

**Balancing the Books:
How Militant Organizations Compensate for Weaknesses with Alliances**

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ABSTRACT

All organizations have relative strengths and weaknesses. The successful ones effectively draw on their comparative advantages to mitigate their flaws. We argue that this process of “balancing the books” helps to explain the alliance and affiliation behavior of major militant organizations. We identify ideological and operational credibility as two essential attributes of successful transnational terrorist organizations and trace the impact of variations in the relative endowments of these assets through three cases. We argue that organizations with substantial operational credibility—typified by the so-called Islamic State—can draw on their reputation and success to build international networks that they can then point to as a source of ideological credibility. In contrast, organizations with an ideological “surplus” and an operational “deficit”—typified by al-Qaeda—can lend their ideological credibility to affiliates who in turn supply the organization with reach into active conflicts that bolsters their reputation for capable violence. Finally, those without solid endowments of either attribute—typified by the Red Army Faction—have no recourse to affiliates when faced with setbacks. These findings indicate that, in contrast to the prevailing wisdom, substantial upticks in a militant group’s alliance formation may not be an indication of mounting organizational strength so much as a strategic response to underlying problems. This is important because mistaking a signal of weakness for a signal of strength risks the misallocation of valuable counterterrorism resources.

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The rise of the so-called Islamic State (IS) seems to challenge every orthodoxy about militant behavior. The organization revels in brutality, even though conventional wisdom holds that indiscriminate violence tends to set back political objectives.¹ It tenaciously holds territory, even though past revolutionaries caution (and scholars consistently find) that doing so makes militants vulnerable to state power.² It has established extensive administrative structures in this territory, even though governance draws valuable resources away from the warfighting effort.³ It responds to setbacks by antagonizing an ever-growing list of powerful adversaries rather than scaling back and limiting its exposure. These deviations lead some political observers to shrilly claim that IS is unlike any militant threat the United States and its allies have dealt with in the past.

We argue, however, that IS is not as anomalous as it appears. The root cause of much of its behavior is not bloodlust or psychosis, but rather unusual endowments of organizational weaknesses and strengths. IS, like all successful militant groups (and organizations generally), strategically leverages strengths to counterbalance vulnerabilities. Our specific contention is that this balancing act is central to understanding the origin and maintenance of IS's international networks of allies and affiliates.

For IS, like most militant organizations, the vulnerabilities they must guard against are the scars of prior struggles for survival and relevance. In a bid for resurrection after being decimated in the 2007 Anbar Awakening, the organization (then known as al-Qaeda in Iraq [AQI]) had to make a series of compromises. First, it rebuilt its leadership ranks with what was available—a mix of foreign

¹ Unlike selective attacks on military targets, indiscriminate attacks on civilian targets risk lowering public support for concessions and hence the odds of attaining them. On public support, see Bloom 2004, Berrebi and Klor 2006 and 2008; Chowanietz 2011; and Berrebi 2009. On government concessions, see Abrahms 2006 and 2012; Abrahms and Gottfried 2016; Fortna 2015; Gaibulloev and Sandler 2009; Getmansky and Sinmazdemir 2012; Jones and Libicki 2008; and Neumann and Smith 2008. Osama bin Laden himself warned against prematurely declaring a state or caliphate before it could provide for the population and fend off foreign powers.

² See de la Calle and Sánchez-Cuenca 2012. Mao Tse-tung (1966, Chapter 3) warns, “To gain territory is no cause for joy, and to lose territory is no cause for sorrow.” IS's own setbacks over the course of 2016 demonstrate the problems associated with holding territory as a militant organization.

³ On IS's extensive governance practices, see Caris and Reynolds 2014. On the costliness of rebel governance for non-state actors in general, see Keister and Slanchev 2014, Arjona 2016.

jihadists, clerics, and local insurgents with more nationalistic, ethnic, or sectarian motivations.

Second, it sought refuge in Syria's ongoing conflict, a zone saturated with other militant groups that, unlike IS, were indigenous to the area. Third, to set itself apart in that crowded field, IS developed ideologies, strategies, and tactics so extreme that even its parent al-Qaeda (AQ) eventually disavowed the organization.

These compromises had far reaching implications for the organization – introducing internal fissures, embedding it among hostile populations and militant competitors, and putting it at odds with its ideological patron (AQ). This result was a strategic quandary: internal divisions and local isolation made the organization ever more reliant on foreign fighters, but the potential for ideological isolation after the split with AQ threatened the group's ability to recruit them. We argue that IS, drawing on its substantial media savvy, leveraged its operational credibility to assemble a network of international relationships in a concerted effort to maintain its ideological credibility and thereby forestall any downturn in the flow of foreign recruits.

Generalizing from IS, we argue that, for a small subset of transnational militant organizations, alliances arise from the balancing act between surpluses and deficits in two dimensions of credibility: ideological and operational. Militant organizations with substantial operational credibility can translate a reputation for effective violence into international relationships that bolster ideological credibility, while those with ideological credibility can draw on it to forge international relationships that extend their reach and operational credibility. This strategic interplay of strengths and weakness at the internal, local, and international levels is a recurring theme, particularly among the subset of ideologically driven militant groups with expansive political aspirations.⁴ We demonstrate the generalizability of this framework with supplementary case studies

⁴ Precursors of this idea can be found in recent theoretical frameworks; see Salehyan et al. 2011 and Toft and Zhukov 2015, among others. For a general overview of types of outside support for such groups and its consequences, see Byman et al. 2001.

of al-Qaeda and the Red Army Faction, which also built (or attempted to build) far-flung networks of international relationships to compensate for organizational deficiencies.

Our findings have significant implications for both theory and policy. The dominant strands of the quantitative literature on militant alliances (e.g. Asal and Rethemeyer 2008, Horowitz and Potter 2014), as well as the operating assumptions of policymakers, view such ties as a clear signal of organizational strength, vitality, and attractiveness. The findings we present here indicate that in a minority of cases, but some of the most important ones, these relationships are the most observable signal of an underlying organizational problem. This corrective is important because mistaking a signal of weakness for a signal of strength risks the misallocation of valuable counterterrorism resources. More to the point, if relationships are instrumental in the way we argue, then interrupting them can exacerbate the underlying problems they were meant to solve and thereby diminish organizational capacity.

Theory: Credibility, Deficits, and Transnational Ties

Ideological and Operational Credibility

Militant organizations with expansive political aspirations must be both ideologically compelling to their political constituency and capable enough to carry on a campaign of violence. Deficiencies on the first dimension lead to a failure to inspire and recruit, while those on the second lead to failures of execution and relevance. Organizations, however, vary dramatically in their natural endowments of these goods. Few have both, but we argue that a group can leverage a comparative advantage in one area to compensate for deficits in the other.

For a militant organization to thrive and have any hope of achieving its political objectives through force, it must generate commitment from both fighters and secondary supporters.

Committing to militancy is inherently risky for the individual, and the attractiveness of such a risk

stems in part from an organization's ideological credibility. As Atran and Axelrod note, ideological credibility invokes "sacred values" that draw recruits and convert them into "devoted actors."⁵ In this way, organizations can extend their recruiting reach and resolve commitment problems among adherents to ameliorate principal-agent problems.

Ideological credibility, however, is often at odds with the compromises demanded by actual fighting, where political and military realities tend to take precedence over orthodoxy. The battlefield, however, is precisely where operational credibility is honed: frequent contact with the enemy develops tactical competence and produces hardened fighters. It also generates the credibility that comes from doing rather than talking. Historically, ethnic insurgencies have been the incubators for this sort of operational capability, but by virtue of their local nature and the compromises required by their struggle, they tend to not be central in ideological networks. In contrast, organizations that invest in ideology tend to be able to do so because they are relatively insulated from immediate state interference. However, by virtue of this same insulation, they are not compelled to actively hone operational credibility and fail to generate the prestige that comes from planning and executing major attacks or standing prominently against a major state enemy. The implication is that while both ideological and operational credibility are essential for organizational success, there are structural reasons why even major organizations tend to be better endowed with one than the other.

An essential organizational challenge then is to marry these conflicting dimensions of organizational strength. We posit that militant organizations leverage relationships with other groups to accomplish this goal and "balance the books." Those with ideological credibility can bestow it on operationally credible organizations through alliances and thereby claim global, on the ground reach into ongoing conflicts. Those with operational credibility and its accompanying resources can

⁵ Atran and Axelrod 2008.

leverage and aggregate these advantages into an international network that they can then point to as a source of (and evidence for) ideological credibility.⁶

Organizational Deficits and Transnational Ties

The need to balance ideological and operational credibility stems in part from the central role these attributes play in the lifeblood of all organizations – recruitment. Without members, militant groups, like all other organizations, cannot operate. Understanding this relationship between recruitment and ideological and operational credibility requires backing up slightly to think about the organizational dynamics of militant groups.

Militant groups have three main sets of relationships: (1) *internal* relationships between members of the group; (2) *local* relationships between the group and local populations and organizations; and (3) *international* relationships between militant groups. Most research on the relational aspects of militant behavior focuses on the first of these, the networks of individuals inside organizations.⁷ While voluminous and diverse, this literature generally finds that militant groups confront a tradeoff between hierarchy, which is generally associated with better discipline, and looser cell-like structures that can improve security.⁸ Between those two options, most scholars treat decentralization as a best practice (from the perspective of the militant organization).⁹ The argument is that decentralization makes militant groups more adaptive, flexible, inclusive, innovative, resilient,

⁶ This theory of militant cooperation as a process of organizational maintenance supplements rather than replaces models of cooperation as a mechanism for material support (e.g. Asal and Rethemeyer 2008). The IRA and FARC, for example, built a transactional relationship based on the exchange of cash, weapons, and operational know-how (Murphy 2004). We introduce operational and ideological credibility as important intangible “goods” that are traded alongside weapons, money, and fighters.

⁷ See, for example, Hoffman and McCormick 2004; Sageman 2004, Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Jones 2008.

⁸ Zelinsky and Shubik 2009, Heger et al. 2012, Shapiro 2013. Abrahms and Potter 2015.

⁹ Arquilla and Ronfeldt 2001, Joosse 2007.

and specialized.¹⁰ More importantly, decentralization confers strategic advantages by rendering organizations harder to anticipate, detect, infiltrate, isolate, prosecute, and ultimately defeat.¹¹

That said, decentralization also presents substantial challenges.¹² In clandestine organizations, decentralization contributes to the loss of command and control and can exacerbate problems of coordination, discipline, and security.¹³ A reliable recruitment pool of committed and high-quality footsoldiers (particularly coethnics) can help with this,¹⁴ but those that are more often willing to serve at the lower levels of the militant organization are often incompetent, criminal, or weakly committed.¹⁵ Principal-agent problems then arise because prospective members have an incentive to manipulate private information by both overstating their qualifications (adverse selection) and pursuing private agendas upon joining (slack or moral hazard).¹⁶ For the purpose of our argument, the crucial insight is that high-caliber footsoldiers mitigate these problems, while low-quality ones exacerbate them.¹⁷

The local and international networks in which the militant group is embedded play a central role in the quality of the recruitment pool and, by extension, the vitality of the organization. Strong local relationships, particularly those that graft onto preexisting social groups (e.g. tribes, clans, political organizations), can facilitate high quality recruiting and enable better monitoring of members within the organization.¹⁸ In contrast, fraught relationships with local organizations and civilian populations dry up resources and local recruits while creating opportunities for defection.¹⁹

¹⁰ Moch and Morse 1977, Mishra 1996.

¹¹ See Arquilla and Ronfeldt 2001; Gunaranta 2002; Hoffman 2003; Joesse 2007; Greenberg, Wechsler, and Wolosky 2002; and Kaplan 1997.

¹² But see Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Jones 2008 for notable exceptions.

¹³ Shapiro 2013, Abrahms and Potter 2015.

¹⁴ Weinstein 2005, Hegghammer 2013.

¹⁵ Shapiro 2013.

¹⁶ See Weinstein 2005; Milner 2006; and Forney 2015.

¹⁷ Weinstein 2005, Forney 2015.

¹⁸ Hardin 1995, Fearon and Laitin 1996, Byman 1998, Weinstein 2005, Habyarimana et al. 2007.

In the literature on civil wars and insurgency, recent work highlights the importance of preexisting networks between individuals as central to shaping how leaders build their groups and function (e.g. Sinno 2008, Staniland 2012 and 2014).

¹⁹ Kalyvas 2008, Staniland 2012b, Oppenheim et al. 2015, Ottman 2015

In such instances, militant groups may look further afield for quality, committed recruits to maintain organizational momentum. International relationships with other militant actors can facilitate this recruitment by providing immediate access to seasoned fighters, but more commonly it is the operational or ideological credibility such relationships yield that makes the organization more appealing in the eyes of potential international recruits.²⁰

There are many examples of this strategic use of international alliances. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) separated itself from a sea of rivals (and the corresponding competition for recruits and resources) by establishing ties with groups from Japan, Western Europe, and elsewhere in the Middle East. These relationships bolstered the PFLP's ideological credibility by linking it to anti-imperialist forces around the world and tying their Marxist-Leninist spin on the Palestinian struggle in to like-minded global movements during the 1970s and 1980s.²¹ In Chechnya, insurgent groups shifted to an "Islamist" framing of the conflict against Russia in the late 1990s in part to forge relationships with global jihadist organizations, which bolstered ideological credibility and resulted in an influx of foreign fighters.²² The same strategy has emerged in other contexts—the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War and Islamist organizations in the 1980s deliberately reframed their respective movements and struggles to tap into transnational networks and attract fighters from abroad to their respective causes.²³

²⁰ Scholars have examined such intergroup interactions between militant groups, both regionally and internationally (e.g. Asal and Rethemeyer 2008, Bapat and Bond 2012, Chenoweth 2010, Karmon 2005, Horowitz and Potter 2014). Many of these scholars argue that the drive for survival and operational effectiveness motivates militant groups to ally with one another. Others note the potential for contagion in the context of terrorist tactics, a process that relies on the presence and importance of inter-organizational ties. For example, Pedahzur and Perliger 2006 demonstrate that social networks influence whether or not groups use suicide attacks. Bapat and Bond 2012, in turn, establish that militant groups able to survive government repression often try to form alliances when they have willing local partners.

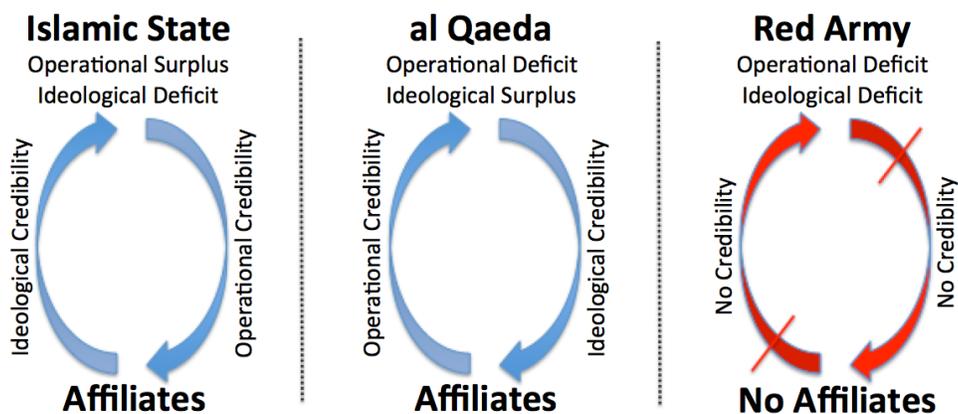
²¹ Cubert 1997, Bacon 2013

²² Bakke 2014; Toft and Zhukov 2015, 225-226

²³ Hegghammer 2011, Jung 2016

We demonstrate this strategic interplay of relationships in detail with case studies of the Islamic State (IS), al-Qaeda (AQ), and Red Army Faction (RAF).²⁴ IS exemplifies the operationally credible organization with ideological vulnerabilities. In response to these weaknesses, it leveraged its operational credibility to manufacture a network of international relationships that bolstered its ideological credibility, particularly after its break with al-Qaeda (Figure 1, Panel 1). AQ (Figure 1, Panel 2), in contrast, had substantial ideological credibility but risked operational irrelevance if it was excluded from the post-9/11 fights that consumed the attention of the broader jihadist community. In response, AQ used its ideological credibility to entice affiliates in these conflicts, thereby extending its reach and preserving its standing. The Red Army Faction (RAF) (Figure 1, Panel 3) is the exception that proves the rule – the West German organization disintegrated in part due to its inability to establish meaningful transnational ties with its Western European peers that would have allowed it to restore its operational and ideological credibility.

Figure 1. Network Affiliation Strategies - Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and Red Army Faction



²⁴ Our argument applies primarily to a small set of militant organizations with stated expansive, global aspirations, and the three cases we have selected reflect this. The cases vary in terms of behavior and outcomes and the groups in terms of time period, ideology, region, and the particular “wave” of terrorism. At the risk of selection bias, we also chose cases of historical or strategic importance to heighten the policy relevance of the findings.

Islamic State

Over a very short period of time during 2014 and 2015, the Islamic State (IS) developed relationships with dozens of other militant organizations all over the globe – ranging from Boko Haram in Nigeria to Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines. The rapid emergence of this network deeply concerned counterterrorism officials, with many worrying it indicated mounting capacity and appeal.²⁵ We argue instead that, in keeping with our theoretical mechanisms, IS developed these relationships to preempt organizational vulnerabilities.

In this regard, IS is a hard test for the argument that international alliances emerge as a strategic response to underlying weaknesses. The organization's efforts to form relationships came at a moment when it was doing well both from an operational perspective and the popularity of its "caliphate"-building project. However, while the organization was strong and seeking to capitalize on its success with its alliance formation, it was doing so to preemptively address underlying structural vulnerabilities that were at risk of reopening with the final public rift with AQ in 2014. In this sense, IS was doing precisely as our theory would anticipate – leveraging its strengths to build a durable set of relationships that would inoculate it against AQ counter-messaging and thereby maintain its pipelines of foreign fighters. This strategy had the additional advantage of bolstering the independent aspects of IS's ideology, which implied creating a province-based system as opposed to AQ's expansion through branches. As a consequence of these actions, the break from AQ did not hurt IS's ideological credibility, but only because the organization preemptively built an international network to limit its vulnerability.

²⁵ The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), for example, noted in its February 2015 Worldwide Threat Assessment that "With affiliates in Algeria, Egypt, and Libya, the group is beginning to assemble a growing international footprint that includes ungoverned and under-governed areas. Similarly, the flow of foreign fighters into, and out of, Syria and Iraq—many of whom are aligned with ISIL—is troubling." (<http://docs.house.gov/meetings/AS/AS00/20150203/102880/HHRG-114-AS00-Wstate-StewartUSMCV-20150203.pdf>).

To understand IS's underlying vulnerabilities, one must cut past the myths of omnipotence around the organization. IS's organizational structure did not arise from a master plan but rather from the group's struggle to survive and maintain relevance among transnational jihadists. In this process, the organization surprised many by becoming prominent, but this does not mean that every element of the resulting structure is optimal. To the contrary, IS emerged from these struggles internally fractured, locally alienated, ideologically isolated, and consequently heavily reliant on foreign fighters to fill its ranks. The network of international relationships that it developed was designed to square this circle by providing the ideological credibility needed to compensate for these deficits.

A full history of IS's circuitous history is beyond the scope of this article, but a brief overview reveals important insights for our argument.²⁶ The organization first emerged in Jordan's prisons in the 1990s as Bayat al-Imam – a product of the unfortunate combination of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi's clerical authority and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's charisma and brutality. When freed in a 1999 amnesty, Zarqawi went to Afghanistan, where he was given refuge but held at arm's length by Osama bin Laden.²⁷ Following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Zarqawi's embryonic organization, then called al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, fled and eventually ended up in northern Iraq, only to become part of the tenuous linkage drawn by the Bush administration between Saddam Hussein and AQ.²⁸

After the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the renamed al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) dealt with substantial setbacks before becoming a central actor in the bloody insurgency that emerged after 2003. The

²⁶ For book-length treatments of the organization's history and evolution see Warrick, Joby. *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS*. Random House, 2015; McCants, William. *The ISIS apocalypse: The history, strategy, and doomsday vision of the Islamic State*. Macmillan, 2015.

²⁷ al-Ubaydi et al. 2014, 11; Kirdar 2011, 3. Kirdar notes that "Bin Laden, wary that Jordanian intelligence had infiltrated the released prisoners, was suspicious of Zarqawi...the al Qaeda leader was taken aback by Zarqawi's unabashed criticism of al Qaeda's support for the Taliban's "un-Islamic" fight against the Northern Alliance and disapproved of Zarqawi's 'swagger,' his tattooed hand, and his intense hatred of Shiites" (Kirdar 2011, 3).

²⁸ al-Ubaydi et al. 2014, 11-12

organization's role in that struggle reached its apex with the establishment of the Mujahideen Shura Council in January 2006, which brought together AQI and other prominent insurgent organizations, along with its rebranding as Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) in October 2006. The Anbar Awakening in 2007, coupled with mounting criticisms over the organization's indiscriminate bloodletting, drove it to the brink of extinction before it reconstituted itself with new leadership in the context of the Syrian conflict as ISIS (and eventually the so-called Islamic State).²⁹

This cursory history is familiar to most readers, but it reveals two interrelated organizational vulnerabilities that are central to our argument: heterogeneous leadership and outsider status. As we will demonstrate, IS has successfully evolved to compensate for these weaknesses by heavily recruiting and relying upon foreign fighters. The public break with al-Qaeda was a catalyst that threatened IS with ideological isolation that might undercut its self-imposed solution to the two aforementioned organizational challenges. This need for sustained ideological credibility motivated IS to manufacture an independent network of far-flung international relationships to provide the credibility it needed to recruit foreign fighters.³⁰ In so doing, it drew on its comparative strengths to preempt the exploitation of its vulnerabilities by AQ.

Vulnerability 1: Heterogeneous Leadership

IS's leadership is a product of the chaotic environment in which it arose, or rather, re-arose in the aftermath of the 2007 Anbar Awakening. As it resurrected, the organization took all comers, especially if they could contribute to capability. The result was an eclectic mix of jihadists, clerics,

²⁹ Kirdar 2011, 4-6

³⁰ According to then-Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, at least 38,200 foreign fighters have poured into Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War. See, Remarks as delivered by The Honorable James R. Clapper Director of National Intelligence Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing – IC's Worldwide Threat Assessment Opening Statement Tuesday Feb 9, 2016 (https://fas.org/irp/congress/2016_hr/020916-sasc-ad.pdf). The exact number of fighters still fighting for the Islamic State is difficult to determine, but it is estimated that 20-30% have gone home, while the majority have either been killed or continue to fight for the organization. Tunisia has contributed the most foreign recruits. Russia, France, and Germany are the three largest contributors among non-Islamic countries. For more detail see, http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf.

and insurgents with varied local, ethnic, and sectarian motivations – including remnants of the toppled Iraqi regime.

Camp Bucca, a U.S. detention facility in Iraq, was central to this process. Just as a Jordanian prison brought Zarqawi and Maqdisi together in the organization's early days, the petri dish of confinement again forged the unlikely allies that became the core of IS. The prison was a dumping ground for those picked up in sweeps during the insurgency, which itself had Islamist, ethnic, sectarian, and nationalist elements. Abu Ahmed, who eventually became an IS commander, was a young jihadist when taken to Camp Bucca in 2004. He described it as an “extraordinary opportunity,” saying “[w]e could never have all got together like this in Baghdad, or anywhere else...it would have been impossibly dangerous. Here, we were not only safe, but we were only a few hundred meters away from the entire al-Qaida leadership.”³¹

Even before these chance meetings in prison, the post-2003 de-Ba'athification of Iraq pushed many nationalists into the company of extremist Islamist groups, such as the Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, providing precedent for the eventual integration of this element into IS.³² Thus, while Zarqawi was hesitant to include former Iraqi officers in his inner circle for fear of undercutting the ideological credibility of the organization,³³ Baghdadi purposely targeted former officers to increase military capacity.³⁴ Many of these ex-Ba'athists rose to high levels within IS. Haji Bakr (Samir Abd Muhammad al-Khlifawi), a former intelligence officer in Saddam's regime, came to head the IS military council. Abu Muslim al Afari al-Turkmani (a former colonel in both Saddam's

³¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/11/-sp-isis-the-inside-story>

³² <https://www.stratfor.com/sample/weekly/how-baath-party-influences-islamic-state>;

Even prior to this, military Ba'athists had some exposure to salafism. Saddam Hussein's “Faith Campaign”, enacted in 1993, Islamized the regime. According to the Orton (2015) “with significant resources devoted to producing this regime-loyal Saddamist- Salafism, the Faith Campaign produced a more sectarian, Salafized population, with its focal points on clerics and mosques.” According to Rayburn (2014) “as they [Iraqi officers] encountered Salafi teachings, many became more loyal to Salafism than to Saddam.” This set up the conditions for the conversion of Ba'athist officers to be, at minimum, opportunistic collaborators with the jihadists and in some cases jihadist leaders themselves (e.g. Haji Bakr).

³³ Knights and Mello 2015, 2.

³⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/the-hidden-hand-behind-the-islamic-state-militants-saddam-husseins/2015/04/04/aa97676c-cc32-11e4-8730-4f473416e759_story.html?tid=sm_tw

military intelligence corps and the Republican Guard) was Baghdadi's chief deputy in Iraq until he was killed by a U.S. airstrike in August 2015. Abu Ali al Anbari, the current chief deputy in charge of IS in Syria, served as a major general in the Iraqi Army.³⁵

These individuals came to play the central roles in IS, particularly in terms of military strategy and command.³⁶ According to a former Syrian member of IS, "all the decision makers are Iraqi, and most of them are former Iraqi officers [ex-Ba'athists] ... The Iraqi officers are in command, and they make the tactics and the battle plans."³⁷ Stern and Berger corroborate this: "the people in charge of military operations in the Islamic State were the best officers in the former Iraqi army, and that is why the Islamic State beats us [the current Iraqi Army] in intelligence and on the battlefield. When leaders are killed, new former Ba'athist are brought up to replace them."³⁸

This is not, however, entirely or even primarily a story of high-level Ba'athist military officers, of whom there are inevitably relatively few. Much of the rank-and-file of the organization that was recruited locally is also more tied to IS by its operational capability than its ideological tenets. These relatively "secular" elements contributed significantly to operational capability, but the inclusion of those more motivated by nationalist or ethnic grievances has always been an organizational vulnerability because of the challenge their presence represents to IS's ideological

³⁵The list goes on: Abu Ayman al-Iraqi, also killed by a US airstrike, was a Colonel in Iraqi Air Force intelligence and was believed to have been an IS military council member. Abu Ahmad al Alwani, a member of the IS military council, was an officer in Saddam Hussein's army. Abdulla Ahmad al Mishhadani, another former Iraqi officer, is in charge of foreign fighters and suicide bombers in IS. Hajji Bakr, Baghdadi's closest adviser until his death in 2014, was a former Iraqi army colonel. Abu Ali al Anbari, another holdover from the Hussein regime, also sat on the IS Shura council and headed its Security and Intelligence Council. See: <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/20599>;

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/most-of-islamic-states-leaders-were-officers-in-saddam-husseins-iraq/2015/04/04/f3d2da00-db24-11e4-b3f2-607bd612aeac_graphic.html;

<http://ara.reuters.com/article/topNews/idARAKBN0NA0YS20150419?pageNumber=1&virtualBrandChannel=0>

³⁶ <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2015/4/8/الدولة-تنظيم-يقيودون-ال-عراق-ب-عث-ضباط>

³⁷ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/the-hidden-hand-behind-the-islamic-state-militants-saddam-husseins/2015/04/04/aa97676c-cc32-11e4-8730-4f473416e759_story.html?tid=sm_tw

; Also see: <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2015/4/8/ضباط-عث-عراق-ب-عث-ضباط> and <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/investigations/2016/1/12/الى-ال-عراق-ي-ال-جيش-قيادة-ان-ضم-لم-اذا-ال-جهاديون-ال-ضباط> 2-2-داعش

³⁸ Stern and Berger 2015.

credibility.³⁹ A widely shared Twitter post, for example, declared IS to be “A Caliphate in Accordance with the Ba’athist Model.”⁴⁰ As a consequence, the jihadist elements of the organization have always held the nationalists at arm’s length, giving them influence over the military components of IS, not the ideological aspects.⁴¹

The essential problem is that while the nationalists’ and jihadists’ short- and medium-term interests may coincide, their end goals differ substantially. Even when the former nationalists have fully bought into the ideological cause, it is difficult for the organization to screen the committed from the opportunistic – a particularly acute version of the principal-agent problem that afflicts all militant organizations.⁴² A fighter in the then IS-allied Naqshbandi Army headed by Saddam’s former Vice President Izzat Al-Doura said in 2014 that “we are fighting now with Daesh, but we will protect Iraq from their religious ideas.”⁴³ This sentiment is shared by some of Iraq’s politicians: a prominent Sunni MP, Talal al Zawba’i, argues that the goals of the nationalists today are “completely counter to the goals of IS” and that they “have the ambition to return, to win and to lead the country once again, and they will always have this ambition until they are dead.”⁴⁴ Ahmed Hashim, an expert on the Iraqi insurgency, states that “...it’s a tactical alliance...A lot of these Ba’athists are not interested in ISIS running Iraq...They want to run Iraq...A lot of them view the jihadists with this Leninist mind-set that they’re useful idiots who we [ex-Ba’athists] can use to rise to power.”⁴⁵

IS clearly recognizes these fissures in its organizational structure: whenever pressure mounts, the divisions become accentuated and leadership begins to prey on itself. For example, the increased

³⁹ Under Baghdadi’s leadership, IS also began breaking Sunni prisoners, including ex-Ba’athists, out of Iraqi jails in order to fill their middle ranks, an approach that rebuilt the organization’s numbers and short-term strength.

<http://www.nctc.gov/site/groups/aqi.html>.

⁴⁰ McCants 2015.

⁴¹ <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2015/4/8/الدولة-تنظم-يقودون-العراق-بعث-ضباط>

⁴² Weinstein 2005, Shapiro and Siegel 2012, Forney 2015

⁴³ http://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=12989&article=776431#.V_QZf9zEON0

⁴⁴ <http://www.ara.shafaq.com/22692>

⁴⁵ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/the-hidden-hand-behind-the-islamic-state-militants-saddam-husseins/2015/04/04/aa97676c-cc32-11e4-8730-4f473416e759_story.html

pressure on Mosul in September 2016 led to these suspicions breaking into the open, with IS internally targeting former regime military officers and other deemed more closely associated with Iraq than the caliphate: “[t]hey know that they still might have connections to some people in the military, and they are afraid that they will cooperate with the army or turn against them.”⁴⁶

Because the upper echelons of IS are occupied by this fraught combination of nationalist and jihadist elements, it is unusually reliant on pliable recruits from outside to smooth over the differences.⁴⁷ This contributes to the centrality of foreign fighters. They are reliable foot soldiers for military operations, but their presence also demonstrates the legitimacy of the “caliphate.”⁴⁸ As long as the ranks are swelling with international recruits and the organization is successfully moving forward, the overlap in the interests between the two sides of the organization can be managed. However, as the example of Mosul suggests, while the divisions within the organization are manageable in good times, they are considerably less so in the face of setbacks that threaten the flow of foreign fighters.

Vulnerability 2: Outsider Status

With origins in Jordan and a circuitous path to Iraq and Syria, IS is alien to the territories in which it primarily operates. This “outsider status” presents major challenges for the establishment of a “caliphate” because that goal is fundamentally territorial and therefore more akin to the aspirations of ethno-nationalist militant organizations. Unlike such organizations, however, IS has no natural local constituency from which to adopt hierarchies of authority, identify leaders, or recruit foot soldiers. Compounding these problems, IS does not operate in an empty space: Iraq and Syria are full of competing militant organizations with closer links to the ground.

⁴⁶ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/signs-of-panic-and-rebellion-in-the-heart-of-islamic-states-so-called-caliphate/2016/09/20/55421e4a-7520-11e6-9781-49e591781754_story.html?hpid=hp_hp-more-top-stories-2_mosulmood-1100am%3Ahomepage%2Fstory

⁴⁷ Knights and Mello 2015, 2

⁴⁸ Given its disputed legitimacy by Muslims not associated with IS, we place “Caliphate” in quotes and do so for the remainder of the paper.

Territorial control often requires administration, which diverts resources, manpower, and time from the warfighting effort.⁴⁹ To supply these needs, ethno-nationalist organizations as disparate as the Taliban, the Tamil Tigers, and Hamas all rely on preexisting authority structures (tribal, ethnic, military, bureaucratic, etc.) to coordinate leaders, followers, and administer territory.⁵⁰ However, because it lacks local roots, IS's organizational challenges are more akin to those of an occupying force than these more local forces. Like an occupying force, it must import manpower rather than recruit it locally. Indeed, IS has gone so far as to use settler tactics in areas it conquers, placing foreigners in abandoned homes to lay claim to territory.⁵¹ This outsider status also further contributes to the centrality of foreign fighters in IS's stability and persistence.

IS's behavior towards other organizations in Syria both reflects and reinforces this outsider status. Early in the Syrian conflict, more secular elements of the armed opposition welcomed the aid of jihadist groups, including IS, in their quest to depose Bashar al-Assad. But IS quickly wore out its welcome. Conflict erupted openly in January 2014 when IS forces clashed with Islamist Mujahedeen Army and Free Syrian Army units in and around Aleppo.⁵² Notably for our theory, the fighting was not primarily along religious/secular fault lines so much as local/foreign, as the more indigenous armed groups sought to expel IS from its areas of control in Syria. Ahrar al-Sham, for example, fought alongside Jabhat al-Nusra and other rebel groups to try and expel IS from Raqqa.⁵³ Efforts by Saudi cleric Abdullah Muhammad Al-Muhaysini to reconcile the various Islamist groups in Syria were agreed upon by Jabhat al-Nusra and several other organizations but rejected by IS, which

⁴⁹ Mampilly 2011, Keister and Slantchev 2014, Arjona 2016.

⁵⁰ Byman 1998.

⁵¹ Legrand 2014.

⁵² <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/18130>; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/03/syrian-opposition-attack-alqaida-affiliate-isis>; <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/55275?lang=en>

⁵³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/06/syrian-rebeal-oust-a-qaidi-jihadists-raqqq>; <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/01/isil-recaptures-raqqq-from-syrias-rebels-2014114201917453586.html>

instead pursued a strategy of assassination against leaders of groups associated with the Islamic Front.⁵⁴

To compensate for this outsider status, IS relies on finances (from predation and resource extraction), imported manpower and expertise (from foreign fighters), and the resulting operational success to force compliance from local competitors. As a general rule, when peace and cooperation have emerged between IS and local factions, it is usually driven by either temporarily overlapping interests or compulsion by IS. For example, after the group overcame initial resistance from indigenous rebel organizations to capture much of northern Syria, rebels from other groups and IS fighters agreed to a pact of non-aggression in Damascus. Under the truce, the two parties agreed to respect a ceasefire until Assad had been deposed, but the agreement did not hold in the face of setbacks for IS.⁵⁵

IS clearly recognizes the precariousness of its outsider position, apparently internalizing the lesson from the 2007 Anbar Awakening that the group is vulnerable when indigenous groups with deeper roots in the community turn against it. As a result, IS has been intolerant of independent poles of power within its spheres of operation, demanding that all pledge *bay'a* (allegiance) to Baghdadi and detaining and executing those who do not cooperate with or attempt to flee the group.⁵⁶ This has led to a dynamic in which IS attempts to envelop other organizations, while the leadership of such groups attempts to keep IS at bay. For example, Suqour al-Sham fought IS as outsiders, but suffered substantial damage as a consequence because IS's organizational success

⁵⁴ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29135922>

⁵⁵ <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/newsyrialatestnews/563491-syria-rebels-is-in-non-aggression-pact-near-damascus>

⁵⁶ <http://www.ara.shafaq.com/22692>; http://www.businessinsider.com/isis-security-crackdown-syria-desertions-2016-10?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+businessinsider+%28Business+Insider%29

allowed it to simultaneously attract those at the lower levels of Suqour al-Sham and compel the leadership at the top of the organization.⁵⁷

IS's outsider status extends to the broader population of the areas under its control: "Even if we see them in the streets or in the shops, there is no mingling," said a Raqqa local.⁵⁸ IS has drawn substantial numbers of local recruits, but often through coercion and necessity. Former residents of IS-controlled areas note that "most of the [local] people who work for the Islamic State do so out of economic desperation...In places where the cost of food has skyrocketed and where many people are living on little more than bread and rice, some men have concluded that becoming an Islamic State warrior is the only way to provide for their family..."There is no work, so you have to join them in order to live...So many local people have joined them. They were pushed into Daesh by hunger."⁵⁹

Given the depth of the faults in its internal and regional relationships, it is remarkable that IS is able to survive at all. As we have argued, it does so by relying on foreign fighters. The centrality of foreigners to the organization is demonstrated by the prominent role they played in Abu Bakr al Baghdadi speech declaring the "caliphate":

"Therefore, rush O Muslims to your state. Yes, it is your state. Rush, because Syria is not for the Syrians, and Iraq is not for the Iraqis....O Muslims everywhere, whoever is capable of performing hijrah to the Islamic State, then let him do so, because hijrah to the land of Islam is obligatory, we make a special call to the scholars, [Islamic legal experts] and callers, especially the judges, as well as people with military, administrative and service expertise, and medical doctors and engineers of all different specialisations and fields."⁶⁰

⁵⁷ This same model of local organizational domination holds in the relationships with other actors in Syria such as Ahrar al-Sham and the Free Syrian Army.

⁵⁸ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/life-in-the-islamic-state/2015/10/01/overview/>

⁵⁹ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/life-in-the-islamic-state/2015/10/01/overview/>

⁶⁰ <https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/documents/baghdadi-caliph.pdf>

The foreign fighters serve as footsoldiers in their own right, but also provide the strength to force otherwise reluctant locals to bandwagon.⁶¹ Both of these factors also necessitate the organization's frenetic operational pace – if it is not moving forward and sustaining its operational credibility, then internal and local divisions could boil over and the external supply of foreign fighters may dry up. This also contributes to the tendency of the organization toward the extreme violence that observers have found both troubling and puzzling.⁶² The need to recruit from abroad and intimidate locally incentivizes what would otherwise be counterproductive violence. This is not, and cannot be, a plodding organization that practices strategic restraint in support of its political goals. Rather, the nature of the organization's structure means that it must burn hot and needs external oxygen to perpetuate itself.

The Catalyst: A Threatened Ideological Challenge

Recruiting the foreigners needed to manage these structural vulnerabilities requires that IS be ideologically attractive. Until 2014, the organization was able to rely on a combination of its operational successes and sophisticated Internet propaganda to maintain its ideological credibility. The complete schism with the AQ leadership, and the counter-messaging that accompanied it, had the potential to reopen the preexisting weaknesses we have identified and leave IS ideologically discredited in the eyes of potential foreign fighters. IS therefore needed to confront AQ for supremacy in the global jihadist community to avoid losing its standing.⁶³ To accomplish this, IS

⁶¹ Evidence of the fragility of this internal structure can be found in the documented violent clashes among IS fighters (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/rift-grows-in-islamic-state-between-foreign-local-fighters-1458930063>).

⁶² U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said the group "poses a profound and unique threat to the entire world" (<http://thehill.com/policy/international/218999-kerry-isis-poses-threat-to-the-entire-world>), while others have argued that IS is "too extreme, even for al Qaeda" (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/11/isis-too-extreme-al-qaida-terror-jihadi>), others note the group's "unfathomable brutality" (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/06/13/isis-beheadings-and-the-success-of-horrifying-violence/>), and others ask "why are they so violent?" (<http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/558078/Islamic-State-IS-what-is-ISIS-why-are-ISIL-so-violent>)

See also: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/08/isis-islamic-state-ideology-sharia-syria-iraq-jordan-pilot>

⁶³ Mendelsohn 2016.

promoted its caliphate building project to develop a web of far-flung international affiliates to remain central in the global jihadi community, bolster its ideological credibility, and preempt AQ efforts to diminish it.

The need for this network as a visible indication of legitimacy was particularly acute because, despite the outward signs of ascendancy, the organization had long faced challenges to its ideological credibility in the background. While the organization began its existence in Jordan with Maqdisi's relatively unadulterated version of the AQ-style salafism, over time the fight for survival forced what became IS outside the mainstream of jihadist ideology. This began with the start of the process of divorce from the parent AQ organization during the Iraqi insurgency. AQI's mounting brutality, which it used to set itself apart in a crowded theater, drove Maqdisi to break with Zarqawi and disavow the organization - pushing ordinary Iraqis (including Sunnis) away from the organization,⁶⁴ and leading even AQ to chide its excesses.⁶⁵ The tension all culminated in a series of disagreements between Zarqawi and AQ's leadership on the targeting of Shia civilians and the trend toward scenes of indiscriminate slaughter.⁶⁶ Even so, Zarqawi's AQI remained an AQ affiliate, in part because of AQ's need to have a presence in Iraq.⁶⁷

AQI reintegrated somewhat with AQ leadership after Zarqawi's death in 2006, but the rebranding as Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), the first iteration of the group under the name "Islamic State," led to renewed tensions. The transition to ISI was an attempt to establish the group as "more Iraqi" to better compete in a local insurgency, but it challenged AQ's preferences regarding premature declarations of statehood.⁶⁸ This illustrates the dueling tensions that the organization

⁶⁴ Shapiro 2013, 86

⁶⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/05/jordan-release-jihadi-cleric-al-maqdisi-isis-killing-pilot-al-kasasbeh>

⁶⁶ *Letter from Al-Zawahiri to Al-Zarqawi*. 9 July 2005. <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Zawahiris-Letter-to-Zarqawi-Translation.pdf>

⁶⁷ This is a reflection of the aforementioned tension in priorities between ideologically focused international organizations and locally oriented organizations when faced with the realities of operations on the ground.

⁶⁸ <https://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/1>

faced: addressing its geographic isolation led AQI to put distance between itself and AQ by branding itself as Iraqi, but this in turn contributed to its ideological isolation.

The “statehood” claim also did not sit well with leading jihadist intellectuals. Jihadist thinkers such as Hamid al-Ali argued that the ISI had broken Islamic law with the declaration because a true state must be able to govern.⁶⁹ Clerics with credibility in conservative circles echoed these critiques. For example, Ahmad al-Raysouni of the World Union of Muslim Scholars (an organization closely linked to the Muslim Brotherhood) argued that “declaring a caliphate is a mere dream, whether it’s from a legitimacy point of view, or a reality point of view.”⁷⁰ Reflecting another popular refrain about unity, a Saudi mufti, Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al- Sheikh, described ISIS and al-Qaeda as “khawarij,” or “those who make cleavages between Muslims.”⁷¹

The criticism came from militants as well. In separate letters that followed shortly upon one another, Maqdisi and Abu Qatada al Filistini (arguably among the best known jihadist intellectuals) attacked IS and Baghdadi for declaring himself caliph. According to Abu Qatada, “there exists no emir firmly established such that he should be treated as the caliph—or with similar names and titles.”⁷² Notably, IS’s response to these jihadist intellectual heavyweights came from a relatively obscure 40-year-old cleric, Umar Mahdi Zaydan,⁷³ reflecting the extent to which the weight of ideological legitimacy in this community was oriented against IS.

AQ leadership shared the intellectuals’ concerns but worried even more about the strategic implications, anticipating that a premature declaration was likely to lead to failure at the hands of the same combination of disgruntled subjects angered by the failure to govern and elevated counter-measures from countries that had undercut previous attempts at jihadist “states.” At first, however,

⁶⁹ McCants 2015.

⁷⁰ <http://www.almoslim.net/node/213696>

⁷¹ <http://www.alhurra.com/content/Saudi-Arabia-clerics-Islamic-state/257705.html>

⁷² <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/بإلشام-الجهاد-لأهل-ربنا.pdf>

⁷³ <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/دين-من-الاسلامية-الخالفة-جعل-من-لقول-المنقض-1الرفض.doc>

AQ kept these critiques out of the public sphere – chastising ISI leadership and distancing itself from the organization, but keeping them within the fold in order to maintain a presence in the Iraqi insurgency. Fishman emphasizes the extent to which the animosity between AQ and IS that broke into the open in 2013 had actually been swirling just under the surface for the better part of a decade.⁷⁴ This history of antagonism over the trajectory and vision of jihad, laid out in part in Sayf al-Adl’s seven-stage plan, is in part why IS had to act decisively as soon as the schism became public in 2013.

The organization’s move into Syria made these matters worse. In 2014, ISI declared that Jabhat al Nusra (JN), the recognized Syrian affiliate of al-Qaeda, was in fact the Syrian branch of their own organization, and took the name “Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham” (ISIS). The leader of JN, Abu Mohammad al Julani, appealed to Zawahiri, who ruled that ISIS should be abolished and that Baghdadi should confine his group’s activities to Iraq.⁷⁵ Baghdadi, however, dismissed Zawahiri’s ruling and took control of 80% of JN’s foreign fighters.⁷⁶ Further attempts at reconciliation failed, and AQ renounced any connection with the group that became IS.⁷⁷ This presented a challenge for IS. While it remained undeniably popular among the population of potential foreign fighters, even in the face of this rift, ideological isolation from the broader jihadist community was a long-term risk. Open rhetorical and physical competition for supremacy (particularly if that competition were lost) threatened to undercut the legitimacy that the organization relied on to draw the foreign fighters it needed to resolve its internal and regional challenges.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Fishman 2016.

⁷⁵ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/06/2013699425657882.html>

⁷⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/10/syria-al-nusra-front-jihadi>

⁷⁷ To be clear, while the focus here is on the way in which IS addressed the schism, the break was a much bigger risk for AQ in terms of legitimacy. This was in large part because AQ, much diminished by this time, lacked the comparative advantages to leverage in competition with IS. The apocalypticism, sectarianism, and state creation espoused by IS were always rejected by AQ, but they were popular among the rank and file.

⁷⁸ http://foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/09/02/islamic_state_vs_al_qaeda_next_jihadi_super_power (drawn from Soufan Group Report)

The Response: Building a Global Network

The rift with AQ was a catalyzing moment for IS in which it either had to accept a secondary role (and, given its internal divisions and local challenges, perhaps crumble under the weight of that designation) or strike out on its own with a rapid expansion to assert its credibility and relevance on the international jihadist network. History tells us that it chose the latter, and doing so required the deft assembly of ties with other militant groups to compete with AQ's longstanding network of affiliates. The extent to which this undertaking was a strategic response is clear from the organization's starkly different behavior before the full break with AQ. Prior to this divorce, a few organizations, such as Ansar al-Islam, independently tied themselves to IS or its precursors. IS, however, tended to downplay or discourage these relationships in part to avoid exacerbating tensions with AQ.

Given the prior signals that IS received from AQ, the mounting tensions over the organization's engagement in Syria and confrontation with JN, and the drumbeat of critique from the ideologues of the international jihadist network, it was clear that the declaration of a "caliphate" would precipitate a final break with AQ and open competition for the top spot in the global jihadist hierarchy. It is little surprise then that when Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani announced the "Islamic State" title and the declaration of the "caliphate" under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi that the call was centered on the remand for allegiance from global jihadist organizations:

"We clarify to the Muslims that with this declaration of khilāfah, it is incumbent upon all Muslims to pledge allegiance to the khalīfah Ibrāhīm and support him (may Allah preserve him). The legality of all emirates, groups, states, and organizations, becomes null by the expansion of the khilāfah's authority and arrival of its troops to their areas. Imam Ahmad (may Allah have mercy upon him) said, as reported by 'Abdūs Ibn Mālik al-'Attār, "It is not permissible for anyone who believes in Allah to sleep without considering as his leader whoever conquers them by the sword until he becomes khalīfah and is called Amīr ul-Mu'minīn (the leader of the believers), whether this leader is righteous or sinful."⁷⁹

⁷⁹ <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/isis-spokesman-declares-caliphate-rebrands-group-as-islamic-state.html>

IS did not seek relationships so much as insist on them, but while the rhetoric is framed as a demand for allegiance, the reality was that the group had little means by which to compel compliance from organizations outside Iraq and Syria. Moreover, it is precisely these distant relationships that would be particularly valuable for boosting its ideological credibility. In many cases, however, IS was able to effectively “buy” relationships to demonstrate global reach.

For example, Jabhat Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (JABM), based in the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt, sent members to call on IS in 2014 shortly after the break with AQ to ask for financial support, weapons, and tactical advice in return for a pledge of allegiance. IS agreed, and JABM received training, funding, weapons, and publicity:

“Analysts say that after the pledge, a new level of sophistication could be seen in attacks in Sinai, suggesting ISIS provided militants there with training in bomb-making, and the basics of how to pull off large-scale, coordinated attacks. That sophistication was on display in a wave of assaults against Egyptian army and police positions on July 1, 2015 that killed at least 50.”⁸⁰

The relationship also allowed JABM members to gain operational expertise: “They also agreed that ISIS will train ABM’s members [in Syria] because proper training is not possible in Egypt due to the [presence of] the military.”⁸¹ After successfully becoming the Sinai Province of the Islamic State in November 2014, JABM’s propaganda took on the sophistication and brutality commonly associated with IS.⁸²

The relationship with JABM was part of a much larger initiative. Figure 2 below shows the number of new relationships each month from the middle of 2014 through the end of 2015. The concentration at the beginning of this span is consistent with the sense in the organization that building and publicizing these relationships was central to the ongoing legitimacy of the “caliphate.” It is also notable that the spike in September 2014 coincides with some of the most brutal beheading

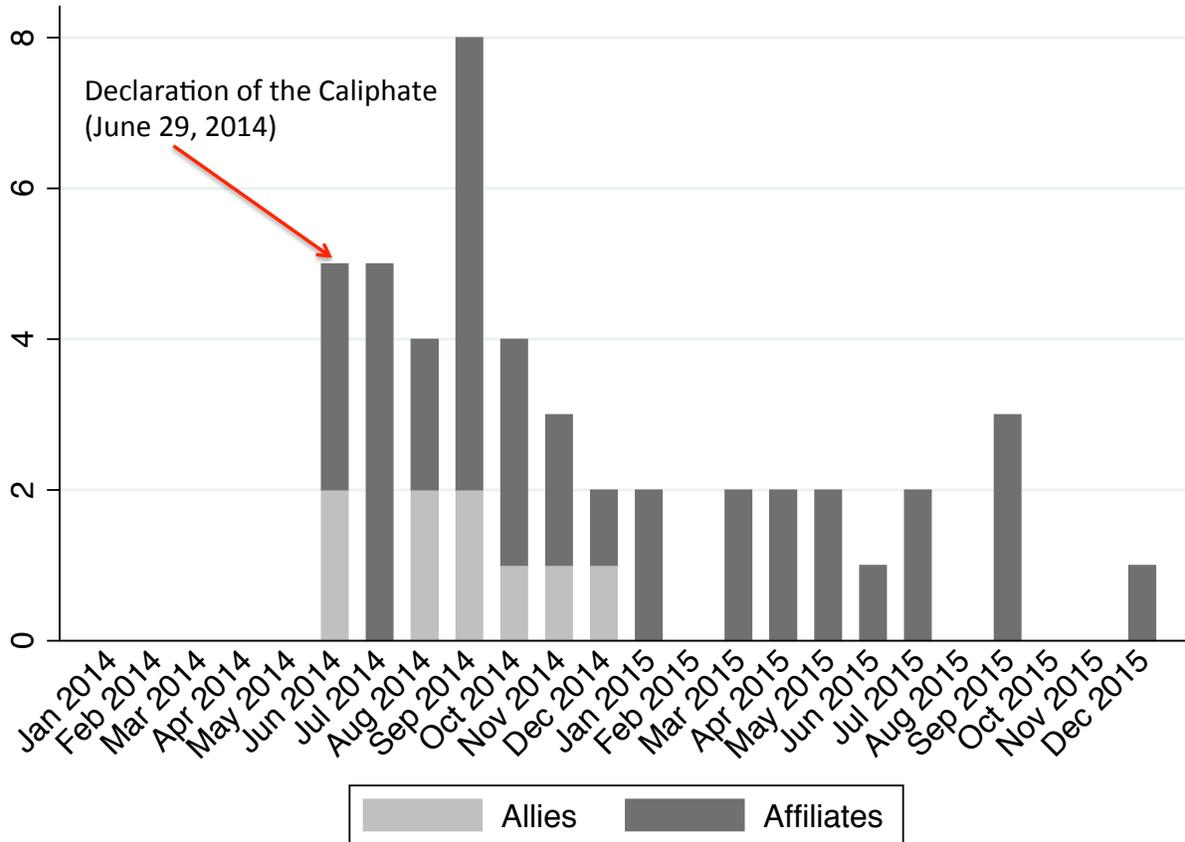
⁸⁰ *PBS Frontline*: <http://apps.frontline.org/isis-affiliates/>

⁸¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/10/egyptian-jihadists-pledge-allegiance-isis>

⁸² <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/15/world/middleeast/islamic-state-sprouting-limbs-beyond-mideast.html>

videos (those of Steven Sotloff, David Haines, and Hervé Gourdel, among others) as well as the taking of Kobani, both of which the organization pushed heavily in its propaganda to potential affiliates.⁸³

Figure 2 – Islamic State Allies and Affiliates 2014–2015*



**Note: Data from MGAR, IntelCenter, Mapping Militants, and media accounts of pledges*

Seeking to bolster the outward appearance of the “caliphate” (and by extension its internal legitimacy), IS strategically sought affiliates’ ungoverned spaces that could plausibly be labeled as “wilayats” (provinces) of the “caliphate.” Over the course of 2014 and 2015 the organization rapidly recruited 36 affiliates (including 21 wilayats) and 10 allies (Table 1).

⁸³ For example, a video released during this period of the beheading of approximately 16 Syrian regime soldiers contained a direct appeal for affiliates and a map of territories that IS claimed to have under its control.

Table 1 – Islamic State Allies and Affiliates, Declaration of “caliphate” – December 2015

Organization	Country	Date	Relationship
al-Tawheed Brigade in Khorasan	Afghanistan	9/23/14	Affiliate
Heroes of Islam Brigade in Khorasan	Afghanistan	9/30/14	Affiliate
Taliban	Afghanistan	5/10/15	Ally
al-Huda Battalion in Maghreb of Islam	Algeria	6/30/14	Affiliate
The Soldiers of the Caliphate in Algeria	Algeria	9/30/14	Affiliate
al-Ghurabaa	Algeria	7/7/15	Affiliate
al-Ansar Battalion	Algeria	9/4/15	Affiliate
al-Ansar Battalion	Algeria	9/4/15	Affiliate
Djamaat Houmat ad-Da'wa as-Salafiya (DHDS)	Algeria	9/19/15	Affiliate
Jamaat Ansar Bait al-Maqdis	Egypt	6/30/14	Affiliate
Jund al-Khilafah in Egypt	Egypt	9/23/14	Affiliate
Mujahideen Shura Council in the Environs of Jerusalem (MSCJ)	Egypt	10/1/14	Ally
Ansar al-Tawhid in India	India	10/4/14	Affiliate
Mujahideen Indonesia Timor (MIT)	Indonesia	7/1/14	Affiliate
Jemaah Islamiya	Indonesia	7/1/14	Affiliate
Jemaah Anshorut Tauhid (JAT)	Indonesia	8/1/14	Affiliate
Ansar al-Islam	Iraq	1/8/15	Affiliate
Liwa Ahrar al-Sunna in Baalbek	Lebanon	6/30/14	Affiliate
Islamic Youth Shura Council	Libya	6/22/14	Ally
Lions of Libya	Libya	9/24/14	Affiliate
Shura Council of Shabab al-Islam Darnah	Libya	10/6/14	Affiliate
Islamic State Libya (Darnah)	Libya	11/9/14	Affiliate
Boko Haram	Nigeria	3/7/15	Affiliate
Tehreek-e-Khilafat	Pakistan	7/9/14	Affiliate
Jundullah	Pakistan	11/17/14	Ally
Leaders of the Mujahid in Khorasan (ten former TTP commanders)	Pakistan	1/10/15	Affiliate
Abu Sayyaf Group	Philippines	6/25/14	Ally
Ansar al-Khilafah	Philippines	8/14/14	Affiliate
Jemaah Islamiyah	Philippines	4/27/15	Affiliate
Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF)	Philippines	8/13/14	Ally
Bangsamoro Justice Movement (BJM)	Philippines	9/11/14	Ally
Central Sector of Kabardino-Balakria of the Caucasus Emirate (CE)	Russia	4/26/15	Affiliate
The Nokhchico Wilayat of the Caucasus Emirate (CE)	Russia	6/15/15	Affiliate
Supporters of the Islamic State in the Land of the Two Holy Mosques	Saudi Arabia	12/2/14	Ally
al-Shabaab Jubba Region Cell Bashir Abu Numan	Somalia	12/7/15	Affiliate
al-'tisam of the Koran and Sunnah	Sudan	8/1/14	Ally
Jaish al-Sahabah in the Levant	Syria	7/1/14	Affiliate
Faction of Katibat al-Imam Bukhari	Syria	10/29/14	Affiliate
Martyrs of al-Yarmouk Brigade	Syria	12/1/14	Affiliate/Merger
Okba Ibn Nafaa Battalion	Tunisia	9/20/14	Ally
Jund al-Khilafah in Tunisia	Tunisia	3/31/15	Affiliate
Mujahideen of Tunisia of Kairouan	Tunisia	5/18/15	Affiliate
Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)	Uzbekistan	7/31/15	Affiliate
al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)	Yemen	7/1/14	Affiliate
Supporters for the Islamic State in Yemen	Yemen	9/4/14	Affiliate
Mujahideen of Yemen	Yemen	11/10/14	Affiliate

Note: Data from MGAR, IntelCenter, Mapping Militants, and media accounts of pledges.

To be clear, the primary advantage of these relationships was rhetorical and about burnishing IS's ideological credibility generally rather than locally. Most were not direct pipelines for fighters, and many fighters came from locations without affiliates. For example, many Tunisians joined IS as foreign fighters even though the group had little organizational presence in Tunisia.⁸⁴ Regardless of the potential fighters' origin, however, reputation and legitimacy were important for foreign recruitment and burnished the organization's ideological credibility.⁸⁵

The logic and process behind this network of relationships is laid out explicitly in *Dabiq*, IS's English language magazine.⁸⁶ *Dabiq* indicates that for IS leadership to accept a new affiliate, the affiliate must swear *bay'a*, select a leader, and present a plan. The organization must also be the preeminent one in the space that it operates, as there are reputational consequences from the defeat or misbehavior of an ally or affiliate. According to a former CIA case officer, "They don't want to pick a real amateurish outfit that will get crushed."⁸⁷

IS's relationship with Boko Haram, cemented in March 2015, illustrates several of these trends. The organization pledged allegiance to Baghdadi, giving it claim to global reach. While experts have had trouble determining the exact nature of the relationship, General David Rodriguez (head of U.S. Africa Command) said Boko Haram's use of roadside bombs and suicide bombings evolved after the alliance. Experts also noticed more polish in Boko Haram's propaganda offerings. The relationship, however, has also had downsides that are consistent with the principal-agent problems we have identified. Boko Haram, for example, complained that the alliance complicated lines of control and led to ambiguity of mission.⁸⁸ For IS, Boko Haram's excesses—specifically the

⁸⁴ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-tunisia-became-a-top-source-of-isis-recruits-1456396203>

⁸⁵ <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/03/isis-and-the-foreign-fighter-problem/387166/>;
<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/12/why-people-join-isis/419685/>

⁸⁶ <http://media.clarionproject.org/files/islamic-state/isis-isil-islamic-state-magazine-issue-6-al-qaeda-of-waziristan.pdf>

⁸⁷ <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-report-cited-on-pbs-frontline-where-the-black-flag-of-isis-flies/>

⁸⁸ See: https://www.yahoo.com/news/boko-haram-fracturing-over-islamic-state-ties-u-212414834.html?soc_src=social-sh&soc_trk=tw; <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-36973354>; <http://www.newsweek.com/boko-haram-isis-abubakar-shekau-abu-musab-al-barnawi-496615>

use of child suicide bombers against Sunni mosques—presented public relations difficulties and eventually led IS to replace Abubakar Shekau with a new “governor,” Abu Musab al-Barnawi. The result was the public splintering of Boko Haram.⁸⁹

In many cases, however, these declarations and affiliation do not indicate a working relationship at all. This is unsurprising, given that both sides of the relationship achieve their core objectives even if the interaction is merely rhetorical. IS affiliates benefit from the publicity and notoriety that comes from attaching themselves to the already infamous IS brand, which can help them outcompete local rivals, raise funds, and increase their operating capacity. For IS, the affiliation is all about the ideological credibility that it bestows - there is little more to be gained from material exchange. Rather, these alliances allowed IS to preserve the credibility it needed to address the group’s internal divisions and a weak local position by maintaining the ideological clout required to continue to recruit foreign fighters in the face of its break with AQ.

al-Qaeda

al-Qaeda (AQ) emerged in the context of the anti-Soviet “jihad,” in which Muslims from around the world flocked to Afghanistan to wage war against the USSR and drive them from Afghanistan.⁹⁰ However, by the time AQ was coalescing in the 1990s, the fight against the Soviets was fading as the organizing principle for an internal movement, due to the USSR’s withdrawal in 1989; AQ ascended to the top of the jihadist hierarchy in part because it was able to manage that transition.⁹¹

⁸⁹ <http://www.wsj.com/articles/behind-boko-haram-s-split-a-leader-too-radical-for-islamic-state-1473931827>

⁹⁰ Gerges 2005, 80-87

⁹¹ Rubin 2002

The early precursors of AQ grew out of Osama bin Laden's efforts to assist Arabs who sought to travel to Afghanistan to fight against the Soviets.⁹² By 1985, these efforts had produced training camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan for jihadists coming from all over the globe to fight.⁹³ While this was an important role, it was one of support—the organization provided training and logistics rather than strategy and ideology. This organizational and physical infrastructure, however, proved important and adaptable. After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, bin Laden transformed AQ into an independent, ideologically-driven organization, establishing a centralized leadership and providing financing and training for terrorist attacks after moving to Sudan in 1990.⁹⁴

Upon shifting back to Afghanistan in 1996, bin Laden made a decisive strategic decision to wage global jihad. Breaking from the traditional jihadist emphasis on local struggle against pro-Western Arab regimes such as Egypt and Jordan that had been the norm since the 1970s, AQ instead espoused a transnational jihadist agenda that called for concerted attacks against the “far enemy” (i.e. the United States).⁹⁵ Osama bin Laden had the necessary funding, but lacked the manpower and ideological credibility needed to wage this global struggle and attract followers to the cause. To this end, he formed a partnership with Ayman al-Zawahiri and the latter's organization Tanzim al-Jihad, and drew Zawahiri's fellow Egyptian jihadists into the AQ fold. Together, these individuals came to form the core of the AQ leadership.⁹⁶ Building on finances from bin Laden and ideological credibility from Zawahiri and his followers, the group established itself as the *de facto*

⁹² http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB343/osama_bin_laden_file01_transcription.pdf

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ “Al-Qa’ida in Sudan, 1992-1996: Old School Ties Lead Down Dangerous Paths,” Digital National Security Archive, <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/368988-2003-03-10-al-qaida-in-sudan-1992-96-old-school.html>; Kahler 2009, 5-6

⁹⁵ Gerges 2005, 25-34 and 144-145. Gerges distinguishes between these two types of jihadists – “religious nationalists” and “transnationalists” (Gerges 2005, 51).

⁹⁶ Sageman 2004, 25-26.

global jihadist leader and launched a series of attacks against Western targets during the second half of the 1990s.⁹⁷

As a result of its global orientation and origin among itinerant jihadists, AQ lacked the natural constituency enjoyed by ethno-nationalist militant organizations. And, much like the nationalist-Islamist fissure in IS, tensions between Egyptians and non-Egyptians within AQ led to infighting.⁹⁸ To compensate for these weaknesses, the organization utilized its global brand and clout within the jihadi community and international ties with other militant organizations to ensure a steady stream of recruits to its training camps and perpetuate the ideological credibility the bin Laden-Zawahiri “marriage” had produced.⁹⁹ This undertaking echoes Mendelsohn’s finding that AQ’s international ties were largely a response to internal and local organizational weaknesses that led it to reach abroad to bolster its capacity.¹⁰⁰ More important, however, was the network of affiliates that AQ was able to build, in part based on relationships formed in the camps. This network gave AQ global operational reach and made the movement durable against external attack, as it leveraged its ideological credibility to wage a global jihad.

Building these transnational ties was relatively straightforward in the 1990s. During this period, AQ was able to maintain its physical infrastructure and centralized leadership, and therefore could develop relationships and centrality in the global network by leveraging its trained camps in Sudan and subsequently Afghanistan to maintain its prominent position and relevance.¹⁰¹ AQ

⁹⁷ Zelinsky and Shubik 2009, 331

⁹⁸ Gerges 2005, 140-143

⁹⁹ “Afghanistan Camps Central to 11 September Plot: Can Al-Qa’ida Train on the Run?” Digital National Security Archive, <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/369179-2003-06-20-afghanistan-camps-central-to-11.html>

¹⁰⁰ Mendelsohn 2016.

¹⁰¹ “How Bin Laden Commands a Global Terrorist Network” Digital National Security Archive, <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/368944-1999-01-27-how-bin-ladin-commands-a-global.html>; Mohamedou 2007, 53-54

established international relationships by both opening its training camps to individuals from around the world and providing financial support for affiliates' operations in places such as Indonesia.¹⁰²

With the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 came the loss of the group's safe haven and significant damage to its operational capability. In response, AQ leveraged its international networks.¹⁰³ Mohamedou describes this strategy as aiming for "the proliferation of mini-al-Qaeda, groups that would be connected loosely to a 'mother al Qaeda' (*al Qaeda al Oum*), but which would be independent and viable enough to act on their own within a regional context."¹⁰⁴ Mohamedou goes on to note that the operational emphasis on this strategy was a direct result of the loss of the group's "centralized sanctuary" in Afghanistan. Mendelsohn likewise notes that this branching-out strategy was a result of internal tension, and, importantly, a stepped-up American campaign against AQ that diminished its capabilities.¹⁰⁵ Along similar lines, Byman argues that AQ built its network of affiliates to expand its capability and reach.¹⁰⁶

Rather than imploding and disintegrating after the 2001 setback, AQ worked to offset its weakened internal relationships and operational credibility using its network of affiliates across regions, relying on individuals or groups with potentially no direct connection to AQ central to carry out attacks inspired by or in the name of the original group.¹⁰⁷ The group's increasingly valuable global "brand" allowed AQ to exploit its ideological credibility in order to rebuild its operational credibility through the growth of entities such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, which constituted independent organizations that fell under the global AQ "brand."¹⁰⁸ Though what is left of the original AQ organization plays no direct role in these affiliates' functioning and operations, they perpetuate the

¹⁰² Kahler 2009, 21-22

¹⁰³ Hoffman 2004, 551-552

¹⁰⁴ Mohamedou 2007, 62

¹⁰⁵ Mendelsohn 2016, 61-63

¹⁰⁶ Byman 2014.

¹⁰⁷ Hoffman 2004

¹⁰⁸ Gerges 2005, 247-250; Cafarella 2014

group's continued relevancy in the context of the global jihadi movement by providing the means through which AQ's operational credibility is secured.

This story, of course, dovetails with that of IS. As we noted, bin Laden had long been wary of Zarqawi's bloodthirstiness and tendency to target fellow Muslims, and, in particular, his goal of stoking the flames of a sectarian conflict with the Shi'a. But despite such suspicions and disapproval, AQ accepted Zarqawi's organization, Monotheism and Jihad, into the fold as an affiliate. The reason is illuminating: "[a]l-Qaeda had just mounted a disastrous terror campaign in Saudi Arabia and was desperate for a role in the growing Sunni insurgency in Iraq."¹⁰⁹

The key point here is that AQ sought to resolve problems with its own stature and operational credibility by forging an alliance in a prominent conflict, making use of its ideological credibility to enter the fray and have a dog in the local fight. In the short term, the strategy worked: according to the envoy who negotiated the relationship between AQ and Zarqawi, "[d]onations to Al Qaeda's coffers had dried up as bin Laden's top men were killed or captured. Now private money is once again flooding in. Bin Laden himself is looking more confident and relaxed."¹¹⁰ Absent weaknesses within AQ, it is unlikely that Bin Laden and Zawahiri would have been able to overlook the fact that Zarqawi had different ideas about targeting, the role of public opinion, and the timing of a "caliphate." However, the immediate gains for AQ's operational credibility outweighed the foreseeable costs that affiliating with ISI would bring. In addition, the risks vis-à-vis the group's ideological credibility were spread across a vast number of affiliates at that time, to the point where the poor behavior of one (such as ISI), along with AQ's ability to sever ties at any time, would not damage the group's overall standing.

In both Iraq and elsewhere, AQ has thus been able to adapt to changing circumstances by leveraging its international networks to maintain flows of recruits, resources, and weapons to its

¹⁰⁹ McCants 2015, See also Hegghammer 2010.

¹¹⁰ <http://www.newsweek.com/terror-broker-116359>

global jihadist cause and brand. The ability to draw on this strategy – leveraging ideological surplus to address operational deficit – has played an important role in the organization’s remarkable resilience. Even with the death of Osama bin Laden, the loss of a host of top commanders, its retreat from Afghanistan, and the rise of IS, AQ’s global network allows it to continually draw on its strength in ideological credibility to make up for its deficit in operational credibility and in so doing, remain central to transnational terrorism despite being a shell of its former self.

Red Army Faction

While both IS’s and AQ’s global networks of relationships have come to dominate policy agendas in a way that arguably has not been seen before, this is not a new phenomenon. International cooperation between militant organizations has long perplexed policymakers and analysts. Networks of anarchists challenged peace and prosperity in the late 19th century. More recently, linkages between leftist and Maoist organizations were widespread throughout the 1960s and 1970s, with relationships emerging in particular among Palestinian and broader Marxist militant factions and their anti-state peers in Western Europe and Latin America. It is in this context that our last case fits.

What became the Red Army Faction (RAF) was originally established out of the 1960s West German protest movement, founded by a group of university students and dubbed the “Baader-Meinhof Gang” by the West German media as a combination of the last names of founders Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof.¹¹¹ Several incidents connected to individuals that would form the core of the RAF occurred between 1968-1970, leading to the imprisonment of some of its members, including Baader.¹¹² On May 14th, 1970, other RAF members broke Baader out of jail, and three days

¹¹¹ Moghadam 2012, 158; Pluchinsky 1992, 43

¹¹² Aust 2008, 30-32

later the group released its first communiqué to the press.¹¹³ At this time, the group “consisted of some twenty to thirty hard-core members who performed both logistical tasks...and operational tasks,”¹¹⁴ with no clear platform.¹¹⁵ Having formed from a limited group of university student protesters, the RAF initially lacked any significant sources of manpower, financing, or weapons with which to undertake violence. Stated differently, the group lacked the basic tools that militant organizations need for operational credibility.

In an attempt to compensate for these shortcomings, the RAF began initial efforts at establishing international relationships, sending members to Jordan to train at a Fatah camp in May 1970. RAF’s relative vitality at the time allowed for a successful interaction. In Jordan they received instruction in guerrilla warfare techniques and tactics, which they intended to employ in West Germany.¹¹⁶ They returned home in late summer 1970 and went underground in preparation to launch a campaign of violence aimed at promoting their leftist ideology and attract recruits to their cause. Many of the resulting attacks, however, were more about organizational maintenance than politics, which alienated the broader West German population. Over the next two years members of the RAF primarily engaged in bank robberies to finance the group, further undercutting the organization’s ideological credibility.¹¹⁷

In June 1972, the group’s core leadership were all arrested and imprisoned for life, which sent the organization into crisis.¹¹⁸ With the majority of its leadership in prison, RAF restructured to make its primary goal to free the leadership from jail, reducing politically-motivated struggle to an afterthought.¹¹⁹ The imprisoned leaders came to form the core head of a hierarchical organization,

¹¹³ Aust 2008, 6-11

¹¹⁴ Pluchinsky 1992, 46

¹¹⁵ Moghadam 2012, 160

¹¹⁶ Horchem 1982, 34; Aust 2008, 65-75

¹¹⁷ The organization did carry out a series of politically motivated bombings in May 1972. Pluchinsky 1992, 57-58; Moghadam 2012, 159

¹¹⁸ Aust 2008, 165-176

¹¹⁹ Horchem 1991, 65; Moghadam 2012, 163

with commandos and supporters on the outside.¹²⁰ This clearer bureaucratic structure allowed lower-level subordinates to be promoted to take the place of those that were captured or killed, and enabled the RAF to persist in the face of mounting arrests.¹²¹ It did not, however, allow the organization to grow or pursue a political agenda.

With its leaders imprisoned, the RAF only carried out one commando operation between 1973 and 1976, which was undertaken to free prisoners.¹²² Further setbacks came with the suicides of imprisoned RAF leaders Holger Meins in 1973 and Baader and Ensslin in 1977, after which the leadership roles and organizational initiative shifted to the commandos in the RAF.¹²³ The series of bombings initiated in response to this increased autonomy led to the arrest of the entire commando leadership in 1982 and the loss of safe houses, weapons caches, and other organizational resources.¹²⁴ Meanwhile, the group's actions led to further public backlash, with the West German government gaining the right to take extraordinary measures to combat the group, actions that were increasingly supported by the country's politicians.¹²⁵

In the face of these setbacks, the RAF attempted to resurrect itself by building a network of international relationships – the same strategy employed by AQ and IS to balance the books.¹²⁶ The difference was that they had very little to offer the outside world, as they were simultaneously operationally weak and ideologically discredited. Nevertheless, the organization sought to construct an “anti-imperialist front” of guerrillas, militants and political fighters.¹²⁷ The RAF also sought

¹²⁰ Pluchinsky 1992, 44-46

¹²¹ Geipel 2007, 456

¹²² Pluchinsky 1992, 59-60

¹²³ Ibid., 50

¹²⁴ Moghadam 2012, 164-165

¹²⁵ Geipel 2007, 444

¹²⁶ Horchem 1991, 65-67

¹²⁷ Ibid.

specific ties with Action Direct (AD) in France and the Belgian group Communist Combatant Cells (CCC).¹²⁸

Given the state of the RAF at the time, it is unsurprising that few benefits emerged from these attempts to develop a network of international relationships.¹²⁹ Horchem notes “the CCC only gave the RAF logistical support in one case.”¹³⁰ In terms of the RAF’s proposed Western European alliance, only the equally desperate AD joined, and the two militant groups carried out just one attack together in August 1985 before the AD was wiped out in 1987 by French authorities.¹³¹ The RAF also approached the Italian Red Brigades to participate but to limited effect, as just one joint statement was issued, and even that was the result of internal dissension among RB members.¹³²

Despite the failure of these attempts to generate transnational ties, the RAF continued to try to develop its foreign appeal in the late 1980s by proposing “United Europe” – a called for attacks against “imperialist” targets in Europe.¹³³ The RAF even went so far as to name its operations after specific terrorists from other groups in hopes of at least creating the appearance of linkages where none actually existed – one example was the “Patsy O’Hara” operation to kill Ernst Zimmermann, the CEO of Motors and Turbines Union (MTU), in 1985.¹³⁴

These repeated transnational initiatives, however, largely fell on deaf ears and failed to result in any sustained alliances or increased ideological or operational credibility for the RAF.¹³⁵ The major reason for this is that the RAF was so severely diminished in both dimensions of credibility by the time it sought these international relationships that it had nothing meaningful to offer partners.

Where AQ could provide prestigious ideological credibility to allies in return for operational reach,

¹²⁸ Pluchinsky 1992, 48-49; Horchem 1991, 67-69

¹²⁹ Geipel 2007, 444-445

¹³⁰ Horchem 1991, 68

¹³¹ Horchem 1991, 68; Pluchinsky 1992, 48-49

¹³² Horchem 1991, 68

¹³³ Horchem 1991, 69-70

¹³⁴ Pluchinsky 1992, 49-50; Moghadam 2012, 169

¹³⁵ Horchem 1991, 69-73

the RAF spent years fighting for immediate-term objectives such as money and the freedom of its leadership, neglecting its ideological bona fides. Where IS could leverage its operational credibility, the RAF was so poor and organizationally decimated that it had nothing to offer and no victories to boast of.¹³⁶

The further weakness that followed the failure to build an international network opened up additional rifts within the organization. Contrary to what was the case in the 1970s where the organizational initiative of the RAF lay with its imprisoned members directing the action of those outside, the 1989 RAF prisoners' hunger-strike was conducted without the approval of the organization's commando level.¹³⁷ This disagreement evolved into an internal split between the prisoners and the commandos, which "widened after the German government offered amnesty to those members who would renounce violence."¹³⁸ On April 20th, 1998, the RAF released a statement declaring that it was dissolving itself after a total failure in its campaign. In this closing statement, the RAF itself explicitly noted the role played by a lack of connections with other militant groups in its collapse, and the consequences for its ideological and operational credibility:

"The attempt to form a front with other groups from the resistance movement did not broaden into reality. For this reason, the front collapsed, because too much energy was spent on trying to adhere to the "correct" line. This narrow focus prevented any political dynamic from being created. Instead of a new horizon, which seemed possible given the variety of resistance in the early 1980s, the rigidity and narrowness of the politics increased as the decade wore on."¹³⁹

Conclusion

It is essential for both theoretical and practical reasons to consider militant organizations' networks of relationships holistically. As groups pursue their political objectives, they attempt to

¹³⁶ Horchem 1991, 71-72; Moghadam 2012, 174

¹³⁷ Horchem 1991, 71

¹³⁸ Moghadam 2012, 169-170

¹³⁹ Strassner 2003, 259; Pluchinsky 1993, 136-140; Geipel 2007, 445

strategically manage the interplay between and strengths/weaknesses within their *internal* (between members), *local* (between the organization and other organizations and/or civilian populations), and *international* (between the organization and its cross-border peers) relationships.

We have argued here that one way in which this happens is that militant groups build transnational ties to compensate for organizational weaknesses. As we illustrated, the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and Red Army Faction all sought to establish transnational ties when faced with vulnerabilities. IS was able to build ties to shore up its ideological credibility, while al-Qaeda used a network of relationships to fortify its operational credibility. In contrast, the RAF's failure to establish relationships with peer groups played a central role in the organization's downfall.

The findings help to clarify otherwise puzzling behaviors from organizations like IS and recast them in a more rational, strategic light. Observers have long noted the seemingly counterproductive behaviors of IS, particularly in terms of territorial expansion and brutality, and have wondered why they persist. Theoretically, this boils down to the distinction between Maoist and Foucaultian models of revolution – the Maoist model puts politics first while the Foucaultian version stresses violence as a precursor to change. The latter rarely works, but IS and other groups have persisted in it. Why? Our answer is that they sometimes have little choice because basic structural problems in their internal and regional networks drive them toward expansionist and exhibitionist behaviors to perpetuate their ideological credibility.

Our findings also speak to a larger puzzle: why do militant organizations form international relationships at all? Prior research tells us that surprisingly little in terms of weapons, resources, or fighters actually moves through most international relationships between militant organizations,¹⁴⁰ yet transnational ties are common despite the potential costs to organizational security, reputation,

¹⁴⁰ Horowitz and Potter 2014.

and autonomy.¹⁴¹ Our argument suggests that the answer to this puzzle is that these international relationships can serve as a conduit for “trade” in ideological or operational credibility rather than tangible material goods, which, in turn, can mitigate organizational vulnerabilities. In such alliances, pure material goods such as manpower or financing may be partially or wholly absent, yet pursuing such ties fits with an organization’s quest for survival and relevance.

Finally, the theory and cases have important policy implications. At present, there is a tendency among national security experts to treat militants’ international networks as a signal of organizational strength, but orthogonal to the actual fight against the organization.¹⁴² The conventional thinking is that if an organization is diminished, then its relationships will fade away as an immediate consequence. Our research suggests that this line of reasoning is incorrect. Relationships, particularly those between militant organizations, are not necessarily a sign of organizational strength, but rather a mechanism for remedying significant organizational weaknesses. Operating based on the conventional assumption about transnational ties thus risks misallocating valuable counterterrorism resources. It stands to reason then that prioritizing the disruption of international relationships can exacerbate the problems on the ground that spurred them in the first place, thereby diminishing the group.

This is especially important vis-à-vis IS because it suggests that the group is particularly vulnerable to disruption of its international networks. While it has proven challenging to contest al-Qaeda’s ideological authority and thereby undercut the organization’s global position, state actors are better equipped for more traditional missions that target IS’s areas of comparative advantage (territory, resources, and operational success). This suggests that IS may be relatively more

¹⁴¹ Shapiro 2013.

¹⁴² For example, see: <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/comparing-al-qaeda-and-isis-different-goals-different-targets/>
<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/isiss-growing-caliphate-profiles-affiliates>
<https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/middle-east/isis-advantage>

vulnerable to conventional military operations, and therefore more fragile as the hub of the international jihadi/terrorist network than al-Qaeda proved to be.

Several avenues for future research remain. This analysis has focused on international militant alliances from the strategic perspective of the “hub” initiator. Future work would do well to consider the impact of these relationships on the satellite ally, as well as the incentives and disincentives of those organizations for agreeing to them. As we have noted in passing in our cases, in some instances these relationships yield real benefits for the affiliates in terms of legitimacy and material gain. However, the historical record points to a minority of instances where transnational ties diminish the ally, such as with the cases of the Red Brigades in Italy and (more recently) Boko Haram in Nigeria. In these instances, the decision to form international relationships led to internal fissures, splits, and infighting.¹⁴³ Understanding the circumstances under which such relationships are likely to benefit or harm the ally would compliment the work we have done here.

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¹⁴³ Horchem 1991, 68-69; https://www.yahoo.com/news/boko-haram-fracturing-over-islamic-state-ties-u-212414834.html?soc_src=social-sh&soc_trk=tw; <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-36973354>; <http://www.newsweek.com/boko-haram-isis-abubakar-shekau-abu-musab-al-barnawi-496615>

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