

What, us worry?

On the second anniversary of the London bombings, terror seems to surround us again: From last week's foiled plot in Britain, to reports at home of stolen nuclear devices. But are Canadians even anxious about the threats in the air? For that matter, shou

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You. Stop smiling.

Don't you read the papers?

JULY 3: "Canada faces an elevated risk of a terror strike, with Ottawa and Toronto among six North American cities in particular danger, says a report by a panel of international security experts."

JULY 3: "At least 76 radioactive devices - several of which could be used in a terrorist attack - have gone missing in Canada over the last five years, newly compiled figures show."

JULY 4: "A federal study says the explosion of a small dirty bomb near the CN Tower would spew radioactivity over four square kilometres, resulting in mass anxiety, a rush on medical facilities and an economic toll of up to \$23.5 billion."

And, of course, terrorists attempted days earlier to bomb a London nightclub and Glasgow Airport.

The terror-related news, in the week leading up to today's anniversary of the 7/7 2005 London suicide bombings, has not been happy. But are you actually worried? And, perhaps more important, should you be?

"Canadians' reactions to terror," says EKOS Research Associates president Frank Graves, "are very complicated."

On one hand, Graves says, terrorism is low on our lists of fears. In 2004, only 19 per cent of the Canadian respondents to a Pew Research Center poll - compared with half of the Americans - said they were worried about

terror attacks. In monthly EKOS "Security Monitor" list-of-concerns polls, terrorism consistently ranks behind climate change, traditional violent crime, and traffic accidents. And when asked "in a hard trade-off" to pick between risk areas to which governments should devote more resources, "Canadians selected protecting the environment and fighting organized crime at least six in every 10 times they are paired against another option," Graves wrote in a 2005 paper.

"Attacks on Canadian soil, weapons of mass destruction in Canada, and attacks launched on the United States from Canada rate as much lower priorities."

On the other hand, Graves says, terrorism is the "lead image" Canadians envision when they think of security. And when asked to make choices that pit security against civil liberties, Canadians "dramatically and consistently by a large margin" choose the former.

"Which is somewhat odd," he says, "given that they don't tend to rate the actual risk levels as that high."

Why don't they?

It helps ease the mind, certainly, that Canada is not fighting extremists in Iraq; it helps ease the mind, certainly, that our country is nicknamed The Great White North and not The Great Satan.

And perhaps Canadians are more truthful about their fears and non-fears than Americans - some of whom may view "alarm" over terrorism as a badge of conservative-hawk honour.

"I think if you asked Canadians an honest question on whether they feel threatened, they'll tell you from their hearts and not what political card they carry. Whereas in the States, it's a label," says Ipsos Reid senior vice president John Wright, author of *What Canadians Think: About Almost Everything*. "It embodies a question of patriotism and political support. It's not just a question."

Perhaps Canadians - who are not usually named in Al Jazeera harangues, who have not had a Sept. 11, whose country Iranian mullahs have not honoured with an annual hatred holiday - are able to be more rational about terrorism than beleaguered Americans.

It's not like we're ignoring the threat, right? Two-thirds of us, according to a May SES Research poll, think Canada's participation in the war in Afghanistan makes us more vulnerable to a terrorist attack.

But we aren't freaking out, either.

"Here's an interesting stat," says Graves. "About one in 10 Americans, and sometimes it gets up to one in 5, think they personally will experience a terror event like Sept. 11." For all of them to be right, he says, "there would have to have been a Sept. 11 every single day since Sept. 11. The distortion is so egregious that it's almost unimaginable."

We're not only calmer, however, than Americans.

In April and May of 2005, according to an international Pew poll, 56 per cent of Canadians were concerned about Islamic extremism: a lower percentage than in Germany (78 per cent), Spain (77 per cent), the Netherlands (76 per cent), France (73 per cent), the U.S. (70 per cent), and (pre-7/7) Great Britain (70 per cent).

Spain, of course, had already suffered the Madrid train bombings; the Netherlands had been roiled by an Islamic extremist's murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh, who had made a movie protesting radical Muslims' treatment of women; French secularists were fighting high-profile battles with Muslims over, among other things, the hijab and radical mosques. Canada had not experienced anything comparable.

But even immediately after the 2006 arrest of 17 purported members of a "homegrown" Islamist terrorist cell, 37 per cent of Canadian respondents to an Ipsos poll believed "the arrests represented an isolated group of fanatical individuals" and were "not indicative of the existence of other potential terrorist groups in Canada."

According to the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, there are more terrorist groups in Canada than in any country in the world other than the U.S.

Perhaps Canadians are in denial.

"It's denial," says David Harris, a former CSIS chief of strategic planning and now a senior fellow with the anti-Islamist Canadian Coalition for Democracies. "And it blossoms from there."

Canadians, Harris says, don't understand the "ideology of global jihad" or the "the nature, extent or scope of the physical threat." We don't understand that Muslim extremists hate our live-and-let-live values and want to destroy our society.

And we don't understand that, even though the vast majority of immigrants and refugees from Islamic countries are "wonderful people,"

the sheer number we receive guarantees that some will be extremists.

"If you do the numbers and do a modest extrapolation," he says, "we will meet and exceed anything that's happening in Britain and France in due course."

And, perhaps, we won't.

"I don't think anybody would argue that our risk is comparable to Britain's," says professor Wesley Wark, who studies security and intelligence at the University of Toronto's Munk Centre for International Studies.

Our Muslim population, Wark says, is far less radical; extremist imams don't abound in our mosques and prisons; an attack on Canada, a non-superpower without a history of imperialism, would not be as attractive to groups like Al Qaeda.

The threat of terrorism, Wark says, is "very real; it could visit Canada, and we have to take appropriate responses." But - fortunately? unfortunately? - he says it's tougher to assess the threat posed to Canada than the threat posed to other nations.

"It's a very difficult notion: it can happen here, but it might not. This is the kind of dilemma that many European countries, many Middle Eastern countries, South Asian countries, and the U.S. don't have to face. They can be much more certain about the nature of the threat. We can't be in this country. We can't embrace it as a kind of pessimistic certainty.

"We," Wark says, "are stuck somewhere in between."