

Design, Inference, and the Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism: A Rejoinder

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In “Design, Inference, and the Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism”, we show that Robert Pape’s work on suicide terrorism, particularly his 2003 *American Political Science Review* article, is deeply flawed. Because he looks only at instances of suicide terrorism, his data are consistent with essentially any view about the risk of suicide terror due to occupation by a democracy. Our bounds on what can be learned from his data show that they do not support the policy conclusions he tries to draw.

In “Methods and Findings in the Study of Suicide Terrorism” (2008), Pape claims that our criticisms of his work are incorrect. The bulk of his response, however, ignores the problem we identify in our comment; instead, he largely summarizes arguments from his later work, arguments that are irrelevant to our basic point. And when he eventually addresses the substance of our critique, Pape simply repeats the error that motivated our original comment.

Getting the Research Design Straight

Pape’s actual response to our argument is confined to the final column of his reply. He makes two claims. First, he writes that he “collected the universe of suicide attacks” and thus cannot suffer from “sample bias” (p. 276). Second, he argues that his data allow him to claim that suicide

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terrorism cannot occur without occupation, ie, occupation is a “*necessary* condition for suicide terrorism” (p. 276, italics in the original). Neither claim is relevant to our point.

Take sample bias first. Our claim is not that Pape’s sample of suicide attacks is unrepresentative of suicide attacks; rather, the population he studies is not the right one to study to answer questions about the association between occupation and suicide terrorism. Getting a grip on that association is an inherently comparative activity, one that needs a contrast between the likelihood of suicide terror in occupied areas and the likelihood of suicide terror in non-occupied areas. In Ashworth et al. (2008), we demonstrate that Pape’s data are consistent with any relationship between these two quantities.

Talk of necessary conditions won’t help. Let us grant, for argument’s sake, that Pape has established a necessary condition (even though no such claim was made in Pape (2003)). That would tell us only that the observed frequency of suicide terror campaigns in non-occupied areas is zero. We would still know almost nothing about the likelihood of suicide campaigns given an occupation. Absent that, we couldn’t calculate the increase in the likelihood of suicide terror attributable to occupation. Knowing only that the increase is positive would surely not be enough for policy advice. After all, leaving the house in the morning is a necessary condition for being hit by a bus, but someone who, because of that necessary condition, refuses to leave their house needs therapy.

As we stressed in our comment, the right way to proceed is to identify the universe of all potential sites of occupation and suicide terror, and use it (or a random sample from it) to identify the association between occupation and suicide terror. In a paper that we learned of only after our comment went to press, Wade and Reiter (2007) use just this approach to assess Pape’s claim that democracies are more likely than other regime types to experience suicide terror. They find only lukewarm support for the hypothesis.

Pape’s entire direct response to our comment is encapsulated in his penultimate paragraph. Let

us repeat that paragraph with some of the nouns changed, to highlight the fallacy involved¹:

The medical examiner of a small city made a limited claim about the likelihood that the apparent association of consuming beverage X with death represents a real effect. This finding is based on the fact that there were 16 deaths in the previous week. All 16 were beverage- X -drinkers; none was a non-drinker. Compared to chance (i.e., a coin flip between drinking and not drinking beverage X), this result would occur less than 1 in 55,000 trials, far less than the .05 level of significance that is the standard benchmark in statistical studies.

This sounds good, until we learn that beverage X is water.

What About Pape's Later Work?

Pape worries that we are unaware of the work in his book. He needn't be. We studied his book carefully, and the rich detail of, eg, chapter 11 of Pape (2005) is just what we had in mind when we wrote that his work "make[s] a real contribution towards undermining stereotypes about suicide terrorists" (Ashworth et al., 2008, p. 270). The book does not, however, do anything to allay our concerns about the research design.

The strongest reconstruction of the argument in Pape (2008) runs as follows: we can infer the risk of suicide terror due to occupation by first establishing the necessity of occupation, so the probability of suicide terror absent occupation is zero, and then studying all of the occupations, to find out the likelihood of suicide terror given occupation. We didn't mention Pape's subsequent work because it fails both to establish necessity and to look at all occupations.

Is Pape's claim to have established a necessary condition actually plausible? One way to think about this is to ask what we would have learned using Pape's approach at an earlier date.² The

¹We owe the idea of this fable to Ethan Bueno de Mesquita.

²An admirable feature of Pape's work is that he makes his data widely and easily available, so we can simulate what his methods would have found had he done his study earlier.

first three campaigns detailed in Appendix 1 of Pape (2005), plus the first two isolated attacks listed on p. 264 are the entire universe of suicide attacks carried out between 1980 and 1986. One is by an unidentified group in Beirut; all of the rest were by Hezbollah. So in 1986 we would have concluded being a Shi'a extremist group appears to be a necessary condition for a suicide attack. This simulated study would have exactly the qualities that Pape claims as virtues of his actual work: it examines the entire universe of suicide attacks, and it identifies what looks like a necessary condition.

Unfortunately, 1987 saw the first suicide attack by a new group, the Tamil Tigers. So being Shi'a, or Muslim, or even religious is not a necessary condition for carrying out a suicide attack after all. And who is to say what groups will take it up in the future? Indeed, Pape's own argument suggests that we should not expect to find any stable necessary condition for suicide terror. One of his main claims is that suicide tactics are spreading in a process of social learning: "during the past 20 years, suicide terrorism has been steadily rising because terrorists have learned that it pays" (Pape, 2003, p. 344). The idea that the tactic will not spread beyond groups resisting occupation is, given Pape's data, no more compelling than the idea as of January 1987 that it would not spread beyond Hezbollah, given the data at that time.

In fact, we can already falsify the claim that occupation in Pape's sense is a necessary condition for suicide attack.³ On July 4, 2003 three men attacked a Shia mosque in Quetta, Pakistan using suicide tactics. On Christmas Day, 2003 a suicide bomber attempted to ram Pakistani President Perez Musharraf's motorcade with a truck full of explosives. Both instances were suicide terror attacks not carried out by a nationalist community occupied by a foreign democracy.⁴ The Global Terrorism Database, which records the 2003 attacks, registers 48 more suicide terror attacks in Pakistan in the years since. In total, that is 50 suicide attacks on a single non-democracy since the completion of Pape's book.⁵ So, much as one might incorrectly conclude in 1986 that being

³We thank Alice Gordon for pointing us toward the Pakistan case.

⁴The first attack was not mentioned in Pape's data, and the latter was classified as both an attack against the US by Al Qaeda and as part of the campaign of Kashmir Separatists against India.

⁵For those who like to quantify such things, Pakistan's POLITY score for 2003 is -5. Furthermore, Pape himself

associated with Hezbollah was a necessary condition for using suicide terror tactics, concluding that occupation by a democracy is necessarily linked to the use of suicide tactics in 2007 is also a mistake.⁶

If necessity were established, the second task would be to find out the likelihood of suicide terror given occupation. To do this, we need a representative sample of occupations. Pape claims to go one better and look at the entire universe. Pape's claim that he has examined the universe of occupations is dubious. To sustain his claim that occupation by a democracy is a necessary condition for suicide terror in the face of the 2001 attacks on the U.S., he needs a relatively generous definition of occupation. But there is a serious tension between using a definition broad enough to include Al Qaeda and using a definition limiting enough to support Pape's claim to have examined all of the occupations.

In the first paragraph of his response, Pape allows that clear occupation is not necessary, writing that suicide terrorism can be the product of "the terrorists' perception that territory they prize is under occupation, for example, Al Qaeda's conviction that governments on the Arabian peninsula represent an American occupation regime" (Pape, 2008, p. 275). Given this definition, it is surprising to see that the U.S. appears only four times on Pape's list of occupations, as occupier of Lebanon, Iraq, Arabia, and native American territories.⁷ Anyone who is following the current presidential campaign will notice that Germany, Japan, and South Korea are missing even though U.S. troops have been stationed there for the entire period Pape's Appendix 2 claims to cover. As Wade and Reiter (2007) point out, those with longer memories will wonder about U.S. occupations of Grenada, Panama, and Haiti.⁸ Most tellingly, Pape's list of occupations includes

writes that Pakistan has not been occupied, by the United States at least (Pape, 2005, p. 109).

⁶Geifman (1993, p. 21) and Gambetta (2005, p. 285) point out that the hypothesis could have been falsified by looking back before 1980, as Russian anarchists carried out suicide bomb attacks in a terrorist campaign in the early twentieth century.

⁷Oddly enough, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand do not appear as occupiers of indigenous populations, while Ecuador and Peru are both listed as occupying two distinct indigenous groups.

⁸Wade and Reiter (2007) raise some additional issues with this dataset. Pape bases his list of minority groups who might feel occupied on the Minorities at Risk (MAR) dataset. But for several states, he includes only a strict subset of the minorities identified by MAR. Also, they report that for several of the occupations, the dates of occupation were unavailable, and were proxied by the dates of conflict.

the U.S. occupation of Iraq, but not of Afghanistan. Even this short selection of omissions makes it clear that either Pape does not have the universe of occupations or his concept of occupation is specially tailored to make his case. Either way his argument fails.

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