Why Terrorists Overestimate the Odds of Victory

by Max Abrahms and Karolina Lula

History is the best teacher, but its lessons are not on the surface.

Kenneth Thompson (1960) [1]

Abstract

Terrorism is puzzling behavior for political scientists. On one hand, terrorist attacks generally hail from the politically aggrieved. On the other hand, a growing body of scholarship finds the tactic politically counterproductive. Unlike guerrilla attacks on military targets, terrorist attacks on civilian targets lower the odds of governments making concessions. This article proposes and tests a psychological theory to account for why militant groups engage in terrorism, given the political costs of attacking civilians.

Introduction

Terrorism is puzzling behavior to scholars. On one hand, social scientists generally assume that terrorists are rational political actors.[2] On the other hand, recent empirical research demonstrates that terrorism is a losing political tactic. Not only do terrorists seldom if ever achieve their political platforms via terrorism, but their attacks on civilians tend to dissuade governments from granting concessions.[3] Why, then, do terrorists engage in this counterproductive tactic?

Surprisingly little research has attempted to resolve this puzzle since Humphreys and Weinstein first identified it.[4] To square the circle, several scholars hypothesize that terrorists are irrational actors.[5] Other research contends that terrorists tend to be motivated by an alternative, apolitical incentive structure.[6] These claims are problematic because many studies indicate that aggrieved groups select tactics to promote their political agendas.[7] In this article, we propose and test an alternative explanation—that terrorists are motivated by political aims, but systematically overestimate the odds of achieving them for an essentially rational reason. Below, we develop this psychological explanation to account for the use of terrorism in light of its political costs.

Our argument proceeds in four main sections. In the first, we present the theoretical puzzle that terrorists are rational political actors who target civilians notwithstanding the negative political return. This section shows that whereas guerrilla campaigns against military targets often coerce government compliance, terrorist campaigns against civilian targets are a political failure. In the second section, we propose a psychological theory to explain why aggrieved groups engage in terrorist campaigns despite their abysmal political record. Because terrorist attacks have historically hailed from militant groups, any theory on terrorism must begin with the leadership.

[8] Our principal argument is that terrorist leaders overestimate the political effectiveness of terrorist campaigns because they draw false analogies from successful guerrilla campaigns, which are indeed comparatively profitable. In the third section, we present an eclectic mix of empirical evidence in support of the theory. The fourth section concludes by exploring the counterterrorism implications.

The Puzzle of Terrorism

A common assumption among social scientists is that terrorists are rational actors.[9] Demographic research on terrorists is confirming. In his studies of failed suicide bombers, for instance, Ariel Merari finds that they do not disproportionately suffer from psychopathology or any other known personality disorder.[10] Anat Berko, a criminologist in the Israel Defense Forces who interviewed dozens of failed Palestinian suicide terrorists, likewise finds that they seldom have "an emotional disturbance that prevents them from differentiating between reality and imagination."[11] In his analysis of Salafi terrorists, Scott Atran affirms that they do not tend to exhibit any conspicuous cognitive infirmities.[12] Similarly, Marc Sageman reports a lack of mental disorders in his sample of Al-Qaeda affiliated terrorists.[13] In a précis on the mental health of terrorists, Jeff Victoroff observes that they appear cognitively normal.[14] Martha Crenshaw was an early proponent of this view, maintaining that "The outstanding common characteristic of terrorists is their normality."[15] Louise Richardson agrees that "The one shared characteristic of terrorists is their normalcy."[16] So, too, does RAND: "We should not expect terrorists to be disproportionly insane."[17] In a review, Roxanne Euben concludes that those familiar with the psychological research on terrorists "will appreciate how handily they dispense with the remarkably resilient claim that they and those who recruit them are insane, irrational, brainwashed, or otherwise unable to fathom the nature of what they do."[18] In sum, psychological assessments of terrorists indicate they are cognitively normal outside their use of terrorist tactics. Furthermore, the leaders of terrorist organizations are presumably even more likely than other members of the group to behave in a rational manner.[19]

The puzzle of terrorism is that despite the presumed rationality of the perpetrators, this mode of violence does not seem to advance their given political cause. For decades, terrorism specialists have noted that terrorists are political losers. In the 1970s, Walter Laqueur published a article entitled "The Futility of Terrorism" in which he claimed that terrorist groups do not attain their political platforms.[20] In the 1980s, Martha Crenshaw likewise observed that terrorists do not obtain their given political ends, and "Therefore one must conclude that terrorism is objectively a failure."[21] Similarly, a RAND study noted that "Terrorists have been unable to translate the consequences of terrorism into concrete political gains…[I]n that sense terrorism has failed. It is a fundamental failure."[22] In the 1990s, Thomas Schelling proclaimed that "Terrorism almost never appears to accomplish anything politically significant."[23] Viginia Held went even further, claiming that the "net effect" of terrorism may actually be counterproductive.[24]

Admittedly, a universally accepted definition of terrorism eludes resolution.[25] A common distinction though is between non-state attacks on civilian targets versus military ones. Whereas the former are generally labeled as terrorist attacks, the latter are often labeled as insurgent, guerrilla, or militant attacks.[26] Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, a series of large-*n*

observational studies has shown that non-state attacks on civilian targets in particular actually inhibit government compliance. In this sense, terrorism is politically counterproductive,

In 2006, Max Abrahms published in *International Security* an article entitled "Why Terrorism Does Not Work," the first large-*n* study on terrorism's political effectiveness.[27] To test the effectiveness of terrorism, he analyzed the political plights of twenty-eight Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs), as designated by the U.S. State Department. The analysis yields two main findings. First, the FTO success rate is far lower than other scholars had asserted. Robert Pape, for instance, states that terrorists achieve their strategic demands over fifty percent of the time, whereas Abrahms shows that only ten percent prevailed politically.[28] In fact, the vast majority of FTOs have perpetrated terrorism for decades without any real signs of political progress. Second, the successful FTOs used terrorism only as a secondary tactic. Although non-state actors are known to employ a hybrid of asymmetric tactics, all of the politically successful FTOs directed their violence against military targets, not civilian ones. By disaggregating the FTOs by target selection, Abrahms therefore revealed the full extent to which terrorism—defined as non-state attacks on civilian targets—has historically been a losing political tactic.

Seth Jones and Martin Libicki subsequently examined a larger sample, the universe of known terrorist groups between 1968 and 2006. Of the 648 groups identified in the RAND-MIPT Terrorism Incident database, only 4 percent obtained their strategic demands.[29] More recently, Audrey Cronin has reexamined the success rate of these groups, confirming that less than 5 percent prevailed.[30] These low figures actually exceed the coercion rate, as terrorists may accomplish their demands for reasons other than civilian casualties. In fact, all of the studies conclude that terrorism does not encourage concessions. In his 2006 study, Abrahms contends that terrorism's poor success rate is inherent to the targeting of civilians. Jones and Libicki claim that in the few cases in which terrorist groups have triumphed, civilian pain "had little or nothing to do with the outcome."[31] And Cronin finds that the victorious have achieved their demands "despite the use of violence against innocent civilians [rather] than because of it," and that "The tactic of terrorism might have even been counterproductive."[32] Hard case studies have inspected the limited historical examples of clear-cut terrorist victories, determining that these salient events were idiosyncratic, unrelated to the harming of civilians, or both.[33]

Other recent studies provide even stronger empirical evidence that terrorism is not epiphenomenal to political failure. In a recent statistical article in *Comparative Political Studies*, Abrahms exploits variation in the target selection of 125 violent non-state campaigns. The analysis demonstrates that campaigns against civilian targets are significantly less effective than campaigns against military targets at inducing government concessions, even after controlling for a host of tactical confounds, including the capability of the target country, that of the perpetrators, and the nature of their demands.[34] In another new statistical study, Page Fortna finds that rebel groups in civil wars significantly lower the odds of achieving their demands by attacking the population with terrorism—again, after controlling for a host of methodologically complex selection issues.[35]

Studies on public opinion reach the same conclusion. Without exception, these show that terrorism does not intimidate citizens of target countries into supporting more dovish politicians. On the contrary, terrorism systematically raises popular support for right-wing leaders opposed

to appeasement. In a couple of articles, Claude Berrebi and Esteban Klor demonstrate that terrorist fatalities within Israel significantly boost local support for right-bloc parties opposed to accommodation, such as the Likud.[36] Other quantitative work reveals that the most lethal terrorist incidents in Israel are also the most likely to induce this rightward electoral shift. The authors conclude that heightening the pain to civilians tends to "backfire on the goals of terrorist factions by hardening the stance of the targeted population."[37] These trends are not specific to Israel, but the international norm. Christophe Chowanietz analyzes variation in public opinion within France, Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States from 1990 to 2006. In each target country, terrorist attacks have shifted the electorate to the political right in proportion to their lethality.[38] In a summary of the literature, a RAND study noted: "Terrorist fatalities, with few exceptions, increase support for the bloc of parties associated with a more-intransigent position. Scholars may interpret this as further evidence that terrorist attacks against civilians do not help terrorist organizations achieve their stated goals (e.g., Abrahms 2006)."[39] In sum, terrorism presents a puzzle for social scientists: its practitioners are presumably rational, but their modus operandi is manifestly counterproductive. In the next section, we propose a theory to explain these counterintuitive axioms.

The False Promise of Terrorist Campaigns

Terrorist and guerrilla campaigns are not the exact same class of violence.[40] Increasingly, social scientists are distinguishing between terrorist campaigns, which are directed mainly against civilian targets, and guerrilla campaigns, which are directed mainly against military targets.[41] This distinction in target selection is crucial for predicting the strategic outcome of political violence. Whereas terrorist campaigns have an abysmal political track record, guerrilla campaigns are responsible for highly salient asymmetric victories, such as Hezbollah's successful coercion of U.S. and French forces from Southern Lebanon in the 1980s. The variable political success rates of terrorist and guerrilla campaigns beg the question of whether leaders of aggrieved groups confound them—specifically, whether they overrate the odds of terrorist campaigns succeeding by drawing false analogies from guerrilla campaign victories.

On the surface, this explanation may seem to violate the accepted wisdom that terrorists are rational actors. But this objection would be mistaken for a couple reasons. First, psychological and rational explanations are not necessarily mutually exclusive.[42] Dan Reiter elaborates:

> If one conceives of rational choice as maximizing utility given certain choices and information, then information-gathering strategies ought not be viewed as either rational or non-rational but rather as pre-rational. The fundamental tenet of classical rationality is that given certain information, preferences, and choices, a decision maker will act to maximize her utility. Rationality provides no guidance in determining what information is relevant, however, just as it does not determine what an actor's preferences ought to be—both are what might be called 'pre-rational' assumptions. Therefore, it is inappropriate to deem as rational or irrational a particular information search or belief update strategy. Of course, in hindsight, we can judge some decisions as better than others, but this is not the same as judging some decisions as rational and some as irrational.[43]

Second, the research consensus is not that terrorists update their actions in Bayesian fashion—only that they are no less irrational than non-terrorists. As Loren Lomasky observes, social scientists ascribe to terrorists "no lesser rationality than that which social analysts routinely ascribe to other actors…"[44] A relevant question, then, is whether non-terrorists also confuse terrorist and guerrilla campaigns. Indeed, Paul Wilkinson noted that "Guerrilla warfare is often confused with terrorism" and that "It is an elementary but common mistake…to equate terrorism with guerrilla war."[45] Even political scientists confound guerrilla campaigns and terrorist campaigns, leading to overestimations of their political value. When political scientists claim that terrorist campaigns are a winning method of coercion, their supporting examples are nearly always of non-state campaigns against military targets, not civilian ones.[46] In sum, the proposed psychological explanation is not only compatible with our understanding of essentially rational terrorist actors, but is also evident among non-terrorists whose rationality is rightly unquestioned.

In fact, analogical reasoning is a necessary, universal heuristic given our cognitive and information constraints.[47] Houghton details the cognitive process: "When a decision maker uses an analogy, he or she identifies a past situation (or analogical base), which seems particularly useful in understanding the nature of a present situation (or analogical target); the base is then 'mapped' onto the target."[48] The political psychology literature emphasizes that leaders often rely on historical analogies to inform their decision-making.[49] Political leaders adopt analogies to assess the effectiveness of various courses of action.[50] Within policy circles, for example, the received "lesson" from World War Two is that appeasement will ultimately fail to placate the aggressor. The so-called "lesson of Munich" was repeatedly invoked by Harry Truman in Korea, Anthony Eden in the Suez, John Kennedy in the Cuban Missile Crisis, Lyndon Johnson in Vietnam, and George H.W. Bush in the first Persian Gulf War.[51]

Although historical analogies can help to simplify decision-making in a complex world, they frequently lead to sub-optimal decision-making.[52] Khong observes: "A recurrent tendency of policymakers [is] to use analogies poorly" due to "neglect of potentially important differences between situations being compared."[53] Similarly, Jervis highlights how historical analogies tend to "obscure aspects of the present case that are different from the past one," as "the lessons learned will be applied to a wide variety of situations without a careful effort to determine whether the cases are similar on crucial dimensions."[54] Flawed analogical reasoning is so pervasive because analogies are generally chosen based on their salience rather than on their structural relevance.[55] Successful guerrilla campaigns are indeed highly salient, but do not offer reliable guidance on whether non-state attacks on civilians will prove equally effective.

The military diffusion literature strengthens the argument that leaders of aggrieved groups may adopt terrorist campaigns by drawing false inspiration from successful guerrilla campaigns. This literature stresses two relevant points. First, the diffusion of a military practice requires a "demonstration effect," that is, a tactic scoring a highly visible victory.[56] Examples include the prominent battlefield accomplishments of the Napoleonic and Prussian military systems, which revolutionized warfare in Europe until the twentieth century; the rapid defeat and fall of France at the hands of the Hitler's Blitzkrieg; and the lightning British raid on the Italian fleet at Taranto. All of these practices quickly became well-known throughout the Western world, sparking emulators.[57] Second, although demonstrably effective practices diffuse, they are rarely

perfectly replicated. In practice, most adopters are only selective emulators. In fact, it is not uncommon for the adopter to overlook the central reason for the supplier's military success.[58] In sum, the military diffusion literature underscores that international actors try to adopt demonstrably effective practices, but that they often get distorted, leading to sub-optimal political outcomes.

Terrorism is such an innovation. In the next section, we offer empirical evidence that leaders of aggrieved groups have in fact turned to terrorist campaigns to replicate the political successes of recently triumphant guerrilla campaigns. Although these asymmetric campaigns are indeed highly salient, such triumphs do not imply that non-state campaigns against civilians will likewise prevail.

Empirical Support

The advent of modern international terrorism occurred in July 1968, when members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine hijacked an *El Al* commercial flight en route from Rome to Israel. In the decade that followed, the number of terrorist groups in the world soared from ten to fifty-five, with a commensurate rise in terrorist incidents and fatalities.[59] As Paul Wilkinson has asked, "How did terrorism become a fashion which caught on all over the world?"[60] The answer seems to reside in the tectonic global events that immediately preceded it.

The pre-1968 period of the twentieth century witnessed the most politically successful spate of asymmetric campaigns in world history. National liberation movements in Africa, Asia and the Middle East achieved independence despite their military inferiority. The success of these non-state campaigns was due to the devastation wrought by the Second World War, normative changes in the international system, as well as to skillful military strategy. The leading strategists of the anti-colonial campaigns recognized the importance of engaging in selective violence against opposing forces rather than in indiscriminate violence against the population.[61] Abdullah Yusuf Azzam, Regis Debray, Vo Nguyen Giap, Che Guevara, Carlos Marighela, and other leading revolutionaries encouraged attacks on government targets, but warned their foot-soldiers that punishing the population would prove politically disastrous.[62] Guevara, for example, was adamant in his teachings to "Avoid useless acts of terrorism."[63] He stressed that the tactic is "generally ineffective and indiscriminate in its results, since it often makes victims of innocent people and destroys a large number of lives that would be valuable to the revolution."[64] In *Guerrilla Warfare*, his manual for asymmetric strategy, Che emphasized: "We sincerely believe that terrorism is of negative value, that it by no means produces the desired effects, that it can turn a people against a revolutionary movement."[65] In the *Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla*, Marighella likewise warns his foot-soldiers not to "attack indiscriminately without distinguishing between the exploiters and the exploited," but to instead direct the violence "against the government and foreign domination of the country."[66] This strategy was adhered to closely, as Laqueur notes: "Little or no terrorism erupted during World War II or its immediate aftermath, although there was a great deal of guerrilla warfare, which is something quite different."[67] Similarly, Wilkinson explains that terrorism was at most "an auxiliary tactic" in the anti-colonial campaigns.[68]

Ironically, however, these guerrilla successes had a profound impact on the rise of international terrorism. Martha Crenshaw, Bruce Hoffman, David Rapoport, and Paul Wilkinson note that the emergence of modern terrorism in the wake of these anti-colonial campaigns was not happenstance. New Left groups such as the Action Directe, Japanese Red Army, Red Army Faction, and Red Brigades sprang up throughout Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the United States, inspired by the political successes of the anti-colonial campaigns.[69] Wilkinson writes that these postcolonial terrorist groups and others emerged because they were:

> …greatly attracted to emulating the models and style of anti-colonial and Third World liberation struggles. For example, admiration for the Cuban Revolution is a recurrent theme in the polemics of Vallieres, Gagnon and other terrorist ideologues of the F.L.Q. And Provisional I.R.A. leaders look eagerly at the history of EOKA and F.L.N. terrorism, oblivious of the glaring dissimilarities between these and their own situations. Yet if terrorists believe they are fighting a classic-style national liberation war this structures their whole perception of their role in society and gives them an exalted sense of historical mission.[70]

In fact, the leaders of these nascent terrorist groups often said that history's "lesson" was apparent: aggrieved, militarily inferior people can evidently coerce major political concessions with asymmetric tactics.[71] Although these terrorist leaders believed their violent campaigns would prevail due to the favorable political outcomes of the anti-colonial campaigns, their tactics differed in a crucial respect: whereas the anti-colonial campaigns exerted pressure on the occupying powers by targeting their troops, the New Left groups sought coercive leverage by targeting civilians, which infuriated local governments and undermined popular support for political change, as the leaders of the anti-colonial campaigns had anticipated. In marked contrast to the guerrilla campaigns that immediately preceded them, these newly developed terrorist groups systematically failed.[72]

In Rapoport's periodization of terrorism, the "New Left Wave" is supplanted in the 1990s by what he calls the "Religious Wave," which persists today.[73] This wave of terrorism also emerged in the immediate aftermath of high-profile guerrilla campaign victories. In 1983, the Hezbollah attacks on the American and French forces in Lebanon coerced the multinational peacekeepers into withdrawing; in 1994, Somali attacks on American peacekeepers coerced their withdrawal; and in between, attacks on Soviet forces coerced their withdrawal from Afghanistan. Upon completing the mission in Afghanistan, most of these militants dispersed throughout the Levant, Maghreb, Persian Gulf, and Western Europe, forming the backbone of what became known as Al-Qaeda.[74]

Even more important than this worldwide diffusion of fighters was their newfound belief in themselves as potential agents of political change. To the Mujahideen, Afghanistan demonstrated that they could "crush the greatest empire known to mankind."[75] Bin Laden and his lieutenants reasoned, "If the Soviet Union can be destroyed, the United States can also be beheaded," and "so we are continuing this policy in America."[76] In fact, they boasted that terrorizing the United States into submission "would be easier, God willing, than the earlier defeat of the Soviet Union" because "the Americans are cowards," a "paper tiger" that "after a few blows ran in defeat," as in Lebanon and Somalia.[77]

Based on this analogical reasoning, bin Laden concluded that the September 11, 2001, attacks would achieve "victory over them [Americans] just as we did before."[78] As Omar Saghi points out, the Mujahideen underwent a "mental shift" after their trifecta of guerrilla successes by drawing an "analogy" between the front lines and their terrorist attacks on the United States.[79] Leading up to 9/11, bin Laden openly admitted, "We do not distinguish between those dressed in military uniform and civilians" because "Our enemy is every American male, whether he is directly fighting us or paying taxes."[80] The military leaders of Al-Qaeda and its affiliates taught group members the same tactics as the jihadists had acquired in the training camps of Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Somalia—only this time, to be used against American civilians.[81]

Empirically assessing the impact of analogical reasoning is methodologically complex, but not without scholarly precedent. In a seminal study on the Vietnam War, Khong employs content analysis to determine whether historical analogies informed U.S. policymakers on the relative effectiveness of various strategic options.[82] Below is a content analysis of the historical campaigns Osama bin Laden invoked from 1994 to 2004 to determine the probability of terrorist tactics coercing the United States into withdrawing from the Middle East. The focus is on bin Laden's statements for two reasons. First, he was the leader of one of the most important terrorist groups in world history. Second, the terrorist organization he led is categorized as a "religious" group, and this type of group has historically been the least successful in achieving political objectives.[83] If the analysis reveals that bin Laden relied largely on the successes of prior guerrilla campaigns to determine the prospects of his terrorist movement prevailing, such evidence would go a long way toward explaining the use of terrorism given its political inefficacy.

A potential limitation to this approach is that terrorist leaders have an interest in mobilizing constituents, so bin Laden may have publicly invoked successful guerrilla campaigns knowing that they are not actually analogous to attacking American civilians. Fairbank has claimed that history is a "grabbag (sic) from which each advocate pulls out a 'lesson'" to advance his agenda.[84] This is indeed a concern, but not a terminal one. Psychological research demonstrates that there is seldom a great distance between discourse and reasoning.[85] Furthermore, the public statements of terrorist leaders are thought to reflect their true thinking, and this has been said about bin Laden in particular.[86] Still, to sidestep the objection that his public statements are merely propaganda, we analyze his private statements as well.[87] The content analysed represents the universe of bin Laden's translated statements made in public and private between 1994 and 2004.[88] Collated by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, this self-contained compilation of 98 interviews, correspondences, and fatwas are believed by counterterrorism officials to provide reliable insight into Al-Qaeda's strategic mindset during that period.[89]

Figure 1 reveals that all 65 of the non-state campaigns invoked are guerrilla—not terrorist—in the sense that they targeted the government's troops as opposed to its civilians. Figure 2 provides additional evidence that bin Laden overrated the political effectiveness of terrorist campaigns by confounding them with successful guerrilla campaigns. Consistent with the psychology literature, the vast majority of the analogies invoked are recent and thus particularly salient historical episodes: namely, the guerrilla campaigns in the 1980s and 1990s that forced the Soviets from Afghanistan, the peacekeepers from Lebanon, and the Americans from Somalia.

Figure 1: Al-Qaeda's Misuse of History: Analogies Invoked to Predict Terrorist Campaign Success
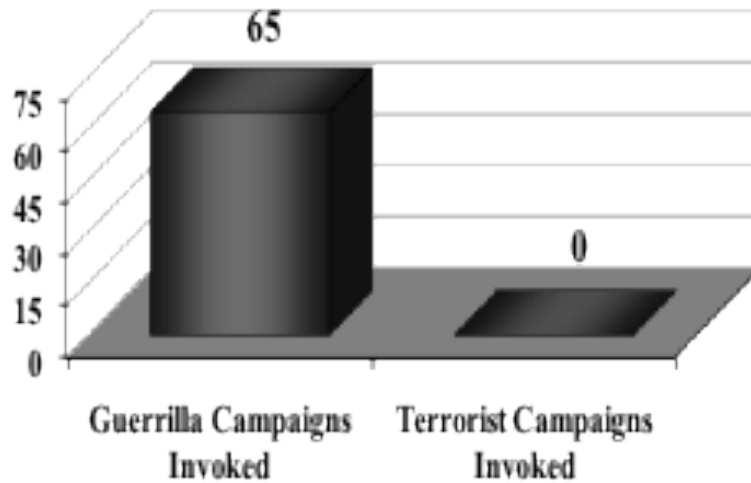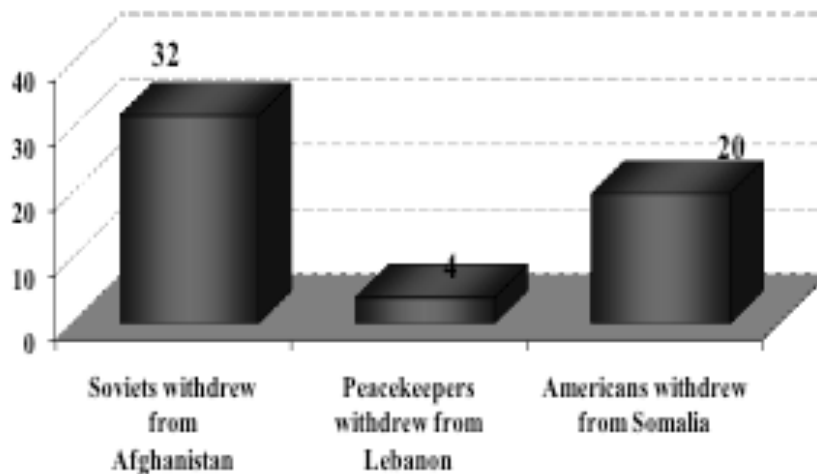

Figure 2: The Salience of Recent History: The Three Most Commonly Invoked Analogies

The favorable political outcomes of these guerrilla campaigns in Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Somalia were obviously not replicated in the September 11, 2001 attacks. Whereas bin Laden was quick to celebrate the former for ending those foreign occupations, he also lamented the latter for provoking the United States into increasing its troop presence in the Persian Gulf by a factor of fifteen.[90] Together, these figures provide compelling empirical and theoretical

evidence that bin Laden overestimated the likelihood that 9/11 would coerce American concessions by drawing faulty analogies with salient guerrilla campaign victories.

Al-Qaeda is hardly the only terrorist group in the current Religious Wave to use terrorism in order to replicate the political successes of recent guerrilla campaigns. Hezbollah's guerrilla campaign against the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) compelled them to withdraw from Lebanon in May 2000, and just a few months later, the Second Intifada erupted. That the bloodiest Palestinian terrorist campaign in history came in the immediate aftermath of the IDF withdrawal was not coincidental, according to Palestinian terrorist leaders. They said that just as the attacks on the IDF had coerced their retreat from Lebanon, attacks on the Israeli population would coerce it from historic Palestine. The leader of Palestinian Islamic Jihad explained the rationale behind the surge of Palestinian attacks against Israeli civilians: "The shameful defeat that Israel suffered in southern Lebanon and which caused its army to flee in terror was not made on the negotiations table but on the battlefield and through jihad and martyrdom, which achieved a great victory for the Islamic resistance and Lebanese people. We would not exaggerate if we said that the chances of achieving victory in Palestine are greater than in Lebanon."[91] The Hamas leadership offered the same rationale for its decision to blow up *Egged* buses and markets inside Israel: "The Zionist enemy only understands the language of jihad, resistance, and martyrdom; that was the language that led to its blatant defeat in South Lebanon and it will be the language that will defeat it on the land of Palestine."[92] In contrast to the guerrilla attacks on the IDF that forced its withdrawal from Lebanon, the terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians shifted the electorate to the right. This shift empowered Likud hard-liner Ariel Sharon to suspend the peace process, erect a wall in the West Bank, and reoccupy most of the territory.[93] Like the terrorist groups in the New Left wave, those in the Religious Wave have systematically failed to replicate the political success of the guerrilla campaigns that apparently inspired them.

Implications

Over fifty years ago, Sidney Verba instructed social scientists to embrace psychological explanations when they outperform assumptions of perfect rationality.[94] Contrary to the view of many political scientists, terrorists are not masterminds. Even their leaders make the same cognitive mistake as do other mortals—overestimating the political effectiveness of terrorist campaigns by drawing false analogies from recently successful guerrilla campaigns. To a surprising degree, this simple theory can account for the global diffusion of terrorism despite its political futility.

Although hardly the Bayesian updaters of rational choice models, terrorists do exhibit signs of learning.[95] Future research should further investigate how non-state actors adjust their tactics to emulate salient international successes. Already, the recent achievements of the Arab Awakening have tempered the international allure of terrorism as a political instrument. In the months leading up to his death, even Osama bin Laden commanded his lieutenants to refrain from targeting Western civilians.[96] According to contemporary news accounts, the growing realization of terrorism's relative ineffectiveness is behind the primacy of predominantly non-violent mass actions engulfing the Middle East and North Africa.[97] Indeed, the percentage of Muslim grassroots organizations in support of terrorism is now in steep decline.[98]

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Notes

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