Sectarian Framing in the Syrian Civil War

Daniel Corstange

Assistant Professor

Department of Political Science

Columbia University

daniel.corstange@columbia.edu

Erin York

Ph.D. Candidate

Department of Political Science

Columbia University

eay2109@columbia.edu

Abstract

How do civilians respond to civil war narratives? Do they react to ethnic frames more strongly than to alternatives? Governments and rebels battle for hearts and minds as well as strategic terrain, and winning the narrative war can shift legitimacy, popular support, and material resources to the sympathetically framed side. We examine the effect of one-sided and competing war discourses on ordinary people's understandings of the Syrian civil war — a conflict with multiple narratives, but which has become more communal over time. We conduct a framing experiment with a representative sample of Syrian refugees in Lebanon in which we vary the narrative that describes the reasons for the conflict. We find that sectarian explanations, framed in isolation, strongly increase the importance government supporters place on fighting. When counterframed against competing narratives, however, the rallying effect of sectarianism drops and vanishes.

1 Introduction

How do civilians respond to competing civil war narratives? Rebels and governments go to great lengths to win not only battles over strategic terrain, but also propaganda wars over hearts and minds — themselves a strategic resource. Winning the battle of narratives helps warring factions rally their own support bases, demobilize their opponents, and attract foreign sympathy and material support (Berman and Matanock, 2015; Humphreys and Weinstein, 2008).

Civil wars are often fought along ethnic lines, or, at least, are described that way (Christia, 2012; Kaufmann, 1996; Sambanis, 2001). Do people respond more strongly to war narratives framed around ethnicity than they do to alternatives? Possibly, but not unconditionally. Research on ethnic conflict suggests that violence increases the salience of communal identities, but it also highlights elite efforts to encode events in ethnic terms in order to build coalitions of support (Brubaker and Laitin, 1998; Fearon and Laitin, 2000). By emphasizing a favorable cleavage, framing the conflict in *ethnic* terms can benefit some factions at the expense of others, suggesting that ethnic appeals may not be equally compelling to all constituencies (Kalyvas, 2006; Varshney, 2003).

Public opinion research demonstrates the importance of controlling the framing of an issue for how mass publics perceive a problem and what to do about it. Foundational work showed that aptly-framed narratives could alter citizens' views dramatically by focusing their attention on different aspects of an issue (Chong and Druckman, 2007*b*; Kinder, 1998; Zaller, 1992). Later work, however, demonstrated that competitive framing, by exposing citizens to rival narratives, reduces people's suceptibility to framing effects (Chong and Druckman, 2007*a*; Druckman and Lupia, 2016; Sniderman and Theriault, 2004). In the context of a civil war, the factions may try to propagate their preferred narratives unchallenged, but opponents have incentives to break the discursive monopoly with their own counternarratives.

The Syrian civil war is partly a contest of narratives, an important one of which is that it is *sectarian* at its core — a conflict between a popular supermajority of Sunnis fighting a minority-dominated regime. Yet this claim competes for an audience with revolutionary

appeals for democracy and counterrevolutionary denouncements of foreign meddling (Lynch, 2016). The dogged efforts of the government and opposition to propagate their narratives suggest that neither side is willing to concede the conflict over the nature of the conflict (Horowitz, 1991).

We examine the effect of this narrative competition on popular perceptions of the war with a framing experiment embedded in a large-scale survey of Syrian refugees in Lebanon — one of the first of its kind. The experiment varies the war narratives describing the conflict and whether they are presented in isolation or in competition with one another. We expect sectarian frames to induce Syrians to interpret the causes of the fighting in communal terms, but, given the narratives promoted by the warring factions, to affect government and opposition supporters differently. Yet we also anticipate that competing frames, by stimulating Syrians to think about the conflict in multiple ways, will limit the degree to which sectarian arguments can influence citizens' understandings of the war.

We find that the sectarian narrative does, indeed, influence people's perceptions of the war under restrictive conditions — but we also find important limits on the capacity of frames to move people. When presented alone, sectarian narratives cause government supporters, but not their opposition counterparts, to emphasize sectarian differences in the conflict, along with cognates such as minority rights and the role of religion in politics. When presented alongside one of its discursive competitors, however, the effect of the sectarian frame drops in magnitude and often vanishes. These findings suggest that sectarian narratives have a rallying effect on government supporters, consistent with regime propaganda efforts, but that exposure to competing arguments can counteract this effect. Meanwhile, we find little evidence that the other narratives alter Syrian views on their own, suggesting that people will not simply adopt whatever frame is placed before them.

This paper contributes to the literatures on civil war, ethnic conflict, and issue framing. It demonstrates that ordinary people may, indeed, respond more strongly to civil war narratives pitched in ethnic terms than to alternatives, but that these responses are neither automatic nor unconditional. Instead, it suggests that people's receptivity depends on their factional

preference in the war, and whether or not they have multiple frames of reference to consider. The literature on ethnic conflict often indicts ethnic entrepreneurs for activating identity categories for their own purposes, but this paper suggests that their ability to do so may be more limited than commonly supposed. While some elites may try to convince people to think about conflict in ethnic terms, strategic opponents have incentives to reorient the conflict around other, non-ethnic dimensions — and providing a viable discursive alternative may be enough to disrupt ethnic narratives.

Lastly, this paper extends the literature on issue framing to the extreme setting of a civil war. Nearly all framing studies are set in stable democracies and address issues such as welfare policy or international trade that do not approach the existential crises that people face in a violent civil war. This paper demonstrates that framing dynamics occur even on issues of extremely high salience — suggesting that, when frames move people, they do so by making the considerations they highlight applicable and not just accessible.

2   Conflict Framing

Violent conflict provokes impassioned struggles to explain why people are fighting, to justify the behavior of some actors, and to condemn the actions of others (Brass, 1997; Brubaker and Laitin, 1998; Fearon and Laitin, 2000). This battle of narratives is what Schattschneider (1960, 68) called the "choice of conflicts" and Horowitz (1991, 2) called the metaconflict over meaning — "the conflict over the nature of the conflict." Winning the narrative war helps win the physical one by shifting legitimacy, popular support, and material resources to the sympathetically framed side.

As a descriptive matter, many civil wars are fought along ethnic lines — or, more precisely, are summarized in those terms by participants and observers (Christia, 2012; Kaufmann, 1996; Sambanis, 2001). But an ethnic summary is a *choice*, not a self-evident truth. As Kalyvas (2006, 78) observes, warring parties compete to frame their conflict in favorable terms to "mobilize the population around the cleavage dimension they represent, because they know that the population is divided in a multitude of contradictory ways." Efforts to

pick a beneficial cleavage from a wider menu of options are thus central to the conflict itself (Schattschneider, 1960, ch. 4).

Attributing *ethnic* meaning to a civil war is part of the metaconflict over the relevant social cleavages. As Brubaker and Laitin (1998, 444) note, "the 'ethnic' quality of ethnic violence is not intrinsic to the act itself; it emerges through after-the-fact interpretive claims" that assert who is fighting whom. Ascription, if accepted by the people so ascribed, separates groups, hardens boundaries, and frames the conflict in existential terms (Fearon and Laitin, 2000; Kaufmann, 1996). Yet instrumental accounts of identity choice focus on the supply side of the story; elites may offer an explanation for the conflict, but they must still convince ordinary people to accept their preferred interpretation (Varshney, 2003).

Research in political communication shows that issue frames affect how citizens perceive issues (Chong and Druckman, 2007b; Kinder, 1998; Zaller, 1992). Elites fight to shape public definitions of problems and convince their audiences to weigh some considerations more heavily than others (Sniderman and Theriault 2004, 145; Jacoby 2000, 751, Druckman and Lupia 2016, 20). In so doing, the competing sides "wage a war of frames because they know that if *their* frame becomes the dominant way of thinking about a particular problem, then the battle for public opinion has been won" (Nelson and Kinder, 1996, 1058).

Issue frames "define what the problem is and how to think about it" by summarizing a complex issue, curating considerations for relevance, and promoting a particular interpretation of the matter (Kinder 1998, 172; Sniderman and Theriault 2004, 135). They lay out "master narratives" that provide "a handy way... to simplify, streamline, and ultimately erase the war's complexities" (Kalyvas, 2006, 386). Framing works through several psychological processes: by making new considerations *available*, by making available ones *accessible*, and by convincing people that some considerations are *applicable* while others are not (Chong and Druckman, 2007a,b; Kinder, 1998; Nelson, Oxley and Clawson, 1997).[1]

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[1]A "consideration" is "any reason that might induce an individual to decide a political issue one way or the other" (Zaller, 1992, 40). Note that framing is closely related to the concept of priming; one review explains that "framing effects and what communication

From this perspective, civil war narratives that invoke ethnicity makes considerations about communal conflict available and accessible, but also encourages people to place greater weight on inter-communal differences. Ethnic frames summarize complex and ambiguous wartime events in simple, discrete terms that are easy to apply and compatible with people's "everyday primordialism" (Fearon and Laitin, 2000). Public opinion research suggests that group referents require minimal sophistication to use, making them attractive appeals for a wide audience (Nelson and Kinder, 1996). Indeed, even when elites pick allies based on power considerations, they often justify those choices in identity terms that "have psychological and emotional import for the rank and file" (Christia, 2012, 6–7).

If the ethnic narrative were the *only* one to which citizens were exposed, its selective presentation of the conflict might actually sway them. Indeed, initial research on framing effects, based on single-frame studies, suggested that people's views were easily manipulated. Yet opponents have strong incentives to recast the struggle along other dimensions, and a number of studies show that competing frames, by exposing citizens to rival narratives, motivate people to evaluate those considerations consciously and reduce their susceptibility to framing effects (Chong and Druckman, 2007*a,b*; Sniderman and Theriault, 2004).

To date, most scholars have studied framing effects in stable, democratic polities with issues of modest salience; the canonical application asks Americans to assess a proposed white supremacist rally framed in terms of free speech or public order. Despite the more extreme circumstances, we expect framing dynamics to apply in civil war settings as well. While citizens may prefer one *side* or another, they may be less certain about the *reasons* for the fighting, especially since they observe only a small fraction of the war's events — and the frames provide them with ready-made syntheses of the events they do not see.

In the Syrian civil war, we anticipate that citizens exposed only to sectarian explanations will use them to make sense of the civil war. Given the array of forces in that conflict, we expect government and opposition supporters to react differently to the sectarian frame, as we

scholars have called priming effects share common processes, and the two terms can be used interchangeably" (Chong and Druckman, 2007*b*, 115).

discuss in the next section. Yet we also expect that people exposed to competing narratives will be less susceptible to sectarian framing effects as they bring more considerations to bear on the reasons for the fighting.

3 Framing the Syrian Civil War

The Syrian conflict is one of the most destructive civil wars of the modern era, the root causes of which government and opposition forces have contested since its onset. A common argument, however, is that the fighting has become increasingly communal over time — pitting a government dominated by an "alliance of minorities" against a Sunni supermajority. Sectarian narratives of the war cast it as the latest installment of a broader Sunni–Shia struggle for dominance in the Middle East tied to the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Abboud, 2015; Droz-Vincent, 2014; Heydemann, 2013; Hokayem, 2013; Lynch, 2016).

Nonetheless, the sectarian narrative is neither the only one to circulate, nor even the most prominent. Protests against authoritarian rule broke out several months after the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, with local committees channeling demonstrations toward civically-oriented demands for "the transition to a democratic and pluralistic state based on freedom and equality for Syrian citizens." The Syrian regime moved quickly to change the narrative by denouncing "sedition" and foreign conspiracies, as well as portraying the protesters as criminals and terrorists. The president belittled the "revolution" and accused foreign conspirators of sectarian incitement by "[sending] masked people to neighborhoods with different sects living in them, knocking on people's doors and telling each that the other sect has already attacked and are on the streets, in order to get a reaction."[2]

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[2]See Lynch (2016); "Vision of the Local Coordination Committees (LCC) for a political solution in Syria," `http:///www.lccsyria.org/751` (accessed 12 May 2016); "President Bashar al-Assad's Speech to the Syrian Parliament, Wednesday, March 30, 2011," `http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/speech-to-the-syrian-parliament-by-president-bashar-al-` accessed 12 May 2016).

In response, opposition groups denounced the government for "playing the invalid card of sectarianism," tried to subvert sectarian rhetoric with slogans such as "freedom is my sect," and stressed its core demands for "freedom and democracy" with "no room for sectarianism or discrimination."[3] The rhetoric hardened as the government cracked down, however, with chilling slogans — rumored to be the work of government provocateurs — surfacing at protests, such as the infamous "Christians to Beirut, Alawites to the grave."[4] The inflow of foreign forces, mostly Sunnis on behalf of the opposition and Shiites on behalf of the government, contributed to the vitality of the sectarian narrative (Lynch, 2016). Nonetheless, the sectarian narrative has not yet eclipsed rival claims in Syrian discourse.

In the polarized media environment surrounding the Syrian conflict, citizens have minimal access to dispassionate sources of information. In effect, getting both sides of the story would require people to follow both pro-government and pro-opposition media — a tall order in the best of circumstances. Although we lack basic data on media consumption among Syrians, our survey sample does suggest that many people are disengaged from politics, and, accordingly, are unlikely to seek out multiple sources of information. Opposition sympathizers are more engaged than their government counterparts; we might expect the former to hear the latter's narratives more often than the reverse (see Supplemental Appendix 1).

Ultimately, we seek to understand how these competing narratives affect how ordinary

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[3]See, e.g., Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami (2016, ch. 4), and Droz-Vincent (2014, 54). For the quoted passages, see the "Vision of the Local Coordination Committees (LCC) for a political solution in Syria" (`http://www.lccsyria.org/2863`; accessed 12 May 2016); `http://en.etilaf.org/coalition-components/syrian-national-council.html`; and `http://en.etilaf.org/coalition-documents/declaration-by-the-national-coalition-for-syria` (accessed 17 May 2016).

[4]Fabrice Balanche, "The Alawi community and the Syrian crisis," *Middle East Institute*, 14 May 2015 (`http://www.mei.edu/content/map/alawi-community-and-syria-crisis`; accessed 12 May 2016).

Syrians make sense of the war. In particular, we expect sectarian arguments to affect people in different ways, with government sympathizers most receptive to them and opposition supporters more likely to reject them. Yet we also expect that exposure to multiple narratives will reduce the influence of the sectarian frame by increasing the number of considerations people bring to bear when trying to understand the conflict.

4 Data and Methods

As a practical matter, large swaths of Syria proper are inaccessible, so we study the effect of the war narratives among displaced Syrians in neighboring Lebanon, where some 1.5 million people have taken refuge. Sampling Syrians in Lebanon is challenging for conceptual and operational reasons, however. We use the term "refugee" inclusively to refer to Syrians displaced by the civil war, regardless of whether or not they are registered formally with the United Nations (UNHCR). This target population in Lebanon nests, in turn, within a wider conceptual population of displaced Syrians in the Middle East and the rest of the world.

4.1 Refugee Sample

Refugees constitute a transient population for which there is no sample frame. UNHCR has registered roughly two-thirds of the displaced Syrians in Lebanon and regularly issues updated data on the spatial location of the registered refugees. The displaced population congregates in space, regardless of registration status, partly for family reasons and partly due to housing costs. We use area sampling techniques to extrapolate from the UNHCR data to locate refugee households. We sample from each province (*muhafaza*s) in proportion to the number of refugees registered with UNHCR, and then sample localities proportionally within districts (*qada*s) where displaced Syrians concentrate. Enumerators used random walk patterns within sampled neighborhoods to select households, and then randomized within households according to the next adult birthday. Ultimately, we drew a sample of

2000 adult subjects between 19 May and 12 June 2015 with a response rate of 91 percent.[5]

Although this design yields a reasonable sample in light of the practical limitations, it is not perfectly representative of the population (compare Humphreys and Weinstein, 2008, 443–445). First, it almost certainly undersamples Syrians at either end of the wealth spectrum: the most destitute and transient Syrians are not easily located, while wealthier Syrians do not live in the low-income neighborhoods where registered refugees concentrate. Second, as expected with a population holding traditional gender views, we undersample women — who constitute 40 percent of the sample — due to about 10 percent of householders demanding that a male participate in place of a female. The replacements tend to be older and less educated, but are otherwise similar to their peers.[6] Lastly, security constraints imposed by the Lebanese army prevented us from sampling in the border town of Arsal.

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[5]Beirut-based Information International drew the sample based on data from UNHCR. They included all provinces proportional to the Syrian population, and then drew, proportionally, all districts in which Syrians comprised at least 2 percent of the resident population (14 of 26 total *qada*s). Enumerators solicited interviews from randomly drawn household members 20-years old or older, skipped households with no resident Syrians, and included one follow-up visit if the selected member was not home before declaring a unit non-response.

[6]More precisely, we sampled all *households* randomly, but 11 percent of them prevented us from completing the randomization *within* the household: 5 percent are males who entered after a female relative refused to participate, while 6 percent are males who entered after a male refused to allow a female relative to participate. Other than being older and less educated, we find surprisingly few imbalances between these replacement males and the rest of the sample in terms of location and length of time in Lebanon, sect and degree of religiosity, political engagement, and factional sympathies in the war.

4.2 Background Descriptives and Factional Support

Although there are few benchmarks with which to work, Supplemental Appendix 1 provides descriptive overviews of the Syrian refugee population in Lebanon, against which our sample compares favorably. Overall, the sample leans poor, uneducated, Sunni Arab, and religious — all consistent with what we know about the war's refugees. Only 20 percent of the sample has a secondary school education. We proxy material well-being with household room density, with a median of 2.5 residents per bedroom — 50 percent more crowded than homes in Syria. Sunni Arabs predominate among the refugees; 12.5 percent of the sample belonging to one of Syria's minority communities (Kurds, non-Sunni Muslims, and Christians) against roughly a third of the polity. Personal religious practices are similar to those found elsewhere in the Arab world, as are degrees of political engagement.

In simplified terms, 39 percent of respondents support the sitting government, 53 percent sympathize with the rebels, and the remainder express no preference. To measure factional leanings, we asked subjects to rank their top three choices from a list of six groups: the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the Syrian government, Syrian Islamist groups, foreign Islamist groups, Kurdish groups, and Hizballah.[7] People's first choices split almost entirely between majority support for the FSA — which respondents used as a catch-all category for the rebels — and a substantial minority in favor of the government. People supporting the Kurdish groups invariably expressed support for the government, so we group them together. About half of the opposition supporters cited Islamists with their second choice, and half did not; we call the latter "Nationalists" for lack of a better label. As we demonstrate later, both groups responded similarly to the treatments, so we group them together in the main analysis.

People's factional preferences are consistent with qualitative assessments of the govern-

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[7]The question reads: "I'm going to read you a list of some of the groups fighting in the conflict right now. In general, with which one do you sympathize most? How about second-most? And how about third-most?" We chose this format because of the complexity of the choice set and to limit non-response.

ment and rebel support bases, increasing our confidence in the sample (cf. Abboud, 2015; Hokayem, 2013; Pearlman, 2016; Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami, 2016). Supplemental Appendix 2 reports a basic descriptive model of government support. In short, there are no major surprises in these data: minorities and people of higher socioeconomic status support the government, while politically engaged and religiously devout people favor the opposition.

4.3 Experimental Design

Ultimately, we seek to understand how the different war narratives spun by the government and the opposition affect how people view the causes of the conflict. To do so, we expose subjects to randomized descriptions of the war, mirroring established procedures in the experimental literature on issue framing. Control group subjects received an innocuous, unframed prompt:

> People have explained the Syrian conflict to us in a number of different ways.

Immediately following the control prompt, subjects in the treatment conditions received a randomized framing of the conflict. Those treated with a *single frame* in isolation heard:

> People have explained the Syrian conflict to us in a number of different ways.
>
> For example, many people have described it as a conflict between *FRAME*.

where *FRAME* (with its shorthand label) was one of the following:

- "Sunnis and Alawis" (*Sectarianism*),
- "democracy and dictatorship" (*Democracy*),
- "religion and secularism" (*Secularism*), or
- "foreign forces fought on Syrian soil" (*Foreigners*).

Finally, we contrasted the *Sectarianism* frame against a competitor from the the above list. Subjects treated with *competing frames* (one of which was always *Sectarianism*) heard:

> People have explained the Syrian conflict to us in a number of different ways. For example, many people have described it as a conflict between *FRAME 1*, and a few people have described it as a conflict between *FRAME 2*.

Note that we randomized the *many people* versus *a few people* quantifiers, but found little evidence that people reacted to them; as such, we pool them to conserve statistical power when comparing the frames. In total, we have one control group, four single frame conditions, and three competing frame groups, for a total of eight experimental conditions. As Supplemental Appendix 3 confirms, these conditions balance across the pre-treatment covariates.

The treatment conditions attempt to capture some of the most widely used narrative tropes about the Syrian conflict while also keeping them short, to the point, and non-inflammatory. In particular, sensitivity concerns prompted us to avoid harsh polemics in the frames. As such, the treatments are milder versions of the narratives deployed by the government and opposition over the course of the war.[8]

Theoretically, we are most interested in the frame that cites a conflict between "Sunnis and Alawis." Although there are other communal groups in Syria, this formulaic statement is common shorthand to invoke sectarianism. The "democracy and dictatorship" frame draws on opposition-friendly language dating back to the early days of the uprising, while "religion and secularism" corresponds to the rising prominence of Islamist groups as the conflict progressed. Finally, early government rhetoric about foreign conspiracies took on greater relevance as foreign funds and fighters poured into Syria in support of, or in opposition to, the rebellion — a narrative we capture with the "foreign forces" frame.

We are interested in how the content of the frames affects how people explain the fighting — and, particularly, how a sectarian narrative of the conflict influences their reasoning. People sometimes encounter these frames alone, and sometimes alongside each other. The single frame corresponds, roughly, to narratives propagated by centrally controlled media outlets or conversations between like-minded individuals. The competing frames correspond to the wider debate within Syrian society about the country's descent into civil war.

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[8]Ethically, we did not want to subject people to the derogatory slurs that pepper extreme versions of sectarian rhetoric. More generally, we abstained from provocative wording to avoid compromising the survey's tone of impartiality in order to protect our enumerators' safety and minimize the risk of interview break-offs.

4.4 Outcome Measures

The core outcome measure asks subjects to assess, on a four-point scale of importance, why people are fighting in the conflict. The battery includes eight reasons:[9]

- Democratic freedoms,
- Sectarian differences,
- International rivalries,
- The role of religion in politics,
- Minority rights,
- Terrorist activity,
- Declining living standards, and
- Corruption.

Note that the outcome battery measures perceptions of the conflict, which is a slight modification to the literature's usual focus on support for a given issue. Following existing practice among framing studies, however, some of the reasons listed in the battery — e.g., *democratic freedoms* and *sectarian differences* — are clearly connected to the experimental frames. Other battery items, in contrast, have no direct connection to the treatments. For example, *declining living standards* and *corruption*, although cited in the protests early in the uprising, began to fall out of the central narrative as the conflict militarized. We include these items to discriminate between reasons that are plausibly connected to the frames and those that are not.

Conceptually, the outcome battery measures the importance people place on various factors behind the fighting — that is, factors in the metaconflict over what the war is about. The government and opposition have struggled to win over popular support bases, whether to recruit fighters, encourage civilian collaboration, or simply to deter defections. To do

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[9]The question wording reads: "Why do you think people are fighting in the conflict? Let me list off some possibilities. For each of them, please tell me if you think it is very important, somewhat important, not very important, or not important at all."

so, they have framed the conflict in ways that increase the salience of factors favorable to their own side, and unfavorable to their opponents. The frames may or may not work, of course. People may adopt whatever narrative is placed before them, or they may resist due to competing considerations, finding a frame inapplicable to the conflict, or holding views that are too strong to budge. The outcome battery helps us assess the potency of the frames.

To substantiate the wide gulf in narratives between opposition and government support-ers, Figure 1 plots the mean responses in the control group on each of the outcome variables. As an observational baseline, opposition supporters stress democratic freedoms, declining living standards, and corruption, while government sympathizers highlight international ri-valries and terrorist activities. On average, then, ordinary Syrians adopt views of the conflict that are consistent with the narratives of their preferred factions and not their opponents.

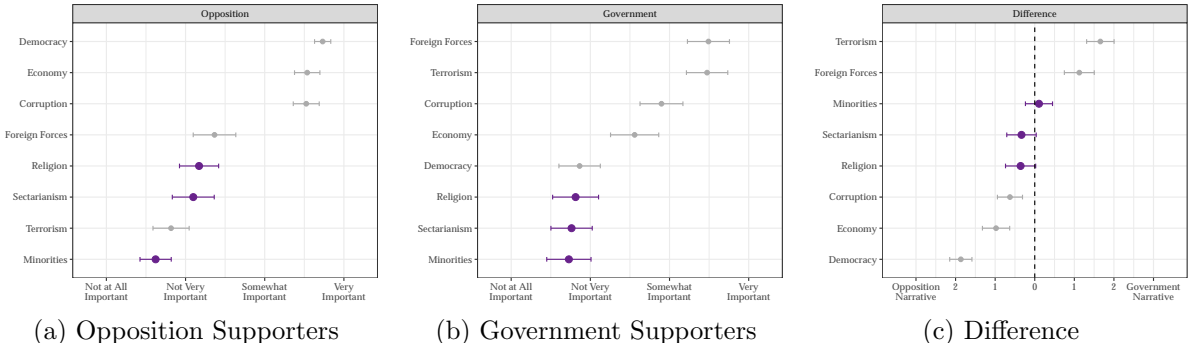(a) Opposition Supporters   (b) Government Supporters   (c) Difference

Figure 1: Importance of various factors for the fighting (control group). Plots depict sample means with 95-percent confidence intervals.

Intriguingly, neither government nor opposition supporters cite sectarian differences, reli-gious politics, or minority rights as central components of the conflict. They are, in fact, the three *least* important items for government sympathizers, and three of the bottom four for their opposition counterparts. This lack of importance in the control group suggests that, in the absence of explicit prompting, people are *not* focused on the sectarian aspects of the fighting — consistent with arguments that communalism is an elite-driven phenomenon.

5 Effects of Sectarian Framing

If sectarian narratives affect how Syrians understand their civil war, we should observe the sectarian frame altering the importance that subjects place on sectarian differences as a cause of the fighting. *How* it affects perceptions of importance may not, however, be the same for all Syrians. Government narratives that invoke sectarianism tend to highlight the threat of extremism, while the mainstream opposition has denounced government efforts to "play the sectarian card" and downplayed sectarian differences. As such, we should see countervailing reactions to the sectarian frame between government and opposition constituencies (cf. Corstange and Marinov, 2012).

5.1 Narrative Frames and Their Outcomes

To begin, we test the effect of the sectarian frame by modeling the importance that government and opposition supporters place on sectarian differences according to the treatment frames, adjusting for the baseline covariates described in Supplemental Appendix 1. In general, we use ordinary least squares on normalized outcome variables to express estimated effects in standard deviation units. Here, we plot the core marginal effects for clarity. For completeness, we report full regression estimates in tabular form for all models in Appendix A. Figure 2 distills the marginal effects from the first column of Table 1 of the sectarian frame when presented *Alone* and alongside the competing frames about *Democracy*, *Secularism*, and *Foreigners* fighting in Syria.

Consistent with the wide gaps in the government and opposition narratives, we do observe systematically different responses to the sectarian frame. Figure 2 shows that, when framed alone, the sectarian narrative causes government supporters to place *greater* importance on sectarian differences by some 0.4 standard deviations. For context, this effect is comparable in size to the gap between the least and best educated government sympathizers, and to the baseline difference between government and opposition supporters.

As expected, the sectarian frame affects opposition sympathizers in a countervailing but noisy manner. The point estimate suggests that the sectarian frame, presented alone, causes
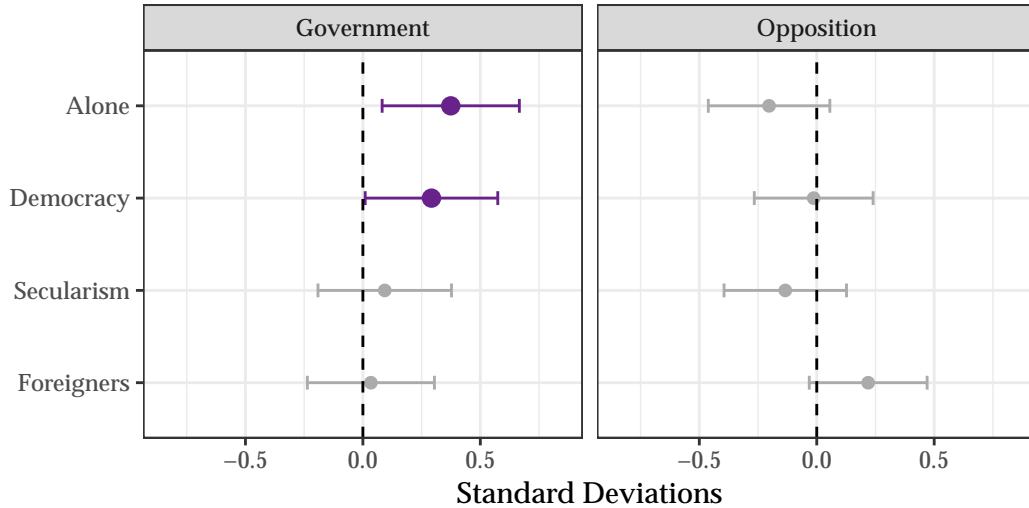
Figure 2: Marginal effect of the sectarian frame on the importance of sectarian differences when presented *Alone* and alongside competing frames. Plots depict point estimates with 95-percent confidence intervals.

these subjects to place *less* importance on sectarian differences, consistent with opposition efforts to denounce sectarian incitement. Yet the observed effect is half the magnitude of the government effect (about -0.2) and is imprecisely estimated ($p > .10$). Contrary to our expectations, the preponderance of evidence that we report below suggests that the weak opposition effect is a true null.

In isolation, the sectarian frame moves government supporters. Yet Figure 2 also shows that the effect of the sectarian narrative *vanishes* when presented alongside two of the three alternative frames: *Secularism* and *Foreigners* fighting in Syria. Although moved by sectarian arguments in isolation, government supporters did not move at all when those arguments were paired directly with alternate explanations of the conflict. Interestingly, the effect of sectarianism drops by about 25 percent but does not disappear when paired against the *Democracy* frame, a point to which we return below.

In contrast to the theoretically anticipated effect of the sectarian frame, we find little evidence that the non-sectarian narratives altered the importance placed on sectarian differences. Moreover, we find virtually no effects of these latter frames on the outcomes that are closest conceptually to them (Figure 3). We estimate all nulls for the *Democracy* frame

on the "democratic freedoms" outcome, all nulls for the *Foreigners* frame on "international rivalries," and mostly nulls for the *Secularism* frame on "religion in politics." Even the one "detectable" marginal on the latter appears to be a false positive: it is both hard to interpret and disappears after we correct for multiple comparisons (Supplemental Appendix 5).
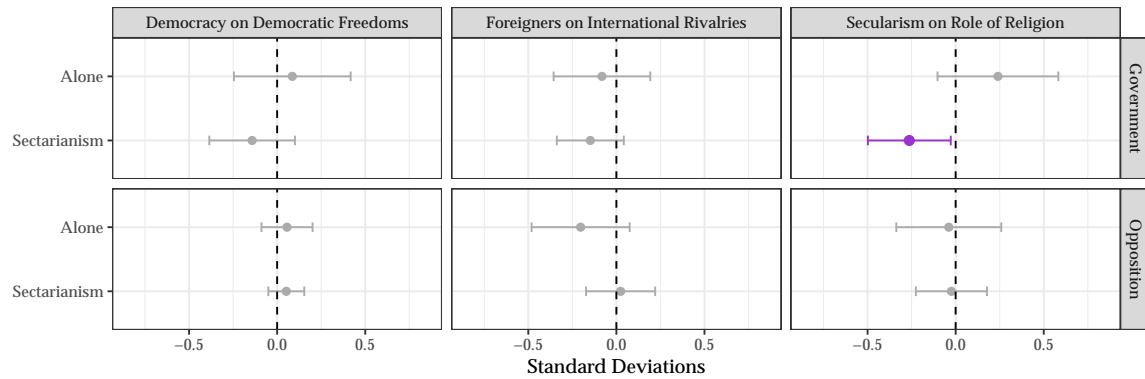

Figure 3: Marginal effect of the non-sectarian frames on the importance of their closest conceptual outcome matches when presented *Alone* and alongside the sectarian frame. Plots depict point estimates with 95-percent confidence intervals.

In sum, the sectarian narrative pushes people as anticipated — greater emphasis on sectarian differences for government supporters, less for the opposition — while the other narratives fail to move people. These findings highlight two takeaway points. First, sectarian discourse does work, but only for some people, and only when sheltered from discursive competitors. Second, the non-sectarian frames fail to move people, despite being well-known tropes in the competition of narratives; simply making a consideration accessible is not enough to induce movement. Put together, these points suggest that elites are more constrained in their ability to frame than we commonly suppose.

5.2 Broader Impacts of Sectarian Framing

Sectarian differences are one manifestation of sectarianism, but, to the degree that people perceive a sectarian conflict in Syria, they should also perceive it as a conflict over *something*. Sectarian discourse also invokes the role of religion in politics, a close cognate that imputes religious content to communal differences. Similarly, sectarian conflict implies a struggle

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over institutions through which to channel demography into political power.

We repeat the same modeling procedures as before, but swap in the *religion in politics* and *democratic freedoms* assessments. Based on the coefficient estimates reported in Appendix Table 1, the first two columns of Figure 4 plot the marginal effects of the sectarian frame. The results for these cognate outcomes closely track those for *sectarian differences*. We see the same patterns as before among government supporters: a large, positive effect for sectarianism framed *Alone* that attenuates when counterframed against *Democracy* and vanishes when pitched against the *Secularism* and *Foreigners* narratives. Also as before, we observe no detectable treatment effects among opposition supporters, whether for the focal *Sectarianism* frame or any of its competitors (cf. Supplemental Appendix 5).
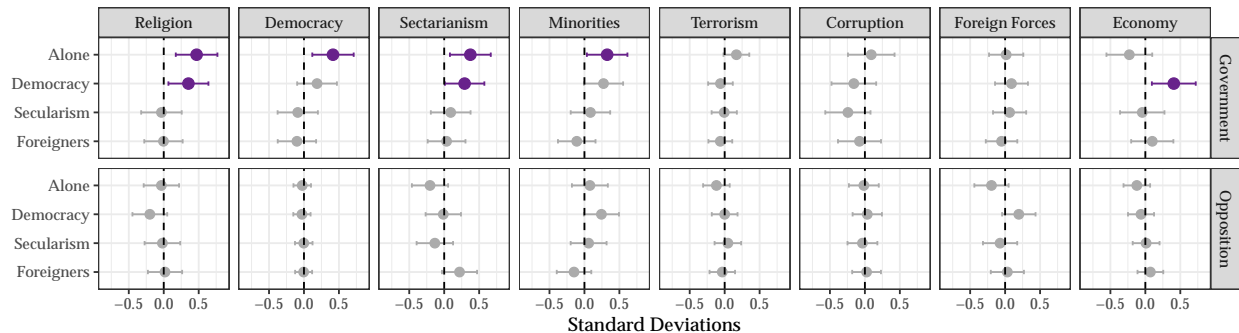

Figure 4: Marginal effect of the sectarian frame on each of the outcomes in the *Fight* battery when presented *Alone* and alongside competing frames. Plots depict point estimates with 95-percent confidence intervals.

We repeat these procedures for each of the outcome variables in the *Fight* battery and find largely consistent patterns across them, as reported in Figure 4. We can detect almost no effects of the sectarian frame among opposition supporters on any of the outcomes, and even the stray "detectables" disappear after correcting for multiple comparisons (Supplemental Appendix 6). We again find little evidence that the non-sectarian frames influence the importance people place on the battery outcomes (Supplemental Appendix 6). These *null* findings demonstrate that people do not move their views on just anything framed for them.

In contrast, the sectarian narrative, when framed alone, causes government supporters to increase the importance they place on most of the *Fight* battery. The effect is detectably

positive on four of the eight outcomes at the 95-percent confidence level and one more (terrorism) at the 90-percent level; of the remaining three, two — corruption and the economy — are more conceptually distant from communal conflict than are the other battery items. we see much the same pattern of competitive framing as described previously: the effect of sectarianism attenuates when presented alongside the *Democracy* frame, and vanishes when contrasted with the *Secularism* or *Foreigners* narratives.

5.3   Sectarianism to Rally Supporters

What could explain these patterns? One possibility is that the *Fight* battery taps into a syndrome of related concerns for government sympathizers, but not opposition supporters. In line with this interpretation, the battery outcomes are much more consistent internally for the former than for the latter. Cronbach's α for government supporters is double that of their opposition counterparts (.76 versus .39), and above the conventional .70 threshold for scale reliability. Likewise, the average inter-item correlation is four times greater for the government than the opposition (polychoric $\bar{\rho}$ of .36 versus .09).

This disparity in internal consistency suggests that the two sides see the outcomes in qualitatively different ways — with government supporters thinking less about the importance of fighting over specific aspects of the conflict and more about the importance of *fighting at all*. To confirm this intuition, we examine the battery's first and second moments by distilling each subject's normalized mean and variance over the eight outcomes.[10]

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[10]We calculate the mean and variance over the eight items for each subject i and then normalize according to the full sample values to express units as standard deviations. Doing so leads to the semantic oddity of discussing the standard deviations of the normalized variances — a mind-bender, to be sure, but one we think is worth tolerating for the sake of consistent units of measurement. Note that using the full battery is conservative insofar as it includes at least two outcomes — "economy" and "corruption" — that are conceptually far removed from sectarianism and whose inclusion attenuates the relationship toward zero. The battery average correlates strongly with the first principal component — Pearson's $r = .83$

The control group battery average is about a quarter of a standard deviation *lower* for government supporters than their opposition counterparts, putting an extra burden on the government to motivate its support base. If sectarian discourse actually rallies people, we should observe two types of variation. First, the sectarian frame should increase the overall importance of fighting. Second, it should decrease the variance as people's responses pile more uniformly on the "important" side of the scale.

We model the battery mean and variance as before, reporting the coefficient estimates in the last two columns of Appendix Table 1 and distilling the marginal effects of the sectarian frame into Figure 5. Consistent with the above expectations, the sectarian narrative, framed *Alone*, increases the mean importance of fighting while decreasing the variance among government supporters by nearly half a standard deviation each. As before, these effects attenuate when counterframed against *Democracy*, and vanish when presented alongside the *Secularism* and *Foreigners* frames. The sectarian narrative moves opposition supporters tenuously at best, and the other frames have only minimal influence (cf. Supplemental Appendix 5). Put together, these findings suggest that sectarian narratives rally government supporters when they are the only discourses offered — but lose much of their appeal when competing against other narratives.

5.4   The Limits of Framing

Why did the sectarian narrative affect government supporters but leave their opposition counterparts largely untouched? A partial explanation begins with the asymmetric use of sectarian discourse among the warring parties. Sprinkled in with its denunciations of foreign conspiracies and criminal gangs, government propaganda efforts highlight the threat of religious extremism and its own role as protector of Syria's minorities. Notwithstanding extremist rhetoric, the mainstream opposition has denounced sectarianism and efforts to scare

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for government supporters with all outcomes, and $r = .92$ when removing the "economy" and "corruption" outcomes.
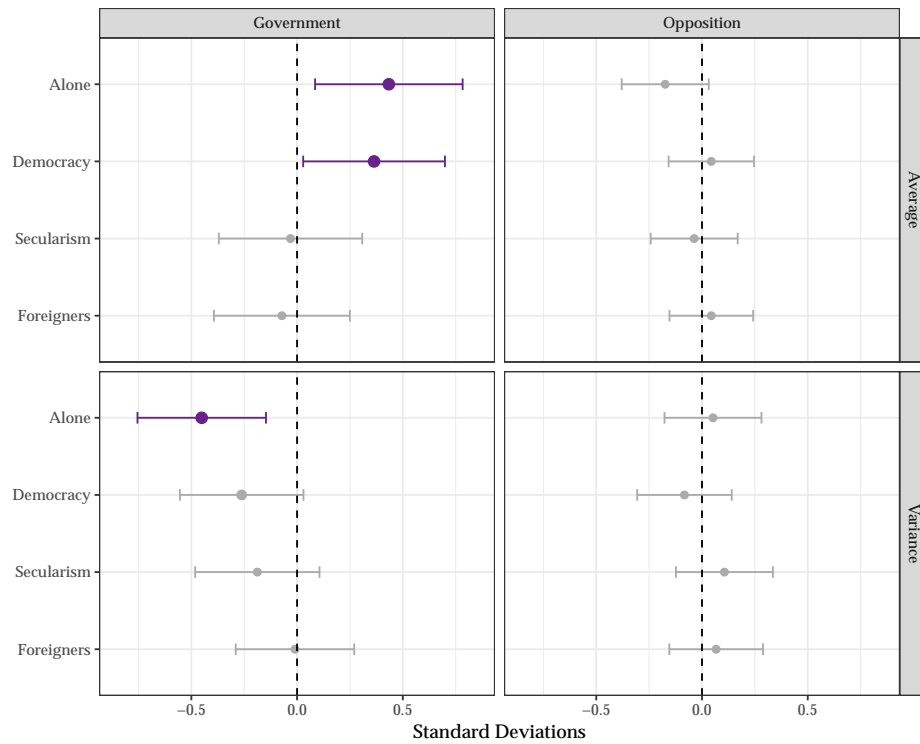
Figure 5: Marginal effect of the sectarian frame on the *Fight* battery average and variation when presented *Alone* and alongside competing frames. Plots depict point estimates with 95-percent confidence intervals.

minorities. The government has used sectarianism to rally its base, while the opposition, for the most part, has not.

The governing coalition in Syria is often characterized as an alliance of minorities. Yet minorities are themselves a minority in the government support base: in our sample, there are nearly three Sunni Arabs that sympathize with the government for every minority that does so. Despite their confessional differences, these sub-constituencies respond to the *Fight* battery in similar ways.

Government supporters of both types react similarly to sectarian discourse, as Supplemental Appendix 7 demonstrates. Sunni Arabs and minorities are identical in their response to the sectarian narrative when framed *Alone*: an increase of nearly half a standard deviation on the battery mean, and a drop of similar magnitude on the variance. As before, this effect vanishes when counterframed against *Secularism* and *Foreigners*. The main distinction is that the effect of sectarian discourse disappears among minorities when framed alongside the democracy narrative; the democracy anomaly identified previously concentrates among government supporters from the majority Sunni Arab community. Even then, that anomaly mostly disappears after we correct for multiple comparisons (cf. Supplemental Appendix 6).

Sectarian narratives induce the government support base to see the fighting in sectarian terms. Yet these frames also affect their views on other aspects of governance, including minority rights, the public role of religion, and democratic freedoms — because they are additional ramifications of sectarian conflict in Syria. Government sympathizers find themselves on the wrong normative side of the uprising's democracy versus dictatorship narrative by supporting a regime with an abysmal record on human, civil, and political rights — one reason why the government competes so hard to convince Syrians to put more weight on *other* considerations less damaging to its own cause.

Sunni Arab supporters have reason to feel particularly ambivalent. As members of the demographic majority, a shift to democratic governance benefits them in strictly communal terms. Yet, to the degree that they are wealthier and more secular than their peers in the opposition, democracy may look worrisomely like an extreme form of populism. As such,

they may respond to regime discourse that highlights Sunni religious extremism — even as it implicates their own community and calls their loyalty into question.

In contrast, opposition-aligned Sunni Arabs do not respond to the sectarian frame, consistent with Zaller's (1992, 77) observation that "some people may possess considerations that are so consistent...that the admission of additional considerations should have no effect." Further analysis demonstrates that this null effect is not an artifact of pooling disparate opposition factions together: we observe the same non-finding among opposition nationalists as well as Islamists (see Supplemental Appendix 8). This *lack* of response suggests that the harsh rhetoric and behavior of jihadi groups do not deflect ordinary Syrians from the uprising's original, pro-democracy narrative — an outcome as opposed by the jihadis as it is by the regime. Instead of building a support base for themselves, the jihadis seem, by word and deed, to be rallying reluctant support for the government and its version of events.

Two core points emerge from this experiment. First, sectarianism can indeed rally people in a civil war, but only under limited conditions. In Syria, our evidence suggests that only one side of the war responds to sectarian rhetoric, and even then, does so only when confronted by the sectarian narrative in isolation. For opposition supporters, sectarianism is an illegitimate smear on their revolution, but for government sympathizers, it is a familiar and superficially plausible explanation for the war. In the absence of competing considerations to stimulate evaluation of the sectarian claim, government supporters adopt it; with alternatives, they reconsider the superficial explanation and become less susceptible to sectarian discourse.

The second point builds upon the first. These data demonstrate not the *ease* with which elites can manipulate their followers by framing events sympathetically, but rather the *limits* of framing. The sectarian frame affected only some of the people some of the time, and the other frames affected no one. It was *not* the case that we could tell subjects about democracy and have them parrot democracy back at us, or that the war is about foreign intervention and expect to hear about international conspiracies. Early contributions to the framing literature expressed anxiety at the apparent ease with which people's views could be moved by a well-chosen frame. Our findings buttress work that offers a cautionary corrective: elites

have less leeway to mold the public than we sometimes suppose (Druckman and Nelson, 2003; Sniderman and Theriault, 2004).

6   Conclusion

Since its origins in a peaceful uprising against authoritarian rule, the Syrian conflict has become one of the most destructive civil wars of the modern era. In addition to killing up to half a million people and displacing millions more, there is a metaconflict over the meaning of the conflict itself — is it a struggle for democratic freedoms, is it foreign meddling in Syrian affairs, is it a sectarian war, or is it something else entirely? Judging from their dogged efforts to frame the conflict in terms sympathetic to their own side, neither the government nor the opposition view the war narrative as a semantic nicety. By justifying some actions and actors, and villifying others, winning the narrative war helps in waging the physical one by rallying popular support bases to the cause, demobilizing opponents, and attracting material support from abroad.

The opposition's core narrative of a struggle between dictatorship and democracy met with immediate government counterclaims about terrorism and foreign conspiracies. Over time, the war's sectarian undertones became overtones as the government moved to shore up support among minorities, the opposition denounced efforts to "play the sectarian card," and mounting atrocities against civilians took on a communal tone. Melodramatic accounts sometimes pitch the war as the latest installment of a primordial, region-wide struggle between Sunnis and Shiites. Yet the repeated invocations and denunciations of sectarianism — to rally supporters, or else peel them away from opponents — suggest a more instrumental motivation on the part of elites. For this rhetoric to affect the course of the conflict, however, at least some ordinary Syrians must *accept* this framing — that the relevant cleavage is, in fact, sectarian, rather than one of the alternatives.

Issue framing offers one plausible explanation for how war narratives influence ordinary people's understandings of the conflict in which they find themselves. By focusing attention on some aspects of the issue and downplaying others, aptly-framed narratives can orient

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people's thinking on a problem and possible solutions to it. But while early studies showed that a single frame, presented in isolation, could move people's opinions in dramatic fashion, subsequent work demonstrated that competitive framing — exposing people to multiple narratives at the same time — substantially reduced their susceptibility to framing effects.

These framing dynamics offer a reason for the warring parties to propagate their preferred narratives to the exclusion of others: an unchallenged frame may indeed move opinions, but competing ideas limit their ability to define the conflict. Despite government and opposition efforts to push hegemonic narratives of the war, none have definitively supplanted the others — at least not within the Syrian body politic as a whole. Yet what government sympathizers hear in regime strongholds, and what opposition supporters hear in the liberated areas or the refugee camps, may not be a contest of ideas so much as the propagation of local hegemonies. If so, we speculate that the absence of competing ideas, and the consequent widening and hardening of the narrative gap, will complicate efforts to negotiate peace and sell it to a reconstituted Syrian public — whose components believe they are fighting each other for qualitatively different reasons.

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A Regression Estimates

	Sectarianism	Religion	Democracy	Minorities	Terrorism	Corruption	Foreigners	Economy	Mean	Variance
Democracy	-0.11 (0.15)	0.14 (0.15)	0.05 (0.11)	-0.01 (0.15)	-0.13 (0.11)	-0.01 (0.14)	-0.08 (0.14)	-0.01 (0.14)	-0.05 (0.15)	0.18 (0.14)
Secularism	-0.08 (0.15)	-0.07 (0.15)	0.00 (0.11)	0.19 (0.15)	-0.16 (0.11)	-0.01 (0.15)	-0.03 (0.14)	-0.04 (0.14)	-0.06 (0.15)	0.11 (0.15)
Foreigners	-0.34* (0.15)	0.00 (0.15)	-0.05 (0.11)	0.21 (0.15)	-0.03 (0.10)	-0.01 (0.14)	-0.15 (0.14)	-0.15 (0.13)	-0.14 (0.14)	0.09 (0.14)
Sectarianism	-0.22 (0.13)	-0.06 (0.13)	-0.04 (0.10)	0.07 (0.13)	-0.11 (0.09)	-0.02 (0.13)	-0.19 (0.12)	-0.14 (0.12)	-0.19 (0.13)	0.07 (0.13)
Sectarianism × Democracy	0.21 (0.18)	-0.13 (0.18)	0.01 (0.14)	0.16 (0.18)	0.12 (0.13)	0.06 (0.18)	0.38* (0.17)	0.08 (0.17)	0.24 (0.18)	-0.15 (0.18)
Sectarianism × Secularism	0.10 (0.19)	0.05 (0.19)	0.05 (0.14)	0.01 (0.18)	0.16 (0.13)	-0.02 (0.18)	0.12 (0.17)	0.16 (0.17)	0.17 (0.18)	-0.01 (0.18)
Sectarianism × Foreigners	0.43* (0.18)	0.09 (0.18)	0.05 (0.13)	-0.18 (0.18)	0.07 (0.13)	0.03 (0.18)	0.16 (0.17)	0.25 (0.17)	0.24 (0.18)	-0.01 (0.18)
Government	-0.57** (0.17)	-0.48** (0.17)	-1.67** (0.13)	-0.08 (0.17)	1.10** (0.12)	-0.76** (0.16)	0.78** (0.16)	-0.89** (0.15)	-0.55** (0.17)	0.08 (0.16)
Government × Democracy	0.12 (0.23)	-0.06 (0.23)	0.04 (0.17)	0.02 (0.23)	0.37* (0.16)	0.17 (0.22)	-0.03 (0.21)	-0.37 (0.21)	0.08 (0.22)	-0.29 (0.22)
Government × Secularism	0.22 (0.24)	0.38 (0.23)	0.23 (0.17)	-0.10 (0.23)	0.27 (0.17)	0.15 (0.23)	-0.12 (0.21)	0.00 (0.21)	0.28 (0.22)	-0.30 (0.23)
Government × Foreigners	0.54* (0.23)	0.47* (0.23)	0.30 (0.17)	0.08 (0.23)	0.22 (0.16)	0.18 (0.22)	0.07 (0.21)	0.03 (0.21)	0.50* (0.23)	-0.42 (0.22)
Government × Sectarianism	0.63** (0.20)	0.57** (0.20)	0.46** (0.15)	0.28 (0.20)	0.27 (0.14)	0.12 (0.19)	0.21 (0.19)	-0.09 (0.18)	0.65** (0.20)	-0.58** (0.20)
Government × Sectarianism × Democracy	-0.34 (0.28)	-0.03 (0.28)	-0.25 (0.21)	-0.24 (0.28)	-0.34 (0.20)	-0.31 (0.27)	-0.34 (0.26)	0.57* (0.26)	-0.35 (0.28)	0.44 (0.27)
Government × Sectarianism × Secularism	-0.44 (0.28)	-0.67** (0.28)	-0.57** (0.21)	-0.31 (0.28)	-0.31 (0.20)	-0.29 (0.27)	-0.06 (0.26)	0.01 (0.26)	-0.69** (0.28)	0.37 (0.27)
Government × Sectarianism × Foreigners	-0.81** (0.28)	-0.60** (0.28)	-0.58** (0.21)	-0.26 (0.28)	-0.32 (0.20)	-0.19 (0.27)	-0.28 (0.25)	0.09 (0.25)	-0.78** (0.27)	0.52 (0.27)
Age	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.01** (0.00)	-0.00** (0.00)	-0.01** (0.00)	0.01** (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.01** (0.00)	-0.01** (0.00)	-0.01** (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Female	0.01 (0.05)	0.06 (0.05)	0.07* (0.04)	0.05 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.03)	0.04 (0.05)	-0.12** (0.04)	0.17** (0.04)	0.06 (0.05)	0.06 (0.05)
Minority	0.18* (0.08)	0.29** (0.08)	-0.00 (0.06)	0.27** (0.08)	0.06 (0.06)	-0.09 (0.08)	0.08 (0.07)	-0.05 (0.07)	0.20** (0.08)	-0.14 (0.08)
Crowding	-0.21** (0.05)	-0.07 (0.05)	-0.08* (0.04)	-0.13** (0.05)	0.17** (0.03)	0.00 (0.05)	0.17** (0.04)	-0.12** (0.04)	-0.06 (0.05)	-0.05 (0.05)
Education (Mid)	0.05 (0.06)	0.01 (0.06)	0.03 (0.04)	-0.16** (0.06)	0.06 (0.04)	-0.04 (0.06)	0.01 (0.05)	-0.07 (0.05)	-0.02 (0.05)	0.04 (0.05)
Education (High)	0.31** (0.07)	0.14* (0.06)	0.02 (0.05)	0.03 (0.06)	0.22** (0.05)	0.07 (0.06)	0.22** (0.06)	-0.07 (0.05)	0.26** (0.06)	-0.23** (0.06)
Political Engagement (Mid)	-0.04 (0.07)	0.11* (0.07)	0.03 (0.05)	0.07 (0.07)	-0.02 (0.05)	0.26** (0.06)	0.08 (0.06)	0.02 (0.06)	0.12* (0.06)	0.18** (0.06)
Political Engagement (High)	-0.17** (0.06)	0.34** (0.06)	0.14** (0.04)	0.22** (0.06)	-0.28** (0.04)	0.31** (0.05)	-0.16** (0.05)	0.10 (0.05)	0.10 (0.05)	0.33** (0.05)
Personal Religiosity (Mid)	-0.21** (0.07)	-0.05 (0.07)	-0.09 (0.05)	-0.26** (0.07)	-0.23** (0.05)	-0.33** (0.07)	-0.19** (0.07)	0.04 (0.07)	-0.34** (0.07)	0.20** (0.07)
Personal Religiosity (High)	-0.33** (0.06)	-0.25** (0.06)	-0.17** (0.05)	-0.17** (0.06)	-0.28** (0.05)	-0.32** (0.06)	-0.22** (0.06)	-0.16** (0.06)	-0.50** (0.06)	0.29** (0.06)
(Intercept)	0.63** (0.15)	0.39** (0.15)	0.82** (0.11)	0.48** (0.15)	-0.56** (0.11)	0.45** (0.14)	-0.41** (0.14)	0.84** (0.14)	0.62** (0.15)	-0.11 (0.15)
R²	0.07	0.08	0.50	0.07	0.54	0.14	0.23	0.24	0.09	0.10
N	1781	1781	1781	1781	1781	1781	1781	1781	1781	1781

$**p < 0.01$, $*p < 0.05$

Table 1: Effect of conflict framing on the importance of each element of the *Fight* battery, including the battery mean and variance. Estimates related to treatment frames highlighted. Baseline covariates including to provide comparisons of effect magnitude; treatment effects similar without covariate adjustment. Models exclude subjects who did not identify with a faction; results are similar when including them.