



To Die or to Kill? An Analysis of Suicide Attack Lethality

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Summary

Whereas prior literature usually focuses on the strategic advantages of suicide terrorism, the author examines variation in lethality among suicide and non-suicide attacks based on tactical advantages (i.e., geographic location, attack type, and target/victim type). Most researchers who are familiar with terrorism research are aware of the claims that suicide attacks are the most lethal form of terrorism today. However, the author argues that there is a need for more empirical support for this claim and that prior research usually focuses solely on macro-level analysis of lethality data. The underlying research question for this study is *under what conditions might suicide attacks be more lethal than non-suicide attacks, or vice versa?* In addition, *what about those attacks made them more or less lethal?* The author concludes that although suicide attacks kill more people on average overall, across geographic regions, across different attack types, and across different target types; suicide attacks may prove to be a “suboptimal” tactic from a terrorist group leader perspective, as there may be other methods that are less costly and produce similar results (e.g., the use of small arms and IEDs).

Methods

This study draws data from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) on nearly 142,000 terrorist attacks from 1970 to 2014 (extreme outliers, such as the 9/11 attacks, were removed as they would skew the statistical analysis). The unit of analysis for this study is the terrorist attack itself, which is common for research in terrorism. Data analysis focused primarily on mean lethality rates for suicide and non-suicide attacks across geographic regions, attack types, and victim/target types. In addition, the analysis introduces a new metric—the lethality ratio (i.e., the number of perpetrators killed divided by the total number of people killed)—to examine the cost and benefits of each type of attack.

Results

Findings reveal that although suicide attacks are usually more lethal than non-suicide attacks, they come with greater costs to the organization. The analysis also shows that behavior is inconsistent with the premise that terrorist groups are focused on maximizing lethality while reducing costs in all cases. Another finding is that despite certain advantages, suicide attacks remain a suboptimal tactic from the perspective of the terrorist group. Finally, suicide attacks are laden with symbolism and significance, which may impact the weighing of costs/benefits in decision making.

Implications

It is important—in order to save lives—to gain a better understanding of how these attacks are considered from the perspective of terrorist organizations. Thinking like terrorists may prove to be a fruitful tactic in building a defense against suicide attacks. In addition, the author of this article introduced a new concept (the lethality ratio) to help operationalize attacks in purely quantitative terms. This new tool proves to be useful in the study of suicide attacks with understanding the costs/benefits of each type of attack.