

Spatial decision making of terrorist target selection: Introducing the TRACK Framework

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Introduction

Localised terrorist tactics and strategies are continuously changing in response to increased counter-terrorism capability. There has been a clear shift from attacks on high impact high security targets to high impact low security targets with numerous casualties. From a rational perspective, targets with less situational protective measures may be value maximising due to the ease of operation. Recent high-profile ISIS-inspired terrorist attacks heightened national security concerns in Europe. The 2017 attacks in the UK especially demonstrated a relatively low level of sophistication that went undetected. Lone actors especially pose several challenges for law enforcement. Given the recent substantial increase in the number and diversity of lone actor attacks, it is important to establish patterns related to target selection to aid prevention and investigation efforts. This paper builds on EVIL DONE¹'s foundations by incorporating recent empirical research and by accounting for the very different operational dynamics of terrorism present in the ISIS-inspired era. We suggest a terrorist's spatial decision-making process is shaped by the degree to which a potential target is *Tolerable, Relevant, Accessible, Close and/or Known (TRACK)*.

TRACK Framework

The following framework is based on five factors that may increase the attractiveness of a potential target: tolerable, relevant, accessible, close and/or known (TRACK). These five elements are not a definitive list of features of attack commission (preventive actions should be focused on specific types of attacks to maximize effectiveness) but are designed to give an insight into an offender's spatial decision making. They may be more or less relevant in different contexts and are intended to cover all types of terrorist related incidents, by both group and lone actors. As such, some elements of the model may be more pertinent for some types.

Tolerable

Is the individual able to reach the point of attack at this target without being overcome by fear/anxiety? How high is the risk of detection (up to the point of attack implementation, i.e. not during or post attack)?

Situational factors that increase the risks associated with a criminal opportunity can strongly influence criminal decision-making. No matter the length of the planning

¹ EVIL DONE (Clarke and Newman, 2006) suggests terrorists are influenced by the degree to which a target is *exposed, vital, iconic, legitimate, destructible, occupied, near and easy*.

process, terrorists weigh up various risks and benefits during the planning phase. Typically, several potential targets are kept in mind before the one with the relatively fewest risks is chosen. Fear and nerves can negatively impact the decision-making processes in planning and carrying out an attack. The weighing of security features may necessitate hostile reconnaissance, which itself offers risk to the terrorist in terms of detection. Complex attacks, such as those on iconic targets with high levels of security are likely to be beyond most lone actors' individual capability. The level of protection and difficulty in accessing these types of targets increases the complexity of the attack, which is amplified for lone actors as they lack human capital.

Relevant

Is the target relevant to the ideology of the individual/group?

As with ordinary criminals, terrorists make a series of cost-benefit analyses to judge whether a particular offence is worth committing. Unlike ordinary criminals, their decision also has to fit their overarching ideological goals. Terrorists, being utility maximising, will target areas that they perceive will offer the highest rewards. Rewards may be dependent on the availability of suitable victims. Specific structures will increase the attractiveness of the area, as the likelihood that a suitable target is present will increase. The subject(s) of an attack may not always be explicitly symbolic, but attacks will generally be designed to communicate a message. For ISIS, anyone who rejects Sharia law can be considered a legitimate target. Scholars have argued that this 'us vs them' dichotomy between members and non-members of an organization eases the process of viewing civilians as legitimate targets. This mindset and legitimisation of civilian targets may lead to an increase in attacks against softer targets, as they are not worried or constrained by fear that the use of excessive violence will lead to condemnation.

For lone actors in the US and Western Europe, most targets that have been selected can be considered 'symbolic', i.e. buildings or persons that would serve as a symbol of the individual's grievance. Individuals have travelled further for iconic targets than symbolic or arbitrary targets, and further for symbolic targets than arbitrary targets. This suggests that a consideration of costs vs. benefits may take place in decision making regarding target selection, and that there is a trade-off between distance to the target and the representative value of the target, as lone actors are willing to travel further for targets that are more in line with their grievance.

Accessible

Is the target itself, whether it be a building or an individual, easily accessible? Is it easy for the offender to get to the target from their origin, i.e. via major roads?

Target accessibility may be another crucial component of target selection. It is likely that areas that are more connected to other parts of the city will experience more attacks than those that are not. For example, the existence of a major thoroughfare in the area may influence the likelihood of an area being chosen. Major roads facilitate travel around the city and are therefore more likely to be travelled on more often than

other smaller streets. Thus, an individual's familiarity with the area surrounding major thoroughfares is increased. This in turn increases both their awareness of opportunities and their awareness of entry and exit points. When examining the road network of a city, the risk is higher in places that are more connected to others, as they are more likely to feature in an offender's route.

Close and/or Known

Is the target close to the home location or other activity nodes of the offender? Is the target known to the individual through their awareness space or hostile reconnaissance?

One of the most fundamental relationships in environmental criminology is that of spatial interaction and distance. Collectively, the rational choice perspective, the routine activity approach and crime-pattern theory suggest offenders will actively select areas and targets in a way that minimises effort and risks and maximises rewards. Offenders are more likely to attack within their awareness space. Awareness space includes the area close to their home and other activity nodes such as place of work/education, previous addresses and places of recreational activity. Most geospatial research is guided by the least effort principle which intimates that when considering a *"number of identical alternatives for action, an offender selects the one closest to him in order to minimize the effort involved"*.

Distance is consistently highlighted as an important factor in terrorist target selection criteria. The distance decay function that is evident when examining urban crimes has been replicated in group and lone-actor terrorists, with frequency of attacks decreasing as distance from home locations increases. As well as considering effort, the risk of interception before an attack will also be deliberated. Geographical constraints may be amplified for lone-actor terrorists. As lone actors lack the resources and support of a wider network it is likely that they will keep distances travelled minimal, to increase the utility of their attack.

An individual's full awareness space is guided by other locations of their daily routine activities or past residences. Individuals have a range of routine activities, involving home, work, school, recreation etc, which increase their awareness space. This familiarity and increased knowledge of an area allows for a better evaluation of risks and minimises the effort of locating suitable targets. This highlights the importance of considering the whole awareness space of an individual. Even when individuals travel great distances, and the attacks are seemingly random, there is a strong likelihood of some identifiable geographical connection between the terrorist and the target. Previous addresses, place of work/higher education also warrant consideration.