

START 

Comparing Failed, Foiled, Completed and Successful Terrorist Attacks

Erik J. Dahl

START Annual Meeting

September 18, 2014

This research was supported by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Science and Technology Directorate's Office of University Programs and Human Factors/Behavioral Sciences Division (HFD) through START. Any opinions, findings, conclusions or recommendations presented here are solely the authors' and are not representative of DHS or the United States Government.

Our Project

- Study in progress; 3d year of 5 years
- Collect and analyze data on unsuccessful terrorist plots to help understand terrorism and its consequences
- What counter-terrorism and deterrence policies are most effective?
- Focus on jihadist plots against U.S. and selected allies, 1993-2013

Our Team

- Martha Crenshaw
 - Stanford University Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC)
- Margaret Wilson
 - Institute for Security Science and Technology, Imperial College London
- Erik Dahl
 - Naval Postgraduate School and Center for Homeland Defense and Security (CHDS)

Acknowledgments

- Martha's work on U.S. counterterrorism strategy
 - “Fight against terrorism likely slow and incomplete” ([Stanford News](#))
 - “Dealing with Terrorism,” chapter forthcoming in *Managing Conflict in a World Adrift* (USIP Press)
 - Mapping Militant Organizations project , <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/>

Acknowledgments (cont.)

- Margaret's study of observable behavior during terrorist attacks
 - Extracting consistent patterns with implications for prediction and counter-terrorism policy
 - DHS Human Factors/Behavioral Science Division
 - U.S. Army Research Institute, UK MoD, UK Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council/Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure (EPSCR/CPNI)

Acknowledgments (cont.)

- Erik's separate work on domestic intelligence and homeland security
 - Center for Homeland Defense and Security (CHDS)
 - Includes focus on domestic rightwing terrorism not included in our START project
 - Recent articles on lessons learned from search for Osama bin Laden; local approaches to counterterrorism, including NYPD
 - *Intelligence and Surprise Attack* (Georgetown U.P.)

Background

- Most blue ribbon commissions, research, and data sets examine intelligence failures
 - When something goes wrong, we investigate
 - When it goes right, what then?
- Databases such as the GTD focus on successful terrorist efforts (i.e., intelligence failures)
- Intelligence failure is over-determined
 - Intelligence success is under-studied

Why Study Success? Why Not?

- Don't want to reveal sources and methods
- But focus on terrorism successes (intelligence failures) reveals only tip of iceberg
- Need to know why terrorism fails
- Much of the literature argues that terrorists use terrorism because it works
 - We show that it often *doesn't* work
 - And we ask why

Lessons About Terrorism?

- Motivations and intentions
- Targets and methods (e.g., substitution effect?)
- Effectiveness and causation
- Geographical range
- “Foreign fighters”
- Policy consequences and policy effectiveness

Progress to Date

- Looking at attempts to commit violence
 - We don't require perpetrator be part of a group
- Coding GTD-compatible
- EU, NATO, Australia, NZ
- Roughly ten times number plots as GTD successful attacks (200 vs. 20) occurring in more countries

Coding: Additional Variables

- Intent or motivation
- Whether failed or foiled, if so *how* and *at what stage* of plot progress
- Foreign assistance?
- Perpetrator information (e.g., convert to Islam, citizenship, residence, identity/country of origin)
- Organizational attribution (if so, claim of responsibility?)

Our Typology

- Failed attacks
 - Not accomplished; mistakes or decisions of the perpetrators
- Foiled attacks
 - Thwarted or interrupted
- Completed
 - Physical accomplishment of act of terrorism
- Successful
 - Fulfilled intentions of the perpetrators

Plot Progress

- Stage 1: Communication of intent
- Stage 2: Attempt to acquire capability
- Stage 3: Practice or training for attack
- Stage 4: Detailed target selection, actual plan laid out
- Stage 5: Placing device, physical completion of act

Preliminary Findings

- 64 foiled plots in U.S.
- Shift toward “homegrown” perpetrators
- Fewer links to Al Qaeda/AQAP over time
- Few “lone wolves”
- No returned “foreign fighters”
- Most foiled by authorities through use of informers (38%) and surveillance (28%)
- Typically interrupted or intercepted at early stage
- Family/community tips account for 13% foiled cases

Preliminary findings Britain and France

Great Britain

- 88% foiled (22 of 25)
- Of foiled plots, 77% foiled by authorities
- 22% tips
- None by informants
- 41% AQ linked
- Bombings 50%

France

- 75% foiled (24 of 32)
- Of foiled plots, 87% foiled by authorities
- 4% tips
- 4% involving informants
- 33% AQ linked
- 25% GIA linked
- Bombings 71%

Europe “Foreign Fighters”

- 72 of estimated 466 perpetrators (15%)
- Most trained (75%); few fought (25%)
- Half with AQ and affiliates
- GIA next (25%+)
- Pakistan and Afghanistan favored
- Although a minority, involved in important plots

Policy Consequences?

- Link to plots (specific and cumulative)
- Type of domestic change (law, regulation, course of action, institutions, personnel/leadership)
- Foreign policy and international ramifications (cooperation by foreign governments, commercial aviation, private sector)
- E.g., major changes aviation and air cargo security

Benefits of Local Approaches

- Effective tools for domestic counter-terrorism are already in the state and local toolbox
 - Traditional law enforcement techniques
- Suggests one way to address the intelligence legitimacy paradox
- Local law enforcement generally supported
 - If only the IC had that level of trust!
- Local efforts calibrated to suit local concerns

Next Steps?

- Plots vs US non-military targets worldwide
- Plots vs wider range of US allies
- Jihadist interpretations of FF attacks
- Substitution or learning effects?
- Policy consequences for non-US countries
- Produce new data base to be hosted by START

Where We Need Help

- What is a 'lone wolf,' and why does it matter?
 - Many believe they are working with AQ, but actually involving informants
- Measuring intent
 - Line between protected speech and serious threat
- Where to extend our data?
 - Plots against embassies overseas
 - U.S. military when not engaged in combat

Contact

Erik Dahl

ejdahl@nps.edu

www.start.umd.edu