



The Softest of Targets: A Study on Terrorist Target Selection

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Summary

Asal et al. seek to answer what factors are important in terrorist organizations choosing to attack soft targets (unprotected civilians) as well as continuing to attack soft targets more than once. The authors find that group ideology, specifically religious ideology, is the key factor in selecting soft targets to attack while group size and centrality of the network impact the number of attacks against soft targets.

Methods

Data were collected from the Terrorism Knowledge Base (TKB) from the National Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism (MIPT) on domestic and international terrorism attacks from 1998 – 2005. The dependent variable measures the number of attacks on soft targets. To account for multiple zeroes, the authors used zero-inflated negative binomial regression. Additionally, to account for the size and impact of Al-Qaeda, the authors tested models with and without the group presence.

Results

The study finds that religion is an important predictor of attacking soft targets, whereas ethnonationalism is not a significant predictor. Organizational size and connectedness of the organization are strongly related to the number of attacks. Thus, ideology is important in determining if a group will specifically focus on soft targets and availability of resources determines how many times they will attack.

Implications

Since religious terrorists are more likely to target civilians, the authors argue law enforcement, and key community figures, should closely monitor these groups. Efforts to eliminate resources of terrorist organizations such as making it difficult for groups to recruit and suppressing communication efforts could be beneficial.