

# Does military support increase terrorist threat in the home country?

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*Op 22 maart 2016 was België het doelwit van twee terroristische aanslagen waarbij 32 dodelijke slachtoffers en talrijke gewonden vielen. Ons land was in shock. Zowel de recente aanslagen in Brussel als de verijdelde aanslag in Verviers en de gebeurtenissen in Parijs en Nice tonen ons dat terrorisme akelig dichtbij komt. Zijn deze terroristische aanslagen in Europa een gevolg van de militaire steun die wij leveren in de strijd tegen het terrorisme? Betalen we de prijs voor onze militaire aanwezigheid in landen waar terroristische groeperingen actief zijn? In dit artikel bieden we een antwoord op deze vraag.*

*Le 22 mars 2016, la Belgique était la cible de deux attaques terroristes causant la mort de 32 personnes et de nombreux blessés. Notre pays se réveillait en état de choc. Les récents attentats de Bruxelles ainsi que les attentats déjoués de Verviers et les événements de Paris et de Nice nous montrent que le spectre du terrorisme plane sur nous. Ces attentats en Europe sont-ils une conséquence de l'appui militaire que nous livrons à la lutte contre le terrorisme ? Payons-nous le prix de notre présence militaire dans les pays où des groupes terroristes sont actifs ? Dans cet article, nous apportons une réponse à cette question.*



## INTRODUCTION

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Since the 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, the Western world no longer perceives terrorist attacks as remote events. As a result, a number of military interventions have been initiated with the purpose of defeating and eliminating terrorist organisations. The frequency and the lethality of more recent attacks (Paris, Brussels, Nice ...) however weakened the public support for participation in the War on Terror. The fear is dictated by the idea that participation in this war will have a backlash effect by increasing the proneness of the own country to international terrorism. Anecdotic evidence supporting this fear can be found in a videotape made by one of the suicide bombers of the 2005 attacks in London in which the terrorist explicitly states “what you have witnessed now is only the beginning [...] until you pull your forces out of Afghanistan and Iraq” and in the IS statement after the Paris attacks in November 2015: “Let France and those who walk in its path know that they will remain on the top of the list of targets of the Islamic State, and that the smell of death will never leave their noses as long as they lead the convoy of the Crusader campaign [...]”. This article summarises the results of an academic study that provides statistical support for this anecdotic evidence<sup>1</sup>.



## DATA

In order to test our hypothesis, we created a database for all NATO countries for the period 1998 to 2007 including information on their military support as well as on the terrorist attacks in these countries<sup>2</sup>. Since a country can provide military support to a foreign government in different ways, we included multiple indicators to measure this support. Beside the number of deployed personnel in foreign military missions, we also considered the effects of the supply of military equipment and of the arms exports to a country. In order to retrieve the deployment data (troops and material), we used The Military Balance, the annual assessment of military capabilities by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). The information on arms exports is found in the annual publications of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). While all of these variables measure a certain aspect of military support, they do not necessarily reinforce each other. Sometimes countries support foreign governments in multiple ways (e.g. USA in 1998 with 1,567 troops in the Middle East and arms exports totalling \$3.995 million), whereas others give only one line of support (e.g. France deployed 1,200 troops in Senegal in 1999, but did not export weapons to the country). Another important factor to be taken into account relates to the relative importance of the numbers. For terrorist organisations, the addition of 100 foreign troops to a country that has 10,000 troops clearly creates a different situation than the addition of 100 foreign troops to a country with 100 troops. Hence, we relate all of our variables of military support to the military capacity of the home country in order to make them relative variables.

In order to test our research hypothesis, we wanted to know that if country X decides to provide military support to country Y, country X will more likely become a target for terrorists originating from country Y and not just by any random terrorist group. To that end, we needed to construct our dependent variable in a dyadic form relating source and target country (e.g. we pair Belgium with Afghanistan for each year to find out whether Belgian troops deployment in Afghanistan induced attacks that originate from that country). This procedure resulted in a total of 50,980 observations in our database. The information on the number of attacks for each country is extracted from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD). For all these observations, our database showed a total of 262 attacks divided over 145 dyads. These dyads are highly diverse, with 17 out of 28 target countries reporting at least one act of transnational terrorism. The attacks originated in 35 different countries.

The likelihood that a country will be targeted by terrorist organisations is of course not only determined by its foreign policy actions. Hence, we also included control variables, i.e. variables which have been proven to significantly affect the terrorist threat in literature. Earlier studies have indicated that richer and larger countries are more vulnerable to terrorist attacks. Apparently, wealthier countries have a greater likelihood to be targeted by international terrorist groups. In order to account for this effect of wealth, we included the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in our analysis. When controlling the size of the country, we also included the total population size. Information on these two variables comes from the World Bank. Not only wealth and size but also the regime type of the target country has proven to affect the attractiveness of this country for terrorist attacks. Here the literature is less conclusive. While some authors suggest a negative relationship between the degree of democracy and the level of transnational terrorism, most empirical work suggests a positive relationship. In other words, the more democratic the regime in a country is, the higher the probability that it will sustain a transnational terrorist attack. To control the possible effect of the democracy level on the probability that a country is targeted by terrorists, we also entered the polity index in our regression. This measure is an index with a value ranging from -10 (strongly autocratic) to +10 (strongly democratic). Finally, we included as well a distance variable indicating the distance between the capital of the target country and the capital of the terrorist home country, as it can be expected that distance is negatively related to the probability of a terrorist attack<sup>3</sup>. Information on this last control variable can be found in the Eugene Database.

With respect to our dependent variable, i.e. the “vulnerability” of a country in terms of terrorist targeting, we used the number of attacks against citizens in that country. A quick overview of our data identified enormous differences in figures between the 28 NATO countries. During the entire sample period, Poland, for example, was never the target of a terrorist attack, while the USA suffered attacks against its citizens in each year of the studied period.

## **EMPIRICAL RESULTS**

In order to test whether military support leads to an increased terrorism threat, we used the dyad design dataset with observations for every “couple of (source and target) countries” over a period of 10 years.

Our results provided support for our research hypothesis. The results docu-

mented a significant positive effect from military deployment as well as from the dummy variable indicating whether the target country exports arms to the source country<sup>4</sup>. Hence, countries that deploy troops in another country are more likely to be attacked by terrorist groups that originate in that country. For the average observation, the number of attacks is expected to increase by a factor of 1.002 in the case where relative deployment is raised by one unit. Exporting arms even increases the likelihood of a terrorist attack by a factor exceeding 2. The variable measuring the amount of material sent by a nation with its deployment does not seem to have a meaningful influence on the number of attacks. With respect to the control variables, our results are largely in line with earlier literature. The relationship between GDP per capita of the target country and of an attack is supported. Richer countries seem to be more often the target for transnational terrorists. With respect to the population variable, we also find a clear positive effect. The polity variable of the target country appears, however, to not be significant. The results are therefore in line with the earlier results, suggesting that the regime type as such is not significant in explaining the “attractiveness” of a county as a target of terrorism. Finally, for the variable measuring the distance between the two countries, we also find a significant result for the number of attacks (only a 10% significance).



A study of the relationship between military support and transnational terrorism aligns, almost necessarily, with a discussion on causality. Of course,

one could wonder whether terrorist attacks are a reaction to the deployment of troops (as a signal from terrorist organisations to the world not to interfere in their conflicts), or whether military deployment to specific regions follows from attacks by terrorist groups from these countries. More specifically, are the 22 March 2016 Brussels attacks a backlash effect of the Belgian deployment in Iraq, or is the decision to send Belgian troops to Syria a consequence of these attacks? In order to tackle this causality issue, we also looked at the longer-term relationship. If military support causes terrorist attacks, these attacks might not only be explained by military support in the same year, but could also depend on past decisions dealing with military actions. The results of our empirical model<sup>15</sup> indicate indeed that decisions to support a foreign country one year can increase the likelihood of attacks the following year. With respect to military deployment, this effect fades after two years, whereas the effect lasts longer than two years for arms exports<sup>6</sup>.



## CONCLUSION

This article provides sound empirical evidence that military support leaves the providing country more prone to terrorism. Sending troops increases the probability both of casualties among the troops and of fatalities among citizens due to the backlash effect of the deployment. Therefore, this study indicates

that proactive measures towards terrorism, such as military deployment in the conflict area, have an even higher cost (in terms of increased risks) than previously assumed and than officially stated. Hence, governments should take this increased cost into account when deciding whether or not to deploy troops in foreign missions. Proactive measures are, however, a crucial ingredient for a successful counterterrorism strategy. Consequently, this study should in no way be interpreted as a call towards a less proactive and a more repressive policy towards terrorism. While repressive measures (e.g. Operation Homeland) aimed at protecting potential targets are very important, the transnational character of terrorism (threat) requires a more comprehensive approach, including both repressive as well as proactive measures. At international level a proactive counterterrorism strategy is plagued by the free rider problem resulting in a general underspending. However, if every country only focuses on defensive counterterrorism measures, the world will be even worse off.

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<sup>1</sup> The article is based on the C. Du Bois & C. Buts, “Military support and transnational terrorism”, *Defence and Peace Economics*, vol. 27 n° 5, 2016, pp. 626-643.

<sup>2</sup> As we are interested in the effect of military support to foreign countries, we analyse only international terrorist attacks.

<sup>3</sup> The variable equals 0 if the two countries share a border.

<sup>4</sup> We entered arms exports as a dummy variable in our analysis since the data showed a very large dispersion.

<sup>5</sup> Since including lagged military deployment variables would create multicollinearity problems, we used a Koyck approach as well as a negative binomial model with changes of the deployment level instead of absolute values.

<sup>6</sup> Since military material was not statistically significant in the first original model, we did not include this variable in this study.

