

*Below, I use my political science honors thesis's abstract to frame the discussion section, which provides a sample of both my analytical and written capabilities. I would be happy to provide the complete document upon request.*

## **Abstract**

This thesis seeks to ascertain the apolitical crisis conditions under which armed non-state actors (ANSAs) accrue power. Existing literature examines the structures that nurture ANSA power, including territorial control, group legitimacy, and access to resources. A monopoly on the use of force enables groups to sustain these structures. I explore whether ANSAs instrumentalize moments of apolitical national crisis to nurture these pillars of power and expect that groups will decrease their reliance on the use of force, instead utilizing catastrophes as opportunities to bolster legitimacy among local populations. Statistical, spatial, and qualitative analyses buttress this pursuit. In short, this research suggests that groups do try to accrue power in times of crisis, though not through service provision. Instead, they rely on force initially, and with an interaction effect between the temporal and spatial variation of their use of force – a curious finding that necessitates further investigation. As well, inter-group competition does not increase; groups instead seek to build alliances when threatened. Lastly, some groups rely on performativity *sometimes* – namely, politically motivated ANSAs use symbolic appeals. The duration and expansiveness of a disaster might also affect which groups make these appeals.

## **Discussion**

The three methodological approaches rendered complex and somewhat inconsistent results. Each methodology rests on different units of analysis, with the spatial component observing mean lethality levels within spatial and temporal zones and the MLR models observing lethality rates associated with a specific group within a country in a given year, thus adding a layer of complexity and requiring caution to draw comparisons. Still, the results elucidate curious trends for each hypothesis, especially H1 and H4, which concern ANSA's reliance on the use of force as a central pillar for power in times of crisis. In this section, I gauge the above results against each hypothesis.

<b>Hypothesis</b>		<b>Supported?</b>
H1:	Armed groups increase their power-seeking activities in times of national crisis.	Yes <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Increases in lethality (Spatial Analysis)</li><li>- Attempts to bolster legitimacy (ONLF &amp; PKK)</li></ul>
H2:	National crises will be associated with an increase in ANSA governance.	No
H3:	Weak groups will rely on the use of force after crises.	No direct causation, but weak ANSAs do appeal to the disaster to help justify the use of force in the short term <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- ONLF &amp; PKK</li></ul>
H4:	On average, ANSAs will reduce their reliance on violence after crises.	No; violence tends to increase <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Within 100 km, in 0-8 months</li><li>- Within 1000 km, after 16-20 months</li><li>- ONLF &amp; PKK increased attacks</li></ul>
H5:	National crises will prompt greater ANSA engagement with symbolic processes.	Yes <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- ONLF &amp; PKK</li></ul>
H6:	Competition will increase between ANSAs in times of national crisis.	No

H7: ANSA networks will experience net growth in times of national crisis.	Yes
	- ONLF & Gulf Cartel (latter sought alliances responding to its most pressing crisis, though not the national disaster)

Table 1. Review of findings' support for hypotheses.

## **HYPOTHESIS 1: Armed groups increase their power-seeking activities in times of national crisis**

The first hypothesis captures the central essence of this project, and other hypothesis tests relate to this initial and broader assertion. Generally, it seems that ANSAs indeed seek to maximize power during times of crisis; however, such an impetus might simply result from the group's consistent desire to accrue power or from its need to compensate for crisis-induced operational weaknesses. The case studies can substantiate both interpretations. On one hand, the ONLF indeed responded to the crisis with power-maximizing efforts that specifically referenced the drought: it decried the government's blockade as a weaponization of the crisis, called on the international community for support, and struck alliances with other Ethiopian rebel groups. The PKK acted similarly, casting the government's response negatively. On the other hand, Hurricane Alex seemed to pass almost imperceptibly by the Gulf Cartel: the group continued its activities without overt or subtle reference to the crisis, yet those activities involved striking alliances with other cartels and launching attacks on its rivals.

In the latter case, it seems that external cartel politics produced more of a crisis for the Gulf Cartel than did the hurricane. These insights underscore the need to gauge the salience of the crisis for each group based on its effects on group performativity and tactical opportunities. Where the crisis aligns with the group's performativity, it can use the event to push a legitimization agenda; where it affects tactical outlooks, the group might become weakened and thus forced to reconstruct its *modus operandi*; where the crisis achieves neither, groups will likely continue business as usual.

The spatial analysis component offers interesting insights in this regard. Close to the crisis site, groups on average increase their projection of violence; within eight months they return civilian casualty levels to their norm but maintain fatality levels higher than the pre-crisis norm (albeit lower than the initial post-conflict spike). This pattern might indicate that groups rush to secure their monopoly on power and territorial holdings when the initial shock threatens it most, and thereafter might wane those efforts to instead focus on public legitimacy, continuing their attacks and clashes with other groups or government forces, but instrumentally decreasing civilian predation rates.

However, at a greater distance from the catastrophe (1,000-kilometer threshold), ANSAs increase their use of force exponentially after the crisis. Similarly, the lagged MLR models demonstrate a significant positive trend between crisis presence and lethality rates in the subsequent year. Together, these findings suggest that greater degrees of temporal and spatial separation from a crisis give way to greater ANSA violence. This finding could speak to the crisis' weakening effects on groups, prompting them to protect their primary interests through the use of violence, which is one of the more readily available power accrual mechanisms.

Ultimately, this research supports the first hypothesis, with caveats. Namely, ANSA typology, crisis salience relative to the ANSA in question, and spatial-temporal distance from the event severely sway the group's ability and disposition to capitalize on crisis.

## **HYPOTHESIS 2: National crises will be associated with an increase in ANSA governance**

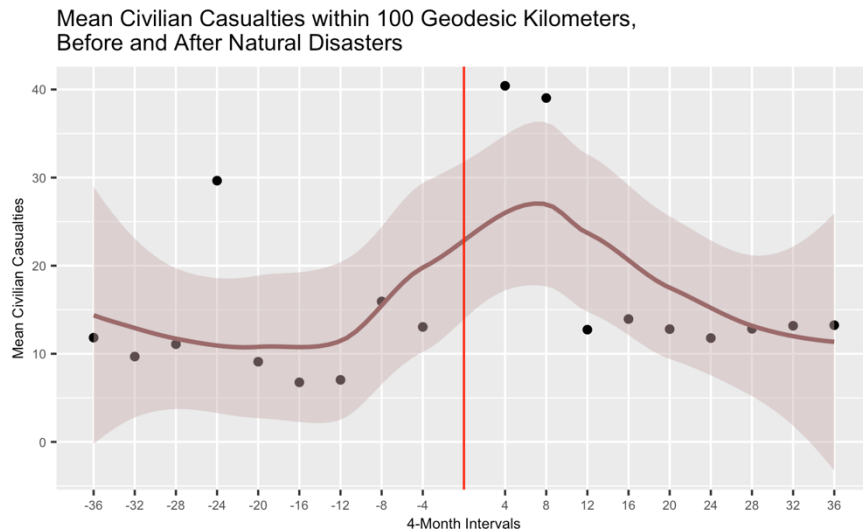
The case studies test for this second hypothesis and offer null results. ANSAs did not increase their service provision in any of the crisis events. The reasoning here might be rooted in power accrual mechanism prioritization: governance is always a last-order concern for ANSAs –

even activist and secessionist groups – because of its resource intensity. Groups must secure other power components to enable themselves to then provide governance. Catastrophes affect ANSA capacity, not just that of governments or civilians, so affected armed groups' priorities understandably lie in securing territory first and foremost and service provision last. Governance serves as an instrument to build long-term public support. In crisis times, the use of force can induce civilian compliance with greater ease and lower costs. Thus, the null effect of crises on ANSA governance makes sense and does not come as a surprise.

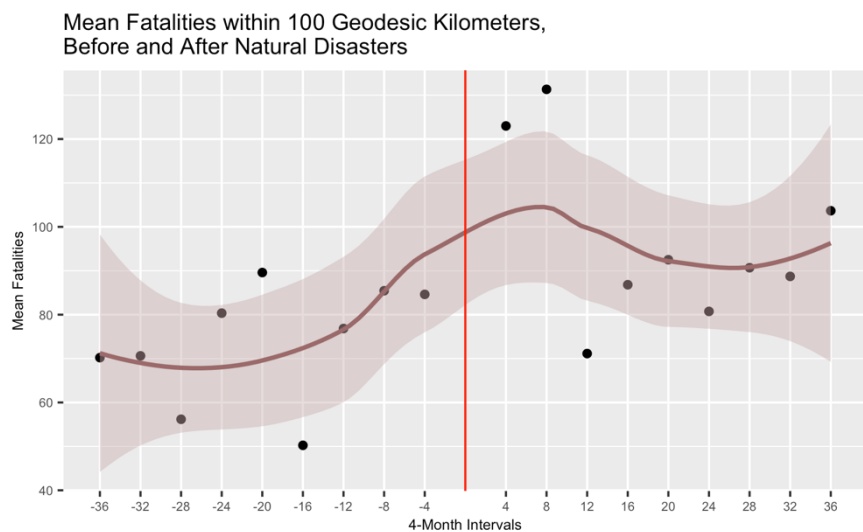
### HYPOTHESIS 3: Weak groups will rely on the use of force after crises

The ONLF case provides support for H3. The group, entering the drought from a debilitated position, used the catastrophe to animate its activist efforts. In particular after the government instituted blockades and counterterrorism strategies that severely diminished civilian livelihood and compounded on the droughts' adverse effects, the ONLF revived its operations and relied heavily on its militant apparatus, launching attacks against the state and its supporters.

Because Hurricane Alex did not pose a severe threat to the Gulf Cartel, gauging its reliance



on force does not provide insights for apolitical crises' effects on armed groups. Yet, it did enter its adversarial campaign against Los Zetas from its weakest position and indeed relied on the use of force as an attempt to neutralize the threat. Perhaps relevant apolitical crises would render similar results as did this inherently political and organizational threat for the Gulf Cartel.



### HYPOTHESIS 4: On average, ANSAs will reduce their reliance on violence after crises

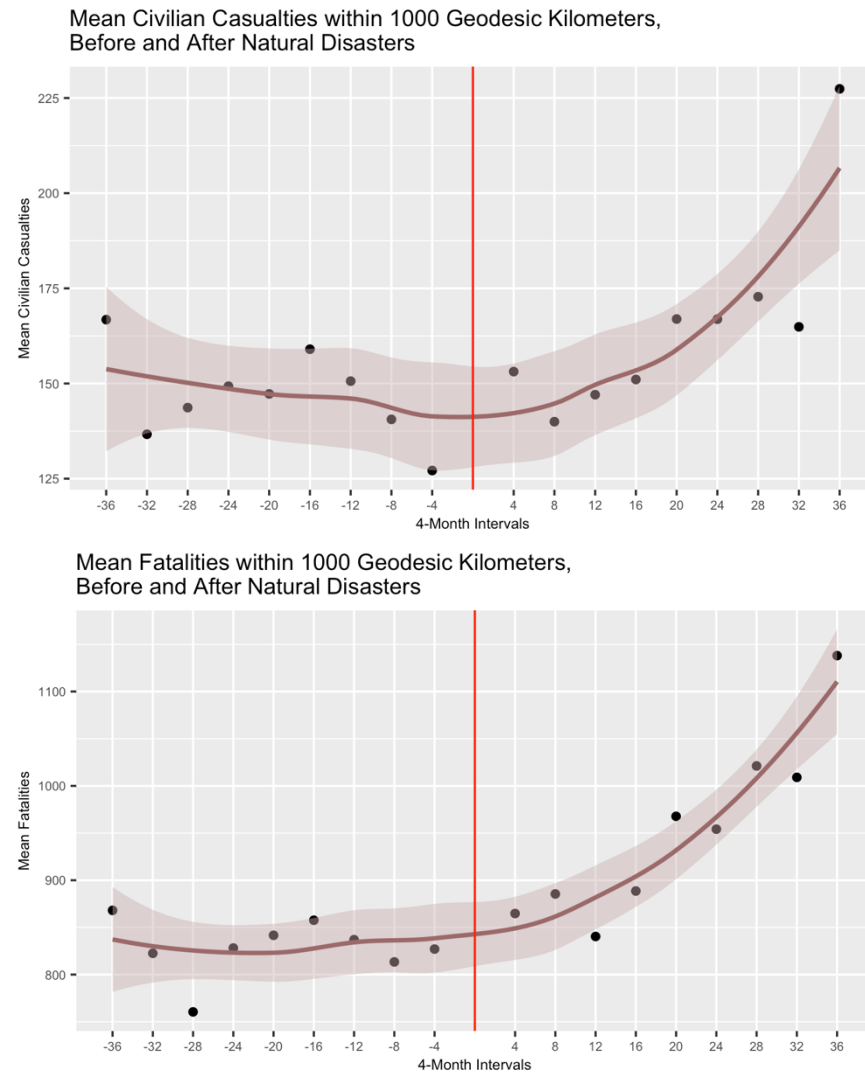
All methodological approaches tested for the fourth hypothesis. The MLR models suggest that crisis components (crisis presence, number of crises, economic crises, and natural disasters) significantly decrease country-group-year lethality rates at large. This trend might indicate, as expected, that armed groups focus energies on legitimacy

Figure 1. Scatterplot with Loess trendline of mean civilian casualties (top) and mean overall fatalities (bottom) by 4-month intervals before and after natural disasters, within 100 geodesic kilometers.

as opposed to their monopolies on violence during times of crisis. Yet, a one-year lag changes the influence of these components, with crisis presence significantly increasing the subsequent country-group-year's lethality rates, suggesting that after an initial shock that meters the projection of violence, groups recoup and restart violent activities.

The spatial analysis approach to this quandary demonstrates that, within 100 kilometers of a natural disaster, mean lethality levels spike significantly up to 8 months after the catastrophe and then taper. This trend seems incompatible with the MLR discoveries: whereas lethality rates decrease and then increase based on the MLR models, the spatial models propose that mean lethality levels increase and then return to their norm (in the case of mean civilian casualties) or reduce but remain above the pre-disaster norm (in the case of mean fatalities). Yet, this trend might capture the slopes (pictured in Figure 1) that turn downward between eight and twenty months after a crisis, within 100 kilometers of the event.

Meanwhile, within the broader 1,000-kilometer threshold, there is a consistent and somewhat exponential increase in mean lethality levels as time since the disaster elapses (depicted in Figure 2). This pattern, again, remains incompatible with the contemporaneous MLR results but



corroborates the lagged models. Nonetheless, greater distance from a disaster site might associate with a lower practical and public relations impediments to ANSA violence, hence rendering increased lethality levels. Terrain, infrastructure, and civilian livelihood 1,000 kilometers away from a disaster's epicenter will likely experience less turbulence after the event, especially after it loses salience over time.

These quantitative inconsistencies might arise from the spatial and temporal controls present in the spatial models but not the MLR models. Whereas the spatial models observe mean lethality levels at precise time intervals relative to the crisis, the MLR models observe crises at the year level, obfuscating the precision that four-month intervals afford. As well, the spatial models consider

Figure 2. Scatterplot with Loess trendline of mean civilian casualties (top) and mean overall fatalities (bottom) by 4-month intervals before and after natural disasters, within 1,000 geodesic kilometers.

a narrower conception of *crisis*, only looking at natural disasters; the MLR models include economic crisis observations, and their natural disaster observations also comprise a more diverse, non-georeferenced set of events, such as public health crises. These differences might reliably inform the negative association between crisis components and lethality rates, indicating that a wider array of crises produce different patterns than do natural disasters with a geo-referenceable epicenter.

The case studies offer some additional insights vis-à-vis the fourth hypothesis. While the Gulf Cartel did not significantly change its projection of violence following Hurricane Alex, the ONLF did see an increase in clashes with the government during the drought, particularly at its peak. These differences suggest that both the ANSA typology as well as the type of crisis might impact whether a group resorts to heightened levels of violence after a crisis. More importantly, state capacity in the affected area plays a tremendous role: where the state can respond effectively and proactively to ameliorate the hardship that a crisis imposes on civilians, as was the case in Mexico's northern states after Hurricane Alex, ANSAs might have less of an incentive to resort to violence. Where the state actively aggravates the crisis for civilians, as did the EPRDF during Somali Region's 2008-2011 drought, activist ANSAs might have a greater motivation to respond violently, especially if the government's imposition severely diminishes civilian livelihood. Doing so allows the activist ANSA both to legitimize itself in the eyes of the public it seeks to represent as well as to mount a viable military challenge on the state.

The PKK's increasing reliance on the use of force seems to be exogenous to the earthquake, given that its attack surge commenced prior to the disaster and continued its initial trends after the event. However, its continuation of violence despite the catastrophe suggests that crises do not serve to temper ANSAs' use of force.

In sum, I reject H4: the available evidence, with the exception of the contemporaneous MLR models, suggests that ANSAs actually increase their reliance on the use of force in times of apolitical national crisis. Specifically, groups significantly increase their violence projection immediately after and near the crisis site as well as directly related to the time elapsed since the crisis and the distance from the crisis site.

#### **HYPOTHESIS 5: National crises will prompt greater ANSA engagement with symbolic processes**

Threatened groups indeed buttress symbolic processes as a means to heighten legitimacy and in turn accrue or protect power. Eminently, the ONLF appealed to the international community to condemn the Ethiopian state's trade and aid blockade in Somali Region during the drought. Similarly, the PKK accused the government of neglecting Kurdish earthquake victims. Although their reverberations were unsubstantial, the groups' rhetorical appeals demonstrate an attempt to generate external support and garner momentum for their respective causes.

The Gulf Cartel's silence on the matter may arise from either the crisis' null impact on the group or the cartel's non-ideological essence. On the one hand, the DTO might not need to cast the government in a negative light or instrumentalize the disaster to further an agenda vis-à-vis civilian support (in fact, perpetuating weak governance and political disenfranchisement empowers Mexican cartels). On the other hand, the disaster did not threaten the ANSAs' assets. Had the storm debilitated the cartel's business operations, it might have had a greater incentive to respond to the event directly.

To illustrate, cartels have actively responded to the COVID-19 crisis because lockdowns pose obstacles in global supply chains, which implicate DTO businesses.<sup>1</sup> As well, by overstating the pandemic's threat, they imply a supply shortage and thus manage to manipulate markets and inflate prices. These dynamics underscore how different crises pose different threats to armed groups and thus offer varying incentives for action. For groups with activist aims, merely recognizing public plight or state deficiencies can readily serve their ideological agendas, predisposing such groups more so than their greed-driven counterparts to instrumentalize moments of upheaval.

**HYPOTHESIS 6: Competition will increase between ANSAs in times of national crisis**

The Gulf Cartel case best serves to assess this hypothesis and prompt me to reject it. Hurricane Alex produced a negligible threat to this cartel and failed to impact the group's adversarial relationship with Los Zetas. The ONLF case substantiates this notion: even when the ONLF splintered at the end of the drought, the two factions did not compete violently, nor did the group clash with other activist groups in Ogaden. Recalling that inter-ANSA hostilities are most prevalent between weak groups and between powerful groups,<sup>2</sup> crisis situations might reduce ANSA capacity to that middle ground where competition ebbs.

**HYPOTHESIS 7: ANSA networks will experience net growth in times of national crisis**

Instead, the case studies offer support for H7. Groups bolstered their diplomatic appeals and interactions to in turn accrue power in times of crisis. At the height of its weakness during the drought, the ONLF struck alliances with other Ethiopian armed groups as a means to decrease the government's power and in turn relatively increase its own potential. As well, it called for international humanitarian assistance to assuage the drought's effects and ensuing famine.

Again, the hurricane did not affect the Gulf Cartel in the slightest. Yet, the group partnered with other national DTOs when Los Zetas emerged as a formidable threat. At the time, Los Zetas' splintering produced the gravest crisis for the Gulf Cartel – albeit an inherently political one. Still, its allegiant response to this situation gives reason to believe that this type of ANSA would respond similarly to an apolitical and pertinent threat.

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<sup>1</sup> Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Mexican Cartels Are Providing COVID-19 Assistance. Why That's Not Surprising," *Brookings* (blog), April 27, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/04/27/mexican-cartels-are-providing-covid-19-assistance-why-thats-not-surprising/>.

<sup>2</sup> Fjelde and Nilsson, "Rebels against Rebels," 612, 620.