

## ANALYTICAL ESSAYS

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# More Data, New Problems: Audiences, Ahistoricity, and Selection Bias in Terrorism and Insurgency Research

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The quality of social science inquiry examining terrorism, insurgency, and nonviolent civil resistance has progressed rapidly in recent years. One reason for this advancement is the emergence of new datasets and the subsequent application of quantitative methods to the analysis of asymmetric political conflict between states and nonstate actors. Despite rapid development within the research paradigm, the use of new data has coincided with several methodological and conceptual challenges. This inquiry employs insights from qualitative social science methodology and organizational sociology to highlight and propose solutions to three shortcomings found in recent quantitative analyses of asymmetric conflict. The first problem arises from scholars' proclivity to ask research questions based on easily accessible categories of data rather than on theoretically significant puzzles in the literature. The second pitfall concerns limitations and "conceptual stretching" associated with static, nominal variables constructed to enable statistical inference. Finally, the third class of research obstacles arises from selection bias caused by underreporting of data. Each of these methodological problems potentially undermines theoretical claims made in recent work on insurgent organizations, terrorism, civil war, and nonviolent resistance.

**Keywords:** terrorism, insurgency, civil war, guerrilla warfare, asymmetric conflict, qualitative methods, research design

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The quality of social science inquiry examining terrorism, insurgency, and nonviolent civil resistance has progressed rapidly in recent years (Sandler 2014; Shelton, Stojek, and Sullivan 2013; Chenoweth and Cunningham 2013; Young and Findley 2011). Among academics and policy analysts who study these phenomena, there is now general agreement regarding many of the field's central concepts, including convergence over the terms "terrorism," "guerrilla warfare," "insurgency," "civil war," and "strategic nonviolence." In addition to this conceptual alignment—a necessary condition for theory building within a research paradigm—in recent years the emergence of new datasets has permitted researchers to apply statistical methods to the analysis of political violence and nonviolent civil resistance across a

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broad population of oppositional groups.<sup>1</sup> This quantitative revolution certainly has advanced knowledge within the field. In general, there can be little argument that more empirical information about a subject is preferable to less (Geddes 2003; King, Keohane, and Verba 1994). However, the availability of large datasets does not signify that research design obstacles have vanished. On the contrary, the use of newly available quantitative information has resulted in additional methodological and conceptual challenges to examining asymmetric conflicts, and, despite marked advancements, several regularly used research conventions remain obstacles to further progress in the field.

This inquiry employs insights from qualitative social science methodology and organizational sociology to highlight three shortcomings widely prevalent in recent large-N analyses of asymmetric conflicts between governments and nonstate actors. The first challenge arises from scholars' proclivity to ask research questions based on easily accessible categories of data. In the field of terrorism studies, this trend has led to a disproportionate focus on patterns of civilian targeting rather than on the intended audiences of attacks. In addition, researchers have concentrated their efforts on the means used to carry out terrorist incidents rather than on the strategic rationale underlying terrorism. The result of these two trends is increased research addressing the way terrorist incidents are executed but less extensive analysis of whom extremist groups seek to influence. Ultimately, without identifying the audiences of attacks, researchers cannot make conclusive determinations about the strategic utility of civilian targeting.

The second methodological pitfall examined in this inquiry addresses widespread use of static, nominal variables to summarize the strategies of rebel groups and the outcomes of asymmetric conflicts. To facilitate large-N analysis of insurgencies, scholars often simplify dynamic conflict processes into categories that neither account for the historical sequence of events during insurgencies nor the strategic interaction of adversaries. For example, the outcomes of civil wars and terrorist campaigns are often coded as success, draw, or failure (Shelton and Stojek 2013, 517). This practice overlooks important metrics of rebel group development that change over time and serve as proxies for the threat organizations pose to governments. Similarly, extremist organizations are often simply characterized as either violent or nonviolent, although they may use an array of strategies over their lifespans. Simplifying rebels' multifaceted strategies into fixed categories results in work that may overlook the importance of mixed approaches to rebellion while also attributing excessive causal importance to a single strategy of insurgency.

The third class of research design challenges arises from selection bias caused by underreporting of data. The relative ease with which particular types of information about asymmetric political conflicts are collected, and the difficulty in obtaining others, has led investigators to focus on only certain types of extremist group activity. For instance, unrealized threats to attack civilians for political gain are considered terrorist incidents by definition (Sandler 2011, 280); however, datasets generally do not track terrorist bluffs. This omission means that a widely-used terrorist tactic remains overlooked by previous research, thus potentially skewing scholars' assessments of nonstate terrorism's efficacy.

The remainder of this inquiry proceeds in the following sequence. First, it reviews recent academic convergence around central concepts in research examining asymmetric political conflict. The second section assesses datasets widely used in analysis of nonstate terrorism and underscores the lack of research on the audiences of

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<sup>1</sup>For instance, see The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), *Global Terrorism Database*, <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>; Sundberg and Melander (2013) *UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset*, <http://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/>; Mickolus et al. (2011) *International Terrorism Attributes of Terrorist Events (ITERATE), 1968–2011*; Raleigh et al. (2010) *Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED)*, <http://www.acleddata.com>; Birnir et al. (2015), "Socially Relevant Ethnic Groups, Ethnic Structure, and AMAR." The All Minorities at Risk (AMAR) project [http://www.mar.umd.edu/amar\\_project.asp](http://www.mar.umd.edu/amar_project.asp).

terrorist incidents. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria's (ISIS) terrorist campaign in Mosul is examined to demonstrate that the audiences of attacks can be identified and used in assessments of terrorism's strategic utility. Third, ahistoricity is discussed in the context of coding practices used to assess the outcomes of insurgencies and the varying strategies of rebel groups. Several approaches that incorporate the use of time-series data are put forward as alternatives that will allow scholars to incorporate dynamic aspects of asymmetric conflict into research designs. The penultimate section describes underreporting of data on terrorist threats and resulting selection bias caused by overlooking this phenomenon. The Nigerian insurgent group Boko Haram's campaign against secular education is analyzed to show how unrealized threats can be identified and incorporated into assessments of civilian targeting. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the inquiry's arguments and suggests directions for future research.

### The Conceptualization of Asymmetric Political Conflict

A longstanding obstacle to the analytic study of asymmetric political conflict between states and nonstate actors is the extensive degree of conceptual confusion that has existed across research (Goodwin 2006; Hoffman 2006). For years, the terms "insurgency," "guerrilla warfare," "civil war," "terrorism," and "social movement" were used interchangeably or operationalized differently. Clarifying the distinctions between these related phenomena was an important first step to advancing knowledge in the field. While some debate remains, in recent years scholars have generally coalesced around a set of widely accepted definitions for these terms.<sup>2</sup>

In both academic research and policy analysis, an insurgency is defined by the presence of a rebel organization that seeks political control over part or all of a sovereign state through the use of extra-legal means. For example, Findley and Young (2007, 380) classify an insurgency as a "protracted political-military conflict over control of the state or some portion thereof using irregular military forces." Kilcullen (2006–07, 112), a policy-oriented analyst, identifies an insurgency in a similar manner, characterizing it as "a struggle to control a contested political space between a state (or group of states or occupying powers) and one or more popularly based, non-state challengers." Hence, the goal of an insurgent organization is political control of territory, either over an entire country or as part of a separatist movement that seeks to govern only a specific region. It is important to note that the strategy used by an insurgent group does not form part of the definition of an insurgency. That is, while many insurgent organizations use violence, rebel groups can also be primarily nonviolent (Cunningham, Dahl, and Frugé 2017; Chenoweth and Cunningham 2013; Stephan and Chenoweth 2008). Furthermore, governments that struggle against insurgent groups do not themselves use membership size or territorial control thresholds to classify these organizations (United States Department of the Army 2007).

Civil wars possess the features of insurgencies but are additionally characterized by high intensity violence that does not occur in the context of many intrastate conflicts. While a range of different indicators has been used by scholars to identify the threshold necessary to classify as a civil war—including one thousand battle deaths over the duration of a conflict—Sambanis (2004) has developed a more nuanced operationalization that includes the following three criteria: a total of one thousand battle deaths over the first three years of a conflict, no three year period with fewer than five hundred deaths, and at least one hundred battle deaths a year inflicted upon the stronger actor in the conflict. Civil wars thus constitute the most

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<sup>2</sup> While scholars using empirical methods to analyze the behavior of nonstate oppositional groups generally agree on definitions for central concepts, researchers in the subfield of critical terrorism studies have noted several problematic aspects with widely used classifications. For more on this debate, see Jackson, Smyth, and Gunning (2009).

destructive intrastate conflicts but are less common compared to typical insurgencies, which are characterized by low intensity violence and often involve relatively small organizations (Blomberg, Engel, and Sawyer 2010; Jones and Libicki 2008).

As opposed to insurgent groups, which attempt to seize territory from a sovereign government, social movements seek the more limited objective of altering government policy through contentious politics (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001; Tarrow 1994). Because insurgent organizations and social movements often use similar tactics, they sometimes appear to be comparable organizations. However, the maximalist objective of political control over territory makes the task of insurgent groups more difficult than that of most social movements (Goodwin 2001). Because social movements seek limited objectives, they are more likely to be placated by government concessions. Conversely, insurgent groups' struggles with governments are often existential. Because the objectives of these two types of oppositional groups differ, researchers generally analyze them separately.

#### *Terrorism and Guerrilla Warfare*

There is an extensive literature seeking to define terrorism (Young and Findley 2011; Goodwin 2006). Although some disagreement remains, in recent years much of the field has settled upon a three-point classification to qualify as a terrorist incident: 1) the threat or use of violence; 2) the target of the threat or attack must be civilian; 3) the threat or attack is intended to achieve a political or social objective by influencing third-party audiences (Sandler 2014). In contrast to terrorism, in which the targets are civilian noncombatants, organizations using a guerrilla warfare strategy primarily attack their opponent's armed forces. Carter (2016, 133–34) highlights this difference by noting there is a “sharp distinction between “terrorist groups” that target civilians and “guerrilla groups” that target state security forces.” Similarly, Arreguín-Toft (2001, 103–4) characterizes a guerrilla warfare strategy as consisting of hit-and-run attacks in which a weak actor targets “opposing armed forces and their support resources” in order to inflict costs that include “the loss of soldiers, supplies, infrastructure, and peace of mind.” Like nonstate terrorism, guerrilla warfare is intended to wear down the resolve of a government over time rather than to win an outright military victory.

Although scholars and policy analysts often prefer to restrict the application of the term terrorism to nonstate organizations, governments have been responsible for the politically motivated deaths of far more civilians than nonstate actors (Downes 2007; Davenport 2007; Blakely 2007). When used by governments, state terrorism usually is intended to deter, compel, or otherwise influence the behavior of an aggrieved domestic population.<sup>3</sup> Typically, the goal of this repression is to reduce dissent or civilian support for a rebel group. In extreme cases, governments may resort to “mass killing” in an effort to eradicate enough of an insurgent group's supporters that it will be impossible for the organization to function (Downes 2007; Valentino, Huth, and Balch-Lindsay 2004).

In summary, terrorism is a strategy that can be used by actors at all levels of analysis. Tilly (2004, 5), for instance, maintains “the terms terror, terrorism, and terrorist do not identify causally coherent and distinct social phenomena but strategies that recur across a wide variety of actors and political situations.” Jenkins (1990, 29) similarly argues: “terrorism can be defined by the quality of the act, but not by the identity of the perpetrators or the nature of their cause.” Both point out correctly that terrorism can be conducted by individuals, organizations, and governments; however, scholars generally agree that the investigation of terrorism at these three levels of analysis should be carried out separately (Sandler 2014). Since

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<sup>3</sup>State terrorism is distinct from “state-sponsored terrorism” in which governments support nonstate organizations by supplying them with resources, training, and other forms of material assistance. See Carter (2012).

governments that use repression often are stronger than their opponents, state terrorism is likely to be more strategically effective for governments than for organizations. Likewise, “lone-wolf terrorists” are typically assessed separately from organizations that target civilians (Spaaij 2010).

### How Available Data Influence the Questions Researchers Ask

Prior to the September 11 terrorist attacks, there were few datasets tracking nonstate political violence. Those that did exclusively examined transnational terrorism rather than domestic incidents (Enders, Sandler, and Gaibulloev 2011; Sánchez-Cuenca and de la Calle 2009).<sup>4</sup> Within a few years, though, collection efforts by governments, institutions, and individual teams of researchers led to the creation of datasets that have enabled both within-country and cross-national statistical analyses of nonstate political violence. Additionally, scholars have recently begun collecting information about oppositional movements that primarily utilize strategic nonviolence rather than terrorism or guerrilla warfare (Cunningham, Dahl, and Frugé 2017; Stephan and Chenoweth 2008). The emergence of new data has rapidly advanced knowledge in the field, allowing researchers to make theoretical generalizations about insurgencies that move beyond the middle-range theory arising from small-n comparative case studies. Nevertheless, the accessibility of certain types of data, and the absence of other information, has influenced scholars’ choice of research questions, resulting in a lack of work on important theoretical topics. Specifically, researchers have largely overlooked two central aspects of nonstate terrorism: the audiences of terrorist incidents and the organizational goals groups seek to achieve by attacking civilians.

A nonstate terrorist incident involves three actors: the group that carries out the attack, the civilian victims, and the audience or audiences whom terrorists ultimately seek to influence (Sandler 2014; Young and Findley 2011). Despite frequent claims in the media arguing that destruction is the central goal of organizations that use terrorism, this characterization represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the phenomenon. Terrorists’ primary objective is to influence third party audiences, which can include domestic or foreign governments, potential sympathizers, specific demographic categories within a country’s population, and potential material supporters (Kydd and Walter 2006). Violence is the means through which terrorists seek to alter the behavior and thinking of these different audiences. Additionally, attacks can be intended to influence audiences in varying ways. Certainly, some terrorist operations are efforts to coerce governments into changing their policies; however, organizations also use terrorism to intimidate civilians (Kydd and Walter 2006), outbid competing extremist groups (Bloom 2004), bring governments to the negotiating table (Thomas 2014), and provoke governments into repression (Carter 2016).

Audiences form such an integral component in the strategic logic of extremist groups that scholars widely characterize nonstate terrorism as a form of “costly signaling” (Kydd and Walter 2006). Viewed in this way, terrorism is a means to convey information about extremists’ capabilities and resolve to audiences who might otherwise doubt groups’ credibility. Therefore, at its core, nonstate terrorism is a form of communication rather than an act meant to cause destruction. Despite widespread academic agreement that terrorism is a type of signaling, researchers have produced few inquiries analyzing the intended audiences of attacks, while instead opting primarily to assess the causes of terrorist incidents and variation in groups’ target selection (Young 2016; Young and Findley 2011, 7; Victoroff 2005). A review of common dependent variables in research on nonstate political violence bears this point out. For example, academics have examined the number of

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<sup>4</sup>The ITERATE database, for instance, tracks data only on transnational terrorism.

casualties caused in a terrorist campaign (LaFree, Dugan, and Miller 2015), variation in the lethality of extremist groups (Asal and Rethemeyer 2008), the number of attacks in a given country or across countries (Coggins 2015; Gassebner and Luechinger 2011; Piazza 2011), the spatial and temporal distribution of attacks (LaFree et al. 2012), the number of attacks in democracies versus autocracies (Chenoweth 2010; Li 2005; Eubank and Weinberg 1994), and the differences between domestic and transnational attacks (Enders, Sandler, and Gaibullov 2011). The focus on the causes of terrorism and the target selection of perpetrators is not surprising given available data. For instance, the widely used Global Terrorism Database (GTD) tracks various features of attacks including: incident date, country location, nationality of the target, and the total number of fatalities. While this is certainly important information that can be used to identify explanatory variables correlated with terrorists' choice of targets, it does not directly pertain to the intended audiences of attacks. This means that researchers have comparatively little information about whom terrorists seek to influence and what objectives extremist groups strive to achieve through their actions.

In addition to focusing on the victims of terrorist incidents, scholars have spent considerable effort examining the tactical methods used by extremist organizations (Choi and Piazza 2016; Benmelech, Berrebi, and Klor 2012; Sandler and Gaibullov 2009; Pape 2005). As with targets, several sources track the means organizations employ to harm civilians. For example, the International Terrorism Attributes of Terrorist Events (ITERATE) dataset breaks incidents down into tactical categories including kidnapping, car bombing, aerial hijacking, and chemical/biological attack (Mickolus et al. 2011). As with information about targeting, data on the means used to execute terrorist operations is important, both for scholars assessing broad patterns in extremist group behavior and for law enforcement and intelligence officials who seek to prevent terrorist attacks before they are executed. However, as with target selection, the methods organizations use to carry out terrorist incidents do not reveal information about the audiences extremists seek to influence. For this reason, terrorist tactics—including suicide terrorism—do not in and of themselves divulge the logic underlying organizations' signaling.

By overlooking the intended audiences of terrorist incidents, researchers have avoided addressing important questions about the motives of extremist organizations. Put simply, inferences about terrorists' goals and strategies cannot be made by only examining patterns in their target selection and attack methods. In fact, a group's choice of targets reveals only limited information about their aims. For example, in the early 1970s, the Basque insurgent organization *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* (ETA) began a terrorist campaign that primarily involved targeting individuals associated with the dictatorship of Francisco Franco (Sánchez-Cuenca 2001). By attacking targets with regime ties, it might initially appear that ETA's objective was to coerce the Franco government into changing its repressive policies in Spain's Basque region. However, data on target choice alone cannot confirm this hypothesis, which in this case was incorrect. Rather than seeking to coerce the regime into policy concessions, ETA's terrorist campaign was intended to provoke a heavy-handed response from the Franco regime (Barros, Passos, and Gil Alana 2006). ETA believed that the dictatorship's repression against the Basque population would cause an "action-repression spiral" resulting in the aggrieved Basque population gradually mobilizing against Franco (Sánchez-Cuenca 2001).

The above case demonstrates the complex nature of terrorist signaling. Ultimately, in order to ascertain the messages organizations seek to convey to audiences, and subsequently to identify what objectives extremists want to achieve by carrying out terrorist incidents, researchers must analyze contextual information about individual asymmetric conflicts in conjunction with quantitative information on targets and tactics. Furthermore, without identifying the intended audiences of terrorist campaigns, researchers cannot reach accurate conclusions about the

strategic utility of civilian targeting. A common practice in the literature has been to assume that terrorism is carried out to alter government policies or to topple regimes (Abrahms 2012). Studies examining this question generally conclude that terrorism is a suboptimal strategy (Fortna 2015). However, this research does not first distinguish between the different audiences and types of goals organizations seek to influence by attacking noncombatants and, therefore, may set an unreasonably high bar for assessing terrorism's utility. For this reason, rather than presuming that most civilian victimization is intended to influence government audiences—and subsequently judging terrorist campaigns using the metric of government concessions—assessments of terrorism should be made based on evaluating its effect on the intended audiences groups seek to influence in distinct campaigns.<sup>5</sup>

*Coding Audiences to Assess Terrorism's Efficacy: ISIS's Mosul Campaign*

To demonstrate an approach for identifying the audiences of terrorist incidents, this section assesses civilian targeting carried out by ISIS as part of its terrorist campaign in Mosul, Iraq.<sup>6</sup> To determine the intended audiences of ISIS's attacks, analysis of sixty-eight terrorist incidents carried out in Mosul and attributed to the group by the GTD between June 2014 and December 2015 was conducted using the following coding protocol.<sup>7</sup> First, the target of each attack was identified using GTD data. While information on targeting alone is insufficient to draw conclusions about the intended audiences of incidents, it can provide initial clues to ISIS's underlying objectives. The following target types were recorded: 1) Mosul civilians (general), 2) foreign civilians, 3) journalists, 4) politicians, 5) religious figures and institutions, 6) children, and 7) security forces.<sup>8</sup> Second, where possible the motive underlying each attack was identified by referencing GTD incident summaries, open source information on selected attacks, and the emerging analytical literature on ISIS's strategies (Stern and Berger 2015; McCants 2015; Weiss and Hassan 2015). Civilians in Mosul were targeted for the following reasons: 1) general opposition to ISIS, 2) collaboration with non-ISIS security forces, 3) violation of ISIS's religious law, 4) association with a non-Sunni religion, 5) political association with the Iraqi government, and 6) forced recruitment.<sup>9</sup> Third, using both information on targeting and motivation, the underlying strategic logic and audience of each attack was coded into one of the following four categories, which emerge from previous theoretical literature (Kydd and Walter 2006; Bloom 2004): 1) coercion of a government audience through attrition, 2) intimidation of a civilian audience, 3) provocation of a government audience, and 4) signaling to internal organizational audiences.<sup>10</sup> Incidents intended to influence the policies of the Iraqi government or a foreign

<sup>5</sup> Examining campaigns reflects the reality that extremist groups' goals change over time and that groups may have distinct goals in different geographical theatres. See Pape (2005) and Stephan and Chenoweth (2008) for further discussion of campaigns.

<sup>6</sup> ISIS's campaign was chosen for examination due to the significant level of media coverage of the group's terrorist attacks in Mosul. Extensive reporting on ISIS's strategy, activities, and incidents by professional journalists provides information necessary to infer the audiences of attacks. Furthermore, it should be noted that this case is used to demonstrate a practical approach for coding audiences rather than to extrapolate broader implications about terrorist strategy.

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix A for a more detailed discussion of coding procedures. At the time that this manuscript was completed, GTD attack data was available through 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Attacks against military targets as part of ongoing conflict between Iraqi security forces and ISIS were not included as part of the analysis because these incidents are more accurately characterized as guerrilla warfare. However, attacks against former members of Iraqi security forces, potential military recruits, or captured soldiers were included in the dataset.

<sup>9</sup> In a small number of attacks, there were multiple reasons that ISIS targeted civilians.

<sup>10</sup> Outbidding and spoiling, two additional strategies of terrorism identified by Kydd and Walter (2006), were included in the coding process; however, none of ISIS's attacks in Mosul were motivated by these strategic objectives, which typically occur in cases where several groups compete for superiority within a larger nationalist movement. For more on this type of competition see Krause (2013/2014).

government were coded as attrition. Conversely, incidents intended to exert social control over civilians, journalists, or non-Sunnis were coded as intimidation. Attacks intended to incite a harsh response from the Iraqi government or a foreign government were coded as provocation. Finally, attacks carried out to advance ISIS's organizational capacity were categorized as signaling to an internal audience.

Assessment of ISIS's campaign in Mosul demonstrates that the group primarily used terrorism to alter the behavior of civilian audiences through intimidation. Fifty-six of sixty-eight total incidents—or 82 percent of all attacks—were intended to exert control over the city's residents, while only two incidents were intended to influence governments through attrition. This assessment of ISIS's terrorist activity is in line with many analysts' accounts of the organization's broad strategic objectives, which note that ISIS often uses terrorism to influence civilians in territory the group controls or contests to advance its larger state-building objective (Byman 2016, 140–45). That is, ISIS often targets civilians to further its goal of consolidating control over land. Ensuring that residents in the territory it controls obey ISIS law and refrain from opposing the organization are central to this objective.

While ISIS primarily uses terrorism in Mosul to control the behavior of civilians, its attacks were carried out to intimidate different segments of the city's population. ISIS sought to influence three primary audience classes. The most common rationale behind attacks was to deter a broad audience of all Mosul civilians from violating ISIS's religious laws, collaborating with non-ISIS security forces, or disobeying ISIS's orders. Attacks with one of these objectives, which were intended to intimidate all Mosul residents, comprised 55 percent of incidents. The second category of attacks sought to deter non-Sunni audiences, including Christians, Sufi Muslims, and Shia Muslims, from practicing their religions. Incidents aimed at intimidating non-Sunnis primarily targeted religious institutions and comprised 20 percent of ISIS's total attacks. Finally, journalists were the third primary audience ISIS sought to influence in Mosul. Concerned that reporters would relay a negative portrayal of life under ISIS rule, the group prohibited journalists in Mosul from reporting on ISIS's activities. To enforce this policy, ISIS targeted journalists on eight occasions in attacks that were intended to deter additional reporting on conditions in the city.

The above summary of ISIS's campaign in Mosul demonstrates that the group primarily used terrorism to intimidate civilian audiences. To evaluate the efficacy of this campaign, therefore, the results of ISIS's attacks should be measured against the group's objectives, not by whether terrorism enabled ISIS to alter the policies of the Iraqi government or foreign governments. In the specific case of Mosul, ISIS's civilian targeting helped the organization maintain its rule over the city for an extended period. The group seized Mosul in June 2014—in a campaign that employed both conventional and guerrilla warfare tactics—in which it faced little resistance from Iraqi security forces (Weiss and Hassan 2015, 44). After defeating the Iraqi army, ISIS largely solidified its hold over the city through intimidation of civilian dissent (McCants 2015; Fishman 2016). ISIS faced little in the way of organized resistance from residents from the time it conquered the city until a coalition of Iraqi, Kurdish, and US security forces began an operation to retake Mosul in October 2016 (Cockburn 2016). Put simply, by using terrorism to intimidate dissent, ISIS was able to control Mosul for over two years.

ISIS targeted civilians to achieve its broad objectives of quelling organized dissent and holding territory in Mosul; however, further investigation is necessary to determine whether the group's efforts to influence other audiences were also effective. As mentioned previously, in addition to repressing opposition, ISIS sought to use terrorism to prevent non-Sunni Muslim audiences from practicing their religions. With respect to this goal, there is evidence that ISIS was at least partially successful. For instance, shortly after seizing Mosul, ISIS demanded that Christians in the city convert to Islam or face execution. Because of this threat, the number of Christians living in Mosul—several thousand at the time of ISIS's conquest—was reduced



significantly as many chose to flee rather than suffer persecution (Rubin 2014). ISIS also sought to intimidate Shia Shabak and Shia Turkmen audiences in the city by destroying several Mosques where these groups worshipped (Human Rights Watch 2014). As with Mosul's Christian population, there is evidence that ISIS's intimidation caused thousands of Shia Turkmen and Shia Shabak to abandon their homes (REACH 2014).

ISIS also used terrorism in an effort to deter journalists from reporting on conditions in Mosul. After the group seized the city, it issued a public statement prohibiting news reports or photographs from being disseminated without its approval (Dearden 2014). ISIS's aim was to intimidate reporters and thus limit negative portrayals of the organization from being published. Following the warning, over sixty professional journalists left Mosul due to fears that they would be targeted (Reporters Without Borders 2016). This evacuation certainly made it more difficult for information about ISIS's actions to be accurately conveyed to both the city's residents and to the Iraqi and global publics; however, it did not stop foreign media outlets from conducting interviews with refugees or obtaining reports from citizen journalists.

To review, ISIS used terrorism in Mosul in efforts to intimidate and control the city's residents, prevent non-Sunni audiences from practicing their religions, and deter journalists from reporting on ISIS's activities. ISIS rarely targeted civilians in Mosul to alter the policies of the Iraqi government or foreign governments. These findings do not imply that ISIS does not have broader objectives related to influencing government audiences; however, it does suggest that terrorism often is not the primary strategy the group uses to achieve these goals. For instance, ISIS has regularly clashed with Iraqi and Syrian security forces in battles that are best characterized as conventional warfare or guerrilla warfare (Jasper and Moreland 2016). This indicates that ISIS often targets the recognized armed forces of states, rather than civilians, when it seeks to influence governments. Finally, this assessment does not contend that ISIS never uses terrorism to influence government audiences. Certainly, ISIS has targeted civilians in countries seeking to destroy the organization, including France and Turkey, yet these incidents comprise just 1 percent of ISIS's total terrorist activity (START 2016).<sup>11</sup> Again, this suggests that the bulk of ISIS's terrorism is intended to influence civilian audiences in Iraq and Syria, and is therefore linked to ISIS's broader strategic efforts to control territory in these countries.

### *Summary*

For research assessing nonstate terrorism to advance, academic inquiry of civilian targeting must expand to include audiences as central objects of investigation along with perpetrators' tactics and targeting. Without identifying the audiences of terrorist campaigns, researchers cannot determine groups' objectives and therefore cannot make accurate claims about the strategic impact of civilian targeting. As demonstrated in the analysis of ISIS's terrorist campaign in Mosul, this line of research is likely to involve collection and coding of information that differs from data tracked by existing institutions. Nonetheless, datasets such as the GTD can serve as useful starting points for these efforts and already contain information relevant to identifying audiences. Future research on audiences should seek to address additional questions including: Is terrorism more effective at influencing certain types of audiences than others? How and why do certain audiences misinterpret terrorist signaling? Developing theories to answer these and other related puzzles can serve as a starting point for scholars to branch out into this overlooked area of research.

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<sup>11</sup> Note that through 2015 the GTD does not attribute any attacks in the United States to ISIS. So-called "ISIS inspired attacks" in the United States have yet to be conclusively linked to planning carried out by the group's core organization. ISIS has, however, targeted American citizens abroad.

### Ahistoricity and Nominal Variables

Nominal categories—such as rebel groups’ “success” or “failure” in achieving their stated political objectives and the “onset” and “termination” of civil war—are often used as dependent variables in studies examining insurgencies (Shelton and Stojek 2013; Duffy-Toft 2010; Hegre and Sambanis 2006). In some instances, nominal variables can be important methodological tools. For instance, they can be used to identify outlier cases in which omitted variable bias may be present. In addition, there are types of events that are nominal by nature, such as the presence or absence of a public responsibility claim for a terrorist incident (Hoffman 2010). However, using nominal variables to categorize aspects of social phenomena like insurgencies, which often last for decades (Young and Dugan 2014; Cronin 2009; Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2009), can be problematic because they frequently do not account for causal sequences of events and long-running social processes that take place over extended periods of time (Pierson 2004).

This section assesses two types of variables regularly used in research on insurgencies. The first is the outcome of conflicts, which researchers commonly measure by using three categories: success of a rebellion, negotiated settlement, or failure of a rebel group. These three outcomes are contrasted with less-commonly employed indicators of organizational development that can be measured over time including membership size, control of territory, and group capacity. The second nominal variable type examined is rebel group strategy, which is often coded in dichotomous fashion as either violent/non-violent or terrorist/guerrilla warfare. This binary coding method is problematic because it disregards that actors in insurgencies regularly change strategies over the course of conflicts or use terrorism, guerrilla warfare, and strategic non-violence simultaneously (Stanton 2013; Staniland 2012; Moore 2000).

#### *Coding the Outcomes of Insurgencies and the Strategies of Actors*

Researchers often measure the outcome of insurgencies with a “win, lose, or draw” dependent variable. Rebel groups are considered successful if they defeat a government, unsuccessful if they are destroyed or dissipate, and a partial success if they reach a negotiated settlement that includes major government concessions. While this categorization system is one way of distinguishing between the relative performance of groups, the practice can be misleading because it does not consider metrics that gauge the changing strength of organizations or the challenge they pose to governments. Furthermore, because most insurgent groups do not achieve their long-term objectives, this type of coding lumps together groups with different levels of strength posing varying levels of threat into the same category of “failure.”

To make this point clear, compare two organizations categorized as failed insurgencies using standard coding practices: Shining Path and Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA). Both insurgent groups were active in Peru during roughly the same period in the 1980s and 1990s and both were inspired by variants of anti-colonial Marxist thought (McCormick 1993). If Shining Path and MRTA are evaluated solely by assessing their ability to meet their stated objective of regime change, both organizations would be characterized as failures because neither was ultimately able to overthrow the Peruvian government. However, a different picture emerges when comparing Shining Path and MRTA using alternate indicators of organizational development and strength such as membership size, control of territory, and number of executed attacks.

By most accounts, Shining Path represented an existential challenge to the government of Peru; at its peak the group had over 10,000 armed members and controlled approximately a quarter of the country’s territory (McClintock 1998). By the early 1990s, several of Shining Path’s militant fronts surrounded Lima and were preparing for an offensive military campaign against the Peruvian government

(Burt 1998). In addition, over its lifespan Shining Path carried out over 4,500 violent attacks, making it one of the most destructive insurgent groups of the last fifty years (START 2016). Conversely, MRTA was a small group with less than six-hundred members at its apex (Sanchez 2003). The organization never controlled significant territory and carried out roughly one-tenth the number of violent attacks as Shining Path. In the late 1990s, after a high-profile hostage incident at the Japanese Embassy in Lima, MRTA dissipated as an organization. Ultimately, while neither MRTA nor Shining Path won major concessions from the Peruvian government, there were significant differences between the organizations across almost every other important metric of insurgent group capacity. This comparison illustrates the conceptual stretching that can arise when coding the outcomes of insurgencies into just one of three categories. By classifying rebel organizations in this way, groups with significantly different levels of strength that present vastly different challenges to governments are not distinguished as units within the dependent variable. By adopting this type of coding, therefore, researchers risk convoluting the very aspects of conflict they seek to explain when assessing the outcome of insurgencies: namely the level of threat rebel groups pose to governments, the relative performance of groups, and the factors contributing to the development and decline of insurgent organizations.

In addition to the outcome of insurgencies, the classification of actors' strategies is an area where analysts often use nominal variables that overgeneralize the dynamics of asymmetric conflicts. Opposing sides in an insurgency rarely select one strategy and stick with it. On the contrary, both governments and rebel groups regularly change approaches when they are not advancing their interests (Sullivan, Loyle, and Davenport 2012; Moore 1998; Hoover and Kowalewski 1992). Although insurgencies are often extended conflicts with numerous strategic phases, much previous research often characterizes both governments and rebels as actors that employ only a single strategy. That is, actors' behavior is coded in datasets as either violent/non-violent or terrorist/guerrilla warfare for the entirety of an insurgency. While convenient for use in statistical analysis, this practice represents a methodological shortcoming by overlooking the alternating sequence of strategic decisions that characterize insurgencies.

For example, the multiple strategies used by the Lebanese organization Hezbollah, which is regularly included in research assessing non-state violence, demonstrate the overlapping and changing approaches often adopted by militant groups during their lifespans. Hezbollah formed in 1982 with the goals of expelling Israeli troops from Lebanon and creating an Islamist government (Norton 2007). In the 1980s, the group focused on waging guerrilla warfare against Israeli security forces. It also attacked civilian targets, in both Lebanon and abroad, viewed as being sympathetic to Israeli and American interests. By the late 1980s, however, the organization also began to build medical clinics, schools, and additional infrastructure projects to win the hearts and minds of the Shia population in Beirut and southern Lebanon (Norton 2007). With the help of foreign sponsors Iran and Syria, Hezbollah increased its size and popular support in the 1990s. Simultaneously it amplified its guerrilla campaign against Israel, its total number of terrorist attacks, and its non-violent efforts to become an enduring political institution. According to the GTD, during the 1990s the group carried out 225 terrorist attacks, more than double the previous decade (START 2016).<sup>12</sup> In 2000, though, following Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon, Hezbollah reduced its terrorist activities and transitioned into functioning as a normalized political party—albeit one with a powerful militia—that sought to consolidate influence in Lebanon through largely peaceful means (Harik 2005). Despite increased focus on the domestic Lebanese political process, Hezbollah has not given up its armed capabilities. It continues to carry out limited

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<sup>12</sup> Because the GTD only codes terrorist incidents, guerrilla attacks against military targets are underreported in the dataset.

terrorism while also engaging in both conventional warfare and guerrilla warfare in the 2006 Lebanon War and more recently in the Syrian Civil War.

Hezbollah's transition from a small, clandestine rebel force into a large organization with a paramilitary army and robust political party exemplifies the structural conversions that can take place within oppositional groups over time. Meanwhile, Hezbollah's simultaneous use of terrorism, guerrilla warfare, and political strategies demonstrates the variety of approaches groups may use in efforts to achieve objectives and thus the conceptual challenges that can emerge for scholars when seeking to characterize an organization using a single nominal category such as "terrorist," "guerrilla," or "non-violent," for the entirety of its lifespan. Moreover, an added layer of complexity emerges when considering Hezbollah's varying strategic actions were used in efforts to achieve domestic political goals in Lebanon, regional power objectives vis-a-vis Israel and Syria, and broader objectives related to the United States, Iran, Russia, and the greater Middle East (Azani 2009). The diversity of the group's goals signifies that untangling the relationship between strategic choice and the effect of those strategies is a complex enterprise that should consider the totality of the group's activities. Standard coding practices for rebel group strategy and conflict outcomes are unlikely to capture these nuances and thus may misattribute results to a single nominal strategy made in a coding decision.

#### *Examining Insurgencies as Dynamic Phenomena Using Time-Series Data*

The use of nominal variables in research examining asymmetric conflict results in two shortcomings. First, coding only the outcome of insurgencies creates a dependent variable that lumps conflicts possessing significantly different characteristics into the same category, calling into question the similarity of units making up the variation being explained by independent variables. Second, because rebel groups are often coded as employing only a single strategy, additional approaches used by organizations to advance their interests, either as part of "mixed strategies" or at different points during their lifespans, are not incorporated into explanations of conflict development. This may cause research to attribute outcomes to only a single strategy, such as terrorism, even though groups regularly use multiple approaches to advance their interests.

If widely used coding practices do not accurately reflect the relative threat insurgent groups pose to governments or the different strategies groups employ over time, what metrics should be used to incorporate these features of rebellion into research designs? One prospective answer comes from the field of organizational sociology. A central concept in this discipline holds that the primary objectives of organizations are survival and growth, which can be measured by changes in membership size, capacity, and public support (Hirschman 1970; Wilson 1973; Whetten 1987). In addition, organizational sociology maintains that a distinction should be made between organizations' publicly stated goals and their primary objectives. Meyer and Rowan (1977, 340), for example, contend that the publicly stated objectives of organizations function as "powerful myths, and many organizations adopt them ceremonially" to increase support and legitimacy. Similarly, Pfeffer and Salancik (1978, 36) note that only rarely can effectiveness in securing stated objectives adequately explain whether an organization thrives. Since many rebel groups begin as small organizations, often with less than one-hundred members (Blomberg, Engel, and Sawyer 2010; Byman 2008), their initial stated goal of regime change may be viewed as a form of "organizational myth" intended to publicize and promote groups' ideologies and grievances. That is, most small insurgent organizations are likely to have more immediate objectives than defeating governments, including survival, growth, and amassing resources. Using an organizational lens to evaluate insurgencies would lead analysts to focus on changes in these indicators of rebel group development rather than conflict outcomes. This is not to say that

examining outcomes should be abandoned. Instead, conflict outcomes should be used alongside metrics of organizational progress to obtain a more detailed picture of the challenge that insurgents pose to governments.<sup>13</sup>

To address problems caused by static coding of actors' strategies, political scientists again may find solutions within the discipline of sociology, which has previously called for detailed mapping of the effects of the strategic innovations, adaptations, and interactions of combatants. For example, [McAdam \(1983\)](#) notes that the fate of oppositional groups is intricately linked to the strategic responses of the governments they challenge and that the chess-like nature of asymmetric conflicts should be tracked in order to explain their development. At a more general level, [Abbott \(1992\)](#) has urged that more scholarship be focused on processes that examine sequences of actions rather than on fixed entities. [Aminzade \(1992\)](#) likewise counsels that an advantage of sociological historical sequence analysis is that its focus is not on the presence or absence of certain variables but rather on the temporal intersection of decisions and processes. These points have been echoed in recent political science literature advocating the use of process tracing ([Bennett and Checkel 2015](#)).

Finding information that tracks changes in group size, territorial control, capacity, and strategic choice can be challenging; however, various data on these indicators of organizational strength and behavior is available. For instance, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) records the estimated size of certain militant groups as part of its annual publication *The Military Balance* ([IISS 1987–2016](#)). In addition to group size, *The Military Balance* approximates the military equipment possessed by select rebel organizations, a metric which can serve as an alternate indicator of group strength. Additionally, RAND ([Jones and Libicki 2008](#)), Stanford's Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC) *Mapping Militants Project*, and the Big Allied and Dangerous 2 (BAAD2) dataset ([Asal and Rethemeyer 2015](#)), all have estimates on the membership sizes of numerous groups. While some of the data available from these sources is not time-series, it can be used to create a tiered scale that reflects the relative strength of oppositional organizations. For instance, alongside a "win, lose, or draw" dependent variable, scholars can use an ordinal ranking that divides groups into categories based on their peak size along the following lines: 1) 100–1,000; 2) 1,000–5,000; 3) 5,000–10,000; 4) 10,000–30,000; 5) > 30,000. This type of scale would prevent relatively powerful groups that did not win political concessions from governments, such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) or Armed Islamic Group (GIA), from being treated as similar units in a dependent variable that also contains organizations with small memberships that posed little threat to governments.

In addition to group size, control of territory during insurgencies represents an important indicator of rebel group strength and is a rapidly emerging topic of inquiry ([Arjona et al. 2015](#); [Mampilly 2011](#)). Data on changes in territorial control during some intrastate conflicts is tracked by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) ([Raleigh et al. 2010](#)). ACLED records several variables that reflect geographic shifts in power among opponents including battles in which non-state actors gain control of territory, battles in which governments regain control of a location, and instances when a non-state organization establishes a base or headquarters. ACLED also records incidents when a battle does not result in a change in territorial control. ACLED data is time-series and reaches a detailed level of geographical precision; therefore, it may be used to determine when both rebels and governments are able to seize and hold territory over the course of conflicts. While ACLED represents an invaluable source for scholars, it has two limitations.

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<sup>13</sup> While sociological approaches to assessing insurgencies are not widely used in political science, [Crenshaw \(1987\)](#) has previously argued that a primary objective of extremist organizations is to sustain themselves rather than to achieve stated objectives.

First, it primarily tracks insurgencies in Africa. This may limit the generalizability of results that emerge from the dataset. Second, ACLED only begins recording events in 1997 and thus does not include information about insurgencies before that year.

Measuring changes in group capabilities and strategic choice over time can be accomplished by examining several different indicators. One metric previously used by scholars is the number of violent attacks carried out by groups across their lifespans. For instance, [Clauzet and Gleditsch \(2012\)](#) find that as organizations grow and gain more tactical experience, they are more likely to execute additional terrorist incidents. In addition to terrorism, time-series data on nonstate actors' use of conventional war, guerrilla warfare, and nonviolent activities are available from existing datasets. For example, ACLED tracks incidents of nonviolent protest—which often go unreported or underreported in other datasets ([Chojnacki et al. 2012](#), 387). Information on nonviolent activities can demonstrate both how groups' strategies change over time and how groups may adopt simultaneous mixed approaches to rebellion. Additionally, the UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset (UCDP GED) ([Sundberg and Melander 2013](#)) records both rebel and government attacks that result in deaths regardless of whether the incidents are classified as terrorism. UCDP GED thus enables scholars to include insurgent guerrilla warfare and conventional warfare activities into their analyses.

Finally, if time-series data on rebel groups' size, extent of territorial control, strategic shifts, or indicators of capacity are unavailable or unsuitable to answer a specific research question, alternate metrics may be employed to measure changes in groups' strategies and development. For example, using monthly data on bargaining between rebel groups and governments, [Thomas \(2014\)](#) finds that extremist organizations carrying out more terrorism are more likely to gain concessions from governments. In addition to measuring periodic indicators of rebel success rather than conflict outcomes, Thomas' research is innovative because it tracks fixed interval shifts in civilian targeting by groups, thus incorporating the dynamic nature of rebel decision-making into the inquiry's design. Finally, scholars using cross-sectional data as part of their research may seek to include the duration of insurgencies in their work in order to integrate an element of temporality. Recent research by [Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan \(2009\)](#), [Blomberg, Gaibullov, and Sandler \(2011\)](#), and [Young and Dugan \(2014\)](#), uses data that measures the longevity of groups to determine what factors allow some organizations to persist for extended periods while others dissipate quickly or are destroyed by counterinsurgency operations. Data on conflict duration from these inquiries can be used as an alternate measure of rebel group performance. That is, rebel group longevity often can serve as a proxy for the costs and threats organizations impose on governments, thus capturing important attributes of insurgencies that might be discounted by examining conflict outcomes alone.

### **Selection Bias and Underreported Data**

When assessing potential selection bias in the social sciences, scholars often focus on research designs without variation on the dependent variable. However, selection bias also occurs when data used to make inferences systematically excludes a significant portion of the representative population being investigated ([Geddes 2003](#); [King, Keohane, and Verba 1994](#)). This section assesses an instance of this second type of selection bias present in research on civilian targeting that results from underreporting of unfulfilled terrorist threats. According to widely accepted definitions of terrorism, threats to harm civilians in order to advance political objectives constitute terrorist incidents ([Sandler 2011](#), 280). Because bluffs are rarely incorporated into existing datasets, however, a significant portion of extremist group activity remains overlooked by previous research. Since bluffing represents a relatively low

cost, high reward, and widely used tactic, assessments of nonstate terrorism's efficacy should avoid its systematic exclusion.

Strategic bluffing in terrorist campaigns occurs when organizations warn of future violence against specific civilian targets but do not follow through on their threats.<sup>14</sup> Bluffs are strategic acts used to advance groups' objectives and are distinct from instances when terrorist attacks fail in the execution phase or are thwarted by law enforcement. Groups successful in gaining concessions from audiences by issuing threats rather than carrying out attacks achieve an extremely efficient outcome. They avoid using valuable resources, keep hidden important tactical methods, and evade negative consequences associated with causing civilian casualties, all while successfully coercing their targets. For instance, in June 2014, the Nigerian insurgent group Boko Haram threatened to attack public screenings of Nigeria's World Cup soccer games in the state of Adamawa. In response to this threat, the Nigerian government ordered all venues in the state to close when the national team was playing.<sup>15</sup> In this instance, Boko Haram achieved its goal of preventing public soccer screenings without ever mounting an attack.

Although bluffing is a tactic often employed by extremists, research on terrorism almost exclusively examines incidents that were successfully realized while overlooking threats that were never executed (Tishler 2016). This omission is not surprising. Since bluffs do not cause casualties, they are less likely to receive the publicity of executed terrorist incidents and therefore often go unreported. Enders and Sandler (2011, 72–73) examine terrorist bluffing briefly, noting that the material cost of making a threat is low while governments often expend considerable resources responding to these actions. However, beyond this brief aside, previous theoretical research has largely overlooked terrorist bluffing.

Most datasets tracking nonstate political violence do not record unrealized threats. The GTD does not track bluffs, and neither do the UCDP GED or ACLED, which both require at least one death for a violent incident to be coded. Two additional datasets, ITERATE and the Monterey WMD Terrorism Database, have limited information on bluffing; however, neither actively tracks terrorist threats, and both have drawbacks limiting the generalizability of inferences emerging from their contents. ITERATE records only international incidents, which account for less than 20 percent of all global terrorism (Sanchez-Cuenca and de la Calle 2009). For this reason, ITERATE data cannot shed light on the strategies of rebel organizations that use bluffing during civil wars, insurgencies, and as part of other extended intrastate conflicts. Meanwhile, the Monterey WMD Database, which is no longer actively managed, only records bluffs that involve the threatened use of weapons of mass destruction; these incidents constitute a small portion of all nonstate terrorism and often involve one-off hoaxes by individuals. Because of these limitations, there is no reason to be confident that information collected on bluffing in the ITERATE and Monterey WMD datasets is representative of the broader phenomenon of terrorist bluffing. In fact, because these datasets track relatively less common types of terrorism, their utility is limited to describing bluffing within their specialized domains.

While solutions to other research design challenges examined in this inquiry involve reconceptualizing variables or using alternate metrics to assess the performance of insurgent groups, the first step in addressing the omission of terrorist bluffing is simply to increase efforts to track this activity. While construction of a dataset seeking to record unrealized threats across all insurgencies is presently not feasible, collecting data on bluffs in individual terrorist campaigns is possible, especially for groups that receive significant media coverage. In this study, bluffs were

<sup>14</sup> In this inquiry, a group must identify a specific target for an incident to be coded as a threat. Broad, nonspecific terrorist warnings are not included as possible instances of bluffing.

<sup>15</sup> *BBC News*, "Bomb Threat' Curtails Nigeria World Cup Viewings." June 12, 2014.

identified using the following process. First, instances when a group issued a terrorist threat were detected by searching the *LexisNexis* news database. In this way, an initial log of threats within a given campaign was constructed. Second, each threat was checked against data in the GTD to determine whether it was subsequently carried out. Threats warning of attacks on specific dates that went unfulfilled were coded as bluffs. Threats without a specified date range were checked against GTD attack data for a year from the date the threat was made. If threats went unfulfilled for a year, they were also coded as bluffs. Threats that were ultimately fulfilled or that failed in the execution were not included as bluffs. These final steps in the process involved careful review of individual attack descriptions in the GTD, as well as additional news reports, to determine whether executed terrorist attacks corresponded to previous threats.

#### *Bluffing in Boko Haram's Campaign Against Educational Institutions*

This section demonstrates how bluffs can be merged with information from existing datasets by examining Boko Haram's terrorist campaign against educational institutions.<sup>16</sup> While Boko Haram has several long-term objectives—including establishing an Islamist government in the country's northeastern region—one of the organization's primary goals is suppressing secular education. Since 2009, Boko Haram has undertaken a terrorist campaign targeting schools to deter students, faculty, and employees from participating in academic activities ([Human Rights Watch 2016](#)). Boko Haram's campaign gained worldwide notoriety in 2014 when the group kidnapped 276 girls from the Government Secondary School in Chibok, prompting global condemnation of the organization. The Chibok incident, however, was just one attack in a broader campaign. According to the GTD, since 2009 Boko Haram has carried out seventy-seven terrorist incidents targeting educational institutions ([START 2016](#)).

In addition to executing attacks that have resulted in kidnappings, injuries, or the deaths of hundreds of students, teachers, and school employees, Boko Haram has also engaged in bluffing as part of its campaign against secular education. For instance, in June 2014, Boko Haram sent letters to secondary schools in Gindiri, Plateau State, warning of future attacks. In response to the threats, several schools in Gindiri, including the Government High Secondary School and the Girls High Secondary School, closed due to fear they would be targeted.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, Boko Haram never used violence against these institutions; however, by issuing threats the group was able to force the schools to close temporarily.

Since 2009, Boko Haram has issued unfulfilled threats against schools on at least twelve occasions.<sup>18</sup> When merged with GTD data, these bluffs comprise 15 percent of Boko Haram's total terrorist activity targeting educational institutions. In six of these incidents, Boko Haram either forced schools to enhance security or deterred students from attending classes, while on another four occasions schools were shut down for extended periods. In total, in ten of twelve instances in which Boko Haram bluffed, the group either deterred students and faculty from attending school or else forced local law enforcement to use resources to enhance security. Furthermore, it also appears Boko Haram used bluffs to increase its geographical range of influence. While most of the group's executed attacks against schools have taken place in the states of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa, seven of twelve bluffs targeted schools outside these states, where the group's influence is not as prominent. This

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<sup>16</sup> This case was selected because of the significant level of media attention Boko Haram receives. High levels of scrutiny by both Nigerian and global press means that Boko Haram's threats have a good likelihood of being reported.

<sup>17</sup> *Premium Times*, "Boko Haram Threat: Private, Public Schools Shut in Plateau." June 10, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> See Appendix B for a complete list of Boko Haram's bluffs.



suggests that Boko Haram used bluffing to intimidate audiences outside its core geographical stronghold.

Although unfulfilled threats comprise a small number of incidents in Boko Haram's campaign against schools, the group's activities indicate that organizations involved in ongoing terrorist campaigns can use bluffs to advance their strategic interests. Specifically, groups may intermingle terrorist attacks with bluffs—designed to mimic previous attacks—to maximize their influence. That is, bluffs may be used in conjunction with executed attacks to increase the leverage a group can exert on target audiences. By threatening to carry out attacks similar to previous incidents, threats may be judged as credible and thus be more likely to cause audiences to succumb to demands. If groups sequence bluffs in such a way that audiences are unable to distinguish them from legitimate warnings, they can potentially augment the influence of a terrorist campaign to a level greater than that of using executed attacks alone.

To summarize, analysis of terrorist bluffing poses a challenge to researchers because threats against civilians are not comprehensively tracked. By overlooking bluffs, analysts risk disregarding a widely-used extremist group tactic that can shed light on the strategy of militant groups. By way of comparison, examination of suicide terrorism—another tactic used by numerous extremist organizations—has spawned an extensive literature that has advanced knowledge in the field (Choi and Piazza 2016; Benmelech, Berrebi, and Klor 2012; Pape 2005; Bloom 2005). This section has demonstrated that information on terrorist threats can be collected using open source materials and subsequently merged with existing data in the GTD to identify bluffs. Subsequently, this merged data can be used by researchers to determine what influence bluffs have on target audiences and how groups intermingle bluffs with executed attacks. While this means of identifying bluffs may not permit analysts to describe the phenomenon across all terrorist campaigns, it will allow them to begin forming the foundation for an empirical assessment of unrealized terrorist threats.

## Conclusion

This inquiry has outlined several methodological and conceptual challenges that have emerged along with the use of large datasets in research analyzing asymmetric conflicts between governments and nonstate organizations. The objective of this study is not to contest the utility of large-N work in the field or to dismiss quantitative research designs as inherently flawed. On the contrary, there can be little argument that the use of new data has advanced knowledge in the field; nonetheless, this does not signify that research design obstacles have disappeared. Rather, as more data about political violence and nonviolent civil resistance become available, scholars must be aware of evolving research challenges.

This investigation has used arguments from qualitative social science methodology and organizational sociology to identify three areas where improvements in research design can be implemented. First, scholars should structure research around theoretically significant questions rather than basing it solely around easily accessible data. Specifically, in the field of terrorism studies, researchers cannot make accurate inferences about the strategic utility of civilian targeting without first identifying the audiences that groups seek to influence. Second, where possible, inquiries should avoid using static, nominal variables to characterize complex social phenomena that change over time. In previous work on insurgencies, researchers often measure the outcome of conflicts using a “win, lose, or draw” dependent variable, lumping together organizations with significantly different levels of strength into the same category. Rather than solely examining outcomes, scholars should also seek to measure indicators of rebel group strength that change over time including group size, territorial control, and capacity. Finally, scholars should acknowledge potential

problems caused by selection bias in datasets. Specifically, most datasets record only executed violent incidents and overlook unrealized threats. This omission means that a widely-used tactic employed by militant groups remains understudied by analysts.

Finally, as many scholars have previously noted, qualitative and quantitative logics of inference are not mutually exclusive. Both approaches to social science research seek to use empirical information to identify causal relationships between explanatory variables and outcomes (George and Bennett 2005; King, Keohane, and Verba 1994). Each approach offers tools to address specific types of questions. Quantitative approaches enable generalizations across large populations and identification of correlations between variables. Qualitative methods permit researchers to identify different causal mechanisms connecting variables while facilitating testing of hypotheses generated from statistical inquiry by using most-likely, least-likely, and crucial case study designs (Mahoney 2012; Levy 2008; Van Evera 1997). Analytic examination of asymmetric conflict will continue to benefit from a mixed-method approach to research design in which the use of large datasets to discern patterns across cases is combined with qualitative analysis of theoretically important cases.

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## Appendix A: Coding Audiences of ISIS Terrorist Incidents in Mosul

### *Introduction*

This appendix describes the procedures used to identify the intended audiences of terrorist incidents carried out by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the city of Mosul from June 2014 through December 2015. The original data used to obtain information on ISIS's civilian targeting in the city was downloaded from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), and the unit of analysis is individual terrorist incidents. The subsequent process of identifying audiences involved three steps. First, the types of targets ISIS attacked were recorded. At times, additional details beyond information tracked by the GTD were added based on material from open source accounts of attacks. Second, using GTD incident data, available open source accounts of attacks, and analytical literature on ISIS's strategies, the underlying rationale for civilian targeting in each incident was identified. In total, there was enough information to code the underlying reasons for attacks in sixty-one of sixty-eight incidents. Third, using information about targeting and motive, each incident was assigned a strategic logic and audience using categories established in previous scholarship (Kydd and Walter 2006; Bloom 2004). The following sections define the target types, rationales for attacks, and audiences coded, and discuss types of evidence used to make coding decisions.

### *Targets*

The targets of terrorist incidents comprise the civilian victims of attacks and/or nonmilitary physical structures damaged by extremist violence.

- 1) Mosul civilians (general)
  - This is a broad category that encompass noncombatants in Mosul who are not members of one of the narrower target categories described below.
- 2) Foreign civilians
  - Noncombatants in Mosul who are not citizens of Iraq.
- 3) Journalists
  - Noncombatants in Mosul who work for professional news organizations.
- 4) Politicians
  - Noncombatants in Mosul who are members of the local or national Iraqi government or who have recently run for public office in Iraq.
- 5) Religious figures and institutions
  - Prominent members of Christian, Sunni Muslim, Shia Muslim, and Sufi Muslim religions as well as physical structures where these major religions are practiced or that symbolize these religions.

- 6) Children
  - Mosul residents under eighteen years of age.
- 7) Security Forces
  - Attacks against members of the armed forces of states or professional militias involved in ongoing conflict with ISIS were not included in the dataset; however, incidents targeting captured members of security forces and prisoners of war who were attacked by ISIS after detention were coded as acts of terrorism.

#### *Motive for Civilian Targeting*

Where possible, this category attributes a motive to incidents using information from GTD incident summaries, open source reporting, and broader literature on ISIS's strategic goals. Using this material, six reasons that ISIS targeted civilians in Mosul were identified. The possibility that more than one rationale could motivate terrorist attacks was considered when making coding choices.

- 1) General opposition to ISIS
  - Attacks in which ISIS targeted civilians who failed to obey ISIS orders, demonstrated against ISIS, or spoke out against ISIS rule in Mosul.
- 2) Collaboration with non-ISIS security forces
  - Attacks in which ISIS targeted civilians who the group believed to be working with Iraqi security forces, Kurdish security forces, or other non-ISIS militias.
- 3) Violation of ISIS's religious law
  - Attacks in which ISIS targeted civilians who did not adhere to the group's religious law. Noncombatants were attacked for violations that included adultery, petty crime, "occult" activities, blasphemy, and having "inappropriate" clothing / personal appearance.
- 4) Association with a non-Sunni religion
  - Attacks in which ISIS targeted individuals and religious structures because they were associated with Christianity, Shia Islam, and Sufi Islam.
- 5) Political association with the Iraqi government
  - Attacks in which ISIS targeted noncombatants because they were actively associated with the Iraqi government, formerly associated with the Iraqi government, or had recently run for public office.
- 6) Recruitment
  - Attacks in which ISIS kidnapped civilians and forced them to join the organization.

#### *Strategic Logic and Audience*

After identifying information on targets and the rationale behind attacks, where feasible each incident was assigned a strategic logic and audience. The possibility that ISIS carried out attacks with the intention of influencing multiple audiences was considered while making coding decisions.

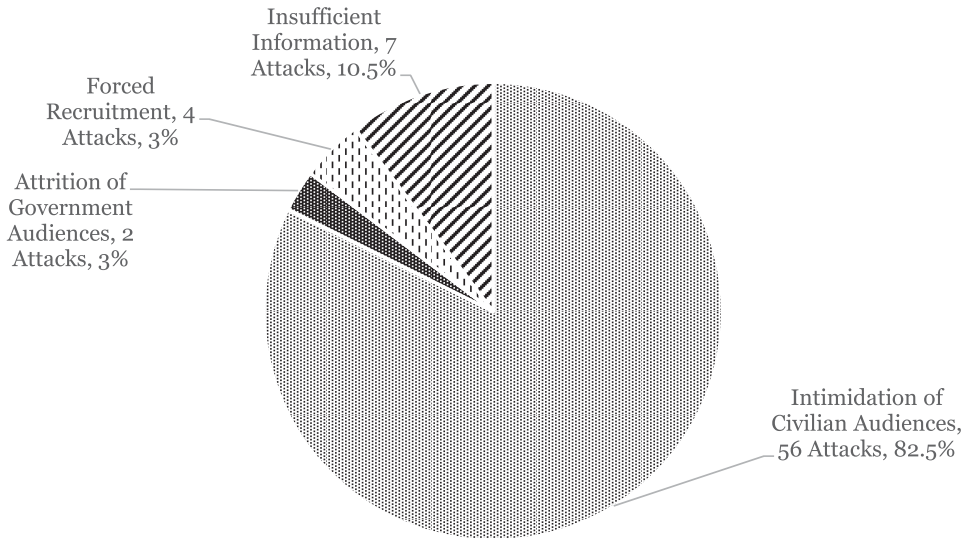
- 1) Attrition of a government audience
  - Attrition involves efforts to alter a government policy through imposing costs (Kydd and Walter 2006; Pape 2005). The goal of an attrition

strategy is to force a government to give in to the demands of extremists rather than incur the costs of future terrorist attacks. Incidents coded as attrition involved instances in which ISIS sought concessions from the Iraqi government or a foreign government or made demands on a government and associated those demands with civilian targeting.

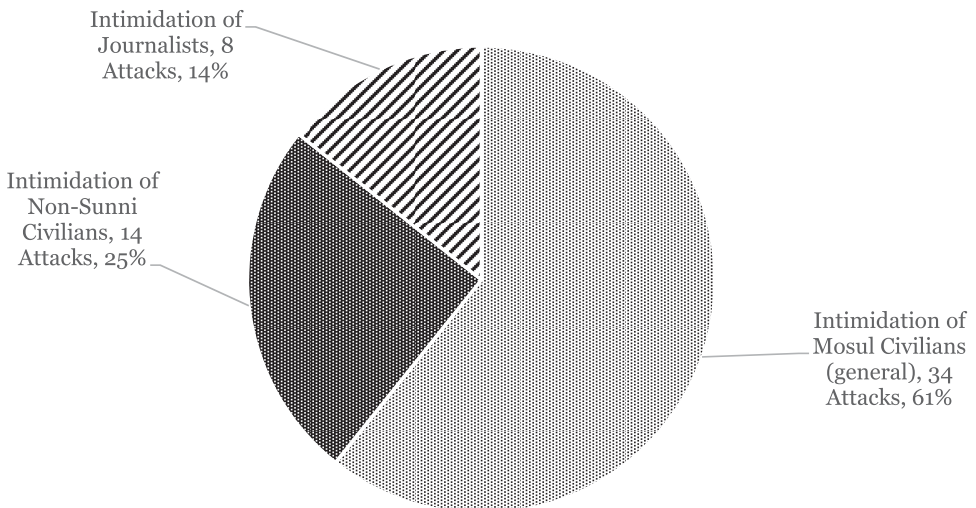
- 2) Intimidation of civilian audiences (Mosul civilians, non-Sunni civilians, journalists)
  - Intimidation involves coercing or deterring the behavior of non-combatants by using threats or carrying out terrorist attacks. Organizations often use terrorism to influence the actions of segments of the population rather than to change government policies (Kydd and Walter 2006). Terrorist incidents that were carried out to exert social control over civilian sectors of the population were coded as intimidation. ISIS sought to influence the behavior of three types of audiences by using intimidation: all Mosul civilians, non-Sunni civilians, and journalists. Incidents intended to influence all civilians targeted non-combatants who had expressed opposition to ISIS, collaborated with non-ISIS security forces, violated ISIS religious law, or had an association with the Iraqi government. Attacks intended to influence non-Sunni civilians often targeted religious figures or institutions for their association with a non-Sunni religion. Attacks intended to influence journalists regularly targeted journalists who published information critical of ISIS activities in Mosul.
- 3) Provocation of a government audience
  - Provocation occurs when organizations carry out terrorist attacks with the goal of encouraging a harsh response from a state's security forces that results in repression of the underlying civilian population (Carter 2016).
- 4) Internal Signaling to ISIS members
  - Extremist groups may target civilians to influence internal organizational audiences with the goal of boosting internal morale and increasing cohesion. In three incidents in Mosul, ISIS kidnapped children for the purposes of recruitment. There is no evidence that these kidnappings were intended to influence external audiences. For this reason, the attacks were coded as likely cases of internal signaling.
- 5) Outbidding
  - Outbidding occurs when numerous extremist groups are in competition for limited resources and support provided by a sympathetic population. In this context, groups attack civilians to demonstrate their superior commitment to achieving goals in order to gain a greater portion of available resources (Bloom 2004; Kydd and Walter 2006).
- 6) Spoiling
  - Spoiling takes place when one extremist organization seeks to influence negotiations between another extremist group and a government by targeting noncombatants (Kydd and Walter 2006).



Figure 1 summarizes ISIS's strategies of terrorism in Mosul while Figure 2 disaggregates ISIS's terrorist incidents that were intended to intimidate civilian segments of the Mosul population.



**Figure 1.** ISIS's Terrorist Strategies in Mosul.



**Figure 2.** Disaggregating ISIS's Intimidation Efforts in Mosul.

**Appendix B. Boko Haram's Bluffs Against Educational Institutions**

Date	City	State	Threat Target	Method	Outcome
6/4/11	Maiduguri	Borno	University of Maiduguri Teaching Hospital	Letter	Unknown
7/11/11	Maiduguri	Borno	University of Maiduguri	Letter	School Closed
9/13/11	Ibadan	Oyo	University of Ibadan	E-mail	Increased Security
1/26/12	Kano	Kano	Several Kano Primary and Secondary Schools	Video	Schools Closed
12/14/13	Maiduguri	Borno	University of Maiduguri	Letter	Unknown
2/14/14	Hong	Adamawa	Adamawa State College of Education	Letter	Students Intimidated
3/17/14	Kano	Kano	Bayero University	Letter	Students Intimidated
5/18/14	Makurdi	Benue	Government College / Mount Saint Gabriel School	Letter	Increased Security
6/4/14	Fotokol	Cameroon (country)	Fotokol High School	Flyers	Increased Security
6/10/14	Odogbolu	Ogun	Federal Government College	Text Message	Increased Security
6/10/14	Gindiri	Plateau	Girls High Secondary School / Government Secondary School	Letter	Schools Closed
9/7/14	Mubi	Adamawa	Adamawa State University	Unknown	School Closed

Sources: All Africa, BBC, Blueprint Nigeria, Daily Post Nigeria, National Mirror, Nigeria Daily News, Nigerian Monitor, Premium Times, The Eagle, The National, and Vanguard Nigeria.