

Rational Peasants or Religious Clubs

Eli Berman

University of California Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, UC San Diego

Background. Recent research on the psychology of terrorists indicates that most terrorism is usefully thought of not as an individual psychosis or as the effect of a theology of hate on impressionable individuals (Kruglanski, 2005), but as a tactic designed to achieve some feasible, rational goal, typically domestic political power. Rebel organizations use a variety of tactics to achieve their goals, including terrorism, kidnapping, conventional insurgency and sometimes political engagement. Hamas, Hezbollah, the Mahdi Army and the Taliban are examples of rebel organizations that switch tactics and use different tactics simultaneously.

Different *terrorism production functions* are relevant for different tactics. Rebels who turn to terrorism tend to operate against governments or occupying armies that are militarily superior, so that a) rebels must disperse themselves into low density networks, and b) leaks of intelligence make the rebel organizations extremely vulnerable to targeting and capture. A well resourced military with an active CT/COIN strategy will aggressively seek intelligence, creating a *market for leaks and defection*. Thus the tactical choices available to a given organization are limited by its' resilience to leaks and defection.

In May 2007 IGCC convened a multidisciplinary group of academics from the U.S. the UK and Israel together with officials from DHS, USAID, the State Department, and the U.S. military, to discuss research on terrorist organizations, as part of a larger effort to design a terrorism research agenda. Participants identified two broad theoretical approaches underpinning counterterrorism and counterinsurgency thinking by practitioners, both intelligence-based and addressing the structure of terrorist organizations.

1. The “rational peasant” model (Popkin, 1979) is the workhorse of conventional counterinsurgency theory, as practiced by U.S. forces against the Viet Cong. Rebels compete with government for the loyalty of some constituency of residents. Residents (disenfranchised as they may be) always have the choice of sharing intelligence with either the government or rebels (of which there may be several groups). This information can result in the capture of rebels. If rebels control territory (at least after dark) they can extort residents into not sharing information. Control by rebels allows tactics such as command-detonated roadside bombs, kidnapping and complex ambushes, which would otherwise be vulnerable to intelligence leaks by residents acting as informants. One key insight is that the terrorism production function for these tactics necessarily shares information with noncombatants, the “rational peasants,” in the Vietnamese context. This model is related to the “defiance” literature in criminology—aggressive treatment of civilians can undermine intelligence collection by government. Akerlof and Yellen (1994) have neatly packaged these insights in a tractable formal model. Though this model underlies the revised U.S. counterinsurgency manual (Petraeus and Amos, 2006) it is *critically dated*. It misses both the role of religion and the capability of radical religious organizations to destroy high value targets using terrorist attacks beyond the immediate conflict zone.

2. The “club” model applies to religious organizations, sects and mafias, whose members cooperatively produce some local public good (sometimes using violence) for their own benefit, such as law and order, or political power through terrorism. These organizations develop internal

relationships of trust in previous cooperative activities (sometimes nonviolent) which make them resilient to defection, even when carrying out high value attacks for which operatives face huge incentives (bribes) to leak intelligence. Clubs can operate disperse networks at distances and can employ high damage tactics unavailable to other organizations. Such tactics include hijacking, suicide attacks, and attacks using biological, chemical and nuclear weapons. *Critically, clubs can employ tactics whose production does not share information with noncombatants (such as suicide attacks), making them resilient to the standard “hearts and minds” approach to gain information from noncombatants.* Clubs tactics are the relevant threat for domestic terrorism in the U.S., since tactics which share information with U.S. residents would carry a prohibitive risk of leaks.

Activities. A. Explore the related literatures in criminology, counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, industrial organization and political development to develop a robust version of these two modeling approaches. We want models that both intelligence analysts and academics find credible. B. Test these models using data on international terrorism, including data which the U.S. military has shared with us on attacks in Iraq. After cleaning and coding, these data will allow us to match attacks and lethality to organizations, locations and tactics. Critically, this is open source research on declassified data, freeing us of potentially compromising dependence on the military.

Testing. We will conduct two mutually complementary studies of the relationship between how terrorists are organized, their choice of tactics, and the location of attacks. The first study will test the predictions outlined above on how tactical choices are constrained by organizational form. We will use original coding and expert surveys with anchoring vignettes (building on a current project conducted at CREATE) to measure the two independent variables: (1) whether groups control territory; and (2) the extent to which they operate as a club. To measure the dependent variable, the mix of tactics, we will aggregate information on attacks from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD). Since the pre-coded fields in the GTD do not map perfectly into the variation in tactics we seek to explain, we will recode a random sample of incidents and re-run the analysis on that sample. This first study is relevant to COIN and CT because it allows us to predict who endangers U.S. nationals and where, allowing CT efforts (domestic and foreign) to focus on credible threats.

Our second study will test two hypotheses that also have clear implications for counterterrorism policy. Both theoretical approaches, rational peasants and clubs, imply that terrorists' survival depends on a lack of intelligence leaks to government forces about their activities, the market for leaks and defection. The more complex the attack, the greater the terrorists' reliance on the population's discretion. This is one reason rebel organizations so often are social service providers; only they can successfully ensure the loyalty of either the community (in the rational peasant model) or the members (in the club model). Thus we expect that when government forces compete for locals' loyalties by providing services: (1) the overall rate of attacks will decline; and (2) the attacks will become less complex. Importantly though, the club theory predicts that government forces need to compete by providing the same kinds of services as militants, simply providing goods is not enough.

To test these hypotheses we draw on data from Iraq which CENTCOM is sharing. Working with the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at the United States Military Academy we are collecting precise geo-located data on terrorist attacks, civilian deaths, reconstruction spending, and basic community characteristics throughout the country. These data will allow us to use within-country variation in the intensity of terrorist violence as the dependent variable. The independent variable is the extent of competition over service provision, as measured by community level reconstruction spending. Since spending levels may be endogenous to violence we are currently negotiating with branches of the U.S. military to make internal organizational data available which will provide an instrument for reconstruction spending. Importantly, our data on reconstruction spending allow us to distinguish between large-scale reconstruction spending and programs that provide the same kinds of community services that insurgents offer.

Preliminary results from both these projects have begun to flow in, are informative, and tend to support these models.

Duration. This is a two year study, building on data collection for a current CREATE project. Model design and conference (below) could be completed by Fall 2008 with funding assured in Spring 2008. We believe that each of the two empirical studies will take about 18 months to fully test and circulate results in research seminars and among practitioners. That schedule could be accelerated with increased funding or with funding from partner agencies.

Collaboration within DHS COEs. We see potential synergies with two DHS affiliated groups.

- 1) The START center at the University of Maryland has an active data collection program on terrorist organizations to augment the GTD. We would like to collaborate with that group to broaden and deepen those data in a manner informed by theory, to allow the production function conjectures to be tested with more extensive international data. The START center also has a strong research component that draws on criminology, which is clearly relevant for the “rational peasant” and club production functions.
- 2) The CPASS center at Georgetown University, which is affiliated with the CREATE center, has excellent research capabilities in intelligence and analysis. Its’ scholars have deep experience identifying the practical implications of basic research on conflict processes. We would like to explore possible synergies with that group, both to test the market for leaks and defection approaches on analysts, and to explore the extent to which this approach can provide useful predictive tools relevant for homeland security.

Related Activities (not budgeted in project). A research workshop in the Fall gathering intelligence specialists from DHS, CTC, other domestic and foreign intelligence experts, criminologists, economists, political scientists and sociologists from the U.S. and abroad to discuss a focused set of questions in irregular warfare and homeland security.