

Marie Curie Final Report
(01/10/2011 – 30/09/2013)

Grant Agreement No: 272369
 Project Acronym: TRiPMAP

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BACKGROUND DESCRIPTION

Terrorism, and especially the notion of a 'new' terrorism, has been framed in the prevailing public discourse as an all-pervasive societal threat. In turn, the official response to this 'new threat' has been crystallized in the emergence of a new global counterterrorist paradigm which calls for a new equilibrium between security and civil-liberties in favor of the former. The project maintained that the emergence, and acceptance, of this new paradigm is based on two large presumptions: (a) that the late 1990s witnessed a sea change in the character of global terrorist activity with the rise of an identifiably 'new', and more dangerous, brand of terrorism; and (b) that democracies, because of some idiosyncratic regime properties epitomized by their respect of civil liberties, are associated with increased terrorist activity.

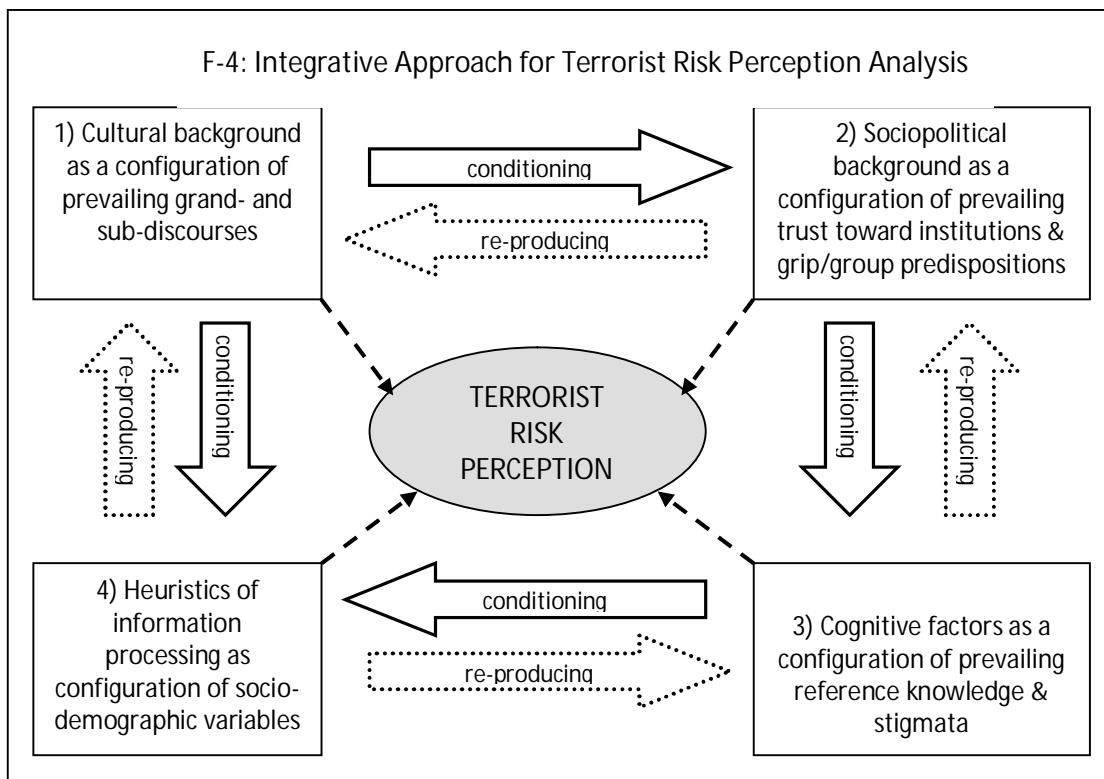
FINDINGS (F)

The project concluded that

- (F-1): both assumptions upon which the global counterterrorist paradigm is based are empirically questionable. This is so
- (F-2): because the established, in the literature, positive correlation between democracy and terrorism is not a function of their respect of civil liberties that makes them vulnerable to terrorist violence. Rather, it is a function of contaminated data that systematically distort the actual relationship between the two; and,
- (F-3): because, contra the prevailing discourse, today's terrorism is not a fundamentally 'new' phenomenon but grounded in an evolving historical context, as the following juxtaposition, along three main variables, illustrates.

	Prevailing Discourse	Project Findings
Operational Range	'New' terrorism has an expansive geographical focus, as its operations have moved from within home-region to outside home-region	(F-3a): World trends are suggestive of a <i>de-globalization</i> (or <i>localization</i>) of terrorism, as the share of international incidents is particularly low and has been relatively constant over time
Tactics	While 'old' terrorism adopted a restrained approach to the use of violence, 'new' terrorism displays a willingness to use excessive and indiscriminate violence	(F-3b): Although the level of terrorism induced lethality is on the increase, the distribution of lethality varies significantly across time and not across an 'old' vs. 'new' divide
Motives	'New' terrorism differs fundamentally from the familiar politically motivated terrorism, as its motives are derived from religious doctrines	(F-3c): Religious terrorism is by no means a new phenomenon. Rather, it is a cyclic return to earlier motivations for terrorism

If both the analytical value and empirical veracity of the notion of a 'new' terrorism is questionable, why has it proved so attractive as to become our pre-eminent security concern? This raises the question of why the risk of terrorism is perceived - a question that constituted a further project objective. However, we soon came to realize that the state-of-the-art in analysis of risk perception resembles more of a patchwork with no systematic attempt at cross-fertilization. In view of this, the project tried to develop an integrative approach to risk perception that incorporates macro- and micro-determinants. The following figure summarizes the suggested approach/findings (F-4)



A first attempt at employing the above framework produced preliminary results that are supportive of the view, and of earlier findings in the literature, that attitudes toward strong antiterrorist measures, which reduce civil liberties, are related to levels of trust and political orientation. That is:

(F-5): the lower the people's trust in government, the less willing they are to trade-off civil liberties for security, and

(F-6): political left-right orientation seems to be a strong predictor of attitudes toward the use of strong antiterrorist measures. Yet, even though liberals are less willing to trade-off civil liberties for security, they converge towards the position of conservatives when their perception of terrorist risk is high.

SCIENTIFIC & POLICY IMPACT

F-1 to F-3

At the scientific level, the notion of a radical transformation of terrorist activity reinforces a post-9/11 amnesiac debate on the subject and a dominant presentism, when what is necessary is a more historically grounded understanding of terrorism. A further corollary of adopting a rigid distinction between 'old' and 'new' terrorism, is that it impedes on our ability to develop a general, structural theory of terrorism, the lack of which characterizes, if not bedevils, the current state of the field.

At the policy level, it needs to be stressed that labels, words, frames, and the ideas that inform them, matter a great deal. Calling a problem 'new' forces one to automatically buy into the belief that the appropriate solutions must also be 'new', even though they may well be unnecessary. Indeed, the current official response to the threat of terrorism might not just be potentially damaging to democracy but also, by being unnecessarily exaggerated, counterproductive.

F-4 to F-6

Our research confirmed the so-called extreme-event bias according to which in the face of extreme risks, risk perceptions can deviate substantially from actual (objective) risks. Given that individual decision-making is influenced by emotions such as fear and anxiety, the indirect effects/cost of terrorism often exceed the direct ones. So, in order to fully evaluate the impact of terrorism on societies and to design effective strategies that aim at mitigating its overall costs, more research is necessary on linking decision making variables with the perceived risk of, and emotional responses to, terrorism. The project's proposed integrated model offers a modest contribution in systematizing variables that affect the perceived risk of terrorism.