Provocation and Recruitment: Subnational Variation in Terrorist Targeting Strategies 1990-2014

by

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Abstract

Scholarly research has begun to examine the strategic logic of terrorist targeting. But most of this work remains aggregated to the country-level, limits group selection to anti-state or secessionist rebel campaigns, and evaluates terror tactics only during civil wars. Yet, many violent non-state actors that employ terrorist violence are not rebel groups. Omitting such groups from analyses of terrorist targeting risks mischaracterizing the correlates of extremist-group decision-making. Further, country-level analyses ignore important local-level drivers of terrorist attacks. We offer three advances on current scholarship. First, we model terrorist targeting at the sub-national level to more clearly identify the location of attacks as well as both the micro- and country-level determinants of group choice. Second, we do not restrict our analyses to rebel groups or periods of civil war, but rather consider a broader category of extremist groups that employ terrorism. Finally, we offer a theoretical argument centered on differentiating the actions of extremist groups with distinctive goals: provocation and recruitment. We argue that terrorists select their targets, security and civilian, based on a number of strategic considerations such as state capacity at the local level, regime type of the state, a desire to increase recruitment, and imposing high costs on the state. The empirical analyses of all geocoded incidents of domestic terrorism between 1990 and 2014 show that local state capacity plays an important role in terrorist target selection. However, the effect of the local setting on terrorist targeting appears conditional on a country's regime type. In democratic states, terrorists strike civilian targets in urban settings but attack security personnel in more rural environments. The opposite relationship appears to hold for autocratic states. From our analyses, we infer that provocation drives terrorist targeting in democratic regimes while recruitment/outbidding concerns better explain attacks in autocratic states.

Keywords

Terrorist Targeting, Provocation, Recruitment, Outbidding, Regime Type, Grid-Cell

INTRODUCTION

May 28, 2010: A passenger train was derailed in a major terrorist attack in West Bengal, India killing 68 travelers and injuring another 200. A Maoist outfit called the People's Committee against Police Atrocities (PCPA) claimed responsibility of the attack. About 3000 miles away, an Egyptian Jihadist group called Wilayat Sinai conducted a series of spectacular attacks on a police officers' club in Arish and various locations around the city of Sheikh Zuweid, including the police station and approximately 15 security checkpoints, killing about 100 security personnel on 1 July, 2015. The attacks in India and Egypt have several similarities: both of these groups, Maoists and Wilayat Sinai, operating in India and Egypt, are categorized as terrorist organizations by the Global Terrorism Dataset; both groups have regime change objectives; and both the groups are parts of broad global political movements. However, there is a major difference between the group in India and the group in Egypt: target selection. While the Maoist PCPA's violent actions have mostly been directed at civilian targets, Wilayat Sinai has predominantly targeted Egyptian and Israeli security forces. What explains the variance in targeting strategies of these two extremist organizations? Recent research and data collection show that terrorist organizations attack specific targets with clear goals in mind.[1] But targeting strategies appear to vary across distinct extremist groups. Whom are terrorist groups more likely to target and why? Is there any identifiable pattern or logic behind how terrorists select their targets?

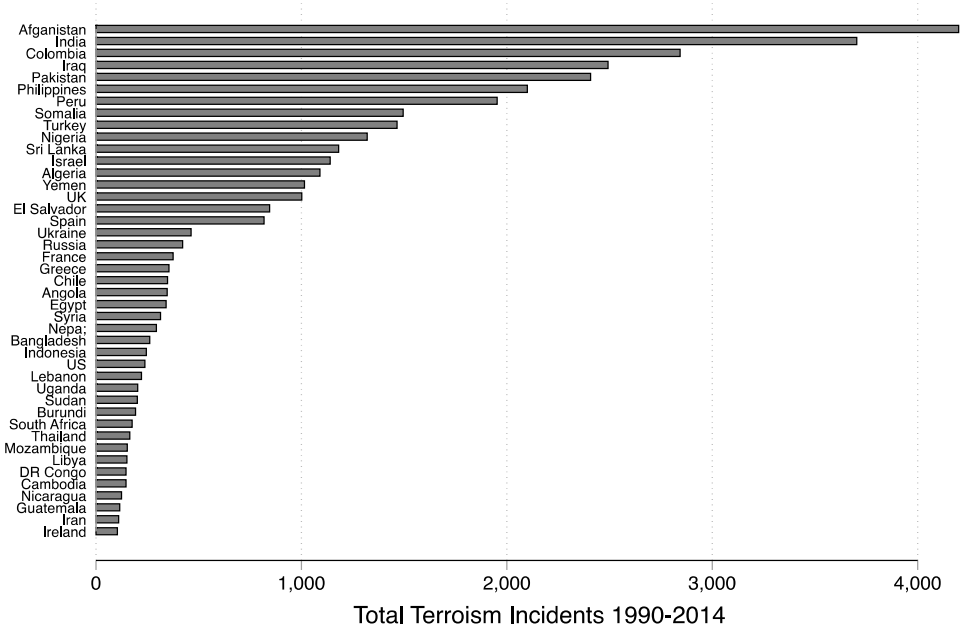
Countries experience dramatically different rates of domestic terrorism (see Figure 1 below).[2] Afghanistan, for example, experienced over 4,000 attacks between 1990 and 2014, while

[1] The Global Terrorism Database (GTD) defines terrorism as "…the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation." One additional criterion of GTD is that the action must be outside the context of legitimate warfare activities.

[2] The Global Terrorism Database distinguishes domestic from transnational attacks. But, the nationality of perpetrator and target remain uncertain in most attacks. Our analyses use only those incidents clearly coded as domestic by GTD.

both Iran and Ireland endured far fewer attacks (about 100 each) over the same 25-year period. Civil war certainly helps explain extensive terrorist activity in some countries and differentiates the environment in India from Iran and Ireland. For example, the Maoist rebellion in India, which began in the dense forests of West Bengal state in the late 1960s, has produced widespread attacks against non-combatants as part of an anti-state strategy. In Egypt, political insurgency has also produced significant domestic terrorism. The Islamic State of Sinai Province (or Wilayat Sinai) was responsible for nearly 500 separate attacks between 2014 and 2018. Begun as an effort to eliminate Western and Israeli influence in Egypt, Wilayat Sinai turned its focus on the Egyptian regime after Mohammed Morsi was toppled in 2013 (CISAC 2020).

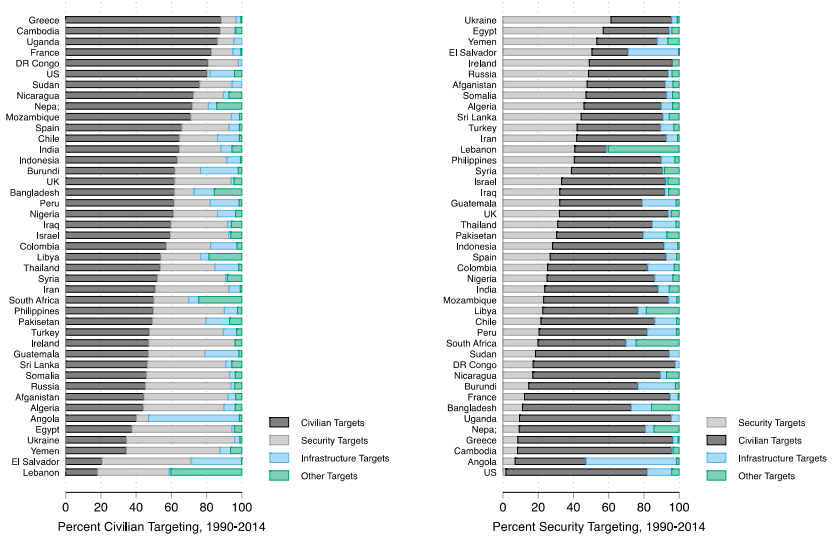
Figure 1 Count of Terrorist Incidents Across Countries



The Maoists in India and IS-SP in Egypt both target non-combatants in their violent anti-state campaigns. But, the Maoists in India direct their violence predominantly toward civilian targets while Wilayat Sinai in Egypt chiefly assails security personnel (see Figure 2). Both groups have similar objectives (removal of current regimes in power) and yet each group has selected a

different targeting strategy for accomplishing that goal. We find regime type and capacity as important factors influencing group decision-making. Since democratic leaders are more susceptible to audience costs and remain electorally vulnerable to accusations of political cowardness, displays of regime strength can be used to counter a narrative of fragility and vacillation. Provoking democratic leaders into excessive uses of force can decrease regime legitimacy and improves a terrorist group's image. In contrast, authoritarian regimes do not depend directly on mass public support and are consequently more difficult to provoke. But autocratic leaders do require support from military elites to keep them in power and terrorist groups recognize this vulnerability. Attacks against security targets not only signal opposition to the regime, they also demonstrate resolve and capability that attracts popular support.

Figure 2 Distribution of Terrorist Targets Worldwide



In their struggle against a state for political concession, extremists strategize their actions in anticipation of the target state's possible responses as well as the possible depletion of civilian support. A recent study notes variance in the costs that extremist groups incur for attacking civilians (Polo, 2020). Resource scarcity and low out-group competition dampen civilian targeting

by increasing the importance of local support. But regime elites also confront political costs that vary based on parochial conditions. Militant groups recognize the variance in incentive structures across regimes and select their targets based on the local environment. Attacks directed against civilian soft targets are not simply a function of the organizational incentives of the extremist group. They are a function of the organizational incentives of the state as well. Targeting civilian non-combatants exposes inherent political pressures in democratic regimes that remain less compelling in more authoritarian polities. Militant group strategies, therefore, anticipate regime responses so as to discredit government actions and increase popular support for the group.

We organize this manuscript into four sections. First, we review the extant literature on the strategy of target selection by non-state groups with special focus on terrorist actors. Next, we theorize that distinct objectives guide targeting strategies by extremist groups in different regimes. Provocation drives terrorist attacks in democratic states while outbidding better explains violence in autocratic regimes. This is because regime elites in democratic and authoritarian states confront different constituencies to remain in power. The hypotheses drawn from the theoretical discussion are then empirically tested against a geo-coded dataset of domestic terrorism events from 1990-2014. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the implications of our study and suggest future avenues of research.

STRATEGIES AND TARGETS IN POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Scholars have often applied a rationalist approach to explain why violent political dissidents adopt different strategies and select disparate targets in their fight against states (Asal & Rethemeyer, 2008; Goodwin, 2012; Horgan, 2005; Juergensmeyer, 2001; Kalyvas, 1999, 2006; Kydd & Walter, 2006; Lake, 2002, 2003; Pape, 2003; Turk, 2004; Victoroff, 2005; Walter, 1997). Most rationalists argue that dissidents desire a particular policy outcome but cannot reach a bargain with states due

to information asymmetries. This results in dissidents pursuing a number of strategies and selecting disparate targets to resolve bargaining failures and achieve their desired outcomes (Findley & Young, 2012). Kydd and Walter (2006) have identified five strategies of political violence such as coercion, intimidation, provocation, spoiling and outbidding. These mutually inclusive strategies might be directed towards the state, its population and dissidents' support base.

The coercive logic of terrorism has been widely explored in conflict research; militant groups use violence to coerce the state into making political concession (Crenshaw, 1981; Hultman, 2007; Pape, 2003). Frieden, Lake and Schultz (2013) argue that terrorists carry out spectacular attacks on civilians, firstly, to impose huge costs on the target state to compel it to concede, and, secondly, to create panic and uncertainty among the state's population who would eventually pressure the state to negotiate with the perpetrators of political violence. However, there is little conclusive evidence of the effectiveness of the strategy of coercion. Thomas (2014) finds some evidence that terrorism in civil war works well in inducing concession from government, whereas Abrahms (2012), Fortna (2015) and Abrahms and Potter (2015) find little evidence of the effectiveness of civilian killings in civil conflict. While Fortna (2015) indicates that rebel groups use terrorism as a strategy for perpetuating a conflict, Abrahms and Potter (2015) argue that rebel groups with deficient leadership will use terrorism more than others.

Intimidation as rebel strategy is mostly seen in civil conflict where dissidents might selectively target their own support base to prevent suspected "informers" from cooperating with the state or to gain total control over an area (Balcells, 2010; Cunningham et al., 2012; Kalyvas, 2006; Stewart & Liou, 2017). However, Duursma (2019) has argued that intimidation can be directed against peacekeepers to prevent them from monitoring human rights violations by the rebels in civil conflict. Similarly, attacks against humanitarian aid workers may follow the same

logic where violent groups would attempt to deter and delegitimize any outside interference in the areas of conflict (Hoelscher et al., 2017).

Militants might carry out attacks to provoke retaliatory state action which, in turn, would alienate sections of the population and help dissidents in recruitment (Kydd & Walter, 2006). However, states are unlikely to fall into such a trap of provocation which would eventually help the militants (de Mesquita & Dickson, 2007; Holmes, 2001; Siqueira & Sandler, 2006). Blankenship (2018) argues that states with weak bureaucratic capacity are provoked into brutal repression because such states lack the resources to monitor and detect for more selective retaliation. Additionally, scholars have explored the use of terrorist violence in order to outbid rival groups (Bloom, 2005) and spoil an impending peace process in civil wars (Findley & Young, 2015).

Militant groups are seen to attack a number of targets such as civilians, state infrastructure, police stations, media houses, educational institutions and so on. A growing body of research in recent years explores the logic of target selection in terrorism and civil conflict (Abrahms et al., 2018; Abrahms & Potter, 2015; Ash, 2018; Horowitz et al., 2018; Polo & Gleditsch, 2016; Ramirez & Robbins, 2018; Santifort et al., 2013). These recent studies complement earlier findings that identified substitutions and complementarities among terrorists' diverse targets of attack. Enders and Sandler (1993) found that metal detectors in airports decreased skyjackings and diplomatic incidents, but increased assassinations and kidnappings. Similarly, Brandt and Sandler (1993) show that transnational terrorists substituted kidnappings for skyjackings. They also found that skyjacking incidents were positively correlated to hostage takings. In a renewed focus on rebel target selection, Santifort et. al. (2013) explored how diversity in target choice has changed since the early 1970s among domestic and transnational terrorists. According to the authors, bombings

of private parties have become the preferred target over the years, as they are the hardest-to-defend and require the most homeland security resources.

A few scholars (Abrahms et al., 2018; Horowitz et al., 2018; Polo, 2020; Polo & Gleditsch, 2016) have explored terrorists' attack behavior by dividing targets into 'soft' and 'hard.' Polo and Gleditsch (2016) argue that rebels' use of violence against specific targets is a function of rebel groups' characteristics and state response. Weaker groups more frequently resort to terrorist violence in civil conflict. However, rebel groups with more inclusive audiences will attack 'hard' targets such as the military and the police because they do not want to undermine popular support, while groups with more sectarian audiences will attack civilians ('soft' targets). Abrahms et al. (2018) also explore the logic of diversity in terrorist attacks and argue that civilian attacks often result from agency problems between terrorist groups, when the parent group creates affiliates. Affiliates are more likely to attack defenseless civilians because they gain the most from civilian attacks, while the parent group bears the costs because of their different organizational incentives. However, affiliates change their attack behavior "as they become more established organizations and can prioritize the achievement of outcome goals over process goals by exhibiting greater tactical restraint" (Abrahms et al. 2018: 39). Horowitz et al. (2018) argue that some militant organizations diversify into multiple tactics and attack a variety of targets to ensure their survival and continued relevance in response to government repression and inter-organizational competition.

Our study builds on this previous research and makes three primary contributions. First, this article contributes to the study of terrorism by disaggregating terrorist attacks into security and civilian targets, and explores the environmental factors that drive groups to attack such diverse targets. Most terrorism research analyzes incidents of terrorism in totality ignoring the diversity of

target choices (Choi & Piazza, 2016; Enders & Sandler, 2006; Eubank & Weinberg, 2001; Piazza, 2012, 2015; Young & Dugan, 2011). The driving factors of targeting defenseless civilians may well differ from the drivers of attacking government and security targets because the costs and benefits associated with the attacks on these two target types are different. Groups may even switch from one tactic to another if external or internal circumstances change (Shapiro, 2012).

Second, this paper contributes to conflict research by exploring the logic of target selection by terrorist groups. Earlier studies have explored the rationale of rebels' use of violence against civilians (Ash, 2018; Calle & Sánchez-Cuenca, 2011; Fortna, 2015; Stanton, 2013) and the logic of diversity in target selection by rebel groups (Horowitz et al., 2018; Polo, 2020; Polo & Gleditsch, 2016). However, little attention has been paid to the diversity in attack behavior of terrorist organizations. Abrahms (2006) analyzed attack behavior of twenty-eight terrorist groups from the list of foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) in 2001. In another study on terrorist targeting, Abrahms et al. (2018) limited the study to 238 terrorist groups from 1998 to 2005. Our study includes all terrorist groups between 1990 and 2014, increasing the sample size and the temporal domain compared to earlier studies.

Third, our study includes a richer theoretical explanation for target selection by considering both country and local level factors that shape terrorist targeting patterns. Existing studies on the attack behavior of militant groups are either group-level or country-level analyses, the empirical sections of which use country-level correlates (Abrahms et al., 2018; Brandt & Sandler, 2010; Polo & Gleditsch, 2016; Stanton, 2013). In our study, we focus on the micro-level drivers of terrorist targets within the context of a country. Specifically, we explore the interactive roles of a country's regime type and its state capacity at the local level in shaping the tactical choice of terrorist targeting. Hendrix and Young (2014) argue that a dissident group's choice of violent tactics is

shaped by group beliefs about the viability of these tactics given the repressive capacity of the state and the group's organizational strength. We offer a unique theoretical argument that takes into account state capacity as conditioned by regime type in explaining the strategic motivations of terrorist targeting, namely, provocation in democracy and recruitment/outbidding in autocracy. Extant research has explored the role of regime types on the incidence of terrorism (Chenoweth, 2013; Choi, 2010; Gaibulloev et al., 2017; Ghatak et al., 2019; Li, 2005; Windsor, 2003). However, scholars have largely ignored the possible role of regime type in explaining terrorist targeting. We intend to address this gap in terrorism research by exploring the interactive roles of regime and state capacity in terrorist group's selection of targets. By incorporating this complexity both in theory and empirics, our study provides more accurate and generalizable results.

THEORETICAL EXPECTATIONS: TERRORIST TARGETING, STATE CAPACITY AND REGIME TYPE

Information theory can help explain targeting decisions by violent non-state actors; terrorist groups and the state contend over a policy outcome and often fail to reach a bargain because of uncertainty in credibility and commitment (Lake 2002, 2003; Findley and Young 2012; Blankenship 2018). Consequently, terrorist organizations seek to convince the state of their resolve and capability by conveying costly signals; a target group's selection likely depends on the anticipated response from the target state, the legitimacy of the state, group's organizational strength, its recruitment potential, and the level of competition with rival groups. The term 'soft target' has been used in recent research to indicate a vulnerable civilian population or private parties, distinct from 'hard targets' which refer to government personnel and business installations that have enhanced security measures. Studies show that governments in recent years have hardened government and

business installations making it more difficult for terrorist groups to launch attacks against these targets (Brandt & Sandler, 2010; Santifort et al., 2013). Therefore, terrorists increasingly target private parties as they are the "hardest to defend." In this paper, we seek to understand the strategic logic of target selection. Rather than hard and soft target categories, we differentiate civilian and government targeting as a function of the regime type of a country and the capacity of the state at the local level.

State Capacity and Terrorist Targeting

There are several reasons why terrorists may selectively attack diverse set of targets in a country. First, a deterministic trend of terrorist targeting is unlikely since terrorist groups strategically shift their targets to maximize the impact of attacks. Creating uncertainty is an important part of psychological warfare that terrorists wage against states. There are two main benefits of sowing uncertainty. First, terrorists can keep the target state's population in a constant state of anxiety, which can create pressure on the state to concede to the terrorists' policy demands, and the uncertainty can also delegitimize the state as a protector. Second, in the absence of an identifiable trend, it becomes harder for states provide security to possible targets. It has been observed that when states increased security in airports to stop plane highjacks, terrorists immediately changed their tactics to kidnappings and assassination; thus, creating confusion among policy makers and uncertainty among civilians (Enders and Sandler 1993). Marketing research, for example, demonstrates the logic of diversification in explaining the strategies of firms, which decide to expand and or revise their business tactics in response to pressure in a competitive market. External pressure and the economic environment incentivize firms to diversify in order to mitigate future losses (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Weitzel & Jonsson, 1989). Conflict scholars have recently adopted this economic rationale of militant groups' strategy selection. Non-

state actors as a part of their strategic decision-making might adopt diverse tactics to minimize risk because they operate in an environment of uncertainty and information asymmetry (see Horowitz et al 2018). In fact, terrorist organizations mostly select their target in anticipation of state response, which is often determined by the target state's ability and willingness to protect a certain population. Therefore, understanding their strategic response to different environments can lead to better prediction of attack patterns.

Second, a factor that can influence the target choice of a terrorist group is the strength of a state across regions within a country. A cursory examination of the pattern of terrorist targeting shows that terrorists regularly attack both civilian and government targets in nearly every country where extremists are present. However, some regions may suffer civilian attacks more than others. For instance, most states are marked by a strong presence in urban centers but fail to exercise control over peripheries. These states' inability to project power over longer distances exposes places that are far from urban centers to risk from violent non-state actors. Studies on civil conflict have argued that the target choice of an armed group is likely to be a function of a state's capacity (Hendrix & Young, 2014; Wood, 2010). Stronger rebel groups are more likely to attack military bases in remote areas where state capacity is weak, but use violence indiscriminately against civilians as they do not have the capacity to entice loyalty (Wood, 2010). We argue that terrorist groups are also strategic about their target choices.

As argued by Stantifort et. al. (2013), states harden high-value-target areas to prevent terrorist groups from imposing high costs. These high-value targets are usually located in urban centers. The possibility of immediate retaliation by the state in these areas is much higher. Compared to other regions, it is therefore more costly for terrorist groups to attack government and security targets in urban centers. Instead, it is relatively less costly to launch an attack against

defenseless civilians in these urban spaces. Moreover, states perceive attacks on civilians as a challenge to their monopoly on coercion as well as their legitimacy. This is even more so in urban centers, where the presence of the media tends to highlight any breach of security, undermining a state's reputation and legitimacy.

Third, if it is less costly for terrorists to attack civilians, one might wonder why security personnel are targeted at all. Considering the political objectives of terrorist groups, they are in fact better off attacking government and security targets directly, but due to the power asymmetries, civilians generally become the principal targets. However, as a corollary to the above argument, the power asymmetry between the state and terrorists tends to narrow in non-urban areas, where security forces are isolated and reinforcement can be difficult. Terrorist groups are almost always weaker than the target state in coercive capacity but exploit state weakness in the periphery by engaging in opportunistic attack behavior.[3] Terrorist groups often set up their bases in safer outlying regions, which are often mountainous or forested, and less administered by the state. Knowledge of local terrain become an additional resource. While greater surveillance by the state's intelligence and other security agencies prevents them from attacking security targets in urban centers, it is easier to hide and carry out clandestine attacks on defenseless civilians in cities. These advantages allow terrorists to come out from their bases and attack government and security targets in more rural settings using 'ambush' or 'hit and run' techniques. The above discussion leads to the following hypothesis.

H1: Terrorist groups are more likely to target civilians where state capacity is high. Conversely, areas of low state capacity are more likely to be associated with attacks on security targets.

Regime Type and Targeting

Regime type plays an important role in terrorist violence; democracies are found to be more vulnerable to terrorist attacks (Enders & Sandler, 2006; Eubank & Weinberg, 2001; Eyerman, 1998; Li, 2005; Young & Dugan, 2011). However, no study has so far explored how regime type interacts with state capacity to drive terrorist targeting. We argue that terrorist groups attack civilians in democracies where state capacity is high. Terrorist groups are more likely to attack civilians in democracies in order to impose high costs on a state where it hurts the most and compel a popular government to concede to terrorist demands. Democracies have greater "audience costs" than other regimes (Conrad et al., 2014) and, even face electoral defeat for failure to physically protect the electorate. Moreover, terrorist groups might target civilians in a democratic state in order to delegitimize the government in the eyes of the public; in fact, it is the popular legitimacy of the government that differentiates a democracy from other regimes. Additionally, opposition political parties might take advantage of a democratic regime's failure to protect civilians to criticize the ruling party and reap political benefits in future elections. Moreover, press freedom in democracies amplify the message of terrorist attacks by widely reporting on violent events (Gadarian, 2010). In psychological warfare, terrorists thrive when they can create an environment of fear among a large group of people. Such vulnerabilities encourage terrorist groups to attack civilians in democratic states.

It is important to note that the basic assumption of democratic vulnerability (Pape, 2003) concerns the ease with which terrorist groups force democratic regimes to concede to demands through violent attacks against civilians. Interestingly, evidence does not support such a supposition. Although civil rights and liberties in a democracy might facilitate mobilization of political dissent, there is little evidence that violent political movements are successful in such

popular regimes. On the contrary, democratic regimes can circumvent constitutional rules and norms to devise repressive measures to combat extremist violence. Such regimes might enact laws of preventive detention or aggressively execute existing laws on organized crime to tackle political violence. For example, India has from time to time enacted draconian laws of preventive detention such as the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act 1985 (TADA), the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2002 (POTA) and the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act 1967 as amended in 2008 (UAPA) in order to deal with extremist political violence. Often democracies witness rare political unity among parties of opposing ideological and policy orientations to pass stringent laws to fight against terrorism. For example, the USA Patriot Act was passed nearly unanimously by the Senate 98-1, and 357-66 in the House, with the support of members from across the political spectrum. These trends across democracies imply that the general population mostly supports aggressive counter-terrorism measures rather than a conciliatory state approach towards terrorist groups. In fact, studies have shown that major terrorist attacks push democratic publics to support more hawkish and less conciliatory attitudes toward terrorists and the populations that support them (Abrahms, 2007; Berrebi & Klor, 2008; Davis & Silver, 2004; Gadarian, 2010).

Interestingly, democracies still experience higher levels of terrorist activities than other regimes. It is puzzling to witness such high levels of terrorism in democracies while such regimes might be aggressive in countering political violence because of greater public support for harsh government actions after major terrorist attacks. In fact, provocation is a strategy that terrorist groups use against popular governments in order to increase recruitment. Terrorists might be actually motivated to attack civilian targets in places of high state capacity in order to provoke a democratic government to retaliate against their acts of violence. High legitimacy of a popularly elected government renders terrorist groups weak and ineffective in influencing the government.

However, groups will try to increase organizational capacity in such areas if they want to send the target state a strong signal. A strategy of provocation (see Kydd and Walter 2006) might work for groups to increase their support base and secure legitimacy with a certain civilian population; states often undertake massive counter-terrorism operation to hunt down suspected terrorists and unintentionally harass, arrest or prosecute innocent individuals as suspects. Such collateral damage in a state's counter-terrorism actions often antagonize people and drive up terrorist recruitment. Democracies are likely to be more vulnerable to provocative attacks because democratic publics support more hawkish and retaliatory attitudes toward terrorists. Additionally, democracies which are generally rich and economically stable (Quinn & Woolley, 2001) can afford to increase state security to tackle extra-legal violent activities. In fact, democracies, with larger resource pools, can allocate greater resources after incidences of massive terrorist violence than they would be able to spend in normal situations (for example, US Department of Homeland Security and its massive budget post 9/11).

A terrorist targeting pattern should differ in autocracies. We argue that terrorists are more likely to attack security targets in areas of high state capacity in autocracies. There may be several reasons why groups would attack security targets. First, terrorists would most likely target the state where it hurts the most. Targeting civilians is not likely to have an impact on an autoocracy because such regimes are not dependent on popular support. If groups want to send a strong signal to the regime they confront, security or state targets in areas of high capacity should be selected. Autocracies are generally weaker and poorer than democracies; the lack of resources will result in poor training and weaponry for the security forces. Therefore, security targets are exposed to terrorist attacks even in areas of high state capaciy in unpopular regimes. Interestingly, autocracies generally survive with only a small winning coalition, which provides the protection required to

stave off attacks from regime opponents. For example, military dictators generally depend on the top brass of the country's military. However, terrorists prefer attacking poorly trained security targets, which likely yield better results in extracting concessions from the target state (Abrahms, 2006).

Second, terrorists are more likely to attack security targets in areas of high state capacity in autocracies in order to send a signal not only to the state but also to their support base. A group's ideal target in an autocracy would be the government's winning coalition if they want to hurt the state the most. However, given the high level of security provided to these small number of elites, attacking a state's security personnel and installations would be the second best option. Interestingly, such attacks on state security targets might signal to a group's audience its commitment to the desired political goal and wean away support from rival groups. Such a strategy of oubidding is often observed in places where multiple terrorist groups with similar goals and or ideologies operate and compete for prominence. In a democracy, multiple groups with similar goals may not be sustainable because of greater legitimacy of the elected government. For example, 14 Maoist groups in India came together in 2004 under an umbrella of the Communist Party of India (Maoist) in order to present a unified challenge to the government. On the contrary, the populace in an autocratic state would remain mostly aggrieved and unsupportive to their government; hence, multiple groups have greater chances of survival than in other regimes. For example, Wilayat Sinai, an Islamist group with Wahhabi ideology, emerged in 2011 to compete against 20 existing groups with similar ideologies and goals in Egypt (CISAC 2020). The group has carried out a number of devastating attacks on Egyptian security since the removal of the popularly elected Morsi government in 2011; hence, the outbidding logic better explains Wilayat Sinai's targeting behavior in Egypt. Finally, terrorist groups prefer attacking security targets

instead of civilians because they do not want to antagonize civilian non-combatants whose support they require for survival. In most autocracies, governments lack legitimacy and states use brute force to compel obedience. Consequently, a group has a greater probability of extracting support from an aggrieved population if it attacks the state security personnel, the instrument of state oppression. This discussion leads to the following hypotheses on terrorist targeting across regimes.

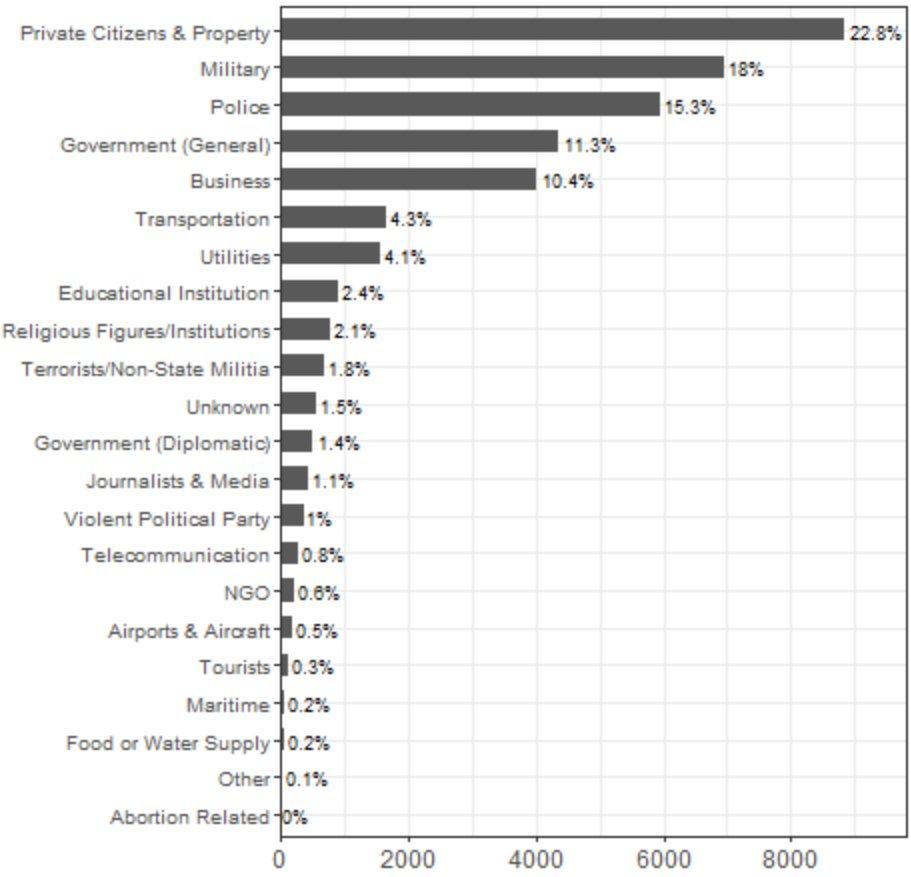
H2a: Democracies are more likely to experience terrorist attacks on civilian targets in areas of high state capacity. In other words, terrorist groups will target civilians in areas of high state capacity in democracies.

H2b: Autocracies are more likely to experience terrorist attacks on government and security targets in areas of high state capacity. In other words, terrorist groups will target state security personnel and installations in areas of high state capacity in autocracies.

Data and Measurement

We use the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) to analyze terrorist events across the world from 1990 to 2014. But we only include attacks perpetrated by known domestic terrorist groups, since our main theory is based on the strategic bargaining between the groups and the government. The dataset has 38,670 counts of such incidents. Important for this analysis is the information included in the GTD about the target category of each terrorist incident, such as business, government personnel, police, military, airports, food, or water supply. Figure 3 shows the distribution of the target categories in the dataset.

Figure 3: Domestic Terrorist incidents by Target Types (1990-2014)



We re-define these target types into three main categories: civilian targets, government and security forces, and other target types. First, as shown in Figure 3, nearly 23% of the terrorist attacks are targeted against private citizens and property. But even among some of the other target types, such as the business or transportation, civilians are the primary victims. Therefore, we categorize terrorist incidents as those involving *civilian targets*, if attacks are aimed against private citizens and property, journalists, religious figures, private business, NGO personnel, tourists and transportations. Second, we categorize incidents involving *government and security force*, if the attacks are targeted against military, police, or government officials. Military and police alone comprise 23% of all terrorist attacks in the dataset. In addition, around 13% of the attacks are targeted against government personnel and government (diplomats). Finally, all other incidents are

categorized as *other targets*, which include attacks against infrastructure like telecommunications, airports and aircrafts, ports and maritime facilities, educational institutions, food or water supply, other militias, violent political parties, and unknown targets.

To understand the local dynamics of terrorist targeting in various regimes worldwide, we need to examine geographical units within the borders of a country. But rather than administrative boundaries, we use the grid-cell as the unit of analysis, by dividing countries across the world into 55 km by 55km grid-cells using the PRIO-GRID dataset (Tollefsen et al., 2012). Using the grid-cell is an improvement compared to administrative boundaries since these grid-cells are smaller, consistent, and have less concern for selection bias that could affect inference. There are 64,452 grid-cells that cover countries around the world. From 1990 to 2014, we first compile a yearly panel dataset to produce grid-cell year observations. We then aggregate the number of domestic terrorist incidents involving the three target types in grid-cell years for that time period.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable in this study is the degree of terrorist attacks on civilians compared to government and security forces. Figure 4 shows the re-defined categories of target types in the dataset. As shown in the figure, 54.4% of the terrorist incidents are targeted against civilians, whereas 33.4% of the incidents are attacks on government officials and security forces. Only 12.3% of all terrorist incidents make up attacks on other target types.

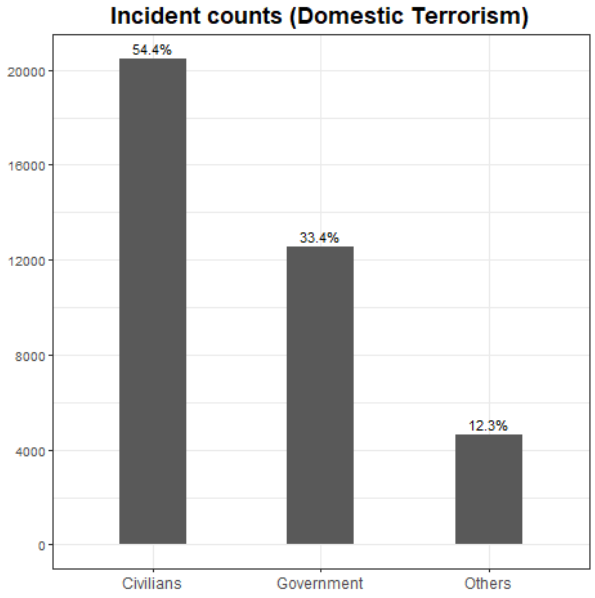


Figure 4: Re-categorizing Terrorist Targets (1990-2014)

To compare the terrorist targeting of civilians with government and security forces, we create the variable *CMS*. Variable *CMS* in each grid-cell year shows the difference between the number of incidents with civilian targets minus those with government and security targets. Thus, a higher and positive value on variable *CMS* in a grid-cell suggests more civilian targeting in the grid-cell and an increasing value in the negative direction suggests a greater number of security targets in the grid-cell. Since the dependent variable is continuous, we first use linear regression models with country-level fixed effects to test our theoretically-derived conjectures. Since we do not expect the hypothesized mechanism to play out in international terrorism, as mentioned above, we exclude international terrorist incidents from the dataset and focus only on domestic terrorism events.[4]

[4] We exclude transnational terrorist events or those with unknown perpetrators.

The two main explanatory variables in this study are the regime type of a country, at the country-level, and state capacity at the local level. For regime type, we divide countries in the dataset into three categories—democracies, autocracies and anocracies, using the polity scores of the countries for a given year (Marshall et al., 2016). Countries with polity scores of 6 or higher are categorized as democracies, those with scores below -4 as autocracies, and any scores in between as anocracies. Past studies have shown that armed conflict and terrorism are more likely to occur in anocracies compared to the two other regime types. Since our hypotheses examine terrorist targeting in autocracies and democracies, anocratic regime is treated as the baseline category against which the two other regime types are compared.

To measure state capacity, we use the level of urbanization within each grid-cell. Urbanization is measured as the percentage of a grid-cell covered by urban area from Meiyappan and Jain (2012).[5] But rather than degree of urbanization using a continuous scale, we create two categories of urbanization for each grid-cell. The variable urban is coded as 1 if the urbanization level of a grid-cell is more than the 75^{th} percentile of all grid-cells in the country. Creating a dichotomous measure of state capacity in this way is somewhat arbitrary, but this is preferable to a continuous scale due to the uneven distribution of the grid-cell urbanization data. We expect that the capital cities of countries should always fall into the more urbanized category, with greater state capacity. When comparing the distance from a country capital between grid-cells categorized as urban and non-urban, we find that the mean distance for urban grid-cells is less than half compared to non-urban grid-cells, and the t-test shows that this difference is statistically significant

[5] Some scholars have used night light emission as the measure for urbanization. But following a recent study (Omelicheva & Markowitz, 2019), we use percentage of grid-cell covered with urban area, variable urban_ih_comp, as the measure from Meiyappan and Jain (2012). The two variables, night lights and urban_ih_comp are highly correlated. The correlation coefficient for the two variables in the dataset is 0.64 and significant at $p<.0.001$. When disaggregating by year, the level of significance stays the same for all years and the average correlation coefficient is 0.67.

at p<.0.001.[6] Note that we use the term non-urban, rather than rural, to describe grid-cells that exclude urban areas since the rest are either less urban or totally uninhabited areas.

We control various factors at the country- and grid-cell levels. Since terrorism and civil war overlap significantly, we use a binary variable to indicate whether a country was undergoing armed conflict in given year. The variable *armed conflict* is coded as 1 if the country is categorized as armed conflict for that year in the UCDP dataset, and 0 otherwise. Two other variables used as controls at the country level are GDP and the population of a country in logarithmic scale, both taken from the World Bank. At the grid-cell level, we include the variable *distance from border*, since rebels and terrorist groups are more likely to operate in areas closer to borders.

Results

The GTD data on domestic terror attacks shows democratic regimes to have the highest proportion of terrorist incidents. While 14.3% of all terrorist incidents in the dataset are in autocratic regimes, 28.3% of the incidents are in anocratic regimes, and 57.4% are in democratic regimes. For each regime type, the distribution of target types is similar. As shown in the Figure 5, civilians are the most common targets across all regimes. Incidents that involve attacks against government and security forces rank as the second highest. But some differences stand out. Democracies have the highest proportion of terrorist incidents with civilian targeting, whereas autocracies have the highest proportion of incidents where government and security forces are targeted. Along with civilians, the other category of targets, such as infrastructures, is also the highest in democracies.

[6] Mean distance between the capital of countries all across the world to their urban grid-cells is 946 km, whereas to non-urban grid-cells, it is 1943 km.

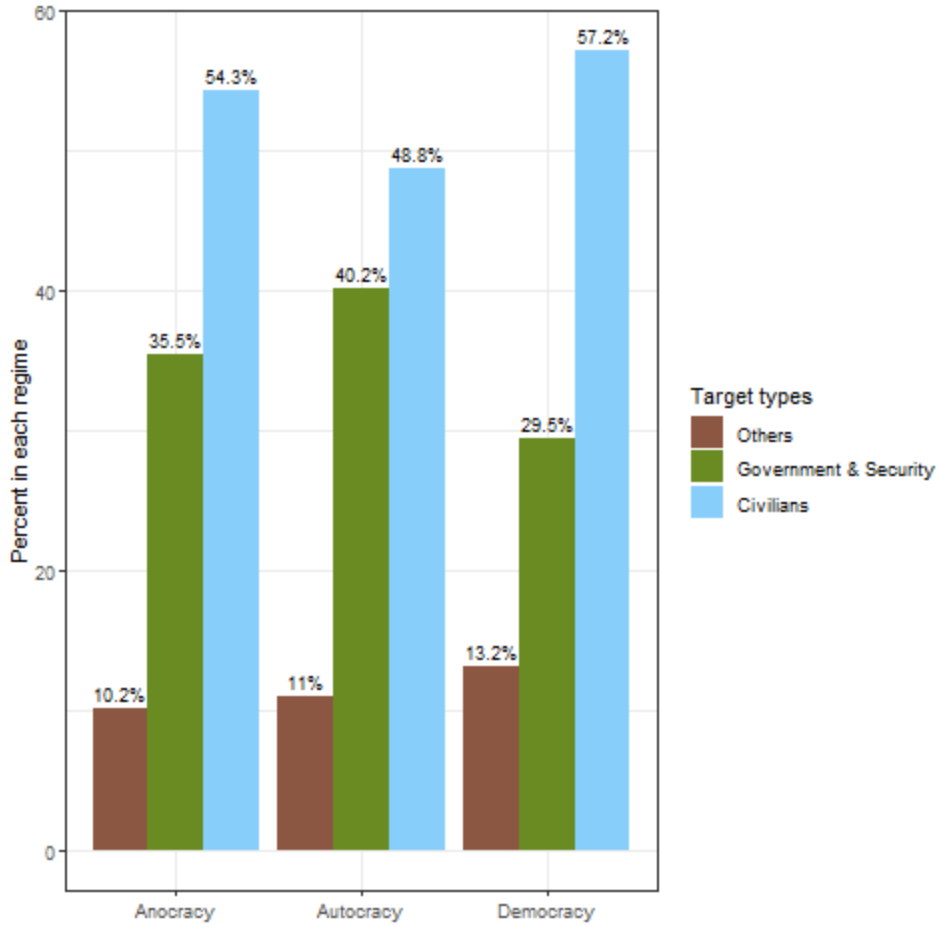


Figure 5: Terrorist Targets by Regime types (1990-2014)

To systematically test our hypotheses, we use a series of regression models, the results from which are shown in Table I. Models (1) to (4) in the table show results of the OLS regression models with country fixed effects, and include variables at both country and grid-cell level. The main model, model (5), is a multi-level model with grid-cell variables at the first level and country level variables at the second level. All models except the first include the cross-level interaction terms. Whereas models (2) to (4) are random-intercept models, model (5) includes both random intercept and slope. As described earlier, the regime type measure is categorical, with anocratic regime as the baseline category. The second main independent variable, urban, is a dichotomous variable indicating the urban and non-urban category of a grid-cell in the country.

Results in model 1 show that variables *urban* and *autocracy* are both statistically significant, but their coefficient signs are in opposite direction. A positively significant coefficient for the variable *urban* suggests that terrorists, on average, target more civilians than government officials in urban areas. This is expected. But the negatively significant coefficient for the variable *autocracy* suggests that compared to the baseline category, more government and security officials are targeted in autocratic regimes. Other variables such as conflict, population and GDP are all positive and statistically significant, suggesting that more civilians are targeted by terrorist groups in wealthier and more populous countries experiencing armed conflict.

The interaction term in models 2 through 5 is the primary variable of interest. Model 2 shows the effect of the interaction between democratic regime and urban area. The coefficient of the interaction term in model 2 is positive and statistically significant at $p<0.01$. While the variable *democratic regime* is not statistically significant in model 1, the interaction term in model 2 is positive and significant at $p<0.01$, suggesting that compared to other areas in democratic regimes, terrorists target more civilians in urban areas (H1). Model 3 shows the interaction between autocratic regimes and urban grid-cells. The coefficient for the interaction term in model 3 is negative and statistically significant at $p<0.01$. While terrorist groups target more government and security forces in autocratic regimes, as seen in model 1, they seem to do that more in rural areas. In other words, compared to democracies, we do not find more civilians targeted in the urban areas of autocratic regimes (H2). Results for the interaction term hold when includingit in model 4 that uses country dummies, and the coefficient for the term is even stronger in model 5 which uses a multi-level regression with random-intercept and slope. The better result in model 5 is expected since the random-slope in models 2 through 4 have stricter non-nested (what has stricter non-nested criteria?) criteria as they (what does they refer to here?) assume high variability and ignores

some similarities that may exist due to factors like shared borders or regions. However, when modeling both within and across differences using multi-level models, the coefficients for the interaction term become stronger (Gelman & Hill, 2007, pp. 254–258).

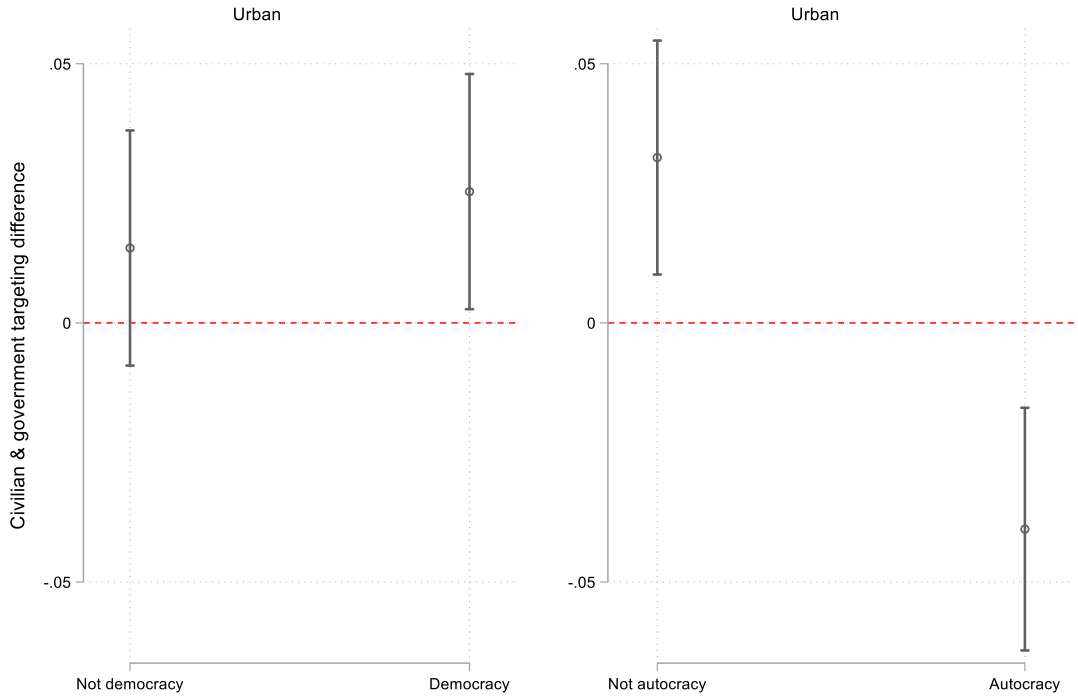
Table I: Regime type, state capacity and terrorist targeting

	cms	cms	cms	cms	cms
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Urban x Demo		0.009***		0.006***	0.011***
		(0.001)		(0.002)	(0.003)
Urban x Auto			-0.012***	-0.008***	-0.073***
			(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.004)
urban	0.003***	-0.002	0.005***	0.001	0.013
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.011)
Democratic regime	0.001	-0.001	0.001	-0.000	-0.000
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Autocratic regime	-0.009***	-0.009***	-0.007***	-0.008***	0.001
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Distance from border	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	-0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Conflict	0.139***	0.138***	0.138***	0.138***	0.042***
	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.012)
Year	-0.000***	-0.000***	-0.000***	-0.000***	-0.000***
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Country GDP (log)	0.003**	0.003**	0.004**	0.004**	0.003**
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Population (log)	0.010***	0.010***	0.010**	0.010**	0.003
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.003)
Constant	0.353***	0.358***	0.357***	0.359***	0.279**
	(0.114)	(0.114)	(0.114)	(0.114)	(0.111)
lns1_1_1					-2.123***
					(0.068)
lns1_1_2					-2.522***
					(0.071)
lnsig_e					-1.190***
					(0.001)
Country Dummy	(Included)	(Included)	(Included)	(Included)	(MLM)
AIC	643429	643389	643391	643379	641693
BIC	645203	645175	645177	645177	641864
Observation	1397274	1397274	1397274	1397274	1397274

*p<0.1 **p<0.05 ***p<0.01. Note: Table above shows results from regression models. Models (1) to (4) are OLS regression with country fixed effects, while model (5) is multi-level model with random intercept.

Figure 6 shows the predicted marginal plot from the two cross-level interaction terms in the multi-level model, model 5, in Table I. The left panel and the right panel in the figure depict the interaction of the variable *urban* with democratic and autocratic regimes respectively. As the figure suggests, civilian targeting in urban areas increases in democratic regimes compared to others and reaches statistical significance at $p<0.1$. The relationship is more pronounced for autocratic regimes, with negative slope that reaches the statistically significance of $p<0.01$. These results suggest that compared to government and security forces targeting of civilians in urban areas is clearly higher in democratic regimes, but not in autocratic regimes. Furthermore, two observations stand out. First, relatively more government and security forces seem to get targeted in less urban areas in autocratic regimes. Second, the value 0 in the variable *urban* includes not only less urban (rural) areas, but also uninhabited areas or empty space. In the next set of analyses, we check the robustness of these results and check further expectations by re-categorizing the grid-cells into urban-rural-uninhabited groupings. We also include all measures of regime type using a continuous polity scale, -10 to +10, rather than the discrete category.

Figure 6: Cross-level Interaction between Urban and Regime Type from Model 5 in Table I



Note: Confidence interval of the figure at 90%

Robustness check

We check the robustness of the above results by using the actual polity scale for regimes at the country level rather than the categorical scale of the variable we used with the models in Table I. Using a continuous policy scale that ranges from -10 for autocratic regimes to +10 for democratic regimes instead of the regime categories helps us view the effect of the interactions more holistically. We also modify the urbanization category of the grid-cells. The variable *urban*, as described earlier, represents the top 25 percentile urbanized grid-cells in a country. We further

disaggregate the non-urban category from the variable into two dummy variables, each representing rural area and the uninhabited empty space. The binary variable *rural* represents grid-cells that are less urbanized (below top 25 percentile urbanization) but greater than empty space (above bottom 10 percentile urbanization in each country). The third urbanization variable, *uninhabited land*, are grid-cells that are at the bottom 10 percentile urbanization of a country. When both rural and urban variables are included in a model, the baseline category for comparison is the *uninhabited land*.

Results from these modified variables are shown in Table II, where all other variables remain the same as the previous analyses. As in Table I, we show results from both fixed effects OLS regressions, models 1 to 3, and multi-level regression, model 4, mainly to understand how the results from complex multi-level models vary, if any, from fixed effects models that are more parsimonious and less opaque (Möhring, 2012).[7]

Models 1 and 2 in the table includes the interaction term separately, while both are included in models 3 and 4. Results for the interaction term in models 1 to 3 are similar to the result in the last model that uses multi-level regression. As expected, coefficients for the interaction terms are in the same direction as in Table I, and both are statistically significant. Interestingly, the variable *conflict* is no longer statistically significant. But the main variables of interest in these models are the interaction terms, the substantive effects of which from model 4 are shown in Figure 7.

Table II: Robustness Checks

	cms	**cms**	**cms**	**cms**
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Urban	0.001	0.002***	0.000	-0.014
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.012)
Rural	-0.005***	-0.001	-0.002	0.002
	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.004)

[7] We have included results from interaction figure from model 3 in online appendix and the results are almost identical.

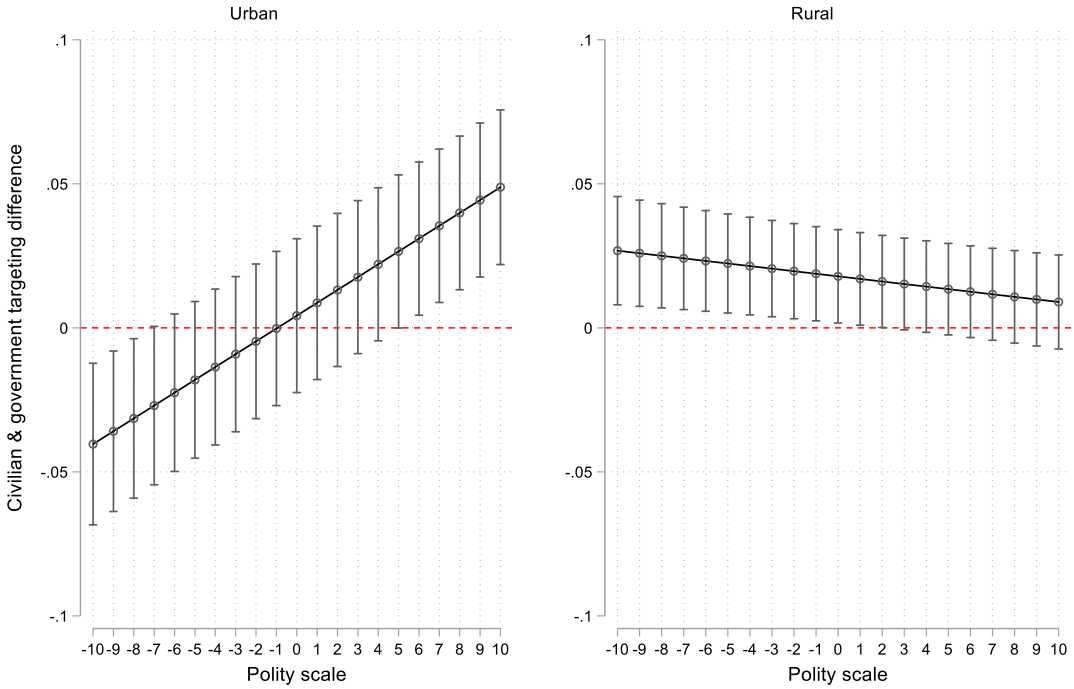
Polity	0.001***	0.001***	0.001***	-0.001
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Urban X Polity	0.001***		0.001***	0.005***
	(0.000)		(0.000)	(0.000)
Rural X Polity		-0.001***	-0.001***	-0.002***
		(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Distance from border	0.000	0.000	0.000	-0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Conflict	0.010	0.012	0.011	0.000
	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.010)
Year	-0.001***	-0.001***	-0.001***	-0.001***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
GDP (log)	0.003**	0.003**	0.003**	0.003**
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Population (log)	0.013***	0.013***	0.013***	0.005*
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.003)
Constant	0.378***	0.394***	0.392***	0.318***
	(0.113)	(0.113)	(0.113)	(0.106)
lns1_1_1				-2.025***
				(0.071)
lns1_1_2				-3.534***
				(0.108)
lns1_1_3				-2.825***
				(0.084)
lnsig_e				-1.191***
				(0.001)
Country Dummy	(included)	(Included)	(Included)	(MLM)
AIC	641465	641475	641454	639443
BIC	643227	643237	643227	639625
Observation	1396883	1396883	1396883	1396883

*p<0.1 **p<0.05 ***p<0.01. Note: Table above shows results from regression models. Models (1) to (3) are OLS regression with country fixed effects, while model (5) is multi-level model with random intercept.

The two panels in Figure 7 are produced from the cross-level interaction in model 4 in Table II. The figure depicts the conditional effect of the regime variable on urban and rural grid-cells. On the left panel of the figure, the line representing the urban grid-cell category increases with an increase in the polity scale. This suggests that terrorist groups tend to target more civilians

than government or security personnel in urban areas of a democratic country. This confirms the results from Table 1. On the contrary, in the right panel of the figure, the line representing the conditional effect of the polity variable on rural grid-cells has a negative slope. This indicates that, on average, more civilians get targeted in rural areas of authoritarian regimes, but the difference between civilian and government targets tends to narrow in the rural areas of democratic countries. While the theory we propose does not elaborate on terrorist targeting in rural areas, this result likely shows the terrorists' need to control civilians in rural areas of an authoritarian regime. It is less clear why this is more so in autocratic regimes.

Figure 7: Marginal effects of the cross-level interactions in model 4, Table II



Note: Confidence internal in the figure is at 95%

Conclusion

Do terrorists discriminate civilians and government personnel when launching an attack? Past studies have argued that terrorist groups have increasingly targeted civilians in recent years. According to this research, civilians have become more vulnerable since governments around the world have hardened other high value targets since the start of the global war on terrorism (Brandt & Sandler, 2010; Santifort et al., 2013). We contribute to this work by highlighting the strategic logic of target selection by the perpetrators of terrorist attacks at the local level in different regime contexts. We offer a new theory of terrorist target selection, arguing that on average, more civilians get targeted in the urban areas of a democratic regime where state capacity is high and civilians are generally more supportive of the government, when compared to the urban areas of autocratic regimes. In contrast, terrorist groups tend to target more government and security personnel than civilians in the urban areas of autocratic regimes. By exposing this dynamic, our study adds to an understanding of terrorist targeting, which has important policy implications.

Our study also suggests several future avenues of research. For instance, future research can explore the consequence of terrorist targeting. Studies so far are inconclusive on whether targeting civilians helps or hurts terrorist groups in achieving their political objectives. To our knowledge, all these studies have explored the possibility of consequences without modeling the regime-type distinction. Following our study, researchers in the future may have a clearer answer if they examine the consequences of terrorist targeting by disaggregating regime-types and considering local level factors. For instance, are terrorist groups in democratic countries more likely to achieve their objectives by targeting civilians?

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