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Intervention

Why insurgents kill civilians in capital cities: A disaggregated analysis of mechanisms and trends[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Research into the causes of violence against civilians has increased significantly in recent years, yet the mechanisms governing spatial patterns of victimization remain poorly understood. My investigation explores if and why one specific locality, capital cities, experiences a higher frequency of violence against civilians perpetrated by armed insurgent organizations. I argue that the political value associated with capitals allows these groups to asymmetrically impose higher costs on the regime by targeting civilians in these localities. I lay out and validate three specific mechanisms to explain this pattern: elite coercion, popular intimidation, and international persuasion. In the first scenario insurgents aim to influence domestic elites directly. In the second, they aim to affect domestic civilians' resolve. In the third, they seek to influence international audiences. Using new geolocated global atrocities data for the years 1996–2009, I evaluate this linkage by employing different methodological approaches and accounting for potential reporting biases. Finally, I show that ethnic and secessionist wars are more likely to experience atrocities in the capital compared with other conflicts. The findings illustrate potential benefits from explaining the temporal and spatial variation in violence by insurgents, with a focus on strategic conditions and power asymmetries.

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On March 19, 2015, two armed men entered a museum in Tunis, the capital of Tunisia, and opened fire, killing 19 people. The assailants specifically targeted a popular tourist destination with the alleged goal of introducing the Islamic State (IS) to the region in a manner “timed to precede a pledge of allegiance from Tunisian jihadis for maximum impact” (Botelho & Tawfeeq, 2015). This is just one of many examples of civilian victimization designed to inflict damage and fear in the government center, even when doing so is more difficult than attacking closer locations that offer a high number of civilian targets. For instance, on July 11, 2010, El-Shabaab, a rebel group based in Somalia, carried out a series of suicide bombings in Kampala, Uganda's capital, killing 74 people. The group's official justification for the bombings was to “wage war against the 6000 collaborators,” a reference to the 6000 Ugandan peacekeepers stationed in Somalia (CNN, 2010). Rather than directly attacking these peacekeepers, El-Shabaab chose to target the Ugandan capital, located about 700 miles from the nearest

Somalian border (with Kenya).

The frequency with which insurgents¹ perpetrate violence against civilians in capital cities strongly suggests that focused analysis that explains why capitals attract high levels of violence, as well as the related policy implications, is warranted. Despite a large and growing literature about intentional civilian killings by non-state actors – to which, for convenience, I refer simply as “atrocities”² – researchers note that more work is needed in order to understand and carefully explain one of the most basic choices insurgents make: *where* to kill civilians in a manner that maximizes political gain (e.g., Fjelde & Hultman, 2014; Raleigh, 2014). Indeed, a close examination of a *global sample* of newly released data on civilian deaths resulting from political violence at the *disaggregated* 0.5° geospatial grid level³ (PITF, 2009) reveals that a staggering 24% of atrocities against civilians perpetrated by insurgents between

¹ I discuss the definition of “insurgents” in greater detail below.

² An atrocity incident is defined as a violent event “involving five or more non-combatant deaths,” and perpetrated “in a single locality within a 24-h period” (PITF, 2009, 5–6). This variable is discussed in more detail below and in the Supplemental Appendix.

³ I.e., “cells” of approximately 55 × 55 km around the equator, which decrease in size as one moves toward the Poles (Tollefsen et al., 2012).

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1996 and 2009 occurred in capital cities, although these grid cells constitute only a tiny fraction ($\approx 1\%$) of the total number of terrestrial grid cells worldwide.

This grid cell level evidence and the anecdotal stories mentioned above suggest an important pattern of civilian victimization, which encompasses a large number of contemporary atrocity incidents that has arguably not received sufficient attention in current analyses. Are these concentrations of violence evidence of the unique effect of these localities? More broadly, do violent insurgents make strategic choices to perpetrate significantly higher levels of victimization in these locations, and if so, why? The answers to these questions are both normatively and substantively important for scholars and policymakers interested in ameliorating the human costs of atrocities and forecasting such attacks.

Considering the importance of capitals as a source of regime legitimacy, the relative absence of research on violence in these locations is surprising. Current approaches to political violence emphasize the instrumentalist logic behind it (Valentino, 2014), namely that insurgents target civilians as one of several strategies designed to impose costs on the regime and its supporters, exhibit territorial control, and shape local civilians' behavior. An important implication of the instrumentalist logic is that insurgents will adapt their strategies in response to different geospatial characteristics (Schutte & Weidmann, 2011; Buhaug & Rød, 2006; Deiwiks, Cederman & Gleditsch, 2012). Research on insurgent attacks in Kabul, for instance, suggests that increasing indiscriminate violence closer to the capital shows the weaknesses of the target government (Schutte, 2017). Numerous studies establish the motivations behind the use of violence by insurgents in urban settings (e.g., Jenkins, 1974; Raleigh & Hegre, 2009; Staniland, 2010; Fair, 2004; Kilcullen, 2006–07), but these studies stop short of explaining *civilian victimization* in these locations. Establishing clear theoretical and empirical linkages between centers of political power and patterns of victimization would contribute to the field's understanding of the motives for violence by armed non-state actors. Moreover, evidence of a systematic relationship would allow policy-makers, military strategists, and state authorities to better anticipate the *timing and location* of attacks on civilians and respond to such incidents more effectively.

The relative lack of attention given to capital cities and their political importance in extant scholarship can be explained by (i) more emphasis on political power asymmetries at the state rather than the subnational level, (ii) the absence of fine-grained data allowing scholars to examine these theoretical linkages globally at the subnational levels, and (iii) the problems of relying on news-wire and nongovernmental organization reporting, which can lead to inferential biases. More studies now dedicate attention to power asymmetries at the subnational level (Fjelde & Hultman, 2014; Buhaug & Rød, 2006; McDoom, 2014), while the availability of new geolocated data and quasi-experimental methods opens doors to new investigations in this arena.

I begin by theoretically exploring the notion that capitals have a specific political value other regions within the country lack. Building on this logic, I identify and empirically validate three distinct mechanisms linking atrocities in capitals to higher political costs for the government. Using the PITF worldwide atrocities data for the years 1996–2009, which provides an exceptional *global* coverage of atrocity incidents by exact geographic location, I then validate this trend across the entire terrestrial globe, employing different methodological approaches and accounting for potential reporting biases. Finally, I evaluate how the nature of the conflict impacts the frequency of these attacks, by testing whether ethnic and separatist wars experience higher frequencies of atrocities in capital cities.

Capital cities and capital violence

Concepts and theory

In this section, I posit a theory that links (i) capital cities as politically distinctive locations within the state with, (ii) insurgents' strategies of violence towards noncombatants. As such, I treat the use of violence against civilians as one strategy of obtaining political gains from governments. The definition of "insurgents" used here thus encompasses any politically motivated, non-state groups operating against the actor who officially holds authority over the state and its institution, and without the latter's consent. This includes rebels, terrorist organizations, or any other entity that falls under this definition.⁴ Understandably, hewing to this definition has both its advantages and disadvantages, but it is preferred for at least three reasons. First, precedence for studying political violence perpetrated by these organizations exists (e.g., Valentino, 2014; Fortna, 2015), which suggests that this type of analysis has been proven useful in the past. Second, many of these groups – e.g., IS, El-Shabaab, the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) or the Armed Islamic Group in Algeria (GIA) – employed a combined strategy that includes both operating against military objectives and targeting noncombatants in regions with large concentrations of civilians. Third, this definition corresponds to a variety of conflict-intensity levels, ranging from terrorist attacks to large-scale massacres.

The idea that insurgents use violence against civilians to obtain strategic goals is firmly established in the extant literature (e.g., Kalyvas, 2006; Valentino, 2004; Wood, 2010). Previous studies linked violence against civilians to factors such as asymmetry of control (McDoom, 2014; Kalyvas, 2006, 111–146) and ethnic settlement patterns (Fjelde & Hultman, 2014), and argued that insurgents seek to maximize the damage their attacks inflict on the regime (Hultman, 2007; Wood, 2010). Building on these studies, the emphasis is not on attacking capitals to conquer them or to destroy specific structures, but rather on attacking people to generate political costs. By targeting noncombatants, these groups signal their resolve (Kydd & Walter, 2006) and inflict higher costs on the government compared with other attack types that do not involve intentional civilian casualties. Correspondingly, governments are more likely to face and respond to international and domestic pressures if civilians are being harmed (Hultman, 2007). It is also important to distinguish such deliberate assaults from other attacks where civilian deaths occur as "collateral damages," e.g., when insurgents aim to kill soldiers and some civilians are hurt as a result. Other studies, however, show that attacks on civilians can generate the opposite effect, increasing civilian resolve and support for their leaders, and resulting with right-wing governments (e.g., Fortna, 2015). By arguing that this violence is used strategically, I refer to the idea that insurgents intentionally target civilians "when they *perceive* it to be both necessary and effective" (Valentino, 2004, p. 67, emphasis added).

Building on this definition of strategic targeting, we should expect that insurgents will use violence against noncombatants where it generates the greatest impact. Attacking civilians in urban areas allows a group to efficiently allocate its resources and obtain higher returns, especially considering that the majority of the world's population now resides in cities (Worldwatch-Institute, 2007). Moreover, because capitals are the nation's political and economical centers, insurgents aiming to mount a significant challenge to the state or highlight the group's relevance must be

⁴ Pro-government militias and similar auxiliary troops are not included because these groups are defined as state-sanctioned.

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