

# TABLE TALKS | MEDIA AND TERRORISM

## WAS 9/11 SUCCESSFUL?

- Was 9/11 a successful terrorist attack?
- This question seems strange – the attack killed over 3000 people and has resulted in the launch of a 15 year “war on terror” which has involved 2 separate wars. But does that mean it was a success? Well, that depends on what “success” looks like for a terrorist organization.

## TWO TYPES OF SUCCESS

- In our first table talk where we defined terrorism as the use of violence to achieve a political goal. Given this then, perhaps a terrorist attack is only successful if, and only if, it achieves the stated political goal.
- So was 9/11 a success? Well, in this sense no. Because it did not result in the withdrawal of United States Forces from the Middle East. In fact it increased them.
- But there is a more important variable of “success,” and one that far more commonly is used to evaluate the success of a terrorist attack. That is, simply, the amount of attention a terrorist attack (or their group) receives in the aftermath of a terrorist event.
- Looking at 9/11 in this perspective, given everything that has been said and done in response to it. We can absolutely, and inconclusively say it was a success.

*“The success of a terrorist operation depends almost entirely on the amount of publicity it receives.”*  
-Walter Laqueur (1977)

## THE MEDIA AND TERRORISM; A “SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIP”?

- The relationship between the media and terrorists is mutually beneficial. What this means is that while a terrorist organization clearly benefits from the media attention they receive, the media benefits to. When they are able to break news about a terrorist offender, they get more clicks and viewers. This incentivizes them to always be breaking news about terrorism, meaning that terrorist organizations have a willing conduit to report their activities.



### DID YOU KNOW?

Terrorist organizations actually change their behavior to suit what the media are reporting more of. For example, a man (or woman) in a propaganda with a American or British accent will always glean more attention. Given this, is it any surprise that terrorist organizations seek to use Western fighters in their videos?

**QUESTION FOR YOU:** Should the media stop reporting about terrorism altogether or is there another way to address this problem?

# TABLE TALKS | MEDIA AND TERRORISM

## FAILED BUT AFLOAT:

- A flight from the Netherlands to Detroit on Christmas Day was the target of the failed bombing attempted by al-Qaeda in 2009. The 23 year old, Umas Farouk Abdulmutallab, more commonly known as the “Christmas Day Bomber” or the “Underwear Bomber”. The bomb he set off sewn into his underwear which faulted and blew up only hurting himself.
- The attack was a failure but because of the media attention it received it was viewed as a success.
- Dubbing him the “underwear bomber” or “Christmas Day bomber” only gave him more publicity, and the more publicity and feedback from the people, the more coverage he received.
- We see this same pattern play out when low-level lone wolves are unsuccessful, but because of the amount of media attention they receive, the attacks still have a psychological effect.

## SOCIAL MEDIA AND TERRORISM

- Terrorist’s use of social media is a relatively new phenomenon, made popular by ISIS in the past few years.
- ISIS regularly posts videos sometimes are long as 20 minutes showing raids, killings, and operations they’re doing along with teachings of their ideology. The prowess of ISIS isn’t so much to content they’re posting but also in amount they post. In 2014, when ISIS burst onto the scene after the James Foley video, over 200,000 pro-ISIS tweets were being sent out each day. Today there are close to 100,000 ISIS twitter accounts.
- Their social media is not just about their terrorist activities; but often more “pleasant” media such as ISIS fighters holding kittens (see below)!



## TABLE TALK TAKEAWAY

The media has been called the “oxygen” that terrorist groups breathe. This represents the fact that their level of success is directly related to the amount of media attention they are afforded. This is an issue because, as the media becomes increasingly interested in reporting news about terrorism, terrorists have to “do less” to be effective, because even the smallest lone-actor attack becomes national news.