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Research Article

Assessing Public Attitudes toward Random versus Symbolic Terrorist Targets: Survey Experimental Evidence

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Abstract

Do citizens react more adversely to terrorism that strikes random or symbolic targets? Despite the relative neglect of this question by conflict scholars, few attributes of terrorist attacks are more scrutinized by the public. In this article, we field a pair of preregistered, national survey experiments in the United Kingdom that measure the impact of random and symbolic targeting on public demands for armed retaliation. We find that results appear to vary depending on the level of stylization with which the attack is presented. In the abstract, citizens support more retaliation for terrorism directed at random targets. Yet when more concrete details are presented, citizens become similarly defensive of national symbols. We attempt to reconcile this apparent discrepancy by drawing on insights from political psychology, which lead us to propose that changes to the stylization of stimuli may induce citizens to emphasize different cognitive and emotional responses related to random and symbolic targeting. Our results call for more study into how the presentation of terrorist attacks affects public reactions.

¿Reaccionan los ciudadanos de manera más adversa ante el terrorismo que ataca objetivos aleatorios o ante el terrorismo que ataca objetivos simbólicos? A pesar de que los académicos en el campo de los conflictos han estado descuidando, relativamente, esta cuestión, esta es una de las características de los ataques terroristas que tiene un mayor interés para el público. En este artículo, presentamos un par de experimentos de encuestas nacionales prerregistradas en el Reino Unido que miden el impacto que tienen tanto los ataques aleatorios como los ataques simbólicos sobre las demandas públicas de represalias armadas. Concluimos que los resultados parecen variar en función del nivel de estilización con el que se presenta el ataque: de manera abstracta, podemos decir que los ciudadanos apoyan en mayor medida aquellas represalias por terrorismo que están dirigidas a objetivos aleatorios. Sin embargo, cuando se presentan detalles más concretos, los ciudadanos tienden a ponerse, igualmente, a la defensiva con respecto a los símbolos nacionales. Intentamos reconciliar esta aparente discrepancia recurriendo a ideas de la psicología política, que nos llevan a proponer que los cambios en la estilización de los estímulos pueden inducir a los ciudadanos a enfatizar diferentes respuestas cognitivas y emocionales relacionadas con la orientación a objetivos aleatorios y a objetivos simbólicos. Nuestros resultados requieren más estudios acerca de cómo la presentación de los ataques terroristas puede afectar las reacciones del público.

Les citoyens réagissent-ils moins bien au terrorisme visant des cibles aléatoires ou symboliques? Malgré un manque relatif d'attention à la question par les chercheurs spécialisés dans les conflits,

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elle compte parmi les attributs du terrorisme qui intéressent le plus la population. Dans cet article, nous remplissons une paire de sondages nationaux pré-enregistrés au Royaume-Uni qui mesurent les effets de cibles aléatoires et symboliques sur les demandes publiques de représailles armées. Nous observons que les résultats semblent varier en fonction du niveau stylistique de la présentation des attaques. Dans le résumé, les citoyens soutiennent davantage les représailles face au terrorisme dirigé vers des cibles aléatoires. Pourtant, lorsqu'on leur présente des détails plus concrets, les citoyens défendent tout autant les symboles nationaux. Nous tentons de concilier cette divergence apparente en nous fondant sur des enseignements de la psychologie politique pour proposer que les changements de stylisation des stimulus puissent pousser les citoyens à accentuer des réactions cognitives et émotionnelles en lien avec la prise de cibles aléatoires ou symboliques. Nos résultats montrent qu'il est nécessaire d'étudier plus avant les effets de la présentation des attaques terroristes sur les réactions de la population.

Keywords: terrorism, civilian targeting, political violence, public opinion, survey experiment
Palabras clave: terrorismo, ataques contra civiles, violencia política, opinión pública, experimento de encuesta
Mots clés: terrorisme, cibler les civils, violence politique, opinion publique, expérience de sondage

Few features of terrorism attract greater public scrutiny than whether attacks strike random or symbolic targets. For example, in recounting the destruction of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, a *New York Times* article captured a defining element of 9/11 in describing "terrorists turn[ing] commercial jetliners into missiles bearing down on quintessential symbols of American wealth and power" (Barron 2003). By contrast, after a 2015 ISIS plot that left more than 130 dead in restaurants, cafes, and other venues across Paris, *France 24* (2015a) emphasized how the "attackers fired salvos into the crowd, often at random, to cries of "Allahu Akbar"." While the distinction between random and symbolic targeting is not always clear, how do populations respond to these different forms of violence? In the volatile, high-stakes aftermath of terrorism, do plots aimed at random or symbolic targets elicit more demands for retaliation?

Both intellectually and practically, the questions carry considerable significance. As with 9/11 and Paris, strong public reactions to terrorism often encourage counterattacks, which can thrust countries into conflict or even trigger full-scale war (e.g., Jacobson 2010; Dahlgreen 2015). Politicians, media outlets, activists, and even terrorists themselves also frequently frame threats as jeopardizing symbolic or random targets, which may affect support for military spending or preparedness. On the twentieth anniversary of 9/11, for instance, George W. Bush continued to warn of "violent extremists abroad" possessing a "determination to defile national symbols" (Cohen 2021). By comparison, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2018) recently raised ongoing alarms about random terrorist "attacks that could occur anywhere, at any time, with the potential for mass casualties."

A substantial literature has established that public opinion is arguably the prime driver of how states respond to terrorism (e.g., Mueller and Stewart 2018). Terrorists use selective targeting not only to propagandize their goals (e.g., Khalil 2006; Braithwaite 2013; Fortna 2015), but also with anticipation of certain retaliatory measures (e.g., Arce and Sandler 2007; Jacobson and Kaplan 2007; Carter 2016). Researchers have underscored the salience of terrorist target selection and have differentiated on other related attributes (e.g., "hard" versus "soft" targets, civilian versus military) (e.g., Libicki, Chalk, and Sisson 2007; Brandt and Sandler 2010; Asal, Brown, and Schulzke 2015; Abrahams, Ward, and Kennedy 2018; Polo 2020). However, there has been little attention to the distinction between attacks on random versus symbolic sites, or to the different public responses they elicit. By analyzing the often-overlooked variable of soft-target type, our research sheds light on when the public seeks retaliation for terrorist attacks.

In this article, we make an empirical contribution by adjudicating between competing predictions regarding public support for retaliating against terrorist attacks aimed at different kinds of targets. Using a pair of preregistered national survey experiments in the United Kingdom, we specifically analyze public demands for military retaliation in response to random and symbolic targeting across multiple contexts. Data from our two exper-

iments yield different findings, pointing to an apparent discrepancy: Respondents seem to react more strongly to terrorism against a random target described generically than a symbolic target described generically. However, when presented with precise random targets (i.e., coffee shop, grocery store, and theater) and precise symbolic targets (i.e., Trafalgar Square, the London Eye, and Tower Bridge), these disparities largely dissipate. In other words, citizens support more military action in response to random targeting in the abstract. Yet when descriptions of attack locations become more concrete, respondents become similarly protective of national symbols.

We reason that one plausible interpretation of our data is that respondents express comparatively high demands for military retaliation against random targets, regardless of whether they are depicted as specific or generic. This indicates that the level of resolution with which these targets are presented may not, on net, trigger different cognitive or emotional reactions. By contrast, our data may be viewed as respondents having comparatively lesser demands for retaliation against symbolic targets presented generically than specifically. From a cognitive perspective, this could be because threat calculations are lower when respondents are not thinking of a concrete landmark that they recognize, have visited before, or could typically imagine themselves or others they know going to see. From an emotional vantage, amorphous descriptions of symbolic targets could prompt respondents to less viscerally associate an attack with an assault on their national or cultural pride.

Substantively, our findings speak to a considerable quantitative scholarship on terrorism and public opinion (e.g., Avdan and Webb 2018; Gaibulloev and Sandler 2019; Schuurman 2020; Godefroidt 2023) by showing that demands for retaliation against random and symbolic targeting may be context-specific. In particular, understanding the apparent conditional influence of target specificity adds new texture to research on how terrorist targeting in a Western democracy affects pressures for military intervention. Similarly, our results contribute to growing work on how terrorist targets are presented to the public and the effects of such framing on support for armed reprisals (e.g., Norris, Kern, and Just 2003; Powell 2011; Woods 2011). This especially includes research on the psychological and emotional drivers of public responses to terrorism (e.g., Small, Lerner, and Baruch 2006; Bongar et al. 2007; Sheppard 2009; Canetti et al. 2013; Baucum et al. 2021).

Practically, we suggest that generic and specific attack scenarios describing both random and symbolic targets have real-world validity. When discussing the prospect of future attacks, specific target details are necessarily unknown. Therefore, the looming threat of random targeting may generate more demands for retaliating militarily than abstract symbolic targeting. However, when reports of targeting occur in the aftermath of an act of violence, the exact location is clearly known. As a result, whether an actual attack strikes a random or symbolic target may be less consequential in shaping public demands for military responses. Taken together, this implies that terrorists may have limited ability to influence public demands for retaliation based on striking random or symbolic locations. By comparison, political rhetoric about protecting the homeland from future terrorism may be more impactful when warning against hypothetical attacks on random locations.

Broadly, our results call for more study into the causal mechanisms shaping our results, the robustness of our findings, and how the presentation of terrorist attacks affects public reactions generally. This aligns with mounting calls for using experiments to study terrorism (e.g., Arce, Croson, and Eckel 2011; Crabtree and Wayne 2018; Huff and Kertzer 2018), the use of which has arguably seen more growth in other areas of international security. Our analysis provides an example of how inductive interpretations of experimental data can facilitate theory-building. By presenting the evolution of our thinking based on statistical results, the study conforms to guidance for how pre-analysis plans (e.g., Franco, Malhotra, and Gabor 2014; Ofosu and Posner 2021) can promote lessons learned and improve transparency about findings that deviate from expectations (e.g., Ryan and Krupnikov 2021).

Random versus Symbolic Terrorist Targeting

An extensive literature in international relations examines how populations respond to terrorism and how governments pursue reciprocal measures consistent with these demands (e.g., Gaibulloev and Sandler 2019; Schuurman 2020). Drawing on diverse rational-choice, social-psychological, and behavioral approaches (e.g., Spilerman and Stecklov 2009; Huq 2013), these studies marshal both observational and experimental data to link citizen attitudes to outcomes like armed retaliation. Although much of the focus is on identifying the micro-foundations of differential views toward terrorism, the general insight is the predominance of public opinion in determining government responsiveness to violence (e.g., Mueller and Stewart 2018). States are more likely to mount counteroffensives or bolster military capacity when citizens prioritize terrorism relative to other policy concerns.

Against this backdrop, studies have identified terrorist targeting as one of the key mediums through which terrorists not only communicate their goals (e.g., Khalil 2006; Braithwaite 2013; Fortna 2015), but also expect citizens and, therefore, states to retaliate (e.g., Arce and Sandler 2007; Jacobson and Kaplan 2007; Carter 2016). Target selection is generally presumed to align with the ideological, strategic, and organizational objectives of its perpetrators (e.g., Libicki, Chalk, and Sisson 2007; Brandt and Sandler 2010; Asal, Brown, and Schulzke 2015; Abrahams, Ward, and Kennedy 2018; Polo 2020). However, it may also affect the anticipation of both the odds of an armed retaliation and the shape that it takes. Research has examined the effects of various types of targeting (e.g., soft versus hard targets, military versus civilian) on public opinion, yet it has largely overlooked the distinction of random versus symbolic targeting.

Despite this gap, many scholars acknowledge that the choice of a random versus symbolic strike is one of the most distinguishing and visible features of terrorism (e.g., Wilkinson 1992; Schmid and Jongman 2005). In a frequently cited definition of terrorism, for instance, former UN security expert Alex P. Schmid explicitly labeled terrorism "a method of combat in which *random or symbolic* victims serve as instrumental target[s] of violence" (Schmid and Jongman 2005, emphasis added). In general, random targeting refers to attacks on arbitrary locations, chosen with the intent not only to maximize civilian casualties, but also to induce panic that anyone, at any time, could be victimized. Symbolic targeting, by comparison, typically involves strikes on well-known emblems—such as monuments, landmarks, or other iconic pillars—designed as a broader assault on power, culture, or identity.

Public responses to terrorism are most commonly tied to either "cognitive" or "emotional" reactions. Cognitive reactions involve risk calculations, especially pertaining to the perceived likelihood of victimization and its impact (Von Winterfeldt and Borcherding 1981; Lerner et al. 2003; Huddy et al. 2005; Baucum et al. 2021). Emotional reactions, by contrast, involve sentiments such as anger, resentment, grief, or the desire for vengeance (Lerner et al. 2003; Huddy et al. 2005; Skitka et al. 2006; Sinclair and Antonius 2012; Giner-Sorolla and Maitner 2013; Fisk, Merolla, and Ramos 2019; Liberman and Skitka 2019; Vasilopoulous et al. 2019; Wayne 2019). Both random and symbolic terrorist targeting can plausibly evoke both emotional and cognitive reactions. However, questions over their relative weight yield competing predictions regarding which generates more appetite for retaliation.

In terms of cognitive responses, both random and symbolic targeting might increase perceived threat levels. With random targeting, a sense of risk might rise because individuals can picture themselves and those they know visiting everyday locations. With symbolic targeting, a sense of risk could also be activated because individuals or others they know have likely been to major locations like national landmarks that could be singled out for attacks. Likewise, both random and symbolic targeting might trigger emotional responses. Random targeting could conjure up visceral feelings over the prospect of fellow citizens going about their days—who could just as easily be themselves or their family members, friends, or neighbors—being victimized. Symbolic targeting might also heighten affections that citizens attach to locations with great cultural or national significance.

The above discussion yields the following competing hypotheses:

H0: *Random terrorist targeting generates more public demands for retaliation than symbolic targeting.*

H1: *Symbolic terrorist targeting generates more public demands for retaliation than random targeting.*

The Experiments

To adjudicate between whether random or symbolic terrorist targeting generates more public demands for retaliation, we fielded two preregistered[1] national survey experiments in the United Kingdom. The experiments randomly simulated the type of target under different contexts with varying levels of detail about the attack location. We then gauged respondent demands for supporting a military counter-strike. Questions were embedded in two waves of the YouGov UK Political Omnibus survey (Total $N = 3{,}402$), given to UK adults aged eighteen and over, from June 16 to 20, 2022. Responses were weighted to national representativeness by age, gender, social class, region, and education level, pegged to data from the UK Census, random probability surveys (e.g., UK Labour Force Survey), recent electoral referenda, and Office of National Statistics population information.[2]

By randomizing select characteristics of the violence, the experiments address several main identification challenges that make it difficult to establish causality

1 Pre-analysis plan available at https://osf.io/qu9x2/. See online appendix A5 for discussion of ethical implications.

2 YouGov relies on proprietary "active sampling." For more information on YouGov UK's sampling strategy, see https://yougov.co.uk/about/panel-methodology. Online appendix, table A1 reports summary statistics and balances of conditions.

with observational polling data on terrorism (e.g., Arce, Croson, and Eckel 2011). First, to the extent that some features of attacks, such as the perpetrator implicated, are collinear with random or symbolic targeting—for example, ISIS has a record of attacking random targets and Al-Qaeda symbolic targets—endogeneity can bias inference (e.g., Byman 2015). Additionally, the often highly idiosyncratic descriptions of terrorism can complicate efforts to generalize public responses to anecdotal violence aimed at random versus symbolic targets (e.g., Drake 1998). Lastly, some terrorist attacks may more clearly blur the line between random and symbolic targeting.

We conducted our experiment in the United Kingdom because the country has incurred several high-profile terrorist attacks aimed at both random and symbolic targets.[3] Among Western countries, the United Kingdom has experienced among the highest rates of terrorism in recent decades. Importantly, the United Kingdom also gives us relevant leverage over reactions to different kinds of targets. First, the UK's relatively compact geography and concentration of citizens in major population centers (>82 percent urban) like London (>13 percent) mean that most respondents are likely to view random terrorist attacks as potentially threatening themselves or others close to them. Moreover, the UK's strong emphasis on its history and heritage, reflected in many iconic landmarks, means that most respondents might view an attack aimed at a symbolic target as assaulting a shared sense of national unity or cultural identity.

In both experiments, we focused on attitudes toward retaliatory strikes abroad as our central outcome variable because military action constitutes the highest-stakes response that governments can pursue. In this way, answers reflect the real-world pressures that citizens can exert on public officials as a reaction to attacks on the homeland. We included the caveat that the retaliatory strike could kill civilians, both to increase realism and to highlight the major practical and normative implications of deploying lethal force. Although Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions prohibits the intentional targeting of civilians, "collateral" casualties are permissible when the strikes are deemed "proportionate" and the byproduct of legitimate targeting of combatants (ICRC 2022a, b). As such, calls for retaliation are ethically arguable, adding to the moral dilemmas faced by respondents.

We compare "head-to-head" the effects of random and symbolic terrorist attacks on demands for military retaliation for two reasons. Substantively, prior research points to significant public support for armed retaliation (upward of 60–70 percent, according to some studies [Hedgecock and Sukin 2023; Pew Research Center 2021]).[4] This indicates that any indifference in support for armed retaliation against random and symbolic attacks is unlikely to solely be a function of a lack of support for retaliation broadly. Empirically, directly contrasting public responses to one type of terrorist attack versus another also presents a more demanding and appropriate statistical test. While support for military retaliation against either random or symbolic attacks may be significantly different from the baseline (no attack), this does not guarantee that support for a counter-strike is significantly different across attack types.

We set up two experiments with varied levels of stylization about the attack location as tests for robustness. In debates over the richness of details to include in experiments, a standard trade-off is often assumed: Greater abstraction can often increase the generalizability of treatments, but at the expense of pertinent details (Aguinis and Bradley 2014; Brutger et al. 2022). Previous studies differ over which approach is preferable (e.g., Brooks and Valentino 2011; Morton and Tucker 2014), pointing to the need for replicating questions across different conditions and designs. This is especially relevant in the context of terrorism, where known information can vary depending on the discussion of the event or threat. When referring to potential attacks, for example, descriptions of targets are necessarily generic. By contrast, in the wake of actual violence, media and other outlets have granular details about locations.

Experiment 1, an "A/B" conjoint, tested how respondents reacted to terrorist attacks in the abstract, devoid of significant location details.[5] Respondents saw a pair of hypothetical terrorist acts in a side-by-side table format that randomly varied five different features of the attacks (target, tactic, actor type, motivation, and casu-

3 For example, the Manchester Arena bombing (March 22, 2017); stabbings at a public park in Reading (June 20, 2020); Liverpool Women's Hospital bombing (November 14, 2021); Palace of Westminster car attack (August 14, 2018); London Bridge stabbing (November 29, 2019); and the London transport network bombings (July 7, 2005).

4 Some research, however, has shown that support for retaliatory violence varies by country. See, for example, Shandler et al. (2021) and Stein (2015).

5 For more on conjoints, see Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto (2014).

alties[6]) (see online appendix A3 for text).[7] The highly stylized presentation—depicted in a list-style template—reinforced the high level of abstraction of the attack description itself. The random target was "Local gathering spot in London"; the symbolic target was "Well-known national landmark in London." Respondents were asked: "If you had to choose, under which scenario—Terrorist Attack 1 or Terrorist Attack 2—would you be most likely to support a retaliatory strike abroad by the UK military, even if it cost civilian lives?"

Experiment 2 presented a hypothetical vignette of a terrorist attack that randomly varied specific targets (see online appendix A4 for text).[8] The vignette-style presentation—depicted in narrative form that simulates how citizens might read about a real-world attack—complemented the specificity of the description. Three random and three symbolic targets were randomized, and then collapsed into their respective categories. The random targets were: "a coffee shop in London," "a grocery store in London," and "a theater in London." The symbolic targets were major landmarks: "Trafalgar Square in London," "the London Eye," and "Tower Bridge in London." Respondents were asked, "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I would support the UK military launching a retaliatory strike abroad, even if it cost civilian lives." Options spanned a 7-point Likert scale of agreement.

Our selection of specific random and symbolic targets introduced important trade-offs in methodological design. First, although the chosen specific random targets—a coffee shop, grocery store, and theater—are all clearly less abstract than a "local gathering spot," it is possible that they could be made even more precise. Naming specific random targets with further detail, however, could reduce the plausibility of these attack locations being present in most communities. For example, referencing a precise coffee shop, even a national chain (e.g., Pret A Manger), could lessen the salience for respondents who do not have that particular vendor in their community.[9] Nonetheless, it is possible that the specific random targets in the vignettes did not feel as granular as the specific symbolic targets, which are listed explicitly.

In choosing specific symbolic locations, we avoided well-known British symbols with strong associations to government (e.g., "Big Ben" at Parliament) or religion (e.g., Westminster Abbey) because their connotations might complicate causal inference.[10] Citizens might subconsciously respond differently to an attack on a governmental symbol based on whether they tend to support its political leaders or policies. Likewise, faith adherents might respond differently to an attack on a house of worship generally (or an attack directed at their own religion) compared to atheists, agnostics, or members of other religious sects. We also avoided presenting public transit hubs (e.g., King's Cross) because some citizens might use these services more or less regularly, and because these locations more clearly blur the line between random and symbolic targets.

Although we aimed to differentiate between random and symbolic targets, we recognize that there may be some conflation between the two types of sites. This is consistent with the larger conceptual challenge in defining random versus symbolic terrorism (Schmid and Jongman 2017, 7). In particular, specific random targets might take on symbolic meaning if they are seen as an attack on a broader way of life. For example, targeting a theater could be viewed as an attack on culture, or targeting a commercial space could be construed as an attack on an economic system. Moreover, symbolic targets may appear more random if "random" is interpreted as impacting common citizens in their everyday lives. For instance, a respondent might focus on the fact that a "symbolic" attack on Trafalgar Square would likely strike "random" civilians.

6 We chose to indicate the number of casualties to avoid respondents instead answering based on their *assumptions* of casualties in each scenario. This number was kept constant in Experiment 2. In Experiment 1 (the conjoint experiment), we varied the number to be able to compare how much shifting the type of target changes support for retaliation *relative* to other factors, such as increasing the number of casualties.

7 Characteristics are broadly based on Huff and Kertzer (2018).

8 Consistent with Experiment 1, Experiment 2 also presented information on target, tactic, actor type, and casualties. Because it was not a conjoint, information was held constant using baselines. Information on the motivation was left out to approximate Experiment 1's baseline of there being no clear motivation for the attack.

9 We also note that actual media reports of attacks on random locations often tack between more or less specificity in naming targets. See, for example, *France 24* (2015b) in which the main headline refers to a "Paris café," while the subheadline and caption specify the precise name.

10 See, for example, Norman (2022), who demonstrates that citizens are more likely to condemn terrorist attacks when they are sympathetic to the politics of the target.

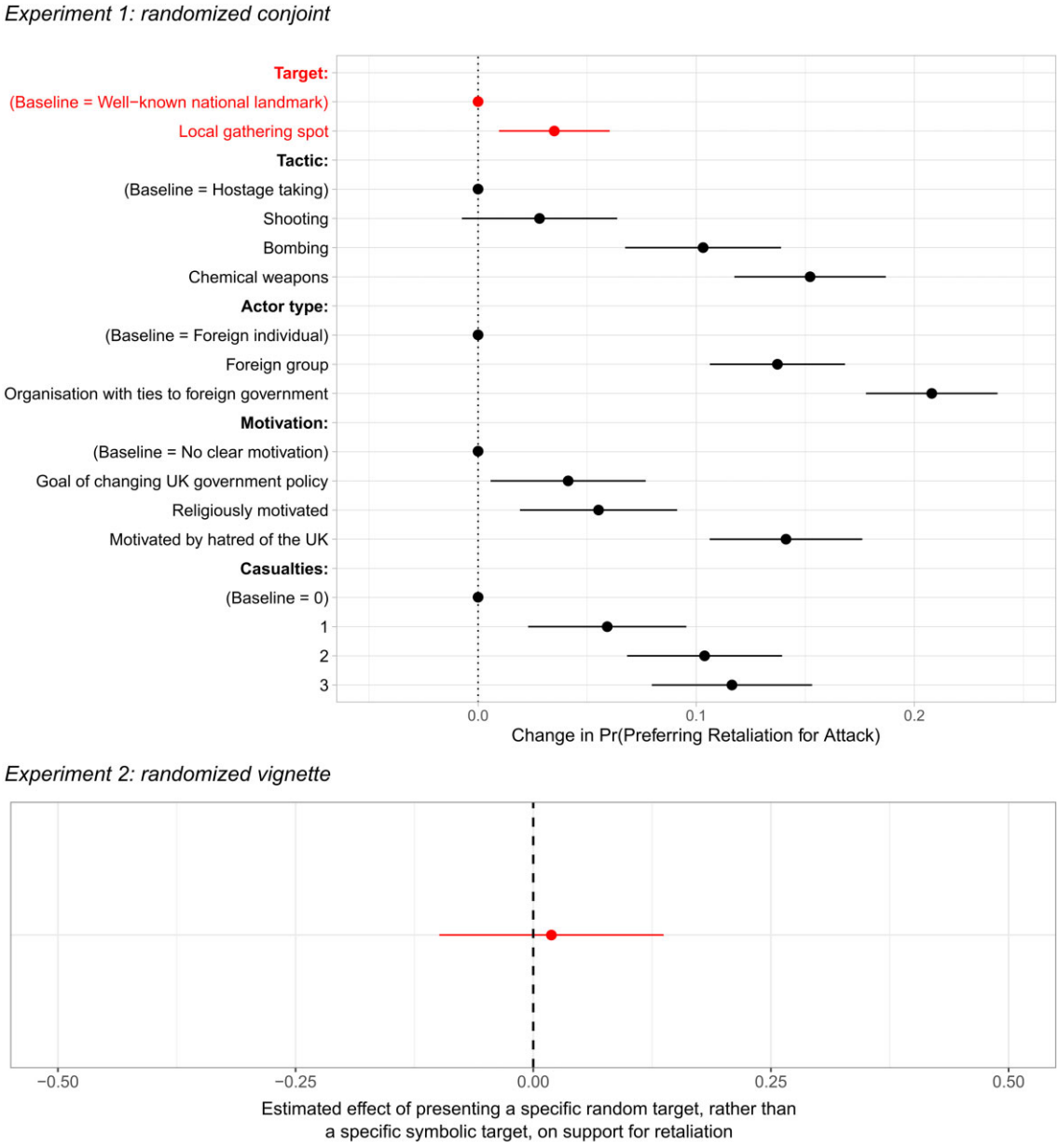

Figure 1. Experimental Results. Experiment 1 (top): AMCE for each attribute value, which can be interpreted as the average change in the probability that a respondent will prefer retaliation for one attack over the other when that attack includes the given attribute value instead of the baseline. Experiment 2 (bottom): Linear regression estimate for the effect of target on support for retaliation as measured by a 7-point Likert scale. Horizontal bar represents 95 percent CIs. Full tables are available in online appendix, table A2.

Experimental Findings

Figure 1 plots the results, with full tables presented in online appendix A2. Estimates for Experiment 1 (top), reported as the average marginal component effects (AMCEs) for each attribute, show a modest but significant preference for retaliating against generic random targets over generic symbolic targets. Presenting the terrorist attack as a local gathering spot rather than a well-known

national landmark raised the probability that a respondent would choose to retaliate by 3.5 percentage points ($SE = 1.3$). For reference, this is a slightly smaller effect than shifting from an attack with no motivation to one in which the motivation was to change UK government policy (4.1 percentage points). The results of Experiment 2 (bottom), however, which estimate linear effects, indicate no significant difference in support for retaliation against a specific random target versus a specific symbolic one.

As noted previously, we designed the treatments and setups in our experiments with varying specificity to evaluate the robustness of our findings under different contexts. However, the conflicting results between the two experiments are suggestive of how a difference in abstraction may itself condition public responses to terrorist targeting. In Experiment 1, when the location is depicted generically in a highly stylized conjoint, citizens demand more retaliation for random targeting that puts the safety of citizens in jeopardy for pursuing everyday activities. However, in Experiment 2, when citizens receive a more concrete picture of the target within a granular vignette, that prior is largely neutralized. While we did not make ex ante predictions about directional effects on the two experiments, we did not expect the inconsistency. Public reactions to random or symbolic terrorist targeting appear to be context-specific.

Reconciling the Results

What explains this apparent discrepancy between the experiments? Although we cannot directly compare across our two questions because, by design, they relied on different outcomes,[11] we propose that one plausible way to conceptualize the mixed results is in terms of the relative activation of underlying cognitive and emotional responses. Specifically, the act of visualizing precise versus generic targets may affect both the risk calculations and feelings that underlie demands for retaliation. As shown in table 1, one interpretation is that, with random targeting, cognitive and/or emotional responses activate in producing comparatively high demands for retaliation across both high- and low-resolution presentations. By contrast, with symbolic targeting, the level of resolution presented may change the risk calculation and/or the feelings that are salient, leading to a relative drop-off in activated responses when the target is presented in low resolution.

Table 1. Underlying cognitive and emotional responses to terrorist targeting driving demands for retaliation

	Random target	Symbolic target
Specific presentation	Activated	Activated
Generic presentation	Activated	Less activated

This explanation is rooted in the dual cognitive–emotional components that, independently, have been shown to shape public responses to terrorism. Cognitively, public opinion on terrorism is largely based on risk perception, consisting of calculations of an attack's likelihood and impact (Fischhoff et al. 2003; Baucum et al. 2021). Emotionally, studies identify feelings such as anger, resentment, grief, hatred, or the desire for revenge as driving public reactions (e.g., Freyd 2003; Lerner et al. 2003; Huddy et al. 2005; Skitka et al. 2006; Sinclair and Antonius 2012; Giner-Sorolla and Maitner 2013; Fisk, Merolla, and Ramos 2019; Liberman and Skitka 2019; Vasilopoulos et al. 2019; Wayne 2019; Roach, Cartwright, and Pease 2020). Because terrorism evokes complex responses, these categories are not always separable. "Risk as feelings" models, for example, reflect how cognitive and emotional dimensions often overlap (Fischhoff et al. 2005; Loewenstein et al. 2001).

Random Targets—Resolution Matters Less

To the extent that demands for retaliation can be seen as relatively high regardless of whether a random target is presented as specific or generic, this could be consistent with cognitive and/or emotional responses activating similarly, on net, under both scenarios. Cognitively, the underlying risk perception might yield considerable threat calculations regarding the odds of an attack. Irrespective of whether the target is described generically as a "local gathering spot" or specifically as a "coffee shop," "grocery store," or "theater," citizens could conceivably imagine themselves or others they know being at such locations. What matters is that citizens register vulnerability when perceiving dangers that they cannot minimize. The target's level of resolution may be immaterial to a rationalist expectancy-value calculation that weighs the probable risks of harm.

Likewise, from an emotional vantage, whether a random target is described with low or high abstraction, citizens may perceive an attack on an arbitrary location as an unconscionable act of violence. In each case,

11 The relative level of support between (rather than within) the two treatments is difficult to state with precision, as the AMCEs from Experiment 1's forced choice design cannot be compared directly to Experiment 2's Likert outcome.

this may trigger commensurate feelings like anger, resentment, grief, or desire for revenge. The generically described random location could stir up affective feelings insofar as nearly everyone can imagine a local gathering spot in their own hometown or community. Citizens might empathize with those affected because they realize that it could just as easily have been themselves or others close to them who were victimized. Similarly, because coffee shops, grocery stores, and theaters are such common places of leisure and commerce, it may be equally easy for citizens to picture casualties of such an attack and to respond emotively, regardless of the level of abstractness with which the target is described.

Symbolic Targeting—Resolution Matters More

To the degree that citizens exhibit reduced demands for retaliation in reaction to generic symbolic targets relative to precise symbolic ones, this could signal that cognitive and/or emotional responses are less acute when the target is presented in low resolution. Cognitively, citizens may calculate that they would rarely be in the vicinity of one of countless unnamed national monuments. By contrast, the perceived risk of an attack might increase if citizens visualize a precise target that they recognize, have visited before, or could imagine themselves or others they know going to see. For example, most citizens could likely envision themselves or their friends or relatives at specific iconic targets like Tower Bridge, the London Eye, or Trafalgar Square. These more granular depictions could remind citizens of all the times they have visited notable symbolic locations.

On an emotional level, citizens may affectively distance themselves from a generically described "well-known national landmark" that appears amorphous or devoid of obvious meaning. That detachment, however, may be more difficult with specific symbols that conjure up strong feelings like national or cultural pride. Citizens might not feel particularly patriotic or defensive of their customs and traditions in the abstract. Yet they may exhibit instinctual reactions when their identities are perceived to be concretely threatened. Because some symbols are so deeply rooted in the consciousness of populations, citizens may reflexively see an attack on precise locations as an assault on their heritage (Koleva et al. 2012). The metaphoric and connotative value of what symbols represent may not be obvious to citizens until they are rendered with a high degree of exactitude.

Discussion

In sum, we expected the results from Experiments 1 and 2 to align, given treatments designed to capture random versus symbolic targeting in both. However, the findings were mixed. We suggest that one way to reconcile the data may come from considering how presenting different levels of specificity of an attack location can shape public responses to terrorist attacks. More granular descriptions of locales with metaphoric significance, such as national symbols, may activate more salient cognitive and emotional responses than generic identifiers. By contrast, the level of detail may not alter reactions to strikes on random targets, where risk perceptions and emotional attachments might be heightened regardless of the level of abstraction with which the location is described.

Our explanation speaks to prior studies in experimental methodology that center on the level of stylization presented in scenarios and the extent to which vignettes reflect true-to-life evaluations (e.g., Aguinis and Bradley 2014; Brutger et al. 2022). Some scholars claim that decontextualized descriptions of events better capture psychological universals by extricating assessments from real people and places. Others, however, insist that minimalist stimuli lead to unrealistic assessments and that information should be embedded in detail-rich vignettes (Bloom 2011; FeldmanHall 2012; Alekseev, Charness, and Gneezy 2017; Bostyn, Sevenhant, and Roets 2018; Schein 2020). Our findings could be read as showing that more context-rich details can—under certain circumstances—stimulate stronger reactions as respondents consider real events, people, or things (Loewenstein et al. 2001).

We acknowledge that this is just one possible explanation, and further research is needed to fully probe the mechanisms driving our results. Our study should prompt more attention to the importance of stylization in experimental treatments relating to terrorism specifically and conflict generally. Despite disagreements over whether presentations should be parsimonious or detailed, the choice may depend on the question (e.g., Alekseev, Charness, and Gneezy 2017). Some calculations—such as those less swayed by metaphoric attachments—may be relatively unmoved by the level of abstractness. However, other assessments—such as those where citizens might feel strong figurative connections to precise places or names—may yield different responses. Such divides may be relevant to designing and interpreting a range of survey questions in conflict studies (e.g. Sagan and Valentino 2017).

Conclusion

Our article sheds light on how soft-target type may influence public reactions to terrorism. Based on two original survey experiments in the United Kingdom, we found that citizen responses to random versus symbolic terrorist attacks appear to depend on the resolution with which a target is presented. When faced with generic details of a target, citizens demanded more retaliation against random strikes. However, when confronted with more concrete details, the impulse to protect national symbols grew equally pronounced. We attempted to reconcile this discrepancy by theorizing about the role of stimuli in activating underlying cognitive and emotional responses. One conceivable interpretation is that strikes on random targets generally activate similar risk calculations and/or feelings. However, strikes on symbolic targets may lessen these responses when the attack location is depicted in generic, not specific terms.

Although it is key to stress that our findings emerge from different experimental treatments, the results could be indicative of how the resolution of presentations of terrorist targeting shapes public opinion. The modest effect sizes and their deviation from expectations make it important to replicate the results under different conditions. While the conjoint and vignette designs reinforced the stylization of the respective treatments, one test for sensitivity would be to rerun a similar survey but keep the experimental designs identical across questions. Our explanation also calls for studies that expressly manipulate cognitive and emotional responses under different scenarios through ex ante prompts, which could parse mechanisms (e.g., Neumann 2000; Pearlman 2022). Such treatments could align with how political actors speak about both abstract and real-world attacks (e.g., Kellner 2007; Redfield 2009; Esch 2010).

Apart from adding to extensive literatures on terrorism, public opinion, and political psychology, the findings call attention to ongoing methodological debates over abstraction and detail in survey design (Aguinis and Bradley 2014; Brutger et al. 2022). While scholars debate how the level of stylization of vignettes affects respondent answers, our results indicate that the impacts may be context-specific. To the extent that our theoretical explanation has purchase, the vividness of the presentation of real places, events, and people is more likely to influence responses when the terrorist target has metaphoric significance. Where it instead involves relatively arbitrary locations, the level of resolution of treatments may be less significant. Designing surveys that test hypotheses under both conditions may help to confirm the robustness of findings or identify points of discrepancy.

Practically, our study may have implications for explaining public support for counterterrorism policies. The results suggest that political actors who warn hypothetically against future strikes on random targets may—deliberately or not—drum up more support for military investments or action than if they emphasize strikes on generic symbolic targets that have less tangible resonance. Comparatively, in the wake of actual terrorist attacks, whether a strike was directed at a random or symbolic target may be unlikely to significantly influence public demands for armed responses. While terrorists may still strike random or symbolic targets for other reasons, the suggestion that terrorists can preempt or hedge against retaliations by choosing one type of target does not appear to be supported by our data.

More work is needed into how these dynamics could affect domestic politics. Elected officials, for example, may leverage the presentation of hypothetical targets to advance their own interests. One reason might be to induce "rally 'round the flag" effects to bolster their incumbencies (Mueller 1970). Politicians may also have an incentive to overestimate the risks of attacks, so as not to be proven wrong or accused of ill-preparation if terrorism does strike (Braithwaite 2013). These potential benefits are in addition to electoral gains that politicians might achieve as a result of using threats as a pretext for pursuing foreign policy or military aims that increase their popularity (Altheide 2006). Our results indicate that constituents may be especially susceptible to abstract rhetoric that plays on concerns about random attacks that either heighten a sense of risk or trigger any number of emotions.

Future research could extend our results beyond the United Kingdom, given that our findings are limited to an advanced democracy during peacetime. Studies could also explore other outcomes, such as support for enhanced security measures or specific counterterrorism operations (e.g., drone strikes versus boots-on-the-ground deployments). Another priority is disaggregating responses based on individual-level characteristics, such as generalized personality traits related to fear or risk perceptions (e.g., Silver et al. 2006; Maguen 2008). Given the now dominance of "homegrown" terrorism in the West (e.g., Sánchez-Cuenca and de la Calle 2009; Jones, Doxsee, and Harrington 2020), scholars might also study public reactions when domestic actors claim responsibility for planning and execution. Our study lays the groundwork for more research into how both the target type and the presentation of terrorist attacks influence political behavior.

Supplemental Information

Supplementary information is available at the *Journal of Global Security Studies* data archive.

Funder Information

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