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Research Report

The Role of Public Support for the Occurrence of Terrorism

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Jitka Malečková



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- **Does public opinion affect the occurrence of terrorism?**
- **What aspects of public opinion have an impact on terrorism?**
- **Who are the people whose support matters for terrorism?**

Summary: Our research confirms that public opinion has an impact on the occurrence of terrorism. Specifically, we find that the opinion in one country on the performance of the leader of a foreign power has an impact on the occurrence of terrorism originating from the former country and directed against the foreign power. We also find that it is important for the same group of people in a country to both justify terrorism and hold unfavourable attitudes towards a potential target. Finally, our research points to the importance of strengthening democracy and civil rights in the societies from which terrorism originates.

POLICY BRIEFING

October 2011 EUSECON Policy Briefing 6

The Role of Public Support for the Occurrence of Terrorism

Introduction

Although terrorism has attracted an increasing interest of both scholars and security experts, its causes and predictors remain unclear. One of the factors whose impact on the occurrence of terrorism has recently started to be studied more closely is the support for terrorism among general public. The effects of public opinion have been examined especially in the case of anti-Americanism in the Muslim world after the attacks of 9/11. However, little research to date has been devoted to the relationship between public opinion and terrorist acts. The aim of our research within the EUSECON project is to study this relationship and determine whether public opinion affects the occurrence of terrorism and, if so, to learn more about the public support that possibly matters. This policy briefing is primarily concerned with international terrorism, i.e. terrorism involving citizens or the territory of more than one country.

While this paper is embedded in the broader EUSECON project, it is based primarily on Malečková and Stanišić (2011; forthcoming).

Public Opinion Matters

It is important to understand the relationship between public attitudes and the occurrence of terrorism because public opinion can provide an early warning signal of terrorist threats. Better knowledge of the support for terrorism among broader populations and

the circumstances of its changes over time could inform counter-terrorist policies. Examining the relationship between public opinion and acts of terrorism can help us understand the factors that affect the occurrence of terrorism. For example, a rise in the general disapproval of another country's policies could create a broader pool of people who provide material support for terrorist cells or join terrorist groups, resulting in more terrorist acts. Public opinion could also act as an incentive, providing a source of approval and legitimization, encouraging individuals to participate in terrorist activities. If public opinion toward another country is unrelated to the incidence of terrorism perpetrated against that country, there would be support for the view that terrorism is carried out by a fringe group with views and support networks that lie far from the mainstream of society.

Alan Krueger and
Jitka Malečková

(2009) examined the effect of public opinion in one country towards another country on the number of terrorist attacks perpetrated by people or groups from the former country against targets in the latter country. Public opinion was measured by the percentage of people in Middle Eastern and North African countries who disapprove of the leadership of nine world powers. Although opinion on the job performance of a leader of a world power is only one of the aspects of public attitudes towards a country that can and should be analyzed, it reflects the approval or disapproval of the foreign country's policies. Linking the data on public opinion to the number of terrorist incidents perpetrated by people from each of the Middle Eastern and North African countries against people or property from the nine powers showed a greater incidence of international terrorism when people of one country disapprove of the leadership of another country.

Aspects of Public Opinion

Given the relatively strong support for terrorism among important segments of the population in a number of countries in the Middle East, North Africa and Asia with large Muslim populations, it is

important to understand which aspects of public opinion in these countries capture the support for terrorist methods. Various studies identify such dimensions, without linking them to terrorist acts (Fair and Shepherd, 2006; Tessler and Robbins 2007). Tessler (2006), for example, finds no relationship between personal religiosity or attachment to Islam and attitudes towards the West and Western policies. We identified two possible aspects of public opinion - justification of suicide terrorism and opinions on regional powers - that were found relevant in previous research. We linked data on attitudes towards suicide terrorism and attitudes in 16 countries of the Middle East, Africa and Asia towards nine regional powers to data on international terrorist incidents that occurred between 2004 and 2008. We found that justification of suicide terrorism and

International terrorism increases when people of one country disapprove of the leadership of another country

unfavorable opinion on regional powers are correlated with the occurrence of terrorism and the effect of each of these dimensions of public opinion varies with the level of the other. In addition, we find a positive relationship between the share of people in a country who at the same time justify suicide bombings and have an unfavorable opinion of a regional power and the occurrence of terrorism originating from that country (Malečková and Stanišić 2011).

Whose Opinion Matters?

Concurrently, our results indicate that it is not sufficient for the unfavorable attitudes towards regional powers and justification of suicide bombing to be spread among various groups in a country. It is important that the same group of people in a country both holds negative views of a potential enemy (regional power) and believes that suicide terrorism is a justifiable means of struggle. This finding, and the particular share of the population who hold these negative views, deserve more attention in future research in order to find out more about how these attitudes translate into action. Is it the material support and legitimization that affect the intensity of terrorist incidents, or does this group present the actual pool of potential recruits?

In a follow-up paper (Malečková and Stanišić, forthcoming) we analyze specifically the “critical group” whose support we previously found to be relevant for the occurrence of terrorism. The group is selected based on attitudes towards suicide terrorism and regional powers and the subsequent analysis focuses primarily on demographic characteristics with specific attention paid to gender, age and education, which have been identified as significant in studies on support for terrorism. Economic status, which has been analyzed by many studies on terrorism (Krueger and Malečková 2003, Berrebi 2007), in contrast, has not been found to have a clear correlation with the occurrence of terrorism. Moreover, for the case of women, “economic status” in many Middle Eastern, African and Asian countries tends to reflect the status of males, rather than women themselves. Our analysis suggests that highly educated women (with college degree or above) who justify suicide bombing and have unfavorable opinion towards the target countries have an important role in the support for terrorism.

Policy recommendations

Our research confirms that public opinion indeed has an impact on the occurrence of terrorism. Translated into policy, this means that public opinion should be monitored as it may provide an early warning signal before terrorist acts themselves happen. To better understand the impact of public attitudes on

Foreign policy may have the potential to affect public opinion and, in consequence, the occurrence of terrorism

terrorism, we should also ask whether public opinion is monitored in the most efficient and sensible way and how the collection of data on support for terrorism and terrorism itself can be improved. Specifically, more international collaboration would be useful in data collection concerning both terrorist acts and public support for terrorism (namely the consistency of questions and countries included in

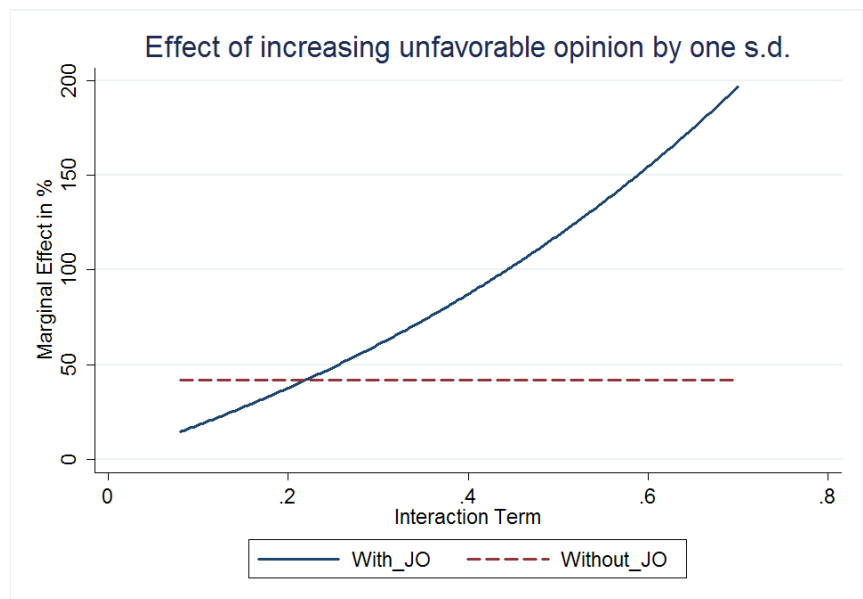


Figure 1 Impact of increase in unfavourable opinion depends on the level of justification of suicide terrorism (graph by Dragana Stanišić).

international surveys that would enable comparisons over longer periods and checking predictions and trends). The European Union could benefit from the data gathered often mainly in the United States and in turn help expand and describe the existing data, e.g. by contributing to the discussion on which violent acts are labeled as “terrorist”.

Our research also suggests that public opinion should be explored separately across its different dimensions. Specifically, the views in one country on the performance of the leader of a foreign power have an impact on the occurrence of terrorism originating from that country and directed against the power. This indicates the relevance of foreign policy, which is embodied in the perception of the job performance of the leaders of world powers. Foreign policy thus may have the potential to affect public opinion and, in

consequence, the occurrence of terrorism. Another aspect of public

opinion that matters is justification of terrorism, particularly in combination with unfavorable attitudes towards a potential target. It is therefore useful to watch for cases where both unfavorable opinion of a country and justification of terrorism (or suicide terrorism) are high as these may be warning signals that terrorism originating from the former country and targeted against the latter country may rise.

Finally, our research points to the role of democracy and civil rights, or rather their lack, in the countries from which terrorism originates. A low level of civil rights in a country affects the occurrence of terrorism originating from that country. Analyses of public opinion suggest that if people have no other ways in which to express their disapproval of a foreign country and its policy they tend to support terrorism or engage in it. Therefore, encouraging democracy may help decrease the risk of terrorism in the long run.

Credits

This EUSECON Policy Briefing was authored Jitka Malečková from the Economics Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences and the Charles University in Prague. The views expressed in this briefing are the author's alone.

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