PSC/IR 106: Five Myths about Terrorism

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Outline

- 1. Terrorists are irrational
- 2. Suicide terrorists are male religious extremists
- 3. Terrorists are poor
- 4. Terrorist attacks are random
- 5. Terrorist only want to scare their targets

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Rationality

- Terrorism is strategic
- Common criticism of rational choice modeling of terrorism: "people who kill themselves are not rational"
 - We don't need to understand why people are okay with killing civilians to understand how they behave

Rationality Definition

- In math world, rational =/= sensible.
- "Rational" means that an actor's preferences are complete and transitive
 - Complete: For any outcomes a and b, the actor prefers a to b, prefers b to a, or is indifferent
 - Transitive: For any outcomes a, b, and c, if the actor prefers a to b and b to c, then he also prefers a to c

Which of these People Is Rational?

Person 1

"I prefer the Los Angeles
Angels of Anaheim to the
New York Yankees. I also
prefer the New York
Yankees to the Chicago
Cubs. And I prefer the
Chicago Cubs to the Los
Angeles Angels of
Anaheim."

Person 2

 "I prefer blowing myself up to kill five people to working a 9-5 desk job. I prefer working a 9-5 desk job than being in Will's class. And I prefer blowing myself up to kill five people than being in Will's class."

Furthermore...

- Terrorism is an effective weapon in the absence of conventional military force
- Terrorists are responsive to incentives

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American Airlines # 11



Al Sugami



Waleed M. Alshehri Wail M. Alshehri





Alomari



Atta

American Airlines #77



Moqed



Almihdhar



Nawof Alhazmi



Salom Alhazmi



Hanjour

United Airlines # 93



Alghamdi



Al Haznawi



Alnami



Jarrah

United Airlines # 175



Al-Shehhi



Alghamdi



Al Qadi Banihammad



Hamza Alghamdi



Alshehri

What group is responsible for the most suicide terrorist attacks?



Is religious fanaticism and belief in the afterlife necessary to commit suicide attacks?



Atheists

Are all suicide bombers male?







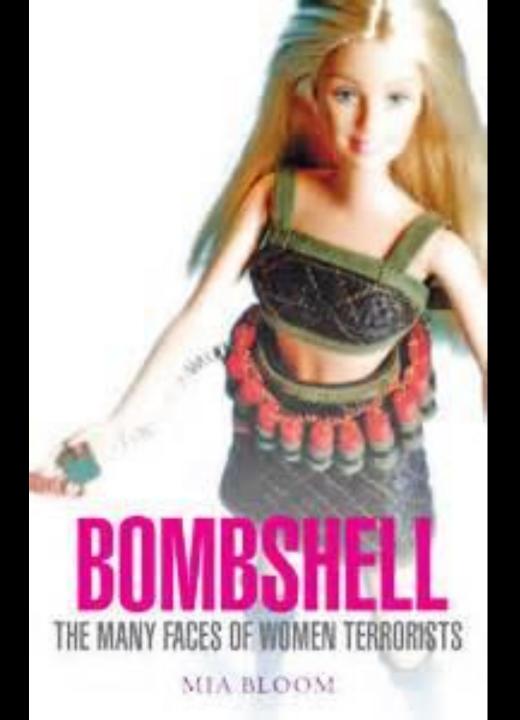




Women and Terrorism

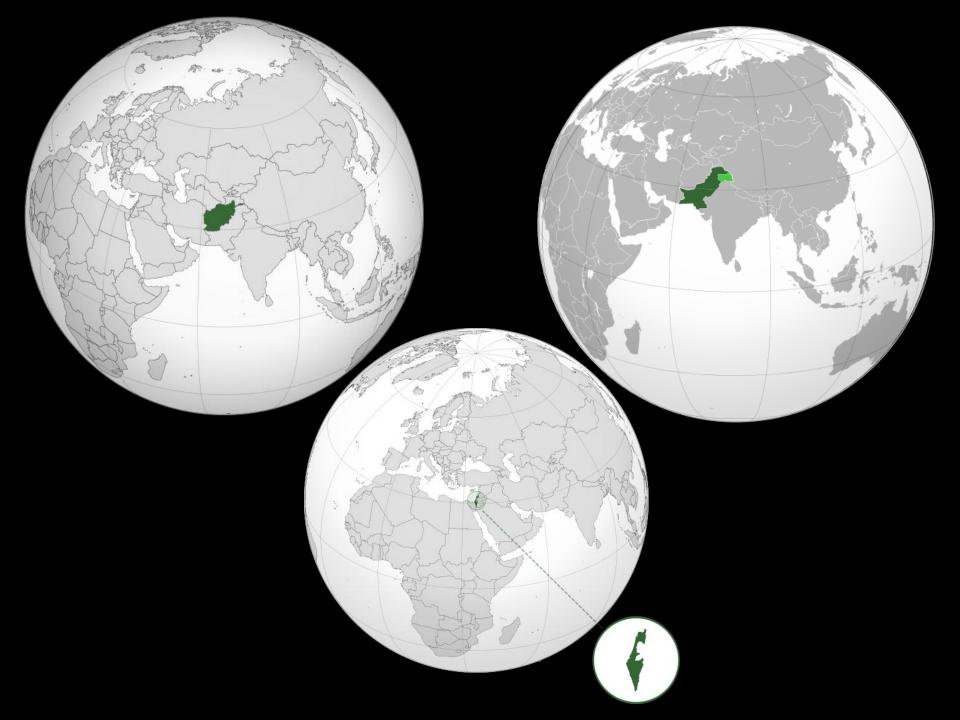


MIA BLOOM



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American Airlines # 11 American Airlines #77









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Moqed

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Hanjour

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Alghamdi

Al Haznawi

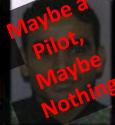
Alnami

Jarrah

United Airlines # 175











Al-Shehhi

Alghamdi

Al Qadi Banihammad Hamza Alghamdi

Alshehri

Terrorists come from poor regions, but terrorists themselves are not.

Competency

- Suppose you are a terrorist commander
- You only want to commit one attack right now
- Do you send the poor guy or the wealthy guy?
 - Who is smarter?
 - Who has better access?
 - Who can blend in better?

Signaling

- Terrorists work alone, without direct observation
 - Principal-agent problem
- Organizations want to hire most motivated individuals
 - Who is more motivated: the poor guy or the rich guy?

Richer terrorists kill more people.

Improving economic opportunities might not reduce terrorism.

Our biggest problem is the hordes of young men who beat on our doors, clamoring to be sent. It is difficult to select only a few. Those whom we turn away return again and again, pestering us, pleading to be accepted.

—Hamas Leadership

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Puzzle

- Terrorist attacks are not randomly distributed
 - Clumping around peace talks
 - What does this say about terrorists' responsiveness to incentives?
 - Why this clumping?

Preferences

- Home and foreign state negotiate
- Foreign state wants peace
- Foreign is unsure whether home wants peace

Preferences

- If Home wants peace, it will actively police extremists within its country
 - Foreign thus does not want peace with uncooperative Home types

Preferences

- Extremists always want conflict
 - Need to convince Foreign that Home is uncooperative regardless of Home's true type

Monitoring Problem

- Policing is not fully effective
 - Even if a peace-loving Home tries to stop extremists, it might fail
- Policing effort is hard to observe
 - Foreign can thus only make inferences based on whether an attack has occurred, not on what Home did to (possibly) stop an attack

Updating

- Suppose no attack occurred
 - What should Foreign infer about Home?

Updating

- Suppose an attack occurred
 - What should Foreign infer about Home?

Updating

- Suppose an attack occurred
 - What should Foreign infer about Home?
 - It cannot know for sure that Home is uncooperative
 - But its belief that Home is uncooperative increases

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Puzzle

- After an attack, multiple groups often claim responsibility
- If survival favors the clandestine, why not just keep your mouth shut?

Organizational Conflict

- Terrorist organizations need foot soldiers and donations to keep the business running
- Both are scarce



Outbidding

 When multiple competing groups exist, each terrorist organization has incentive to outbid the other by increasing quantity and intensity of attacks