

Offensive Counterterrorism: Lessons from Israel

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June 2022

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Acknowledgments

This chapter is based on my longtime collaborative work with Claude Berrebi and Esteban Klor. I am grateful to my teacher Gary Becker for the inspiration and encouragement to use economic models to analyze the phenomenon of suicide bombers. I also thank Esteban Klor for helpful comments and Laura Jones Dooley for editorial help.

1. Introduction

In order to both counter and deter terrorism, governments around the world use offensive counterterrorism tactics ranging from drone strikes to house demolitions and targeted killings. This chapter surveys and evaluates the use and effectiveness of offensive counterterrorism tactics, focusing on the actions of the Israeli security forces.

Counterterrorism actions can be classified as either *defensive* or *offensive*. As the name suggests, *defensive* actions focus on securing borders, population centers and institutions in order to deter, prevent and, neutralize terror attacks. In contrast, *offensive* actions are initiated by security forces against specific terrorist targets and are launched in the areas where terrorists inhabit and operate. According to counterterrorism expert Boaz Ganor (2005), the goals underlying offensive actions include prevention of terrorist attacks, disruption of the terror organization's routine operations, deterrence, revenge and punishment, and lifting the morale of the nation's populace and enhancing the perception of security.

Although there is evidence that government policies to deter terrorism and disrupt the operations of terror organizations tend to be effective (Ganor 2005; Frisch 2006), alternative theoretical models suggest that they may have a boomerang effect. In this view, harsh measures of counterterrorism backfire by fostering hatred and attempts to exact revenge (Siqueira and Sandler 2006).

The main challenge of offensive counterterrorism tactics is to target directly those involved in perpetrating and executing terror attacks. Often, however, terrorist perpetrators not only are part of the local population but also deliberately launch their attacks from civilian areas. Terror

organizations employ this strategy to disguise their activities and make it harder for the other side to retaliate. And since counterterrorism policies typically affect the general population in the form of collective punishment, their effectiveness depends on their ability to target terror organizations directly (Fearon and Laitin 2003; Bueno de Mesquita and Dickson 2007). Ariel Merari, an eminent scholar of terrorism, clearly summarizes the trade-off that is embedded in collective counterterrorism policy:

In general, collective antiterrorism measures are likely to have two opposing effects on the population from which the insurgents emerge: on the one hand, they breed fear and, on the other hand, hatred to the government. The actual behavior of the affected public, as a result of the infliction of collective punishment, depends on whether fear is stronger than anger, or vice versa. Persons who are willing to kill themselves in order to kill others are, obviously, very hard to deter by the threat of punishment to themselves, but they may still care about the well-being of their families (2005, 230).

In their attempts to counter terrorism, Israeli security forces have employed two main offensive counterterrorism tactics: targeted killing and house demolition. The first measure, targeted killing, has been practiced by Israel since the 1970s—mostly as a response to attacks by Palestinian terror organizations. Targeted killings escalated during the Second Intifada (2000–2005), when security forces used this measure not only to respond to an attack but also to strike preemptively to prevent a terror attack. From September 2000 to April 2004, the Israeli security forces targeted 159 members of Palestinian terrorist organizations for killing.¹

The second offensive counterterrorism tactic is house demolition. The Israeli security forces carry out two main types of house demolition: clearing (precautionary) operations and punitive destruction.² According to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), clearing operations are carried out for military purposes: houses and areas are demolished to prevent attacks from being launched from these locations. Such demolitions are not related in any way to activities carried out by the owners or occupants of the houses being demolished. During the Second Intifada, clearing operations took place primarily in the Gaza Strip to create so-called no-go areas. Houses were demolished mostly along the Egyptian border in the south; around Israeli settlements, army posts, and roads that were used by settlers and IDF forces throughout Gaza before the Israeli

¹ Zussman and Zussman (2006).

² This section draws mostly on Darcy (2003) and Shnayderman (2004).

evacuation of 2005; and in the northern Gaza Strip, in areas from which mortar rockets (mainly Kassam) had been fired, targeting Israeli communities in southern Israel. In contrast, in punitive house demolitions, the IDF demolishes or seals houses that housed Palestinians suspected of, detained in connection with, or convicted of involvement in violent acts against Israelis, regardless of the results. These acts include suicide bombings that caused civilian casualties as well as thwarted attacks against soldiers and civilians. The demolished houses belong not only to perpetrators but also to individuals accused of involvement in an attack by planning it, dispatching the perpetrators, or providing assistance to the responsible terrorist cell.

In research published in 2015, my colleagues Claude Berrebi, Esteban Klor, and I analyzed the effectiveness of house demolitions as a counterterrorism tool. We differentiated between the two types of house demolitions carried out by the IDF—punitive and precautionary—and showed that, when targeted correctly, counterterrorism measures such as house demolitions provide the desired deterrent effect. In contrast, when used indiscriminately, house demolitions lead to radicalization of the population, resulting in more subsequent attacks. Similarly, in a noteworthy paper, Zussman and Zussman (2006) provided indirect evidence—based on the Tel Aviv stock market reaction to targeted killing—that the market reacts negatively to the assassinations of senior political leaders of terrorist organizations. The results in these papers provide strong support to the hypothesis that indiscriminate violence is potentially counterproductive because it may backfire. When targeted correctly, counterterrorism measures such as house demolition or targeted killing of military leaders do provide the desired deterrent effect. When used indiscriminately, however, offensive counterterrorism tactics may radicalize the population and backfire, resulting in more subsequent terror attacks.

The rest of this chapter is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses the use of targeted killing as an offensive counterterrorism action by Israel and assesses its effectiveness. Section 3 the history of the policy of house demolition and provides evidence on its effectiveness. Section 4 discusses the overall effectiveness of offensive counterterrorism. Section 5 concludes.

2. Targeted Killing

Targeted killing is one of the most commonly used tactics in the offensive counterterrorism arsenal. While countries around the world have been using targeted killing for centuries, those actions were generally not publicly acknowledged, accounted for, or justified (Blum and Heymann 2010).

In the United States, following the terrorist bombing of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, President Bill Clinton issued a presidential finding that authorized the use

of lethal force in self-defense against al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush issued another finding that broadened the scope of potential targets beyond the top leaders of al-Qaeda and beyond the boundaries of Afghanistan (Blum and Heymann 2010). President Barack Obama's administration did not change the policy on targeted killing; "in fact, it ordered a 'dramatic increase' in the drone-launched missile strikes against Al-Qaeda and Taliban members in Pakistan" (Blum and Heymann 2010, 151).

Israel began to practice targeted killing in the 1970s, mostly as a response to attacks by Palestinian terror organizations.³ In 1972, following the massacre at the Munich Olympics, Israel launched operation Wrath of God, which targeted the leaders of Black September and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). In 1973, in operation Spring of Youth, Israeli security forces targeted top PLO leaders. Israel's use of targeted killing continued during the First Intifada (1987–1993). One of the founders of Fatah, Khalil al-Wazir—known in the Arab world as Abu Jihad—was killed by Israeli commando forces in Tunis in 1988. Abbas al-Musawi, the cofounder and secretary general of Hezbollah, was killed in 1992 when Israeli helicopters fired missiles at his motorcade in southern Lebanon, killing him, his wife, his son, and four others. Emad Akel, a commander of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas, was killed in a shootout with Israeli forces in 1993.

Targeted killings by the Israeli security forces escalated during the Second Intifada. Following waves of Palestinian suicide bombings, targeted killings were deployed not only in response to terror attacks but also in preemptive strikes. During the period from September 2000 to April 2004, Israeli security forces attempted 159 targeted killings of members of Palestinian terrorist organizations (Zussman and Zussman 2006). Of these, 135 attacks were successful—that is, the target was killed—and in 24 attacks (15 percent), the target survived the attack. The attacks resulted in the killing of 317 persons, of which 248 (78 percent) were members of terrorist organizations and 69 (22 percent) were killed as the result of collateral damage. Targeted killing peaked in 2002 (56 attacks) and then declined over time, with 22 attacks in 2006, 14 attacks in 2007, and 2 and 3 attacks in 2009 and 2010, respectively (fig. 1). More recently, during the Gaza War, or Operation Protective Edge, in 2014, targeted killing spiked to 81 attacks.

As with other offensive counterterrorism tactics, when it comes to targeted killing, there are two key questions to ask: First, is it legal? Second, is it effective in deterring and preventing future terror attacks?

³ Although Israel did assassinate some enemy targets in the 1950s (Egyptian intelligence officers) and the 1960s (German scientists developing missiles for Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt), these targeted killings were carried out against other countries rather than against terror organizations.

The debate over the lawfulness of targeted killings centers around the so-called war paradigm—that is, treating terrorists as combatants and justifying targeted killing of terrorists as “equivalent to the lawful killing of members of an enemy force on any battlefield” (Blum and Heymann 2010, 156). The war paradigm is reflected in the Israeli High Court of Justice Supreme Court judgment 769/02, dated December 14, 2006. This judgment was issued following a petition by two human rights organizations asking the Court to declare that targeted killing was illegal under international law and to order the respondents, which included the government of Israel and the IDF, to desist from the practice. In his decision, Supreme Court president Aharon Barak denied the plaintiffs’ petition. Barak ruled that customary international law distinguishes between “combatants” and “civilians” and that because the Second Intifada was an “international armed conflict,” use of military means was both warranted and justified. Barak qualified the ruling to limit targeted killing to those who directly participate, instigate, and execute terrorist acts rather than to any member of these terror organizations. Moreover, the Court also addressed concerns about collateral damage and proportionality.

The effectiveness of the practice of targeted killing is disputed. Aharon Yariv, former head of Israeli Military Intelligence and the prime minister’s counterterrorism adviser in the early 1970s, stated that the targeted killing of PLO leaders following the Munich Olympics massacre was effective: “The impact was very significant because they were top-level officials in sensitive positions and suddenly felt as if they weren’t safe even in their own homes” (Ganor 2005, 127). Yariv’s conclusions contrast with the view of another former head of Israeli Military Intelligence, Uriel Sagie, who expressed doubts about the effectiveness of targeted killing: “Even this assumption, that these actions serve as deterrents, has not been proven. Although in principle leaders of terrorist organizations should be killed, replacements always spring up from within the organization” (2005, 127).

During the Second Intifada some have argued that the targeted killing of Fatah leader Raed Karmi backfired with an escalation of Palestinian violence:

During a lull in the violence following the late Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat’s call for a cease-fire in January 2002, Israel launched a targeted killing of Fatah leader Raed Karmi. Until that point, Fatah had refrained from both suicide bombings and attacks within the 1967 borders. Karmi’s death removed those restraints and destroyed perhaps the greatest opportunity to curb the

*violence, propelling into motion the lethal Palestinian attacks of March 2002 that resulted in more than 120 Israeli deaths.*⁴

Evaluating the effectiveness of counterterrorism, and of targeted killing in particular, is a challenging empirical task. Microlevel data are difficult to obtain since security forces are reluctant to release classified counterterrorism information. Even when data are available, the effect of counterterrorism policies remains unclear because terror organizations react to the new conditions by choosing different targets and modes of attack.

Researchers Asaf Zussman and Noam Zussman (2006) used an indirect approach, known as an event study approach, to evaluate the effectiveness of targeted killing. They measured the Israeli stock market reaction to news about Israeli targeted killings of Palestinian combatants during the Second Intifada. They found that the Tel Aviv 25 stock market index reacted positively to assassinations of senior military targets. On the other hand, the stock market index declined when the Israeli state targeted senior political leaders of terror organizations. Interestingly, the killing of junior military targets was not associated with a significant stock market reaction. They concluded: “The market does react strongly . . . to the assassinations of senior leaders of terrorist organizations: it declines following assassinations targeting senior political leaders but rises following assassinations of senior military leaders. To the extent that these reactions reflect expectations regarding future levels of terrorism they imply that the market perceives the first type of assassinations as counterproductive, but the second as an effective measure in combating terrorism” (2006, A205).

3. House Demolition

For more than five decades, Israeli security forces have practiced house demolition as a tool to both deter and punish terrorists. In the taxonomy of counterterrorism policies, house demolition is classified as a form of offensive punishment, in which the state acts against those responsible for terror attacks, avenging their actions in order to deter existing and potential terrorists from future acts.⁵ Unlike judicial punishment, which is carried out by a regular or special judicial process, offensive punishment “is usually the result of an administrative decision by a leader, security body, or entity belonging to the operative arms of the country, and it [can] be carried out without any preliminary legal process” (Ganor 2005, 203). Although government policies to deter

⁴ David Dabscheck, *Sharon at War*, Foreign Policy, October, 20, 2009.

⁵ Other objectives of such a policy may include harming the morale of the terrorists and raising the morale of the population in the country targeted by the terror attacks (Ganor 2005, 203).

terrorism and disrupt the operations of terror organizations are considered by many to be effective (Ganor 2005), alternative theoretical models suggest that they may have a boomerang effect. In this view, harsh measures of counterterrorism backfire by fostering hatred and provoking attempts to exact revenge (Siqueira and Sandler 2006). Counterterrorism policies typically affect the general population, yet their effectiveness depends on their ability to target terror organizations directly.⁶ This section covers the evolution of the house demolition policy in Israel, the political and legal debate over its use, and its effectiveness as a counterterrorism tool.

3.1 The History of House Demolitions

The policy of house demolitions in the Middle East began during the period of the British Mandate in Palestine, 1920–1948. In 1945, in the wake of the Arab revolt and facing the prospect of further unrest, the Crown authorized the British high commissioner for Palestine to enact a sweeping set of emergency defense regulations. In September 1945, the acting British high commissioner for Palestine published a comprehensive set of emergency defense regulations. The 147 regulations created a regime of effective martial law in which military courts could try offenses with no writ of habeas corpus and no appeal. British soldiers had broad powers of search and seizure. Those suspected of affiliation with unlawful groups could be detained or deported. The authorities could conduct searches, make arrests, close off areas, and impose curfews. Specifically, under Emergency Regulation 119(1), the military was authorized to seize and destroy houses, structures, and land as punishment for unlawful acts.

As historian Alan Dowty has described: “The 1945 Defense (Emergency) Regulations were a compilation of old and new Mandatory orders issued in response to the double threat of internal rebellion and world war. Following the Arab ‘revolt’ in Palestine in 1936, the Privy Council in London adopted the Palestine (Defense) Order in Council 1937, authorizing the British high commissioner in Palestine to enact such defense regulations ‘as appear to him in his unfettered discretion to be necessary or expedient for securing public safety’” (1998, 000).

The enactment of the Defense (Emergency) Regulations led to a storm of protest from the Jewish population in Palestine. As Dowty has noted: “Richard Crossman, after hearing Jewish complaints as a visiting member of the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry in early 1946, recorded in his diary that ‘I certainly had no idea of the severity of the Emergency Regulations . . . There can be no doubt that Palestine today is a police state.’ This opinion was shared by Bernard

⁶ See, e.g., Fearon and Laitin 2003; and Bueno de Mesquita and Dickson 2007.

(Dov) Joseph, later Israeli minister of justice, who in 1948 published a critique of British rule in Palestine that also used the term ‘police state’ in describing the Defense Regulations” (1998, 000).

In 1948 the newly formed State of Israel inherited all Mandate legislation except those that had been explicitly annulled. These regulations gave the Israeli government a formidable apparatus of emergency powers that had been enacted by the British. The only section of the regulations to be canceled was the one restricting immigration.

Following the Six Days’ War in 1967, the Israeli security forces began conducting punitive house demolitions, destroying almost 1,400 houses in the late 1960s. Following this campaign the policy continued in place, but punitive house demolitions were rare occurrences from the early 1970s until 1987. With the beginning of the First Intifada in December 1987, the IDF significantly increased the use of punitive house demolitions to penalize acts of violence and deter future such actions. There were 125 demolitions in 1988, followed by 144 demolitions in 1989 and 107 in 1990. House demolitions declined to 46 in 1991, 8 in 1992, and only 1 in 1993. While there were no demolitions in 1994 and 1995, there were 11 demolitions in 1996 and 6 in 1997. The policy of house demolitions was discontinued from 1998 until September 2001.

In response to the wave of violence of the Second Intifada that began in October 2000, the IDF informally renewed punitive house demolitions. The first house demolished during the Second Intifada belonged to a Palestinian suicide bomber who killed twenty-one Israelis when he blew himself up in a discotheque in Tel Aviv. The political-security cabinet of the Israeli government officially renewed the policy of punitive demolitions on July 31, 2002, right after a terror attack at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem killed nine Israelis. The number of demolitions increased from 7 in 2001 to 246 in 2002 before decreasing slightly to 218 in 2003 and decreasing further to 174 in 2004 (fig. 2). The Second Intifada ended in 2005, and there were no demolitions from 2005 to 2013.⁷

The practice resumed informally again in June 2014, when the IDF demolished a house of a Hamas terrorist who had killed an Israeli police officer. Later that summer the IDF demolished the houses of the terrorists who had kidnapped and killed three Israeli teenagers, a terrorist act that led to the initiation of Operation Brother’s Keeper and eventually to the Gaza War. The increase in the number of violent attacks that began in the fall of 2015—mostly by lone-actor (lone wolf) terrorists—led the Israeli government to renew its policy of house demolitions. There were 12 house demolitions in 2015 and 28 in 2016. Between 2017 and 2020, the number of demolitions fluctuated between a low of 6 (2020) and a high of 14 (2019).

⁷ Although there is no official date for the end of the Second Intifada, the Sharm el-Sheikh Summit in February 2005 is considered as the conclusion of the conflict.

The use of house demolitions as a counterterrorism tool has been hotly debated inside and outside of Israel, and human rights organizations have repeatedly challenged its legality. In cases argued before the Israeli Supreme Court of Justice, these organizations have asserted that the policy of house demolitions constitutes a war crime because it punishes innocent individuals for acts committed by others (Darcy 2003).⁸

In defense of the house demolition policy, Israeli officials repeatedly argue that the policy falls within the exception to article 53 of the Fourth Geneva Convention. According to the IDF, the demolition of houses of terrorists and terror operatives is a crucial counterterrorism tool for deterring terrorism in general and suicide terrorism in particular. In its role as the High Court of Justice, the Supreme Court has repeatedly declined to interfere with the IDF's operational military considerations, although it did require that the principle of proportionality must be kept in deciding whether to demolish a house. Over the years, the Supreme Court has reaffirmed prior decisions holding that home demolitions for counterterrorism purposes are legal in principle and that such demolitions are used not as a punishment but rather as a deterrence.

The overall view of the Supreme Court is well reflected in the High Court of Justice judgment 8091/14, dated December 3, 2014. This judgment was issued following a petition by eight human rights organizations asking the Court to revisit its decision regarding the lawfulness of punitive house demolitions. The petitioners argued that since the Court's earlier related rulings in 1979 and 1986 (HCJ 434/79 and HCJ 897/86), important developments in international law had occurred, including the formation of international courts and tribunals, and that the demolitions policy therefore constituted a grave breach of international humanitarian law. A three-judge panel sat at the hearing and rendered judgment.

The main objective of Emergency Regulation 119, ruled Judge Elyakim Rubinstein, is deterrence rather than punishment, and it is designed to provide the military commander with counterterrorism tools that can create effective deterrence. As such, house demolitions should be classified as a form of targeted deterrence, not collective punishment.

Judge Noam Sohlberg agreed with Rubinstein's ruling and reinforced the notion that demolitions are used as deterrence rather than as collective punishment. In his ruling, Sohlberg cited the empirical evidence on demolitions presented by my colleagues and myself: "The results indicate that, when targeted correctly counterterrorism measures such as house demolitions provide the desired deterrent effect" (Benmelech, Berebbi, and Klor 2015, 28). Moreover,

⁸ These arguments are supported by Article 53 of the Fourth Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, which states that occupying states are forbidden to destroy property except where such destruction is rendered absolutely necessary by military operations.

according to Sohlberg, it is likely that terrorists and suicide bombers are motivated, not by altruistic motives, but rather by rational choice, and that such house demolitions may therefore deter potential terrorists by inflicting additional costs on the terrorists' family. Indeed, in another paper, Berrebi and I (2007) provided empirical evidence supporting the notion of "rational sacrifice."⁹

Finally, Judge Esther Hayut agreed with the judgment of Judge Rubinstein in rejecting the petition. Hayut concurred that house demolitions are used as a form of counterterrorism deterrence rather than as a means of collective punishment. However, her main argument was that the High Court of Justice had previously decided not to rule on similar prior petitions presented to the Court. Hayut also cited the evidence presented in Benmelech, Berrebi, and Klor (2015).

3.2 The Effectiveness of House Demolitions

The Israeli government and the IDF have repeatedly argued before the Supreme Court of Justice and in the popular press that the practice of house demolitions is an effective counterterrorism tool, although they acknowledge that "it is impossible to know the exact figures of potential terrorists that have been deterred from perpetrating attacks by this prevention tactic" (Shnayderman 2004, 64). In support of the deterrent effect of house demolitions, government and military officials often cite anecdotal evidence in which relatives of individuals recruited to commit suicide attacks have contacted the IDF and cooperated with the military in an attempt to stop the attack and thus save their houses from being demolished (Alon 2002). In other cases, fearing the demolition of their houses, family members of terrorists who attacked civilians have extradited their relatives to the Israeli forces. In 2016, for example, the uncle of a terrorist who attacked an Israeli civilian with an ax—critically injuring him—extradited his nephew to the Israeli Security Agency.

Opponents argue that demolishing houses backfires, since it increases Palestinians' hatred of and animosity toward Israel. Indeed, in a preliminary, incomplete analysis Aryeh Shalev (1990) relies on seven data points from the First Intifada to argue that, in the aftermath of house demolitions, the number of violent events against Israelis did not decrease and in fact sometimes even increased.

The sole comprehensive study of the effectiveness of house demolitions is Benmelech, Berrebi, and Klor 2015. We used a data set on houses demolished during the Second Intifada. We matched house demolitions data to a data set containing the universe of Palestinian suicide

⁹ See also Iannaccone 2006.

terrorists during the same time period. We then augmented these data with information on additional counterterrorism measures, as well as on the economic and demographic characteristics of Palestinian localities.

The house demolitions data included all punitive house demolitions between September 2000 and December 2005 and all precautionary house demolitions for the years 2004 and 2005. For every house demolition (both punitive and precautionary) we documented the date and location of the house demolished, as well as the number of units in each house, the number of residents in the house, and the house's size.

As mentioned, it is difficult to evaluate the effectiveness not only of counterterrorism generally but of house demolition in particular. However, our novel microlevel data on house demolitions and suicide attacks enable us to evaluate the effectiveness of house demolitions on future suicide attacks, differentiating between the two main types: precautionary and punitive.

To test the relation between house demolitions and the number of suicide terrorists, we aggregated house demolitions into district-month cells (or localities-month cells). Our baseline regressions identified the effect of house demolitions within a district on future suicide attacks originating from that district. That is, we estimated the effect of demolitions on the number of future suicide bombers originating from the same localities after controlling for potential confounding factors. These include Israeli-induced Palestinian fatalities, demographic and economic characteristics, and Israeli security measures that vary across districts and time, as well both district fixed effects that control for districts' unobservable, time-invariant characteristics and year fixed effects that absorb common fluctuations of violence over time. Hence, by including fixed effects for each district and year, we essentially examined whether variation over time in punitive house demolitions within a district is correlated with variation over time within a district of suicide terror attacks while controlling for the common trend in violence across districts and a rich set of districts' characteristics.

Our main findings are that in those models in which we control for district fixed effects (to account for unobserved underlying heterogeneity across districts) and year fixed effects (to account for common fluctuations over time of the variables of interest), punitive house demolitions in a given district significantly decreased the number of suicide terrorists who originated from that district. This effect is not only statistically significant but of a sizable magnitude. In particular, the estimated rate ratio implies that the marginal punitive house demolition lowered the number of suicide terrorists originating from a district in the following month by a factor of 0.941. This effect implies that a standard deviation increase in the number

of punitive house demolitions (which in our sample is equal to 2.04) causes a decrease of 11.7 percent in the number of suicide terrorists originating from an average district-month cell.

The negative effect of punitive house demolitions on the number of subsequent suicide terrorists is qualitatively and quantitatively robust to the inclusion of additional controls, such as demographic and economic characteristics as well as other proxies for the security situation at the district level. The results, moreover, are also robust to the inclusion of district-specific time trends.

In additional analyses we evaluated the data using both district-month and locality-month aggregations and obtained similar results. In short, our research found that punitive house demolitions had an immediate deterrent effect on suicide terrorism. This effect was robust to different specifications and for different measures of punitive house demolitions. To that end, we then studied the persistency of house demolitions over six months (fig. 3). We demonstrated that the effect of punitive house demolitions, though significant a month after their occurrence, faded away over time. That is, the pattern of coefficients consistently showed for the four measures of demolitions a negative and significant effect of house demolitions within a one-month lag and an almost monotonic convergence to zero for higher-order lags.

In another set of regressions we analyzed the geographic dispersion of the effect of punitive house demolitions on suicide terrorism. To that end, we studied whether house demolitions in a neighboring district had an effect on local suicide terrorism. We found that the effects of house demolitions dissipated not only over time but also across geographic distance. Accordingly, the effects of local punitive house demolitions on the number of local suicide terrorists were still negative and statistically significant. However, punitive house demolitions in other districts in the same region did not have a significant impact on the number of suicide terrorists.

After establishing the negative link between punitive house demolitions and terrorism we studied the effects of precautionary house demolitions on suicide terrorism. Precautionary house demolitions are dwellings demolished by the IDF in clearing operations intended to meet military needs. For houses demolished for punitive reasons, the IDF directly links the owner and/or occupant of the house to terror activity against Israel—that is, there is a direct link between an individual's action and the resulting punishment. In contrast, for houses demolished for precautionary reasons, the IDF does not claim an existing connection between the house's occupant and terror activity—that is, there is no connection between the individual's actions and the resulting demolition of the house. In fact, the main determinant of precautionary house

demolitions is whether the house is located near the Egyptian or Israeli borders or surrounding an Israeli settlement or roads used by settlers.

Remarkably, our research shows that precautionary demolitions had a positive effect on the number of suicide terrorists. The estimated coefficients are statistically significant and of an important magnitude. The estimated rate ratio implies that the marginal precautionary house demolition increased the number of suicide terrorists originating from a district in the following month by a factor of 1.051. This effect implies that a standard deviation increase in the number of precautionary house demolitions (which is equal to 7.99) causes an increase of 48.7 percent in the number of suicide terrorists originating from an average district-month cell.

4. Targeted Offensive Counterterrorism

Our research analysis draws on a framework motivated by the pioneering social scientist Stathis Kalyvas's comprehensive study of violence in civil wars.¹⁰ In his characterization of violence, Kalyvas distinguished between indiscriminate violence and selective violence: "Indiscriminate violence may be used to achieve a variety of goals, such as exterminating particular groups, displacing people, plundering goods, or demonstrating a group's power and ability to hurt another group" (2006, 147). Following Kalyvas's (2006) classification of types of violence, we view punitive house demolitions as a form of selective violence and precautionary house demolitions as a form of indiscriminate violence.

Our research results provide strong support to the hypothesis that indiscriminate violence is potentially counterproductive because it may backfire (Rosendorff and Sandler 2004; Kalyvas 2006; Bueno de Mesquita and Dickson 2007). The results indicate that, when targeted correctly, counterterrorism measures such as house demolitions or targeted killing provide the desired deterrent effect. When used indiscriminately, however, offensive counterterrorism tactics may radicalize the population and backfire, resulting in more subsequent attacks. Evidence from other conflicts around the world confirm these results. This nuanced result is perhaps the most important message that emerges from studies on the effectiveness of counterterrorism policies.

A prime reason for a state to employ indiscriminate violence against anti-state actors is the inability to identify and separate between the general population and the insurgents and terrorists. In the Philippines, for example, according to Alan Berlow, this issue led the military to use excessive violence: "A major problem for the Philippine military was the one the Americans encountered in Vietnam: They couldn't figure out who the 'fish' were until they started shooting.

¹⁰ Kalyvas wrote extensively on violence in civil wars; I refer here to his seminal book *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (2006).

To be on the safe side, Filipinos, like the Americans in Vietnam, erred on the side of overkill and assumed that anyone was an enemy until proven otherwise” (1998, 180.)

In theory, indiscriminate violence may be counterproductive because it creates new grievances, fails to generate a clear structure of incentives, and allows insurgents to solve collective action problems.¹¹ Indiscriminate violence against civilians thus boosts popular support for terrorist and insurgent groups. Terrorists and insurgents usually translate this surge of support into bigger cadres and increased violence against their political opponents. However, empirical evidence for the use of indiscriminate violence is mixed. Some studies suggest that indiscriminate violence is counterproductive because it creates new grievances.¹² Jason Lyall (2009), however, finds that the use of indiscriminate violence in Chechnya by the Russian army caused a significant decrease in insurgents’ attacks.

In contrast to the indiscriminate approach, selective violence is harder to implement when selection criteria are rough. Yet selective violence is argued to be more productive since it is consistent with a notion of fairness: it does not distort incentives because it punishes only those directly involved in acts of insurgency and terrorism. Kalyvas identifies the key to an effective policy of selective violence: “To achieve deterrence, political actors must convince the targeted population that they are able to monitor and sanction their behavior with reasonable accuracy. In other words, they need to cultivate a *perception of credible selection*. They can achieve this goal without being perfectly accurate in their targeting. A mix of accurate and erroneous hits is compatible with a perception of credible selection” (2006, 191). Selective policies may fail, however, if actors fail to discriminate between the guilty and the innocent. Moreover, selective violence requires intelligence and access to local information.

Benmelech, Berrebi, and Klor (2015) differentiate between two types of house demolitions carried out by the IDF—punitive and precautionary—and show that, when targeted correctly, counterterrorism measures such as house demolitions provided the desired deterrent effect. In contrast, when used indiscriminately, house demolitions led to the radicalization of the population, resulting in more subsequent attacks. These results are consistent with Zussman and Zussman (2006) findings that Israeli targeted killing of Palestinian military personnel resulted in an increase in the Israeli stock market index, while the targeted killing of senior political leaders resulted in declines.

¹¹ See, e.g., Rosendorff and Sandler 2004; Bueno de Mesquita and Dickson 2007; and Kalyvas 2006.

¹² As argued by Rosendorff and Sandler 2004 and Bueno de Mesquita and Dickson 2007 in related studies of terrorism, and by Kalyvas 2006 in his comprehensive study on the use of violence in civil wars, indiscriminate violence against civilians increases popular support for terrorist and insurgent groups. Terrorists and insurgents usually translate this increase into bigger cadres and increased violence against their political opponents.

But do the results hold in other conflicts and different measures of counterterrorism? The answer seems to be yes. In an analysis of the Northern Ireland conflict, Victor Asal and colleagues (2015) find that British counterterrorism efforts against the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) between 1970 and 1998 followed similar patterns to those we identified in our study. Asal and his fellow researchers created two counterterrorism variables: a count of the PIRA members killed by British forces, and a count of Catholic civilian noncombatants killed by British forces. Consistent with our findings, they determined that British killing of PIRA members—which they termed “discriminate killing”—led to a decrease in the number of total fatalities from PIRA attacks. On the other hand, they also found that killings of civilians by counterterrorism forces—which they termed “indiscriminate killing”—had the opposite effect and tended to increase the number of total fatalities in PIRA attacks. In a related paper, Gary LaFree, Laura Dugan, and Raven Korte (2009) identified six major British strategies aimed at reducing political violence in Northern Ireland from 1969 to 1992. They found evidence that some counterterrorism interventions resulted in terrorism backlash, while others led to deterrence. Similarly, in a study of U.S. airstrikes against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Joshua Allen (2019) found that civilian casualties and leadership casualties had no effect on al-Qaeda attacks, whereas militant casualties reduced terror attacks.

5. Conclusion

House demolitions and targeted killing are offensive counterterrorism interventions practiced by the Israeli security forces. And while the practice of house demolition dates back to the British Mandate, both house demolition and targeted killing have evolved as Israel’s primary offensive counterterrorism tools – in particular in response to Palestinian terror campaigns. An examination of the evidence on the effectiveness of house demolitions and targeted killing shows that directed proactive measures, including house demolitions, leads to an immediate decrease in the number of suicide terrorists. This effect, however, dissipates over time and space. In contrast, precautionary house demolitions—an indiscriminate policy of counterterrorism—leads to a significance increase in the number of suicide terror attacks against Israeli citizens. Similarly, targeted killing of Palestinian military personnel resulted in an increase in the Israeli stock market index, while the targeted killing of senior political leaders resulted in declines.

These results are consistent with findings from other conflicts in Northern Ireland and in Yemen. The notion that selective counterterrorism policies work while indiscriminate counterterrorism policies backfire appears to be supported by evidence from different regions and in different time periods.

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Figure 1. Targeted killing over time, 2000–2019

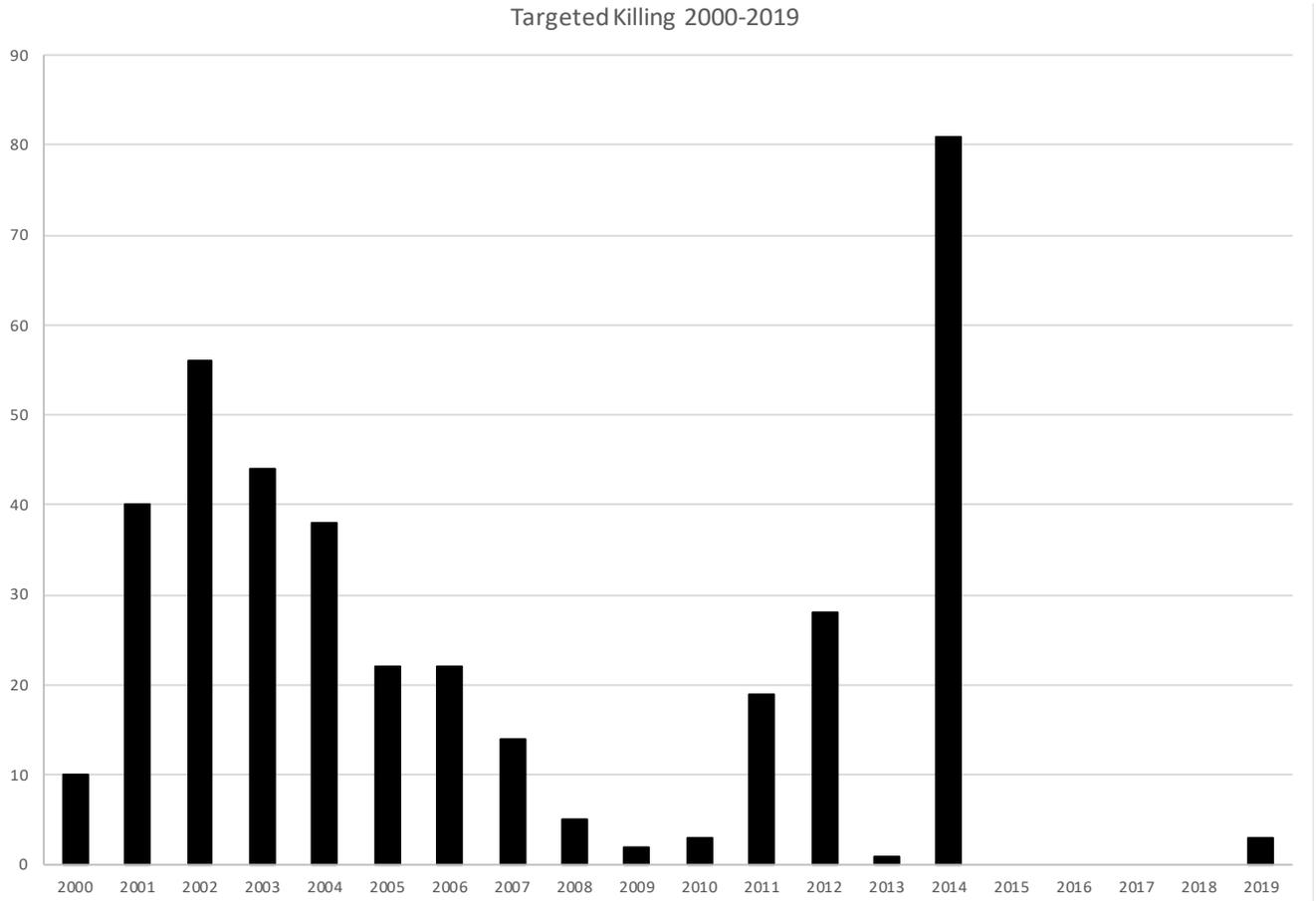


Figure 2. House demolition over time, 2000–2020

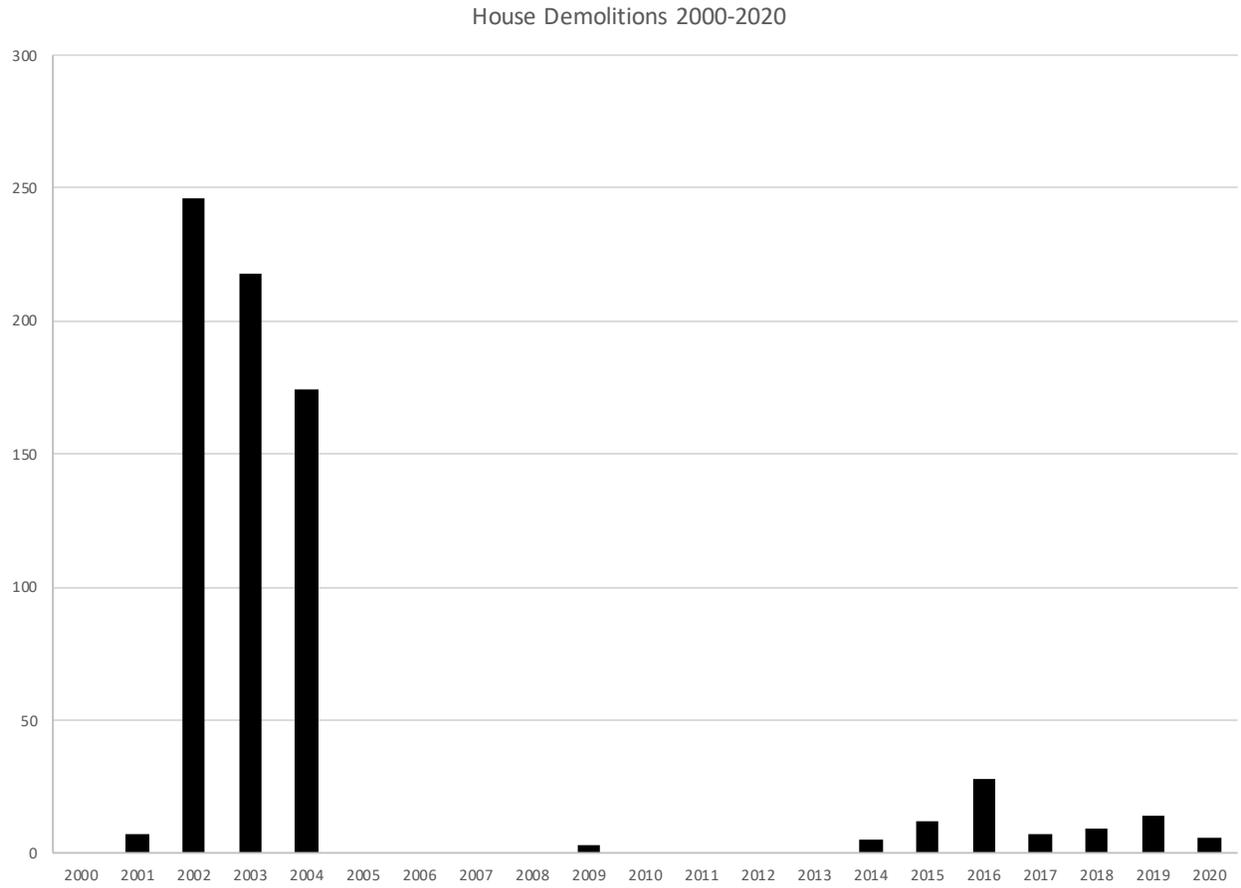


Figure 3. The dynamic effects of punitive demolitions on the number of suicide attacks (90 percent CI in shaded area) Source: Benmelech, Berrebi, and Klor (2015).

