



Reputation and Restraint: When Do Governments Negotiate with Terror Groups in Civil Conflict?

Ilker Kalin, Frederic S. Pearson, and Marie Olson Lounsbery

Introduction

The effectiveness of terrorism has been attributed in recent literature to its ability to extract political concessions from governments or force them to give in to terrorist activities. The often-heard slogan “we do not negotiate with terrorists” would suggest that such tactics to achieve any sort of political goals would be counterproductive. In fact, the general premise in the extant terrorism literature seems to suggest that terrorism is an ineffective but damaging tool of the “weak” (Crenshaw, 1981; Pruitt, 2006) and groups utilizing terrorism are no more likely to extract political gains than other non-state actors (Abrahms, 2006, 2012).

This logic, however, though generally accurate about comparative weakness, runs counter to the idea that terrorism can be a calculated tool utilized by so-called rational actors (Kydd & Walter, 2002) and fails to explain the recurrent use of terror tactics by insurgent groups (Pape, 2003). Besides, depending on how sustained the terror activity becomes, governments, despite their frequent vows never to negotiate with terrorists, frequently are obliged to offer political concessions ranging from prisoner exchanges and ceasefires (an example is the case between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan government) to peace agreements (as is the case between the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) and the British government).

These opposing views on terrorism efficacy raise questions that need to be addressed in further scrutiny of the literature, including the following: What are the factors that account

for the variation in peace negotiation onset with terror groups within and across conflicts? Why do some governments initiate talks with certain terror groups, while others resist such talks? Are there any specific groups or types of groups to which governments are more likely to extend concessions or offer talks, or any particular scenarios or terrorist strategies conducive to such interactions (concessions/talks)?

We address these questions within the context of civil conflicts. While terrorism and civil conflicts have historically been treated as separate phenomena in some early political violence literature,¹ more recent scholarship recognizes that they frequently overlap in practice and should be analyzed in relation to one another (Fortna, 2015; Stanton, 2013; Thomas, 2014). According to Stanton (2013), terrorism is one of many tactics that rebel groups may employ within the broader strategy of civil conflict, and many insurgent groups shift tactics depending on political and military dynamics, as well as their relationships with constituencies. Thomas (2014) and Fortna (2015) similarly show that rebel groups often use terrorism strategically during civil wars to shape conflict outcomes, highlighting its role as a tactical choice within intrastate conflict.

We acknowledge that the term “terrorist” is often politically expedient and used by states to delegitimize opposition and that states also sometimes indulge in terroristic behavior. To avoid conflating diverse types of violent actors, our analysis focuses on the strategic use of violence against civilians as a distinguishing characteristic (Clarke, 2025), allowing for a more behavior-based definition rather than one rooted in political labeling. In this study, we treat terrorism as a tactic employed by insurgent actors in the context of civil war, rather than as a distinct type of conflict, and adopt the term “terrorist rebel groups” (see, Fortna, 2015). Throughout the article, we use the terms “rebels” and “insurgents” interchangeably. When we

¹ There are, however, certain exceptions, such as Boulden, 2009; Findley & Young, 2012; Kalyvas, 2004.

use the term “terror group,” we refer to rebel groups that engage in intentional civilian targeting, consistent with the coding in the Reputation of Terror Groups (RTG) dataset. Thus, this usage reflects a behavior-based definition, not a politically contested designation. Importantly, not all such groups employ civilian targeting to the same extent or with the same consistency over time. We conceptualize variation in civilian targeting as an important source of reputational dynamics that may influence a group’s perceived legitimacy and its likelihood of being engaged in negotiations.

We examine how the constituency reputation of terror groups influenced the likelihood of negotiation during civil conflicts from 1980 to 2011. Drawing on the RTG dataset, we disaggregate domestic terror groups by the reputational signals they send to the communities they claim to represent. In particular, we assess whether groups that provide public goods, maintain political affiliations, or engage in media outreach – indicators of constituency engagement – are more likely to be offered formal negotiations by governments. We also explore how these reputational signals interact with the tactical decision of using violence against civilians.

Previous work by Heger and Jung (2017) suggests that rebel factions that can build a positive reputation with the community through the provisions of public service are proficient in leveraging that reputation through negotiations with their government. Does this same benefit apply to rebel groups who engage in the intentional targeting of civilians? We know that governments are reluctant to negotiate with “terrorists,” often drawing that line in the sand as a mechanism to discourage the use of such tactics or to obviate the need for concessions. Yet, governments do indeed engage in peace-related negotiation with groups they have identified as terrorist at times. We suspect that terror groups may also be able to develop good will among the community and legitimize their opposition to the government in

ways like those found by Heger and Jung (2017) among rebels, but the relationship is potentially complicated by tactical decisions by the nonstate actors involved.

Governments' response to terrorism or to any opposition, by default, is generally to suppress any dissidents (Davenport, 2007). The consideration of negotiation as an option emerges only after exhausting alternative counter-terrorism strategies such as repression, cooptation (divide and conquer), foreign assistance, or isolation (Pruitt, 2006). These governmental tactics may prove less efficacious against terror groups enjoying high esteem within their constituency, especially if that constituency represents a substantial or influential portion of the population, *and* refrains from specifically targeting civilians. Moreover, a positive constituency reputation bestows upon a terror group the status of a legitimate political actor, at least within a segment of society, thereby mitigating a commonly cited barrier against negotiation with non-state actors. Thus, we argue that governments may perceive peace negotiations with popularly supported terror groups as less costly and even beneficial, as opposed to engagements with groups negatively or weakly reputed by their constituency, unless that reputation is offset by high levels of civilian targeting.²

The article proceeds as follows. First, we review the existing literature on negotiation initiation and the strategic effectiveness of terrorism. We then present the theoretical framework, focusing on how the constituency reputation of insurgent groups may influence the likelihood of peace or accommodation negotiations, primarily through the lens of governments' cost-benefit calculations. The research design section outlines the methodological approach and describes the key variables. This is followed by the presentation of empirical results and discussion of their implications. The article concludes by emphasizing

² The focus here is on decisions by the government to engage in negotiations with rebel factions. While states can and do target civilians, the impact of those tactics is not part of our theoretical approach.

the role of reputation-building in shaping negotiation dynamics between terror groups and governments in civil conflicts.

Negotiation Initiation and Terrorism Efficacy

The question of whether terrorism works or not has been a long-standing debate in the literature. The existing results regarding the efficacy debate are at best mixed. On one hand, some scholars have argued that terrorism is an effective means to achieve political gains, especially for weaker parties. Pape, for example, suggests that terror groups can gain modest concessions from governments through conducting suicide terror (e.g., bombings) (Pape, 2003, 2005), though one must note that such tactics can also result in repressive moves such as building barrier walls. Terrorism can work “because it causes governments and individuals to respond in ways that aid the terrorists’ cause” (Kydd & Walter, 2006, p. 50). By applying “power to hurt” logic, Thomas argues that as rebel groups begin to exert an increasing number of terror attacks, governments become more likely to extend concessions and participate in negotiations, though of course, the opposite may also be true as in more desperate government crackdowns (Thomas, 2014).

On the other hand, others perceive terrorism as a relatively ineffective tool. Abrahms argues that terror groups seldom extract significant political concessions from governments (Abrahms, 2006, 2012). Terrorism can only bring minor gains, such as media attention, obtaining financial support, and advancing voluntary membership, which Abrahms refers to as process goals (Abrahms, 2012). Of course, some of these outcomes, such as increased notoriety, may in themselves be highly valued by the group(s). However, Abrahms argues that terrorism fails to produce major political gains, such as reaching specified political ends, which he refers to as outcome goals. By the same token, Cronin (2009) argues that terrorism generally yields only partial achievements for terror groups and cannot provide a complete success of the group’s stated political objective. In a comparison of terror and rebel groups in

civil conflicts, Fortna (2015) argues that the former are less likely to achieve their stated political objectives, concluding that “terrorists do not win.”

These differences regarding success are mainly due to studies’ varied conceptions of success (Fortna, 2015). Without reaching an agreement as to what constitutes success, it is unlikely that the controversy can be settled. In that regard, Thomas (2014) criticizes the literature for exerting too much focus on the full achievement of the group’s political goals while neglecting negotiation attempts and concessions *per se* as a success for rebel groups. Indeed, formally engaging in talks with governments presents significant benefits, such as group recognition and consideration of demands. For this reason, it is possible that governments may insist on secret or indirect talks through third parties. Nevertheless, negotiation itself is a breakthrough, particularly when those talks are aimed at underlying grievances (Crenshaw, 1981). Moreover, some scholars have emphasized the importance of taking negotiation as a process, rather than just an outcome (Ari, 2023; Kaplow, 2016; Pearson et al., 2011). In response to this call, recent studies on negotiation with non-state actors during civil conflicts have taken serious steps to parse negotiation into stages and consider it as a process (Findley, 2013; Ogutcu-Fu, 2016). Scholars have also asserted that any negotiation attempt during conflicts may be an indicator of future talks, signaling the willingness of the parties to discuss the conflict issues further, including their relative statuses (Kalin & Abduljaber, 2020; Pearson et al., 2011).

A few studies have systematically analyzed the conditions for initiation of talks with dissidents in general (Bapat, 2015; Walter, 2002), while terror group concerns have been included by only a limited number of studies (Fortna, 2015; Thomas, 2014). A large body of literature has focused on the obstacles that constrain parties to a civil dispute from participating in talks (Miller, 2011; Neumann, 2007; Wilkinson, 2006). At their heart lie the issues related to the legitimacy and complexity of groups, whether terrorist or not (Toros,

2008). Other concerns for initiating negotiations on either the group or government side include the possibility of spoilers (Kydd & Walter, 2006; Stedman, 1997), the terror group's potential hidden intentions (Duyvesteyn & Schuurman, 2011; Hewitt, 1984), the credibility of the other side (Iklé, 1971; Pillar 1983), rewarding bad behaviors (Thomas, 2014), and the government's reputation and political standing as "concession-prone" (Walter, 2002). On the other hand, a group of studies asserts that some of the obstacles (i.e., affording credibility and legitimacy) preventing the warring parties from holding talks can be overcome through the aid of third-party mediators and/or multilateral military interventions (Olson Lounsbury et al., 2011; Olson Lounsbury & DeRouen, 2016), as in the sporadic indirect talks we have heard about between Israel and Hamas during the Gaza war.

Despite these obstacles, peace negotiations between governments and terror groups do occur more often than might be expected (Neumann, 2007). The ripeness theory, posited by William Zartman (1989), is the most pronounced argument in the literature to explain when conflict negotiations occur. Zartman (1993) argues that parties are more likely to negotiate when they find themselves in a "mutually hurting stalemate" whereby they cannot successfully escalate the costly conflict further in pursuit of their goals. In such a situation, they seek "a way out" through negotiation (Zartman, 2000). Similarly, negotiations occur when "one side demonstrates that it cannot push or punish the enemy beyond a certain point" (Pillar, 1983, p. 59). Both Pillar's argument and Zartman's ripeness theory point to the imposed cost of ongoing conflict on the warring parties as the determinant of negotiation initiation. Following the same logic, scholars have suggested that rebel groups can increase the cost of conflict on governments and coerce them into concessions through terrorist attacks, violence against civilians, irregular warfare, and provocation strategies (Kalyvas & Kocher, 2007; Lake, 2002; Thomas, 2014).

The main gap in the literature, however, seems to be the lack of disaggregation of terror groups concerning the possibility of negotiations. As such, our attention is drawn to the question of whether there are specific groups or types of groups with whom governments are more likely to initiate negotiations. Although the former question has been partially answered by several studies (Pruitt, 2006; Zartman & Alfredson, 2019), finding negotiations with non-ideological ethnonationalist terror groups more common than with other terror groups, both questions should be addressed in further scrutiny since there may be other important group and situational characteristics that make talks more or less palatable and that have been overlooked or downplayed.

Theoretical Premises

We build our theoretical framework on three core premises about the strategic behavior of governments and terror groups during civil conflicts. First, terrorism may be a rationally selected strategy in the hands of insurgents during civil conflicts (Kydd & Walter, 2006). This means that groups using terrorism, including intentional targeting of civilians, expect to gain specific benefits from their actions, though of course some extremists may simply be anarchic and destructive. A terrorist act is defined as “the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence to attain a political, economic, religious or social goal through fear, coercion or intimidation” (Lafree & Dugan, 2007, p. 184). One of the ways that terror groups will instill fear, coercion, or intimidation is through the targeting of civilians. This is how one distinguishes terrorists from rebels: “Terrorism... is characterized by the use of violence by sub-state actors to attack innocent civilians in order to garner attention for their cause and ultimately, create pressure in order to attain political ends” (Clarke, 2025, p. 442).

Interestingly, not all groups identified as terror (either by their own governments or by the Global Terrorism Database) specifically target civilians. We agree with Clarke and suggest that there is an important distinction between ‘terror’ groups that victimize civilians and those

that do not, and further, this distinction will influence decisions by governments to engage in peace talks with opposition groups.

Second, both governments and terror groups rely at least to an extent on public support to achieve their political goals. Neither governments nor terror groups are unitary actors. Albeit in different manners, both actors rely on constituent support (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003). Hewitt (1984) states that terror groups need three essentials to function: personnel, weapons, and popular support. Admittedly, the need for public support generally holds more for governments than for terror groups, as the former need the support or tolerance of a significant portion of the population for political survival (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003). Indeed, the respective government and insurgent constituencies also react to the opponent, with greater and lesser degrees of tolerance; highly unpopular governments will tend to strengthen the hand of insurgents, and highly reviled insurgents will do the same for increased government constituency support. Work by Cook and Olson Lounsbery (2017) suggests that popular support for either the government or insurgents will in part determine tactical decisions by both actors, including decisions to engage in negotiations.

Third, terrorism efficacy can be evaluated in a variety of ways other than a mere focus on significant political concessions or winning on the battlefield (Abrahms, 2012; Cronin, 2009). These include gaining attention (Dershowitz, 2002), survival of terror groups (Kirisci, 2020), international support, and bringing governments to negotiation tables (Thomas, 2014). As such, terror groups might perceive even a failed negotiation as a partial success granting the group at least *de facto* legitimacy and popularity, which are believed to ripen the conditions for future bilateral talks in each conflict. Thus, examining negotiations held between warring parties, whether successful or failed, is a valuable first step since negotiations often precede and determine the ensuing phases of peace processes or reversion to violence.

Building on these premises, we argue that governments, regardless of regime type, privately weigh the reputational signals of terror groups when considering negotiation. Groups that cultivate positive reputations within their constituency, such as through political ties or public service provision, are more likely to be seen as legitimate actors. However, this reputational benefit may be undermined by civilian targeting. Thus, we expect governments to be more willing to negotiate with groups that demonstrate positive constituency engagement and avoid indiscriminate violence against civilians, particularly when the timing and political context are conducive to talks.

It is important to clarify, however, that the measures used in this study reflect groups' efforts to cultivate support rather than direct indicators of public approval. That is, providing public goods or operating a media outlet does not necessarily mean the group enjoys strong popular legitimacy. Nonetheless, following the framework of Tokdemir and Akcinaroglu (2016), we assume that these actions are strategic signals aimed at building or sustaining reputation among key audiences. Governments, in turn, may interpret such efforts as indicators of organizational strength, local embeddedness, or constituency engagement, factors that could shape their willingness to negotiate, even if actual support levels vary.

Our focus is limited to domestic terror groups within the context of civil wars or violence for several reasons. For one thing, it allows for the judgment of terrorism efficacy when groups have other available strategies to employ in pursuit of their political goals, such as anti-government combat insurgency (Thomas, 2014). On the other hand, the effect of constituency reputation could be even more relevant for domestic terror, which we discuss further in the next section.

Reputation of Terror Groups and Negotiations

Governments may initially perceive any negotiations with terror groups off limits, largely due to fears of legitimizing the group and appearing weak. Engaging in talks may harm their

reputation as “concession-prone” (Bapat, 2015; Walter, 2002), as they must depart from their common “no negotiation with terrorists” rhetoric. This reluctance can be especially pronounced at the early stages of conflict or when dealing with groups that target civilians. Therefore, a significant portion, if not all such formal negotiations during civil conflicts are preceded by informal or secret talks, two-way or back channels, and shuttle diplomacy (Pruitt, 2005).

Pruitt (2006) outlines a range of strategic options governments can pursue when confronting terror groups: capitulating, combating, isolating, mainstreaming, and negotiating. Capitulating, meeting the group’s demands, is rare and generally politically untenable. States typically begin with repression (combat) and only consider negotiation if the group manages to survive and persist during this period (Bapat, 2015). Even then, alternative strategies may still be preferred. Isolation (or marginalization) targets the group’s support base by offering political and social incentives to its presumed constituency, in hopes of undermining support (Pruitt, 2006). This strategy has a higher chance of working with more loosely attached or marginal constituencies. Mainstreaming, on the other hand, encourages terror groups to end terrorist activities and pursue their objectives through political means (Pruitt, 2006). This has been a key element in peace agreements in Northern Ireland and Colombia, for example. This strategy is more likely to work with groups that are affiliated with semi-legitimate or newly formed political parties like Sinn Fein.

The term “terrorist” is often politically expedient allowing the government to delegitimize opposition to their rule. However, many such groups actively cultivate support among local populations and seek to represent a constituency. Like other political actors, they aim to appeal to their audience as well as the audience of their adversaries in government. This is why terror groups may target both audiences in their actions and strategies, as they presume that targeting civilians is a strategically adopted tool for non-state actors to achieve

political ends (Lake, 2002). As with rebel groups in general, terror groups evaluate how the target government population and their constituency will respond to their actions (Stanton, 2013).

We argue that governments may see negotiation as less costly, and more potentially rewarding, with terror groups that have cultivated a positive reputation among their constituents, for several reasons. First, when groups are deeply embedded in their communities, isolating or mainstreaming them becomes less viable. Negotiation may then become a more attractive option. Second, governments are wary of commitment problems, especially the risk of internal spoilers disrupting peace processes (Stedman, 1997; Walter, 2002). However, groups with strong internal legitimacy and a supportive base can be seen as more reliable to uphold agreements. Finally, governments have better chances of framing potential negotiations as a key opportunity to end the violence with groups who have built a positive constituency reputation, especially if these groups avoid targeting civilians. In a sense, terror groups with a positive constituency reputation extend an olive branch to governments by providing them with better excuses to put negotiation onto the political agenda without losing face to the public.

We propose three ways that terror groups may build constituency reputation and legitimacy, and in turn influence the likelihood of negotiations.

Public Good Provision

All rebel groups claim to represent a group of people, gathering along the lines of religion, ethnicity, nationalism, or other ideologies. While some groups invest time and finance in winning the “hearts and minds,” or at least the tolerance of a civilian constituency, others forego such efforts. In weaker countries that lack the ability, or even the willingness, to effectively care for their citizens, nonstate actors can replace the government as the provider of essential public goods. Heger and Jung (2017) suggests that rebel factions that can build a

reputation with the community through the provisions of public service can leverage that reputation through negotiations with their government. Terror groups may similarly use social service provision as a strategic tool to challenge the state and enhance their legitimacy; this has been noted for example in Hezbollah's appeal especially among Shi'ite populations in Lebanon (Asal et al., 2022; Kirisci et al., 2023; Yetim, 2023). In Lebanon, Hezbollah has provided "a vast network of social services that include infrastructure, health-care facilities, schools, and youth programs" (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). In doing so, legitimacy of the group increases as allegiance to the group improves relative to the government. When nonstate actors are willing and able to provide such services, particularly amid civil conflict, their existence seems necessary for survival. As support and legitimacy of the group increases, the threat posed to the government of the state increases as well.

We suspect, however, that the reputational benefits from providing public goods will only be experienced when terror groups refrain from targeting civilian populations. The case of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines offers a suggestive illustration of this logic. Representing the Moro Muslim minority, the MILF cultivated local legitimacy through public service provision in areas under its control, including community policing, Islamic legal institutions, and socio-economic development programs (Podder, 2012). In contrast to more radical groups like Abu Sayyaf, the MILF generally refrained from large-scale violence against civilians, focusing its attacks primarily on state security forces (Abuza, 2005). This combination of constituency engagement and tactical restraint may have contributed to the group's perceived credibility, contributing to its eventual inclusion in formal peace talks that culminated in the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro.

When rebels refrain from indiscriminate violence, efforts to delegitimize the group will likely fall on deaf ears as the experience of the citizens under the group's care or

influence will speak louder than countering narratives that paint such groups as terrorists. As the battle of the conflict narratives shifts in favor the nonstate actor, governments will be forced to minimize their losses but also maintain their privileged position, and thus peace negotiation seems more likely. Therefore, we propose the following:

Hypothesis 1a: Governments are more likely to engage in negotiation with terror groups that provide public services.

Hypothesis 1b: This effect is weakened or reversed when those groups engage in high levels of civilian targeting.

Media Influence

Nonstate armed actors may also seek to build legitimacy and improve their base of support using media. As groups seek to justify their opposition to the government, as well as their use of violence to achieve their goals, they may harness the power of the media as a mechanism for delivering their narrative; in doing so, such groups can provide an alternative to the delegitimizing campaign typically put forth by the government. Groups that can deliver their message regularly have an advantage over those that do not have that capability. Media access suggests a certain level of organization and institutionalization, in addition to providing the tools to persuade and mobilize a potential constituency. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in Colombia, for example, had long broadcasted a radio program, called “Voice of Resistance,” to spread its propaganda and enhance the social status of its fighters. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, also, provided public services (i.e. health, education, and law) for the Tamil youth to increase community support (Tokdemir, 2021). Again, the benefits of media access will be curtailed with civilian victimization.³ Whatever messages of legitimacy that are portrayed in the media by the

³ While we acknowledge that the effects of civilian victimization may vary depending on the nature of the conflict, particularly in ethnically charged contexts where violence is directed at rival

terrorist organization, indiscriminate violence and the fear it generates will speak louder than those messages. Therefore, we propose the following:

Hypothesis 2a: Governments are more likely to engage in peace negotiations with terror groups that demonstrate media influence.

Hypothesis 2b: This effect is weakened or reversed when those groups engage in high levels of civilian targeting

Political Affiliation

Nonstate armed actors identified by either their government, or by other entities, as terrorist groups struggle to obtain legitimacy given their direct challenge to the state. To legitimize their cause and their organization, some groups will move to create a political party allowing them to enter into the existing political realm. In fact, it is not uncommon for terrorist organizations to create a political arm for this purpose (see, for example, Sinn Féin's relationship with the Provisional Irish Republican Army and Batasuna and EH Bildu's relationship to ETA or *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* in the Basque region of Spain). The ability to do so will provide a level of legitimacy.

A well-known example is the relationship between the Provisional IRA and Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland. As Sinn Féin gained electoral traction, the group's political visibility increased, but legitimacy remained limited as long as the IRA engaged in indiscriminate violence (Borsuk, 2016). It was only after the IRA declared a ceasefire and reduced civilian targeting that Sinn Féin became a credible participant in peace talks leading to the Good Friday Agreement (Moloney, 2002). This suggests that political institutionalization may enhance a group's chances of negotiation, but such benefits are conditional on tactical restraint. We, therefore, suspect that governments will be more likely to engage in

communities, we maintain that, in general, indiscriminate or high-profile civilian targeting carries reputational costs and tend to turn supporters off.

negotiations with such groups compared to those who lack that level of legitimacy. That legitimacy will again be undermined when the armed faction of that movement targets civilians.

Hypothesis 3a: Governments are more likely to engage in negotiation with terror groups with political party affiliation.

Hypothesis 3b: This effect is weakened or reversed when those groups engage in high levels of civilian targeting

Research Design

We construct our dataset by combining information from the Reputation of Terror Groups (RTG) dataset by Tokdemir and Akcinaroglu (2016) and the Peace Negotiations in Civil Conflicts (PNCC) dataset by Ari (2023). The RTG dataset is based on the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) (Enders et al., 2011), which defines terrorism as “the premeditated use (or threat) of violence by subnational groups in the pursuit of political, economic, social, core religious goals, in the aim of which is to intimidate an audience beyond its immediate victims” (Tokdemir & Akcinaroglu, 2016, p. 269). All domestic terror groups are included that engaged in at least five such terror attacks as identified by the GTD over the time period under study. Comparatively, the PNCC dataset relies on the dyadic UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset (ACD) (Melander et al., 2016). Our analysis focuses on dyads consisting of domestic rebel groups and state governments involved in civil conflicts between 1980 and 2011. These rebel groups that are classified as “terror groups” in the RTG dataset due to their consistent or sporadic use of terrorist tactics.

Our unit of analysis is the dyad-year, meaning each observation captures a single year of interaction between a given group and the government. The dataset includes both active conflict years (when violence occurred) and inactive years (when violence did not occur) if a negotiation took place during those inactive periods. This allows us to capture the political

dynamics that may lead to negotiations even outside of active fighting. In total, our sample includes 88 rebel–government dyads, resulting in 644 dyad-year observations.

In defining civil war, we rely upon the definition of the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), that is internal armed conflicts between a government and a non-state armed group over incompatibility regarding control over territory or governance that result in at least 25 battle-related deaths in a year (Gleditsch et al., 2002; Harbom et al., 2008). In defining terrorism, we employ the definition of the GTD already provided above and originally attributed to LaFree and Dugan (2007), that is “the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation.”

Dependent Variable

Our dependent variable is *negotiation*, a binary indicator coded 1 if any formal peace or accommodative negotiations took place between a state and a terror group during a given dyad-year, and 0 otherwise. This measure is drawn from the PNCC dataset, which systematically records when a government and a non-state actor entered and exited formal negotiations. The dataset captures not only active talks but also distinguishes years without negotiations, offering a comprehensive view of negotiation activity. Negotiations refer to any formal meetings, direct or indirect talks, mediated discussions, or agreements aimed at resolving conflict either partially or wholly.

Independent Variables

Our primary independent variables capture the extent to which terror groups cultivate a positive constituency reputation, operationalized through three main indicators: public goods provision, media presence, and political party affiliation. These variables are drawn from the Reputation of Terror Groups (RTG) dataset. *Public goods provision* is a binary variable coded 1 if the group provides any form of public services to the local population (e.g., education,

healthcare, infrastructure), and 0 otherwise. The provision of public goods is used as a proxy for a group's effort to build legitimacy and support among its constituency. This variable corresponds to Hypothesis 1 (H1).

Media presence is a binary variable coded 1 if the group demonstrates active media engagement, such as operating a TV or radio station or publishing newsletters, and 0 if no such media activity is observed. Media presence reflects the group's capacity to disseminate its narrative and engage with its audience, aligning with Hypothesis 2 (H2).

Political affiliation is a binary variable coded 1 if the terror group is affiliated with a political party or has established a formal political wing, and 0 otherwise. Political affiliation indicates institutional development and signals an openness to political engagement, as outlined in Hypothesis 3 (H3).

To assess whether the reputational benefits of public goods provision, media presence, or political affiliation are conditional on tactical behavior, we include a measure of *civilian targeting* as a moderator. This variable captures the extent of indiscriminate violence committed by the group. Specifically, we rely on RTG's coding of the number of civilians killed, logged to address right-skewed distribution. All four independent variables, public goods provision, media presence, political affiliation, and civilian targeting, are lagged by one year to reduce concerns of reverse causality and to better reflect the temporal order of effects.

Control Variables

We include several control variables grouped into conflict-related and country-level factors, relying on the RTG dataset. Among conflict-level characteristics, we control for *the number of terror groups* operating in a given country-each year. Governments presumably become less willing to grant concessions when there are multiple potential claimants in the country (Walter, 2002). It is also possible that governments may seek to divide and weaken the opposition by offering concessions to some groups over others (Cunningham et al., 2009).

Additionally, we control for the *age* of insurgent groups (logged), believing that groups with greater longevity are more likely to be viewed as durable actors, and therefore more viable candidates for negotiation. We also include a *religious group* indicator, coded as a binary variable for whether the group is identified as having a religious ideology. Prior research suggests that conflicts involving religious groups tend to be more protracted and resistant to negotiated settlements, which may influence the likelihood of talks (Pruitt, 2006; Svensson et al., 2024). We include a binary variable for *cross-border operations*, coded as 1 if the group engages in activities in more than one country, and 0 otherwise.

At the country-level, we also control for *regime type* by including a *democracy* indicator based on the Polity IV score (Marshall et al., 2016). Countries with a score of *6 or higher* are coded as democracies, while others are classified as non-democracies.

Democracies are thought to be both more constrained in their counterterrorism responses and more susceptible to public pressure, potentially shaping negotiation dynamics (Chenoweth, 2010, 2013).

We also include a *pre-Cold War* dummy variable to account for structural shifts in international conflict resolution after 1990, a period associated with a rise in negotiated peace settlements (Harbom et al., 2006). Finally, we include the logs of *GDP per capita* and *Population size* (from the RTG dataset) to account for state capacity and broader development, which may influence both the feasibility and the attractiveness of negotiating with insurgent actors.

Empirical Results and Discussion

Before turning to multivariate models, we first present descriptive and bivariate results to explore patterns in the data and provide context for the regression analyses. Table 1 summarizes the distribution of the main variables of interest. Approximately 52.2 percent of groups provided public goods, 38.7 percent had a media presence, and 79.2 percent were

affiliated with political parties. Around 31.7 percent of group-year observations involved some form of negotiation with the government.

Table 1. Descriptives

Variable	N	Min.	Max.	Mean/Freq. (%)	SD
Negotiation	644	0	1	31.7	-
Public goods	644	0	1	52.2	-
Media presence	644	0	1	38.7	-
Political affiliation	644	0	1	79.2	-
Number of civilian casualties	644	0	1028	49	106
Democracy	616	0	1	53.4	-
Religious group	637	0	1	22.1	-
Number of terror groups	644	1	24	4.1	4.3
Log GDP	616	4.69	10.45	7.96	-
Cross-border group	644	0	1	19.7	-
Pre-1990 Conflict	644	0	1	25	-

Since civilian targeting functions as a moderator in our analysis, we also explore whether groups with positive constituency characteristics are systematically more or less likely to harm civilians. Table 2 presents mean comparisons (using t-tests) of civilian casualties across groups with and without each characteristic. These averages are reported under the “Mean Casualties (Yes)” and “Mean Casualties (No)” columns, respectively.

The results suggest that groups with positive constituency traits are not uniformly less violent toward civilians. In fact, groups providing public goods or maintaining a media presence were associated with significantly higher average civilian casualties than those without. However, no statistically significant difference is observed between politically affiliated and non-affiliated groups. These findings indicate that legitimacy-building efforts such as public service or media outreach do not necessarily translate into more restrained violence. This sets the stage for our multivariate analysis, which examines whether these characteristics interact with civilian targeting in predicting peace negotiations.

Table 2. *Group Comparisons on Civilian Casualties*

Characteristics	Mean Casualties (No)	Mean Casualties (Yes)	<i>p</i>(t-test)
Public goods	32.19	64.48	< 0.001
Media presence	32.63	75.06	< 0.001
Political affiliation	43.35	50.53	0.44

Table 3 presents logistic regression models examining the likelihood of peace negotiations between governments and terror groups, focusing on how constituency-building efforts interact with civilian targeting. All independent variables, including civilian targeting, are lagged by one year. This lag structure accounts for the reduction in the number of observations, particularly due to the exclusion of the first year of each dyad, where lagged values are unavailable.

In Model 1, we test the association between public goods provision and negotiation. The results show that public goods provision is positively and significantly associated with the likelihood of negotiation ($b = 1.131$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that groups providing public services are more likely to be engaged in peace talks. However, the interaction between public goods and civilian targeting is not significant, indicating that the benefit of public service provision for negotiations is not meaningfully altered by a group's level of civilian violence.

Model 2 tests media presence. Neither the main effect of media presence nor its interaction with civilian targeting reaches statistical significance, indicating no robust association between media access and negotiation outcomes.

Model 3 introduces political affiliation. The main effect of political affiliation is positive and statistically significant ($b = 1.533$, $p = 0.05$), but notably, the interaction term between political affiliation and civilian targeting is negative and statistically significant ($b = -0.297$, $p < 0.05$). This implies that the benefits of political affiliation for negotiation are conditional: they erode as civilian targeting increases. In other words, political affiliation

increases the likelihood of negotiation only when groups refrain from or limit targeting civilians.

Model 4 includes all three group traits and their interactions with civilian targeting. Public goods provision and political affiliation remain positive and significant predictor of negotiation ($b = 0.973$, $p < 0.1$ and $b = 1.465$, $p < 0.05$, respectively). The interaction between political affiliation and civilian targeting also remains significant ($b = -0.319$, $p < 0.05$), reinforcing the idea that the reputational benefits of political party affiliation are undermined by civilian victimization. Media-related variables remain insignificant across models.

Table 3. *Interaction Effects of Group Characteristics and Civilian Targeting on Negotiation*

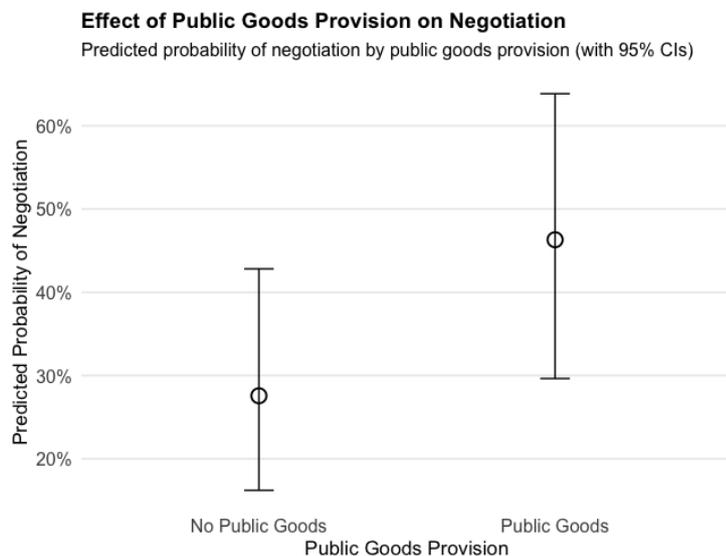
	<i>Dependent variable: Negotiation</i>			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Public Goods	1.131** (0.551)			0.973* (0.523)
Media Presence		0.152 (0.543)		-0.087 (0.585)
Political Affiliation			1.533** (0.646)	1.465** (0.588)
Target Civilians	-0.056 (0.101)	-0.091 (0.069)	0.132 (0.121)	0.192 (0.154)
Democracy	0.974** (0.448)	1.112** (0.453)	1.344*** (0.461)	1.160*** (0.448)
Religious Group	0.337 (0.568)	0.398 (0.604)	0.527 (0.516)	0.364 (0.535)
# of Terror Groups	0.081 (0.060)	0.093 (0.058)	0.097* (0.058)	0.081 (0.057)
Log GDP	-0.787*** (0.256)	-0.946*** (0.228)	-0.944*** (0.239)	-0.755*** (0.261)
Cross-border Group	-0.063 (0.241)	-0.157 (0.246)	-0.046 (0.261)	0.014 (0.254)
Pre-1990 Conflict	-0.694* (0.409)	-0.542 (0.385)	-0.619* (0.372)	-0.763* (0.404)
Group Age	0.596* (0.241)	0.830** (0.246)	0.842** (0.261)	0.613* (0.254)

	(0.331)	(0.340)	(0.342)	(0.354)
Log Population	-0.831***	-0.916***	-0.993***	-0.891***
	(0.207)	(0.187)	(0.196)	(0.203)
Public Goods × Target Civilians	-0.120			-0.066
	(0.143)			(0.144)
Media × Target Civilians		-0.039		-0.033
		(0.122)		(0.132)
Politics × Target Civilians			-0.297**	-0.319**
			(0.134)	(0.152)
Constant	6.142***	7.479***	6.368***	4.886**
	(1.875)	(1.476)	(1.550)	(1.961)
Observations	430	430	430	430
Log Likelihood	-232.668	-238.523	-234.031	-229.016
Akaike Inf. Crit.	489.336	501.046	492.062	490.031

Note: * p<0.1 ** p<0.05 *** p<0.01. Standard errors clustered around the warring dyad.

While public goods provision appears to have intrinsic reputational value, political affiliation is more fragile, losing its positive effect when paired with indiscriminate violence. Figure 1 shows the predicted probability of negotiation for groups that provide public goods versus those that do not, holding continuous variables at their means and categorical variables at their modal values.

Figure 1. Predicted probabilities of negotiation based on public good provision (based on Model 4)



Our expectation that the reputational benefits of group characteristics depend on restraint from civilian targeting is supported only for political affiliation. Figure 2 shows the predicted probabilities of negotiation for groups with and without political affiliation across varying levels of civilian casualties, holding all other covariates at their mean or modal values. The shaded areas around each line represent 95 percent confidence intervals for the predicted probabilities of negotiation. Where the intervals do not largely overlap, particularly at the low end of civilian casualties, the predicted probabilities for groups with and without political affiliation are statistically distinguishable. The wider bands at the extremes (especially toward the right) reflect greater uncertainty in predictions at those levels, likely due to fewer observations or higher variance in the data.

Figure 2 indicates that for groups without political affiliation, the likelihood of negotiation increases with more civilian casualties. This is in line with the “power to hurt” logic (Thomas, 2014) which posits that greater violence may compel governments to negotiate. In contrast, for politically affiliated groups, the likelihood of negotiation markedly declines as civilian casualties increase. This divergence aligns with our expectation that the political legitimacy gained through affiliation is undermined when groups target civilians.

Figure 2. *Predicted probabilities of negotiation based on political affiliation and civilian targeting (based on Model 4)*

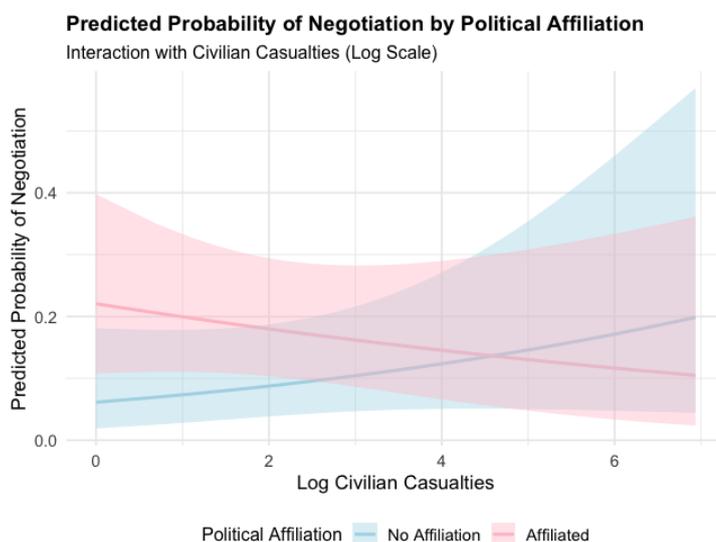
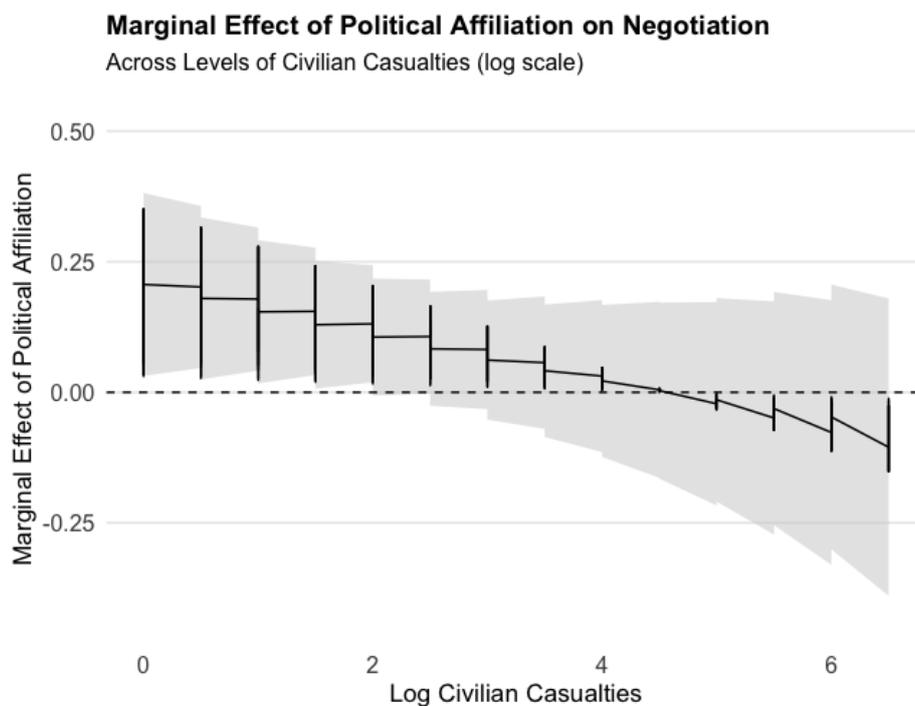


Figure 3 presents the marginal effect of political affiliation on negotiation across the spectrum of civilian casualties. Political affiliation has a significant positive effect on the likelihood of negotiation when civilian casualties are low, but the effect becomes negative and not statistically distinguishable from zero when civilian casualties are higher. This suggests that political affiliation enhances negotiation prospects only when groups exercise restraint in their use of violence.

Figure 3. *Marginal effect of political affiliation on negotiation across levels of civilian casualties (based on Model 4)*



Overall, the findings provide support for Hypothesis 3 and partial support for Hypothesis 1, while Hypothesis 2 is not supported. Although we do not find evidence that media presence influences the likelihood of negotiations, this may stem from limitations in how the variable is measured. Specifically, a binary indicator may fail to capture important variation in the quality, reach, or credibility of media engagement across groups. Public goods provision, however, significantly increases the likelihood of negotiation regardless of civilian

targeting behavior. This lends support to the findings by Heger and Jung (2017) that groups can leverage community-oriented service provision into political gains at the negotiation table. This finding implies that such efforts to build legitimacy may have an intrinsic value that is not easily undermined by violent tactics, or alternatively, that groups capable of providing services may also possess other traits conducive to negotiation.

By contrast, the benefits of political affiliation are conditional on restraint from civilian targeting, as we hypothesized. Groups with a political wing are more likely to be engaged in negotiations only when they do not engage heavily in civilian violence. This highlights the reputational cost of civilian targeting for politically institutionalized groups and underscores the importance of tactical discipline in securing political dialogue.

Concluding Remarks

This study offers a revised perspective on the conditions under which governments negotiate with terror groups during civil conflicts. Building on the assumption that both states and nonstate actors operate with political constituencies in mind, we posited that groups that cultivate a positive constituency reputation, through service provision, media messaging, or political organization, are more likely to be engaged in peace talks. However, this reputational effect is not unconditional. Our findings reveal a crucial tension between reputation and restraint: the benefits of legitimacy-building are conditional upon the group's restraint from targeting civilians. In other words, a group's political credibility can be undone by its strategic use of civilian violence.

In armed conflicts, negotiations tend to occur when "the time is ripe" and parties begin to "seek a way out" (Zartman, 1989, 2000). Yet this moment may still depend on group-specific characteristics that can facilitate or impede the process. In this context, constituency reputation might emerge as an important strategic factor. Accordingly, our findings should be interpreted as probabilistic rather than deterministic. Popular support of terror groups might

serve as a catalyst in easing governments' punitive "no negotiation" stand into a more conciliatory tone. A group's positive constituency reputation evidently signals to the government that (1) the group has a strong support base, which makes it harder to marginalize the group; (2) the group has become a legitimate actor at least for some share of the society; and (3) the group has an internal consistency and likely staying power, which render it as a relatively more credible negotiation partner.

We find support for our hypothesis regarding the influence of political institutionalization on the likelihood of negotiations. Political affiliation, usually in the form of a political party, significantly increases the likelihood of negotiation, but only when the rebel group refrains from high levels of violence against civilians. Political affiliation may signal credibility, resilience, and a constituency that the government cannot easily ignore or marginalize. Civilian targeting, however, undermines the perceived legitimacy of groups that might otherwise be seen as potential political actors, particularly when those groups are embedded within formal political processes. We also find partial support for our hypothesis regarding public goods provision. Groups that offer public services are more likely to experience negotiations, regardless of their targeting behavior. This aligns with prior findings by Heger and Jung (2017). We interpret these finding to mean that governments do weigh the reputational standing of terror groups, particularly among their own constituencies, when calculating the costs and benefits of having talks.

Our expectation, however, was not conclusively met regarding media presence. Certainly, some groups, such as Sinn Fein, the PLO, and ETA have benefited from their media presence and were able to garner international support as a result, but our findings do not support the importance of media presence more generally. One possible explanation is that our binary measure of media activity fails to capture qualitative variation in reach or credibility. Additionally, the media presence variable in the dataset primarily reflects

traditional media platforms, such as radio broadcasts, television appearances, or printed publications. However, the role of digital communication and social media, which are increasingly used by armed groups to build support and engage with constituencies, is not captured by this measure. Future work could benefit from incorporating measures of digital media use, including social media campaigns and online influence networks, to better assess the reputational effects of media engagement.

It is important to note that our research only captures whether negotiations occur, not whether they are successful or durable. Nor do we explore the internal dynamics within groups that may shape negotiation probabilities or outcomes. Future work should investigate whether reputational characteristics affect durability, agenda scope, or bargaining strength, as well as explore non-constituency reputation and third-party mediation. Understanding whether a group is negotiating for a ceasefire or full autonomy, for example, is a critical step in refining this analysis. Indeed, we should analyze different types of negotiation and the particular issues on the table.

Our findings carry important policy implications. Policymakers should assess the strategic benefits of negotiation earlier in the conflict cycle, rather than ruling it out categorically. A more nuanced interpretation of group demands, and societal ties may help open space for reform or dialogue that weakens incentives for violence. If groups with positive constituency reputations are more likely to be offered talks, as this study suggests, then addressing those constituencies' needs could be a more productive path toward de-escalation. Governments that ignore these dynamics, as in the case of Syria, risk pushing moderate communities toward extremism. For non-state actors, the path to negotiation requires more than constituency reputation alone. They must reckon with the dual imperative of reputation and restraint: building credibility among their constituents while refraining from violence that could undermine it.

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