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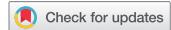
Competition from Within: Ethnicity, Power, and Militant Group Rivalry

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ABSTRACT

Why do militant groups turn on each other? This behavior is somewhat puzzling, since such groups are often on the same side of a conflict. A growing body of literature seeks to understand political violence by looking at cooperative and competitive relationships among non-state actors. Debates continue about the sources of militant group rivalry. We argue that shared motivations, especially ethnic motivations, along with power differences among groups should help explain inter-group fighting. Our analysis uses new dyadic data on rivalry among the militant groups of Africa and Asia since 1990. Unlike some previous studies, we analyze both terrorist and insurgent organizations. Results suggest that pairs of groups with a shared ethnic identity are more likely than others to have rivalrous relationships. Power asymmetry is also somewhat associated with rivalry, but interaction models indicate that the association is only statistically significant in the presence of shared ethnic motivations.

Why do militant groups turn on each other? The literature on civil conflict and political violence typically focuses on the relationships between state and non-state actors (Piazza 2017; Polo and Gleditsch 2016). However, a growing body of research examines intergroup relationships (Asal and Rethemeyer 2008; Bacon 2018; Bakke, Gallagher Cunningham, and Seymour 2012), including competition among non-state actors (Belgioioso 2018; Dorff, Gallop, and Minhas 2020; Larson 2016). A prominent debate in the literature is why two militant groups would compete with one another, instead of focusing on the state (Fjelde and Nilsson 2012; Kalah, Hafez, and Gabbay 2019; Mendelsohn 2019). Why did the National Council for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD) and the National Forces for Liberation (Palipehutu-FNL) actively compete and fight against one another during the Burundian Civil War, even though both claimed to be driven by Hutu nationalism?

We argue that two important conditions are likely to drive rivalry among militant groups. First, consistent with recent work emphasizing militant group ideology or motivations (Hafez 2020; Leader Maynard 2019), we claim that groups that share the same general political motivations are prone to competition. Such sets of organizations depend on the same pool of recruits and supporters, putting them at odds with one another. This is especially true of militant groups sharing an *ethnic* motivation, since their supporters and members are drawn from a relatively limited and identifiable community (Chandra 2006), often located within a defined geographic region. Second, drawing on work on relative power and militant group rivalry (Kalah, Hafez, and Gabbay 2019; Mendelsohn 2019;

Pischedda 2018), we suggest that groups are more likely to engage in competitive behavior when there is a wide power gap between them. Stronger groups are sometimes incentivized to eliminate their weaker counterparts to maximize their own rewards. We also expect a joint effect of shared ethnic motivations and power asymmetry: groups with shared ethnic identity are more likely to engage in rivalry as power asymmetry increases.

We test these expectations using a new dyadic dataset, the Violent Non-State Actor Rivalry (ViNSAR) dataset. ViNSAR provides information on competitive relationships between militant groups in Africa and Asia. Some quantitative studies of rivalry only examine groups that use terrorism (Phillips 2019), or the overlapping set of groups in civil wars (Fjelde and Nilsson 2012; Kalah, Hafez, and Gabbay 2019; Powell and Florea 2021). We take a broader approach and analyze all militant groups, whether more terrorist or insurgent. The data allow us to identify whether groups engaged in competitive behavior, including public denunciations of one another, threats of violence, or the actual use of violence. The data also provide information on the motivation 'fields' of each group. Combining this information with data on group size, we find evidence in favor of our hypotheses. Ethnic intrafield dyads are significantly more likely to form rivalries. Dyads with power asymmetries are also somewhat likely to form rivalries, but interaction models indicate this relationship only occurs among pairs of groups from the same ethnicity. This is the first study to test the relationships between motivations, power distributions, and rivalry with a large sample of organizations spanning multiple countries.

The next section discusses research on militant group rivalry, including the work on why rivalries form. We then offer our theoretical argument. We test our argument in a series of models with the ViNSAR data, and conclude with implications of the research and possible future steps.

Rivalry and Its Consequences

A growing body of research examines the dynamics of competition and conflict among militant groups. This literature has largely considered the *consequences* of intergroup competition, finding that militant group rivalry affects everything from the treatment of civilians to group longevity (Asal et al. 2021; Biberman and Zahid 2019; Bloom 2005; Gaibulloev, Hou, and Sandler 2020; Young and Dugan 2014).[1]

One implication of this research is that intergroup rivalry may be counterproductive for militant groups seeking to gain leverage over their competitors. Staniland (2012) finds, for instance, that rebel group infighting leads to a loss of life and material resources, enables a group's opposition to apply divide-and-conquer tactics, and may encourage the defection of group members. Factionalism among insurgencies can also lead to protracted civil conflicts and/or negotiated agreements that fall short of the organization's stated goals. Additionally, engaging in violence against other militant groups can undermine perceptions of a group's legitimacy (Hafez 2020).

Scholars have linked militant group rivalry to broader negative outcomes, including violence against non-combatants. Studies of 'outbidding' behavior suggest that competitive pressures among militant groups incentivizes them to engage in demonstrative violence against noncombatants to signal that they are the most capable and committed group representing a particular constituency (Bloom 2005; Kydd and Walter 2006). Various studies have shown a link between rivalry and civilian abuse (Asal et al. 2019; Nemeth 2014). Research has also demonstrated that intergroup competition may result in more brutal or severe forms of violence, as groups attempt to captivate audiences (Conrad and Greene 2015). Beyond indiscriminate targeting, competition can increase civilian victimization through direct, factional targeting (Balcells 2010; Bloom 2005; Gallagher, Bakke, and Seymour 2012).

Finally, rivalry may provide benefits for militant groups. While states may ignore or encourage competition in the hope that it leads to the destruction of these groups, rivalry can boost group longevity (Gaibulloev, Hou, and Sandler 2020; Phillips 2015), at least for some groups (Young and

Dugan 2014). Interactions lead to innovation (Kenney 2007), and intergroup competition can spur innovation as well (Bloom 2005).

Determinants of Intergroup Rivalry

Not all militant organizations engage in rivalries. Some factors that seem to encourage rivalry include involvement in the drug business, territorial control, state sponsorship, power distributions, and ideology or motivations. Regarding drugs, some studies find that illegal drug production can lead to competition among militant groups (Fjelde and Nilsson 2012; Idler 2019). Resource constraints frequently pose an obstacle to effective, sustained militancy (Berti 2020).

The successful exploitation of resources makes groups more likely to succeed. Thus, access to natural resources or a product derived from natural resources – such as illegal narcotics – allows groups to overcome some of their material constraints. Militant groups often compete with one another for control of these resources. For example, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) controlled the cultivation of coca and trafficking of cocaine in Colombia for years, and fighting among militant groups over coca production and cocaine distribution 'has been a key factor in the conflict's extreme levels of violence' (Otis 2014).

State sponsorship has also been linked to intergroup rivalry. State funding of one group may lead to significant resource gaps between groups, leading to conflict (Phillips 2019). The wealth gap resulting from state sponsorship can also increase power asymmetry between groups. In a more direct influence on intergroup competition, a state sponsor may also require funded groups to attack proxies of the state's rivals. However, other studies do not find a relationship between sponsorship and rivalry (Kalah, Hafez, and Gabbay 2019).

Weak state authority may also facilitate rivalry (Berti 2020). Fjelde and Nilsson (2012) argue that when the state is weak, groups are more concerned with their power relative to other groups, raising the probability of intergroup fighting. When the state is not able to exercise authority effectively, the legitimacy of the state as a primary bargaining actor is brought into question and the outcome of the conflict becomes more dependent on the bargaining position of militant groups relative to one another. Groups subsequently focus more of their efforts on the elimination of rivals. For example, in the absence of central authority after the fall of Muammar Qaddafi in the Libyan Civil War, conflict proliferated nationwide as groups fought each other for control (Chivvis and Martini 2014).

Another factor linked to intergroup competition is territorial control. The potential for controlling land could lead to competition through several mechanisms, but empirical support is mixed. Fjelde and Nilsson (2012) find that territorial control increases the likelihood of intergroup conflict, while Phillips (2019) finds no significant relationship, and that ethnic motivation seems to better explain rivalry. We examine group motivations in more detail in the following section.

Intrafield Dynamics and Same-ethnicity Rivalry

For our explanation of rivalry, we start by considering the overall motivations or goals of groups, such as whether they are Marxist or seek to represent a particular ethnic group. This emphasis on motivations is consistent with a growing line of research on ideology in conflict studies (Gutiérrez and Wood 2014; Leader Maynard 2019; Schubiger and Zelina 2017). Our emphasis is not precisely on ideology, per se, as we do not incorporate all aspects of groups' varied strategic positions and objectives (Gutiérrez and Wood 2014). We are focused on the broader or perhaps primary motivation of a group. The LTTE in Sri Lanka sought to represent the Tamil minority and fight for Tamil rights, while the FARC in Colombia fought for a Marxist notion of wealth distribution and justice. Group motivations connect leaders and foot soldiers by fostering identification with group objectives and motivating commitment and sacrifice (Lichbach 1998). Each group is part of a 'field,' a broader social movement, such as the Tamil rights movement or Colombian Marxists, respectively. Following Phillips (2015), we refer to pairs of groups that share the same broad motivation as 'intrafield'

pairs, whereas those with substantially different motivations are considered 'interfield' pairs. This terminology has been adopted in a number of studies (Bacon 2018; Feyyaz 2017; Maher and Thomson 2018).

Intrafield dyads nominally fight for the same revolutionary cause or the rights of the same ethnic group. Relationships among such groups are frequently characterized by competition over the support of the population. These groups often draw from the same pool of recruits and donors, putting them at odds with one another in the pursuit of these finite resources. The inherent competitive pressures among groups seeking to represent the same community should increase the likelihood of intergroup confrontations. Lilja and Hultman (2011) argue that groups engage in co-ethnic violence to establish dominance over shared ethnic constituencies. Competition over resources can be further amplified by intrafield conflict, as groups may be geographically tied to their population base and the resources available in their area. Christia (2008) examines intrafield violence among Muslims in the Bosnian Civil War and suggests that economic payoffs and strong local elites who provide access to resources push groups to fight against each other.

Intrafield rivalries can also develop when an ideological tree – for example, nationalists – fractures into groups of extremists and centrists (DeNardo 2014; Walter 2017). During such conflicts, extremists are more likely to resort to violence as they can justify attacks on fellow rebels through extremist ideology whereas centrist groups will more often rely on balancing, outbidding, or defecting to manage the rivalry (Hafez 2020). Groups of the same overarching motivation might emphasize differences between themselves and others, to stand out (Tokdemir et al. 2021).

After the fracture of a group or movement, competing groups might remain credible voices among the shared constituency due to their joint history and ideological proximity. Their ideological distance, however, results in disagreements that divide their followers between two separate groups. Hafez (2020) describes this as a 'proximity-distance paradox.' Consistent with this, Mendelsohn (2019) identifies several pathways through which groups of the same overall motivation might start attacking each other. Gallagher, Bakke, and Seymour (2012) find that as the number of competing factions within a single movement increases, factional conflict and attacks on coethnics increase. Both Mendelsohn (2019) and Hafez (2020) qualitatively test their hypotheses on the case of the Algerian civil war, finding support for explanations of why groups of the same motivation – in this case, Islamist – engage in rivalry.

The Importance of Ethnic Motivations in Particular

While any shared motivation provides a powerful incentive for groups to engage in competitive behavior, we argue that groups are especially likely to form rivalries when they share an ethnic constituency. An extensive literature on ethnic conflict suggests that there are unique attributes to the violence and other behavior of groups seeking to represent their broader ethnic community (Byman 1998; Harff 2018; Horowitz 2000; Polo 2020; Toft 2010). Pairs of ethnic groups, more than other types of intrafield pairings, are primed for competition. These groups claim to represent the interests of the same discrete population, thereby triggering (at least the perception of) a zero-sum game. As discussed above, such organizations compete directly over limited resources derived from the same base of support, and this competition may be intensified by splits between extremists and moderates. These mechanisms are most acute among groups with a shared ethnic identity. Ethnically-motivated terrorist groups, for instance, fundraise primarily from their own communities (Byman 1998). Richardson (2007) suggests that ethnonationalist groups outlive other types of groups precisely because they are so closely aligned with their communities. Similarly, Hoffman (2017) argues that ethnonationalist groups are more resilient because of the built-in support from their constituency and a greater clarity of goals.[2]

Since competition among these groups is driven by concerns over a fixed (and shared) pie of resources, coethnic groups can expect to immediately absorb at least some of the resources of an eliminated rival (Pischedda 2018), providing an additional incentive to engage in intergroup conflict.

By contrast, intrafield groups that are religious or politically-motivated (such as rightwing or left-wing groups) are not constrained to their immediate community for resources and recruits. These groups may be able to accumulate resources from donors throughout the country, region, or even internationally, making other groups less of an immediate existential threat. For example, many Salafi-jihadist groups are transnational or even global (Mishali-Ram 2018). As a result, their market share of support and resources is less constrained by geographical locations (Farrell 2020). For religious groups, as well as right-wing and left-wing groups, the 'pool of potential supporters' is anywhere the internet can be accessed (Farrell 2020). The same is rarely true for ethnic militant groups, however, since supporters and members are drawn from a specific ethnic community and are usually located within a defined geographic region. This makes the pool of supporters and recruits far more limited and increases the likelihood for intergroup competition.

At least anecdotally, it seems that many of the cases of militant groups attacking each other are those involving groups representing the same ethnic community. Bloom's (2005) classic study of intergroup competition and suicide attacks focuses primarily on two examples: Palestinian groups and Tamil groups, each in intrafield rivalries. Other work on rivalry focuses on intraethnic competition (Lilja and Hultman 2011). Research on rebel group fragmentation – which frequently leads to rivalry – often only examines ethnopolitical organizations (Krause 2017; Seymour, Bakke, and Gallagher Cunningham 2016; Warren and Troy 2015). Additionally, some quantitative studies – while monadic, not dyadic – have found that ethnically motivated militant groups are more likely than others to have rivals (Fjelde and Nilsson 2012; Phillips 2019). Overall, militant groups that share an ethnic community directly compete for the same resources and rely on the same relatively finite population for support.

Hypothesis 1 (Ethnic Motivation): *Militant group dyads sharing the same ethnic field are more likely to engage in rivalry than dyads that do not share the same ethnic field.*

Although there are theoretical and empirical reasons to believe that groups with similar motivations – and ethnic motivations in particular – should be more likely to form rivalries, some studies emphasize the role of ideological distance for explaining competition (Kalah, Hafez, and Gabbay 2019). Groups with different or opposite motivations do clash. Right-wing groups fight left-wing groups, and militants representing different ethnic communities or religions, often battle (Della Porta 1992; Horowitz 2000).[3] Kalah et al. (2019) analyze conflictual ties between rebel groups in the Syrian Civil War. They find that groups with different motivations, such as Kurdish vs. jihadist, are more likely to be rivals than other sets of groups – at least in that particular conflict. This suggests that the hypothesis is debated, and thus worth testing.

The Role of Power

In addition to overlapping motivations, a growing literature suggests that relative power also influences the likelihood of rivalry (Kalah, Hafez, and Gabbay 2019; Mendelsohn 2019; Pischedda 2018). Governments, aiming to avoid granting concessions, often employ 'divide-and-rule' strategies to limit the groups they accommodate (Johnston 2007). The practical effect of this strategy is that smaller groups will receive large concessions relative to their military strength. Nilsson (2010) shows how powerful groups are especially disadvantaged in negotiations with the government by the presence of multiple competing groups. To maintain leverage over future distributions of power and resources, strong groups should therefore seek to eliminate weaker rivals (Fjelde and Nilsson 2012) during 'windows of opportunity' (Pischedda 2018). Windows of opportunity arise when there is a significant power disparity between rivals. Under such circumstances, a more powerful organization may be tempted to use violence to eliminate a rival and consolidate power (Pischedda 2018).

Additionally, stronger groups are better able to extract concessions from governments (Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2009; Nilsson 2010). However, once negotiations begin, every group – regardless of size or strength – can expect to receive a portion of the benefits. Thus,

the presence of weaker rivals is a fundamental disadvantage for stronger groups in their negotiations with the state, providing further incentive for powerful groups to crush their weaker rivals (Fjelde and Nilsson 2012). Weaker factions pose another threat because they can act as spoilers to prevent the leading faction from reaching a conflict-ending agreement with the government. If small groups continue to carry out attacks, the government may no longer believe that the stronger group is capable of reining in violence (Kydd and Walter 2006). For powerful groups committed to reaching a successful agreement with the state, elimination of smaller rivals may be viewed as a necessary prerequisite.

Weaker groups also sometimes target more powerful ones because of the potential payoff. Pischedda (2018) argues that 'windows of vulnerability' open when a relatively weak group faces the prospect of a dramatic power reduction in comparison to a rival.[4] It is in the face of few options that smaller groups spur intergroup strife through a gamble for resurrection (Pischedda 2018). The incentives for attacking a more powerful rival should be even greater when the stronger group controls resource-rich territory (Fjelde and Nilsson 2012). A successful attack by a smaller faction also generates recognition and legitimacy, which can subsequently be used as leverage in negotiations with the state.

Some quantitative evidence supports the argument that power disparities should catalyze competition among militant groups. Fjelde and Nilsson (2012), for instance, find that especially strong or weak groups are more likely to have rivals. Kalah et al. (2019) examine militant groups fighting in Syria, and also find that power asymmetry is associated with rivalry.

Hypothesis 2 (Power Distribution): *Militant group dyads are more likely to engage in rivalry as power asymmetry increases.*

Finally, we expect a combined effect of shared ethnic field and power asymmetry to influence the likelihood of competitive behavior. We argue that rebel groups that share the same ethnic field are more likely to engage in rivalry and that this effect should be particularly evident as the power gap within the dyad increases. Given the mechanisms described above, we predict that rebel groups with shared ethnic identity are likely to engage in rivalry due to a perceived zero-sum game, but that power asymmetry provides a more clear opportunity to act against one's rivals. This dynamic is displayed in the relationship between the LTTE and other Tamil groups in Sri Lanka in the 1980s. During this time period, the LTTE defeated a number of smaller Tamil groups, 'emerging as the dominant group by the end of the decade' (Mapping Militant Organizations 2018). Sharing an ethnic identity put the LTTE and other groups in competition for the same resources. As the LTTE grew in power, it apparently had incentives to try to consolidate power by eliminating the smaller Tamil organizations.

Hypothesis 3 (Group Motivation and Power Distribution): *Militant group dyads sharing the same ethnic field are more likely to engage in rivalry than dyads that do not share the same ethnic field, and this effect is augmented as power asymmetry increases.*

Research Design

In each of our hypotheses, the dependent variable is the existence of a rivalry between militant groups. We therefore require data on observed competition between groups. For this, we rely on the Violent Non-State Actor Rivalry (ViNSAR) dataset, which will be made publicly available in the coming months. The ViNSAR project provides information on all observed competition among militant groups in Africa and Asia between 1990 and 2015 (most of the models in this paper include 1990–2011 due to data availability on the relative power variable). The unit of analysis is the non-directed dyad-year. We analyze 'politically-relevant' dyads, pairs of groups active in the same country, because direct rivalry is unlikely among groups in different countries, and including all militant groups in Africa and Asia as potential rivals would inflate observations excessively.[5] Although

scholars and their data sources have often focused on alliances between groups (Akcinaroglu 2012; Asal and Rethemeyer 2008; Bapat and Bond 2012; Kalah et al. 2019), the ViNSAR data exclusively provides information on rivalries. In doing so, the dataset provides several advantages over previous measures of competition.

First, the data are collected at the dyadic level. The unit of analysis in the data is the *militant group dyad-year*, so scholars can examine whether specific groups engaged in competitive behavior in a given year. This is a significant advantage over many previous data efforts, often collected monadically, indicating whether a particular group engaged in *any* competition. Second, the data provide a wide range of information relevant to understanding the relationship and interactions between groups. ViNSAR offers information on the behavioral manifestations of rivalry, including violence and threats of violence. Other available information includes the overall motivation ('field') for the groups, the physical locations of their competition, and whether their competition occurred across national boundaries. Third, the data provide information on the universe of militant organizations operating in Africa and Asia over a period of 25 years. This exhaustive sample provides researchers with an opportunity to examine a number of research questions while mitigating concerns about selection bias.

To build our broader data set, we first compiled a list of all militant groups in these regions from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program's (UCDP) Armed Conflict Dyadic Dataset (Harbom, Melander, and Wallensteen 2008; Allansson, Melander, and Themnér 2017), the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) (START 2016),[6] and the Pro-Government Militias Database (PGMD) (Carey, Mitchell, and Lowe 2013). This approach brings in all militant groups – whether technically classified as rebel or insurgent groups in civil conflict, terrorist organizations, or militias.

Because this study depends on measures of relative power from a UCDP-linked data source (see below), most of the models in this paper only include UCDP groups. However, as noted, many groups appear in multiple data sources, as it is often debatable whether a group is a rebel, terrorist group, militia, or some combination of categories. For example, in our geographical area, the UCDP includes many groups also thought of as terrorist organizations, such as the Abu Sayyaf Group, al-Qaeda in North Africa, Boko Haram, and the LTTE. Additionally, to show the robustness of some of our results as well as the potential of the full ViNSAR data, some models include the full sample, not only UCDP organizations (see Table 3).

The dependent variable, *Rivalry*, comes directly from the ViNSAR data. The project codes the existence of rivalry between two groups if they engage in any of the following behavior in a given year: verbal condemnation, threats of physical violence, or actual violence.[7] The inclusion of both violent and non-violent or less-violent behavior (condemnation, threats) is consistent with the operationalization of rivalry among states (Diehl and Goertz 2001). Additionally, violence by militant groups is often unattributed, so the inclusion of denouncements and threats provides additional sources of information on behaviors that overlap with inter-group violence. However, results are similar if only violence is used to operationalize rivalry.

The variable captures *observed* competitive behavior. This offers a substantial advantage over many previous studies of militant group rivalry, which used the number of groups in a conflict or country as a proxy for inter-group rivalry or competition (Belgioioso 2018; Conrad and Greene 2015; Findley and Young 2012; Gaibulloev, Hou, and Sandler 2020). The identified behaviors are only coded as *Rivalry* if one or both groups explicitly directed their behavior at the policies, leaders, members and/or supporters of the other group. The variable is coded '1' if this was the case, and '0' otherwise.[8] Rivalry is relatively rare, occurring in about 5% of dyad-years.[9]

One of our key independent variables, *Same Ethnic Field*, is also calculated using information from the ViNSAR data. For each group, the project lists primary and secondary 'fields,' indicating the group's primary ideology or motivation. A group can be classified as belonging to one of eight fields: ethnic, religious (other than Islamist), Islamist, left-wing, right-wing, progovernment, anti-government or other. Coders were instructed on how to categorize groups based on the context of the political/religious/ethnic dynamics of the country. For instance, if groups are primarily driven

by their support of, or opposition to, the incumbent government, they are coded as 'Pro-government' or 'Anti-government,' respectively. The data also provide keywords that specify additional information about a group's field. For instance, a group may be listed as 'ethnic' in its Primary Field and its keyword may be listed as 'Hutu' to distinguish it further from other groups. Using the combined information of group fields and keywords, we created a variable that captures whether the two groups in a dyad both represent the same ethnic group. The variable is coded as '1' if the two groups are both listed as 'ethnic' in the Primary Field and their accompanying keywords match. It is coded as '0' if the dyad does not meet these requirements.

Our second key independent variable, *Power Asymmetry*, is calculated using information available in the Non-State Actor (NSA) dataset (Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2009). The NSA data offer a variety of information on rebel groups and the states they target during civil conflicts. We rely on one aspect of the project, which provides estimates of the number of members belonging to specific groups. The data include high, low and 'best' estimates of a group's troop strength. We merge the best estimates for each group into the dyadic data and then calculate the level of *Power Asymmetry* in the dyad. This variable is created by taking the estimate for the stronger group in the dyad and dividing it by the sum of both groups. The resulting variable ranges from 0.5 to 1, with lower values indicating that the groups are more equally matched, and higher values indicating that one group is significantly stronger than the other. To test H3, we also include a multiplicative combination of *Same Ethnic Field* and *Power Asymmetry*.

Combining information from the two data sources produces a sample of nearly 1,000 militant group dyad years, with 241 dyads. Because the NSA data are restricted to only groups that appear in the Uppsala Conflict Data Programme (UCDP) project, the final sample captures militant groups involved in a civil conflict in Asia or Africa between 1990–2011 (the ViNSAR data extend to more recent years, but the NSA data end in 2011). Although we cannot test Hypothesis 2 or 3 without relying on the NSA data, our results for Hypothesis 1 hold even after expanding the sample to include dyads that operate outside of a civil conflict (beyond the NSA data), suggesting that our general conclusions are not artifacts of the sample used here.

Control Variables

We also incorporate several controls that could conceivably influence both our independent and dependent variables. We first account for another group-level factor: whether either group in the dyad controlled territory. *Territorial Control* is drawn from the NSA dataset, and indicates whether the group controlled *any* physical territory during its conflict. The dyadic version of the variable therefore indicates whether either group in the dyad controlled territory, a situation that may influence both the power distribution within the dyad, as well as the incentives to engage in competitive behavior.

We also account for state-level factors: the level of democracy in the country where the dyad is located, as well as the country's real per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP), measured in 2005 US dollars. The measure of regime type comes from Polity (Gurr, Marshall, and Jaggers 2010), with higher values representing higher levels of democracy. The measure of GDP per capita is provided by Gleditsch (2002). We also include regional dummies indicating whether the dyad was located in Sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa, Central Asia, or Southeast Asia. The omitted category is South Asia, the region with the most militant groups in our sample. Finally, we also include a dichotomous measure *Post-2001*, which is coded '1' in years after 2001. This is to take into consideration dynamics resulting from the Global War on Terrorism and the related conflicts of the era.[10]

Because the dependent variable in all of our models is binary, we use a logistic regression approach. This approach is frequently used when examining models with dichotomous dependent variables, as such variables can violate standard linear regression assumptions. To account for

Table 1. Models of rivalry among militant group dyads in Africa and Asia.

	(1) Main model	(2) Interaction model
Same Ethnic Field	2.715***	−9.472
	(1.048)	(6.979)
Power Asymmetry	3.477*	2.793
	(1.907)	(2.019)
Same Ethnic Field X Power Asymmetry		15.245*
		(8.626)
Territorial Control	−0.345	−0.345
	(0.494)	(0.491)
Regime Type	−0.029	−0.017
	(0.049)	(0.054)
GDP per Capita	−0.000	−0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)
Sub-Saharan Africa	1.742**	2.048**
	(0.827)	(0.901)
North Africa	3.295***	3.459***
	(1.139)	(1.174)
Central Asia	1.850**	2.160**
	(0.901)	(1.003)
Southeast Asia	−0.025	−0.655
	(1.403)	(2.203)
Post-2001	−0.854	−0.976
	(0.733)	(0.760)
Constant	−5.553***	−5.383***
	(1.735)	(1.756)
N	974	974

Standard errors clustered by dyad are shown in parentheses. * p<.10, ** p<.05, *** p<.01.

potential heteroskedasticity across dyads, we estimate robust standard errors, clustered on the dyad. We also explore the sensitivity of our main results in a series of models that we discuss following the empirical analysis.

Results

The primary results are shown in Table 1. The first model evaluates H1 and H2, while the second model includes the interaction term to test H3. In Model 1, the coefficient on *Same Ethnic Field* is statistically significant and positively signed, suggesting that dyads in which both groups are claiming to represent the same ethnic community are more likely then other dyads to form a rivalry. This suggests support for Hypothesis 1. *Power Asymmetry* is also statistically signifcant and positively signed, although the significance is marginal ($p < .10$). This provides some support for H2.

In Model 2, the interaction model, the variables *Same Ethnic Field* and *Power Asymmetry* cannot be interpreted in a straightforward manner. Since they are component terms in an interaction, each should be interpreted as indicating the relationship between their variable and the likelihood of rivalry, when the other variable is set at 0 (Braumoeller 2004). Thus, these two variables should not be used to evaluate H1 or H2. To better understand the potentially interactive relationship, we graph it in Figure 1.

Figure 1 shows that at higher levels of power asymmetry, rivalry is more likely – but only when the pair of militant groups is of the same ethnic group or field. It might seem like the difference between *Same Ethnic Field* at 0 and 1 is statistically significant for a small section of the graph, the extreme right. However, about a third of the observations in the sample fall in this range (*Power Asymmetry*
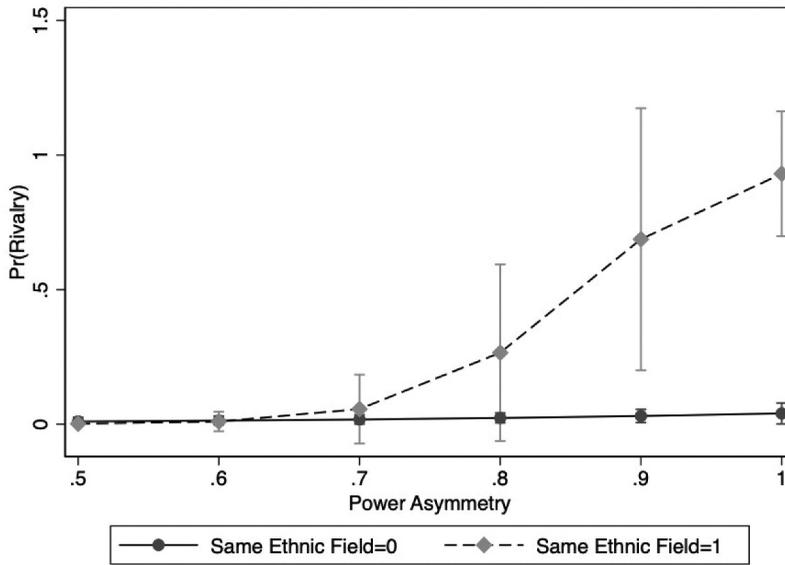
Figure 1. The conditional relationship between Power Asymmetry, Same Ethnic Field, and Rivalry.

>.80). Note that power asymmetry is *never* related to rivalry for pairs of groups that are not of the same ethnic community (*Same Ethnic Field = 0*). Overall, Figure 1 suggests support for H3.

Regarding control variables, *Territorial Control* is statistically insignificant in both models, suggesting no relationship between holding territory and rivalry. While groups do sometimes fight over territory, there does not seem to be a pattern of this occurring in this sample of militant groups. Neither *Regime Type* nor *GDP per Capita* are statistically significant. Group or dyad attributes likely matter more than country-specific phenomenon for explaining why some pairs of groups form rivalries.

The regional controls suggest that militant groups in Sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa, or Central Asia are more likely to form rivalries than dyads in the omitted region, South Asia. The coefficient on *Southeast Asia* is statistically insignificant. Finally, the variable indicating post-2001 years is statistically insignificant in both models. There does not seem to be a difference between the pre-9/11 and post-9/11 era regarding the propensity for rivalry formation.

Table 2 includes several robustness checks of the two primary models. The first two models exclude *Regime Type* and *GDP per Capita*, since their inclusion causes some observations to drop. Results are substantively the same as those of the main models. The one difference is that *Post-2001* becomes marginally statistically significant, suggesting rivalry was less likely after 2001. The second set of robustness check of models uses a more strict dependent variable, only coding rivals as those where at least one used violence against the other. Pairs that only denounced or threatened each other are not coded as rivals. Results are robust in the non-interaction models, and mostly the same in the interaction model. The coefficient on the interaction term is statistically insignificant, but when graphed, the results are similar to those of Figure 1. *Post-2001* is statistically significant and negatively signed in these models, further suggesting that rivalries were less common after 2001.

The final two models of Table 2 use *Same Field* instead of *Same Ethnic Field* to see if other pairs of groups from the same field, such as two leftist groups or two religious groups, might be similarly prone to rivalry. The models show similar results in the non-interaction model. However, the coefficient on *Same Field* is smaller than those on *Same Ethnic Field* in previous models, and the substantive significance of *Same Field* is estimated to be smaller.[11] Furthermore, graphing (not shown) suggests the interactive relationship of H3 does not hold for these types of groups. The

Table 2. Robustness checks of the primary models of *Rivalry*.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	No country controls	No country controls, inter-action	Violent rivalry only	Violent rivalry only, inter-action	Same Field (not only ethnic pairs)	Same Field (not only ethnic pairs), interaction
Same Ethnic Field	2.637**	−11.250*	3.124**	−5.970		
	(1.137)	(6.265)	(1.232)	(7.561)		
Power Asymmetry	3.245*	2.656	4.432*	3.912	3.898*	3.715
	(1.774)	(1.803)	(2.638)	(2.753)	(2.240)	(3.198)
Same Ethnic Field X Power Asymmetry		17.431**		11.596		
		(7.864)		(9.390)		
Same Field					1.626***	1.318
					(0.621)	(2.838)
Same Field X Power Asymmetry						0.412
						(3.766)
Territorial Control	−0.023	−0.093	−0.246	−0.255	−0.322	−0.313
	(0.479)	(0.482)	(0.544)	(0.542)	(0.479)	(0.469)
Sub-Saharan Africa	2.361***	2.485***	3.010***	3.385***	1.635*	1.638*
	(0.597)	(0.597)	(1.105)	(1.210)	(0.850)	(0.853)
North Africa	3.464***	3.570***	5.820***	6.106***	2.721**	2.737**
	(0.837)	(0.872)	(1.511)	(1.558)	(1.359)	(1.347)
Central Asia	2.363***	2.424***	2.963***	3.369***	0.588	0.580
	(0.669)	(0.673)	(1.127)	(1.272)	(1.154)	(1.159)
Southeast Asia	−0.463	−0.972			0.593	0.609
	(1.214)	(2.017)			(1.410)	(1.409)
Post-2001	−1.094*	−1.192*	−2.140**	−2.207***	−0.782	−0.783
	(0.641)	(0.693)	(0.849)	(0.846)	(0.655)	(0.655)
Regime Type			0.077	0.099	−0.020	−0.019
			(0.071)	(0.081)	(0.057)	(0.060)
GDP per Capita			−0.001	−0.000	−0.001	−0.001
			(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Constant	−6.313***	−5.867***	−7.233***	−7.257***	−5.717***	−5.590**
	(1.745)	(1.742)	(2.655)	(2.636)	(1.708)	(2.335)
N	991	991	899	899	974	974

Standard errors clustered by dyad are shown in parentheses. * p<.10, ** p<.05, *** p<.01.

impact of groups having the same overall motivation on rivalry does not hinge upon the power symmetry of the groups. Across all the models of Table 2, H1 is robustly supported, H2 is marginally or weakly supported (p < .10), and H3 is mostly supported – though only when groups share the same ethnic motivation.

Table 3 includes additional tests of H1, about the relationship between *Same Ethnic Field* and *Rivalry*. Recall that the sample size is limited substantially by depending on NSA data for *Power Asymmetry*.[12] These models exclude *Power Asymmetry* and other variables to test the robustness of *Same Ethnic Field* on much broader samples. These are not our primary models because they exclude the theoretically important variable measuring relative power. The results should be taken with some caution because of potential omitted variable bias. Additionally, the sample is qualitatively different – instead of only examining militant groups involved in civil conflict, it includes many groups not in the NSA data, such as certain terrorist organizations or pro-government militias. However, they allow us to harness the (much) broader data on rivalry to provide additional tests of H1.

Across all models in Table 3, *Same Ethnic Field* remains statistically significant and positively signed. This is remarkable given the vastly different samples used – around 1,000 observations in previous models, and up to 17,806 observations in this table. This suggests robust support for H1. Dyads of militant groups where both are of the same ethnic motivation are much more likely than other pairs of groups to be rivals. This idea is supported among groups involved in civil conflict (the primary models based on NSA data), and more broadly among terrorist organizations and pro-government militias.

Table 3. Tests of *Same Ethnic Field* on broader samples.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Power Asymmetry excluded	State controls excluded	Region controls excluded	No controls
Same Ethnic Field	2.194***	1.770***	1.936***	1.719***
	(0.576)	(0.536)	(0.446)	(0.446)
Territorial Control	1.040***	0.986***	1.103***	
	(0.247)	(0.220)	(0.215)	
Regime Type	0.009			
	(0.020)			
GDP per Capita	0.000*** (0.000)			
Sub-Saharan Africa	1.479***	1.159***		
	(0.340)	(0.238)		
North Africa	0.695*	0.545*		
	(0.422)	(0.301)		
Central Asia	1.620***	0.970**		
	(0.590)	(0.457)		
Southeast Asia	−1.321***	−0.450		
	(0.462)	(0.353)		
Post-2001	−0.627**	−0.219	−0.255*	
	(0.245)	(0.165)	(0.151)	
Constant	−4.597***	−3.763***	−3.578***	−3.472***
	(0.325)	(0.209)	(0.136)	(0.100)
N	14,866	17,806	17,806	17,806

Standard errors clustered by dyad are shown in parentheses. * $p<.10$, ** $p<.05$, *** $p<.01$.

Regarding control variable results, there are some changes in these models. *Territorial Control* is statistically significant and positively signed. Pairs of groups where at least one controls territory are more likely than pairs where neither holds territory to engage in rivalry. *GDP per Capita* is also statistically significant and positively signed in a model, suggesting that pairs of groups in wealthier states are more likely to be rivals. Regarding region controls, *Southeast Asia* is statistically significant and negatively signed in one model, and this is different from the primary results. *Post-2001* shows inconsistent statistical significance across the models, with some negative and statistically significant results.[13] Overall, some changes between the primary models and those of Table 3 should be expected given the considerable increase in sample size, and the qualitative difference in the sample – examining more types of groups beyond the NSA data civil conflict groups.

Conclusion

In this paper, we sought to identify the conditions under which militant groups are more likely to compete. Using a new dyadic dataset, the Violent Non-State Actor Rivalry (ViNSAR) data, which records instances of both verbal and material competition between a wide range of militant groups, we find support for several mechanisms. First, violent groups which seek to represent the same ethnic community are especially likely to be rivals. This finding is highly robust. Second, we find some support for the notion that power imbalances lead to rivalry. Further, we find that the impact of power asymmetries are only associated with rivalry among groups representing the same ethnicity. This conditional effect is noteworthy given recent research suggesting the role of power in fomenting rivalry (Mendelsohn 2019; Pischedda 2018).

These findings have interesting implications for research on militant competition. First, while the bulk of the existing quantitative research on competition between violent non-state groups has measured the *number* of actors (Conrad and Greene 2015; Young and Dugan 2014), our findings suggest competition might actually be driven by the *type* of groups that are present. This may help explain some of the inconsistent findings in studies of outbidding (Findley and Young 2012). Second, while groups representing the same ethnicity might also seem to be the most likely to ally with one

another, our findings suggest that opportunism might scuttle these potential alliances, leading instead to enmity.

Future research can build on this work with a continued focus on the role of shared ethnicity and power on militant group rivalry. Rivalry frequently leads to civilian abuse, and our findings suggest which types of civilians may be especially at risk. Since groups sharing an ethnic motivation are more likely to compete, then civilians from the ethnic group seem especially likely to be caught in the crossfire – but this is worth studying. Future work would also benefit from more fine-grained time-varying measures of militant group power. Finally, given the prominence of the outbidding hypothesis in the literature, the ViNSAR data could be used for more nuanced theorizing and testing of outbidding-related arguments.

Notes

1. We define rivalry as when organizations confront each other with verbal denouncements, threats, or actual violence. In this paper we use rivalry and competition as synonyms.
2. Regarding 'built-in support' from their constituency, the fact that ethnicity is relatively *visible*, and key aspects of ethnic identity often "can be obtained through superficial observation" (Chandra 2006, 399), members of the community are relatively easy to identify as potential recruits, or for donations.
3. Consistent with the notion of interfield cleavages being salient, Walter (2019) finds that countries with more ethnic groups tend to have more rebel groups in civil wars. Often these groups turn on each other.
4. This is consistent with Mendelsohn (2019)'s argument that power shifts can lead to rivalry.
5. However, because we include 'terrorist groups' from the Global Terrorism Database we are able to capture groups that may potentially be involved in cross-national rivalries.
6. Groups are included in the ViNSAR sample if GTD deems them responsible for ten or more terrorist attacks between 1990 and 2015. This eliminates a large number of transitory groups for which little information is available. This is consistent with some other databases of terrorist groups (Price 2012, 25). We also exclude GTD groups that are not 'formal' groups, but represent generic groupings of individuals, such as 'rioters.'
7. The information was coded by teams of faculty members and undergraduate and graduate students, who relied on news reports, reports by non-governmental and international organizations, and academic studies.
8. Future research could use a group (not dyadic) unit of analysis to study why some groups have more rivals than others.
9. See the appendix for descriptive data.
10. If year fixed effects are included, some years drop because of a lack of any rivalries for those years. However, results are similar.
11. We examined other types of shared motivations and they generally had weaker results. For example, a variable indicating if both groups are leftist is only statistically significant at the p < .10 level if included instead of *Same Field*.
12. Territorial Control also comes from the NSA data, but only one group in the dyad needs to be in the NSA data to code the variable since it measures if either group controls territory.
13. Perhaps the Global War on Terrorism made rivalry less likely, as groups banded together to resist U.S.-led forces. The negative relationship could also reflect groups like al-Qaida and ISIS serving as 'alliance hubs,' bringing militants together as allies during this era (Bacon 2018), perhaps making rivalry less likely.

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APPENDIX

1 Selected Codebook Information: Violent Non-State Actor Ri- valry (ViNSAR) Dataset

The Violent Non-State Actor Rivalry (ViNSAR) dataset compiles information on competition and intergroup rivalries among non-state, militant groups. The ViNSAR data offer several im- provements over previous measures. First, information is coded at the dyadic level, indicating whether or not specific pairs of groups are involved in a rivalry. Second, rather than just coding the existence of a rivalry, the ViNSAR data provide detailed information on the rivalry, including the historical relationship between each pair of organizations, as well as behavioral manifesta- tions of the rivalry. Such manifestations can include verbal denunciations, threats of violence, or actual violence against competing groups. Third, the dataset provides this information for all pairs of groups for the time period 1990–2015. In addition to the original data collected and compiled by the project, the dataset includes a number of unique actor identifiers, which allow researchers to readily combine the data with other existing datasets on militant group behavior and armed conflict dynamics. These identifiers also allow researchers to subset their analysis on specific actor types, such as terrorist organizations or insurgent groups.

1.1 Key Variables Included in Manuscript

Rivalry: This is the main variable, coded 0 if no rivalry is observed for the dyad-year, and 1 if a rivalry is observed for the dyad-year. A rivalry is present if there are verbal denunciations or threats between the groups in the dyad, or if there is violence between them. A dyad is not coded for a rivalry if the groups simply co-exist in similar geographic or ideological space, theoretically competing for resources. Rivalry is observed to be contested, verbal, or physical.

Denouncement: This binary variable is coded as '1' if either group or its representatives (e.g, leader or spokes- person) publicly criticized, condemned or denounced the other. Any mes- sage credibly attributed to the group or its members is included. This includes criticism of actions, policies, leaders, members and/or supporters linked to the other group.

Threat: This binary variable is coded as '1' if either group or their representatives (e.g, leader or spokesperson) has publicly threatened violence against the other group. Non-violent threats, such as a threat to walk away from negotiations, are not included, but they may be codeable as denouncements. Threats can be directed towards leaders, members and/or supporters linked to a group. We also code a group as engaging in threats whenever violence is implied by their state- ment. For instance, if military commanders of a group publicly pledge to protect a village from another group, we consider this an implicit threat of violence.

Violence: This binary variable is coded as '1' if there is evidence of either group using vi- olence against the other, or joint violence between the two groups. Violence can be committed against leaders, members and or/supporters of a group. In the latter case, evidence must exist that the supporters were targeted specifically because of their association with the group.

Primary Field: This variable contains the name of the primary 'field' of the groups, regard-

less of whether there is a rivalry. A group's field captures the broader social movement to which it belongs, and therefore indicates a group's central motivation or ideology. Groups can be coded as one of the following eight categories:

- Pro-government
- Anti-government
- Ethnic
- Religious
- Islamist
- Left-wing
- Right-wing
- Other

Categories are coded according to the political/ethinic/religious context of a given country. 'Reli- gious' refers to non-Islamist groups motivated by a religious or metaphysical ideology. If groups are primarily driven by their support of, or opposition to, the incumbent government, they are coded as 'Pro-government' or 'Anti-government,' respectively. If the group ican not be clearly identified with one of the seven substantive categories, it is coded as 'Other.'

Primary Keyword: Provides keywords with additional information about the group's Pri- mary Field. For instance, a group coded as 'Islamist' may include the keyword 'Sunni' to further distinguish it from other groups.

1.2 Sources Consulted

For all data collection, the primary source of information is media reports accessed through Global Newsstream, Access World News, and/or Nexis Uni. Where available, coders also search reports from various NGOs and INGOs such as Human Rights Watch, the United Nations, and Amnesty International. We also consult historical and other academic works dealing with po- litical violence. The exact sources consulted and utilized for each country are detailed in the project notes. After utilizing the main coding sources coders also conduct targeted searches us- ing Google. In general, this method is used to confirm inactivity: when the collection process returns no codeable information.

2 Descriptive data for the paper's main models

Table A1: Summary statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Rivalry	974	.050	.219	0	1
Power Asymmetry	974	.724	.138	.500	.989
Same Ethnic Field	974	.015	.123	0	1
Same Field	974	.125	.331	0	1
Territorial Control	974	.514	.500	0	1
Regime Type	974	5.089	5.853	−8	9
GDP per Capita	974	1980.902	961.213	367.850	7875.080
Sub-Saharan Africa	974	.115	0.319	0	1
North Africa	974	.070	0.255	0	1
Central Asia	974	.026	.158	0	1
Southeast Asia	974	.077	.267	0	1
Post2001	974	.386	.487	0	1