# "We Have Nothing to Do With It": How Statements of Denial by Armed Actors Shape Public Perceptions and Emotions

*Revised & Resubmitted*

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**Abstract**

Armed groups operating in conflicts around the world publish statements of denial to dissociate themselves from acts of violence. Existing research argues that armed groups publish denial statements to avoid public backlash, favorably frame the conduct of their campaigns, and distance themselves from unsanctioned actions conducted by rank-and-file members. However, the broader psychological impact of denial statements on public perceptions remains unexplored. Investigating the effects of denial statements published by armed groups, we conducted a novel survey experiment with a national sample of 1,616 adults in the United States. Participants were presented with a fictional attack attributed to an armed group by the government and randomly assigned to conditions in which the group denied, claimed, or remained silent about the attack. Our findings reveal that denials reduce perceived culpability in attacks, undermine trust in government, and alter emotional responses to violence. These results highlight how denial statements may serve as important rhetorical tools in armed groups' discursive repertoire. This study contributes to scholarship on the communication strategies of armed groups, psychological responses to violence, and the effects of militant discourse on public perceptions.

**Keywords:** political violence, denial of responsibility, political narrative manipulation, trust in government, public outrage

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## INTRODUCTION

A growing body of conflict research explores why and when armed groups claim responsibility for conducting violent acts (Hoffman, 2010; Abrahms & Conrad, 2017; Brown, 2020; Kearns, 2021). However, armed groups operating in conflicts across the world also publish statements of denial to dissociate themselves from violent events. The Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance, for example, denied any links to the killing of 14 civilians in southern Senegal in January 2018, claiming that the group was not responsible for this "barbaric massacre" (Jawo, 2018). In other cases, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front denied responsibility for the 2007 beheading of Philippine soldiers (Abuza, 2008) while the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam rejected accusations of assassinating Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister in 2005 (Reuters, 2007). Elsewhere, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb denied responsibility for the 2011 Marrakesh bombings by proclaiming: "We have nothing to do with it" (al Jazeera, 2011).

Existing scholarship argues that armed groups publish denial statements for multiple reasons. This includes organizational attempts to avoid public backlash, favorably frame the conduct of violent campaigns, and distance themselves from unsanctioned actions executed by rank-and-file members (Kearns, Conlon, & Young, 2014; Abrahms & Conrad, 2017; Hearty, 2022). While previous studies shed critical light on why armed groups deny their involvement in violence, the broader psychological impact of denial statements, especially regarding their influence on public opinion and emotional responses to violence, remains unexplored.

Building on existing research, we investigate the effects of denial statements on public perceptions surrounding political violence. In doing so, we contend that denial statements published by armed groups may influence public perceptions and emotions in various ways. Denial statements can generate uncertainty about an armed group's involvement in violence, introducing

competing narratives that challenge government discourse. Despite being produced by potentially untrustworthy actors, these statements can provide a form of evidence that individuals may use to reinterpret ambiguous events in ways that align with pre-existing attitudes or reduce emotional distress caused by perceptions of threat from armed groups. As a result, denial statements may diminish confidence in a group's culpability for attacks, undermine trust in government credibility, and temper public outrage by disrupting moral clarity and encouraging cognitive reappraisal.

To analyze these arguments and the effects of denial statements, we conducted an original survey experiment with a national sample of 1,616 adults in the United States.[1] Respondents read about a terrorist attack attributed to a fictional armed group by government officials and were randomly assigned statements in which the group either *denied, claimed*, or *remained silent* about the attack. The results reveal that denial statements may shape public perceptions in notable ways, serving as a potent communication tool in an armed group's discursive repertoire.

The findings from this survey experiment contribute to multiple areas of research in political psychology and conflict studies. First, this study extends theories of costly signaling and political communication, offering new insights into how armed groups may shape public perceptions and emotions (Johnson and Gillooly, 2023). While multiple studies have explored the psychological and attitudinal impact of armed group violence (Crenshaw, 2000; Nussio, 2020; Vasilopoulos & Brouard, 2020; Lueders et al., 2024), less research has systematically explored the effects of armed group discourse on public opinion. Representing the first experimental evidence regarding the effects of denial statements, our findings also highlight the importance of denials as non-violent, rhetorical tools that armed groups may use to disrupt official narratives propagated

[1] Although we discuss the generalizability of our findings beyond the United States in greater detail below, it is worth noting that recent evidence suggests that experimental studies conducted in the United States largely replicate across a diverse set of countries, including those with significant armed group activity, such as India, Israel, and Nigeria (Bassan-Nygate et al., 2024).

by governments. Finally, this study contains important policy implications for countering misinformation campaigns and maintaining public trust in contested information environments following acts of violence.

## DENYING RESPONSIBILITY FOR POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Armed groups devote significant time and resources to their propaganda efforts. Seeking to disseminate their messages to different audiences, armed groups have developed sophisticated media apparatuses that publish audio messages, documents, and videos in numerous languages (Ying 2024). Dedicating scarce resources to producing such materials stems from armed groups' recognition of the importance of propagating their narratives and justifying their actions to the public. In an internal al-Qaeda document, for example, Ayman al-Zawahiri (2005) stated: "We are in a battle, and…more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media."

Within their broader propaganda efforts, armed groups have multiple incentives to claim responsibility for acts of violence. By claiming credit for public displays of violence, armed groups can distinguish themselves from rivals in competitive environments (Hoffman, 2010), establish reputations when entering new conflict zones (Hansen, 2023), delineate standards for group behavior (Brown, 2020), and recover from organizational setbacks (Author, 2023). Claiming credit for violence can further demonstrate an organization's resolve and reduce uncertainty regarding its commitment to achieving long-term objectives. After all, violence can serve as a costly signal (Kydd & Walter, 2006), or a credible threat that imposes costs that the sender would be reluctant to bear without intending to follow through (Fearon, 1997), that armed groups may attempt to amplify by claiming responsibility for violence.

Although there are multifaceted incentives to take responsibility for violent acts, the vast majority of armed group attacks remain unclaimed (Kearns, 2021; Hansen, 2023).[2] However, even if armed groups remain silent following attacks, governments frequently attribute violent acts to particular organizations in their efforts to reduce uncertainty about the identity of the perpetrator among the general public (Kearns, 2021). Armed groups often combat government attributions of responsibility by publishing statements that explicitly disavow their involvement in violent acts.

Examples from numerous conflict zones demonstrate that armed groups with varying ideological orientations use denial statements in their discursive repertoire. In 2008, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rejected United Nations (UN) reporting that claimed the group had conducted kidnappings in the Central African Republic, with an LRA spokesperson declaring: "That report is biased, ill-intentioned" (Nyakairu, 2008). In another case, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslieem "categorically" denied "false claims" surrounding the group's responsibility for killing a peace campaigner in Mali in 2021 (BBC Monitoring Africa, 2021). Combating accusations surrounding the executions of government soldiers in 2005, the Maoist People's Liberation Army in Nepal stated: "The army's claims that we lined up the 40 soldiers and brutally murdered them…is baseless, imaginary and untrue" (Agence France-Presse, 2005).

Armed groups might deny involvement in acts of violence to distance themselves from actions that could harm their reputation or alienate their support base (Kearns, Conlon, & Young, 2014). Such denials may occur after attacks against certain targets, such as civilians, that have a higher likelihood of inciting public backlash (Abrahms & Conrad, 2017). Armed groups can also issue denial statements in their efforts to shape opinion among proximate and distant audiences surrounding their conduct, internal unity, and the character of group members (Hearty, 2022).

[2] Armed groups claimed responsibility for only 16 percent of events in the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) from 1998 to 2016 (Kearns, 2021).

Overall, statements of denial constitute a key aspect of armed groups' propaganda strategies. Previous studies underscore various incentives for armed groups to publish denial statements in their efforts to influence different audiences. However, the effectiveness of these denial statements on public perceptions has received less attention in existing research. In the following section, we draw on scholarship in conflict studies and political psychology to theorize why and how statements of denial issued by armed groups might affect public emotions as well as perceptions surrounding armed group culpability and government credibility.

## PSYCHOLOGY OF DENIAL STATEMENTS

We outline three interconnected theoretical expectations, rooted in political psychology, to examine how denial statements may influence public opinion. Our focus is on theorizing the effects of denial statements on audience beliefs and emotions, rather than whether armed groups strategically anticipate these effects. While denial statements may be directed toward multiple audiences—including domestic constituencies, international publics, and government actors—our discussion centers on mass public reactions, given the centrality of public opinion in shaping policy responses to political violence (Gershkoff & Kushner, 2005; Huff & Kertzer, 2018).

First, we discuss how denial statements might affect the public's belief in an armed group's involvement in violent acts. Second, we consider the implications of these denials on the perceived credibility of the government. Finally, we deliberate how denial statements may alter individuals' emotional responses to political violence, specifically by reducing feelings of outrage.

### *Public Perceptions of Involvement in Violence*

The perceived trustworthiness of a communicator significantly affects the persuasiveness of their message (Pornpitakpan, 2004; O'Keefe, 2015). In the case of violent actors, there may be salient

skepticism toward statements released by armed groups. For instance, Abrahms (2013) argues that observers infer intentions directly from actions, often perceiving violent actors as having malicious motives, regardless of their political goals. Accordingly, denial statements published by armed groups might be ineffective—or even counterproductive—if the public sees a disconnect between a group's actions and its claimed innocence. Yet, even in the face of government attributions, statements of denial may potentially reduce public perceptions surrounding an armed group's involvement in violence for multiple reasons.

Despite coming from potentially untrustworthy actors, denial statements can increase uncertainty among the public regarding the perpetrator of violence. Recent research highlights how denial statements can generate uncertainty in disparate contexts. Schiff, Schiff, and Bueno (2024) demonstrate that politicians can create informational uncertainty by denying credible scandal reports, helping them maintain public support. Bloch and McManus (2024) further show that denials of responsibility for covert actions issued by state actors can generate uncertainty and influence public preferences. Existing studies suggest that such uncertainty can persist even in the face of compelling evidence (Cormac & Aldrich, 2018; Brown & Fazal, 2021).

Violent attacks generate high levels of uncertainty and create fear and perceptions of threat among the public (Lachlan, Spence, & Seeger, 2009; Kearns, 2021). By publishing denial statements, armed groups introduce narrative competition within these unsettled political environments. These competing narratives challenge the government's evidence and official account of violent events. In doing so, armed groups may proclaim that government attributions are unfounded and lack credible evidence, constituting politicized attempts to shift the blame for a government's intelligence and security failures onto other actors. Denial statements published

by armed groups may thus amplify the ambiguity that follows violent attacks, reducing public beliefs regarding an armed group's responsibility for conducting particular attacks.

Aside from augmenting uncertainty, denial statements may influence how individuals process information about an armed group's involvement in violence by interacting with existing motivational biases. Psychological research shows that people often engage in *motivated reasoning*, a process in which cognitive judgement is shaped by underlying desires and goals (Bolsen & Palm, 2019; Druckman & McGrath, 2019). Here, motivations denote "any wish, desire, or preference that concerns the outcome of a given reasoning task" (Kunda, 1990, 480).

Within this framework, individuals may pursue *accuracy goals* – the desire to reach the most accurate conclusion – or *directional goals*, which reflect "the goal of arriving at a particular conclusion" (Kunda, 1999, p. 212). *Directional motivated reasoning* thus entails cognitive attempts to reach a predetermined conclusion about a given situation and may be used to achieve goals such as belief maintenance, identity protection, and the preservation of particular values (Druckman & McGrath, 2019; Bayes et al., 2020). Recent findings highlight how such reasoning can influence public perceptions in the aftermath of violence (Noor et al., 2019). However, individuals may not be able to arrive at certain conclusions simply because they wish to. Rather, they can "draw the desired conclusion only if they can muster up the evidence necessary to support it" (Kunda, 1990, p. 483).

Denial statements may resonate differently across individuals depending on their predispositions, directional goals, and information-processing strategies. For individuals who already harbor skepticism toward the government, oppose the ruling party, or sympathize with non-state actors, denial statements offer an alternative narrative that challenges official accounts and reinforces existing worldviews (Kertzer, Rathbun, & Rathbun, 2020; Bloch & McManus,

2024). In this sense, denial-induced ambiguity can be selectively embraced to serve directional motivations, such as affirming distrust in state institutions or resisting narratives that attribute threat to favored actors.

By contrast, individuals who generally trust government institutions or hold hawkish views on national security may be more likely to dismiss denial statements as disingenuous or manipulative. Yet even beyond political predispositions, individuals often pursue other directional goals, such as minimizing perceived personal threat. Denial statements—even if not fully credible—can provide cognitive material that helps lower threat perceptions. For example, individuals motivated by concerns for personal safety may gravitate toward denial narratives because they offer psychological relief, suggesting that perpetrators lack the intent or capability to inflict future harm. In such cases, individuals may gravitate toward the less threatening narrative—the denial—because it reduces perceptions of imminent danger.

While directional motivated reasoning may work in contrasting ways depending on individuals' goals, denial statements serve as competing narratives that challenge government rhetoric. In doing so, denial statements offer evidence that can help individuals downplay either armed group culpability or perceived threat. Thus, denial statements can satisfy different directional motivations by increasing ambiguity surrounding an armed group's responsibility for violence. Taken together, we contend that denial statements may generally decrease individuals' conviction in a group's involvement in violence.

**Hypothesis 1**

Statements of denial by armed groups diminish individuals' conviction in the group's involvement in a violent attack.

***Public Perceptions of Government Credibility***

Discourse plays a prominent role in the aftermath of violent attacks. Government officials frequently assign blame to specific armed groups following acts of violence (Kearns, 2021). Domestic populations may be inclined to believe these government attributions of responsibility. Research shows that violent events can generate a "rally around the flag effect" (Hetherington & Nelson, 2003), temporarily boosting public support for political leaders and institutions. For instance, levels of confidence in the U.S. government increased in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks (Gross, Brewer, & Aday, 2009). Individuals placing their confidence in the government after violent events might be motivated to view attributions surrounding an armed group's culpability as dependable evidence coming from trustworthy officials.

However, this confidence is often not durable. For one, recent findings highlight that rally effects following violent attacks are often relatively short-lived for incumbent politicians (Falcó-Gimeno, Muñoz, & Pannico, 2023). Moreover, violent attacks can damage domestic populations' trust in governments. In Mali, for example, Gates and Justesen (2020) find that trust in government officials decreased just days after violence conducted by rebel forces. Utilizing survey evidence from Nepal, De Juan and Pierskalla (2016) also showcase how exposure to violence reduced citizens' trust in the national government. These findings underscore how political violence can generate a climate of institutional strain in which government credibility is vulnerable to disruption.

Denial statements from armed actors can exploit this climate, undermining public faith in the government's credibility. By introducing an alternative narrative that calls the government's attribution into question, denials may prompt cast doubt on the government's competence, investigative integrity, or transparency. Research shows that acts of violence may alter perceptions

surrounding a government's ability to effectively manage future incidents of violence. In Norway, Christensen and Aars (2017) note that while general support for security-related institutions slightly increased after the 2011 Anders Breivik attacks, belief in government agencies' capability to prevent and deal with crises declined significantly.

In this sense, denial statements challenge the government's ability to control the narrative and may foster perceptions of deception or incompetence. Perceptions of incompetence, in turn, may raise doubts about the government's ability to accurately attribute violence. This can lead individuals to question whether officials misled the public for political gain or to conceal strategic failures. After all, previous studies suggest that domestic populations disapprove of inconsistency and hypocrisy in government leadership (Tomz, 2007). Likewise, evidence from survey experiments shows that leaders face political costs when their lies are exposed to the public (Maxey, 2021; Yarhi-Milo & Ribar, 2022). Armed group statements of denial may foster such perceptions by challenging a government's credibility in uncertain political environments.

The impact of denial statements on government credibility may be even more pronounced in contentious environments where armed groups assume de facto governing roles (Arjona, 2016). In such contexts, denial statements can exploit institutional weaknesses, amplifying doubts about the government's credibility. Yet, this dynamic is not limited to conflict-ridden states. Even in democracies with low levels of political violence, governments can lose popular confidence and trust following attacks (Gross, Brewer, & Aday, 2009; Christensen & Aars, 2017; Falcó-Gimeno, Muñoz, & Pannico, 2023). Consequently, denial statements—despite originating from actors often seen as untrustworthy—may resonate with the public, deepening skepticism toward the government's honesty and capacity to manage threats.

**Hypothesis 2**

Statements of denial by armed actors that follow statements of attribution by governments reduce individuals' conviction in the government's credibility.

### *Emotional Responses to Violence*

An established body of research examines the role of emotions in shaping political processes (Marcus, 2000; Pace & Bilgic, 2019). Emotions constitute "affective responses to what happens in the environment and cognitive representations of the event's meaning for the individual" (Frijda, 1994, p. 51). As Marcus (2003, p. 189) explains, emotions become attached to experiences and shape reactions and behaviors—whether favorable or unfavorable—toward people, events, and circumstances. Given their power to influence judgment and behavior, emotions play a critical role in shaping political responses to violent events (Milliff, 2023).

Acts of violence often evoke strong emotional responses. While violent acts can generate positive emotions like hope, excitement, and pride in one's country (Brandon & Silke, 2007; Gross, Brewer, & Aday, 2009), they also produce fear, anger, hatred, and sadness (Nussio, 2020; Kaakinen et al., 2021). Outrage, for example, is a frequent reaction to political violence—marked by moral indignation and a desire for revenge (Balcells, 2017; Wayne, 2023; Schnakenberg & Wayne, 2024). Exposure to violence may also trigger feelings of humiliation (Barber et al., 2016), which, rather than suppressing action, can intensify the drive for conflict (Barnhart, 2017; Masterson, 2022). However, as noted above, statements of denial might introduce doubt about the perpetrator of violence. This uncertainty can potentially disrupt emotional appraisals that are key for the emergence of outrage.

Research on appraisal theories of emotion suggests that emotions like anger and outrage arise from evaluations of events as intentional, immoral, and threatening (Ames & Fiske 2013,

2015). To experience moral outrage and a desire for retribution, individuals must perceive an event as caused by an identifiable agent (Ginther, Hartsough, & Marois, 2022). Denial statements might complicate these appraisals by creating ambiguity about who is responsible, lowering preferences for retaliation in the face of contradictory evidence (Bloch & McManus, 2023). For example, Hedgecock and Sukin (2023) find that uncertainty about a cyberattack's perpetrator significantly affects public support for retaliation. The moral clarity required for outrage to develop may, thus, be undermined by denial statements, weakening the certainty needed to sustain anger and calls for retribution (Carson, 2018).

Cognitive reappraisal has been shown to reduce emotions like anger and increase support for conflict resolution in communities affected by political violence, such as Israel and Colombia (Halperin, Porat, & Gross, 2013; Hurtado-Parrado et al., 2019). Denials can operate as a cognitive reappraisal mechanism by prompting individuals to engage in a process of "taking a step back and viewing a provoking event in an objective way" (Denson & Fabiansson Tan, 2023). By offering an alternative narrative that counters initial perceptions of hostility or aggression, denial statements may redirect attention toward gathering more evidence or questioning responsibility—fostering deliberation instead of moral judgment and outrage.

Finally, while denial statements do not communicate contrition or remorse in the way that formal apologies might, they may nonetheless diminish perceptions of confrontational intent (Bloch & McManus, 2024). In doing so, denial statements can signal that the alleged perpetrators of the attack may wish to avoid escalation (Carson, 2018; Lonergan & Lonergan, 2022; Yoder & Spaniel, 2022). Moreover, by rejecting responsibility for specific attacks, armed groups can blunt the perception that the violence constituted a deliberate, humiliating provocation. This may, in turn, temper emotional reactions like outrage and fear (Masterson, 2022). Even if the denial is not

fully believed, it can introduce enough ambiguity to lower the perceived intent to escalate, producing a modest emotional relief among the public.

**Hypothesis 3**

Statements of denial by armed actors reduce the outrage individuals feel in response to acts of political violence.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

Addressing the effectiveness of denial statements requires experimental evidence to isolate the causal effects of these statements on public perceptions. This is especially important because the effectiveness of denials may depend on the public's willingness to trust information from potentially untrustworthy actors. Following recent experimental research analyzing public responses to terrorism (Huff & Kertzer, 2018; Baele et al., 2019), we employ a vignette survey experiment to examine the impact of denial statements on individual perceptions and emotions. The study design, including treatment conditions, research questions, and the analysis plan, was preregistered with AsPredicted.org on January 18, 2023.[3] The outcome measures and hypotheses analyzed here build on the pre-registered framework, with refinements made during the course of the study.

The survey experiment was conducted in January 2023 on a national sample of 2,016 U.S. adults recruited through the Lucid Theorem online panel—a period marked by heightened terrorism concerns, including threats from foreign terrorist organizations like the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, as well as lone wolf actors (Wilson Center, 2023). The Lucid Theorem panel, documented as largely representative of the broader U.S. population (Coppock & McClellan,

[3] The registration number is #119157. An anonymous PDF copy of the preregistration is submitted along with the manuscript. Consent form, debriefing narrative, and IRB documentation available upon request.

2019), has been widely used in recent studies on public opinion and political violence (Armaly & Enders, 2024; Armaly, Buckley, & Enders, 2022; Piazza, 2024a; Piazza, 2024b).

Due to the omission of certain dependent variable questions in one treatment condition (*attack without government attribution*), analyses for this study focus on a subsample of 1,616 respondents who were asked the full set of questions required to test our hypotheses. This adjustment ensures that all treatment groups included in the analyses are comparable in terms of available outcome measures while preserving the internal validity of the experiment. As shown in Appendix 4, respondents included in the analyses do not differ significantly from those excluded in terms of demographic characteristics.

To maximize accessibility, the survey was distributed in batches across different days and times, accommodating participants in various time zones. Participants provided informed consent before taking the survey and received a debriefing upon completion. To address concerns about subject inattentiveness, multiple attention checks were included, and respondents who failed these checks were excluded from the analysis (Westwood, Grimmer, & Nall, 2022).[4] Descriptive statistics for the sample are available in Appendix 3.

Participants were presented with a fictional scenario simulating a terrorist attack attributed to a fictional armed group by government officials.[5] To maximize emotional engagement, the experimental vignettes were designed to resemble authentic news reports, including images purportedly taken at the scene of the attack and statements from eyewitnesses. Participants were

[4] Our analysis sample includes individuals who passed initial checks but later showed partial inattentiveness (e.g., misidentifying the group blamed for the attack), reflecting real-world patterns of partial engagement with political information.

[5] We used a fictional armed group to minimize ethical concerns, isolate the psychological effects of denial statements, and avoid confounding prior attitudes toward real-world actors. Prior research suggests that using fictional versus real actors does not systematically alter treatment effects (Brutger et al., 2023).

then shown a corresponding statement by the armed group based on their randomly assigned experimental condition.

### *Vignette Construction and Experimental Manipulations*

All vignettes describe an explosion in a shopping mall in Overland Park, a suburb of Kansas City, which resulted in civilian casualties and injuries. Authorities attribute the attack to the *International Resistance Movement*, a fictional anti-American terrorist organization. The narrative includes details about the attack, the authorities' response, and eyewitness accounts. The full text of the vignettes appears in the first column of Figure 1.

All participants read the same fictional attack and the experiment's key manipulation is the nature of the armed group's response. While the original design included an additional treatment condition (*attack without government attribution*), this condition was excluded from the primary analyses reported here because respondents in this group were not asked questions related to their conviction in the group's involvement or their perception of government credibility. Consequently, the following four experimental conditions to which participants were randomly assigned were analyzed: *silent response* by the armed group, *denial* of responsibility by the armed group, *claim* of responsibility by the armed group, and *competing claims* of responsibility by two different groups.

| Vignette Introduction | Condition | Experimental Manipulation |
|---|---|---|
| An explosion rocked a shopping mall yesterday in Overland Park, a suburb of Kansas City, killing eight people and wounding 20 in what officials are calling a foreign terrorist attack.<br><br>Authorities say that a group called the International Resistance Movement, an anti-American terrorist organization that operates in several foreign countries, committed the attack.<br><br>"We have credible evidence that the International Resistance Movement committed this bombing," said Martha Hoover of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS).<br><br>Three of the victims were airlifted to a local hospital and are reported to be in critical condition. Others are reported to be in stable condition and may be released as early as tomorrow morning.<br><br>The bombing occurred just before 11:00 am outside one of the main anchor stores in the mall. Police say that the explosive device used in the attack was placed inside a trash container outside of the store. It appears to have been detonated by a timer. First responders raced to the scene as shoppers helped survivors exit the building.<br><br>"I had just come into the mall when I heard a loud crashing sound," said Jill McKnight, a local resident who was at the scene but avoided injuries. "Then everyone started screaming and running away. I'm still very scared."<br><br>"This was clearly a terrorist attack," said Hoover. "The explosive device was sophisticated and is the type used by the International Resistance Movement," she added.<br><br>Police working with DHS agents are interviewing eyewitnesses, reviewing security camera footage, and studying the explosive device used in the explosion to get more information and determine the International Resistance Movement's involvement in the explosion. | *Silent Response* | *No further manipulation* |
| | *Denial of Responsibility* | Several hours after U.S. authorities accused the group, the International Resistance Movement published a statement on a social media website to deny their involvement in the explosion.<br><br>The statement read, "We are not responsible for the explosion in Kansas City. We have no information about the incident and only heard about it from the media. We reject the allegations that put the blame on our fighters. The allegations are irresponsible acts aimed at discrediting our movement." |
| | *Claim of Responsibility* | Several hours after U.S. authorities accused the group, the International Resistance Movement published a statement on a social media website to acknowledge their involvement in the explosion.<br><br>The statement read, "The International Resistance Movement has struck against the United States. Our fighters managed to place explosive devices in the midst of a shopping mall in Kansas City. This strike is a warning; we do not sleep, and our movement will not quit." |
| | *Competing Claim of Responsibility* | Several hours after U.S. authorities accused the group, the International Resistance Movement published a statement on a social media website to acknowledge their involvement in the explosion.<br><br>The statement read, "The International Resistance Movement has struck against the United States. Our fighters managed to place explosive devices in the midst of a shopping mall in Kansas City. This strike is a warning; we do not sleep, and our movement will not quit."<br><br>The statement by the International Resistance Movement was followed by another statement published by the Liberation Brigades. "Our brave fighters carried out the recent explosion in the Kansas City shopping mall. This recent attack against the United States is a warning from the Liberation Brigades. Our attacks will continue; our movement will not back down," the Liberation Brigade's statement read. |

**Figure 1.** Scenarios Used in Experimental Vignettes

### *Silent Response*

The armed group remains silent and does not issue any statement regarding the attack or the government's attribution of the attack to them. This condition serves as a baseline for comparing the effects of the group's communicative actions. The participants in this condition only receive the standard vignette described above.

### *Denial of Responsibility*

In this condition, the armed group explicitly denies responsibility for the attack, aiming to distance itself from the violence, reject allegations, and discredit the government's attribution. Participants in this condition read the standard vignette along with a denial statement issued by the group (see the third column of Figure 1 for verbatim text). As discussed earlier, we expect participants in this

condition to exhibit diminished conviction in the group's involvement, reduced trust in the government's attribution, and lower levels of outrage compared to respondents in other conditions.

*Claim of Responsibility*

In this condition, the armed group claims responsibility for the attack, acknowledging its involvement and framing the incident as a warning to signal its continued resolve. Participants in this condition read the standard vignette along with a claiming statement issued by the group (see the third column of Figure 1). Unlike denials, claims of responsibility eliminate uncertainty about political violence by confirming the accused perpetrators' involvement. This is likely to reinforce individuals' trust in the government's attribution and amplify outrage, as the perpetrators are explicit and unequivocal about their threat. Thus, this condition serves as the antithesis of the denial condition.

*Competing Claims of Responsibility*

Multiple armed groups have claimed credit for the same attack in numerous conflict zones (Abrahms and Conrad, 2017). Indeed, there are over 2,500 incidents with competing claims in the Global Terrorism Database (GTD). In this condition, two different armed groups claim responsibility for the same attack, each issuing separate statements. Here, participants read the standard vignette along with claiming statements from both groups (see the third column of Figure 1).

This condition serves two purposes. First, it allows us to capture the full spectrum of possible armed group communication strategies following violent attacks (Author et al., 2024). Second, it tests whether uncertainty evoked by armed group communication alone shapes public responses, or if additional mechanisms play a role. Unlike a single claim of responsibility, which

largely eliminates ambiguity about agency (who is responsible), competing claims introduce lingering uncertainty about culpability. However, given that armed groups are taking responsibility for conducting an act of violence in this condition, we do not expect competing claims to generate the same psychological and emotional effects as denial statements.

***Measurement***

After reading the vignette, participants were asked a series of questions aimed at measuring their emotional responses, perceptions of the credibility of the government's attribution, and belief in the armed group's involvement in violence. To test Hypothesis 1—which posits that denial statements by armed groups reduce individuals' conviction in the group's involvement—participants were asked to assess the likelihood that the International Resistance Movement was responsible for the attack. The question asked: "*How likely or unlikely is it that the International Resistance Movement is indeed responsible for the attack?*" This provides a direct measure of the impact of the group's statement on perceptions of their involvement. The first dependent variable, *Group Involvement*, is coded as 1 if respondents indicated the group was very likely or somewhat likely responsible and 0 if they did not.[6]

To test Hypothesis 2—which posits that denial statements by armed actors following government attributions reduce individuals' conviction in the government's credibility—participants assessed whether the government correctly identified the perpetrator of the attack. Participants were asked: "*Do you think the government correctly identified the perpetrator of the attack?*" The second dependent variable, *Government Credibility*, is coded as 1 if respondents indicated the government correctly identified the perpetrator and 0 if they did not. While this

[6] We conduct robustness checks using the original 4-point scale and the results presented in Appendix 10 are comparable.

measure captures perceptions of episodic attribution accuracy rather than broader notions of institutional credibility, we consider it as a context-specific proxy for credibility. In the immediate aftermath of a violent attack, public perceptions of attribution accuracy can be intertwined with broader beliefs about a government's capacity to manage threats. Thus, attribution accuracy constitutes a policy-relevant expression of credibility in action.

To test Hypothesis 3—which posits that denial statements by armed actors reduce the outrage individuals feel in response to acts of political violence—participants selected their emotions after reading the vignettes from a provided list (e.g., anxious, outraged, disgusted, calm, optimistic, resigned). The third dependent variable, *Outrage*, is coded as 1 if respondents reported feeling outrage and 0 if they did not.

In addition to the experimental measures, we collected demographic information—including age, gender, income, education, race, religion, and political affiliation—as well as data on participants' news consumption and social media usage. This information was gathered prior to the treatment vignettes and post-treatment questions. These variables are included as controls in our extended models. Descriptive statistics for all dependent variables, treatment variables, and control variables are presented in Appendix 1.

### *U.S. Focus and Generalizability Abroad*

We conducted our experiment in the United States for several reasons. First, the United States has experienced diverse forms of political violence, including mass shootings, domestic terrorism, and politically motivated attacks (Kleinfeld, 2021), making it a relevant setting for studying public opinion following violent events. Second, the U.S. context provides a compelling case for examining public reactions to armed actors' messaging strategies. Its highly visible media landscape and increasingly polarized population create a rich context for investigating how denial

statements influence public perceptions. Third, U.S. public opinion plays a critical role in shaping policy responses to political violence (Gershkoff & Kushner, 2005; Huff & Kertzer, 2018). Finally, as a global leader in counterterrorism and national security, the United States often shapes international security policies and strategies (El Masri & Phillips, 2024). Its military reach and history of foreign interventions suggest that insights from this context may inform broader patterns of public sentiment and counterterrorism responses in other countries.

Nonetheless, we recognize the importance of considering our findings' relevance beyond the U.S. context. While our results should be broadly applicable to countries with occasional political violence, they may also extend to settings experiencing higher levels of violence. First, repeated exposure to violence may not desensitize the public to messaging strategies like denials. Frequent violence often amplifies, rather than eliminates, uncertainty and skepticism about responsibility for attacks, deepening doubts about government credibility (Author and Co-author, 2024). This skepticism creates fertile ground for denials to gain traction, particularly where audiences already question official narratives. Groups with prior sympathies toward the denying actor—or animosities toward the government—may be especially receptive to messages that reinforce their existing beliefs. Thus, far from losing their impact in high-violence contexts, denials may thrive precisely because repeated exposure to violence fosters distrust, polarization, and psychological motivations that make audiences more receptive to narratives challenging official attributions of blame.

An important concern is that the U.S. population may significantly differ from other populations in terms of dispositional characteristics, potentially altering their receptiveness to denial statements by armed actors. For instance, U.S. residents may be more (or less) liberal, prone to anger, hawkish, nationally chauvinistic, tolerant of political violence, or susceptible to

conspiratorial thinking and populist attitudes. These factors could influence individuals' tendency to believe—or discredit—messaging strategies by governments and armed groups. The multi-site replication study conducted by Bassan-Nygate et al. (2024) suggests that treatment effects estimated in the United States are more likely to generalize to other countries when dispositional attributes exhibit low heterogeneity. This insight provides a useful framework for evaluating the external validity of our findings.[7]

To test for heterogeneous treatment effects, we interacted our denial treatment with measures of liberalism, anger disposition, hawkishness, national chauvinism, tolerance for political violence, conspiratorial thinking, and populist attitudes—all measured before the treatment vignettes. Our findings show no variation in treatment effects based on these dispositional attributes, suggesting that our results are likely generalizable beyond the U.S. context—a point we elaborate on further below.

## RESULTS

We use multivariate logistic regression models to examine the effects of different statement types on public perceptions and emotions. Table 1 presents these models, analyzing the impact of denial statements by armed groups on three dependent variables: (1) individuals' belief in the group's involvement in a violent attack, (2) trust in the credibility of the government's attribution, and (3) feelings of outrage in response to political violence. It includes naive models (1, 3, and 5) that test the effects of experimental conditions—*denial, claim*, and *competing claims*—without controls, and extended models (2, 4, and 6) that incorporate demographic, political, and media-related controls. Both sets of models yield evidence for the three hypotheses.

[7] Bloch and McManus (2024) use a similar approach to assess the generalizability of their treatment effect.

**Table 1.** Logistic Regression Models of the Impact of Denial Statements

| | H1: Group Involvement | | H2: Government Credibility | | H3: Outrage | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 | Model 6 |
| *Experimental Condition* | | | | | | |
| Denial | -0.857*** | -0.803*** | -0.905*** | -0.890*** | -0.264* | -0.289* |
| | (0.264) | (0.284) | (0.162) | (0.171) | (0.142) | (0.149) |
| Claim | 0.375 | 0.229 | 0.621*** | 0.597*** | 0.084 | 0.149 |
| | (0.230) | (0.243) | (0.183) | (0.190) | (0.140) | (0.148) |
| Competing Claims | 0.291 | 0.166 | -0.177 | -0.171 | -0.025 | -0.028 |
| | (0.227) | (0.240) | (0.169) | (0.179) | (0.140) | (0.148) |
| *Demographic Controls* | | | | | | |
| Age | | 0.983*** | | 0.543*** | | 0.404** |
| | | (0.263) | | (0.200) | | (0.169) |
| Female | | -0.022 | | -0.292** | | 0.060 |
| | | (0.178) | | (0.129) | | (0.107) |
| Income | | 0.078 | | -0.053 | | 0.035 |
| | | (0.091) | | (0.062) | | (0.053) |
| Education | | 0.034 | | -0.141 | | -0.149* |
| | | (0.141) | | (0.103) | | (0.085) |
| White | | 0.071 | | 0.168 | | 0.033 |
| | | (0.200) | | (0.152) | | (0.128) |
| Christian | | -0.082 | | 0.365*** | | 0.283** |
| | | (0.182) | | (0.132) | | (0.111) |
| *Party Identification* | | | | | | |
| Republican-leaning | | 0.135 | | -0.042 | | 0.147** |
| | | (0.121) | | (0.087) | | (0.071) |
| *Media Habits* | | | | | | |
| News Consumption | | 0.108 | | 0.041 | | 0.110** |
| | | (0.067) | | (0.051) | | (0.043) |
| Social Media Usage | | 0.154 | | 0.069 | | 0.250** |
| | | (0.197) | | (0.147) | | (0.122) |
| *Time* | | | | | | |
| Duration (log) | | 0.344** | | 0.097 | | 0.214*** |
| | | (0.148) | | (0.094) | | (0.076) |
| Constant | 1.427*** | -5.458*** | 0.893*** | -1.767** | -0.034 | -3.917*** |
| | (0.172) | (1.234) | (0.121) | (0.896) | (0.099) | (0.735) |
| Observations | 1,033 | 973 | 1,351 | 1,269 | 1,616 | 1,520 |
| Akaike Inf. Crit. | 953.227 | 883.481 | 1,624.601 | 1,513.623 | 2,238.771 | 2,070.268 |

*Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01*

***Impact on Perceptions of Involvement in Violence***

The results in Models 1 and 2 provide strong evidence that denial statements significantly reduce individuals' conviction in the armed group's involvement in the attack. In the naive model (Model 1), denial is associated with a 0.857 decrease in the log-odds of believing the group was involved ($p < 0.01$). This negative relationship remains robust when controls are added in Model 2, where denial reduces the log-odds of perceived involvement by 0.803 ($p < 0.01$). By contrast, claims or competing claims do not produce a statistically significant change in perceived involvement.

Substantively, these coefficients indicate that denial statements produce a substantial decrease in the likelihood that respondents attribute responsibility to the group. Figure 2 (left panel) visualizes the predicted probabilities of attributing blame under different experimental conditions, highlighting a sharp drop in perceived involvement following denial statements, compared to the probabilities observed under the control condition, claims, or competing claims. In the naive model (Model 1), the predicted probability of attributing responsibility to the group is approximately 80.6% in the control condition (e.g., Silent Response). However, when a denial statement is issued, this probability drops to 63.9%—a 16.7 percentage-point decrease. The coefficient estimate remains substantively large when demographic, political, and media-related covariates are included (Model 2), showing only a slight reduction from –0.857 ($p < 0.001$) in the baseline model to –0.803 ($p < 0.001$) in the covariate-adjusted model. These findings align with the hypothesized relationship (H1), demonstrating that denial statements can cast doubt on the accused group's culpability.

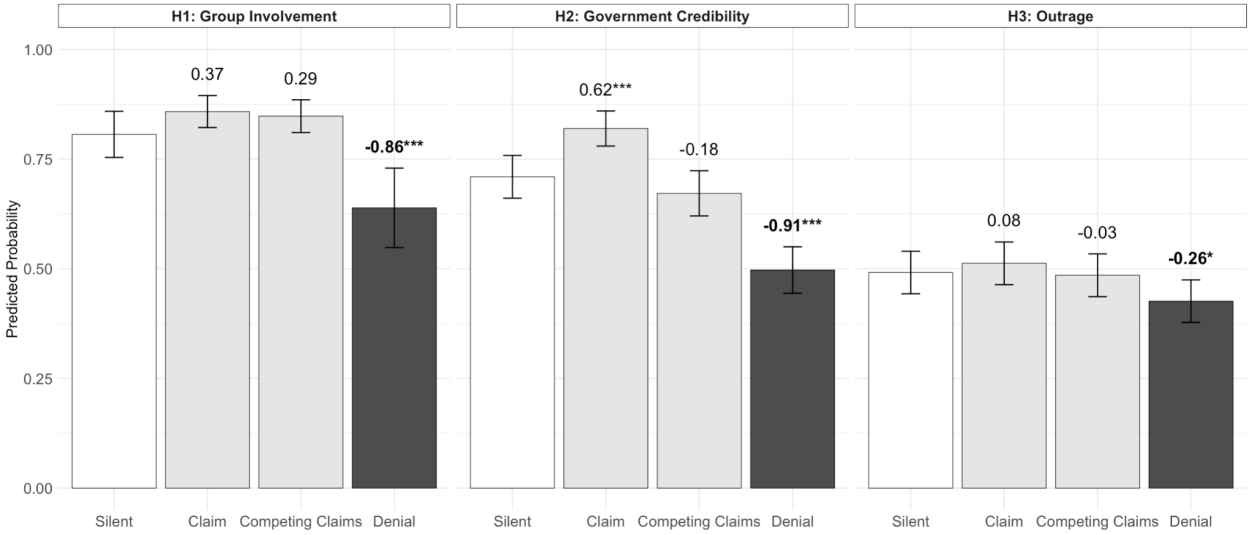


**Figure 2.** Effect of Denials on Public Perceptions and Emotion.
*Note: Predictions are based on naive models without controls. Estimated coefficients for experimental conditions are included above the error bars.*

### *Impact on Perceptions of Government Credibility*

The results in Models 3 and 4 provide evidence that denial statements significantly undermine individuals' confidence in government credibility regarding the attribution of blame. In the naive model (Model 3), denial is associated with a 0.905 decrease in the log-odds of believing the government's attribution of blame ($p < 0.01$). This negative relationship remains robust after accounting for controls in Model 4, where denial reduces the log-odds of perceived government credibility by 0.890 ($p < 0.01$). By contrast, claiming responsibility increases perceived credibility (0.621, $p < 0.01$ in Model 3; 0.597, $p < 0.01$ in Model 4), reinforcing that claims bolster government credibility. In contrast, competing claims fail to produce statistically significant effects.

Substantively, these coefficients indicate that denial statements create considerable doubt about the government's reliability as a source of information regarding violent events. Figure 2 (middle panel) visualizes the predicted probabilities of trusting government credibility under

different experimental conditions. In the naive model (Model 3), the predicted probability of trusting government credibility is approximately 71% in the control condition (e.g., Silent Response). However, when a denial statement is issued, this probability drops to 50%—a 21 percentage-point decrease. These findings align with the hypothesized relationship (H2), demonstrating that denial statements can cast doubt on official attributions.

***Impact on Public Outrage***

The results in Models 5 and 6 provide some evidence that denial statements may reduce the levels of public outrage individuals feel in response to acts of political violence. However, the effects are more modest and statistically weaker compared to other outcomes. In the naive model (Model 5), denial is associated with a 0.264 decrease in the log-odds of expressing outrage, but this effect is only significant at the 90% confidence level. Similarly, in the extended model (Model 6), denial statements are associated with a 0.289 decrease in the log-odds of outrage, again reaching significance at the 90% confidence level. Neither claiming responsibility nor competing claims produce statistically significant effects on public outrage in either model.

Substantively, these coefficients suggest that while denial statements may help dampen emotional reactions to violent incidents, the effects are smaller and less conclusive than those observed for perceptions of culpability or government attribution. Figure 2 (right panel) visualizes the predicted probabilities of public outrage under different experimental conditions, illustrating a slight reduction in emotional intensity following denials. In the naive model (Model 5), the predicted probability of experiencing high levels of outrage is approximately 49% in the control condition (e.g., Silent Response). When a denial statement is issued, this probability decreases to 43%—a 6 percentage-point decrease.

These findings partially align with the hypothesized relationship (H3), suggesting that denial statements can serve as a potential tool for armed groups to mitigate public outrage, albeit with more limited effectiveness compared to their influence on perceptions of culpability and government attribution of blame

***Heterogeneous Treatment Effects?***

We also examined whether the main effects of denial statements varied across different dispositional and attitudinal characteristics. As discussed in the research design, we tested for heterogeneous treatment effects by interacting the denial treatment with measures of liberalism, anger proneness, hawkishness, national chauvinism, tolerance for political violence, conspiratorial thinking, and populist attitudes. These characteristics capture individual differences that could plausibly shape how respondents process denial statements and interpret the associated competing narratives. The questions asked to measure these traits are included in Appendix 6.

The results, presented in Appendix 7, 8, and 9, reveal no evidence of significant heterogeneity in the effects of denials across any of the three dependent variables—*group involvement, government credibility*, and *public outrage*—with one exception: hawkishness significantly moderated the effect of denial on perceptions of the credibility of government attribution. Specifically, individuals with stronger hawkish attitudes were less likely to reduce their trust in government attribution when exposed to denial statements. Aside from this exception, the influence of denial statements appears broadly uniform across ideological, emotional, and psychological profiles. Individuals with varying predispositions tend to respond similarly to denial statements.

### *Exploring Theoretical Mechanisms*

We conducted additional analyses to explore the psychological mechanisms theorized in the study. To better capture perceived uncertainty, we re-estimated our primary H1 model using the original 4-point ordinal scale measuring perceived group involvement (rather than the dichotomized version used in the main models). Results from the ordered logit analysis (Appendix 10) confirm that denial statements significantly reduce confidence in the group's culpability.

Second, we examined whether denial statements influence post-treatment beliefs in ways consistent with reduced threat perception. Respondents assigned to the denial condition reported significantly lower perceived likelihood of a terrorist attack occurring within the next few days compared to those in the silent or claim conditions (Appendix 11). Denial statements also increased agreement with the idea that the government should negotiate with terrorist leaders (Appendix 12), consistent with cognitive processes that temper perceptions of threat and hostility.

Finally, we probed the role of narrative competition by interacting the denial treatment with an ordinal measure of social media news consumption. The negative effects of denial on group involvement ($p < 0.05$), government credibility ($p < 0.05$), and outrage ($p < 0.1$) were significantly attenuated among frequent social media users (Appendix 13), suggesting that individuals regularly exposed to fragmented information environments are less susceptible to the disruptive effects of denial narratives. We evaluate the finding that denials are most effective among individuals who likely do not engage with multiple competing political narratives on a daily basis as a piece of evidence in favor of our theoretical claim that denials operate via introducing narrative competition.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Armed groups engage in a "media battle" against rival organizations and state adversaries. This study provided one of the first empirical analyses regarding the effectiveness of denial statements in shaping public perceptions. By examining the effectiveness of denial statements, we advance understanding of how armed groups can influence public opinion not only through violent displays of strength but also through rhetorical acts that affect public interpretations of violence. Taken together, these expectations provide a framework for understanding how denial statements can operate not as mere rhetorical tools but also as mechanisms for shaping perceptions, emotions, and narratives in contentious political environments.

The study also demonstrates that denial statements have psychological effects beyond rational assessments of blame. Armed groups can subtly temper emotional responses to violence, potentially weakening public support for retaliatory policies or counterterrorism measures (Wayne, 2023). However, the more modest effect on emotional outcomes that we estimate may reflect the difficulty of fully disrupting feelings of outrage following events involving civilian casualties. While denial statements can complicate the moral clarity necessary for full-blown outrage, they may not completely erase the emotional salience associated with the attack itself.

Although the absence of heterogeneous treatment effects reinforces the broad applicability of our findings, our experimental context—by design—presents a simplified information environment. In reality, individuals encounter violent events alongside a broader array of prior beliefs and information sources. Accordingly, while our findings provide important theoretical insights into the psychological influence of denial statements, they may represent an upper-bound estimate of denial's impact in real-world settings.

Therefore, this study opens several avenues for further exploration. First, future studies could examine whether denial strategies resonate differently in more complex, information-rich environments, where individuals are repeatedly exposed to partisan cues. Testing how denial statements interact with real-world levels of polarization, media fragmentation, and prior beliefs would offer important insights into the robustness of the effects observed in this study.

Second, researchers could test whether denial strategies are more or less effective in contexts characterized by varying levels of political violence, media restrictions, and trust in government. For instance, denial statements may potentially be more effective in creating uncertainty in fragmented civil wars containing multiple armed groups that engage in similar forms of violence. In addition, future work could build on the present study by developing and testing broader, multi-item measures of government credibility.

Third, future research could investigate the long-term effects of denials, examining whether perceptions and emotions shift over time or persist as competing narratives evolve. In doing so, such studies could provide additional tests of the mechanisms through which armed groups may influence public perceptions. Further research could also explore how media environments—including social media platforms—facilitate or constrain the spread and credibility of denial statements. Finally, field experiments could assess the effectiveness of counter-messaging interventions, testing governmental strategies designed to mitigate misinformation and bolster institutional trust.

Beyond academic debates, these results carry important policy implications. The government's ability to accurately attribute acts of violence is crucial for maintaining public trust and effectively addressing security threats. The erosion of credibility due to armed actors' communication efforts can significantly impede the government's capacity to respond to and

preempt future acts of political violence. Governments facing denial strategies must carefully balance transparency and credibility to avoid amplifying competing narratives. Strategies emphasizing fact-checking, rapid attribution, and communication consistency may be crucial to counteracting misinformation while maintaining public trust.

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