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**Comment on Claude Berrebi and Esteban F. Klor (2008):**

**“Are Voters Sensitive to Terrorism? Direct Evidence from the Israeli Electorate”**

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In “Are Voters Sensitive to Terrorism? Direct Evidence from the Israeli Electorate,” Claude Berrebi and Esteban F. Klor analyze the causal effects of terrorist attacks on the political preferences of the Israeli electorate. They find that, if a locality suffers a terrorist attack within three months of a parliamentary election, support for the right bloc of political parties increases, on average, by 1.35 percentage points. This magnitude is politically significant, given that the Israeli electorate is narrowly split. In left-leaning localities, interestingly, local terror fatalities lead to an increase in the relative support for the right bloc, but terror fatalities outside the locality increase support for the left bloc of parties. Terrorist attacks, Berrebi and Klor argue, can contribute to the ideological polarization of the electorate: Terrorism, they find, increases support for the right bloc in all the right-leaning localities, but decreases support for the right bloc in most left-leaning localities. Berrebi and Klor interpret their findings to be, for the most part, supportive of the policy voting hypothesis, according to which “parties benefit from the salience of issues to which they are generally viewed as attaching highest priority.” (Kiewiet, 1981)

Berrebi and Klor’s article contributes to a growing body of research literature on the causes and effects of terrorism, defined by Sandler and Enders (2004) as “the pre-meditated use, or threat of use, of extra-normal violence to obtain a political objective through intimidation or fear directed at a large audience.” Sandler and Enders (2004) provide a comprehensive review of the research literature on the causes and consequences of terrorism. Research on the causes of terrorism has often focused on the political and socio-economic determinants of terrorism (Russell and Miller, 1983; Krueger and Malečková, 2003; Krueger and Laitin, 2008; Piazza, 2006). Berrebi and Klor’s paper contributes to a burgeoning literature on the effects of terrorism: Previous research has studied, *inter alia*, whether terrorism helps achieve the terrorists’ political goals (Pape, 2003), its effects on states’ respect on human rights (Dreher et al., 2010), as well as

on specific industries, such as tourism (Drakos and Kutan, 2003). Berrebi and Klor's study analyzes the effect on terrorism on voter preferences and electoral outcomes – a crucial question, given terrorism's explicit focus on achieving political objectives. In addition, the paper provides an important link between the relatively recent literature on the causes and consequences of terrorism, and a long strand of academic literature on electoral behavior (Bartels, 2008), pioneered by Lazarsfeld et al. (1944), Black (1948) and Downs (1957).

The strengths of Berrebi and Klor's paper are most apparent in its careful robustness tests. In particular, the authors test whether the results hold for alternative ways of including a variable for terrorist attacks (the number of fatalities suffered, the number of attacks, and a dummy for the occurrence of an attack), as well as for alternative definitions of the right and the left political blocs, and for variable time periods before a parliamentary election.

The most important shortcoming of Berrebi and Klor's paper lies in their treatment of possible reverse causality. The authors correctly point out that a naïve regression model would yield biased coefficients, since “terror attacks may influence the electorate's preferences, but terrorism may also be a reaction to those preferences.” Their remedy, however, is unconvincing: They add to the analysis terror attacks' “variation across space,” which they show to be exogenous to the electorate's political preferences. They, however, estimate a fixed-effect linear regression model that does not resolve the endogeneity problem caused by terror attacks' variation over time. Instead, the authors would be well-advised to estimate a two-stage least-squares (2SLS) model, where they explicitly instrument for terrorist attacks by variables suggested by Berrebi and Lakdawalla (2007): These include, among others, the locality's population, its area (in km<sup>2</sup>), the percentage of Jewish residents in the local population, and the distance to the closest terrorist home base. Instrumental variables approaches are a standard

econometric method to resolve problems of simultaneity (Wooldridge, 2009), and have been used widely in studies of civil and political violence (Miguel et al., 2004; Brunschweiler and Bulte, 2009).

Another potential problem arises in Berrebi and Klor's demonstration that, rather than influencing the relative turnout of left- and right-leaning voters, terrorism affects the political preferences of the electorate. To test this hypothesis, the authors focus on localities with very high turnouts: those, in which the average turnout rate exceeds 85%. In these localities, the authors argue, "almost everybody votes" and, therefore, "any influence of terrorist on the relative support for the right bloc must be a consequence of voters changing their preferences, and not their turnout decisions." It is, however, conceivable that, even at high turnout rates, some people may, in the wake of a terrorist attack, decide to either vote or refrain from going to the polls. Although Berrebi and Klor's conjecture may sound plausible, they need to support their claim by further empirical evidence – for instance, from an individual-level panel survey of voters in high-turnout localities. The authors could obtain this evidence either from existing research on voter behavior in Israel, or offer it as a suggestion for further research.

A final concern involves over-controlling in the specification of the linear regression model: In their basic model, the authors include two variables that account for fatalities caused by terrorist attacks:  $TerrorFatalities_{i,t}$  and  $TotalFatalities_t$ .  $TerrorFatalities_{i,t}$  accounts for the number of fatalities in the examined locality. Berrebi and Klor interpret the coefficient on  $TotalFatalities_t$  (total number of terror fatalities in Israel) as the effect on political attitudes of fatalities in other localities. In multiple regression models, coefficients have a "partial effect" interpretation: What is the effect of an additional local or non-local fatality on the relative support for the right bloc, *holding everything else equal*? The number of local fatalities,

however, cannot increase without a corresponding rise in the total number of terror fatalities in Israel. The authors should therefore consider replacing  $TotalFatalities_t$  by  $OutsideFatalities_{i,t}$  equal to  $TotalFatalities_t - TerrorFatalities_{i,t}$ . The coefficient on  $TerrorFatalities_{i,t}$  will then be clearly interpretable as the *ceteris paribus* effect of a local terror fatalities on the political support for the right bloc.

If Berrebi and Klor's findings hold up, they could have several policy implications: Counterterrorism policies that increase terrorism's salience in the public mind may, they suggest, enable terrorists to have a greater effect on the political process. By contrast, policies that diminish the electorate's sensitivity to terrorism may help lower the threat. In addition, the author's work yield important clues about the objectives of terrorist groups: If terrorist attacks increase support for the political right (which, in Israel, favors aggressive counterterrorism measures), such attacks may not help achieve terrorists' goals (Abrahms, 2006), terror groups may have multiple objectives (Kydd and Walter, 2006), or there may be a more complex interplay (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2006). Finally, policy-makers should be careful in applying lessons from this research to other countries. Additional research is needed to test whether Berrebi and Klor's findings, based on evidence from Israel, extend to different settings.

All in all, Berrebi and Klor's is comprehensive in its focus on the support for political party blocs, as well as on larger issues such as political polarization; rigorous in its multiple robustness tests; and can yield important insights for researchers and policy-makers. If the authors successfully address the concerns outlined earlier in this report, they will have made a significant contribution to our understanding on the complex interplay between terrorism, voter preferences and electoral behavior.

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