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

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• 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.
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.