



Public opinion and terrorist acts

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines support for terrorism in public opinion and the relationship with terrorist attacks. We link the 2007 PEW survey data on justification for suicide terror and opinions in 16 countries of the Middle East, Africa and Asia on nine regional powers, to the NCTC data on international terrorist acts between 2004 and 2008. We find that justification in public opinion for suicide terrorism increases terror attacks on people in countries that are unfavorably regarded. There is a robust positive relationship between the share of the population in a country that at the same time justifies suicide bombings and has an unfavorable opinion of another country, and terrorism originating from the former country.

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1. Introduction

Public support for terrorism affects the selection of terror methods, the decision to end terror, and the pool of potential recruits for terror attacks (Gurr, 1998; Merrari, 2005; Katzenstein and Keohane, 2006). The mechanism whereby public opinion relates to terror however remains unclear. If a connection can be established between public opinion and occurrence of terrorism, terror can be predicted by public opinion in relevant populations. In a recent paper, Alan Krueger and one of the authors of the present paper examined the effect of public opinion in one country toward another country on the number of terrorist attacks perpetrated by individuals or groups from the former country against the latter (Krueger and Malečková, 2009). Linking data from the Gallup World Poll from Middle Eastern and North African countries on the performance of the leaders of nine world powers to the NCTC data on the number of terrorist events, a greater incidence of international terrorism was revealed when people in one country disapprove of the leadership of another country. In this paper we seek a more nuanced view of the dimensions of public opinion that may be relevant for population's support for a terror and we check the finding of the previous paper about the relationship between public opinion and occurrence of terrorism using different data. We focus on two dimensions of public opinion: The first, opinions of regional powers, expresses the attitude to a country or group of countries that can be considered responsible for regional policy and status quo; this attitude can be shaped and mobilized in a conflict or terrorist campaign. The second dimension of public opinion that we analyze is justification for suicide terrorism. As is common in terrorism research, it is difficult to find systematic data that cover a longer period and a larger set of countries, and to keep the survey questions consistent. We use the 2007 PEW survey and specifically the information on justification for suicide terror and opinions in 16 countries of the Middle East, Africa and Asia on nine regional powers. We link these data to the NCTC data on international terrorist attacks between 2004 and 2008. We are aware that responses in survey data can be expressive: that is, a response in a survey is a low-cost action that allows people to obtain expressive utility from the answer that they give, without consequences for any actions they need to undertake

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(Hillman, 2010). However, we propose that, on support for terror, opinions reflect true beliefs. Moreover, we note in supporting terror, respondents are not constrained by ethical bounds (Kirchgässner, 2010) in advocating use of terror to kill innocent people. We find wide variation among respondents in different countries. Opinions on regional powers and justification for suicide terrorism are found to be independent. Our analysis suggests that justification for suicide terror and unfavorable opinions on regional powers are correlated with the occurrence of terror and the effect of each of the dimensions of public opinion varies with the level of the other. We find a robust positive relationship between the share of the population in a country that at the same time justifies suicide bombings and have an unfavorable opinion of a regional power and the occurrence of terror originating from the former country. After a brief description of the data, we provide an overview of the justification rates of suicide terrorism and opinions on nine regional powers in 16 countries of the Middle East, Africa and Asia. We examine the relationship between the above two dimensions of public opinion and the effect of these dimensions on the occurrence of terror originating from the 16 countries and targeted against the nine regional powers. We conclude with interpretations of our results and implications for policy and for further research.

2. Data

We use data on public opinion from the PEW Global Attitudes Project, specifically the survey issued in June 2007 – Pew Global Attitudes Project: Spring 2007 Survey – concerning 16 countries in the Middle East, Africa and Asia with large Muslim populations. The PEW surveys are among the most useful databases for the study of public opinion and political violence or terrorism, because some of the surveys include a large set of countries and the same survey questions are sometimes repeated over time (unfortunately not always and not always in the same countries). The PEW public opinion surveys are nationally representative.¹ In the 2007 survey, only in Pakistan were the samples chosen urban. In most countries,² face-to-face interviews were conducted in local languages and most of the surveyed population consisted of adults (above 18). Among the survey questions relevant for the study of terrorism, we selected two that tap into different aspects of public opinion: first, attitudes towards powers that may be seen as affecting the fate of a country and the whole region, and, second, attitudes towards suicide terror.

2.1. Dimensions of public opinion

The first dimension of public opinion is represented by the following question:

Please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable or very unfavorable opinion of: (country)?

The countries (or groups of countries) about which this question was asked were: China, Egypt,³ the European Union, India, Iran, Japan, Russia, Saudi Arabia and the United States. We refer to these as countries Y. We construct a variable “Opinion”, which is the percentage of people in a country that have a somewhat unfavorable and very favorable opinion of country Y.

The exact phrasing of the second question is:

Some people think that suicide bombing and other forms of violence against civilian targets are justified in order to defend Islam from its enemies. Other people believe that, no matter what the reason, this kind of violence is never justified. Do you personally feel that this kind of violence is often justified to defend Islam, sometimes justified, rarely justified, or never justified?

This question can be considered problematic as it conflates terrorism and suicide terrorism.⁴ Yet, it reflects approval/disapproval of the use of extreme forms of violence and terrorist means and has been utilized in research to study support for terrorism (Fair and Shepherd, 2006). For the purpose of our analysis, we include all the countries where this particular question was asked, namely Bangladesh, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kuwait, Malaysia, Morocco, Senegal, Tanzania, Mali, Jordan, Lebanon, Indonesia, Turkey, Pakistan, Palestine and Nigeria. We refer to these countries as countries X. The possible answers to the question were: often justified, sometimes justified, rarely justified and never justified. We construct a variable “justification rate” by combining the answers “often justified” and “sometimes justified” and use these answers to construct the rate that represents the percentage of the population that justifies suicide terror.⁵

2.2. Dependent variable

We measure terrorism through the number of international terrorist incidents that occurred from 2004 to 2008 as collected by the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC). In the NCTC Worldwide Incidents Tracking System (WITS), a terrorist incident is defined as

¹ The sample sizes were as follows: Kuwait 500; Malaysia 700; Mali and Senegal 700; Tanzania 704; Ethiopia 710; Palestine Territories 808; Turkey 971; Bangladesh, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco 1000; Indonesia 1008; Nigeria 1128 and Pakistan 2008.

² Except in Kuwait where face-to-face interviews were combined with interviews via telephone.

³ We excluded the Egypt–Egypt pair, since we focus only on international terrorism incidents.

⁴ For a discussion on this question, see Fair and Shepherd (2006).

⁵ The data were provided with the weights so the adjustments were done for the missing responses and the answers are weighted and represent a part of the total 100%.

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