

POLS 429: International Terrorism

Lecture 18 (02.26.2020): Explaining Terrorism - Target Selection

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Overview

- 1 Quick review
- 2 Introduction
- 3 Theoretical Approaches
- 4 Implications
- 5 Extra Material

Review

WHAT WE COVERED LAST MEETING?

- **Movie:**

- ① group dynamics (recruitment, friends, family ties, prison time).
- ② Globalization (weapons and people - Yemen, Syria and Europe).
- ③ Preconditions (social and economic) and precipitants (US invasion).
- ④ ISIS as a radical splinter group from AQ.

Questions??

Terrorist Target Selection

INTRODUCTION

- Targeting decisions by terror groups or individuals.
- Research questions:
 - ① Discriminate versus indiscriminate targets?
 - ② Transnational versus domestic terrorism?
 - ③ Why certain countries are targets of terror attacks?
- **Main objective:** identify the underlying drivers of targeting choices.
- Some data: [▶ TargetsTotal](#) [▶ TargetTrends](#)

The Strategic Approach

THE LOGIC OF TARGETING CHOICES

- Strategic terrorism → rational actors.
- Target selection → demonstrate the group's resolve and credibility in order to secure the most benefits for their cause.
- Targets are selected with the objective of posing a **credible threat**.

The Strategic Approach

Physical Locations

- Soft targets: public spaces (malls, transportation platforms, religious institutions).
- Why?
 - 1 Attrition.
 - 2 Provocation - government overreaction.
- Example: Al Qaeda and 9.11 attacks.
 - Attrition: mass civilian casualties → high costs for US presence in Middle-East.
 - Provocation: invasion to Afghanistan.

The Strategic Approach

Civilian - Military Dilemma

- Targeting civilians → the fear factor. ▶ CiviliansTargets
- **Polo (2019)**: target civilians based on in- and out-group membership, and government repressive policy.
- Indiscriminate repression → targeting out-group: strengthen group identity and support within the in-group. ▶ Targeting
- Algeria: FLN target civilians (discriminate, clear targets).

The Strategic Approach

National - Transnational

- Attack foreign targets → enhance domestic support (rational).
- Targeting foreigners, the terror group and local government.
- 'Expel' foreign troops (US military presence).
- Stronger political position at home.

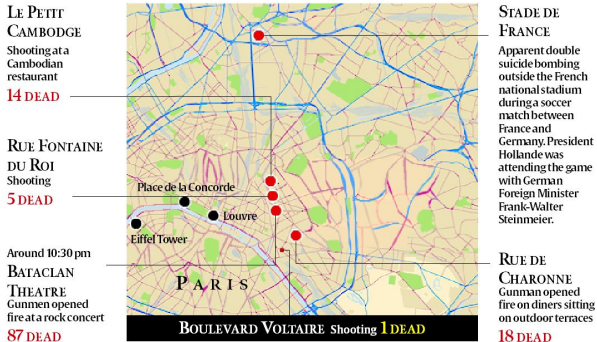
The Organizational Approach

- Internal group dynamics and organizational factors.

Size

- Small groups → undefended civilians (easier targets).
- Large groups → greater capacity and more diverse options.
- Diverse targets require special skills and resources (maritime).
- Example: maritime targets → "The Sea Tigers" (LTTE-1984) in Sri Lanka.

9:17 and 9:19 pm local time



The Organizational Approach

Organizational Environment

- Targeting choices: a function of group competition.
- Al Qaeda → mass casualty and sophisticated attacks.
- How groups stand-out? Emulation.
- How groups stand-out? Innovation (extreme methods).
- Example: right wing groups in Europe adopting discriminate assassinations in 1980's .

The Organizational Approach

Cooperation

- Capacity, new skills and target diversity.
- "Stretching" the state's defensive capabilities → must defend multiple potential targets.

Internal Strife and Leadership crises

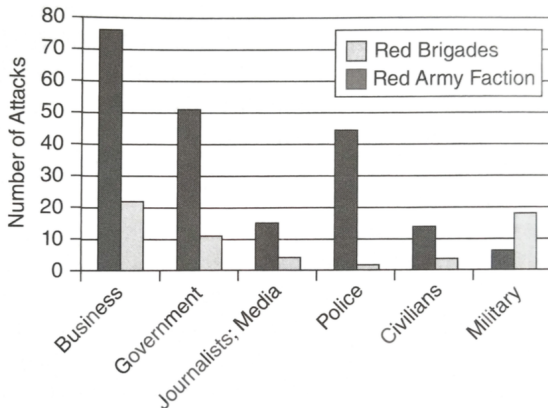
- Target members to enhance discipline, insubordination and reduce betrayal (IRA and suspected informants).
- *Internal outbidding* → attention grabbing targets (schools in Pakistan and Russia).

The Ideological approach

- Ideology (beliefs): an explanation for the range of legitimate targets.
- An exclusivist ideology → indiscriminate targeting choices ('entire population' is a legitimate target).
- Nationalist-Separatist → target security forces (represent "occupier"). [▶ TargetIdeology](#)
- ETA (Spain): almost 50% of attacks (1970-2011) target security forces and government installations. [▶ TargetsETA](#)

The Ideological approach

- Ideology restricts target selection: left wing groups.
- Right-wing and sectarian ideologies are less discriminate.



The Ideological approach

- Religious ideology: lethal and broad attacks against civilians.
- Legitimacy: the need to protect the (religious) belief from “non-believers” (“outsiders”).
- “Audience” → supernatural (less restrictions).
- Al Qaeda, religious belief and targeting mass civilian population.
- Targets were mostly described as “infidels” and “outsiders”.

The Psychological Approach

- Explain specific targeting decisions.
- **Pathologies:** *Aum Shinrikyo* Sarin Gas attack (Tokyo, 1995)
 - Group leader → mentally unstable, doomsday philosophy.
- **Groupthink:** target civilians; refrain from assessments of effectiveness.

TERRORISM AND PSYCHOLOGY

- Mass killings → severe trauma and social paralysis.
- Loss of control over situation and emerging social divisions.

The Structural Approach

- Target selection → underlying society-wide factors that motivate groups' decisions.
- **Dominant power behavior:** shift to international targets to counter unaccepted behavior.
- **Geography:** target capital cities and dense population centers.
- Urban areas → harder to protect civilians.
- Rural areas → Police and security forces are more vulnerable.

The Structural Approach

- **Regime Type:** civilians are targeted in democracies:
 - ① Perceived as 'equal targets' as government.
 - ② Benefit from government policies (the "ultimate targets").
 - ③ Easier to spread fear (developed and unrestricted media).
- **Repression and economic conditions:** extent of public support for the government versus the terror group.
- **CT policies:** substitution in methods and targets.
 - Skyjacking → Hostage-taking (metal detectors).
 - Enhanced assets protection → assassinations of officials.
 - Increase commercial aviation security → target civilians with bombs and firearms.

The Critical Approach

- Question the view of terrorism as a negative tool.
- **Targeting choices:** focus on civilians and noncombatants suggest that violence against military forces is not terrorism.
- Yet, Hamas, ETA do target military forces.
- Focusing on nonstate groups distract from state violence.
- Ignoring the underlying causes of conflicts.

Policy Implications

- Structural/strategic approach → harden targets.
- Enhance protection: embassies, airports, government buildings and shopping malls.
- Effective in reducing attacks on these locations.
- Yet, in many public areas, hardening is not an option (Paris, 2015: targeted restaurants and coffee shops).
- A possible solution: more security guards and metal detectors in the entrance for large public spaces (Israel).

Policy Implications

- Organizational approach: CT policies limitations.
 - ① Targeted killings → internal struggle and shift focus to target civilians.
 - ② Infiltration and internal chaos also enhances targeting of civilians.
- Solution: disrupt cooperation that enhance capabilities and target diversity.
- Collaboration between security and intelligence agencies.
- Better understanding of consequences of internal dynamics and dense environment.

Policy Implications

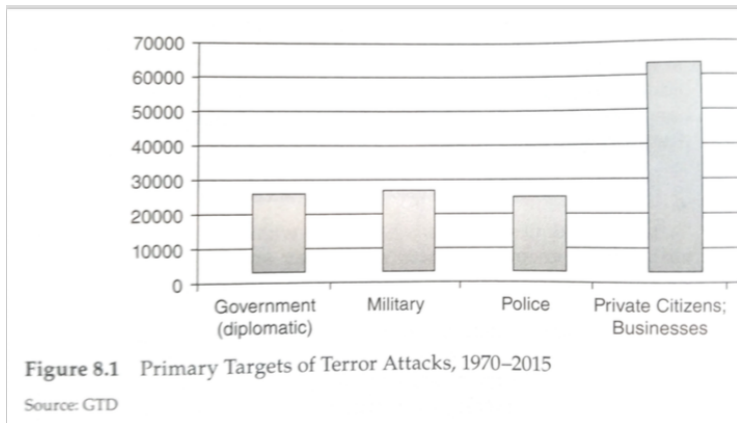
- Ideological approach: policies and moral issues.
- Monitor religious groups, invasive measures.
- Discriminate certain groups → enhance (and justify) their grievances.
- Targeting military forces is more effective for concessions.
- A need for greater resiliency facing mass civilians casualty attacks.
- Governments must not overreact with repressive policies that are likely to backfire and increase support for the group.

Recommended readings

More studies on terrorism and target selection:

- 1 Charlinda Santifort, Todd Sandler and Patrick T. Brandt, "Terrorist Attack and Target Diversity: Changepoints and Their Drivers," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 50, Issue 1 (2012), pp. 75-90.
- 2 Michael Horowitz, Evan Perkoski, and Philip B. K. Potter, "Tactical Diversity in Militant Violence," *International Organization*.

Terrorism: changes in usage of terms



Terrorism: changes in usage of terms

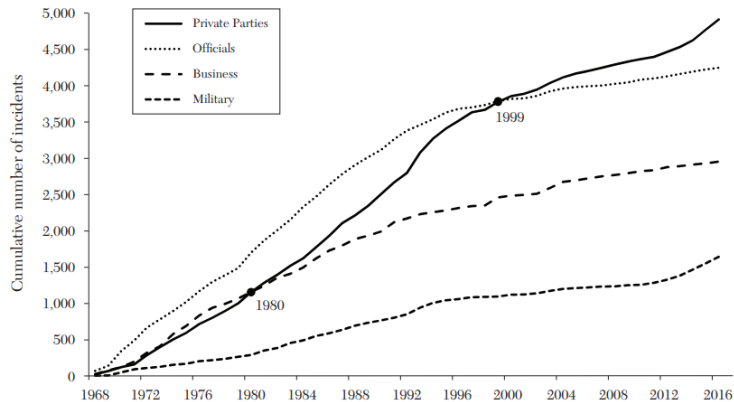


Figure 11. Cumulative Number of Transnational Terrorist Attacks by Target Type

