

## **The Importance of Territory: Probing the Nature and Effectiveness of Terrorism**

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**Abstract.** Is terrorism an effective method for achieving political goals? And why do scholars provide such different answers to this question? This article shows that the current debate on the effectiveness of terrorism turns on a definitional disagreement. It makes the case for a conceptualisation focused on terrorist groups' clandestine nature and inability to control territory. Three quantitative analyses are then performed which show the political ineffectiveness of terrorist groups relative to guerrilla organisations. Our analysis indicates that the main variable accounting for violent group success is control over territory, and not target selection as previous research has suggested. This finding raises some hypotheses for further research concerning the effects of western military intervention or support for local military action against violent sub-state groups.

**Key Words:** terrorism definition, effectiveness, guerrilla, territory, violent extremism, counterterrorism.

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## Introduction

The current debate on the effectiveness of terrorism raises several critical issues. Does terrorist violence really pay off? Under what conditions do terrorists achieve their aims? Is terrorist violence more or less effective than other types of asymmetric warfare? In this article, we show that the answers to these questions vary dramatically when different conceptions of terrorism are used. An analysis of the conflicting findings of existing research on the issue of effectiveness reveals the importance of underlying assumptions about the nature of terrorism.

Robert Pape (2003; 2005) finds that terrorist campaigns have a remarkable record of coercing governments into making significant policy concessions.<sup>1</sup> Surveys by Max Abrahms (2006; 2012), however, find the opposite to be the case – that terrorist groups rarely achieve their policy objectives.<sup>2</sup> The datasets constructed to support these opposing arguments are based on contrasting definitions of terrorism. Pape takes a broad view, defining terrorism as the use of violence by a sub-state group to intimidate an audience. Abrahms, on the other hand, stresses that terrorist groups are those that attack *civilians* to coerce a government. Different definitions lead these authors to place groups in different categories. Not surprisingly, they arrive at different empirical conclusions.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Other authors supporting this position include Kydd and Walter (2006, 49), Gunaratna (2002, 321) and Sprinzak (2000, 68). Although Pape's research focuses on groups that practice suicide terrorism, it has been cited as evidence that terrorism in general is politically effective. See, for example, Kydd and Walter (2006, 49).

<sup>2</sup> Other authors, who reached similar conclusions, include Jones and Libicki (2008, 32-34) and Cronin (2009, 10-11, 73-93).

<sup>3</sup> See Pape, (2005, 7-9, 40, 61, 64-65); Abrahms (2006, 42-43, 55-56). Abrahms (2012) codes a new dataset of 125 violent sub-state campaigns "as either guerrilla or terrorist depending on whether the target country's deaths were mainly to its military or its civilians." In this article, Abrahms reinforces his earlier finding that terrorism is ineffective. Apart from their definitional disagreement, Pape and Abrahms' different empirical findings are also influenced by the different ways in which they operationalise the "campaigns" of violent groups. To understand how they construct "campaigns"

There are shortcomings in both the broad and narrow definitions of terrorism used in scholarly debates today. Pape, like many authors, focuses on the intention to spread fear in an audience or population. However, as we discuss below, many forms of violence – not just terrorism – rely on the mechanism of fear to generate compliance. Narrower definitions focus on the target of the violence, specifying that terrorism is violence directed against civilians. But many terrorist groups also extensively target security forces. Abrahms, being aware of this variation, categorises a group based on which type of target – combatant or civilian – it attacks more often.<sup>4</sup> This means that an organisation is dubbed “terrorist” if its number of attacks on civilians edges over 50 per cent of its total attacks, but is seen as guerrilla if its attacks on civilians fall short of that 50 per cent mark. This creates some problems. First, as we show below, several groups that are universally considered to be terrorist in nature do not qualify as terrorist according to Abrahms’ criterion because the majority of their attacks have been on security forces. Second, the criterion is unstable, since relatively small changes in the composition of targets may lead a group to change its nature. The “civilian-targeting” definition does not provide a durable concept of what constitutes a terrorist group. Overall, the construction of datasets on the basis of these two types of existing definitions is problematic.

This article explores an alternative conceptualisation, drawing on a large literature that claims that terrorism is an extreme form of asymmetric conflict. It is the particular type of violence carried out by groups whose strength is extremely low in comparison to the state they are fighting (Crenshaw 1981, 379-399; Lake 2002, 15-29).

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differently, see the seven groups analysed by Pape, in contrast with Abrahms’ treatment of these same groups: Pape (2003, 348, 351); and Abrahms (2006, 49-50).

<sup>4</sup> Abrahms (2006, 55) divides targets into two categories: (i) state security forces and officials; and, (ii) civilians, which broadly correspond to the combatant vs. non-combatant distinction one usually finds in the literature.

These groups are typically underground ones, that is, groups that do not control any part of the state's territory. The contrast here is with guerrilla organisations, which do control some territory, usually in the jungle or in the mountains. This distinction about territory accounts for some long-standing judgments about which groups are terrorist in nature. Observers have tended to see ETA in the Basque Country or the Red Brigades in Italy as terrorist groups, whereas the FARC in Columbia and the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka for most of their existence have been regarded as guerrilla organisations. The main difference between them hinges on the territorial issue.

The territorial criterion is particularly relevant for an analysis of effectiveness. As we argue below, control of territory affects the size and recruitment capacity of a violent group, and consequently also its lethality. Both size and lethality help to account for the degree of success that groups have in fighting against the state. The conceptualisation of terrorism offered here thus provides mechanisms that may explain why some insurgencies<sup>5</sup> are more effective than others.

We replicate Max Abrahms' dataset and analyse data from the MAROB database and the Global Terrorism Database (GTD). Our analysis of these sources produces some striking results. Terrorist groups rarely succeeded in achieving their political objectives, but guerrilla organisations had a higher success rate in this respect. While the analysis broadly supports Abrahms' argument that "terrorism does not work," it suggests very different reasons for the political ineffectiveness of these groups relative to guerrilla organisations. Rather than stemming from a difference in target selection (civilian vs. combatant), as Abrahms argues, we find that the key variable accounting for violent group success is control over territory. Territorial control produces a greater

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<sup>5</sup> This article refers to 'insurgency'/'insurgent organisation' as a general term for all types of politically motivated, violent sub-state groups. This general term is then broken down into two specific types – terrorist organisations and guerrilla organisations – which are discussed in more detail below.

ability to coerce governments. Terrorist groups' inability to control territory constrains their lethality, reducing their ability to wring concessions out of governments. We also find that, among terrorist groups, those with less radical goals tend to have more success. The degree of control over territory in combination with the nature of terrorist group goals accounts better for the variation in violent groups' political effectiveness than target selection.

This article has two main sections. The first section discusses existing understandings of terrorism and makes the case for a definition focused on terrorist groups' clandestine nature and inability to control territory. It also discusses the mechanisms that may link territorial control to effectiveness. The second section offers three quantitative analyses, which suggest that terrorist organisations rarely succeed in achieving their political objectives. The key variable for explaining this outcome is shown to be the terrorists' inability to control territory and consequent reduction in lethality, relative to guerrilla groups. The article concludes by suggesting some hypotheses for further research concerning the effects of western military intervention or support for local military action against violent sub-state groups.

### **The Conceptualisation of Terrorism**

Whether terrorism is meant to be a set of violent tactics, a type of conflict or a kind of armed group, has far-reaching consequences for empirical research. The available datasets (GTD, MPIT, ITERATE, Patterns of Global Terrorism, TWEED, MAROB, and others) do not resolve this issue since we cannot take for granted that they cover terrorism and nothing but terrorism, given the vague definitions on which they were built. For instance, the Global Terrorism Database, probably the most comprehensive and most used source in the field today, says that terrorism corresponds to “the

threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence to attain a political, economic, religious or social goal through fear, coercion or intimidation.” (LaFree and Dugan 2008) In this section, we critically analyse this and other understandings of the term.

Three broad approaches to the concept of terrorism can be identified. One defines the phenomenon in terms of the status of the people that are usually targeted by terrorist violence. Another focuses on features of terrorist violence, such as the distinction between the target of violence and the main target, or the aim of instilling fear in a population. The third one, which we explore in this article, establishes a strong link between terrorist violence and the conditions of clandestinity or absence of territorial control under which armed actors carry it out.

According to the first view, terrorism consists of killing civilians or non-combatants (Abrahms 2006; Goodwin 2006; Kydd and Walter 2006; McCormick 2003). If the victims of violence are civilians, then we are in the presence of terrorism. This understanding stems from “the international bias”, according to which terrorism is conceptualised as the kind of terrorism we are most familiar with, namely the international attacks epitomised by Al-Qaeda’s 9/11 or Black September’s raid on the Munich Olympics in 1972 (Sánchez-Cuenca and De la Calle 2009). When most social scientists write about terrorism, they think of infamous attacks in which many civilians were killed.

If we consider cases of domestic terrorism, however, a different picture emerges. There are many groups, which have always been considered terrorist in the literature, that have systematically killed combatants to a greater extent than civilians. Members of the security forces and the military (i.e., combatants) represent far more than 50 per cent of all fatalities in these cases. Using the Domestic Terrorism Victims dataset (DTV), which covers all fatalities caused by political violence in Western Europe from 1965 to

2005, we provide in Table 1 information about the proportion of combatants killed by four groups that are widely regarded as terrorist: the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), Basque Homeland and Freedom (ETA), the Red Brigades, and the October First Antifascist Revolutionary Group (GRAPO), a Maoist revolutionary organisation that acted in Spain for more than 20 years. Combatants (military, security forces, and paramilitary) represent more than 60 per cent of victims in all cases. It goes without saying that there are many other groups that kill civilians to a much greater extent, but our point is only that there are groups universally labelled terrorist that, nevertheless, kill more combatants than non-combatants.

TABLE 1

It is not only that there are groups usually considered terrorist that kill mainly combatants, but also that there are many non-terrorist groups that systematically kill civilians or non-combatants, as recent work on wars, guerrillas, and genocides attests (Kalyvas 2006; Valentino 2004). In the past century, more civilians than combatants were killed in war-related conflicts. As Downes (2008, 1) points out, civilians made up between 50 and 62 per cent of all fatalities in inter-state and civil wars during the twentieth century. In the case of guerrillas, which is especially interesting for the comparison with terrorism, Stathis Kalyvas (2006) has shown that targeting civilians is part of the internal logic of insurgency: guerrillas try to rule, to impose order and to extract rents from dwellers in the areas they control. To guarantee compliance and to avoid collaboration with state security forces, guerrillas often engage in selective violence against civilians. In sum, if we define terrorism in terms of targets, a number of groups that have always been considered terrorist may be excluded, whereas many

groups and conflicts not usually seen as terrorist in nature would have to be included.

The fact that the definition clashes with considered judgments about what groups should be classified as terrorist points to an error in the conceptualisation.

The second family of definitions considers that terrorist violence hinges upon the distinction between the direct target of violence and the general or main target that contemplates the violence and understands what might happen if it does not comply with the perpetrators' demands (Crenshaw 1995, 3-24; Enders and Sandler 2006, 3; Frey 2004, 7; Hoffman 1998, 44; Krueger 2007, 14; Schmid and Jongman 1988, 28). Thus, when Hamas commits a suicide attack against some passers-by in Israel, the direct target is indeed those civilians who are killed, but the main target is the state of Israel. The incentive that the main target has for giving in to the terrorists is the avoidance of further violence. If the main target eventually yields, it is because of the expectation of more violence if it does not give in. This is where terror, or fear, enters into the picture. People feel fear or are terrorised when they imagine the consequences of not complying with the terrorists' demands.

The problem, however, is that the aim of instilling fear in the main target also applies in any form of coercive violence, terrorist or not. Coercive violence consists of imposing a cost on someone through violent means in order to force the person to act as the coercer wants. As Thomas Schelling (1966, 2) puts it, "there is a difference between taking what you want and making someone give it to you." The logic of coercive violence corresponds to "making someone give it to you". Terrorism represents a particularly refined form of this kind of violence, but it cannot be held that coercive violence is embodied uniquely in terrorism. Recent theoretical work on wars has made clear that warfare is not just about seizing the territory and weapons of the enemy: coercion and bargaining are also essential elements, particularly in modern warfare

(Powell 2004; Slantchev 2003; Wagner 2000). Neither the distinction between the two types of target nor the aim of spreading fear are exclusive to terrorism. They can be found, for instance, in the area bombings by the Allied powers in Second World War, or in the two atomic bombs over Japan. In both cases, the direct target was civilians, whereas the main target was the fascist governments of Germany and Japan. And of course these were attempts to instil fear in the population (Freedman 2005, 161-70). Terrorism is definitely some sort of coercive violence, but it cannot be simply defined as coercive violence, unless we are willing to expand the scope of the concept much beyond its usual applications.

This brings us to the third approach, according to which, terrorism is characterised in terms of the conditions under which this kind of violence is produced. It is important, first of all, to specify the nature of this violence and how it is different from other types. The tactics that most people associate with terrorist violence include hostage taking and kidnapping, assassinations, plane hijacks, selective shootings and destruction of property and life through bombs in urban areas. This contrasts with the tactics that are usually attributed to guerrillas, such as skirmishes, ambushes, seizing of villages, raids, and even small scale battles. It also contrasts with the tactics of state repression, such as torture, executions, mass arrests, internment in concentration camps and mass disappearances.

What are the conditions under which armed groups resort to terrorist violence? Following other authors, notably Bruce Hoffman (1998, 41) and Ariel Merari (1993), we argue that terrorist violence is mainly determined by the absence of territorial control. What makes terrorism quite unique is that it is violence carried out when the perpetrators act within the enemy's territory. This imposes severe constraints on the insurgents' capacity to exert violence. The lack of any territory of their own leads

terrorist insurgents to act in a clandestine way, mainly in urban areas. It is not by chance that in the 1970s the terms “urban guerrilla” and “terrorist” were used interchangeably. In an “urban guerrilla”, as opposed to a rural one, the insurgents do not control territory and have to act underground (Moss 1972).

The technology of violence used by terrorists follows from the constraints that clandestinity imposes. Unlike guerrillas, terrorist groups cannot aspire to engage in irregular military operations against the enemy. Abraham Guillén, a Spanish anarchist exiled in Latin America, in his 1966 *Strategy of the Urban Guerrilla*, wrote extensively on the differences that territory makes. He recommended urban terrorism for Argentina and Uruguay, based on the fact that the great majority of the population lived in cities and that the terrain was flat (and therefore unsuited to guerrilla warfare) in both countries. For him, the focus on cities implied eschewing efforts to conquer space because “in the cities, the [urban terrorists] agitate, fight and give cover to the masses, but cannot establish liberated zones” (Guillén 1973, 281). This, it seems to us, is an able characterization of terrorism.

We thus define terrorist groups as clandestine organisations that do not control any part of the state’s territory, which use or threaten violence in pursuit of a political goal. Of course, not only underground groups resort to terrorist tactics. Many guerrillas also commit terrorist atrocities. But, we argue, guerrillas typically engage in terrorism when they are subject to the same constraints as underground groups. This happens when the guerrilla acts far away from its territorial base. A case in point is the explosion of a car bomb by the Shining Path in a neighbourhood of Lima in July 1992, killing 25 and injuring around 200 more. Here, the guerrilla penetrates an urban territory controlled by the state and reproduces the behaviour of an underground group in that context.

Territorial control (or lack of it) is crucial to understand the differences between terrorist groups and guerrillas. Guerrillas seize territory from the state's control, developing a base, normally in the jungle or in the hills. The existence of such a base solves basic security constraints. The guerrillas can move safely, store weapons and other material and can even develop some infrastructure (camps, schools, courts, etc). Thus, the process of recruitment and training of new activists is much easier than in the case of a fully clandestine group. Clandestinity is associated with small groups (in the range of hundreds of recruits) as opposed to guerrilla organisations that tend to have thousands of recruits. On purely empirical grounds, a cut-off of 1,000 recruits seems reasonable. ETA has never had more than 500 members; the Provisional IRA had about 900 activists; and the Red Brigades, around 425 members (Domínguez 1992, 39; O'Leary 2005, 233; Moss 1989, 65-7). These are all terrorist organisations. The contrast with guerrillas is telling: the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka had a minimum of 3,000 recruits; between 4,000 and 5,000 in the case of the KNU (Karen National Union); and 18,000 in the case of the FARC in Colombia (Hopgood 2005, 43; Tan 2007, 47; Chernick 2007, 56). These examples are not meant to be exhaustive and some exceptions can be found.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, there does seem to be an underlying trend: insurgencies with control of territory tend to be bigger than underground groups.

The difference in size between territorial and non-territorial insurgencies influences, in turn, their lethal capacity.<sup>7</sup> Again, a 1,000 threshold makes sense, albeit

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<sup>6</sup> While it is hard to think of guerrillas with less than 1,000 recruits, there have been, according to our definition, terrorist groups with more than 1,000 recruits: the Montoneros in Argentina had at their peak 3,500 members, see Moyano (1995, 104)

<sup>7</sup> In their analysis of the lethality of violent sub-state groups between 1998 and 2005, Asal and Rethemeyer found that those groups controlling territory produced significantly more deaths than the groups which acted completely clandestinely. A means test of their data shows that the groups with territorial control had an average number of 166 killings for the period aforementioned, whereas groups without territory

now referring to fatalities. The great bulk of territorial insurgencies produce more than 1,000 killings, whereas non-territorial groups tend to produce less than this. ETA has killed less than 900 people; the Red Brigades, less than 60; the Red Army Faction, less than 40; the Ulster Volunteer Force less than 600.<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting, in this regard, that the literature on civil wars considers that a domestic conflict qualifies as a civil war if more than 1,000 people are killed. A natural extension of this rule is that those groups that kill less than 1,000 people are generally terrorist in nature and the challenge they pose does not amount to a civil war. As with the recruit figures, this also has to be taken as a trend rather than as a clear division between two types of violence. There are certainly terrorist groups that have surpassed the 1,000 threshold, including the PIRA (more than 1,600 fatalities), not to mention Al Qaeda, which in a single attack was able to kill more than 2,600 people. But these counterexamples, important as they may be, are exceptional in the universe of terrorist groups.

Since underground groups are generally smaller in size and less lethal than those with territorial control, it follows that the former will be, on average, less effective than the latter. The key assumption here is that more lethal groups have a greater ability to coerce governments. Terrorist groups' inability to control territory constrains their lethality, reducing their capacity to wring concessions out of governments. Usually, the most that terrorist groups can extract from the state is intermediate concessions, which in some of the most significant cases could be attributed to alternative factors – for instance, to the existence of legitimate political forces with representation in parliament, as in the Irish and the Basque cases.

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had on average only 15 deaths. This difference is statistically significant at 0.001. See Asal and Rethemeyer (2008).

<sup>8</sup> Data taken from the Domestic Terrorism Victims dataset. <http://www.march.es/dtv> (September 21, 2011).

The challenge to the state posed by a terrorist organisation tends to be minor compared with that of a guerrilla. Both groups put into question the monopoly of violence that the state is supposed to have. But the guerrilla goes beyond that, since it also questions the de facto sovereignty of the state over part of its own territory. Once the guerrilla controls territory, it may develop some military power, which it uses in order to take control over new areas, aiming eventually to provoke the collapse of the state. Terrorism, by contrast, is based on a different kind of pressure and does not involve the development of military power. The attacks of terrorist groups impose a cost on the state (in terms of the destruction of life and property). This cost can indeed be high, so high that the state may prefer to make concessions, but the government and the state apparatus are not in danger of being overthrown. Because of this difference in the coercion capacity of the two types of insurgency, we can expect that the political effectiveness of groups without territorial control will be lower than that of groups with it.

### **Testing the Effectiveness of Terrorist and Guerrilla Organisations**

In a widely-read article published in 2006, Max Abrahms challenged the view that terrorism is an effective strategy for achieving terrorists' goals. Reacting to Robert Pape's work on the effectiveness of suicide campaigns, Abrahms showed that the campaigns surveyed by Pape related to a limited number of countries and that many of them were carried out by guerrilla groups whose main targets were military and security forces (Abrahms 2006, 46, 55). Using our own conceptualization, as set out in the previous section, we will replicate Abrahms' data and use the MAROB and the GTD1 datasets to investigate the effectiveness of terrorist groups.

In our first empirical test, we find that Abrahms' argument on the effectiveness of terrorism comes closer to the truth than Pape's, but for the wrong reasons. Terrorist organisations tend to be less effective than guerrillas not because of a propensity to target civilians but because of their lack of control over territory and the constraints that flow from this. According to Abrahms, the key variable that accounts for terrorist effectiveness is "target selection" since those organisations predominantly killing civilians rarely fulfil their policy objectives. He argues that terrorist groups' use of extreme methods (civilian targeting) leads target countries to infer that the terrorists also have extreme, or "maximalist", political objectives. This perception of the enemy's goals dissuades target countries from making political concessions (Abrahms 2006, 57). However, we question the empirical basis for this argument. Our analysis indicates that the explanatory power of "civilian targeting" pales once the statistical model accounts for whether the insurgent group controlled some parts of the territory under dispute.

Abrahms built a dataset comprising the twenty-eight groups included in the Department of State's list of foreign terrorist organisations between 2001 and 2005. He measured their effectiveness in terms of the degree of "attainment of a terrorist group's policy objective" (Abrahms 2006, 48), an approach that we follow here. By focusing on terrorist organisations' ability to achieve their political objectives, we restrict ourselves to assessing the political effectiveness of these groups.<sup>9</sup> Abrahms constructed four categories for his analysis. "Total success" implies the full attainment of the terrorists' goals, whereas "no success" reflects the absolute failure of the terrorist group. In between, Abrahms employed two middle categories, "partial success" and "limited

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<sup>9</sup> A fully comprehensive conception of terrorist group effectiveness would examine outcomes at more levels of analysis, such as: combat effectiveness (ability to perpetrate successful attacks); ability to ensure organisational continuity; ability to mobilise sections of the population; and, finally, ability to achieve political objectives. For a discussion of the different aspects of terrorist group effectiveness (or "success"), see Cronin (2009, 73-82).

success”, but offered no grounds for distinguishing between them. As for the main independent variable of his study, civilian targeting, he coded the 28 groups by measuring the share of attacks against civilians that the group carried out: if this share went above 50 per cent, the group is called a “civilian-centric terrorist group”; if the share was below 50 per cent, it is a “guerrilla group”. Finally, as a relevant intervening factor, Abrahms also coded the type of goals that insurgents were pursuing. They were classified in three categories: “limited” goals (related to territorial claims), “maximalist” goals (related to regime change), and “idiosyncratic” goals (aims such as eliminating rival organisations).

In order to replicate his data, we have taken three decisions. First, we have broadened the dependent variable by including as positive cases not only those of “total success” and “partial success” (as Abrahms did), but also those defined as a “limited success”. We do so because Abrahms did not offer any reason to drop cases of “limited success” from his analysis. Thus, the dependent variable takes a value of 1 when the terrorist campaign was coded by Abrahms as a “total success”, “partial success” or a “limited success” (7 cases in total out of 42 terrorist campaigns). Second, as all the cases with “idiosyncratic” goals do not show variation on their outcome (all 9 cases failed), we have turned the initial three-value variable on the goals of the organisation into a two-value variable [regime change (value of 0) vs. territorial change (value of 1)]<sup>10</sup> in order to avoid missing observations in the empirical analysis. Finally, we have operationalised our definition of terrorism by checking whether each insurgent

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<sup>10</sup> All cases of “limited” objectives take values of 1. “Idiosyncratic” objectives also take a value of 1, since they do not demand the change of the current regime –for instance, “sever ties with the US” does not necessarily imply the collapse of the regime. In addition, five cases of “maximalist” objectives (establish an Islamic state in Philippines and establish a state in Palestine) are recoded as “limited”, since for the groups involved (Abu Sayyaf, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, PFLP and PFLP-General Command) the implementation of a specific type of political regime is conditional on achieving independence –a limited objective on its own.

organisation included in Abrahms' dataset controlled part of the territory under dispute or not. This new variable is called "territorial control" (value of 1 for territorial control; 0 otherwise).<sup>11</sup>

Our expectation is that guerrillas -i.e., organisations controlling territory- will be more successful in achieving their policy objectives. Moreover, those organisations pursuing territorial change goals should also be more successful, since their victory does not necessarily involve the overthrow of the government (Buhaug 2006). Table 2 presents the results. Model 1 assesses "civilian targeting" as a predictor of the level of insurgent effectiveness. The coefficient is not statistically significant, which means that the level of effectiveness does not seem to be explained by the targeting of civilians. On the other hand, the control of territory (model 2) and the pursuit of territorial-change objectives (model 3) account better for the variation in the rate of success: those insurgencies controlling territory and those with territorial change goals are more effective in achieving their objectives.

Model 4 illustrates our point that civilian targeting does not explain better the variation on success than territorial control. If insurgent effectiveness is regressed on these two variables, territorial control still remains positive and significant, whereas the systematic targeting of civilians by the insurgents does not have any noticeable impact on their effectiveness. Furthermore, models 5 and 6 show that the positive effect of

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<sup>11</sup> The following insurgent groups are considered as controlling territory: Abu Sayyaf (Philippines), Armed Islamic Group (Algeria), National Liberation Army (Colombia), FARC (Colombia), Hezbollah (Lebanon), PKK (Turkey), Shining Path (Peru), and the Tamil Tigers (Sri Lanka). The rest of the groups did not control territory within their natural borders in a permanent way: Abu Nidal (Palestine), Al Qaeda (Saudi Arabia), United Forces of Colombia, Aum Shinrikyo (Japan), People's Liberation Front (Turkey), Islamic Jihad (Egypt), ETA (Spain), Hamas (Palestine), Harakat ul-Mujahidin (India), Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Islamic Group (Egypt), Islamic Jihad (Palestine), Kach (Israel), Mujahideen-e-Khalq (Iran), PFLP (Palestine), PFLP-General Command (Palestine), Palestine Liberation Front (Palestine), RIRA (UK), Revolutionary Nuclei (Greece), and Seventeen November (Greece).

territorial control on insurgent effectiveness becomes larger, once we control for the goals of the organisation, while this pattern does not emerge with civilian targeting. Finally, model 7 confirms that the control of territory is a stronger predictor of success than civilian targeting even if we control for the goals of the insurgent organisation.<sup>12</sup> In brief, territorial control and the goals of the organisation seem to have more explanatory power to account for effectiveness than targeting.

## TABLE 2

Our findings about the importance of territorial control need to be evaluated outside of Abrahms' framework. We performed two additional tests using other datasets, the Minorities at Risk Organizational Behaviour (MAROB) and the Global Terrorism Database (GTD1).

MAROB collects information about all active organisations from 12 ethnic groups in 11 countries: Alawi (Syria), Arabs (Israel), Azerbaijanis (Iran), Berbers (Algeria and Morocco), Druze (Lebanon), Kurds (Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey), Maronites (Lebanon), Palestinians (Israel, Jordan and Lebanon), Saharawis (Morocco), Shi'is (Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia), Sunnis (Iraq and Lebanon) and Turkish Cypriots (Cyprus). The time range is 1980-2004 (Minorities at Risk Project 2008). The unit of analysis is organisation/year, and there are 1,789 observations. This dataset is very convenient for our purposes since it includes information about the strategies and the effectiveness of various ethnic organisations. It allows us to investigate if the killing of civilians decreases the prospects of receiving concessions

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<sup>12</sup> With all variables set on their means, the predicted probability of receiving concessions for a terrorist group is 0.11. This probability goes up to 0.34 if the group controlled territory. If the group also pursued territorial goals, then its probability skyrockets to 0.58.

and to compare this with the effects of both guerrilla methods and non-violent strategies.

In our analysis of the data, effectiveness takes a value of 1 when the government either conceded to the organisation its primary or secondary goal or started negotiations with it in the observed year, and 0 otherwise. We combine concessions with negotiations because the first is a rare event in the dataset (only 2 per cent of observations), and also because negotiations always involve some sort of recognition of the insurgency's aims –at least temporally.

To capture our distinction between terrorism and guerrilla warfare, MAROB offers several variables concerning the strategy of the organisation. Although they are not strictly comparable to Abrahms' study, they are sufficiently similar to carry out an analysis about the effects of target selection and territory. Regarding target selection, the "ORGST7" variable gauges whether the organisation carried out attacks against civilians as part of its repertoire of action. We turn this variable into a dummy variable ("civilian targeting") that takes the value of 1 if the organisation pursued attacks against civilians as a major strategy, and 0 if it did not. We combine two other variables to create our proxy for "territorial control". On the one hand, "ORGST8" identifies whether the organisation triggered "guerrilla or civil war activity" as a major strategy. As we argued above, such activity is only possible for insurgencies that achieve some degree of territorial control. On the other, "ORGST9" identifies whether the organisation was able to set up governing structures within the territory under dispute, an undeniable indicator of territorial control. Our variable "territorial control" takes a value of 1 if the organisation pursued at least one of these two strategies.<sup>13</sup> It is worth

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<sup>13</sup> More restrictive definitions of this proxy –e.g., to include only those organisation/years that had governing structures as cases of "territorial control"- do not alter the results (results are available on request).

mentioning that although the two strategies could be practiced together, the dataset includes few instances of this combination –there is only one group, the Kurds in Turkey, that systematically used the two techniques.

In addition to our two relevant independent variables, we take advantage of MAROB to control for: (i) the ideological leanings of the organisation –distinguishing between nationalist, religious, leftwing and rightwing goals (ethnic goals is the base category); (ii) the existence of external patrons supplying some sort of help (“foreign patrons”); (iii) if it fielded candidates to fight electoral contests (“electoral strategy”); (iv) the level of “popularity” the organisation enjoyed;<sup>14</sup> and (v) if there were other organisations competing for the same goals (“internal competition”). Table 3 includes the descriptive statistics.

### TABLE 3

Table 4 collects the logit estimates of the analysis. Models 1 and 2 show that if we regress “success” on our two key independent variables separately without other regressors, “civilian targeting” has no impact on concessions, while “territorial control” has a positive and significant influence. Models 3 and 4 replicate the analysis, but with the control variables. Their introduction does not vary the results: organisations with territorial control have better prospects of succeeding, whereas the systematic targeting of civilians does not affect the chances of success. Finally, model 5 includes both variables together. It confirms that the positive effect of “territorial control” is robust to different specifications.

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<sup>14</sup> MAROB does not include information on the size of the groups, and, as far as we know, there is no external source with the necessary yearly data to complement the dataset in this regard. We are left with the support for the group as an imperfect measure of its size.

TABLE 4

Territorial control again seems to be a better predictor of insurgent organisations' level of effectiveness than the targeting of civilians. Moreover, "territorial control" exerts the largest influence on the outcome. The marginal effect of this variable is 0.17, much higher than the marginal effects of the other relevant independent factors: popularity (0.12), nationalist (0.08) and rightwing goals (0.05). To measure the real impact of territorial control, a MAROB group with nationalist goals and the highest level of support would move from a low prospect of success of 19 % if holding no territory to a prospect of 58 % if having seized some territory from the state's hands. This is by no means a negligible effect.

For the third test of the effectiveness of terrorist groups, we built our own dataset. We have selected from the Global Terrorism Database – GTD1 – (LaFree and Dugan 2008), which collects violent events worldwide from 1970 to 1997, those insurgent groups that killed at least 10 people in more than one year of activity. This criterion yields a list of 156 insurgent groups for the period 1970-1997.<sup>15</sup> For each group, we used the GTD1 to calculate its absolute number of deaths, its share of non-combatant victims and its number of years in action.

We complemented this with additional information for each group on effectiveness, recruitment, ideology, and territorial control. We used as baseline RAND data coded by Jones and Libicki (2008; 142-186). Unfortunately, RAND data only cover 106 of the 156 groups meeting our minimum requirement of violent activity.

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<sup>15</sup> The list of 156 groups is available on request. The time frame covered by GTD1 is especially useful because it allows us to investigate if insurgent groups who still remained operative in 1997 have already ended their fight.

Thus, we have searched external information (case studies, monographs, internet sites) about the four variables. *Effectiveness* has three values: defeat, negotiated settlement and victory.<sup>16</sup> *Recruitment* is an ordinal variable, going from 0 (<100 militants) to 5 (>10,000 militants). *Ideology* distinguishes between religious, nationalist, religious-nationalist, leftwing and rightwing groups. Finally, *territorial control* measures if the group was able to seize and keep some portion of the territory under dispute in a permanent way.<sup>17</sup> After careful examination of the 156 cases, 81 correspond to groups with territorial control and 75 to those without it.

Jones and Libicki's codification of effectiveness covered only groups that had given up violence by 2006, the year in which they completed their dataset. In order to gain more observations in the analysis, we also included the final outcome for those groups that stopped operating between 2006 and 2010.<sup>18</sup>

#### TABLE 5

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<sup>16</sup> This is a slightly different coding than Jones and Libicki's. Our categories 2 and 3 resemble their "politics" and "victory" outcomes, respectively. Our category 1 pulls together their categories for defeat –namely, "policing", "splintering" and "military force".

<sup>17</sup> In order to hold territorial control in a permanent way, the insurgents must be able to do some or all of these three things: (i) set up camps or bases in which they store weapons, train recruits, etc., within the country borders; (ii) establish stable roadblocks, disrupting the flow of goods and persons within the country; (iii) rule the civil population in the localities they seize. When any one of these conditions is met, the group has territorial control. Otherwise, it is an underground group.

<sup>18</sup> The mismatch between the time frame on killings (1970-1997) and on termination (1970-2010) could be a problem if the outcome of groups ending their violence between 1997 and 2010 would be explained by unaccounted variation of the main independent variables. Still, we ran some checks to investigate whether the main determinants of termination for those groups renouncing violence between 1997 and 2010 resembled the determinants for the groups renouncing between 1970 and 1997 and we did not find any difference. Results available on request.

Table 5 includes three multinomial logit models. The base category is “defeat” (64 percent of the cases), being the other two categories “settlement” (23 percent) and “victory” (13 percent). Model 1 analyzes the impact of territorial control, civilian targeting, ideology (base category=leftwing), lethality and duration on how insurgent groups end. This analysis shows again that killing non-combatants does not affect whatsoever the outcome of the conflict. In turn, insurgencies with territorial control have larger odds of either reaching a negotiated settlement or defeating the enemy than clandestine groups. Finally, groups with nationalist goals and a longer life are more able to force the state to negotiate, although these features do not increase the chances of full victory. Duration, then, does not seem to be a prerequisite for success.

Model 2 includes the size of the groups (recruitment). According to our logic, groups with territorial control will be able to amass larger armies with more lethal consequences.<sup>19</sup> Thus, we expect the inclusion of recruitment in the model will reduce the effect of territorial control, and this is what model 2 shows. To a large extent, recruitment captures the effect of insurgency, although territorial control is still significant. In table 6, we simulate the joint probability of settlement and victory for groups with/without territory and for different levels of militant support.

#### TABLE 6

Terrorist groups have on average larger chances of being defeated (97.5 percent) than guerrillas (91.2 percent). As the number of recruits goes up, guerrillas boost their possibilities of success. Given that 80 percent of the terrorist groups recruited less than

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<sup>19</sup> The correlation between the two variables in our dataset is 0.57.

1,000 members, they are almost doomed to fail. On the contrary, 75 percent of the guerrillas in our dataset recruited more than 1,000 militants, which gives them a small but still appreciable prospect of achieving some of their political objectives. In brief, only very big terrorist groups can really aspire to extract concessions from the state.

The three sources of empirical evidence discussed in this section show that most successful insurgent organisations have some level of territorial control, whereas the carrying out of attacks against civilians does not have a noticeable impact at all. In the end, it is guerrilla organisations with territorial control and large numbers that are best equipped to force governments to deliver concessions directly related to their goals.

## **Conclusion**

Scholars have been divided on the political effectiveness of terrorism. This study supports the view that terrorist groups are relatively ineffective at achieving their political goals when compared to guerrillas, and it offers a new perspective on the strengths and weaknesses of violent sub-state groups. The existing research by Max Abrahms suggests that terrorist groups rarely achieve their political goals because they predominantly target civilians. It is true that civilian targeting can reduce a group's legitimacy in the eyes of the broader population, potentially diminishing its ability to attract new recruits and possibly contributing to a reduction of its effectiveness over the long term.<sup>20</sup> However, our empirical analysis indicates that the target selection of insurgent groups is not the most influential factor shaping their ability to achieve policy objectives.

Insurgents' degree of control over territory accounts better for the variation in

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<sup>20</sup> Opinion polls indicate that Islamist-inspired violence against civilians has been increasingly unpopular in Muslim-majority countries in recent years. See, for example, Pew Global Attitudes Project (2009). See also Abrahms (2006, 76-77).

groups' political effectiveness than target selection. Those organisations with territorial control – and therefore likely to have greater size, capabilities and lethality – have a higher chance of achieving their political objectives. Future research should subject these findings to further testing, for example, by evaluating their explanatory power in the comparative analysis of case studies. If borne out by further research, the findings presented here could have important policy implications. They suggest that governments that follow the existing research – focusing their attention on insurgent groups' target selection (and its effect on those groups' popularity) – may head in the wrong direction. Policy makers who are concerned about the long term impact of insurgencies may be better advised to pay attention to these groups' capabilities and ability to control territory.

A territorial perspective on terrorism thus raises some hypotheses for further research or consideration by policymakers in relation to the U.S.-led campaign to counter violent extremism around the world. It indicates that direct western military intervention or support for local military action against insurgents could have two somewhat contradictory effects. It may contribute to an increase in terrorism, but at the same time, it may undermine insurgents' ability to achieve their political goals.

Firstly, military action against insurgents by the United States and its allies may contribute to an increase in terrorism. This is not simply because military intervention creates resentment, thereby increasing support for anti-western terrorism over the longer term. Whether it be American drones, boots on the ground or financial support for a local army's action against militants, western intervention may increase terrorism in a more direct and short term way. It denies or constrains the insurgents' efforts to control territory and drives them underground. As we argued above, militants operating underground in clandestine conditions are more likely to use terrorist tactics. Moreover,

terrorist tactics that are practiced in distant conflict zones can be rapidly diffused to western cities.<sup>21</sup> Thus, attempts to flush militants out of their tribal strongholds may make them a bigger problem for international security than they would otherwise be.

Secondly, however, our quantitative analysis indicates that insurgencies that do not control territory are less likely to achieve their political goals than those that do have some territory. Thus, if military action by the United States and its allies is able to deny militant groups the opportunity to control territory, it can increase the likelihood that these groups will fail to achieve their objectives. In considering the contradictory effects of military intervention, policymakers may need to weigh the risks of pressurising insurgents – potentially driving them to terrorism – against the relative importance of the militants’ goals. This involves asking how serious a threat is a particular militant group’s goals to U.S. or western interests? Are these goals so inimical to the United States to justify a military intervention that may contribute to an increase in terrorism both locally and internationally? Thinking explicitly about these trade offs may help America and its allies to forge an appropriate strategy for each battleground of the global fight against violent extremism.

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<sup>21</sup> In several British cases, for example, including the 2005 London bombings, individuals have received terrorist training in camps in Pakistan before going on to engage in attack planning against targets in the UK. See Brandon (2008)

Table 1. Target selection in four terrorist groups

	PIRA	ETAm	Red Brigades	GRAPO
Combatants	65.0%	60.1%	60.4%	77.6%
Non combatants	35.0%	39.9%	39.6%	22.4%
Total number of fatalities	1,648	772	53	85
Source: Domestic Terrorism Victims (DTV) dataset ( <a href="http://www.march.es/dtv">www.march.es/dtv</a> )				

Table 2: Determinants of terrorist success (logit estimates).

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7
Civilian targeting	-1.20 (0.86)			-1.05 (0.84)	-1.20 (0.90)		-0.91 (0.94)
Territorial control		1.67* (0.88)		1.56* (0.83)		2.23** (1.01)	2.07** (0.91)
Goal			1.96* (1.15)		1.96* (1.12)	2.50** (1.17)	2.41** (1.06)
Constant	-0.92 (0.60)	-2.23*** (0.61)	-4.91** (2.13)	-1.59*** (0.50)	-4.21* (2.24)	-6.63*** (2.21)	-5.88*** (2.23)
N	42	42	42	42	42	42	42
Prob>Chi2	0.162	0.058	0.087	0.170	0.031	0.017	0.002
Pseudo R2	0.05	0.10	0.11	0.13	0.16	0.25	0.27

Notes: Robust standard errors in brackets. \* significant at 10%; \*\* significant at 5%; \*\*\* significant at 1%. All significance intervals in the article are two-tailed.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics, MAROB dataset.

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min.	Max.
Concessions	1786	0.08	0.28	0	1
Electoral Strategy	1789	0.12	0.32	0	1
Nationalist	1789	0.36	0.48	0	1
Religious	1789	0.24	0.42	0	1
Leftwing	1789	0.31	0.46	0	1
Rightwing	1789	0.07	0.26	0	1
Popularity	1750	2.03	0.46	1	3
Civilian targeting	1789	0.03	0.16	0	1
Territorial control	1789	0.10	0.30	0	1
Internal competition	1785	0.22	0.41	0	1
Foreign patrons	1572	0.37	0.48	0	1

Table 4: Logit robust estimates of terrorist vs. guerrilla success, MAROB.

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5
Civilian targeting	0.46 (0.45)		-0.14 (0.48)		-0.30 (0.79)
Territorial control		2.65*** (0.19)		1.76*** (0.24)	1.77*** (0.39)
Electoral strategy			0.41 (0.26)	0.47* (0.26)	0.46 (0.34)
Nationalist goals			1.78*** (0.23)	1.29*** (0.25)	1.29*** (0.48)
Religious goals			-0.62* (0.35)	-0.62* (0.35)	-0.63 (0.46)
Leftwing goals			-0.02 (0.24)	-0.39 (0.27)	-0.38 (0.46)
Rightwing goals			1.10*** (0.26)	0.71*** (0.27)	0.69* (0.41)
Popularity			1.11*** (0.21)	0.86*** (0.21)	0.85*** (0.28)
Internal competition			-0.36 (0.25)	-0.16 (0.27)	-0.15 (0.36)
Foreign patrons			0.72*** (0.20)	0.25 (0.23)	0.27 (0.24)
Constant	-2.40*** (0.09)	-2.98*** (0.12)	-6.08*** (0.60)	-5.20*** (0.58)	-5.50*** (0.56)
N	1786	1786	1535	1535	1535
Prob>chi2	0.303	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Pseudo R2	0.001	0.17	0.19	0.24	0.25

Notes: Robust standard errors in brackets. \* significant at 10%; \*\* significant at 5%; \*\*\* significant at 1%.

Table 5. Logit robust estimates of terrorist vs. guerrilla success, GTD1.

	<i>Base Category=Defeat</i>			
	Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>Settlement</i>	<i>Victory</i>	<i>Settlement</i>	<i>Victory</i>
Civilian targeting	-0.11 (1.27)	1.75 (1.43)	-0.07 (1.37)	2.13 (1.53)
Territorial control	2.61*** (0.56)	1.87** (0.74)	1.45** (0.60)	1.21† (0.77)
Recruitment			0.76*** (0.19)	0.57** (0.24)
Nationalist goals	1.25** (0.55)	0.64 (0.67)	0.98 (0.61)	0.47 (0.72)
Religious goals	-15.21*** (0.65)	0.48 (1.02)	-15.90*** (0.72)	0.34 (1.16)
Nationalist-religious goals	-0.41 (1.01)	-15.66*** (0.73)	-1.02 (0.86)	-16.56*** (0.77)
Rightwing goals	0.97 (0.93)	0.52 (1.18)	1.52 (1.36)	0.64 (1.61)
Lethality (in thousands)	-0.15 (0.15)	-0.54 (0.49)	-0.29 (0.20)	-0.94 (0.91)
Duration	0.09** (0.04)	0.02 (0.05)	0.08** (0.04)	0.01 (0.06)
Constant	-3.99*** (1.25)	-4.16*** (1.37)	-4.93*** (1.34)	-5.14*** (1.51)
N		138		129
Prob>chi2		0.000		0.000
Pseudo R2		0.19		0.27

Notes: Robust standard errors in brackets. † significant at 15%; \* significant at 10%; \*\* significant at 5%; \*\*\* significant at 1%.

Table 6. Probability for insurgent groups of ending the fight without being defeated, by size and territorial control.

<b>Group size</b>	<b>Terrorist</b>	<b>Guerrilla</b>
<100	0.6	2.1
100-500	1.1	4.0
500-1,000	2.1	7.4
1,000-5,000	4.0	13.4
5,000-10,000	7.4	23.2
>10,000	13.5	37.4
<b>Total</b>	2.5	8.8

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