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State Legitimacy and Terrorism

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Studies that focus on the causes of terrorism often overlook the issue of legitimacy. Ehud Sprinzak first spoke about the relationship between legitimacy and terrorism to explain why mobilized groups transition from political opposition movements to terrorism. This study advances upon this analysis by assessing the relationship between a state's legitimacy and the occurrence of domestic terrorism. The data suggest that legitimacy is a robust predictor of terrorism and merits further investigation as a causal variable.

Keywords: State Legitimacy, Structural Causes of Terrorism, Terrorism

INTRODUCTION

Revolutions, civil wars, and insurgencies of all types are often an outcome of a certain set of structural conditions within a given state. Domestic terrorism, as a form of insurgency, is no exception to this rule. The challenge we face is in trying to isolate the structural conditions that make domestic terrorism more likely. We know that terrorism can happen in any society at any point in time. However, we also know that certain states tend to experience more terrorist events than others. By understanding the intersection between structural conditions and terrorism, we can further our understanding of the dynamics that result in higher rates of terrorism for some states and not others, and ideally, of how to better defuse insurgent terrorist problems as they emerge.

Structural conditions are those that are considered enduring over time and outside the control of individuals, rather than those that involve the active choice of individuals and groups.¹ Jeffrey Ian Ross (1993) identifies three broad structural factors that precipitate domestic oppositional terrorism: geography, modernization, and the political system.² Among these broad structural factors, the political system and modernization are the most scrutinized. Within the subset of the political system, attention tends to focus on two characteristics, the first being regime characteristics like

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the Democracy–Autocracy continuum, or political regulation/competition and executive constraints. The second condition is state stability (failed or weak states). Studies on these political regime characteristics show wide variation in their explanatory utility, resulting in assertions that the accumulation of knowledge on structural causes of terrorism is very low.³

Meanwhile, little attention has been devoted to the issue of state legitimacy. Ehud Sprinzak first proposed the hypothesis that terrorism is the outcome of a process of delegitimation.⁴ In short, legitimacy is tied to moral and instrumental dimensions of the state referring to what people think a state should be doing, and how those ideas translate into outcomes.⁵ States are best able to secure their legitimacy when their institutions perform well in the interests of the population. Terrorism itself is a strategy employed by oppositional groups to challenge the legitimacy of the state. The onset of terrorism is likely related to subgroup perceptions regarding the low legitimacy of the state. However, it is difficult to isolate that specific relationship, as measures of legitimacy based on public opinion reflect majoritarian perspectives and are not sensitive enough to capture subgroup perceptions. However, we can approach the relationship between legitimacy and terrorism from a different angle: performance. The way a state responds to terrorist threats can enhance or damage their legitimacy. If the state's legitimacy is damaged, it can embolden the terrorist group, resulting in more attacks.

This study explores the nexus of state legitimacy and terrorism. The two sections that follow present a wide-ranging discussion on legitimacy as a variable to explain political outcomes, and a narrower discussion on the relationship between legitimacy and terrorism. In these sections, we lay bare the deep challenges in using legitimacy as a causal variable for domestic oppositional terrorism. At the same time, we feel that the relationship needs to be explored to its fullest potential rather than dismiss it because of the challenges associated with using legitimacy. Next we lay out the methods for investigating the relationship between legitimacy and domestic oppositional terrorism. The analysis uses the legitimacy scale from the *State Fragility Index*, and its components (security legitimacy, political legitimacy, economic legitimacy, and social legitimacy) and domestic terrorist events are extracted from the *Global Terrorism Database*. We present two analyses of the data, a descriptive analysis and a multivariate analysis. In both sets of analyses, the relationship between domestic oppositional terrorist events and legitimacy is robust. When the analysis shifts toward the components of the legitimacy index, political and security legitimacy account for a very high percent change in the number of terrorist events observed. In short, legitimacy is a robust variable that can explain the observed rates of domestic terrorism in a country. The analysis suggests that states that manage to legitimate themselves fair better against domestic terrorism, than do states that face delegitimation challenges. More to the point, terrorism within a state may have less to do with how

the political regime is configured (democratic/authoritarian, strong/weak) and more to do with its performance in managing conflict.

LEGITIMACY AND POLITICAL OUTCOMES

Legitimacy is one of the more important, yet troubling, concepts for students of political behavior. Legitimacy is central to understanding phenomena like political stability, revolutionary action, and development, to name a few. Yet legitimacy is believed to be such an abstract, immeasurable, and obscure concept as to defy effective measurement for models of political phenomena. Despite these hurdles, scholars have decided it is better to try to measure legitimacy and incorporate it into behavioral models than to simply hand wave at it and move on to other distal factors to account for the political phenomena they seek to explain. Our goal here is to explore the relationship between state legitimacy and terrorism. To get to that particular relationship, it serves us best to first delve into the general concept of legitimacy, as well as its utilities and limits as an explanatory variable.

There are two ways to consider legitimacy. First, legitimacy is a form of soft power that provides states more opportunities to effect change and development.⁶ To conceptualize legitimacy as soft power means that trust serves as a foundation for the interplay between the state and society. In this sense, a crisis of legitimacy sets in when the rulers are seen as taking actions (political change) to advance their self-interest and their supporters, but not the broader society.⁷ Second, legitimacy can be seen as an indicator of a state's capacity to manage political affairs, particularly conflict. Put more precisely, every state always possesses greater capabilities to defeat insurgents. However, if the regime is undermined by elite divisions, conflicts between government leaders and elites, insurgencies can sustain themselves.⁸ How a state is able to use its resources (military, taxing authority, police, and regulatory authority) in order to meet the challenges that the state faces matters.⁹

These two perceptions of legitimacy are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they tend to emphasize the different features of the concept. That is to say that legitimacy is related to a moral dimension and an instrumental dimension. It is moored to what people think (what a state should be doing with its resources), how those thoughts define interests, identities, and motivations, and how behavior attached to these interests translate into outcomes.¹⁰ The state experiences enhanced legitimacy when its institutions are able to perform well.

Moving from conceptual definition to causal variable introduces problems for scholars. Legitimacy tends to have an iterative impact on political structures (legitimacy may shape the political structures of a state, while the political structures of a state may impact legitimacy). From this understanding, the question becomes, how can we isolate legitimacy from its position as

either a cause of certain phenomena or as an effect of certain phenomena? Additionally, legitimacy is plagued by the fact that outcomes associated with increasing or decreasing legitimacy are complex and may be nonlinear. For instance, one state may respond to declining legitimacy by seeking ways to improve its performance. Other states may seek out replacement support structures by doing things like coercing opposition groups to demobilize them or elevating core constituencies into the elite power structures.¹¹ In other words, it is difficult to assert direct or linear causal relationships. We must be skeptical and appreciate the fine crevices in which legitimacy operates and matters as a causal variable.¹²

For instance, the performance of a state is traceable to its legitimacy. The task of governing a society requires (at times) that states make unpopular choices (e.g. raise taxes, redistribute resources to enhance equality). Making unpopular demands on the population is facilitated best by a state that is seen as a "rightful ruler."¹³ If a state is not legitimate, when it makes unpopular decisions (regardless of how appropriate the decision may be), citizens may interpret the decision outcome as a reflection of self-interests (to enhance the position of rulers, or supporters of the rulers) rather than for the benefit of society writ large. What this suggests is that a state may have strong institutional capacities and still suffer a crisis of legitimacy.¹⁴ Bruce Gilley states it more plainly, noting that legitimate states constrain incentives to defect from state mandates, while illegitimate states are likely to observe citizens acting against the social order in order to satisfy their demands.¹⁵

This final point moves us from the general discussion on legitimacy to a more specific discussion on the relationship between legitimacy and terrorism. Ehud Sprinzak asserts that the presence of terrorist groups and terrorist activity presupposes a crisis of legitimacy. But we must ask if that is truly the case. In this sense, we need to be conscious of the notion that legitimacy is complex and determine the way in which legitimacy may matter to the occurrence of terrorism.

LEGITIMACY AND TERRORISM

To frame our discussion, it is best to start with the works of the late Ehud Sprinzak, who urged us, as students of terrorism studies, to look at the nexus of legitimacy and terrorism in order to explain the emergence, and even decline, of terrorist groups in society. In his view, terrorism is the product of how active political groups perceive the legitimacy of the state, its actors, and its policies. In other words, it is the course of state–society interaction that makes terrorism possible. As perceptions of a state's legitimacy decrease, the rate of terrorism increases.¹⁶

The primary emphasis of the theory is to explain the microlevel process of group radicalization. The marginalization of a political group is an important

step that begins the process of delegitimation.¹⁷ The group feels increasingly estranged from their government every day, and the people's confidence in their government slowly withers away.¹⁸ It is a shift in attitude that may ultimately predispose the regime to political violence. Sprinzak refers to this stage of delegitimation as a *crisis of confidence*, where there is a negative assessment of specific rulers and/or policies, but no one has directly challenged them.¹⁹ If conflict continues in a society, there is a possibility for an alternate ideology or cultural norm to arise in protest of the regime. Sprinzak refers to this stage as a *conflict of legitimacy*, where citizens begin to directly challenge the regime through protests, vandalism, and even low-scale violence. The role of the *conflict of legitimacy* is to denote the presence of radicalization within previously moderate groups.²⁰ However, during the conflict of legitimacy stage the preconditions for terrorism are not yet complete, and the radicals require a political additive in order to convert to terrorist activity.

There is a point where the acts of the regime have a greater possibility of resulting in malignant effects. Sprinzak admits that in order for a terrorist act to be morally acceptable, there must be a *crisis of legitimacy*, where a group will undergo an extreme mental transformation and "free themselves from the yoke of conventional morality."²¹ Upon this crisis, legitimacy may act as a precipitant of terrorist behavior. As Martha Crenshaw states, "Finally, an event occurs that snaps the terrorists' patience with the regime. Government action is now seen as intolerably unjust, and terrorism becomes not only a possible decision but a morally acceptable one. The regime has forfeited its status as the standard of legitimacy. For the terrorist, the end may now justify the means."²² An event or decision occurs, and a crisis of legitimacy infects the state. It is the integrity of the social fabric that connects the regime and the latent radical group that becomes the determining factor for terrorism.

Yet, Sprinzak also notes that some terrorist organizations do not have grievances with the regime and act on other purposes not directly related to state legitimacy. Right-wing terrorist organizations centered on racial or religious divisions in society have "particularistic" motives, whereas groups that oppose the regime have a "universalistic" purpose. Particularistic groups rarely see themselves connected to the regime because they are in opposition to a particular group or faction in society and not to the "establishment" in its entirety. This skews the validity of the previous assertion that the process of delegitimation is a product of conflict with the regime. Despite this caveat, Sprinzak does not abandon the assertion that delegitimation is the basis for terrorism. Instead, Sprinzak dubs the process of delegitimation within right-wing groups as "split" or "dual" delegitimization.

In the case of dual delegitimation, the terrorist organization has a consistent grievance with a nongovernmental faction while undergoing a watered-down process of delegitimation with the regime. This is a process of "uneven radicalization," where all the stages of delegitimation are present but

occur sporadically against two separate entities in society. The particularistic extremists see an ethnicity or race as having an illegitimate position in society and the regime as unwilling to act against that illegitimate position. Thus, a split delegitimation occurs between the radical organization, a nongovernmental group, and the regime. The legitimacy of the regime also depends on their willingness to snuff out illegitimate groups in society.²³

By the reasoning presented here, the relationship between legitimacy and terrorism is straightforward: as legitimacy decreases, terrorism increases. However, as stated above, we must be critical. Terrorism is a form of internal conflict. As Bruce Gilley states, the relationship between legitimacy and internal conflict is “complex and uncertain” at best.²⁴ The question remains, can we tease apart where legitimacy fits into the causal picture? Is terrorism a symptom of a state’s failure to legitimate itself? Is legitimacy a consequence of terrorism?

One issue is the fact that internal conflict, terrorism in particular, is the product of minority group action and does not necessarily involve a majority of the population. Rather, it reflects the views of smaller groups. Legitimacy is a broader condition. There will be variation between subgroup views on the legitimacy of a state and the majority population. Hence, it is likely that subgroups may see a state as illegitimate, but the majority of society sees the state as legitimate.²⁵ Terrorism can exist in this environment and lack a clear link between state legitimacy and group behavior. For instance, during the 1980s, Chinese policy had focused on integration of the Xinjiang region into the broader Chinese society. In the 1990s, a shift occurs in the direction of assimilation and a dilution of the Uyghur identity.²⁶ In response, we observe a surge in separatist terrorism by Uyghur groups from the 1990s into the first decade of the 2000s.

The Uyghur case captures much of the difficulty in using legitimacy as a causal variable to explain terrorism. First, measures of legitimacy based on mass majoritarian measures (public opinion) are too insensitive to capture aggrieved subgroups and their opinions on state legitimacy. Second, Gilley suggests that the Uyghur conflict may be exacerbated by China’s legitimacy. Since the state is seen as legitimate by the broader population, there is little pressure to respond to the interests of the subgroup, which may encourage greater violence by the subgroup in order to persuade the opinions of the majority to address the demands of the unreconciled subgroup.²⁷ From these two problems, Gilley urges scholars to look beyond legitimacy to other structural variables, like regime type, in order to explain internal conflict.²⁸

There are two ways to respond to this conclusion. First, states that are broadly legitimate will still likely experience some terrorism. But the number of terrorist incidents is likely low. China is legitimate in the eyes of the broader population,²⁹ but not so much among the Uyghurs. In this case, the predicted relationship between terrorism and legitimacy holds up. We do not

observe much terrorist activity. The overall trend shows 3.75 terrorist attacks per year from 1970 to 2005 and 8.73 terrorist attacks in the period following the change in China's policy toward Uyghur integration.³⁰ Being a legitimate state does not lead to the conclusion that there will be zero conflict incidents, but rather that legitimate states will experience less and be better positioned to manage the incidents of conflict as they arise. China is legitimate and does not experience much terrorism over time or in specific telescoped periods of time. An aggrieved population may be more active, but their increased terrorist activity does not amount to a major terrorist threat. The Uyghur case is important to us because it does reveal the truth that perceptions of legitimacy that might drive terrorist behavior are local, among subgroups, and not necessarily reflective of the broader population.

A second way to respond to Gilley's conclusion is to demonstrate that it is premature and misses the broader picture of the relationship between terrorism and legitimacy. Beginning with the latter assertion, Audrey Cronin asserts that terrorism involves *strategies of leverage* that include provocation, polarization, and mobilization.³¹ The goals are to (a) force a state to vigorously respond to terrorist attacks, (b) drive regime responses to the right so that the population is forced to choose between the terrorist cause and repression by the state, and (c) recruit and rally the masses.³² Terrorists understand from the outset that they are not broadly legitimate actors and that states, by contrast, generally are. The goal of terrorist violence is to force a state to reveal its interests in power over serving the interests of the people. If successful, terrorism can then begin a process of eroding the legitimacy of the state. In short, terrorism is a fight over legitimacy between the terrorist group and the state.

What we are now left with is a chicken–egg argument between legitimacy and terrorism. Sprinzak asserts that delegitimation begets terrorism. Meanwhile, Cronin appears to assert that terrorism begets delegitimation. The answer to the riddle is that the relationship is iterative. Low legitimacy among subgroups is likely the genesis of oppositional political movements, which may include terrorist activity. But sustained campaigns of terrorism, where rates of violence remain high and consistent over longer periods of time, likely result from polarized state responses that seek to restore lost legitimacy in the face of terrorist attacks designed to elicit polarized counterstrikes. The important distinction here is that terrorist attacks *alone* are not necessarily damaging to the state's legitimacy. Instead it is how the state reacts, and then it is the attack–counterattack dynamic that matters to the legitimacy of the state. Going back to the Uyghur example, if Uyghur groups (that use terrorist tactics) limit operations to the Xinjiang region, and China responds with extreme repression, the impact of the repression is narrowly felt in society, and the rebound to the state's legitimacy is likely low. However, if Uyghur groups are able to export their attacks to the economic and political centers of China, and the Chinese government opts for repressive tactics that impact a broader

segment of society, there would likely be some impact on the state's legitimacy. We assert that in this example, if China's legitimacy were to decline, Uyghur groups would likely increase their rate of attack, feeling empowered by gains in the legitimacy battle.

Gilley's assertion that legitimacy might best be "relegated to the background," relative to internal conflict, is a premature conclusion because the relationship between legitimacy and terrorism is very complex. Being complex does not mean we should move it aside. Rather, we need to be more deliberate in specifying the relationship. Specifically, measures of legitimacy based primarily on majoritarian perspectives may not be the best tool for assessing the relationship between legitimacy and terrorism.

In this sense, we may need to direct our attention away from affective orientations between the citizens and the state and toward the capacity of the state to manage crises as they emerge. Reorienting our perspective toward capacity focuses attention on the means with which states respond to onset problems and instability (i.e., ethnic war, revolution, genocide, and politicide). For instance, do people live under the secure rule of law or are widespread violations of civil and political rights common within the state?³³ On the political front, are citizens included or incorporated into governance, or are there noticeable patterns of exclusion and discrimination? A focus on capacity delinks the discussion of legitimacy from mass majoritarian measures related to "rightful rulers" in order to observe the behaviors attached to the interests of institutions and how those translate into outcomes. When a state pursues its interests and runs into opposition from mobilized political actors, how do they respond? Does the state show a tendency to integrate opposition concerns, responding to them as legitimate expressions of misgiving and disagreement in order to take all steps necessary to convince those in opposition of the interests of the state? In some cases, an opposition group may respond to state actions with resistance, up to and including violence. In this condition, does the state respond with actions deemed consistent with the political culture? In saying this, we seek to highlight the reality that some states do respond to terrorist threats with repressive actions. Repressive reactions to terrorism by itself do not indicate a less legitimate state. If the state's actions are in line with what a society expects, possibly even demands, in response to terrorism, then violations of the rule of law would not indicate legitimacy problems. What matters is consistency. If a state's response to opposition groups is increasingly repressive, increasingly discriminatory, we should expect domestic terrorism to increase.

Consider the revolution in Syria as an example. The movement to reform government and remove Bashar al-Assad from power begins as a protest movement located primarily in the city of Homs. As state repression escalates, the protest movement turns into a violent revolutionary movement in many different cities and regions across Syria. As violent revolution set in, we observed an onset of terrorist violence as part of the strategy. In this

case, terrorism did not precipitate government repression. Rather, government repression of the protest movement precipitates the onset of terrorism.

Legitimacy is a difficult concept to employ in the study of political outcomes. The challenge is heightened even more when we turn our attention to forms of internal conflict and rely on legitimacy as a potential explanatory variable. Perceptions of low legitimacy may only be reflected in small subgroups within a larger population. If perceptions of low legitimacy are relegated to only the subgroup, we should observe some terrorism in a state with high legitimacy. But the number of terrorist events per year is likely low and uneven. In this sense, we should not expect legitimacy to serve as a variable to predict the *occurrence* of terrorism. Instead, legitimacy may serve us better to explain why some states experience *more* terrorism than others.

DATA, METHODS, AND RESULTS

This study provides an empirical examination of the proposition that low legitimacy states experience higher levels of domestic terrorist activity than high legitimacy states. Legitimacy is a difficult variable to conceptualize and measure, as indicated by the discussion above. Legitimacy can be operationalized on the basis of majoritarian perspectives or on the basis of institutional capacities. The primary analysis in this study employs an operationalization based on institutional capacities using a composite legitimacy score derived from the *State Fragility Index* with the raw component parts of the index on a country-year by country-year basis. Legitimacy scores based on majoritarian perspectives are exceptionally useful for certain analytical questions. However, such measures are too insensitive to the opinions of subgroups, making them imprecise for an assessment on the relationship between legitimacy and terrorism. Moreover, data collection on majoritarian legitimacy measures, at present, have too long of a time lag between data points and inconsistent data collection to be useful in this particular analysis.³⁴

In order to rigorously examine the relationship between legitimacy and terrorism, this study employs two analyses. The first is a bivariate analysis that uses descriptive statistics to assess the relationship between a state's legitimacy category and the average number of terrorist incidents per year. The descriptive analysis is then supplemented by a cross-national, time series analysis on state legitimacy and its contribution to domestic terrorism (employing a series of standard control variables in the analysis).

Descriptive Analysis

The point of departure for the analysis is to evaluate the relationship between the legitimacy category for states and the average number of domestic terrorist attacks per year (1995 to 2005). The *State Fragility Index* (SF)

produced by the *Center for Systemic Peace* provides annual data on state fragility for 164 countries with populations greater than 500,000 beginning in 1995.³⁵ The SF index is a composite of effectiveness scores and legitimacy scores for each state assessed over four dimensions: security, political, social, and economic. This study focuses its attention on these four dimensions within the legitimacy score side of the SF index so that *security legitimacy* measures state repression, *political legitimacy* measures regime/governance inclusion, *social legitimacy* measures human capital care, and *economic legitimacy* measures share of export trade in manufactured goods.³⁶ The scale is 0 to 12, with zero indicating high legitimacy and 12 indicating low legitimacy. The scale is subdivided into four categories for this analysis. These categories include Extremely Low Legitimacy states (10–12), Low Legitimacy states (7–9), Moderate Legitimacy states (4–6), and High Legitimacy states (0–3).

The terrorism data comes from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), decomposed by Enders, Sandler, and Gaibullov into three categories: transnational and domestic terrorist events, and uncertain events.³⁷ For purposes of this study, terrorism is defined as “the premeditated use or threat to use violence by individuals or subnational groups against noncombatants in order to obtain a political or social objective through intimidation of a large audience beyond that of the immediate victims.”³⁸ *Domestic terrorism*, the focus of this study, is further defined as an event where the target venue and perpetrators all come from the same country, where the impact is meant only for the venue country.³⁹ The definition used here excludes events where the motivation is related to money, extortion, or material gain, which qualifies as a criminal act.

The decomposition of the GTD is carried out in several stages. The first involves removing known transnational terrorist events using a five-step procedure to sift events (a) where the nationalities of the victims differ from the venue country; (b) where target types represent transnational target states (e.g., diplomats, foreign missions); (c) where there are attacks against US and international entities (e.g., UN agencies); (d) when events include US victims outside the US, US hostages, or US-specific demands; and (e) in the country where the event has concluded.⁴⁰ Once the transnational terrorist events are extracted, the remaining events are uncertain and domestic terrorist events. Uncertain events are then removed. An uncertain event is defined as one where there is missing information on the nationalities of the victims, target type, target entity, and US victims/interests.⁴¹ The remaining events are classified as likely domestic terrorist events; they include events where the venue country matches the three identified victims of the attack and do not include diplomatic or multilateral entities. The authors concede that there are some possible transnational events left in the domestic terrorist data owing to the fact that the nationality of the perpetrator is not known, which could lead to

a situation where a transnational terrorist group uses local terrorists to carry out an attack (for example, the 7/7 London attacks).⁴²

In the period under analysis (1995–2005), there are 29,665 domestic terrorist attacks, spread over a potential pool of 1742 country years. When applying the Legitimacy Score for countries to the decomposed GTD terrorist events data, we find that the legitimacy category of a state is a significant predictor for domestic terrorism, with a coefficient of 10.025 (.000 significance). We add more insights into these findings by showing the average domestic terrorist attacks by the legitimacy classification with a Pearson's r coefficient in parenthesis (see Table 1). States that rank as “extremely low legitimacy” and “low legitimacy” have a higher average of domestic terrorist attacks than states that rank in the “moderate” and “high legitimacy” categories. More precisely, “extremely low” and “low” legitimacy states are over three times more likely to have a domestic terrorist attack than “high” legitimacy states. Furthermore, “extremely low” and “low” legitimacy states are nearly twice more likely to have a domestic terrorist attack than a “moderately” legitimate state.

The evidence in Table 1 provides some evidence to support Sprinzak's claim that states on the lower end of the legitimacy spectrum are more likely to experience domestic-level oppositional terrorist attacks. However, the analysis to this point is only a sketch. The data suggest a correlation between legitimacy category and domestic terrorism, but we do not gain any insights into causal direction or impact of legitimacy.

Table 1: Incidents of domestic terrorism by *State Fragility Index* (legitimacy scores) classification with correlation coefficients.

State Fragility Index Legitimacy (Country-Years)	Average Incidents by Location (1995–2005)
Extremely Low Legitimacy $N = 177$	9.32 (.057)*
Low Legitimacy $N = 411$	9.25 (.087)**
Moderate Legitimacy $N = 516$	5.37 (–.004)
High Legitimacy $N = 638$	2.57 (–.109)**

Note. All correlation coefficients in parenthesis are Pearson's r with two-tailed significance tests, where *indicates significance at the .05 level and **indicates significance at the .01 level. The difference of means between the defined categories is significant with an F -statistic 10.025 significant at the .000 level.

Multivariate Analysis

The multivariate analysis forms the main test of the hypothesis: low legitimacy states experience more terrorist events than high legitimacy states. The analysis includes five time-series negative binomial regression models using data from 143 countries from 1995 (or year of independence) to 2005, producing 1371 observations per model.⁴³ The dependent variable is terrorist events per country-year. It is the nature of the dependent variable that makes negative binomial regression a preferred modeling tool for this analysis. The dependent variable is a count variable that cannot include negative values. Count variables for the dependent variable move us into the territory of Poisson models. The negative binomial regression (NBREG) model is selected over a standard Poisson model because terrorist events are unevenly spread out over time and space, with clusters of attacks taking place in some countries and in some years that are, in theory, not independent of each other, as attacks in one year may lead to more attacks in other years.⁴⁴

In the first regression model, the main explanatory variable is the composite state legitimacy score for each state collected from the *State Legitimacy Index*. The additional models (2–5) include country-year observations of the component parts of the legitimacy score: security legitimacy, political legitimacy, economic legitimacy, and social legitimacy. The terrorism events data is drawn from the decomposed Global Terrorism Database.

There are a variety of control variables included in the analysis. Regime type is operationalized along two dimensions: the impact of institutional restraints on the executive branch of government and political competition. Previous studies on the causes of transnational terrorism hold that certain democratic features of government tend to make states more vulnerable to terrorist attacks.⁴⁵ In particular, Li's study on transnational terrorism finds that countries with higher degrees of executive constraints experience higher rates of terrorism, while states with more political participation and competition experience lower rates of terrorism.⁴⁶ In short, these variables capture procedural characteristics of democracy in ways that speak to the intersection of regime type and terrorism. The executive constraints variable captures the notion that democratic states may not be able to respond quickly or effectively to terrorist threats, making them vulnerable to terrorist attacks. Political competition isolates the degree to which the political system allows mobilized political actors to engage in normal political processes. The assertion is that more participation and competition diffuses tensions in society, thereby making terrorism less viable as a strategy of political engagement.⁴⁷ What is not known is the performance of these variables when the focus of the analysis is on domestic terrorism. There is every reason to believe that the findings related to transnational terrorism would be consistent for domestic terrorism. States that cannot respond quickly or effectively may experience higher rates of terrorism,

and states that diffuse tensions through participation and competition should experience less terrorism.

Capability is related to the strength of the government. The strength of the government is related to its military capacity and economy as a percent of the capability in the international system. Hence, capability is a relative measure of government strength. The capability measures are drawn from the Correlates of War (COW) project as measured by the CINC variable (Composite Index of National Capability).⁴⁸ The literature on government capabilities is divided. Studies on transnational terrorism suggest that weaker states will experience more transnational terrorist events than strong states. Weak states are more attractive venues for operations.⁴⁹ However, in the case of domestic terrorism, the relationship may be the opposite. The logic is to first assume the rise of an insurgent group. The question is, will the group select guerrilla warfare or terrorism? The assertion is that in weaker states, the government and military cannot exert full control over their territory, giving space for guerrillas to rise because territorial control is an essential feature of this form of insurgency. Meanwhile, in strong states, the insurgents become terrorists because terrorists groups can operate with minimum territorial requirements.⁵⁰

Other control variables include durability, history of terrorism, population, income, and ethnic fragmentation. *Durability* is the measure of the years the current regime has held power. The relationship to terrorism is negative. Newer regimes, particularly newer democracies, are more likely to experience terrorism.⁵¹ A *history of terrorism* is an important predictor of terrorist activity in a state. Terrorist organizations build over time, which makes current levels of terrorism a function of past terrorist activity.⁵² To capture history of terrorism, the variable measures the average number of terrorist incidents in a given country for each of the previous years in the period under observation. *Population* is measured as the natural logarithm of the sample country's population from Version 5.0 of Gleditsch's expanded data.⁵³ The literature suggests that states with larger populations experience more terrorism. The environment is likely more diverse, which can lead to more intergroup strife. The complex environment may be more challenging for the state to manage.⁵⁴ *Income* is measured via a country's gross domestic product derived from Version 5.0 of Gleditsch's expanded data.⁵⁵ Variables related to wealth, poverty, and wealth distribution show high degrees of inconsistency in the literature. As such, we take no firm position on the expected direction of the relationship between income and terrorist events. It is possible to argue that poverty is related to motivating grievances for terrorism, and people may opt to act out against the government in response to this grievance, but the literature simply does not provide clear guidance at this point.⁵⁶ Finally, studies on transnational terrorism conclude that homogenous countries experience fewer transnational terrorist events. Since ethnic conflict is inherently local, it is safe to assert that fragmented countries would likely experience higher

levels of domestic terrorism.⁵⁷ *Ethnic fragmentation* is measured using the Ethnic Heterogeneity Index (EHI).⁵⁸ The EHI uses three characteristics of ethnic division to measure the total level of ethnic heterogeneity in a country: ethnic groups based on racial differences; ethnic groups based on linguistic, national or tribal differences; and ethnic groups based on stable religious communities.⁵⁹ The higher the EHI, the more fragmented the country; the lower the EHI, the less ethnically fragmented the country. Since ethnic fragmentation is relevant to nationalist terrorism, and nationalist terrorism is one of the more common forms of terrorism, we assert a positive relationship between ethnic fragmentation and domestic terrorism.

To control for endogeneity, state legitimacy and its component parts (security, political, economic, and social legitimacy), executive constraints, political competition, population and, income are all lagged one year. History of terrorism is an endogenous control variable in its construction and is not lagged. All other variables (durability, capability, and ethnic heterogeneity) are constant with the country-year.⁶⁰

RESULTS

The results of the analysis (reported in Table 2) suggest that the main explanatory variable (and some of its component parts) performs very well. More precisely, state legitimacy is a significant predictor of terrorist events, as are security legitimacy and political legitimacy. However, economic and social legitimacy are not significant predictors of domestic terrorism. In Models 1, 2, and 3, the direction of the legitimacy variables is positive, as predicted, which suggests that less legitimate states are positively correlated with a high rate of terrorism (more terrorist events per year). The composite state legitimacy score (Model 1) accounts for a 13.6 percent change in terrorist events (percent change is not reported in the table) for each unit change in a state's legitimacy score. Security legitimacy and political legitimacy are more significant contributors to terrorist events, with security legitimacy accounting for a 114.7 percent change in terrorist events, and with political legitimacy accounting for 119.9 percent change in terrorist events. These data suggest that generally less legitimate states experience more terrorist events. More specifically, states that utilize repression as part of its domestic security policy and exclude different political groups from the governing regime experience much higher rates of terrorism. At the same time, social and economic legitimacy are positively correlated with rates of terrorism, but neither variable is significant. Taken together, these data support Sprinzak's assertion that terrorism is a by-product of a general condition of low legitimacy, and that low political and security legitimacy matter even more. The control variables are not entirely consistent with previous analyses, and this does require some explanation. First, the control variables that performed best include capability, durability, and history of terrorism. Ethnic fragmentation performs inconsistently and

Table 2: Negative binomial regression of domestic terrorism and state legitimacy, 1995–2005.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
State Legitimacy	.1278367 (.044357)***				
Security Legitimacy		.7641116 (.1506058)***			
Political Legitimacy			.4113065 (.1223381)***		
Economic Legitimacy				-.137975 (.1322083)	
Social Legitimacy					.0800806 (.1223408)
Executive Constraints	.0075396 (.0635653)	-.0164213 (.0562388)	.0420609 (.0562683)	-.0115027 (.0675048)	-.0048752 (.066673)
Political Competition	.0026568 (.0630596)	.0311437 (.0510854)	-.0323074 (.0560692)	-.062089 (.0620233)	-.0325837 (.0666615)
Capability	31.78918 (9.405378)***	30.69457 (8.181636)***	32.21791 (9.084736)***	26.10769 (7.13248)***	27.73319 (8.043456)***
Durability	-.0123097 (.0035106)***	-.0098911 (.0035678)***	-.0145876 (.0033463)***	-.014862 (.0034356)***	-.0137975 (.0036407)***
History of Terrorism	.0346577 (.0069615)***	.026941 (.0066738)***	.032793 (.0070906)***	.0375954 (.0074021)***	.0379512 (.0071761)***
Population	-.00000140 (.00000160)	-.00000188 (.00000143)	-.000000816 (.00000293)	-.000000009 (.00000180)	-.00000103 (.00000154)
Income	-.00000449 (.0000166)	-.00000421 (.0000148)	-.00000254 (.0000173)	-.00000907 (.0000163)	-.00000795 (.0000172)
Ethnic Fragmentation	-.0073429 (.0035628)**	-.0029092 (.0035941)	-.0076609 (.0036581)**	-.0091073 (.0031483)**	-.0089342 (.003252)***
Constant	.0152742 (.5095389)	-.5585005 (.4439989)	245414 (.4203378)	1.475863 (.4122845)***	.949693 (.4743189)**
N	1371	1371	1371	1371	1371
Wald Test X ²	103.85***	166.09***	102.75***	94.22***	92.62***

Coefficients reported to Indicate Directionality. Robust Standard Errors in Parenthesis.
*p < .1 level; **significant at the .05 level; ***significant at the .01 level or higher.

opposite the direction predicted, but on balance it is also a significant predictor of terrorism. The data on capability suggests that stronger states experience more domestic terrorism than weaker states. The finding deviates from recent research on failed and weak states and on transnational terrorism.⁶¹ However, the finding it is consistent with the assertion that domestic terrorists are the insurgents of strong states.⁶² Also, the finding contradicts recent studies that assert that the causes of domestic and transnational terrorism are similar.⁶³ However, it is consistent with the conventional wisdom that while the behavior may be the same (terrorism), the causal conditions between the domestic and transnational arenas do differ.⁶⁴

Durability performs as expected. The variable is negative and strongly significant. These findings support Eyerman's claim that newer states experience more terrorism than more established states. The findings are suggestive of the notion that terrorism, particularly domestic terrorism, may be a product of early state-building. In essence, terrorist violence erupts as a new regime asserts its authority by responding with repression, which is common among newly emerging states over the past two centuries.⁶⁵

History of terrorism is also positive and strongly significant, and it accounts for a 3.5 percent change in the number of terrorist incidents per country. The data indicate that terrorism today is a function of terrorism in the past. There are two ways to interpret this statement, neither of which is mutually exclusive. First, the rate of terrorism in the present is a function of the ability of the terrorist group to build up its organizational capacity. In this sense, if a terrorist group can overcome an initial onslaught of repression by its target state, surviving the early stages of organizational institutionalization, then it is positioned to sustain higher rates of terrorism over time. Second, once terrorism is established as a form of political behavior, it can sustain itself within an environment. In other words, terrorism may achieve a status as an acceptable form of political activity. In saying this, we do not assert that terrorism ever becomes a mainstream form of political engagement; rather, taboos associated with violent insurgency are dispelled, and over time various political groups may view the strategy as an acceptable alternative to normal political engagement.

Now we turn our attention to ethnic fragmentation. The assertion in the literature is that terrorism is often the by-product of intense competition between ethnic factions. Given that ethnic terrorism is one of the more prevalent forms of terrorism, it makes sense to assume that ethnic characteristics in a state would be a significant predictor of terrorism. The findings in this study do not discount this assertion. The data, however, do suggest that terrorism is less the product of ethnic fragmentation and more associated with ethnic homogeneity. The variable is negative and moderately significant in Models 1 and 3, strongly significant in Models 4 and 5, and not significant in Model 2. In all models, the direction of the variable is consistent, suggesting that homogenous societies experience higher rates of domestic terrorism than fragmented societies. The data suggest that domestic terrorism, while not completely untethered to the

goal of territorial change, is more focused on goals associated with regime change.⁶⁶ That is to say that domestic terrorism is less driven by ethno-national competition. However, as with the findings on state capabilities, more investigation is needed before any firm conclusions can be drawn.

The other variables in the analysis are not significant predictors of domestic terrorism. The markers for democratic polities, executive constraints, and political competition show inconsistent directionality and are not significant. The findings suggest that domestic political institutions and political processes are not relevant to the rate of domestic terrorism. Similarly, population and income are not significant predictors for domestic terrorism in this analysis.

In sum, this study supports Ehud Sprinzak's assertion that terrorism is an outcome of low legitimacy. The data suggests that low legitimacy states experience more terrorist attacks in a given year than do high legitimacy states. Moving deeper into the data, states that rely on repression (low security legitimacy) are not inclusive (low political legitimacy) experience higher rates of terrorism. Such states tend to be less established, have a history of terrorism, and have strong capabilities. If they are to extract lessons from this analysis, states need to be aware of the interaction between terrorism and legitimacy. As Audrey Cronin asserts, terrorism involves strategies of leverage intended to undermine the legitimacy of the state. Through provocation, polarization, and mobilization, the terrorist group attempts to lure states into repressive responses in order to undermine their legitimacy among the broader population. This study does not assert that states avoid repressive responses to terrorism, as that would be overly idealistic; rather, states need to be cautious of the often obscured boundary between enhancing security in the face of a terrorist threat and repression that becomes a justification for further terrorist activity against the state.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to evaluate the relationship between legitimacy and domestic terrorism. The relationship is very complex and difficult to examine empirically. First, state responses to legitimacy challenges are nonlinear; some states seek to improve performance, while others look to repressive strategies to empower secure support groups and demobilize challengers. Second, it is difficult with available data to isolate the conjunction of onset domestic terrorism and legitimacy. The available data is not sensitive enough to subgroup opinions on state legitimacy in order to determine a causal connection to unreconciled groups that may opt for terrorist strategies to secure their interests. These challenges leave us with the choice of abandoning legitimacy as a causal variable in favor of other, distal, factors to account for domestic terrorism, or to look for alternative ways to conceive and analyze the relationship. This study opts for the latter choice.

Rather than focus attention on legitimacy and terrorism at the onset stage, we propose to look at the relationship based on rates of terrorism. Additionally, rather than look at majoritarian-based measures of legitimacy, we utilize measures that emphasize performance of the state. The gist of the argument is that terrorists attack states in order to challenge their legitimacy. State responses to the terrorist attack then reveal the overall position of the state. If the state responds with polarized, provocative responses to the terrorist threat, it damages their legitimacy and emboldens the terrorist group to continue its campaign. The result is higher sustained attacks by the group or groups over time. By turning to the *State Fragility Index*, we can disaggregate the data to focus on state legitimacy and the component parts of legitimacy: security, political, economic, and social. The findings in this study suggest a strong relationship between state legitimacy and domestic terrorism. In this first cut analysis, extremely low and low legitimacy states average over twice as many domestic terrorist attacks per year as moderate legitimacy states, and over three times as many domestic terrorist attacks as high legitimacy states. In the multivariate analysis, state legitimacy, security legitimacy, and political legitimacy are strongly correlated with domestic terrorism. Moreover, security legitimacy and political legitimacy account for nearly a 115 and 120 percent change in the number of domestic terrorist events.

The findings are interesting and add a new dimension to structural explanations for domestic terrorism. By including legitimacy into the discussion, we move past more static conditions (democracy-autocracy) and now focus more on dynamic conditions like rising and falling legitimacy. At the same time, we must be cautious about the findings. These findings are preliminary. The performance-based variable on legitimacy serves as a work-around solution to evaluate the relationship between legitimacy and terrorism. Sprinzak's original theory on the relationship between legitimacy and terrorism is anchored in the area of onset terrorist activity. The current state of legitimacy data does not allow us to drill down in order to test the relationship at that nexus point. At present, we can observe the broader relationship between state legitimacy and domestic terrorism. This is a useful beginning. But we cannot feel completely confident about the significance of this relationship unless and until we can evaluate the relationship between perceived state legitimacy, at the subgroup level, and the onset of domestic terrorism activity.

NOTES

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38. *Ibid.*, 321.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*, 322–23.
41. *Ibid.*, 323.
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43. The models use a Huber/White Sandwich estimator of standard errors to provide robust standard errors over country clusters.
44. Patrick T. Brandt et al., “Dynamic Models for Persistent Event Count Time Series,” *American Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 4 (2000): 823–43. There is an additionally confounding feature to terrorist events data. Terrorist events are rare and unevenly distributed across countries in the analysis, which results in a higher number of country-years with zero events (864 country-years with zero events). To be rigorous, we must ask if the presence of zeros in the data comes from more than one source. First, do we observe zero events in a year because there is a likelihood of a terrorist attack that did not happen? Second, do we observe zero events because characteristics in the country make terrorism less likely to occur? If we assume this condition, then a zero-inflated negative binomial (ZINB) regression model is preferable to a NBREG model. While the distribution of the data (based on Vuong tests) does suggest a ZINB model may fit the data better, there is no reason to assume the uneven clustering of terrorist events is derived from two different types of country cases. Moreover, using the ZINB model absent a clear rationale for assuming different types of cases producing the abundance of zero-event country-years may overfit the data, thereby diminishing the value of the results. Hence a positive Vuong test is not enough rationale to justify using the ZINB model over the NBREG. For more discussion, see Scott J. Long and Jeremy Freeze, *Regression Models for Categorical Dependent Variables Using STATA* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001).

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