



Provoking local ethnic violence – A global study on ethnic polarization and terrorist targeting



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ABSTRACT

This article theorizes and empirically investigates the link between ethnic divisions and terrorist attacks on a local scale. We argue that terrorists in ethnic contexts can use two separate provocation strategies: one targeting the government and one targeting opposing ethnic groups in order to stir up ethnic conflict. Following the second strategy, terrorists should target especially highly polarized localities, which are more prone to an escalation of ethnic conflict. Empirically, we suggest an innovative approach to estimate ethnic division indices at sub-national level, using 55×55 km grid cells as the unit of observation. Our empirical analysis uses negative binomial regression models including a spatially lagged dependent variable to account for spatial autocorrelation. The analysis reveals that, from 2002 to 2014, areas with high levels of ethnic polarization encountered more terrorist attacks. The results are robust for different model specifications and ethnic polarization remains the most robust ethnic predictor. We conclude that the pattern of terrorist attacks is consistent with our argument that terrorism can be used as a strategy for local ethnic provocation.

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Introduction

In this article, we theorize and empirically investigate the link between local ethnic division and terrorist attacks. Recently, the study of the role of ethnic groups in conflicts has experienced an upsurge. Ethnic groups were found to be influential in the onset (Cederman, Wimmer, & Min, 2010), intensity (Eck, 2009), duration (Wucherpfennig, Metternich, Cederman, & Gleditsch, 2011), and the use of violence against civilians in civil war (Fjelde & Hultman, 2014) to name just a few. However, the study of terrorism has not, yet, engaged in an equally thorough scrutiny of the role of ethnicity (McAllister & Schmid, 2011).

On a macro level several studies found that the emergence of terrorism is linked to some of the same variables as the emergence of ethnic civil wars and armed conflicts. For instance, terrorism seems to be more likely in the presence of excluded and concentrated ethnic groups (Arva & Piazza, 2016; Choi & Piazza, 2016) and ethnically diverse countries (Basuchoudhary & Shughart, 2010; Piazza, 2008b), although the effects of variables like the ethno-

linguistic fractionalization index (ELF) and ethno-linguistic polarization may depend on the ideological background of terrorist groups (Kis-Katos, Liebert, & Schulze, 2014).

To our knowledge there is currently only one global disaggregated study on terrorism that accounts for the influence of ethnicity at least as a control variable. Nemeth, Mauslein, and Stapley (2014) investigate the covariates of terrorist attacks on a local level and control for ethnic diversity, measured as the number of ethnic groups present. They find that ethnic diversity only matters in democratic countries from which they infer that ethnic diversity as a predictor of targeting is highly context specific as it produces competition among ethnic groups only in democratic countries. However, the authors do not engage with theories of ethnic conflict (which favor polarization instead of ethnic diversity as predictor of conflict); nor does the paper provide an adequate theoretical link between risk factors of ethnic conflict and terrorism.

In this article we aim for more clarity in studying the connection between ethnicity and terrorism. First, we argue that local competition among ethnic groups is insufficient in explaining terrorism. Terrorists often attack targets based on strategic considerations and not on mere spatial proximity. Instead we argue that terrorists can take advantage of local ethnic conflict. While it is often observed that terrorists exploit the consequences of violent

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backlashes perpetrated by government armed forces, we think they can equally benefit from local violence. Therefore, provoking local ethnic or religious organizations and stirring up ethnic violence against the terrorists' own ethnic constituency can have the same effect as an overblown government reaction, i.e. increase support for the terrorists. For that reason, we argue that terrorists will target areas that have a high propensity to escalate into ethnic conflict. The recent literature and empirical findings on ethnic violence carried out especially at local levels suggest that ethnically polarized areas are more prone to experience violence. Therefore, we assess our argument with a global study based on disaggregated data on terrorist attacks as well as ethnic division indices measured at a local scale. Using negative binomial regression models, we find that high values of ethnic polarization are associated with a higher expected number of terrorist attacks and our results are robust to different model specifications. These findings have important policy implications. If terrorists do not only seek to provoke the government but also local ethnic groups, counter-terrorism in ethnic contexts needs to also countervail this strategy of inciting ethnic conflict in order to be effective.

Terrorism as provocation

In our view terrorism is best understood as a subset of violent strategies designed to reach a political goal. We follow [Kydd and Walter \(2006\)](#) and define terrorism as the “deliberate targeting of civilians by non-state actors to attain political goals”. The focus on violence against civilians separates terrorism from other violent strategies in conflict. Attacks on government officials and attacks on military facilities, which are sometimes subsumed under the heading of terrorism, may in fact follow very different strategic reasoning and have a differing potential for provocation (e.g. [Carter, 2016](#); [Stanton, 2013](#)).

From this definition it follows that terrorism is a strategy of low costs, low risk and low military impact. The strategic rationale of this sort of terrorism is, therefore, seldom to wear down the enemy militarily but more often to signal a message to an audience, either the government or a civilian population ([Kydd & Walter, 2006](#), p. 50). While most authors agree that terrorism is meant to be first and foremost a signal, the literature distinguishes several distinct signaling strategies. For instance, [Kydd and Walter \(2006](#), p. 51) identify five different logics of terrorism: attrition, intimidation, provocation, spoiling, and outbidding. In this paper we will concentrate especially on provocation, which is frequently cited as one of the most important terrorist strategies ([Fromkin, 1975](#); [Kydd & Walter, 2006](#)).

Provocation is generally used as a strategy with the intent to increase support for the terrorists from the population. To that end terrorists attack in order to provoke a violent, indiscriminate backlash by the government that disproportionately hurts the innocent among the civilian population. The more indiscriminate the government's response, i.e. the more innocent people have to suffer from the government reaction, the more people will come to the conclusion that fighting the government is inevitable ([Kalyvas, 2006](#)). The government reaction can, thus, help the terrorists to overcome their collective action dilemma and make support for the terrorists more likely ([Kalyvas & Kocher, 2007](#)). In addition, an indiscriminate reaction can reveal information about the government. If the government deliberately chooses indiscriminate repression, the population may take this as a signal that the government is unconcerned with their welfare which pushes them further into the direction of violent opposition ([Bueno De Mesquita & Dickson, 2007](#)).

In the context of ethnic conflicts, the provocation strategy is essentially designed to provoke a government backlash against the

terrorists' ethnic group. Since ethnic groups often do not have a strong coherent identity before a conflict, the provocation strategy can be used as a powerful instrument to create a group identity or to increase group cohesion ([Byman, 1998](#); [Goodwin, 2006](#)). Yet, provocation strategies of this kind can be found in many places. Terrorist groups such as the *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* (ETA) in Spain, the *Rote Armee Fraktion* (RAF) in Germany, the *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) in Algeria and many others sought to target governments in order to provoke a violent backlash. The empirical literature on terrorism seems to confirm that terrorist attacks can be successful in provoking governments ([Piazza & Walsh, 2009](#); [Robison, 2009](#)). Although recent studies point out that provocation may work better when targeting governments with low bureaucratic capacities ([Blankenship, 2016](#)) and when not targeting civilians ([Carter, 2016](#)).

However, so far, accounts on the provocation strategy mostly only concentrate on the potential provocation of the government and fail to consider other targets of provocation. Yet, terrorists may equally seek to incite reactions from non-state actors like ethnic or religious organizations.

We argue that terrorists can seek to provoke members of ethnic groups in order to incite local violence. From the terrorists' point of view, stirring up ethnic violence on a local level has the same logic as provoking the government. If, for instance, terrorists target the places of worship of an opposing ethnic or religious group, they may hope to produce riots and pogroms against their own constituency with the effect that individuals of their own group will be more inclined to actively join the conflict on their side. Depending on the strength of the terrorists and pre-existing patterns of conflict, the provocation of local violence may prove much less difficult and more effective than provoking the government. First, attacking important government targets may be too difficult to reach for terrorists. If the terrorist organization is fighting a strong state or if the terrorist organization is very weak it may be cost-efficient for terrorists to aim for a more localized reaction. Second and related to the first point, the impact of a terrorist attack will be felt more strongly on a local level than within a government. Terrorism lives from the implicit threat that the terrorists can strike again with a similar attack. By attacking soft targets such an implicit threat is more credible than with spectacular attacks that cannot be repeated. Finally, if terrorists are successful in inciting ethnic violence, the government will have to divert resources in order to police the situation.

While the theoretical and quantitative literature on terrorism has not focused so far on the instigation of local violence, cases abound with descriptions of this mechanism. A prominent example of such a strategy and its success can be found in Iraq. Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, the leader of Al-Qaida in Iraq from 2004 to 2006, had the vision that it was more important to incite a sectarian civil war in Iraq than to direct the efforts at military targets of the government or the Coalition Forces ([McCants, 2015](#); [Warrick, 2015](#)). When Zarqawi applied for membership in Al-Qaida, he explained in a lengthy letter to Bin Laden, what his vision was for Iraq:

“If we are able to strike them [the Shi'a] with one painful blow after another until they enter the battle, we will be able to [re] shuffle the cards. Then, no value or influence will remain to the Governing Council or even to the Americans, who will enter a second battle with the Shia. This is what we want, and, whether they like it or not, many Sunni areas will stand with the mujahidin. Then, the mujahidin will have assured themselves land from which to set forth in striking the Shi'a in their heartland, along with a clear media orientation and the creation of strategic depth and reach among the brothers outside [Iraq] and the mujahidin within” ([Zarqawi, 2004](#)).

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