

# A Social-Cognitive Prediction of the Perceived Threat of Terrorism and Behavioral Responses of Terrorist Activities

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**Abstract.** This paper applies a social-cognitive model to the situation in Israel following the second intifada. In the model cognitive and social-contextual factors directly influence behavioral responses to terrorism as well as indirectly through affective factors. The findings suggest that the perceived risk of a terrorist attack influenced both preparedness and anxiety and concern. However, in some cases the influence of anxiety and concern on behavioral responses was greater than the cognitive or social-contextual factors i.e. gas mask preparedness. In other cases, the Iranian nuclear threat, the perceived risk did not influence the level of preparedness indirectly through anxiety and concern. The divergence in these findings reflects overconfidence in the state's ability to cope with the nuclear threat and the hypothetical nature of the responses.

**Keywords:** risk perception, social-cognition, terrorism.

## 1 Introduction

There has been a significant amount of research on terrorism and its psychological impacts since the September 11, 2001 attacks. Previous work in this area [1] suggests that individuals' motivation to prepare for a disaster is a function of their cognitive and affective reactions as well as risk perceptions. As Lee and Lemyre [2] (LL from here on) point out there have been limited attempts to demonstrate individual responses and preparedness to these threats using a model that incorporates cognitive, social-contextual, and affective factors. Thus, they develop a model where the cognitive factors and social-contextual factors both influence behavioral responses directly and also indirectly via affective responses. This paper applies LL's social-cognitive model to the situation in Israel following the second intifada. One important distinction is that in the LL model individuals form a perception of the risk of terrorism in the absence of terrorist activity. This is not the case here where individuals have experienced terrorist activity.

## 2 History of Terrorism

The second intifada, also known as the “al-Aqsa Intifada” concluded in 2005 with several important results. The first is that Israel constructed a barrier wall around the West Bank and the second is that Israel withdrew from the Gaza strip. Since the second intifada Israel has engaged in three wars, two in the south and one in the north. All of these confrontations were launched from areas – Southern Lebanon and the Gaza Strip - from which Israel had fully, and unilaterally withdrawn [3].

In July 2006, Hezbollah crossed into northern Israel from Southern Lebanon and ambushed several soldiers leading to the Second Lebanon War. During this war a large area of Israel experienced heavy rocket attacks, nearly 4,000 Katyushas rockets were fired into northern Israel [4]. Although the majority of these fell into empty fields, 25 percent hit urban areas and halted daily life in northern Israel, the port in Haifa, refineries and other strategic installations. The heavy rocket fire led to casualties - 44 Israeli civilians and 119 Israel Defense Force (IDF) soldiers were killed and approximately 3,000 were injured [5,3]. In addition, there were major disruptions to everyday life as over one million Israelis took refuge in bomb shelters and approximately 300,000 temporarily relocated [6].

The armed takeover of Gaza by Hamas in June 2007 and increasingly severe rocket and mortar fire by Hamas and Palestinian terrorist organizations from Gaza led to the second and third wars. The first of these, Operation Cast Lead in December 2008-January 2009 was due to severe rocket and mortar attacks into southern Israeli towns and cities. While the majority of Israel was relatively unaffected by this confrontation, southern towns and cities were heavily bombed by mortars and rockets resulting in major disruptions of everyday life. The conflict resulted in 13 dead and 518 wounded Israelis [7]. The operation was deemed somewhat successful as it reduced rocket fire, rocket attacks decreased from 3,278 in December 2008 to 231 in 2010 [8], and weapons smuggling.

The decrease in rocket attacks following Operation Cast Lead was brief. Rocket attacks quickly increased to 627 in 2011 and 2,248 in 2012 [9]. In response to increasing heavy rocket fire – over 100 rockets over a 24-hour period – Operation Pillar of Defense was launched in November 2012 [9]. Southern towns and cities were heavily bombed by mortars and rockets. In contrast to the attacks in 2008-9, Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist organizations launched long-range rockets, such as the Fajr-5, and for the first time rockets reached Tel Aviv and Jerusalem [9]. Although, fewer individuals were killed than in 2008-9 - 6 deaths and 240 injured- a larger portion of the population was affected due to the use of long-range rockets [9].

During the confrontation over 1,506 rockets were fired. Of these, more than 800 struck Israel – damaging homes, schools, and other areas; 421 were intercepted by Iron Dome; and 152 crashed back into Gaza [9]. The relatively low fatality rate is due to the effectiveness of “Iron Dome”. Iron Dome is a missile defense system designed to intercept and destroy short-range missiles and artillery shells. While Iron Dome has proved to be effective it does not provide a hermetic, leak-proof defense

[9]. The operational success of the system did not prevent major disruptions to everyday life. The public were still required to seek shelter during rocket attacks, schools and public events were suspended, and these areas experienced economic distress and a loss of trade [10]. Although, it is unlikely that individuals would continue day to day life uninterrupted even if the system were to provide a hermetic seal due to debris from intercepted rockets [6].

Israel has experienced a number of terrorist attacks since the conclusion of the second intifada in 2005, including three significant confrontations. These confrontations form the backdrop in which individual behavioral responses to terrorist activities are examined using a social-cognitive model.

### 3 Theoretical Foundation

There is a wide body of evidence - Goodwin et al., [11], Huddy et al., [12], Lerner et al., [13], and Bergstrom and McCaul [14] - that has shown that both cognitive and affective factors play a role in individuals' response to terrorism. The "risk-as-feelings" hypothesis models this as a reciprocal relationship between cognitive evaluations and feelings [15]. However, Kobbeltved et al., [16] and LL find supporting evidence that the relationship is one-sided.

What is less clear is how social-contextual factors are involved in behavioral responses to terrorism. Lee et al., [17] link cognitive and social-contextual factors, motivated by concern, with behavioral responses. They show that affective responses need to be evaluated within the social context in which they are experienced. Paton's [18] social-cognitive model of disaster preparedness includes trust in information as a determinant of individual preparedness and identification of one's tendency to transfer responsibility for preparedness to others as a barrier to individual preparedness. LL in their survey of Canadian citizens are able to demonstrate that behavioral responses to terrorism threats such as preparedness, information, and avoidance behaviors are in fact a function of both cognitive and social-contextual factors. They find that worry about terrorism influences behavioral responses above and beyond cognitive and social-contextual factors.

This study employs the model that LL developed where cognitive and social-contextual factors both influence behavioral responses directly and also indirectly via affective responses. As Sunstein [19] argues responses to conflict type disasters are based on the perceived consequences of an attack rather than its likelihood of occurrence. Therefore, in order to examine individuals' responses the model must first identify the perceived threat and actual threat. Given the history of terrorism in Israel the actual threat of a terrorist attack is very real. Although the number of suicide bombers has decline significantly, rockets from Gaza are launched regularly, and the threat of a nuclear Iran is ever present. The question is how do residents perceive the threat of these attacks and what behaviors are induced? This study applies the social-cognitive model to the situation in Israel.

## 4 Social-Cognitive Model

### 4.1 Cognitive Factors

This study will utilize the perceived threat of an attack and religiosity as cognitive measures. The perceived risk is a function of the number of attacks in the past, whether these have been increasing in intensity, the residents' location and religiosity. As described above there have been a number of recent terrorist attacks over the last ten years. However, the intensity of these attacks has varied with respect to military actions taken by Israel.

Before examining the perceived risk of an attack an important distinction needs to be made. The distinction between the perceived security of the nation as a whole versus the individuals' perception of their personal security. A tendency of many Western democracies is for individuals' to view the security of the nation more negatively than their own personal security [3]. This view is due in large degree to the media [3]. A survey carried out by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) indicates that this is also the case in Israel.

In 2012 Israelis perceived the security of the nation as significantly better than the 2004-9 period but similar to that in 2009 [3]. This perception is unlikely to change over the next 5 years [3]. The overall threat index as measured by the INSS has been relatively consistent from 2004 to 2012, with a slight rise in 2007 and 2009, and a slight decline in 2012<sup>1</sup>[3]. These fluctuations most likely reflect the effects of the Second Lebanon War and the first Gaza incursion [3, 7]. Over the same time period the average Israeli perceived that there had been a dramatic improvement in their personal security and that this trend was likely to continue into the future – significant improvement in the next five years [3].

The rise in confidence from 2004 to the present both for the country as a whole as well as personally is a reflection of the improved economic situation<sup>2</sup> and improvements in the security situation [7]. The number of Israelis killed in terror attacks dropped from 451 in 2002 to 13 in 2009 to 9 in 2012 [3]. The number of suicide bombings dropped from 60 in 2001 to one in 2012 [20]. While the number of bomb attacks have varied with respect to military actions. There were 510 bomb attacks in 2001, increasing to 3,278 in 2008 and 2,248 in 2012 before falling to 41 in 2013 [21]. In addition, the operations targeted and were successful in destroying weapon smuggling tunnels and terrorist sites.

The next step is to identify those situations that Israelis perceive as the most dangerous. The rank order of situations that Israelis find dangerous has remained unchanged over the last six years. Israelis view the Iranian nuclear threat as the most serious threat facing the public although, they do not view it as an existential one. However, almost all Israelis do not believe that their personal lives will be affected by Iran obtaining nuclear weapons. The next serious threat is, nuclear, chemical, and

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<sup>1</sup> This value was calculated prior to the severe rocket attacks in 2012 and resulting war.

<sup>2</sup> Real per capita GDP increased by approximately 22% between 2004 and 2012. Calculated from the Israel Census Bureau.

biological weapons in the hands of an enemy state. Internal issues and rockets aimed at Israel are considered medium issues, while the return of territories, establishment of a Palestinian state, and war with Syria are viewed as the least threatening [3].

The perception of risk is influenced by religiosity. There is some debate about how religiosity influences perceived risk. Billig [22] and Levay, Kohn, and Billig [23] showed that religiosity had a protective effect against the psychological distress of terrorism and reduced the perceived risk. The survey of Israelis as a whole indicate that on a personal level the most religious group viewed themselves as the least threatened relative to traditional and secular groups [7]. This effect is eliminated by 2012, when the survey results show no relationship between religiosity and the level of perceived threats [3]. The strength of the relationship between risk perception and religiosity, found in previous literature may reflect the population sampled. Settlers<sup>3</sup> tend to be more religious on average, than the nation as a whole.

Overall Israelis have a lower perceived risk of terrorist attacks than five years ago and are optimistic about the future. This perceived risk is even lower among the most religious groups in society. In general Israelis perceive that the greatest obstacle to national security is the Iranian threat, followed by nuclear, chemical and biological weapons in the hands of an enemy state.

## 4.2 Social-Contextual Factors

The social-contextual factors included in the model are perceived government preparedness and ability to cope with threats. It is important to determine how prepared Israelis believe the government is to handle the risk of terrorist activities. This perception is partially the result of the activities and level of trust that Israelis have in the Home Front Command. In addition, to the development of the “Iron Dome” defense system and the role that it plays in mitigating the perceived risk of an attack.

In 2012 Israelis felt fairly confident about the state’s ability to cope with external and internal hazards [3]. Israelis were most confident about the state’s ability to cope with the Syrian conflict, then war with all Arab countries, and least with a nuclear attack. While the state’s ability to cope with a nuclear attack inspired the least confidence more than half of all Israelis sampled believe that Israel can cope with this threat [3]. This confidence is further enhanced by the recent successes of Iron Dome defense system. During the 2012-13 conflict with Hamas and Palestinian terror organizations, Iron Dome was responsible for intercepting almost 30 percent of the rockets fired [24]. Although, Iron Dome did not provide a hermetic, leak-proof defense it did constrain the disruptions to life. This success has generated a mood of “near euphoria” among the Israeli public, further building feelings of confidence in the government’s ability to cope with terror threats, particularly with respect to Iran [25].

However, this euphoria should be tempered. There is a concern about overconfidence in the system. Brig. Gen. (res.) Meir Elran warns that “the over-glorification by the politicians, the soldiers and the media is triggering a level of expectation that

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<sup>3</sup> These studies surveyed settlers in the West Bank and Gaza region.

might prove problematic.” [25] In a full scale war Iron Dome is most likely to deal with the shorter-range rockets, likely to be fired from Lebanon, Gaza and maybe Syria [25]. It is reasonable that it will be responsible for defending military bases and essential economic facilities rather than the general population. The system is not designed to engage long-range ballistic missiles from Iran and Syria, or heavy rockets from Lebanon [25]. Therefore, Israelis risk perception, particularly with regard to potential attacks from Iran may be more optimistic than the reality [25].

Another factor that influences Israelis perception of government preparedness is the Home Front Command. Israel has a comprehensive Home Front Command. This command was established as the fourth IDF command entity in response to the First Gulf War in February 1992 [25]. One of its primary responsibilities is to ensure that Israelis are equipped and prepared and to provide information regarding terrorist attacks and wars [25]. In particular it is responsible for the distribution of gas masks to the public, instructions on how to prepare safe, sealed rooms, and the coordination of medical and rescue teams on the home front. The command holds frequent drills to ensure that the country is prepared [25].

One particular area of preparedness that has recently been debated is the distribution of gas masks. Between 2010 and 2012, 4.6 million kits were distributed representing 60 percent of the population [26]. Although, the Home Front Command attributes this low level of distribution to Israelis lack of confidence in the state’s institutions and guidelines [26], it is more likely the result of passivity and a perception that Israelis are responsible for their own level of protection [27]. In August 2013, when the U.S. contemplated a strike against Syria, anxious Israelis flooded distribution centers in anticipation of a retaliatory attack [28]. Thus, giving credence to the theory that Israelis’ low participation in gas mask distribution represents their view that the level of preparedness is their own responsibility.

“Overall, the Israeli public expresses a level of concern that is balanced by the public’s confidence in Israel’s ability to cope with these hazards. These trends suggest an improvement in the sense of perceived personal situation and a slight decrease in the level of confidence about the future of the country as a whole.”[3] However, it is important to note that those that live in the North<sup>4</sup> are less confident in the ability of the state to cope with the threats compared to the Israeli population in general. The more religious citizens express a greater confidence in the Israeli government to deal with the threats [3]. The development of the Iron Dome defense system has raised Israelis’ confidence in the state’s ability to cope with dangerous situations, in particular the Iranian threat. Also, Israeli responses to the Home Front Command suggestions indicate passivity to these suggestions and support the view that they are individually responsible for their own level of preparedness.

### 4.3 Affective Factors

According to the model developed by LL cognitive and social-contextual factors should impact behavioral responses directly and also indirectly via affective

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<sup>4</sup> Northerners live near the Lebanon and Syrian borders.

factors such as concern and anxiety. The model also specifies that social-contextual factors such as perceived government preparedness influences anxiety and concern and thus influences behavioral responses.

The affective factors included in this model are concern and anxiety. Since the second intifada, approximately 80 percent of respondents expressed concern that they or a member of their family might become a victim of a terrorist attack [7]. This value reached a high of 92 percent in 2002 and has been gradually declining since then, 72 percent in 2006, 69 percent in 2007, and 70 percent in 2009 [7]. This decline reflects the decrease in the number of suicide bombings. However, this value is still quite high and is due to the constant threat of suicide bombings and rocket attacks. Interestingly more Israelis are killed in traffic accidents each year than by terrorist yet Israelis do not view this as a comparable threat [7].

#### **4.4 Behavioral Responses**

The behavioral responses included in this model are avoidance of potentially dangerous situations and the individual level of preparedness. One possible response to the threat of terrorism is the evacuation of outlying settlements. In general there was some willingness among Israelis to evacuate some outlying settlements and unauthorized outposts. However, the public was split regarding evaluating any settlement as part of a partial or unilateral realignment of the settlement map of Israel. In addition, there was little support for the removal of all settlements, including the large settlement blocs [3]. It is interesting to note that all of the conflicts covered in this paper – the Second Lebanon War and the two Gaza Operations – have been in response to terrorist activities connected to areas that Israel had fully and unilaterally withdrawn.

Another expected response to terrorist activities would be for individuals' to move from areas that are subject to more intense bombings. During the Second Lebanon War approximately 300,000 individuals temporarily relocated in order to avoid bomb attacks [7]. However, this phenomenon has not been observed in the South. Jewish communal settlers in the south have a strong tendency to stay in their area [29]. This strong home attachment is due to their firm ideology of holding the land, religious faith, strong place and home attachment, and low risk perception [30].

An additional behavioral response to terrorist threats is the individual level of preparedness, for example obtaining a gas mask kit. As mentioned above only a slight majority of individuals collected their gas mask kits prior to 2013. However, when the threat of a possible strike from Syria looked imminent Israelis quickly acquired these kits. This result is not surprising given that prior to 2013, Israelis viewed war with Syria as a low ranking threat and therefore did not take any preventative or preparedness actions. However, once the risk perception changed Israelis made significant changes to their level of preparedness.

There has been a general lack of behavioral responses to terrorist activity since the second intifada, except for the change in gas mask preparedness. In general Israelis' have not taken significant behavioral changes in response to rocket attacks in the

south or north. The perceived lack of behavioral responses to terrorist activity is something that was observed during the second intifada and attributed to strong social resilience [31]. During the second intifada, when threat perception values were higher than they are today, Israelis continued to go out to cafes and travel on public buses, although they did modify their behavior marginally [27, 32].

## 5 Discussion

The situations discussed in this paper appear to support the LL model in some cases but not in others. LL found that worry about terrorism influenced behavioral responses above and beyond cognitive and social-contextual factors. In this study the cognitive factor such as the perceived risk of a terrorist attack influenced both behavioral responses and affective factors. However, the influence of anxiety and concern on behavioral responses was greater in some cases than the cognitive or social-contextual factors examined but not in others. The case of gas mask preparedness supports the LL model while the situation with Iran does not.

The perceived risk of a confrontation with Syria ranks among the lowest perceived threats even though Syria had a large cache of chemical and biological weapons. A behavioral response to this threat would be to acquire gas masks. Prior to 2013 the low level of distribution is attributed to passivity and a belief that Israelis are responsible for their own level of protection [33]. In August 2013, the U.S. contemplated a strike against Syria. This spiked individuals' perceived risk of a terrorist attack and anxiety and concern regarding the threat. The result was that, anxious Israelis flooded distribution centers in anticipation of a retaliatory attack [3]. In this case an increase in the perceived risk of a threat led to an increase in anxiety and concern and altogether these resulted in behavioral responses – the acquisition of gas masks.

An alternative model of the relationship between cognitive, social-contextual, affective and behavioral responses is the perceived Israeli response to a nuclear Iran. The link between perceived risk and behavioral responses is somewhat weak in this situation. Israelis believe that the greatest hazard facing the country is the threat of a nuclear Iran. However, most have become increasingly confident in the state's ability to cope with this threat, likely due to the successes of Iron Dome and other defense systems and the state's deterrent capability – probably because almost all Israelis believe that Israel has nuclear weapons [3]. Although, Israelis' have a high risk perception regarding this issue, this has not translated into anxiety and concern. In fact, even though the likelihood of the threat has strengthened in the last three years, Israelis have become more complacent – 87 percent do not believe that it will affect their lives [3]. This has translated into Israelis' limiting responses to the Iranian threat. Half of the population believes that Israel should use all political resources available to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapon, while the other half believe that Israel should attack nuclear installations in Iran [3]. Only a small percentage considers



behavioral responses such as leaving the country<sup>5</sup> [3]. Given that a large majority does not believe that a nuclear Iran will affect their lives, no real individual responses have occurred.

The difference in the link between the factors highlighted by these two situations may be a function of the behavioral responses examined. In the case of the gas mask example the behavioral responses are actual responses, while in the case of a nuclear Iran the behavioral responses are hypothetical. This may be problematic because actions that individuals expect to take and those that they actually take under duress may be very different. Israelis may in fact feel differently if Iran actually acquires nuclear weapons. This then leads to incorrect conclusions about the actual relationship between threats and responses. An additional factor that may lead to the divergence of results is that individuals feel totally impotent in preparing for the perceived Iranian threat and thus do not engage in any behavioral responses, whereas obtaining a gas mask is a simple and achievable preparation. If this is the case then there may be some threshold level of threat that once met - individuals' feel like they cannot take any action to combat this threat - and thus fail to prepare for it entirely.

## 6 Conclusions

This paper applies the social-cognitive model developed by LL to the situation in Israel following the second intifada. The LL model specifies that cognitive and social-contextual factors directly influence behavioral responses to terrorism as well as indirectly through affective factors. One important distinction is that in the LL model individuals form a perception of the risk of terrorism in the absence of terrorist activity. This is not the case in this study where individuals have experienced terrorist activity.

Overall Israelis have a lower perceived risk of terrorist attacks than five years ago and are optimistic about the future. This perceived risk is even lower among the most religious groups in society. In general Israelis perceive that the greatest obstacle to national security is the Iranian threat. This growing optimism about the future has occurred simultaneously with a decline in the anxiety and concern that Israelis feel regarding a terrorist attack. Further the Israeli public has expressed a high level of confidence in the state's ability to cope with these hazards which may be the result of Iron Dome defense system successes and the belief that they are individually responsible for their own level of preparedness. In general there has been a lack of behavioral responses such as avoidance or preparedness to terrorist activity since the second intifada. However, this may be the result of strong place attachment and social resilience.

The LL model specifies that cognitive and social-contextual factors directly influence behavioral responses as well as indirectly through affective factors. In this study the perceived risk of a terrorist attack influenced both preparedness and anxiety and

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<sup>5</sup> "Only 3 percent said that they would leave the country, 4 percent stated that they would consider moving to another community, and the remaining 6 percent said that "they would consider moving to another country, for instance, by acquiring a foreign passport." [3]

concern. However, in some cases the influence of anxiety and concern on behavioral responses was greater than the cognitive or social-contextual factors. The results of the study indicate that the social-cognitive model explains the relationship between cognitive, social-contextual, and affective factors on behavioral responses under specific conditions. In particular, the behavioral responses must be actual responses and not hypothetical responses. The actions that individuals expect to take and those that they actually take under duress may be very different, leading to incorrect conclusions about the actual relationship between threats and responses. In addition, there may be some threshold level of perceived threat beyond which individuals feel impotent and thus do not prepare at all.

One caveat that must be mentioned is that this paper does not perform a survey or statistical analysis and therefore, it is difficult to determine the strength or even the existence of relationships in the absence of outside factors. Thus, it may appear that relationships may or may not exist when in fact these may be due to an outside factor and the relationship is just spurious. Future work will perform a survey and analysis of the data within the framework of this model.

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