PS 0500: Terrorism

William Spaniel

https://williams Spaniel.com/classes/worldpolitics/
Outline

1. Definition of Terrorism
2. Rationality of Terrorists
3. Do Terrorists Respond to Incentives?
4. The Profile of a Terrorist
5. Understanding Suicide Terrorism
6. Provocation
7. Spoiling
8. Outbidding
9. Counterterrorism as a Collective Action Problem
Definition of Terrorism

• Bluntly: we don’t really have one
  – The term “terrorism” is heavily politicized
  – Whether you call something “terrorism” depends on which side you are on
What are the defining features of terrorism?
Terror Definition Features

1. Violence/force (83.5%)
2. Political (65%)
3. Fear/terror emphasized (51%)
4. Threat (47%)
5. (Psychological) effects and (anticipated) reactions (41.5%)
6. Victim-target differentiation (37.5%)
7. Purposive, planned, systematic, organized action (32%)
8. Method of combat, strategy, tactic (30.5%)
9. Breaches rules/without humanitarian restraint (30%)
10. Coercion/extortion (28%)

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Distilling...

1. Violence
2. Political goal
3. Audience extends beyond direct victims
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Rationality

• Common criticism of rational choice modeling of terrorism: “people who kill themselves are not rational”
  – We don’t need to understand why people are okay with killing themselves to kill civilians to understand how they behave
Rationality Definition

• In science world, rational $\neq$ sensible
• “Rational” means that an actor’s preferences are complete and transitive
  – Complete: For any outcomes $a$ and $b$, the actor prefers $a$ to $b$, prefers $b$ to $a$, or is indifferent
  – Transitive: For any outcomes $a$, $b$, and $c$, if the actor prefers $a$ to $b$ and $b$ to $c$, then he also prefers $a$ to $c$
Which of these People Is Rational?

Person 1

• “I prefer the Steelers to the Penguins. I also prefer the Penguins to the Pirates. And I prefer the Pirates to the Steelers.”

Person 2

• “I prefer blowing myself up to kill five people to working a 9-5 desk job. I prefer working a 9-5 desk job than being in Will’s class. And I prefer blowing myself up to kill five people than being in Will’s class.”
Explaining These Preferences

• Not so much a topic within IR
  – Psychology, sociology
  – But we can take these preferences as given and investigate the implications for strategic behavior
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Alternate Conception of Irrationality

• Previously: Terrorism is completely compatible with rational preferences
• Different concern: Terrorists are irrational because they do not respond to incentives
  – Test: Are terrorist attacks completely random? Or do attacks occur more frequently when we would expect them to?
Correlates of Terrorism

• “On Welfare and Terrorism” (Burgoon): social spending is correlated with less terrorism
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• “On Welfare and Terrorism” (Burgoon): social spending is correlated with less terrorism
• “Democracy, Foreign Policy, and Terrorism” (Savun and Phillips): greater foreign policy activity is correlated with more terrorism
Correlates of Terrorism

• “...Poorly Managed Political Conflict and Terrorism in India” (Piazza): unaddressed grievances are correlated with more terrorism
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- “...Poorly Managed Political Conflict and Terrorism in India” (Piazza): unaddressed grievances are correlated with more terrorism
- “Sabotaging the Peace” (Kydd and Walter): attacks are clustered around peace talks
Correlates of Terrorism

• “Why Respecting Physical Integrity Rights Reduces Terrorism” (Walsh and Piazza): greater physical integrity rights is correlated with less terrorism
Correlates of Terrorism

• “Why Respecting Physical Integrity Rights Reduces Terrorism” (Walsh and Piazza): greater physical integrity rights is correlated with less terrorism

• “Poverty, Minority Economic Discrimination, and Domestic Terrorism” (Piazza): economic discrimination is correlated with more terrorism
Strategic Problems

• If terrorists did not respond to incentives, how do we explain how groups survive for so long?
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Not all organizations that use suicide bombings are religious.
Not all suicide bombers are male.
WHAT DO YOU CALL A FEMALE TERRORIST?
WHAT DO YOU CALL A FEMALE TERRORIST?

BOMBSHELL
BOMBSHELL

Women and Terrorism

MIA BLOOM
Terrorists usually aren’t dirt poor.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>American Airlines #11</th>
<th>American Airlines #77</th>
<th>United Airlines #93</th>
<th>United Airlines #175</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Law Student</strong></td>
<td><strong>College Student</strong></td>
<td><strong>Professor</strong></td>
<td><strong>Alcoholic, Thief</strong></td>
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<td>Al Suqami</td>
<td>Waleed M. Alshehri</td>
<td>Alomari</td>
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<td><strong>U Arizona, Pilot</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>College Grad, Security Guard</strong></td>
<td><strong>Law Student</strong></td>
<td><strong>College Student</strong></td>
<td><strong>Aerospace Engineering Student, Rich Parents</strong></td>
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<td><strong>College Student</strong></td>
<td><strong>College Student</strong></td>
<td><strong>College Student</strong></td>
<td><strong>Maybe a Pilot, Maybe Nothing</strong></td>
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</table>
Terrorists tend to come from poor regions, but terrorists tend not to be poor.
Competency

• Suppose you are a terrorist commander
• You only want to commit one attack right now
• Do you send the poor guy or the middle class guy?
  – Who is smarter?
  – Who has better access?
  – Who can blend in better?
Signaling

• Terrorists work alone, without direct observation
  – Principal-agent problem

• Organizations want to hire most motivated individuals
  – Who is more motivated: the poor guy or the rich guy?
Richer terrorists kill more people.
Improving economic opportunities might not reduce terrorism.
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Why Become a Suicide Terrorist?

• Lack of opportunity is not a good explanation
• There are strategic and tactical advantages to suicide terrorism
• A very small percentage of people with extreme grievance/ideological preferences are willing to exploit those advantages
Strategic Advantage

• Long-term goal of terrorism: convince political opponent that sustained costs are not worth the policy in dispute
  – Having operatives commit suicide is also a costly signal of things to come
Tactical Advantages

- Planning an attack is harder when you also need to plan an escape
- Suicide bombers are smart bombs
- Non-suicide attackers leave evidence behind
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Provocation

• Terrorist organizations commit attacks hoping to provoke large-scale, counterproductive responses
  – Economic and military costs
  – Recruitment problems
Provocation

• Puzzle: Why would governments choose counterterrorism policies that backfire?
Domestic Explanations

- Policymakers do stupid things
- Rally ‘round the flag effects
- Diversionary incentives
- Purges
Information Problems

• Targeted governments know less about how sympathetic audience will respond
• Who is less likely to attack: a robust group or a weak group?
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Puzzle

• Terrorist attacks are not randomly distributed
  – Clumping around peace talks
    • What does this say about terrorists’ responsiveness to incentives?
    • Why this clumping?
Preferences

- Home and foreign state negotiate
- Foreign state wants peace
- Foreign is unsure whether home wants peace
Preferences

• If Home wants peace, it will actively police extremists within its country
  – Foreign thus does not want peace with uncooperative Home types
Preferences

• Extremists always want conflict
  – Need to convince Foreign that Home is uncooperative regardless of Home’s true type
Monitoring Problem

• Policing is not fully effective
  – Even if a peace-loving Home tries to stop extremists, it might fail

• Policing effort is hard to observe
  – Foreign can thus only make inferences based on whether an attack has occurred, not on what Home did to (possibly) stop an attack
Updating

• Suppose no attack occurred
  – What should Foreign infer about Home?
Updating

• Suppose an attack occurred
  – What should Foreign infer about Home?
Updating

• Suppose an attack occurred
  – What should Foreign infer about Home?
    • It cannot know for sure that Home is uncooperative
    • But its belief that Home is uncooperative increases
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Puzzle

• After an attack, multiple groups often claim responsibility
• If survival favors the clandestine, why not just keep quiet?
Organizational Conflict

• Terrorist organizations need foot soldiers and donations to keep the business running
• Both are scarce
Outbidding

• When multiple competing groups exist, each terrorist organization has incentive to outbid the other by increasing quantity and intensity of attacks
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Incentives

• Who benefits from offensive attacks against terrorist organizations? Who pays the costs?
• Who benefits from defensive measures to stop terrorist attacks? Who pays the costs?