

## Tourism in Crisis: Managing the Effects of Terrorism

By: [Sevil F. Sönmez](#), [Yiorgos Apostolopoulos](#), and Peter Tarlow

Sönmez, S., Apostolopoulos, Y., and P. Tarlow (1999). Tourism in Crisis: Managing the Effects of Terrorism. *Journal of Travel Research*, 38(1):13-18.

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### **Abstract:**

While tourists are free to avoid destinations associated with risk, the consequences of disastrous events on tourist destinations are inescapable and can be profound. Terrorism that targets tourism can be viewed as a disaster for a destination and ensuing events can create a serious tourism crisis. This article argues that tourist destinations—especially those vulnerable to politically motivated violence—should incorporate crisis management planning into their overall sustainable development and marketing/management strategies to protect and rebuild their image of safety/attractiveness, to reassure potential visitors of the safety of the area, to reestablish the area's functionality/attractiveness, and to aid local travel and tourism industry members in their economic recovery. Recommendations include having a crisis management plan in place, establishing a tourism crisis management task force, developing a crisis management guidebook, and partnering with law enforcement officials.

### **Article:**

The tourism industry—regardless of setbacks such as the collapse and subsequent instability of Eastern Europe; the Persian Gulf War; the civil war in the former Yugoslavia; the financial and sociopolitical turmoil in Southeast Asia, Japan, Russia, and Latin America; and the perpetual international state of affairs—has become the world's preeminent industry, contributing about \$3.6 trillion to the global gross domestic product (GDP) and employing 255 million people (World Travel and Tourism Council 1997). As a key component of development in many countries, and despite its notable economic power and apparent resiliency, tourism is highly vulnerable to internal and external shocks as diverse as economic downturns, natural disasters, epidemic disease, and international conflicts.

While a natural disaster can impede the flow of tourism, terrorism risk tends to intimidate the traveling public more severely—as demonstrated by the realignment of travel flows and cancellation of vacations during periods of heightened terrorist activity. When tourism ceases to be pleasurable due to actual or perceived risks, tourists exercise their freedom and power to avoid risky situations or destinations. Substantial declines in global visitation were recorded during the height of terrorist activity in the 1980s and again during the 1991 Persian Gulf War; travelers either choose safer destinations or avoid travel altogether. Tourists can easily choose safer destinations, but the effects of negative occurrences on the local tourism industry and tourist destination can be profound.

Random acts of terrorism curtail travel activity until the public's memories of the publicized incidents fade. Persistent terrorism, however, can tarnish a destination's image of safety and attractiveness and jeopardize its entire tourism industry. Egypt, Israel, Northern Ireland, and Peru illustrate how ongoing political violence can adversely affect tourist perceptions of destinations and travel behavior. Although countries may experience terrorism differently, their tourism industries share similar challenges—some more drastic than others. These examples validate claims that terrorism absorbs each society's characteristics (Wahab 1995). Following a disastrous occurrence, the tourist destination and its related enterprises are put into the particularly difficult position of not only managing the crisis for themselves but also of meeting their responsibility to take care of their guests and clients. A mismanaged disaster can easily destroy the destination's image of safety while evolving into a long-term crisis for the local tourism industry. Through a domino effect, a tarnished image can

threaten tourism sustainability, which, in turn, can jeopardize the area's long-term economic viability. The two primary objectives of this article are to discuss terrorism as a tourism crisis and to offer suggestions for managing the effects.

## **TERRORISM AS A TOURISM CRISIS**

The tourism industry is highly vulnerable to natural (i.e., hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, torrential rains) and human-caused disasters—whether social or political (i.e., riots, insurgency, terrorism, crime, political upheaval, war, regional tensions). Regardless of their nature, disasters create difficult, often tragic, situations for the afflicted area and its residents. Over the years, media coverage of disasters has conveyed the resulting loss of life, human suffering, public and private property damage, and economic and social disruption. The ensuing negative publicity often characterizes the period after a disaster occurrence that lasts until full recovery is achieved and predisaster conditions resume. For a tourist destination, this period can represent a *tourism crisis*, which can threaten the normal operation and conduct of tourism-related businesses; damage a tourist destination's overall reputation for safety, attractiveness, and comfort by negatively affecting visitors' perceptions of that destination; and, in turn, cause a downturn in the local travel and tourism economy, and interrupt the continuity of business operations for the local travel and tourism industry, by the reduction in tourist arrivals and expenditures (Sönmez, Backman, and Allen 1994). Although the repercussions of a tourism crisis are likely to damage all destinations, the period of recovery can vary for each.

Often, large numbers of people have a vested interest in the health of the local tourism industry. Stakeholders and the local economy depend on outsiders' perceptions of the community. For this reason, it is highly unfortunate that tourism crises receive wide publicity because tourism centers are, by definition, places with high visibility. Regardless of whether tourism crises are triggered by natural or human-caused disasters, travelers will shy away from afflicted areas. Consequently, the local tourism industry will suffer from a lag-effect, in which a negative image caused by the disaster may well outlive physical damages and the tourism community/ industry will have to find ways to manage the disaster's after effects. This, in turn, may cause an economic downturn that is as harmful to a destination's tourism sustainability as the initial disaster. Tourism crises triggered by terrorism are likely to be different from those caused by natural disasters. Although terrorism has been a political tool since early history, modern-day terrorism began in the latter part of this century. International terrorism increased rapidly during the late 1960s and early 1970s. After a brief lull in activity, the 1980s began and ended with terrorist violence. By the end of the decade, terrorism had become commonplace (D'Amore and Anuza 1986; Richter and Waugh 1986). Fewer terrorist incidents in the United States have been recorded for the first half of the 1990s; however, their nature and magnitude are more severe than those of past years' events. Experts indicate that terrorism will continue to victimize "soft" targets, attacks will become more indiscriminate, terrorism will become institutionalized as a method of armed conflict, it will spread geographically, and the public will witness more terrorism than ever due to the media's improved ability to cover terrorist incidents (Atkinson, Sandler, and Tschirhart 1987; Jenkins 1988).

### ***Targeting the Tourist: Convenience or Calculation?***

Even though scholars differ in their explanation of terrorist objectives, they agree that terrorists have much to gain by targeting tourists. Terrorists' goals are classified broadly as revolutionary (narrow or broad), antigovernment (including overthrow of government) or subrevolutionary (including policy and personnel changes) (Richter and Waugh 1986). Upon closer examination, several more specific objectives emerge. First, targeting tourists helps terrorists achieve *strategic objectives*. These short- or long-term objectives can include using the excitement and commotion at tourist centers as a cover for their activities, destabilizing the economy, or gaining much needed media attention. Attacking tourists can not only provide terrorists with instrumental advantage by disrupting the tourism industry and assuring publicity but by gravitating toward international tourists and facilities, terrorists can also satisfy their own resource needs. Large groups of foreign-speaking and foreign-looking tourists provide camouflage and safety while offering various opportunities and choice of targets. Terrorists can circulate among travelers and carry out financial transactions in foreign currencies without arousing suspicion (Richter and Waugh 1986).

Because tourism represents a significant economic activity, terrorist attacks on tourists cause foreign exchange receipts to decline, thereby allowing terrorists to impose indirect costs on their governments and to gain political advantage over government officials (Hall and O'Sullivan 1996; Richter and Waugh 1986). Tourist decisions to stay home or choose safer destinations translate into significant losses for the tourism industry of the country suffering from terrorism (Edgell 1990). Egypt's 43% drop in tourism receipts as a result of terrorist attacks, which began in 1992, demonstrates how terrorists can damage a country's economy (Wahab 1996). When tourism symbolizes capitalism and state-sponsored tourism represents government, attacking tourism means attacking the government the terrorists are fighting (Hall and O'Sullivan 1996; Richter and Waugh 1986). This provides terrorists with the added benefit of strengthening their claims to political legitimacy by making the government look weak (Hall and O'Sullivan 1996).

Over the years, terrorist recognition of the political significance of international tourism has been repeatedly and tragically communicated. The reasons are simple and obvious and have been demonstrated by numerous incidents: when nationals of other countries become involved, news coverage is guaranteed. "By capturing the media agenda for days or weeks, such groups can hope to increase their profile and amplify their message; enhance their relative moral legitimacy; and improve their organizational effectiveness" (Weimann and Winn 1994, p. 143). Terrorists secure media attention while curtailing their government's ability to censor news content when they target international tourists. When tourists are kidnapped or killed, the situation is instantaneously dramatized by the media, which also helps the political conflict between terrorists and the establishment reach a global scale. Terrorists achieve the exposure they crave (Richter 1983) and the media increases its circulation or ratings.

Second, terrorists target tourists to achieve *ideological objectives* (Hall and O'Sullivan 1996), which can be explained in terms of clashing values, cultures, or socioeconomic levels. Travelers are targeted for their symbolic value as indirect representatives of other, perhaps hostile, governments (Richter 1983; Richter and Waugh 1986). This was fatally demonstrated during the 1985 hijacking of the *Achille Lauro* yacht by Palestinian terrorists. The selection of the only Jewish American on board as the one passenger to be killed is anything but coincidental. Ideological objectives can be explained in socioeconomic terms as well. For example, language barriers as well as economic and social gaps separate tourists and locals in Egypt. Violence against tourists can result from friction that develops when poverty-stricken locals are forced to coexist with international tourists enjoying luxuries (Aziz 1995) and from resentment that builds toward tourism because travel styles can represent ideological values, class behavior (i.e., conspicuous consumption), and the political culture of tourists and their countries (Richter 1983). The conflict between host and guest resulting from clashing cultures or values was aptly demonstrated in recent years in Egypt (Aziz 1995). Certain tourist behaviors (i.e., consumption of pork and alcohol, gambling, Western dress and codes of behavior) incongruent with Islamic cultural values have resulted in terrorist attacks against tourists in Egypt. When tourism represents a threat to well-established societal norms, traditions, value systems, and religious convictions (Wahab 1995), the desire to protect sacred beliefs can regrettably manifest itself in terrorism.

Simply put, the literature demonstrates that tourism can be the message as well as the medium of communication initiated by terrorists. Tourism can inspire terrorist violence by fueling political, religious, socioeconomic, or cultural resentment and be used as a cost-effective instrument to deliver a broader message of ideological/political opposition. In either case, the choice of the tourist as target is not coincidental. For terrorists, the symbolism, high profile, and news value of the international traveler are too valuable to be left unexploited.

### ***Traveler Response to Terrorism***

It is consumer reaction to terrorist activity that fuels a tourism crisis; examining related statistics is a sobering experience. For example, in 1985, 28 million Americans went abroad and 162 were killed or injured in terrorist activities. Thus, the U.S. tourist had a probability of less than .00057% of being victimized by terrorism (East, West 1986; Europe suffers 1986). Yet, despite this infrequency, nearly 2 million Americans changed their foreign travel plans in 1986 as a result of the previous year's events (which also included the U.S. military raid

on Libya) (Edgell 1990). More recently, during the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the fear of terrorism again influenced international travel flows when 275 terrorist incidents were recorded (U.S. Department of State 1992). Other countries around the world have experienced significant drops in tourist arrivals and earnings as a result of political violence during the 1990s, including Egypt, Mexico, Turkey, and Slovenia. The statistics representing consumer reaction to terrorism risk during the 1990s do not appear as dramatic as they did for the 1980s; however, there is no reason to believe that traveler reaction will not quickly and easily escalate parallel to terrorist activity in the years ahead.

The statistics clearly demonstrate that travel risks alter tourist demand patterns. On the other hand, tourism activity has been found to increase when terrorism risk is removed. “One of the most manifest ‘peace dividends’ was the massive increase in the level of tourism activity within Northern Ireland in the first year of the joint cease-fires” (O’Neill and Fitz 1996, p. 161). The reference is, of course, to the 18-month (1994-1996) cease-fire initiated by the Provisional Irish Republican Army and joined by the Combined Loyalist Military Command. Because of the intangible nature of the travel experience, tourism depends heavily on positive images. Destination image has been identified as a crucial factor in travel choice and tourism marketing (Bramwell and Rawding 1996; Chon 1991; Dann 1996; Echtner and Ritchie 1991; Gartner 1993); however, the link between mass media and destination image has received scant research attention (Butler 1990; Ehemann 1977). The impact of terrorism on destination image has been virtually ignored.

### *The Media’s Role in Destination Image*

Although the tourism industry is quite adept at using proven marketing principles, setbacks due to negative occurrences call for something more than traditional marketing efforts. The industry must conduct recovery marketing—or marketing integrated fully with crisis management activities. Because it is often the first casualty of violence, a destination image makes recovery marketing imperative. Media coverage of terrorism or political upheaval has the potential to shape individuals’ images of destinations. It is argued that a symbiotic relationship exists between terrorists and journalists and that terrorism is both a symbolic event and a performance that is staged for the benefit of media attention (Weimann and Winn 1994). Karber’s (1971) description of terrorism as communication takes on new meaning in light of Weimann and Winn’s (1994) description of terrorism as a media event. Broadcast media (especially television) provides the perfect stage for the riveting performance of terrorist incidents. Oddly and despite different motives, the media and terrorists converge to aid each other in the effort to communicate with the audience; the media achieves higher ratings and terrorists achieve their goal of publicity. Considering terrorist motives to disrupt tourism, media coverage of violence involving travelers is likely to be extremely gratifying to terrorist groups. Regardless of the motives, the time and attention afforded to terrorists clearly benefit both their organizations and the media. The losers include society as well as those destinations, which suffer as a result of the negative images such coverage spawns.

### *Lessons from the Past*

Case studies of destinations that have experienced aforementioned challenges offer several crisis management strategies. For instance, Egypt has tried to deal with its terrorism problem through increased security and aggressive marketing and promotion efforts. Egyptian police adopted preventive and proactive measures that eventually helped them find and arrest terrorist leaders. After foreign visitors were targeted by Egyptian terrorists, the Egyptian police force adopted countermeasures against terrorism based heavily on tight anticriminal actions aimed at protecting the country at large and the vulnerable tourist industry in particular (civil police officers were placed on all transportation vehicles used by tourists) (Wahab 1996). The Egyptian tourism ministry reevaluated its marketing strategy, then set new objectives including heavy advertising (Egypt hosted a series of international special events to draw world and industry attention away from the terrorism) (Wahab 1996).

Following the conflict in Chiapas, Mexico, the tourism minister exerted aggressive recovery efforts, which converged on efforts to increase domestic tourism by reestablishing confidence in Chiapas. One million letters were sent to businesses in Mexico entreating them to hold their meetings and conferences in the city’s new convention centers. As incentives, businesses were offered tax breaks for using Chiapas hotels and hotel prices

were lowered to more competitive levels (Pitts 1996). As part of crisis management efforts, recommendations were made to produce and distribute videos of other destinations that suffered a similar fate, demonstrating their return to peace and stability, and developing slogans to the same effect to aid recovery efforts (Pitts 1996).

Northern Ireland tried to overcome its terrorist-caused negative image by devising strategies to increase visitation (i.e., developing new tourism products/attractions) supported by heavy promotions (Witt and Moore 1992). Recognizing that promotion alone is insufficient, others recommend maintaining good contacts with members of the international media; providing comprehensive information to international tour operators, travel agents, and the press (to evaluate travel risks in their proper context); and wisely guiding tourists away from high-risk areas (Wahab 1996). The above examples provide potentially successful strategies in dealing with a tourism crisis; however, one can argue that having an organized plan of action in place—of which the above strategies are a component—might assure more effective solutions.

## **MANAGING THE IMPACT OF TERRORISM**

Protection from the ramifications of terrorism can occur at different levels. As a form of protective behavior, travelers can alter their destination choices; modify their travel behavior; or if they decide to continue with their travel plans, acquire information on terrorism, political turmoil, heavy crime, and health risks (Chandler 1991; Englander 1991; Fedarko 1993; Fletcher 1993; Hagerty 1993; Norton 1987; Pelton and Aral 1995; Reeves 1987; East, West 1986; Europe suffers 1986; Ambushing 1990). Those who decide to travel despite risks are advised by various sources (i.e., travel magazines, government advisories, Internet) to avoid displays of wealth, to keep a low profile, to vary daily routines during lengthy business trips, and to fly economy class—since hijackers are known to prefer first class to establish their temporary headquarters (D'Amore and Anuza 1986). If the potential costs of travel appear to outweigh the benefits, the traveler can decide to stay home. Unfortunately, for destinations plagued with terrorism or political turmoil the solution is far more complex.

### ***Framework for Crisis Management***

Tourist destinations, especially those where economic viability depends mainly on tourism, have little choice but to implement crisis management strategies to deal with terrorism. Unless terrorism is viewed as a crisis by the tourism industry, energy and resources cannot be effectively channeled into its management. It is imperative for destinations to augment their crisis management plans with marketing efforts, to recover lost tourism by rebuilding a positive image. There are surprisingly few sources for the tourism industry to turn to for guidance on crisis management. Even more difficult is finding crisis management strategies tailored for terrorism or political violence. Ideas can be gleaned from tourism crisis management manuals geared for natural disasters (Sönmez, Backman, and Allen 1994). General suggestions begin with the organization of a task force, development of a crisis management plan and guidebook (Sönmez, Backman, and Allen 1994), and partnering with law enforcement officials (Tarlow 1998).

Once a situation is identified as a crisis and the crisis mind-set is in place, the gravity of the situation is likely to assure discipline and dedication from the initiation of crisis management activities until full recovery is achieved. The following recommendations are intended to guide the initial stages of crisis management. Each destination should tailor these suggestions to fit its own needs.

**Being prepared for crisis management.** Every tourist destination should incorporate crisis management planning into its overall tourism planning, marketing, and management strategies. Those destinations vulnerable to politically motivated violence in particular need a plan of action to follow. The purpose of such guidelines is to facilitate tourism recovery from negative occurrences by protecting or rebuilding a local area's image of safety and attractiveness, reassuring potential visitors of the safety of the area, reestablishing the destination's functionality and attractiveness, and aiding local travel and tourism industry members during their economic recovery. A tourism crisis management plan cannot supersede local emergency preparedness plans, nor can it prevent or solve a disastrous occurrence, but it can serve as a guide for managing its aftermath. Having a plan will help save valuable time by providing the community with a road map to facilitate a smooth and speedy recovery. To understand the value of crisis management, its costs can be compared with the possible cost of not

having a plan. The lack of preparation can result in the loss of visitor confidence, a permanently damaged image, loss of revenues, and heavy advertising costs to regain public confidence and rekindle visitor interest in the area.

**The crisis management taskforce.** Being prepared for crisis management must include the timely (precrisis) organization of a task force. It is recommended that this group be composed of local government officials, local travel and tourism industry professionals, and community leaders and be fully dedicated to achieving complete recovery. This crisis management task force can be developed as a special division of the primary tourism organization/agency in the area (i.e., tourism ministry/bureau, chamber of commerce, convention and visitors' bureau [CVB], industry association) and serve under a board of directors or executive committee with oversight authority. The group can be organized into teams according to delegated tasks, as follows: (1) a communication/public relations team headed by a qualified media spokesperson to represent the destination and local tourism industry to the media by providing a unified voice and conveying accurate information to prevent possible embellishment of the events by media members; (2) a marketing/promotion team to direct recovery marketing efforts including profiling the destination's past and potential visitors, tracking changes to destination image, developing appropriate messages to inform and attract visitors back to the destination; (3) an information coordination team to coordinate damage assessment activities and gather disaster-related information for accurate dissemination, to estimate the approximate period of recovery, and to convey recovery efforts to constituents; and (4) a finance/fund-raising team to track expenditures and conduct fund-raising activities to support crisis management efforts.

To ensure effectiveness and efficiency, the responsibility of heading each team should be delegated to individuals according to their areas of expertise and the entire group should be headed by a director to orchestrate all task force activities.

**The crisis management guidebook.** The development of a crisis management guidebook—also prior to any negative occurrences—detailing necessary actions is strongly recommended. This document, which can serve as the only tangible guide at a time of distress and possible panic, can explain how to initiate task force activities, outline responsibilities for task force teams as well as team coordinators, suggest both predisaster and postdisaster actions in the form of a checklist, and detail various responsibilities delegated to task force members. Among other things, the plan should also detail by-laws of the task force to avoid confusion and disagreement among members, offer the proper use of terminology, explain how a tourism crisis differs from other crises, suggest how to orient law enforcement officials to tourism-specific crises, offer sample press kits/releases as well as a directory of contacts, suggest what to do or what to avoid during a press conference, recommend methods of developing and maintaining positive relationships with media members during noncrisis times to ensure balance and accuracy of coverage during the crisis, and assist in identifying and communicating with various constituents.

**Partnering with law enforcement officials.** Cooperation between the tourism industry and law enforcement is critical. Although police departments are still struggling with issues of tourism policing, several nations and American cities have started to create specific tourism policing divisions. Recently, police departments have begun to face the issue of tourism, crime, and security. Police officers receive training in how to interact with the tourism industry, how important tourism is to the local economy, and how necessary they are in aiding and protecting the industry (Tarlow 1998). Tourism policing departments have been established in a number of U.S. cities and a theory of tourism policing is slowly emerging. In being conditioned to consider tourists, police officers are trained to compare the needs of tourists to those of a popular form of policing, called *community policing* (CP). For example, part of CP is to know the community well in terms of its needs, customs, schedules, and social makeup. When CP is infused with tourism techniques, it means identifying the tourism markets/segments, knowing tourism cycles/seasons, identifying needed services, and knowing the community's tourist attractions. Applying other CP principles to the tourism context also means communicating with tourists, understanding the importance of tourist perceptions, and accepting the role of tourism in the community's

quality of life. The pivotal role law enforcement can play in managing crises and helping to restore public faith in the safety and normalcy of the destination should not be underestimated.

Being prepared for the possibility of a tourism crisis, having a task force in place, and having a guidebook are the bare essentials of managing a tourism crisis; vulnerable destinations need at least this level of preparation. Each community should align its own plan of action to its particular needs and characteristics. It is highly desirable for communities sharing similar problems to communicate with one another to hone crisis management skills over time, to better understand which actions are successful and which are not. While designing a crisis management strategy, destinations need to ask several questions. For example, What types of occurrences would constitute a crisis for the destination? What specific set of guidelines does the local tourism industry need to manage a crisis? What should be the scope of crisis management and who should implement the strategies? What examples can be drawn from past experiences and other destinations? What types of expertise are needed to develop a pragmatic plan? How should tourists and tourist perceptions be dealt with after a disaster (visitors less familiar with the community are likely to panic more than residents, and cultural differences between visitors and locals may affect the reaction to events and the destination)? What type of partnership can be developed with law enforcement agencies and government emergency mitigation teams? The enormity of the task at hand necessitates cooperation from a variety of experts in developing pragmatic solutions. It would be naive to believe that the suggestions made in this article could lead to a much needed crisis management model—one that would be applicable to tourist destinations around the world. For this reason, the authors challenge tourism scholars to search for truly effective solutions in dealing with tourism crises resulting from terrorism and political turmoil—possibly by organizing an international consortium to develop the needed model.

## CONCLUSIONS

Accepting the permanence of terrorism and regional political problems is a requisite to managing them. This is pertinent not only for governments of nations afflicted with terrorism or political disturbances and tourist-generating nations but also for the international tourism industry. When the tourism industry experiences negative events caused by natural disasters, greater public and industry understanding and tolerance are invoked. But, human-caused events, especially those involving political violence, trigger public outrage or intimidation. Although the problem at hand is exceptionally complex, the hope for effective and applicable solutions lies in additional research and cooperative efforts of practitioners, government agencies, and academicians. It is high time for the academic community and tourism industry to view these problems as crises in need of management rather than periodic problems. Clearly, a tourism crisis can begin after a disaster of some type (i.e., terrorist attack) occurs and can continue to escalate with negative media coverage and ruined image, as visitation and expenditures plummet—possibly destroying the profitability of a tourism community (Sönmez, Backman, and Allen 1994; Tarlow 1998; Wahab 1996). If predictions hold true, terrorism can be expected to continue, meaning that either tourism officials must develop a proactive stance or they will be forced to react on a piecemeal basis. Few nations around the world afflicted with terrorism or political turmoil can afford to give up their tourism earnings. Instead, both governments and members of their tourism industries need to focus on the topic to assess risks to international travelers and strategize for effective crisis marketing (Hall and O'Sullivan 1996).

Crisis management has its boundaries and is not intended to prevent actual disasters or focus on micromanagement (i.e., evacuation, rescue); having a plan in place can neither prevent random acts of terrorism nor aid in the capture of terrorists. Each crisis situation is unique and difficult to resolve with simple formulas; nevertheless, destinations need to be prepared with a plan of action. Having such a blueprint promises to save valuable time, energy, and other resources for a tourist destination. In light of societal and global complexities, no destination is immune to negative occurrences, thus adhering to an “it can't happen to us” philosophy can only be described as naive, if not reckless. It may be difficult, even impossible, to fully control terrorism, but nations cannot ignore the problem either.

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