

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 use a novel recruitment strategy with Facebook advertisements to conduct an otherwise infeasible survey experiment in Egypt's highly authoritarian context. 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, the country's security forces violently dispersed a sit-in of the president's supporters, killing at least 800 and likely well over 1,000 non-violent protesters. Both state-owned and private media outlets trumpeted the government's propaganda,¹ which attempted to justify the massacre by alleging falsely that the protesters were terrorists who had tortured Egyptian citizens, killed policemen, and threatened the security of the Egyptian state. Governments and their security forces routinely use misinformation about their victims' violent behavior to justify state-sponsored violence, and the problem is particularly severe in authoritarian regimes, where repression is more common (Dav-enport 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? On one hand, trust in authoritarian institutions often appears to be low, suggesting they may have little leeway to influence public opinion. On the other hand, biased communications sources can be effective at shaping public attitudes (Iyengar and Simon 2000; DellaVigna and Gentzkow 2010), particularly when the public is exposed to a the kinds of dominant messages propagated by most authoritarian regimes (Zaller 1992).

Because authoritarian regimes usually control the press, independent human rights organizations often provide one of the few reliable sources of information capable of challenging the regime's narrative. These organizations work to expose government violations, undermine the justifications for those violations, and then disseminate that information to the public. In Egypt, for instance, local and international NGOs collected and published evidence to disprove the government's claims that

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

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 human rights organizations 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 2010).

We address these questions by investigating the effects of competing information from Egyptian security forces and a human rights organization on Egyptians' attitudes toward an incident of state-sponsored violence against the opposition Muslim Brotherhood. Our study relied on Facebook advertisements as a novel recruitment method to conduct an online survey experiment that would otherwise have been infeasible in Egypt's highly authoritarian context. We based the experiment on an actual incident of repression against the Muslim Brotherhood in July 2015, using real accounts of the event for our treatments. Respondents were randomly assigned to a control group in which little information about the incident was provided, or to one of three treatment groups. The first treatment group read an account of the incident from the security forces reported in the Egyptian press that justified the use of violence against the Muslim Brotherhood by portraying the victims as terrorists who had attacked the police. The second treatment group read an account of the incident from Human Rights Watch, which provided evidence that the killings were extra-judicial executions of peaceful members of the opposition. The third treatment group received both sets of information together.

We find that exposure to information from the security forces increased support for the violent police tactics used in this incident by nearly 50 percent compared to the control

group. This result suggests that the Egyptian security forces have some capacity to influence the public's acceptance of repression when they control the message about why violence was used against the opposition. In demonstrating this effect, the study contributes to a growing empirical literature on authoritarian propaganda. Due to the difficulty of conducting research in these contexts, most studies of persuasion have focused on democracies (DellaVigna and Gentzkow 2010). However, several recent papers use creative methods to extend the literature into authoritarian settings, showing that authoritarian regimes can use propaganda effectively to shape both attitudes (Huang 2018; Stockmann and Gallagher 2011; Truex 2016a, 2016b) and behaviors (Adena et al. 2015; Peisakhin and Rozenas Forthcoming). We extend this literature by focusing specifically on attitudes toward state-sponsored violence, and by providing experimental evidence that propaganda can bolster acceptance of the repression that is often key to keeping these regimes in power. In addition, the use of Facebook advertisements to recruit respondents in Egypt demonstrates a novel method for conducting experimental research in authoritarian regimes and conflict settings.

For the human rights treatment, we do not find evidence that information from Human Rights Watch increased opposition to repression relative to the control group, indicating that such information may struggle to persuade individuals willing to express support for repression in the absence of context-specific information. However, when respondents were exposed to the security forces propaganda and the human rights account together, the large effects from the security forces treatment disappeared. This result suggests that when information from human rights organizations manages to reach the public, it has some capacity to neutralize the justifications of abusive security forces. By providing experimental evidence for the importance of countervailing information in these settings, this finding builds on the existing empir-

ical literature in authoritarian regimes that has focused primarily on single message environments. The results also contribute to literature on the effectiveness of human rights messaging, which has included relatively few experimental studies (Ausderan 2014). A practical implication of the paper is that policymakers and activists interested in promoting human rights should take steps to assist human rights organizations with the dissemination of their messages in authoritarian regimes, particularly given that these regimes have increasingly sought to limit space for human rights organizations to operate (Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014).

Finally, the paper sheds light on political developments after the collapse of Egypt's democratic transition, in which the new military regime perpetrated some of the worst single-day incidents of state-sponsored violence in recent history (Human Rights Watch 2014). With these events occurring only two years after a revolution motivated in part by anger at abusive security forces, it was to some extent surprising for so many Egyptians to appear supportive, or at least accepting, of the new regime and its use of repression. However, the effects for the security forces treatment suggests that the regime and its coercive apparatus possess some ability to influence attitudes toward security-related issues, which may have helped the regime to avoid public backlash against its reliance on extreme violence to suppress the political opposition.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 discusses relevant literature for the competition between authoritarian regimes and human rights organizations to shape 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 Shaping Public Support for Repression: Theoretical Expectations

There are few actions a government can take that are more unpopular than the unjustified use of force. In fact, a number of scholars have demonstrated that repression can actually backfire and increase anti-regime mobilization (e.g. Davenport 2007; Rasler 1996; Martin 2007). This backlash may occur in part because specific, visible cases of abuse can quickly become focal points for opposition to the authorities, as with the brazen and brutal murder of Khalid Said in Egypt prior to the 2011 revolution (Alaimo 2015). Because of this risk, governments that use repression often attempt to minimize the likelihood of backlash by leveraging propaganda. This reliance on propaganda is particularly prevalent in (though not exclusive to) authoritarian regimes, which tend to exercise greater control over the media (Whitten-Woodring and Van Belle 2015).

In some cases, this propaganda may be intended to *reinforce* repression by demonstrating the regime's strength and further intimidating the public into silence (Wedeen 1999; Edmond 2013; Simpser 2013; Huang 2014; Little 2015). The problem with such "hard propaganda" is that, even if it reinforces repression in the short term, it can undermine support for the regime over time (Huang 2018; Wedeen 1999). As a result, authoritarian regimes have strong incentives to use propaganda as a tool to mitigate the public's anger through *persuasion* and *justification*. In particular, regimes may utilize propaganda to create excuses for why the repression was not their fault (e.g. claims by the Syrian government that Syrian opposition forces are actually responsible for chemical weapon attacks in the civil war) or to provide justifications for why the repression was reasonable and right (e.g. the violence was targeted at armed groups). Research suggests that justifications may be more effective than excuses for

persuasion (McGraw 1991), and there are countless examples of authoritarian regimes referring to their opponents as “terrorists,” “subversives,” “criminals,” and other epithets, accusing them of (often) false acts of violence in an effort to justify the use of force against them.

Justifications for repression that emphasize such violent behavior by the victims may be particularly effective at sustaining support for human rights violations. Existing empirical evidence, particularly from democracies, suggests that people generally fear and dislike violent political actors, against whom they are more likely to support a repressive response from the state. For instance, Hetherington and Suhay (2011) demonstrate that perceived terrorism threats to one’s physical safety are associated with lower support for civil liberties in the United States. Several older studies of mass communication also emphasize that media coverage of protesters as violent and radical can bolster public support for the status quo (Gitlin 1980; McLeod and Hertog 1992; McLeod and Detenber 1999; Turner 1969). Multiple mechanisms may underlie these relationships. For one, individuals’ need for personal security and aversion to risk can push them to accept repression that is believed to target violent threats (Hetherington and Suhay 2011). Likewise, individuals may perceive violent political groups as unreasonable and extreme, and therefore less deserving of public support or protection from the state (Simpson, Willer, and Feinberg 2018). Extrapolating to authoritarian contexts, this literature suggests that authoritarian regimes may be able to use false information about the opposition’s violent conduct to increase public acceptance of the regime’s own violent repression.

However, almost all of these studies are both non-experimental and based in democratic Western contexts, highlighting how little empirical attention has been paid to how authoritarian regimes justify the use of force against opposition groups. One

reason for this may be that many scholars in political science, not to mention popular accounts in the news media, are skeptical of authoritarian regimes' ability to persuade the public.² Authoritarian regimes—and especially their security forces—are often corrupt, repressive, and inefficient. Such characteristics imply that these institutions will not be trusted by a majority of the public (Mishler and Rose 2001; Morris and Klesner 2010), which suggests they may lack the credibility to influence public attitudes. Other scholars, however, have provided empirical evidence that authoritarian propaganda can be persuasive in a variety of contexts, whether by increasing support for the Nazi Party and its anti-Semitic violence in Germany (Adena et al. 2015), driving anti-Tutsi violence in the Rwandan genocide (Yanagizawa-Drott 2014), countering belief in the content of anti-government rumors in China (Huang 2017), strengthening pro-Russian parties in Ukraine (Peisakhin and Rozenas Forthcoming), or building support for the Communist regime in China (Cantoni et al. 2017).

Indeed, Zaller's (1992) influential theory of mass opinion implies that authoritarian regimes should be effective at influencing public opinion, because a dominant, high-intensity message leaves little room for alternative attitudes to develop. The effectiveness of this dominant message can presumably weaken, however, in the presence of countervailing information that creates space for opposing attitudes to emerge (Chong and Druckman 2007; Sniderman and Theriault 2004; Zaller 1992). This dynamic implies that human rights organizations have an important role to play in documenting and publishing information that disproves the justifications used by authoritarian regimes, since other media voices are typically silenced or marginalized. If portrayals of the opposition as violent can increase public support for the regime's repression, then presumably human rights organizations should be able to undermine such support by establishing that the alleged violent conduct justifying

²See Stockmann (2013, 23-29) who provides an overview of this skepticism.

state-sponsored violence did not in fact occur.

In line with this expectation, scholars have generally argued that human rights organizations are effective at shaping public opinion and establishing norms against rights violations (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Keck and Sikkink 1999; Ropp and Sikkink 1999; Clark 2001; Welch 2001; Simmons 2009). Yet these organizations may struggle to reduce support for repression, whether because the security threat is not entirely invented by the regime (Jetschke 2010), their reputation has been discredited by smear campaigns (Sherwood 2015), or the public inherently trusts pro-government media sources more than potential alternatives (Truex 2016a). Ultimately, the effectiveness of human rights organizations is an empirical question for which additional experimental evidence is needed (Davis et al. 2012; Ausderan 2014; Krebs 2017), particularly in the context of a competitive information environment. To understand when individuals are more or less likely to support repression in authoritarian political systems, it is important to evaluate how attitudes are shaped by competition between autocrats' justifications for state-sponsored violence and the counter-information provided by human rights organizations.

3 Justifying and Contesting Repression in Sisi's Egypt

On July 3, 2013, General and Defense Minister Abdel Fattah El-Sisi ousted Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi, following a week of mass mobilizations. Morsi, elected in June 2012, was Egypt's first freely-elected president and also a member of the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood. In the immediate aftermath of the coup, the military-led regime swiftly shut down pro-Brotherhood media outlets and arrested thousands

of Islamists, including President Morsi. In response, the Brotherhood and their allies mobilized large counter-demonstrations, refusing to accept the new regime.

The security forces quickly resorted to using deadly force against those opposed to the coup. Just five days later, security forces killed more than 50 protesters engaged in a sit-in outside the Republican Guard club in Cairo. To justify the violence, the government asserted that protesters riding motorcycles had used firearms to attack guards in an effort to break into the building. Human rights organizations quickly cast doubt on the story. For instance, 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 2013a).

Over the next several weeks, the government frequently threatened to clear the Muslim Brotherhood’s larger sit-ins at the Rabaa and Nahda Squares, despite the presence of tens of thousands of protesters. The government repeatedly portrayed the sit-in participants as violent, claiming, for instance, that the sit-ins were “a threat to the Egyptian national security and an unacceptable terrorizing of citizens.” According to *The New York Times*, “The authorities have painted the squares as hotbeds of “terrorism,” a term they use loosely to describe their opponents. 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).

When the sit-ins were dispersed on August 14, at least 817 protesters were killed, in an incident likely worse than China’s infamous Tienanmen Square massacre (Human Rights Watch 2013c, 2014; Dunne and Williamson 2014). As with previous events, the government attempted to justify the violence by claiming that protesters had resorted to violence first (Fick and Nasralla 2014). Human rights organizations and foreign

media have discredited this version of events, documenting that the security forces' response was premeditated and that cases of protesters firing back were marginal at most (Human Rights Watch 2014).

Despite the strong evidence against the government's position, justifications for the violence were repeated incessantly in the Egyptian media, which had been purged of noncompliant voices and actively supported repression of the Brotherhood (Youssef 2015). In the years since, Sisi's regime has continued to exercise significant influence over the media, through which it has continued to justify the killing and jailing of its opponents.³ In short, following the coup, Egypt's military-led regime has justified its use of state-sponsored violence by propagating narratives in which their victims are violent terrorists who pose a direct threat to the state. Because of this threat, the security forces claim the right to use force. Can the public be persuaded of these justifications when they are exposed to incidents of state-sponsored violence in the media or elsewhere? Egypt would seem to be a natural case in which the government and its security forces lack the credibility to persuade citizens about repression: the country had recently experienced a revolution motivated in part by opposition to police abuse (Alaimo 2015). Historically, however, the military in particular enjoyed a degree of popular support. As in other Muslim countries like Turkey and Algeria, the Egyptian military had built its reputation by positioning itself as a neutral arbiter defending the state from external opponents, but also internal subversion by Islamists allegedly committed to the revolutionary ideal of an Islamic state (Blaydes and Lo 2011; Cook 2007). As a result, the military government and its allies in the security forces may possess enough credibility to shape the public's attitudes toward violent

³Some media outlets are owned directly by the state, while most private outlets are owned by companies and businessmen closely tied to the security apparatus (Reporters Without Borders 2017). The regime has also censored, intimidated, jailed, and killed independent-minded journalists, making it clear that the costs of dissent are high (Lindsey 2017).

repression in some contexts.

Survey data from Egypt supports this position. Table 1 displays opinions about institutions responsible for coercion and propaganda, taken from the 2013 Arab Barometer Survey and the 2014 Pew Global Attitudes Survey.⁴ The Arab Barometer was conducted before the July coup, and the Pew survey was conducted in 2014 under Sisi's government. The data show that the security forces and media received relatively high approval ratings during this period in which they were engaging in and justifying state-sponsored violence frequently. Majorities approved of the armed forces in both surveys, and the Central Security Forces – responsible for much of the regime's most violent acts – likewise received majority approval. As might be expected, Sisi supporters in the Pew survey (54 percent of respondents) viewed these institutions more favorably than Sisi's opponents, 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 sample and across the partisan divide. These results suggest that Egypt's security forces possesses more capacity to persuade the public than might typically be assumed in studies of authoritarian regimes.

Table 1 here.

Because of the regime's tight control over media outlets, human rights organizations have been forced to rely primarily on the internet to challenge the regime's narratives justifying state-sponsored violence. This medium has severe limitations in the Egyptian context: in the Arab Barometer, only 22 percent of Egyptians claimed to receive

⁴Both surveys were conducted face-to-face with nationally representative samples of Egyptian adults. The Pew survey was conducted between April 10 and April 29, 2014 with 1,000 respondents, using an area-probability design. The Arab Barometer survey was conducted between March 31 and April 7, 2013, with 1,196 respondents, using a national probability sample with stratification and clustering.

news online on a weekly basis, compared to 92 percent who said the same about television. Nevertheless, the regime clearly views these organizations as a threat. Domestic and international human rights defenders have been smeared in the press, accused of treason, jailed, exiled, and in some cases killed. Restrictive laws have been put in place to monitor NGOs, limiting their ability to collect and publish information (Chick 2017). Despite this pressure, both domestic and international human rights organizations have continued to publish investigations of violations by the regime and its security forces. In cases where this information does reach an Egyptian audience, it remains an open question whether it has the capacity to reduce support for repression.

4 Experimental Design

We designed a survey experiment to test whether Egyptian security forces are able to justify repression by painting opposition forces as violent, as well as the ability of human rights organizations to undermine such justifications. The experiment assigned respondents with equal probability to a control group or one of three treatments: a security forces treatment involving a statement from Egyptian security forces; a human rights treatment using 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, since such pre-treatment exposure can limit subjects' responsiveness to experimental vignettes (Druckmann and Leeper 2012). On the one hand, repeated exposure to real-world messaging from the security forces may result in respondents tuning out 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 context of the survey cannot outweigh the repeated exposure to security forces messaging pre-treatment.

For obvious reasons, we cannot mitigate this issue completely. However, to minimize its impact, we focused our experiment on a specific case of repression against the Muslim Brotherhood, since attitudes toward individual events may be more responsive to the specific contextual information received about these events – i.e. the extent to which the victims posed a violent threat. With this approach, we should be able to learn about the effects of propaganda and human rights messaging more broadly by focusing on their ability to affect attitudes toward a narrower case of state-sponsored violence. To that end, the experimental vignette addressed a specific incident in which Egyptian security forces killed 9 members of the Muslim Brotherhood, with outcome questions geared toward this incident.

4.1 Prompt

The event in the vignette occurred on July 1, 2015, two years after the coup that ousted President Morsi and 14 months before we implemented our experiment. El-Sisi had been elected president approximately one year before the event took place, and by this point the regime’s opponents had been pushed underground and were no longer able to mobilize mass street protests. However, the security forces continued to pursue the Muslim Brotherhood by jailing or killing its supporters, and it also faced a growing Islamist insurgency in response.

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 then 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 statements from the Interior Ministry claimed the men had been responsible for plotting terrorist attacks in Egypt. However, Human Rights Watch, an international human rights organization based in New York City, 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. According to the victims' relatives, the 9 men were part of a Muslim Brotherhood committee that had formed to take care of the families of Brotherhood members killed or jailed following the 2013 coup (Human Rights Watch 2015).

The survey was conducted in Arabic. The English translation of the vignette is below.⁵ All participants read the initial control statement. They were then randomly assigned to receive no additional information or one of the three treatment conditions.⁶

- **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

⁵The 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 the appendix for the Arabic version.

⁶We 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.

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:** Combined 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), which has persistently worked to expose abuses despite repeatedly being attacked by the Egyptian authorities.⁷ The control group is intended to capture “pre-treatment” attitudes toward repression of the Muslim Brotherhood

⁷Our 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 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.

when no context is included, while the contested information permits evaluation of whether one or the other sources of information is relatively more persuasive.

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.⁸ 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

Our expectation was that Egyptians' attitudes toward repression would respond on average to the information received in the security forces and human rights treatments about the use of violence by the different actors involved. Because the security forces treatment paints the Brotherhood members as violent, we expected attitudes to become more supportive of the state-sponsored violence against them. On the other hand, because the human rights treatment provides strong evidence that the Brotherhood members were peaceful, we expected attitudes to become less supportive of the state-sponsored violence in this case.

⁸This transformation is also more conservative than the 5-point scale.

These expectations apply to communications environments in which either the security forces or Human Rights Watch controls the story about this specific incident. This environment is plausible for the security forces treatment, since Egypt’s regime exerts a high level of influence over the information reported in newspapers and on TV and radio—the most common sources of news for the Egyptian public. For the human rights treatment, however, this environment is less realistic, since these organizations are usually responding to a government narrative that has already been advanced in the media. In this case of contestation, we expect that attitudes toward police violence will revert to pre-treatment attitudes, as respondents choose to trust the information that confirms their view of the current political environment and especially the acceptability of state repression in general (Sniderman and Theriault 2004). This dynamic would still have important implications for the ability of human rights organizations to contest the narratives propagated by authoritarian regimes, as it would suggest their countervailing information can neutralize the justifications used by these regimes to defend the use of repression.

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, social scientists have begun using them to recruit convenience samples for survey experiments (Samuels and Zucco 2013a; Samuels and Zucco 2013b). This method of recruiting respondents is especially valuable in authoritarian contexts such as Egypt, where administering such a survey instrument through more traditional channels would be extremely difficult – if not impossible – given the regime’s hostility to research examining rights abuses. Using this recruitment strategy, approximately 600 respondents completed the experiment. See Appendix Section 7 for additional details on the ads.

As with any convenience sample, our respondents were not representative of the broader Egyptian population. As might be expected, they were much more likely to have a college education. Consistent with other Facebook surveys, they were also predominantly male. Politically, the respondents were evenly split between individuals who voted for Sisi in the 2014 election and those who voted for his challenger or boycotted the election, suggesting a reasonable degree of political diversity in the sample.⁹ Prior to the experimental vignette, respondents were also asked about how closely they follow political news and their evaluation of the government. After the vignette, they were asked about their income, the governorate in which they lived, and whether they thought they had heard of the incident previously. We consider the implications of our sample composition when discussing the results.

Table 2 reports summary statistics and balance information for our covariates. There were slight imbalances for respondents' education levels and government performance evaluations. However, the substantive differences are fairly small across the treatment groups, and the primary results are robust to the inclusion of controls. The appendix includes additional information on the sample, including a comparison to the nationally representative Arab Barometer for variables on which this data is available.

Table 2 here.

4.5 Safety and Ethics

The advantage of using Facebook ads for recruitment is that it protects the respondents from possible consequences for participating in a survey on sensitive political questions. Given the political environment in Egypt at the time this study was con-

⁹38 percent reported voting for Sisi; 34 percent reported boycotting; 4 percent reported voting for the opposition challenger Sabahi; and 25 percent reported not voting for some reason other than boycotting.

ducted, researchers conducting interviews or surveys would not be able to guarantee the anonymity or safety of their research subjects, and researchers would also be at extreme risk. Once an Egyptian Facebook user clicked on the Facebook ad, however, they were redirected to Qualtrics, where they could not be connected to their Facebook accounts.¹⁰ We also took extra security precautions by disabling Qualtrics tracking of respondents' IP addresses and using an encrypted email account 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 took several issues into consideration to mitigate potential ethical concerns related to using information from the Egyptian security forces. First, the general information provided in this treatment has been a regular feature of Egyptian politics since 2013. Second, we made it clear that the security force's statement was attributed to the article rather than the researchers. Because our university affiliation was not included with the survey, there was also no risk of the university being perceived as agreeing with the security forces' narrative. As a result, the survey neither injected new content into Egypt's polarized political environment nor provided an endorsement of justifications for political violence. Finally, at the end of the survey, all respondents saw a debriefing statement. The debrief noted that human rights organizations had documented extensive human rights violations by the Egyptian security forces against unarmed members of the opposition, and it included a link to the Arabic-language Egypt page of Human Rights Watch.

¹⁰Author Institution Risk Management verified this with Facebook.

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 opposition as violent, and they provide mixed evidence for the ability of human rights organizations to contest these narratives 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. The online appendix also provides results for additional robustness checks, including different models and different 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 at the time of the survey, without detailed information on the circumstances in which such violence was used.

The percentage of respondents willing to support the violent police tactics and oppose accountability increased substantially in the security forces treatment group. For *tactics-justified*, support for the police tactics rose by 14.9 percentage points ($p = 0.008$), meaning that nearly half of respondents in this group were willing to endorse

the use of violence. This effect is substantively large, resulting in a 47 percent increase in expressed support. Likewise, opposition to accountability rose by 10 percentage points for *no-accountability* in the security forces treatment group ($p = 0.040$), 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 would normally oppose the use of state-sponsored violence are responsive to the specific circumstances in which repression occurs – i.e., 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.

Contrary to our expectation about the human rights treatment, the additional information from Human Rights Watch did not appear to 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. With the benefits of hindsight, this pattern does not seem entirely surprising. If respondents' pre-treatment attitudes toward the Muslim Brotherhood are so strongly negative that they are willing to endorse police violence toward the group without knowing the circumstances in which the violence was used, they are probably unlikely to be persuaded otherwise when exposed to additional information about those circumstances.

For the contested treatment, results generally resembled the human rights treatment, with 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.

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 human rights organizations to counter propaganda that seeks to increase support for state-sponsored violence. When the security forces were not challenged by Human Rights Watch, their account of the victim's violence significantly increased support for repressive tactics and decreased opposition to accountability; however, when respondents were also exposed to the information from Human Rights Watch, the security forces' account no longer had these effects. In other words, the information from Human Rights Watch appears to have neutralized the ability of the security forces to increase respondents' acceptance of repression in this incident.¹¹ While some Egyptians may become more supportive of repression in cases where the security forces are unchallenged in portraying their victims as violent, these Egyptians revert to disapproval of repression when also exposed to countervailing information indicating the falsity of these claims.

5.2 Alternative Explanations

One alternative explanation for the security forces effect is that respondents may be answering questions on a controversial topic based on social desirability bias. Perhaps they expected the researchers to be opposed to the police repression and only

¹¹F-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).

revealed their support for it when reading information that suggested such an opinion was acceptable. While this explanation cannot be ruled out completely, we believe it unlikely for several reasons. First, research suggests that online, anonymous surveys are less susceptible to this type of bias (Kreuter, Presser, and Tourangeau 2009). Second, expressing support for repression against the Muslim Brotherhood does not appear to be a socially unacceptable position, particularly for Egyptians who support the regime. Following the coup, many Egyptians attempted to persuade foreigners that the repression of the Brotherhood was justified (Blumenthal 2013). Furthermore, in the survey, one-third of respondents were willing to express support for the police violence even in the absence of any justification or additional information. Third, the survey did not identify the researchers or the institution, thereby reducing the possibility that respondents were trying to provide answers they thought the researchers would want to hear.

Another possibility is that respondents who received the security forces treatment may have been more likely to suspect the survey of being conducted by the security forces, and therefore more likely to report favorable opinions of the repression. 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 large numbers drop out once they had read the treatment, compared to the other treatment groups. This pattern did not occur.¹²

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 par-

¹²For 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.

ticularly credible.¹³ However, while it is true that *Al-Masry Al-Youm* developed a reputation for an independent streak prior to the Egyptian revolution, the paper has staunchly supported the regime’s war against the Brotherhood since the July 2013 coup. For instance, in 2015 its owner wrote a column asserting that he loved El-Sisi “like millions of loyal Egyptians” (Lindsey 2017). Given this positioning by the paper, it is unlikely that using its name in the prompt 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 of Egyptians. However, we believe that these differences should bias against our findings on the security forces treatment. For one, the vast majority of our respondents (75.5 percent), including half of Sisi voters (50.2 percent), rated the government’s performance as somewhat unsuccessful or very unsuccessful.¹⁴ While it seems likely that a majority of Egyptians disapproved of the government at the time the survey was conducted, this sample is likely biased in favor of 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 clearly diverges from the national 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 the effects of propaganda in authoritarian settings

¹³We 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.

¹⁴Only 25 percent of Sisi voters said the government had been somewhat successful or very successful. 24 percent said the government had been neither successful nor unsuccessful.

(Geddes and Zaller 1989; Truex 2016b; Yanagizawa-Drott 2014), so we weighted the data by university education and reran the analysis. These results are shown in Figure 3.¹⁵ Consistent with existing research on propaganda, the magnitude of the effects for the security forces treatment increases substantially with the weighted data, while the effects for the human rights and contested treatments are unchanged.¹⁶ For *tactics-justified*, the security forces treatment effect rises from 14.9 percentage points to 24.5 percentage points in the model without covariates. Likewise, the effect increases 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.

Figure 3 approximately here.

Another concern with external validity has to do with the content of the treatment messages and the incident they addressed. As with most survey experiments, it is possible that different language about the opposition’s use of violence – by either the security forces or Human Rights Watch – would have produced different results, due either to the treatment strength or the persuasiveness of certain language. Relatedly, we have evidence regarding a specific repressive incident – extra-judicial executions – that may not travel well to other cases of state-sponsored violence. In other words, it is possible that we would have observed different outcomes if other language had been used by the security forces and Human Rights Watch, and it is possible that the nature of the incident itself may have shaped the results.

¹⁵Weights were calculated by dividing the population percentage over the sample. University education = $0.205/0.721 = 0.28$. No university education = $0.795/0.279 = 2.85$

¹⁶While 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 3.

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 4. 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 human rights organizations possess some capacity to mitigate these effects when their countervailing information reaches the public, we are limited in our ability to say when these outcomes are more or less likely to occur.

Finally, it is also important to note that our findings may be driven partially by specific characteristics of the Egyptian context. Under Sisi's rule, Egypt resembles other contemporary authoritarian regimes in important ways: it governs through nominally democratic institutions like elections and a legislature, it combines control of public media sources with extensive manipulation of private media sources, and it relies on relatively targeted repression of specific groups rather than wholesale totalitarian monitoring. However, the regime also differs in key ways from the modal authoritarian regime, particularly with regards to its military tenor. 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 and political instability of Egypt during the period in which the experiment was conducted may also have increased Egyptians'

willingness to trust state institutions on claims about matters related to national security. As a result, it is also important for future research to consider whether our findings apply in other authoritarian contexts.

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 a human rights organization can demonstrate the falsity of the regime’s narrative of repression. 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, however, it remains the case that authoritarian regimes like Egypt’s exercise extensive control over the information to which their citizens are exposed. Most Egyptians still receive their news from TV, radio, or newspapers—all

of which have been strongly influenced by the government following the 2013 coup. 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 like the one in our experiment. 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 is opposed to such repression in general.

Nonetheless, it remains important that when the human rights information was paired with the security forces account of the raid, it appears to have counteracted the ability of the security forces to increase support for the state-sponsored violence. 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 human rights organizations 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, and less likely to face public pressure as a result of these actions. Policymakers committed to human rights can push back against this trend by offering these groups additional training and funding, as well as technical support for online platforms through which to disseminate their message and stronger 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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	AB Trust	Pew Influence	Pew Sisi Support	Pew Sisi Oppose
Police Force	37%	42%	53%	29%
Armed Forces	88%	55%	71%	36%
Central Security Forces	–	52%	63%	40%
Media	–	60%	60%	59%

AB Trust: Percentage who trust to a great or medium extent.
Pew Influence: Percentage who view influence as very good or somewhat good. Pew Sisi Support / Sisi Oppose: views of influence among those who support or oppose Sisi.

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 Bracket	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
Recruitment Ad	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

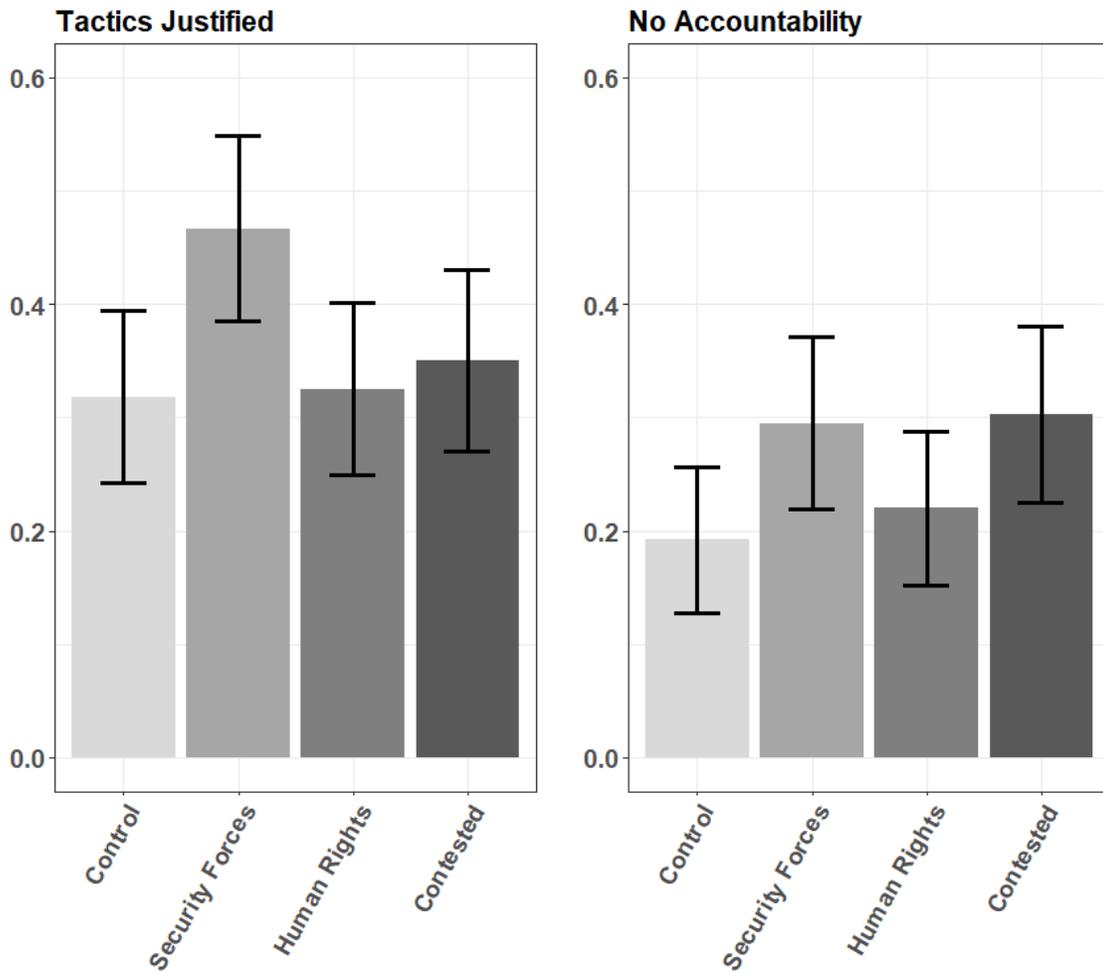


Figure 1: Mean Responses by Treatment Group

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.

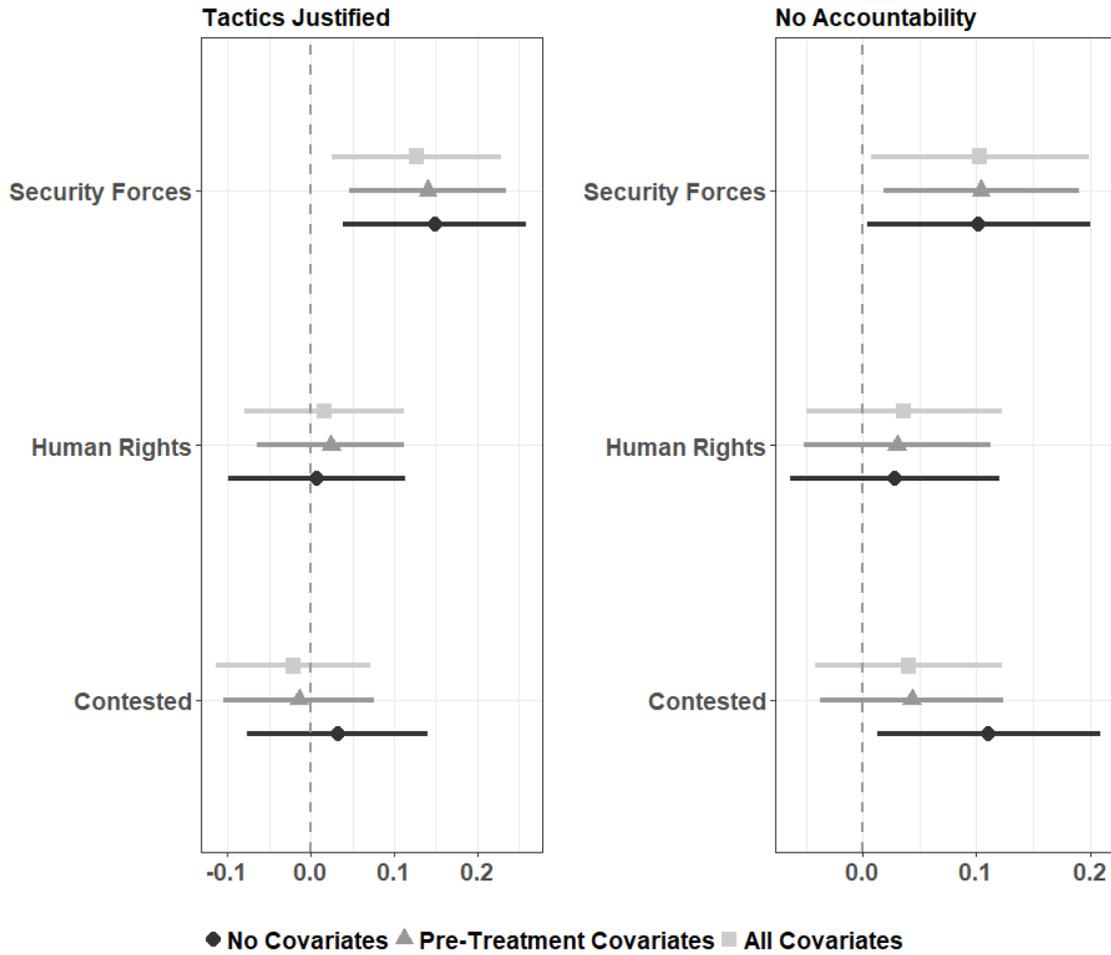


Figure 2: Coefficient Plots of ATEs

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.

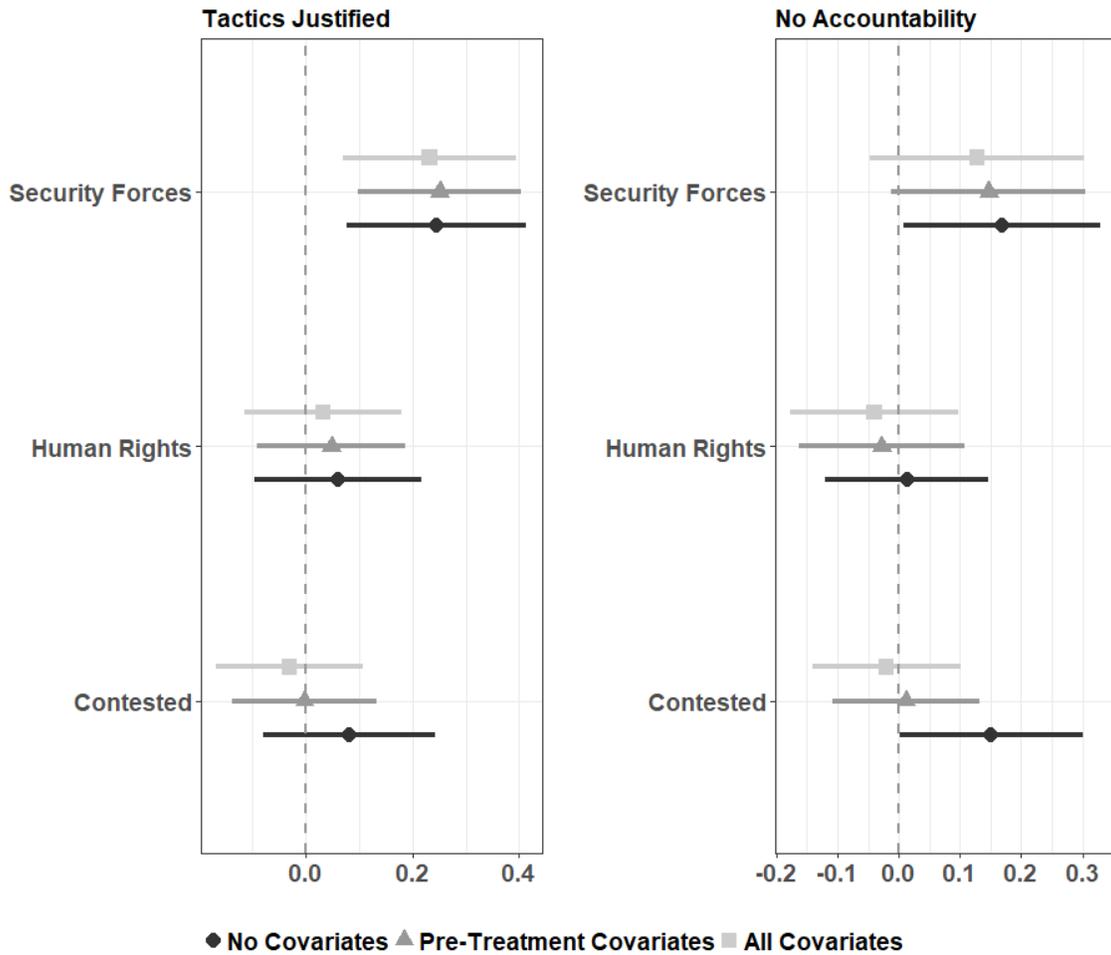


Figure 3: Results Weighted by University Education

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.