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The New Terrorism Revisited: Some Remarks on Terrorism Evolution and Its Strategic Significance After 9/11

STUDIA I ANALIZY

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Abstract: *The article discusses main evolutionary trends in terrorism after 9/11. Analysing the phenomenon globally and with reference to the concept of so called “new terrorism”, the article points out the continuation of majority of trends in terrorism’ evolution from the past, particularly on motivational and organizational level. The study stresses, however, significant quantitative growth in terrorist acts and changes in their geographical distributions. In addition, the article analyses reasons why the risks of super- and cyberterrorism did not materialized fully in last decades.*

Introduction

The September 11 attacks were a turning point in terms of the significance of terrorism as a challenge to international security as well as security of individual states. They have led not only to more intense discussions on this subject (in academic, analytical, and – even more fervent – political circles, and in public debate), but above all to actions (either actual or rather declaratory) aimed at countering the threat posed by ter-

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rorists. It is not clear, however, whether they have proved to be as much of a turning point for terrorism, understood as a certain political phenomenon and thus determining a new direction of its development, or only contributed to reinforcing the evolutionary trends that had already been present before¹. The so-called “new terrorism”², as a form significantly different from the one from the Cold War period, was in fact already shaping near the end of Cold War, mainly as a result of the then progress of globalisation³. It was then, namely in the late 1980s, but particularly in the 1990s, that its key features determining “new” specific nature became apparent: in terms of motivations of terrorist actions, the dominance of religion as justification for the terrorist violence (instead of the previously principal political ideologies, mostly extreme leftist and revolutionary or ethno-nationalist ones); the spread of “flat” and flexible network models instead of the structures previously predominant among terrorist groups that were strongly hierarchical in organisational dimension; and, finally, in terms of operation, the turn towards maximising the number of victims and the scale of destruction as a result of the mounted attacks, also due to the use of “non-selective” methods (namely those affecting everyone within the range of a weapon, not aimed at specific targets), including suicide attacks⁴. After 2001, possibly all these major trends have not died out, but instead have actually intensified. This, however, combined with the changes (as mentioned, which were far more profound) in the ways of responding to terrorism and, above all, in assessments of the strate-

¹ Given the differences in the literature as regards the definition of “terrorism”, for the purpose of this study it is defined as “violence or its used by non-state actors in order to advance a political program by arousing fear in a group of people larger than those directly targeted and, through such pressure, to induce concessions from subject governments or to bring about the destruction of the existing political order”. M. Madej, *Arcs of Crises, zones of peace? The geography of wars, conflicts and terrorism in the twenty-first century*, [in:] M. W. Solarz (ed.), *New Geographies in the Globalized World*, Routledge 2018, p. 172. For challenges related to defining terrorism, see e.g. B. Saul, *Defining Terrorism: a conceptual minefield*, [in:] E. Chenoweth, R. English, A. Gofas, S. N. Kalyvas (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Terrorism*, OUP 2019; A. Richards, *Defining Terrorism*, [in:] A. Silke (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Terrorism and Counterterrorism*, Routledge 2019, pp. 13–22.

² For more about the so-called new terrorism: I. O. Lesser (et. al.), *Countering the New Terrorism*, RAND 1999; W. Laqueur, *The New Terrorism: Fanaticism and the Arms of Mass Destruction*, OUP 1999.

³ F. Hainsbourg, *The War Against Terrorism and the transformation of the World Order: A European View*, ESF Working Paper 2001, No. 5, pp. 1–7.

⁴ For more extensive discussion see e.g. B. Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, Columbia University Press 2017, pp. 83–139; 242–269; W. Laqueur, *The New Terrorism...*, pp. 127–156, 226–254.

gic relevance of terrorism in the context of international stability, has nonetheless led to a significant modification of the overall picture and nature of terrorism. This has not actually meant that the most worrying scenarios have materialised, especially the emergence of the so-called super-terrorism: mass-scale actions using unconventional means of warfare and weapons of mass destruction⁵. Yet this does not mean that the current forms of terrorism no longer pose a serious challenge, or that their specific nature and characteristics do not differ (at least in some important points) from the vision of the “new terrorism” formulated on the basis of the experience from the first post-Cold War decade.

Therefore, this article aims at identifying and characterising the most significant changes in terrorism in the first two decades of the 21st century, and attempts to determine their scope, extent, and sources, particularly in relation to the trends prevailing in the first post-Cold War decade, giving rise to claims that the “new terrorism” emerged at that time. It also tries to verify to what extent predictions about the direction of the development of terrorism in global terms have materialised, especially the fears of its growing importance as a threat to international security, being a direct consequence of the September 11 attacks. All this will be used to assess the actual strategic relevance of terrorism as a challenge to international stability, and to identify the factors that determine it. Thus, the article will essentially be an overview, at the same time being an outlook on the strategic level, focused on general and global trends rather than on a detailed analysis of individual terrorist groups or campaigns. It will primarily be based on a review of literature, as well as on the confrontation of findings and predictions as to the general development of terrorism in the period following the September 11 attacks, particularly those presented immediately after these events, with the processes and developments actually taking place in this regard.

Main trends

Perhaps the most notable change in terrorism after 11 September 2001 compared to its earlier forms is the substantial increase in the number of such incidents. This is somewhat of a paradox, given that it was in the aftermath of the Al-Qaeda attacks in New York and Washing-

⁵ Cf. Y. Alexander, M. Hoenig, *Super Terrorism: Biological, Chemical, and Nuclear*, Transnational Publishers 2001.

ton that the so-called Global War on Terror (GWOT) began, initiated by the United States but widely supported (at least initially) internationally. It meant not only intensification of international cooperation in combating terrorism within the existing structures and systems (in intelligence, police and justice, legal international, and to some extent economic respects), but also a significant increase in violent actions against terrorist groups, including strictly military ones⁶. Nevertheless, as the data in Tables 1 and 2 show, after the initial decline immediately after 9/11, the number of acts of terrorism in the world has steadily and rapidly increased since 2004, at least until 2014, then gradually declining but still not dropping to the level from the last decade of the 20th century. Suffice it to say that the number of terrorist attacks in 2019 (6,739) was higher by more than 50% compared to the number of attacks recorded in 1992, which was the worst year in this respect in the first post-Cold War decade (see Tables 1 and 2). Admittedly, it can be assumed that this statistical increase in the number of recorded acts of terrorism results, in part, from changes in their very perception as a threat to international security and to security of individual states, leading, on the one hand, in a more meticulous collection of the related data and, on the other, in a broader interpretation of the very scope of terrorism and the spectrum of its manifestations (which is justified, as will be explained later in this article, by the transformation of terrorism, in particular its closer links with the course of armed conflicts). However, this would not fully explain such a significant increase in the number of recorded attacks. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that the increase in terrorist activities after 2001, especially after 2004 (one year after the invasion of Iraq by international forces led by the USA, constituting the most controversial element of GWOT and starting the long-term occupation of the country), results to some extent from the popularisation of this method of political violence thanks to the success of the September 11 attacks by Al-Qaeda, proving the ability of at least some terrorist organisations to effectively attack a world superpower (and on its territory). To an even greater extent, however, it was arguably a consequence of the international response to terrorism, or at least its dominant post-2001 forms, focusing on use of force. This has provoked a number of groups and communities to also respond with

⁶ S. Lindahl, *20 Years with the Global War on Terror: A Critical evaluation and Thoughts on How to Prevent Future Terrorism*, «Bezpieczeństwo. Teoria i Praktyka» 2021, No. 3, pp. 36–38.

force or – considering the accompanying “militarisation” of counter-terrorism, a general increase in tolerance within the international community (at both the state and social level) as to the use of force – to shift from non-violent to violent political activity. The best evidence of this is the sharp rise in terrorist activity in Afghanistan and especially in Iraq after the launch of military interventions there (as part of GWOT) in 2001 and 2004, respectively⁷.

Table 1. Number of terrorist attacks in 1990–2000: regional breakdown

	Sub-Saharan Africa	Asia-Pacific	Middle East and North Africa	North and South America	Europe	Total
1990	427	896	365	1,276	395	3,359
1991	239	727	488	1,677	730	3,861
1992	483	836	948	1,313	792	4,372
1993	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
1994	349	551	816	595	618	2,929
1995	216	1,108	512	442	382	2,660
1996	199	949	312	670	617	2,747
1997	239	657	490	946	553	2,885
1998	63	167	209	137	207	783
1999	93	270	194	154	250	961
2000	152	545	218	172	371	1,458
1990–2000	2,460	6,706	4,552	7,382	4,915	25,925

Source: Compilation based on the Global Terrorism Database, www.start.umd.edu/gtd (01.01.2022).

⁷ In Iraq, 108 (successful and unsuccessful) incidents of a terrorist nature were recorded in 2002, already 425 in 2003 (almost exclusively after the start of the invasion in March 2003), 940 in 2004, 2,487 in 2010, and 6,685 in 2014. In Afghanistan, the corresponding figures were as follows: 52 attacks in 2001, 138 in 2002, 625 in 2006, 963 in 2010, and as many as 3,267 in 2014. As cited in Global Terrorism Database, <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/> (20.01.2022). Cf. M. Smith, S. M. Zeigler, *Terrorism before and after 9/11 – a more dangerous world?*, «Research and Politics» 2017, No. 4, pp. 1–8.

Table 2. Number of terrorist attacks worldwide in the 21st century: regional breakdown

	Sub-Saharan Africa	Asia-Pacific	Middle East and North Africa	North and South America	Europe	Total
2001	145	542	322	268	411	1,688
2002	104	396	290	159	200	1,149
2003	66	429	256	149	189	1,089
2004	28	420	395	51	86	980
2005	43	680	678	64	169	1,634
2006	101	1,041	1,031	60	142	2,375
2007	231	1,182	1,243	61	123	2,840
2008	332	2,111	1,413	157	328	4,341
2009	273	2,463	1,306	181	339	4,562
2010	308	2,379	1,390	168	388	4,633
2011	467	2,279	1,520	113	283	4,662
2012	937	3,560	1,979	151	340	6,967
2013	774	4,911	3,768	187	392	10,032
2014	1,781	5,186	5,622	250	671	13,545
2015	1,600	4,875	5,054	199	651	12,379
2016	1,633	4,025	5,280	213	368	11,519
2017	1,503	3,724	3,156	227	375	8,985
2018	1,717	3,353	2,089	353	244	7,756
2019	1,542	3,049	1,599	336	213	6,739
2001–2019	13,585	46,605	38,391	3,382	5,912	107,875

Source: Compilation based on *Global Terrorism Database*, www.start.umd.edu/gtd (01.01.2022).

Whatever the reasons for the increase in manifestations of terrorism worldwide after 2001, it is important to note that this affects almost all geostrategic regions of the world. To some extent, in the light of the breakdown presented in the tables, the only exception is the Western Hemisphere where fewer attacks were recorded after 2001 compared to the 1990s (in the case of South and Central America, it resulted mainly from ending some of the armed conflicts active in the 1990s, and the

insignificance of the religious motivations among the groups there, so crucial in international terrorism since the 1990s⁸; in relation to North America, however, this would indicate, to some extent, that GWOT aimed primarily at reducing the risk of repeating 9/11, and limiting the threat of terrorist attacks on US territory, but less at reducing the terrorist threat as such). In the case of Europe, irrespective of fluctuations in figures on attacks in individual years, it is possible to say that, in general, the number of attacks has remained stable, or at least within the range similar to that from the 1990s. In the 21st century, terrorism has principally increased in the Middle East and Asia, and – earlier, before 2011 and the Arab Spring affecting this region to a relatively small extent – sub-Saharan Africa. This confirms, on the one hand, the link between the intensity of military operations against terrorism (Afghanistan, Iraq and, in 2011, Libya) and the increase (rather than decrease) in the number of acts of terrorism, and, on the other, highlights the key importance of religious motivations in stimulating the development of contemporary terrorism, given the rapid spread of Islamic fundamentalism in these regions, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa (mostly the Sahel)⁹.

The marked increase in the number of terrorist acts recorded in the post-2001 period is also related to the progressive “fusion” of this type of activity with other forms of political violence, including above all irregular warfare, diverse in forms and motives. Certainly, some of non-state political movements had already combined terrorist techniques with guerrilla warfare, e.g. as part of revolutionary, national liberation, or separatist activities, varying only the methods of action depending on the area in which they were carried out¹⁰. These phenomena have never been completely separate, and it has often been difficult to classify individual groups practising political violence as terrorist groups based on their very methods, as illustrated by the case of Colombian leftist armed

⁸ Cf. W. Laqueur, *No End to War. Terrorism in the twenty-first century*, Continuum 2003, pp. 30–71.

⁹ Cf. M. Madej, *Arcs of Crises...*, pp. 176–180; A. Cordesman, *U.S. Strategy and the Trends in Its “Wars” on Terrorism*, 8 August 2018, www.csis.org/analysis/terrorism-us-strategy-and-trends-its-wars-terrorism (20.01.2022).

¹⁰ Good examples include the Liberation Tigers of Tamil that, for many years, have waged guerrilla war against the central government of Sri Lanka in the northern part of the island, in other areas, and abroad, acting in a manner closer to terrorism; or PKK and other Kurdish groups, practising rural guerrilla warfare in eastern Turkey, but developing terrorist-like activities in other regions of the country (e.g. in Istanbul) or in other countries (notably Germany in the 1990s).

groups, such as FARC or ELN. Undoubtedly, this was also fostered by the direction of evolution of armed conflicts in the post-Cold War period, the vast majority of which took on the character of the so-called “new wars”, fought mostly in failed or failing states between non-state actors representing (albeit often to a large extent only in hollow declarations, but in fact pursuing their particularist interests and those of their leaders, the so-called warlords) various ethnic or religious groups, and avoiding open confrontation with other armed groups, but focusing on attacking civilians (for various reasons: operational, political, and above all, economic)¹¹. However, after 2001, this trend has intensified even more. Initially, Al-Qaeda and its local offshoots (particularly in Iraq after 2004) have undoubtedly contributed to this, prevailing in terms of motivations (ideology and justification of actions) and largely guiding the development of terrorism worldwide in the first two post-Cold War decades at organisational (group structures) and operational levels (tactics and means of attack). This is because they have combined terrorist methods with irregular warfare and, at the same time, at the doctrinal level, inscribed all local conflicts of Muslim communities into the logic of a “pan-Islamic” (in fact Sunni) global confrontation with different cultures and religions “hostile” to Islam (or at least considered as such by fundamentalists), especially the Western world. In the last decade, particularly thanks to the military successes in the fight against the Iraqi government in 2012–2013, the main driver of deepening the links between guerrilla warfare and terrorism became – after splitting from Al-Qaeda around 2006 – the Islamic State (IS/ISIS). It managed to combine, even more strongly (and effectively) than Al-Qaeda, the practice of guerrilla warfare with terrorist activity, and additionally had a bigger impact on the development of violence inspired by extreme forms of Islamic (Sunni) fundamentalism in the region that experienced relatively the greatest number of armed conflicts in the post-Cold War period, mainly on the religious or ethnic backdrop, namely in Sub-Saharan Africa, especially in its eastern part (including Somalia) and the Sahel¹². A manifestation of these changes is the growing activity (and brutality, demonstrated by the increased use of terrorist methods, e.g. attacks on public buildings, kidnapping of civilians, etc.) of groups initially identifying themselves with Al-Qaeda and later with the Islamic State, such as Boko Haram in

¹¹ For more on the origins and specific nature of the new wars, see: M. Kaldor, *New and Old Wars. Organised Violence in the Global Era*, Polity Press 1999.

¹² W. Laqueur, Ch. Wall, *The Future of Terrorism*, Thomas Dunne 2018, pp. 93–118.

northern Nigeria and neighbouring regions, Al-Shabaab in Somalia and Kenya, or MOJWA (Movement for Oneness and Jihad) in Mali¹³.

However, the reported increase in the intensity of terrorism in Sub-Saharan Africa (and, in fact, mainly in the Sahel and East Africa) combined with the rapid spread of fundamentalist ideology in this region seems to confirm, at least on a global arena, the persistence of the developmental trend of terrorism, already visible since the 1980s, but is particularly evident since the end of the Cold War, namely the key relevance of religious motivations (justification of a given group's political programme and methods by reference to religious values). This trend, as mentioned before, has determined to the greatest extent the specific nature of the so-called "new terrorism" in the post-Cold War period. After 9/11, it has not only remained unchanged, but has actually grown stronger, which is understandable to some extent, if only in view of the group that organised the attacks. Importantly (and also remaining rather the continuation of the 1990s situation), this was determined almost exclusively by the increase in terrorist activity motivated by various variants of the fundamentalist version of Islam, with a marginal role of other religions. The interventions made in response to the actions of terrorists by coalitions of Western states led by the USA in Afghanistan (2001–2014 and, to a limited extent, until 2021) and Iraq (2003–2011 and then, on a smaller scale and directed against the so-called Islamic State, since 2014) have only reinforced this (clear, pre-2001) trend and its additional (also already present before) anti-Western nature¹⁴.

At the organisational level of terrorism after 2001, one could also see mainly the continuation of the trends outlined at least a decade earlier, namely the progressive decentralisation and networking of terrorist groups' structures, and the growing autonomy of individual units' operations and activities (including their freedom to decide on the targets, timing, and methods of attacks), bringing them closer (regardless of their motivations or values behind their activities) to the model of *leaderless resistance*¹⁵. The result was a certain "amateurisation" of terrorist activities, meant that increasingly often terrorist attacks directly

¹³ For more on the progressive integration of irregular actions in armed conflict and terrorism, see P. Rogers, *Irregular War. The New Threat from the Margins*, I. B. Tauris 2017, pp. 152–174.

¹⁴ For more extensive information, see: J. Burke, *The 9/11 Wars*, Allen Lane-Penguin Books 2011.

¹⁵ G. Michael, *Leaderless Resistance: The New Face of Terrorism*, «Defense Studies» 2012, No. 2, pp. 257–282.

involved people who were not regularly engaged in such groups, but mostly trained on an ad hoc basis or even merely inspired to become active by existing groups and their ideology. Probably the biggest contributor to this circumstance was the rapid development of modern communication technologies, including social media, and the continued (at least until the COVID-19 pandemic) increase in the movement of people throughout the world. On the one hand, the above-mentioned trends in terms of organisation increased the resistance of terrorist groups to counteractions (such loosely organised groups are difficult to recognise and break up effectively by state services specialising in this field) and the unpredictability of their actions (limiting the possibility of effective prevention, at least through passive, not active actions¹⁶). However, the cost was the reduction in organisational and coordination capabilities, including organisation of long-lasting, complex and intensive campaigns, of the vast majority of organisations, also those, such as Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State, having access to relatively the greatest resources, numerous staff, and logistical capabilities¹⁷.

Therefore, strictly in the operational respect of terrorist activities (methods and means of attack), the last two decades (with the possible exception of the first years after the September 11 attacks) have seen relatively the greatest changes overall in relation to the first post-Cold War decade, meaning precisely a relative drop in the complexity and organisational advancement of the attacks carried out by terrorists (regardless of their motivation or area of operation). This is interesting given that back in the 1990s, this kind of complexity of terrorist actions tended to increase. More complex tactics and tools were used more frequently, and simultaneous attacks were carried out, which required relevant logistics and intelligence preparation, and better training of the perpetrators. Meanwhile, in this respect, there has been a clear shift,

¹⁶ Passive response (sometimes referred to in the literature as *antiterrorism*) is understood here as measures aimed at increasing the level of preventive protection for potential targets against terrorist attacks (e.g. control measures at airports, etc.), whereas active actions (sometimes referred to as *counterterrorism*) are aimed at disrupting or destroying terrorist groups (actions of intelligence services, capturing terrorists, but also, for example, the so-called selective elimination – extrajudicial killing of persons identified as terrorists).

¹⁷ B. M. Jenkins, *Stray Dogs and Virtual Armies: Radicalization and Recruitment to Jihadist Terrorism in the United States Since 9/11*, RAND 2011, pp. 1–2; J. J. Norris, *Idiosyncratic Terrorism: Disaggregating an Undertheorized Concept*, «Perspectives on Terrorism» 2020, No. 3, pp. 2–18.

especially in the last decade, towards simpler, or even primitive (but not necessarily ineffective), tactics and methods of operation, as shown by the wave of attacks principally in Europe between 2014 and 2017, using vans and trucks to run over larger groups of people¹⁸, or the relatively frequent activity of knifemen or lone gunmen¹⁹. In other words, in terms of operational complexity, the attacks of 11 September 2001 have so far proved to be the pinnacle of terrorist activities, rather than a harbinger of the increasing prowess of terrorist groups. Certainly, there have been many reasons for that. They range from the intensification of counterterrorism measures by states and their cooperation in this field (under this type of pressure, it becomes more difficult to carry out complex attacks, which require longer preparation), through changes in the organisation of terrorist groups in which – on the one hand – individual cells becoming more autonomous (planning and carrying out their actions in fact independently, with little or no cooperation from other elements of the structure, only inspiration from the “core” and leaders) and, on the other, “amateurisation” mentioned above happened (“amateurs” are often radicalised, but not always well-trained, so capable of preparing only a simple attack). Turning to simpler tactics has also significant operational advantages (unpredictability and, therefore, difficulty in effective counteraction; the psychological effect of such attacks that “could happen anywhere and at any time”). While, in a military sense, a turn towards this kind of actions means lower effectiveness or efficiency, it can bring real effects in the psychological and, thus, political sense, deepening the insecurity of the societies so affected.

Fears unfulfilled – the threat of super- and cyberterrorism

By contrast, fears of the so-called superterrorism (the effective use of weapons of mass destruction by terrorists) have not materialised. The scale and complexity of the September 11 attacks, despite the fact that they did not exploit any unconventional means (although civilian passenger aircraft were used in an innovative way) greatly reinforced fears

¹⁸ During the specified period, at least 17 such attacks were carried out worldwide, resulting in 173 fatalities (including as many as 87 in a single attack in Nice on 14 July 2016) and 667 injured. K. Ketner, *Vehicle Ramming Attacks*, 2017, https://www.isbe.net/Documents/Kim_Retner_Vehicle_Ramming_Attacks.pdf (20.01.2022).

¹⁹ P. Nesser, A. Stenersen, *The Modus Operandi of Jihadi Terrorists in Europe*, «Perspectives on Terrorism» 2014, No. 6, pp. 12–15 and 19–21.

of such events, already present, primarily as a result of the attack of the Japanese doomsday cult the Supreme Truth with the use of the sarin nerve gas in March 1995²⁰. Immediately after the 9/11 attacks, the scenarios assuming the detonation of a nuclear device by terrorists in the centre of a large city, the spread of a toxic chemical substance, or the release of a deadly pathogen, leading to tens or perhaps even hundreds of thousands of casualties, were treated as a highly dangerous and yet realistic option, since it was perceived as not only in the sphere of interest, but also within the technical capabilities of at least some terrorist groups. Information about the efforts of some groups, including Al-Qaeda, to obtain such means seemed to substantiate these fears, as did (most likely unrelated to Al-Qaeda's activity) a series of anthrax letter attacks aimed at government and media institutions in the US in the fall of 2001. Additionally, this possibility was linked to the threat of terrorist being supported by certain governments possessing, or developing (or suspected of developing) WMD technology (DPRK, Iraq and Iran were sources of particular concerns in this regard)²¹. From the start, however, these considerations have tended to underestimate the scale of the technical and logistical constraints associated with terrorists' attempts to acquire such means of destruction and then use them effectively, or the scale of the actual interest in such actions among terrorist groups. This even led to a kind of hysteria in which the scale of the threats was overestimated, misinterpreting (intentionally or not) the data on attempted uses (mostly taken by groups with relatively limited operational capabilities, perhaps not even fully aware of the complexity of the task and their own inability to achieve success in this regard²²), but also misjudging the priorities of the international policy and cooperation (e.g. adopting in 2005 the International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism, being relatively the least likely, and not taking equally intensive steps – especially in practical terms, not in

²⁰ E. Spinzak, *The Great Superterrorism Scare*, «Foreign Policy» 1998, No. 112, pp. 110–125.

²¹ For more extensive information, see: Ch. D. Ferguson (et. al.), *The Four Faces of Nuclear Terrorism*, Monterrey 2004.

²² After 2001, for example, there were alleged attempts to poison water intakes with biological agents in Rome, London or Amman by members of Al-Qaeda (or more likely amateur sympathisers, usually having no adequate training or permanent links to the organisation). These attempts, mostly halted at an early stage, usually involved the use of low-quality and insufficiently powerful measures to cause mass casualties. Cf. J. Spyer, *The Al Qaeda Network and Weapons of Mass Destruction*, «Middle East Review of International Affairs» 2004, No. 3, pp. 32–37.

form of legal standard – in the context of biological weapons)²³. It must be admitted, however, that the strongest fears of superterrorism have been demonstrated in the US, whereas globally this concern has been more prevalent in political and media debate than among academics or analysts. Ultimately, however, since 2001 there has been virtually no successful terrorist attack with the use of non-conventional means in a way that leads to mass casualties (mostly due to the technical limitations of the perpetrators and the lack of a suitable means). This can only partly be explained by the effectiveness of the (costly and often cumbersome) preventive measures introduced by states alone or in cooperation with others, particularly intensive in the first years after 2001, more so by the negligible likelihood of such actions from the outset²⁴.

To a certain extent, the evolution of terrorism in the context of new information technologies has been similar (although not identical). Their rapid development and, as a result, the proliferation of IT applications as well as the sharp increase in the degree of dependence of modern societies on their effective operation (especially the most advanced ones) have caused serious fears, dating back to the early 1990s, but reinforced by the shock of the September 11 attacks, of the so-called cyberterrorism. Initially, the focus was on the threat of terrorists using these technologies and tools (relatively inexpensive and providing access to a large number of potentially sensitive and important targets, such as components of the critical infrastructure controlled and supervised by ICT networks, also ignoring geographical barriers) as a weapon enabling them, with the appropriate measures, such as viruses or worms, to destroy systems connected to and dependent on the web networks, and possibly cause numerous fatalities. In fact, however, for various reasons²⁵, terrorism has

²³ W. C. Potter, Ch. D. Ferguson, L. S. Spector, *The Four Faces of Nuclear Terror: And the Need for a Prioritized Response*, «Foreign Affairs?» 2004, No. 3, pp. 130–132.

²⁴ Cf. G. Ackerman, *Chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) terrorism*, [in:] A. Silke (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Terrorism and Counterterrorism*, Routledge 2019, pp. 240–253.

²⁵ A number of technical factors can be identified here (despite the global nature of IT networks and the cyberspace based on them, in fact the possibilities of effectively accessing and then destroying physical systems connected to it are limited and require appropriate target identification and programming competences, but also the ability to deactivate protective measures), together with the difference of this type of actions from the standard methods known to terrorists (which makes it difficult to control the operation and predict its outcome, consequently increasing the risk of failure), and a certain lack of drama of such steps (although it is possible to cause, for example, significant financial losses, by destroying bank data, but it is more difficult to cause direct

not evolved in this direction, at least for the time being, despite the ever-increasing use of IT, their almost ubiquitous presence and multitude of applications, and the ever-increasing dependence of current societies and economies on its effective operation. These technologies have not become a “safe (for the user) alternative” to bombs and guns, a weapon used most frequently by non-state actors, and most successful cases of use of such measures (including the so-called *Stuxnet* worm attack on Iranian uranium enrichment facilities in 2009–2010) were perpetrated by state agents, not terrorists²⁶. However, terrorists (as well as states) have discovered and intensively exploited other advantages of the rapid IT progress. It has enabled to radically improve the functioning of terrorist groups in terms of, so to speak, logistics: improve internal communication within increasingly transnational and geographically dispersed groups; expand the possibilities of acquiring information and financial resources; and, above all, exploit the propaganda and disinformation potential of cyberspace and social media, which has rapidly expanded the possibilities of terrorists’ psychological impact and even revolutionised the processes of radicalising sympathisers and recruiting new members. Ultimately, although no terrorist group has actually started to commit attacks with consequences in the “real world” on regular basis, and the few efforts to do so have had poor results, the use of IT to enhance terrorist activity and increase its psychological effect (as a kind of force multiplier) is undoubtedly one of the key characteristics of the 21st century terrorism. Additionally, it is impossible to rule out that, with the further progress of the IT revolution, especially the introduction of 5G technologies, artificial intelligence, and the growing automation and robotisation of modern societies and economies, the threat of attacks using these achievements may nevertheless increase (for instance, with the introduction of autonomous means of transport), although the scale of benefits for terrorist groups from the undisturbed operation of cyberspace may, to some extent, limit their readiness to “transfer” the strictly terrorist activity to the virtual sphere²⁷.

fatalities or physical restriction, thus reducing the psychological effect; additionally, it is often difficult to prove that such losses are the result of a hackers’ attack inflicted by terrorists and not, for example, of a simple malfunction). M. Conway, *Reality Check: Assessing the (Un)Likelihood of Cyberterrorism*, [in:] T. Chen, L. Jarvis, S. Macdonald (eds.), *Cyberterrorism*, Springer 2014, pp. 103–121.

²⁶ R. Slayton, *What Is the Cyber Offense-Defense Balance?*, «International Security» 2017, No. 3, pp. 95–104.

²⁷ For more on the use of IT networks for radicalisation and recruitment by extremists, see e.g. J. Ebner, *Going Dark. The Secret Social Lives of Extremists*, Bloomsbury 2020.

Conclusions

Regardless of the journalistic nature of the term, it is not uncommon to treat the September 11 attacks as a kind of symbolic beginning of the 21st century in international relations, at least in the field of security, setting the tone, to some degree, for the first decades of the new century. Terrorism has indeed become one of the most serious challenges to international security during this period, and certainly the subject of intense international cooperation aimed at combating it. Importantly, however, as this paper has tried to demonstrate, to a relatively limited extent this has been the result of some profoundly revolutionary trends emerging in terrorism in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, and the resultant formation of an entirely new form of terrorism. After all, some kind of revolution in this political phenomenon had occurred earlier, in the period immediately following the end of the Cold War, whereas those changes following the September 11 attacks only continued them, even if they resulted in a sharpening or strengthening of its key features (such as the networking of structures of terrorist organisations or the dominant role of religious motivation in their justification). In other words, the most important characteristic features of post-2001 terrorism resembles those forms of terrorism that emerged in the 1990s, prompting some researchers at the time to formulate the concept of the so-called “new terrorism”.

This does not mean, however, that the strategic importance of terrorism as a threat to international security and stability has not increased in the post-2001 period, which is somewhat surprising, given the intensity of the counteractions. This is primarily due to the sharp quantitative increase in this phenomenon, as indicated in this paper, and to the fact that it has become more widespread and present (albeit with varying intensity) in basically all geostrategic regions of the world. Undoubtedly, this is also affected by the deepening integration of terrorism with other manifestations of political violence by non-state actors, and by the increasing unpredictability of the time, place, and specific forms of its manifestation involving individual attacks following changes in terms of operation, and the consequent difficulty of effective prevention and defence against them.

Paradoxically, however, what seems to have made terrorism one of the most important driving forces and determinants of changes in the global security environment of the 21st century has been less the change occurring within it, and more the forms of the responses to this threat by

individual states and the international community as a whole. There has been a clear move towards forceful solutions, resulting, on the one hand, in an increase in military action aiming at destroying terrorist groups and depriving them of the support of certain governments and societies, thus leading to a wave of (mostly ineffective) international interventions in the first two decades of the 21st century. On the other, it has caused a significant shift in the balance between the respect for human rights and international law, and the powers of state services responsible for combating terrorism (or, more broadly, for ensuring national security, including public security). This has meant a growing acceptance of the measures taken in the name of security needs, previously considered to be at least controversial, and often exceeding the limits permitted by law (e.g. the use of torture by the USA and some other states, and consent to it on the part of many others, in the case of terrorism suspects, or the relatively high tolerance for such practices as targeted killing or extraordinary renditions). It is possible that terrorism was more of a pretext than a real cause in this respect. However, triggered to a large extent by the 9/11 attacks and justified by the need to respond adequately to the alleged scale of the threat, a kind of “return of power” in international relations has become a reality, significantly affecting global processes in international security and modifying the mechanisms of its development and maintenance. In a way, this can be considered the terrorists’ greatest, even if not entirely intentional, success.

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