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An Israeli army bulldozer demolishes a Palestinian house that was built without municipality permission in the Jerusalem Arab neighborhood of Isawiyya.



FOREIGN POLICY

Punitive Demolitions Work

Debates rage over the Israeli policy of demolishing the houses of suicide bombers, with critics saying the policy punishes innocent relatives. But three economists asked a more pragmatic question: Do demolitions work?

The short answer: yes, so long as they are retribution for specific terrorist acts. The scholars used data from the human-rights group B'Tselem and distinguished between punitive demolitions (linked to specific terrorist attacks) and preventative demolitions (undertaken largely to create "no-go" zones from which mortar attacks could not be launched).

Once the researchers took into account factors such as the demographics and pre-existing levels of violence in the regions in which punitive demolition took place, they found the demolitions were linked to large, significant decreases in subsequent suicide bombings. Each house destroyed reduced suicide bombings from that region by 5% (though the effect was short-lived: it lasted about a month).

In contrast, preventative house demolitions seemed to inspire violence. Each additional house destroyed increased the likelihood of a future attack by 6%, leading the authors to conclude that only "discriminate" violence is effective.

"Counter-Suicide-Terrorism: Evidence from House Demolitions," Efraim Benmelech, Claude Berrebi, Esteban Klor, National Bureau of Economic Research working paper (October 2010)



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