

Bloody Benefactors: A Model of Transregional Terrorist Sponsorship in Civil Wars

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Introduction

Some rebel groups receive the aid of transregional actors, while others don't. Why were Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami, and later the Taliban, able to successfully attract al Qaeda support during the Afghan civil war, while Massoud's Jamiat-i-Islami was not? Why did the Algerian resistance group GSPC seek support from al Qaeda, while their predecessor, GIA, did not? Why has al Shabaab solicited al Qaeda's support, while Jaish al Islam and Hamas have resisted? Why did al Qaeda initially reject al Shabaab's request, and later provide support? More generally: what explains variation in transregional sponsorship in civil wars? This puzzle has two distinct parts that are often in tension. Which rebel groups do transregional groups want to support? Which rebel groups want sponsorship?

In this paper, I develop a theory to explore (1) the tradeoffs that transregional terrorist groups make when deciding whether to intervene in a local war, and which group to sponsor; (2) the tradeoffs made by the sponsored groups when deciding whether to accept or solicit sponsorship from the transregional group; and (3) when tensions between the two can be resolved. I argue that transregional groups prefer to invest in local affiliates that are strong enough to provide secure access to territory, and have strong enough command and control over their sub-units to effectively carry out strategic operations. Strong local groups, however, don't need transregional group support, and are unwilling to trade sovereignty and independence for any support the transregional group could offer. This creates a tension which is resolved when relatively strong local groups require goods that they cannot access themselves, but that transregional groups can provide. This occurs when strong local groups are in decline, or lose access to a resource critical to their survival. Understanding this tradeoff will help us to understand when local insurgencies are likely to become internationalized, and to exploit tensions in these partnerships.

The theory is informed by insights into al Qaeda's sponsorship decisions provided by captured documents, jihadist publications, secondary source interviews with top al Qaeda officials and members of sponsored organizations, and news and intelligence reports. Captured documents include those taken from Osama bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, and the Harmony database, which contains documents captured by the US government during operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. These documents, along with other primary source material, provide insights into the decision-making process used by al Qaeda and their sponsors. Throughout the paper, I will motivate the theory with vignettes and examples obtained from these documents.

In section 1 I will describe the scope conditions by defining transregional groups and local groups. In section 2 I outline competing hypotheses drawn from the literature. In section 3 I outline my hypotheses. In section 4 I describe my methods. The following sections contain case studies on al Qaeda in Afghanistan, Algeria, Somalia, Sudan, and Chechnya. I conclude with a note on The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), how their provinces differ from al Qaeda's franchises, and what the theory tells us to expect.

Transregional and Local Groups

Transregional terrorist groups are classified here as any groups that have an interest in expanding their area of operation or influence beyond a *single local conflict*. This interest may arise from policy goals which transcend a single locality, or because they are interested in seeding sympathetic governments in nearby regions. My definition is distinct from traditional definitions of *transnational* groups. Traditionally, any group that carries out attacks either in the territory of more than one state, or against the nationals of more than one state, is classified as transnational.¹ State boundaries, however, do not perfectly correspond to conflict boundaries. The traditional definition therefore classifies groups according to contextually arbitrary geographic lines, rather than based on the geographical dispersion of their interests. My definition solves this problem by classifying groups based on the nature of their goals.

To illustrate the distinction between transnational and transregional groups, consider two groups with contiguous territory that conduct attacks across state lines: the PKK and AQIM. Both are transnational groups because they carry out attacks in multiple countries. Only AQIM is a transregional group, however. The PKK has highly localized interests that pertain to a single, mostly unchanging territory. AQIM, on the other hand, is interested in expansion, and involves itself in many localized conflicts. For example, it focuses many of its attacks in Algeria, but also supported the Tuaregs in their rebellion against the Malian government.

A group can also be transregional while only acting within the boundaries of a single country if it is interested in gaining territorial access across multiple localities. For example, national and international umbrella skinhead organizations operate across different locations, with support from independent and competing chapters that are based in local communities. Several of these umbrella organizations have existed solely within the US, but still follow a transregional pattern.

Transregional groups are theoretically distinct from local violent actors because of their interest in territorial expansion. Civil wars in undergoverned territories provide an opportunity for terrorist groups to expand their reach (Watts, Shapiro, & Brown, 2007). One way to expand into new territory is through partnership with local rebel groups, who either have control over territory, or some level of freedom of operation that they can share with the terrorist group. This gives the local group a competitive advantage in conducting local attacks that the transregional group can take advantage of if the two cooperate. For example, al Qaeda uses partnerships with Pakistani terrorist groups to provide themselves with access to Pakistani society, which would have been much more expensive to consolidate alone (Fair, 2004). While rebel groups tend to have local aims that are distinct from the transregional group's, they may be willing to accept sponsorship from a transregional group if it increases their capacity.

An instructive analogy can be drawn between these two classes of non-state actors, and state actors. The Soviet communist party was a transregional actor in many ways. It was interested in fomenting communist revolutions across the world, in part to support sympathetic governments that it could influence. Likewise, the CIA supported anti-communist groups. These groups can be distinguished from most other domestic parties and actors, which are primarily concerned with local power. Viewed from this lens, al Qaeda has more in common with the Soviet Communist Party than it does with locally focused terrorist groups, in that the structure of its motives lies at the intersection of the global and local.

Why Partner at All?

¹ See, for example, (Sandler & Enders, 2004).

Transregional and rebel groups can benefit from partnerships because they can gain from efficiencies due to specialization in specific assets. Local groups have access to local infrastructure. By nature of having survived, they have an area of operations within which they have some level of freedom of operation. This access to territory may mean formal control, or it may mean a network of safe houses. They have local networks that enable them to operate covertly (Parkinson, 2013). They know the language, know who to bribe, can more safely engage with the broader public and raise local funds.

Transregional groups, on the other hand, have global infrastructure. They have access to global donor, arms, and smuggling networks. They have broad, generalizable knowledge and can provide training and intelligence. Global actors have a brand that can sometimes help confer legitimacy, especially among donors and potential supporters (Huff & Strezhnev, n.d.).

Both local and global assets take time and resources to develop. Partnering allows groups with high asset specificity to access assets that would be too hard to develop alone. But if partnering is so beneficial, why doesn't every group do it? What explains the variation?

Literature: Common explanations tell an incomplete story

Ideology:

One appealing explanation for the variation in sponsorship is that groups form partnerships when they have an ideological or ethnic affinity (Byman, 2013). The intuition is straight forward: groups with similar ideologies are both sympathetic to one another, and have similar goals. The explanation is appealing when viewed from the top down in the case of Islamist rebels such as al Qaeda and ISIS, because supporting Islamist groups in civil wars helps them make direct progress on their goal to establish a Caliphate across the Middle East. Local groups that fit into this broader vision may be happy to play their part if it means help achieving their local ambitions.

Ideology clearly plays a constraining role, but this explanation cannot fully explain variation in three ways. First, ties form between ideologically dissimilar groups: Al Qaeda supported secular groups in Somalia against the US.² Al Qaeda provided seed funds to, and ultimately sponsored, Abu Musab al Zarqawi in Iraq despite ideological differences as deep as those between ISIS and al Qaeda today, and a strong personal animosity between Zarqawi and Osama bin Laden (Mendelsohn, 2016).

Second, sponsorship fails to occur when groups are ideologically compatible (Bacon, 2014). Al Qaeda withdrew support from al Shabaab's predecessor, and declined to officially sponsor al Shabaab, despite bin Laden's professed ideological similarities, and his personal support for the group.³ Both Gulbudin Hekmatyar and Ahmad Shah Massoud were Islamist rebels in Afghanistan, but only one received support from al Qaeda. GSPC was an Islamist group for years before it formed a relationship with al Qaeda and became al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

Finally, group ideology is flexible. Chechen separatist president Maskhadov maintained a careful balance between secular nationalists and Islamism in order to avoid alienating the moderate population while still garnering support from extremists abroad. The rebel groups in Afghanistan regularly changed their narrative in order to justify forming alliances with erstwhile enemies (Christia, 2012). While some level of ideological affiliation contributes to the variation, it alone cannot explain why some local groups opt to join a transregional movement, when they do, or when transregional groups will accept them.

² Harmony Document: AFGP-2002-600053

³ Harmony Document: SOCOM-2012-0000005-HT

Ideology may also make groups less likely to cooperate: groups with similar ideologies compete over the same constituents and the same donors, which can make them more competitive than groups with different support bases who are working towards a common goal (Kydd & Walter, 2006; Nemeth, 2013). While the communists were still strong in Afghanistan, the regional mujahidin commanders had common goals and separate constituencies, and therefore could cooperate. This cooperation fell apart once they needed to expand their constituency to control the whole country.

Tensions between ideologues can also exist between local groups and transregional groups, but this tension is likely to be one sided. Transregional groups have global aims which are facilitated by sponsoring sympathetic rebellions. Rebel groups, on the other hand, have local aims, and are more likely to feel threatened by the introduction of a potential competitor in their territory, appealing to their constituents. For example, local fighters in both Afghanistan and Chechnya preferred autonomy, and sometimes resented the well-resourced foreign fighters.

Ideology Hypothesis: Common ideology is not enough to explain sponsorship decisions.

Power

Ideology alone cannot explain variation in partnerships because it fails to account for power relations, and strategic tradeoffs to partnerships. Rebel groups operate outside the law, so they cannot appeal to a higher authority to enforce agreements. This means that they both have the capacity to harm one another, and exist in a state of anarchy. Moreover, violent groups are often in direct competition either for control of the state, or for leadership of the rebellion.

Competition under anarchy makes it hard for rebel groups to cooperate (Furtado, 2007), but without cooperating, it is also hard for them to survive. Groups balance against threats by forming coalitions (Karmon, 2005), but these coalitions are inherently unstable because when they are strong enough to achieve victory over another coalition, individual factions within the coalition have an incentive to splinter in order to gain concessions (Bapat & Bond, 2012), or form a minimum winning coalition with the other side, thereby maximizing their spoils (Christia, 2012).

In the face of local competition, intervention by a third party can help a group to survive when it cannot depend on its local competitors (Bapat & Bond, 2012; Christia, 2012). Like states, transregional groups can help shift the balance of power. For example, AQIM helped Ansar al Dine to overpower other more moderate and nationalist Tuareg groups in Mali.

Power Hypothesis: Local groups are more likely to seek sponsorship if they are too weak to survive alone.

State Intervention

The work on civil war power dynamics described above sheds some light on when local groups might accept sponsorship, but not on when a transregional group that is not in direct competition with local actors would choose to intervene. The literature on state intervention is the closest analogue.

Both states and transregional groups are entities with broad, strategic, geopolitical goals that make decisions about whether to intervene in civil wars. This means that we may be able to learn something about when terrorist group intervention in civil war from insights on when states intervene. States intervene in civil wars for international strategic reasons (Balch-Lindsay &

Enterline, 2000; Kathman, 2011; Tillema, 1989, 1994), domestic reasons (Carment & James, 1995; Saideman, 2002), material reasons (Ross, 2004), or combinations thereof (Regan, 1998). Each of these motivations has an analogue for terrorist groups.

Strategically, transregional terrorist groups have regional or global policy goals that may be furthered by having specific groups in power, or having access to specific regions (Mendelsohn, 2016), which could guide their selection. Al Qaeda's stated strategy is to focus on the "far enemy,"—the United States. So when the United States intervened in Muslim lands in Iraq, it was crucial to al Qaeda's strategy to be part of that fight (Mendelsohn, 2016). This helps explain why bin Laden was willing to support someone he personally disagreed with: Zarqawi provided an opportunity to get a foothold in the Iraq war. This means that transregional groups will focus on politically relevant conflicts.

While transnational groups do not have domestic publics, they do have constituencies. These constituencies consist of potential recruits, funding sources, and sympathizers that create a culture that facilitates recruitment, fundraising, and freedom of movement. Another reason al Qaeda needed to get involved in the Iraq war was because it drew such strong international attention. As a new focal point, al Qaeda had to be seen to be doing something in order to maintain leadership over the transnational movement. Constituency concerns will therefore also push groups into politically relevant conflicts.

Materially, transnational terrorist groups may also seek access to resources that may enable them to continue their campaigns, choosing to ally with wealthy groups or with groups that have access to, or may gain access to, mineral wealth. This may explain the initial relationship between AQIM and al Qaeda. Al Qaeda's brand name conferred legitimacy, while AQIM's access to smuggling routes made them flush with funds. An al Qaeda leader cited access to resource wealth as a motive for supporting the Chechen Civil War.⁴ Along similar lines, unlike states, transregional groups do not have sovereign territory. One material gain from intervention is territory within which to operate.⁵

Al Qaeda Franchising

There has been some recent work on transregional group sponsorship specifically in the case of al Qaeda. Much of this work has focused on whether or not it is a sign of strength (Braniff & Moghadam, 2011; Farrall, 2011), weakness (Mendelsohn, 2016), or something in between (Byman, 2014).

On the one hand, expansion offered a way for al Qaeda to expand its reach without having to build up grassroots support. Al Qaeda sees itself as a leader in the global jihadist movement, and was willing to support its affiliates in order to achieve its broader goals (Bacon, 2014). Conversely, Mendelsohn contends that it was a strategy born of weakness (Mendelsohn, 2016). The scale of the 9/11 attacks gave al Qaeda the notoriety they craved, but they were unprepared for the fallout. Faced with both increased expectations and decreased operating capacity in the wake of the US response, al Qaeda needed to find some way to double down and show their strength. According to Mendelsohn, affiliation was a strategy that could be used to appear to be in control and expanding, without actually having to pay the costs of doing so.

⁴ Harmony Document #AFGP-2002-600053. "The internal situation in the Caucasus poses advantages and disadvantages to the jihad movement there. The advantages include: ... The region is rich in resources, especially petroleum

⁵ Harmony Document #AFGP-2002-600053. Another advantage listed was "The nature of this mountainous region and its tough people are totally suited to guerrilla warfare, the inevitable picture of future warfare. In the view of most observers the battle of Grozny was the initiation of this lengthy war."

Whether or not al Qaeda chose a franchising strategy because they felt insecure, franchising still represents a cheaper way to extend influence than building up an organization in unfamiliar territory. Sponsorship did allow al Qaeda to extend its reach into the territory of the groups it sponsored.

While cooperation can be beneficial, it is also risky. Local affiliates focus on local goals, often at the expense of al Qaeda Core's mission and reputation (Byman, 2014; Mendelsohn, 2016; Thomas, 2013). Local groups with local goals can also dilute the ideological purity of the parent organization (Mendelsohn, 2016). Maintaining command and control requires time and resources, and risks security (Shapiro, 2008). For affiliates, the al Qaeda name provokes international attention,⁶ and local groups must forego autonomy and swear allegiance to al Qaeda in exchange for the brand.

Bringing it Together: Transregional Groups

The above explanations help explain which conflicts groups are likely to be interested in, but do not narrow the scope enough to explain variation, and cannot help explain how transregional groups select among local rebels. If cooperation with local groups provides benefits, why don't transregional groups ally with everyone pursuing a similar ideological agenda locally, or with everyone who could provide access to territory or other resources? First off, transregional groups have limited resources and cannot invest in all potential partners. For example, under bin Laden, al Qaeda was supportive of, but not prepared to dedicate massive resources toward, al Shabaab. This creates a resource allocation problem, but what are the criteria that drive selection of partners?

Given limited resources, transregional groups will invest only in groups that will provide a strong return on investment. When states intervene in civil wars, they are more likely to do so when their investment is necessary and sound (Gent, 2008). Transregional groups follow a similar logic, and only support groups that they believe are strong enough to survive and to provide secure access to territory. Providing training and resources to a group that will soon be dismantled results in a wasted investment, but is also dangerous because it allows counter-terrorists to use information captured from the weak group to target the transregional group.

Investment hypothesis: Transregional groups want strong local partners.

Being a good investment means being able to survive, but it also means that the investment will translate into the outcomes that interest the transregional group. These outcomes may be overthrowing a government, maintaining access to a territory, or even maintaining a trade route as in the case of organizations involved in the black market. The ability of a local group to deliver depends both on their capacity to deliver outcomes, and their interest in delivering outcomes favorable to the transregional group.

Strong groups have a greater capacity to deliver because they have better command and control over their rank and file. Better command and control means more efficient and directed use of the resources provided to the group. Transregional groups can provide training with international contextualization. Groups with a strong command and control structure, whatever that structure may be, will be better able to utilize the lessons and training provided by transregional groups. Without command and control, lessons provided by the transregional group cannot diffuse to operatives. Without disciplined and skilled operatives, coordination of attacks is difficult. Similarly, since groups with stronger command and control can better control their

⁶ Harmony doc. SOCOM-2012-0000005

own actions, they are also better able to commit to actions that are in the interest of the transregional group.

One of a transregional group's most valuable assets is its international network of operatives and donors. This means that it must carefully maintain its reputation. Transregional groups prefer partners with strong command and control in part because they are better at controlling their low-level operatives, and can therefore better guard their reputation. For example, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) commanders complained of the lack of discipline among their affiliates in Mali, and how it alienated local populations and foiled their plans to create a long-term base of operations. Enforcing command and control of local affiliates, when it is possible at all, is risky and expensive (Shapiro, 2008).

Finally, the investment is favorable if the local group can commit to engaging in activities that are beneficial to the transregional group. Local groups and transregional groups have inherently different interests. Local groups focus on local goals, often at the expense of the transregional group's mission and reputation (Byman, 2014; Thomas, 2013). One reason for the tensions between al Qaeda-core and ISIS' predecessor al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was that the brutality and sectarianism of AQI harmed al Qaeda-core's international reputation. Conversely, transregional groups focus on transregional goals at the expense of local goals. Haqqani was frustrated when bin Laden redirected his forces from what Haqqani considered an important local battlefront, to defend Saudi Arabia from Saddam Hussein, which bin Laden considered a more important international battlefront.

While at the most basic level transregional groups want access, their very presence impinges on the sovereignty of their local partners. The Taliban did everything they could to prevent bin Laden from making public international statements because they believed it harmed their efforts to gain international recognition as the government of Afghanistan, even though the statements contributed to al Qaeda's primary objective. Groups will partner when their interests are more aligned. Note that this is not the same as having a common ideology: al Qaeda supported secular groups against the US in Sudan, for example.

There is an inherent tension in the value of affiliate strength. In asymmetric interstate alliances, the weaker state can compensate the stronger state for failing to contribute much defensive capacity to the union by giving up some of their autonomy (Morrow, 1986, 1991). A similar dynamic may take place among militant groups (Bapat & Bond, 2012). Strong groups are more able to exert their independence. Because they are less dependent on the transregional group, they will be less willing to alter their behavior to accommodate the transregional group's objectives. But weak groups are a poor investment: it is only worth investing in a group if that group can survive.

While the nature of the relationship may change depending on group strength, the importance of reputation and survival to transregional groups means that they will err on the side of choosing strong groups. While states have the luxury of having weak allies because they have territory, transregional groups depend on their affiliates for access to land. Moreover, weak groups have poor command and control. While some of the divergent interests between al Qaeda and its affiliates are strategic, many of the most damaging divergences related to reputational damage when local groups were brutal or behaved criminally. Less professional groups with worse command and control are more likely to engage in criminal activity, and thus damage the reputation of the transregional group—as occurred with Ansar al Dine and AQIM in Mali. It is better to lose some influence over a partner than to lose access to territory because a group is weak, or to compromise an international brand by affiliating with groups incapable of preventing

local units from engaging in undirected criminal behavior. From Somalia, to Algeria, to Afghanistan, al Qaeda has shown a preference for affiliating with strong groups.

Hypothesis 1: Transregional groups prefer strong local partners that provide a safe investment over weaker local partners that they can control.

Bringing It Together: Local Rebels

Local groups benefit from cooperation because they receive resources, training, global intelligence, and access to international networks providing funds, legitimacy, and recruits. Sponsorship from a transregional group can tip the power balance in the local conflict and help a group to survive or succeed in consolidating control over their territory. For example, with support from AQIM, Ansar al Dine was able to make major territorial gains in Mali.

The benefits of being sponsored also come with costs. Local groups trying to consolidate territory care about local sovereignty, and must give up some level of sovereignty and autonomy when they allow a transregional group freedom of action within their territory. Al Qaeda requires all of its official affiliates to swear bayat, or a formal declaration of obedience to al Qaeda-core's leader. This requirement for subservience was almost enough to make Zarqawi of al Qaeda in Iraq refuse affiliation (Weaver, 2006). Even more extreme, once a transregional group is present, it may compete for influence locally. This kind of competition is in part why ISIS split with al Qaeda when it entered the Syrian Civil War. Along similar lines, local groups must also trust that if they grant transregional groups access, they will continue to support them, and not their rivals. While al Qaeda may have benefited from access to the Northeastern regions of Afghanistan, supporting Massoud's Jamiat-e-Islami would have meant supporting their chosen sponsor's enemy. Hekmatyar, the leader of Hezb-e-Islami, was angry when he erroneously believed that al Qaeda had provided weapons to Massoud.⁷

Beyond power relations, local and transregional groups also have inherently different goals. Transregional groups want local groups to engage in activities that benefit their broader goals at the expense of local objectives. Local groups are interested in winning a local conflict, while transregional groups have broader goals that extend beyond the local context. For example, bin Laden, partnered with the Haqqani network in Afghanistan, withdrew his forces at the last minute from a joint attack on the Khost airport, in order to prepare his soldiers to protect Saudi Arabia from an expansionist Saddam Hussein just before the first Gulf War.⁸ While both al Qaeda and the Taliban benefited from the Taliban's control of Afghanistan, al Qaeda launched the 9/11 attacks without the knowledge of the Taliban, which stood to suffer.

Local groups should only be willing to trade autonomy for the benefits sponsorship can provide when they have to. They only have to when the transregional group can offer something necessary to their survival. But, only groups that are strong enough to survive are a safe enough investment for transregional groups. So when does partnership occur?

Hypothesis 2: Local groups only accept transregional support when they require something that the transregional actor can provide, which they cannot attain on their own.

Groups use substitutable goods in order to survive and act. They need resources for arms and training, recruits, and territory within which to act. Resources, recruits, and training can come from substitutable sources. Recruits can be drawn internationally, or from different local constituencies, and different groups are better suited to tapping into different recruitment pools. Similarly, resources can be drawn from the population, trade, natural resources, looting, or international donors. Training and military expertise can be sourced locally, from state sponsors,

⁷ Harmony Document: AFGP-2002-800581

⁸ Harmony Document: AFGP-2002-600090

or from transregional group sponsors. Groups will only accept the hit to their autonomy by accepting sponsorship if they have no other way to access the goods they need to survive or succeed. This helps to resolve the apparent contradiction: local groups can be capable of providing strong command and control, and be established enough to survive, but be unable to, or less efficient at, producing an asset necessary to thrive. This is especially likely when groups are in decline, or face a new foe.

Local groups and transregional groups specialize in different tasks, and are therefore better at producing different assets necessary for producing sustained local rebellion.⁹ Transregional groups, by their nature, are better at soliciting international donations and recruits.¹⁰ Their connection to the international network also allows them to source weapons and other supplies. They can also provide generalizable expertise. Al Qaeda-core specializes in collecting lessons learned from their affiliates in order to produce contextualized best practices for the conduct of fighting, which they package into training that they offer to their operatives. This makes al Qaeda fighters very effective in a general sense.

Local groups, on the other hand, have access to territory. Even if they do not hold sovereign control over territory, they have an area within which they are able to operate. For example, they may have bribed the appropriate officials, or have a network of safe houses allowing them to operate within a territory controlled by the government. Transregional groups would have to duplicate this effort without a detailed knowledge of the local context. Local groups also specialize in cultivating the support of their local base, which can provide funds or facilitate their operations within their territory.

Transregional groups can invest in operating locally, and local groups can invest in building transregional networks, but this requires a concerted effort that distracts from their primary goals. The Haqqani network, a local group in Afghanistan, was unique in its efforts to create its own global support network that allowed it to continue to operate somewhat independently of the larger regional warlords (Peters, 2012). It was able to do this by publicizing its exploits in magazines. This attention to international donors was part of what attracted support from bin Laden to begin with, with the burgeoning al Qaeda being an important part of his network. Similarly, Sayyaf of Ittehad-al-Islami was able to build a group because he solicited support from Arab donors. This allowed him to substitute international recruits and funds for a local support base, and thus to be a successful local commander in the Afghan Civil War. Haqqani and Sayyaf were exceptions. Others, such as Younis Khalis, tried, but were unable to gain international support because of their lack of notoriety.

This specialization allows groups to cooperate to more efficiently produce their goals. Transregional groups depend on local groups for territorial access. Local groups will accept transregional group support when they can provide a good that they specialize in, and the local group requires access to in order to succeed. This allows a possible resolution in the tensions between hypotheses 1 and 2. Transregional groups want strong partners, but strong, self-sufficient local groups prefer independence. Because groups have limited resources, partnership between strong local groups and transnational groups is possible when the transnational group can provide specialized goods needed by the local group.

Hypothesis 3: Cooperation between strong local groups and transregional groups is possible when transregional groups can provide specialized goods required by local groups.

⁹ AFGP-2002-800597

¹⁰ Harmony Document: AFGP-2002-600970.

Case Studies

Case Selection

To test the theory, I use four case studies in which I examine the effect of the trajectory of group strength on sponsorship. The theory presupposes that the groups have shared aims and would benefit from cooperation. I therefore condition on ideological affinity, and transregional group interest in the conflict. Al Qaeda's global legitimacy and access to donor networks and recruits hinged on their involvement in global jihadist struggles against non-Muslim occupiers, and support for groups establishing Islamist emirates. This makes several civil conflicts stand out as likely candidates for intervention. Specifically, al Qaeda was interested in the Afghan and Chechen civil wars against Russia. In Algeria, they had an interest in supporting Islamists against the French backed regime and pro-French elite. In Somalia, al Qaeda was interested in opposing the United States and the UN Operation in Somalia, as well as in taking advantage of ungoverned territory there.

These four cases, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Somalia, and Sudan, provide variation within which to test the theory. Three cases show within-case or temporal variation, helps to control for many possible confounders. The final case, in which no partnership occurred, helps ensure that the three previous cases were not just a matter of arbitrary timing. First, AQIM exhibits temporal variation: why did AQIM's predecessor, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), opt for sponsorship at the time at which it did, given it, and its predecessor the Armed Islamic Group's (GIA), long term ideological affinity? My second case, Afghanistan, exhibits within-case variation: Osama bin Laden had to choose between two Islamist warlords with whom he shared some ideological affinity. Why did he choose Hekmatyar over Massoud, despite his early ties with the Muslim Brotherhood? Somalia shows temporal variation: why did al Qaeda give up on Somalia, and why did they eventually change their mind to support al Shabaab? Finally, why was there no partnership between al Qaeda and rebels in Chechnya, despite their ideological affinity, the importance of the Chechen civil conflict to al Qaeda's rhetoric, and al Qaeda's demonstrated interest?

Empirical Implications of the Theoretical Model

If the tensions described the theory are at play, we should expect to see several things in the case studies. First, transregional groups should avoid entangling partnership with, or abandon, weak local groups that cannot provide security or command and control over their sub-units. If transregional groups prefer highly asymmetric partnerships in which they create new groups, sponsor weak groups that are beholden to them, or avoid sponsorship of strong groups that are independent, then that would be evidence in support of the alternative hypothesis that transregional groups prefer sponsorees that they can control.

Second, strong self-sufficient local groups should reject sponsorship by transregional groups. Groups should only give up their independence when they have exhausted alternative means of survival. Evidence against the theory would be if local groups accept transregional group presence when they were self-sufficient. This might suggest that local groups are looking for support wherever they can find it, or that they are driven by ideological considerations.

Algeria

The Algerian civil war began in 1992, when a military coup attacked the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) party¹¹ after a first round of electoral victories, before their anticipated

¹¹ "Algeria's Islamic fundamentalists, poised for election victory, said yesterday the armed forces had been deployed in strength throughout the country over the last 24 hours ... [to] regions where seats were decided at the first poll." (Reuter, 1992)

victory in a second round.¹² The military pushed out the defeated prime minister,¹³ canceled elections, rounded up thousands of FIS supporters and worked to dismantle the organization. The military successfully captured most of the FIS leadership and many supporters, successfully clamping down on public uprising for a time. Surviving members of the FIS fled, creating the more moderate Armed Islamic Movement (MIA) under Abdelkader Chebouti, and the more radical GIA under Abdelhak Layada. While the groups sometimes coordinated action, the MIA and FIS focused on military targets and were open to dialogue. The GIA, on the other hand, was more violent and targeted both civilians and the military.

The origins of the GIA and their initial ties to al Qaeda are unclear. Some secondary sources suggest that early GIA members were veterans of the war in Afghanistan where they came into contact with al Qaeda (Tawil, 2011). Another report suggests that bin Laden offered funding if GIA promised to split with the MIA, and then rescinded support when the GIA requested exclusive funding in Algeria.¹⁴ If this report is true, it suggests that the GIA opposed bin Laden funding its competitors, and viewed the funding as a means to get a comparative advantage in the conflict. It is also possible that they attended training at bin Laden's camp in Khartoum during his time in Sudan.¹⁵ None of these reports are verified. Either way, if there was a relationship early in the group's existence, it did not amount to full scale sponsorship. Al Qaeda did probe other neighboring Islamist groups while headquartered in Khartoum, it may be that he briefly engaged with the GIA. If it existed at all, it was likely little more than either a personal relationship between members of GIA and al Qaeda formed during the Afghan civil war, or a small seed investment from bin Laden.

The GIA was unlikely to rely on al Qaeda for external fundraising, because the GIA sent operatives to France to engage in fundraising and recruiting directly. They also drew revenue from local taxation and check points, looting, and kidnapping ransoms, which was enough to support their efforts through the early 90s.

The GIA's undoing was their exceptional brutality (Tawil, 2011). It enforced its draconian version of Shariah law and targeted anyone it condemned as an apostate, which included anyone who was not a supporter. They conducted massacres and executed or mutilated civilians for offenses such as having a satellite dish, or not wearing a scarf.¹⁶ They also targeted defectors and members of rival groups. As a result, they rapidly lost public support, domestically

"Security forces last night arrested Mr Abdel Kader Hachani, the acting leader of the FIS for inciting soldiers to desert the army." (Financial Times, 1992).

FIS leaders arrested, supporters take to the streets. (Financial Times, 1992)

¹² "Resounding victory of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in the first round of the country's general election." (Financial Times, 1991)

"While this second round is not expected to prevent the fundamentalist group, the Islamic Salvation Front, from winning a majority, the hope of the secular forces is that they can win enough seats to give them a voice in the new assembly" (Daily News of Los Angeles, 1991)

¹³ Anti-Democratic Forces Push Chaldi Out. ("NPR," 1992)

¹⁴ A footnote in a Combating Terrorism Center suggests that report refers to "Muqaddam, 80ff", "Muhammad Muqaddam, al-Afghan al-Jaza'iriyun: min al-jama'a ila'l-qa'ida (Rouiba: Mu'assasa al-wataniyya li'l-itisal wa'l-nashr wa'l-ishhar, 2002)." I cannot find this reference. It is possible that it is an unreleased document in the Harmony center, or an Arabic language document.

¹⁵ A footnote in (Brynjar & AAsild, 2001) refers to an msnbc article with a broken link and that I could not find in news archives in which unnamed US officials claimed there was a connection to Khartoum

¹⁶ See an account of the massacres by an independent truth commission (Mellah & justice pour l'Algérie, 2004)

and internationally,¹⁷ which harmed their ability to partner with others. Moreover, it was rumored that GIA had been infiltrated by the Algerian security forces, which meant that other resistance groups were hesitant to cooperate lest they be targeted by the Algerian government, and internal commanders lacked trust. The GIA, with its failing reputation, was not a viable candidate for sponsorship.

In 1996, rifts began to form between commanders in the GIA over the failure of their civilian victimization strategy. In 1998, Hattabi led an exodus of commanders into the newly formed Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) over conflicts about the targeting of civilians. Hattabi publicly declared his opposition to the killing of civilians. The public break amounted to rebranding for the commanders who made the move. The GSPC could portray itself as more civilian friendly, and capitalize on the swell of support to outpace the remaining commanders in the GIA, while maintaining some operational continuity and access to funding networks.

The GSPC's initial success was short lived. After the September 11th attacks, the U.S. clamped down on global terrorist financing, freezing GSPC assets.¹⁸ This constrained GSPC's capacity to draw on funds from Europe. For example, the GSPC had skimmed from disreputable Muslim charities, many of which were shut down. Assets were also seized. Several million U.S. dollars in ransom funds were frozen in Chad. In 2003, the war in Iraq diverted funds and potential recruits. These financial pressures contributed to the conduct of criminal activity and the weakening of the GSPC's anti-civilian casualty reputation.

Meanwhile, the government made inroads toward finding a resolution to the conflict. Algeria held presidential elections in 1995, and parliamentary elections in 1997. In 1995 the FIS and other small groups entered into talks with the Government, though these talks were unsuccessful. In 2000, the government began signing amnesty agreements to encourage rebels to lay down their arms. With the possibility of government reconciliation, and concerns over civilian casualties, Hattab pushed to negotiate with the government.¹⁹ This caused fissures within the GSPC between Hattab and more extremist commanders. In September of 2003, Hattab resigned as leader of the GSPC. Many of the rank and file also began to leave in favor of accepting amnesty deals (Tawil, 2011), though this was buttressed by the release of over a thousand imprisoned combatants, many of whom rejoined the rebellion.²⁰

Facing financial straits and with dwindling popularity and recruitment, the GSPC needed access to new resources and to find a new way to legitimize themselves and seek access to recruits and funds.²¹ In 2004, they began to make inroads to al Qaeda-core,²² because al Qaeda could provide them with a different pool of recruits and a different source of legitimacy. These inroads began with a unilateral declaration of support for al Qaeda in order under the new emir, Nabil Sahraoui. After Sahraoui was killed, his successor Abd al-Malik Droudkel continued to solicit support from al Qaeda, using Zarqawi in Iraq as a mediator. In 2006, GSPC formally

¹⁷ The GIA was condemned by the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, Egyptian Islamic Jihad, Osama bin Laden, and former supporters including Abu Qatada and Abu Musab- al-Suri. (Mendelsohn, 2016)

¹⁸ (Executive Order 13224, 2001)

¹⁹ Portion of an interview with Hattab, published in (Tawil, 2011)

²⁰ Interview with Droudkel, leader of GSPC from 2006 onwards. (The New York Times, 2008)

²¹ "We saw the merger with al-Qa'ida as giving us the breathing space we badly needed," Quote from AbuUmar Abd al Birr, head of GSPC media wing, published in (Tawil, 2011)

²² Ibid.

declared bayat to al Qaeda, and changed their name to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). By 2008 at the latest, a Qaeda-core was funneling funds to AQIM.²³

The leadership of the group, which remained largely constant from their time in the GIA, initially focused on the Algerian conflict. When their local tactics hurt their credibility and capacity, several major leaders rebranded as the GSPC. It was only when the global war on terror reduced their fundraising capacity and local reconciliation efforts reduced their local standing that they reached out formally to al Qaeda for support. Rather than focusing on national liberation, the group shifted focus toward creating a caliphate because it allowed them to draw from a new pool of recruits, and on a new source of legitimacy. The group's first choice was to attempt to rebrand, but when that didn't work, they sought sponsorship from a transregional group, and shifted their behavior in order to continue to effectively gain that support, and in order to rely on al Qaeda's more robust financing networks.

Afghanistan

Variation among the commanders in Afghanistan is more complex. The two major Islamist commanders, Ahmad Shah Massoud and Gulbudin Hekmatyar, both sought support from donors operating out of Peshawar. All parties required support in order to survive for two reasons. First, the war was highly asymmetric: groups needed access to funds and weapons in order to survive against the Soviets. Second, there was considerable competition among the rebels. Groups were made up of nested commanders, each vying for independence and prominence. Success in this competition required having access to funds and weapons which could be funneled to sub-commanders to secure their support as they engaged in their own local competitions. All parties needed external support because everyone else had it, and if they didn't, they would be replaced by an enterprising competitor who was willing to accept outside funds from one of the many states or non-state actors who wanted to influence the war.

Two cases exemplify the importance of external support in Afghanistan, and the extent to which it was able to help commanders become primary actors in the war. The first is the success of Sayyaf and his Ittihad-al-Islami. Sayyaf had little support or influence within Afghanistan, but was able to recruit foreign fighters in order to become a lasting, prominent actor within the civil war. He was kept relevant and afloat because of both state and non-state support. Ismael Khan in Herat was defeated, but was able to start afresh and reenter the war after being funded by Iran. In both of these cases, it was access to funds and weapons provided by external actors that allowed these groups to not only survive, but to thrive.

Both Hekmatyar and Massoud required external support to survive, but Hekmatyar was in greater need for several reasons. First, Massoud was a more charismatic, popular figure. He had a broader base of popular support. To this day, his commanders and advisors use their connection to him as a source of legitimacy. He was also good at talking to Western media, which earned him friends in Washington, where he was viewed as the least distasteful option. Most US support went to Hekmatyar indirectly through Pakistan, but the US did provide Massoud some funds directly. The US was an ideal supporter because it was legally not allowed to get involved directly in the civil war, and was thus very hands off. US support consisted of checks and weapons with few real strings attached. Once, when the US paid Massoud to attack

²³ Abbatobad document titled "Respected Brother, kind Shaykh, Zamrai, Sahib". In it, an al Qaeda operative uses coded language to inform bin Laden (Zamrai) that funds had been transferred to the "Algerians". Two of the names in referenced in the letter refer to individuals who either died or were killed in 2008.

the Soviets in a mountain pass, he took the money but made no attack. He was not punished, and continued to receive funds, because the other options were so unsavory.

Hekmatyar was more conservative and more brutal, which made him unpopular in Washington. He received much of his support through Pakistan,²⁴ which wanted an Islamist who would not challenge the Durand line dividing Pashtunistan between Afghanistan and Pakistan, to dominate the Pashtuns. Hekmatyar ruled because he was able to funnel funds to his sub-commanders, and because he had the biggest stick. Under him were several relatively independent commanders, with less of a base of popular support. His coalition was therefore less stable, and he was more dependent on external support for funds. Hekmatyar and Massoud were among the two strongest parties vying for dominance in the rebellion, and as such, had an interest in both gaining external sponsors, and preventing one another from receiving support. Unlike Massoud, who had more options because of his cultivated relations with the West and his base of popular support, Hekmatyar was active in Peshawar soliciting donations and competing against, (and assassinating,) his rivals.

One source of support was the Arabs who had congregated in Peshawar in order to support the jihad against the Soviets. The precursor to al Qaeda, the Services Office, was founded by Abdullah Azzam and his young mentee, Osama bin Laden. The Services Office was transregional in nature—Azzam had helped seed the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine—but was less militant than al Qaeda would be. It was intended to help rid Muslim countries of foreign occupiers, but bin Laden was still a Saudi patriot, and the organization was not focused on overthrowing corrupt leaders. While it funded the rebels in Afghanistan, it had no regular fighters and focused on humanitarian work. Azzam, who shared brotherhood ties with Massoud's party, favored Massoud as his warlord of choice.

Aymin al Zawahiri fled Egypt to Afghanistan after failing to foment jihad. He believed that Egypt should be the seat of global jihad, and that Afghanistan was a peripheral conflict but an opportune place to train forces for the real battle in the Middle East. A medical doctor, Zawahiri worked in a field hospital on the border in order to gain experience and credibility, and recruit support for jihad in Egypt. He met bin Laden, and the two became secret friends because Azzam disapproved of the relationship and the bad influence he was having on bin Laden.

Al Qaeda's eventual support for Hekmatyar over Massoud can in part be explained in terms of petty politics among the Arabs in Peshawar. Bin Laden, who was young, rich, and idealistic, was a catch for anyone trying to create a militant group. As the competition for bin Laden's favor intensified, Hekmatyar and Massoud were drawn in. Azzam favored Massoud, Zawahiri favored Hektmatyar. Rumors about Massoud spread through the camp, such as that Massoud was bathing with French nurses, in an attempt to discredit Massoud, which in turn discredited Azzam. Internal politicking alone is not enough to explain why the conflict unfolded as it did, however. Azzam was a popular charismatic figure who had disagreements with Zawahiri's vision for the future, so conflict was inevitable, but why did support for Hekmatyar and Massoud fall the way they did, and why did the conflict center on who to support?

Unlike Azzam's more charity-oriented approach, Zawahiri's vision required the formation of a transregional *militant* organization, with fighters that required access to the battle, and territory within which to operate autonomously. Massoud was a poor choice for two reasons. First, his territory was far away from the border. Getting to the Panjshir valley required a two week donkey ride across the Hindu Kush mountain range. Second, Massoud was not as keen on

²⁴ While his support was funneled through Pakistan, the original source of the support was Pakistan, the US, and Arab donors.

allowing fighters to operate within his territory. He had more consolidated, centralized control with a stronger domestic support base than did Hekmatyar, and had access to hands-off Western funds. Unlike Massoud, Hekmatyar spent time in Peshawar lobbying for support, and was willing to allow bin Laden and his fighters to act within his territory.

The decentralized structure of Hekmatyar's organization also made him an appealing choice. Bin Laden's first base was within the territory of one of Hekmatyar's sub-commanders, Jalaludin Haqqani. In pursuit of autonomy and security, Haqqani solicited external support from the Arabs. He was the one willing to give territory to bin Laden for his first training camp in exchange for access to fighters and infrastructure. Bin Laden and Haqqani built a complex of caves, and bin Laden built a training camp near one of Haqqani's (Fisk, 1993). New recruits would receive basic training with Haqqani before moving on to bin Laden's camp after which they would choose whose units to join (Rassler & Brown, 2011). Though Hekmatyar would later rent land to bin Laden for additional bases.

The fledgling al Qaeda partnered with Hekmatyar because he was one of the strongest Islamists in the country, and because he, and more importantly his sub-commander Haqqani, were willing to trade territory for access to the Saudi network of donors and fighters that al Qaeda could provide. Haqqani was willing to give up some sovereignty because it secured his position in the competition for prominence among local warlords, and Hekmatyar was willing to consent for similar reasons.

Later, once the Taliban had gained control and grew in strength, there were tensions between the Taliban and bin Laden. The Taliban didn't need al Qaeda, and did not want to accept the decrease in sovereignty that allowing al Qaeda access to Afghanistan entailed. The Taliban publically tried to distance itself in order to avoid the negative repercussions of affiliation with al Qaeda (Shenon, 1999). In response to finding that Bin Laden had acted against his wishes within his territory again, Mullah Omar exclaimed: "There is only one ruler. Is it me or Osama?" Mullah Omar wanted Western recognition, which was harmed by bin Laden's continued media presence. The Taliban did its best to keep bin Laden off air (Cullinson & Higgins, 2002), but al Qaeda was operating from within Haqqani territory. Haqqani maintained relative independence under Younis Khalis, who had officially declared fealty to the Taliban, but who operated independently enough to be able to provide secure territory to al Qaeda.

Al Qaeda was even wary of supporting the Taliban at first because bin Laden did not believe that they had a strong organization that could successfully control territory. The Arab fighters viewed the Taliban as country bumpkins, incapable of sophisticated ideology or ruling the country (Cullinson & Higgins, 2002). Haqqani's erstwhile commander, Younis Khalis, promised bin Laden that he would do what he could to intercede with the Taliban should bin Laden ever get into trouble. Moreover, bin Laden forbade any of his fighters from fighting with the Taliban. The only time this rule was broken was when they were conducting joint activities with Haqqani (Peters, 2012; Rassler & Brown, 2011). Al Qaeda remained predominantly within Haqqani's territory. The other commanders were falling to the Taliban, meaning that they could not have offered al Qaeda sustained territorial access. Haqqani managed to maintain his independence while officially joining the Taliban, so his territory was relatively safe. The Taliban might have been able to offer more expansive territory, but they were still untested when bin Laden returned to Afghanistan. It wasn't until the Taliban became strong that bin Laden attempted to reconcile with Mullah Omar.

While Haqqani was technically Taliban affiliated when al Qaeda returned to Afghanistan, Mullah Omar was not acceptant of their presence until after the US cruise missile bombing, at

which point reconciliation with the West became less of a priority. Viewed through the lens of the theory, it was not until the Taliban realized that they could not receive legitimacy from the West that they turned to another source. By recognizing Mullah Omar as an Emir, bin Laden provided the Taliban with much needed legitimacy, and in exchange, received access to Taliban territory and a position of trust with Mullah Omar.

Other groups did want al Qaeda affiliation. A letter to bin Laden from an unnamed high ranking al Qaeda official describes the influx of affiliate requests in 2010, and the need to develop a system to handle them and to exclude groups that would not be good stewards of the brand name.²⁵ The reason cited for this influx is the growing popular appeal of al Qaeda, and the desire for legitimacy. As al Qaeda specialized in creating a network of support, groups sought sponsorship in order to solicit funds and recruits from new constituencies.

While GSPC and the Afghan commanders had strong organizations, al Qaeda has refused partnership with organizations that were not capable of effective command and control, even if they offered territorial access. While al Qaeda has built training camps in several countries, they do so in areas securely controlled by a sponsored group.

Chechnya and the Caucasus

While sponsorship decisions in the other three cases were two-way, they were often driven by solicitation from local groups. The Chechen case is valuable because it highlights an example of a strong group refusing attempted inroads by a transregional group. My first order is to demonstrate that al Qaeda wanted to be involved in the Caucasus.

The Chechen conflict has long been rhetorically important to al Qaeda. Russian control of, and humanitarian abuses in, Muslim-majority Caucasus is a frequent refrain in calls to Jihad.²⁶ Moreover, early in al Qaeda's career, Chechnya was one a popular wars in extremist circles. Involvement would have helped al Qaeda to recruit, fundraise and expand their global network. For example, Mounir El Motassadeq, one of the plotters for the 9/11 attacks, testified that Atta, the mastermind behind the attack, and wanted to fight in Chechnya.²⁷

There is also a fair amount of evidence that al Qaeda tried to do more than pay lip service. Because the nature of their operations are covert, establishing exactly how they were involved is challenging. While any single piece of evidence is circumstantial, when taken as a whole, suggest fair confidence that al Qaeda would have liked to expand into the Caucasus region. In 1996, as the Afghan civil war was beginning to draw down as the Taliban took control, al Qaeda began to explore next steps. Bin Laden had already moved to Khartoum to probe the situation in Africa as a potential next locus. Aymin al-Zawahiri allegedly went to Chechnya to explore the possibility of engagement there, but was captured by Russian forces and imprisoned

²⁵ Harmony Document: SOCOM-2012-0000006

²⁶ For Example, in a letter found in the Abbottabad compound titled "Kind brother... may God preserve you" from Atiyatallah (Abu 'Abd-al-Rahman) to bin Laden in 2010: "Here I am, one of the Muslim arrows; let the Muslim leadership throw me where it wants. Then he would be told: So-and-so, go to Chechnya because they need someone like you and because going there is easy for you".

In a lecture by bin Laden in July of 2007: "thousands and thousands of our brothers have been annihilated by bulldozers and tanks in Chechnya". <https://ds-drupal.haverford.edu/aqsi/aqsi-statement/667>

²⁷ ("Hijackers Had Hoped to Fight in Chechnya, Court Told (washingtonpost.com)," n.d.)

for 6 months.²⁸ According to an al Qaeda defector, bin Laden paid recruits \$1,500 to go to Chechnya to cover the cost of weapons.²⁹

Bin Laden and the early members of al Qaeda-core likely had personal relationships with some of the commanders in the Chechen civil war dating back to when they were all followers of Azzam in Afghanistan. Specifically, Ibn al-Khattab and his successor Abu Walid, commanders of the foreign fighters unit in Chechnya, started their career as jihadists in Afghanistan.³⁰ These personal relationships should not be overstated—both Khattab and Abu Walid fought in both Chechen civil wars, earning their fame and position, married local wives, and made the Chechen conflict their own. But their movement to Chechnya suggests that Chechnya was a priority for Azzam's mentees. It is possible that bin Laden sent a small core of al Qaeda forces to join Khattab in Chechnya. Reports of al Qaeda fighters are unconfirmed and are likely to be exaggerated by the Russian media. However, al Qaeda affiliates were found in sweeps of the Pankisi valley, a rebel safe haven in Georgia, in 2002. If al Qaeda did send fighters, it may have been to explore the possibility of getting a foothold for involvement in the conflict.

Finally, Chechen fighters participated in the Afghan civil war, and some likely attended training camps there before returning to Chechnya.³¹ Al Qaeda training camps are selective, that they took in Chechen fighters may suggest an attempt to create sympathy toward al Qaeda's ideology among fighters. Together, the collection of evidence suggests an al Qaeda interest.

The Chechen separatists were resistant to interference from foreign influence. This was in part due to the nationalist undertones to the rebellion, and in part because groups were able to sustain themselves without loss of autonomy. The first civil war began in September of 1991 when Chechnya unilaterally declared independence. The rebellion was initially united under President/General Dzhokhar Dudayev. Players that would later emerge as major commanders remained subordinate under Dudayev's charismatic leadership. Dudayev kept the conflict local. For example, when Major (at the time) Baseyev requested permission to take his Special Missions Battalion to participate in the conflict in the Abkhaz, Dudayev refused. Baseyev resigned and took "volunteers" instead, which allowed Dudayev to credibly deny that official Chechen units had been sent.³² But the outflow of Chechen fighters to the conflicts in Afghanistan and Abkhazia in anticipation of the war with Russia created valuable expertise that would benefit the rebels during the war.

The rebellion remained strong, unified, and independent through the first Chechen civil war. War broke in 1994, with the forces under Dudayev opposing a pro-government militia under Umar Avturkhanov and Russian forces. Throughout 1994, the rebels maintained a strong position, inflicting losses on the Russians. In 1995 the Russians began to push south into rebel strongholds, but rebels were able to retreat into the hills. Besayev retaliated by taking a hospital with 1500 hostages in Budennovsk, which led to immediate concessions including a ceasefire with safe passage and peace talks.

Like in Algeria, with peace on the horizon, internal fractures started to appear. Baseyev was only willing to accept complete independence, while Dudayev was willing to accept autonomy under Russian control. By 1996, Baseyev remained loyal to Dudayev but controlled

²⁸ This is widely reported, but with limited direct evidence. ("BBC NEWS | Middle East | Profile: Ayman al-Zawahiri," n.d.)

²⁹ (Weiser, NYT, 2001)

³⁰ Harmony biography on Khatab, referencing personal accounts and jihadist produced biographies of Khattab, including personal accounts from Abu Walid. (al-'Ubaydi, 2015)

³¹ Jane's Intelligence Review attributes this to CIA sources. (Jane's Intelligence Review, IHS, 2000)

³² Interview with Baseyev in 1999. Transcript printed in full by Jane's Intelligence Review. (Besayev, 1999)

roughly a third of the separatist fighters. Still other factions wanted Dudaev to be more tolerant of criminal activity in order to fund their operations, especially as Dudaev's resources started to run thin. In May of 1996, Dudaev was assassinated and briefly succeeded by his vice president, before Russian withdrawal and the end of the war. With Dudaev gone and imminent elections for control of the new separatist government, called the Government of Ichkeria.

Aslan Maskhadov won the election, beating Shamil Basayev. Basayev was appointed prime minister, several units were incorporated into the government's regular forces, and others were told to disband. Some militias, including that of Salman Raduyev, refused to disband or be formally integrated. Commanders such as Raduyev used their militias for criminal purposes and personal enrichment.³³

Tensions came to a head in 1998. Violent clashes took place between nationalists and religious radicals. Tensions between Maskhadov and Raduyev tipped into open opposition when Raduyev tried to take the city of Gudermes as a personal fiefdom in a break with the rest of the separatists, and when Raduyev conducted a deadly train blast in Armavir, Russia.³⁴ There was an assassination attempt against Maskhadov.

Maskhadov tried to use his response to the assassination attempt to solidify control.³⁵ He blamed the assassination and clashes on foreign fighters, expelled five foreign nationals, and demanded that the Wahabi radical groups disband immediately,³⁶ including the paramilitary units that had participated in the attacks on Gudermes. He stripped Arbi Barayev, Ramzan Akhmatov, and Abdul Malik Mejidov, three religious commanders, of their ranks. He further integrated another 500 fighters into the regular units and mobilized 5000 reservists, to crack down on black market trade, kidnapping, and other criminal activity.

Maskhadov's efforts had a mixed effect, but ultimately did not stop the fractures. The Wahabist groups immediately released a statement in support of Maskhadov and the Chechen people, promising to only conduct terrorist attacks against Russia and not within Chechnya.³⁷ But they immediately reformed into a new council called the Jamaat. Basayev formally resigned as prime minister, but Maskhadov was able to coopt him as Deputy Chief Commander of the Armed Services in order to maintain some unity.

While Maskhadov tried to take control in Chechnya, Khattab and Basayev made inroads into neighboring Dagestan. Together they formed the Islamic International Brigades (IIB). Partnering with Basayev gave Khattab some local legitimacy in light of the crackdown by Maskhadov. This also marked a religious turn for Basayev, who was always more conservative than Maskhadov, but who was now embracing Wahabism. The incursion ultimately failed, in part because of a lack of broad-based support for Wahabism, and in part because of the ethnic heterogeneity of Dagestan.

By 2000, war had resumed. After their previous successes, the rebels expected to be able to hold off the Russians again, but the Russian force was stronger and somewhat more professional than in the previous war. They were also at least as brutal, which led to war weariness and difficulties recruiting. While the separatists were hard pressed, they were able to maintain their cohesion by successfully transferring to Guerilla tactics. Russia controlled the

³³ ("Yeltsin advisor pessimistic about situation in Chechnya," 1997)

³⁴ Maskhadov threatened to "tear [Raduyev's] head off". ("Russian policy split on Chechnya," 1997)

³⁵ ("Chechen president's ultimatum to hostage-takers seen as war on opposition," 1998)

³⁶ ("Wahhabi Muslim leaders given 24 hours to leave Chechnya," 1998).

³⁷ ("Chechen Islamic militants issue statement threatening terrorism in Russia," 1998)

cities, while the separatists controlled the periphery and foothills, and the separatists were able to avoid deep seeking external intervention.

By 2002, tensions began to arise between Basayev and Khattab because Khattab was unwilling to share the resources he received from his personal fundraising network in the gulf. Khattab was able to maintain operational independence by failing to specialize and drawing on his own international network, in a similar way to Sayyaf in Afghanistan. This may have led to a split, but Khattab was assassinated by Russia in 2002. Basayev took command of the IIB's Chechen fighters, while Khattab's successor, Abu Walid, took the foreign fighters. Abu Walid was both able to continue fundraising, and was willing to cooperate with Maskhadov's forces against Russia.³⁸

A major split in the separatists did finally occur in 2002, but it did so in a way that did not encourage the commanders to seek sponsorship. Russia began to call for peace talks around 2000. Recognizing that Russia had superior troops this time around, Maskhadov's strategy was to use the rebellions ability to deny Russia victory as a bargaining chip in gaining autonomy and ending the conflict. This meant that he had to distance himself from the increasing slate of terrorist attacks conducted by the Wahabist groups. He publicly condemned 9/11 and al Qaeda's actions in 2001. Maskhadov also relied on local support to sustain his operation, both for recruiting and fundraising. He had to maintain a careful balance between moderately religious, and nationalist secularist in order to maintain his base of support. He therefore both alienated al Qaeda and their donor network, and had a base of support that would collapse if he tried to shift ideologically. Maskhadov therefore primarily targeted the military.

The Wahabist groups, on the other hand, opposed peace with Russia and engaged in a campaign of violent attacks. In 2002, two events occurred. Abu Walid led an attack bringing down an M16 helicopter in coordination with Maskhadov. This helped him solidify his new leadership position and prove himself, while also signaling cooperation with Maskhadov. Meanwhile, Barayov, lead an attack on a theater in Moscow, taking over 800 hostages. Over 100 hostages were killed in the attack, primarily by narcotic gas used by the Russians while storming the theater. This caused outrage in Moscow. Putin vowed to crush the separatists and arrested Maskhadov's deputy who had been in the process of informal peace talks.

The theater attack turned out to be a route by Basayev. He broke with Maskhadov and announced a new rebel group, the Riyadus-Salikhin Reconnaissance and Sabotage Battalion of Chechen Martyrs (RAS). He announced that Basayev was a subordinate commander in the RAS who had carried out the theater attack on Basayev's behalf.

Basayev's route gave him dominance among the separatists while finally driving a wedge between himself and Maskhadov. Maskhadov's entire strategy was undermined and his forces were weakened, but he was unable to seek external funding because the remainder of his force relied on his moderate views, and because he had publicly opposed al Qaeda. He was not in a position to even consider seeking sponsorship. With Basayev as the new strongman, he was the new candidate for sponsorship, but he was no longer interested because he had successfully dominated the playing field on his own.

The separatists did eventually decline, but they did so in the face of Russian force, reducing their appeal as a potential base at a time when al Qaeda was already suffering from assassination campaigns by the US in its home territory. Khattab's assassination was a taste of what was to come. Abu Walid was assassinated two years later. Basayev two years after that, and he was succeeded by a revolving door of leaders. These decapitations led to conflict within the

³⁸ Abu Walid and the IIB took on the eastern front.

ranks, until the emergence of Dokka Umarov, who was able to unite the remaining rebel groups under the Republic of Ichkeria. As the organization continued to suffer defeats, he made an attempt to expand outward throughout the Caucasus, declaring himself as emir of the Caucasus Emirates. This was a way to expand his base of recruitment and area of operations into relative safety. The Caucasus Emirates was never actually sponsored by al Qaeda, despite the claims of Russian state media. Russia had an interest in portraying the group as a part of al Qaeda in order to justify continued action in the region, and tried to claim a link throughout the second war and the ensuing counterinsurgency. Umarov has been very careful to emphasize that his organization is not al Qaeda affiliated.³⁹ But the Caucasus Emirates continued to weaken, until its individual commanders began declaring allegiance to ISIL in the hopes of regaining some international relevance again.

In sum, al Qaeda had an interest in involvement in Chechnya, where Islamist groups had secure control of territory in a struggle against a world superpower occupying Muslim-majority lands. But the resistance remained sufficiently strong, and unified, for long enough to resist al Qaeda. When fractures did occur, the weaker party that might have benefitted from sponsorship was unable to seek it because of the nature of its domestic constituency. And the party that was an ideal candidate, Basayev, was too strong to need it.

Somalia

Al-Ittihad al-Islami (AIAI) was a Salafist group in Somalia. It consisted of a network of religious organizations from judiciaries to local governing bodies that had mostly existed since the 60's, but came together under the AIAI umbrella. The organization was led by Sheikh Ali Warsame, but local commanders had relative autonomy. The AIAI became more militant throughout the late 80's in opposition to Siad Barre increasingly barbaric rule. The militant wing came under the command of Warsame's son in law, Hassan Dahir Aweys. AIAI was Salafist, while the Somali population was largely Sufi, a much more moderate sect of Islam. AIAI was able to grow quickly by capitalizing on opposition to Barre, and recruiting through university campuses. But with Barre deposed in 1991, the group's aims shifted to establishing an Islamic state. Their aims therefore aligned closely with al Qaeda's. But at the time of bin Laden's arrival in Sudan, AIAI was still making the transition from a political opposition group to a strong armed actor, and was only just beginning to build its network of courts.

After the defeat of the Soviets in Afghanistan, bin Laden tried to expand his operations to Africa (Fisk, 1993).⁴⁰ He moved his headquarters to Sudan, from where he began making inroads into Somalia.^{41, 42} Bin Laden was searching for a potential area of operations from which to launch attacks into neighboring countries. Somalia had only a handful of Islamic political groups, with even fewer violent groups (International Crisis Group, 2005). The AIAI, with their broader regional vision, seemed like a perfect candidate. Moreover, the AIAI operated in the Ogden along the border to Ethiopia, which made for an ideal staging ground into Ethiopia.

Al Qaeda participated in a handful of campaigns alongside General Aidid against the US and UN peacekeepers, but after the fall of Aidid was left without a strong local group to sponsor. Al Qaeda attempted to engage with AIAI, and built personal relationships with commanders

³⁹ Interview with Umarov published by the Caucasus Emirate's propaganda arm. (Dokku, 2011)

⁴⁰ Harmony Document: AFGP-2002-800581

⁴¹ Harmony Document: AFGP-2002-800597

⁴² For a detailed case study of al Qaeda in Somalia, see (Watts et al., 2007). Many of the facts presented here were described by Watts and colleagues.

within AIAI who may have joined al Qaeda in committing the US embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, but quickly discovered that the group did not yet have the command and control, or military strength to be able to be a viable partner. There was internal division within AIAI about their role as a military organization. Al Qaeda eventually decided that it was better to cut their losses in Somalia, and gave up on sponsorship.

After the fall of Barre, and the UN peacekeeping operation targeting General Aidid, a power vacuum allowed AIAI to contribute to the building of local governance structures which combined tribal order with Islamic courts, thereby extending AIAI's reach. AIAI was able to expand because of the desperate need for security and governance across Somalia.

The Islamic Courts Union ICU grew out of the court and governance systems put in place by the AIAI, and ruled from 2006 to early 2007. It was a broad-based group which was maintained by the support of clan elders based on the success of the group's predecessor's court system. Radical Islamism, however, did not have broad support in Somalia. The organization was still not a unified group capable of attracting al Qaeda. There was also internal debate about whether they should.⁴³ It was becoming increasingly difficult to argue that their war against the state and African peacekeepers was legitimate. Warsame eventually called a conference of leaders within the ICU to announce that Somalia was not ready for an Islamic government because the group could not hope to coopt sufficient public support for a transformation of the state. Instead, he argued, they should move towards reconciliation with the state.

Two commanders within the ICU, Godane and Ayrow, walked out from Warsame's announcement and immediately called a conference of their own, forming al Shabaab in 2007. Al Shabaab was able to grow because of the Ethiopian intervention beginning in 2006, by framing the conflict as a struggle against foreign occupation (Mendelsohn, 2016).

Al Shabaab launched a successful insurgency. By 2009 they controlled large swaths of the country, including the capital. It was around this time that al Shabaab first made bids to join al Qaeda. Why would they do so, when they appeared to be at the height of their power?

The conflict had attracted a flow of foreign support and fighters, which exacerbated internal tensions. Warsame was correct that the Somali population was not Salafi and was hostile to foreign fighters. As Ethiopia withdrew, they faced challenges maintaining domestic support, and had to choose between embracing domestic demands in order to create domestic legitimacy, or pursuing foreign flows of funds and fighters. Given the lack of support for Salafism and historic failures to establish an Islamic state in Somalia, it is likely that al Shabaab anticipated difficulty in maintaining their newly won territory or sustaining the organization once Ethiopia left (Mendelsohn, 2016).

At least as important as the lack of support among the population was the tension among the leadership of al Shabaab (Aynte, 2012; Mendelsohn, 2016). Al Shabaab's first in command, Ahmed Abdi Godane, preferred a globalist strategy. Others, such as commanders such as Mukhtar Robow, Abu Mansour, and Sheikh Hussan Dahir Aweys, did not.⁴⁴ Commanders within al Shabaab threatened to engage in talks with security forces to end the conflict.

Godane knew that without a base of support, and with commanders within the organization ready to defect, the only way for al Shabaab to survive was by seeking international legitimacy. With the war with Ethiopia drawing to a close, future survival depended on keeping the support of foreign fighters.

⁴³ .("No Al-Qa'idah in Somalia, says Islamist leader," 2007, p.)

⁴⁴ For example, see ("Al-Shabab militant Zakariya Ahmed Ismail Hersi 'surrenders,'" 2014)

So, in 2009, Godane began making inroads to al Qaeda through public declarations of support. Al Qaeda responded with a video in which bin Laden encouraged foreign fighters to flock to Somalia, and for them to fight on. This had the expected effect: it caused backlash among those preferring a Somalia-focused strategy, and it energized foreign fighters. Godane responded by publicly pledging their allegiance to bin Laden.

Bin Laden initially rejected their Bayat because he did not believe the organization had a strong enough position to survive the sponsorship, or that it would be able to maintain command and control in the long term. The public outcry was evidence of internal divisions. Moreover, a top al Qaeda advisor stationed in Somalia, Mohammed Fazel, opposed the merger because of the internal divisions. Bin Laden also likely remembered his earlier forays into Somalia, the preeminence of tribal politics and the resulting factionalizing of Islamist groups, and the disorganization of the ICU. Fazel's continued concern over al Shabab's unity and their past with the ICU was likely damning.⁴⁵

Bin Laden expressed his concern over the ability of the population to support jihad, especially with the global spotlight that would result from al Qaeda membership. In a letter to al Shabaab leader Mukhtar Abu al-Zubayr, bin Laden explained that while he supported what al Shabaab was doing, that al Shabaab was not strong enough to withstand the pressure that would come with being an al Qaeda affiliate. Without public support, they would be unable to handle the increased international pressure.⁴⁶ Zawahiri disagreed, and wrote to bin Laden urging him to reconsider. Zawahiri concern was that now that al Shabaab has already pledged allegiance, that it would be worse for al Qaeda to recant. But he goes on to discuss the problem of declarations of membership among those who do not have al Qaeda's support, suggesting that he also believes that al Shabaab is strong enough, and has sufficient professionalism to be a trusted steward of the al Qaeda name.⁴⁷

Two years later, shortly after the death of bin Laden, Zawahiri did accept al Shabaab. This was likely at least in part because al Qaeda, still reeling from bin Laden's death, wanted to show that they were still relevant, and in part because Zawahiri had believed al Shabaab was strong enough to begin with. Moreover, Godane had engaged in a purge of his rivals, helping him to consolidate control over his organization. Despite a loss of some of its territory, al Shabaab had also demonstrated their ability to withstand the renewed onslaught from the African Union, Ethiopia, and Kenya. Even though he controlled less territory than he had before, and his needs for legitimation were even stronger, he had still demonstrated himself in the two areas where bin Laden had expressed concern. On the part of al Shabaab, Godane was all the more desperate for al Qaeda recognition when he finally received al Qaeda sponsorship. A thinning of forces from a draught and the purge of his rivals meant that he was in need of more foreign sources of support and recognition (Mendelsohn, 2016).

Conclusions and Implications

The cases above illustrate a common theme to al Qaeda's sponsorships. Al Qaeda preferred strong groups, even when that created tensions between al Qaeda's goals, and the local group's goals. Weak groups could not provide secure access to territory, and required large

⁴⁵ In fact, Fazul was part of the Godane's purge.

⁴⁶ Harmony documents: SOCOM-2012-0000006, SOCOM-2012-0000005

⁴⁷ After al Qaeda's death, Zawahiri approved the merger. The announcement was originally posted at: <http://as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=55735>, and can be found archived in the Way Back Machine, here: <https://web.archive.org/web/20120609175746/http://as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=55735>.

investments of resources for little return. Al Qaeda was initially wary about engaging with the Taliban, abandoned AIAI, and was hesitant to fully support al Shabaab until they were certain they had overcome their command and control issues.

Looking at sponsorships from the local perspective, groups were only willing to partner with al Qaeda when they required access to goods that al Qaeda specialized in, and that they could not access on their own. Haqqani benefited from al Qaeda's training camps and source of recruits. Having access to al Qaeda's support helped Haqqani to maintain his relative autonomy despite being an otherwise small fish in the Pashtun region of Afghanistan. Hekmatyar needed support to move past a stalemate. The Taliban, which was strong enough to exist without al Qaeda, was a grudging host that threatened to try to remove al Qaeda, but couldn't because of Haqqani and Younis Khalis' protection. GSPC only sought al Qaeda support after their rebranding failed. Al Shabaab wanted support because the lack of domestic support meant they needed continued access to global flows of recruits. Across the world, groups requiring a source of prestige and legitimacy pursued the al Qaeda name, which al Qaeda only gave out to groups that were strong enough to defend it.

Taken together, the case studies tell a story of the rise of al Qaeda as a transregional actor, and has broader implications for global violence writ large. Al Qaeda was able to strategically use partnerships to grow from a group of malcontents in the teahouses of Peshawar, funneling money and occasionally playing with guns, to a global actor, hegemonic in their power within the non-state actor system. Bin Laden had global ideas, making him a transregional actor, but al Qaeda sponsorship in Afghanistan was inherently different from al Qaeda sponsorship of al Shabaab.

In the beginning, all al Qaeda could offer Hekmatyar and Haqqani was construction equipment and another path of funds and fighters from Arab countries. Their international network and bin Laden's construction business gave them some asset specificity. In the bloody Afghan war, where access to funds and any comparative advantage was the difference between elimination and survival, Haqqani was willing to trade access to his territory for the efficiency that working with bin Laden provided. It was through that war that bin Laden was able to gain experience and build networks of personal relationships and the notoriety that that eventually allowed him to confer legitimacy on others.

Al Qaeda was able to use strategic sponsorships to increase their global notoriety and power. Many partnerships differed in their scope and scale, but each new partnership allowed al Qaeda to extend its reach and its global partnership, leading to hegemonic power within the Islamist non-state system. But the strategy that led to al Qaeda's rise may also be its downfall.

Taken to its extreme, the theory presented here implies the emergence of competition. Al Qaeda depends on strong partners, but strong partners prefer autonomy. That means that al Qaeda's affiliates should only be willing to allow al Qaeda to extend its reach into their territory if they continue to need al Qaeda's support. But al Qaeda's support helps to strengthen these groups, thereby increasing their demands for autonomy. When groups need legitimation or access to al Qaeda networks, the relationship can be sticky. But by empowering the groups that it sponsors, al Qaeda is creating potential rivals. This is what happened in the case of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).

Al Qaeda gained notoriety in part because global attention was on the war in Afghanistan while al Qaeda was present. When America shifted its focus to Iraq, global attention shifted as well. There was a new hot war attracting fighters. In order to maintain their position as global

leaders, al Qaeda needed to be present in Iraq as well, but al Qaeda did not have an on-the-ground presence. Instead, they relied on Zarqawi's Tawhid Wal Jihad, which became AQI.

Young jihadists from around the world sent their fighters to Iraq. The legitimacy granted by the al Qaeda name meant that many foreign fighters flocked to Zarqawi. Smuggling networks were set up to channel fighters to Iraq (Mendelsohn, 2016), and fighters came and went home, which helped Zarqawi to build a global network of his own. On the one hand, because he was an affiliate, his success was al Qaeda's success. For example, it was because of the connections made through foreign fighters in Iraq that the GSPC was able to appeal, in part via Zarqawi, to al Qaeda core for sponsorship. But on the other hand, al Qaeda was losing its asset specificity: as the face of the jihad in Iraq, Zarqawi had his own legitimacy and had built his own global networks. He no longer needed al Qaeda and could increasingly ignore their directives. AQI even changed its name to the Islamic State in Iraq, and once the conflict in Syria started and presented them with their own opportunity to expand, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

It was because they had been empowered by al Qaeda that AQI was able to emerge as a contender for hegemony in the jihadist system. It is not Waltz' balance of power or Walt's balance of threat that shapes militant group networks (Christia, 2012; Karmon, 2005; Walt, 1985; Waltz, 2010), but Gilpin's hegemonic theory of war and Organski's power transition theory (Gilpin, 1988; Organski, 1968). At the height of its power, al Qaeda was able to create relative unity among jihadist forces and act as a purveyor of legitimacy among Salafists. But by creating a system in which their partners were empowered, they facilitated the rise of ISIS. ISIS and al Qaeda are engaged in a competition for leadership of global jihad, each expanding and competing in theaters across the globe.

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