

Temporal Sequencing, Incident Sophistication, and Terrorist Outcomes

OVERVIEW

There have been few efforts to examine how the planning process affects the outcome of a terrorist plot. This research brief provides some preliminary findings from an examination of the impact of the length of the planning process, the impact of multiple participants, and the volume of precursor activity on the success or failure of terrorist plots in the United States.

While conventional wisdom holds true that a shorter planning process and fewer preparatory activities reduces perpetrators chances of getting caught therefore increases success rate, the new findings show that the more people involved in the planning process also increases the probability of success.

DATA

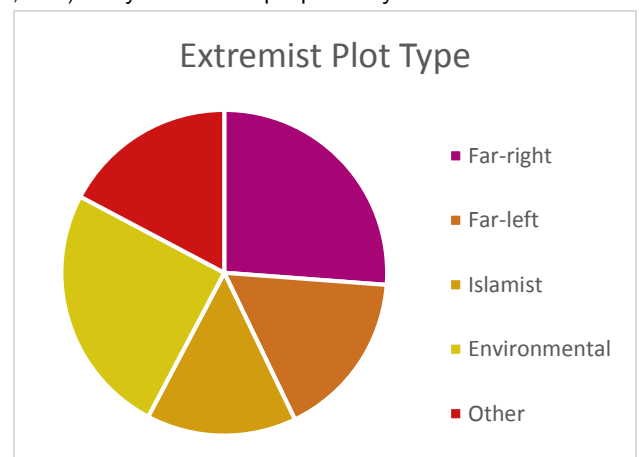
Data from the American Terrorism Study were used for this analysis. Analysis was conducted on 504 terrorism plots in the United States from 1980-2015. Data included measurements on the following variables:

- **Success** – Each plot was evaluated to determine whether it was successfully carried out, partially successful, or was foiled or failed. For this analysis, “successful” and “partially successful” plots were compared to those that were foiled or failed. Incidents were coded as “unsuccessful” when activity on the intended target was prevented or failed to occur due to plot cancellation, complete device failure, or human intervention.
- **Number of participants** – measured as the total number of participants involved in the terrorism plot. This number includes not only those indicted for committing the terrorist act, but also those involved in any planning or preparatory act associated with the plot. Unindicted co-conspirators are included in this measure.
- **Number of preparatory acts** – measured as the total number of known activities related to the planning or preparation of the planned incident (e.g., meetings, purchase or theft of weapons, etc.). Only confirmed preparatory activities were counted; other “antecedent” activities (such as meetings in which the specific plot was not discussed) were excluded.
- **Length of the planning process** – was determined by measuring the number of days from the first identified “preparatory” activity to the date of the planned incident.

Data for the analysis included information from:

- 132 far-right terrorism plots
- 84 far-left plots
- 75 Islamist extremist plots, and
- 126 environmental extremist plots.

The remaining plots include activities by a variety of other nationalist/separatist groups as well as some single-issue plots, all of which occurred in the United States.



PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Detailed below, a summary of our significant conclusions, are:

- Terrorists who engage in a significantly **shorter planning** and preparation cycle have the **greatest probability of success**.
- The **greater the number of preparatory acts** required for commission of a terrorist incident, the **greater the probability of failure**.
- Contrary to most expectations, the **fewer the number of persons** involved in the preparation process, the **lower the rate of success**.

LENGTH OF THE PLANNING AND PREPARATION PROCESS

Length of the planning process is the most difficult variable to measure, requiring time-stamped data for both the first planning activity and the date of the planned incident. Consequently, analysis could only be conducted on 262 (51.9%) of the incidents using this variable. Of these, nearly two-thirds (64.9%) of the plots were partially or completely successful, while slightly over one-third (35.1%) were unsuccessful.

Table 1: Incident Success by Length of the Planning Process

<i>Number of Days</i>	<i>Unsuccessful</i>	<i>Partially/Fully Successful</i>	<i>Row Totals</i>
0-21 Days	16.7% (n=10)	83.3% (n=50)	22.9% (n=60)
22-90 Days	34.0% (n=16)	66.0% (n=31)	17.9% (n=47)
91-120 Days	62.5% (n=10)	37.5% (n=6)	6.1% (n=16)
Over 120 Days	40.3% (n=56)	59.7% (n=83)	53.1% (n=139)
Total	35.1% 92	64.9% 170	100% 262

$$\chi^2 = 15.88, df = 3, p < .001.$$

As Table 1 reveals, terrorists who engaged in the shortest planning cycle had the highest rates of success. Plots where known preparatory behaviors were limited to the three-week period prior to the incident were very likely to be successfully completed (83.3%).

This success rate steadily declined for group or individuals who engaged in preparatory behaviors up to three or four months prior to the planned incident (with success rates of 66% and 37.5%, respectively). However, success rates climbed after this point, rising to nearly 60 percent for terrorists who engaged in planning activities longer than four months.

NUMBER OF PREPARATORY BEHAVIORS AND SUCCESS OF TERRORIST INCIDENTS

If there are fewer precursor behaviors for law enforcement officials to observe, it seems reasonable to assume that terrorists would have a greater chance to successfully complete the planned incident. Our results reveal that to be an accurate assessment. Our measurements represent a conservative count of the volume of precursor, preparatory behavior by terrorists in these incidents. However, they do accurately represent the precursor known to law enforcement and prosecutorial agencies as a result of the investigative process. Most of these behaviors are either listed as counts against the defendants or as overt acts of the conspiracy in the indictment. The number of preparatory acts was determined on 342 of the 504 incidents examined.

Table 2: Incident Success by Number of Preparatory Acts

<i>Number of Known Preparatory Acts</i>	<i>Unsuccessful</i>	<i>Partially/Fully Successful</i>	<i>Row Totals</i>
0 - 2	32.0% (n=47)	68.0% (n=100)	43.0% (n=147)
3 - 5	39.1% (n=25)	60.9% (n=39)	18.7% (n=64)
6 - 10	46.0% (n=23)	54.0% (n=27)	14.6% (n=50)
More than 10	76.5% (n=62)	23.5% (n=19)	23.7% (n=81)
Total	45.9% 157	54.1% 185	100% 342

$$\chi^2 = 43.32, df = 3, p < .001.$$

The findings in Table 2 are consistent with our expectations. The more preparatory activities the terrorists engaged in prior to an incident, the greater the probability of failure. Success rates consistently declined the more preparatory activities were required to carry out the incident. Incidents with two or fewer known preparatory activities were successful 68 percent of the time, compared to a 23.5 percent success rate if the group or individual engaged in more than 10 preparatory acts. If one can assume that the more sophisticated a planned incident is, the more preparatory acts are required to carry it out successfully. If this is correct, these findings suggest, fortunately, that while simple, smaller acts of terrorism are more likely to go undetected, more sophisticated planned terrorism incidents are more likely to attract the attention of law enforcement and eventually be thwarted. Although more research on this subject is warranted, these findings perhaps also indicate why many terrorists are trending toward simpler attacks against softer targets.

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS AND INCIDENT SUCCESS

Many different types of terrorist groups have adopted an “uncoordinated violence” strategy in the past 20 years - from the “leaderless resistance” model advocated by the extreme right to the “self-radicalization” of Islamist militants by ISIS. Although law enforcement agencies have decried the advent of the “lone actor” or “lone wolf” strategy as a means to avoid detection, it has not been clear whether the phenomenon is really as effective as it has been purported to be. We previously reported that “lone actors” had a significantly lower success rate than did members of groups or cells. In the current analysis, we use a different method of measuring participation. For this brief, we counted the number of persons who were not only involved in the commission of the actual terrorism incident, but also those who were involved in any participatory conduct. Data were coded on 475 of the 504 incidents in the sample.

Table 3: Incident Success by Number of Participants

<i>Number of Participants</i>	<i>Unsuccessful</i>	<i>Partially/Fully Successful</i>	<i>Row Totals</i>
One	49.8% (n=102)	50.2% (n=103)	43.2% (n=205)
Two or Three	39.4% (n=52)	60.6% (n=80)	27.8% (n=132)
Four or More	26.8% (n=37)	73.2% (n=101)	29.1% (n=138)
Total	40.2% 191	59.8% 284	100% 475

$\chi^2 = 18.11, df = 2, p < .001.$

Overall, 43 percent of the terrorist incidents were carried out by lone actors. Although not shown here, the percentage of incidents carried out alone has been increasing since the mid-1990s. However, the strategy does not appear to be as successful as it has been reported. Consistent with our early comparison between “lone actors” and “cells/groups,” the current analysis reveals a consistent finding that success rates increase with the addition of more participants. While there may be a threshold where additional members become a detriment to success, it is clear that terrorists who had help in preparing for an incident have greater success than those who “go it alone.” Although the dynamics of this finding needs further study, it may be that this is related to the number of preparatory acts necessary to carry out a successful terrorist attack. If the number of preparatory behaviors for an attack is relatively constant regardless of the number of members, having fewer participants requires that “lone wolves” commit all of these preparatory acts by themselves. Multiple participants allows these preparatory acts to be committed by several persons, thereby diluting the possibility that the precursor conduct would come to the attention of law enforcement. Although this is largely conjecture, it provides the most logical explanation for this controversial finding.

ABOUT THE AMERICAN TERRORISM STUDY

The American Terrorism Study (ATS) is led by researchers at the Terrorism Research Center at the University of Arkansas. The ATS is an empirical relational database consisting of data on federal terrorism-related court cases, persons indicted in these court cases, and related officially designated terrorism incidents. Included in the TEVUS portal are data from court case, person, organization, affiliation, incident, and precursor activity (antecedent) tables in the ATS. Variables included cover demographic information, terrorist group to which the individual belongs, and temporal and geospatial data on incidents and antecedent activities.

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