The International Burden of Terrorism:
An Introduction

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There should be no doubt by now that the challenge of terrorism has left an indelible mark on the world as we know it. From the 11 September 2001 assaults on the New York City World Trade Center and the US Pentagon to the daily carnage in Iraq, as the traditional Turkish expression goes, we are truly "living the history". No group is as intimately connected to the need to respond to the unique demands of terrorism in the world today as is the readership of this journal. One of the first steps in addressing a challenge of this magnitude and complexity is to delineate the extent to which terrorism impacts human communities. To this end, Prehospital and Disaster Medicine began over a year ago, to lay out the foundation for two special theme issues on the topic of "Terrorism".

The first of these two theme issues on terrorism is published here. In bringing together reports on the burden of terrorism in 17 countries on six continents, this theme issue offers the remarkable opportunity to consider the challenge of terrorism from an international perspective. With several reports coming from countries rarely represented in the English-language medical literature, this theme issue facilitates an unusual understanding of the international burden of terrorism.

This collection of international reports also offers the opportunity to discover many of the lessons learned from a wealth of experience in planning, preparing, and responding to terrorist acts across the world. One particularly important lesson learned is that when it comes to dealing with terrorism, no country is an island. The challenge of terrorism spans all inhabited continents, crosses all cultures, and penetrates all jurisdictions. A related corollary is that terrorism is not just an affliction of the developed world. As several articles attest, terrorism has placed an enormous burden on a number of developing countries, such as Colombia, Indonesia, Peru, and Turkey. For example, some Americans still reeling from the events of 2001, may be surprised to learn that in Turkey since 1985 more than 30,000 persons have died from terrorism-related causes.1 The impact of terrorism in the developing world is of paramount importance to trans-national or national organizations responsible for distributing resources aimed at managing this problem. This issue also provides striking evidence that the burden of so-called conventional terrorism on communities (i.e., bombings, shootings, hostage-takings, and hijackings) far outweighs any burden of unconventional terrorism (i.e., chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear releases). In the country reports included here, only Japan lists any examples of terrorism-related chemical releases, and no article reveals any instances of biological, radiological, or nuclear release (other than benign "white powder" events stemming from the 2001 US anthrax letter attacks). This pattern has huge implications for the priorities of emergency management in communities at risk. It suggests that the first step in emergency preparedness for terrorism must be to ensure that communities have the requisite capacities, capabilities, and competencies to adequately respond to everyday bombings and shootings that generate large numbers of casualties before proceeding to contingencies related to the use of weapons of mass destruction.

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These reports also underscore the critical point that terrorism-related events typically are emergencies for communities, but almost never disasters. Accordingly, all terrorism-related events require local systems of emergency medical response, based on local emergency medical services (EMS) systems, hospital, and public health resources.

These articles also tell us that the perpetrators of terrorist acts frequently remain anonymous, making it impossible to accurately determine their underlying motives or ideologies. In the first article in this special issue, we offer a proposed medical and public health definition of terrorism that focuses on the impact of terrorism on communities as the only consistently knowable aspect of terrorism, and ultimately, the only feature of practical importance to emergency management. In arriving at this proposed definition of terrorism, the authors incorporated a range of opinion from around the world with the intention of asymptomatically approaching an internationally harmonized definition. Nevertheless, the Journal also recognizes that such an endeavor is unlikely to avoid controversy. It is hoped that any ensuing debate over what exactly is or isn't terrorism will be framed in the form of correspondence with the Editor-in-Chief of Prehospital and Disaster Medicine.

This collection of reports also points out a number of gaps in our understanding of terrorism in the world today. As the authors of these reports learned, one critical gap is the paucity of published information about the burden of terrorism in many countries. To date, the primary sources of information about terrorist events in other countries are reports from the media, governments, academic institutions, or special interest groups, with all of these sources suffering from limitations that range from publication bias to, in some cases, frank political manipulation.

Another important source for information about the burden of terrorism is the peer-reviewed medical literature. Although such articles—usually case reports or epidemiological studies—almost always are limited by their retrospective nature, they come closest to providing the type of information needed by emergency managers, such as the number of immediately surviving injured, the number of injured that access emergency medical care, the time course of emergency management. This collection of reports also points out a number of gaps in our understanding of terrorism in the world today. As the authors of these reports learned, one critical gap is the paucity of published information about the burden of terrorism in many countries. To date, the primary sources of information about terrorist events in other countries are reports from the media, governments, academic institutions, or special interest groups, with all of these sources suffering from limitations that range from publication bias to, in some cases, frank political manipulation.

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References