

False Dichotomy: How Both Psychology and Strategic Incentives Influence Terrorist Groups and Violent Social Movements

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Tricia Bacon²

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Thomas Zeitzoff³

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

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ABSTRACT

Why do violent social movements target civilians for violence? Most of the existing literature on terrorist groups argues that either psychological or strategic motivations better explain this kind of violence, and mostly the context of civil wars and insurgencies. Group and movement leaders have balance between ideological and logistical resources. This tradeoff has two consequences. First, it determines the kind and level of violence a group will employ against civilians. The tradeoff between ideological and logistical concerns also influences the kind of recruit the group will attract, which further affects its willingness to employ violence against civilians. We use case studies of the Al Qaida in Iraq (AQI) and the Weatherman to show the utility of our framework for understanding the different approaches of these groups to targeting civilians. Finally we conclude with thoughts about how our framework can understand the threats posted by post-caliphate ISIS and violent white nationalist movements in the West.

¹ Includes Main Text and Footnotes, but excludes references and abstract.

² bacon@american.edu

³ zeitsoff@american.edu

*“There is a temptation to rehearse this observation—that jihadists are modern secular people, with modern political concerns, wearing medieval religious disguise—and make it fit the Islamic State. In fact, much of what the group does looks nonsensical except in light of a sincere, carefully considered commitment to returning civilization to a seventh-century legal environment, and ultimately to bringing about the apocalypse.”- Graeme Wood *The Atlantic* 2015.*

*“There is a natural tendency to shy away from treating terrorists as rational actors. It is not comfortable, after all, to work through logical arguments that justify killing innocent civilians to achieve political change, nor is it comfortable to think of murderers as having logical reasons for what they do. Yet there is ample evidence that terrorists behavior rationally in most respects.” - Jacob N. Shapiro, *Terrorist Dilemmas* (p. 20)*

Motivation

Violent social movements perpetrating political violence continues to be one of the largest national security threats facing the US and Western Europe. Despite ISIS’s retreat in Iraq and Syria, they, and other Salafai-jihadist groups have made inroads and allied themselves with militant groups and insurgencies across Africa and Asia (Mir 2019; Byman 2019). The large numbers of foreign fighters that have gone to fight in Syria, as well as these other conflicts represent a large threat to their host countries if/when they return (Benmelech and Klor 2018; Hegghammer 2013; Malet and Hayes 2018).

Yet Salafi-jihadism is not the only global security threat from violent social movements. Across the West there has been a growth of radical right, nationalistic groups that oppose immigration and are linked to several high profile attacks (*The Economist* 2019). These include the Christchurch, New Zealand mosque shooting in March of 2019 that killed more than 50 people and the 2019 El Paso, Texas shooting that killed 22 (Lorenz 2019; *The*

Economist 2019). Some see these allied radical right movements as a larger threat to Western governments than Salafi jihadists (Friedman 2019). Many of these radical right groups are also associated with and represented by mainstream political parties.⁴ All of these factors have policymakers increasingly concerned about the growing threat from transnational, right-wing extremism (Davies and Doering 2019; Piazza 2017).

Threats from violent social movements are both diverse and acute. Our central research question is: what explains variation in the use of violence against civilians by certain groups within social movements? Some groups within the very same social movement vary significantly in their willingness to use violence against civilians. So why do some groups engage in widespread violence against civilians, while others use more targeted violence, or abstain from violence all together?⁵ We argue that the answer to this question lies in how leaders choose to balance ideological versus strategic concerns, and how this balance in turn influences tactics. Given the large effects from terrorism on security, voting, domestic, and foreign policy (Bali 2007; Enders and Sandler 2011; Getmanksy, Anna and Zeitzoff 2014; Mueller and Stewart 2014), understanding the strategies and motivations for militant groups violence against civilians are crucial.

After the 9/11 attacks, a large amount of research focused on terrorism, and why certain social movements target civilians with violence (Findley and Young 2011; Hoffman 2002).

⁴ See (Mudde 2018)

⁵ For instance, many Salafists openly eschew politics, or rarely confront state authorities. Only a minor percentage openly support violence, and in particular violence against civilians or perceived non-believers (Salafi-jihadism). See (Dar and Hamid 2016).

This research focused on explaining terrorist tactics (Bueno de Mesquita and Dickson 2007; Kydd and Walter 2006; Rosendorff and Sandler 2010), their recruitment strategies (Atran 2011; Blair et al. 2013; Bloom 2005; Krueger and Malečková 2003), why they ally with certain groups (Bacon 2014), and most central to our research--- what explains their motivation and makes them “tick” (Abrahms 2008; Chenoweth et al. 2009; Ginges et al. 2011)?

Most of this research can be divided into two schools of thought. There is the rational choice school that argues that varying terrorist and insurgent behavior⁶ or are motivated by individuals employing violence for strategic objectives, in order to further their goals, and are driven by cost-benefit calculations (Enders and Sandler 2011; Shapiro 2013) and where even ideological extremism is instrumental (Walter 2017). The decision to use certain tactics and manage organizations in certain ways stems from these axioms of maximizing benefits and minimizing costs. In contrast, others see terrorism as driven by psychological or ideological factors, with small group dynamics, sacred values, and deep seated ideological beliefs driving behavior (Ginges et al. 2011; Gómez et al. 2017; McCants 2015; Sageman 2011). Advocates of rational choice or ideological theories of terrorism have gone back and forth marshalling various evidence to prove or disprove theories.

Yet, whether the behavior of individuals involved in violent social movements are driven by ideological concerns or strategic objectives is a false dichotomy. They both matter.

Successful leaders balance the need for ideological cohesion, group mission, with the more strategic, but important goals of financing, organization, and logistical concerns. Failure to

⁶ See the critique of Walter (2017) by Abrahms and Maynard and Thaler (2017).

respond to ideological concerns and a group can become infiltrated by opportunists and criminals, and lose ideological relevance. And groups that don't account for the day-to-day management and running of an organization are prone to collapse. The rational choice versus psychological debate over motivations in the terrorism literature thus obscures a crucial trade-off faced by leaders of groups within violent social movements.

Our framework, where actors' motivations (utilities) include both logistical and ideological components, more accurately describes the mixed motives⁷ of individuals and leaders in violent social movements. Second, and perhaps most importantly, it opens up a new way to understand groups' behavior. Leaders must manage both logistical resources--recruitment, organization, and funding--as well as the ideological and psychological resources of the group--emotions, social solidarity, ideology, and morale. Leaders of groups involved in violent social movements are cognizant of these dual resources and pay careful attention to managing them.

Recent insights from psychology, political science, and economics all support our fundamental argument about mixed motives driving human behavior. Individuals are motivated by a mix of rational (strategic concerns, money, power) and psychological concerns (moral values, emotions, fairness, and ideology). Individuals are willing to sacrifice money or time to "get even" (Abbink and Herrmann 2009; Abbink and Sadrieh 2009; Fehr and Gächter

⁷ E.g. ISIS in addition to providing an extreme ideology, also provided social services and security enforcement for local populations. See (Zucchino 2017; Zelin 2014)

2002); interpret facts in biased ways to fit their worldview (Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017); place great value on groups and camaraderie (Gómez et al. 2017; McClendon 2014; Whitehouse et al. 2014); and emotions can sometimes be even more powerful than money in getting people to act (Ariely, Bracha, and Meier 2009; Thaler 2015).

We argue that leaders of groups within violent social movements have two crucial choices to make. First, they must figure out how to manage the spirit, convictions, and the overall mission of the group. We refer to this as the group's "ideological resources." Second, they must deal with more operational choices such as how to fund an organization, how to manage members, what internal decision-making should look like, and crucially what choices should be made to try to ensure the survival of the group and its position within the movement. These we refer to as "logistical resources." Sometimes there is no tension in violent social movements between choices about ideological and logistical resources, and leaders are thus free to make independent choices about logistics and ideology (independent). Other times ideology can bolster the logistical resources of the group, and the two end up being mutually beneficial (complements). Finally they may be in opposition, where groups and individuals decide how much weight they choose to give towards ideological needs versus strategic needs (substitutes).

Leaders' decisions about logistical and psychological resources determine several important behaviors of groups involved in violent social movements. We focus on two related outcomes of this resource management trade-off made by leaders. First, leaders have to choose how

much to emphasize psychological or logistical resources which in turn influences the choices leaders make about tactics and the acceptability of violence against civilians and non-combatants (Downes 2006). Leaders have to be strategic about the kind of violence they employ to ensure that their group and movement has sufficient material resources for survival, but also not so strategic that they lose the ideological orientation of their group. Second, this trade-off and its effect on decisions about the acceptability of violence against civilians determines the kinds of recruits a group attracts. Does the group attract violent fanatics, undisciplined thugs, professional criminals, or organized believers? These recruits in turn further influence the tactics of violence a group will employ.

Our theory and framework is related to other theories that argue that terrorist group behavior is determined by internal politics (Crenshaw 1987; Mesquita and Bueno 2008; Shapiro 2013; Weinstein 2006), and theories of armed politics (Staniland 2017). Yet, we distinguish our theory from others by incorporating both rational choice and ideological theories into a unified framework and show how they are connected to the organization of groups, their recruitment strategy, and violence against civilians. Given the prominent role that terrorist attacks against civilian targets play in both terror groups' calculations and counter-terror responses, our theory advances our understanding of the production of violence by insurgent groups.⁸

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. We first discuss previous rational choice and psychological theories of terrorism, as well as recent advances in relevant theories of

⁸ A large literature exists on why rebel groups harm civilians during wartime. See (Azam and Hoeffler 2002; Balcells 2010; Wood 2010) Note our study is not explicitly about civil war, but more generally about why social movements employ violence against civilians whether during wartime or not.

cognition and motivations across psychology, political science, and economics. We then introduce our theory of violent social movements and discuss how it influences recruitment, management and organization, and decisions related to violence and tactics, particularly violence against civilians. To show the broad explanatory value of our theory we apply it to two groups that faced very different contexts and adhered to very different ideologies, but were still subject to the constraints of managing logistical and ideological resources: al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) and the Weathermen. These most different cases show how groups adopted opposite approaches to targeting civilians--one indiscriminate and willing to target civilians and the other selective and unwilling to do so--differences explained through the proposed framework. Finally we conclude with thoughts on how our theory generalizes to the cases of ISIS post-Caliphate and white nationalist social movements in Western Europe and the U.S.

Existing Theories of Terrorism and Political Violence

Psychological theories

Psychological theories of violent social movement can be broadly grouped into three complementary explanations for political violence and terrorism--emotions and grievances, ideology, and social bonds.

Emotional-based theories of terrorism and violent social movements argue that grievances best explain recruitment and tactics (Hazelton 2017). Individuals participate in these movements due to hatred, alienation, and anger that then motivates violence against certain

targeted groups (Goodwin 2006; Gurr 1970; Post 2007; Victoroff 2005). There are three major arguments that emotional theories make to connect grievances to explain terrorist violence. 1) Emotions provide non-material incentives to solve collective action problems. Individuals feel anger, pride towards the ingroup, etc., and this provides the motivation for individuals to engage in costly political violence. 2) Most of these theories argue that emotional motivations do not fit the cost-benefit style that rational choice or strategic arguments make about participation. 3) The intensity of negative emotions both predicts the likelihood of participation of and the willingness to engage in violence

A second set of theories focuses on the underlying ideology, morality, or worldview for terrorists. Some of these theories focus on how a black and white world view which divides the world between allies and enemies, and obsession with an underlying grievance get grafted onto an ideology that justifies violence (see Victoroff 2005)). Others focus on the perceived violation of sacred values and morality as a key explainer of participation and support for violence (Atran 2011; Ginges et al. 2011; Gómez et al. 2017). All of these theories argue that the ideology of violent social movements both serves as an attraction for new recruits, as well as a means to justify tactics and violence.

Finally, a distinct, but related group of theories focus on social identity and small group behavior as the defining characteristic that explains the emergence and dynamics of violent social movements (Abrahms 2008; Chenoweth et al 2009). Individuals join groups and participate in violence out of an affinity to a close-knit network or social grouping. Radicalization happens when central individuals within a group, or network become

radicalized and then “recruit” others to follow them (Sageman 2011). Furthermore, participation and willingness to sacrifice one’s life, or engage in violence against civilian targets is a product of the perceived fusion of one’s core identity with that of the group. Individuals in these groups feel a kinship that motivates extreme sacrifice as well as violence against those that are perceived as threatening (Gómez et al. 2017; Sheikh et al. 2014; Whitehouse et al. 2014).

These three psychological arguments of violent social movements--emotional, ideological, and small-group-focused--are not mutually exclusive. For instance many groups can fit all three explanations: their members were angered and alienated, and were eventually radicalized in their worldview by members of their close social network. However, all of these psychological theories share a common thread--namely that terrorism and violent social movements’ behavior--both recruitment and tactics-- are better understood as being driven by fundamental psychological needs. Yet, a shortcoming of these theories is that many groups with similar ideologies pursue very different tactical choices.⁹ As we discuss below, a second set of theories ascribed to rational choice view terrorism and violent social movements through the lens of strategic behavior and cost benefit calculations.

Rational choice theories

⁹ For instance, in the Syrian Civil War Al-Nusra Front and ISIS both held similar ideologies and were both offshoots from Al Qaida in Iraq. Yet they differed in both their immediate goal to declare a caliphate, but also in their willingness to work with Al-Qaida Central command in Afghanistan. These choices are also reflected in ISIS’s greater willingness to attack local regimes and populations in Syria and Iraq, as well as engage in widespread violence against civilians. In contrast Al-Nusra has been more restrained. See (Byman 2015)

The guiding precept of rational choice theory is that individuals take actions that are in their narrow self interest. In the context of political violence this is usually expressed as individuals engage in violence, or group leaders choose violence, when the benefits are greater than costs. Rational choice theories of terrorism can further be broken down into four distinct categories.

First terrorist violence can serve as a form of intimidation meant to raise the cost of a targeted government or group from continuing a certain policy. Examples of this can be seen in the 1982 Beirut barracks bombings, the 2004 Madrid train bombings, and terrorist violence against so-called occupying or targeted enemies (Bali 2007; Bell 1976; Montalvo 2010; Pape 2006). Terrorism is thus a tactic of coercion designed to impose costs on incumbent governments, or occupying forces, by turning a targeted populace against it.

Second, terrorism can be used to create a 'backlash.' Groups may employ terror in order to provoke a harsh response from a target or scuttle any peace deal (Kydd and Walter 2006). This type of violence is designed to polarize the population and make compromise difficult. For instance, in 2006 AQI bombed one of the most holy sites in Shia Islam, the al-Askari mosque, which led to further reprisal killings and sectarian violence between Sunni and Shia between 2006-2008 (Cave and Bowley 2007). A similar dynamic occurred in the post-Oslo Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with Hamas engaging in a series of high profile suicide to turn Jewish-Israeli public opinion against the peace accords and marginalize pro-peace factions with the Palestinian Authority (Gupta and Mundra 2005).

Third violence targeting civilians can be a result of factional disputes between various parts of an organization (Bell 1976; Crenshaw 1987; Mesquita and Bueno 2008). This is related, but distinct from the backlash effect. Groups and movements have divergent preferences over outcomes. Hardline factions may choose to jockey with moderate and use violence against civilians to press their preferences. For instance, in Northern Ireland various factions of the Irish Republican Army have split several times following negotiations with the British (Morrison 2017).

Finally, violence employed by terror groups might be a result of organizational weakness. Certain kinds of organizations may attract or recruit a particular type of recruit that are more ruthless or prone to attack civilians (Shapiro 2013; Weinstein 2006). Moreover, some organizations may lose leaders through arrest or assassination or lack command and control, and thus violence is a byproduct of a lack of control (Abrahms and Potter 2015; Jordan 2014).

The rational choice approach to understanding terrorism violence is useful because it shows that even ideological, cruel violence can have a strategic logic. Furthermore, it provides a framework for how internal group politics play a pivotal role in terrorist violence, with backlash, factionalism, and organizational disarray all being positively related to terror violence. Yet, a key shortcoming of these theories is that ideological concerns are relegated to secondary importance, or assumed to be exogenous to strategic explanations. Central to the motivations of many foot soldiers as well as leaders are ideological goals. Finally it does not account for the importance that competing identity and emotional motivations play in determining behavior.

Towards a Behavioral Framework for the Production Violence

Our theory bridges the gap between rational choice and psychological theories of terrorism by arguing that psychological and rational choice theories explain different facets of groups and individuals in violent social movements. Psychological theories emphasize the importance of ideological resources, such as camaraderie and ideological orientation of a group. Rational choice theories of terrorism focus on how logistical constraints shape terrorist strategies. Our theory provides a unified framework for both of these approaches. We focus on leaders of terrorist groups that are part of broader violent social movements, since these are the individuals who are making choices about ideological orientation, tactics, organization structure, and balancing competing interests.

Leaders of groups within violent social movements face a fundamental dilemma: how do they balance the logistical challenges of their group—the security context, payments, organizational structure, and realpolitik of their organization—with the more ideological components of their group—the ideological vision and emotional solidarity they provide to their members? Leaders must make choices about how to weigh these logistical and ideological resources. Sometimes logistical and ideological resources are complements, whereby increasing the emphasis on ideological components of a group can strengthen the logistical resources of a group. Yet this situation is the exception rather than the rule. Most leaders and violent social movements face trade-offs between these ideological and logistical

components. Leaders who become too ideologically rigid risk their groups collapsing from organizational problems. Conversely, leaders who are too ideologically flexible allow their groups to be infiltrated by opportunists and criminals and risk irrelevance.

Leaders thus calibrate their group's ideological orientation to the demands of their group's logistical resources. This is analogous to how politicians balance various constituencies of support which in turn determines how they campaign—e.g., do they run as a consensus builder or outside agitator? The calibration by terrorist group leaders determines the group's core constituency and which type of recruit they are likely to attract. Leaders have to satisfy the ideological goals of their core constituency and members, but also remain ideologically flexible enough to address the logistical challenges and political context.

This calibration between ideological and logistical components answers two crucial questions for leaders: 1) who are the group's core constituencies to find recruits and support? And 2) how will the group be organized--will it be a loosely affiliated network, or a tight hierarchy? The organizational structure and constituencies both in turn influence how much groups are willing to perpetrate violence against civilians and non-combatants. Thus the decision to employ violence against civilians is both a direct and indirect result of choices leaders make about the ideological and logistical orientation of their group. Figure 1 below shows this relationship.

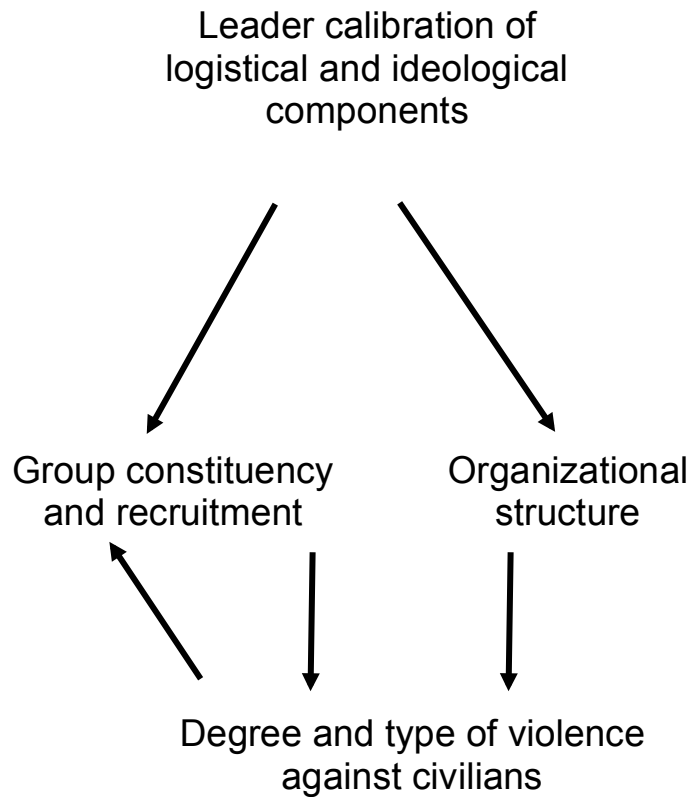


FIGURE 1: The effects of leader calibration on recruitment, organization and violence

We argue that the type of violence a group engages in influences the kind of recruits it attracts. Violence that is highly targeted against military and government forces versus indiscriminate civilian violence will have differential effects in the kinds of followers attracted to a group. Likewise violence that is motivated by logistical concerns, such as looting of resources, will have very different recruitment effects compared to violence that is ideologically driven. Groups that use targeted, ideological violence are more likely to attract disciplined recruits. In contrast, groups that engage in widespread, extortive violence against civilians will attract undisciplined criminal thugs.

The effect of indiscriminate violence is moderated by the underlying motivation for the violence (see Table 1). Groups that use logistical and material-driven violence to target the civilian population (looting, sexual violence, and killings) attract undisciplined thugs. For example, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone's Civil War (1991-2002) engaged in widespread atrocities ("Shocking War Crimes in Sierra Leone" 1999). This was an intentional strategy by leaders who used the easy access of alluvial diamonds as a strategy to entice "thugs, drug users, and tools of the political elite" from Freetown to joining the RUF (Weinstein 2006, p. 617). In contrast, organizations that engage in targeted, logistical violence are likely to attract professional criminals. In Mexico in 2013 the *autodefensa* movement (literally self-defense in Spanish) took hold in southwest Mexico, particularly the states of Michoacan and Guerrero, as locals banded together to thwart violence and extortion of local cartels (Phillips 2017). Yet, many of these same *autodefensa* groups were infiltrated by cartel members and began to take the place of the local cartels, extorting the local population and engaging in drug trafficking (Woody 2016; Lohmuller 2017).

One question might be how our theory applies to violent social movements that are decentralized or have diffuse organizations, or leaderless resistance groups. Yet decisions to eschew a hierarchical organization, in favor of more decentralized movement is a strategic choice that leaders make given the ideological and logistical constraints. For example, ISIS's 2014 missive urged its followers in the West to "If you are not able to find an IED or a bullet, then single out the disbelieving American, Frenchman or any of their allies. Smash his head with a rock or slaughter him with a knife or run him over with your car or throw him down from a high place or choke him or poison him" (CNN 2019). This decision to attack far-off

targets using lone attacks is a choice movement leaders make when logistical constraints and counter-terror pressures prevent more formal, organized attacks. Prominent white supremacist and former KKK member Louis Beam summed up this idea of leaderless resistance as a strategic response to logistical weakness, “Let the coming night be filled with a thousand points of resistance. Like the fog which forms when conditions are right and disappears when they are not, so must the resistance to tyranny be” (Beam 1992, p. 6).

The focus of our current paper is on how leaders and terrorist groups manage ideological violence, and in particular the choice to engage in targeted versus more widespread violence. We do this via a comparison of the tactical choices of most different cases in the Weather Underground and al-Qaida in Iraq.

MOTIVATION BEHIND VIOLENCE	TYPE OF VIOLENCE		
		<i>Widespread violence, including against civilians</i>	<i>Targeted violence</i>
	<i>Ideological</i>	Violent Fanatics (Al Qaida in Iraq)	Disciplined Believers (Weather Underground)
	<i>Logistical/Material Resources-Driven</i>	Undisciplined Thugs (RUF in Sierra Leone)	Professional Criminals (Cartels)

TABLE 1: Effect of motivation and type of violence on type of recruits

The Weather Underground Organization

As the 1960s came to a close, a violent far left movement, dubbed the New Left, emerged in virtually every hemisphere (Hoffman 2006, 63; Rapoport 2001). They rebelled against their

governments and the U.S.-led “imperialist” world order (ibid). Many were galvanized by the ferocity of the Viet Cong’s opposition to the United States, but most still focused on their parochial agendas in practice.

Many of the leftist groups engaged in a “theatrical” form of terrorism, meaning acts of violence that would seize attention for their cause, including hostage takings, hijackings, kidnappings, and targeted assassinations (Rapoport 2001). In contrast to contemporary times where many jihadist groups engage in mass casualty attacks, far left militant groups generally calibrated their attacks to garner attention but limit casualties (Hoffman 2006, 158). This approach led Jenkins to conclude that “[t]errorists want a lot of people watching, not a lot of people dead” (Jenkins 1975). Deliberate tailoring of violence was an “overriding tactical—and indeed ethical—imperative for left-wing terrorists,” according to Hoffman given these groups’ view that their constituency was “the people” (Hoffman 2006, 158)

Even by that standard, after a period of less restrained violence right after its inception, the far left Weathermen adopted a restrained approach to its attacks, engaging in bombings of symbolic targets carefully timed to avoid collateral damage. The combination of its ideologically motivated and targeted violence produced a group of disciplined believers. The Weathermen, subsequently renamed the Weather Underground Organization (WUO), emerged from the Students for a Democratic Society to become a well-known far left militant organization within the US movement. In the early years, the WUO faction was one faction among several within the broader Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Over the course of the 1960s, SDS grew into the most prominent student anti-war organization in the United States. Klimke describes the SDS, with its motto ““Let the people decide!” as an:

open, nondogmatic, and democratic organization, which desired to emancipate itself and break away from the Old Left partly because of the latter's outdated doctrinaire views shaped by anticommunism and the Cold War, but even more so because of its loss of passion (Klimke 2011, 18).

At its peak, SDS had an estimated 100,000 members nationwide (Klimke *The Other Alliance* 15). But it soon became a large and unwieldy umbrella organization. With such rapid growth, internal fissures were not far behind, and SDS began to devour itself in a series of power struggles, disputes over priorities, and ideological debates (Green and Siegel 2003). As the decade wore on, it became clear that the war was not ending, but was in fact escalating, tensions and frustration mounted.

By 1969, SDS was in the throes of a crisis. Fissures had become permanent fault lines as the internecine fighting grew more vicious. As SDS prepared for its annual convention in Chicago in 1969, eleven figures drafted a manifesto entitled, "You Don't Have to be a Weatherman to Know Which Way the Wind Blows," drawing from the lyrics of Bob Dylan's song *Subterranean Homesick Blues*. It laid out "the Weathermen's" vision for the way forward for SDS. They proposed building a "revolutionary youth movement" that would unite students and working-class youth in support of Third World revolutions (Rudd n.d.).

Manifesto signatories would go on to lead the group until it disbanded in 1977, though their individual influence would vary over time. In contrast to many groups, the WUO was led by a clique of leader-founders, rather than by one specific figure. This leadership body was known as the Weather Bureau. The leaders were college-educated, young adults, mainly white and from middle- or upper-class backgrounds. With a few changes, the cabal of leaders remained

fairly constant between 1969 and 1977. Despite being the target of an FBI manhunt for much of that time, none of the leaders were captured until they opted to surrender.

Now at the helm of the divided SDS, the Weathermen clique began experimenting with more confrontational and attention-grabbing tactics as a mobilization strategy. For example, a group of Weathermen ran through public beaches in Chicago carrying NLF flags and chanting “Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh, the NLF is gonna win” (Gilbert 2012, 186). It also sought to attract working class youths by running through the halls of high schools in Pittsburgh calling for students who were being “oppressed by the system” and were thus “metaphorical prisoners” to leave class (Berger 2006, 100). Such guerilla theatre tactics—sometimes involving brawls with locals or the police—epitomized the group’s recruitment and organizing efforts in its early days when it sought to rally the working class. While it viewed the working class as its constituency, it garnered little support and few recruits from this population. It was sometimes even violently rejected by them (Burrough 2015, 75). One of its few working class recruits was actually an FBI informant.

Instead, it mainly found support among educated middle- and upper-class, largely hite, educated youths. Weathermen members were overwhelmingly intelligent and promising college students or recent graduates from prestigious institutions. Berger characterized the group as comprised of America’s “darling children” (Berger 2006, 150). Indeed, one Weather Bureau leader described his childhood home as “straight off the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post*... oak-lined streets, the volunteer fire department, the Busy Bee Barber” (Ayers 2009, 197).

The SDS/Weathermen leadership then decided it was time to escalate from small-scale acts of theatrical resistance to mass action. The centerpiece of this strategy was an event in Chicago. Dubbed “the Days of Rage,” the Weathermen envisioned it as a large-scale confrontation with police, timed to coincide with the beginning of the Chicago 8 trial and the second anniversary of the death of Che Guevara. The group deliberately chose Chicago—the site of mayhem during protests against the Democratic National Convention in 1968—because of the city’s reputation for heavy-handedness. The event was designed to be an inflammatory, offensive move, which would provoke the government to overreact and thereby expose its “true face” as an oppressor (Berger 2006, 107). The Weathermen anticipated tens of thousands of working class White youth descending on the streets for a fight with the Chicago police (Berger 2006, 108).

But the Days of Rage was not a mass action (United States Congress Senate Committee on the Judiciary Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security 1975, 15). The turnout fell dramatically short of its organizers’ expectations as a few hundred protesters—a maximum of 600, according to high-end estimates—trickled in (Varon 2004, 82). Nonetheless, the event went forward, and the group got its awaited brawl with the police. In the ensuing havoc, almost 300 people were arrested, and dozens were injured.

Disappointed with “White complicity and complacency,” the group decided to abandon efforts at mass mobilization and go underground as an “elite fighting force” (Jacobs 1997, 87). In January 1970, the Weathermen officially closed the SDS National Office, an act that crystallized the group’s decision to abandon mass mobilization (Berger 2006, 124). The group

prepared to escalate its attacks, with four leaders within the Weather Bureau advocating greater violence taking the reins (Burrough 2015, 82).

Moving Underground and Calibrating Violence

In the shift from a mass movement to a fighting force, more members left and the leaders dropped those deemed insufficiently committed from the organization. As part of SDS, the Weathermen lived carefully but openly. But now the group shifted to operating underground, i.e. living clandestinely to avoid being captured by law enforcement. The need to operate underground securely weighed prominently in the leaders' approach to organizing, which was to function in compartmentalized factions, known as collectives, in major cities throughout the US. The Weather Bureau tightly controlled the flow of information between the collectives. Collectives were not aware of one another's plans and virtually all communication with the leadership was done verbally (Jacob 95). For security reasons, the "need to know" principle governed access to all information, but this also contributed to the group's hierarchical culture (Ayers 2009, 205–28). In the group's earlier years, monogamous relationships were not permitted. Individuals were even moved among the collectives in part to prevent attachments between members (Varon 2004, 58). The group gradually moved away from the impersonal, controlled concept of collectives as the primary organizational unit to a "family" approach. Families were still groupings of Weathermen who lived together, though members were encouraged to share bonds deeper than their revolutionary politics within families (Jacobs 1997, 124).

In early 1970, the Weathermen commenced small-scale attacks, such as throwing Molotov cocktails at police cars and military recruiting stations. Up until that point, the Weathermen's

actions had not caused any fatalities, though it had come precariously close. It was more luck than a deliberate decision that fatalities, especially among police, had not occurred. The Weather Bureau, recognized the possibility that fatalities might occur during the Days of Rage, and some members were prepared, even eager, to inflict that kind of violence on police targets in particular (Ayers 2009, 199; Burroughs 2015, 68). As one leader later reflected, the group had not yet been able to “resolve the question of how militant, how far would we go. Some people felt, literally, that the bigger mess we could make, the better” (Green and Siegel 2003). In the wake of its failure to mobilize the masses, the group increasingly saw those who were not with it as being against it and thus, some members argued for expanding the set of acceptable targets (Green and Siegel 2003). Police in particular were seen as valid targets, as were military personnel because of their role in oppressing minorities (Burrough 2015, 90-94) Moreover, the Weathermen were operating in an overall environment of escalating far left violence in the United States. From September 1969 to May 1970, there was, on average, one bombing in the United States everyday (Berger 2006, 116).

Then, on March 6, 1970, an explosion leveled a townhouse in Greenwich Village in New York City. Two women emerged from the wreckage and then fled without a trace. Three did not survive the blast, including a leader advocating greater violence. The New York collective was using the townhouse, owned by the parents of one of the women who escaped, as a bomb-making factory. A nail bomb being fabricated short-circuited and detonated while a member was working on it (Ayers 2009, 191–93). The collective was preparing to attack a non-commissioned officers’ dance at Fort Dix in New Jersey: an attack that would have deliberately targeted people. The attack was justified as a “pre-emptive strike against those who would soon drop bombs over Vietnam” (Berger 2006, 129).

The townhouse explosion precipitated the kind of reflection that the Days of Rage had not. One member concluded that a calamity like the townhouse explosion was inevitable. “There were just too many people doing too many things with too little political and technical preparation,” he lamented (Berger 2006, 131). The remaining members of the group were badly shaken by the death of their friends and the implications of the plot. They paused to re-evaluate the Weathermen’s direction at a secret meeting in California the following month. On the verge of a serious escalation in violence, the Weather Bureau reversed course and decided to engage only in what it called “armed propaganda.” In practice, this meant that the group would refrain from targeting people and would undertake precautions so that people would not be harmed as a result of its attacks. The Weather Bureau expelled a hardline leader who continued to advocate for greater violence. From this point forward, it vowed to only conduct attacks against symbolic targets timed to avoid casualties, though some leaders would later falsely claim that the group always employed such restraint (Ayers 2009, 213–15; Burrough 2015, 121-124).

A Campaign of Armed Propaganda: Balancing the Ideological and the Logistical Considerations

The Weathermen’s core ideological mission remained unchanged: to support national liberation movements, with the “American Black liberation movement” and Viet Cong at the top of its agenda. As Jacob summed it up, for the Weathermen “revolution meant to fight in support of wars of national liberation in the third world and to eventually install a socialist government in the U.S. in support of third world revolutions” (Jacobs 1997, 69). After the townhouse explosion, the group commenced a highly ideological armed propaganda campaign, taking pains to issue communiques that explained its worldview as well as the

rationale for every individual act. At times, one leader admitted, “the group was practically taken over by words” (Ayers 2009, 240).

However, the townhouse explosion also escalated the pressure from the US government. As a result, the group’s main logistical concern after 1970 was managing its collectives so that members could not only live without being captured but could also conduct operations.

Nonetheless, the Weathermen generally did not engage in violent acts motivated by the need for resources; its attacks were driven by ideological considerations. Unlike other comparable far left groups operating in the West, like the Red Army Faction in West Germany, the WUO did not engage in criminal acts like bank robberies or kidnappings to acquire funds. One

exception to this is arguably the group’s involvement in helping Timothy Leary escape from prison in 1970. Leary was a well-known counter-culture figure and former psychology professor at Harvard University who extolled the benefits of the drug LSD. The

Weathermen’s main role was facilitating his travel to Algiers after he scaled the fence at the prison and met with a Weathermen getaway car. The Weathermen—paid \$20-25,000 by a group of Leary followers—built support among counter-culture elements in addition to getting a quick influx of cash. Labeling Leary as a “political prisoner,” the Weathermen characterized its assistance as a “revolutionary act” (Berger 2006, 139). In general though, the socio-economic background of its members helped the group to get sufficient funds through friends, families, and sympathizers, though some engaged in petty non-violent crimes like check fraud.

As the group went underground, the Weather Bureau purged the group of members it deemed inadequate, insufficiently committed, potential informants, or in some cases, simply out of contact or in prison at the wrong time (Varon 2004, 171). Operating underground reinforced

its tendency to be selective in recruitment, but it also limited the group's ability to grow. Members severed friendships and other connections outside of the group in order to protect the group's security and ensure complete loyalty to the group (Berger 2006, 105; Ayers 2009, 227). While this posture had benefits in terms of security, Varon pointed out that "[t]he self-imposed isolation of the members in tight-knit collectives, where doubts were taken as a sign of weakness, served to reinforce their questionable assumptions" (Varon 2004, 109).

Operating underground and in collectives also contributed to the group's rigid and severe organizational culture, which required members to renounce their "bourgeois" ways (Varon 2004, 57). As one Weather Bureau leader explained, they believed that this was necessary in order "to transform a group of relatively privileged groups of students into fighters and steel ourselves for what we saw as the upcoming upheaval" (Green and Siegel 2003). Most members lived together in sparse, minimal housing with few amenities. All property and money was collectively owned. The group conducted intensive self-criticism sessions that required individuals to recognize, confront, and be disparaged for their "revolutionary shortcomings." They were a way for the group to break down individual members and then indoctrinate them, in a quest to build stronger revolutionaries (Varon 2004, 59). This organizational culture gradually relaxed over time, although the group remained firmly hierarchical—consistent with the principle of "democratic centralism" (Varon 2004, 294).

Over the next seven years, the Weathermen lived up to its April 1970 pledge to pursue "armed propaganda" (Ayers 2009, 227). It became adept at striking targets associated with current grievances while avoiding fatalities. After the 1970 townhouse explosion, the group implemented precautions to ensure that no one was harmed in its future operations. It was remarkably successful, conducting dozens of attacks without inflicting collateral damage or

injuring any of its own members (The Reminiscences of David Gilbert 1985, 217). Its attacks generally consisted of small explosive devices timed to detonate in the middle of the night when people would not be present. Targets were surveilled during business hours to determine the layout and appropriate spot to place the explosive device and then cased again after hours in order to ensure no one would be in danger when the bomb was timed to detonate (Berger 2006, 154). As an additional safeguard, the group phoned in warnings to both the police and the media prior to the bombs' detonation (Ayers 2009, 199).

The WUO used its attacks to reinforce its narrative by selecting targets that represented American "imperialist" power and striking the institutions that oppressed the people and operated the "war machine" (Ayers 2009, 235). The group characterized its bombings as being driven by three motives: 1) retaliation for crimes committed against Black and Third World people; 2) a desire to "disrupt and agitate against U.S. aggression and terror against Vietnam and the Third World;" and 3) an effort to draw attention to the forces that oppress the people. The profile of its members helped the group to access these targets. One member conceded that the group's composition even helped it to limit its violence, explaining

[t]here's a way in which the Weather Underground, compared to what the Black Liberation Army was dealing with and what the FALN had to deal with, was still the white, middle-class underground. It wasn't a situation in which our own communities were being killed. And so there was a way in which we comfortably limited the level of violence we took on... which limited the amount of solidarity we provided Third World struggles (The Reminiscences of David Gilbert 1985, 218).

In 1970 alone, the Weathermen conducted about a dozen small-scale bombings in response to “imperialist oppression.” In May, the group bombed the National Guard headquarters after the shooting of Kent State University students by Guardsmen who were deployed to quell unrest on campus. On the eleventh anniversary of the Cuban revolution, the Weathermen conducted bombings at the Presidio Army Base in San Francisco and a Bank of America branch in New York City. The group bombed the Marin County Hall of Justice in retaliation for the shooting of the brother of George Jackson, a prison reform activist. Other targets the Weathermen struck that year included the New York Police Department Headquarters, courthouses in Long Island and Queens, the San Francisco Hall of Justice, and a bank in New York City (Green and Siegel 2003; United States Congress Senate Committee on the Judiciary Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security 1975). The group also destroyed the Haymarket Square statue in Chicago for a second time. The Weathermen’s last action in 1970 was conducted by its women’s brigade. It struck Harvard University’s Center for International Affairs. The Center conducted counter-insurgency research for the U.S. Government and was a previous employer of former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger (Berger 2006, 143). In response, the FBI announced “one of the most intensive manhunts in FBI history” for the group’s leaders (United States Congress Senate Committee on the Judiciary Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security 1975, 28).

The Weathermen reflected on its actions and the events of 1970 in a communiqué named after another Bob Dylan song “New Morning, Changing Weather.” It acknowledged that the group’s “tendency to consider only bombings or picking up the gun as revolutionary, with the

glorification of armed action as a “military error” and also confessed mistakes due to its “technical inexperience” (Jacobs 1997, 123).

While its targets remained high profile, the overall tempo of the WUO’s attacks slowed after 1970 (Ayers 2009, 267). A significant amount of time, attention, and resources were spent simply living and functioning underground. In the spring of 1971, the FBI nearly captured most of the group’s West Coast membership, including several founding members. Having barely slipped the FBI’s noose, the West Coast collective was forced to re-establish its entire underground network and heighten its security posture. This corresponded with a decline in the frequency of attacks as the group was consumed with its own security (Ayers 2009, 259).

Nonetheless, the WUO expressed its ongoing opposition to U.S. military actions in Southeast Asia by striking two of the most coveted symbols of American power. It bombed the Capitol in February 1971, causing \$300,000 in damage, to protest the U.S. invasion of Laos. Then in May 1972, the group detonated a bomb in the Pentagon—causing tens of thousands of dollars of damage—after President Nixon ordered a bombing campaign in North and South Vietnam to subdue a renewed insurgent offensive (Ayers 2009, 264–65).

Prisons in particular were seen by the WUO as a way for a society “run by white racists to maintain its control” (Berger 2006, 169). Therefore, symbols associated with the prison system were prime targets for the organization, especially when prison unrest made headlines in 1971. For example, the group struck the Office of California Prisons in Sacramento, San Mateo, and San Francisco in retaliation for the killing of Black Panther member and prison reform figure George Jackson by prison guards at San Quentin prison during an alleged

escape attempt. It then hit the New York Department of Corrections following the state's forceful response to the uprising at Attica prison in September 1971.

However, the size of the group dwindled to double digits, as members drifted away from the organization and recruitment was difficult because of the group's logistical concerns (Jacobs 1997, 151). What remained of the group had become fairly adept at functioning underground, and those members remained committed to their cause as well as to one another (Jacobs 1997, 144–45).

With the Paris Peace Treaty and the cessation of the draft, the Vietnam War lost some of its urgency, requiring the WUO to adapt to the changed context (Ayers 2009, 275). The group turned its attention to issues that had been a lower priority to date and reacted to events in other parts of the world. For example, in 1973, a U.S.-backed military coup installed General Augusto Pinochet in Chile and removed the elected Communist government from power.

International Telephone and Telegraph (ITT) was among the American companies that had agitated for such a change after its \$200 million investment appeared to be in jeopardy under the Communist government in power. In the fall of 1973, the WUO struck ITT's headquarters in New York City, accusing the company and the U.S. Government of subverting democracy in Chile (Berger 2006, 169). While it had consistently voiced sympathy and support for Third World struggles, especially in Latin America, this was the first attack that the WUO attributed specifically to an event in the region. The WUO similarly weighed in on events in Africa. It bombed Gulf Oil's Pittsburgh Office in protest of the company's "imperialist" policies in Portuguese-controlled Angola, where an independence struggle was on the verge of succeeding after thirteen years of conflict (United States Congress Senate Committee on the

Judiciary Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security 1975, 42).

In 1974, the WUO took stock of the situation in a book titled *Prairie Fire: The Politics of Revolutionary Anti-Imperialism* (“Weather Underground (Weathermen)” 1976). *Prairie Fire* was a treatise on the WUO’s “political ideology—a strategy for anti-imperialism and revolution inside the U.S.” It was an effort to update the group’s thinking on the state of affairs after four years underground and to explain its view of the relevant struggles (Ayers 2009, 240). It included sections on Vietnam, Black resistance, Native American resistance, Third World resistance, and feminism/sexism. The manifesto presented a toned down, “kinder and gentler” WUO than the strident group that had seized SDS five years earlier (Ayers 2009, 240–41).

Prairie Fire served both an internal and an external purpose. The group’s semi-autonomous families were still responsible for their own activities, survival, and relationships, but the publication helped renew a sense of unity within the group (Ayers 2009, 243). It was a product of extensive internal collaboration, debate, and discussion—something lacking within the rigidly hierarchical group during its earlier years (Berger 2006, 190). It was also the group’s attempt to reinvigorate and re-connect with the broader New Left by acknowledging the necessity and value of both violent and non-violent components of the struggle, including mass mobilization and party building (Berger 2006, 187). “Without mass struggle, there can be no revolution, without armed struggle, there can be no victory,” the group now acknowledged (Varon 2004, 292). An above-ground support and mobilization apparatus, called the Prairie Fire Organizing Committee, was created (“Weather Underground

(Weathermen)” 1976). Donations, support, and recruitment all increased following the unveiling of *Prairie Fire*, which sold 40,000 copies (Berger 2006, 192).

The WUO increased its focus on propaganda by publishing a quarterly magazine, *Osawatomie*, and being featured in a 1976 documentary film (Ayers 2009, 240–60; “Weather Underground (Weathermen)” 1976). While its pace of operations slowed to a crawl, the WUO demonstrated a continued willingness to conduct symbolic attacks when it set off a stink bomb at a hotel where Nelson Rockefeller was to receive a humanitarian award. The group attributed this attack to Rockefeller’s hardline drug policies (Berger 2006, 193).

1975 was the last year that the WUO functioned as a cohesive organization. Its attacks in 1975 were motivated by a combination of established grievances and a desire to be relevant in emerging areas. The group struck the Department of State and Department of Defense offices in Oakland, California to protest “the government’s continued aggression” in Vietnam and Cambodia (United States Congress Senate Committee on the Judiciary Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security 1975). Another company, Kennecott Corporation, was targeted for its role in the 1973 Chilean coup. In support of the Puerto Rican independence movement and striking workers in Puerto Rico, the WUO bombed Banco de Ponce (Berger 2006, 225). But these attacks masked a group in turmoil.

By 1976, fissures in the organization and discontent on several levels threatened its unity. An effort to unify various groups under one umbrella at an above-ground conference held in Chicago hosted by the Prairie Fire Organizing Committee was beset with disagreements among participants over issues of gender and race (Berger 2006, 297). Without the Vietnam

War as a common mobilizing issue, it was difficult to forge a shared agenda among these disparate groups. Tensions also emerged between the Prairie Fire Organizing Committee and the WUO. The Prairie Fire Organizing Committee was no longer content to be an above ground support apparatus for the WUO and began asserting its own identity (Jacobs 1997, 175). Within the WUO, divisions between factions of the group based on the West Coast and the East Coast grew more pronounced, and the Weather Bureau leaders came under criticism (Varon 2004, 298). Members began to question the wisdom and necessity of remaining underground, especially given the lack of government recourse against the group after the fallout from COINTELPRO. In the midst of this growing internal crisis, the WUO did not conduct any attacks in 1976. Its main underground activity was to increase the frequency of *Osawatomie* from quarterly to bi-monthly—essentially dedicating itself to a publication that was not illegal, published by individuals with few charges still pending against them (Berger 2006, 207–10).

Internal tensions could no longer be contained in 1977. The Prairie Fire Organizing Committee split, and the West Coast chapter broke away to become the May 19th Communist Organization. Within the WUO, a faction anointed itself as “the Revolutionary Committee” and expelled the Weather Bureau leaders, who were isolated by this time (Berger 2006, 334). The Revolutionary Committee attempted to re-invigorate recruitment and the armed campaign. In the process, it recruited two FBI agents into the group (Berger 2006, 235). Shortly thereafter, the group conducted a bombing of the Immigration and Naturalization Services offices in San Francisco in solidarity with Mexican workers and in protest of the government’s “racist” immigration policies (Berger 2006, 334). Then a plot against the office

of a California state senator was disrupted when five WUO members were arrested with the help of the newly recruited FBI informants.

Those insisting that the group remain underground were dealt a blow in the fall, when one founding leader emerged after seven years underground. While he had not been active for years, he was well-known from his public profile in the early years. His re-emergence, especially the minimal consequences he faced, demonstrated the possibility of relinquishing life underground. Five more surrendered to police that year and the following year. All received light sentences but refused to provide information about their colleagues still in hiding (Jacobs 1997, 181).

Over the course of the next few years, other central figures would come out of hiding, including the highly sought-after Weather Bureau leaders. Others would remain underground and pursue more violent activity with other organizations. But the Weathermen ceased to function as an “armed struggle” organization. The WUO combined ideological motivation with targeted violence to become an organization of disciplined believers. The group calibrated its violence and avoided targeting civilians. It succeeded in managing the logistical challenge of operating underground with few members and no leaders captured by authorities. But as a result, it was a fairly small organization, which made it susceptible to pathologies and difficult to replace members, and eventually succumbed to internal disarray.

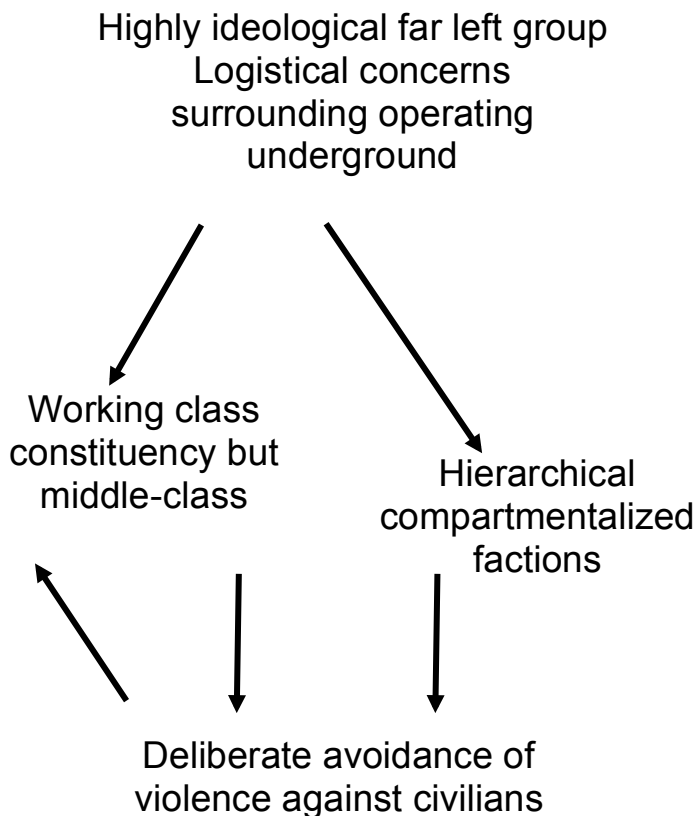


Figure 2: The effects of leader calibration on the Weathermen’s recruitment, organization, and violence

Al-Qaida in Iraq

In general, militant organizations with religious ideologies engage in higher levels of violence against civilians than their ideological counterparts, including striking soft targets (Hoffman 2006; Asal and Rethemeyer 2008; Asal, Schulzke, and Pate 2016). The violence perpetrated by groups in the Salafist jihadist movement has defined the terrorist threat in the years since 9/11. However, even within the movement, al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) stood apart in its willingness to use indiscriminate violence against civilians, which helped it to attract

thousands of Iraqis and foreign fighters willing to engage in indiscriminate violence but ultimately alienated the Iraqi Sunni population.

AQI can be traced back to the group created by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in the late 1990s, Jund al-Sham. He originally formed an organization primarily to overthrow the regime in his home country of Jordan. Like many Salafist jihadist groups facing oppressive security environments at home, Jund al-Sham moved to Afghanistan during the Taliban rule in the late 1990s (Weaver 2006). The group had ties to al-Qaida and its Afghan hosts but maintained more autonomy from them than most. Unlike other foreign groups, Jund al-Sham's camps were in the west, rather than the provinces in the south and east of Afghanistan where the Taliban was strongest.

Zarqawi was among those who fled Afghanistan after the US invasion and Taliban collapse in 2001. He eventually found sanctuary in northern Iraq and linked up with a Kurdish Islamist group. He developed smuggling networks to move weapons and operatives into Iraq. In a relatively short time, Zarqawi managed to build and organize a network, despite being a foreigner (Warrick 2015, 134). He was well-positioned to initiate an insurgency against the United States just months after it toppled the Saddam Hussein regime in 2003. As early as mid-2003, he had established cells in key cities and was conducting operations (Malkasian 2017, 34).

Zarqawi had already earned a reputation as an uncompromising thug, even among fellow jihadists. In Jordan, he was the tattooed muscle with little education complementing the religious charisma and pedigree of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi. Zarqawi's time in prison during the 1990s only sharpened his rough edges. While he possessed leadership skills, he did

not have a sophisticated grasp of Islam (B. Fishman 2006). He was not sufficiently literate that he could read much of the Koran ((Warrick 2015, 183–84). When he was with al-Maqqdisi, he had ideological guidance. But now he was on his own in Iraq, and he developed his own ideology and strategy. It was “more a hyper-violent, antiestablishment ethos than a formal ideology.” Fishman argued that its defining characteristics were a narrow version who is a Muslims and a view that jihadists, rather than religious scholars, were the authority of Islam (B. H. Fishman 2016, 60–61).

Zarqawi was not just content to expel the US from Iraq. He saw the Shia as an implacable enemy that not only stood in the way of an Islamic state, but also as a force that could be used as an enemy to activate the Sunnis to rally around his organization. Without the credentials to discern what was ideologically permissible under Islam, Zarqawi “interpreted the law however he wants. He created his own rules, like a cult” (Warrick 2015, 160). As Fishman explained his logic, "Zarqawi’s strategy was fundamentally designed to assert control over Sunni groups and replace tribal loyalty and Iraqi nationalism with an ideological commitment to jihadi-salafi ideological goals...Total sectarian war was to be the justification necessary to convert Sunnis to AQI’s absolutist ideology"(B. H. Fishman 2009, 2).

Zarqawi explained how he intended to accomplish this to Usama bin Laden in the lead up to the formalization of his group into an al-Qaida affiliate in October 2004:

“Targeting and hitting Shia in their religious, political and military depth to provoke them to show Sunnis their rabies and bare the teeth of the hidden rancor working in their breasts. If we succeed in dragging them into the arena of sectarian war, it will become possible to awaken the inattentive Sunnis as they feel imminent danger and

annihilating death at the hands of these Sabeans” (Department Of State. The Office of Electronic Information 2004).

In other words, Zarqawi sought to provoke the Shia into over-acting against the Sunnis population and thereby drive the Sunnis to support AQI and violently oppose the Shia-dominated government in Iraq. Zarqawi argued to bin Laden that the ensuing civil war would force Sunnis to “reclaim their lost power and prestige in Baghdad and restore the glory of Nur al-Din” (Department Of State. The Office of Electronic Information 2004). This approach to violence was advocated in the notorious *Management of Savagery*. The manuscript, which circulated online in jihadist circles in 2004, urged massive violence to inflame the opposition and drag the masses into a conflict (Naji n.d.). Indeed, three-quarters of AQI’s attacks were against Iraqi targets, rather than the Americans, and primarily against Shias.

Provoking a Civil War in Iraq

In pursuing this strategy, Zarqawi casted himself the “sheik of slaughters,” and his organization followed suit in its approach to violence (Warrick 2015, 160). From the outset of the insurgency in Iraq, Zarqawi’s organization distinguished itself with the scope of its violence. In August 2003, his group’s opening salvo came in the form of two mass casualty attacks: one against the Jordanian Embassy in Baghdad, which killed 17, and the other on the UN headquarters in Baghdad, which killed 22. Then at the end of that month, it struck the Imam Ali Mosque--one of Shia Islam’s holiest shrines--and killed 100 people, including the leader of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq. AQI struck Shia shrines in Najaf, Baghdad, and Karbala in 2004. The attacks in Baghdad and Karbala were conducted on Ashura, timed to strike mid-morning when crowds had amassed. His actions caused General

Petraeus to conclude that Zarqawi was “changing the battlefield itself, using terrorism as a brutal force for creating new enemies and allies as it suited his purpose... [I]t suited Zarqawi to stir hatred between Iraq’s Sunnis and Shia” (Warrick 2015, 130).

AQI was not content to just engage in acts of brutal violence. It wanted to broadcast them. In addition to mass-causality attacks, AQI conducted beheadings of hostages, including that of American Nick Berg in 2004. It videotaped the brutal acts and then posted the videos on the internet. The result was, as Warrick explained, “His intended audience by now knew exactly the kind of battle he meant. Since Berg’s savage murder, Islamist media were awash in Zarqawi-inspired gore” (Warrick 2015, 169). Zarqawi himself was also featured prominently in public statements released online “to convey determination, ideological fervor, and strategic purpose to followers, enemies, and pole-sitters” (B. Fishman 2006, 27). He was particularly visible in efforts to recruit suicide operatives through video propaganda (Warrick 2015, 170). He became a revered figure in the jihadist movement, one whose stature surpassed even bin Laden’s (Jones 2012).

But al-Qaida central leaders in Pakistan worried that AQI was alienating constituents with its approach. Al-Qaida viewed its constituency as the entire ummah. This concern led Zawahiri to counsel Zarqawi in 2005 to “avoid any action that the masses do not understand or approve, if there is no contravention of Sharia in such avoidance.” (“Zawahiri’s Letter to Zarqawi” n.d.). He cautioned Zarqawi to temper his targeting of the Shia and use of brutal tactics.

However, Zarqawi’s view of his constituency was not as expansive. He only sought to appeal to “hardened jihadists and to sow fear among everyone else,” which vastly expanded the parameters of acceptable targets (Warrick 2015, 160). AQI had a strong takfiri streak, viewing

as even those Sunnis who did not join or support the group as adversaries. It pronounced them as expelled from Islam, which made targeting them permissible (B. H. Fishman 2016, 61).

Between 2003 and 2005, AQI's ranks were a minority in the Sunni insurgency in Iraq--an estimated 15% of the overall insurgency--but they had a disproportionate impact because of their willingness to conduct indiscriminate attacks (Riedel 2008, 100–101). This was not a reflection of an organization out of control internally. By 2004, Zarqawi's command-and-control structure was already more centralized than that of other Sunni insurgent groups (Malkasian 2017, 34). AQI conducted only 14% of all insurgent attacks during this period, but it conducted 42% of the suicide operations (Riedel 2008, 100–101). Zarqawi wrote that these operations were the most “deadly weapon we have in our possession: weapons with which we can inflict the deepest wound upon our enemy. All this notwithstanding the fact that these kinds of operations are of little effort for us; they are uncomplicated and are the least costly for us” (Warrick 2015, 170).

Such operations were the least costly in part because the group had an ample supply of foreign fighters willing to be suicide operatives. They joined at a rate of 100-150 a month, attracted by AQI's brutal propaganda (Warrick 2015, 187). As Johnston et al found, AQI “allocated human capital rationally, with the suicide bomber corps dominated by foreigners who were likely than Iraqis to be fanatical believers in the group's religious ideology and with intelligence and security personnel dominated by its Iraqi members” (Johnston et al. 2016, 8).

AQI's use of indiscriminate violence helped the group to recruit ideological fanatics. Having attracted members through its brutal actions, its followers then wanted to perpetuate that same approach. Though AQI conducted expansive violence, it did seek to manage the level of

violence within those parameters (Johnston et al. 2016, 49). The leadership struggled to do this. It was a self-created problem that reflected the group's success in attracting members who embraced the group's extreme violence. Nonetheless, even its leader miscalculated violence. Most notably, AQI's attack on three hotels in Amman, Jordan in 2005 killed largely Sunni civilians and generated a significant backlash against the group.

In addition, one of the logistical concerns for a group that engages in such indiscriminate violence is that it will attract violent opportunists. AQI faced this risk, especially as it transitioned from relying on petty crime to more sophisticated mafia-style protection rackets to direct involvement in oil production and smuggling. AQI made millions on black-market oil sales and other criminal activity (Malkasian 2017, 65). AQI raised funds locally, largely from criminal activities, with some funds sent back to headquarters and some kept by the local units. Such enterprises attracted thugs driven by a desire for resources but lacking ideological commitment.

AQI did struggle with this problem. It managed to avoid being overtaken by undisciplined thugs by developing a payroll system with clearly defined salaries—a practice that sustained over the organization's evolution. Importantly, the group did not pay competitive wages. Pay was often even lower in places with higher levels of fighting and during periods when combat was more intense (Johnston et al. 2016). This approach helped reduce the appeal of the group to opportunists and largely limit membership to those who were highly ideologically committed. At the same time, AQI “offered considerable upward mobility, allowing working class individuals to move from low-level IED layers to organizational leadership” (Malkasian 2017, 64).

The group increased its capability throughout 2004 and 2005 in the midst of a Sunni insurgency with numerous elements. By 2006, a few Salafist jihadist groups had consolidated power within the insurgency, and AQI was the dominant Sunni insurgent group within Iraq in large part because of its willingness to employ high levels of violence against its rivals, the Shia, and US forces.

The Backlash

AQI's excessive violence succeeded in attracting hard core ideological adherents. The combination of AQI's type and motivation for violence was effective at recruiting the type of members who would execute Zarqawi's strategy. But a group of violent fanatics proved to be self-limiting in terms of winning mass support among Iraqi Sunnis.

AQI not only targeted Shia, it exacted violence on Sunnis who did not capitulate to its authority, including rival groups and tribal leaders. This produced mounting resentment among Iraqi Sunnis that a foreigner demanded such allegiance from them. Cognizant of this, Zarqawi adjusted to make Iraqi figures more visible (Warrick 2015, 182). In January 2006, AQI created the Mujahidin Shura Council, which brought several smaller insurgent groups into an umbrella organization with AQI. An Iraqi was at the helm of this entity, rather than Zarqawi.

Yet Zarqawi's narcissism proved to be an obstacle. He increasingly saw himself as a seminal figure in Islamic history (Warrick 2015, 183). He rejected criticisms from his former mentor al-Maqdisi and persisted with his strategy, despite further admonitions from al-Qaida leaders ("Atiyah's Letter to Zarqawi" n.d.). And he remained committed to his overall approach.

AQI developed into highly organized with “a top-down multidivisional hierarchy” with a central management structure and functional bureaus as well as established bureaucratic and administrative processes. It adopted an organizational structure similar to that advocated by al-Qaida. At the top was an emir and an advisory committee. Then there were functional committees for an array of issues. This structure was then replicated at lower geographic levels throughout Iraq with some functional committees added based on local needs. The central management, i.e. Zarqawi and his advisors, set strategy and policy. Local units were given a fair level of autonomy to execute the strategy, but they had to report back to leadership about their activities (Johnston et al. 2016, 71–83).

This organization mattered as Johnson et al found that AQI and its successor group the Islamic State in Iraq “produced violence relative to the population in areas where it had more positions filled in its administrative apparatus” (Johnston et al. 2016, 100). In other words, when the organization was fully staffed its violence was better managed, though still indiscriminate overall. The leadership continued to struggle to manage the levels of violence. A 2006 letter from a member of the group’s shura council to a commander in Ramadi revealed leadership’s effort to calibrate violence. He instructed “Stop the killing of people unless they are spying, military, or police officers. . . . [F]ind a secure method because if we continue using the same method, people will start fighting us in the streets” (Shapiro 2013, 48).

Amidst increasing opposition among Sunnis, AQI’s actions succeeded in unleashing the sectarian war Zarqawi sought when the group bombed the Shia Askariya mosque in Samarra in February 2006. The desecration of the holy site incited a sectarian backlash from the Shia against Sunnis that it sought. It was exactly the outcome Zarqawi had described to bin Laden.

But Zarqawi's plan had a major flaw. The Sunni population was insufficiently protected to defend itself (B. H. Fishman 2009). Instead of pushing Sunnis en masse to join AQI, it increased Sunni resentment of the group.

Four months later, Zarqawi was killed in a coalition airstrike. By then, some Iraqis, especially in Anbar, had rejected AQI as a foreign element seeking to control the Sunni population and replace their tribal and nationalist loyalties with a hardline jihadist ideology. As Fishman argued, "By late 2006, AQI's demons were coming home to roost. Brutal tactics, the murder of Muslim civilians, and unrealistic efforts to dominate the political environment in a nation of well-armed tribes had put the group in an untenable position" (B. H. Fishman 2009, 10).

This opposition gained momentum that culminated into the Awakening and a period of decline for the group.

From the group's inception, AQI earned a reputation as ideologically uncompromisingly and brutal towards civilians, even within the Sunni jihadist movement. Its leader had a narrow view of the group's constituency, developed high levels of organization, limited material rewards, and propagated a black and white view of the enemy to produce an organization of violent fanatics. This combination produced massive violence against civilians and problems managing violence, which ultimately produced a backlash against the organization from the population.

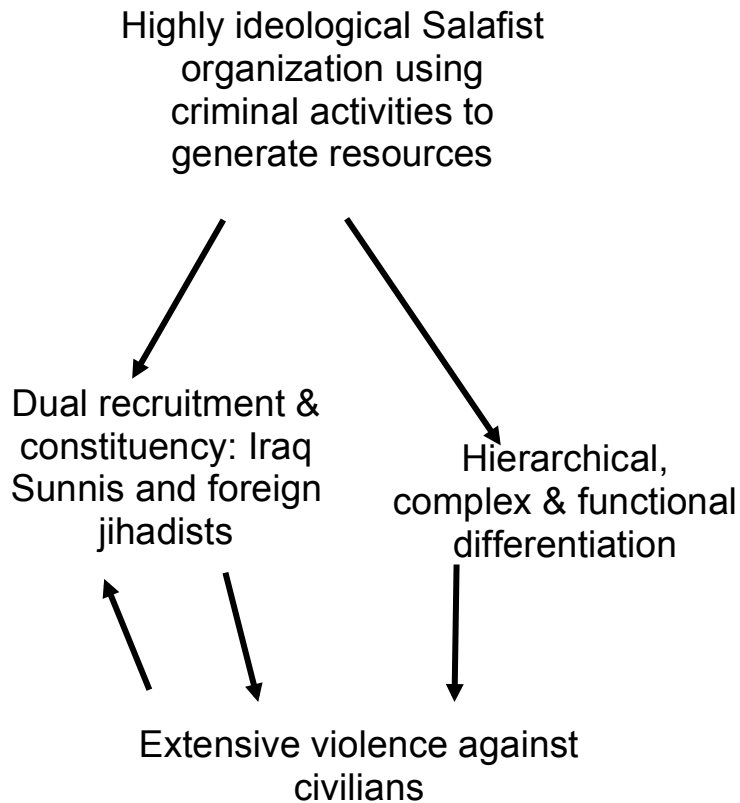


Figure 3: The effects of leader calibration on the AQI's recruitment, organization, and violence

Further Applications

We now turn to two additional cases: ISIS post-caliphate, and the rise of the violent, transnational radical right groups (hereafter referred to as the radical right). We choose these two movements for three reasons. First, they are active in very different contexts. Most of ISIS's activities are in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia, particularly in countries with

weak central governments. In contrast many of the radical right groups are active in Europe and North American, in countries with strong central governments. Second, ISIS and the radical right have very different relationships with mainstream politics and violence. ISIS seeks to support and co-opt local insurgencies and use spectacular terrorist attacks against civilians to raise their profile. In contrast many radical right groups are actively participating and supporting political parties, and focusing on less violent, but still provocative actions such as protests or social media campaigns.

Some might be concerned by trying to draw generalizations from our theory to broad social movements. We admit that this is a more difficult task. These movements are more diffuse and there are fewer primary source documents than for AQI or the Weather Underground. While we acknowledge these shortcomings, leaders of these movements are cognizant of the balancing between the ideological and logistical components, and have chosen tactics and the utility of violence against civilians in accordance with this balance.

ISIS Post-Caliphate

By March 2019, ISIS had lost its last remaining territory it controlled in Syria and most of it in Iraq (Issa, Rosa, and Alleruzzo 2019). What does the post-caliphate ISIS, without its territory look like? What are the strategic goals of the movement? And how do leaders trade-off strategic and ideological components, and use violence?

ISIS as a violent social movement has two distinct strategies--one for Iraq and Syria, and another for its transnational affiliates. As Hassan suggests when discussing ISIS's future in Iraq, "As the group retreats from its last strongholds, ISIS operations will target new

governing structures and Sunni collaborators in order to prevent the establishment of alternatives to ISIS rule that might appeal to local communities in predominantly tribal and rural areas. Hit-and-run attacks would demonstrate that nothing is out of ISIS's reach, even if its ability to control territory has plummeted" (Hassan 2018). This echoes previous strategies of AQI which morphed into a rural insurgency following the U.S. surge (2007-2008), only to reemerge as ISI later. Key to this strategy of a rural insurgency is the use of violence against the Syrian and Iraqi central governments, and in particular perceived Sunni collaborators. This kind of violence serves two goals. First it reinforces the ideological focus of the group to punish those viewed as apostates and collaborators while also discrediting the central government. It also reinforces the ideological view that ISIS is in it for the "long war"--and unlikely to be defeated easily (Friedman 2016).

The second part of ISIS's strategy centers on solidifying its transnational affiliates. There are three important components of the broader transnational strategy. 1) ISIS wants to continue spectacular attacks against civilian targets, particularly in the West, to show that ISIS still has a 'global reach.' 2) ISIS will continue to serve as a hub for Salafi jihadists online activity, and seek to maintain its "cyber caliphate" (Winter and Parker 2018)

Finally, 3) ISIS has adopted a strategy of co-opting local groups and grievances. As it holds less territory, it has allowed its affiliates to play a larger role in the movement and messaging. For instance, the April 2019 Sri Lankan church attacks were carried out by a local affiliate (Callimachi and Schmitt 2019). Meanwhile ISIS-Khorosan has emerged in Afghanistan as a serious security threat gaining a foothold in eastern Afghanistan (*Al-Jazeera* 2019). This co-

optation of local groups has evolved as ISIS has lost territory and sought a foothold in other areas. Part of this strategic co-optation of local forces involves being more attuned to local grievances and issues, and giving up some of the centralized structure and focus of the physical caliphate. As one counter-terrorism analyst described the mutually beneficial relationship between ISIS and separatists in Mindanao, Philippines, “ISIS can say, ‘We have global reach,’ and local groups, like Abu Sayyaf factions, can sit on the shoulder of a giant like ISIS and get connections and financial support” (Beech and Gutierrez 2019) All of these observations point to ISIS being willing to shift and adapt its ideological and logistical focus from forming and governing a caliphate to chiefly becoming a transnational movement. This has led to the two pronged tactical approach--with ISIS in Iraq and Syria, targeting the government and perceived Sunni collaborators, and ISIS the movement broadly delegating tactical decision-making to its local affiliates. Thus, even in an organization as ideological as ISIS, this tension between organization survival and ideological adaptation is present.

Radical right

In contrast to ISIS, groups associated with the radical right have pursued a very different strategy. Operating mostly in countries with high state capacities across Europe and North America, these radical right groups are characterized by their support for nationalist and populist policies, as well open hostility towards immigration, various minority groups (Roma, LGBTQ, immigrants, etc.), and leftists (academics, socialists, etc.) who they view as an existential threat to their respective countries. The strategy of the various radical right groups are diverse, and reflect local contexts but they share several common strategic goals.

First, many groups on the radical right are focused on linking internationally with like-minded groups that seek to “take their country back.” These causes can be as diverse as support President Donald Trump, for Brexit, or for various separatists in the War in Donbass (Provost and Fitzgerald 2019; Hume 2019). While many European radical right groups have long enjoyed close ties, more recently groups such as the Alt-Right and white supremacists in the U.S. have increasingly close ties with their counterparts in Europe (Cai and Landon 2019).

For instance, Ukrainian ultranationalist groups have held joint mixed martial arts fights with American and European far right groups (Miller 2018). As one journalist who has covered the far right in Ukraine for years said, “They (the far right in Ukraine) are stronger than they have ever been....but they can’t get anybody elected into the Rada (Ukrainian parliament). What’s the point? They don’t need it. They have slick guys on social media, and they are able to organize street actions and pressure the government with impunity.”¹⁰¹¹ Many of the groups in the far right in Ukraine are also employed as muscle in business disputes between oligarchic factions. “It’s natural. They (members of the far right) like violence, and there’s a market for their services, so they can build camaraderie and earn money.”¹²

Second, many of the groups in the radical right, in contrast to ISIS affiliates, do not engage in top-down, planned attacks. Most of the violent terrorist attacks perpetrated by the radical right are carried out by lone actors, allowing a degree of plausible deniability for others within the movement. More broadly when groups do engage in violence it is usually against the

¹⁰ Author interview, January 30, 2020.

¹¹ <https://www.economist.com/international/2019/03/21/why-white-nationalist-terrorism-is-a-global-threat>

¹² Author interview with researcher who monitors the radical right in Ukraine, February 19, 2020.

backdrop of provocative, symbolic protests like the 2017 Unite-the-Right Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia (chants of “blood and soil”), or marches in Poland celebrating Independence Day with demonstrators chanting “Pure Poland, white Poland,” as well as “refugees get out” (Ioffe 2017; Berendt 2018). In central Ukraine a far right group called the “National Militia”—armed and wearing ski masks—stormed a city council meeting demanding that a budget be passed (Talant 2019; Bennetts 2018). The goal of such actions are provocation and notoriety. When violence happens following these acts, groups can point the finger at the police or counter-protestors.

Another favorite tactic of many radical right groups is the online trolling and harassment of perceived enemies. For instance U.S.-based radical right supporters regularly inundated Jewish journalists with Nazi and Holocaust imagery during the 2016 presidential election (Gross 2018). These provocative acts provide media coverage and notoriety which raises the profile of the groups. It also allows radical right groups to claim to be “the real victims” when targets of these attacks respond, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of the “dangers posed by leftists and minorities.”

A specific subset of trolling and harassment is the use of humor and irony to simultaneously push it’s message into the mainstream by engaging in outrageous, racist, and anti-Semitic speech, while also being able to claim that people were taking it “too seriously.” As Andrew Anglin, the founder of the white supremacist website The Daily Stormer said in a “A Normies Guide to the Alt-right”:

Some of the ways the movement presents itself can be confusing to the mainstream, given the level of irony involved. The amount of humor and vulgarity

confuses people. The true nature of the movement, however, is serious and idealistic. We have in this new millennium an extremely nihilistic culture. From the point when I first became active in what has become the Alt-Right movement, it was my contention that in an age of nihilism, absolute idealism must be couched in irony in order to be taken seriously. This is because anyone who attempts to present himself as serious will immediately be viewed as the opposite through the jaded lens of our post-modern milieu (Wilson 2017).

This quote encapsulates the trade-offs movements must make between ideological rigidity and irrelevance or flexibility and adaptation. The tactics used by the radical right in the West are not as violent as ISIS for two reasons. 1) The groups are operating within stronger states, so their ability to engage in high-profile, organized violence is limited. 2) They have the ability to directly and indirectly influence political parties and politicians. As the comparison between post-caliphate ISIS and the radical right shows, movements inherently face a tension between their ideological and strategic components. How they choose to make this trade-off, affects the trajectory of the group and the kind of tactics they use. For instance, ISIS's choice to pursue a two-pronged rural insurgency in Iraq and Syria, and connect with local affiliates abroad, or the radical right's domestic and transnational connections to political parties and strategy of provocation. These decisions represent distinct choices that movement leaders make about ideology and group survival.

Conclusion

We've made three key arguments about violent social movements and why some choose to engage in widespread violence against civilians. First, psychology and rational choice theories of violent social movements are not mutually exclusive. Second, leaders of groups involved in these movements make choices about the logistical and ideological resources of their group. These choices influence the organization of the group, the kind of recruits that groups attract, which in turn influence the production of violence against civilians. And finally, this choice of violence against civilians influences the type of recruits attracted to a group.

Our case studies of the Weathermen and AQI, along with our discussions of ISIS post-caliphate and the radical, provide support for our general argument about leaders within violent social movements. Leaders have to balance logistical and ideological concerns of their movements. And that in turn can shape the course of the kind of recruits and violence against civilians groups employ.

Rather than treating ideological and rational choice explanations as competing explanations for terrorism and violence, we show they can be synthesized in a unified approach. Even organizations as ideological and brutal as AQI have a strategic logic and are sensitive to logistical constraints. And groups that are as sensitive to civilian casualties, such as the Weather Underground have to balance ideological concerns. Choices that leaders make about how to balance ideology versus their funding and internal politics influence the type of recruits and organizational structure of a group. The type of recruits and organizational

structure influence the type of violence a group employs, which in turn affects the kind of recruits an organization attracts. This dynamic framework is key to understanding why some groups evolve to target civilians, while others refrain from doing so. And furthermore why some groups within movements survive and others die out.

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