This book explores a perplexing trend—the enduring reality that terrorist attacks occur more regularly in democracies than in nondemocracies.\(^1\) Democracy is often thought to be the antidote to terrorism—a cure for restless people driven to violence to oppose repressive rule. But the historical record discloses a much different story. Terrorism has been, and widely remains, a phenomenon that is uniquely concentrated in democracies.\(^2\) Since 1970, terrorism has been an overwhelmingly democratic phenomenon, occurring primarily in fully and transitional democracies at about twice the rate as in authoritarian regimes. Even though terrorism in illiberal regimes has increased since the 1970s, more current data confirms that terrorism continues to plague democracies through 2007.

These trends are puzzling because terrorism is often considered to be most prevalent in places where brutal injustices by the ruling regime drive people to violent desperation. The fact that terrorism occurs in democracies at all is curious; but the fact that terrorism occurs with a higher frequency in democracies than in nondemocracies is especially counterintuitive. Why do groups and individuals commit costly violent acts rather where there are legal channels through which to express their political grievances?

Equally puzzling is the fact that some democracies experience high frequencies of terrorism where others do not. Why do some democracies—such as Italy, the United Kingdom, Spain, and the United States—seem to experience terrorism often, whereas other democracies—such as Norway, Sweden, and Japan—experience very little terrorism?

The Argument

The central contention of this book is that terrorism occurs so often in democracies because of a competitive logic that drives groups to compete with other political groups using violence. Although democracies are not permissive of terrorism, as some authors suggest, they do permit conventional mobilization of all sorts. The result is a diverse array of interest groups, political parties, and private actors attempting to affect the polity. At the extremes of these political groups are individuals or groups who view progress as impossible without violence, given the intensity of the competition. The more mobilization that occurs, the more likely terrorist groups are to form. And once terrorist groups have formed, the competition becomes much more deadly. Thus terrorist violence

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\(^1\) For my purposes, terrorism is the deliberate use or threat of force against noncombatants by a non-state actor in pursuit of a political goal. Terrorism is distinguished from other forms of violence (such as civilian victimization during civil war) by its randomness and its attempt to convey a political message beyond the targets themselves. For a detailed discussion about defining terrorism, see Bruce Hoffman. 2006. *Inside Terrorism*, 2\(^{nd}\) edition. New York: Columbia University Press.

\(^2\) In general, the arguments made in this study are most relevant to domestic terrorism groups. However, domestic terrorism makes up more than 90% of terrorist activity according to the Global Terrorism Database. Additionally, the terrorism that troubles emerging democracies such as Iraq and Afghanistan is largely domestic.
in democracies is self-reinforcing and produces a multitude of new competitive groups, whereas terrorism in undemocratic societies is less likely to result in competitive, outbidding dynamics. Terrorism is interest group politics by other means. This explanation also helps to resolve the puzzle about why such variation exists across democracies with regard to terrorism. In general, domestic terrorism is best predicted by a high degree of conventional mobilization in the democracy. Competition among various constituents leads some groups to adopt more extreme tactics to express their grievances. In particular, competition between protest movements, conventional interest groups, and even other existing terrorist groups compels marginal groups to outbid the others for influence by using still more violence. But in democracies where conventional mobilization is low, the incentives for groups to resort to more intense levels of contestation are also low.

The implications of this argument are profound. The book provides an important challenge to the prevailing wisdom that democracy is an antidote to terrorism. Scholars and policymakers alike have routinely argued that democracy—especially combined with economic opportunity—removes the underlying reasons that individuals join terrorist groups. The United States especially has been steadfast in its emphasis of free market competition and political pluralism as the ideal domestic systems through which to undermine terrorist groups abroad. From Bill Clinton to George W. Bush to Barack Obama, American presidents have advocated democracy-promotion as crucial to the U.S. effort to defeat terrorist groups abroad. But my study suggests that as democracy spreads as the primary form of governance around the world, terrorism is likely to increase as a form of political contestation—not decrease. Instead of defeating terrorism by encouraging democratic development abroad, unqualified democracy-promotion may actually exacerbate preexisting tendencies toward violent mobilization—or even create these tendencies where they did not exist in the first place.

Moreover, groups such as Al Qaeda-affiliates in Western states are recast as essentially foreign policy “lobby” groups, whose outbidding dynamics can easily spiral out of control. In order to avoid this process in countries facing homegrown Islamist terrorism, democratic societies must attend to the conventional, nonviolent interest groups operating within their societies—even if they appear extreme—so that they do not escalate their activities, “crowd” the polity, and inadvertently provide the incentives for terrorist group formation.

The Evidence
To explore the competing explanations, I bring to bear a variety of evidence. I develop statistical models to evaluate the broad mechanisms that drive the relationship between democracy and terrorism. But I also employ qualitative case studies that combine research of terrorist communiqués, manifestos, and reports about interviews with terrorists with fieldwork I conducted in Europe from 2007-2008. During my research, I spoke with many scholars, policymakers, and activists about the different reasons that terrorism persisted in their countries. I also employed a web-based survey to solicit responses from activists and interest groups to determine which factors made such groups more likely to adopt violence. As expected, groups that felt more threatened by the competitive environment in which they sought political influence were those who indicated a willingness to use violence to achieve their goals.
The results are striking. Terrorist groups compete not only with conventional interest groups, nonviolent protest movements, and groups with rivaling ideologies, but also they compete with groups who share their ideological goals in a competitive, outbidding dynamic. This competitive logic best explains why democracies—especially emerging democracies—may be particularly prone to terrorist violence.

This book is the first to link competitive terrorism to the preponderance of terrorist activity in democracies, thus advancing the field to a greater understanding of the systematic relationships between regime type and terrorism. The book also features case studies that are of theoretical and intrinsic interest to scholars and policymakers, including the UK, Italy, Turkey, Iraq, Afghanistan, etc. The book is therefore likely to appeal to scholars of international security, strategic studies, and terrorism studies.

**Alternative Explanations**

The book also evaluates two popular alternative explanations for the relationship between democracy and terrorism: (1) the civil liberties explanation, and (2) the press freedom explanation.

First, the civil liberties explanation argues that political and civil liberties are positively correlated with terrorism because of the increased opportunity and permissiveness of democratic systems. The freedoms of movement and association enjoyed within democracies provide opportunities for terrorist groups to take root in societies and perform actions against either their own governments or foreign governments abroad.

Second is the press freedom explanation, which has two purported effects. First, proponents of argue that press freedom has a direct effect on terrorism because countries with the highest level of press openness are the most likely to fully report terrorist activities. Because the media is like oxygen for terrorism, terrorist attacks should occur where media coverage is the most independent and conducive to sensationalist coverage. Thus terrorists target countries with a high degree of press freedom. The second effect is indirect, in that countries without a free press are more likely to be authoritarian regimes, whose interest is in underreporting terrorist attacks. Thus the effect of press freedom would not be causal, but simply correlates to low terrorism attacks because of a deliberate suppression of information about attacks when they occur.

In evaluating the evidence, I contend that these two arguments, although perhaps relevant in some cases, are dubious explanations for the systematic relationship between democracy and terrorism. The civil liberties argument has several key flaws. First, although respect for civil liberties may seem to provide a permissive environment for terrorism to thrive in democracies, a general adherence to civil liberties does not necessarily prohibit democracies from pursuing repressive counterterrorist tactics in practice. Indeed, some democratic electorates quickly and easily grant their executives extra powers in responding to terrorism. The United Kingdom’s perpetual adoption of Emergency Powers since the 1920s—often with a great deal of immediacy and virtually no resistance from the legislative and judiciary branches—is another example. Thus

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democratic governments are quite capable of circumventing civil liberties during terrorist crises, and they have historically done so often with the public’s blessing. Second, even if civil liberties allow terrorists to thrive, this explanation fails to account for the motivation to use terrorism. Why would terrorist groups (especially domestic groups) use violence to disrupt conventional politics in spite of legal channels to pursue their interests? In other words, what motivates citizens of democratic countries to engage in costly, violent acts to express their political preferences in spite of legal means to do so? The opportunity structure alone is insufficient to explain the proliferation of terrorist groups in democracies. There must be some other factor(s) that affect the growth of terrorism as well.

The press freedom argument is also problematic. First, this perspective fails to explain why terrorists target some countries with high levels of media freedom and not others. If press freedom had a uniformly positive effect on terrorists target selection, then we would expect the countries with the highest degrees of media freedom being the routine targets of terrorism. Yet many countries with high rankings of press freedom—such as Canada, Switzerland, and Australia—are relatively immune from terrorist violence. Second, although some scholars insist that the preponderance of missing data on terrorist attacks occurs in authoritarian regimes, no scholars have proffered convincing evidence to this effect. In the conflict literature, researchers are often able to uncover evidence of violent events occurring in the past, either through witness testimony or archives that become available after the country has achieved a sufficient amount of liberalization. Yet no scholars have uncovered proof that violent attacks have been overlooked by the relevant databases. Moreover, the most comprehensive database on terrorist incidents, the Global Terrorism Database, confirms the positive correlation between democracy and terrorism, even though it contains far more observations of terrorism in authoritarian regimes than the database that previously dominated terrorism studies. The argument that press freedom leads to a spurious relationship between democracy and terrorism is speculative rather than conclusive.

Instead, the competition argument I advance in this book accounts for both the occurrence of terrorism in democracies and the variation of terrorism across democracies.

Plan of the Book

The book proceeds as follows. Chapter 2 develops the core argument regarding the competitive model of terrorism. I first highlight the theoretical explanation concerning the competitive model, discussing several key examples as I lay out the theory. I then test the three competing arguments—the competitive model, the civil liberties model, and the press freedom model—using a quantitative analysis of terrorist attacks from 1970 to 2007. I also conduct tests on the effects of inter-group competition on the emergence of new terrorist groups between 1968 and 2005, using an original index of terrorist group competition that I developed. Specifics about the measurement of these variables and robustness checks will be available in a methodological appendix as well as accompanying documentation that will be available on my website for replication.

In Chapter 3, I explore the competitive logic of terrorism in the United Kingdom (UK). The UK is selected for several reasons. First, its long history with terrorist violence (mostly concentrated in Northern Ireland) has drawn much attention to the question of why terrorism persists in democracies. Being an advanced democracy with general respect for human rights, the UK case is especially puzzling. However, it also affords significant within-case variation, as the terrorism threat has waxed and waned over the course of 50 years. Thus the UK case provides ample opportunity to compare the competing explanations for why terrorism occurs in democracies. In this chapter, I discuss the history of terrorism in the UK, including the Northern Irish conflict and fundamentalist Islamic terrorism in the 2000s. I also report findings from a web-based survey of radical groups, which suggests that the groups that view the interest group environment as exceedingly competitive are the ones that express a willingness to select terrorism as a tactic by which to achieve their goals.

Chapter 4 explores terrorism in Italy. Italy possesses a long history of terrorism, beginning with South Tyrolean separatists in the decades immediately following World War Two. During the 1960s, Italian terrorism emerged as a left-wing phenomenon, answered with considerable violence by terrorist groups on the right. These ideological opponents engaged in a bloody struggle throughout the 1970s and 1980s, with the “strategy of tension” ceasing only when the Italian government succeeded in using a combination of innovative amnesty policies and experienced some fair fortune in counterterrorism operations. More recently, Islamist terrorism has become a concern for Italy. But this case also provides an opportunity to conduct a thorough within-case analysis, as there is considerable variation across the independent and dependent variables. My interviews there yielded several interesting observations about terrorist group competition, which I report in this chapter.

In Chapter 5, I shift gears to explore whether and how terrorism emerges in new democracies. Five mini-case studies provide a useful opportunity to compare pre-democratic systems to post-democratic systems, so that I can observe whether terrorist activity has changed its character across regime types. The mini-cases I discuss include Greece, Turkey, Iraq, and Afghanistan. I find that competitive terrorism emerged only after democracy took hold in these countries, whereas cooperative terrorism—which seeks to balance the authoritarian regime rather than compete for influence—preceded the democratic transitions. For instance, competitive terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan did not flare up when the U.S. and Coalition occupations began; instead, the violence began as elections were introduced.

In Chapter 6, I respond to a potential critique of my argument—that if democratic competition causes groups to escalate their activities and choose violence, why is the number of terrorist groups in democracies finite? Why do more terrorist groups not develop, and why do some democracies seem immune from terrorist violence? In this chapter, I identify the few democracies that have been relatively immune from terrorism and argue that because the main cause of competitive terrorism is domestic mobilization, then democratic regimes who experience little terrorism have addressed the underlying causes of domestic protest before it reaches a level of intensity conducive to violence. In democracies that do not experience terrorism, mobilization is low because the citizenry is already satisfied with the status quo. Such regimes offer many lessons that policymakers should adopt.
The concluding chapter lays out the policy implications of this study, which are wide-reaching. First, instead of expressing surprise when groups resort to violence in democracies, democratic governments must develop pragmatic approaches to containing the violence. For instance, if the main cause of terrorism is domestic mobilization, then democratic regimes can reduce such violence by addressing the underlying causes of domestic protest before it reaches a level of intensity conducive to violence. Many protestors express concerns about economic, labor, or security conditions. If democracies begin to ameliorate these concerns, then the pressures to intensify mobilization will decline. I argue that democracies can disrupt the proliferation of terrorist groups in four key ways: (1) introducing incentives for terrorists to exit the group and cooperate with authorities through amnesty policies; (2) resolving major domestic grievances before the mobilization turns violent; (3) fortifying potential targets on a case-by-case basis; and (4) ending unqualified democracy-promotion abroad.