

When Terrorists Compete: The Marketplace of Violence

John Sawyer, Jonathan Wilkenfeld
Georgetown University, START

Project Scope: This research project introduces economic and business strategy analysis techniques to the study of competition between terrorist groups in order to explain why they form or turn to terrorism, how they behave, and why some groups discontinue the use of terrorism. This model assumes that there is a demand for political violence, creating a marketplace where terrorists win political and/or material support in exchange for their production of violence. The size of the demand, barriers to entry, production costs, and level of competition within the market all work together to determine the violent behavior of each terror group. The initial tests of this model are a large-N statistical analysis to examine the universality of the argument and an in-depth case study of Northern Ireland over 30 years to provide a better understanding of how the market forces interact.

Recent Progress: I spent nearly three months in the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland in Summer/Fall 2007 gathering data on the cooperation and competition between violent Republican groups from 1968 to 1998. This highly qualitative data-collection is ongoing, using resources at the Library of Congress, and I will be going for a second, six-week research trip in May 2008. This presentation will focus on the large-N study, which is closer to completion. I have collected the terrorist incident data and have begun coding the market features each group faces.

Relevance: This research is highly relevant to the Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences because it formalizes a major factor of terrorist behavior that has thus far been dealt with in an ad hoc manner. Recent scholarship has begun to highlight the importance of competition, especially in explaining when groups turn to suicide terrorism, but the issue has not yet been systematically addressed. Moreover, this project challenges the conventional policy wisdom of promoting terrorist discord by demonstrating the potential for monopolist groups to be comparatively more peaceful.

Publications: None. This is the first presentation of the preliminary findings for this project.

Future Plans: This research will form the basis of my doctoral dissertation. More immediately, using the feedback from this conference, I will present the large-N study at the International Studies Association Annual Conference in San Francisco on March 28, 2008. I will then prepare the paper for publication in a major academic journal. Also, part of the Northern Ireland case study will be presented at the Mitchell Conference at Queens University, Belfast, on May 22, 2008 (pending acceptance). This will also be turned into an article for publication.