

Contesting Narratives of Repression: Experimental Evidence from Sisi's Egypt

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Abstract

Authoritarian regimes frequently attempt to justify repression by accusing their opponents of violent behavior. Are such claims successful at persuading the public to accept state-sponsored violence, and can these claims be contested effectively by human rights organizations seeking to publicize evidence contradicting the regime's narrative? To evaluate these questions, we conducted a survey experiment in Egypt using Facebook advertisements to recruit respondents safely. The experiment evaluates the persuasiveness of competing information provided by a human rights organization and the Egyptian security forces at shaping attitudes toward an incident of state-sponsored violence in which security forces killed several leaders of the opposition Muslim Brotherhood. We find evidence for the ability of Egyptian security forces to increase support for this repression when they control the narrative about why violence was used. However, we also find that the effects of this propaganda disappear when paired with information from Human Rights Watch that counters the security forces' justifications. These findings provide experimental evidence that propaganda can help authoritarian regimes to increase public support for repression, but they also indicate that human rights organizations can play some role in mitigating this support when they succeed at disseminating countervailing information in these contexts.

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1 Introduction

Six weeks after the July 2013 coup that ousted Egypt's first freely elected president, security forces violently dispersed a sit-in of the president's supporters, likely killing well over 1,000 non-violent protesters. Local media trumpeted the government's propaganda,¹ which attempted to justify the massacre by alleging that the protesters were terrorists who had tortured civilians, killed policemen, and threatened national security. Governments and their security forces routinely use misleading or false claims about their victims' violent behavior to justify state-sponsored violence, and the problem is particularly severe in authoritarian regimes, where repression is more common (Davenport 2007) and government influence over the media is stronger (Whitten-Woodring and Van Belle 2017). To what extent does this propaganda shape public attitudes toward repression in these political systems? While low trust in authoritarian institutions may limit their capacity to change attitudes toward state-sponsored violence, research also demonstrates that biased communications sources can often be effective at persuasion (DellaVigna and Gentzkow 2010).

Because authoritarian regimes dominate the press, independent human rights organizations (HROs) frequently provide one of the few sources of information capable of challenging the regime's narrative. These organizations attempt to gather evidence of rights violations and to disseminate that information to the public. In Egypt, for instance, NGOs disseminated information disproving government claims that state-sponsored violence was triggered by the opposition's use of force. To what extent can these activities constrain authoritarian regimes by reducing support for repression? The literature on human rights is generally optimistic about the ability of HROs to mobilize public opinion against violators, but scholars have often overlooked the possibility that human rights narratives may not resonate in certain contexts (Hafner-Burton 2014; Risse and Ropp 2013), especially when governments can wield state security narratives effectively (Jetschke 2011).

¹We define propaganda as the propagation of false, misleading, or biased information in order to support a particular political viewpoint.

We address these questions by investigating the effects of competing information from Egyptian security forces and a human rights organization on Egyptians' attitudes toward state-sponsored violence against the opposition Muslim Brotherhood. The experiment used an actual incident of repression against the Muslim Brotherhood in July 2015, leveraging real accounts of the event for our treatments. The results indicate that information from the security forces increased support for violent police tactics significantly, while information from the HRO did not strengthen opposition to this repression. However, when respondents were exposed to a competitive information environment with both accounts, the large effects from the security forces treatment disappeared, suggesting that human rights investigations have some capacity to neutralize the effects of authoritarian propaganda.

The paper makes several contributions to the study of authoritarianism and human rights. First, it builds on a growing literature about the persuasiveness of propaganda in authoritarian regimes (e.g. Adena et al. 2015; Huang 2018; Peisakhin and Rozenas 2019; Stockmann and Gallagher 2011; Truex 2016). The findings extend this research by focusing on attitudes toward state-sponsored violence, and by testing the robustness of propaganda to competing information. Second, the experimental design applied to Egypt contributes to literature on the effectiveness of human rights messaging, which has included relatively few experiments, especially outside the United States (Ausderan 2014; McEntire, Leiby, and Krain 2015). Third, we recruited respondents using Facebook advertisements, which provides a relatively new and important source of data for experimental research in authoritarian regimes and conflict settings. Fourth, the findings shed light on political developments in an important case of authoritarian rule (Blaydes 2010; Brownlee 2007), suggesting that propaganda assisted the violent reconstitution of Egyptian autocracy following the failed democratic transition. Finally, a practical implication of the paper is that policymakers and activists interested in promoting human rights should assist HROs with the dissemination of their messages in authoritarian regimes, especially since these regimes have increasingly limited space for these organizations to operate (Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014).

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 discusses theoretical expectations for how competition between authoritarian regimes and HROs shapes attitudes toward repression, and section 3 provides additional context on Egypt. In section 4, we discuss our research design and the ethics of our research. The results are presented in section 5, and we discuss their implications for human rights in authoritarian regimes in section 6.

2 Repression and Persuasion under Autocracy

There are few actions a government can take that are more unpopular than the unjustified use of force; as a result, state-sponsored violence is risky, since repression can backfire and increase anti-regime mobilization (Davenport 2007). Because of this risk, governments attempt to minimize backlash through propaganda, especially in authoritarian contexts where control over the media is greater. In some cases, this propaganda may be intended to reinforce repression by demonstrating the regime’s strength and further intimidating the public (Wedeen 1999; Huang 2014), but this approach may undermine support for the regime over time (Huang 2018). As a result, authoritarian regimes have strong incentives to use propaganda to persuade as many people as possible that they were justified in the use of force.

Repression is more likely to be perceived as justified when it occurs as a response to violent behavior (Gitlin 1980; McLeod and Detenber 1999). While the unprovoked use of force violates expectations of fair conduct by the state’s coercive agents, a forceful response to violent acts is more likely to be seen as consistent with procedural fairness (Mazerolle et al. 2013; Tyler 2003). Furthermore, when the targets of repression use violence themselves, their actions can generate feelings of threat and fear, which may convince the public that the targets do not deserve legal protections or human rights (Hetherington and Suhay 2011; Jetschke 2011; Simpson, Willer, and Feinberg 2018; Young 2019). It follows that if authoritarian regimes can persuade their citizens that opposition forces have behaved violently, they may be able to strengthen acceptance of repression. There are countless examples of author-

itarian regimes referring to their opponents as “terrorists” and “criminals,” accusing them of (often) false acts of violence to justify the use of force against them. On the other hand, if countervailing sources provide information that undermines the regime’s claims about the context in which its security forces engaged in violent behavior, citizens may be convinced that the use of force was unjustified, and their opposition to the regime may increase as a result. This task often comes down to HROs, which investigate and then publicize rights violations with the goal of undermining support for the violators (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Ropp and Sikkink 1999; Simmons 2009).

How might individuals respond to information about state-sponsored violence provided by the regime or HROs? The vast literature on persuasion suggests that responses will be influenced heavily by the perceived credibility of the messenger, and by the content and strength of recipients’ priors about a given issue (DellaVigna and Gentzkow 2010). Below, we draw on extant literature to consider how each of these two factors – credibility and prior beliefs – could affect how information disseminated by authoritarian regimes and HROs will affect public opinion on repression. Specifically, we argue that there are reasons to expect that these factors could work for or against each actors’ ability to shape attitudes toward state-sponsored violence.

Traditionally, many scholars in political science, not to mention popular accounts in the media, have been skeptical of the persuasive capacity of authoritarian propaganda (Stockmann 2013). Authoritarian regimes—and especially their security forces—are often corrupt, abusive, and inefficient. Their primary goal is to perpetuate their power, regardless of the truth. Such characteristics imply that these institutions will not be trusted as impartial sources and will lack the credibility to influence public opinion (Mishler and Rose 2001; Morris and Klesner 2010). As a result, information they provide to justify repression may be dismissed as self-serving and likely-false by most individuals who receive it, in which case attitudes are unlikely to shift significantly. This dynamic may be reinforced if much of the public opposes the regime strongly and is motivated to resist updating their beliefs in a way

that would absolve the regime and its security forces for using violence (Taber and Lodge 2006).

Yet, the weak credibility of authoritarian regimes may be overstated. Polling data from many autocracies suggests that trust in institutions is often fairly high (Rossteutscher 2010). People may be particularly likely to trust the security forces as a credible source on matters of national security, since these issues fall directly within their purview and supposed expertise. This credibility may be enhanced further if elements of the opposition have in fact relied on violent tactics previously, granting the regime a plausible claim to be defending national security (Jetschke 2011). In addition, many individuals living in authoritarian regimes do not appear to follow politics closely or hold strong political beliefs (Geddes and Zaller 1989), in which case motivated reasoning is less likely to forestall attitude changes in response to information from the authorities (Taber and Lodge 2006). These dynamics imply that information about state-sponsored violence propagated by authoritarian regimes and their security forces may be effective at convincing a meaningful part of the public that repression is justified.

The literature on HROs has generally been optimistic about their ability to undermine public support for human rights abuses, in part by releasing information that shames the violators (Davis et al. 2012; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Ropp and Sikkink 1999). As independent groups motivated by the desire to protect vulnerable individuals, it might be assumed that their credibility would be high, and that the public would be inclined to trust the information they provide about the regime's repressive acts. To the extent that this assumption is correct, citizens who encounter reporting from HROs about incidents of state-sponsored violence should become more opposed to the regime's use of force. This dynamic may be reinforced by motivated reasoning as well if most citizens oppose the regime and are looking for reasons to strengthen their negative views of the authorities.

However, the credibility of HROs in authoritarian contexts may be overstated. Authoritarian regimes often invest substantial effort in discrediting them as corrupt, foreign

agents (Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014). It is plausible that such campaigns have some success in defining HROs as biased promoters of a threatening, foreign agenda. Furthermore, motivated reasoning may constrain the persuasive capacity of HROs significantly, particularly in countries where fear of instability is widespread and citizens want the government to maintain order. In these contexts, individuals who encounter information from HROs may be motivated to dismiss it, in which case their attitudes toward state-sponsored violence are unlikely to become more negative. Consistent with this more pessimistic expectation, studies of human rights messaging find mixed effects, and the few experimental tests find weak or insignificant results (Davis et al. 2012; Ausderan 2014; Krebs 2017).

The above discussion considers how and why we might expect individuals' attitudes toward repression to shift in response to information from either the regime or HROs. However, it is also important to evaluate how attitudes might change when individuals are exposed to both sources. HROs in particular are unlikely to have a captive audience; rather, the people they reach will likely have been exposed to claims made by the regime. In this scenario, two dynamics are possible. First, one message may be so much stronger that public opinion instinctively shifts in its direction (Chong and Druckman 2007). If the public inherently trusts HROs, opposition to the use of force may increase even in this competitive information environment; on the other hand, if citizens are wary of these organizations and inclined to trust the regime, then exposure to the government's propaganda may still increase support for repression despite access to human rights messaging.

Second, competing messages may reinforce respondents' prior beliefs about state-sponsored violence, in which case attitudes will not shift significantly one way or the other. With the ability to process both sets of information, citizens may choose to believe the source that reaffirms views they already hold (Sniderman and Theriault 2004; Taber and Lodge 2006). Such a scenario could still demonstrate the importance of human rights messaging if citizens would – in the absence of information from the HROs – be persuaded by the regime's propaganda to become more supportive of repression. In other words, by puncturing the

regime's dominant message, these organizations would help to create space for opposing attitudes to reemerge (Zaller 1992).

In sum, extant literature emphasizes the importance of source credibility and recipient priors in determining whether a message is persuasive. In our discussion above, we have provided reasons for why each of these factors could push the public in either direction with respect to messaging about state-sponsored violence in authoritarian contexts. Existing research provides few tests of the persuasive capacity of authoritarian regimes and HROs, particularly on the issue of repression and in competition against each other. As a result, we require far more empirical evidence from authoritarian regimes than is currently available to sort between competing theoretical expectations. To this end, we administer a test of these dynamics with an experiment implemented in Egypt. The next section provides important background information and draws on the theoretical factors discussed above to outline our expectations in this context.

3 Contesting Repression in Sisi's Egypt

Egypt provides a useful case in which to study how authoritarian propaganda and human rights messaging shape attitudes toward state-sponsored violence. Since coming to power through a coup that ousted president Mohammed Morsi in July 2013, the military-dominated regime of Abdel Fattah El-Sisi has relied heavily on repression to crush mass opposition. Security forces have killed hundreds of people and arrested tens of thousands more (Dunne and Williamson 2014). The regime has also sought to justify this violence to the public, and these efforts have been contested wherever possible by international and domestic HROs.

To justify its actions, the regime has always claimed that security forces have used deadly force following violent provocations by the opposition. For instance, when security forces killed more than 50 protesters outside the Republican Guard Club in Cairo just one week after the coup, they claimed to have been responding to an armed attack. Six weeks

later, the security forces killed at least 817 and likely more than 1,000 protesters when clearing sit-ins at the Rabaa and Nahda Squares in Cairo (Human Rights Watch 2014). Again, the government attempted to justify the violence by claiming that protesters had fired first on security forces when they began to clear the squares (Fick and Nasralla 2014). The government had also worked hard to portray the sit-in participants as violent in the weeks before the operation began. According to *The New York Times*, “The authorities have painted the squares as hotbeds of “terrorism”...Officials have also said that the Islamists are storing weapons, and have accused them of other abuses, including the fatal torture of at least 11 people in the two squares” (Fahim and Gladstone 2013).

Human rights groups have investigated and disproved these justifications. Regarding killings outside the Republican Guard Club, Human Rights Watch provided evidence that, “...protesters were peacefully praying or gathering when the military and police moved in to break up the sit-in” (Human Rights Watch 2013). They also documented how the forceful clearings of the Rabaa and Nahda sit-ins were premeditated, while cases of protesters firing back at security forces were marginal (Human Rights Watch 2014). In recent years, a similar dynamic has occurred with extra-judicial killings of detainees. Since 2015, security forces claim to have killed hundreds of alleged militants in gun battles during counterterrorism operations. Yet, investigations strongly suggest that such battles are often invented to cover-up and justify executions of prisoners suspected of Islamist connections (Greene and McManus 2017; Reuters 2019).

The military regime and its security forces have used their control of the media to propagate their justifications for repression. Similar to other authoritarian regimes (Stockmann 2013), this control operates through direct ownership of some media outlets and extensive manipulation of others. Noncompliant voices were purged following the coup, with the regime censoring, jailing, and killing independent-minded journalists and shutting down opposition-oriented media (Lindsey 2017). Businessmen tied to the security forces have also purchased most private media outlets (Reporters Without Borders 2017). As a result, when

incidents of state-sponsored violence occur, Egyptians are exposed primarily to the narrative of the security forces on traditional media outlets. Because of this controlled environment, HROs have been forced to rely heavily on the internet to disseminate their message.

Do the above efforts by the regime and HROs to frame state-sponsored violence actually influence public opinion? The intensity of Egypt’s political divide following the revolution might plausibly make it difficult for either source to shift attitudes toward repression. Ostensibly, supporters of Sisi are convinced that the Muslim Brotherhood coddles terrorists and wants to impose an Islamic state, while opponents of the coup believe fervently that Morsi’s ouster marked the tragic end of Egypt’s democratic experiment. With such strongly-held beliefs dividing the country, many Egyptians may resist or ignore information that contradicts their priors about the righteousness or injustice of the regime. Nonetheless, much of the public remains disconnected from political developments. In the 2013 Arab Barometer survey, only 11 percent of respondents claimed to be “very interested” in politics. Furthermore, many Egyptians continue to have low levels of educational attainment. Individuals with less political interest and less education tend to be more susceptible to persuasion (Geddes and Zaller 1989; Truex 2016; Zaller 1992), suggesting the potential for Egyptians’ views of repression to shift in response to information received from either the regime or HROs.

Polling data displayed in Table 1 also suggests Egypt’s security forces and media retain greater public trust than might typically be assumed of authoritarian regimes. The data comes from the 2013 and 2016 Arab Barometer surveys and the 2014 Pew Global Attitudes Survey.² Majorities approved of the armed forces in all three surveys, and the Central Security Forces – responsible for much of the regime’s most violent acts – likewise received majority approval. The police forces initially received lower ratings, but their reputation appears to have strengthened over time. As might be expected, Egyptians who approve

²See Appendix Section 1 for information on survey procedures. The 2013 Arab Barometer survey was conducted before the July coup in that year, the Pew survey was conducted in 2014 early in Sisi’s government, and the 2016 Arab Barometer survey was conducted after three years under the military-led regime.

of Sisi in the Pew survey (54 percent of respondents) viewed these institutions more favorably than respondents who disapproved, but it is notable that non-trivial percentages of Sisi’s opponents still expressed positive attitudes toward the state’s coercive apparatus. The media also received relatively high marks in the full Pew sample and across the partisan divide. These responses suggest that the institutions responsible for coercion and propaganda possess enough credibility to shift public attitudes effectively. As a result, we expect that Egyptians will demonstrate greater acceptance of state-sponsored violence against the opposition when exposed to the security forces’ justifications for repression.

Table 1 here.

Polling data about Egyptians’ attitudes toward HROs is unavailable, but as in other authoritarian political systems, the regime has worked hard to discredit them. Human rights defenders are smeared with accusations that they are serving a “foreign agenda,” engaging in corruption, committing treason, and defending terrorists (Elmasry 2019). As a result of these efforts, these groups may not have the capacity to undermine the regime’s justifications for state-sponsored violence when their information manages to reach Egyptians. Nonetheless, it might be assumed that they would retain credibility because of their independence from the state and the popularity of their mission – most Egyptians endorse human rights. In the 2013 Arab Barometer, 64 percent of Egyptian respondents said that human rights violations were not justified by national security threats, and 62 percent answered this way in 2016. As a result, we expect that Egyptians will become less supportive of state-sponsored violence against the opposition when confronted with information from HROs.

When Egyptians encounter narratives about repressive incidents from both the security forces and HROs, it is possible that one of these sources possesses enough of a credibility advantage to shift the public’s attitudes in their direction. However, the data above suggests that such a clear-cut advantage is unlikely to exist. Furthermore, even if many Egyptians do not hold strong political preferences, most appear to lean one way or the other. In the

2014 Pew survey, for instance, fewer than 1 percent of respondents answered “don’t know” when asked to rate their attitudes toward Sisi, and fewer than 2 percent said the same about Morsi. As a result, we expect that a competitive information environment will reinforce Egyptians’ prior attitudes toward state-sponsored violence, thus blocking significant shifts from occurring. Such a dynamic would imply that HROs can help to mitigate the effects of regime propaganda justifying repression.

4 Experimental Design

We designed an experiment to test these expectations in Egypt. The experiment asked about a repressive event and assigned respondents with equal probability to a control group or one of three treatments: a security forces treatment using a statement from the security forces; a human rights treatment with a statement from Human Rights Watch; and a contested treatment with both accounts.

This research is complicated by the fact that all Egyptian respondents would have been exposed to regime communications about state-sponsored violence prior to the survey. Such pre-treatment exposure can limit subjects’ responsiveness to experimental vignettes (Druckmann and Leeper 2012). On the one hand, repeated exposure to messaging from the regime may lead respondents to ignore the security forces treatment because it provides little new information. On the other hand, more limited exposure to human rights messaging may result in a situation where exposure to a single human rights message within the survey cannot outweigh exposure to security forces messaging pre-treatment. While we cannot mitigate this issue entirely, we attempt to minimize its impact by focusing on a specific case of repression against the Muslim Brotherhood, since attitudes toward individual events may be more responsive to the contextual information received about these events. This approach should enable us to learn about the effects of propaganda and human rights messaging more broadly by focusing on how they affect attitudes toward this specific case of state-sponsored

violence. Thus, the experimental vignette addressed a specific incident in which Egyptian security forces killed 9 members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

4.1 Prompt

The event in the vignette occurred on July 1, 2015, two years after the coup and 14 months before our experiment. Sisi had been elected president approximately one year before the event took place, and by this point the regime’s opponents were no longer able to mobilize mass street protests. However, the security forces continued to pursue the Muslim Brotherhood, and it also faced a growing Islamist insurgency.

The event used for the experiment occurred in this context. Egyptian security forces raided an apartment in which 9 leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood had been meeting. All 9 of the men were killed. The security forces justified the deaths by portraying the men as violent terrorists: they said they had been fired upon as they entered the apartment; the government released photos showing weapons in the apartment; and the men were said to be responsible for terrorist attacks in Egypt. However, Human Rights Watch investigated the incident and concluded that the deaths were likely extra-judicial killings. Witnesses suggested the men had been arrested before they were killed, and lawyers who saw the bodies said their wounds supported this conclusion. The apartment also showed no signs of a shootout, and the men were involved in peaceful efforts to support families of Brotherhood members killed or jailed by the regime (Human Rights Watch 2015).

The survey was conducted in Arabic. The English translation of the vignette is below.³ All participants read the initial control statement. They were then randomly assigned to receive no additional information or one of the three treatment conditions.⁴

³The security forces statement was taken directly from the original Arabic article, and the Human Rights Watch statement was taken from the Arabic version on the organization’s website. The remainder of the survey was translated by a translation company specializing in Arabic-English translations. See Appendix Section 8 for the Arabic version.

⁴We acknowledge that we cannot rule out the possibility that differential treatment lengths would contribute to the results. However, we believe this possibility is unlikely given the strong content of the treatments.

- **Control:** Last year, police raided an apartment in 6 October City. During the raid, they killed 9 members of the Muslim Brotherhood.
- **Security Forces Information:** The following article from *Al-Masry Al-Youm* describes the incident: “According to a security source, security forces had observed leaders from the Brotherhood planning terrorist operations and followed them to a meeting inside the Villa, where they were in possession of explosives and weapons. The security source added that the Brotherhood leaders exchanged fire with the police before they were killed, and that during the operation the security forces recovered a list of senior officials being targeted for assassination.”
- **Human Rights Information:** According to an investigation by an independent human rights organization: “The fatal shooting by Egyptian security forces of nine Muslim Brotherhood members on July 1, 2015, may have been unlawful killings and could qualify as extrajudicial executions.” The organization spoke to 11 relatives and other witnesses with knowledge of the incident who said that “the security forces had arrested the men, fingerprinted them, and tortured them before killing them.” The organization said that “the photos and video of the scene that the Interior Ministry released after the shooting did not show signs of a shootout inside the apartment, such as spent bullet casings, bullet marks on the walls, or blood stains.”
- **Contested Information:** Both statements from the security forces and Human Rights Watch.

The security forces statement was an actual quote taken from an article in the major Egyptian newspaper *Al-Masry Al-Youm* (Shalabi, Dabash, and Al-Qamash 2015). Similar statements were reported in most other newspapers. The Human Rights Watch statement was quoted from the investigation of the incident released by Human Rights Watch (2015).⁵

⁵Our decision to attribute the statement to an “independent human rights organization” was based on the fact that Human Rights Watch has been targeted extensively by Egyptian authorities, and we wanted to

The control group is intended to capture prior attitudes toward repression of the Muslim Brotherhood when no context is included, while the contested information permits evaluation of a competitive information environment.

4.2 Outcomes

Following the prompt, respondents were asked two outcome questions designed to assess attitudes toward this specific incident: if they thought the police tactics were justified, and if the police should be held accountable for killing the nine men. Respondents could answer both questions on a five point Likert scale. For ease of interpretation, we condense these responses to binary variables for the analysis. For the question about whether the police tactics were justified, responses were coded as 1 if the respondent said they were definitely or probably justified and as a 0 otherwise. We call this variable *tactics-justified*. For the question about whether the police should be held accountable for the violence, responses were coded as a 1 if the respondent said the police should definitely or probably not be held accountable and as a 0 otherwise. We call this variable *no-accountability*.

4.3 Hypotheses

As discussed previously, we expected that Egyptians' attitudes toward the repressive incident would respond on average to the contextual information they received, such that the security forces' portrayal of the Brotherhood members as violent would increase acceptance of the killings, while the evidence that the men were nonviolent and summarily executed would strengthen opposition to the police tactics. In the case of contestation, however, we expected that attitudes would revert to those captured by the control group, with respondents choosing to believe the information that aligned with their priors about the acceptability of state-sponsored violence against the Muslim Brotherhood.

be careful about the possibility of creating additional complications for the organization by conferring the impression that this particular part of the study was being conducted by them.

4.4 Recruitment and Sample

Respondents for the study were recruited using Facebook ads. Because these ads are cheap and can be targeted at users on the basis of specific characteristics, they have increasingly been used by social scientists to recruit survey respondents (Hirano et al. 2015; Samuels and Zucco 2014; Samuels and Zucco 2013; Rife et al. 2016; Zhang et al. 2018). This recruitment method is especially valuable when respondents are difficult to reach (Jager 2017), as in countries like Egypt where the authoritarian regime is hostile to research on rights abuses. It is also useful for implementing survey experiments (Samuels and Zucco 2013), where representative data is less crucial for estimating generalizable causal effects (Mullinix et al. 2015). We used two different ads for our study, which were targeted at respondents who were located in Egypt and used Arabic as their profile language.⁶ We relied on sidebar advertisements, which are only available to users with a desktop or laptop computer, because users cannot engage with these ads in a way that would reveal their identities. Section 9 of the Appendix contains additional details on the advertisements.

Selection effects create potential issues for generalizability, because only a small percentage of profiles exposed to the ads ever click on them. In our case, the ads were displayed to 4,057,249 profiles, of which 10,237 clicked through. This click-through-rate of 0.25 percent falls within the standard range (Jager 2017). Of these individuals, approximately 600 began the survey after reading the consent form and completed the experiment. Facebook samples tend to be educated and more interested in politics (Samuels and Zucco 2013; Rife et al. 2016), and this was true of our sample as well. These characteristics suggest that respondents may hold particularly strong political beliefs, which could reduce the likelihood that they update their attitudes in response to our treatments. The sample was also heavily male, as in other Facebook surveys, but it was not noticeably younger, as has often been the case (Samuels and Zucco 2013; Rife et al. 2016). Politically, the respondents were evenly split between individuals who voted for Sisi in the 2014 election and those who voted for his

⁶As shown in the results, effects do not differ when controlling for the ad that recruited each respondent.

challenger or boycotted the election, indicative of political diversity in the sample. Table 1 in the Appendix compares our sample to nationally-representative data from the 2013 Arab Barometer, and we consider the sample composition when discussing our results.

In addition to the questions discussed above, respondents were also asked about government performance, income, governorate of residence, and if they thought they had heard about the incident in the vignette. Table 2 reports summary statistics for the covariates. There are slight imbalances for education and perceptions of government performance. However, the substantive differences are fairly small, and the primary results are robust to the inclusion of controls.

Table 2 here.

4.5 Safety and Ethics

One advantage of using Facebook for recruitment is that it protects the identities of the respondents. Given the political environment in Egypt, researchers are not able to guarantee the anonymity or safety of their research subjects, and researchers are also at extreme risk. Once an Egyptian Facebook user clicked on our ads, however, they were redirected to Qualtrics and could not be connected to their profile.⁷ We also took extra precautions by disabling Qualtrics tracking of IP addresses and using encrypted email for correspondence with respondents. In addition, we removed mention of Author Institution from the consent information, identifying ourselves only as researchers to protect university affiliates in Egypt at the time the survey was active. These steps were taken in consultation with Risk Management and IRB at Author Institution University.

We also attempted to mitigate ethical concerns related to the use of information from the Egyptian security forces. First, the general information in this treatment has been a regular feature of Egyptian politics since 2013. Second, we clearly attributed the security forces' statement to the article rather than the researchers. Thus, the survey neither injected

⁷Author Institution Risk Management verified this with Facebook.

new content into Egypt’s political environment nor endorsed justifications for political violence. At the end of the survey, respondents saw a debriefing statement which noted that HROs had documented extensive human rights violations by the Egyptian security forces. The statement included a link to the Arabic-language Egypt page of Human Rights Watch.

5 Results

5.1 Main Effects

The results indicate that Egypt’s security forces can be successful at shaping attitudes toward specific incidents of repression when they are able to portray the targets as violent, and they provide mixed evidence for the ability of HROs to contest these claims effectively. For both outcomes, Figure 1 displays the difference in means across the control and treatment groups. In Figure 2, we then show the treatment effects when estimated using three OLS models with robust standard errors: the first with no covariates, the second with pre-treatment covariates only, and the third with additional covariates acquired post-treatment in the survey.⁸ Appendix Section 3 also shows additional robustness checks, including different models and constructions of the dependent variables.

Figure 1 approximately here.

As shown in Figure 1, approximately 32 percent of respondents in the control group felt that the police tactics were justified, and approximately 20 percent of respondents in the control group claimed that the police should not be held accountable for killing the nine men. These results suggest that a non-trivial percentage of Egyptians were willing to endorse state-sponsored violence against the Muslim Brotherhood without detailed information on the circumstances in which the violence was used.

⁸The pre-treatment model controls for age, gender, Sisi support, government performance, education, and political interest. Additional controls are then added for exposure to the incident, income, and residency in Cairo, Giza, or Alexandria, as well as the Facebook ad used for recruitment.

The percentage of respondents willing to support the police tactics and oppose accountability increased substantially in the security forces treatment group. For *tactics-justified*, support rose by 14.9 percentage points ($p = 0.008$), meaning that nearly half of respondents in this group endorsed the violence. This effect is substantively large, resulting in a 47 percent increase. Likewise, opposition to accountability rose by 10 percentage points for *no-accountability* ($p = 0.040$), an increase of 50 percent. As shown in Figure 2, these effect sizes are consistent across the different OLS specifications. We interpret these results to indicate that some Egyptians who generally oppose the use of state-sponsored violence are responsive to the specific circumstances in which repression occurs: they can be convinced to support repression when the security forces control the narrative and are able to portray their victims as violent, threatening terrorists.

Figure 2 approximately here.

By contrast, the additional information from Human Rights Watch did not decrease support for the police tactics or reduce opposition to accountability, relative to the control group. In fact, the coefficients for both outcomes point in the other direction, though the magnitude is small. These non-effects are consistent across the three OLS specifications, as shown in Figure 2. This result is consistent with a dynamic in which respondents who were willing to endorse violence against the Muslim Brotherhood even in the absence of contextual information were also distrustful of HROs and motivated to view repression of the group as justified regardless of the circumstances. As a result, they resisted updating their attitudes when confronted with information establishing the extra-judicial nature of the specific killings in question.

For the contested treatment, results demonstrated no statistically significant difference from the control group. For *tactics-justified*, these results were consistent regardless of the OLS specification used, as shown in Figure 2. For *no-accountability*, the results were somewhat muddled. Without covariates, the contested treatment group was ten percentage

points more likely than the control group to oppose accountability for the police, similar to the security forces treatment group. However, this effect disappeared with the inclusion of the covariates, indicating that it may have been an artifact of the imbalances on income and education. These results suggest that individuals reverted to their pre-treatment attitudes toward repression against the Muslim Brotherhood when provided with competing claims about the incident.

Given the substantively large effects of the security forces treatment, we interpret results from the contested treatment to provide some evidence for the ability of the human rights messaging to counter propaganda justifying state-sponsored violence. When the security forces were not challenged by the HRO, their account of the violent victims significantly increased support for repressive tactics and decreased opposition to accountability; however, when respondents were also exposed to the information from the HRO, the security forces' account no longer had these effects. In other words, the HRO information appears to have neutralized the ability of the security forces to increase respondents' acceptance of repression in this incident.⁹ While some Egyptians became more accepting of repression in cases where the security forces were unchallenged in portraying their victims as violent, they reverted to disapproval when also exposed to countervailing information indicating the falsity of the regime's claims.

5.2 Alternative Explanations

Social desirability bias constitutes a potential alternative explanation for the security forces effect if respondents only revealed their support for a controversial position after the treatment suggested it was acceptable. While this explanation cannot be ruled out completely, we believe it unlikely. First, research suggests that online, anonymous surveys are less susceptible to this type of bias (Kreuter, Presser, and Tourangeau 2009). Second, expressing

⁹F-tests indicate that the difference between the contested treatment and the security forces treatment is statistically significant for *tactics-justified* in the three OLS models ($p = 0.042; 0.002; 0.003$). The difference is not significant for *no-accountability*, though it is close for the models with covariates ($p = 0.878; 0.158; 0.164$).

support for repression against the Muslim Brotherhood does not appear to be a socially unacceptable position. Following the coup, many Egyptians attempted to persuade foreigners that violence against the Brotherhood was justified (Blumenthal 2013). Demand effects are also possible if respondents tried to reflect the researchers' preferences, but research suggests these effects are unlikely to occur (Mummolo and Peterson 2019). In addition, the survey did not identify the researchers or the institution, which should limit this concern.

Another possibility is that respondents in the security forces treatment may have been more likely to suspect the survey of being conducted by the regime. However, we also believe this explanation is unlikely, because only a small number of respondents viewed the treatments and then did not answer the outcome questions. If respondents in the security forces treatment were suspicious of the survey, we would expect to see relatively large numbers drop out once they had read the treatment. This pattern did not occur.¹⁰

It is also possible that treatment effects for the security forces were driven by the specific mention of *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, if respondents perceived this paper as particularly credible.¹¹ However, while it is true that *Al-Masry Al-Youm* developed a reputation for independence prior to the revolution, the paper has staunchly supported the regime since the 2013 coup (Lindsey 2017). Given this positioning, it is unlikely that its name lent additional credibility to the statement by the security forces.

5.3 External Validity

This section considers threats to external validity. First, it is possible that our results would have differed with a more representative sample. However, we believe these differences should bias against our findings on the security forces treatment. The vast majority of our respondents (75.5 percent), including half of Sisi voters (50.2 percent), rated the government's

¹⁰For the justified question, 10 dropped out of the security forces treatment, 8 from the human rights treatment, 11 from the contested treatment, and 8 from the control. For the accountability question, 14 dropped out of the security forces treatment, 12 from the human rights treatment, 9 from the contested treatment, and 8 from the control.

¹¹We chose to include the reference to a paper to further minimize any chance that respondents would view the use of the quote as an endorsement from the researchers.

performance as somewhat unsuccessful or very unsuccessful. While it seems likely that a majority of Egyptians disapproved of the government at the time of the survey, this sample is probably biased toward opposition opinions, suggesting the potential for a higher degree of skepticism about government institutions like the security forces.

Relatedly, one consequential way in which our sample diverges from the population is in educational attainment: 72.1 percent of our respondents had completed university, compared to just 20.5 percent in the fourth wave of the nationally representative Arab Barometer. Prior research indicates that less educated individuals are more vulnerable to propaganda in authoritarian settings (Geddes and Zaller 1989; Truex 2016), so we weighted the data by university education and reran the analysis. These results are shown in Figure 3.¹² Consistent with prior research, the magnitude of the security forces effect increased substantially, while the effects for the human rights and contested treatments were unchanged.¹³ For *tactics-justified*, the security forces treatment effect rose from 14.9 percentage points to 24.5 percentage points in the model without covariates. Likewise, the effect increased from 10.2 percentage points to 16.8 percentage points for *no-accountability*. On the one hand, these results support our main findings by implying that the security forces treatment may have been even more effective with a nationally representative sample. On the other hand, they indicate the importance of acquiring such samples in future work.¹⁴

Figure 3 approximately here.

Another concern with external validity relates to the content of the treatments and the incident they addressed. As with most survey experiments, it is possible that different language about the opposition's use of violence would have produced different results, due

¹²Weights were calculated by dividing the population percentage over the sample. University education = $0.205/0.721 = 0.28$. No university education = $0.795/0.279 = 2.85$

¹³While we are underpowered to detect heterogeneous effects, analysis of subgroup differences by university education are consistent with changes in the weighted results, as shown in Appendix Section 4.

¹⁴In Appendix Section 5, we also weight the data by residence in Cairo, Giza, and Alexandria, to explore how the results might change if we had a more representative set of respondents from rural areas and smaller cities. Again, the security forces treatment effect increases and the others do not change.

either to the treatment strength or the persuasiveness of certain language (Chong and Druckman 2007). Relatedly, we have evidence regarding a specific incident involving extra-judicial executions that may differ from other cases of state-sponsored violence. Indicative of these issues, we also ran a significantly shorter experiment in the survey that addressed hypothetical repression of protests, and the results did not demonstrate any attitudinal shifts. This lack of effects may have occurred because the messaging was much weaker relative to the experiment reported in the paper, or it may have occurred because protests have been so frequent in Egypt that public attitudes may have become entirely divorced from contextual information about the use of state-sponsored violence against specific demonstrations. For the sake of transparency, a discussion of these results is reported in Appendix Section 6. Thus, while our paper provides evidence that Egyptian security forces can exert relatively substantial influence on the public's attitudes toward state-sponsored violence in some circumstances, and that HROs possess some capacity to mitigate these effects, we are limited in our ability to say when these outcomes are more or less likely to occur.

It is also important to note that our findings may be influenced by specific characteristics of the Egyptian context. The regime resembles the modal authoritarian government in many ways, but a key difference is the dominance of the armed forces. Militaries are often relatively popular with the public, particularly in periods of instability; as a result, military-led regimes and the security forces that support them may possess more capacity than other authoritarian regimes to sway public opinion on the use of force. In addition, the revolutionary fervor, instability, and very real terrorism threat in Egypt during the period in which the experiment was conducted may also have increased Egyptians' willingness to trust state institutions on national security matters. These dynamics might plausibly have strengthened the security forces treatment relative to what we would find in other authoritarian regimes. For instance, in more stable autocracies like China or Hungary where opposition has been primarily peaceful and relatively muted, citizens may be more skeptical of claims that targets of repression acted violently. Another possibility is that Egyptians

react relatively more strongly to information encountered online because social media is less controlled by the regime than in some countries. As a result, it is also important for future research to consider how our findings apply to other authoritarian contexts.

Finally, the results may be influenced by our focus on print sources distributed online through social media. This mode of information transmission has become increasingly important for politics in the Arab world and globally. However, it has limitations in the Egyptian context, where internet penetration is around 50 percent. In wave 3 of the Arab Barometer, only 22 percent of Egyptians claimed to receive news online on a weekly basis, compared to 92 percent who said the same about television. Likewise, in Pew’s 2014 Global Attitudes Survey of Egyptians, only one-third of respondents said they had used the internet to get news about politics at some point in the past year. The figures are likely comparable in many other authoritarian political systems. However, to the extent that results would change with a different medium, our expectation is that television and radio sources would benefit autocrats and their security forces over HROs. Not only can they control these outlets more fully, but the visual images and sounds associated with violence might plausibly inspire greater fear among the public, further increasing acceptance of repression (Young 2019). Notably, other studies of authoritarian propaganda on television and the radio find substantively large effects on attitudes and behaviors (e.g. Adena et al. 2015; Peisakhin and Rozenas 2019).

6 Conclusion

In their review of empirical evidence on persuasion, DellaVigna and Gentzkow (2010) write that, “Virtually all the evidence is from the United States or other democracies. Yet one of the original motivations for studying persuasion is its role in autocracies and dictatorships.” While recent empirical studies increasingly support the claim that authoritarian propaganda can be persuasive, more experimental evidence is needed. Our paper contributes to this

growing literature by demonstrating that Egypt's security forces can have some success at justifying their use of violence when they control the narrative and are able to portray the opposition as violent terrorists. This finding illustrates how autocrats can use their control over the media to insulate themselves from potential backlash against repression. However, we also find that the persuasive capacity of the security forces is diminished in a competitive information environment in which an HRO challenges the regime's claims. This finding underscores the need for further research on competitive information environments in authoritarian regimes, particularly since liberalizing media markets and growing internet access mean that individuals living in these political systems are increasingly able to access non-governmental sources of information.

Despite these changes, it remains the case that authoritarian regimes like Egypt's exercise extensive control over information flows. Most Egyptians still receive their news from television, radio, or newspapers—all of which are strongly influenced by the government. As a result, the security forces treatment is most representative of the information environment experienced by the majority of Egyptians when they receive news about specific incidents of state-sponsored violence. The findings therefore suggest that Egypt's security forces may be relatively successful in justifying specific cases in which the opposition is repressed violently, even if the public generally holds negative views of state-sponsored violence.

Nonetheless, it is important that when the human rights information was paired with the security forces account of the raid, it counteracted the ability of the security forces to increase support for repression. This finding has important implications for policymakers interested in promoting human rights in authoritarian regimes. In recent years, autocrats around the world have increasingly moved to close space for HROs and other NGOs operating in their countries (Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014). This reduced ability to maneuver means that even less countervailing information will reach people living in these political systems, suggesting that authoritarian regimes will be better situated to justify repression of their opponents. Policymakers committed to human rights can push back against this trend

by offering additional training and funding to HROs, independent media outlets, lawyers, and other human rights advocates, by providing technical support for online platforms through which to disseminate their message, and by strengthening diplomatic protections against targeted repression. These resources would provide a useful investment for helping to limit the pernicious effects of authoritarian propaganda and its ability to increase support for state-sponsored violence.

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	Police	Armed Forces	Central Security	Domestic Media
<i>Pew Global Attitudes</i>				
Positive Influence in 2014:				
All Respondents:	42%	55%	52%	60%
Sisi Supporters:	53%	71%	63%	60%
Sisi Opponents:	29%	36%	40%	59%
<i>Arab Barometer</i>				
Trust in 2013:	37%	88%	–	–
Trust in 2016:	73%	86%	–	–

Trust: Percentage who trust to a great or medium extent. Positive Influence: percentage who view influence as very good or somewhat good.

Table 1: Perceptions of Egyptian Security Forces and Media

Variable	Obs.	Min-Max	Control	T1: Security	T2: Rights	T3: Contested	p-value
Male	591	0-1	0.85	0.86	0.85	0.89	0.69
Age	585	1-8	4.66	4.53	4.77	4.82	0.74
Education	595	1-8	6.43	6.87	6.65	6.48	0.05
News Reader	594	1-4	1.57	1.67	1.59	1.65	0.70
Election Choice	588	1-4	2.54	2.52	2.42	2.34	0.45
Gov. Performance	595	1-5	4.17	4.11	4.38	4.01	0.05
Income	560	1-5	2.67	2.84	2.72	2.89	0.14
Cairo/Alexandria	526	0-1	0.51	0.52	0.56	0.46	0.46
Heard of Incident	595	0-1	0.59	0.69	0.58	0.69	0.08
Advertisement	601	0-1	1.57	1.56	1.52	1.56	0.85

Reported p-values correspond to F tests.

Table 2: Summary Statistics and Covariate Balance

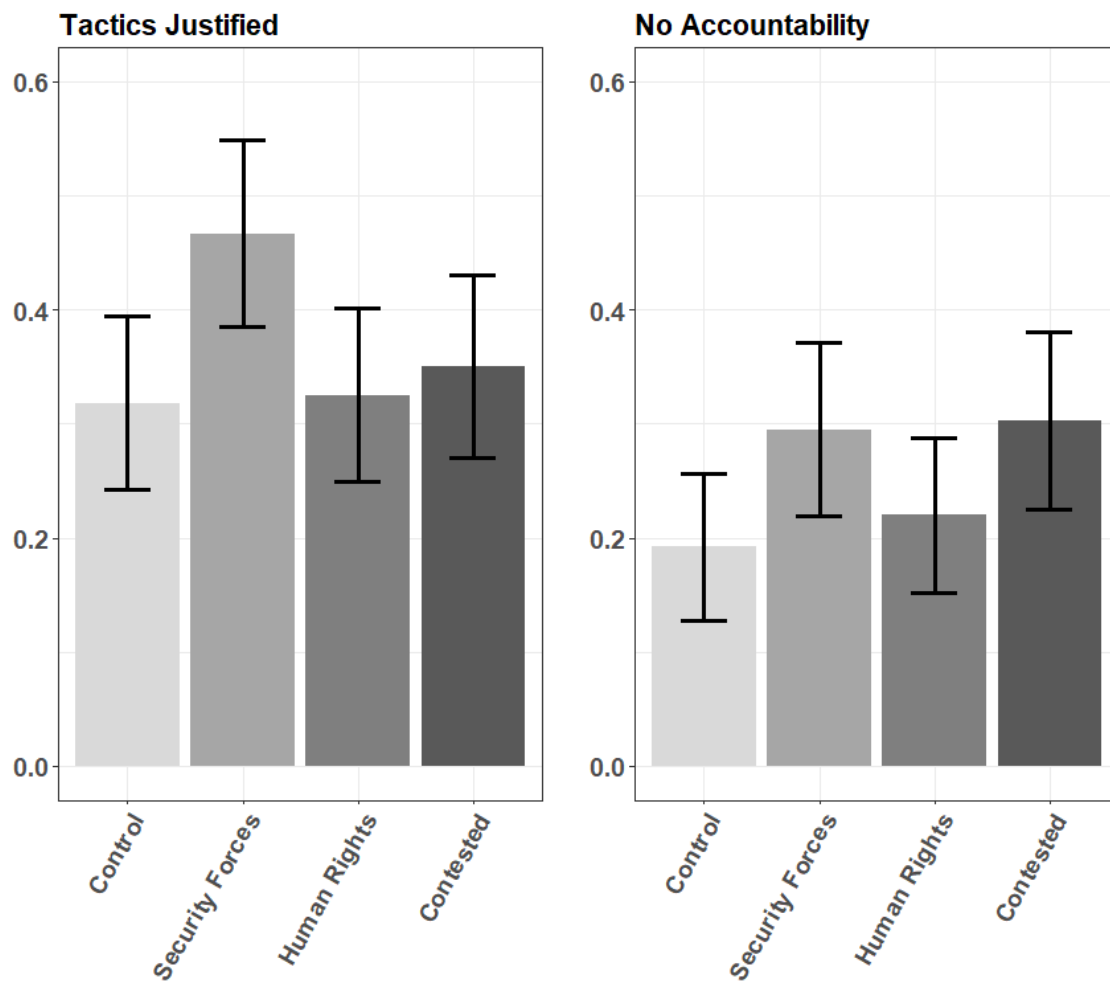


Figure 1: Mean Responses by Treatment Group

Note: Plots show mean responses by treatment group for the binary construction of tactics-justified and no-accountability, with 95 percent confidence intervals. N = 595 for tactics-justified; 589 for no-accountability.

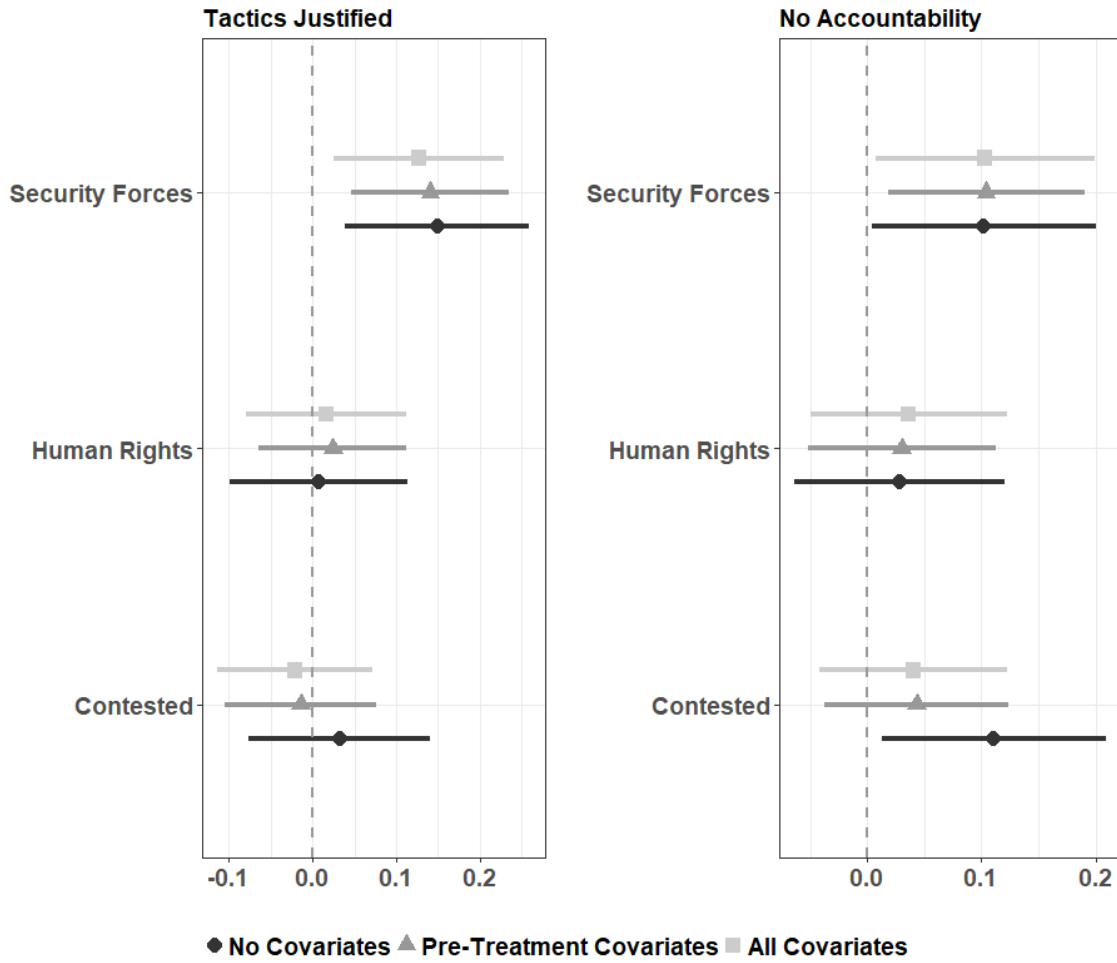


Figure 2: Coefficient Plots of ATEs

Note: Plots show average treatment effects with 95 percent confidence intervals for each group relative to the control, using different OLS specifications. $N = 595; 553; 488$ for tactics-justified and $589; 546; 482$ for no-accountability.

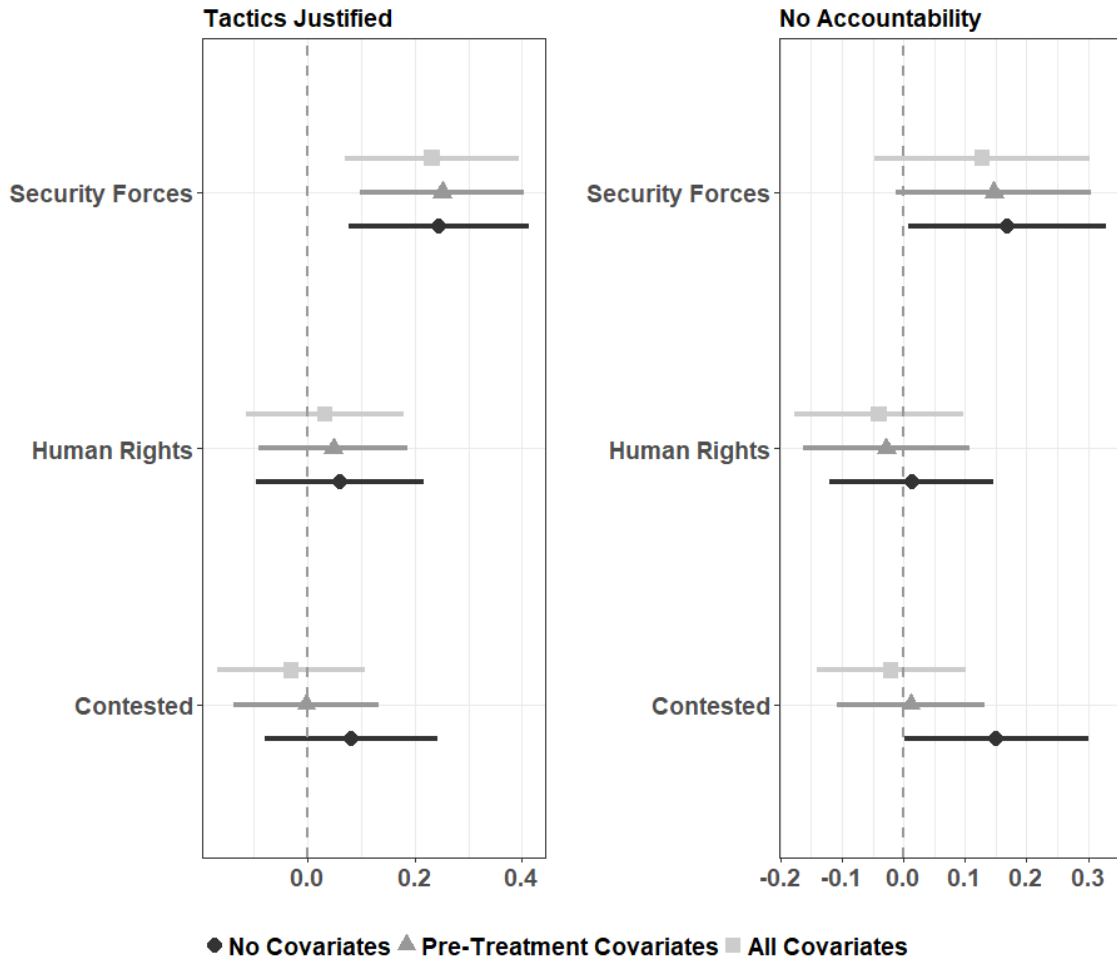


Figure 3: Results Weighted by University Education

Note: Plots show average treatment effects with 95 percent confidence intervals for each group relative to the control, using different OLS specifications. Data is weighted by a binary indicator for whether the respondent attended university. $N = 595; 553; 488$ for tactics-justified and $589; 546; 482$ for no-accountability.