

Do the Means Match the Ends?

Exploring the Connection between Terrorist Tactics & Motives

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Abstract

What explains the tremendous variation in targeting strategies between different terrorist organizations? This article examines the relationship between terrorist group objectives and strategies using a newly created data set of terrorist organizations. We hypothesize that the relative scope of a terrorist group's motives – whether they are limited or maximalist – leads groups to choose different types of attack and targeting strategies. Specifically, we argue that groups with limited aims will utilize an attrition strategy, designed to inflict persistent pain that induces a government to concede policy objectives, while groups with maximalist goals will pursue a provocation strategy, designed to achieve important process goals for the group so that the group can eventually take what they want by force. Using a newly built cross-national dataset of 69,540 attacks by 600 different terrorist organizations, we find that, indeed, groups with limited goals are more likely to use conventional weapons to attack civilian targets, while groups with maximalist goals are significantly more likely to utilize sensational weaponry and launch attacks against government targets. Because of this emphasis on sensational weaponry, attacks by maximalist groups are more lethal, despite their focus on government (rather than civilian) targets. This research has important implications for our understanding of terrorist violence, demonstrating the crucial role motives play in structuring terrorist groups' strategic incentives.

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In the last month of 2016 alone, terrorist actors around the world launched at least 30 attacks (START, 2016). What is perhaps notable about these terror attacks is their incredible variety, including: a bombing in Libya that killed 4 Libyan soldiers; an execution of a university student in Kabul; a shooting attack at a prison in Mali; the suicide bombing of a hospital in Iraq; the stabbing of a civilian outside his home in Israel; and a vehicular attack on a government complex in China. What explains this clear variation in terrorist methods and targets?

Indeed, though terrorism as a tactic of political violence is often treated as a relatively monolithic phenomenon – discontented groups either choose to use terrorism as part of their repertoire of violence or they forego terrorism in favor of guerrilla tactics and/or non-violent activism – there is in fact tremendous variation among groups that use terrorism in terms of the types of targets hit, the weaponry utilized, and their relative lethality and frequency. Some groups that use terror, such as the Zionist Irgun in Palestine or the Real IRA in Northern Ireland, focused their attacks largely on governmental targets – purposefully hitting symbols of government power. Other groups, such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka or Lashkar-e-Taiba in the Kashmir concentrate their attacks on the mass public, hitting everyday places like trains and markets, while purposefully aiming for higher casualty counts. What explains these distinct targeting strategies across different terrorist organizations?

We contend that different terrorist *motives* are crucial to understanding the divergent strategies that groups that use terror choose. Specifically, we argue that the relative *scope* of a terrorist group’s political motives – whether they are limited or maximalist – leads terrorist groups to choose different types of attack strategies. Groups with limited aims will utilize an *attrition* strategy, designed to inflict persistent pain on a society so that the government (or its citizens) decide that the issue in contention is not worth the continuing cost and concede the policy goal. In this case, terrorism is used to *coerce* states into compliance with terrorist demands by signaling considerable costs yet to come. On the

other hand, groups with maximalist aims recognize that attrition is unlikely to succeed – the costs the group inflicts will not be able to outweigh the (very high) costs the government would be forced to pay by conceding a maximalist policy goal. As such, groups with maximalist aims will instead pursue a *provocation* strategy designed to place reputational pressure on governments to respond forcefully to terrorist violence. This helps the group achieve important process goals by triggering a backlash against the government violence among potentially sympathetic audiences. This backlash (as well as the attention garnered by the attack itself) may help the group gain more recruits, impress external state sponsors, receive shelter from sympathetic civilian populations, and more. These benefits then help the group to grow in strength so that they can eventually *take what they want by force* from the adversarial government. Essentially, these groups use terrorism as part of a long-term *strategy of force* in which the primary audience is the sympathetic one. By and large, an *attrition* strategy seeks to improve the group’s bargaining position vis-a-vis the state, while a *provocation* strategy seeks to improve the group’s military position.

We argue that these two strategies manifest themselves into distinct targeting tactics. An attrition strategy is designed to *inflict costs* on an adversary while a provocation strategy is designed to *maximize benefits* that the terror group will receive in the aftermath of the attack. As such, we argue that terrorist groups seeking limited goals and pursuing an attrition strategy should, counterintuitively, be more likely to stage attacks against mass public targets rather than against government ones, because these attacks direct hurt casualty-averse civilian populations who may, in turn, pressure their governments to concede. Groups pursuing an attrition strategy are also less likely to emphasize the “sensationalism” of the attack, and as a result, will tend to use conventional weaponry such as knives, guns or sabotage equipment to carry out their attacks as efficiently as possible. Third, an attrition strategy will likely be marked by frequent, prolonged campaigns rather than sudden, one-off attacks, so as to make continued conflict costly for the state.

In contrast, groups seeking maximalist goals and pursuing a provocation

strategy will utilize very different targeting tactics. First, these groups will likely stage attacks primarily against government targets rather than mass public ones, for two key reasons. First, these government targets directly engage the state's reputation, placing more pressure on political elites to respond to terrorist violence. And second, the targets themselves have important value as a symbol of the adversary's power and influence, allowing terrorists to claim a "symbolic victory" that they can market to their potential supporters. Groups pursuing maximalist goals will also tend to place more emphasis on the relative "sensationalism" of their attacks – using weaponry that maximizes this effect such as explosives, incendiaries and perhaps even chemical or biological weaponry. This helps them garner maximum attention from potentially sympathetic actors and showcases strength, reassuring potential state sponsors. Third, these groups are also more likely to engage in sudden, unexpected attacks rather than in prolonged terrorist campaigns. This also helps garner maximum exposure for each attack, a strategy of shock and awe designed to gain recruits and public support.

In an effort to analyze variation in group tactics, we build a new cross-national dataset of 600 organizations with 69,540 attacks, spanning over a period between 1970-2015. We use different linear regression models to analyze the relationship between organizational motives and attack strategies. The results of our analyses demonstrate the accuracy of our hypotheses related to target and weapon selection and attack lethality. We find that, indeed, groups with limited goals are more likely to use conventional weapons to attack civilian targets, while groups with maximalist goals are significantly more likely to utilize sensational weaponry and launch attacks against government targets. The results do not change when we exclude cases where there was an ongoing conflict. This shows that even when disentangling the interlocking effects of terror attacks that are byproducts of an ongoing conflict, the effect of group motives on different attack and targeting strategies remain in the direction hypothesized above.

By disaggregating the potential targets of terrorist violence, this project has

important implications for the way we think about terrorist strategies. Namely, we show how terrorist groups' motives can inform their choice to engage in *attrition* versus *provocation* strategies. In the former, terrorists focus on simple, frequent, mass public attacks to coerce an enemy population into giving up the policy goal. In the latter, terrorists engage in infrequent, sensationalist attacks on targets of symbolic significance to the enemy government in order to trigger costly government responses that augment terrorists' capacity vis-a-vis the state and help them, eventually, achieve their goals by force. By exploring the role that motives (and their relative scope) play in terrorists' strategic calculus, this work provides insight into terrorist tactics and the incentives that shape them – breaking down our monolithic depiction of “terrorism” and explaining the different targeting choices by different terrorist groups over time. This can help governments to better predict terrorist behavior and preempt terrorist violence.

The rest of this paper is divided into five sections. In Section 1, we review the literature on strategies of terrorism and terrorist objectives. Section 2 then builds off this work to theorize the connection between “means” and “ends”, detailing the hypothesized strategic logic of terrorist targeting in greater detail. In the next section, we describe our basic research design, outlining our expansive cross-national dataset and our operationalization of key variables. In section 4, we present our analysis and results. The final section discusses the core implications of our findings and potential avenues for future research.

1 STRATEGIES OF TERRORISM & TERRORIST GOALS

1.1 TERRORISM AS THE WEAPON OF THE WEAK?

What is terrorism and how does it help terrorists achieve their political objectives? In politics, the word terrorist is frequently a pejorative one, used to paint one's adversaries as immoral or depraved political actors ([Hoffman](#),

2006). However, arriving at an objective definition of terrorism is critical for positivist political science research seeking to understand its use. As such, the basic definition of terrorism for this study is: violence or the threat of violence by a non-state actor directed at non-combatant targets, designed to influence an audience beyond the specific target, for some political purpose.² This is similar to the coding criteria used in the Global Terrorism Database, which requires events to be 1) intentional, 2) violent, and 3) perpetrated by non-state actors. Furthermore, attacks in the GTD must meet two of the following three criteria: 1) attack launched in pursuit of economic, social or political aims; 2) evidence of intention to convey message to larger audience; and 3) the action must be outside the context of legitimate warfare activities, particularly the prohibition against targeting non-combatants.³

But why do dissatisfied actors choose terrorism over other forms of political violence? The most widely accepted strategy underpinning terrorist violence is that terrorism is “a weapon of the weak” - a strategy of last resort for a group with poor strength of arms, little popular support and few opportunities for alternative venues in which to express grievances (Lake, 2002). As such, variations in terrorist target selection are often attributed to a logic of substitution – terrorists will attack the weakest, softest target possible (Enders and Sandler, 1993; Landes, 1978). By this logic, terrorists’ choice to focus attacks on the mass public is not really a choice at all – but, rather a necessity borne out by their military weakness. They are simply unable to hit governmental or military targets. If they were, they would adopt a more systematic rebel structure that would more directly target government capabilities (Carter, 2015b; McCormick, 2003; Merari, 1993).

²Note that this definition is agnostic to motives - groups that perpetrate guerrilla attacks may have the same motives as those who perpetrate terror attacks; what distinguishes them is who they target.

³Importantly, because distinguishing terrorism from other forms of political violence is sometimes difficult, the Global Terrorism Database contains a ‘doubt terrorism proper’ variable that indicates whether an attack listed in the database may fit better under another category of violence, such as guerrilla warfare. We conduct robustness checks of our main findings excluding these questionable cases.

However, as noted above, many terrorist groups have historically demonstrated both the motivation and ability to hit targets with *some* level of defensive fortification (e.g., attacks on embassies, police stations, airliners, government employees, etc.). Moreover, these attack patterns often vary between groups that use terror – many groups focus their violence directly on the government, while others emphasize civilian populations as their primary targets; some groups stage large, sensational attacks spaced apart, while others stage smaller attacks more frequently. These varying patterns suggest that terrorist groups consider other strategic implications of their targeting choices as well, such as the signal that different types of attacks would send to their adversaries and allies as well as the potential responses these attacks may engender.

1.2 TERRORISM AS COSTLY SIGNALING

Thus, terrorist target selection may be better understood using a logic of costly signaling (Kydd and Walter, 2006). And indeed, the political science literature has witnessed an increasing number of studies that utilize game theory to formally analyze this strategic interaction between terrorist organizations and governments (Bapat, 2006; De Mesquita, 2005b; Bueno de Mesquita and Dickson, 2007; Carter, 2015a; Siegel and Young, 2009; Siqueira and Sandler, 2006).

Most of these studies outline the relationship between governments and terrorists as follows: There exists some advantage asymmetry between the government and the terrorist group; the former enjoys a force advantage, whereas the latter has a strong information advantage over the government (McCormick, 2003). Against this backdrop, groups use terror tactics to not only force governments to incur costs, but also to signal their commitment to their cause. This suggests two different audiences that the signals are aimed to: civilians whose support and contribution (in the form of tacit compliance, sponsorship or provision of recruits) is essential for the group's survival and governments whom they aim to coerce to concede to their demands (Arce and Sandler, 2007; Kydd and Walter, 2006).

Kydd and Walter have identified five different terrorist signaling logics: attrition, intimidation, provocation, spoiling, and outbidding, each of which sends a different signal to a different audience. The two strategies most relevant for terrorists' strategic interaction with rival states are attrition and provocation - launching attacks in order to demonstrate resolve or capabilities and gain concessions (outcome goals) or to provoke costly retaliation that strengthens the terrorist group's recruitment and local support (process goals). In other words, terrorists may use their attacks in an attempt to attrit the enemy - convincing them to concede the policy goal given mounting costs - or terrorists may use their attacks purposefully to provoke the government, achieving important "process" goals as a result that strengthen the group and enable them to take what they want by force. Both strategies are considered most effective in democratic regimes (Bueno de Mesquita and Dickson, 2007; Crenshaw, 2011; Lake, 2002), who will be most susceptible to citizen or reputational pressure to respond, and, as a result, have been disproportionately targeted by terrorist attacks (Chenoweth, 2010, 2013; Enders and Sandler, 2006; Young and Findley, 2011).

In other words, depending on the underlying strategy, terrorist attacks can be seen as a message aimed at different audiences: the people the group claims to represent, the targeted population, and the international community. The signals differ accordingly: "the message sent to the population [or other supportive actors] is one of empowerment and heightened morale, which is meant to strengthen its support of the terrorist organization and encourage enlistment into its ranks...the message sent to the targeted population is meant to undermine morale, lessen confidence and sense of personal security, and spread panic..." (Ganor, 2005).

2 ESTABLISHING A MEANS-ENDS FRAMEWORK

2.1 UNDERSTANDING TARGETING CHOICES

But how do these distinct signaling logics map back on to targeting choices? Thus, far, political scientists have largely turned to other factors, aside from terrorist motives and strategy, to explain variation in terrorist target selection. Specifically, most researchers have focused on variables related to terrorist *capacity*, such as organization age (Borum and Gelles, 2005; Hoffman and McCormick, 2004), organizational capabilities (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 2001; Asal et al., 2009), proximity to operational bases (Clarke and Newman, 2006), or the relative costs of the attack (e.g. how well-defended a target is versus its operational value) (Benmelech and Berrebi, 2007; Berman and Laitin, 2008; De Mesquita, 2005a; Johnson, 2000; Juergensmeyer, 1997; Sandler and Lapan, 1988; Miskel, 2004; Powell, 2007) to explain targeting choices.

While these factors are doubtless important, and are included in our models, this focus on *capacity* rather than *motive* misses the extent to which terrorists' target selection is not necessarily an incidental function of their abilities, but also a purposeful, tactical component of an overarching strategy.

2.2 THE ROLE OF MOTIVES

While some researchers have focused on more motivational components driving terrorist target selection, such as ideology (Drake, 1998; Hoffman, 2006), religion (Israeli, 2002; Tucker, 2001; Wiktorowicz and Kaltner, 2003), or the regime type of the targeted regime (e.g. whether the targeted state is a democracy or not) (Abadie, 2006; Chenoweth, 2010; Eubank and Weinberg, 2001; Li, 2005; Schmid, 1992; Stanton, 2013), very little work has explored the way in which the group's *specific political aims* impact its targeting decisions. As such, this crucial connection between means and ends has remained underexplored. This oversight is important because abstract ideational beliefs, such as a left-

wing or religious ideology are distinct from concrete political aims. For example, left-wing and right-wing groups have distinct ideologies, but may each seek regime change. Likewise, both religious and communist groups may seek social revolution. Table 1 demonstrates this distinction.

James Piazza’s (2009) work on Islamic terrorism blends these two ap-

Table 1: Cross-Tabulation of Group Goals Across Classification

Variables	Status-Quo		Policy Change		Terr. Autonomy		Terr. Secession		Regime Change		Social Revolution		Empire	
	Total	Percent	Total	Percent	Total	Percent	Total	Percent	Total	Percent	Total	Percent	Total	Percent
Primary Class														
Miscellaneous	0	0.00%	50	0.07%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Right-wing	674	1.00%	242	0.36%	5	0.01%	3	0.00%	201	0.30%	46	0.07%	0	0.00%
Left-wing	4	0.01%	1057	1.56%	129	0.19%	181	0.27%	22377	33.06%	2251	3.33%	0	0.00%
Nationalist	836	1.24%	1531	2.26 %	3266	4.83%	13842	20.45%	784	1.16%	17	0.03%	8	0.01%
Religious	317	0.47%	288	0.43%	961	1.42%	627	0.93%	9303	13.75%	13	0.02%	8669	12.81%

proaches. In that research, Piazza investigates the claim that Islamic terrorism is more deadly than terrorism perpetrated by other types of groups. He finds that Islamic groups that use terror are only more deadly insofar as they seek “abstract / universal” rather than “strategic” goals. Piazza argues that “the primary difference between universal / abstract groups and strategic groups is that the former are distinguished by highly ambitious, abstract, complex, and nebulous goals that are driven primarily by ideology... In contrast, strategic groups have much more limited and discrete goals: the liberation of specific territory, the creation of an independent homeland for a specific ethnic group, or the overthrow of a specific government” (Piazza, 2009).

This distinction places groups with abstract/universalist goals into an ‘ideological’ category and those with more limited aims into a ‘strategic’ category. We make a sharper distinction between ideology and motive, arguing that groups seeking both limited and maximalist aims have ideological motives and, importantly, both are strategic. Groups seeking limited goals – such as a maintenance of the status quo, a policy change, or even a territorial demand for increased autonomy – are essentially seeking more tangible, realistic concessions from the state. Put simply, it is conceivable that the state could be convinced that the group’s demands (and accompanying violence) merit some

specific, concrete concession on their part. In contrast, groups with maximalist (or “abstract/universal”) goals are unlikely to convince a government to, say, give up half their territory, be overthrown and replaced with a new regime, allow a social revolution or give way to a new empire. As such, they must pursue a different strategy to achieve their aims.

In this paper, we extend a means-ends framework, arguing that, just as “the nature of a state’s primary political objective has both direct and indirect effects on the probability that it can attain that objective through the use of military force,” so too do the nature of a terrorist group’s objectives (Sullivan, 2007). Specifically, we contend that, while groups with limited goals can be effective using a strategy of attrition, groups with maximalist aims must rely on a longer-term strategy of force (in which short-term provocation plays a key role). These different strategies, in turn, necessitate distinct tactical choices surrounding target selection and, as such, have important implications for the group’s lethality over time.

2.3 A SIGNAL TO WHOM?

Whether the primary audience is the adversarial or sympathetic one, there exists a broad consensus among terrorism scholars that terrorist violence is essentially designed to be coercive, with the ultimate aim of attriting an adversary into submission. According to this logic, because terrorists are too weak to enforce their will through strength of arms, they seek instead to alter beliefs among a target audience about the terrorists’ ability to impose costs (e.g. their capabilities) and their degree of commitment to their cause (e.g. their resolve). In essence, the efficacy of terrorist violence is a function of its ability to make these powerful states *feel* weak, causing governments to give up a policy objective without actually altering the objective power balance.

However, as Fortna explains, “To be credible, [coercive] signals have to be costly... Precisely because it is less costly to attack ‘soft’ civilian targets than hardened military ones, terrorism signals military impotence rather than strength”

(Fortna, 2015). This may explain terrorist groups' frequent failures in achieving their policy goals (Abrahms, 2006; Jones and Libicki, 2008; Fortna, 2015): the persistent, painful costs inflicted on a society by terrorist violence may convince adversaries to give up non-central or minor political goals, but is unlikely to work when terrorists seek larger concessions from the state. The capacity of terrorists to hurt is simply not high enough (Schelling, 1966). Thus, terrorism as coercion is limited in its efficacy: it may work insofar as terrorists hope to achieve *limited* goals, but will likely be ineffective in achieving *maximalist* goals.

Yet, many groups that use terrorism do indeed seem to have very large, maximalist goals (Lake, 2002). Why would these groups use this strategy of terrorism if it is unlikely to be successful in achieving their aims? Groups with maximalist goals are not using terrorism in order to coerce governments to concede, but rather to coerce them to attack. In other words, terrorist groups are playing a long game (Lake, 2002).⁴ They recognize that, in the short term, their attacks are unlikely to lead to the concessions they seek, but they hope to use the state's counter-attack as way of gaining more power, which, ultimately would lead to either a better bargaining position and more concessions down the road (Lake, 2002) or help the group to simply take what it demands by force, without the conciliation of the state.

Indeed, this logic is implicit in much of the work on terrorism as a strategy of provocation, which dates back decades (Crenshaw, 1981; Fromkin, 1974; Kydd and Walter, 2006; Thornton, 1964). Terrorism (and the backlash it triggers from a government) is still a signal, but it is a signal to the sympathetic population rather than the adversarial one – aiding in recruitment, making local civilian populations more supportive, destabilizing the area, etc. – all of which makes the group stronger in the long run (despite potential short-term setbacks). Eventually, these groups hope to use this increased strength to ob-

⁴Essentially, these groups that use terror are engaging in a costly gamble - risking annihilation from a retaliating state in order to recruit more supporters that, if the group is able to survive, will ultimately strengthen the group in the long term.

tain their political objectives *without target compliance*, seizing and holding their objectives by force (Sullivan, 2007).

2.4 CONNECTING STRATEGY & TACTICS

We argue that these distinct strategies in turn lead to different tactical choices by terrorist groups, as follows. A strategy of attrition is designed to “persuade the enemy that the terrorists are strong enough to impose considerable costs if the enemy continues a particular policy” (Kydd and Walter, 2006). Thus, the more costs an organization is able to inflict, the more effective the strategy will be. As such, terrorists pursuing an attrition strategy will seek to maximize costs – that is, they will seek to maximize civilian casualties. The most effective way of doing this is to directly target everyday places frequented by the mass public. We hypothesize that groups with limited aims will attack mass public targets more than they will attack government targets. As such, in contrast to existing theories of civilian targeting (Abrahms, 2006), we contend that groups with limited aims are paradoxically more likely to target civilians than groups with maximalist aims. In addition, attrition strategies are designed to progress over time – continually inflicting persistent pain on the society. Thus, we also hypothesize that groups with limited aims will pursue frequent attacks spaced closed together. In order to achieve this, each individual attack must be smaller in scope and cost. This leads to the hypothesis that groups with limited aims will utilize more simple, conventional weaponry, such as guns or knives.

A strategy of provocation, in contrast, is designed to “induce the enemy to respond to terrorism with indiscriminate violence, which radicalizes the population and moves them to support the terrorists” (Kydd and Walter, 2006). Thus, a provocation strategy requires the adversary’s reputation to be engaged to such an extent that they essentially must respond with force, becoming their own worst enemy in the process. As such, we hypothesize that groups with maximalist aims will focus their attacks on government targets that directly represent the state, as the targeting of these sites places more pressure on

states to respond. Likewise, government targets have the additional advantage of being emblematic of the enemy state – allowing groups that use terror to tout “symbolic victories” to sympathetic populations and sponsors. Because a provocation strategy relies on media attention in order to engage the adversary’s reputation, terrorist groups using this strategy will need to use more sensational tactics. As such, we hypothesize that groups with maximalist aims are more likely to use “sensational” weapons such as bombs or other incendiaries that will garner the most media attention. Likewise, groups will get maximum media attention to the extent that their attacks are staged further apart (e.g. there is not an acculturation effect). Thus, groups with maximalist aims will stage attacks further apart than groups with limited aims. The implications of these distinct targeting tactics for the lethality of the terror group are, however, unclear. For instance, it is conceivable that groups with limited aims will be more lethal in the short-term because of their increased emphasis on targeting civilian populations. Yet, the sensational weapons utilized by groups with maximalist goals may lead them to be more lethal, because of the increased destructive power of this type of weaponry.

- H1: Terrorist groups with limited aims will attack more mass public targets, whereas groups with maximalist aims will attack more government ones.
- H2: Terrorist groups with limited aims will use more conventional – cheap and easy to use – weaponry in their attacks than more expensive (but potentially more sensational) tools. In contrast, terrorist groups with maximalist aims will use more sensational weaponry in their attacks.
- H3: (a) Attacks of terrorist groups with limited aims will be less lethal than those with maximalist aims. (b) Attacks of terrorist groups with limited aims will be more lethal than those with maximalist aims.
- H4: Terrorist groups with limited aims will launch attacks more frequently (spaced closer together) than groups with maximalist aims.

3 DATA

To analyze these hypotheses, we compiled a new cross-national dataset of 600 terrorist organizations. Our data set includes organizations that are cross-listed in multiple datasets (GTD ([START, 2016](#)), TORG-Crosswalk ([Asal, Cousins and Gleditsch, 2015](#)) and Jones & Libicki ([Jones and Libicki, 2008](#))) and contains information about 69,540 terror attacks perpetrated by 600 terrorist groups for the time period 1970-2015.⁵ In the Appendix, we provide a detailed codebook that outlines our selection criteria, the total list of organizations included in the empirical analyses, and other relevant descriptive statistics about the dataset.

3.1 MOTIVE

Our main independent variable is a measure of motive at the organizational level, which we create using the classification of Jones & Libicki's (2008) "Group Goals" variable. The Jones & Libicki dataset, which includes 648 militant groups (of which 333 match our groups), codes six different group goals: empire, policy changes, regime changes, social revolution, status-quo, and territorial changes. We split the territorial change goal into two different goals – autonomy and secession, to further refine this category. These goals range from narrow to broad, creating a seven-level classification (see the Codebook in the Appendix for additional details). For example, status quo maintenance, policy aims and certain territorial goals (such as autonomy) are fundamentally limited in scope. On the other hand, secessionist territorial goals, plans for regime change, social revolutions or the establishment of a new empire are maximalist in nature. For the remaining 667 organizations in our dataset, we then manually coded the "Group Motive" variable (as well as additional

⁵Several types of attacks and organizations are not included in the dataset given their theoretical irrelevance for the research question at hand: (a) those organizations that have only carried out one attack throughout their existence, (b) those organizations for whom all their attacks focused on abortion clinics, and (c) those organizations for whom all their attacks focused on other terror or rebel groups.

controls) using multiple primary and secondary sources.⁶ In line with our theoretical framework, we divide the organizations into two groups: those that seek maximalist goals and those that seek more limited goals. The goals are then listed as a range from the most limited to the most maximalist as follows: Status-quo, Policy Changes, Territorial Changes (Autonomy), Territorial Changes (Secession), Regime Changes, Social Revolution, and Empire. The first three are categorized as limited, whereas the latter four are categorized as ambitious. Drawn from this classification, *Motive* is a time-invariant variable that indicates an organization with “maximalist goals” if it takes a value of 1 and an organization with “limited goals” otherwise.

3.2 DEPENDENT VARIABLES: DEFINING TERRORIST STRATEGIES

We use a variety of indicators that capture our conceptual framework for the different strategies employed by these organizations: target type, weapon type, lethality and attack frequency.

Target Type: The target type is a binary variable based on the classifications, taken from the GTD’s “target/victim type” variable, which consists of 22 different categories and various subcategories. We divide these different categories into two groups based on our definition of ‘government’ and ‘civilian’ targets. *Target Type* is the first dependent variable, receiving the value of 1 if the target is a “government target” and 0 otherwise. Table 2 shows our classification strategy, with details about the breakdown of total count and percent of cases in each category in the Appendix (1.3).

Weapon Type: The weapon type is a binary variable based on the classifications, taken from the GTD’s “weapon type” variable, consisting of 13 different categories. Similar to target choice, we divide these different categories into two groups based on our definition of ‘sensational’ and ‘conventional’ weapons. Our definition of conventional here is different from the general us-

⁶Some of the consulted sources include (Ciment, 2015; Gerringer, 2002; Guidère, 2012; Schmid, 2011; on *Combatting Terrorism and of America*, 1988; Weinberg, Pedahzur and Perliger, 2008)

Table 2: TARGET TYPE CLASSIFICATION

Target Type	Gov't	Civil
Airports and Aircrafts		✓
Business (Type 1)	✓	
<i>Gas/Oil, Bank/Commerce, Multinational Corporation Industrial/Textiles/Factory, Medical/Pharmaceutical Mining/Construction, Private Security Company</i>		
Business (Type 2)		✓
<i>Restaurant/Bar/Cafe, Retail/Grocery/Bakery Hotel/Resort, Entertainment/Cultural/Stadium/Casino, Farm/Ranch</i>		
Demilitarized Zone	✓	
Educational Institutions		✓
Food or Water Supplies		✓
Government (Diplomatic)	✓	
Government (General)	✓	
Journalists and Media	✓	
Maritime	✓	
Military	✓	
NGO		✓
Other (Ambulance, Fire Fighter/Truck, Refugee Camp)		✓
Police	✓	
Private Citizens and Property (Type 1)	✓	
<i>Memorial/Cemetery/Monument, Political Party Member/Rally</i>		
Private Citizens and Property (Type 2)		✓
<i>Civilians, Students, Race/Ethnicity, Farmer, Labor Union, Protester Passenger Vehicles, Marketplace/Plaza/Square, Village/City/Town/Suburb House/Residence, Procession/Gathering, Public Areas, Cultural Center</i>		
Religious Figures and Institutions		✓
Telecommunication	✓	
Tourists		✓
Transportation (other than aviation)		✓
Utilities	✓	
Violent Political Parties	✓	

age of this term in the literature, which categorizes anything that is not a WMD (biological, chemical or nuclear weapon) as a conventional weapon. Conventional, in our case, refers to basic weaponry that is used in many types of conflict, such as guns, knives or sabotage equipment. Sensational weapons refer to all explosive weapons - including bombs, rockets, incendiaries - as well as WMDs. *Weapon Type* is thus the second dependent variable, receiving the value of 1 if the weapon used in the attack is a “sensational weapon” and 0 otherwise. Table 3 shows our classification strategy, with details about the breakdown of total count and percent of cases in each category in the Appendix (1.4).

Table 3: WEAPON TYPE CLASSIFICATION

Weapon Type	Sensational	Conventional
Biological	✓	
Chemical	✓	
Explosives/Bombs/Dynamite	✓	
Fake Weapons		✓
Firearms		✓
Incendiary	✓	
Melee		✓
Nuclear	✓	
Radiological	✓	
Sabotage Equipment		✓
Vehicle		✓

Lethality: The third dependent variable *Lethality* is a count variable that measures the number of killed and wounded in any given attack. This variable is built using the sum of GTD’s “number of killed” and “number of wounded” variables. High values on this metric are indicative of organizations that tend to produce highly lethal attacks.

Attack Frequency: The dependent variable *Attack Frequency*, is the average number of days between each attack date per organization. To construct this variable, we first calculated the date difference between each attack for every organization and then averaged it over the number of attacks. High values on

this variable refer to organizations that aim to inflict persistent pain and are less concerned about the “surprise effect” that infrequent attacks produce.

3.3 CONTROL VARIABLES

We use various organization level and event level variables to control for other potential factors that could influence our results. We code organization-level *Primary Classification* variable as a proxy for different terrorist group ideology types. The five categories are “Miscellaneous”⁷, “Left-wing”, “Right-wing”, “Nationalist” and “Religious” groups. Another organization level variable we control for is the *Peak Strength* of the group, which is a four-level categorical variable that measures the size of the terrorist group at its peak strength using its membership base. The size thresholds are: “10s”, “100s”, “1000s”, “10000s”. Third, to control for the effect of ongoing conflicts, we include a dummy variable *Conflict* at the event level, indicating the presence of a conflict in the country where the attack took place during that year. We also include a *Polity* measure to account for variance in the regime types of the attacked countries.

Finally, we code for two similar variables to measure organizational age at two different levels. The first one - *Age at Period t* , is an event-level count variable that measures the age of the terrorist organization in years at any given attack period. It is calculated by subtracting the year of the first attack from each subsequent attack of an organization ($t_i - t_0$). The second variable - *Overall Age*, is a time-invariant, organization-level variable that measures the overall age of the organization until its collapse or until present time if it still exists. It is calculated by subtracting the founding year of the organization from either the disintegration year, if the organization is currently inactive, or from 2015, if the organization is still active. We use this last variable only for the analysis of effect of the fourth dependent variable, *Attack Frequency*.

⁷There are very few organizations in this category, but they are mainly organizations that did not fit neatly into one of the other four categories, such as mafias or gangs.

4 DATA ANALYSIS

This section tests our hypotheses by analyzing variation in tactics between the organizations in our dataset across all of the attacks they launch. We use two different versions of our dataset to run our analyses. The first three hypotheses are tested using the event level data from the general dataset. The unit of analysis in this version of the dataset is the terror attacks perpetrated by 600 terrorist organizations (n=69,540) observed over a time period between 1970-2015. The final hypothesis is tested using a subsetting version of the dataset that only includes organization level variables. The unit of analysis in this version of the dataset is terrorist organizations (n=600). Because our dependent variable in the last hypothesis (*Attack Frequency*) is a time-invariant variable, we are only using the reduced form of the data, so as not to conflate our results. Tables 4 and 5 provide summary statistics for all of the continuous and categorical variables utilized in our analyses. Tables with additional summary statistics are also provided in the Appendix.⁸

Table 4: Summary statistics (Continuous Variables)

Name	Mean	Median	Std.Dev.	Range	N
<i>Organization Level Variables</i>					
Organizational Age (overall age in years)	6.89	3.00	9.2	[0, 45]	600
Attack Frequency (average number of days)	382.48	112.29	800.7364	[0, 9384]	600
Number of attacks (overall number per organization)	69.54	5.00	335.18	[1, 5314]	600
<i>Event Level Variables</i>					
Organizational age (at the time of the attack)	10.87	8.00	9.77	[0, 45]	69,540
Polity Score (attacked countries)	5.177	7.00	4.77	[-10, 10]	64,049
Lethality (number of killed and wounded per attack)	6.426	1.00	36.42589	[0, 5513]	64,606

⁸In Table 4, our analysis uses a group N of 600. This is because the manual coding of the *Motive* variable for the remaining 400 groups is currently underway. These organizations represent only 2.67% of all events in our dataset.

Table 5: Summary statistics (Categorical Variables)

Variables	Organizations		Events	
	<i>Total</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Peak Strength				
10s	159	34.57	2575	4.96
100s	167	36.30	11036	21.24
1000s	90	19.57	23581	45.90
10000s	44	9.57	14496	27.90
Primary Classification				
Miscellaneous	9	1.52	51	0.08
Right-wing	37	6.24	1171	1.73
Left-wing	174	29.34	26005	38.42
Nationalist	245	41.32	20285	26.97
Religious	128	21.59	20178	29.81
Group Goals				
Status-Quo	23	3.90	1831	2.71
Policy Change	108	18.31	3168	4.68
Territorial Change (Autonomy)	59	10.00	4361	6.44
Territorial Change (Secession)	137	23.22	14653	21.65
Regime Change	181	30.68	32665	48.26
Social Revolution	47	7.97	2327	3.49
Empire	35	5.93	8677	12.82
Conflict Existence				
Wartime	492	49.30	58112	83.58
Peacetime	506	50.70	11416	16.42

4.1 GROUP DIFFERENCES

As a first step in our analyses, we calculated the difference in proportions for the first two dependent variables (*Target Type* and *Weapon Type*) and the difference-in-means for the third and fourth dependent variables (*Lethality* and *Attack Frequency*). The contingency tables 6 and 7 show the counts and percent at each combination of our *Motive* variable with *Target Type* and *Weapon Type* variables. Basic t-tests show that we can reject the null hypothesis of no difference between the two groups for target and weapon choice ($p < .001$ in both cases). Similarly, the difference-in-means tests for the *Lethality* variable between the two groups also demonstrate that there is a significant difference between the two group averages ($p < .001$). However, the t-test results for the *Attack Frequency* shows no significant difference between the two groups.

Table 6: Contingency Table (Target Type)

Motive	Target Type	
	Civilian Target	Government Target
Limited	3,113 (0.05%)	5,001 (0.08%)
Maximalist	14,255 (0.24%)	37,674 (0.63%)

Table 7: Contingency Table (Weapon Type)

Motive	Weapon Type	
	Conventional	Sensational
Limited	4,305 (0.07%)	4,179 (0.06%)
Maximalist	22,992 (0.38%)	29,660 (0.49%)

To further explore the relationship between terrorist organizations' motives and various terrorist strategies, we run a set of models using a Logistic Regression and an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) estimator on event-level data. Given

that in the first two models, we have binary dependent variables (*Target Type* and *Weapon Type*), we use logistic regressions on our full dataset. The third model uses an OLS regression to estimate the effect of the *Motive* on *Lethality* using the full dataset. Finally, our fourth model uses an OLS to estimate the effect of the *Attack Frequency* using the subsetting organizational-level data.

4.2 REGRESSION MODEL RESULTS

Table 8 presents the results of the four regression models. The effect of our main explanatory variable is statistically significant across the first three models. Table 9 lists the odds-ratios and their confidence intervals for the first model. Model I shows that, organizations with maximalist goals are significantly more likely to focus on more government targets than civilian targets, supporting our Hypothesis 1. After controlling for a variety of factors, the log odds ratio of hitting government targets for maximalist groups vs. minimalist groups is 0.286 [0.224, 0.349].

The age of the organization at the time of the attack is statistically significant at the 0.05% level, indicating that the longer a terrorist organization exists, the more it will focus on government targets. At the same time, *Polity* score is negatively associated with target type, suggesting democracies on average experience less attacks on government targets, compared to civilian targets. The coefficient for conflict existence is insignificant for target selection, indicating that target selection does not vary significantly based on whether the targeted country is currently experiencing conflict or not. Compared to the base line group of right-wing organizations, the odds of hitting government targets are 3 times higher for left-wing organizations and approximately 2 times higher for nationalist and religious organizations. Those organizations that have a member base of thousands are less likely to hit government targets than those with smaller base, which indicates that stronger groups are, surprisingly, more likely to hit easier targets. This suggests, indeed, that target selection is less

Table 8: Linear Models

	<i>Dependent variables:</i>			
	Target Type	Weapon Type	Lethality	Attack Frequency
	<i>Logistic</i> (1)	<i>Logistic</i> (2)	<i>OLS</i> (3)	<i>OLS</i> (4)
Motive	0.286*** (0.032)	0.242*** (0.030)	1.172** (0.562)	27.281 (60.758)
Polity	-0.022*** (0.003)	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.107** (0.045)	
Conflict	-0.007 (0.033)	-0.829*** (0.031)	-0.716 (0.552)	
Age at Period t	0.003** (0.001)	0.014*** (0.001)	-0.083*** (0.020)	
Overall Age				10.795*** (2.720)
Peak Strength (100s)	-0.024 (0.058)	-0.630*** (0.056)	-0.481 (0.951)	-5.697 (68.699)
Peak Strength (1000s)	-0.238*** (0.057)	-0.901*** (0.055)	2.105** (0.954)	-133.691 (83.382)
Peak Strength (10000s)	0.008 (0.060)	-1.027*** (0.058)	4.793*** (1.010)	-194.988* (104.428)
Primary Class (Religious)	0.700*** (0.087)	1.570*** (0.103)	4.360*** (1.554)	28.684 (132.125)
Primary Class (Nationalist)	0.787*** (0.083)	1.805*** (0.099)	-2.418 (1.485)	32.168 (120.450)
Primary Class (Left-wing)	1.124*** (0.085)	1.480*** (0.101)	-4.455*** (1.528)	30.003 (125.436)
Primary Class (Miscellaneous)	0.856 (1.228)	11.063 (66.809)	-5.120 (23.018)	759.477 (590.711)
Constant	0.046 (0.094)	-0.228** (0.108)	6.710*** (1.649)	191.046 (119.221)
Observations	41,582	42,757	43,818	459
R ²			0.007	0.043
Adjusted R ²			0.007	0.024
Log Likelihood	-23,880.990	-28,080.990		
Akaike Inf. Crit.	47,785.980	56,185.990		
Residual Std. Error			39.766 (df = 43806)	578.515 (df = 449)
F Statistic			27.777*** (df = 11; 43806)	2.266** (df = 9; 449)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

tied to capacity and more tied to motive. Performed Wald-tests also indicate that the overall effect of *Primary Classification* and *Peak Strength* variables are statistically significant.

Similarly, in Model 2, *Motive* variable is positive and statistically significant,

Table 9: Odds-Ratios & Confidence Intervals: Target Type

	OR	2.5 %	97.5 %
Motive	1.332***	1.251	1.417
Polity	0.979***	0.973	0.984
Conflict	0.993	0.931	1.059
Age at Period t	1.003**	1.000	1.005
Peak Strength (100s)	0.977	0.872	1.093
Peak Strength (1000s)	0.788***	0.704	0.881
Peak Strength (10000s)	1.008	0.895	1.134
Primary Class (Religious)	2.015***	1.700	2.390
Primary Class (Nationalist)	2.196***	1.868	2.582
Primary Class (Left-wing)	3.077***	2.603	3.639
Primary Class (Miscellaneous)	2.353	0.224	50.848

indicating that organizations with maximalist goals prefer to use sensational weapons in their attacks. The log odds ratio of using sensational weapons for maximalist groups vs. minimalist groups is 0.242 [0.183, 0.301]. Table 10 lists the odds-ratios and their confidence intervals for the second model.

The age of the organization at the time of the attack is again statistically significant. The more mature an organization is at the time of the attack, the more it will prefer sensational weapons. For a one year increase in the age of the organization, the odds of using sensational weapons (versus conventional weapons) increase by a factor of 1.01. The attacked country's regime type has no effect on the weapons used at the time of an attack. When the country where the terrorist attack is taking place is undergoing a conflict, the probability of using sensational weapons decreases in favor of conventional weapons. This makes sense because there is likely a larger availability of conventional

Table 10: Odds-Ratios & Confidence Intervals: Weapon Type

	OR	2.5 %	97.5 %
Motive	1.274***	1.201	1.352
Polity	0.999	0.995	1.004
Conflict	0.436***	0.410	0.464
Age	1.014***	1.012	1.016
Peak Strength (100s)	0.533***	0.477	0.594
Peak Strength (1000s)	0.406***	0.364	0.453
Peak Strength (10000s)	0.358***	0.320	0.401
Primary Class (Religious)	4.806***	3.941	5.896
Primary Class (Nationalist)	6.083***	5.020	7.415
Primary Class (Left-wing)	4.392***	3.613	5.371

weapons in conflict societies. The odds of terrorist groups using sensational weapons are 6 times higher for nationalist organizations, 5 times higher for religious organizations, and approximately 4 times higher for left-wing organizations, using right-wing organizations as a baseline. Those organizations that have a larger member base are more likely to use conventional weapons than those with smaller base.

Results of the OLS regression in the third model suggest that organizations with maximalist goals are on average more lethal than organizations with limited goals. Thus, this result suggests that hypothesis 3a is correct - groups with maximalist goals, using sensational weaponry, are more lethal than those with limited goals, despite limited groups' focus on attacking the mass public. Democracies on average experience less lethal attacks than more restrictive regime types. Thus, even though democracies are more likely to have their civilians targeted in attacks, each attack is, on average, less lethal. A slightly counter-intuitive coefficient here is the *Age at Period t* variable: older organizations tend to produce less lethal attacks than newly formed organizations, although the effect is very small. As expected, organizations with larger membership base are on average more likely to produce deadlier attacks. Finally,

the results show that groups with different ideological bases have differing levels of lethality: while religious organizations are more likely to carry out high lethality attacks, this effect is reversed for left-wing organizations.

Our final model, which is based on a smaller sample of our original dataset, suggests none of the variables used, except for the overall age of the organization, is associated with the frequency of the attacks. We think this lack of effect is a result of the relatively small number of cases used in the subsetted data. The fourth model might also be improved by using a better model specification than what we currently have.

5 DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Our findings indicate that, indeed, different terrorist motives are crucial to understanding the strategies and tactics of terrorist organizations. Specifically, we find that the relative scope of a terrorist groups' political motives – whether they are limited or maximalist – leads terrorist groups to choose different types of attack strategies.

Groups with limited aims utilize an attrition strategy designed to inflict costs on an adversary by staging attacks against mass public targets rather than against government ones. Moreover, we find that groups with limited aims are less likely to emphasize the “sensationalism” of the attack, and, as a result, are significantly more likely to use conventional weaponry such as knives, guns or sabotage equipment to carry out their attacks as efficiently as possible. However, despite their focus on attacking civilian populations, these groups are actually significantly less lethal than maximalist groups, perhaps because this type of weaponry is not as effective at killing as many people at one time as other more “sensational” weapon types.

In contrast, we find that groups with maximalist goals are more likely to use a provocation strategy designed to maximize benefits that the terror group will receive in the aftermath of the attack. First, we find that these groups

are significantly more likely to stage attacks primarily against symbolic government targets rather than mass public ones. We argue that this is because these targets directly engage the state's reputation, placing more pressure on political elites to respond to terrorist violence. In addition, these types of government targets have important symbolic value, allowing terrorists to claim a "symbolic victory" that they can market to their supporters. We also find that groups with maximalist goals are significantly more likely to emphasize the relative "sensationalism" of their attacks – using weaponry that maximizes this effect such as explosives, incendiaries and even weapons of mass destruction. We contend that these forms of weaponry are utilized because they are more helpful for terrorists seeking to garner maximum attention from potentially sympathetic actors and showcase strength to potential state sponsors. Perhaps because of this focus on sensational weapons, these groups are also more lethal than groups with limited aims, despite their focus on government rather than civilian targets.

Our final hypothesis, however, regarding the frequency of the terrorist attacks was not supported in the current model. There were no significant differences in attack frequency between groups with limited versus maximalist aims. We had hypothesized that an attrition strategy would necessitate more frequent attacks over time, whereas a provocation strategy would benefit from sudden, unexpected attacks that occur further apart. We did not find evidence for this; however, this may be due to poor model specification and is an important future avenue for research.

In sum, this project has shown how terrorist groups' motives play a critical role in terrorists' choice to engage in attrition versus provocation strategies, above and beyond the capabilities of the terror organization. By exploring the role that motives (and their relative scope) play in terrorists' strategic calculus, this work provides important insight into terrorist tactics and the incentives that shape them – breaking down our monolithic depiction of 'terrorism' and explaining the different targeting choices by different terrorist groups over time.

Specifically, these results have important implications for policy practitioners seeking to protect their societies from terrorist violence. First, weapons (and, therefore, weapons control) matters. We find that groups using sensationalist weaponry are likely to kill more people than groups using conventional weapons - despite the fact that groups using sensationalist weapons are much more likely to focus their attacks on symbolic buildings rather than crowded public spaces. Second, capacity is not as good of an indicator as motive in signaling the likely targets of terrorist violence. In our data, we find that low capacity groups are actually more likely to hit government targets than are high capacity groups. This is likely because motive is a much stronger predictor of target selection than capacity. Finally, groups with limited aims are potentially more deadly to civilian populations. In other words, groups with more limited goals are not necessarily less dangerous than those with maximalist aims; they cause less fatalities, but the fatalities they do cause are overwhelmingly civilian rather than governmental or military. These and other insights can help governments to better predict terrorist behavior and preempt terrorist violence.

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