

**Rival Consolidation in Nascent Insurrections:
Why Some Militant Groups
Wage Sustained Insurgencies**

by

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Abstract

Why do some militant groups wage sustained armed conflicts (or insurgencies) while other groups do not? I argue that shifts in nascent rival relations between militant groups, from competition to consolidation, are key to understanding this puzzle. A militant group which has consolidated its rivals – whether by destruction, merger, or hegemonic dominance – should be in a stronger position to fight the target state than groups preoccupied with counterproductive violence against rivals within a militant movement. This thesis uses a multi-method, three-stage, research design starting with a novel quantitative regression analysis of 246 prominent militant groups worldwide from 1970-2007, featured in the Global Terrorism Database (GTD). I find that, on average, organizational characteristics (i.e. ideology and organizational structure) and constituency dominance are stronger indicators for engagement in sustained insurgencies than traditional proxies for observable group capabilities (i.e. group size, state sponsorship, etc.), challenging conventional wisdom. The second stage narrows in on a more bounded population (Middle Eastern and North African insurgent groups) and uses cross-case comparative methods to build my theory based on three forms of primary rival relations: competition (infighting or outbidding), strategic alliance, and hegemonic consolidation. I then use process tracing methods to explore within-case inferences and identify causal mechanisms in three diverse case studies: Hezbollah, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Rival consolidation helps dominant groups mobilize resources effectively and overcome two major organizational hurdles: collective action and principal-agent problems. Without major competitors, dominant groups attract recruits and support, while militant leaders divert their attention to strengthening organizational capacity and preparing for war with the target state. Hegemonic militant groups are also in a stronger position to ensure compliance among rank-and-file operatives, attract outside support, and secure critical safe haven to sustain an insurgency. My temporal theory of rival consolidation offers a more compelling explanation that accounts for the timing of sustained insurgency onset, compared to scholarly accounts that rely on largely static factors or remain incomplete. From a policy perspective, this thesis challenges assumptions and presents a generalizable framework identifying nascent rival relations as a pragmatic indicator that can help practitioners anticipate potential insurgent threats.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: REASSESSING INSURGENCY ONSET

1.1 PUZZLE

On August 15, 1984, two PKK units descended from the Turkish-Iraqi border and attacked Turkish military barracks in the towns of Eruh and Semdinli, marking the onset of a long insurgency plaguing Turkey.¹ The group gradually escalated attacks and engaged in a multi-faceted guerilla campaign involving traditional hit-and-run tactics including army patrol ambushes, sabotaging power stations, and striking military and police positions. Why did the PKK successfully launch a sustained insurgency against a far more powerful Turkish regime? The PKK emerged as a clandestine militant group in the mid 1970's, with only a handful of members, minuscule resources, and limited ties to the Kurdish peasantry it sought to represent. During its early years, the militant organization used violence sporadically and mainly against Kurdish tribal leaders, rural landowners, and rival Kurdish organizations. What explains the onset of insurgency against Turkey in 1984?

Since its emergence in 1982, Hezbollah has transformed from a rag-tag collection of militants to arguably the most powerful militant organization in the world. Today, Hezbollah is a regional power with capabilities that rival many states. But in its earliest stages, Hezbollah was preoccupied with its survival and competing for resources and support against its older, and more powerful, rival Amal. By the end of the 1980s, Hezbollah evolved from a clandestine group into a full-fledged guerrilla force posing a

¹ Aliza Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 80.

serious challenge to Israel's military in southern Lebanon.² While most of Hezbollah's attacks took the form of assassinations, bombings, and kidnappings in its early years, after 1991, there was a clear and dramatic shift to hit-and-run strikes on Israeli military targets. Hezbollah eventually forced Israel's military to evacuate from southern Lebanon in 2000 following a decade-long war of attrition. But why did Hezbollah launch a sustained campaign of attrition against Israel in the early 1990s?

Most militant groups fail to survive beyond their first year, let alone wage a full-fledged insurgency. Some groups, like the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood or the Egypt's al-Jamm'a al-Islamiya, engaged in armed insurrections but failed to sustain military operations against their respective target regimes beyond a few years. Why do some prominent militant groups engage in sustained armed conflicts (or insurgencies), while others fail to get an insurgency off the ground or face defeat early on?

1.2 RESEARCH QUESTION

This dissertation seeks to understand the conditions under which a nascent militant group evolves into a formidable force and wages a full-blown insurgency against a state. It is puzzling why some initially weak militant groups, who face immense difficulties in garnering material resources and support, are able to eventually launch sustained violent operations and confront far more powerful militaries with disproportionately higher capabilities. The majority of militant groups do not survive beyond their first, and most

² In a quantitative analysis of Hezbollah's attack profile, researchers show that, in 1991, the militant group shifted its tactics from attacks generally associated with clandestine militant groups to traditional guerrilla operations. See Luis De La Calle and Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca, "How Armed Groups Fight: Territorial Control and Violent Tactics," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38, no. 10 (2015): 795–813.

vulnerable, year of existence.³ Yet the remaining number of militant groups account for 94% of coded attacks.⁴ Among 246 of the most prominent and capable militant groups (groups that have survived beyond their first year and have committed at least 10 attacks during their lifespan) featured in the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), I have identified 77 (~31%) groups that have participated in a sustained armed conflict (for a minimum of five years) with their target state.⁵ Why do some militant groups engage in sustained armed conflicts (or insurgencies) while other groups do not?

1.3 ARGUMENT

I argue that shifts in rival relations between militant groups – from competition to consolidation – are key to understanding this research puzzle. A militant group which dominates its constituency and has consolidated its rivals – whether by destruction, merger, or hegemonic dominance – should be in a stronger position to fight the target

³ Bruce Hoffman, “The Modern Terrorist Mindset,” in *Terrorism and Counterterrorism: Understanding the New Security Environment*, ed. Russell D. Howard and Reid L. Sawyer (Gilford, CT: McGraw Hill, 2002), 84. Dugan (2012) finds that 74% of the militant groups in the Global Terrorism Database between 1970 and 2007 ceased to operate within their first year. See Laura Dugan, “The Making of the Global Terrorism Database and Its Applicability to Studying the Lifecycles of Terrorist Organizations,” in *The Sage Handbook of Criminological Research Methods*, ed. David Gadd, Sussane Karstedt, and Steven F. Messner (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012). Brian Phillips, however, examines the most prominent datasets on militant group longevity and finds that – depending on the sample – 25-74 percent of groups do not survive past their first year. See Brian J. Phillips, “Do 90 Percent of Terrorist Groups Last Less than a Year? Updating the Conventional Wisdom,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31, no. 6 (2017): 1255-1265.

⁴ Gary LaFree, Laura Dugan, and Erin Miller, *Putting Terrorism in Context: Lessons from the Global Terrorism Database* (New York: Routledge, 2015). This observation is based on the GTD’s data from 1970 to the end of 2012. To access the GTD data see National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), (2018), Global Terrorism Database [Data file]. Retrieved from <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>.

⁵ The 246 prominent militant groups are identified in Joshua Kilberg, “Organizing for Destruction: How Organizational Structure Affects Terrorist Group Behaviour” (PhD diss., Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, Carleton University, 2011). I coded which groups engage in sustained armed conflicts based on criteria outlined in more detail below.

state than groups preoccupied with counterproductive violence against rivals within a militant movement.⁶

Other rival organizations, not the target government, are usually the focus of nascent militant groups during the initial phases of an armed insurrection. Highly competitive movements force groups to pay most of their attention to internal matters, such as enhancing recruitment and improving their own positions within the wider movement. Through the strategic use of violence, prominent militant groups can eclipse more established rival groups to gain dominance over their respective constituencies. Militant groups vying for constituency support may escalate violence to outbid rivals or directly fight one another in an effort to destroy the competition. The origins of well-known insurgencies are often characterized by considerable infighting and competition for dominance, such as the LTTE, PKK, Fatah, and Hezbollah.⁷

Rival consolidation helps dominant groups mobilize resources and achieve organizational objectives that improve a group's chances of posing a serious armed challenge to the state. In the nascent stages of an insurrection, I expect that militant groups are primarily focused on two organizational hurdles: overcoming collective action and principal-agent problems. Consolidating constituent rivals and reducing counterproductive violence from within the militant movement should help alleviate these issues. Dominant militant groups that consolidate their rivals have access to new resources – pooled from other organizations or derived from the local constituency.

⁶ This argument is developed in greater detail in Chapter Four's theory building exercise, based on my quantitative and comparative analyses. I am inspired by Peter Krause's (2017) recent work on national movement effectiveness in formulating the logic of my argument. I am exceptionally grateful for his comments on my theory-building chapter.

⁷ Daniel Byman, "Understanding Proto-Insurgencies," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 31, no. 2 (2008): 165-200.

Without other viable options, dominant groups are in a stronger position to persuade non-aligned civilians to support or formally join the organization. While alleviating the more immediate collective action problem, militant leaders can divert more of their attention to strengthening their internal organizational capacity and preparing for war with the target state. Lacking major competitors, leading militant groups signal their credibility to members and are in a better position to keep lower-ranking fighters in line with leadership objectives, helping address principal-agent problems. Hegemonic militant groups are also in a stronger position to secure critical safe haven to sustain an insurgency, attract outside support, and effectively absorb new resources. My temporal theory of rival consolidation offers a more compelling explanation that accounts for the timing of sustained insurgency onset, compared to existing scholarly explanations that either rely on largely static factors or remain incomplete.

1.3.1 Scope Conditions

My theory focuses on oppositional militant groups seeking to engage in a sustained armed conflict, generally against a far more powerful state. I expect this theory to offer important insights to similar asymmetric environments characterized by competing militant groups and rival factions vying for power over a wider constituency, during the lead up to and throughout the initial stages of an armed conflict. Collective action and principal-agent problems are common in these types of settings and groups that overcome these organizational hurdles are more likely to thrive and pursue more strategic goals. This thesis explains when militant groups fight to initiate new civil conflicts and does not explain civil war recurrence or why some militant groups join

ongoing insurgencies.⁸ By outlining these conditions, I bind the scope of my analysis to a crucial and understudied phenomenon associated with a particular sub-class of violent intra-state conflicts as opposed to trying to explain wide-ranging stages of insurgency development or outcomes of militant campaigns.

1.4 MOTIVATION AND SIGNIFICANCE

Over the last few decades, the majority of organized political violence has occurred within states, not between them.⁹ In recent years, there is an increasing threat from militant groups who are capable of escalating their level of violence and posing serious challenges to the states they fight and, in some cases, international security. The dramatic and rapid rise of the Islamic State (IS) and its affiliates shocked many observers around the world. By waging a successful military campaign in 2014, the IS was able to gain control of significant territory in Syria and Iraq, consolidate new power bases in the region, attract an unprecedented number of foreign fighters and coordinate large-scale attacks around the world. Some of the militant group's regional affiliates also pose major threats to the states they fight. For example, the IS affiliate in the Sinai Peninsula has evolved into unprecedented militant threat to the Egyptian regime in only a few years and continues to sustain a low-level insurgency.¹⁰

⁸ For the causes of civil war recurrence see Barbara F. Walter, "Does Conflict Beget Conflict? Explaining Recurring Civil War," *Journal of Peace Research* 41, no. 3 (2004): 371–388.

⁹ Of 40 recorded armed conflicts in 2014, 39 occurred within states Therése Pettersson and Peter Wallensteen, "Armed Conflicts, 1946-2014," *Journal of Peace Research* 52, no. 4 (2015): 536-550, 537. For more on the UCDP data, see Nils Petter Gleditsch, Peter Wallensteen, Mikael Eriksson, Margareta Sollenberg, and Havard Strand, "Armed Conflict 1946-2001: A New Dataset," *Journal of Peace Research* 39, no. 5 (2002): 615-637.

¹⁰ Omar Ashour, "Sinai's Stubborn Insurgency: Why Egypt Can't Win," *Foreign Affairs*, November 8, 2015.

According to the Global Terrorism Index 2016, terrorist attacks claimed the lives of over 32,500 people around the world – an 80 percent increase from 2014.¹¹ While recorded terrorist attacks have declined over the past three years, the overall trend over the past decades indicates a sharp increase in militancy worldwide. Recorded deaths from terrorist attacks are almost three times higher in 2017 compared to 2001. Similarly, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) data indicates that 2014 witnessed the highest number of conflicts since 1999 and the most battle-related deaths inflicted during civil conflicts since the end of the Cold War, contributing to a wider trend.

There is a high correlation between battle-related deaths and fatalities from terrorism around the world. The vast majority of coded terrorist incidents occur in the context of civil war.¹² However, there also appears to be a strategic logic behind the terrorist activity preceding the onset of a civil war. This finding motivates this dissertation and warrants further investigation. Using geo-spatial techniques, Findley and Young (2012) show that there is considerable temporal and spatial overlap between coded terrorist attacks and civil war.¹³ The observed concentrations of terrorist attacks occurring during the pre-civil war phase are likely to be concentrated in the same

¹¹ Many attacks coded in terrorism databases include traditional guerrilla operations – focused on military targets – or ethnic cleansing episodes in civil wars; nevertheless, the data indicates a sharp rise in attacks and casualties inflicted by militant groups in recent years. The number of people killed from terrorist attacks has risen ninefold from 2000-2014. In the past few years, fatalities caused by terrorism have dropped slightly since 2014, but the broader trend points to a dramatic increase in terrorist inflicted deaths over the last few decades. See Institute for Economics and Peace (2018), Global Terrorism Index 2018: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism, Retrieved from <http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2018/12/Global-Terrorism-Index-2018-1.pdf>

¹² In 2017, about 95% of terrorism-related deaths took place in countries that experience at least one armed conflict. See Ibid. For Stanton (2013), the use of terrorism in civil wars involves armed groups using explosive devices to target civilians. For more on this dynamic, see Jessica A. Stanton, “Terrorism in the Context of Civil War,” *The Journal of Politics* 75, no. 4 (2013): 1009-1022.

¹³ The authors find that most terrorist incidents occur during civil war and in the geographic areas where the war is taking place. Michael G. Findley and Joseph K. Young, “Terrorism and Civil War: A Spatial and Temporal Approach to a Conceptual Problem,” *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 2 (2012): 285-305, 286.

geographic areas later characterized by civil war. While these patterns are well established from an aggregate, country-level of analysis, it is less clear why some militant organizations escalate their level of violence to an armed conflict or civil war.

The disproportionate rise of intrastate conflicts in the 1990's motivated a rich literature on the causes and consequences of civil wars and insurgencies. There is a plethora of studies devoted to understanding the onset, duration, and termination of civil wars – usually defined in conflict datasets as armed conflict between a state and at least one rebel group within the boundary of that state resulting in at least 1,000 battle-related deaths.¹⁴ But most of the prominent conflict datasets use this high battle-death threshold to determine armed conflict onset, overlooking the emergence of militant groups or low-intensity conflicts.¹⁵

Looking beyond conflict onset, the insurgency literature tends to focus on why some insurgent groups ultimately defeat the states they fight or why some groups fighting in a civil war target civilians under certain conditions.¹⁶ A more recent research program focusing on the militant group-level of analysis evaluates groups largely based on capability indicators such as group strength, size, or control of territory to help determine civil war dynamics and outcomes. Most of this literature evaluates militant groups based

¹⁴ These studies are reviewed in more depth in this dissertation's literature review (Chapter Two).

¹⁵ Nicholas Sambanis, "What Is Civil War? Conceptual and Empirical Complexities of an Operational Definition," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48, no. 6 (2004): 814-858; Paul Collier, Anke Hoeffler, and Dominic Rohner, "Beyond Greed and Grievance: Feasibility and Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers* 61, no. 1 (2009): 1-27.

¹⁶ Ben Connable and Martin C. Libicki, *How Insurgencies End* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010); Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson III, "Rage Against the Machines: Explaining Outcomes in Counterinsurgency Wars," *International Organization* 63 (2009): 67-106; Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy Weinstein, "Handling and Manhandling Civilians in Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 100, no. 3 (2006): 429-447; Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

on organizational cohesion, group longevity, or achieving ultimate goals.¹⁷ More importantly, this research program tends to prioritize militant groups that are already fighting in insurgencies or sustained armed conflicts. The processes and dynamics characterizing the initial stages of insurgency prior to armed conflict onset are poorly understood. There are few scholarly attempts trying to explain why some nascent militant groups evolve to into viable insurgent threats in the first place.¹⁸

Most prominent militant groups engage in violent activity before larger-scale violence erupts. However, these organizations' early attack profiles are largely absent from prominent terrorism datasets as well, including the Global Terrorism Database (GTD). For example, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was founded in 1976 and civil war in Sri Lanka began in 1983. However, I find that virtually none of LTTE's attacks were explicitly registered in the GTD from 1976-1983, though qualitative literature on the organization's history point to significant violent activity against various targets during this early period. Similar issues arise when I analyze early attack profiles of prominent insurgent groups including the main Basque militant group, ETA, in Spain and the PKK in Turkey. Groups often avoid claiming responsibility for certain terrorist attacks for a variety of reasons, potentially more so during their nascent stages.¹⁹

Hezbollah, for example, used a variety of aliases to take credit for its earliest and most

¹⁷ Sarah E. Parkinson and Sherry Zaks, "Militant and Rebel Organization(s)," *Comparative Politics*, 50, no. 4 (2018): 271-293.

¹⁸ One notable exception is Janet Lewis (2012)'s dissertation, which tackles a similar puzzle concerning why some nascent rebel groups in Uganda evolve into viable threats. Janet I. Lewis, "How Rebellion Begins: Insurgent Group Formation and Viability in Uganda" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2012).

¹⁹ Erin M. Kearns, Brendan Conlon, & Joseph K. Young, "Lying About Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37, no. 5 (2014): 422-439; Max Abrahms and Justin Conrad, "The Strategic Logic of Credit Claiming: A New Theory for Anonymous Terrorist Attacks," *Security Studies* no. 26, 2 (2017): 279-304.

spectacular attacks, arguably to avoid retribution while it was still a relatively clandestine organization.²⁰ Many prominent groups' earliest attacks target rival groups or constituent civilians – attacks that often fail to be captured in terrorism databases due to underreporting or coding criteria.

This dissertation's puzzle is motivated by a gap in knowledge that is widened by selection biases among prominent conflict datasets which tend to feature militant groups participating in full-fledged civil wars and the over-emphasis of qualitative accounts focusing on the most high-profile militant organizations.²¹ Most case studies of insurgency or rebellion only look at the most lethal and enduring militant groups. There is no shortage of literature on powerful insurgent groups such as Hezbollah, IRA, PKK, or LTTE, among others. Since these organizations outlasted other groups among their respective constituencies and inflicted the most casualties, most analysts associate the entire conflicts with the dominant group and overlook their main rivals.²² Data limitations are inherent when seeking to study militant groups that fall into the dustbin of history. Yet conflict researchers and practitioners can learn a great deal about armed conflict by understanding the trajectories of militant groups that emerge under similar conditions but fail to pose a serious military challenge to the target state.

²⁰ Nicholas Blanford, *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel* (New York, NY: Random House, 2011), 59.

²¹ Seth G. Jones, *Waging Insurgent Warfare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Charles W. Mahoney, "More Data, New Problems: Audiences, Ahistoricity, and Selection Bias in Terrorism and Insurgency Research," *International Studies Review* 20, no. 4 (2018): 589-614.

²² For more on the selection bias in the literature on insurgency and rebellion see Lewis, "How Rebellion Begins," 16-23.

1.5 IMPORTANCE FOR POLICY AND THE ANALYTIC COMMUNITY

Islamist-oriented militant groups are responsible for the vast majority of deaths from terrorist attacks worldwide.²³ Since 9/11, the threat from Salafi-jihadist and other Islamist-oriented groups has evolved considerably. One recent report estimates that the number of Salafi-Jihadists (broadly defined to include members of some Sunni Islamist organizations) have grown four-fold since 2001.²⁴ However, it is important to note that most of these militants are primarily fighting in local conflicts. Most al-Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates around the world are currently prioritizing their efforts to wage insurgencies against the states where they reside, as opposed to planning international terrorist attacks against the West, as was the case over a decade ago.²⁵ From both an academic and policy standpoint, it makes more sense to conceptualize these local Islamist-oriented violent conflicts through the prism of traditional insurgencies.

The growing threat from militant groups continues to dominate policymakers' attention. National security and defence practitioners around the world face a myriad of counterterrorism intelligence issues and limited resources to discern among nascent militant groups that might pose serious insurgent threats in the future.²⁶ Practitioners relying on open-source intelligence or media accounts are likely to miss signs of a potential insurrection, since journalists and observers usually start reporting on conflicts

²³ Institute for Economics & Peace, "Global Terrorism Index 2018."

²⁴ Seth G. Jones, Charles Vallee, Danika Newlee, Nicholas Harrington, Clayton Sharb, Hannah Byrne, *The Evolution of the Salafi-jihadist Threat*, Center for Strategic & International Studies (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, 2018). Retrieved from <https://www.csis.org/analysis/evolution-salafi-jihadist-threat>; For more on Salafi-ideology see Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

²⁵ Sam Heller, "Rightsizing the Transnational Jihadist Threat," *International Crisis Group*, December 12, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/rightsizing-transnational-jihadist-threat>.

²⁶ Daniel Byman, "The Intelligence War on Terrorism," *Intelligence and National Security* 29, no. 6 (2014): 837-863.

only after larger-scale violence ensues. U.S. officials working in this space, for example, appear to prioritize observable militant group capabilities and known information among other possible indicators of potential threats.²⁷ Intelligence limitations and potential cognitive biases towards certain indicators has led to notable strategic surprises – such as the unexpected and rapid rise of the Islamic State group in 2014.

Understanding this research puzzle is critical since groups that are capable of launching sustained operations gain more influence, recruitment, and fundraising capabilities while further weakening the target state. The Islamic State’s attacks on Iraqi police and military targets in 2014, for example, diminished government resources and deterred recruitment into the state’s already fragile security apparatuses, creating more power vacuums that enabled the insurgent group to pursue its strategic objectives.²⁸ By launching a sustained armed conflict, organizations also improve their coercive bargaining power vis-à-vis the state.²⁹ Conflicts characterized by higher rates of lethality are associated with higher rates of civil war recurrence.³⁰ From a policymaking perspective, nascent militant groups tend to be most vulnerable in their early stages and states maintain crucial influence over their trajectories. Important dilemmas emerge regardless of which path states take to combat nascent militant groups – co-optation can signal weakness and encourage militants to push forward while military repression can backfire if conducted indiscriminately. It is far easier for states to prevent a nascent

²⁷ Iris Malone, “Uncertainty and Civil War Onset” (paper presented at the annual conference of the International Studies Association, San Francisco, CA, 2018).

²⁸ Will McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2015), 80-81.

²⁹ The probability of militant group collapse is highest at the early stages of an insurgency and groups significantly improve their chances of survival over time. See Navin A. Bapat, “Insurgency and the Opening of Peace Processes,” *Journal of Peace Research* 42 no.6 (2005): 699-717.

³⁰ Virginia Page Fortna, “Does Peacekeeping Keep Peace? International Intervention and the Duration of Peace After Civil War,” *International Studies Quarterly* 48 (2004): 269-292.

insurrection from developing than defeating a matured and consolidated militant organization.³¹

1.6 CONCEPTS & DEFINITIONS

This section provides definitions of the main concepts underpinning the study. The broader scholarly literature tends to treat civil war, terrorism, and insurgency as analytically distinct phenomenon, despite representing interrelated forms of political violence.³² Different terms mean different concepts to scholars, fueling some confusion and challenging accumulation of knowledge. For example, Hoffman (2006) argues that *terrorists* do not “function in the open as armed units, generally do not attempt to seize or hold territory, deliberately avoid engaging enemy military forces in combat, are constrained both numerically and logistically from undertaking concerted mass political mobilization efforts, and exercise no direct control or governance over a populace at either the local or the national level.”³³ According to this popular perspective, the term *terrorist* generally conveys a more clandestine violent actor than the more overt and multi-faceted *insurgent*.³⁴ De La Calle & Sanchez-Cuenca (2012) distinguish militants

³¹ Once an insurgency survives its most incipient and vulnerable stages, the likelihood that the armed opposition will either achieve its objective or secure a negotiated agreement increases considerably. See David E. Cunningham, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Idean Salehyan, “It Takes Two: A Dyadic Analysis of Civil War Duration and Outcome,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53, no. 4 (2009): 570-597, 574.

³² Jeff Goodwin, “A Theory of Categorical Terrorism,” *Social Forces* 84 no. 4 (2006): 2027-46; Luis de la Calle and Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Terrorism,” *Politics & Society* 39, no. 3 (2011): 451-472; Todd Sandler, “The Analytic Study of Terrorism: Taking Stock,” *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 22 (2014): 257-271; Brian J. Phillips, “What is a Terrorist Group? Conceptual Issues and Empirical Implications,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no. 2 (2015): 225-242.

³³ Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 35.

³⁴ Daniel Byman (2008) estimates that roughly half of the groups designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations by the U.S. State Department are also insurgent organizations. This research project also engages in literature related to insurgency, which the CIA broadly defines as “a protracted political-military activity directed toward completely or partially controlling the resources of a country through the use of

based on territorial control, coding *insurgents* as groups that hold territory and *terrorists* as groups that do not.³⁵ Most *insurgent* groups, however, do not emerge and immediately control territory and the researchers acknowledge that analyses of group transitions are overlooked.

Other perspectives emphasize group size or guerrilla hit-and-run tactics as defining characteristics distinguishing between *terrorist* and *insurgent* groups. Byman (2008) seeks to address overlapping concepts by analyzing “*proto-insurgencies*”: groups that aim to “gain the size necessary to more effectively achieve its goals and use tools such as political mobilization and guerrilla warfare as well as terrorism.”³⁶ Yet *insurgent* organizations almost always rely on concurrent strategies, including *terrorism* (attacks against civilians) as one of its methods.³⁷ Both types of armed actors – to varying degrees – use violence, tend to seek local support, and engage in non-violent tactics. Group size and territorial control are also quite variable distinctions. Khalil (2013) argues that assigning dichotomous labels between *terrorists* and *insurgents*, as most scholars and military analysts do, is counterproductive since the proposed factors differentiating

irregular military forces and illegal political organizations. Insurgent activity—including guerrilla warfare, terrorism, and political mobilization, for example, propaganda, recruitment, front and covert party organization, and international activity—is designed to weaken government control and legitimacy while increasing insurgent control and legitimacy.” See Central Intelligence Agency, *Guide to the Analysis of Insurgency*, Washington D.C. nd, 2009, 2. Other scholars of insurgency have also relied on this definition including, Seth Jones (2008) and Daniel Byman (2008). See Daniel Byman, “Understanding Proto-Insurgencies,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 31, no. 2 (2008): 165-200; and Seth G. Jones, “The Rise of Afghanistan's Insurgency: State Failure and Jihad,” *International Security* 32, no. 4 (2008): 7-40. For some prominent scholars, the term insurgency denotes a technology of rebellion. According to Fearon and Latin (2003), insurgency consists of “small, lightly armed bands practicing guerrilla warfare from rural base areas.” See Fearon, James D. and David D. Laitin. “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War.” *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003): 75-90, 79.

³⁵ Luis De la Calle and Ignacio Sanchez-Cuena, “Rebels without a Territory: An Analysis of Nonterritorial Conflicts in the World, 1970–1997,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 4 (2012): 580-603.

³⁶ Byman, “Understanding Proto-Insurgencies,” 5.

³⁷ Ariel Merari, “Terrorism as Strategy of Insurgency,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 5, no. 4 (1993): 213-251.

between the two actors are continuous.³⁸ Static differentiations common in the literature inherently place complex forms of political violence into distinct conceptual spheres, inhibiting the ability to conduct analysis on the transition from one form to another.

To avoid fueling conceptual ambiguities, actor-centric concepts including *guerrilla*, *rebel*, *terrorist*, and *insurgent* will solely be referred to as *militant* – a more politically neutral term – unless I specifically explore a particular literature or reference an author that utilizes a given term or concept.³⁹

1.6.1 Unit-of-analysis: Militant group

As opposed to analyzing dynamics concerning individual terrorist initiatives or low-level cell operations, this research project focuses on the group-level of analysis. I define militant group as a collective organization with a designated name that engages in the use of illegal violence to achieve a “political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation.”⁴⁰ My universe of cases is drawn from the Global

³⁸ Khalil, “Know Your Enemy.” According to this perspective, it is possible for a militant actor to be both a terrorist and an insurgent. Large militant organizations – like Hezbollah – maintain a guerrilla fighting force, political wing, and international terrorist unit devoted to targeting diplomats and civilians abroad.

³⁹ *Terrorism* has increasingly become a pejorative and politically charged term. I am agnostic to whether a particular militant group is perceived as an ally or enemy to any given entity in the international system at a certain point in time. For the purposes of this project, the growth of violent non-state organizations with primarily political ultimate objectives seeking to challenge a target state needs to be better understood in order to be stifled. Containing threats posed by militant groups are likely a top priority for the target regime and a possible goal for certain states in a region or the international system. From a policymaking perspective, practitioners and officials could simultaneously label a militant group as a *terrorist* organization while conceptualizing its objectives and operations as primarily *insurgent* in nature (i.e. if the group mainly focuses its attacks on military targets or explicitly seeks control of state resources/territory). See Assaf Moghadam, Ronit Berger, and Polina Beliakova, “Say Terrorist, Think Insurgent: Labeling and Analyzing Contemporary Terrorist Actors,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 5 (2014): 2-17.

⁴⁰ National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), *Global Terrorism Database (GTD) Codebook: Inclusion Criteria and Variables*, 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/downloads/Codebook.pdf>, 9. Most prominent militant groups rely on non-violent methods as well, however, my base-line definition binds my unit of analysis to organized groups that engage in political violence to help achieve their objectives. The GTD’s broad definition of *terrorism*

Terrorism Database (GTD) and encompasses prominent militant organizations that survive their most vulnerable first year and have conducted at least ten attacks throughout their lifespan. I argue that these organizations represent a set of potential militant groups that engage in sustained insurgencies because they demonstrate a willingness and serious capacity to use violence to address some grievance against their target state.

My research focuses on militant groups operating primarily from the states where they initially emerge. While the line between transnational and domestic militant groups is increasingly blurred, my model does not seek to explain all types of militant groups. Purely transnational terrorist groups, like the Japanese Red Army, which execute the overwhelming majority of attacks outside their origin state, are left out of the analysis.⁴¹ Groups affiliated with transnational vanguard groups like al-Qaeda, which mainly participate in local insurgencies, however, are within my scope.⁴² Criminal-oriented groups that emerge with primarily profit-maximizing objectives (i.e. Mexican drug cartels), rouge military factions (i.e. splintered military units emerging throughout the process of disintegration in 1991 Yugoslavia), and state formed militias (i.e. the Shabiha group formed by Syria's regime) also remain outside the analysis. This dissertation

is appropriate for this project's conception of militant violence. While there is no universal definition, many definitions specifically reference that targets of *terrorism* are primarily soft targets or civilians. A major aspect of most terrorism definitions relates to whether the attack was intended to send a psychological message to a wider audience beyond the immediate victim of the violence. See Alex P. Schmid, "Frameworks for Conceptualizing Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16, no. 2 (2004): 197-221. It is important to clarify that the GTD's definition may encompass incidents that might not be traditionally viewed as terrorist attacks by some, including civil war related violence and classic guerrilla hit-and-run attacks targeting military convoys for example. Since most prominent militant groups tend to include both civilian and military targets within their attack profiles, this broad definition is appropriate for my analysis.

⁴¹ Following a similar logic De la Calle and Sanchez-Cuenca (2012) dismiss groups that conduct over 95 percent of their attacks beyond their host state. See De la Calle and Sanchez-Cuenca, "Rebels without a Territory," 585.

⁴² Some have referred to al-Qaeda (AQ) as a global insurgency, posing unique threats which require new understandings of insurgency. Yet territorial control and violent escalations in local theatres remain core objectives for Islamic State and AQ affiliates. See David Kilcullen, "Counter-insurgency Redux," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 48, no. 4 (2006): 111-130.

focuses on the evolution of prominent, oppositional militant groups that may or may not engage in sustained armed conflicts.

1.6.2 Constituent rivals

This thesis focuses on relations between prominent militant groups and rivals within a broader movement that represent a similar constituency (i.e. Turkish Kurds, Syrian Sunnis, Lebanese Shi'a). Competitors in wider militant movements generally share the same broader ideology or political motivation. Rival groups may differ on ultimate objectives – like secession or regime change. But the unifying trait is the common constituency they emerge from and claim to defend.⁴³ My theory primarily focuses on constituent relations among rivals within the same country – not international ties. For example, the PKK's ties with Kurdish groups in Iraq would be considered an external alliance between independent militant groups despite sharing a Kurdish identity. These relations reflect a different phenomenon from mergers or consolidation processes between the PKK and Kurdish group in Turkey.

I refer to these types of groups broadly as “*rival constituent groups*” or “*constituent rivals*.” For the purposes of this theoretical framework, the term “*rivals*” encompasses both formal groups and identifiable factions. At the nascent stages of an insurrection, I expect that the lines between what is labelled a “group” or “faction” are blurred. Organizational splits and splinter groups are a common feature in both civil wars and a movement's early phases prior to the outbreak of violent hostilities. The term

⁴³ Brian Phillips refers to this type of rivalry as “intra-field” rivalries, as opposed to “inter-field” rivals that have considerably different ideologies or represent different ethnic or religious groups. Brian J. Phillips, “Terrorist Group Rivalries and Alliances: Testing Competing Explanations,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 11 (2018): 997-1019.

“group” may denote a more formal organization, while “faction” might be construed as a group within a formal group. For example, Hamas and Fatah are distinct militant groups within the Palestinian national movement. At times, each of these groups may be composed of various factions and individual allegiances as well that contribute to internal rifts. In other cases, the distinction between group and faction is more ambiguous. Organizational ties between the Fighting Vanguard and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, during the late 1970’s Islamist Uprising in Syria, remains a source of debate for scholars and observers.⁴⁴ Therefore, when I use the term “*rivals*,” I mean either formal groups or identifiable factions with separate leaderships that seek to represent a similar constituency or movement within the same country.

1.6.3 Dependent variable: Sustained armed conflict

I define armed conflict based on the more fine-grained UCDP armed conflict dataset which includes lower-intensity conflicts, defining the phenomenon as: “a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year.”⁴⁵ A “sustained armed conflict”, for this project’s purposes, entails violent hostilities at this threshold to be maintained for a minimum of five years.⁴⁶ Scholars often code civil wars if an organized

⁴⁴ Raphaël Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Brynjar Lia, “The Islamist Uprising in Syria, 1976-82: The History and Legacy of a Failed Revolt,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 43, no. 4 (2016): 541–559.

⁴⁵ Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), *Definition of Armed Conflict*, 2016. Retrieved from http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/definitions/#Top_of_page.

⁴⁶ The average length of an insurgency is approximately ten years. See Connable & Libicki, “How Insurgencies End,” 27. After presenting my quantitative analysis at various scholarly conferences, the discussants agreed that the five-year mark is an appropriate threshold for this research puzzle. Additional thresholds and extensions can be explored in future iterations of this research.

armed conflict within a state reaches a high lethality threshold – mainly 1000 battle-related deaths.⁴⁷ Kalyvas (2006) ignores numerical thresholds and considers civil wars to be “armed combat within the boundaries of a recognized sovereign entity between parties subject to a common authority at the outset of the hostilities.”⁴⁸ Brown (2001) specifies that civil wars involve violent conflicts that are sustained for a period of time involving belligerents with group identities and organizational capacities.⁴⁹ While thresholds may seem arbitrary, it is often important to distinguish between various intensity levels of conflict. To avoid discounting militant groups that participate in armed conflicts that produce less than 1000 battle-related deaths or never reach the 25 battle-related deaths threshold, I rely on UCDP’s definition of armed conflict.

Failing to sustain an armed conflict is conceptualized broadly to encompass groups that do not get an insurgency off the ground or are defeated within the first few years after armed conflict onset. Both militant groups and states would prefer to fight and win early, as opposed to sustaining operations for a long time. There are several ways that militant groups, who want to militarily challenge a state, fail to sustain an insurgency. Some groups may achieve their political objectives through negotiations or concessions from the state before widespread hostilities erupt. Other groups could ultimately defeat the target state within a few years and avoid a drawn-out conflict – although this outcome is extremely rare in my universe of cases.⁵⁰ Many other militant

⁴⁷ Nicholas Sambanis, “What Is Civil War? Conceptual and Empirical Complexities of an Operational Definition,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48, no. 6 (2004): 814-858; Paul Collier, Anke Hoeffler, and Dominic Rohner, “Beyond Greed and Grievance: Feasibility and Civil War,” *Oxford Economic Papers* 61, no. 1 (2009): 1-27.

⁴⁸ Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, 5.

⁴⁹ Michael E. Brown, “Ethnic and Internal Conflicts: Causes and Implications,” in *Turbulent Peace: The Challenges of Managing International Conflict*, eds. Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela R. Aall, Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2001, 212.

⁵⁰ Only 13 (5%) of the militant groups in my universe of cases ended by achieving victory.

groups fragment and splinter into smaller organizations, merge with other groups, or are swallowed by more powerful groups representing the same constituency.⁵¹ Some militant groups eventually renounce violence, while others are crushed militarily or through the efforts of law enforcement. This dissertation does not explicitly distinguish between the myriad of ways that militant groups cease to exist as violent threats or fail to launch a sustained insurgency.⁵²

Framing the problem: Sustained insurgencies, campaigns of attrition

This dissertation primarily focuses on militant organizations challenging more powerful states in asymmetric conflicts. Distinguishing between three broad categories of civil war, Kalyvas and Balcells (2010) argue that not all civil wars are “insurgencies.” According to their categorization, insurgency is synonymous with irregular or guerrilla warfare which is a product of the relative asymmetric capabilities between rebels and the state.⁵³ I primarily conceptualize militant group engagement in insurgencies as a strategic objective, irrespective of whether a group ultimately achieves its stated goals. These sustained confrontations often reflect campaigns of attrition, whereby militant groups try

⁵¹ Connable & Libicki, *How Insurgencies End*; Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qaeda* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008).

⁵² Cronin (2006) outlines how terrorist groups might end, including transformation toward insurgency, but stops short of analyzing this transition. Audrey Kurth Cronin, “How al-Qaids Ends: The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups,” *International Security* 31, no. 1 (2006): 7-48.

⁵³ Conventional civil wars – when the rebels maintain high capabilities to confront the state in direct confrontations – and symmetric nonconventional civil wars – where both rebel and state capabilities are very weak – differ from civil war insurgencies in this regard. Kalyvas and Balcells (2010) also argue that there was a major decline in insurgency onsets – compared to other types of civil wars - after the Cold War. However, the authors use a high 1,000 battle deaths threshold for inclusion in their dataset and overlook the onset of attempted insurgencies or low-intensity conflicts. See Stathis N. Kalyvas and Laia Balcells, “International System and Technologies of Rebellion: How the End of the Cold War Shaped Internal Conflict,” *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 3 (2010): 415-429, 419.

to signal their capabilities and resolve by degrading and destroying enemy forces.⁵⁴ To avoid sounding repetitious, I will use the terms “insurgency” and “attrition” interchangeably with “armed conflict.”

Why focus on battle-related deaths?

This dissertation differentiates between militant groups that engage in sustained insurgencies – based on battle-related deaths – and those that do not. As discussed earlier, other scholars differentiate violent non-state actors based on longevity, group size, territorial control, or adopted strategies. Achieving larger group size or conquering territory is an important objective for would-be insurgent groups. Yet some groups can survive for a long period of time and fail to train a larger army of recruits to challenge regime forces in an insurgency. Evaluations of groups based on size or territorial control also do not entirely reflect the analytic objective I pursue in this dissertation. Some larger groups with territory may prefer negotiating from a position of strength while smaller, more clandestine groups can still get an insurgency off the ground.⁵⁵

It is important to note that there are many factors that cause militant groups to escalate their level of violence and that battle-related deaths do not necessarily reflect a group’s military capacity.⁵⁶ Powerful groups might avoid armed conflict or engage in lower-level violent confrontations because they are focusing on other organizational

⁵⁴ Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, “The Strategies of Terrorism,” *International Security* 31, no. 1 (2006): 49-80.

⁵⁵ David E. Cunningham, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch and Idean Salehyan, “It Takes Two: A Dyadic Analysis of Civil War Duration and Outcome,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53, no. 4 (2009): 570-597; James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War,” *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003): 75-90, 79.

⁵⁶ See Bethany Lacina, “Explaining the Severity of Civil Wars,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50, no. 2 (2006): 276–289 and David Cunningham, “Veto Players and Civil War Duration,” *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 4 (2006): 875–892.

objectives or have achieved a level of deterrence with the state. Weaker militant groups might also escalate to large-scale violence seeking to attract international attention or desperately trying to counter government efforts. But compared to other existing criteria, measures of sustained battle-related deaths – in my view – better distinguish between militant groups that pose a serious military challenge and those that do not.

1.7 RESEARCH DESIGN

Quantitative regression analysis (Large-n)

This thesis uses a mixed-methods, three-stage, research design based on different ontological understandings of causation. In the first stage, I conduct quantitative regression analysis – using a probit estimating technique – on 246 prominent militant groups from 1970-2007. I code my dependent variable based on existing armed conflict datasets, primarily the UCDP, and secondary literature to determine which of the militant groups in my universe engage in sustained armed conflicts.

I first adopt a macro-level approach to make cross-case inferences among a wider population: prominent militant groups from around the world throughout an almost 40-year time period. Large-n quantitative analysis relies on a variance-based ontological understanding of causation, which focuses on the average mean effects of certain factors – holding other variables constant.⁵⁷ Cross-sectional data is used, with the militant group as the unit of analysis, since most of the quantitative measures used to assess militant organizations are largely time invariant. While I make efforts to account for endogeneity,

⁵⁷ Stephen L. Morgan and Christopher Winship, “Regression Estimators of Causal Effects,” in *Counterfactuals and Causal Inference: Methods and Principles for Social Research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 188–225.

clear causal explanations are difficult to establish at this stage of the analysis.⁵⁸ However, my quantitative findings present generalizable empirical associations across diverse militant groups and highlight interesting factors worth unpacking to identify other forms of causal relationships in subsequent chapters.

Comparative methods (Small-n)

The second stage of the research design explores a positive-on-outcome (similar to Mill's method-of-agreement) comparative analysis of all 10 Middle Eastern and North African militant groups that engage in sustained armed conflicts in my universe of cases. Relying on a comparative logic of elimination, this exercise is used to disconfirm individually necessary conditions and to potentially identify a particular variable(s) that are most commonly associated with the outcome of interest.⁵⁹ This method helps identify cross-case inferences across a more bounded population and develop more limited scope conditions for a particular theory to operate.

Case-based researchers understandably find limited value in purely large-n quantitative approaches and often place a high value on contextual conditions including similar temporal or spatial scope. For example, comparativists are likely to point out that the causes of democratization in Latin America differ considerably from Western Europe. According to this view, lumping all cases of democratization (and lack of democratization) across the world would skew results for a highly contextual phenomenon. Similarly, factors driving militant mobilization and armed conflicts in

⁵⁸ Jason Seawright, *Multi-Method Social Science: Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Tools, Strategies for Social Inquiry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 55.

⁵⁹ James Mahoney, "Strategies of Causal Inference in Small-N Analysis," *Sociological Methods & Research* 28, no. 4 (2000): 387-424.

1970's Latin America vary widely from post-9/11 Islamist insurgencies. Case study researchers therefore tend to prioritize a more in-depth analysis of a small number of militant groups, perhaps from a particular region and time period.

Whereas quantitative or variance-based scholars warn against “selecting on the dependent variable,” cases solely based on their membership in the outcome (or where the dependent variable equals one in variance-based terminology) can also yield interesting results in a search for a more generalizable theoretical understanding of the phenomenon in question.⁶⁰ My quantitative regression and qualitative comparative methods explore important, yet different, causal inferences and justify case selection to identify a more in-depth form of explanation: causal mechanisms and within-case inferences.⁶¹

Case studies (n=1)

In the third and final stage of the research design, I carry out three in-depth case studies. I use process tracing methods and a mechanistic logic of causation to explore within-case inferences.⁶² Unlike the large-n quantitative or small-n cross-case comparative analysis, the case studies are used to identify specific causal mechanisms linking my cause of interest (i.e. rival consolidation) to the outcome (i.e. onset of sustained insurgency). Rival plausible explanations are taken into account throughout each case study. My approach mirrors the logic of historical explanation and the sequence

⁶⁰ For more on methodological debates about “selecting on the DV” see Barbara Geddes, “How the Cases You Choose Affect the Answers You Get: Selection Bias in Comparative Politics,” *Political Analysis* 2 (1990): 131-150; David Collier and James Mahoney, “Insights and Pitfalls: Selection Bias in Qualitative Research,” *World Politics* 49, no. 1 (1996): 56-91.

⁶¹ Seawright, *Multi-Method Social Science: Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Tools*.

⁶² Derek Beach and Rasmus Brun Pedersen, *Causal Case Study Methods: Foundations and Guidelines for Comparing, Matching, and Tracing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

elaboration method, whereby the relative importance of causes is evaluated based on their temporal position and role within a particular chain of events.⁶³

To conduct the case studies, I primarily rely on prominent journalistic and historical accounts for each case, in addition to scholarly books and journal articles. I also consult older news articles, government sources, and intelligence reports for specific pieces of evidence and information using source-aggregating programs such as Lexis Nexis, ProQuest, and the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS). This more detail-oriented approach better outlines how relations with rivals impact the trajectory of prominent militant groups during their nascent stages.

Some qualitative methodologists suggest that case study research should rely on an asymmetric understanding of causation.⁶⁴ Through this ontological prism, understanding why some militant groups engage in sustained armed conflicts is not necessarily the inverse of why others fail. Identifying broader cause(s) of militant group success does not automatically imply the inverse: that the absence of these cause(s) explains group failure. However, keeping in line with variance-based logics of causation traditionally associated with large-n and small-n comparative methods, I also explore a deviant or “negative” case – a group that seemed to have a chance to get sustain a nascent insurgency but failed to do so.⁶⁵ The following table summarizes the different methods and logics of causal inference used in this dissertation.⁶⁶ A summary of key findings from each approach is briefly outlined in the subsequent section.

⁶³ James Mahoney, Erin Kimball, and Kendra L. Koivu, “The Logic of Historical Explanation in the Social Science,” *Comparative Political Studies* 42, no. 1 (2009): 114-146.

⁶⁴ Beach and Pederson, *Causal Case Study Methods*.

⁶⁵ James Mahoney and Gary Goertz, “The Possibility Principle: Choosing Negative Cases in Comparative Research,” *The American Political Science Review* 98, no. 4 (2004): 653-669.

⁶⁶ I re-visit this table in subsequent chapters, highlighting the method used in a particular chapter while contextualizing the approach among the dissertation’s broader research design.

TABLE 1: DIFFERENT METHODS & LOGICS OF CAUSAL INFERENCE IN THIS THESIS

Method	Quantitative Regression Analysis (Large-n)	Comparative Methods (Small-n)	Process-Tracing Case Studies (n = 1)
Ontological Understanding of Causation	Variance-based, frequentist logic	Comparative logic of elimination	Mechanistic logic
Types of Causality Assessed	Mean causal effect of independent variable X on dependent variable Y	Necessary and/or sufficient conditions that produce Y	Identifying causal mechanisms, linking cause(s) to an outcome
Types of Inferences	Cross-case inferences to the broader population	Cross-case inferences to more contextualized population	Within-case inferences
Associated Chapter(s) in this Thesis	Chapter 3 Probit analysis of militant groups worldwide from 1970-2007	Chapter 4 Theory-building exercise (Positive-on-Outcome analysis); disconfirming individually necessary conditions	Chapters 6-8 Case studies to identify causal mechanisms

1.8 CONTRIBUTION & SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In Chapter Two, I review and integrate findings from literatures on terrorism dynamics, insurgency development, and civil war onset. By reviewing insights from recent research, I identify debates and gaps in the literature that help produce testable hypotheses for further exploration in subsequent chapters. The literature review outlines rival explanations and different ways to assess militant group success, allowing me to build a new theory and test the argument against competing alternatives.

**QUANTITATIVE REGRESSION FINDINGS:
Motivation, organizational structure, & competitive environments**

This dissertation is the first attempt, to my knowledge, to empirically test determinants of militant group engagement in sustained insurgencies. By exploring a novel outcome of interest and incorporating all prominent militant groups – not just those groups already waging insurgency – the first stage of my analysis helps overcome selection biases prevalent in the quantitative literature on insurgency and civil war.

Guided by a social movement framework in Chapter Three, I conduct quantitative regression analysis on 246 prominent militant groups worldwide from 1970-2007. I find that, on average, organizational characteristics (i.e. ideology and organizational structure) and constituency dominance are stronger indicators for engagement in sustained armed conflicts than traditional proxies for observable group capabilities (i.e. group size, state sponsorship, multiple & coordinated attacks, hard target strikes), challenging conventional wisdom.

A militant group's competitive environment plays an especially important role. I find that the more militant groups there are operating in a state, the less likely a particular militant group will engage in a sustained armed conflict. Previous research shows that in a full-fledged war, governments are more likely to defeat a single-group insurgency compared to a multi-group insurgency.⁶⁷ But single-group insurrections – featuring only one active group at the time an armed conflict is launched – are the strongest determinant of whether a particular militant group challenges a target state in a sustained insurgency or not. Dominant groups may have been embroiled in a more competitive environment prior to consolidating rivals and then challenging the regime. Before digging deeper into

⁶⁷ Seth G. Jones, *Waging Insurgent Warfare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

this insight, I briefly summarize the other key findings from my quantitative analysis below.

Religious groups rarely achieve their ultimate objectives.⁶⁸ But my findings suggest that religiously motivated militant groups are far more likely to engage in sustained armed conflicts than other ideologically oriented groups – whether they are ultimately successful or not. Some militant groups should be more capable of capitalizing on grievances than others – especially religious and ethno-nationalist groups that can draw on resources from a well-defined constituency.

Militant groups with hierarchical structures tend to be more lethal and have a higher likelihood of ultimately defeating the states they fight.⁶⁹ More centralized and integrated groups are more capable of allocating resources effectively and keeping lower-ranking members in line with the group's broader objectives.⁷⁰ By looking at a different dependent variable, however, my findings challenge conventional wisdom: groups with relatively less centralized command and control are just as (and perhaps slightly more) likely to engage in sustained armed conflict than the most hierarchically structured organizations.

After conducting the comparative analysis described below, I identify a new cause of interest (constituency dominance) and incorporate the new variable into a more powerful quantitative model in Chapter Five. I find that a proxy for constituency

⁶⁸ In a study of 648 terrorist groups between 1968 and 2006, Jones and Libicki (2008) find that no religious group, which ceased to operate during that time period, achieved victory. See Jones and Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End*, xiv.

⁶⁹ Victor Asal and R. Karl Rethemeyer, "The Nature of the Beast: Organizational Structures and the Lethality of Terrorist Attacks," *The Journal of Politics* 70, no. 2 (2008): 437-449; Ben Connable and Martin C. Libicki, *How Insurgencies End* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010).

⁷⁰ Paul Staniland, "Organizing Insurgency: Networks, Resources, and Rebellion in South Asia," *International Security* 37, no. 1 (2012): 142-177.

dominance or single-group insurrections are stronger determinants and outperform other measures of group competition, including the number of groups in a particular environment. This type of iterative process, similar to other forms of nested analyses, improves the strength of my research design.⁷¹

**COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS FINDINGS:
Constituency dominance as a key determinant of sustained insurgency onset**

Chapter Four presents a theory of rival consolidation based on the dissertations' quantitative and qualitative comparative analyses, and insights from recent research related to militant group relations. Militant groups engage (and do not engage) in sustained armed conflicts in a variety of contexts – in weak and relatively strong states, in democracies or autocracies, with the help of a state sponsor and without, with varying levels of capabilities and territorial control, with different motivations and organizational structures, and facing diverse counterinsurgency campaigns. A comparative analysis of all 10 Middle Eastern and North African groups that wage sustained insurgencies in my universe of cases suggests that no single theoretically relevant causal factor can be deemed an individually necessary condition. Yet one factor stands out when comparing all positive-on-outcome cases: dominating a particular constituency around the time a militant group begins engaging the target state in a sustained armed conflict.

Many comparative studies on militant groups set up a most-similar systems design, whereby groups are selected based on sharing all similar traits except for the cause of interest that seems to vary accordingly with the outcome.⁷² In reality, however, it

⁷¹ Evan S. Lieberman, "Nested Analysis as a Mixed-Method Strategy for Comparative Research," *American Political Science Review* 99, no. 3 (2005): 435-452.

⁷² For a more detailed elaboration of related works, see Chapter Two's literature review.

is very difficult to control for all theoretically relevant variables given that insurgencies vary considerably across contexts. For example, two groups selected for comparison may emerge in relatively weak states with access to state sponsorship. Digging deeper into factors that are selected as qualitative controls may reveal that each group receives different levels of outside support (i.e. military assistance vs. logistical assistance) or face varying levels of repression or weak counterinsurgency campaigns. I, on the other hand, adopt a positive-on-outcome design which is rarely used in the social scientific study of militant groups. As discussed, militant groups emerge in a variety of contexts. But constituency dominance is one factor that seems to unite prominent militant groups that fight in sustained insurgencies.

Constituency dominance, however, is not individually sufficient to produce the outcome of interest. Some militant groups seeking to challenge the regime – who are the most active in their environment – fail to sustain an insurgency. Other contextual or causal conditions must be identified to paint a more accurate picture of why some militant groups pose serious challenges to the states they fight. I argue that the primary nature of rival relations is the key. Militant groups that consolidate their constituent rivals are in stronger position to mobilize resources and shift attention towards fighting the state than groups embroiled in counterproductive competition. I provide justification for this dissertation’s case selection based on my updated quantitative model and qualitative comparative findings in Chapter Five. I test my argument against other major explanations in detailed case studies and flesh out causal mechanisms largely consistent with my theoretical expectations.

CASE STUDY FINDINGS: Consolidating rivals on the road to war

Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight present case studies that identify my theory's causal mechanisms via process tracing. The nascent trajectories of the Lebanese Hezbollah (1982-1991) and the PKK in Turkey (1976-1984) – from group formation to sustained armed conflict onset – are explored in greater detail in chapters Five and Six respectively. These two well-known groups are selected as *typical* cases (where both the main factor and outcome of interest are present) to assess the explanatory power of my theory.

Existing case-based studies of civil war processes emphasize the role of material resources, social endowments, ideology or solidarity in helping overcome collective action problems. My within-case analysis embraces a slightly different and more encompassing perspective by emphasizing how the process of consolidating rivals facilitates collective action as dominant groups pool resources and signal their resolve as a formidable force to potential recruits and supporters. I also show how rival consolidation helps nascent militant groups overcome principal-agent problems, as militant organizations are more capable of deterring defections and keeping lower-level fighters in-line with leadership objectives.

By successfully outbidding and eliminating its competitors, Iran-backed Hezbollah was able to siphon resources from its rivals, solidify territorial control in southern Lebanon, build its organization, and prepare for a sustained guerilla war against Israel. Though initially seeking to derail Hezbollah, the Syrian government joined Iran to throw their full weight behind the militant organization only after it emerged as the hegemonic Shi'a militant organization in 1990. Hezbollah was then able to shift its

efforts from primarily internal fights to waging a sustained campaign of attrition against Israel's military in southern Lebanon.

Similarly, the PKK successfully outbid its more established Kurdish rivals through the strategic use of violence during its early years. By targeting landowning elite and leaders involved in tribal feuds, the PKK integrated itself among a rural base of support and gained notoriety as a credible militant organization willing to conduct risky operations for the Kurdish nationalist cause. The PKK emerged as one of the only viable options for Kurds who did not want to side with an increasingly ruthless regime. Syrian state support was critical for the PKK's early survival. But the Assad regime hosted many other anti-Turkey groups at the time and considerably limited the PKK's freedom of action. While failing to solidify a strategic alliance with weaker rivals, a hegemonic PKK was powerful enough to shift its attention from internal fights to waging an insurgency.

In 1983, the PKK relied on its hegemonic status to negotiate an agreement with Iraq-based Kurdish militants and secure a critical safe haven along a mountainous border region. From its new base of operations, relatively safe from Turkish military reprisals, the PKK launched a sustained armed conflict which solidified its dominance over the Kurdish constituency in Turkey. The PKK's leadership would have likely delayed or halted its decision to launch an insurgency had its main Kurdish rivals persisted to challenge the organization for dominance of the constituency.

Chapter Eight is reserved for the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, a deviant case that my initial model incorrectly expected to sustain an armed conflict. This "negative" case offers both support for my argument and exposes key theoretical limitations, since the MB's failure can be attributed to several causes. While the Assad regime's unrestrained

counterinsurgency would have likely crushed the nascent insurrection regardless, the MB's failure to consolidate its rivals is a critical part of the story leading to its demise as a militant threat. In 1979, the Combatant Vanguard, a radical faction turned splinter group, escalated attacks against the Assad regime which pressured the MB to join the fight or risk being sidelined. In essence, the MB was chain-ganged into a war it was not ready to wage. Despite the establishment of a strategic alliance between the MB and its rivals, ideological and personal differences constantly disrupted any meaningful cooperation. Because of constant infighting within the Islamist movement, the Brotherhood also failed to overcome principal-agent problems as fighters in the field lacked direction and coordination at key turning points of the conflict. As a result, the Syrian MB failed to secure sufficient sources of external support and failed to withstand the Syrian regime's onslaught culminating in the 1982 Hama massacre.

Implications for theory & policy

My overall findings are summarized in Chapter Nine, which includes a richer discussion integrating insights from each case study. By pitting my theory against rival explanations, the chapter provides important implications for theory and scholarship. Rival consolidation theory offers a stronger account of why the PKK and Hezbollah engaged in a sustained armed conflict (and why the Syrian MB failed) against more powerful states than other explanations that rely on largely static factors or remain incomplete. The temporal nature of my theory also better explains the timing of sustained armed conflict onset than rival explanations. Grievances, ultimate goals, and group ideology remained largely constant during each group's nascent stages. Both the PKK

and Hezbollah's organizational structure and military capacity to wage guerilla war expanded as they consolidated their main rivals. Both groups only secured critical forms of outside support and access to a robust safe haven after they emerged as the hegemonic militant group among their respective constituencies. Without viable competitors and counterproductive violence minimized, Hezbollah and the PKK mobilized resources and shifted their focus on fighting Israel and Turkey, respectively, in sustained campaigns of attrition.

The MB's leadership, however, remained distracted with internal fights which proved destabilizing during Syria's nascent Islamist insurrection. The Syrian MB's failure to consolidate rivals inhibited the group's ability to mobilize sufficient resources and support to sustain an insurgency.

My dissertation findings also offer important implications for policy in Chapter Ten. Practitioners should divert more attention to analyzing the primary nature of rival relations in the nascent stages of a potential armed conflict, instead of almost exclusively focusing on observable group capabilities. It should be easier for practitioners to monitor and assess the consequences of different rival relations than trying to measure more complex and clandestine indicators, including an organization's pre-war social ties or the relative power distribution within a wider movement. However, more research is needed before any specific policy recommendations can be prescribed.

Analysts and practitioners often measure a militant group's threat based on their activity and attack levels. This dissertation also differentiates militant groups based on a measure of sustained battle-related deaths. However, my research suggests that the period between rival consolidation and insurgency onset is itself an overlooked indicator which

may reflect a relative calm before the storm. In both the Hezbollah and PKK cases, violence temporarily dropped after each group formally consolidated their rivals and emerged as the hegemons of their respective constituencies. Without viable competitors, both groups' leaderships increasingly focused on absorbing new resources, solidifying safe havens, and preparing for an insurgency against their target states. Both Israel and Turkey, to different extents, underestimated the nascent militant threats they faced and paid heavy costs as a result. While neither militant group achieved their ultimate objectives, they are enduring and resilient organizations that continue to pose threats to their enemies.

What this thesis does not do: systematically explain why or how groups consolidate rivals

This research project does not systematically explain *why* some groups engage in certain types of relations with other groups, electing to assess *how* rival consolidation (or lack thereof) influences trajectories among nascent militant groups. Militant group cooperative or competitive arrangements are often the product of idiosyncratic factors that are difficult to assess from an organizational level perspective. Alliances in civil wars tend to be fragile and subject to abrupt shifts in allegiances.⁷³ Similarly, strategic cooperation among constituent groups tend to breakdown because of ideological disagreements and individual rivalries. These individual-level power dynamics are extremely difficult to anticipate or model. This dissertation also avoids systematic examination of *how* some groups reach particular forms of relations with rivals or *how* dominant groups consolidate their rivals. Some umbrella structures are created by hostile

⁷³ Fotini Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

takeover after a period of destructive competition while other types of mergers are voluntary. Most hegemonic consolidations, however, involve the use of force against rivals at some stage. These context specific processes and nuances are explored in greater detail in the case studies, but this dissertation is primarily focused on the impact of rival consolidation and associated processes on a group's ability and willingness to engage in a sustained armed conflict.

Plan of the dissertation

The dissertation proceeds as follows. Chapter Two's literature review situates existing arguments and debates that produce testable hypothesis for assessment in Chapter Three's quantitative regression analysis. In Chapter Four, I narrow in on a more bounded population (Middle Eastern and North African insurgencies) and use qualitative comparative methods to build a theory of rival consolidation in nascent insurrections. Based on my qualitative comparative findings, I code a new variable for constituency dominance in Chapter Five, presenting an improved quantitative model and justifying this dissertation's case selection. Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight feature process-tracing case studies on Hezbollah, PKK, and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, respectively. Chapter Nine summarizes the dissertation's key findings and offers implications for theory by comparing my argument against existing explanations. Chapter Ten concludes with policy implications and future avenues for research.

CHAPTER TWO

MILITANCY AND INSURGENCY ONSET: A Review of the Literature

Daniel Byman (2008) launches a discussion that motivates my dissertation's puzzle, outlining the main factors that help clandestine militant groups evolve into-full blown insurgent organizations.¹ To facilitate this transition, a group must first establish a salient identity related to a popular cause or grievances that resonate with constituents beyond the founding group members. The group then tends to focus on achieving dominance over rival organizations competing for resources and members. Finally, groups seeking to challenge the target regime need to consolidate a safe haven to effectively train, enhance recruitment, and hide from counterinsurgent or local security forces. Outside support is often critical for a militant group's success but can also destabilize group objectives. Research on social movements similarly stress several key factors that help explain why some militant organizations among wider movements should be more successful than others: framing (i.e. developing a salient ideology that resonates with a wider constituency), opportunity (i.e. exploiting weak states, cultivating safe haven), and resource mobilization.² Though Byman's work synthesizes key factors explaining proto-insurgency growth, it stops short of systematically testing the research problem. My dissertation offers a key piece to this puzzle.

¹ For Byman, if a militant group does not engage in guerrilla warfare (i.e. hit and run tactics against largely military targets) it should not be considered a proto- or full-blown insurgent movement. See Daniel Byman, "Understanding Proto-insurgencies," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 31, no. 2 (2008): 165-200.

² Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1978); J. Craig Jenkins, "Resource Mobilization Theory and the Study of Social Movements," *Annual Review of Sociology* 9 (1983): 527-553.

In this chapter, I review relatively disparate literatures devoted to militant group success, insurgency development, and civil war onset. Despite often being treated as distinct phenomenon, the academic literature focusing on various types of political violence presents similar theoretical explanations. By integrating insights from recent research, I identify debates and gaps in the literature that help produce testable hypotheses in subsequent chapters. The literature review outlines rival explanations and different ways to assess militant group success, helping me to build a new theory and test it against competing alternatives.

This chapter is divided into two main parts: 1) findings from the early civil war onset literature and country-level explanations 2) recent insights from the militant group-level of analysis. The first section reviews motivational arguments related to insurgency, focusing on grievance and greed-based approaches. I then explore a different strand of argumentation emphasizing conditions that improve insurgency feasibility, including the role of state capacity and opportunities for rebellion. The chapter then shifts attention to recent literature focusing on the militant group-level of analysis. In the second section, I review research on militant group ideology/objectives, capabilities, access to safe havens or territorial control, and resource mobilization. Other studies show that pre-war social ties and organizational structures can help explain different levels of militant group success and cohesion. I then briefly discuss the role of external state sponsorship and other forms of outside support. The chapter concludes by exploring the few recent and related theses or working papers resembling my research question, situated in a broader discussion on counterinsurgency.

2.1 MOTIVATION vs. FEASIBILITY ARGUMENTS

2.1.1 Motivations for insurgency

Grievance

To gain traction, militant organizations need to represent a popular cause that resonate with constituents beyond the founding group members. Motivations to rebel or wage an armed conflict can vary based on perceived ethnic, political, economic, or religious grievances.³ From a conflict escalation perspective, the *grievance* school of thought suggests that civil war erupts when states engage in repression and enflame grievances, leading to higher levels of rebellion among dissidents who seek to address past injustices.⁴ Shared ethnic preferences and historical grievances, according to this stand of research, motivate conflict onset.⁵ While prominent large-n studies find no relationship between macro-level ethnicity indicators and civil war onset, other scholars find that ethnicity plays an important role for violent conflict processes in certain sub-national regions.⁶ This line of research shows that ethnic groups facing high levels of discrimination and exclusion from positions of power are more likely to engage in violent conflict. According to this perspective, ethnicity serves as a technology of rebellion that helps militant group's tap into aggrieved communities to facilitate resource mobilization

³ Ted R. Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970); Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

⁴ Christian Davenport, David A. Armstrong II, and Mark I. Lichbach, "From Mountains to Movements: Dissent, Repression and Escalation to Civil War" (paper presented at the *International Studies Association* annual conference, San Diego, 2006).

⁵ In terrorism literature, Crenshaw (1981) argues that militant groups often form after social movements fail to achieve their objectives through peaceful means. See Martha Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism," *Comparative Politics* 13, no. 4 (1981): 379-399. According to this perspective, individuals are more inclined to engage in violence if they believe that their grievances remain unaddressed and government repression is high.

⁶ Lars-Erik Cederman, Andreas Wimmer, and Brian Min, "Why Do Ethnic Groups Rebel? New Data and Analysis," *World Politics* 62, no. 1 (2010): 87-119.

and overcome collective action problems. Marginalization and various forms of political or economic inequality can motivate other types of groups as well – including tribal or class-based groups.⁷

Greed

A different school of thought suggests that economic factors motivate rebel groups to mobilize and fight for the purposes of controlling territory and resources.⁸ According to this perspective, taking control over the state or territory allows rebel groups to distribute the resources or tax revenue among its members. Challenging relative deprivation arguments, Lichbach's (1994) rational choice models suggest that rebellions occur if militant leaders effectively provide selective incentives to potential recruits to overcome collective action problems.⁹ From a country-level perspective, greed-based indicators tend to better explain civil war onset than variables that traditionally proxy grievances in the cross-national quantitative literature.¹⁰ However, nascent insurgency development is a largely local phenomenon, requiring closer attention to sub-national and regional characteristics.¹¹

⁷ Identities often overlap and many prominent militant groups rely on cross-cutting cleavages to build salient ideologies. Byman, "Understanding Proto-insurgencies."

⁸ Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers* 56, no. 4 (2004): 563-595.

⁹ Mark I. Lichbach, "What makes Rational Peasants Revolutionary? Dilemma, Paradox, and Irony in Peasant Collective Action," *World Politics* 46, no. 3 (1994): 383-418. Related economic models of conflict often consider the expected and opportunity costs for rebellion, in addition to the perceived strength of the target regime. See Ibrahim Elbadawi and Nicholas Sambanis, "How Much War Will We See?: Explaining the Prevalence of Civil War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46, no. 3 (2002): 307-334.

¹⁰ Davenport et al., "From Mountains to Movements: Dissent, Repression and Escalation to Civil War."

¹¹ See Nicholas Sambanis and Annalisa Zinn, "The Escalation of Self-Determination Movements: From Protest to Violence" (paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, 2003).

Compared to civil war literature, terrorism studies tend to put less of an emphasis on greed-based or economic arguments. There is a general consensus that economic conditions – at both the individual and country-levels of analysis – are poor predictors of terrorism incidence.¹² It may be the case that poor national economic conditions are associated with states that experience civil wars, while lower-level acts of political violence tend to occur in more advanced and richer countries. Unemployment and poverty can be a factor that explains why some individuals join militant groups in certain contexts, particularly in poorer states where militant groups might offer more lucrative opportunities through resource distribution.¹³ But a growing body of evidence from ongoing conflicts, including civil wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, challenge primarily economic-based arguments for insurgency.¹⁴ Motivations of various stripes are nevertheless insufficient to explain the onset of organized armed conflict, since

¹² James A. Piazza, “Rooted in Poverty? Terrorism, Poor Economic Development, and Social Cleavages,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18, no. 1 (2006): 159-177. For a slightly divergent perspective see Brock S. Blomberg, Gregory D. Hess, and Akia Weerapana, “Economic Conditions and Terrorism,” *European Journal of Political Economy* 20, no. 2 (2004): 463-478. The authors show that negative external economic shocks are associated with higher rates of terrorism, mainly in high-income democratic countries. While Piazza (2011) finds that there is no direct relationship between poverty or poor economic conditions and terrorism, he argues that minority economic discrimination better explains patterns of terrorism compared to other types of discrimination. James A. Piazza, “Poverty, Minority Economic Discrimination, and Domestic Terrorism,” *Journal of Peace Research* 38, no. 3 (2011): 339-353.

¹³ Collier and Hoeffler, “Greed and Grievance in Civil War,”; Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy M. Weinstein, “Who Fights? The Determinants of Participation in Civil War,” *American Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 2 (2008): 436-455.

¹⁴ Other seminal research suggests that unemployment rates may have a negative relationship with militant violence in key insurgent contexts including Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Philippines. See Eli Berman, Michael Callen, Joseph Felter, and Jacob Shapiro. “Do Working Men Rebel? Insurgency and Unemployment in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Philippines,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 55, no. 4 (2011): 496-528. Other scholars have explored potential economic incentives for individuals to engage in terrorist activity and join militant organizations. See Walter Enders and Todd Sandler, *The Political Economy of Terrorism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006; Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy M. Weinstein, “Who Fights? The Determinants of Participation in Civil War.” In some contexts, militant operatives – such as Palestinian terrorists and suicide bombers – tend to hail from relatively higher socio-economic and education levels than their peers. See Claude Berrebi, “Evidence About the Link Between Education Poverty and Terrorism Among Palestinians,” *Peace Economics, Peace Science and Public Policy* 13 no. 1 (2007): 1-36.

grievances against the target regime tend to be quite constant and inadequately explain variation in violent episodes. Another body of literature focuses on opportunity factors and environmental conditions that are more conducive for insurgency.

2.1.2 Insurgency feasibility

State capacity & country-level factors

Fearon & Laitin (2003) posit that conditions favouring insurgency development best predict the outbreak of civil war, arguing that opportunity in the form of weak states and poor counterinsurgency strategies encourage rebels to increase their efforts in challenging the state.¹⁵ Low GDP per capita, which is used to proxy weak states, is the most robust indicator associated with civil war onset across this literature.¹⁶ An insurgency can also develop if the state is ineffective at stifling dissent, signaling weakness, and encouraging violent rebellion to escalate.¹⁷ But considerable debate surrounds which attributes of weak states – whether repressive capacity or institutional quality for example – are better predictors of civil war onset.¹⁸ Kalyvas (2003), for example, argues that low GDP per capita may reflect the inability of weak states to control and distribute goods to peripheral areas, providing militants with the opportunity

¹⁵ James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War.” *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003): 75-90.

¹⁶ Havard Hegre and Nicholas Sambanis, “Sensitivity Analysis of Empirical Results on Civil War Onset,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50, no. 4 (2006): 508-535.

¹⁷ Christian Davenport, David A. Armstrong II, and Mark I. Lichbach, “Conflict Escalation and the Origins of Civil War,” (Research Gate working paper, 2012). Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Christian_Davenport/publication/228678666_Conflict_Escalation_and_the_Origins_of_Civil_War/links/0046351f2233162a72000000.pdf, pg 8.

¹⁸ Zeynep Taydas, Dursun Peksen and Patrick James, “Why Do Civil Wars Occur? Understanding the Importance of Institutional Quality,” *Civil Wars* 12, no. 3 (2010): 195-217; Helge Holtermann, “How Can Weak Insurgent Groups Grow? Insights from Nepal,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 0 (2014): 1-22.

to supplant the state.¹⁹ Weak states often face increasing difficulty projecting power the farther the insurgency is located from the capital.²⁰

Other factors associated with insurgency feasibility include non-contiguous territory and rough or mountainous terrain, which can help insurgents access safe havens and evade counterinsurgents.²¹ Militants operating close to an international border – particularly poorly-monitored regions – are in a stronger position to endure and develop their military capacities.²² Political instability and access to natural resource wealth are other factors that have been shown to increase the likelihood of civil war onset.²³ Weak states are also less capable of credibly committing to accommodate a militant group's demands, contributing to bargaining failures that may lead to civil war.²⁴

The early quantitative literature on conflict onset has made significant progress on identifying factors that explain why some countries are more likely to experience armed

¹⁹ Stathis N. Kalyvas, "The Ontology of "Political Violence": Action and Identity in Civil War," *Perspectives on Politics* 1, no. 3 (2003): 475-494.

²⁰ Sebastian Schutte, "Geography, Outcome, and Casualties: A Unified Model of Insurgency," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 6 (2014): 1-28.

²¹ Fearon and Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War." Another prominent study of insurgency outcomes found no significant support for rough or mountainous terrain. See Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson III, "Rage Against the Machines: Explaining Outcomes in Counterinsurgency Wars," *International Organization* 63, no.1 (2009): 67-106. It is important to note that the quantitative literature on terrain and conflict depends on structural, country-characteristic data and does not explore the specific interaction between rebel groups operating in rough terrain and their subnational geopolitical effects. Rough terrain might also prevent insurgents from accessing the broader urban population and mobilizing mass support. See Thomas J. Moriarty, "The Vanguard's Dilemma: Understanding and Exploiting Insurgent Strategies," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 21, no. 3 (2010): 476-497.

²² Sebastian Schutte, "Geography, Outcome, and Casualties; A Unified Model of Insurgency," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 6 (2014): 1101-1128; Idean Salehyan, *Rebels Without Border: Transnational Insurgencies in World Politics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009.

²³ Halvard Buhaug and Scott Gates, "The Geography of Civil War," *Journal of Peace Research* 39, no. 4 (2002): 417-433; Havard Hegre and Nicholas Sambanis, "Sensitivity Analysis of Empirical Results on Civil War Onset," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50, no. 4 (2006): 508-535; Michael L. Ross, "How Do Natural Resources Influence Civil War? Evidence from Thirteen Cases." *International Organization* 58, no. 1 (2004): 35-67

²⁴ James D. Fearon, "Why Do Some Civil Wars Last so Much Longer than Others?" *Journal of Peace Research* 41, no. 3 (2004): 275-301; Barbara F. Walter, "Bargaining Failures and Civil War," *Annual Review of Political Science* 12, no. 1 (2009): 243-261.

conflict onset or why some ethnic groups are more likely to rebel. But findings from the cross-national literature make it difficult to discern whether those indicators represent a motivation to rebel or an opportunity to launch and sustain rebellion. Some of the seminal quantitative works rely on largely static indicators to explain highly complex and dynamic processes. Structural theories are inherently limited in explaining the timing of insurgency outbreak, relying on time invariant factors (i.e. rough terrain, non-contiguous territory, prior civil war experience) or slow-moving factors (GDP per capita, regime type) to explain insurgency onset. Even Fearon and Laitin (2003), who largely use structural indicators to explain civil war onset, indirectly reference the importance of pre-civil war activity by referring to “nascent” and “active” rebels in the lead up to civil war outbreak.²⁵ More importantly, these macro-level approaches cannot explain which militant groups within a country or among a wider constituency engage in sustained insurgencies.

Two conceptual paths to armed conflict

Debates among the motivation and feasibility schools of thought suggest two conceptually different processes behind how armed conflict starts. Arguments from the motivation-based strand for research appear to present armed conflict onset as function of a large number of aggrieved constituency members that participates in protests as part of a wider movement, which then produces the formation of militant groups that may escalate violence to a civil war. On the other hand, others argue that a clandestine militant group with few members can launch an insurgency largely independent of local

²⁵ Fearon & Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War,” 80.

populations or pre-existing grievances.²⁶ A small and motivated group of militants might be able to manipulate the preferences of local populations to support the group's cause. Janet Lewis' rigorous study on the initial stages of rebel group formation suggests that the latter conceptualization of rebellion is more appropriate in understanding the nascent stages of insurgency development.²⁷ To better understand my research puzzle, I shift attention to more recent research that focuses on the militant-group level of analysis to help explain why some militant organizations are more successful – according to various criteria – than others.

2.2 THEORIES FROM A MILITANT GROUP-LEVEL OF ANALYSIS

A more recent research program focusing on the militant group-level of analysis assesses groups largely based on capability indicators such as group strength, size, or control of territory to help determine civil war dynamics and outcomes. Most of this literature evaluates militant groups based on attaining ultimate objectives, maintaining organizational cohesion, or longevity. More importantly, this research program tends to prioritize militant groups that are already fighting in insurgencies or sustained armed conflicts. There are few scholarly attempts trying to explain why some nascent militant groups evolve to into viable insurgent threats in the first place.²⁸

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Janet I. Lewis, "How Rebellion Begins: Insurgent Group Formation and Viability in Uganda" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2012), 30-31.

²⁸ One notable exception is Janet Lewis (2012)'s dissertation, which tackles a similar puzzle concerning why some nascent rebel groups in Uganda evolve into viable threats. See Lewis, "How Rebellion Begins."

2.2.1 MOTIVATION: Group ideology & objectives

To facilitate this transition to a full-fledged insurgency, a militant group must first establish a salient identity related to a popular cause that resonates with constituents beyond the founding group members.²⁹ Exploiting or fueling grievances among a particular population is critical for groups to mobilize for an insurgency. Some militant groups should be more capable of capitalizing on grievances than others – particularly religious and ethno-nationalist groups that can draw on resources from a well-defined constituency.³⁰ While rarely achieving ultimate goals, religiously motivated groups tend to be more lethal and maintain indivisible objectives, making negotiated settlements improbable and armed conflict more likely.³¹ In terms of group objectives, separatist groups seeking independence from a state should be more likely to engage in sustained insurgencies than regime change-oriented groups – or groups trying to take over the entire state – because of their access to a more concentrated recruitment base in a particular territory.³² Group objectives likely follow ideological orientations and therefore both factors, to some extent, reinforce a group’s ability to mobilize resources and challenge the state in an armed conflict.

²⁹ Byman, “Understanding Proto-Insurgencies.”

³⁰ Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qaeda* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008).

³¹ Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*; Eli Berman, *Radical, Religious, and Violent: The New Economics of Terrorism* (MIT Press: Cambridge, 2009); Monica Duffy Toft, “Getting Religion? The Puzzling Case of Islam and Civil War,” *International Security* 31, no. 4 (2007): 97-131.

³² Max Abrahms, “Why Terrorism Does Not Work,” *International Security* 31, no. 2 (2006): 42-78; Audrey Kurth Cronin, “How al-Qaida Ends: The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups,” *International Security* 31, no. 1 (2006): 7-48; Jones & Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End*.

2.2.2 GROUP CAPABILITIES

Current cross-national and detailed comparative research tend to stress the important of relative power between the militant group and the state. Militant groups with larger membership sizes and stronger capabilities are more lethal and more likely to ultimately defeat the states they fight than weaker groups.³³ Stronger militant groups are also more likely to extract concessions from states and sign negotiated settlements – which may satisfy some of the group’s objectives.³⁴ While these findings seem intuitive, it is less clear whether indicators of group strength are good predictors for a militant group’s initial engagement in sustained insurgencies. Insurgencies characterized by lower-levels of violence tend to remain dormant and are often dismissed from analyses of armed conflicts.³⁵

Militant groups with relatively weak capabilities can still fight in prolonged conflicts if they operate along the state’s periphery and avoid destruction. Relatively capable states often miscalculate the level of effort needed to counter less visible militant groups, increasing uncertainty and the likelihood of insurgency onset.³⁶ Overall, stronger militant groups operating in weaker states should be more likely to challenge the target regime in a sustained insurgency to pursue objectives that the state cannot accommodate.

³³ Victor Asal and R. Karl Rethemeyer, “The Nature of the Beast: Organizational Structures and the Lethality of Terrorist Attacks,” *The Journal of Politics* 70, no. 2 (2008): 437-449; Ben Connable and Martin C. Libicki, *How Insurgencies End* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010).

³⁴ David E. Cunningham, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Idean Salehyan, “It Takes Two: A Dyadic Analysis of Civil War Duration and Outcome,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53, no. 4 (2009): 570-597.

³⁵ Shivaji Mukherjee, “Why are the Longest Insurgencies Low Violence? Politician Motivations, Sons of the Soil, and Civil War Duration,” *Civil Wars* 16, no. 2 (2014): 172-207.

³⁶ Iris Malone, “Uncertainty and Civil War Onset” (paper presented at the annual conference of the International Studies Association, San Francisco, CA, 2018).

2.2.3 SAFE HAVEN & TERRITORIAL CONTROL

Militant groups with access to safe havens should be more likely to engage in sustained insurgencies than groups that do not.³⁷ Safe havens help militant groups organize, increase fundraising opportunities, train operatives, manufacture weapons, and build capable military forces.³⁸ Some scholars argue that militant safe havens emerge as a direct function of state capacity, and the level of economic development influences rebel strategies.³⁹ According to this perspective, poor states provide militant groups with the opportunity to seize territory and engage in rural guerrilla warfare, while states with intermediate levels of development force militant groups to operate clandestinely – generally in urban contexts.⁴⁰ A group’s ability to secure safe haven is strongly associated with higher levels of lethality, an important measure of operationalizing success throughout an militant campaign.⁴¹ Territorial control also improves the likelihood rebels ultimately defeat the states they fight.

³⁷ Gurr, “Why Men Rebel.”

³⁸ Luis De la Calle and Ignacio Sanchez-Cuenca, “Rebels without a Territory: An Analysis of Nonterritorial Conflicts in the World, 1970–1997,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 4 (2012): 580–603; Daniel Byman, “Understanding Proto-Insurgencies.” There are three broad types of safe haven. Internal sanctuary within the borders of the country where the insurgency primarily occurs, external voluntary sanctuary which tends to be offered by a willing neighbouring country or non-state actor, and external involuntary sanctuary in a neighbouring country or territory where safe haven is provided without official permission from the host state. Connable & Libicki, *How Insurgencies End*, Appendix

³⁹ Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Calle and Sanchez-Cuenca, “Rebels Without a Territory.”

⁴⁰ Most insurgencies, however, are characterized by dynamic strategies and some tend to have both rural and urban components simultaneously. David Kilcullen, “Counter-insurgency Redux,” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 48, no. 4 (2006): 111–130.

⁴¹ Daniel Byman, Peter Chalk, Bruce Hoffman, William Rosenau, and David Brannan, *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001; Victor Asal and R. Karl Rethemeyer, “The Nature of the Beast: Organizational Structures and the Lethality of Terrorist Attacks,” *Journal of Politics* 70, no. 2 (2008): 437–449. Lai (2007) finds that states lacking the capacity to adequately police their territories are likely to become safe havens for militants that engage in higher levels of transnational terrorist attacks. See Brian Lai, “‘Draining the Swamp’: An Empirical Examination of the Production of International Terrorism, 1968–1998,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 24 no. 4, (2007): 297–310.

Weak states can provide easier access for militant organizations to operate. ‘Ungoverned’ territories usually refer to areas that are outside central government control, but it is important to stress that these territories are often governed by non-state forms of social and political organization such as traditional tribal systems.⁴² Local communities may end up providing active support or fertile recruiting grounds for nascent insurgent organizations. Regions that host sympathetic ethnic or religious communities and areas that provide economic opportunities for survival and expansion offer important comparative advantages for militant groups seeking refuge from counterinsurgent forces.⁴³ Despite nuanced debate, weak state capacity and concentrations of aggrieved populations sympathetic to a militant group’s cause can facilitate the formation of a safe haven – a critical component for mobilizing resources and sustaining militant operations.

2.2.4 RESOURCES & MILITANT MOBILIZATION

Low-level acts of terrorism – whether at the individual or small-cell level – do not require significant resources. But organized militant groups need to mobilize sufficient resources and steady financial influxes if they want to successfully engage in sustained violent campaigns. Scholarly analyses of terrorism provide some insight concerning opportunity structures for mobilization. For example, diminishing a group’s ability to

⁴² Stewart Patrick, “‘Failed’ States and Global Security: Empirical Questions and Policy Dilemmas.” *International Studies Review* 9, no. 4 (2007): 644-662; Cristiana Brafman Kittner, “The Role of Safe Havens in Islamist Terrorism,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19, no. 3 (2007): 307-329.

⁴³ Rem Korteweg, “Black Holes: On Terrorist Sanctuaries and Governmental Weakness,” *Civil War* 10, no. 1 (2008): 60-71. Enders & Sandler (2006) also show that strong popular support correlates with higher success rates among terrorist organizations. Toft (2005) demonstrates that concentrated ethnically homogenous regions are more likely to mobilize for conflict than less concentrated, heterogeneous regions. See Monica Duffy Toft, *The Geography of Ethnic Violence: Identity, Interests, and the Indivisibility of Territory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

engage in one type of tactic will likely force the group to invest in other operations or targets, should the group's total resource pool remain the same.⁴⁴ Depleting total resources, however, should lead to a reduction in all militant activities – whether attacks or non-violent operations. It is important to note that financial influxes do not necessarily translate into more violence as militant organizations may allocate resources to enhance social service provision and improve the group's influence.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, groups seeking to escalate their operations and level of violence to a sustained armed conflict will need to effectively mobilize significant resources – both labour and capital.⁴⁶

Several prominent studies have explored the role of specific types of resources on insurgency development and militant group behaviour.⁴⁷ Scholars tend to emphasize the importance of two types of resources: both legal and illicit financial activities (i.e. drug trade; weapons/human smuggling; money laundering; controlling lootable resources) and external support (i.e. states, diasporas, and refugee communities). Yet considerable debate remains.

Some scholars show that resources enhance militant organization and operations, while others point to a militant *resource curse*, arguing that resource flows can facilitate predatory behaviour and descent into criminality. Weinstein (2007) argues that militant

⁴⁴ Using a rational choice model, Enders and Sandler (2002) show that militant organizations can allocate resources to various activities. Enders and Sandler, *The Political Economy of Terrorism*.

⁴⁵ Timothy Wittig, *Understanding Terrorist Finance*, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

⁴⁶ Mikel Buesa, and Thomas Baumert, "Untangling ETA's Finance: An In-Depth Analysis of the Basque Terrorist's Economic Network and the Money it Handles," *Defence and Peace Economics* 24, no. 4 (2013): 317- 338; John Horgan and Max Taylor, "Playing the 'Green Card' – Financing the Provisional IRA: Part 1," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 11, no. 2 (1999): 1-38; John Horgan and Max Taylor, "Playing the 'Green Card' – Financing the Provisional IRA: Part 2," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 15, no. 2 (2003): 1-60.

⁴⁷ Michael L. Ross, "How Do Natural Resources Influence Civil War?"; Jeremy W. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Paul Staniland, "Organizing Insurgency: Networks, Resources, and Rebellion in South Asia," *International Security* 37, no. 1 (2012): 142-177.

groups endowed with economic resources have less incentive to rely on local popular support producing undisciplined organizations that engage in higher levels of civilian victimization.⁴⁸ Heavy reliance on material resources, according to this perspective, promotes organizational fragmentation. On the other hand, illicit economic activities – especially drug trafficking – have played important roles in the evolution of powerful militant organizations, such as the Taliban, PKK and IRA.⁴⁹ However, upon formation, most militant groups generally maintain poor resource profiles and tend to secure critical sources of resources after enhancing coercive capacity.⁵⁰ Groups often need to gain physical control of territory by force before enjoying the financial benefits of lootable resources or taxation.

2.2.5 SOCIAL TIES & ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Resource mobilization frameworks help differentiate militant groups based on their capacity to generate resources, develop cohesive organizational structures, and mobilize people towards achieving the group's objectives.⁵¹ Research on social movements and militant group structures suggests that centralized and formally structured groups should be more effective at mobilizing resources and achieving broader objectives than more decentralized groups.⁵² Militant groups with hierarchical structures are also associated with increased lethality and higher likelihood of ultimately defeating

⁴⁸ Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*.

⁴⁹ Tamara Makarenko, "The Crime-Terror Continuum: Tracing the Interplay Between Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism," *Global Crime* 6, no. 1 (2004): 129-145. James A. Piazza and Scott Piazza, "Crime Pays: Terrorist Group Engagement in Crime and Survival," *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2017): 1-23.

⁵⁰ Lewis, "How Rebellion Begins," 27.

⁵¹ John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory," *The American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 6 (1977): 1212-1241.

⁵² Jenkins, "Resource Mobilization Theory and the Study of Social Movements."

the states they fight.⁵³ However, most measures of organizational structure in these studies rely on static coding efforts in a certain snapshot in time. The relationship between organizational structure and a nascent militant group's willingness or ability to wage an insurgency is less clear. It may be the case that militant groups develop more hierarchical structures, with functionally differentiated wings, after challenging the state in an armed conflict.

Stronger pre-war social networks can help a militant group gather enough resources and support to wage an insurgency.⁵⁴ For Staniland (2012), the strength of pre-existing social networks – based on horizontal and vertical ties – help explain the formation of durable institutions that determine whether resource influxes enhance or hinder militant organizational cohesion.⁵⁵ In reality, groups rarely emerge with specific resource endowments and tend to rely on varying levels of both social and material resources – not one or the other. Militant organizations with access to robust social networks are often in a stronger position to effectively screen recruits, helping overcome principal-agent problems.⁵⁶ Integrated and cohesive militant organizations are more capable of allocating resources effectively, keeping lower-ranking members in line with the group's broader objectives, and withstanding government counterinsurgency efforts.

⁵³ Lindsay Heger, Danielle Jung, and Wendy H. Wong, "Organizing for Resistance: How Group Structure Impacts the Character of Violence," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24, no. 5 (2012): 743-768; Connable and Libicki, *How Insurgencies End*; Victor Asal and R. Karl Rethemeyer, "The Nature of the Beast"; Joshua Kilberg, "Organizing for Destruction: How Organizational Structure Affects Terrorist Group Behaviour" (PhD diss., Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, Carleton University, 2011); Joshua Kilberg, "A Basic Model Explaining Terrorist Group Organizational Structure," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35, no. 11 (2012): 810-830.

⁵⁴ Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014); Jennifer M. Larson and Janet I. Lewis, "Rumors, Kinship Networks, and Rebel Group Formation," *International Organization* 72, no. 4 (2018): 871-903.

⁵⁵ Staniland, "Organizing Insurgency."

⁵⁶ Jacob N. Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

While Staniland's work offers a compelling and parsimonious theory, his research does not explore how interactions with rival militant groups impact certain organizational transitions.⁵⁷

2.2.6 MILITANT GROUP RELATIONS & MOVEMENT STRUCTURE

Competition for resources and manpower among rival constituent factions and other rebel groups is particularly crucial in the early phases of a violent conflict. Violence often serves as an important signal of capabilities and resolve among groups competing for the leadership of a particular constituency – similar to the outbidding logic outlined in the terrorism literature.⁵⁸ In the nascent stages of an insurgency, militant groups often have to consolidate rivals – whether by destructive campaigns or merger – to emerge as the dominant organization among a wider constituency. Examining the early stages of the Sri Lankan Civil War, Lilja and Hultman (2011) show that rebels target co-ethnic rivals to consolidate dominance over their constituency and target co-ethnic civilians to ensure cooperation against the government. In the pre-armed conflict phase, militants “try to establish social control over a population to become an efficient fighting unit” capable of challenging the regime.⁵⁹

The scholarly literature on civil wars and terrorism has recently started to systematically examine dynamics associated with militant group relations and movement

⁵⁷ It is also less clear whether Staniland's four classifications of pre-war social ties should be viewed as absolute categories or in terms relative to rival groups in the same conflict.

⁵⁸ Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, “The Strategies of Terrorism,” *International Security* 31, no. 1 (2006): 49-80.

⁵⁹ See Jannie Lilja and Lisa Hultman, “Intraethnic Dominance and Control: Violence Against Co-Ethnics in the Early Sri Lankan Civil War,” *Security Studies*, 20, no. 2 (2011): 171-197, 175.

structure.⁶⁰ Most research on militant group relations focuses on either cooperation *or* competition, examining either why some groups engage in a particular type of relationship or evaluating the consequences of these ties. Militant relationships have primarily been used to evaluate group lethality and tactical choices, among other outcomes.⁶¹ For example, different types of militant group competition have been shown to both hurt and help militant group longevity – contributing to ongoing debates in the field.⁶²

Militant group collaboration, on the other hand, has been shown to increase group longevity and lethality.⁶³ Militant cooperation can also facilitate knowledge transfer and expertise, especially when it comes to deploying sophisticated weapons systems or

⁶⁰ Ely Karmon, *Coalitions Between Terrorist Organizations: Revolutionaries, Nationalists and Islamists* (Netherlands: Nijhoff Publishers, 2005); Victor Asal, Hyun Hee Park, Karl Rethemeyer and Gary Ackerman, “With Friends Like These...Why Terrorist Organizations Ally,” *International Public Management Journal* 19, no. 1 (2016): 1-30; Assaf Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation Among Terrorist Actors* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); Mohammed M. Hafez, “Fratricidal Rebels: Ideological Extremity and Warring Factionalism in Civil Wars,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2017); Tricia Bacon, “Hurdles to International Terrorist Alliances: Lessons From Al Qaeda's Experience,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20, no. 1 (2017): 79-101; Navin Bapat and Kanisha D. Bond, “Alliances Amongst Militant Groups,” *British Journal of Political Science* 4, no. 42 (2012): 793-824; Seden Akcinaroglu, “Rebel Interdependencies and Civil War Outcomes,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 5 (2012): 879-903; Hanne Fjelde and Desirée Nilsson, “Rebels Against Rebels: Explaining Violence Between Rebel Groups,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 4 (2012): 604-628; Brian J. Phillips, “Terrorist Group Cooperation and Longevity,” *International Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 58 (2014): 336-347.

⁶¹ Brian J. Phillips, “Terrorist Group Rivalries and Alliances: Testing Competing Explanations,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 11 (2018): 997-1019.

⁶² Young and Dugan (2012), for example, find that higher levels of militant group competition (based on the number of active terrorist groups in a country) reduce the likelihood of group survival. Joseph K. Young and Laura Dugan, “Survival of the Fittest: Why Terrorist Groups Endure,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 2 (2014). Retrieved from <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/334/html>. Phillips (2015), on the other hand, argues that competition among militant groups with divergent ideologies or objectives (“*inter-field rivals*”) actually enhances militant group longevity. See Brian J. Phillips, “Enemies with Benefits? Violent Rivalry and Terrorist Group Longevity,” *Journal of Peace Research* 52, no. 1 (2015): 62-75.

⁶³ Asal and Rethemeyer, “The Nature of the Beast.”; Brian J. Phillips, “Terrorist Group Cooperation and Longevity,” *International Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 58 (2014): pp. 336-347.

constructing powerful explosive devices.⁶⁴ Most of this research privileges relationships among groups already fighting in full-fledged civil wars or inter-group ties among organizations with diverse ideologies or objectives (i.e. al-Qaeda's ties to Hezbollah or ETA-IRA cooperation). Other scholars have sought to explain the causes and consequences of ties between more ideologically compatible organizations, particularly in the context of emerging threats from al-Qaeda or the Islamic State and their respective affiliates worldwide.⁶⁵

While these works help differentiate among broader forms of militant ties, my research seeks to explore the consequences of particular forms of rival relations within the early stages of a specific militant movement. Most insurgency contexts involve multiple groups vying for dominance of a particular constituency in the nascent stages of an armed conflict with a more powerful state. The budding literature on militant or *rebel* movement fragmentation offers interesting insights relevant to my puzzle.

Fragmented militant movements vary considerably and influence conflicts in different ways, with implications for civilian targeting and broader patterns of violence. Different types of militant group splits may also influence the duration of insurgencies or group longevity.⁶⁶ Some research has shown that fragmented movements are more likely to experience civil war outbreak. According to this perspective, highly divided movements produce more commitment and information problems with the state, reducing

⁶⁴ Michael C. Horowitz and Phillip B. K. Potter, "Allying to Kill: Terrorist Intergroup Cooperation and the Consequences for Lethality," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 2, no. 58 (2014): 199-225.

⁶⁵ Tricia Bacon, *Why Terrorist Groups Form International Alliances* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

⁶⁶ Charles W. Mahoney, "Splinters and Schisms: Rebel Group Fragmentation and the Durability of Insurgencies," *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2017): 1-20.

the likelihood to achieve a settlement before widespread violence erupts.⁶⁷ Other scholars argue that unified movements are best positioned to present a coherent front and pursue strategic success.⁶⁸ Transcending the united-divided debate, Peter Krause's (2017) work outlines three broader types of national movement systems that are functions of the movement's internal distribution of power: hegemonic, united, and fragmented.⁶⁹ For Krause, hegemonic movements featuring one clearly dominant organization (*hegemon*) are most likely to achieve broader strategic successes – such as statehood or the expulsion of an occupying force – compared to united or fragmented movements lacking a hegemon.⁷⁰ A similar logic can apply to prominent militant groups representing a wider constituency or movement – beyond nationalist or self-determination campaigns.

2.2.7 STATE SPONSORSHIP & EXTERNAL SUPPORT

State sponsorship has been cited as one of the most critical factors explaining militant group success.⁷¹ In a study of 89 prominent insurgencies, Connable and Libicki

⁶⁷ Cunningham (2013) argues that movements with higher levels of internal divisions are more likely to experience civil war outbreak. Kathleen G. Cunningham, "Actor Fragmentation and Civil War Bargaining: How Internal Divisions Generate Civil Conflict," *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 3 (2013): 659-672.

⁶⁸ On the role of united movements and strategic success see Wendy Pearlman, *Violence, Nonviolence, and the Palestinian National Movement* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁶⁹ Peter Krause, "The Structure of Success: How the Internal Distribution of Power Drives Armed Group Behavior and National Movement Effectiveness," *International Security* 38, no. 3 (2013/14): 72-116, 77; Peter Krause, *Rebel Power: Why National Movements Compete, Fight, and Win* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).

⁷⁰ For a militant group to be classified as the "hegemon," it needs to be at least three times more powerful than any other group in the movement. Krause defines and operationalizes militant group power and position in the hierarchy of a movement based on a combination of three factors: group membership, political seats, and fundraising.

⁷¹ Byman et al. *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements*. For discussions on the potential negative impacts of state sponsorship see David B. Carter, "A Blessing or a Curse? State Support for Terrorist Groups," *International Organization* 66, no. 1 (2012): 129-151. The civil war literature tends to focus on which type of conflicts attract external interventions, overlooking actor-centric approaches or characteristics of particular insurgent groups receiving foreign assistance. Research shows that conflicts with external involvement are more lethal and are harder to resolve through negotiations. See Bethany Lacina, "Explaining the Severity of Civil Wars," *Journal of Conflict*

(2010) found that groups with state sponsorship achieved their objectives at a 2:1 ratio among the cases studied.⁷² State support can help a group gain tactical insights, new technologies, joint training, and access to external safe haven. A state can also help facilitate cooperation among different militant organizations.⁷³ Outside support is important to mobilize resources for militant organizations and may be most critical during the early phases of an insurgency. As Byman et al. (2001) note, “insurgents seek externally what they cannot acquire internally: One movement may need a haven; another, weapons; and third, political support.”⁷⁴ Like state sponsorship, diaspora support has been shown to bolster militant organizations against the states they fight.⁷⁵

External patrons can also cause major problems for their clients. State sponsors, motivated by their own interests, can manipulate nascent militant groups to engage in counterproductive behaviour that ultimately derails their trajectory and survival.⁷⁶

Resolution 50, no. 2 (2006): 276-289; Patrick M. Regan, “Third-party Interventions and the Duration of Intrastate Conflicts,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46, no. 1 (2002): 55-73. While generally prolonging conflict duration, foreign military intervention has also been shown to serve as an overwhelming advantage for recipient belligerents in ongoing civil wars. See Regan, “Third-party Interventions and the Duration of Intrastate Conflicts.”

⁷² Connable & Libicki, *How Insurgencies End*. The study also finds that the withdrawal of outside state support diminishes an insurgent group’s ability to wage violent campaigns and contributes to the increased likelihood that a group is defeated.

⁷³ Daniel Byman, “Outside Support for Insurgent Movement,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35, no. 12 (2013): 981-1004.

⁷⁴ Byman et. al. *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements*, 104.

⁷⁵ Research suggests that other transnational factors play an important role in civil war processes as well. Regional factors related to conflict in neighbouring states has an impact on civil war onset, suggesting neighbouring contagion and diffusion processes are important. See Zaryab Iqbal and Harvey Starr, “Bad Neighbors: Failed States and Their Consequences,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 25, no. 4 (2008): 315-331. Significant refugee flows contribute to the spread of rebel networks and the destabilization of neighbouring states, increasing the likelihood of civil war onset. See Idean Salehyan and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, “Refugees and the Spread of Civil War,” *International Organization* 60, no. 2 (2006): 335-366. Linebarger (2015) shows that regional and international factors also influence the emergence of militant groups. See Linebarger, Christopher. “Civil War Diffusion and the Emergence of Militant Groups, 1960–2001.” *International Interactions: Empirical and Theoretical Research in International Relations* 41, no. 3 (2015): 583-600.

⁷⁶ Carter, “A Blessing or a Curse? State Support for Terrorist Groups.” Militant groups can also feel empowered and deviate from their sponsor’s objectives. Navin Bapat, “Understanding State Sponsorship of Militant Groups,” *British Journal of Political Science* 42, no. 1 (2012): 1-29.

Outside powers sometimes try to prevent the emergence of a hegemonic militant group by simultaneously supporting rival groups among a particular constituency.⁷⁷ While external support for militant organizations is generally a strong indicator of a militant group's ability to ultimately defeat the states they fight, it is unclear how foreign assistance impacts a militant group's ability to initiate a sustained armed conflict. Outside assistance can help a militant group defeat its rivals within an overall movement or broader constituency.⁷⁸ But other militant groups might secure external support only after proving itself as a legitimate challenge to the target regime.

2.2.8 STATE RESPONSES & COUNTERINSURGENCY

Dan Byman argues that “the reaction of the state is often the most important factor in the (militant) movement's overall success or failure.”⁷⁹ Historical and scholarly literature on counterinsurgency tends to differentiate between two broad approaches: population-centric (winning “hearts and minds”) or enemy-centric counterinsurgency (targeting militants and militant infrastructure).⁸⁰ An apparent consensus in the scholarly literature suggests that states that primarily rely on brute force are largely unsuccessful and often drive neutral members of the population into insurgents' ranks.⁸¹ Indiscriminate

⁷⁷ Henning Tamm, “Rebel Leaders, Internal Rivals, and External Resources: How State Sponsors Affect Insurgent Cohesion,” *International Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (2016): 599-610.

⁷⁸ Iran's crucial support for Hezbollah in the early 1980s, for example, helped the Lebanese group overshadow its rival Amal and evolve into a dominant militant force. See Marc R. Devore, “Exploring the Iran- Hezbollah Relationship: A Case Study of How State Sponsorship Affects Terrorist Group Decision-Making,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 6, no. 4-5 (2012). Retrieved from <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/218/html>.

⁷⁹ Byman, “Understanding Proto-Insurgencies,” 21.

⁸⁰ Michael Findley and Joseph K. Young, “Fighting Fire with Fire? How (Not) to Neutralize an Insurgency,” *Civil Wars* 9, no. 4 (2007): 378-401; Christopher Paul, Colin P. Claire, and Beth Grill, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2010), 36-55.

⁸¹ John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaysia and Vietnam* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005); David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001); Luke N. Condra and Jacob N. Shapiro, “Who Takes the Blame?”

state responses and repression are often cited as the most important factors that encourage insurgencies to flourish.⁸² However, others scholars have shown that indiscriminate state response and violent state building processes can be effective and lead to a reduction in militant violence.⁸³ In reality, states rarely choose between either enemy-centric or population-centric counterinsurgency strategies and often rely on a combination of the two. States usually target militants and potential supporters with violent and political actions.⁸⁴

Militant groups might seek to provoke a disproportionate state response to spark a wider conflict by using the state's strength against itself. Provocative militant strategies can help a group improve its organizational capacity and mobilize the necessary resources to eventually challenge the state from a stronger position.⁸⁵ But provoking an indiscriminate state response may be counterproductive if militants are incapable of providing protection to civilians under regime attack.⁸⁶

The Strategic Effects of Collateral Damage," *American Journal of Political Science* 56 no. 1 (2012): 167-187; Daniel Branch and Elisabeth Jean Wood, "Revisiting Counterinsurgency," *Politics and Society* 38, no. 1 (2010): 3-14; Ivan Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Lyall and Wilson III, "Rage Against the Machines."

⁸² Kelly M. Greenhill and Paul Staniland, "Ten Ways to Lose at Counterinsurgency," *Civil Wars* 9, no. 4 (2007): 402-419; Byman, "Understanding Proto-Insurgencies." Elizabeth Wood convincingly shows that state repression and indiscriminate attacks enhanced existing grievances among peasants in El Salvador, cultivating an insurgent political culture that fueled mobilization for insurgency. For Wood, socio-economic indicators failed to predict why some peasants joined the rebellion while others did not. Elisabeth Jean Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁸³ Jason Lyall, "Does Indiscriminate Violence Incite Insurgent Attacks?: Evidence from Chechnya," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53, no. 3 (2009): 331-362. For a recent critique of the "hearts and minds" theory for counterinsurgency success see Jacqueline L. Hazelton, "The 'Hearts and Minds' Fallacy: Violence, Coercion, and Success in Counterinsurgency Warfare," *International Security* 42, no. 1 (2017): 80-113.

⁸⁴ Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, Beth Grill, and Molly Dunigan, "Moving Beyond Population-Centric vs. Enemy Centric Counterinsurgency," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 6 (2016): 1019-1042.

⁸⁵ Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism." Kydd and Walter, "The Strategies of Terrorism."

⁸⁶ State violence may facilitate the emergence of club goods, whereby capable militants engage in selective protection and incentives of particular communities and individuals. See Kalyvas, Stathis N. and Matthew Adam Kocher, "How "Free" Is Free Riding in Civil Wars? Violence, Insurgency, and the

Most of the dominant historical works on counterinsurgency derives insights from a select few conflicts that mainly involve foreign expeditionary conflicts, such as the British campaign in Malaya or U.S.-led wars in Vietnam, and more recently Afghanistan and Iraq. Most counterinsurgencies, however, involve states fighting militant groups that emerge from within the same country, often without direct foreign military intervention. More importantly, the social scientific literature primarily evaluates the outcomes or dynamics of full-fledged insurgencies, overlooking lower-level conflicts or militant groups that failed to get an insurgency off the ground. Therefore, lessons learned from successful and well-known counterinsurgencies might be limited in explaining how to deter or suppress nascent insurrections from developing.

2.2.9 MOST-RELATED RESEARCH

A few recent works seek to address why some nascent militant groups evolve to become more serious threats. Addressing Byman's proto-insurgency puzzle, Charles Mahoney (2011)'s dissertation argued that incipient militant groups were able to evolve into insurgent organizations when they adopted opposing primary strategies to the target state (i.e. 'hearts & minds' strategy; enemy-centric; punishment strategy).⁸⁷ In reality, belligerent strategies are often overlapping and continuously evolving throughout a conflict. But at the nascent stages of an insurrection, Mahoney argues that a targeted

Collective Action Problem," *World Politics* 59, no. 2 (2007): 177-216, 190. According to this perspective, the militant group's organizational capacity to withstand and exploit government repression may serve as a necessary intervening factor that facilitates successful mobilization.

⁸⁷ Charles W. Mahoney, "Hearts and Minds or Blood and Guts? Strategy, Terrorism, and the Growth of Proto-Insurgencies" (Phd diss., University of California, 2011). Retrieved from <http://gradworks.umi.com.proxy.library.carleton.ca/35/01/3501968.html>. These findings appear to support Arreguin-Toft's (2001) work on asymmetric strategies and insurgency outcomes. See Ivan Arreguin-Toft, "How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict," *International Security* 26, no. 1 (2001): 93-128. Mahoney (2011) operationalizes proto-insurgency success when a group reached 1000 members.

military campaign to arrest or kill militant leaders before the organization matures is the most effective counterinsurgency strategy regardless of what primary strategy the militant group adopts.

Based on field research in Uganda, Janet Lewis' thesis (2012) shows that the key to rebel viability, according to her criteria, depends largely on ethnic group concentrations and the perceptions of the civilian population in the area where a group initially emerges.⁸⁸ According to this perspective, certain types of local information networks help spread rumors that impact whether civilians will denounce nascent rebel activity to the government. As a result, Lewis argues that greater investments in domestic intelligence apparatuses can help weak states tap into local information networks and disrupt nascent militant groups from evolving into viable insurgent threats.

Iris Malone's dissertation shows that civil wars are often a product of asymmetric information regarding a militant group's capabilities.⁸⁹ According to this perspective, uncertainty leads relatively capable states to miscalculate the level of effort to allocate against less visible militant groups. States tend to allocate resources to counter insurgencies based on a group's observable capabilities. Resource constrained or weak states, on the other hand, are often incapable of mobilizing sufficient resources to effectively suppress a powerful nascent militant group. However, the level of a state's

⁸⁸ Janet Lewis (2012)'s dissertation tackles a similar puzzle concerning why some nascent rebel groups in Uganda evolve into viable threats. See Lewis, "How Rebellion Begins." As opposed to group size or battle-related deaths, Lewis adopts far more stringent criteria for success – whether a rebel group maintains at least 200 members and is capable of controlling a piece of territory for at least three months. Lewis' highly micro-level approach includes a sample size of groups that may have failed to even conduct one attack. Her focus requires very detailed ethnographic fieldwork to assess the earliest phase immediately following rebel group formation in a single country, limiting the generalizability of her findings. My dissertation, however, looks at why some prominent and diverse militant groups – that survive the earliest and most vulnerable stages of their existence – engage in sustained insurgencies.

⁸⁹ Malone, "Uncertainty and Civil War Onset."

nascent counter militancy efforts would not necessarily explain when an insurgency could erupt.⁹⁰

Concluding remarks

There is no single formula that can explain all militant group trajectories and each counterinsurgency requires a unique mix of strategies based on context specific considerations. But at the broader group-level of analysis, there should be some overarching framework that helps differentiate between militant groups that fight states in sustained insurgencies and those that do not. In this chapter, I review literatures devoted to militant group success, insurgency development, and civil war onset to outline the dominant theories related to my puzzle. By exploring key debates and identifying gaps, I help produce testable hypotheses in subsequent chapters for further exploration. Chapter Three's quantitative analysis offers an initial step to identify which indicators serve as more generalizable determinants of this phenomenon and help build a theory of rival consolidation in nascent insurrections.

⁹⁰ Gartzke (1999) argues that predicting the timing of war onset is difficult, if not impossible, in advance since war is generally the product of unobservable factors. See Erik Gartzke, "War is in the Error Term," *International Organization* 53, no. 3 (1999): 567-587.

CHAPTER THREE

MILITANT GROUPS & SUSTAINED INSURGENCY: A Large-n Quantitative Approach

3.1 INTRODUCTION

It is puzzling why some initially weak militant groups, who face immense difficulties in garnering material resources and support, are able to eventually engage in sustained violent operations and confront more powerful militaries. Many more militant groups rarely survive their most vulnerable first year, let alone pose a serious threat. Why do some militant groups engage in sustained armed conflicts while other groups do not? Using a resource mobilization framework, I conduct quantitative regression analysis on 246 prominent militant groups from 1970-2007 and find that, on average, religious militant organizations operating in less competitive environments are associated with a higher likelihood of engaging in sustained armed conflicts.¹ Challenging conventional wisdom, groups with relatively less centralized command and control are similarly as likely to engage in sustained armed conflict than the most hierarchically structured organizations. Overall, my model shows that organizational characteristics and competitive environments are better predictors of sustained armed conflicts than traditional measures of group capabilities, diverging from current explanations of insurgency onset or outcomes. Posing a serious challenge to a regime is not necessarily a function of how powerful or capable a group may seem – it's about

¹ The prominent militant groups under study and many of their characteristics are identified in Joshua Kilberg, "Organizing for Destruction: How Organizational Structure Affects Terrorist Group Behaviour" (PhD diss., Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, Carleton University, 2011).

the motivation and organizational capacity to effectively mobilize resources and sustain armed hostilities against regime forces.

The chapter proceeds as follows. The first section derives hypotheses from key debates presented in Chapter Two's literature review. The second section describes the quantitative research design, data, and methodology used to test the main hypotheses. Regression results and marginal effects are presented in the third section. Subsequent sections offer a discussion of the findings followed by concluding remarks. While this quantitative analysis does not uncover clear causal sequences, or explain escalations in violence, the findings provide empirical associations that differentiate between militant groups that wage sustained insurgencies and those that do not.

3.2 TESTABLE HYPOTHESES

Social movement framework as an organizing principle

Before developing a specific theory for my research puzzle in Chapter Four, I rely on existing scholarly arguments and a framework used in the study of social movements to identify indicators that differentiate militant groups based on their capacity to generate resources, develop cohesive organizational structures, and mobilize people towards achieving the group's objectives.² Research on social movements stress several key factors that should help explain why some militant

² John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory," *The American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 6 (1977): 1212-1241.; Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1978.; J. Craig Jenkins, "Resource Mobilization Theory and the Study of Social Movements." *Annual Review of Sociology* 9 (1983): 527-553.

organizations are more successful than others: framing, opportunity, and resource mobilization.³

3.2.1 Motivation: Group ideology & objectives

The social movement literature describes the role of entrepreneurs (or militant group leaders in this context) in the strategic framing of a particular ideology, leading a process that promotes allegiance and ideological congruence among the rest of the organization.⁴ Groups that embrace salient identities, particularly ethno-nationalist or religious ideologies, should be more capable of mobilizing resources and more likely to achieve strategic objectives than left-wing or right-wing militant organizations.⁵

Religious and ethno-nationalist militant groups are more likely to draw on resources from a well-defined constituency and should be in a better position to capitalize on grievances than other types of militant groups. Regions that host sympathetic ethnic or religious communities offer important comparative advantages for militant groups seeking opportunities for expansion and refuge from counterinsurgent forces.⁶ Religiously

³ Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1978); J. Craig Jenkins, "Resource Mobilization Theory and the Study of Social Movements," *Annual Review of Sociology* 9 (1983): 527-553. Critics point out that social movement frameworks overlook micro-level decision making processes and alliance formations. But the broader framework is appropriate for a large-n analysis of militant groups at the organizational level of analysis.

⁴ Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, eds., *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000), pp. 611–639.

⁵ Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qaeda* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008).

⁶ Rem Korteweg, "Black Holes: On Terrorist Sanctuaries and Governmental Weakness," *Civil War* 10, no.1 (2008): 60-71. Toft (2005) demonstrates that ethnically homogenous regions are more likely to mobilize for conflict than less concentrated, heterogeneous regions. See Monica Duffy Toft, *The Geography of Ethnic Violence: Identity, Interests, and the Indivisibility of Territory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

motivated groups in particular tend to be more lethal and maintain indivisible objectives, making negotiated settlements improbable and armed conflict more likely.⁷ When it comes to group objectives, previous research suggests that groups seeking narrow goals, like secession or territorial independence, are more capable of achieving their ultimate objectives than groups seeking maximalist goals like toppling a regime or taking over an entire country.⁸

Hypothesis 1: Militant groups motivated primarily by nationalist or religious ideologies are more likely to engage in sustained armed conflicts than other ideologically oriented groups.

Hypothesis 2: Militant groups with territorial objectives, like secession, are more likely to engage in sustained armed conflicts than groups seeking to capture the regime or state. Militant groups with either territorial or regime change objectives are more likely to engage in sustained armed conflicts than other goal-oriented groups.

3.2.2 Organizational structure

Research on social movements and militant group structures suggests that centralized and formally structured groups should be more effective at mobilizing

⁷ Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*. Eli Berman, *Radical, Religious, and Violent: The New Economics of Terrorism* (MIT Press: Cambridge, 2009); Monica Duffy Toft, “Getting Religion? The Puzzling Case of Islam and Civil War,” *International Security* 31, no. 4 (2007): 97-131.

⁸ Max Abrahms, “Why Terrorism Does Not Work,” *International Security* 31, no. 2 (2006): 42-78; Audrey Kurth Cronin, “How al-Qaida Ends: The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups,” *International Security* 31, no. 1 (2006): 7-48; Jones & Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End*.

resources and achieving broader objectives than more decentralized groups.⁹ Militant groups with hierarchical structures are also associated with increased lethality and higher likelihood of ultimately defeating the states they fight.¹⁰ Integrated militant organizations are more capable of allocating resources effectively, keeping lower-ranking members in line with the group's broader objectives, and remaining cohesive throughout a civil conflict.¹¹ The following hypothesis on organizational structure is derived based on current scholarly debates and resource mobilization arguments:

Hypothesis 3: The more hierarchical a militant group is organized, the more likely it will engage in a sustained armed conflict.

3.2.3 Competitive environment

Competition for resources and manpower among rival constituent factions and other rebel groups is particularly crucial in the early phases of a violent conflict. In the nascent stages of an insurgency, militant groups often have to consolidate rivals – whether by destructive campaigns or formation – before emerging as the dominant

⁹ Jenkins, "Resource Mobilization Theory and the Study of Social Movements."; McCarthy & Zald, "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements."

¹⁰ Lindsay Heger, Jung, Danielle, and Wendy H. Wong, "Organizing for Resistance: How Group Structure Impacts the Character of Violence," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24, no. 5 (2012): 743-768; Ben Connable and Martin C. Libicki, *How Insurgencies End* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010); Victor Asal and R. Karl Rethemeyer, "The Nature of the Beast: Organizational Structures and the Lethality of Terrorist Attacks," *The Journal of Politics* 70, no. 2 (2008): 437-449; Kilberg, "Organizing for Destruction: How Organizational Structure Affects Terrorist Group Behaviour"; Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

¹¹ For Staniland (2012), the strength of pre-existing social networks help explain the formation of durable and integrated institutions that determine whether resource influxes enhance or hinder militant group cohesion. See Paul Staniland, "Organizing Insurgency: Networks, Resources, and Rebellion in South Asia," *International Security* 37, no. 1 (2012): 142-177.

organization.¹² Young and Dugan (2012) find that higher levels of militant group competition (based on the number of terrorist groups in a country) reduce the likelihood of group survival.¹³ For an initial assessment of competitive environments, the following hypothesis is derived given that a militant group's trajectory is often a function of rival militant groups operating in the host state.

Hypothesis 4: The more militant groups operating in a state, the less likely a particular militant group will engage in a sustained armed conflict.

Previous studies of insurgencies focus mainly on militant group dynamics during full-fledged civil wars or why some militant groups achieve their ultimate objectives, overlooking militant groups that never engage in sustained armed conflicts in the first place.¹⁴ At an aggregate level of analysis, there appears to be a strategic

¹² Examining the early stages of the Sri Lankan Civil War, Lilja and Hultman (2011) show that rebels target co-ethnic rivals to consolidate dominance over their constituency and target co-ethnic civilians to ensure cooperation against the government. In the pre-armed conflict phase, militants “try to establish social control over a population to become an efficient fighting unit” capable of challenging the regime. See Jannie Lilja and Lisa Hultman, “Intraethnic Dominance and Control: Violence Against Co-Ethnics in the Early Sri Lankan Civil War,” *Security Studies*, 20, no. 2 (2011): 171-197, 175.

¹³ Joseph K. Young and Laura Dugan, “Survival of the Fittest: Why Terrorist Groups Endure,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 2 (2014). Phillips (2015), on the other hand, argues that competition among militant groups with divergent ideologies or objectives (“*inter-field rivals*”) actually enhances militant group longevity. See Brian J. Phillips, “Enemies with Benefits? Violent Rivalry and Terrorist Group Longevity,” *Journal of Peace Research* 52, no. 1 (2015): 62-75.

¹⁴ Terrorism literature tends to overlook relationships between terrorist attacks and other forms of political violence – mainly insurgency or full-fledged civil war. For example, Cronin (2006) outlines how terrorist groups might end, including transformation toward insurgency, but stops short of analyzing these transitions. See Cronin, “How al-Qaida Ends.” Terrorism scholars tend to focus on broad economic, ideological, and political explanations for the occurrence of terrorism, the impact of regime type, attack trends, and economic consequences of terrorist attacks – overlooking relationships between terrorism and armed conflict. See Todd Sandler, “The Analytical Study of Terrorism: Taking Stock,” *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2 (2014): 257-271. Research concerning insurgency and civil war onset identify similar gaps. In a review of four seminal studies on insurgency, Sidney Tarrow (2007) notes that despite offering important contributions, none of the works examined the “escalation to civil war from nonviolent contention or from less lethal forms of violence.” See Sidney Tarrow, “Inside Insurgencies: Politics and Violence in an Age of Civil War,” *Perspectives on Politics* 5, no. 3 (2007): 587-600, 589.

logic behind the militant activity preceding sustained armed conflict that warrants further investigation.¹⁵ This is one of the first quantitative studies that empirically tests the determinants of militant group engagement in sustained armed conflicts – an underexplored outcome of interest.

3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN & METHOD

In the first stage of this thesis’ research design, I conduct quantitative regression analysis using a probit estimating technique – on 246 prominent militant groups from 1970-2007. The quantitative analysis presents a macro-level approach to make cross-case inferences among a wider population: prominent militant groups from around the world throughout an almost 40-year time period. Large-n analysis relies on a variance-based ontological understanding of causation, which focuses on the average mean effects of certain factors – holding other variables constant.

TABLE 1: DIFFERENT METHODS & LOGICS OF CAUSAL INFERENCE IN THIS THESIS

Method	Quantitative Regression Analysis (Large-n)	Comparative Methods (Small-n)	Process-Tracing Case Studies (n = 1)
Ontological Understanding of Causation	Variance-based, frequentist logic	Comparative logic of elimination	Mechanistic logic

¹⁵ Using geo-spatial techniques, Findley and Young (2012) show that there is considerable temporal and spatial overlap between coded terrorist attacks and civil war. The observed concentrations of terrorist attacks occurring during the pre-civil war phase are likely to be concentrated in the same geographic areas later characterized by civil war. See Michael G. Findley and Joseph K. Young, “Terrorism and Civil War: A Spatial and Temporal Approach to a Conceptual Problem,” *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 2 (2012): 285-305, 286.

Types of Causality Assessed	Mean causal effect of independent variable X on dependent variable Y	Necessary and/or sufficient conditions that produce Y	Identifying causal mechanisms, linking cause(s) to an outcome
Types of Inferences	Cross-case inferences to the broader population	Cross-case inferences to more contextualized population	Within-case inferences
Associated Chapter(s) in this Thesis	Chapter 3 Probit analysis of militant groups worldwide from 1970-2007	Chapter 4 Theory-building exercise (Positive-on-Outcome analysis); disconfirming individually necessary conditions	Chapters 6-8 Case studies to identify causal mechanisms

3.4 DATA

This study’s primary model tests hypotheses using Joshua Kilberg’s (2011) dataset featuring militant groups identified in the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) that committed at least 10 attacks and survived a minimum of one year, between 1970 and 2007. Cross-sectional data is used, with the militant group as the unit of analysis, since most existing quantitative measures used to assess militant organizations are largely time invariant.¹⁶ The number of observations (militant groups) for the base model is 228 – down from 246 after including control variables. I argue that these militant groups represent a set of potential militant groups that engage in sustained insurgencies because

¹⁶ While many quantitative studies use group-year or country-year panel data, most data on group characteristics and state-level variables are largely time invariant (i.e. group ideology, mountainous terrain) or exhibit very gradual temporal variation (i.e. GDP per capita or regime type) and therefore limited in explaining variation year to year. Group ideologies or structures may evolve over the lifespan of a particular group, but much of the existing data relies on coding these variables in a particular snapshot in time. Relying on a group-level unit of analysis is appropriate here since I am initially seeking to differentiate between militant groups based on engagement in sustained insurgencies.

they demonstrated a willingness and capacity to use violence to address some grievance against the host state. About 70% of all terrorist groups in the GTD do not survive longer than one year, yet the remaining number of groups account for 94% of attributed attacks.¹⁷ This research proposal focuses on analyzing viable militant groups that have already survived the earliest and most vulnerable phase of their existence and demonstrate the capacity to conduct more than a few attacks. The question is why do some of these prominent militant groups engage in sustained armed conflicts (or insurgencies)?¹⁸

3.4.1 Dependent variable

The dependent variable is *Sustained Armed Conflict* and is coded 1 if a group in Kilberg's dataset is identified in the UCDP Armed Conflict Dataset – featuring conflicts characterized by a minimum of 25 battle-related deaths in a given year for at least five consecutive years.¹⁹ It is important to note that there is no reliable information at the moment to identify which of those battle-related deaths were caused by the militant group or the state. However, if only one belligerent in a conflict used violence, the UCDP would categorize the situation as one-sided violence, which would be featured in a different UCDP dataset than the battle-deaths data used here. The UCDP Armed Conflict

¹⁷ Gary LaFree, Laura Dugan, and Erin Miller, *Putting Terrorism in Context: Lessons from the Global Terrorism Database* (New York: Routledge, 2015). This observation is based on the GTD's data from 1970 to the end of 2012.

¹⁸ For the purposes of this quantitative analysis, I am not trying to explicitly explain escalations of violence – from low-level terrorism to sustained insurgency for example. Instead, I choose to prioritize why some militant groups are able and willing to challenge target regime forces in a sustained armed conflict. Some militant in groups in the dataset may have begun targeting state forces directly upon formation. This chapter examines which group characteristics or other indicators play a role in whether some prominent militant groups engage in sustained insurgencies at any point between 1970-2007.

¹⁹ Therése Pettersson and Peter Wallensteen, "Armed Conflicts, 1946-2014," *Journal of Peace Research* 52, no. 4 (2015): 536-550.; UCDP Dataset 2016.

Dataset is the most fine-grained global dataset in civil war research, but some conflicts in the data feature broad labels for non-state belligerents, such as *Kashmiri insurgents*, due to coding and data limitations. Secondary academic sources and other prominent datasets on civil war and insurgency were consulted to corroborate and complement initial coding efforts. Of the original 246 militant groups under study, I code 77 (~31%) that engage in sustain armed conflicts according to my criteria.

3.4.2 Independent variables

Motivation: Militant group ideology & objectives

Militant group ideology is delineated according to four categories: religious, nationalist, left-wing and right-wing. While overlapping philosophies often motivate prominent groups, the primary ideology is used for this study.²⁰ Related to ideology, a group's stated ultimate objectives should also influence its willingness and capacity to mobilize resources for sustained campaigns of attrition. Group objectives are divided according to five types: whether a group has goals focused on territorial control, regime change, social revolution, policy change, or maintaining the status quo. Previous analyses of insurgencies justifiably focus on only groups seeking territorial control (i.e. secession) or regime change, but some groups without these overt objectives can still attempt to spark armed conflicts and should not be dismissed.²¹

²⁰ Data on group ideology and objectives are collected from Kilberg (2011), who primarily relied on coding criteria outlined in Jones and Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End*.

²¹ For example, the Weather Underground, a 1970s-era terrorist group seeking to battle the American state from within, published a manifesto that clearly suggests it employs targeted violence in a bid to mobilize society against the state. According to its strategy: "At this early state in the armed and clandestine struggle, our forms of combat and confrontation are few and precise...By beginning the armed struggle, the awareness of its necessity will be furthered...Bernardine Dohrn, Billy Ayers, Jeff Jones, and Celia Sojourn "Prairie Fire: The Politics of Revolutionary Anti-Imperialism: Political Statement of the Weather Underground," 1974, 1-153, 3. Quoted in Findley and Young, "Terrorism and Civil War," 285.

Organizational structure

Kilberg (2012) codes four different types of organizational structures: bureaucracy, hub-spoke, all-channel, and market – in descending order of centralization.²² Bureaucratic structures are the most hierarchical, with clear command and control mechanisms emanating from a well-defined leadership to lower-level units, and distinct divisions with particular specializations. Hezbollah's organizational structure is a well-known example of a bureaucracy with centralized command and clear specialized units, including a political and media wing, a division focused on guerrilla/conventional military operations, and an external terrorist operations unit devoted to striking Jewish and Israeli targets abroad.²³ Like bureaucratic structures, hub-spoke structures have a leader and various units or cells with particular roles or functions, but lack centralized command and control. Without a clear hierarchy, each node of the hub-spoke structure usually needs to report to the central leader to coordinate operations. Examples include Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) in Peru and Lashkar-e-Taiba, where units or cells associated with this type of structure tend to have more independence and discretion to prepare and conduct attacks. All-channel structures have a leader but maintain minimal hierarchy, if any, and no explicit functional differentiation among the group's constituent parts. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood operating in the late 1970s is an example of a militant group with an all-channel structure. Finally, market structures are the most decentralized, with virtually no clear leadership or command and control.

While rare, other militant groups primarily focused on maintaining the status quo (i.e. RENAMO, Rwanda Patriotic Front) or changing a broader policy (i.e. African National Congress) have also engaged in armed conflicts.

²² Joshua Kilberg, "A Basic Model Explaining Terrorist Group Organizational Structure," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35, no. 11 (2012): 810-830.

²³ Matthew Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013).

Competitive environment

To assess the competitive environment hypothesis, I use Young and Findley (2012)'s data featuring the "total number of primary terrorist groups that operated in an organisation's primary country in a given year."²⁴ Less prominent groups that remain outside my sample are included in this count, since active militant groups that fall short of ten attacks still influence the competitive environment. Since my data is cross-sectional (as opposed to group-year panel data), I use the average number of groups operating for the entire lifespan of a particular group that never reaches the threshold of sustained armed conflict. For groups that engage in sustained armed conflicts, I rely on the precise number of active groups operating during the year a particular militant group reaches the threshold of armed conflict, where possible.²⁵ This distinction should help better explain whether more competitive environments influence the probability that a group engages in a sustained armed conflict, when they do.

3.4.3 Rival explanations (Control variables)

3.4.3.1 Militant group capabilities

As discussed in Chapter Two, militant groups with relatively stronger capabilities are more likely to ultimately defeat the states they fight than weaker groups. The literature identifies several measures of militant group capabilities including group size, external support, and the ability to wage multiple, coordinated strikes or attacks against hard targets. Militant groups with relatively weak capabilities can still fight in prolonged

²⁴ Young & Dugan, "Survival of the Fittest." The authors code this variable from active militant groups in the GTD and use this proxy to assess militant group longevity.

²⁵ Results hold for estimations including the average number of militant groups in the lifespan of militant groups engaged in sustained armed conflicts as well.

conflicts if they operate along the state's periphery and avoid destruction. But overall, more capable organizations should be more likely to launch full-fledged insurgencies against relatively more powerful states.

Several proxies for militant group capabilities are included here to account for rival plausible explanations. One measure of capabilities is reflected in the percentage of multiple and coordinated attacks a group conducts out of total attacks in its first year (*Multiple Attacks*). Dummy variables are used to denote whether a militant group has a state sponsor (whether a foreign country provides finances, capabilities, weapons, or safe-haven) and if a group conducts at least one attack in more than one country (*State Sponsorship; Transnational Targets*) (Kilberg 2011, GTD). Groups that strike a higher proportion of hard targets, such as military installations or convoys, in their first year should also be more capable of engaging in sustained armed conflicts than groups primarily or solely attacking soft targets (i.e. civilians, public places). The variable *Hard Targets* is also extracted from the GTD.

3.4.3.2 State-level attributes

State-level controls that may correlate with the model's main independent variables are also included. Quantitative literature on civil war tends to proxy state capacity with measures of GDP, which has also been used to proxy counter-terrorism capabilities or societal development. While the negative relationship between GDP per capita and civil war onset is well established, there is emerging consensus that economic conditions are poor predictors of terrorist activity outside of armed conflict. It is expected that lower rates of GDP per capita (extracted from Penn World Tables 2009) are expected

to be associated with a higher likelihood of sustained armed conflict. Scholars also continue to debate the impact of regime type on conflict dynamics including terrorism incidence, militant group survival, and civil war onset. Various measures of democracy, regime type, and regime durability are also included as controls (Freedom House, Polity IV). Following previous research, a measure of ethnic fractionalization – the probability that two people randomly selected from society are members of different ethnic groups – is taken from Fearon & Laitin (2003) data.²⁶

3.4.4 Data limitations

Most variables – including proxies for state capacity or economic development, regime type, percent of multiple/coordinated attacks or hard targets, and group ideologies – are all measured in the first year a militant group appears in the GTD. Some scholars treat a group’s emergence in a dataset as the first year of their existence, but this is often inaccurate. It is important to note that many notable militant groups are often first identified in the GTD around the time they also begin engaging in sustained armed conflicts. These data limitations are understandable, given the difficulties in tracking a group’s early attack profile immediately after their emergence or first violent attack. For example, the GTD fails to capture most of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) earliest attacks, prior to insurgency onset. Similar issues arise when I analyze early attack profiles of other prominent insurgent groups. Groups often avoid claiming responsibility

²⁶ Other state-level controls from civil war literature include whether the host state’s territory is contiguous, the extent to which a state relies on oil exports and other primary commodities, country-level religious fractionalization, population size, and the size of a state’s Muslim population. Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, “Greed and Grievance in Civil War,” *Oxford Economic Papers* 56, no. 4 (2004): 563-595; James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin. “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War.” *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003): 75-90; Young & Dugan, “Survival of the Fittest.” None of these controls are statistically significant in any model specification and are omitted from the models presented here.

for certain terrorist attacks for a variety of reasons, potentially more so during their nascent stages.²⁷ Hezbollah, for example, used a variety of aliases to take credit for its earliest and most spectacular attacks, arguably to avoid retribution while it was still a clandestine and relatively organization.²⁸ Many prominent groups' earliest attacks target rival groups or constituent civilians – attacks that often fail to be captured in terrorism databases due to underreporting or coding criteria.

Nevertheless, relying on available indicators from a group's "first year" helps alleviate issues related to endogeneity and standardizes a baseline for the analysis of factors that may impact a group's willingness and/or ability to engage in a sustain armed conflict. This study, however, does not seek or claim to uncover clear causal mechanisms, acknowledging the limitations of most large-n research on political violence. The purpose of this quantitative analysis is to identify group and environmental-level associations that help explain differences between militant groups that engage in sustained armed conflicts and those groups that do not. Since the dependent variable is binary, I use a probit regression analysis to test the main independent variables.

²⁷ Erin M. Kearns, Brendan Conlon, & Joseph K. Young, "Lying About Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37, no. 5 (2014): 422-439; Max Abrahms and Justin Conrad, "The Strategic Logic of Credit Claiming: A New Theory for Anonymous Terrorist Attacks," *Security Studies* 26, no. 2 (2017): 279-304.

²⁸ Nicholas Blandford, *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel* (New York, NY: Random House, 2011), 59.

TABLE 3.1: REGRESSION ANALYSIS
Probit Analysis: Militant Group Determinants of Sustained Insurgency
(Marginal Effects)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<u>Group Objectives</u>			
Territorial Control	0.435** (3.06)	0.539** (2.90)	0.467** (3.18)
Regime Change / Social Revolution	0.219* (2.02)	0.339** (2.29)	0.251** (2.26)
<u>Group Ideology</u>			
Religious	0.303* (2.72)	0.337** (2.86)	0.261** (2.39)
Nationalist	-0.060 (-0.69)	-0.047 (-0.47)	-0.060 (-0.67)
<u>Competitive Environment</u>			
Number of Groups	-0.017*** (-3.18)		
Single Group		0.715*** (4.74)	
> Five Groups			-0.236*** (-3.66)
<u>Organizational Structure</u>			
Bureaucracy	0.418** (3.09)	0.378** (2.67)	0.378** (2.86)
Hub-Spoke	0.481** (2.95)	0.438* (2.57)	0.462** (2.88)
All-Channel	0.268 (1.79)	0.281 (1.79)	0.233 (1.61)
<u>Group Capabilities</u>			
State Sponsorship	0.024 (0.36)	-0.0002 (-0.00)	0.007 (0.10)
Transnational Targets	0.054 (0.69)	0.086 (0.96)	0.047 (0.59)
Hard Targets	-0.007 (-1.50)	-0.007 (-1.32)	-0.007 (-1.51)
Multiple Attacks	-0.009 (-1.69)	-0.007 (-1.49)	-0.010 (-1.67)
<u>State-Level Controls</u>			
Ethnic Fractionalization	0.484*** (4.34)	0.479*** (3.78)	0.459*** (4.05)
Democracy	-0.018** (-2.19)	-0.019* (0.035)	-0.018* (-2.17)
Pseudo R ²	0.3476	0.4278	0.3632
<i>N</i>	222	228	228

* p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

The dependent variable is *Sustained Armed Conflict*. A DProbit estimating technique is used. Numbers in parentheses are Z-values. Coefficients for each model represent the marginal effect of the particular variable relative to the comparator, holding all other variables constant.

3.5 FINDINGS

Motivation: Ideology & objectives

Scholars suggests that groups with salient identities, particularly ethno-nationalist or religious motivations, should be more capable of mobilizing resources and more likely to achieve strategic objectives than left-wing or right-wing militant organizations.²⁹ Empirical results from the quantitative analysis support these insights and the paper's first hypothesis. The results show that groups with primarily religious motivations are about 34% more likely to engage in sustained armed conflicts than other ideologically motivated militant groups, holding other factors constant.³⁰ This result is particularly interesting considering notable quantitative work finds that religious groups never achieve their ultimate objectives, given their tendency towards maximalist goals and non-negotiable demands.³¹ It is highly unlikely that a Salafi-jihadist organization, for example, will establish a Shari'a based theocracy or a global Caliphate. But religious groups tend to fare better than others in garnering the necessary resources to launch campaigns of sustained attrition. It is important to note that all but one of the religious

²⁹ Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 2006; Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qaeda*.

³⁰ I treat left-wing and right-wing militant groups together as the comparator case in this regression to highlight the relative impact of a shift from predominately political ideological orientations (left/right) to ethno-nationalist or religious ideologies.

³¹ In a study of 648 terrorist groups between 1968 and 2006, Jones and Libicki (2008) find that no religious group achieved victory. See Jones and Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End*, xiv.

groups in my universe, that engage in sustained insurgencies, are Islamic militant organizations.³²

Surprisingly, the *Nationalist* measure lacks statistical significance across all model specifications. However, this unexpected result could be reflected in the findings concerning group objectives.

Previous research suggests that groups seeking narrow goals, like secession, are more capable of achieving their ultimate objectives than groups seeking maximalist goals like toppling a regime or taking over an entire country. This study shows that groups seeking territorial control and groups fighting for regime change/social revolution are about 53% and 34%, respectively, more likely to engage in sustained armed conflicts than other goal-oriented groups, keeping other variables constant.³³ The results seem to contradict findings on group ideology, considering that nationalist groups tend to have territorial objectives like secession, while religious groups tend to have broader goals like social revolution or regime change.

Group objectives likely follow ideological orientations and therefore both factors, to some extent, reinforce a group's ability to mobilize resources and challenge the state. Organizations with religious ideologies and maximalist objectives face a much tougher

³² The non-Islamic religious group that engaged in a sustained insurgency in my sample is Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army. Over the last few decades, religious militant groups – mostly of Islamic persuasion – are responsible for far more attacks and casualties than other types of militant groups worldwide. See Berman, *Radical, Religious, and Violent*. Most religious civil wars since 1940 involve belligerents that identify with Islam and religious civil wars are characterized by far higher rates of lethality than other types of civil wars. See Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*; Berman, *Radical, Religious, and Violent*; Monica Duffy Toft, "Getting Religion? The Puzzling Case of Islam and Civil War," *International Security* 31, no. 4 (2007): 97-131.

³³ I interact groups seeking regime change and groups seeking social revolution into one category because both types of groups aspire to facilitate some type of total regime overhaul. Insurgent organizations, according to most definitions, either seek to control territory (i.e. secession) or take over an entire state. But my analysis does not discount other types of groups. The comparator case for group objectives include groups seeking policy change and groups seeking to maintain the status quo. These types of groups are the least likely to wage insurgencies.

path to overall victory than groups with more limited aims but are still quite capable in mobilizing sufficient resources and support to engage in a campaign of sustained attrition. A more nuanced story emerges when looking beyond motivations and analyzing the role of organizational structures.

Organizational structure

Findings concerning organizational structure do not fully support hypothesis 3 – that suggests more hierarchically structured militant groups are associated with an increased likelihood of engagement in sustained armed conflicts. Using market structure as the base and holding other variables constant, hub-spoke groups are 44% more likely to engage in sustained armed conflicts, while the most hierarchical groups (*Bureaucracy*) are about 38% more likely. This finding challenges conventional wisdom and previous research. Even groups without a centralized command and control apparatus can pose a serious challenge to target states, as long as they have a leader and functional differentiation within the organization. Much of the insurgency literature strongly suggests that more centralized and hierarchical structures are strongly associated with militant group lethality and ultimate success. But this study shows that, irrespective of centralized hierarchies, groups with well-defined specializations and relatively more autonomy among lower-level cells or units could pose a similar threat to the states they fight as groups with highly centralized commands. Lacking high-levels of centralization, hub-spoke structured groups may be less willing or able to credibly commit to enforce an agreement with the state prior to full-fledged armed conflict. States may also find it more difficult to infiltrate and disrupt hub-spoke structured militant groups. Stifling a relatively

less connected and more independent unit of a hub-spoke structure might not significantly impede the broader organization. It is important to note that most religious groups (*Religious* has the most statistically significant and positive association with armed conflict, compared to other ideologies) tend to also have a hub-spoke structure.³⁴

Competitive environment

Supporting hypothesis 4, findings show that the more militant groups there are operating in a state, the less likely a particular militant group will engage in a sustained armed conflict. A particular militant group is 2% less likely to engage in sustained armed conflict for every additional militant group present in a competitive environment. When disaggregating the *Number of Groups* variable, results show that nascent insurrections featuring one prominent militant group are most likely to experience a sustained challenge between a particular militant group and the state. The *Single Group* variable is the most statistically significant and the largest, positive association across all models. Results suggest that a nascent insurrection featuring one primary militant group is about 72% more likely to engage in a sustained campaign of attrition than militant groups operating in more competitive environments. Findings from model 3 suggest that a militant group operating in an environment with five or more primary militant groups is 24% less likely to engage in sustained armed conflict, holding all other variables constant.

³⁴ As expected, a very low number (3 out of 41; or ~7%) of militant groups organized in the most decentralized, market structure engage in sustained armed conflicts. The data suggests that having a market structure (no identifiable leader, functional differentiation, or centralized command) is a nearly sufficient condition that a group will not engage in sustained armed conflict.

A count of the number of groups is a crude proxy for group competition used elsewhere in recent literature. But this measure does not say anything about the relative power between groups or about which groups belong to specific movements. The purpose of this macro-level, quantitative analysis is to primarily differentiate between militant groups, justify case selection, and identify key factors for further exploration. I will dig deeper, beyond simple counts of militant groups, throughout the case study analysis after building a theory of rival relations in the next chapter.

Rival explanations (Control variables)

Militant group capabilities

Results for proxies of group capabilities suggest that higher levels of capabilities are not associated with an increased likelihood of engagement in sustained armed conflicts. The coefficient estimate for the variable *State sponsorship* lacks statistical significance across all model specifications. This does not mean support from an external patron is not important. Though state sponsorship is often cited as a critical factor explaining militant group's ultimate success against the state they fight, it is likely less important than organizational factors in explaining engagements in armed conflicts. For some groups, external patrons with different priorities may derail their client's trajectories, while other groups with weak institutions may fragment following influxes of resource flows. States also provide support to militant groups that intend on remaining clandestine. In terms of operational targets, variables *Hard Targets* and *Transnational Targets* lack statistical significance across both models. In the first and third models, *Multiple Attacks* actually has a negative association, but weak statistical significance.

Groups that have conducted attacks outside their primary state are no more likely to engage in sustained armed conflicts with their host regime. It may be the case that some groups seeking to launch domestic insurgencies are less inclined to divert resources to strike targets outside the primary state and attract unnecessary interventions. Militant groups seeking to pose a serious challenge may be focused on internal challenges in their nascent stages, such as building organizational capacity and targeting constituent rivals for dominance before facing the regime in a sustained armed conflict. Groups that rely on strategies of provocation or attrition – in the form of ambitious attacks or strikes on fortified targets – before developing the capacity to withstand government responses will likely fail.³⁵ Irrespective of the precise logics underpinning these broader findings, this study shows that organizational characteristics and the competitive environment are better predictors of engagement in armed conflict than traditional proxies of group capabilities.³⁶

³⁵ Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, “The Strategies of Terrorism,” *International Security* 31, no. 1 (2006): 49-79. Provocation involves militants seeking to spark a wider conflict by using the state’s strength against itself, provoking a disproportionate response that may drive passive civilians into the hands of militant groups. As a weapon of the weak, provocative terrorist strategies can help a group improve its organizational capacity and mobilize the necessary resources to eventually challenge the state from a stronger position. Martha Crenshaw, “The Causes of Terrorism,” *Comparative Politics* 13, no. 4 (1981): 379-399. On the other hand, provoking an indiscriminate state response may be counterproductive if militants are incapable of providing protection to civilians under regime attack. A militant group’s organizational capacity to withstand and exploit government repression may serve as a necessary intervening factor linking provocative strategies and successful mobilization. See Stathis N. Kalyvas and Matthew Adam Kocher, “How “Free” Is Free Riding in Civil Wars? Violence, Insurgency, and the Collective Action Problem,” *World Politics* 59, no. 2 (2007): 177-216, 190.

³⁶ A group’s peak size should also reflect strength and capabilities. A group’s maximum membership levels (*Peak Size*) are based on Jones and Libicki (2008) data, coded as 1 if a group’s peak size features 0-99 operatives, 2 (100-999), 3 (1000-9999), and 4 (10000+). Peak size may be one of the most important variable explaining why some militant groups ultimately defeat the states they fight, but was omitted from this model for reasons of endogeneity since a group most likely reaches its maximum membership after its first year. Nevertheless, models including a measure of peak size (not reported here) show that a militant group’s engagement in sustained armed conflict does not depend on a group’s size. As Fearon & Laitin (2003) note, it may only require a few hundred committed fighters to launch an insurgency.

State-level attributes

The estimated coefficients for GDP per capita, a proxy for state capacity, are all negative and statistically significant: the higher the level of state capacity (or counter-terrorism effectiveness or level of economic development – however one chooses to primarily interpret the proxy) the less likely a particular militant group will engage in a sustained armed conflict. Since GDP per capita and regime type tend to be closely related, some models (not shown here) relied on only one control at a time. Across several model specifications, coefficients associated with all key measures of democracy and regime durability scores are negative and statistically significant. More democratic, politically free, and stable regimes are more likely to reduce a militant group's willingness and/or ability to engage in a sustained armed conflict. It may be the case that democracies tend to also be more capable and inclusive states that prevent or deter the emergence of sustained armed conflicts, forcing groups to remain clandestine and engage in low-level terrorist attacks. These results are consistent with similar findings in the literature.

Much of the cross-national quantitative literature argues that *greed*-based indicators tend to better explain civil war onset than variables that traditionally proxy *grievance*.³⁷ This study, however, finds that countries with higher levels of ethnic fractionalization are associated with an increased likelihood of sustained armed conflict. While this paper has not coded for ethnic fractionalization scores of particular regions where prominent militant groups emerge or escalate violent operations, results suggest

³⁷ Christian Davenport, David A. Armstrong II, and Mark I. Lichbach, "From Mountains to Movements: Dissent, Repression and Escalation to Civil War" (paper presented at the *International Studies Association* annual conference, San Diego, 2006).

that analyzing conflict from a group-level of analysis may challenge some findings from previous cross-national studies.³⁸ Pairwise correlation tests and a VIF check suggest that the models do not have any multicollinearity problems. Though important, state and regime-level attributes cannot explain variation among different militant groups operating in the same state. Empirical assessments of key factors related to armed conflict feasibility contribute to ongoing debates and serve as relevant controls that emphasize the importance of group characteristics and competitive environments.

Conclusion: Organizational characteristics & competitive environments

There is no single theory that can explain all militant group trajectories and each counterinsurgency requires context specific evaluation. But my quantitative model introduces an overarching framework that helps differentiate between militant groups that pose serious challenges to the states they fight and those that do not. Taking rival plausible explanations into account, I find that group characteristics (i.e. motivation and organizational structure) and competitive environments are better determinants of sustained armed conflicts than traditional measures of group capabilities (i.e. group size, state sponsorship, hard target/multiple strikes). While never achieving ultimate goals, religiously motivated militant organizations are more likely to engage in sustained campaigns of attrition than other ideologically oriented militant groups. Posing a serious challenge to a regime is not necessarily a function of how powerful or capable a group

³⁸ Janet Lewis finds that Ugandan rebel groups emerging in ethnically homogenous areas of the country are more likely to become viable organizations than groups emerging in relatively diverse areas. See Janet I. Lewis, "How Rebellion Begins: Insurgent Group Formation and Viability in Uganda" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2012).

may seem – it’s about the competitive environment and internal capacity required to effectively mobilize resources and sustain armed hostilities against regime forces.

By looking at a different dependent variable my findings challenge conventional wisdom: groups with relatively less centralized command and control are just as (or slightly more) likely to engage in sustained armed conflict than the most hierarchically structured organizations. Without strict centralization, fighters have more freedom to react to fluid situations on the ground. As opposed to a more conventional military confrontation, traditional guerilla, hit-and-run style attacks do not require stringent direction from the top.

Previous research shows that in a full-fledged war, governments are more likely to defeat a single-group insurgency compared to a multi-group insurgency.³⁹ But a nascent insurrection characterized by one primary militant group is a strong predictor for whether that group engages in a sustained campaign of attrition in the first place. More nuance around this finding is explored throughout the rest of this dissertation. In the next two chapters, I rely on small-n comparative methods to build a theory of rival consolidation in nascent insurrections and improve my quantitative model with a new measure of constituency dominance.

³⁹ Seth G. Jones, *Waging Insurgent Warfare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

CHAPTER FOUR

BUILDING A THEORY OF RIVAL CONSOLIDATION IN NASCENT INSURRECTIONS: A Small-n Comparative Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Why do some militant groups, who survive their most vulnerable first year and demonstrate a capability to conduct attacks, end up challenging a more powerful state in a sustained armed conflict? Scholarly theories of insurgency and civil war onset offer an array of arguments but are limited in explaining why some prominent groups engage in sustained campaigns of attrition. There is no single theory or pathway that can explain all militant group trajectories and each counterinsurgency requires context specific evaluation. Nevertheless, there should be some overarching organizational framework that helps differentiate between militant groups that pose serious challenges to the states they fight and those that do not.

Overall, militant groups primarily focused on critical organizational or process-oriented goals are less likely to successfully pursue more strategic objectives vis-à-vis target states.¹ In the nascent stages of an insurrection, I expect that militant groups are primarily focused on two major organizational hurdles: overcoming collective action and principal-agent problems.² Mobilizing sufficient resources and support for an insurgency,

¹ Peter Krause, "The Political Effectiveness of Non-State Violence: A Two-Level Framework to Transform a Deceptive Debate," *Security Studies* 22, no. 2 (2013): 259-294. In civil war contexts, militant group use of terrorism enhances their longevity (an organizational objective) but reduces the likelihood of achieving ultimate goals. See Virginia Page Fortna, "Do Terrorists Win? Rebels' Use of Terrorism and Civil War Outcomes," *International Organization* 69, no. 3 (2015): 519-556.

² The collective action problem in militant contexts has been widely studied. See for example, Lichbach, Mark I. *The Rebel's Dilemma*. University of Michigan Press, 1998; Elisabeth Jean Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Jeremy M. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge

while maintaining organizational control and security, are seemingly insurmountable dilemmas that militant groups often face.

I argue that the more a dominant militant organization consolidates its rivals, the more likely it will overcome these organizational problems and the more likely it will be both willing and capable to engage in a sustained armed conflict.

Consolidating rivals helps minimize counterproductive forms of violence and allows the dominant militant group to focus its efforts on more strategic objectives, like waging a sustained armed conflict. Without major competitors, non-aligned civilians and potential recruits face fewer options to pick sides for support, while fighters in the field are less likely to defect or deviate from the leadership's objectives. By consolidating rivals, a militant group has a better chance of securing a safe haven to prepare for an insurgency and attract important sources of outside support. Without major constituent foes, a militant group can more credibly signal its commitment to the wider constituency and convince prospective supporters that the militant group has a chance to sustain an insurgent challenge against the regime. This section introduces and justifies my theoretical argument, based on insights from recent literature, the dissertation's quantitative findings, and cross-case comparative analysis.

University Press, 2006); Stathis N. Kalyvas and Michael Adam Kocher, "Ethnic Cleavages and Irregular War: Iraq and Vietnam," *Politics & Society*, Vol. 35, no. 2 (2007): 183–223. On militant organizations and principal-agent problems see Jacob N. Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013) and Scott Gates, "Recruitment and Allegiance: The Micro-foundations of Rebellion," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46, no. 1 (2002): 111–130. Organizational and strategic goals are often at odds as militant groups face considerable trade-offs between organizational security and effectiveness.

Quantitative findings: Competitive environments as a key determinant of armed conflict engagement

Guided by a social movement framework, my quantitative analysis shows that, on average, organizational characteristics (i.e. ideology and organizational structure) are stronger indicators for engagement in sustained armed conflicts than traditional proxies for group capabilities (i.e. group size, state sponsorship, multiple & coordinated attacks, hard target strikes).

Most social movements, like many militant movements, feature multiple organizations competing for dominance. In general, I find that more competitive militant environments also reduce the likelihood any particular militant group engages in a sustained insurgency against the states they fight. After disaggregating among various competitive environments, I find that nascent insurrections characterized by one active militant group are more likely to experience sustained armed conflicts than contexts featuring three or more groups. Environments with more groups likely reflect increased levels of competition for limited resources and constituency support.

Single-group insurrections in particular – featuring only one dominant group at the time an armed conflict is launched – are the strongest determinant of whether a particular militant group challenges a target state in a sustained insurgency or not. Dominant groups may have been embroiled in a more competitive environment prior to consolidating rivals and then moving forward by challenging the regime. This dynamic is particularly crucial among militant groups in the early phases preceding the onset of

insurgency, as organizations strive to dominate a wider movement in order to pursue more strategic objectives vis-à-vis the states they fight.³

4.1 LIMITS OF LARGE-N RESEARCH & DIFFERENT ONTOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF CAUSATION

It is important to stress that the interpretation of large-n quantitative analysis relies on a variance-based ontological understanding of causation, which focuses on the average mean effects of certain factors over a large set of highly diverse cases. For example, the first stage of the analysis examines prominent militant groups from around the world featured in the Global Terrorism Database between 1970-2007. My quantitative findings present generalizable empirical associations across diverse militant groups and highlights interesting factors worth unpacking to identify causal relationships. Case-based researchers, on the other hand, understandably find limited value in this approach, often placing a high value on contextual conditions including similar temporal or spatial scope.⁴ Factors driving militant mobilization and success in 1970s Latin America differ considerably from post-9/11 Islamist insurgencies. Case researchers therefore tend to prioritize a more in-depth analysis of a small number of militant groups, perhaps from a particular region and time period. Overcoming selection bias is an important and understandable goal for most variance-based scholars – a goal that motivated the exploration of all prominent militant groups (not just those groups already waging

³ Daniel Byman, “Understanding Proto-Insurgencies,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 31, no. 2 (2008): 165-200.

⁴ James Mahoney, “Strategies of Causal Inference in Small-N Analysis,” *Sociological Methods & Research* 28, no. 4 (2000): 387-424.

insurgency) and a novel dependent variable in my quantitative analysis.⁵ But examining cases solely based on their membership in the outcome (or where the dependent variable equals one in variance-based terminology) can also yield interesting results in a search for a more generalizable theoretical understanding of the phenomenon in question.

TABLE 1: DIFFERENT METHODS & LOGICS OF CAUSAL INFERENCE IN THIS THESIS

Method	Quantitative Regression Analysis (Large-n)	Comparative Methods (Small-n)	Process-Tracing Case Studies (n = 1)
Ontological Understanding of Causation	Variance-based, frequentist logic	Comparative logic of elimination	Mechanistic logic
Types of Causality Assessed	Mean causal effect of independent variable X on dependent variable Y	Necessary and/or sufficient conditions that produce Y	Identifying causal mechanisms Linking cause(s) to an outcome
Types of Inferences	Cross-case inferences to the broader population	Cross-case inferences to more contextualized population	Within-case inferences
Associated Chapters in this Thesis	Chapter 3 Probit analysis of militant groups worldwide from 1970-2007	Chapter 4 Theory-building exercise (Positive-on-Outcome analysis); disconfirming individually necessary conditions	Chapters 6-8 Case studies to identify causal mechanisms

⁵ For methodological debates concerning selection biases in social science see Barbara Geddes, “How the Cases You Choose Affect the Answers You Get: Selection Bias in Comparative Politics,” *Political Analysis* 2 (1990): 131-150; David Collier and James Mahoney, “Insights and Pitfalls: Selection Bias in Qualitative Research,” *World Politics* 49, no. 1 (1996): 56-91.

4.2 COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: *Top Dog* as an (almost) necessary condition

Militant groups engage (and do not engage) in sustained armed conflicts in a variety of contexts – in weak and relatively strong states, in democracies or autocracies, with the help of a state sponsor and without, with varying levels of capabilities and territorial control, with different motivations and organizational structures, among other indicators. A positive-on-outcome (similar to Mill’s method-of-agreement) comparative analysis of 10 Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) militant groups that engaged in sustained armed conflicts in my universe of cases suggests that no single theoretically relevant causal factor can be deemed an individually necessary condition.⁶ Yet one factor stands out when comparing all positive-on-outcome cases: being the *Top Dog* (a militant group that commits the most attacks – against military and/or civilian targets – in a given year compared to all other active militant groups in their country of origin) at or around the time they begin engaging the target state in a sustained armed conflict.⁷ Of course, in reality, the most active group does not necessarily mean it is the most powerful. But at this stage of the analysis, being the most active militant group in a particular environment is a crude, yet intuitive, proxy for groups that dominate their constituencies before going on to challenge the regime.

This proxy for constituency dominance further approximates reality when a particular militant group maintains its *Top Dog* status throughout the initial stages of the

⁶ Derek Beach and Rasmus Brun Pedersen, *Causal Case Study Methods: Foundations and Guidelines for Comparing, Matching, and Tracing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

⁷ About 85% of the 54 militant groups (excluding India and Myanmar-based groups) that engaged in armed conflicts are also the *Top Dog*. I excluded militant groups from India and Myanmar for this calculation since both countries were facing multiple and simultaneous insurgencies throughout the time period and it was difficult to confirm which groups were *Top Dogs* in their respective conflicts.

armed conflict. For example, the PKK and LTTE emerged in the mid-1970s and dedicated most of their attacks against rival Kurdish and Tamil groups, respectively, until challenging regime forces in an armed conflict in the mid-1980s. Both groups are the *Top Dog* groups in their respective environments throughout the early years of full-fledged armed conflict.

In a comparative analysis of all Middle Eastern and North African insurgent groups, being the *Top Dog* is an almost necessary condition for engagement in sustained armed conflict. Militant groups need not be the *Top Dog* in their environments to engage in a sustained armed conflict. Weaker rival Palestinian groups have joined the PLO or Hamas in sustained armed campaigns against Israel, for example. More importantly, the *Top Dog* proxy is not individually sufficient. Some militant groups seeking to challenge the regime, who are the most active in their environment, do not challenge regimes in armed conflicts for a sustained period. Other contextual or causal conditions must be identified to paint a more accurate picture of why some militant groups pose serious challenges to the states they fight.⁸

⁸ Beach & Pedersen, *Causal Case Study Methods*, 245-248.

TABLE 4.1: POSITIVE-ON-OUTCOME ANALYSIS

Palestine Liberation Organization	Hamas	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb	Armed Islamic Group (GIA)	Al-Jama' at allIsmiyya	Hezbollah	Polisario Front	PKK	Mujahideen-e-Khalq (MEK)	Group
Israel/Palestinian territories 1964 (1965)	Israel/Palestinian territories 1987 (1993)	Algeria 1998 (1999)	Algeria 1992 (1993)	Egypt 1977 (1993)	Lebanon 1982 (1990)	Morocco 1973 (1975)	Turkey 1978 (1984)	Iran 1965 (1979)	Country
Nationalist	Nationalist/Religious (Islamist)	Religious	Religious	Religious (<i>Sumi Islamism</i>)	Religious (<i>Shi' a Islam</i>)	Nationalist (<i>Sahrawi</i>)	Nationalist (<i>Kurdish</i>)/Marxist-Leninist	Religious (<i>Shia Islamist</i>)/Marxist-Leninist	Ideology
Territorial control	Territorial control	Social revolution	Regime change	Social revolution	Regime change	Territorial control	Territorial control	Regime change	Goal
Refugee community; foreign fighters	Religious organization/movement	Splinter	Political party	Informal political/social movement	Splinter (Merger)	Splinter; student/youth group (Merger)	Student group	Political party	Militant Origins
Bureaucracy	Hub-Spoke	All-Channel	Bureaucracy	All-Channel	Bureaucracy	Bureaucracy	Bureaucracy	Bureaucracy	Org. Structure
Democracy	Democracy	Autocracy	Autocracy	Autocracy	Anocracy	Autocracy	Democracy	Autocracy	Regime Type
1	8	4	5	3	14	1	2	1	# of Groups
Extortion	None	None	Extortion; robbery	None	Fraud; Narcotics	Trafficking; Robbery	Trafficking; Extortion;	None	Crime
Military	Non-Military	None	Military	Military	Military	Military	Military	Military	State Support (Type)
Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Territory
Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Top Dog

Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)	Israel/Palestinian territories	1978 (2002)	Religious; nationalist	Territorial control	Religious organization/movement	Hub-Spoke	Democracy	9	None	Non-military	No	No
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I conducted a positive-on-outcome analysis on the 10 militant groups operating in the MENA region that at some point engaged in a sustained insurgency between 1970-2007.⁹ I chose to narrow in on this region because of gaps in related scholarly work and policy relevant reasons. The few systematic studies that explore similar research puzzles from the militant group’s perspective focus on other geographic regions, including Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South/Southeast Asia.¹⁰ While other regions experienced declines in violent intra-state conflicts since the early 1990s, violent conflicts have increased considerably in the MENA region over the last 15 years.¹¹ The MENA region also witnessed the most dramatic rise in terrorist attacks during this period.¹² Compared to civil wars and insurgencies in other regions, violent conflicts in the MENA region are far more difficult to resolve and impact international security to a greater degree.¹³ While this theory-building exercise develops an argument that should apply to any militant group that emerges in competitive environments, subsequent case study

⁹ My quantitative model correctly classified or closely predicted most (7/10) of the MENA insurgent organizations explored here. The three incorrectly predicted groups are Hamas, AQIM, and MEK.

¹⁰ Charles W. Mahoney, “Hearts and Minds or Blood and Guts? Strategy, Terrorism, and the Growth of Proto-Insurgencies” (Phd diss., University of California, 2011); See Janet I. Lewis, “How Rebellion Begins: Insurgent Group Formation and Viability in Uganda” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2012); Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

¹¹ For example, Fearon (2017) identifies a jump from three civil wars in MENA in 2002 to twelve ongoing civil wars in 2014. See James D. Fearon, “Civil War & the Current International System,” *Daedalus* 146, no. 4 (2017): 18-32.

¹² Institute for Economics and Peace (2018), *Global Terrorism Index 2018: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*, Retrieved from <http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2018/12/Global-Terrorism-Index-2018-1.pdf>

¹³ Fearon, “Civil War & the Current International System.”

analysis narrows in on Middle Eastern and North African militant group dynamics for the reasons listed above.¹⁴

4.2.1 A note on necessity & sufficiency

Discussions focused on necessary or sufficient conditions might not necessarily be required for a theory-building exercise pertaining to such a complex and global phenomenon like insurgency onset. An assessment of probabilistic causality seems more appropriate.¹⁵ Some methodologists committed to identifying necessary and/or sufficient conditions refute that a condition can be considered *almost* necessary.¹⁶ A condition is either necessary or not for a particular outcome, according to this perspective. Nevertheless, I present this discussion to situate my approach among ongoing methodological debates concerning small-n comparative approaches.

Top Dog status can also be viewed as a potentially tautological cause since elements of the outcome of interest (sustained armed conflict) may include attributes of the cause. The *Top Dog* proxy is a function of a particular militant group's attack profile and whether the group commits the highest number of attacks against either civilian or military targets, or both. The outcome of interest, sustained armed conflict engagement, is derived from a threshold based on annual battle-related deaths (among all belligerents) during an insurgency. As best as possible, I classify the *Top Dog* variable prior to the onset of an armed conflict. However, due to data limitations described in Chapter Three,

¹⁴ Scope conditions for my theory are laid out in the final section. A more thorough justification of case selection based on the quantitative and comparative analyses is outlined in Chapter Five.

¹⁵ Peter Krause raised this point to me. I am grateful for his invaluable comments on this chapter.

¹⁶ Derek Beach brought this to my attention in discussions during his May 2017 qualitative research methods workshop at Concordia University in Montreal.

many prominent militant groups begin appearing in the Global Terrorism Database only after crossing UCDP's 25 battle-related deaths threshold for armed conflict.

Despite these important issues, I argue that this *Top Dog* proxy reflects a measure of constituency dominance in the nascent stages preceding or surrounding the onset of sustained insurgency. Compared to other theoretically relevant variables, dominating a particular constituency is the factor that is most commonly associated with militant groups that engage in sustained insurgencies. Based on theories of social movements and my initial findings, I believe it is worth further unpacking how particular competitive environments and forms of rival militant group relations play a role in this story.

4.3 CONCEPTUALIZING CONSTITUENT RIVALS

This chapter focuses on relations between prominent militant groups and rivals within a broader movement that represent a similar constituency (i.e. Turkish Kurds, Syrian Sunnis, Lebanese Shi'a). Competitors in wider militant movements generally share the same broader ideology or political motivation. Rival groups may differ on ultimate objectives – like secession or regime change. But the unifying trait is the common constituency they emerge from and claim to defend.¹⁷ My theory primarily focuses on constituent relations among rivals within the same country – not international ties. For example, the PKK's ties with Kurdish groups in Iraq would be considered an external between independent militant groups despite sharing a Kurdish identity. These

¹⁷ Brian Phillips refers to this type of rivalry as “intra-field” rivalries, as opposed to “inter-field” rivals that have considerably different ideologies or represent different ethnic or religious groups. See Brian J. Phillips, “Terrorist Group Rivalries and Alliances: Testing Competing Explanations,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 11 (2018): 997-1019.

relations reflect a different phenomenon from mergers or consolidation processes between the PKK and Kurdish group in Turkey.

I refer to these types of groups broadly as “*rival constituent groups*” or “*constituent rivals*.” For the purposes of this theoretical framework, the term “*rivals*” encompasses both formal groups and identifiable factions. At the nascent stages of an insurrection, I expect that the lines between what is labelled a “group” or “faction” are blurred. Organizational splits and splinter groups are a common feature in both civil wars and a movement’s early phases prior to the outbreak of violent hostilities. The term “group” may denote a more formal organization, while “faction” might be construed as a group within a formal group. For example, Hamas and Fatah are distinct militant groups within the Palestinian national movement. At times, each of these groups may be composed of various factions and individual allegiances as well that contribute to internal rifts. In other cases, the distinction between group and faction is more ambiguous. Organizational ties between the Fighting Vanguard and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, during the late 1970s Islamist Uprising in Syria, remains a source of debate for scholars and observers.¹⁸ Therefore, when I use the term “*rivals*,” I mean either formal groups or identifiable factions with separate leaderships that seek to represent a similar constituency or movement within the same country.

¹⁸ Raphaël Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Brynjar Lia, “The Islamist Uprising in Syria, 1976-82: The History and Legacy of a Failed Revolt,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 43, no. 4 (2016): 541–559.

Militant group relations and rebel fragmentation

As discussed in Chapter Two's literature review, scholars of civil wars and terrorism have recently begun to systematically examine dynamics associated with militant group relations and movement structure.¹⁹ Most research on militant group relations focuses on either cooperation *or* competition, examining either why some groups engage in a particular type of relationship or evaluating the consequences of these ties. Militant relationships have primarily been used to evaluate group lethality and tactical choices, among other outcomes.²⁰ While previous scholarship helps to differentiate among broader forms of militant ties, my research seeks to explore the consequences of certain forms of rival relations during the early stages of a nascent insurrection. Many insurgency contexts involve multiple groups vying for dominance of a particular constituency in the nascent stages of an armed conflict with a more powerful state.²¹

I primarily justify my theoretical focus based on my quantitative and qualitative analyses. However, the specifics of my argument are largely inspired by Peter Krause's (2017) work on national movement effectiveness. Krause outlines three broader types of

¹⁹ Ely Karmon, *Coalitions Between Terrorist Organizations: Revolutionaries, Nationalists and Islamists* (Netherlands: Nijhoff Publishers, 2005); Victor Asal, Hyun Hee Park, Karl Rethemeyer and Gary Ackerman, "With Friends Like These...Why Terrorist Organizations Ally," *International Public Management Journal* 19, no. 1 (2016), pp. 1-30; Assaf Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation Among Terrorist Actors* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); Mohammed M. Hafez, "Fratricidal Rebels: Ideological Extremity and Warring Factionalism in Civil Wars," *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2017); Tricia Bacon, "Hurdles to International Terrorist Alliances: Lessons From Al Qaeda's Experience," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20 no.1 (2017): 79-101; Navin Bapat and Kanisha D. Bond, "Alliances Amongst Militant Groups," *British Journal of Political Science* 4, no. 42 (2012): 793-824; Seden Akcinaroglu, "Rebel Interdependencies and Civil War Outcomes," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 5 (2012): 879-903; Hanne Fjelde and Desirée Nilsson, "Rebels Against Rebels: Explaining Violence Between Rebel Groups," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 4 (2012): 604-628; Costantino Pischedda, "Wars Within Wars: Why Windows of Opportunity and Vulnerability Cause Inter-rebel Fighting in Internal Conflicts," *International Security* 43, no. 1 (2018): 138-176.

²⁰ Phillips, "Terrorist Group Rivalries and Alliances."

²¹ Byman, "Understanding Proto-insurgencies."

national movement systems that are functions of the movement's internal distribution of power: hegemonic, united, and fragmented.²² According to his theory, hegemonic movements featuring one clearly dominant organization (*hegemon*) are most likely to achieve broader strategic successes – such as statehood or the expulsion of an occupying force – compared to united or fragmented movements lacking a hegemon.²³

4.3.1 Movement structure and strategic effectiveness

Without significant competitors vying for leadership of the constituency, the hegemonic militant group is in a strong position to focus their efforts on pursuing strategic objectives. Hegemonic movements allow the dominant group to restrain counterproductive challenges from within, as subordinate groups try to improve their own position of power within the movement.²⁴ Fragmented movements – when all significant rival groups lack an alliance – are the least likely to attain strategic success. Militant groups in a fragmented movement might be directly fighting one another or stove-piping operations by avoiding coordination. But for Krause, even united movements – where significant groups form an alliance – can be plagued by counterproductive competition (including infighting or outbidding) among groups vying for dominance. Groups in an alliance still maintain loyalty to their respective leadership despite attempts at strategic coordination of efforts. Militant alliances, especially within civil war contexts, tend to be

²² Peter Krause, “The Structure of Success: How the Internal Distribution of Power Drives Armed Group Behavior and National Movement Effectiveness,” *International Security* 38, no. 3 (2013/14): 72-116, 77; Peter Krause, *Rebel Power: Why National Movements Compete, Fight, and Win* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).

²³ For a militant group to be classified as the “hegemon,” it needs to be at least three times more powerful than any other group in the movement. Krause (2017) defines and operationalizes militant group power and position in the hierarchy of a movement based on a combination of three factors: group membership, political seats, and fundraising.

²⁴ Krause, “The Structure of Success,” 74.

fragile and often break-down.²⁵ Since united movements can be plagued by counterproductive competition, internal hegemony is the ideal movement structure to achieve broader strategic and ultimate objectives. Nevertheless, a non-hegemonic, yet dominant, group of a strategic alliance should have a better chance at challenging the state than dominant groups embroiled in destructive competition.

Whether a dominant group achieves hegemony later in the insurgency or whether the wider movement attains broader strategic successes after initially challenging the target state is beyond the scope of my analysis. Hegemonic movements may be the key factor in explaining why some movements are ultimately more successful than others. When it comes to launching a sustained campaign of attrition, however, I expect that hegemony is preferred but not necessary.

4.4 THE STRATEGIC LOGIC OF MILITANT VIOLENCE IN NASCENT INSURRECTIONS

Violence serves various purposes throughout a militant group's campaign, including as a form of costly signalling that can demonstrate credible resolve and help mobilize, and socialize, recruits. Nascent militant groups often rely on targeted forms of violence to differentiate themselves from their competitors.²⁶ While most strategies of

²⁵ Fotini Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

²⁶ Byman, "Understanding Proto-insurgencies." Kydd & Walter (2006) outline several main strategies of *terrorism* (or militant violence) including, provocation, attrition, intimidation, outbidding. Spoiling is another militant strategy whereby extremists seek to derail a peace process. See Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, "The Strategies of Terrorism," *International Security* 31, no. 1 (2006): 49-80. I expect spoiling to occur during negotiations or after an agreement with the state, not during the nascent stages of an armed insurrection. Though Young and Findley (2012) posit that only provocation and attrition strategies are present during the pre-armed conflict phase, outbidding and intimidation of constituent populations could also occur throughout a militant group's early campaign. See Michael G. Findley and Joseph K. Young, "Terrorism and Civil War: A Spatial and Temporal Approach to a Conceptual Problem," *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 2 (2012): 285-305.

terrorism discussed in the literature are intended to strengthen a militant group's organizational capacity, my dissertation's focus and outcome of interest centers on a group's willingness and ability to sustain an armed campaign of attrition. A strategy of attrition refers to militant group's ability to degrade enemy capabilities in an effort to signal strength to the target state and the broader society.²⁷ The remainder of this section briefly outlines other major strategies of militant violence and associated forms of rival relations.

4.4.1 Destructive competition: Infighting & chain-ganging

Some fragmented movements are embroiled in more destructive competition than others at different points in their nascent trajectories. In destructive competition, militant groups directly attack each other, trying to degrade rival militant forces to assume leadership of the constituency.²⁸ In highly competitive environments, militant groups may also target constituent population members to consolidate support for the group through coercion and deter collaboration with the state.²⁹ This is commonly referred to as the strategy of *intimidation*. Some militant groups or factions may initiate attacks against the target state to spark a wider conflict, forcing other groups in the movement to join in or risk becoming irrelevant. In these types of *chain-ganging* spirals, one or more groups would rather avoid conflict with the state, but end up being drawn into a confrontation because of the actions of rivals.³⁰ States may incorrectly attribute attacks or purposefully

²⁷ Kydd & Walter, "The Strategies of Terrorism."

²⁸ Pischedda, "Wars Within Wars."

²⁹ See Jannie Lilja and Lisa Hultman, "Intraethnic Dominance and Control: Violence Against Co-Ethnics in the Early Sri Lankan Civil War," *Security Studies*, 20, no. 2 (2011): 171-197.

³⁰ The concept of chain-ganging has been explored in the study of other international relations phenomenon, including alliance formation and the onset of inter-state war. See Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, "Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity," *International*

hold the leading group responsible for violence conducted by rivals. Chain-ganging can be destructive to particular movements if militant groups are drawn into a conflict which they are ill-prepared or unwilling to fight.

4.4.2 Competitive escalation: Outbidding

Militant groups engaged in outbidding – a healthier form of competition than destructive infighting – escalate attacks against the target state as a show of strength to gain support from a constituent base at the expense of rivals.³¹ Like chain-ganging, outbidding can be a counterproductive form of violence – whether movements are fragmented or united – if the main militant groups are ill-prepared for a sustained armed conflict against the regime.³² Though both forms of violence can spark an armed conflict, these escalatory spirals are primarily a product of organizational competition.³³ Competitive escalations generally do not reflect a coherent strategy to challenge the regime in a war of attrition. The chances for infighting, chain-ganging, or outbidding should be minimized in situations where a dominant militant group effectively consolidates constituent rivals in more strategically cooperative or hegemonic arrangements. Without major internal challenges, a dominant militant group is more

Organization 44, no. 2 (1990): 137-168; Dominic Tierney, “Does Chain-Ganging Cause the Outbreak of War?” *International Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (2011): 285-304.

³¹ Justin Conrad and Kevin Greene, “Differentiation and the Severity of Terrorist Attacks,” *Journal of Politics* 2, no. 77 (2015): 546-561; Stephen Nemeth, “The Effect of Competition on Terrorist Group Operations,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 2, no. 58 (2014): 336-362.

³² Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Kydd & Walter, “The Strategies of Terrorism.” Michael Findley and Joseph Young, “More Combatant Groups, More Terror?: Empirical Tests of an Outbidding Logic,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24, no. 5 (2012): 706-721.

³³ Mia Bloom, “Public Support, Market Share, and Outbidding,” *Political Science Quarterly* 119, no. 1 (2004): 61–88.

likely to focus its efforts on degrading and destroying regime targets in a sustained campaign of attrition.

4.4.3 Provoking the enemy

Of all the main strategies at militant groups' disposal, scholarship on terrorism and insurgency most often focus on provocation as an effective strategy to mobilize resources in the early stages of a violent conflict.³⁴ Provocation is usually employed to spark a wider conflict by using the state's strength against itself, provoking a disproportionate response that may drive passive civilians into the hands of militant groups.³⁵ State violence could facilitate the emergence of club goods, whereby capable militants offer selective (dis)incentives and protection of particular communities.³⁶ Provoking an indiscriminate state response may be counterproductive, however, if militants are incapable of protecting civilians from rival groups or the regime. Overall, I expect that the more a dominant organization consolidates its rivals and reins in on counterproductive violence, the more likely it will be effective at executing and exploiting a coherent provocation strategy. In a less competitive militant environment, indiscriminate state responses are more likely to drive non-aligned civilians and potential recruits into the hands of the dominant group. The dominant group, in turn, will be in a

³⁴ Byman, "Understanding Proto-insurgencies,"; David B. Carter, "Provocation and the Strategy of Terrorist and Guerrilla Attacks," *International Organization* 70, no. 1 (2016): 133–73; Brian Blankenship, "When Do States Take the Bait? State Capacity and the Provocation Logic of Terrorism," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62, no. 2 (2018): 381–409.

³⁵ Martha Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism," *Comparative Politics* 13, no. 4 (1981): 379–399; Kydd and Walter, "The Strategies of Terrorism."

³⁶ Kalyvas, Stathis N. and Matthew Adam Kocher, "How "Free" Is Free Riding in Civil Wars? Violence, Insurgency, and the Collective Action Problem," *World Politics* 59, no. 2 (2007): 177–216.

better position to vet recruits and offer protection to its supporters if it is not plagued by counterproductive competition from within.

4.5 A THEORY OF RIVAL CONSOLIDATION IN NASCENT INSURRECTIONS

The following section outlines the core logic of my argument: the more a dominant militant group consolidates its rivals, the more likely it will engage in a sustained armed conflict with the target state. Other rival organizations, not the target government, are usually the focus of nascent militant groups during the initial phases of an armed insurrection. Highly competitive environments force groups to pay most of their attention to internal matters, such as enhancing recruitment and improving their own positions within the wider movement. The origins of well-known insurgencies are often characterized by considerable infighting and competition for dominance, as in the cases of LTTE, PKK, Fatah, and Hezbollah. A dominant militant group which has consolidated its rivals should be in a stronger position to fight the target state than groups preoccupied with counterproductive violence against rivals within a militant movement.³⁷

Dominant militant groups that consolidate their rivals have access to new resources – pooled from other organizations or derived from the local constituency.³⁸ Without other viable options, dominant groups are in a stronger position to persuade non-aligned civilians to support or formally join the organization. While alleviating the more immediate collective action problem, militant leaders can divert more of their attention to strengthening their internal organizational capacity and preparing for war with the target state. Lacking major competitors, leading militant groups signal their credibility to

³⁷ Bakke, Cunningham, and Seymour, “A Plague of Initials.”

³⁸ Pischedda, “Wars Within Wars”.

members and are in a better position to keep lower-ranking fighters in line with leadership objectives. Achieving dominance over constituent rivals helps a prominent militant group to emerge as a formidable force and pose a serious and sustained challenge to the target state.³⁹

If a militant group emerges as the dominant actor through an effective process of rival consolidation – whether by hegemonic takeover or merger – counterproductive violence is minimized and the chances for sustained armed conflict increase considerably. Militant groups preoccupied with fighting one another for turf and support are highly unlikely to garner the willingness or capabilities needed to pose a serious challenge to the regime. James Fearon (2004) argues that civil wars are often the product of shocks to the relative power of aggrieved opposition groups and the state. Armed conflict then ensues when one side seeks to exploit a temporary advantage. Using a related logic at a different level-of-analysis, I argue that the motivation and ability for a militant group to challenge a target state in an armed conflict is a function of rival relations and relative power within the opposition’s movement. By launching an armed conflict, whether ultimately successful or not, a dominant group signals its commitment to defend its constituency in an effort to cement its position as movement leader. The process of consolidating rivals can therefore be viewed as influencing both the opportunity and willingness to engage in a sustained armed conflict. Eliminating viable competitors helps the dominant group pool resources from rivals and attract larger numbers of recruits (*opportunity*), while

³⁹ Examining the early stages of the Sri Lankan Civil War, Lilja and Hultman (2011) show that rebels target co-ethnic rivals to consolidate dominance over their constituency and target co-ethnic civilians to ensure cooperation against the government. In the pre-armed conflict phase, militants “try to establish social control over a population to become an efficient fighting unit” capable of challenging the regime. See Jannie Lilja and Lisa Hultman, “Intraethnic Dominance and Control: Violence Against Co-Ethnics in the Early Sri Lankan Civil War,” *Security Studies*, 20, no. 2 (2011): 171-197, 175.

impacting the leadership's decision-making calculus (*willingness*) to focus the organization's attention from battling rivals to waging war against the target state.

The following table outlines the main types of militant group relations in descending order, from the highest level of rival consolidation to the lowest: hegemonic takeover/umbrella structure (merger), strategic alliance, competitive escalation, destructive competition. From a movement-level of analysis, these main types of relations roughly correspond to the three movement structures identified by Krause: hegemonic, united, and fragmented. These four types of rival relations are explored from the perspective of the leading militant group – or what type of relations the dominant group identified in my analysis (i.e. *Top Dog*) has with its main constituent rivals. I argue that the more rival consolidation a dominant group achieves, the more likely it will engage in a sustained armed conflict. The table includes key attributes for each type of rival relations and expected outcomes, from the perspective of the leading group.

TABLE 4.2: RIVAL RELATIONS AND EXPECTED LIKELIHOOD OF SUSTAINED ARMED CONFLICT

Rival Relations	Attributes	Implications	Sustained Armed Conflict: Expected Likelihood⁴⁰
Hegemonic Consolidation / Umbrella Structure⁴¹	Consolidation of rivals, single hegemonic group or common command and control among constituent rivals led by dominant group; pooled resources/fighters	Dominant group more prepared to overcome organizational hurdles, shift focus to combatting regime; subordinate groups too weak to challenge dominant group; prospect for counterproductive violence is minimized	Most Likely (Attrition)
Strategic Alliance⁴²	Maintaining independent chains of command; pooled resources/fighters among constituent rivals, more focus on targeting regime	Dominant group maintains leadership, but challenging groups could disrupt alliance	More Likely (Attrition, but other counterproductive forms of violence possible)
Destructive Competition / Competitive Escalation⁴³	Groups battling each other for resources and dominance, targeting constituent rivals and/or constituent civilians to coerce support and deter collaboration with the state; groups may target the regime, not each other in outbidding spirals	Chain-ganging may occur, drawing ill-prepared militant groups into a destructive conflict with the state; Counterproductive to strategic gains as groups mainly focused on internal fights	Unlikely (Intimidation/ Infighting/ Chain-ganging/ Outbidding)

⁴⁰ Associated strategic logic(s) of violence are listed in parentheses. See Kydd and Walter, “Strategies of Terrorism”; Krause, *Rebel Power*.

⁴¹ Assaf Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation Among Terrorist Actors* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars*.

⁴² Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad*; Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars*.

⁴³ Clint Watts, “Deciphering Competition Between al-Qa’ida and the Islamic State,” *Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) Sentinel* 9, no. 7 (2016): 1-7; Lilja and Hultman, “Intraethnic Dominance and Control;” Pischedda, “Wars Within Wars;” Bloom, “Public Support, Market Share, and Outbidding.”

Note: The expected outcomes are based on probabilistic predictions of relative success between types of militant group rival relations. While the universe of rival relations involves other types of relations, this table includes major forms and their expected outcomes. It is unclear how more minor forms of relations (i.e. ideological competition, stove-piping, transactional collaboration, or tactical cooperation) among groups would impact sustained armed conflict engagement. These types of relations are omitted from this table for simplicity but are not entirely discounted from the case studies.⁴⁴

While Krause's theory is instructive, it is important to further disaggregate between various forms of rival relations – from a militant group's perspective – when assessing the likelihood of armed conflict engagement. Krause seeks to explain wide ranging rebel group behaviour and national movement effectiveness. I, however, strive to explain why some prominent militant groups launch sustained campaigns of attrition – not if that group (or wider movement) achieves more strategic or ultimate objectives (like international recognition or statehood). Internal power distribution is at the core of Krause's argument, whereby strength is operationalized as a function of a group's membership, popular support, and finances.⁴⁵ But these measures, including public

⁴⁴ The table outlines four main types of rival relations among militant groups. I have identified more forms of militant group ties from previous research, but only outline the types of relationships that make sense for my argument – focusing on relations among rivals representing the same constituency within a particular state. See Moghadem, *Nexus of Global Jihad*. According to my theory, rival consolidation is an ordinal measure associated with the types of rival relations described in the table above. In reality, the distinctions among types of rival relations are more complex and fluid. Militant groups can engage in various forms of both cooperative and competitive relations with different groups at any given moment. For example, a militant group might violently engage with a rival group for turf, while competing with a different rival for support by escalating attacks against the regime. In this scenario, counterproductive competition is plaguing the wider movement and it is unlikely a single dominant militant group will emerge to take the regime head on in a sustained armed conflict. Alternatively, if a dominant militant group successfully consolidates rivals – whether by hostile takeover or merger – it will be more likely to pose a sustained challenge to the regime since counterproductive challenges from within the movement are reduced. For the purposes of this research, I am interested in unpacking the link between a dominant group's *primary* state of rival relations and likelihood of engagement in sustained armed conflict in the nascent stages of a militant insurrection.

⁴⁵ Arms and other forms of weaponry are not formally included in Krause's measure of strength, since not all groups in a particular movement resort to violence. See Peter Krause, "The Structure of Success: How the Internal Distribution of Power Drives Armed Group Behavior and National Movement Effectiveness," *International Security* 38, no. 3 (2013/14): 72-116, 77; Peter Krause, *Rebel Power: Why National Movements Compete, Fight, and Win* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).

opinion polling or seats in political institutions, are not as useful or appropriate in the study of nascent militant groups prior to the onset of insurgency. Militant groups do not need large numbers of members to get an insurgency off the ground. Similarly, militant groups usually secure major forms of financing and domestic political support or representation only after developing sufficient coercive capacity and maturing into a full-fledged insurgent organization. I argue that the primary nature of nascent relations between rivals is a more effective and pragmatic indicator to address my research puzzle.

4.6 HOW RIVAL CONSOLIDATION LEADS TO SUSTAINED ARMED CONFLICT

In this section, I briefly explore two major organizational hurdles that militant organizations need to address throughout their campaigns, particularly in the nascent stages of an insurrection. These organizational problems are well established in the scholarly literature and correspond to dilemmas most groups face: overcoming collective action problems (coined as *The Rebel's Dilemma* by Mark Lichbach (1994)) and principal-agent problems (coined as *The Terrorist's Dilemma* by Jacob Shapiro (2013)). I then lay out the logic behind how rival consolidation helps dominant militant groups overcome these organizational issues through several observable manifestations. According to my theory, the process of rival consolidation should unleash several causal mechanisms that help explain why some militant groups go on to challenge more powerful states in a sustained insurgency.

4.6.1 Rival consolidation & overcoming collective action problems

Overcoming collective action problems remains one of the earliest and most important organizational issues facing militant groups seeking to launch an insurgency.⁴⁶ Convincing people to fight and potentially die for a cause is particularly difficult in the early stages for a militant movement prior to large scale confrontations with the target state. Most individuals caught up in a nascent insurrection would prefer to reap the benefits of a militant victory without incurring any of the costs required to achieve victory. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as *free riding*.⁴⁷ There are two main ways for militant organizations and leaders to alter cost-benefit calculations for potential participants and alleviate collective action problems: punishment and reward.⁴⁸ Many prominent militant groups may offer selective material incentives – such as salaries, social services, and family benefits.⁴⁹ But nascent militant groups lack the resources and infrastructure required to sustain material inducements to current and potential recruits. Militant groups therefore rely on immaterial selective incentives as well to fill this void.⁵⁰ Ethno-nationalist and religious groups should be more effective at providing non-material sources of inspiration, whether it is the promise of heroic status for participants or a stake

⁴⁶ See Lichbach, *The Rebel's Dilemma*.

⁴⁷ Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and The Theory of Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).

⁴⁸ Existing studies of civil war processes emphasize the role of material resources, social endowments, or solidarity in helping overcome collective action problems. This thesis takes a slightly different perspective by exploring how the process of consolidating rivals facilitates collective action as dominant groups pool resources and signal their resolve as a formidable force to potential recruits and supporters. See Samuel L. Popkin, *The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); Lichbach, *The Rebel's Dilemma*; Elisabeth Jean Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁴⁹ See Popkin, *The Rational Peasant*; Lichbach, *The Rebel's Dilemma*; Walter Enders and Todd Sandler, *The Political Economy of Terrorism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁵⁰ Elisabeth Jean Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Gates, "Recruitment and Allegiance."

in a future state. All major militant groups among a wider movement likely have some ability to manipulate incentives to encourage militant recruitment.⁵¹ But organizations that rely less on financial and material incentives to bolster recruitment can prioritize finite resources to prepare for and wage an armed conflict.⁵² Eliminating rivals allows the dominant group to emerge as the only viable option for potential recruits and present itself as a formidable force willing to take action to defend the constituency's interests.

Militant groups that continue to be embroiled in destructive forms of competition with rivals are wasting scarce resources on internal fights. But a dominant group that has successfully consolidated rivals can devote considerably more resources and attention to addressing collective action issues. A consolidated militant group can more credibly signal resolve and dedication to its constituents, while effectively executing provocation strategies against the target state.⁵³ Without major rival factions vying for leadership, individuals are now left with either supporting the government, supporting the dominant militant group, or trying to avoid picking sides.⁵⁴ As the costs of nonparticipation become higher, collective action problems become less of a burden for the dominant militant group.⁵⁵ Once dominant militant groups address the early, and seemingly insurmountable, mobilization hurdle they can then divert more attention to strategic objectives and fighting the regime in battle. Performing effectively in the battlefield in turn encourages

⁵¹ To this end, militant groups with strong pre-war social ties have a major advantage over groups founded on weaker networks. See Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion*.

⁵² Barbara F. Walter, "The Extremist's Advantage in Civil Wars," *International Security* 42, no.2 (2017): 9-39, 19.

⁵³ Kydd & Walter, "The Strategies of Terrorism."

⁵⁴ Militant groups can also engage in coercion-based recruitment strategies. See Kristine Eck, "Coercion in Rebel Recruitment," *Security Studies* 23, no. 2 (2014), pp. 364–398; Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy M. Weinstein, "Who Fights? The Determinants of Participation in Civil War," *American Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 2 (2008): 436-455.

⁵⁵ See Kalyvas and Kocher, "Ethnic Cleavages and Irregular War."

further recruitment, as more individuals and other militant leaders are encouraged to join forces with the dominant organization. The Islamic State group, for example, attracted many defectors from other Syrian militant organizations following its early military successes in 2014.⁵⁶ Collective action problems are usually the main organizational hurdle and more immediate issue to overcome for most militant groups. But in the nascent stages of an armed conflict, militant organizations are also preoccupied with addressing another critical issue: principal-agent problems.

4.6.2 Rival consolidation & overcoming principal-agent problems

When organizing an insurgency, nascent militant leaders often find themselves facing principal-agent problems common in any formal organization. Leaders have difficulties ensuring that rank-and-file members and fighters on the ground are behaving in congruence with organizational objectives.⁵⁷ Some lower ranking operatives may “shirk” their responsibilities or put in less effort than their leadership demands. Without proper oversight, militant members may engage in subversion and deviate from organizational goals – for example by engaging in predatory or criminal behaviour.⁵⁸ Overcoming this agency problem is at the root of what Shapiro (2013) refers to as the *Terrorist’s Dilemma*: a trade-off between maintaining organizational secrecy and efficiency.⁵⁹ Communication – whether by technological means or in person – is necessary to ensure agents are acting in line with the principal. Governments, however,

⁵⁶ Will McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2015), 80-81.

⁵⁷ Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Shapiro, *The Terrorist’s Dilemma*.

can intercept these communications and subsequently disrupt or even crush militant groups. This problem is particularly prevalent for nascent militant groups seeking to build and strengthen their organizational capacity.

Militant leaders face difficulties determining which recruits are truly dedicated to the organization's cause and which recruits join for more opportunistic or personal reasons, such as thrill seeking or revenge.⁶⁰ Committed recruits will likely continue to be dedicated to the organization, perform well in the battlefield, and remain in line with leadership objectives. Recruits motivated by more self-interested concerns are more likely to deviate from leadership objectives.⁶¹ Without other viable options, both opportunists and dedicated recruits will seek to join the dominant militant organization. Nascent militant groups preoccupied with battling one another should have a more difficult time overcoming principal-agent problems. But by consolidating constituent rivals, dominant militant groups can focus their attention on enhancing internal organizational capacity and focusing on mechanisms to discern between opportunists and more dedicated recruits.

Without viable competitors, dominant militant groups can also credibly signal their commitment to the broader cause. This dynamic can be viewed as a reverse principal-agent problem, whereby the principal also needs to assure its agents that it is capable and willing to root out corruption from within and focus on more strategic

⁶⁰ Kalyvas and Kocher, "Ethnic Cleavages and Irregular War." Religious groups in particular should be in a stronger position to effectively screen recruits via their robust social networks. Compared to its more secular rival Fatah, Hamas was more effective in identifying and managing its operatives through its religious networks and social services provision. See Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma*, 248. This angle may be another reason why religious militant groups, according to my quantitative analysis findings, are more likely to engage in sustained armed conflicts than other ideologically oriented groups.

⁶¹ Barbara F. Walter, "Bargaining Failures and Civil War," *Annual Review of Political Science* 12 (2009): 243–261.

objectives.⁶² By consolidating rivals, the dominant militant group is communicating an ability to overcome internal threats and emerge as the vanguard of the movement. Potential recruits who plan on deviating from the organization's objectives or shirk responsibilities will have to think twice about joining a consolidated group that can manage internal issues more efficiently.⁶³ Fighters at any stage of an insurgency can seek to disengage or switch sides and help the state. This phenomenon is fairly common in multi-party civil wars.⁶⁴ But dominant militant groups without serious rival challenges should be better positioned to deter defections to weaker constituent groups or the state.⁶⁵ Weaker rivals are more likely to voluntarily join the hegemonic group in a strategic alliance or merger if they believe the hegemon has a good chance of launching and winning an insurgency.⁶⁶ Beyond rival groups, militant leaders are also pre-occupied with rooting out subservient behaviour from within their core organization and perceived challenges to their vision. With less rival groups to worry about, leaders of dominant militant groups are more capable of imposing costs on individuals accused of deviant behaviour and eliminating potential threats from within the organization itself.

Groups that consolidate rivals will still face difficulties vetting recruits and differentiating opportunists from truly committed foot soldiers. But the risks and threats from internal subversion will be reduced in an environment with less viable competitors

⁶² Walter, "The Extremist's Advantage in Civil Wars."

⁶³ For more insight on agency issues facing militant groups fighting in civil wars, see Peter Schram, "Managing Insurgency" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2017).

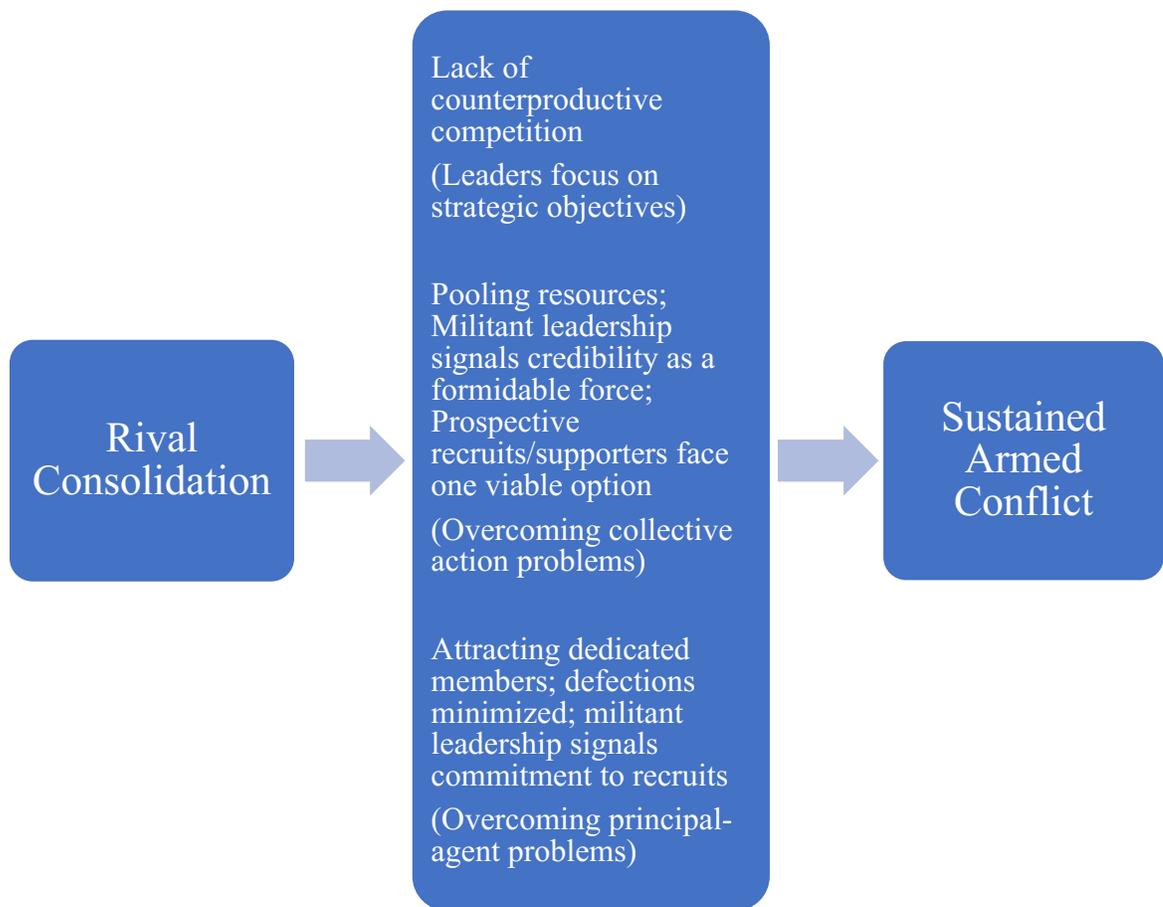
⁶⁴ Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars*.

⁶⁵ On the other hand, with less prominent rival groups to worry about, states can also make gains by focus their efforts on disrupting the dominant and consolidated militant organization. This may be one reason behind why states facing multiple militant groups in a full-fledged insurgency have a tougher time achieving total victory. See Seth G. Jones, *Waging Insurgent Warfare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁶⁶ Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars*.

and counterproductive violence. Rival consolidation also enhances a dominant militant group's ability to provoke and withstand government repression, which is likely to facilitate resource mobilization and promote key organizational objectives needed to pose a serious challenge to the state.

FIGURE 4.1: HOW RIVAL CONSOLIDATION LEADS TO SUSTAINED ARMED CONFLICT (CAUSAL MECHANISMS)



Evaluating militant group success requires discerning between a group's tactical, organizational, strategic, and ultimate objectives. My dissertation explores nascent militant group trajectories and how key organizational goals (i.e. consolidating rivals to

solidify dominance of the constituency) translate into strategic success (i.e. sustained engagement in an armed conflict or *attrition* with the target state).⁶⁷ Nascent militant groups preoccupied with battling one another have a much more difficult time addressing major organizational hurdles required to sustain military operations. By consolidating constituent rivals, dominant militant groups can focus their attention on enhancing internal organizational capacity, attracting large numbers of recruits, and eliminating potential rivals from within the organization itself. With fewer options, fighters dedicated to the movement's broader cause are less likely to defect in an environment characterized by a dominant and consolidated militant organization.

Concluding remarks: Rival relations and rival explanations

The goal of this theory building exercise is not to discount or diminish existing theories of insurgency mobilization, or to claim that my theory definitively has more explanatory power than all others. There will always be deviant cases that do not conform perfectly to theoretical expectations, requiring an ongoing process of updating causal factors or contextual conditions for theory. The purpose of this chapter – and the larger dissertation – is to lay the groundwork for organizational explanations that serve as an underexplored and more generalizable piece to the broader puzzle of why some militant groups engage in sustained armed conflicts.

⁶⁷ Marsden (2013) and Krause (2016) offer frameworks to conceptualize various degrees of terrorist group success, spanning from the short to long-term goals and discerning between various political and organizational objectives. See Sarah Marsden, “Successful Terrorism: Framework and Review,” *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 4, no. 2 (2012): 134-150; Krause, “The Political Effectiveness of Non-State Violence.”

Most existing theories of insurgency onset are either related to opportunity arguments (repressive regimes, weak states, regime type) or motivational perspectives (group ideology, grievances, objectives). Many of the proxies for these factors, however, remain relatively constant throughout the nascent stages prior to large-scale armed hostilities. Several dominant theories of civil war onset and insurgency development are limited in addressing variation and cannot explain why some states or groups facilitate the transition from lower-levels of violent conflict to sustained armed conflicts.⁶⁸ Armed conflicts and civil wars do not erupt in a vacuum and are largely a product of existing violent contention among competing groups and the state.

The need to overcome rivals in the nascent stages of an insurrection is an almost universal feature of competitive militant environments worth exploration in subsequent case study analysis. Before turning to the case studies, I re-visit my quantitative model with a new measure for constituency dominance and justify the dissertation's case selection for process-tracing.

⁶⁸ A comparison of my theory to other arguments is explored in Chapter Nine, following the dissertation's case study analyses.

CHAPTER FIVE

NESTING THE ANALYSIS: Improved Quantitative Model & Case Selection for Process-tracing

5.1 UPDATED QUANTITATIVE MODEL

This short chapter serves as a bridge between the development of my theory and in-depth case studies. Before justifying my thesis case selection and elaborating on process-tracing methods, I briefly re-visit my quantitative model. After conducting a comparative analysis in Chapter Four, I classify a new quantitative measure intended to proxy constituency dominance (*TopDog*) for all militant groups in my universe of cases. I find that this new variable outperforms other measures of militant group competition and improves my model's explanatory power. My initial quantitative analysis suggests that less competitive militant environments improve the chances for a particular militant group to engage in a sustained armed conflict. However, the updated findings suggest that militant groups dominating their constituencies or groups that are the only active group in their environment are stronger determinants for engagement in sustained armed conflict.

By re-visiting my quantitative model, I help fulfill one of the criteria associated with nested analysis and demonstrate the iterative nature of my dissertation's research process.¹ Despite some improvements, my model does not classify all cases correctly. As a result, I justify the selection of three cases for process-tracing to test my new theory of rival consolidation in nascent insurrections.

¹ Evan S. Lieberman, "Nested Analysis as a Mixed-Method Strategy for Comparative Research," *American Political Science Review* 99, no. 3 (2005): 435-452.

Classifying Top Dog groups

Similar to my comparative analysis, I classify a militant group that engaged in sustained insurgencies as “Top Dog” if it was the most active militant group the year before and/or at the time it challenged the state in an armed conflict. But for groups that never cross my dependent variable threshold, I code groups as Top Dog if they held that status for at least half the duration of their lifespan, consecutively or not.²

TABLE 5.1: UPDATED REGRESSION ANALYSIS

*Probit Analysis: Militant Group Determinants of Sustained Insurgency
(Marginal Effects)*

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
<u>Group Objectives</u>					
Territorial Control	0.435** (3.06)	0.539** (2.90)	0.467** (3.18)	0.449** (2.98)	0.575** (3.02)
Regime Change / Social Revolution	0.219* (2.02)	0.339** (2.29)	0.251** (2.26)	0.205 (1.75)	0.314* (2.07)
<u>Group Ideology</u>					
Religious	0.303* (2.72)	0.337** (2.86)	0.261** (2.39)	0.259* (2.28)	0.303* (2.55)
Nationalist	-0.060 (-0.69)	-0.047 (-0.47)	-0.060 (-0.67)	-0.564 (-0.62)	-0.065 (-0.66)
<u>Competitive Environment</u>					
Number of Groups	-0.017*** (-3.18)				
Single Group		0.715*** (4.74)			0.593*** (3.54)
> Five Groups			-0.236*** (-3.66)		
Top Dog				0.358*** (5.02)	0.255** (3.25)
<u>Organizational Structure</u>					

² For example, the Turkish leftist militant group Devrimci Sol has been active since 1978, yet never crossed my sustained armed conflict threshold. During its initial militant lifespan (1978-mid 1990s), it was classified as the *Top Dog* for only three years. As a result, I assigned the group a 0 in the *Top Dog* category overall. On the other hand, the Turkish People’s Liberation Army (TPLA) is assigned a 1 for the overall *Top Dog* category since it was the most active group in its environment for the majority of its militant lifespan (1970-1980), despite never crossing my threshold for engagement in sustained armed conflict.

Bureaucracy	0.418** (3.09)	0.378** (2.67)	0.378** (2.86)	0.400** (2.84)	0.372* (2.50)
Hub-Spoke	0.481** (2.95)	0.438* (2.57)	0.462** (2.88)	0.482** (2.80)	0.451* (2.51)
All-Channel	0.268 (1.79)	0.281 (1.79)	0.233 (1.61)	0.279 (1.79)	0.294 (1.79)
<u>Group Capabilities</u>					
State Sponsorship	0.024 (0.36)	-0.0002 (-0.00)	0.007 (0.10)	0.023 (0.33)	0.021 (0.27)
Transnational Targets	0.054 (0.69)	0.086 (0.96)	0.047 (0.59)	0.068 (0.82)	0.120 (1.29)
Hard Targets	-0.007 (-1.50)	-0.007 (-1.32)	-0.007 (-1.51)	-0.005 (-0.96)	-0.006 (-1.03)
Multiple Attacks	-0.009 (-1.69)	-0.007 (-1.49)	-0.010 (-1.67)	-0.008 (-1.28)	-0.006 (-1.11)
<u>State-Level Controls</u>					
Ethnic Fractionalization	0.484*** (4.34)	0.479*** (3.78)	0.459*** (4.05)	0.460*** (3.90)	0.462*** (3.61)
Democracy	-0.018** (-2.19)	-0.019* (0.035)	-0.018* (-2.17)	-0.191* (-2.24)	-0.015 (-1.68)
Pseudo R ²	0.3476	0.4278	0.3632	0.4054	0.4620
N	222	228	228	225	225

* p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

The dependent variable is *Sustained Armed Conflict*. A DProbit estimating technique is used. Numbers in parentheses are Z-values. Coefficients for each model represent the marginal effect of the particular variable relative to the comparator, holding all other variables constant.

Discussion

A thorough discussion of the original regression models (1-3) is provided in Chapter Three. To conclude this section, I briefly discuss how the new quantitative models (4-6) – featuring a proxy for constituency dominance – impact the overall results. Across all updated models, the new *Top Dog* variable’s coefficient is positive and highly statistically significant. In Model 4, the coefficient suggests that if a militant group is identified as the most active militant group in its environment, it has a 36% greater likelihood of waging a sustained insurgency than less active militant groups. Including the *Top Dog* variable maintains the overall model’s predictive power while having no

considerable impact on the magnitude and effect of the variables in the original models. However, when *Top Dog* is included along with the *Number of Groups* variable – the latter loses its statistical significance (not shown here). Identifying the most active militant group in an environment is a stronger predictor of sustained insurgency onset than a simple count of active militant groups.

As with the original models, *Single Group* remains the strongest predictor of sustained insurgency onset. The most robust updated model includes both *Single Group* and *Top Dog* variables. In this model, a *Top Dog* group is 26% more likely than less active groups to wage a sustained insurgency whereas environments characterized by only one active militant group are almost 60% more likely to experience a sustained insurgency than multi-group insurrections. Being the *Top Dog* considerably improves a militant group's chances of waging a sustained insurgency – but being the only active militant organization remains the most preferable situation for militant groups seeking to fight a target state in an armed conflict.

5.2 MULTI-METHOD CASE SELECTION JUSTIFICATION: Hezbollah and the PKK

This section briefly justifies my case selection based on my quantitative regression and qualitative comparative analyses. I decided to select Hezbollah and the PKK as “positive” cases and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) as a “negative” case. The quantitative justification is straight forward: my model correctly classified Hezbollah and the PKK as groups that would be expected to challenge their respective regimes in sustained insurgencies. Overall, my quantitative model correctly classifies roughly 85%

of the cases in my universe. However, one important case that the model incorrectly classified is the Syrian MB – which I elaborate on later in this section.

I now turn to qualitative method justifications for selecting Hezbollah and the PKK. Case studies are often used in conjunction with cross-case methods to (dis)confirm a particular theory. According to Beach & Pederson, theory-centric process tracing should involve selecting typical cases for further exploration.³ In this thesis, I select two typical cases (Hezbollah and the PKK) where the hypothesized cause (X) and the outcome of interest (Y) are both present. The case studies are conducted to identify causal mechanism(s) that link the cause of interest (rival consolidation) and the outcome (engagement in sustained armed conflict). I argue that the process of rival consolidation should help dominant militant groups reduce counterproductive violence from within the wider movement, while addressing collective action and principal-agent problems. I rely on these cases to evaluate the explanatory power of my argument compared to rival explanations.⁴

Identifying causal mechanisms for building or testing theory is highly effective in most-likely cases that take extreme values of both the cause and outcome of interest. Hezbollah is a well-known case of an organization that originated as a relatively weak umbrella group and transitioned into a full-fledged insurgent organization with military capabilities that rival many states. Hezbollah consolidated its rivals and emerged as the hegemonic militant group in Lebanon shortly before waging a sustained war of attrition

³ Derek Beach and Rasmus Brun Pedersen, “Selecting Appropriate Cases When Tracing Causal Mechanisms,” *Sociological Methods & Research* 47, no. 4 (2018): 837-871.

⁴ Jason Seawright and John Gerring, “Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research: A Menu of Qualitative and Quantitative Options,” *Political Research Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (2016): 294–308.

against Israel.⁵ Similarly, the PKK emerged as a clandestine militant group that soon eclipsed its Kurdish rivals and solidified its status as the hegemonic militant group among its constituency before launching a sustained insurgency against Turkey.⁶

TABLE 5.2: MULTI-METHOD CASE SELECTION JUSTIFICATION

MILITANT GROUP	CASE STUDY TYPE	JUSTIFICATION BASED ON QUANTITATIVE MODEL	JUSTIFICATION BASED ON QUALITATIVE METHODS PRINCIPLES
HEZBOLLAH	Typical	Correctly Classified (quant. model correctly expected group to succeed)	Hypothesized cause (Rival Consolidation) & Outcome (Sustained Armed Conflict) both present
PKK	Typical	Correctly Classified (quant. model correctly expected group to succeed)	Hypothesized cause (Rival Consolidation) & Outcome (Sustained Armed Conflict) both present
SYRIAN MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD	Deviant or “Negative” case	Incorrectly Classified (quant. model incorrectly expected group to succeed)	Hypothesized Cause (Rival Consolidation) is absent & Outcome (Sustained Armed Conflict) is absent; Negative case based on “Possibility Principle”

⁵ Nicholas Blandford, *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah’s Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel* (New York: Random House, 2011); Luis De La Calle and Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca, “How Armed Groups Fight: Territorial Control and Violent Tactics,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38, no. 10 (2015): 795–813.

⁶ Aliza Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

5.2.1 The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood: A “negative” case

My quantitative model incorrectly classified the Syrian MB and expected the group to engage in a sustained armed conflict against the target regime.⁷ The group is also classified as the *Top Dog* (most active militant group) in Findley and Young’s (2012) data throughout the duration of its armed campaign. As a type of *deviant* case, where the expected cause(s) are present, but the outcome is absent, there must be some omitted contextual/causal conditions from my model. A critical omitted causal condition, in my assessment, is the particular nature of rival relations among the wider Islamist movement in Syria: between the Syrian MB and constituent rivals.

I similarly justify selecting the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood as a case worth exploring using the “Possibility Principle.”⁸ According to this perspective, “negative” cases are selected based on whether the outcome of interest did not occur, but there was a real – not just theoretical – possibility that it could have. If one or several independent variables predict an outcome’s occurrence, then the outcome of interest should be considered possible and particular case is relevant for study.⁹ The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood emerged as a civic/religious organization that peacefully participated in Syria’s political system before developing an armed militant wing in the late 1970s to strike Syrian regime targets. The militant group sought to represent Syria’s Islamist movement and fight for aggrieved Sunni constituents. Members of its armed wing received guerilla warfare training and prepared for a full-blown insurgency in an effort to

⁷ Observations with predicted scores greater than 0.5 indicate the model expected these groups to engage in a sustained armed conflict. The Syrian MB’s predicted score was 0.65, yet the militant group was classified as a group that did not wage a sustained armed conflict.

⁸ James Mahoney and Gary Goertz, “The Possibility Principle: Choosing Negative Cases in Comparative Research,” *The American Political Science Review* 98, no. 4 (2004): 653-669.

⁹ Mahoney and Goertz, “The Possibility Principle,” 4.

topple the repressive Assad regime. But the militant group failed to fully consolidate and its rivals or emerge as the undisputed hegemon. Counterproductive violence from within the Syrian Islamist movement hurt the Syrian MB's ability to mobilize resources and sustain an insurgency beyond a few years. The militant group may have been no match to defeat the state, but it had a chance to sustain a full-fledged insurgency.

Some methodologists suggest that qualitative case study research should rely on an asymmetric understanding of causation.¹⁰ Through this ontological prism, understanding why some militant groups engage in sustained armed conflicts is not necessarily the inverse of why others fail. Identifying broader cause(s) of militant group success does not automatically imply that the absence of these cause(s) explains group failure. Nevertheless, exploring “negative” cases identifies the extent to which my theory of rival consolidation plays a role in a group's nascent trajectory. I do not claim that the counterfactual to my theory explains why some groups fail to challenge regimes they fight. Even if the Brotherhood successfully consolidated rivals – or emerged as the movement hegemon – and built an effective organization capable of waging an effective military campaign, Syria's unrestrained counterinsurgency campaign would have likely crushed the insurrection regardless. But, as Chapter Eight shows, the Brotherhood's inability to consolidate rivals plays a crucial role in its nascent trajectory and demise as a significant militant threat.

¹⁰ Derek Beach and Rasmus Brun Pedersen, *Causal Case Study Methods: Foundations and Guidelines for Comparing, Matching, and Tracing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

Shared contextual conditions

Relevant negative cases must share similar contextual conditions with positive cases for a theory to be properly evaluated.¹¹ In each case, a militant group which dominates its constituency seeks to challenge a more powerful state in an asymmetric armed conflict. The three militant organizations under study emerged during the mid-to late 1970s or early 1980s in the Middle East's Levant region. In all three cases, a particular ethnic or religious constituency is facing discrimination and repression from a government largely consisting of a dominant ethnic-religious group. These state-periphery relations helped produce the necessary grievances to form the foundations for militancy among a specific movement.

In Turkey, the government suppressed minority Kurdish rights for decades prior to the emergence of the PKK. The Shi'a of Lebanon also faced similar discrimination and long periods of neglect from the more powerful Sunni and Christian sects, despite representing a large segment of the country's population. The Syrian MB sought to represent the interests of Syria's religious Sunni community amid repression from a secular Ba'athist regime in Damascus dominated by the minority Alawite sect – a Shi'ite offshoot. The three militant groups also embraced ideologies prioritizing religious or ethno-nationalist identities and pursued either secessionist or regime change-oriented ultimate objectives.¹² But from a more fine-grained perspective, each group differed considerably on ideological outlook and more strategic goals.

¹¹ Kim Sass Mikkelsen, "Negative Case Selection: Justifications and Consequences for Set-Theoretic MMR," *Sociological Methods & Research* 46, no. 4 (2017): 739–771.

¹² As discussed in Chapter Two, broader ideological dispositions often overlap in reality.

Hezbollah emerged during a civil war as a vanguard of the Lebanese Shi'a community seeking to ultimately replace the current Lebanese order with a religious state based on Shi'a rule. Unlike other cases, Hezbollah's main target of violence, since gaining hegemony of its constituency, has always been a neighbouring state: Israel. In the other cases, like most insurgencies, the militant groups primarily fight the state from the country where they emerge. The Marxist-Leninist PKK – which increasingly adopted a more ethno-nationalist ideology to widen support – fights the Turkish state in an effort to secure independence for the stateless Kurdish population in the region. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, on the other hand, emerges as a branch of the broader Muslim Brotherhood movement – a vanguard of political Islamism across the Muslim world. The Syrian MB therefore represent a strand of radical Sunni Islamist ideology, seeking to overthrow the Alawite regime in Damascus. Three different ideologies (religious Shi'a, ethno-nationalist, religious Sunni) and three different goals (battle foreign occupation, separatism, regime change) are represented across the cases explored in this thesis.

Most-similar or most-different systems?

Many comparative studies on militant groups set up a most-similar systems design, whereby groups are selected based on sharing all similar traits excepted for the cause of interest that seems to vary accordingly with the outcome.¹³ In reality, however, it is very difficult to control for all theoretically relevant variables given that insurgencies vary considerable across contexts. For example, two groups selected for comparison may

¹³ Janet I. Lewis, "How Rebellion Begins: Insurgent Group Formation and Viability in Uganda" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2012), 30-31; Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

emerge in relatively weak states with access to state sponsorship. Digging deeper into factors that are selected as qualitative controls may reveal that each group received different levels of outside support (i.e. military assistance vs. logistical assistance) or faced varying levels of repression or weak counterinsurgency campaigns. I, on the other hand, adopt a positive-on-outcome design in Chapter Four which is rarely used in the social scientific study of militant groups. As discussed, militant groups emerge in a variety of contexts. But constituency dominance is one factor that seems to unite prominent militant groups that fight in sustained insurgencies.

Based on my findings, I infer that dominating a particular constituency is an important cause explaining why some groups pose a serious challenge to the states they fight while others do not. However, the three groups selected for further inquiry were also classified as the *Top Dog* – most active militant group in their environment before launching sustained campaigns insurgencies (in the cases of Hezbollah and the PKK) or throughout their entire lifespan (Syrian MB). This suggests that this proxy for constituency dominance is, on its own, insufficient in explaining why some groups go onto challenge regimes in sustained insurgencies while others fail to get an insurgency off the ground or are crushed early on.

In Chapter Four, I present an argument that privileges a militant group's rival relations as the key to this puzzle. It is not just about whether a militant group is simply the leader of its movement or dominates its constituency. A more compelling story emerges after analyzing whether a dominant militant group has sufficiently consolidated

its rivals to the point that counterproductive competition within the wider movement has largely ceased.¹⁴

TABLE 5.3: RIVAL RELATIONS & CASE SELECTIONS

Group (Start Year)	Country	Ideology	Objectives	Militant Origins	Org. Structure	Regime Type	State Support	Top Dog	Rival Relations¹⁵	Sustained Insurgency
<i>PKK (1978)</i>	Turkey	Marxist-Leninist/Ethno-Nationalist (<i>Kurdish</i>)	Separatist / Independent Kurdish state	Student group	Bureaucracy	Democracy	Military	Yes	Hegemonic Consolidation	Yes
<i>Hezbollah (1982)</i>	Lebanon	Religious (<i>Shi' a Islam</i>)	Evict Foreign Forces / Regime Change	Splinter (merger)	Bureaucracy	Anocracy	Military	Yes	Hegemonic Consolidation	Yes
<i>Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (1979)</i>	Syria	Religious (<i>Sunni Islamist</i>)	Regime Change	Religious, civic organization; political party	All-Channel	Autocracy	Military	Yes	Destructive Competition/Chain-gang	No

Independence of cases

By selecting cases in different conflicts, I am ensuring that there is a high degree of independence among each case study and other cases within the wider population.¹⁶

Previous related studies tend to examine rebel or militant groups within the same state, to

¹⁴ Recent research also suggests that hegemonic national movements – with one clear dominant militant group – are more likely to achieve strategic successes than united or fragmented movements. See Peter Krause, *Rebel Power: Why National Movements Compete, Fight, and Win* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).

¹⁵ Forms of rival relations are coded based on my assessments and supported by quantitative and/or qualitative accounts for each group. Each case study chapter will introduce a chart that explores a particular militant group’s chronological trajectory through the prism of its relations with rivals. I justify each ‘rival relations’ classification with references to the most authoritative accounts in scholarly research and historic records.

¹⁶ John Gerring, *Social Science Methodology: A Criterial Framework* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 178-181.

control for some country-level factors and regime characteristics.¹⁷ However, comparing rebel groups within the same conflict might interfere with the examination of a particular causal process since the trajectories of one case likely impact the outcomes for others. More importantly, my thesis does not aim to systematically examine why some groups are more successful or more cohesive than co-ethnic or constituent rivals. There may be evidence of learning or contagion among my selected cases, since the militant groups operated in a similar region and time period, facing overlapping geopolitical considerations at times. However, I believe I am ensuring an appropriate level of independence among my cases by looking at prominent militant groups in different countries and distinct conflicts.

5.3 PROCEEDS-TRACING METHOD

Limits to comparative methods

Small-n comparative methods, on their own, are limited in confirming causal relationships. Comparative methods are often used to construct small, causally homogenous populations to facilitate case selection with the hopes that insights from certain case studies can be applied to other similar cases.¹⁸ Since it is difficult to generalize beyond a small number of cases, researchers should aim to combine cross-case methods with within-case analysis to enhance our understanding of a particular phenomenon.

¹⁷ Lewis, “How Rebellion Begins: Insurgent Group Formation and Viability in Uganda”; Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion*.

¹⁸ Alexander L. George and Andrew Benet, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 151-180.

Comparative frameworks are limited in assessing interactions and are set up in a way that assumes causes are independent of one another. This is particularly problematic in complex social phenomenon, such as insurgency development, where factors often work in conjunction with others to produce self-reinforcing outcomes. Individual conditions are rarely necessary or sufficient on their own, but comparative methods can account for conjunctions where, for example, two factors together are sufficient for an outcome.¹⁹ My positive-on-outcome analysis in Chapter 4 helps definitively eliminate individually necessary conditions while helping identify interesting patterns for further exploration. More importantly, the comparative analysis offers weak evidence of the existence of a causal relationship between being the *Top Dog* and engaging in sustained insurgencies. Process-tracing methods are required to provide more in-depth support for whether a causal relationship exists and what potential causal relationships might look like.

¹⁹ Charles C. Ragin, *Fuzzy-set Social Science*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000); George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, 157.

TABLE 1: DIFFERENT METHODS & LOGICS OF CAUSAL INFERENCE IN THIS THESIS

Method	Quantitative Regression Analysis (Large-n)	Comparative Methods (Small-n)	Process-Tracing Case Studies (n = 1)
Ontological Understanding of Causation	Variance-based, frequentist logic	Comparative logic of elimination	Mechanistic logic
Types of Causality Assessed	Mean causal effect of independent variable X on dependent variable Y	Necessary and/or sufficient conditions that produce Y	Identifying causal mechanisms Linking cause(s) to an outcome
Types of Inferences	Cross-case inferences to the broader population	Cross-case inferences to more contextualized population	Within-case inferences
Associated Chapter(s) in this Thesis	Chapter 3 Probit analysis of militant groups worldwide from 1970-2007	Chapter 4 Theory-building exercise (Positive-on-Outcome analysis); disconfirming individually necessary conditions	Chapters 6-8 Case studies to identify causal mechanisms

Process-tracing for causal inference

Process-tracing methodology by definition allows researchers to make *within-case* inferences about causal relationships. To make more generalizable claims, process-tracing case studies must be nested into other cross-case research designs. By closely exploring historical trajectories and strategic interactions, process-tracing can uncover specific sequences between the hypothesized variable(s) of interest that are inherently overlooked by large-n regression and small-n comparative analyses. Unlike

cross-case methods, within-case analysis adopts a systems understanding of causal mechanisms, exploring *how* a process of rival consolidation (or lack thereof) contributes to a militant group's willingness and ability to engagement in a sustained insurgency.²⁰ The within-case analysis can also better explain temporal variation than other methods, helping identify *when* nascent militant groups make the leap to sustained insurgency.

This approach differs slightly from previous literature on process tracing, that often take a counterfactual understanding of causal mechanisms.²¹ In a mechanistic, systems understanding, each constituent part of the theorized mechanism is unpacked, outlining the actors or entities engaged in particular activities that affect the next part of the causal chain.²² Examining the origins and early trajectories of three prominent militant groups will help me unpack the mechanisms linking their relations with rivals and their willingness/ability to engage in sustained insurgencies.

Like other methods, process tracing has its drawbacks. Identifying credible pieces of evidence in the study of clandestine and secretive militant organizations is inherently difficult. Militant actors and the regimes they fight also have incentives to exaggerate or minimize their activities or motivations, often biasing open-sources information. Nevertheless, process tracing can be an effective way to differentiate and evaluate among competing theories of particular cases, especially in complex

²⁰ Beach, *Causal Case Study Methods*, 305-307.

²¹ George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Science*; Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey T. Checkel, "Process Tracing," in *Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool*, ed. Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey T. Checkel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 3-38.

²² Beach, *Causal Case Study Methods*, 85.

phenomenon like insurgency development that are driven by multiple and overlapping factors.²³

5.3.2 A note on sources

I primarily rely on prominent journalistic and historical accounts for each case, in addition to scholarly books, journal articles, and policy-oriented publications. I also consult older news articles for specific pieces of evidence and information using news-aggregating programs such as Lexis Nexis and the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), a former open-source intelligence database of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Similar to my quantitative analyses, I reference the Global Terrorism Database, UCDP Armed Conflict data, and secondary sources to classify my outcome of interest: sustained armed conflict onset. I also consulted various experts on Hezbollah's trajectory during the Israel Political Science Association annual conference, based on my presentation and subsequent conversations in Hebrew. As described in Chapter Four, I use a variety of sources to code the primary nature of rival relations between militant groups. This more detail-oriented approach better outlines how relations with rivals impact the trajectory of prominent militant groups during their nascent stages. The next three chapters take a more in-depth look at Hezbollah, the PKK, and the Syrian MB's nascent stages primarily through the prism of rival relations.

²³ Andrew Bennett, "Process Tracing and Causal Inference," in *Rethinking Social Inquiry: Diverse Tools, Shared Standards*, ed. Henry E. Brady and David Collier (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 207-220.

CHAPTER SIX

HEZBOLLAH: 1982-1991

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Since its emergence in 1982, Hezbollah has transformed from a rag-tag collection of militants to arguably the most powerful militant organization in the world. Today, Hezbollah's military intervention into neighbouring Syria's civil war is credited as a key factor saving the Assad regime from collapse.¹ But among its early military successes, Hezbollah forced Israel's military to evacuate from southern Lebanon in 2000 following a decade-long war of attrition. The scholarly literature, which prioritizes understanding insurgency outcomes, often cites Israel's withdrawal as a rare instance of militant victory. But why was Hezbollah able to launch a sustained armed conflict with Israel in the first place? I argue that Hezbollah's consolidation of its Shi'a rivals helps explain the militant organization's timing and ability to launch a sustained campaign of attrition against Israel in 1990.

Throughout its early years, Hezbollah successfully outbid rival groups through high-profile attacks against foreign targets in Lebanon and gained prominence among the Shi'a constituency. Throughout this process, Hezbollah siphoned critical resources and dedicated fighters from rival groups. Towards the end of the 1980s, Hezbollah defeated rival militant groups, mainly its chief competitor, Amal, in a bloody war for dominance of the Lebanese Shi'a community. Following the end of Lebanon's long civil war in

¹ Nadav Pollak, "The Transformation of Hezbollah by its Involvement in Syria," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy* Research Notes 35 (2016). Retrieved from <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-transformation-of-hezbollah-by-its-involvement-in-syria>.

1990, Hezbollah emerged as the hegemonic Shi'a militant group with a clear mandate – sanctioned by Syria and Iran – to take on Israeli forces in southern Lebanon. It is worth unpacking this important puzzle, considering that many other prominent militant groups fail to launch sustained campaigns of attrition against more powerful states.

Understanding Hezbollah's nascent trajectory is particularly important given its increasingly prominent role in Lebanese and Syrian domestic and regional affairs.

Existing debates surrounding Hezbollah's rise and effectiveness are structured around arguments that prioritize Iran's early sponsorship or the militant group's internal organizational factors.² But I argue that examining Hezbollah's rise through the prism of constituent rival relations is a crucial and overlooked piece of the broader puzzle.

Building a powerful identity, harnessing constituency grievances, tapping into strong social networks, effectively absorbing Iranian state support, relying on a safe haven, and other factors were definitely critical to Hezbollah's successes. However, these factors either remained fairly constant during the group's nascent stages or are better understood as a result of Hezbollah's rival consolidation. The most notable shift in Hezbollah's earliest years was its relations with rivals: from competitive escalation to destructive competition to hegemonic consolidation.

Consolidating rivals allowed Hezbollah to tap into critical resources required to sustain military operations. While Hezbollah did not face significant collective action problems, consolidating rivals enabled it to emerge as the only viable option for potential recruits and dedicated fighters seeking to confront Israel. By eliminating its competitors,

² Marc R. DeVore and Armin B. Stähli, "Explaining Hezbollah's Effectiveness: Internal and External Determinants of the Rise of Violent Non-State Actors," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no. 2 (2015): 331–57.

Hezbollah was able to solidify its territorial control in southern Lebanon, focus on building its organization, and overcoming principal-agent problems. Relying on a secure safe haven was critical to launching sustained guerilla-style attacks. Though initially seeking to derail Hezbollah, the Syrian government joined Iran to throw their full weight behind the militant organization only after it emerged as the hegemonic Shi'a militant organization in 1990. Hezbollah was able to then shift its efforts from primarily internal fights to waging a sustained campaign of attrition against Israel's military in southern Lebanon. I therefore offer a temporal theory of why Hezbollah engaged in a sustained armed conflict against Israel in the early 1990s, whereas current explanations fall short or remain incomplete.³

³ This case study is less concerned with systematically comparing Hezbollah's successes against Amal or other Shi'a rivals. Hezbollah's superior organization and training, ideological commitment, social service provision, strong network ties, and Iranian sponsorship are well-known reasons behind why Hezbollah outcompeted its constituent rivals. Though it was not inevitable that Hezbollah would beat Amal in a destructive war and emerge as the hegemonic Lebanese Shi'a organization. See Eitan Azani, "The Hybrid Terrorist Organization: Hezbollah as a Case Study," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 36, no. 11 (2013): 899–916. This paper, however, focuses on *how* the process of rival consolidation helps explain Hezbollah's timing and ability to launch a sustained campaign of attrition against Israel in the 1990s.

TABLE 6.1: HEZBOLLAH’S RELATIONS WITH RIVALS & SUSTAINED ARMED CONFLICT ONSET

Time Period	Primary Rival Relations	Implications	Outcome (Sustained Armed Conflict Onset)
1982 – 1985	Competitive escalation (outbidding) ⁴	Hezbollah attacks multinational troops, Western hostages, Israeli military targets – outbidding rivals and gaining prominence among constituency	No
1986 – 1990	Destructive competition (infighting) ⁵	Hezbollah defeats rival Shi’a groups, mainly Amal, in violent clashes	No
1990 – 1991	Hegemonic consolidation ⁶	Hezbollah emerges as the hegemon militant group, pools resources from rivals, secures Syria’s backing; agreement to stop movement infighting is reached; Hezbollah launches sustained war of attrition against Israeli military in S. Lebanon security zone	Yes (1991) ⁷

⁴ Eitan Azani, “The Hybrid Terrorist Organization: Hezbollah as a Case Study,” 906.

⁵ Nicholas Blandford, *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah’s Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel* (New York, NY: Random House, 2011), 90.

⁶ Eitan Azani, *Hezbollah: The Story of the Party of God* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 82-86.

⁷ Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), *UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset v. 18.1, 1946-2017*, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, (2018); Luis De La Calle and Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca, “How Armed Groups Fight: Territorial Control and Violent Tactics,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38, no. 10 (2015): 795–813.

The chapter is divided according to chronological periods corresponding to various types of relations between Hezbollah and its rivals, mainly Amal. The first section briefly introduces the historical background of Hezbollah's emergence amid Lebanon's civil war. The second section describes Hezbollah's strategic use of violence to successfully outbid its rivals and gain prominence among the Lebanese Shi'a constituency. The third section details the destructive competition between Hezbollah and its rivals – an overlooked aspect of Hezbollah's nascent trajectory. This case study offers evidence that supports my argument: rival consolidation increases Hezbollah's opportunity and willingness to engage in a sustained armed conflict against Israel. Alternative explanations are explored in the final sections before concluding. My theory of rival consolidation is offered as a complement to existing explanations, not to entirely supplant them. The temporal nature of my argument exposes limitations among existing theories and better explains the timing of Hezbollah's attrition campaign.

6.2 BACKGROUND: THE SHI'A AWAKENING AND FOUNDATIONS FOR A MILITANT MOVEMENT

To better understand the context behind Hezbollah's rise, this section introduces a brief historical background with an emphasis on the Lebanese Shi'a community.⁸ Over two decades prior to Hezbollah's founding in 1982, the Shi'a of Lebanon had been undergoing a massive political and social awakening.⁹ In the early 1960s, Shi'a cleric Must al-Sadr emerged as a charismatic and powerful leader that sought to mobilize

⁸ For more on the Shi'a community and Hezbollah's emergence see Eitan Azani, *Hezbollah*, 47-74.

⁹ Daniel Byman, *Understanding Proto-Insurgencies*, RAND Counterinsurgency Study – Paper 3 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2007), Appendix A.

Lebanon's Shi'a and focus on increasing the community's profile within Lebanese political affairs. Sadr focused on two core Shi'a grievances: preaching against the Lebanese state for neglecting to invest in Shi'a-dominated regions and for failing to deter Israeli incursions in southern Lebanon.¹⁰ At the time, the Shi'a community was considerably marginalized, underrepresented in many professional industries and denied access to basic services. Sadr toured the country, attracting huge crowds and delivering powerful speeches.¹¹ Throughout the 1970s, religious fundamentalism began to flourish more prominently among some Lebanese clerics and subsequently promoted among Shi'a students in Islamic educational institutions.¹² Other religious institutions, including mosques and charities, helped disseminate a form of Shi'a Islamist ideology throughout Lebanese society. Conditions were ripe for the emergence of a Shi'a-based militant movement, but before Hezbollah came to the fore, a more secular-oriented organization paved the way for Shi'a militancy.

As Shi'a grievances and religious ideology reached new heights, Imam Sadr began preaching that the era of Shi'a subordination was over. For Sadr, it was time for "revolution and weapons."¹³ In 1974, Sadr formed the militant organization Afwaj Muqawama al-Lubnaniyya (Amal) to defend southern Lebanese communities from Israeli incursions.¹⁴ The imam began recruiting from Lebanese universities in the following years and the Palestinian Fatah organization secretly trained the new militant

¹⁰ Blanford, *Warriors of God*, 7.

¹¹ Fouad Ajami, *The Vanished Imam: Musa al Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

¹² Azani, "The Hybrid Terrorist Organization: Hezbollah as a Case Study," 902.

¹³ Blanford, *Warriors of God*, 6.

¹⁴ "Formation of Resistance Organization Announced, *Beirut Daily Start*, July 7, 1975, accessed via FBIS; Augustus R. Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a: Struggle for the Soul of Lebanon* (Austin TX, University of Texas Press, 1987).

group in military camps in eastern Beka'a.¹⁵ The Shi'a spiritual leader feared that his reputation as a peaceful figure would be tarnished if Amal's militant build-up were to be exposed. But by April 1975, Lebanon had already descended into a full-fledged civil war pitting its main sectarian communities against one another – a brutal war that would last 15 years.¹⁶

Sadr mysteriously vanished while on a trip to Libya in 1978, sowing confusion among his followers but also earning a legacy of martyrdom akin to the revered Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law, Ali, who Shi'a consider to be his rightful heir.¹⁷ Sadr had already successfully galvanized the Lebanese Shi'a community into a powerful social force. But it was the Islamic Revolution in Iran a year later that demonstrated the potential for a Shi'a regime to assume control of a state. In light of Musa Sadr's sudden disappearance, Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini positioned himself as a new leader for the Lebanese Shi'a.¹⁸ Lebanon's Shi'a were now empowered to be the masters of their own destiny. Yet the Revolution exacerbated tensions within Amal between the more secular oriented followers of Nabih Berri – Sadr's more moderate successor – and Hassan Nasrallah's religious Islamists.¹⁹ The new Iranian regime quickly concluded that Amal would not serve as an effective proxy to spread the Revolution's ideals throughout Lebanon.²⁰

¹⁵ Blanford, *Warriors of God*, 22.

¹⁶ Dilip Hiro, *Lebanon: Fire and Embers* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).

¹⁷ Prominent observers believe Qaddafi had Sadr killed in Libya during his visit. See Ajami, *The Vanished Imam*; "Shi'ite Council Issues Statement on Missing Leader," *Beirut Domestic Service*, September 11, 1978.

¹⁸ Blanford, *Warriors of God*, 34.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Azani, *Hezbollah*.

The Islamic Republic was finally presented with an opportunity to make inroads among Lebanon's Shi'a community following the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Shortly after, with Iranian oversight, Hezbollah emerged as an umbrella organization encompassing groups in Lebanon that were inspired by the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the teachings of Ayatollah Khomeini. Members of these Shi'a groups sought to establish a polity similar to the nascent Islamic Republic of Iran. The era of competition between Hezbollah and Amal for complete dominance of the Shi'a constituency was underway.

Marginalization and foreign occupation were necessary factors that led to the emergence of Hezbollah and other Shi'a militant organizations. The subsequent widespread dissemination of religious Shi'a fundamentalism also galvanized the local community to produce an emerging generation of youth dedicated to fighting for a dual ethno-nationalist and religious cause. Adopting a more religious and fervent ideology helped Hezbollah outcompete its Shi'a rivals over time. Yet the mere presence of grievances and radical ideology from the 1970s are insufficient in explaining why Hezbollah was able to launch a sustained armed conflict against Israel in 1990 – the focus of this chapter. Addressing the timing and scope of Hezbollah's war of attrition requires a deeper look into a critical, yet understudied, phenomenon that is common to most prominent militant organizations and varies clearly during the group's nascent stages: the process of rival consolidation.

6.3 FIGHTING FOR PROMINENCE: CLANDESTINE BEGINNINGS AND COMPETITIVE ESCALATION, 1982-1985

The following section explores Hezbollah's earliest and clandestine years. Before announcing a formal organization in 1985, Hezbollah largely functioned as an Iranian-led umbrella organization that absorbed smaller, like-minded groups seeking to fight Israel following the 1982 invasion of Lebanon. During this period, Hezbollah often avoided claims of responsibility for high-profile attacks or used aliases to evade retribution. After sitting on the sidelines, Amal began escalating attacks of its own to compete for support from the Lebanese Shi'a constituency. Yet Hezbollah was credited with launching the most ambitious attacks on Israeli and international targets in Lebanon. From the prism of rival relations, the nascent stages of this insurrection can be viewed as a competitive escalation, whereby Hezbollah and rival groups outbid each other with spectacular attacks targeting foreign forces to win prominence among their common constituency. But as this section shows, Hezbollah's operations helped the group overshadow Amal as a more capable Shi'a militant group willing to conduct riskier and deadlier attacks. These high-profile attacks helped Hezbollah get more media coverage and disseminate its radical ideology across Shi'a society. As a result, Hezbollah effectively signaled its commitment to the wider Shi'a community, siphoning critical resources and dedicated fighters from rival groups. Hezbollah was able to claim victory for Israel's withdrawal from most of Lebanon in 1985. The militant group then began consolidating its organizational structure and preparing to destroy its main rivals.

Israel's invasion of Lebanon and Hezbollah's emergence, 1982

Following violent escalations between Israel and Lebanese-based Palestinian militants, Israel launched a full-scale ground invasion of southern Lebanon in June 1982.²¹ Israeli forces faced little resistance initially as the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was ill-prepared for the invasion, despite anticipating a war for months. The Lebanese Shi'a community originally welcomed the Israeli invasion, grateful that Israel's military forced many Palestinian militants out of the country.²² As many Shi'a greeted the Israelis as liberators, Amal's leadership even ordered its fighters to allow Israel safe passage through southern Lebanon. But Israeli defense officials had far grander plans for Lebanon, hoping to help install a friendly Maronite Christian regime in the process and maintain a military presence indefinitely to achieve this end.²³ The Shi'a community's joy quickly turned into hostile resentment.

Despite being embroiled in a war with Iraq at the time, Iran viewed Israel's invasion of Lebanon as an opportunity to spread the Islamic revolution and began preparing to support a new militant group to hijack the Shi'a community's nascent and unorganized resistance. Israel's military had overwhelmed Syrian forces in Lebanon in a matter of days. To avoid complete destruction, the Assad regime allowed about 1,500 members of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) to set up a base of operations in Lebanon to train militants with an ideological affinity for the Islamic

²¹ "Foreign Ministry Issues Paper on Operation," *Jerusalem Post*, June 8, 1982, accessed via FBIS; New York Times, "Mideast Tensions; Chronology of 15 Years of Civil War in Lebanon," *The New York Times*, October 14, 1990, accessed Lexis Nexis Academic.

²² Hala Jaber, *Hezbollah: Born with a Vengeance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 14.

²³ Jaber, *Hezbollah*, 16. For more on strategic considerations and divergent decisions among Israeli leaders in the lead up to and early years of Israel's invasion see Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari, *Israel's Lebanon War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 11-45.

Republic.²⁴ IRGC forces quickly deployed to Lebanon to help fight Israel's military head-on and start mobilizing recruits for a new militant organization to replace the more secular Amal with a decidedly religious Shi'a force. The IRGC facilitated religious education and military training after helping form a coalition of splinter groups and other Islamist parties, encompassing more radical elements of Shi'a society. Some of these groups included the Lebanese Da'wa, the Association of Muslim Students, and the Islamic Amal – a splinter group featuring more religiously motivated operatives, including future Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah.²⁵ With Iran's help, the coalition produced an initial manifesto outlining three core tenets: acknowledging the primacy of Shi'a Islam guiding the new organization, fighting Israel as the "ultimate confrontation priority," and utmost loyalty to the Iranian regime's *wali al faqih*.²⁶ The coalition lacked a formal name until finally calling itself Hezbollah – the Party of God – in 1984.

Shortly after Israel's invasion, major divisions within Amal – the most dominant Muslim militant group at the time – flared up between more moderate factions seek a reconciliation deal and Islamist elements seeking total confrontation.²⁷ In November 1982, Islamic Amal seized Lebanese municipal offices and military barracks in Baalbek and established a new IRGC headquarters in the Beka'a valley.²⁸ Amal dominated the south at the time, but was rapidly undermined by Iranian efforts to supplant it. Syria's relationship with the nascent Hezbollah organization, however, was far more complex

²⁴ Blanford, *Warriors of God*, 44. "Al-Asad Receives Iranian Military Delegation," *Damascus Domestic Service*, June 8, 1982, accessed via FBIS.

²⁵ Byman, "Understanding Proto-insurgences", 32.

²⁶ Blanford, 47.

²⁷ Azani, "The Hybrid Terrorist Organization," 908.

²⁸ Blanford, 47-48.

and often led to direct clashes.²⁹ The Assad regime sought to preserve its ties to Iran and tolerate a rival group to keep its primary proxy, Amal, in check. But Syria's support for Amal took precedence, and its rocky relationship with Hezbollah was largely motivated by the Assad regime's desire to prevent a hegemonic political force from dominating Lebanon.³⁰ Iran's committed and sustained sponsorship of Hezbollah, however, considerably outweighed Syria's efforts to derail the group's trajectory.

Some analysts argue that IRGC trainers were actually counterproductive to Hezbollah's earliest operations, promoting expensive and poorly planned operations.³¹ Influenced by their experience in the Iran-Iraq war, IRGC planners led Hezbollah to launch attacks using large numbers of fighters in direct confrontations against far more powerful targets. Israel's military easily repelled these types of human wave assaults. Hezbollah only started to achieve military successes after veterans from the Lebanese civil war, including fighters from Amal, took responsibility for orchestrating hit-and-run attacks.³² By relying more on indigenous Lebanese leaders with intimate knowledge of the terrain, Hezbollah was able to carry out more effective and deadlier attacks. Over time, Hezbollah's high-profile terrorist activities gained the organization more notoriety, as their activities and ideology were increasingly discussed in Lebanese media.³³ Hezbollah's early successes against foreign and Israeli targets – coupled with more robust propaganda and social campaigns – continued to help attract large numbers of Amal defectors and earn new supporters from the Shi'a population.

²⁹ Syrian-Hezbollah Clash in Ba'labak," *Beirut Voice of Lebanon*, May 19, 1984, accessed via FBIS.

³⁰ Augustus R. Norton, *Hezbollah* (Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2007), 35.

³¹ DeVore and Stähli, "Explaining Hezbollah's Effectiveness: Internal and External Determinants of the Rise of Violent Non-State Actors," 351.

³² DeVore and Stähli, "Explaining Hezbollah's Effectiveness."

³³ Azani, "The Hybrid Terrorist Organization," 905.

The Strategic Logic of Hezbollah's High-Profile Attacks, 1983

Seeking to differentiate itself from a more complacent Amal, Hezbollah launched several high-profile attacks targeting Israeli and international forces in Lebanon. Hezbollah's leaders sought to impose heavy costs on foreigners in Lebanon, but they were primarily focused on siphoning support from the Shi'a constituency at the expense of its rivals. Hezbollah launched its first major suicide bombing operation in November 1982, targeting the IDF headquarters in Tyre and killing 75 Israeli soldiers.³⁴ The militant group conducted several other vehicular suicide bombings, a new innovation at the time, against fortified Israeli positions and headquarters that produced significant casualties.³⁵ Israel's use of repressive measures and other forms of collective punishment to contain the violence proved to be ineffective and only strengthened the resistance against its presence. Hezbollah also launched ambitious assaults on the South Lebanon Army (SLA) – a militia Israel backed in an effort to form a buffer zone between Shi'a militants and to prevent a resurgence among Palestinian militants.³⁶ This hit and run strikes were designed to wear down the SLA's resolve and erode Israel's capabilities by targeting its main proxy in Lebanon. Hezbollah's attacks in this period tend to be interpreted as a form of punishment against Israel's military presence or an effort to provoke disproportionate Israeli responses and increase militant recruitment. But another important motivation guiding Hezbollah attacks is the strategic logic of outbidding, as the organization seeks to gain prominence and emerge as the Shi'a community's primary defender.³⁷

³⁴ Daily Star, "Time of Major Hezbollah operations since 1982," *The Daily Star (Lebanon)*, January 29, 2015, accessed Lexis Nexis Academic.

³⁵ Herbet H. Denton, "Bomb in Tyre Kills 39; Israeli Planes Retaliate, Strike PLO Near Beirut," *Washington Post*, November 4, 1983, accessed Lexis Nexis Academic.

³⁶ Blanford, *Warriors of God*, 85.

³⁷ Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, "The Strategies of Terrorism," *International Security* 31, no. 1 (2006): 49-80.

As a declassified CIA intelligence report states: “rivalry between Amal and Hezbollah may impel both towards greater participation in terrorist acts – especially against Israel but also against the United States – in response to escalating demands for proof of commitment to the Shia cause.”³⁸

Beyond Israeli targets, the U.S.-led Multinational Force (MNF) in Lebanon bore the brunt of several major Hezbollah attacks as well. In April 1983, a suicide bomber drove a truck packed with explosives into the American embassy in Beirut, killing 63 people including 17 Americans.³⁹ In October, Hezbollah struck the U.S. Marine barracks and orchestrated a suicide truck bombing of French paratroop headquarters in Beirut – killing 241 U.S. service personnel and 58 French soldiers.⁴⁰ To avoid retribution, Iran and Hezbollah denied responsibility at the time of the attacks, using the shadowy Islamic Jihad moniker to claim responsibility.⁴¹ In the earliest years of the group’s existence, many Hezbollah attacks against civilians and international targets in Lebanon were ambiguously attributed aliases like the Islamic Resistance or Islamic Jihad.⁴² Conventional wisdom in terrorism studies suggests that militant groups publicly claim responsibility for attacks to enhance their profile – yet a significant percentage of coded

³⁸ U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), “Amal and Hizballah: The Line Between Politics and Terrorism,” CIA Directorate of Intelligence, August 16, 1985, accessed <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP85T01058R000506780001-0.pdf>, 1.

³⁹ Eric Pace, “Car Bombing Has Become Favored Tactic of Terrorists in the Middle East,” *New York Times* September 21, 1984, accessed Lexis Nexis Academic.

⁴⁰ “Hezbollah Party Member Praises Bombings,” *Paris AFP*, November 1, 1983, accessed via FBIS.

⁴¹ “U.S., French Troops Warned in Beirut; Shiite Group Issues New Threat,” *Washington Post*, December 23, 1983; “Iran Denies Any Involvement in Bombing of U.S. Embassy,” *New York Times*, April 20, 1983, accessed Lexis Nexis Academic.

⁴² Hezbollah later acknowledged that these groups were part of the wider organization, see Ranstorp, *Hizb’allah in Lebanon*, 53. Milton Coleman, “Identity of Attackers Eludes U.S. Probers,” *Washington Post*, November 7, 1983, accessed Lexis Nexis Academic.

terrorist attacks remain unattributed.⁴³ In Hezbollah's case, the leadership understood that its organization was too nascent to justify coherent credit claims and invite retaliation. Outside actors and, more importantly Lebanese Shi'a constituents, believed that Hezbollah was behind the most ambitious attacks on Israeli and international targets in Lebanon.⁴⁴

Amal joins the fight

Amal decided to escalate attacks after a pivotal moment in October 1983, when an Israeli military convoy accidentally disturbed a large gathering for the Ashoura commemoration: one of the most important events in Shi'a religious tradition commemorating the death of Ali, the Prophet Mohammed's son-in-law.⁴⁵ As disgruntled participants challenged the convoy, Israeli forces opened fire and enflamed Shi'a grievances to irreversible heights.⁴⁶ After showing considerable restraint, Amal came off the sidelines and escalated attacks when its leadership realized that the support of the Shi'a constituency was at stake. Shi'a clerics that had remained passive issued religious decrees to confront Israel after the Ashoura incident.⁴⁷ Similar to outbidding dynamics in other militant contexts, Hezbollah's goal to surpass Amal as leader of the Shi'a

⁴³ Erin M. Kearns, Brendan Conlon, & Joseph K. Young, "Lying About Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37, no. 5 (2014): 422-439; Max Abrahms and Justin Conrad, "The Strategic Logic of Credit Claiming: A New Theory for Anonymous Terrorist Attacks," *Security Studies* 26, no. 2 (2017): 279-304.

⁴⁴ Many years after the attacks, Tufayli – a founding member of Hezbollah - admitted to expert Nicholas Blanford that the group orchestrated the bombing of the U.S. marine barracks. See Blanford, *Warriors of God*, 59.

⁴⁵ Augustus R. Norton, "Ritual, Blood, and Shiite Identity: Ashura in Nabatiyya, Lebanon," *TDR* 49, no. 4, (2005): 140-155; Blanford, *Warriors of God*, 58.

⁴⁶ Norton, *Hezbollah*, 83.

⁴⁷ Blanford, *Warriors of God*, 58.

community drove much of the organization's early activities and desire to conduct high-profile attacks.

Hezbollah's "Society of Resistance"

Compared to prominent militant groups in other contexts, addressing collective action was relatively easy for a nascent Hezbollah that sought to represent a constituency plagued by civil war and widespread grievances. In its earliest stages, Hezbollah did not need financial or material incentives to bolster recruitment. Young, religious Shi'a were easily motivated to fight against marginalization and Israel's presence in the south. Fighters, including hundreds of volunteers, were mobilized on a large scale via clan networks.⁴⁸ Individual motivations were based on a blend of religious and ethno-nationalist identity, which served as Hezbollah's ideological foundations. Over time Hezbollah institutionalized schools and youth movements to radicalize emerging generations of Shi'a youth from a very early age. Through the provision of social services and ideological and religious indoctrination, Hezbollah created an effective system to produce a steady stream of recruits and supporters that continues to transcend generations.⁴⁹

Once Israel completed its first withdrawal from Lebanese territory in 1985 – evacuating from Sidon, the Bekaa Valley and Tyre – Hezbollah gained prominence among the Shi'a constituency and began cultivating a safe haven at its rivals' expense. The group focused on expanding its social service provision to further consolidate Shi'a support. With Iranian funding, Hezbollah oversaw a multi-million-dollar social welfare

⁴⁸ Blanford, *Warriors of God*, 103.

⁴⁹ Azani, *Hezbollah*, 137-173.

program that addressed impoverished Shi'a families and administered pensions, health care, and education. These efforts were critical in overshadowing Amal. Hezbollah continued to build other units devoted to specific functions within its organization, including units devoted to garbage collection and infrastructure investment. The organization offered agricultural assistance and helped to rebuild schools, hospitals, houses destroyed in the war, and mosques. During this period Hezbollah recruited a village guard unit that also helped spread Hezbollah propaganda and lead religious study groups after prayers. Members of the village guard were recruited from all walks of life and provided with basic military training and weapons.⁵⁰ Through this vast social service program, Hezbollah successfully supplanted an absent Lebanese state and garnered Shi'a support from constituents increasingly dependent on the militant organization.⁵¹

Israel's first withdrawal and Hezbollah's official declaration, 1985

Facing domestic political unrest and deteriorating military morale, Israel began a phased departure from most of Lebanon's territory in January 1985.⁵² Israel's withdrawal to the southern security belt, 15 miles into Lebanon from Israel's border, altered the military dynamics between its military and the Shi'a militant groups.⁵³ Now there was a clear frontline between Israel and the Shi'a militant groups, who formerly operated within the Israeli-occupied area. Hezbollah fighters dug underground tunnels and shelters

⁵⁰ Blanford, *Warriors of God*, 80.

⁵¹ Simon Haddad, "Explaining Lebanese Shii Adherence to Hezbollah: Alienation, Religiosity and Welfare Provision," *Defense and Security Analysis* 29, no. 1 (2013): 16–29.

⁵² Edward Walsh, "High Cost of Pullout; Israelis See Casualties Increase," *The Washington Post*, February 20, 1985. Accessed Lexis Nexis Academic; "Peres on Lebanon Withdrawal, Peace With Jordan," *Jerusalem Domestic Service*, September 17, 1984, accessed via FBIS.

⁵³ Raphael D. Marcus, *Israel's Long War with Hezbollah: Military Innovation and Adaptation Under Fire* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2018), Chapter 1 "IDF' Routine Security' and the Evolution of Hezbollah (1985-92).

to plan attacks in relatively secure areas from Israeli reprisals. While infiltrating the new Israeli area was difficult, the new situation allowed Hezbollah to cultivate a safe haven and base of operations.

The IDF, however, continued to underestimate Hezbollah's growing strength and pursued a relatively constant counter-militancy approach throughout the organization's nascent stages. Until 1982, Israel's military experience was primarily oriented towards defeating multiple state militaries in quick and decisive conventional conflicts and the IDF was ill-prepared to take on a proto-insurgency. Israel prioritized its early efforts in Lebanon to confront Syria's military in the country and the Golan Heights. As expert Raphael Marcus notes: "Hezbollah in the 1980s was viewed on the same level militarily as Palestinian militias, as a 'routine security' threat not worthy of major conceptual or operational attention, which could be dealt with by low-level intensity security operations."⁵⁴

In February 1985, Hezbollah organized its largest and most public rally in southern Beirut to celebrate Israel's withdrawal from Sidon – Lebanon's third largest city. The event was a clear signal of Hezbollah's growing power to its Shi'a constituency.⁵⁵ The time was ripe for Hezbollah's formal emergence as a tightly organized militant group.⁵⁶ At a press conference in early 1985, Hezbollah spokesman Ibrahim Al-Amin publicly declared Hezbollah's ideology, strategy, and objectives.⁵⁷ In its official charter the group clearly outlined its objectives: the destruction

⁵⁴ Marcus, *Israel's Long War with Hezbollah*, 37.

⁵⁵ Blanford, *Warriors of God*, 71.

⁵⁶ "Hezbollah Headquarters Moved from Syria to Ba'labakk," (*Clandestine*) *Radio Free Lebanon*, February 27, 1985, accessed via FBIS.

⁵⁷ Augustus R. Norton, "The Role of Hezbollah in Lebanese Domestic Politics," *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs* 42, no. 4: 475-491.

of the Jewish state and the creation of a Shi'a Islamic state in Lebanon.⁵⁸ As Hezbollah founder Naim Qassem stated: "Up until 1985, Hezbollah was not yet a single entity that could stand up and speak for itself...the nature of our formation required clandestine behavior."⁵⁹

From Clandestine Coalition to Formal Militant Organization

The group's founding manifesto also outlined its multi-faceted organizational structure and commitment to the Islamic Republic of Iran.⁶⁰ The document describes Hezbollah's dynamic organizational structure that seeks to incorporate various political, military, and social activities. Hezbollah had officially emerged as an organized and increasingly threatening force. By the middle of 1985, Hezbollah was responsible for most of the attacks targeting Israeli forces in Lebanon, eclipsing its main Shi'a rivals.⁶¹ But before challenging Israel in a full-fledged war of attrition, Hezbollah needed to fight for undisputed dominance and leadership of the Shi'a constituency.

Hezbollah and its main Shi'a rivals shared the same objectives from the outset. Each militant group sought to remove any foreign presence from Lebanon and alleviate Shi'a grievances. However, Hezbollah's prominence began to grow considerably because it strategically employed violence and successfully outbid its main competitors. By 1984, Hezbollah was able to claim victory following the withdrawal of the U.S. marines and the Multinational Force from Beirut.⁶² A year later, Israeli forces withdrew to southern

⁵⁸ Blanford, *Warriors of God*, 72.

⁵⁹ Na'im Qassem quoted in Jaber, *Hezbollah*, 62.

⁶⁰ "An Open Letter: The Hezbollah Program," *The Jerusalem Quarterly*, 48 (1988). Retrieved from <http://www.ict.org.il/Articles/tabid/66/Articlsid/4/Default.aspx>

⁶¹ Blanford, *Warriors of God*, 85.

⁶² John M. Goshko, "Reagan Declares End to U.S. Role in Lebanon Force," *The Washington Post*, March 31, 1984, accessed Lexis Nexis Academic.

Lebanon and Hezbollah boasted of its success by officially coming out of the shadows and cultivating a robust safe haven. With a less overbearing Israeli presence, Hezbollah was better able to focus on overcoming principal-agent problems, attract dedicated recruits, and ensure that members largely complied with leadership objectives.⁶³ After gaining prominence among its constituency, Hezbollah began to enhance its organizational structure and prepare for the next phase in its trajectory: taking over its Shi'a rivals.

6.4 “WAR FOR DOMINATION”: FROM DESTRUCTIVE COMPETITION TO HEGEMONIC CONSOLIDATION, 1985-1990

By the late 1980s, the struggle for dominance over Lebanon's Shi'a constituency descended into a full-fledged war. Previous rival relations were primarily characterized by outbidding and ideological struggles – less destructive forms of competition in which Hezbollah excelled and gained prominence. The following section outlines the subsequent destructive competition phase among the major Shi'a organizations.

According to Byman, “perhaps Hezbollah's biggest military struggle was within the Shi'a community.”⁶⁴ Hezbollah first crushed Lebanese Communist Party fighters in street battles throughout 1985-1986, before taking on its main Shi'a adversary: Amal.⁶⁵ After two years of fighting, Hezbollah defeated its constituent foes in bloody clashes and assumed hegemonic dominance of the Shi'a community. Hezbollah emerged as the only viable option to fight Israel and defend the Shi'a constituency's interests. Rival

⁶³ Magnus Ranstorp, *Hizb 'Alah in Lebanon* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 66-67.

⁶⁴ Byman, “Understanding Proto-insurgencies,” 33.

⁶⁵ “Further on Amal, Hizballah, Communist Clashes,” *Beirut Voice of Lebanon*, February 22, 1986; “Communist Party Leader on Situation in Beirut,” *Paris L'Humanite*, November 29, 1985, accessed via FBIS.

consolidation allowed Hezbollah to pool fighters, secure Syrian state support, and absorb critical resources into its organization. Lacking internal challengers, Hezbollah then shifted its efforts to confront Israel in a sustained campaign of attrition.

Over time, Hezbollah's more robust propaganda and social service programs helped attract large numbers of Amal defectors. Hezbollah's earlier high-profile attacks helped the group gain prominence and recruit new supporters.⁶⁶ The organization claimed credit for Israel's withdrawal from most of Lebanon to the southern security zone. Without an Israeli military presence in Beirut's suburbs, the main Shi'a groups were left to fight each other for leadership of their community. But before taking Amal on directly, Hezbollah exhibited patience and focused on weakening its Shi'a rival by supporting Palestinian militant groups fighting Amal for turf in Lebanon.

"War of the Camps"

Between 1985-1988, Amal was embroiled in deadly battles with Palestinian militants known as the "War of the Camps."⁶⁷ Complying with Syria's demands, Amal reduced attacks against Israel to focus on preventing a Palestinian resurgence in the refugee camps.⁶⁸ Seizing the opportunity, Hezbollah began supporting Palestinian groups – mainly Fatah – with weapons and armaments. Fatah Central Committee Member Salah Khalaf admitted to pragmatically accepting Hezbollah support in an undated interview: "In any case, we are not allies of Hizballah. We say we will confront any force that

⁶⁶ Azani, "The Hybrid Terrorist Organization," 908.

⁶⁷ "Fighting Erupts at Palestinian Camps in Beirut: Amal, Palestinians Clash," *Beirut Voice of Lebanon*, January 28, 1986, accessed via FBIS; Julie Flint, "Never-ending Battles Crush Spirit of Beirut Camps," *The Guardian (London)*, June 10, 1988, accessed Lexis Nexis Academic; "Birri Comments on Fighting, Camps War," *Beirut Voice of Lebanon*, February 17, 1987, accessed via FBIS.

⁶⁸ Norton, *Hezbollah*, 23.

attacks us (Amal) and will defend ourselves. We do not care who stands by our side, even if it is the Devil himself.”⁶⁹ By backing the dominant Palestinian faction, Hezbollah was able to position itself as a champion of the Palestinian cause and weaken its main Shi’a competitor.

By the end of the struggle, Fatah was badly beaten and Amal lost a significant number of fighters in the process.⁷⁰ Hezbollah’s support for the Palestinians proved crucial in depleting Amal’s resources and fighting power. Taking advantage of Amal’s weakness, Hezbollah escalated its efforts to overtake Amal as the vanguard of the Shi’a community.⁷¹

Hezbollah vs. Amal

By 1988, tensions between Amal and Hezbollah reached a boiling point. In February 1988, fighters from an Amal splinter group sympathetic to Hezbollah abducted U.S. Marine Lt. Colonel William Higgins, triggering violent hostilities between Hezbollah and Amal.⁷² Seeking to maintain cooperative ties with the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), Amal’s leadership launched a failed search mission to locate Higgins – who was later found murdered – and challenge Hezbollah’s prestige

⁶⁹ “Fatah’s Khalaf on Iranian Arms Deal, Lebanon,” *Kuwait al-Qabas*, March 30, 1987, accessed via FBIS.

⁷⁰ Blanford, *Warriors of God*, 71; “14 Casualties in Amal-Palestinian Camps Clash,” *Radio Free Lebanon*, March 10, 1987, accessed via FBIS.

⁷¹ “Amal, Hizballah Clash in Southern Suburb,” *Radio Free Lebanon*, July 23, 1986, accessed via FBIS.

⁷² Hezbollah denied responsibility for the kidnapping but voiced support for the Hezbollah-affiliated cell – Organization of the Oppressed on Earth – behind the abduction. See “Hizballah Supports Abduction,” *Radio Free Lebanon*, February 20, 1988; “Hizballah Denies Allegations,” *Voice of the People*, February 20, 1988, accessed via FBIS. Norton, *Hezbollah*, 43.

in the process. Street battles between both Shi'a forces followed.⁷³ The final war for leadership of the Shi'a constituency was underway.

Even by 1988, Amal remained larger and more powerful than Hezbollah – maintaining superior capabilities, including tanks and artillery.⁷⁴ When fighting broke out between both Shi'a groups, Amal tightened its hold on southern Lebanon.⁷⁵ At the outset of hostilities, Amal inflicted considerable losses against Hezbollah and forced some of its troops to retreat from their positions.⁷⁶ Hezbollah and Amal continued to fight it out in the streets and conduct senior-level assassination and detention campaigns against one another.⁷⁷ As Blanford notes: “the Shia combatants...butchered one another with a ferocity scarcely matched at any other time during the civil war.”⁷⁸ Yet Hezbollah managed to bounce back and demonstrate remarkable warfighting skills. Despite capability deficiencies, Hezbollah's more effective organization exhibited a tactical superiority that proved decisive in the end.⁷⁹

By the end of 1988, Hezbollah had defeated Amal's forces in Beirut and the surrounding suburbs, “losing virtually its entire military foothold in the capital.”⁸⁰ The following year, Hezbollah focused on conquering Amal positions in the country's south. In January 1989, Hezbollah launched a successful offensive and executed a decisive blow

⁷³ “Amal has ‘Clues’ to Abductors,” *Paris AFP*, February 18, 1988; “Amal Efforts at Higgins Dialogue Fail,” *Jerusalem Domestic Service*, March 1, 1988, accessed via FBIS.

⁷⁴ “Amal Brings in Tanks,” *Radio Free Lebanon*, April 6, 1988, accessed via FBIS.

⁷⁵ “Amal-Hizballah Clash Reported,” *Radio Free Lebanon*, February 21, 1988, accessed via FBIS; Norton, *Hezbollah*, 43.

⁷⁶ “Last Hizballah Stronghold Seized,” *Beirut Voice of Lebanon*, April 8, 1988; “30 Hizballah, 3 Amal Killed,” *Radio Free Lebanon*, May 4, 1988, accessed via FBIS; Charles Van Der Leeuw, “Amal Encircles Hostage Stronghold,” *The Independent*, January 5, 1989, accessed Lexis Nexis Academic; Blanford, 90.

⁷⁷ “Amal Detains Four Hizballah Officials,” *Beirut Voice of Lebanon*, January 7, 1986, accessed via FBIS.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 91.

⁷⁹ Hizballah Attempt at ‘Hegemony’, *The Jerusalem Post Service*, October 20, 1988, accessed via FBIS.

⁸⁰ Norton, *Hezbollah*, 43.

to Amal.⁸¹ From bases in the Iqlim al-Touffah heights, Hezbollah took over Amal-dominated villages and effectively destroyed their rival forces.⁸² Despite previous Iran-Syria-led efforts to broker an agreement, fighting continued.⁸³ The warring militant organizations, under the auspices of their respective state patrons, signed another “Damascus Agreement” in November 1990 and finally laid down their arms.⁸⁴ Though foreign powers pushed the warring militant groups to the negotiating table, Hezbollah had already gained the upper hand militarily and emerged as the hegemonic organization within the Lebanese Shi’a movement.⁸⁵ After consolidating its rivals, Hezbollah solidified its control of Shi’a territory around Beirut and the southern regions. Hezbollah then focused on cultivating a safe haven and base of operations to target Israel in a sustained war of attrition.

Hezbollah’s early successes in their campaign against foreign forces helped increase the number of Hezbollah sympathizers within Amal. These dedicated fighters worked to promote chronic instability and derail Amal from within.⁸⁶ Amal’s leadership grew more corrupt and its organizational structure continued to fracture as a result, evolving into a patronage-based system.⁸⁷ Hezbollah’s organizational structure, on the other hand, continued to strengthen and expand its functions as the group grew more

⁸¹ “Hizballah Staging ‘Open War’, *Voice of the Mountain*, January 2, 1989, accessed via FBIS; Nora Boustany, “Truce Between Shiites in S. Lebanon Collapses,” *The Washington Post*, January 26, 1989, accessed Lexis Nexis Academic.

⁸² “Hizballah Wins Control of Towns,” *Radio Free Lebanon*, January 8, 1989, accessed via FBIS.

⁸³ “New Ceasefire Announced,” *Beirut Voice of Lebanon*, April 7, 1988; “51 Killed; 130 Wounded,” *Beirut Domestic Service*, April 8, 1988, accessed via FBIS.

⁸⁴ The Independent, “Hizballah and Amal Make Peace,” *The Independent* (London), November 6, 1990, accessed Lexis Nexis Academic.

⁸⁵ Amal’s defeat would have been more resounding if regional powers Iran and Syria did not pressure their respective clients to reach a negotiated settlement. See DeVore and Stähli, “Explaining Hezbollah’s Effectiveness,” 346.

⁸⁶ CIA, “Amal and Hizballah: The Line Between Politics and Terrorism.”

⁸⁷ Blanford, *Warriors of God*, 90.

powerful than its foes. Hezbollah expert Eitan Azani notes, “this [intra-Shi’a] struggle shaped Hezbollah’s sphere of influence, actions, and behaviour during the decade to come.”⁸⁸ Throughout the intra-Shi’a war, Hezbollah gained critical battlefield experience and reinforced its image as a formidable force capable of posing a serious challenge to Israel’s military.

A more mature and pragmatic organization

Part of Hezbollah’s success over Amal can be attributed to its increasingly pragmatic posture towards key actors in Lebanon’s civil war. Hezbollah never directly challenged Lebanon’s most effective militant organizations: the Maronite Christian Lebanese Forces and the Druze Popular Socialist Party.⁸⁹ Both of these groups were well-equipped and far better organized than Amal and would have therefore put up stronger resistance. Civil wars also tend to produce strange bedfellows: Hezbollah eventually secured weapons arrangements and other forms of tactical collaboration with an Israel-sponsored Christian militia.⁹⁰ As discussed, Hezbollah provided material support to Lebanese-based Palestinian militants – whom many Shi’a distrusted – in their war against Amal. By cultivating temporary marriages of convenience and avoiding fights with Lebanon’s predominant militant groups at the time, Hezbollah prioritized its war against rival Shi’a groups for dominance of the constituency they sought to lead.⁹¹

Hezbollah’s campaign to abduct foreigners – at Iran’s behest – was a

⁸⁸ Azani, “The Hybrid Terrorist Organization,” 908.

⁸⁹ Tony Badran, “Lebanon’s Militia Wars,” in *Conflict and Insurgency in the Contemporary Middle East*, ed. Barry Rubin (London: Routledge, 2009), 161-186.

⁹⁰ Blanford, *Warriors of God*, 91.

⁹¹ For more on various forms of militant cooperation, including tactical alliances, see Assaf Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation Among Terrorist Actors*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2017.

controversial strategy that created further divisions between Hezbollah and Amal. However, the kidnappings embarrassed western powers who often had to adhere to Hezbollah's significant demands.⁹² At first, the kidnappings promoted Hezbollah's notoriety among its constituency, especially following major prisoner releases of accused Shi'a militant inmates in Israeli jails.⁹³ By the early 1990s, however, Hezbollah stopped encouraging and conducting kidnappings and released the remaining Western hostages in its custody.⁹⁴ Eventually, kidnappings hurt Hezbollah's reputation as these actions made it look like a classic terrorist organization that targeted civilians. The group ended this practice due to significant divisions within the Shi'a community regarding its utility.⁹⁵ Over time, Hezbollah's leadership began distancing itself from the abductions and avoided claims of responsibility. But Hezbollah also stopped kidnappings because the civil war was winding down and it had already emerged as the hegemonic militant group.

Suicide bombings were another controversial strategy that came to an end by the late 1980s. Contrary to conventional wisdom, secular nationalist groups – not Hezbollah – were behind most of the suicide operations targeting foreign forces in Lebanon.⁹⁶ Hezbollah actually relied on this method in relatively rare instances. Suicide bombings gradually waned and virtually ceased towards the end of the decade as Hezbollah successfully outbid other groups for dominance. There was little need to continue perpetuating shocking suicide operations as competitive militant relations transitioned to a Hezbollah-dominated hegemony.

⁹² For more on the hostage crisis in Lebanon see Ranstorp, *Hizb'allah in Lebanon*.

⁹³ Azani, "The Hybrid Terrorist Organization," 907.

⁹⁴ Toronto Star, "Release of Western Hostages Linked to Israel Freeing Arabs," *The Toronto Star*, March 25, 1991, accessed Lexis Nexis Academic.

⁹⁵ Azani, "The Hybrid Terrorist Organization," 907.

⁹⁶ Blanford, *Warriors of God*, 65.

Hezbollah's leadership also exhibited pragmatism by engaging in cautious diplomacy to prevent an all-out conflict with the Syrian regime.⁹⁷ As the main power broker in Lebanon, Hezbollah's leadership understood that it needed to mend ties with its neighbour. The Assad regime was Amal's primary benefactor, supplying the rival Shi'a group with arms and much needed supplies.⁹⁸ As fighting between the Shi'a groups intensified, Amal's leadership desperately reached out to the Syrian government and requested its military to destroy Hezbollah. In a subsequent meeting with Assad, however, Hezbollah officials convinced the Syrian leader that the militant organization did not seek to overcome Amal and was primarily focused on confronting Israel.⁹⁹ But Hezbollah's leadership deceived Assad and continued to prioritize its campaign against constituent foes. An understanding was reached, whereby Syrian forces deployed to the southern suburbs and Hezbollah retained its militant capabilities to fight Israel.¹⁰⁰ The agreement was a notable example of Hezbollah's ability to act pragmatically and manage critical relations with outside powers.

Tehran's pivotal, yet limited role

Iran's revolutionary regime was critical in creating Hezbollah and helping the militant organization gain prominence over its rivals. Iran's financial support, for example, allowed Hezbollah to issue higher salaries and recruit the most effective Shi'a

⁹⁷ During the civil war, Hezbollah fighters would sometimes engage in battles with Syrians. See "Hizballah, Syrian Forces Clash in Ba'labakk," *Beirut Voice of Lebanon*, March 12, 1986; "Hizballah, Syrian Nationalists Clash," *Radio Free Lebanon*, June 9, 1986, accessed via FBIS.

⁹⁸ Robert Fisk, "Syria Gives Amal Soviet Tanks / Lebanese Muslim Militia Receive Military Equipment," *The Times (London)*, July 31, 1985, accessed Lexis Nexis Academic; Norton, *Hezbollah*, 72.

⁹⁹ Blanford, *Warriors of God*, 91.

¹⁰⁰ "Syrian Forces Deploy Between Amal, Hizballah," *Beirut Voice of Lebanon*, January 4, 1989; "Hizballah Group Goes to Syria to Settle 'Problems'," *Beirut Voice of National Resistance*, February 14, 1989, accessed via FBIS.

fighters.¹⁰¹ With Iran's help, Hezbollah cultivated highly sophisticated social programs and religious infrastructure to help disseminate propaganda and cultivate popular support. These institutions allowed Hezbollah to attract more disciplined and ideologically committed fighters than its main rival. But Iran's support is not a sufficient condition for Hezbollah's military success and was at times counterproductive. At first, IRGC trainers – based on their experience in the destructive Iran-Iraq war – encouraged mass human-wave assaults that failed to achieve their objectives and led to unnecessary militant casualties.¹⁰² Throughout the early 1980s, Hezbollah's guerrilla operations were largely futile. As leader Hassan Nasrallah noted: "at that stage, the Resistance did not pose a strategic threat or a threat to the very existence of the enemy entity at all (Israel)."¹⁰³ Hezbollah's ability to absorb Amal guerilla warfare experts – with intimate knowledge of the terrain – were decisive in helping the militant organization emerge as a dominant military force.

Though Iran was critical in sustaining Hezbollah operations, state sponsorship, on its own, cannot explain why Hezbollah launched its war of attrition in 1990. Towards the end of the 1980s, Iranian support for Hezbollah declined as the Islamic Republic was more preoccupied with the Iran-Iraq war, which ended in a bloody stalemate in 1988.¹⁰⁴ In 1989, the founder of Iran's Islamic Republic and spiritual head Ayatollah Khomeini died. He was replaced with more pragmatic leaders who prioritized strengthening Iran's ties with the broader Shi'a community – beyond Hezbollah. Infighting among Lebanese

¹⁰¹ DeVore and Stähli, "Explaining Hezbollah's Effectiveness," 346.

¹⁰² Ibid, 343.

¹⁰³ This quote is from a speech Nasrallah gave on February 16, 2014 as cited in Marcus, *Israel's Long War with Hezbollah*, 39.

¹⁰⁴ Norton, *Hezbollah*, 43.

Shi'a was viewed as highly problematic in Tehran. As civilian casualties mounted, Iran's new leaders condemned both Shi'a organizations for their bloody feud.¹⁰⁵ As a result, Iran considerably reduced its support for its proxies during this period.¹⁰⁶ To institutionalize Hezbollah's dominance, the organization's leadership needed to diversify its external support and secure political backing from Syria – the main power broker in Lebanon.

Hegemonic Hezbollah gains Syria's backing

The agreement to end the intra-Shi'a conflict coincided with the resolution of Lebanon's civil war in 1990.¹⁰⁷ Under the Taif Accords, Syria emerged as the external state guarantor of Lebanon's fragile government and civil war-era militant groups were forced to disarm. Amid serious internal deliberations on Hezbollah's future, the organization's new leadership adopted a more pragmatic posture to survive the post-civil war era despite its reservations with the final agreement. With Syria's backing, Hezbollah was the only Lebanese militant group allowed to maintain its military capabilities with an explicit mandate to fight Israel.¹⁰⁸ Despite years of mistrust and efforts to undermine Hezbollah, the Assad regime recognized the militant group's unique ability to impose

¹⁰⁵ "Montzeri Forbids Amal, Hizballah From Fighting," *IRNA (Tehran)*, January 20, 1989, accessed via FBIS.

¹⁰⁶ Augustus R. Norton, "Lebanon: The Internal Conflict and the Iranian Connection," in *The Iranian Revolution: Its Global Impact*, ed. J.L. Esposito, (Miami: Florida International University Press, 1990), 132; "Iran 'Radically' Cuts Hizballah Financial Aid," *Jerusalem (in Arabic to the Arab World)*, October 27, 1988. Some reports even suggest Iran began arming Amal to "curtail" Hezbollah's power. See "Iran Allegedly Arming Shiite Amal Movement," *The Independent*, August 22, 1989, accessed via FBIS.

¹⁰⁷ Several attempts at ceasefires and agreements were announced before but failed to last. "Amal, Hizballah Agree to Stop Fighting," *IRNA (Tehran)*, January 25, 1989, accessed via FBIS; Al-Jazeera, "A Look at the Taif Accord," *Al-Jazeera*, March 13, 2005. Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/archive/2005/03/2008410135815459954.html>

¹⁰⁸ Hezbollah signed the agreement after receiving Iran's approval. See Norton, *Hezbollah*, 83; "Amal Fighters Begin Withdrawing," *Beirut Domestic Service*, November 10, 1990, accessed via FBIS.

significant costs on Israel. After initially supporting Amal, Syria now joined Iran to back Hezbollah once the militant group emerged as the hegemonic Shi'a organization. As Blanford notes: "The immediate threat to its resistance priority was over, and with Iran's religious blessing and continued material support as well as Syria's political backing, Hezbollah could concentrate on the task for which it was born: confronting Israeli occupation."¹⁰⁹

6.5 RIVAL CONSOLIDATION AND THE WAR OF ATTRITION, 1991

As my theory suggests, Hezbollah first achieved a sufficient level of rival consolidation prior to devoting most of its resources and attention to waging a war of attrition against Israel. By the end of the 1980s, Hezbollah evolved from a clandestine group into a full-fledged guerrilla force posing a serious challenge to Israel's military in southern Lebanon.¹¹⁰ While most of Hezbollah's attacks took the form of assassinations, bombings, and kidnappings in its early years, after 1991, there was a clear and dramatic shift to hit-and-run strikes on Israeli military targets. I argue that Hezbollah's ability and willingness to launch a sustained war of attrition at this time is primarily a function of its relations with rivals. Some scholars point to territorial control as the key determinant explaining this shift in tactics. Controlling territory allowed Hezbollah to focus on developing its internal organizational structure and establishing a robust military apparatus. However, a critical piece of this story centers on Hezbollah's relations with rivals. Hezbollah fully secured territorial control only after gaining prominence among its

¹⁰⁹ Blanford, *Warriors of God*, 95.

¹¹⁰ In a quantitative analysis of Hezbollah's attack profile, researchers show that, in 1991, the militant group shifted its tactics from attacks generally associated with clandestine militant groups to traditional guerrilla operations. De La Calle and Sánchez-Cuenca, "How Armed Groups Fight," 808.

constituency and destroying its Shi'a foes in Beirut and southern Lebanon. By defeating its competitors and cultivating a safe haven, Hezbollah was in a position to mobilize the necessary resources, overcome key organizational hurdles, and focus its efforts to launch a sustained war of attrition against Israel. Between 1989 and 1990, Hezbollah considerably improved its strategic posture by launching sophisticated guerilla operations and retaining several thousand, well-trained militants.¹¹¹

Throughout the process of consolidating its rivals, Hezbollah incorporated many local fighters and mobilized critical resources to sustain militant operations.¹¹² Rival consolidation allowed Hezbollah to pool resources from other Shi'a groups and ramp up recruitment of more dedicated fighters. Unaffiliated civilians were left with one clear Shi'a militant group to support, helping Hezbollah better address any remaining collective action problems. After waging a successful outbidding campaign and gaining prominence among the Shi'a constituency, Hezbollah declared victory in 1984 after Western powers evacuated and Israel withdrew from most of Lebanese territory. Soon after, Hezbollah formally emerged from the shadows and established a hierarchical organizational structure. From its new safe haven, Hezbollah expanded its social services provision, financial payments, and educational programs to bolster recruitment. Significant numbers of Lebanese Shi'a of all stripes – from active fighters to older village guards and ordinary civilians – were mobilized on behalf of Hezbollah's goals.

As Israel withdrew to its southern security belt in 1985, Hezbollah's prominence grew among the Shi'a constituency and the organization began expanding a safe haven at

¹¹¹ Marcus, *Israel's Long War with Hezbollah*, 44.

¹¹² Shimon Shapira, "The Origins of Hizballah," *The Jerusalem Quarterly* 46 (1988): 115-130, 124; Carl Anthony Wege, "Hizballah Organization," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 17, no. 2 (1994): 151-164, 154.

the expense of its rivals. Hezbollah cultivated a base of operations with a less overbearing Israeli presence, which allowed the group to better address principal-agent problems. Israel was much more limited in monitoring Hezbollah's communications and disrupting operations now that a front line separated the belligerents. From its new safe haven, the leadership was better positioned to safeguard its organizational structure and ensure compliance from rank-and-file fighters. Without viable competitors, Hezbollah's leadership could worry less about defections to other Shi'a organizations and deter deviant behaviour from within the movement. By 1989, after defeating its main competitors in bloody clashes, Hezbollah gained invaluable fighting experience and fully consolidated its territorial control over the outskirts of Beirut and southern Lebanon. When counterproductive violence ceased within the wider Shi'a militant movement, Hezbollah was in an even stronger position to focus on military training, identify the most dedicated recruits, and effectively allocate members for specialized roles and operations. The IDF, on the other hand, underestimated Hezbollah's potential and maintained a relatively constant counter-militancy approach throughout the organization's nascent stages. The process of rival consolidation was instrumental in helping Hezbollah overcome major organizational hurdles, including collective action and principal-agent problems.

After consolidating its rivals, Hezbollah leveraged its status to secure and improve critical forms of external support. Iran's leadership ramped up support to Hezbollah after acknowledging the group's hegemony, following a relative decline in state sponsorship during the intra-Shi'a war of the late 1980s. Syria – the main power broker in Lebanon – only offered its full support to Hezbollah in 1990, after the organization emerged as the

hegemonic Shi'a force with the capabilities to impose serious costs on Israel. After attaining its immediate organizational objectives, Hezbollah was able to pursue its more strategic goals of eroding Israel's military capabilities and destroying its will to continue a military occupation in southern Lebanon. Hezbollah's growing size and diminishing casualty ratios reflected Hezbollah's increasing strength.¹¹³ Towards the end of the decade, Israel's leadership acknowledged that the costs of maintaining its military presence in Lebanon outweighed the perceived benefits. In 2000, Hezbollah achieved one of its core objectives when Israel unilaterally withdrew its military forces from Lebanon.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ According to one expert estimate, the Hezbollah/IDF casualty ratio reached roughly 2:1 by the mid 1990s. The ratio was 5:1 during the late 1980s. See Augustus Richard Norton, "Hizballah and the Israeli Withdrawal from Southern Lebanon," *Journal of Palestinian Studies* 1 (2000): 25-35.

¹¹⁴ Eyal Zisser, "Hizballah and Israel: Strategic Threat on the Northern Border," *Israel Affairs* 12, no.1 (2006): 86-106, 94. Citing an ongoing and trilateral territorial dispute, Israel maintained control over the Shab'a Farms – a small area on the southern tip of the Syrian-Lebanese border. See Anonymous (name redacted). "The Shib'a Farms Dispute and Its Implications," *Congressional Research Service* August 7, 2001.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE KURDISTAN WORKERS' PARTY (PKK): 1978-1984

7.1 INTRODUCTION

Why was the PKK able to wage a sustained insurgency against the far more powerful Turkish state? What explains the onset of insurgency in 1984, as opposed to earlier or later? I argue that the story behind the PKK's rise as a full-fledged insurgent threat is primarily a function of its ability to consolidate its rivals in the group's nascent stages. Through the strategic use of violence, the PKK was able to successfully outbid and eclipse more established Kurdish groups to gain the Kurdish peasantry's support. With Syrian support, the PKK's leadership re-built its organization while the Turkish regime crushed leftover rival Kurdish groups in the aftermath of the 1980 military coup. The destruction and fragmentation of Kurdish rivals helped the PKK to attract more recruits and resources, enabling the group to overcome collective action problems that plague most nascent militant organizations. Without viable competitors, counterproductive violence from within the Kurdish nationalist movement ceased, allowing the PKK to shift their attention from internal fights to securing an external safe haven in northern Iraq. As the hegemonic militant organization, the PKK deterred defections and was in a stronger position to keep lower-ranking fighters in line with leadership objectives, which helped the group build its military capacity and address principal-agent problems. The PKK was then willing and able to launch a guerilla war in an effort to provoke a popular rebellion and cement its gains as the undisputed hegemon of the Kurdish nationalist movement.

This case study contributes to a gap in the literature on the PKK. Much of the

literature concerning the PKK consists of historical and journalistic accounts, focusing mainly on the context behind the rise of Kurdish nationalism or the nature of the PKK's activities.¹ One study that explicitly traces through the PKK's various insurgency stages prioritizes the transition following the end of the group's initial armed conflict phase in mid-1993 to a "reconciliation" phase characterized by lower levels of violence and negotiations.² Ünal (2014) devotes one short paragraph to the PKK's most nascent stages, prior to its guerrilla war. In an empirical analysis of the origins of PKK militants, Tezcür (2015) highlights the differences between the PKK's recruitment patterns in the pre-guerrilla phase (1976-1984) and the initial armed conflict phase (1984-1989).³ This case study focuses on tracing the PKK's transition to insurgency from its earliest years – through the prism of the group's relations with rivals.

There are several existing explanations for why the PKK launched a sustained armed conflict against the Turkish state. Turkey's adoption of repressive measures and indiscriminate state violence targeting the Kurdish community since the 1960s played a defining role in awakening the Kurdish nationalist consciousness that could make support for a wider insurgency appealing. Kurdish victimization increased considerably after the 1980 coup, contributing to the necessary – but insufficient - grievances required to mobilize a population for insurgency. The PKK's dual Marxist-Leninist and ethno-nationalist ideology also appealed to many members of the Kurdish peasantry. But state repression, grievances, or ideology – relatively static factors – cannot explain why the

¹ Aliza Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

² Mustafa Coşar Ünal, "Strategist or Pragmatist: A Challenging Look at Ocalan's Retrospective Classification and Definition of PKK's Strategic Periods Between 1973 and 2012," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 3 (2014): 419–448, 421.

³ Güneş Murat Tezcür, "Violence and Nationalist Mobilization: The Onset of the Kurdish Insurgency in Turkey," *Nationalities Papers* 43, no. 2 (2015): 248–266.

PKK was able to eclipse rival Kurdish groups and launched an insurgency in 1984. More mature Kurdish groups with similar objectives would have been more likely to dominate the Kurdish constituency given their stronger pre-existing social ties. But it was the younger, more strategic, PKK that reaped most of the organizational benefits in this period through the strategic use of violence at the expense of its main rivals – who later fragmented following the 1980 Turkish military coup. By successfully outbidding and defeating its rivals in violent clashes, the PKK was able to mobilize more resources and secure support from large segments of the Kurdish constituency.

Throughout the process of consolidating rivals, the PKK was better able to access or exploit key conditions commonly associated with insurgency success: safe haven – particularly in mountainous terrain - and foreign support. While Syrian sponsorship was critical for the PKK to re-organize and survive, the Assad regime refused to allow the Kurdish group to attack Turkey from its territory. The PKK strategically selected mountainous border regions with a weak Turkish state presence to set up military bases of operations, lending credence to the core structural-level explanations of insurgency onset.⁴ However, consolidating rivals was a necessary step to successfully utilizing these regions. After attaining hegemony in the post-coup era, the PKK then set its sights to striking an agreement with a leading Kurdish militant group in northern Iraq. The PKK's external alliance enabled the group to access a crucial safe haven on the Turkey-Iraq border region immediately prior to the onset of the PKK's insurgency.⁵ Existing scholarly theories of insurgency help explain the PKK's emergence and rise as a serious challenge

⁴ Fearon, James D. and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003): 75-90.

⁵ Hannes Černý, "Ethnic Alliances Deconstructed: The PKK Sanctuary in Iraqi Kurdistan and the Internationalization of Ethnic Conflict Revisited," *Ethnopolitics* 13, no. 4 (2014): 328–354.

to the Turkish regime. However, my theory of rival consolidation is a critical part of the larger story that better explains the PKK's ability and timing to wage a sustained insurgency than rival explanations. When primarily competitive relations with rivals transitioned to hegemonic consolidation, the PKK was in a strong position to effectively utilize key regions and tap into vital sources of support required to launch a sustained armed conflict.

TABLE 7.1: PKK'S RELATIONS WITH RIVALS AND SUSTAINED ARMED CONFLICT ONSET

Time Period	Primary Rival Relations	Implications	Outcome (Sustained Armed Conflict Onset)
1978 – 1980	Competitive escalation (outbidding) / Destructive competition (infighting)	PKK outbids rival groups by targeting landowning elites, violently engaging in local tribal feuds; PKK fighting rival Kurdish groups	No
1980 – 1983 (Turkish military takeover)	N/A	PKK escapes shortly before coup, rebuilds organization in Syria/Lebanon; Military regime crushes Kurdish groups left in Turkey; PKK absorbs recruits from rival groups	No
1981	Strategic alliance	PKK-dominated alliance with leftist Turkish militant groups (does not include remaining Kurdish groups); alliance falls apart	No

1982 – 1983	Hegemonic consolidation	Main rival groups eliminated; counterproductive violence minimized; PKK leadership reaches formal agreement with rival Kurds in Iraq to access critical safe haven to conduct guerilla attacks; PKK launches sustained armed conflict targeting Turkish military positions in August 1984	Yes (1984)
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This paper is divided into chronological time periods and respective rival relations. The first section briefly introduces the rise of Kurdish nationalism and the PKK’s emergence. The second section outlines competitive relations between the PKK and its main Kurdish rivals, mainly outbidding and destructive competition. The third section explores consequences of the 1980 Turkish military coup and the PKK’s rebuilding efforts in neighbouring Syria. The final sections evaluate how rival consolidation impacted the PKK’s ability and decision making to launch a sustained insurgency against Turkey. Alternative explanations are explored throughout the chapter. My theory of rival consolidation offers a powerful and more complete perspective that better addresses temporal variation – where static explanations fall short – to explain why the PKK evolved to pose a serious armed challenge to the Turkish regime in 1984.

7.2 THE KURDISH NATIONALIST MOVEMENT AND FOUNDATIONS FOR MILITANCY

Throughout modern Turkish history, there have been several Kurdish revolts against the state. But none of these earlier rebellions escalated to a full-fledged insurgency and posed such a serious challenge to the Turkish state. By the 1960s, a

powerful sense of Kurdish nationalism re-emerged in Turkish politics and society.⁶ Scholars point to a variety of explanations for this phenomenon. The transition to multiparty democratization in Turkey in 1946 facilitated relatively more openness and outlets for opposition parties, including Kurdish groups, to voice their concerns.⁷ Some observers attribute the rise of Kurdish nationalism to primarily socio-economic factors, including rising urbanization and inequality in Turkey's Kurdish-dominated regions.⁸ The spread of education among Kurdish society also played an important role. By the late 1950s, Kurdish students and intellectuals in leading universities started organizations that emphasized Kurdish culture. Kurdish cultural activities facilitated growing debates about the state of Kurdish rights and identity in Turkish society. Other scholars point to geopolitical factors, including an emboldened Iraqi Kurdish political consciousness in neighbouring Iraq that inspired their counterparts in Turkey.⁹

Following the 1960 military coup, Turkey's regime increased repression and engaged in arbitrary detentions of Kurdish activists and tribal leaders. In response to state-led denials of a distinct Kurdish people, Kurdish intellectuals started to adopt a more socialist identity and framed Kurdish identity as a people subjected to Turkish colonization.¹⁰ According to these leading perspectives, major socio-economic transitions and political developments facilitated new opportunities for Kurds to forge ties with more

⁶ M. Hakan Yavuz, "Five Stages of the Construction of Kurdish Nationalism in Turkey," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 7, no. 3 (2001): 1-24.

⁷ Hamit Bozarslan, "Kurds and the Turkish State," in *Turkey in the Modern World*, ed. Reşat Kasaba (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 333-356.

⁸ Cengiz Gunes, "Explaining the PKK's Mobilization of the Kurds in Turkey: Hegemony, Myth and Violence," *Ethnopolitics* 12, no. 3 (2013): 247-267, 251.

⁹ Denise Natali, *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey and Iran* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2005).

¹⁰ "TKP Appeals for Resistance Against Martial Law," *Our Radio (Turkey)*, December 31, 1979, accessed via FBIS; Gunes, "Explaining the PKK's Mobilization of the Kurds in Turkey," 250.

Marxist-Leninist outlets. Kurdish activists increasingly joined leftist organizations and political parties, with a predominate ethnic Turkish membership base, as a vehicle to express broader Kurdish grievances. But by the early 1970s, several Kurdish groups and parties emerged – including the Socialist Party of Turkish Kurdistan (TKSP), Rizgari, and the Kurdistan National Liberationists (KUK) – to defend the wider constituency.¹¹ Ankara’s neglect of the Kurdish countryside and assault on Kurdish identity led some activists to embrace the prospect of militancy.

7.3 FROM ANKARA TO THE KURDISH COUNTRYSIDE: THE PKK’S CLANDESTINE BEGINNINGS, 1973-1978

In 1973, a political science student at the University of Ankara, Abdullah Ocalan, broke away from Turkish leftist organizations and formed the PKK with a small group of young Kurdish activists.¹² The PKK was primarily motivated by Maoist principles and embraced the need to launch an armed conflict against Turkey to provoke a wider popular rebellion. Between 1974-1978, its leader Ocalan was primarily focused on studying revolutionary literature, expanding a core cadre of dedicated recruits, and dispatching members to mobilize popular support.¹³ In 1975, Ocalan and a handful of activists moved their nascent organization from Turkey’s urban centres to Kurdish rural areas in the country’s southeastern region. While most anti-Turkish political activism in the 1970s

¹¹ “Kurdish Organizations in Turkey Detailed,” *Hurriyet*, June 19, 1978, accessed via FBIS. Some of these groups openly called for a violent uprising. In a 1979 interview, an unnamed leader of the outlawed Kurdistan Democratic Party said: “We know we will never get out independence without armed struggle. And it is full independence we want, first here in Turkey, and then in all of Kurdistan. See “Kurdish Leader Interviewed on Plans for Independence,” *The Daily Telegraph*, October 22, 1979, accessed via FBIS.

¹² Ünal, “Strategist or Pragmatist,” 424.

¹³ Nur Bilge Criss, “The Nature of PKK Terrorism in Turkey,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 18, no. 1 (1995): 17–37, 19; David Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization, and Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 73.

flourished in the cities and urban areas, the PKK and a few other Kurdish groups made the most effort to rally Kurdish support in the countryside. PKK members began their grassroots recruitment campaigns, highlighting Kurdish grievances and framing Turkey's presence in the region as illegitimate colonial rule.¹⁴

In November 1978, the PKK officially declared its founding as a formal, yet still clandestine, organization. In the PKK's founding Congress, the leadership announced its ultimate objective of establishing an "Independent United Kurdish State" that would span predominately Kurdish populated territories in Turkey and neighbouring countries.¹⁵ The group immediately adopted a centralized and hierarchical organizational structure, with Ocalan at the top. Years later, when the PKK matured into a viable and dominant organization, the group secured outside state support and enjoyed high levels of Kurdish diaspora contributions.¹⁶ But during its earliest years, lacking weapons and sources of financing, the PKK – like other leftist militant groups at the time – resorted to drug trafficking, petty crime, and bank robberies to fund the nascent organization's activities.¹⁷ The PKK first had to gain credibility before accessing major sources of financing.

Despite minor strategic or ideological differences, all of the main Kurdish organizations adhered to a variant of socialist ideology and were devoted to Kurdish ethno-nationalism. But the PKK soon eclipsed the older, more established, Kurdish

¹⁴ Ünal, "Strategist or Pragmatist," 425.

¹⁵ "Kurdish Party Announces Formation, Outlines Objectives," *Hurriyet*, August, 2, 1979, accessed via FBIS; Ünal, "Strategist or Pragmatist," 425, citing "Ankara Devrimci Yuksek Ogrenci Dernegi; Ankara Revolutionary Students' Association (ADYOD) at the University of Ankara in the Province of Ankara in Turkey," footnote 19.

¹⁶ Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement*, 91.

¹⁷ Criss, "The Nature of PKK Terrorism in Turkey," 18-19. In later years, the PKK diversified its funding sources considerably by engaging in various organized criminal ventures. See Mitchel P. Roth and Murat Sever, "The Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) as Criminal Syndicate: Funding Terrorism through Organized Crime, a Case Study," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 30, no. 10 (2007): 901–920.

organizations that maintained more robust social ties and pre-existing networks.¹⁸ While the PKK's leadership ties were strong, the group's urban and intellectual beginnings remained distant from Turkey's rural countryside. Militant groups with strong pre-war social ties are associated with more robust organizational cohesion and success throughout an insurgency.¹⁹ But the PKK had to develop its vertical, social ties to the Kurdish peasantry by integrating itself in local conflicts. The PKK soon stood out as the main Kurdish group willing to actively confront the Turkish regime and defend Kurdish peasants stuck in exploitative conditions and embroiled in local feuds. A defining reason behind the PKK's success over its rivals is its strategic use of violence to manipulate local conflicts and ability to better signal its credibility to the Kurdish constituency.²⁰

7.4 FIGHTING FOR DOMINANCE, 1978-1980

When the PKK formally emerged in 1978, there were already several Kurdish national organizations with fairly robust civil society representation, constituent support, and affiliated politicians. But within two years, the PKK gained prominence among the nationalist Kurdish constituency after waging a successful campaign of outbidding and elimination of rivals. There are several explanations for why the PKK emerged as the prominent organization among the Kurdish constituency during this period. The PKK's success has been attributed to its willingness to fight the regime early on and its ability to

¹⁸ The Kurdish Socialist Party was reportedly the "strongest and most influential among the Kurdish organizations" according to a June 1978 Turkish media publication. See "Kurdish Organizations in Turkey Detailed," *Hurriyet*, June 19, 1978, accessed via FBIS.

¹⁹ Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

²⁰ This observation is one of David Romano's (2006) main arguments behind the PKK's successful rise as a mass movement, see Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement*.

withstand the government's campaign to destroy the organization.²¹ Other observers stress the importance of the PKK's discourse through propaganda campaigns and cultural activities that raised the organization's profile.²² But during its earliest years – unlike other Kurdish groups – the PKK did not have its own publication to disseminate propaganda.²³ The PKK leadership purposefully chose to prioritize violent outbidding and elimination of its rivals during this period.

While the PKK conducted some attacks against Turkish security forces during this period, the majority of the group's efforts were focused on combating rival Kurdish groups and fighting on behalf of the Kurdish peasantry against local landowning elites. Between 1978 and 1980, the PKK's attacks led to about 350 recorded deaths – most of the victims were ethnic Kurds.²⁴ With minimal manpower and few resources, the PKK set out to mobilize constituent support and dominate the Kurdish nationalist movement by strategically waging a violent campaign of outbidding and direct clashes against rival Kurdish groups.

Outbidding rival groups for constituency support

In its earliest years, the PKK strategically employed violence to differentiate itself from its rivals to gain support from the local Kurdish constituency. During this period,

²¹ Henri J. Barkley and Graham E. Fuller, *Turkey's Kurdish Question* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 30.

²² Gunes, Explaining the PKK's Mobilization of the Kurds in Turkey, 249.

²³ In September 1979, Turkish authorities arrested several members of the "Supporters of APO" group. "Apo" was PKK leader Ocalan's nickname. According to a Turkish media report, the operatives "started by distributing leaflets and later joined forces under the name 'Partiya Kerkari Kurdistan—Kurdish Labor Party.'" See "Members of Clandestine Kurdish Organization Arrested," *Anatolia*, September 27, 1979, accessed via FBIS.

²⁴ Andrew Mango, *Turkey and the War on Terror: For Forty Years We Fought Alone* (London: Routledge, 2005), 34.

PKK operatives prioritized defending the Kurdish peasantry - who lived in highly unequal socioeconomic conditions under the rule of local landlords.²⁵ In this time period “most [PKK] activities were locally supported peasant-based attacks on tribal chiefs in the Urfa province.”²⁶ Though all Kurdish groups criticized land inequality, the PKK was the only organization to challenge and combat powerful landlords.

The PKK’s first high-profile attack was an attempted assassination of a powerful land-owning elite and member of Parliament – Mehmet Celal Bucak – in July 1979.²⁷ The attack sparked a violent feud between the Bucak tribe and PKK members in Urfa province.²⁸ Even though the PKK failed to subdue the tribe, the group’s reputation improved considerably among many Kurds for emerging as a credible force willing to take on powerful and oppressive elites. The PKK also reportedly conducted several false-flag attacks, making it look like fighters from the Bucak clan retaliated, to provoke further spirals of violence.²⁹ Other Kurdish groups – such as Ala Rizgari – attempted to organize demonstrations against land owning elites. But the PKK’s targeted killing campaign against specific exploitative figures and tribal leaders signaled the organization’s resolve to fight for its constituency.

Local Kurds that did not help the PKK violently overthrow a particular tribal leader or landowner would have likely been sidelined from reaping the benefits of liberated territory. Incentives to help the PKK were rising during this period, helping the

²⁵ Tezcür, “Violence and Nationalist Mobilization,” 254.

²⁶ Imset G. Imset, “The PKK: Terrorists or Freedom Fighters?” *Democracy at Gunpoint; Turkey Survey*, (1996), 26, quoted in Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement*, 74.

²⁷ David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I.B. Taurus, 1997), 419; Martin van Bruinessen, “Between Guerrilla War and Political Murder: The Workers’ Party of Kurdistan,” *Middle East Report* 153 (1988): 40-50.

²⁸ Tezcür, “Violence and Nationalist Mobilization,” 254.

²⁹ Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement*, 75.

organization overcome collective action problems common in most nascent insurrections. Many peasants that helped take over local elites were subsequently socialized into the PKK's organization to avoid the risk of reversing their gains and increasingly began supporting the group's broader ethno-nationalist agenda.³⁰

The group's popularity skyrocketed because it credibly committed to serving as an armed vanguard of Kurdish peasantry interests in the areas where the group operated. Tezcür (2015) empirically shows that the PKK was best able to recruit members and fighters from areas where the organization was most active and violent. In an analysis of 142 PKK members killed between 1978-1980, the vast majority died during battles with landlords in Urfa and Mardin provinces. Twenty-two (15%) of the fighters were previously affiliated with other Turkish leftist or Kurdish organizations before joining the PKK.³¹

By killing and displacing landowning families in certain regions with a weak state presence, the PKK emerged as a guarantor for the safety of some local communities. In violent and unstable circumstances, militant groups that can offer protection to local populations help reduce fear and promote recruitment. For example, from around early 1979, many Alevi Kurds began joining the PKK for protection from sectarian violence.³² The average Kurdish citizen was still caught in between supporting the state or the PKK, unsure which side was in more control of a particular area.³³ But by waging

³⁰ Ibid., 76.

³¹ Tezcür, "Violence and Nationalist Mobilization," 256.

³² Ibid., 257.

³³ For more on the fluid nature and implications of territorial control in armed conflicts, see Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

a successful outbidding campaign, the PKK gained prominence among the Kurdish constituency and absorbed members from rival groups.

Destructive competition

While the PKK became increasingly embroiled in violent feuds with local landowning families, the group also clashed directly with members of rival Kurdish organizations. As the PKK took on rival groups in street battles, its organizational support and membership grew considerably, at the expense of its competitors. As a result, the PKK “achieved considerable support in the oil town of Batman, fought against Turkish leftist organizations in the province of Tunceli, and established a foothold in the industrial city of Antep,” during this period.³⁴ The organization started to overcome the collective action problem as its membership grew dramatically in the two years prior to the 1980 Turkish military coup.³⁵ Focused on battling rival groups and absorbing new recruits, the PKK was in no position to launch a sustained insurgency against the Turkish regime.

Despite facing several enemies, the PKK’s rivalry with the Kurdistan Ulusal Kurtuluscu-lari (KUK) was especially violent. Most of the older Kurdish opposition groups failed to make deep connections with the Kurdish peasantry in the countryside. Some groups, like Kawa, tried to make inroads but were repelled by forces loyal to local landlords.³⁶ Of the PKK’s main rivals, the KUK was the only group with a similar socio-economic and geographic membership base.³⁷ Both groups shared views on the necessity

³⁴ Tezcür, “Violence and Nationalist Mobilization,” 256.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 249.

³⁶ Tezcür, “Violence and Nationalist Mobilization,” 257.

³⁷ Martin van Bruinessen, “The Kurds in Turkey,” *MERIP Reports* no. 121 (1984): 6-12.

of armed struggle to gain Kurdish independence and relied on recruitment among peasants and students in the same border provinces. The groups fought each other in major street battles and other armed confrontations. As relations descended into full-fledged destructive competition, the PKK tried to physically eradicate the KUK in an effort to dominate the Kurdish constituency.³⁸ However, the Turkish military regime inadvertently finished the PKK's job for them. Like many other opposition groups left in Turkey, the KUK was effectively eradicated following the 1980 Turkish military coup.

7.5 MILITARY COUP IN TURKEY AND THE PKK'S RE-ORGANIZATION FOR SURVIVAL, 1980-1983

Between 1976-1980, Turkey experienced one of the deadliest surges in terrorist violence worldwide, killing over 5000 people.³⁹ While Turkish leftists were predominately responsible for the political violence plaguing the country, Kurdish ethno-nationalist attacks were on the rise between 1979-1980.⁴⁰ Higher rates of terrorism in Turkey's urban centers and major cities led to a weakened state presence in the country's rural periphery.⁴¹ The PKK exploited this political vacuum by escalating attacks against Turkey's security forces, rival Kurdish groups, and local elites. State repression increased after 1979 when the state restricted legal and political avenues for Kurdish groups to challenge the state.⁴² Anticipating a military crackdown, Ocalan and several PKK operatives fled Turkey in May 1979.⁴³ In September 1980, the Turkish military forcibly

³⁸ Van Bruinessen, "Between Guerrilla War and Political Murder."

³⁹ Sabri Sayari, "Political Violence and Terrorism in Turkey, 1976-80: A Retrospective Analysis," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, no. 2 (2010): 198-215, 199.

⁴⁰ "Incidents of Political Violence Reported Throughout Country," *Ankara Domestic Service*, September 5, 1979, accessed via FBIS.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Gunes, "Explaining the PKK's Mobilization of the Kurds in Turkey," 255.

⁴³ Marcus, *Blood and Belief*, 52-75.

took over power, justifying the coup by blaming the civilian government for failing to adequately address the recent surge of violence.

Between 1980-1983, Turkey's military regime crushed the overwhelming majority of the oppositional militant groups remaining in the country.⁴⁴ Many members of Turkish leftist and Kurdish organizations were either arrested, exiled, or killed.⁴⁵ Tens of thousands of Kurds accused of supporting separatists were detained during this period. By 1981, over two thousand accused PKK sympathizers were jailed – more than any other Kurdish organization despite still maintaining a relatively small membership base.⁴⁶ This disproportionate incarceration level reinforced the view that the PKK emerged as the prominent Kurdish militant group among the broader ethno-nationalist movement. Much of the scholarly literature on civil war and insurgency argues that state repression is a major factor that leads to higher levels of political violence.⁴⁷ However, Turkey's martial law and widespread repression drastically reduced the number of terrorist attacks and oppositional activities throughout the country.

During this period, most of the PKK's main rivals were effectively destroyed. A significant number of rival fighters were imprisoned and leaders failed to reinvigorate their respective organizations.⁴⁸ Remaining members from rival leftist or Kurdish

⁴⁴ "Restrictions on Activities, Groups," *Ankara Domestic Service*, September 12, 1980, accessed via FBIS.

⁴⁵ Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement*, 49**

⁴⁶ "Commands Report 2,554 Apoists Captured to Date," *Ankara Domestic Service*, June 3, 1981; "Military Court Begins Mass Trial of Secessionists," *Anatolia*, April 13, 1981, accessed via FBIS; Michael Gunter, "The Kurdish Problem in Turkey," *The Middle East Journal* 42, no. 3 (1988): 389-406, 395.

⁴⁷ John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaysia and Vietnam* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005); David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001); Luke N. Condra and Jacob N. Shapiro, "Who Takes the Blame? The Strategic Effects of Collateral Damage," *American Journal of Political Science* 56 no. 1 (2012): 167-187; Daniel Branch and Elisabeth Jean Wood, "Revisiting Counterinsurgency," *Politics and Society* 38, no. 1 (2010): 3-14; Ivan Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁴⁸ Marcus, *Blood and Belief*, 61-62.

organizations either continued to battle the group in armed clashes or were absorbed into the PKK ranks.⁴⁹ For example, TIKKI, a leftist armed group, gravitated towards the PKK during their time in prison and some fighters joined the PKK after their release.⁵⁰ Amid high levels of state repression, the PKK's strategy of embracing armed conflict emerged triumphant over the strategies of rival groups. But the PKK's leader realized that the current situation was still too dangerous for his fighters.⁵¹ Instead, Ocalan prioritized solidifying the group's dominance over rival groups and re-building the organization from new bases in neighbouring countries.

The Assad regime offers refuge in Syria

A year before the military coup, Ocalan fled to Damascus in an effort to evade Turkish authorities and to cultivate ties to the Assad regime and Palestinian militant groups. Despite Syria's record for suppressing Kurdish rights within its borders, almost every Kurdish group outside the country had representatives in Damascus and held senior-level meetings in the capital.⁵² The Assad regime tolerated Kurdish fighters entering its country because Syria wanted to cultivate bargaining leverage with Turkey concerning several outstanding territorial and resource disputes. The Syrian regime also believed Turkey was harbouring members of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, a militant organization that waged a failed insurgency against the Syrian regime in 1976 (the focus of the next chapter) – around the same time some Kurdish leaders started to flow into

⁴⁹ Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement*, 79.

⁵⁰ Criss, "The Nature of PKK Terrorism in Turkey," 19.

⁵¹ "Security Forces Capture Militants, Arms Supplies," *Ankara Domestic Service*, June 30, 1981, accessed via FBIS.

⁵² Marcus, *Blood and Belief*, 53.

Syria.

The Assad regime's safe haven saved Ocalan and the PKK from complete destruction, but outside state support, on its own, cannot explain why the PKK waged an insurgency against Turkey several years later. Syria served as a popular haven for many other Kurdish and Turkish dissident groups as well.⁵³ There were also major limits to Syrian support. Assad did not want to empower the PKK too much fearing an uprising from Syria's own Kurdish community. Most importantly, the Assad regime prohibited the PKK from using its territory as a launch pad for attacks against Turkey to avoid military retribution from Ankara.

By fleeing in 1979, Ocalan believed that he had an advantage over rival revolutionary groups that largely remained in Turkey at the time. "The others could only get out two years after me, after they had already lost their organization," Ocalan said adding that "because I got out before Sept 12. I could both save hundreds of my comrades and get them trained."⁵⁴ Some leaders of other Kurdish groups, like the TKSP group, fled to Western Europe before the coup as well, but were not able to revive their operational presence in Turkey or challenge the PKK's rising prominence.⁵⁵ Maintaining focus on challenging the Turkish regime, Ocalan prioritized building the PKK's organization from Syria and securing guerrilla war training for his fighters in Lebanon.

⁵³ Criss, "The Nature of PKK Terrorism in Turkey," 19.

⁵⁴ Mehmet Ali Birand, *Apo ve PKK* (Istanbul: Milliyet Yayinlari, 1993), 111 quoted in Marcus, *Blood and Belief*, 62.

⁵⁵ Gunes, "Explaining the PKK's Mobilization of the Kurds in Turkey," 256.

Palestinian training camps in Lebanon

Beyond Syria, PKK militants cultivated ties with Palestinian militants in Syrian-controlled areas of Lebanon, including the Bekk'a Valley. Various Palestinian factions oversaw military training camps that included courses on manufacturing explosives and guerrilla warfare.⁵⁶ The Palestinians, in turn, benefited from this arrangement by positioning themselves as a movement that trained various revolutionary groups worldwide and believed the PKK militants could be used to defend Palestinian bases in the event of an Israeli attack. "We thought that this group [the PKK] was the most serious group in Turkish Kurdistan. This is why we kept them [in the camps]," recalled Abu Laila – a senior official with the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP).⁵⁷ As the preeminent Kurdish organization, the PKK was a highly attractive partner for outside actors seeking to improve their respective geopolitical positions. While training with Palestinian militants helped the PKK develop guerilla warfighting skills, the Kurdish organization still lacked a viable base of operations to launch militant attacks. By 1982, Israel invaded southern Lebanon to stifle Palestinian militant activity in the country – forcing the PKK to relocate its forces.⁵⁸

In the post-1980 era, the PKK emerged as one of the only viable options for Kurds that did not want to support the state. While opposition violence in Turkey virtually ceased during this period, indiscriminate government crackdowns enflamed

⁵⁶ Giles Trendle, "Turks Vow to Blast Kurds Out of Lebanon," *The Sunday Times (London)* October 13, 1991, accessed Lexis Nexis Academic; "Alleged PLO Involvement," *Anatolia*, March 29, 1981, accessed via FBIS.

⁵⁷ Abu Laila is quoted in an interview with Aliza Marcus in Marcus, *Blood and Belief*, 57.

⁵⁸ According to a Turkish media report, Israeli forces detained several Kurdish militants during raids on Palestinian training camps in Lebanon. Two of the detainees on the list were identified as PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan and his wife, Kesire. See "Israel Captures Turkish Terrorists in Lebanon," *Hurriyet*, July 10, 1982, accessed via FBIS.

grievances among the Kurdish population.⁵⁹ Turkey's repressive measures often targeted many Kurds that were unaffiliated with any particular militant group or subversive activity. Avenues for non-violent mobilization and political participation were increasingly shut down. As a result, more unaffiliated Kurdish civilians decided it was time to support armed conflict against the Turkish government.⁶⁰ The PKK was in the best position – compared to its rivals – to attract and absorb significant numbers of new recruits into the organization.

As the PKK consolidated its rivals and became less concerned with Kurdish competitors, the organization rapidly began focusing on developing the capacity to sustain a guerrilla campaign. During this period, the PKK gradually transitioned to operate from the mountainous border area, mainly in the Sirnak province.⁶¹ The region was more conducive to guerilla war than the flatlands of Urfa and the PKK's earliest bases of operations. The border province soon became the primary focal point for recruitment – almost 40% of the PKK's militants absorbed during the early insurgency phase hailed from Sirnak.⁶² By the end of 1982, the PKK was clearly the leading militant group among the wider Kurdish nationalist movement. But to enshrine the PKK's dominance, Ocalan first attempted to mend ties with the remnants of the major oppositional groups and form a strategic alliance to confront the Turkish regime.

⁵⁹ According to Sayari (2010), militant incidents declined by roughly 90 percent within a year following the 1980 military coup. Sayari, "Political Violence and Terrorism in Turkey, 1976-80," 90.

⁶⁰ Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement*, 85.

⁶¹ Tezcur, "Violence and Nationalist Mobilization," 260.

⁶² *Ibid.*

7.6 REPAIRING RIVAL RELATIONS: A SHORT-LIVED STRATEGIC ALLIANCE, 1981

As Turkey's military cracked down on opposition groups, Ocalan tried to resolve outstanding disputes with rival organizations and form a strategic alliance. With help from Jalal Talabani, leader of the Iraqi Kurdish PUK group, Ocalan courted the remnants of rival Kurdish groups.⁶³ Playing the role of mediator, Talabani encouraged the leader of the influential groups, like the Kurdistan Socialist Party, to consider allying with the PKK. Prominent Kurdish groups, in turn, demanded that Ocalan apologize for attacking fellow Kurdish groups in the past. But rival Kurdish leaders did not view Ocalan's apparent overtures as sincere and refused to join a PKK-dominated coalition.

The PKK leader reached out to non-Kurdish groups as well, including to leaders of Devrimci-Yol (Dev-Yol) – the largest left-wing militant organization in Turkey. After exchanging letters, one of Dev-Yol's leaders – Mesut Akyol – flew to Damascus to meet Ocalan in 1981.⁶⁴ In the following months, the two leaders hashed out what an alliance between revolutionary Turks and Kurds might entail. While Turkish leftists remained skeptical, and resented Ocalan for the PKK's previous attacks against rival Turkish groups, an alliance was formed.

The PKK, Dev-Yol, and some five smaller left-wing parties joined together to form the Front Against Fascism (FKBD-C) - an alliance overwhelmingly dominated by the PKK.⁶⁵ In July 1981, the PKK held a major conference featuring about 80 PKK

⁶³ Marcus, *Blood and Belief*, 63.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Marcus, *Blood and Belief*, 65.

militants and activists to discuss next steps for the organization.⁶⁶ Leaders discussed plans for waging an armed conflict inside Turkey in coordination with rival groups. But as Dev-Yol's organization fragmented under Turkey's repressive measures, many of the group's fighters fled to Europe and the PKK's union with leftist revolutionaries quickly broke down.

As my theory suggests, a strategic alliance or merger with far weaker parties would likely have made little difference on the PKK's ability or willingness to launch a sustained armed conflict against Turkey. Alliances often help militant groups improve their capabilities to launch more sophisticated and deadlier attacks. But alliances among militants are often short-lived and are subject to quick ruptures – often due to ideological differences or leadership disputes.⁶⁷ Ocalan wanted to improve his chances of sparking a popular rebellion by widening his support among prominent leftist Turkish groups. But the quick collapse of the PKK-led union did not derail the militant organization's trajectory. The PKK had already achieved hegemony over the Kurdish nationalist constituency in Turkey and counterproductive violence within the movement virtually ceased. By 1983, the PKK could almost exclusively focus on its next objective: securing direct access to the Turkish border to wage an insurgency.

7.7 HEGEMONIC CONSOLIDATION, EXTERNAL ALLIANCE, & SAFE HAVEN, 1982-1983

Securing outside support from the KDP – a powerful Kurdish militant across the

⁶⁶ Joost Jongerden and Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya, "Born From the Left: The Making of the PKK", in *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey: Political Islam, Kemalism and the Kurdish Issue*, ed. Marlies Casier and Joost Jongerden (New York: Routledge Studies in Middle Eastern Politics, 2011), 133.

⁶⁷ Fotini Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

border in Iraq – allowed the PKK to access a critical safe haven relatively free from Turkish reprisals. For several years, the PKK enjoyed access to training bases in Lebanon and a safe haven to rebuild the organization in Syria. However, regional geopolitical circumstances forced the PKK to look for a new base of operations in Iraq.⁶⁸ Ocalan believed that the northern Iraqi region bordering Turkey was the only viable option to cultivate a launch pad for sustained attacks against the Turkish security forces.

Despite previous feuds and ideological schisms, Ocalan successfully negotiated an agreement with KDP leader Massoud Barzani to allow the PKK access to a safe haven in northern Iraq on the border with Turkey. Barzani offered PKK fighters freedom of movement in and out of the KDP-dominated border region after signing the “principles of solidarity” agreement in July 1983.⁶⁹ The agreement allowed PKK operatives to immediately begin constructing military bases in northern Iraq.⁷⁰ One of the bases included a central camp in Lolan – a strategic area with valleys and mountainous terrain straddling the borders of Iran, Iraq, and Turkey. Moving from the relative comforts of Lebanon’s training camps to the cold mountains of northern Iraq – with minimal food and infestations – helped PKK fighters prepare to survive as a guerilla army prior to the onset of armed conflict.

From northern Iraq, the PKK dispatched a few operatives to enter Kurdish villages in Turkey to conduct reconnaissance of the terrain and military position. The operatives engaged with local Kurdish civilians in an attempt to assess the level of

⁶⁸ As discussed earlier, the Assad regime would not tolerate the PKK launching attacks from its territory and provoking a Turkish response. The PKK also had to re-think its presence in Lebanon’s Beka’a Valley following Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Černý, “Ethnic Alliances Deconstructed,” 339.

⁶⁹ Michael Gunter, “Kurdish Infighting: The PKK-KDP Conflict,” in *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s: Its Impact on Turkey and the Middle East*, ed. Robert Olson (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1996), 50-64.

⁷⁰ “Troops Pursue Kurds into Iraq,” *Our Radio (Turkey)*, September 3, 1983, accessed via FBIS.

constituent support for a sustained armed struggle. Over the last few years, heightened levels of state repression spread immense fear among the local population. Most believed that an insurgency would be futile.⁷¹ Yet deployed PKK operatives sensed that many Kurdish civilians were simultaneously sympathetic to the idea of an armed insurrection. “We understood that if we started the armed struggle, and gave the image that we are growing and strong, then we could win the support of the people,” reflected Sari Baran – a former PKK operative tasked with helping lay the ground work for the eventual insurgency.⁷² From its new external safe haven, the PKK was able to conduct surveillance and gage the potential level of support for armed conflict among the local Kurdish population.

There are several explanations behind the PKK-KDP alliance, including mutual disdain for the Turkish regime and shared ethnic group solidarity.⁷³ Other scholars point to outside pressure from Damascus and Tehran, seeking to undermine the KDP’s main rival in Iraq – the PUK – that sided with Saddam Hussein after the Iran-Iraq War started in September 1980.⁷⁴ Both Barzani and the PUK’s Talabani had viewed support for the dominant PKK as an opportunity to enhance their profiles as leaders of the wider Kurdish nationalist movement.⁷⁵

Irrespective of the geopolitical or individual-level motivations behind the PKK-

⁷¹ Marcus, *Blood and Belief*, 76-85.

⁷² Quoted in Marcus, *Blood and Belief*, 78.

⁷³ Moore and Davis’ (1998) ethnic alliance model suggests that transnational ethnic ties are akin to alliance formations between states, as theorized in international relations literature. See Will H. Moore and David R. Davis, “Transnational Ethnic Ties and Foreign Policy,” in *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict: Fear, Diffusion, and Escalation*, ed. David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 93.

⁷⁴ Černý presents this line of argumentation after interviewing some of the most prominent scholars on Kurdish nationalist politics. See Černý, “Ethnic Alliances Deconstructed,” 341.

⁷⁵ “Clandestine Broadcast on Pact with Turkey,” *Voice of Iraqi Revolution*, October 24, 1984, accessed via FBIS.

KDP alliance, the PKK's status as the hegemonic Kurdish organization in Turkey was a defining factor that enabled the organization to attract outside militant support in the first place. Barzani would likely have avoided signing an agreement that could have led to conflict spillover and instability from feuding Turkey-based Kurdish groups. Had the PKK continued to be embroiled in counterproductive competition with other Kurdish groups in Turkey, the PKK would likely have had to focus on internal fights instead of credibly committing to an external alliance and working to cultivate a vital safe haven across the border.

Overcoming principal-agent problems

In a 1998 interview with professor Michael Gunter, Ocalan described the organization's difficulties in overcoming principal-agent problems. "I keep in daily contact with my associates by telephone and radio. Still, there are major organizational problems in running the PKK and its related organizations abroad," Ocalan said adding that "the PKK is fighting a big war and it is very difficult to control people. At any moment somebody could stab you in the back. It is more difficult to change the traditional Kurdish ways than to split the atom."⁷⁶ He also described how disagreements with PKK commanders over civilian targeting led to some infighting and, ultimately, dismissals. All militant groups have to address issues related to command and control throughout their lifespan.⁷⁷ But principal-agent problems are particularly pronounced in

⁷⁶ PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan in an interview with Michael Gunter, "Abdullah Ocalan: 'We are Fighting Turks Everywhere'," *Middle East Quarterly* 5, no. 2: (1998): 79-85.

⁷⁷ Jacob N. Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

the nascent stages of an armed conflict.⁷⁸ Militant leaders must work to ensure their operatives comply and do not deviate from group objectives to get a sustained insurgency off the ground.

Shortly prior to the onset of war – and throughout the PKK’s initial campaign – an increasingly paranoid Ocalan escalated his efforts to eliminate perceived threats from within the PKK organization itself. Many PKK commanders and other prominent figures were accused of undermining organizational objectives, often arbitrarily.⁷⁹ Some of these individuals were dismissed, detained, or even killed under Ocalan’s orders. Whether or not these purges helped the PKK’s organization become more cohesive is unclear. But Ocalan strengthened his power and the core of the group’s cadre remained ideologically committed to the organization’s cause.⁸⁰ As the PKK prevailed over rival Kurdish groups and facilitated collective action, its leadership was in a better position to address principal-agent problems and strengthen its organizational structure from its new safe haven.

Securing land in northern Iraq as a base of guerilla operations was far more important for the purposes of waging a sustained armed conflict than refuge and training bases in Syria and Lebanon. If Ocalan failed to strike a deal with Barzani, the PKK would have been forced to wage a futile insurgency from within Turkey against a strong military

⁷⁸ Byman, “Understanding Proto-insurgencies.”

⁷⁹ Marcus, *Blood and Belief*, 94.

⁸⁰ From 1983-1985, at least 11 senior current and former PKK members were assassinated in Europe and northern Iraq. Many were viewed as threats to Ocalan’s rule and potential rivals deviating from the organization’s focus on armed conflict. For the next few years, others perceived of dissenting from the leadership’s objectives were pursued and killed. While the PKK focused on waging an armed conflict, the organization was simultaneously trying to ensure strict compliance with leadership objectives by vigilantly pursuing members who were critical of the group’s activities. Executions of suspected PKK dissenters in northern Iraq escalated after the onset of armed conflict in 1984. See Marcus, *Blood and Belief*, 94-96.

with limited opportunity to hide.⁸¹ Virtually all scholars and experts on the PKK agree that securing a sanctuary in Iraq's Kurdish region was necessary for waging a sustained insurgency against the Turkish regime.⁸² But the PKK was only able to secure such an agreement with its Iraq-based counterparts because it had already solidified itself as the hegemonic Kurdish organization in Turkey. By mid-1984, Ocalan met with senior militant figures to declare that the PKK was ready for war.⁸³

7.8 PKK LAUNCHES A SUSTAINED ARMED CONFLICT, 1984

On August 15, 1984, two PKK units attacked military barracks in the towns of Eruh and Semdinli. Teams of operatives descended into the town squares to distribute propaganda and announce the onset of a Kurdish war for liberation.⁸⁴ The PKK prioritized military targets in key locations that would garner considerable attention from the local community, but close enough to the border for a safer retreat. "Our goal really wasn't to kill a lot of soldiers," PKK figure Sari Baran acknowledged, adding that "the attack was more to gain people's support and get them to join us. At the same time, we wanted to stage an attack that would give people trust [in the PKK's abilities]."⁸⁵ When PKK operatives feared that some of the group's early attacks may have gone unnoticed in the media, the group dispatched members to spread word among Kurdish villages. Turkey's economic and military infrastructure were the primary targets during the early

⁸¹ Ibid, 71.

⁸² Černý, "Ethnic Alliances Deconstructed," 339; Gunes, "Explaining the PKK's Mobilization of the Kurds in Turkey," 257; Tezcür, "Violence and Nationalist Mobilization," 259.

⁸³ Marcus, *Blood and Belief*, 78.

⁸⁴ Ünal, "Strategist or Pragmatist," 423.

⁸⁵ Quoted in Marcus, *Blood and Belief*, 79.

phase of the PKK's guerilla war.⁸⁶

The PKK escalated attacks and engaged in a multi-faceted guerilla campaign involving traditional hit-and-run tactics including army patrol ambushes, sabotaging power stations, and striking military and police positions.⁸⁷ Striking Turkish military targets in guerilla attacks enhanced the PKK's credibility as a capable militant organization and increased recruitment.⁸⁸ The PKK's early successes helped the organization evolve into a mass movement and an unprecedented internal challenge to the modern Turkish state. Throughout the process of consolidating its rivals, the PKK began mobilizing resources and overcoming collective action problems as the only viable Kurdish option to fight the regime. The PKK then secured a critical safe haven and began developing a military structure that could take on the Turkish military in a sustained insurgency.

Since its founding, the PKK has maintained a strictly hierarchical organizational structure under Ocalan's leadership. Centralized militant organizational structures, with functional differentiation, are associated with higher rates of lethality and are more likely to achieve broader objectives.⁸⁹ But the PKK only established a dynamic organizational structure with explicit roles after consolidating its rivals. The first major changes to its structure, with the formal creation of functionally differentiated departments, occurred after the PKK launched its insurgency. In 1984, the PKK formally established its military

⁸⁶ "Kurdish Separatists Attack Military Garrison," *Paris AFP*, August 16, 1984, accessed via FBIS.

⁸⁷ Mustafa Coşar Ünal, "Terrorism Versus Insurgency: A Conceptual Analysis," *Crime, Law and Social Change* 66, no. 1 (2016): 21–57.

⁸⁸ Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement*, 85.

⁸⁹ Victor Asal and R. Karl Rethemeyer, "The Nature of the Beast: Organizational Structures and the Lethality of Terrorist Attacks," *The Journal of Politics* 70, no. 2 (2008): 437–449; Ben Connable and Martin C. Libicki, *How Insurgencies End* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010).

wing, the ERNK. Its early operations, however, failed to mobilize the level of regional supported Ocalan desired. The PKK leader worried that some of his operatives on the ground were deviating from leadership objectives. As a result, the PKK leader set up a the ARKG in 1986 as a separate wing to serve as the foundation for a “people’s army.”⁹⁰ The PKK instituted conscription in Kurdish villages under its control and kidnapped young Kurdish men, who initially avoided enlisting, from their families.⁹¹ This highly controversial policy took a toll on the PKK’s popularity in some villages and led to an influx of recruits that likely lacked the ardent ideological commitment displayed by the group’s early volunteers. But as the only viable Kurdish militant groups, current and prospective recruits had no choice but to support the PKK. With the possibility of defections to other groups minimized, the PKK leadership was in a strong position to build its military capacity and ensure its rank and file complied with the group’s objectives.

The PKK established specific committees devoted to propaganda and social service provisions only after the militant organization eclipsed its rivals in the early 1980s. In its earliest days, the PKK prioritized the strategic use of violence to gain popular support while its main rivals competed primarily through the dissemination of propaganda. The PKK only cultivated its main media outlets and publications after emerging as the dominant Kurdish group.⁹² Once the PKK launched an insurgency and took effective control of a particular Kurdish village, the group would begin

⁹⁰ Criss, “The Nature of PKK Terrorism in Turkey,” 19.

⁹¹ Süleyman Özeren, Murat Sever, Kamil Yilmaz and Alper Sozer, “Whom Do They Recruit?: Profiling and Recruitment in the PKK/KCK,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 37, no. 4 (2014): 322–347.

⁹² The PKK only launched its first publication outlet in 1982. See Tezcur, “Violence and Nationalist Mobilization,” 256.

administering governance function to challenge the state and improve their credibility vis-à-vis its constituency. Clandestine Kurdish schools and PKK-administered courts emerged to resolve local disputes. In some areas, the group established local police units and offered a variety of social services, including economic aid to the poorest constituents and medical assistance.⁹³ Militant groups that offer social services and supplant the state in various areas are associated with higher rates of lethality and long-lasting popularity.⁹⁴ But with few resources during its earliest years, the PKK was only able to offer robust social services after gaining hegemony over the Kurdish constituency and launching its insurgency.

Turkish nascent counterinsurgency

The PKK's ability to launch coordinated guerilla strikes caught Ankara off guard. In relatively strong states, like Turkey in 1984, governments are more likely to underestimate a clandestine militant organization before it escalates violence to an armed conflict.⁹⁵ Just a year earlier, the Turkish PM Target Ozal viewed the PKK as a weak group of predatory criminals.⁹⁶ Turkey's military rulers were overtly confident in their policies over the past three years, virtually eradicating political violence in the country and stabilizing the economy.⁹⁷ Several months before the onset of insurgency, the military regime transferred power to a civilian government, which initiated a process to

⁹³ Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement*, 89.

⁹⁴ William A. Wagstaff and Danielle F. Jung, "Competing for Constituents: Trends in Terrorist Service Provision," *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2017).

⁹⁵ Iris Malone, "Uncertainty and Civil War Onset" (paper presented at the annual conference of the International Studies Association, San Francisco, CA, 2018).

⁹⁶ Criss, "The Nature of PKK Terrorism in Turkey," 19.

⁹⁷ Marcus, *Blood and Belief*, 83; "Martial Law Court Sentences Apoists to Death," *Anatolia*, May 2, 1983, accessed via FBIS.

revoke the marital law imposed over the country since 1980.⁹⁸ But under Turkey's new democratic government, Kurds remained institutionally discriminated against. Turkey formally prohibited the open use of the Kurdish language in 1983 – despite being a de facto policy since the 1930s – and denied the very existence of minorities in the country, referring to Kurds as “mountain Turks.”⁹⁹ The PKK's first attacks were viewed by Ankara as a reaction to prior repression under military rule, not the start of a wider war for Kurdish liberation.

It was clear the military was initially ill-prepared for an insurgency. Since the PKK focused most of their nascent efforts against rival Kurds, instead of Turkish security forces, the government may have unexpected a full-blown insurgency. Underestimating the militant group's power, the Turkish state did not effectively allocate resources, training, and military equipment for its troops to withstand a traditional guerrilla warfare campaign.¹⁰⁰ The military faced tremendous difficulties differentiating militants hiding among ordinary civilians and engaged in indiscriminate counterinsurgency operations.¹⁰¹ Poor counterinsurgency practices early on drove even more Kurdish recruits into the PKK's ranks.¹⁰² While Ankara underestimated the PKK's strength early on, by the late

⁹⁸ New York Times, “Turkey Permits Political Parties but Keeps Ban on Former Leaders,” *New York Times*, April 25, 1983; Marvine Howe, “Turks Electing First Parliament Since Coup,” *New York Times*, November 6, 1983, accessed Lexis Nexis Academic; John Torode, “Turkish Pledge on Martial Law,” *Guardian Weekly*, May 12, 1985, accessed Lexis Nexis Academic.

⁹⁹ Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement*, 52.

¹⁰⁰ Criss, “The Nature of PKK Terrorism in Turkey,” 20.

¹⁰¹ Gokhan Bacik and Bezen Balamir Coskun, “The PKK Problem: Explaining Turkey's Failure to Develop a Political Solution,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 34, no. 3 (2011): 248–265, 251–252.

¹⁰² Mustafa Coşar Ünal, “The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Popular Support: Counterterrorism Towards an Insurgency Nature,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 23, no. 3 (2012): 432–455.

1980s, Turkey's government acknowledged the organization as a serious challenge to the state.¹⁰³

Nascent militant organizations are more likely to grow in membership if they adopt a more targeted and discriminate violent strategy relative to the state's counterinsurgency efforts.¹⁰⁴ Facing early setbacks in the war, Turkey established a *village guard* system in 1985 which supported local Kurdish militias to fight the PKK in areas where the military was unable or unwilling to operate.¹⁰⁵ During the insurgency's earliest phase, the PKK devoted a considerable amount of resources to killing suspected Kurdish collaborators and, at times, even their families. While many observers viewed the PKK's retributions as ruthless, the PKK's credibility improved among ordinary Kurds who viewed their targeted killings as discriminate and justifiable, especially compared to the government's indiscriminate repression and arbitrary detentions. Weaker parties in asymmetric conflicts can gain more strength by exploiting a strategic mismatch against more powerful states.¹⁰⁶

Once the PKK achieved hegemony over its rivals, the organization's leadership mobilized sufficient resources and secured a safe sanctuary required to launch an insurgency. Counterproductive violence within the Kurdish nationalist movement ceased and the PKK shifted its efforts to fighting the Turkish regime. A major objective for any war of attrition, by definition, is to degrade and destroy enemy capabilities in order to

¹⁰³ Even in 1987, Ankara labeled the organization as "a handful of bandits" but the state also had an interest to not overblow the PKK threat publicly. Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement*, 85.

¹⁰⁴ Charles W. Mahoney, "Hearts and Minds or Blood and Guts? Strategy, Terrorism, and the Growth of Proto-Insurgencies" (Phd diss., University of California, 2011).

¹⁰⁵ Bacik and Coskun, "The PKK Problem: Explaining Turkey's Failure to Develop a Political Solution," 254.

¹⁰⁶ Ivan Arreguin-Toft, "How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict," *International Security* 26, no. 1 (2001): 93-128.

erode the enemies' will to continue fighting. The PKK's campaign was no exception. But for the PKK, the more immediate goal for launching a sustained war of attrition was to solidify its hegemony of the Kurdish constituency in Turkey and cultivate mass support for the organization. By launching an insurgency, the PKK's leadership sought to demonstrate the organization's capabilities and ultimately provoke a popular rebellion that would overthrow Turkish rule in Kurdish-dominated regions. Waging an armed conflict in 1984 can therefore be seen as both a consequence of rival consolidation and a cause for even further constituency dominance and resource mobilization. In essence, hegemonic consolidation explains why the PKK launched an insurgency in 1984, which in turn further entrenched the PKK's dominant position among the Kurdish national movement throughout its armed conflict campaign.

Concluding remarks

The PKK's ability to persevere against Turkish military operations and continue striking military targets eroded Turkish public – and particularly Kurdish – confidence in the state to maintain stability. By the early 1990s, most observers acknowledge that the PKK was beginning to realize its immediate goals of fueling a mass uprising.¹⁰⁷ But Turkey's superior forces made considerable gains in the war and forced the PKK's leadership to re-evaluate their goals. In a 2010 statement, Ocalan retroactively declared that the PKK's goal was increased autonomy, not full statehood.¹⁰⁸ Despite failing to achieve its ultimate objectives of independence, the PKK's armed campaign garnered mass support among the Kurdish constituency that increasingly embraced an ethno-

¹⁰⁷ Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement*, 99-170.

¹⁰⁸ Ünal, "Strategist or Pragmatist," 420.

nationalist identity. The PKK's efforts also helped raise international awareness of Kurdish grievances and thrust Kurdish issues into Turkey's public discourse after decades of state-sponsored neglect.

Today, the PKK – through various affiliates and organizational offshoots – is one of the main players in Syria's civil war and Kurdish Peshmerga fighters are largely credited for helping roll-back the Islamic State's territorial presence in the country.¹⁰⁹ The PKK will continue to be a major political and military force in the Middle East for the foreseeable future.

When the PKK formally emerged in 1978, the militant organization used violence sporadically and mainly against Kurdish tribal leaders, landowners in the countryside, and rival Kurdish organizations. In 1984, however, the PKK launched an insurgency and shifted its attacks primarily against Turkish military and state security targets. Why was the PKK able and willing to launch its insurgency in 1984? I argue that the key to understanding the PKK's nascent trajectory is rooted in its relations with rival Kurdish groups. During its earliest years, the PKK successfully outbid its Kurdish rivals through the strategic use of violence. By targeting landowning elite and leaders involved in tribal feuds, the PKK integrated itself among a rural base of support and gained notoriety as a credible militant organization willing to conduct risky operations for the Kurdish nationalist cause. With few resources and minimal manpower, the PKK successfully outbid older organizations that had stronger pre-war social ties.

¹⁰⁹ Eric Schmitt, "Battle to Stamp Out ISIS in Syria Gains New Momentum, but Threats Remain," *New York Times*, May 30, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/30/world/middleeast/isis-syria-battle-kurds-united-states.html>.

In the case of Hezbollah, hegemonic consolidation closely preceded the militant group's shift to a war of attrition against Israel – lending strong support to my argument. For the PKK, however, it is less clear when the group formally emerged as the hegemon within its national movement. It could be the case that the PKK was already hegemonic by 1982, but its leadership still perceived that it needed to reach out to other rivals and form a strategic alliance. More importantly, my argument suggests that rival consolidation works in conjunction with other key factors to explain sustained insurgency. My theory, on its own, is not intended to explain the precise timing of sustained insurgency outbreak. However, the process of rival consolidation plays a vital role in the PKK's trajectory in securing critical forms of external support and safe haven immediately prior to the onset of armed conflict.

Militant groups can overcome their rivals through a variety of means, whether by outbidding, hostile takeover, or voluntary mergers. Often these mechanisms overlap. In the case of the PKK, the Turkish government inflicted a major blow to the PKK's main rivals following the 1980 military coup. Kurdish victimization increased considerably after the 1980 coup, contributing to the necessary grievances required to mobilize a population for insurgency. But state repression actually stifled violence in Turkey considerably during this period and Kurdish grievances had persisted for decades before the PKK's emergence. These largely structural factors cannot explain why the PKK was able to eclipse rival Kurdish groups and emerge as a formidable force capable of challenging the Turkish regime by 1984.

During this period, the PKK emerged as one of the only viable options for Kurds who did not want to side with an increasingly ruthless regime. Syrian state support was

critical for the PKK's early survival. But the Assad regime hosted many other anti-Turkey groups at the time and considerably limited the PKK's freedom of action. While failing to solidify a strategic alliance with weaker rivals, a hegemonic PKK was powerful enough to shift its attention from internal fights to waging an insurgency. In 1983, the PKK relied on its hegemonic status to negotiate an agreement with Iraq-based Kurdish militants and secure a critical safe haven along a mountainous border region. From its new base of operations, relatively safe from Turkish military reprisals, the PKK launched a sustained armed conflict which solidified its dominance over the Kurdish constituency in Turkey. The PKK's leadership would have likely delayed or halted its decision to launch an insurgency had its main Kurdish rivals persisted to challenge the organization for dominance of the constituency. While current theories of civil war and insurgency provide important insights to this puzzle, my temporal theory of rival relations offers a more complete explanation for why the PKK was both willing and able to launch a sustained armed conflict in 1984.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE SYRIAN MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD (MB), 1976-1982

8.1 INTRODUCTION

In 1982, the Assad regime crushed an uprising in the city of Hama and put an end to a nascent Islamist insurrection. Why did the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) fail to wage a full-fledged and sustained insurgency? What were the main factors behind the Brotherhood's demise as a militant threat? One critical reason behind the MB's demise was its inability to consolidate constituent rivals and emerge as the undisputed hegemon of the Islamist movement in Syria. In 1979, the Fighting Vanguard, a radical faction turned splinter group, escalated attacks against the Assad regime which pressured the MB to join the fight or risk being sidelined. In essence, the MB was chain-ganged into a war it was not ready to wage. Despite the establishment of a strategic alliance between the MB and its rivals, ideological and personal differences constantly disrupted any meaningful cooperation. Failure to consolidate rivals led to critical coordination problems in the field, which helped the Syrian regime to exploit divisions among the militant Islamist movement.

There are several explanations for why the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood failed to mount a sustained challenge against the Assad regime. A brutal and unrestrained Syrian counterinsurgency campaign, which finally crushed the nascent Islamist uprising in 1982, is the most common explanation of the group's demise. The Syrian regime's indiscriminate campaign simply raised the costs of supporting the Islamist opposition and forced remaining MB leaders into exile. But the group's inability to consolidate rival factions and groups is a critical part of the story. Most importantly, the Syrian MB was

chain-ganged by a rival into a war it was not willing or ready to fight. Internal discord and counterproductive competition prevented the Syrian MB from building a united front capable of mounting a sustained military challenge. These organizational failures inhibited the militant group from overcoming collective action problems and mobilizing mass support. The group also failed to harness a salient cause that resonated with broader Sunni Arabs in the country. Many Syrian Sunnis resented the Alawite-dominated government, but the MB's Islamist vision was too stringent and religiously motivated for many secular citizens to support.

Because of constant infighting within the Islamist movement, the Brotherhood also failed to overcome principal-agent problems as fighters in the field lacked direction and coordination at key turning points of the conflict. Some operatives were even confused as to which faction they actually belonged to. Plagued by infighting, the Syrian MB failed to secure sufficient sources of external support or state sponsorship. Failing to emerge as the hegemonic militant organization also hurt the MB's chances for securing a critical safe haven to organize for a sustained insurgency. Facing an unrestrained Syrian counterinsurgency, disgruntled Sunnis and potential recruits did not have a consolidated militant organization to support in such a highly fragmented movement. My theory of rival relations helps explain why other major causes of militant group success were largely absent in the case of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamist Uprising. As a result, the MB had little chance to sustain an insurrection against the Syrian regime.

Understanding why some militant groups engage in sustained armed conflicts is not necessarily the inverse of why others fail. Identifying broader causes of militant group success (as outlined in Chapters Six and Seven on Hezbollah and the PKK) does

not automatically imply that the absence of these causes fully explains group failure. Nevertheless, exploring “failed” cases helps identify the extent to which my theory of rival consolidation plays a role in a group’s nascent trajectory. I do not claim that the counterfactual to my theory definitively explains why some groups fail to challenge regimes they fight. Even if the Brotherhood successfully consolidated rivals – or emerged as the movement hegemon – and built an effective organization capable of waging an effective military campaign, unrestrained Syrian counterinsurgency would have likely still crushed the insurrection. But the Brotherhood’s inability to consolidate rivals prevented the organization from sustaining an insurgency beyond a few years and is a critical part of its demise as a militant threat.

TABLE 8.1: THE SYRIAN MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD’S RELATIONS WITH RIVALS & SUSTAINED ARMED CONFLICT ONSET

Time Period	Primary Rival Relations	Implications	Outcome (Sustained Armed Conflict Onset)
1976 – 1979	Competitive escalation (outbidding) ¹	Sporadic violence against regime and Alawite targets; Rivals attempt to coordinate efforts but fail; radical factions differentiate themselves by escalating violence	No
1979 – 1980	Destructive competition (chain-ganging) ²	The Fighting Vanguard, an MB rival group, escalates attacks, provokes Syrian regime to increase repression;	No

¹ Brynjar Lia, “The Islamist Uprising in Syria, 1976-82: The History and Legacy of a Failed Revolt,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 43, no. 4 (2016): 541–559.

² Raphaël Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 102–105.

		pressures ill-prepared MB to declare war	
1980 – 1981	Strategic alliance / Destructive competition (infighting) ³	Strategic alliance formed; destructive competition and ideological disagreements persist; joint command disintegrates in by the end of 1981	No
1982	Non-hegemonic, fragmented movement ⁴	Syrian regime exploits internal divisions, crushes the MB and the nascent Islamist insurrection	No

This chapter proceeds as follows. The first section introduces the historical background behind the emergence and radicalization of Syria’s Muslim Brotherhood. The second section focuses on the MB’s competition with its main rivals and the sporadic violence against Syrian regime targets from 1976-1979. The third section describes how a more radical rival chain-ganged the MB into declaring war with the Syrian regime in 1979. The rise and quick fall of a strategic alliance between the MB and its main rivals had major ramifications for coordinating attacks in the field. Failing to consolidate its rivals, the MB was ill-prepared to wage a sustained insurgency against a far more powerful and ruthless Syrian military. Other explanations are taken into account throughout the chapter. The final section concludes with a brief discussion of the 1982 Hama Massacre and the demise of the Syrian MB as a militant threat.

³ Raymond Hinnebusch, *Authoritarian Power and State Formation in Ba’thist Syria: Army, Party, and Peasant* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), 282.

⁴ Dara Conduit, “The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the Spectacle of Hama,” *The Middle East Journal* 70, no. 2 (2018): 211–226.

8.2 THE EMERGENCE AND RADICALIZATION OF SYRIA'S MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD

The Syrian MB formed in the mid-1940s during the final years of the French mandate in Syria, to fight the colonial power and establish an Islamic state in the country. The organization was the second affiliate of the global Muslim Brotherhood movement, following the largest and most influential branch formed in Egypt in 1928.⁵ The Syrian MB encompassed a collection of various Islamist-oriented groups that emerged throughout the 1930s and 1940s.⁶ At first, the group preferred to operate within Syria's political system and not overthrow the regime – unlike its Egyptian counterparts.⁷ But by the 1960s, the Syrian MB embraced the idea of overthrowing the Shi'a Alawite-dominated Syrian regime and installing Shari'a (Islamic law) throughout the country. Throughout its existence, the Syrian MB did not operate as a strictly centralized organization and consisted of various factions across the country that differed by geography and ideological outlooks. The Syrian MB drew most of its support from the Sunni urban middle class and operated in the country's four most prominent cities: Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Hama.⁸ The organization was considered the largest opposition force in Syria and primarily drew support from urban Sunnis. However, the group failed to secure backing from Syria's minorities, rural communities, and most importantly, the Sunni commercial elite. Relations between the Syrian MB and its main

⁵ For more on Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood see Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *The Muslim Brotherhood – Evolution of an Islamist Movement* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); Hazem Kandil, *Inside the Brotherhood* (London: Polity Press, 2015).

⁶ Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama*, 82.

⁷ Joshua Teitelbaum, "The Muslim Brotherhood and the 'Struggle for Syria', 1947 – 1958 Between Accommodation and Ideology," *Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 3 (2004): 134–158.

⁸ Yehuda U. Blanga, "The Role of the Muslim Brotherhood In the Syrian Civil War," *Middle East Policy* 24, no. 3 (2017): 48-69, 49.

constituent rivals play a critical role in the organization's trajectory and ultimate demise as a militant threat.

The radicalization of Syria's Islamist movement

Throughout the 1960s, members of Syria's Islamist movement increasingly embraced the idea of violent struggle against the Syrian regime. This radicalization process largely escalated following the 1963 military coup that brought the Ba'ath regime to power in Syria.⁹ The Ba'ath sought to revolutionize Syrian society, impose a secular nationalist ideology, and enact reforms strongly opposed by the Sunni elite and other core MB supporters.¹⁰ Violent and sporadic confrontations between MB supporters and the Syrian regime broke out shortly after. The Syrian regime responded by forcing Brotherhood leader Issam al-Attar into exile in 1964, for failing to rein in MB operatives in the field.¹¹ However, violent incidents persisted throughout 1964 and early 1965. Rioters came from various sectors of Syrian society, including shop owners and students who called for a representative democracy. The regime brutally crushed these demonstrations, which further enflamed grievances among predominately Sunni sectors of society.¹²

In 1966, more extreme and sectarian Ba'athist elements, led by Alawite and Druze officers, carried out another military coup. The new regime cemented the

⁹ Conduit, "The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the Spectacle of Hama," 216.

¹⁰ Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syria's Alawis and the Ba'ath Party," in *The Alawis of Syria: War, Faith and Politics in the Levant*, ed. Michael Kerr and Craig Larkin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹¹ Carnegie Middle East Center, "Key Figures in the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, April 10, 2013, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/51470?lang=en>.

¹² Hanna Batatu, "Syria's Muslim Brethren," *Middle East Research and Information Project* 12 (1982), http://www.merip.org/mer/mer110/syrias-muslim-brethren#_32_,

Alawite's control of Syria and adopted even more stringent anti-religious policies, including banning Islamic studies outside mosques and arresting anti-regime clerics.¹³

The ruling Alawite regime immediately started to consolidate its control over state institutions and impose socialist economic structures at the expense of the Sunni elite and urban middle class.

In November 1970, Hafez al-Assad assumed power of Syria and made attempts to mend ties with the country's religious establishment.¹⁴ During Assad's early years, the regime tried to alleviate some of the Sunni's grievances by liberalizing the economy and enabling more Sunni representation in parliament. However, these reforms would not override decades of discrimination and marginalization against major sectors of Syria's Sunni community.¹⁵

Throughout its history, the Syrian MB was the main opposition organization in the country. However, the group remained fragmented and failed to capitalize on growing anti-regime dissent among its constituency. During the 1960s and 1970s, the MB's leadership was plagued by infighting between its more moderate Damascus wing and the more radical faction based in Hama.¹⁶ For decades, the Damascus wing largely embraced a pragmatic strategy that called for the peaceful participation in Syrian politics. But by the early 1970s, the capital city-based faction would become increasingly sidelined by hardline elements from Syria's northern cities, including Latakia, Hama, and Aleppo.¹⁷

¹³ Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society Under Asad and the Ba'ath Party* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

¹⁴ Robert Rabil, "How is Syria Ruled?," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy Policy Watch* #992, May 9, 2005, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-is-syria-ruled>

¹⁵ Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988).

¹⁶ Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama*, 88-96.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 88

Polarization and fragmentation among Syria's Islamists

The MB lacked a clear leader between 1969 and 1972, as the two main factions splintered into distinct entities.¹⁸ During this period, many MB members from Damascus fled the country while Syrian regime repression against the wider Islamist-oriented constituency increased. Militant groups with weaker pre-war social ties are more likely to fragment than groups founded on strong networks.¹⁹ According to this perspective, the Syrian MB would have little chance to remain cohesive in a future war against a more powerful regime. Personality clashes, regional factionalism, and ideological differences all played a role in the further splintering of the Syrian MB, which culminated in a clear leadership schism in 1969.²⁰

In 1973, clashes renewed after the latest iteration of Syria's constitution did not designate Islam as the state religion, as Syrian Islamists had previously demanded.²¹ Facing serious backlash, Assad reinserted a clause stating that "Islam shall be the religion of the head of the state."²² Assad then embarked on a conciliatory campaign to improve his legitimacy among the Sunni community, engaged in openly devout religious practices, and received declarations from revered clerical figures that attested to Assad

¹⁸ Raphael Lefèvre, "The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's Alawi Conundrum," in *The Alawis of Syria: War, Faith and Politics in the Levant*, ed. Michael Kerr and Craig Larkin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Stanley Reed, "Syria's Assad: His Power and His Plan," *New York Times*, February 19, 1984.

¹⁹ Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014); Jennifer M. Larson and Janet I. Lewis, "Rumors, Kinship Networks, and Rebel Group Formation," *International Organization* 72, no. 4 (2018): 871-903.

²⁰ Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama*, 92.

²¹ For an English translation of the 1973 constitution see Peter B. Heller, "The Permanent Syrian Constitution of March 13, 1973," *Middle East Journal* 28, no. 1 (1974): 53-66.

²² Robert Olson, *The Ba'th and Syria, 1947 to 1982: The Evolution of Ideology, Party and State from the French Mandate to the Era of Hafiz Al Asad* (Princeton: Kingdon Press, 1982), 169.

and the Alawite community's Islamic status.²³ Despite these efforts, the MB and Syria's Islamists still viewed the Alawite regime as apostates.

A more hardline Muslim Brotherhood

After more pragmatic MB leaders fled the country, hardliners within the Syrian Islamist movement exploited the political vacuum. In 1975, Adnan Saadeddine assumed power of the Syrian MB and surrounded himself with other Hama-based ideologues that adopted more hawkish positions into the MB's platform. The organization denounced the secular Ba'athist regime as "infidels" and adopted justifications for violence in local sermons.²⁴ The new leadership accelerated the group's process of radicalization that started in the 1960's – inspired by Egyptian MB leader Sayyid Qutb's ideology calling for the violent overthrow of Egypt's regime. Radical literature became increasingly prevalent among mosques and religious book stores.²⁵ Affiliated ideologues embraced previous fatwas – religious decrees – that prioritized fighting local non-Sunni sects over non-Muslim communities. The MB sought religious justifications to broaden its support base among the country's majority Sunni population and began preparing to confront the Syrian regime. But the leadership crisis also created space for a more extreme faction to hijack the broader Syrian Islamist movement into embracing armed struggle against the Syrian regime.²⁶

²³ Mordechai Kedar, "In Search of Legitimacy: Asad's Islamic Image in the Syrian Official Press," in *Modern Syria from Ottoman Rule to Pivotal Role in the Middle East*, ed. Moshe Maoz, Joseph Ginat and Onn Winckler (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 1999), 24.

²⁴ Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama*, 97.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.

²⁶ Yvette Talhamy, "The Muslim Brotherhood Reborn: The Syrian Uprising," *Middle East Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (2012): 33-40.

A radical splinter group prepares for war

In the late 1960s, Marwan Hadid, a young radical leader broke ranks with the Muslim Brotherhood and formed an organization called the Fighting Vanguard of the Mujahedeen that sought to topple the Assad regime in an armed confrontation.²⁷ Hadid and his core supporters travelled to Jordan to receive guerilla warfare training from Palestinian militant groups.²⁸ The militant group also reportedly received training from the Palestinian Fatah organization in their Lebanon-based camps.²⁹ Hadid's fighters returned to Syria in 1970, after Jordan's King Hussein crushed many Palestinian camps in a massacre that became known as "Black September." The group then established clandestine training camps within Syria, particularly in the Latakia region.³⁰

By 1974, Hadid controlled numerous armed militant cells in Hama and Damascus, which began targeting Syrian government figures in an effort to raise awareness and attract recruits. But the Fighting Vanguard primarily wanted to provoke a harsh government reaction that would pressure the Muslim Brotherhood to wage an armed conflict against the regime.³¹ Hadid's detention in 1975, and death in jail a year later, helped mobilize support for the leader's vision and sparked efforts to initiate an armed conflict.

²⁷ Robert G. Rabil, "The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood," in Barry Rubin eds., *The Muslim Brotherhood: The Organization and Politics of a Global Islamist Movement* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

²⁸ Alison Pargeter, *The Muslim Brotherhood: The Burden of Tradition* (London: Saqi Books, 2010), 76. Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama*, 102-104.

²⁹ "Palestinians Training Muslim Brotherhood Members," *Voice of Lebanon*, August 8, 1980, accessed via FBIS.

³⁰ Lia, "The Islamist Uprising in Syria , 1976 – 82," 546.

³¹ Umar F. Abd-Allah, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria* (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1983), 106–109.

8.3 FROM TARGETED ASSASSINATIONS TO VIOLENT ESCALATION, 1976-1979

From 1976-1979, members of the Fighting Vanguard were largely responsible for a wave of militant attacks against Syrian regime targets, marking the onset of the Islamist Uprising. Shortly after Hadid's death, the Fighting Vanguard absorbed disparate cells across Syria's main cities and carried out high profile attacks, including the assassination of Hama's head of intelligence in early 1976.³² In 1977, militants conducted a simultaneous bombing attack targeting the Ba'ath Party headquarters and the People's Assembly.³³ Senior Ba'athists officials, including Assad's family members, and military personnel – irrespective of religious or ethnic identity – were the primary targets of the Fighting Vanguard-led militant campaign during the period. But both groups remained clandestine and did not openly claim responsibility for the attacks, allowing the Assad regime to initially blame Iraq. Like in other conflicts, militant groups often avoid taking credit for attacks to evade retribution or sow confusion.³⁴ In the nascent stages of Syria's Islamist uprising, Fighting Vanguard militants were primarily focused on provoking a full-fledged armed conflict.

State repression targeting Syria's Islamists and Sunni constituency was relatively constant since the mid 1960s and even declined under the Assad regime. Repression is therefore of limited use in explaining the onset of sporadic violent campaign in 1976. The

³² Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama*, 103.

³³ Central Intelligence Agency, "Politics in Syria: An Intelligence Assessment," *National Foreign Assessment Center*, May 1, 1979.

³⁴ Erin M. Kearns, Brendan Conlon, & Joseph K. Young, "Lying About Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37, no. 5 (2014): 422-439; Max Abrahms and Justin Conrad, "The Strategic Logic of Credit Claiming: A New Theory for Anonymous Terrorist Attacks," *Security Studies* 26, no. 2 (2017): 279-304.

violence that ensued in 1976 is largely the result of a concerted Vanguard-led process involving years of military training and preparation to confront the Syrian regime.³⁵

Since its emergence, the Syrian Islamist movement has been constantly marred with duelling factions and internal divisions. Movement fragmentation was destabilizing and prevented any meaningful coordination on strategy or operations. By the late 1970s, the MB and its rivals tried to mend ties and coordinate plans. The rival groups reportedly agreed to establish a joint military command in a 1978 meeting in Beirut.³⁶ Under the initial arrangement, the MB's leadership reluctantly gave up control over its militant activities to the more radical Fighting Vanguard. Shortly after, militant attacks encompassed public servants and non-ruling Alawites in various professions – not just explicit military and regime targets. Eventually counterproductive violence, in the form of chain-ganging from within the Islamist movement, propelled the Syrian MB into a war it was not willing or ready to wage.

8.4 RIVAL CHAIN-GANGING: SYRIA'S MUSLIM BROTHERS JOIN THE NASCENT INSURRECTION, 1979-1980

In June 1979, Adnan Uqlah – the head of a local cell in Aleppo – took matters into his own hands and orchestrated a mass casualty attack at a military school in Aleppo.³⁷ Sunni officers sympathetic to Syria's Islamist movement killed up to 83 Alawite soldiers in the attack – a defining event that changed the course of the Islamist

³⁵ Lia, "The Islamist Uprising in Syria , 1976 – 82," 546.

³⁶ Lia, "The Islamist Uprising in Syria, 1976 – 82," 545.

³⁷ Edward Cody, "Syrian Leader Seen in Need of Strong Show of Power," *Washington Post*, June 29, 1979, accessed Lexis Nexis Academic.

insurrection.³⁸ The attack was executed in an effort to provoke the Syrian regime and mobilize broader Sunni support for the insurrection.³⁹ After the attack, Uqlah essentially directed the tempo and escalation of the Fighting Vanguard-led armed campaign. As Uqlah intended, the Syrian regime used the attack as a pretext to launch an even more brutal campaign of repression that further enflamed grievances among the Sunni constituency.⁴⁰

The Fighting Vanguard also sought to pressure the Syrian MB – which condemned the Aleppo military school attack – into waging a direct armed campaign against the Syrian regime.⁴¹ MB leaders had long debated whether the group should support violent struggle or commit to more peaceful disobedience. But after the Aleppo military school attack, the MB’s leadership felt cornered and forced to declare *Jihad* against the Assad regime. Facing relentless state repression, the Muslim Brotherhood’s Consultative Council announced its intention to adopt violence in its fight against the Syrian regime and establish a military wing in October 1979.⁴² By early 1980, the Assad regime was facing a full-fledged Islamist insurrection.⁴³

³⁸ Various fatality estimates range from 33-83. The Syrian Human Rights Committee, “The Massacre of the Military Artillery School at Aleppo—Special Report,” November 3, 2003, <http://www.shrc.org/en/?p=19785>; Raphael Lefèvre, “The Syrian Brotherhood’s Armed Struggle,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 14, 2012, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2012/12/14/syrian-brotherhood-s-armed-struggle-pub-50380>

³⁹ Hanna Batatu, “Syria’s Muslim Brethren,” *MERIP Reports* 110 (1982): 12–36, 20.

⁴⁰ Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama*, 111.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 102–105.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 115–116.

⁴³ Thomas Mayer, “The Islamic Opposition in Syria, 1961–1982,” *Orient* 4 (1983): 589–609.

The strategic logic(s) behind the Aleppo military school attack

In some situations, militant groups or factions may initiate attacks against the target state to spark an armed conflict, forcing other groups in the movement to join in or risk becoming irrelevant. In these types of chain-ganging spirals, one or more groups would rather avoid conflict with the state, but end up being drawn into a confrontation because of the actions of its rivals.⁴⁴ This phenomenon differs from outbidding, where rival groups escalate attacks against the target state as a show of strength to compete for support from their constituent base.⁴⁵ It is usually difficult to clearly identify a singular or specific logic behind a certain militant campaign or incident. The Aleppo military school attack could be simultaneously viewed as an example of provocation against state, outbidding rivals for support, or chain-ganging pressures forcing rivals to join a fight. But either form of militant violence can be viewed as counterproductive, especially if the main militant groups are ill-prepared for a sustained armed conflict against the regime.⁴⁶ According to this perspective, the Fighting Vanguard, whose leadership was constantly pre-occupied with becoming the dominant group among Syria's Islamist movement, provoked the Syrian MB into a war the latter sought to avoid at the time.

⁴⁴ Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, "Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity," *International Organization* 44, no. 2 (1990): 137-168; Dominic Tierney, "Does Chain-Ganging Cause the Outbreak of War?" *International Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (2011): 285-304.

⁴⁵ Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, "The Strategies of Terrorism," *International Security* 31, no. 1 (2006): 49-80.

⁴⁶ Peter Krause, "The Structure of Success: How the Internal Distribution of Power Drives Armed Group Behavior and National Movement Effectiveness," *International Security* 38, no. 3 (2013/14): 72-116, 77; Peter Krause, *Rebel Power: Why National Movements Compete, Fight, and Win* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).

Cycles of violence escalate to an armed conflict

Towards the end of 1979, the Syrian MB and its rivals escalated attacks against regime targets, assassinating senior officials, including the intelligence chief in Aleppo.⁴⁷ Innocent Alawites were also targeted, including families of Syrian representatives and religious figures who supported the regime. The Islamist opposition conducted successful guerilla attacks against military targets, police stations, and militias supporting the Assad regime.⁴⁸ It appeared as if Syrian Islamists could mount an effective military campaign and sustained insurgency.⁴⁹

Between March and June 1980, the MB's popularity grew among its core constituency as its armed struggle gained momentum.⁵⁰ In March 1980, demonstrators from across the societal spectrum, including professional circles and labour unions, held protests and strikes across cities in northern Syria.⁵¹ The Assad regime cracked down on dissent and stifled public displays of protests, but the Islamist opposition continued to wage a violent campaign against regime targets.⁵² In April, the MB withstood a military siege of Aleppo, involving heavy weaponry, tanks, and militias.⁵³ Over 1,000 people

⁴⁷ "Intelligence Chief Killed," *Voice of Lebanon*, December 16, 1979; "Voice of Lebanon Reports Attacks, Clash in Aleppo", *Voice of Lebanon*, Daily Report, October 13, 1979; "Muslim Brotherhood Kills Eight Intelligence Men," *Voice of Lebanon*, November 27, 1979, accessed via FBIS.

⁴⁸ "Muslim Brotherhood Group Kills Policemen in Syria," *Voice of Lebanon*, December 1, 1979; "Explosion, Clashes Occur in Aleppo," *Voice of Lebanon*, December 3, 1979, accessed via FBIS.

⁴⁹ "Fierce Fighting in Aleppo Over Husni 'Abu's Arrest," *Voice of Lebanon*, August 10, 1979; "Syrian Army, Muslim Brotherhood Clash," *Voice of Lebanon*, August 20, 1979; "Serious Clashes in Damascus," *Voice of Lebanon*, December 30, 1979; "Violent Incidents Throughout Syria," *Voice of Lebanon*, January 18, 1980, accessed via FBIS.

⁵⁰ "34 Syrian Soldiers Killed in Ambush in Aleppo," *Voice of Lebanon* February 18, 1980, accessed via FBIS.

⁵¹ "Disturbances in Damascus, Aleppo, North," *Voice of Lebanon*, March 18, 1980; "'Acute Tension' Arrests in Northern Syria," *Voice of Lebanon*, March 22, 1980, accessed via FBIS.

⁵² Middle East Watch, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Assad Regime*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 8-22. "Eight Muslim Brotherhood Members Hanged in Damascus," *Voice of Lebanon*, June 7, 1979; "Second Syrian CP Official Killed by Muslim Brotherhood," *Voice of Lebanon*, April 30, 1980, accessed via FBIS.

⁵³ Seale, *Asad of Syria*, 328.

were killed and about 8,000 detained in the process.⁵⁴ On June 26, the Islamist militants attempted an assassination on the Syrian President, sending shockwaves across the country.

In response, the regime escalated their repression and unrestrained campaign against militants and their supporters. For example, Syrian troops killed up to 1,000 prisoners accused of supporting the MB in a Palmyra jail.⁵⁵ MB fighters launched a car bombing campaign targeting regime officials and government buildings and military bases, leading to hundreds of casualties.⁵⁶ The regime conducted mass arbitrary detentions and summary executions, while forcing thousands of accused Islamists into exile. In July, the regime formally outlawed membership in the MB, a crime that could receive capital punishment.⁵⁷ While these measures pressured many MB members to defect and seek clemency, ideologically committed fighters continued their armed campaign.

The Syrian regime also conflated the Fighting Vanguard and the MB, blaming the latter organization for most of the violence.⁵⁸ Many high-profile attacks were automatically attributed to the MB, even if the Fighting Vanguard was directly responsible.⁵⁹ Radical Islamist ideologue Abu Mus'ab al-Suri also criticized the MB for

⁵⁴ Middle East Watch, *Syria Unmasked*, 15.

⁵⁵ "Brotherhood Paper Accuses Syria of Prison Massacre," *Paris AFP*, August 9, 1980, accessed via FBIS; Blanga, "The Role of the Muslim Brotherhood In the Syrian Civil War," 51.

⁵⁶ Middle East Watch, *Syria Unmasked*, 16-17.

⁵⁷ "Text of People's Assembly Law on Muslim Brotherhood," *Damascus Domestic Service*, July 8, 1980, accessed via FBIS; Aron Lund, "Struggling to Adapt: The Muslim Brotherhood in a New Syria," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 7, 2013, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2013/05/07/struggling-to-adapt-muslim-brotherhood-in-new-syria-pub-51723>; "Explosions, Deaths in Aleppo," *Voice of Lebanon*, August 11, 1980, accessed via FBIS.

⁵⁸ "Security Forces Kill Muslim Terrorists in Damascus," *Damascus Domestic Service*, January 8, 1981; "Muslim Brotherhood Blamed for Assassinations," *Damascus Domestic Service*, June 19, 1980, accessed via FBIS.

⁵⁹ Raphael Lefèvre, "The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria: A 'Centrist' Jihad?," *Turkish Review* 4, no. 2 (2014): 142-152.

claiming responsibility for some high-profile attacks that were actually planned and executed by the Fighting Vanguard.⁶⁰ According to Lefèvre, ties between “the two organizations was much more complex as, in fact, there was more rivalry than complementarity.”⁶¹ Despite some notable attempts at cooperation, both groups were marred by consistent infighting and counterproductive competition.

8.5 ‘THE ISLAMIC FRONT IN SYRIA’: A SHORT-LIVED ALLIANCE, 1980-1981

Seeking to regain control of the Islamist movement, the MB decided to coordinate the insurgency with its constituent rivals and formed a strategic alliance with Issam al-Attar’s “Damascus wing” faction and Adnan Uqlah’s jihadist militants. The rival Islamist groups formed ‘The Islamic Front in Syria’ in December 1980, with Fighting Vanguard leader Adnan Uqlah designated as the head coordinator of military operations and recruitment.⁶² The following month, the new merger’s leadership published its charter that called for a united armed campaign against the Assad regime.⁶³

While the Damascus wing tried to persuade other factions to adopt a more peaceful resistance, the Fighting Vanguard and MB remained committed to pursuing armed conflict.⁶⁴ Each group’s leadership believed that a unified front and coordinated campaign were necessary to overthrow the Syrian regime.⁶⁵ However considerable personal and ideological differences inhibited meaningful coordination. For example,

⁶⁰ Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of al Qaida Strategist Abu Mus’ab al-Suri* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2007).

⁶¹ Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama*, 120.

⁶² Abd-Allah, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria*, 127–128.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 114-143.

⁶⁴ “Jerusalem Reports on Fighting in Syrian Cities,” *Jerusalem Domestic Service*, April 28, 1981, accessed via FBIS.

⁶⁵ Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama*, 118

Uqlah was prohibited from joining the umbrella group's ultimate decision-making body.⁶⁶ The Fighting Vanguard was also opposed to the Syrian MB's idea of forming a broader coalition with non-Islamist opposition groups and supporting negotiations with the Syrian regime. These factors fuelled tensions within the wider Islamist movement.

'The Islamic Front' collapses

By the end of 1981, the Fighting Vanguard split from the Syrian MB after nearly a year of failed negotiations to solidify a united front.⁶⁷ Relations deteriorated so significantly that Uqlah sought a *fatwa* (religious decree) sanctioning kidnapping and detention of MB leaders.⁶⁸ Facing defeat, the MB leadership sought to work with secular opposition groups, further estranging the militant organization from the Islamist rivals it tried to cooperate with. While a broader alliance between secular and Islamist groups attempted to coordinate a response against the Syrian regime, major disagreements on strategy quickly descended into destructive competition. Throughout the spring of 1980, Islamist militants attacked and killed their secular counterparts.⁶⁹ Chronic instability and violence within the wider anti-Assad opposition was a major factor that prevented any meaningful attempt at coordinating an effective insurgency.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Lia, "The Islamist Uprising in Syria , 1976 – 82," 553.

⁶⁸ Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama*, 121.

⁶⁹ Hans Günter Lohmeyer, *Opposition und Widerstand in Syrien* (Hambourg: Deutsches Orient-Institut, 1995), 298-299, cited in Lia, "The Islamist Uprising in Syria , 1976 – 82," 548.

Organizational structures & principal-agent problems

The Syrian MB and the Fighting Vanguard were part of the broader Islamist movement, but each organization maintained ideological distinctions and, for the most part, operated under separate commands. The limited literature on the Syrian MB reveals some debate about the nature of the group's organizational structure. Some scholars have pointed out that, under Saad al-Din's leadership, the Syrian MB adopted a hierarchical organizational structure with functionally differentiated wings early on.⁷⁰ Others have classified the Syrian MB as having a decentralized, "all-channel", organizational structure without clear delineation of specialized roles.⁷¹ Irrespective of specific structure classifications, the group did not have strict centralization and control. The Syrian MB began developing a specialized military wing in 1979, after it was pressured to wage an armed conflict against Syria.

The Fighting Vanguard, on the other hand, evolved from a fringe MB faction into a distinct and highly trained militant organization. The group maintained a relatively loose organizational structure that allowed regional commanders a level of autonomy to coordinate local attacks.⁷² Maintaining a clandestine organizational structure, with few direct links to the leadership, helped the group survive after local fighters were captured. But without a clear leading group within the Islamist movement, internal divisions emerged concerning both militant organization's next steps in their armed confrontation.

⁷⁰ Blanga, "The Role of the Muslim Brotherhood In the Syrian Civil War," 50

⁷¹ Joshua Kilberg, "Organizing for Destruction: How Organizational Structure Affects Terrorist Group Behaviour" (PhD dissertation, Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, Carleton University, 2011).

⁷² Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama*, 104.

It was difficult for the Syrian MB and the Fighting Vanguard to deter defection and ensure that their operatives remained in-line with leadership objectives.

Distinctions between both groups were often blurred among operatives in the field, hindering both militant organizations from overcoming principal-agent problems and mounting a sustained insurgency or effective military campaign. Militants in the field could switch sides quite easily. The MB's more pragmatic Damascus faction actively distanced itself from the Fighting Vanguard while some operatives of the Hama-based group, including leaders, possessed membership in both organizations.⁷³ Brynjar Lia notes that "at the local level, the intermeshing between the MB and the Fighting Vanguard militants in the northern cities meant that members were not always entirely sure to which organization their local cell belonged."⁷⁴ Failing to consolidate rivals, both the Syrian MB and the Fighting Vanguard faced enormous difficulties overcoming principal-agent problems and coordinating operations with rank-and-file militants.

As the Fighting Vanguard's popularity grew, many Brotherhood members defected to the Vanguard's ranks.⁷⁵ According to a US Defense Intelligence Agency cable, the Vanguard only had a few hundred members in the late 1970s. By the early 1980s, the group's membership surpassed 1,000 fighters.⁷⁶ As Brynjar Lia notes: "plagued by internal divisions, the exile-based leadership was unable to devote its full attention to running an effective guerrilla war inside Syria."⁷⁷

⁷³ Ibid., 123-124

⁷⁴ Lia, "The Islamist Uprising in Syria , 1976 – 82," 545

⁷⁵ Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama*, 119.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Lia, "The Islamist Uprising in Syria , 1976 – 82," 543.

Radical ideologue Abu Musa'ab al-Suri's also had major disputes against the MB leadership, which were expressed clearly in his memoirs. Al-Suri believed the MB lacked a coherent strategy and failed to take a strong stance on challenging the regime.⁷⁸ According to this perspective, members of the Fighting Vanguard believed that the MB leadership failed to credibly signal their commitment to the cause. Advancement within the organization was viewed as a function of personal loyalty and popularity, not necessarily expertise or merit.⁷⁹ Like other Vanguard sympathizers, Abu Musa'ab al-Suri thought that "[the MB's leadership] was side-tracked by marginal conflicts and spent a lot of time and effort jockeying for positions instead of concentrating all their resources and efforts on winning the battle."⁸⁰

Failing to facilitate Sunni collective action

Plagued by counterproductive competition with its rivals, the Syrian MB was unable to mobilize sufficient resources or devote considerable attention to cultivating mass support and facilitating collective action. Lacking a clear and consolidated leader of the Islamist movement, non-ideological prospective supporters were dissuaded from throwing their support behind a fragmented opposition movement. While support for the MB initially increased following the onset of anti-regime violence, the militant groups failed to attract key sectors of the Sunni constituency, including the influential business class in Damascus and Aleppo. Without a sustained source of income, militants relied on

⁷⁸ Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, "Lessons Learned from the Armed Jihad Ordeal in Syria", *Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) Sentinel*, Ref #:AFGP-2002-600080.

⁷⁹ Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama*, 121.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 122.

petty crime to generate finances including bank robberies and other forms of theft.⁸¹ The Syrian MB's ideology mattered little to a key constituency that prioritized maintaining commercial activity. The commercial elite in Syria's main urban centres essentially sided with the regime in this confrontation. As a result, the MB failed to overcome the critical collective action problem facing most militant organizations in the nascent stages of an armed conflict.

The role of outside support

While the Brotherhood received some forms of external assistance, the group never secured a sufficient level of state support to compensate for its lack of domestic resource mobilization. The MB was initially inspired by the 1979 Islamic Revolution and sought Iran's support, after Ayatollah Khomeini called for Islamic revolution across the Muslim world.⁸² But the new Iranian regime, which had started cultivating ties with Syria earlier that decade, decided to align with President Assad and strengthen relationships with Shi'a-affiliated actors throughout the region. Saddam Hussein also came to power in 1979 and sought ways to support anti-Assad Islamists.⁸³ Iraq primarily supported the Syrian MB in order to weaken the Assad regime, one of its main regional rivals, despite both regimes sharing Baathist ideological origins.⁸⁴

While Iraq provided some political and financial assistance to the MB, debates surrounding the role of outside support in fueling the nascent insurrection remain

⁸¹ Lia, "The Islamist Uprising in Syria , 1976 – 82," 548.

⁸² Talhamy, "The Syrian Muslim Brothers and the Syrian-Iranian Relationship," 569.

⁸³ Saddam's support for the MB brought the Syrian regime and Iran even closer.

⁸⁴ "Statement of 'Responsible Source' on Relations with Iraq," *Voice of Lebanon*, October 11, 1980, accessed via FBIS.

unresolved in the limited case literature about the militant group.⁸⁵ Some scholars have referred to Hussein's Iraq as the Brotherhood's main source of support.⁸⁶ Iraq also trained Syrian MB fighters to use advanced weapons including rocket propelled grenades.⁸⁷ But Hussein's secular regime was at odds with the MB ideologically and therefore limited its support for temporary geopolitical reasons.

Outside state support for fragmented movements can be counterproductive. Without an undisputed leader among Syria's Islamist constituency, Iraq's financial and military assistance to various factions may have further fueled tensions between the Syrian MB and its rivals.⁸⁸ More importantly, Hussein did not offer the MB a critical safe haven in Iraqi territory to build its military capacity and launch operations against the Assad regime. Hussein only offered a token safe haven to some MB operatives after the militant group's demise as a militant threat, following the Syrian regime's 1982 onslaught of Hama.⁸⁹

At the same, the Assad regime worked hard to shore up its regional support, particularly after expanding support for Palestinian militants attacking Israel from Syrian territory.⁹⁰ The Assad regime threatened Israel directly with large-scale military drills on

⁸⁵ Hinnebusch, *Authoritarian Power*, 285; Abd-Allah, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria*, 114-143; "Documents on Iraqi Aid to Muslim Brotherhood Revealed," *Damascus Domestic Service*, October 25, 1980, accessed via FBIS.

⁸⁶ Batatu, "Syria's Muslim Brethren," 13; Itamar Rabinovich, "The Impact on the Arab World," in Efraim Karsh ed., *The Iran-Iraq War: Impact and Implications* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 105.

⁸⁷ Stephen Hayes, "Saddam's Terror Training Camps: What the Documents Captured from the Former Iraqi Regime Reveal – and Why They Should All Be Made Public," *Weekly Standard*, January 16, 2006.

⁸⁸ Henning Tamm, "Rebel Leaders, Internal Rivals, and External Resources: How State Sponsors Affect Insurgent Cohesion," *International Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (2016): 599-610.

⁸⁹ Magdalena Kirchner, "A Good Investment?: State Sponsorship of Terrorism as an Instrument of Iraqi Foreign Policy (1979-1991)," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 27, no 3. (2014): 521-537, 532.

⁹⁰ Helena, Cobban, "Assad Tries to Placate Syria's Hard-Hitting Dissidents," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 26, 1980, retrieved from <https://www.csmonitor.com/1980/0326/032666.html>.

the border and challenged Israeli incursions in Lebanon.⁹¹ A growing crisis with an external enemy helped unite support for the Assad regime both within Syria and throughout the Arab world. These geopolitical developments eroded limited external support for the Muslim Brotherhood-led insurrection and invigorated the Assad regime's counterinsurgency campaign.

8.6 A FRAGMENTED ISLAMIST INSURRECTION FALLS AMID SYRIA'S UNRESTRAINED CAMPAIGN, 1980-82

In response to popular protests and Islamist attacks, the Syrian regime – with the help of militias and paramilitary forces – launched a ruthless and widespread counterinsurgency campaign in 1980.⁹² Military units and allied militias were dispatched into the cities to conduct mass-scale operations against suspected militants and their supporters. The Syrian military relied on heavy-handed tactics, including indiscriminate fire from tanks and aircraft. The Assad regime even pursued its exiled opponents in assassination and kidnapping campaigns across Europe and the Middle East. Reports of massacres and collective punishment were growing, encompassing entire Syrian towns and city areas viewed as hotbeds of Islamist activity. In previous cases, harsh and indiscriminate government responses drove civilians into the hands of militants.⁹³ However, the chaotic and fragmented Sunni militant movement did not offer a clear choice for prospective recruits or passive civilians to support.

⁹¹ Ya'aqov Erez, "Tel Aviv Ma'ariv Views Deployments," *Ma'ariv*, January 28, 1980, accessed via FBIS.

⁹² "Demonstrations, Clashes in Syria," *Voice of Lebanon*, June 15, 1981, accessed via FBIS.

⁹³ Kelly M. Greenhill and Paul Staniland, "Ten Ways to Lose at Counterinsurgency," *Civil Wars* 9, no. 4 (2007): 402-419.

By failing to consolidate its rivals, the Syrian MB was in a weak position to ensure compliance among its foot soldiers and deter defections to the regime. The Syrian government also exploited differences within the Islamist movement by offering amnesty for MB defectors and flirting with the idea of negotiations. Numerous MB members fled the organization's ranks, causing further schisms among the Islamist constituency.⁹⁴ Some of the defectors offered critical intelligence to Syrian authorities. To exasperate internal tensions, the Syrian regime's propaganda machine broadcast reports of deadly battles between the MB and its rivals in Jordan.⁹⁵ The regime effectively exploited divisions among the Syrian Islamist movement and gradually undermined the MB's social support base among urban Sunni communities.

The Hama massacre and the Syrian MB's demise, 1982

Towards the end of 1981, violence escalated significantly with reports of bombings and armed confrontations in Syria's main city centres.⁹⁶ But after several years of conflict, the Syrian regime eventually crushed the nascent Islamist insurrection, culminating in the onslaught of Hama throughout February 1982. In an effort to conquer Hama, Islamist fighters – including by Muslim Brotherhood cells – took over the city's government installations.⁹⁷ Militant leaders declared that Hama was “liberated by the

⁹⁴ “More Withdrawals from Muslim Brotherhood Announced,” *Damascus Domestic Service*, July 29, 1980, accessed via FBIS.

⁹⁵ Lia, “The Islamist Uprising in Syria, 1976 – 82,” 552.

⁹⁶ “Clashes with Muslim Brotherhood in Syria,” *Voice of Lebanon*, December 16, 1981; “Reports of Clashes in Syria and Evacuation of Soviet Families,” *Voice of Lebanon*, January 25, 1982, accessed via FBIS.

⁹⁷ Conduit, “The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the Spectacle of Hama,” 214.

mujahedeen” and called for a popular uprising.⁹⁸ Fighting continued in other key cities as well, including the Alawite-dominated city of Latakia.⁹⁹ In response, the Syrian regime instituted a three-week siege of Hama and launched an unprecedentedly ruthless campaign to re-take the city.¹⁰⁰ Syria’s military indiscriminately targeted the city’s residents and used tank fire and heavy artillery to shell civilian areas.¹⁰¹ An estimated 5,000-25,000 were killed during the siege of Hama – the details of which remain clouded in secrecy.¹⁰² After the siege, the Islamist insurrection largely withered to a halt and the Assad regime was able to restore its control over Syria. The Hama massacre remains one of the deadliest battles in Middle East history and has had a defining impact on the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the broader global jihadi movement ever since.

Concluding remarks

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood failed to wage a sustained insurgency for several reasons, but chronic infighting and counterproductive competition with Islamist rivals were central factors behind the MB’s demise. Failing to consolidate constituent rivals meant that the Syrian MB was constantly embroiled with internal movement schisms and

⁹⁸ “Syrian ‘Islamic Revolution’ Issues Statement,” *Baghdad Voice of Arab Syria*, February 10, 1982; “Rebels Issue Bonn Communique on Hamah Takeover,” *Paris AFP*, February 10, 1982, accessed via FBIS.

⁹⁹ “Muslim Brotherhood, Policy Clash in Latakia,” *Paris AFP*, February 7, 1982, accessed via FBIS.

¹⁰⁰ “Syrian Official Admits Hamah Closed Off,” *Baghdad Voice of Arab Syria*, February 15, 1982, accessed via FBIS; Conduit, “The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the Spectacle of Hama,” 214; “Syria Ends Operation Against Muslim Brotherhood,” *Moscow TASS*, February 25, 1982, accessed via FBIS.

¹⁰¹ “Uprising Reported in Syrian City, Border Closed,” *Jerusalem Domestic Service*, February 7, 1982, accessed via FBIS.

¹⁰² Middle East Watch, *Syria Unmasked*, 20; Conduit, “The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the Spectacle of Hama,” 211.

ill-prepared to wage an effective military confrontation. Indecisiveness and infighting prevented meaningful coordination with rivals at key junctures of the conflict.

As my theory suggests, leading groups that consolidate rivals are more likely to overcome major organizational hurdles, particularly collective action and principal-agent problems. Plagued by constant movement infighting, the Syrian MB failed to inspire mass mobilization to the cause and secure sufficient external support. Outbid by a more extremist rival, the MB adopted a more radical ideology that did not resonate with key sectors of Syria's Sunni constituency. Without a clear leader of the Islamist movement, prospective recruits and operatives were confused about which militant organization to support. Members of both groups could switch sides fairly easily, while fighters in the field lacked clear direction from de-centralized organizations. These factors, which stem from a failure to consolidate rivals, contributed to the MB's inability to overcome principal-agent problems during the nascent stages of armed conflict. Counterproductive violence and infighting dominated the MB leadership's attention, which was distracted from planning an effective guerilla warfare campaign. Failing to effectively consolidate rivals prevented the Muslim Brotherhood from mobilizing the necessary resources and support to pose a more serious challenge to the regime, before its formal demise as a militant threat in 1982.

Relations with rivals played a played a key role in the Syrian MB's trajectory. The Fighting Vanguard, an extremist MB faction which splintered into a distinct organization, eventually chain-ganged the Syrian MB into a war it was not ready for. Disputes over the legitimacy and effectiveness of armed conflict plagued the MB for many years. In 1976, the Vanguard outbid its rival and escalated violent attacks while the

Syrian MB largely remained on the sidelines. By 1979, the MB reluctantly joined the fight and declared *jihad* against the Syrian regime in an effort to regain leadership of the Islamist movement.

Towards the end of 1980, the Syrian MB formed a strategic alliance with its main Islamist rivals in an effort to coordinate an insurgency against the Assad regime. However, ideological and personal leadership differences precluded any meaningful cooperation. Destructive competition and infighting continued.

The collapse of the strategic alliance in 1981 occurred a year before the Islamic movement's crushing defeat in Hama. The Assad regime's ruthless counterinsurgency campaign likely would have crushed the nascent insurrection with or without the strategic alliance. But a coordinated and unified effort among the main factions would likely have improved the opposition's chances of sustaining an armed conflict for longer. Failing to consolidate rivals in the nascent stages is a defining reason explaining the Brotherhood's overall failure to sustain the insurgency.

It is difficult to definitively assess which factor has more explanatory power than others in a single case study, especially in a "negative" case where the outcome of interest did not occur. Staniland's theory of social networks and organisational cohesion could plausibly provide an equally satisfying explanation for the MB's failure. Weak pre-war horizontal and vertical ties may have pre-destined a fragile MB for fragmentation once war with the Syrian regime ensued. Perhaps these explanations are not entirely mutually exclusive. The answer may lie in how one views the Fighting Vanguard in relation to the core Syrian MB leadership. If the Vanguard is considered a radical faction (still organizationally part of the MB) at the onset of war, then Staniland's approach

provides a more effective organizational understanding behind the MB's demise. But in this case study, like other recent scholarly analyses, I treat the Fighting Vanguard as a splinter and distinct militant group, with its own leadership and organizational structure. From this perspective, the MB's failure to emerge as the hegemonic militant organization among the wider Syrian Islamist movement is an important part of the story.

For the other two case studies in my dissertation, my argument appears to offer a stronger or more complete explanation for why Hezbollah and the PKK engaged in sustained wars of attrition against their respective target states. However, looking at why the Syrian MB failed is a different question and far more difficult to assess. The MB is a tougher test of my theory because there are far fewer sources and pieces of evidence to assess in the case than other prominent militant groups. More importantly, from a theoretical standpoint, assessing why some groups fail may not be the direct inverse of why some groups succeed.¹⁰³ Nevertheless, the MB's failure to consolidate its main rivals is a key reason behind the organization's inability to wage a sustained insurgency.

¹⁰³ I elaborate further on this point in my introductory and theory-building chapters (Chapters One and Four).

CHAPTER NINE

RIVAL RELATIONS & RIVAL EXPLANATIONS: Findings and Implications for Theory

9.1 INSIGHTS FROM QUANTITATIVE AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSES

This chapter presents the dissertation's core findings and implications for theory by evaluating key explanations of insurgency onset and militant group success throughout each section. Based on three different methodological approaches, I show that theories of why some militant groups achieve their stated objectives or ultimately defeat the states they fight are limited in explaining why some nascent militant groups engage in sustained insurgencies in the first place.

Findings from my quantitative analyses show that, on average, organizational characteristics (i.e. motivation and organizational structure) and constituency dominance are stronger indicators for engagement in sustained armed conflicts than traditional proxies for group capabilities (i.e. group size, state sponsorship, multiple & coordinated attacks, hard target strikes). In the second stage of the research design, a comparative analysis shows that constituency dominance is the most common factor associated with groups that successfully wage sustained insurgencies in the Middle East and North Africa. Waging an insurgency is not necessarily a function of how powerful or capable a group may seem – it's mainly about constituency dominance and the organizational capacity to effectively mobilize resources and sustain armed hostilities against regime forces.

After a brief review of the main findings from my quantitative and comparative analyses, the bulk of this chapter is devoted to evaluating my theory of rival relations as it pertains to the dissertation's case studies.

9.1.1 Quantitative regression findings: Motivation, organizational structure, & competitive environments

Motivation: Group ideology & objectives

Religious groups rarely achieve their ultimate objectives.¹ But my findings suggest that that religiously motivated militant groups are far more likely to engage in sustained armed conflicts than other ideologically oriented groups – whether they are ultimately successful or not. Exploiting or fueling grievances among a particular population is critical for groups to mobilize for an insurgency. Some militant groups should be more capable of capitalizing on grievances than others – particularly religious and ethno-nationalist groups that can draw on resources from a well-defined constituency. Religiously motivated groups in particular tend to be more lethal and maintain indivisible objectives, making negotiated settlements improbable.² These types of organizations are also better at overcoming key militant organizational hurdles, such as collective action and principal-agent problems.³ Religious groups are often in a stronger

¹ In a study of 648 terrorist groups between 1968 and 2006, Jones and Libicki (2008) find that no religious group, which ceased to operate during that time period, achieved victory. See Jones and Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End*, xiv.

² Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Eli Berman, *Radical, Religious, and Violent: The New Economics of Terrorism* (MIT Press: Cambridge, 2009); Monica Duffy Toft, "Getting Religion? The Puzzling Case of Islam and Civil War," *International Security* 31, no. 4 (2007): 97-131.

³ Jacob N. Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

position to effectively screen recruits and mobilize resources via their robust social networks compared to more secular rivals.

Previous research suggests that groups seeking narrow goals, like secession are more capable of achieving their ultimate objectives than groups seeking maximalist goals like toppling a regime or taking over an entire country.⁴ Separatist groups seeking independence from a state should be in a stronger position to mobilize resources because of their access to a more concentrated recruitment base in a particular territory. Lending support to previous research, my quantitative analysis shows that groups seeking territorial control or independence are more likely to engage in sustained insurgencies than groups fighting for regime change or social revolution. Group objectives likely follow ideological orientations and therefore both factors, to some extent, reinforce a group's ability to mobilize resources and challenge the state in an armed conflict. Organizations with religious ideologies and maximalist objectives face a much tougher path to overall victory than groups with more limited aims but are still quite capable of mounting sustained insurgencies.

Organizational structure

Research on social movements and militant group structures suggests that centralized and formally structured groups are more likely to achieve broader objectives than more decentralized groups.⁵ Militant groups with hierarchical structures tend to be

⁴ Max Abrahms, "Why Terrorism Does Not Work," *International Security* 31, no. 2 (2006): 42-78; Audrey Kurth Cronin, "How al-Qaida Ends: The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups," *International Security* 31, no. 1 (2006): 7-48; Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al-Qa'ida* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008).

⁵ J. Craig Jenkins, "Resource Mobilization Theory and the Study of Social Movements," *Annual Review of Sociology* 9 (1983): 527-553.

more lethal and have a higher likelihood of ultimately defeating the states they fight.⁶ More centralized and integrated groups are more capable of allocating resources effectively and keeping lower-ranking members in line with the group's broader objectives.⁷ By looking at a different dependent variable, however, my findings challenge conventional wisdom: groups with relatively less centralized command and control are just as likely to engage in sustained armed conflict than the most hierarchically structured organizations. Without strict centralization, fighters have more freedom to react to fluid situations on the ground. As opposed to a more conventional military confrontation, traditional guerilla, hit-and-run style attacks do not require stringent direction from the top. Less rigid structures also make it harder for counterinsurgency forces to infiltrate and dismantle militant groups. Overall, groups with more autonomous cells and specialized wings can still launch a sustained insurgency, regardless of whether they end up ultimately defeating the regime.

Competitive environments

Previous research shows that in a full-fledged war, governments are more likely to defeat a single-group insurgency compared to a multi-group insurgency.⁸ But my analysis shows that single-group insurrections – featuring only one dominant group at the time an armed conflict is launched – is the strongest determinant of whether a particular

⁶ Lindsay Heger, Jung, Danielle, Wong, Wendy H., "Organizing for Resistance: How Group Structure Impacts the Character of Violence," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24, no. 5 (2012): 743-768; Victor Asal and R. Karl Rethemeyer, "The Nature of the Beast: Organizational Structures and the Lethality of Terrorist Attacks," *The Journal of Politics* 70, no. 2 (2008): 437-449; Ben Connable and Martin C. Libicki, *How Insurgencies End* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010).

⁷ Paul Staniland, "Organizing Insurgency: Networks, Resources, and Rebellion in South Asia," *International Security* 37, no. 1 (2012): 142-177.

⁸ Seth G. Jones, *Waging Insurgent Warfare*.

militant group challenges a target state or not. Competition for resources and manpower among rival constituent factions and other rebel groups is particularly crucial in the early phases of a violent conflict.⁹ In general, I find that more competitive militant environments also reduce the likelihood any particular group presents a major threat to the states they fight. After disaggregating among various competitive environments, I find that nascent insurrections characterized by a single active militant group are more likely to experience sustained armed conflicts than contexts featuring three or more groups. Environments with more groups likely reflect increased levels of competition for limited resources and constituency support. Dominant groups that challenge regimes in armed conflicts may have been embroiled in a more competitive environment prior to consolidating rivals.

After exploring the comparative analysis discussed below, I identify a new cause of interest (constituency dominance) and incorporate the new variable into a more powerful quantitative model in Chapter Five. I find that a proxy for constituency dominance out performs other measures of group competition, including the number of groups in a particular environment. This type of iterative process, similar to other forms of nested analyses, improve the strength of my research design.

Militant group capabilities & state sponsorship

Research shows that militant groups with larger membership sizes, external state support, and stronger capabilities are more likely to ultimately defeat the states they fight than weaker groups. Stronger militant groups are also more likely to extract concessions

⁹ Daniel Byman, "Understanding Proto-insurgencies," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 31, no. 2 (2008): 165-200.

from states and sign negotiated settlements – which may satisfy some of the group’s objectives.¹⁰ However, my quantitative analysis shows that, on average, indicators of nascent group capabilities are poor determinants for whether a militant group engages in a sustained insurgency in the first place. Launching an insurgency does not require large number of fighters, a transnational presence, or advanced weaponry from the outset. Militant groups with relatively weak capabilities can still fight in prolonged conflicts if they operate along the state’s periphery and avoid destruction. Outside state sponsorship is often secured only after a militant group presents itself as a viable option for support and can nonetheless derail militant group trajectories.¹¹ Asymmetric information and uncertainty might also lead states to underestimate militant threats and miscalculate the level of effort needed to nascent militant groups that do not yield strong observable capabilities.¹²

9.1.2 Comparative analysis findings: Constituency dominance as a key determinant of sustained insurgency

My comparative and case study analyses suggest that shifts in rival relations between militant groups – from competition to consolidation – are key to understanding this research puzzle. Militant groups engage (and do not engage) in sustained armed conflicts in a variety of contexts – in weak and relatively strong states, in democracies and autocracies, with the help of a state sponsor and without, with varying levels of

¹⁰ David E. Cunningham, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Idean Salehyan, “It Takes Two: A Dyadic Analysis of Civil War Duration and Outcome,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53, no. 4 (2009): 570-597.

¹¹ Daniel Byman, Peter Chalk, Bruce Hoffman, William Rosenau, and David Brannan, *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001; David B. Carter, “A Blessing or a Curse? State Support for Terrorist Groups,” *International Organization* 66, no. 1 (2012): 129-151.

¹² Iris Malone, “Uncertainty and Civil War Onset” (paper presented at the annual conference of the International Studies Association, San Francisco, CA, 2018).

capabilities and territorial control, with different motivations, origins, and organizational structures, among other indicators. A comparative analysis of 10 Middle Eastern and North African groups that engaged in sustained insurgencies in my universe of cases suggests that no single theoretically relevant causal factor can be deemed an individually necessary condition. Yet one factor stands out when comparing all positive-on-outcome cases: a proxy for constituency dominance. Dominant militant groups often face tough competition before consolidating constituent rivals and waging an insurgency.

I argue that militant groups that consolidate constituent rivals are more likely to wage sustained insurgencies than groups embroiled in destabilizing internal fights. Consolidating rivals helps minimize counterproductive forms of violence and allows the dominant militant group to focus its efforts on more strategic objectives, like waging a sustained armed conflict. Without major competitors, non-aligned civilians and potential recruits face fewer options to pick sides for support, while fighters in the field are less likely to defect or deviate from the leadership's objectives. Lacking major constituent foes, dominant militant organizations should be more likely to address two key organizational hurdles that most nascent groups face: overcoming collective action and principal-agent problems. By consolidating rivals, a militant group has a better chance of securing a safe haven to prepare for an insurgency and attract important sources of outside support. The rest of this chapter evaluates the main theories of insurgency onset and militant group success as they relate to the dissertation's case studies.

9.2 INSIGHTS FROM CASE STUDIES: Consolidating Rivals on the Road to War

In Part II, I show that current theories are largely insufficient on their own in explaining the opportunity and timing of sustained insurgency onset. The first two sections for each case study narrow in on the role of grievances and militant group motivation before turning to arguments related to a group's social ties and organizational structure. The third section discusses explanations concerning access to safe haven and territorial control. The fourth section explores the role of state sponsorship and outside support. The final section reviews the state's counterinsurgency efforts during the nascent stages of each armed conflict. Throughout the process of rival consolidation, the PKK and Hezbollah became more successful in overcoming collective action and principal-agent problems. While current theories help explain the Syrian MB's demise, the organization's failure to consolidate rivals inhibited its ability to overcome key organizational hurdles and sustain an insurgency.

TABLE 9.1: RIVAL RELATIONS AND RIVAL EXPLANATIONS

Militant Group	Motivation	Social ties / Organizational structure	Safe haven / Territorial control	External support	State responses / Counter-insurgency	Rival relations
Hezbollah (1982-1991)	Constant	Strong social ties; hierarchical org. in 1985; expanded as rivals consolidated	Secured after defeating rivals; social services expanded after insurgency onset	Constant in early years (Iran); declined before insurgency onset; secured critical support (Syria) after rival consolidation	Israel prioritized Syrian threat early on; constant counter-militancy approach; underestimated Hezbollah's capabilities	Competition (1982-1989); Hegemonic consolidation (1990-91)
PKK (1978-1984)	Constant	From weak to strong local social ties; hierarchical since founding, expanded after rival consolidation	Secured after defeating rivals; provided governance after insurgency onset	Limited (Syria); PKK secured base of operation in Iraq after rival consolidation	Kurdish repression relatively constant; Turkey underestimated PKK capabilities; military over-confident after stabilizing country shortly before insurgency onset	Competition (1978-1980); Alliance (1981); Hegemonic consolidation (1982-1983)
Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (1976-1982) ["negative" case]	Constant	Weak social ties, decentralized; defections to rivals	Weak safe haven in urban centres	Limited (Iraq)	Mass repression and indiscriminate COIN operations; Assad regime successfully exploits internal divisions among Islamist constituency	Competition (1976-1980); Chain-ganging (1979); Alliance/infighting (1980-1982); Fragmented, destroyed (1982)

MOTIVATION

Grievances

Though marginalization and repression were necessary factors that led to the emergence and growth of each militant group under study, grievances on their own merit are insufficient in explaining why Hezbollah and the PKK were willing and able to wage a sustained insurgency. Both Hezbollah and its rivals relied on exploiting similar grievances from the Shi'a community they sought to represent. Those grievances – marginalization from the rest of Lebanese society and Israeli military incursions – remained fairly constant prior to Hezbollah's emergence. After 1982, Israel's military occupation enflamed these grievances and led to Hezbollah's formation. Though Israel withdrew from key areas within Lebanon between 1982 and 1990, its military presence

on Lebanese territory was a constant feature in southern Lebanon during this period and cannot explain why Hezbollah launched a sustained war of attrition in the early 1990s as opposed to earlier.

Similarly, state repression and Kurdish grievances were largely constant since the mid 1970's and cannot explain why the PKK was able to eclipse rival Kurdish groups or why it launched an insurgency against the Turkish regime in 1984. Turkey's adoption of repressive measures against the Kurdish community and land inequality played a defining role in awakening the Kurdish nationalist conscious, making support for a wider insurgency more appealing.¹³ Kurdish victimization increased considerably after the 1980 military coup, enflaming grievances to a heightened level that pushed large segments of the Kurdish population to support a mobilization for insurgency. Eight months before the onset of insurgency, the military regime attempted to alleviate widespread grievances by transferring power to a civilian government, which initiated a process to revoke the marital law imposed over the country since 1980.¹⁴ But under Turkey's new democratic government, Kurds remained institutionally discriminated.

Older, more established Kurdish and Lebanese Shi'a groups with similar objectives sought to exploit their respective hostile environments to bolster recruitment. But it was Hezbollah and the PKK that reaped most of the organizational benefits in their nascent stages because they successfully outbid and destroyed their rivals to emerge as hegemonic militant organizations among their broader movements. Throughout the

¹³ For more on Kurdish grievances and the emergence of the PKK, see Chapter Seven.

¹⁴ Aliza Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 83

process of rival consolidation, both the PKK and Hezbollah adapted their ideological messages to attract other societal sectors beyond their core supporters.

Ideology & objectives

Hezbollah's overarching ethno-nationalist ideology remained largely constant throughout the organization's nascent stages. Hezbollah's more immediate ideological messaging, however, shifted in tandem with changes to its relations with rivals. During the early competitive escalation phase, Hezbollah's religious credentials helped attract and socialize dedicated recruits that served a higher purpose beyond a particular ethno-nationalist community or state.¹⁵ Many Amal fighters defected to Hezbollah, or remained as Hezbollah's spies from within, as Hezbollah was increasingly seen as a more religiously pure and committed organization.

Ideological competition persisted throughout the destructive wars of the late 1980s. But as Hezbollah consolidated its rivals, the organization moderated its religious face and shifted its message to encompass a more Lebanese nationalist tone to attract a wider audience beyond its immediate Shi'a constituency. As Hezbollah rose to the top of its constituency, the militant organization increasingly recruited from Lebanon's other sectarian groups, including Christians. Hezbollah moderated its image to appeal to the Shi'a middle class, which was less inclined to live under stringent religious law.¹⁶

Following the consolidation of rivals and the onset of Hezbollah's attrition campaign, the

¹⁵ See Chapter Six for more details on the competitive dynamics between Hezbollah and its main Shi'a rival, Amal.

¹⁶ Augustus R. Norton, *Hezbollah* (Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2007), 46.

organization's leadership adopted a more pragmatic strategy by agreeing to participate in Lebanon's 1992 elections.¹⁷

Hezbollah's ultimate objectives of establishing a Shi'a dominated theocracy in Lebanon and the destruction of Israel persist to this day.¹⁸ But organizational and strategic objectives during its nascent stages shifted according to changes in its rival relations: from the expulsion of international forces to dominating the Shi'a constituency to forcing Israel out from southern Lebanon. Hezbollah proved to be remarkably flexible and pragmatic by adapting its messaging and goals depending on the circumstances. As relations with rivals transitioned from counterproductive forms of competition to hegemonic consolidation, Hezbollah's strategies and immediate objectives shifted accordingly in anticipation of a sustained armed conflict with Israel.

Despite minor strategic or ideological differences, all of the main Kurdish organizations adhered to a variant of socialist ideology and were devoted to Kurdish ethno-nationalism to some extent. In response to state-led denials of a distinct Kurdish people, Kurdish intellectuals started to adopt a more socialist identity and framed Kurdish identity as a people subjected to Turkish colonization. The PKK was primarily motivated by Maoist principles and embraced the need to launch an armed conflict against Turkey to provoke a wider popular rebellion.¹⁹ But since its emergence, the PKK has evolved its messaging to accommodate a wider constituency and siphon support from rival socialist

¹⁷ Augustus R. Norton, "The Role of Hezbollah in Lebanese Domestic Politics," *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs* 42, no. 4: 475-491.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Kurdish Party Announces Formation, Outlines Objectives," *Hurriyet*, August, 2, 1979, accessed via FBIS; Mustafa Cosar Unal, "Strategist or Pragmatist: A Challenging Look at Ocalan's Retrospective Classification and Definition of PKK's Strategic Periods Between 1973 and 2012," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 3 (2014): 419-448, 425, citing "Ankara Devrimci Yuksek Ogrenci Dernegi; Ankara Revolutionary Students' Association (ADYOD) at the University of Ankara in the Province of Ankara in Turkey," footnote 19.

groups. To mobilize popular support, the organization gradually embraced more of an ethno-nationalist message when trying to reach Kurdish peasants who may have had little understanding of socialist ideology.

In the 1978 PKK founding Congress, the leadership announced its ultimate objective of establishing an “Independent United Kurdish State” that would span predominately Kurdish populated territories in Turkey and neighbouring countries.²⁰ This broader objective remained constant throughout the nascent stages of the PKK’s armed conflict. The PKK achieved its key organizational and strategic goals after emerging as the hegemonic Kurdish group and waging a sustained insurgency against the Turkish regime, but the organization failed to ultimately win the war or achieve its stated political objectives.²¹

Failure to resonate

Unlike the other two groups under study, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood failed to tap into constituent grievances and harness a salient ideology. The MB emerged as a Sunni Islamist organization that eventually embraced the idea of overthrowing the Shi’a Alawite-dominated Syrian regime and imposing Shari’a law over the country.²² A series of military coups in Syria consolidated secular Ba’athist control over the country and further alienated the majority Sunni population. From early on, the MB represented the most powerful opposition movement in Syria and heavily relied on urban Sunni support.

²⁰ Unal, “Strategist or Pragmatist,” 425.

²¹ Facing major setbacks in its fight against Turkey, the PKK altered its ultimate objectives over time: from statehood to more political autonomy.

²² See Chapter Eight for more information on the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood’s rise and fall as an insurgent threat.

The regime ruthlessly crushed protests in the mid 1960's which enflamed Sunni grievances to new heights. Despite the regime's brutality, however, the MB's ideology and objectives failed to resonate among rural communities and the more powerful Sunni elites. A large part of the MB's failure was a product of internal discord from within the organization and infighting within the wider Syrian Islamist organization.

Plagued by counterproductive competition with its rivals, the Syrian MB was unable to mobilize sufficient resources or devote considerable attention to cultivating mass support and facilitating collective action. Lacking a clear and consolidated leader of the Islamist movement, non-ideological prospective supporters were dissuaded from throwing their support behind a fragmented opposition movement. While support for the MB initially increased following the onset of anti-regime violence, the militant groups failed to attract key sectors of the Sunni constituency, including the influential business class in Damascus and Aleppo. As a result, the MB failed to secure sustained sources of revenue and overcome key organizational hurdles facing most nascent militant groups.

SOCIAL TIES

Strong pre-war social ties can help explain why some militant groups remain cohesive while other similar groups fragment over the course of a civil war.²³ The strength of these social ties helps determine the emergence of viable militant institutions that explain a group's propensity to absorb resource flows and withstand government

²³ Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014); Jennifer M. Larson and Janet I. Lewis, "Rumors, Kinship Networks, and Rebel Group Formation," *International Organization* 72, no. 4 (2018): 871-903.

counterinsurgency campaigns.²⁴ When it comes to explaining the Syrian MB's failure as an insurgent force, organizational or social network-related arguments have strong explanatory power. My theory of rival relations, however, explains Hezbollah and the PKK's timing for launching a sustained armed conflict.

Both Hezbollah and the PKK emerged in militant environments dominated by stronger and more established constituent rivals. Amal, for example, was the oldest and strongest Shi'a organization at the start of the Lebanese Civil war until the late 1980s, relying on strong pre-war social ties and veteran military experience. Over time, however Hezbollah was able to develop stronger institutions, allocate resources more effectively, and keep lower-ranking members in line with the group's broader objectives.²⁵ Hezbollah's superior social service provisions and educational programs were a testament to their ability to cultivate robust and lasting relations with southern Lebanese communities. Improved social ties and stronger militant institutions played a role in explaining why Hezbollah was able to gut Amal from within and eventually outlast its main rivals. Yet these factors cannot explain why Hezbollah launched a sustained campaign of attrition against Israel in 1990.

While the PKK relied on pre-existing networks, including key unions and local schools to mobilize support, the nascent group was far less integrated into the local population than older Kurdish groups led by elites with robust tribal and religious ties.

²⁴ Staniland's (2014) theory focuses on explaining organizational cohesion over the course of a civil war or conflict, not whether a militant group launches or sustains insurgent operations. Staniland's argument also seems better suited at systematically comparing militant groups within the same conflict or movement, whereas this thesis primarily explains prominent militant group trajectories across different countries and conflicts.

²⁵ Amal, on the other hand, grew more corrupt over time and eventually descended into a full-blown patronage system. See Nicholas Blanford, *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel* (New York, NY: Random House, 2011), 90.

The PKK developed from a student association in Ankara's university, detached from rural Kurdish society. Though the PKK's leadership-level ties were strong, the organization had to develop its vertical social ties to the Kurdish peasantry by actively integrating itself in local conflicts.²⁶ The PKK soon stood out as the main Kurdish group willing to and defend Kurdish peasants stuck in exploitative conditions and embroiled in local feuds. A defining reason behind the PKK's success is its strategic use of violence to confront the Turkish regime, manipulate local conflicts, and signal their credibility to the Kurdish constituency.

Compared to other prominent militant organizations, the Syrian MB was founded on weak social ties. Linkages among the Syrian MB's leadership remained weak throughout its existence and prevented the formation of a cohesive militant organization. Personality clashes, regional factionalism, and ideological differences all played a role in the splintering of the Syrian MB in 1969.²⁷ Around this time, Marwan Hadid broke ranks with the MB and formed the more radical Fighting Vanguard organization, which began training for guerilla war in neighbouring Jordan.

While the MB's power centre shifted from the capital Damascus to Hama, the increasingly radicalized organization remained heavily based in the country's main urban centres, including Aleppo, and failed to make strong linkages in the country side. Weak horizontal (leadership-to-leadership) and vertical (leadership-to-people) ties facilitate the MB's fragmentation amid state repression and prevented the group from successfully organizing a rural insurgency.

²⁶ See David Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization, and Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

²⁷ Raphaël Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 92.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Organizational structure is also cited as a key factor helping to explain various measures of militant group success.²⁸ At first, loosely organized and relatively autonomous fighters in south Lebanon led attacks against Israeli forces in the early 1980's. Over time, these units were incorporated into Hezbollah's organizational apparatus and evolved into more effective combat units. By 1985, Hezbollah had a clear mandate and hierarchical organizational structure with compartmentalized roles and a more coherent command and control apparatus.²⁹ Yet Hezbollah did not launch a sustained campaign of attrition after forming a formal and integrated organizational structure. Despite Hezbollah's organizational successes in this period, its main rivals continued to pose a threat to its quest for hegemony until around 1990.

Hezbollah's dynamic organizational structure – a key factor behind its survival and success – expanded as a result of shifts in its relations with rivals: from outbidding to destructive competition to hegemonic consolidation. As Hezbollah defeated its rivals in battle, it secured its territorial control over predominately Shi'a regions and focused on developing its military wing. In the early 1990s, as the organization prepared to participate in Lebanon's politics and focus on waging a war of attrition with Israel, it formally established a political wing and a *jihad* council.³⁰ Throughout the nascent stages of its insurrection, Hezbollah's organizational structure evolved according to its changing priorities. These priorities, in turn, were a function of its relations with rivals.

²⁸ Victor Asal and R. Karl Rethemeyer, "The Nature of the Beast: Organizational Structures and the Lethality of Terrorist Attacks," *The Journal of Politics* 70, no. 2 (2008): 437-449; Ben Connable and Martin C. Libicki, *How Insurgencies End* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010).

²⁹ Amal, like Hezbollah, was also hierarchically organized with various wings designated for particular functions.

³⁰ Eitan Azani, "The Hybrid Terrorist Organization: Hezbollah as a Case Study," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 36, no. 11 (2013): 899-916, 904.

Since its founding, the PKK maintained a strictly hierarchical organizational structure under Ocalan's leadership. In its earliest days, the PKK prioritized the strategic use of violence to gain popular support while its main rivals competed primarily through the dissemination of propaganda. The PKK established specific committees devoted to other functions, such as propaganda and social service provisions only after the militant organization eclipsed its rivals in the early 1980s. The first formal changes to its structure, with the formal creation of functionally differentiated departments, occurred after the PKK launched its insurgency in 1984.³¹

While the Syrian MB's organizational structure remains a source for debate, the group did not have strict centralization and control like the PKK and Hezbollah. Distinctions between different Syrian Islamist groups were often blurred among operatives in the field, hindering the MB from overcoming principal-agent problems and waging an effective military campaign. The Syrian MB only began developing a specialized military wing in 1979, after it was chain-ganged by its main rival – the Fighting Vanguard – into waging an ill-prepared armed conflict against the Syrian regime. Though relations with rivals play a critical role in the MB's trajectory, arguments related to pre-war social ties and organizational structure also help explain the group's early demise as an insurgent threat.

³¹ The PKK formally established its military wing, the ERNK, in 1984. Its early operations, however, failed to mobilize the level of regional support Ocalan desired. The PKK leader worried that some of his operatives on the ground were deviating from leadership objectives. As a result, the PKK leader set up the ARKG in 1986 as a separate wing to serve as the foundation for a "people's army." See Nur Bilge Criss, "The Nature of PKK Terrorism in Turkey," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 18, no. 1 (1995): 17–37, 19.

SAFE HAVEN & TERRITORIAL CONTROL

Controlling territory and securing safe haven from government reprisals is probably the most important factor determining whether a militant group can sustain military operations against a more powerful state.³² But Hezbollah and the PKK had to first consolidate their rivals before firmly securing territory.

To dominate Shi'a areas of Beirut and southern Lebanon, Hezbollah had to defeat Amal and other rivals in a bloody turf war. Hezbollah emerged during a civil war in a country with a largely absent state apparatus. Amal, and later Hezbollah, quickly filled political vacuums and did not face major difficulties overcoming collective action problems in a civil war context full of heightened Shi'a grievances. But consolidating rivals allowed Hezbollah to assume full control of Shi'a territories, enabling Hezbollah to absorb more defectors from rival groups and attract dedicated fighters. Once movement infighting was put to an end, Hezbollah consolidated a safe haven to enhance its internal organization, address principal-agent problems, and focus its efforts on more strategic objectives like fighting Israel.

The PKK similarly secured a safe haven after consolidating its rivals. As the PKK became less concerned with Kurdish competitors in the early 1980s, the PKK gradually transitioned to operate from the mountainous border area, mainly in the Sirnak province.³³ But to launch an insurgency against a strong Turkish state, the PKK needed

³² Territorial control is also a major determinant differentiating groups that engage in guerrilla-warfare tactics – primarily striking hard targets – and those that remain more clandestine. See Luis De La Calle and Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca, “How Armed Groups Fight: Territorial Control and Violent Tactics,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38, no. 10 (2015): 795–813; Luis De la Calle and Ignacio Sanchez-Cuenca, “Rebels without a Territory: An Analysis of Nonterritorial Conflicts in the World, 1970–1997,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 4 (2012): 580–603.

³³ The region was more conducive to guerilla war than the flatlands of the PKK's earliest bases of operations. See Güneş Murat Tezcür, “Violence and Nationalist Mobilization: The Onset of the Kurdish Insurgency in Turkey,” *Nationalities Papers* 43, no. 2 (2015): 248–266, 260.

access to an external sanctuary in Iraqi Kurdistan.³⁴ If Ocalan failed to strike a deal with Barzani, the leader of the Kurdish-Iraqi KDP, the PKK would have been forced to wage a futile insurgency from within Turkey against a strong military with limited opportunity to hide. Had the PKK continued to be embroiled in counterproductive competition in Turkey, the PKK would likely have had to focus on internal fights instead of credibly committing to an external alliance with the KDP and working to cultivate a vital safe haven across the border. Once the PKK launched an insurgency and took effective control of a particular Kurdish village, the group would begin administering governance functions to challenge the state and offer social services to its constituency.³⁵

To some extent, the Syrian MB enjoyed relative safe haven in parts of major urban centres across the country. Sympathetic civilians and active supporters were able to shelter MB operatives throughout their nascent stages, particularly in the city of Hama. However, the MB failed to develop a rural base of operations to build a formidable guerilla capacity and evade government forces. Without territorial control and a sustained source of income, militants had to rely on petty crime to generate finances including bank robberies and other forms of theft.³⁶ Internal movement discord and infighting were some of the reasons behind the organizations inability to mobilize sufficient resources and secure a robust safe haven to sustain insurgent operations.

STATE SPONSORSHIP & EXTERNAL SUPPORT

Outside state support played a crucial role in Hezbollah's early trajectory, but

³⁴ New regional geopolitical circumstances in Syria and Lebanon forced the PKK to look for a new base of operations in Iraq.

³⁵ Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement*, 89.

³⁶ Lia, "The Islamist Uprising in Syria , 1976 – 82," 548.

rival consolidation provides a more complete explanation for why Hezbollah launched a war of attrition against Israel by the early 1990s. Iranian state sponsorship was critical to Hezbollah's founding and subsequent success, but Amal was also sponsored by a powerful neighbour: Syria. Iran transferred advanced weaponry, deployed IRGC trainers, assisted in Hezbollah's propaganda campaigns, and funneled massive amounts of cash to help the group get off the ground and sustain operations. Yet the group's operational success is largely owed to its Lebanese fighters – mainly Amal defectors – who relied on their fighting experience from the civil war.³⁷ More importantly, Iranian support actually declined in the late 1980s, while the Islamic Republic was distracted by the Iran-Iraq war. As punishment for the Hezbollah-Amal war, Iran withheld some financial and military support to its main proxy after mounting Shi'a civilian casualties upset the mullahs in Tehran.

Rival consolidation helps explain why Syria – Lebanon's main power broker – flipped and started backing the hegemonic Shi'a militant group. At first, Syria worked actively to derail Hezbollah and bolster its preferred proxy Amal. But after Hezbollah emerged as the hegemonic militant group, Syria faced little choice but to throw their weight behind Hezbollah to impose serious costs on Israel's military presence in southern Lebanon. Once it was clear that Hezbollah was the hegemonic fighting force in Lebanon, Syria allowed Hezbollah to maintain its capabilities to fight Israel when all other remaining militant groups were essentially forced to disband their military wings.

Throughout its nascent stages, the PKK also enjoyed various forms of outside support. The Assad regime's safe haven saved Ocalan and the PKK from complete

³⁷ DeVore and Stähli, "Explaining Hezbollah's Effectiveness," 351.

destruction shortly before the Turkish military coup. But outside state support, on its own, cannot explain why the PKK waged an insurgency against Turkey several years later. First of all, Syria served as a popular haven for many other Kurdish and Turkish dissident groups as well. There were also major limits to Syrian support. The Assad regime, for example, only tolerated a PKK presence in Syria for refuge and prohibited the organization from using its territory as a launch pad for attacks against Turkey.

As the preeminent Kurdish organization, the PKK was a highly attractive partner for other outside actors seeking to improve their respective geopolitical positions. Tactical cooperation and training with Palestinian militants helped the PKK develop guerilla warfighting skills, but the Kurdish organization still lacked a viable base of operations to launch militant attacks. Eventually, a hegemonic PKK was in a strong position to negotiate with Iraqi Kurdish militants to secure an external safe haven on the Turkish-Iraqi border.

While the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood received some forms of external assistance, the group never secured a sufficient level of state support to compensate for its lack of domestic resource mobilization. Iraq's leader Saddam Hussein provided the Brotherhood's with some military training and other sources of support.³⁸ But Hussein's secular regime was at odds with the MB ideologically and therefore limited its support for temporary geopolitical reasons to weaken the Assad regime. Outside state support for fragmented movements can often be counterproductive. Without an undisputed leader among Syria's Islamist constituency, Iraq's financial and military assistance to various

³⁸ Umar F. Abd-Allah, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria* (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1983), 114-143; "Documents on Iraqi Aid to Muslim Brotherhood Revealed," *Damascus Domestic Service*, October 25, 1980, accessed via FBIS.

factions may have further fueled tensions between the Syrian MB and its rivals. Shifting allegiances among the Syrian MB's rank and file likely inhibited the group's ability to fully capitalize on a scarce supply of outside state support.

STATE RESPONSES & COUNTERINSURGENCY

In relatively strong states, like Turkey in 1984, governments are more likely to underestimate a clandestine militant organization before it escalates violence to an armed conflict.³⁹ The PKK's ability to launch coordinated guerilla strikes caught Ankara off guard. Since the PKK focused most of their nascent efforts against rival Kurds, instead of Turkish security forces, the government may have unexpected a full-blown insurgency.⁴⁰ Underestimating the militant group's power, the Turkish state failed to provide resources, training, and military equipment for its troops to withstand a traditional guerrilla warfare campaign.

Nascent militant organizations are more likely to grow in membership if they adopt a more targeted and discriminate violent strategy relative to the state's counterinsurgency efforts.⁴¹ During the insurgency's earliest phase, the PKK devoted a considerable amount of resources to killing suspected Kurdish collaborators and, at times, even their families. While many observers viewed the PKK's retributions as ruthless, the PKK's credibility improved among ordinary Kurds who viewed their targeted killings as discriminate and justifiable, especially compared to the government's indiscriminate

³⁹ Malone, "Uncertainty and Civil War Onset."

⁴⁰ Just a year before the insurgency began, an overly confident Turkish leadership viewed the PKK as a weak group of predatory criminals. See Criss, "The Nature of PKK Terrorism in Turkey," 19.

⁴¹ Charles W. Mahoney, "Hearts and Minds or Blood and Guts? Strategy, Terrorism, and the Growth of Proto-Insurgencies" (Phd diss., University of California, 2011).

repression and arbitrary detentions. Facing indiscriminate state violence, more unaffiliated Kurdish civilians decided it was time to support armed conflict against the Turkish government. Poor counterinsurgency practices drove even more Kurdish recruits into the PKK's ranks – as the only viable Kurdish militant organization that could put up a fight against the regime.

The IDF similarly underestimated Hezbollah's growing strength and pursued a relatively constant counter-militancy approach throughout the organization's nascent stages. Until 1982, Israel's military experience was primarily oriented towards defeating multiple state militaries in quick and decisive conventional conflicts and the IDF was ill-prepared to take on a proto-insurgency. Israel prioritized its early efforts in Lebanon to confront Syria's military presence throughout the country and the Golan Heights. Israel viewed Hezbollah on the same level as other Palestinian militant groups in Lebanon, "as a 'routine security' threat not worthy of major conceptual or operational attention."⁴² The IDF's early tactical success against militant groups in Lebanon helped contribute to Israel's overconfidence. While IDF operations succeeded in managing the militant threat by the late 1980s, Hezbollah leaders claim that the group reduced attacks against Israel in order to grow organizationally, consolidate their rivals, and prepare for a sustained insurgency against the Jewish state.

Unlike the Kurdish or Lebanese Shi'a constituencies, a chaotic and fragmented Sunni Islamist movement in Syria prevented any single group from successfully exploiting widespread grievances amid Syria's relentless counterinsurgency campaign. In response to escalating cycles of violence during the late 1970's, the Syrian regime

⁴² Raphael D. Marcus, *Israel's Long War with Hezbollah: Military Innovation and Adaptation Under Fire* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2018), 37.

increased their repression against Islamist militants and their supporters. The regime conducted mass arbitrary detentions and summary executions, while forcing thousands of accused Islamists into exile. Plagued by internal divisions, there was no viable militant organization for prospective recruits or passive civilians to throw their full support.

The regime effectively exploited divisions among the Syrian Islamist movement and gradually undermined the MB's social support base among urban Sunni communities. Failing to consolidate its rivals, the Syrian MB was in a weak position to ensure compliance among its foot soldiers and deter defections to the regime, causing further schisms among the Islamist constituency. By 1982, a divided Syrian Islamist movement had little chance to sustain a nascent insurrection and met its demise after the regime's final onslaught in Hama.

CONCLUSION

By exploring my dissertation's main findings, this chapter presents important implications for theory. Overall, I find that existing theories of insurgency outcomes or militant group success are limited in explaining sustained insurgency onset at each stage of my research design. Grievances, ultimate goals, and group ideology remained largely constant during Hezbollah and the PKK's nascent stages. Each group's organizational structure and military capacity to wage guerilla war expanded and improved as they consolidated their main rivals. Both groups only secured critical forms of outside support and access to a robust safe haven after they emerged as the hegemonic militant group among their respective constituencies. After attaining dominance, each group secured

territorial control to evade government reprisals and expanded social service provisions among other forms of governance.

Without viable competitors, Hezbollah and the PKK mobilized resources and shifted their focus on fighting Israel and Turkey, respectively, in sustained campaigns of attrition. Both states were caught off guard with the rise their respective insurgent threats, leading to ill-prepared counter-militancy campaigns during the nascent stages. Indiscriminate state measures and overconfidence helped fuel the rise of these militant organizations, who primarily reaped the benefits of ineffective state actions as their rivals became increasingly inconsequential.

Current explanations of insurgency or civil war onset often mirror broader structure-agency debates in the study of major social phenomenon.⁴³ Yet my theory of rival relations encompasses aspects of both structure and agency, helping merge arguments across different levels of analyses. Militant group engagement in sustained armed conflicts are simultaneously a function of the competitive environment they are situated in and the willingness of group leaders to pursue particular organizational or strategic objectives as a result. Throughout the rival consolidation process, dominant militant groups pool resources from other groups and emerge as the only viable option for current fighters and prospective recruits to support. With counterproductive violence minimized, leaders of dominant militant groups can shift their attention from internal fights to waging an insurgency. The temporal nature of my theory better reflects the

⁴³ Chapter Two's literature review outlines competing perspectives that focus on either motivation or feasibility.

timing of sustained armed conflict onset than rival explanations that remain incomplete or rely on largely static factors.⁴⁴

Consolidating rivals increases the likelihood they can sustain a serious challenge against the state, but it by no means guarantees this outcome.⁴⁵ A state's nascent counterinsurgency efforts are often cited as the most important factor that determines whether an sustained insurgency gets off the ground.⁴⁶ Far more powerful regime forces, especially ones with effective intelligence capabilities, can still destroy a dominant militant organization that faces few challenges from within. Similarly, some militant groups fight regime forces while simultaneously battling rival groups for turf and influence. Therefore, rival consolidation is neither individually necessary nor sufficient for engagement in sustained armed conflict. On average, however, I argue that the more a group consolidates its constituent rivals, the more likely it will engage in a sustained armed conflict against the target state.⁴⁷ Exploring how rival consolidation increases a militant group's chances of engaging in sustained armed conflicts will improve our understanding of why some groups pose seriously challenges to the states they fight and others do not.

⁴⁴ There are several arguments explaining the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood failed attempt to wage a sustained insurgency. Explaining a "negative" case is considerably more challenging than cases where the outcome of interest is present. Internal discord and rival infighting prevented the organization from mobilizing sufficient resources and building a united front capable of mounting a sustained military challenge.

⁴⁵ The regime can also divert their efforts to crushing a single militant organization instead of worrying about splitting their efforts among various competing groups.

⁴⁶ Daniel Byman, "Understanding Proto-insurgencies," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 31, no. 2 (2008): 165-200; Luke N. Condra and Jacob N. Shapiro, "Who Takes the Blame? The Strategic Effects of Collateral Damage," *American Journal of Political Science* 56 no. 1 (2012): 167-187; Daniel Branch and Elisabeth Jean Wood, "Revisiting Counterinsurgency," *Politics and Society* 38, no. 1 (2010): 3-14; Ivan Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁴⁷ In line with previous research, I adopt probabilistic assessments given the complex nature of studying militant groups and armed conflict.

Most theories explaining insurgency development involve self-reinforcing mechanisms and factors that are difficult, if not impossible, to disaggregate. My theory of rival consolidation is no exception. The particular sequencing of factors promoting insurgency development often vary considerably by context. But the need to overcome rivals in the nascent stages of an insurrection is an almost universal feature of nascent militant environments. Beyond implications for theory and scholarship, this dissertation's findings offer important implications for policy and motivates further exploration in subsequent work.

CHAPTER TEN

CONCLUSION: POLICY IMPLICATIONS & FUTURE AVENUES FOR RESEARCH

In an effort to leverage scholarly insights for practitioners, this final chapter reviews some policy implications associated with my findings.¹ National security and defence practitioners around the world face a myriad of intelligence issues and limited resources to discern among nascent militant groups that might pose serious insurgent threats in the future.² Academic researchers and policy professionals tend to emphasize the importance of observable militant group capabilities. However, these biases have led to notable strategic surprises – including the unexpected and rapid rise of the Islamic State group in 2014. My thesis identifies an important and overlooked indicator that may help security practitioners and operational analysts better differentiate among potential insurgent threats, although more research is needed before any concrete policy recommendations can be prescribed. As a result, this dissertation concludes with some future avenues for scholarly work within a broader research program that I aim to advance.

10.1 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

10.1.1 ‘Rival relations’: A key indicator of potential insurgent threats

Previous research suggests that national security practitioners almost exclusively focus on observable group capabilities, such as group size or territorial control, when

¹ This dissertation was developed at a policy-relevant school that encourages a concluding discussion of policy implications from scholarly research.

² Daniel Byman, “The Intelligence War on Terrorism,” *Intelligence and National Security* 29, no. 6 (2014): 837-863.

trying to identify future insurgent threats.³ To better assess nascent insurrections, I argue that practitioners should divert more attention to analyzing the primary nature of rival relations in the lead-up to a potential armed conflict. Militant groups that have fully consolidated their rivals are the most likely to successfully launch a sustained insurgency. A key indication of a potentially hegemonic or consolidated militant group is the absence of counterproductive violence emanating from within the wider militant movement.

Throughout my dissertation, I explain how my rival consolidation theory provides a more compelling argument than previous explanations addressing this puzzle. In this chapter, however, I argue that my theory offers a more effective and more pragmatic prism to assess nascent militant threats than other evidence-based suggestions. It should be easier to monitor and assess the consequences of different rival relations than trying to measure highly complex factors like an organization's pre-war social ties or the relative power distribution within a wider movement.

Bridging the gap

Scholars studying political violence are increasingly engaging in “policy-relevant research” and diversifying their efforts to better reach government audiences.⁴ Some of these attempts involve the inclusion of a ‘policy recommendations’ section in scholarly work, as part of a wider campaign to bridge the divide between policy and academic communities. However, recent findings – from workshops and initiatives devoted to

³ Iris Malone, “Uncertainty and Civil War Onset” (paper presented at the annual conference of the International Studies Association, San Francisco, CA, 2018).

⁴ James Goldgeier, “A New Generation of Scholars Looks to Bridge the Gap,” *War on the Rocks*, February 22, 2018; Marc Lynch, “After the Political Science Relevance Revolution,” *Washington Post Monkey Cage*, March 23, 2016. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/03/23/after-the-political-science-relevance-revolution/?utm_term=.fa873d7b1b77;

strengthening these analytic communities – show that policymakers are not necessarily looking for concrete recommendations from outside experts.⁵ According to this view, practitioners motivated to formulate evidence-based policy are more interested in better understanding particular variables or indicators that drive outcomes of interest.

During my time in government, I similarly noticed that policymakers looked to academic research for compelling indicators of different problems, not specific recommendations on what to do.⁶ Many of my forward-looking projects in government were structured to address this need. My doctoral dissertation is no exception.

This chapter does not outline concrete steps to counter rival consolidation in nascent insurrections, such as risky and untested ideas that call for supporting rival groups fighting the dominant organization or fueling discord within a wider militant movement. These types of prescriptions for countering militant campaigns often present serious dilemmas and can backfire. The unintended consequences of major policy decisions need to be seriously assessed on a case-by-case basis and situated among plausible scenarios to help alleviate strategic surprise. Offering directions for rigorous intelligence analysis or strategic foresight is beyond the scope of my dissertation, which primarily focuses on explaining previous cases.

From a policy standpoint, however, my dissertation's findings identify an underexplored indicator – nascent rival relations – that drives a particular outcome of interest: the onset of a sustained insurgency. Analysis of nascent rival relations should be incorporated in policy foresight exercises and intelligence assessments focused on

⁵ Cyanne E. Loyle, Kathleen Cunningham, and Joe Young, “How to Get Research to Impact Policy,” *Political Violence at a Glance*, May 24, 2018.

⁶ From 2015-2017, I served as a scholar-in-residence and senior advisor with the strategic foresight unit in Canada's foreign ministry.

identifying plausible insurgent-related trends or futures. If a dominant militant group is preoccupied with fighting and competing with constituent rivals, then it is unlikely to be in a strong position to shift its attention and capabilities towards launching a sustained insurgency against a target state. If, however, a group successfully consolidates rivals, to the point that counterproductive movement violence ceases, then the likelihood of sustained insurgency onset increases. Examining how rival militant groups interact in the nascent stages of an armed insurrection is a key component to understanding the broader puzzle of why some militant groups evolve to pose serious military challenges to the states they fight.

10.1.2 Challenging assumptions

My findings challenge deep-seated assumptions about nascent militant threats. Across three levels-of-analysis, I find that observable indicators of militant group capabilities and strength are poor predictors of sustained insurgency onset. These assumptions are not only held by the scholarly community – they appear to be widely held by policy professionals as well.⁷

Stanford University Ph.D. candidate Iris Malone conducted semi-structured interviews with former and current U.S. national security and defence officials to identify how practitioners assess various militant organizations that could later become insurgent threats.⁸ Most of the indicators that practitioners appear to rely on reflect a militant group's observable capabilities such as external support, weaponry, and combat

⁷ Malone, "Uncertainty and Civil War Onset," 10.

⁸ Ibid. Many of the practitioners' assessments are rooted in previous experiences fighting insurgencies in the Philippines, Afghanistan, or Iraq.

experience. Group ideology, objectives, social and ethnic networks also play an outsized role in official threat assessments.⁹ Based on my analysis, however, militant groups that wage sustained insurgencies have wide ranging motivations, emerge from a variety of social and ethnic origins, and develop varying organizational capacities.

Scholars are only beginning to systematically assess the implications of various types of relations between rival constituent groups – a key piece to my dissertation’s puzzle. Practitioners should embrace a similar analytic shift in their assessments.

10.1.3 A more pragmatic measure

Civil wars and insurgencies are infamous for being messy conflicts characterized by asymmetric or incomplete information. Collecting data on clandestine militant organizations is notoriously difficult or impossible, especially for states with weak local intelligence apparatuses. Nevertheless, I argue that the primary nature of rival relations is a more pragmatic and effective prism to assess nascent militant threats than other evidence-based indicators.

Previous scholarship offers compelling answers to related puzzles concerning militant organizational dynamics, but the policy prescriptions seem incredibly difficult to implement. Paul Staniland’s socio-institutional theory, for example, offers a powerful explanation for why some militant groups remain cohesive while others fragment throughout a civil war.¹⁰ However, it seems that his framework can only be retroactively applied after a full-fledged violent conflict is well underway, or has concluded, and

⁹ These assumptions are likely prevalent across likeminded security establishments in other Western countries.

¹⁰ Paul Staniland, “Organizing Insurgency: Networks, Resources, and Rebellion in South Asia,” *International Security* 37, no. 1 (2012): 142-177.

researchers have access to historical information. Security practitioners from states facing a potential insurrection face immense hurdles gathering enough information and intelligence to accurately label which groups are founded on differing levels of horizontal (leader-to-leader) and vertical (leader-to-population) social ties.¹¹ Measuring the strength of social relations between leaders of a clandestine group, or their level of integration with local populations seems like an impossible task in real-time, especially for weaker states with more limited capabilities. Updating the social foundations of these groups would only become harder as an insurgency escalates. Most importantly, Staniland's theory, like traditional explanations of insurgency dynamics, is not intended to address the timing of insurgency onset.

Measures of relative power distribution within a national militant movement are also very difficult to identify in real-time. To capture the internal power distributions, Peter Krause operationalizes strength as a function of a group's membership, popular support, and finances.¹² But it would be exceptionally difficult for national security practitioners to accurately assess any of these criteria for nascent militant groups or movements given significant data limitations. Firstly, group size is a notoriously difficult measure to capture and is usually expressed in wide and vague ranges such as 'dozens or low hundreds.' Popular support is measured as a function of public opinion polls and/or seats in political institutions. These pieces of information would not be available for

¹¹ Staniland's typology provides some understanding into how states and outside sponsors influence various group trajectories but offers little insight on how relations with militant rivals fit into the picture.

¹² Arms and other forms of weaponry are not formally included in Krause's measure of strength, since not all groups in a particular movement resort to violence. See Peter Krause, "The Structure of Success: How the Internal Distribution of Power Drives Armed Group Behavior and National Movement Effectiveness," *International Security* 38, no. 3 (2013/14): 72-116, 77; Peter Krause, *Rebel Power: Why National Movements Compete, Fight, and Win* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).

nascent militant groups that have not reached a level of strength required to administer forms of governance or face constituent evaluations. Meaningful variation in levels of funding, whether from criminal activities, natural resource extraction, or external support are also extremely difficult to assess in real-time. Like Staniland's pre-war social ties argument, Krause's indicators are more useful to retroactively assess mature movements and various forms of strategic success. I believe that more simplistic assessments of rival relations among a nascent militant movement offer practitioners one measure to identify potential insurgent threats.

10.1.4 Identifying rival relations and its implications

Before narrowing in on specific forms of rival relations, practitioners should consider identifying the number of active militant groups operating in a particular environment. This proxy for group competition may seem like a crude measure since it does not take into account group strength or relative power distributions. However, my quantitative model and a strong body of research on the consequences of rebel fragmentation or group competition suggests identifying the number of rival groups in a particular movement or environment is a good start. I find that single group insurrections, conflicts characterized by one active militant group shortly before or around the time of sustained insurgency onset, is the strongest determinant of sustained insurgency onset. This insight suggests that militant groups in competitive environments often consolidate their rivals before taking on the state in war. The second stage of my research leads me to unpack the role constituency dominance plays in insurgency development. Identifying the *Top Dog* – or most active militant group in a particular environment – is an intuitive way

to discern among the most threatening militant groups. However, being the most active militant group says little about the power distribution or the primary nature of relations between the dominant group and its constituent rivals. The most meaningful and policy relevant findings in my dissertation stem from my theory of rival consolidation and its ability to better anticipate the timing of sustained insurgency onset.

As discussed in previous chapters, my theory offers a more compelling argument than previous explanations that remain incomplete or rely on either static factors. Largely time invariant factors like weak state capacity, grievances, organizational ideology, group origins, or objectives are inadequate to explain the timing of sustained insurgency onset. Some of these factors are helpful in differentiating why some militant groups within a particular movement are more successful or cohesive than their rivals – but they do not explain why or when militant groups set their sights to fight a target state in a war of attrition.

Safe haven and territorial control are critical factors that differentiate militant groups among those that can wage guerilla campaigns versus more clandestine groups. But relations with rivals and the process of rival consolidation are often an important step before prominent militant groups solidify their control of a particular territory. Without major internal competitors, militant groups with a robust safe haven can build capable military forces, expand organizational structures, and evade government forces. Other key indicators – like state sponsorship and additional forms of external support – are critical for militant groups to ultimately defeat the states they fight but are limited in explaining why some groups escalate their level of violence to an insurgency in the first place. Militant groups often need to consolidate constituent rivals before attracting

important sources of outside support and allocating resources within the organization effectively.

Like any study of clandestine militant groups, most indicators are inherently difficult to operationalize or capture in real-time given data limitations and secrecy. However, compared to the main indicators identified by scholars examining similar puzzles, I believe that my framework is more practical for policy professionals to consult. For example, it should be easier for intelligence agencies to pick up reports of rival militant groups engaging in destructive forms of competition, especially when rival groups fight one another for turf and support. Competitive forms of escalation, like outbidding, would be more difficult to identify than violent infighting since militant groups primarily attack regime targets in these situations. As a result, observers may interpret such attacks as the start of a campaign of attrition or insurgency. However, competitive spirals of violence tend to be short lived. According to my case study findings, outbidding attacks tend to involve spectacular attacks (like suicide bombings) or targeted campaigns against local figures (i.e. exploitative landlords in Kurdistan). In both situations, the targets of outbidding spirals are associated with the state or its allies. These types of attacks should be interpreted as attempts by nascent militant groups to gain prominence over rivals and solidify dominance of their constituency.

Evidence of a strategic alliance among rival militant groups should be a greater cause for concern than more counterproductive forms of rival relations. Militant groups coordinating violent operations or strategic efforts to fight a common enemy are more threatening than groups that primarily stove-pipe operations or fight one another. Observers should look for evidence of strategic alliances as potential examples of

progress towards movement consolidation. However, alliances in civil war contexts tend to be quite volatile and are unlikely to sufficiently minimize counterproductive violence from within the militant movement.

'Calm before the storm'

Practitioners should divert most attention to nascent militant movements with a clear leading group and limited evidence of internal challengers for dominance. The key indication of a potentially hegemonic or consolidated militant group is the absence of counterproductive violence emanating from within the wider militant movement. Dominant militant groups that consolidate their rivals have access to new resources – pooled from other organizations or derived from the local constituency. Without other viable options, dominant groups are in a stronger position to persuade non-aligned civilians to support or formally join the organization. While alleviating the more immediate collective action problem, militant leaders can divert more of their attention to strengthening their internal organizational capacity and preparing for war with the target state. Lacking major competitors, leading militant groups signal their credibility to members and are in a better position to keep lower-ranking fighters in line with leadership objectives, helping address principal-agent problems.

Analysts and practitioners often measure a militant group's threat based on their activity and attack levels. This dissertation also differentiates militant groups based on a measure of sustained battle-related deaths. However, my research suggests that the period between rival consolidation and insurgency onset might be deceiving and reflect a so-

called calm before the storm.¹³ In both the Hezbollah and PKK cases, there was a period of relative calm after each group formally consolidated their rivals. Without viable competitors, each group's leadership increasingly focused on acquiring new resources, solidifying safe havens, and preparing for an insurgency against their target states. As a result, both Israel and Turkey, to different extents, further underestimated their respective militant threats and failed to stifle full-fledged insurgencies early on. The cessation of counterproductive movement violence may therefore serve as an indicator for a potential outbreak of large-scale insurgent campaign.

One more piece of the puzzle

Based on my findings, a militant group's timing and ability to engage in a sustained insurgency is primarily a function of its relations with rival constituent groups. The development of robust domestic intelligence apparatuses, that infiltrate local populations and incorporate citizen participation, can help cultivate access to key information networks and deter the development of very nascent rebellions.¹⁴ Once a militant movement starts to mature, however, practitioners should consider investing more resources and attention – via local and allied intelligence capabilities – to monitoring processes of rival consolidation among nascent militant groups prior to the onset of a full-fledged insurrection.

¹³ A similar dynamic may play a role in ongoing, and potentially recurring, armed conflicts. For example, as of March 2019, the Islamic State has lost virtually all of its territorial control in Syria and Iraq. However, the group has reverted to its insurgent roots and is preparing to resume a more clandestine campaign of attrition. Islamic State attacks have declined sharply since their peak in 2014/15. But the militant organization may re-emerge as a serious conventional threat in the region. See Hassan Hassan, "Insurgents Again: The Islamic State's Calculated Reversion to Attrition in the Syria-Iraq Border Region and Beyond," *Combatting Terrorism Center (CTC)* 10, no. 11 (December 2017).

¹⁴ Janet I. Lewis, "How Rebellion Begins: Insurgent Group Formation and Viability in Uganda" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2012), 248.

In recent years, conflict researchers have increasingly focused on developing models that better anticipate or predict insurgency onset.¹⁵ Older studies are limited since country-level data cannot explain why some militant groups pose greater threats and most civil war datasets examine militant groups already participating in armed conflicts, overlooking similar groups that fail to escalate their levels of violence. This selection bias suggests that practitioners should be skeptical of embracing policies based on previous research until more comprehensive data is available to assess competing explanations of insurgency onset. My thesis offers a preliminary attempt to develop an overarching organizational model of nascent insurrections and narrows in on an overlooked piece to the wider puzzle of why some militant groups wage sustained insurgencies. More comprehensive global data and rich case studies from other regions or contexts are needed to develop compelling models that help practitioners anticipate why and how some militant groups wage sustained insurgencies. I seek to advance this goal by cultivating a broader research program based on this puzzle and offering some suggestions for additional inquiry.

10.2 FUTURE AVENUES FOR RESEARCH

10.2.1 Quantitative extensions

My dissertation is one of the only scholarly attempts to address the puzzle as to why some militant groups engage in sustained armed conflicts (or insurgencies) while others do not. Given data limitations, my quantitative model examines group-level cross-sectional data to identify which prominent militant groups wage sustained insurgencies.

¹⁵ Malone, “Uncertainty and Civil War Onset.”; Lewis, “How Rebellion Begins.”

However, scholars should devote more attention to better explaining violent transitions or escalations from lower to higher-intensity armed conflicts. For example, why do some insurgent groups escalate their level of violence to higher intensity armed-conflicts or civil war? In an ongoing research project, University at Albany professor Victor Asal and I seek to explain escalations of violence among 140 insurgent groups worldwide, in a new and highly comprehensive dataset, across three commonly used thresholds of organized armed conflict: low-intensity (25-100 battle deaths), high-intensity (100-1000 battle deaths), and civil war (1000+ battle deaths). Preliminary findings show that larger and more networked insurgent groups, which control territory and engage in criminal activities to finance operations, are more likely to escalate their violent campaigns to higher-intensity armed conflicts. Interestingly, group ideology and state sponsorship are unrelated to armed conflict escalations, suggesting that organizational capacity is key. But the number of insurgent alliances is the strongest determinant of group escalations to higher-intensity conflicts.

My dissertation focuses on relations with rival constituent groups during an organization's nascent stages. Future work, however, can examine the role of relationships among constituent and non-constituent militant groups as nascent insurrections mature into more intense armed conflicts.

New data can also better capture government responses and counterinsurgency tactics – disaggregating between primarily coercive measures or conciliatory actions. In line with previous work, our new working paper shows that states relying primarily on coercive actions (*sticks*) to combat militant groups risk fueling insurgencies, while conciliatory actions (*carrots*) can help alleviate grievances and reduce the likelihood of

escalations. But interesting nuances emerge at different thresholds of violence, which offer even more avenues for future researchers to unpack. By using group-level and time-varying data, the new empirical strategy provides a novel examination of armed conflict escalations compared to existing research.

Coding rival relations annually

In Chapter Five, I re-visit my original quantitative analysis and include a measure for constituency dominance to improve the overall model. Future scholars, with research assistance, can pursue a far more ambitious iteration of coding by classifying the primary nature of rival relations for every group-year observation. Researchers can use my theoretical framework as a basis to code for the four main types of rival constituent relations: destructive competition, competitive escalations, strategic alliance, and hegemonic consolidation. This endeavor would improve the generalizability of this dissertation's findings and produce a more sophisticated model that is conducive to duration and survival analyses. How long does it take dominant groups to consolidate rivals? Why do some militant groups consolidate rivals in longer or shorter time periods relative to other similar groups? Exploring yearly variations in rival relations can help researchers identify and anticipate the timing of sustained insurgency onset.

10.2.2 Out-of-sample cases

Researchers can further improve the generalizability of my theory by testing it on out-of-sample or ongoing cases.¹⁶ To what extent do rival consolidation processes

¹⁶ For example, scholar Peter Krause applied his framework to explain the success of the Eritrean national movement following his initial work. Peter Krause, "Coercion by Movement: How Power Drove

influence insurgency onset in other contexts outside the Middle East and North Africa? Competitive environments are an almost universal feature of militant group campaigns. But how do consolidation processes play out in more diverse theatres, like Latin America or South Asia?

To enhance external validity, researchers can also test the theory on more recent cases. For example, I am working on a paper that examines the rise of the Islamic State's affiliate in the Sinai Peninsula – a less understood militant group that gained prominence over other Sinai-based organizations following the 2011 uprisings in Egypt. The role of outside support from its Islamic State remains a source of debate among observers of the Sinai insurgency. Why and how did Wilyat Sinai emerge as the dominant militant group in the Peninsula and escalate its level of violence to a sustained armed conflict against a far more powerful Egyptian state? This puzzle has clear implications for policymakers looking to identify the most threatening Islamic State affiliates, as the parent militant group loses its core territorial stronghold in Syria and Iraq.

10.2.3 From IV to DV: Testing rival trajectories

In this thesis, I treat the process of rival consolidation as relatively unitary phenomenon for the sake of parsimony, without discerning whether particular consolidation processes have different implications over others. I am agnostic to precisely how dominant militant groups consolidate rivals. But why do some groups mainly destroy their rivals during stages of infighting while others consolidate by merging under an umbrella structure? Explaining transitions between different forms of primary rival

the Success of the Eritrean Insurgency, 1960-1993,” in *Coercion: The Power to Hurt in International Politics*, Kelly Greenhill and Peter Krause (eds.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 138-159.

relations is similarly important. Why (and when) do some militant groups transition from outbidding to destructive competition or vice versa? Studies that treat rival consolidation or rival relations as the outcome of interest, as opposed to an independent variable, would yield interesting insights.

Future researchers could also take a step backward in the process and systematically evaluate how particular forms of rival consolidation impact militant trajectories. Various paths to consolidation undoubtedly influence the trajectories of dominant militant organizations in different ways. My theory narrows in on two major organizational hurdles: overcoming collective action and principal-agent problems. But what other mechanisms are unleashed throughout or following the rival consolidation process? Organizational objectives are often at odds with a militant group's strategic or ultimate goals. How might consolidating rivals inhibit dominant groups from pursuing their objectives vis-à-vis the target state? Scholars are only beginning to examine these types of puzzles in the study of militant groups and armed conflict.

In this chapter, I present how academic research – reflected in this dissertation's findings – can be relevant to policymakers and other analytic communities. Scholars and policymakers appear to share similar assumptions when it comes to assessing potential insurgent threats, tending to emphasize the importance of indicators reflecting observable capabilities and group strength. My thesis, on the other hand, offers more insight into an overlooked, yet crucial, aspect to insurgent organizational growth: nascent rival relations and consolidation processes. But more research is needed to build on this insight before concrete policy options can be presented. Future scholars can explore related questions and puzzles that flow from my dissertation and contribute to research programs

concerning the evolution of militant organizations, relations between rival groups, and insurgency onset.

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