

VEO ‘targeting errors’ can lead to erosion of popular support for the group.

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General Description of the Literature:

Cronin (2009) argues that if a terrorist group chooses a target that is viewed as illegitimate by their constituents, the group can lose a significant amount of popular support. The constituents might transfer their support to the government out of disapproval. Terrorist groups gain their legitimacy by claiming that they are acting on behalf of a larger cause, however, targeting errors can lead to a significant loss of popular respect, trust, and support. Therefore, the sustainability of a terrorist group is partially dependent upon their ability to make calculative and correct moves, and avoid mistakes.

Detailed Analyses

126: *VEO ‘targeting errors’ can lead to erosion of popular support for the group.*

Summary of Relevant Empirical Evidence: Cronin (2009) supplied a number of examples of targeting errors. In Northern Ireland, the people reacted to the Omagh bombings with fury because the attack killed many civilians. The RIRA was in control of the bombings, and even though they tried to redeem themselves by clarifying that they did not intend to kill civilians, the population was still in shock, and the group never recovered (Cronin 2009). In the Basque case of 1978, the ETA bombed the construction site of a nuclear power plant killing at least 2 people and injuring 14. The people of Basque were furious and protested against the ETA in the streets (Cronin 2009). The ETA made a similar targeting error in the years following the Basque incident, and this caused their popularity to decrease even further. The death of Aldo Moro in the hands of the Italian Red Brigades also caused an upheaval among the population and led to the loss of popular support (Cronin 2009). Aldo Moro was known as the most important political figure and was well-liked by his people, so there was no explanation for why he was the target. This caused people to lose trust in the Red Brigades. Another case of targeting error took place in the town of Luxor on November 1997 by the Islamist group al-Gama’a al-Islamiyya and killed 62 people. This incident led the public to protest against terrorism and the capture of many of the terrorists involved (Cronin 2009; Ashour also notes that the Luxor act also helped lead to the deradicalization of the group). Dugan et al. (2008) also noted that two Armenian VEOs fell apart after a harsh attack on France’s Orly airport in 1983. The authors posited that the attack had a negative impact on the Armenian diaspora.

Empirical Support Score: 9 = Multiple empirical analyses, including at least one quantitative and one qualitative study supporting the hypothesis

Applicability to Influencing VEOs: Targeting errors can lead to backlash and loss of political support for VEOs. The above studies were done on VEOs and there is strong reason to believe the findings will apply in other cases.

Applicability Score: Direct: At least some of the empirical results directly concern the context of influencing VEOs.

Bibliography:

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- Cronin, Audrey Kurth. 2009. *How Terrorism Ends*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Dugan, Laura, Julie Y. Huang, Gary LaFree, and Clark McCauley. 2008. "Sudden Desistance from Terrorism: The Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia and the Justice Commandos of the Armenian Genocide." *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 1(3): 231-249.