

POLICY BRIEF | DECEMBER 2018

# EXPLORING THE PUZZLE OF REBEL TERRORISM

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**OVERVIEW:** The decision by rebel groups to employ terrorism is influenced, in part, by the structure of rebel organizations as well as the strategic environment in which they operate. Rebel groups are more likely to use terrorism when they have close ties to vulnerable communities and are able to use media coverage of attacks to highlight their goals to their constituents. By understanding the strategic and organizational factors that lead to terrorism in war, conflict affected states and international stakeholders can take steps to reduce this form of violence.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Seventeen years after the start of the war on terror, terrorism remains a troubling security threat to policymakers. While terrorist attacks are perpetrated globally, the vast majority occur during civil wars, as insurgents and other disaffected non-state actors use this brutal form of violence to pressure the state into entering negotiations and/or providing accommodations.<sup>1</sup> The consistent use of terrorism has spurred considerable debate within the academic community as to the efficacy of this

strategy. Virginia Page Fortna has recently argued that terrorism is, in general, an ineffective weapon of war.<sup>2</sup> Rebels who use terrorism, Fortna contends, often fail to achieve favorable outcomes during civil wars. This presents a puzzle: If terrorism is widely ineffective, why do rebel groups use it?

To address this puzzle, Eric Keels (One Earth Future) and Justin Kinney (University of Tennessee, Knoxville) recently examined the role of rebel group structure on the use of terrorism.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, the authors examined how the presence of a parallel political wing shapes the use of terrorism by rebel groups. Keels and Kinney found that the effects of rebel political wings are conditioned by relative media freedom within the country. This policy brief is based on research by Keels and Kinney recently published in *International Interactions*.

## II. WHY USE TERRORISM IN WAR?

Terrorism is often used in civil wars for a number of reasons. Weak rebel groups prefer to use terrorist violence as it is asymmetric and generally imposes significant costs on the incumbent government.<sup>4</sup> Equally, groups that have recently suffered battlefield losses or are relatively new may use terrorism as a way to demonstrate resolve to their constituents, suggesting that they will continue the war effort despite potential setbacks.<sup>5</sup> This is one reason why



*A Somalia police officer investigates the scene of a suicide bomb attack in the capital, Mogadishu on October 1, 2018 by Al-Shabaab Islamists. Photo: Abdi Hussein Farah/AFP/Getty Images*

terrorism is often used in states with relatively liberal laws surrounding freedom of the press. Rebel groups may hope to garner greater attention through terrorist violence by using free media coverage of attacks to sell their message.<sup>6</sup> This explains, in part, why terrorism is more common in fragile democracies than it is in conflicts against autocratic leaders.

Terrorism is a risky strategy for rebel groups, though. The indiscriminate violence that often follows rebel use of terrorism is generally unpopular. Rebel groups may risk alienating possible supporters who are dissatisfied with the incumbent government if they use terrorism in civil wars. For organizations that rely heavily on the civilian population for support, this generates a difficult choice.

### III. RESEARCH

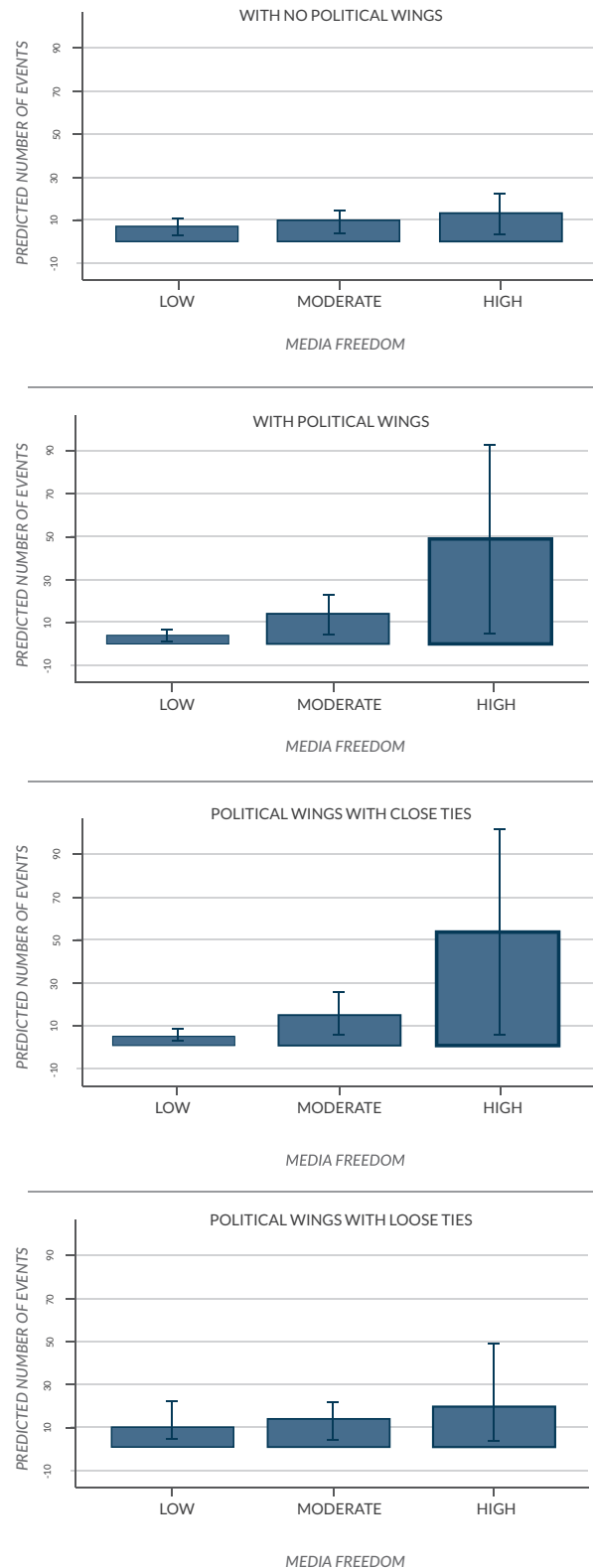
Keels and Kinney find that certain organizations can offset the perception costs associated with the use of terrorism by building strong ties with core constituents. Rebel organizations such as Sendero Luminoso in Peru and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) in El Salvador engaged in prolific terrorist attacks while also operating for years among a sympathetic civilian base. A key predictor of these close civilian relationships is the maintenance of a parallel political wing.

Political wings are affiliated political organizations that operate in tandem with the military branch of the rebel group.<sup>7</sup> Political wings may be legal entities that participate in elections (such as Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland), or they may be banned organizations that operate clandestinely (such as the Zimbabwe African National Union [ZANU] during the Rhodesian civil war). These political branches of rebel organizations are not merely the proverbial “window dressing” of opposition movements. Political wings are designed to mobilize support for the rebels’ cause by engaging with sympathetic communities, aggregating their grievances, and formulating policy demands based on popular sentiments within their target population. They then use this information to shape their messaging to offset perception costs that arise from terrorist attacks.

Following attacks, the political wings will use increased press coverage to reframe public focus toward the rebel group’s key talking points: the goals of the organization as well as their issues with the state. Political wings often use media coverage of violence as a way to highlight the grievances of their core constituents, allowing them to justify violence as part of the broader war effort. This was a common strategy

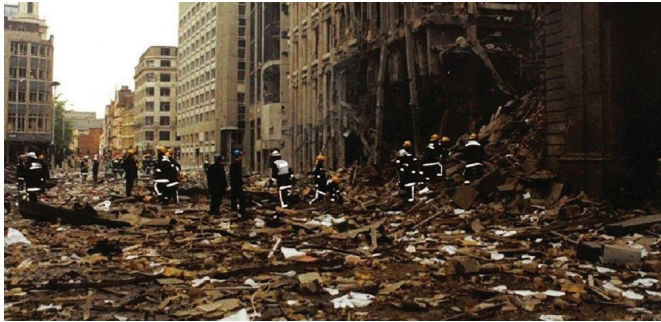
of Sinn Féin, the political wing of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA). Following high-profile bombings perpetrated by

**FIGURE 1. MEDIA FREEDOM AND REBEL TERRORIST ATTACKS**



Adapted from Keels and Kinney, “Any Press Is Good Press.” Estimates derived from negative binomial regressions predicting the number of terrorist attacks perpetrated by rebel groups.

the IRA, Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness would often shift the blame for violence to the continued British occupation of Northern Ireland.<sup>8</sup>



*Aftermath of the April 24, 1993 bombing of the Bishopsgate area of London's financial district by the IRA. Photo: City of London Police*

Keels and Kinney note that this strategy is only effective under certain circumstances. Primarily, political wings are only capable of offsetting the costs of terrorism if the country maintains a relatively free press. This strategy requires that the press is free to include statements made by political wings shortly after terrorist bombings. When the government maintains tight control over the press, elites can use media coverage to frame bombings as senseless barbarism perpetrated by rebel groups. This becomes costly for rebel groups that operate political wings, as these organizations invest heavily in building close ties with vulnerable communities. Absent the ability to reframe terrorism as part of a larger war effort, rebel groups that operate political wings will avoid using terrorism when there is little or no free press.

Another key factor is the relative connection between political wings and the military wings of rebel groups. Rebel groups that have loose ties with their political wings will be unable to effectively coordinate so as to reduce perception costs following terrorist attacks. Rebels must be able to time press releases or have talking points ready following bombings.<sup>9</sup> As noted by Lindsay Heger, military wings will even decrease terrorist activity around elections when the political wing is allowed to freely compete in elections.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, political wings must have close ties with the military wing in order to effectively manage the use of terrorism in civil war.

This is not to say, though, that only rebel groups with political wings engage in terrorism. For many organizations, such as Boko Haram or Al Shabaab, terrorism is often an attractive strategy given their weak connections to the civilian population as well as their need to demonstrate resolve in the face of military setbacks. The rate of terrorism tends to be much less, though, as compared to organizations that maintain political wings. As opposed to bombings that simply demonstrate resolve, the presence of political wings significantly increases the use of terrorism in states with greater media freedom.

## IV. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PEACEBUILDING AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Given the importance of a relatively free press in war-torn countries, this research presents complicated results. Elites interested in stymieing terrorist attacks may simply tamp down on media outlets. This would inevitably lead to a moral hazard, where (absent the spotlight of the fourth estate) governments would be more eager to engage in brutal counterterrorism operations. Rather, these findings point to more nuanced policy options for stakeholders interested in reducing terrorist attacks.

1. Interested stakeholders should attempt to allow banned opposition parties to freely participate in elections, thereby reducing the incentive to engage in terrorism. Keels and Kinney demonstrate in further tests that rebel political wings that are legally allowed to participate in the political process engage in less terrorism than groups that operate banned political wings. This finding is particularly pertinent for the current Kurdish insurgencies in Syria and Turkey, where both the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) operate banned political wings.
2. The efficacy of political wings rests in their ability to build close ties with vulnerable communities. Unilateral concessions and accommodations offered by the government will undercut the ability of militants to build strong ties among disaffected civilians. The new insurgency spurred by the English-speaking minority in Cameroon is likely to develop strong ties with aggrieved civilians, particularly after heavy government repression. This behavior also plays into the hands of sophisticated insurgents, as they use government repression as further justification for their war. If the international community is interested in reducing terrorist attacks in the country, it should pressure the Cameroon government into shifting course militarily and politically.
3. Private actors within the press should become more sophisticated when it comes to engaging with the political wings of rebel groups. While a free press should be encouraged to cover incidents of political violence, it should be careful not to become an unwitting participant in promoting militant messages. When necessary, the fourth estate should be willing to decline interviews with spokesmen of violent insurgents. This applies to international press agencies as well. As noted by Keels and Kinney, the media outlets in conflict-affected areas, while not interviewing political wings directly, will use rebel statements given to international news organizations in their own domestic publications.

## ENDNOTES

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