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“Long Version of Letter to *International Security*”
March 5, 2007

The short version of this letter is being published in the “Correspondence” section of the Summer or Fall 2007 issue of *International Security*, along with a reply from Max Abrahms. The short version focuses on the Madrid train bombing case study; it omits most of this letter’s concerns with data selection; and it greatly edits down the “implications for theory” section at the end of the case study. It references this long version and lists a URL for getting to it on Professor Rose’s faculty profile page.

To the Editors:

Max Abrahms’ analysis on why terrorism rarely works makes a number of contributions to our understanding of terrorism’s consequences.² Every research project has limits, however, and we highlight two. First, several problems make it harder than necessary to reconstruct parts of his data set. Second and more importantly, he considers only evidence that supports his thesis that terrorist groups targeting primarily civilians never achieve their political objectives. This second limitation restricts the degree of certainty of his findings and therefore the utility of his policy prescriptions. Missing is any effort to find case studies that might falsify his thesis or at least narrow the range of its explanatory power.

The first section below highlights strengths of Abrahms’ article. The second section discusses challenges replicating parts of his study and suggests how to alleviate these problems. The third section explains why the analysis should extend beyond a “plausibility probe” and move toward theory testing and refinement, and it recommends how to make this shift. The fourth and

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² Max Abrahms, “Why Terrorism Does Not Work,” *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Fall 2006), pp. 42-78.

longest section presents a case study that directly challenges his thesis, and it forwards implications of this case for theory and policy.

Our new case study focuses the March 2004 Madrid train bombings. This deadly attack was perpetrated by an ad hoc, largely “home grown” jihadist network with only loose ties to al-Qaida. Its underlying purpose was to support al-Qaida’s goal of defeating U.S.-led occupations in Afghanistan and especially Iraq. To serve this goal, the instrumental objective was to compel Spain to end its active participation in U.S.-led occupations. The result was a partial success because the terrorist attack affected the outcome of the Spanish election and brought in a new government committed to withdraw Spanish troops from Iraq. It was not a total success because Spain continued to support coalition efforts in Afghanistan.

Our central argument is that Abrahms is incorrect in his claim that terrorist groups targeting primarily civilians never achieve their political objectives. Our Madrid case study leads to an understanding of conditions under which at least partial success is possible, and these findings have implications for counter-terrorism policy. Two additional arguments follow from this case. First, Abrahms’ concentration on official Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO) is too narrow to capture the emerging phenomenon of ad hoc terrorist networks that do not have a formal structure or formal affiliation as a cell of a recognized FTO. Second, his focus on compelling governments to make policy concessions misses an important distinction between the impact of a terrorist attack on a government and on a country’s citizens. In Spain, the Madrid attack never compelled the government led by the Popular Party to change policy on Spanish troops in Iraq. Instead, the attack mobilized voters to elect a new government led by the Socialist Party because, in large part, this party campaigned on the promise to pull Spanish troops from Iraq.

We grant that terrorist organizations rarely achieve their political objectives. Additional research, however, should shed light on the uncommon conditions under which terrorism against

civilians tends to work even if only partially. Once these conditions are known and explained, the basic knowledge gained will be more refined and therefore relevant policy implications will have stronger empirical backing.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE LITERATURE

Although we focus on several limitations of Abrahms' article, the strengths of his analysis outweigh its weaknesses. In particular, he makes at least five significant contributions. First, contrary to some recent scholarship on terrorism, he convincingly shows that terrorist organizations rarely achieve their political objectives. While he is not the only scholar to argue that terrorism usually fails, he is the first to analyze systematically a large number of terrorist organizations and campaigns.³ Second, and again in a systematic manner, he clarifies the conditions under which success can occur: when terrorist groups have limited objectives and, more importantly, when their main targets are military and not civilian. Third, he adapts correspondence inference theory to explain his observations. In sum, "the basic contention is that civilian-centric terrorist groups fail to coerce because they

³ Abrahms is right that a number of publications that appeared after the 2001 attack on the United States have argued that terrorism is an effective coercive strategy. He misses, however, that many scholars who have published on terrorism for decades instead argue that terrorism by non-state organizations rarely achieve their strategic, long-term political goals. We wish to thank Bruce Hoffman for this insight. Personal correspondence, December 12, 2006. See, for example, Walter Laqueur, "The Futility of Terrorism," *Harper's Magazine*, March 1976, pp. 129-140, especially p. 135; Lawrence Freedman *et al.*, *Terrorism and International Order* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), p. 18; Paul Wilkinson, "The Strategic Implications of Terrorism," in *Terrorism and Political Violence: A Sourcebook*, ed. M. L. Sondhi (New Delhi: Indian Council of Social Science Research and Har-anand Publications, 2000), second page of his chapter; and Yonah Alexander, "Conclusion," in *Combating Terrorism: Strategies of Ten Countries*, ed. Yonah Alexander (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), p. 378. See also, Sergio Catignani, "The Security Imperative in Counterterror Operations: The Israeli Fight against Suicide Terror," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 17, No. 1-2 (Spring-Summer 2005), p. 246.

miscommunicate their policy objectives. Even when a terrorist group has limited, ambiguous, or idiosyncratic objectives, target countries infer from attacks on their civilians that the group wants to destroy these countries' values, society, or both. Because countries are reluctant to appease groups that are believed to harbor maximalist objectives, [terrorist groups that target mainly civilians] are unable to win political concessions...."⁴ Fourth, he presents three new case studies on the consequences of terrorism that support the plausibility of his theory. Fifth, his article stimulates contemplation, discussion, and new research projects—including the Madrid case study below and follow-up recommendations for further research.

DATA SELECTION

Abrahms' evidence consists of two sets of case studies. First, he analyzes the strategic effectiveness of twenty-eight terrorist groups designated by the State Department as foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) since 2001. Second, he forwards three cases in much greater depth to explore how causation plausibly works. The research methods for constructing these two sets of case studies are mostly on track, but several problems present challenges for replication of the study.

FOREIGN TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS. Starting with the list of FTOs makes sense. As he explains, "Using this list provides a check against selecting cases on the dependent variable, which would artificially inflate the success rate because the most well known policy outcomes involve terrorist victories (e.g., the US withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 1984)."⁵ It is also wise to examine FTOs that have been listed since 2001 rather than more recently, so that they would have time to make progress on their policy goals. One minor and one more serious problem arise,

⁴ Abrahms, "Why Terrorism Does Not Work," p. 56.

⁵ Ibid., p. 47.

however. First, his source for the list of FTOs is misleading because the URL cited takes one to the October 11, 2005 list of FTOs—which contains forty-two terrorist groups and not twenty-eight like one expects.⁶ For a while we wondered why he excluded so many and if their inclusion might alter his findings. We soon realized that we needed the list from 2001, which indeed has exactly twenty-eight FTOs.⁷ Second and more importantly, as Abrahms summarizes information about the FTOs Table 1, it is not easy to reconstruct intermediate values for his dependent variable (the extent of success).⁸ The extreme values of “total success” and “no success” present no problem, and he is clear that “partial success” is more effective than “limited success.”⁹ It is not obvious, however, where to draw the line between the two intermediate values. The distinction is important, because the few instances of an intermediate outcome constitute the only evidence that could challenge his major conclusion that attacking primarily civilians precludes either total or partial success.

He offers additional ideas that might help to code the dependent variable, but in the quotation that follows we have trouble drawing operational implications. “A ‘limited success’ is counted as neither a success nor a failure, even though the terrorist group invariably faces criticism from its natural constituency that the means employed have been ineffective, or even counterproductive. Thus a policy objective is deemed a success even if the terrorist group was only partially successful in accomplishing it, whereas an objective receives a failing grade only if the group has not made any noticeable progress toward achieving it.”¹⁰ We seek clarification for two methodological issues. First, how much success is needed to shift from “no success” to “limited

⁶ Ibid., p. 43 and note 7, p. 43.

⁷ U.S. Department of State, “2001 Report on Foreign Terrorist Organizations,” October 5, 2001, <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/rpt/fto/2001/5258.htm>, accessed November 8, 2006.

⁸ Abrahms, “Why Terrorism Does Not Work,” pp. 49-50.

⁹ For a discussion of the four outcomes, see Ibid., pp. 48 and 51.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 51.

success,” and how much is needed to shift from a “limited success” to a “partial success”? Second, how is “progress” toward achieving a policy goal measured? Might achieving a goal involve one or more intermediate policy objectives, whereby achieving one (or some fraction of several) constitutes a certain level of success? The author does mention several types of intermediate objectives that he does not code as a success (i.e., the ability of terrorist groups to gain international attention and support), and we agree with his decision to exclude them.¹¹ However, might other intermediate objectives be more substantive and, when achieved, count as “noticeable progress” toward achieving a goal?

His table of twenty-eight FTOs, several of which have multiple objectives, presents a total of 42 outcomes. Only three of these instances combine targeting mostly civilians and any outcome other than no success: limited successes for al-Qaida’s goal to expel the United States from the Persian Gulf, and for Hamas’ goal and Islamic Jihad’s goal to establish a state in historic Palestine. Abrahms’ narratives about al-Qaida and Hamas offer additional ideas and examples that provide partial answers to our questions. His discussion of al-Qaida’s four objectives is clear on why three have been failures. He reasonably codes their fourth objective, to expel the United States from the Persian Gulf, as a limited success. He shows that after September 11, 2001, “the one modest success” was the U.S. decision to draw down its troop presence in the Saudi Arabian Peninsula. He discounts this outcome, however, because the United States did not reduce overall U.S. involvement in the Gulf and because the organization did not consider significant the reduction of troops in Saudi Arabia.¹² The other instance of limited success that he discusses involves Hamas’ objective of establishing a state in historic Palestine. The “good news” from Hamas’ perspective is its territorial acquisition of Gaza. The “bad news” is twofold: Gaza represents only two percent of the total land

¹¹ Ibid., p. 47, n. 25.

¹² Ibid., note 110, p. 71.

area Hamas claims as its own, and Israel still controls Gaza's airspace and Palestinian movement on land and by sea.¹³ We would add that Gaza has not become an Islamic political entity.¹⁴ The third and final FTO that mainly targets civilians and has achieved limited success is Islamic Jihad, but we find no information in his article that would help to understand this coding. A constraint on replicating his research into Islamic Jihad, moreover, is that he provides insufficient guidance to specify which Islamic Jihad group he means.¹⁵

From the two al-Qaida and Hamas cases that Abrahms does discuss, one can infer some minimum requirements for a "limited success"—that a minor amount of progress has been made toward a group's stated political objective, even if that progress has been offset by other circumstances or events that counter the extent of success. This observation helps to determine the dividing line between "limited success" and "no success." We can find no explicit clues in his discussion of these two instances, however, to determine the threshold between "limited" and "partial" success.

His dataset contains only one instance of a "partial success," the Tamil Tigers and their goal to establish a Tamil state. Unlike the al-Qaida and Hamas cases in the previous paragraph, however,

¹³ See *Ibid.*, note 120, p. 74.

¹⁴ See <http://www.tkb.org/Group.jsp?groupID=49> and <http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/hamas.htm>, both accessed November 12, 2006.

¹⁵ The MIPT database does not have a listing for "Islamic Jihad." It does list two groups with "Islamic Jihad" the first part of their name, but neither operates in the Palestinian region. See <http://www.tkb.org/Category.jsp?catID=1&contentType=1&startsWith=I&sortBy=0&sortOrder=0&pageIndex=1>, accessed November 12, 2006. MIPT does list Palestinian Islamic Jihad, as does the FAS database. The FAS database, moreover, has no listing for "Islamic Jihad" but does include "Islamic Jihad for the Liberation of Palestine." See <http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/>, accessed November 12, 2006. The latter has another name, Lebanese Hizballah, which Abrahms may cover under his Hezbollah FTO. More guidance would be appreciated.

Abrahms notes that the Tigers' main targets are military and not civilian.¹⁶ In any event, his narrative says that "in 1990 the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka wrested control of Tamil areas from the Sinhalese-dominated government."¹⁷ Research into the Tigers reveals that their control over territory is greater than Hamas' control over Gaza, but that they have not achieved total control or formal statehood.¹⁸ Contrasting the Hamas and Tiger cases suggests that "partial success" for control over territory would involve a certain measure of control and perhaps effective sovereignty, but not total control and formal recognition as an independent state. This inference does help to identify threshold indicators between "limited" and "partial" success at seeking national self-determination. It is less helpful, however, in clarifying the possible relevance of intermediate objectives. An instrumental objective might be, for instance, to compel a key ally in an occupying coalition to stop supporting the occupation.

THREE CASE STUDIES. Abrahms' second collection of evidence involves three case studies: the September 1999 Russian apartment bombing by Chechen terrorists, the September 11 attacks on the United States, and Palestinian terrorism in the first intifada. All three cases meet the five sensible criteria he forwards for case study selection, but we expected an explicit or implicit sixth criterion whereby a case must be part of the FTO data set. With attention to this criterion, the cases would be a small subset of the larger data set and would serve to illustrate general trends found in the larger set. Although the latter two cases met this criterion, the Russian case does not because the Chechen

¹⁶ Abrahms, "Why Terrorism Does Not Work," pp. 49, 50.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁸ See <http://www.tkb.org/Group.jsp?groupID=3623> and <http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/lte.htm>, both accessed November 12, 2006.

terrorist organization is not on the FTO list. If Abrahms had a good reason for branching outside the FTO list, he did not explain it.

FROM PLAUSIBILITY TO CERTAINTY

Abrahms asserts that terrorism rarely succeeds in achieving its political objectives, especially when a terrorist organization primarily targets civilians. To support his thesis and his correspondence inference theory that explains these consequences of terrorism, he sensibly starts with historical examples that demonstrate the argument's plausibility. All of the FTOs that he examines meet his expectations. He then turns to three case studies that match his predictions perfectly, and he explores them in greater depth to show how causation unfolds. His research serves as a shining example of a plausibility probe.¹⁹

As we continued to read the article, we looked in vain for any acknowledgement that his thesis might be wrong at least sometimes or that the degree of certainty of his conclusions is not high.²⁰ Likewise, we hoped to find a section in which he would encourage scholars to find case

¹⁹ See Harry Eckstein, *Regarding Politics: Essays on Political Theory, Stability, and Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pages 147-152. Eckstein says, "At a minimum, a plausibility probe into theory may simply attempt to establish that a theoretical construct is worth considering at all, that is, that an apparent empirical instance of it can be found. ... There is no reason why empirical plausibility probes should not take the form of modest or rather diffusely designed comparative studies, as preludes to more ambitious and tighter ones. Indeed, most systematic comparative studies in macropolitics make more sense as plausibility probes (or as 'heuristic comparative studies') than as what they are generally claimed or regard to be: that is, works presenting definitive results."

²⁰ Echoing this concern about uncertainty is the "Report of the Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction," presented to the President on March 31, 2005. Reflecting on the intelligence failure concerning weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the Report states, "... far and away the most damaging tradecraft weakness we observed was the failure of analysts to conclude—when appropriate—that there was

studies that challenge his thesis. Such cases might be discovered by relaxing restrictions he established to build his set of terrorist groups. For example, one could allow for Foreign Terrorist Organizations added to the State Department's after 2001, or for lists of structured or ad hoc terrorist organizations drawn up from other sources. A larger-n study could be conducted to get more reliable results. Looking at his five criteria for selecting cases to explore in depth, the criteria could be altered to permit cases that did not fit his expectations perfectly.²¹ Contrary to his image of causation, for example, one might find instances of terrorist organizations that had limited objectives, targeted primarily civilians, and achieved either partial or total success.

If one exception is found, we would learn that his theory does not apply at least once. Yet that one case might be unique. If more than one exception is found, then we might learn that his theory is not always correct even though it might be right most of the time. Once exceptions are found, moreover, analysts could seek to discover under what conditions exceptions occur and explain why these conditions are important. This analysis could point toward condition variables that affect when and how various outcomes occur.²² A scholar could then forward a refined explanation for these newly discovered variations. Alternative explanations for the more complex observations could be explored so that the relative utility of the revised explanation can be assessed. This thorough process of theory testing and refinement would lead to a more robust understanding of terrorism's consequences. With a higher degree of certainty than before, refined policy

not enough information available to make the a defensible judgment. As much as they hate to do it, analysts must be comfortable facing up to uncertainty and being explicit about it in their assessments," p. 408. See also pp. 389, 405, and other sections on 408. See also Mark Mazzetti, "Latest Reports on Iran and North Korea Show a Newfound Caution Among Analysts," *New York Times*, March 2, 2007.

²¹ The criteria are discussed in Abrahms, "Why Terrorism Does Not Work," pp. 59-60.

²² For a discussion of condition variables, see Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Studies of Political Science* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 11-15.

predictions and prescriptions would be more credible—and therefore they would be more feasible than otherwise.

THE MADRID TRAIN BOMBINGS: A COUNTER-EXAMPLE

On March 11, 2004, Spain was the site of the most devastating terrorist attack in European since World War II. Ten bombs exploded on three separate commuter trains full of passengers making the morning trip into Madrid. The attack resulted in 191 deaths and 1,500 wounded.²³

The political objective of the perpetrators was to compel Spain to end its military support for U.S.-led occupations in Afghanistan and especially Iraq. Spain complied partially when it soon pulled its troops out of Iraq. This response does not follow Abrahms' theory that "terrorist groups that target primarily civilians are unable to coerce policy change."²⁴ Instead of viewing the attack as an assault on Spain's values or society, the bulk of Spanish citizens viewed it as a consequence of Spain's involvement in the Iraq war and its strong ties to the United States. In national elections three days after the attack, voters defied earlier polls and voted out the government (led by the People's Party) that supported Spain's intervention in Iraq. The surprise winner was the Socialist Party, which during the campaign had called for removing Spanish troops from Iraq. This case therefore gives evidence that 1) target countries whose citizens are attacked by a terrorist organization will not always infer that the group has maximalist objectives, and 2) such target countries will thus not necessarily be dissuaded from making policy concessions. A complication revealed in this case, however, is that the sitting government never decided to make a concession. Instead, Spain changed its policy because the public elected a different government.

²³ Raj S.Chari, "The 2004 Spanish Election: Terrorism as a Catalyst for Change?" *West European Politics*, Vol. 27, No.5 (November 2004), p. 954.

²⁴ Abrahms, "Why Terrorism Does Not Work," p. 65.

Since this case is an anomaly from the standard pattern that Abrahms observes, it deserves elaboration. First, the terrorist group responsible for the attack is identified, along with the nature of its political objectives and the type of target it typically attacks. Second, the domestic political consequences of the attack are described and explained. Third, implications for theory are explored, along with suggestions for further research. Finally, several implications for policy are forwarded.

IDENTITY OF THE TERRORIST GROUP. In the immediate hours and days following the Madrid bombing, the Popular Party government of Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar blamed the Basque separatist movement ETA. Soon it became clear, however, that an Islamic terrorist group had planned and executed the attack. In the immediate weeks following the attack the press widely referred to al-Qaida as having carried out the attack. Later in March the perpetrator was identified as the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group, denoted in the literature by its French acronym as GICM (*Groupe Islamiste Combatant Marocain*). Although the original and primary goal of GICM is to establish an Islamic state in Morocco, scholars and journalists have said that it had a European branch intended to serve the interests of global jihad.²⁵ Complicating the picture, several al-Qaida linked groups claimed responsibility soon after the attack, including Abu Hans al-Masri Brigade and Abu Nayaf al-Afghani.²⁶

²⁵ See “Moroccan group ‘derivative structure’ of Al-Qaida,” *Middle East On-Line* (March 20, 2004), accessed November 12, 2006 at <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=9727>; John P. Entelis, “The democratic imperative vs. the authoritarian impulse: the Maghrib state between transition and terrorism (Northern Africa),” *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 59, No. 4 (Autumn 2005), pp. 546-547; and Rollie Lal, “The Maghreb,” in Angel M. Rabasa *et al.*, “The Muslim World after 9/11,” RAND Project Air Force, 2004, p. 162.

²⁶ See <http://www.tkb.org/Incident.jsp?incID=18461> and <http://www.tkb.org/Incident.jsp?incID=18518>.

The actual situation is more complicated than any of the above images.²⁷ The individuals who helped plan, fund, and carry out the attack constitute an ad hoc network and not a particular terrorist organization. A number of these individuals had ties with high profile members of GICM, but some were linked to other groups or were unaffiliated. They were homegrown radicals acting on their own rather than at the behest of al-Qaida, GICM, or any particular organization. The individuals have roots in Morocco, Algeria, and to a lesser extent other countries in North Africa or the Middle East. Groups with these roots have been called a Maghribian network because Arabs traditionally have referred to the land between the “sea of sand” (the Sahara) and the Mediterranean Sea as the Maghrib.²⁸ A convenient way to refer to the terrorist network that attacked the trains in

²⁷ We wish to thank Javier Jordán for this insight. Personal correspondence, December 9, 2006. Petter Nesser shared similar insights in personal correspondence, January 9, 2007. See Javier Jordán and Nicola Horsburgh, “Spain and Islamism: Analysis of the Threat and Response 1995-2005,” *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (July 2006), pp. 209-229; idem, “Mapping Jihadist Terrorism in Spain,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 28 (2005), pp. 169-191; Javier Jordán, “Conceptualizing the ‘grassroots jihadist networks’ (GJN),” unpublished paper, 2006; “Madrid train bombings ‘not the work of al-Qaida,’” *Evening News*, Scotsman.com News, March 10, 2006, accessed at <http://news.scotsman.com/topics.cfm?tid=1094&id=364422006&format=print> on January 4, 2005; Renwick McLean, “29 Are Indicted In Connection With Attacks In Madrid,” *New York Times*, April 12, 2006. For a general analysis of “leaderless networks,” see Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, revised and expanded edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), pp. 38-40.

²⁸ Jordán, “Spain and Islamist Terrorism,” p. 213; Entelis, “The democracy imperative vs. the authoritarian impulse: the Maghrib state between transition and terrorism,” *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (Autumn 2005), p. 9 from full text, on-line version, accessed November 14, 2006 at <https://butternut.conncoll.edu/go/find.galegroup.com/itx/infomark.do?&contentSet=IAC-Documents&type=retrieve&tabID=T002&prodId=EAIM&docId=A138859876&source=gale&srcprod=EAIM&userGroupName=a03cc&version=1.0>; and Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, Area Handbook Series, Algeria, “Glossary—Algeria,” p. 2 from full text version, accessed at http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/algeria/dz_glos.html.

Madrid is the 11-M network, which is shorthand for the network that carried out the March 11, 2004 attacks.²⁹

Scholars considering the motive for attacking Spain argue that the 11-M network sought to compel Spain to pull its troops out of Afghanistan and especially Iraq. Javier Jordán and Robert Wesley assert, for example, that the March 11 “date chosen for the attack was carefully decided and meant to influence the elections three days later. The terrorists had lived for many years in Spain and appreciated the level of popular dissatisfaction with Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar’s decision to join the intervention in Iraq. They also knew there was a strong chance that such an indiscriminate attack in the heart of the country would force public discontent to boil over.”³⁰ Finally, the terrorists may have hoped that Spain would prove to be the weakest link in the U.S. coalition in Iraq, whereby its withdrawal would cause other coalition partners to follow.³¹ Translating their desire to compel Spanish withdrawal into terms consistent with Abrahms’ analysis, it was a “limited objective” associated with demands over territory.³²

²⁹ Spanish journalists and scholars commonly refer to the terrorist event as the 11-M attack. Jordán and Horsburgh usefully refer to the group carrying out the attack as the 11-M network. “Spain and Islamist Terrorism,” p. 220.

³⁰ Javier Jordan and Robert Wesley, “The Madrid Attacks: Results of Investigations Two Years Later,” *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 4, No. 5 (March 9, 2006), pp. 1-4. See also Charles Powell, “Did Terrorism Sway Spain’s Election?” *Current History*, November 2004, p. 378; Brynjar Lia and Thomas Hegghammer, “Jihad Strategic Studies: The Alleged Al Qaida Policy Study Preceding the Madrid Bombings,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 27, No. 5 (September-October 2004), pp. 355-75.

³¹ See Lia and Hegghammer, “Jihadi Strategic Studies,” 368-369.

³² Abrahms says, “...a terrorist group is said to have limited objectives when its demands are over territory. Specifically, the group is fighting to either (1) evict a foreign military from occupying another country, or (2) win control over a piece of territory for the purpose of national self-determination.” “Why Terrorism Does Not Work,” p. 53.

This ad hoc terrorist network, with its informal links to GICM and al-Qaida, targeted civilians. A similar network was blamed for targeting civilians in Casablanca, Morocco in May 2003.³³ GICM members have been active in the Iraq insurgency, but no mention is made about their primary target.³⁴ In Spain the major target, commuter trains, was clearly civilian. Since we are explaining Spanish reactions to the Madrid bombing, this perception is what carries the day.

DOMESTIC POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE ATTACK. With civilians as the primary target, Abrahms' theory leads one to expect that the public will interpret the attack in maximalist terms, directed against the country's values and society. This predicted consequence did not occur. Only a day after the attack, newspapers throughout Spain conveyed that many people viewed the attack as a result of Spain's involvement in Iraq war. On March 12, *La Vanguardia* of Barcelona said that if it was proved that al-Qaida had perpetrated the attack it would be "a punishment for supporting the Iraq war." *El Pais* likewise said that the attack "had to do with the role played by Aznar's government in the Iraq war."³⁵ One Elcano poll found that forty-nine percent of Spaniards believed that troop withdrawal would make Islamist attacks less likely, further corroborating the conclusion that the Spanish public correctly saw the limited objectives of the terrorist group.³⁶

³³ "Minister's careless talk 'hindered terror inquiries'," *Expatica*, November 3, 2005, p. 1, accessed November 17, 2006 at http://www.expatica.com/actual/article.asp?subchannel_id=48&story_id=25011; Lal, "The Maghreb," p. 162.

³⁴ Petter Nesser, translated text from Spain's March 11 indictments about the GICM, pp. 1396-1397. Personal correspondence, December 11, 2006.

³⁵ These two newspaper quotations can be found in Jose A. Olmeda, "Fear or Falsehood? Framing the 3/11 Terrorist Attacks in Madrid and Electoral Accountability," Real Instituto Elcano, Defense & Security Working Paper No. 24, May 5, 2005, p. 25.

³⁶ Powell, "Did Terrorism Sway Spain's Election?" p. 380.

Al-Qaida's Ayman Al Zawahiri, only a month after the 9/11 attacks in the U.S., publicly stated that "Al-Andalus (the Arabic name give to the Iberian peninsula by its Muslim conquers) was a promised land that one day would revert to Islamic rule."³⁷ While Zawahiri may not have had a hand in planning the Madrid attacks, it is plausible that if the Spanish thought that the March 11 attackers had maximalist objectives then they could have turned to such a statement as proof of that view.

Commentators agree that the voting public saw the attack as punishment for Spain's involvement in Iraq and as a warning of more carnage to follow if the troops remained. The public did not misinterpret the Madrid bombing and come to believe that the terrorists sought to destroy Spanish society and values. Commentators also agree that the attack is correlated with the Popular Party losing the election, despite its favored position just before the attack.³⁸ The opposition Socialist Party, led by Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, was the victor of the March 14 election. During the campaign Zapatero had promised to remove Spanish troops from Iraq by June 30 of that year.³⁹ Twenty-eight percent of voters said that the bombings had influenced their vote.⁴⁰ When Spanish troops were withdrawn a month earlier than expected, a strong majority supported the move.⁴¹

The Socialist Party won 42.64 percent of the votes compared to 37.64 percent for the Popular Party. With 164 out of 350 seats in the Congress of Deputies, the Socialists were in a

³⁷ Ibid., p. 376.

³⁸ In the weeks preceding the March 11 terrorist attack, "most political analysts and pollsters predicted a narrow victory of Aznar's Popular Party." Ibid., p. 378.

³⁹ A qualifier to this campaign pledge is that Spanish troops would withdraw June 30 unless the operation was turned over to the United Nations. It was widely doubted that the UN would assume control, however. Ibid., p.381.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 379.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 381.

position to form a minority government.⁴² The Madrid attacks shifted the election results by motivating about 1,700,000 voters who had not been planning to vote, by discouraging another 300,000 voters from voting—leading to a net four-percent increase in voter turnout, and by converting 1,100,000 voters.⁴³

Scholars discuss a range of factors that motivated the public. Although they sometimes disagree on the relative weight of these circumstances,⁴⁴ three prominent ones are common to most analyses. First, some hypothesize that many voters were moved primarily to punish the Popular Party because they believed that its leadership intentionally tried to deflect blame for the attack onto ETA even after they learned that an Islamic group was responsible. Admitting that Islamists were to blame, the argument goes, would have exposed Aznar to the charge that his foreign policy toward Iraq contributed to the terrorist attack.⁴⁵ Segments of the population did seek to punish the party for the apparent deception. This factor is linked to a highly partisan “framing contest” between the government and the opposition, whereby the opposition did a more effective job presenting the situation to the public than the government.⁴⁶ Second, a significant segment of the public mistrusted

⁴² Chari, “2004 Spanish Election,” pp. 957-958.

⁴³ Narciso Michavila, “War, Terror and Elections: Electoral Impact of the Islamist Terror Attacks on Madrid,” Real Instituto Elcano, Public Opinion Working Paper No. 13, April 6, 2005, p. 4.

⁴⁴ Michavila does an especially good job considering competing hypotheses intended to explain the outcome of the election. Ibid.

⁴⁵ Powell, “Did Terrorism Sway Spain’s Election?” pp. 379-380.

⁴⁶ Jose A. Olmeda, “Fear or Falsehood? Framing the 3/11 Terrorist Attacks in Madrid and Electoral Accountability,” Real Instituto Elcano, Defense & Security Working Paper No. 24, May 5, 2005, pp. 3-4. Michavila calls this circumstance the dual news manipulation hypothesis. “War Terrorism and Elections,” pp. 20-22. Jordán and Horsburgh are concerned about the partisan politics that this factor revealed, whereby the two parties were “playing politics with

the Popular Party even before the Madrid attacks. In reaction to three negative events since the party assumed an absolute majority in 2000, a sense developed that the party was complacent and arrogant, and that its decision process lacked transparency.⁴⁷ Third, when the terrorists effectively signaled devastating punishment for Spain's involvement in Iraq, the public's anti-war views became more pressing. Previously, many had opposed the war but supported Aznar. Following the 11-M attack, however, a significant segment was no longer willing to support the Popular Party and its war policy.⁴⁸

terrorism.” “Politics and Terrorism. The Madrid Attacks Case,” in *Playing Politics with Terrorism: A User's Guide*, ed. George Kassimeris, forthcoming, p. 2.

⁴⁷ We wish to thank Raj Chari for this insight. Personal correspondence, December 11, 2006. See also Chari, “2004 Election,” pp. 954-955. There were three alleged mistakes: 1) the *Prestige* oil-tanker disaster of 2002, when the government was accused of doing little to avoid the spill off the Galician coast, of hiding information about the magnitude of the disaster, and of seeking few remedies for the unprecedented disaster; 2) the Popular Party's 2003 decision, without Parliamentary approval, to involve Spain in the Iraq war; and 3) and the party's lack of investigation into the crash of a Yak 42 troop carrier in Afghanistan that killed over sixty soldiers.

⁴⁸ A possible criticism of our argument is that the terrorists could not have foreseen that the Popular Party would suffer politically because of its position on ETA. If the main cause of the election outcome was public anger at governmental deception, the argument goes, the terrorists cannot take credit for the Socialists' victory. For three reasons this argument does not negate our conclusions. First, a plausible counter-argument is that Aznar could be expected to blame ETA. Previously, ETA was the only active terrorist group in Madrid. Furthermore, the terrorists may have delayed taking credit for the attack until after the election because they thought that the government would blame ETA and suffer electoral consequences as a result. We wish to thank Chaim Kaufmann for pointing out the possible criticism, as well as Raj Chari for his ideas about the plausible counter-argument. Second, at the beginning of the paragraph we noted that scholars disagree on the relative weight of the three causal factors. Charles Powell, for instance, says that punishing the Popular Party for deception is less important than its support for the war in Iraq. “Did Terrorism Sway Spain's Election?” pp. 376, 379-380. Finally, the third factor in the paragraph—more pressing anti-war views—applies whether or not the terrorists expected Aznar to blame ETA.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY. The Madrid case can help to identify those rare conditions under which some degree of success is possible for a terrorist group that targets primarily civilians. Identifying such factors may help to refine correspondence inference theory so that it can account not only for general trends but also for instances when exceptions occur. If the theory cannot be suitably repaired, then knowledge of key circumstances may suggest boundary conditions for the utility of the theory.

One factor is obvious: both a solid majority of the Spanish electorate and the 11-M network wanted Spain to remove its troops from Iraq. Yet the wishes of the terrorists and Spain's voters diverged on the issue of Spanish troops in Afghanistan; the new government led by the Socialist Party actually increased the number of Spanish troops there.⁴⁹ These observations explain why the terrorists were only partially successful. Because of Spain's continued military activities in Afghanistan, however, Islamic terrorism remains an active threat.⁵⁰

A second factor is that a significant segment of the public did not trust the government led by the Popular Party. Some citizens perceived duplicity on the part of the government for insisting that the terrorists were from ETA even after evidence began to mount that they were Islamic radicals. Even before the election, others thought that government decisions over the previous two years indicated arrogance, complacency, and secretiveness. This situation differs from one of Abrahms' three case studies: the Russian response to the 1999 apartment bombings by Chechen

⁴⁹ Jordán and Horsburgh, "Spain and Islamist Terrorism," p. 226.

⁵⁰ Jordán and Horsburgh list Islamist terrorist plans since the Madrid attack that have been foiled by the security services. They add that a possible maximalist aspiration to regain the Muslim Al Andalus (i.e., almost all of Spain and Portugal) seems to be a minor motivation. They warn, however, that it may become an issue in the future once the proportion of Muslim immigrants of the first and second generation becomes much larger. *Ibid.*, pp. 224-226.

terrorists. Before the apartment bombing, Russian public opinion supported the belief that Chechen demands were limited and therefore was supportive of Russia making concessions toward Chechen national self-determination. As Abrahms expected, the attack on Russian civilians shifted public opinion so that Chechen demands were then seen as maximalist and therefore Russia should make no concessions. In the Russian case, however, the public never seriously doubted the veracity of the government's interpretation of events.⁵¹ In Spain there was doubt, and this doubt apparently interacted with the public's prior desire to remove Spanish troops from Iraq.⁵²

A third factor is that the Madrid attack came three days before a close national election. The Socialist Party trailed the sitting Popular Party in the polls by a small margin. The Socialist Party's platform called for the removal of Spanish troops from Iraq, which coincided with the wishes of the majority of citizens. Again, this situation differs from the Russian apartment instance when no election was pending. This condition, like the first two, may be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for successful terrorism against civilians. In other instances when terrorism occurred on the eve of an election, moreover, opinion shifted away from making concessions to meet the political goals of terrorist organizations.⁵³

⁵¹ Abrahms notes a conspiracy theory that the Russian Federal Security Services framed the Chechens to build support for a counteroffensive, but that polling data indicates that less than ten percent of Russians accept the theory as credible. See "Why Terrorism Does Not Work," p. 62, n. 70.

⁵² This interaction is consistent with some of the conclusions of the Spanish scholar Narciso Michavila: "...Without a latent desire for change, without the Spanish government's support for the war in Iraq, and without the shock caused by the attacks, the change of government could not have occurred. The two-way manipulation of information, by the government and against it, tended to reinforce the process...." See "War Terrorism and Elections," p. 32.

⁵³ In December 2003, for example, Chechen terrorists struck in Russia during an election season. This bombing killed 41 and injured over 150. The attack was less than a week before the election of the Russian Duma, part of their Parliament. Up to this point, the Chechen problem had more or less been ignored by United Russia, the party supporting

Where might this set of conditions that favored partial success for the terrorists fit into correspondence inference theory? To answer this question, the theory must be summarized in a manner that highlights key types of causal factors.

The independent variable is the principal target of the terrorist group: military or civilian. The intervening variable is the accuracy of popular perceptions of the terrorists' political objective, which varies between accurate and inaccurate. The value of the intervening variable is caused by the value of the independent variable: military targets lead to an accurate public perception that the terrorists' goal is non-maximalist, while civilian targets lead to the misperception that their goal is maximalist. The value of the intervening variable in turn affects the value of the dependent variable, the prospect of success. The dependent variable can vary between a state reacting with occasional concessions and reacting with no concessions. When a group primarily attacks military targets, therefore, success is possible. When civilians are the primary target, success is impossible.

The theory is most useful when it can explain non-obvious situations and outcomes. One such situation is when the public wrongly believes that a terrorist group mainly targets civilians. Another is when the public misinterprets non-maximalist terrorist objectives as maximalist. Our analysis does not consider the first misperception because, in the Madrid case, the public correctly understood (as expected) that the 11-M network primarily targets civilians. The Madrid case does shed light on and challenge the second situation, however, because the terrorist network had limited

President Vladimir Putin. The attack was intended to put the Chechen problem back into the election. The terrorists hoped that by regaining the attention of the Russian public and instilling fear in them, the Russian public would seek an end to terrorism by giving in to Chechen demands for independence. Instead, the terrorist attack rallied support for Putin and the United Russia party. Russian voters wanted a government that would punish terrorists, not appease them. Therefore the Chechen's were not successful in their goal to change the course of Russian policy. See Peter Baker and Susan Glasser, "Russian Train Bombing Kills 41: Officials Blame Pre-election Attack on Chechen Separatists," *The Washington Post*, December 6, 2003, p. A15.

objectives and (unexpectedly) the public did not misperceive this fact. Thus our attempt to repair the theory concentrates only on situations that meet the following antecedent conditions: the terrorist group targets mainly civilians, and it has non-maximalist objectives (i.e., limited, idiosyncratic, or ambiguous objectives).⁵⁴ Furthermore, the outcome is either partial or total success, and the repaired theory should be able to explain this unexpected outcome.

Under these restricted circumstances, the intervening variable is where situational factors could influence its value (i.e., the accuracy of public perceptions of terrorist objectives). Therefore, a confluence of the three condition variables may affect the accuracy of public perceptions.⁵⁵ In the Madrid case the public accurately interpreted the 11-M network's demands as limited. Thus when a terrorist group targets mainly civilians, accurate perceptions of limited objectives can be expected when 1) the terrorist group and a majority of the public share the same limited policy objective, or at least part of a set of limited terrorist objectives; 2) a significant sector of the public does not trust the government; and 3) the terrorist attack occurs just prior to a close election. The above controlled comparison between the Spanish and Russian cases supports this assertion.⁵⁶

This confluence of conditions is probably quite rare. There may be additional, non-obvious condition variables that matter, and perhaps sometimes they carry more causal weight than these three. The Madrid case is also only one anomaly for the theory, and the case may be unique. Consequently at this stage of research, the generalizability of our findings about these condition variables is low. Yet the case does show that Abrahms' theory is not always right.

⁵⁴ We define an "antecedent condition" as a situation required for the theory to operate. Its value does not vary, unlike the values of variables.

⁵⁵ A condition variable is a factor whose value varies and which governs the size of the impact that independent and intervening variables have on dependent variables and other intervening variables. See Van Evera, *Guide to Methods*, p. 11.

⁵⁶ For a useful discussion of the controlled comparison research method, see *Ibid.*, pp. 56-58 and 68-69.

Further research is needed to learn more about the reliability of his findings. We encourage scholars to conduct studies with a larger collection of cases, including cases that involve ad hoc terrorist networks. We especially urge scholars to seek out cases that may be exceptions to the rule. If more exceptions can be found, then the analysis of relevant condition variables can widen and deepen—so that our understanding of why terrorism usually fails can be refined.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY. Abrahms forwards four policy implications.⁵⁷ If further research supports our findings, and if successful terrorist attacks against civilians are indeed rare like we expect, then the impact on his policy implications would not be extensive and would not always apply (as with his first implication below). After discussing his four implications and our modifications for three of them, we finish by adding two policy implications of our own.

First, Abrahms predicts that “terrorists will find it extremely difficult to transform or annihilate a country’s political system.” This situation involves maximalist political objectives, and our case study casts no doubt on its validity.

Second, he says that “jihadists stand to gain from restricting their violence to military targets.” Our research suggests a qualifier, whereby terrorists usually (or almost always) stand to gain from concentrating on military targets. Also keep in mind his research comparing civilian-centric and guerilla groups, whereby even groups that mainly attack military targets fail to achieve their political objectives twice as often as such groups succeed.⁵⁸

Third, “the self-defeating policy consequences of terrorism will ultimately dissuade potential jihadists from supporting it.” A qualifier can be added that indicates some but not much uncertainty to this predicted outcome. Terrorism that targets civilians will likely continue to fail most of the

⁵⁷ Abrahms, “Why Terrorism Does Not Work,” pp. 76-77.

⁵⁸ Ibid., Figure 2 on p. 56.

time, but not always. Therefore the repaired policy implication is that terrorists and their supporters who are rational actors (i.e., who are sensitive to cost-benefit calculations) will likely reduce but not end their support for terrorism. As Abrahms adds, moreover, Islamist groups would continue to have an incentive to switch to an insurgency strategy that hits mainly military targets.

Fourth, “it is commonly said that terrorists cannot be deterred because they are willing to die for their cause and that they lack a ‘return address’ to threaten with a retaliatory strike. But perhaps the greatest reason deterrence breaks down is because of the widespread, albeit erroneous, belief that attacking civilians is an effective strategy for terrorist groups to advance their policy goals. Disabusing terrorists of this notion would go a long way toward defusing the cycles of violent reprisal.” The Madrid case study suggests that terrorists may hold on to the belief that terrorism against civilians, although it rarely works, sometimes succeeds at achieving its political goals at least partially. Because of the Madrid case study, therefore, we are somewhat more pessimistic than Abrahms about the prospect of terrorism’s demise. We agree, however, that the fact that terrorism rarely succeeds needs to be conveyed to potential terrorists and their supporters.

Additional policy implications derive directly from the observation that 11-M terrorist network probably targeted Spain because it was the weakest link in European members of the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq. The document providing this analysis was posted on a well-known Islamist message board four months before the 11-M attack, and it contained a rational analysis of politics in Poland, Britain, and Spain and implications for the jihadist policy agenda. The author sensibly concluded that attacks that caused Spanish casualties would be more effective than attacks on either the British or Polish.⁵⁹ Although the analysis focused on causing casualties in Iraq rather than in Europe, it set the stage for predicting success for the 11-M network.

⁵⁹ See Lia and Hegghammer, “Jihadi Strategic Studies,” pp. 368-371.

To the extent that the strategic analysis influenced the terrorists, several predictive and prescriptive implications follow. First, more such analyses are predicted for the future, because even partial success breeds support for them. Thus at least some terrorist groups will concentrate on targets where success is possible. Second, several relevant elements for countering terrorism are prescribed. One is that scholars and analysts worried about terrorism should conduct parallel analyses that could provide early warning signals for countries at higher risk for terrorist attacks. Because the terrorists are somewhat more likely to succeed in such countries, another recommendation is to give higher priority to preventing or foiling the attack. If the attack occurs, it should be handled with less partisanship than occurred after the 11-M attack.⁶⁰ Finally, because distrust of the government led by the Popular Party contributed to the terrorists' success, it is in the interest of governments to build and maintain the trust of their publics.

⁶⁰ "Partisanship" refers to the Popular Party and the opposition both seeking to manipulate the media in order to present a favorable framing of the issue. See Jordán and Horsburgh, "Politics and Terrorism," p. 2.