

What Do We Know About Suicide Terrorism?

POSC 1020 – Introduction to International Relations

Steven V. Miller

Department of Political Science



Goal for Today

1. *Argue that an extreme form of terrorism (suicide terrorism) is rational/strategic.*
2. *Highlight how inferential fallacies and research design flaws can preclude a thorough understanding of the causes of suicide terrorism.*

Terrorism and International Security

Terrorism is actually a familiar problem for national security.

- Anarchist groups in the 19th century.
 - Assassination of Alexander II in Russia, William McKinley in the U.S.
- Ku Klux Klan in the United States
- Irish Republican Brotherhood/Army
- Armenian Revolutionary Federation in the Ottoman Empire

These are just a few examples.

Terrorism and International Security

We do observe an increase of terrorism after WWII.

1. Liberation movements
2. Revolutionary movements

1968 is typically held as the hallmark year for terrorism.

- El Al Flight 426
- El Al Flight 253

The Problem of Suicide Terrorism



We observe the first suicide terror attack in the 1983 Beirut barracks bombing.

The Problem of Suicide Terrorism

Suicide terrorism increases from there.

- Hamas, Hezbollah vs. Israel
- Tamil Tigers vs. Sri Lanka
- PKK vs. Turkey
- Al Qaeda vs. the United States
- Chechnyan rebels vs. Russia

By 9/11, suicide terrorism was increasing as other forms of terrorism were decreasing.

How Do We Explain Suicide Terrorism?

It's easy to assume this “irrational” behavior is motivated by religious fundamentalism in the Middle East.

- However, the Tamil Tigers committed more suicide terror attacks than any other group.

It's even more difficult to explain suicide attacks by individual-level factors.

- Suicide terrorists run the gamut of young/old, rich/poor, educated/uneducated, etc.

Pape's Argument

Suicide terrorism has a “strategic logic”.

- It's instrumental behavior aimed at coercing a target government to change policy.
- It's an extreme form of Schelling's “rationality of irrationality”.

Pape's Argument

Pape argues five findings follow from his “universe” of suicide terror attacks (1980-2001).

1. Suicide terrorism is “strategic”, and clusters into campaigns.
2. Goal: coerce democracies to make concessions on “occupied territories”.
3. Terror groups have learned it gets results.
4. Results are limited to moderate concessions on inconsequential security interests.
5. Preventing suicide terrorism means reducing terror group's confidence in ability to execute attack.

Distinguishing Suicide Terrorism

We observe three common forms of terrorism.

1. Demonstrative terrorism
2. Destructive terrorism
3. Suicide terrorism

Distinguishing Suicide Terrorism

Demonstrative terrorism:

- Aimed at publicity (to recruit and/or gain sympathy).
- Common forms: hostage-taking, hijacking, bombings announced in advance.
- Examples: ETA, Brigade Rosse

Destructive terrorism:

- Seeks to coerce opponents and galvanize community.
- Common forms: bombings, assassinations, indiscriminate killing
- Examples: FARC, IRA

Distinguishing Suicide Terrorism

Suicide terrorism is the most extreme form of terrorism.

- Imposes most costs on target group.
- Unique in that the attacker is not expected to survive.
- Goal: kill the most people in the target population.
- Runs the risk of alienating terror group's own community.

Suicide Terrorism's Coercive Logic

Suicide terrorism is a coercive strategy.

- Separate from interstate coercion.
- The terror group is usually weaker in military capabilities.

Terror groups try to raise *costs* of target state's policy.

- Terror groups typically have no chance at military conquest.

Suicide terror magnifies coercive effects of “unishment” in three ways.

1. Suicide attacks are generally more destructive.
2. Effective signal that more attacks will come.
3. Willingness to die signals high motivation by terror group.

The Record of Suicide Terrorism

Three findings emerge from 1983-2001:

1. Suicide attacks are non-random and cluster into coherent campaigns.
2. Suicide attacks have nationalist goals.
3. Suicide attacks target democracies.

The Timing of Suicide Terrorism

Suicide terror attacks are not sporadic and cluster in “campaigns”.

- Campaigns include: Kurdish independence, Chechnyan independence, etc.
- 95% (179 of 188) of terror attacks were part of overall campaigns.

The *suspension* of suicide terror campaigns is also important.

- Terror groups call them off during negotiations or after concessions.

The Goals of Suicide Terrorism

Pape finds **all** suicide terror campaigns have nationalist goals.

- Terror groups want target state removed from “homeland”, or independence of territory.
- In other words: this is a necessary condition.

Pape argues that the goals are not unrealistic.

- They reflect self-determination aspirations in the community.
- They also enjoy a lot of support (e.g. Hamas).

The Targets of Suicide Terrorism

Every target of suicide terror has been a democracy.

- Counts Sri Lanka and Russia as democracies.

This hinges on terror group perceptions.

- Democracies are considered “soft” and more constrained in their policies.

The PKK illustrates this nicely.

- Iraq had been more brutal in its treatment of Kurds, but all suicide terror campaigns were directed at Turkey.

The Success of Suicide Terrorism

Terror groups use suicide terror because they've learned it works.

- Every group that uses it first tried something else.

Al Qaeda, for example, prides itself on its “terrorist manual” and the importance of learning.

The Success of Suicide Terrorism

Of 11 campaigns, six resulted in concessions by target side.

- U.S., France withdrew from Lebanon in 1983.
- Israel withdrew from Lebanon in 1985
- Sri Lanka started negotiations in 1994.
- Three other “vague” successes were Hamas campaigns vs. Israel.

The Limits of Suicide Terrorism

However, suicide terror is *unlikely* to achieve more ambitious goals.

- For core security interests, states are willing to bear high costs.

The observed successes have been over minor interests for the target state.

- U.S./French mission to Lebanon was a humanitarian mission.
- Israel's 1985 withdrawal from Lebanon came with a security buffer.
 - Israel was unaffected by a subsequent campaign in 1986.

Sri Lanka has been remarkably stubborn in its dealings with the Tamil Tigers.

- It actually defeated them in 2009.

Pape's Policy Implications

Pape concludes with some policy advice for dealing with suicide terrorism.

- Offensive counterterror campaigns (e.g. Israel) are ineffective.
- Concessions won't work unless they're total concessions.
- Partial, limited concessions are dangerous for target states.
- Offense is limited; defense is critical for a target state.
- Strategies of military conquest/occupation (e.g. U.S.) just exacerbate the problem.

Ashworth et al.'s (2008) Critique

Ashworth et al. (2008) argue Pape's conclusions cannot follow from his data.

1. Pape selects on the dependent variable.
2. He cannot elucidate the causes of suicide terrorism.
3. His data are consistent with a strong association or weak non-association between foreign occupation and suicide terrorism.

Selection Bias in Suicide Terrorism

Pape says he collected the “universe” of suicide terror attacks from 1983-2001. What could be the problem?

- Pape selects on observed suicide terrorism and attributes causality afterward.
- Causal statements must consider $X \rightarrow Y$ **and** $X \rightarrow \sim Y$.
- However, Pape doesn't code $\sim Y$!

We can say nothing of how territorial occupations by a democracy increase the risk of a terror group using suicide terrorism.

- i.e. we don't see these problems in Germany or South Korea, for example.

The Issue of Attributable Risk

This matters because we are interested in the *risk* of suicide terrorism, given these antecedent conditions of foreign occupation.

- This is, in fact, a conditional probability problem.

Let's introduce some terms:

- O : an act of resistance is motivated by occupation of territory.
- $\sim O$: an act of resistance is not motivated by occupation of territory.
- S : act of resistance is suicide terrorism.
- $\sim S$: act of resistance is not suicide terrorism.

Attributable Risk

Pape's argument of statistical association is of **attributable risk**:

- $AR(S | O) = Pr(S | O) - Pr(S | \sim O)$

In short: Pape's policy prescriptions follow if $Pr(S | O) > Pr(S | \sim O)$.

- Otherwise, there is no increased risk of suicide terrorism *given* an occupation of territory.

Attributable Risk

We need estimates of $Pr(S \mid O)$ and $Pr(S \mid \sim O)$.

- Our best way to do this would be a large random sample of all terrorist attacks.

However, Pape's data do not provide this.

- He selects only on suicide terror attacks.
- We know only $Pr(O \mid S)$ and $Pr(\sim O \mid S)$.

Attributable Risk

Bayes rule can help us. This gives us:

$$\Pr(S|O) = \frac{\Pr(O|S) \Pr(S)}{\Pr(O)}$$

And:

$$\Pr(S|\sim O) = \frac{\Pr(\sim O|S) \Pr(S)}{\Pr(\sim O)}$$

Attributable Risk

This gives us this attributable risk formula:

$$AR(S|O) = \frac{\Pr(S)[\Pr(O|S) - \Pr(O)]}{\Pr(O)(1 - \Pr(O))}$$

We need: $\Pr(S)$, $\Pr(O)$, and $\Pr(O | S)$.

- We can get $\Pr(S)$ and $\Pr(O | S)$ from Table 1.
- However, we still need the probability of occupation by a target state.

The Limits of What Pape Can Tell Us

Bayes' theorem allows for the derivation of $Pr(O)$:

$$Pr(O) = Pr(O|S) Pr(S) + Pr(O | \sim S) Pr(\sim S)$$

...and now we're stuck. We can't know $Pr(O | \sim S)$ because Pape selected on observed suicide terror attacks!

- Any value of $Pr(O)$ between 178/4155 (.042) and 4145/4155 (.997) would be consistent with Pape's data.

As a result, we cannot know about the risk of suicide terrorism for a state's occupation of territory.

Pape's Response

Read my book!

- ...and that's basically it.

Pape quote-dumps from his book and reiterates two points:

1. There's no "sample bias" (sic) in collecting a "universe".
2. He's arguing more a necessary condition than sufficient condition.

Ashworth et al.'s Rebuttal

A talk of necessary condition doesn't help. Consider:

- A medical examiner examines 16 deaths in the previous week.
- All 16 deaths were X -drinkers; none was a non-drinker.
- Compared to chance, this would occur in 1 in 55,000 trials.
- Thus, there is a real effect of X on mortality.

That sounds convincing until we learn than X is water.

Ashworth et al.'s Rebuttal

Appeals to Pape's "universe" don't help either.

- 1980-1986: Shi'a extremism is a necessary condition (Hezbollah).
- 1987-2009: Religion is not a necessary condition (Tamil Tigers).
- 2003–: Occupation/democracy are not necessary either (Pakistan).

We would still know nothing of the likelihood of suicide terrorism, given these antecedent conditions.

Conclusion

Despite its peculiar barbarism, suicide terrorism is goal-oriented and strategic behavior.

- It's an extreme form of Schelling's "rationality of irrationality".
- It's a statement of motivation by the terror groups.
- They've also learned its effective relative other strategies.

However, we still don't know the root causes of suicide terror.

- Suicide terror is not the domain of Islamic fundamentalism, nor must it target democracies over territorial occupations.

Take research design seriously.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Pape's Argument

- The Coercive Logic of Suicide Terrorism

- The Record of Suicide Terrorism, 1983-2001

Research Design and Inferential Fallacies

- The Problem of Selection Bias

- Attributable Risk

- Pape's Response

- Ashworth et al.'s Unpublished Follow-up

Conclusion