

# Voice and silence: Why groups take credit for acts of terror

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## Abstract

Terrorism is designed to draw attention to particular issues and causes. Yet, the incidence of credit-taking (announcing one's responsibility for acts of terror) varies even though anonymity can undermine the clarity of the intended messages. This article offers an explanation of the variation in credit-taking that emphasizes how the competitive context in which groups operate shapes terrorists groups' need to cultivate support for their activities. Increasing numbers of terrorist organizations make it difficult for the supporters of terrorism to reward the perpetrators of particular attacks with their backing. Since such support is critical to the proper functioning of terrorist organizations, groups use claims of responsibility to distinguish themselves from those that had no hand in the violence. Consequently, variation in the probability of credit-taking fluctuates as a function of the number of active terrorist groups in a given theater of operations. This argument is contrasted with theories that suggest credit-taking is influenced by: the ideological mix of terrorist organizations; the willingness of governments to respond to terrorism using military force; state sponsorship; the depth of communal grievances; and the use of suicide attacks. The results, based on an analysis of transnational terrorism events conducted in the Israeli theater of operations between 1968 and 2004, suggest that competitive context is a consistently strong predictor of credit-taking. By implication, the results point to the utility of counter-terrorism strategies that interfere with the transmission of information between terrorist organizations and their supporters.

## Keywords

competition, credit taking, Israel, ITERATE, terrorism

## Introduction

Terrorism is designed to draw attention to particular issues and causes. Yet, perpetrators often keep their involvement in acts of terrorism secret, resulting in confusion among target audiences. The 1995 Oklahoma City bombing is a case in point. Timothy McVeigh's decision to hide his participation in the attack led some authorities to speculate that Islamic militants were to blame (Johnston, 1995). McVeigh's silence permitted observers to overlook his message (which was one of frustration with federal police actions in Waco, Texas and Ruby Ridge, Idaho) and to focus instead on other groups and issues. Given the importance of publicity in terrorist campaigns, why are claims of responsibility issued for some terrorist attacks, but not others?

Claims of responsibility are worthy of analysis because they provide a window into what perpetrators of terrorism want and the incentives that influence their behavior. For example, anonymous attacks are often taken to indicate that groups are disinterested in building grass-roots support for their movements and closed to efforts at political compromise (e.g. Enders & Sandler, 2006). Claimed attacks, on the other hand,

are seen as signifying that groups are unafraid of retaliatory strikes (e.g. Hoffman, 1997a,b), which might further imply weaknesses in certain counter-terrorism efforts. In short, credit-taking has the potential to tell observers a great deal about the nature of the threat groups pose and the adequacy of the responses to their attacks.

Yet, the promise of using credit-taking to understand the strategy of terrorism is complicated by the difficulty of explaining the actual propensity of claims. Organizations like Hamas and al Qaeda that might be expected to disdain credit-taking, either for ideological reasons or the desire to avoid military counter-strikes, instead often claim responsibility for attacks. Terrorism may be influenced by more than ideology or the prospect of military action.

In this article, I advance an alternative explanation for the conditions under which claims of responsibility are issued for acts of terrorism: variations in the competitive context in which groups operate affects the probability of credit-taking

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in given arenas. This argument builds on work that suggests that efforts to capture larger shares of support from pro-terrorism audiences influence a wide-range of terrorist activity (e.g. Bloom, 2005; Crenshaw, 1985; Siqueira, 2005). Claims of responsibility solve an information problem that arises from the existence of multiple potential perpetrators of terrorist violence. Groups want others to know who they are and what they do in order to generate support for their activities. However, the challenge of identifying the perpetrators of specific acts of violence increases with the number of potential perpetrators. The effect is a greater probability of credit-taking as groups increasingly reveal their involvement in violence to capture the support of potential backers.

I examine the relationship between competitive context and credit-taking using data on transnational terrorist attacks committed in the Israeli conflict theater (including the West Bank and Gaza Strip) between 1968 and 2004. Transnational attacks put the question of credit-taking to terrorist organizations like no other instances of terrorist violence. The ramifications of these strikes ripple across borders, drawing the interest of both domestic and foreign media organizations and guaranteeing perpetrators ample opportunity to announce their responsibility to large audiences. At the same time, transnational attacks pressure leaders to react vigorously, creating countervailing pressure against credit-taking. How groups respond to this mix of incentives is, therefore, likely to provide important insight into elements of their usually secret strategies and goals.

The analysis suggests that competitive context is a significant predictor of credit-taking. By implication, the results suggest that terrorist groups have a great need for support and that their efforts to cultivate this backing depend on clear communications. Counter-terrorism policies that disrupt the signals groups send to supporters may find success because they cut access to the resources groups need to conduct future attacks.

Below, I begin by discussing the function credit-taking plays in terrorist campaigns. A small literature on credit-taking in terrorist campaigns exists, but it focuses on possible reasons for declining claim rates associated with terrorist attacks (see Hoffman, 1997a,b; Pluchinsky, 1997; Rapoport, 1997). Answers to questions about the role credit-taking plays in the strategy of terrorism have not been developed fully. A theoretical discussion of the relationship between competitive context and credit-taking is next, followed by a review of alternative hypotheses. These conceptual sections lead into a discussion of the research design used to test these explanations of credit-taking. Results of the data analysis are reported after that. I conclude by highlighting the research findings and what they imply about motives for terrorism.

### **Credit-taking in terrorist campaigns**

Terrorism is a strategy involving the actual or threatened use of force for the purpose of influencing audiences. Although many emphasize its clandestine nature, groups throughout history

have shown a willingness to publicize their responsibility for acts of terror. In the first century, the Zealots attacked targets during the day in crowded areas to maximize awareness of their strikes (Rapoport, 1984). Revolutionaries in 19th-century Europe used posters describing their actions to passers-by (Schmid & de Graaf, 1982: 14). Today, terrorists use the Internet to advertise their exploits. This historical urge to advertise culpability for violence is arguably one of the factors that lead analysts to think about terrorism as more than senseless violence.

A claim of responsibility is issued when someone purporting to represent the attackers publicly names the organization(s) accountable for executing an attack. Such claims are distinct from the advance warnings authorities and media organizations sometimes receive about attacks. Unlike warnings, claims are issued after attacks and released to the public by perpetrators and their alleged representatives. Since perpetrators, rather than authorities, release their names to the public, claims of responsibility reflect the plans terrorists rely on in ways warnings cannot. The reason is that claims of responsibility are not filtered through government authorities who have the ability to alter their content and timing. It is the control perpetrators exercise over claims that makes them useful for drawing inferences about the strategies groups rely on.

Terrorist organizations find claims of responsibility attractive because violence is a crude method of communicating with others. 'Be afraid' is often the most complicated message violence can send (Cordes, 1988). Claims add information to attacks. This is because knowing the identity of attackers is often useful for understanding the issues behind violent strikes. For example, public understanding of the Madrid train bombing changed when it was revealed that al Qaeda, not ETA, bore responsibility for the attack. Claims are not the only way terrorist organizations can reveal their involvement in violence, but they are preferable to many of the alternatives (e.g. distinctive targeting practices). Most importantly, claims are easily understood by target audiences. In contrast, the public frequently needs experts to uncover fragmentary evidence and make complex inferences to decipher anonymous attacks.

Credit-taking has two added advantages over other signaling devices terrorist organizations might use to create public awareness of their activities. First, it is relatively inexpensive to issue claims of responsibility. The price of credit-taking is little more than the cost of mounting a terrorist attack. In contrast, using specialized bomb designs or attack signatures requires operatives with specialized technical expertise. These individuals are relatively difficult to recruit, expensive to retain, and hard to replace. Other strategies, like the provision of local public goods that groups might use as a platform to inform the public about their resistance efforts are more expensive still.

Second, it is difficult for groups to credibly claim responsibility for attacks committed by others. Perpetrators of terrorist attacks possess a 'first-move advantage' with respect to credit-taking because temporal proximity to an attack helps establish

the credibility of claims. Persistently late claimers will be dismissed as phonies because the quality of credit-taking opportunities degrades with use. The difficulty of free-riding on credit-taking opportunities means that claims of responsibility enable perpetrators to distinguish themselves from others clearly. Distinctive targeting practices and attack signatures, on the other hand, do not offer the same degree of discrimination. Many groups share interests in similar targets and tactical innovations can be copied (Fleming et al., 1988). Credit-taking is one of the few ways groups have to reliably distinguish themselves from other potential perpetrators.

### Competition and credit-taking

The benefits of credit-taking notwithstanding, claims of responsibility for acts of terror are issued selectively. I argue this variation is influenced by the competitive context terrorism suppliers confront for the support of sympathetic audiences. As the number of terrorist organizations increases, the more difficult it is for actual perpetrators to distinguish themselves from groups that had no hand in the violence. This is problematic because sympathizers that cannot identify the perpetrators of terrorism will not be transformed into active supporters of those organizations. Credit-taking solves this problem, enabling those that commit acts of terrorism to reap the organizational benefits of violence.

As Kreuger (2007: 49) points out, terrorism is conducted in a kind of market. Terrorist organizations 'sell' resistance to segments of the public that demand either changes to or defense of the status quo. In Pakistan, for example, the organization Harkat-ul-Mujahideen uses posters depicting Kalashnikov rifles and other guns to recruit new members (Stern, 2003: 213). In return, groups like Harkat require 'payment' for their services in the form of organizational support. The resources terrorist organizations seek include: cash for operating budgets and salaries, volunteers to carry out organizational missions, and goodwill from communities that may be asked to turn a blind eye to illicit activities (Stern, 2003: 141–145). Yet, these organizational supports are scarce. Most resistance efforts have only local appeal (Bob, 2005: ch.1), which reduces the size of the support networks terrorist organizations are able to cultivate. Indicative of this, 95% of all attacks catalogued in ITERATE, the authoritative database of *transnational* terrorist activity, start and end in the same place (Piazza & Walsh, 2009). In addition, terrorism is typically unpopular. In a 2009 World Public Opinion poll, for example, large majorities (67%–81%) in Muslim countries rejected the use of 'bombings and assassinations' to achieve political or religious goals.

Terrorist organizations respond to the scarcity of support by making sure actual and potential backers are satisfied with their performance. At a minimum, this means terrorist organizations must keep 'constituents' apprised of their activities. However, the difficulty of providing this information varies. Imagine an attack against civilians launched in an arena in

which only one terrorist group operates. In this context, there is little need for the perpetrator to reveal its identity for the benefit of its backers because target audiences have little trouble assigning responsibility for violence. The monopolist's notoriety and position make it the only suspect, meaning that it does not have to do anything additional to reap the benefits (or suffer the costs) of its behavior. Terrorism, in this scenario, sends a clear signal to audiences about an assailant's identity and motivations.

Now, imagine the same attack against civilians committed in an arena that has a number of active terrorist groups. In this circumstance, it is difficult for target audiences to infer the identity of the perpetrators because there are too many suspects. By itself, the act of violence does not reveal who perpetrated an attack and why. This is a problem for terrorist organizations, since violence is the tool they use to cement their members' loyalty, attract new recruits, and persuade donors that they deserve support. Groups that fail to convince constituents to support them are doomed to failure as other terrorist organizations, which also require support, lure their financial benefactors and personnel away.

Faced with inter-group struggle for community support and a noisy information environment, the perpetrators of terrorism increasingly turn to credit-taking to advertise their accomplishments. Attackers must do something distinctive to make themselves stand out from the crowd. Attack signatures are one way to go, but (as I argued above) distinctive targeting patterns are difficult to sustain and specialized bomb designs require expertise that not all groups possess. Claims of responsibility are easy to use and enable groups to overcome the signal distortion multi-actor systems create. By revealing 'whodunit', claims of responsibility permit target audiences to reward the actual perpetrators of terror for their efforts, thus completing the exchange relationship between groups and supporters.

This argument assumes that terrorist organizations are (1) self-regarding, (2) require the support of constituents to survive, and (3) cannot easily reveal their identities through violence alone. Support for terrorism is also assumed to be a scarce resource, which violent organizations struggle to capture. Government efforts to curb the public's enthusiasm for terrorism mainly work to shrink or expand the amount of grass-roots support available for terrorist organizations to draw on (Siqueira & Sandler, 2006).

Applied to terrorist campaigns, the approach suggests that as the numbers of terrorist organizations increases, the ability of perpetrators to communicate with supporters decreases. Groups are therefore more likely to attempt to cut through the confusion by revealing their responsibility for terrorism publicly when there are more groups. The result is a *sigmoidal (S-shaped) relationship between the number of terrorist organizations in a given theater of operations and the probability of credit-taking*. This functional relationship emerges because the availability of information about the identity of perpetrators diminishes drastically as campaigns transition from a single perpetrator to several perpetrators.

Groups respond by increasing the rate at which they claim responsibility for acts of terror exponentially in an effort to retain their supporters' attention and backing. However, the pressure for credit-taking subsides as terrorist organizations become more numerous. At some point, additional groups produce small changes in the ability of target audiences to identify perpetrators. Once the number of groups gets large, adding or subtracting a few does not reduce the need to distinguish oneself from competitors.

### Alternative explanations

Whereas the approach described above sees credit-taking as a response to the difficulties potential supporters have identifying and rewarding the actual perpetrators of terrorism, there are several alternative explanations that also must be considered. Credit-taking is not often the subject of sustained theoretical or empirical analyses (an exception is Cordes, Jenkins & Kellen, 1985). As a result, existing explanations of credit-taking derive from existing theories of terrorism. On one end of the spectrum are theories that suggest the ideas to which groups subscribe and the tactics they choose influence the probability of credit-taking. External forces play a limited role in the credit-taking calculus. On the other end of the spectrum are theories that suggest the probability of credit-taking is determined by forces beyond the control of perpetrators, such as the frequency of military responses to terrorist activity, the support of foreign governments, and the depth of communal grievances. I review these arguments below.

#### *Ideology*

The most widely cited explanation of credit-taking attributes the propensity to claim responsibility for acts of terror to the ideological character of perpetrating organizations. Ideology provides 'a motive and framework for action' (Drake, 1998: 55) that guides behavior. Political ideologies, such as Marxism and nationalism, make credit-taking more likely by emphasizing material goals and the notion that mass support is a key to success (Rapoport, 1997). Groups that hold these ideologies see terrorism as a tactic designed to capture mass attention. Credit-taking is the means by which attention is translated into the backing groups need to wring concessions from their opponents. In contrast, religious and millenarian beliefs make credit-taking less likely by de-emphasizing political goals in favor of service to god (Ranstorp, 1996). For these groups, terrorism is a form of piety (Juergensmeyer, 2003) that requires no justification since it is intended for omniscient deities who approve of violence (Rapoport, 1984).

The implication of this argument for studying terror campaigns is this: *the ideological mix of terrorist organizations in a given arena influences the probability of credit-taking*. Terrorist campaigns dominated by Marxist and/or ethno-nationalist groups are more likely to produce claimed attacks because these groups are interested in persuading others to support

them and their causes. Campaigns dominated by religious and/or millenarian groups are less likely to produce claims of responsibility since groups of these ideological types care little for publicity (Enders & Sandler, 2006: 47–48; Larsson, 2006).

#### *Suicide attacks*

Another explanation that focuses on the choices groups make points to a relationship between suicide terrorism and credit-taking. In contrast to 'ordinary' terrorist attacks, suicide attacks are claimed nearly all the time (Pape, 2005). A general explanation of this relationship has not been provided as yet. However, in the Israeli case, Hafez (2006: ch. 3) argues that decisions to publicize responsibility for these attacks are designed to establish a culture of martyrdom that stokes Palestinian enthusiasm for future attacks. In line with these findings, I expect *credit to be taken more frequently for suicide attacks than other acts of terrorism*.

#### *Counter-terrorism responses*

Contextual factors are also thought to influence the probability of credit-taking. In particular, *militarized counter-terrorism efforts are hypothesized to influence the probability of credit-taking*. The use of force by governments is significant because of the capacity for violence to produce shifts in the demand for terrorism. However, the relationship between military counter-strikes and credit-taking is controversial. Some argue that violent responses to terrorism create backlashes against perpetrators because military reprisals harm innocents from communities that harbor these groups. Thus, militarized counter-terrorism policies depress the incidence of credit-taking because terrorist organizations do not want to be blamed when governments retaliate indiscriminately (Hoffman, 1997a). On the other hand, militarized counter-strikes may boost public anger at the counter-attacking government. Therefore, credit-taking should increase as groups capitalize on government opposition by associating themselves with violence in order to recruit new backers (Frey, 2004).

A variation on these arguments is implicit in Bueno de Mesquita's (2005) work, which suggests that the effect of militarized counter-terrorism policies on public support for terrorism varies with the frequency of government response. At both high and low levels of government response, the probability of credit-taking should also be high. Infrequent military responses to terrorism enable groups to take credit for acts of terror more often since there are few penalties for doing so. Frequent counter-strikes, on the other hand, also create incentives for credit-taking because groups are able to capitalize on the anger that military reprisals generate among potential supporters. Moreover, the recruiting possibilities inherent in such high-response environments tend to outweigh the losses groups might suffer from revealing their militant activities.

In contrast to these high and low conditions, middling numbers of counter-strikes reduce the probability of credit-taking. In this range, military reprisals penalize the perpetrators of terror without mobilizing the public that terrorist organizations rely on for support. Consequently, middling levels of response are the most difficult environment for groups to operate in because the penalties associated with credit-taking are high at the same time that the opportunities for building organizational support are low. If this approach is correct, then *the relationship between militarized counter-terrorism efforts and credit-taking is U-shaped.*

#### *State sponsorship*

Analysts also argue that *state sponsorship of terrorism reduces the probability of credit-taking* (Pluchinsky, 1997). According to Byman (2005: 4–7), many states find supporting terrorism more appealing than using violence themselves. Open warfare against other states invites penalties that governments try to avoid (e.g. economic sanctions). Supporting terrorism, on the other hand, is a less visible way to influence neighbors, topple rival governments, or satisfy public demand for action against their enemies. Hence, to keep their involvement secret, governments discourage credit-taking by groups they support (Pluchinsky, 1997).

Terrorist organizations accept these state-imposed limitations on their behavior because of the benefits of state sponsorship. For example, the funds foreign governments provide are useful for retaining skilled operatives with salaries and other benefits. State sponsors can also provide terrorist organizations the backing they require when grass-roots support for terror is in short supply (Siqueria & Sandler, 2006).

#### *Grievances*

The final explanation considered here emerges from broader research into the causes of terrorism (e.g. Gurr, 1970). It suggests that *as grievances intensify, the probability of credit-taking increases.* There are two reasons grievances might be associated with credit-taking. The first is that as grievances intensify, groups work to get help from those on the outside of a conflict. Claims of responsibility are essentially ‘fire alarms’ (McCubbins & Schwartz, 1984) that groups pull to alert others about their suffering and to trigger international responses. The second interpretation suggests that credit-taking in response to intensifying grievances is less strategic than expressive. In other words, terrorism is less about enlisting allies to fight oppression than it is about voicing the frustrations of suffering populations (Hafez, 2006).

### **Research design**

I examined the theories of credit-taking using original data on claims of responsibility for acts of terrorism committed in the Israeli conflict theater between 1968 (the start of the organized campaign against Israeli interests) and 2004 (the last year data

are available). I identified attacks using ITERATE.<sup>1</sup> ITERATE defines transnational attacks as actual or threatened strikes for political purposes that ‘through the nationality or foreign ties of its perpetrators, its location, the nature of its institutional or human victims, or the mechanics of its resolution, its ramifications transcend national boundaries’.

The Israeli conflict theater, including the disputed West Bank and Gaza Strip, is a natural laboratory for examining the effects of competitive context on credit-taking. It is one of the few arenas that exhibit variation in all the theoretically significant predictors of credit-taking. Omitted variable bias, therefore, is less likely in a study of the Israeli arena than in a global test of the correlates of credit-taking, since reliable data on counter-terrorism efforts around the world (among other things) are unavailable at this time. Furthermore, past research into the relationships between terrorism and religious fundamentalism (Laqueur, 1999), military counter-terrorism policies (Bueno de Mesquita, 2005), and grievances (Slater, 2001) suggests that the alternative explanations of credit-taking should perform well in the Israeli case. In other words, there is no reason to believe that the Israeli case places any of the explanations of credit-taking at a disadvantage in the tests that follow. On the contrary, choosing the Israeli conflict theater may bias the results in favor of the alternative explanations.

The Israeli theater has the added advantage of offering terrorist organizations ample opportunity to publicize their activities using claims of responsibility. Terrorist attacks committed in this locale are more likely to be publicized than attacks launched elsewhere (Weimann & Winn, 1993). Groups in other arenas, such as those fighting for Uyghur independence in China, cannot claim the same level of press attention or access (Bob, 2005: 1) and cannot capitalize on credit-taking opportunities to the extent groups in the Israeli theater can.

Finally, because most of the attacks considered in this project were reported by the *Jerusalem Post*, it is reasonable to assume that local supporters of terrorism knew about the violence and its consequences. Thus, not only did perpetrators face a government with a proclivity for militarized counter-terrorism responses, they also contended with an attentive public that could evaluate every group’s performance and shift their support to the most effective organizations. In this context, claims of responsibility were consequential and terrorist organizations had to weigh carefully the costs and benefits of publicizing their behavior.

One limitation of the Israeli theater as a test case is that it was never host to a terrorist monopoly. Consequently, a thorough examination of the predictions from the theory of competitive context is not possible using observations from this

<sup>1</sup> The MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base was the main alternative to ITERATE when data for this project were collected (the University of Maryland’s Global Terrorism Database was not ready at the time), but MIPT restricted the use of its incident file limiting its utility as a tool for scholarly research. Another option is ICT, a database of terrorist events maintained by the Herzliya Institute for Counter-Terrorism, but it uses undefined criteria to identify events. ITERATE does not have these weaknesses.

arena. I offer some observations on credit-taking in situations of monopoly in the conclusion to this article, but additional tests are required to assess the logic of the argument when one organization dominates a terror campaign.

#### *Claims of responsibility: Operationalizing the dependent variable*

The dependent variable in this research measures whether claims of responsibility were issued in the aftermath of transnational terrorist attacks. In operational terms, claims are announcements attributing culpability for an attack made by someone purporting to represent the perpetrators. They can be issued by a spokesperson, on militant websites, or through written communications (e.g. pamphlets), typically within a few hours after an attack. As I outlined earlier, only announcements made by terrorist organizations or their alleged representatives count as claims. For instance, I did not place a 1974 event in the claimed category even though the *Jerusalem Post* reported that 'it has been established that the [attackers] were sent by the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine' (see Goodman, 1974) because the information was not described as coming from alleged perpetrators of the attack. I did accept news accounts about claims as long as the report associated the announcement with the name of an alleged terrorist organization.

Using this definition, I coded whether claims of responsibility were issued for transnational terrorist attacks committed within the Israeli theater against Israeli targets between 1968 and 2004 (0 = unclaimed; 1 = claimed) using reports from the *Jerusalem Post*, *Associated Press*, and ITERATE event summaries (e.g. Mickolus, Sandler & Murdock, 1989).<sup>2</sup>

#### *Independent variables*

**Competition:** The best measure of competitive context is the number of groups engaged in terrorist campaigns in Israel during the previous year.<sup>3</sup> I established an annual count of active groups using a list of groups suspected of committing at least two transnational terrorist acts in Israel between 1968 and 2004 (according to ITERATE). The list included groups like Yasir Arafat's *Al Fatah*, but excluded Black September, a phony organization created to hide *Fatah*'s hand in violence.<sup>4</sup> The

two-attack criterion was used because it is the smallest number of strikes consistent with the notion that groups involved in terrorist campaigns employ violence repeatedly; setting the bar higher would ensure that only the most resilient groups are considered. Even so, the final list is consistent with other inventories of the conflict, such as the one found in the UCDP/PRIO armed conflict data (see Harbom & Wallensteen, 2009).

Using this list, I established the number of active groups per year by identifying each group's first and last years of operation and summing the annual total. When other signifiers were absent, I used a group's first and last known attacks to define its life-span.<sup>5</sup> Data for this variable came from histories of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (e.g. Morris, 2001), compendiums of terrorist groups (e.g. Janke, 1983), and the MIPT *Terrorism Knowledge Base*'s group file.<sup>6</sup>

**Ideology:** To assess the effect of ideology on credit-taking, I created a variable measuring the ratio of religious and millenarian groups to left-wing and ethno-nationalist groups active in Israel in year  $t-1$ . A measure identifying the ideology of groups responsible for specific attacks was rejected because the perpetrators of anonymous attacks frequently could not be determined. Group ideology was coded using scholarly assessments (e.g. Janke, 1983) of the beliefs shaping an organization's worldview. If disagreements arose (as they do over Hamas), I sided with ideology hypothesis proponents to provide the most charitable treatment of their argument (the classification I used appears in the appendix).

**Counter-terrorism response:** I assessed whether credit-taking is sensitive to Israeli military strikes using data I collected on the number of counter-terrorist responses by Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) to transnational terrorist attacks against Israeli targets.<sup>7</sup> Operationally, any action taken by the IDF to disrupt a terrorist attack (e.g. a firefight with perpetrators) counted as a military response to terrorism. IDF efforts to disrupt or destroy terrorist bases in the Israeli theater or other countries also counted as military responses as long as the strikes transpired within eight days of an attack. This time frame was selected to balance the demands of data collection with the sense that IDF responses to terrorist attacks were likely to occur shortly after the attacks themselves. Data for the eight-day time frame surrounding terrorist attacks were drawn from *Jerusalem Post* and *Associated Press* reports. Next, I checked event-histories contained in ITERATE's companion volumes to ensure that the eight-day time frame did not overlook important Israeli responses that took place more than eight days after the initial attack. These data were then

<sup>2</sup> The unit of observation is the terrorist attack. It might seem preferable to focus on groups instead of attacks, but that approach makes it impossible to investigate key hypotheses about the factors that influence credit-taking. Terrorist attacks are frequently perpetrated by unknown assailants. Hence, it is impossible to compute the normal rate at which individual groups claim responsibility for acts of terror they committed and detect changes in those rates. The design used in this research sidesteps the problem of attributing blame for unclaimed attacks by examining what makes some attacks more likely to be claimed than others.

<sup>3</sup> The data on terrorist groups is not precise enough to specify the month that groups start or stop their violent campaigns, just the year.

<sup>4</sup> I counted Al Aqsa Martyr's Brigade as an independent group even though Israeli officials allege it was a *Fatah* front. The Congressional Research Service concluded that ties between *Fatah* and Al Aqsa Martyr's Brigade were 'murky' (Cronin, 2004: 9) and there is evidence of a split between the *Tanzim* and PLO leaders (see Ashrawi, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> The categorization of terrorist groups appears in the appendix.

<sup>6</sup> The MIPT terrorist organization profile dataset is now available through the University of Maryland's START center (<http://www.start.umd.edu/start/data/tops/>) accessed 3 March 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Characterizing Israeli uses of force against suspected terrorist organizations as 'counter-terrorism' is not an effort to suggest that Israel's role in its conflict with Palestinians is either wholly reactive or justified. It is designed to judge only whether IDF responses to terrorist attacks influenced subsequent attacks.

summed into quarterly measures of IDF responses between the fourth quarter of 1967 and the third quarter of 2004, the dates reflecting a one-quarter lag I introduced to insure proper sequencing in the analysis.<sup>8</sup>

**State sponsorship:** I gauged the level of state sponsorship for terrorist organizations active in the Israeli conflict theater using the percentage of groups receiving significant external support from governments in year  $t-1$ . This measure is better than ITERATE's 'sponsored event' variable because only two attacks in the Israeli theater meet ITERATE's sponsored-event definition, which is not enough to assess the state sponsorship hypothesis adequately.

I classified the relationship between terrorist organizations and governments using three Congressional Research Service reports (see Katzman, 2002a,b; Cronin, 2004). Groups identified in the reports as supported by foreign governments are designated as sponsored organizations for the entirety of their active life spans, unless a disruption in funds was reported. Once again, Hamas was the most difficult group to classify. It receives support from Iran, but the CRS reports estimate the money represents only ten percent of the group's budget. For this reason, I did not place Hamas in the state sponsored category. (The coding appears in the appendix.)

**Grievances:** I measured Palestinian grievances using the log of the annual size of the settler population in the West Bank between 1968 and 2004, a central issue in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. *Haaretz* (2003) supplied the data for the years between 1980 and 2004. Figures for 1970 and 1977 came from the *Jewish Virtual Library* (2009). I used interpolation to complete the series.

## Data analysis

Between 1968 and 2004, Israel was the site of 356 transnational terrorist attacks, 200 of which were claimed. It appears that there is little free riding on the credit-taking opportunities created by others. Most of the 200 claims (170) were made on behalf of a single organization. However, 30 attacks were claimed by multiple organizations. Ten of the 30 attacks involved joint claims of responsibility, but 14 others involved conflicting claims.<sup>9</sup> In these instances, the news reports I relied on either explicitly reference a dispute over the organization actually responsible for an attack or provide some indication that the claimants were not acting together. (A report might say something like, 'the DFLP issued a statement claiming responsibility for the blast, but a representative of the Abu Nidal group also took credit for yesterday's attack'.) Thus,

<sup>8</sup> In the event there were no IDF retaliations in the previous quarter because there were no transnational terrorist attacks, I used the data I collected from two quarters earlier in my analysis. I did this to reflect the fact that terrorist organizations undoubtedly remember recent IDF actions even if they were not taken within the previous three months.

<sup>9</sup> I did not have enough information to classify the remaining six cases.

there is some evidence of free riding, but it appears to be uncommon.

The claims were also overwhelmingly made on behalf of established organizations like Fatah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and Hamas. Only four of the attacks – slightly more than 1% of the attacks considered here – were claimed on behalf of previously unknown groups. Of those four claims, only one (on 24 July 1995) involved what authorities described as a cover name for an existing organization. In the Israeli theater at least, credit-taking appears to be a tool for revealing, rather than hiding, one's involvement in attacks.<sup>10</sup>

The number of terrorist organizations active in the Israeli conflict theater when these claims were issued ranged from two, in 1968, to eight between 1989 and 1992 (mean = 6.21). A yearly count of terrorist organizations appears in the appendix. Most of the groups espoused leftist or nationalist beliefs (mean = .71); on average, they outnumbered religious and millenarian groups by a ratio of 2:1. The percentage of groups receiving state sponsorship varied annually from zero to .86, with a mean of .53. Suicide missions accounted for nearly 20% of the total number of observed attacks against Israeli targets. The IDF responded to these and other attacks at a rate of 46:1. In other words, the IDF took an average of 46 individually identifiable actions for every one terrorist attack, but the spread around this figure ranges from zero responses in the second quarter of 1968 to as many as 306 responses during the height of Israel's crackdown of the second *intifada* (see the appendix for a table of descriptive statistics).

### Logistic regression results

I used logistic regression to test the relationship between the probability of credit-taking for individual attacks and the independent variables described above.<sup>11</sup> The analysis, shown in Table I, suggest competitive context has a consistent, statistically significant effect ( $b = 1.408$ ,  $p < .01$ ) on the probability of credit-taking for attacks committed in the Israeli conflict theater. The bivariate case provides the strongest statistical relationship between competitive context and credit-taking, but introducing controls does not change the basic result. The number of active terrorist organizations exerts a significant, positive effect on the probability of credit-taking in Models 2 ( $b = 2.946$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and 3 ( $b = 2.743$ ,  $p < .05$ ) controlling for: the ideological mix of terrorist organizations, the frequency

<sup>10</sup> Pluchinsky (1992) reports Palestinian terrorist organizations often used false names when taking responsibility for attacks staged in Europe, although it is not clear that the use of cover names outpaces 'honest' claims. If there is a bias associated with studying the Israeli conflict theater, it may be that false names are less prevalent than they are in other arenas.

<sup>11</sup> I checked for temporal dependence using standard and robust variograms (graphs used to examine the spatial and temporal independence of standardized residuals – see Agresti, 1996) and cubic splines (see Beck, Katz & Tucker, 1998). Both methods suggest the observations are temporally independent of one another, requiring no adjustment to the ordinary logit model. Copies of these results appear in the appendix.

Table I. Logistic regression results

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Competitive context	1.408*** (.4452)	2.946** (1.242)	2.743** (1.245)	
Ideology		2.921*** (1.053)	2.451** (1.059)	2.004** (.9784)
Militarized responses		.0032 (.0021)	-.0094 (.0062)	-.0107* (.0062)
Militarized responses <sup>2</sup>			.00006** (.00003)	.00006** (.00003)
Settler population		-.8248*** (.2507)	-.6596** (.2585)	-.2951 (.1873)
State sponsorship		.7476 (.7392)	.3515 (.7576)	8.655e-01 (7.103e-01)
Suicide attacks		2.583*** (.4643)	2.635*** (.4682)	2.600*** (.4680)
Constant		4.722*** (1.647)	3.731** (1.688)	1.643 (1.327)
AIC	1.35	1.23	1.22	1.23
Pseudo-R2	.021	.132	.143	.133
Observations	356	356	356	356

Standard errors in parentheses; \* significant at 10%; \*\* significant at 5%; \*\*\* significant at 1%.

of militarized counter-terrorism responses, the size of the Israeli settler population, percentage of groups receiving significant levels of state sponsorship, and the use of suicide attacks.

Several measures of model fit further suggest that taking account of competitive context adds depth to our understanding of claiming activity. Model 3's Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) statistic (1.218) is lowest of the four models, suggesting it is slightly more precise than the others. The comparison between Model 3 and Model 4 (AIC = 1.23), which lacks a measure of competitive context, is most telling since Model 4 underperforms Model 3 across several model-based statistics (Pseudo-R<sup>2</sup> = .133 vs. .143; Count R<sup>2</sup> [not shown] = .646 vs. .669).<sup>12</sup>

Based on Model 3, the probability of credit-taking increases from a low of roughly 24% to a high of approximately 75% as the number of active terrorist organizations changed from its observed minimum (2) to its observed maximum (8), holding other variables in the model at their mean values. As expected, change in the probability of credit-taking associated with competitive context is non-linear (see Figure 1).<sup>13</sup> The initial growth path, from two to five groups, approximates an exponential function, before hitting an inflection point at 5.5 groups when changes in the probability of credit-taking slow down.<sup>14</sup>

The measure of group ideology ('ideology' in the table) produces statistically significant effects on the probability of credit-taking across models. Moreover, the effect of group ideology is substantial: changing the ratio of religious and millenarian groups to left wing and ethno-nationalist groups from its minimum observed value (0) to its maximum observed value (1.33) increases the probability of credit-taking by nearly 57.4%. (See Table II for predicted probabilities associated with the variables in Model 3.) However, the sign associated with the ideology coefficients is inconsistent with theoretical expectations. As the number of left wing/ethno-nationalist groups declines relative to religious and millenarian groups, the probability of credit-taking is also supposed to decline. Instead, the probability of credit-taking increased as religious groups, such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, became more numerous.<sup>15</sup>

The direction of the relationship between ideology and credit-taking is puzzling given existing theory and is something that will have to be examined in future research. One possible explanation is that the fanatically religious Palestinian groups are, at base, really nationalist organizations. Sageman (2004: 62), for example, did not include Palestinian terror organizations in his research, arguing that these groups lack the ideological purity of those involved in the global Salafi jihad (e.g. al Qaeda). Another possibility is that ideology is better at predicting the content of claims than their timing. There is some suggestion in the literature (e.g. Laqueur, 1999) that leftist groups are more likely to issue lengthy diatribes than other

<sup>12</sup> Additional measures of Model 3's sensitivity and specificity are available in the appendix.

<sup>13</sup> The values used to create Figure 2 were generated using *Clarify*. See King, Tomz & Wittenberg (2000).

<sup>14</sup> The location of the inflection point was determined through trial and error.

<sup>15</sup> This result stays the same even after reclassifying Hamas as a nationalist organization.

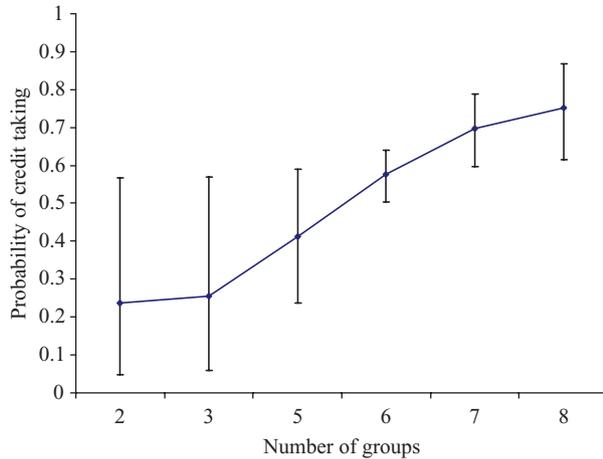


Figure 1. Influence of competitive context on the predicted probability of credit-taking

Vertical lines represent the 95% confidence interval.

organizations, which is consistent with the idea that left-wing and ethno-nationalist groups care more deeply about starting political movements than religious organizations.

The relationship between military responses to terrorism and the probability of credit-taking is significant in Models 3 ( $b = .00005$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and 4 ( $b = .00005$ ,  $p < .05$ ) when entered as a squared term, but credit-taking appears unaffected by the simple frequency of militarized counter-terrorism responses. Substantively, this implies that there is a U-shaped relationship between military responses and credit-taking: the probability of credit-taking is highest at the highest and lowest levels of military activity, as expected. Credit-taking is less likely in the middle range. In other words, credit-taking is most attractive either when it is easy to do because counter-strikes are rare or when counter-strikes are severe and generate tremendous anger against those responsible for counter-terrorism responses.

The results associated with Israel's military activity, however, are heavily dependent on IDF actions during the second *intifada*. When I re-ran the models without the 50 most influential observations (all had Cook's Influence Statistics greater than 1), the relationship between militarized activity and credit-taking disappears. The other results were unaffected. Counter-terrorism policies do not appear to influence the calculus of credit-taking under normal circumstances. Only intense periods of military repression seem to influence the willingness of groups to take credit for acts of terror. This is consistent with the hypothesis, but it also means that in many situations militarized counter-terrorism efforts are unrelated to credit-taking.

The logged growth of the settler population reduced the probability of credit-taking in Models 2 ( $b = -.0824$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and 3 ( $b = -.0659$ ,  $p < .05$ ), but showed no relationship to credit-taking in Model 4. Some collinearity among the variables seems to be the culprit. Substantively, the results suggest that frustration in Palestinian communities made anonymous terrorism more likely, perhaps because it increased the

Table II. Probability of credit-taking when independent variables are changed from their minimum to their maximum values, holding the others constant

Variable	Coefficients
Competitive context	.514**
Ideology	.574**
Militarized responses	-.494
Militarized responses <sup>2</sup>	.454**
Settler population	-.607**
State sponsorship	.071
Suicide attacks	.443***

probability of terrorism by so-called 'lone-wolves'. I found support for this interpretation by examining the pattern of terrorism during the first and second *intifadas*, when frustration was high in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. First, the proportion of attacks with unknown perpetrators (i.e. those with no claim of responsibility and no attribution of responsibility by authorities) rose during the *intifadas* relative to other periods. Second, the attacks during the *intifadas* were more likely to be carried out by a single perpetrator than attacks in other periods. This evidence is consistent with a turn to more disorganized 'expressive' terrorism that helps explain the observed negative relationship between the size of the settler population and the probability of credit-taking.

The percentage of state sponsored organizations showed no relationship to the probability of credit-taking in any of the models. The difficulty of observing how states actually assist terrorist organizations is an obvious limitation for assessing the consequences of state sponsorship on credit-taking. Another possibility, based on the US State Department analyses (see *Patterns of International Terrorism*, 1980: 8), is that only certain kinds of sponsored attacks – assassination attempts against government officials – are unlikely to be claimed. Indeed, attacks aimed at government facilities, which can be construed as efforts to kill government officials, were claimed 14% of the time, much less than other attacks. However, there is little additional evidence tying these attacks to groups with ties to foreign governments, making it difficult to conclude that state sponsorship influences credit-taking behavior in the Israeli theater.

Finally, suicide bombings are strongly and consistently associated with increased credit-taking. On average, using the coefficients from Model 3 ( $b = 2.635$ ,  $p < .01$ ), claims of responsibility were 13 times more likely to be announced after a suicide attack than non-suicidal forms of terrorism. More specifically, only six of the 69 suicide attacks included in this analysis were committed anonymously, despite the fact that most were conducted during the height of Israel's military crackdown during the second *intifada*.

## Conclusion

The analysis presented above lends a measure of support to existing explanations of the conditions under which claims

of responsibility are offered for acts of terrorism. The ideological mix of terrorist organizations – intensity of militarized counter-terrorism efforts, use of suicide bombers, and intensity of grievances – all appear related to the probability of credit-taking, although not always in anticipated ways. Only the degree of state sponsorship did not influence credit-taking, but here too the analysis hinted that there may be a complex relationship between tactics, targets, and claims of responsibility that requires study.

The results also suggest that the ability of groups to project clear messages about themselves influences credit-taking. Groups want sympathizers to know about their violent activities to attract their support. The problem is that the more groups there are that rely on terrorism, the harder it is for supporters to know whom to reward for successful resistance. Claims of responsibility solve this information problem by enabling perpetrators of terrorism to identify themselves to potential supporters, who can then provide backing for subsequent actions.

Consistent with this perspective, the analysis presented in this article suggests a robust relationship between the number of terrorist organizations and the probability of credit-taking in the Israeli conflict theater. In several tests, measures of competitive context consistently emerged as an important predictor of credit-taking, even controlling for more traditional explanations. The empirical results further suggest that the relationship between competitive context and credit-taking follows a sigmoidal path. Adding groups to a small number of competitors produces larger changes in the probability of credit-taking than the addition of groups to relatively populous terrorist campaigns.

In substantive terms, the results shed light on the underlying motivations for terrorism. Consistent with much of the work on terrorism more generally, credit-taking is seen as something groups do because they are ideologically committed to political goals, interested in drawing attention to communal grievances, or trying to build support for suicide missions. Groups that hide their involvement in acts of terror do so because they fear retaliation by enemy governments or because they are trying to keep the support of foreign governments secret. In contrast, the results of this research suggest that organizational imperatives affect the strategy of terrorism. The need for constituent support pushes groups to act as much or more than the enemy's tactics or the long-term goals groups pursue.

While results from the Israeli conflict theater may be influenced by groups that are unusually connected to their constituents and have preferential access to the media, the findings nevertheless suggest lines of research that are worth pursuing. First, terrorist violence may be designed as much for the supporters of terrorism as it is for the opponents. Groups with staying power, perhaps even those that profess fanatical ideas, survive by attending to their constituents.

Second, terrorist organizations are sensitive to disruptions in the information environment. Changes in the competitive context groups face influence the probability of credit-taking because the number of active groups affects the ease with

which groups are able to communicate with supporters. Violence intended for an enemy does not require persistent credit-taking once demands are communicated, but violence committed to satisfy one's constituents must be claimed if groups are to benefit from their actions. In fact, it appears from the pattern of credit-taking observed in this study that terrorist organizations are sensitive to disruptions in their ability to communicate with potential supporters.

Whether these lessons are borne out in other conflict arenas is a subject for future research. As I discussed earlier, the Israeli conflict theater is not representative of all the places terrorist campaigns are conducted. However, data I collected on claims for transnational attacks in England (i.e. mainland United Kingdom) and Northern Ireland suggest that the competitive pressures groups experience in the Israeli case are also felt elsewhere. Between 1973 and 1998 (the years I have data for), England experienced 532 transnational attacks, 79 of which were claimed (14.8%). This overall claim rate is more than 3.5 times (3.78) smaller than the one observed in the Israeli arena, even though transnational attacks were more frequent in England than Israel (532 vs. 356). The difference in observed claim rates is consistent with the competitive context hypothesis since the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) operated virtually alone in England while groups in Israel had multiple competitors.

Adding data on transnational attacks in Northern Ireland provides another useful comparison, for unlike England, this was an arena in which the PIRA had competitors (e.g. INLA). Over the period 1973–98, ten claims (55.5%) were issued for the 21 transnational attacks committed in Northern Ireland. This rate is similar in magnitude to the one observed in the competitive Israeli arena and 3.75 times larger than the rate observed in England. The change from an international to a local 'market' appears to have a dramatic effect on the likelihood of credit-taking. In this case, the reason appears to be related to the number of terrorist organizations active in each place. Absent interference from others, groups need not take credit for acts of terror to get their messages out. In non-competitive arenas, supporters of terrorism can hear their suppliers' calls just fine.

## Replication data

The dataset, do-file, and appendix for the empirical analysis in this article can be found at <http://www.prio.no/jpr/datasets> and on the author's website: <https://sites.google.com/site/amhst20/home/terrorism>.

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