

# Terrorism by Insurgents and Rebels

## Jakana Thomas

### Introduction

Although *transnational* terror attacks tend to attract substantial attention and engender outsized anxiety, most acts of terrorism around the globe are actually perpetrated by assailants that reside in the same country they target. That is, the majority of terror attacks can be classified as *domestic terrorism*. According to Enders, Sandler and Gaibullov (2011), between 1970 and 2007 there were more than three and a half times more domestic attacks than transnational attacks. Berkebile (2017) puts the proportion of domestic attacks higher, at between 80 and 90% of all attacks. Moreover, nearly half of these domestic attacks were conducted in the context of a rebellion (Findley and Young 2012). Despite the frequency of civil war-related terror, few studies seek to understand the frequency and value of terrorism in this particular context. This chapter explores the use of terrorism by rebel organizations involved in a sustained domestic struggle against a government and explains why violent political organizations may view terrorism as a viable means to achieve victory over a state opponent. Ultimately, by theorizing about what groups hope to achieve with their use of terrorism, we gain a better understanding of why this particular tool is so attractive in rebellion, and therefore so prevalent.

Acts of terrorism are commonly perpetrated in and around civil conflicts (Stanton 2013). As many as two-thirds of attributed global attacks occurring between 1970 and 2004 were conducted by recognized rebel organizations while around half took place in declared war zones (Findley and Young 2012). These domestic terror attacks were used to start, restart, prolong and end wars. Given the availability of other strategies and tactics, why do actors rely on terror?

#### Key Concepts:

**Terrorism:** the “premeditated use or threat to use violence by individuals or subnational groups against noncombatants in order to obtain a political or social objective through the intimidation of a large audience beyond that of the immediate victims” (Enders, Sandler and Gaibullov 2011:321).

**Civil conflict:** an organized violent domestic struggle between a state and a non-state entity over a political, economic or social policy that leads to a significant number of fatalities (i.e., greater than 25 deaths). A civil conflict escalates to a civil war when a higher death count is registered (i.e., greater than 500 deaths).

The basic answer to the puzzle of domestic conflict-related terror is that terrorism is compelling violence that can generate significant benefits for the actors that use it. Rebel organizations primarily utilize violence against civilians to help them achieve their war aims. These aims may include broad political or social goals as well as smaller “process” goals. While broad goals may encompass drastic changes to the political, economic and social structures in a state, process goals focus on smaller day-to-day objectives that allow rebels to eventually achieve their more ambitious aims. Recruitment and fundraising are two process goals that terrorism can help advance. While the jury is still out on the actual efficacy of terrorism, there are a number of convincing reasons to believe that visiting violence upon the civilian population would help rebel groups accomplish their objectives. First, terrorism can be used to bolster groups with limited fighting capacity and reduced military prospects. Terrorism is thought to be a tool of the weak and a last resort for groups that have tried other strategies

and failed. Asymmetric insurgencies or guerrilla wars, which feature rebels that are much weaker than their state opponents, often feature terror, as violence against civilians can level the playing field between unequally matched opponents. Put simply, terrorism keeps rebels in the game longer. Second, rebel groups use violence against civilians to establish and maintain territorial control. Not only can terror help subdue a population that would otherwise resist rebel rule, terrorism can also demonstrate the state's inability to effectively govern its own territory. Doing so affords rebels the opportunity to show civilians that their leadership is preferable to the state's. Rebel organizations may provide positive benefits at the same time they intimidate civilians with violence. By providing benefits in the form of social services, protection or material goods, rebels can persuade the population to endure rebels' violence and reject the state. Finally, terrorism can help dissidents wear down their targets or sow discord into a political process that makes an opponent give up, providing the clearest mechanism by which terrorism helps a group achieve its goals. Each of these arguments highlight the ways in which terrorism during civil war can be intentional and strategic.

### **Rebel Relative Strength**

Terrorism is both a “tool of the weak” and a last resort. Martha Crenshaw (1981:387) suggests that terrorism is the preferred tool of a “minority that by its own judgement lacks other means.” Thus, when militants have tried other tactics with little success, they are likely to resort to terrorism as a last-ditch effort to attain their goals (Crenshaw 1981). Teichman (1989) argues that “struggles of national liberation are struggles of the poor against the rich, the weak against the strong. As such they cannot succeed unless inexpensive methods are used.” In this regard, terrorism is particularly attractive for relatively weak or less endowed organizations because the cost is typically low while the potential returns are high. For instance, while the transnational 9/11 attacks were believed to cost around \$500,000 from initial planning to execution, many domestic attacks cost less than the price of a cheap cell phone, while others are cheaper than the average college textbook.

In 2007 Harkat-ul-Jihad-e-Islami Bangladesh detonated two bombs in Hyderabad, India, which killed and injured more than 90 people. The cost? \$50 total (Acharya 2009). Hoffman (2003) suggests that the makeshift suicide bombs used in Israel likely cost around \$150 while estimates put a remote-controlled bomb at around \$400. These attacks can be financed relatively cheaply while imposing great damage on targets. Suicide terrorism is especially useful for addressing material power asymmetries between a weak group and a much stronger government adversary (Horowitz 2010, Hafez 2006). Thus, it is sensible that groups with few resources but big demands, would incorporate terrorism in order to contend with a much more imposing government. Indeed, studies find that when rebels are weak relative to their state foes, they are more likely to adopt terrorist tactics or victimize civilians (Stanton 2013). Battle losses also explain rebels' turn toward terrorizing civilians. As rebels lose more, they terrorize more. It is unsurprising then that states with stronger militaries experience greater rates of terrorism. Since most rebel groups are weaker than the states they fight, terrorism is part and parcel of the civil war experience.

In civil war, imbalances in military capabilities force rebel organizations to resort to unconventional tactics. Unconventional or irregular tactics are those where militants avoid direct confrontations with the state and instead rely on “hit and run” attacks, that are often associated with insurgencies. The use of irregular/guerrilla warfare, according to Kalyvas (2006), is an unambiguous statement of a group's relative weakness. Terrorism is also a form of irregular violence (Lake 2002). Both terrorist and insurgent tactics eschew direct confrontations for clandestine, sporadic attacks and can be used to achieve similar objectives. Terrorism and guerrilla warfare are both thought to be “weapons of the weak designed to harass the enemy and gradually erode his will” (Moghadam et al.

2014:5). Both tactics are designed to alleviate or address unevenness in the distribution of military power between a rebel group and the state. However, while guerrillas launch attacks at the state in a battle of attrition, terrorists inflict direct harm on civilians or non-combatants even if the ultimate aim is to compel the state to change its policies. Therefore, insurgency and terrorism are two ways that weaker militant groups attempt to force concessions from a stronger adversary.

If relative weakness causes a group to adopt both terrorism and insurgent tactics, groups that adopt one tactic should be likely to use the other. This appears to be true, despite alleged differences between guerrilla and terrorist organizations in terms of their size, capabilities and goals. In fact, although organizations like al Qaeda, Hamas and the Islamic State (ISIS) have gained notoriety as terrorists, they actually only engage in terrorism “on the side.” Their primary activities are war-fighting (Moghadam et al. 2014:3). By all accounts, groups that are generally classified as “terrorists” often focus as much, if not more direct attention on battling the state. The overwhelming majority of global terror groups operating between 2002 and 2012 were involved in organized domestic conflicts at the same time that they were waging campaigns of terror and did far more damage to state entities than civilian communities; only about one-third of these terror attacks targeted civilians directly (Moghadam et al. 2014). In Western Europe, combatants fighting on behalf of the state made up nearly half of all fatalities from domestic terror incidents between 1965 and 2000 (De Calle and Sanchez Cuenca 2009).

### Key Concepts

**Insurgency** a domestic conflict where lightly armed rebel units challenge a much more capable state opponent using indirect, hit-and-run- attacks (Price 1977). These conflicts are also referred to as irregular rebellions or guerrilla wars.

**Symmetrical non-conventional conflict** symmetrical conflicts where neither the state nor the rebel group are strong enough to engage in sophisticated set-piece battles with well-defined frontlines. Instead, both states and rebels may use unconventional tactics to strike out at their enemy.

**Conventional conflict** military engagement where both states and rebels use sophisticated techniques, are heavily armed and fight in traditional battles defined by clear frontlines.

Terrorism and insurgency are often used in tandem as is demonstrated by Figure 1, which examines the use of terrorism in civil conflicts between 1960 and 2008. The darkest bar reflects the total number of terror attacks in each type of conflict, while the lighter bars display the number and severity of attacks across each type of target. These data show that terrorism is both most frequent and most severe during insurgencies compared to other types of rebellion; terrorism was used in more than 85% of cases classified as insurgencies. On average, such conflicts experience 83 terror attacks in a given year. Non-insurgencies, which include conventional and symmetrical non-conventional conflicts, however, average only 23 terror attacks per year. Additionally, more deaths from terrorism were recorded in irregular conflicts; insurgencies averaged 244 deaths while other types of conflicts together averaged about 142 fatalities per year.

<Insert Figure 1 about here>

Since a defining feature of an insurgency is the imbalance between state and non-state military forces, the trends support the notion that terrorism is used to address rebels' *relative* weakness. That is to say that the power disparity between belligerents, not a rebel groups' inherent weakness, leads to the reliance on terrorist tactics. If all weak rebel groups found terrorism attractive, situations where

both the rebel and state armies were both weak would also see more terrorism. This is not the case, however. Terrorism is actually *least* common in symmetrical non-conventional (SNC) conflicts, or disputes where both the state and rebels have limited military power. This is reflected in Figure 1.

<Insert Figure 2 about here>

What is more is that insurgents do not appear to use terrorism only to strike out at the government. Figure 2 shows us that although insurgent rebels attack state entities quite often, civilians are actually their main targets. The disparity becomes even more apparent when rates of terrorism against civilian targets are compared with attacks against only state military forces. While there are about 45 insurgent attacks on civilian targets in a given year, the mean number of terror attacks against the military stands at only 24. This suggests that terrorism is used to accomplish something distinct from guerilla attacks on the state. The following sections explore the distinct logic of attacking civilians in a war against the government.

<Insert Case Study 1 Box Here>

### Case Study X.1 Terrorism by UNITA

The rebel organization, National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) is a useful case to demonstrate the effect of military asymmetry on the use of terrorism. UNITA fought a decades-long war against the government of Angola from the mid-1970's until 2002 using both conventional and guerrilla tactics. Over the span of the war, the organization was estimated to have been manned by as many as 60,000 rebels and at its peak reached parity with the Angolan state (Cunningham et al. 2013). At its weakest point, the organization was estimated to comprise only a couple of thousand fighters. Most importantly, UNITA used terrorism quite liberally.

<Insert Figure 3 about here>

According to the Global Terrorism Database, the organization was implicated in over 400 terror attacks between 1978 and 2002. However, UNITA did not use terrorism consistently across that time. Instead, the group's use of terrorism varied with its military strength, particularly relative to the government's. Figure 3 demonstrates that UNITA executed terror attacks more frequently in years it was judged to be weaker than the state. These attacks were also deadlier. When the organization was unable to hurt the state directly, it tended to aim its violence at the undefended and defenseless civilian population. Conversely, UNITA used far less terrorism in years its strength matched the government's, labeled here as parity. When the group was considered to be as strong as the Angolan military, it launched only about 8 attacks in a given year. Nearly 180 more civilians were killed, on average, in years where UNITA's army was weaker than government forces.

<Insert Figure 4 about here>

The types of targets UNITA attacked also hint at the group's strategy. Although UNITA directed its violence at a range of targets, civilians were hit hardest overall. Attacks on civilians were most common, however, when the group was doing poorly on the battlefield. Figure 4 shows during periods of UNITA's relative weakness, attacks focused disproportionately on producing civilian casualties. UNITA's terror

attacks killed on average 192 civilians a year— more than four times the number of government personnel slain— when the rebel group was weaker than the state army. The group continued to use terrorism when it was strong enough to contest the state on the battlefield, but these attacks were less frequent and tended to harm individuals associated with the government rather than civilians. Figure 4 shows that under more favorable military conditions, UNITA's attacks killed about 15 civilians in a given year, whereas those same conditions led to the deaths of more than three times the number of government personnel.

UNITA appears to have used terrorism as a substitute for conventional military operations. When its own organizational weakness prevented the group from hurting its primary enemy in battle, the rebels hoped to injure the state through its attacks on civilians. UNITA's behavior suggests a trade-off between military and civilian deaths and supports the general argument that terrorism during civil war is caused by disparities in military power. Parallels can be drawn between weak rebels and school yard bullies; both prey on those believed to weaker in order to deflect from their own power deficiencies.

Question 1: Why would attacks against the civilian population be viewed as acceptable substitutes for attacks against the Angolan army?

Question 2: Why would UNITA's attacks on the civilian population harm the state rather than the rebel group itself?

## **Territorial Control, Civilian Compliance & Terrorism**

Although weaker rebels are often compelled to use terrorism to gain a military advantage over a stronger government foe, objectively strong groups also rely on terrorism during war. While across the board, terrorism can be used to increase a group's leverage over the state, the logic of attacks against civilians may be different for small and large rebel organizations. Weak groups use terrorism to look strong, while stronger groups use terror to look legitimate. In particular, terrorism may help stronger groups liberate and administer territory, an important aim since territorial control allows militants to build a robust insurgency (Kalyvas and Balcells 2010). Territorial control affords rebels the space to organize a rebellion and a place to retreat to when they need to regroup. For groups engaged in criminal enterprises, territory can be an essential resource to sustain business. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), for example, utilized the land and its inhabitants to sustain a booming coca (cocaine) enterprise. In other conflicts like that in the Democratic Republic of Congo, rebel organizations benefitted from occupying and extorting resource-rich territories. The extraction of gemstones, drugs and even timber has helped prolong rebellions around the world (Ross 2004).

While territorial control is beneficial for rebels, the road to dominance is likely to be difficult and bloody, which is why terrorism is frequently employed in areas that insurgents do not yet fully control (De la Calle and Sanchez-Cuenca 2012). To establish control over a given area, civilians will need to be subdued, as they often resist rebel rule (Aronja 2015). Violence can be an effective means of exerting dominance over an area. As Stuart Elden (2009:xxx) suggests, "to control a territory is to exercise terror; to challenge territorial extent is to exercise terror."

Contested control, in particular, can spur violence against civilians, as competitors attempt to force the population to cooperate and prevent mass defection that could weaken their authority (Kalyvas 2006, Metelits 2009). Yet the decision to use terror can be risky when attempting to govern, as attacks against civilians may alienate supporters and cause the population to instead seek protection

from the opposing side (Kalyvas 2006, Polo and Gleditsch 2016). Violence clearly has its productive limits.

Scholars have found that selective, intentional targeting of individual “guilty” civilians can increase cooperation, while indiscriminate attacks against innocent civilians can be counterproductive (Kalyvas 2006). In order to discriminate between guiltless and culpable civilians, however, combatants need accurate intelligence on instances of compliance and defection at the individual level. Therefore, high value is placed on information and parties will often go to great lengths to extract it from the civilian population. While some belligerents attempt to terrorize civilians into collaborating, others recognize there are more benign ways to elicit compliance. Many rebel groups make efforts to woo the civilian population with a mix of coercive and benevolent strategies. Territory-holding rebels have strong incentives to place emphasis on the latter and develop cooperative relationships with civilians to secure vital material benefits, including taxes, information, shelter and recruits, that increase its standing (Stewart and Liou 2016). While terrorism can crush opposition, it does little to generate sustained civilian loyalty. Governance efforts, on the other hand, can help achieve this goal.

### Key Concepts

**Proto-state:** a non-state political institution that performs many similar functions to the state without the sovereignty that comes with statehood. These entities are also referred to as quasi-states or states within states.

**Public good:** a good or service provided to members of a community that is typically free and non-excludable. Public goods generally refer to social services, such as education, healthcare, security and judicial systems.

A clear link has been established between territorial control and the provision of services (Ishiyama and Widmeier 2013, Berman and Matanock 2015). Seizing territory enables a violent group to set up a proto-state, which rivals the authority and legitimacy of the government. Power vacuums left by the absence of the government from a particular territory enables rebels to offer essential services, especially protection, in exchange for compliance. According to Ahmad (2017:25), “When a state descends into civil war, no party has a clear monopoly on force, and security must be purchased from competing warlord protection rackets. Each of these rackets not only protects its clients but also threatens them and attacks other rackets.” Therefore, territorial control, service provision and violence come together to form political order in civil war zones (Ahmad 2017).

### Rebel Social Service Provision

Violent groups branded as terrorists are often involved in the *provision of social services* including administering institutions in the education, health and security sectors. Groups including Hamas, Fatah, Hezbollah, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and al Qaeda are well-known for setting up extensive bureaucracies and public service outfits. Hamas, for example, has run charities, schools, mosques and media outlets in the West Bank and Gaza since its inception (Berman 2011, Szekely 2015). The LTTE also developed expansive security, judicial, health and educational institutions in

Tamil Eelam (Mampilly 2012, Wagstaff and Jung 2017). Social services clearly benefit the communities to which they are provided, yet social service provision is also associated with more terrorism (Asal et al. 2019, Heger et al. 2017). That is, groups that provide public goods often also produce the worst of public ills— terrorism.

**<Insert Figure 5 about here>**

Heger and Jung (2017) identify nearly 400 groups that have utilized terrorism since 1980 and their levels of social service administration. These data, which record the number of times each terror group was mentioned for its provision of public goods in news media show clearly that terrorist groups engaged in rebellion are more often mentioned for their contributions to public services than groups that engage in terrorism outside of conflicts. Figure 5 demonstrates that terrorist-rebel groups are twice as likely to be mentioned for their service work than terrorist groups that are not parties to civil conflicts. The activities of rebel groups that utilize terrorism were mentioned about 4669 times, while terrorists that do not operate within a rebellion were mentioned for their service provision only 2287 times. Among the top 20 social service providers, 35% are coded as rebel groups that use terrorism. This is notable given that only 25% of the terrorist organizations in the data qualify as rebels. Among the top 3 providers of public goods, Hamas and Fatah score the second and third highest. Hamas in particular, is a powerful force in the Palestinian territories.

This begs the question: if groups that use terrorism generally do so from a position of weakness, why do we see so many groups that appear to be of higher capacity, such as Hamas and Fatah, also using terrorism? The short answer is that while weaker groups may be forced to adopt terrorism, other groups choose terrorism because it can help them achieve long-term strategic aims as well as smaller goals that may eventually benefit their greater ambitions.

**<Insert Case Study 2 Box Here>**

## Case Study X.2 Doing Bad while Doing Good: Explaining the Taliban's Social Service Efforts in the Context of Terrorism

As the UNITA case above suggests, terrorism is not only used by weak groups during war. The Taliban, which has been engaged in a decades-long insurgency against the government of Afghanistan, uses both guerrilla and terrorist tactics but should not be considered weak. On the contrary, the group has been considered to be among “the most accomplished rebels of modern times” (Berman 2011:30). This assessment is supported by the Afghan National Security Forces’ failure to defeat the organization militarily as well as the Taliban’s ability to capture and govern large amounts of Afghan territory. At its peak, the organization controlled as much as 90% of the country (Elden 2009). While the Taliban’s share of territory has diminished over the course of the “War on Terror” it has been increasing in recent years. As of 2019, the organization was estimated to control fully or contest government control in nearly half of Afghanistan's districts.

Despite recent U.S. proclamations that the Taliban is an “armed insurgency” not a “terrorist group,” the organization uses an awful lot of terrorism while also offering support to other terrorists. According to the Global Terrorism Database, over 8,700 terror attacks in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2018 have been attributed to the Taliban, with the vast majority falling outside of what could be considered “legitimate warfare activities.” Attacks have exploded in recent years, with 2015 standing out as one of the organization’s bloodiest years. During Afghanistan’s presidential elections in 2019, the Taliban carried out more than 200 terror attacks in an attempt to upend the electoral process and deter voting. These incidents were preceded by scores of attacks aimed at pressuring the government to commit to peace talks with the group. The inclination toward terrorism is also evident in its relationships with other organizations. Even as the Taliban fought against ISIS’ reign of terror, it continued to maintain ties with al Qaeda, the terror group responsible for the 9/11 terror attacks, and the Pakistan-based Haqqani network. Regardless of its appeals to legitimacy and decency, the Taliban has undoubtedly embraced terrorism.

Surprisingly however, the organization is also known for its effective governance of Afghanistan and scores among the top 20 service providers in the Terrorist Social Service Provision dataset. Like, the FARC, which brutalized the civilian population in Colombia, the Taliban has developed a substantial bureaucracy that includes health, educational and criminal justice systems (Mampilly 2012). During the COVID-19 outbreak, for instance, the Taliban’s Islamic Emirate Health Commission staged public awareness campaigns, provided the population with masks, gloves and disinfectants, erected quarantine centers and treated the sick. The organization also welcomed healthcare and aid workers back into its territories in an effort to manage the pandemic but also continued to abduct healthcare providers and target pharmacies. How can we make sense of a group that actively terrorizes civilians while providing public goods to that same population?

Both terrorism and public goods provision can be used to boost an organization’s image domestically and internationally. By coupling these strategies, the Taliban appears to be playing the long game hoping that both the positive incentives and negative reprimands increase the organization’s power and control when the war ends. Not only does violence encourage obedience from civilians, it also undermines the state by demonstrating that the Taliban itself is the only entity capable of stopping the bloodshed in Afghanistan. Essentially, by demonstrating its own strength, the Taliban seeks to highlight the Afghan government’s weakness. One Taliban commander from Nangahar province underscored this point noting that “compared to 10 years ago... the world sees [the Taliban] as more legitimate, and all of that is through [their] violence” (George 2019). Revealing that the incumbent is incompetent, however, does little to show that the Taliban is the preferred alternative. This is where their demonstration of good governance comes in. By governing their own territories well, the Taliban can prove its ability to provide leadership superior to the current government’s. This strategy appears to be working. Not only is their judicial system perceived to be fairer and less corrupt, citizens have noted that the Taliban’s COVID response has topped the state’s. The 2019 peace deal inked between the US and the Taliban, which is expected to be a precursor to an agreement with the Afghan government, also validates the group’s mixed terror-governance strategy. Thus, it is no surprise that following the historic settlement with the U.S. and in the midst of a global pandemic, the Taliban has stepped up its use of terrorism alongside its public works.

Question 1: How can violence offer legitimacy to an organization such as the Taliban?

Question 2: How much effort does the Taliban have to expend on providing public goods to offset their use of terrorism in Afghanistan?



First, service provision may be used to gain compliance from the civilian population in areas they administer. Governance institutions anchor militant organizations into the community and ensure they are able to engage in effective surveillance and oversight of the civilian population. Public goods provision will be most fruitful when rebels are in competition with the state or other non-state actors for the population's support (Wagstaff and Jung 2017) and when resources are scarce and the government is either absent or weak. Public projects enable violent groups to offer relief to neglected or marginalized communities and fill voids left by ineffective governments (Berman 2011). These circumstances allow rebels to trade public benefits for civilian loyalty.

Service institutions can build a group's popularity and increase the public's reliance on the organization's goodwill. As a result, terrorist rebel groups may see substantial legitimacy gains from erecting civilian institutions (Mampilly 2012). This may be necessary since the use of terrorism can damage a rebel group's reputation (Fortna, Lotito and Rubin 2018), which is especially costly for organizations that rely on civilian supporters to function (Polo 2019). Seemingly-random attacks on the population may generate new grievances and alienate existing supporters. Civilians may also oppose acts of terror aimed at enemy supporters if such attacks delegitimize the broader movement (Fortna, Lotito and Rubin 2018). Terrorism is generally considered to be amoral (Lake 2002, Asal 2012, Moghdam et al.) and the reluctance to negotiate with terrorists is widespread (Toros 2008). Therefore, while beneficial in one respect, a group's use of terrorism may also bring about significant downstream consequences.

The provision of resources to the population, however, may offset civilian grievances produced by a group's reign of terror and increase a rebel organization's legitimacy. By providing more services in an effective manner, organizations are able to rally support among even those who are not attracted to its goals or vision (Berman 2011, Szkeley 2015). Maintaining effective institutions may help rebels win civilian hearts and minds. Such a strategy is sensible given French counterinsurgency expert, David Galula's (2006) argument that both insurgents and counterinsurgents are largely waging a political battle for the undecided population. In this regard, Galula urges effective counterinsurgents to develop economic, social, cultural and medical projects geared toward the civilian population during their military campaigns. Terrorists and insurgents wisely adopt similar strategies. It is argued that the LTTE did just this; the organization attempted to augment the effects of its violence and coercion by building legitimacy through the delivery of social services (Terpstra and Frerks 2017). In this way, public works can be helpful in offsetting the pernicious effects of terrorizing the civilian population. They can work to boost a rebel organization's popularity, sometimes ensuring militant's success in electoral politics after wars end (Ishiyama and Widmeier 2013).

## **The Strategies of Terrorism**

As discussed above, terrorism can be helpful for ensuring civilian compliance and for wresting territory from the state. These are sometimes called process goals. But how might terrorism help achieve longer term, broader strategic goals?

Though the terror inflicted by some rebel organizations appears to serve no logical end, most terrorism appears to be motivated by a coherent strategy or logic (Lake 2002, Kydd and Walter 2006). Terrorism can be useful for advancing a wide-range of political aims, from negotiations to substantive political concessions and compromise settlements. Broadly, terrorism can be used to advance a number of strategies that attempt to compel the state directly through punishment or indirectly by denying them civilian support, which threatens their legitimacy to rule. By undermining the state and building viable military and political organizations, rebels are able to use terror to make the state offer significant policy concessions.

Kydd and Walter (2006) identify several different strategies that groups may be pursuing when they use terrorism. Attrition, intimidation, provocation are all strategies that hinge on the idea that terrorism can be painful to the government. The *attrition* strategy is used to demonstrate a group's willingness to impose substantial costs on the state if it does not alter its policies (Crenshaw 1981, Kydd and Walter 2006). Terror attacks can be especially devastating when used in a war of attrition as these attacks hit governments where it hurts most. Attacks in areas populated by government supporters can offer violent organizations more “bang for their buck,” as terrorism can engender more shock and awe in places that states are expected to be able to protect (Koren 2017:249). Terrorists often target capital cities, for instance, to coerce elites (Koren 2017). These attacks in the seat of government can also impose severe economic costs on the regime and its supporters (Ash 2018). Foreign investments are even found to fall with increasing violence against civilians (Koren 2017).

According to Crenshaw (1981:380), terrorism is the “systematic inducement of fear and anxiety to control and direct a civilian population,” suggesting that terror is used primarily to alter the behavior of civilians. This is what an *intimidation* strategy aims to do. Here, terrorism compels the population to defect from leaders of the state (Kydd and Walter 2006). Violence against civilians can be used to demonstrate that the state is illegitimate because it is unable to protect its own civilians. From a social contract approach, states exist primarily to provide organization and security to its citizens and are expected to be the sole violence specialists within a territory. Citizens give up their individual freedoms and sovereignty, as well as tax money, to be protected by the government. Terrorism can reveal that the regime is ill-equipped to or disinterested in fulfilling this important purpose. Ironically, violence often hurts governments more than the organization’s perpetrating the attacks, since it is only the state’s obligation to protect citizens. Accordingly, research shows that acts of civil disobedience increase after sustained campaigns of civilian victimization (Koren 2017) providing direct evidence that states are in fact held accountable for their inability to adequately protect the population.

Scholars argue that Western democracies (Pape 2006, Crenshaw 1981, Kydd and Walter 2006) and weak states (Crenshaw 1981) are most likely to be targets of attrition and intimidation strategies, respectively, because of their unwillingness and inability to secure the state at any cost. Liberal states may hesitate to restrict citizens’ civil liberties, while incompetent states are simply inefficient at doing so. Brutal authoritarian regimes, on the other hand, may be less likely to fall prey to attrition or intimidation strategies, but they may be more suitable candidates for a *provocation* strategy. Here, terrorism is used by violent actors that hope to force the state into a repressive response that undermines its own civilian support. Put differently, militant groups use violence to harass the government into heavy-handed counterterrorism measures that mainly harm civilians. Such a reaction to terrorism is not far-fetched as governments are rarely able to discriminate between insurgents and ordinary civilians (Kalyvas 2006). Carter (2016) provides evidence for provocation, asserting that Western European governments often overreact to terrorism in a way that victimizes the very population it is charged to protect. This strategy has been exploited by Basque separatists against the Spanish government, the Zionist Irgun against the British government in Mandate Palestine (Buono de Mesquita and Dickson 2007), Boko Haram against Nigeria (Thomas 2014) and the Irish Republican Army against the United Kingdom (Carter 2016).

Although it seems risky to provoke the government’s wrath, doing so actually benefits rebels that are able to provide safety for affiliates. Government repression enables rebels to recruit new members by offering protection exclusively to the group's collaborators. Harsh government responses to terrorism can also radicalize moderates, inclining them toward the terrorists' cause and building support for extremist goals (Lake 2002). Government repression may remove constraints on rebels that would otherwise refrain from attacking civilians (Polo 2016). Together, the intimidation and

provocation strategies represent a dilemma for states. Governments face a backlash when their attempts at counterterrorism inflict harm on civilians and also when they fail to formulate an effective response that actually protects civilians from terrorists. Both strong and weak state responses to terror are likely to illicit sympathy and support for terrorists. How hard is it, then, for states to execute a moderate response? As it turns out, very hard.

The three aforementioned strategies are expected to harm the government and lead to state losses either by depriving the regime of domestic (and international) support or targeting the state's assets directly. While attrition strategies impose unbearable costs on the state to induce elites to change the state's policies, intimidation and provocation are designed to undercut the states' civilian support which undermines its legitimacy. When used successfully these strategies should be associated with a greater willingness of the state to give in to the demands of groups using terrorism. This expectation has garnered empirical support from studies on both terrorism and civilian victimization. More terrorism is associated with a greater probability that the state will come to the negotiating table as well as a larger number of concessions on rebels' key demands in post-Cold War Africa (Thomas 2014). Similarly, African conflicts that see high-levels of civilian abuse by rebels are more likely to end in negotiated settlements (Wood and Kathman 2014). Pape (2006) finds that suicide terror campaigns around the world have been successful at compelling democratic states to concede to rebel's demands; suicide terrorism forced American, French and Israeli withdrawals from Lebanon in the 1980's and compelled Sri Lanka to support significant Tamil autonomy in the 1990's. Some scholars still doubt, however, that terrorism can be an effective means by which rebels advance their war aims. Fortna (2015), for example, finds that when rebels engage in small-scale bombing campaigns against civilian targets, they are actually less likely to sign negotiated agreements. Abrahms (2012), finds that foreign terrorist organizations do not typically achieve their long-term outcome objectives, even if they do succeed at meeting their process goals. If terrorism does not lead to concessions, what else could it be useful for?

While concessions are important for many violent dissident groups, a subset do not use terrorism in an effort to strike a better bargain with the state. Groups that pursue a *spoiling* strategy, for example, engage in acts of terror to derail a peace process (Stedman 1997; Kydd and Walter 2006). This strategy is likely to emerge when at least two parties have committed to a compromise settlement, but all parties do not view peace or the terms of that peace as beneficial (Stedman 1997). This strategy can explain Hamas' terrorism in the 1990s. The group used violence in an attempt to undermine the Oslo peace process and its rival, Fatah, which stood to gain control over a future Palestinian state (Berman 2011). Hamas is believed to have planned significant terror attacks to coincide with major events during the Arab-Israeli peace process in order to convince observers that the leaders of the Palestinian Authority were untrustworthy. This dynamic also played out in the peace process in South Africa. Multiple groups engaged in strategic violence at important points during negotiations (Sisk 1993). While the African National Congress (ANC) engaged in terror to thwart its political rivals, the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) used attacks to avoid exclusion from the peace deal. Critically, the Pan-Africanist Congress of Azania (PAC) engaging in a campaign of terror strategically to derail peace talks between the ANC and the South African Apartheid government. Evidence confirms that terrorism can destabilize peace by extending the duration of a conflict and increasing the likelihood that it recurs (Findley and Young 2015).

A final strategy, *Outbidding*, is the result of competition between two militant groups for civilian support and is, therefore, also most likely to arise in a multiparty conflict. In this scenario, terrorism is used to demonstrate that the most violent group is more committed than its less violent counterparts. Again, Hamas, utilized terrorism against Israel to separate itself from the secular Fatah movement and “to present themselves as the true nationalists” while casting their opponent as collaborators of the Israeli government (Berman 2011:130-131). Researchers also point out that

internal rifts between factions within the same organization may encourage violence (Biberman and Zahid 2019). In particular, Biberman and Zahid (2019) argue that outbidding between disparate factions within Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and Riyadus-Salikhin was the cause of school massacres in Pakistan and Russia, respectively. Despite some case-specific evidence, broader quantitative support for this theory is mixed. Some studies find clear evidence of outbidding (Conrad and Greene 2015, Nemeth 2014), while others find no consistent support for a relationship between terrorism and domestic competition (Findley and Young 2012).

## Conclusion

Terrorism is used frequently in civil war, but not by all rebels. Violent actors make strategic decisions about the types of violence they use during conflicts. While some groups target only militaries, others attack civilians; still others adopt mixed-strategies that couple organized armed resistance with campaigns of terror. To understand a group's tactical choice in a civil war, it is often necessary to examine the military constraints that it faces. More capable groups are likely to eschew indiscriminate terror, while weaker groups may rely on it. Groups of all stripes may find selective and moderate civilian victimization worthwhile. This is because terrorism can be used to win a game of “mercy” against the state. Here, militants apply enough pressure and pain on the regime until it concedes defeat. By targeting civilians, terrorists can undercut the state's base of support, damage the economy, and hurt elites directly, which can all help bolster a group's war effort. Such a strategy is most helpful when rebels are unable to cause enough damage to the state on the battlefield. Terrorism, therefore, can be considered as a complement to other strategies in war.

Terrorism is not only used in conjunction with violence but can be picked up by organizations that use non-violent resistance as well. The tactic can be used at one point and neglected at another. As Tilly (2003) suggests, there is no clear class of actors called “terrorists;” there are simply actors that use terrorism and terrorize. Applying the loaded “terrorist” label to specific actors, makes it difficult to fully grasp the range of actors that use the tactic. It makes it hard to put the actions of organizations like the African National Congress into context. The ANC, South Africa's current governing party, was regarded as a legitimate revolutionary organization that fought against apartheid and oppression. Many herald the nonviolent strategy adopted by the organization to achieve its lofty goals, but less attention is paid to the organization's use of terrorism. Though it was founded on the principle of non-violent resistance, it also relied on violence, including brutal attacks against political opponents, to achieve its aims. To contextualize the organization's turn to violence, the ANC's leader, Nelson Mandela, proffered that “there came a point in [the] struggle when brute force of the oppressor could no longer be countered through passive resistance alone.”<sup>14</sup> Mandela realized early that success through nonviolence would be difficult, painstakingly slow and arduous. This prompted the organization to consciously adopt military strategies, including guerrilla warfare and terrorism, better suited to contend with the well-endowed, highly repressive state. Ultimately, both violence and nonviolence contributed to the organization's success.

Terrorism is not a panacea; it can come at a cost. Though the ANC generally kept civilian casualties to a minimum, the use of terrorism did hurt the organization's legitimacy. Yet, while nonviolent resistance is generally viewed positively, some groups judge that it is not as effective as violence for achieving large demands. Organizations base their tactical choices, in part, on how much they expect to achieve. However, during a civil war, concerns about one's legitimacy are real and

---

<sup>14</sup> Nelson Mandela, “The Sacred Warrior: The Liberator of South Africa Looks at the Seminal Work of the Liberator of India.” *CNN*. December 27, 1999.

should not be ignored. Thus, it is not uncommon that organizations engage in activities that boost their legitimacy, while also utilizing terrorism. We learned, for instance, that terrorism and civilian governance tend to go hand and hand. Groups may also strategically switch between tactics to achieve a similar purpose. As a result, it is hard to ignore Machiavelli's argument that the end ultimately justifies the means.

## Questions

1. Why is terrorism a distinct form of political violence from insurgency or guerrilla warfare?
2. Which actors use terrorism in civil wars?
3. Which types of strategies can terrorism be used to further?
4. Is terrorism an effective tactic for goal attainment in civil war? Why or why not?
5. What are the major explanations for the use of violence against civilians during rebellions?
6. How do we understand the decision to govern and terrorize the civilian population?

## Guide to Further Reading

Although we have touched on the strategic nature of terrorism within this chapter, there are a number of other important works that more deeply describe the strategies of terrorism and explain what rebel groups aim to achieve by employing terror during a domestic conflict. Some of the works follow:

Berman, E. (2011), *Radical Religions and Violent: The New Economics of Terrorism* (MIT Press).

Crenshaw, M. (1981) "The Causes of Terrorism." *Comparative Politics*, 13:4, pp. 379-399.

Kydd, A., and Walter, B. (2006). "The Strategies of Terrorism," *International Security* 31.1, pp. 49-80.

Lake, D. (2002), 'Rational Extremism: Understanding Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century,' *Dialog-IO*, 1.1, pp. 15-28.

Pape, R. (2006). *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (NY: Random House Incorporated).

Tilly, C. (2004), "Terror, Terrorism, Terrorists," *Sociological Theory*, 22:1, pp. 5-13.

## References

- Abrahms, Max. "The political effectiveness of terrorism revisited." *Comparative Political Studies* 45.3 (2012): 366-393.
- Acharya, Arabinda. "Small amounts for big bangs? Rethinking responses to 'low cost' terrorism." *Journal of Money Laundering Control* 12.3 (2009): 285-298.
- Ahmad, Aisha. *Jihad & Co.: black markets and Islamist power*. Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Arjona, Ana. "Civilian Resistance to Rebel Governance." in *Rebel Governance in Civil War*, Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir and Zachariah Mampilly, eds. (2015): 180-202.
- Asal, Victor, et al. "Carrots, sticks, and insurgent targeting of civilians." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 63.7 (2019): 1710-1735.
- Asal, Victor, "Killing civilians or holding territory? How to think about terrorism." *International Studies Review* 14.3 (2012): 485-490.
- Ash, Konstantin. "The War Will Come to Your Street: Explaining Geographic Variation in Terrorism by Rebel Groups." *International Interactions* 44.3 (2018): 411-436.
- Berkebile, Richard E. "What is domestic terrorism? A method for classifying events from the global terrorism database." *Terrorism and political violence* 29.1 (2017): 1-26.
- Berman, Eli. *Radical, religious, and violent: The new economics of terrorism*. MIT press, 2011.
- Berman, Eli, and Aila M. Matanock. "The empiricists' insurgency." *Annual Review of Political Science* 18 (2015): 443-464.
- Biberman, Yelena, and Farhan Zahid. "Why terrorists target children: Outbidding, desperation, and extremism in the Peshawar and Beslan school massacres." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31.2 (2019): 169-184.
- Bueno de Mesquita, Ethan, and Eric S. Dickson. "The propaganda of the deed: Terrorism, counterterrorism, and mobilization." *American Journal of Political Science* 51.2 (2007): 364-381.
- Carter, David B. "Provocation and the strategy of terrorist and guerrilla attacks." *International Organization* 70.1 (2016): 133-173.
- Crenshaw, Martha. "The causes of terrorism." *Comparative Politics* 13.4 (1981): 379-399.
- Conrad, Justin, and Kevin Greene. "Competition, differentiation, and the severity of terrorist attacks." *The Journal of Politics* 77.2 (2015): 546-561.
- Cunningham, David E., Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Idean Salehyan. "Non-state actors in civil wars: A new dataset." *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 30.5 (2013): 516-531.

De la Calle, Luis, and Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca, "Killing civilians or holding territory? How to think about terrorism." *International Studies Review* 14.3 (2012): 481-484.

Sánchez-Cuenca, Ignacio, and Luis De la Calle. "Domestic terrorism: The hidden side of political violence." *Annual Review of Political Science* 12 (2009): 31-49.

Elden, Stuart. *Terror and territory: The Spatial Extent of Sovereignty*. University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

Enders, Walter, Todd Sandler, and Khusrav Gaibulloev. "Domestic versus transnational terrorism: Data, decomposition, and dynamics." *Journal of Peace Research* 48.3 (2011): 319-337.

Findley, Michael G., and Joseph K. Young. "Terrorism and Civil War: A spatial and temporal approach to a conceptual problem." *Perspectives on Politics* 10.2 (2012): 285-305.

Findley, Michael G., and Joseph K. Young. "Terrorism, spoiling, and the Resolution of Civil Wars." *The Journal of Politics* 77.4 (2015): 1115-1128.

Fortna, Virginia Page. "Do Terrorists Win? Rebels' Use of Terrorism and Civil War Outcomes." *International Organization* 69.3 (2015): 519-556.

Fortna, Virginia Page, Nicholas J. Lotito, and Michael A. Rubin. "Don't Bite the Hand that Feeds: Rebel Funding Sources and the Use of Terrorism in Civil Wars." *International Studies Quarterly* 62.4 (2018): 782-794.

Galula, David. *Counterinsurgency warfare: theory and practice*. Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006.

George, Susannah. "Inside the Taliban's Afghanistan, Violence Remains the Path to Power." *Washington Post Blogs*, December 2019.

Hafez, Mohammed M. "Rationality, culture, and structure in the making of suicide bombers: A preliminary theoretical synthesis and illustrative case study." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29.2 (2006): 165-185.

Heger, Lindsay L., and Danielle F. Jung. "Negotiating with rebels: The effect of rebel service provision on conflict negotiations." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61.6 (2017): 1203-1229.

Heger, Lindsay L., Danielle F. Jung, and Wendy H. Wong. "Linking nonstate governance and violence." *Journal of global security studies* 2.3 (2017): 220-236.

Hoffman, Bruce. "The logic of suicide terrorism," *Atlantic Monthly* 291. 5. (2003).

Horowitz, Michael C. "Nonstate actors and the diffusion of innovations: The case of suicide terrorism." *International Organization* 64.1 (2010): 33-64.

Ishiyama, John, and Michael Widmeier. "Territorial control, levels of violence, and the electoral performance of former rebel political parties after civil wars." *Civil Wars* 15.4 (2013): 531-550.

Kalyvas, Stathis N. *The logic of violence in civil war*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Kalyvas, Stathis N., and Laia Balcells. "International system and technologies of rebellion: How the end of the Cold War shaped internal conflict." *American Political Science Review* 104.3 (2010): 415-429.

Krcmaric, Daniel. "Varieties of civil war and mass killing: Reassessing the relationship between guerrilla warfare and civilian victimization." *Journal of Peace Research* 55.1 (2018): 18-31.

Koren, Ore. "Why insurgents kill civilians in capital cities: A disaggregated analysis of mechanisms and trends." *Political Geography* 61 (2017): 237-252.

Kydd, Andrew H., and Barbara F. Walter. "The strategies of terrorism." *International security* 31.1 (2006): 49-80.

LaFree, Gary and Laura Dugan. "Introducing the Global Terrorism Database." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19.2 (2007):181-204.

Lake, David A. "Rational extremism: Understanding terrorism in the twenty-first century." *Dialogue IO* 1.1 (2002): 15-28.

Mampilly, Zachariah Cherian. *Rebel rulers: Insurgent governance and civilian life during war*. Cornell University Press, 2012.

Metelits, Claire. *Inside insurgency: violence, civilians, and revolutionary group behavior*. NYU Press, 2009.

Moghadam, Assaf, Ronit Berger, and Polina Beliakova. "Say terrorist, think insurgent: Labeling and analyzing contemporary terrorist actors." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8.5 (2014).

Nemeth, Stephen. "The effect of competition on terrorist group operations." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 58.2 (2014): 336-362.

Ross, Michael L. "How do natural resources influence civil war? Evidence from thirteen cases." *International organization* 58.1 (2004): 35-67.

Pape, Robert A. *Dying to win: The strategic logic of suicide terrorism*. Random House Incorporated, 2006.

Pettersson, Therese and Öberg, Magnus. "Organized violence, 1989-2019." *Journal of Peace Research* 57.4 (2020): 597-613.



Polo, Sara MT. "The quality of terrorist violence: Explaining the logic of terrorist target choice." *Journal of Peace Research* (2019)

Polo, Sara MT, and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch. "Twisting arms and sending messages: Terrorist tactics in civil war." *Journal of Peace Research* 53.6 (2016): 815-829.

Price, H. Edward. "The strategy and tactics of revolutionary terrorism." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 19.1 (1977): 52-66.

Szekely, Ora. "Doing Well by Doing Good: Understanding Hamas's Social Services as Political Advertising." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38.4 (2015): 275-292.

Sisk, Timothy D. "The violence-negotiation nexus: South Africa in transition and the politics of uncertainty." *Negotiation Journal* 9.1 (1993): 77-94.

Stanton, Jessica A. "Terrorism in the context of civil war." *The Journal of Politics* 75.4 (2013): 1009-1022.

Stedman, Stephen John. "Spoiler problems in peace processes." *International security* 22.2 (1997): 5-53.

Stewart, Megan A., and Yu-Ming Liou. "Do good borders make good rebels? Territorial control and civilian casualties." *The Journal of Politics* 79.1 (2017): 284-301.

Teichman, Jenny. "How to define terrorism." *Philosophy* 64.250 (1989): 505-517.

Terpstra, Niels, and Georg Frerks. "Rebel governance and legitimacy: Understanding the impact of rebel legitimization on civilian compliance with the LTTE rule." *Civil Wars* 19.3 (2017): 279-307.

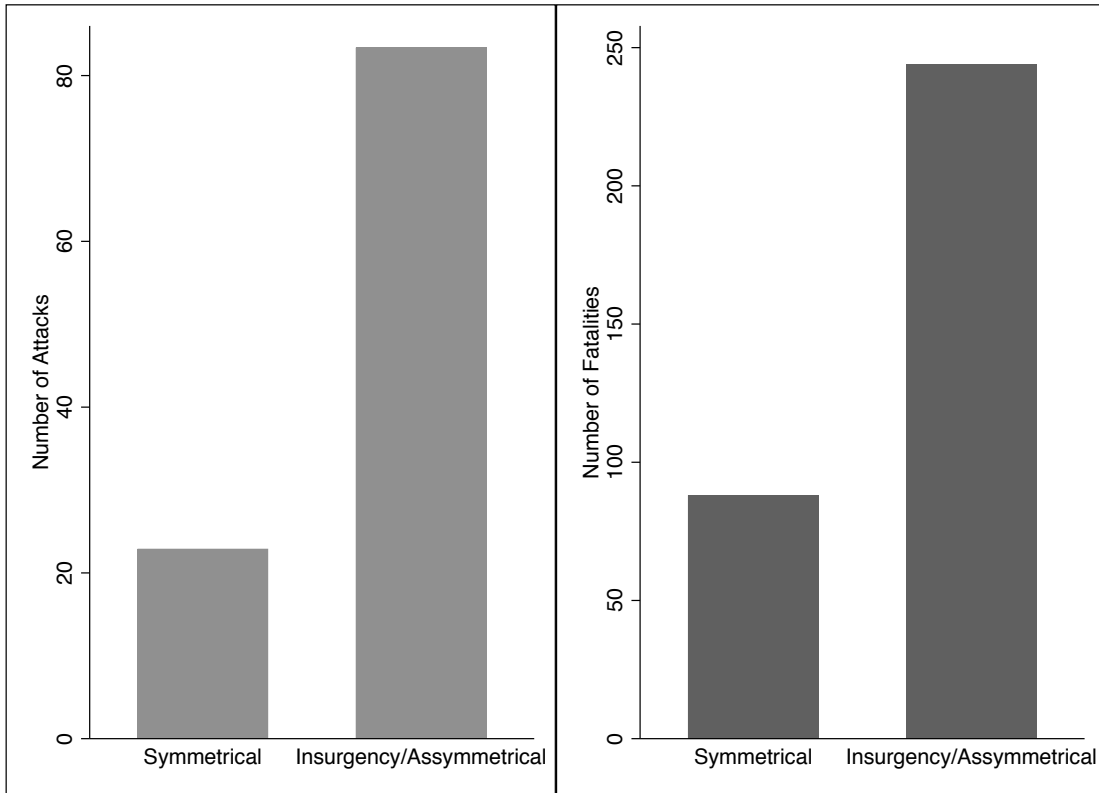
Thomas, Jakana. "Rewarding bad behavior: How governments respond to terrorism in civil war." *American Journal of Political Science* 58.4 (2014): 804-818.

Toros, Harmonie. "We don't negotiate with terrorists!": Legitimacy and complexity in terrorist conflicts." *Security Dialogue* 39.4 (2008): 407-426.

Tilly, Charles. "Terror, terrorism, terrorists." *Sociological theory* 22.1 (2004): 5-13.

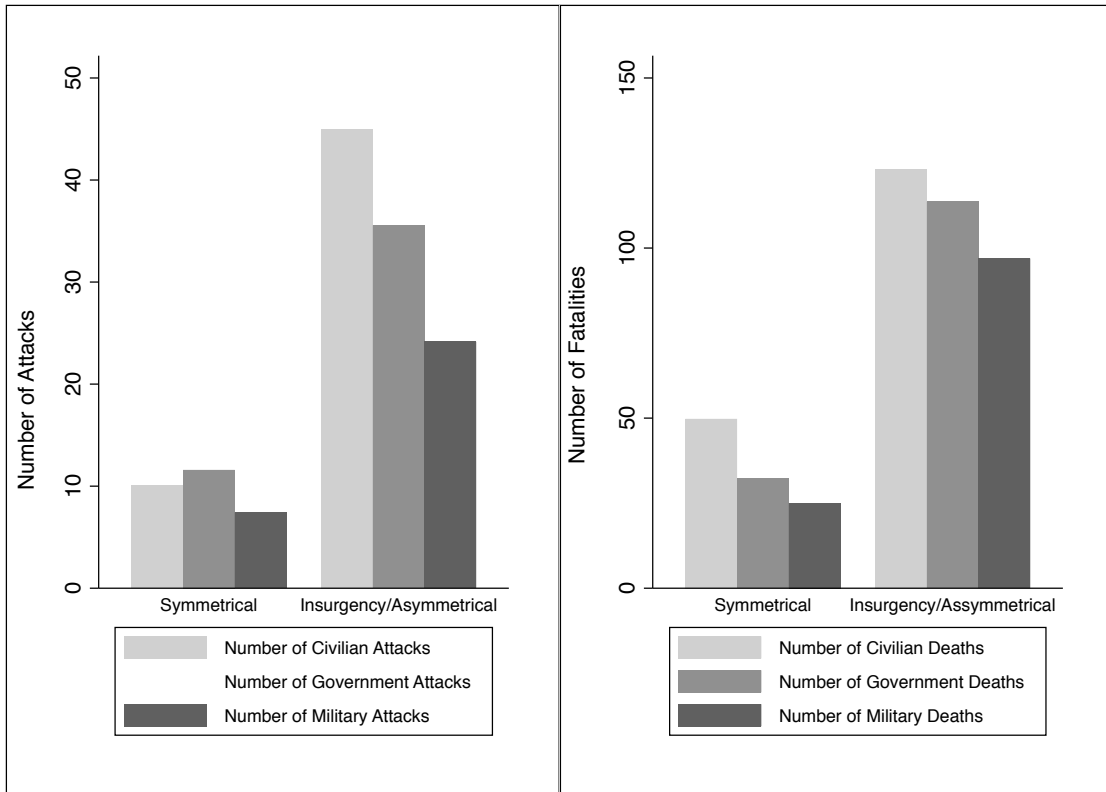
Wagstaff, William A., and Danielle F. Jung. "Competing for constituents: Trends in terrorist service provision." *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2017): 1-32.

Wood, Reed M., and Jacob D. Kathman. "Too much of a bad thing? Civilian victimization and bargaining in civil war." *British Journal of Political Science* 44.3 (2014): 685-706.



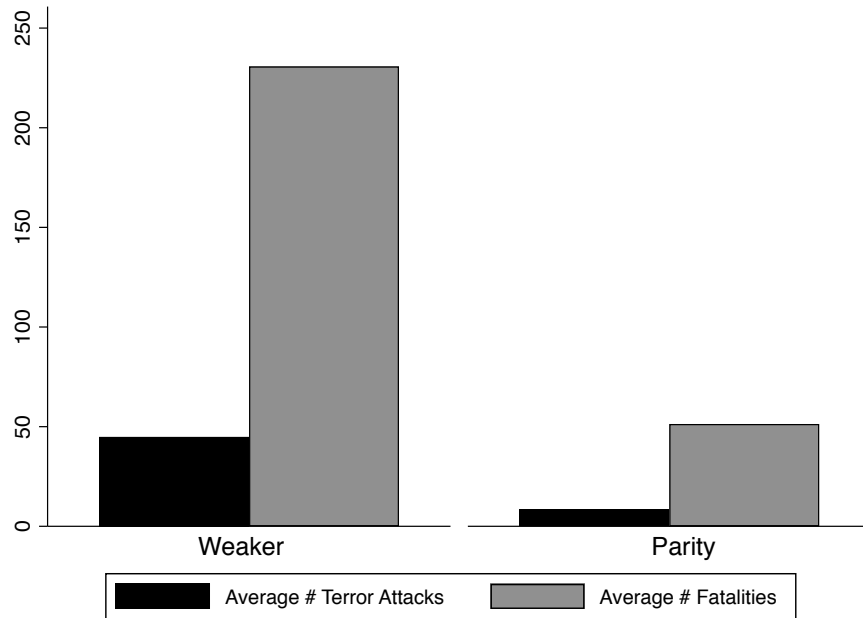
**Figure 1: Frequency and Severity of Terrorism by Insurgents, 1960-2008**

*Incidents from the Global Terrorism Database are matched to Kalyvas and Balcells' (2010) conflict typology using replication files from Krmaric (2018). The left-hand graph examines the number of terror attacks by insurgents and non-insurgents, while the right-hand graph displays the number of fatalities from terror attacks.*



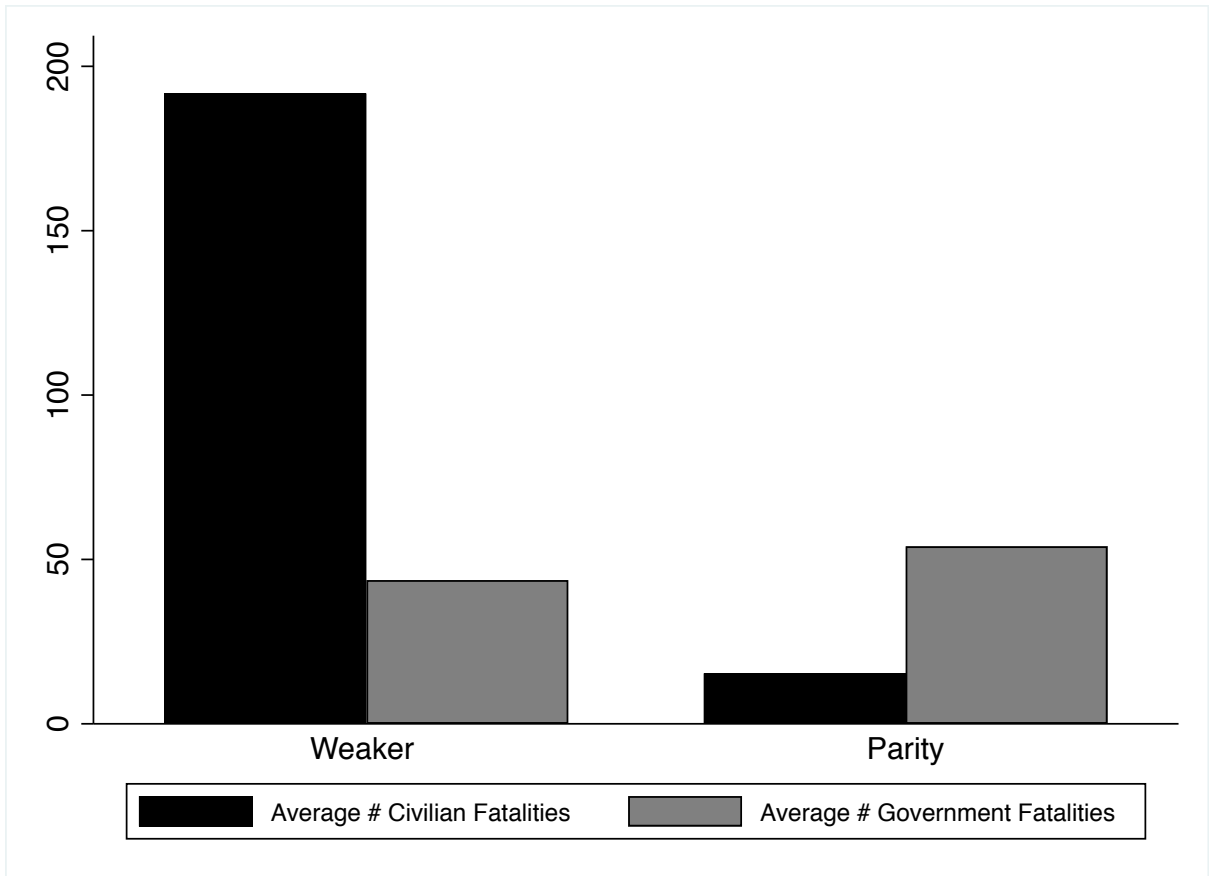
**Figure 2: Targets of Terrorism by Insurgents, 1960-2008**

*Incidents from the Global Terrorism Database are matched to Kalyvas and Balcells' (2010) conflict typology using replication files from Krmaric (2018). The left-hand graph displays the number of terror attacks by insurgents and non-insurgents across target types, while the right-hand graph examines the number of fatalities from terror attacks by target.*



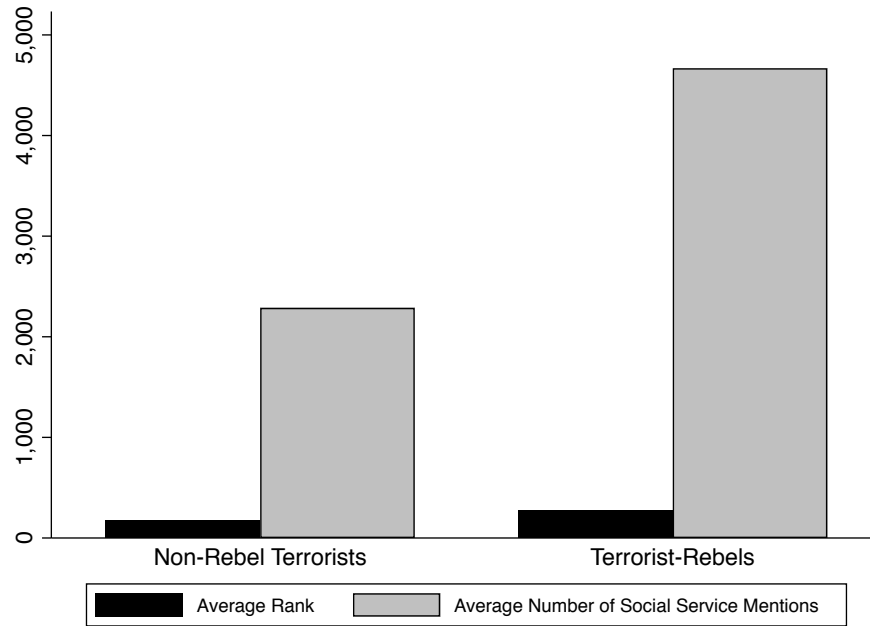
**Figure 3: Frequency of UNITA Terrorism, 1989-2002**

*Incidents from the Global Terrorism Database are matched with data on rebel strength from Cunningham et al.'s (2013) Nonstate Actor dataset. The left-hand figure displays the frequency and severity of UNITA attacks when the organization is judged as weaker than the state, while the right-hand figure provides information on UNITA attacks when the organization is equally matched with the state.*



**Figure 4: Severity of UNITA Terrorism by Target, 1989-2002**

*Incidents from the Global Terrorism Database are matched with data on rebel strength from Cunningham et al.'s (2013) Nonstate Actor dataset. The left-hand figure displays the severity of UNITA attacks when the organization is judged as weaker than the state, while the right-hand figure provides information on UNITA attacks when the organization is equally matched with the state. The darker bar examines civilian fatalities, while the lighter bar considers all government fatalities.*



**Figure 5: Average Mentions of Terrorist Social Service Provision, 1970-2011.**

*Terrorist-Rebels refer to violent organizations that simultaneously execute terror attacks while participating in an organized conflict with the state, while non-rebel terrorists are groups that utilize terror but are not parties to a domestic conflict. These data match Heger and Jung's (2017) "Terrorist and Insurgent Organization Social Services" dataset (TIOS) with UCDP civil conflict data (Pettersen et al. 2019) to identify rebel groups that use both terrorism and provide services.*