



■ MONDAY, JULY 14, 2008

Deterring Suicide Bombers

by Brandon Fuller

So far this year, Israel has suffered two attacks at the hands of Palestinian men who resided in East Jerusalem. In the wake of the attacks, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert renewed a legislative proposal aimed at deterring would-be terrorists by punishing the families of the attackers. Punishment



would include home destruction and cancelled access to Israeli social insurance programs. Eric Westervelt's *NPR* [story](#) offers more on the proposed law.


For the moment, let's leave aside the major issue of whether it is moral to punish people for murders committed by a dead relative. The objective of the law is clear: to provide a disincentive to suicide attacks by punishing the perpetrator's surviving family members. Should the law pass, suicide bombers would forgo not only their own lives but also, potentially, the welfare of their families. By raising the opportunity cost of a suicide attack, the supporters of the law hope to reduce the number of attacks. Recent research on the economic roots of terrorism can help us think about whether the policy will achieve its intended consequences.

In a 2003 research paper, Alan Krueger and Jitka Maleckova found that participation in terrorism is unrelated, and possibly even positively related, to a person's income and education. As Daniel Lerner pointed out in a study of Middle East extremism in the 1950s, would-be terrorists are not so much have-nots as they are want-mores. In a more recent [article](#) in *The American*, Krueger cites Claude Berrebi's research on the characteristics of Palestinian terrorists from the West Bank and Gaza Strip:

"[Berrebi] compared suicide bombers to the whole male population aged 16 to 50 and found that the suicide bombers were less than half as likely to come from families that were below the poverty line. In addition, almost 60 percent of the suicide bombers had more than a high school education, compared with less than 15 percent of the general population."

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Apparently, better-educated terrorists are more likely to be committed to their organization's goals and also more likely to have the financial means to participate actively. After all, a person needs some level of income security to have pursuits beyond basic subsistence.

Krueger and Maleckova also cite some anecdotal evidence suggesting that terrorist groups attempt to recruit somewhat educated suicide bombers. Nasra Hassan, a UN relief worker, interviewed 250 Palestinians militants and their associates between 1996 and 1999:

"A planner for Islamic Jihad explained to Ms. Hassan that his group scrutinizes the motives of a potential bomber to be sure that the individual is committed to carrying out the task. Apparently, the groups generally reject for suicide bombing missions 'those who are under eighteen, who are the sole wage earners in their families, or who are married and have family responsibilities.'"

The evidence presented by Krueger and Maleckova casts doubt on the effectiveness of the Israeli Prime Minister's proposal. The threat to families isn't much of a threat to a terrorist *with* minimal or zero family responsibilities. The law may not present much of a threat to terrorists with families either. If the suicide bombers tend to be a bit more educated and financially stable than their peers, they will probably develop a contingency plan that softens the punitive blow to their families. Similarly, terror groups may alter their tactics in response to the law, perhaps offering some sort of compensation to the families of suicide bombers as a recruitment incentive.

Discussion Questions

1. Economic analysis allows us to answer "what if?" questions, such as "**What** would happen to the number of suicide attacks **if** the Israeli government punished the families of suicide bombers?" Economics is not so great for dealing with "what should?" questions; but as citizens, we still have to tackle them. **What should** the Israeli legislature do about Olmert's calls to punish the families of suicide bombers?
2. In Krueger's article from *The American*, he suggests using "demand-side" policies to reduce the number of terrorist attacks. In the "market" for terrorists, the demanders are terrorist groups hoping to employ the services of suicide bombers. According to Krueger, what types of policies might suppress the demand for terrorists? Can you think of ways for Israel and its allies, like the United States, to go about attacking the financial resources of terror groups?
3. Krueger points out that we're unlikely to find many would-be terrorists among the illiterate and destitute. What does he say about the notion that "the elite become terrorists because they are outraged by the economic conditions of their countrymen?"

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