

The Strategic Logic of Credit Claiming: A New Theory for Anonymous Terrorist Attacks

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In theory, terrorism is a political communication strategy for groups to convey their grievances and the costs of ignoring them. In practice, though, terrorist groups take responsibility for just a small portion of their attacks. Rather than getting credit for the violence, terrorist leaders generally deny their operatives committed it. This theoretical and empirical disconnect may explain why scholars have ignored the subject of unclaimed attacks despite the fact that they are the norm. With a mixed-methods research design, our study helps to fill this lacuna by proposing and testing a new theory to help account for variation in which attacks are claimed.

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On July 18, 1994, a van packed with ammonium nitrate fertilizer and fuel oil detonated in front of the Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires, killing 85 people. On November 26, 2008, a ten-man squad embarked on a shooting and bombing spree across Mumbai, killing 160. And on March 1, 2014, a group of eight knife-wielding men and women stabbed to death 29 Chinese civilians at the Kunming Railway Station. Each attack is believed to have been committed by a known terrorist organization. But none took credit for the violence. Such “anonymous” attacks are actually the norm, as only about one in seven terrorist incidents is claimed.¹

The modal terrorist attack in the world poses an apparent puzzle. As terrorism theorists acknowledge, “Why these attacks are unclaimed is itself unknown.”² Anonymous attacks are perplexing because they seem to contradict the dominant scholarly view of terrorist groups as rational strategic actors.³ In theory, terrorism is instrumental violence that functions as a political communication strategy. Perpetrators supposedly mount an operation to call attention to their grievances and the costs of ignoring them. When the perpetrators conceal their hand in the violence, however, the target country is unable to know—never mind redress—their grievances. Why, then, do terrorist groups so often refrain from taking credit for their violent deeds?

Many terrorism researchers admit that unclaimed attacks are difficult to reconcile with the extant theoretical literature.⁴ In general, this literature simply dismisses the fact that the lion’s share of terrorist incidents worldwide goes unclaimed. As David Rapoport notes, “Taking the evidence seriously would have compelled us to reconsider much of what we were doing and re-orient the field accordingly.”⁵ Bruce Hoffman likewise observes that a focus on anonymous attacks would “require re-thinking our most basic and longstanding assumptions about terrorism.”⁶ For this reason, remarkably few studies have attempted to explain when terrorist groups claim credit for their attacks or why.

The most popular explanation hinges on the ideological orientation of the perpetrators.⁷ In the 1990s, researchers identified a “new” type of terrorism characterized by increased

¹ Calculations from Global Terrorism Database from 1970 to 2011.

² Victor Asal and R. Karl Rethemeyer, “The Nature of the Beast: Organizational Structures and the Lethality of Terrorist Attacks,” *The Journal of Politics*, 70, no. 02 (2008), p. 441.

³ See David A. Lake, “Rational Extremism: Understanding Terrorism in the Twenty-first Century,” *Dialogue IO* 1, no. 01 (2002), p. 15; Dennis A. Pluchinsky, “The Terrorism Puzzle: Missing Pieces and No Boxcover,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 9, no. 1 (1997), p. 7; Alex Peter Schmidt and A. J. Jongman, *Political Terrorism: A New Guide To Actors, Authors, Concepts, Data Bases* (Transaction Publishers, 2005), p.160.

⁴ See, for example, Lake, 2002, p. 15; Pluchinsky 1997, p. 7; and Schmidt and Jongman 2005, p. 160.

⁵ David C. Rapoport, “To Claim or not to Claim; that is the Question—Always!” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 9, no. 1 (1997), p. 12.

⁶ Hoffman, Bruce. “Why terrorists don't claim credit.” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9.1 (1997): 1.

⁷ See Aaron Hoffman, “Voice and Silence: Why Groups Take Credit for Acts of Terror,” *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no. 5 (2010), p. 618; C.J.M. Drake, “The Role of Ideology in Terrorists’ Target Selection,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 10, no. 2 (1998), p. 5.

anonymity and religiosity.⁸ The belief quickly spread that religiously motivated terrorists—especially ones driven by radical interpretations of Islam—are responsible for low levels of credit taking. In principle, this thesis is tractable if god rather than governments is the intended audience.⁹ But the religion thesis is ultimately unconvincing for explaining variation in credit claiming. For starters, even religious groups express political grievances, which governments are unable to address without knowing the identity of the perpetrators.¹⁰ The Hamas charter states, for example, that the Islamist group is dedicated to not only spreading “Islam as the way of life,” but also to achieving the “liberation of Palestine.”¹¹ Further, it remains unclear whether religiosity helps to predict credit claiming. Religiously oriented groups hardly have a monopoly on anonymous attacks. In fact, previous research has found that Islamist groups in Israel are actually responsible for higher rates of credit claiming than their secular counterparts.¹² Clearly, the notion that religiosity helps to determine credit taking is unfounded or at least underspecified.

This study proposes and tests a new theory to help account for when and why terrorist groups claim credit for attacks. The decision is neither arbitrarily nor ideologically determined. Rather, the choice to assume responsibility for attacks follows a testable strategic logic that applies across terrorist groups regardless of their ideological orientation. We argue that far from breaching the dominant scholarly view of terrorist groups as rational political actors, their patterns of credit claiming bolster it. In practice, credit claims are typically issued by the leadership or at least with its consent.¹³ When operatives strike a target, their leaders claim credit only if the expected political return is positive. When the anticipated political fallout is negative, leaders of the group are understandably reluctant to attribute the violence to their organization. This means that terrorist group leaders around the world should be more likely to withhold credit when their operatives attack civilian targets rather than military ones because such indiscriminate violence risks undermining the political goals of the group.¹⁴

This causal story is predicated on two increasingly prominent research programs within the conflict literature. First, a growing body of theoretical work emphasizes that terrorist groups are internally heterogeneous social units rather than unitary actors.¹⁵ Whereas the leaders are generally understood as essentially rational political actors, foot-soldiers are prone to acting in

⁸ Ian Lesser et. al, *Countering the New Terrorism* (RAND 1999).

⁹ J.M. Post, “The New Face of Terrorism: Socio-Cultural Foundations of Contemporary Terrorism.” *Behavioral Sciences and the Law* 23 (2005), pp. 451-465; Magnus Ranstorp, “Terrorism in the Name of Religion.” *Journal of International Affairs* 50, no. 1 (1996), p. 41; Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*. Vol. 13. (University of California Press, 2003).

¹⁰ Assaf Moghadam, “Motives for Martyrdom: Al-Qaida, Salafi Jihad, and the Spread of Suicide Attacks,” *International Security* 33, no. 3 (2009), pp/ 46-78.

¹¹ Hamas Covenant 1998, Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History, and Diplomacy http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp.

¹² Hoffman, 2010.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Lone wolf actors are responsible for just a tiny percentage of terrorist incidents and fatalities worldwide.

¹⁵ See, for example, David A. Siegel “Social Networks and Collective Action.” *American Journal of Political Science* 53, no. 1 (2009): 122-138.

defiance of their preferences, posing a recurrent principal-agency problem.¹⁶ Second, a burgeoning body of empirical work finds variation in the strategic value of violence depending on its target selection. For state challengers, indiscriminate violence against civilian targets is reportedly less strategic than more selective violence against military targets.¹⁷ When they attack civilians, terrorist groups have also been found to risk strengthening the resolve of the target country,¹⁸ lowering the odds of government concessions,¹⁹ eroding popular support,²⁰ and expediting organizational demise.²¹ Taking credit for such indiscriminate violence may also raise intolerable security risks by leading to increased counterterrorism efforts, which are disproportionately directed against the leadership.²² Together, these theoretical and empirical insights suggest that attacks against civilians may depress the odds of credit claiming if leaders indeed condition this decision on the expected political return. This study helps to resolve the longstanding puzzle of why so many terrorist attacks go unclaimed. The first section summarizes extant theories to account for variation in credit taking and then explicates our own. The second section presents an empirical strategy for assessing our theory in comparison to others. Unlike

¹⁶ See, for example, Abrahms, Max, and Philip BK Potter. "Explaining terrorism: Leadership deficits and militant group tactics." *International Organization* 69.2 (2015): 311-342; David A. Siegel and Joseph K. Young, "Simulating terrorism: Credible commitment, costly signaling, and strategic behavior." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 42, no. 04 (2009): pp. 765-771; Jacob N. Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing violent covert organizations* (Princeton University Press, 2013); Weinstein, Jeremy M. *Inside rebellion: The politics of insurgent violence*. Cambridge University Press, 2006..

¹⁷ See, for example, Alexander B. Downes. "Draining the Sea by Filling the Graves," *Civil Wars* 9, no. 4 (2007): pp. 420-444; Michael Horowitz and Dan Reiter, "When Does Aerial Bombing Work? Quantitative Empirical Tests, 1917-1999." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45, no. 2 (2001): pp. 147-173; Matthew Adam Kocher, Thomas B. Pepinsky, and Stathis N. Kalyvas. "Aerial Bombing and Counterinsurgency in the Vietnam War." *American Journal of Political Science* 55, no. 2 (2011): pp. 201-218 ; Robert A. Pape. *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War*. (Cornell University Press, 2014).

¹⁸ See, for example, Abrahms, Max. "Why terrorism does not work." *International Security* 31.2 (2006): 42-78; Claude Berrebi and Esteban F. Klor. "Are Voters Sensitive to Terrorism? Direct Evidence from the Israeli Electorate." *American Political Science Review* 102, no. 03 (2008): 279-301; Christophe Chowanietz, "Rallying Around the Flag or Railing Against the Government? Political Parties' Reactions to Terrorist Acts," *Party Politics* (2010); Anna Getmansky and Thomas Zeitzoff. "Terrorism and Voting: The Effect of Rocket Threat on Voting in Israeli Elections." *American Political Science Review* 108, no. 03 (2014): pp. 588-604.

¹⁹ See, for example, Abrahms, Max. "The political effectiveness of terrorism revisited." *Comparative Political Studies* 45.3 (2012): 366-393; Abrahms, Max. "The Credibility Paradox: Violence as a Double-Edged Sword in International Politics." *International Studies Quarterly* 57.4 (2013): 660-671; Khusrav Gaibulloev and Todd Sandler, "The Impact of Terrorism and Conflicts on Growth in Asia." *Economics & Politics* 21, no. 3 (2009): pp. 359-383; Anna Getmansky and Tolga Sinmazdemir. "Success Breeds Failure: The Effect of Terrorist Attacks on Land Control in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," APSA 2012 Annual Meeting Paper (2012); Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qaeda*, Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, CA (2008).

²⁰ See, for example, Martha Crenshaw. "The Logic of Terrorism." *Terrorism in Perspective* 24 (2007); Seth G. Jones, and Martin C. Libicki 2008; Walter Reich, "Understanding Terrorist Behavior: The Limits and Opportunities of Psychological Inquiry," in ed. Walter Reich, *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind* (Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1990): pp. 261-279.

²¹ See, for example, Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*. (Princeton University Press, 2009); Nelly Lahoud et al., *Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Ladin Sidelined?* (West Point Military Academy, Combating Terrorism Center, 2012).

²² See Hoffman, 1997.

previous studies that are restricted to attacks within a single conflict zone, our sample includes the universe of known attacks by terrorist groups worldwide from 1970 to 2011 based on the Global Terrorism Database and other reputable datasets. Across model specifications, the results consistently indicate that attacking civilian targets has an independent, negative effect on credit claiming. All else equal, terrorist group leaders are significantly less likely to take responsibility for an attack when their operatives have struck civilians. Attacks on military targets are not only more likely to be claimed by the leadership, but to evoke competing claims of responsibility from multiple groups. The statistical analysis thus supports our thesis that terrorist group leaders tend to behave as rational political actors who condition the decision to claim credit for an attack on its expected political value. By contrast, the statistical tests find comparatively weak empirical support for the most commonly espoused alternative credit claiming theories. The third section provides more fine-grained evidence for our theory with a detailed in-sample case study on the Taliban, which highlights how the leadership tries to eschew organizational responsibility when operatives attack civilian targets due to the potential political costs. The final section explores the research implications for understanding a multitude of related terrorist group dynamics.

New Credit Claiming Theory

Why terrorist groups so often withhold credit for their attacks remains an open question in the conflict literature. The most popular explanation is that the proclivity to assume responsibility for violence depends on the ideology of the perpetrators.²³ As Charles Drake notes in a broader context, ideology tends to shape organizational behavior by providing a framework for action.²⁴ Terrorist organizations with secular ideologies such as nationalism or communism are often thought to take credit for their attacks in order to convey to target countries the costs of noncompliance, whereas Islamist and other religiously inspired terrorist organizations supposedly stay mum because their violence is directed to omniscient deities rather than to a human audience.²⁵ This theory is problematic, however, as even religiously oriented groups tend to issue material demands such as over money, prisoners, and territory.²⁶

²³ Hoffman, 2010, p. 618.

²⁴ Drake, 1998, p. 55.

²⁵ See, for example, Juergensmeyer, 2003; J. P. Larsson. "The Role of Religious Ideology in Modern Terrorist Recruitment," *The Making of a Terrorist: Recruitment, Training, and Root Causes*. (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International (2006), pp. 197-215; Pluchinsky, 1997; Ranstorp, 1996; David C. Rapoport. "Fear and Trembling: Terrorism in Three Religious Traditions." *American Political Science Review* 78, no. 03 (1983): pp. 658-677.

²⁶ See Assaf Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); and Robert A. Pape, "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism," *American Political Science Review* 97.3 (2003): 343-361.

Many political scientists lean towards a secular explanation over a religious one.²⁷ The bargaining literature implies that terrorist groups condition taking credit for attacks on the extent to which they signal organizational capability. The perception of organizational strength is important under anarchy not only for terrorizing target countries into compliance, but also for outbidding rival groups over popular support. This school of thought would predict that terrorist groups are disposed to claiming credit for more lethal attacks especially in theaters populated with rival groups.²⁸ Although these propositions have remained largely untested, extant empirical research suggests only mixed support for them.²⁹

Traditional theories on credit taking are lacking because they rest on the faulty assumption that terrorist organizations are unitary actors. Within the organizational literature, demographic research finds important differences among members. Although an analytical simplification, a common distinction is between leaders and subordinates. Compared to the former, the latter generally possess inferior commitment to the official aims of the organization and the knowledge of how best to achieve them.³⁰ The principal-agent framework helps to explain the recurrent disconnect between the preferences of leaders and the actual behavior of subordinates, which often runs counter to the official goals of the group.³¹ Agency problems arise because prospective members have an incentive to manipulate private information by overstating their qualifications and to then pursue private agendas upon joining.³² Recent scholarship has applied aspects of the principal-agent framework to other important questions about terrorist groups.³³ We explore its relevance for credit claiming.

²⁷ This preference for secular explanations in international relations is not restricted to studies on credit claiming. For important exceptions, see Jonathan Fox, "Religion as an Overlooked Element of International Relations." *International Studies Review* 3.3 (2001): pp. 53-73; and Ron E. Hassner, "'To Halve and to Hold': Conflicts over Sacred Space and the Problem of Indivisibility," *Security Studies* 12.4 (2003): 1-33.

²⁸ On the lethality of attacks, see Eric Min. "Taking Responsibility: When and Why Terrorists Claim Attacks." APSA 2013 Annual Meeting Paper; Austin L Wright, "Why Do Terrorists Claim Credit?" Working paper, Princeton University, 2011; On outbidding, see Hoffman, 2010.

²⁹ See, for example, Justin Conrad and Kevin Greene, "Differentiation and the Severity of Terrorist Attacks," *Journal of Politics*, 77, 2, p. 546-56;. Robert J. Brym and Bader Araj, "Palestinian Suicide Bombing Revisited: A Critique of the Outbidding Thesis," *Political Science Quarterly* 123, no. 3 (2008): 485-500; Erica Chenoweth, "Democratic Competition and Terrorist Activity," *The Journal of Politics* 72, no. 01 (2010): pp. 16-30; Michael G. Findley and Joseph K. Young. "More Combatant Groups, More Terror?: Empirical Tests of an Outbidding Logic." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24, no. 5 (2012): pp. 706-721; Hoffman 1997.

³⁰ See, for example, Chester Irving Barnard. *The Functions of the Executive*. (Harvard University Press, 1968).

³¹ See, for example, Darren G. Hawkins, David A. Lake, Daniel L. Nielson, and Michael J. Tierney, eds. *Delegation and Agency in International Organizations*. (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

³² The former pathology refers to "adverse selection," the latter to "agency slack" or "moral hazard." See, for example, Erica R Gould, "Delegating IMF Conditionality: Understanding Variations in Control and Conformity," *Delegation and Agency in International Organizations: Political Economy of Institutions and Decisions* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

³³ See, for example, Abrahms and Potter 2015; Salehyan, Idean, David Siroky, and Reed M. Wood. "External rebel sponsorship and civilian abuse: A principal-agent analysis of wartime atrocities." *International Organization* 68.03 (2014): 633-661; Jean-Paul Azam and Alexandra Delacroix, "Aid and the Delegated Fight Against Terrorism," *Review of Development Economics* 10, no. 2 (2006): 330-344; Daniel Byman and Sarah E. Kreps. "Agents of Destruction?"

Principal-agent theory may shed light on the conditions under which terrorist group leaders are liable to take credit for their operatives' attacks. In recent years, empirical research has found that violence – especially against civilians – is often counterproductive for advancing the political goals of the group. Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan find that nonviolence is more politically profitable than violence at least under certain conditions.³⁴ Numerous studies have found that indiscriminate violence against civilian targets carries higher political risks than more selective violence against military targets. Compared to the latter, the former risks strengthening the resolve of the target population,³⁵ reducing the odds of government concessions,³⁶ weakening popular support for the group,³⁷ and shortening its longevity.³⁸ Although several studies reach discrepant results on the utility of indiscriminate violence, the preponderance of empirical work finds that attacks against civilian targets generally offer less strategic utility.³⁹ The principal-agent framework implies that lower level members of terrorist groups will sometimes act in defiance of leadership preferences, including in their targeting choices.

We suspect that a member's position within the organizational hierarchy may be inversely related to his incentives for attacking civilians. First, senior leaders are traditionally among the oldest members of the group, with the greatest experience studying asymmetric conflict. Foot soldiers and other low-level operatives, by contrast, are usually the newest recruits or volunteers with the least experience at any level of combat.⁴⁰ As such, senior leaders are presumably more likely to have observed the strategic fallout of indiscriminate bloodshed and to consequently oppose such counterproductive targeting practices. Second, the lowest members of terrorist groups have the fewest resources at their disposal, incentivizing them to strike softer targets. Because more senior members are in a higher position within the organizational hierarchy, they can better access resources for comparatively sophisticated attacks against

Applying Principal-Agent Analysis to State-Sponsored Terrorism," *International Studies Perspectives* 11, no. 1 (2010): pp. 1-18.

³⁴ Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (Columbia University Press, 2011).

³⁵ See, for example, Abrahms 2006; Berrebi and Klor 2008; Chowanietz, 2011; Getmansky and Zeitzoff, 2014.

³⁶ See, for example, Abrahms 2012, 2013; Fortna, Virginia Page. 2012. *Do Terrorists Win? Rebels' Use of Terrorism and Civil War Outcomes*. Working Paper. New York: Columbia University; Gaibullov and Sandler 2009; Getmansky and Sinmazdemir, 2012.

³⁷ See, for example, Crenshaw, 2007; Jones and Libicki, 2008.

³⁸ See, for example, Cronin, 2009; Lahoud, 2010; Laqueur, 2000; Ross and Gurr, 1989.

³⁹ For discrepant empirical studies, see Eric D. Gould and Esteban F. Klor, "Does Terrorism Work?" *Quarterly Journal of Economics* (2010); Reed M. Wood and Jacob D. Kathman. "Too Much of a Bad Thing? Civilian Victimization and Bargaining in Civil War." *British Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 03 (2014): pp. 685-706; Peter Krause. "The Political Effectiveness of Non-State Violence: A Two-Level Framework to Transform a Deceptive Debate." *Security Studies* 22, no. 2 (2013): pp. 259-294; and Jakana Thomas. "Rewarding Bad Behavior: How Governments Respond to Terrorism in Civil War." *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 4 (2014): pp. 804-818. Most studies find that state challengers also risk undermining their political cause with indiscriminate violence (e.g., Horowitz and Reiter 2001).

⁴⁰ See Sageman, Marc. *Understanding terror networks*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.

hardened targets. Third, the lowest-level members stand to gain the most personally from civilian targeting. Prior research suggests that lower-level members sometimes attack civilians to gain status among their peers, whereas leaders presumably have a measure of respect by dint of their superior position.⁴¹ In sum, the targeting preferences of terrorist members are shaped by their relative positions within the organizational hierarchy.⁴²

Indeed, the historical record abounds with militant leaders warning their foot-soldiers to refrain from indiscriminate violence because of the potential political costs. Abdullah Yusuf Azzam, Regis Debray, Vo Nguyen Giap, Che Guevara, Carlos Marighella, and other revolutionary leaders routinely advised their fighters against striking civilians.⁴³ Che, for instance, admonished subordinates to “Avoid useless acts of terrorism.”⁴⁴ His fighting manual stresses that “terrorism is of negative value, that it by no means produces the desired effects, that it can turn a people against a revolutionary movement.”⁴⁵ In the *Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla*, Marighella likewise cautions his foot-soldiers not to “attack indiscriminately without distinguishing between the exploiters and the exploited.”⁴⁶ Similarly, leaders of the Kenyan Land and Freedom Army banned fighters from attacking women and children because such indiscriminate violence was seen as counterproductive for ending colonial rule.⁴⁷ In the 1980s, Sinn Fein likewise assailed operatives in the Provisional Irish Republican Army for harming civilians due to the political fallout.⁴⁸ More recently, al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades chief Marwan Barghouti has advocated Palestinian attacks against the Israel Defense Forces, while opposing attacks against Israeli civilians within the pre-1967 borders or so-called Green Line.⁴⁹ According to Barghouti, Israeli civilians should be off-limits because historically such indiscriminate violence has been strategically “detrimental to us.”⁵⁰ The FARC leadership has likewise “repudiated and condemned” its fighters for their “lack of foresight” in attacking civilians.⁵¹ Doku Umarov, former head of the Caucasus Emirate, also admonished the Mujahedeen “to focus their efforts on attacking law enforcement agencies, the military, the security services, state

⁴¹ Humphreys, Macartan, and Jeremy M. Weinstein. “Handling and manhandling civilians in civil war.” *American Political Science Review* 100.3 (2006): 444.

⁴² Shapiro believes terrorist leaders are actually “smarter” than operatives when it comes to selecting optimal tactics for political success (2013, 27).

⁴³ See, for example, Rapoport, David C. “The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism.” *Attacking Terrorism: Elements of a Grand Strategy* (2004): 46-73.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Andrew Sinclair. *Guevara*. (Collins, 1970, 33).

⁴⁵ Che Guevara. *Guerrilla Warfare*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002.

⁴⁶ Carlos Marighella. *Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla*. (Praetorian Press LLC, 2011).

⁴⁷ Josiah Mwangi Kariuki, Mau Mau Detainee: The Account by a Kenya African of his Experience in Detention Camps (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1975), 22-24.

⁴⁸ Smith, Michael Lawrence Rowan, *Fighting for Ireland? The Military Strategy of the Irish Republican Movement* (Routledge, 2002), 176.

⁴⁹ Gil Friedman. Strategic Deficiencies in National Liberation Struggles: The Case of Fatah in the Al-Aqsa Intifada. *Journal of Strategic Studies* 31.1, (2008) p. 54.

⁵⁰ Quoted in *Yedioth Ahronot*, 2 September 2001.

⁵¹ Ariela Navarro, “Divisions Erupt as Colombia Revels Criticize Their Own.” *AFP* (25 Jan 2014).

officials,” but “to protect the civilian population.”⁵² The leader of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, Murat Karayilan, directs his forces to engage “military targets” and “not harm civilians.”⁵³ Even the al-Qaida leadership has reprimanded its foot-soldiers for attacking civilians in Afghanistan, Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen.⁵⁴ In fact, al-Qaida leaders are increasingly issuing public apologies when operatives defy their orders by harming civilians, especially Muslim ones.⁵⁵ Such apologies for harming civilians are found across militant groups from Colombia’s National Liberation Army to Lebanon’s Abdullah Azzam Brigades to Nepal’s Communist Party.⁵⁶

These statements from the top should not be reflexively dismissed as merely propaganda. Terrorist leaders are known to make the same targeting appeals in private correspondences with other members. As Peter Bergen reports, “We know from the documents recovered at the bin Laden compound in Abbottabad by U.S. Navy SEALs in May 2011 [that] al Qaeda’s leaders were often writing to each other privately and also to groups they are associated with about the need to minimize civilian (Muslim) casualties and often wrote about the damage to the al Qaeda brand that killing civilians had achieved by al Qaeda operations in Iraq.”⁵⁷ Even more tellingly, recent research finds that operatives nearly always refrain from striking the population when their leaders publicly oppose indiscriminate violence and are strong enough to impose their targeting preferences on the group.⁵⁸ This preference is impossible to consistently implement because of the inherent tradeoff between organizational security and tactical control. Terrorist leaders are often compelled to delegate tactical autonomy to operatives – even if doing so compromises the quality of decision-making – in order to evade government countermeasures.⁵⁹ Although principals generally have a basic understanding that trying to control agents carries inherent risks for the organization, terrorist leaders are nonetheless known to sanction subordinates for defying their preferences by attacking civilians. The Northern Command disbanded the Fermanagh unit of the IRA in 1989 for ignoring its instructions by engaging in

⁵² Quoted in Valery Dzutsev. “Leader of the Caucasus Emirate Vows to Stop Attacks against Russian Civilians.” *North Caucasus Analysis* 13.3 (2012).

⁵³ Quoted in Ertugrul Mavioglu, “Civilians in Turkey Off Target List, PKK Boss Says,” *Hürriyet DailyNews*, 28 October 2010.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Nelly Lahoud. *Beware of Imitators: Al-Qa’ida through the Lens of its Confidential Secretary*. (Military Academy West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2012).

⁵⁵ See, for example, *Reuters*, March 8, 2014.

⁵⁶ See, for example, “Rebel leader apologizes for Colombian church kidnapping,” 7 June 1999 at <http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/americas/9906/07/colombia/>; “Al Qaeda-Linked Militants in Lebanon Apologize for Civilian Deaths,” 8 March 2014 at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-blasts-idUSBREA270L120140308>; Nepalese Rebels Apologize for Deadly Bombing of Civilian Bus, 6 June 2005 at http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/2005-06-07-nepal-rebels_x.htm.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Yousuf Basil and Catherine E. Shoichet, “Al Qaeda: We’re sorry about Yemen hospital attack,” 22 December 2013 at <http://www.cnn.com/2013/12/22/world/meast/yemen-al-qaeda-apology/index.html>.

⁵⁸ Max Abrahms and Philip BK Potter, “Explaining Terrorism: Leadership Deficits and Militant Group Tactics,” *International Organization* 69.02 (2015): 311-342.

⁵⁹ Shapiro 2013.

sectarian violence against the Protestant population.⁶⁰ In 2010, PKK leaders meted out a 24-year prison sentence to a couple operatives for violating their targeting guidelines by attacking civilians in the Batman province of Turkey.⁶¹ In 2012 and 2014, leaders of the New People's Army in the Philippines dealt a variety of "disciplinary actions" to wayward rebels for separate incidents against civilians.⁶² And in 2015, al-Nusra Front leaders forced several members to stand trial before an Islamic court for defying their targeting guidelines by killing 20 Druze villagers in Idlib, Syria.⁶³ The punishment is sometimes less severe, such as when Ayman al-Zawahiri simply wrote a harsh letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi for his indiscriminate violence in Iraq or when other leaders of his al-Qaeda affiliate rebuked a Ramadi cell for committing a similar offense against the population in defiance of al-Qaeda Central's targeting instructions.⁶⁴ These are hardly isolated cases; in his analysis of 108 terrorist biographies, Jacob Shapiro finds that 44 percent feature examples of leaders punishing subordinates, generally for committing tactical mistakes.⁶⁵

In sum, there are both theoretical and empirical reasons to suspect that terrorist organizations are prone to principal-agency problems in which leaders are often displeased with their operatives for attacking civilians due to the potential political costs. If so, the leadership should presumably try to distance the organization from such indiscriminate violence, thereby depressing credit claiming rates when civilians are struck. To be clear, our theory does not imply that leaders will claim credit for all military attacks or never claim credit for civilian attacks; leaders recognize that sometimes refraining from any type of violence is politically preferable and organizational culpability is sometimes undeniable.⁶⁶ Nonetheless, we anticipate that leaders are strategic actors who are more reluctant to claim credit for civilian attacks in particular, at least when deniability is plausible. The next section explains the empirical strategy for testing our theory that credit claiming hinges significantly on target selection, as leaders are even more hesitant to assume organizational responsibility when operatives strike civilian targets due to the political risks.

⁶⁰ J. Bowyer Bell, *The secret army: The IRA* (Transaction Publishers, 1997), 610.

⁶¹ "Report: PKK Punished Those Behind Batman Blast," 2 December 2010, at http://www.todayszaman.com/national_report-pkk-punished-those-behind-batman-blast-apologized-for-deaths_228438.html.

⁶² "Communist Rebels 'Sorry' for Circus Bombing in Davao City," 7 September 2014 at <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/266026/communist-rebels-sorry-for-circus-bombing-in-davao-city> Sept 7 2012; and "Philippine Rebels Apologize for Attack on Medics," 7 March 7 2014 at <http://www.ucanews.com/news/philippine-rebels-apologize-for-attack-on-medics/70446>.

⁶³ "Syria's al-Qaeda affiliate says it regrets killing of Druze," 13 June 2015, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/syrias-al-qaeda-affiliate-says-it-regrets-killing-of-druze/>.

⁶⁴ "Instructions to Abu-Usamah," Harmony Documents, Combating Terrorism Center, IZ-060316-02, 20 April 2006 at www.ctc.usma.edu/harmony_docs.asp.

⁶⁵ Shapiro 2013, 69.

⁶⁶ Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011. Shapiro (2013, 3) believes that often leaders get upset with operatives not just for striking "the wrong targets," but also for employing "too much violence."

Research Design

To assess the conditions under which terrorist organizations claim credit, we examine all of their attacks between 1977 and 2011 according to the Global Terrorism Database (GTD). The GTD is uniquely well-suited for our investigation because it includes information on the known properties of terrorist attacks around the globe, the organizations thought to have perpetrated them, and whether their leaders took responsibility. This information is crucial for evaluating when the leaders of organizations identified as having committed the attacks actually claimed credit for them. In our study, the dependent variable is a binary indicator of credit claiming equaling ‘1’ if the leadership claimed responsibility for the attack and ‘0’ otherwise.⁶⁷ Credit claiming may include messages of responsibility delivered through letters, emails, videos, and other mediums. Although credit claims may theoretically be fabricated, Hoffman notes that in practice “it is difficult for groups to credibly claim responsibility for attacks by others.”⁶⁸ Our principal-agency theory anticipates that leaders will often be reluctant to assume responsibility when their subordinates commit an attack, especially against civilians. The theory predicts not only that many acts of violence will go unclaimed, but that leaders will be particularly hesitant to take credit when their operatives strike civilian attacks, while more inclined to issue competing claims of responsibility when operatives from other groups commit attacks that steer clear of civilians. Because of our interest in target selection as an important explanatory factor, the analysis includes a binary variable equaling ‘1’ if the attack is against civilians and ‘0’ if the attack is against a military or other government target. To be precise, the *Civilian Target* variable includes attacks on private businesses, airports, schools, journalists, private citizens, religious figures, telecommunications, tourists, transportation and utilities according to the GTD.⁶⁹ The unit of analysis is the attack itself. The sample of attacks for which the coders of the data knew both the target and whether the attack was claimed yields nearly 28,000 observations.

Alternative Hypotheses

Beyond target selection, we also evaluate the evidence for preexisting hypotheses on the determinants of credit claiming. First, we test the prevailing view from bargaining theory that attacks are more likely to be claimed when they signal greater organizational capability. The severity of the attack is the most common proxy for signaling strength.⁷⁰ Following this convention, we analyze data on the *Number of Fatalities* resulting from the attacks – mindful that certain types of targets are harder to strike than others. All else equal, attacks that kill more

⁶⁷ Importantly, credit claiming is not the same thing as attribution for an attack. In many cases in the data, attacks go unclaimed even though they are linked to specific groups (i.e, the perpetrators are known). Likewise, many attacks are claimed by groups, though it is unknown whether they actually perpetrated the attack.

⁶⁸ As discussed later, this does not always stop rival terrorist groups from trying. Hoffman, 2010, p. 616.

⁶⁹ In the online appendix, we use alternative measurements of “civilian target,” but our key conclusions do not change.

⁷⁰ See, for example, Lake, 2002.

people presumably signal more organizational capability. For instance, attacks that kill 50 civilians are generally thought to convey greater organizational capability than attacks that kill only five civilians. In addition to their lethality, other attack characteristics also display organizational capability. Certain methods of attack require, and thus signal, more capability than others such as *Armed Attacks*, *Assassinations*, and *Hostage Incidents*.⁷¹ By definition, armed attacks reveal more capability than unarmed attacks, while assassinations and, to a lesser extent, hostage-taking demand greater sophistication in terms of planning, logistics, and training.⁷²

We also empirically assess whether groups in more competitive political environments are apt to claim attacks in an effort to outbid organizational rivals. For this estimation, we use data from GTD on whether the attack occurred in a situation of multiparty conflict. The *Multiparty Competition* variable equals ‘1’ if the attack occurred in a conflict involving more than one terrorist organization and ‘0’ otherwise. Because data for this variable were available only in older versions of the GTD potentially due to reliability issues, we tested the robustness of this finding by creating another variable for multiparty competition. Specifically, we use data on the duration and location of terrorist organizations from Young and Dugan to generate a count of the number of terrorist organization that were active in a given country in the year an attack occurred.⁷³

Characteristics of the groups themselves are also thought to influence the probability that their leaders will claim an attack. An argument from the bargaining literature is that leaders of weaker groups are more likely to claim attacks to promote the appearance of organizational strength. *Organization Size* is one potential measure of strength, so we include an ordinal variable which ranges from ‘0’ to ‘3’ that captures the relative size of the group’s membership. The variable is drawn from the Big Allied and Dangerous (BAAD) dataset, which codes this information for nearly 400 terrorist groups.⁷⁴ According to this alternative hypothesis, smaller organizations should be more likely to claim attacks against civilians. This variable is a problematic proxy for our purposes, however, for a couple reasons. Such an effect of organization size on credit claiming would also be consistent with our explanation because larger groups suffer greater principal-agency problems. Furthermore, estimates of membership rosters within terrorist organizations are notoriously unreliable due to their clandestine nature.⁷⁵ To

⁷¹ See, for example, Adam Dolnik, “Contrasting Dynamics of Crisis Negotiations: Barricade versus Kidnapping Incidents,” *International Negotiation: A Journal of Theory and Practice* 8, no. 3 (2003): pp. 495–526.

⁷² According to GTD, armed attacks involve “the use of a firearm, incendiary, or sharp instrument.” Not included in this category are “attacks involving the use of fists, rocks, sticks, or other handheld (less-than-lethal) weapons.”

⁷³ Joseph K. Young and Laura Dugan, “Survival of the Fittest: Why Terrorist Groups Endure,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 2 (2014). Young and Dugan’s data is coded based on information from the GTD.

⁷⁴ Victor Asal, Karl Rethemeyer and Ian Anderson, “Big Allied and Dangerous (BAAD) Database 1 – Lethality Data, 1998-2005,” <http://hdl.handle.net/1902.1/16062>, Harvard Dataverse, V3.” (2011).

⁷⁵ Alex P. Schmid and Albert Jongman, *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Data Bases, Theories and Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1988, 488. For an important contemporary example, see Micah Zenko, “How Many Bombs Did the United States Drop in 2015?” Council on Foreign Relations, 7 January

better test these competing explanations, we therefore include another common proxy of organizational strength, state sponsorship.⁷⁶ This is also a useful variable to examine because terrorist sponsoring states arguably exert pressure on the perpetrators to withhold credit in order to avoid international opprobrium.⁷⁷ Both arguments would therefore anticipate state sponsorship to depress credit claiming. In our study, *State Sponsorship* is a binary variable that indicates whether the organization responsible for the attack was sponsored or not by a foreign government. Finally, we test whether the organization responsible for an attack espouses an *Islamist Ideology*, which is widely presumed to depress credit claiming. The BAAD dataset supplies data on the state sponsorship and ideological preferences of the organizations.⁷⁸

Finally, we also control for the level of *State Repression*, as the broader security environment may influence the type of organizational violence employed and its perceived utility.⁷⁹ Drawn from the Political Terror Scale project, this is an ordinal variable on a 5-point scale that captures the level of political terror used by the state against its own people.⁸⁰ Lower values represent countries with more protections against such violations, while higher values represent countries that engage in more frequent violations. Because the dependent variable in our models is a binary measure of credit claiming, we use logistic regression to estimate the mean causal effects of the aforementioned independent variables. Robust standard errors clustered on the terrorist group help to account for correlations across attacks by the same group. Fixed country and time effects are applied across model specifications.⁸¹

Empirical Analysis

The central hypothesis of this study is that leaders are more reluctant to claim credit for attacks when their operatives strike civilians owing to the political risks. We begin by examining descriptive statistics of the relationship between civilian targeting and credit claiming. Using the sample of observations from the analysis in this paper, Table 1 displays information about the frequency with which attacks in the data were claimed. They reveal that organizations are indeed significantly less likely to claim credit for an attack when it harms civilians. More than 16% of attacks against government and military targets were claimed, while only 12% of attacks against

2016 at <http://blogs.cfr.org/zenko/2016/01/07/how-many-bombs-did-the-united-states-drop-in-2015/#more-6369>.

⁷⁶ See, for example, Chris Qullen, "A Historical Analysis of Mass Casualty Bombers." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 250, no. 5 (2002), p. 285; Idean Salehyan, "The Delegation of War to Rebel Organizations," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (2010).

⁷⁷ On this logic, see Steven Simon and Daniel Benjamin, "The Terror." *Survival* 43, 4 (2001), p. 5.

⁷⁸ We also test the effect of suicide attacks on credit claiming. In the main models, inclusion of this variable does not negate the core findings reported in the manuscript.

⁷⁹ On this logic, see Shapiro (2013).

⁸⁰ M. Gibney, L. Cornett, R. Wood and P. Hashcke, "Political Terror Scale 1976-2012," (2013).

⁸¹ The results of the fixed effects analysis are comparable to those reported here and are available in the online appendix.

civilians were claimed. To further assess the role of target selection on credit claiming, Table 2 displays information on the related question of whether attacks with *competing* claims of responsibility by more than one organization are disproportionately directed against the military. Within our sample 15% of military attacks involved multiple claims of responsibility compared to only 9% of attacks against civilians. For both sets of tests, the differences in means across the two targeting categories is statistically significant ($p < .01$). Although preliminary, these results support our intuition that terrorist group leaders tend to base credit claiming decisions on the expected political return as reflected in the target selection.

Table 1: Attack Claims by Target Selection

	Military/Government		Civilian	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Not claimed	5,663	83.55%	13,423	88.42%
Claimed	1,115	16.45%	1,758	11.58%
Observations	6,778	100%	15,181	100%

Table 2: Competing Claims by Target Selection

	Military/Government		Civilian	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
No competing claims	192	84.96%	399	90.89%
Competing claims	34	15.04%	40	9.11%
Observations	226	100%	439	100%

Using logistic regression, Table 3 tests the evidence for our causal mechanism relative to alternative explanations. The first two models include covariates that allow us to use the largest amount of observations in the GTD data. The difference between Model 1 and Model 2 is the measure used to capture the competitiveness of the political environment. In Model 1, we employ the GTD variable for multiparty conflict; in Model 2, we instead use the count of organizations compiled from Young and Dugan.⁸² Models 3 and 4 are identical to the first two models, but include covariates from the BAAD dataset, reducing the sample size. Across all model specifications, our key independent variable of target selection significantly influences whether an attack is claimed. Specifically, attacks against civilian targets are indeed significantly less likely to be claimed than attacks against military and other government targets. Holding the

⁸² Young and Dugan, 2014.

control variables constant at their mean values, civilian attacks are 29% less likely to be claimed by the leadership, demonstrating the substantial influence of targeting type in its decision-making.⁸³

Models 1 and 2 also appear to support the argument from the bargaining literature that credit claiming hinges on the extent to which the attack signals organizational capability. The number of fatalities in these models increases the probability of credit claiming. But the effect loses statistical significance in Models 3 or 4 when characteristics of the groups are taken into account. To further scrutinize this argument from bargaining literature, we interacted the number of fatalities with the target type, but in no model specification does this interaction significantly influence credit claiming.⁸⁴ That is, more lethal attacks against civilians are no more likely to be claimed than less lethal attacks against civilians. These results in combination provide only weak evidence, at best, that leaders condition credit claiming on the extent to which attacks signal organizational capability. Models 1 and 2 also find meager empirical support that credit claiming depends on the sophistication of the attack. Terrorist organizations are more likely to assume responsibility for hostage-taking incidents, but not for assassinations or armed assaults. Moreover, the influence of hostage-taking is not significant in Models 3 and 4 when organization characteristics are included in the analysis. We also find only modest empirical support for the outbidding thesis – specifically, the claim that terrorist group leaders are liable to claim credit when operating in environments with organizational rivals. In fact, Model 1 indicates that the GTD variable for Multiparty Competition is statistically significant in the opposite direction ($p < .05$). That is, attacks occurring in environments with multiple terrorist organizations are less likely to be claimed. In Model 2, where we substitute this measure with a count of the groups, the coefficient is statistically insignificant. In the more restricted samples, the number of groups has a significant effect in the expected direction (Model 4), but the GTD variable is insignificant (Model 3). Competition is hence an unreliable predictor of credit claiming.

Models 3 and 4 offer additional evidence that unclaimed attacks depend on principal-agency problems within terrorist groups. As suggested, agency loss may be observed not only in terms of target selection, but predicted by the size of the terrorist organization. Organizations with larger memberships are more likely to suffer from agency problems because the principal must delegate additional authority to unreliable agents.⁸⁵ Given this insight from the organizational literature, we would expect the leaders of terrorist organizations with larger memberships to be less content with their targeting choices, reducing credit claiming rates. To operationalize this robustness check, we analyze data on *Organization Size* from the BAAD dataset. As our principal-agency theory would predict, leaders of larger terrorist organizations are indeed significantly less likely to claim attacks that have been attributed to them ($p < .01$).

⁸³ These substantive effects are calculated using the results from Model 2, and the difference in predicted probabilities is significant at the .05 level.

⁸⁴ Results are available in the online appendix.

⁸⁵ See, for example, Cortell and Peterson, 2006.

These results are also consistent with the alternative hypothesis that weaker groups may be more likely to claim attacks in an effort to create a perception of strength. To tease out these explanations, we therefore test an additional measure of organizational capability – *State Sponsorship* – and find that this variable does not have a consistent impact on the odds of credit claiming. State sponsorship exerts a statistically significant impact on whether leaders assume credit for attacks in Model 3, but not in Model 4. These results, then, provide additional evidence for our main hypothesis, while providing tenuous support for the counterargument that less capable organizations are more likely to claim attacks against civilians.

Table 3: Attack Claims by Capability, Ideology and Competition

Dependent Variable: Credit Claimed				
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Civilian Target	-0.40*** (0.08)	-0.39*** (0.09)	-0.27** (0.13)	-0.24* (0.13)
Number of Fatalities	0.01*** (0.01)	0.01*** (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
State Repression	-0.20 (0.13)	-0.19 (0.15)	-0.03 (0.16)	-0.06 (0.16)
Assassination	-0.19 (0.24)	-0.21 (0.26)	0.06 (0.33)	-0.01 (0.37)
Hostage Incident	0.62** (0.28)	0.74** (0.31)	0.18 (0.22)	0.20 (0.19)
Armed Assault	-0.22 (0.15)	-0.23 (0.17)	-0.18 (0.17)	-0.28 (0.18)
Multiparty Competition (GTD)	-0.39** (0.21)	- -	0.13 (0.21)	- -
Number of Groups	- -	0.02 (0.01)	- -	0.05*** (0.02)
Organization Size	- -	- -	-0.92*** (0.27)	-0.75*** (0.25)
Foreign State Sponsorship	- -	- -	0.48* (0.27)	0.45 (0.32)
Islamist Ideology	- -	- -	0.35 (0.35)	0.29 (0.35)

Constant	-0.65 (0.68)	-1.02 (0.66)	0.56 (0.41)	0.25 (0.43)
Observations	21959	27570	6768	8069

* $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed)

Logistic regression

Robust standard errors clustered on terrorist group in parentheses

Finally, Models 3 and 4 address the notion that credit claiming hinges on the ideological preferences of the perpetrators. Although widely presumed to depress credit claiming rates, Islamist terrorist groups around the world are apparently no less likely to assume responsibility for their attacks. In marked contrast to the preexisting explanations from the conflict literature, then, our key independent variable of civilian attacks reduces the probability of credit claiming across all models in Table 3, as does the related principal-agency proxy of organization size. Compared to the alternative explanations, we therefore find overwhelming support for our principal-agency theory across a variety of specifications, temporal periods, and sample sizes.

Several studies have found evidence that terrorist group leaders maintain sufficient control over credit claiming to influence whether organizational responsibility is taken or withheld.⁸⁶ We thus have confidence that the vast majority of credit claims were made by the leadership or at least with its consent. Even with the social media “revolution” which enables lower level members to assume a higher profile in the group, credit claiming is generally issued through official sources under the direction of the leadership.⁸⁷ Nonetheless, as a robustness check we control for whether the attack occurred in 2008 or later and the results are comparable to those reported in the other models.⁸⁸

In the next section, we scrutinize our proposed mechanism with a detailed in-sample qualitative case study of the Afghanistan-based Taliban. The Taliban is arguably a hard test for our theory because the group is Islamist, militarily capable, state sponsored, and operates in an area contested by organizational rivals – alternative factors commonly presumed in the literature to determine variation in credit claiming. Neither the longtime leader Mullah Mohammed Omar nor the replacements after his death in April 2013 have a reputation for their tactical discretion. Figure 1 suggests, however, that even the Taliban leadership may base the decision to take organizational responsibility for an attack on its target selection. The Taliban claimed only 27 percent of its attacks against civilians compared to 42 percent against the military and other government targets from 2001 to 2011. The difference in these rates is statistically significant ($p < .05$), suggesting that target selection is a potentially important factor in the credit claiming

⁸⁶ Hoffman, 2010; Hoffman 1997; Min 2013.

⁸⁷ See, for example, Site Intel, “IS Official Accounts Move to Russian Social Media Platform,” <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/is-accounts-move-to-russian-social-media-platform-2.html>.

⁸⁸ All tests are in the online appendix.

calculus. With over 1,500 attacks during this time-span, the Taliban is an outlier in terms of militancy. To ensure this group is not driving our results, Table 4 presents results when excluding the Taliban from our larger sample, as well as when the analysis is restricted to this intrinsically important group. Across all of these specifications, civilian attacks continue to significantly depress credit claiming ($p < .05$).

Figure 1: Credit Claiming by the Taliban

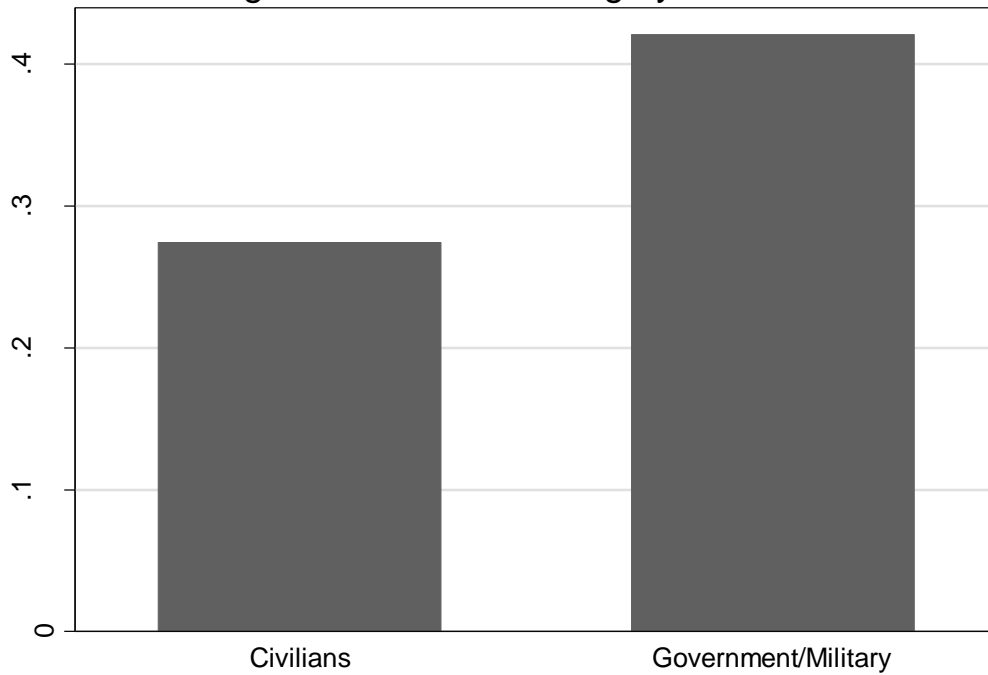


Table 4: Attack Claims by Taliban

	Excluding Taliban	Taliban Only
Civilian Target	-0.25*** (0.03)	-0.65** (0.11)
Constant	-1.77*** (0.03)	-0.32*** (0.08)
Observations	28283	1525

Unit of analysis is terrorist attack

Logistic Regression

Robust standard errors, clustered on the terrorist group in parentheses

The Afghan Taliban

The Taliban case bolsters our credit claiming theory by offering fine-grained evidence that (1) Mullah Omar and other senior leaders of the organization have consistently commanded their operatives to spare civilian targets due to the potential political costs; (2) the leadership successfully inhibits operatives from attacking civilians at least some of the time; (3) the organization suffers from a growing principal-agent problem, though, as foot-soldiers increasingly flout their targeting guidelines by attacking civilians; (4) the leaders try their best to highlight the selectivity of Taliban violence by more readily claiming responsibility for military attacks than civilian ones, except when culpability is impossible to deny.

According to the Taliban leadership, its operatives are prohibited from attacking civilians because such indiscriminate violence risks “ending up in a clash between civilian and Taliban.”⁸⁹ Mullah Omar, the founder and chief strategist of the Taliban until his mysterious death in April 2013, emphasized in public statements: “The mujahedeen have to take every step to protect the lives and wealth of ordinary people.”⁹⁰ This position cannot be dismissed as merely propaganda; internal documents seized by U.S. military forces in Pakistan confirm that the upper echelon of the Taliban regards the organization’s attacks on civilians as a political liability.⁹¹ Indeed, the leadership’s proscription against harming civilians has been at the core of the “Code of Conduct” issued to Taliban members since the first “Laheya” of 2006. Rule 21 states, “Anyone who has killed civilians during the Jihad may not be accepted into the Taliban movement.”⁹² Rule 46 declares, “Taliban commanders should try their best to avoid civilian deaths during fighting.”⁹³ In the 2009 Laheya, Rule 41 reminds operatives to “avoid civilian casualties”; Rule 48 bans “Cutting noses, lips, and ears off people”; and Rule 59 mandates that “The Mujahidin must have a good relationship with all the tribal community and with the local people.”⁹⁴ In the 2010 Laheya, Rule 57 decrees, “In carrying out martyrdom operations, take great efforts to avoid casualties among the common people”; Rule 65 enjoins mujahedin to “be careful with regard to the lives of the common people and their property”; and the back cover stresses that “Taking care of public property and the lives and property of the people is considered one of the main responsibilities of a mujahed.”⁹⁵ The Taliban Leadership Council emphasizes that the only permissible targets are selective: “...foreign invaders, their advisors, their contractors and

⁸⁹ Quoted in Tony Prudori, “On Civilian Casualties, Taliban Try To Look Like Victims,” *Threat Matrix*, (17 Aug. 2010), http://www.longwarjournal.org/threatmatrix/archives/2010/08/on_civilian_casualties_taliban_1.php#.

⁹⁰ Quoted in “Taliban Calls on Fighters to Spare Civilians,” *Al Jazeera* 6 Nov. 2011.

⁹¹ See Lahoud 2012.

⁹² Quoted in Greg Kleponis, “Throwing the Book at the Taliban: Undermining Taliban Legitimacy By Highlighting Their Own Hypocrisy” (USAF-NTM-A/CSTC-A, 2010), p. 47.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁹⁴ Quoted in Matthew C. DuPee., Thomas H. Johnson, and Matthew P. Dearing. “Understanding Afghan Culture-Analyzing the Taliban Code of Conduct: Reinventing the Laheya” (Department of National Security Affairs Naval Postgraduate School, 2009).

⁹⁵ Kate Clark, “First Wave of IS Attacks? Claim and Denial Over the Jalalabad Bombs,” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 22 April 2015.

members of all associated military, intelligence and auxiliary departments. And similarly, the high ranking officials of the stooge Kabul regime; members of Parliament; those associated with Ministries of Defense, Intelligence and Interior.”⁹⁶ These targeting guidelines are also enshrined in the Code of Conduct. In the 2010 *Laheya*, for instance, Rule 5 directs operatives to attack “high-ranking government officials” and Rule 41 demands the target of suicide bombers to be “high valued.”⁹⁷ Since then, the leadership has only increased its warnings to operatives about the political perils of indiscriminate violence.⁹⁸

To safeguard Afghan civilians, Taliban leaders incentivize members to engage in selective violence. The Code of Conduct is not lacking in enforcement mechanisms.⁹⁹ The leadership has an office mandated with investigating and punishing members who harm civilians.¹⁰⁰ In some cases, wayward members are stripped of their ranks. For more egregious targeting violations, transgressors have been sent directly to Mullah Omar and other high-level leaders for strict sentences under Sharia law.¹⁰¹ Not only are targeting violations subject to punishment, but Taliban leaders educate foot-soldiers about best practices, offer hands-on training to spare civilians, steer them away from crossfire, and promote members for engaging military targets.¹⁰² A United Nations report concludes that Taliban leaders thus reduce “casualties among the common people” by “implementing guidance in the *laheya* to target military objects more carefully.”¹⁰³

Despite these efforts, Taliban foot-soldiers have continued to kill thousands of Afghan civilians.¹⁰⁴ Compared to their leaders, these lower level members are typically regarded as incompetent, inexperienced, negligent, and unstable fighters driven by greed, vendettas, and other personal aims at odds with the official Taliban platform.¹⁰⁵ Whereas the leaders favor selective violence, lower level members are more inclined to harm the population because they are “prone to make operational and strategic mistakes,”¹⁰⁶ “less competent,”¹⁰⁷ “less experienced

⁹⁶ Leadership Council 2012.

⁹⁷ Quoted in Kleponis 2010.

⁹⁸ UN News Centre, “Civilian Casualties in Afghanistan Up 14 Per Cent Last Year, Says New Un Report,” 8 February 2014, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=47107&Cr=Afghan&Cr1=#.U7xff9hOVdi>.

⁹⁹ Clark 2011.

¹⁰⁰ Council on Foreign Relations, “The Taliban: A CFR InfoGuide Presentation,” at http://www.cfr.org/terrorist-organizations-and-networks/taliban/p35985?cid=marketing_use-taliban_infoguide-012115#!/.

¹⁰¹ Thomas H. Johnson and Matthew C. DuPee. “Analysing the New Taliban Code of Conduct (*Laheya*): An Assessment of Changing Perspectives and Strategies of the Afghan Taliban.” *Central Asian Survey* 31, no. 1 (2012): pp. 77-91.

¹⁰² See, for example, Bill Roggio, “Taliban Suicide Bomber Kills 7 Afghans at Baghlan Mosque,” *The Long War Journal*, (6 November 2011), http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/11/taliban_suicide_bomb_32.php.

¹⁰³ United Nations report, 2010, 9.

¹⁰⁴ Kleponis, 2010.

¹⁰⁵ See, for example, *BBC Online*, 21 June 2007; Kleponis, 2010.

¹⁰⁶ Daniel Byman, *Foreign Affairs* 18 (2009), p. 19.

¹⁰⁷ Asif Shahzad and Kimberly Dozier, “Record level of US airstrikes hit Afghan militants,” *Boston.Com*, 14 September 2010.

and less skilled,”¹⁰⁸ “less likely to be amenable to restraining their actions” against civilians,¹⁰⁹ “more brutal” towards civilians,¹¹⁰ “more radical”¹¹¹ and “more radicalized”¹¹² in their treatment of the population.

The discrepancy between their targeting guidelines and practices reflects a principal-agent problem. As Kate Clark notes, “The Taliban has severe command and control problems within its ranks.”¹¹³ The International Crisis Group observes that the leadership “has struggled to exert authority over its field commanders” and that “Given the autonomy that Taliban commanders and allied networks enjoy, the leadership might exercise little control over everyday military operations.”¹¹⁴ The U.N. Secretary General for Afghanistan reiterates that actions “by the Taliban leadership are not nearly enough to end the killing and injuring of innocent Afghan civilians.”¹¹⁵ A report from the Center on International Cooperation at New York University likewise laments the inability “of the central leadership to enforce decisions” against harming civilians.¹¹⁶ *Reuters* adds, “Even if the Taliban wants to bring down the number of civilians it kills, it lacks total control over the bombers, or those who guide them.”¹¹⁷ The *New York Times* affirms that attacks against civilians are typically perpetrated by low level Taliban members acting “on their initiative” because “The Taliban is a fractious organization and its leadership...often has only marginal control over the day-to-day activities of the rank and file, who usually decide whom to attack and when.”¹¹⁸ Gen. John R. Allen, who commanded the American-led coalition, agrees that operatives “were the ones who were planning the roadside bombs and intentionally targeting civilian targets” seemingly “isolated from more senior Taliban leadership.”¹¹⁹

Taliban difficulties with command and control are rooted in its “open door” recruitment policy, which has historically admitted fighters with weaker abilities and organizational commitment.¹²⁰ Drone strikes since 2008 have also exacerbated principal-agency problems by attriting the leadership. Given the internal dynamics of the Taliban, the targeted killings have

¹⁰⁸ Sanjeev Miglani, “Targeted killings inside Pakistan — are they working?” *Reuters* 11 August 2009.

¹⁰⁹ Leah Farrall quoted in Eric Schmitt, “As Al Qaeda Loses a Leader, Its Power Shifts From Pakistan,” *New York Times*, 7 June 2012.

¹¹⁰ Cameron Charles Russell, “The Targeted Killings Debate – the Endogeneity Problem,” *Across the Pond* (Anglo-American Conversations on International Affairs, 14 June 2011).

¹¹¹ *USA Today* 24 Jan. 2012.

¹¹² Gen. Mackay quoted in *Daily Mail* 2 March 2012.

¹¹³ Clark, *Afpak Channel* 19 Oct. 2011.

¹¹⁴ International Crisis Group 2008, 29, 33.

¹¹⁵ Quoted in UN News Centre, 8 February 2014.

¹¹⁶ Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn. *Separating the Taliban from al-Qaeda: The Core of Success in Afghanistan*. (Center on International Cooperation, 2011).

¹¹⁷ *Reuters* 8 Nov. 2011.

¹¹⁸ Azam Ahmed and Matthew Rosenberg, “Taliban Deny Responsibility for Attack on Red Cross,” *New Your Times* (31 May, 2013).

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ DuPee and Johnson, 2009; Gopal, 2010.

eroded organizational restraint towards civilians by endowing subordinates with additional operational autonomy.¹²¹ The counterterrorism analyst Leah Farrall has likened the decapitation campaign to the practice of killing off older elephants: The killings thin out the herd, but it then becomes prone to indiscriminate rampages without the guidance of the older, wiser guard.¹²²

Although unable to fully control which targets their operatives strike, Taliban leaders can usually determine which attacks are claimed by the organization. The leadership eagerly assumes Taliban responsibility for selective attacks against military targets, but veils organizational involvement when operatives commit indiscriminate bloodshed. For instance, the Taliban “quickly claimed responsibility” when operatives ambushed Mohammad Qasim Fahim, leader of the alliance that toppled the Taliban in 2001, on a road in northern Kunduz in July 2009.¹²³ Not only does the leadership publicly celebrate such selective attacks, it even claims credit for those committed by other organizations, such as when the Haqqani network has struck Afghan or NATO installations in Khost, Paktia, or Paktika.¹²⁴ By contrast, the leadership released the following statement when operatives defied its orders by striking the International Committee of the Red Cross in Jalalabad: “The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan wants to clarify to everyone that it was neither behind the May 29th attack on the I.C.R.C. office in Jalalabad city nor does it support such attacks.”¹²⁵ Taliban specialists affirm that this target-dependent credit claiming strategy is the norm. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan observes that Taliban attack denials are “frequently issued following civilian casualty incidents...perhaps highlighting the Taliban’s continuous interest in gaining the Afghan people’s support.”¹²⁶ The governor of Farah Province, Rohul Amin, also remarks: “Whenever there are civilian casualties, the Taliban deny responsibility.”¹²⁷ After a Taliban attack on a Kandahar wedding for which the group evaded responsibility, *Radio Free Europe* reported that the leaders “routinely deny causing civilian casualties.”¹²⁸ When a bank was blown up in Jalalabad, *France 24* likewise anticipated that the Taliban would withhold credit as the leaders “rarely claim attacks that kill large groups of civilians.”¹²⁹ *France 24* pointed out that the Taliban refused credit for bombing a

¹²¹ See Johnson and DuPée, 2012, 77–91.

¹²² Leah Farrall, quoted in “US killing moderate al Qaeda leaders, like Abu Yahya, says CT analyst,” *Long War Journal* (June 8, 2012): http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/06/us_killing_moderate_al_qaeda_l.php.

¹²³ Whadat Afghan, “Afghan Vice-presidential Candidate Survives Ambush” *Reuters* (July 26, 2009). <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/07/26/us-afghanistan-attack-idUSTRE56P0R220090726>.

¹²⁴ See, for example, Bill Ardolino and Bill Roggio, “New Details Emerge About Complex Attack On Fob Salerno,” *The Long War Journal*, (10 June 2012).

¹²⁵ Ahmed and Rosenberg, 31 May 2013.

¹²⁶ United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, “Afghanistan Annual Report 2013: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict,” (February 2014), p. 32

http://unama.unmissions.org/Portals/UNAMA/human%20rights/Feb_8_2014_PoC-report_2013-Full-report-ENG.pdf.

¹²⁷ Bill Roggio, “Suicide Bomber Strikes in Western Afghanistan” *Long War Journal* (20 November 2009). http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/11/suicide_bomber_strik_3.php.

¹²⁸ http://www.rferl.org/content/Thirty_Nine_Killed_In_Kandahar_Blast/2066996.html.

¹²⁹ “Suicide Attack in Afghanistan Kills at Least 33 People,” *France24.com* (18 April 2015). <http://www.france24.com/en/20150418-afghanistan-suicide-bombing-jalalabad-bank/>.

wedding reception in the northern Afghan town of Aybak because “The group often distances itself from attacks with high civilian death tolls.”¹³⁰ According to information minister Mian Iftikhar Hussain, Taliban leaders eschew credit for anti-civilian violence because “They are desperate to wash their tainted image among the public.”¹³¹

In fact, Taliban leaders are known to reverse their public stance upon discovering an attack harmed civilians.¹³² Instead of taking credit for civilian attacks, the leaders often try to attribute them to government forces. In February 2014, for instance, UNAMA published a detailed report on civilian casualties in Afghanistan. Of the 8,614 to occur in the previous year, 6,374 or 74 percent were assessed as Taliban perpetrated.¹³³ Predictably, though, the Taliban leadership refused ownership of these attacks, appealing that “civilian casualties are caused by the enemy itself” and that “the enemy is responsible for most incidents of civilian losses.”¹³⁴ The Taliban spokesman says that such reports linking Taliban fighters to civilian casualties in Afghanistan are “propaganda,” “far from reality,” and “lies, all lies” intended to “cover up the blatant crimes of the Pentagon.”¹³⁵ Relatedly, Taliban leaders sometimes pin indiscriminate attacks on organizational rivals.¹³⁶ When they assume organizational responsibility for attacks against civilians, Taliban leaders commonly say they were not actually civilian targets. For instance, a Taliban spokesman insisted that the 27 laborers shot dead in October 2008 were secretly “Afghan National Army soldiers...traveling to Helmand wearing ordinary clothes.”¹³⁷ Similarly, the leadership announced that a June 2012 martyrdom operation killed “countless foreign terrorists [NATO forces] and their cowardly local puppets [Afghan security forces],” when it harmed only civilians.¹³⁸ And when another suicide attacker killed nine Afghan civilians in Kajaki earlier that year, Taliban leaders declared that the operation instead took out 17

¹³⁰ “Top MP Killed in Suicide Attack at Daughter’s Wedding,” *France24.com* (14 July 2014) <http://www.france24.com/en/20120714-afghanistan-suicide-bomber-kills-22-afghan-wedding-taliban>.

¹³¹ “Pakistan: Taliban Backs off from Attacking Civilians,” *Inter Press Service* (23 July 2011) <http://www.ipsnews.net/2011/07/pakistan-taliban-backs-off-from-attacking-civilians/>.

¹³² “Suicide Blast Slays 40 at Afghan Wedding Party,” *NBCNews.com* (10 June 2010) http://www.nbcnews.com/id/37589087/ns/world_news-south_and_central_asia/t/suicide-blast-slays-afghan-wedding-party/#.VVZoW9jBjdg.

¹³³ United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, “Afghanistan Annual Report 2013: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict,” February 2014, .

¹³⁴ Mullah Mohammad Omar, “Message of Felicitation of Amir-ul-Momineen on the Occasion of Eid-ul-Fitr,” *Voice of Jihad*, (6 August 2013) <http://www.shahamat-english.com/index.php/paighamoona/35234-message-of-felicitation-of-amir-ul-momineen-may-allah-protect-him-on-the-occasion-of-eid-ul-fitr>; “Interview with Mr. Sarhadi, the Director of the Special Committee for the Prevention of Civilian Losses,” *Voice of Jihad*, (17 June 2013), <http://www.shahamat-english.com/index.php/interviwe/32843-interview-with-mr-sarhadi,-the-director-of-the-special-committee-for-the-prevention-of-civilian-losses>.

¹³⁵ Quoted in Tony Prudori, 17 August 2010.

¹³⁶ “Suicide Blast Kills More than 30 in Afghanistan,” *NPR* (18 April 2015) <http://www.npr.org/2015/04/18/400658665/suicide-blast-kills-more-than-30-in-afghanistan>.

¹³⁷ Quoted in Nadem 2008.

¹³⁸ Bill Roggio, “Taliban Kill 21 Afghans in Double Suicide Attack,” *The Long War Journal*, (6 June 2012), http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/06/taliban_killed_21_af.php.

troops.¹³⁹ Only when Taliban culpability is undeniable does the leadership assume organizational responsibility, but then typically brands the perpetrators as unrepresentative “rogue elements” within the group.¹⁴⁰ In these ways, the leadership acts strategically to belie the indiscriminate nature of Taliban violence given the potential political costs.

In sum, the Taliban is an intrinsically important, in-sample case that elucidates how attacks on civilian targets tend to depress credit claiming. True to our theory, the Taliban is clearly an internally heterogeneous organization that suffers from a principal-agent problem in which the leadership is more strategic-minded than lower level members. Taliban leaders consistently advocate and incentivize selective attacks on military targets over indiscriminate attacks on civilians. When operatives strike the former, the leadership is more eager to assume organizational responsibility even when perpetrated by rival groups. But when operatives transgress their targeting guidelines, as is often the case, the leadership tries to distance the organization by withholding credit for the politically counterproductive behavior or if necessary blaming it on unrepresentative deviants.

Research Implications

In theory, terrorism is a political communication strategy for groups to convey their grievances and the costs of ignoring them. In practice, though, terrorist groups across the ideological spectrum take responsibility for just a small portion of their attacks. Rather than getting credit for the violence, terrorist leaders generally deny their operatives committed it. This theoretical and empirical disconnect may explain why scholars have ignored the subject of unclaimed attacks despite the fact that they are the norm. Our study helps to fill this lacuna by proposing and testing a new theory to account for variation in whether terrorist attacks are claimed. The evidence suggests that terrorist leaders behave as rational political actors who conduct a cost-benefit analysis on whether to assume organizational responsibility for an attack. Terrorist leaders are inclined to accept group responsibility only when the anticipated political outcome is positive. When the expected fallout would be harmful for the group politically, its leaders hesitate to declare organizational involvement. More concretely, we provide robust quantitative and qualitative evidence that terrorist leaders condition credit claiming on the target of the attack. When operatives strike civilian targets rather than military ones, their leaders are significantly more likely to withhold credit due to the political risks. The July 2014 attack on Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 is not anomalous. Initially, Russia-backed Donbass insurgents bragged over social media about downing what they thought was a large Ukrainian army cargo plane. When it

¹³⁹ Bill Roggio, “Taliban Kill 20 Afghans in Suicide Attack, Bombings in the South,” *The Long War Journal*, (19 January 2012), http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/01/taliban_killed_20_af.php.

¹⁴⁰ *New York Times*, 9 May 2011. The “majority” of Taliban attacks on civilians are indeed accidental (Afghanistan Annual Report 2013, p. 6).

turned out to be a commercial airliner with 295 passengers onboard, however, the leadership immediately denied any organizational involvement due to the expected fallout.¹⁴¹

Although original, our theory builds on two burgeoning research programs in the conflict literature. The first stresses how terrorist groups are internally heterogeneous rather than unitary actors.¹⁴² While the leaders are typically regarded as strategic, foot-soldiers often defy their preferences, posing a principal-agent problem.¹⁴³ The second finds that the utility of violence can hinge on the target. Compared to more selective violence against military targets, indiscriminate violence against civilian targets carries an even higher risk of political backlash.¹⁴⁴ This study provides both macro- and micro-level evidence that civilian attacks depress credit claiming, as the leadership tries to evade organizational responsibility when operatives hit costlier targets. Because of the preliminary nature of our theory, however, future research would bolster it in several ways.

First, additional research should help to establish why operatives tend to exhibit less civilian restraint than their leaders. For reasons outlined in the principal-agency framework, the rank and file may possess weaker abilities and commitment than the leadership. Mirroring the broader organizational literature, conflict research generally characterizes terrorist leaders as more strategic than their foot-soldiers. Not only are lower-level members less carefully vetted, but they may have stronger personal incentives to attack the population owing to their position within the organizational hierarchy. This logic, while intuitively compelling, should be tested more empirically.

Second, researchers should analyze the determinants of leadership support for civilian targeting. Our study does not address why certain leaders do, in fact, favor attacking civilians. Although less apt than their operatives to support indiscriminate violence, some leaders such as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi of Islamic State and [Abubakar Shekau](#) of its Boko Haram affiliate seem to welcome this practice. These intrinsically important cases undercut the adage that “terrorism is a weapon of the weak” given the organizational capability of these groups in terms of their membership size, territory, and revenues.¹⁴⁵ Still, the structural explanation should be more rigorously tested to assess whether leaders are generally more likely to favor civilian targeting when their organizations lack sufficient capability to engage military forces.¹⁴⁶ More generally, researchers should continue investigating whether civilian targeting serves group interests under certain conditions, which should be carefully identified. Leaders may also exhibit signs of learning by favoring more selective violence over time in line with the rational actor model. If

¹⁴¹ Leonid Ragozin, “Who is Responsible for the MH-17 Tragedy?” *Aljazeera.com* (July 2014).

¹⁴² See, for example, Pearlman, 2009; Siegel, 2009.

¹⁴³ See, for example, Gill and Young, 2011; Kalyvas, 2003.

¹⁴⁴ See, for example, Cronin, 2009; Berrebi and Klor, 2006, 2008.

¹⁴⁵ See Audrey Kurth Cronin, “ISIS Is Not a Terrorist Group,” *Foreign Affairs* 94.2 (2015): 87-98.

¹⁴⁶ For a recent study on this topic, see Virginia Page Fortna, “Do Terrorists Win? Rebels' Use of Terrorism and Civil War Outcomes,” *International Organization*, 69, 2015, 519-556.

so, we would expect Islamic State and its affiliates to curtail their attacks against civilians and refrain from bragging about them as the backlash becomes more apparent to the leadership.

Third, our study also does not directly address why anonymous attacks have been rising over time.¹⁴⁷ This question is slightly outside the scope of this study, but nonetheless interesting and important. One explanation is that norms against civilian attacks have stiffened over time, creating higher audience costs for claiming them.¹⁴⁸ Another explanation in line with our framework is that agency problems are more pronounced in contemporary terrorist groups, reducing the quality of violence produced by agents and thus the inclination for principals to claim them. Previous research suggests that terrorist leaders tend to delegate tactical autonomy to lower level members in order to maintain organizational security.¹⁴⁹ If so, tougher counterterrorism especially since the September 11, 2001 attacks have likely promoted newfound agency problems for terrorist groups. Agency problems may be on the rise not only because of greater government investment and cooperation, but also because decapitation strikes in particular have become a core component of counterterrorism since the advancement of drone technology around 2008. Indeed, recent work indicates that drone strikes can promote agency problems that compromise the “quality” of terrorist group violence.¹⁵⁰ The Taliban case study lends additional support, as the targeted killings have empowered lower level members with weaker civilian restraint. Such explanations may help to account for the growing “anonymity” of terrorist attacks.

Fourth, our theory predicts that leaders are more inclined to claim credit for military attacks than civilian attacks – not that leaders will always claim credit for the former and never the latter. In fact, there are likely situations when it is strategic for leaders to withhold credit for military attacks or claim credit for civilian attacks. Although selective violence is generally seen as more strategic than indiscriminate violence, even attacks on military targets are not cost-free.¹⁵¹ Prior studies suggest that abstaining from violence entirely is sometimes the best political course of action and that leaders often want their subordinates to wield less violence, not more.¹⁵² That leaders are known to withhold credit even for military attacks is therefore consistent with our broader strategic framework. Still, additional work should investigate whether our strategic explanation can also predict the conditions under which leaders evade organizational responsibility for military attacks and assume responsibility for civilian attacks.

Fifth, the group’s propaganda can provide additional insight into the tactical preferences of the leadership. In a sense, propaganda videos serve the opposite function as unclaimed attacks.

¹⁴⁷ Abrahms, Max. "What terrorists really want: Terrorist motives and counterterrorism strategy." *International Security* 32.4 (2008): 89..

¹⁴⁸ See Pinker, Steven. *The better angels of our nature: Why violence has declined*. Penguin, 2011.

¹⁴⁹ Shapiro 2013.

¹⁵⁰ Abrahms and Potter 2014.

¹⁵¹ On the costs of military escalation, see James D. Fearon, “Rationalist Explanations for War,” *International organization* 49.03 (1995): 379-414.

¹⁵² Chenoweth and Stephan 2013; and Shapiro 2013.

Whereas leaders withhold credit to conceal tactical choices that could hurt the group, propaganda videos are designed to highlight its winning ways. As such, we would expect terrorist propaganda videos to disproportionately feature selective attacks on military targets rather than indiscriminate attacks on civilian targets, even among Islamist groups. This pattern has been observed in Taliban promotional videos and is likely generalizable across other terrorist group productions.¹⁵³

Finally, researchers should explore how the recent profusion of social media affects credit claiming. Historically, terrorist leaders have had greater control over their operatives in this domain. Social media empowers the rank and file by endowing lower level members with unprecedented autonomy to broadcast misdeeds over their own Twitter and Facebook accounts, among other platforms. Our observation period of 1970 to 2011 minimizes the impact of this technological revolution. As a robustness check, we also control for credit claiming before and after the onset of the social media revolution starting around 2008. Future research should further examine whether attacks against civilian targets are more likely to be claimed as organizational spokesmen become more diffuse. If so, we would anticipate more centralized terrorist outlets to exercise greater restraint in claiming civilian attacks in accordance with our principal-agency theory.

¹⁵³ Dorrnsoro, 2009.