

The Effectiveness Of Terrorism

Posted on July 31, 2022

Research on the effectiveness of terrorism asks whether attacks help organizations obtain political goals, not whether they create fear, casualties, publicity, or economic damage. The original essay compared Max Abrahms's "Why Terrorism Does Not Work" with Robert Pape's "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism." It correctly identified their disagreement. Abrahms argues that terrorist organizations rarely secure their stated policy objectives, especially when they attack civilians, because target governments infer that the attackers hold maximal or destructive goals and become less willing to compromise. Pape argues that suicide terrorism often follows strategic logic and has sometimes been used to pressure democracies to withdraw military forces from territory terrorists regard as their homeland. The disagreement is not simply that one believes terrorism never works and the other believes it always works. It concerns definitions of success, selection of cases, interpretation of concessions, organizational goals, target choice, and the difference between a rational strategy and an effective one.

Defining Terrorism

There is no universally accepted definition, but terrorism generally involves threatened or actual violence by non-state actors intended to influence a broader audience for political, ideological, or religious purposes. Many definitions emphasize deliberate attacks on civilians or noncombatants. Separating terrorism from guerrilla attacks on military forces is important in Abrahms's analysis because he treats target selection as a major variable. The label is politically contested, and states also commit violence against civilians, but a focused study needs consistent inclusion rules. Without them, researchers may compare fundamentally different campaigns and reach misleading conclusions.

What Counts as Effectiveness?

Terrorist organizations may seek several outcomes: policy change, territorial withdrawal, prisoner release, regime overthrow, publicity, recruitment, revenge, polarization, disruption of peace, or survival of the organization. A campaign may fail at its declared strategic goal while succeeding at attracting attention or provoking repression. Researchers must therefore distinguish tactical, organizational, and strategic effectiveness. Abrahms focuses mainly on whether groups achieve major policy objectives. Pape focuses on coercive pressure associated with suicide campaigns. Differences in the outcome being measured can produce different conclusions without either author examining exactly the same question.

Abrahms's Dataset and Argument

Abrahms examined twenty-eight organizations designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations by the United States Department of State and identified forty-two policy objectives. He concluded that these groups achieved a small proportion of their objectives and that campaigns directed primarily against civilian targets performed worse than campaigns focused more heavily on military targets. The original essay described all twenty-eight as organizations designated "since 2001," but the study used the organizations on the State Department list during the period examined. Abrahms's central claim is that terrorism's low success is partly inherent in the tactic of attacking civilians because such attacks communicate information about the attacker's intentions.

The Correspondence-Inference Mechanism

Abrahms draws on social psychology to argue that target governments infer an organization's goals from its behavior. When a group attacks military targets linked to a specific territorial dispute, leaders may interpret the violence as instrumental and limited. When it deliberately kills civilians, governments and publics may conclude that the organization is driven by extreme preferences, indiscriminate hatred, or ambitions broader than its stated demand. Even if the group claims to seek one concession, the target fears that compliance will encourage further attacks rather than settle the conflict. Civilian targeting therefore undermines credibility as a bargaining partner.

Why Governments Resist Concessions

Governments worry that concessions will reward violence, weaken deterrence, encourage imitation, divide supporters, and fail to end the threat. Democratic leaders also face public pressure after civilian attacks, often producing anger and demands for punishment rather than compromise. Terrorism can narrow the political space available to leaders who might otherwise negotiate. An attack may also strengthen hard-line parties and reduce sympathy for the attackers' underlying cause. Abrahms uses this process to explain why spectacular violence can be strategically counterproductive even when it demonstrates capability.

Civilian Versus Military Targets

The distinction between civilian and military targets is ethically and strategically important. Attacking civilians violates core humanitarian norms and may alienate potential supporters. Attacks on military forces may still be unlawful depending on context, but they can communicate a more limited objective connected to occupation or conflict. Abrahms does not argue that every attack on military personnel succeeds. He argues that organizations relying less on civilian targeting have a better chance of convincing opponents that their aims are limited enough for negotiation. Targeting is

therefore a signal as well as a method of harm.

Al-Qaeda as a Case

The original essay used al-Qaeda to illustrate strategic failure. Its attacks produced enormous harm and influenced security policy, military intervention, surveillance, and public fear. Yet if its objective included forcing the United States to withdraw broadly from the Muslim world or ending American influence, the post-attack response moved in the opposite direction through wars, military expansion, and international counterterrorism. The organization gained recruits and publicity in some contexts but also suffered leadership losses, territorial setbacks, internal disputes, and broad condemnation. The case demonstrates why organizational survival or attention should not be confused with achievement of ultimate political goals.

Pape's Strategic Logic

Pape collected a dataset of suicide terrorist attacks from 1980 through 2001 and argued that most campaigns were organized, strategic, and connected to efforts to compel democratic states to withdraw military forces from territory valued by the attackers. He rejected explanations based solely on individual irrationality, poverty, or religious fanaticism. Suicide attacks are costly signals because participants expect to die and organizations invest in recruitment, preparation, and publicity. According to Pape, groups use this tactic when they believe conventional military victory is impossible but that democracies are sensitive to casualties and domestic pressure.

Suicide Terrorism as Coercion

Coercion attempts to change an opponent's behavior by imposing or threatening cost. Suicide attacks can penetrate defended targets and signal willingness to endure sacrifice. Pape argues that organizations study previous cases and may interpret partial withdrawals or negotiations as evidence that the tactic works. This learning can encourage diffusion. The phrase "strategic logic" does not mean the tactic is moral or that individual attackers calculate in the same way as leaders. It means organizational choices may follow an instrumental theory about pressure and concession.

The Lebanon Example

Pape points to the withdrawal of American and French forces from Lebanon after the 1983 barracks bombings and later Israeli withdrawals as influential examples. Organizations could interpret these outcomes as proof that suicide attacks imposed intolerable costs. However, causal attribution is difficult. Military withdrawals can reflect several factors, including local politics, strategic priorities, casualties from many sources, diplomatic agreements, and changes in the mission. Demonstrating

that an attack occurred before a withdrawal does not establish that it caused the concession or achieved all organizational goals.

Pape's Claim About Democracy

Pape argues that democracies are frequent targets because their governments are believed to be vulnerable to public opposition over casualties. This claim helps explain target selection but can oversimplify democratic response. Publics may demand withdrawal from an unclear foreign mission, yet attacks on civilians can also create unity and support for force. Authoritarian regimes experience domestic pressure too, even when it is less visible, and terrorist groups attack non-democracies for varied reasons. Regime type is one factor among occupation, capability, geography, ideology, and opportunity.

Religion, Nationalism, and Occupation

Pape challenges the claim that Islamic fundamentalism alone explains suicide terrorism, noting secular organizations and nationalist campaigns. He emphasizes foreign military presence and territorial control. This correction is valuable because religious identity cannot explain every case. At the same time, later research has argued that ideology, organizational competition, community support, and sacred values can interact with occupation. Religion may supply narratives of sacrifice or legitimacy without being the sole root cause. A complete analysis avoids both cultural stereotyping and single-cause materialism.

Criticism of Pape's Research Design

Ashworth and colleagues criticized Pape's design and causal inference. Campaigns are selected after suicide terrorism occurs, and concessions may be coded in ways that exaggerate success. The relevant comparison is not only whether a state made a concession after attacks but whether the concession would have occurred without the tactic and whether alternative strategies performed better. Organizations choose suicide terrorism under particular conditions, creating selection bias. The dataset also ended in 2001, before major later campaigns that may alter conclusions. These criticisms do not show that no campaign has coerced a concession; they show that proving effectiveness requires a stronger counterfactual.

Criticism of Abrahms's Research Design

Abrahms's study also faces limitations. Organizations may announce unrealistic or multiple goals, making success difficult by definition. The Foreign Terrorist Organization list reflects United States policy and may exclude relevant groups. Coding whether an objective was achieved can involve

judgment, and outcomes may take many years. Groups may prioritize survival, constituency control, or sabotage of negotiation rather than official public demands. A low strategic success rate is still important, but researchers should not assume that all leaders are pursuing the goals they state publicly in the same way.

Gould and Klor's Findings

Gould and Klor examined terrorism and political attitudes in the Israeli context and found a more complicated relationship. Terrorism can shift public opinion, but the direction may depend on the intensity and geographic proximity of attacks. Lower levels may generate support for accommodation under some circumstances, while sustained violence may move voters toward hard-line positions. This suggests that coercive effects are nonlinear. An organization may obtain a temporary political reaction while damaging long-term support. Context, timing, and scale matter.

Does Tactical Rationality Mean Strategic Wisdom?

A tactic can be rational relative to an organization's beliefs and still fail. Leaders may learn the wrong lesson from a previous withdrawal, overestimate public sensitivity, underestimate retaliation, or prioritize internal competition. Suicide attacks may help an organization outbid rivals, prove commitment, attract donors, or prevent compromise even when they do not achieve the movement's broader goal. Rationality therefore means action is understandable in relation to incentives and beliefs, not that it produces the best outcome for the population represented.

Organizational Competition

Terrorist groups often compete with moderates and rival armed organizations. Violence can establish credibility among supporters, provoke government repression that weakens peaceful alternatives, and polarize communities. In such cases, an attack that appears strategically ineffective against the government may be effective in internal politics. This possibility complicates both Abrahms and Pape because the true audience may include potential recruits and rival factions as well as the target state. Counterterrorism policy should avoid responses that unintentionally reward this strategy by eliminating political space.

Provocation and Overreaction

One strategic purpose of terrorism is provocation: encouraging a state to respond indiscriminately so affected communities become alienated and more receptive to the organization. A military response may remove operational capacity but also create civilian harm, grievance, or propaganda. Abrahms's argument that attacks often work against political objectives applies to states as well:

counterterrorism can be tactically forceful and strategically counterproductive. Proportionate, lawful action and protection of civilians reduce the attacker's ability to benefit from overreaction.

Spoiling Peace Processes

Organizations may attack to destroy negotiations between moderates and governments. Success is then measured by whether trust collapses, not whether the attackers receive an immediate concession. Civilian attacks can be highly effective at producing fear and reciprocal hostility. This does not contradict the claim that terrorism rarely achieves constructive policy objectives. It demonstrates that destructive or negative goals may be easier to achieve than building a preferred political order. Researchers need to specify whether "work" means changing policy in the attacker's favor or merely preventing compromise.

Media and Psychological Effects

Terrorism communicates through audiences. A small attack can receive extensive coverage because of symbolic target, dramatic imagery, or public fear. Media attention may magnify perceived risk beyond statistical probability. Public communication should inform without reproducing propaganda, sensationalizing perpetrators, or stigmatizing entire communities. Psychological impact is a tactical success, but fear does not necessarily translate into desired policy. It may lead to resilience, security reform, prejudice, or military escalation.

Homeland Security Versus Offensive Action

The original essay reported Pape's recommendation that Western democracies strengthen homeland security rather than rely primarily on offensive military operations. Defensive measures can reduce expected returns by protecting targets, improving intelligence, disrupting finance, securing transport, and building emergency resilience. Yet security measures can impose costs on privacy, civil liberties, and minority communities. They should be evidence-based, reviewable, and proportionate. Overseas force may be necessary against immediate threats in some circumstances, but broad occupation can create the conditions Pape associates with suicide campaigns and the provocation dynamics described above.

Policy Lessons From Abrahms

Abrahms's work suggests governments should distinguish groups by target selection and goals rather than treat every violent organization identically. Concessions after civilian attacks may create incentives, but refusing all political engagement can also strengthen spoilers. Negotiation is most plausible when organizations demonstrate limited aims, cease civilian targeting, and possess

authority to implement an agreement. Governments should communicate that peaceful political action can produce results while deliberate attacks on civilians reduce legitimacy. This strategy requires consistency; states undermine the principle when their own actions disregard civilian life.

Policy Lessons From Pape

Pape's research directs attention to foreign military presence, territorial disputes, and organizations' belief that democracies can be coerced. Policymakers should examine whether deployments create benefits sufficient to justify their political and security costs, reduce unnecessary exposure, and avoid allowing tactical decisions to become open-ended occupations. However, withdrawal solely in immediate response to an attack may reinforce the attackers' theory. Timing, communication, alliance commitments, and political settlement all influence the signal received. Defense and diplomacy must be coordinated.

Ethical Evaluation

Strategic analysis does not excuse terrorism. Deliberate violence against civilians is morally and legally prohibited regardless of whether it advances a cause. Describing rational calculation can help prevention without granting legitimacy. The same ethical consistency should apply to counterterrorism: collective punishment, torture, indiscriminate attack, and discrimination cannot be justified by the identity of the enemy. Civilian protection is both a moral requirement and a strategic necessity because abuse fuels recruitment and destroys credibility.

Which Argument Is More Convincing?

Abrahms offers the stronger general claim about organizations seeking broad policy concessions through civilian targeting: the tactic usually hardens opposition, damages legitimacy, and communicates unlimited intentions. Pape offers an important correction by showing that suicide terrorism is frequently organized and strategic rather than inexplicable fanaticism. He also identifies cases in which actors believed coercion contributed to withdrawal. The evidence is insufficient to conclude that suicide terrorism generally "pays," especially once retaliation, partial outcomes, selection, and long-term effects are included. The most defensible synthesis is that terrorism can shape agendas, provoke responses, spoil peace, and occasionally contribute to limited concessions, but it rarely delivers stable realization of maximal political goals and often harms the population it claims to represent.

Conclusion

Abrahms and Pape ask different but overlapping questions about terrorist strategy. Abrahms finds low policy success and argues that civilian targeting leads governments to infer extreme objectives, making concessions unlikely. Pape identifies a strategic logic in suicide campaigns, especially those aimed at pressuring democracies over territorial military presence. Both reject the idea that terrorism is simply random violence, but they disagree about coercive results. Later criticism shows that success depends on coding, case selection, counterfactuals, organizational audiences, and time horizon. Terrorism is effective at causing harm and fear and may achieve negative goals such as polarization or disruption. It is far less reliable as a method for obtaining legitimate, durable political settlement. Counterterrorism should therefore protect civilians, deny tactical opportunity, avoid overreaction, preserve political alternatives, and address conflicts without rewarding violence.

References

- Abrahms, M. (2006). Why terrorism does not work. *International Security*, 31(2), 42–78.
- Ashworth, S., Clinton, J. D., Meirowitz, A., & Ramsay, K. W. (2008). Design, inference, and the strategic logic of suicide terrorism. *American Political Science Review*, 102(2), 269–273.
- English, R. (2016). Does terrorism work? A history. Oxford University Press.
- Gould, E. D., & Klor, E. F. (2010). Does terrorism work? *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 125(4), 1459–1510.
- Kydd, A. H., & Walter, B. F. (2006). The strategies of terrorism. *International Security*, 31(1), 49–80.
- Pape, R. A. (2003). The strategic logic of suicide terrorism. *American Political Science Review*, 97(3), 343–361.