

BEYOND OUTBIDDING: HOW TRANSNATIONAL JIHADISTS RESHAPE COMPETITIVE VIOLENT MARKETS

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Abstract

Numerous jihadist organizations competing with local armed groups for resources in conflicts worldwide have pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS). How do these transnational jihadist rivals (AQ/IS affiliates) shape the behavior of local groups? Scholars argue that heightened competition in violent political markets encourages armed groups to escalate violence against civilians—known as *outbidding*—to distinguish their “brand.” However, existing research has largely overlooked how the *type* of actor involved in competition, rather than the quantity of competitors or their infighting, shapes competitive dynamics. We argue that transnational jihadists, with their legacy of brutality and the international scrutiny they attract, reshape militant competition, making escalatory violence ineffective and counterproductive for local groups seeking brand differentiation. Instead, we propose a theory of *restrained competition*, where local groups moderate civilian harm to distinguish themselves, thereby bolstering their local support and international appeal. We posit that this reputational calculus intensifies when local groups maintain greater ideological distance from transnational jihadists and have credible prospects for enhancing their international standing through restrained behavior. Using original data on pledges to AQ and IS, and leveraging their sudden emergence as a quasi-experimental treatment, we apply a Difference-in-Differences (DiD) analysis. Aligning with our *restrained competition* theory, we find that local groups—particularly those with non-religious ideologies and not designated as terrorist by the United States—reduce violence against civilians in response to emerging transnational jihadist competitors. Our findings challenge assumptions about escalation in fragmented conflicts, offering new insights into strategic armed group behavior.

Keywords: militant competition, violence against civilians, outbidding, strategic restraint, transnational jihadist networks

Main Body: 11,344 words
References: 2,805 words
Total: 14,149 words

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“The global spread of a militant or extremist strain of political Islam, often referred to as “jihadi” Islamism, ranks as one of the most important political developments in the post–Cold War world; it carries implications for our understanding of both the politics of global security and contemporary trends in political violence.”¹

INTRODUCTION

Over recent decades, dozens of jihadist groups pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda (AQ) or the Islamic State (IS). Challenging the international order in their efforts to replace state sovereignty with a transnational caliphate, AQ, IS, and their “affiliates”² have operated in some of the world’s most populous countries, including India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. More than 40 percent of the global population reside in states affected by these transnational jihadist networks. Reflecting their global reach, surveys from the previous decade consistently show that citizens across Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America viewed IS as one of the greatest threats to their countries³. After all, AQ, IS, and their affiliates were involved in over half of all civil conflicts in 2019, accounting for more than 70 percent of global fatalities caused by armed groups in one-sided violence⁴. Participating in insurgencies across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, AQ and IS affiliates vie against other armed groups for critical resources in competitive violent political markets that increasingly characterize civil wars.

A growing body of literature examines how these competitive settings shape trajectories of violence⁵. Here, the prevailing explanation suggests that heightened competition in violent political markets encourages armed groups to *outbid* rivals by escalating violence—particularly against civilians—to distinguish their “brand”⁶. Yet, existing scholarship has primarily focused on the proliferation of groups within a conflict, and more recently, infighting among organizations⁷, while

¹(Kalyvas 2018, p. 36)

²Often referred to as “branches” or “franchises,” affiliates constitute jihadist organizations that have pledged allegiance to the leaders of AQ or IS and received formal acceptance into either transnational organization.

³(Pew Research Center 2017, 2019)

⁴(Pettersson and Öberg 2020)

⁵(Bloom 2005; Kydd and Walter 2006; Lilja and Hultman 2011; Fjelde and Nilsson 2012; Nemeth 2012; Conrad and Greene 2015; Findley and Young 2012; Phillips 2015; Pischedda 2018; Breslawski and Ives 2019; Phillips 2019b; Gade, Hafez and Gabay 2019; Pischedda 2020; Conrad and Spaniel 2021a; Perkoski 2022; Conrad, Greene and Phillips 2023; Welsh 2023; Belgioioso and Thurber 2024; Polo and Welsh 2024)

⁶(Bloom 2004; Farrell 2020; Asal, Phillips and Rethemeyer 2022)

⁷(Polo and Welsh 2024)

largely neglecting the *type* of actors involved in competition. As a result, conflict research has yet to account for how qualitative shifts in competitive violent markets—arising from the transformation of existing organizations into transnational AQ/IS affiliates—reshape competitive dynamics and influence the behavior of rival local groups.

This article addresses these gaps by examining how local armed groups respond to competition from emerging transnational jihadist rivals. Rather than simply adding another player to violent political markets, the presence of transnational jihadists in a previously localized conflict transforms competitive dynamics in key ways. These organizations introduce a legacy of extreme brutality against civilians, attract significant international scrutiny and media attention, and increase chances of external intervention. Consequently, we argue, the emergence of transnational jihadist groups in a conflict fundamentally reshapes the “rules” of militant competition, rendering escalatory violence an ineffective and counterproductive strategy for brand differentiation among armed groups. Rather than engage in outbidding, we contend that armed groups will strategically restrain their use of violence against civilians to distinguish themselves from transnational jihadist actors. This strategic restraint serves a dual purpose: it enables armed groups to appeal to local civilian populations wary of threats of extreme violence posed by transnational jihadists while also bolstering groups’ international reputations and ability to attract support and recognition from external powers (e.g., governments, supranational organizations, international NGOs and advocacy groups) invested in containing transnational jihadist threats to the international order.

We further argue that groups’ use of strategic restraint to enhance local civilian support and international reputation is most effective under two conditions: first, when they maintain greater ideological distance from transnational jihadist rivals; and second, when they have credible prospects for improving their reputation through restrained behavior. When ideological distance is substantial, groups can more effectively set themselves apart from transnational jihadist organizations by adopting less violent and more community-oriented strategies. Their ideological dissimilarity to transnational jihadists amplifies the credibility of restraint as a signal to both local and external audiences. Concurrently, groups that have not been stigmatized on the global stage through official terrorist designations—unlike their stigmatized counterparts—retain meaningful prospects for enhancing their reputations. By improving their conduct toward civilians, these groups can increase their chances of securing favorable media coverage, strengthening ties with international NGOs

and advocacy groups, and building partnerships with foreign governments and supranational organizations, thereby expanding their international support and recognition.

To test the observable implications of our theory, we employ novel data on organizational pledges of allegiance by jihadist groups to AQ and IS⁸. The data were compiled by examining both Arabic and English sources on the organizational histories of 161 jihadist organizations operating across 41 countries. Using Difference-in-Differences (DiD) models, we analyze a time-series cross-sectional dataset covering 485 local armed groups from 2004 to 2016. By leveraging the sudden emergence of these pledges as a quasi-experimental treatment, our design isolates the causal effects of transnational jihadist competition on local group behavior. Our baseline DiD analysis supports the notion that non-AQ/IS-affiliated groups respond to transnational jihadist competition by reducing violence against civilians. However, further analysis shows that this effect is primarily driven by groups with non-religious ideologies and those not designated as terrorist organizations by the United States. This finding aligns with our argument that the reputational calculus underlying strategic restraint is most compelling for groups that are ideologically distinct from transnational extremists and operating without international stigmatization associated with terrorism designations⁹.

This study advances our theoretical and empirical understanding of armed group behavior and conflict dynamics in fragmented civil wars. Contemporary conflicts are increasingly marked by fragmentation¹⁰. While conventional theories almost universally anticipate violent escalation to occur as a consequence of increased competition, we develop a theory of *restrained competition* that demonstrates how, under specific conditions, rivalry among armed groups can instead incentivize moderation toward civilians. Challenging dominant assumptions about militant behavior in competitive environments, we join recent scholarship that refines outbidding models of escalation¹¹, advancing the debate by foregrounding transnational jihadist influences as drivers of distinctive competitive dynamics that incentivize other groups to adopt restraint toward civilians.

Second, quantitative analyses of fragmented conflicts often measure the intensity of militant

⁸We chose to collect original data on pledges rather than relying on Farrell's (2020) existing dataset. Farrell's (2020) data ends in 2014, excluding the peak period of IS activity, which limits our ability to fully analyze the impact of pledges to IS. In contrast, our dataset includes 27 additional pledges made after 2014—11 to AQ and 16 to IS—providing more comprehensive coverage of recent developments.

⁹(Búzás and Meier 2023)

¹⁰(Malone 2022; Lewis 2023)

¹¹(Conrad and Spaniel 2021b; Polo and Welsh 2024; Crisman-Cox and Gibilisco 2024)

competition by counting the number of armed groups in a country, assuming this correlates with a higher propensity for outbidding through escalatory violence. This approach, however, overlooks critical distinctions between the *types* of actors involved in competition. We argue that transnational extremist actors—internationally stigmatized for their brutal violence—can fundamentally reshape the rules of competition in ways that comparatively moderate actors cannot. While the outbidding model may explain how competition against moderate local rivals can lead to escalation, we highlight how competition against transnational jihadist actors renders escalatory violence an ineffective and counterproductive tool for differentiation in violent political markets.

Finally, the transnationalization of armed groups’ goals is another defining characteristic of the recent wave of civil wars¹². The rise and “expansion of transnational jihadist groups like IS and al-Qaida and their affiliates represents one of the most distinctive trends in organized violence since the end of the Cold War”¹³. While scholars have examined why jihadist groups cooperate with AQ and IS and how such linkages may affect organizational behavior¹⁴, relatively less scholarship has explored how high-level rhetorical cooperation with these transnational organizations affects the behavior of other armed groups in a conflict. By examining pledges to AQ and IS, we not only offer new insights into how these transnational organizations influence the behavior of other armed groups, but also provide one of the first causal tests of violence escalation in competitive settings.

Prior to discussing our theoretical and methodological approach in greater depth, we outline the dynamics surrounding the pledges of allegiance to AQ and IS in recent years.

PLEDGING ALLEGIANCE TO AL-QAEDA AND THE ISLAMIC STATE

Jihadist organizations—Islamist groups that justify the use of violence to achieve religiously-based goals¹⁵—have proliferated in recent decades¹⁶. While jihadist involvement characterized only 5 percent of civil wars in the 1990s, this figure rose to 40 percent by 2014¹⁷. Leading the jihadist movement, AQ and IS have played a central role in civil wars across multiple regions. Across the international system, these transnational organizations caused the majority of battle-related deaths

¹²(Walter 2017; Svensson and Nilsson 2018; Lynch, Gunning and Valbjørn 2024)

¹³(Melander, Pettersson and Theménér 2016, 731)

¹⁴(Farrell 2020; Jadoon 2022; Blair and Potter 2023; Jadoon, Jahanbani and Fruchtman 2023)

¹⁵(Nielsen 2017; Ahmad 2019)

¹⁶(Walter 2017)

¹⁷(Fearon 2017)

in seven out of ten years between 2010 and 2019¹⁸.

To achieve this global influence, AQ and IS “cores” strategically expanded their presence to new geographic areas by receiving formal oaths of allegiance (*bay'a*) from leaders of pre-existing jihadist organizations¹⁹. Early pledges to AQ came from groups like Jama’at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad in Iraq, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in Algeria, and al-Shabaab in Somalia. After declaring its caliphate in June 2014, IS adopted a similar strategy²⁰, receiving pledges from groups such as Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis in Egypt, Boko Haram in Nigeria, Ahlu Sunna wal Jama’at in Mozambique, and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters in the Philippines. While leaders of AQ affiliates remained loyal to AQ after IS’s rise, several factions, including parts of al-Shabaab and AQIM, splintered to declare allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and IS²¹.

This form of rhetorical cooperation is essential for leaders and their groups to gain formal acceptance into the ranks of AQ or IS²². By pledging fealty to the leaders of these transnational organizations, previously unaffiliated groups make a strategic decision that signals their commitment to the ideologies, military strategies, and tactics promoted by AQ or IS²³. Once these pledges are recognized by AQ’s or IS’s leadership, pledging groups assume responsibility for operations in specific geographic regions, such as the “Islamic Maghreb” or “Central Africa.” In many cases, pledging groups espouse new identities and formally jettison previous names in favor of AQ or IS branding, further highlighting their loyalty to AQ or IS²⁴. These alliances are, thus, far from symbolic; they carry significant implications for the dynamics of conflicts involving pledged groups.

For one, AQ, IS, and their affiliates are infamous for their high-casualty attacks against civilians. AQ, for instance, played a key role in the global diffusion of suicide attacks²⁵, with organizational affiliates also using this tactic. In 2007, the GSPC executed its first suicide bombing attack just months after pledging fealty to AQ and changing its name to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) also executed numerous suicide attacks in

¹⁸(Pettersson and Öberg 2020)

¹⁹In some cases, existing AQ members have built organizations from the ground up. For instance, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, who traveled to Afghanistan in the late 1990s and became Osama bin Laden’s personal secretary, built up AQ’s network and conducted attacks in Yemen.

²⁰(Blair and Potter 2023; Jadoon, Jahanbani and Willis 2020)

²¹(Warner et al. 2022)

²²(Blair et al. 2022; Berlin 2024)

²³(Brzezinski 2024)

²⁴(Byman 2014)

²⁵(Moghadam 2009)

Yemen, including a 2015 suicide bombing attack in central Sana'a that killed at least 47 people²⁶. Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), for its part, accounted for a disproportionate percentage of causalities by armed groups in Iraq through suicide attacks and indiscriminate violence against civilians²⁷.

Similarly, IS attained enormous global attention for its large-scale violence against civilians. This involved massacres, various forms of sexual violence, videotaped executions, and acts such as beheadings, burning and downing of hostages, and crushing captives with tanks²⁸. Groups that pledged allegiance to IS have also emulated the latter's use of brutal violence²⁹. The Islamic State's affiliate in Mozambique turned a football pitch into an "execution ground" in 2020, beheading more than 50 people³⁰. Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, which pledged to IS in 2014 claimed responsibility for the 2015 downing of Metrojet Flight 9268, killing 224 passengers³¹. The Islamic State Khorasan's 2021 suicide bombing attack at the Kabul Airport, which killed 170 civilians and 13 U.S. soldiers, is noted to have "sent shockwaves around the world"³².

AQ, IS, and their affiliates remain among the most violent armed groups in the international system, with a well-documented history of perpetrating mass violence against civilians across disparate conflicts.³³ Their international notoriety stems from their aforementioned brutality, execution of large-scale militant operations, and war against global powers. Beyond targeting local civilians and regional regimes, these transnational groups have launched attacks in Europe and the United States as part of their efforts to combat "Crusader" and "Imperialist" powers³⁴. In their pursuit to establish a transnational political order³⁵, AQ, IS, and their affiliates have sought to dismantle international borders and overturn the state-based international system³⁶. Thus, rather than merely adding another armed group to violent political markets, the spread of AQ and IS to local insurgency zones through their affiliates reshapes local conflict dynamics by introducing a legacy

²⁶(Reuters 2014)

²⁷(Piazza 2009)

²⁸(Friis 2018)

²⁹(Brzezinski 2024)

³⁰(BBC 2020)

³¹(Jumet and Gulmohamad 2023)

³²(Ghazaleh, Kepel and Milelli 2008, 2)

³³This is not to say that these groups do not place any limits on their violence or only target civilian populations in organizational operations. Recent years have witnessed various attempts by AQ and its affiliates to limit Muslim casualties in attacks (Hamming 2020). In another example, IS has placed restrictions on the permissibility of using different forms of sexual violence against particular targets (Revkin and Wood 2021).

³⁴(Hegghammer 2009; Nesser 2019)

³⁵(Svensson and Nilsson 2018, 1134)

³⁶(Fazal 2018; Ahram 2019)

of brutality against civilians, attracting significant international scrutiny and media attention, and potentially even provoking external state intervention. We further explore the implications of these fundamental changes for militant competition and the escalation of violence in the following sections.

COMPETITION AND ESCALATION IN THE SHADOW OF TRANSNATIONAL JIHADISTS

Contemporary civil conflicts are increasingly fragmented³⁷, forcing armed groups operating in close vicinity of each other to compete for resources and civilian support³⁸. Since civilian populations can provide armed groups with sustenance, shelter, recruitment, and intelligence³⁹, securing a degree of civilian support is vital for group survival. As an Irish militant aptly asserted, “No guerrilla can exist without a support base”⁴⁰. However, in highly competitive conflict environments, civilians often remain ambivalent about the true intentions and capabilities of rival groups, making it challenging for individual groups to secure popular support at the expense of their rivals⁴¹. To overcome this uncertainty, armed groups can calibrate their use of violence, selecting from a variety of violent repertoires to project strength, credibility, and commitment to their cause.⁴²

According to conventional scholarly wisdom, one prominent strategy through which armed groups calibrate their violence to increase their “market share” of popular support is through *violent outbidding*⁴³. Violent outbidding involves the deliberate adoption of increasingly innovative and severe tactics to distinguish one’s organization from rival groups by signaling greater resolve and effectiveness to potential supporters⁴⁴. As Conrad and Greene (2015, p. 549) state: “While committing more shocking attacks may not...help the group achieve long-term goals, the spectacle

³⁷Following the onset of the civil war in Syria, for instance, estimates suggest that upwards of 1,500 opposition organizations emerged (Baylouny and Mullins 2018). Similar fragmentation has been observed in conflicts in Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Libya, Pakistan, and Sudan, where numerous armed groups have challenged state authority (Lewis 2023).

³⁸(Gade, Hafez and Gabbay 2019; Hafez 2020)

³⁹(Crenshaw 1987; Balcells and Stanton 2021)

⁴⁰(Okado-Gough 2003)

⁴¹(Kydd and Walter 2006)

⁴²For instance, approximately half of all insurgent groups active between 1970 and 2011 refrained from employing terrorism. Among those that did resort to terrorism, there is significant temporal variation in its application (Polo and González 2020) and targeting choices (Onder 2024), with some organizations conducting a higher percentage of their attacks against civilians (Polo 2020).

⁴³(Bloom 2004)

⁴⁴(Kydd and Walter 2006; Belgioioso 2018; Conrad and Spaniel 2021a)

of more severe attacks might generate the *perception* that the organization is more effective than it actually is.”

The outbidding model of violence—described as “one of the most widely cited theories of [armed] groups’ motivations and actions”⁴⁵—has been widely used to explain the proliferation of suicide bombings as well as attacks against civilians, NGOs, schools, sexual minorities, and U.S. citizens abroad⁴⁶. However, empirical tests of the model’s theoretical expectations have yielded mixed results, with several studies failing to find consistent evidence of escalation⁴⁷. These mixed results cast doubt on the universality of outbidding as an outcome of militant competition, suggesting instead that the incentives for armed groups to escalate violence to outshine rivals are contingent on specific contextual conditions.

Recent formal modeling innovations in the outbidding framework insinuate that one such condition may be the initial level of violence employed by competing groups⁴⁸. For outbidding to be an effective signaling mechanism, competing armed groups may need to start from a relatively moderate stance regarding the use of extreme violence. This initial moderation establishes a baseline from which groups can escalate their tactics in response to rivals’ actions, creating opportunities for differentiation through increased brutality. Under such conditions, each incremental act of violence may serve as a strategic signal of commitment and capability, helping groups to develop distinct identities within the violent political market.

By contrast, if groups already employ extreme violence from the outset, the potential for meaningful escalation may be limited, potentially reducing the effectiveness of the outbidding mechanism⁴⁹. In these cases, groups may recognize that they cannot match their rival’s capabilities or effectiveness in shifting public opinion through violence⁵⁰. This marks the first significant way in which the spread of AQ and IS to different conflict zones through their affiliates reshapes the “rules” of militant competition, forcing armed groups to adapt to the realities of operating within their shadow. By establishing a baseline of extreme violence, these groups raise the threshold for

⁴⁵(Farrell 2020, p. 437)

⁴⁶(Bloom 2005; Murdie and Stapley 2014; Tschantret 2018; Biberman and Zahid 2019; Asal, Phillips and Rethemeyer 2022; Asal et al. 2023; Conrad, Greene and Phillips 2023)

⁴⁷(Brym and Araj 2008; Findley and Young 2012)

⁴⁸For instance, Crisman-Cox and Gibilisco (2024) show that the escalatory effects of competition are most likely when groups’ competitive positions are relatively balanced.

⁴⁹(Polo and Welsh 2024)

⁵⁰(Crisman-Cox and Gibilisco 2024)

escalation to a level that renders further increases in violence ineffective as a means of differentiation. As a result, the presence of transnational jihadist competitors may compel local groups to explore more effective means for distinguishing themselves.

A second potential condition centers on localized competition for shared audiences. Outbidding is more likely to function effectively when competing armed groups operate within the same local context and lack significant transnational ties⁵¹. Conflicts confined to local settings often attract limited international attention, allowing armed groups to focus their competition for support primarily within the local population. In such environments, escalating violence can serve as a powerful mechanism for differentiation, enabling groups to signal resolve and capability to local stakeholders without facing substantial external scrutiny. Local populations' sensitivity to violence amplifies the impact of such signals—civilians who are directly affected by violence may perceive escalating violence as a response to injustices or encroachments, making them more receptive to radicalization and increasing the pool of potential supporters that groups compete to attract⁵².

However, these competitive dynamics may shift when rival groups possess transnational affiliations, particularly those internationally condemned for their extreme violence. This marks the second significant way in which transnational jihadists reshape the “rules” of militant competition. By attracting heightened international attention and criticism, transnational jihadists often provoke scrutiny from global actors and, at times, external state intervention. These external pressures impose significant reputational and strategic risks that local groups must navigate. For local groups, adopting similarly extreme tactics risks drawing the same level of external scrutiny, making escalation as not only futile but actively counterproductive to their survival. Rather than helping them stand out, attempts to outbid transnational jihadists may instead erode local groups’ legitimacy, invite sanctions or crackdowns, and jeopardize their long-term viability. Confronted with these challenges, local groups may feel pressured to forsake escalatory violence as a branding strategy and adopt more productive forms of competition.

Below, we theorize how local armed groups operating within the shadow of transnational jihadist rivals can remain competitive by strategically restraining their violence against civilians to

⁵¹Farrell’s (2020) application of the outbidding framework to a transnational context—where Salafi-jihadist groups escalate violence after pledging allegiance to al-Qaeda or ISIS—is an exception. However, her focus is on militant competition for patronage from organizations like al-Qaeda or ISIS, rather than securing civilian support.

⁵²(Conrad and Spaniel 2021b)

effectively differentiate themselves from these rivals.

RESTRAINED COMPETITION

In this section, we develop our theory of *restrained competition*—a competitive strategy in which armed groups reduce violence against civilians to differentiate themselves from transnational jihadist rivals. We argue that outbidding becomes ineffective and potentially counterproductive when local armed groups face transnational jihadists already associated with extreme brutality and international scrutiny. Building on the premise that the *type* of rival an armed group faces shapes militant competition, we contend that competition from highly stigmatized transnational jihadist groups incentivizes local groups to moderate their behavior to appeal to both domestic civilian populations and international actors.

Strategic Restraint

An expanding body of literature demonstrates that armed groups may deliberately restrain their use of violence, even when they possess the capability to escalate. Busher and Bjørgo (2020, p. 3) define restraint as a conscious process in which “militants *choose* to drop, downscale, or limit an attack or campaign, or adopt tactical or strategic innovations that lead them away from violence.” Such decisions often reflect recognition that certain forms of violence may be strategically counterproductive for securing popular support, misaligned with group identities, or harmful to organizational survival⁵³.

Such behavioral restraint is more pervasive than typically recognized in existing literature. For example, the Real Irish Republican Army (RIRA) consciously limited the use of specific violent tactics following internal deliberations after the 1998 Omagh bombing⁵⁴. Similarly, the GSPC in Algeria sought to minimize civilian casualties to distinguish itself from the Armed Islamic Group (GIA)⁵⁵. In another case, the leadership of the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) has strategically eschewed terrorism, apprehensive that such violence could “undermine the prospects of gaining popular support and opportunities to promulgate the NRM’s political views via public and

⁵³(Busher and Bjørgo 2020)

⁵⁴(Morrison 2020)

⁵⁵(Thurston 2020)

legal channels”⁵⁶. Likewise, British extreme right factions refrained from escalating violence during the 1990s, recognizing that less violent strategies were more efficacious in achieving long-term goals⁵⁷. Importantly, restraint does not entail that armed groups completely jettison the use of violence. Rather, restraint highlights that armed groups may consciously limit the use of certain tactics or targeting practices they view as being counterproductive to achieving organizational objectives.

Restraint as Differentiation

When the conditions necessary for outbidding to be effective—such as a moderate baseline of violence or the absence of transnational competitors—are lacking, armed groups are likely to pursue alternative strategies of differentiation to sustain their competitiveness. One such strategy is limiting the targeting of civilians, a choice that carries particular significance given that attacks against civilians are among the most consequential forms of violence employed by armed groups.

Targeting civilians carries substantial reputational risks⁵⁸. As Polo (2020, 236) observes: “Terrorist attacks against undefended civilians … can be much more costly than attacks on official targets in terms of loss of popular support and legitimacy.” Where transnational jihadist rivals have escalated violence to extreme levels in competitive violent markets, reputational costs of violence are amplified. This leaves little, if any, room for further escalation to occur without alienating local populations, provoking international backlash, or attracting punitive measures from external actors. By restraining their violence against civilians, armed groups can position themselves as a moderate alternative to extremists and cultivate a positive reputation among local populations—projecting an image of accountability that contrasts with the violence used by AQ and IS.

Differentiating themselves in this way may attract local sympathizers repulsed by brutal violence, as well as potential recruits who are disillusioned with the government but too moderate to join extremist groups. After all, significant variation may exist among potential supporters regarding levels and displays of violence⁵⁹. By presenting themselves as a more locally grounded and community-oriented alternative, these groups can appeal to civilians seeking protection and stability in the midst of disorder aggravated by transnational jihadists. In this sense, restraint may

⁵⁶(Bjørgo and Ravndal 2020, 38)

⁵⁷(Macklin 2020)

⁵⁸(Conrad and Greene 2015; Polo 2020; El Masri and Phillips 2021)

⁵⁹(Mitts, Phillips and Walter 2022; Berlin and Rangazas 2023)

help strengthen ties with local communities, enabling groups to secure resources, intelligence, and logistical support. At the same time, this approach can broaden recruitment by appealing to individuals who reject both the state's perceived failures and the ideological rigidity and brutality of transnational jihadist groups, positioning restrained groups as credible agents for addressing grievances without resorting to indiscriminate violence.

Historical examples illustrate how restraint can serve as a deliberate tactic to preserve local support and maintain political viability. For instance, the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) in El Salvador recognized the reputational costs of civilian victimization and, by the mid-1980s, shifted its focus to infrastructure targets rather than high-casualty attacks on civilians⁶⁰. This deliberate shift allowed the FMLN to sustain legitimacy in the eyes of its key audiences. Similarly, both the Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) and Irish Republican Army (IRA) transitioned away from indiscriminate civilian killings as they responded to the increasingly moderate preferences of their support bases⁶¹.

The ability to cultivate legitimacy through restraint operates not only locally but also on the international stage. Rebel organizational behavior can attract diplomatic support from external audiences⁶², while diplomatic support can prompt armed groups to shift away from targeting civilians in anticipation of material support⁶³. As Tokdemir and co-authors (2021, 737) write: “Moderate groups are more likely to engender international sympathy and support, which can bring external patrons, support from diasporas, and donations to the group’s cause.”

On the international stage, restraint can operate both defensively—to avoid stigmatization and punitive intervention—and offensively—as a tool to attract external support and recognition. Demonstrated restraint towards civilians can be particularly effective in securing support from democratic sponsors who tend to be more sensitive to human rights abuses than authoritarian regimes⁶⁴, or when local groups can contrast their restraint with the brutality of transnational jihadists⁶⁵. This dynamic played out in Syria, where Kurdish armed groups, by distinguishing themselves from the ideological extremism of IS, secured higher levels of external backing⁶⁶. Further-

⁶⁰(Stanton 2013)

⁶¹(Sanchez-Cuenca 2007)

⁶²(Arves, Cunningham and McCulloch 2019)

⁶³(Levy, Dudley and Siegel 2024)

⁶⁴(Salehyan, Siroky and Wood 2014)

⁶⁵(Stanton 2020)

⁶⁶(Schwab 2023)

more, groups that avoid indiscriminate violence against civilians can more effectively shield themselves from international condemnation, including naming-and-shaming campaigns⁶⁷ and punitive interventions such as United Nations sanctions⁶⁸ and International Criminal Court prosecutions⁶⁹.

Taken together, these insights highlight how restrained competition offers armed groups an alternative pathway to differentiation—allowing them to navigate competitive pressures while preserving, and even strengthening, both their local support base and international appeal. Thus;

Hypothesis 1. Armed groups facing competition from a transnational jihadist rival will reduce violence against civilians.

Ideological Distance and the Incentives for Restraint

Building on our restrained competition argument—that restraint enables local armed groups to position themselves as viable alternatives to transnational jihadist organizations both locally and internationally—we argue that the incentives for restraint are not uniform across all armed groups. Instead, these incentives may vary based on a group’s ideological distance from transnational jihadist rivals. An ideology denotes “a set of more or less systematic ideas that identify a constituency, the objectives pursued on behalf of that group, and a program of action”⁷⁰. In contemporary conflicts, ideology “shapes relations between members of a group and outsiders”⁷¹. As such, ideology functions as both a guiding framework for action and a symbolic marker that distinguishes armed groups from their competitors within violent political markets.

Armed groups that share ideological affinities with transitional jihadist rivals may struggle to construct meaningful contrasts with those rivals. Similar doctrinal justifications for violence, overlapping constituencies, or common enemy hierarchies may render these groups indistinguishable to local and international observers. For example, some U.S. policymakers and analysts continue to view “radical Islam” as a monolithic movement, seeing little distinction between disparate Islamist groups despite their adoption of significantly different goals, strategies, and tactics⁷².

⁶⁷(Brandt and Kotajoki 2023)

⁶⁸(Radtke and Jo 2018)

⁶⁹(Jo and Simmons 2016)

⁷⁰(Sanín and Wood 2014, 213)

⁷¹(Ugarriza and Matthew 2013, 450)

⁷²(Lynch 2017)

By contrast, armed groups with greater ideological distance from transnational jihadist groups—whether in terms of conflict framing, visions of governance, or territorial aspirations⁷³—can more effectively leverage restrained behavior to highlight their differences from these rivals. This sharper ideological contrast allows them to signal not only their rejection of brutal and indiscriminate tactics but also their broader disassociation from the radical worldviews that justify such violence. For instance, armed groups with secular nationalist, secessionist, or Marxist revolutionary agendas—which the literature consistently links to aspirations for state-building within recognized borders, social transformation through service provision, and international recognition through modulated behavior⁷⁴—may employ restraint when competing against transnational jihadists. In doing so, these groups can contrast themselves with organizations that have a history of mass violence against civilians and that are focused on overturning the existing international order.

Ideological distance from transnational jihadists can, therefore, amplify the credibility of restraint as a signal to local and external audiences, helping restraint to be interpreted not merely as a tactical adjustment but as a principled stance. Unlike groups with overlapping religious narratives that may struggle to convince observers of their meaningful differences from transnational jihadists, ideologically distinct groups can leverage restraint to project a consistent image. Thus, when facing competition from transnational jihadist rivals:

Hypothesis 2. Armed groups that are *ideologically distant* from transnational jihadist rivals will *reduce* violence against civilians *more* than groups that share ideological affinities with these organizations.

Prospects for Reputational Gain and the Incentives for Restraint

While ideological distance from transnational jihadists enhances the credibility of restraint as a signal, not all groups are equally positioned to translate this credibility into reputational gains—particularly on the international stage. The potential to bolster international appeal through restraint likely depends on how groups are perceived by key audiences. As a result, an armed group’s pre-existing reputation may further shape the incentives for adopting restraint as a competitive strategy.

⁷³(Gade, Hafez and Gabbay 2019)

⁷⁴(Huang 2016; Stewart 2018; Fazal and Konaev 2019; Fazal 2021; Huang and Sullivan 2021)

Pre-existing reputation, here, refers to how an armed group is perceived by external actors, including foreign governments, international organizations, and advocacy networks, before it adopts or rejects restraint as a strategy. This reputation is often reflected in formal diplomatic recognition, prior participation in or exclusion from negotiations and peace processes, and classifications such as terrorist listings and sanctions, which codify external perceptions of a group's legitimacy or threat level. Among these indicators, terrorist designations stand out as particularly powerful markers of a group's reputation. The label "terrorist" not only codifies perceptions of a group as illegitimate and threatening but also institutionalizes its reputation through legal and economic restrictions⁷⁵.

Terrorist designations, particularly those issued by the United States, carry far-reaching consequences that can sharpen or blunt incentives for restraint. The role of the United States as a global leader in counterterrorism and national security means its designations not only shape domestic policies but also influence the decisions of other governments toward armed groups⁷⁶. Once a group is labeled as a terrorist organization, it becomes subject to economic sanctions, asset freezes, and travel restrictions, limiting its political and operational flexibility⁷⁷. These labels often lead to broader isolation, cutting off access to international aid, diplomatic channels, and negotiation opportunities⁷⁸. Given the enduring nature of these designations—it is rare for groups' terrorist status to be revoked⁷⁹—the reputational damage can be irreparable.

Crucially, although jihadist armed groups are found to be more likely to be designated as terrorists by the United States, this stigma is not restricted to religious extremists⁸⁰. Prominent secessionist and Marxist revolutionary groups, such as the Shining Path in Peru, Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front (DHKP/C) and Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Turkey, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, Revolutionary Struggle in Greece, Continuity Irish Republican Army (CIRA) in the UK, and Communist Party of the Philippines, have all been blacklisted alongside religiously motivated actors. This highlights that even groups with localized ambitions and secular state-building objectives may be burdened by the stigma of negative prior reputations.

⁷⁵(Búzás and Meier 2023)

⁷⁶(El Masri and Phillips 2024)

⁷⁷(Cronin 2004; Haspeslagh 2013; Jo, Phillips and Alley 2020; Tominaga, Lee and Lyu 2022)

⁷⁸(Dudouet 2010; Haspeslagh 2013, 2021)

⁷⁹(Phillips 2019a)

⁸⁰(El Masri and Phillips 2024)

Overall, we argue that armed groups that have thus far avoided blacklisting by terrorist designation are better positioned to leverage strategic restraint as a tool for enhancing their international appeal. Their relatively untainted reputations leave open the possibility of building legitimacy in the eyes of foreign governments and international organizations, enabling them to capitalize on restraint. In contrast, groups already burdened by terrorist designations face significant constraints in translating restraint into reputational gains. For these groups, the enduring stigma associated with blacklisting—codified through legal, economic, and diplomatic restrictions—limits the ability of restrained behavior to reverse international condemnation, restore opportunities for diplomatic recognition, or garner donations from advocacy networks. As a result, the strategic effectiveness of restrained competition hinges on a group’s reputational starting point and its prospects for reshaping external perceptions. Thus, when facing competition from transnational jihadist rivals, we posit:

Hypothesis 3. Armed groups *without prior terrorist designations* will *reduce* violence against civilians *more* than armed groups already designated as terrorists.

DATA AND RESEARCH DESIGN

We leverage the sudden emergence of pledges of allegiance to AQ and IS by pre-existing organizations as a quasi-experimental treatment within a Difference-in-Differences (DiD)⁸¹ framework. In doing so, we assess how armed groups adapt their behavior in response to the abrupt introduction of competition from transnational jihadists in their violent political market. We estimate our DiD models using a time-series cross-sectional dataset, covering 485 armed groups between 2004 and 2016. The dataset includes all groups listed in the Extended Data on Terrorist Groups (EDTG) dataset during this period⁸². We begin our study in 2004 because the first recorded pledge to AQ from a non-affiliated group occurred that year⁸³.

We refrain from drawing on the UCDP/PRIOR Armed Conflict Dataset due to its reliance on battle-related deaths thresholds, which significantly limit its coverage of groups. UCDP/PRIOR imposes a minimum threshold of 25 battle-related deaths per year to classify armed group activity

⁸¹Our DiD design is explained in further detail below.

⁸²(Hou, Gaibulloev and Sandler 2020)

⁸³(Byman 2014; Mendelsohn 2015)

as a conflict, excluding groups that engage in lower-intensity violence. Given that our aim is to assess whether non-AQ/IS-affiliated local groups reduce their violence against civilians, excluding groups that do not meet this threshold would introduce selection bias into our analysis by disproportionately dropping less violent groups from the sample.

By contrast, the EDTG dataset offers broader coverage by including groups identified in the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), regardless of the level of violence they perpetrate. This approach aligns more closely with our empirical goals, as it ensures that we capture both highly violent and less violent armed groups.

Civilian Victimization

Our primary outcome of interest is the victimization of civilians by armed groups that have not pledged allegiance to AQ or IS (hereafter referred to as “non-AQ/IS-affiliated groups”). Specifically, we explore changes in these groups’ civilian victimization following pledges of allegiance to AQ or IS by jihadist groups operating in the same country.

To measure civilian victimization, we use data from the GTD, which provides incident-level data on armed group attacks targeting a variety of victims, including civilians. The GTD identifies 22 target/victim types. We consider attacks whose target is identified by the GTD as private citizens, businesses, educational institutions, journalists, religious figures, tourists, NGOs, airports, maritime, telecommunication, transportation systems, or abortion clinics as attacks aimed at perpetrating civilian victimization⁸⁴. Our main measure of civilian victimization, *Civilian Victimization*, denotes the number of attacks⁸⁵ perpetrated by a given non-AQ/IS-affiliated group targeting one of the above categories in a given year, though we present robustness checks with alternative measures—*Number of Civilian Casualties* and *Casualties per Attack Targeting Civilians*—in our appendix.

⁸⁴Thereby, we exclude attacks on government, police, military, and violent organizations.

⁸⁵We use a logged version of this variable in our models. Following conventional practice, we add 1 before log-transforming our variable to handle zeros in this count variable.

Pledges to al-Qaeda and Islamic State

To collect data on pledges to AQ and IS, we analyzed the organizational histories of 161 jihadist groups that were active between 2004-2020 in 41 different countries across Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa. We gathered an initial list of jihadist organizations⁸⁶ by examining the backgrounds of hundreds of armed groups in the Armed Group Dataset⁸⁷, Non-State Actors in Armed Conflict Dataset (NSA)⁸⁸, Big, Allied and Dangerous (BAAD)⁸⁹, How Terrorist Groups End⁹⁰, and the Mapping Militants Project⁹¹. In addition to these sources, we also explored the histories of jihadist groups in academic publications, policy-oriented reports, and media articles. Additional research was necessary given that the temporal focus of various datasets ends before IS's rise in 2014 and since the nature of relations between AQ, IS, and other jihadist groups is often uncertain in these databases.

We examined if each jihadist organization had reportedly issued their “allegiance,” “fealty,” or “fidelity” to AQ or IS⁹². Importantly, we only accounted for pledges to AQ and IS by previously unaffiliated organizations rather than groups formed by AQ- and IS-central⁹⁴. We excluded the latter set of groups because AQ/IS-founded groups are planned expansions of AQ/IS networks into regions they deem important, meaning their presence is likely endogenous to prior conflict dynamics. By focusing our attention on the disruptive shocks introduced by pledges made by pre-existing organizations, we can better isolate the causal impact of competitive pressures⁹⁵. We also excluded instances when an organization issued its broad support for AQ or IS rather than formally pledging fealty because a formal declaration of fealty is a necessary condition for organizations seeking to

⁸⁶While Shi'a groups may also pursue jihadist goals, we excluded these organizations from this list given they do not pledge allegiance to AQ or IS.

⁸⁷(Malone 2022)

⁸⁸(Cunningham, Gleditsch and Salehyan 2013)

⁸⁹(Asal and Rethemeyer 2015)

⁹⁰(Jones and Libicki 2008)

⁹¹(Crenshaw 2010)

⁹²Our list of pledges only includes pledges by organizations and not by individuals. This is the predominate way in which AQ and IS expanded to different conflict zones⁹³. Furthermore, we did not count for instances of temporary logistical cooperation (Jadoon 2018).

⁹⁴Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, for instance, was formed by existing AQ members (Johnsen 2013).

⁹⁵We discuss the plausible randomness of pledges by pre-existing groups in greater detail as we consider the parallel trends assumption below.

be accepted into AQ or IS networks⁹⁶. Analyzing Arabic-language media and statements issued by jihadist leaders and organizations helped to account for these important distinctions.

For each previously unaffiliated organization that pledged fealty to AQ or IS, we accounted for the year of the pledge and the organization's primary base of operations. Figure 1 visualizes the geographic distribution of these pledges, demonstrating that pledging is not confined to any single region of the world. This widespread distribution highlights the relevance of pledging to a diverse range of conflicts, emphasizing that examining this phenomenon's affect on local conflict dynamics offers a significant contribution to the broader study of civilian victimization. Moreover, Figure 1 illustrates that several countries experiencing armed group activity have not witnessed such pledges, providing an opportunity to empirically contrast the civilian victimization behavior of armed groups in contexts with and without transnational jihadist competition.

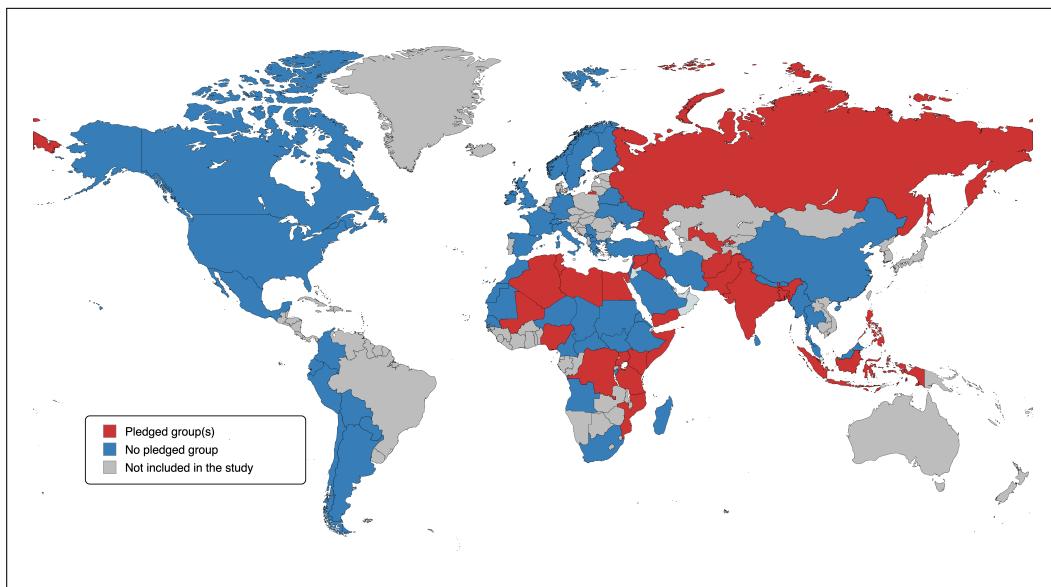


Figure 1. Geographic Distribution of Pledges to AQ and IS, 2004-2016

Ideology and Terrorist Designation

Religious group ideology constitutes a major dimension in capturing ideological distance or affinity between non-AQ/IS-affiliated groups and their transnational jihadist competitors. Relying on the EDTG, we measure *religious group ideology* using a binary variable, classifying groups as

⁹⁶(Blair et al. 2022; Berlin 2024)

either religiously motivated or not. While we acknowledge the limitations of this binary approach—particularly its inability to capture fluctuations in ideological appeals, such as instances where even jihadist groups adopt secular rhetoric in response to shifts in their military power⁹⁷—this measure remains the most feasible given the broad scope of our dataset. Moreover, broad distinctions between religious and secular ideologies are more relevant to our argument about ideological distance making restraint a viable pathway to differentiation than minor fluctuations in public discourse, which may not alter the perceived ideological identity of these groups.

To measure whether a group has been officially designated as a terrorist organization, we directly rely on the U.S. Department of State’s Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) list⁹⁸. We operationalize *terrorist designation* as a binary variable, coding groups as either designated or not designated.

Difference-in-Differences Design

We use a DiD design to evaluate how pledges to AQ and IS in a country affects the civilian victimization behavior of non-AQ/IS-affiliated groups operating in the same country. We conduct this analysis at the group-year level rather than the country-year level to allow for a more precise examination of individual group behavior.

In our DiD design, pledges serve as the treatment. We compare the average change over time in civilian victimization by treated armed groups (i.e., groups operating in countries with pledged groups) to the average change in civilian victimization by control groups (i.e., groups operating in countries without pledges). Groups in countries with pledged organizations may differ systematically in the levels of violence they inflict on civilians compared to those in countries without pledged groups. The DiD design enables us to examine any within-group changes in civilian victimization over time as influenced by the presence of pledges in a group’s country of operation while accounting for both time-invariant group-level confounders and time-variant confounders that are consistent across all armed groups. Figure 2 shows the geographic distribution of treated groups.

Since pledges can occur in any given year, not all treated groups receive the treatment at the

⁹⁷(Ying 2024)

⁹⁸For additional information on this list, see <https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/>.

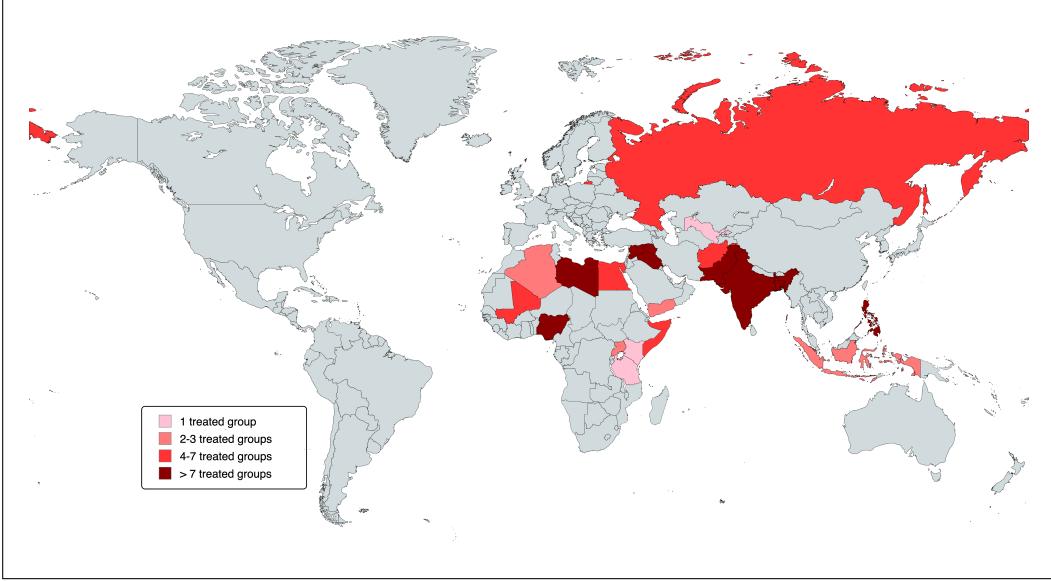


Figure 2. Geographic Distribution of Treated Groups, 2004-2016

same time. Therefore, we use a staggered DiD design, which allows for variations in the timing of treatment across groups. Unlike standard DiD approaches such as *Two-Way Fixed Effects (TWFE)*, this approach accounts for the differing timing of treatment across treated units and can estimate the dynamic effect of the treatment across time⁹⁹. Figure 3 presents the temporal distribution of the number of groups treated each year. As expected, 2014—coinciding with the peak of IS’s military strength and its widespread appeal among jihadist organizations—witnessed the highest number of treated groups (e.g., groups operating in countries where a jihadist group pledged to AQ or IS).

We estimate the effects of pledges on civilian victimization outcomes using the following DiD model:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta \text{Treatment}_{it} + \delta_t + \lambda_i + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

where Y_{it} denotes the outcome variable (e.g., civilian victimization by non-AQ/IS-affiliated group) for group i at time t . The term α represents the intercept. The treatment indicator Treatment_{it} is equal to 1 if group i is operating in a country with a pledged group at time t and from then onwards, and 0 otherwise. Time fixed effects are denoted by δ_t , capturing factors that vary over time but are constant across units. Unit fixed effects are represented by λ_i , accounting for characteristics that

⁹⁹(Callaway and Sant’Anna 2021)

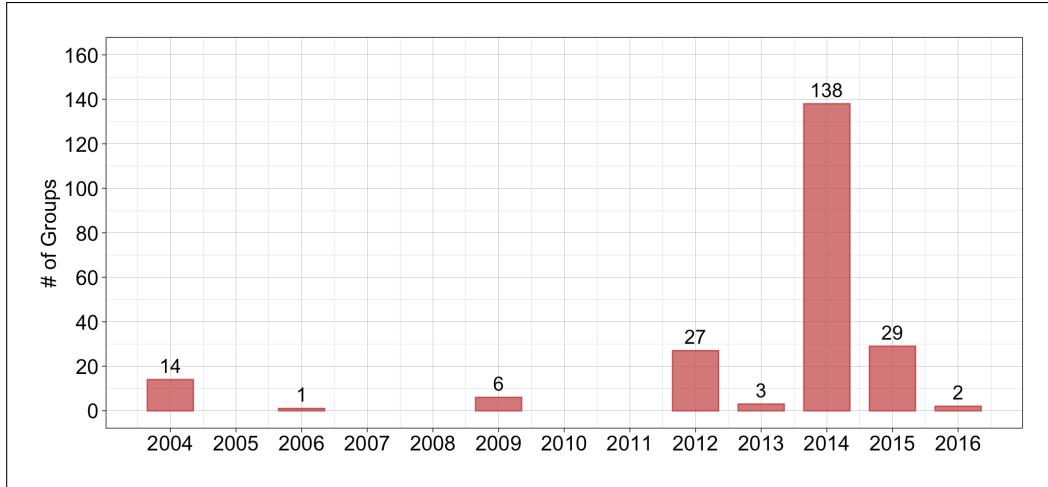


Figure 3. Number of Groups Treated Each Year, 2004-2016

vary between non-AQ/IS-affiliated groups but are constant over time. ε_{it} represents the error term, which includes all other unobserved factors.

In our extended models, we also include several time-variant controls—a given local group’s share of transnational attacks, the diversity of its attacks, binary indicators for whether the group engaged in kidnapping/extortion or experienced leadership decapitation, and the group’s age. More information about these controls is provided in the Appendix.

Parallel Trends

A DiD strategy relies on a parallel trends assumption which posits that the average change observed in the control group (e.g., groups operating in countries without pledges) would mirror the change that would have occurred in the treatment group (e.g., groups operating in countries with pledged groups) if the treatment (e.g., pledges) had not occurred. If this assumption holds, the model can estimate the treatment’s effect on the outcome variable independently of any confounding factors that might influence both the occurrence of the treatment and the observed outcome. This assumption might be compromised if country-level confounders affect both the likelihood of jihadist groups pledging and the manner in which non-AQ/IS-affiliated groups victimize civilians. We examine whether a violation of the parallel trends assumption poses a threat to our inferences, both theoretically and empirically.

The parallel trends assumption should theoretically hold in our context because the decision

for groups to pledge is primarily driven by individual leader- or group-level factors rather than country-level ones. First, pledges to AQ and IS are not contained to any particular region or country¹⁰⁰. More importantly, previous research shows that factors such as organizational weaknesses, ideological deficiencies, or the reputational deficits of particular leaders are more influential in the decision to pledge than country-specific conditions¹⁰¹.

A plausible theoretical concern here is that the decision to pledge may be strongly influenced by domestic militant competition. Specifically, one might argue that groups operating in more competitive environments are strategically motivated to pledge as a means of enhancing their resources. However, numerous jihadist organizations, such as Ajnad Misr, Ansar al-Shari'a Libya, Islamic Jihad Union, Moro Islamic Liberation Front, and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, have faced intense local competition without pledging to AQ and IS. Moreover, other organizations, such as the GSPC in Algeria or the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, pledged fealty years after initial competition with other groups began¹⁰². While this concern surrounding competition warrants consideration, it does not undermine the validity of our estimates. Importantly, if pledging were primarily driven by escalating domestic competition, and if such competition were associated with greater violence against civilians, we would expect to observe a positive correlation between pledges and increased civilian victimization by non-AQ/IS-affiliate groups in our data. However, as we detail in our results section, our findings show the opposite pattern.

Yet, to further support the robustness of our DiD design, we empirically assess the parallel trends assumption¹⁰³. First, we test for prior trends to see whether the treated and untreated groups exhibited similar trends before the treatment. In the Appendix, we include parallel trends plots illustrating that the trends in our civilian victimization measure between the treatment and control groups were approximately parallel during the pre-treatment periods. Secondly, we conduct a pre-treatment regression analysis by interacting the DiD treatment variable with time dummies to create *leads* (e.g., dummy variables for pre-treatment periods) and *lags* (e.g., dummy variables for post-treatment periods)¹⁰⁴. Using the following equation:

¹⁰⁰(Jadoon 2018; Warner et al. 2020)

¹⁰¹(Byman 2014; Mendelsohn 2015; Bacon 2018; Blair and Potter 2023; Berlin 2024)

¹⁰²(Berlin 2024)

¹⁰³While there are commonly accepted methods for evaluating this assumption, no definitive test can validate it. Therefore, these empirical techniques should be considered as providing suggestive evidence rather than conclusive proof (Huntington-Klein 2022)

¹⁰⁴(Autor 2003)

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \sum_{k=-m}^{-1} \beta_k (\text{Time}_{t+k} \times \text{Treatment}_i) + \sum_{k=1}^n \gamma_k (\text{Time}_{t+k} \times \text{Treatment}_i) + \delta_t + \lambda_i + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (2)$$

where Y_{it} is the outcome variable, Time_{t+k} represents the time dummies, and Treatment_i is the treatment indicator, we test whether the pre-treatment trends for the treatment and control groups are parallel. If the pre-treatment trends in civilian victimization are parallel, that is if the parallel trends assumption holds, the interaction terms for the *leads* (β_k) should be statistically insignificant. This is indeed what we find, as presented in the Appendix.

Finally, we employ event-study designs as another way to inquiry pre-treatment imbalances¹⁰⁵. As detailed in our results section (see Figures 4, 5, and 6), we do not uncover any statistically significant differences between treatment and control group units, which provides additional support for the parallel trends assumption.

Testing for Heterogeneous Treatment Effects

Building on our main DiD framework, we extend our analysis to evaluate the conditional effects proposed in Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3, which focus on variations in responses to transnational jihadist competition based on ideological orientation and prior terrorist designations. To test these hypotheses, we apply our original DiD design to subsets of the data. By focusing on theoretically relevant subpopulations, we evaluate whether the treatment effect—exposure to transnational jihadist pledges—varies based on ideological orientation and prior designation status.

For Hypothesis 2, we divide the sample into religious and non-religious groups based on their ideological profiles, and we estimate the same staggered DiD model within each subset. We expect weaker or null effects among religious groups but larger reductions among non-religious groups, supporting H2. For Hypothesis 3, we classify groups based on their terrorist designation status before treatment. We replicate the original DiD model within each subset. We expect larger reductions in civilian victimization among non-designated groups relative to designated ones, consistent with H3.

¹⁰⁵(Hassell and Holbein 2024)

RESULTS

We estimate the average treatment effects in our DiD setup, with *Pledges* serving as the treatment and *Civilian Victimization* by non-AQ/IS-affiliated groups (measured as the logged number of attacks against civilians) being the dependent variable. We use clustered bootstrapped standard errors at the group level.

Baseline Results

Our first set of results evaluates the effect of pledges in a country on the civilian victimization strategies of non-AQ/IS-affiliated groups operating in the same country using the full sample of groups. Table 1 presents the weighted average of group-time average treatment effects. Model 1 provides a naive estimate of the treatment effect, while Model 2 introduces controls for targeting strategies that may influence victimization patterns. Model 3 further accounts for leader decapitation and group age.

Across all specifications, non-AQ/IS-affiliated groups exhibit restraint toward civilians following pledges. The Average Treatment Effect (ATE) of pledges on civilian victimization is consistently negative and statistically significant at the 90% confidence level across models. Estimates from the fully specified Model 3 suggest pledges caused a 16.31% decrease in the expected number of attacks targeting civilians.

These findings align with expectations, suggesting pledges correspond to reduced civilian victimization. However, the results' significance at the 90% confidence level warrants a cautious interpretation, offering moderate—though not definitive—support for the restraint hypothesis (H1) when applying DiD models to the full sample without accounting for group ideology or designation status.

Further insights emerge from the event study analysis reported in Figure 4. Event time refers to the years before and after the announcement of pledges. Negative values of event time denote pre-treatment periods, whereas positive values denote the post-treatment period. Dynamic group-time average treatment effects¹⁰⁶ reveal no significant differences between treatment and control

¹⁰⁶This procedure computes average effects across varying lengths of treatment exposure and mirrors an event study approach.

Table 1. Pledges and Local Groups' Civilian Victimization

<i>DV: Civilian Victimization</i> Sample: All non-AQ/IS-Affiliated Groups			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Average Treatment Effect	-0.1754* (0.0965)	-0.1599* (0.0947)	-0.1781* (0.0952)
Time-Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Unit-Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Controls</i>			
Share of Transnational Attacks	No	Yes	Yes
Diversity of Attacks	No	Yes	Yes
Kidnapping/Extortion	No	Yes	Yes
Leader Decapitation	No	No	Yes
Group Age (logged)	No	No	Yes
N	2366	2301	2301

Note 1: **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1

Note 2: Robust standard errors clustered on group are in parentheses. All models are estimated with Callaway and Sant'Anna's (2021) doubly robust estimation method for staggered Difference-in-Differences using the `att_gt` function of the `did` package in R. All models consider both "Never Treated" and "Not Yet Treated" units as the control group.

units in the pre-treatment period, confirming parallel trends.

Post-treatment estimates show a downward shift in civilian victimization. While some estimates achieve only 90% confidence (red markers), others reach 95% (blue markers). Notably, years 5, 6, and 9 post-treatment exhibit substantial reductions in civilian targeting. These patterns reinforce the hypothesis that transnational extremist competition encourages restraint among local non-AQ/IS-affiliated groups, albeit with modest overall effects.

Heterogeneous Treatment Effects by Ideology

We next examine the effects of pledges on civilian victimization by non-AQ/IS-affiliated local groups by disaggregating groups based on ideology—religious versus non-religious—to evaluate whether ideological distance between non-AQ/IS-affiliated groups and transnational jihadists moderates responses to competition (H2).

Separate DiD models are run for religious (N = 136) and non-religious groups (N = 349). Table

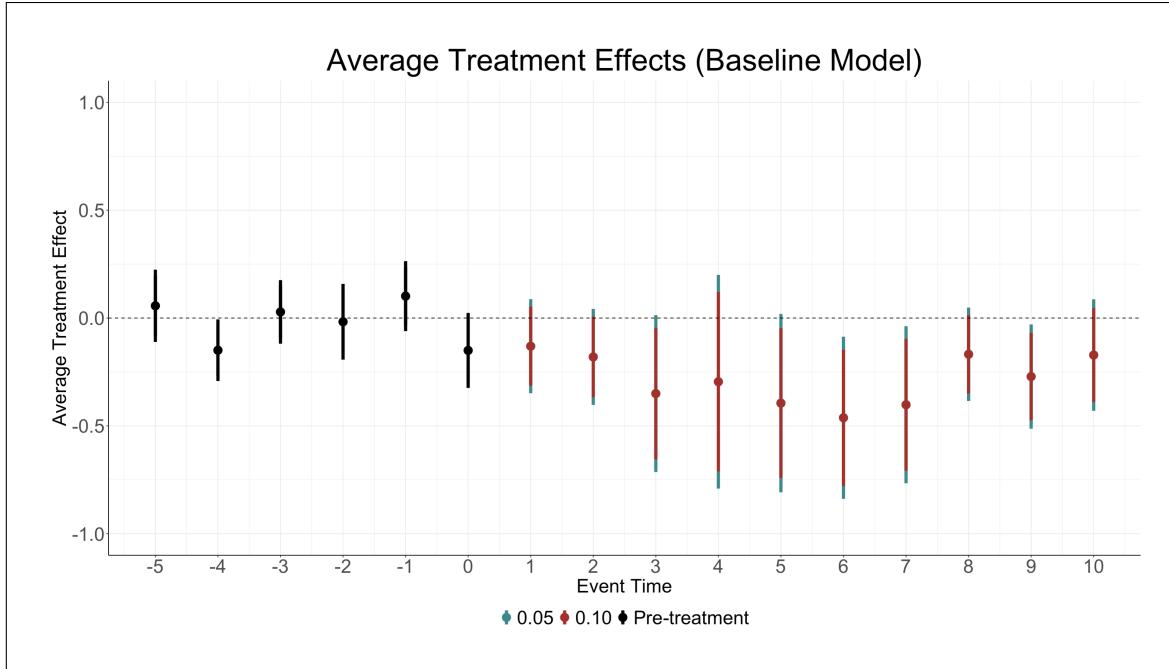


Figure 4. Aggregate Group-Time Average Treatment Effects (Event Study), 2004-2016

Note: Event study is based on Model 1 of Table 1. Dynamic group-time average treatment effects are computed using the `aggte` function of the `did` package in R.

2 presents these results. Religious groups show no evidence of restraint, yet their ATEs (Models 4–6) are consistently negative, albeit statistically insignificant. Importantly, these results also fail to support the conventional outbidding hypothesis, suggesting that religious groups do not escalate civilian targeting in response to competition.

In contrast, non-religious groups (Models 7–9) display stronger support for both the overall restraint hypothesis (H1) and the *ideological distance* hypothesis (H2). The ATEs are negative and significant at the 95% confidence level in Model 7 and the 90% level in Models 8 and 9. Estimates from the fully specified Model 9 indicate pledges reduced non-religious non-AQ/IS-affiliated local groups' attacks against civilians by 17.45%. Non-religious groups thus exhibit more consistent reductions in civilian targeting following pledges in their country.

Figure 5 extends this analysis through event studies using Models 4 and 7. The left panel plots dynamic treatment effects for religious groups, while the right panel does so for non-religious groups. The left panel shows religious groups maintaining parallel trends pre-treatment, but post-treatment declines fail to achieve statistical significance, even at the 90% level.

In contrast, the right panel illustrates stronger patterns for non-religious groups (72 percent of

Table 2. Pledges and Local Groups’ Civilian Victimization by Group Ideology

	DV: Civilian Victimization					
	Sample: Religious Groups			Sample: Non-Religious		
	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9
Average Treatment Effect	-0.1762 (0.1895)	-0.1229 (0.226)	-0.0842 (0.1431)	-0.192** (0.0959)	-0.1804* (0.1058)	-0.1917* (0.1057)
Time-Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Unit-Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Controls</i>						
Share of Transnational Attacks	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Diversity of Attacks	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Kidnapping/Extortion	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Leader Decapitation	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
Group Age (logged)	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
N	624	585	585	1742	1716	1716

Note 1: **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1

Note 2: Robust standard errors clustered on group are in parentheses. All models are estimated with Callaway and Sant’Anna’s (2021) doubly robust estimation method for staggered Difference-in-Differences using the `att_gt` function of the `did` package in R. All models consider both “Never Treated” and “Not Yet Treated” units as the control group.

our groups). Pre-treatment effects hover around zero, supporting parallel trends. Post-treatment effects reveal sustained reductions in civilian targeting, achieving 95% significance (blue markers) starting from year 3 onward. Taken together, these results provide support for H2, which posits ideological distance as a key moderating factor in shaping local groups’ responses to transnational jihadist competition. Ideologically distant groups (non-religious) demonstrate more pronounced and sustained restraint in response to competition from transnational jihadists, while religious groups—who may struggle to construct meaningful contrasts with transnational jihadists—exhibit weaker responses.

Heterogeneous Treatment Effects by Terrorist Designation

We further test whether the effects of pledges depend on non-AQ/IS-affiliated groups’ terrorist designation status (H3). Specifically, we hypothesize that non-designated groups, facing greater reputational incentives, will moderate violence more than designated groups. Separate DiD models analyze designated (N = 37) and non-designated groups (N = 448). Table 3 reports results.

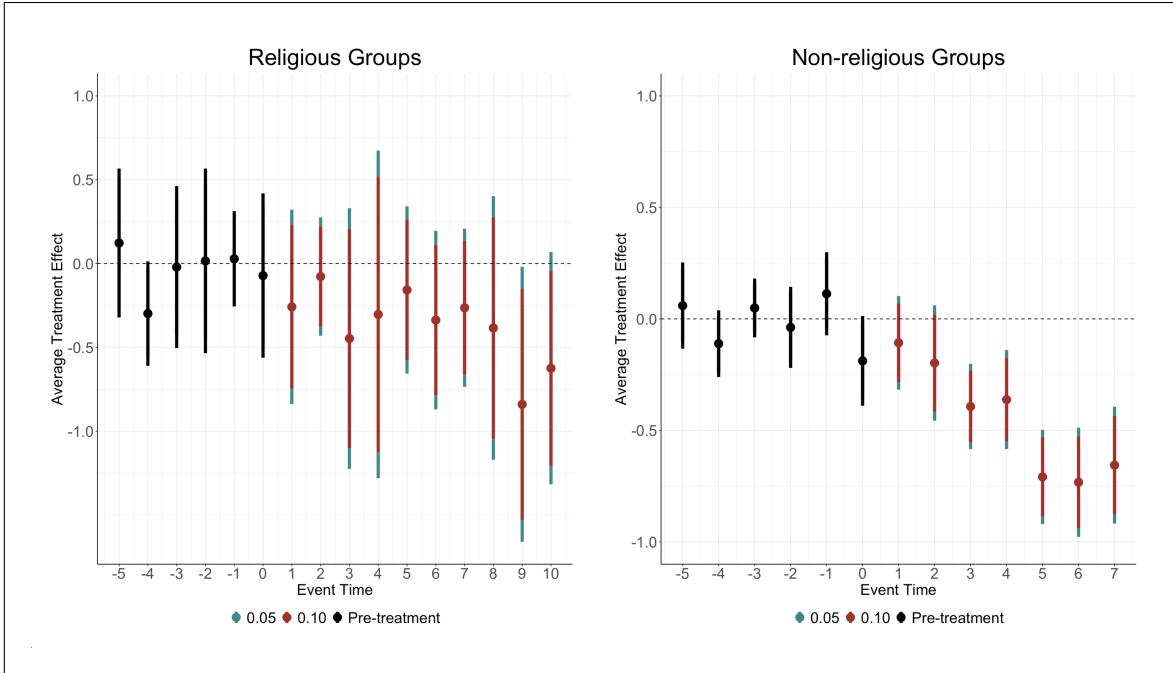


Figure 5. Aggregate Group-Time Average Treatment Effects by Group Ideology

Note: Event study is based on Models 4 and 7 of Table 2. Dynamic group-time average treatment effects are computed using the `aggte` function of the `did` package in R.

Among designated groups (Models 10–12), ATEs are negative but statistically insignificant. This aligns with expectations, as designated groups face limited prospects for reputational improvement. By contrast, non-designated groups (Models 13–15) exhibit significant reductions in civilian victimization, supporting H3. The ATEs are negative and significant at conventional levels across specifications, with Model 15 estimating a 20.6% decrease in civilian targeting by non-designated non-AQ/IS-affiliated local groups following a pledge in their country.

The event study results in Figure 6 corroborates these findings. For designated groups (left panel), post-treatment effects remain insignificant, reinforcing the lack of moderation. In contrast, non-designated groups (right panel) exhibit significant and sustained reductions, reaching 95% confidence (blue markers) by years 5–7 and again in year 9. These results underscore the importance of designation status. Non-designated groups—motivated by greater prospects for reputational improvement—demonstrate restraint towards civilians, potentially leveraging competition with transnational jihadists to enhance their international appeal.

Table 3. Pledges and Local Groups' Civilian Victimization by Designation Status

	DV: Civilian Victimization					
	Sample: Designated Groups			Sample: Non-Designated		
	Model 10	Model 11	Model 12	Model 13	Model 14	Model 15
Average Treatment Effect	-0.3609 (0.36)	-0.0075 (0.4146)	-0.531 (0.5953)	-0.1886** (0.0911)	-0.2054** (0.1019)	-0.2307** (0.1149)
Time-Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Unit-Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Controls</i>						
Share of Transnational Attacks	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Diversity of Attacks	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Kidnapping/Extortion	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Leader Decapitation	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
Group Age (logged)	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
N	234	234	234	2067	2002	2002

Note 1: **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1

Note 2: Robust standard errors clustered on group are in parentheses. All models are estimated with Callaway and Sant'Anna's (2021) doubly robust estimation method for staggered Difference-in-Differences using the att_gt function of the did package in R. All models consider both "Never Treated" and "Not Yet Treated" units as the control group.

ROBUSTNESS AND EXTENSIONS

The findings remain robust across several alternative specifications of our DiD models. Details of these robustness checks and their results are provided in the Appendix.

Alternative Measures

We employ two alternative measures of civilian victimization: (a) the *logged number of civilian casualties* and (b) the *logged number of casualties per attack targeting civilians*. Both measures are aggregated using event data from the GTD, as outlined in our research design section. The results (Appendix 5) align closely with our primary findings.

We also employ an alternative measure of group ideology: strategic vs. universalist groups, using data collected by Piazza (2009) and extended by Hand and Saiya (2022). Piazza (2009, 65) defines universalist groups as those with "highly ambitious, abstract, complex, and nebulous goals that are driven primarily by ideology." This measure provides a plausible proxy for ideological distance between local groups and their transnational jihadist competitors. Transnational jihadist

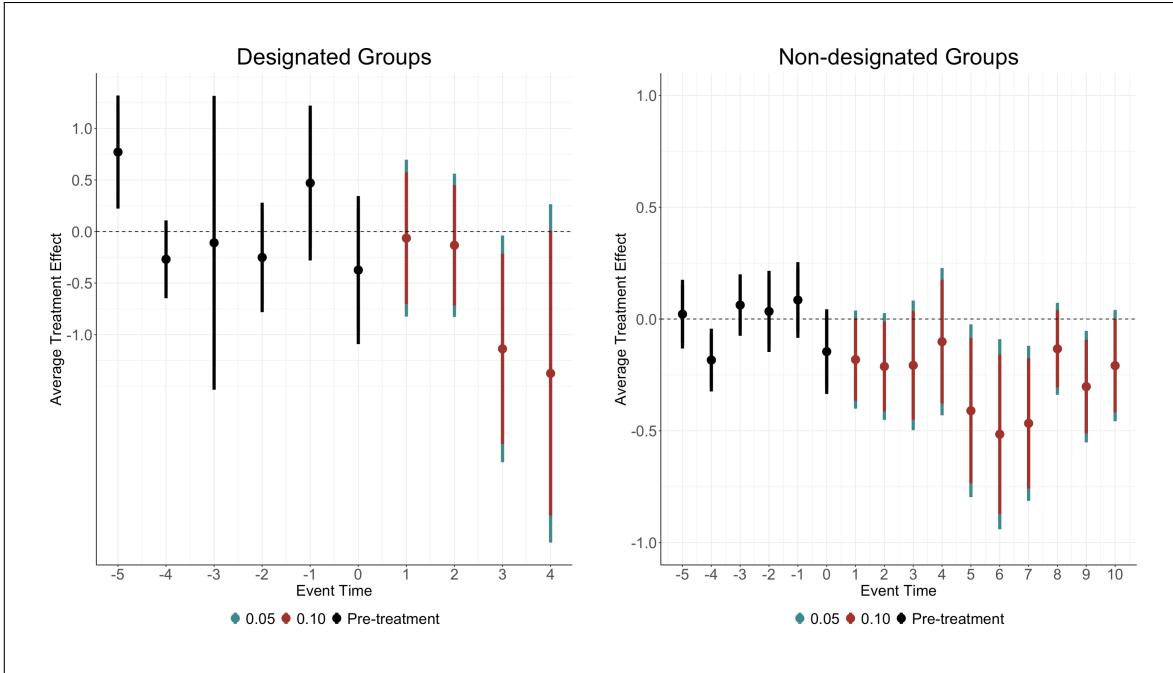


Figure 6. Aggregate Group-Time Average Treatment Effects by Designation Status

Note: Event study is based on Models 10 and 13 of Table 3. Dynamic group-time average treatment effects are computed using the `aggte` function of the `did` package in R.

groups, with aspirations to establish a global caliphate by dismantling the existing international order, can be classified as universalist. Using this alternative measure of ideological distance, we replicate our main findings. While pledges lead strategic local groups to exhibit restraint, universalist local groups do not demonstrate the same behavior (Appendix 5).

Resource-Centric Concerns

While our DiD models estimate within-group changes over time, we still address potential alternative explanations related to time-variant group-level factors that could bias our estimations. To account for these concerns, we incorporate into our models two factors that plausibly shape civilian victimization patterns—*foreign state support* (serving as a proxy of reduced dependence on local populations) and *social service provision* (serving as a proxy of greater concern for and potential greater dependence on local populations). Both measures are derived from the EDTG dataset. The results (Appendix 6 and 7) are consistent with those reported earlier, demonstrating that the observed patterns of restraint are not merely artifacts of variations in group resources or

population-oriented strategies.

Militant Infighting

Recent research shows that militant infighting—groups engaging in violent attacks against each other—may lead to behavioral restraint by exacerbating resource pressures and, as a result, increasing groups’ dependence on civilians¹⁰⁷. If local groups and AQ/IS affiliates in their country frequently clash, the restraint that local groups exhibit in response to pledges could stem from a reallocation of resources to infighting efforts, rather than AQ/IS affiliates changing the “rule of competition” by introducing a legacy of brutality or attracting international media attention.

To account for this possibility, we run our DiD models while controlling for the propensity of non-AQ/IS-affiliated groups to attack other armed groups, using the GTD’s indicators of target type. The results (Appendix 12) are consistent with those reported earlier. We further probe this issue by re-running our models, focusing only on group-years where militant infighting was minimal. The results remain unchanged, as non-religious and non-designated non-AQ/IS-affiliated groups continue to exhibit restraint in response to pledges despite not being frequently engaged in violence against other groups, demonstrating that the observed patterns of restraint are not merely artifacts of militant infighting.

Organizational Capacity and Territorial Aspirations

We further assess the robustness of our findings by controlling for two group-level factors that are relevant to the causal mechanism we propose—specifically, non-AQ/IS affiliated groups’ *organizational strength* and *secessionist goals*. Both measures are derived from the EDTG dataset.

One might argue that non-AQ/IS-affiliated groups could lack the resources and capacity to escalate violence against civilians, particularly if AQ/IS-affiliated rivals outcompete them for recruits, funding, or territorial control. If weaker organizational capacity were driving restraint rather than strategic calculation, our results could be confounded by resource limitations rather than deliberate moderation. Similarly, controlling for secessionist goals addresses the possibility that groups pursuing territorial autonomy may be especially sensitive to competition from AQ/IS-affiliated rivals,

¹⁰⁷(Polo and Welsh 2024)

as such rivals may pose a direct threat to their territorial ambitions. However, after accounting for these factors, the results (Appendix 8 and 9) remain consistent with our primary findings.

Transnational Jihadist Brutality

Our theoretical framework hinges on the assertion that transnational jihadist groups’ extreme violence serves as a competitive reference point, reshaping the “rules of competition” and prompting restraint among local rivals. To account for this brutality aspect, we use the GTD to calculate the *logged number of civilian casualties caused by pledged AQ/IS-affiliated groups* in a given year within each country. This measure captures the scale of brutality employed by these transnational actors. We then merge this country-year-level brutality measure with our analysis data, linking it to non-AQ/IS-affiliated local groups operating in the same country. We incorporate this pledged group brutality measure as a control variable in our DiD models and the results (Appendix 10) remain consistent with those reported earlier.

Spatial Substitution

Finally, we address the concern that non-AQ/IS affiliated groups might substitute victimizing civilians in their immediate vicinity with attacks against civilians across borders. Such a substitution effect could suggest that the negative treatment effects of pledges observed in our DiD analysis result from groups shifting their operations—possibly to avoid transnational jihadist competitors—rather than reflecting the restraint mechanism we propose. To mitigate this possibility, we re-estimate our DiD models (Appendix 11), focusing exclusively on attacks targeting civilians across national borders (measured as the logged number of cross-border attacks). The consistency of our main findings under this specification strengthens the argument that the observed effects are not driven by geographic displacement but instead support the proposed restraint mechanism.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study sheds new light on the strategic behavior of armed groups, challenging common assumptions about competition and escalation. Contrary to expectations that competition inherently drives escalation, our findings reveal that the entry of additional rivals does not always prompt

armed groups to resort to heightened violence against civilians. Instead, groups strategically assess their rivals, taking into account the type and perceived legitimacy and stigma of competing actors rather than focusing solely on the number of competitors.

Our findings also contribute to broader debates about how armed groups balance violence with aspirations for legitimacy and reputation¹⁰⁸, showcasing how these aspirations shape groups' behavioral responses to inter-group competition. While not all groups prioritize reputation, groups with greater prospects for enhancing their reputations—such as those not burdened by terrorist designations—demonstrate stronger incentives to moderate violence under competitive pressures.

These insights hold important implications for policymakers grappling with the rise of transnational organizations like al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS). Concerns about outbidding dynamics—where local groups escalate violence to compete with transnational jihadists—have shaped policy debates¹⁰⁹. Our findings suggest that escalation is not inevitable. Instead, competition may, in some cases, push groups to adopt more restrained approaches to maintain civilian support and bolster international appeal. Recognizing these dynamics can inform counterterrorism strategies that avoid reinforcing stigmatization and incentivize moderation.

Future research could build on this study in several ways. First, future work could expand our focus on the *type* of actor inducing competition in a violent political market to include other types of actors—beyond transnational jihadists—who could plausibly alter the “rules of competition”. For instance, international criminal organizations and cartel-like networks operating in gray zones between political and economic violence may shape competition in ways scholars have not yet considered¹¹⁰.

Second, while this study highlights violent tactics, further work is needed to examine how competition with transnational jihadists affects local groups’ non-violent practices, such as governance strategies, service provision, and relationships with state actors. Analyzing changes in discourse, propaganda, and public messaging could also illuminate how groups discursively highlight differences from extremist actors to mobilize support under competitive pressures.

Third, additional research should continue to study armed organizations espousing religious ideologies. While our findings suggest that religious groups did not significantly moderate in

¹⁰⁸(Jo 2015; Stanton 2016; Fazal and Konaev 2019; Stanton 2020)

¹⁰⁹(Hamming 2020; Berlin 2024)

¹¹⁰(Gilbert 2024)

response to pledges to AQ or IS in their country, neither did they escalate civilian targeting. This challenges common assumptions that religious ideologies inherently produce groups indifferent to public judgment¹¹¹.

¹¹¹(Nemeth 2014; Juergensmeyer 2017)

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