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Convergence of the Salience of Terrorism in the European Union Before and After Terrorist Attacks

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ABSTRACT

Many European countries have been the target of jihadist terrorist attacks between 2015 and 2017. While the chance of becoming a victim of a terrorist attack is low, terrorism scholars have emphasized that terrorism does not revolve around statistics and casualty numbers. Terrorists use attacks to reach an audience and affect groups beyond the direct victims. To this date, little is known about how terrorist attacks might affect the salience of terrorism beyond national borders. This paper investigates possible convergence of issue salience of terrorism among citizens within the European Union for ten jihadist attacks in the period 2015–2017 using Eurobarometer survey data. The results indicate that it is not simply a question of convergence or divergence of salience of terrorism after a terrorist attack. The connection is multidirectional and depending upon a variety of factors. Most importantly, we observed convergence on the EU-level, but divergence on the national level. This raises important questions about the transnationality of the effects of terrorism. As this research does not test nor find a causal mechanism and is solely dependent on existing data, further research is necessary to test some of its findings.

KEYWORDS

Terrorism; salience; identity; transnationalism; impact; public opinion

Introduction

Over the past years, jihadist terrorists have targeted several European countries. Well-known examples are the attacks in Paris (January and November 2015), Brussels (2016), Nice (2016), Manchester (2017) and Barcelona (2017). These attacks aligned with the rise of the so-called Islamic State (IS) and have made headlines worldwide as well as led to policy changes within the affected countries.¹

Statistically speaking, the risk of an individual being killed because of a terrorist attack in Europe is close to zero. According to the “European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Reports” of Europol, terrorist attacks led to the death of 151 people in 2015, 142 people in 2016 and sixty-eight people in 2017.² On a total population of 511 million within the EU, this is a rate of about 0.7 to 1 million over those three years.³ Thus, the probability that an individual becomes a victim of a terrorist attack is very low.⁴

The risk of terrorist attacks in Europe, however, has manifested itself as being a lot more than a mere statistical possibility. Terrorism does not revolve around statistics such

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as casualty numbers and the risk of being killed: many terrorism researchers have emphasized that terrorism fundamentally is about reaching an audience beyond the direct victims and using terrorist attacks to send a message.⁵ Media coverage of a terrorist attack helps terrorists to spread this message.⁶ The large-scale terrorist attacks that occurred in the period 2015–2017 in the European Union made headlines for days across countries, reaching a wide audience. Some authors have thus called terrorism a low-probability, high-impact threat.⁷ To this date, however, there hardly exists any literature that investigates how these terrorist attacks could affect the salience of terrorism and thereby both influence public opinion as well as policy agenda's.

This idea can be broadly defined as issue salience: the importance citizens assign to an issue. This paper will look at the salience of terrorism within the European Union in the years 2015–2017. It aims to see to what extent there is convergence or divergence in the salience of terrorism as an issue among citizens of different EU member states in this period. To this end, we will use the data of the Eurobarometer. The Eurobarometer is a series of opinion surveys carried out for the European Commission since 1973.⁸ The period that will be studied is 2015–2017 when European countries were confronted with several large-scale terrorist attacks. The attacks and concurrent possible changes in issue salience around this time will be studied for jihadist attacks in which the perpetrators killed at least five people. These ten attacks are attacks in Paris in January and November 2015, Brussels in March 2016, Nice in July 2016, Berlin in December 2016, London in March and June 2017, Stockholm in April 2017, Manchester in May 2017 and Barcelona in August 2017.⁹ The central question of this paper is: to what extent do we see the same (relative and absolute) change in the salience of terrorism in countries that are attacked as compared to the average within the EU?

By studying the salience of terrorism, this study aims to take the first step toward a better understanding of how the effects of terrorism might cross national borders. This paper tries to address an important gap in the literature on the impact of terrorism. While several scholars have emphasized the importance of the audience of terrorism, very few attempts have been made to gauge the extent to which attacks affect the salience of terrorism among an important audience group: the wider population. An exception is the 2006 study by Bakker into threat perceptions within the EU, which concluded that “the threat is not pan-European.”¹⁰ This study builds on Bakker’s important contribution and wishes to update it to the current period in which Europe has been confronted, again, with several jihadist attacks. It aims to broaden Bakker’s design as he studied the overall development of the salience of terrorism within the EU but did not investigate possible differences between countries of attack and the EU average before and after particular terrorist attacks. Furthermore, whereas Bakker used Eurobarometer data (2003–2005) on the most important issues on a national level, we argue that, in addition, we also need to see how citizens rank terrorism as an issue to the European Union to understand how the effects of terrorism might cross borders.

The outline of this paper is as follows. First, after defining issue salience, the theoretical framework will discuss key concepts related to expected convergence or divergence in the salience of terrorism after terrorist attacks. These include media attention, transnationalism, shared identity and a lack of transnationalism. The methods section will outline how the Eurobarometer is used to study the salience of terrorism. The results section will present the data, which will be followed by a discussion on how these results should be

interpreted in light of convergence or divergence within the European Union and the impact of terrorist attacks.

Theoretical framework

Before delving into the empirical data on issue salience, we first need to define issue salience in the context of terrorism.

Issue salience

There exists a wide variety of definitions of issue salience; there is not one, clear definition of this concept. According to an in-depth study on the use of issue salience, the majority (62 percent) of the articles provided no definition of the term at all. Others defined salient policy issues as issues prominent in the minds of citizens. Then again, others pointed toward the level of importance given to an issue.¹¹ For example, Beyers, Dür and Wonka assume that issue salience is the importance the public attribute to a political matter.¹² Warntjen defines salience as “the importance an actor attaches to an issue.”¹³ For this research, we will define issue salience as issues that are ranked among the most important issues according to European citizens.

Another question relates to how to measure the level of salience. Here too, a myriad of methods is possible. Some scholars looked at the political elites or news media, whereas others focused on voting behavior.¹⁴ Yet again, other scholars studied the importance citizens placed on the issue, which is the most common measurement.¹⁵ This type of measurement can be carried out in two different ways: the first focuses on the importance citizens place on the issue for the country or community as a whole, whereas the second focuses on the importance a citizen places on the issue personally.¹⁶ For this paper, we will use the first type of measurement, as the importance citizens place on the issue for their country and community (the EU) is measured by the Eurobarometer and most clearly aligns with the research objectives of this paper.

Convergence

Media attention

The news of a terrorist attack transcends borders and shows the transnational impact of these attacks. This means both the phenomenon of terrorism and the impact are transnational. Several studies have found a clear relationship between media coverage and the salience of issues for citizens. An example is the study by Wanta, Golan and Lee on the relationship between media coverage and the way in which Americans viewed foreign nations.¹⁷ The authors found that the top two countries on the public agenda received the highest media coverage. Additionally, the countries that received the lowest media coverage were also at the bottom of the public agenda.¹⁸ Thus, it could be argued that when events such as terrorist attacks receive a lot of news coverage, the issue is placed higher on the public agenda and is more likely to become a salient issue. Consequently, we believe that terrorist attacks such as the ones included in this study increase issue salience as they receive a lot of media attention. This effect will be visible in the Eurobarometer data.

Nellis and Savage explored the effect of media exposure related to terrorism fear in the United States, drawing upon earlier research from fear of crime literature. They found that “frequency of exposure [to TV news] was associated with greater fear for one’s family, greater personal perceived risk of terrorism and greater risk of terrorism to others.”¹⁹ It stands to reason that this effect is mirrored by media coverage on terrorism and issue salience. Parker et al. found that press coverage of terrorist attacks can shape the reaction of the public. They found that “press reporting in both countries [the UK and Denmark] frequently frames lone-actor terrorism as a significant and increasing problem.”²⁰ However, they also found that the type of media coverage is important. Many of the articles in their dataset do not report details of terrorist messaging, which, according to them, counters the role of the media in acting as a “force-multiplier for terrorist campaigns.”²¹ This means that the content of media coverage matters as well: the media could affect the response of the audience and therefore amplify issue salience of terrorism on the public agenda, depending on the type of coverage.

To understand how media coverage might affect issue salience, Birkland has pointed at so-called “focusing events.” He defined these as “an event that is sudden, relatively rare, can be reasonably defined as harmful or revealing the possibility of potentially greater future harms, inflicts harms or suggest potential harms that are or could be concentrated on a definable geographical area or community of interest, and that is known to policymakers and the public virtually simultaneously.”²² A focusing event often gains widespread attention due to the nature of this event.²³ A terrorist attack can be regarded as a focusing event since they often occur suddenly and are relatively rare. Additionally, the inherent violent nature of a terrorist attack is aimed at inflicting harm, and due to the immediate and abundant media coverage following a terrorist attack, the occurrence of such an attack is known to policymakers and the public at the same time.

Transnationalism

Terrorist attacks might increase the salience of terrorism across European countries as citizens know that terrorism is a transnational phenomenon that crosses national borders.²⁴ Over 42,000 foreign fighters from more than 120 countries have joined jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq since 2011.²⁵ Terrorist organizations such as IS frequently threaten entire regions in their propaganda. A pro-IS media group released a video after the Brussels attacks of March 2016, in which it was stated that “[i]f it was Paris yesterday, and today in Brussels, Allah knows where it will be tomorrow. Maybe it will be in London or Berlin or Rome. We will come to you and terrify you everywhere ...”²⁶ The goal is to send the message that such an attack could happen anywhere and that there is no difference for jihadists between European countries. In the past years, terrorists directly instructed or inspired by IS have indeed targeted various European countries.

Secondly, the idea of a transnational threat could also be strengthened because the EU as such can be regarded to be a transnational community. In practical terms, the Schengen Agreement and freedom of movement of citizens enables terrorists to cross borders relatively easily and, on paper, to attack almost anywhere within the EU.²⁷ In more theoretical terms, scholars have investigated the question to what extent the EU can be seen as something more ideological, often phrased as a “community of values.”²⁸ This is another factor that could contribute to convergence: a feeling of solidarity due to belonging to a community of shared values.

Shared identity

Looking at the aftermath of terrorist attacks within Europe, terrorist attacks often inspire solidarity across various countries with the targeted country, at least when looking at outward appearances. We have seen many recent examples ranging from “Je Suis Charlie” after the attacks on the offices of Charlie Hebdo in January 2015 and world leaders holding hands on the streets of Paris to the hype of Facebook users covering their profile pictures with an image of the French flag after the November 2015 Paris attacks. The question is, however, to what extent such public manifestations of solidarity can be equated to actual identification with the victims, leading to increased threat perceptions as well as an increase in the salience of terrorism as an issue.

According to Liem, Kuipers and Sciarone, the reason why terrorist attacks in one European country affect other European countries is because the attack is not just an attack on one country, or the victims of an attack, but it serves as a greater message to a system of shared values and a community as a whole.²⁹ The authors also showed that more people in the Netherlands searched for terrorism-related terms on Google after a terrorist attack abroad.³⁰ Although this paper was solely focused on the effects in the Netherlands, it stands to reason that these effects are similar in other European countries and that the salience of terrorism thus increases after an attack. This could be related to feelings of a shared identity within the EU. Scholars have found that these feelings are present in the EU. Delanty suggests that there are signs that a collective identity exists within the EU, specifically related to the cultural and political identity of the EU.³¹ This is consonant with Eurobarometer data from the Eurobarometer 40-year public opinion survey.³² The data from this survey showed that most people within the EU view themselves as European. The majority of the people within the EU feel that they are European in some way every time this question has been asked, since 1992.³³ However, according to the same research, this varies from country to country.

Divergence

Lack of transnationalism

Divergence could be related to the fact that the threat of terrorism in general and terrorist attacks in particular remain very local, contained events. Although jihadist terrorists have a transnational agenda, they often focus on particular countries. For instance, according to data of Europol, there were a total of 705 arrests related to jihadism in 2017. Of these arrests, 373 were made in France, seventy-eight in Spain, fifty-two in Germany, fifty in Belgium and forty-six in Austria.³⁴ This means that around 85 percent of the arrests, reflecting the intensity of jihadist activity, were made in just five countries. Additionally, almost all jihadist terrorist attacks have taken place in Western and Northern Europe. Many countries in the Eastern or Southern part of Europe are less confronted with the issues of, for instance, foreign fighters or homegrown jihadist networks. Clearly, the threat of terrorism is not the same in different regions within the European Union, as was also observed by Bakker in his 2006 study.³⁵ A small number of countries are targeted frequently, but most European countries, fortunately, have not been targeted by jihadist attacks. Therefore, it could be expected that citizens in those parts of Europe that are not regularly confronted with (jihadist) terrorism would have a different interpretation of the salience of terrorism and would be less affected by the occurrence of terrorist attacks in

other parts of Europe. This would mean that a possible change in issue salience within the country of attack is not observed when looking at the European Union average, leading to divergence in issue salience.

Furthermore, while we do see outward solidarity (in the form of statements from European leaders or civilians) after terrorist attacks, this cannot be directly equated to an increase in the salience of terrorism. After the attacks in France in 2015, many people changed their Facebook profile picture in support of the victims of the terrorist attacks. While we do see some type of outward solidarity, there is no evidence so far that European citizens of other countries truly identify themselves with the victims of an attack. According to the Special Eurobarometer “Europeans in 2014,” the majority of European citizens do not feel that the EU member states are close in terms of shared values. This decline started in 2012 and was visible in 2014 as well.³⁶ This does seem to contradict earlier findings of signs of a collective identity within the EU.

According to Criado, a terrorist attack in itself is not sufficient to change terrorism salience in public opinion.³⁷ Criado analyzed this issue for Spain, a country that has been confronted with terrorism for an extensive amount of time. She found that the target of a terrorist attack, the ideology of a party in government, the closeness to the election and the presence of an agreement to exclude terrorism from party competition all contribute to terrorism salience.³⁸ This means that there could be many other factors that contribute to the salience of terrorism as an issue.

Methods

The data of the Eurobarometer is used to study the convergence or divergence of issue salience of terrorism within the European Union. The Standard Eurobarometer (EB) is a survey conducted by TNS Opinion & Social at the request of the European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication. It is carried out every few months, usually within a two-week period across the European Union. The number of respondents is around 1,000 per country. For the EU average score (EU28), the results of the different countries are weighed in the survey in proportion to their population size and population density.³⁹

The survey questions that will be used for this study pertain to what people perceive as the most important security issues, which we interpret as issue salience. Citizens are asked three different versions of the question: one pertaining to the most important security issue for their own country (QA3 in the survey), one pertaining to the most important security issues on a personal level (QA4), and one pertaining to the most important security issue for the EU as a whole (QA5). The exact questions are:

- QA3 What do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment? (ROTATE – MAX. 2 ANSWERS)
- QA4 And personally, what are the two most important issues you are facing at the moment? (ROTATE – MAX. 2 ANSWERS)
- QA5 What do you think are the two most important issues facing the EU at the moment? (ROTATE – MAX. 2 ANSWERS)

Respondents choose a maximum of two items from a rotating list of the following options: crime, economic situation, rising prices/inflation, taxation, unemployment, terrorism,

EU's influence in the world, the state of member states public finances, immigration, pensions, the environment, energy supply, climate change, other (SP.), none (SP.), DK (don't know). For this study, question QA3 and QA5 will be analyzed as this enables us to study potential differences in the relative issue salience of terrorism on a national level and the EU-level for different EU countries.

The Standard Eurobarometers 82 (November 2014) to 88 (November 2017) will be used as they align with the period of the studied jihadist terrorist attacks in Europe. The dates in this study are the dates when the survey was conducted. The time between the first EB before and after an attack differs on a case-by-case basis. For each terrorist attack, the dates of the survey as well as the time before and after the terrorist attack will be provided.

First of all, the overall trend of issue salience of terrorism is shown on both the national and EU-level, providing an overview of the development in the period November 2014–November 2017. Then, for each of the ten studied terrorist attacks, the results of the last EB that was conducted before and the first EB that was conducted after the terrorist attack will be compared. This will be performed for both Q3A and Q5A—comparing the issue salience on national and European level. For both questions, the results will be presented for the country where the terrorist attack took place as well as the EU28-average. For each studied terrorist attack, one graph will be presented containing the results of the two different EBs for the country of attack and the EU average: the left-hand side of the graph pertains to Q3A and on the right-hand side pertains to Q5A for the country of attack and the EU average in the two EBs. A total of nine graphs are presented as two attacks occur in the same country in the same period and are shown in one graph.

It must be noted that a causal link between terrorist attacks and the salience of terrorism cannot be tested, since terrorist attacks are just one, albeit highly important, factor that could affect those perceptions. Secondly, since the Eurobarometer data focuses on the salience of several security issues, the terrorist threat is relative to other security threats (for example, crime, immigration or economics). Thirdly, the amount of time between the polling dates of the Eurobarometer and the various jihadists attacks varies, which complicates comparisons between those cases. Despite these shortcomings, the Eurobarometer forms a unique source as it consistently tracks public opinion within the EU over a longer period of time. As the Eurobarometer surveys citizens on security issues twice a year, it is guaranteed that data is available at most a few months after each terrorist attack. This research design enables us to develop our insight into the relative issue salience of terrorism in the period before and after a terrorist attack and to see to what extent convergence or divergence occurs within the EU.

Results

Overall development of issue salience of terrorism within the EU

Overall, there has been a steady increase in the salience of terrorism within the EU in this period. This applies to the questions about national issue salience (Q3A) as well as EU issue salience (Q5A). The results (see [Figure 1](#)) show that EU citizens on average rank terrorism less of a national security issue than an EU security issue and the difference between those two seems to have been expanding over the past years. Whereas the EU average on national issue salience moved from 6 percent to a peak of 19 percent in May

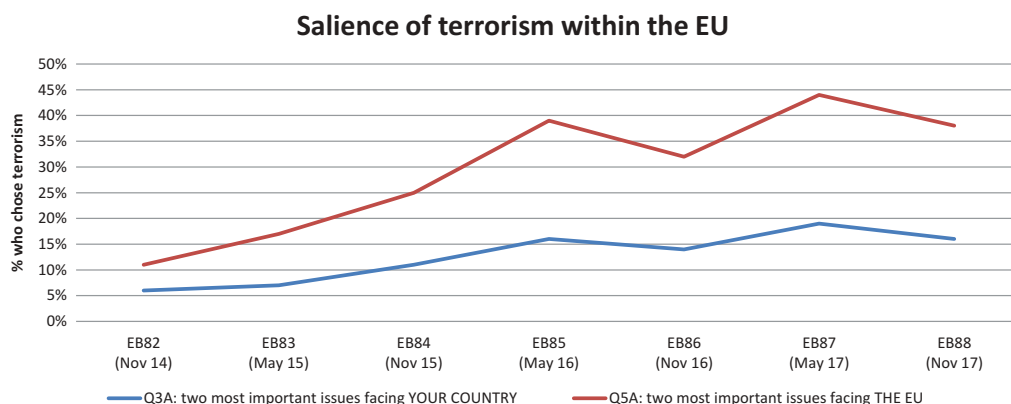


Figure 1. Results of EU average of salience of terrorism within the EU.

2017 and back to 16 percent in November 2017, the EU average on EU issue salience moved from 11 percent to a peak of 44 percent in May 2017 and 38 percent in November 2017. This corresponds to the relative position of terrorism among the list of security issues presented to respondents. For the EU average of national salience of terrorism, terrorism never reached the top three of issues identified by respondents. On national issue salience, issues such as unemployment, immigration and the economic situation almost continuously ranked higher. The situation for EU issue salience is different. In the surveys from EB84 and onwards, terrorism has on average consistently ranked as the second most frequently mentioned item of security issues for the EU as a whole. In EB85, terrorism was ranked as the number one or two security concern to the EU in every member state with the exception of Greece, where citizens ranked it third (after immigration and the economic situation). In EB86, only citizens in Greece, Finland and Sweden ranked terrorism outside of the top three security concerns to the EU (on number four, after immigration, the economic situation and public finances/rising inflation). For EB87, with 44 percent of the respondents mentioning terrorism, terrorism was on average seen as the most important security issue for the EU as a whole.

Development of issue salience after terrorist attacks

This section will show the results of the salience of terrorism on a national and EU level before and after ten jihadist terrorist attacks.

Charlie Hebdo attacks

The results⁴⁰ of the salience of terrorism in the EBs before and after the Charlie Hebdo attacks and in January 2015 in France that killed seventeen people are displayed in [Figure 2](#). It shows a large increase in the national salience of terrorism (Q3A) within the country of the attack—from 5 percent to 13 percent in France—whereas the EU average of the national issue salience (the average of how European citizens perceived terrorism as a security issue *for their own country*) hardly changed (from 6 percent to 7

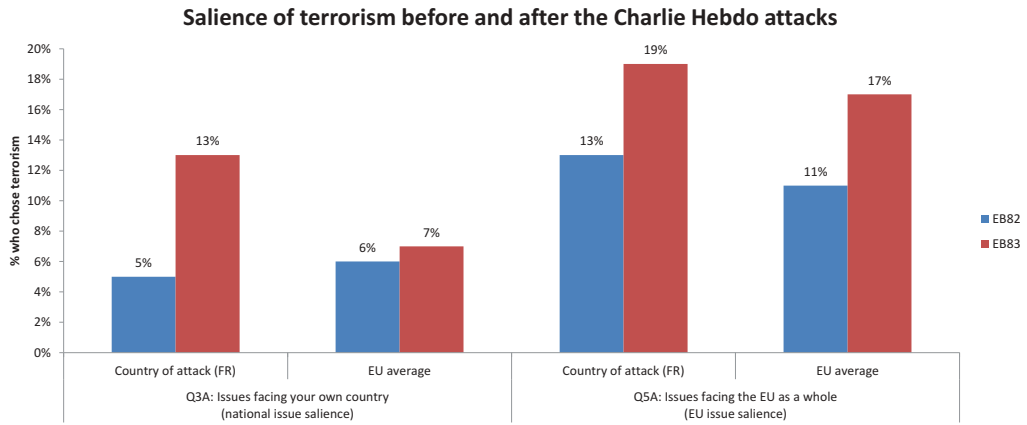


Figure 2. National and EU salience of terrorism before and after the Charlie Hebdo attacks.

percent). Concerning EU issue salience (Q5A), a similar substantial increase can be seen in the country where the attack occurred (13 percent–19 percent) as compared to the EU average (11 percent–17 percent). This means that whereas terrorism was ranked higher as a security issue for the EU both in France and in the EU as a whole, this did not apply to the national issue salience of terrorism. In France, there was a considerable increase, but in the EU as a whole, it remained virtually unchanged.

November 2015 Paris attacks

The results⁴¹ of the salience of terrorism in the EBs before and after the November 2015 Paris attacks that killed 137 people are displayed in [Figure 3](#). For both the national and EU salience, similar results are observed for the country of attack and the EU average. Regarding the national issue salience of terrorism (Q3A), the results within the country of the attack and the EU average are, respectively, +5 percent and +4 percent. Concerning

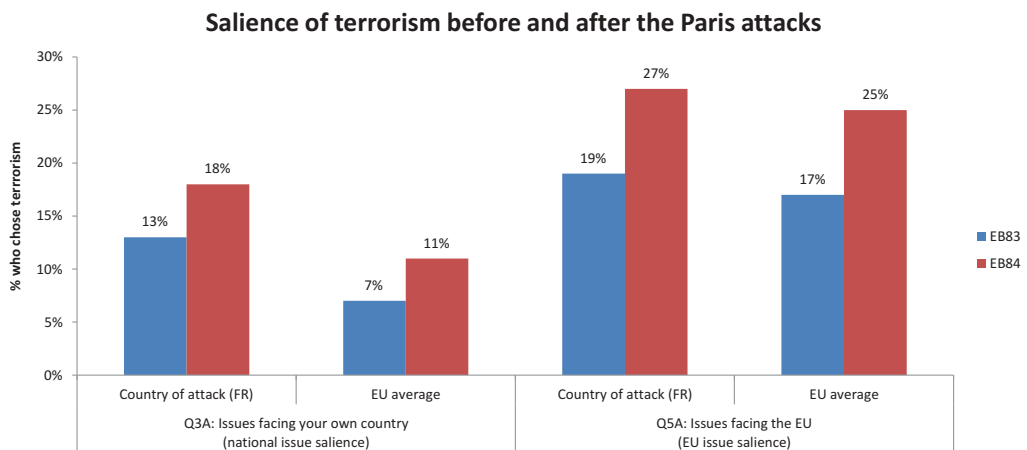


Figure 3. National and EU salience of terrorism before and after the November 2015 Paris attacks.

EU salience (Q5A), an increase of 8 percent is seen for both the country of attack and the EU average. In this case, convergence can be seen.

Brussels attacks

The results⁴² of the salience of terrorism in the EBs before and after the 2016 Brussels attacks that killed thirty-two people are displayed in Figure 4. Here, a strong divergence is observed for the results of the country of attack and the EU average on national issue salience (Q3A). For Belgium, there was a large increase from 9 percent to 33 percent who mentioned terrorism as one of the two most important issues for Belgium. This 33 percent corresponded to terrorism being the most often mentioned security issue in Belgium. For the EU average on national salience, terrorism only increased from 11 percent to 16 percent. For the EU issue salience (Q5A), a large increase was seen in Belgium (from 25 percent to 35 percent) but an even larger increase was seen in the EU average (25 percent to 39 percent). In this case, strong divergence is seen on national issue salience but more convergence is seen on EU issue salience, although Belgium witnessed a somewhat smaller increase as compared to the EU average.

Nice attack

The results⁴³ of the salience of terrorism in the EBs before and after the 2016 Nice attack that killed eighty-six people are displayed in Figure 5. The results for national issue salience (Q3A) almost remained unchanged in both the country of attack (+1 percent) and the EU average (−2 percent). A decrease was seen for EU issue salience (Q5A) both in the country of attack (−4 percent) and a larger one for the EU average (−7 percent). In this case, convergence is seen on both national and EU issue salience. Interestingly, in France, the national issue salience still increased (although very marginally) whereas the EU issue salience in France decreased.

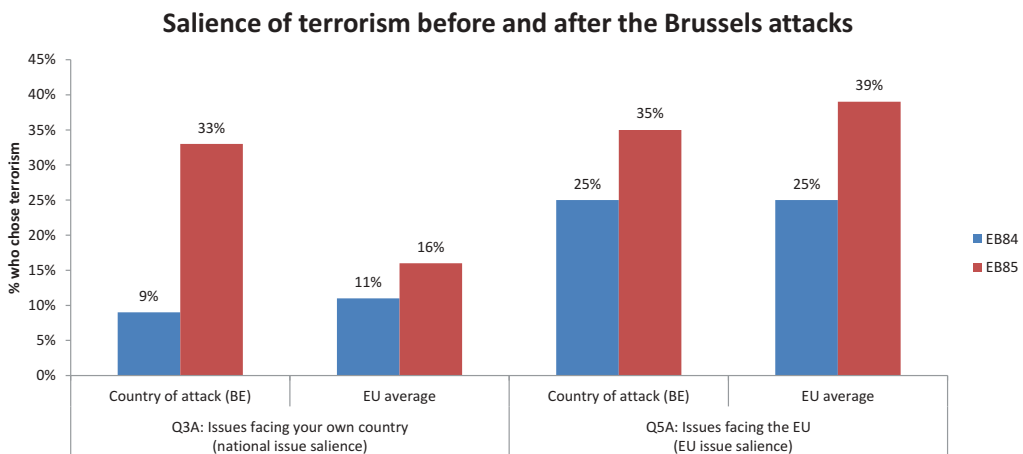


Figure 4. National and EU salience of terrorism before and after the Brussels attacks.

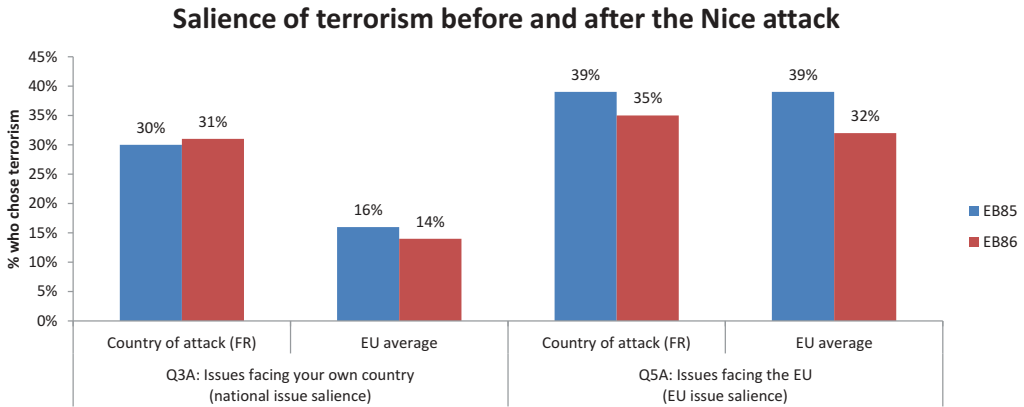


Figure 5. National and EU salience of terrorism before and after the Nice attack.

Berlin attack

The results⁴⁴ of the salience of terrorism in the EBs before and after the 2016 Berlin attack that killed twelve people are displayed in [Figure 6](#). The results for national issue salience (Q3A) show an interesting difference between the country of attack and the EU average. In Germany, the national issue salience decreased by 1 percent, whereas the EU average increased considerably from 14 percent to 19 percent. In Germany, the EU issue salience (Q5A) increased with 3 percent and the EU average increased very strongly from 32 percent to 44 percent. Thus, interestingly, in Germany, national issue salience of terrorism decreased (although very marginally) in the first EB after the attack while EU issue salience increased. The EU average increased more strongly on both the national issue salience and the EU issue salience; thus, divergence rather than convergence is observed.

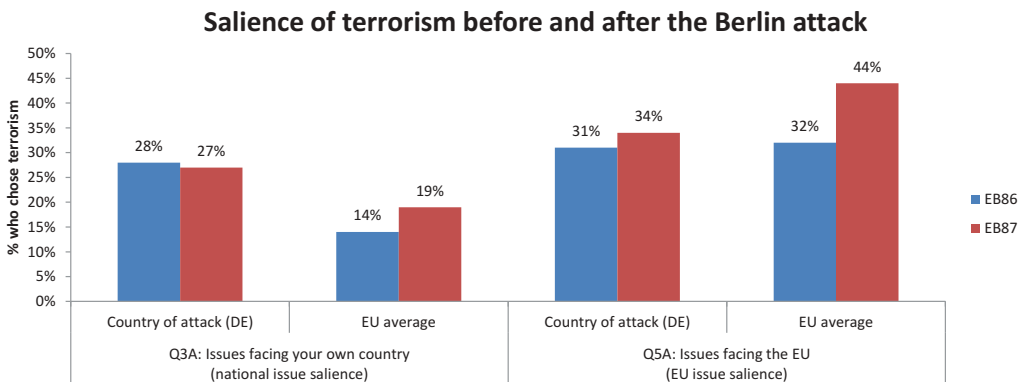


Figure 6. National and EU salience of terrorism before and after the Berlin attack.

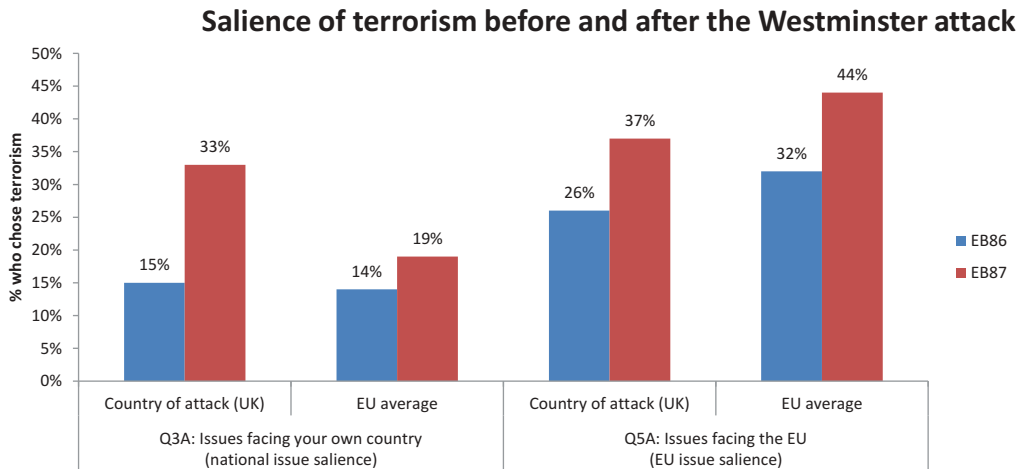


Figure 7. National and EU salience of terrorism before and after the Westminster attack.

Westminster attack

The results⁴⁵ of the salience of terrorism in the EBs before and after the 2017 Westminster attack that killed five people are displayed in Figure 7. The results for national issue salience (Q3A) show a very large increase in national issue salience. It more than doubled from 15 percent to 33 percent in the UK, whereas the EU average only increased by 5 percent (14–19 percent). Regarding EU issue salience (Q5A), the country of attack as well as the EU average showed a large increase of, respectively, 11 percent and 12 percent, adding up to 37 percent and 44 percent. The interviews of the EB after the attack (May 20–28) were partially held after the Manchester attack (May 22) and might therefore also reflect the post-Manchester attack result in addition to the post-Westminster attack result.

Stockholm attack

The results⁴⁶ of the salience of terrorism in the EBs before and after the 2017 Stockholm attack that killed five people are displayed in Figure 8. The results for national issue salience (Q3A) show that it increased from a very low 3 percent to 6 percent in Sweden. The EU average increased from 14 percent to 19 percent during the same period. Regarding EU issue salience (Q5A), Sweden already showed a much higher figure compared to national issue salience before the attacks (20 percent), which increased to 27 percent after the Stockholm attack. The EU average increased even more sharply during the period (from 32 percent to 44 percent). This shows convergence on national issue salience and EU issue salience but with different intensity.

Manchester and London Bridge attacks

The results⁴⁷ of the salience of terrorism in the EB's before and after the 2017 Manchester attack and London Bridge attacks are displayed in Figure 9. This graph combines the two attacks as they both occurred in the same period relative to the publication of the

Salience of terrorism before and after the Stockholm attack

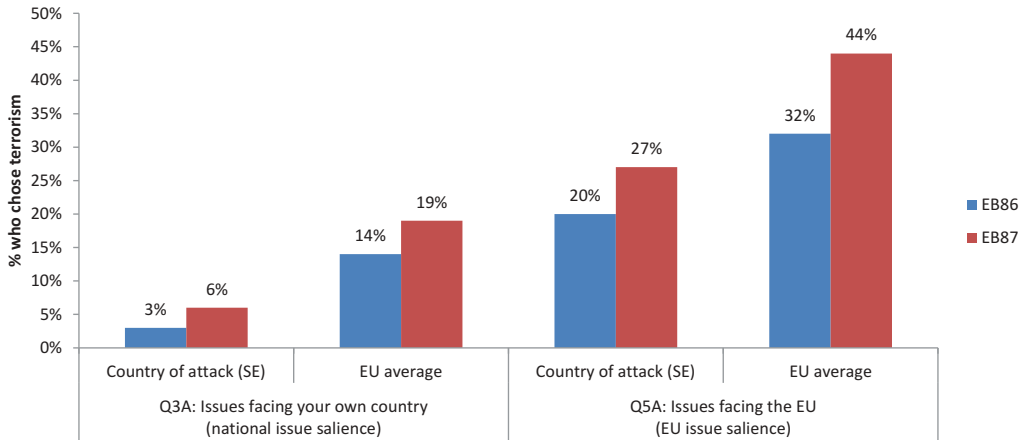


Figure 8. National and EU salience of terrorism before and after the the Stockholm attack.

Eurobarometers. On May 22, 2017, twenty-two people were killed during the Manchester attack on June 3, 2017, eight people were killed during an attack in the London Bridge and Borough Market area. The results for national issue salience (Q3A) display a difference between the country of attack and the EU average. In the UK, the national issue salience decreased considerably with 8 percent, whereas the EU average decreased slightly less: from 19 percent to 16 percent. Regarding the EU issue salience (Q5A), both for the country of attack as well as for the EU average, a considerable decrease was seen (–6 percent). On all metrics, issue salience of terrorism decreased in the period after the Manchester and London Bridge attacks. It must be noted that this result might have been caused by the fact that the survey dates of the “pre-attack” EB (20–28 May) were in fact mostly after the Manchester attack (22 May) and thus effectively showed the “post-attack”

Salience of terrorism before and after the Manchester & London Bridge attack

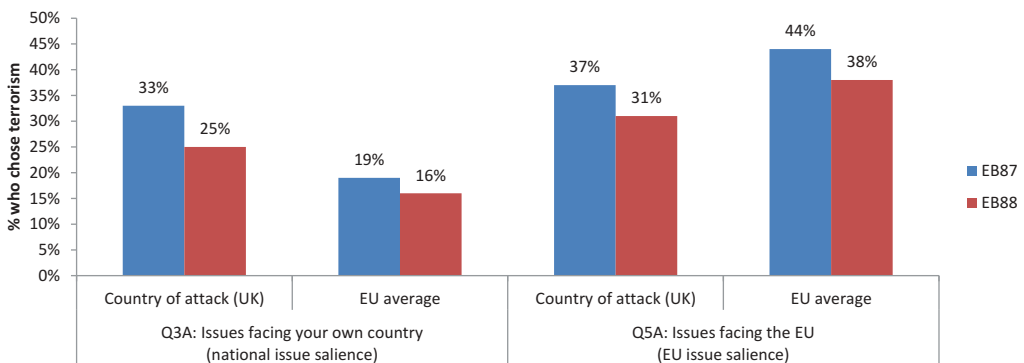


Figure 9. National and EU salience of terrorism before and after the Manchester and London Bridge attack.

result. The results of this graph are therefore excluded from being analyzed for the overall conclusion of this paper.

Barcelona attack

The results⁴⁸ of the salience of terrorism in the EBs before and after the 2017 Barcelona attack that killed sixteen people are displayed in Figure 10. The results for national issue salience (Q3A) display an interesting difference between the country of attack and the EU average. In Spain, the national issue salience increased slightly with 2 percent, whereas the EU average decreased slightly with 3 percent. Regarding the EU issue salience (Q5A), both for the country of attack and for the EU average, a considerable decrease was seen (–8 percent and –6 percent). This shows divergence on national issue salience and convergence on EU issue salience.

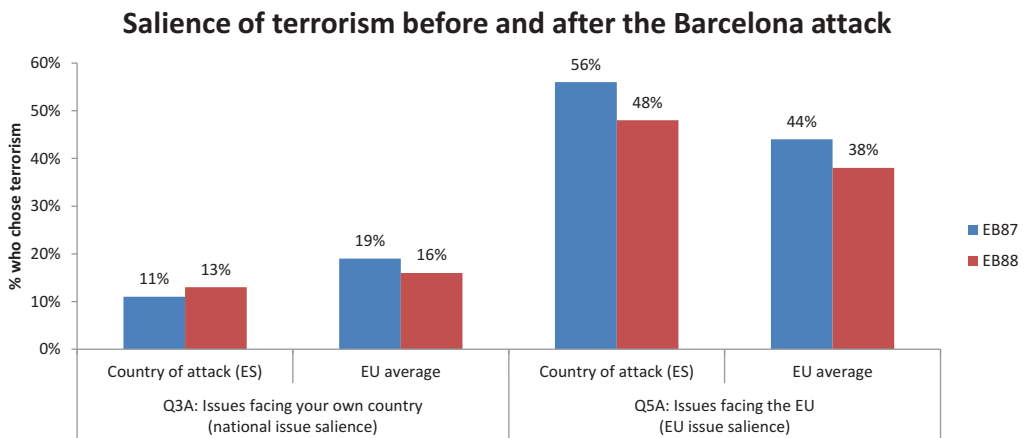


Figure 10. National and EU salience of terrorism before and after the Barcelona attack.

Table 1. Increase or decrease of issue salience.

Terrorist attacks	Direction of national issue salience of terrorism after terrorist attack (1)		Direction of EU issue salience of terrorism after terrorist attack (2)	
	Country of attack	EU average	Country of attack	EU average
Charlie Hebdo attacks	↑↑	-	↑↑	↑↑
Paris attacks	↑	↑	↑↑	↑↑
Brussels attacks	↑↑↑	↑	↑↑	↑↑↑
Nice attack	-	↓	↓	↓↓
Berlin attack	-	↑	↑	↑↑↑
Westminster attack	↑↑↑	↑	↑↑↑	↑↑↑
Stockholm attack	↑	↑	↑↑	↑↑↑
Barcelona attack	↑	↓	↓↓	↓↓

This table is based on the data of the different EB graphs that were presented above with the exception of the Manchester/London Bridge attacks.

Legend: —: ≤1 percent increase or decrease; ↑&↓: >1 ≥ 5 percent increase or decrease; ↑↑&↓↓: >5 ≥ 10 percent increase or decrease; ↑↑↑&↓↓↓: >10 percent increase or decrease.

Overall results

We combined the results of the different graphs and visualized it in order to see any patterns emerging. Table 1 on the previous page shows the direction of the change in issue salience of terrorism before and after an attack for both the national salience (1) how terrorism was seen as an important issue to the particular countries and the EU salience (2) how terrorism was seen as an important issue to the EU. It is split in the results of the country where the terrorist attack occurred and the EU average to see if they converge or diverge both in terms of the direction and the magnitude of the change.

This table shows that substantial differences exist between national and EU issue salience. In terms of EU issue salience, a convergence of the salience of terrorism can be observed in most cases. The direction of issue salience in the country of attack and the EU average is similar in each of the eight cases. The magnitude of the change differs in four of the eight cases, with only the Berlin attack being a case where this difference was considerable (more than 5 percent). In terms of national issue salience, less convergence or even divergence can be seen. Only in half of the cases (four) we observe the same direction of the change in issue salience, with two cases—the November 2015 Paris attacks and the April 2016 Stockholm attack—where we also see the same magnitude of change. In the other four cases, the direction of the change was not the same. The data shows that national issue salience differs per country: there is no convergence, but rather divergence.

Discussion

The aim of this paper was to investigate to what extent we can observe divergence or convergence in the salience of terrorism after terrorist attacks in the country of attack compared to the EU average. The results presented above indicate the existence of different mechanisms and patterns. First of all, we observe strong convergence on issue salience when citizens are asked about the most important security issues to the EU as a whole. Secondly, divergence is observed regarding the national salience of terrorism. This could be called a paradoxical situation in terms of the transnationality of issue salience: citizens within a country of a terrorist attack experience the same changes in their perception of terrorism as an important security issue to the EU when compared to the EU average, but different developments are seen when they are asked about the importance of terrorism to their own country.

These differences could be explained by the fact that many factors can affect the salience of terrorism and that it is not year clear which factor, under what circumstances, has what kind of effect on the “total issue salience of terrorism;” the issue salience that we find in the Eurobarometer survey. For instance, the concept of transnationality could explain why citizens draw similar conclusions for the importance of terrorism to the EU as a whole. A lack of transnationalism, on the other hand, could explain why this convergence is not seen on the national salience of terrorism: in the end, citizens still draw different conclusions for their own country and do perceive terrorist attacks, to some extent, as geographically contained events.

Profuse media coverage of attacks, something that is present for all major jihadist attacks, does not seem to be the most important factor affecting the salience of terrorism for citizens, as we would have then seen stronger increases in salience on all levels. Similarly, the casualty numbers also do not seem to be an important explanatory factor

as the sharpest increases in the EU average of EU issue salience occurred often after relatively small-scale attacks in terms of the victim numbers (Berlin, Stockholm) and conversely, decreases occurred after relatively lethal attacks (Nice, Barcelona). The fact that we still see some convergence on the national level, however, indicates that feelings of shared identity or a transnational perception of the threat are, to some extent, likely to be present. Despite the fact that profuse media attention might not be the most important factor affecting the salience, questions could still be raised about the link between the type of media coverage and issue salience. This was also suggested by Parker et al. when they explained that the media does not always focus strongly on terrorist messaging, limiting the potential effects on issue salience.⁴⁹ Detailed studies in the type of media coverage and issue salience could shed more light on this.

Another set of observations relates to the actual direction of change in issue salience. Interestingly, in some cases, the national salience of terrorism did not increase after a terrorist attack in that particular country. This should point us toward the limits of the impact of terrorist attacks. On the contrary, it might also be understood as showing the resilience of countries and populations to cope with such shocking events and bounce back from them. Terrorist attacks do not seem to automatically lead to an increase in issue salience. Despite the fact that the issue salience only reflects the relative importance of terrorism to citizens as compared to other security issues, it does show that terrorist attacks do not always “overpower” or “crowd out” other security issues for citizens. Only in March 2016 did terrorism enter the top four of national security concerns, although unemployment, immigration and the economy continued to rank higher.⁵⁰ A similar sign of caution to recognize the limits of the effects of terrorist attacks can be found in the fact that the importance of terrorism as a security issue to the EU as a whole (temporarily) declined even at times when terrorist attacks were still occurring (between May 2016–November 2016 as well as May 2017–November 2017). Again, this could also be interpreted as a sign of resilience and it shows that terrorist attacks are not always successful tools to affect the importance citizens award to terrorism. As terrorism is understood to be a violent communication strategy, this raises questions about the effectiveness of terrorist attacks in affecting public opinion. It could also indicate that we need to focus more on studying the response to terrorist attacks, including concepts such as framing and meaning-making, to understand the salience of terrorism to citizens.

Ultimately, this study shows that the answer to convergence or divergence of issue salience of terrorism after attacks is that it can be observed on the EU-level, but not on the national level. Our findings partially confirm those of Bakker who stated that “there is no European threat perception” when looking at the national salience of terrorism.⁵¹ However, this paper has argued why it is necessary to complement this by studying how citizens rank terrorism as a security issue to the EU. There we observe the opposite, as there is strong convergence in changes in salience when comparing the country of attack with the EU average in the period 2015–2017. In addition to the studied attacks, further proof can be found in the relative ranking of terrorism for the EU compared to other security issues. Terrorism was not just on average ranked high as a security threat to the EU, but citizens in almost all member states ranked terrorism among the top three issues in the studied period. A little variation could be seen between the individual member states. These are further indications of convergence of issue salience of terrorism on the European level.

As this study only takes the first exploratory steps to investigate the effects of terrorist attacks, more research is needed to look into a causal link between the attacks and issue salience. Further research could take up this challenge to empirically and statistically test these first observations. Particular attention should also be paid to trying to discover the different factors that affect issue salience and how they might change under different circumstances and in relation to other security threats.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Notes

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 41. Date of attack: November 13, 2015. Fatalities: 137, EB before: EB 84 – fieldwork dates (survey dates): 16–27 May 2015, EB after: EB 85 – fieldwork dates: 7–17 Nov 2015, time between attack and next EB: less than 1 month. Important to note that the Paris attacks occurred between the two different EB85 survey dates. The report mentions that 90 percent of the survey results in France were linked to 16–17 November and 75 percent of the total survey results. This means the data is imperfect, but mostly accurate as post-attack data, particularly for France, so it is included in the overall conclusion.
 42. Date of attack: March 22, 2016. Fatalities: 32, EB before: EB84 – fieldwork dates (7–17 Nov 2015), EB after: EB85 – fieldwork dates: 21–30 May 2016, time between attack and next EB: 2 months.
 43. Date of attack: July 14, 2016. Fatalities: 86, EB before: EB85 – fieldwork dates: 21–30 May 2016, EB after: EB86 – fieldwork dates: 3–16 November 2016, time between attack and next EB: 4 months.
 44. Date of attack: December 19, 2016. Fatalities: 12, EB before: EB86 – fieldwork dates: 3–16 November 2016, EB after: EB87 – fieldwork dates: 20–29 May 2017, time between attack and next EB: 5 months.
 45. Date of attack: March 22, 2017. Fatalities: 5, EB before: EB86 – fieldwork dates: 3–16 November 2016, EB after: EB87 – fieldwork dates: 20–29 May 2017, time between attack and next EB: 2 months.

46. Date of attack: 7 April, 2017. Fatalities: 5, EB before: EB86 – fieldwork dates: 3–16 November 2016, EB after: EB87 – fieldwork dates: 20–29 May 2017, time between attack and next EB: 1 month.
47. Date of attack: May 22, 2017. Fatalities: 22, EB before: EB87 – fieldwork dates: 20–29 May 2017, EB after: EB88 – fieldwork dates: 5–14 November 2017, time between attack and next EB: 6 months. Note: the fieldwork dates of EB87 are spread out before and after the Manchester attack and the report does not provide figures on the percentages before and after the attack. Most polling dates are after the attack whereas for this paper, it needed to reflect the pre-attack result. Therefore, this graph is excluded from being incorporated into the conclusions of this paper.
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