

The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism in Sri Lanka

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Introduction

Recent years have seen a rise in suicide bombings, prompting researchers to ask why this tactic has become so widespread as well as why individual terrorists have embraced it. This research analysed the type of suicide terrorism utilised by the Black Tigers, the militant wing of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), in their efforts to “liberate” Sri Lanka’s Tamil minority community. It examined the strategic logic behind this tactic and evaluated how the LTTE leadership persuaded members to carry out suicide missions, based on the portrayal of successful suicide bombers and the LTTE’s culture of martyrdom. I argue that suicide terrorism was the preferred tactic of the Black Tigers because of its symbolic, sacrificial nature and its power to inculcate its members with a strong sense of group cohesion. I also examine how the LTTE’s suicide terrorism has inspired contemporary terrorist groups and individuals to emulate this tactic.

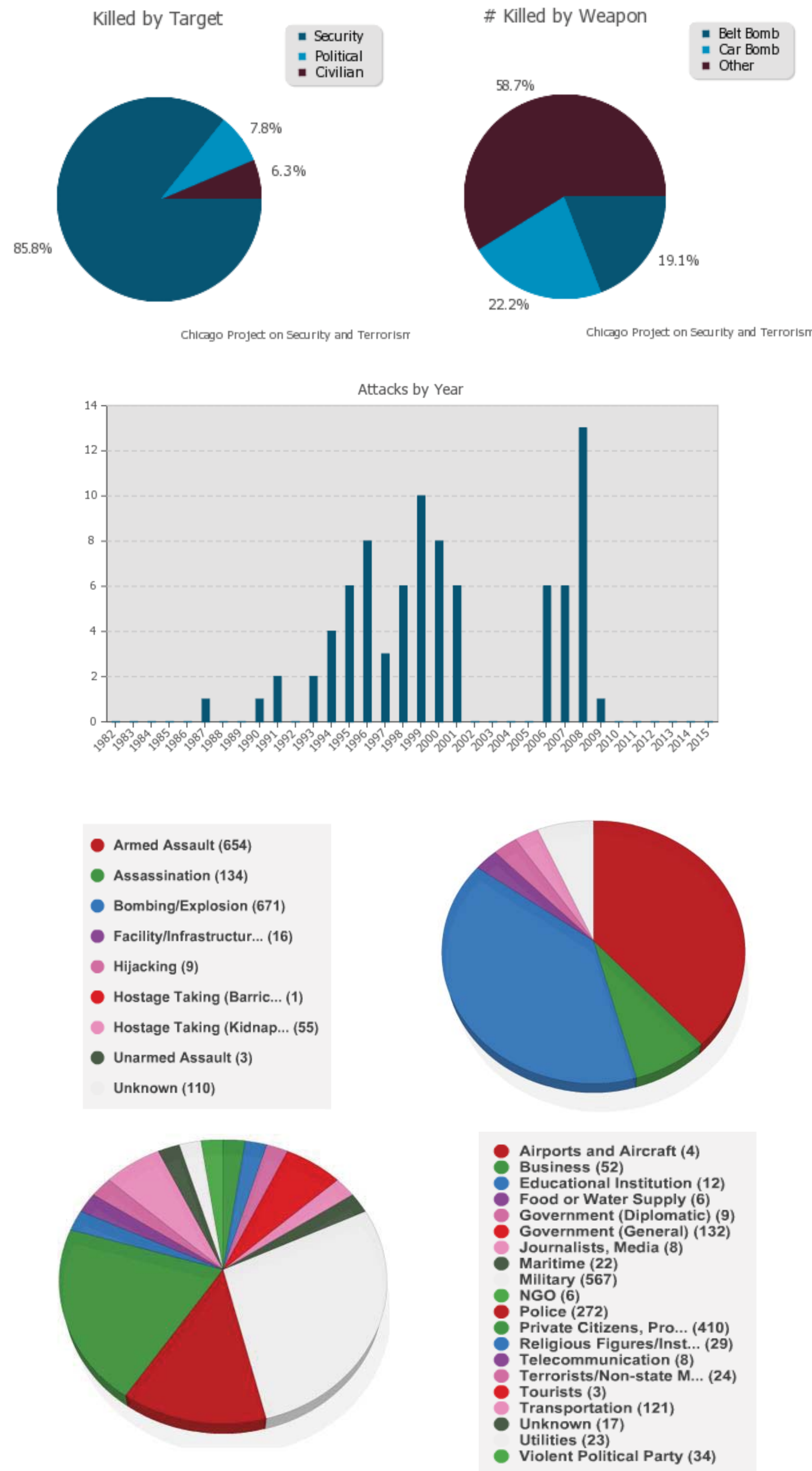
Background

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was established in 1976 under the leadership of Velupillai Prabhakaran as a response to the growing political and ethnic tensions between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils in Sri Lanka. It proved to be one of the most lethal, well organised and disciplined terrorist forces with the sole objective of creating a homeland for ethnic Tamils. In doing so, the LTTE fought a civil war with the Sri Lankan government for twenty-six years. What makes the LTTE so unique was its ability to establish itself as a *de facto* government, where it shared many of the governing responsibilities with the local municipalities.

The organisation was also infamous for its high profile suicide attacks as well as the invention of the suicide bomb belt. Since the 1980’s, the LTTE had conducted over two hundred suicide attacks, targeting mostly government officials, transit hubs, and office buildings. In fact, the LTTE is the only terrorist organisation that has successfully assassinated high ranking political figures, including Rajiv Gandhi and Ranasinghe Premadasa and has been accused of killing almost a dozen other high level figures. In May of 2009, Sri Lankan forces killed the elusive Prabhakaran and declared the end of the conflict, marking this as the only time in history a terrorist group has been successfully defeated.

Objectives

- Examine the motivation and logic behind the usage of suicide terrorism to achieve its objective of a homeland
- Analyse why suicide terrorism was the preferred tactic of the LTTE



Discussion

The Black Tiger unit was the LTTE’s ultimate measure against the Sri Lankan government. Its aim was simple: to procure a Tamil homeland and achieve political, and economic gains. Suicide attacks proved to be a rather successful strategic tactic in the Black Tigers’ arsenal, as countless high profile officials, including two political leaders, were successfully assassinated by this tactic. Simply put, these attacks are incredibly powerful statements. It is a different type of violence because it is inherently self-sacrificial in nature and can amass a great deal of public support. The attacks of the Tigers were not acts of desperation; they were cold, calculated moves. There was a very clear conception of why and for what the LTTE was fighting for and thus, suicide attacks became a weapon of intimidation and weapon of reprisal. The very act of suicide terrorism resonated with the Tamil people’s commitment to self-sacrifice.

Furthermore, suicide terrorism, unlike other tactics, could unify the Tamil people. The sacrificial aspects of suicide attacks helped foster a strong sense of cohesion amongst the population, which in turn led to a high level of individual commitment. Since these attacks were committed for the greater good, the Tamil people saw it as a noble, rather than violent, act. The LTTE, in order to be successful, had to garner support from the people and so, created a culture around suicide attacks, making it a point of pride. A suicide mission was not referred to as *that-kolai*, which means suicide, but as *that-kodai*, which means self-gift.

Specifically within the Black Tiger unit, there was an air of mystery and sense of martyrdom. One had to be recruited and personally selected based on a strong nationalistic spirit. The cult of personality cultivated by Vellupillai Prabhakaran also promoted the culture of martyrdom. He was an elusive, God-like figure, rarely seen in public, and who had become the face of the struggle. His central status in the LTTE and his role of overseeing the Black Tigers division allowed him to generate immense support for martyrdom whilst simultaneously guaranteeing recruitment of more suicide bombers. No other terrorist tactic could be as powerful - in terms of influence and actual strength - and as symbolic as an individual partaking in a suicide bombing to achieve a political objective, making suicide terrorism the ultimate commitment to the movement.

Future Prospects

The end of the LTTE does not mean the end of suicide attacks; rather, the number of suicide attacks has increased. With the proliferation of suicide terrorism occurring more than ever, and in particular the Middle East, there is still a need for more research on suicide terrorism to determine other factors that influence organisations to turn to suicide tactics to achieve their objectives. One of the biggest reasons as to why this threat is increasing has much to do with the faulty premise and assumptions made about suicide terrorism, including misunderstanding the logic behind the tactic. The emergence of the Islamic State highlights the immediate need for this discourse, as it proves to be another unique case, similar to the LTTE in its creation of a *de facto* state.

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