Does Media Attention Elevate ISIS’s Platform and Increase Suicide Attacks?

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This paper analyzes how ISIS strategically utilizes resources and climate to plan suicide attacks. Ultimately, this paper seeks to correlate media attention in the previous month to ISIS suicide attacks in the subsequent month. Media attention creates a focal point for coordination between potential terrorists and ISIS, which further radicalizes a population. Increased media attention toward ISIS contributes to ISIS’s main goals: strike fear in civilians and recruit potential members. ISIS couples these two tactics, known as intimidation and outbidding, during and/or after periods with large media attention in the U.S. in order to maximize their payoffs. This paper analyzes media minutes aggregated from CNN, NBC, ABC, and CBS over a 48-month period and suicide attacks and attack deaths in the corresponding months. In addition to the influence of the media attention, retaliatory attacks, territorial acquisitions, propaganda in the form of decapitations or campaign announcements, and the months following Ramadan contribute to spikes in attacks. This paper suggests that media attention can be seen as an additional resource as well as a method of terrorist coordination between multiple players.

Television has long been a global platform for the dissemination of information. National outlets cover a variety of topics, including the economy, politics, and international events. Although a vital source for recent news and information, television has an incentive to sensationalize coverage in order to attract more viewers. Sensationalism is a tactic employed by the media to obtain and sustain viewership by covering triggering topics, such as war and terror. In some cases, the media chooses to maximize profits by increasing views over objectively spreading accurate information to the public. Media coverage tends to cover terrorist attacks in explicit detail in such a way that could encourage further acts of terrorism.

In order to counter terrorism, it is important to understand the complexity of its determinants. Terrorism is defined as “the premeditated use, or threat of use, of extranormal violence to obtain a political objective through intimidation or fear directed at a large audience” (Kydd & Walter, 2006). For the purpose of meaningful research, defining terrorists as rational actors is critical to understanding the mechanism between possible explanatory variables. Using this framework, economic tools can be applied to predicting and preventing future terrorist attacks.

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (also known as IS, The Islamic State, ISIL, and furthermore ISIS) is a Salafi jihadist movement that splintered off from al-Qaeda. ISIS has expressed a desire to establish an independent Islamic state in the Middle East. In order to obtain its mission, ISIS wishes to spread its message as far as possible. ISIS’s goals are complex and

* This paper was submitted as a graduation requirement to the Department of Economics, Terry College of Business, University of Georgia, Athens, GA (email: ). [Acknowledge your advisor and any others who provided support.]
varied from member to member, but for all intents and purposes, its main objectives can be simplified to: (1) damaging targets; (2) recruiting potential members; and (3) striking fear in target populations. As an anti-Western group, as demonstrated through their violent “Death to America” campaign, ISIS’s target population reaches far past the Levant. ISIS wishes to demonstrate their capacity to the Iraqi and Syrian masses, but specifically to send a message to the West.

Thomas Schelling, one of the fathers of traditional game theory, described how multiple individuals could reach a similar conclusion without direct communication (1960). Schelling describes this phenomenon as a “psychic moment” in which common values and subliminal information serve as a catalyst for coordination. In terms of terrorism, this meeting of the minds is known as a focal point for radicalization. In a multi-player game in which the ISIS organization is trying to recruit potential members, the media acts as a mouthpiece that spreads propaganda. In terms of ISIS radicalization, Salafist views serve as the common foundation to allow for coordination. Media coverage of Salafi terror serves as the platform for which groups and potential terrorists can coordinate their actions. This paper argues that the media serves as a means of fostering coordination and providing a mouthpiece to Salafi jihadists.

Although suicide terrorism has been thought to be the product of religious fanaticism alone, much research has emphasized its strategic nature and timing. Suicide terrorist attacks demonstrate an extreme willingness that serves as a costly signal to the masses that the group is resolute enough to inflict serious damage. Beyond just attrition purposes, suicide terrorism generates greater media attention due to its violent and extreme nature. The inherent nature of jihadism is to spread Salafism across the world. Beyond just a radicalization focal point for recruiting, media coverage of suicide terrorism serves as a transmitter of the costly signal. I theorize that once the media started to elevate the ISIS message, ISIS used this as a platform to reach the masses. ISIS leverages this platform when it’s at its highest to strike harder and more often, resulting in greater casualties. Not only does the media serve as a mouthpiece to radicalize supporters, but as a success measure for jihadists.

Research suggests that week-by-week media coverage intensified al-Qaeda attacks. This research can be strengthened with metrics from ISIS’s suicide campaign. Suicide attacks are especially violent and tend to generate more media attention. Using data compiled from Vanderbilt Television News Archive, I have been able to calculate minutes per month for CNN, MSNBC, ABC, and CBS. I constrain my research to these four stations, as they are the most prominent international news sources in the United States, which means they best represent the political climate. These four stations consistently generated ISIS-related coverage from 2013-2016. I predict that months with higher minutes devoted to ISIS coverage will lead to a higher number of ISIS suicide attacks and death per attacks in the corresponding month than months with lower minutes devoted to ISIS coverage.

I. Literature Review

Terrorist resources can be defined as funding, beliefs, members, etc. These resources are allocated towards attacks, propaganda, and even services such as education and training (Overgaard 1994). Resources, in a microeconomic framework, can also be viewed as a budget constraint (Carter 2006). Evidence shows a desire for terrorists to “frontload” attacks, rather than stretch resources (Carter 2006). The more damage people believe that a terrorist group has inflicted, the more donations they will receive from radical extremists. Specifically, radicals are
more likely to fund terrorists who are effective in inflicting damage. The more funds a terrorist organization has, the more income the organization has, thus shifting the budget constraint to the right. Thus, terrorists front load these attacks not only to create a lasting effect and provoke enemy targets in order to radicalize home audiences but also to hedge their bets on the promise that their budget constraint is dynamic (Lapan 1993). Kydd and Walter refer to this tactic as “outbidding”, in which a terrorist group utilizes the media not only to inflict fear but also to recruit those with matching ideologies (Kydd and Walter 2006).

Pape (2003) explores how suicide terrorism can be a logical tactic to gain concessions and inflict maximum damage. Pape concludes that terrorists select suicide terrorism because it is a strategy that “pays” the best. Further, suicide terrorism should not be seen as a method to promote fanatical hatred, but rather to inflict fear. Pape utilizes data from the late 19th century and observes trends in suicide terror campaigns. This paper seeks to further extend Pape’s analysis into the 21st century, as well as to conduct a regression for certain incentives, such as territorial gains and propaganda.

Berrebi and Lakdawalla (2007) discuss how terrorist attacks are both strategic and timed. Using examples from Israel, Berrebi and Lakdawalla, the paper concludes that terrorists attack methodically based on current events and context. The authors also conclude that there are certain fixed effects for terrorism, such as religious holidays, territorial acquisitions, and monthly effects. The inclusion of this fixed effect accounts for several confounding aspects of Islamic terror, including the end of Ramadan. For example, many Iraqis celebrate the end of Ramadan known as Eid al-Fitr. While Iraqis celebrated in Khan Bani Saad, ISIS detonated an ice truck bomb in a crowded square, killing 120 people.

Gill et al (2018) discuss how ideological influences work in part with rational calculations to aid terrorist attack planning. The authors predicts that attack planning is both strategic and timed rationally within organizations. They utilize autobiographical research from within terrorist cells to conclude that most likely, terrorists do not attack randomly or impulsively. The paper finds that across fifteen studies, the number of “planners” ranged from 13.5 percent to 87 percent with a mean of 39.6 percent and a median of 37 percent.

Schelling, a pioneer in traditional game theory, describes a “psychic moment,” as a scenario in which individuals choose aligning actions, even without direct communication (Schelling, 1960). In terms of ISIS radicalization, Salafism is a common value system that underlies the connection between ISIS and potential terrorists themselves. It is noted that Salafism does not automatically lead to one becoming an ISIS fighter. The media plays a role in radicalization because it is increasing communication of ISIS’s values, actions, as well as the individual’s payoffs if they were to join. The media creates a “focal point” that catalyzes the interaction between ISIS and those inclined to commit Salafi terror. This event is stochastic, meaning those who receive the signal and choose to radicalize is random. Therefore, it is assumed that media is a transmitter of the signal, which allows ISIS attack coverage to serve as propaganda. Burke (2016) describes how terrorism has become more “peer-to-peer”, rather than utilizing a central server. Media serves as a free platform which terrorists use to spread their message.

Jetter (2017) observes a causal effect between U.S. news coverage and Al-Qaeda attacks, possibly signaling that media catalyzes terrorist attacks. Jetter utilizes controls, such as the number of supporters and non-attack coverage, to isolate the correlation between FOX media minutes devoted to Al-Qaeda and attack deaths. Jetter theorizes that media coverage radicalizes existing members of Al-Qaeda, thus inciting violence against Westerners. The paper’s main
conclusion is that sensationalized media coverage incites violence in terrorists because it demonstrates that their costly signals are “paying off.” Jetter’s research suggests that al-Qaeda members utilize their already existent platform to strike again. This paper seeks to build on Jetter’s findings to further analyze the determinants of terrorism, such as retaliation, Ramadan, propaganda, and territorial acquisitions.

II. Hypothesis

Terrorist organizations time their attacks optimally in order to extract the highest payoffs possible. ISIS has a large network of supporters across the world, including in the United States. ISIS is well-informed regarding the level of coverage they are garnering. ISIS takes an opportunity while their platform is elevated to strike again. Therefore, I predict that previous months (t-1) with higher minutes devoted to ISIS will lead to a higher number of ISIS suicide attacks in the corresponding months (t) than previous months with fewer minutes devoted to ISIS.

III. Data Collection

The Vanderbilt Television News Archive is self-described as “the world’s most extensive and complete archive of television news.” This paper uses VTNA to compile media attention in the previous month (t-1), denoted by variable “media”. In order to measure the average minutes per day of ISIS coverage per station, I compiled daily second totals for ISIS coverage across CBS, NBC, ABC, and CNN. These four networks are not only the most watched stations across the countries, but they are also the most consistent with ISIS coverage. FOX News was originally added, then omitted due to lack of foreign affairs coverage. The VTNA compiles data searchable by keywords. For this data, the focus is on minutes per month of the month previous to the suicide data (t-1). In order to keep the correlation between coverage and attacks temporal, the period before the current t is measured in order to account for possible reverse causality.

The Suicide Attack Database (SAD) housed at the University of Chicago has compiled every suicide attack since 1968. For this study, I have compiled attacks committed by the Islamic State, Islamic State of Iraq, and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. All three groups are the same fundamental Islamic State but have changed names and supporters over time. Most of the attacks were carried out against the Iraqi government, the Syrian government, the Syrian Democratic Forces, the United States, and the Pakistani government. I used the SAD to collect data for “attacks”, denoting total suicide attacks conducted by ISIS in month t.

In order to account for the effects of other explanatory variables, I accessed the Wilson Center’s Timeline: The Rise, Spread and Fall of the Islamic State. The timeline documents every ISIS gain and loss of territory, every airstrike against ISIS, every suicide attack centered around Ramadan, and every campaign announcement. In order to account for these effects, I included them as binary categorical variables. For all intents and purposes, the territorial gains, retaliatory effects, Eid al-Fitr effects, and campaign announcements were tabulated in the current time-period t, due to their immediate nature.

The variable “gain” signals a month where ISIS sought territorial acquisitions. I included this variable because suicide terrorism is an effective way to gain territory. Pape (2003) describes how suicide terrorism is often a tool used to regain territory. In the months that ISIS sought territory, it is expected that suicide attacks, and attacks in general, will increase.
Attacks believed to be on retaliatory grounds, such as responses to airstrikes and territorial losses within a given period $t$. The variable “retaliation” signals a month where ISIS’s opponents conducted airstrikes against the Islamic State. Losses in life and territory could further spark radicalization and a desire to conduct mass attacks for revenge, or to regain lost territory.

The variable “Ramadan” signals the months of June and July, which includes the holiday of Eid al-Fitr. A possible theory could be ISIS’s desire to coordinate resources toward fewer, yet more deadly attacks after the month of Ramadan. Ramadan is a focal point in the Muslim faith, so ISIS wishes to attract as much attention as possible after the holiday ends.

Lastly, “announce” signals a month in which an ISIS leader announced a specific suicide campaign in the previous month ($t-1$). This variable helps account for propaganda within the Islamic State itself, which serves as a positive indicator of increased attacks in the subsequent month. The variable “announce” includes months where ISIS video-taped public executions and/or announced campaigns against the West.

IV. Summary Statistics

Table 1. Summary statistics for media attention (media), retaliatory effects (retal), territorial acquisitions (gain), campaign and propaganda announcements (announce), months following Ramadan (ramadan), suicide attacks (attacks) and suicide attack deaths (deaths).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Obs</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>media</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>.33.82476</td>
<td>.38.31592</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>148.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>retal</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>.3541667</td>
<td>.4833211</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gain</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>.3333333</td>
<td>.4763931</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ramadan</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>.0833333</td>
<td>.2793102</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>announce</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>.3541667</td>
<td>.4833211</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attacks</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>11.8125</td>
<td>7.747769</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>deaths</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>144.5208</td>
<td>102.4161</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>583</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

V. Method

Ultimately, I seek to measure the correlation between media attention in the previous month with suicide attacks and deaths in the corresponding month. I calculated the total minutes per previous month attacks in one column and totaled attacks and deaths in the subsequent month. Media attention was collected by measuring the number of minutes devoted to each station, then taking the average in order to determine media minutes per station.

Past research suggests that most suicide attack deaths occur during the summer months, including the holiday Eid al-Fitr. Further, ISIS outlines specific campaign outlines, in which leaders of the group call for action against Westerners and civilians in the Levant. I predict that such campaign announcements will be positive predictors of increased suicide attacks, as supporters are rallied by their leaders to strike.
Below, media attention and announcement of campaigns are measured in month \((t-1)\) in order to account for lag time. Territorial acquisitions (gain), retaliation effects (retaliation) and Ramadan (ramadan) are contemporaneous, so their effects are measured in the current period \((t)\). Below are the models for suicide attacks and suicide attack deaths:

1. **Suicide Attacks**
   \[
   \text{Suicide Attacks}_t = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 (\text{media}_{t-1}) + \alpha_2 (\text{gain}_t) + \alpha_3 (\text{retaliation}_t) + \alpha_4 (\text{ramadan}_t) + \alpha_5 (\text{announce}_{t-1})
   \]

2. **Suicide Attack Deaths**
   \[
   \text{Suicide Attack Deaths}_t = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 (\text{media}_{t-1}) + \alpha_2 (\text{gain}_t) + \alpha_3 (\text{retaliation}_t) + \alpha_4 (\text{ramadan}_t) + \alpha_5 (\text{announce}_{t-1})
   \]

VI. Results

Table 2. Regression for Media Attention (in period t-1), Suicide Attacks (in period t)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>Number of obs</th>
<th>F(5, 42)</th>
<th>Prob &gt; F</th>
<th>R-squared</th>
<th>Adj R-squared</th>
<th>Root MSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model</td>
<td>1456.13362</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>291.226724</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>8.96</td>
<td>0.0000</td>
<td>0.5161</td>
<td>0.4585</td>
<td>5.7013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>1365.17888</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>32.5042591</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2821.3125</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>60.0279255</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| attacks   | Coef.  | Std. Err. | t    | P>|t| | 95% Conf. Interval |
|-----------|--------|-----------|------|------|-------------------|
| media     | .157429| .0244469  | 6.44 | 0.000| .1080931 - .206765|
| gain      | -.2033663 | 1.978615 | -0.10 | 0.919 | -4.196373 - 3.78964 |
| retaliation| -.8703883 | 1.945506 | -0.45 | 0.657 | -4.796578 - 3.055801 |
| ramadan  | -10.68936 | 3.216076 | -3.32 | 0.002 | -17.17966 - 4.199052 |
| announce | -3.626604 | 2.065344 | -1.76 | 0.086 | -7.794638 - .54143 |
| _cons    | 8.715436 | 1.318455 | 6.61 | 0.000 | 6.054686 - 11.37619 |
As seen in the table above, for every minute devoted to ISIS per station, the number of suicide attacks increase by .157. For every minute devoted to ISIS per station, the number of suicide deaths increases by 1.685. This suggests that media attention affects terrorist tactics. It is probable that ISIS harnesses the media platform to commit suicide attacks.

The research has found that the month of July has fewer attacks on average than the remaining months. Despite a lower number of attacks, ISIS killed and wounded more people during the month of July. Research suggests that the summer months, which includes the month of Ramadan, see an influx in terrorist attacks after Ramadan is over. On July 3, 2016, ISIS militants carried out a suicide bombing that killed more than 200 people on a busy shopping street in Baghdad. The attack was ISIS’s deadliest bomb attack on civilians to date (Wilson Center, 2018). Past research suggests that Islamic terror may subside during Ramadan, which could lead to an increase in the subsequent months. On average, suicide attacks in the months of June and July decreased by 10.689, but suicide deaths increased by 49.190. The aforementioned attack on Baghdad could be responsible for the increase in deaths suggested by the model. In terms of territorial acquisitions, both suicide deaths and attacks decreased in months when ISIS focused on gaining land. In months when ISIS gained territory, suicide attacks decreased by - .203 and suicide attacks decreased by -28.213, on average. This suggests that ISIS devotes its resources toward acquiring and targeting military installations during months of territorial gains. The data suggest that months with retaliatory attacks were more lethal. Although months with retaliatory attacks saw a -.87 decrease in attacks, these months also saw an average 28.213 deaths. These observations are in accordance with the theory that U.S., Iraqi, Egyptian, or Turkish airstrikes have a positive association with the lethality in that month. Although there are fewer attacks in these months, the regression suggests that the retaliatory effect encourages suicide terrorists to strike harder, leading to increased deaths. Lastly, internal propaganda
stemming from within ISIS is an important consideration. During months with increased propaganda, on average, suicide attacks decreased by -3.62 and suicide deaths increased by 21.56.

VII. Conclusion

At this time, there are no accurate predictors of ISIS supporter size on a per month basis, and this data would be strengthened with that information. Estimates from 2014 predict that ISIS had a terrorist network of anywhere from 25,000-50,000 supporters and fighters across the globe (Wilson Center, 2018). Predictions also estimate that ISIS was gaining supporters at around 1,200 per month from 2013-2015 (Wilson Center, 2018). It is even more difficult to determine the number of fighters in the region I analyze, which is predominantly in Syria and Iraq. In addition to this complexity, suicide attacks such as the November 2014 attacks in Paris present a unique complication in addressing how many supporters lie dormant in countries outside of the Levant. While international authorities attempt to predict the number of ISIS supporters across the globe, an accurate estimate is elusive. Furthermore, the Suicide Attack Database (SAD) only includes data through 2016. For further research, data is needed from 2017 and 2018, in the presence of high media attention and low territorial claims. In these years, ISIS lost large amounts of territory, yet retained large amounts of supporters.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that the previous month’s media coverage of terrorism encourages next month’s suicide attacks. The U.S. needs to rein in its sensationalist coverage of ISIS, as it gives the radical Salafism group a platform. Suicide terrorism, in particular, draws in more media coverage. This balance of coverage is difficult, as sensational media draws in more viewers, but potentially encourages more violence. Media must inform the public while practicing self-restraint in a way that limits terrorists’ benefits.

REFERENCES


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Vanderbilt Television News Archive. 2018.