

The special case of suicide attacks

CDSn4002 Political Violence

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Definitional issues

- the overall number of suicide attacks is quite small compared to total numbers of attacks on similar targets using other means
- suicide attacks or suicide terrorism?
- suicide attacks have been used to assassinate individuals and to strike specific military targets and killing civilians does not distinguish suicide attacks from other forms of violence
- in several well-known cases, suicide attackers did not target civilians indiscriminately or did so rarely

An Act of Free Will?

- the key question of whether or not the suicides must be acts of free will, which is also something that is not always easy to know
- willingness to die as the key element of a definition?
- what if bombers were subjected to intense social pressures that pushed them in the direction of martyrdom?
- what if the attacker blew themselves up only when cornered by the police?

Is a general theory of suicide attacks possible?

- considering how difficult it is to define the concept, modesty may be the wisest course of action
- a scholarly consensus that suicide attacks are instrumental or strategic from the perspective of a sponsoring organization that represents the weaker party in an asymmetrical conflict
- they serve the political interests of identifiable actors, most of whom are non-states opposing well-armed states
- the method is mechanically simple and tactically efficient, and it possesses high-symbolic value as well as versatility
- suicide attacks presumably also mobilize sympathetic constituencies and attract recruits and financial support
- the death of the perpetrator is thought to legitimize the action

How effective is it?

- Pape claims it ultimately forces democratic regimes occupying foreign countries to withdraw from the foreign territory
- typically, resorting to suicide terrorism is meant ultimately to end foreign occupation and secure autonomy or independence
- Pape: suicide terrorism is successful only when occupying powers have “limited or modest” goals as opposed to those “central to their wealth or security”
- he concludes that six of thirteen completed campaigns from 1983 to 2001 resulted in “no change” in the foreign occupation
- however, he argues that “even a 50 percent success rate is remarkable

How effective is it?

- suicide terrorism is attractive because it enhances an organization's prestige and gives it an advantage in intra-movement competition by attracting recruits, publicity, and money
- the argument is probably most persuasive regarding the Palestinian case
- for example, Al Qaeda's actions are hard to explain in terms of competition with rivals
- if suicide attacks are effective (in either or both of these ways), why are they infrequent?
- Kalyvas and Sanchez-Cuenca note that suicide attacks can be counterproductive if they kill civilians indiscriminately

Pape: *Dying to Win:* *The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*

- compiled a database of every suicide bombing and attack around the globe from 1980 - 2003, it included 315 attacks
- the data show that there is little connection between suicide terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism, or any one of the world's religions
- the leading instigators of suicide attacks were the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, a Marxist-Leninist group whose members are from Hindu families but who are opposed to religion
- this group committed 76 of the 315 incidents, more suicide attacks than Hamas

Pape: *Dying to Win:* *The Strategic Logic of Suicide* *Terrorism*

- what nearly all suicide terrorist attacks have in common is a **specific secular and strategic goal**: to compel modern *democracies* to withdraw military forces from territory that the terrorists consider to be their homeland
- **religion is rarely the root cause**, although it is often used as a tool by terrorist organizations in recruiting and in other efforts in service of the broader strategic objective
- four key factors increase the likelihood of suicide attacks:
- a) foreign occupation, b) democracy, c) religious difference between the occupied country and the invading forces, and d) ongoing rebellion

Foreign occupation & protracted (military) conflict

- what nearly all suicide terrorist attacks have in common is a specific **secular and strategic goal**
- suicide attacks serve “to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from territory that the terrorists consider to be their homeland”
- suicide attacks are a last resort, used once other violent antioccupation tactics have failed
- thus, suicide attacks should be expected to occur in the context of a protracted insurgency

Democracy

- democratic states are uniquely vulnerable to suicide terrorists
- the United States, France, India, Israel, Russia, Sri Lanka, and Turkey have been the targets of almost every suicide attack of the past two decades, and each country has been a democracy at the time of the incidents
- they represent attractive targets for suicide attacks for three reasons:
 - 1. democracies are generally perceived as highly casualty averse and thus easily coercible
 - 2. democratic responses to suicide attacks are likely to be constrained by human rights norms and public opinion, thus reducing the risk of a massive retaliation that could eliminate the militant group
 - 3. the openness and individual freedoms characterizing democracies facilitate the planning and execution of suicide attacks

A religious dimension to the logic?

- there is an interaction effect between foreign occupation by democracies and religious differences between occupiers and the occupied community
- this religious clash increases the likelihood that suicide attacks will be employed because the situation is more likely to be interpreted in zero-sum terms by the occupied community
- religious radicalism *per se* is not a cause of suicide attacks, but merely an instrument used by nationalist leaders to motivate and control their followers

The theory does not seem to explain recent trends in suicide attacks

- while in the 1980s and 1990s, nearly all suicide attacks were indeed associated with occupation struggles,
- since the 2000s, a substantial number of attacks occurred in countries that can hardly be defined as being under occupation (e.g., Pakistan and Yemen)
- Al-Qaeda's principal objective is the removal of US occupying forces from the Arabian Peninsula,
- however, it is unconvincing to claim, as Pape does, that the US presence in the region should be conceptualized as occupation

The perpetrators and victims of suicide attacks

- where suicide attacks did occur in the context of occupations, such as in Iraq or Afghanistan, they tended to target co-nationals as often as foreigners
- in addition, in those cases where suicide attacks are carried out in occupied countries against occupying forces, the attacks are often performed by nationals of non-occupied countries

The lack of critical data

- Pape's original data set, only covers the time period from 1980 to 2003
- as such it excludes the peak period of suicide attacks between 2003 and 2008
- 1,457 suicide attacks conducted between 2003 and 2006 constitute 84% of all the 1,730 ever executed
- given the relatively small overall number of suicide attacks, such rapid changes can radically alter statistical findings

Selection bias

- in his book, Pape examined all occupations undertaken by democracies as his unit of analysis, thus, also including cases where suicide attacks did not occur
- however, his study suffers from **selection bias**:
- Pape cannot infer whether democratic occupiers are more likely targets of suicide attacks because he does not examine cases in which the occupation and democracy variables take on different values

How to deal with the selection bias?

- Wade and Reiter (2007) replicated Pape's findings, correcting for this selection bias
- they analyzed all countries, regardless of whether or not they have experienced suicide attacks
- they used the presence of religiously distinct minority as a proxy for occupation
- they find that **neither democracies nor states with religiously distinct minorities, are more likely to be targeted by suicide attacks** than nondemocracies or states without relevant minorities
- overall, they find that **partial democracies with several religiously distinct minorities are far more likely targets** of suicide attacks than either full democracies or autocracies

Foreign or Domestic Occupation?

- Collard-Wexler et al (2014) claim the Pape's work also conflates societies occupied by a foreign state with minority groups seeking independence or autonomy
- they distinguish between **foreign occupation**, when a state invades and occupies another state, and **domestic occupation**, when a minority group perceives itself as under occupation and seeks autonomy or independence
- they find that occupation is associated with a greater risk of suicide attacks, as predicted by Pape

Foreign or Domestic Occupation?

- however, when they treat foreign and domestic occupations separately, they find that **foreign occupations are associated with a higher risk** of suicide attacks,
- however, there is no consistent evidence of association between domestic occupations and suicide attacks (i.e. generalizations made by Pape go too far)
- finally, they argue that the different effect of domestic and foreign occupations is due to **hardening** of targets
- paradoxically, certain kinds of hardening tend to increase the likelihood of suicide attacks

Policy implications?

- some measures of homeland security, such as up-armorizing troops and hardening critical buildings, may actually increase incentives to use suicide attacks as opposed to other tactics
- overall, however, the baseline probability of any state experiencing a suicide attack in a given year is low
- therefore, although the magnitude of the effect of foreign occupations and civil wars may be great, the actual change in the number of attacks is still generally small
- states want to reduce their exposure to attacks; they also need to consider the magnitude of these side effects in crafting effective policies

Female Suicide Bombers

- Are female suicide bombers deadlier than male suicide bombers?
- A tendency to see women either as victims of violence or involuntary participants in violent attacks
- some women indiscriminately suffer due to political violence
- others join militant groups, and engage in violent activities
- a number of female terrorists joined the ISIS, Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda and other organizations, and played a key role in various types of activities

Female Suicide Terrorists: Alternative Views

- 1. women in general are considered less threatening than men
- they are not fully scrutinized in all circumstances, which facilitates their operations
- consequently, female perpetrators are potentially highly effective
- 2. female suicide terrorism is no longer new or inconceivable
- no longer sporadic or rare incidents, they are therefore anticipated
- women cannot be categorized as more effective terrorists than men, because there is nothing new or special about "female terrorism"

A gendered perspective

- women operationally superior to men because they take advantage of the existing gender stereotypes
- dominant stereotypes: women are considered genetically predisposed to caring, nurturing, and protecting
- the fact that they can be militant, violent, and eager to kill does not align well with the existing stereotypes associated with being a woman
- consequently, women are not exclusively profiled or duly searched
- gender stereotypes facilitate the job of female suicide bombers: they can evade intimate searches even when they are observed for suspicious behavior

Empirical Tests of the Hypothesis

- a large-N analysis of suicide attacks between 1998 and 2015 (Alakoc 2020)
- other things being equal, suicide terrorist attacks carried out by female suicide bombers are deadlier than those by male suicide bombers
- some evidence that effect of female-led suicide missions on lethality is largest in low-accessibility locations

Other reasons to deploy female suicide bombers

- 1. when women are deployed in suicide missions, their attacks are guaranteed to attract greater media attention and generate wider publicity
- 2. women have a greater “propaganda value” than men and they are generally more skilled at gaining sympathy and support for a given cause
- 3. terrorist organizations also recruit women strategically in order to shame and thereby convince men to join the ranks of their organizations