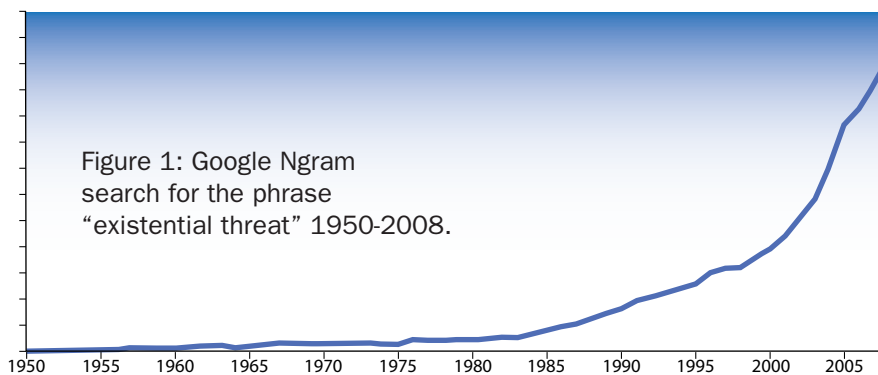


# TERRORISM: TOP 10 MYTHS

Is terrorism an “Existential threat”—a threat to our way of life or even to our existence or survival?

## THE RISE OF THE USE OF THE TERM “EXISTENTIAL THREAT”



Is terrorism really an “existential threat” to our way of life? Tracking the phrase with a Google Ngram search shows that it didn’t come into use until the late 1950s, most likely for describing the growing threat of global thermonuclear war. It crawls along the bottom of the curve through the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s. Then, around 1983, its use takes off in a steady upward trend line to 2001, after which it spikes dramatically upward in a hockey-stick like increase, clearly in response to 9/11.

If ISIS or any of the other terrorist organizations grounded in Islamism were successful in their global jihad to bring about Sharia law, terrorism could become an existential threat. But will they? No. Here are 10 myths about terrorism that explain why.



## MYTH 1: TERRORISTS ARE PURE EVIL

Terrorists are not pure evil. Evil in the theological sense of existing outside of human behavior is a myth, as when President George W. Bush declared a war on the “evil doers” and that we need to defeat “evil” in the world. “Evil” may be a good adjective for describing something or someone you really don’t like, but the concept only clouds our understanding of human behavior. Everyone has a motive and a point of view, including people we call evil, such as Islamic terrorists.

## MYTH 2

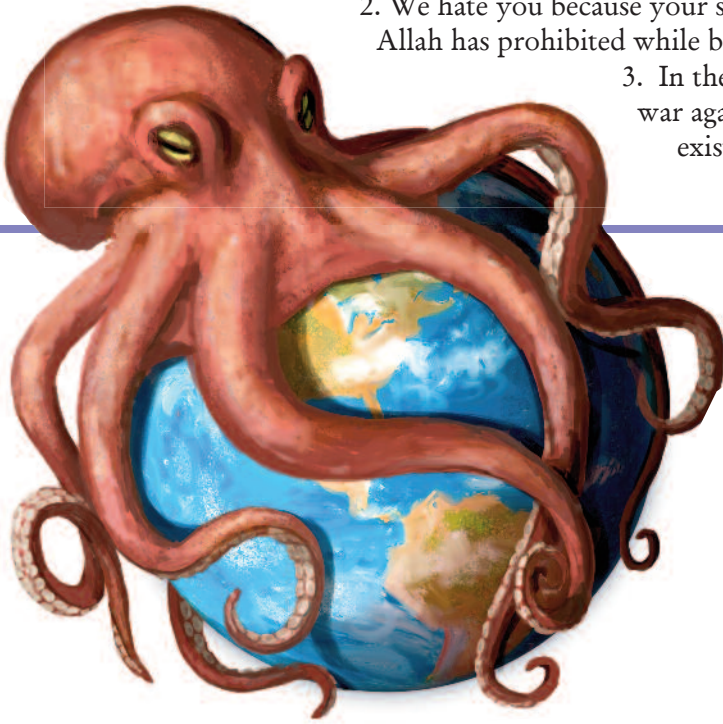
### TERRORISTS ARE PRIMARILY POLITICALLY MOTIVATED

This myth is busted by the terrorists' own words. Their primary motive is religious. 9/11 hijacker Mohammed Atta, for example, wrote in his suicide note:

Pray for yourself and all of your brothers that they may be victorious and hit their targets and ask God to grant you martyrdom. Shout, "Allahu Akbar," because this strikes fear in the hearts of the nonbelievers. Know that the gardens of paradise are waiting for you in all their beauty, and the women of paradise are waiting, calling out, "Come hither, friend of God." They have dressed in their most beautiful clothing.

This religious conviction was reinforced in a 2016 article in the ISIS publication Dabiq titled "Why We Hate You, Why We Fight You." The three primary reasons are religious:

1. We hate you, first and foremost, because you are disbelievers; you reject the oneness of Allah, you blaspheme against Him, claiming that He has a son, you fabricate lies against His prophets and messengers, and you indulge in all manner of devilish practices.
2. We hate you because your secular, liberal societies permit the very things that Allah has prohibited while banning many of the things He has permitted.
3. In the case of the atheist fringe, we hate you and wage war against you because you disbelieve in the existence of your Lord and Creator.



### MYTH 3: TERRORISTS HAVE A GLOBAL ORGANIZATION

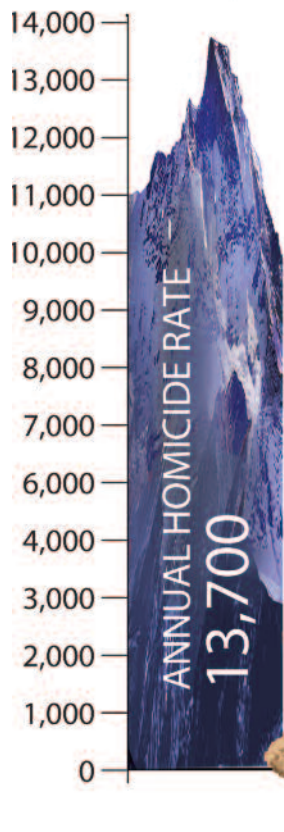
Politicians like to portray terrorists as part of a vast global network of top-down centrally-controlled conspiracies against the West. But as Atran shows, terrorism is "a decentralized, self-organizing, and constantly evolving complex of social networks," often organized through social groups and sports organizations, such as soccer clubs.

### MYTH 4:

### TERRORISTS ARE DIABOLICAL GENIUSES

The 9/11 Commission report described Al Qaeda terrorists as "sophisticated, patient, disciplined, and lethal." But according to the political scientist Max Abrahms, after the decapitation of the leadership of the top terrorist organizations, "terrorists targeting the American homeland have been neither sophisticated nor masterminds, but incompetent fools." Examples include: The 2001 airplane shoe bomber Richard Reid was unable to ignite the fuse because it was wet from the rain and his own foot perspiration; the 2009 underwear bomber Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab succeeded only in setting his pants ablaze; the 2010 Times Square bomber Faisal Shahzad managed merely to torch the inside of his 1993 Nissan Pathfinder; the 2013 Boston marathon bombers were equipped with only one gun for defense and had no money and no exit strategy beyond hijacking a car with no gas in it that Dzhokhar Tsarnaev used to run over his brother Tamerlan, followed by a failed suicide attempt inside a land-based boat.





## MYTH 5: TERRORISM CAUSES MASS DEATHS

In comparison to homicides in America, deaths from terrorism are in the statistical noise, barely a blip on a graph compared to the 13,700 homicides a year. By comparison, after the 3,000 deaths on 9/11, the total number of people killed by terrorists in the 38 years before totals 340, and the number killed after 9/11 and including the Boston bombing is 33, and that includes the 13 soldiers killed in the Fort Hood massacre by Nidal Hasan in 2009. That's a total of 373 killed, or 7.8 per year. Even if we include the 3,000 people who perished on 9/11 and the 14 killed in San Bernardino, that brings the average annual total to 70.4, compared to that of the annual homicide rate of 13,700.

## MYTH 6: TERRORISM IS EFFECTIVE AT ACHIEVING ITS GOALS

In a study of 42 foreign terrorist organizations active for several decades, Max Abrahms concluded that only two achieved their stated goals—

Hezbollah achieved control over southern Lebanon in 1984 and 2000, and the Tamil Tigers took over parts of Sri Lanka in 1990, which they then lost in 2009. That results in a success rate of less than five percent. In a subsequent study, Abrahms

and his colleague Matthew Gottfried found that when terrorists kill civilians

or take captives it significantly lowers the likelihood of bargaining success with states, because

violence begets violence and public sentiments turn against the perpetrators of violence. Further, they found that when terrorists did get what they wanted it is more likely to be money or the release of political prisoners, not political objectives.



## MYTH 7: TERRORISTS CONQUER AND ESTABLISH STATES

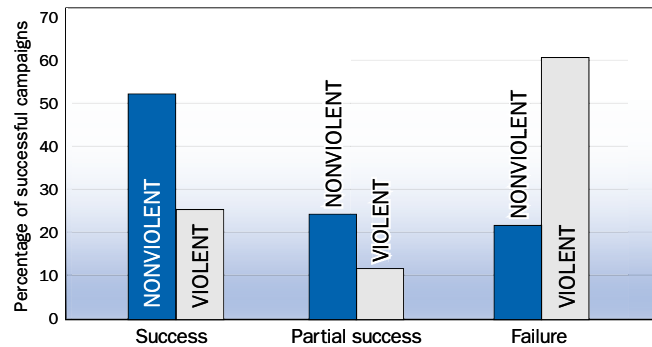
In terms of the overall effectiveness of terrorism as a means to an end, in an analysis of 457 terrorist campaigns since 1968 the political scientist Audrey Cronin found that not one terrorism group had conquered a state and that a full 94 percent had failed to gain even *one* of their strategic political goals. And the number of terrorist groups who accomplished all of their objectives? *Zero*. Cronin's book is entitled *How Terrorism Ends*. It ends swiftly (groups survive only 5-9 years on average) and badly (the death of its leaders).



## MYTH 8: TERRORISM IS AN EFFECTIVE MEANS OF POLITICAL CHANGE

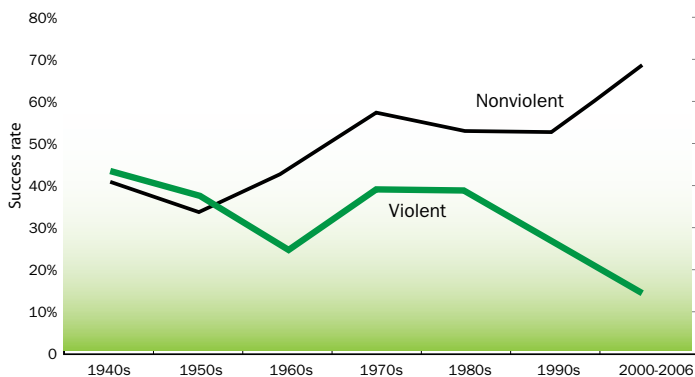
The political scientists Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan have documented the relative success and failure of violent vs. nonviolent campaigns for political change since 1900. Results: “From 1900 to 2006, nonviolent campaigns worldwide were twice as likely to succeed outright as violent insurgencies.”

Chenoweth added that “this trend has been increasing over time—in the last 50 years civil resistance has become increasingly frequent and effective, whereas violent insurgencies have become increasingly rare and unsuccessful. This is true even in extremely repressive, authoritarian conditions where we might expect nonviolent resistance to fail.” Chenoweth notes that if your movement is based on violence, you are necessarily going to be limiting yourself to mostly young, strong, violence-prone males who have a propensity for boozing and brawling.



**Figure 2. Success rate of campaigns for political change since the 1940s comparing violent and nonviolent methods reveals that violence is a failed strategy and nonviolence is the method of choice.**

## MYTH 9: VIOLENT CAMPAIGNS FOR POLITICAL CHANGE RESULT IN SELF RULE



**Figure 3. Progress in Nonviolent Campaigns for Political Change**  
The percentage of successful campaigns for political change comparing violent and nonviolent methods.

Chenoweth explains that campaigns that relied solely on nonviolent methods were on average four times larger than the average violent campaign. And they were often much more representative in terms of gender, age, race, political party, class, and urban-rural distinctions. “Civil resistance allows people of all different levels of physical ability to participate—including the elderly, people with disabilities, women, children, and virtually anyone else who wants to.” Finally, nonviolent campaigns of political change are far more likely to result in democratic institutions than are violent insurgencies. “The data are clear,” Chenoweth concludes: “When people rely on civil resistance, their size grows. And when large numbers of people withdraw their cooperation from an oppressive system, the odds are ever in their favor.”

## MYTH 10: NUCLEAR TERRORISM IS LIKELY TO HAPPEN

Most experts agree that acquiring the necessary materials and knowledge for building a nuclear weapon or dirty bomb is far beyond the reach of most (if not all) terrorists. In his book *On Nuclear Terrorism*, Michael Levi invokes what he calls “Murphy’s Law of Nuclear Terrorism: What can go wrong might go wrong,” and recounts numerous failed terrorist attacks due to sheer incompetence on the part of the terrorists to build and detonate even the simplest of chemical weapons. It is important to note that no dirty bomb has ever been successfully deployed resulting in casualties by anyone anywhere, and that according to the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission—which tracks fissile materials—“most reports of lost or stolen material involve small or short-lived radioactive sources that are not useful for a RDD [radiological dispersal device, or dirty bomb]. Past experience suggests there has not been a pattern of collecting such sources for the purpose of assembling a RDD. It is important to note that the radioactivity of the combined total of all unrecovered sources over the past 5 years would not reach the threshold for one high-risk radioactive source.” In short, the chances of terrorists successfully building and launching a nuclear device of any sort is so low that we would be far better off investing our limited resources in diffusing the problem of terrorism in other areas.

