"A tough sell"?
US and UK public support for military action in Iran

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The extent and nature of Iran's nuclear ambitions remain a matter of Western concern. In this comparative experimental study we examine the US and British publics' receptiveness to calls from their governments for air strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities. A brief vignette is followed by questions gauging support for strikes and other policy alternatives. Three aspects of that vignette were manipulated: success (the extent to which the planned strikes would delay Iran's nuclear programme); civilian casualties (anticipated number of civilian deaths) and casualty framing (as 'civilian casualties' or 'ordinary Iranians'). Support for military action, while clearly the minority position in both countries, was markedly stronger in the US, being driven more strongly by various aspects of conservatism: partisanship, ideology and personality. And the American public was generally less responsive to the experimental manipulations, also suggesting that the issue is more politicised in the US and so more minds are already made up. In particular, the prospect of civilian casualties did less to dampen support for war in the US. The main reason is that those scoring higher on authoritarianism and related personality variables were largely impervious to such casualties, unlike in Britain where responses to civilian deaths were consistent across the sample.

1. Introduction

On the day of finalising this paper, President Obama was speaking at a nuclear security summit in Seoul, warning Tehran that "time is short" for diplomacy to end the standoff over its nuclear program (Hennessey, 2012). That programme has been a long-running blot on the foreign policy landscape facing the US and other Western powers. And the blend of diplomatic persuasion and harder-edged threats used by Obama at the Seoul summit was typical of the strategy of coercive diplomacy, or persuasion by threat of force, that successive US administrations have used in a bid to pressure Iran into abandoning its nuclear ambitions.

However, any threat of force made by a democracy lacks credibility if its public is so set against military action that sending in troops would be politically disastrous. Widespread public opposition to military action not only makes such action harder; it also makes threats sound emptier. This is a pertinent problem following long and costly wars in Afghanistan and Iraq which have sapped the US public's faith in the efficacy, if not the justification, of military action. Moreover, several aspects of the Iran context are reminiscent of those recent wars: the reliance on uncertain intelligence about weapons of mass destruction, the difficulty

in building a wide coalition of support, the risk of inciting more terrorism than is prevented, and so on. In short, military action in Iran looks a tough sell for the US government – and, indeed, for any other government contemplating such action.

In this paper, we assess the state of public opinion with respect to action against Iran in two Western countries: the US and the UK. Although this provides for some interesting comparisons, our choice of cases is motivated more by substantive relevance than by a most-similar-systems or other such comparative design. While part of the EU troika –with Germany and France – leading nuclear negotiations with Iran, the UK has also threatened force in the event of non-compliance, following the US 'no options off the table' line (and joining the flotilla that recently sailed through the Straits of Hormuz to signal that military action would be used should they be cut off). As in Afghanistan and Iraq, then, the UK looks set to be a key American ally in any dealings, including military, with Iran. So the credibility of British threats matters, too. Our aim is therefore to examine the nature and origins of mass opinion on the Iran nuclear issue in two cases where those opinions matter.

We begin by discussing how and why public opinion is important in these strategic contexts, and then review the literature on the key factors – longstanding predispositions and short-term contextual factors – that shape judgements about the use of force. Having described our data and measures, notably a survey experiment, we then present results indicating considerable public uncertainty about the Iranian nuclear issue, particularly in the UK. This in turn gives considerable scope for opinion-formers to build support for – or opposition to – military action, and we end by discussing the role that one of our key variables, the expected civilian death toll, might play in such opinion formation.

2. Why US – and even British – public opinion matters

For coercive diplomacy to succeed, the threats involved must be credible. The transparency required of governments in democratic states means that they can signal their resolve more

credibly than can non-democracies. But this depends on favourable domestic politics. The theory of Strategic Conflict Avoidance argues that a US President's threats will be more believable if there is widespread support for a military strike on Iran (Davies 2008a, 2008b). There is an underlying assumption that potential targets of attack examine the democratic leader's domestic political incentives for conflict to ascertain whether he or she is bluffing. If the political conditions within the US favour a military strike, then potential targets will generally become more cooperative (Smith 1996; Clark 2003; Fordham 2005). However, in a situation where the President lacks the necessary support, a rival state may become emboldened in its flaunting of US demands (Foster 2006).

One source of support is from opposition parties. When opposition parties feel unable to make political gains by opposing the governments suggested use of force, this signals a general consensus within the country. (Schultz 1998). Inter-elite competition and political transparency provide a resolved US President with a powerful tool for demonstrating that he will carry out a threat. However, another crucial indicator of support for military action is from the public. Opinion poll data give a general sense of how the public view military action and whether they support military strikes on specific countries.

While the lack of comparable poll questions makes it difficult to draw a detailed trend-line, the broad pattern of US public support for military action against Iran is clear enough. The 9/11 attacks increased the salience of foreign affairs and security in the minds of the US public (McAvoy, 2006). Iran was cast within President Bush's 'Axis of Evil', being accused of having links with terrorist groups as well as actively seeking weapons of mass destruction (Bush 2002). Then, in March 2003, the US and her allies invaded Iraq and achieved what looked like a quick, low-casualty victory. US public confidence in its armed forces was incredibly high, and polls shortly after the invasion reflected that confidence with widespread

support for a military strike against Iran.[1] However, as conditions in Iraq and to a lesser extent Afghanistan began to deteriorate, and the military casualty rate remained stubbornly high in both cases, the US public's support for further such action waned. According to polls conducted between February 2006 and September 2008, only around 10-20% of respondents supported military intervention in Iran (compared to 50% or more in April 2003).[2]

Of course, due to the transparency of US politics, these polling trends – along with all the other key information about domestic political conditions in the US – are clearly visible to the Iranian regime. The significant post-9/11 public support for action, then boosted by the Iraq rally effect, probably explains why in 2003, with the approval of both Ayatollah Khameini and President Khatami, Iran made a series of overtures toward the US including sending a letter to the Bush administration suggesting negotiations (Leverett 2006).   When the American public appetite for further action in the Middle East waned, this too was noted in Tehran. As one Iranian diplomat put it, "the US public does not have the stomach for another war and it does not have the stomach for oil costing $200 per barrel" (quoted in Davies, 2011, p. 7).

More recently, as the Iranian nuclear issue rose up the political and the mainstream media agenda, support for action has shown the same upturn. In 2012 polls so far, the average support is in the 40-50% range, indicating a public divided on the issue.[3] However, responses are characteristically dependent on question wording. Support climbs over 50% in conditional questions confirming the threat, e.g. "If there is evidence that Iran is building nuclear weapons, would you…?" In contrast, when questions pit military action against alternatives such as sanctions, support for the former option is a good deal lower. The strong influence of contextual cues in the survey question suggests that many respondents are yet to make up

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[1] Los Angeles Times Poll. April 2–3, 2003. N = 745 adults nationwide. MoE ± 4 (total sample) retrieved from www.pollingreport.com/iran.htm.
[2] CBS News ⁄ New York Times Poll. Sept. 21-24, 2008. //www.pollingreport.com/iran.htm.
[3] Various polls reported at http://www.pollingreport.com/iran.htm.

their minds on the issue (Zaller, 1992; Alvarez and Brehm, 2002). We return to these themes in the next section.

Tellingly, there have been fewer tests of British public opinion on the Iran nuclear issue. This is not because the issue is unimportant for the UK's foreign policy. Among elites, it has been the subject of debates and negotiations for some time now (BBC, 2005) and Britain has been at the forefront of international attempts to scrutinise and to restrict Iran's nuclear activities. Moreover, the issue raises major public concerns such as nuclear proliferation, state-sponsored terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism, and US imperialism. Yet it has remained low on the media and public agenda, probably because, with the decisions to go to war in Afghanistan and Iraq having been taken by the left-wing and typically less militarist party, foreign policy issues cross traditional partisan lines and thus tends to be less politicised. Nevertheless, if US action in Iran becomes a realistic prospect, the matter will rise up the public agenda, even more so if there are calls for Britain also to play a military part. Under those circumstances, British public support for action becomes a factor not only in the British but also the US and Iranian governments' strategic calculations. What little evidence there is suggests that the British public is – as in other contexts – more reluctant to take military action than their US counterparts. Yet the British share the Americans' unfavourable image of Iran and they also exhibit even more uncertainty on the issue, substantial minorities answering 'not sure' to the various survey questions (Angus Reid, 2012). This suggests at least the possibility of the British public shifting in support of action, which would in turn help to boost the credibility of international threats of such action.

3. Predispositions, context, and support for action in Iran

Next, then, we examine the factors likely to shape US and British public attitudes to military action in Iran. One prominent strand of research into public support for war has been concerned with individuals' predispositions to support military action. Scholars have

specified a range of values and ideological principles that citizens can use to lead them to decisions on foreign policy issues (e.g. Hurwitz & Peffley, 1987; Wittkopf, 1990; Chittick et al., 1995; Holsti, 2004; Alvarez & Brehm, 2002, ch. 9; Brewer et al., 2004). Prominent among these value dimensions are internationalism versus isolationism (Wittkopf, 1990), militarism versus accommodation (Holsti, 2004; Alvarez & Brehm, 2002, ch. 9), national chauvinism (Herrmann et al., 2009) and broader liberal-conservative ideology (Russett et al., 1994). While most of this research has been based on the US public, there seems no reason to doubt that the basic point holds elsewhere. Core beliefs and values leave some people strongly predisposed against military action, but others far readier to support the use of force. This explains why, regardless of the structure and wording of the question, polls on the Iranian nuclear issue always reveal sizeable blocs both of opposition and support.

One set of predispositions particularly likely to be relevant in the Iranian context is that associated with religion. On the unsubtle reading it is likely to receive in political and media discourse, military action against Iran will be framed in the same 'clash of civilisations' discourse (Huntington, 1993) as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. As Smidt puts it, "militant Islam may well have replaced the Soviet Union in the eyes of most Americans as the object of opposition in American foreign policy" (2005, p. 246). Several studies confirm a religious dimension to American public opinion on the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Support for these interventions was not only stronger among those taking a more negative view of Islam (Smidt 2005) but was also markedly stronger among adherents to Christian denominations than among those disclaiming any such affiliation (Guth 2006). Most notably, those in Evangelical denominations (or identifying as a 'born-again' Christian) have been found to be markedly more supportive of military action in a range of contexts (Guth 2009; Baumgartner et al. 2008; Froese and Mencken 2009), consistent with the strong support for Bush's foreign policy from prominent Evangelicals such as Pat Robertson and James Dobson (Durham 2004; Barker et al. 2008). Since religious affiliation and attendance are much rarer

in Britain than in the US (Voas and Ling, 2010), and there is no significant Evangelical tradition, we would expect religious predispositions to matter much less for British public support. More generally, with both foreign policy and religion less (party) politicized in the UK, we would expect political predispositions more broadly to generate less variation in public support for action against Iran.

Yet predispositions are only part of the story. Most people will endorse the use of force in certain circumstances but not in others. Public opinion researchers have largely ceased to regard such 'inconsistency' as evidence of nonattitudes (see Almond, 1950; Converse, 1964). Rather, it attests to the sensitivity of public opinion to context (Zaller, 1992; Alvarez & Brehm, 2002). A vast range of contextual or situational factors can affect public support for military action, both initially – in the run-up to a possible conflict – and as the war progresses. Examples include: the objective of military action, with control of an aggressive adversary proving a more popular justification than regime change, humanitarian intervention or peacekeeping (Jentleson, 1992; Eichenberg, 2005); the extent of domestic elite consensus (Zaller, 1992; Dixon, 2000); the extent of international backing, from other states or supranational organisations (Kull & Destler, 1999; Isernia and Everts, 2004); the nature and image of the target state (Tomz and Weeks, 2010; Johns and Davies, 2011); and military casualty rates, with the public sensitive both to cumulative death tolls and to marginal casualty rates, especially when the success of the mission seems in doubt (Gartner and Segura, 1998; Karol and Miguel, 2007; Voeten & Brewer, 2006; Gelpi et al., 2005).

The works cited above are just examples from much larger literatures, and so there are strong grounds to suppose that these general factors will also apply in the Iranian context. Rather than retesting those same hypotheses, we instead examine a different aspect of potential military action in Iran: the prospect of civilian casualties. In contrast to the extensive research on the effect of military casualties, the relationship between (foreign) civilian casualties and (domestic) public backing for war has been almost entirely neglected.

In the next section, we explore whether and how expectations about civilian casualties might influence the US and British public's judgements about military action in Iran.

4. Civilian casualties and support for war

Elsewhere in the survey of the British public used for this paper, respondents were asked to rank, in order of importance to them, a variety of possible concerns about the war in Afghanistan. Two of these were 'British military casualties' and 'Afghan civilian casualties'. British military deaths were the most important concern for 53% of people, and one of the top three concerns for more than four in five respondents. Afghan civilian deaths were most important for just 9%, and ranked in the top three by just two in five respondents. Needless to say, this does not reflect differences in the two death tolls. Even on the most conservative estimate of Afghan civilian casualties, they outnumber British military casualties by at least 20:1. Yet they are clearly of far less concern to the public than the deaths of British troops.

There are a number of reasons why domestic publics might be relatively tolerant of foreign civilian deaths. Most simply, adherents of the maxim that "all's fair in (love and) war" might conclude that military action is against a state, not just its military, and that civilians are a legitimate target. Perhaps – and hopefully – more common is the proportional reasoning highlighted by Friedrich and Dood's (2009) experiments, in which civilians were seen as more expendable than US military because they are smaller fractions of a larger group. A third reason for civilian casualty tolerance is that, in certain strategic contexts – notably the choice between air strikes and ground invasion – there is a clear trade-off between military and civilian casualties. Finally, simply by being foreign, civilian casualties belong to an outgroup (Triandafyllidou, 1998; Brewer, 1999), and from Lewin et al. (1939) onwards there is ample social psychological evidence of greater aggression towards such groups. This hostility is redoubled when, as usual in a military context, those groups are constructed as threatening and perhaps even infrahumanised – that is, seen (not necessarily

consciously) in some ways as less than human (Bandura et al., 1975; Leyens et al., 2000; Castano and Giner-Sorolla, 2006).

Yet there are also grounds to suppose that the prospect of civilian casualties will erode support for war (even if the effect is weaker than in the case of military casualties). One point is simply instrumental. Disregard for civilian lives tends both to weaken international backing for military action and to accentuate grievances in the target state, in both cases making the war harder to win. Other reasons are essentially the flipsides of points noted earlier. Many British or American citizens, far from denying the humanity of foreign civilians, might empathise with them as fellow innocent bystanders in a war between states.[4]

This point about empathy raises the question of whether unconcern about civilian casualties is more a matter of ignorance than insensitivity. Polls showing greater public concern with military than civilian casualties in Afghanistan are in line with the much greater media and political attention given to the former. Not only is the military death toll well publicised, especially as it passes each numerical milestone, but individual casualties receive extensive coverage, with coverage of returning coffins, grieving relatives, and eulogies from commanding officers (see Brosius, 2003, on such 'exemplars'). It is unrealistic to expect foreign civilian casualties to receive anything like that quantity and tone of coverage. Yet it is worth examining whether confronting domestic publics more directly with even basic information about civilian casualties has a dampening effect on support for action.

In this paper, we test a number of hypotheses about such civilian casualty effects. The first is based simply on the numbers of civilian casualties. Yet, if the key to civilian casualty effects is empathy and humanisation, then raw numbers may matter less than the framing of such casualties. As discussed above, the most humanising frames – detailed information about casualties, especially women and children, including biographical detail and photos –

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[4] This argument gathers force when, as in the autocracies that are Western states' usual enemies, civilians have little or no say in whether to go to war.

are unlikely but even the basic terms used can have an impact. The phrase 'civilian casualties' is itself rather bowdlerised and does not encourage empathy. We therefore test whether an alternative wording, 'ordinary people', has a greater effect on support.

H1: Public support for military action is negatively related to the anticipated number of civilian casualties

H2: The effect of civilian casualties on public support is increased when they are described as 'ordinary people'

We mentioned earlier the possibility that civilian casualties might be part of an instrumental calculation about the likelihood of success. This can be addressed by testing whether the impact of casualties on support is moderated by the anticipated effectiveness of military action. Our 'necessary evil' hypothesis is:

H3: The effect of civilian casualties on public support is dampened when military action is perceived as likely to be successful

5. Who reacts to casualties? A cognitive-interactionist framework

Our empirical approach owes much to that of Herrmann et al. (1999), whose survey experiments demonstrate the impact of both predispositions and situational factors on the American public's support for military action. They also highlight the interaction between predispositions and context. In their cognitive-interactionist framework, the way that people respond to specific situations depends on their general values and attitudes. For instance, while respondents were on the whole readier to use force when US interests were clearly at stake, this difference was far greater among those scoring high on 'military assertiveness'; less militarist respondents remained reluctant to take action even it were definitely in the national interest (1999, 563). So we should bear in mind the likelihood that the American and British publics will not react homogenously to our situational manipulations when

considering military action. These differences are not only of academic interest but have substantive implications for parties and others wishing to influence public attitudes to a particular action. Tailoring discourse to a target group involves an understanding of which factors can – and which cannot – shift opinion in that group.

A variety of predispositions are potentially relevant in this context. Three of these, right-wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation (SDO) and national chauvinism form a cluster in that all three involve a general downplaying of the rights and concerns of outgroup members and all three are positively associated with support for military action against outgroups (McFarland, 2005; Henry et al., 2005; Herrmann et al., 2009). In the cases of nationalism and authoritarianism, there is also some evidence of reluctance to see outgroup members as equally human (Viki and Calitri, 2008; Hodson and Costello, 2007; Motyl et al., 2010). Previous research thus suggests links between this cluster of personality variables and both the extent and framing of civilian casualties. Our hypotheses are therefore as follows:

H4a: The effects of civilian casualty variables – both number and framing – on public support are weaker among those high on <u>authoritarianism</u>

H4b: The effects of civilian casualty variables – both number and framing – on public support are weaker among those high on <u>SDO</u>

H4c: The effects of civilian casualty variables – both number and framing – on public support are weaker among those high on <u>national chauvinism</u>

6. Data and measures

The empirical basis for this study is a 2010 survey experiment conducted in parallel on American and British samples. The questions elsewhere in the survey allow us to begin with a model of how predispositions shape support for action against Iran, following what is becoming common practice (e.g. Herrmann et al., 1999; Isernia and Everts, 2004; Tomz and

Weeks, 2010), we use the experiment to gauge the effects of our situational factors. In addition to the established advantages in terms of internal validity (Morton and Williams, 2008), an experiment here also offers an external validity advantage over the most obvious survey alternative, the hypothetical question in which respondents are asked about whether and how their support for action against Iran would be affected by the likelihood of success or the prospect of extensive civilian casualties. The strength and blatancy of such cues, along with the social desirability considerations involved in measuring casualty tolerance, means that direct hypothetical questions are prone to overstate effect sizes. Of course, experiments come with their own external validity problems – a point to which we return in the concluding section – and so studies of aggregate opinion, investigating the covariation of civilian casualty rates and public support for war, would usefully complement this research.

The US data (N = 2,075, response rate = 67.4%) were collected in a survey fielded under the auspices of the Time-Sharing Experiments for the Social Sciences (TESS) project. Fieldwork was conducted over the internet by Knowledge Networks (KN). The KN on-line panel via which TESS surveys are implemented is a probability-based panel, selected using random-digit dial (RDD) and address-based sampling methods, and is representative of U.S. adults. In order to cover the off-line population, households are provided with access to the internet and hardware if needed.

The British data are taken from the first two waves of a major three-wave panel study of foreign policy attitudes among the British public (Wave 1: N = 1,276,[5] response rate = 62.2%;[6] Wave 2: N=1,065, retention rate = 83.4%). The surveys were administered over the internet by YouGov, whose approximately 300,000 panel members formed the sampling

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[5] The British sample sizes are considerably smaller than the American because, in the British experiment, there was an additional manipulation whereby dominant faith was primed by reference (in a quotation from the target state's leader) to scripture. Since this could well affect the relationship between our key variables, all those receiving this prime were omitted from the analyses in this article.

[6] The response rates are not strictly comparable. Since members of the KN panel have a known probability of selection, it is feasible to calculate a response rate taking into account all sources of non-response, including panel recruitment and retention. With the YouGov opt-in panel, response rates are, in effect, completion rates, representing the proportion of those asked to take part in that survey that agreed to do so.

frame.[7] Unlike KN, YouGov uses an opt-in panel. Hence the resulting samples are non-probability samples, and the off-line population is not covered. Because of this difference in methodology, we do not simply pool the US and British data and include country effects; instead we run our analyses in parallel on the two datasets.[8] With this approach, there are reasons to suppose that the results are broadly comparable. Most YouGov panelists are actively recruited (using targeted campaigns via non-political websites) rather than volunteering for the panel. Similarly, respondents are not able to choose in which surveys to take part: they are either sampled for a given data collection or not. And the company has an impressive track record of sampling and weighting to achieve representative samples of the British electorate – at least as measured by their accuracy in predicting election results.[9]

Survey experiment

The survey experiment was based on a vignette concerning Iran's development of nuclear technology. It is presented below, with manipulations highlighted in bold.

> This question is about a situation in which Britain might take military action. Please read the following description of that situation and then answer the question below.
>
> "Western governments, including the British, have long expressed concerns about Iran's nuclear ambitions. In particular, they claim that Iran has secret facilities that are being used to develop nuclear weapons. Iran has consistently denied that these claims are true but, according to the British government, Iran is not far away from being able to launch a nuclear strike. The British government is considering air strikes against the Bushehr nuclear facility, which it says is producing the nuclear materials

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[7] Tomz and Weeks (2010) also used a YouGov survey as the vehicle for their own experiment.
[8] Error bars and confidence intervals give at least an impression of whether differences in effect size across countries are in the region of statistical significance. Precise calculation of this is not possible given the difference in sampling methodology.
[9] Three further points should be noted about the two data collections. First, in Britain, the experiment and the accompanying questions were embedded into a longer survey, and so the overall instrument is not the same as that fielded in the US. However, the British study questionnaires were designed so as to minimize order effect, with the embedded experiments preceded and followed by questions on a different topic. The second point results from our wish to maintain respondent cooperation by keeping the internet questionnaires relatively short. This study is not a traditional panel, then. The aim was rather to divide a long instrument into manageable chunks, and to field these at very brief intervals so that the entire process of data collection took less than a month. Since almost all of the measures used here are taken from the first wave of the survey (the exceptions being highlighted below), the 'staggered' approach to data collection has minimal implications for this article. Third, due to administrative difficulties, the TESS survey was fielded a little (just under two months) later (16-26 March) than the British data collection (Wave 1, 18-19 January; Wave 2, 1-8 February). Fortunately, there were no significant developments in the Iran nuclear situation – or indeed any major foreign policy events – in the interim, and so this delay should have no impact on the comparability of the results.

necessary for Iran's weapons programme. Since this facility is in a populated area, air strikes are likely to result in **civilian casualties/ordinary Iranians dying**. Professor Anna Knott, an expert on the region, estimates the likely civilian death toll at around **50/500/5,000/50,000** people. She adds that air strikes are likely to slow down Iran's nuclear weapons programme by **one year/ten years**."

Three aspects of the story were therefore subject to random manipulation: the framing of civilian casualties ('civilian casualties' or 'ordinary people');[10] the estimated number of civilian casualties (50, 500, 5,000, or 50,000); and the likely effectiveness of action (slowing down Iran's nuclear programme by one or ten years).

The vignette was followed by two questions providing dependent variables for the upcoming analyses. The first and more refined measure is the basis for most of the analyses in this paper. However, the second is useful both in providing a straightforward percentage measure of support and in acknowledging the range of policy alternatives open to the US and UK governments in dealing with the Iran nuclear issue.

❐ On a scale from 0 (strongly oppose) to 6 (strongly support), how do you feel about American/British air strikes in this case?

❐ In addition to air strikes, there are other options open to the US/British government. Here are various courses of action – please choose the one that you think the government should follow.
  o Invade Iran to remove the regime
  o Air strikes (as described above)
  o Impose sanctions on Iran (e.g. stopping the country from selling oil)
  o Negotiate to try to persuade Iran to stop developing nuclear weapons
  o Nothing – Iran is not a threat

Additional variables

In addition to the experiment, both surveys included a number of additional variables. These can serve both as predictors in our initial models of support but also as moderators of the experimental effects as per the cognitive-interactionist framework. The British survey included an array of such variables but space was far tighter on the TESS survey. However,

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[10] In the British experiment, there were two further conditions of the casualty framing manipulation: 'innocent Iranians dying' and 'innocent Iranians dying, many of them women and children'. Due to restrictions on the number of conditions permissible in the TESS experiment, we had to use the simplified two-category version, and so this is also the basis for the comparisons in this paper. If the British results are anything to go by, this is not a major loss. While the 'innocent Iranians' conditions were intended to intensify the humanising effect, they turned out not to yield significantly different results from the 'ordinary people' condition.

it does include standard socio-demographic controls and the key political variables of ideology and partisanship. Since both the meaning and measurement of these variables differs across our two cases, we aim for functional equivalence rather than enforcing identical measures and feigning exact comparisons.[11] Both surveys also included the three Likert items below, tapping the core personality variables of nationalism, authoritarianism, and social dominance.[12] These single items are obviously crude measures of the underlying orientations but, as we see below, they do contribute important explanatory power.

- ❏ [Nationalism] "Generally speaking, Britain/America is better than other countries"
- ❏ [Authoritarianism, reverse scored] "People in Britain/America should be more tolerant of those who lead unconventional lives"
- ❏ [Social dominance] "Some people are just more deserving than others"

The other variable worthy of detailed consideration is the respondent's religious affiliation. A first point to note is that all of those reporting a non-Christian religious affiliation – including Muslims – were omitted from analysis. The alternative was cells too sparse for meaningful analysis. We then make the key distinctions identified in previous research on religion and American foreign policy opinion. In particular, we follow Guth's (2006, 2009) example in distinguishing ethno-religious categories rather than merging what are often very distinct black and white congregations (see also Steensland et al. 2000). In particular, while many African American Protestants describe themselves as 'born again', they often come from churches with a pacifist outlook very different from that in white Evangelical traditions. So we distinguish seven groups: Mainline Protestant; Evangelical Protestant; Black Protestant; White Catholic; Hispanic Catholic; Mormon; and Other Christian. The equivalent

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[11] For example, partisanship in the US was measured by the standard seven-point scale from 'strongly Democrat' to 'strongly Republican' while, given the more complicated party system in Britain, we use separate dummy variables for support for each party. Similarly, conservative ideology was measured in the US by another standard seven-point scale from 'extremely liberal' to 'extremely conservative', but in Britain by an established left-right scale of Likert items (see Heath et al., 1994).

[12] The items measuring authoritarianism and social dominance were in the second wave of the British survey. The drop-off in sample size in analyses including those variables is due to attrition between the two waves.

UK variable has four categories: Church of England/Scotland; Catholic; Nonconformist (largely Baptists and Methodists); and Other Christian.

7. Results

We first present the basic levels of support for air strikes. The more detailed analyses are then divided into three sections. First, we report regressions showing the key predispositional influences on support in each country. Then, turning to the experiment, we describe the effects of the situational manipulations. Third, we introduce predisposition-situation interactions to explore how different types of people reacted differently to the manipulations.

Table 1 reports the distributions of our two dependent variables among the US and British samples. Whichever dependent variable we look at, there are noticeable differences across our two cases. The mean support in the US is around half a scale point higher (which equates to more than half a standard deviation) and both military options – the air strikes proposed in the experiment and the more drastic alternative of invasion for regime change – are appreciably more popular in the US. British respondents were much more likely (47% compared to 28%) to prefer the negotiations route. In terms of overall levels of support, there is a further contrast between the two variables. The policy preferences question suggests little appetite for military action, with more than two-thirds of the American and five-sixths of the British public preferring a non-military option. However, the air strikes response scale suggests that few people in either country are absolutely set against the option. The US mean is almost exactly at the midpoint of the scale and more than half of the British public is at that point or above. The scale results set up the upcoming analyses nicely: there is plenty of variation along the scale that might be explained by predispositions; and the fact that few respondents take an extreme pro- or anti-military view means that there is considerable scope for situational factors to move them along the scale.

Table 1: Support for air strikes by country

		USA	Britain
Air strikes			
0 - Strongly oppose		16	20
1		7	11
2		11	15
3		27	27
4		16	14
5		9	5
6 - Strongly support		13	7
Don't know		1	0
Mean support (excl. DKs)		**3.01**	**2.49**
	N	*2048*	*2624*
Policy options			
Invasion for regime change		13	6
Air strikes on nuclear facilities		18	8
Economic sanctions		34	33
Nuclear negotiations		28	47
Nothing - Iran not a threat		6	6
Don't know		3	0
	N	*2035*	*1268*

Predispositions and support for air strikes

This section is based on four multiple regressions predicting responses to the first dependent variable. Since the response scale was explicitly numbered and the response distributions are not sharply skewed, we treat the dependent variable as interval and thus take advantage of the comparability and ease of interpretation of OLS regression coefficients.[13] Model 1 includes only the socio-demographic variables; Model 2 introduces the political identities and attitudes which are partly shaped by socio-demographic background but probably have their own independent explanatory power. Both standardised and unstandardized coefficients are reported.

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[13] Re-estimating these models using ordered probit yields identical substantive conclusions.

Table 2: Regression models of support by socio-demographic and political predispositions

	USA				Britain			
	Model 1		*Model 2*		*Model 1*		*Model 2*	
	B	Beta	B	Beta	B	Beta	B	Beta
Female	-.18**	-.05	.02	.01	.00	.00	-.07	-.02
Aged 25-34	.11	.02	-.08	-.02	-.18	-.04	-.30**	-.06
Aged 35-44	.11	.02	-.16	-.03	-.10	-.02	-.25*	-.05
Aged 45-54	.35**	.07	.05	.01	-.43***	-.09	-.49***	-.11
Aged 55-64	.21	.04	-.11	-.02	-.90***	-.22	-.90***	-.21
Aged 65 plus	.07	.01	-.47***	-.09	-.95***	-.16	-1.04***	-.19
Black	-.53***	-.09	-.05	-.01				
Hispanic	-.21	-.04	-.01	.00				
Other	-.02	.00	.09	.01				
Non-white (UK)					-.27	-.03	.02	.00
Mainline Protestant	.43***	.08	.10	.02				
Evangelical	.43***	.10	-.19	-.04				
Black Protestant	.26	.03	.03	.00				
White Catholic	.23*	.05	-.08	-.02				
Mormon	.34	.02	-.27	-.02				
Other Christian (US)	.03	.00	-.21	-.02				
Anglican					.26***	.07	.14	.04
Catholic					.41***	.06	.24*	.04
Nonconformist					.10	.01	-.04	.00
Other Christian (UK)					.37*	.03	.35	.03
High school	-.12	-.03	-.24*	-.06	-.35***	-.09	-.19	-.05
Higher/further educ.	-.22	-.05	-.40***	-.10	-.75***	-.14	-.52***	-.10
Degree	-.39***	-.09	-.48***	-.11	-.93***	-.26	-.47***	-.13
Family military links	.44***	.10	.26***	.06	.11	.03	.10	.03
Conservatism			.35*	.05			.99***	.19
Authoritarianism			1.62***	.21			.63***	.08
Social dominance			.66***	.09			.39***	.06
Nationalism			1.55***	.21			.92***	.13
Party ID (scale)			.56***	.11				
Conservative ID							.02	.00
Labour ID							.10	.02
Lib Dem ID							-.13	-.02
SNP/Plaid Cymru ID							-.25	-.02
Green ID							-1.09***	-.08
BNP ID							.36	.03
UKIP ID							.29	.03
(Constant)	4.07***		1.96***		4.37***		2.91***	
R^2 (adj.)	.03		.19		.05		.14	
N	2,047		2,006		2,623		2,133	

Note: In this and subsequent tables, statistical significance is denoted as follows: *** $p<0.01$; ** $p<0.05$; * $p<0.10$

Model 1 shows two clear similarities across the two cases: in both, military action is more popular among those identifying with Christian denominations (the reference category being the non-religious) and less popular among those with higher education qualifications. The education effect is particularly strong in Britain. There are also some differences. A negative association between age and support for air strikes in Britain compares with little if any difference across age groups in the US, while the usual gender gap in support for war materialises only in the American sample. Less surprisingly, race is a significant predictor only in the US, though this has more to do with small numbers of ethnic minorities in the British sample (and population). But the main point about Model 1 is that, in both countries, these variables account for only a very small proportion of the variation in support for air strikes.

Not only are the attitudinal variables introduced in Model 2 more powerful predictors of support for action, but they also reshape some of the effects discussed above. The significant effects of race and religion in the US are washed out indicating that, insofar as white Christian respondents were more inclined to support military action, this is because they are likelier to be authoritarian or nationalist. However, the education effects in the US were if anything strengthened, indicating an impact of higher education that is independent of students' ideological predispositions (and is comparable in size to that in Britain). Turning to the direct effects of the added variables, we can see that all three personality variables have significant effects in both countries, as does the more general measure of conservatism.[14] The particular variable that matters most differs, with authoritarianism and nationalism equally important in the US while conservatism has the strongest effect in the UK. The British effects are generally weaker, consistent with our earlier suggestion that military issues like this are less politicised in Britain. The same message comes across even more clearly

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[14] The weaker effect of 'conservatism' in the US is probably due to its closer correlation with authoritarianism and the other ideology and personality variables. In Britain, left-right tends to refer primarily to economic rather than social attitudes, and the former are less closely connected with authoritarianism (Heath et al., 1994).

from the party identification results: a significant and moderately strong effect in the US contrasts with null findings for all three of the major parties in Britain, none of whose identifiers were significantly different from the reference category of non-partisans.[15] The overall result is that these variables deliver a stronger boost to variance explained in the US analysis than in the British sample. The point should not be overstated, given that the R^2 values are not very different across the cases, but the apparently greater politicisation of the Iran issue in the US – and, in particular, the particularly strong influence of authoritarianism and nationalism – might lead us to expect its public to be less responsive to our experimental manipulations.

Situational manipulations and support for air strikes

We switch at this point from multiple regression to analysis of variance. Since both belong to the same family, the general linear model, they deliver the same results. However, ANOVA offers a more economical way of both estimating and illustrating the interactions that are crucial in this and the next section. The upcoming models also include all of the variables from the regressions in Table 2, but for reasons of space we present only the new effects of the situational manipulations. With each ANOVA, we report the F-statistics (and accompanying significance tests) and partial eta (η), a measure of effect size akin to a standardised regression coefficient.

Table 3 reports the main effects of and two-way interactions between the three experimental factors.[16] Both publics were significantly less likely to support action that would slow Iran's nuclear programme by just one rather than ten years, and both were significantly less likely to support action with a higher expected civilian death toll. This latter finding constitutes clear support for H1. However, and consistent with the point made

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[15] We had no clear expectations about its 'main effect' and we have no clear explanation for why its association with support for military action is positive in the US but negative in Britain.

[16] In neither country did the three-way interaction between the factors come anywhere near significance.

just above, the effect of civilian casualty numbers on the US public was rather weak, both in absolute terms ($\eta = 0.06$) and relative to the British public ($\eta = 0.11$). On the other hand, the casualty numbers effect in both countries was stronger than that of estimated success. This is striking given that the latter has featured fairly prominently in the literature on support for war. Civilian casualties certainly have a claim to be considered as one of the contextual variables that may be factored into citizens' judgements about military action.

Table 3: Analyses of variance in support for air strikes by situational factors

	USA		Britain	
	F	η	F	η
Effectiveness	3.9**	.04	14.9***	.08
Number of casualties	2.9**	.06	8.4***	.11
Framing of casualties	4.4**	.05	1.1	.04
Number * framing	1.5	.05	1.7*	.08
Effectiveness * framing	10.3***	.07	2.7*	.05
Effectiveness * number	.3	.02	4.0***	.07
R^2 (adj.)	.20		.17	
N	2,006		2,133	

By contrast, the framing manipulation had a significant effect only on the US respondents, and this effect runs counter to that posited in H2. In fact, mean support was slightly (around 0.2 scale points) higher when casualties were described as 'ordinary Iranians' rather than 'civilian casualties'. We postpone discussion of that counter-intuitive result pending further analysis of the casualty frames manipulation, which begins with the interactions between framing and the other two situational variables. These interactions allow us to address H2 from a different angle, first assessing whether the effect of casualty *numbers* is moderated by the description of those casualties. As Table 3 shows, the numbers-framing interaction was only significant – and then just at the borderline – in the British data. The nature of such interactions is more easily illustrated than described and so we graph it in Figure 1. The

columns represent the estimated marginal means of support among those in each of the experimental conditions, holding all other variables constant.[17]

Figure 1: Mean support for air strikes by civilian casualty numbers and framing
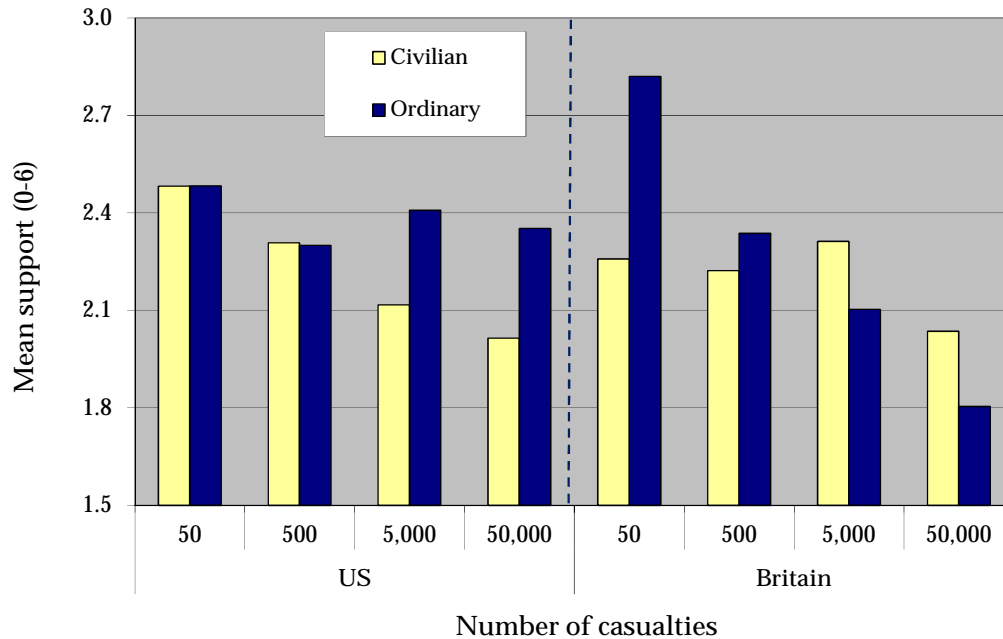

The graph reveals an interesting contrast between the two cases. The reason why the American public was overall more sanguine about 'ordinary Iranians' is that, with that formulation, civilian casualty numbers prove largely irrelevant. The effect anticipated in H1 materialised in the US only when the deaths were described as 'civilian casualties'. In Britain, by sharp contrast, the numbers effect was quite dramatic when the term 'ordinary Iranians' was used but was negligible in the 'civilian casualties' condition. The British results thus provide strong support for H2, although there remains the puzzle that 'ordinary Iranians' were considered more expendable than 'civilians' when the numbers were low.

Next, we look at the interaction – significant in both countries but larger in the US – between casualty framing and the anticipated effectiveness of air strikes in delaying the

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[17] These marginal means are calculated from the ANOVA estimates with other variables held at their means or, in the case of dummy variables, at their modal values. As a result, the marginal means may not be centred around those reported in Table 1.

Iranian nuclear programme. It is graphed in Figure 2. In both cases, and consistent with the broader argument underpinning H2, the larger effects are to be seen when the casualties are described as 'ordinary Iranians'. However, the form of this effect is not what we anticipated. It is the 'ordinary Iranians' rather than the 'civilian casualties' that are deemed a worthwhile sacrifice – especially by the US public – when action can set back Iran by ten years.

Figure 2: Mean support for air strikes by casualty framing and effectiveness of action
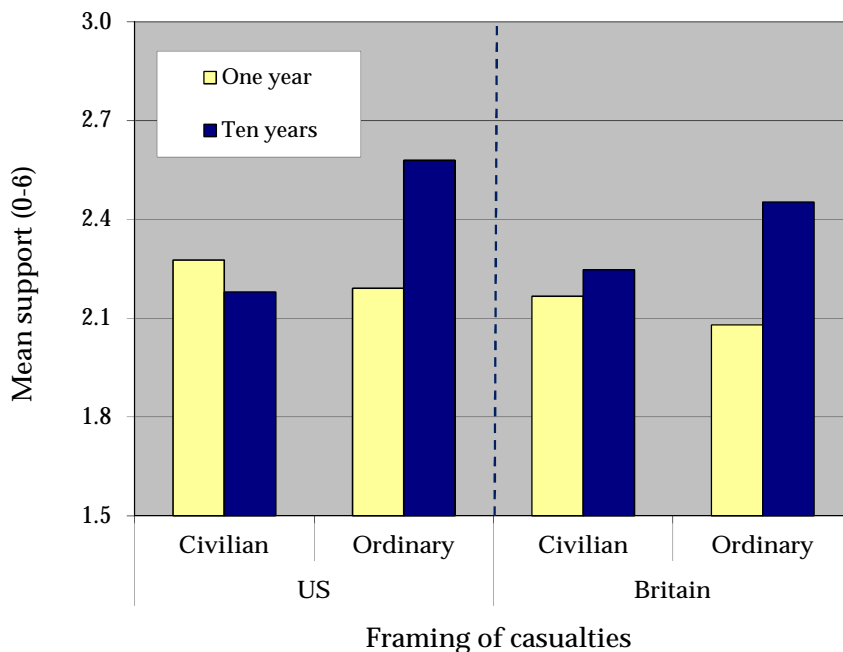
The patterns in Figure 2 also tend to contradict H3. The effects of civilian casualty framing were if anything weaker when military action was expected to be more successful. An alternative test of that hypothesis involves the final interaction between civilian casualty numbers and effectiveness, which is shown in Figure 3. The graph shows clearly why this interaction was non-significant in the US sample: the casualty results show the same downward trend regardless of the expected success of the mission. The patterns in the British data are more complicated. It seems that fifty casualties were considered a price worth paying and that 50,000 casualties were not a worthwhile sacrifice, regardless of the success of

the mission. Yet the intermediate conditions provide support for H3. When the action would

prove successful, the downturn in support only arrives at 50,000 casualties; when Iran would

be delayed by just a year, most of the downturn has happened by 500 casualties. The clear

indication is that, at least in the British case, information about civilian casualties is being

incorporated into a kind of cost-benefit analysis of the air strikes.

Figure 3: Mean support for air strikes by casualty numbers and effectiveness of action
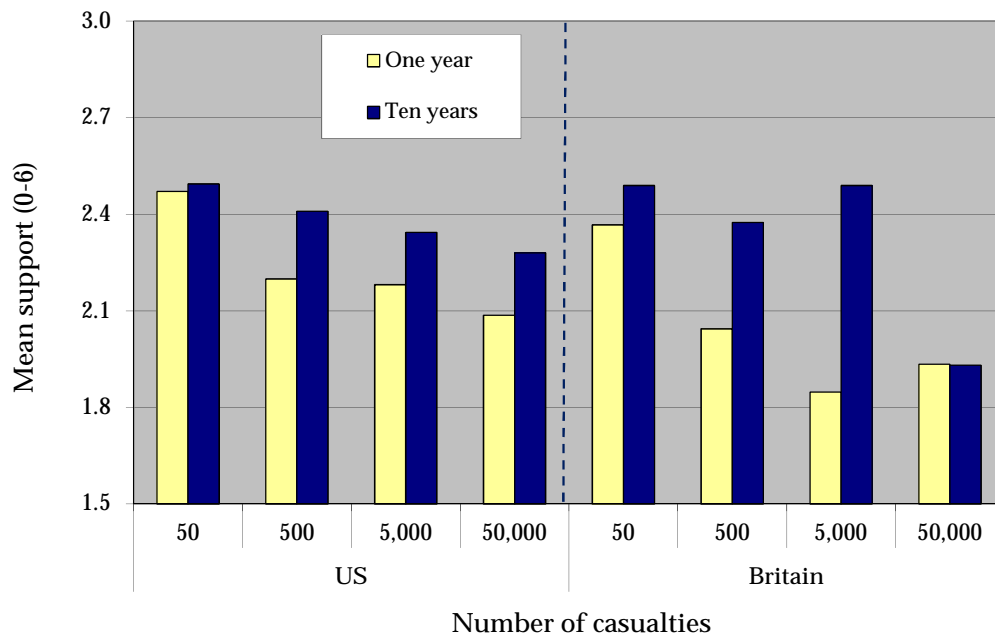
The results so far defy pithy summary. However, we can identify some differences between

the American and British reactions to civilian casualties. The latter public reacts more

strongly against civilian casualties and will tolerate significant numbers of these deaths only

if the gains are similarly substantial. The US public is rather little affected by the prospect of

civilian casualties, especially when they are framed as 'ordinary Iranians' rather than using

the conventional military terminology. One speculative explanation is that authoritarianism

and nationalism, shown in Table 2 to be major drivers of support for US action against Iran,

also act as a brake on public concerns about civilian casualties. It may also be that the

outgroup cue in the phrase 'ordinary Iranians' further erodes authoritarians' and national

chauvinists' sympathies. To test this speculation further, we should reintroduce those personality variables as moderators of the experimental effects.

Predisposition-situation interactions

This section is based on the ANOVA model from Table 3 but with six additional interaction terms – between each of our three personality variables and the two casualty manipulations. Table 4 reports the results. The first point to note is that none of the predisposition-situation interactions in the British analysis is significant (although the effect sizes are small rather than minuscule). Knowing a British citizen's level of authoritarianism, nationalism or social dominance orientation is little help in predicting how he or she will react to civilian casualties. This is not true in the US where some of the added interactions are substantively as well as statistically significant, and together they make a perceptible contribution to R^2.

Table 4: ANOVAs of support by situation and predisposition-situation interactions

	USA		Britain	
	F	η	F	η
Effectiveness	4.0**	.04	15.9***	.09
Number of casualties	4.2***	.08	1.0	.04
Framing of casualties	1.7	.03	1.2	.04
Number * framing	1.9	.05	1.6	.08
Effectiveness * framing	10.4***	.07	.9	.04
Effectiveness * number	.2	.02	4.1***	.08
Authoritarianism * number	5.0***	.09	1.3	.04
Authoritarianism * framing	13.0***	.08	.4	.02
Social dominance * number	2.2*	.06	2.0	.05
Social dominance * framing	.2	.01	1.1	.04
Nationalism * number	2.5*	.06	1.0	.04
Nationalism * framing	.1	.01	2.2	.05
R^2 (adj.)	.23		.17	
N	*2,006*		*2,133*	

We continue to use graphs to illustrate these interactions and to test the hypotheses. To make these graphs easier to read, we collapse each personality Likert item into two categories, 'low' and 'high'. Figure 4, based only on the US sample in which these effects were significant, shows the interactions between casualty numbers and (separately) authoritarianism and SDO. The pattern is actually rather clearer in the case of social dominance: as anticipated in H4b, those high on SDO are largely impervious to the numbers of casualties while there is the expected negative effect among those less likely to agree that "some people are just more deserving than others". There appears to be more of a curvilinear relationship between authoritarianism and reactions to casualty numbers, with the differences by RWA narrowest in the middle of the graph. Nonetheless, the basic pattern predicted in H4a – that the authoritarians are less influenced by casualty numbers – seems to hold. To save space, we do not present the corresponding graph for nationalists but it follows the same pattern and thus provides support for the 'numbers' part of H4c.

Figure 4: Mean support by casualty numbers, authoritarianism and SDO – <u>US only</u>
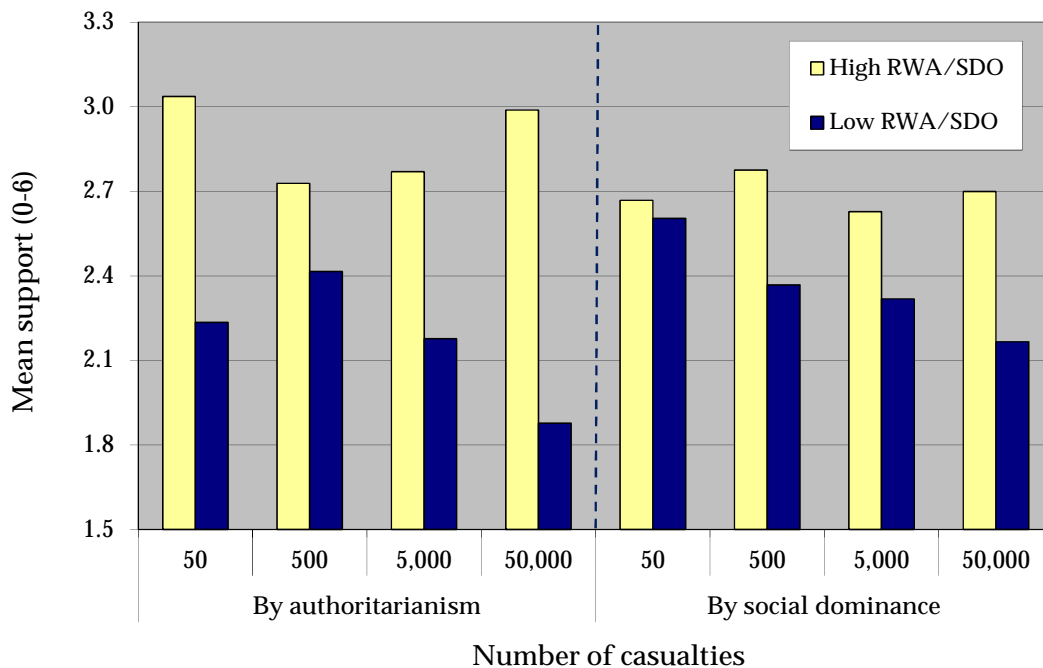
These results support our earlier suggestion that the weak effect of civilian casualty numbers in the US is due partly to a group within the American public that is predisposed not to care much for outgroups. We should note that a main effect of casualty numbers remains, and has in fact strengthened compared with Table 3. In other words, once we take account of the fact that certain groups – authoritarians, nationalists and those high on SDO – are unmoved by civilian casualty numbers, the general if weak aversion to civilian casualties shows through more clearly.

The predictions about framing in Hypotheses H4a-c fare less well. Of the three variables, only authoritarianism interacts significantly with casualty frame.   The nature of that interaction is shown in Figure 5, which this time includes the British results for comparison. It is just as expected given the previous results. In Britain, authoritarian respondents were likelier than non-authoritarians to support air strikes but that gap was the same regardless of the description of the civilians at risk.   In the US, the equivalent gap was noticeably dependent on casualty frame, largely because authoritarians were more sanguine about 'ordinary Iranians dying' than about 'civilian casualties'. The explanation for this is still unclear.   But the fact that authoritarianism is the only significant moderator of casualty framing has implications for our earlier speculation. If the relative willingness to sacrifice 'ordinary Iranians' was due to their being highlighted as 'Iranians', we would expect this tendency to be stronger among national chauvinists.   On the other hand, if it was their 'ordinariness' that made these casualties seem expendable, we might expect a particularly strong effect among those high on SDO and thus accustomed to such hierarchical discrimination.   We are left suggesting that 'ordinary Iranians dying', being a less euphemistic description than civilian casualties, does least to repel those who score highest on authoritarian aggression.

Figure 5: Mean support for air strikes by casualty frames and authoritarianism
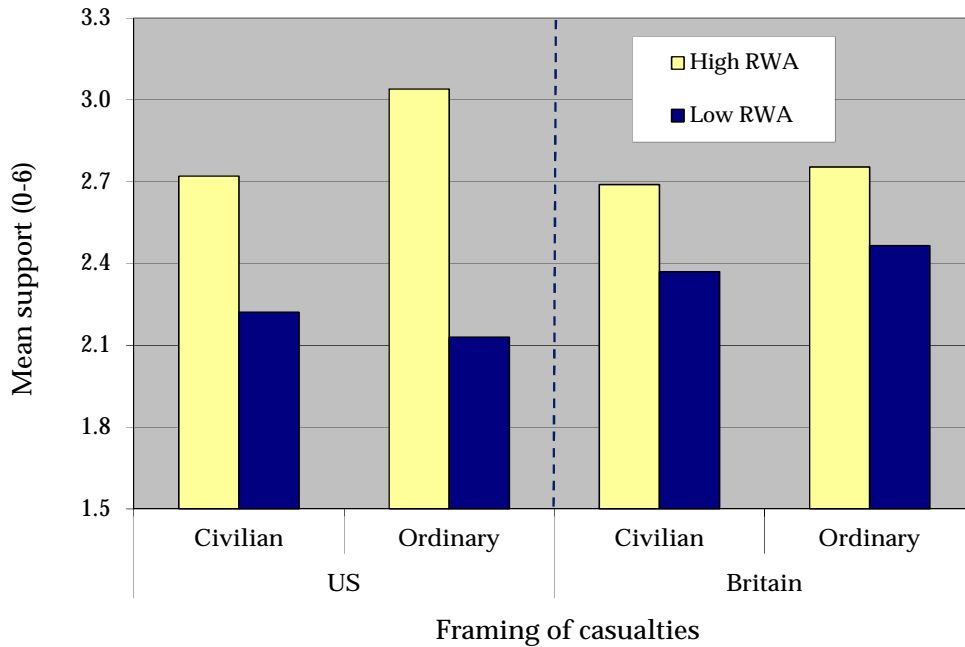
Conclusions

The data analysed in this paper were collected around two years ago. Since then, with growing political and media attention to Iran's developing nuclear programme, air strikes on Iran have become less of a 'tough sell' for the US and British governments. The steady softening of opinion against military action recorded in opinion polls is consistent with the evidence from our surveys in which, while majorities of both publics preferred alternative policies, most looked at worst ambivalent about air strikes. As in other cases of potential military intervention, a large proportion of the public will make up their mind based on aspects of the particular situation – whether there is UN approval, how credible is the intelligence, the risks to military personnel, and so on. Majorities in favour of air strikes are entirely possible, then, but anything but guaranteed. And it is the (currently) undecided who will prove decisive.

One key message from this paper is that civilian casualties can be added to the list of contextual factors with the potential to influence support for military action. The scale of this effect in real-world contexts is obviously hard to judge, which brings us back to the questionable external validity of experimental results. On the one hand, experimental manipulations are an unobtrusive way of testing the effect of a variable. On the other hand, no experiment comes anywhere near capturing the vast array of factors that are at play in any real military scenario, and the prospect of civilian casualties may well be obscured by other information. Indeed, this is highly likely since those looking to persuade a sceptical public of the need to take military action are hardly likely to emphasise such a cost. Yet there are two sides to such discursive battles and our findings have implications for those seeking to encourage public opposition to war. At least some people drew back when alerted to the likelihood of substantial civilian deaths. It is hard to say whether civilian casualties have influenced levels of public support for previous military actions but, insofar as they have not, this looks more a case of 'don't know' than 'don't care'. Emphasis on civilian casualties would not therefore seem like wasted words from those arguing against military action.

The foregoing concerns *whether* information about civilian casualties is presented to the public. We also explored *how* such information was presented but on that point the results were less clear-cut. One reason is that the wording manipulation is fairly subtle. A strongly humanising frame would involve not just different terminology but also biography, photography, and so on. And we lack the detailed manipulation checks required to explain whether and why 'ordinary Iranians dying' failed to have the humanising effect that we intended in designing the experiment. On this point, then, we can only end with the traditional call for further research.

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