Week 11 - Future Trends? Asymmetric Wars and Terrorism

The aim of this response paper is to show gaps in Robert Pape's theory of the *strategic logic of suicide bombing*, as well as demonstrate how Nicholas Sambanis' distinction between terrorism and civil war has blurred in light of evidence resulting from the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Pape paints a black and white picture of suicide bombing, since his theory separates ideology and beliefs from strategic logic. According to Pape, suicide bombers are not individual fanatics, but part of a larger group which uses suicide terrorism as a strategy to achieve political goals; once the goals have been accomplished the suicide campaigns are suspended. His argument for the purely strategic nature of the suicide bombings stems from evidence given by *timing* and *target selection* that coincide with the *nationalist goals* of the terrorist group. Since suicide bombings are the most coercive form of attack, they are used at critical times against modern liberal democracies to achieve nationalist goals which revolve around reclaiming or defending territory, a distinctly strategic rather than ideological goal. Pape's main reason for making this distinction is based on the secular nature of the leaders in suicide bombing at the time of his study of the Tamil Tigers (LTTE). However, research shows that although the LTTE consisted of Christians, Buddhists and Hindus, and appeared secular on cursory examination, they are connected though a belief in rebirth and the deification of those who die while fighting against perceived injustice. This is where the incompleteness of Pape's theory becomes apparent. By omitting to provide a close examination of the belief systems and ideologies which lie at the core of the terrorist groups, he fails to establish micro- and macro-level connections. It must be noted that Pape's database, which only covers suicide attacks from 1980-2001, is highly outdated, and in the current *Chicago Project on Security and Threats Suicide Attack Database*, it is no longer the LTTE, but Islamic fundamentalist groups, who are responsible for most suicide bombings.

The most prominent of the Islamic fundamentalist groups is ISIS, which evolved from a jihadist terrorist cell into an insurgent group numbering several tens of thousands and, until recently, held significant territory in Iraq and Syria. Their goal is to establish a caliphate, i.e. an Islamic state, under their rule. This fits with Pape's model of terrorists who pursue nationalist goals and use suicide bombers as a strategy for coercing territorial concessions, however they are no longer targeting modern liberal democracies. In the case of ISIS, their nationalist goal and their beliefs and ideology are deeply intertwined. ISIS rejects a traditional nation-state identity in favor

of an absolute Islamist entity. This interplay of ideology and strategy compels us to view suicide bombers through a different lens. Yes, they are used as part of a greater strategy, however, it would not be possible to adopt this strategy if not for beliefs held by leaders and followers alike. Additionally, suicide bombers are no longer only used at critical times to coerce an enemy into making concessions, they are employed in irregular attacks motivated by ideological hatred or simply as another alternative for regular tactical warfare. The connection between nationalist goals and ideology eludes Pape, who views his data in purely geopolitical terms. The quotes from a Hamas spokesman and other Islamic jihadist leaders in his study even cite *jihad* and *martyrdom* as a reason for their success. When suicide bombing is tied to beliefs in such a clear way, it seems unwise to leave the supporting ideology out the equation. Seemingly, ideology and strategy are both responsible for suicide bombings, and a deeper understanding must be gained though micro-level research.

A reading of Sambanis with examination of the history of ISIS is interesting, because he makes several distinctions between terrorism and civil war that have proven to be wrong, and makes some theoretical predictions that have proven to be correct.

Sambanis conceptualizes terrorism as something which is causally distinct from civil war. He uses the concepts of *degree of organization, public participation, power balance, levels, targets and purpose of violence* to distinguish terrorism from civil war. However, in five out of six of these distinctions, ISIS blurs the line.

According to Sambanis, it is unlikely that terrorism can ever evolve into civil war, since terrorist groups are too extreme and alienate the masses. He believes that this could only occur if the state were to mishandle an unstable situation and push people into the arms of the terrorists. This is exactly what happened in the case ISIS. In 2011, Maliki in Iraq and Assad in Syria fanned the flames of the sectarian fire by repressing and persecuting Sunnis, essentially pushing them into the waiting arms of ISIS. Furthermore, and in this case contrary to Sambanis, it was the zealotry and extremism of ISIS which worked in their favor and attracted thousands of followers to join their cause.

Sambanis states that the regular cost-benefit scheme may not fit all terrorists and that some may reap psychological rewards no matter the success of their political agenda. As much as their brutal and ultra-fundamental interpretation of Islam has helped them garner supporters, it has also alienated many of their potential allies, including Al-Qaida, showing that for ISIS, ideology clearly outweighs strategy. ISIS has profited from the sectarian strife in the region and

has used its Jihadist propaganda as a successful strategy to gather support and fight a war. However, its ideology is also a weakness and it has made enemies out of all who are not Sunnis and in line with their beliefs.

Even though the tide appears to have turned following ISIS' loss of Raqqa and Mosul, it still poses a serious threat. Thanks to an extensive global network, it can revert into smaller terrorist cells and continue to fight through asymmetric warfare. The problem is that ideas are the root cause of the issue, and as Daniel Byman notes, even if ISIS disappears, the broader movement will not. Although the recent battle for territory has been a success, the battle of ideas is far from being won.

References

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