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Lying About Terrorism

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Abstract

Conventional wisdom holds that terrorism is committed for strategic reasons as a form of costly signaling to an audience. However, since over half of terrorist attacks are not credibly claimed, conventional wisdom does not explain many acts of terrorism. This paper suggests that there are four lies about terrorism that can be incorporated in a rationalist framework: false claiming, false flag, the hot-potato problem, and the lie of omission. Each of these lies about terrorism can be strategically employed to help a group achieve its desired goal(s) without necessitating that an attack be truthfully claimed.

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Brian Jenkins[i] claimed that *terrorism*[ii] *is theater* where attacks are performed for an audience to generate a response that is in line with the goals of the perpetrator.[iii] Recent rationalist research is built on the premise that terrorism is committed for strategic reasons.[iv] These literatures disagree over the extent to which the attacks are symbolic or serve an instrumental purpose. However, if the purpose of terrorism in each framework is to communicate to an audience, why do many attacks go unclaimed? Related, why are attacks falsely claimed by a group or blamed on a group that was not responsible? Rationalist explanations of terrorism address why groups *claim responsibility for their attacks*, but do not offer an explanation for why groups *lie about terrorism*.

Kydd and Walter[v] provide the most comprehensive framework of rationalist explanations for terrorism.[vi] They argue that terrorism is a form of costly signaling whereby weak groups must demonstrate that they are credible adversaries. By carrying out attacks, violent groups hope to achieve any combination of the following five end goals: territorial change, policy change, regime change, social control, and maintaining the status quo. To achieve these goals, Kydd and Walter identify five strategic logics of costly signaling: 1) *attrition* to cause maximum damage and convey to the adversary that the terrorist group is capable of imposing a significant cost on its opponent, 2) *intimidation* to convey to the population that the group is too strong for the government to stop them, 3) *provocation* to elicit a disproportionate response that would radicalize the population against the group's opponent, 4) *spoiling* to communicate to the opponent that moderates on your side are not trustworthy or powerful and 5) *outbidding* to convey to the population that the terrorist group is more determined to fight its opponent than any rival groups and thus is more worthy of public support. This is a comprehensive framework

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and brings together years of rigorous empirical and theoretical work. These strategic logics of terrorism, however, are only applicable to terrorist events where the perpetrator claims credit.

Kydd and Walter's[vii] theory of terrorism as a costly signal fails to explain all forms of terrorism. Whether a group takes responsibility for a terrorist attack that was not its own, intentionally implicates another group, or simply fails to take responsibility for an attack that it did commit, groups sometimes lie about terrorism.[viii] There is a dearth of research on why groups lie about attacks. In this framework, it would seem that when an attack is not claimed, it fails to coerce the attacker's enemy and thus appears pointless. This paper, however, offers a rationalist explanation for why a group might lie about terrorism through false claiming, false blaming, or lies of omission.

Understanding why groups lie about terrorism is of particular importance today. Despite the conventional wisdom that terrorism is about coercion and signaling, many terrorist attacks are not claimed.[ix] In fact, according to the Global Terrorism Database only 12.4% of terrorist attacks were claimed from 1998 to 2011.

[Figure 1 About Here]

As shown in Figure 1, the percentage of terrorist attacks claimed per year during this time period is never over 18.1%. Additionally, during the past few decades, the percentage of claimed attacks has dropped from 61% in the 1970s to just 14.5% from the late 1990s through 2004.[x] Credit is no longer taken for many of the most deadly attacks.[xi] Changes in claiming attacks highlight not only the importance of explaining why terrorists lie, but also hint at the existence of

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strategic reasons for lying about terrorism. While lying about terrorism appears to be more common in recent decades, it is *not* a new phenomenon. Some of the cases that are discussed in more detail below occurred in the 1970s and 1980s. As these and other cases show, the modern history of terrorism has examples of lying over involvement in attacks. One of the problems with these lies is that often they are not discovered, or the full details of the events are not made public, until years later. Though lying about terrorism is not a recent occurrence, the increasing number of attacks that are unclaimed indicates that terrorism is not always a *clear* signal. While terrorism can be a form of costly signaling through claiming, there are also rationalist explanations for attacks that are unclaimed and thus appear to lack a signal, but in fact may be perpetrated for another strategic purpose.

This paper does not aim to challenge Kydd and Walter's[xii] theory of terrorism where a group accepts responsibility for its own attack. The aim of this paper is to expand rationalist theory to terrorist attacks where lying about responsibility occurs. This paper suggests that there are four lies about terrorism that can be incorporated in a rationalist framework. In brief, a group can perpetrate a terrorist attack and lie about it in two ways: by blaming the attack on a rival group and by not claiming credit for it. A group can lie about a terrorist attack that they did not perpetrate in two ways as well: by taking credit for another group's attack and by blaming it on another group without knowing what group was truly responsible. The levels of internal and external control exerted by a group may help determine the type of lie that the group chooses to tell. Each of these lies about terrorism can be strategically employed to help a group achieve its desired goal(s).

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The next section examines why groups claim responsibility for terrorist attacks; however, this offers an incomplete understanding of terrorism. Next, the paper examines reasons why a group might falsely claim, falsely blame, or fail to take credit for a terrorist attack. Then, the paper offers rationalist explanations for each of these lies and provides case studies to illustrate how lying about terrorism can be strategically motivated. Finally, the paper concludes by discussing issues with modeling these attacks, identifying hypotheses about situations where one could expect to see each strategic lie, and suggesting policy implications.

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Telling the Truth about Terrorism

The practice of claiming credit for terrorist attacks began in the late 1800s as a way for rebels, in part, to differentiate themselves from criminals.[xiii] The strategic model assumes that perpetrators of terrorism are rational actors who seek to achieve their goals through costly signaling. Historically, groups that use terrorism have met this definition; they were motivated by a particular goal, had clear and understandable demands, claimed credit for their attacks, and explained how their actions were in-line with their ideology.[xiv] Hoffman[xv] argues that groups take credit because an attack alone is a poor form of communication. It is not expensive to claim an attack, and by claiming one's own attack it is more difficult for other groups to credibly claim an attack for which they were not responsible**.**

Traditionally, groups have perpetrated terrorism because they want publicity, not a high body count; however, recent attacks are more lethal and less likely to be claimed than attacks in the past.[xvi] Hoffman[xvii] suggests that terrorist attacks may be more lethal today for a variety of reasons including the fear that the attack will not otherwise gain sufficient attention,

development of expertise through experience, and the role of state-supported terrorism. These explanations for the increased lethality of terrorist attacks may also explain why groups are less likely to claim credit for their attacks. The reduction in claiming may indicate that violence has become the end goal. As a result, explanations and credit taking may occur less often, and attacks may become more deadly.[xviii]

The chances of a militarized counterstrike may impact credit taking where low and high responses would increase claiming, but moderate response would decrease it.[xix] Hoffman[xx] suggests, however, that the relationship between claiming and likelihood of retaliation may be impacted by public opinion about civilian casualties when a government responds to terrorism. Claiming may be more likely when backlash is directed at the government instead of the group that commits terrorist attacks.

In sum, groups may be more likely to tell the truth about terrorism when they want to gain publicity and calculate that there is a low risk of backlash from the population and the government. These conditions, however, are not always present. Furthermore, there are strategic explanations for lying about terrorism when conditions are sub-optimal. While all unclaimed attacks may not be strategic, it may be that some are. Since the majority of attacks are now unclaimed, even explaining a portion of these attacks is an important task.[xxi]

Lying about Terrorism

Communications between actors in a group that uses terrorism are complex due to the clandestine nature of these actions. Accordingly, the ways in which a group can lie about terrorism are also complex, and may not fall under a traditional understanding of a lie. In this

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paper, the term "lie" refers to both direct and indirect lies about terrorism. As discussed at the outset, there are four lies that a group can tell about a terrorist attack, each of which has its own purpose. First, a group may claim responsibility for an attack that they did not perpetrate. Second, a group may commit *false flag terrorism* by carrying out an attack and then blaming it on a rival organization. Third, a group may lie by blaming an attack that it did not commit on a rival group, which is termed the *hot-potato problem*. Fourth, a group may engage in a lie of omission where they perpetrate an attack but neither claim responsibility for it nor blame it on another group. Knowing *how* groups lie about terrorism leads to the next question: *why* do groups lie about terrorism?

[Table 1 HERE]

Why Claim Responsibility for an Attack that a Group did not Commit?

It is difficult to ascertain how many terrorist attacks are claimed by a group that was not the actual perpetrator. In one study focusing on Israel, Hoffman[xxii] found that multiple groups claimed 8.4% of the attacks between 1968 and 2004. Nearly half of these attacks had conflicting claims of responsibility, whereas the rest were joint ventures. The number of attacks that are falsely claimed by a group and not credibly claimed by the true perpetrator, thus leading to a general belief that the false claimer is actually responsible, is not known. These results, however, provide evidence that claiming responsibility for an act that one did not commit is a relatively common phenomenon in terrorism and warrants explanation.

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Of the four types of lies about terrorism, Kydd and Walter's [xxiii] framework is most applicable to explaining why groups claim credit for an act that they did not commit. When this occurs, the group that falsely claims an attack may be trying to convince its target of persuasion that it is a credible threat. Attrition as a strategic logic of terrorism is used when a group's power to make good on its threats is questioned. A group could take credit for another group's attack to convince the enemy of its power. A group that falsely claims another's attack could lack the power it is attempting to display, or it could have the capacity to carry out the attack itself but opportunistically claim credit to prevent another group from demonstrating its power.

Outbidding as a strategic logic of terrorism is ripe for taking credit for another group's attack. Hoffman[xxiv] found that the likelihood of claiming credit increases when multiple terrorist groups with the same general goals are competing for supporters. However, when there are multiple competing groups and an attack goes unclaimed, there may be an additional incentive to free ride and not attack but to claim credit for another's violence. Taking credit for another group's work can cause doubt among the population over the effectiveness of the rival. If two groups both take credit for the same attack, then it may become less clear to the population who is actually responsible and deserves support. Taking credit for another's attack may be a logical choice even when a group does not expect to gain many supporters from it.

Why Commit an Attack and Blame it on a Rival Group?

Blaming violence on another has a long history.[xxv] The term "false flag" likely originated in naval combat, where ships would fly a more innocuous flag prior to violent engagement. *False flag terrorism* is when one group commits an attack and blames it on a rival group or a fictitious

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group of its invention. Due to the secret and deceptive nature of such attacks, it is difficult to identify incidents of *false flag terrorism*.[xxvi] Jenkins[xxvii], however, argues that *false flag* attacks are common and identifies the four main strategic reasons for committing *false flag* terrorism: infiltration, deniability, stigmatization, and destabilization.

Infiltration

Infiltration occurs when government agents are able to penetrate an already existing group and rise through its ranks.[xxviii] A more advanced form of infiltration occurs when a provocateur advances within the organization and is able to authorize attacks for the purpose of discrediting the organization and stigmatizing the ideology of the group she has infiltrated. In this case, the penetrated organization is carrying out attacks and claiming credit for them. The 1957 Battle of Algiers is an oft-cited example.

Deniability

Deniability occurs when an organization desires to carry out an attack to obtain a tactical or practical objective but cannot take credit for the attack. This can take a number of forms, including state-sponsored attacks being claimed by known groups giving false names[xxix] or a group creating a bogus opposition group to use as a cover.[xxx] An example of *false flag* terrorism through deniability includes Libya commissioning the Japanese Red Army to attack US targets following the 1986 air strikes.[xxxi]

Stigmatization

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Stigmatization occurs when an attack is committed by one group in a manner where the enemies of the actual perpetrator would be blamed and receive public backlash. This style of *false flag* terrorism may be more common where groups have an ideological base, as it can cause speculation.[xxxii] Jenkins[xxxiii] provides alleged Libyan involvement in the Lebanese group, The Call of Jesus Christ, where it was later shown that the French secret service was involved as an example of *false flag* terrorism through stigmatization.

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Destabilization

Destabilization occurs when a group commits an act against its own people and blames a rival group for it. In destabilization, the goal is to cause a general environment of chaos. There are multiple reasons why groups might find a benefit in using terrorism to create an environment where security of the average individual is uncertain.[xxxiv] In Jenkins's[xxxv] conception of destabilization, government agents are responsible for an attack that is blamed on a rival organization; however, terrorist organization can also use destabilization to create chaos. Greece, Spain, and Turkey are examples of *false flag* terrorism through destabilization.[xxxvi]

Why Blame an Attack That You Did Not Commit on a Rival Group?

Groups that use terrorism often have rivals. Some are bitter and others less so. Hamas and Fatah, for example, are Palestinian groups that compete for support of the Palestinian people and have been strategic rivals for decades with dramatic episodes of intra-Palestinian violence.[xxxvii] Not all

rivalry or intergroup competition, however, encourages strategic acts of terrorism. One scenario, the *hot-potato problem*, can occur when there are two or more competing organizations.

Within states, there are a number of organizations that seek to achieve some goal. These organizations are often nonviolent but some groups may perceive violence as necessary in order to fulfill their objectives. The *hot-potato problem* can arise due a lack of agreement about cooperation between organizations. One organization may believe that violence is antithetical to achieving its objectives, while another organization may perceive violence as critical. When this occurs, nonviolent groups may attempt to eliminate inaccurate perceptions that their organization is violent, while violent groups may desire a furthering of that perception. As a result, when a violent organization carries out an attack, nonviolent groups may have a strong incentive to distance themselves from the act. One common way to accomplish this is to blame the attack on a rival organization. Of course, the organization falsely being blamed for the attack may also not wish to be associated with the stigma of violence. Out of such an environment, a *hot-potato problem* may arise where groups pass blame to rival organizations in order to avoid stigmatization of being associated with violence. The *hot-potato problem* can also arise when a group perpetrates an attack and initially takes credit for it but then retracts and possibly blames a rival group, generally due to backlash or other negative effects of having claimed credit.

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Why Commit an Attack and Neither Claim It Nor Blame It?

The lie of omission is most common; the perpetrator neither claims credit for the attack nor blames the attack on another group. Al Qaeda attacks since 1998 have often followed this pattern, while the Shining Path in Peru was likely one of the pioneers of this approach in the

1980s.[xxxviii] Over the past few decades, both the nature of groups that use terrorism and the prevalence of claiming responsibility of terrorist attacks have changed. The main goal of groups today may be fear, not publicity, which could explain why groups claim attacks less frequently since anonymous attacks still generate fear in the target population.[xxxix] Not claiming credit is a way to amplify fear and the potential catastrophic damage intended by the perpetrators.[xl] Groups may not need to claim responsibility for an attack publically if the intended audience is internal[xli] or a competing group.[xlii] State-backed attacks are not likely to be claimed, but the target usually knows who is responsible and why that attack occurred.[xliii]

The destabilization argument can also be applied to attacks where no one claims credit. For example, a government or an allied government group may want to create an environment where the populace would support more oppressive measures and reductions in freedoms. However, since the populace is unlikely to support such restrictions, the government has an incentive to create an environment of insecurity. By covertly organizing attacks against the populace, the government can create a tense environment to orchestrate support for repressive measures, but also cannot credit for the attacks, which would undermine its goal.

More recently, some of the most deadly terrorist attacks have gone unclaimed.[xliv] It is possible that some of these attacks were not claimed because they were directed at civilians and the responsible group feared backlash. Pluchinsky[xlv] suggests that groups may not claim attacks that conflict with their desired public perception, or if the number of casualties exceeds expectation. In a study of eight Middle Eastern terrorist group-types, Chasdi[xlvi] found that 27.7% of attacks were unclaimed. The unclaimed attacks in this study were more likely to have targeted civilians and, surprisingly, were also more likely to have no injuries or fatalities than claimed

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attacks. The lack of injuries and fatalities in unclaimed attacks may suggest that the acts were merely meant to cause fear and add to political pressure, or it may suggest that the responsible group views the lack of civilian casualties as a failure and are too embarrassed to claim credit.[xlvii] These conflicting findings suggest that, perhaps, attacks on both ends of the casualty spectrum are likely to go unclaimed, but for different reasons.

Hoffman[xlviii] also notes the political differences between the era when groups were more likely to claim attacks and the present. In the 1970s, there was more impunity for terrorist attacks whereas some states are now more likely to use military force and economic sanctions in response to terrorism, which drives groups that use terrorism and their sponsors underground and increases the utility of remaining anonymous.

When civilians are killed in a terrorist attack, the target population will likely be upset and may react in ways that are counterproductive to the perpetrator's goal(s). Killing civilians can also result in international outcry against the responsible organization. Civilian casualties will often make governments less cooperative with responsible terrorist groups, and governments may react by changing policies that the terrorists enjoyed. For all of these reasons, claiming terrorism can be a poor strategy.

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The Principal-Agent Problem

The principal-agent problem occurs when an actor within a group behaves in a way that is not sanctioned by the leadership of his organization. Power structures within organizations that use terrorism range from strictly hierarchal to more horizontal cells. Due to varying structures of groups that use terrorism, there are a number of ways that communication can fail and impact

claiming of attacks. When a group has a hierarchal structure, the leadership gives an order and agents carry out that order. When a group is comprised of horizontal cells, the leadership may set out broader guidelines and, rather than being told what and when to attack, agents have autonomy to perpetrate attacks and then report back to leadership. When power is not focused into a single governing body, there is an increased chance for principal-agent issues to arise, which can explain why some attacks go unclaimed.

Just as multiple strategic logics of terrorism can be used simultaneously[xlix], groups can also employ multiple strategies of lying about terrorism. This paper has outlined four lies that can be told about terrorism from the perspective of a group's leadership. However, a principal-agent problem can further explain why each of these lies may be told. First, an organization may claim responsibility for an attack based on false statements of responsibility from its agents. An agent may take credit for an attack carried out by another group to appear more effective. Leadership might then claim responsibility for the attack without realizing that they are lying. Second, an agent may carry out an attack and report back to leadership only to discover that leadership disagreed with the agent's action. Since the leadership cannot undo the attack, they may neglect to claim credit for it or blame the attack on a rival group to prevent their group from receiving the negative ramifications of the attack. Third, an agent may carry out an attack that he determines to be a failure so he does not inform his superiors about his involvement in the attack. Because the organization is unaware that its agent was responsible, they may blame the attack on a rival organization. Fourth, an agent may carry out an attack and report it to his superiors. However, the leadership may be selective in deciding which attacks are worth claiming and fail to claim some attacks.

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Levels of Control and Lying about Terrorism

Lies about terrorism may be a function of both the level of control the group has over its environment and the level of control the group's leadership has over its subordinates when an attack occurs. Table 2 shows how the levels of an organization's external and internal control can impact the type of lie told about terrorism.

[Table 2 Here]

False claiming occurs when a group has high external control and high internal control. In this situation, a group is able to make a claim about an attack perpetrated by another organization without repercussions or its own agents betraying the truth. However, false claiming can also occur when a principal-agent problem arises and a group has high external control but low internal control whereby the agent can tell his superiors that he committed an attack that he did not such that the leadership is unaware that they are falsely claiming responsibility for another group's attack.

False flag terrorism occurs when a group has high external control and high internal control. In this situation, a group is able to carry out an attack and successfully blame it on another group in a way that is credible to the target population and is not betrayed by its own agents. However, false blaming can also occur when a principal-agent problem arises and a group has high external control but low internal control whereby an agent can commit an attack

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that is not sanctioned by his superiors and when he tells the leadership of his organization about the attack they falsely blame the attack on a rival organization.

The *hot-potato problem* occurs when a group has low external control and high internal control. In this situation, it is possible that one group may commit an attack that could reflect poorly on a different group. Since the non-perpetrating group does not have control over the responsible organization, the non-perpetrating group blames the attack on a rival group to minimize the backlash and stigmatization that its group may face as a result of another group's attack. It is also possible that a group may be responsible for the attack and initially claim credit but later retract that claim and blame a rival, generally due to backlash faced as a result of having claimed credit. However, the *hot-potato problem* can also occur when a principal-agent problem arises and a group has low external control and low internal control whereby an agent carries out an attack but fails to inform his superiors about his responsibility for the attack and the organization's leadership blames a rival group for the attack instead.

Unclaimed attacks can occur when a group has high external control and high internal control. In this situation, a group is able to successfully carry out an attack and keep members of its organization from betraying their involvement outwardly. However, unclaimed attacks can also occur when a principal-agent issue arises and a group has high external control and low internal control whereby an agent carries out an attack that would be detrimental to the group's goal and thus leadership fails to claim credit for the attack.

Cases

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This paper has outlined four strategic reasons why a group may lie about terrorism through false claiming, false blaming, the *hot-potato problem*, and lies of omission. To illustrate these arguments, case studies are provided to outline examples where groups have lied about terrorism to achieve a strategic goal.

The London Nail Bombings

In April 1999, a bombing campaign shook London. On April 17th, the first bomb detonated in Brixton, a predominantly black community, injuring forty-five. On April 24th, a bomb exploded in East London near Brick Lane, a predominantly Bangladeshi neighborhood, injuring thirteen. On April 30th, a third bomb went off in Soho, a predominately gay community, injuring seventy-nine and killing three.

The perpetrator, David Copeland, was apprehended on the night of the last bombing. Copeland admitted to carrying out all three bombings and stated that he worked alone.[l] Two years before that attacks, Copeland had joined a far-right political group, the British National Party, but left the following year due to the group's unwillingness to use violence.[li] Copeland later joined the National Socialist Movement and became the regional leader in Hampshire a few weeks before his bombings.[lii] Despite his links to right-wing extremist groups, Copeland acted alone in these attacks.[liii]

Four right-wing extremist groups separately claimed credit for the April 1999 London bombings. The groups that claimed credit ranged from the well known, like Combat 18, to the relatively unknown, like White Wolves,[liv] to the obscure, like the English National Party and the English Liberation Army.[lv] At the time of the bombings, Combat 18's leader was imprisoned and

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police had infiltrated the group, so its claims of responsibility were quickly discarded as false.[lvi] The White Wolves claimed credit for all three attacks and specifically stated that they, not Combat 18, were responsible for the bomb in Brixton.[lvii] Adding to the sense of confusion and unease, twenty-five people including leaders of the black and Asian communities in London received death threats from the White Wolves.[lviii] Despite these claims of credit, there was no evidence of the White Wolves' involvement in the attacks. Very little is known about the two other groups that claimed credit for the attack in Brixton.

Groups are more likely to claim attacks when there are multiple organizations that are competing for support in the environment.[lix] While this was meant to explain why groups truthfully claim their own attacks, it also offers a rationalist explanation for why groups in competitive environments may falsely claim responsibility for an attack.

To be successful in a false claim, a group must have a high level of control both within its organization and outside of it. Authorities did not believe the claims of credit, even prior to Copeland being apprehended. None of the four groups that claimed responsibility was particularly powerful or well known, aside from Combat 18. For this reason, it is likely that each of these groups claimed these attacks because the targets were in line with their goals, and claiming such high profile attacks would garner attention and portray strength. However, these groups failed to convince the population of their involvement because no group had strong external control, which allowed for four groups to separately claim credit for attacks that none of them committed.

It is possible that one or more of the group that falsely claimed responsibility did so without realizing that they were lying. A principal-agent issue can arise when an agent wants to

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impress his superiors and appear more effective by claiming involvement in an attack for which he has no responsibility. If this occurred, the leadership of the group(s) would not be aware that they were lying about the attack. For the principal-agent issue to occur in false claiming, the group would need to have high external control but low internal control, which is unlikely for small, ideologically based groups such as those that claimed credit. While a principal-agent issue may account for some of the lies told about this bombing campaign, it is unlikely the reason that all four groups falsely claimed responsibility.

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The Cinema Rex Fire

The Cinema Rex fire in Abadan, Iran was one of the deadliest attacks in modern history and a catalyst for the White Revolution of 1979. The attack on the Cinema Rex is also an exemplary case of the strategic utility of *false flag* terrorism. On August 19,1978, the anniversary of the 1953 coup that overthrew Mosaddeq, the democratically-elected Iranian Prime Minister, a theater in a working-class neighborhood of Abadan was set on fire during a screening of a controversial, slightly pro-leftist film.[lx] The doors were locked from the outside and anywhere from 350 to 800 people were killed.[lxi] The shah blamed Islamic militants for the attack while the revolutionary Islamists blamed SAVAK, the shah's secret police.[lxii] Public opinion supported the latter position, illustrating the lack of public trust in the shah's government, and led to public outrage and protests.[lxiii]

The shah responded to the protests by making concessions, which was seen as a sign of weakness.[lxiv] On September 8, a peaceful protest in Tehran ended with troops opening fire and killing between 80 and 90 protesters, though public perception was that the death toll was several

thousand.[lxv] This event marked a turning point. The shah responded with greater repression, including closing schools and suspending the media.[lxvi] Attempts to quell the opposition failed and the public viewed the shah as untrustworthy, indecisive, and unstable. In contrast, Ayatollah Khomeini had a clear goal for the future and the revolution began shortly thereafter.[lxvii]

The official investigation into the cause of the fire stopped when the revolution started.[lxviii] The 1980 trial showed that a religion-oriented group was responsible, and the attack may have been directed by higher clericals.[lxix] After the revolution, an official investigation discovered that Islamic militants set the fire to create public animosity against the Pahlavi regime.[lxx] However, due to the nature of the events and the political climate at the time, there is a dearth of information about the fire.[lxxi] It cannot be known for certain who set the fire, but the preponderance of evidence suggests that the Islamic revolutionaries were responsible and the events that unfolded after the fire were certainly more beneficial for them.

Regardless of whether the fire was actually set by Islamic militants or by the shah's SAVAK forces, both groups blamed the other for the attack. Following the logic of costly signaling, the true perpetrator should have claimed credit for the attack, but that is not what occurred. Therefore, the primary objective of the Cinema Rex fire was not to send a costly signal. However, lying about the attack did have a strategic aim, and it led to the Islamic revolutionaries achieving one of Kydd and Walter's[lxxii] end goals: regime change.

To successfully carry out *false flag* terrorism, the group that actually perpetrates the attack must have high external and internal control. The political climate in Iran during August 1978 provided a ripe environment for such attacks. The shah's regime was crumbling and revolutionary sentiments were beginning to grow. However, the opposition was not unified and

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there was not yet massive public support for regime change. The Islamic revolutionaries capitalized on the shah's low level of external control and their own high level of internal control to carry out a *false flag* attack. As a result, the Islamic revolutionaries also solidified the opposition movement and expanded their own control.

Three of Jenkins's[lxxiii] strategic reasons for committing *false flag* attacks apply to the Cinema Rex fire: deniability, stigmatization, and destabilization. Deniability was necessary and advantageous to the Islamic revolutionaries. The revolutionaries sought to carry out a provocative attack that would generate support to their cause. The attack on innocent families at a movie theater achieved their tactical objectives. However, it was necessary that the attack be perpetrated in such a way that it could not be easily linked back to their cause. Stigmatization was essential, and the fire started a chain of backlash. While the regime rightfully blamed revolutionaries for the attack, the public largely did not believe this and held the shah's regime responsible. As a result, distrust in the regime grew and resulted in public outrage and rekindled protests. Destabilization that resulted from the fire provided the chaotic environment necessary to serve as a catalyst for the White Revolution.

While it is possible that the Cinema Rex fire is an example of *false flag* terrorism due to a principal-agent problem, that explanation is unlikely. For the principal-agent problem to occur in a *false-flag* situation, a group needs to have high external control but low internal control such that an agent commits an attack that is not sanctioned by his superiors so leadership blames their opponent for the attack. However, at the time of the Cinema Rex fire, the Islamic revolutionaries had high internal control, as the movement was hierarchical and centered around creating a theology-based regime. Rather, evidence suggests that Islamic revolutionaries clandestinely

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orchestrated the attack with the purpose of stigmatizing the shah's regime and destabilizing the political environment to garner support for regime change. The Cinema Rex fire is the pinnacle example of the strategic utility and success of *false flag* terrorism in achieving the terrorist's end goal.

The Bologna Train Bombing

On August 2, 1980, an unattended suitcase bomb detonated in the train station in Bologna, Italy killing 85 and injuring over 200. Hours after the attack, Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari (NAR), a neo-fascist group, called a newspaper in Rome to claim credit for the attack. The Red Brigade and the Organized Communist Movements, both communist groups, also claimed credit for the attack but later retracted their claims. There were widespread protests in Bologna the following day, and a few days later, there was a nationwide strike and calls for swift justice. A few weeks after the bombing, dozens of NAR members were arrested, but they have maintained their innocence to this day.[lxxiv]

During a bank fraud investigation in 1981, police discovered documents in the office of Licio Gelli, a prominent financier, which both implicated military and political officials in misleading investigators about the Bologna train bombing and detailed a plan to install an authoritarian government.[lxxv] Gelli was later acquitted of charges of carrying out the bombing but was convicted of investigation diversion along with four members of the Italian military secret service. Through a series of trials and appeals members of NAR were convicted of carrying out the bombing: husband and wife Valerio Fioravanti and Francesca Mambro in 1995 and Luigi

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Ciavardini in 2004. Despite convictions and admissions to other crimes including murder, all maintain that they were not involved in the Bologna bombing.

The attack was likely symbolic, as it occurred on the same day that trial started for eight neo-fascists for the 1974 Italicus Express bombing.[lxxvi] Accordingly, many believe that NAR was responsible for the attack, and that, perhaps, it was perpetrated to sway public opinion in the ongoing *strategy of tension* between communist and neo-fascist groups, including the Red Brigade and NAR.[lxxvii] However, given that Bologna was a communist stronghold, public opinion at the time led many to conclude that the Red Brigade was, in fact, responsible.[lxxviii] To this date, there is still doubt about the true perpetrators of this attack.

The political environment in Italy at the time was tense and the months leading up to the Bologna train station bombing were filled with terrorist incidents across Italy. The *strategy of tension* that characterized this period was full of fear and propaganda aimed to sway public opinion. Accordingly, a complex environment of loyalties was borne out of the relationships between various groups, including the Red Brigade, other communist groups in Italy, NAR, other neo-fascist groups in Italy, and the Italian government. In such a situation, the *hot-potato problem* can arise when a group perpetrates an attack, initially takes credit for it, but later the group or its agents retract its claim of credit. Based on available information, this is likely what happened in the Bologna train bombing where NAR claimed credit but, after apprehension, the leader and agents maintained their innocence. This was not, however, the only lie told. The Red Brigade and the Organized Communist Movements also lied by falsely claiming credit for the attack and later retracting, possibly due the widespread public backlash against the bombing in the days that followed.

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The political environment in Italy during this time was ripe for the *hot-potato problem* since individual organizations had low external control but high internal control. It is possible that NAR perpetrated the attack and took credit due to its low level of external control. NAR may have falsely assumed that this would benefit the group by increasing public attention after a number of Red Brigade attacks in the previous months. However, NAR leaders and members insistently deny responsibility for the attack. This retraction indicates a high level of internal control and was a rational action primarily because arrests are counterproductive to the cause and, to a lesser extent, because public response to the attack was overwhelmingly negative. While it is possible that the principal-agent problem was also at play in the Bologna train bombing, it is unlikely given the available information.

The December 21st Charasadda Suicide Bombing

On December 21, 2007, the main mosque in the small village of Sherpao, Pakistan was packed with over 1,000 worshipers when an individual in the second row detonated a suicide bomb.[lxxix] Over fifty people were killed and over one hundred were injured.[lxxx]

The primary goal of the attack was likely not civilian casualties.[lxxxi] Rather, the attack appeared to be an assassination attempt against Pakistan's former interior minister, Aftab Ahmed Khan Sherpao.[lxxxii] This attack was not the first assassination attempt against Sherpao.[lxxxiii] On April 28, 2007, the Taliban targeted Sherpao at a political rally for his party, Pakistan's Peoples Party.[lxxxiv] Sherpao escaped both attacks unharmed.[lxxxv]

No group claimed credit for the December 2007 attack, and the evidence does not point to any specific group.[lxxxvi] The Pakistani Taliban perpetrated the first attempt on Sherpao's life,

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which makes them the most obvious suspect. However, they are not the only group with motive.[lxxxvii] Both Al Qaeda and the Taliban considered Sherpao a target due to his efforts as Interior minister against the rise of extremism.[lxxxviii]

Sometimes, a group may not claim credit for an attack because it is obvious to its targets that they are responsible.[lxxxix] In such cases, no official claim is needed to make the signal.[xc] However, Pakistan is a country with a plethora of violent organizations and, because more than one group had reason to want Sherpao dead, it is not obvious who was responsible. As such, the failure to claim this attack cannot simply be explained by a perceived lack of need on the perpetrators' part.[xci] In this case, if a group wanted credit, it would have had to explicitly claim the attack.

There are three explanations for why failing to claim this attack was strategic: costly signaling was never the goal, the assassination attempt failed, and there was fear of public backlash. If the attack was an assassination attempt, as is widely believed, then the failure to claim responsibility for this attack was most likely the product of deniability. The perpetrator may have had objectives other than costly signaling and wanted to avoid the negative ramifications of responsibility. This would require the group to have high external and internal control, since no rumors of responsibility have surfaced. The attack's primary objective seems to have been to assassinate Sherpao. Thus, this attack may have had nothing to do with signaling. Related to the first point, it is also possible that the responsible group planned to claim credit for the attack, had it been a success. However, since the attack failed, the responsible group may not have claimed credit for fear of being perceived as weak or ineffective.

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The group responsible may have failed to claim credit because the attack killed more people than the group expected.[xcii] By claiming responsibility for the attack, there are two ways that the perpetrators could be harmed: public backlash and governmental response. Since the attack killed many in a mosque, there may have been particularly strong public backlash against the group responsible. Since the target was a political figure, it may have generated more severe governmental response as well.

While the principal-agent problem can potentially explain why some terrorist attacks are not claimed, it probably does not apply to this case. The principal-agent problem occurs when agents of a terrorist organization act independently from leadership, and this breakdown in communication results in attacks contrary to the objectives set forth by leadership. Given that this was an assassination attempt of a major target, it is unlikely that an agent was acting independently from leadership. The fact that it was a suicide attempt, and that the previous attempt on Sherpao was planned, also suggest that this was most likely an attack planned and authorized by the leadership.

Why It Is Difficult to Model

This paper provides a theoretical expansion for understanding terrorism through a rationalist lens. Previous research has detailed the strategic reasons that groups tell the truth about terrorism, and this paper offers strategic reasons why groups lie about terrorist attacks. While the present paper expands our theoretical understanding of how terrorism can be strategic, regardless of whether or not a credible claim of credit is made, it is difficult to model these problems.

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The central concern is how to tell if people are lying. According to the Global Terrorism Database,[xciii] a large proportion of terrorist attacks involve a lie, most of which appear to be a lie of omission or falsely claiming the attack of another group. It is more difficult to ascertain the proportion of attacks that are true *false flag* instances or are subject to the *hot-potato problem*, but as the case studies discussed in this paper indicate, all of these lies about terrorism do occur. Identifying that groups sometimes do lie about terrorism is the first step in theorizing about why this phenomenon occurs, especially with greater frequency. However, at this point, it is probably not possible to model these problems using a large N study.

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Where We Expect to See Each Lie

As discussed above, the type of lie told about terrorism is a function of a group's level of internal and external control when the attack occurs. Based upon this understanding about how groups lie, it is possible to hypothesize the environments in which each lie is most likely to occur.

False claiming, *false flag*, and unclaimed attacks all require that a group possesses high external control, but the level of internal control can vary. If a group has high external control and high internal control, its agents do not betray the truth, which can manifest in different types of lies. A false claim is likely to occur and be believed when the group is dominant in its region, not faced with strong competition, and more hierarchically structured. New or weak groups may falsely claim in hopes of gaining attention and appearing stronger than they are, but these claims are less likely to be believed. *False flag* attacks are likely to occur when the group needs a catalyst event to provoke a disproportionate response or generate public support for its cause, and necessitates that the group has the capacity to credibly and believably blame the attack on its

opponent. Unclaimed attacks are likely to occur when the attack is meant to communicate to an internal audience or when the group does not have competition in the region and thus the perpetrator is obvious to the population.

If a group has high external control but low internal control, then the group may be unknowingly lying about its responsibility, unknowingly denying its responsibility, or knowingly denying its responsibility for an unsanctioned attack. Under these conditions, both false claiming and false blaming are likely to occur by a dominant group in a region, but the group's structure is more likely to be horizontal and thus the group's leadership is less aware of their subordinates' actions. Unclaimed attacks are likely to occur when the attack was not carried out as planned or when the public has a negative perception of the attack.

Conversely, the *hot-potato problem* will only arise in environments where groups have low external control due to a number of competing groups. If a group has high internal control, the *hot-potato problem* will likely arise when another group perpetrates an attack that is counterproductive to its goals. If a group has low internal control, the *hot-potato problem* may also arise if an agent commits an attack that is counter to his group's goals and thus fails to report it so the group's leadership may unknowingly blame a rival group for the attack, which would be denied by the group who was blamed but not responsible, thus resulting in blame being bounced back and forth.

Policy Implications

In recent years, the percentage of terrorist attacks that are credibly claimed has decreased. This paper presents rationalist explanations for why groups lie about terrorism, either through false

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claiming, false blaming, the *hot-potato problem*, or lies of omission. By expanding our understanding of terrorism from a rationalist perspective to include instances where groups lie, this paper also expands the policy implications for addressing terrorism.

Groups may lie about terrorism for a number of reasons and in a variety of ways. Claims of terrorist attacks should be treated with a degree of skepticism from both an academic and a policy standpoint. As this paper demonstrates, even when only one group claims responsibility for an attack, this does not guarantee that the claiming group is truly responsible. Thus, it is better to acknowledge the claim of responsibility than to ascribe responsibility for any given attack. Furthermore, in order to fully understand terrorism, it is important to appreciate the environment in which an attack takes place and the potential repercussions for the group that is publically deemed responsible for an attack. As such, it is worth treating attacks that seem strategically ill timed with a great deal of suspicion. This does not mean that every attack that leads to repercussions against the terrorist group will have a lie behind it. If the propositions above are useful, it is wise to consider the degree of internal and external control to identify different potential reasons for lying. Terrorism is not the straightforward game of costly signaling that conventional wisdom has assumed it to be. Rather, terrorism occurs in environments where errors, disorder, and stigmatizations are key elements, and where costly signaling is only one of the potential explanations.

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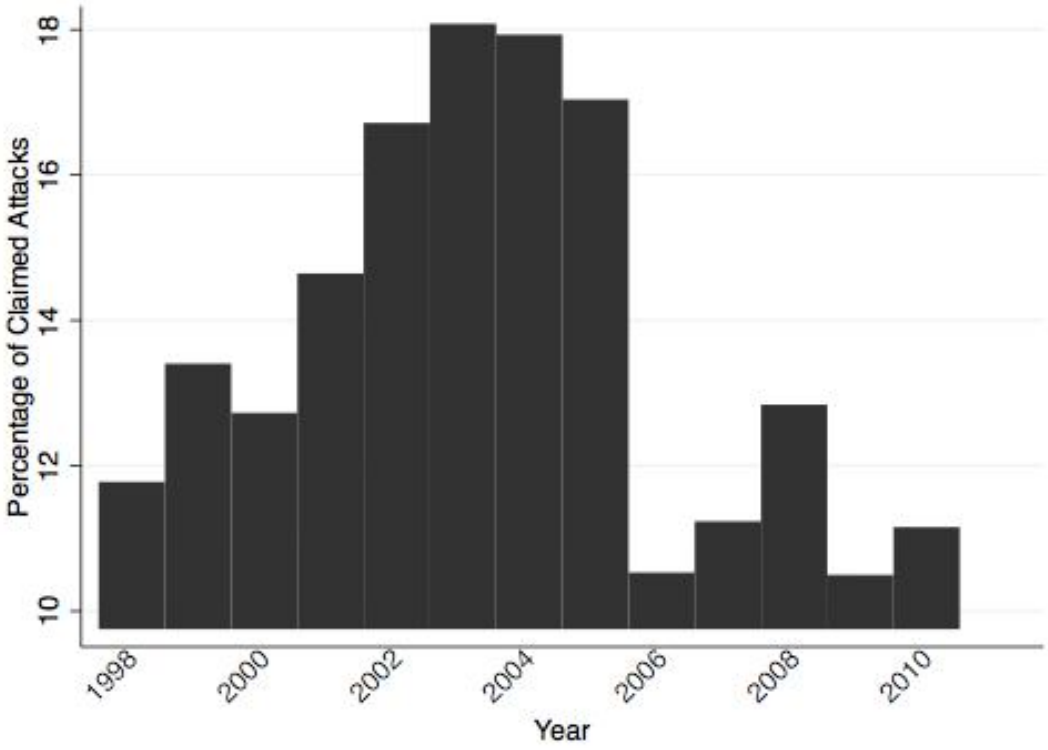
Figure 1: Percent of Terrorist Attacks that are Claimed, 1998-2011.



Source: Global Terrorism Database

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Table 1. Committing, Claiming, and Blaming Terrorism

	Did the group actually commit the attack?	
	YES	**NO**
TOOK CREDIT	Truthful terrorism	False claiming another's act Principal-Agent Problem
DID NOT TAKE CREDIT	Unclaimed act Principal-Agent Problem	
BLAMED IT ON ANOTHER	False Flag Terrorism Principal-Agent Problem	Hot-Potato Problem

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Table 2. Control and Lying about Terrorism

Level of External Control		
High	False claiming False flag Unclaimed	False claiming/Principal agent problem False flag/Principal agent problem Unclaimed/Principal agent problem
Low	Hot-Potato problem/Principal agent problem	Hot-Potato problem

Level of Internal Control

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Notes

[i] Brian M. Jenkins. *International Terrorism: A New Kind of Warfare'*. (1974): 4.

[ii] We define terrorism as violence or threats of violence against noncombatants to coerce an opponent in pursuance of a goal. For a more thorough discussion of defining terrorism see Bruce Hoffman. *Inside Terrorism.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) and Leonard Weinberg, Ami Pedahzur, and Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler. "The Challenges of Conceptualizing Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16, no. 4 (2004): 777-794. Joseph K. Young and Michael G. Findley. "Promise and Pitfalls of Terrorism Research," *International Studies Review* 13, no. 3 (2011): 411-431 examine the implications of changing these definitions for terrorism research.

[iii] See, for example, Jenkins. *International Terrorism*. Gabriel Weimann. "Media Events: The Case of International Terrorism," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 31, no. 1 (1987): 21-39. Gabriel Weimann and Conrad Winn. *The Theater of Terror: Mass Media and International Terrorism*. White Plains, NY: Longman Publishing Group. Bruce Hoffman. "Why Terrorists Don't Claim Credit," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9, no. 1 (1997): 1-6.

[iv] Andrew Kydd and Barbara F. Walter. "Sabotaging the Peace: The Politics of Extremist Violence," *International Organization* 56, no. 2 (2002): 263-296.

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David A. Lake. "Rational Extremism: Understanding Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century," *Dialog-IO* 1, no. 1 (2002): 1-15.

[v] Kydd and Walter. "Strategies."

[vi] They build and extend on the work of James D. Fearon. "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (1995): 379-414 and others who model conflict in a general bargaining framework and attempt to explain why war or violence occurs even when it is costly for the parties involved.

[vii] Kydd and Walter. "Strategies."

[viii] Individuals can lie about terrorism as well. We do not have an *a priori* reason to separate group from lone wolf attacks, thus this discussion should apply to each actor's use of violence

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[x] A. L. Wright. (2011). "Why Do Terrorists Claim Credit?"

[xi] Bruce Hoffman. "Don't Claim."

[xii] Kydd and Walter. "Strategies."

[xiii] D.C. Rapoport. "To Claim or Not to Claim; That is the Question—Always!." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9, no. 1 (1997): 11-17.

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[xvi] J. Gearson. "The Nature of Modern Terrorism," *The Political Quarterly* 72, no. s1 (2002): 7-24.

[xvii] Hoffman. "Trends."

[xviii] Ibid.

[xix] E. Bueno de Mesquita. "Conciliation, Counterterrorism, and Patterns of Terrorist Violence." *International Organization* 59, no. 1 (2005): 145-176.

Hoffman. "Voice."

[xx] Hoffman. "Voice."

[xxi] A rival explanation for the lack of claim-making might be related to religious ideology or lack of ideology. Although ideologies that promote terrorism have waned and waxed over time, they rarely disappear and at any given time there are many groups with a myriad of ideologies utilizing terrorism.

[xxii] Ibid.

[xxiii] Kydd and Walter. "Strategies."

[xxiv] Hoffman. "Voice."

[xxv] One infamous event, the so-called Manchurian Incident, was a false flag attack by Japanese agents against their own interests as a pretext for a larger invasion of China (James Weland. "Misguided Intelligence: Japanese Military Intelligence Officers in the Manchurian Incident, September 1931," *The Journal of Military History* 58, no. 3 (1994): 445-460).

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[xxix] Bruce Hoffman. "Reply to Pluchinsky and Rapoport Comments," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9, no. 1 (1997): 18-19.

[xxx] Bale. "May."

[xxxi] Hoffman, Bruce. "Reply."

[xxxii] Jenkins. "Two Flags."

[xxxiii] Ibid.

[xxxiv] Bale. "May."

[xxxv] Jenkins. "Two Flags."

[xxxvi] Ibid.

[xxxvii] Jonathan Schanzer. *Hamas vs. Fatah: the Struggle for Palestine*. (Macmillan, 2008).

[xxxviii] We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for making this point.

[xxxix] Hoffman. "Voice."

[xl] Again, we thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.

[xli] T. Copeland. "Is the 'New Terrorism' Really New?: An Analysis of the New Paradigm for Terrorism," *Journal of Conflict Studies* 21, no. 2 (2001).

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[xlii] D. A. Pluchinsky. "The Terrorism Puzzle: Missing Pieces and No Boxcover." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9, no. 1 (1997): 7-10.

[xliii] Rapoport. "Claim."

[xliv] Hoffman. "Don't Claim."

[xlv] Pluchinsky. "Puzzle."

[xlvi] Chasdi. "Middle East."

[xlvii] Pluchinsky. "Puzzle."

[xlviii] Hoffman. "Don't Claim."

[xlix] Kydd and Walter. "Strategies."

[l] Hopkins, Nick, and Sarah Hall. "Festering Hate that Turned Quiet Son into a Murderer." *The Guardian.* 30 June 2000. Online.

[li] Ibid.

[lii] Ibid.

[liii] "Profile: Copeland the killer" *BBC News.* 30 June 2000. Online.

[liv] Hopkins and Hall. "Festering."

[lv] Ibid.

[lvi] Ibid.

[lvii] Ibid.

[lviii] Hopkins and Hall. "Festering."

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[lxi] E. Abrahamian. "The Crowd in the Iranian Revolution," *Radical History Review,* 105 (2009): 13-38.

[lxii] Ibid.

[lxiii] Ibid.

[lxiv] Moazami. "Islamization."

[lxv] Ibid.

[lxvi] Keddie and Richard. *Modern Iran.*

[lxvii] Marvin Zonis. "Iran: A Theory of Revolution From Accounts of the Revolution," *World Politics* 35, no. 4 (1983): 586-606.

[lxviii] Elham Gheytanchi. "I Will Turn off the Lights: The Allure of Marginality in Postrevolutionary Iran," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27, no. 1 (2007): 173-185.

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[lxxi] Moazami. "Islamization."

[lxxii] Kydd and Walter. "Strategies."

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[lxxiii] Jenkins. "Two Flags."
[lxxiv] Donna Bassett. "Bologna Train Station Bombing" in *Encyclopedia of Terrorism,* ed. Peter Chalk, (2012): 136-138.
[lxxv] Ibid.
[lxxvi] Ibid.
[lxxvii] "1980: Bologna Blast Leaves Dozens Dead" *BBC News.* Online.
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[lxxix] AAJ News Archive. "Suicide bomber kills 50 Namazis in Charsadda." *AAJ News.* December 24, 2007. Online.
[lxxx] Ibid.
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[lxxxii] Ibid.
[lxxxiii] Bill Roggio. Pakistan: Over 50 Killed in Charsadda suicide attack. *The Long War Journal.* December 21, 2007. Online.
[lxxxiv] Ibid.
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