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DOES TERRORISM REALLY WORK? EVOLUTION IN THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM SINCE 9/11

MAX ABRAHMS

The basic narrative of bargaining theory predicts that, all else equal, anarchy favors concessions to challengers who demonstrate the will and ability to escalate against defenders. For this reason, post-9/11 political science research explained terrorism as rational strategic behavior for non-state challengers to induce government compliance given their constraints. Over the past decade, however, empirical research has consistently found that neither escalating to terrorism nor with terrorism helps non-state actors to achieve their demands. In fact, escalating to terrorism or with terrorism increases the odds that target countries will dig in their political heels, depriving the non-state challengers of their given preferences. These empirical findings across disciplines, methodologies, as well as salient global events raise important research questions, with implications for counterterrorism strategy.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, I have had the privilege of teaching courses on terrorism to students at both Dartmouth College and Johns Hopkins University. With a question, I open the seminar: On September 12, 2001, what did you want to know about the nature of the terrorism threat? Invariably, three sets of questions emerge. The first pertains to the expected consequences of the violence. What will happen next, they wondered? How would the United States respond? The second set of questions deals with the motives of the perpetrators. Why would anyone intentionally kill all of these innocent people? Are such killers just crazy? And the third set of questions relates to counterterrorism strategy. How should the United States respond? And can governments do anything to prevent subsequent attacks? At the time, the field of political science offered few empirically substantiated answers.

Although the Cold War had elapsed, realism was still the dominant paradigm in international relations. As a product of its generation, realism focuses on conflicts between states, not challenges to them from below. Realism is particularly interested in contests between great powers such as the United States and the now-defunct Soviet Union rather than non-state actors such as al-Qaida and its affiliates. Without ready-made answers about the terrorism threat, political scientists stormed into the research vacuum spurred by intellectual curiosity, altruism, student demand, and unprecedented government funding.

What quickly emerged after 9/11 is what I call the Strategic Model. Where there were once questions about terrorism, political scientists now claimed to have the answers. The Strategic Model rests on three intuitive, theoretically cohesive assertions about the nature of

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the terrorism threat. First, political scientists posited that governments respond to terrorism by making concessions to the perpetrators in order to spare their populations additional pain. Second, political scientists theorized that the aggrieved must turn to terrorism for precisely this reason—its tactical effectiveness in coercing government compliance. And third, political scientists concluded that the key to counterterrorism is thus to divest terrorism of its political utility relative to that of nonviolence with peace processes, democracy promotion, or a strict no-concessions policy in the face of terrorism. Clearly, the Strategic Model is predicated on its first premise—that terrorism is indeed an effective tactic for pressuring governments into appeasing terrorist demands. For this reason, a flurry of post-9/11 research has focused on determining whether terrorism is a winning political tactic.

This study illuminates this question in three main sections. In the first, I underscore the core premise of the Strategic Model that terrorism is an effective instrument of coercion. In this section, I explain why proponents of the Strategic Model believe this premise to be true based on their understanding of bargaining theory, which highlights the strategic utility of escalation under anarchy. In the second section, I present the countervailing empirical evidence. Across disciplines and methodologies, I reveal how studies are consistently finding that terrorism does not actually promote government concessions. In fact, the evidence shows that rather than complying with the demands, target countries tend to dig in their political heels, especially as the level of terrorist violence rises. In the third section, I explore some research and policy implications given the mounting body of evidence that terrorism is counterproductive for coercing government accommodation. Together, the analysis will reveal that the Strategic Model is stronger theoretically than empirically, inviting additional research on the motives of terrorists and the optimal way to combat them.

Intellectual Basis of the Strategic Model

The intellectual basis of the Strategic Model hails from bargaining theory—perhaps the most productive research program in international relations since the 1960s. Like realism, bargaining theory has traditionally focused on violence between states instead of the actions of non-state actors. Since Schelling (1960, 1966), bargaining theorists (e.g., Byman and Waxman, 2002, 10; Baldwin, 2000, 104; George, 1993, 7; Howes, 2009, Introduction; Kinsella and Russett, 2002, 1047; and Slantchev, 2005, 533) have emphasized that violence is strategic behavior which helps challenger states to coerce target countries into accommodating their demands. The presumed relationship between escalation and compliance is monotonic, Lake (2010) remarks: “As a general rule, the greater the violence threatened or inflicted by A (the coercer), the more likely B (the target) is to comply with A’s demand.” Escalating to violence, but especially with violence is believed to help challenger states pressure compliance by enhancing the credibility of their threats under anarchy, in two broad ways. At their heart are Schelling’s pioneering ideas on how escalation signals to the defender that the challenger is both willing and able to inflict physical costs for noncompliance.

First, bargaining theory highlights how escalation adds credibility to threats by signaling that the challenger is resolved. In the 1960s, Schelling (1960, 1966) famously theorized that states possess private information about their commitment to winning a dispute. Because fighting is costly, escalation separates bluffers from the truly committed. The most obvious costly signal is in blood and treasure; by depleting finite human and financial resources, warfare incurs “sunk costs” even for the triumphant. Fighting also jeopardizes challenger states by “leaving something to chance” since escalation requires them to cede

control over the process and outcome of the conflict, generating an autonomous risk of ever costlier developments. Finally, escalation invites “audience costs” by offending constituencies of support beyond the target of the pressure.¹ In these ways, bargaining theory underscores that there are multiple costs to challenger states for escalating, which reveal resolve, enhance the credibility of their threats under anarchy, and thereby add pressure on defenders to relent.

Second, bargaining theorists highlight that escalation also lends credibility to threats by inflicting costs on the defender. Schelling (1966, 3) established that physical pain is the most credible signal of the challenger’s “power to hurt” him in a world of asymmetric information. By employing a measure of force, the state reveals his threat is not empty. Powell (1990, 7) and others demonstrate how under anarchy, “A state’s punitive capability is its ability to inflict costs on an adversary.” Conversely, restraint in a crisis leaves uncertain whether the challenger is capable of inflicting costs on the defender for continued intransigence.² Crucially, bargaining theory predicts that challenger states will gain coercive leverage by raising the costs of resistance; this is because as rational actors, defenders are expected to become more pliant as their adversaries reveal heightened punishment capacity with larger amounts of pain.³ According to what Daniel Drezner (2003, 645) calls “the basic narrative” of bargaining theory, coercion thereby succeeds through escalation, when the expected costs to the defender exceed his interest in resisting the demand. In sum, a key legacy of Schelling is that escalation helps to promote concessions by lending credibility to threats under anarchy, namely, by signaling that the challenger is both willing and able to punish for noncompliance.

Since the September 11, 2001, attacks, numerous political scientists (e.g., Berman and Laitin, 2008; Kydd and Walter, 2006; Lake, 2002; and Siegel and Young, 2009) have applied this familiar framework to non-state actors, particularly those that escalate to or with terrorism. Of course, states and non-state actors approach the decision to escalate from opposite structural conditions. The former normally bargain from a position of strength, whereas the latter are by definition in a position of weakness. The strategic logic is otherwise identical (Pape, 2003). Like states, non-state actors operate in a competitive international arena of incomplete information, where they too have an incentive to overstate their threats to achieve their preferences. By escalating—in this case, against civilians—terrorists also inflict costs on themselves and the target to display their commitment and punishment capacity. In this way, terrorists reveal the threat that they actually pose, raising pressure on targets to comply.

Political scientists (e.g., Berman and Laitin, 2008, 7; Kydd and Walter, 2006, 50-51) underscore how terrorism is costly to perpetrators in blood and treasure compared to their relying on less extreme tactical options, thus signaling resolve. Indeed, many scholars (e.g., Gould, 1995; Lichbach, 1998; Popkin, 1979; Tullock, 1971; Weinstein, 2007; and Wood, 2003) analyze terrorism as a collective action problem precisely because of the dangers in comparison to remaining on the sidelines or partaking in nonviolent resistance.⁴ Terrorism also jeopardizes the perpetrators by leaving something to chance. Mueller’s (2006) research in particular details how in the face of terrorism target countries

¹In Fearon’s models e.g., 1997, these costs are not accrued unless the challenger backs down. On the micro-foundations of audience costs, see Gartzke and Gleditsch 2004; Gowa 1999; Schultz 1998; Slantchez 2006; and Tomz 2007.

²For an explanation, see Walter 2009. For an application, see Nemeth 2009.

³For an explanation, see Lebow 1996. For an application, see Pape 1996.

⁴On the relative costs of partaking in violence, see Chenoweth 2010, 256-257. For a contrarian perspective, see Kalyvas and Kocher 2007.

tend to respond in an unpredictable, heavy-handed way. The historical record is replete with aggrieved parties escalating to or with terrorism, aware that the additional pain to the target would boost the odds of paying a prohibitively steep price.⁵ In the early 1970s, the Jordanian government urged the Palestine Liberation Organization to refrain from attacking the Jewish state because the Israeli Defense Forces were liable to overreact (Dobson, 1974). Similarly, Afghan tribal leaders warned Osama bin Laden against carrying out the September 11 attacks due to uncertainty over the costliness of the American response (The 9/11 Commission, 2004, 251). Finally, political scientists (e.g., Laitin and Shapiro, 2008; Berman and Laitin, 2008, 7; Hultman, 2005; and Weinstein 2007, 206) point out that terrorism also entails substantial audience costs, perhaps more than any other tactic. The international community is generally more sympathetic to the given ends of terrorists than to their grisly means. Because of all these costs to non-state actors as identified in bargaining theory, scholars (e.g., Kydd and Walter 2006; Pape 2005; and Weinstein 2007) agree that using terrorism enhances the credibility of their threats by revealing resolve.

There is also little debate that terrorism inflicts costs on defenders, revealing the power to hurt them. Terrorism is a so-called “weapon of the weak,” but only in the sense that its practitioners are non-state actors and thus less capable than their government foes. No empirical study (Fortna, 2011) demonstrates that weaker groups are somehow prone to terrorism. Consistent with bargaining theory, a plethora of studies (e.g., Abrahms, 2006, 2012; Asal and Rethemeyer, 2008; Bloom, 2004; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Jones, 2008; Gambetta, 2005; and Horowitz, 2010) shows that terrorism is positively associated with group capability. For this reason, formal models (e.g., Lapan and Sandler, 1993; Overgaard, 1994) commonly use terrorism as a proxy for group capability, with greater lethality signaling additional punishment capacity.

When political scientists apply bargaining theory to terrorism, they naturally predict that the violence will help non-state actors to coerce compliance, especially as the level of pain rises. Indeed, the most prominent exponents of the Strategic Model are invariably bargaining theorists. Kydd and Walter (2006, 59-60) assert, “Terrorism often works. . . . the greater the costs a terrorist organization is able to inflict, the more credible its threat to inflict future costs, and the more likely the target is to grant concessions.” Pape (2003, 28) likewise contends that terrorists aiming to exact concessions will try to kill as many people as possible because the apparent risk of future pain “maximizes the coercive leverage.” Hoffman and McCormick (2004, 250) also draw explicitly on bargaining theory, predicting that terrorist groups should gain “leverage at the bargaining table” in proportion to the lethality of their attacks. This bargaining process is frequently modeled (e.g., Lapan and Sandler, 1993; Overgaard, 1994), with governments modifying their posterior positions of whether to comply based on the presumed resources of the perpetrators as reflected in the number of civilians killed. Mirroring the standard rationalist narrative applied to challenger states, defenders are expected to concede when the anticipated cost of the terrorism outweighs their interest in resisting the demands. As Pape (2005, 30) writes, terrorism succeeds politically by creating “mounting civilian costs to overwhelm the target state’s interest in the issue in dispute and so to cause it to concede the terrorists’ political demands.” In the next section, however, I present growing empirical evidence that terrorism fails to induce government concessions and actually impedes them contra the predictions of bargaining theorists.

⁵In fact, many scholars believe that groups adopt terrorism to provoke target countries. For an early exponent, see Fromkin 1975.

Empirical Research on Terrorism's Coercive Ineffectiveness

The Strategic Model's core premise that terrorism promotes government concessions rests on bargaining theory, not empirical analysis. In fact, for decades terrorism specialists have expressed skepticism that attacking civilians helps non-state actors to achieve their demands. In the 1970s, Laqueur (1976) published a paper entitled "The Futility of Terrorism" in which he claimed that terrorist groups seldom attain their political platforms. In the 1980s, Crenshaw (Crenshaw, 1988, 15) likewise observed that terrorists do not obtain their given political ends, and "Therefore one must conclude that terrorism is objectively a failure." Similarly, the RAND Corporation (Cordes et al., 1984, 49) remarked at the time that "Terrorists have been unable to translate the consequences of terrorism into concrete political gains. . . [I]n that sense terrorism has failed. It is a fundamental failure." In the 1990s, Held (1991, 70) asserted that the "net effect" of terrorism is politically counterproductive. Chai (1993, 99) declared that terrorism "has rarely provided political benefits" at the bargaining table. Schelling (1991, 20) agreed, proclaiming that "Terrorism almost never appears to accomplish anything politically significant." Since the September 11 attacks, a series of large-*n* observational studies has offered a firmer empirical basis. These indicate that although terrorism is chillingly successful in countless ways, coercing government compliance is not one of them.⁶

In 2006, I published in *International Security* a paper entitled "Why Terrorism Does Not Work," the first large-*n* study on terrorism's political effectiveness. The effectiveness of terrorism can be measured in terms of its process goals or outcome goals. Process goals are intended to sustain the terrorist group by attracting media attention, scuttling organization-threatening peace processes, or boosting membership and morale often by provoking government overreaction. The outcome goals of terrorists, by contrast, are their stated political ends, such as the realization of a Kurdish homeland, the removal of foreign bases from Greece, or the establishment of Islamism in India. An important difference between process goals and outcome goals is that unlike the former, the latter can only be achieved with the compliance of the target government. The Strategic Model assumes that terrorism helps groups to achieve outcome goals, not process goals. For this reason, my study (Abrahms, 2006) assessed whether terrorism has indeed helped terrorist groups to achieve their strategic demands. To test this fundamental assumption, I analyzed the political plights of the twenty-eight Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs), as designated by the U.S. State Department. The analysis yields two main findings. First, the FTO success rate is low—under ten percent—compared to other tactics. On average, the FTOs perpetrated terrorism for decades with few visible signs of political progress. Second, the successful FTOs used terrorism only as a secondary tactic. Terrorist groups often use a hybrid of tactics; all of the political winners directed their violence against military targets, not civilian ones. By disaggregating the FTOs by target selection, I therefore revealed the full extent to which terrorism—defined as attacks against civilian targets—has historically been a losing political tactic.

Jones and Libicki (2008) then examined a larger sample, the universe of known terrorist groups between 1968 and 2006. Of the 648 groups identified in the RAND-MIPT Terrorism Incident database, only 4 percent obtained their strategic demands. More recently, Cronin (2009) has reexamined the success rate of these groups, confirming that less than 5 percent prevailed. Suicide terrorism is usually more lethal than the conventional type, but

⁶For the argument that terrorists derive utility from their actions even when governments refuse to grant concessions, see Abrahms 2008.

its practitioners fail at an even higher rate (Abrahms, 2010). These low figures actually exceed the coercion rate, however, as terrorists may accomplish their demands for reasons other than civilian pain. In fact, all of the studies conclude that terrorism does not encourage concessions. In my 2006 study, I showed with structured case studies how the poor success rate is inherent to the tactic of terrorism itself. Jones and Libicki (2008, 32-33) contend that in the few cases in which terrorist groups have triumphed, "Terrorism had little or nothing to do with the outcome."⁷ And Cronin (2009, 203) finds that the victorious have achieved their demands "despite the use of violence against innocent civilians [rather] than because of it," and that "The tactic of terrorism might have even been counterproductive." Hard case studies (Abrahms, 2010; Cronin, 2009; Dannenbaum, 2011; Moghadam, 2006; Neumann and Smith, 2007) have inspected the limited historical examples of clear-cut terrorist victories, determining that these salient events were idiosyncratic, unrelated to the harming of civilians, or both.

Other recent studies confirm that terrorism is not epiphenomenal to political failure. Admittedly, terrorists are both weak actors relative to governments and known to express unrealistically expansive demands. But their harm to civilians consistently has an independent, negative impact on the odds of government compliance. Gaibullov and Sandler (2009) analyze a dataset of international hostage crises from 1978 to 2005. They exploit variation in whether the hostage-takers escalate by killing the hostages instead of releasing them unscathed. The study finds that hostage-takers significantly lower the odds of achieving their demands by inflicting physical harm in the course of the standoff. The authors conclude that terrorists gain bargaining leverage from restraint, as escalating to "bloodshed does not bolster a negotiated outcome" (19). Scholars are divided over whether the definition of terrorism requires the violent act to inflict physical pain. Terrorism datasets often include all hostage incidents in which an aggrieved person or group issues a demand.⁸ Yet many scholars (e.g., Bron, 1998; Goodwin, 2006) count an act as terrorism only in the event a measure of physical harm is inflicted, usually in the form of a civilian death. Those statistical results may therefore be interpreted as showing that escalating to terrorism or with terrorism hinders bargaining success.⁹ Chenoweth and Stephan (2008, 2011) provide additional empirical evidence that meting out pain hurts non-state actors at the bargaining table. Their studies compare the coercive effectiveness of 323 violent and nonviolent resistance campaigns from 1900 to 2006. Like Gaibullov and Sandler (2009), the authors find that refraining from bloodshed significantly raises the odds of government compliance even after tactical confounds are held fixed. These statistical findings are reinforced with structured in-case comparisons highlighting that escalating from nonviolent methods of protest such as petitions, sit-ins, and strikes to deadly attacks tends to dissuade government compromise. Chenoweth and Stephan employ an aggregate measure of violence that incorporates both indiscriminate attacks on civilians and discriminate attacks on military personnel or other government officials, which are often differentiated from terrorism as guerrilla attacks (Abrahms 2006; Cronin 2009; and Moghadam 2006). Other statistical research (Abrahms, 2012, Fortna, 2011) demonstrates that when terrorist attacks are combined with such discriminate violence, the bargaining outcome is not additive; on the contrary, the pain to the population significantly decreases the odds of government concessions.

⁷For instance, several terrorist groups achieved national liberation by dint of the Soviet Union unraveling in the late 1980s.

⁸Major examples include the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) and the International Terrorism: Attributes of Terrorist Events (ITERATE) database.

⁹On the difficulty of coding terrorism versus other asymmetric tactics, see Schmidt and Jongman 1988.

All of those works are coercion studies, so they use bargaining outcomes as the dependent variable. But economists are finding complimentary results with public opinion data. Without exception, these studies show that terrorism does not cow citizens of target countries into supporting more dovish politicians. Quite the opposite, terrorism systematically raises popular support for right-wing leaders, who are less amenable to engaging with adversaries. In a couple of statistical papers, Berrebi and Klor (2006, 2008) demonstrate that terrorist fatalities within Israel significantly boost local support for right-bloc parties opposed to accommodation, such as the Likud. Other quantitative work goes even further, revealing that the most lethal terrorist incidents in Israel are the most likely to induce this rightward electoral shift. The authors (Gould and Klor, 2010, 1507) conclude that heightening the pain to civilians tends to “backfire on the goals of terrorist factions by hardening the stance of the targeted population.” These trends do not appear to be Israel-specific.¹⁰ Chowanietz (2010) analyzes variation in public opinion within France, Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States from 1990 to 2006. For each target country, terrorist attacks have shifted the electorate to the political right in proportion to their lethality. More anecdotally, similar observations (Mueller, 2006, 184; Neumann and Smith, 2005, 587; Wilkinson, 1986, 52) have been registered after mass casualty terrorist attacks in Egypt, Indonesia, Jordan, the Philippines, Russia, and Turkey. Hewitt (1993, 80) offers this syllogism of how target countries typically respond: “The public favors hard-line policies against terrorism. Conservative parties are more likely to advocate hard-line policies. Therefore, the public will view conservative parties as the best.” In a more recent summary of the literature, RAND (Berrebi, 2009, 189-190) also determines: “Terrorist fatalities, with few exceptions, increase support for the bloc of parties associated with a more-intransigent position. Scholars may interpret this as further evidence that terrorist attacks against civilians do not help terrorist organizations achieve their stated goals (e.g., Abrahms, 2006).” Psychologists (e.g., Jost 2006, 2008) have replicated these results in laboratory experiments, further ruling out the possibility of a selection effect driving the results.

Consistent with these quantitative studies, historical research (e.g., Cronin, 2009; Jones and Libicki, 2008) on terrorism is also finding that the standard governmental response is not accommodation, but provocation particularly after the bloodiest attacks. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most notorious rebel leaders in modern history from Abdullah Yusuf Azzam to Regis Debray, Vo Nguyen Giap, Che Guevara, and Carlos Marighela admonished their foot-soldiers against targeting the population since the indiscriminate violence was proving counterproductive (Rapoport, 2004, 54-55; Weinstein, 2007, 30-31; and Wilkinson, 1986, 53, 59, 100, 112). In the months leading up to his death, even Osama bin Laden commanded his lieutenants to refrain from targeting Western civilians because in his view the indiscriminate violence was not having the desired effect on their governments (“Bin Laden against Attacks on Civilians, Deputy Says,” *Reuters*, 25 February 2011). According to contemporary news accounts (“For Arab Awakening, Bin Laden Was Already Dead,” *Radio Free Europe*, 4 May 2011), this growing consensus is behind the primacy of nonviolence over terrorism in the Arab Awakening engulfing the Middle East and North Africa.

As an object of empirical inquiry, terrorism is notorious for defying generalizations. But this unusual convergence of empirics across disciplines, methodologies, and salient events runs counter to bargaining theory. Contrary to the predictions of bargaining theorists, the

¹⁰Gassebner, Jong-A-Pin, & Mireau 2008 find that escalating to terrorism or with terrorism helps non-state actors to remove incumbent leaders of target countries from political office. Unfortunately for the terrorists, however, target countries tend to become even less likely to grant concessions.

evidence strongly indicates that escalating to terrorism or with terrorism is counterproductive for inducing government compliance, despite adding credibility to non-state threats. How much confidence should researchers place in the recent spate of studies on terrorism's political inefficacy? Skeptics may contend that a selection bias is driving the foregoing results rather than the use of terrorism per se. Admittedly, strategic actors do not employ tactics at random, inviting potential concern that the decision to adopt terrorism co-varies with other factors, which themselves lower the odds of political success. Most research on the topic, however, allays concern of such endogeneity with structured in-case studies, regression analysis, or controlled experiments. With the exception of poverty failing to predict terrorism, no other post-9/11 research finding is as robust. Indeed, even leading exponents of the Strategic Model are reversing their view that terrorism pays. Pape, for instance, claims in his 2005 book that terrorism is a "remarkable" instrument of coercion, yielding "significant" policy concessions over fifty percent of the time (64-65, 343). In his 2010 book, by contrast, Pape acknowledges that terrorism actually has "limited coercive power" (24). This emerging consensus raises copious research questions, with potentially important policy implications.

Research and Policy Implications

First, why are countries so opposed to appeasing groups that target their civilians? Studies suggest that civilian targeting impedes government compliance even when the challengers are states. Overwhelmingly, the civilian victimization literature finds that states also fail to benefit at the bargaining table by targeting the population.¹¹ Caleb Carr (2001, 12) charts the rise and fall of empires and great powers based on their brutality towards civilians, providing numerous historical examples that "The nation or faction that resorts to warfare against civilians most quickly, most often, and most viciously is the nation or faction most likely to see its interests frustrated and, in many cases, its existence terminated." In their book on coercive bargaining, Byman and Waxman (2002, 65) reach a similar conclusion that indiscriminate bombings, sieges, scorched-earth campaigns, and the like have only "increased pressure on leaders not to concede," reducing the odds of government accommodation. More systematically, Pape (1996) surveys the universe of strategic bombing campaigns from the First World War to the 1990 Persian Gulf War. His analysis reveals that governments reach an inferior bargain when their campaigns target the population, an assessment reaffirmed in independent statistical analysis. In the most comprehensive and recent study, Cochran and Downes (2011) exploit variation in the use of civilian victimization campaigns on interstate war outcomes from 1816 to 2007. Their research shows that military leaders and politicians err in thinking that civilian victimization pays. Though obviously successful in stamping out countless civilians, indiscriminate bombings, sieges, missile strikes, and other painful methods against the population do not yield a superior settlement regardless of the costs.

Future research should investigate why countries are so reluctant to make concessions when their populations are the focus of attack. One possibility is that governments resist compliance to avoid incentivizing this extreme behavior. Since Hobbes, social contract theorists have emphasized that the main task of government is to defend the population. If so, then perhaps governments are uniquely opposed to rewarding violence against it. Another explanation is that civilian targeting fails because it offends our moral sensibilities and is hence regarded as an illegitimate political instrument. To test this hypothesis, researchers

¹¹For a thorough review, see Downes 2008.

might examine whether the political utility of terrorism has diminished over time, and conversely, whether nonviolent protest is achieving unprecedented political returns, as Steven Pinker (2011) suspects. A final explanation is a psychological one advanced in “Why Terrorism Does Not Work” (Abrahms, 2006). In principle, terrorism succeeds politically by conveying to the target that complying with the demands is cheaper than resisting them. Via structured within-case studies, however, I demonstrate that the means of non-state actors are not fully independent from their perceived ends. When non-state actors adopt terrorism, target countries tend to conclude that they harbor correspondingly extreme preferences, closing off a bargaining space even when the demands are surprisingly moderate in nature. Within Israel, for instance, terrorist incidents increase perceptions among the electorate that the Palestinians are motivated not to achieve the more modest goal of a two-state solution, but to harm Israelis as an end in itself. Similarly, separatist terrorism within Russia has convinced the population that the Chechens are bent on harming it, notwithstanding their persistent demands for independence. In a controlled setting, experimental research should further test how the extreme means of international actors inform perceptions of their presumed ends, as well as the implications for bargaining theory. If defenders tend to infer the extremeness of challengers’ preferences directly from their tactics, escalation would render their vow to remove the pain unbelievable, creating a credible commitment problem.

Second, terrorism’s suboptimal political return raises new questions about why its practitioners perpetrate it. The Strategic Model posits that because terrorism is an effective instrument of coercion, the aggrieved must adopt this tactic for the concessions. If terrorism serves to impede them, however, then why employ this tactic? A theoretical possibility is that terrorists are simply irrational or insane. Yet psychological assessments (see Atran 2004; Berrebi 2009; Euben 2007; Horgan 2005; Merari 2006; and Victoroff 2005) of terrorists indicate that they are cognitively normal. An alternative explanation with superior empirical support is that terrorists simply overestimate the coercive effectiveness of their actions. By most definitions, terrorism is directed against civilian targets, not military ones (Abrahms 2006; Ganor 2002; Goodwin 2006; Hoffman 2006; Schmid and Jongman 2005).¹² When bargaining theorists point to cases of successful terrorist campaigns, however, their examples are usually of guerrilla campaigns, such as the U.S. and French withdrawals from Lebanon after the 1983 Hezbollah attacks on their military installations. Interestingly, Osama bin Laden also referenced historically successful guerrilla campaigns as proof that terrorist campaigns would prevail. Content analysis of bin Laden’s statements reveals that the 9/11 attacks were intended to emulate three salient guerrilla victories in particular: the aforementioned U.S. and French withdrawals from Lebanon in the early 1980s, the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in the late 1980s, and the U.S. withdrawal from Somalia in 1994, despite the fact that these campaigns were directed against military personnel, not civilians. Hamas leaders make the same mistake; they often cite the U.S. and French withdrawals from Lebanon as evidence that blowing up Egged buses in Jerusalem will likewise force the Israelis to cave. According to Wilkinson (1986, X, 53, 85), international terrorism began in the late 1960s because emulators tried to replicate the political successes of the anti-colonial struggles. This failure to disaggregate military targeting from civilian targeting obfuscates an important historical lesson: the former often induces concessions, whereas the latter tends to elicit the opposite response—provocation. If terrorists, like many political scientists, fail to appreciate the divergent political effects of civilian versus military targeting, then successful guerrilla campaigns may continue to

¹²Admittedly, this distinction can blur with respect to passive military targets.

spur aggrieved parties to take up arms against the population, with opposite results. Future research should further test whether successful guerrilla campaigns indeed increase the likelihood of terrorist campaigns among misguided emulators.

Another possibility is that terrorist groups attack civilians due to poor organizational discipline. In the military, militia are more likely to attack the population than are special forces. Considerable variation of personnel also exists within terrorist groups, perhaps leading foot-soldiers to prey on civilians even when leaders of the organization recognize the benefits of greater selectivity. To test this hypothesis, future research might investigate whether horizontally-structured networks are more likely to target civilians than are vertical organizations, with stronger leadership at the top. Similarly, researchers might examine whether targeted assassination leads to less discriminate violence.

A final explanation is that terrorists derive utility from their actions regardless of whether governments comply politically. This interpretation is consistent with the emerging body of evidence that although terrorism is ineffective for achieving outcome goals, terrorism is indeed effective for achieving process goals (e.g., Abrahms 2008; Arce and Sandler, 2007, 2010; Bloom, 2005; Kydd and Walter 2002). Whereas terrorist acts generally fail to promote government concessions, the violence against civilians can perpetuate the terrorist group by attracting media attention, spoiling peace processes, and boosting membership, morale, cohesion, and external support.

Finally, terrorism's abysmal track-record in coercing concessions raises important questions about not only the motives of its practitioners, but by extension, the optimal way to combat them. Recall that the Strategic Model rests on three claims: (1) terrorism helps non-state actors to coerce government concessions; (2) rational groups therefore turn to terrorism to achieve their political platform; and (3) the international community can thus combat terrorism by divesting its political utility relative to nonviolence with peace processes, democracy promotion, or a strict no-concessions policy in the face of terrorism. If terrorists are motivated mainly to achieve apolitical goals, then such countermeasures are unlikely to work on any systematic basis. Indeed, terrorists tend to ramp up their attacks during peace processes, precluding concessions (see Kydd and Walter, 2002). Democracies are widely seen as the preferred hosts for terrorist groups (Abrahms, 2007). And clearly, withholding concessions does not deter terrorists from committing the violence. Future research should continue to probe the utility terrorists derive from their actions. Only then will the international community be positioned to eliminate the lingering appeal.

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