# THE BOOMERANG EFFECT OF THE WAR ON TERROR

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**Abstract:** The goal of the war on terror is to prevent a new 9/11. In order to achieve this, the preemptive strike has been introduced to tackle the terrorism risk. However, this precisely leads to the increasing unpredictability of terrorism and hence the likelihood of a new 9/11. Preemption does not help to reduce the terrorism risk, but on the very contrary leads to its increase. The argument will be taken a step further by claiming that, in fact, the war on terror increases the likelihood of catastrophic terrorism, because the risk of terrorism increases as such that terrorists might seek indiscriminate violence not shying away to use weapons of mass destruction. The war on terror therewith turns into a risk paradox – carrying consequences which, arguably, are even more risky than the original risk itself. In order to demonstrate this point, this article applies the concept of risk to terrorist groups and relates it to the paradox implications of the war on terror.
*Keywords*: war on terror, terrorism risk, risk paradox, catastrophic terrorism, 9/11.

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## INTRODUCTION

Todos While the war on terror seeks to destroy terrorism, terrorists see themselves as acting in self-defense. A vicious terror and counter-terror circle ensues with violence being constantly reproduced. However, not only do terrorists gain legitimacy and justification for their terrorism from states' violence, they also exhibit organizational learning and to adapt to changing circumstances. Bruce Hoffmann, for example, points to the "terrorism-counterterrorism conundrum" that exists today: "As counterterrorism measures improve and become stronger, Al Qaeda and its affiliates and associates must constantly scramble to adapt themselves to the less

congenial operational environments in which they now have to operate."[1] The war on terror therewith turns into a risk paradox – carrying consequences which, arguably, are even more risky than the original risk itself. Reinforcing its own reason, the war on terror becomes self-perpetuating.

Surely it is not new that risk policy itself is risky.[2] Paradoxical effects – consequences which are more costly than the risk are frequent.[3] Yet, even when the Club of Rome states that the change towards modern civilization implies consequences from which some have the opposite effect of what was intended[4], we are not halted to accept inconsistent policies. On the very contrary, the disclosure of paradoxes can sometimes be traced back to an actual use of arguments which scrutinized more closely lose explanatory power.

What is a paradox? A paradox is "the situation in which the condition of possibility is also the condition of impossibility".[5] A prototype is the famous liar paradox wherein the claim that everybody is a liar becomes a contradiction en se. This contradiction results from negating a self-referential statement, e.g. keeping freedom by taking measures which limit freedom or keeping the ideal of equality by making some more equal than others. Another example is employing violence to reach peace – an example that clearly fulfills the paradoxical meaning of sacrificing values in the present in order to realize them in the future. It takes "the end justifies the means" literally.

The self-referential nature of paradoxes highlights the stake of an actor in bringing himself into a paradoxical situation in the first place. According to Ulrich Beck actors in the

world risk society are left with the option of feigning control over what is ultimately not controllable.[6] In turn, Aradau und van Münster criticize Beck's approach, pointing out that risks are not something 'out there'[7]. Much more interesting, so they argue, is an analysis of risk which makes evident "how the world and existing problematizations are made into risks"[8].

In order to confront the risk of terrorism, the war on terror seeks to act proactively. Thus, the preemptive strike was introduced as an antidote. Preemption, however, does not help to reduce the terrorism risk, but on the very contrary leads to its increase. Repressive risk policy to prevent terrorism is failing, which is why the war on terror can not be won. This argument will be taken a step further by claiming that the war on terror increases the likelihood of catastrophic terrorism because the risk of terrorism increases as such that terrorists might seek indiscriminate violence not shying away to use weapons of mass destruction. The development of terrorism is decisively impacted by the way the terrorism risk is confronted, because after all terrorism is not just something 'out there.'

## 1. THE CONCEPT OF RISK

Surely nobody would contest that the concept of terrorism is essentially contested. Like no other, its definitional framing is highly politicized and at the core of heated debates. To escape this dilemma, some have suggested focusing on the employment of violence against civilians as the distinctive conceptual core - just to face the next dilemma: how to differentiate terror and crime or terror and state violence. Some have sought for shared global norms that enable a common definitional framing. Thus, according to Robert Kennedy we share global norms beyond differences in religion and culture[9]. However, at the same time Kennedy points out that there are obstacles to this sharing of global norms as for example "a revival of *jus ad bellum* thinking that operates to the detriment of *jus in bello*"[10]. Again others have tried to extrapolate the key common elements in numerous definitions and come up with a common denominator.[11] But it seems that the search for a universally valid terrorism definition is inhibited by the realities on the ground. Some would surely disagree to this statement and hold up that the issue of definition does not matter. Clearly, agreement about disagreement does not make scientific work easier, yet it defines the challenge: to clarify the purpose of ones' own employed

concept. After all, scientific work commences with conceptual work[12] or as Niklas Luhmann succinctly states: "if it is not at all clear what one is supposed to be dealing with, it is quite impossible to start investigating."[13]

The current landscape of war and conflict escapes the margins of the traditional focus on interstate conflict and is, contrarily, dominated by non-state violence. Corresponding repercussions have among others resulted in the introduction of the concept of risk: "The changing contours of conflicts, wars, and crises with and after the end of the Cold War have led to a semantic shift: Not the avoidance of threats, so the argument goes, but the management of risks characterizes contemporary security practices."[14] Part of this semantic shift is the broadening of security concerns because "it became increasingly clear that military threats – in the traditional sense – were no longer the most eminent problem of world politics."[15] The first reaction focused on broadening the security concept itself:

The focus on military questions was increasingly augmented by economic, ecological, and cultural concerns. Another approach was to reformulate the kind of danger that security policy addresses. Not threats, but risks dominate the security agenda, it was argued, thus redefining the task of security policy to proactively prevent or mitigate possible harm.[16]

Christopher Daase seeks to conceptualize international risks in order to frame the parameters of a risk political research program and thus asks what distinguishes international risks and military threats. "Risk", as he acknowledges, will of course remain a contested concept, because "like no-other it goes to the core of the *conditio humana* of the modern – and post modern – human between free will and security aspiration."[17] The goal of scientific conceptualization would be therefore to develop a concept appropriate for a clearly determined problem area and to operationalize it accordingly. But how can we differentiate threats and risks? During the Cold War aspiring for security - the highest goal in anarchy - uttered in the security dilemma: striving for security became the source of new insecurity, arms races being a case in point. Yet, this system was based on a known and credible threat and therewith on relative certainty. This notion of threat was highly plausible for the

Cold War period, as three conditions were fulfilled: the existence of a hostile actor, a hostile intention and a military potential. In the aftermath of the Cold War dangers are of a different kind. They often lack predictable means, a political cause or tangible goals. Terrorism is a case in point. While the Cold War justified the notion of threat, its coming to an end also implied the obsolescence of its dominating threat paradigm of security. Risks, not threats, mark contemporary international relations.[18]

## 2. THE WAR ON TERROR AS A RISK PARADOX

Not less than the "fastest and most dramatic change in the history of the American Foreign Policy"[19], the war on terror thwarts under-statements. As an anticipated fulfillment of the no-concessions-doctrine, the pre-emptive strike eventually relegates the use of diplomatic means to the last resort. In 1990, Mary Kaldor titled her book on the Cold War confrontation "The Imaginary War" in which she prospectively sets out that "there is also a danger of new imaginary and real wars"[20] and in her lecture on "Old Wars, Cold Wars, New Wars, and the War on Terror" in 2005, she merges both concepts by depicting the Iraqi war theatre as "a reconstructed 'Old War'"[21].
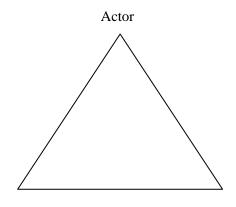
What do the war on terror and the Cold or other "Old" Wars have in common? They are based on the same concept – the concept of threat. Thus, during the Cold War the Soviet Union and its East European allies constituted the first, an offensively perceived ideology and as hostile interpreted intention the second and the Soviet military potential the third element in the threat triangle.[22] "The War on Terror, {just} like the Cold War, is viewed as a powerful crusade – freedom against totalitarianism….Global Islam

is dubbed as a new totalitarian ideology even though totalitarianism…is intrinsically linked to state power…The idea of the war on terror is, for many Americans, no less convincing than the Cold War[23]".

The war on terror is based on the visible threat triangle elements. Although the understanding of terrorism as a sub-state phenomenon "signals a reverse of the original meaning from the French Revolution"[24], it has found widespread use and acceptance, obviously boosted by state actors. The argument for state-sponsored terrorism is reflected in official U.S. policy until today: the position that terrorist groups are supported (and hence linked) by sponsoring states. This conviction conversely climaxed in Claire Sterling's book, according to which "Sovietologists"[25] discovered the offspring of a "Guerrilla International"[26] in the 1970s. Convinced, the journalist writes: "The fact that there is such a thing as an international terrorist circuit, or network, or fraternity – that a multitude of disparate terrorist groups have been helping one another out and getting help from not altogether disinterested outsiders – is hardly classified information anymore."[27] The durability of this conception can be shown by following from statement to statement until Bush's State of the Union Address in 2006: "Abroad, our nation is committed to an historic, long-term goal -- we seek the end of tyranny in our world… Dictatorships shelter terrorists, and feed resentment and radicalism, and seek weapons of mass destruction. Democracies … join the fight against terror."[28]

The use of force aimed at deterrence is based on notions of state sovereignty, rationality and power in terms of material violence. It is based on the notion of the visible opponent: the state. It is based on the concept of threat:

**Figure 1. Intention Diagram**

Actor

Intention
Diagram [29]

Paradoxically, this focus entails the actor's invisibility. The war on terror therewith turns into a risk paradox contributing to the very risk it aims to prevent. Accordingly, Bruce Hoffmann points to the "terrorism-counterterrorism conundrum" that exists today:

As counterterrorism measures improve and become stronger, Al Qaeda and its affiliates and associates must constantly scramble to adapt themselves to the less congenial operational environments in which they now have to operate. For the terrorists this inevitably entails tapping into new and different pools of recruits, adjusting targeting and modus operandi to obviate governmental countermeasures and an enforced evolutionary process on which their survival depends.[30]

Similarly, Scott Atran observes:

Repeated suicide actions show that massive counterforce alone does not diminish the frequency or intensity of suicide attack. Like pounding mercury with a hammer, this sort of top-heavy counterstrategy only seems to generate more varied and insidious forms of suicide terrorism. Even with many top Al Qaeda leaders dead or now in custody, the transnational jihadist fraternity is transforming into a hydra-headed network more difficult to fight than before.[31]

The evolution of terrorism into net-war has, however, been described already in 1999 by John Arquilla, David Ronfeldt and Michele Zanini who associate this development with the advent of the information age, such that "each group within this network becomes relatively autonomous but is still linked by advanced communication"[32]. In Arquilla's and Ronfeldt's concepts of three ideal types of networks (chains, hubs and all-channels) the relevant players remain defined. Shaul Mishal's and Maoz Rosenthal's Article "Al Qaeda as a Dune organization" challenges the "two key organizational approaches [to terrorist groups]: hierarchical order and networks"[33] and introduces the concept of the Dune organization: "The Dune concept is inspired by the de-territorialization of the new political order: the world image of 'geo-political vertigo':

That is, a world that enables global terrorist organizations to adopt dunelike dynamics. When one takes this metaphor and applies it to the world of terrorist organizations, the resemblance of the geological Dune to the organization Dune becomes apparent. That is, terrorist organizations acting in the manner described with respect to Al Qaeda, act in a dynamics of a fast-moving entity that associates and disassociates itself with local elements while creating global effects….these features…may explain Al Qaeda's choice of global targets while employing limited power in an innovative and flexible manner; a manner that has to be employed due to the immense constraints faced by Al Qaeda since 11 September 2001.[34]

Having adopted a novel mode of operation in the aftermath of the 2001 U.S.-led attack on Afghanistan, Al Qaeda succeeded in transforming the strategic and military obstacles erected by the United states into strategic advantages and thereby challenged two main conditions of the conventional structures in hierarchical and network organizations: "In the case of Al Qaeda, although its inner core may continue to rely, in some of its operations, on these two principles, de-territorialization, instead of affiliation with definite territorial location, and disappearance rather than institutional presence, have become Al Qaeda's organizational trademarks."[35] The organizational shape of terrorist groups becomes more difficult to define as a consequence of the war on terror. The terrorist actor is becoming invisible.

The war on terror has, moreover, played into the hands of terrorist groups. The following words by Ayman al Zawahiri on the second anniversary of September 11th seem to underpin this argument:

We thank God…for appeasing us with the dilemmas in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Americans are facing a delicate situation in both countries. If they withdraw they will loose everything and if they stay, they will continue to bleed to death.[36]

Just as the organizational shape of the terrorist actor evolves during the course of confrontation, does the intention adapt to the circumstances. In this context the development of Al Qaeda into an ideology has received widespread attention. How the war on terror has contributed to this transmutation into an ideology can be imagined in the following ways: In "Modern Jihad. The Islamist

Crusade", Loretta Napoleoni establishes a connection between the talk of "crusades", "axis of evil" or "struggle of light against the dark" brought forward through the Bush Administration and the "ideologization" of terrorism:

In his speeches Osama Bin Laden has often drawn parallels with Christian Crusades, accusing America of being the new Crusaders engaged in a colonial war to subjugate the Muslim world. He portrays Islamic Jihad against the West as a justified response to an atavistic aggressor.[37]

Furthermore, a link between Al Qaeda transmuting into an ideology and the focus on the visible actor – the state territory as exemplified in the Iraq war – can be found in Robert Pape's book "Dying to Win":

Even in today's globalizing world, the territory that national groups perceive as the birthplace of their community usually evokes special commitment. Although boundaries may be ambiguous and history may be contested, the homeland is imbued with memories, meanings, and emotional attachments. Over time, as a group occupies and narrates a particular territory, a transformation occurs. Instead of the group defining the territory, the territory comes to define the group.[38]

The lost territory is mystified, a process contributing to the emergence and reinforcement of ideology. This process, in turn, is intensified, when the alien occupiers value a different religion than the occupied: "The harder the boundary between groups – the more exclusive are membership rules – the more extreme is the 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy. Religion is normally more exclusive than other national differences under the condition of an occupation and so often becomes the principal defining boundary…"[39]

The loss of the territory furthermore gives rise to ideologization not only because it is somehow lost as a reality and because the identities of occupier and occupied become confrontational, but also because the formation of an ideology constitutes an effective glue for disparate networked actors. Interesting in this context is the observation by Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkins that nongovernmental groups, whose members extend across borders, are held together by common ideas.[40]

Rather than an actor with concrete political goals, Al Qaeda is thus described today as an ideology. The group's intention is consequently turning into an equally amorphous and puzzling element, even harder now to comprehend and analyze. The intention is becoming invisible.

The potential of Al Qaeda has inspired the strongest concerns. Estimations and measures, especially within the context of the WMD accessibility debate, fluctuate between inactivity and overreaction.[41] Thus, Alan Krueger and David Laitin highlight the State Department's big mistake in 'Misunderestimating Terrorism' in a October 2004 *Foreign Affairs* article.[42] With the advent of the concept "new" terrorism authors as Walter Laqueur, Ashton Carter or John Deutsch, in turn, emphasize the increasing unpredictability of a terrorist potential suggesting a conceptual jump towards 'postmodern' or 'catastrophic' terrorism.[43] Concerning the visibility or in other words our knowledge of the terrorist group's means, the thesis that the Iraq war concentrates the terrorist struggle outside such that they can be fought "there" rather than at home is contrasted by the following observation of Hoffman: "For Al-Qaeda therefore, Iraq's preeminent utility has been as a useful side-show: an effective means to preoccupy American military forces and distract U.S. attention while Al Qaeda and its confederates make new inroads and strikes elsewhere".[44]

Another argument for the growing unpredictability of the potential of terrorist groups can be found when investigating the implications of the growing network character of terrorist groups and the terror-crime nexus described by Chris Dishman:

The rise of networked organizations has given greater independence to criminals and terrorists who previously answered to a clear chain of command. These members are now willing to engage in operations that before had been off-limits because the leadership believed the activity would hurt the organization's broader mandate. The result is that a 'leaderless nexus' is beginning to emerge between criminals and terrorists.[45]As a result, the terrorist group's potential is even harder to assess as terrorist organizations access novel and unknown financial sources, as criminals

and terrorists copy each other's expertise and as the identification of hybrid organizations becomes more difficult because "cells with hybrid organizations are chameleons – criminal by day, terrorist by night".[46]

Just as the invisibility of the actor contributes to the invisibility of the potential, might ideology add to the unpredictability of terror, such that unlimited goals come along with

unlimited means. The war on terror focuses on a predictable potential it seeks to destroy and thereby aids its unpredictability. The potential is becoming invisible.

The war on terror can hence be based on the growing invisibility of the three elements as the paradox implication of the war on terror. It can be based on the concept of risk:
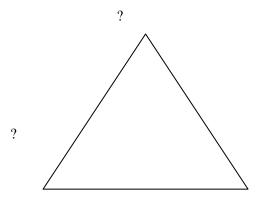
**Figure 2. The concept of risk**

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Diagram [47]

In contrast to the threat triangle which is based on the three visible elements: actor, intention and potential, risk can be defined as missing at least one of these elements. Climate change, for example, can be connected to an actor, but not to a military potential. With the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, it remains unclear whether the intention to use them is a given.[48] Terrorist groups are characterized by lacking numbers[49] and thus are often invisible as collective actors. The war on terror, as this paper argues, makes terrorism even more risky. Not only do terrorist actors become even harder to spot as they adapt their organizational shape, also their intention becomes more and more unpredictable. The decreasing calculability of actor and intention adds to the incalculability of the terrorists' potential. All three elements of the threat triangle become increasingly invisible and unpredictable as a consequence of the war on terror. The risk of catastrophic terrorism therewith becomes more likely, turning the war on terror into a risk paradox.

**CONCLUSION**

The goal of the war on terror is to prevent a new 9/11. In order to achieve this, the preemptive strike has been introduced to tackle the terrorism risk before it materializes.

However, this precisely leads to the increasing unpredictability of terrorism and hence the likelihood of a new 9/11.

Terror and the war on terror feed into each other. If a small minority of terrorists resorts to violence, the goal of winning over the masses will be the more successful the more repressive the state. The imperative not to let a small minority impose a major change is, ironically, foiled by the very change terrorism imposes if the state employs violence. Resorting to force and not giving in to terrorist demands may fail to deter terrorists also because concessions might not be their primary goal: "terrorists get benefits from their violent acts even if their targets do not immediately yield to their demands."[50] That Zawahiri thanks God for "appeasing us with the dilemmas in Iraq and Afghanistan"[51] can be understood in this context.

Rather than benefitting from soft counter-terrorism policies, terrorist groups often instrumentalize attacks in order to gain publicity by playing the theatre of terrorism choreographed for the media.[52] The principle of provoking through terror is thereby nothing new: from being formulated in Russia in the late nineteenth century over being adopted by leftists extremists in South America in the 20th

century until guiding Western European leftists terrorism as provocation was and is used throughout the world.[53]

Often, non-state actors instrumentalize small wars to legitimize themselves while state actors lose legitimacy especially when engaging in dirty warfare. While namely war against an external threat may contribute to the state's cohesion and legitimacy by mobilizing its citizens, violence against an internal threat forces the state to "to conduct an unconventional 'dirty' war and betray its own principles".[54] But even keeping public support against an external terrorist threat such as Al Qaeda is a complication. Christopher Daase describes this when stating that the legitimacy of a state is only not threatened if the state limits its war measures in time and within the scope of the legal order. Obviously, the lengthy Iraq war and terrorist suspect detention in Guantanamo Bay did neither orient on time limits nor a legal order frame. Extreme Islamists, on the other hand, found an 'easy' way "to place their own issues on the international agenda by provocation aimed at intensifying the conflict between the Muslim world and leading Western or pro-Western governments."[55] This attempt to provoke a response has been a clear success.

Whether the war on terror fails to prevent terrorists from achieving their goals or not remains unclear, since we are left guessing what terrorists are ultimately striving for. However, the war on terror contributes, among others, to the ideologization of terrorist groups. As this article has shown, the goals of terrorists are becoming more and more unpredictable as a paradoxical consequence of the war on terror. The transformation of terrorist groups feeds into the growing unpredictability of terrorism. When groups as Al Qaeda or others become increasingly "irrational", they might indeed give up on goals beyond mere violence. The transmutation of terrorist groups into an ideology is closely linked to the organizational adaption to the war on terror. As terrorist groups develop a network or rather dune-like character, ideology provides the glue to hold a loose group together by common ideas. Diminishing control over group members in loosely connected terrorist groups, as Chris Dishman elaborates, comes along with terrorists' cooperation with criminal gangs. And as the fusion of terrorist groups with such criminal gangs makes their financial means

and hence disruptive potential further incalculable, the war on terror calls for what it is actually trying to prevent. Responding to the terrorism risk by focusing on conventional threats in form of preemptively striking states culminates in the risk getting even more risky.

If this argument holds true, current counter-terrorism policies are not less preoccupying than terrorism itself. Indeed the American reaction to September 11th would therewith be even more worrisome than September 11th. Many observers and politicians do nevertheless hold on to the war on terror and focus on military means to fight terrorism.

This conviction is seriously put in question by the high social, economic and political costs of terrorism and the simultaneous ineffectiveness of military pre-emption policies. Indirect consequences as the restriction of civil liberties, the erosion of international law or the escalating intercultural alienation stress the significance of designing appropriate strategies.[56] And how inappropriate current counter-terrorist policies really are is not only evidenced by the steady increase in terrorist incidences. As "new"[57] terrorists do not occupy a territory and are usually cut off from family members, basic conditions for deterrence to work are not given. Since there is furthermore no common profile of terrorists, detection policies are to no avail. And as pre-emption ultimately feeds terrorism by contributing to radicalization, war methods based on interstate confrontation have to be re-thought.

With the advent of terrorist catastrophes – the likelihood of which we witnessed on 9/11 – seeking alternatives to the vicious risk reproducing circle of deterrence becomes imperative.

Terrorism is risky because it lacks predictable means. It is risky because it constitutes an invisible actor. And it is risky because it often lacks concrete, realizable goals. The war on terror combines the terrorism risk with the threat of the axis of evil. And the "readdressing of terrorism to states that harbor terrorists is then an attempt to invoke the traditional vocabulary of deterrence and the logic of the security dilemma."[58]

Applying this logic to risks not only leads to a security paradox but simultaneously misdeals the chance of detente for deterrence. Selling

terrorism as a threat 'out there' – as something that is independent of policies which are directed to counter it "might produce a distance between oneself and "the other"."[59] Therewith it forfeits the opportunity of alternative risk management measures which "would require a self-reflective analysis of how "us and them" are constructed in the first place."[60] As Daase and Kessler note: "what might be true here might not be true there. Accepting uncertainty would make it imperative to understand the other's position and engage in a dialogue."[61]

## NOTES

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[53] Kurz, Anat. "'New Terrorism': New Challenges, Old Dilemmas." Strategic Assessment 6 (September 2003) Available at (www.tau.ac.il/jcss/sa/v6n2p3Kur.html).

[54] Daase, Christopher „Kleine Kriege - Grosse Wirkung: Wie unkonventionelle Kriegführung die internationale Politik verändert, (Nomos: Baden-Baden), p. 223.

[55] Kurz, Anat. "'New Terrorism': New Chaellenges, Old Dilemmas." Strategic Assessment 6 (September 2003) Available at (www.tau.ac.il/jcss/sa/v6n2p3Kur.html).

[56] Albeit the direct consequences of terrorism are often overestimated, terrorist acts have indirectly far-reaching consequences for International Relations, For example Jochen Hippler speaks of the militarization of the policies of states and the deepening of instability in regional conflicts as a consequence of terrorist action, see Debiel et al. "Globale Trends 2007", Bonn, 2006, p. 121.

[57] The term of the "new" terrorist has become infamous since the bombing of New York's World Trade Centre and the attack of Tokyo's underground in the mid 90's. From Walter Laqueur who suggests that "there has been a radical transformation, if not a revolution, in the character of terrorism" to Bruce Hoffman to whom new terrorism seems "a… far more lethal threat than the more familiar 'traditional' terrorist groups", terrorism experts agree on what is widely suspected – namely that "all of this renders much previous analysis of terrorism based on established groups obsolete". For more see Spencer, Alexander "Questioning the Concept of New Terrorism".

[58] Kessler, Oliver/ Daase, Christopher "From Insecurity to Uncertainty".

[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid.