Repression, Group Threat, and the Threat Environment

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Abstract:

How do governments contend with multiple sources of dissent? The Law of Coercive Responsiveness tells us that governments respond to threats to the status quo with repression, but this does not explain how governments choose to spend their limited resources when there are multiple targets. To answer this question, I extend our understanding of “dissident threat.” In addition to the two latent dimensions of Group Demand and Group Capacity that the literature has identified, we also need to consider the larger universe of threats, the *threat environment*, when assessing the government’s repressive responses. Using a game-theoretic model, I demonstrate how the government’s repressive decisions are a function of the threat posed by the targeted group *and* the threat posed by the other groups around it. I then use the MAROB dataset to demonstrate this relationship empirically, showing that the threat posed by other groups has a significant influence on the government’s allocation of repression. These results show that governments have a hierarchy of threat, prioritizing capable targets over demanding but ineffective ones.

**Introduction**

When scholars write about contentious politics, they often frame their discussion around a back-and-forth process between two main actors: the government[[1]](#footnote-1) and some dissident group[[2]](#footnote-2). The government is often portrayed to be responding to some threat posed by the dissident group: the group is large and/or can mobilize the public quickly (Davenport 1995; Carey 2006; Carey 2010), may be willing to use violent tactics (Davenport 1995; Carey 2006; Carey 2010), the group is making an extreme demand (Davenport 1995; Danneman and Ritter 2013), or some combination of these factors. Our current understanding of the dissent-repression nexus reflects this framing, meaning that many of our theories implicitly assume that repression and dissent are interrelated, dyadic processes.

Advances in the literature have borne out the assumption that repression and dissent are endogenous to one another – a government’s repressive tactic fuel outrage and prompt a backlash from dissidents, dissidents express their dissatisfaction with the status quo and convince the government they need to be dealt with outside of politics-as-usual (Ritter and Conrad 2016). The assumption that the government’s repressive policy towards a group is based *solely* on that group - that the repressive process is *dyadic* - requires re-examination. Depending on the research questions we ask, this assumption might be more or less useful. If we’re interested in how repression influences the internal dynamics of an organization (Davenport 2014; Sullivan and Davenport 2017), for example, this assumption makes sense: we’re concerned about how repression influenced a single group, and trying to use this interaction to generalize to the universe of dissident groups. For some questions, however, this assumption is less useful. Suppose we are trying to understand *why* the government repressed a group in the way it did. We could consider this interaction as a dyadic one solely between the government and the group, but that is often empirically not the case – far from a dyadic process, repression and dissent involve complicated webs of relationships, assessments, and strategy.

In this work, I present a theory of repression that explicitly engages the wider universe of dissident threats – what I call the “threat environment.” I propose that governments make their repressive decision based on the characteristics of their target *and* the threat posed by other groups in the *threat environment*. Since governments have finite resources, they must make their repressive decisions carefully. Governments must weigh the benefit they receive from repressing their target against the possibility they may come not be able to muster the resources to fight off a different group in the future. As a result of this trade-off, governments rank the dissident groups based on their threat and make their repressive decisions accordingly. However, the “threat” posed by a group varies from country to country and regime to regime. There are groups that are major threats in some countries and minor annoyances in others not because of the characteristics of the groups themselves, but rather because the other groups *around them* are more or less threatening.

**Threat in the Literature**

One of the most consistent findings of the repression-dissent literature is that governments respond to dissident threats with coercion. This is such a truism that the “law of coercive responsiveness” (Davenport 2007) receives a mention in almost every political science article written on repression. But what goes in to “dissident threat”? How does the state decide what groups are “threatening” enough to warrant repression? How does the state pick its repressive targets?

Much of the literature sidesteps this question by assuming that the leaders are dealing with existential threats: either the repression succeeds and the dissidents back down, or they are faced with the possibility that they are removed from office. For example, one of the key findings from Ritter (2014) is that the use of repression is contingent on *regime stability*: the more secure leaders feel in their position, the less likely they are to use political repression. This logic is echoed by several scholars (Regan & Henderson 2002; Young 2013; Christensen & Weinstein 2013; Escriba-Folch 2013; Ritter and Conrad 2016; Heffington 2021), and it makes intuitive sense: regimes should be threatened by movements that seek to topple them. However, repression gets used on dissidents who are seeking less extreme demands than regime change (Koren & Mukherjee 2021). Clearly, there must be something threatening about these groups that doesn’t depend on their ability to overthrow the regime.

Although often implicit, there are two latent dimensions underlying the current conceptualization: group demand and group capacity. Using these dimensions, we can break down the concept of “threat as regime change” and understand why authors find that governments use repression on groups with less extreme goals. First, consider a group’s demand – the goal they are working towards achieving. On the extreme end, we have a group that wants to replace the current regime. This threat can manifest in several ways (i.e., the leader having concerns over the type of exit they will make (Escriba-Folch 2013), concerns over what will happen to them after they are removed from office (Conrad & Ritter 2013, Ritter 2014), etc.), but the underlying factor here is that the group’s demand, if achieved, upsets the status quo.

Existing research finds that status quo maintenance as the reason behind government repression (Earl, Soule, & McCarthy 2003; Pierskalla 2010; Davenport, Soule, & Armstrong 2011; DeMeritt 2016), and we can see implicit calls for this in the literature that uses deviations from the cultural norm as a measure of threat (see, for example, Davenport 1995). The general underlying logic is that group demands represent changes to the status quo power structure, which the government wants to defend. At the extreme, the status quo the government is trying to maintain is their leadership position, tying this dimension in with the literature on repression as a response to stability threats. However, *any* changes to the status quo are negative, as they represent an erosion of the power structures that put the current government in charge (Earl, Soule, & McCarthy 2003; Davenport, Soule, & Armstrong 2011; Davenport & Inman 2012; Chang & Vitale 2013). The changes are not all equally negative – changing a few policies is less threatening than regime change – so these groups should experience different levels of dissent. It should also be noted that threat is subjective to the government: similar demands might get different responses depending on the government (Chang & Vitale 2013).

The second dimension of threat in the current literature is group capacity. We can see this dimension implicitly invoked when authors refer to the tactics group use, their membership, and their organizational capacity (Davenport 1995; Moore 2000; Carey 2010; Danneman & Ritter 2014). This dimension revolves around the group’s ability to coerce the government into meeting its demands: Does it have the ability to generate enough costs on the government to make switching policies a less costly alternative? This makes intuitive sense when paired with the demand dimension. Groups may espouse extreme demands, but without the capacity to coerce the government these demands can be written off (Pierskalla 2010). This dimension covers everything from the group’s ability to get “boots on the ground” (Davenport 1995; Carey 2010) to their ability to learn from others and incorporate tactics that have worked before and ignore ones that failed (Danneman & Ritter 2014).

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | *Capability* | |
| *Demand* | High Capability | Low Capability |
| High Demand | **High Threat** | **Moderate Threat** |
| Low Demand | **Moderate Threat** | **Low Threat** |

These two dimensions—a group’s intent to disrupt the status quo and their capability to do so—are useful for understanding when governments will expend scarce resources to repress dissident groups. However, there are aspects of repression that cannot be explained by these dimensions alone. Theoretically, if a group’s demand and capability remained constant, we should expect the government’s response to be constant as well.[[3]](#footnote-3) Empirically, however, this is not the case – we observe the government’s repressive response to a group change over time, sometimes within a matter of days or weeks. This could be evidence of an initial miscalculation on the part of the government – perhaps their information about the group’s capabilities and/or demand was incomplete, and once they made contact by attempting repression, they were able to update this information and their response. This is a reasonable explanation for some of the cases, but it can’t be representative of all of them: some states have impressive intelligence apparatuses that are used to gather important information on group demand and capability before they can dissent, and even these governments change their repressive strategies over time (Cunningham 2005). The answer lies outside of the threat characteristics of any one group; rather, we can explain these changes in repression by looking at the wider universe of groups – the *threat environment*.

**The Threat Environment**

The literature often assumes, for the sake of convenience, that repression-dissent interactions are dyadic: a government represses a group, that group dissents against the government, and the interaction ends. While the assumption that these interactions take place in a vacuum has helped to streamline theory and narrow interactions down to basic elements, this simplifying assumption runs the risk of misattributing the reasons for both changes in the government’s strategy and the group’s response. In reality, both the government and dissident group operate in a broader *threat environment* that is made up of all the existing and potential groups that the government may have to contend. All the groups in the threat environment have their own demands, their own capacity, and each pose a distinct threat to the government. Since repressive resources are not infinite, the government must weigh the benefits of repressing the target group right now against the possibility of not being able to stop the next group.

This threat environment changes the strategic calculus considerably. The government must now consider the demands and capacities of the other groups in the environment when crafting their response to the target group. Expending too many resources on repressing the target group may get them back down but leaves the government open to other threats. Focusing too much on other potential threats may stop dissent from cropping up in the future but does nothing to address the current problem. *Changes* in the threat environment, then, can explain shifting government policies towards groups; even if the group and the government stay the same, groups entering and exiting the threat environment change the government’s strategic calculus, changing their repressive policy as a result.

**A Model of Repression and the Threat Environment**

To illustrate the logic behind the threat environment, I create a formal model. In this model, a pair of dissident groups are making decisions about whether to act, and the government is trying to figure out how best to use its repressive resources. Since its repressive resources are limited, the government may not have enough to repress both groups to the point where they back down. As such, the government is forced to weigh the threat posed by each group, in the form of their demands and capacities, and decide how best to invest in repression. The model demonstrates that, when the government has an abundance of repressive resources, it will repress with impunity. However, as the resources available to it dwindle and eventually become scarce, the government begins to carefully consider the threats posed by the different groups. Using various comparative statics derived from the model, I find that the repression faced by a group is a function of the threat posed by the other group – in particular, the other group’s demand and capacity interact to influence the likelihood of the government investing in repressing the target group fully.

*The State of the System*

This model looks at the interaction between three actors: a government, and a pair of dissident groups that I call the active group and the potential group. The government has some status quo policy that it derives benefit from and would like to maintain. The active group, on the other hand, would like to change the status quo and enact their preferred policy. The members of the latent group would also like to change the government’s status quo policy, albeit in a different way, but first need to mobilize before they can mount a challenge. In this interaction, the government first sets its level of reactive and preventive repression from its limited budget, then the active group decides whether to dissent or back down, and finally the latent group decides whether to attempt mobilization. This means that the outcome of the interaction has a great deal of variability. If the government can successfully get the other groups to back down, the interaction ends with the status quo maintained. Otherwise, the interaction ends in conflict, with the active group dissenting and/or the latent group attempting to mobilize.

*The Government*

The first of the main actors in this interaction is the government.[[4]](#footnote-4) The government uses the resources at its disposal to protect the status quo through repression. The government can employ deterrent repression against the active group, raising the costs it faces, or employ preventive repression against the potential group, influencing its ability to mobilize. In this model, the government has the option to use one or both tactics – it can choose to only employ preventive repression, only employ reactive repression, or set some combination of both.[[5]](#footnote-5) The government’s allocations to each type of repression are subject to a resource constraint: the government has a set budget it can spend on repression, and each dollar it invests in reactive repression is one less that it can invest in preventive repression.[[6]](#footnote-6) As a result, the government faces a trade off in any given interaction – does it want to invest more in dealing with the group in front of it at the expense of potential further dissent down the line, or does it allow the current group to operate with relative impunity so it can quell latent dissent?[[7]](#footnote-7)

While assuming that all governments similarly value the status quo is useful for understanding how governments allocate repressive resources on average, this simplification impacts what I can say about the relationship between individual governments and individual dissident groups. The relationship between a government and a group depends on that government and the nature of the status quo; a different status quo may result in the same group being seen differently. The government might find the same group’s demand to be more or less extreme depending on the current status quo. While this may be the case, this simplification does not reduce my ability to speak to the main dynamic of interest: the interaction between a government and a group that wants to change the status quo under the threat of further potential dissent.

*The Active Dissident Group*

The second main player is a dissident group that is assumed to be active at the start of the interaction.[[8]](#footnote-8) The group has one decision to make: it can either dissent, challenging the government to change the status quo, or it can back down and preserve the status quo. If it chooses to dissent, it enters a lottery where the group has a chance[[9]](#footnote-9) of getting their demand or a chance of being defeated and having the status quo prevail.

*The Potential Dissident Group*

The final actor in the interaction is a potential dissident group. The unitary actor in the model represents all the individuals in the population that are dissatisfied with the government and are interested in attempting mobilization.[[10]](#footnote-10) This desire to try to solve the collective action problem is represented by the group’s mobilization potential. As the group’s mobilization potential increases, they have more ability to overcome the collective action problem and successfully mobilize. Their mobilization potential also helps insulate the group against the government’s attempts to thwart their mobilization.

This “group” must decide between backing down, which maintains the status quo but allows them to keep the resources they would otherwise use for mobilization, and attempting to mobilize, where they have some endogenously determined probability of successfully mobilizing and getting a mobilization benefit. Since preventive repression is not meant to be a deterrent,[[11]](#footnote-11) the government’s repression directly influences the probability of successful mobilization. As the government invests more heavily in preventive repression, the roadblocks put in place by the government make it less likely that the individuals in the latent group will be able to mobilization and form a new active group.

*Sequence of Moves and Payoffs*

The interaction begins with the active group’s demand and capability and the latent dissident mobilization potential and benefit being set. The government then sets levels of deterrent and preventive repression using all its allocated repression budget. Once the government has set its desired levels of repression, the active group decides whether to dissent. If the group backs down, they get their status quo payoff since their preferred policy is not put into place. If the group chooses to dissent, both actors enter a lottery where the government has some probability of defeating the group, which is a function of the group’s capabilities. Recall that the repression this group faces is deterrent – this is represented as a cost set by the government that the active group incurs if it attempts to dissent regardless of the outcome of its attempt. Finally, the potential group must decide whether it will invest its mobilization potential and attempt to mobilize.[[12]](#footnote-12) If the potential group chooses to refrain from attempting mobilization, it gets its status quo payoff but gets to keep its mobilization potential. Consider the resources that the individuals would sacrifice to attempt mobilization: their time, money, anonymity, etc. If the group does not attempt to mobilize, its members get to keep these resources for potential investment another day. If the group does attempt to mobilize, it enters a lottery where the mobilization has some probability of being successful, which would grant the group some mobilization benefit; this probability is a function of the group’s mobilization potential and the government’s investment in preventive repression.

To clarify this interaction, consider the following utility functions. If the interaction ends with the status quo (that is, the active dissident group backs down and the latent group refrains from attempting mobilization), the active dissident group gets the following utility:

This expression represents their dissatisfaction with the status quo: *dA* is the active group’s demand, while *-b* represents the group’s dissatisfaction with the government’s status quo policy.

The potential group gets the following utility:

Where *m* represents the group’s mobilization potential and *-b* represents their dissatisfaction with the status quo. Finally, in a situation where there is truly know conflict, the government simply gets its status quo benefit *b*.

Utilities are slightly more complicated when conflict arises. First, assume that the active group dissents while the latent group refrains from mobilization. In this case, the latent group simply gets their status quo payoff.[[13]](#footnote-13) If the active group succeeds, it gets its desired policy outcome; failure results in the status quo. Depending on the government’s actions, however, they may also incur repressive costs when they challenge the government, determined by the government’s investment in reactive repression (denoted *n*):

Or

Where q represents the government’s probability of success against the group. Recall that the group’s ability to amass capabilities in the fledgling stage increases their chances against the government. As a result, when the capabilities of a group increase, the government’s probability of victory (*q*) decreases. The government has a similar expected utility for active dissent:

Or

Unlike preventive repression, deterrent repression’s purpose is to impose costs on the active group. As such, it does not directly impact the group’s ability to achieve their goal (it does not directly impact probability *q*); rather it makes achieving their goal less attractive via the imposition of costs. This imposition of costs also makes the realization of the group’s demand less costly for the government.

Next, assume that the active group backs down and the potential group attempts to mobilize. Here that active group simply gets its status quo payoff. The potential group has the following expected utility for attempted mobilization:

Or

Where *l* is the potential group’s benefit to mobilization and *p* is the probability the group will fail to mobilize. Recall that this probability is an endogenous function of the group’s mobilization potential, *m*, and the government’s investment in preventive repression, *w*, leading to the following:

Meanwhile, the government gets the following expected utility for mobilization:

Or

Or

Finally, assume that the interaction ends in full conflict: the active group dissents and the potential group attempts to mobilize. In this situation, the active group gets its expected utility for dissent and the latent group gets its expected utility for attempted mobilization. The government gets an expected utility that is a combination of the two previously discussed utility functions:

*The Active Group’s Decision to Dissent*

The active group will back down and maintain the status quo if the utility of maintaining the status quo is at least as good as their expected utility for dissenting. The group will back down if the amount of reactive repression the government sets is greater than or equal to *b-bq*. The group compares how bad the status quo is and how likely they are to be defeated by the government. As the government’s benefit for maintaining the status quo increases (i.e., the group’s costs for having the status quo maintained increase), a higher level of reactive repression is necessary to keep the group from dissenting. Additionally, as the group’s probability of victory decreases (that is, *q* increases), less reactive repression is required to keep the group from dissenting. In the extreme scenario where the government is guaranteed to win (*q* = 1), the group requires no reactive repression to back down (*n* = 0). Going forward, I refer to the minimum amount of reactive repression necessary to get the group to back down as *n\**.

*The Potential Group’s Decision to Mobilize*

The potential group will not mobilize if their utility for maintaining the status quo is greater than or equal to their expected utility for attempting mobilization. Recall that if the group backs down it incurs a penalty for the status quo, but it gets the benefit of keeping its mobilization potential. If it attempts to mobilize, it loses its mobilization potential but gains some probability of successfully forming an active group. The latent group will back down if the government sets a level of preventive repression greater than or equal to *l-m*, which I will refer to as *w\**. This term directly compares the group’s benefit from successfully mobilizing, *l*, with what the group keeps if they maintain the status quo. As the group’s benefit from mobilization increases, the government must invest more in preventive repression to keep the group from attempting to mobilize. As the group’s mobilization potential increases, however, the government can invest less in preventive repression: higher levels of mobilization potential make the status quo more attractive to the latent group, as the group gets to keep these resources if they back down.

*The Government’s Repressive Decision*

The government’s desired repressive outcome is deceptively simple: use enough repression to get both groups to back down. The decision is complicated by the fact that the government has a limited repressive budget, meaning that investment in one type of repression leaves fewer resources for the other type. To examine this further, I divide the following section into four scenarios. These scenarios vary the government’s repressive endowment: sufficient resources to repress both groups to their critical points, more than enough resources to repress both groups fully, only enough resources to repress one group, and finally too few resources to repress either group. By looking at these scenarios, we can understand how the government decides where to allocate repression and how changes in the government’s resource endowment and threat environment change how the government responds to these groups.

*Scenarios 1 & 2: Sufficient & Abundant Resources*

In this first scenario, the government has exactly enough repressive resources to repress both groups to their critical point. Formally, this is denoted as *s = n\* + w\**. Unsurprisingly, in this scenario, the government sets the levels of preventive and reactive repression at their critical values. The government has no incentive to deviate from this strategy – setting one level of repression above the critical value means that the other falls below the critical value, inviting dissent or mobilization. As a result, there is only one equilibrium in this scenario: the government sets the levels of preventive and reactive repression at their critical values, the active group backs down, and the latent group refrains from mobilization.

This second scenario is an extension of scenario 1: instead of having just enough resources to repress the groups, the government has more than enough to repress both. Formally, this can be represented as *s > n\* + w\**. Like the above scenario, the government always prefers setting the levels of repression at the critical value as opposed to below them, ensuring both groups back down. However, the government is now indifferent between setting a level of repression at the critical point versus setting a level above it as long as the other level of repression clears the critical point. For example, consider the government setting reactive repression at *n\** versus some value greater than *n\**. If *w* does not fall below *w\**, the government is indifferent between these distributions – they all result in the status quo being maintained. As a result, instead of there being a single equilibrium in this scenario, there are a class of equilibria: every combination of *n* and *w* are valid providing both *n* and *w* clear their critical points and *s = n + w*. In every one of these, the active group backs down and the latent group refrains from attempting to mobilize.

*Scenario 3: Dwindling Resources*

In this scenario, the government has enough resources to repress one group to its critical point, but not both. Formally, this can be represented as *s < n\* + w\** but . This is the first scenario where the government faces an important strategic decision about its resource allocation, as reaching the critical point for one group automatically means that the other group will dissent/mobilize. In this scenario the government will set *n = n\** if the active group’s demand is sufficiently high (that is, ) or the penalty the government suffers from that potential group’s mobilization is sufficiently low (that is, ).[[14]](#footnote-14) By setting *n* to this level, the government forces the active group to back down, but the latent group will mobilize.

In this scenario, where the government only has the resources to repress one group there are two potential Nash equilibria. First, if the active group meets the critical value of demand and/or the penalty for latent group mobilization falls below the critical value, the government sets *n = n\**, the active group backs down, and the latent group attempts to mobilize. Second, if the active group’s demand falls below the threshold or the penalty for mobilization is sufficiently high, the government sets *w = w\**, the active group dissents, and the latent group refrains from mobilization.

Importantly, the government’s strategy is *not* solely determined by the characteristics of the active dissident group. It is also shaped by the latent group. This shows that the government’s repressive choice is not simply a function of the characteristics of the group they are repressing: the same active group, for example, might be treated differently in different threat environments (generated by the latent group). An active group with a weak latent group is more likely to get repressed to the point of backing down than if that same group occupied a threat environment with a stronger latent group, regardless of that active group’s demands. The inverse relationship is also true: a latent group trying to form is likely to get repressed less when they occupy a threat environment with a strong active group versus one with a weak active group.

The following figures demonstrate how the cutpoint *d­A\** change with respect to the potential group’s mobilization capacity and potential demand/benefit to mobilization. In Figure 1, we see how the cutpoint moves with respect to the mobilization capacity of the potential group at differing levels of potential demand:

Chart

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Figure 1 - d\* as a function of the Other Group’s Mobilization Capacity

For any given line in Figure 1, the space above the line represents a situation where the government will set *n = n\**, repressing the active group to the point where they will back down. The space below the line represents situations where the government will set *w = w\**, fully repressing the potential group but allowing the active group to mount a challenge. Thus, if the active group has a demand *d* that is above a line the government considers it threatening enough to fully repress, and if it has a demand *d* that falls under the line the government will focus its attention elsewhere.

Figure 1 demonstrates an interesting relationship between the potential group’s mobilization capacity and the government’s willingness to repress the active group fully. We can see that an increase in the potential group’s mobilization capacity there are fewer demands by dissident groups (*d­A*) that would cause the government to repress the active dissident group. This then leads to my first implication:

*Implication 1:*  As the potential group’s mobilization capacity increases, the government is less likely to repress the active group to the point of backing down, all else equal.

Figure 2, meanwhile, looks at how the cutpoint changes with respect to the potential group’s potential demand – the benefit they receive from mobilization and the costs the government faces from successful mobilization. The Figure is read the same way as Figure 1: area above a line represents equilibrium space where the government represses the active dissident group (by setting its expenditures on deterrent repression *n = n\**), and area below it represents equilibrium space where the government represses the potential group (by setting *w = w\**). This Figure demonstrates an interesting interactive effect between the potential group’s demand and capacity – at high levels of mobilization capacity increases in the potential group’s demand make it *less* likely that the government will set *n = n\**, but at low levels of capacity increases in the potential group’s demand make it *more* likely that the government will set *n = n\**. This leads to my second set of implications:

*Implication 2a:* At high levels of mobilization capability, increases in the potential group’s demands make the government devote fewer repressive resources to the active group and more towards the potential group.

*Implication 2b:* At low levels of mobilization capability, increases in the potential group’s demands make the government devote more repressive resources to the active group and fewer to the potential group.

These implications demonstrate that the government is thinking differently about the dimensions of threat. Increased dissident capability seems to be threatening to the government no matter the demand attached to it, while demand appears to be differentially threatening depending on the capabilities around it. In the model, this is due to the construction of the different dimensions – capability influences the probability of success, while demand is the additive cost to the government of dissident success. Thinking in terms of expected utilities, the expected utility for the government of losing to a highly capable group with a moderate demand is much lower than the expected utility of losing to a group with extreme demands but without a low capability. Outside of the context of the model, this difference makes sense – demand should matter to governments, but only if the governments believe the group can follow through and accomplish their goals.

Chart, line chart

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Figure 2 - d\* as a function of the Other Group's Potential Demand

*Scenario 4: Scarce Resources*

In the final scenario, the government’s resources are severely restricted – it no longer has the resources to repress either group to the critical point. Formally, this can be expressed as *s < n\* + w\**, *s < n\**, and *s < w\**. Since there is no way the government can reach the groups’ critical points, the government invests its resources to maximize its full conflict utility. Under these conditions, the government maximizes its utility by setting *n = n’’* and *w = w’’*.[[15]](#footnote-15) Assuming the government has enough resources to hit these points, there is an equilibrium where the government sets *n = n’’* and *w = w’’*, the active group dissents, and the latent group attempts to mobilize. If, however, the government does not have enough resources to reach these values, the government must decide where to allocate its entire repressive budget. In this scenario, one of the groups is going to be unrepressed, allowing it to operate with impunity. The government will invest everything in reactive repression (that is, *n = s*) if *l,* the change to the status quo if the potential group mobilizes, is sufficiently low: . Otherwise, it will invest everything in preventive repression (*w = s*). Regardless, the active group will dissent, and the potential group will attempt to mobilize. Figures 3 & 4 show how *n’’* change with respect to the potential group’s mobilization capacity and potential demand, respectively; Figures 5 & 6 show the same but for *w’’*. These graphs indicate an unsurprising trend: as the potential group gets more threatening, the government sets a lower *n’’* and a higher *w’’*. As the potential group becomes less threatening, we observe the inverse.

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Figure 3 - Optimal n as a function of the Other Group's Mobilization Capacity

Chart

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Figure 4 - Optimal n as a function of the Other Group's Potential Demand

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Figure 5 - Optimal w as a function of the Other Group's Mobilization Capacity

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Figure 6 - Optimal w as a function of the Other Group's Potential Demand

**Empirical Implications**

The model gives us several implications that can be translated into testable, empirical hypotheses. Note that the implications listed below are particular to states with moderate repressive capacity. As discussed above, these implications arise from the scenario where the government has dwindling resources for repression – they have enough resources to repress one group to the point they back down, but not both. This resource scarcity is what drives the shift in repression; if the government had abundant resources, it would simply repress everyone (i.e., the first scenario).

Implication 1 states that as the potential group’s mobilization capacity increases, the government should be less likely to repress the active group to the point where it will back down. This tipping point for the active group can be thought of as severe repression – targeting enough repression at the group to get it to back down. From this implication, we get my first hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1:* As the Other Group’s Capacity increases, the severity of repression faced by the Active/Target Group decreases.

The second set of implications states an interactive relationship between the potential group’s capacity and demand: at high levels of capacity increases in demand lead to a decrease in the probability that the government sets *n = n\**, but at low levels of capacity increases in demand lead to an increase in the probability that the government sets *n = n\**. Again, thinking about that tipping point as the severity of repression faced by the active/target group, we get the following set of hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 2a*: At high levels of Other Group Capacity, increases in Other Group Demand will result in a decrease in the severity of repression faced by the Active/Target Group.

*Hypothesis 2b*: At low levels of Other Group Capacity, increases in Other Group Demand will result in an *increase* in the severity of repression faced by the Active/Target Group.

**Data**

The predictions generated by the theoretical model require specific information about the characteristics of dissident groups *and* the government’s response to them. I also need to be able to assess the number of dissident groups in a given country at a given time. With these data needs in mind, I utilize the Minorities at Risk Organizational Behavior (MAROB) dataset (Wilkenfield, Asal, & Pate 2011). Coded at the organization-year[[16]](#footnote-16) level, this dataset looks at ethnopolitical groups in the MENA region from 1980 – 2004.[[17]](#footnote-17) Each of the organizations[[18]](#footnote-18) in the dataset is trying to forward the interests of a particular minority group in a given country. The dataset records various important characteristics about the groups, including information about the organization’s leadership structure, specific demands, their tactics, and their relationship to the state.

*Organization-Level Variables*

Recall that the main variable of interest is the *share of the repressive budget* that the state devotes to each organization. In the model, I make the assumption that increasing the share of the repressive budget results in increasing repression against the targeted group. I continue along this line of reasoning when operationalizing this concept, as well. Governments are unlikely to give up the fine grain budgetary information[[19]](#footnote-19) necessary to directly assess the theory (i.e., by looking at fluctuations in the repressive budget), so I instead try to assess this concept through the severity of repression faced by a group.

The variable “STORGREPRESS” looks at the state’s relationship with the organization in a given year, ranging on a score from 1 to 3.[[20]](#footnote-20) I assume that as an organization moves from a 1 to a 2 to a 3 it is receiving a higher share of the repressive budget, while those decreasing on the scale are likely accounting for a smaller share of the repressive budget.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Another key part of the theory is the threat posed by each organization to the government – the group’s demand and capability. I conceptualized the group’s demand as how much they desire to change the status quo. Mapping a measure of demand directly onto the conceptual definition would require very fine-grained data about the specific policies that make up the current status quo *and* information on how the group plans to change these policies, but we can approximate this using MAROB’s data on group ideology. MAROB codes the organizations on various dimensions: whether they’re religious, economically left- or right-wing, their relationship to gender, etc. Most of these would require some knowledge about how these dimensions relate to the state (i.e., whether the state is left- or right-wing, the current regime type, whether there is a state religion, etc.), but there is one that should generalize to all states over time. The “NATORG” variable looks whether the organization in question in nationalist – whether the organization is claiming autonomy or independence for a particular minority group. Assuming all states value territorial integrity, we can consider nationalist groups to be “high demand”[[22]](#footnote-22) groups, while non-nationalist groups are “low demand”.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Group capability is defined as the group’s ability to implement their desired change – the probability that they can coerce the government into enacting their demands. There are several standard ways of operationalizing this concept, ranging from looking at the membership of the group to the tactics they use. While these are useful operationalizations, they come with some caveats – “membership” doesn’t always translate into capability[[24]](#footnote-24) and their tactics do not always denote strength.[[25]](#footnote-25) Instead, I operationalize the group’s capability as their organizational structure. Different organizational structures influence an organization’s ability to withstand repression, mobilize supporters, maintain operational security, etc. – all integral to their ability to affect change. I use MAROB’s “LEAD” variable for this, which looks at how centralized the group’s leadership is. I assume that groups with *centralized* leadership are more capable than ones with decentralized leadership or ones that lack leadership entirely. [[26]](#footnote-26) This variable takes on a value of 1 if a group is led by a strong single leader or ruling council, and a score of 0 if the leadership is decentralized or actively competing against one another.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The combination of these two dimensions represents the overall “threat” a group poses to the government. We can use a group’s score on the two component variables to give us a rough approximation of their overall threat: a group that is not nationalist and has weak leadership is low threat, a nationalist group with weak leadership ora non-nationalist group with strong leadership are in the moderate threat category[[28]](#footnote-28), and a group that is nationalist and has strong leadership is considered high threat.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | *Capability* | |
| *Demand* | Strong Leadership | Weak Leadership |
| Nationalist | **High Threat** | **Low Moderate Threat** |
| Non-Nationalist | **High Moderate Threat** | **Low Threat** |

While this gives us a lot of information about what I will refer to as the “reference group” (i.e., the group whose repression we are assessing), we also need to know about the wider threat environment – the characteristics of the groups around the target group. To do this, I first count the total number of groups active in a given country-year, including the target group. For example, say the target group of interest was the Turkish Republican Party in Cyprus in the year 1980. The first step is to count the number of groups active in Cyprus in 1980 – the target group itself, the Democratic People’s Party, the Toplumcu Kurtulus Partisi, the National Unity Party, and the Turkish Unity Party, bringing the total number of groups in Cyprus during 1980 to 5. I then subtract the target group from the total number of groups to get the number of *other groups*, or the number of groups that make up the threat environment. To get information on the demands and capabilities of these groups, I follow a similar process: count the number of nationalist groups/groups with strong leadership in a given country-year and subtract the target group from the total (assuming it is also nationalist/has strong leadership). This leaves us with counts of the number of other high demand and high capability groups active in a country-year.[[29]](#footnote-29)

These measures provide me with a general idea of what the threat environment looks like around the reference group, but it is hard to theoretically grapple with the implications of increasing the number of groups of x characteristics by one. For example, some governments might be unable to handle even one additional “low threat” group, while others might be able to contend with multiple additional “high threat” groups. Moreover, having 5 highly capable groups, for example, means one thing when there are 15 groups currently active versus 5. As such, I construct measures that look at the proportion of highly capable and highly demanding groups *around* the reference group (i.e., proportionally, what the rest of the threat environment looks like). I calculate these variables by taking the counts of other highly capable/demanding groups and divide by the total number of other groups (i.e., excluding the reference group).

These are my primary independent variables. To put the hypotheses in terms of the empirical model, I predict that as the *proportion of other highly capable groups* increases, the severity of repression faced by the reference groups should *decrease*.[[30]](#footnote-30) Increasing the *proportion of other highly demanding groups* has a differential effect depending on the capabilities of those groups – increasing the proportion of demanding groups *on their own* (i.e., without corresponding capabilities) should result in an *increase* in the repression faced by the reference group, while increasing the proportion of demanding groups *and* capable groups should correspond with a *decrease* in reference group repression.[[31]](#footnote-31)

*State-Level Variables*

While the organizations themselves are the main focus of the theory, the characteristics of the state play an important role. The state’s repressive budget is of particular interest, as higher budgets allow the state to repress with impunity, while lower budgets result in constraints that force the state to pick and choose between targets. Unfortunately, states have an incentive to keep their repressive budgets hidden – to hide their true repressive capacity from both the dissidents and the wider international community. There are a few ways we can try to approximate the government’s repressive capacity, however.[[32]](#footnote-32)

First, we might assume that the government’s military personnel to roughly correlate to its repressive capacity. A higher number of personnel means the state can send more troops to deal with a given problem. I use data from Correlates of War Project’s National Material Capabilities dataset (Singer, Bremer, & Stucky 1972; Singer 1987) for information on this variable.[[33]](#footnote-33) I standardize this variable by taking the z-score, preserving the general distribution of the data while limiting the impact of outliers on the overall regression results.

Another way of approximating repressive capacity is by looking at the state’s gross domestic product. In theory, the higher a state’s GDP, the more resources it can invest in repressing a target. I use data from the Penn World Tables dataset (Feenstra, Inklaar, & Timmer 2015) to measure GDP. I utilize the PWT’s measure of output-side real GDP as a way to assess the government’s ability to “produce” repression.[[34]](#footnote-34) I again standardize this variable by taking the z-score to preserve the distribution while limiting the impact of outliers.

*The Empirical Model*

The basic structure of my empirical model is an Ordinary Least Squares regression[[35]](#footnote-35), with the following formula:

I account for omitted variables at the governmental level by using country-year fixed effects.

Note that the characteristics of the reference group do not factor into the equation. Theoretically, the characteristics of the reference group matter – the government is comparing these groups to one another, so we need to account for both the threat environment and the characteristics of the individual reference group in the research design. To account for this, I split the sample based on the characteristics of the reference group. The means that I have four main models – one looking at only high threat groups, one looking at groups that are *only capable*, one looking at groups that are *only demanding*, and one looking at only low threat groups.

There are some theoretically consistent predictions we can make regarding how the government will respond to each of these different reference groups. Recall that the model predicts that capability is seen as threatening regardless of demand, while demand is only threatening in the presence of capability. This implies that groups that are highly capable *and* demanding (i.e., the high threat groups) should be the focus of the government’s attention. Groups that are *only* capable should be lower on the threat list, as capabilities are always seen as threatening. Groups that are *only* demanding will be lower still, as the government uses their resources to fight more capable threats. Finally, groups that are neither demanding nor capable should get the least attention from the governments.

Results

Recall that Hypothesis 1 predicts that as the proportion of capable groups increases, the repression faced by any given reference group will *decrease*. Thus, we should expect increasing the propotion of capable groups to have a *negative* and significant impact on repression. Hypothesis 2a states that increasing the proportion of demanding groups *on its own* should result in the government *increasing* repression against the reference group. Thus, we should expect a *positive* and significant impact on repression. Finally, Hypothesis 2b states that increasing the number of *high threat* groups in the environment (that is, capable and demanding groups) should correspond with a decrease in repression towards the target group, with the expectation that the interaction term will be negative and significant. These hypotheses are all driven by the government’s need to move resources around to deal with emerging threats: governments shift resources away from less threatening groups (for example, ones that are only demanding) to ones that are more threatening (capable/capable and demanding groups).

The first model looks at all groups that could be considered highly threatening to the regime – they are nationalist groups led by strong leaders. Thus, we should expect the government to be paying the most attention to these groups. The government will want to concentrate their repressive resources on these groups, and that is largely what we find.

FIG 1

The government only eases up on repression when there are other threatening targets, particularly other *capable* groups. Consistent with the theory, this is a recurring pattern in the models.

The second model looks at groups that pose slightly less of a threat to the government – they have strong leadership, but their demands are less extreme than secession. Even though they are less demanding, they still pose a considerable threat. The empirical results show that governments respond accordingly – governments tend to concentrate their repressive resources on these targets, in line with the predictions of the theory.

FIG 2

As the formal model predicts, the government prioritizes these groups over those that are only demanding.

The third model looks at groups that are only nationalist – their lack of organized leadership makes them a mild threat, despite their extreme demands.[[36]](#footnote-36) As the empirical results show, the government pays relatively little attention to these groups. This is consistent with the theoretical model’s predictions about the government’s prioritization of threat: that they will prioritize capable groups with less extreme goals over radical groups with less abilities.

FIG 3

The fourth and final model looks at groups that do not have strong leadership or a secessionist goal; these groups pose the lowest threat. The results confirm this – like the model above[[37]](#footnote-37), the government seems to pay relatively little attention to these groups.

FIG 4

**Conclusion**

Repressive policy is not set in response to any single group, entity, attack, etc. Instead, it is a product of its environment – the universe of threats, how threatening each of them are individually, and how they compare to one another. The government compares these groups based on their ability to alter the status quo; a combination of the group’s demands and their ability to actually carry out operations. These dimensions are not equally weighted, however: the government will generally find capable threats more concerning than simply demanding ones.

Empirically, we see that this is largely the case – the government tends to shift repressive resources away from groups the theory would classify as lower threat and towards groups it would classify as high threat. The results also demonstrate the fact that the government’s repressive policy is not a product of the characteristics of a single group; rather, it is placing this group in the context of the groups around it and setting policy accordingly. As the proportion of more capable, threatening groups increases, governments pull resources off of current targets to address the new threat. When the proportion of demanding groups increases, however, we do not see this behavior – in fact, the government focuses more on current capable threats.

This theory and these empirical results demonstrate that we cannot think of repression and dissent as a dyadic concept – the nature of the threat environment is always going to influence government policy. This is not the whole story: we should expect the threat environment to influence how dissident groups act, as well. Dissidents do not operate in a vacuum – they interact with one another frequently. They ally with some groups and enter open conflict with others. They are strategic actors, and understanding how they respond to the threat environment is an important part of understanding the wider repression-dissent nexus.

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**Appendix A – Tables of Results**



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

**Appendix A – Formal Model**

*The Active Group’s Critical Point*

The active group will back down from dissenting if their utility for the status quo is greater than or equal to their expected utility of dissent:

Or

Where *dA* represents the group’s demand, *b* is their status quo payoff, *q* is the probability the government will defeat the group if they attempt to mount a challenge, and *n* is the government’s investment in reactive repression. Note that *q* is *exogenously given* here – the government’s probability of victory is decided before the interaction happens. The active group is choosing between maintaining the status quo unrepressed or attempting to upset the status quo knowing that 1) they might fail and 2) they will face some costs whether they are victorious or not. Solving this algebraically, we get , or . The group will back down and maintain the status quo if , and will dissent otherwise.

*The Latent Group’s Critical Point*

The latent group will not attempt to mobilize if their utility for the status quo is greater than or equal to their expected utility of dissent:

Or

Where *m* represents the group’s mobilization potential, *b* represents their status quo payoff, *l* represents their benefit to mobilization, and *p* represents the probability the group will fail to mobilize. Note that *p* is *endogenous*: , where *w* is the government’s investment in preventive repression. The choice for the latent group is between “investing” its mobilization potential in an attempt to form a group versus maintaining the status quo and keeping its ability to mobilize. Practically, we can think of this as the resources of the members of the potential group: their time, money, connections, and anonymity. If they stay quiet, they get to keep all these resources and save them for another day. If they attempt to mobilize, they make themselves known to the government and use up these resources. Solving this algebraically, we get , or . The latent group will refrain from mobilization if , and will attempt to mobilize otherwise.

*The Government’s Repressive Decision*

Recall that the government’s expected utility for full conflict (that is, the active group dissents and the latent group attempts to mobilize) is:

Or

Or

Where *b* is the government’s status quo payoff, *q* is their probability of victory over the active group, *p* is the probability that the latent group fails to organize, *n* is the government’s investment in reactive repression, *w* is the government’s investment in preventive repression, *dA* is the active group’s demand, *l* is the government’s mobilization payoff, and *m* is the latent group’s mobilization potential. Also recall that *n* and *w* are drawn from the government’s pool of repressive resources, *s*, and that (by assumption) the government uses all its repressive resources (that is, *s = n + w*).

Depending on the government’s investment in repression and the actions of the other groups, this utility changes. If the government sets *n = n\** but *w < w\** and the latent group attempts to mobilize while the active group backs down, the government gets the following expected utility:

If the government sets *w = w\** but *n < n\**, the latent group will back down while the active group will attempt to dissent, leading to the following:

Finally, if the government sets *n = n\** and *w = w\**, the status quo is maintained and the government simply gets a payoff of *b*. I investigate four scenarios, varying the government’s repressive endowment.

*Scenario 1: Sufficient Resources*

Assume *s* (the government’s resources for repression) is equal to *n\* + w\**, meaning that the government has exactly enough resources to repress both groups enough to get them to back down. Intuitively, we should expect the government to divide its repression in such a way that and . This would then mean that the active group would back down and the latent group would refrain from mobilization. To support this statement, the government must not be willing to divert some resources away from one type of repression and add it to the other (recall that it is assumed that the government uses all its repressive endowment). First, compare the utility the government gets from setting its levels of repression to the critical points against the expected utility of setting , meaning the active group will dissent. The government will prefer the critical points if:

Where *n’ < n\**. Solving this algebraically, we get . If the lower value of *n* is below the group’s demand, the government prefers setting *n = n\**. This condition is a result of the form of the government’s utility – the additive nature of the repression implies that if the government invests enough in reactive repression, it could eventually make the term negative, which would *add* utility for the government.

Next, compare the government’s utility for the critical points to its expected utility of setting *w < w\**, meaning that the latent group will attempt to mobilize. The government will prefer the critical points if:

Or

Where *w’ < w\**. Since those terms are assumed to be positive, this is true by definition. As such, when the government has just enough resources to repress both groups, it prefers to set its levels of repression at the critical points instead of focusing on one group at the expense of the other. This leads to the following proposition:

*Proposition 1*: When *s = n\* + w\**, the government will set *n = n\** and *w = w\**. The active group will back down, and the latent group will refrain from attempting to mobilize.

*Scenario 2: Abundant Resources*

Assume *s > n\* + w\**, meaning that the government has a surplus of resources. Scenario 1 demonstrated that the government will never set the levels of repression below the critical points if it has the resources available to meet them, but what about setting the level of resources *above* the critical points. First, I compare the government’s utility for setting *n = n\** and *w > w\** to its utility for setting *n > n\** and *w > w\**. In this setup, the government is shifting resources away from preventive repression to invest more in reactive repression while still being above the critical point in both. This leads to the following:

Or

Which is true. Since the government is always investing enough in repression to get both groups to back down, it always gets the status quo payoff of *b*. As such, it is indifferent between setting *n* at the critical point and setting *n* above it *if there are enough resources to get the latent group to back down as well*. This is also true for the level of preventive repression:

This means that there are essentially infinite equilibria here, as the government’s investment in repression is continuous – as long as , and *s = n + w*, it is a valid combination of investments. This leads to my second proposition:

*Proposition 2:* When *s > n\* + w\**, there is a class of equilibria where the government sets and . The active group backs down and the latent group refrains from mobilization.

*Scenario 3: Dwindling Resources*

Assume *s < n\* + w\** but . This means that the government does *not* have enough resources to repress both groups up to their critical point, but it does have enough to repress one group to its critical point. The government decides on how to invest in repression by comparing the expected utility for reaching the critical point of the active group to the expected utility of reaching the critical point of the latent group. The government will prefer reaching the active group’s critical point if:

Where *n’ < n\** and *w’ < w\**. Since the government is assumed to use all its repressive endowment, *w’ = s – n\**, or

*s – (b – bq)*. Similarly, *n’ = s – w\**, or *s – (l – m)*. This leads to the following inequality:

Solving this for *dA,* the active group’s demand, we get the following:

Or

This inequality can also be solved for *l*, the mobilization payoff. The government sets *n = n\** if:

Or

This tells us that, in general, as *dA* increases (or *l* decreases), the government is more likely to set *n = n\**. As *l* increases (or *dA* increases), the government is more likely to set *w = w\**. This leads to the following propositions:

*Proposition 3a:* When *s < n\* + w\** but , the government sets *n = n\** and *w = w’ < w\**. The active group backs down and the latent group attempts mobilization.

*Proposition 3b:* When *s < n\* + w\** but , the government sets *n < n\** and *w = w\**. The active group dissents and the latent group refrains from mobilization.

Importantly, these cutoffs show that the government’s repressive decisions are not just a function of the characteristics of the active/latent group, but rather a combination of a group’s characteristics *and the characteristics of the other groups around it*. For example, *dA\** contains elements from the active group *and* the consequences of the latent group mobilizing and its mobilization potential. This shows that even if the characteristics of the active group remained the same, a change in the threat environment (a different latent group, in this case) can lead to the government treating active group differently. If the latent group becomes more threatening (*l* increases), the government shifts resources away from repressing the active group. If the latent group becomes less threatening (*l* decreases), the government invests more resources in repressing the active group.

*Scenario 4: Scarce Resources*

Assume *s < n\* + w\**, *s < n\** and *s < w\**, that is, the government does not have the resources available to reach the critical point of either group. In this scenario, conflict is inevitable: no matter how the government divides its repressive resources, it will not be enough for either group to back down. As such, the government is attempting to invest its repressive resources to maximize its conflict utility:

Where *n’ < n\** and *w’ < w\**. This expression is twice differentiable and is concave down when:

Or *n = n’’*

And

Or *w = w’’*

Implying that these are maxima. Under the conditions where the government cannot set these values (for example, too few repressive resources), the government is deciding between setting one value for repression at zero and using all its resources for the other. The government will set *n = s* and *w = 0* if:

Which is true if:

Or

This leads to the following propositions:

*Proposition 4a:* If *s < n\* + w\**, *s < n\**, and *s < w\**, the government sets *n = n’’* and *w = w’’*. The active group dissents and the latent group attempts to mobilize.

*Proposition 4b:* If *s < n\* + w\** and *s < n’’ + w’’*, the government will set *n = s* and *w = 0* if . The active group dissents and the latent group attempts to mobilize.

*Proposition 4c:* If *s < n\* + w\** and *s < n’’ + w’’*, the government will set *n = 0* and *w = s* if *l > l’’*. The active group dissents and the latent group attempts to mobilize.

**Appendix B – Detailed Discussion of Empirical Models**

Model #1 – High Threat Reference Groups

In this model, I limit the sample to all high threat (that is, high capability and high demand) reference groups. As noted above, these groups should be commanding the lion’s share of the government’s resources by their very nature. The model below looks at how changing the proportions of highly capable and highly demanding groups around these high threat groups influences the government’s repression (N = 463). Recall that Hypothesis #1 predicts that as the proportion of *other* highly capable groups increases, the government will shift its repressive resources towards these capable targets. As such, the repression faced by the reference group should *decrease*. Hypothesis #2a predicts that increasing the proportion of highly demanding groups *on its own* should cause the government to focus more on current threats, as demands without capability are not seen as highly threatening. Hypothesis #2a, on the other hand, predicts that demands coupled with capability are sufficiently threatening enough to warrant the government transferring resources. As such, we should expect similar results to Hypothesis #1 – the repression against the reference group decreasing as the government allocates resources elsewhere.

[FIGURE N HERE]

Since the reference groups included in this model are highly threatening, and thus likely already commanding much of the government’s repressive budget, we might expect null results – the government does not move funding away from these groups, as they are the most dangerous, or the government does not transfer funding towards fighting these groups because they’ve already maximized what they’re willing to spend. Figure N, however, suggests that this is not the case. We can see that the coefficient for increasing the proportion of *other* capable groups is significant and negative – this means that as the proportion of other capable groups increases, the repression faced by the reference group decreases. This makes sense when taken in the context of the theory, particularly when we consider the government’s limited repressive budget and how it prioritizes threat. The government’s limited repressive budget means there is an upper limit on what it can spend on repression at any given time, requiring it to redistribute resources as circumstances change. Since the government finds capability more threatening that demand (on its own), the government is willing to redistribute resources towards fighting capable groups. This is true even if it involves pulling some resources off of a high threat target, as some strategies of repression can hit multiple targets (CITATION) or be useful for combatting similar strategies of dissent (CITATION).

While this model offers strong support for Hypothesis #1, the findings for Hypotheses #2a and #2b are more mixed. We can see that the coefficient for the proportion of high demand groups is positive, but it is insignificant. This seems to suggest that the government’s repressive strategy does not change when facing more groups that are demanding but not capable. While this is at odds with the specific predictions of the theory, I believe it fits with the overall logic – the government finds these groups non-threatening, especially in comparison to the high threat reference groups. As such, they do not change their repressive strategy against the high threat groups, even when there’s a large proportion of high demand groups in the environment.

Finally, we can see that the interaction term is *not* significant, running contrary to the predicted decrease in repression; indeed, the results for the fixed-effects version of the model has a positive coefficient, suggesting the opposite relationship. While we cannot reliable infer anything from this null result, it does make sense when taken in the context of which reference groups we are looking at. As noted above, the high threat groups are likely to top the government’s repressive list, and increasing the number of other high threat groups is unlikely to change that. If anything, we might expect the government to implement more policies aimed at repressing high threat groups as a type, resulting in repression against these groups *increasing* as a result of the other high threat groups around them. This explanation is consistent with the results of the model.

Model #2a – Moderate Threat, High Capability Reference Groups

In this model, I limit the sample to all groups that are highly *capable* but *not* demanding (N = 558). This means we are looking at groups that should rank moderate high on the government’s threat list – lower than groups that have high demands and capability, but higher than groups that have demands alone or truly low-threat groups. As such, we might expect the government to be willing to pull resources off of lower threat groups to target these groups, and pull resources off of these groups to target high threat groups.

[FIGURE N+1 HERE]

As we can see in Figure N+1, the coefficient for the proportion of highly capable groups is *positive*, and significant in the model without fixed effects. This seems to suggest that increasing the proportion of capable groups *increases* repression against reference groups that are capable themselves. While this technically runs contrary to the predictions of Hypothesis #1, if fits with the general logic of the theory and our understanding of technologies of repression – the government may be investing in repression that targets *all* capable groups, or it may be paying specific attention to capable groups because they are politically salient. This also meshes with the results from Figure N – governments shift resources off of those groups and on to the capable groups more generally, resulting in the increase in repression seen here.

More interesting are the results for increasing the proportion of demanding groups. As we can see in Figure N+1, the coefficient for the proportion of demanding groups is *positive and significant* for both versions of the model, giving strong support to Hypothesis #2a. This suggests that as the proportion of solely demanding groups increases, the government *choses* to focus on the capable reference groups instead. Moreover, the results suggest the opposite behavior when we consider high-threat groups: while insignificant, the coefficient for the interaction is negative, suggesting the government is willing to pull repression off capable groups and direct it towards high-threat groups when necessary.

Model #2b – Moderate Threat, High Demand Reference Groups

This model looks at the remaining moderate threat targets: those that are high demand but *not* high capability (N = 65). Note the small sample size – there are relatively few groups that are nationalist in demand but lack the leadership structure that would make them threatening, perhaps suggesting something about the relationship between high demands and capability.[[38]](#footnote-38) These groups have a similar but lower place in the threat hierarchy to other moderate groups – since these groups are high demand but not high capability, the government should prioritize capable threats before these groups, but devote repression to the high demand groups before repressing the completely low threat groups. As such, we should expect the government to be willing to pull repression of off these groups to fight capable groups and high threat groups, per Hypotheses #1 and #2b. It is less clear how the government will react to changes in the number of solely demanding groups – we might expect that increasing the proportion of demanding groups does not influence the repression of these groups individually but rather as a collective, similar to the results for the other moderate groups.

[FIGURE N+2 HERE]

As we can see from the model, none of the key independent variables are significant, though it is unclear whether there is truly no relationship or if this is due to the small N. We can see that the coefficient for the proportion of capable groups is negative, which is consistent with the predictions of the theoretical model and the basic logic of the theory – the government pulls repression off of this group to help with more capable groups. Since the other coefficients are inconsistent across versions of this model (i.e., the signs differ when discussing the OLS v. Fixed Effects model), I will refrain from discussing these results in detail. However, it does appear that little seems to influence the repression of these groups, with is consistent with them being on the bottom of the threat hierarchy.

Model #3 – Low Threat Reference Groups

The final model looks at the remaining dissident groups – those that are *neither* high demand nor high capability (N = 135). These groups should be, comparably, the lowest threat: they are advocating for smaller changes to the status quo, and they lack organized leadership.[[39]](#footnote-39) As a result, the government should devote few repressive resources to these groups, and is willing to reallocate those resources if greater threats arise.

[FIGURE N+3 HERE]

The first thing to note is that the coefficients for all of the key independent variables are insignificant, limiting what we can infer from the results. That being said, the coefficients are all *negative,* suggesting that increasing the proportions of *either* high demand *or* high capability groups leads to lower repression for these groups. This is consistent with the threat ordering predicted by the model – these groups are the least threatening, and the government should be willing to move assets away from these groups when bigger targets arise.

1. In particular, I define “government” as the “current regime” as opposed to the state in perpetuity. This is important, as different regimes are going to have different policy priorities, which will in turn influence how they deal with dissent. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A group of actors attempting to change the status quo. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Assuming the characteristics of the government do not change, as group “threat” is subjective to the government. Different governments have different ideal status quos and different abilities to weather the group’s coercive abilities, thus making it so the same group can pose a different level of threat to two different hypothetical governments. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I use the term “government” as shorthand for any political regime currently in power – the “government” actor is whoever currently controls the state. The government actor for any given state may change over time – when a regime is replaced, that new regime would be considered the government actor by my model. These regimes share one key trait, however: they all value the status quo. The status quo represents the current structure that allowed them to rise to and maintain power (Earl et al. 2003; Davenport et al. 2011); as such, they value the status quo remaining intact and deviations from the status quo are all negative. Larger changes to the status quo hurt more than minor ones, but they all hurt. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I assume that repression is effective in as far as reactive does raise costs for the group and preventive does make mobilization more difficult. I also assume that higher investments in repression lead to higher effectiveness. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Note that these two types of repressive spending are not equally efficient – stopping a group before it has a chance to form is better for the government than responding to the actions of a group. In the terms of the model, I assume that preventive repression influences the probability of successful group mobilization, while reactive repression takes the form of an additive cost on groups intending to act. Both strategies are effective in their unique use cases, but in a vacuum it would be more efficient for a government to invest everything in preventive repression and stop any group from forming in the first place. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In this model I am assuming that the government has a fixed budget that it can use for repression and that it *must use all of it*. The amount it invests in reactive repression and the amount it invests in preventive repression must sum to the total amount. Conceptualizing it this way highlights the trade-off that I believe is at the core of the interaction, but it does add artificiality – I am forcing the government to spend some amount on repression. While this is a strong assumption, it is not without some basis in reality. Governments often have budgets set out for specific purposes, and usually all of budget must be used or it might be reduced in the future. Combined with the fact that governments possess finite resources, this suggests there is at least some validity in conceptualizing the resource constraint in this way. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This means that before this interaction began, this group solved the collective action problem, formalized its demands, and can make a claim on the government. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. While the group’s probability of victory is exogenously determined in this model, we could think of it as a function of the group’s capabilities: their resources, manpower, organizational structure, etc. As the group increases in capabilities, the probability that it can successfully challenge the government increases – making it more likely that the group will see its policy demand met. The group knows that if it attempts to dissent, it could face some repressive costs from the government regardless of whether the group is successful. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. While this group is modeled as a singular actor, it is more conceptually accurate to think of it as a loose amalgam of individuals who are working to solve the collective action problem and mobilize. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The government is unable to effectively target individuals in a group that has not fully formed yet. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. While this is written as following the active group’s dissent decision, it could happen at any time after the government makes its repressive decision. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. It is assumed that the payoffs for the active and latent groups are independent of one another, in that the actions of one group does not influence the other outside of how they influence the government’s repressive decision. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See the Appendix for the exact definitions of these points. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See the Appendix for the exact definition of these points. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. There is information included about the group’s country of operation, but the data itself is organized at the organization-year level. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The limited timeframe, geographic scope, and political scope of the data does impose some restrictions on what we can conclude from the results. Namely, any results can only be said to apply to specifically ethnopolitical groups operating in the MENA region during the years 1980 – 2004. While this is an issue, it is a relatively minor one: these groups vary greatly in their structure, specific demands, popular support, etc., allowing us to make meaningful comparisons between the groups. Moreover, the region itself is quite heterogeneous, with states varying in terms of their GDP, military capabilities, and regime types. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The criteria required for inclusion into the data are as follows:

    “1) The organization makes explicit claims to represent the interests of one or more ethnic groups and/or the organization’s members are primarily members of a specific ethnic minority.

    2) The organization is political in its goals and activities.

    3) The organization is active at a regional and/or national level.

    4) The organization was not created by a government.

    5) The organization is active for at least three consecutive years between 1980 and 2006.

    6) Umbrella organizations (coalitions/alliances) are NOT coded. Instead, member organizations are coded.” (MAROB Codebook Version 9/2008, 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. This is putting aside the question of whether governments would record this information in a meaningful, parsable way in the first place. Governments have every incentive to hide their repressive spending – doing so creates plausible deniability for the regime and denies the dissidents crucial information about the opposition they face. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. This is recoded from MAROB’s original coding scheme. The original categories are somewhat ordinal, with a “1” representing an organization that is legal, a “2” representing an organization that is legal but subject to periodic repression, a “3” denoting an organization that is illegal but tolerated, a “4” denoting an illegal organization that is subject to periodic repression, and a “5” representing an organization that is both illegal and is targeted for ongoing repression. I recode this variable so there are three main groups: groups that are tolerated by the state (the “1”s and “3”s), those that are subject to periodic repression from the state (the “2”s and “4”s), and those that are targeted for ongoing repression by the state (the “5”s). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The median value for this variable is a 1, and most organization-years are considered “low repression.” The frequency decreases from low to moderate to high repression, meaning that in most years organizations experienced relatively low intensity repression. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. There are 112 organizations in the dataset, with 67 identified as “low demand” (non-nationalist), 44 identified as “high demand” (nationalist), and 1 unknown (nationalist stance is not identified – Iraqi Communist Party). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. The extreme nature of this type of demand restricts us to comparing groups at the very high end of the demand continuum to all the other groups, but this in and of itself is a meaningful comparison, especially given the interactive nature of demand and group capability. Recall that the theory predicts states tend to ignore organizations with extreme demands but not the capability to back them up. Operationalizing group demand as their desire to secede is an extreme way to test this dynamic. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. For example, it can be difficult to mobilize a high number of people, and small groups can be effective at getting the government to change policies. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. For example, a group can turn violent because it feels it is strong enough to take on the state directly or because they are desperate. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. The assumption that decentralized groups are weaker than centralized ones is a strong one, but not without precedent. First, there is a specific definition for “weakness” in this case – “weaker” groups are ones unable to coerce the government. This process of coercion involves being able to weather adverse circumstances, like government repression, and their ability to effectively mobilize supporters and allies. Bob and Nepstad (2007) find that groups with established leadership structures and less factionalization are better able to deal with adverse events like the assassination of a leader. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. In the original LEAD variable, a score of “1” denotes a group with competing leadership, a “2” refers to a group with weak or decentralized leadership, a “3” denotes a group with a strong ruling council, and a “4” represents a group with a strong single leader. It is difficult to say whether a group with competing leadership is more or less capable than a group with decentralized leadership, or whether a group with a strong single leader is more or less capable than a group with a strong ruling council. As such, I recode this into a “strong” variable – a group is “weak” if it scores a “1” or a “2” (its leaders are competing, or it is decentralized) and a group is “strong” if it scores a “3” or a “4” (it has a strong single leader or ruling council). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. These groups can be further subdivided based on the theory, which predicts the government prioritizes capable threats over demanding ones. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. We could effectively think of the threat environment as a *spatial weight* (Beck, Gleditsch, & Beardsley 2006) – where the spatial distance between any two groups is a function of their state of operation and the characteristics of the threat environment. For example, two groups in the same country with a large number of high threat groups are going to be “closer” to each other than to a group in a different country with a similar number of high threat groups or to a group in the same country but at a different time when there were fewer high threat groups. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. To reiterate the intuition of the theoretical model, this is because the government is transferring resources *away* from the reference group to put them towards combating the more capable threats. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Governments do not find demand on its own particularly threatening. As such, increasing the number of demanding groups without capabilities causes the government to devote resources to more threatening groups. Increasing the number of demanding groups *with* capabilities (the most threatening groups), on the other hand, should result in the government pulling resources away from the less threatening reference group. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. In addition to the variables listed below, the sample itself is important to consider. The predictions of the theory focus on governments with *moderate* resources – they are able to repress *some* groups, but not all of them. The governments covered by the MAROB dataset fit into this criterion – they are classified by the World Bank as low- to middle-income economies (World Bank 2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. While military expenditure and the number of personnel provide us with good estimates of a state’s martial strength, this does not *necessarily* translate 1-to-1 into repressive strength (see, for example, Hendrix 2010). For example, having a large number of soldiers does not necessarily mean they are well-trained or well-equipped. Higher expenditure per soldier doesn’t necessarily translate into military effectiveness if the bureaucracy cannot get the money where it needs to go. On a more fundamental level, the government may not use the military to repress – they may instead delegate repressive responsibilities to local law enforcement. However, these measures do give us some insight into the government’s priorities re: coercive power, and the military can and has been used for repression in multiple countries. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Similar to the above military variables, GDP can be an effective measure of state capacity, but it has some important drawbacks. In theory, GDP is a straightforward measure of state power – increased GDP means that there are more resources to commit to policies like repression. In practice, however, we cannot assume that GDP immediately and always translates into repressive (or even military) might. Revenue takes time to turn into tangible resources – equipment must be bought, personnel trained, etc. Governments often have private information regarding their budgets, meaning that we cannot be sure how they are allocating their resources. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Given the categorical nature of my dependent variable, one could argue it would be more appropriate to use a maximum likelihood model. Since my dependent variable is ordered – repression increases from a level of one to three – an ordered logit or probit would be most appropriate. I conduct ordered logit analyses, and find results that are consistent with the regression model. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Note the small N of this group – 65. This limits our ability to draw meaningful conclusions about this subgroup. While the results are consistent with the theory, it is impossible to rule out the possibility that this sample is skewed in some way. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. The models are also similar in their small N – 135. The same caveats apply. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. It is likely that demands are endogenously linked to capability, making it unlikely for groups to demand more than they have the capability of accomplishing. We cannot infer this from the data, however, as this represents the end of a selection process to get viable groups in the first place – it could be that high demand, low capability groups are common at some point in the dissent-repression process, but are weeded out before they are able to organize into a coherent whole that shows up in data. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. This does not mean these groups are *harmless* by any means. Rather, they are simply the least threatening out of all the other groups around – they can still be effective on their own. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)