# PS 0500: Terrorism

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#### Outline

- 1. Definition of Terrorism
- 2. Rationality of Terrorists
- 3. Do Terrorists Respond to Incentives?
- 4. The Profile of a Terrorist
- 5. Understanding Suicide Terrorism
- 6. Provocation
- 7. Spoiling
- 8. Outbidding
- 9. Counterterrorism as a Collective Action Problem

# Definition of Terrorism

- We don't really have \*one\*
  - The term "terrorism" is heavily politicized
  - Whether you call something "terrorism" depends on which side you are on

# What are the defining features of terrorism?

- 1. Violence/force (83.5%)
- 2. Political (65%)
- 3. Fear/terror emphasized (51%)
- 4. Threat (47%)
- 5. (Psychological) effects and (anticipated) reactions (41.5%)

- 6. Victim-target differentiation (37.5%)
- 7. Purposive, planned, systematic, organized action (32%)
- 8. Method of combat, strategy, tactic (30.5%)
- Breaches rules/without humanitarian restraint (30%)
- 10. Coercion/extortion (28%)

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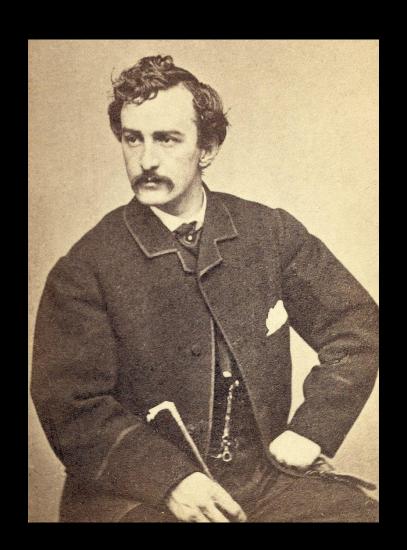
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# Distilling...

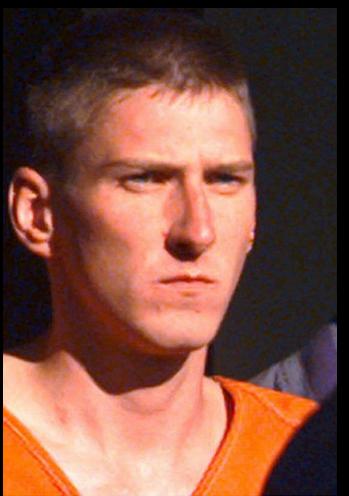
- 1. Violence
- 2. Political goal
- 3. Audience extends beyond direct victims











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# Rationality

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

# Rationality Definition

- In science 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 Steelers to the Penguins. I also prefer the Penguins to the Pirates. And I prefer the Pirates to the Steelers."

#### 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."

# Explaining These Preferences

- Not so much a topic within IR
  - Psychology, sociology
  - But we can take these preferences as given and investigate the implications for strategic behavior

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# Alternate Conception of Irrationality

- Different concern: Terrorists are irrational because they do not respond to incentives
  - Test: Are terrorist attacks completely random? Or do attacks occur more frequently when we would expect them to?

 "On Welfare and Terrorism" (Burgoon): social spending is correlated with less terrorism

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- "Democracy, Foreign Policy, and Terrorism" (Savun and Phillips): greater foreign policy activity is correlated with more terrorism

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- "Sabotaging the Peace" (Kydd and Walter): attacks are clustered around peace talks

 "Why Respecting Physical Integrity Rights Reduces Terrorism" (Walsh and Piazza): greater physical integrity rights is correlated with less terrorism

- "Why Respecting Physical Integrity Rights Reduces Terrorism" (Walsh and Piazza): greater physical integrity rights is correlated with less terrorism
- "Poverty, Minority Economic Discrimination, and Domestic Terrorism" (Piazza): economic discrimination is correlated with more terrorism

# Strategic Problems

 If terrorists did not respond to incentives, how do we explain how groups survive for so long?

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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



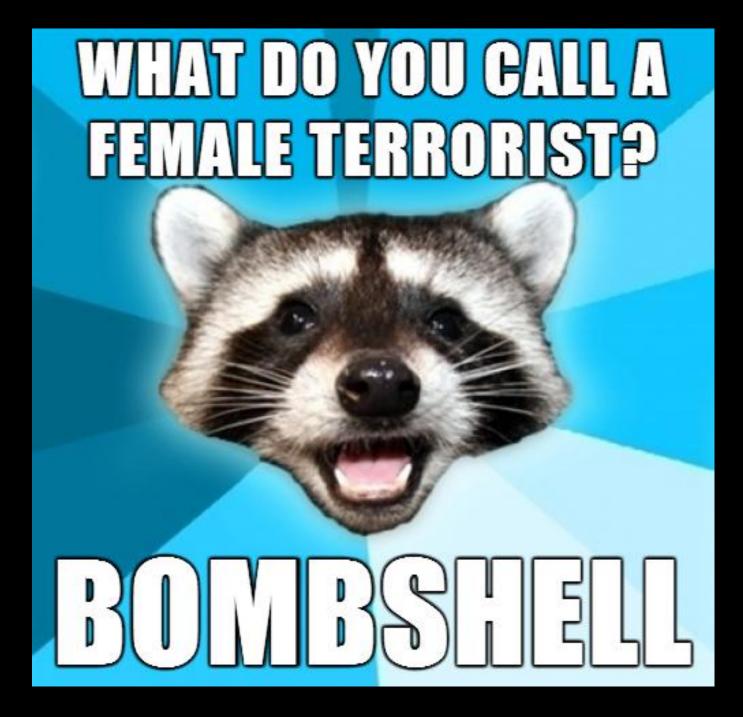
Alshehri

# Not all organizations that use suicide bombings are religious



# Not all suicide bombers are male

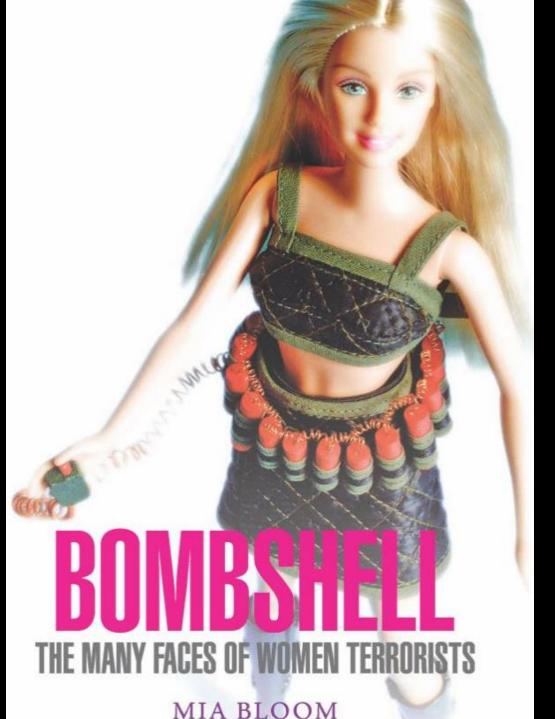




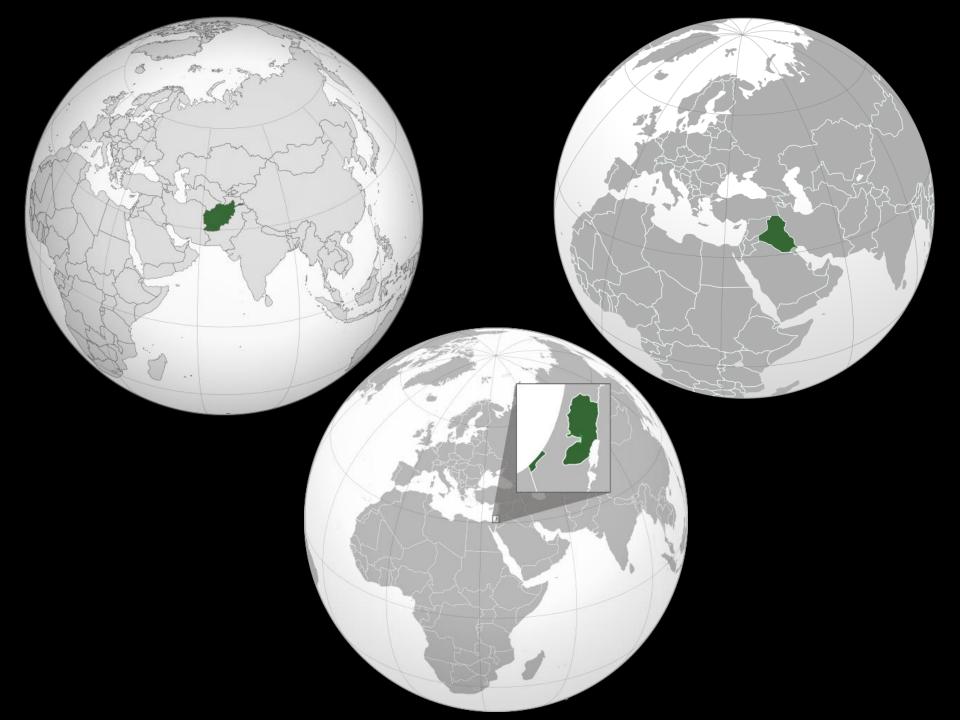
# Women and Terrorism



**MIA BLOOM** 



Terrorists usually aren't dirt poor



American Airlines # 11 American Airlines #77











Waleed M. Alshehri Wail M. Alshehri

Alomari

Atta









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

# Terrorists tend to come from poor regions, but terrorists tend not to be poor

## Competency

- Suppose you are a terrorist commander
- You only want to commit one attack right now
- Do you send the poor guy or the middle class 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

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# Why Become a Suicide Terrorist?

- Lack of opportunity is not a good explanation
- There are strategic and tactical advantages to suicide terrorism
- A very small percentage of people with extreme grievance/ideological preferences are willing to exploit those advantages

## Strategic Advantage

- Long-term goal of terrorism: convince political opponent that sustained costs are not worth the policy in dispute
  - Having operatives commit suicide is also a costly signal of things to come

## Tactical Advantages

- Planning an attack is harder when you also need to plan an escape
- Suicide bombers are smart bombs
- Non-suicide attackers leave evidence behind

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## Provocation

- Terrorist organizations commit attacks hoping to provoke large-scale, counterproductive responses
  - Economic and military costs
  - Recruitment problems

## Provocation

• Puzzle: Why would governments choose counterterrorism policies that backfire?

# **Domestic Explanations**

- Policymakers do stupid things
- Rally 'round the flag effects
- Diversionary incentives
- Purges

## Information Problems

- Targeted governments know less about how sympathetic audience will respond
- Who is less likely to attack: a robust group or a weak group?

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## Puzzle

- Terrorist attacks are not randomly distributed
  - Clumping around peace talks
  - But why?

## 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?

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- Suppose an attack occurred
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## **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 quiet?

# 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

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#### Incentives

- Who benefits from offensive attacks against terrorist organizations? Who pays the costs?
- Who benefits from defensive measures to stop terrorist attacks? Who pays the costs?