Pro-government Militias, Plausible Deniability and Public Opinion: Testing the Microfoundations

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Notes in red are specific comments for my reviewers at the conference.

A previous version of this project was drafted and run Summer 2024. Based on various feedback, I redesigned the survey instrument. The previous write-up can be found here. The preregistration for this previous survey run can be accessed here.

Feel free to reach out via email.

Abstract

Existing work in political science has argued that states use pro-government militias in order to achieve plausible deniability. When states fear international punishment but are intent on abusing their citizenry, they delegate unsavory violence to sub-state militias in order to create uncertainty about the government's involvement and ultimately to avoid international punishment. This project examines the micro-processes underlying plausible deniability. Do observers assign less blame to governments that delegate violence to militias instead of using the military? Does this delegation make denials of involvement more plausible? Does delegating violence lead observers to express more support (oppose punishments) for that government.

To answer these questions, I propose a 4×1 survey experiment in which individuals assess government blame across four different violence delegation scenarios followed by a general denial of involvement. I ask respondents to evaluate various dimensions of government blame for the violence, to assess the plausibility of the government's denial of involvement, and to indicate their preferred international response to the violence. Each of these outcomes reflects the extent to which delegating violence to militias buys states plausible deniability and enables them to avoid being held accountable for violence. This project aims to uncover the micro-foundations of an established theory in international relations. Future work should consider different contexts and the relatively persuasiveness of other attempts at avoiding blame.

1 Introduction

Understanding why and when states use pro-government militias has been a critically important question in political science. Militias such as the Arkan Tigers, the Interhamwe, and the Janjaweed have been key drivers of genocidal violence in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Darfur. In other places, militia usage has been connected to increased civilian deaths (Stanton 2015) and widespread human rights abuses (Mitchell, Carey, and Butler 2014). Given their violent track record, one of the primary explanations for why state's collaborate with militias is explicitly to commit egregious violence while enabling the state to avoid accountability for the atrocities. The nominal independence of the militia helps the state deny involvement in the violence and appeal to agency slack, shifting blame to the militia itself. In short, militias provide states plausible deniability (Carey, Colaresi, and Mitchell 2015).

Despite the intuitive appeal of this explanation, the empirical record for plausible deniability is mixed. Certainly in some cases, leaders have used militias to avoid international convictions for mass atrocities. Serbian leaders in the 1990s largely escaped criminal conviction for the Bosnian genocide because the court could not establish the leaders' direct involvement in the militia violence. However, other leaders have successfully avoided conviction for the same reason even though violence was committed by their own soldiers.[1] Furthermore, even though leaders may evade legal punishments, they face various other repercussions for their militias' abuses. Despite being acquitted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity (BBC 2021), Laurent Gbagbo of Cote d'Ivoire faced sanctions and forcible removal from power by international actors for his militia-led attempt at overturning the 2010 election (NPR 2011). The military government of Indonesia faced aid suspensions for the numerous human rights abuses committed by government formed militias (Marshall, Lamb, and Goldman 1999). Leaders may avoid some punishments by using militias for violence, but these examples demonstrate that it is unclear whether leaders'

1. Jean Pierre Bemba of the Democratic Republic of Congo had his ICC conviction overturned based on a lack of evidence demonstrating that he directly coordinated the violence committed by his own men. He successfully appealed that he could not adequately monitor and restrain his soldiers (Ba 2018).

denials are seen as more plausible or whether leaders actually fare better when they delegate violence to militias.

In this paper, I aim test how observers (mis-)assign blame for delegated political violence. Do governments that delegate violence to militias actually receive less blame than governments that use the military? Does this delegation make the government's denial of involvement more plausible? Does using militias render international observers more willing to support (less willing to punish) the government?

In order to answer these questions, I propose a 4×1 repeated measures survey experiment in which respondents evaluate foreign government blameworthiness across four violence delegation scenarios. In each case, the government denies involvement. I query respondents on three key outcomes. First, I ask respondents to assign blame to the foreign government. I draw upon research in psychology to motivate follow-up questions on the various considerations that inform these blame evaluations. I then ask respondents to evaluate the plausibility of the government's denial of involvement. I end with a series of questions about the respondents' preferred international response to the events and punishments for the government. These outcomes provide a lens through which we can investigate the causal effect of delegating violence to militias on perceptions of government responsibility and deservingness of punishment.

This project aims to uncover the the micro-processes enabling states to use militias in order to avoid international punishment. Existing research on plausible deniability has provided indirect evidence to support the theory (Carey, Colaresi, and Mitchell 2015; DiBlasi 2020) whereas this project investigates the direct effect of delegating violence to militias on individual judgments and attitudes. This project is a critical test of this established theory.

The results of the experiment will also speak more generally to how people assign blame for organized political violence. Although this project specifically investigates US citizens' responses to militia violence another country, the specific outcomes in the experiment will provide insight into how citizens reason about general government responsibility to monitor

and control armed political groups. Given the growing specter of organized political violence in the US and western Europe, it is critically important to understand citizens' preferences and thought processes about the government's responsibility for and involvement with violent armed groups.

Finally, this project will contribute to research on effective accountability mechanisms and compliance with international norms and laws. In order to better hold abusive leaders accountable, we should understand how leaders attempt to skirt accountability or create uncertainty about their responsibility. This information can help policy-makers craft more effective strategies to hold leaders accountable for abuse.

Future work may consider different factors that influence whether states are blamed and punished for militia violence. This project specifically focuses on government denials; however, states may attempt to justify their decision to use militias by highlighting the offsetting benefits of militia activity. Other contextual factors like an ongoing civil war might also influence observers' willingness to blame the government for militia abuses. Understanding the effect of each of these factors will provide a more complete picture of when and how states avoid accountability for militia violence.

2 Theory and Expectations

Pro-government militias (PGMs) are perhaps one of the most widespread yet under-recognized political actors across the globe. In the time period between 1981 and 2014, over 90 states, both weak and strong, democracies and autocracies, have collaborated with a PGM at some point. Four attributes distinguish PGMs from other armed militias or special military units. Pro-government militias are (1) organized (2) armed groups that are (3) supported or sponsored by the incumbent government yet (4) fall outside of the official military apparatus (Carey, Mitchell, and Lowe 2013). Existing research has demonstrated that militias correlate with numerous unsavory outcomes including deepened ethnic cleavages (Abbs, Clayton,

and Thomson 2020), human rights abuses (Mitchell, Carey, and Butler 2014), more frequent domestic terrorism (Akins 2021), longer and recurrent civil wars (Aliyev 2020; Steinert, Steinert, and Carey 2019), higher civilian death tolls (Stanton 2015), and strategic mass killings (Koren 2017). Indeed militias were instrumental in genocides in Rwanda, Serbia, and Sudan. Even today, powerful government sponsored militias like the Wagner Group (Russia), the Rapid Support Forces (formerly Janjaweed, Sudan), and the Revolutionary Guard (Iran) critically influence politics both domestically and internationally. Given this laundry list of negative consequences of PGMs and their continued relevance in international affairs, it is critically important to understand when and why governments collaborate with these groups.

2.1 Unpacking Plausible Deniability

One of the predominant theories of a state's motivation to use PGMs focuses on the plausible deniability afforded by militia usage (Carey, Colaresi, and Mitchell 2015, 2016). States delegate unsavory violence to sub-state militias to generate uncertainty about the government's involvement. If and when international observers question the government about the violence, the government can appeal to agency slack, claiming that the militia acted independently and that the government could not control the armed group. Ultimately, delegating violence to militias and the subsequently plausible denial should enable governments and leaders to avoid international punishment, maintain access to foreign aid (Carey, Colaresi, and Mitchell 2015), and preserve a positive international reputation (DiBlasi 2020).

2.1.1 Information

In the original argument, the plausibility of the government's denial hinges on the information connecting the government to the militia (Carey, Colaresi, and Mitchell 2015). When very little evidence links the government to the militia, the state can more easily deny involvement with the group. As the government's connection to the militia becomes more clear, however,

the government is less able to escape blame for the PGM's actions.

Carey and coauthors (2015) emphasize the formality of the state-PGM relationship as a key reflection of this information. States that want to generate uncertainty about their involvement in violence are more likely to rely on *informal* militias, characterized by a lack of official legal recognition, than *semi-official* militias, which have official legal permission to operate.

Extending this logic, states should have the hardest time avoiding blame when the state military commits egregious violence. The direct chain of command connecting leaders to the military should make any denial of involvement implausible. Nevertheless, when the military commits atrocities, leaders still appeal to agency slack, claiming that they could not adequately monitor and restrain abusive soldiers. In the aftermath of the Abu Ghraib prison torture scandal, US leaders highlighted their inability control soldiers in a prison in Iraq and largely evaded negative repercussions (Mitchell 2012). Jean Pierre Bemba, a former vice president of the DRC, had his ICC conviction for crimes against humanity overturned based on evidence that he could not sufficiently monitor his soldiers (Ba 2018). In this sense, delegating violence to militias may not be strictly required for states to successfully deny involvement, but in theory, the institutional separation of the government from the militia enhances the plausibility of the government's denial.

2.1.2 Punishment

States attempt to enhance the plausibility of their denials in order to avoid international punishments. Without any potential repercussions for abusing its citizens, state leaders would not bother collaborating with militias and would simply use the official military for repression. Naturally, the first line of accountability for these abusive governments is citizens in the foreign country. Indeed, Carey et al. (2015) argue that weak democracies are more likely to use PGMs since they should face an electoral backlash if they are caught. However, states also face numerous international punishments if they are caught violating human

rights.

In the most extreme cases, state leaders may be arrested and put on trial for abusing human rights. International prosecution has become an increasingly common response to abusive state and militia leaders and has been shown to effectively promote human rights compliance (Simmons 2009). Delegating egregious violence to militias aims to cast doubt on the state's legal culpability for the abuse in the minds of international prosecutors and judges—the primary audience responsible for this punishment. Given the high evidentiary standard required for a conviction, this delegation appears relatively effective at protecting leaders. As mentioned in the introduction, many leaders have been acquitted for crimes committed by militias based on insufficient evidence demonstrating the leader's direct involvement.

This high standard of proof makes any conviction exceedingly difficult to uphold; however. For this reason, international prosecutions are generally reserved for cases of extreme violence. Nevertheless, abusive governments also face potential punishments from other states. These punishments may include suspensions of foreign aid, sanctions, naming-and-shaming, and even direct military intervention. In their analysis, Carey and coauthors (2015) operationalize the need for deniability with a measure of foreign aid dependence, since states that depend on foreign aid stand to lose more from being caught collaborating with PGMs. They find, indeed, that foreign aid dependence strongly correlates with PGM usage. Diblasi (2020) found that states are more likely to foster new PGM relationships after being named and shamed for abuse in international forums. This evidence suggests that states use militias to protect their access to aid and maintain a positive international reputation.

In attempting to evade these interstate punishments, abusive governments aim to persuade other state leaders *and* their citizens of the government's innocence—the other two audiences for militia usage. The most prolific purveyors of foreign aid are democracies, and although leaders decide policy, public opinion shapes these decisions. Research on the second face of international politics has clearly shown that leaders account for public opinion when

making foreign policy (Milner and Tingley 2015). Even though many voters may care less about foreign policy, it still influences voter behavior (Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida 1989; Gelpi, Reifler, and Feaver 2007; Tomz, Weeks, and Yarhi-Milo 2020; Heinrich, Kobayashi, and Long 2018). Furthermore, general sentiment, rather than a widespread public outcry, may be sufficient to influence foreign policy makers since elected officials are careful to consider any downstream electoral repercussions for current decisions (Mayhew 2004).

Beyond their indirect influence on policy through decision-makers, public sentiment may be directly consequential for foreign states, too. General affect toward a country seriously influences that country's attractiveness for trade, investment, and tourism (Wang 2006). Numerous states have invested significant resources in public diplomacy campaigns in the US, motivated by the desire to increase positive feelings and facilitate deeper cooperation between the foreign country and the US (Hartig 2016; Goldsmith, Horiuchi, and Matush 2021; Bry 2017).

The relative frequency of interstate punishments suggests that delegating violence to militias is less persuasive among state leaders and foreign citizens. The US suspended aid to leaders like Gbagbo in Cote d'Ivoire and Habibie in Indonesia despite the fact that these leaders used militias. However, there are cases where states maintained access to aid and a positive reputation despite uncontrolled militia violence. In the early 2000s, the newly established democratic government of Nigeria was struggling to provide security and prevent theft in rural markets. In response, civilians formed a vigilante group known as the Bakassi Boys to find and punish thieves. The group quickly devolved into abusive behavior, arbitrarily detaining, torturing, and executing suspected thieves (Human Rights Watch 2002). Despite negative international press coverage of the group, the government of Nigeria avoided punishment for this violence. In fact, the US actually increased aid to Nigeria in the years following the abuse by Bakassi. These examples further illustrate states' mixed success using militias to avoid interstate punishments.

2.2 Theoretical Expectations

The discussion so far has outlined an established theory about how states use militias to avoid accountability for violence, highlighting the role of information and the punishments that states face if they are blamed for militia abuse. I have attempted to demonstrate that the empirical record in support of this theory is mixed, underscoring the need for new, direct evidence on the effects of militia-use on blame assessments and punishment likelihood.

Given the preceding discussion, if plausible deniability operates as theorized then governments should expect three key reactions among international observers when governments delegate violence to militias. First, the state should receive less blame for the violence when they delegate that violence to militias rather than using the state military. Second, the government's denial of involvement in the militia violence should also be viewed as more plausible than a denial of involvement in military violence.

> **H1 Government Blame:** When violence is committed by a pro-government militia instead of the state military, the government should receive less blame for the violence.
>
> **H2 Denial Plausibility:** When violence is committed by a pro-government militia instead of the state military, the government's denial of involvement should be seen as more plausible.

These two hypotheses are direct predictions of the theory. However, the previous discussion also highlighted the state's desire to maintain a positive reputation and avoid international punishments when using militias. The government's perceived level of blame should directly relate to punishment likelihood, but it may be completely reasonable for observers to simultaneously blame yet continue to support positive engagement with government or, alternatively, to absolve the government of blame yet eschew continued support. In order for states to truly benefit from plausible deniability, they should experience greater support and fewer punishments when they delegate violence to militias.

H3 Government Support: When violence is committed by pro-government militias instead of the state military, observers should express more support (oppose punishments) for the government.

Each of these hypotheses intends to test a different dimension of plausible deniability theory. Delegating violence should shift perceptions about who is to blame–the first hypothesis. Key in this process is a denial of involvement. As the name of the theory suggests, delegating violence to PGMs should make this denial more plausible–the second hypothesis. Finally, it is important to establish that delegating violence also influences the probability that states are punished.

3 Experiment

In order to test my three hypotheses, I propose a 4×1 survey experiment on a sample of US citizens. I plan to recruit roughly 1,500 participants[2] through Connect by CloudResearch. Connect is an opt-in online survey vendor similar to Amazon's MTurk, but participants on Connect have been shown to pay closer attention and provide higher quality responses than respondents on MTurk (Stagnaro et al. 2024).

The full survey flow chart can been seen in Figure 1. The full survey draft can be found in the Appendix. I will begin the survey with a short battery of demographic questions including partisanship. After a short attention check question, I will ask respondents their beliefs about governments' propensity to collaborate with armed groups. Some participants may be pre-disposed to blame governments for militia violence, therefore it will be important to control for this in models with government blame as the outcome.

I will then present respondents with a short descriptive vignette about a hypothetical country—Centralia. In the vignette, I describe Centralia as a democracy that has successfully

2. I have not yet had time to complete a power analysis for this survey run. Using repeated measures where possible and including relatively few treatment conditions should significantly improve my statistical power. I used this many respondents in the previous run of this experiment, so I anticipate a similar number of participants should suffice for this design.

recovered from a history of violence between its two primary ethnic groups, northerners and southerners. I highlight that the president of Centralia is supported primarily by southerners but nominally governs on behalf of all citizens. These details roughly approximate the archetypal PGM-collaborating state. The full descriptive vignette can be read in the survey draft in the Appendix.

I have chosen to use a hypothetical country to avoid racial or ethnic stereotypes influencing respondent's perceptions about the government's agency, corruption or capability to control violence.[3] Research on survey methodology has shown that respondents are capable of reasoning about abstract entities and that using hypothetical countries does not significantly influence treatment effects (Brutger et al. 2023).

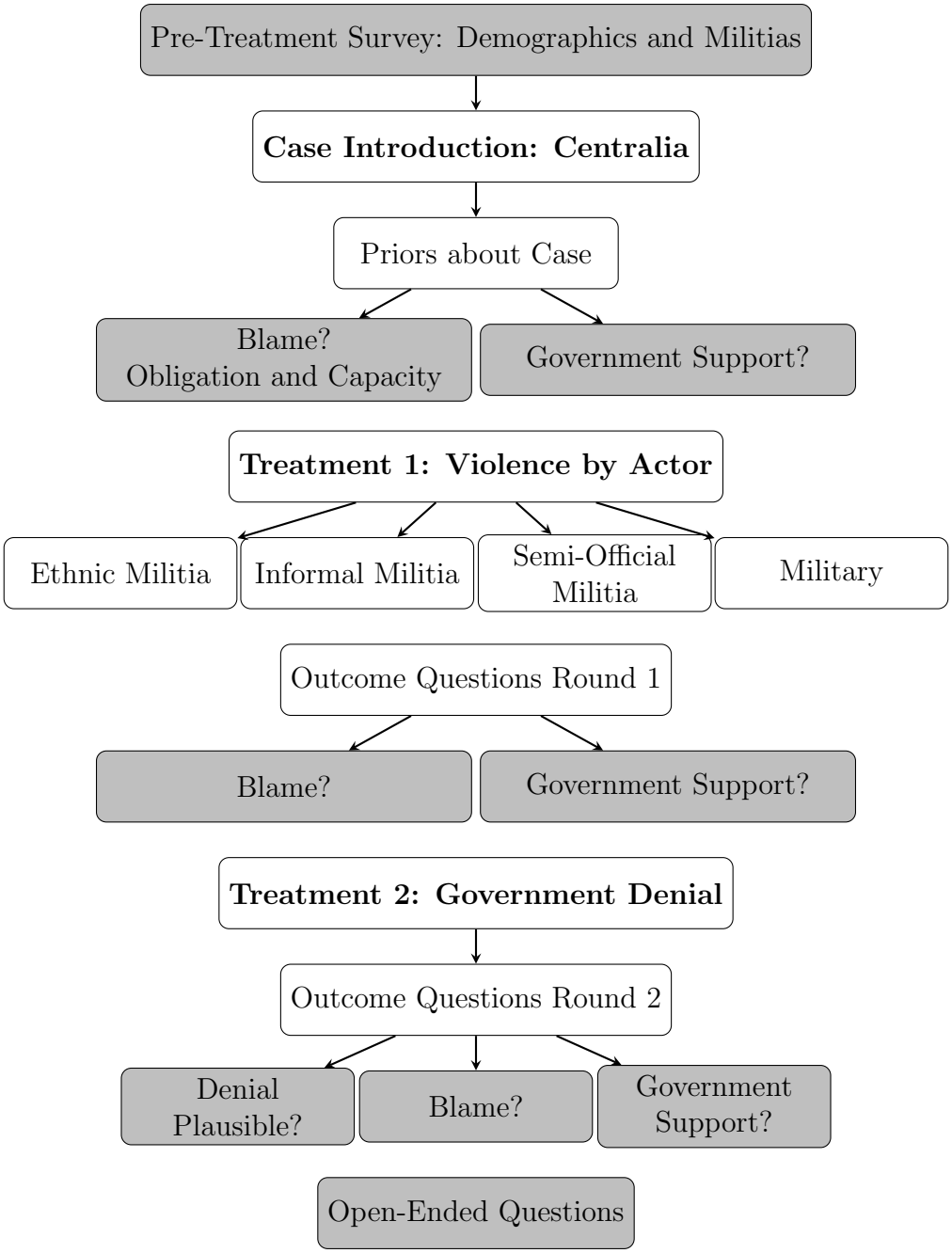
After presenting respondents with this descriptive vignette, I will ask two questions about the government's obligation to prevent violence and their capacity to do so. Responses to these questions will be used as controls in models of government blame (H1) and denial plausibility (H2). I will provide greater justification for these measures in the following section on outcomes for H1 Government Blame.

I plan to use repeated measures in order to test H3 Government Support. As I will discuss in greater detail in the following section about H3, I ask questions about general approval of the Centralian government, support for generally positive or negative engagement with Centralia, and specific international responses to the country. I have worded these questions generally so that I can ask respondents before presenting any information about violence. These pre-treatment responses provide a direct baseline of support for punishment, enabling me to more efficiently estimate the effect of delegation.

After collecting these final pre-treatment questions, respondents will read a short news story about a week-long campaign of violence against Northern communities in Centralia.

3. In the previous run of this experiment, I randomized the setting of the violence between four African countries. When I asked respondents about their preferred reactions to the violence, I found near uniform opposition to continued positive engagement (i.e. continued foreign aid). After examining these results and receiving feedback from multiple sources, it seems that respondents generally opposed continued aid to African countries based on stereotypes that the leaders were corrupt and that the aid would not be used for its intended purposes.

Figure 1: Survey flow chart. Bold text denotes vignettes for respondents to read. Gray-filled boxes are responses.



After describing the violence, respondents will receive the first treatment—a short paragraph about the perpetrator of the violence. Respondents will be randomly assigned to one of four conditions:

1. **Independent Ethnic Militia**

   The attacks were allegedly carried out by a southern ethnic armed group. The group was originally involved in providing rural security in southern areas during the civil war in the 1990s.

2. **Informal Militia**

   The attacks were allegedly carried out by a southern ethnic armed group. The group was originally involved in providing rural security in southern areas during the civil war in the 1990s.

   There have been rumors that the group is connected to the president's family; however, journalists were unable to find direct evidence that the government supports this group.

3. **Semi-Official Militia**

   The perpetrators of the violence were identified as members of a government-formed armed group composed predominantly of southerners. The government recruited the armed group to assist with rural security. The group has received formal training and funding from the government but is not part of the official military.

4. **Official State Military**

   Witnesses have attributed the violence to Centralia's official state military. The military had been stationed in northern regions as part of its broader security operations across the country.

After reading the vignette about the violence and actor, I will present respondents with the first round of post-treatment questions about government blame and the second round

of questions about support for the government. Following these questions, respondents will read the second treatment: a government denial of involvement with the violence.

> *In a press conference, the president of Centralia firmly denied any involvement in the violence. "The government of Centralia is committed to the safety and well-being of all its citizens, regardless of ethnicity," the president stated. "Those responsible for these acts do not represent the government or its interests." No further comments were provided.*

The survey will conclude with another round of questions about government blame, a question about the plausibility of this denial, and the final round of questions about government support. At the very end, I intend to include a few open-ended questions about the respondents' reasoning processes about government blame. I will ask specifically about the components of blame and whether the respondent envisioned some other response to the country.

3.1 Outcomes

This survey design should enable me to fruitfully explore how observers interpret and react to international violence. In the theory section, I forward three hypotheses about these reactions. This section details the specific outcome questions I will use to evaluate these hypotheses.

3.1.1 H1 Blame

The first hypothesis concerns the Centralian government's blameworthiness for the violence. Blame, however, is a complex concept, building upon numerous contextual considerations. To ensure that I capture relevant dimensions of blame in my outcome questions, I draw upon literature in psychology. Early research focused on how considerations of foresight, intention, motivation, and mitigating circumstances might all contribute to blame assessments

(Alicke 2000). More recently, Malle, Guglielmo, and Monroe (2014) presented one of the predominant theories of blame attribution known as a the path model of blame.

The path model begins with some harmful event and some agent. Upon perceiving the event, observers first consider the agent's *causality* and *intention*. Did the agent do something to cause the negative outcome? Did the agent intend for harm to occur? In the context of organized political violence, government leaders rarely commit violence themselves, thus, when querying respondents about government causality, I will ask both about direct and indirect causation—whether the government directly ordered the attack and/ or indirectly caused that attack by failing to control the armed actor.

In the context of intentional action, observers determine the agent's blameworthiness based on these considerations of causality and intentionality. When the negative outcome is seen as unintentional, however, two additional considerations influence whether an observer will blame the agent for the negative outcome. First, observers consider wether the agent has an *obligation* to prevent the negative outcome. Second, they consider the agent's *capacity* to have prevented the negative outcome.

Based on previous research, most people believe that governments are obliged to prevent excessive violence in their country.[4] Given general support for obligation, the final consideration of agent blame relies on an estimate of the agent's capacity. If observers think that the state is so weak that it cannot control violence, then observers may absolve the government of blame. Perhaps, there was simply nothing that the government could have done to prevent the bad outcome.

Taken together, in delegating violence to PGMs, foreign states attempt to shift perceptions of their role in *causing* the violence, their *intentions*, and their *capacity* to prevent the violence. Each of these considerations will ultimately shape the level of blame assigned to

4. In the previous run of my survey, one of my outcome questions concerned whether governments have an obligation to prevent future violent attacks on minority communities. I found overwhelming support for this statement, regardless of the agent committing the violence. I will include a similar question in the government blame section of the post-case-introduction questions. I will present the responses to this question in this section.

foreign leaders.

With this model in hand, I developed a series of questions aimed at gauging respondents' beliefs about each of these considerations. I begin with a general question asking respondents to asses how much the government is the blame for the violence. I then ask whether the government caused the violence by either directly ordering it or intentionally failing to intervene. I also ask respondents whether they believe that the government intended for the violence to occur and whether the armed actor had private motivations to commit the violence. I end the question battery with a question about the government's ability to have prevented the negative outcome and and one about whether the government possesses enough resources to prevent similar attacks in the future.

For analysis, I plan to use both the general assessment of blame and an index of blame questions as outcomes to evaluate H1 Blame. I will create the index by harmonizing the scale and direction of the five blame-component questions on a 0-1 scale and then taking the average across the questions.

3.1.2 H2 Denial Plausibility

Testing the second hypothesis is much more straightforward. I plan to simply ask respondents to rate the plausibility of the president's denial on a continuous scale. This rating will furnish the outcome for tests of H2 Denial Plausibility. Since the government denies involvement with all actors (everyone receives the same treatment), the primary independent variable in this model will be the violent actor treatment condition.

3.1.3 H3 Government Support

The final hypothesis concerns the respondent's general support for the government. One of the key motivations for states to use PGMs is the promise of punishment. Understanding respondents' preferences over punishment is critically important for evaluating whether delegating violence to militias has its intended effects.

Skeptics may argue that normal citizens do not have enough knowledge or interest in international affairs to provide meaningful responses about specific foreign policy actions toward abusive governments. Research on citizens and foreign policy has demonstrated that citizens can, indeed, reason through foreign policy decisions but that this reasoning process rests heavily on interpersonal and intergroup cognition (Rathbun et al. 2016).

In line with this finding, I ask questions about government support at three levels of abstraction. I begin by asking about general approval of the Centralian government. Even respondents who know nothing about foreign policy should be able to faithfully report their approval of the foreign government. I then ask generally whether the US should "support and assist," "punish and sanction," or "should not interact" with the government of Centralia. Again, this question is cast broadly such that even respondents without in-depth knowledge about foreign policy should be able to provide some meaningful evaluation of the government. I end with four questions about specific foreign policies.

Given that foreign citizen approval might itself be a quantity of interest for foreign governments, I plan to use this response as one of the outcomes for models of H3 Government Support. I also plan to harmonize the scales of the general engagement question and the four-question policy battery to create an averaged index of government support to provide another measure for H3.

I plan to end the survey with a few open-ended questions, enabling respondents to provide more insight to their reasoning about the government's involvement with the violence.[5]

3.2 Justifying the Sample

This survey design and selection of questions has been developed with an eye to maximizing the external validity of the survey findings. As highlighted previously, citizens know relatively less about international politics and their influence on specific foreign policies is more

5. I have not yet drafted exact question wording for these open-ended questions, but I want to have at least one question about the respondent's blame assessment and one about their preferred response to the government.

generally questioned. I argue that citizens are a relevant and informative population for this analysis for three reasons.

First, citizens themselves may be an audience for militia usage. As discussed previously, states pay attention to foreign public opinion, especially US public opinion (Wang 2006). States seek to maintain a positive reputation among citizens to increase public willingness to consume goods from and invest in that state. Insofar as public opinion directly matters to these states, blame assessments and general approval are theoretically important quantities to consider.

Second, public opinion indirectly impacts the likelihood that foreign states are punished for abuse through their influence on elected leaders. Research has demonstrated that policy makers consider public sentiment when deciding foreign policy (Milner and Tingley 2015; Mayhew 2004; Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida 1989). Citizens' general approval and preferences over positive/ negative engagement will critically shape the foreign policies that the US implements toward that foreign government. Thus, citizens' opinions are important to consider for their direct and indirect role in punishing abusive foreign governments.

Finally, citizens' responses to this survey may also reveal something about how elites interpret and assign blame for militia violence. The key difference between elites and citizens in this context is background knowledge. Citizens and elites draw upon the same considerations when forming blame assessments, however. Although elites might possess more information about the government's intentions or capacity, these considerations still determine whether the elite will blame the government. Ultimately, elites make these judgments, consciously or not, in the process of deciding foreign policy. Thus, these survey responses may provide insight to how elites evaluate blame for delegated violence.

4 Empirical Expectations and Model Specifications

The preceding treatments and outcomes will enable me to evaluate whether the observable implications of plausible deniability hold in practice. In Carey et al.'s (2015) article, they argue that states that are sensitive to international punishment should be more likely to use *informal* militias since semi-official militias have known connections to the government. In line with this argument, my baseline expectation for all hypotheses compares responses in the informal militia condition to responses in the military condition. Thus, in the simple model below, if α_2 is correctly signed and statistically significant, it would constitute confirmatory evidence.

$$y \sim \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 Gov.Created + \alpha_2 Informal + \alpha_3 Independent$$

To illustrate, if blame is the outcome, then α_2 should be negative and statistically significant suggesting that respondents reliably assign less blame in the informal militia condition.

These expectations on α_2 represent the minimum standard of confirmation or disconfirmation on the usefulness of plausible deniability theory. However, other patterns in the models would provide additional evidence that the theory operates as expected. If gradations in information about the government's connection to the violent actor shapes the level of deniability as theorized then we would expect $|\alpha_1| < |\alpha_2| < |\alpha_3|$. If these differences were also statistically different, it would provide the highest level of support for the idea that information shapes the level of deniability a state receives from militia violence. This ordinal pattern and statistically significant differences between them constitute my core expectations for this survey experiment.

However, I plan to estimate a variety of follow-up analyses to explore the process by which states avoid blame for militia violence. First, the results from the government-created condition and independent militia condition will demonstrate the limits of the plausible deniability. Can states avoid some blame and punishment when they are clearly connected

to militias? How much blame and punishment do states receive when they truly aren't involved?

Second, I plan to evaluate how the different treatments influence specific components of blame—causality, intentions, and capacity. Perhaps in the independent militia condition the state avoids blame through a lack of perceived causality, but in the government-created condition the state avoids blame through a lack of perceived capacity to control the group. While the aggregate results would demonstrate that states avoid blame in both conditions, this exploratory analysis will help us understand *why* states avoid blame.

Finally, the repeated measure of government support and blame will enable me to consider whether the denial of involvement itself shifts blame assessments or government support levels and whether that effect is conditional on the actor that commits the violence. Perhaps in the informal militia condition, a respondent could view the denial as proof of a connection, radically shifting their blame assessments and support after the denial. Although my primary expectations concern the causal effect of delegating violence, this exploratory analysis will enable me to evaluate the effect of the denial, too.

4.1 Model Specifications

In order to evaluate my first hypothesis, I will estimate a simple OLS model using the general blame assessments and the blame index. The model estimates will reflect how respondents assign blame differently across the four treatment conditions after the denial. I model the blame assessments from both rounds jointly in order to maximize efficiency. This also enables me to estimate both the immediate direct effect of delegation plus the effect of delegation conditional on the denial. States delegate to PGMs in order to more plausibly deny involvement, so understanding the effect of the delegation conditional on the denial is a theoretically important quantity to consider. The model specification can be seen below:

$$Blame_{t_1,t_2} \sim \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 Gov.Created + \alpha_2 Informal + \alpha_3 Independent + \alpha_4 \mathbb{1}t_2 + \boldsymbol{\alpha}\mathbb{1}t_2 \times \boldsymbol{D1} + \boldsymbol{\alpha X} + RE$$

The first four terms reflect the simple OLS model discussed previously. The indicator for t_2 will reflect the level of blame in the military condition in the second round. $\boldsymbol{\alpha}\mathbb{1}t_2 \times \boldsymbol{D1}$ is shorthand for three interactions between the other treatment conditions and the denial. The final $\boldsymbol{\alpha X} + RE$ reflects the vector of controls and a participant random effect. In models of blame, I plan to include a host of controls to increase the precision of my effect estimates: general demographics, pre-treatment opinions about government capacity and obligation, respondents' priors on government-militia relationships, and the pre-treatment support measures since each of these may influence respondents' willingness to blame the government.

Evaluating hypothesis two is much more straight forward. Since I only collect the denial plausibility outcome once, I will estimate a simple OLS model where the first treatment is the primary independent variable. The model specification will generally reflect the simple difference-in-means model outlined in the expectations section. I will include the following controls: government blame and support assessments from outcome round one and priors on militias.

I will evaluate hypothesis three in a similar way to the first hypothesis. I will use responses to the approval measure and the support index as dependent variables. When estimating my model, I will "stack" all three rounds of responses and include two indicators for the second and third rounds and two sets of interactions between these indicators and first round treatment. Since I ask each question pre- and post-treatment, I am able to track how each respondent reacts to the violence individually, maximizing my statistical control.

I will largely use these same model specifications for my exploratory analyses as well. The previous models will enable me to consider how respondents react to the government-

created militia and independent militia conditions and will enable me to consider the effect of the denial on the various outcomes. I will estimate identical but separate models using the components of blame as independent outcomes to explore how delegation influences the different considerations.

I am still considering how to evaluate the open-responses, but I want to focus those prompts on the various considerations of blame and how respondents reasoned through their blame and support responses.

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A Survey Draft:

Pre-Treatment Questions

Demographics, Partisanship

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your race?
4. In what state do you live?
5. What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?
6. Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Democrat, an Independent, or a Republican?
7. (If Independent, do you lean toward one party or another? – Assign to party if respondent selects a party)

Attention Check

8. Consider the following list of media sources that you may have watched or read recently. It is important to understand how respondents naturally encounter information about international politics. It is also important to understand how closely they read. Please select only PBS and none of the above to indicate that you have closely read the question.

    - MSNBC
    - CNN
    - PBS
    - The Economist
    - Wall Street Journal
    - Fox News
    - None of the Above

Priors on Militias

Part of blame assessment includes an estimation of the agent's capacity to have prevented/ stopped the bad outcome. In line with this theoretical interest, it will be helpful to gauge respondents' baseline expectations about government-militia relationships and government capacity. I am still unsure which questions are the most relevant to include here. At the end

of the survey, I will include open-ended questions to further mine peoples' thoughts about government-militia relationships.

This is the first place that I encounter the syntactical issue of how to refer to pro-government militias. I have settled on simply using the term "armed group," since alternatives like "militia" or "paramilitary" have unintended anti-government and ideological connotations. "Armed group" seems to reveal the least about the group's intentions, targets, and behaviors. I want to be careful about providing too much background information about states collaborating with militias since one of the treatment conditions involves the state creating a militia and I don't want to lead respondents.

In this following section, we ask a few questions about "armed groups" in other countries. By "armed group," we are referring to any organized group of armed individuals outside the official military. This includes rebel groups, terrorist groups, pro-government militias, paramilitaries, civilian defense forces etc.

9. Do armed groups generally support the government or fight against the government?

10. How often do you think that governments delegate security tasks to armed groups?

11. **Alt:** When you hear about violence by an armed group in another country, what do you assume about the government of that country?

    - The armed group is stronger than the government military $\leftrightarrow$ the government military is stronger than the armed group
    - The government disapproves of the violence $\leftrightarrow$ The government approves of the violence

T0 Introducing a Case: Centralia

The general purpose of this introduction is to provide enough information so that respondents can begin to report their support for the foreign country and preferred level of engagement. I want to generate some favorability and perceived capacity so that the state is not absolved of blame by a lack of capacity (as happened in a previous run using African countries).

Centralia is a hypothetical country. Centralia is composed of two major ethnic groups—Northerners and Southerners. Both groups are native to the region and speak the same language, but have different religions and cultural customs. For many years, Northerners and Southerners fought over access to resources since the North has historically been wealthier than the South which has a larger population. After an intense civil war in the 1990s, the sides settled their differences and, with US assistance, formed a stable unified government.

The current President of Centralia was elected in 2012 by an overwhelming majority of Southerners. The president has claimed to serve all citizens despite lacking political support in the North. Since coming into office in 2012, the President of Centralia has helped develop the country's economy and increase living standards across the entire country. Centralia has become an important trading partner for countries in its region and has widely been hailed as a success story for countries struggling to overcome historical ethnic differences.

T0 Pre-Treatment Questions:

Pre-treatment Blame Measures

Obligation

Rate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statement:

1. The government of Centralia should do everything in its power to prevent violent attacks against citizens, regardless of their ethnic identity.

Capacity

2. The government does or does not have adequate resources to prevent ethnic attacks
3. How capable do you think that the government is at controlling ethnic violence?
    - The government is strong enough to detect and prevent an ethnic attack before it happens.
    - The government may not be able to prevent individual ethnic attacks, but they are strong enough to stop ethnic violence from spreading after an attack.
    - The government may not be able to stop violence from spreading, but they are strong enough to prevent another civil war from starting.
    - The government is not strong enough to prevent another civil war. If violence resumed, the government would need international help to re-establish peace.

Pre-Treatment Government Support Measures

4. Rate your level of approval or disapproval of the government of Centralia
5. How should the US approach interacting with the government of Centralia?
    - The US should support and assist the Centralian government, even if the US has little to gain
    - The US should support and assist the Centralian government, but only if the US also benefits
    - The US should not interact with the government of Centralia
    - The US should punish and sanction the Centralian government, as long as it doesn't harm the US' international goals
    - The US should punish and sanction the Centralian government, even if it is costly to the US
6. Do you believe that...
    - Centralia should or should not remain a candidate for assistance and aid from international organizations like the UN or World Bank

- International aid agencies should or should not continue working with the government to improve living conditions in Centralia
- Other countries should or should not put sanctions on the government of Centralia
- The UN should or should not investigate the government of Centralia

T1 Actor Treatment

Reports have recently emerged from Centralia's northern regions describing a wave of brutal ethnic violence targeting northern communities over the past week. Eyewitness accounts detail numerous atrocities. Civilians were rounded up and arbitrarily detained with many being beaten and tortured during interrogations. In some cases, civilians were publicly executed in the town square, and entire villages were burned to the ground, leaving communities paralyzed by fear. Observers estimate that upwards of 100 northerners have been killed during the violent campaign.

Independent Ethnic Militia

The attacks were allegedly carried out by a southern ethnic armed group. The group was originally involved in providing rural security in southern areas during the civil war in the 1990s.

Informal Militia

The attacks were allegedly carried out by a southern ethnic armed group. The group was originally involved in providing rural security in southern areas during the civil war in the 1990s.

There have been rumors that the group is connected to the president's family; however, journalists were unable to find direct evidence that the government supports this group.

Semi-Official Militia

The perpetrators of the violence were identified as members of a government-formed armed group composed predominantly of southerners. The government recruited the armed group to assist with rural security. The group has received formal training and funding from the government but is not part of the official military.

Official State Military

Witnesses have attributed the violence to Centralia's official state military. The military had been stationed in northern regions as part of its broader security operations across the country.

Q1: Post Treatment Questions

Blame and Component Measures

Overall Blame

7. How much is the government to blame for the violent campaign? ("very little" to "a great deal")

8. Do you believe that the government should or should not be held responsible for the [armed actor]'s actions?

9. I want to have some way to compare blame assignments between the armed actor and the government similar in spirit to Rudolph (2015) "The Meaning and Measurement of Responsibility Attributions." I assume that simply asking whether the armed actor is to blame for the violence would be more like a manipulation check—no one would assign anything less than a great deal of blame to the armed actor. I struggle to think of alternatives that don't artificially require respondents to assign blame in a zero-sum way.

Causality and Intention

10. Agree/Disagree: The government did or did not intend/ hope for the violence to occur.

11. Which statement most closely reflects your opinion about the government's involvement in the violence?

    - The government ordered the attack
    - The government intentionally neglected to monitor and restrain the [armed actor]
    - The government could have monitored and restrained the [armed actor], but did not intentionally neglect to intervene
    - The government could not monitor or restrain the [armed actor]
    - Don't Know/ Unsure

12. How likely is it that the [armed actor] had private motivations that the government did not know about?

13. **Alt:** Which statement most closely reflects your opinion about the government's involvement in the violence?

    - The government intended for the violence to occur and ordered the attack
    - The government intended for the violence to occur and intentionally neglected to monitor and restrain the [armed actor]
    - The government did not intend for the violence to occur, but could have monitored and restrained the [armed actor]
    - The government did not intend for the violence to occur, and could not monitor or restrain the [armed actor]
    - Don't Know/ Unsure

Capacity

14. Do you believe that...

    - The government could or could not have done anything to stop the violence.

- The government does or does not have adequate resources to prevent attacks like this in the future.

In the introductory vignette, I focus on the president specifically, but in the outcomes, I generally ask about the "government's" involvement/ responsibility. I assume that people understand the connection between the president and government while also grasping the potential separation of the government and military.

Repeat Government Support Measures

15. Rate your level of approval or disapproval of the government of Centralia

16. How should the US approach interacting with the government of Centralia?

    - The US should support and assist the Centralian government, even if the US has little to gain
    - The US should support and assist the Centralian government, but only if the US also benefits
    - The US should not interact with the government of Centralia
    - The US should punish and sanction the Centralian government, as long as it doesn't harm the US' international goals
    - The US should punish and sanction the Centralian government, even if it is costly to the US

17. Do you believe that...

    - Centralia should or should not remain a candidate for assistance and aid from international organizations like the UN or World Bank
    - International aid agencies should or should not continue working with the government to improve living conditions in Centralia
    - Other countries should or should not put sanctions on the government of Centralia
    - The UN should or should not investigate the government of Centralia

T2 Denial

In a press conference, the president of Centralia firmly denied any involvement in the violence. "The government of Centralia is committed to the safety and well-being of all its citizens, regardless of ethnicity," the president stated. "Those responsible for these acts do not represent the government or its interests." No further comments were provided.

T2 Post-Treatment Questions

Plausibility Outcome

1. How plausible did you find the government's denial of involvement?

Repeat Blame and Constituent Measures

Repeat Government Support Measures

Open Responses

I want to include some open-response questions at the end to try to understand what considerations people used when forming their assessments. I am particularly interested in whether they think the government is worth helping out anymore or getting more details about the respondent's perceptions of the government's involvement with the actor.