

Emily Goldberg  
Honors Capstone 2008  
Advisor: Charles Call

*Anonymous Terror: The New Threat*

Those studying terrorism often purport that terrorist groups commit acts in order to gain attention or publicity. Bruce Hoffman, renowned terrorist expert, asserts, "...all terrorist groups have one trait in common: they do not commit actions randomly or senselessly. Each wants maximum publicity to be generated by its actions, and, moreover, aims at intimidation and subjection to attain its objectives."<sup>1</sup> In the past, Hoffman's claim was reinforced by the general tendency of all terrorist groups to claim responsibility for their actions, thus drawing attention to their specific group and cause. Recent trends, however, serve to invalidate claims made by Hoffman and other scholars as terrorist groups are now less likely to claim credit for their actions than in previous times.

A new trend among terror groups has emerged, one in which they do not claim responsibility for their attacks. This paper seeks to explain this occurrence, which I call anonymous terror. This paper will also explore what this new trend means to governments fighting the war against terror, specifically the United States, and to citizens who fall victim to terrorist attacks. Past research has briefly addressed the tendencies of terrorist groups to claim responsibility for their attacks or withhold any claim making. More established hypotheses argue that terrorist groups will not claim "spectacular" attacks that cause the most death and destruction<sup>2</sup> for a multitude of reasons and stronger groups will not claim attacks because it does not benefit them, as they are not in need of the publicity generated by an attack<sup>3</sup>. Neither of these hypotheses remains valid as today, some of the most lethal attacks are claimed and insignificant ones remained unclaimed and both strong and relatively weaker groups continue to both claim and fail to claim responsibility.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 173.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Hoffman, "Why Terrorists Don't Claim Credit," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9 (Spring 1997): 1-6.

<sup>3</sup> David Rapoport, "To Claim or Not to Claim; That is the Question – Always!" *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9 (Spring 1997): 11-17.

## What is Terrorism?

Terrorism is perhaps one of the most difficult terms to define. When defining the term, three general components are ubiquitous: it is violent or threatens violence, groups defined as terrorist groups must seek political goals, and it seeks to invoke fear. The term terrorism first became widely used in the late 1700s to describe the tactics of the French Revolution. During this time, a terrorist was, "...anyone who attempted to further his views by a system of coercive intimidation."<sup>4</sup> The French 'reign of terror' was not the first time terrorism, as a tactic, had been used. The earliest recorded terrorist movement was that of the *sicarii* in 66 A.D., Jewish zealots fighting against Roman rule in Palestine. The *sicarii* were followed by the Assassins in the eleventh century. Hassan Sibai, the first leader, realized that his group was too small to confront their opponents in open battle – thus he concluded that a planned, systematic, long-term campaign of terror was an effective political weapon.<sup>5</sup> Groups endorsing terrorism as a main tactic today are often fighting similar asymmetric battles as the Assassins were.

For the purpose of this paper, I have used the following definition of terrorism from the United States government. According to Title 22 of the United States Code, Section 2656f(d), terrorism includes, "...premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience." According to this code, noncombatants are both civilians and unarmed or off duty military personnel.<sup>6</sup> Although this definition is not devoid of deficiencies, it is the most practical for my purposes – data on terrorist attacks is most readily available from the United States government. Weaknesses of this definition involve its exclusion of state agents and/or supporters

---

<sup>4</sup> Walter Laqueur, *A History of Terrorism* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2008), 6.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 7-8.

<sup>6</sup> Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 30-31.

of terrorism and its exclusion of fear as an important factor. As this definition has been used since 1983, the starting point for this paper will be that year as to maintain consistency.<sup>7</sup>

### **Why is this important?**

Terrorism, although an ancient tactic, was understudied until the proliferation of large-scale attacks and the recent ‘war on terror’. Since 2001, the United States, along with other nations, has been fighting this self-proclaimed ‘war on terror.’ In order to be successful in their quest to defeat terrorism, those participating in this campaign must fully understand the strategy of those who employ it. The logic behind terrorism and motivations to act are crucial issues that must be understood. Previously, many scholars believed that publicity was one factor that encouraged groups to use terrorism. If publicity is an inherent goal of terrorist groups, what, then, explains the dying tradition of claiming responsibility? This tendency has been studied briefly and was first brought to the attention of scholars in a 1985 RAND report that found that over, “...sixty percent of terrorist acts in the 1960s and nearly forty percent of terrorist attacks in the 1970s went unclaimed.”<sup>8</sup> The RAND report, however, is outdated. In the 1990s, fifty percent of terrorist attacks were unclaimed and the percentage of unclaimed attacks has continued to increase in recent years, rather than decrease, as the RAND report indicated. Understanding trends in claiming tendencies will indicate new factors, beyond the quest for publicity, that are motivating groups to use terrorism as a tactic and will offer government fighting the ‘war on terror’ further insight into the inner workings of terrorist organizations that could assist them in their efforts to defeat terrorism. Secrecy is not new to the realm of terrorism; the Assassins of the

---

<sup>7</sup> For more information on the definition of terrorism, see *Political Terrorism: A Research Guide*, written by Alex Schmid.

<sup>8</sup> Aaron Hoffman, “Taking Credit for Their Work: When Groups Announce Responsibility for Acts of Terror, 1968-1977” (working paper, International Studies Association, 2004), 1.

eleventh century always acted with complete secrecy.<sup>9</sup> For contemporary terrorism and terrorist groups, however, this tendency represents a radical change.

## **Methodology**

The list of terrorist incidents used for this paper was gathered from the U.S. Department of State<sup>10</sup> and the National Counterterrorism Center.<sup>11</sup> The MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base served as a secondary source for additional information on my variables, if needed.<sup>12</sup> By using information from the United States government, this paper is opening itself up to several weaknesses, not excluded to inherent biases in the information. Although the definition provided by the U.S. government does not specify that acts must be committed against U.S. targets or citizens, the majority of attacks reported and recorded as terrorism are those that specifically target the United States, U.S. citizens, or U.S. government interests. This is a major weakness of the incidents reported by the U.S. government and indicates that usage of their statistics is biased, and will reveal results almost exclusively for terrorists targeting the United States and U.S. interests. Thus, this paper will be more of a reflection of terrorist tendencies to claim when attacking the United States. Additionally, because data prior to 2004 is only available in the form of “A Brief Chronology,” less data is available for the dates between 1983 and 2003, skewing any results. Finally, following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, terrorist attacks within Iraq multiplied and currently represent over 41 percent of the entire data set. This overwhelming focus on Iraqi terror skews the results of this study.

---

<sup>9</sup> Laqueur, *A History of Terrorism*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> United States Department of State, “Significant Terrorist Incidents, 1961-2003: A Brief Chronology,” <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/pubs/fs/5902.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> For 2004, the “Chronology of Significant International Terrorism” was used and, for subsequent years, the “NCTC Report on Incidents of Terrorism” for the specific years was used.

<sup>12</sup> The website for the Terrorism Knowledge Base at the Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism was <http://www.tkb.org/>. This site was shut down March 30, 2008. After this date, all data collected was from the Global Terrorism Database produced by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism <http://www.start.umd.edu/data/gtd/>.

Using the MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base as a primary source, or the ITERATE data set would have provided less biased information, however for the purposes of this paper, this was not reasonable. The MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base, produced by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism at the University of Maryland, provides extensive information regarding global terrorist attacks. This database, however, is too extensive for the purpose of this short paper and often includes unsolved crimes that might have a political nature, in their database. The International Terrorism: Attributes of Terrorist Events (ITERATE), produced by the University of California San Diego (UCSD), is the most comprehensive dataset on terrorism however was inaccessible to me for the purpose of this study. Using these two comprehensive databases should not, but could, result in different conclusions than those presented in this paper. To perform more accurate and further research on anonymous terror, these two databases should be consulted.

This study analyzes the following variables:

- a. **In what year did the attack occur?**
- b. **Was the attack claimed?** Claiming can be highly contested. An attack, for the purpose of this paper, is only considered to be claimed when a group, or several groups, formally announces that they are responsible for a specific event. This variable discounts claims made by individuals, who once arrested the group they are a member of, was responsible for an event. This study does not address the issue of false claims of responsibility by a group or several groups. Studying false claims is difficult because there is no way to validate claims of responsibility.
- c. **How many individuals perished in the attack?** Mortality due directly to the attack addresses hypotheses made by other scholars studying the trend of anonymous terror,

- and is thus an important variable to study. This variable is represented in numerical form and includes all those who died at the scene of the attack and those who died due to injuries sustained from the attack. The number does not include the perpetrator of the attack if it was a suicide mission, if the individual was killed in route to committing an act or during an attack, or if an individual was accidentally killed by his or her own weapon.
- d. **How many individuals were injured in the attack?** Injury is directly related to the severity of the attack and, therefore, must be studied. This too is represented in numerical form. The number includes those physically harmed in an attack, and, if a kidnapping, those kidnapped regardless of physical harm. Number of injuries does not include perpetrators.
- e. **What was the method of attack?** Method of attack is a qualitative variable and may include the following: suicide mission, rocket attack, bomb, mortar, kidnapping, car bomb, RPG attack, assassination, landmine, IED attack, shooting, grenade attack, raiding, fire, or other/multiple.
- f. **Where did the attack occur (City/State, Country)?** This qualitative variable will indicate if the attack was an act of rural or urban terrorism, which will be indicated by the city or region of the state in which the attack occurred. Location of the attack is also important to consider any regional trends in claims of responsibility.
- g. **What group claimed the attack or was suspected responsible?** This is a qualitative variable and lists the group(s) that officially claimed responsibility for specific attacks, or, groups linked to attacks by the authorities – domestic or foreign.

- h. **Was the attack coordinated?** Coordination, for the purpose of this study, addresses the issue of two or more attacks organized by the same group intended to be part of the same attack. This variable is difficult to determine, however one example is an exemplary case. In December and January of 1997, a series of booby-trapped letters were mailed to the Arabic-language newspaper Al Hayat, in Washington DC, London, New York, and other cities around the world. Although these letter bombs could constitute several different attacks, it is clear that they are related, and therefore, coordinated, for the purpose of this study. Additionally, the MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base (TKB) indicates if an attack was coordinated, however because not all attacks reported by the U.S. Government are listed in the TKB, qualifications were established.
- i. **Who or What was the target of the attack.** When looking at an attack, it is often more difficult to identify the intended audience rather than the direct physical target of the attack. Occasionally the audience and the target are one in the same, however, for the purpose of this paper, I have only considered the physical target of the attack. Targets can be divided into the following categories: settlers, businessmen, embassy, businesses, journalists, contractors, citizens, government, NGOs, religious, or other/multiple.
- j. **How many groups are present in the area?** This variable is very difficult to ascertain exactly as new groups are continuously spawning off old groups, being created, or being fabricated. The MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base provides the opportunity to ascertain how many and which groups operate in certain regions and countries of the world.<sup>13</sup> Although the database does not include every terrorist group,

---

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.tkb.org/Category.jsp?catID=13>.

this is the most reliable way of gathering the level of competition between groups in each region of operation. Some groups are excluded from the database, for numerous reasons including size or a lack of knowledge about the group, however it provides a consistent account of groups, and therefore is the most useful for this study. As terror groups often operate in secret, there is no foolproof way of identifying every group active throughout the globe.

- k. **What is the group's ideology?** Ideological tendencies are identified by public statements made by spokespersons for the group or written, formal correspondence. Although groups do assert that they ascribe to a specific ideology, not all groups are confined by this ideology and, therefore, they commit attacks that seem to violate their beliefs; this, however does not negate the publicly claimed ideology. Therefore, the ideology prescribed to a group in this study corresponds directly to public statements and correspondence rather than actions or individual statements. The general categories include Religious, Nationalist/Separatist, and Communist/Socialist.
- l. **Was the group known prior to the attack?** There are four categories of terrorist groups related to this variable: established groups, new groups, off shoots, fabricated groups to cover up an established group. For the purpose of this study, this variable will be answered with either an affirmative or a negative response. The study does account for situations in which groups are known to be associated with another group in variable G.
- m. **Was this a transnational attack?** Contemporary groups have made this final variable difficult to define. For the purpose of this study, a transnational attack will refer to an attack that occurs outside of the location where the group was formed or, if

territorial, outside of the contested territory. For example, an al-Qaeda attack in Saudi Arabia would not be considered a transnational attack because al-Qaeda was formed in Saudi with the initial intent of removing western troops from the region. An al-Qaeda attack, however, in Morocco, unless specifically attributed to al-Qaeda North Africa, would be considered transnational. Attacks made by nationalist and separatist groups are not considered transnational (even if they have declared national independence).

These thirteen variables were chosen because they address numerous aspects of terrorist attacks, and therefore, address factors that have an impact on a group's decision to claim responsibility for an attack. When reading this study it is important to recognize the inherent flaws due to sources of data.

### **Literature Review**

Past research on terrorism addresses the reasons terrorists seek publicity more so than it studies reasons terrorists would not seek attention. Louise Richardson, a Harvard scholar who focuses exclusively on terrorism, claims, "Publicity has always been a central objective of terrorism."<sup>14</sup> In fact, Richardson believes that publicity, renown as she calls it, is one of the three central objectives of terrorism, alongside revenge and reaction. Renown not only spreads the fear that is integral to terrorism, but also brings attention to the cause of the organization who planned or claimed responsibility for the attack.<sup>15</sup> According to scholar Alex P. Schmid, communication, via claims of responsibility, allows groups to attack meaning to an attack that would otherwise not exist. Therefore, "Without communication there can be no terrorism."<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2007), 94.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 94-98.

<sup>16</sup> Alex Schmid, *Violence as Communication*, (London: SAGE Publications, 1982), 9.

Some scholars have recognized the shift in the tendencies of terror groups to claim responsibility for their actions. Scholarly discourse explaining the logic behind the claiming tendencies of terrorist groups can be divided into three groups. One argument, proposed by Bruce Hoffman, claims that groups do not claim very lethal or damaging attacks. A second argument, purported by David Rapoport, argues that stronger groups have no need for publicity, and therefore do not claim responsibility. The third and final reason, explained by Aaron Hoffman, argues that groups facing little or no competition, from other groups, will not claim responsibility for their actions. Although there is very little literature discussing this changing trend, the hypotheses appear to cover many different variables affecting the decision to claim.

Bruce Hoffman, in his article “Why Terrorists Don’t Claim Credit,” was one of the first scholars to address the issue of claims. In this article, Hoffman argues that the most lethal attacks are not claimed, indicating that terrorists are now more reluctant to identify themselves. Hoffman believes that terrorist groups are reluctant because they no longer have the same level of impunity, as they previously held, from state sponsors. Additionally, the international community’s greater willingness to respond militarily to terrorist attacks has weakened the desire to draw attention to a specific group for fear of reprisal.<sup>17</sup> Hoffman does not quantify the characteristics of a ‘spectacular’ other than they have higher death rates and high amounts of damage. This is a weakness because it allows room for multiple interpretations and, thus, less consistent conclusions.

David Rapoport, responding to Bruce Hoffman’s article, argues that the status, vulnerability, and purpose of terrorist groups determine their claiming tendencies. Rapoport argues, “...the ‘stronger’ the terrorist are in relation to opponents, the more likely that they will

---

<sup>17</sup> Hoffman, “Why Terrorists Don’t Claim Credit,” 1-3.

conceal responsibility.”<sup>18</sup> He argues that stronger groups do not claim responsibility for their terrorist actions because terrorism is perceived as a more legitimate tactic for the weak. Rapoport, however, does not detail a method by which group strength can be quantified or judged, a major weakness of his argument. Rapoport’s arguments are more relevant to acts of state terror. He argues that states do not assume responsibility for their acts of terror because they are seen as the stronger party, and thus terrorism is an illegitimate tactic for them, therefore, states engage in covert terror operations. In relation to non-state actors, Rapoport argues that these groups should be more likely to claim responsibility for their attacks because their organizational infrastructure is not as fragile or apparent as a state’s and because they must make their goals known if they desire public support. The one distinction Rapoport makes is in regards to groups based on religious beliefs because these groups, “...see the deity or deities, and not the public, as the most critical audience.”<sup>19</sup>

Bruce Hoffman’s and David Rapoport’s pieces merely skim the surface of the topic. Neither scholar uses any evidence to support their arguments, rather resigning to assumptions and hypotheses. These works provide a basis for further research and bring up an interesting topic for scholars of terrorism to study. Aaron Hoffman’s work looks further into terrorist claiming tendencies based on a 1985 RAND report. Hoffman main argument centers on the competition of groups. He argues that, “...the competitiveness of the situations groups operate in...affects the rate at which groups publicize their responsibility for acts of violence.”<sup>20</sup> Hoffman argues this because, from his analysis of the RAND report, terror groups facing little or no competition are the obvious perpetrators of acts and their demands and messages are already known to the public. He provides what he believes are three reasons groups will take

---

<sup>18</sup> Rapoport, 13.

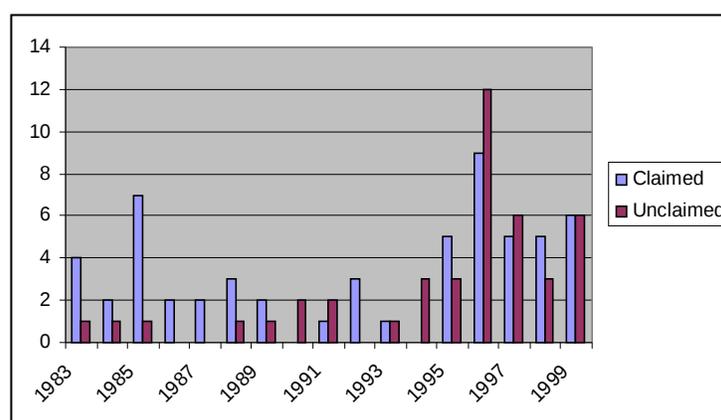
<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>20</sup> Hoffman, “Taking Credit for their Work,” 1.

responsibility for their actions: to advertise their movement or their cause, as a prelude to issuing demands, or to maintain the support of sympathizers and followers.<sup>21</sup> One element of strength in Hoffman's work is his discussion of false claims. This paper will not touch upon this important issue. An element of weakness is his narrow focus on only Palestinian terrorist organizations. While this provides a framework for understanding Palestinian terror organizations, it does not aid scholars or policymakers to understand global terrorist groups.

## Results

The variables used in this paper indicate that the three leading hypothesis cannot explain terrorist claiming tendencies. Since 1983, the U.S. government has reported 1388 terrorist attacks, nine of which have been excluded from this study because they have been committed by states or individuals.<sup>22</sup> Of the 1379 acts of terror considered for this study, 403 were claimed by one or more groups. This represents 29 percent of all of the attacks, indicating an overall tendency of groups not to claim responsibility for their actions. Below are two graphs displaying the trends in claims from 1983 until 2006. In 1990 and 1991, unclaimed attacks outnumber claimed attacks and the trend restarts in 1997, becoming more consistent.

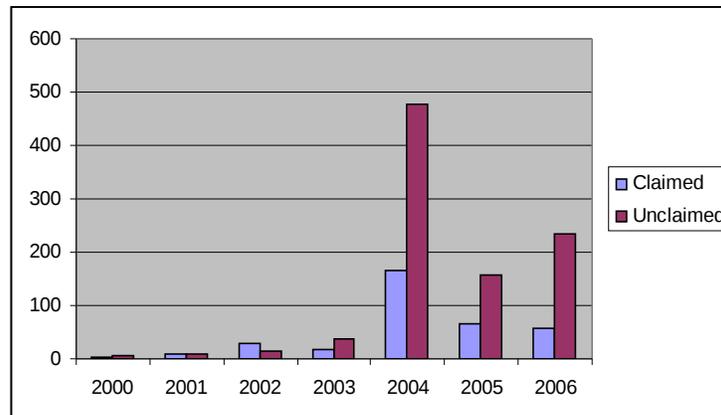


**Figure 1 Claimed vs. Unclaimed attacks 1983-1999**

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 2-3.

<sup>22</sup> These excluded acts are those bolded in the data set.

The graph displaying the years 2000 until 2006 shows that groups are overwhelmingly making a decision not to claim responsibility for their actions.



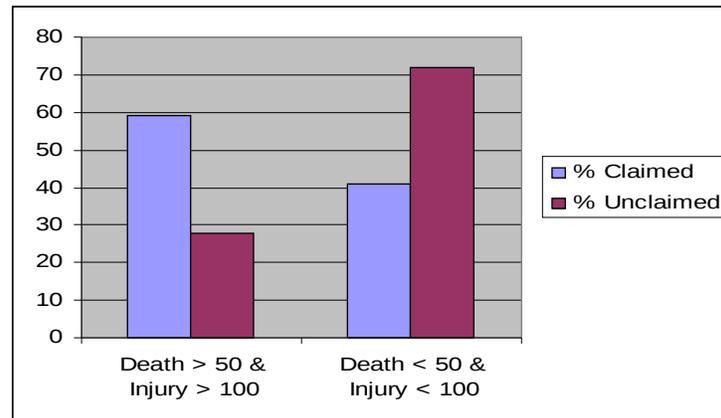
**Figure 2 Claimed vs. Unclaimed attacks 2000-2006**

Whereas between 1983 and 1995 claimed terrorist attacks were standard, following 1999, unclaimed attacks became the norm. Although much of the literature on terrorism presupposes that groups will claim responsibility for their actions for a variety of reasons, it appears that this literature must evolve to consider the actuality of terror groups' propensity to claim responsibility for their actions.

### 'Spectaculars'

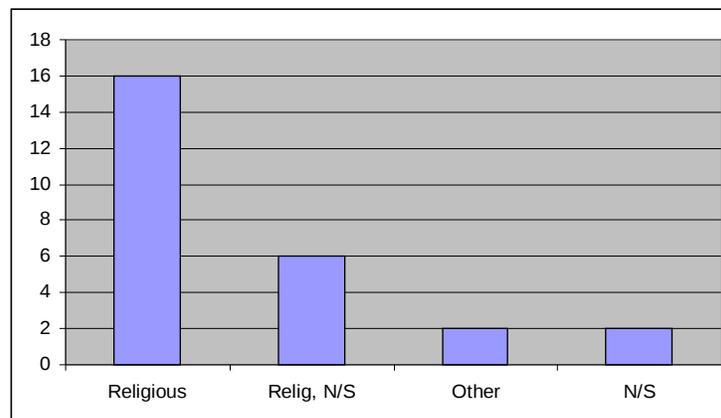
Although Bruce Hoffman does not explain what he is describing as a 'spectacular' in his hypothesis, the data from the U.S. government serves to disprove his hypothesis. During the 1983 until 2006 period, forty-five attacks resulted in the death of over 50 individuals in injured more than 100 individuals. Of these forty-five attacks, twenty-six were claimed, representing 59 percent of the attacks this study quantifies as 'spectaculars'. While this is not an overwhelming majority, this indicates that Hoffman's hypothesis does not hold up when applied to statistics representing actual attacks. It appears, rather, that groups have a higher tendency to claim attacks that might be considered 'spectaculars' as 28 percent of attacks with fewer than 50 deaths and

100 injuries are claimed. Hoffman's hypothesis, proposing that terrorists do not take responsibility for their actions due to fear of retribution from states, cannot explain the actuality of terrorist tendencies.



**Figure 3 Percentage Claimed for Spectaculars and Others**

Although Hoffman's explanation is insufficient, when broken down further, a trend emerges, illustrating that group ideology impacts which groups claim responsibility for attacks causing more than 50 deaths and more than 100 injuries. Religious groups or nationalist and separatist (N/S) groups with religious basing claimed 85 percent of the spectaculars.

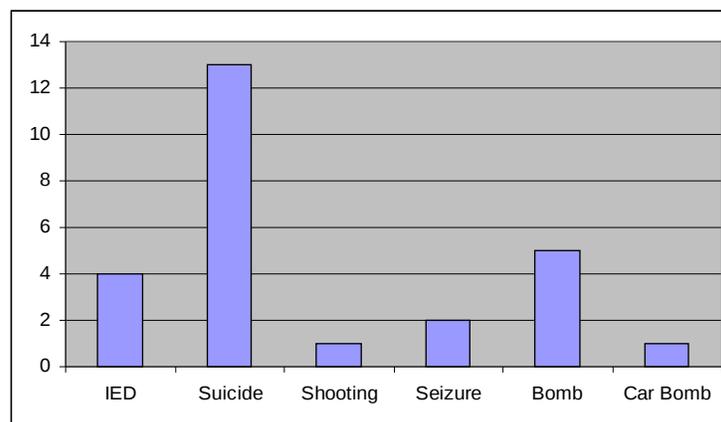


**Figure 4 Breakdown of Claimed Spectaculars by Group Ideology**

David Rapoport's piece addresses claiming by ideology, however, this too contradicts his argument that religious groups, with a deity or deities as their audience, will not claim

responsibility. I propose that religious groups do claim responsibility for their attacks because they do not fear reprisal from state actors, as religion, not states, are the main concern. According to Louise Richardson, “If one’s audience is God, then one does not need to worry about alienating him.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, religious groups show less restraint in their actions and are less fearful of the possible consequences of their terrorist acts.

Another trend emerges when the claimed spectaculars are analyzed. The most common type of attack that produces a claimed spectacular is a suicide bomb, followed by a general bomb. Suicide bombings generally provoke the harshest responses.<sup>24</sup> This makes claiming suicide missions counterintuitive by Hoffman’s hypothesis that groups do not claim because impunity for actions has dissolved.



**Figure 5 Spectaculars Claimed by Type of Attack**

Based on this information, I argue that religious groups are more likely to claim responsibility for their actions, regardless of other factors, because they act in response to an actor or actors they perceive as above the state. The fact that 86 percent of claimed attacks, where deaths are greater than 50, were perpetrated by religious organizations, as opposed to only

<sup>23</sup> Richardson, 61.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2005), 6.

37 percent of attacks associated with religious groups being unclaimed, serves as evidence for this assertion.

#### Group Strength, Type, and Vulnerability

If the hypothesis offered in David Rapoport's piece were accurate, we should expect to see a majority of terrorist actions claimed by the perpetrators. This however, as seen by earlier evidence, is not correct. Rather, a majority of attacks, an overwhelming 71 percent, went unclaimed. Rapoport also offers that religious groups should be less likely to claim responsibility than other groups.<sup>25</sup> The data gained from the U.S. government, however, reflects almost the exact opposite. Religious groups, according to this information, have a strong propensity to claim responsibility for their actions – over 68 percent of all attacks committed by religious groups were claimed. Furthermore, 76 percent of attacks attributed to nationalist and separatist groups with religious basis or backings were claimed. According to the data provided, communist and socialists groups are the least likely to claim responsibility for their actions as only 25 percent of attacks attributed to these groups were claimed. Again, based on this evidence I argue that religious groups, or groups with religious basing, are more likely to claim responsibility for their actions regardless of other factors.

---

<sup>25</sup> Rapoport, 15.

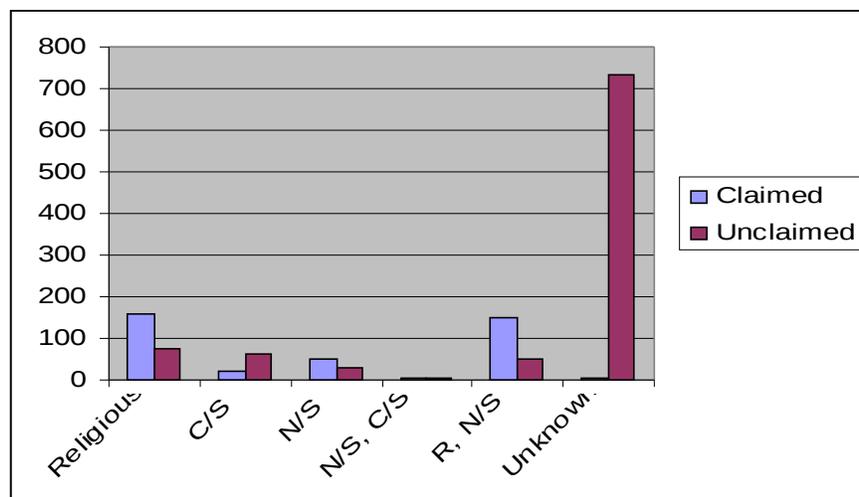


Figure 6 Group Ideologies and Claiming Tendencies<sup>26</sup>

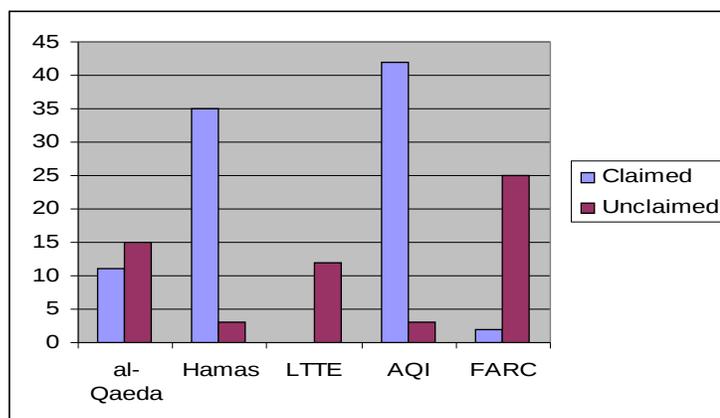
Rapoport's theory also attempts to take into account group strength, an indicator of their popularity and vulnerability, as an explanatory variable. Although assessing strength is difficult, for the purpose of this paper I have identified al-Qaeda as the quintessential 'strong' group that is popular and less vulnerable. According to Bruce Riedel,<sup>27</sup> al-Qaeda "...is a more dangerous enemy today than it has ever been before."<sup>28</sup> Al-Qaeda's reach has spread throughout the Muslim world, where it now has many followers; some estimate that the group has over 18,000 supporters. From this analysis of Bin Laden's organization, it appears that Rapoport's hypothesis would present the case for al-Qaeda to not claim responsibility for their actions. While most of the attacks attributed to the organization by the U.S. government are not claimed, over 42 percent of recognized al-Qaeda attacks were claimed by the group. Al-Qaeda's tendencies do not provide conclusive evidence that strong groups will or will not claim responsibility. To examine Rapoport's conclusions with quantitative data, I chose five strong groups, al-Qaeda, Hamas,

<sup>26</sup> C/S = Communist/Socialist, N/S = Nationalist/Separatist, R = Religious

<sup>27</sup> Bruce Riedel is a Senior Fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution and former Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Near East Affairs on the National Security Council, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Near East and South Asian Affairs, and former National Intelligence Officer for Near East and South Asian Affairs at the National Intelligence Council.

<sup>28</sup> Bruce Riedel, "Al Qaeda Strikes Back," *Foreign Affairs* 86 (May/June 2007): 24.

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Al-Qaeda Iraq (AQI), and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and analyzed their claiming tendencies.



**Figure 7 Strong Groups and Claiming Tendencies**

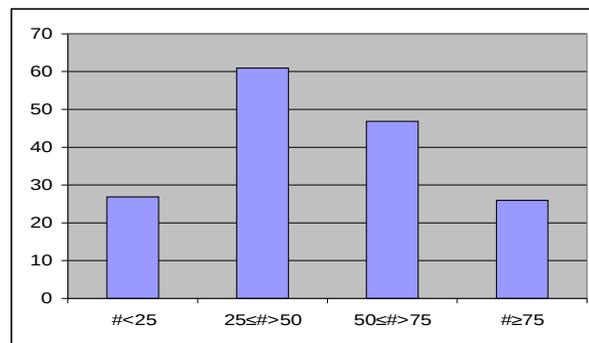
The results of this comparison reveals little – it appears that groups based in the Middle East, al-Qaeda, Hamas, and al-Qaeda Iraq, have a much higher tendency to claim responsibility for attacks associated to them than groups outside of this region. This leads to another question of why groups in certain regions might claim responsibility more often than groups in another region. Aaron Hoffman’s hypothesis addresses this issue.

Rapoport also discusses that an element of strength is the group’s reputation – was it known prior to the attack? According to the data from the U.S. government, an overwhelming 93 percent of attacks perpetrated by previously unknown groups were claimed, while only 61 percent of attacks attributed to previously known groups were claimed. This tendency is logical based on the literature because a group’s main aim is communicating a message. If a group is unknown, and does not claim responsibility for terrorist acts, their goals and demands will continue to go unnoticed and unmet. Communication, through claims of responsibility, is what allows terrorist groups to attach a meaning that is not self-evident to an attack.<sup>29</sup>

### Competition

<sup>29</sup> Schmid, 16.

Aaron Hoffman's research, based on a 1985 report that discusses the claiming tendencies of terror groups, published by the RAND Corporation, led him to the conclusion that perpetrators are less likely to take credit for their actions when they face little or no competition. Hoffman breaks down his analysis by state, focusing specifically on Palestinian terror. When this test is applied to terrorist incidents around the world, competition appears to make little difference in claiming tendencies. Twenty-six percent terrorist attacks occurring in states with greater than 75 active, associated groups were claimed. In states with fewer than 25 active, associated groups, 27 percent of attacks were claimed. Activity in states with fewer than 50, yet more than, or equal to 25 active, associated groups, was claimed 61 percent of the time. Finally, for states with between 50 and 74 groups, over 47 percent of attacks were claimed. Hoffman's hypothesis appears to be valid for only those states with less than 50 associated groups, after this point, claims begin to decline.

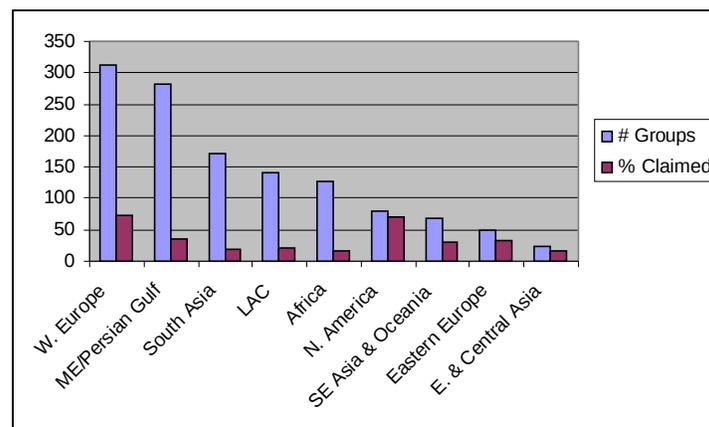


**Figure 8 Number of Groups and Percentage Claimed (Including Iraq)**

The vast number of attacks occurring within Iraq, a country with 77 associated and active groups, would seem to skew the data. Without Iraq considered, over 71 percent of attacks, in states with over 75 active groups, were claimed, following Hoffman's hypothesis. This however does not account for the failure to explain the results for states with between 50 and 75 active

groups; the expected outcome for this portion of attacks is different from the predicted outcome based on Hoffman's hypothesis.

When divided regionally, Hoffman's hypothesis only accounts for the extremes, predicting only the regions that will have both the most and least amounts of claims. Using his hypothesis, however, to predict regions in between, is ineffective and does not produce the expected results.

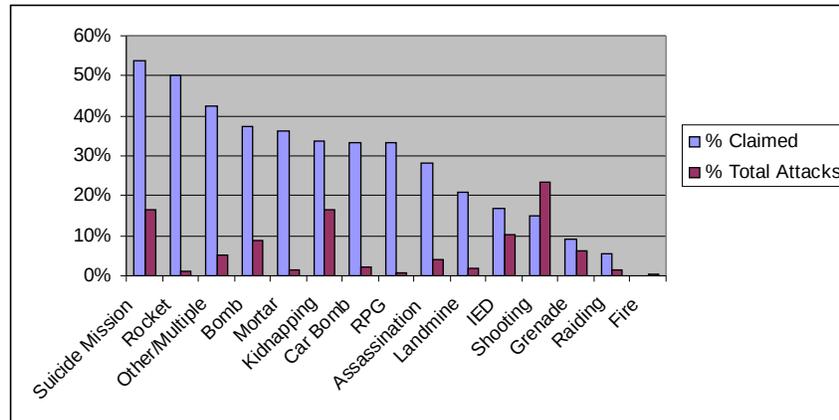


**Figure 9 Number of Groups by Region & Percentage of Attacks Claimed in the Region<sup>30</sup>**

### Type of Attack

The type of attack does not appear to have a significant impact on the claiming tendencies of terror groups. The results do not suggest that one method is favored by groups in terms of claiming responsibility.

<sup>30</sup> ME = Middle East, LAC = Latin America & the Caribbean



**Figure 10 Percentage of Specific Types of Attacks Claimed  
& Percentage of Specific Attacks of the Whole**

However, the results seem conducive for establishing hierarchies of legitimate terrorist tactics, meaning that the tactics most often claimed are viewed as more justifiable by perpetrators to both their followers and those opposing them. Therefore, one might conclude that suicide missions, which are more precise, are viewed as a legitimate terrorist tactic. However, the use of fire or raids, which often have vast consequences and injure unintended individuals, will not elicit a positive response to outweigh the cost of accepting responsibility, therefore groups make the decision not to accept or claim responsibility. This is problematic because it does not address why a group would use a tactic deemed illegitimate. This problem can be mitigated, however, by a group making the rational decision not to claim responsibility or deny it once officials have attributed attacks to the perpetrators.

### Target of Attack

As shown in Figure 11, terror groups tend to claim attacks on certain targets more than on others. It appears that groups claim responsibility for acts that will elicit a positive response from supporters and the least severe response from their enemies. Israeli Settlers are an issue of high contention and, as a target, provide a means for groups to garner support and display that they are actively fighting for Palestinian independence. Religious groups, on the other hand, are the

perpetrators of 31 percent of all attacks. Not only does one suppose these groups respect religious institutions and individuals more than other groups, one would expect than an attack targeting something with religious importance would result in a harsh response from those whom they attacked. The cost of being associated with an attack on religious targets outweighs the possible benefits.

<b>Target of Attack</b>	<b>% Claimed</b>
Settlers – Israeli	71%
Businessmen	58%
Embassy	53%
Other/Multiple	37%
Business	37%
Military	35%
Journalists	31%
Contractors	26%
Citizens	26%
Government	25%
NGO	24%
Religious	20%

**Figure 11**

When looking at group propensities to claim responsibility for certain types of attacks on certain targets, no clear consistent pattern emerges. However, it is possible to predict a high or low probability of claims of responsibility by cross-referencing the two variables. For example, the least likely to be claimed, using this method would be a fire attack on a religious target. Since there are neither fire attacks nor raids on religious targets, the next least likely to be claimed would be a grenade attack on a religious target. The data indicates that no grenade attacks on religious targets have been claimed. The most likely to be claimed, using this hypothesis would be a suicide attack on Israeli settlers. This type of attack is not recorded in the data – the most probable to be claimed that is recorded is a suicide attack on an embassy, which has a 100 percent claimed rate. Further research is necessary to explain the rationale behind why certain targets and methods are preferred to others.

### Coordinated Attacks & Transnational Attacks

Whether an attack is coordinated or transnational appears to have little influence on terrorist claiming tendencies. Coordinated attacks, attacks with multiple components, are claimed more often than single attacks. This appears counterintuitive to a prior hypothesis regarding spectaculars, 18 percent of all coordinated attacks are considered spectacular, and 39 percent of all coordinated attacks are claimed. However, 28 percent of uncoordinated attacks are claimed. This high percentage of unclaimed, uncoordinated attacks, along with the high percentage of claimed coordinated attacks shows that coordination does not greatly affect group preferences for claiming responsibility.

Transnational attacks are claimed less than domestic attacks. Over 93 percent of domestic terrorism is claimed, as opposed to 61 percent of international terrorism. This occurrence is logical because transnational attacks are more often to elicit threatening responses than domestic attacks, as shown by the U.S. response to the September 11 attacks, the invasions of both Afghanistan, and by Egyptian crackdowns on the Muslim Brotherhood following specific actions or attacks. The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan after September 11 was a display of great force against a state and a terrorist organization. Although the United States has failed to destroy al-Qaeda, the invasion served as a warning to other groups considering transnational attacks. Egyptian crackdowns on the Muslim Brotherhood are far less severe than the United States' response to transnational terrorism. Although members of the Brotherhood are often detained and tortured, the group is not forced out of the country and remains a political force within Egypt.<sup>31</sup>

### **Implications**

---

<sup>31</sup> *Brotherhood of Terror*, History Channel, 10 September 2005, DVD.

When violent actions are unclaimed, there is much speculation as to the identity of the perpetrators. Although prior evidence indicated that terrorists claim responsibility for their actions for a multitude of reasons, this trend is changing. Terrorists are no longer taking credit for their work. Initially, one might believe that claims of responsibility are irrelevant to understanding terrorists, terrorist organizations, and their motives. Previous studies indicated that terrorists claim responsibility for their actions to publicize their cause and their demands – violent actions were a means to an end. With this changing trend, however, it is possible that the motivations for terrorists to act have changed. Without understanding why terrorists are committing what we in the west understand to be acts of horror, we will never be able to defeat terrorism. Understanding is the key to containing and reducing terrorism.

This study has shown that groups with religious basing have a higher tendency to claim attacks and that there is a hierarchy of targets and tactics that are claimed. Knowing that religious groups most often claim responsibility for their actions is daunting because these are the groups that are less prone to compromise.<sup>32</sup> Although this would appear a negative find for the War on Terror, it does provide some insight for those fighting to end terrorism. Only 31 percent of the groups associated with attacks in the United States' reports were religiously based. The remaining 69 percent of groups have demands stemming from other sources. Thus, perhaps if the United States and other Western governments reassess the benefit of their stance not to negotiate with terrorists, we will be able to contain, reduce, or eliminate the other 69 percent of groups.

The containment, reduction, or elimination of these groups would prove to be substantial in reducing the number of terrorist attacks globally. A decisive and complete victory over terrorism and terrorist organizations is clearly preferable to merely reducing the threat. However,

---

<sup>32</sup> Richardson, 68.

the potential for such a victory in any war has declined since the end of World War II.<sup>33</sup>

Therefore, relative defeat over 69 percent of terrorists is preferable to the continuation of the high threat environment in which we are currently found. Reducing the number of terrorist groups will also allow counterterror programs to be more successful. Currently, the MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base estimates that 1,255 terror groups are active globally, be they domestic or transnational. Containment, reduction, or elimination of 69 percent of these groups leaves 389 active religiously based organizations. Counterterrorism will be more effective preventing attacks from 389 groups as opposed to the 1,255 they are currently monitoring.

From this analysis of claiming tendencies, it seems that terror groups are rational actors that weigh the costs and benefits of their actions prior to announcing responsibility. This rationality allows groups to act as they please, however, only accept responsibility for those attacks, which they believe will further their goals, rather than harm them from a decline in popularity, a crack down from the state, or intervention from outsiders. Often, terrorist organizations are believed to be irrational actors. Realizing that these groups act rationally and consider the repercussions of their actions, implies that there are certain risks they are willing to take to achieve some of their goals. By doing further research on this subject, we can eventually establish a hierarchy of goals for specific groups that are more valuable to them than other goals. It is only through uncovering these goals that we can attempt to address the root causes of terrorism and the proliferation of terrorist organizations.

This study leaves much room for further research. First, this analysis should be performed using less biased data cross-referencing numerous government sources with journalistic accounts of terrorist attacks. This will allow for more precise results that do not

---

<sup>33</sup> Page Fortna, "Where Have All the Victories Gone? War Outcomes in Historical Perspective," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, 2004, 1.

revolve around attacks targeting a specific country or that country's interests. Second, this analysis should be performed using advanced quantitative tools. This would strengthen the results found in this study; however, I do not have the knowledge to perform advanced statistical analysis that would provide better interpretations of the findings. Finally, if I were to perform this research again, I would add the variable of bases to the data set. Throughout my research I began to question if having a base would result in a group claiming less because they begin to act more like a state in their occupied area. The FARC is one example of a group that occupies a specific area of a country, can be targeted by military actions, and often does not claim responsibility for attacks believed to be associated with them. Al-Qaeda, on the other hand, has bases; however, they are spread throughout the globe. Therefore, destruction of one base does not preempt the annihilation of the group. I believe this will also have an effect on the group tendencies to claim responsibility for their actions.

## Bibliography

- Brotherhood of Terror*, History Channel, 10 September 2005, DVD.
- Fortna, Page. "Where Have All the Victories Gone? War Outcomes in Historical Perspective." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, 2004.
- Hoffman, Aaron. "Taking Credit for Their Work: When Groups Announce Responsibility for Acts of Terror, 1968-1977." Working paper, International Studies Association, 2004.
- Hoffman, Bruce. *Inside Terrorism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.
- Hoffman, Bruce. "Why Terrorists Don't Claim Credit." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9 (Spring 1997): 1-6.
- Laqueur, Walter. *A History of Terrorism*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2008.
- Lesser, Ian O., Bruce Hoffman, John Arquilla, David Ronfeldt, and Michele Zanini. *Countering the New Terrorism*. Santa Monica: RAND, 1999.
- Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism. "Terrorism Knowledge Base." University of Maryland. <http://www.tkb.org/>.
- National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism. "Global Terrorism Base." University of Maryland. <http://www.start.umd.edu/data/gtd/>.
- National Counterterrorism Center. United States Government. "A Chronology of Significant International Terrorism for 2004." 29 April 2005. <http://www.fas.org/irp/threat/nctc2004.pdf>.
- National Counterterrorism Center. United States Government. "Reports on Incidents of Terrorism 2005." 11 April 2006. <http://wits.nctc.gov/reports/crot2005nctcannexfinal.pdf>.
- National Counterterrorism Center. United States Government. "Report on Terrorist Incidents – 2006." 30 April 2007. <http://wits.nctc.gov/reports/crot2006nctcannexfinal.pdf>.
- Pape, Robert. *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2005.
- Rapoport, David. "To Claim or Not to Claim; That is the Question – Always!" *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9 (Spring 1997): 11-17.
- Richardson, Louise. *What Terrorists Want*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2007.
- Riedel, Bruce. "Al Qaeda Strikes Back," *Foreign Affairs* 86 (May/June 2007): 24.
- Schmid, Alex. *Political Terrorism: A Research Guide*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1984.
- Schmid, Alex. *Violence as Communication*. London: SAGE Publications, 1982.
- United States Department of State. "Significant Terrorist Incidents, 1961-2003: A Brief Chronology." <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/pubs/fs/5902.htm>.