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Why Did Putin Invade Ukraine? Why Did Hamas Attack Israel? Answers Suggested by Economic Models of Dictatorship and Terrorism

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Abstract: In this paper I use rational economic models to explain the origins of two recent wars, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022 and the Hamas attack on Israel in 2023. In both cases the literature has prominently featured two different kinds of motivations for the attacks, one offensive and one defensive. Did Russia invade Ukraine because it was afraid that Ukraine was getting too strong and too close to NATO and Russia was weakened by this? Or did it invade because Putin thought that the West was weak, particularly after the botched withdrawal from Afghanistan? Did Hamas attack Israel on October 7th because it was afraid that the other Arab countries were about to abandon the Palestinian cause and thus forever weaken it? Or did its leaders believe they could advance the Palestinian cause with a successful attack and withstand the Israeli response, having built a vast system of tunnels with money from Qatar, and possibly counting on help from Hezbollah and Iran? I address these questions in this paper with economic models. I use the models – of dictatorship and terrorism – developed in my previous work, to provide answers to these questions. In both cases, the models favor the offensive explanations of the attacks as opposed to the defensive ones. Russia attacked Ukraine because it thought it could win easily. Hamas attacked Israel because of its newfound strength.

Keywords: dictatorship; war; extremism; terrorism; conflict

JEL Classification: H0; F5

1 Introduction

This paper looks at the origins of two wars raging in 2025, the Russian – Ukrainian war and the war in the Middle East which followed Hamas' attack on Israel in

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October 7, 2023. Why did Russia attack Ukraine? Why did Hamas invade Israel? How can we know the answers to questions like these? The Russian invasion of Ukraine has been analyzed using Russian and Ukrainian history, (especially Timothy Snyder (2024)), psychological profiles of Putin, and tools of political science (e.g. Levitsky and Way (2010)) and these works have yielded important insights. The attack by Hamas has been studied in the context of the history of the ongoing unsettled conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, and in the context of Israeli politics and the politics within Hamas, including an interesting psychological portrait of its leader at that time, Yahyah Sinwar (Remnick 2024).

Another way to look at these questions is to use an economic model. Over the years I have developed a model of dictatorship (originally in my 1990 article) and in many articles since, and in my book *The Political Economy of Dictatorship* (1998), all of this surveyed in Wintrobe (2018) and elsewhere. I have applied this model to understand the behaviour of dictators in places like Russia, China and North Korea. It is an abstract model, but it does provide a systematic way of thinking about dictatorship. The main focus of models like these is to derive testable implications. But in this paper, I want to use them in a different way: to infer something unobservable (such as Putin's thinking) based on his actions. To my knowledge, this is the first time an economic model of dictatorship has been used this way. That is, the model is being used to understand the motivations of a dictator based on the actions he took. In this case, Putin launched an invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and we can ask, why did he do that? As is well known, there are two competing explanations of Putin's actions, one based on "offensive" and one on "defensive" motives. The defensive motive has been strongly argued by John Mearsheimer (2014, 2022), who says Putin acted, initially in Crimea and then in Ukraine, because he was afraid of NATO expansion, which had already proceeded to the borders of Ukraine and possibly would continue and include Ukraine, putting NATO right on Russia's doorstep. Jeff Sachs (e.g. Sachs 2023) makes a similar argument.

The other, and more commonly expressed explanation is that his actions were based on offence, not defence, that he thought the West and the US in particular were weak after the botched withdrawal from Afghanistan, and that Ukraine was incapable of resisting and was led by an ex-comedian who would certainly not be up to the task of leading a fight against the Russian military.

Of course there could be some truth in both explanations, but in other respects they are mutually exclusive: Did Putin think that Ukraine and the West were too weak to resist? Or was it getting too threatening and strong and had to be stopped?

Now let us turn to the terrorist attack by Hamas on October 7, 2023. Hamas in Gaza is like a dictatorship in many respects, but it seems more appropriate to look at it as an extremist or terrorist group which controls the Gaza strip. It has been designated a terrorist organization by the United States and the European Union Council on Foreign Relations (Council on Foreign Relations 2024).

Again, there are two possible explanations for the attack. The first is defensive: the attack of October 7 was motivated by fear of a rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Israel, leaving the Palestinian cause in the cold, something which seemed to be on the verge of taking place. The other is offensive: the invasion was the beginning of an aggressive action, based on the idea that, at a minimum, the Palestinian issue could be brought to the front burner, and its resolution made a precondition for Saudi Arabia to make bargains with the US and Israel. At a maximum, maybe, aided by Hezbollah and Iran, Israel could once and for all be put back in its place or even brought down.

To understand the behaviour of Hamas' leaders it is straightforward to apply the model of terrorist violence developed in my paper (Wintrobe 2006a) and book (Wintrobe 2006b) and which has been applied to the Israeli – Palestinian question in another paper which focussed directly on this question (Wintrobe 2012). Again, it is possible to infer the thinking of its leaders from their behaviour, and Section 3 of the paper shows how this works.

Of course, there is also an economic literature on the origins of war, and it is useful to relate what is being said here to that literature. Of particular interest in this context are “rational” models of war, especially the idea that wars only occur through misunderstanding (Fearon 1995) and the “greed versus grievance” hypothesis (Collier and Hoeffler 2004). Important contributions to the literature also include Azam (2006), and Hirshleifer (1991, 1995). My approaches to these questions can be related to these models, in that invasion is “rational” in my models in the same sense as it is there: rationality is defined as choosing the best alternative action given the beliefs and aims of the decision – makers involved. But the novel feature of this paper is the idea that one can infer the thinking of a dictator or terrorist leader who initiated the war or attack by looking at his actions with general models of dictatorship and extremism. The models can then be used to distinguish between competing views about the leaders' motivations: Did Putin invade out of fear or optimism? Did Hamas invade out of “grievance” or the optimistic expectation of gain? The next section answers this question for Putin and Section 3 does this for Hamas. Section 4 concludes the paper.

2 Why Did Putin Invade Ukraine?

Much of the recent commentary and analysis of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine can be boiled down to two possible interpretations. The first, made famous by John Mearsheimer in particular (2022), is that the invasion was a response to NATO expansion into Eastern Europe and to the possibility that Ukraine might join NATO. This would remove Ukraine from Russian hegemony and put it further under the

influence of Western ideas about democracy. And it would put the military strength of the West on Russia's doorstep. So, in this way of thinking the invasion was motivated by Putin's perception of an increase in Russian weakness in the face of Western aggression:

"There is no question that Vladimir Putin started the war and is responsible for how it is being waged. But why he did so is another matter. The mainstream view in the West is that he is an irrational, out-of-touch aggressor bent on creating a greater Russia in the mould of the former Soviet Union. Thus, he alone bears full responsibility for the Ukraine crisis....But that story is wrong. The West, and especially America, is principally responsible for the crisis which began in February 2014 (Mearsheimer 2022)."

The second view is the exact opposite of the first. It is that Putin saw the US and NATO as weak, as shown most recently by the botched U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the tepid US and European response to his annexation of Crimea in 2014. The annexation increased his popularity, and he thought he could repeat the operation on a much bigger scale without a really serious response from NATO. On this interpretation, the invasion was motivated by Putin's perception of Russian strength.

It makes a huge difference which interpretation of Putin's behaviour is correct. On the first interpretation, NATO should possibly dial back its (large but restrained) role in the defense of Ukraine. On the second, they should maintain it or even scale it up.

The starting point of my (1990, 1998) model of dictatorship is that all dictators suffer from "the dictator's dilemma" – the impossibility of knowing how popular or threatened they really are. The dilemma arises because the more they use repression alone to stay in power, the less they know about what their subordinates and their populations are really thinking and feeling and the more they are likely to fear a revolt or assassination.¹

No better illustration of the dilemma could be provided than the long table used by Putin to hold meetings, in which he sits at one end and the person he is meeting is 15 feet away from him. And his launching of the war further illustrates the dilemma. He was obviously uninformed or misinformed about the possibility of Ukrainian resistance, and no one had the courage to tell him otherwise. People either didn't know or were afraid to tell him the likely consequences of the invasion, out of fear that he might punish the bearer of bad news. Or they wanted to flatter him.

The dictator's dilemma implies that dictators who survive do not use repression alone to stay in power: they also find ways to create loyalty among their subordinates and subjects. They can do this with people close to them through "overpaying" them – and no one is more overpaid than Putin's bodyguards – and with the general

¹ An interesting recent discussion, critique and extension of this idea can be found in Gehlbach et al. (2025).

population through finding ways to make themselves popular such as providing economic benefits, e.g. creating the conditions for economic growth which makes their peoples richer and lifts them out of poverty, as the Chinese have done.

Another way of creating loyal support is foreign conquest. Putin's adventure in Crimea made him popular, and he was assured by his intelligence services that Ukraine was an easy target. But his subordinates were either misinformed about the likelihood of Ukrainian resistance or afraid to tell him the truth.

So why did Putin invade Ukraine? Let me first suggest an explanation and then discuss it in more detail with the help of a diagram. On the first interpretation, he did it because he felt weakened by the steady advance of NATO towards his borders. Now Putin was initially elected but he has become a dictator, in particular it would appear that he has become a tyrant. A tyrant is defined in my model as a dictator whose level of repression over the population is high, but to whom loyalty is low. A totalitarian has high loyalty as well as high repression (for example, think of modern Communist China). Apart from this crucial difference in the level of loyalty, the two types behave similarly. Both types maximize power. And both are constrained by the supply of loyalty. When either one suspects loyalty to him has fallen, he must reduce repression to prevent losing even more power. That is what leaders in the Former Soviet Union did in the 1980s as economic growth faltered (Wintrobe 1998). But this is not what Putin did: going to war against Ukraine meant increasing repression, not decreasing it.

On the other hand, the invasion is consistent with the idea that Putin did it out of a feeling of strength, not weakness. He perceived weakness in the US and NATO and saw an opportunity to expand his power base. Even though totalitarians or tyrants may already be extremely powerful, since they maximize power, they will always seize an opportunity to grab more power. To do this by invading Ukraine Putin had to increase repression at home.

To see these points consider Figure 1. The figure depicts a dictator whose utility function is $U = f(\pi)$, where π = power. Not all dictators maximize power alone, many are interested in consumption as well as other fruits of office, but tyrants and totalitarians may be thought of as motivated solely by power. The dictator's power (π) is a function of Repression and Loyalty (R and L) and is depicted by a set of iso-power curves in the figure, higher curves denoting higher power. The other set of curves in the figure depict the supply of loyalty. Each of these Supply curves shows how much loyalty the dictator can expect from the population at different levels of repression. Importantly, the supply of loyalty (S_L) depends on the level of repression. At low levels of repression, an increase in repression increases loyalty as it is easy to justify repression against certain obvious "enemies of the state". But as repression increases, it becomes harder to justify and eventually the population begins to believe it might start to be applied against themselves. So, each of the supply of loyalty curves bends backwards as depicted in the figure. This means that although initially more

repression produces more loyalty and more power, as repression keeps rising, at some point this relationship gets reversed. Equilibrium for a power-maximizing dictator is at the highest possible level of power, namely that where the supply of loyalty is tangent to the iso – power line. Initially this is at E_0 in Figure 1.²

Now let us return to the question of why Putin invaded Ukraine. If in fact he did it because he felt weakened by the steady advance of NATO towards his borders, this implies that he felt Russians were becoming more attracted to the West as NATO advanced and therefore were becoming less loyal to him. This implies a fall in loyalty, i.e. a leftward shift of the supply of loyalty curve. The figure shows what would happen. It depicts a fall in the supply of loyalty from S_{L0} to S_{L1} . In turn, this means that at R_0 the initial level of repression, the dictator finds that his power has fallen to π_2 . Then the dictator should *lower* repression (from R_0 to R_1) in order to maximize power. If he does that, his power rises partially back to where it was (it rises from π_2 to π_1). But this decrease in repression is inconsistent with the *increase* in repression required to conduct a war against Ukraine.³ It is easy to see that if Russians were increasingly thought by Putin as finding the West and NATO more attractive, he might want to “buy them off” by lowering repression.

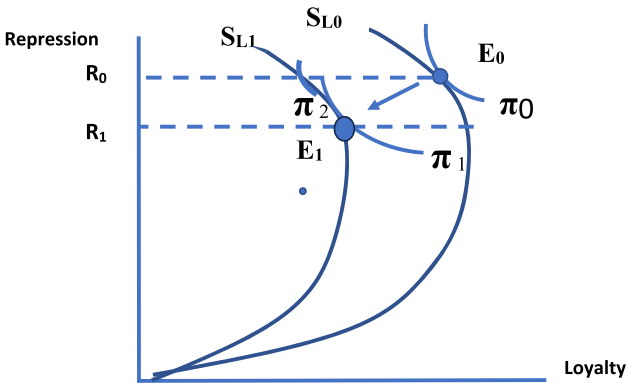


Figure 1: Dictatorship. A fall in loyalty Means that a Tyrant or Totalitarian (or Hybrid) leader should decrease repression to maximize power. This is inconsistent with the Invasion of Ukraine.

² More detail can be found in Wintrobe 1990 or 1998.

³ Another way to see this point is to use the more general (equation rather than graph based) model of dictatorship developed in Wintrobe (1998) chapter 5. There, a fall in the supply of loyalty is represented by an increase in the price that the dictator has to pay people in order to obtain a given amount of loyalty. It is easy to see that if Russians were increasingly thought by Putin as finding the West and NATO more attractive, he might feel he has to “buy them off” by raising the price he pays to “buy” their loyalty in order to prevent its supply from falling.

On the other hand, if Putin thought the appeal of the West to the Russian people had been weakened by events in Afghanistan and Crimea, this implies that he thought the supply of loyalty to him had increased. This implies the opposite, i.e. a rightward shift of supply of loyalty curve. To use Figure 1 to depict this, now let S_{L1} be the original supply of loyalty to him, and an increase in its supply be depicted by a shift of the curve forward, from S_{L1} to S_{L0} . The power – maximizing equilibrium shifts from E_1 to E_0 and Repression rises from R_1 to R_0 . Thus, only the second explanation is consistent with an increase in the level of repression, which is what war demands.

Of course, both factors could have played a role in Putin's thinking, but the question remains whether he invaded out of a feeling of strength or weakness on balance. The oft told story that Putin is aggrieved by the collapse of the Soviet Union, and that countries like Ukraine naturally “belong” to Russia supports the idea that he invaded from a position of strength (Ukrainians could easily become loyal to Russia, since they are “really” Russians anyway), as does the idea that Ukraine appeared itself to be a “weak” state run by an ex-comedian. Accounts that stress Russia's historical aggression in Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland also support this idea. So does the basic idea of “the dictator's dilemma”, the idea that Putin was under the impression that victory would be easy.

It follows that worst thing that Europe, the US and NATO can do is to try to placate Putin. The more they show weakness, and caution, the more aggressive he will become.

3 Hamas' Attack on Israel

Why did Hamas attack Israel on October 7, 2023? Did they attack out of weakness or strength? The politics of the middle east are of course extremely controversial. I want to limit the discussion in this paper to the same issue we discussed in the case of Russia. Again, just as in the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine two broad explanations of Hamas' attack are commonly advanced in the media, one emphasizing weakness and the other strength. Which one is correct?

Tom Friedman sometimes emphasizes the “weakness” explanation:

“Israel's last two major wars have two very important things in common: They were both started by nonstate actors backed by Iran – Hezbollah from Lebanon in 2006 and Hamas from Gaza now – after Israel had withdrawn from their territories....And they both began with bold border-crossing assaults – Hezbollah killing three and kidnapping two Israeli soldiers in 2006 and Hamas [in 2023]. That similarity is not a coincidence. Both assaults were designed to challenge emerging trends in the Arab world of accepting Israel's existence in the region.”

But Friedman also notes some facts which favour the explanation of Hamas's strength:

“This is in spite of the fact that over the past few years, Israel and Hamas developed a form of coexistence around Gaza that allowed thousands of Gazans to enter Israel daily for work, filled Hamas coffers with cash aid from Qatar and gave Gazans the ability to do business with Israel, with Gazan goods being exported through Israeli seaports and airports (Friedman NYT “Why Israel is acting this way” Oct 14, 2023).”

So, Friedman's argument is that the war started because the actors (leaders of Hamas) were afraid things were going to get worse, even though things had considerably improved for the life of Gazans up to that point.

At the same time, the money from Qatar had been used to build the massive network of tunnels inside Gaza, which would aid in a war with Israel, and the leaders hoped that Iran and Hezbollah would join in the attack, according to secret minutes of Hamas leaders which were found by the Israelis and published in the New York Times in 2024.⁴

We can use my general model of extremism and terrorism to address the question of the origin of the attack by Hamas on October 7th. In the model, extremist leaders wish to exert pressure, and have a choice between “moderate” or “violent” methods to do that. Moderate methods include demonstrations, strikes, non-violent marches or sit-ins, etc. Violent methods include insurrection, suicide bombing, terror and war.

The next point is that extremist leaders visualize their conflict situation as depicted in Figure 2. This illustrates the conflict between Israel and Palestine as a specific example, but could be applied to any situation where extremism is important. The basic point is that to the extremist leader the goal of the movement is distant and there is an indivisibility, as if he or she must climb a mountain to achieve its goal. For both Palestinians and Israelis, a certain amount of land is necessary for “nationhood” (Z), and there is an “indivisibility” or a region of increasing returns, as depicted in the Figure. The Figure depicts land to Palestinians on the horizontal axis. Below some level, Palestinian nationhood is not possible: As the amount of land increases, a point is reached where nationhood becomes possible (Z_1) in the figure, and beyond that point, the capacity for nationhood continues to increase, but at a diminishing rate. Of course, more land for Palestinians means less for Israelis (Indeed, the same figure could be drawn with “land to Israelis” on the horizontal axis). Whether there is enough for both groups to achieve nationhood depends partly

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/12/world/middleeast/hamas-israel-war.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare&sgrp=c-cb&ngrp=mn&pvid=3FD93CE9-C8F8-4234-BA1B-1CA4C3548725>.

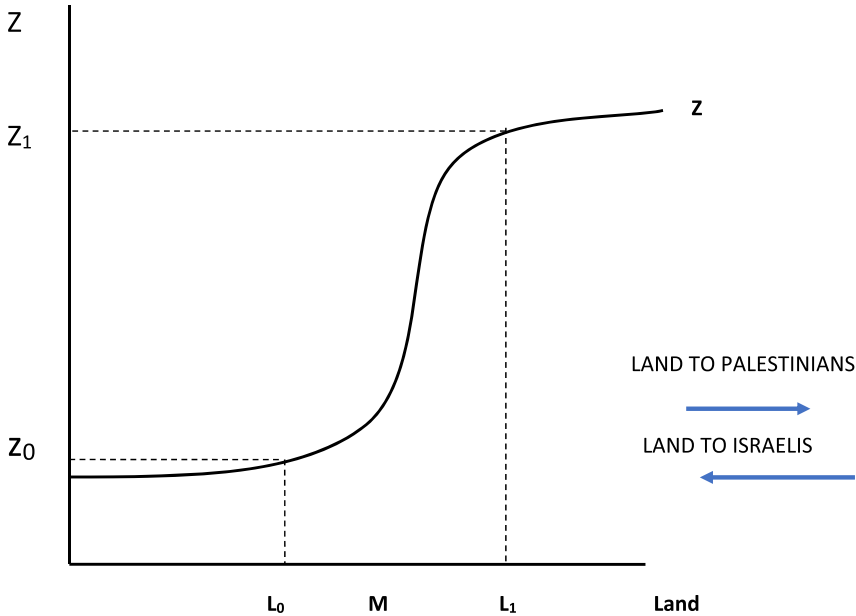


Figure 2: *Extremism and Terrorism 1* (as in Wintrobe 2006a or 2006b). the Figure illustrates the cause of extremism, which is an indivisibility between the intermediate objective and the ultimate objective. In this case, the indivisibility is illustrated by the amount of land (the intermediate objective) needed for “nationhood” for Palestine (a similar diagram could be drawn for Israel).

on how individuals on either side frame the situation. Some Palestinians (Israelis) might believe more land is necessary, some less.

The next point is that the more land is believed to be necessary, the greater the potential for extremism. This is shown in the next figure (Figure 3). The vertical axis again displays the goal of the group (Nationhood Z) but the horizontal axis now shows the capacity to achieve this by extremist compared to moderate methods (the ratio I/M). Nationhood is a function of land, as in Figure 2. Figure 3 shows how much land (and therefore nationhood) is achievable by either moderate or extremist methods. Extremist policies like terrorism are inherently risky, while moderate methods are safe. But moderate methods can only achieve so much, and will typically not get over the indivisible hump; instead, the group can only hope to get to a point like M . On the other hand, with extremist or violent methods, there is the possibility of a big success, as illustrated in Figure 3 by the point $Z_0 + g$ in the figure, which does get the group over the hump of indivisibility. But there is also the possibility of failure which gets the group only to $Z_0 - f$. The central point is that, to the extremist leader who views the situation as depicted in Figure 3, the *possibility* of achieving

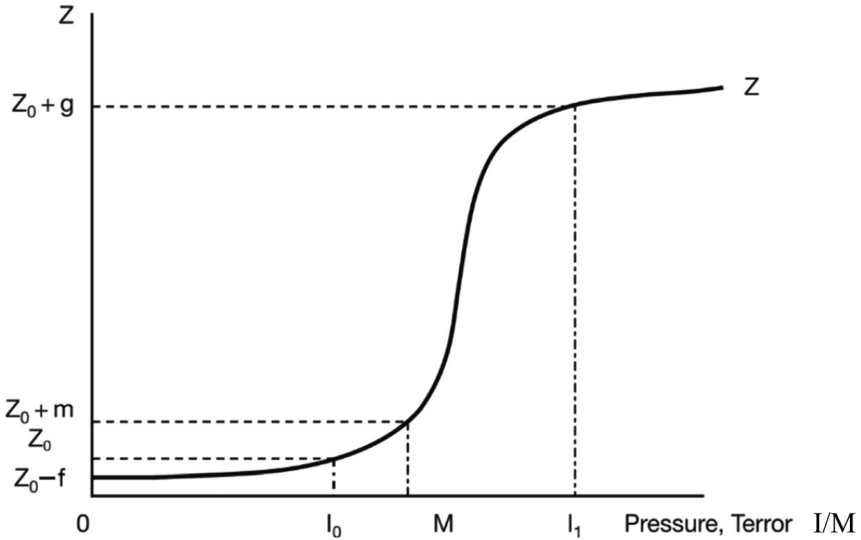


Figure 3: *Terrorism 2.* The (rational) case for more violent (I = violent) action as opposed to moderate (M) actions.

nationhood with extremist methods provides the rationale for their use. This possibility does not exist with moderate methods.

Given this constraint depicting how much can be achieved with moderate versus extremist methods, let us now introduce the preferences of the extremist group. This is done in Figure 4. The preferences of the group are assumed to be described by the expected utility function of its leader $E(U)$ where $E(U) = E(U(Z))$. The indifference curve slopes upwards, denoting risk aversion. The horizontal axis depicts the level of risk (ratio of violent to moderate methods), and the vertical axis the return to their use $E(Z)$. It might help the reader to note that the analysis in Figure 4 of extremism as a choice of the level of risk taking uses the same tools familiar from the economics of portfolio theory – the choice of a level of risk given the return to it from investing money to accumulate wealth.

Figure 4 shows an equilibrium. What is revealed there is that, even if we assume the extremist leader is risk averse, the equilibrium level of violence (I/M) will always be beyond the point of indivisibility, in this case at E_0 in the figure. So, the indivisibility of the goal is the reason behind the choice of at least some violent methods by extremist groups.

Now ask what might cause the level of violence to increase, such as happened with the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7. Suppose that E_0 is the equilibrium level of extremism exerted by Hamas on Israel prior to that date. The income received

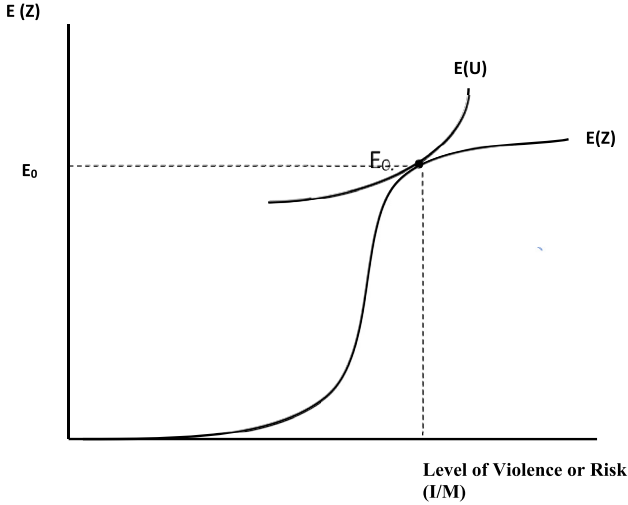


Figure 4: *Extremism and Terrorism 3.* Equilibrium level of violence.

from Qatar over the years and the increased prosperity that came with access to jobs within Israel allowed the Hamas leadership to build its well-known network of tunnels. Links to Iran and Hezbollah raised the possibility that if an attack against Israel were mounted, these parties would come to Hamas' aid in making war on Israel. Both of these factors imply that Hamas' leadership might have thought they were now (in 2023) better equipped for an attack on Israel, that is the tradeoff between risk and return had improved. They may also have thought the Israelis had become complacent.

The result is shown in Figure 5. The increase in return at any given level of risk implies a substitution effect which favors risk taking, and an income or "wealth effect" due to the increase in the organization's capacity to exert pressure. The wealth effect favors risk taking (larger I/M) if the group leader's coefficient of relative risk aversion is decreasing as wealth increases (the most commonly used assumption). It is neutral if this coefficient is constant and negative (lower I/M) if this coefficient increases with wealth. Thus, if the substitution effect dominates the wealth effect, or if the wealth effect is positive or neutral, he or she chooses more violence. This is the result shown in Figure 5.

The alternative explanation of the attack, that Hamas' leadership was concerned about a rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and the US, which would leave the Palestinians more isolated and abandoned by the Arab world, has the opposite implication: in that case the risk-return tradeoff would have deteriorated, and the

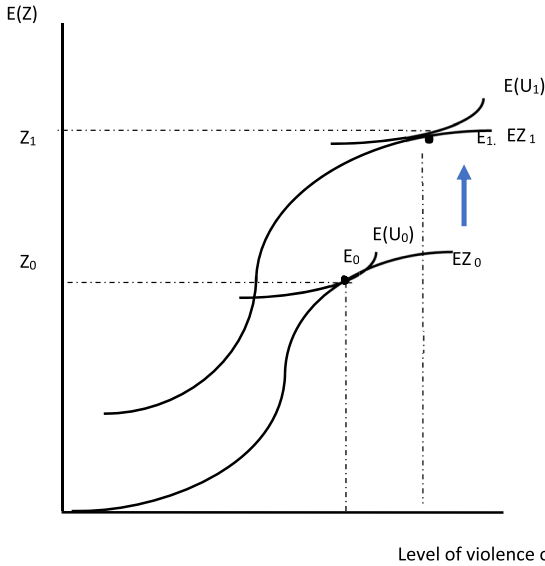


Figure 5: *Extremism and Terrorism 4.* An increase in the risk-return tradeoff (i.e. the expected return to violence available to the extremist group motivates the extremist leader to choose more violence).

curve in Figure 5 would shift downwards rather than upwards. This would imply less violence, and is therefore inconsistent with the events of October 2023.

4 Conclusions

In this paper I used rational economic models to explain the origins of two recent wars, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022 and the Hamas attack on Israel in 2023. In both cases the literature has prominently featured two different kinds of motivations for the attacks, one offensive and one defensive. Did Russia invade Ukraine because it was afraid that Ukraine was getting too strong and too close to NATO and Russia was weakened by this? Or did it invade because Putin thought that the West was weak, particularly after the botched withdrawal from Afghanistan? Did Hamas attack Israel on October 7th because it was afraid that the other Arab countries were about to abandon the Palestinian cause and thus forever weaken it? Or did it attack because it had used the money from Qatar to build a vast system of tunnels that made it possible to launch a successful attack and withstand the Israeli response, possibly helped in this by Hezbollah and Iran, and thus further help advance the Palestinian cause?

I addressed these questions in this paper with economic models. I used the models- of dictatorship and terrorism – developed in my previous work, to provide answers and hopefully insight to these questions. In this way I use economic models in a new way: to get “inside” the mind of a dictator or terrorist leader and understand the motivation for their actions. That is, instead of making comparative static predictions about what they are going to do, I try to understand why they chose certain actions after they took them.

In both cases, the models favor the offensive explanations of the attacks as opposed to the defensive ones. Russia attacked Ukraine because it thought it could win easily. Hamas attacked Israel because of its newfound relative strength. No doubt many will find these conclusions controversial. But what differs them from other explanations of these events is that they are simply derived as implications of general models of dictatorship and terrorism. Perhaps other models would yield different implications. More discussion of these issues using economic methodologies is certainly welcome.

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