

Risk aversion is its own form of terrorism

By Dominic Standish
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How has Italy managed terrorist threats related to Sept. 11 during the last year? Consider the elusive "truck" bomb, the Rome water "poisoning," the Afghans detained near the Vatican and those arrested regarding Dante's fresco in Bologna. Acts of terrorism have been presumed rather than proven. No one has been convicted of possession of the weapons required to carry out a terrorist attack.

In each of these cases, policy been guided by the presumption that Italy is especially vulnerable to Islamic attacks with its plethora of historic symbols of western civilization. Life has been reorganized accordingly with 3000 troops deployed at "sensitive" targets since Sept. 11.

A controversial new report put out by the Global Futures Foundation (<http://www.futureproof.org>), "Refusing to be terrorised: Managing risk after September 11," outlines these dangers of presuming vulnerability and then attempting to eliminate speculative risks.

The management of risks according to these principles has been disruptive. After the U.S. State Department issued warnings about terrorist attacks in four Italian cities last Easter, the Italian government complained these warnings were unjustified and had damaged tourism.

Yet only a few months later, Defense Minister Antonio Martino warned that "we know for sure" an attack will come sooner or later. He was accused of "crying wolf" by the Turin daily *La Stampa* and widely condemned as alarmist. The Interior Minister, Claudio Scajola, was forced to state that there were "no new elements" justifying fears of an attack.

But Martino's critics failed to appreciate that he was following the new strategy, instituted after Sept. 11, of presuming vulnerability. This was again evident in July when the Jewish ghetto in Venice became a closed area as anti-terrorist agents patrolled it. These measures were taken to prevent something "from happening," rather than being a response to a specific threat, said Venice's prefect, Domenico Bagnato.

This approach contrasts with how terrorism was regarded during the "Years of Lead," when most politicians seemed determined not to give in to terrorists trying to disrupt normal life, despite facing formidable attacks.

Most of us have experienced the disruption caused by risk averse policies,

especially during air travel. But the author of the *Global Futures* report, Frank Furedi, a sociology professor at the University of Kent, explains how such policies actually help terrorists. He describes how the primary aim of most terrorists is to have a psychological impact, which is why they usually choose symbolic targets.

The initiation of security alerts by the authorities means that targets are identified for terrorists and they can have a huge psychological impact with minimal effort. Even sending hoax anthrax letters spread fear in Italy.

This climate invites hoaxers or people unconnected with Al Qaeda to achieve an impact beyond their real significance. Domenico Quaranta, an Italian, was arrested July 17 for lighting small gas canisters, including the Milan subway "fire bomb." He made the headlines by planting Islamic messages nearby, but had no meaningful links with Muslim extremists.

The irony is that the risk-averse approach to terrorism increases the risks and disruption we all face. But what is the alternative? Furedi advocates risk resilience. Instead of speculating about how vulnerable we are to risk and identifying endless potential targets, we should use our existing knowledge to make balanced evaluations about the risks we face. So it would be better to focus on the Red Brigades' successors who have carried out terrorist attacks since Sept. 11, unlike Muslims in Italy.

In addition, risks created by terrorist attacks should be treated as normal problems, not incalculable risks that societies cannot absorb. We need to face the fact that there are occasional catastrophes from hurricanes to terrorist attacks. Of course, we must try to prevent disasters, but we also need to prepare for situations when we fail to do so.

It is important to note that the Sept. 11 attacks did not feature in Swiss Re's table of the 40 most deadly catastrophes between 1970 and 2001. Although the loss of 3,300 lives on that day was horrific, it should not be regarded as exceptional and worthy of panic and the heightened security that frightens us all but cannot stop suicide terrorists.

The huge impact of these attacks was psychological, especially for Americans, and economic for the insurance industry. Yet both of these factors had such an impact precisely because America was not resilient to terrorist risk culturally or financially.

The provision of insurance is an indicator of how a society deals with risk. The *Global Futures* report notes that

the United States lacked a "pooling system to cover the property and disruption costs of September 11," adding to the burden on individual companies. In contrast, the U.K. Pool Re system has been in place for many years to help cope with terrorism.

A risk resilient approach would benefit the insurance industry and society more widely. We need to resurrect the notion that some risks are worth taking for social improvements and that we can live with some uncertainty. Projects like the planned suspension bridge to Sicily could face problems after the ter-

rorism risk analysis of aircraft flying into its cables. The Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco has not had insurance covering a terrorist attack in the aftermath of Sept. 11.

Unless we are able to replace the risk averse approach to terrorism with risk resilience, we will continue to paralyze our societies and create a climate of vulnerability that only benefits terrorists and hoaxers.

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