Counter-Suicide-Terrorism: Evidence from House Demolitions

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Abstract

We examine whether house demolitions are an effective counterterrorism tactic against suicide terrorism. We link original longitudinal micro-level data on houses demolished by the Israeli Defense Forces with data on the universe of suicide attacks against Israeli targets. We show that during the second Intifada punitive house demolitions (those targeting Palestinian suicide terrorists and terror operatives) cause an immediate, significant decrease in the number of suicide attacks. The effect dissipates over time and by geographic distance. In contrast, we observe that precautionary house demolitions (demolitions justified by the location of the house but not related to the identity or any action of the house’s owner) cause a significant increase in the number of suicide terror attacks. The results are consistent with the view that selective violence is an effective tool to combat terrorist groups, whereas indiscriminate violence backfires.
Executive Summary

Although it is commonly argued that government policies to deter terrorism and disrupt the operations of terror organizations tend to be effective, alternative theoretical models suggest that they may have a boomerang effect. According to this view, harsh measures of counterterrorism backfire by fostering hatred and attempts to exact revenge. In particular, while counterterrorism policies typically affect the general population, the effectiveness of counterterrorism policies depends on their ability to target terror organizations directly.

However, despite the wide interest that counterterrorism policies draw and the abundance of related theoretical studies, there is little empirical evidence on the effectiveness of counterterrorism measures. Assessing the effectiveness of counterterrorism policies requires detailed micro-level data on terror attacks and counterterrorism operations. Unfortunately, such detailed data are typically not publicly available.

This paper attempts to fill this gap by linking novel micro-level data on house demolitions (a policy used by the Israeli Defense Forces [IDF] to combat and deter terrorism) and suicide attacks, empirically documenting the effects of house demolitions on future suicide attacks. We differentiate between the two main types of house demolitions carried out by the IDF: precautionary demolitions and punitive house demolitions. Precautionary demolitions are intended to prevent the launching of attacks from specific locations and are not related to activities carried out by the owners or occupants of the houses being demolished. In contrast, in punitive house demolitions, the IDF demolishes or seals houses that were home to Palestinian suicide terrorists or to individuals suspected, detained, or convicted of involvement in violent acts against Israelis.

Our analysis is based on original micro-level data. We use a longitudinal micro-level data set containing information on all punitive house demolitions during the second Palestinian uprising as well as all precautionary house demolitions between 2004 and 2005. For each house demolished we know the exact location of the house, the timing of the demolition, the house’s size, and the number of its residents. We link this data set with data on the universe of suicide terrorists during the same time period, including each terrorist’s timing of the attack and locality of residence. We augment our data with localities’ specific economic and demographic data, as well as with longitudinal variation of other counterterrorism measures imposed by the IDF. This
detailed data set allows us to use time and spatial variation to identify and quantify the effectiveness of house demolitions as a deterrence policy of counterterrorism.

We find that punitive house demolitions lead to fewer suicide attacks in the month following the demolitions. The effect of house demolition is significant and sizeable—a standard deviation increase in punitive house demolitions leads to a decrease of 11.7 percent in the number of suicide terrorists originating from an average district. Intriguingly, we find that in contrast to the deterrent effect of punitive house demolitions, precautionary demolitions (which are not related to activities of the houses’ owners and occupants) are associated with more suicide attacks. In particular, our estimates show that a standard deviation increase in precautionary house demolitions leads to a 48.7 percent increase in the number of suicide terrorists from an average district.

Our results are robust to alternative measures of house demolitions, such as the number of housing units demolished, number of residents affected, and the area size of demolished houses. The results are also robust to different specifications including a battery of control variables, counterterrorism measures, and fixed effects. Moreover, we examine the robustness of our results under alternative counterfactuals, estimate the persistence of the effects, and test whether these effects change directions over time.

The results indicate that, when targeted correctly, counterterrorism measures such as house demolitions provide the desired deterrent effect. When used indiscriminately, however, house demolitions lead to the radicalization of the population and backfire, resulting in more subsequent attacks.
Figure 1. Suicide terrorists and house demolitions, October 2000–December 2005
Figure 2. The dynamic effects of punitive demolitions on the number of suicide attacks (95% CI in shaded area)