



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **The aftermath: meaning-making after terrorist attacks in Western Europe**

Roy van Zuijdewijn, J.H. de

### **Citation**

Roy van Zuijdewijn, J. H. de. (2021, September 1). *The aftermath: meaning-making after terrorist attacks in Western Europe*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3209224>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3209224>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3209224> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

**Author:** Roy van Zuijdewijn, J.H. de

**Title:** The aftermath: meaning-making after terrorist attacks in Western Europe

**Issue Date:** 2021-09-01

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Terrorist attacks and their aftermaths

The streets are usually rather desolate on Parisian winter days. Not on the 11<sup>th</sup> of January 2015, when they were buzzing with activity as 1.5 million people had left the warmth of their houses to join the “marche républicaine” (the republican march). Another 2.5 million took to the streets in other French cities. Crowds this size had not gathered in France since De Gaulle marched down the Champs-Élysées to celebrate the Liberation of Paris in August 1944. This time, citizens had not lined the streets to honour their victors; they were honouring the victims of bloody terrorist attacks. “Je Suis Charlie,” one could read on their signs. Planes from across the globe had carried more than forty heads of state to the capital, who solemnly moved along Parisian boulevards. Arm in arm, the leaders participated in an unprecedented demonstration of international solidarity. The march was highly symbolic: it showed how the world came together to march against terrorism and support core values, such as the freedom of speech.

That freedom had been under attack four days before, on January 7, when two brothers armed with Kalashnikovs had stormed into the offices of the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo and killed twelve people. “We avenged the Prophet Muhammad, we killed Charlie Hebdo!” the Kouachi brothers shouted afterwards, referring to the cartoons published by Charlie Hebdo that had mockingly depicted the prophet. The brothers drove away and turned up two days later, in a small print shop forty kilometers northeast of Paris where they took several employees hostage. After a few hours, the police neutralised the perpetrators in the print shop, ending their carnage. Concurrently, on January 9, Amedy Coulibaly had entered the Hypercacher kosher supermarket near Paris, where he killed four Jewish hostages. While the Kouachi brothers told French media that they were acting in name of Al Qaeda in Yemen, Coulibaly had pledged allegiance to the so-called Islamic State (IS) in a video message, saying “you attack the Islamic State, we attack you.”<sup>1</sup> In a phone call to French media, Coulibaly demanded the withdrawal of “the [French] army from the Islamic State, from all places where it has gone to combat Islam.”<sup>2</sup> Soon after the call, police raided the supermarket and killed Coulibaly, around the same time the Kouachi brothers drew their last breaths.

---

<sup>1</sup> Karine Lambin, “Attentats: Ce que les terroristes ont dit à BFMTV,” *BFMTV*, January 9, 2015; Aaron Y. Zelin, “New Video Message from Amedy Coulibaly: ‘Soldier of the Caliphate,’” *Jihadology*, 2015. Coulibaly had also killed a police officer, wounded a street sweeper and allegedly shot a jogger in the days before his attack on the supermarket, although his involvement remains unclear in the last case, see: Ikram Kchikech and Sarah-Lou Cohen, “Joggeur blessé le 7 janvier: “Pour moi, ce n’était pas Coulibaly,” *BFMTV*, January 4, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> “A BFM-TV, Coulibaly explique s’être synchronisé avec les frères Kouachi,” *Le Figaro*, January 9, 2016.

### 1.1.1 Terrorism as a process of action-reaction

The example of the attacks in France illustrates that terrorism is a process of action-reaction: attacks can elicit various responses. In fact, terrorists use attacks to send a message to a wider public and hope that they will respond to it. As Brian Jenkins phrased it in 1974: “terrorism is aimed at the people watching, not at the actual victims.”<sup>3</sup> Arguably, the example of the attacks in France shows how an attack can be both an instrument and a goal. The terrorists wanted to kill particular groups: the cartoonists of Charlie Hebdo (in the case of the Kouachi brothers) and Jews (in the case of Coulibaly). Yet, they intended to reach a larger audience and to deter people from publishing cartoons of the prophet and pressure the French government to change its foreign policy. This shows how the direct victims of the attack are different from the ultimate targets. Terrorists aim to invoke certain responses from their ultimate targets that can help them achieve their political goals.<sup>4</sup>

Terrorist organisations across time and spanning the ideological spectrum have explained how they thought reactions would help them achieving their goals. Anarchists in the late nineteenth century called this “propaganda by the deed”: they hoped that attacks would inspire the masses to rise up against their leaders, violently overthrowing them.<sup>5</sup> Mikhail Bakunin, a prominent anarchist ideologue, concluded after leading a failed uprising in France in 1870 that attacks should be the next step: they were “the most irresistible form of propaganda.”<sup>6</sup> Jihadist groups have also engaged in such forms of strategic thinking about responses to attacks. Osama bin Laden, former leader of Al Qaeda, declared attacking the US to be an important step on the path to conquering Jerusalem. Another jihadist group assessed that an attack on Spain could help to reduce foreign military presence in the Middle East: they thought that Spain was the most likely candidate to withdraw its troops from the US-led coalition that had invaded Iraq in 2003 if the country was attacked.<sup>7</sup> Right-wing extremist Anders Breivik who killed 77 people in Norway published a 1500-page manifesto, hoping that his attack would inspire followers to start a crusade against “cultural Marxists” and Muslims.<sup>8</sup> Dylann Roof, who shot black worshippers in a church in Charleston (USA) wanted to incite a race war.<sup>9</sup> These examples show how terrorists consider their attacks to be a means to an end, with the responses of the audiences in the aftermath of attacks being the crucial element that connects the two.

<sup>3</sup> Brian Michael Jenkins, “International Terrorism: A New Kind of Warfare” (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1974), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Alex Schmid, *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research* (Taylor and Francis, 2011), 86–87.

<sup>5</sup> David. C Rapoport, “The Four Waves of Rebel Terror and September 11,” *Anthropoetics* VIII, no. 1 (2002).

<sup>6</sup> Bakunin’s “Letters to A Frenchman on the Present Crisis” (1870), translated and interpreted by Sam Dolgoff, *Bakunin on Anarchy: Selected Works by the Activist-Founder of World Anarchism*, 1971, 195–96.

<sup>7</sup> Steven Brooke, “Jihadist Strategic Debates before 9/11,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 31, no. 3 (2008): 215; Brynjar Lia and Thomas Hegghammer, “Jihadi Strategic Studies: The Alleged Al Qaida Policy Study Preceding the Madrid Bombings,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 27 (2004): 368.

<sup>8</sup> Jelle Van Buuren, “Spur to Violence? Anders Behring Breivik and the Eurabia Conspiracy,” *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 3, no. 4 (2013): 210.

<sup>9</sup> Travis D. Boyce and Winsome Chunnu Brayda, “In the Words of the ‘Last Rhodesian’: Dylann Roof and South Carolina’s Long Tradition of White Supremacy, Racial Rhetoric of Fear, and Vigilantism,” *Present Tense. A Journal of Rhetoric in Society* 5, no. 2 (2015): 1.

### 1.1.2 Terrorism is theatre

This key role of how audiences respond to terrorism has inspired scholars to state, metaphorically, that terrorism is theatre.<sup>10</sup> Attacks are often carefully choreographed and symbolic, which can include the choice of victims, the modus operandi and the place of attack. For instance, when Al Qaeda brought down the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center on 9/11, the highest buildings in New York, this intended to symbolise the downfall of the alleged power and decadency of the USA. Terrorists hope that spectacular attacks reach large audiences and they often count on the latest media innovations to help them. Anarchists expected newspapers, a relatively new medium, to report their deeds to a mass audience.<sup>11</sup> The Black September terrorists who took Israeli athletes hostage during the Olympic Games in Munich in 1972 reached a global audience of 900 million people who witnessed the events unfolding live on television.<sup>12</sup> Clearly, terrorists attract large audiences with theatrical performances of violence.

Terrorists often define their proximate goals in terms of responses by different audiences.<sup>13</sup> In fact, gaining recognition or attention is the “most basic reason for terrorism,” according to Martha Crenshaw; terrorists might primarily aim for publicity in some cases.<sup>14</sup> There is not one homogenous “audience” of terrorism. The target audience might differ per attack. Based on terrorism definitions, two core audience groups stand out: the authorities and the general public. These audiences also feature in the EU terrorism definition that identifies three aims: 1) “seriously intimidating a population,” 2) “unduly compelling a Government or international organisation to perform or abstain from performing any act,” 3) “seriously destabilising or destroying the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country or an international organisation.”<sup>15</sup> This shows that terrorists want to affect public attitudes, provoke a particular reaction from the authorities or destabilise a system.

While scholars may not agree on the exact definition of the term terrorism, they seem to agree on essential elements: terrorists adopt a focus beyond the immediate victims and generating fear is a key mechanism to achieve political goals.<sup>16</sup> In other words, the core premise of Jenkins’ earlier claim “is still valid today...the nature of terrorism is to send a message to people other than the victim.”<sup>17</sup> These are widely accepted, uncontested elements of terrorism.

<sup>10</sup> Jenkins, “International Terrorism,” 4; Beatrice de Graaf, *Evaluating Counterterrorism Performance: A Comparative Study* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Gabriel Weimann, “The Theater of Terror,” *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 9, no. 3–4 (2005): 379–90.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Jensen, “Daggers, Rifles and Dynamite: Anarchist Terrorism in Nineteenth Century Europe,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16, no. 1 (2004): 116–53.

<sup>12</sup> Simon Reeve, “Olympics Massacre: Munich – The real Story,” *Independent*, January 22, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Martha Crenshaw, “The Causes of Terrorism,” *Comparative Politics* 13, no. 4 (1981): 386.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Council Framework Decision of 13 June 2002 on combating terrorism (2002/475/JHA)*, Council of the European Union, 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Anthony Richards, “Is Terrorism Still a Useful Analytical Term, or Should It Be Abandoned?,” in *Contemporary Debates on Terrorism*, ed. Richard Jackson and Daniela Pisoiu (Routledge, 2018), 17; Amélie Godefroidt and Arnim Langer, “How Fear Drives Us Apart: Explaining the Relationship between Terrorism and Social Trust,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 7 (2020): 1482–1505.

<sup>17</sup> Edwin Bakker, *Terrorism and Counterterrorism Studies: Comparing Theory & Practice* (Leiden University Press, 2015), 42.

## 1.2 The importance of meaning-making by the audiences of terrorism

While terrorists aim to reach various audiences and often manage to do so, it is ultimately up to these audiences to interpret the message and decide on their responses. Societies have to come to terms with the attacks by constructing meaning. Audiences will arrive at their own conclusion of what has happened, why it has happened and what it means (or does not mean) to them. This process is also known as meaning-making.<sup>18</sup>

The aftermath of the attacks in France in January 2015 is an extraordinary example of how audiences responded to terrorism: millions of people took to the streets to show their determination to stand against such a brutal attack on the freedom of expression. Yet, these meaning-making efforts were not automatic or predictable responses to the attacks. From the beginning, the French authorities carefully orchestrated and planned the march with particular goals in mind.<sup>19</sup> The frames of interpretation, the march and the symbols highlighted that the attack had targeted the freedom of expression. Other characteristics of the attack, such as the fact that four members of the Jewish community and two police officers had been killed, received far less attention. French actors did not call it an attack on the freedom of religion nor an instance of anti-Semitism; people did not hold up signs with “Je suis juif” or marched while wearing a kippah. This illustrates how actors can push for particular interpretations and select elements that they consider most salient in the aftermath of attacks.<sup>20</sup>

### Reactions determine the impact of terrorist attacks

The centrality of the audience holds important implications for our understanding of terrorism as an instrument. The execution of a terrorist attack in itself does not result in terrorists achieving their political goals. The reactions of the various audiences to a large extent determine the impact of an attack beyond the direct physical damage.<sup>21</sup>

An exceptionally bloody example of the impact of societal responses is the aftermath of the al-Askari Bombing in Samarra, Iraq, in 2006. While nobody died when a bomb exploded in one of the holiest places in the Shia faith, the subsequent sectarian clashes between Shia and Sunni Muslims that erupted led to the death of thousands of people.<sup>22</sup> Well-known examples of the impact of responses by authorities are the various military operations started by the US and its allies in the “War on Terror” after 9/11, making the impact of the attacks tangible in many parts of the world for many years. Less bloody, but still a clear example of the impact of

<sup>18</sup> Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 613.

<sup>19</sup> Laurie Bousaguet and Florence Faucher, “Quand l'État Convoque La Rue,” *Gouvernement et Action Publique* 6, no. 2 (2017); Florence Faucher and Laurie Bousaguet, “The Politics of Symbols: Reflections on the French Government's Framing of the 2015 Terrorist Attacks,” *Parliamentary Affairs* 71, no. 1 (2018): 169–95.

<sup>20</sup> Bousaguet and Faucher, “Quand l'État Convoque La Rue,” 51.

<sup>21</sup> Edwin Bakker, *Naar meer Weerbaarheid en Veerkracht in Contraterrorismebeleid [Oratie]* (Leiden University, 2012).

<sup>22</sup> Joby Warrick, *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS* (New York: Anchor House, 2015), 281–85.

responses by authorities was the proclamation of the state of emergency in France in response to the November 2015 Paris Attacks and its multiple prolongations. Amnesty International has shown how the state of emergency led to restrictions on various civil liberties.<sup>23</sup> The French Parliamentary Investigation Committee concluded that the state of emergency had not played an important role in decreasing the terrorist threat after the various attacks in 2015.<sup>24</sup> These attacks thus not only resulted in the tragic deaths of dozens of people, but the measures taken in response affected civil liberties of all French citizens while barely helping to decrease the threat.

The importance of understanding reactions to terrorism has been emphasised by Edwin Bakker and Beatrice de Graaf in their paper on fear management. The authors state that “these [counterterrorism] reactions to a large extent determine the social impact of terrorist actions, especially if we consider this in the broader socio-political context over a longer period of time.”<sup>25</sup> This statement underlines the main rationale of this study: to understand how terrorism works, we should not only analyse what happens before an attack—“left of bang”—but also what happens in the aftermath of attacks, or “right of bang.” Studying audience reactions to terrorism is one important way to do this.

### 1.3 Understanding meaning-making in the aftermath of attacks

The reactions of various audiences in the aftermath of terrorist attacks remain understudied. While some notable exceptions exist, terrorism scholars have predominantly focused on understanding terrorists and their modus operandi, as will be discussed in the literature review (Chapter 2). The literature on processes and mechanisms occurring after attacks is less developed. This lacuna has been noted by scholars for decades. Max Abrahms, who was inspired by Crenshaw’s statement in the 1980s that the outcomes of terrorist campaigns had hardly been studied, tried to address this continued gap in 2006.<sup>26</sup> His study exemplifies the most common approach to studying the aftermath of terrorist attacks: assessing to what extent terrorist organisations achieved their political goals.<sup>27</sup> As such studies approach the issue quantitatively, they do not help to understand the dynamics of the aftermath of attacks. Another common approach in terrorism studies is to investigate governmental responses, which is often linked to the issue of overreaction.

<sup>23</sup> “A right not a threat. Disproportionate restrictions on demonstrations under the state of emergency in France,” Amnesty International, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Georges Fenech and Sébastien Pietrasanta, *Rapport fait au nom de la commission d’enquête relative aux moyens mis en œuvre par l’État pour lutter contre le terrorisme depuis le 7 janvier 2015*, Assemblée Nationale, July 5, 2016, 262. After studying emergency and extraordinary measures in France, Belgium and Germany, Noordegraaf et al. also concluded that such measures can have “unintended and uncontrollable” consequences, see: M. Noordegraaf et al., “Nood Breekt Wet? Terroristische Dreiging, Noodtoestand en Maatschappelijke Effecten” (Utrecht: WODC, 2017), 222.

<sup>25</sup> Edwin Bakker and Beatrice de Graaf, “Towards a Theory of Fear Management in the Counterterrorism Domain: A Stocktaking Approach,” *ICCT Research Paper*, 2014, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Max Abrahms, “Why Terrorism Does Not Work,” *International Security* 31, no. 2 (2006).

<sup>27</sup> Abrahms concluded that 28 studied terrorist groups only achieved seven percent of their policy objectives, see: *Ibid.*, 43.

How the wider audience responds to terrorist attacks and interacts with the authorities is not well-understood. While several studies look at public attitudes or perceptions, these mostly approach citizens as passive recipients with little agency to decide on their own responses. How citizens actively respond to terrorist attacks remains understudied. This is a serious lacuna, as the public is a key audience of terrorist attacks. Authorities and citizens do not decide on their responses in a vacuum, but they are influenced by each other. Jointly investigating the responses of both of these audiences helps to get a better understanding of the impact of attacks. This not only adds to the academic literature, but also helps to assess how societies are dealing with one of the most pressing and topical security threats today.

### 1.3.1 Overall approach and outline

This study aims to investigate how various audiences respond to terrorist attacks. It zooms in on one significant aspect of the response: the process of meaning-making. Meaning-making—as discussed in the next chapter—encompasses the various attempts of the audiences of attacks to reflect upon what happened and provides the wider context in which measures, decisions and concrete actions are (subsequently) taken. The focus on meaning-making corresponds to an interpretivist approach, which posits that actors actively construct (social) reality.

The Literature Review (Chapter 2) discusses studies from various disciplines that provide insight into elements of the meaning-making process after terrorist attacks. This includes the fields of terrorism studies, crisis management, political science, communication studies and sociology. Based on this interdisciplinary literature review, the concept of meaning-making is operationalised into three main forms that will be studied: frames, rituals and symbols. This leads to the following research question: how do different actors engage in various forms of meaning-making in the first year after a terrorist attack?

The Methodology (Chapter 3) discusses the rationale behind the various elements of the research question and explains how the study will be conducted. The meaning-making process will be studied for four different jihadist terrorist attacks in Western Europe: the attacks in Brussels (March 2016), Nice (July 2016), Berlin (December 2016) and Manchester (May 2017). To study meaning-making, a distinction is made between the two core audience groups of terrorist attacks—the authorities and citizens—to see how these interact. The meaning-making efforts will be studied for a delineated period, focusing on the first day and first week after the attack and around the first anniversary of the attack.

After presenting the four case studies (Chapters 4-7) that describe the meaning-making process after the four attacks, the Analysis Chapter (Chapter 8) will compare and contrast these cases on the three core elements of the research question: the forms of meaning-making, the actors involved and the dynamics over time. In the final chapter (Chapter 9), the conclusion and

reflection on the findings is presented and discussed in light of the literature, also looking at policy implications and avenues for future research.

As this is an underresearched and undertheorised field, this study is mainly exploratory as well as inductive in nature. By uniting various disciplinary insights and adopting an innovative approach, this study improves our understanding of the meaning-making process in the aftermath of terrorist attacks. The goal is not to engage in theory-testing or theory-building, but to provide empirically based insights that can show the main patterns of meaning-making after terrorist attacks.

