Demand for Terrorism: What factors make a country more vulnerable to attack?

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DEMAND FOR TERRORISM: WHAT FACTORS MAKE A COUNTRY MORE VULNERABLE TO ATTACK?

Terrorism, (n): The calculated use of unlawful violence or threat of unlawful violence to incite fear, intended to coerce or to intimidate governments or societies in the pursuit of goals that are generally political, religious, or ideological.

-Tim Jansen, Masters in Public Policy at Brigham Young University

Sven Wilson, Mentor

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Factors used to explain terrorism range from economic inequality (Barry 2003) to religious fundamentalism and prejudice (Anderson & Taylor 2003). Taylor (2008) found that “both social background, educational opportunity or attainment seem to be particularly associated with terrorism.” In an examination of literature, Hunger and Zimakofsky (2004) found no causal relationship between poverty in individuals and their likelihood of becoming terrorists. They examined the causes of terrorism by looking at biographical information of individual terrorists, politicians, and authors. They found that most terrorists had more education than other members of their home country and were in occupations of high social status.

They also examined country-specific attributes that produce terrorists. Significant independent variables were log population, level of civil liberties, and proportion of illiteracy in the major religion category.  Significant independent variables tested were per capita quarterly and the sharing rate. They found that a lack of civil liberties has a correlation with terrorist attacks and that low income has no direct connection.

While this and other research has focused on supply, I will examine what characteristics make a country more likely to be attacked.

DATA

The dataset containing the dependent variable is the Global Terrorism Database from ICPSR of all known terrorist acts committed from 1998-2004. I have collapsed the data into counts of terrorist attacks per country per year.

The terrorism dataset is combined with several other datasets containing macroeconomic variables from the Penn World Tables. I combined this with a dataset containing measures of government corruption, effectiveness, stability and regulatory quality for each year from the World Bank.

METHODS

I used a negative binomial regression to model the number of terrorist attacks per year in each country. Robust standard errors clustered by country are used to control for heteroskedasticity and serial correlation. I used fixed effects to control for unobserved country-specific characteristics.

RESULTS

From a Hausman test comparing Fixed Effects Model 3 and the Random Effects model, the Random Effects Model is rejected at the five-percent level and I opt to use Model 3.

For Model 3, a $1000 increase in per capita GDP increases the rate of terrorist events in that country by 1%. A one-per cent increase in the GDP per Capita Growth Rate is expected to reduce terrorism by 1.5% if a country were to increase its level of political stability by one unit, such as going from Brazil’s level to that of the United States, we would expect it to decrease the number of terrorist attacks by 7%.

A starting finding is the effect of a country’s voice and accountability: this variable measures “the extent to which a country’s citizens are able to participate in selecting their government, as well as freedom of expression, freedom of association, and a free media” (Kaufman et al., 2005). A one-unit increase in this variable (on a scale of 1 to 7) is expected to increase incidence of terrorism by 5%. Perhaps democracy and a free media, what is seen in the Western world as a “good,” is perceived by terrorists as a “bad,” which might motivate attacks against it.

It is interesting that government effectiveness, control of corruption, and commitment to the rule of law had no measurable effect on terrorist attacks. The findings on the macroeconomic control variables show that higher income countries are more likely to be attacked, while economic openness had no effect. A one percent increase in the GDP per capita growth rate decreases incidence of terrorism by 1.5%. Developed economies with slower growth rates will have more terrorist attacks.

Though not visible from the table, it is also significant to note that the general trend on terrorist attacks is declining during this time period.

CONCLUSION

The models strongly suggest:

- Terrorists prefer targets with weak incumbent governments where they can do the most damage.
- Countries with higher freedom of expression and more free media are significantly more likely to be attacked.
- A cohesive government is less vulnerable to terrorist attacks.

REFERENCES


