

# Peter Nolan

"The emotional urges which are inescapable, and are perhaps even necessary to political action, should be able to exist side by side with an acceptance of reality." George Orwell, Notes on Nationalism

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March 01, 2007

## Booms of a different sort

Rational choice analysis in political science at its finest. Harvard economist Efraim Benmelech and Claude Berrebi of RAND argue in [an new NBER paper](#) that:

This paper provides the first detailed analysis of the relationship between suicide bombers characteristics and their performance in suicide bombing attacks. We find evidence that Palestinian terror organizations match older and more educated suicide bombers to more important Israeli targets.

We also find that older and more educated suicide bombers kill more people in their suicide attacks when assigned to important targets. Furthermore, we also find that older and educated suicide bombers are less likely to fail or to be caught when they attack. Our evidence suggests that, as predicted by economic theory, suicide bombers plausibly maximize an expected payoff from their attacks. The evidence confirms the prediction that older and more educated suicide bombers are more effective when assigned to more important targets, and that older and educated suicide bombers are more likely to launch successful attacks without being caught.

Our paper also contributes to the debate on the relation between education, poverty and terrorism. We revise the existing estimate of the proportion of suicide bombers who either have an academic degree or are enrolled as students in academic institutions. While our estimate is still significantly higher than the average educational attainment in the Palestinian society it is lower than previous estimates of educational attainment of suicide bombers. We argue that sample selection may bias the estimates of education among suicide bombers since less

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educated bombers are significantly more likely to fail in their mission.

I'll be interested to read the NBER studies by Berman et al. that he cites. My belief so far has been that Robert Pape's evidence is weaker than his conclusions in respect of the Palestinian attacks on Israel. Still, if we generally expect the more intelligent to be more altruistic than the general population, then Pape's thesis is supported by this study.

Berman has argued [in a 2003 paper](#) that the organisational economics of the terrorist group itself explains much of the escalation of violence, with the dynamics of maintaining trust within the group demanding ever greater commitments, escalating ultimately to suicide-bombing. Interesting.

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