# Crises and Attacks: Some Avenues to Be Explored and Guidelines for Action

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> *In moments of crisis one is never fighting against an external enemy, but always against one's own body.*
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> —George Orwell, 1984.

Since the September 11, 2001 attacks, Europe has been subjected to a vague threat manifested in a series of terrorist attacks of diverse nature. In France, the 2012, 2015, and 2016 attacks gave a significant boost to the threat and demonstrated the wide variation in the type of terrorist operations that might be anticipated. Some of these operations aimed to bring about major crises by attacking multiple sites or carrying out several attacks on top of one another. The intention of this article is first of all to question the relationship between crisis and terrorism, in order to then work out new ways of reflecting on them and to put forward suggestions for improving existing systems for the prevention and management of major crises.

General Lucien Poirier, in his brochure on the "principles for a theory of crisis," insisted on the need, in the Cold War context, "to look at the crisis-phenomenon in a new way" so as not only to "work out what is meant by a crisis" but also to "arm ourselves intellectually for acting in a crisis" (Poirier 1997). These reflections, which are still relevant, were motivated by a particular observation: namely, that the increasing number of crises is the consequence of nuclear deterrence and the impossibility of direct conflict between the two Great Powers, which has encouraged people to develop strategies for indirect action (Poirier 1997; Meszaros 2005). This nuclear freeze is at the root of the self-determination of the crisis concept in the field of conflict.

In the post-Cold War era, crisis remains an entirely strategic subject, with its grammar and its logic. The "ending of the international system," the growing interdependence between internal and external environments, the increasing role of non-state actors, and the importance of technological factors, are partly responsible

for explaining the proliferation of major crises or "mega-shocks" (Merle 1976, Lagadec 1991, 2015; Beck 1986). The nuclear factor continues to be one of the principal attractors of inter-state crises; but non-state actors, who already played an important role, are now becoming increasingly important attractors of crisis.[2] For this reason, the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States marked a break with the past and a new beginning.

The attacks that have taken place since that date, in Europe and more particularly in France, force us to rethink the traditional frameworks of conflict situations, and notably the relationship between crisis, war, and terrorism. They invite us to rethink state action in the light of "continuity between interior and exterior security" (French White Paper on Defense and National Security 2008). This official report offers a reflection on the relationship between crisis and terrorism. What links can be established between these two phenomena? What strategic consequences can be drawn from them? Starting from an analysis of the relationship between crisis and terrorism I shall here offer, in all humility, some new ways of reflecting on the issue, with a view to improving the systems for preventing and managing major crises, particularly those arising from terrorist attacks.

## CRISIS AND TERRORISM

The notion of crisis, as a large number of specialists have shown, is frequently used inaptly to describe situations of uncertainty (Morin 1976; 2016). However, since the 1970s, the work of crisis specialists has focused on the distinguishing features of crises and their definition. Patrick Lagadec, for example, considers that a major crisis is characterized by a sudden upsurge of different problems, by a state of emergency, and the destruction of familiar points of reference (Lagadec 1991; 2015). My own opinion is that a major crisis reflects the origin or deterioration, either progressive or sudden, of a particular situation. Its seriousness is manifested by an increasing number of problems, ones sometimes never seen before; these bring about a degree of complexity and non-linearity, such that the procedures traditionally designed to deal with negative tensions are no longer capable of fulfilling their purpose and thus re-establishing the equilibrium that previously allowed the system to function normally; and this in turn imperils the survival of the structure.

A crisis can be analyzed at two levels: one is subjective (micro), and reflects the perception that decision units have of the crisis and in the crisis; the other is systemic (macro), and concerns the objective impact that the crisis has on the system or one of its sub-systems (Brecher and Wilkenfeld 2000; Dufour 2009).[3] In crisis situations, decision units are projected out of their comfort zone

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2    The idea of "attractor" is a reference to the work by Frédéric Ramel, *L'attraction mondiale* (Ramel 2012).

3    These conceptions set the crisis within a logic of discontinuity: the crisis is expressed through a

and plunged, without any preparation, into a world without reference points. The capacity for decision, which has to be rapid, is limited by the psychological shock and the amazement induced by perceiving the gravity of the situation and the scale of the problems generated by the crisis. The perception of increased negative tensions, the absence of adequate responses for limiting these tensions, and the time pressure on decision units (micro) all contribute to destabilizing the system (macro) that, in return, will produce new negative tensions or amplify those already existing.

In a global context that is seeing an increase in threat levels, and more fluidity in relationships, information, and communication, crises are more frequent and their effects greater. They may result from the actions of states or of collective non-state actors of very diverse nature (multinational companies, banks, terrorist groups, and so on) or individuals (key political, religious, or economic figures, individuals issuing alerts, hackers, etc.). They may be the consequence of accidental or deliberately engineered events.[4] Whatever the case, these crises—because, most of the time, the effectiveness of the systems for dealing with them is limited or non-existent—succeed in destabilizing the state's structures.

While terrorism, nowadays, is generally presented as one of the main causes of crisis for states, only in certain cases does it provoke major crises. As a form of political violence and method of operating, terrorism is not something new.[5] What does seem completely new is the use made by terrorist groups of all the opportunities offered by globalization and the vulnerabilities of democratic societies. The combination of several factors bestows a particular character upon the threat.

The transnational organization of these groups' human resources, the recruitment of combatants and the diversity of the processes and places of radicalization—whether in a particular country (prisons, schools, etc.) or in cyberspace (social networks)—, their training (on national territory or abroad) is a first factor. Their methods of action—that is to say the capacity of these groups to prepare operations from abroad or directly within the countries concerned; their recourse both to civil methods (airplanes, ram-raiding vehicles) and to military ones (war weapons and explosives), most often acquired thanks to delinquent networks that are themselves transnational—are a second factor.

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breakdown that marks the transition from a normal situation to an exceptional situation. Other approaches, such as "the continuity hypothesis" put forward by Michel Dobry in his sociology of political crises—which focuses on the removal of boundaries in the social sphere and on multi-sectoral mobilization—offers a different study of crises (Dobry 1986; Aït-Aoudia and Roger 2015; Meszaros and Morier 2015).

4    The reference here is to the distinction made by Uriel Rosenthal and Jean-Louis Dufour between engineered crises, provoked deliberately by one or several actors (intentional, desired, planned, well planned, or badly planned) and chance, or accidental crises.

5    I am defining terrorism as the threat to use, or the illegitimate and illegal use of violence—a fighting method, be it widespread or more localized, used by groups of individuals or non-state actors (whether or not they are state-backed) in situations of asymmetry, who commit acts of violence or attacks against innocent targets and/or symbolic targets, for the purpose of fulfilling political objectives.

The technological methods of information and communication used; the internet tools employed to conduct cyberattacks and to ensure recruitment, as well as media coverage for their propaganda and operations, sometimes in real time (Facebook, Twitter, Periscope, Telegram, etc.); the non-stop information offering "support" and an "immediate sounding board" for any attack or operations (Lagadec 2015)—all these constitute a third factor. The social and political dynamics, and the migratory flows produced by situations of instability and conflict—as in the case of Syria or the Arab revolutions—which favor the spread of ideas, the recruitment of combatants and their movements, are a fourth factor.

In addition to these various factors, we should also take these groups' strategic orientations into account. The objective is no longer simply to influence certain government decisions, notably in reaction to military interventions in Afghanistan, Syria, or Iraq. It is, rather, to undermine the foundations of the Western model and to bring about the failure of the democratic political system. The objective of the wide range of "operations" of different kinds, conducted by isolated individuals or groups, is to precipitate crises that will destabilize the political, economic, and social structures of the threatened states. This radical Islamist "millenarian" terrorism is part of a global strategy targeting all sectors of society and is developed on three fronts: on national territories, against the foreign interests of the threatened states, and in cyberspace. Its strategy for action consists in producing crises and "generating chaos," in other words triggering significant psychological shocks and major breakdowns, or "systemic stalling" (Lagadec 2015).

The alternation between large-scale actions and more limited attacks, organized from abroad or on national territory, have the effect of limiting the capacity for prevention. This global destabilization strategy does not aim solely to create terror among the population, but also to wear them down, to create an impact of attrition, and to generate severe turbulence. The practice of attacking multiple sites, or carrying out one attack upon another, serves to fulfill this objective. In the short term, the aim is to cause major systemic dysfunctions that neutralize the most elaborate procedures and systems for managing crises. In the medium and long term, the objective is to create shocks of such a scale that they undermine the values on which the political system rests.

The attacks on multiple sites involve attacking different targets simultaneously. The nature of the targets (schools, shopping centers, airports, theaters, etc.), and the radius within which the operation takes place are chosen with the aim of disrupting any intervention by the emergency services. The difficulties linked to making the targeted zones secure, the high number of victims, and the tactical requirements of operational units, then end up severely hampering the ability to manage the crisis. The operations involving one attack upon another consist in making a direct strike upon operational units or the emergency services that have rushed to the crisis zone, in such a way as to magnify their destabilizing effects. They might also magnify the crisis by targeting crucial decision-making locations

and/or the "sanctuaries" needed for controlling the crisis (hospitals, emergency aid centers, decision centers, etc.).

## SOME FOOD FOR THOUGHT AND COURSES OF ACTION

Faced with acknowledging the transformation and the permanence of a terrorist threat whose purpose is to provoke major crises on national territory and against France's vital interests abroad, several lines of approach and courses of action may be envisaged. These are not, of course, exhaustive.

It is important, first of all, to point out that there are several schools in France whose work focuses on the study of crises; these have existed since the 1970s. We should principally take note of the work done by Edgar Morin on the epistemology of complexity at the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS); the strategic work on the study of nuclear crises conducted by Lucien Poirier at the Centre de Prospective et d'Evaluation (CPE), under the Ministry of Defense, and then at the Institut des Hautes Etudes de Défense Nationale (IHEDN); and Michel Dobry's sociological studies on multi-sectoral mobilization and political crises, developed at the CNRS and the University of Paris 1. There are also the sociological studies on collective risks and post-accidental crises that Claude Gilbert has conducted under the umbrella of the CNRS, at the Pacte de l'Université de Grenoble-Alpes laboratory; the praxeological ones on major risk and "unclassifiable" crises realized by Patrick Lagadec at the econometrics laboratory of the École Polytechnique; and the war studies on international crises by Jean-Louis Dufour working at Saint-Cyr Coëtquidan.

Today, this legacy continues to be built upon, as illustrated by the seminar on "The Factory and the Government of Crises" organized at the Alexandre Koyré Center of the EHESS [School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences] with the support of the IFRIS [Ile-de-France Institute for Research, Innovation and Society] by Sara Aguiton, Lydie Cabane, and Lise Cornilleau; or the creation of the Institut d'Étude des Crises (IEC) and the thematic section on "crisis study" of the Association des Études de Guerre et de Stratégie (AEGES) [Association for the Study of War and Strategy], which seeks to bring together researchers and practitioners from different backgrounds.[6] The aim is to continue to make these different legacies bear fruit, while preserving the individuality of each approach.

Despite these numerous intellectual resources, it is regrettable that the crisis phenomenon continues to remain badly defined or even undefined (Meszaros 2017).[7] However, it appears essential to define the notion in order to develop

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6    This thematic group presented a panel at the AEGES annual conference in December 2016, on the theme "Le brouillard de la crise: Quand des phénomènes exceptionnels remettent en question notre action et notre connaissance." [The Mist of Crisis: When Exceptional Events Question our Action and Knowledge].

7    The 2013 White Paper on Defense and National Security is one illustration of this. The word "crisis" appears 166 times; however, at no time is the notion precisely defined, and this in a document

response strategies adapted to the hyper-complexity demonstrated by crises, which force us to rethink our traditional frameworks of analysis. The "scientific reaction" initiated by the president of the CNRS following the November 2015 attacks called upon the whole scientific community to contribute to this response effort. This initiative should include some fundamental thinking about crises, and how to prevent and manage them. It would seem that this is also the desire of the Secrétariat général à la defense et de la sécurité nationale (SGDSN) [Secretariat-General for National Defense and Security] in the context of updating France's anti-terrorist security plan.

This rethink, accompanied by the development of various guides for professionals and users, with the purpose of teaching them the rudiments of prevention and management of major crises, marks an important stage in the evolution of people's mentalities, on the part of the authorities as well as of citizens. The authorities could probably have gone further and brought in crisis specialists to help produce these guides. The use of digital tools is also a source of innovation, not only in the strategic domain of information, but also in the area of prevention and crisis management.[8]

Innovation and creativity are the keys that will enable us to respond to the hyper-complexity produced by the "upsurge" of problems old and new: the numerous actors (isolated individuals, organized groups managed from inside France or from other countries); the multiple scenarios for possible attacks (attacks with limited opportunity, wide-scale planned attacks on multiple sites or one on top of another, shootings, hostage-takings, cyberattacks, booby-trapped cars, booby-trapped parcels, ram-raiding cars, the use of toxic agents, and also false alerts); and the diversity of potential targets (political, religious, or military figures, representatives of the forces of order, gatherings of citizens, operators of vital importance and sensitive sites, be they institutional, industrial, commercial, or symbolic).

This complexity is also the consequence of contradictory injunctions, or a double bind, which impose demands that are opposed to one another: demands such as freedom and security, which take us back to the question of the durability of the democratic system. These contradictory demands call for some deep thought in order to adapt the response to a situation that is neither routine nor a state of war in the traditional sense of inter-state conflict. To face up to these

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whose strategic and political significance is fundamental. By comparison, the words "war" and "terrorism" appear 30 and 23 times respectively. Different European treaties are just as silent on the meaning of the term crisis, which seems to be interchangeable with the word "conflict." In addition to the need for both civil and military management of crises, the TFUE [Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union] indicates only that "the combat force missions for crisis management," like other missions, "can contribute to the fight against terrorism" (Article 43).

8    The Paris Mayoral office has developed an innovation platform called *Nec Mergitur*, the result of a public-private partnership. This platform, which is run by Paris & Co, provides an excellent example of innovation: it allows the prevention and crisis management systems already in place to be improved, as well as tools and new solutions to be developed.

exceptional situations, it is necessary to think of new procedures, alternative solutions, and innovative tools. The state of emergency is a palliative measure designed to respond to a high threat level, but cannot be a permanent solution.

Although, in the eyes of political decision-makers, the state of emergency represents one of the main responses to the risk of fresh attacks occurring, it is not the solution that is best suited to preventing and managing major crisis situations. Other, more effective ways of responding have yet to be invented, particularly—over the medium and long term—where structural prevention measures are concerned, and—over the short term—operational prevention measures. Crisis researchers could be particularly useful in this.

It would also seem important to reflect on crisis strategies, that is to say the strategies for attacks whose aim is to cause major crises designed to sweep aside the most elaborate security measures. These pose a dual question: on the one hand, how far are social structures able to cope with the loss of familiar landmarks—something that typifies the onset of a crisis situation—and to think the unthinkable, the unbearable? And on the other hand, how far are decision units able to reconfigure rapidly, to adapt in order to meet the demands of the crisis? This is an invitation to think about the time-frame of the crisis, to think of it as an interval during which the system functions in exceptional mode.

Anticipating a crisis requires ways and means of strategic monitoring that deal with blind spots and other taboo issues. But strategic monitoring is not sufficient. We should also prepare ourselves upstream in order to limit the impact of the psychological shock on decision units and facilitate their rapid reconfiguration. The aim of these "reflexes" is to limit the pressure caused by the onset of the crisis and assist strategic management and action-planning, which will provide room for maneuver during the crisis (on the reflex phase see Lagadec 1991).

Simulation is one means of preparing to cope with a crisis.[9] For them to be effective, these exercises must not be confined to conventional simulations. They have to question the limits of organizations, lift the bans and break the taboos in order to start creative and innovative dynamics going. These exercises and limits have to bring together the different levels of decision and action (national, regional, local/political-strategic, operational, and tactical) in such a way as to test out plans and procedures. Coming face-to-face with a real crisis dynamic (loss of bearings, an upsurge of problems, a state of emergency) means being forced to introduce flexibility into tactical operations and security action plans. It is an invitation to override traditional procedures, thus allowing crisis management capabilities to be reinforced, particularly in terms of coordinating services.

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9    Since 2001, we have been developing crisis simulations at the University of Lyon 3, but these exercises are now supported by the Pôle d'Accompagnement à la Pédagogie Numérique (PAPN) [Support Center for Digital Education]. In addition to their educational advantages, these exercises also provide a particularly productive terrain for my research into crises, on which this article is partially based.

Finally, in the context of crisis management it is essential for decision units to equip themselves with a real capacity for critical analysis (Lagadec 1991). This is important, because in the heat of the moment one has to be able to assess the suitability of the decisions and actions engaged in, and perhaps adjust their focus. Such critical capacity also has an important role to play when it comes to feedback, in order to assess the handling of the crisis and identify any post-traumatic shocks.

## CONCLUSION: USING ALL THE RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO RESPOND TO MAJOR CRISES

In the present context, it is necessary to develop a field of research in France that, even though it has existed since the 1970s, still remains in its infancy and is just waiting to grow. It is precisely this ambition that the Institut d'Étude des Crises is now seeking to fulfill. Its objective is to arrive at a more clear-cut use of the word "crisis" to describe specific situations; to establish typologies; and to provide useful modeling for the prevention and management of these exceptional phenomena. Not every situation of uncertainty is a crisis.

This term should therefore be reserved for situations that can be described as serious, where procedures are absent and where the pressure of the emergency and the gravity of the "upsurge" of problems dictate that decisions must be taken *on the razor's edge.* It is essential that official texts of the future, which deal with the prevention and management of crises, whether at the national or the European level—such as the next White Paper on Defense and Security—provide a definition, or partial definition, of what constitutes a crisis, in accordance with clear strategic imperatives; but equally essential that they indicate the obstacles or limits with which they are faced when using this term.

It is a condition that seems necessary if we wish to justify innovative research on major crises and arrive at appropriate response strategies. All the available resources must be mobilized, notably those pertaining to situations that are "outside the limits," and to "unclassifiable" crises, in order to achieve better prevention and better management of the major crises with which France, and Europe, will yet be confronted.

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