

# TIME

## Why Terrorism Works: Jihadi John and the Fear Premium

Massimo Calabresi

February 27, 2015

### It costs a lot to identify future threats

What's it worth it to keep the world safe from "Jihadi John"? In theory, the vast economic resources and intelligence power of the West should make identifying, tracking and detaining a single, brutal terrorist worth the cost.

But ease of travel, availability of low-tech weapons and our inability to identify future threats from the vast pool of potential terrorists make neutralizing bad guys before they become high-profile killers difficult. The calculation becomes even harder when you realize the enormous cost of counterterrorism investments and how many lives can be saved in other areas of life for the same money.

On the surface, it seems like a simple thing. Mohammed Emwazi, who was identified by the *Washington Post* Thursday as the ISIS executioner "Jihadi John", had been questioned and released by British authorities long before he went to Syria to join the group, according to the BBC. Not surprisingly, some are already asking how such a notorious killer could have slipped through authorities' hands.

For starters, it's hard to know whom to watch. Investigations into the July 7, 2005 terrorist bombings in London that killed 52 people and injured 700 confirmed that the UK's domestic security service, MI5, had previously come across some of the members of the plot. But the investigations [pdf] concluded that the huge amount of threat information before MI5 and the lack of evidence of an imminent threat meant "it would not be right or fair to criticise the Security Service for the fact they did not pay greater attention" to the plotters.

Similarly, after the Paris attack at the satirical weekly magazine, *Charlie Hebdo*, French authorities were criticized for not doing a better job tracking the killers beforehand. Both men had been on U.S. terrorist watch lists, and the French Prime Minister admitted "failings" by intelligence services after the attack. But some estimates say it costs millions to monitor just one terrorism suspect, let alone the hundreds that French authorities say they would have to track to

foil every possible future attacker, assuming one could even create a reliable and useful list of suspects.

Some have tried to calculate the total cost of such an effort. A 2014 study by John Mueller of Ohio University and the CATO Institute and Mark Stewart of the University of Newcastle in Australia, did a “back of the envelope” estimate to compare the cost of attacks to the cost of prevention. The authors assumed what they say is a common valuation of a human life of \$6 million-\$7 million and factored in their calculations the consequences of an attack, its likelihood of success, the risk reduction of terrorism measures and their costs.

Their conclusion: based on an estimated \$75 billion increase in annual counterterrorism spending in the wake of 9/11 by the U.S. government, authorities would have to stop “150 Boston-type attacks per year, 15 London-type attacks each year, or one 9/11-type attack every three years” to justify the expense.

Such numbers are more polemical than scientific, of course: dollar costs aren’t the only consequences to factor into the equation. We may decide to pay extra to feel safe from foreign threats, or to fight back against those who directly challenge our political and social structures. We may value humanitarian intervention against terrorists who embrace genocide. Or we may think that the costs of current terrorist attacks could rise dramatically if, for example, bad guys got nuclear, biological or chemical weapons.

National security hawks argue that we should pay with diminished privacy to leverage America’s technical superiority in electronic surveillance, which gives a lot of coverage for relatively little money. Mueller points out that the “Transportation Security Administration’s Federal Air Marshal Service and its full body scanner technology together are nearly as costly as the entire FBI counterterrorism budget,” which delivers a regular stream of arrested potential future jihadis.

Ultimately, if all we’re doing is paying extra because we’re afraid, though, Mueller’s numbers highlight the premium that fear factor represents. It costs a lot more to protect you from a terrorist attack that is statistically extremely unlikely to kill you than to minimize many other daily dangers, like auto accidents, gun deaths and falls by seniors.

That of course is the asymmetric idea as far as terrorists are concerned—use cheap but scary methods to trick opponents into costly, ineffectual countermeasures. In other words, terrorism works.