Delegating repression?: Pro-government militias and domestic terrorism

Harrison Akins

To cite this article: Harrison Akins (2020): Delegating repression?: Pro-government militias and domestic terrorism, Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict, DOI: 10.1080/17467586.2020.1821071

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17467586.2020.1821071

Published online: 12 Oct 2020.
Delegating repression?: Pro-government militias and domestic terrorism

Harrison Akins

ABSTRACT
Scholars have increasingly disaggregated domestic terrorism from transnational terrorism and sought to understand the causal factors of the former by focusing on endogenous features of the state and the actions of the government that either provoke or create opportunities for the occurrence of domestic terrorist attacks, especially repressive actions of the government. These arguments are implicitly framed by a unitary view of the state within intra-state conflict. The conflict literature, however, has increasingly looked beyond this unitary view and examined the role and impact of pro-government militias (PGMs) as a tactical means of increasing the state’s ability to wage violence. Using negative binomial analysis of data on domestic terrorism and PGMs, this article demonstrates that PGM activity that serves as a force multiplier for official security forces increases the likelihood of an increase in domestic terrorism, an argument that is robust to various model specifications.

In 2008, Pakistan announced a new strategy to counter the on-going insurgency by the Pakistani Taliban in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border – the formation and use of local pro-government militias (PGMs) known as lashkars. Government officials saw that local PGMs could be more effective in discriminately targeting Taliban and al Qaeda fighters given their increased knowledge of the conflict environment and help bolster local government authority to secure sustainable and long-term law and order (Akins, 2019b; Perlez & Shah, 2008b). This strategy, however, soon contributed to an increase in terrorist violence by the Pakistani Taliban, including against the lashkars and the local tribal elders leading them. These attacks included an October 2008 suicide bombing by the Pakistani Taliban in FATA’s Orakzai Agency targeting a meeting of a lashkar that killed over 100 people and a November 2008 attack on a council of elders that had formed a lashkar in Bajaur Agency killing over 20 people. The Pakistani Taliban claimed that their attacks were in revenge for actions taken by the local militias in support of the government’s counterinsurgency efforts. The behaviour of the Pakistani Taliban in response to the formation and activity of the lashkars helps to demonstrate the link between the use of PGMs and domestic terrorist attacks.

As scholars have increasingly disaggregated domestic terrorism from transnational terrorism and sought to understand the causal factors of the former, research has primarily focused on features of the state and actions of the government that either provoke or create opportunities for the occurrence of domestic terrorist attacks,
understanding the violence to be driven by interactions between the state and non-state actors challenging the state. The conflict literature, however, has increasingly pushed back against a unitary idea of the state to understand patterns of political violence and terrorism and focused on the role of PGMs. Within the growing literature on PGMs, it is abundantly clear that in addition to examining non-state actors opposed to the government, it is also necessary to consider non-state actors who are aligned with the government. A state’s reliance on PGMs has been recognized to increase its ability and opportunity to commit violence within its borders, with PGM activity mirroring state actions that have been demonstrated to lead to increases in domestic terrorism. This analysis incorporates PGM activity into an analysis of domestic terrorism to test whether governments’ reliance on PGMs increase the likelihood of domestic terrorist attacks and by which pathway PGM activity can lead to an increase domestic terrorism. There are two pathways explored here: (1) PGMs as a force multiplier of regular military forces which increases a state’s ability to commit violence; and (2) PGMs as a substitute for military forces to increase the opportunity to commit violent atrocities against civilians.

This analysis helps to demonstrate that in considering the causal factors for domestic terrorist attacks, it is important to not only consider direct government actions but also the behaviour of non-state actors acting in concert with the government as part of its domestic security strategy. These non-state actors also can impact and change the dynamics of the conflict environment, resulting in terrorist or insurgent groups to alter their behaviour in kind and increase the amount of terrorist attacks that they commit. By looking beyond a bilateral view of intra-state conflict, this analysis provides a more comprehensive understanding of the various actions and policies that can change the dynamics of intra-state conflict and result in an increase in domestic terrorism. It also leads to a better understanding of the impact of a state’s use of PGMs on the conduct and levels of political violence.

Existing research on domestic terrorism and PGMs

Recent conflict literature has increasingly differentiated domestic terrorism from transnational terrorism, especially after the publication of Enders, Sandler, and Gaibulloev (2011) dataset disaggregating the Global Terrorism Database into domestic and transnational terrorist attacks. Scholars subsequently pointed to endogenous features of the state that contribute specifically to the emergence of domestic terrorism, such as economic conditions (Enders, Hoover, & Sandler, 2016), regime type (Ash, 2016; Bandyopadhyay & Younas, 2011; Dreher & Fischer, 2011; Kis-Katos, Liebert, & Schulze, 2011; Wilson & Piazza, 2013), and party system (Piazza, 2010). Scholars also have argued that the presence of a politically or economically marginalized minority or ethnic groups is a stronger predictor of domestic terrorism than state-wide economic or political factors (Choi & Piazza, 2016; Ghatak, 2016; Ghatak & Gold, 2017; Ghatak, Gold, & Prins, 2017; Piazza, 2011, 2012). Hansen, Nemeth, and Mauslein (2020) further argue that the presence of political excluded ethnic groups interacts with variations in local socioeconomic conditions to influence the outbreak of domestic terrorism. It has also been recognized that on-going civil wars result in higher levels of terrorism (Boulden, 2009; Findley & Young, 2012; Fortna, 2015; Kalyvas, 2004; Sambanis, 2008; Stanton, 2013; Thomas, 2014). These prevailing
conditions within a state provide opportunities or incentives for individuals or groups to commit acts of domestic terrorism.

In addition to conditions within the states providing opportunities for groups to commit domestic terrorist attacks, scholars also examined how specific behaviours by the government, such as repressive actions or violence against civilians, can provoke a backlash from the targeted population or group due to increased grievances, leading to higher levels of domestic terrorism (Piazza, 2017; Polo & Gleditsch, 2016; Walsh & Piazza, 2010). Avdan and Uzonyi (2017) show that mass killings by the government result in an increase in domestic terrorist attacks with acts of terrorism becoming more likely as a retaliatory action as they require less opportunity and organization than forming an anti-government insurgency. Asal, Phillips, Rethemeyer, Simonelli, and Young (2019) similarly argues that when states pursue coercive counterinsurgency, targeted groups of sufficient strength respond with increased levels of domestic terrorist attacks. Daxecker (2017) also demonstrates that torturing individuals can provoke an increase in domestic terrorism, but only when states commit “scarring” or visible torture that is able to be used by groups for recruitment or lead to retaliatory attacks. Violent crackdowns or indiscriminate violence by the government on civilian populations can also be strategically used by terrorist groups for recruiting efforts (Bueno de Mesquita, 2005). Bueno de Mesquita and Dickson (2007) even argue that terrorist groups commit attacks in order to exploit the expected repressive actions of the government in order to increase their support among a civilian population.

Within the conflict literature, however, scholars have increasingly looked beyond a unitary understanding of state action within intra-state conflict and focused on the role of PGMs. These groups are non-state actors not part of the official security forces but which governments leverage as part of their domestic security strategy, especially in committing violence against civilians or other human rights abuses for which governments hope to avoid responsibility. A number of PGMs have been criticized for engagement in various atrocities against civilians and government-directed mass killings, especially violence against minority ethnic or religious groups, which include the Janjaweed in Sudan’s Darfur region; the Interahamwe during the Rwanda genocide in the 1990s; and the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh in India (Anderson & Damle, 2018; Fletcher, 2007; Straus, 2006; Vasagar, 2004). These groups may be either formed with the support of the government or pre-exist as a group and subsequently co-opted by the government in support of domestic security efforts. Scholars have focused on a wide range of issues associated with PGMs, including group formation (Staniland, 2012); distinct group motivations (Schlichte, 2009); variation in PGMs’ interactions with rebels in civil war (Barter, 2013); and demobilization (Aliyev, 2019).

PGMs can increase the ability for a state to leverage violence domestically, especially when state capacity is limited (Ahram, 2016; Bates, 2008). PGMs embedded within local populations can also be a valuable source of intelligence and more effective means of counter-insurgency given their local knowledge of the conflict environment (Kalyvas 2006; Lyall, 2010). Changes on the government side, especially changes that weaken its ability to counter rebel violence, can heighten the reliance on PGMs. Tested in Myanmar’s historical use of PGMs, Eck (2015) argues that militaries have a higher likelihood of relying on PGMs following a military purge due to the negative impact on the military’s intelligence-gathering capabilities and organizational capacity. Biberman (2019) further argues that governments rely on PGMs when the balance of power within a civil conflict favours
the rebels or approximately equal between the state and rebel groups. Ambrozik (2019) argues that governments also rely on PGMs during battle phases when both military capacity and media coverage is low. Besides variation in state capacity, Staniland (2015) shows that variations in regime ideology, paired with considerations of strategic value, can define and shape the relationship between the state and pro-government militias. In states where leaders face threats from government actors such as the military, Ash (2016) argues that leaders will form linkages with PGMs for political survival, with leader-level factors driving militia relationships more than state level factors. Raleigh and Kishi (2020) find more broadly that political fragmentation at the national level is a better explanation for variation in the use of PGMs as a proxy for political competition.

Given the propensity for weaker states to rely on PGMs, Ahram (2014) and Mitchell, Carey, and Butler (2014) point to the principal-agent problem inherent in governments’ use of informal armed groups within their own borders. Governments are often unable to control PGMs that may have different goals than the government or use PGMs strategically to shift responsibility away from government forces. Therefore, the use of PGMs will increase the likelihood of repression or mass killings. Carey, Colaresi, and Mitchell (2015) also argue that the deliberate use of militias helps governments evade responsibility for violence against civilians and opposition groups. This is particularly prevalent for states receiving aid from democratic donors who monitor the conduct of government forces. Koren (2017) shows that PGMs can be used as better predictors of state-led mass killings, given militias’ ability to lower the potential economic and political costs for the government in pursuing such actions. In an examination of variation in the use of sexual violence in armed conflict, Cohen and Nordas (2015) argue the principal-agent framework is too limited given that states use PGMs as a complementary actor as opposed to a substitute for violence. Stanton (2015) similarly finds that PGMs and government forces often act in concert with one another, whether targeting or restraining from targeting civilians. This demonstrates that governments can and do exercise control over PGM behaviour. However, she finds that PGMs that recruit from the same constituency as the insurgents are more likely to refrain from targeting civilians.

While scholars have examined the influence of PGMs on civil conflict conditions and the levels of violence, the impact of PGMs on domestic terrorism has been overlooked. It is increasingly understood that there is an overlap between terrorism and civil conflict (Boulden, 2009; Crenshaw, 2017; Findley & Young, 2012; Fortna, 2015; Kalyvas, 2004; Moghadem, Berger, & Bellakova, 2014; Sambanis, 2008; Stanton, 2013). Many insurgent groups rely upon terrorist attacks as just one type of a range of conflict behaviours and tactics. As is further shown, civil conflict environments provide a range of opportunities for groups to commit violence, including the use of terrorist attacks. Therefore, to understand more fully the varying influences within intra-state conflict, it is necessary to examine jointly domestic terrorism and PGM activity and the various pathways in which PGMs can impact the levels of domestic terrorist attacks.

PGMs and domestic terrorism

Scholars have largely focused on two separate roles of PGMs in intra-state conflict. The first is as a force multiplier for state security capacity. They provide governments increased opportunity to commit violence domestically when there are tactical or strategic
limitations on the use of direct military force. These limitations include low state or military capacity or international and domestic political pressure preventing governments from using regular security forces against rebel groups (Ahram, 2016; Akins, 2019a; Eck, 2015; Lyall, 2010). The use of PGMs as a force multiplier for state military capacity can increase the likelihood of targeted groups resorting to terrorism, as opposed to groups pursuing traditional insurgent behaviour. Scholars have recognized that PGMs can be more effective at counterinsurgency efforts than the government’s regular security forces, especially within a minority or ethnic community in which PGMs have greater knowledge about the conflict environment or knowledge about the groups themselves when PGMs consist of defectors from the insurgency (Biberman, 2018; Lyall, 2010; Souilemanov, 2015; Souilemanov & Aliyev, 2016). Effective counterinsurgency can weaken a group’s ability to continue fighting on a traditional insurgent front. With terrorism requiring less organizational capacity and strength, groups can resort to increases in terrorist attacks stemming from losses incurred on the battlefield from well-armed and effective PGMs (Asal, Conrad, & White, 2014; Ghatak, 2018; Hultman, 2007; Stanton, 2013). In India’s counterinsurgency efforts in Indian-administered Kashmir during the 1990s, for instance, the government relied upon the Ikhwan-ul-Muslimeen, a PGM recruited from among former Kashmiri insurgents which was heavily criticized for human rights abuses and attacks against civilians (Akins, 2019a; Human Rights Watch, 1996). This group became the centrepiece of the government’s offensive counterinsurgency efforts, especially with regular military forces occupied with guarding the Line of Control against Pakistani incursions. Government officials acknowledged that the Ikhwan-ul-Muslimeen had been successful in targeting and disrupting insurgent activity, allowing local elections in 1996 to take place (Evans, 2000; Swami, 2003). The activities by this PGM provoked a series of terrorist attacks by insurgents but only after Ikhwan-ul-Muslimeen had achieved a certain level of success on the battlefield in challenging the insurgent groups (Swami, 2003).

The second use of PGMs is as a substitute force for engaging in violence against civilians and other human rights abuses. By delegating repression to PGMs, the government hopes to benefit from human rights abuses against civilians without implicating official security forces. Carey et al. (2015) argue that governments deliberately use PGMs in order to evade responsibility for violence against civilians or political opposition groups. This is prevalent for states receiving aid from democratic donors as the aid provides the international community increased oversight over the use of the assistance and the subsequent conduct of the government. As a result, individual leaders can be held accountable for human rights abuses by regular security forces. In these situations, governments delegate these acts of violence to PGMs with informal connections to the government, hiding the government’s role in the atrocities. Carey and Gonzalez (2020) demonstrate the use of PGMs for state repression against civilian populations can continue post-conflict. Koren (2017) shows that pro-government militias can be used as better predictors of state-led mass killings, given militias’ ability to lower the potential economic and political costs for the government in pursuing such actions without needing to occupy the attention and resources of the regular military forces. Comparing PGMs active in East Timor and Indonesia’s Aceh region, Barter (2013) further demonstrates that PGMs formed by the government are more likely to commit violence against civilians. In an examination of variation in the use of sexual violence in armed conflict, Cohen and Nordas (2015) argue that states delegate “shameful” actions to militias
which are deployed as complementary actors to official security forces. Ahram (2014) and Mitchell et al. (2014) further point to the principal-agent problem inherent in governments’ use of PGMs which can increase the levels of violence against civilians.

The human rights abuses perpetrated by PGMs mirrors government action which scholars have demonstrated can lead to an increase in domestic terrorism (Asal et al., 2019; Avdan & Uzonyi, 2017; Piazza, 2017; Polo & Gleditsch, 2016; Walsh & Piazza, 2010). The indiscriminate use of violence and human rights abuses against civilians has been recognized as a factor that increases the strength of insurgent and terrorist groups and increases their ability to commit attacks against the government as well as providing motivation for increases in violence (Bueno de Mesquita, 2005; Findley & Young, 2007; Toft & Zhukov, 2012). This can lead to the recruitment of a new fighters from the targeted population, increasing a group’s strength and ability to commit attacks, or lead to an escalation of retaliatory violence, especially revenge for the killing of fellow group members or civilians within their social base of support as individuals can use terrorist groups to pursue personal grievances (Ahmed, 2013; Aliyev, 2020; Crenshaw, 1981; Ratelle & Souleimanov, 2017; Souleimanov & Aliyev, 2015; Victoroff, 2005). A former Chechen militant explained, “In the beginning, no one was really willing to go to war … After all, we all had families, households, elderly parents to care for. But when your younger brother is killed in an air strike, what are you supposed to do? Stay home and watch TV? For us Chechens, there was no other choice but to take up arms and seek revenge” (Souleimanov & Aliyev, 2015, p. 174). In a psychological study of terrorist groups and their messaging, Grace (2018) finds that the narrative of revenge as a motivation for terrorist activity is a key aspect of many terrorist groups’ rhetoric and ideology, especially in recruitment efforts and attempts to gain broader support.

PGM actions can lead to retaliatory attacks against PGM members or their supporters within a civilian base, resulting in an increase in the levels of domestic terrorism within the state. In Chechnya, for example, operations by the kadyrovtsy units, Chechen PGMs recruited to “Chechenize” Russia’s counterinsurgency efforts, often provoked blood feuds against the targeted insurgents in their attacks, violence which could spill over to the insurgents’ relatives. These killings of suspected insurgents or even civilians were seen to be part of the initiation process, with kadyrovtsy members not allowed to conceal their identities ensuring loyalty to the PGM by burning bridges with their local community (Souleimanov, Aliyev, and Ratelle, 2018). Former kadyrovtsy members referred to the public knowledge of their involvement in anti-insurgent attacks as “the kiss of death” due to the inevitability of revenge attacks by the targeted clans or communities which subsequently led to lengthy blood feuds between Chechen clans and the kadyrovtsy, increasing the overall level of violence in the conflict (Souleimanov, Aliyev, and Ratelle, 2018, p. 630). Similarly, in the midst of civil conflict in Iraq following the emergence of ISIS, Shia PGMs have been accused of using the political instability as an opportunity to commit attacks against Sunni civilians. They saw these actions as retaliation for attacks against the Shia Iraqi population by ISIS with one Shia PGM leader specifically referencing “revenge for Speicher,” an incident in which hundreds of Shia soldiers were killed by ISIS forces after storming a Tikrit base in June 2014 (BBC News, 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2014, 2015). This helped to feed a deadly cycle of sectarian violence between the Shia militias and ISIS forces, with ISIS increasing their terrorist attacks against Shia communities as a result (Associated Press, 2017; Tawfeeq, 2018).
As seen with the use of anti-Taliban *lashkars* in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas, the Pakistani Taliban’s deadly and dramatic terrorist attacks against the leaders and members of the local PGMs among the Pashtun population, such as suicide bombings, were further meant to serve as a warning against anyone in the region considering joining them (Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, 2009). Following an incident in which the bodies of 28 members of an anti-Taliban lashkar were dumped on a road in South Waziristan Agency, it was recognized by a local elder that the action was intended “as a lesson” and “a message to the tribal area that whoever sides with the government will meet the same fate” (Perlez & Shah, 2008a). Governments efforts at encouraging the formation of lashkars found limited traction in areas, such as Waziristan, where attacks against tribal elders and lashkar members were the highest (Georgy, 2011). During the 2007 Surge in Iraq as well, U.S.-backed tribal PGMs as part of the “Sunni Awakening” led to an increase in reprisal attacks by al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). These terrorist attacks against the pro-government tribal forces and their leaders were meant to dissuade future recruits from joining the PGMs supported by the invading U.S. forces (Clayton & Thomson, 2014). The use and presence of PGMs, therefore, can raise the overall levels of violence within an intra-state conflict, providing increased opportunities or motivations for domestic terrorist attacks as PGM actions are understood to be part of the broader government security strategy against the terrorist or insurgent groups (Biberman, 2018; Cohen & Nordas, 2015; Stanton, 2015; Mason & Krane, 1989).

The activities of PGMs also can indirectly impact the levels of domestic terrorism by influencing the duration or reoccurrence of civil war, an environment that increases the likelihood of domestic terrorist attacks occurring. Through expanding the military capacity of the state, PGMs can increase the overall levels of violence and casualties in civil wars, which can lead to longer and more intense conflict (Abbs, Clayton, & Thomson, 2019; Aliyev, 2020). Aliyev (2020) argues that PGMs in an intra-state conflict, often with their own political agendas distinct from the state, transform the conflict into a multi-sided bargaining environment with PGMs acting as a veto player to stymie any attempts at peace negotiations, to which they are often not invited to join. This results in lengthier civil wars with PGMs seeing benefit from continuing to fight as well as being difficult to disarm. Longer lasting civil wars lead to lengthier conflict conditions in which domestic terrorism is more likely to occur. The presence of PGMs can also lead governments to be less likely to negotiate an end to a civil war as regular security forces bear less of the direct costs of the fighting which are shifted onto the PGMs, leading to further violence that could result in an increase in domestic terrorism. PGMs can also lead to conflict reoccurrence as they hope to gain benefits from re-igniting conflict by enriching the group without repercussions from the state, are dissatisfied with or not bound by the peace agreement, or have strong ideological motivations to continue fighting for a political goal despite efforts by the government to end the conflict (Steinert, Steinert, & Carey, 2019). These causal mechanisms demonstrate PGMs’ indirect influence on the levels of domestic terrorist attacks through their impact on civil conflict conditions, which has been demonstrated to lead to a higher likelihood of domestic terrorism (Sambanis, 2008; Stanton, 2013). This paper, however, focuses on the direct influence of PGMs on the levels of domestic terrorist attacks.

Considering these varying direct mechanisms connecting PGMs with domestic terrorism, this leads to the following hypotheses:
Hypothesis 1: PGM activity, ceteris paribus, results in an increased likelihood of domestic terrorist attacks.

Hypothesis 2: PGM activity that serves as a force multiplier for official security forces, ceteris paribus, results in an increased likelihood of domestic terrorist attacks.

Hypothesis 3: PGM activity that serve as a substitute for official security forces to commit human rights abuses, ceteris paribus, results in an increased likelihood of domestic terrorist attacks.

Research design

For the quantitative analysis, I use cross-sectional, time series models covering the years 1981–2007 for 162 states with state-year as the unit of analysis. The dependent variable is an annual count of domestic terrorist attacks from the Enders et al. (2011) dataset dividing the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) between international and domestic terrorism. In distinguishing between these two types of terrorist attacks, Enders et al. (2011) first exclude from the data any attack that does not meet all three inclusion criteria of the GTD. These criteria are: “(1) the attack is perpetrated for a political, socioeconomic, or religious motive; (2) the attack is intended to coerce, intimidate, or send a message to a wider audience than the immediate victim(s); and (3) the attack is beyond the boundaries set by international humanitarian law” (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 2015). This is a stricter coding protocol than GTD, which only requires an attack to meet two of the three listed criteria for inclusion in the data. Attacks that do not meet all three criteria are labelled “Doubt Terrorism Proper,” which covers incidents deemed to be part of traditional insurgency or rebellion and acts of criminality without a broader political purpose. Once these attacks are separated out from the data, terrorist attacks in which the nationality of the victims is different from the state in which the attack took place is coded as international terrorism. Attacks are also coded international terrorism if the target is diplomatic, an international NGO, a foreign business, or other institutions representing a foreign state. The remaining attacks are coded as domestic terrorism because “the venue country matches the nationality of the identified victims, and that there are no diplomatic or multilateral entities involved. Finally, these domestic terrorist incidents do not concern hostage events that included the interests from two or more countries” (Enders et al., 2011, p. 323). As an alternative measure of terrorist activity, I also estimate models with the annual count of casualties from domestic terrorist attacks as the dependent variable, using data from the Enders et al. (2011) dataset. As a robustness check, I also estimate models with domestic terrorist attacks against military targets as the dependent variable in order to more closely align the outcome of interest with state action (See Table A1 in Appendix).

As the dependent variable is an event count, I estimate the models using a negative binomial regression. While the dependent variable is an event count with excess zeros, suggesting a zero-inflated negative binomial (ZINB) regression, I have chosen instead to use a negative binomial regression for my primary models for a number of reasons. First,
the hypotheses focus on the frequency of domestic terrorist attacks, with the argument that the activity of PGMs increases their frequency, as opposed to the conditions within a state leading to the initial outbreak of domestic terrorism, which would theoretically point to a sub-category of “certain zeros” in the data for which a ZINB regression accounts. Secondly, Li (2005) and Avdan and Uzonyi (2017) suggest that the use of the two-step ZINB regression for modelling terrorist attacks without a strong theoretical reason for doing so is inadvisable. Third, as Uzonyi and Avdan (2017, p. 941) argue, it is a “contestable assumption” of the ZINB regression that the same set of variables used for the two regression steps explains both the outbreak and frequency of domestic terrorism. In Table A1 in the Appendix, I also report the results of the model estimated with a ZINB regression as a robustness check, along with models with random effects. To account for potential heteroscedasticity, I include robust standard errors clustered on state. As past terrorist attacks increase the likelihood of experiencing terrorist attacks in the future, I include a lagged dependent variable, lagged by one year, in each model estimated to address issues of autocorrelation (Li, 2005).

The key explanatory variables are binary measures of: (1) all PGM activity (coded 1 if a PGM is active in committing acts of violence in a given year); (2) PGMs targeting insurgents, rebel groups, and other combatants (coded 1 if PGMs attacked these targets in a given year); and (3) PGMs targeting civilians (coded 1 if PGMs attacked civilian targets in a given year). The explanatory variables are derived from Carey, Mitchell, and Lowe’s (2013) Pro-Government Militias Database (PGMD) which codes PGM activity during both civil war and civil peace from 1981 to 2007 and lists the type of targets the PGMs attack. The PGMD includes militia groups operating within their own borders according to the following criteria: “(1) is identified as pro-government or sponsored by the government (national or subnational); (2) is identified as not being part of the regular security forces; (3) is armed; and (4) has some level of organization.” While much of the literature on PGMs focuses on their role in civil war, PGMs exist inside and outside of civil war environments (Akins, 2019b; Raleigh & Kishi, 2020). By coding PGMs during periods of both civil war and civil peace, it provides a comprehensive overview of PGM activity, as the argument tested here exists within and outside the context of civil wars.

I focus on PGM activity, as opposed to merely PGM presence which Carey, Mitchell, and Lowe also code, due to the fact that I am interested in how the specific actions of PGMs influence an increase in domestic terrorist attacks, rather than explaining government support for PGMs which can include years in which the groups are active or merely present but inactive. I use the explanatory variables defined by the type of target attacked by PGMs as proxies for their role, whether PGMs are used as a force multiplier in government efforts to challenge rebel groups or as a substitute for regular security forces to commit human rights abuses against civilians. This is a means of testing the varying pathways that PGM activity can increase the likelihood of domestic terrorist attacks. These two variables can overlap with one another as the same PGM can fulfil both roles as a force multiplier and as a human right’s abuser. However, by focusing these measures on the type of PGM activity, rather than focusing only on PGM activities without consideration of different targets, I am able to focus on the different pathways of influence to provide a clearer understanding of the causal mechanisms within the analysis. Over concerns of endogeneity, I lag the explanatory variables by one year in order to capture the causal direction of the theory. In Table A1 in the Appendix, I also
estimate an instrumental variable probit model as a further robustness check for any issues of endogeneity with PGM activity as the explanatory variable, using a dummy variable for domestic terrorism within a given year as the dependent variable and a logged measure of annual precipitation as the instrument.

I employ a number of control variables that account for alternative explanations for domestic terrorism. To control for populations within a state against whom the government could be more inclined to use PGMs, I include a measure of states’ rural population as a proportion of the total state population (World Bank, 2017). I use a logged measure of GDP to control for state capacity and economic conditions and states’ Polity IV score to control for the population’s rights with respect to the system of government (Marshall & Jaggers, 2010; World Bank, 2017). The Polity IV score is an ordinal ranking from −10 (hereditary monarchy) to +10 (full democracy). I also include logged measures of states’ total area, total population, and annual military expenditures (SIPRI, 2017; World Bank, 2017). As a proxy for state repression, I use a dummy variable for whether a government has committed mass killings, lagged by one year (Avdan & Uzonyi, 2017). I also include a dummy variable for a War on Terror year, beginning in 2002, as it has been argued that this leads states to be more sensitive to the issue of terrorism and report more incidents as terrorist attacks, especially if they are attempting to gain US support (Bapat, 2011). I also use a dummy variable for an on-going civil war that resulted in at least 1,000 battle deaths, given the higher likelihood of terrorism occurring within civil war (Gleditsch, Wallensteen, Eriksson, Sollenberg, & Strand, 2002).

Results and analysis

Table 1 below displays the results of the primary models. All PGM activity has a positive and statistically significant relationship at the 99% confidence level with the annual count of domestic terrorist attacks. This provides empirical support for hypothesis 1, arguing that all PGM activity, ceteris paribus, increases the likelihood of domestic terrorism. PGM activity also has a positive and statistically significant relationship with the casualties from domestic terrorist attacks. PGM activity that serves as a force multiplier for targeting rebel groups also has a positive and statistically significant relationship at the 99.9% and 95% confidence level with the dependent variable, providing empirical support for hypothesis 2. PGM activity targeting civilians does not have a statistically significant relationship with levels of domestic terrorism when controlling for other PGM activity, demonstrating a lack of empirical support for hypothesis 3.

These findings are robust to an alternative measure of domestic terrorist activity – the annual count of casualties from domestic terrorist attacks – as demonstrated in Table 2 below. These results are also robust to varying model specifications, as shown in Table A1 in the Appendix.

In order to see the substantive effects of PGM activity on the levels of domestic terrorist attacks and casualties from the attacks, I calculate marginal effects for each explanatory variable. Figure 1 below shows the marginal effects of all PGM activity, holding other independent variables at their mean. All PGM activity is expected to lead to 3.5 domestic terrorist attacks at the 99.9% confidence level. The absence of all PGM activity, on the other hand, is expected to lead to 2.1 domestic terrorist attacks at the 99.9% confidence level, with slight overlap of the 95% confidence intervals by .06 percentage points.
Table 1. Annual count of domestic terrorist attacks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable Name</th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
<th>(3)</th>
<th>(4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PGM Activity</td>
<td>512***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(t-1)</td>
<td>(.155)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PGM Activity</td>
<td></td>
<td>.534***</td>
<td>.484*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(t-1) (Force Multiplier)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(.15)</td>
<td>(.189)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PGM Activity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.311</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(t-1) (Human Rights Abuser)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(.191)</td>
<td>(.243)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent Variable</td>
<td>.021***</td>
<td>.022***</td>
<td>.022***</td>
<td>.021***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(t-1)</td>
<td>(.005)</td>
<td>(.005)</td>
<td>(.005)</td>
<td>(.005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil War</td>
<td>1.316***</td>
<td>1.268***</td>
<td>1.401***</td>
<td>1.264***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(t-1)</td>
<td>(.177)</td>
<td>(.168)</td>
<td>(.186)</td>
<td>(.169)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass Killings</td>
<td>.932</td>
<td>-.333</td>
<td>-.199</td>
<td>-.325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(t-1)</td>
<td>(.557)</td>
<td>(.562)</td>
<td>(.605)</td>
<td>(.575)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polity IV</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(t-1)</td>
<td>(.005)</td>
<td>(.005)</td>
<td>(.005)</td>
<td>(.005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area (Logged)</td>
<td>-.126</td>
<td>-.116</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>-.115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(t-1)</td>
<td>(.072)</td>
<td>(.073)</td>
<td>(.074)</td>
<td>(.074)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Population</td>
<td>.356</td>
<td>.396</td>
<td>.351</td>
<td>.373</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Logged)</td>
<td>(.311)</td>
<td>(.321)</td>
<td>(.306)</td>
<td>(.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Rural Population</td>
<td>.011</td>
<td>-.023</td>
<td>.044</td>
<td>-.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Logged)</td>
<td>(.204)</td>
<td>(.216)</td>
<td>(.199)</td>
<td>(.205)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military Expenditures</td>
<td>.41***</td>
<td>.415***</td>
<td>.428***</td>
<td>.414***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Logged)</td>
<td>(.112)</td>
<td>(.111)</td>
<td>(.113)</td>
<td>(.112)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP (Logged)</td>
<td>-.234</td>
<td>-.256</td>
<td>-.257</td>
<td>-.249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(t-1)</td>
<td>(.134)</td>
<td>(.138)</td>
<td>(.133)</td>
<td>(.134)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War on Terror Year</td>
<td>-.958***</td>
<td>-.979***</td>
<td>-.942***</td>
<td>-.981***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(t-1)</td>
<td>(.15)</td>
<td>(.149)</td>
<td>(.148)</td>
<td>(.149)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-.84</td>
<td>-.533</td>
<td>-.83</td>
<td>-.593</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(t-1)</td>
<td>(2.269)</td>
<td>(2.274)</td>
<td>(2.30)</td>
<td>(2.271)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wald Chi-Squared</td>
<td>496.65***</td>
<td>497.46***</td>
<td>519.51***</td>
<td>505.65***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>3,098</td>
<td>3,098</td>
<td>3,098</td>
<td>3,098</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001; Robust standard errors clustered on country in parentheses

Figure 2 below displays the marginal effects of all PGM activity on the casualties of domestic terrorism, holding other independent variables at their means. All PGM activity is expected to result in 1.9 casualties from domestic terrorist attacks at the 99.9% confidence level. An absence of their activity is expected to result in .9 casualties from domestic terrorist attacks at the 99.9% confidence level, without overlap of the 95% confidence intervals. This provides some support for hypothesis 1 which argues that PGM activity increases the likelihood of domestic terrorism.

Figure 3 below displays the marginal effects of PGM activity that targets rebel groups, insurgents, and other combatants on the level of domestic terrorism, holding other independent variables at their means. PGM activity as a force multiplier is expected to result in 3.7 domestic terrorist attacks at the 99.9% confidence level. An absence of this activity is expected to result in 2.2 domestic terrorist attacks, without overlap of the 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 4 shows the marginal effects of PGM activity as a force multiplier on the level of casualties from domestic terrorism, holding other independent variables at their means. PGM activity as a force multiplier is expected to result in 1.9 casualties from domestic terrorist attacks at the 99.9% confidence level. Its absence will result in 1.0 casualties, without overlap of the 95% confidence intervals. This provides further empirical support for hypothesis 2 which argues that PGM activity that serves as a force multiplier for official security forces will increase the likelihood of domestic terrorist attacks.
Figures 5 and 6 below demonstrate the marginal effects of PGM activity that targets civilians on the level of domestic terrorist attacks and casualties from domestic terrorism, holding other independent variables at their means. The 95% confidence intervals
between the presence and absence of this type of PGM activity overlap with one another, demonstrating that PGM activity that targets civilians does not have a significant impact on the level of domestic terrorism. The results, therefore, do not provide empirical support to hypothesis 3.

The results of the control variables also displayed significant results as expected from existing arguments explaining the outbreak or frequency of domestic terrorism. The presence of an on-going civil war is positive and statistically significant at the 99.9% confidence level in all models estimated, supporting previous arguments that domestic terrorism is more likely to occur within the context of civil war. The logged measure of military expenditures was also positive and statistically significant, adding further weight to the argument that increased levels of violence by the government can lead to higher

Figure 2. Marginal effects on domestic terrorism casualties.

Figure 3. Marginal effects on domestic terrorism.
levels of domestic terrorism. Surprisingly, however, the War on Terror dummy variable was negative and statistically significant at the 99.9% confidence level in all of the models estimated. This is evidence to the contrary that the War on Terror leads states to over-report the numbers of any terrorist attacks within their borders (Bapat, 2011). This finding further supports the perspective that domestic terrorism is connected to actions of the government and other non-state actors rather than conditions within the state that provide groups the opportunity to commit domestic terrorist attacks.

Figure 4. Marginal effects on domestic terrorism casualties.

Figure 5. Marginal effects on domestic terrorism.
Conclusion

Many studies of domestic terrorism have considered the actions of the government as an explanation for the outbreak and frequency of domestic terrorist attacks (Asal et al., 2019; Avdan & Uzonyi, 2017; Daxecker, 2017; Piazza, 2017; Polo & Gleditsch, 2016; Walsh & Piazza, 2010). As the above analysis demonstrates, it is equally important to consider the actions of non-state actors within a state for a more comprehensive understanding of domestic terrorism and its causal factors. Governments have increasingly relied on PGMs as part of their domestic security strategy for a variety of reasons connected to issues of low state capacity, strategic limits on the use of regular military force, or to avoid responsibility for human rights abuses (Biberman, 2018; Carey et al., 2015; Koren, 2017; Lyall, 2010; Souilemanov, 2015; Souilemanov & Aliyev, 2016). PGMs increase a state’s ability and opportunity to commit violence, mirroring state violence within the context of civil conflict through two different pathways – as a force multiplier or as human rights abusers.

As this analysis demonstrates, PGM activity that serves as a force multiplier for regular security forces to target insurgent and rebel groups increases the likelihood of domestic terrorist attacks. PGMs increase a government’s ability to target insurgent groups which degrades their organizational capabilities to fight against government forces which increases the likelihood that the groups will rely on terrorist attacks. On the other hand, this analysis does not provide support to the argument that PGM activity that targets civilians leads to an increase in domestic terrorist attacks. These findings are robust to alternative model specifications. Examining only the direct actions of the government offers an incomplete understanding of the factors that can increase the likelihood of domestic terrorism. By looking beyond a unitary view of the state within intra-state conflict, it helps to provide a more complete understanding of internal conflict and security dynamics that can lead to an increased likelihood of domestic terrorist attacks.

Figure 6. Marginal effects on domestic terrorism casualties.
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Harrison Akins is a political scientist and writer living in Washington, DC. His research focuses on intra-state conflict, South Asian politics, and U.S. foreign policy. He received his PhD in political science, with concentrations in international relations and public policy, from the University of Tennessee-Knoxville.

References


## Appendix

Table A1. Annual count of domestic terrorist attacks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable Name</th>
<th>Zero-Inflated NBREG</th>
<th>NBREG w/ Random Effects</th>
<th>Terrorist Attacks on Military</th>
<th>IIVPROBIT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(9)</td>
<td>(10)</td>
<td>(11)</td>
<td>(12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All PGM Activity(_{t-1})</td>
<td>.54*** (.145)</td>
<td>.414*** (.071)</td>
<td>1.343*** (.237)</td>
<td>2.283* (.131)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PGM Activity (Force Multiplier)(_{t-1})</td>
<td>.07 (.174)</td>
<td>.378*** (.088)</td>
<td>1.081*** (.261)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PGM Activity (Human Rights Abuser)(_{t-1})</td>
<td>.139 (.244)</td>
<td>.06 (.09)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent Variable(_{t-1})</td>
<td>.015*** (.003)</td>
<td>.003*** (.000)</td>
<td>.03*** (.007)</td>
<td>.279*** (.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil War</td>
<td>.997*** (.474)</td>
<td>.882*** (.144)</td>
<td>1.724*** (.72)</td>
<td>.619*** (.39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass Killings(_{t-1})</td>
<td>-.533 (.474)</td>
<td>-.393** (.144)</td>
<td>-.674 (.72)</td>
<td>-.896 (.225)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polity IV</td>
<td>.001 (.004)</td>
<td>.005*** (.002)</td>
<td>.001 (.005)</td>
<td>.006 (.003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area (Logged)</td>
<td>-.022 (.076)</td>
<td>-.031 (.034)</td>
<td>-.004 (.099)</td>
<td>-.036 (.66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Population (Logged)</td>
<td>-.243 (.346)</td>
<td>.10 (.147)</td>
<td>.399 (.449)</td>
<td>-.066 (.233)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Rural Population (Logged)</td>
<td>.043 (.251)</td>
<td>.123 (.098)</td>
<td>-.352 (.304)</td>
<td>-.04 (.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military Expenditures (Logged)</td>
<td>.298*** (.243)</td>
<td>.223*** (.098)</td>
<td>.483*** (.304)</td>
<td>.036 (.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP (Logged)</td>
<td>-.089 (.138)</td>
<td>.07 (.14)</td>
<td>-.192 (.197)</td>
<td>-.084 (.107)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War on Terror Year</td>
<td>-.485*** (.131)</td>
<td>-.504*** (.136)</td>
<td>-.543*** (.06)</td>
<td>-.406*** (.102)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.794 (2.098)</td>
<td>1.012 (2.13)</td>
<td>-1.987** (.911)</td>
<td>-1.201 (.102)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wald Chi-Squared</td>
<td>292.09***</td>
<td>333.81***</td>
<td>848.15***</td>
<td>314.05***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>2,982</td>
<td>3,098</td>
<td>3,098</td>
<td>3,098</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05  **p<.01  ***p<.001; Robust standard errors clustered on country in parentheses