



# **The Evolution of Terrorism in 2005**

## **A statistical assessment**

**Prof. dr. Rik Coolsaet  
Teun Van de Voorde**

**Department of Political Science**  
February 2006

## Introductory remarks

1. When dealing with terrorism, numbers are only part of a broader picture. Behind each and every figure there is human suffering and subsequent fear. Terrorists seek to foster a widespread atmosphere of insecurity. Numbers provide for a reality check by helping to equate reality and perception. This might help to deflate the angst terrorists otherwise are eager to exploit.
2. In July 2004, the Department of Political Science at Ghent University (Belgium) issued its first research paper on the long-term evolution of international terrorism.<sup>1</sup> Its main conclusion was that indeed a **wide gap was looming between perception and reality** as far as today's international terrorism is concerned. Our figures contra-intuitively indicated that over time the importance of international terrorism as a political tool had gradually but consistently declined. According to the data of the State Department, the amount of terrorist incidents in **2002 and 2003 represented an all-time low in international terrorism for the past 32 years**. Parallel data from the Rand Corporation showed the same downward trend. Accounted for in absolute terms, 1997-2000 ranked as the most 'terror free' period, followed by an increase between 2000 and 2002, but ending with a decline in 2003, down to the – relatively low – levels of 1977-1980. Consequently, since it is upon perceptions that men act in shaping their conduct, the risk of overreacting was real, the paper concluded.
3. The assessment in our 2004 research paper was based on both the figures provided by the US State Department (*Patterns of Global Terrorism*) and the databases of the Rand Corporation (*RAND Terrorism Chronology*, *Terrorism Incident Database* and the *MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base*). Upon publication in April 2004, the State Department's *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2003* became subject of widespread controversy, both politically and methodologically, and was thereupon discontinued. Consequently, a different methodology was elaborated by the National Counterterrorism Center, rendering comparative analyses before and after 2005 infeasible.<sup>2</sup>
4. The present research paper is therefore based solely upon the databases of the RAND Corporation/MIPT, and more specifically upon the integrated *MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base*.<sup>3</sup> For the year 2004, the *MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base* showed an increase in the number of international terrorist attacks and the number of fatalities, respectively with 45 and 55 percent.<sup>4</sup> On the face of it this contradicted the main conclusions of the 2004 research paper about the gradual demise of international terrorism as a political tool.
5. The present 2006 research paper proposes an overview and assessment of the evolution of (international and domestic)<sup>5</sup> terrorism during the year 2005. As is explained in more detail in annex 3, the numbers in this assessment should not be seen as indisputable certainties. However, it is only by using a constant yardstick over a relatively long period (as the TKB databases do) that it is possible to assess the evolution of terrorism and thus the increase or decrease of the terrorism threat.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://pswserv1.ugent.be/rc/English/Articles/IP/IPArt/IP08.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Country Reports on Terrorism 2004: <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/c14813.htm> (April 2005); A Chronology of Significant Terrorist Incidents 2004: [http://www.tkb.org/documents/Downloads/NCTC\\_Report.pdf](http://www.tkb.org/documents/Downloads/NCTC_Report.pdf) (April 2005)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.tkb.org>

<sup>4</sup> MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base classified the 11 March 2004 attacks in Spain as international terrorism (191 casualties)

<sup>5</sup> See annex 3 for definitions

## The evolution of international terrorism in 2005

6. The year 2005 showed an **overall decline of international terrorism, both in number of victims and attacks**. The number of attacks dropped by a quarter and the number of casualties by 34 percent. The perception of international terrorism as a major external threat is thus not corroborated in reality as far as its lethality is concerned.

<i>International</i>	2005	2004
Number of incidents	<b>301</b>	<b>396</b>
Number of casualties	<b>481</b>	<b>734</b>

7. When regionally breaking down the numbers of casualties of international terrorist attacks, it turns out that international terrorism has evolved from a more or less dispersed international threat to a largely regional threat, since it strikes primarily in the Middle East. In 2005 **almost nine in ten victims of international terrorism fell in Iraq and Jordan** (Amman, November 2005).

<i>International</i>	2005	2004	2003	2002
Total number of casualties, of which:	<b>481</b>	<b>734</b>	<b>470</b>	<b>970</b>
in the Middle East/Gulf, of which	<b>415</b>	<b>405</b>	<b>327</b>	<b>375</b>
in Iraq	341	352	172	*
in South Asia	<b>52</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>105</b>
in Southeast Asia/Oceania	<b>0</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>214</b>
in North America	<b>0</b>	*	*	<b>3</b>
in Western Europe	<b>0</b>	<b>192</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>

\* Data not available

## The evolution of domestic terrorism

8. Contrary to international terrorism, **domestic terrorism is clearly on the rise**. The number of incidents has doubled and the number of fatalities has increased by 70 percent.

<i>Domestic</i>	2005	2004
Number of incidents	<b>4624</b>	<b>2250</b>
Number of casualties	<b>7680</b>	<b>4334</b>

9. This increase is almost entirely the result of the worsening situation in **Iraq**. The numbers of victims of domestic terrorism in this country has risen sharply from 2004 onwards.

	2005	2004	2003	2002
Total number of casualties	<b>7680</b>	<b>4334</b>	<b>1877</b>	<b>1793</b>
in Middle East/Gulf, of which:	<b>6054</b>	<b>2291</b>	<b>557</b>	<b>189</b>
in Iraq	5894	2121	367	3
in South Asia, of which:	<b>1107</b>	<b>803</b>	<b>773</b>	<b>918</b>
in Afghanistan/Pakistan	395	396	248	159
in Southeast Asia/Oceania	<b>87</b>	<b>192</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>137</b>
in North America	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
in Western Europe	<b>56*</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>15</b>

\* London attacks, July 2005

## Concluding remarks

10. In view of the number of international terrorist incidents and victims it is difficult to uphold the view that international terrorism represents a existential threat and that counter-terrorism should be viewed as a 'long war'. **International terrorism is more of a challenge than a threat.**
11. Contrary to widespread belief, it is not international but **domestic** terrorism that presents the gravest danger. Moreover, instead of being a threat of a global nature, **terrorism is largely concentrated within one region**, the Middle East. In 2005, Iraqi Sunni and jihadi groups were responsible for 80 percent of all victims of domestic terrorism.
12. This assessment leads to the following conclusions:
  - a. The vast gap in the numbers of fatalities in the West and in the Middle East undoubtedly points to the success of the national (and international) counter-terrorism efforts, especially in the West. Even so, it also negates a well known contention: the **West is not the prime target of jihadi terrorism.**
  - b. The concentration of fatalities in the Middle East shows that **Muslims are the principal victims of terrorism perpetrated in the name of Islam.** This helps to explain the decreasing sympathy in Muslim countries for jihadi terrorism and for Osama bin Laden in particular.<sup>6</sup>
  - c. The **Iraq war has drastically boosted terrorism**, instead of lessening it – although this was the official rationale for going to war. Considering the high level of domestic attacks and fatalities in Iraq, we can only conclude that 9/11 and the ensuing war on terror has above all contributed to a '**clash within one civilisation**'. The Iraq war, being presented as part of the war on terror, has contributed to turning Iraq into today's epicentre of terrorism.

## Annexes

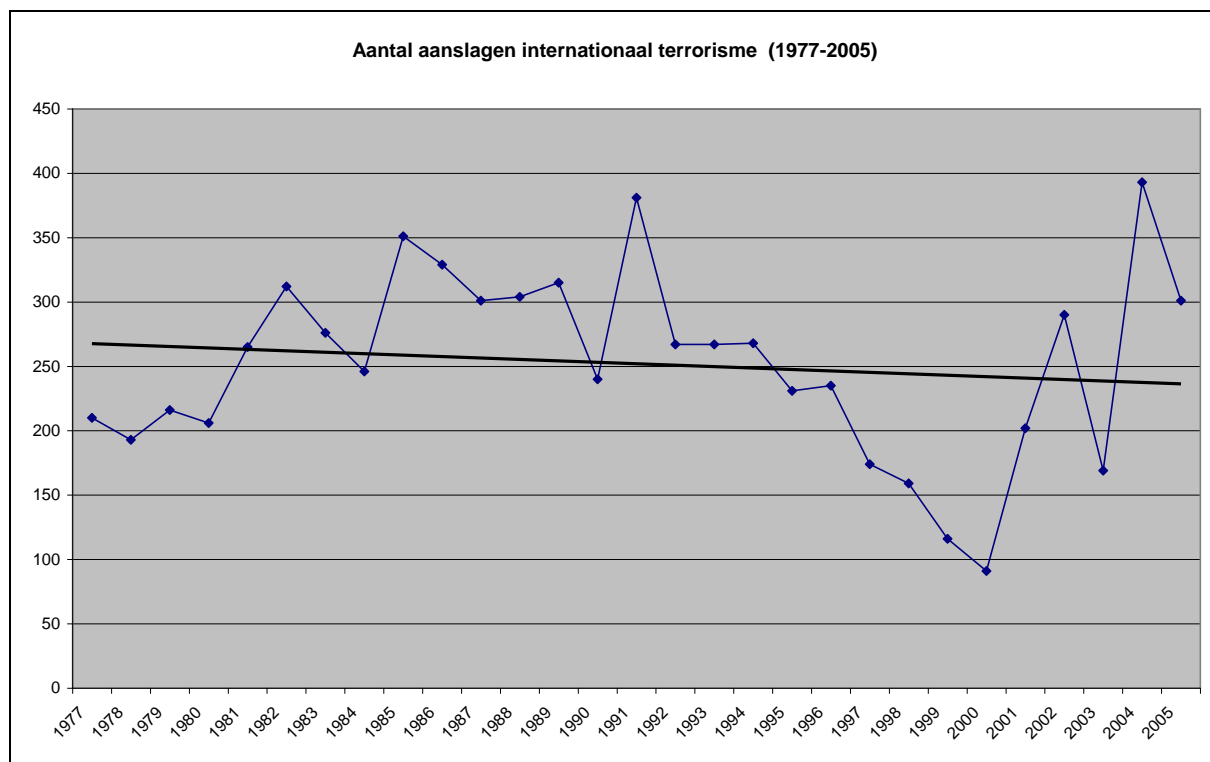
1. Evolution of the number of international terrorist attacks since 1977
2. Evolution of the number of casualties of international terrorist attacks since 1977
3. Methodology
4. The authors

---

<sup>6</sup> *Islamic terrorism: common concern for Muslim and Western publics.* Washington, Pew, 14 July 2005 (<http://pewglobal.org/reports/pdf/248.pdf>). Ipsos-Stat conducted a survey in Jordan after the November 2005 Amman attacks. For results see: <http://www.alghad.jo/index.php?news=56817>

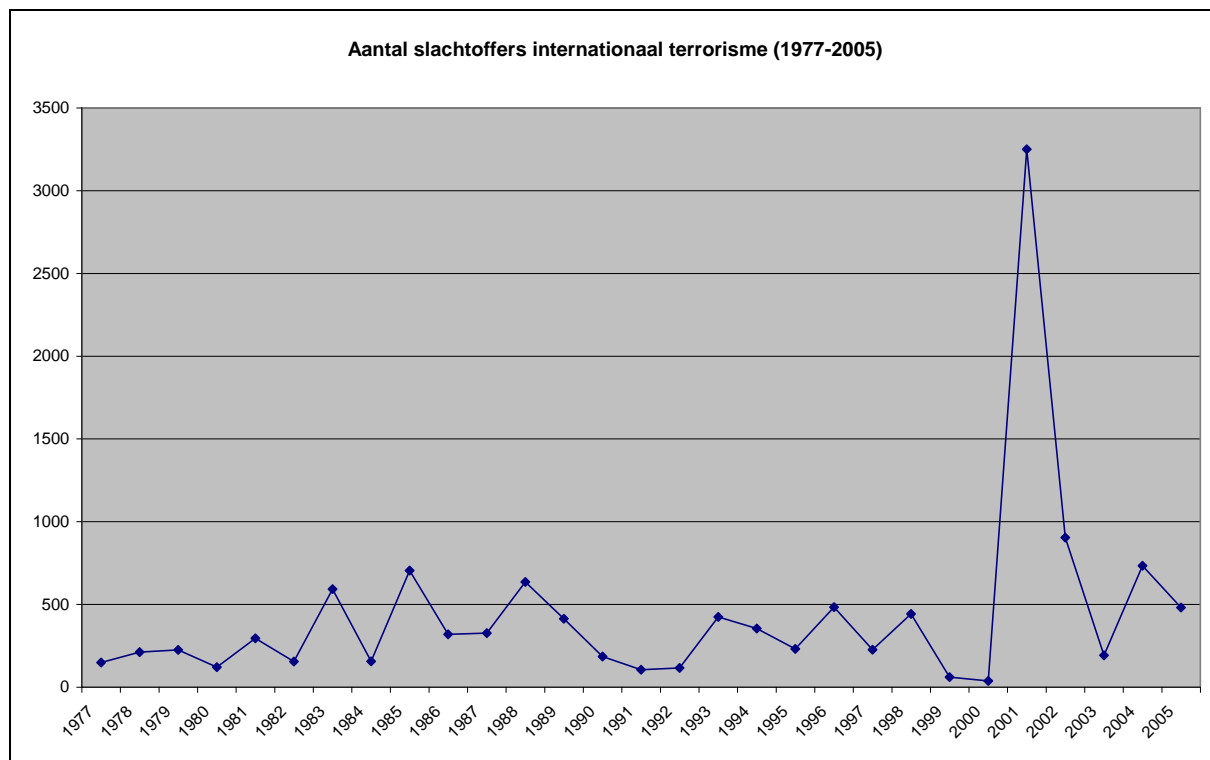
**Annex 1**

*Evolution of the number of international terrorist attacks since 1977*



**Annex 2**

*Evolution of the number of casualties of international terrorist attacks since 1977*



### Annex 3

#### *Methodology*

Data are drawn from the databases as provided by the Rand Corporation and the MIPT (The National Memorial Institute for Preventing Terrorism). More specifically we have based our assessment on the Terrorism Knowledge Base which integrates the data of the *RAND Terrorism Chronology* (international terrorism, 1968-1997) and the *Terrorism Incident Database* (international and domestic terrorism, 1998-now).

The following definitions are used:

“**Terrorism** is defined by the nature of the act, not by the identity of the perpetrators or the nature of the cause. Terrorism is violence, or the threat of violence, calculated to create an atmosphere of fear and alarm. These acts are designed to coerce others into actions they would not otherwise undertake, or refrain from actions they desired to take. All terrorist acts are crimes. Many would also be violation of the rules of war if a state of war existed. This violence or threat of violence is generally directed against civilian targets. The motives of all terrorists are political, and terrorist actions are generally carried out in a way that will achieve maximum publicity. Unlike other criminal acts, terrorists often claim credit for their acts. Finally, terrorist acts are intended to produce effects beyond the immediate physical damage of the cause, having long-term psychological repercussions on a particular target audience. The fear created by terrorists may be intended to cause people to exaggerate the strengths of the terrorist and the importance of the cause, to provoke governmental overreaction, to discourage dissent, or simply to intimidate and thereby enforce compliance with their demands.”

“**Domestic terrorism** is defined as incidents perpetrated by local nationals against a purely domestic target.”

“**International terrorism**: incidents in which terrorists go abroad to strike their targets, select domestic targets associated with a foreign state, or create an international incident by attacking airline passengers, personnel or equipment.”

The numbers in this assessment only have an indicative value and should not be interpreted as absolute certainties nor indisputable facts. This is partly due to the arbitrary character of the notion ‘terrorism’, partly to the limits of the information available (public sources), partly to the fact that crude data have always to be interpreted, and are thus not unquestionable. However, it is only by using the same yardstick over a relatively long period (as the TKB databases do) that it is possible to assess the evolution of terrorism and thus the increase or decrease of the threat. It thus provides for a longitudinal view that is often lacking in today’s debates on terrorism and helps to put contemporary terrorism into perspective.

A remark must also be made on the adjective ‘international’. Today, most experts take the view that al-Qaeda has seriously been degraded as an operational international network, thanks to the tremendous national and international counter-terrorism efforts since September 11. Present-day attacks are perpetrated predominantly by local or regional terrorists inspired by jihadi ideology, but not directed by al-Qaeda. Such attacks are largely planned, financed and conducted by local forces. While jihadi terrorists often have international contacts, they do not receive instructions nor are they connected to al-Qaeda from an organisational point of view. **Such attacks are often dubbed ‘international terrorism’. This denomination is misleading or, at least, is based upon sloppy analysis – if not inspired by partisan intentions.**

### Annex 4

#### *The authors*

**Rik Coolsaet** is Professor of International Relations at Ghent University (Belgium) and Director of the Security & Global Governance Department at the Royal Institute for International Relations (Brussels)

**Teun Van de Voorde** is research fellow at the Department of Political Science at Ghent University. She is preparing a PhD on the rise and demise of successive waves of major terrorist activities

#### **Department of Political Science**

Ghent University  
Universiteitstraat 8  
B-9000 Gent (Belgium)  
Tel. 32 (0)9 264 68 70  
Fax 32 (0)9 264 67 00

[www.psw.UGent.be/polwet](http://www.psw.UGent.be/polwet)  
[Rik.Coolsaet@UGent.be](mailto:Rik.Coolsaet@UGent.be)