

Jarosław STELMACH¹

WSB Merito University in Wrocław, Poland
ORCID: 0000-0003-4936-9231

DOI : 10.14746/ps.2024.1.21

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE IN CONTEMPORARY TERRORIST ATTACKS – CONCLUSIONS FOR DESIGNING AN INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE

INTRODUCTION

The nature of terrorist attacks is not only complex but constantly evolving. Thus, every attack has its own unique characteristics. Upon investigation, emphasis is typically placed on the intended target. Often overlooked, however, is the intended location of the attack, its complexity in planning, intensity, and media coverage. While the desired end state of a terrorist attack is calculated at the planning stage, its effectiveness is ultimately influenced by time and place. As a result, when perpetrators consider these additional factors in their planning, they can maximize the effects of inflicted losses during execution. Invariably, these same factors need to be addressed when undertaking neutralization or rescue operations against terrorist threats.

The type of attack that a perpetrator will carry out is subordinate to both internal and external factors. Internal factors include the availability of material and training. Based on an individual or group's resources, this can have measurable limitations. External factors are much more complex and variable, they include security posture, population density, media attention etc. As such, the interplay between both factors plays a major part in dictating the perpetrator's modus operandi in carrying out an attack.

The place of a terrorist attack also determines the robustness of law enforcement's response. Unlike rural areas, major cities will have the resources to carry out counter-terrorism operations. However, even high-density areas with dedicated response units will have limitations in their responses within certain environments. One such environment is an airplane, which in the instance of a hijacking can quickly shift to hostage rescue, requiring advanced tactics and tools that are rarely available (Walczak, 2008: 104–108). Due to the importance of the chosen location for a terrorist attack, there is a need to put greater emphasis on researching a perpetrator's methodology for choosing specific place to provide recommendations for effective counter-terrorism responses.

¹ This article is licensed under the Creative Commons – Attribution – ShareAlike 4.0 (CC-BY-SA 4.0) license.

Artykuł udostępniany jest na licencji Creative Commons – Uznanie autorstwa – Na tych samych warunkach 4.0 (CC-BY-SA 4.0).

LITERATURE REVIEW

To date, the relationship between the place of terrorist attacks and institutional responses has not been widely addressed in scientific literature. This report analyzes publications which examine reactive responses to terrorist attacks internationally, as well as pro-active counter-terrorism activities. In most cases, the discussion surrounding chosen place of a terrorist attack appear either within case studies examining successive attacks or assessments of law enforcement responses to an attack. Among the source material focusing on counterterrorism efforts (Schmid, Forester, Lowe, 2021: 142–152), the majority of publications discuss state responses to acts of terrorism (Hoffman, 1994: 366–390; Schmid, 2012: 77), provide specific case studies of attacks (Garber, 2015: 221–262; Caravelli, Trim, 2009) or address known issues for first-responders (Newman, Clarke, 2008; Lloyd, 2013; Jackson, Peterson, Bartis, LaTourrette, Brahmakulam, 2002). While the publications do provide assessments on counterterrorism responses (Olson, 2012; German 2007; Craigie, Farrelly, Santos, 2020: 72–75) they do not address the subject of the place of attacks in depth, and how it relates to counterterrorism operations.

PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research is to develop general conclusions on the conduct of counter-terrorism operations focusing on the location of a terrorist attack. The research methodology involved literature analysis and comparative case study analysis (Yin, 2015: 19–21). Comparative case study analysis provided an in-depth examination of known responses to terrorist attacks in specific places, their methods, timing, and tools. The material aided in deriving policy recommendation for anti-terrorism measures. Conclusions for this research were solely based on analysis and synthesis, deduction and induction, and comparative analysis (Apanowicz, 2002: 23–28).

RESULTS

John Horgan recognizes that a terrorist attack is a unique event with its own dynamics, context and logic. It does not appear out of nowhere. It is an element of terrorist activity embedded in a specific political, social or economic context. These factors indirectly influence the direction and scope of given terrorist activity. In most cases, terrorist organizations, not individual perpetrators are responsible for attacks (Horgan, 2008: 133–135).

The examination of an attack of criminal nature needs to encompass all its attributes, to include its goals, conditions, and means to then determine if it is terroristic in nature (Glen, 2021: 98). Once determined that an attack was indeed terroristic in nature additional factors need to be determined such as motivation, degree of preparation, knowledge of environmental factors, and dimensions of support and cooperation. Last, it must be determined if any of these factors played a part in the chosen place of the attack as well as the reasoning behind it.

To best analyze locations of attacks, this report proposes a refined methodology for defining place by five terms (open space, facilities, transportation, mass events, cyberspace) (Stelmach, 2023: 121–123), originally derived from the Global Terrorism Database of the National Consortium for Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). It also should be noted that an attack can occur across more than one place, especially if there are secondary effects such as biochemical or chemical agents which can spread from a facility to open space.

- Open Space:
 - Forests,
 - Fields,
 - Parks;
- Facilities:
 - Private Residence,
 - Warehouses,
 - Office Space,
 - Electric Power Station,
 - Concert Hall,
 - Police Station;
- Means of transport:
 - Land,
 - Air,
 - Sea,
 - Space;
- Mass Events:
 - Political Rallies,
 - Concerts,
 - Seminars,
 - Demonstrations;
- Cyberspace.

The above systematization makes it easier to assign characteristics to the places of terrorist attacks and can facilitate the planning for counterterrorism activities by national security institutions. The first category is open space, for instance forests or parks. Open space locations are rarely chosen by terrorists. This is likely due to the low density of people and the ease of bystanders escaping once the attack has begun. The advantage of such spaces for terrorists is accessibility and very high vulnerability to attack. The leading methods carried out in open spaces are mass shootings, vehicle ramming, and bombings. An example of this was Anders Breivik's attack on the island of Utoya, where the perpetrator, using firearms, killed multiple victims. Features of such attacks carried out in open spaces include their vastness, the presence of a significant number of bystanders (observers) and the increased risk of being affected by subsequent attacks.

The most popular location for modern terrorist attacks is in an urban environment (Jasiński, 2013: 46–49). Terrorists choose cities because of the large population density, presence of critical and symbolic infrastructure, as well as heightened media coverage. While urban environments provide better access to potential targets they

will also provide greater accessibility to law enforcement and first aid responses that might be better equipped to minimize the fallout from a terrorist attack (Jasiński, 2009: 321–354).

Facilities are an attractive target for terrorists to carry out attacks in, as there is not only a higher possibility of mass casualties, but certain buildings are also symbolic in nature. Moreover, facilities are innately going to provide the possibility of a cascading impact causing widespread and multifaceted direct effects by those killed or injured, and material losses (Stelmach, 2018: 19–35). Due to the diversity of this category, it is necessary to consider each type of facility separately during response planning, taking into account specific environmental conditions that enhance or limit the use of selected methods of counterterrorism operations. The category of sites is not homogeneous, and within its set there are many groups of buildings that, due to their own characteristics, require separate and dedicated response plans by special forces or rescue operators.

An additional category for facilities as targets of terrorist attacks is critical infrastructure (CI), which includes for instance: energy supply systems, communication networks, food supply, health care facilities, and transportation hubs. Not only does an attack against critical infrastructure cause harm to life, it can negatively affect a country's economic development. The strategic importance of CI for local, national and regional security can be a decisive factor when selecting it as a target for a terrorist attack. From the perspective of preparing neutralization and rescue operations, cooperation between CI operators and representatives of security institutions is important. The exchange of experience and conducting joint training exercises can significantly improve the quality of counterterrorist operations provided to CI facilities.

Another category where terrorist attacks can be carried out are means of transport. This is a diverse and complex environment, and the different types of transportation differ significantly from each other. In the case of land transportation, most provide free and unrestricted access to perpetrators (e.g., railways, subways, buses, streetcars, cabs). This gives the opportunity to carry out attacks using any method and tool. These can be bombings, mass shootings, or hijacking which can lead to hostage situations. They also are prone to instances of high lethality due to the high density of potential victims and limited possibilities of escape. From a response perspective, it is important to note the lack of staged ground transportation assets on the scene can prolong the response time and the start of counterterrorism operations. Additionally, the means of transport may move, which will further complicate the possibility of implementing neutralization and rescue activities. In such cases, cross-border activities may need to be launched, which can complicate situations in regions with differing socio-politics.

Special attention needs to be given to aircrafts, due to the popularity of terrorist hijackings in the 1970s and 1980s. It should be noted that the number of attacks decreased after the introduction of security measures post 9/11 attack. At that time, numerous restrictions were introduced related to the need to strengthen safety and protection against bringing dangerous tools onboard aircraft (Zasieczny, 2004: 226). Despite this, aircrafts can still be the site of attacks such as unlawful seizure of control of an aircraft, hostage situations, mass murder with weapons or improvised tools, and aircraft distress notifications.

Aircrafts are a particularly difficult environment for counterterrorism operations and pose a real challenge to public security institutions (Compa, 2018: 85–108). When in motion, they change their position and may find themselves in areas with limited counterterrorism response units. Moreover, at the onset of an attack it is difficult to determine who has responsibility for the attack and which country or units have the lead. It could be the country of affiliation of the airline, the country whose citizens are on board the aircraft, or quite another entity not directly related to the situation on board, but which may become an indirect victim of the attack (for example, in the case of aircraft striking objects on its territory). Another difficulty is conducting direct entry onboard aircraft, which are nearly impossible if it is moving. In a situation where a hijacked aircraft has landed, counterterrorism operations still pose a significant challenge for special forces operators. They require the use of specialized tactics, equipment, and carry a high risk of loss of life to hostages and officers. In view of such specified challenges of the air environment, institutional response preparation is particularly important. It should include not only the process of training and preparing dedicated forces, but also the organization of complex counterterrorism activities that will involve numerous and diverse state security actors.

Another space for the site of terrorist attacks in the transportation category are sea or inland vessels. From a practical perspective, perpetrators can carry out mass killings, bombings or hostage-taking on board such vessels. Terrorist hijacking of ships allow for dangerous cargo carried on board to move to places (seaports) where a response will be even more complicated. In this case, the need for international cooperation and legal protection of the actions taken in such cases becomes particularly important.

Means of transport can be targeted in three different ways. First, as a place to carry out an attack. Second, they can become the target of an attack, in which case the site of an attack should be considered much more broadly. For instance, an attempt to shoot down an aircraft with an artillery shell or sabotage in the form of destroying a railway track. Then the target of the attack will be an aircraft or train, and the site of the attack will be determined by the perpetrators' terrain or space of operation. Third, the means of transport can become an instrument of assassination (e.g., in the situation of hijacking an aircraft or vehicle to hit an object with it). In this case, the place of an assassination will be considered much more broadly and may involve both the means of transport and the environment around it. The use of explosives is complex and requires a number of research approaches and perspectives. The distinguishing feature of assassinations via transportation is its dynamically changing nature. In preparing counterterrorism responses for such a scenario it is important to remember that assaults can be carried out when aircraft, ships or vehicles are in motion. It complicates both the concentration of forces and resources and severely limits the ability to conduct direct operations on these moving objects. The history of terrorist attacks shows that these types of events, although rare, pose real challenges to counterterrorism and rescue forces.

The last category of terrorist attack sites are mass events. To achieve greatest effects, terrorists will typically choose areas with high density, a symbolic nature, and large media presence (Misiuk, Dobrowolska-Opała, 2018: 125–126). Among the leading methods of carrying out attacks in these places are mass shootings, bombings, hos-

tage situations, attacks using unmanned mobile platforms (BPMs), and CBRN attacks (NCTC, 2020: 1–3).

Mass events considered as places of assassination are not a homogeneous category. Based on the level of accessibility, mass events can be divided into open and controlled access. Those open to the public are most often held in open spaces in and outside cities. This category includes sports venues, cultural centers, schools, religious venues, political assemblies, concerts, and community meetings. Areas with controlled access will typically have security and credential verification. In both cases, securing a mass event against a terrorist attack is a challenge for the organizers, as well as law enforcement (Cichomski, 2023: 37–87). The challenges that define the planning process for such events are physical, mechanical and technical protection measures. Second, it is particularly challenging to prepare response plans to deal with every type of attack vector which can include different forms and tools, the organization of physical protection, coordination and command of activities at the scene of an emergency, the warning and evacuation system, as well as providing first aid. The security for mass events is carried out by many private and state sector entities, which makes it more difficult for proper coordination. Therefore, when responding to threats at mass event sites, it is particularly important to cooperate with the organizers of such an event, have prior knowledge of the specifics of the internal and external environment, and to have resources available to conduct neutralization or rescue operations.

The most difficult challenge for counterterrorism response is the culmination of the aforementioned spaces colliding in one attack, clearly evident on the morning of September 11, 2001. The first and greatest threat was a moving aircraft. This stage of the event set the entire air defense system in motion on a national scale, however, there was no protocol for such an event. After the first aircraft strikes on the WTC and Pentagon, the site of the attack became a rescue operation across several kilometers. This example shows that the issue of the site of a terrorist attack is complex and heterogeneous. Therefore, additional research needs to be conducted into counterterrorism responses based on the place affected.

DISCUSSION

The results of the research presented above on the issue of terrorist attacks are relevant from the perspective of planning, preparation and implementation of counterterrorist activities. The analysis of selected terrorist events showed that it was often the aspect of the place that proved critical and significantly influenced the scale of destruction. This was the case with Breivik's attack on Utoya Island. The location of the attack on the island made it difficult for police forces and paramedics to arrive efficiently, thus increasing the scale of the terrorist impact. Second, the island's vast and open terrain was not conducive to finding effective protection from the shooter. Therefore, when planning counterterrorism operations it is necessary to consider individual scenarios not only from the perspective of the time, method and tool of the attack, but also in conjunction with the location, which can critically affect many of the conditions of the operations carried out.

CONCLUSIONS

The selected case studies, literature review, reports and analyses, as well as previous research in allowed the author to showcase the importance of designing counterterrorism activities in terms of place. First, when planning counterterrorism operations, it is necessary to use the scenario method and build assumptions of the most likely and most dangerous attacks. Second, at the local level, it is worth taking into account the specifics of the external environment, along with the existing natural and technical infrastructure. Third, the diversity of the sites of potential attacks determines the specific and often dedicated process of preparation of forces and resources in the form of often very specialized equipment and, consequently, the skills of the people operating in it. Fourth, a key factor in determining the effectiveness of the actions carried out is akin to the level of practical training by the counterterrorism units responding to incidents. Thus, real-world exercises should regularly be carried out in various environments. The last conclusion developed is the demand for further and more in-depth research on the issue surrounding the places of terrorist attacks, which can contribute to the creation of valuable and specific guidance for local, state, and national responders.

REFERENCES

- Apanowicz J. (2002), *Metodologia ogólna*, Gdynia, Poland.
- Caravelli J., Trim P. R. J. (2009), *Strategizing Resilience and Reducing Vulnerability*, New York, USA.
- Cichomski M. (2023), *Zabezpieczenie konferencji, imprez, uroczystości i innych wydarzeń, w tym w kontekście zagrożeń o charakterze terrorystycznym. Perspektywa ustawowa*, „Terroryzm – studia, analizy, prewencja”, Vol. 3.
- Compa T. (2018), *Współczesne zagrożenia bezpieczeństwa transportu lotniczego*, „Facta Simonidis”, Vol. 11/1.
- Craigie R. J., Farrelly P. J., Santos R. (2020), *Manchester Arena bombing: lessons learnt from a mass casualty incident*, “BMJ Mil Health”, Vol. 166.
- First Responders Toolbox – Special and Significant Events with Feedback.pdf*, https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/jcat/firstresponderstoolbox/First_Responders_Toolbox_-_Special_and_Significant_Events_with_Feedback.pdf (20.06.2024).
- Garber L. (2015), *Have we learned a lesson? The Boston marathon bombings and information sharing*, „Administrative Law Review”, Vol. 2/67.
- German M. (2007), *Thinking Like a Terrorist: Insights of a Former FBI Undercover Agent*, Washington, D.C., USA.
- Glen A. (2021), *Podstawy poznania bezpieczeństwa podmiotu – aksjologia, ontologia, epistemologia, metodologia*, Siedlce, Poland.
- Hoffman B. (1994), *Responding to terrorism across the technological spectrum*, “Terrorism and Political Violence”, Vol. 3.
- Horgan J. (2008), *Psychologia terroryzmu*, Warszawa, Poland.

- Jackson B. A., Peterson D. J., Bartis J. T., LaTourrette T., Brahmakulam I. T. (2002), *Protecting emergency responders: Lessons learned from terrorist attacks*, Rand Corporation, USA.
- Jasiński A. (2009), *Wielkomięski dylemat – przestrzeń publiczna czy przestrzeń bezpieczna*, „Przestrzeń i Forma”, Vol. 12.
- Jasiński A. (2013), *Architektura w czasach terroryzmu. Miasto – przestrzeń publiczna – budynek*, Warszawa, Poland.
- Lloyd C. A. (2013), *Nuclear Terrorism: Response Preparedness Issues of Major Cities*, New York, USA.
- Misiuk A., Dobrowolska-Opała M. (2018), *Zagrożenia terrorystyczne imprez masowych organizowanych w Polsce*, „Studia Politologiczne”, Vol. 49.
- Newman G. R., Clarke R. V. (2008), *Policing Terrorism: An executive's Guide*, U.S. Department of Justice.
- Olson D. T. (2012), *Tactical Counterterrorism: The Law Enforcement Manual of Terrorism Prevention*, Illinois, USA.
- Schmid A. P. (2012), *Twelve Rules for Preventing and Countering Terrorism by Alex P. Schmid*, “Perspectives on Terrorism”, Vol. 3/6.
- Schmid A. P., Forest J., Lowe T. (2021), *Counter-Terrorism Studies: A Glimpse at the Current State of Research*, “Perspectives on Terrorism”, Vol. 4/15.
- Stelmach J. (2018), *Kategorie obiektów użyteczności publicznej i stopnie ich ochrony w kontekście zagrożenia współczesnym terroryzmem*, in: *Bezpieczeństwo antyterrorystyczne budynków użyteczności publicznej. Analiza – diagnoza – case study*, (eds.) B. Wiśniewska-Paź, M. Szostak, J. Stelmach, Toruń, Poland.
- Stelmach J. (2023), *Zamachy terrorystyczne. Istota i koncepcja reagowania*, Warszawa, Poland.
- Walczak A. (2008), *Master's behaviour in an interaction with ship hijackers*, “Scientific Journals Maritime University of Szczecin”, Vol. 13 (85).
- Yin R. K. (2015), *Studium przypadku w badaniach naukowych. Projektowanie i metody*, Kraków, Poland.
- Zasieczny A. (eds.) (2004), *Encyklopedia terroryzmu*, Warszawa, Poland.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the research, the results of which are included in this publication, was to develop general conclusions regarding the conduct of counterterrorism operations in the context of the place of a terrorist attack. Thus, the identified subject and purpose of the research determined its categorization as applied and embedded in the discipline of security sciences. Corresponding with the purpose of the research process is the research question – what recommendations and conclusions related to the place of a terrorist attacks can be crucial for designing an institutional response? The author assumed in the research hypothesis the possibility of deriving such valuable conclusions that can contribute to strengthening the qualitative response to contemporary terrorist attacks. The research described in the text was based on scientific methods in the form of literature analysis and criticism, document analysis, comparative analysis, cross-sectional synthesis and multiple immersion case studies. The research results obtained became the basis for the development of key conclusions that should be taken into account in the preparation of solutions for institutional response to contemporary terrorist attacks.

Keywords: terrorism, responding to attacks, counter-terrorism, terrorist attack site

WSPÓŁCZESNE ZAMACHY TERRORYSTYCZNE W ASPEKcie MIEJSCA ICH PRZEPROWADZENIA – WNIOSKI DO PROJEKTOWANIA REAGOWANIA W WYMIARZE INSTYTUCJONALNYM

STRESZCZENIE

Celem badań, których wyniki zawarto w niniejszym artykule, było wypracowanie ogólnych wniosków dotyczących prowadzenia działań antyterrorystycznych w kontekście miejsca ataku terrorystycznego. Tym samym zidentyfikowany przedmiot i cel badań przesądził o ich kategoryzacji jako stosowanych i osadzonych w dyscyplinie nauk o bezpieczeństwie. Z celem procesu badawczego koresponduje pytanie badawcze – jakie rekomendacje i wnioski związane z miejscem ataku terrorystycznego mogą być kluczowe dla projektowania reakcji instytucjonalnej? Autor założył w hipotezie badawczej możliwość wyprowadzenia takich wniosków, które mogą przyczynić się do wzmocnienia jakościowej reakcji na współczesne ataki terrorystyczne. Opisane w tekście badania zostały oparte na metodach naukowych w postaci krytycznej analizy literatury, analizy dokumentów, analizy porównawczej, syntezy przekrojowej oraz wielokrotnych immersyjnych studiów przypadku. Uzyskane wyniki badań stały się podstawą do opracowania kluczowych wniosków, które powinny zostać uwzględnione w przygotowywaniu rozwiązań w zakresie instytucjonalnego reagowania na współczesne ataki terrorystyczne.

Słowa kluczowe: terroryzm, reagowanie na ataki, zwalczanie terroryzmu, miejsce ataku terrorystycznego