The Bipolar Jihadist World Order: Exploring how competition between al Qaeda and IS impacts jihadist group alliance formation.

Laila A. Wahedi

Why did Radulan Sahiron, leader of the Abu Sayyaf group, reject the so called Islamic State (IS) while Isnilon Hapilon pledged allegiance? Why did al Shabaab reaffirm its commitment to al Qaeda, while Boko Haram pledged for IS? Why did jihadists in India create al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent while jihadists in the Egypt called themselves Wilayat Sinai to declare themselves a province of the IS caliphate?

Understanding why some groups have pledged allegiance to IS while others have either refrained or remained loyal to al Qaeda will help us to understanding the future of global jihadism. Is the IS allure ephemeral, or is it here to stay? What sorts of conflicts is it likely to get involved in, how is it likely to support them, and to what extent will it be empowered by its provinces? Do we expect it to behave like al Qaeda has in the past, or are we facing something totally new? In order to answer these questions, we must first understand more about the structure of power relations in the global jihadist space.

The emergence of the so called Islamic State (IS) has changed the very nature of global jihad not because it is particularly unique or because it brings new strategies to the table, but because of how its power and inevitable competition with al Qaeda has transformed the structure of the global jihadi system. This competition is inevitable because both groups are dependent upon their global reach in order to maintain their power. As conveyors of legitimacy and brokers of network goods, the strength of one necessarily undercuts the strength of the other.

Unlike states, violent groups in disparate locations do not necessarily have to compete if their fight is local. In previous work, I argue that groups with local aims actually prefer to remain local because aligning with global actors invokes an autonomy cost. Global groups like al Qaeda, however, extend their power by relying on strong local actors. Sponsorship can occur when otherwise capable local groups lose their source local source of legitimacy or access to resources. Global actors can substitute local actors sources of resources and legitimacy by connecting them

to a global network. In this paper, I extend this argument by asking how the structure of the global jihadist system affects the alliance behavior of jihadist groups.

I argue that before al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) transformed into IS, the global jihadi system could be thought of as a hegemonic system dominated by al Qaeda. Al Qaeda, by nature of being the most prominent group, could selectively bestow legitimacy through signaling and formal membership within the al Qaeda franchise. Moreover, as the hub of a vast network, it had leverage over other groups in the system because it could choose to isolate others. The rise of IS can be conceptualized as the rise of peer challenger, transforming the system into a bipolar one. I argue that the structure of the system necessitates competition between IS and al Qaeda, and ask how this bipolarity impacts group decisions to enter the global system, and how it impacts their alliance decisions once they do.

For global groups, (IS and al Qaeda) the increase in competitiveness should drive competition of alliances and reduce standards for acceptance. This should especially be the case for IS as the challenger, who has to demonstrate its independence from al Qaeda, that it has more to offer, and that it is has more global reach than a local insurgency. For local groups, I argue that autonomy is still of primary concern and groups that need support should take the best offer available. However, the existence of alternatives should create pressures for factions to take advantage of the global conflict within their local conflict, possibly leading to fractures.

I will begin by laying out a framework for conceptualizing the global jihadist system and the competition between al Qaeda and IS, through which I will describe the rise of IS. I will then extend my previous work on when groups would join the global system to consider the impact of polarity. Specifically, I will examine how the presence of IS as a competitor shapes both IS and al Qaeda's alliance-seeking behavior, as well as the behavior of groups deciding how to align. I ask the question: how do groups decide which to join? Next I will lay out my case studies. Finally, I will conclude.

The Root of al Qaeda and IS Power

What is it that makes al Qaeda special? The September 11th attacks thrust it into the global eye, but it is still considered a major threat despite the fact that al Qaeda core has no territorial control, has not conducted a major attack in years, and does not even have very many members. What about IS? It cannot just be territorial control—the Taliban had all but taken

Afghanistan before it was considered a global threat, and the average person on the street probably could not tell you where al Shabaab is located, even though they had taken de facto control of Somalia. Moreover, territory was not necessary for al Qaeda's notoriety. It cannot be that either has a particularly compelling ideology, because they are not unique, novel, or even terribly consistent in what they preach. If it were the terror of their ideology, Boko Haram is even more extreme. If it were the theological underpinnings, their spiritual inspiration Abdullah Azzam might just as well lead to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Al Qaeda and IS are not well known because they are dangerous, though they are. They are especially dangerous because they are well known. They both draw considerable power from being the global face of jihad, and the vast global networks that they broker. Moreover, I argue here that the nature of this power means that competition is inevitable because the strength of one directly detracts from the strength of the other.

I define power here as the ability to accomplish priorities efficiently. This requires both persuading others to act in a certain way, and having the capacity to act, both of which require hard tangible or soft intangible resources as well as the ability to generate future resources.

Global face of Jihad

Global groups have soft power that is generated from global constituencies of potential sympathizers and supporters. Prominence and legitimacy help them to set the agenda among diffuse supporters. The more well known a group is, the wider its message can be distributed, and the more it can extract from that constituency. The good extracted can be direct or indirect. For example, they may solicit donations or recruits directly. They may also generate intangible, indirect goods, such as support that can be transferred to a specific goal or be used to garner greater prominence and legitimacy within that audience, which in turn feeds back into the extraction of direct goods. More explicitly: reaching a broad audience that includes many people who will never donate still helps cultivate a sense of authority that may make potential donors more likely to donate, as well as help the group to control the agenda of supporters across many theaters.

This global constituency resource further increases a group's soft power because it can be transferred and therefore traded.

Prominence. By nature of being the most globally prominent group, al Qaeda has historically been able to selectively draw attention to local conflicts. This attention can be a

blessing or a curse. It can hurt when it draws international attention to a group that is unprepared to handle the backlash, as bin Laden explained to al Shabaab after an initial request for support.[1] However, it can also help draw the attention of potential supporters. For example, when Boko Haram pledged for IS, its spokesperson Abu Muhammad Adnani called for potential supporters to travel to Africa to join the fight.[2] This publicity can translate into donations, diffuse support, and direct support. IS use of social media shows just how important communication to the broader world can be in generating support for both itself directly, and its affiliates.

Legitimacy. As global actors, IS and al Qaeda are perceived as authorities who can grant legitimacy to other actors and conflicts. For example, when the GSPC in Algeria was unable to generate grass-roots support after a brutal campaign by its predecessor the GIA, it became an al Qaeda affiliate, calling itself al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in order to generate an alternative source of legitimacy and attract recruits. Once considered legitimate, groups may have an easier time attracting recruits and investments, and may be able to excuse predatory behavior.

Al Qaeda and IS compete over their global constituency because they are both trying to occupy the same position of prominence and authority. IS' legitimacy rests on its claim to be *the* caliphate, while al Qaeda claims to be the leader of the jihadist movement and emphasizes the pledge of allegiance sworn by IS predecessor and other prominent groups. They each have different priorities, and cannot both dominate the agenda within the jihadist movement or public discourse. Moreover, with finite potential recruits and donors, a recruit for al Qaeda or its affiliates is one fewer for IS. This is the case globally, but especially in Syria where Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, formerly al Qaeda's Nusra Front, competes directly with IS for support among the broader population.

<u>Global Networks</u>

Global groups also draw power by being brokers in global networks. IS and al Qaeda have contacts with other illicit groups, corrupt officials, recruitment sources, and wealthy donors around the world. Their access to these networks gives them power because they can both draw

---

[1] Harmony documents: SOCOM-2012-0000006, SOCOM-2012-0000005
[2] See summary of video with some transcript at https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/03/islamic-state-publicly-accepts-boko-harams-allegiance.php (Joscelyn, 2015)

resources from the network, and because they act as brokers, gating the access of other groups to the resources within the network.

Network Resources. Al Qaeda has a vast network of both formal affiliates and less formal partners from which it can draw resources. Sometimes these resources are tangible funds or recruits: al Qaeda has requested funds from Iraq, draws resources from ransoms in Africa, and has requested that its wealthier affiliates such as AQIM fund other regional groups. They may also draw on infrastructure such as courier networks to securely transmit information, safe houses, or smuggling routes. Another important network resource is knowledge and access to training camps. Al Qaeda collects lessons learned from its partners, processes them, and distributes this knowledge through letters, trainers, and formal training camps. Operating these training camps further helps al Qaeda to influence the indoctrination of footsoldiers and therefore control the agenda of partnered groups. Al Qaeda's global network gives it global access. Following in al Qaeda's footsetps, IS has been building its own official global network of affiliates. IS also leveraged its position as a prominent al Qaeda affiliate to begin building a personal network long before.

Because each group's legitimacy rests on being *the* leader of global jihad, and both groups insist on exclusivity from their partners, any partner that is claimed by one group is necessarily taken away from another as a potential partner. When Hapilon defected to IS, al Qaeda lost access to and influence in his faction and Basilan province. This means reduced access to infrastructure such as safe houses and smuggling routes within their zone of activity, knowledge, and influence over their actions. Moreover, because one of the primary benefits of joining with a global group is gaining access to that group's network, every lost partner reduces the marginal utility of partnering for their other groups, making the group less appealing as a partner, thereby reducing their influence further.

Brokers. Global groups act as hubs within the system of groups. As I argue in (Wahedi, working paper) hubs develop specialized structures to manage the costs of maintaining many connections. Al Qaeda has bureaucratic structures intended to help manage its affiliates and partners. It is therefore more efficient for individual local groups to partner with a global hub than to pay the bureaucratic cost of maintaining many individual ties. In other words, it is cheaper to partner with al Qaeda, who has invested in the capacity to partner with everyone else, than to maintain each individual alliance. One example that illustrates this is a conference call

between al Qaeda's Ayman al-Zawahiri and representatives from at least twenty other groups.[3] Given the security constraints limiting illicit communication, it would have been nearly impossible for those groups to come together without al Qaeda's coordination.

Al Qaeda's status as a hub gives them leverage over other members of the network. As the broker in most transactions, al Qaeda can act as a gatekeeper, making sure that resources are directed toward al Qaeda's priorities and isolating groups that do not follow its rules. It can do this because there are few alternative options—it would be too costly for most groups to replicate al Qaeda's network, even if they could without al Qaeda's prominence. It can also extract asymmetric gains from its partnerships, charging up to the value of access to the network to its partners.

The emergence of IS as a competitor changes the nature of the network. Al Qaeda's leverage hinged on it providing exclusive access to the network. The presence of a competitor means that groups have an alternative, and reduces the rents that al Qaeda can demand from its partners. More importantly, it means that al Qaeda has lost its leverage to prioritize the flow of resources. If al Qaeda attempts to isolate a group, that group can turn to IS.

Because IS and al Qaeda are in direct competition, and because their influence is bolstered by being able to claim more of a global presence and thus by having more affiliates, we therefore expect them to compete over alliances. Al Qaeda has historically been selective when choosing affiliates in order to preserve its brand name and maintain its appeal.[4] In particular, they have rejected formal affiliation with groups that are too weak (Wahedi, working paper) and more extreme takfiri groups.[5] Those groups al Qaeda excluded because of their targeting strategy can now be courted by IS, who is itself takfiri and has no compunctions over brutality.

Rise of IS

---

[3] See https://www.thedailybeast.com/al-qaeda-conference-call-intercepted-by-us-officials-sparked-alert (Lake & Rogin, 2013)

[4] In a letter to bin Laden, an unnamed senior al Qaeda official expresses concern over the watering down of the brand name as groups take on the al Qaeda name without permission. Harmony Document: SOCOM-2012-0000006

[5] Takfiris believe that other Muslims who do not follow their strict interpretation should be designated as apostates and killed. Bin Laden has complained about IS' excessive violence against Shia and other Muslim civilian populations and how it alienates the group's support base. Al Qaeda affiliates have also made similar criticisms of the more brutal Boko Haram branch which is a step beyond IS takfirism, believing that anyone who does not fight non-believers is themselves an apostate who should be targeted.

IS was able to leverage the prominence of the wars in Iraq and Syria and exploit al Qaeda's network in order to position itself as a competitor. Al Qaeda's early and continued prominence depended on having a presence in the popular conflict of the day. Usama Bin Laden's initial rise to fame occurred through successes in the Afghan civil war through which he could claim victory against a superpower. After the conclusion of the war, al Qaeda kept attention by orchestrating several embassy bombings targeting the West, followed by the September 11th attacks. This led into Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan where al Qaeda could continue to take credit for a presence. When the United States invaded Iraq, it needed to establish a presence there and to demonstrate efficacy in order to maintain its popular authority. It did this by sponsoring Abu Musab al Zarqawi as an affiliate and prioritizing resource flow toward Iraq. This meant that when al Qaeda drew on its broader network to collect recruits, it sent them to Iraq to work with IS (then named al Qaeda in Iraq.)

The relationships established through the flow of funds and recruits to AQI built over time, allowing Zarqawi and his successors to begin to form connections to global jihadi networks. The prominence of the Iraq war allowed IS to leverage the AQ network to build its own redundant ties and begin to gain strength. Its battlefield successes in the beginning of the Syrian war, bolstered by experience from Sadam regime officials and recruits aggrieved by the protracted civil conflict in Iraq gave it the boost it needed to launch itself as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and then the Islamic State without worrying about alienating al Qaeda. It had already established itself as a focal point for recruits and donations and had established access to recruit and knowledge networks, meaning that the leverage al Qaeda had—connecting it to the broader global network and the bestowal of legitimacy—was gone.

Meanwhile, al Qaeda still needed to demonstrate a presence in the new hot war of the day. It did so through the establishment of the Nusra Front in Syria, demanding that IS return to Iraq. But without leverage over IS, and with Nusra Front too weak to defeat IS militarily, there was nothing to be done. A challenger was born.

IS has since lost most of its territory, but its status as a global threat has remained in part because of its global network and its power to confer legitimacy. Through its forging of a new network, I argue that it has changed the very nature of the global jihadist system from a monopolar system surrounding al Qaeda to a bipolar system.

What are the consequences of this system-level change? What is it that caused groups to join the IS bandwagon, and how did they select between al Qaeda and IS? Understanding the answer to this question may help us to understand which of the two groups may prevail, or if bipolarity is likely to be stable.

Joining the International System

In order to understand how groups select between IS and al Qaeda, I build upon previous work, summarized here, in which I explore what drives them to select into the international system to begin with, and under what conditions a global group is likely to accept them into their network.

Global groups and local groups are good at different things. Global groups have access to global networks, can confer a more global form of legitimacy, and can convey general knowledge. Local groups, on the other hand, know their local context, build grass roots legitimacy within their local conflict, and have local infrastructure—they know who to bribe and how to operate in their own local environment. This asset specificity means that there are efficiencies to be gained from cooperation: local groups can access global donor, knowledge, and resource networks and gain new sources of legitimation in exchange for providing access to their local territory. Moreover, since global groups can turn access to the network on and off, it also necessarily involves giving up some agenda setting autonomy to the global group who can opt not to fund low priority actions.

Since local groups embedded in local civil conflicts care about sovereignty, giving up access to their territory and autonomy of action is a steep price. I show that local groups avoid sponsorship by a global actor if they can help it. Weaker groups without access to their own local resource flow, or who do not have strong local legitimacy or grassroots support, seek sponsorship in order to substitute for their own deficiencies.

Global groups, on the other hand, want to partner in order to gain access to a local conflict or territory. This means that they only want to invest in a group that will survive long enough to be worth the investment and can provide secure access to territory. They want strong local affiliates. Partnership is only possible, therefore, when an otherwise strong group needs access to some substitutable good that is worth trading some autonomy for. For example, the

GSPC joined al Qaeda to form AQIM because it failed to create domestic legitimacy after the violence of its predecessor, the GSPC.

Bipolar context

While the theory described above does a good job of explaining al Qaeda sponsorship in the days before the rise of IS, it is incomplete in the present context. Global groups were theorized as freely selecting among potential local groups. They were treated as making an investment portfolio decision with the primary objective of extending their reach. Local groups, on the other hand, were given the binary choice of whether or not to accept sponsorship, rather than being able to select among potential sponsors.

The rise of IS has added a dimension to the decision-making of both parties. For global groups, (al Qaeda and IS,) the sponsorship decision is more than a resource allocation decision. Rather than picking the groups with the best return on investment, global groups must also consider the reach of their competitor and the perception of a broader audience. Local groups seeking sponsorship now have two competing global sponsors to select between.

Global groups:

In the bipolar context, the decision-making process for global groups is different in two ways: they face increased competition and decreased leverage. In a previous section, the drivers for increased competition can be condensed into two factors. First, al Qaeda and IS are destined for competition because their legitimacy claims both rest on being the primary authority on global jihad. Second, their strength derives from the exclusivity through which they can provide network goods, which is inherently challenged by the presence of the other.

The first factor means that global groups have an increased incentive to demonstrate that they have an active and effective global presence. Just like it was imperative for al Qaeda to demonstrate a presence in Iraq and later in Syria to demonstrate its efficacy, both groups must show that they continue to possess enough of a following to be an authority. They should therefor shift priority weight from having a high return on investment toward having a nominally broader reach. Buying the appearance of presence may matter more than the material reality of presence than it did in a unipolar system. This is not to say that appearance is more important than capacity, just that it should be more important than it would otherwise be.

This leads to the first empirical implication:

As a challenger rises in power, both groups make more bids for sponsorship, and lower their material standards for who they sponsor

An example of this might be al Qaeda's creation of al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, which was hitherto unknown and does not appear to have considerable material strength.

The second factor implies that they have an incentive to degrade one another's networks as they build their own. By reducing the network access that an opponent has to offer, a group increases the relative value of their own. To do this, groups should selectively target strong groups that support or will potentially support their opponent, and demand fewer rents from the partnership. This is especially important because of the nonlinear relationship between partnerships and utility. Joining a global group's network is only valuable if it is a large network. Therefore, global groups should compete to have a large network in order to accrue some benefit, even if it means reduced rents from individual partners. Having those less profitable partnerships is still necessary for maintaining rents from the rest of the network.

Rents should be proportional to the value of the network access provided by the global group. This means that we expect asymmetry in terms of which group lowers its rents. The challenger, which does not have as expansive a network, should have to charge lower rents in order to woo an affiliate.

As a challenger rises in power, groups should selectively target one another's potential targets, and reduce rents from asymmetric partnerships.

Competition also decreases a global group's leverage over the system because the marginal utility of partnering with them is decreased for every connection they lose, and because the presence of an alternative hub decreases their leverage over their partners, who now have an alternative means to access global networks. We expect to see this decreased leverage through the lower rents described above, but also through the behavior of local groups. As the challenger rises in power, global groups should be less able to exert influence over their partners. We expect to see:

As a challenger rises in power, partnered groups should show less rhetorical discipline and greater independence.

Local Groups:

The decision-making process for local groups is different because they are presented with two competing options for potential sponsors. Passively, this may mean that they are presented with better deals that allow them to preserve more autonomy, which may make more groups willing to join. The presence of competing global actors presents another opportunity for local groups: the opportunity to take advantage of the competition to play groups off of one another to increase personal power.

Rebel groups and coalitions are often prone to fracturing (Christia, 2012; Cunningham David E., 2006). This means that when two global groups court a local actor, while it is possible that the group is cohesive enough to make a unified decision to accept the best offer, it is even more likely that the global groups will selectively make those offers to leaders within the group most likely to take them up on it. Competition over local group loyalty creates incentives to for the local group to splinter into factions supporting either of the global groups.

This incentive may even override the incentives to avoid partnership in order to maintain autonomy because it increases *individual leader* autonomy, even if it reduces overall group autonomy. This is similar to how the Haqqani Network was willing to grant land to al Qaeda in order to increase his autonomy from the regional group Hezb-e-Islami (Wahedi, working paper).

Local groups that are courted by both global groups are more likely to splinter over support.

Alternative hypotheses

I will discuss two alternative hypotheses, one drawn from the literature on ideology, the second drawn from an alternative power relations argument.

Ideology:

One possibility is that groups select between IS and al Qaeda based on ideology. Maybe some groups just prefer the manhaj[6] or philosophy of one group over the other. Much ink has been spilled about the ideological differences between IS and al Qaeda,[7] but the key differences can be boiled down to whether to focus on the near or far enemy, and extremism of their takfirism.

---

[6] Manhaj is a term to refer to the methodology for waging jihad. It is the set of guidelines that affiliates should follow, and amounts to a theory of change.
[7] Include select citations

Both al Qaeda and IS want to create a caliphate across historic Muslim lands. They also both believe that the rulers across the Muslim world (near enemy) are corrupt apostates that should be overthrown. They disagree on the when and how. Al Qaeda believes that these states are propped up by the West in general, and the US and Israel in particular (far enemy). It will only ever be possible to defeat the near enemy if you first defeat, or at least deter, the far enemy. This ideology arose from al Qaeda's perceived success in Afghanistan: they believe that the USSR fell because it was mired in the Afghan war, and thus that they can cripple a super power through a war of attrition. IS reverses the order, suggesting that the near enemy must be toppled before the far enemy can be engaged. Their focus is on toppling regimes, holding territory, and creating the caliphate now.

One possibility is that groups who prefer to focus on territorial gains and the near enemy should prefer IS. The problem with this, however, is that it is inconsistent with al Qaeda's support patterns. While al Qaeda does prioritize attacks against the West, it has historically supported groups that have controlled territory and declared local emirates. Most of the primary al Qaeda affiliates are or have been proto-states, including the Taliban, AQIM, and al Shabaab. Moreover, IS has declared that they are the head of the global caliphate, which means that any group that joins IS subordinates their own state to IS and loses apparent autonomy.

The second difference is in the extremeness of their takfiri ideology. Takfiris believe that a Muslim who does not follow their strict interpretation of Islam is an apostate that should be killed. While al Qaeda has committed atrocities against civilians, they at least claim to prohibit attacks explicitly targeting Muslim civilian populations. IS, on the other hand, espouses that they are legitimate targets and has campaigned against Shia populations despite al Qaeda's objections. Several al Qaeda affiliates have presented themselves as alternatives to more brutal opponents,[8] and Bin Laden had lamented the brutality of Zarqawi and implored him to stop killing Shia and other Muslim civilians.[9] Another possibility is that groups with a greater taste for violence are more likely to prefer IS.

This possibility can be readily folded into the theory presented above. Al Qaeda has been clear about the strategic reasons why they object to the violence. It alienates local populations

---

[8] Cite ansaru video condemning Boko Haram, and something on Nusra Front contrasting self to IS. Pull quote from Risallah or Inspire.
[9] Cite letter

and can backfire as it did in the Anbar Awakening. By avoiding more extreme takfiri groups, al Qaeda is protecting its legitimacy and authority among its target global constituency. IS, which has different beliefs about the efficacy of violence, may be more likely to accept these groups into its fold.

Power:

Another possibility is that IS just has more to offer than al Qaeda, and that groups are gradually making the shift as al Qaeda fades. This is unlikely to be the case because the al Qaeda networks are still capable of providing training and coordination. While al Qaeda core may not control territory and may not have conducted many recent attacks, it still has quite a bit to offer its potential affiliates.

If this theory is true, we would expect to see groups increasingly declaring support for IS, and switching allegiance away from al Qaeda, especially when under crisis.

Empirical Strategy

I have identified four observable implications of the theory presented here:

1. *As a challenger rises in power, both groups make more bids for sponsorship, and lower their material standards for who they sponsor*
2. *As a challenger rises in power, groups should selectively target one another's potential targets, and reduce rents from asymmetric partnerships.*
3. *As a challenger rises in power, partnered groups should show less rhetorical discipline and greater independence.*
4. *Local groups that are courted by both global groups are more likely to splinter over support.*

In its present iteration, this paper focuses on the alliance choices made by local groups in order to answer the question: when do local groups pledge allegiance to IS, and when do they pledge to al Qaeda? In future work, I will add case studies to examine the behavior of global groups.

The first three implications depend on a measurement for challenger power. As a proxy for power, I will use territorial control, as well as a metric I am developing to explore the extent to which official statements made by al Qaeda and IS bleed into the online rhetoric of potential sympathizers. Using topic analysis, I track topic words before and after the release of al Qaeda

and IS magazines in online forums. As IS relative influence increases or decreases, I expect to see changes in the rhetoric espoused by groups supported by IS and al Qaeda, upticks in IS efforts to recruit additional partners, and an increase in weaker affiliates and groups verbally supported by group spokesmen.[10]

Case selection:

Several of the implications require different sets of cases to test. To test implication 1, we must look at the number of new sponsorships made since the rise of IS, as well as for the presence of recruitment campaigns targeting groups. How does the operational capacity of groups publicly supported by al Qaeda and IS change as IS power rises? To test implication 3, I will examine public statements made by groups in response to IS rise. Do groups formerly supportive of al Qaeda vacillate? For example, AQIM has made hedging statements stating that it hopes for unity in Iraq without explicitly blaming IS for the discord.

In the present iteration, I present cases selected to test 2 and 4. If implication 2 holds, IS should target for recruitment important members of the al Qaeda network, as well as those al Qaeda left behind. If it cannot recruit, it should attempt to degrade al Qaeda's network by weakening these groups. If the theory is incorrect and the ideology hypothesis is true, IS should capitalize on a natural affinity with more brutal takfiris spurned by al Qaeda but not more hardcore al Qaeda ideologues. If the theory is incorrect and IS just has more to offer, we might expect to see waves of groups with similar needs switching allegiance at the same time. Finally, the theory would prove incorrect if IS does not go out of its way to disrupt al Qaeda's disparate network. If IS is really primarily focused on Iraq and Syria, and not on displacing al Qaeda's global reach, it should not waste energy disrupting unsupportive groups.

If implication 4 holds, we should expect to see IS and al Qaeda target factions and leaders within potential affiliates that they can offer greater autonomy to in exchange for support. Ideology likely plays a role in the selection of factions, and does not detract from the strategic relationship. However, if the theory is incorrect and ideology drives the decision to partner, then we would expect to see whole organizations with more takfiri tendencies or a preference for the near enemy as more likely to join IS than al Qaeda without internal fissure. If the theory is incorrect because groups are making a rational calculation or taking the best offer as a whole, then we should not see a tendency to split.

---

[10] Verbal approval can act as a signal of support, albeit a weaker signal than direct affiliation.

To test implications 2 and 4, I begin with two case studies in which I trace the decision-making process by which the groups decided to support IS or al Qaeda. I use al Shabaab, and Boko Haram, both of which made a declaration in similar temporal proximity, and share many characteristics. Both are in sub-Saharan Africa, have allegedly trained with one another, and have worked with AQIM. While one was much more closely tied to al Qaeda core, they are both important components of the broader al Qaeda network, important for revenue streams from ransoms. They have both controlled large swaths of territory and been targeted by international coalitions of African states, making them of similar strength and material value as partners. While Somalia was much more of a power vacuum during much of al Shabaab's tenure, the northern regions of Nigeria have been undergoverned. Moreover, the two cases differ in a key trait necessary for testing against the alternative ideology hypothesis: Boko Haram is an even more extreme form of Takfiri than IS, something that AQIM and al Qaeda have balked at in the past. The two groups make an ideal valuable paired comparison.

Data and Analysis:

I used the long war journal tags for Nigeria and Somalia to collect aggregated news articles about both countries between 2009 and the present. I read the summaries for each article in order to get a sense of the operational history of each group in order to understand the important players in each conflict, and gain important contextual understanding. In addition, I supplemented these readings with primary source Harmony Documents, which are documents captured by the US government, declassified, and hosted through the Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point. I also used official statements from al Shabaab and Boko Haram as posted on Jihadology.net by Aaron Y. Zelin, translated by the SITE intelligence group, or summarized by the long war journal. Reading the news summaries gave me a general impression of what was occurring through time which allowed me to drill deeper around important events and time periods by, for example, reading blogs of people present in the area while events were occurring during the identified time period, or finding analyses written at the time that reflect current understanding of events at that time.

<u>Al Shabaab</u>

If the theory is correct, we should expect to see several things happen in Somalia. First, because of its importance to the al Qaeda network, IS should either try to recruit it, or degrade its

value as a member of al Qaeda's network by attacking it. Second, recruitment attempts should be targeted at, or result in splintering. I will begin with some important background describing the relationship between al Shabaab and al Qaeda leading up to the rise of IS, as well as describing the potential fault lines for fracture within al Shabaab. I will then describe IS recruitment campaign in Somalia, and conclude with al Sabaab's response.

Al Shabaab first made bids to join al Qaeda in 2009. The group controlled territory and had considerable military strength, but was suffering from an internal rivalry between the foreign fighters who had been attracted to Somalia during the Ethiopian invasion, and locals with limit support for global Jihad. The local population was predominantly Sufi, not Salafi, and there were rising tensions between the foreign and local fights. This reduced Shabaab's local legitimacy and support base. Godane sought recognition from al Qaeda to generate an alternative source of legitimacy. Moreover, he knew doing so would alienate some of his competing commanders who were threatening to defect to the government. Bin Laden refused his pledge, writing in a letter that accepting would bring too much international pressure, but did send a supportive video that was enough to turn the tides toward the foreign fighters secure Godane as leader. Shabaab didn't officially become a member of al Qaeda until after bin Laden's death with Zawahiri accepted their pledge of allegiance. Unlike bin Laden, Zawahiri had believed they were strong enough all along.

The tides began to turn in 2011 as the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) began pushing them out of Mogadishu and US drone strikes began to pick up. However, al Shabaab was able to seamlessly transition between conventional and guerilla warfare as they picked up and lost territory in more rural areas, while maintaining a presence in the capital. While piracy went down in 2013, al Shabaab was able to remain lucrative through its activity in the coal industry and taxation. This meant that by the time Zawahiri accepted Godane's pledge of allegiance, Shabaab was still a valuable ally in Somalia, and remained so in February of 2014 when al Qaeda core formally disowned IS. Throughout this time, Godane continued to face tensions within his ranks, which he responded to with purges.[11]

---

[11] For example, in November 2013 Shabaab replaced clan elders with Shabaab loyalists: www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/11/somalia_shabaab_ousts_traditio.php
Shabaab arrests several leaders: www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/05/shabaab_leader_calls.php

In early 2015, IS began to target al Shabaab for recruitment. While the recruitment effort almost certainly began through informal channels in 2014, it became public with a written plea asking the leadership to join IS.[12] They released roughly a dozen videos and statements encouraging Shabaab leadership and then members to join. Several of the early public letters laid out a case for why IS was the true leader of global jihad with allusions to why al Qaeda was not. Over time, these videos moved on to encouraging individuals within Somalia to defect away from the al Qaeda backed Shabaab toward IS.

Godane, and his successor Abu Ubaidah (aka Ahmad Umar, aka Direye) built their legitimacy off the controversial pledge of allegiance to al Qaeda, the pledge became symbolic as a source of their power. Both leaders repeatedly and frequently reaffirmed their pledge. Abu Buaidah made no direct response to IS public overtures to officially join, but did release statements in support of al Qaeda, Zawahiri, and the Taliban. But given the source of his legitimacy, the continued overtures were a direct threat to Abu Ubaiah's legitimacy and control over the group. This was especially problematic because of the tensions already present between local and foreign troops. While the local fighters remaining with al Shabaab may have come to accept al Qaeda, which allowed al Shabaab to retain its local flavor and pursuit of a local emirate, they were much more suspicious of IS with their global caliphate. It also created suspicion of foreign fighters as potential IS supporters. For example, the American Shabaab member Omar Hammami described how his life was imperiled because of ideological disagreements with the rest of al Shabaab and how tensions between local and foreign fighters were rife. He lamented that they could not just all get along in their pursuit of global jihad.[13]

The early internal tensions faced by Godane helped set the group up for a unified response to IS inroads in the future because of the strength of the group's internal intelligence unit, Amniyat. Because of the lack of local support base and the presence of other strong commanders within al Shabaab, Godane has periodically resorted to internal purges using Amniyat,[14] and forcing rivals to submission with military means. For example, he defeated one

---

[12] Text here: https://justpaste.it/hamilbushra-19.
PDF here: https://somalianewsroom.com/a-message-to-our-brothers-in-somalia-by-isis-supporter-hamil-al-bushra/
[13] For example, see: www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/10/omar_hammami_says_fr.php
[14] For examples, see www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/11/somalia_shabaab_ousts_traditio.php and www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/11/the_united_nations_has_approve.php

of the splinters that had defected from Shabaab after the al Qaeda pledge, Aweys' Hizbul Islam, bringing Aweys back into the al Shabaab fold and illiciting a pledge of support.

The strength of al Shabaab's internal intelligence network meant that as soon as IS started calling for recruits, Amniyat was able to kick into gear eliminating any potential defectors. IS supporters were quickly killed or removed from the ranks, preventing a split before it could happen.[15] All out rebellion was stemmed before it could manifest, with only small-time commanders with very few troops successfully defecting.

The most prominent commander to defect was Abdiqadir Mumin in October 2015.[16] Mumin operated in the Puntland region, which had historically operated independently. The leader's predecessor had been accused multiple times of being in negotiations to defect to the government. Only about 25 of his fighters defected with him, the remaining 175 or so in the region opting to stay. One of the justifications he gave was because of the influx of al Shabaab soldiers in the region. Defecting to IS allowed him greater independence and notoriety as the leader of an entire Islamic State province, nominally making him equal to Abu Ubaidah. The new IS province was too weak militarily to have much of a presence for a year or so, but did begin to conduct attacks claimed by Mumin in 2016.

Mumin had the local knowledge necessary to understand how to operate with Somalia, which meant he could give IS some semblance of reach into Somalia, but did not have the the capacity al Qaeda would have previously required from an official affiliate. Between the declaration of an alternative state to fight al Shabaab, and the ongoing slew of recruitment videos targeting Somalia, IS appears to be challenging al Qaeda's network more than selecting optimal investments.

In summary, IS did target al Shabaab, and did so in a way that appears to be aimed at disrupting al Qaeda's network more than effectively extending IS reach. In establishing its affiliate, IS did empower a local commander that was willing to fracture from the group in order to gain more personal power. It was through al Shabaab's heavy investment in Amniyat due to a history of tensions between commanders that al Shabaab was able to avoid deeper fractures.

---

[15] For example, al Shabaab spokesman Abu Abdalla said that any IS supporters should be killed "on the spot".
http://www.newsweek.com/isis-or-al-qaeda-somalias-al-shabab-divided-over-allegiance-397772
[16] For a summary of the audio recording, see www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/10/shabaab-leadership-fights-islamic-state-expansion.php

<u>Boko Haram</u>

If the theory is correct, we should expect to see several things happen in Nigeria. First, Boko Haram was never as critical a member of the al Qaeda network as al Shabaab. However, it was reputed to be al Qaeda affiliated, and was an important resource to AQIM for its role in piracy and kidnapping. We should therefore expect to see IS target it for recruitment. Second, recruitment attempts should be targeted at, or result in splintering. I will begin with some important background describing the relationship between Boko Haram and al Qaeda leading up to the rise of IS, and how that relationship fed into fault lines within Boko Haram. Boko Haram is a complex case with many potential angles that require additional data to disentangle. I will conclude with open questions within this case study, and what these questions may imply for the theory.

Boko haram was less closely tied to al Qaeda than al Shabaab, in part because its raw brutality and made it a worse fit for al Qaeda's strategic goals. However, subfactions within the broader Boko Haram group had much closer ties than the primary faction under group leader Abubakar Shekau. Specifically, two closely tied factions led by prominent commanders at the time of Shekau's ascendency have a close relationship to AQIM. Abu Usamah al Ansori led a group commonly referred to as Ansaru, while Khalid al Barnawi[17] led Harakatul Muhajiriin. The two units operated closely together, and were often presented to the outside world as operating under the banner of Ansaru. Ansaru operated in the north west of the country, while Shekau's strength resided in his tribal area around Borno.

Khalid al Barnawi and a handful of other senior leaders within Boko Haram fought with the GSPC, the predecessor to AQIM, in an elite training unit called the Tariq Ibn Ziyad Battalion. Khalid al Barnawi further was a close associate of Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a senior commander in the AQIM network who eventually broke off to form al Muhajiroun. This meant that Khalid al Barnawi's Ansaru faction was much more closely connected with al Qaeda and the global jihadist network than Shekau and his faction.

Shortly after Boko Haram's inception as a violent group,[18] another former colleague of Khalid al Barnawi wrote a letter introducing Boko Haram to the leader of AQIM, Abdelmalek

---

[17] Note that al Barnawi is a very common name in the region, referring to someone from the state of Borno in Nigeria. There are several prominent leaders in Boko Haram with this last name, or who are occasionally given al Barnawi as a title to refer to their origin.

[18] It had existed as a cult/movement for years before it began to wage an insurgency in earnest

Droukdel. He vouched for the group on the basis of his relationship with Khalid al Baranwi and his fellow veterans, and recommended that they support the fledgling group with communications support, training, and funds.

While AQIM does not have the global reach that al Qaeda and IS seek, and it is content to subordinate itself to al Qaeda, it is a group that operates as a hub within Africa. The letter describes attributes of Boko Haram that might impact AQIM's return on investment, including that they had 15 potential recruitment sites, but that they did not have broad based appeal within the Muslim north.

AQIM did make the investment, giving $500,000 USD in seed funds, providing training, and providing a courier to pass messages back and forth with AQIM leadership. The training had a direct impact on Boko Haram's operational capacity, making the group more effective and giving them the skills necessary to carry out suicide car bombings as well as with explosives making more generally. These funds were likely passed through the Ansaru faction which funneled them towards kidnappings approved by AQIM, passing some compensation along to Shekau in exchange for logistics support. True to its al Qaeda name, AQIM has strict reporting guidelines for the use of funds (Shapiro, 2008). Conflict arose over the use of the funds that led to Shekau purging the Ansaru sympathizing kidnapping faction that was carrying out AQIM approved attacks. Moreover, Shekau killed fighters that went to training camps without his permission, or who opposed him.[19] This led to a formal split between Ansaru and Boko Haram with Ansaru publicly decrying Shekau's actions.

This formal split was shortlived. Ansaru, with its close ties to Belmokhtar, fought in the Malian conflict. When France invaded, the AQIM network around Mali collapsed, taking Khalid al Barnawi's communication network with it. Abu Usamah al Ansori's Ansaru and Khalid al Barnawi's Harakatul Muhajiriin maintained their independent but close working relationship, but were unable to continue purely on their own. Some form of raproachment is likely, with Barnawi's student Babagana Assalafi being promoted to be Shekau's deputy in late 2012. Boko Haram and Ansaru conducted a joint attack in November of 2013, and then Ansaru had relative silence until 2015.

---

[19] From the testimony of Kabiru Sokoto after he was captured during the purge, one of the bomb makers and a unit commander in Sokoto. The purge occurred because Shekau informed on the location of the kidnapping cell, leading to the arrest and death of several members.

This background is important for understanding some of the critical faults within Boko Haram. Khalid Al Barnawi and his cohort still chaffed at Shekau's raw brutality, but were forced to cooperate under the same banner.

The return of experienced Nigerian fighters from Mali helped spur territorial gains for Boko Haram. However, it also led to increased violence, with roughly 50% more attacks and 150% more deaths.[20] While there is massive disapproval of the Nigerian state in the North, Boko Haram's brutality means that they this disapproval does not translate into support for the group. Through their rise in 2014, Boko Haram was forced to rely on poorly trained, poorly motivated conscripts.

At the beginning of 2015, it became clear that IS was starting to work with Boko Haram. Boko Haram rejected much of modern technology, one consequence of which was that their media strategy was poor. From the beginning of January, Boko Haram began making polished videos with IS-style special effects and branding. Shekau made a far more professional appearance in a video than in his previous, more unhinged appearances. It is unclear when exactly this cooperation began, but negotiations to get to the point of sharing media advisors likely took some time, and occurred during Boko Haram's rise in the latter half of 2014. It is also unclear whether this cooperation was a form of courting by IS, or indicates that an official partnership had been declared.

On February 9th, Boko Haram declared that its shura council would meet to discuss whether to pledge allegiance to IS.[21] Around this same time, Ansaru reappeared, making pointed statements criticizing Shekau and Boko Haram for their targeting of civilians. Ansaru returned to positioning itself as a better alternative to the brutality of both Boko Haram and the government, one that would defend Muslim civilians.

On January 18th, 2015, Chad committed to joining the African taskforce combating Boko haram. On January 27th, troops crossed the border and immediately began taking territory back from Boko Haram along the border. The addition of Chad was a turning point. Throughout 2015, Boko Haram increasingly had to expend its experienced fighters, and took heavy losses.

---

[20] Janes intelligence report: http://janes.ihs.com.proxy.library.georgetown.edu/Janes/Display/jtsm6298-jtsm-2015
Note that death counts in northern Nigeria tend to be unreliable because there is a limited press presence and Nigerian officials do not have the capacity to control necessary to count. For example, a massacre in Borno at the beginning of 2015 had a range between 150 and 2000 dead.
[21] Translated by SITE intel, summary at https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/02/jihadist-divisions-grow-in-nigeria.php

Moreover, Boko Haram experienced logistical difficulties, leaving those inexperienced fighters stranded without fuel or food.[22]

On March 8th, Shekau pledged allegiance to IS, and on the 13th, IS replied accepting the pledge and creating the Islamic State in West Africa. We also know that Shekau took a substantial autonomy hit because it subordinated him to a regional commander. Moreover, IS had been given enough influence to be able to formally replace Shekau with a new leader, Abu Musab al Barnawi (not to be confused with Khali al Barnawi,) another senior Boko Haram leader. Shekau rejected the replacement, leaving Boko Haram in three primary splinters, Ansaru, Boko Haram, and the Islamic State in West Africa.

This leaves us with a puzzle that cannot be disentangled with the available data alone. Why did Shekau join IS when his own emirate had made substantial territorial gains? One possibility is he was on the fence and only formally pledged once those gains had begun to be reversed. This is possible, but would have been a very condensed timeline given how long it takes for video production. Moreover, Ansaru's vocal objections preceded the major Chadian gains, suggesting that Ansaru knew that a split was imminent.

It is also possible that the merger was driven by ideology, but if Shekau was a true believer, why would he have split away from IS when he was replaced?

A final possibility is that despite territorial gains, Boko Haram was in a precarious position. Relying on unwilling conscripts in the face of logistical hurdles and a unified task force clearly more capable and resolved than the Nigerian military, and strengthening internal fissures may have been enough for Boko Haram to realized they would need help if they were to consolidate power over the territory they had taken. Without any source of local legitimacy, the shura council may have felt that it needed some source of external legitimacy in order to sustain its new territory, and that because al Qaeda would no longer touch the group because of the reputational hit it would entail, IS was an ideal partner.

In order to disentangle these possibilities I need to dig into additional primary source material and local Nigerian media. One challenge in the study of Boko Haram is that western media has focused on large scale attacks such as the kidnapping of school girls at the expense of the factions and internal politics of the organization. This is in part because Boko Haram had

---

[22] See local Nigerian blog article from September 2015, https://fulansitrep.wordpress.com/2015/09/11/logistics-is-always-the-b-word-a-lesson-shekau-is-learning/

shut down cell service across most of the North. The Nigerian state has also been unwilling and unable to establish enough of a presence to gain a deeper understanding. Unlike some violent groups that want to garner public support, Boko Haram targets journalists, making it all the harder to study. And finally, much of the language spoken in the North is tribal languages such as Hausa. This makes it important to rely on local journalists such as Fulan Nasrullah in order to gain a deeper understanding of local politics.

What does this puzzle mean for the theory? As expected, IS did target Boko Haram for recruitment. Boko Haram is a group that al Qaeda was wary of because of the nature of al Qaeda's support base, so it is understandable that al Qaeda did not compete over Shekau's primary faction. However, al Qaeda did maintain ties to Ansaru. Finally, as expected, declaring allegiance did lead to fractures within Boko Haram, with one faction reasserting support for al Qaeda, while the other joined IS.

Conclusion

I have presented a theory on how the rise of IS has changed the structure of the international network of jihadist groups from a hegemonic system favoring al Qaeda, to one in which competition is inevitable. Building on my previous work on understanding how this global network initially formed, I show how this change in structure ripples through the network as a whole, with consequences for which groups support who. Who receives support in turn affects whether IS and al Qaeda will survive as global actors, and the ways in which their competition will manifest in conflicts around the world.

IS is not the first group to have declared itself a state and taken territory. In order to demonstrate that it could be *the* caliphate, rather than *a* state, it had to demonstrate its independence from al Qaeda, its reach, and that it had more to offer than al Qaeda. One thing it had to offer initially was capacity. Now that IS has lost most of its territory, its staying power will likely depend on its ability to maintain its global network and to provide network goods. So far, it has failed to disrupt the al Qaeda network to the extent necessary to reduce al Qaeda's appeal as a purveyor of knowledge and training, resources, and legitimacy. Unless IS provinces begin to see gains, it may lose out to al Qaeda in the long run.

IS made a splash with territorial control and global ambitions, but it is not the first jihadist group to rapidly gain and then rapidly lose its territory. This may be enough to help al

Qaeda convince others that its theory of change is correct: as soon as a jihadist group gets too strong, the West and other states will put a stop to it. The loss of IS territory, with only limited success in the creation of an IS global network, may be enough to convince the Jihadist world that al Qaeda's long game is a better strategy.

References

Christia, F. (2012). *Alliance formation in civil wars*. Cambridge University Press.

Cunningham David E. (2006). Veto Players and Civil War Duration. *American Journal of Political Science*, *50*(4), 875–892. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2006.00221.x

Joscelyn, T. (2015, March 13). Islamic State spokesman publicly accepts Boko Haram's allegiance | FDD's Long War Journal. Retrieved March 28, 2018, from www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/03/islamic-state-publicly-accepts-boko-harams-allegiance.php

Lake, E., & Rogin, J. (2013, August 7). Al Qaeda Conference Call Intercepted by U.S. Officials Sparked Alerts. Retrieved from https://www.thedailybeast.com/al-qaeda-conference-call-intercepted-by-us-officials-sparked-alerts

Shapiro, J. N. (2008). Bureaucracy and control in terrorist organizations. *Princeton Uni*.