Old Dominion University

ODU Digital Commons

2012

Identifying Factors that Influence Terrorist Decisions and Target Selection

Barry C. Ezell
Old Dominion University, bezell@odu.edu

Joshua Behr
Old Dominion University, jbehr@odu.edu

Andrew Collins
Old Dominion University, acollins@odu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/vmasc_pubs

Part of the Defense and Security Studies Commons, Emergency and Disaster Management Commons, Public Policy Commons, and the Terrorism Studies Commons

Identifying Factors that Influence Terrorist Decisions and Target Selection

Barry C. Ezell, *Virginia Modeling, Analysis, and Simulation Center, Old Dominion University*
Joshua Behr, *Virginia Modeling, Analysis, and Simulation Center, Old Dominion University*
Andrew Collins, *Virginia Modeling, Analysis, and Simulation Center, Old Dominion University*

Identifying Factors that Influence Terrorist Decisions and Target Selection

Barry C. Ezell, Joshua Behr, and Andrew Collins

Abstract

Currently, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) elicits probabilistic judgments from the intelligence community on actions terrorists may take to attack the continental U.S. For example, how likely is the adversary to choose agent 'x' over agent 'y' or target 'a' over target 'b'? Eliciting these types of judgments is difficult and time consuming. The National Academies and others have suggested that a better approach may be to elicit information on adversary's preferences, perceptions, and capabilities and use this information to calculate probabilities of interest to DHS. Some terrorist groups are thinking about using weapons of mass destruction (WMD), each with its own values, perceptions of reality, and capabilities. This presentation details the findings on the factors & relationships among factors that lead to a terrorist decision to initiate an attack against the continental U.S as well as target selection. To accomplish this, we assembled international experts in WMD, adversary modeling, political science, terrorism, psychiatry, social sciences as well as experts from national laboratories, the Commonwealth of Virginia State Fusion Center, and Hampton Roads Emergency Management.

This paper provides a summary of the findings from an Adaptive Adversary Workshop. In this paper, we provide an overview of the motivation for and design of the workshop as well as 19 emerging themes. The purpose of the workshop was to illicit expert opinions on terrorist decision-making and target selections in an effort to improve our understanding of adversaries (individuals, local/regional groups, transnational groups, states) who may initiate a bioterrorism attack in the form of releasing biological agents upon U.S. interests. Furthermore, these expert opinions are intended to be used to inform Bayesian Belief Network (BBN) models of terrorist networks. These models must be informed or populated with substantive information about the intelligent and adaptive adversary who may initiate an attack. To this end, a conceptual framework, informed broadly by the social sciences community, is intended to capture the terrorists' motivations, methods, and decision calculi.

Currently, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) elicits probabilistic judgments from the intelligence community on actions that terrorists may take to attack the continental United States (CONUS). For example, how likely is the adversary (terrorist) to choose agent X over agent Y or target A over target B? But eliciting such judgments is difficult and time-consuming. Some terrorist groups are thinking about using weapons of mass destruction (WMD), each group having its own values, perceptions of reality, and capabilities. The National Academies and others have suggested that a better approach might be to elicit information on the adversary's values, perceptions, and capabilities and use that information to calculate probabilities of interest to DHS.

Adaptive Adversary Workshop

The Adaptive Adversary Workshop was a one-day workshop focused on determining the factors that lead to a terrorist decision to initiate an attack against CONUS as well as to the selection of targets. To this end, we assembled international experts in WMD, adversary modeling, political science, terrorism, psychiatry, and social sciences; professionals from local law enforcement, the DHS Office of Risk Management, the Commonwealth of Virginia State Fusion Center, Hampton Roads Emergency Management, and the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission; and experts from the Sandia National Laboratories. These experts included Dr. Jessica Stern of the Hoover Institution's Task Force on National Security and Law, who also served on President Bill Clinton's National Security Council staff in 1994–1995; Dr. Ian Lustick, professor of political science at the University of Pennsylvania, who has written and edited more than twenty books on terrorism-related issues; Dr. John Lathrop of Strategic Insights, whose research focuses on counterterrorism and risk management accounting for the adaptive adversary; and Mr. George Gabriel, manager for security, preparedness, and emergency management for Whitney Bradley and Brown Inc., who recently authored the terrorism response plan for the city of Newport News, Virginia.

      The invited participants were given the opportunity to make presentations based on their own research and experience on the subject of terrorism. They were then asked to engage in three moderated discussion-based sessions addressing factors influencing terrorist attack decisions, target selections, and prevailing taxonomies. Other invited participants were encouraged to ask questions and provide input via a live streaming blog during the discussions. These discussions were captured and data were collected via audio recording, written transcript, and data collector notes.

Emerging Themes

Findings covered nineteen themes ranging from individual motivations to group dynamics, U.S. response strategies, undisclosed terrorist motivations, and modeling methodologies. These themes are shown in the table below.

	Title	Description
1	Threat Shifting: Shell Game or Not?	Terrorists do in fact respond to countermeasures. An increase in vigilance and security at a venue decreases the likelihood of an attack at that venue. Although it is recognized that the threat may shift to other targets, target hardening still has the effect of reducing targets and decreasing the overall probability of an attack.
2	Two Cultures (Modelers and the Intel Community)	The challenge is to understand the terrorists' objectives so that their decision-making processes may be modeled. To do this, modelers need to closely collaborate with experts within the intelligence community to gain a better understanding of the objectives of the radial Islamists, their hierarchy, etc. The important point is that we don't build models first and elicit the opinions of experts afterward. We need to start with the narratives of terrorist processes and then fit our tools to that. Unfortunately, the connection between the expert intelligence and tool fitting has not yet been made.
3	Organized Crime, Organized Terrorism	Terrorism is not an individual, isolated person or attack but rather an enterprise with leadership. Therefore, organized terrorism can be approached in much the same manner as organized crime. With such an approach it is imperative to focus on and understand the hierarchal structure of the organization, not the motivations of the individual. Debilitating the overall structure of the organization minimizes the consequences of any attacks.
4	Homegrown Violent Extremist (HGVE)	Exportation of terrorism gives us opportunities to monitor terrorist travel and communications, but this is not the case with the HGVE. We are now seeing the radicalized homegrown terrorist; less controllable by an organization, this type of radical is, by extension, less predictable in the size and nature of the act he may commit. This unpredictability is exacerbated by a lack of understanding as to what motivates the HGVE.
5	Cover All My Bases	Terrorists are heavily invested in instilling fear and breaking down the bonds of trust between society and government, as well as in disrupting the economy and forcing states and organizations to continue investing heavily in counterterrorism measures. As a consequence, we become locked in a fear, blame, and spending spiral, underscoring huge discrepancies between our risk perceptions and the probability of actual attacks.
6	Political Violence as a Dramatic Production (Terrorism is Theater) with Four	*Solipsistic terrorism:* I hit you and I show us; recruiting cast members. The objective is not necessarily to kill or harm as many Americans as possible but, rather, to inspire recruitment.

Judo: I hit you, you hit me, but help me hit yourself even harder; triggering audience to attack the stage. What the terrorist really |

	Title	Description
	Types of Interactions	wants here is an overreaction, exposing the target to more costs and exaggerated threats. The optimal response to this tactic is to minimize the effects by not overreacting. *Ricochet:* I hit you, you hit me. *Classic terrorism:* Most advanced; it is rare. We are not there yet; essentially, we are going to attack you until you stop. This is what the United States did to Japan.
7	Natural Systems Paradigm	Terrorist organizations exist on a spectrum from accomplishment of goals—changing the world, expressing themselves to an audience—to maintenance of goals—keeping members, raising funds, and taking care of their supports. When organizations shift to pure maintenance objectives, they begin to strategically plan attacks for the purpose of recruitment. As a consequence they often transition into a purely criminal organization. The instrumental goal of changing the world thus becomes a marketing strategy.
8	Terrorism as a Mark of Identity	Individuals are drawn to terrorist organizations for numerous reasons, including money, power, and prestige, and often for a sense of belonging―an identity with dignity. This identity with dignity is a powerful motivation for joining and is often the initial reason. It is not until later on that recruits become indoctrinated and adopt the ideology of the organization.
9	Popcorn and the Root Cause	Assume that terrorists are like kernels of popcorn: terrorists are constantly looking for when the heat is hottest (e.g., when a state's prestige is on the line during a cease fire); that is when they stage an event so that they can get as many kernels to pop as possible. Your task should not be to neutralize the kernels that are going to pop but rather to turn down the heat so that fewer pop. This requires determining root causes and demotivating the organization.
10	The Golden Message	An important question is whether the effect of a terrorist attack on recruitment can be mitigated. The most efficient way to reduce the motivation to join a terrorist organization is by managing the response. An American response should communicate the golden message is that America is resilient.
11	Scenario Building	Scenario building leads to a limitless number of imaginable scenarios or possibilities. When someone tells a story and provides a lot of detail, the story becomes entrancing, and that threat or scenario gets most of the attention and money.
12	Talk to the Adversary	We should study the adaptive adversary by looking at and talking to him. When we start with a logical model, we are really beginning with a satanic model of the adversary, but this is different from empirical reality. If we focus on the effect of the adversary's resentment on his behavior rather than on the disgust, fear, etc., that his behavior generates, we can better understand the adversary's thoughts and beliefs and thus are in a better position to counter them.

	Title	Description
13	Emotionally Charged Communications	Much can be learned from the conflicts that terrorist organizations have with one another. It doesn't matter if the communications are secret; it just matters if the communications are emotionally charged. Look at conversation following an event: are the participants interested in glorifying a cause or in achieving some other goal? We can learn a lot about an organization by paying attention to what it is telling its audience; this is called discourse analysis. It is how we learn about the constituents: the conversation goes back and forth between "we ought to initiate attacks" and "we ought to hold back."
14	Lone Wolf	There are growing numbers of self-motivated and self-educated homegrown terrorists who simply feel as though they have been slighted and are waging their own personal jihad. Occurrences of lone wolf attacks are about 1 in a million. Logically, then, there are about 300 of them in the United States. But without any data, the lone wolf threat is difficult to assess. Therefore, we ought to look at the bottleneck: the ability to focus in on those that have both knowledge and access as well as on those who are beginning to exhibit telltale signs of radicalization.
15	Multiple Objectives and Multiple Targets	The objective of the foot operative may be different from the strategic objective of the leadership; the organization is multilayered and populated by individuals with different, perhaps competing, objectives. Thus, when evaluating multiple targets, we need to understand that there may be multiple objectives. Those potential targets that tend to rise to the top of the pile are those that achieve several objectives rather than just one. We can learn about some of these objectives by looking at the documents we capture; they tell us the types of targets and their values (e.g., *The Al Qaeda Training Manuel,* ed. J. Post).
16	Bureaucratic Competition	If the United States and the Soviets are competing, there is a game between the CIA and KGB that is driven by the petty things of concern to individuals—machismo—rather than the bigger strategy of national concerns. We might want to think of the competition between groups as involving more personal issues as well. Perhaps al-Qaeda operatives are motivated by the desire to show us that they can do what they do because they've done it before. How would a model capture that?
17	Political Violence as Demand	Political violence may be viewed as a demand issue. When people become angry, they are more apt to turn to violence. If you can make them less angry, the demand goes down and the violence goes down. So it is useful to view it also as a supply issue. Violence occurs when people can profit by using it. If they want something from you, you are in a position where you can negotiate; this can then become a political relationship.
18	Comfort Level as a Constraint	Most criminal organizations have a comfort level in terms of what they are capable of and willing to do. Many don't stray beyond

	Title	Description
		their comfort zone. If we harden certain infrastructure, they may continue to target the same areas because they are comfortable with them. What they are not comfortable with may never make it into their playbook.
19	Mirroring the Adversary	The temptation is to model the adversary as though the adversary is shaped like we are: top down and rational. Another alternative is to model the adversary in the way it is more convenient for us to envision: motivated by blood thirst. The challenge here is not one of us versus them but rather of us versus our conceptualization of them.

Conclusion

This paper has summarized the findings from an Adaptive Adversary Workshop, in which we elicited expert opinions on terrorist decision-making and target selections in order to improve our understanding of adversaries (individuals, local/regional groups, transnational groups, states) who may initiate a bioterrorism attack upon U.S. interests. These expert opinions are being used to inform Bayesian Belief Network (BBN) models of terrorist networks, which require substantive information about the intelligent and adaptive adversary who may initiate an attack. To this end, a conceptual framework, informed broadly by the social sciences community, is intended to capture the terrorists' motivations, methods, and decision calculi.