Protecting People from Terrorism:
The Problem of Non-Replicable Targets

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Frey and Rohner 2007 article
in *Defence and Peace Economics*

- Terrorists are largely interested in generating media attention.

- By physically damaging prominent "cultural monuments", terrorists can "make a long-lasting symbolic impact."

- If a government precommits to a policy of monument reconstruction (in the event of a successful attack), attacks can be deterred.

Frey and Rohner 2007 article
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- Replication of monuments is now technologically feasible.

- A reconstruction policy may sometimes be less costly than onsite security, but still yield deterrence.

- Therefore, reconstruction policy should "be taken into consideration as a part of anti-terrorist policy."

Our contribution:
placing monument-reconstruction policy in a many-targets context

- There exists a general class of effectively **non-replicable targets**, such as skyscrapers, people, etc.
- F&R do not discuss the possibility that terrorists deterred from attacking monuments by a reconstruction policy may redirect their efforts toward these targets.

Possible unintended consequences from a monument-reconstruction policy

- The standard microeconomic notion of a utility-maximizing agent does suggest that, when a terrorist's first-choice terror plot is rendered less desirable, his **utility** will fall.

- However, terrorist **activity** may not decline – and the impact of second-choice terrorist plots **on others** may be undesirable.

- Are these likely possibilities?

A formalization:
could-be terrorists who satisfice

- We adapt a microeconomic framework where economic agents act by drawing combinations of resources (tools, recipes, other agents, etc.) from the environment.

- Agents search for terrorist plots (combinations) that satisfice, that is, that exceed the expected utility of refraining from terrorist activity.

A formalization: could-be terrorists who satisfice

- Assume that the terrorist threat can be measured by the number of agents who are plotting terrorist activity.

- For a reconstructionist policy to reduce the overall threat, it must be that some agents would find a satisficing plot in the policy's absence but can find no satisficing plots when the policy is in place.
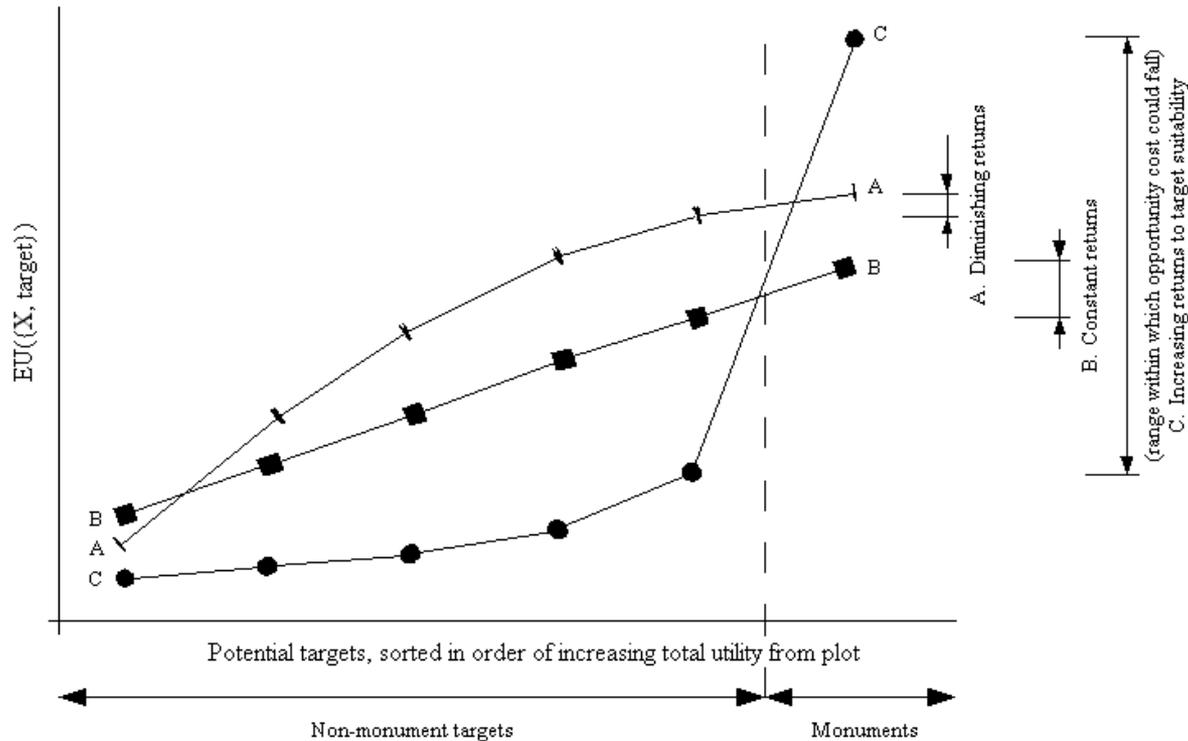
A formalization: could-be terrorists who satisfice

- This holds, i.e., the terror threat will be reduced, if there are some agents:
  - who locate zero satisficing plots for which the target is not a cultural monument,
  - who locate 1+ satisficing plot(s) for which the target **is** a cultural monument, and
  - who, for each satisficing plot located, cannot find a substitute target such that the altered plot (leaving non-target plot elements unchanged) satisfices.

Could these conditions hold (thus reducing terror) in the real world?

- The difference in magnitudes between media coverage of cultural-monument attacks and coverage of other attacks may be related to the likelihood that the conditions hold.

- This is the case because a larger difference in coverage would leave a larger "space" into which any given could-be terrorist's opportunity cost (from non-terror activities) might fall.

Illustration: diminishing, constant, or increasing returns in target suitability?

It is when returns to target suitability are **increasing** that the difference in press coverage for the most-suitable and next-best target is largest.

Could these conditions hold (thus reducing terror) in the real world?

- A world of increasing returns to target suitability over the relevant range would be a world in which, for example, an attack on the Statue of Liberty would receive far greater media coverage than one on the Empire State Building.

- We find this to be implausible in light of the experience of the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks.

- But as successful attacks on cultural monuments have been few, data is limited.

Reduced cost impact

- With no overall reduction in terror, the expected cost savings may fail to materialize.

- If reconstructionist policy for monuments leads to an increase in plots against non-replicable targets, onsite security for those targets may (need to) be increased.

- If onsite security measures are ineffective but often pursued anyway, this could potentially lead to large losses.

Conclusions

- Our model implies that a reconstructionist policy for cultural monuments will do little if anything to deter the terrorist threat overall.

- If determined terrorists become convinced that attacks on symbolic structures are futile, they will pursue alternate and perhaps more deadly means of attracting media attention.

- We thus find cause for normative concern with regard to reconstructionist policy.