

**Terrorism and Institutional Legitimacy:
When do ordinary Citizens Support Extraordinary Violence?**

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Abstract

A growing body of criminological research suggests that attitudes toward crime are closely related to attitudes toward larger social institutions: when citizens lose trust in institutions such as justice and government they become more likely to tolerate or even support criminal behavior. Researchers interested in terrorism have made related claims about the effects of counter terrorist strategies on the popular legitimacy of regimes. Prior research suggests that terrorists frequently rely on the response of governments to mobilize the sympathies of would-be supporters. To the extent that government-based counter terrorist strategies outrage participants or energize a base of potential supporters, such strategies may increase the likelihood of further terrorist strikes. This reasoning has led some to argue that responses to terrorism can be more dangerous than terrorism itself. In fact, several commentators have argued that Osama bin Laden's decision to support the September 11 attacks was animated in part by the belief that American retaliation would inevitably kill innocents, demonstrate the extent of American hatred towards Muslims, and thereby erode the international legitimacy of the United States. Despite the general interest in the connections between legitimacy and attitudes toward terrorism, there has thus far been little research on whether citizens are more likely to support terrorist activity when they have little trust in their government. In this paper, we address this question using international survey data collected in seven countries with large Islamic populations. As the influence and power of terrorist organizations is closely related to their base of popular support, it becomes imperative for researchers to understand when and why ordinary citizens come to tolerate, condone or support terrorist behavior.