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Empty Threats: How Extremist Organizations Bluff in Terrorist Campaigns

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ABSTRACT

Why do extremist organizations issue terrorist bluffs? According to previous research, empty threats against civilians are likely to negatively influence assessments of groups' strength and credibility, thus making it more difficult for extremists to achieve their goals. Despite these potential audience costs, bluffing is a common terrorist tactic. This inquiry assesses data on the bluffing patterns of three organizations—Boko Haram, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, and the Real Irish Republican Army—and finds that groups suffer few costs for making empty terrorist threats. Furthermore, extremists bluff to advance a variety of strategic goals including outbidding rival factions, spoiling peace settlements, and intimidating civilians.

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In June 2014, Boko Haram, a violent extremist organization active in Nigeria and the Lake Chad region, threatened to burn down Fotokol High School in northern Cameroon.¹ Issued via pamphlet, the threat caused significant alarm among students, faculty, and administrative employees. After being notified of Boko Haram's warning, several teachers resigned their positions and the school's headmaster stated: "We are so afraid of being targeted ... everyone says they are going to leave."² Students also responded with apprehension. One female student, aware of Boko Haram's abduction of 276 girls from the Government Secondary School in the Nigerian town of Chibok, declared: "I am so scared Boko Haram will come to our school and kidnap us."³ In response to the possibility of an attack, the government of Cameroon stationed soldiers at the school in an effort to provide additional protection. Ultimately, Boko Haram never followed through on its threat. Fotokol High School was never attacked by the group and no evidence exists that a plot to target the school existed or was foiled by security forces. Boko Haram's bluff, which caused campus employees to resign and forced the government of Cameroon to expend resources guarding the school, highlights the challenges faced by government officials, law enforcement personnel, and civilians who struggle to distinguish legitimate warnings of imminent terrorist attacks—such as those that were made frequently by the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA)—from bluffs. Why do extremist organizations issue terrorist bluffs? What advantages and disadvantages do groups experience from making threats they do not intend to fulfill?

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At present there is no theoretical framework that accounts for bluffing within terrorist campaigns.⁴ In fact, according to the implications of current models characterizing civilian targeting by nonstate actors, organizations that use terrorism should not bluff because it is likely to cause audiences to reduce their assessments of groups' strength and credibility, thus making it more difficult for extremists to achieve their objectives. Despite these potential reputational costs, bluffing is a tactic frequently used by extremist groups.⁵ Moreover, although bluffs are commonplace—and scholars widely agree that threats of violence against civilian targets constitute acts of terrorism—most datasets tracking nonstate political violence do not record unfulfilled threats. For this reason, researchers have largely avoided examining terrorist bluffs in a systematic fashion.

This inquiry fills the existing gap in the literature by developing new theory on bluffing in terrorist campaigns. Two central arguments are advanced. First, nonstate extremist organizations do not suffer the same level of credibility costs for commitment failure as governments. For this reason, extremist groups have significant incentives to incorporate bluffs into their strategic activity. While previous theory on terrorism characterizing civilian targeting as a form of “signaling” implies that extremists should not bluff due to the costs associated with failing to fulfill commitments, this model is largely based on crisis bargaining between governments.⁶ In contrast to governments, violent nonstate organizations face a distinct set of payoffs from bluffing that often makes it an attractive strategic option. Second, groups bluff for a variety of strategic rationales including intimidating civilian audiences, outbidding rival organizations, and spoiling peace settlements. Therefore, while there is no single motive underlying bluffing in terrorist campaigns, groups largely use empty threats to advance existing goals rather than to achieve wholly new objectives. Additionally, bluffing is used by both established organizations to augment ongoing terrorist campaigns and by upstart extremist groups that seek to increase recruitment and publicize grievances. These findings signify that terrorist bluffs are neither a form of nonstrategic behavior nor a means to achieve idiosyncratic goals but are instead used in an effort to advance groups' core objectives.

In addition to examining why extremist organizations bluff, this inquiry also evaluates the strategic consequences of issuing empty threats. Assessing the utility of terrorist bluffs entails identifying groups' motives in distinct campaigns and determining if bluffs contribute to advancing these specific objectives. Evaluating bluffing has proven difficult in the past because existing datasets do not comprehensively track unfulfilled threats issued by extremist groups. To address this challenge, this inquiry identifies bluffs by searching open-source news reports to uncover terrorist threats and subsequently cross-references those threats against existing datasets tracking terrorist incidents. Unfulfilled threats made against civilians for which no evidence exists that plots failed in the execution phase or were foiled by law enforcement are coded as bluffs and used to assess the strategic efficacy of empty threats.

The next section of this inquiry conceptualizes terrorist bluffing and distinguishes it from pre-attack warnings issued by extremist groups as well as from hoaxes carried out by individuals who have no broader political or social objectives. Subsequently, bluffs are analyzed as part of the wider literature characterizing nonstate terrorism as a form of costly signaling. Next, hypotheses that may explain the bluffing patterns of nonstate extremist groups are developed. The inquiry then outlines a method for identifying

terrorist bluffs and tests hypotheses on the bluffing behavior of three organizations: Boko Haram, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, and the Real Irish Republican Army (RIRA). The study's penultimate section assesses initial hypotheses and outlines directions for further research. Finally, the conclusion reviews the inquiry's key arguments.

Conceptualizing terrorist bluffs

Nonstate terrorism is the strategic use of violence, or threat of violence, targeting civilian noncombatants in order to achieve political or social objectives by influencing audiences.⁷ According to this widely used definition, threats of violence against civilians are considered acts of terrorism even if they go unfulfilled.⁸ Similarly, from a legal perspective, unrealized terrorist threats are unlawful acts that often result in severe penalties for perpetrators. Furthermore, terrorism is strategic, meaning that extremist groups attack civilians because they believe it will advance their interests.⁹ If violence or threats of violence are made without the objective of altering a government policy, changing the political or social behavior of civilians, or advancing other strategic organizational interests, then the activity is not terrorism and lies outside the scope of this inquiry.

Although bluffs are an important component of many extremist organizations' strategic activities, they remain largely overlooked in the literature on nonstate terrorism.¹⁰ This oversight is understandable. Because bluffs rarely result in casualties, they do not receive the same level of media coverage as executed terrorist incidents, and therefore are underreported by news organizations and omitted from most datasets tracking civilian targeting.¹¹ Given that the subject is largely overlooked, before moving forward careful conceptual distinction is made between bluffing and other related types of nonstate terrorism including fulfilled threats, warnings of imminent attacks, false claims of credit, failed or foiled terrorist plots, and one-off hoaxes.

Terrorist bluffing takes place when groups threaten future violence against civilian targets but do not intend to execute attacks and instead seek to advance their interests through threats alone. Because bluffing involves no possibility of destruction, it is distinct from legitimate warnings of attacks that occur when groups give advance notice of terrorist operations in an effort to minimize casualties. For example, the PIRA would sometimes telephone warnings of imminent bombings to news outlets—who would subsequently notify law enforcement—in order to avoid the backlash associated with causing civilian casualties.¹² Bluffing is also different from other forms of terrorist misrepresentation including denying accountability for incidents and false claims of credit, which occur when organizations publicly take responsibility for acts of terrorism they did not commit.¹³ The terrorist tactic most closely related to bluffing is the use of hoax devices. In these cases, groups plant fake bombs, mail letters containing substances that resemble biological weapons, or mimic other types of frequently used terrorist tactics. Hoaxes are distinct from bluffs, however, because a warning or statement of responsibility is typically issued only after the device has been planted or mailed. That is, when groups use hoax devices the temporal order of communication is distinct from bluffs, in which a statement of responsibility and grievance come prior to a threatened attack. Additionally, hoaxes pose tactical risks for extremist groups because devices must be planted or mailed and may contain forensic information revealing information

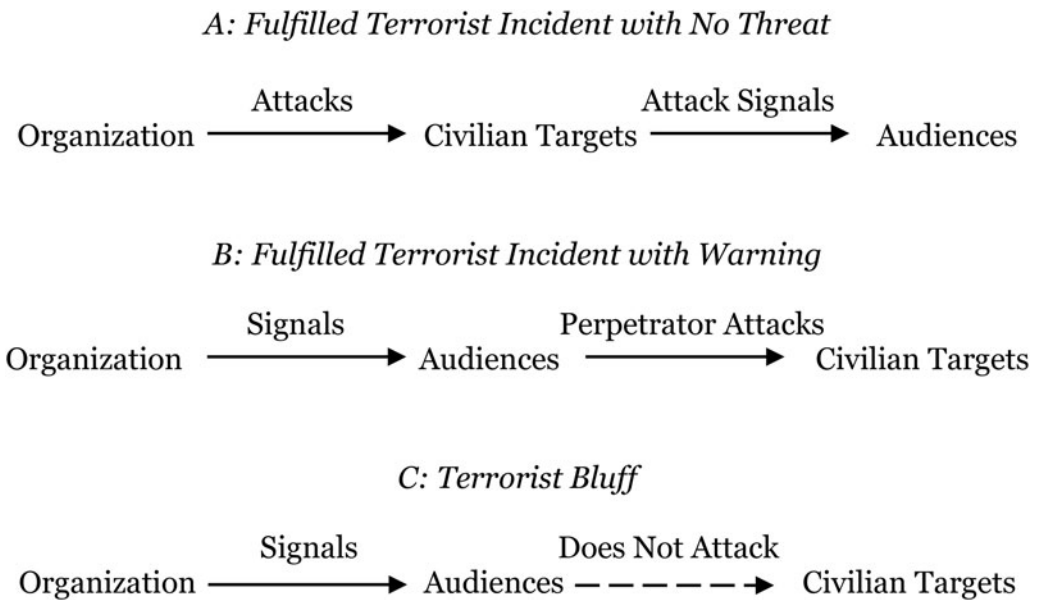


Figure 1. Fulfilled terrorist incidents, warnings, and bluffs.

about perpetrators. For these reasons, while hoax devices resemble terrorist bluffs, they are treated as a separate class of events in this inquiry.¹⁴

Bluffing is also distinct from both failed and foiled terrorist plots. Failed plots involve incidents when perpetrators attempt to carry out operations but are unable to execute their plans due to human error or malfunctions in the means employed to execute an attack.¹⁵ Foiled terrorist plots occur when law enforcement successfully apprehends perpetrators in the planning phase of a terrorist incident or at any point before an attack takes place.¹⁶ Regardless of how an operation was prevented, failed and foiled plots are distinct from bluffs because in both instances organizations actively devote resources to carrying out a destructive attack.

To summarize, in a fulfilled terrorist incident in which no threat is issued, an extremist organization attacks civilian targets to influence audiences. In contrast, a warning of future terrorist violence shifts steps two and three in the chronological process of a traditional terrorist incident, thus seeking to influence audiences and signal intentions before an attack is executed. A terrorist bluff employs the same sequential ordering as a warning but omits the third step in the process—the fulfilled attack. Consequently, bluffs are pure signals intended to communicate information to audiences through the threat of violence alone. [Figure 1](#) depicts the temporal process distinctions between a fulfilled terrorist incident, a legitimate warning, and a bluff.

Costly signaling and bluffing in terrorist campaigns

Terrorist attacks carried out by organizations do not usually occur as isolated incidents. More frequently, civilian targeting takes place in the context of broader campaigns and is a form of costly signaling intended to influence audiences' perceptions of

organizations' strength and resolve.¹⁷ Viewed in this way, each terrorist incident is part of a larger strategic narrative that collectively seeks to cause audiences to reassess extremist groups' capabilities and willingness to inflict pain on targets. Ultimately, the objective of extremist organizations that use terrorism is to raise estimates of their destructive power and commitment to the point that audiences make concessions or change their behavior rather than suffer the projected costs of future incidents.¹⁸ This model implies that organizations that target civilians should rarely make threats they do not fulfill because failing to carry out a pledged attack will cause audiences to lower their assessments of groups' credibility. Surprisingly, however, terrorist bluffing is a tactic frequently employed by extremists.¹⁹

A likely explanation for the existing literature's inability to account for terrorist bluffs lies in the origins of the costly signaling model widely used to conceptualize civilian targeting. Specifically, this model is based on strategic interaction that occurs between governments in the context of crisis diplomacy and war. One of this paradigm's chief findings is that threats must be credible to be effective. That is, for a threat to work, targets must believe their opponents will follow through on their commitments.²⁰ If actors instead are judged to be unreliable, the likelihood that deterrence or compellence can be used to advance their interests decreases. While this central tenet of crisis bargaining theory has held up to scrutiny from scholars, empirical research in the field almost exclusively derives its findings from encounters between governments: actors with attributes and incentives that often differ markedly from nonstate extremist organizations. Specifically, government leaders may suffer domestic "audience costs"—which include challenges from political rivals and decreased popular support—if they do not fulfill their public commitments.²¹ When states bluff, they may also weaken foreign alliances and encourage aggression in the international system. Governments thus face substantial consequences for not meeting their public commitments and therefore have strong incentives to signal their intentions credibly.

Unlike governments, nonstate extremist groups have several incentives to bluff. First, organizations that use terrorism regularly seek goals that do not involve deterrence or compellence, such as raising awareness of their existence, publicizing grievances, and provoking governments.²² In these cases, while bluffs may reduce groups' credibility, benefits can often outweigh costs, especially when organizations are recently formed and primarily seek to increase recruitment and capacity. Second, cases of crisis bargaining involving states are typically high-profile incidents of more consequence to governments than the myriad threats and attacks carried out by extremists in low-intensity conflicts. That is, for governments crises often resemble a "one shot lottery" rather than a repeated game. Consequently, limited instances of bluffing will not affect an extremist group's reputation to the same degree as a state's failure to fulfill a commitment in an international crisis. Put differently, governments have fewer incidents on which to build or maintain their reputations than extremist groups. Third, because of their substantial resources and bureaucratic institutional structure, most governments possess relatively high levels of credibility *a priori*. That is, governments often enter crisis bargaining situations with reputations that are a significant asset. In contrast, extremist groups' more decentralized structure and limited military capabilities give them less credibility and cause them to struggle to convince audiences that they are capable of inflicting

significant costs. Consequently, because credibility is not an asset that most extremist groups possess to begin with, they have less to lose from bluffing than governments.

Despite these notable differences between extremist groups and governments, analysts applying strategic bargaining concepts to nonstate terrorism and other forms of asymmetric violence have not adjusted their assumptions about groups' objectives and incentives sufficiently to account for bluffing, which might otherwise appear to be an irrational or suboptimal activity. Instead, the premise that credibility is equally as vital for extremist organizations as it is for governments remains a central tenet in the literature. In contrast to this assumption, this inquiry argues that while credibility is important for groups that use terrorism, the benefits organizations may receive from bluffing often outweigh these credibility costs.

Hypotheses, data, and case selection

This inquiry advances two deductive hypotheses that may explain the target selection and intended audiences of terrorist bluffs. First, extremist groups are likely to use bluffs to threaten targets similar to those they have attacked previously. In this way, groups are more likely to convince audiences that their threats are credible. Second, bluffs are likely used to influence audiences for the same strategic rationales as fulfilled terrorist incidents. That is, bluffing is strategic and the logics underlying terrorism advanced in previous research—including outbidding rival groups, intimidating civilians, and spoiling peace settlements—can explain decisions to bluff.²³

With respect to target selection, previous theory on bluffing in crises involving governments contends that a good bluff is one that is indistinguishable from a legitimate threat.²⁴ This argument parallels strategy in poker, in which bluffs are most effective when players' betting patterns and behavior reveal no information about their cards, thus making a bluff indistinguishable from representing a strong hand.²⁵ By way of example, in 2009 *The New Yorker* described the betting style and table mannerisms of Chris Ferguson, one of the top Texas Hold'em players of the past decade: "he sits almost cataleptically still ... to bet he lowers his right arm like a lever, then returns to his original pose. The gesture is the same whether the bet is a bluff or a boast."²⁶ The key to Ferguson's bluffing technique is ensuring that his behavior reveals no information to opponents that would give them clues about his hand. If, like professional poker players, extremist groups behave as optimizing strategic actors, they will intermingle bluffs designed to mimic previous terrorist incidents with executed attacks. In this way, extremists can use bluffs in combination with attacks to maximize their bargaining leverage. By threatening to carry out attacks that both law enforcement and the population know groups can fulfill, bluffs are more likely to be considered credible and will therefore be more likely to influence target audiences.

With respect to the strategy underlying terrorist bluffs, this inquiry predicts that the motives behind empty threats will align with those of executed incidents. That is, groups issue bluffs for the same strategic reasons that they carry out attacks. This signifies that bluffing is neither irrational nor used to achieve idiosyncratic goals. Instead, groups use bluffs to advance core strategic objectives. In this inquiry, groups' underlying motives for bluffing were identified by examining statements that often accompany

bluffs, news reports describing underlying rationales for incidents, and broader case study literature and historiography describing groups' goals.

Data and case selection

The lack of available data on unfulfilled terrorist threats presents a significant obstacle to developing theory on terrorist bluffing. Because unfulfilled threats result in no civilian deaths, they often do not receive levels of media coverage associated with executed terrorist attacks and therefore are not tracked by most datasets.²⁷ For instance, neither the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) nor various data collection efforts managed by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program record unfulfilled threats. Two additional datasets—ITERATE and the Monterey WMD Terrorism Database—track certain types of threats, but both are characterized by shortcomings limiting their usefulness for broader theory construction. ITERATE only tracks transnational terrorist attacks, which comprise less than twenty percent of global civilian targeting by nonstate actors.²⁸ Consequently, information from ITERATE cannot be used to assess the strategies of insurgent groups that use terrorist bluffs in intrastate conflicts. The Monterey WMD Terrorism Database tracks only unfulfilled threats that include explicit reference to the potential use of weapons of mass destruction; these events make up a relatively small percentage of global terrorism.²⁹ Despite their narrow purviews, the ITERATE and Monterey datasets have recorded 314 and 757 incidents of unfulfilled threats, respectively. Closer inspection of these data, however, reveals that perpetrators are identified in only twenty percent of cases in ITERATE and thirteen percent of cases in the Monterey WMD data. Because most of the unfulfilled threats these sources track appear to be one-off pranks committed by individuals rather than strategic bluffing by organizations, these datasets do not contain sufficient information for developing a broader theory on empty threats in terrorist campaigns.³⁰

This inquiry collects new data on the bluffing patterns of three organizations: Boko Haram, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, and the RIRA. The precise steps used to identify bluffs proceeded as follows: First, the *LexisNexis* news database was searched for occurrences when an organization under examination made a terrorist threat. Using this approach, a record of threats in individual terrorist campaigns was constructed.³¹ Second, threats were compared with attacks tracked by the GTD to establish whether they were ultimately realized. In cases where no evidence was found that plots failed or were foiled, unfulfilled threats asserting attacks would occur on exact dates were recorded as bluffs. Third, open-ended threats were cross-checked with GTD incidents for one year from the date the threat was issued. If threats were not executed within a year and no evidence was found that plots failed or were halted by law enforcement, they were categorized as bluffs.³² Finally, realized threats, failed attacks, and foiled incidents were excluded from the data. This concluding step required thorough review of GTD attack descriptions and supplementary news reports to establish whether fulfilled terrorist incidents matched preceding threats or if evidence existed that law enforcement prevented attacks in the planning phase. A list of identified bluffs appears in the inquiry's appendix.

Bluffing data were collected on three terrorist campaigns: Boko Haram's campaign targeting schools in Nigeria and Central Africa, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar's campaign following

its split with the Pakistani Taliban, and the RIRA's campaign seeking to disrupt the Northern Irish peace settlement following The Troubles. These cases were chosen for several reasons. Most importantly, gathering data on bluffs by using open-source materials requires that conflicts selected for analysis be covered extensively by news media. Simply put, to identify a bluff there first must be a reported threat. For this reason, only extremist groups highly scrutinized by professional journalists who report instances of executed attacks, threats, failed plots, and foiled attacks provide sufficient data to identify consistent bluffing behavior. Because the insurgencies in Nigeria, Pakistan, and Ireland have received substantial attention from the media in recent years, they are ideal cases to create a record of groups' threats. Additionally, each of the selected groups possesses organizational characteristics that distinguish them from the others. Boko Haram is a large organization with at least 15,000 members that controls territory and faces no serious challenges from rival rebel groups, although the organization has recently undergone a schism.³³ Meanwhile, unlike Boko Haram, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar operates in a highly competitive environment in which numerous organizations vie for recruits and material support. The RIRA, conversely, was a small group with fewer than 200 members that controlled no territory and was in significant decline when it merged with several smaller dissident republican groups in 2012.³⁴ Differences in the geographic location of selected groups, the varying size of organizations, and the distinct competitive environment among cases, permits assessment of terrorist bluffing patterns across a range of conflict settings to determine if a singular rationale for bluffing exists or if strategic motives and target selection patterns diverge across cases.

Boko Haram: Bluffing to augment intimidation

Boko Haram is a *Salafi-jihadist* insurgent organization that seeks to establish an Islamist government in Nigeria and to halt the spread of what it refers to as "Western-style education" in Central and West Africa.³⁵ The group formed in 2002 and began consistently attacking both civilians and state security forces in 2009. Since the onset of its rebellion, Boko Haram has carried out more than 2,000 terrorist incidents and, at its peak strength, controlled up to twenty percent of Nigeria.³⁶ In addition to toppling the government of Nigeria, one of Boko Haram's main goals is suppressing non-religious schooling and supplanting it with a system of education based on its own interpretation of the Quran.³⁷ To further this objective, Boko Haram has undertaken an extended terrorist campaign targeting educational institutions in order to dissuade students, faculty, and school employees from taking part in scholastic programs.³⁸ The group's campaign against non-religious education garnered global attention in 2014 when it kidnapped 276 girls from the Government Secondary School in Chibok, prompting worldwide denunciation. The Chibok abductions, however, were just one incident in a significantly larger effort. GTD data indicate that Boko Haram has committed seventy-eight terrorist incidents targeting educational institutions since 2009.³⁹ Boko Haram's use of terrorism to impede schooling has had profound consequences on the region. In 2017, eight years after the group began its campaign, UNICEF estimated that fifty-seven percent of schools in the Nigerian state of Borno remain shuttered.⁴⁰

In addition to carrying out terrorist incidents resulting in the kidnapping, injury, or death of thousands of pupils, educators, and staff, Boko Haram also uses bluffs as part of its terrorist campaign against secular schooling. For example, in September 2011, the group threatened to bomb two schools in southern Nigeria: the University of Ibadan and the University of Benin.⁴¹ The group stated it planned to target the universities between the dates of 12 September and 17 September because “Western education must stop in Nigeria.”⁴² In response to this threat, the University of Benin and the University of Ibadan increased security measures and police searched vehicles passing through the campuses. The security enhancements disrupted activities at the schools and some students and faculty chose to avoid coming to campus after they discovered the threat came from Boko Haram. In the end, Boko Haram did not follow through on these threats. No bombs were detonated or found at the schools and there is no evidence that plots to attack the universities existed or were foiled by police. Nonetheless, through bluffing Boko Haram intimidated students, hampered university activities, and forced police to spend considerable effort securing the schools.

Boko Haram has broadcast at least twelve terrorist bluffs toward educational institutions since 2009. When combined with GTD incidents, these bluffs make up fifteen percent of the organization’s documented terrorist attacks against schools.⁴³ On six occasions, Boko Haram compelled educational institutions to augment security measures or else dissuaded pupils from going to school. In four additional instances, schools experienced protracted closures.⁴⁴ Overall, on ten of twelve occasions when Boko Haram bluffed, the organization deterred students and faculty from attending schools or else forced police to use resources to augment security.⁴⁵

At first, Boko Haram’s bluffs against schools may seem to mimic their executed terrorist incidents; however, there is a noteworthy distinction between the targets of the group’s empty threats and those of its fulfilled operations. Whereas most of Boko Haram’s attacks targeting educational institutions have occurred in Borno State and Yobe State— in northeastern Nigeria—nine of twelve bluffs were directed against targets outside these two jurisdictions in states and countries where the organization’s presence is not as significant.⁴⁶ This indicates Boko Haram bluffed to intimidate audiences beyond its main territorial area of influence in northeastern Nigeria. That is, Boko Haram issued its bluffs against targets in areas where it would be more difficult for the group to execute successful attacks.

Boko Haram’s decision to use terrorist bluffs against schools in areas far from those it typically targets runs contrary to this inquiry’s initial hypothesis on target selection. If Boko Haram bluffed as predicted, it would have directed its threats toward educational institutions nearly identical to those that it had attacked in the past: namely, schools in Borno State and Yobe State. However, by regularly threatening schools outside its core areas of influence, Boko Haram clearly distinguished its bluffs from executed attacks, thus making them more identifiable and less credible. Despite potentially “showing its hand,” Boko Haram’s bluffs in areas where it was less active were remarkably effective. In all nine instances, schools were closed, students were deterred from attending classes, or enhanced security measures were taken to defend institutions. Therefore, although Boko Haram did not bluff in the most efficient possible manner, the group still managed to expand the range of its terrorist campaign against schools.

To summarize, since 2009 Boko Haram has used terrorism to intimidate students, faculty, and staff from taking part in academic activities in Nigeria. To augment the influence of its executed terrorist incidents in this campaign, Boko Haram frequently issued bluffs threatening to attack schools. Although bluffs comprise just fifteen percent of its recorded incidents targeting schools, the group's actions demonstrate that organizations that use terrorism can bluff to further their broad strategic interests.⁴⁷ Specifically, Boko Haram successfully employed empty threats both to increase the total number of individuals intimidated through terrorism and to expand the geographic scope of its campaign against educational institutions. Because Boko Haram executed numerous terrorist attacks against schools along with its bluffs, its empty threats do not appear to have damaged the public's perception of the group's destructive capabilities. Furthermore, even though most of Boko Haram's bluffs targeted schools well outside the group's core territorial stronghold—and thus should have been judged as less credible—law enforcement and school officials responded to these threats as though there was a high likelihood they would be fulfilled.

Jamaat-ul-Ahrar: Bluffing to outbid rivals

Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA) is an insurgent organization based in northwestern Pakistan that formed in August 2014 when a faction of militants split from Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)—commonly referred to as the Pakistani Taliban—over disputes concerning strategy and future leadership of the movement.⁴⁸ In contrast to factions within the TTP that sought the limited goal of regional autonomy through negotiation, JuA vigorously opposed peace talks with the government of Pakistan and pursued more expansive goals including regime change and creation of a regional caliphate governed according to the group's interpretation of *Sharia*.⁴⁹

As an independent organization, JuA used both terrorist attacks and bluffs to increase media coverage and public awareness of its activities and to spread information about its ideology and objectives to global jihadist franchises operating in Pakistan, including the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (IS-KP). JuA's bluffs, which primarily threatened high profile politicians in Pakistan or targets in foreign countries, were intended to distinguish its ambitious objectives from the narrower goals of other actors in the TTP.⁵⁰ Using this strategy, JuA's goal was to outbid rival factions and become the dominant actor in the Pakistani Taliban. As a spokesperson for JuA stated upon the group's formation: "now the TTP is ours, not theirs."⁵¹

Between August 2014 and June 2015, JuA issued nine bluffs while carrying out nineteen successful terrorist attacks.⁵² Bluffs thus accounted for forty-seven percent of JuA's recorded terrorist activity during this period. Notably, while all of JuA's executed attacks took place within Pakistan and struck relatively soft targets, the group's bluffs threatened foreign governments, targets in foreign countries, or high-profile individuals within Pakistan. Five of JuA's bluffs warned of attacks against targets outside Pakistan. For instance, in November 2014, JuA stated its intention to attack Indian prime minister Narendra Modi, claiming that Modi was "the killer of hundreds of Muslims."⁵³ In other cases involving targets outside Pakistan, JuA threatened to carry out attacks against major economic interests in China, the government of Myanmar, and sites in

Great Britain. JuA also threatened Pakistani education activist Malala Yousafzai, who was a resident in Great Britain. These targeting choices signaled JuA's expansive ambitions to both local sympathizers and to global *jihadist* franchises.

Conversely, just three of JuA's bluffs threatened civilians within Pakistan; however, these warnings also were not directed toward persons or physical sites JuA frequently attacked, which mainly comprise police or soft government targets. Instead, bluffs in Pakistan included threats against Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and high-profile politician Imran Khan. These threats clearly signal JuA's signature objective—deposing the current government of Pakistan—and thus distinguish its aims from the TTP, which primarily sought to maintain its influence and autonomy in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) rather than expand the scope of its insurgency.

As with Boko Haram, JuA's target selection did not align with this inquiry's hypothesis that groups will issue bluffs against categories of targets they routinely attack. However, while Boko Haram bluffed to intimidate students and expand its geographical range of influence, JuA's empty threats were intended to signal its expansive ambitions both to global *jihadist* organizations and to potential recruits in FATA and KP. Because JuA had not demonstrated the ability to execute operations outside Pakistan or to successfully attack prominent politicians, the group could not reasonably expect its threats to intimidate those audiences. Instead, JuA used bluffs to boost media coverage and publicize information about itself and its aims. JuA's terrorist bluffs were thus an effort to outbid factions in the TTP and to mobilize financial and personnel resources within a highly competitive environment.⁵⁴ Bluffs thus composed part of JuA's larger strategy to replace rival groups as the dominant actor among the numerous factions making up the Pakistani Taliban.

Did JuA's bluffs help the group advance its objectives? While JuA certainly gained widespread publicity using both bluffs and executed terrorist attacks, the organization was unable to seize unilateral control of the TTP. Instead, just eight months after its split, JuA announced its intention to realign with rival factions in the Pakistani Taliban. JuA's decision to reintegrate into the TTP was motivated by two factors. First, the Pakistani military's Operation Zarb-e-Azb in North Waziristan and Operation Khyber in Khyber Agency put significant pressure on extremist groups in northwest Pakistan. Facing further territorial losses, JuA and some TTP factions resolved to put aside their differences temporarily in order to fight their common enemy. Second, factions within the Pakistani Taliban movement began to view IS-KP with distrust due to its efforts to consolidate power for itself in the region rather than working to advance the interests of the Pakistani Taliban and Afghan Taliban.⁵⁵ JuA's brief association with IS-KP thus potentially impacted its reputation among local sympathizers. Because JuA primarily recruits from within FATA, the group decided to realign itself with the TTP to dispel any perception that it was linked to IS-KP.

In summary, while terrorist bluffs did not enable JuA to assume control of the Pakistani Taliban movement, the group retains autonomy within the TTP and succeeded in raising both its regional and global reputations by using a combination of bluffs and executed attacks. Since reunification with the TTP, JuA remains largely autonomous and continues to issue its own statements, carry out attacks, and construct

bases in Pakistan where it trains new soldiers.⁵⁶ The group has also gained an international profile as evidenced by the U.S. State Department and the United Nations Security Council placing JuA on their lists of sanctioned terrorist organizations. Therefore, while bluffing did not enable JuA to reach its long-term objective, it helped the organization to publicize its expansive aims—both regionally and globally—boosting its profile and converting it into a significant actor among the many extremist groups operating in northwest Pakistan.

RIRA: Bluffing to spoil the peace

The RIRA was an insurgent organization that sought to end British rule over Northern Ireland. The group formed at the tail end of The Troubles as a splinter from the PIRA. During its peak years, the PIRA was a highly destructive organization with thousands of members and significant popular support in Northern Ireland.⁵⁷ The PIRA's violent campaigns cemented its reputation as an organization that could consistently carry out attacks on British security forces, the Royal Ulster Constabulary, and businesses and individuals that supported Northern Ireland's continued union with Great Britain.⁵⁸ By the mid 1990s, however, after its decades-long violence yielded little political success, the PIRA's leadership concluded that armed struggle offered no clear path to a united Ireland.⁵⁹ For this reason, the PIRA largely abandoned political violence following the 1998 Belfast Agreement.

In 1997, a small faction of PIRA members who disagreed with the group's decision to renounce violence left the organization and formed the RIRA.⁶⁰ Among these defectors were some of the PIRA's top weapons and explosives experts. Although the RIRA gained widespread notoriety as a result of its destructive terrorist attack in the town of Omagh in 1998, it remained a small organization with limited resources and negligible public support.⁶¹ Experts estimate that the group had, at most, between 100 and 200 dedicated members from 1998 to 2012.⁶² The RIRA's small size limited the number of violent attacks the group could execute and made the organization susceptible to counterterrorism operations carried out by police and intelligence services. By most analysts' accounts, the RIRA was incapable of inflicting destabilizing levels of violence on populations in Northern Ireland and England and certainly was incapable of carrying out a destructive terrorist campaign on the scale of the PIRA's operations during The Troubles.⁶³

Because many of its members had formerly been PIRA cadres—and as the result of the Omagh attack—the RIRA's activities attracted substantial media attention and the group was often associated with the destructiveness of the PIRA's past militancy. The RIRA made use of this reputational association by frequently issuing terrorist bluffs to augment its efforts to spoil the Northern Irish peace settlement. From 1998–2012, the RIRA made terrorist bluffs on at least eleven occasions, while also successfully carrying out forty-one terrorist attacks.⁶⁴ Bluffs thus account for twenty-seven percent of the RIRA's documented terrorist activity.⁶⁵ Like the targets of their executed attacks, the targets of the RIRA's terrorist bluffs fall into three broad categories: security forces, competing nationalist organizations, and the government of Great Britain. The most common targets of empty threats were members of the Police Service of Northern

Ireland (PSNI) and associated individuals, who accounted for five of eleven of the RIRA's terrorist bluffs.⁶⁶ In one instance, in September 2003 the RIRA threatened to kill the vice-chairperson of the Northern Ireland Policing Board stating they were making a "death threat" against a "collaborator."⁶⁷ Ultimately, this threat was never acted on. RIRA's bluffs against police are intended to decrease PSNI recruitment and to disrupt local cooperation between Northern Irish political organizations and the PSNI. Additionally, the RIRA threatens the PSNI to discredit Sinn Féin, which in 2007 recognized the PSNI as the legitimate police force of Northern Ireland.

In addition to threatening police, the RIRA has issued empty threats against rival republican organizations including Sinn Féin, the dominant political actor in the broader Irish Republican movement. Four of the RIRA's eleven identified bluffs targeted rival groups and three of those bluffs specifically warn of attacks against Sinn Féin members. The RIRA targeted Sinn Féin in an effort to spoil the power-sharing government in Northern Ireland created after the Belfast Agreement and St. Andrews Agreement. For example, in one instance in April 2009 the RIRA threatened to kill Martin McGuinness, a prominent Sinn Féin leader and the deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland at the time.⁶⁸ McGuinness, a former member of the PIRA, was accused by the RIRA of "cooperating with the enemy" and of being a "traitor" for serving in the Northern Ireland Executive.⁶⁹ This bluff, and others directed against Sinn Féin politicians and supporters, help the RIRA to distinguish itself from Sinn Féin's policies and demonstrate what the RIRA believes is its greater commitment to the objective of British withdrawal. Additionally, the bluffs are intended to intimidate Sinn Féin members and deter them from cooperating with the British government.

The government of Great Britain was the third primary target of RIRA terrorist bluffs. Two of eleven bluffs issued by the group directly threatened symbols of British rule. In one instance, the RIRA threatened Queen Elizabeth II prior to her first official state visit to Ireland. As part of this warning, the RIRA accused the queen of war crimes. In the end, the RIRA did not carry out this threat, and there is no evidence that it failed or was foiled. Threats against prominent figures who symbolize British rule, such as the royal family and cabinet ministers, are unlikely to be realistic warnings due to high levels of security surrounding these individuals and the difficulty the RIRA faces in carrying out attacks outside Northern Ireland.⁷⁰ For this reason, bluffs against high-profile targets in the British government are likely a way for the RIRA to publicize its grievances and stoke sectarian tension.

How effective were the RIRA's terrorist bluffs? There is little evidence the group's empty threats advanced its central political objectives, which involved spoiling the power-sharing government that emerged following The Troubles. With respect to police targets, research shows that the RIRA was unable to deter significant numbers of Catholic recruits from joining the PSNI or that the PSNI suffered substantial defections due to RIRA threats.⁷¹ Furthermore, Sinn Féin has continued to work within the political framework established by the Belfast Agreement and the St. Andrews Agreement. Moreover, Sinn Féin's acceptance of the PSNI as a legitimate law enforcement organization represents a major setback for the RIRA. Finally, the government of Great Britain has not altered its policies toward Northern Ireland because of RIRA bluffs or attacks.

While bluffing has not furthered the RIRA's major political goals, it has enabled the group to achieve some small tactical objectives. In limited cases, threats against individuals resulted in successful intimidation. For instance, in 2003 the group threatened District Policing Partnership member Cathal O'Dolan.⁷² O'Dolan subsequently resigned from the position. Additionally, bluffs have caused law enforcement to expend resources determining the authenticity of warnings and have resulted in general disruptions such as street and rail closings. Nonetheless, these responses have not enabled the RIRA to advance its broader political agenda.

To summarize, because of its connection to the PIRA, the RIRA has received significant media attention and public scrutiny despite its relatively small size and limited capabilities. Due to its lack of resources and a small membership, the RIRA has often bluffed to augment its terrorist attacks, taking advantage of reputational attributes it possessed through its members' prior association with the PIRA. Along with executed attacks, the RIRA's terrorist bluffs were intended to spoil the Northern Irish peace settlement by delegitimizing the PSNI, intimidating Sinn Féin, and influencing the policies of the British government. While both the RIRA's warnings and attacks received significant media coverage, its bluffs have done little to advance the group's larger political objectives or to further its other goals such as mobilizing recruitment. Therefore, bluffs have not advanced the RIRA's cause and, at most, have brought the group limited additional publicity.

Assessment of hypotheses and directions for future research

This inquiry advanced two hypotheses concerning bluffing in terrorist campaigns. First, the targets of terrorist bluffs were expected to resemble the targets of previously executed attacks. By using this approach, groups would be more likely to convince audiences that their bluffs were credible. Second, bluffing was anticipated to align with the same strategic rationales as fulfilled attacks. That is, extremist organizations were projected to issue bluffs to further existing objectives including intimidation, spoiling, and outbidding. If confirmed by evidence, this would support the argument that bluffing is a strategic activity used to further core organizational goals rather than a form of non-strategic or irrational behavior.

These two hypotheses were tested on bluffing activity from three terrorist campaigns. With respect to target selection, surprisingly, in two campaigns groups did not primarily issue bluffs against categories of targets they had attacked previously. In its campaign against educational institutions, Boko Haram largely used empty threats against targets outside the states of Borno and Yobe, where over eighty percent of the group's terrorist incidents against schools have occurred. Like Boko Haram, JuA's bluffs primarily threatened categories of targets the group had not attacked before. In eight of nine instances, JuA issued empty threats against types of targets it had not attacked in the past, including foreign governments and high-profile politicians in Pakistan. Of the three campaigns assessed, only RIRA's bluffs closely mimicked its past terrorist incidents, with eighty-five percent of the group's empty threats directed toward targets the group regularly attacked including police, rival organizations, and symbols of British rule. While examination of these three campaigns yielded evidence contradicting the hypothesis that

extremist groups regularly bluff against categories of targets they frequently attack, the small number of cases reviewed necessitates that additional data be analyzed before refuting this hypothesis confidently.

The inquiry's second hypothesis examined the motivation underlying groups' bluffing activity. In each case, empty threats were used to advance objectives similar to those of ongoing campaigns. Boko Haram issued bluffs to intimidate faculty, students, and administrative employees from participating in scholastic activities. Meanwhile, JuA used empty threats to outbid rival extremists in the TTP. Finally, RIRA bluffed as part of its broader effort to spoil the power-sharing settlement between Great Britain and the government of Northern Ireland. In each of these cases, bluffs were used to augment ongoing terrorist campaigns and for strategic reasons outlined by previous research. These findings support the hypothesis that bluffing is a tactic used by extremists to further existing objectives and that bluffs are used for the same strategic motives as executed terrorist incidents. These findings also suggest that bluffing is neither limited to a small number of extremist groups nor is it a type of irrational behavior.

Directions for future research

Despite finding evidence that did not support one if the inquiry's deductively derived hypotheses, assessment of extremists' bluffing patterns yielded new information that may explain rationales underlying groups' target selection.⁷³ Specifically, Boko Haram used bluffs to expand the geographical range of its threats, while JuA used empty threats to maximize media coverage. In Nigeria and Cameroon, Boko Haram bluffed to augment its terrorist campaign against educational institutions. Although it is a formidable organization with thousands of members, the group's influence in Nigeria is largely limited to the country's northeastern states. Despite this geographical containment, Boko Haram's objective of eliminating secular education extends to schools throughout Nigeria and the Lake Chad region. To advance this aim, Boko Haram used bluffs to target schools in territory where it could not consistently execute attacks. That is, the group concluded it could leverage reputational assets established in one region and effectively spend this credibility in other regions by bluffing. Generalizing from this case, the following hypothesis emerges: extremist organizations with established records of executing terrorist attacks may use bluffs to expand their geographical range of influence. In these cases, groups calculate that damage to their credibility caused by empty threats will be limited due to their previous record of successful attacks.

While Boko Haram issued bluffs that were somewhat similar to its past attacks against schools—varying only the geographical location of threatened targets—JuA's bluffs were directed at targets wholly unlike those it had attacked previously. JuA likely pursued this approach because it calculated that the organizational benefits it would receive through threatening high-profile politicians and foreign governments would outweigh the credibility costs associated with failing to carry out these attacks. More generally, it is plausible that organizations primarily seeking to advance medium-term organizational goals—such as mobilizing support and broadcasting grievances—will issue bluffs against high-profile targets to maximize media coverage. For these groups, terrorist bluffs may be a means to spur recruitment and attract material support rather

than threats intended to coerce. From a strategic perspective, therefore, the public attention and support groups stand to gain from bluffing can outweigh estimated credibility costs. With this in mind, the following hypothesis is advanced: groups primarily seeking to increase publicity and recruitment are likely to issue bluffs against categories of targets they have not attacked previously in order to maximize media coverage.

Because these two hypotheses were developed inductively using data gathered for this inquiry, in the future they should be tested on new cases to determine their validity.⁷⁴ Until additional data are gathered, the explanatory range of these arguments remains indeterminate. While inferences made in this inquiry are thus limited in scope, arguments developed both through testing deductive hypotheses and by generating inductive hypotheses comprise a strong foundation from which to further knowledge on terrorist bluffs. Additionally, the method for identifying bluffs outlined previously in this study demonstrates that creating a larger dataset of empty threats is a feasible endeavor. For these reasons, this inquiry has advanced both the theoretical and empirical study of bluffing in terrorist campaigns.

Conclusion

Bluffing poses a challenge for analysts of nonstate terrorism. According to conventional models of civilian targeting, organizations should not bluff because empty threats will reduce audiences' perceptions of groups' strength and credibility. Despite the potential reputational costs associated with bluffing, organizations that use terrorism often make empty threats. This inquiry has advanced several arguments about the strategic rationales underlying terrorist bluffing. First, in contrast to what previous theory on crisis bargaining between states predicts, extremist groups often do not issue bluffs against targets that closely resemble their executed attacks. Instead, groups sometimes select targets to influence audiences outside their core geographical strongholds or to maximize media coverage. Second, extremist groups at all stages of their lifespans have incentives to bluff and appear to suffer few consequences for failing to execute threats. Splinter groups like JuA bluff to make audiences aware of their existence and grievances, often to mobilize recruitment and outbid rivals. Meanwhile, established insurgent organizations like Boko Haram may use bluffing as a means to augment their coercive influence. When powerful groups bluff, they draw on existing reputational capital built up through a record of executed attacks and use this asset to intimidate broader audiences. Finally, declining extremist organizations like the RIRA bluff to signal continued relevance to sympathetic audiences and to advance political objectives, which may often involve spoiling peace settlements.⁷⁵ Because these groups once were capable of inflicting significant destruction, they possess both name recognition and a reputation for carrying out deadly attacks. This status—accrued through a history of executed incidents—does not necessarily dissipate at the same rate as groups' tangible military and financial strength. Bluffing is therefore a means for declining groups to use what remains of their credibility in a final effort to advance their interests.

Despite lack of an existing large-*N* dataset tracking terrorist bluffs, scholars should not be deterred from further exploring this important phenomenon. In fact, overlooking bluffs while only examining executed attacks constitutes a form of selection bias that

could result in misleading inferences about the frequency and strategic utility of non-state terrorism. While building an extensive dataset that tracks bluffs will take time, collecting data on individual campaigns can be completed over a relatively short period, particularly with organizations that receive significant media scrutiny. As demonstrated in this inquiry, news outlets regularly report on threats made by extremist organizations. Using this information, threats can be checked against existing data tracking executed terrorist attacks in order to detect bluffs. In the future, this method of identifying bluffs will allow analysts to generate and test hypotheses about empty threats empirically, thus forming the foundation for a broader data-based assessment of terrorist bluffing.

Notes

1. “Fear Grips Cameroon Students Caught in Boko Haram Crossfire.” *The National: UAE Edition*, 4 June 2014. <https://www.thenational.ae/world/fear-grips-cameroon-students-caught-in-boko-haram-crossfire-1.450292>
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Many terrorist bluffs are carried out by individuals not associated with larger extremist organizations. While bluffs issued by individuals are an important phenomenon, they lie outside the scope of this inquiry, which examines bluffing as part of terrorist campaigns carried out by organizations.
5. Edward F. Mickolus, Todd Sandler, Jean M. Murdock, and Peter A. Flemming, *International Terrorism Attributes of Terrorist Events, 1968–2011* (Dunn Loring, VA: Vinyard Software, 2011); Monterey Terrorism Research and Education Program, *Monterey Weapons of Mass Destruction Terrorism Database* (Monterey, CA: Monterey Institute of International Studies, 2012).
6. Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara Walter, “The Strategies of Terrorism,” *International Security* 31, no. 1 (2006), 49–80.
7. Jeff Goodwin, “A Theory of Categorical Terrorism,” *Social Forces* 84, no. 4 (2006), 2027–2046; Joseph K. Young and Michael G. Findley, “Promise and Pitfalls of Terrorism Research,” *International Studies Review* 13, no. 1 (2011), 1–21.
8. Todd Sandler, “The Analytic Study of Terrorism: Taking Stock,” *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2 (2014), 257–271; Global Terrorism Database, *Codebook: Inclusion Criteria and Variables* (College Park, MD: START, 2017), 8. The GTD defines terrorism as “the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation.”
9. Robert Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005); David B. Carter, “Provocation and the Strategy of Terrorist and Guerrilla Attacks,” *International Organization* 70, no. 1 (2016), 133–173.
10. One exception lies in the work of Enders and Sandler, who observe that bluffing is a low-cost tactic that often causes governments to deploy substantial resources to defend threatened targets. See Walter Enders and Todd Sandler, *The Political Economy of Terrorism, 2nd ed.* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 72–73.
11. Nicole Tishler, *Taking Hoaxes Seriously: Characteristics of Terrorism Hoaxes and Their Perpetrators* (Waterloo, Ontario: Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security, and Society, 2016).
12. The PIRA did not always give advance notice of their attacks. For more on PIRA warnings see Robert E. Goodin, *What’s Wrong with Terrorism* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2006), 79–91. Other organizations, including Basque Homeland and Freedom (ETA), have issued warnings prior to bomb attacks in order to reduce casualties. For more on ETA’s use of

- warnings see Margaret A. Wilson, Angela Scholes, and Elizabeth Brocklehurst, “A Behavioral Analysis of Terrorist Action: The Assassination and Bombing Campaigns of ETA between 1980–2007,” *The British Journal of Criminology* 50, no. 4 (2010), 699–705.
13. Erin M. Kearns, Brendan Conlon, and Joseph K. Young, “Lying About Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 37, no. 5 (2014), 422–439. For more on claims of credit for terrorist attacks see Max Abrahms and Justin Conrad, “The Strategic Logic of Credit Claiming: A New Theory for Anonymous Terrorist Attacks,” *Security Studies* 26, no. 2 (2017), 279–304; Aaron M. Hoffman, “Voice and Silence: Why Group Takes Credit for Acts of Terror,” *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no. 5 (2010), 615–626; Bruce Hoffman, “Why Terrorists Don’t Claim Credit,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9, no. 1 (2007), 1–6; Max Abrahms, “What Terrorists Really Want,” *International Security* 32, no. 4 (2008), 78–105; Joseph M. Brown, “Notes to the Underground: Credit Claiming and Organizing in the Earth Liberation Front,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2017).
 14. In addition to hoax devices, individuals sometimes carry out one-off pranks, falsely claiming that an attack is imminent. While in some instances these pranks may legally constitute acts of terrorism, they are not bluffs that occur in the context of broader terrorist campaigns and are thus not pertinent to this inquiry. While pranks often receive significant media attention, they do not compose part of the larger strategic interaction that takes place between extremist organizations and governments.
 15. Erik J. Dahl, “The Plots that Failed: Intelligence Lessons Learned from Unsuccessful Terrorist Attacks Against the United States,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 34, no. 8 (2011), 621–648; John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, “The Terrorism Delusion: America’s Overwrought Response to September 11,” *International Security* 37, no. 1 (2012), 81–110; Martha Crenshaw and Gary LaFree, *Countering Terrorism* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2017), 69–99.
 16. For example, in April 2017 the Nigerian Department of State Services thwarted a Boko Haram plot to attack the American and British embassies in Abuja. See “Boko Haram ‘Plot to Attack UK and US Embassies Foiled,’” *BBC*, 12 April 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-39580146>
 17. David A. Siegel and Joseph K. Young, “Simulating Terrorism: Credible Commitment, Costly Signaling, and Strategic Behavior,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 42, no. 4 (2009), 765–771; Maria J. Stephan and Erica Chenoweth, “Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict,” *International Security* 33, no. 1 (2008), 7–44.
 18. Pape, *Dying to Win*; Kydd and Walter, “The Strategies of Terrorism.”
 19. Mickolus et al., *International Terrorism Attributes of Terrorist Events*; Tishler, *Taking Hoaxes Seriously*.
 20. Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966); James D. Fearon, “Rationalist Explanations for War,” *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (1995), 379–414; Branislav L. Slantchev, “Feigning Weakness,” *International Organization* 64, no. 3 (2010), 357–388.
 21. James D. Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Dispute,” *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 3 (1994), 577–592.
 22. Kydd and Walter, “The Strategies of Terrorism.”
 23. Two distinct stages of terrorist bluffs are evaluated in this inquiry: groups’ target selection and the audiences extremists seek to influence by issuing bluffs. As mentioned previously, these stages are distinct aspects of a terrorist incident, and the intended audiences of a terrorist bluff cannot necessarily be inferred from a perpetrator’s choice of target. Identifying the direct targets of bluffs is relatively straightforward and involves verifying threatened individuals or locations. Determining the wider audiences of a bluff, however, requires ascertaining the strategic rationale underlying a terrorist incident. This necessitates investigation of the historical context of conflicts, the objectives of groups, and analysis of individual incidents.
 24. Fearon, “Rationalist Explanations for War.”

25. Erik Gartzke, “War is in the Error Term,” *International Organization* 53, no. 3 (1999), 567–587.
26. Alec Wilkinson, “What Would Jesus Bet?” *The New Yorker*, 30 March 2009.
27. Charles W. Mahoney, “More Data, New Problems: Audiences, Ahistoricity, and Selection Bias in Terrorism and Insurgency Research,” *International Studies Review* (2017).
28. Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca and Luis de la Calle, “Domestic Terrorism: The Hidden Side of Political Violence,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 12 (2009), 31–49.
29. Tishler, *Taking Hoaxes Seriously*; Mahoney, “More Data, New Problems.”
30. Mahoney, “More Data, New Problems.”
31. This study only examines threats that were reported on by news outlets tracked by the *LexisNexis* news database. Although there are numerous recorded threats for Boko Haram, JuA, and the RIRA, it is highly likely that many threats made by these organizations were not published in news reports. For this reason, this inquiry likely underreports the number of threats made by these groups.
32. Mahoney, “More Data, New Problems.”
33. Jacob Zenn, “Boko Haram: Recruitment, Finance, and Arms Trafficking in the Lake Chad Region,” *West Point (USMA) CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 10 (2014), 5–10; Amnesty International, “Boko Haram at a Glance,” 29 January 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/01/boko-haram-glance/>. In 2016 Boko Haram underwent a schism in which a faction of militants supported by the Islamic State left Boko Haram—formally known as Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal-Jihad—and formed Islamic State West Africa. For more on this split see Omar S. Mahmood and Ndubuisi Christian Ani, *Factional Dynamics within Boko Haram* (Addis Ababa: Institute for Security Studies, 2018).
34. Victor H. Asal and R. Karl Rethemeyer, *Big Allied and Dangerous Dataset Version 2*. 2015; “Paramilitary Groups,” *The Telegraph*, 11 June 2002; John Mullin, “Real IRA Ends Silence with Call to Arms,” *The Guardian*, 20 January 2000.
35. Alexander Thurston, *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).
36. National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), *Global Terrorism Database*. 2017.
37. Suranjan Weeraratne, “Theorizing the Expansion of the Boko Haram Insurgency in Nigeria,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 29, no. 4, 610–634.
38. Human Rights Watch, “Nigeria: Northeast Children Robbed of Education,” 11 April 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/04/11/nigeria-northeast-children-robbed-education>
39. START, *Global Terrorism Database*.
40. UNICEF, “More Than Half of All Schools Remain Closed in Borno State, Epicentre of the Boko Haram Crisis in Northeast Nigeria,” 29 September 2017, https://www.unicef.org/media/media_100953.html
41. Ola Ajayi and Gabriel Enogholase, “Boko Haram Threatens to Bomb UI, UNIBEN, 18 Others,” *Vanguard Nigeria*, 13 September 2011, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2011/09/boko-haram-threatens-to-bomb-ui-uniben-18-others/>
42. Ibid.
43. Mahoney, “More Data, New Problems.”
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. The TTP was formally established in 2007 by militant groups in northwest Pakistan seeking to harness their collective strength against counterinsurgency operations being carried out by the Pakistani military. As many as forty distinct factions operate under the TTP umbrella. For more on the TTP see Michael Semple, *The Pakistan Taliban Movement: An Appraisal* (Barcelona, Spain: Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, 2014); Jacob N. Shapiro and C. Christine Fair, “Understanding Support for Islamist Militancy in Pakistan,” *International Security* 34, no. 3 (2010), 79–118.

49. Michael Kugelman, “Bad as Baghdadi? Pakistan’s Most Dangerous Man,” *War on the Rocks*, 4 September 2014, <https://warontherocks.com/2014/09/pakistans-baghdadi/>
50. Since its inception, the TTP’s primary objectives have been defending the Federally Administered Tribal Areas against military operations and supporting the Afghan Taliban’s struggle against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and U.S. armed forces in Afghanistan. While the TTP has at times expressed solidarity with both Al Qaeda and the IS, its leaders generally do not seek a to develop the movement’s influence beyond Pakistan and Afghanistan.
51. Ihsanullah Tipu Mehsud and Declan Walsh, “Hard-Line Splinter Group, Galvanized by ISIS, Emerges From Pakistani Taliban,” *The New York Times*, 26 August 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/27/world/asia/hard-line-splinter-group-galvanized-by-isis-emerges-from-pakistani-taliban.html>
52. START, *Global Terrorism Database*. Following its March 2015 realignment with the TTP, the GTD credits JuA’s terrorist attacks to the TTP.
53. Ankit Panda, “Pakistani Taliban Threatens Indian Prime Minister,” *The Diplomat*, 6 November 2014. <https://thediplomat.com/2014/11/pakistani-taliban-threatens-indian-prime-minister/>
54. Daud Khattak, “Splits in the Pakistani Taliban,” *Foreign Policy*, 3 October 2014.
55. Abdul Basit, “IS Penetration in Afghanistan-Pakistan: Assessment, Impact, and Implications,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 3 (2017), 19–39.
56. Bill Roggio and Caleb Weiss, “Pakistani Taliban Faction Showcases Training Camp, Suicide Attacks,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, 2 February 2017.
57. John Horgan and Max Taylor, “The Provisional Irish Republican Army: Command and Functional Structure,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9, no. 3 (1997), 1–32; Paul Gill and John Horgan, “Who Were the Volunteers? The Shifting Sociological and Operational Profile of 1,240 Provisional Irish Republican Army Members,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 25, no. 3 (2013), 435–456.
58. Brian A. Jackson, “Provisional Irish Republican Army,” in eds. Brian A. Jackson, John C. Baker, Peter Chalk, Kim Cragin, John V. Parachini, and Horacio R. Trujillo, *Aptitude for Destruction: Case Studies in Organizational Learning of Five Terrorist Groups* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2005).
59. Rogelio Alonso, “The Modernization in Irish Republican Thinking Toward the Utility of Violence,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 24, no. 2 (2001), 134–141.
60. When they split from the PIRA, the members of the RIRA considered themselves the authentic representatives of the Northern Irish Republican cause. In 2012, the RIRA united with several smaller dissident organizations to form the New IRA.
61. Jocelyn Evans and Jonathan Tonge, “Menace Without Mandate? Is There Any Sympathy for ‘Dissident’ Irish Republicanism in Northern Ireland?” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24, no. 1 (2011), 61–78.
62. Asal and Rethemeyer, *Big Allied and Dangerous Dataset Version 2*.
63. Ross Frenett and M. L. R. Smith, “IRA 2.0: Continuing the Long War—Analyzing the Factors Behind Anti-GFA Violence,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24, no. 3 (2012), 375–395.
64. START, *Global Terrorism Database*. This inquiry examines only incidents that classify as terrorism. The RIRA has also carried out additional types of violence—such as robbery and vigilantism—that do not classify as terrorism.
65. On at least four occasions, the RIRA issued threats it ultimately fulfilled.
66. This targeting choice is not surprising given that the PSNI and its predecessor, the Royal Ulster Constabulary, have historically been viewed by dissident Republican groups as proxies for British rule over Northern Ireland.
67. *Belfast Telegraph*, “Dissidents Threaten Policing Board Deputy,” 18 September 2003.
68. Sadie Gray, “Real IRA’s Easter Message to McGuinness: Traitor’s Die,” *Independent*. Sunday, 12 April 2009, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/real-iras-easter-message-to-mcguinness-traitors-die-1668018.html>

69. Ibid.
70. Only four of the RIRA's forty-one attacks were carried out in England.
71. Robert Perry, "The Devolution of Policing in Northern Ireland: Politics and Reform," *Politics* 31, no. 3 (2011), 167–178.
72. Barry McCaffrey, "Parties Condemn IRA Death Threat," *Irish News*, 12 September 2003.
73. When deductively advanced arguments are unable to account for an observed outcome and new data are simultaneously discovered that may help account for a phenomenon, inductive inference is often used to generate new hypotheses. See Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004); John Gerring, *Social Science Methodology: A Unified Framework* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 156.
74. Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).
75. For more on declining extremist groups see Ben Connable and Martin C. Libicki, *How Insurgencies End* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010).

Appendix

Boko Haram bluffs targeting schools, 2009–2016				
Date	Location	Target of bluff		Result
6/4/11	Maiduguri, Borno	University of Maiduguri Teaching Hospital		None
7/11/11	Maiduguri, Borno	University of Maiduguri		School closed
9/13/11	Ibadan, Oyo	University of Ibadan/University of Benin		Increased security
1/26/12	Kano, Kano	Schools and Universities in Kano		Schools closed
12/14/13	Maiduguri, Borno	University of Maiduguri		None
2/14/14	Hong, Adamawa	Adamawa State College of Education, Hong		Students intimidated
3/17/14	Kano, Kano	Bayero University		Students intimidated
5/18/14	Makurdi, Benue	Government College/Saint Gabriel School		Increased security
6/4/14	Fotokol, Cameroon	Fotokol High School		Increased security
6/10/14	Odogbolu, Ogun	Federal Government College		Increased security
6/10/14	Gindiri, Plateau	Girls High School/Gov't Secondary School		Schools closed
9/7/14	Mubi, Adamawa	Adamawa State University		School closed
Jamaat-ul-Ahrar bluffs, 2014–2015				
Date	Location	Target of bluff	General category	Result
9/1/14	Pakistan	Journalists	Journalists	None
9/1/14	Pakistan	Nawaz Sharif	Politician	None
9/1/14	Pakistan	Imran Khan	Politician	None
10/12/14	United Kingdom	Malala Yousafzai	Women's rights activist	None
11/5/14	India	India	Foreign country	None
11/6/14	India	Narendra Modi	Foreign leader	None
11/17/14	China	Chinese economy	Foreign country	None
1/5/15	United Kingdom	United Kingdom	Foreign country	None
6/9/15	Myanmar	Myanmar government	Foreign country	None
Real Irish Republican Army bluffs, 1998–2012				
Date	Location	Target of bluff	General category	Result
5/10/98	England	British Cabinet	British government	None
1/21/01	N. Ireland	Sinn Fein councilor	Competing group	None
9/11/03	N. Ireland	Member District Policing Partnership	Security forces	Member resigned
9/18/03	N. Ireland	Vice Chairman Policing Board	Security forces	None
11/28/07	N. Ireland	Police Service of Northern Ireland	Security forces	None
4/11/09	N. Ireland	Martin McGuinness	Competing group	None
4/11/09	N. Ireland	Police Service of Northern Ireland	Security forces	None
7/17/09	N. Ireland	Sinn Fein minister	Competing group	None
9/15/10	N. Ireland	Banks/bankers	Banks	None
5/16/11	Ireland	Queen of England/British Police	British government	None
8/25/11	N. Ireland	Police agents	Security forces	None