UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS
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Terrorism & Homeland Security Research
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Article Summary

When Suicide Kills: An Empirical Analysis of the Lethality of Suicide Terrorism

Burcu Pinar Alakoc
Summary by Hayden Lucas, University of Arkansas

Summary

Seeking to understand why some suicide attacks are deadlier than others, this research focuses primarily on location-specific attributes, the choice of targets, and the use of multiple perpetrators as factors explaining variation in the lethality of suicide attacks. Alakoc (2017) provides a line of empirical evidence to further clarify the strategic advantages of suicide terrorism and test them systematically to see whether and how they influence the expected number of fatalities.

Methods

Alakoc (2017) coded and analyzed four hundred and forty-seven suicide terrorist incidents (both domestic and international) worldwide between the years 1998 and 2015. Data are sourced from the START Center's Global Terrorism Database (GTD). After 1997, the GTD began to incorporate narrative descriptive summaries for each incident, which was crucial for coding variables that account for the tactical attributes of suicide terrorism. Based on these data, the author conducted a multivariate analysis of predictors of suicide terrorism lethality.

Results

- Suicide attacks that occur in easily accessible locations such as parks, cafes, and restaurants, are likely to generate more fatalities (12.6) than attacks that take place in medium (11.1) and low accessibility locations (9.7) such as checkpoints, military bases or parliament buildings.
- When suicide attacks are directed at VIP targets, 6.2 people are killed on average; when targets are military, the expected fatalities rise to 9.2. In addition, when civilians are targeted, the highest fatalities are observed at 13.8.
- A typical suicide attack carried out by a single perpetrator kills an expected number of 10.1 people, whereas a suicide attack that is undertaken by two or more perpetrators kills an expected number of 15.6 people (controlling for all other variables in the model).
- Suicide attacks that involve the use of stationary bombs kill 11.5 people on average, whereas this number goes down to 10.7 for suicide attacks that involve the use of motorized weapons.
- Suicide attacks that occur in more prosperous countries are less lethal than attacks occurring in developing countries.

Implications

Based on this analysis, it would be useful to increase security measures at the time of national holidays, political rallies, or popular events—to improve the safety of soft targets and reduce human casualties overall. In addition, it would be useful to develop and improve security precautions for first responders. By sending our most available rescue teams, police, and ambulances to the first location targeted, we are putting other locations at a higher risk to similar destruction due to vulnerability and easy access.

Alakoc, B. P. (2017). When suicide kills: An empirical analysis of the lethality of suicide terrorism. *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, *11*(8), 1-15. doi: 10.4119/UNIBI/ijcv.493