, and contrary to popular hype, a consolidated, high-quality democracy is increasingly proving to be the best counterterror organization known to humanity. A liberal democracy is by its very nature as an open society built for enduring success against terror.

At the same time, political leaders, security professionals, and voters in electoral and minimalist democracies can expect to reap greater safety from improved democratic quality. Multiparty autocracies—and external actors backing their liberalization—need to prepare for a curvilinear effect in which liberalizing authoritarian regimes will suffer increased incidents of terrorism unless and until they manage to get “over the hump” by attaining levels of democratic quality high enough to push terrorism back down. Closed autocracies, meanwhile, appear to have lost much of the antiterrorist advantage that they may have once enjoyed. Oppression and denial of political access cannot keep them safe.

NOTES

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1. These I define as the states that have appeared most often since 2005 in the top sixteen places in the Fragile States Index (<http://fundforpeace.org/ffsi>), which is compiled annually by the Fund for Peace and *Foreign Policy* magazine. The specific fragile states in which Islamist terror groups have seized control of land and declared themselves rulers over it are Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen.

2. Richard Barrett, “Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees,” Soufan Center, October 2017, <http://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017.pdf>.

3. Nastassja Straucher, "Global Terrorism Index: Death Toll Drops Globally But Rises in Europe," *Deutsche Welle*, 15 November 2017, www.dw.com/en/global-terrorism-index-death-toll-drops-globally-but-rises-in-europe/a-41385199.

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