

## Terrorism: does public opinion matter?

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In October 2001, in the wake of the September 11 attacks, the American public's confidence in their government's ability to fight terrorism was undoubtedly at its lowest point. Yet the latest Gallup poll (October, 2011) shows that, aside from some fluctuations, public opinion has not changed after ten years of an intense 'war on terror'. Less than half of Americans think their country is winning the war on terrorism, while another 42% believe neither side is winning. Academic researchers, too, have tried to understand the apparent ineffectiveness of counter-terrorist policy. Many argue that the lack of appropriate data and interdisciplinary cooperation are to blame.

With the immediate need to gain insight into terrorist activity, researchers have relied on the tried-and-tested research on crime. In 1968 Gary Becker devised a theoretical model showing that people will engage in criminal activity as long as its opportunity cost is lower than its reward. Becker's findings were confirmed empirically many times over, earning him the Nobel Prize, and guiding law enforcement policy ever since. The cost of criminal activity is the risk of getting caught and being incarcerated for some period of time. The cost increases with education, income, and wealth – that is, the quality of life that is given up if convicted. The more educated and the better someone's economic prospects are, therefore, the

less likely they are to break the law. The same axioms were assumed to apply to the choice to engage in terrorist activity. Those with limited education, no family, and no outlook were profiled as the most likely potential terrorists. The suggestion for policy was also clear: increase opportunities for education and a prosperous life, and you will have less terrorist material.

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As more personal data on terrorists were made available, however, it became clear that the analogy with crime was hasty. Empirical results from 2003 showed there to be only a tenuous relationship between economic factors and the decision to engage in terrorism. It was the work of Alan Krueger (recently appointed Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers) and Jitka Malečková (CERGE-EI), who compared the personal data of confirmed terrorists in Palestine to the rest of the Palestinian population, which led to more follow-up studies. Some of these, in fact, found that the probability to become a terrorist increased

with the level of education and openly challenged the wisdom of fighting terrorism with higher education and poverty reduction.

While it is arguable whether rational thinking applies to individuals who choose to become terrorists, there is a stronger case that terrorist organizations which are rational, calculating, and strive to be efficient, can be analyzed using tools from economics. Economists Benmelech (Princeton) and Berrebi (Harvard) show how a simple model on how firms allocate human capital can explain who these organizations pick for the critical task of carrying out a suicide bombing. The more mature, educated members were picked to carry out attacks on the most important targets, which indicates they were seen as more likely to have the skill and fortitude to be successful. This may explain why these confirmed terrorists have more valuable labor market skills than does the average population – they are selected from a larger group of volunteers who otherwise fit the more conventional profile of being poor and uneducated. However, with no way to observe these other undisclosed volunteers, it is impossible to say whether this selection really takes place, or whether terrorists really are more educated on average throughout the organization.

Another avenue of research has been to look at public opinion polls as a way

**Table 1: Lowest, Highest and Average Unfavorable Opinion over Pairs of Countries**

Sample percentage of unfavorable opinion towards regional leading countries. The least unfavorable, the most unfavorable and average per source country.

Bangladesh/India	low	0.06	Mali/China	low	0.07
Bangladesh/US	high	0.41	Mali/Iran	high	0.42
Average		0.22	Average		0.21
Egypt /Saudi Arabia	low	0.08	Morocco /Saudi Arabia	low	0.15
Egypt/US	high	0.78	Morocco /US	high	0.56
Average		0.43	Average		0.26
Ethiopia/Japan	low	0.08	Nigeria/Japan	low	0.16
Ethiopia/Iran	high	0.59	Nigeria/Iran	high	0.47
Average		0.26	Average		0.26
Indonesia/Saudi Arabia	low	0.08	Pakistan/Saudi Arabia	low	0.02
Indonesia/US	high	0.66	Pakistan/US	high	0.68
Average		0.25	Average		0.24
Jordan/Saudi Arabia	low	0.10	Senegal/Japan	low	0.09
Jordan/US	high	0.78	Senegal/Iran	high	0.43
Average		0.46	Average		0.23
Kuwait/Japan	low	0.14	Tanzania/Japan	low	0.08
Kuwait/US	high	0.46	Tanzania/Iran	high	0.56
Average		0.27	Average		0.25
Lebanon/Saudi Arabia	low	0.17	Turkey/Egypt	low	0.37
Lebanon/Iran	high	0.64	Turkey/US	high	0.83
Average		0.43	Average		0.52
Malaysia/Japan	low	0.10	Palestine/Saudi Arabia	low	0.33
Malaysia/US	high	0.69	Palestine/US	high	0.86
Average		0.25	Average		0.5

to gauge society’s stance on terrorism. This has allowed researchers to include factors that are otherwise impossible to measure, like the approval rating of foreign leaders and justification of terrorist activity. Krueger and Malečková first introduced this approach in their Science paper of 2009, where they show that public disapproval of a foreign country’s leaders is strongly correlated with terrorist attacks against that country. Their results suggest that behind educated suicide bombers stands a mass of people who have grievances towards the target country. My research with Jitka Malečková expands upon these results by being more explicit in the classification of public opinion, namely by splitting off unfavorable opinion of a foreign country from justification of terrorist methods in general. Unsurprisingly, we find that the occurrence of

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In particular, we use data on public opinion from the PEW Global

Attitudes Project: Spring 2007 Survey concerning 16 countries (Bangladesh, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kuwait, Malaysia, Morocco, Senegal, Tanzania, Mali, Jordan, Lebanon, Indonesia, Turkey, Pakistan, Palestine and Nigeria). Using the answers to two questions from the survey we identify public support for terrorism among the population in these 16 countries:

*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?*

The second question is:

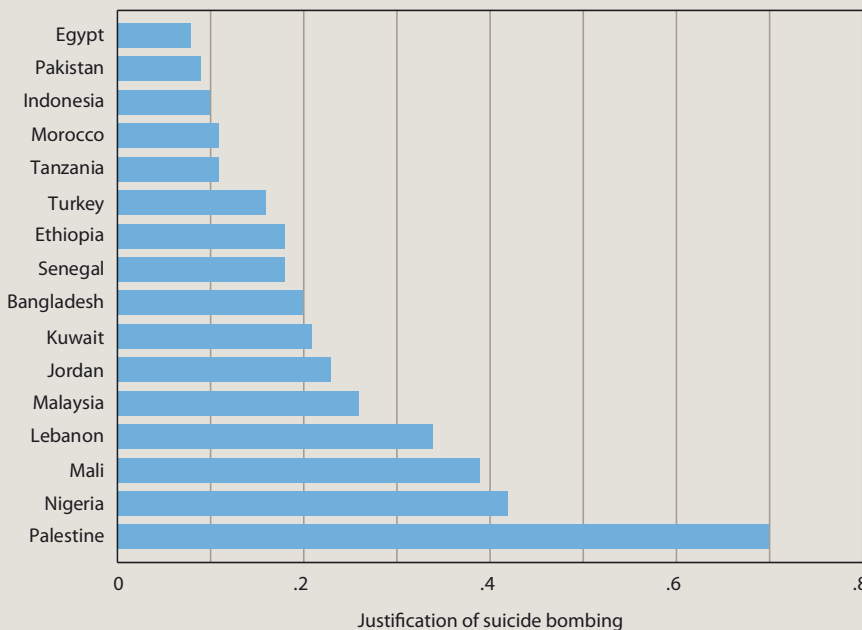
*Please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable or very unfavorable opinion of: (country)?*

The countries (or groups of countries) about which the second question was asked were: China, Egypt<sup>1</sup>, the European Union, India, Iran, Japan, Russia, Saudi Arabia and the United States. Using the survey we refer to the 16 countries as the source countries of terrorism, while as targets we include those countries about which the second question was asked.

Table 1 shows that Palestinians hold the most unfavorable views of the U.S. (0.86), while the most favorable views on the U.S. are expressed in Mali (0.18). Interestingly, the most negative views of the Russian Federation (0.64), China (0.53) and Saudi Arabia (0.39) are held by the Turks, who also have the highest average of unfavorable views on the nine countries (0.52). Palestinians follow with the average of 0.5; they express the most unfavorable views of

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

**Figure 1: Justification Across Source Countries**



the U.S. among the 16 countries (reaching 0.86) and, among the nine regional powers, hold the most favorable opinion of Saudi Arabia (0.33). The following group of high unfavorable averages includes Jordan (0.46), Lebanon (0.43) and Egypt (0.43).

The justification of suicide terrorism presents a more intriguing variation. Across the 16 countries we find that, on average, 23% of the surveyed population justifies suicide bombing. The percentage of those who say that suicide terrorism is often or sometimes justified was, in 2007, highest in Palestine, followed by Nigeria and Mali. The percentage was lowest in Egypt, followed by Pakistan and Indonesia.

In the following step we estimate the effect of these two dimensions of public opinion on the occurrence of terrorism, which we measure by the number of international terrorist incidents that occurred between 2004 and 2008 as collected by the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC). We control for

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both measures of public opinion at the same time and then introduce an interaction term between the two variables in order to explore whether the effect of justification of suicide bombing on the occurrence of terrorism varies with the level of opinion and vice versa. We find that increasing the justification of suicide bombing by one standard deviation at the lowest level of unfavorable opinion increases the number of attacks by 28.51 percent; and increasing the justification of suicide bombing by

one standard deviation at the highest level of unfavorable opinion in a source country of terrorism towards a target increases the number of attacks by 266 percent. Our analysis suggests that, for the occurrence of terrorism, both dimensions of public opinion need to be present, but a high justification rate of suicide bombing in a source country will not result in a high number of attacks originating from that country if the rate of unfavorable opinions towards the target country is low.

Our research confirms the relevance of public opinion for terrorism. It also suggests that public opinion should be explored separately across its different dimensions. We focused on opinions towards regional powers and justification of suicide terrorism. In the context of other research on Anti-Americanism, it would be useful to explore the relationship between further dimensions of public opinion, such as attitudes towards values (democracy) and attitudes toward more specific expressions of foreign policy (e.g. in the Middle East), and their effect on the occurrence of terrorism.

These results are important because they suggest specific areas for counterterrorism policy to address. Greater efforts could be made to present a better image of the country or to provide alternative channels for expressing resentment to sap support for terrorist organizations. The challenge for future research is greater. We need to understand how these attitudes translate into actual participation in terrorist activity. Do these groups provide funds and material support for terrorist organizations? Are they the ultimate pool of potential recruits? There is more to find out, but public opinion research is a major step in the right direction by revealing patterns in behavior that tell us a lot. ■

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