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Research Report

Counterterrorism - Does It Work?

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- **Has counterterrorism policy been evaluated?**
- **Is counterterrorism effective?**
- **What are the best options for policy to fight terrorism?**

Summary: The terrorist threat has increased in importance over the last decade and Western governments have implemented a multitude of measures to address it. Their numbers and the significant financial cost they involve have, however, not been matched with an adequate evaluation of effectiveness. We can therefore only make limited statements on whether or not counterterrorism policy has been effective. Three conclusions with policy implications can nevertheless be drawn from our analysis: the dependency on the local context; the ineffectiveness of measures entailing the use of force; and the need for more evaluation research on protective measures.

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Counterterrorism – does it work?

Introduction

Efforts to combat terrorism have become a priority in the security agenda of many countries. Undoubtedly, the policies, tools and instruments used have imposed high costs on the national economies of these countries. In 2009, the EU is estimated to have spent €93.5 million on counterterrorism (CT) alone (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2011). Comprehensive data on European member states' spending, in contrast, is not available. Estimates for the US suggest that more than \$1 trillion have been spent on counterterrorism measures in the past decade.

Policy efforts not matched by evaluation

The increase in spending and the number of policies implemented, however, has not been matched by an equal assessment of the effects and the effectiveness of these measures. There has not been a systematic effort or much progress in the academic field regarding the evaluation of the effects of counterterrorism policies. Only a small number of studies on terrorism and counterterrorism tackle the question of effectiveness at all.

For instance, the installation of camera surveillance (CCTV) has been advanced in many countries as an instrument to deter future terrorists. There is, however, no systematic evidence on whether these systems have the intended effect (Stutzer and Zehnder, 2010).

However, there is growing interest in learning more about the effectiveness of counterterrorism

instruments. This claim has been repeatedly formulated by scholars and politicians alike. The Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs of the European Parliament, for instance, demanded a review of counterterrorism policies based on criteria such as effectiveness and proportionality in July 2011. Recently, interest and research effort in the area has increased, as illustrated by a limited number of works dealing specifically with counterterrorism effectiveness and the launch of a number of new research projects.

Further, within the EUSECON project a number of studies explicitly deal with the effects of certain policies, including counterterrorist financing (Brzoska, 2011) and the use of CCTV referred (Stutzer and Zehnder, 2010).

Is counterterrorism effective?

Answering this type of question proves to be rather difficult, given the heterogeneous research landscape in the area. Not only does one find a plurality of CT measures and countries studied and methods used, but also of definitions as to what effectiveness means. For some authors, enacting policy measures to address the problem suffices. While for others the indicators of success include outcomes such as the numbers of terrorists arrested or killed, or, indeed, the actual decrease of terrorist activity. Even here, however, we run into the difficulty of deciding, for instance, whether the number of terrorist attacks or their intensity is of relevance.

Having an overarching framework for counterterrorism effectiveness would benefit the field, not only conceptually, but also in order to address and clarify some of the issues mentioned above, such as, what do we actually want to achieve and how do we assess that? In a recent contribution (Van Um and Pisiu, 2011), we adapt the effectiveness conceptualisation initially developed in policy cycle analysis and which distinguishes between output, outcome and impact of a policy.

The kaleidoscope of counterterrorism effectiveness research

Within this framework, *output effectiveness* refers to the implementation of regulations, policy instruments or compliance mechanisms. *Outcome effectiveness*, in contrast, particularly covers the direct and measurable effect that these laws have in real life. *Impact effectiveness* depends on the behaviour of the targeted audience in relation to the long-term objective of the CT policy, namely that of reducing or stopping terrorism.

This concept of effectiveness does not account for the costs related to policy measures, however; for that a concept of efficiency would be needed. Unfortunately, this is not really covered in academic research. One of the few existing studies (Sandler et al., 2011) evaluates the efficiency of INTERPOL work, based on its cost and benefit (prevented attacks).

The causality question

Whether or not certain measures indeed cause a decrease or even cessation of terrorist activity – the core of our question – is an issue that counterterrorism effectiveness research can only address with a limited amount of certainty. This is because the research methods used can only establish correlation. This basically means that doubts remain whether the relationship between policy and effect are causal or not. In most cases, the effect of a policy measure remains probabilistic, since the real reason for an observed effect may be a number of other factors and not the actual counterterrorism measure. For instance, a reduction in terrorism may be due to

terror groups' strategic thinking to reallocate resources for the preparation of a more elaborated attack; or to internal rivalry within a terror group.

This brings us to the core issue of CT effectiveness research, namely the need for causal models that would support the correlations found in studies. For instance, establishing a causal relationship between development aid and a reduction of terrorist incidents would only be convincing if economic underdevelopment had previously been established as a root cause of terrorist violence. However, this relationship has not been fully proven to date.

Similarly, as Brzoska (2011) concludes, the causal link between financing and the number or intensity of terrorist attacks on which policies of counterterrorist financing rest, lacks empirical validity.

Another aspect affecting the question of “what is effective in counterterrorism” is the variety of indicators used. These include output-related indicators such as levels of international or EU cooperation. Other authors have referred to indicators related to outcome-effectiveness (for instance, the number of arrested or killed suspected terrorists, freezing of assets, seizing of weapons). Indicators of impact-effectiveness mostly deal with the number of terrorist attacks carried out or prevented. A commonly encountered fallacy, particularly in policy, is impact evaluation using outcome indicators. For instance, the killing of suspected terrorists as an outcome of a specific policy may not reduce future terrorism but spark recruitment, leading to growing numbers of militants and ultimately even increasing the number of attacks.

There is no universal recipe for counterterrorism

Having said that, even using appropriate indicators will not guarantee accurate evaluation. This is because one and the same aspect may be considered as indicator for the effectiveness of a measure, or rather as side-effect thereof. An example for that is the negative effect of certain CT measures on human rights. This might be considered merely as an unpleasant consequence affecting the state’s reputation and moral credibility, or indeed as actual

indicators of effectiveness through the intermediary of increased recruitment. Similarly, if negative economic consequences of CT measures are only considered as a side-aspect in determining effectiveness, harsh measures that help arrest potential terrorists, but impose a heavy economic burden, might still be considered effective. If, in contrast, the economic impact of CT measures is considered to be central to the evaluation of effectiveness, the same measures might be evaluated more critically. For instance, in the aftermath of major terrorist attacks, the transport sector had to bear additional costs created by newly implemented security standards. This means that the economic effects of CT measures may even be greater than the initial costs of a terrorist attack (Schneider et al., 2011).

What works?

In our recent contribution (Van Um and PISOIU, 2011), we analyse the academic literature that explicitly or implicitly evaluates counterterrorism measures.

Researchers have tested the effects of a variety of counterterrorism measures, examples of which are listed in table 1 and some of which attract moral or legal objections, and the answer to the question of what works, is: **it depends**.

As desirable and practical as it might seem, identifying one or a range of measures that are effective in all countries and at all points in time is a rather hopeless undertaking. This is because effectiveness usually also depends on other circumstances, not least the cultural

and historical context or the type of terrorist group targeted. That said, there are a few types of measures where most scholars agree on their *lack* of effectiveness, and these are usually the ones that entail human rights infringements: aggressive tactics, invasive techniques, as well as the use of force or torture.

Policy recommendations

Three policy recommendations follow from these findings. Given the contextual

Ceasefires & negotiations	House demolitions	Socioeconomic policies
Counterradicalisation policies	Metal detectors	Targeted assassinations
Curfew and search operations	Military tribunals	The use of security/military force
Emergency powers	Wiretapping	Torture
EU/International cooperation	Military air strikes	Racial profiling
Fortification	Preemptive arrests	Unilateral/multilateral economic sanctions

Table 1. Examples of evaluated CT measures

variation, a measure that has proven effective in one country might not work in another. The first recommendation is therefore to be reluctant to imitate without scrutiny of the local setting. The second is related to the type of policy implemented. The majority of studies have focused on a relatively limited number of measures and particularly offensive ones, such as military air strikes and targeted assassinations. These are most often found to be ineffective and actually encourage further terrorism, all the more so when used indiscriminately. We would therefore suggest refraining from the use of aggressive measures. Better success rates seem to be obtained through police work, which has, in fact, traditionally been pursued in European CT policy. Finally, the large number of studies evaluating offensive policies is not matched by research on protective ones. Clearly, more funding is needed to evaluate such measures, especially since they in fact constitute the most important part of the European CT arsenal.

Credits

This EUSECON Policy Briefing was authored by Eric van Um and Daniela PISOIU from the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg. The views expressed in this briefing are the authors' alone.

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For more information on EUSECON, please visit our website:

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