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1 August 2014 | **Conflict, Intelligence, Terrorism**

Is Terrorism an Effective Tool for Obtaining Territorial Concessions?

By Esteban F. Klor



Image: Menendj/Wikimedia

This article was [originally published](#) by [SIPRI](#) on 7 July 2014. This blog post is published as part of a collaborative partnership between SIPRI and [Economists for Peace and Security](#) (EPS).

Terrorism is an important but complex issue that affects many countries. While we have a good understanding of the determinants behind terror campaigns, very little attention has been paid to the question of whether terrorism is an effective strategy for coercing the targeted country to grant political and territorial concessions. The lack of research is surprising, given that the answer to this question is critical to understanding why terror exists at all, and why it appears to be increasing in many parts of the world.

Opposing Views

The related literature presents two opposing views on this issue. The first claims that terrorism is rising around the world simply because it works. This line of research argues that terror campaigns targeting Western democracies tend to achieve significant policy changes. Western electorates are the main channel behind this effect because they are typically highly sensitive to civilian casualties from terrorist acts. This then induces their leaders to grant concessions to terrorist factions. The second view argues not only that there is very little evidence showing that terrorism is effective, but that in fact democracies are less likely to be the target of terror activities than autocratic regimes, and that democracies are less likely to make territorial or ideological concessions.

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One of the main drawbacks of both approaches is that they tend to focus on a small sample of countries and make assessments about the success of terror campaigns against them. However, comparisons across countries are problematic for a number of reasons. First, it is difficult to control for all the factors that may be correlated with the levels of terrorism, political stability freedom in an individual country. All of these factors are most likely to be endogenously determined, and jointly influenced by geography, colonial history, ethnic composition and religious affiliation.

Second, terrorist groups may be emerging endogenously in certain countries according to the success rate of other strategies, and according to the expected success rate of terrorist strategies. In addition, one cannot ignore the fact that most of the countries that suffer high levels of terror are geographic neighbours, and share similar characteristics in terms of long-standing border conflicts intermixed with ethnic and religious tensions. Controlling for these factors is difficult in a cross-section of countries, making it problematic to infer causality from the existing evidence. Third, it is often difficult to assess whether terror is effective when the goals of the terrorists are not even clear.

Evidence From the Israeli Electorate Using Micro-Level Data

Three studies in which I have been involved—two joint studies by Claude Berrebi and myself (links [here](#) and [here](#)), and one [study](#) by myself and Eric Gould—overcome most of these methodological difficulties by focusing exclusively on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, by analysing large samples of micro data, and by exploiting variation in a large number of terror attacks over time and across locations in Israel in the period 1988–2006.

The two studies by Berrebi and myself used data on actual voting patterns at the local level to show that local attacks turned voters towards right-wing parties. In particular, our 2008 findings indicate that the occurrence of a terror attack in a given locality within three months of elections causes an increase of 1.35 percentage points in that locality's support for the right-wing bloc of political parties. This effect is of a significant political magnitude due to the high level of terrorism in Israel and the fact that its electorate is closely split between the right and left blocs.

Moreover, a terror fatality has important electoral effects beyond the locality where the attack is perpetrated, and its electoral impact is stronger the closer to the elections it occurs. These results not only provide strong empirical support for the hypothesis that the electorate shows a highly sensitive reaction to terrorism, but also suggest that terror campaigns have a tendency to backfire because they increase electoral support for hawkish parties.

Gould and myself (2010) focus on surveys of Israeli voters to adopt a more comprehensive view of their political attitudes. We look at individual voting patterns and also examine whether local terror attacks cause Israeli citizens to become more willing to grant territorial concessions to the Palestinians. In addition, we examine whether terror attacks cause Israelis to change their preferences over political parties, as well as attitudes towards establishing a Palestinian state, and whether or not Israeli voters define themselves as being 'right-wing'. Our results indicate that terror attacks have pushed Israelis to the left in terms of their political opinions by making them more likely to support the granting of concessions to the Palestinians. Therefore, this paper is the first comprehensive analysis showing that terrorism can in fact be described as an 'effective' strategy.

Contradictory Conclusions

The three articles combined suggest two apparently contradictory conclusions. First, that terrorism is causing Israelis to increasingly vote for right-wing parties. Second, at the same time, Israeli voters are turning left in their political views. The difference in the pattern of results can be reconciled by the idea that the platforms of the Israeli political parties are changing over time.

For example, the platform of the right-wing Likud party during the 1988 elections stated that 'the State of Israel has the right to sovereignty in Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip', and that 'there will be no territorial division, no Palestinian state, foreign sovereignty, or foreign self-determination (in the land of Israel)'. This stands in stark contrast to the Likud's platform before the 2009 elections, which stated that 'The Likud is prepared to make (territorial) concessions in exchange for a true and reliable peace agreement'. Arguably, the Likud's position in 2009 is to the left of the left-wing Labor party's platform in 1988.

The research project detailed in the three papers shows that terror attacks by Palestinian

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factions have moved the Israeli electorate towards a more accommodating stance regarding the political objectives of the Palestinians. At the same time, terrorism induces Israelis to vote increasingly for right-wing parties, as the right-wing parties (and particular demographic groups which tend to be right-wing in their views) are shifting to the left in response to terror. Hence, we show that terrorism leads to the granting of territorial concessions not only because of the possibility of fostering international pressure, but also because it creates domestic political pressure within the targeted electorate.

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