

Regime Type and Terrorist Attacks

KARA KINGMA, BRYAN CRAMER, and ERICA CHENOWETH

Abstract

We review the current literature on why democracies experience terrorist attacks. Noting that most of these studies were based on data that ended in 2004, we update the data and analyze regime type and terrorist attacks through 2012. We identify a key trend: 2009 appears to have been a watershed year, where terrorist attacks began to occur more often in failed states and countries under military occupation than in democratic ones. Most strikingly, we find that autocratic regimes have experienced a modest increase in terrorist attacks, whereas democracies have experienced a generalized decrease. We then review the literature on terrorism in autocratic regimes, which is mainly focused on explaining variation in terrorist attack patterns across autocratic regimes with different capacities for coercion and co-optation and different sensitivities to audience costs. We conclude by highlighting some of the research and policy implications on regime type and terrorism.

INTRODUCTION: DOES DEMOCRACY INCREASE TERRORISM?

Policymakers in the United States have focused on democracy promotion as a means to reduce terrorism based on the belief that terrorism emerges from autocracies. In this view, terrorists resort to violence because they are frustrated by the lack of political and economic freedom in such systems and are unable to express their grievances peacefully. However, many studies have shown that terrorism is more common in democracies than in autocratic regimes (Eubank & Weinberg, 1994, 1998, 2001; Eyerman, 1998), leading many scholars to challenge this commonly-held policy view.

A number of explanations posit that the very nature of democratic systems encourages terrorism by decreasing its costs and risks. Democracies are distinctly open and provide particular freedoms of which terrorists can take advantage. More specifically, the civil rights guaranteed by democracies allow terrorists to organize and act within them. In her 1981 work, Crenshaw argues that in democracies, "Terrorists view the context as permissive, making terrorism a viable option. In a material sense, the means are placed

at their disposal by the environment" (p. 383). In addition, the justice systems of democracies offer legal and civil protections for terrorists who are apprehended (Schmid, 1992). Terrorists need not worry about overly harsh penalties or extreme repression under these regimes.

As this mechanism would predict, Eubank and Weinberg (1998, 2001) find that terrorism is most common in the freest political systems. Democracies are vulnerable to terrorism, they argue, because they provide terrorists opportunities and because terrorists can coerce their elected officials. These officials are receptive to the voices of terrorists and to the larger public negatively affected by terrorist violence (Eubank & Weinberg, 1994). It is thus strategic for terrorists to act against democracies because elected governments will concede to their demands in order to avoid additional violence. Pape (2003) uses this mechanism to explain instances of suicide terrorism in democracies, arguing that the tactic is often successful in forcing governments to make territorial compromises.

Democracies also guarantee freedom of the press. Many scholars have argued that terrorists seek publicity and thus are motivated to conduct attacks in democracies where their grievance-motivated violence will reach a wide audience (Hoffman, 2006). A freer press leads to more terrorism because "[t]he modern news media, as the principal conduit of information about such acts... plays a vital part in the terrorists' calculus" (Hoffman, 2006, p. 174). Gadarian (2010) points to this explanation in her study on the effect of emotional media coverage of terrorist events on the foreign policy views of citizens. Under conditions of freedom of the press, the media competes for viewers and readers by highlighting terrorist events.

However, some scholars question the link between press freedom and terrorism as an explanation for terrorism in democracies. In their view, a free press leads to more reports of terrorism but not necessarily more terrorism. In other words, terrorist attacks are accurately reported in democracies and underreported in authoritarian systems that generally lack a free press (Sandler, 1995). This mechanism is difficult to prove, but a number of studies have attempted to do so. For example, Drakos and Gofas (2006) conclude in their 2006 work that underreporting is indeed a problem in countries with less free presses. In a 2007 follow-up study, they find that countries that undergo improvements in their Press Freedom status, as measured by Freedom House, report greater terrorist activity in the following years, while those whose Press Freedom status worsens report less terrorist activity.

Another set of explanations look more closely at the particularities of democracies to understand why terrorists target some countries and not others. Scholars of these mechanisms disagree with those who would argue that more democracy leads to more terrorism. Rather, understanding why terrorism occurs in democratic regimes requires looking beyond the

simple divide between democracies and autocracies. First, the institutional environments of some democracies may limit potential terrorist groups from voicing their opinions. Second, some democratic institutions may lead to a general ineffectiveness of government, producing grievances that terrorists seek to resolve through violence.

As elected systems of government, democracies offer the institutional means for would-be terrorists to make their grievances heard peacefully. However, some provide more or less access to the marginalized or extremist groups to which terrorists belong. Young and Dugan (2011) find that democratic systems with more veto players experience more terrorism. Governments in systems with fewer veto players can more easily change policies to meet terrorists' demands, so terrorists are incentivized to act through nonviolent political channels. Terrorism is a more effective strategy and more likely to occur when policy change is unlikely in systems with more veto players. Li (2005) similarly demonstrates that democratic participation reduces terrorism except in the presence of institutional constraints. Political gridlock is more likely in democracies with institutional constraints, motivating terrorists to use violence.

Aksoy (2012) looks at differences in the opportunities for political access across democracies to explain incidences of terrorism. She concludes that democracies that make it easier for smaller groups to participate (through proportional representational electoral systems and higher median district magnitudes) are less likely to experience terrorism. In less permissive electoral systems, the probability of terrorism grows when elections are less than 2.5 years away. Aksoy and Carter (2014) extend this argument by considering the relationship between electoral institutions and terrorist groups' goals. They demonstrate that democracies are only more likely to experience terrorism from anti-system groups, or those groups whose goals cannot be accommodated in a democratic system. Further, electoral permissiveness has a significant effect on the likelihood of attacks by within-system terrorist groups.

Democracies also differ in the level of competition that exists within them. As systems of elected governments, democracies are sites of contestation among various interests. Terrorists might feel it necessary to adopt violent strategies and outbid others in order to achieve their goals. Chenoweth (2010) finds that political systems with higher levels of political competition experience more terrorism. She writes "... terrorism proliferates in democracies ... because of intergroup dynamics, when political organizations are motivated to escalate their activities due to political competition" (p. 16). Moore, Bakker, and Hill (2011) offer support for this argument, concluding that electoral contestation has a positive effect on terrorism. Bloom (2004) and Sanchez-Cuenca and Aguilar (2009) demonstrate similar mechanisms to explain terrorism in Palestine and Spain, respectively.

Finally, some explanations posit that terrorists use violence because of grievances stemming from the policy choices of democratic governments. Arguments for this mechanism look at general ideological viewpoints and specific economic and social policies. For example, Koch and Cranmer (2007) show that governments on the left are more susceptible to terrorism because terrorists expect them to compromise. On the other hand, Danzell (2011) finds that right-leaning governments tend to restrict political freedoms when in power, leading opposition parties on the left to turn to violence. Burgoon (2006) and Piazza (2009, 2011) link policies aimed at reducing economic inequality to lower levels of terrorism. Piazza and Walsh (2010a, 2010b) find that democracies that better respect physical integrity rights and protections from political imprisonment and extrajudicial killings are less likely to be targeted by terrorism.

In sum, various mechanisms have been proposed to explain why terrorism is more common in democratic systems of government. However, some democracies are more vulnerable to terrorism than others. Studies that show democratic regimes increase terrorism do not account for important differences among democracies. As mentioned, one proposed mechanism links terrorism to the opportunities provided by democracy. Yet Abadie (2006) demonstrates that democracies with mid-level measures of political freedom are more vulnerable to terrorism than either democracies with advanced levels of political freedom or autocracies. Kurrild-Klitgaard, Justesen, and Klemmensen (2006) argue that democracies with higher levels of civil liberties experience terrorism less often. Choi (2010) finds that the quality of rule of law in a democracy is negatively related to the likelihood of terrorism.

Democratic systems may ultimately discourage terrorism by providing would-be terrorists political access, but mechanisms of participation and grievance resolution take time to establish and may not be evident in new democracies. Eyerman (1998) and Piazza (2012) show that terrorism is more likely in the youngest democracies. New democracies may fail to provide representation to potential terrorists and in the provision of economic and civil goods, leading to grievances. Chenoweth (2012) supports this argument in her 2012 study, finding that partial democracies, or systems where "...elections are not totally free and fair or political participation is not routine or transparent" (p. 357), experience more terrorist attacks than advanced democracies or autocracies from 1970 until the mid-2000s, when countries under foreign occupation experience the most.

The most convincing mechanisms see terrorism as a product of institutions and policies that create grievances and limit terrorist groups' access to the political system. Various studies have shown that new or transitioning democracies tend to do both. Other research has demonstrated that advanced democracies are likely to experience relatively few instances of

terrorism unless they act in other countries' affairs (Braithwaite & Sobek, 2005; Savun & Phillips, 2009). Consequently, previous studies suggest that as democracy spreads and/or current partial democracies fail to consolidate, democracies are likely to continue to experience more terrorism than other regime types.

SOME EMPIRICAL TRENDS

Much scholarship on the association between regime type and terrorism focuses on the 1968–2004 period. START (2011) Relying on the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), we present some summary statistics to evaluate whether these extant propositions hold through 2012.

We aggregated the latest version of the GTD to a country-year format, and then merged it with the POLITY IV database (Marshall, Jaggers, & Gurr, 2013). Data on total terrorist attacks and Polity score—a 21-point scale from totalitarian government (–10) to full democracy (+10)—are complete from 1970 to 2012, with the exception of 1993.¹

Vreeland (2008) suggests that researchers carefully examine the particular types of regimes that fall in the –5 to +5 range on the Polity scale. Following Chenoweth (2013), we expand Goldstone *et al.*'s (2010) classification of regime type to identify seven relevant categories.

- *Democracy* (Polity score: +7 or higher): a system that combines free and fair elections with routine and transparent political participation. Examples include OECD countries, Costa Rica, Uruguay, and Mongolia (Goldstone *et al.*, 2010, p. 195).
- *Partial Democracy* (PD) (Polity score: 0 through +6): a system in which citizens choose the chief executive among competitive candidates, but the elections are not totally free and fair, or political participation is not routine or transparent. Examples include Albania or Venezuela in recent years (*ibid*, p. 195). This category also includes factionalized democracies, which possess polarization among localized blocs pursuing their interests at the national level. This category would include Venezuela in the early 2000s (*ibid*, p. 195).
- *Partial Autocracy* (PA) (Polity score: –6 through 0): states that repress political participation yet purport to hold competitive elections for national office. Examples include apartheid-era South Africa. PAs may also include countries that allow competitive elections for parliament but do not hold competitive elections for the chief executive. Jordan is an example. PAs may include factionalism (*ibid*, p. 195).

1. Data are missing for 1993 for the GTD because of lost primary materials for that year.

- *Autocracy* (Polity score: -7 through -10): these systems do not have effective competition for the chief executive, nor do they allow free political participation. Examples include North Korea, China, Saudi Arabia, and Libya under Qaddafi (ibid, p. 195).
- *Failed State* (Polity score: -77): a country in which institutions have collapsed and there are no remaining functional sovereign political or governance institutions (Somalia 1992).
- *Under Occupation* (Polity score: -66): a country that with no functional sovereign political or governance institutions because an external country has removed them (Iraq 2004).
- *Transitioning* (Polity score: -88): a country cannot be categorized as any of the above regime types because its institutional structure is currently in flux.

We then calculated the total number of terrorist attacks in each regime category from 1970 to 2012 (excluding 1993 due to missing data) according to the GTD (LaFree & Dugan, 2007).

Figure 1 shows the distribution of terrorist attacks in the seven different regime type categories. These absolute counts illustrate fairly clearly that,

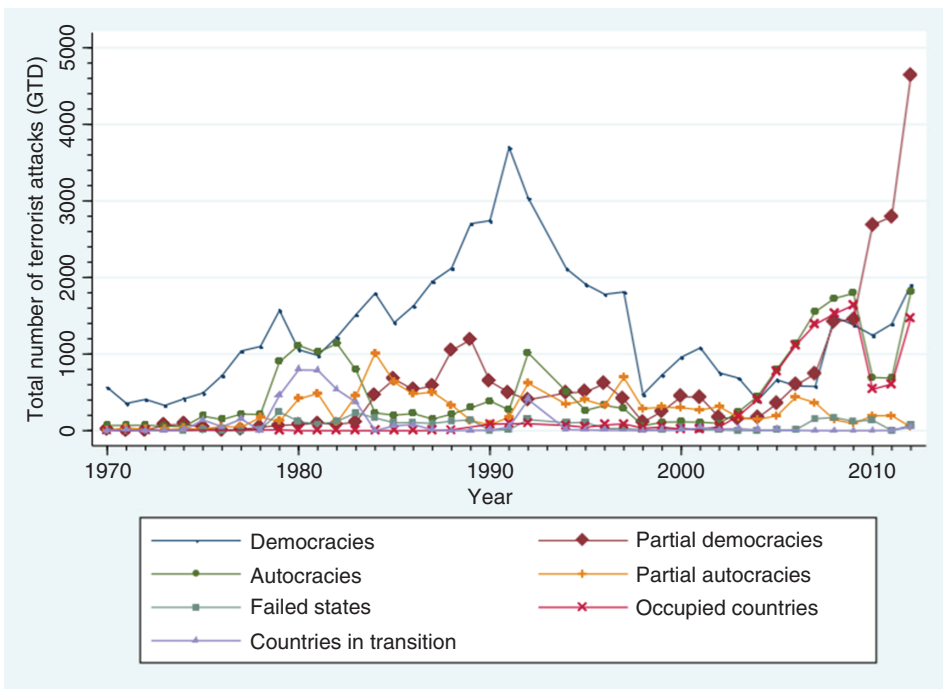


Figure 1 Number of terrorist attacks by regime type, 1970–2012.

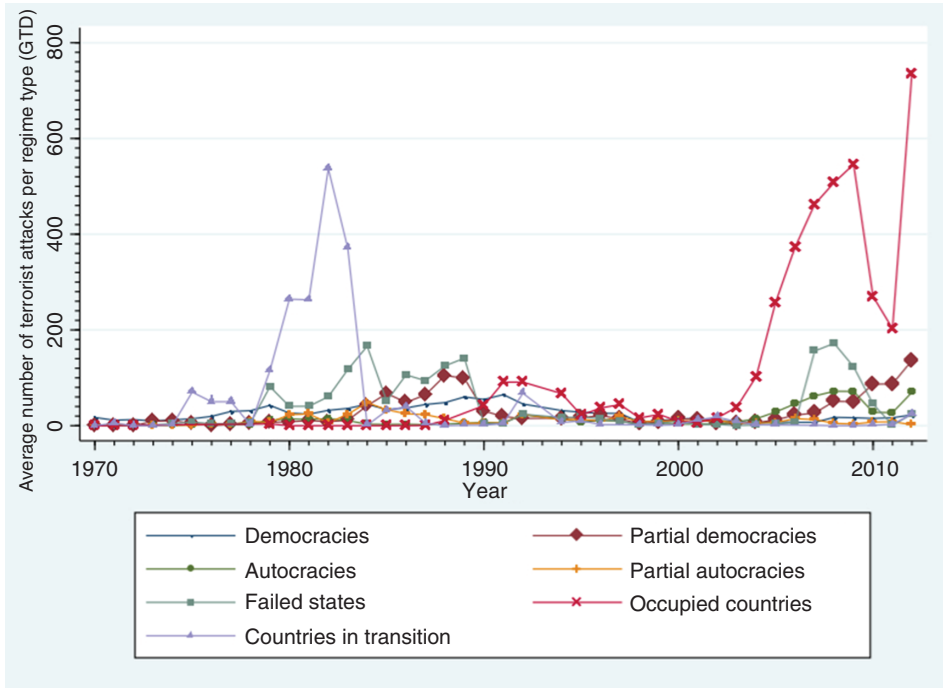


Figure 2 Average number of terrorist attacks per regime type, 1970–2012.

consistent with previous literature, democracies tended to possess the highest number of terrorist attacks until the mid-2000s, when partial democracies, autocracies, and countries under foreign occupation (Iraq and Afghanistan) emerged as more common venues of terrorist attacks.

Of course, the global distribution of regime types has varied considerably over time. As such, we normalized the absolute counts of terrorist attacks by dividing the total number of attacks in each category by the total number of countries in each regime type category to examine the average number of terrorist attacks per regime category per year (Figure 2).

Figure 2 shows some striking differences. The average democracy experienced a stable number of terrorist attacks throughout the series, but it is not the most explosive category. Instead, during the early 1980s, countries in transition (e.g., El Salvador) and failed states (e.g., Lebanon) experienced the highest number of terrorist attacks. And beginning in 2003, occupied countries (e.g., Iraq and Afghanistan) experienced the highest average number of annual attacks per country.

Importantly, however, these trends are driven by small numbers of cases, as there are very few countries in transition, failed states, or countries under occupation in a given year. As such, the high number of average attack counts

Table 1
 Bivariate Association Between Polity Score and Terrorist Attacks
 (Negative Binomial Regression)^a

	Model 1 (1970–2012) DV: Number of Terrorist Attacks	Model 2 (1970–2009) DV: Number of terrorist attacks	Model 3 (2010–2012) DV: Number of Terrorist Attacks
Polity2	0.117*** (0.019)	0.082*** (0.022)	0.049 (0.047)
Population (logged)	0.654*** (0.100)	0.610*** (0.105)	1.096*** (0.232)
Constant	–15.663*** (3.803)	–7.629*** (1.761)	–15.66*** (3.803)
N	6473	5984	489
Wald chi2	68.89	61.14	24.37
Prob > chi2	0.0000	0.0000	0.000

^aEstimates produced using a zero-inflated event count did not significantly alter these results. Moreover, a vuong test reveals that a zero-inflated negative binomial does not significantly improve the model over a negative binomial regression in Model 3. For simplicity, the NBR is presented here; the ZINB commands and results are available in the replication file, which can be accessed at www.ericachenoweth.com.

*** $p < 0.001$.

may be driven by one or two cases in each category and should be taken with a grain of salt.²

That said, these shifting distributions over time do suggest some possible temporal effects in the most common terrorist attack venue. Once we exclude key outlying states—such as El Salvador, Lebanon, Iraq, and Afghanistan—we may be seeing a shift in the types of regime that experience the most terrorist attacks.

We therefore estimated a negative binomial regression on the association between Polity score and terrorist attacks in general (controlling for logged population from Banks, 2013), and then stratified the results by time period (Table 1).

As with prior literature, we find that there is a strong, positive association between the Polity score and the number of terrorist attacks (Model 1). We find, however, that this positive association is conditional on whether the data series takes place before 2010. Through 2009, there was a strong positive association (Model 2), with both statistical and substantive findings nearly identical to those produced in Model 1. However, from 2010 to 2012, the statistical significance of that association disappears, suggesting that in those years, the effects of Polity score on terrorist attacks are not different from 0 (Model 3).

In Figure 3, we identify the predicted counts of terrorist attacks from Models 1 through 3, which we calculated using the `prtab` command in Stata.

2. On the basis of Figure 2, it is easier to understand policymakers' preoccupations with weak and failed states as the most vulnerable to terrorism.

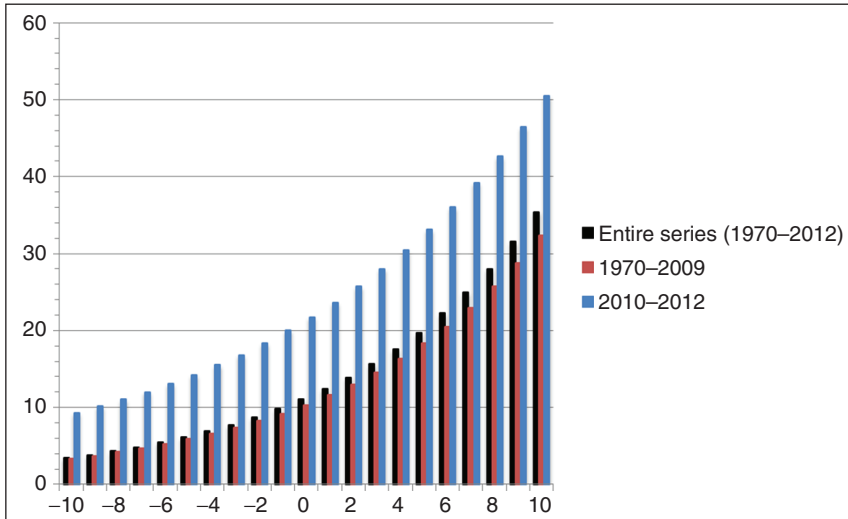


Figure 3 Predicted number of annual terrorist attacks by regime type, 1970–2012.

Several important findings are clear. First, overall terrorist events have increased during 2010–2012 worldwide and in every regime type. On average, however, controlling for population size, the predicted number of annual terrorist attacks in full democracies declined to about 13 in the period 2010–2012 from about 18 in previous years. Second, although the time period 2010–2012 still shows a positive association between regime type and terrorist attacks, it is notable that countries with the lowest Polity scores—between -10 and -5 —have experienced a substantive increase in the number of terrorist attacks they experienced during the pre-2010 period. Although it is likely too early to speculate whether these trends will continue, this finding suggests an important secular departure from previous trends.

WHICH NONDEMOCRACIES WILL SEE MORE TERRORISM? SOME CLUES FROM THE LITERATURE

As Crenshaw notes, regimes that deny access to power and persecute dissenters create dissatisfaction (Crenshaw, 1981, p. 383). Previous research suggests that whether autocracies experience terrorism depends on their ability to coerce and co-opt regime challenges (Wilson & Piazza, 2013, p. 942). Much of the literature therefore concentrates on two types of coercive and co-optive regime attributes—institutions and audience costs—which are highly variable across authoritarian regimes.

The different forms autocracies take matter when it comes to their ability to coerce and co-opt opponents. For example, drawing on Geddes' categories

of political dictatorship, Wilson and Piazza find that single-party autocracies are better able to employ both coercion and co-optation to address political opposition (Wilson & Piazza, 2013, p. 953). Single-party regimes can coerce opponents through their control over the military, but they can also co-opt opponents through their influence on institutions such as legislatures, political parties, and courts (Wilson & Piazza, 2013, p. 945). On the other hand, democracies must try to co-opt terrorists because their ability to coerce terrorists is limited by guarantees of civil, political, and human rights (Wilson & Piazza, 2013, p. 945). Military regimes are limited to coercion because they are less capable of co-opting opponents and need to rely on coercive power to maintain control (Wilson & Piazza, 2013, p. 945). Thus, those autocracies that are able to complement repression with co-optive institutions and to deter challenges while accommodating others are less prone to terrorism (Wilson & Piazza, 2013, p. 952).

Others find that autocracies use formal institutions as mechanisms through which to reduce the risk of terrorism. Aksoy, Carter, and Wright (2012) explore how political party activity in dictatorships helps to mobilize discontented opposition groups. Specifically, the ability of opposition groups to participate in legislatures and voice their grievances may help to mitigate the possibility these groups will pursue violence. Repression is a costly and risky strategy for dictators, which is why they seek to purchase loyalty to the regime by co-opting potential challengers. By co-opting potential challengers, dictatorships bring their opponents into the political system allowing them to gain some concessions from the regime (ibid, 2012). Once opponents have been co-opted, through formalized roles in the legislature, Aksoy *et al.* (2012) note they will be less likely to risk challenging the regime for fear of losing their share of the regime's spoils. However, the presence of opposition political parties without a functional legislature makes regimes more likely targets of terrorism, further supporting Wilson and Piazza's hypothesis on the fundamental importance of co-optation as a tool of authoritarian management of potential terrorist groups (ibid, 2012). In fact, Aksoy *et al.*'s (2012, p. 818) data reveal that dictatorships with opposition parties and no legislatures experience a nearly 60% higher probability of emergence of violent groups. As long as autocracies can use institutions such as legislatures and elections to successfully co-opt potential challengers, Aksoy *et al.* argue, they need not resort to repression.

Dictators also have to be concerned with the potential audience costs in the event of terrorist attacks. Audience costs are the domestic punishment that leaders face for backing down from public threats (Fearon, 1994, pp. 577–592). Autocratic leaders face accountability threats not from the public, but rather from the domestic, regime elites on whom they rely for support. It is these elites that can act like voting publics in democracies by coordinating

to punish an authoritarian leader (Weeks, 2008, p. 36). If dictators are unable to respond to the challenge of terrorist actions, regime elites may hold the leader accountable by replacing him. Aksoy, Carter, and Wright (2013, pp. 4–5) find strong evidence that increasing political violence is associated with a higher risk of a reshuffling coup (where an autocratic leader is replaced but not the entire regime). C. R. Conrad, J. Conrad, and Young (2014) suggest that these authoritarian audience costs may increase incentives to use terrorism against authoritarians. Because terrorists want their actions to have as much of an impact as possible, there are greater incentives to launch terrorist actions against states with high audience costs.

What, then, are the key takeaways from this literature in further understanding terrorism in autocracies? The first trend would be to look more closely at state behavior itself (Chenoweth, 2013, p. 375). Wilson and Piazza's article is a step in this direction, along with Aksoy *et al.*'s suggestions to attempt to understand the interaction of opposition groups and dictators (2012, p. 823) and how terrorism influences incumbent dictators (2013, p. 6). The growing research on audience costs is a trend that also opens promising research into future understanding of trends between terrorism and autocracy. As Weeks notes, the literature on accountability remains narrow and much remains to be learned about domestic politics in nondemocracies (Weeks, 2008, pp. 59–60). Autocracies are not as monolithic as they were once understood to be, and perhaps widespread acceptance of this reality has made them more likely targets of terrorist attacks.

THE FUTURE OF REGIME TYPE AND TERRORIST ATTACKS

While we are not certain whether the autocracy-terrorism trend will continue, we can draw several conclusions from recent trends. First, the emergence of semi-autocratic systems and “hybrid regimes” is likely to complicate previous assumptions about the reasons why democracies were so susceptible to terrorism (Levitsky & Way, 2011). Indeed, many of the mechanisms, which thought to make democracies more vulnerable—such as political competition, mobilization, and transition—are now quite common to many autocracies.

Second, we do see variation in the types of autocracies and transitioning countries that experience terrorism. As such, a promising line of research is attempting to explain this variation. Future research that focuses on the behavioral aspects of autocracy is likely to yield new insights into the relationship between these regimes and terrorist groups.

Finally, it is clear that countries under military occupation—including Iraq and Afghanistan—have accounted for much of the terrorist violence in recent years. As such, an important development to note is how the United States

and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan—and the Afghan government’s ability to consolidate power—will affect terrorism there in the future. However, recent trends do not paint an optimistic picture. If these trends continue, then neither a slide toward autocracy nor a consolidation of democracy is likely to reduce terrorist violence in Afghanistan. Indeed, if recent trends persist or accelerate, the regime type of the host country may have little or no effect on prospects for future violence.

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KARA KINGMA SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Kara Kingma is a PhD student in International Studies at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies. She focuses on the fields of Comparative Politics and International Political Economy.

BRYAN CRAMER SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Bryan Cramer is a Project Assistant at the National Democratic Institute and a graduate of the MA program at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies.

ERICA CHENOWETH SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Erica Chenoweth is an Associate Professor at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver, and an Associate Senior Researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO).

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