

## DISCUSSION OF “ESTIMATING THE HISTORICAL AND FUTURE PROBABILITIES OF LARGE TERRORIST EVENTS” BY AARON CLAUSET AND RYAN WOODARD

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**1. Introductory remarks.** In developing a new algorithm for estimating probabilities for tail events Clauset and Woodard have provided an important new tool for understanding social events that are rare and momentous. Such upper-tail large-scale events are notoriously hard to predict because there is obviously less certainty relative to more typical events. So even unbiased estimates, which are difficult, are likely to have large confidence intervals. This is further exacerbated by the measurement error challenges inherent in nearly all aggregated social science data.

The safety of millions of people depends on understanding the intentions and actions of terrorist groups. To protect citizens, governments and nongovernmental organizations invest enormous amounts of time and energy attempting to detect malevolent covert groups and to thwart terrorist attacks. These terrorist events vary dramatically in scope, but are usually measured in terms of casualties (injuries and fatalities). However, the effect of terrorist attacks can be quite substantial even with modest casualties; the Boston Marathon bombing of 2013 had “only” three fatalities and yet had a great effect on the nation’s psyche. So it is considered to be a successful terrorist event by observers and scholars of terrorism. Why is this? It is because the real intention of a terrorist is not just to kill people; this is an intermediate step. The real intention of terrorists is to make citizens feel that their government cannot protect them. This is designed to create unrest and lead to a change of government policies in a direction favored by the terrorists, or a failure of government, presumably to be replaced with one that is preferred by the terrorists. Therefore, the more grisly (blood, gore, beheadings, hanging bodies, etc.) and the more seemingly random the victims, the greater the psycho-social effect on the population. Examples are unfortunately plentiful throughout the world: the Taliban wants to replace the current US-supported Afghan government, the Moro Island Liberation Front wants to topple the government in Manila to create a separate Islamist government in the South Philippine islands, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb wants to overthrow the government of Algeria and neighboring countries to form an Islamic state in Northern Africa, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) is still active in trying to destabilize the current government and