



The dislocations of terror: Assessments of risk during the Second Intifada

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ABSTRACT

The goal of terrorism is to create havoc and disrupt the normal functioning of society. To understand the impact of terrorism on a country it is useful to consider two types of country experiences with these shocks to the social order—the instance of a very small number of attacks against high profile targets and the case of chronic terror with a great number of attacks, generally against targets that are part of routine daily activities. The present study explores the Israeli experience with chronic terror. Using expenditure information from coffee shops and restaurants we examine how individuals assess their vulnerability to an attack and adjust their behavior. Specifically, we explore whether distance from the site of an attack, and similarity of a contemplated undertaking to the target of a recent attack, influence decision making in a context of chronic terror. We find strong support for a situational similarity effect but only weak evidence for a proximity effect. We examine the implications of these findings for the organization of economic activity.

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1. Introduction

Terrorist attacks have had a greater impact on expenditures by western countries and on the psychological well-being of their residents than might be expected solely from a calculation of the lethal effects. Even taking into account the horrific September 11, 2001 strikes at the World Trade Center and at the Pentagon, and the high profile attacks in London and Madrid in the years that followed, there is greater loss of life each year from traffic accidents than from terror attacks. Similarly, natural and industrial disasters have been responsible for many more fatalities than terrorism.

Nonetheless, far greater resources have been expended by the United States and by European countries to safeguard their populations from terrorism than is invested to mitigate the human cost of traffic accidents or workplace hazards. Part of the reason for the acute concern with terrorism stems from a belief that the volume of attacks would surely increase in the absence of heightened vigilance and deterrence (Posner, 2004, p. 171). Yet, the threat of terror attacks generates a level of anxiety and trepidation that is unique to this phenomenon, and a democratic government must respect this fear even when the preventive actions that are instituted have little practical effect or are unwarranted on the basis of a cost/benefit analysis (Sunstein, 2003; Shapiro, 2007, p. 1).

Terrorism is frightening because it implies agency: the maneuvering by a malevolent actor intent on inflicting injury and mayhem. The actor could be clever, devious, adaptive in foiling preventive measures, even prepared to sacrifice his or her life in order to wreak havoc and destruction—features not associated with a traffic accident or a workplace mishap. Indeed, the corrosive impact of terrorism on feelings of security is well-recognized. Thus, Fullerton et al. (2003, p. 6), assessing the

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psychological effects of different types of traumatic events, has ranked terrorism as one of “the most powerful and pervasive generators of psychiatric illness, distress, and disrupted community and social functioning.”

1.1. *Terror as a rare event versus chronic terrorism*

In the United States, our familiarity with terrorism has largely been molded by the massive attacks of September 11, which provoked deep feelings of anxiety and a sense of vulnerability. In a national survey conducted a week after the World Trade Center strike, Schuster et al. (2001) found that 44% of adults reported severe stress symptoms; follow-up studies by Galea et al. (2002) and Holman et al. (2008) reinforced this assessment. Not surprisingly, the large scale attacks in Madrid on March 11, 2004 and in London on July 7, 2005 generated similar manifestations of psychological unease in England and Spain (Vazquez et al., 2006; Rubin et al., 2005), though there is a suggestion that the impact was muted because of the inuring effects of prior bouts with terrorism in these countries.

Distressing as it has been to residents in the United States, the attack at the World Trade Center produced only minor change in individual behavior or in the operational routines of commercial actors, except for enhanced airport security and an intensification of activity by organizations charged with responsibility for public safety. In a recent literature review, Spilerman and Stecklov (2009) concluded that the effects on the national economy were quite modest, with a rapid return to normality in the months following the assault. Few modifications were made by individuals in their daily routines as a result of the attack. Aside from the perfunctory checking of handbags at public events, it is not evident that shopping decisions, leisure activity, or bus or rail travel have been much affected, though the New York City subway rider is now urged by frequent announcements to “say something if you see something.”

If the impact of terror on everyday activities has been modest in the United States and in Western Europe, this has not been the case elsewhere. In this regard, it is useful to distinguish between two historical experiences with terrorism: terror as a rare event—a very few attacks, usually directed against iconic targets—and chronic terrorism, in which many attacks have taken place over a long period of time (Spilerman and Stecklov, 2009). In countries that have experienced chronic terror, such as Northern Ireland and Israel, one’s sense of vulnerability is not limited to the few times when “risky” behavior is undertaken, such as boarding an airline or visiting a prominent public building. Rather, in those countries, attacks have taken place in a great variety of settings—restaurants, retail stores, movie houses, busses, even on crowded streets.

These two types of exposure to terrorism have very different emotional and behavioral consequences. In the first case there is the perception of a rupture in one’s sense of normality and the afflicted society quickly orients itself to repairing the damage and restoring the status quo ante. The impulse shock from the attack generates a “low point” in feelings of security and well being—the moment when it is recognized that the worst has transpired—which is then followed by a period of recovery and a return to normality (Baum and Dougall, 2002, p. 620). This formulation, incidentally, conforms to the stage progression model of a community’s rebound from a natural or industrial disaster (e.g. Barton, 1963; Quarantelli and Dynes, 1977), and it is therefore not surprising that several investigations of the behavioral response to the September 11 strike have invoked this temporal imagery (e.g., National Research Council, 2002; Smelser, 2007, chap. 5).

The second type of encounter with terrorism has consequences that intrude more deeply into the fabric of society and are pervasive and longer lasting. Once it is recognized that the attacks constitute not so much an interruption of the customary order as the emergence of a new normality with danger and threat lurking in every activity, however quotidian, individuals tend to modify their daily routines to lessen the vulnerability. They may alter mode of travel from bus to taxi, avoid unguarded restaurants, and shift shopping choices from street stores to establishments in protected malls. Indeed, Borell (2008) found this very sort of adaptation in Beirut to the wave of bombings following the assassination of Rafik Hariri in 1995.

These behavioral modifications carry profound implications for the viability and profitability of commercial establishments, consequences which are borne out in studies of several countries that experienced bouts of terrorism. Thus, following the renewal of attacks into Israel from the Palestinian territories in September 2000, there was a steep fall off in foreign tourism (Fleischer and Buccola, 2002; Morag, 2006), an observation that echoes findings from other countries—e.g., the Basque attacks in Spain in the 1970s and 80s (Enders and Sandler, 1991); violence by radical Islamist groups in Egypt in the 1990s (Aziz, 1995). Further, in Israel, bus ridership was found to decline by some 5% in the week subsequent to an attack, even more deeply in large cities that were frequent targets (Becker and Rubinstein, 2011). In regard to summary effects on the Israeli economy, Eckstein and Tsiddon (2004) estimate that over a 3 year period the attacks were responsible for a 10% reduction in productive output, though the effect was uneven across economic sectors, with firms in the security industry experiencing a notable increase in sales and in market value (Berrebi and Klor, 2005; Handels, 2004).

1.2. *Vulnerability and coping strategies under chronic terrorism*

From the perspective of understanding the variety of ways that terrorism can impact the social order, the experience of countries that have had to confront chronic terrorism is clearly the more informative case. It is also evident that the effects on commercial actors in these countries, noted above, are driven by the concerns individuals have about their personal safety, and that the modifications made in their daily routines are intended to reduce exposure to an attack. This raises a fundamental issue of how individuals come to assess their personal vulnerability and the sorts of steps they take to reduce at least the anxiety associated with vulnerability, if not the actual risk of becoming a victim. This issue is the subject of the present study.

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