

# Terrorism Works, for Its Supporters

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## Abstract

Empirical studies have shown that terrorists' policy goals are rarely achieved, leading some to conclude that terrorism doesn't work. We theorize that terrorism works, but for its supporters rather than for the terrorists themselves. Because supporters are willing to contribute resources to a terrorist organization, thereby increasing the organization's ability to launch attacks, this coerces the targeted government to revise its policies in accordance with the supporters' preferences. Targeted governments respond with concessions in order to erode support and thereby render the terrorists easier to defeat. Support can be rational even when supporters' ideal policies are closer to those of the government than to those of the terrorists. We examine Hamas's campaign against Israel's government, generally regarded as a failure. We show that the government at times made concessions that placated the supporters but not the terrorists, and that this was followed by reduced support for and occurrence of violence.

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# Introduction

Terrorism doesn't work. Or at least, that is the conclusion drawn from comparing the stated demands of terrorist organizations to the outcomes of their violent campaigns: those demands are almost never met (Abrahms, 2006, 2012; Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011; Crenshaw, 2011; Cronin, 2009; English, 2016; Jones and Libicki, 2008; Krause, 2013). In case after case, many terrorists end up dead or imprisoned, their organizations are rendered unable or unwilling to sustain a campaign of violence, and their manifestos are reduced to hopeless wish lists.

Why would anyone participate in an activity with such a high risk of death and such a low chance of success? Scholars have resorted to a variety of conjectures to solve this puzzle. Perhaps terrorists mistakenly believe they have a high probability of success or that even failure will be divinely rewarded (Crenshaw, 2011, Ch 5). Maybe terrorists seek social solidarity (Abrahms, 2008) or organizational survival (Krause, 2013) over political goals. Or they might simply be irrational owing to the pathology of groupthink (Tsintsadze-Maass and Maass, 2014) or to principal-agent problems that lead the rank-and-file of militant organizations to attack civilians (Abrahms and Potter, 2015). And yet terrorists are apparently quite rational in their selection of targets and preparation of attacks (Pape, 2006). Why do people irrationally choose to become terrorists but then conduct terrorism in a rational manner?

We present a different solution to this puzzle: terrorism works, but for its supporters, who compensate the terrorists for their low chance of success and use them as a tool to coerce a government. We conceptualize a terrorist organization as an agent, working at the behest of a base of supporters, who are not themselves members of the terrorist organization, that forms the principal. These supporters provide the resources the terrorist organization needs to carry out its campaign. Even if their own goals are quite moderate, they might still rationally support terrorism, and may even prefer to support terrorists with remarkably

extreme goals.

We analyze a game-theoretic model in which the support base and the targeted government implicitly bargain over the policies set by the government on which they disagree. The support base can choose to offer support to the terrorist organization, thereby enabling and motivating it to conduct attacks against the government. These attacks might result in the overthrow of the government and its replacement by the terrorist organization, but even if they do not, they impose costs on the government, as well as the terrorists and the supporters. The targeted government therefore anticipates this possibility in setting its policies.

Individuals join the terrorist organization and conduct attacks because their efforts are materially and socially rewarded by the organization's supporters. Those with the most radical views, or the most tolerance for violence, are more likely to join and choose to fight even if the chance of victory is low. But these and others will also be motivated by the prospect of money and status provided by the base of supporters. This rationalizes participating in terrorism.

Supporters contribute to the terrorist organization in order to encourage it to conduct attacks because they anticipate this will lead to concessions from the government. They avoid the danger and cost of doing the fighting themselves, but nonetheless can use their support of the terrorist organization to exert leverage on the government. We show that supporters can rationally do so even in situations where their own policy goals are closer to the government's than to the terrorist organization's, as seems plausible given the extreme goals of most terrorist organizations. Such moderate supporters may even prefer to support a more extreme organization, because it can be motivated at a lower cost in support.

The targeted government makes changes to its policy, not to pacify the terrorist organization, but to placate its supporters. By giving them at least some of what they want, the government can cause them to lessen or end their support for the terrorist organization,

undermining the terrorist organization's ability to conduct attacks and making it easier for the government to suppress terrorism.

In effect, the support base employs the terrorist organization as an instrument of coercion, much as a government utilizes its military. In this view, whether the terrorists achieve their stated goals is a potentially misleading answer to the question of whether terrorism works, in much the same way as whether an infantry division achieves its objectives would not necessarily tell us whether war works. Instead, this view would have us ask whether the supporters of the terrorist organization achieve their goals, something that might happen even if the terrorists themselves are decisively defeated.

If our theory is right, then terrorism works for its supporters, in that it brings desired concessions from the government, but not for the actual terrorists, who are merely the instrument for bringing those concessions about. The participation of the terrorists is rationalized by the support they receive, and this support is in turn rationalized by the anticipated concessions from the government.

To illustrate and test our theory, we examine the campaign of Hamas against Israel's government, which most scholars assess as a case of terrorism not working, in the sense that Hamas has not achieved its stated goals. We determine Hamas's goals, identify its primary supporters and characterize their preferred policies, investigate the policy concessions plausibly made by Israel's government at least partly in response to Hamas's campaign, and assess whether and how support for terrorism and the occurrence of attacks changed after those concessions. We find strong evidence for our theory. Palestinians preferred outcomes different from the status quo, but far more moderate than those desired by Hamas. Terrorism worked for these supporters, in that Israel's government at times changed its policies in ways favorable to the supporters, who then reduced their support for terrorism. This loss of support coincided with dramatic reductions in violence against Israel's government. Moreover, Palestinians' reasoning for their altered support for terrorism corresponds quite closely to

the workings of our theory. Palestinians believed that Hamas’s violence had coerced Israel into making policy concessions, and understood that once concessions were made, violence had to be curtailed to keep them.

Our study focuses on the support base for a terrorist organization, and analyzes the influence this support has on the actions of both the organization and the target government. By contrast, much of the extant scholarship on terrorism focuses on the terrorist organization itself.<sup>1</sup> As examples, recent research investigates interactions within and between terrorist organizations and how these are affected by the environment they face. Bloom (2005) shows how competition can lead to escalating violence as groups try to “outbid” one another. Bueno De Mesquita (2005*a,c*, 2008*b*); Kydd and Walter (2002) analyze factions within a group and how these influence and are influenced by the agreement and implementation of settlements with target governments. Bueno De Mesquita (2005*b*); Schram (2019, 2021*b*) study terrorist leaders’ selection and management of recruits and the effects these have on the resulting violence.

Analyzing terrorism from the perspective of the terrorist organization is a natural approach that has yielded many important insights. Our contribution here is to demonstrate that augmenting this with an analysis of terrorism from the perspective of its supporters can offer a potential resolution to the puzzle of why terrorism happens if it rarely works. This shift in perspective also generates new conjectures about the causes, conduct, motives, combatting, termination, and ethics of terrorism, which we present in the concluding section.

Our perspective has more in common with the literature on foreign sponsorship of terrorism (or rebellion), which views the militant organization as an agent and the foreign state as the principal (Carter and Pant, 2019). Byman and Kreps (2010); Salehyan (2010); Salehyan, Gleditsch and Cunningham (2011) treat sponsorship as a substitute for war between the for-

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<sup>1</sup>For a multi-disciplinary review of this literature, see Crenshaw (2014). For a review of the political economy of terrorism, see Bueno de Mesquita (2008*a*).

eign sponsor and the targeted government. Bapat (2006); Salehyan, Siroky and Wood (2014) argue that the sponsor can induce the militant organization to accept a peace settlement or refrain from committing atrocities. Bapat (2012, 2014); Bapat and Zeigler (2016) show that sponsorship can induce bargaining failure and lead to war between the sponsor and target. Qiu (2020); Schram (2021*a*) formalize mechanisms wherein sponsorship weakens the target government relative to the sponsor by forcing the target to focus military resources on the militant organization rather than the sponsor. We focus on a different rationale for supporting terrorism: to coerce the target government into changing its policy, rather than to shift the balance of power or substitute for war. In our theory, supporting terrorism is more akin to economic sanctions than to arming or war.

We are not the first to argue that terrorism can work in the sense of achieving political goals. In a highly influential study, Pape (2003, 2006) argues that specifically suicide terrorism does work about half the time. This conclusion has been critiqued as deriving from a too-forgiving standard of efficacy, in which any substantial policy change by the target government in the terrorists' preferred direction counts as success, even if policy overall remains quite far from the terrorists' stated goals (Abrahms, 2005; Crenshaw, 2007; Moghadam, 2006). Pape (2003, 349) argued for this standard on the grounds that "terrorists' political aims [...] are often more mainstream than observers realize," because either the terrorists state "unrealistic goals" but actually hold more reasonable ones or the terrorists' community actually subscribes to their stated goals. Our theory offers an alternative way to reconcile terrorists' extreme stated goals with the modest policy concessions governments sometimes make and subsequent reductions in terrorism: even if terrorists are sincere in their expressed objectives and cannot be appeased with modest concessions, their supporters can, and the withdrawal of support that attends those concessions denies the resources needed for continuing violence.

Perhaps the most closely related work to our own also distinguishes moderates and ex-

tremists on the terrorist side and the potential for concessions to mollify the former but not the latter. Kydd and Walter (2002) analyzes how extremists might spoil a peace agreement by undermining the government's trust that the moderates are willing and able to suppress terrorism after the agreement is made. While the supporters in our model are theoretically analogous to the moderates in theirs, we think of supporters as outside the terrorist organization, because empirically that is where most support originates. We focus on the role of this support in inciting and sustaining the terrorist campaign, and we presume that its withdrawal must eventually lead to the end of that campaign. Spoiling surely happens empirically, but it cannot be sustained without a continuing flow of support. Bueno De Mesquita (2005a) develops an alternative mechanism for moderates to restrain extremists and so enable peace: by colluding with the government against the extremists. The threat to stop colluding, and the attendant decrease in the government's ability to fight the extremists, motivates the government to carry through with concessions, and the threat to withdraw concessions keeps the moderates colluding. We view this mechanism as substantively distinct from but complementary to our own: denial of support to terrorists (in our model) can complement active assistance to government (in his) in rendering peace stable.

## Theory

We analyze the conditions under which supporters can leverage a terrorist organization to secure policy concessions from a government. We first lay out the setup of our model and explain why it is a useful representation of this strategic interaction.

A government ( $G$ , he), a sponsor or support base ( $S$ , she), and a terrorist organization ( $V$  for violent, it) have opposed interests over policy, with ideal policies  $\hat{x}_G = 0$ ,  $\hat{x}_S > 0$ , and  $\hat{x}_V > \hat{x}_S$  respectively. In each period,  $G$  chooses a policy  $x \in [0, \hat{x}_V]$ .  $S$  then selects a level of support  $f \geq 0$ , at cost  $f$  to  $S$ , to provide to  $V$ .  $V$  then attacks or not. If  $V$

attacks, it receives a payoff of  $\zeta f$ , where  $\zeta > 0$ , and wins with probability  $P(f)$ , where  $P(\cdot)$  is continuous and increasing, and the players suffer costs  $c_G, c_V > 0$  and  $c_S \geq 0$ . If  $V$  wins, it sets policy in this and every subsequent period, and  $G$  and  $S$  have no further actions. If  $V$  does not win or does not attack,  $G$ 's choice of policy is implemented and the game repeats. Each period's implemented policy  $x$  yields payoffs of  $-x$  for  $G$ ,  $-|\hat{x}_S - x|$  for  $S$ , and  $-|\hat{x}_V - x|$  for  $V$ . Future payoffs are discounted by  $\delta \in (0, 1)$ , and all actions and parameters are common knowledge.

Both the supporters and the terrorists want to change policy from the government's ideal, and in the same direction, but the terrorists want a bigger change than the supporters (that is,  $\hat{x}_G < \hat{x}_S < \hat{x}_V$ ). We will see later on why  $S$  would prefer a more extreme terrorist organization, so that this order of policy preferences would arise naturally. Though we do not model terrorist recruitment explicitly, we will interpret  $V$ 's characteristics—its ideal policy ( $\hat{x}_V$ ) and cost of attacking ( $c_V$ )—as indicative of its members'.

Support ( $f$ ) consists of anything that helps the terrorist organization to conduct its campaign ( $P(\cdot)$ ) or motivates it to continue ( $\zeta f$ ): donating funds, transferring weapons, sharing intelligence, preserving secrets like terrorists' identity or whereabouts, or providing shelter or sanctuary, as well as less material aid such as encouraging people to join, bestowing social status on terrorists, honoring their efforts, or commemorating their sacrifices. These contributions of scarce resources are costly for supporters, but enable a more effective terrorist campaign (raising  $P(f)$ ) and are also directly enjoyed by the terrorists ( $\zeta$ ). By assuming that the terrorists only enjoy this support if they conduct attacks, we abstract away from the problem of terrorists pocketing support and then shirking: it seems plausible to presume that shirking would lead supporters to go elsewhere, disciplining the terrorists.

Attacks impose costs not only on the targeted government, but also on the terrorists, who must bear the risk of imprisonment, injury, or death as the government conducts counter-terrorism. Supporters may also suffer, whether due to collateral damage from the terrorist



attacks and government responses or to punishment if the government identifies specific supporters. Attacks might also result in the decisive defeat of the government, with the terrorists usurping the power to set policy, but we make no assumption about the likelihood of this: it might be high, low, or even arbitrarily close to zero. Preserving this possibility allows for the model to explain the empirical observation that terrorists almost never achieve their goals, rather than simply presuming it to be true.

By contrast, we assume that the government cannot achieve a decisive victory, in the sense of eliminating any possibility of future attacks regardless of the policy it sets. This simplifies the exposition and seems empirically plausible: even if a terrorist organization suffers a crushing defeat, its supporters could reconstitute it or shift their contributions to a different organization. A government could only prevent this with something like mass killing of the population from which support derives, which may be infeasible. That said, we show in the online appendix that qualitatively similar results obtain if we incorporate this possibility, though under more stringent conditions.

In our model, each actor knows the ideal policies and costs of the others, and understands how support affects the terrorists' chance of victory. The government also observes how much supporters contribute to the terrorists. Consequently, neither support nor terrorist attacks will happen on the equilibrium path of our model. Because  $G$  knows the interests of  $S$  and  $V$ , it correctly anticipates their reactions to its choice of policy, and sets a policy that it knows will not cause  $S$  to support  $V$  or  $V$  to attack. This setup can still be used to analyze the conditions under which supporters can use the threat of supporting a terrorist organization to extract concessions from a government, by examining whether support and attacks will occur off the path and how this influences the policy the government sets on the path.

That said, these features are obviously unrealistic. Terrorists, their supporters, and the government's counter-terrorist agents all depend for their lives on operating in secrecy from one another, so each actor is surely prone to uncertainty about the others' preferences,

capabilities, and actions. We show in the online appendix that incorporating uncertainty in the parameters into our model can lead to both support and attacks happening on the equilibrium path, but also that the qualitative conclusions about when supporters can coerce the government remain the same.

## Analysis

We begin with two assumptions that can be thought of as scope conditions for our theory. First, we assume that a terrorist campaign is hopeless for  $V$  without any support: the probability of winning absent support is too low to be worth the cost for  $V$  of conducting attacks. This implies that  $V$  has no ability to extract concessions from  $G$  without  $S$ 's support. This seems empirically plausible: absent funds, weapons, recruits, or shelter, a terrorist organization would find it difficult to carry out operations at all, much less pose a threat to the government severe enough to coerce it.

**Assumption 1.**  *$V$  will not attack without support:  $c_V > P(0)\frac{\hat{x}_V}{1-\delta}$ .*

If  $V$  will not be supported, then it will not attack regardless of the government's policy, so  $G$  would just set his ideal policy  $x = 0$ . However, support from  $S$  can motivate  $V$  to conduct a campaign and, if support is maintained, may enable  $V$  to eventually defeat the government.  $S$  might be able to threaten to support  $V$  for as long as its victory takes, unless the government sets a satisfactory policy. We assume that  $S$  cannot credibly follow through on this threat, even if the government makes no concession.

**Assumption 2** (No Weapon of the Strong).  *$S$  will not sustain support for  $V$  until it wins:  $f^* + c_S > P(f^*)\frac{2\hat{x}_S - \hat{x}_V}{1-\delta}$ , for any  $f^*$  that motivates  $V$  to attack, or  $c_V \leq \zeta f^* + P(f^*)\frac{\hat{x}_V}{1-\delta}$ .*

We call supporting  $V$  until victory the “weapon of the strong” both because it is obviously a severe threat, and because  $S$  must be in a pretty strong position relative to  $G$  for it to

be credible. She must be able to generate a high-enough chance ( $P(f^*)$ ) of a large-enough improvement in policy (from 0 to  $\hat{x}_V$ , an improvement in utility for  $S$  of  $2\hat{x}_S - \hat{x}_V$ ) to outweigh the cost of supporting  $V$  and suffering the campaign ( $f^* + c_S$ ). Implicit in this is that  $S$  must be willing to pay for a level of support sufficient to motivate a relatively moderate  $V$ . If  $V$  is too extreme relative to  $S$  ( $2\hat{x}_S < \hat{x}_V$ ), then  $V$ 's victory would actually lead to a policy even worse for  $S$  than if  $G$  made no concession. But the more moderate  $V$  is, the less it has to gain from victory, and the more support  $S$  must provide to motivate it.

Thus, when the weapon of the strong is employed, it should involve a deeply-supported, relatively moderate militant organization with a serious chance of defeating the government and implementing a new policy that supporters strongly favor. This accords well with what scholars normally think of as a mass uprising, but it does not suit what we conventionally think of as a terrorist campaign.

Our assumption is that  $S$  instead finds herself in pretty a weak position. The government may be too strong (so that  $P(f)$  is low even when  $f$  is large) and too able to inflict high costs on supporters ( $c_S$ ) and the militant organization ( $c_V$ ). Supporters may not value a change in policy enough relative to the costs of a successful campaign against the government ( $\hat{x}_S$  low relative to  $f^* + c_S$ ) and may be unable or unwilling to contribute enough support to motivate a militant organization whose moderate policy they actually want to see implemented.

Surprisingly,  $S$  may still be able to use  $V$  to coerce  $G$  into changing its policy. Rather than threaten (non-credibly) to support  $V$  until victory,  $S$  might instead threaten to support  $V$  only *temporarily* if  $G$  does not make an expected policy concession.

**Proposition 1** (Weapon of the Weak). *There is an equilibrium in which  $S$ 's threat to support  $V$  for a period if  $G$  sets  $x < x^*$  induces  $G$  to make a policy concession  $x^* \in (0, \hat{x}_S]$  on the path if and only if,  $\forall x \in [0, x^*)$ , there is a level of support  $f_x^*$  for which the following conditions*

hold:

$$\begin{aligned}
c_V &\leq \zeta f_x^* + P(f_x^*) \frac{\hat{x}_V}{1-\delta} + [1 - P(f_x^*)] \frac{\delta x^*}{1-\delta} - P(f_x^*)x \\
f_x^* + c_S &\leq P(f_x^*) \frac{2\hat{x}_S - \hat{x}_V}{1-\delta} + [1 - P(f_x^*)] \frac{\delta x^*}{1-\delta} - P(f_x^*)x \\
c_G + P(f_x^*) \frac{\hat{x}_V - x^*}{1-\delta} &\geq [1 - P(f_x^*)] (x^* - x)
\end{aligned}$$

If  $S$  does not carry out her threat when  $G$  deviates, or if these conditions are not met, then  $G$  makes no policy concession,  $S$  never supports  $V$ , and  $V$  never attacks.

This is a “weapon of the weak” because it is obviously far less severe for the government to be attacked temporarily than it is to be subjected to a militant campaign that will last until it is overthrown, as in the weapon of the strong. But we will also see that, when this equilibrium obtains, the actors and their behavior correspond closely with the notion of terrorism as a weapon of the weak, and this milder threat is still enough to extract a policy concession so that terrorism works, for its supporters. Importantly, our claim is not that the militant organization itself is weak, or that an organization that uses terrorism is weak. In our theory, it is the *supporters* that are weak, and so must rely on this less severe threat to coerce the government.<sup>2</sup>

We start by explaining the three conditions that must be met for this threat to coerce  $G$  to make the policy concession ( $x^*$ ). First,  $V$  must be sufficiently motivated to attack by  $S$ 's support if  $G$  deviates (setting  $x < x^*$ ):  $V$ 's enjoyment of the support ( $\zeta f_x^*$ ), of its ideal policy if it wins ( $P(f_x^*)\hat{x}_V/(1-\delta)$ ), and of the policy that  $G$  will set subsequently if  $V$  doesn't win ( $[1 - P(f_x^*)] \delta x^*/(1-\delta)$ ) must outweigh  $V$ 's cost of attacking ( $c_V$ ). Second,  $S$  must actually be willing to provide this support to  $V$  if  $G$  deviates: for her, too, the value of the policy she will get if  $V$  wins ( $P(f_x^*)(2\hat{x}_S - \hat{x}_V)/(1-\delta)$ ) and if  $V$  doesn't ( $[1 - P(f_x^*)] \delta x^*/(1-\delta)$ )

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<sup>2</sup>Our theory thus does not contradict Fortna (2023), which finds little evidence that the use of terrorism is associated with weak rebel groups.

must outweigh the cost of supporting and suffering  $V$ 's attack ( $f_x^* + c_S$ ). Finally,  $G$  must be deterred from deviating by this threat: the cost of suffering an attack ( $c_G$ ) and the risk of  $V$  winning and changing policy to its ideal ( $P(f_x^*)(\hat{x}_V - x^*)/(1 - \delta)$ ) must outweigh the temptation of reducing the expected policy concession if  $V$  doesn't win ( $[1 - P_x^*](x^* - x)$ ).

We highlight three implications of these conditions.

**Observation 1.** *The weapon of the weak is easier to wield than the weapon of the strong.*

The only possible upside of using the weapon of the strong is that  $V$  might win and set a policy that is better for  $V$  and  $S$ . That could still happen when the weapon of the weak is used, but there is also a different upside: even if  $V$  doesn't win,  $G$  will be disciplined by the attack and return to making the expected policy concession. Because that concession will only be restored if  $G$ 's deviation is punished,  $V$  has more to gain from attacking and  $S$  has more to gain from supporting  $V$ . Moreover, because this new upside makes  $V$  easier to motivate,  $S$  does not have to contribute as much support to incite  $V$  to attack.

This in turn eases the constraint  $S$  faces in what kind of  $V$  she can credibly support. Recall that for  $S$  to use the weapon of the strong,  $V$  must simultaneously be cheap enough to motivate and moderate enough in its ideal policy, so that  $S$  is willing to pay the amount necessary and actually wants  $V$  to win. Under the weapon of the weak, the new upside from restoring the expected concession can compensate  $V$  for a lower level of support from  $S$ . Because  $S$ 's level of support can be lower,  $V$ 's chance of winning will also be lower. This means that the policy  $V$  will set in the less likely event it wins is less important to  $S$ , so that  $V$  need not be so moderate.

**Observation 2.** *The weapon of the weak may be credible if, and its credibility may require that, the terrorist organization is extreme.*

Remarkably, the weapon of the weak may be viable even if  $V$  is so extreme that  $S$  actually prefers  $G$ 's ideal policy to  $V$ 's ( $\hat{x}_V > 2\hat{x}_S$ ), and in certain situations it may be viable *only* if

$V$  is this extreme.  $S$  could never employ such an extreme  $V$  for the weapon of the strong, because it would be made worse off if  $V$  won. But this is possible and may even be desirable under the weapon of the weak. A more extreme  $V$  is cheaper for  $S$  to motivate because it has more to gain from winning, and cheaper for  $S$  to use to deter  $G$  from deviating because  $G$  is worse off if a more extreme  $V$  wins, and so can be deterred at a lower probability of  $V$  winning. In these situations,  $S$  fears  $V$ 's victory too, but nonetheless can use the threat of temporarily supporting it and subjecting both  $S$  and  $G$  to the risk of  $V$  winning in order to coerce  $G$ . Supporting  $V$  is thus akin to nuclear brinkmanship—both sides want to avoid a disastrous outcome ( $V$  winning), but one side can still use the threat of increasing the chance of this to coerce the other.

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate these two mechanisms with numerical examples. In Figure 1,  $V$ 's cost of attacking the government rises on the vertical axis. As this cost rises,  $S$  must provide more support to motivate  $V$  to attack, and once the required support is high enough, the cost is too high for  $S$  to bear and the weapon of the weak is not viable. However, as  $V$  becomes more extreme along the horizontal axis, less support is needed to motivate it, and so it remains affordable for  $S$  to support at a higher cost of attacking. This is true even though, at every point in this figure,  $V$  is so extreme ( $\hat{x}_V \geq 1 > 2\hat{x}_S = 0.6$ ) that  $S$  never wants it to win!

In Figure 2,  $G$ 's cost of suffering attacks rises on the vertical axis. In this example, there is a ceiling to  $V$ 's chance of winning no matter how much support  $S$  offers, so for a low enough cost of being attacked,  $G$  simply cannot be deterred from renegeing on the expected policy concession. As this cost rises,  $G$  becomes deterrable, but the support required to raise  $V$ 's probability of winning to the point of deterring  $G$  is unaffordable for  $S$ . Only once  $G$ 's cost is high enough is  $S$  able to afford the support needed to deter  $G$ . However, as  $V$  becomes more extreme along the horizontal axis,  $G$  fears its victory more, so that a lower probability of  $V$  winning is enough to deter  $G$ , and the support required becomes affordable

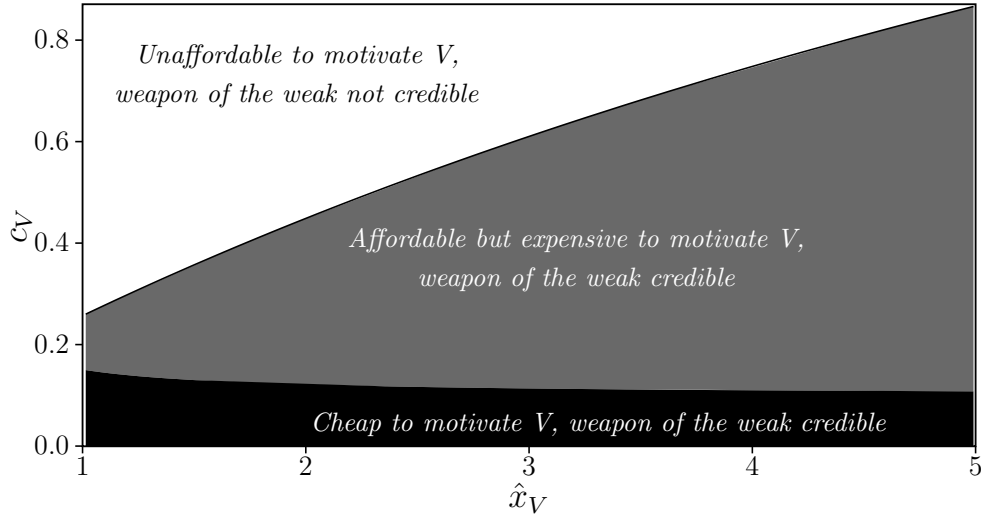


Figure 1: More extreme terrorists accept greater danger for less support. (Parameter values are  $\delta = 0.9$ ,  $\hat{x}_S = 0.3$ ,  $c_S = c_G = 0.2$ ,  $\zeta = 0.04$ ,  $P(f) = \min\{\frac{f}{100}, 1\}$ .)

for  $S$  at a lower level of  $G$ 's cost. Here, as long as  $G$ 's cost is below 0.5,  $V$  must be extreme enough that  $S$  does not want it to win for it to be affordable for  $S$  to deter  $G$ .

**Observation 3.** *The weapon of the weak resembles a terrorist campaign.*

Following the previous reasoning, when the weapon of the weak is employed, it should involve limited support for a possibly quite extreme militant organization that may have little chance of actually defeating the government, and if it did, might impose a new policy that supporters actually dislike. This is a good fit for what scholars normally think of as a terrorist campaign. The terrorists fight, even if their chance of success is low, because they enjoy the support they receive and because they will accept even a small chance of radically changing policy to suit their extreme ideal. Supporters contribute to the terrorist organization, and may prefer that it be quite extreme, not necessarily because they support its goals—which they may view as even worse than the government's—but because they expect this to lead to a policy concession from the government. And the government makes a modest policy concession that is enough to placate the supporters, who will halt their support and thereby the terrorists' attacks. Indeed, both the government and the supporters share an interest

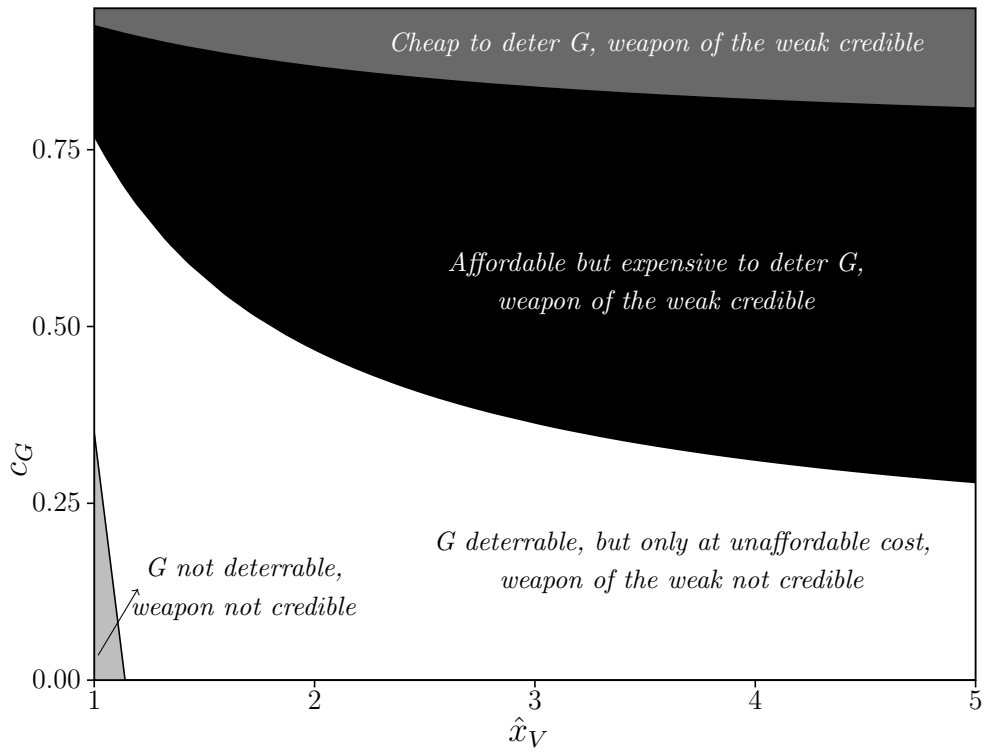


Figure 2: More extreme terrorists deter a tougher government with less support. (Parameter values are  $\delta = 0.8$ ,  $\hat{x}_S = 0.95$ ,  $\theta = 5$ ,  $c_S = 3$ ,  $\zeta = 2$ ,  $P(f) = \min\{\frac{f}{5}, 0.5\}$ .)



that the policy concession should be no more than the supporters favor—any bigger change would make both of them worse off—and thus potentially far more modest than the change the terrorists seek.

## The Case of Hamas

Testing our theory is challenging because of limitations in the information available for many terrorist organizations. It is usually straightforward to identify a group's goals, target government, and main supporters, but we also need to know the intensity of terrorist violence and how that varies over time. If a group's support derives from a popular constituency, we need public opinion polls to ascertain its desired policies and level of support and how this changes over time. If support comes from a state sponsor, we need public reports or declassified intelligence estimates of the state's objectives and level of support and how it changed over time. Because governments rarely wish to advertise concessions made in response to terrorism, we need less biased sources in a language we can read to assess the occurrence and nature of any concessions the government makes. In practice, this restricts us to cases that have generated sufficient Western interest.

We examined six groups for which these requirements might be met: Al Qaeda, the Egyptian Islamic Group, Hamas, Hezbollah, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, and the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA). All six are regarded as either partially or completely failing to achieve their strategic goals, and thus are potentially informative tests of our theory's contention that terrorism works, for its supporters. For each case, we determined the ideal policies of the group, identified its primary supporters and their preferred policies, investigated any policy concessions plausibly made by the targeted government in response, and assessed whether and how support for terrorism and the occurrence of attacks changed after those concessions were made. Our theory predicts that the supporters should prefer

policies more moderate (that is, closer to the status quo) than the terrorist group's ideal, and that when the targeted government makes concessions, they should be designed to appease the supporters rather than the terrorists, and this should reduce support for terrorism and its occurrence.<sup>3</sup>

The quantity and quality of the information we need varies substantially over these cases. While we found evidence consistent with our theory in all six cases, it is usually incomplete, in the sense that we cannot test all our theory's predictions for a case, and sometimes ambiguous, in the sense that it can be interpreted in line with our theory but is also subject to other interpretations. We report here only our results for Hamas, because it is the case for which the available information allowed the most thorough test of our theory. The appendix also discusses the IRA, for which we found similarly good information.

The Islamic Resistance Movement, known as Hamas, was formed in 1987 and has pursued a campaign of violent attacks against the government of Israel and its citizens within Israel and the Palestinian territories. Its long-standing goal, which is unmet and seems quite improbable, is to overthrow the government of Israel and replace it with an Islamist government with sovereignty over both Israel and the Palestinian territories (Hamas, 1988).

Hamas draws its support primarily from the population of the Palestinian territories of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Arab states in the region such as Saudi Arabia have provided rhetorical support as well as funds; Qatar and Syria in particular have provided sanctuary for the political leadership of Hamas; and Iran has provided funds, training, and weapons. However, most experts agree that Hamas should be regarded not as a proxy for its state sponsors, but rather as a predominantly Palestinian organization focused on its local

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<sup>3</sup>Adhering strictly to our model, concessions should happen on the equilibrium path, induced by the threat of support and terrorist attacks that only occur off the path, because the government perfectly anticipates supporters' reaction to its choice of policy. In reality, and as we show in a model extension in the online appendix, some support and terrorist attacks may have to occur to convince the government that the supporters' threat is credible and induce it to set a more conciliatory policy, and our predictions are specified accordingly.

constituency.

Both its Palestinian and its Arab state supporters clearly prefer more moderate changes to the status quo than does Hamas.<sup>4</sup> Public opinion polling of Palestinians consistently indicates they seek only an end to Israel’s occupation and settlements, compensation for refugees from Israel’s founding, a capital at East Jerusalem, and non-demilitarized statehood.<sup>5</sup> With regard to the final outcome desired, even during the worst violence of the Second Intifada (2000–05), 76% of Palestinians most preferred a two-state solution or mutually-agreed one-state solution, and only 21% preferred Palestinian rule over both peoples.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the Second Intifada, 70–80% would support reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians if a peace settlement were reached.<sup>7</sup> At least since 1996, the Arab states have unanimously endorsed the same preferred outcome as the Palestinians.<sup>8</sup> Thus, neither of Hamas’s most important bases of support appears to seek an overthrow of the government of Israel.

Moreover, as far as the Palestinians are concerned, Islamism is also not a popular goal. Only 20% thought safeguarding religion was the most important Palestinian national interest, against 50% who thought it was ending the Israeli occupation.<sup>9</sup> When asked what sort of state they would like to have, 64% chose a secular autocracy or democracy and only 25% chose theocracy or “an Islamic system”.<sup>10</sup> Finally, in the crucial elections of January 2006, in which Hamas first won a national majority, self-described religious voters supported it over Fateh by only 52 to 40, suggesting that support for Hamas is not particularly driven by

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<sup>4</sup>For Palestinian views, we rely on polls conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, which can be accessed at <https://www.pcpsr.org/en>. We refer to specific polls by the month and year in which they were conducted.

<sup>5</sup>See polls from September 1993, March 1994, March and April 1997, July 2000, December 2003, December 2005, and June and December 2006 for examples.

<sup>6</sup>Poll from October 2003.

<sup>7</sup>See polls from July 2000, December 2001, and every poll from 2002 to June 2006.

<sup>8</sup>See the peace process communique from the June 1996 Arab League summit in Cairo, the Arab Peace Initiative adopted during the May 2002 summit in Beirut, and the re-adoption of the same initiative during the March 2007 summit in Riyadh.

<sup>9</sup>Poll from July 2001.

<sup>10</sup>Poll from December 2001. A similar question asked in November 1993 gave 77% for secular government and only 19% for Islamist.

a desire for theocracy.<sup>11</sup>

Israel has not adopted the set of policies sought by most Palestinians and Arab states, but it has occasionally made substantial changes in its policies toward the Palestinians. The peace process that began in September 1993 and ended by July 2000 produced a number of agreements featuring concessions by Israel, and the period of “disengagement” from February 2005 to August 2006 featured unilateral concessions by Israel (though they were not presented as such).<sup>12</sup> Our theory predicts that these concessions should resemble the goals of Hamas’s supporters, not those of Hamas itself. As concessions are announced and implemented, support for violence against Israel should decline, Hamas should be weakened, and violence should decrease. By contrast, the period between the peace process and disengagement should see support for violence and for Hamas rise, and the level of violence should increase.

Consistent with the theory, these concessions were all clearly aimed at the preferences of the Palestinian public and Arab states, and a far cry from Hamas’s goals. The peace process agreements dealt with establishment of self-government in the Palestinian territories, withdrawal of Israeli occupation, and timetables for negotiations over settlements, Jerusalem, refugees, security, and borders. The policies associated with disengagement included Israel’s withdrawal of military forces and dismantlement of all settlements in the Gaza Strip, as well as a few in the West Bank, and a similar disengagement from a large portion of the West Bank that was adopted as government policy but never implemented. No concession was made regarding territory traditionally regarded as part of Israel; none broached a unitary state for the two peoples, with most of the peace process agreements instead codifying mutual recognition of political rights and peaceful co-existence; and agreements spoke not of Islamist

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<sup>11</sup>Special (exit) poll from February 2006.

<sup>12</sup>The peace process began with the Oslo I Accord of September 1993, featured a series of implementing agreements from May 1994 to September 1999, and is generally regarded to have ended by the failed Camp David summit of July 2000. The disengagement period began with the Israeli Knesset’s final approval of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s proposed plan in February 2005, which was implemented that summer, and ended with Prime Minister Ehud Olmert’s suspension of further withdrawal in August 2006.

governance, but of democratization. The Palestinian public viewed them all very favorably, with 65% approving of the Gaza-Jericho Agreement of May 1994,<sup>13</sup> 72% approving of the Oslo II Accord of September 1995,<sup>14</sup> and 73% approving of the plan for withdrawing from the Gaza Strip.<sup>15</sup>

The trends in support for violence, support for Hamas, and the level of violence are also in accordance with the theory. First consider the period of the peace process. From March 1995 through 1996, when most of the agreements were made, Palestinian support for the peace process was generally 70–80% and support for “armed operations”—attacks conducted primarily by Hamas but also by other groups—hovered around 20%. Only 12% of Palestinians would vote for Hamas candidates in March 1995, and this steadily declined to 8% by December 1996. From early 1997 to just before the end of the peace process in July 2000, implementation deadlines were missed and two additional agreements were mostly not implemented.<sup>16</sup> During this period, support for the peace process softened to 60–70%, for armed operations increased to around 40%, and for Hamas candidates increased back to 12%. Thus, even when the peace process was not going as well, large majorities favored the peace process, opposed attacks, and preferred parties other than Hamas. Finally, the level of violence carried out by Palestinian militants, judged by the number of Israeli deaths incurred in the conflict, was substantial early on, ranging from 46 to 75 deaths per year from 1993 to 1996, but fell rapidly to 29 in 1997, 12 in 1998, and 4 in 1999.<sup>17</sup> Over the whole period, Israeli deaths averaged 40 per year.

Next consider the period after the peace process ended, but before disengagement began. As our theory expects, when Israel was seen as no longer willing to make concessions,

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<sup>13</sup>Poll from September 1993, when the agreement was proposed.

<sup>14</sup>Poll from October 1995.

<sup>15</sup>Poll from March 2004.

<sup>16</sup>The Wye River Memorandum of October 1998 was quickly suspended, and the Sharm el-Sheik Memorandum of September 1999 was only partially implemented.

<sup>17</sup>All deaths figures come from B'Tselem, available at [https://www.btselem.org/statistics/first\\_intifada\\_tables](https://www.btselem.org/statistics/first_intifada_tables).

support for violence skyrocketed, support for Hamas substantially increased, and the level of violence exploded. Immediately after the failed Camp David Summit of July 2000, 52% supported armed attacks against Israeli targets and 63% thought that Palestinians should “emulate” “Hizbullah methods” (attacks on both military and civilian targets). Every poll from 2001 through 2004 shows support for armed attacks above 80%, with support for attacks specifically against Israeli civilians inside Israel always 50–60%. Retrospective support for specific, recent suicide bombings was always at least 75%. At the same time, support for Hamas rose and hovered around 20%, double its average during the peace process. The level of violence rose rapidly, from 41 Israeli deaths in 2000 to 419 in 2002, 185 in 2003, and 108 in 2004. Over this period, the Israeli deaths incurred averaged 189 per year, 4.5 times the level during the peace process.

Finally, during the disengagement period, support for violence and the level of violence dropped as predicted, though support for Hamas increased, counter to our theoretical expectation. Support for attacks against Israeli civilians inside Israel fell to 38% in March 2005 and remained around 40% through 2005, but retrospective support for a recent suicide bombing was only 29%, and support for the ceasefire with Israel that had just been declared, and for an immediate return to negotiations with Israel, reached 84%, and remained above 75% for the rest of the year. The level of violence dropped to 51 Israeli deaths in 2005 and 23 in 2006, for an average of 37, about the level observed during the peace process. During 2005, support for Hamas actually rose slightly to an average of about 28%, and Hamas won a majority of the Palestinian legislature in elections in January 2006.

While this contradicts our theory, polling just before and during the election reveals that the increase in support for Hamas was heavily due to the increasing severity and salience of the incumbent party Fateh’s corruption and the perception that Hamas would be much better at fighting corruption.<sup>18</sup> Only 9% of voters indicated a party’s ability to reach a peace

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<sup>18</sup>See the exit poll analysis of December 15, 2005 for the local elections and of February 15, 2006 for the

agreement with Israel as the most important factor in their choice, while 25% indicated instead its ability to fight corruption. Even among those who voted for Hamas in the elections, 40% supported and 30% opposed the peace process, compared to 60% vs. 17% among all voters.

We have shown that the concessions offered and the levels of support for violence, support for Hamas, and observed violence are mostly consistent with the theory. However, one might still ask whether the principal in this case—primarily, the Palestinian public—actually views the relationship between terrorist violence and policy concessions in the way our model describes. The available polling evidence strongly suggests that it does.

Palestinians clearly understood that attacks brought concessions from Israel that would otherwise not be forthcoming. During the latter, less productive half of the peace process, support for the process remained high but support for attacks fluctuated, rising when implementation halted and falling when it resumed. This is not only our interpretation: the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research’s own commentary on these results held that “consistent support for the peace process and the fluctuation in the support for violence point to the possible conclusion that many Palestinians view the latter as a means of moving the former forward and not as an alternative to it.”<sup>19</sup> Just after the failure of the Camp David summit, 60% would support “violent Israeli-Palestinian confrontations” if no permanent settlement was achieved by the agreed deadline, and 57% “believe that such confrontations [...] would achieve Palestinian rights in a way that the negotiations could not.”<sup>20</sup> By July 2001, when the peace process had clearly disintegrated, 71% “believe[d] that a return to armed confrontations will achieve Palestinian rights in a way that the negotiations can not.” In every poll from 2001 through 2006, around 67% “believe[d] that the armed confrontations so far have achieved Palestinian rights in a way that negotiations could not.”

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national elections.

<sup>19</sup>Polling analysis from April 1999.

<sup>20</sup>Poll from July 2000.

During the disengagement period, around 75% consistently viewed Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip "as a victory for the Palestinian armed resistance against Israel."<sup>21</sup> Asked to select "the single most important factor in the Israeli decision to withdraw from the Gaza Strip," 57% selected "attacks by Palestinian resistance."<sup>22</sup>

Palestinians also recognized that, once concessions were made, further attacks might lead Israel to retract them and so should be stopped. Late in the earlier, more productive half of the peace process, 75% of Palestinians believed that "the continuation of [terrorist] attacks may impede the peace process," and 59% supported "the Palestinian Authority taking measures to prevent them," even though 74% believed those measures "may lead to internal Palestinian conflict."<sup>23</sup> When the proposal for disengagement from Gaza was first publicly aired, a plurality of 41% believed it would lead to fewer attacks from Gaza.<sup>24</sup> Over this period, 60–70% consistently opposed further attacks from the Gaza Strip so long as Israel's disengagement from it was complete.<sup>25</sup> Before the withdrawal was completed, 60% opposed the collection of arms from militants in Gaza, but after, 60-70% *supported* this step to prevent further attacks from Gaza.<sup>26</sup> They anticipated that continued attacks might lead Israel to retract the concession, with 86% believing that "if firing rockets at Israeli towns continued from the Gaza Strip after the completion of Israeli withdrawal," Israel "would reoccupy the strip and stay in it" or "carry out a big military operation in the Strip."<sup>27</sup>

Altogether, we view the evidence in this case as strongly supporting our theory. Palestinians saw Hamas's violence as a means to coerce concessions from Israel, and modulated their support for violence and for Hamas, and thereby the intensity of violence that oc-

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<sup>21</sup>Polls from September and December 2004 and all polls from 2005.

<sup>22</sup>The next most selected factor was "to insure a Jewish majority," the rationale Sharon publicly offered, at 15%. Poll from September 2005.

<sup>23</sup>Poll from March 1996.

<sup>24</sup>Poll from March 2004.

<sup>25</sup>Every poll from 2005.

<sup>26</sup>Poll from March 2005 for majority opposition, polls from September and December 2005 and June and September 2006 for majority support.

<sup>27</sup>Poll from September 2005.



curred, according to Israel's grant or refusal of those concessions. And Israel's concessions have clearly been intended to satisfy Palestinians, not Hamas itself.

## Conclusion

Conceptualizing a terrorist organization as an instrument of coercion for its supporters who are the principal political actor, akin to the role a military plays for a state, yields some interesting implications. In particular, we have shown that it offers a way to resolve the puzzle of why terrorists engage in an activity that is both very dangerous and quite unlikely to achieve their stated goals: they do so because it is supported and so brings real rewards separate from the (remote) prospect of succeeding in those goals. We also demonstrated that this resolution is consistent with the detailed empirical evidence available for the case of Hamas. Here, we offer some additional ramifications of this conceptualization, for other aspects of terrorism, that we view as promising avenues for further investigation.

First, as we have emphasized, our study suggests that terrorism can work for its supporters, in the sense of helping them to exert leverage over a government whose present policies they do not like. Popular constituencies that do not control a state cannot rely on a military to defend their interests or coerce an opponent, and may find non-violent resistance or a mass uprising too costly or too unlikely to succeed to be worthwhile. Foreign states may similarly find diplomacy, sanctions, or war cost-ineffective or see the virtue of supplementing these instruments. Supporting a terrorist organization offers a means of coercing a government to change its policy that is, by comparison, relatively cheap and safe for supporters. Though Pape (2003) is surely right that terrorism's coercive power has serious limits, it can still bring modest changes to policy that supporters desire and which may be worth the costs of supporting and enduring a terrorist campaign.

If we want to understand the causes of terrorism, then it may be profitable to focus

more on what leads a set of possible constituents to conclude that supporting a terrorist organization is worthwhile, and less on what causes individuals to form or join a terrorist group or what that group says or does. Consider an analogy to interstate war and arming: scholars studying their causes typically focus on the political actors that employ militaries—the governments—rather than the militaries themselves. Governments build and employ militaries in order to defend their interests from perceived threats, and shrink or disband them when that need diminishes. Why someone joins the army, how it is organized, how it interacts with the air force or navy, and whether it joins a battle are only relevant to explaining why war or arming occurs to the extent that they shape the government’s use of the military as a coercive instrument. Similarly, why individuals become terrorists, how groups function, how they interact with other groups in a terrorist campaign, and whether they carry out an attack may have limited relevance to explaining why terrorist groups form or whether terrorism occurs. The proper unit of analysis for investigating terrorism’s causes, then, might be a particular support base, not a particular terrorist organization. Because supporting terrorism is a costly means of resolving a dispute, the bargaining theory of war should apply and offer some guidance on how to think about terrorism’s causes (Fearon, 1995). Applying this theory (suitably generalized), terrorism is caused by a dispute between its supporters and the target government that is serious enough to merit suffering the costs of support and attacks but cannot be resolved peacefully because of some bargaining friction, such as the sources of asymmetric information identified by Kydd and Walter (2006).

Terrorism may also work, though in a very different sense, for the terrorists themselves. Although individual members of a terrorist organization may vary in how they weigh commitment to the stated goals against other interests, participating in terrorism that is well-supported can mean getting oneself or one’s family paid, enjoying elevated social status among supporters, gaining the satisfaction of cooperating in a challenging endeavor with one’s comrades, and contributing meaningfully to one’s perceived community (whether this

be one's fellow citizens or instead sympathetic states abroad). In this respect, too, a terrorist organization may be analogous to a military, and members may join to receive a similar combination of pay, status, camaraderie, and service. Militaries find it easy to attract recruits and secure generous budgets in times when support for their efforts is strong, and so it may be with terrorist organizations. This suggests that, to understand the formation of, recruitment into, and capabilities of terrorist organizations, it may be valuable to analyze whether and how much support an organization receives from outside in addition to studying who joins it.

In our theory, neither supporters nor the terrorists themselves need be either irrational or in any way psychologically anomalous. Of course, having joined the group, it may be rational for individual recruits and for the group itself to inculcate fervent commitment to the cause, to cultivate an objectively-implausible belief in its probability of success, to shed certain moral qualms, and to form intense attachments to other members. These are core elements of the culture in many militaries precisely because they make for better soldiers who are more likely to win. But, for both militaries and terrorist organizations, they do not imply that joining up, supporting, or deploying the organization are anything other than strategically rational acts.

None of this should be taken to deny the possibility that individual terrorists, or a terrorist organization as a whole, may act in ways that deviate from the interests of either the organization or its base of supporters. Soldiers and armies do not necessarily follow orders and may betray their commanders, and these principal-agent problems may be essential to understanding how they operate and are managed, but they are not particularly relevant for understanding why militaries exist or what causes their employment. Inducing a military to stop fighting an enemy, or to restrain itself from using prohibited tactics, may be easier than getting a terrorist organization to do the same given the stronger apparatus of control available to a state. But these features are not central to understanding why war or terrorism

occurs or why it ends.

Focusing on the support base rather than the group also casts a different light on the study of counterterrorism. A belligerent state that kills or captures the leadership of an enemy infantry division, or even devastates the entire division in battle, has achieved a substantial tactical success, but of course the war may not be over, since officers can be replaced and new divisions can be raised. We would not conclude that the state had won, and the fact that the division had been defeated would be irrelevant when it came to assessing overall victory or defeat in the war. Similarly, if a targeted government kills or captures a terrorist group's leaders, or even if it wipes out its membership, the terrorist campaign may not end. New individuals willing to engage in terrorism can be found, new groups formed, and new attacks conducted so long as the support base remains committed to the campaign. Thus it may be more profitable to focus on explaining the success or failure of a terrorist campaign—which may involve multiple groups, as long as they are supported from within a common base—rather than the success or failure of a particular terrorist organization.

Similarly, it may be useful to study how terrorist *campaigns*, rather than terrorist organizations, end. In war or peacetime, states may disband units that are too expensive or have become combat-ineffective, re-organize an army from divisions into brigades or corps, encourage rivalry or instead cooperation among branches, or divert supplies from one unit to another. None of these are likely to be central in explaining why a war ends. Analogously, a support base might cease supporting a disfavored terrorist group, might encourage splintering or consolidation in search of greater coercive power, encourage groups to compete or cooperate in attacking the target government, and switch its support from one group to another. These actions might have serious consequences for particular terrorist organizations, leading to their decline or end, but they may not be central to understanding why or how terrorism ends. It might instead be more germane to ask when and why and how the target government convinces the support base to cease supporting attacks.

Finally, English (2016, 261) points out that moral evaluations of terrorism may be determined by its lack of efficacy. To be clear, one might conclude that killing civilians for no military purpose was simply unethical, regardless of whether it works. But even if one is willing to contemplate arguments that this means might be justified by the ends, if terrorism's ends are rarely achieved, as most scholarship has argued, then its means are surely quite difficult to justify. That evaluation might change if both the ends and terrorism's efficacy in achieving them are assessed from the perspective of its supporters.

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