

How Community Ties Influence Terrorist Targeting of Civilians

Terrorist Behavior and Societal Tolerance for Violence

OVERVIEW

The tactics of terrorist groups that are embedded in local communities are influenced by community reactions to the groups' targeting of civilians. Assessing when socially embedded groups, such as the Provisional IRA (PIRA) and the Palestinian Hamas, are more and less likely to target civilians necessitates attention to the pattern of community condemnations and endorsements of their attacks.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

This project traces the effects of societal tolerances on terrorist groups' decisions to use tactics that target civilians. Scholars commonly emphasize the effects of strategic incentives or ideology in decisions to target civilians, thus undervaluing societal factors and social pressures. This project analyzed significant episodes among the PIRA and the Palestinian Hamas, as well as al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI).

INTERIM FINDINGS

This project finds that groups that are socially embedded may choose tactics that compromise strategic or ideological priorities in order to avoid alienating local communities.

Case studies of key episodes in the **campaigns of the PIRA and Hamas** demonstrate the effects of pressures from within the militant groups' communities on their choice of tactics that target civilians. **Both groups compromised strategic and ideological goals when faced with negative reactions to their tactics**; only when the community was sufficiently radicalized to endorse attacks against civilians was a group free to pursue those tactics without fear of condemnation.

- The PIRA, for example, compromised its ability to generate offensive power and impose costs on the British, while Hamas limited its use of suicide bombings against Israeli civilians in response to fluctuations in support for armed attacks, especially in the 1990s.
- Both groups were consequently "constrained" in their targeting decisions by their communities, although increased support for armed attacks generated a more permissive environment for Hamas' suicide bombings against civilians in the early 2000s.

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Analysis of AQI's campaign, conversely, shows how a lack of strong social footing in the Sunni areas in which the group operated correlated with a lack of responsiveness to community pressures. The group failed to modify its tactics targeting civilians in response to societal criticism about deaths of Muslims and the sectarian nature of its attacks. **Strategic and ideological pressures prevailed and overrode societal reactions in dictating tactical choices and the targeting of civilians.**

Several insights follow from the analysis:

- **The targeting of civilians is not purely a strategic or ideological decision** but occurs within a social context that is insufficiently appreciated in current analyses. Groups with community ties may compromise other priorities to accommodate pressures from their communities. There is clear evidence that relatively powerful terrorist groups—like PIRA and Hamas—will accept serious tradeoffs in their ideological principles or in their ability to attain strategic goals in their armed campaigns for the sake of not alienating their constituencies.
- The analysis underscores the importance of recognizing that **groups without social footing are unlikely to be constrained by community reactions in targeting civilians.** AQI's "foreignness" is exemplary in this regard. Without strong ties to communities in Iraq, AQI was unresponsive to evidence that its attacks, while effective in generating costs on coalition forces and in stoking sectarian tensions, were driving away Iraqi support for the insurgency.

- Another insight from the analysis is that it underscores how **targeting that is decisively sectarian in orientation—as distinguished from targeting that kills civilians across society indiscriminately—does not protect terrorist organizations from significant criticism from their respective constituencies.** Despite many differences in the cases – especially during key moments in the Troubles and during the early phases of Iraq insurgency, when the PIRA and AQI's attacks were perceived as strictly sectarian (categorically attacking Protestants, or Shiites, respectively, and not Catholics or Sunnis, respectively) - some in the communities still voiced objections, whereas attacks on soldiers (British or Coalition Forces, respectively) were generally tolerated if not endorsed.

Messaging intended to delegitimize terrorist groups should emphasize how their attacks are responsible for bringing death and destruction to their own communities.

- A common theme in the cases is that **fear of retribution or counter-violence influenced community support for targeting civilians.** In both the PIRA and Hamas cases, fear that attacking an adversary's constituency would prompt opposing insurgent groups or the state to punish one's own community emerges as an important theme. This suggests counterterrorism messaging efforts aimed at delegitimizing terrorist groups should emphasize how their attacks are responsible for bringing death and destruction to their own communities.

Community pressures are anticipated to have two effects on terrorist groups' targeting choices. First, a group's targeting of civilians should reflect fluctuations in how communities react to a group's attacks—with condemnations generating restraint and endorsements facilitating attacks that generate greater harm to civilians. Second, these social pressures should result in groups making tradeoffs in their strategic goals and ideological principles in order to adapt to community constraints. Decisions about who to target, and with what means, may be influenced by strategic incentives, calculations about relative capabilities, and ideological principles, but must also be reconciled with community tolerances.

METHOD

Through case studies based on field work, this project analyzes significant episodes in the armed campaigns of three groups:

- The Provisional IRA or PIRA (focusing on key events in the period 1969-1993);
- Palestinian Hamas (from 1988-2005); and,
- Al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) (from 2003-2006).

The Provisional IRA and Palestinian Hamas represent groups that retained strong social network ties with their local communities. AQI, as a foreign led organization that recruited locally, but lacked enduring social ties in the Sunni communities from which it was based and operated, represents a contrast to the socially embedded groups. It is anticipated that both the PIRA and Hamas should be attentive to community reactions to their attacks that kill civilians and modify their tactics in conformity with that feedback. In contrast, while AQI may recognize adverse societal reactions to its tactics, modification of the group's targeting of civilians in response is unlikely, in part because of the strategic and ideological imperatives driving the group, but also because it would have not been subject to the same kind of community pressures that renders socially embedded groups more willing to make difficult tradeoffs in their targeting choices.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This project draws attention to the necessity of additional research on what factors shape communities' reactions to different terrorist tactics and how those tolerances evolve and change. Given that societal tolerances are found to influence terror groups' targeting of civilians, more insight into the patterns and bases of variation in those tolerances is warranted.

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