

## Abstract

# Terrorism and its Risks as Perceived by the German Public

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Due to the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the following political reactions, terrorism became a premier topic, a long runner in media reporting. With the attacks in Madrid the international terrorism reached European terrain and made the subject even more explosive. Although it meets high attention in the public, the empirical research on the public's perception of terrorism and the assessment of its risks is rather sparse in Germany.

Between December 1<sup>st</sup> 2003 and February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2004, the University of Stuttgart, »Department of Sociology of Technologies and Environment« carried out 43 textbook interviews with very different interviewees throughout Germany. The intention was to gain differentiated insights into the present perception of terrorism – admittedly at the expense of quantitative generalization of the results.

Most interviewees regard terrorism as a communication strategy of people lacking other means, who try to impose their own problems, views and objectives with concealed force on a superior opponent – and they use the public as a form of pressure.

In the present situation it is not surprising that in the eyes of the public the international terrorism predominates all other variants – here, the interviewees relate to »New York«, »Iraq«, »Palestine« or »Afghanistan«. Sometimes the interviewees also remember spectacular attacks of the recent past – Bali, Djerba, Istanbul, Moscow - , whereas the attacks of the IRA, the ETA and even the RAF seem nearly forgotten.

There are different views about the reasons for the international terrorism: On the one hand it is interpreted as an attempt to keep away the expansion of western modernization, causing cultural, economical and political losses to traditional Islamic countries. Those interviewees understand that religion is an instrument for recruiting activists and justifying violence. On the other hand, religious fanaticism itself is seen as the motive for terrorism.

Some of the interviewees assess the risk of terrorism to be very high, others assess it to be very low. The societal threat is virtually always assessed to be much higher than the threat

for the individual. Altogether, terrorism is seen as an increasing danger. The risk is described to be omnipresent, but only some interviewees think it is present everywhere; other interviewees expect symbolic places in the capitals with their vulnerable infrastructure as particularly threatened.

The perceived uncertainty of the risk is particularly striking: The probability of an attack is uncertain as well as the extent of possible damages, as terrorists try to make use of the enemy's infrastructure and therefore possibly gain increased effects. Terrorism is perceived as an intentional, forced on, individually not controllable, inevitable risk that – in contrast to risks e.g. emerging from nuclear power, mobile networks or tobacco – has no personal or social benefit. Altogether, terrorism is therefore described as a particularly pejorative risk which is condemned to a large extent. The establishment of safety – in personal as well as in social sphere - is mostly regarded to be impossible. Most interviewees ascribe the fact that Germany up to now has escaped from international terrorism to the judicious foreign policy.