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Devotion to God or to the Collective?

Understanding the relationship between religion and popular support for suicide bombing:

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Abstract

Suicide terrorism has become an increasingly popular tactic used predominantly by religiously motivated sub-state groups. This suggests that such organizations are particularly successful in using suicide terrorism while maintaining (and perhaps increasing) their popular support. This success could be a product of devotion to specific religious creeds (Hypothesis 1) or of devotion to the collective which is encouraged and demonstrated through participation in collective religious rituals (Hypothesis 2). In an analysis of data from a nationally representative survey of 1151 Palestinian Muslims Hypothesis 2 was confirmed; support for suicide terrorism carried out by Palestinian Islamist organizations was predicted by frequency of Mosque attendance but not by prayer frequency. It is concluded that support for suicide terrorism is unrelated to devotion to specific religious beliefs. Instead collective religious rituals that encourage and demonstrate self-sacrificial devotion to the collective may increase support for suicide terrorism carried out by religiously motivated organizations.

Introduction

Although the coupling of suicide and killing for political purpose is not new (Laquer, 1999; Ohnuki-Tierney, 2002), the modern practice of suicide bombing, or more generally “suicide terrorism”, first gained prominence with the 1983 Hezbollah attack on the barracks of U.S. Marines stationed in Lebanon. Suicide terrorism is a growing phenomena and much of that growth appears to be a result of its increased use by religiously motivated organizations. In the 20 years prior to 2001 it is estimated that 188 acts of suicide terrorism were carried out mostly by organizations with non-religious motivations (Pape, 2003). However, between 2000 and 2004 over 400 such attacks occurred, at least 70% of which were carried out by religiously motivated organizations (Atran, 2004). This growing association between religion and suicide terrorism may be partly a result of the role religion plays in encouraging popular support for this tactic and the groups that employ it. Almost all insurgent organizations, including those that use suicide terrorism, require a threshold of passive and active popular support to survive (Kasfir, 2002; Weinstein, 2003). At the very least they require the acquiescence of “constituent” communities in supplying their young for missions entailing certain violent death. Moreover, most insurgent organizations that use terrorism do so with the intention of inspiring *greater* levels of popular support for their organizations and causes (Gunaratna, 2002; Pape, 2003; Satre, 1967). Given the increasing use of suicide terrorism by religiously motivated organizations it seems possible that religion may help to overcome some special difficulties in using suicide terrorism to obtain popular support.

There is some evidence demonstrating an empirical association between beliefs in or identification with “political Islam” and support for suicide terrorism amongst Muslims (cf., Haddad & Khashan, 2002). Nevertheless, despite the appearance of an association between

religiosity and support for suicide terrorism, the meaning of this connection is unclear. Particularly troubling are connotations that support for suicide terrorism may be somehow a function of specific religious beliefs or cultures (Brooks, 2002; Calvert, 2002, 2003). Because religiously motivated suicide terrorism is currently almost exclusively carried out by Muslim organizations there is a tendency to see a causal relationship between Islam and suicide terrorism. A competing perspective argues that groups seeking political power utilize religious communal authority (Fox, 1999; Juergensmeyer, 2001) and take advantage of religious communal practices to mobilize aggrieved and frustrated populations with often a poor knowledge of Islam (cf., Paz, 2004) to support suicide bombing as a military strategy.

Thus there are two alternative hypotheses explaining the evident relationship between religion and suicide terrorism. The first hypothesis is that specific religious beliefs encourage support for suicide terrorism. Religious beliefs might be helpful in justifying the loss of life amongst innocent civilians that is caused by suicide bombings. This is particularly so given the indiscriminate nature of suicide terrorism which often kills people belonging to the bombers' own ethnic or religious groups. Unlike other terrorism, suicide terrorism poses another specific problem: the certain, planned loss of life of the perpetrators (Merari, 2004). Indeed, some have argued that self-immolation is primary to suicide terrorism (Gambetta, 2004). High levels of religious beliefs, particularly a belief in an afterlife and in the holiness and justification of martyrdom, might then be necessary to justify the certain loss of life amongst the bombers themselves. Indeed, without these beliefs it may be all too easy to view the organizations recruiting suicide bombers as manipulators preying on vulnerable individuals to send them to their death. If specific religious beliefs do encourage support for suicide terrorism then variance

personal levels of devotion to relevant religions should predict individual variance in support for suicide terrorism within a community.

Notwithstanding a potential link between specific religious beliefs and support for suicide terrorism, research into religious belief in general would predict that personal religiosity may be unrelated to support for suicide terrorism. Personal devotion to a higher spiritual being and to a religion has been hypothesized to assuage existential anxieties (Atran & Norenzayan, 2004). While some have argued that this devotion has negative implications for out-group tolerance (Pyszczunski, Greenberg & Solomon, 1999)¹ others have demonstrated that increasing individual mortality salience positively influences a belief in “foreign” spiritual beings. For example, priming Christians to consider their own mortality leads to increased belief in the power of Buddhist prayer (Atran & Norenzayan, 2004). Related research has demonstrated that devotion to God is negatively related to intolerance and approval of aggression towards religious out-groups if beliefs in religious “exclusivity” are controlled for (Hansen & Norenzayan, 2004).

The second hypothesis explaining the apparent link between religion and support for suicide terrorism focuses on the organizing characteristics of religion. This hypothesis does not infer a relationship between specific religious beliefs, or devotion to such beliefs, and support for suicide terrorism. Rather, it sees an individual’s support for suicide terrorism as being a function of his or her devotion to the collective, a devotion which is encouraged and demonstrated through collective religious rituals. Communal religious ritual has a unifying characteristic (Durkheim, 1912; 1995) that helps to overcome collective action problems (Irons, 2001) and to increase intragroup cooperation (Sosis & Ruffle, 2003). Communal acts of religious devotion such as

¹ For example, research into Terror Management Theory (e.g., Pyszczunski, Greenberg & Solomon, 1999) has shown that increasing mortality salience (and thus presumably the need for non-rational beliefs in God or ideology) leads to aggression and intolerance when a participant’s world-view is attacked. However, this conflates the impact of belief in God on intolerance with threat to such beliefs.

synchronized prayer or costly sacrifice during public religious rituals are mutual displays of non-rational passionate commitment to the collective (Atran & Norenzayan, 2004); a commitment that could have evolved to bind large groups of “fictive kin” (Nesse, 1999) and that may be abused by modern political organizations that ask people to sacrifice themselves as a display of passionate commitment to the group and the political cause (Atran, 2003). If the second hypothesis is correct we would expect that individuals who support suicide terrorism do so not because of specific religious beliefs but because of their devotion to community that is encouraged and demonstrated by their participation in collective religious rituals.

The research reported here evaluated these hypotheses by investigating the relationship between religion and support for suicide terrorism within the Palestinian Muslim population living in the West Bank and Gaza. More specifically, support for suicide terrorism was regressed on prayer frequency (personal religious devotion; Hypothesis 1) and on frequency of Mosque attendance (collective devotion; Hypothesis 2). Between 1993 and 1999 (the year the reported data was collected), Palestinian Islamic resistance groups *HAMAS* and *Palestinian Islamic Jihad* had carried out 18 suicide attacks that had caused 149 Israeli deaths and 872 injuries. No other Palestinian resistance organization prior to 2000 had carried out any suicide attacks. It should be clear that religion is not seen as the only factor encouraging Palestinian rebellion against Israeli occupation or support for suicide terrorism. The goal of this paper is to better articulate the *nature* of the relationship between religion and suicide terrorism. To do so we analyzed the respective power of personal religious devotion and communal religious devotion in predicting support, amongst Palestinian Muslims residing in the West Bank and Gaza, for suicide bombing carried out by Palestinian resistance groups.

Method

Participants and procedures

This paper reports data collected in a representative survey of Palestinian adults residing in the West Bank and Gaza. The survey was conducted by the Jerusalem Media and Communications Center in May 1999. They surveyed 1,200 Palestinian adults in the West Bank and Gaza using face-to face interviews carried out in respondents home. Our data deals with a subset of Muslim respondents (N=1151). Females constituted 50.3% of the sample and the mean age was ≈ 34 (ranged between 18 and 90). Refugees constituted 33.5% of the sample. Participants were distributed across education levels: primary = 11.6%; preparatory = 21.5%; secondary = 35.2%; some college = 20.6%; college and above = 8.8%.

Predictor variables

Following previous research into personal versus public religiosity (c.f., Nonnemaker et. al., 2003) frequency of prayer was used as a proxy for personal religious devotion and frequency of attendance of communal religious services was used as a proxy for communal religious devotion. Participants were asked how frequently they prayed: “never” (9.1%); “very little” (7.1%); “on Fridays and religious holidays” (6.2%); “more than once a week” (8.4%); or “five times a day” (69.3%). The communal devotion predictor variable was Mosque attendance: “on religious holidays only” (24.1%); “on Fridays and religious holidays” (35.6%); “at least once a week” (22%); or “once a day” (18.3%). Out of participants who reported praying five times a day, 23.8% attended the Mosque daily, 26.8% attended the Mosque once a week, 29.3% attended the Mosque on Fridays and religious holidays, and 20.2% attended the Mosque on religious holidays only. In contrast over 90% of those who attended the Mosque daily prayed 5 times a day.

Dependent variable

Participants were asked whether they supported their opinion about suicide bombing: “strongly support” (15.6%); “somewhat support” (7.8%); “somewhat oppose” (23.2%); or “strongly oppose” (44.9%). Because we were interested in decisions to support versus oppose suicide bombing, responses were coded “0” (oppose) or “1” (support).²

Control variables

We controlled for variables typically hypothesized to predict support for terrorism amongst Palestinians: age, gender (“0” = female; “1” = male), refugee status (“0” = non-refugee; “1” = refugee), education status (“0” = primary; “1” = preparatory; “2” = secondary; “3” = some college; “4” = college and above) and ratings of “your own family’s standard of living today” (“1” = very good, to “4” = very bad; $M = 2.71$, $SD = .854$).

Results

The results were analyzed using logistic regression analysis³. In the first step, both predictor variables were entered simultaneously without the control variables with support/opposition to suicide bombing the dependent variable. For Mosque attendance and Prayer frequency, reverse Helmert contrasts were used where each category of the predictor variable except the first category was compared to the average effect of previous categories. The results of this analysis are shown in “Step 1” of Table 1. The reference category for Prayer frequency was “never” and the reference category for Mosque attendance was “religious

² Preliminary analysis indicated no reliable differences between grades of support or opposition with respect to any of the independent or control variables.

³ Logistic regression was used because the aim was to link objectively different levels of religious activity with decisions to support/oppose suicide bombing. However a linear regression analysis found similar results treating the outcome variable as continuous and using dummy variables to examine the predictive ability of prayer (“0” < 5 times a day, “1” = 5 times daily) and Mosque attendance (“0” < daily, “1” = daily). Prayer did not predict degree of support for suicide bombing (adjusted Beta = .061, $p = .098$) whereas Mosque attendance did predict degree of support for suicide bombing (adjusted Beta = .149, $p < .001$).

holidays only”. Frequency of prayer did not have a reliable influence on the predicted odds that a participant would support suicide bombings. In contrast, the frequency of Mosque attendance had a reliable positive influence on the predicted odds that a participant would support suicide bombings. As illustrated in Figure 1, the predicted odds of support for suicide bombing for participants who attended the Mosque more than once a week (compared to participants who attended the Mosque once a week or less) increased by a factor of 1.531. Moreover, the predicted odds of those who reported attending the Mosque daily supporting suicide bombing (compared to those who reported attending the Mosque less frequently) increased by a factor of 2.101. In the second step, the control variables were added as predictor variables. The results are shown in “Step 2” of Table 1. After controlling for age, gender, education, refugee status and economic satisfaction the effect of Mosque attendance remained reliable while the effect of Prayer was still insignificant.

Discussion

The prominence of religiously motivated suicide terrorism emerging from mainly Muslim societies where perpetrators intentionally kill themselves and others has lead sensible people to ask why some societies produce and support such violence (e.g., Huntington, 1993; Lewis, 2002). More specifically, this paper asked whether support for suicide terrorism is related to religious belief and devotion, or is a product of the organizing characteristics that religion brings to social and political movements. We found that religious devotion, measured by frequency of prayer, was unrelated to the odds of a Palestinian Muslim supporting the use of suicide bombing. Thus devotion to Islam and, presumably, Islamic doctrine did not seem important in influencing individuals to support the practice of suicide bombing. In contrast, communal religious devotion, measured by the frequency of Mosque attendance, was a good predictor of support for suicide

terrorism, even while controlling for prayer frequency, age, economic satisfaction, gender, and refugee status.

No attempt is being made here to implicate Mosque attendance *in general* to support for suicide terrorism. The relationship between these two variables is surely contingent on the leadership of specific Mosques and the way particular communities are situated within an ethno-political conflict. In addition, as with all cross-sectional survey data the present study cannot determine causality with respect to the relationship between Mosque attendance and support for suicide bombing. This however was not the purpose of the current paper. This research demonstrated that the statistical association between Islam, religion and suicide terrorism has little to do with personal devotion to the creed of Islam, and more to do with the use of communal religious practices to obtain and maintain popular support for suicide terrorism amongst Palestinians.

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Table 1. The influence of the prayer frequency and Mosque attendance on support for suicide bombing amongst Palestinian Muslims. Significant results are in bold. For all non-significant results $p > .1$.

	Support vs. Opposition	
	Wald (Sig.)	Log Odds (95% CI)
Step 1		
Prayer Frequency	4.096	
- <i>Very little</i>	2.082	3.401 (.645 - 17.944)
- <i>Fridays & religious holidays</i>	2.776	2.426 (.855 - 6.881)
- <i>More than once a week</i>	1.901	1.814 (.778 - 4.232)
- <i>Five times a day</i>	2.288	1.502 (.887 - 2.543)
Mosque Attendance	17.156 (p <.001)	
- <i>Fridays & religious holidays</i>	.755	.803 (.490 - 1.316)
- <i>More than once a week</i>	3.639 (p <.06)	1.531 (.988 - 2.371)
- <i>At least daily</i>	12.794 (p <.001)	2.101 (1.399 - 3.155)
Step 2		
Prayer Frequency	3.779	
- <i>Very little</i>	1.581	2.426 (.821 - 7.165)
- <i>Fridays & religious holidays</i>	2.572	1.942 (.806 - 4.679)
- <i>More than once a week</i>	2.191	1.457 (.826 - 2.570)
- <i>Five times a day</i>	1.688	2.960 (.545 - 16.072)
Mosque Attendance	15.621 (p <.001)	
- <i>Fridays & religious holidays</i>	1.137	.740 (.426 - 1.287)
- <i>More than once a week</i>	4.838 (p <.05)	1.740 (1.062 - 2.849)
- <i>At least daily</i>	9.315 (<.005)	2.069 (1.297 - 3.300)
Economic standard of living	.069	1.030 (.826 - 1.284)
Education	4.74	1.157 (.969 - 1.381)
Age	1.430	.988 (.969 - 1.008)
Refugee	.021	1.028 (.700 - 1.511)
Male	.929 (p >.1)	1.246 (.796 - 1.950)

Figure 1 The predicted odds of support for suicide terrorism amongst Palestinian Muslims as a function of frequency of Mosque attendance

