

Terrorist Prison Breaks

by Trevor Cloen, Yelena Biberman and Farhan Zahid

Abstract

Why would an insurgent group which employs terrorist tactics intentionally stage a quiet, nonviolent prison break when it could instead carry out a violent spectacle? Insurgent targeting of prisons poses a puzzle to our understanding of security in state-building environments, but it has yet to be explored. This article addresses the question of why terror groups choose to employ nonviolent means for a prison break with a comparative study of prison break attempts in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Nigeria. Using an original dataset consisting of all known prison break attempts carried out by a terrorist organization between 2001 and 2015, this article discerns the conditions under which nonviolent tactics are pursued. We argue that insurgents engage in nonviolent tactics when the predominant security authority signals the imminent withdrawal of military assets. This incentivizes them to limit violent activity, thereby encouraging the completion of the withdrawal process.

Keywords: Terrorist tactics, prison, terrorist groups, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, Nigeria

Introduction

Most insurgent-staged prison breaks are violent spectacles. On July 21, 2013, Islamic State militants attacked the notorious Abu Ghraib prison west of Baghdad. They used suicide bombers and mortar teams to breach the prison walls and free over 800 inmates. The operation was part of a widely successful plan to free and recruit from Iraq's large prison population, and it significantly undermined the legitimacy of the Iraqi government.[1] But, some prison breaks are markedly nonviolent and unspectacular. On September 2, 2011, thirty-five militants with connections to Al-Qaeda attempted to escape from jail through a sewage drainage pipe.[2] Insurgent groups that employ terrorist tactics,[3] such as the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda, typically free their captured and prospective members from prisons with a spectacular display of power. An act requiring physical force, a prison break offers a chance for an organization pursuing attention through violence to show off its audacity and capacity, and its opponent's impotence. Why, then, would a terrorist organization intentionally stage a quiet, nonviolent prison break when it could instead carry out a violent spectacle?

The existing literature offers several potential explanations to this question. First, some important works have questioned the belief that terrorism pays,[4] thereby suggesting that nonviolent terrorist prison breaks occur because the violent alternatives are simply ineffective. This approach does not, however, explain the variation in the violence of prison breaks, nor does it explain why an insurgent group would resume violent prison breaks after a period of nonviolence. Second, there is compelling work that links violence to organizational factors. Jacob Shapiro, for example, argues that a "terrorist's dilemma"—the problem of managing an organization while maintaining secrecy—makes it difficult for terrorist groups to control violence.[5] Jeremy Weinstein shows that violence can be a product of a group's membership, itself a function of the kind of resources it possesses.[6] These works may help to explain why different groups exhibit different levels of violence, but they do not account for why the same group may engage in different approaches toward the same type of target within a relatively short period of time (i.e. while facing the same "terrorist's dilemma" and maintaining basically the same membership).

This article applies the concept of strategic restraint, which has been used to understand the behavior of states on the international stage,[7] to explain the behavior of insurgent groups. In doing so, it builds on and

contributes to the rationalist scholarship which understands terrorism as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself,[8] and treats nonviolent behavior as strategic.[9]

Drawing on an analysis of an original dataset of 54 prison break attempts across 20 countries,[10] we identify two factors that increase the likelihood that an insurgent group will carry out a nonviolent prison break. The first is the presence of a temporary security authority, such as a foreign occupying power, in an otherwise weak state. The second is the signaling of withdrawal by the temporary authority. The presence of a temporary security authority offers force that bolsters an otherwise weak domestic regime. However, this arrangement is temporary by nature and invites competition for power following the foreign power's exit. When a temporary authority signals intent to exit, oppositional groups limit their visibly aggressive behavior in order to encourage the completion of the withdrawal process. They engage in strategic restraint to reclaim lost assets and to build group capacity. After the foreign military presence is removed, insurgent groups abandon strategic restraint and reemerge as threats to the now-independent domestic authority.

The contribution of this article is twofold. First, it is the first work to systematically analyze prison breaks by terrorism-practicing insurgent groups. Assault on government prisons by insurgent and terrorist organizations have been virtually unexplored to date, and offer insight into the broad range of insurgent tactics. Second, this article carries direct implications for ongoing counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan and other occupied war zones by demonstrating that violence is not a reliable indicator of militant capacity. Nonviolent activities, such as quiet prison breaks, may reflect not weakness but strategic restraint, and should also be taken into account when considering the strength of an insurgency.

Case Selection and Methods

This article addresses the question of why terrorist groups with territorial aspirations choose nonviolent over violent tactics when targeting government prisons. An original dataset of prison break attempts of terrorist organizations between the years 2001 and 2015 was compiled using secondary source material (newspapers, online news services, and the Global Terrorism Database),[11] in conjunction with law enforcement officials in Islamabad.[12] Additional interviews were conducted of U.S. officials who were involved in both the Iraq and Afghanistan counterinsurgency campaigns.[13]

We begin with instances of prison escapes in Iraq and Afghanistan to develop our argument, and then consider its implications in Yemen and Nigeria. The cases of Iraq and Afghanistan were selected because they are "extreme cases," which exemplify extreme values (number of inmates freed) compared to the overall distribution.[14] The strategy of extreme case selection facilitates exploratory research by enabling us to focus on the cases where the issue under examination (prison breaks) is the most pronounced.[15] Yemen and Nigeria were selected because they are also salient cases in terms of the number of inmates freed, yet provide an important contrast: they were not under foreign occupation. This difference allows us to investigate the impact of foreign occupation on violent and nonviolent prison escape strategies.

Strategic Restraint in Iraq

On March 6, 2007, several dozen militants assaulted Badush Prison in Mosul, Iraq. The attackers wielded automatic weapons and approached in a carefully choreographed assault. They quickly overwhelmed the prison authorities. Local guards were forced to call for assistance of U.S. forces, but the assault ceased before reinforcements arrived. Over 140 inmates escaped. The majority of them had been detained in connection to Al-Qaida. Fewer than half were recaptured.[16] The Badush Prison attack was the largest successful prison attack in Iraq to that date, and was a severe blow to the government's security forces.

The next prison break attempt occurred on July 25, 2010. Four high-profile Al-Qaida leaders fled from the U.S.-built Camp Cropper Prison days after the facility was turned over to the Iraqi authorities.[17] The Camp

Cropper incident was the first Iraqi escape attempt since the Badush Prison assault, and stands in stark contrast to its predecessor. Rather than assaulting the compound, Al-Qaida corrupted local prison authorities to assist in the escape. The escapees were personally driven from the base by Omar Hamis Hamadi al-Duleimi, a 34-year-old warden originally trained by U.S. task forces.[18] The escape marked the beginning of a trend towards nonviolence in Al-Qaida's prison break attempts. Five additional attempts occurred between 2010 and 2012. Four of them were nonviolent.

At a glance, this change in tactics seems illogical. The nonviolent prison break attempts carried a greater risk of failure than their violent counterparts for several reasons. First, escape plots had to be planned and kept secret while under the supervision of authorities. To do so is inherently difficult and requires extreme caution. One former escapee recounted that he was unaware of a Taliban-organized escape plan until he was unexpectedly summoned for the attempt by a fellow member.[19] Insurgent groups often attempt to corrupt local authorities to decrease the chance of detection. In the case of the Camp Cropper escape, Al-Qaida affiliates first appealed to sectarian tendencies of al-Duleimi before bribing him to take part in the escape plan. However, success is not guaranteed in this endeavor either. Failure increases the risk of detection, and raises the cost of future action. Finally, nonviolent escape attempts are usually time-consuming. In 2011, Al-Qaida members unsuccessfully attempted to tunnel under the Abu Ghraib Prison walls using a frying pan. The structure took several months to construct, and was eventually detected by prison authorities.[20] Risk of detection increases with the duration of escape attempts, further increasing the risk of failure.

Violent prison assaults lack many of the disadvantages of their nonviolent counterparts. Success is contingent on the attacker's ability to overwhelm prison authorities until the assailant's objective is achieved. Planning is done in secret, reducing the risk of detection, and no external actors are implicated. Furthermore, violent prison assaults offer greater potential rewards to insurgent organizations. In addition to the immediate gain of reclaiming imprisoned assets, successful break attempts further the insurgent goals by undermining public confidence in the incumbent authority.

Experts contend that the Bush Administration's 2007 decision to increase U.S. military presence in Iraq by 30,000 additional troops suppressed insurgent activity in Iraq, thereby stabilizing the security environment. [21] It is tempting to suggest that the increased military presence enabled the Iraqi security forces to establish control, resulting in a period of relative peace during the U.S. withdrawal process. However, repeated prison break attempts between 2010 and 2012 demonstrate otherwise. Al-Qaida freed 62 inmates from Iraqi prisons, including several high-profile leaders, across three escape attempts during this period. All prison break attempts lacked outright violence. Nonetheless, insurgent violence steadily decreased from mid-2008 to December 2011. Then, on January 12, 2012, Al-Qaida attempted its first violent prison break in nearly five years, just twelve days after the withdrawal of American forces. The group used exploding cars and suicide bombers in a brazen but unsuccessful attempt to penetrate a U.S.-built compound.[22] The next year, Iraq witnessed three additional prison break attempts, two of which were violent. All subsequent prison break attempts have been violent since. Four violent attacks occurred between 2013 and 2014 alone, resulting in the escape of over 3,500 detainees. Domestic security concerns continued to grow as well. The rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, an offshoot of Al-Qaida in Iraq, brought renewed civil war to Iraq in 2014. By the end of 2015, the group had taken control of several major Iraqi cities from government forces. Iraqi security gains were neither permanent nor substantive, and proved to be fleeting following U.S. withdrawal.

Why did Al-Qaida pursue nonviolent tactics when attempting to free prisoners in 2008-2011? Interviews with U.S. officials stationed in the region at the time suggest that Al-Qaida may have pursued two greater strategic objectives. First, it sought control of the Iraqi state by undermining public trust in the government. Second, it tried to force the removal of U.S. military presence by imposing unacceptably high costs on foreign powers. The public breakdown of negotiations over a prolonged Status of Forces agreement between Iraq and the United States governments signaled the coming end of U.S. military presence by early 2008. On

December 4, 2008, both governments ratified an agreement outlining the terms of U.S. withdrawal, set to complete by December 31, 2011.[23] The breakdown in negotiations fulfilled Al-Qaida’s second strategic objective in the region. Following the announcement of withdrawal, insurgents had little strategic incentive to continue aggressive operations against foreign troops, as their exit was now imminent. As a result, overall violence decreased between 2008 and 2011.

Evidence of insurgent restraint is available in combat statistics from this period. Figure 1 displays the frequency of attacks on U.S. and Coalition troops from 2004 to 2010.[24] Violence against foreign troops first decreased in late 2007 with the introduction of George W. Bush’s “troop surge.” However, frequency of violence continued to decrease steadily over the next two years. Figure 2 reflects the number of multiple fatality bombings over the same time period.[25] In both graphs, violence continued to decrease during the period of U.S. withdrawal. Al-Qaida was not inactive during this period. It freed members from as many as three separate prisons. Even in this, however, violence decreased quickly. As stated earlier, all prison break attempts during the withdrawal period were nonviolent in nature.

The rapid decay of security in Iraq immediately following the completion of the withdrawal process indicates that Al-Qaida retained its capacity as a violent organization between 2008 and 2011. The continued decrease in violence during this period suggests that the group made a strategic decision to limit violence against foreign forces. Washington clearly signaled that it was no longer committed to maintaining security in Iraq. Rather than provoking a renewed build-up, insurgents limited targeting of temporary military forces. Continued activity is also reflected in nonviolent prison break attempts, as the group sought to reclaim imprisoned assets. Following the completion of foreign withdrawal, insurgent violence immediately resumed in an effort to destabilize the government. Al-Qaida resumed violence against the Iraqi government to its full capacity, engaging in repeated spectacular events.

Figure 1. Insurgent-Initiated Attacks against U.S. and Coalition Forces in Iraq

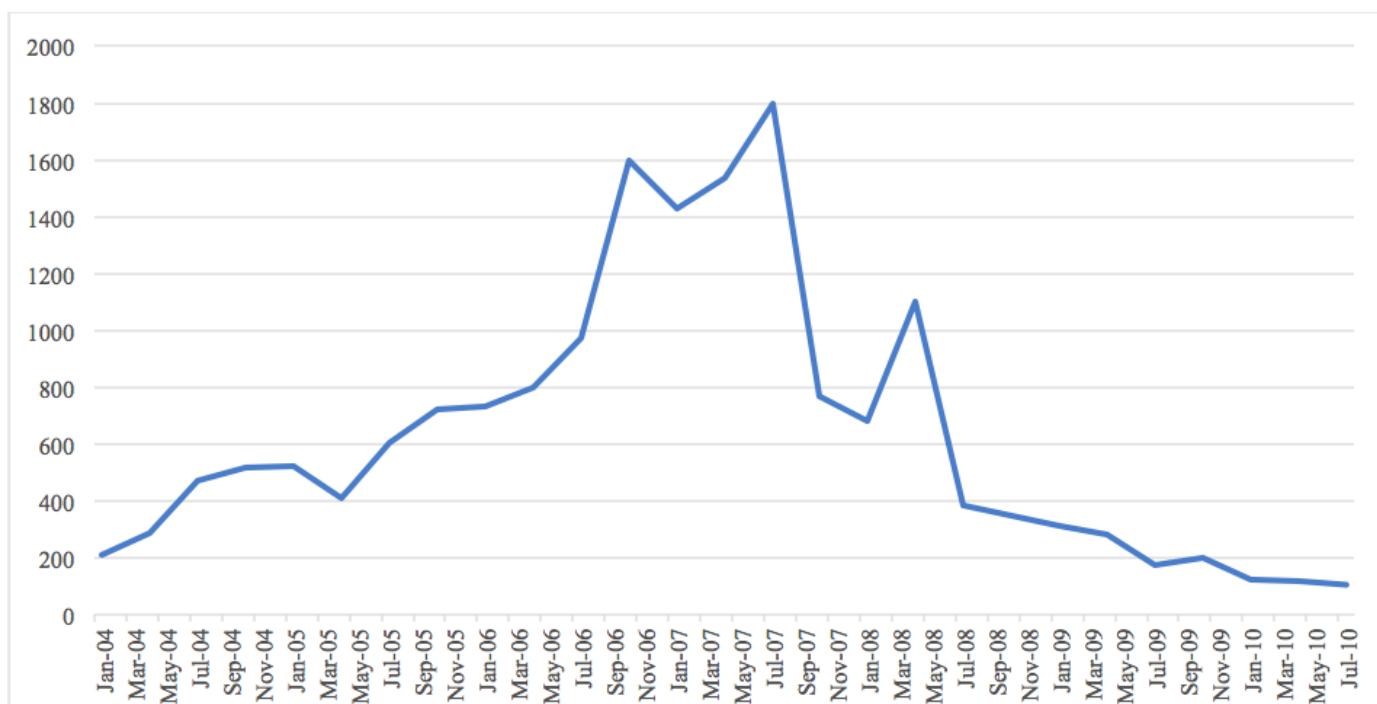
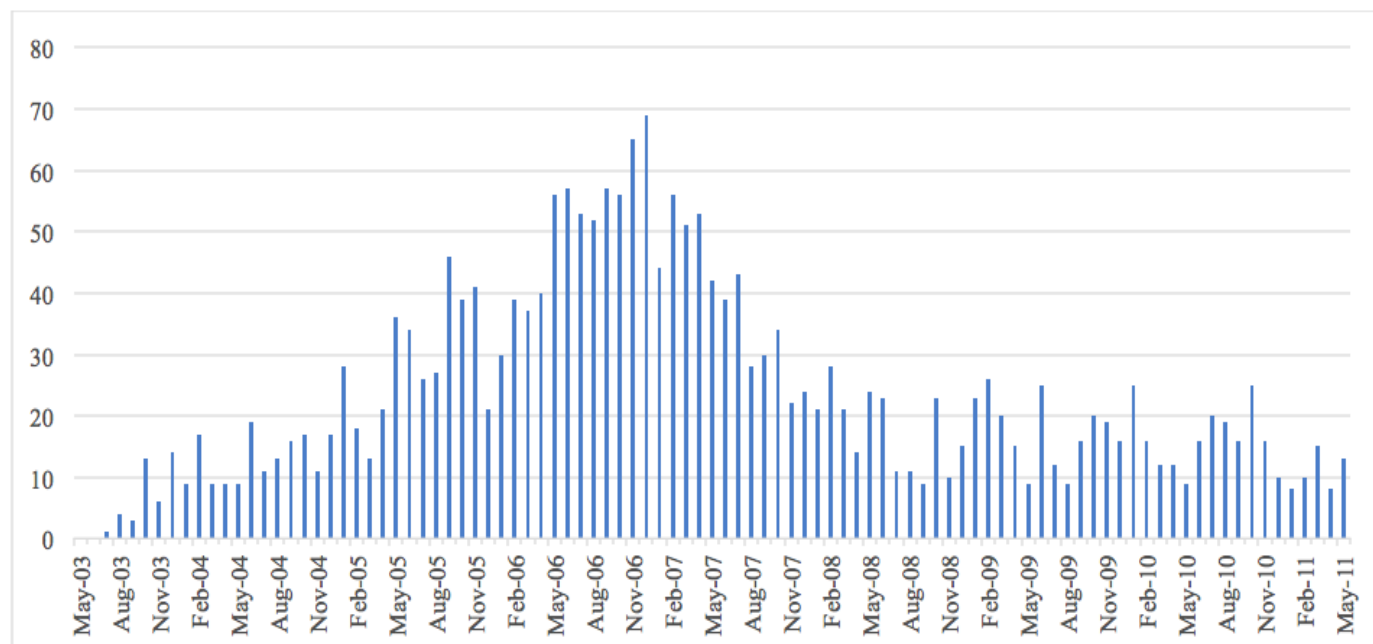


Figure 2. Multiple Fatality Bombings in Iraq

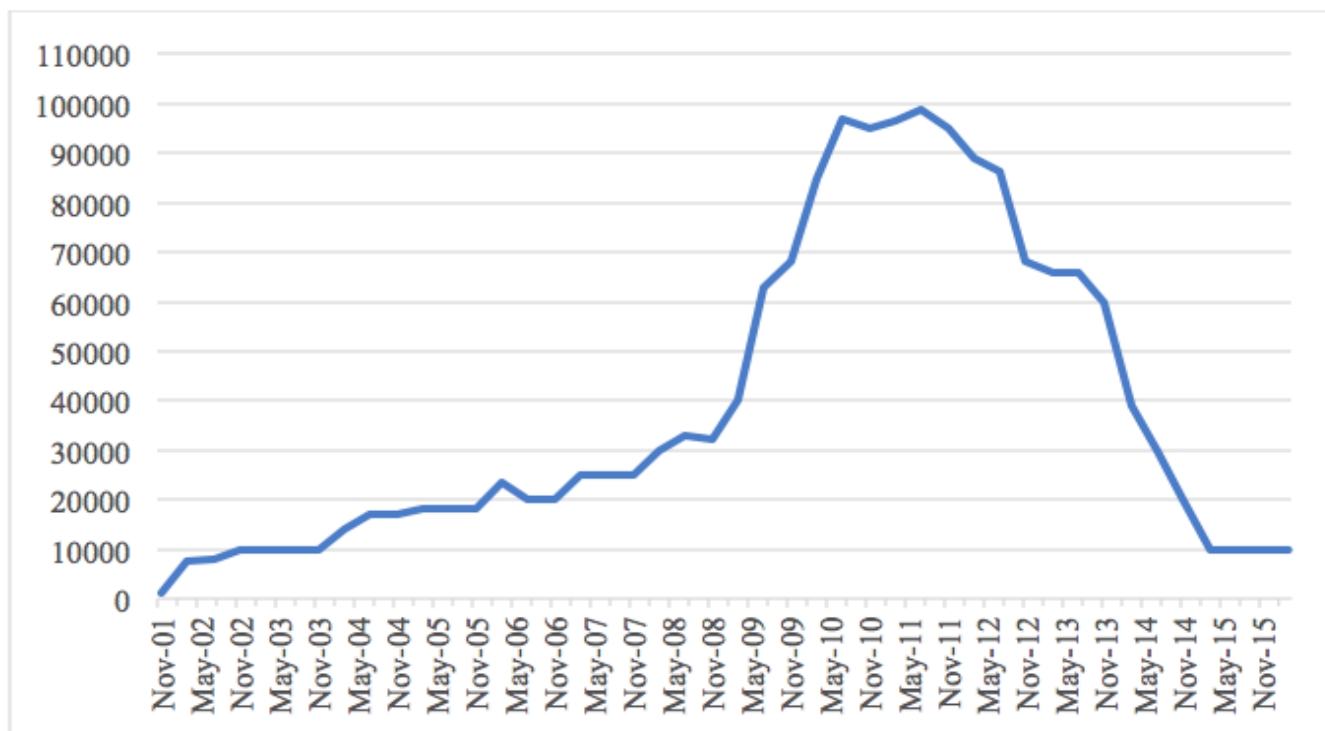


Strategic Restraint in Afghanistan

Is this framework applicable to cases of insurgency outside of Iraq? The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan offers a case for comparison. Like Iraq, Afghanistan was occupied by the United States in its War on Terror. The current caretaker government faces a violent insurgency by the Taliban, which was removed from power following the United States invasion. Finally, both Al-Qaida and the Afghan Taliban committed a series of prison break attempts during periods of U.S. occupation and corresponding withdrawals.

Like in Iraq, the United States signaled to insurgents that its commitment to Afghan security was temporary. In mid-June 2011, the Barack Obama administration announced a plan calling for the rapid removal of 30,000 troops in the following year, a reduction of nearly a third, and for continued reduction afterward.[26] Over the next three years, the U.S. military presence dwindled from over 100,000 troops to approximately 10,000, where it stands today. Figure 3 shows the number of occupying U.S. forces over time.[27] Domestic affairs have also signaled a hesitance on the part of policymakers to maintain a presence in Afghanistan. Obama conceded in 2011: “America, it is time to focus on nation-building here at home.”[28] Although combat operations were extended through 2017, U.S. commitment grew increasingly limited. Troop numbers currently rest at 9,800 and are set to reduce to 5,500 in the coming year, even as the Afghan government continues to cede ground to the Taliban. The Afghan government currently controls two-thirds of the territory.[29] By failing to allocate renewed resources to the conflict, the U.S. government signaled that it was no longer willing to assume the predominant security role in Afghanistan.

Figure 3. U.S. Troops Deployed in Afghanistan



The Taliban has attempted numerous prison breaks over the past decade. On March 2, 2014, ten of “the most prominent insurgents” held at Sarposa Prison walked freely through the front gates. The group exited with 18 recently paroled inmates, in an embarrassing incident for the Afghan security forces. An official ledger was altered by an unknown official, and the militants were permitted to leave unscathed.[30] The incident was not the first Taliban operation at Sarposa. In 2008, Taliban-affiliated militants assaulted the prison, overwhelming the local authorities and indiscriminately freeing over 1,200 inmates.[31] Three years later, 470 militants escaped through a hundred-meter-long tunnel.[32] The operation took several months, and likely relied on the corruption of prison authorities to go unnoticed.

Why did the Taliban choose to free inmates quietly and nonviolently in 2011 and 2014, even after it had successfully infiltrated Sarposa? The 2014 prison break departs drastically from previous measures. The operation was selective, only freeing ten members, and it did not require the use of force. It demonstrated a desire to contain the impact of the operation while still reinforcing the ranks of the Taliban.

Like Al-Qaida in Iraq, the Taliban insurgency has demonstrated a variety of strategies in response to U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. The Taliban initiated a single violent prison escape attempt in 2008, prior to a renewed build-up of U.S. forces. Prison break attempts remained rare during the period of peak U.S. presence. A single peaceful attempt occurred in 2011, when the organization successfully tunneled under the Sarposa Prison walls. Unwilling to engage U.S. and Afghan forces during the peak of the U.S. surge, the Taliban instead resorted to nonviolent means of freeing members. No prison breaks occurred during the subsequent three years, during which the United States removed the majority of its forces. U.S. policymakers' failure to react to Taliban gains between 2014 and 2016 demonstrated an unwillingness to further increase military commitment in the region. Unsurprisingly, violent prison attacks have resumed in response. The Taliban have since committed three prison break attempts, two of which were violent, freeing over 350 inmates in total.

Changes in the Taliban behavior toward foreign soldiers are reflected in combat data as well. Following the withdrawal announcement, the number of attacks on foreign security forces exhibited a steady decrease. It

is possible that this trend reflects the lower probability of foreign troops engaging in combat with insurgents due to a decrease in absolute numbers. In order to account for this possibility, we interviewed U.S. officials stationed in Afghanistan at the time. Their responses suggest that the decrease in violence against security forces was the product of restraint on the part of the Taliban, and not due to a decreasing probability of U.S. troops encountering insurgents. As one officer put it: "It was clear that the Taliban had standing orders to avoid being decisively engaged with American forces. Following the beginning of the withdrawal process, engagement with American troops carried a huge tactical risk to fulfill an already completed strategic goal." [33] The insurgents shifted their focus towards Afghan security forces instead.

These results suggest that the Taliban actively attempted to limit aggression towards foreign fighters during the period of U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Violent prison break attempts ceased during military buildup, and did not resume during the subsequent withdrawal. Subversive tactics were used to regain group assets from the prison population without threatening the security forces. Meanwhile, the targeting of foreign troops decreased in both absolute terms and in proportion to the number of troops present. After Coalition forces signaled that they were unwilling to once again escalate combat operations in Afghanistan, Taliban attacks on Afghan security forces resumed with intensity. Taken together, these trends suggest that the Taliban actively shifted resources away from violence against foreign forces, and towards efforts to undermine the Afghan regime.

Absence of a Credible State Authority

The data suggest that prison break attempts are nearly entirely violent in the absence of a credible state authority. In 2010, Boko Haram assaulted the Bauchi State prison in northern Nigeria, freeing nearly 700 prisoners.[34] The group attacked the prison with automatic weapons, killing four guards and injuring several others, before meticulously freeing inmates cell by cell. The prison was set on fire as the group retreated. Similar violence was observed in Yemen. Al-Qaida in Yemen carried out four violent prison break attempts between 2011 and 2016, freeing nearly 1600 inmates in total.

Both Yemen and Nigeria have experienced consistent, violent attacks against prisons by insurgent organizations. Both states lack sufficient state capacity to suppress insurgency, and they also lack security assistance from foreign powers. As a result, the government and militant groups compete for control of territory and the confidence of the public. In the absence of an occupying power to temporarily boost state capacity, insurgent groups are free to violently undermine state authority. Prisons provide an ideal target for such an objective. In Nigeria and Yemen, insurgent organizations possess the necessary capacity to overwhelm security resources in small encounters, and are thus able to carry out escalated attacks against government prisons. Additionally, neither Boko Haram nor Al-Qaeda in Yemen have proper incentive to nonviolently free members from prison. Corruption of prison authorities is both more time consuming and less effective in undermining confidence in state security. While corruption of a prison official may certainly raise eyebrows, the burning of a prison is far more effective in inciting public fear.

In the absence of an external power to bolster state security, insurgent violence against prisons is likely to continue. The prison security records of Yemen and Nigeria demonstrate the consequences of weak state security. Violent and highly visible prison attacks have repeatedly occurred against government prisons. However, the case in Nigeria also demonstrates that effective state security may properly limit targeting of prisons. In 2014, Boko Haram severely botched an attack on the Giwa Barracks compound, resulting in the deaths of 87 militants. No violent prison attacks have since then been carried out by Boko Haram.[35] By repelling the raid, prison authorities successfully imposed unacceptable costs on Boko Haram, deterring future raids from occurring. Since the Giwa Barracks raid, only one prison break attempt has occurred, at the Koton-Karfe Prison. Unsurprisingly, the attempt was entirely nonviolent. While thirteen inmates escaped

with the assistance of a corrupt guard, the incident was neither as visible nor catastrophic as the Bauchi state prison incident in 2010.

Discussion and Conclusion

Prison break attempts vary in form and frequency across weak states around the world. We show that the presence of a strong state authority or occupying power imposes unacceptably high costs on groups that would otherwise target prison facilities. When the temporary power signals intent to withdraw from the affected region, insurgent groups respond with strategic restraint. They limit violence against foreign forces, instead using nonviolent action to reclaim captured assets from prisons. Violence is likely to resume as insurgent capacity is preserved and reclaimed during the subsequent withdrawal period. In the absence of strong state authority, insurgent action against government prisons is almost entirely violent. The cost of violence is comparatively low compared to prospective gains in public perception.

Understanding the determinants of prison violence carries greater implications for counterinsurgency and state-building measures. Decreases in levels of insurgent violence are often considered to be indicators of success in counterinsurgency operations. Indeed, such indicators were cited in the U.S. decision to withdraw from Iraq beginning in 2008. However, analysis of the type and prevalence of prison break attempts, coupled with other metrics of insurgent violence, suggests that such a judgement was premature. Iraqi and Afghan insurgents responded by limiting the targeting of foreign forces and adopting nonviolent prison break tactics to facilitate foreign exit. The resumption of violence shortly after U.S. exit in Iraq indicates that insurgents retained the capacity for violence, and strategically waited until the end of the U.S. occupation to resume hostile operations.

The results of this paper suggest that alternative metrics are necessary for evaluating the success of counterinsurgency. The prevalence of insurgent violence is not a reliable indicator of insurgent capacity. Additional indicators, such as the prevalence of prison escapes, both nonviolent and otherwise, should be incorporated when evaluating the success of counterinsurgency operations.

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Notes

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- [10] They are Afghanistan (5 observations: Taliban, a total of 1,724 freed), Bangladesh (1: Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh, 3 freed), Columbia (2: Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and National Liberation Army, 141 freed), Egypt (2: Hezbollah and Hamas, 71 freed), India (1: Students Islamic Movement of India, 3 freed), Indonesia (2: unspecified, 151 freed), Iraq (12: Al-Qaeda and ISIS, 3,811 freed), Israel (1: unspecified, 0 freed), Kyrgyzstan (1: Jaish al Mahdi, 4 freed), Libya (1: unspecified, 1,117 freed), Mauritania (1: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, 1 freed), Morocco (1: unspecified, 9 freed), Niger (2: Boko Haram and Al-Qaeda, 0 freed), Nigeria (8: Boko Haram and Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, 1,110 freed), Pakistan (2: Taliban, 650 freed), Philippines (3: Jemaah Islamiyah, Moro Islamic Liberation Front, and Maute, 57 freed), Singapore (1: Jemaah Islamiyah, 1 freed), South Africa (1: unspecified, 0 freed), Ukraine (1: Donetsk People's Republic, 70 freed), and Yemen (6: Al-Qaeda, 1,613 freed). A grand total of 10,536 inmates were freed.
- [11] Events were coded as violent when they involved fatalities (or intent to inflict fatalities) or destruction of property (e.g. the burning down of parts of a prison), and nonviolent when they did not. Examples of acts of nonviolence included escaping through a sewage pipe or bribing a guard. Data collection and coding were first completed by David Immerman, an undergraduate researcher, under the supervision of one of the co-authors. Each case was then reviewed by the co-authors, who also conducted additional research to check for incomplete or missing data.
- [12] Interviews with the Pakistani law enforcement officials were conducted by one of the co-authors, who is a superintendent of police and course commander at the National Police Academy in Islamabad, Pakistan.
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