

A Quest for Legitimacy: Drivers of Organizational Affiliation with Global Jihadist Networks

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Abstract

Why do some locally oriented Islamist militant groups affiliate with global jihadist networks such as al-Qaeda or the Islamic State while others do not? There have been few attempts to theorize answers to this important question and test them systematically. Given the importance of legitimacy for armed groups, I argue that when local Islamist militants run into a domestic legitimacy deficit, they try to substitute for it at the transnational level by affiliating with global networks. I test my argument using new data on ninety-seven groups, over 1998–2016. Groups with high local legitimacy, measured by social service provision, have a lower likelihood of affiliation. There is also evidence that groups of low legitimacy, measured by young age or kidnapping, are more likely to affiliate. The findings contribute to debates on the transnational nature of conflict and have important policy implications, shedding light on the dynamics governing global jihadist networks.

Resumen

¿Por qué algunos grupos militantes islamistas de orientación local se afilian con redes yihadistas globales como al-Qaeda o el Estado Islámico mientras que otros no lo hacen? Ha habido algunos trabajos que han intentado teorizar respuestas a esta importante pregunta y probarlas de forma sistemática. Dada la importancia que tiene la legitimidad para los grupos armados, argumentamos que cuando los militantes islámicos locales se enfrentan a un déficit de legitimidad nacional, intentan sustituirlo a nivel transnacional mediante la afiliación a redes globales. Ponemos a prueba nuestra hipótesis. Para ello, utilizamos nuevos datos procedentes de 97 grupos, durante los años comprendidos entre 1998 y 2016. Los grupos que cuentan con un alto nivel de legitimidad local, medida por la prestación de servicios sociales, tienen una menor probabilidad de afiliarse a las redes globales. Sin embargo, también, encontramos evidencias que muestran que los grupos con un bajo nivel de legitimidad, medidos por su reciente creación o por su recurso al secuestro, tienen una mayor probabilidad de afiliarse. Nuestras conclusiones contribuyen a los debates relativos a la naturaleza transnacional del conflicto y tienen importantes implicaciones políticas. Además, arrojan luz sobre las dinámicas que rigen las redes yihadistas globales.

Résumé

Pourquoi certains groupes militants islamistes orientés au niveau local s'affilient-ils aux réseaux djihadistes mondiaux comme Al-Qaïda ou l'État islamique quand d'autres ne le font pas? Peu de chercheurs ont tenté de théoriser des réponses à cette question importante et de les tester systématiquement. Étant donné l'importance de la légitimité des groupes armés, j'affirme que lorsque les militants islamistes locaux connaissent un déficit de légitimité nationale, ils essaient de le substituer au niveau transnational en s'affiliant à des réseaux mondiaux. Je teste mon argument à l'aide de nouvelles données sur 97 groupes entre 1998 et 2016.

Les groupes à légitimité élevée à l'échelle locale, mesurée en fonction de la fourniture de services sociaux, ont moins de chances de s'affilier. Il semblerait également que les groupes peu légitimes, à cause du jeune âge ou de kidnappings, ont plus de chances de s'affilier. Les conclusions contribuent aux débats sur la nature transnationale du conflit et s'accompagnent d'importantes implications politiques, mettant en lumière les dynamiques régissant les réseaux djihadistes mondiaux.

Key words affiliation, armed groups, jihadist networks, legitimacy, Islamic State, al-Qaeda, organizational behavior

Palabras clave afiliación, grupos armados, redes yihadistas, legitimidad, Estado Islámico, Al-Qaeda, comportamiento organizacional

Mots clés affiliation, groupes armés, réseaux djihadistes, légitimité, État islamique, Al-Qaïda, comportement organisationnel

Introduction

The years of the 2020s have been among the most violent in recent history (Rustad 2024), with terrorism and civil war targeting and killing thousands of people each year. An important dynamic behind this trend is the increasing expansion of Islamist transnational networks, prominently the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. In fact, although IS and al-Qaeda have made less headlines in major international news outlets, both organizations have seen an increase in local jihadist groups pledging allegiance to either network. These groups are now engaged in intensifying conflicts in different locations, including the Sahel and the Af-Pak regions, among others.

Armed groups generally benefit from cooperating with other armed groups (Asal and Rethemeyer 2008; Phillips 2014; Bacon 2018). However, affiliation to a global network is a unique type of cooperation that could potentially provide more benefits (Byman 2015a; Mendelsohn 2016; Moghadam 2017; Bacon 2018; Warner et al. 2021). This special process entails an important oath that should not be reneged on except under specific circumstances, including leadership change or death. This is evident by the fact that once affiliate, mostly always affiliate, except for very few instances, such as Jabhat al-Nusra dissociation from al-Qaeda in 2016 (BBC News 2016). The allegiance is pledged to the caliphate and ensures obedience in return of military and political protection provided to the affiliates (Wagemakers 2015).

Why do some groups seek affiliation while others do not? Existing research offers some suggestions as to when and why terrorist groups affiliate with transnational networks. Some qualitative works suggest a shift in strategy as a dominant explanation (Schultz 2008; Byman 2015a). Groups appear to be motivated by operational necessity following successful counter-insurgency measures adopted by national governments. More broadly, affiliation with transnational networks is seen as a strategic behavior aiming at increasing the chances of survival (Cragin 2009; Byman 2015a; Bacon 2018). For example, affiliation with IS specifically has been theorized to be caused by lo-

cal Islamist groups seeking to distinguish themselves from other competitors, especially nationalist groups; a strategy that has been referred to as “Takfiri outbidding” (Day 2016).

At the same time, other scholars theorize that groups seek affiliation because of ideological motivations, whether rooted in further radicalization or convergence (Gray and Stockham 2008; Sargamaso 2012). But such an explanation alone disregards that not all Islamist groups have adopted a new global jihadist agenda. Analysis of the data collected for this study shows that the majority of Islamist groups remain locally focused and do not seek to affiliate with IS or al-Qaeda. Examples include Jemaah Islamiyah (Indonesia) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (Pakistan), as well as the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (Philippines) and Hamas. In fact, fewer than a quarter of all Islamist armed groups seek affiliation or become affiliated, which shows a substantial variation in the level of transnationalism of jihadist groups.

To explain this variation, I propose an argument rooted in a legitimacy-seeking rationale. Given the importance of legitimacy for armed groups for stature, success, and sustainability (Schlichte and Schneckener 2015), I argue that when local Islamist militants run into a legitimacy deficit domestically, they try to substitute for it at the transnational level by affiliating with a network of global jihad like AQ or IS. As such, groups losing legitimacy and support bases locally, can regain membership in more encompassing entities that claim religious rightness and hence incur recognition and status driven from networks transcending borders. This can have positive effects on how groups are perceived locally and translates into different forms of support, both locally and transnationally.

I test my argument using original coded data on Islamist groups affiliations, combined with variables from Extended Data on Terrorist Groups (EDTG) dataset (Hou, Gaibullov, and Sandler 2019), Terrorist and Insurgent Organization Social Services (TIOS) Dataset (Heger and Jung 2017) and Big Allied And Dangerous Dataset (BAAD-Insurgency Dataset) (Asal et al. 2019) to measure high and low legitimacy attributes. For proxies of high legitimacy

attributes, I use social service provision, and for proxies of low legitimacy attributes, I use kidnapping and young age. I find support for the proposition that high legitimacy levels are associated with lower chances of affiliating with transnational networks of jihad, and evidence that groups suffering from low levels of legitimacy would exhibit higher chances of affiliation.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. The following section discusses the main benefits and costs attributed to affiliation in the literature. The third section proposes my argument centered around legitimacy seeking, followed by a brief section highlighting additional caveats about legitimacy. The fifth section discusses the research design, combining new data on global affiliation networks with data on ninety-seven jihadist groups, and then the results. The final section concludes with a brief discussion of the implications of the findings and some possible directions for future research.

Transnational Affiliation: Benefits and Costs

Analysts have often studied the spread of global jihadists and the expansion of their “franchises”. Most of these explanations of expansion are derived from the perspective of transnational/global networks and groups, like al-Qaeda and IS (e.g., [Byman 2015a](#); [Mendelsohn 2016a](#)). Fewer studies have, however, focused on why locally oriented and nationalist Islamist militants become members of transnational networks.

The conventional wisdom is that external support accrued from expanding network alliances strengthens militant organizations. In fact, the odds of survival significantly increase depending on the number of connections and allies an organization maintains with other militant organizations ([Acosta 2014](#); [Phillips 2014](#)). This is rooted in the paradigm that violent nonstate actors are like states, motivated in their interactions by the pursuit of security as a means to survival ([Bond 2010](#); see also [Fearon 1995](#); [Walter 1997](#)).

One set of reasons driving affiliation and changing the scope of operations from national to transnational jihadism is failure, or setbacks. These setbacks are often the result of successful counter-insurgency measures carried out by adversary domestic governments. As a result, sharing best practices and know-how—through technology diffusion, propaganda, and branding measures, in addition to training, alongside providing means of financing and sanctuaries—helps local militant groups increase the threat they pose to state governments, increase their recruits, and resist counter-terrorism measures ([Cragin et al. 2007](#); [Bacon 2014](#); [Byman 2015a](#); [Weeraratne 2017](#)).

In sum, it could be argued that larger networks enable smaller groups to attack frequently and effectively. This is strengthened with the literature that analyzes the positive effect of the size of militant groups on their survival ([Jones and Libicki 2008](#); [Blomberg, Gaibullov, and Sandler 2011](#)). Scholars have also argued that cooperation between militant groups increases their lethality and longevity ([Asal and Rethemeyer 2008](#); [Horowitz and Potter 2014](#); [Phillips 2014](#)).

When it comes to explanations that account for ideology, some perceive the affiliation with a transnational organization as a manifestation of further radicalization of the domestic group ([Gray and Stockham 2008](#); [Sargamaso 2012](#)). These explanations usually capitalize on the repression and exclusion faced by most of these groups in their home countries ([Warraich 2018](#)). Another way of approaching ideology-based explanations is proposing that a group will join a transnational network after its ideology has become in harmony with the latter. Generally, [Asal et al. \(2016\)](#) found that Islamist organizations/groups are more likely to make and seek connections with other Islamically inspired organizations than organizations with different ideologies. The authors also point to the notion that resource sharing concerns would come secondary to issues of trust in matters of terrorist alliances. This is supported by [Blair et al. \(2022\)](#), maintaining that shared ideology plays an important role in enhancing trust and commitment, necessary conditions for alliances among groups.

Affiliation also offers benefits to the larger networks. Affiliation with local groups brings the hubs’ specialization and expansion benefits and a comparative advantage ([Mendelsohn 2011](#); [Byman 2014](#); [Blair and Potter 2022](#)). For an organization that has an edge in ideological authority, such as AQ or IS, local affiliates can bring specialized operational capacity and reach into localized active conflicts (see, e.g., [Byman 2015a](#); [Blair and Potter 2022](#)). They also bring recruits with local knowledge and organizational infrastructure, providing a “shortcut to growth” ([Mendelsohn 2011](#)). Together, these benefits only consolidate the name and brand of the larger networks as righteous leaders of the jihadist movement and “legitimate ruler of all Muslims” ([Byman 2016](#)), and give the pledgee “an aura of mysticism and symbolism” ([Igalada and Yagüe 2021](#)).

More importantly, affiliation could also be motivated by the hubs’ status decline ([Mendelsohn 2016](#)) and could be seen as a remedy for their weakness to ensure their survival and resilience as much as it does for local groups. By examining the strategic logic of AQ franchising, [Mendelsohn \(2011\)](#) refers to the fact that AQ expansion was driven mainly by its need to adapt to the pressures and setbacks resulting from the post 9/11 global war on terror.

Affiliating with local groups allowed the central hub to maintain activity and rectify the ensuing command and organizational weaknesses.

Apart from the benefits of affiliating with a global jihadist network, there are also costs to joining global jihad specifically and seeking external support generally. These include the risk of autonomy and independence loss,¹ potential local backlash since not all group members and/or local populations might approve of the new arrangements, and increased counter-terrorism measures (e.g., [San-Akca 2016](#); [Bacon 2017](#)). At the same time, the networks could have concerns about control of local affiliates and the consequences that could follow on delegation and integration of the network or again reputational backlash ([Byman 2014](#)). The presence of these costs could suggest that affiliation is not the first choice for either actor.

However, local militants do not operate in vacuum; adversary governments and other rival groups affect their capacity to survive and garner the necessary support. Similarly, the hubs face organizational challenges at different times, pertaining to leadership and control, as can be seen by observing the ebbs and flows in the trajectories of both AQ and IS. Affiliation then becomes a strategic decision made by both actor types, where benefits—mainly strengthening and maintaining survival and relevance for both—outweigh the costs. The fact that de-affiliation is very rare also suggests that affiliation is a strategic calculus more often than not.

Factoring Legitimacy In: A Local–Transnational Trade-Off

From the above overview, one can deduce the following. Most of the survival arguments view transnational jihad as a means to an end. Within this view, actors maximize their expected political utility subject to a binding constraint ([van Um 2011](#)). This view assumes that the fundamental problem for collective action is the resources available for mobilization, sustainability, and ultimate success. It thus follows that the establishment of transnational organization capacity is the key solution for sustained contention where emerging movements are incentivized to appropriate existing organizations for collective action ([Beck 2008](#)).

Resources accrued from alliances differ in nature and functions. Mainly, alliances between armed militants can confer legitimacy, prestige, and stature, along with other material benefits. These nonmaterial constructs can later

translate into more tangible benefits such as recruits and funds ([Bacon 2014](#)). Legitimacy is indeed important for militant groups, irrespective of their ideologies, as it affects the strategic calculation of the different groups and their self-conceptions ([Podder 2017](#)).

In November 1974, when Yasser Arafat addressed the General Assembly of the United Nations to convince them that the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was not a terrorist organization but a revolutionary movement, he capitalized his rhetoric on the unique legitimacy attributes of the PLO as the only organization that represents the Palestinian masses. It is an organization that both earned this legitimacy through its leadership and sacrifices, and “been granted it” by the different segments of the Palestinian society ([Finlay 2010](#)). Representation projects legitimacy (e.g., [Cunningham, Huang, and Sawyer 2021](#)) as do many other notions related to different pathways of armed groups’ governance.

Following [Suchman \(1995\)](#), legitimacy could be defined as the “generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions.” In simpler and more general words, legitimacy can be seen as being “about making claims and the conditions under which such claims are accepted” ([Schlichte and Schneckener 2015](#)). More specifically, rebel legitimacy is defined as “support and recognition that a rebel group is a viable political authority,” which extends to include material and nonmaterial aspects ensuring that the group’s institutions are perceived as the right institutions for their society ([Jo 2015](#)). A legitimate armed group is not different than the political legitimate actors that are seen as the “rightful wielder of power, exerciser of authority, maker and interpreter of rulers or user of force and who thereby warrants support and compliance” ([Rapkin and Braaten 2009](#); see also [Hurd 1999](#)).

However, it is worthy to note that armed groups’ legitimacy is different from political actors’ legitimacy in an important aspect, and that is the justification of violence. As opposed to states, armed groups lack the institutional structures and legal frameworks that legitimize their use of violence ([Schlichte and Schneckener 2015](#)). In fact, the use of violence might have competing effects on groups’ legitimacy. On the one hand, violence draws attention to the conflict, which incentivizes the armed groups involved to make direct use of it; however, it can also affect the legitimacy of the group reducing their motives to use violence again or at least directing it toward their opponents only and not their constituencies ([Schlichte and Schneckener 2015](#)). Meanwhile, violence can also bestow heroic and glorified attributes to the leaders, thus

¹ Some research, however, suggests that local affiliates maintain their independence and autonomy ([Mendelsohn 2016](#); [Warner et al. 2021](#)).

increasing notions of power and status that have returns on compliance (Schlichte and Schneckener 2015).²

It is therefore important to note that the effectiveness of the use of terrorism by militant groups is not straightforward (see, e.g., Polo and González 2020), and it is even more contested with some scholars finding supporting evidence for their usefulness as strategies to enforce coercion, and extract favorable policies and concessions (Pape 2003; Goodwin 2006; Thomas 2014), and others contending these premises (Fortna 2015), or arguing that terrorism can increase the potential of violent riots among civilians (Brandsch and Python 2021), thus reversing the compliance effect.

As a result, armed groups must develop alternative and parallel procedures of symbolic and performance-based legitimacy (Schlichte and Schneckener 2015). It might be argued that these problems are more relevant to insurgent and rebel groups in civil wars than for terrorists (Jo 2015). Yet, for this research, terrorism is conceptualized as a tactic used by any armed group during conflict. This creates a potential overlap between rebel groups and terrorists (Jo 2015).

Legitimacy is also not static, but dynamic, and the politics associated with it change over time (Schlichte and Schneckener 2015). In addition, it is relational (Podder 2017); the claims evolve and legitimacy has therefore to reflect progressive acceptance and actions that are aligning with newly emerging social orders (Duyvesteyn 2017).

I build my argument around notions of legitimacy seeking. The underlying assumption is that when their legitimacy is compromised, Islamist militant groups seek to affiliate with transnational networks of global jihad. My analysis is rooted in the relational approach to the legitimacy of armed groups (Schlichte and Schneckener 2015; Podder 2017) and the notion of triangulation of armed groups' legitimacy-seeking behaviors during wartime (McWeeney and Cunningham 2019). The main idea behind this approach is that there are multiple audiences for armed groups' claims that can be distinguished across three levels: (1) the active supporters and followers among the population, (2) specific local communities or a wider national audience, and (3) the international arena which includes states, international organizations, and transna-

tional NGOs (Podder 2017). These audiences can either confer or withhold legitimacy following distinct reciprocal dynamic relationships (Podder, 2017).

The relational approach extends to analyze how the legitimacy of armed groups is affected by the active contextual relationships that develop between them and the respective target audience. Podder (2017) advances three main relationships for consideration: (1) the relationship between the armed group and the civilian population it seeks to represent, determined by levels of violence along with modes of governance; (2) the relationship between the armed group and the government of the state where it operates³; and (3) the relationship between the armed group and the international community, extending to include regional states, humanitarian actors, and NGOs, among others.

In this research, I focus on the first and third relationships only and argue that if there is a deficit in the legitimacy within their respective local community, the Islamist militant group will seek to substitute for this deficit from the external arena by affiliating with a transnational network of global jihad. The effect of dealing mostly with Islamist militants that are characterized as terrorist groups limits the scope of international support they could gather. Therefore, the potential of being supported by the global jihadist movement is higher than being supported by international organizations or states. Subsequently, while most understanding of third/external actors is confined to states and international organizations and bodies, I make use of the diversity of the international system and extend it to include transnational nonstate armed networks. From that point, the Salafist jihadist networks can be seen as source of legitimacy for Islamist militants, especially if they are seen as the legitimate representatives and members of the jihadist movement. And while AQ and IS compete over the hegemonic leadership of the movement (Drevon 2017), the acceptance of the allegiance of a group into their networks confers recognition into the movement and projects legitimacy to different audiences.

Sources of Domestic Legitimacy

Legitimacy is a main source of support for the armed groups at the domestic level, and it is manifested through civilian compliance, which can vary from voluntary to coercive compliance (Podder 2017). The literature on rebel governance has depicted various strategies through which cooperation and compliance can be secured, beyond violence. This includes the provision of public goods and

² Farrell's (2020) argument focuses on notions of competition arising post-affiliation among groups of shared ideology, i.e., Salafist-jihadist ideology, leading to increased violence post-affiliation. According to the author, this trend is driven by the need of these groups to "differentiate themselves from other affiliates and show their competency and legitimacy." Along extended lines, as I show below, I maintain that affiliation itself is rooted in legitimacy deficit at the local level. However, it is important to note that the post-affiliation violence to prove increased operational capacity only shows that the legitimacy accrued from affiliation continues to be contested as the affiliates constantly struggle to prove their relevance to the parent organization; however, post-affiliation legitimacy is beyond the scope of this article.

³ In extended conflicts, distinct types of relationships between the two sides emerge in which the level of accommodation varies, having different effects on the legitimacy of the armed groups.

social services (Podder 2017; McWeeney and Cunningham 2019).

Social services provision differs from one context to the other, ranging from health care and education provision to more coercive aspects such as taxation, law enforcement, and Sharia courts, with the probability of overlap between both aspects. However, it is worthy to note that one aspect of legitimacy does not preclude the other. While it is true that what groups may refer to as taxation might be perceived as extortion by some of the population, the legitimization feature of this form of governance relies on the reciprocal level of service provision and how the population perceives these services in return.

Extortion generally would imply less or no service provision in return, while taxation would imply more service provision in return. A similar rationale could be extended to Sharia courts, as while they could be seen as repressive modes of governance, to some, their deterrence effects could outweigh their repressive attributes.⁴

If rebel groups controlled a territory and provided security to the local population, civilians would more likely prefer their rule to anarchy or state rule and the rebels would be able to obtain political legitimacy. Rebel groups, which are comparable to the stationary bandits, are then motivated to maintain their rule and order, and provide public goods, as doing so, would increase their taxable income (Olson 1993, as cited in McWeeney and Cunningham 2019). On a related note, institutionalized taxation to a legitimate armed group, would benefit the local community by increasing household welfare through providing insurance and protection (Sabates-Wheeler and Verwimp 2014). While this lays down the rationalist foundation for domestic legitimacy, rooted in self-interest dynamics between the armed groups and the civilian population, recent literature extends the understanding of legitimacy to constructivist approaches as well showing how it is influenced not only by interests, but also norms and socialization processes (Jo 2015; McWeeney and Cunningham 2019). This leads to a more multifaceted and multidimensional understanding of social services provision and legitimacy altogether where the latter is also rooted in the local perceptions (see, e.g., Revkin 2021).

Despite these inherent contradictions stemming from different perceptions attributed to a single behavior, to date, governance in the form of service provision, remains

one of the most acknowledged modes of governance that bestows legitimacy and support (e.g., Podder 2017; McWeeney and Cunningham 2019; Loyle et al. 2019; Loyle et al. 2021). Inclusive provision of goods and services, such as those provided to even nonsupporters, by groups like Hezbollah, secures the legitimate group's claims of sovereignty to the different local and international audiences (Stewart 2018).

This discussion points to the first mechanism of local legitimacy compensation taking place when a group affiliates with a global network of jihad, and that is the substitution for internal shortage resulting from a local legitimacy deficit. Examples include shortages of money and weapons or any other material resource that could be lost along with local legitimacy yet could be compensated for by external funds. Similarly, local expertise can be substituted for by external experience and knowledge, and a shortage of fighters could be rectified by the provision of foreign fighters. In addition, transnational affiliation provides safe havens substituting for the loss of local sanctuaries. These forms of foreign support help sustaining the activities of the local affiliate and ensuring its endurance.

Sources of International Legitimacy

Two interrelated notions are linked to the rationale behind armed groups' incentives in gathering international support: armed groups' diplomacy and politics of recognition (see, e.g., Jo 2015; Huang 2016). While armed groups' diplomacy was more specifically developed for rebel groups and defined as their "conduct of foreign affairs during civil war for the purpose of advancing its military and political objectives" (Huang 2016), there are no apparent concerns to extend and generalize this definition to include other militant groups, as recognition granters need not only be states or international organizations, but they can also be other non-state armed groups (Pfeifer, Geis, and Clément 2022).

Armed groups often seek the power and status of states, and throughout their military conflicts, they engage in parallel political contests "over allies, endorsement and legitimacy both at home and abroad" (Huang 2016). Diplomacy confers various strategic benefits in both the short and long terms. In the short term, external ties could provide the armed group with the necessary material support needed during the conflict. For the long term, diplomacy can secure bilateral agreements with states that entail trade agreements or other forms of alliances or political favors (Coggins 2015).

Arguably, recognition is the most important benefit associated with international/transnational support gathering and diplomacy efforts of armed groups. When an armed group is granted recognition by great powers, great

⁴ Revkin (2021) argues that within a context of competitive governance between a rebel group and a state, the decisions of displacement are based on perceived effectiveness and fairness of governing institutions: The rebel groups only need to be "less bad" than the state for civilians to decide not to leave. In the survey she conducted in Mosul, 35 percent reported a decrease in crime under IS rule. This could imply that courts and law enforcement, even the strict Sharia rules, can be preferred by individuals over others, and in these cases, the militant group would be perceived as more legitimate than the state.

benefits can incur, including being granted legal status to participate in international politics, but also membership in international bodies could follow, which reflects being accepted as a legitimate representative, as was the case with the Moro National Liberation Front of the Philippines, which was granted membership in the Organization of the Islamic Conference and recognized as the only representative of the Bangsamoro people in the late 1970s (Huang 2016).

Affiliation could then be thought of as an act of diplomacy for the purpose of legitimacy seeking. An affiliation between a transnational network and a local group would not materialize unless the latter is recognized by the former as a legitimate group with legitimate grievances, which could help reinforce legitimizing narratives locally (see, e.g., Joshi 2023). Indeed, Huang (2016) maintains that there are feedback loops between domestic and international legitimacy, both feeding each other. I build on this notion further and argue that even in cases where local legitimacy is eroded, external legitimacy can help fill the gap.

In the case of local Islamist militants lacking domestic legitimacy, affiliating with a global jihadist network can signal recognition by powerful violent actors, bolstering their ideological credibility (see, e.g., Blair and Potter 2022). For instance, Zarqawi's decision to affiliate with al-Qaeda may have served to project "revolutionary legitimacy" and turned him into a "global jihadi on par with the masters" and not simply "a mere field commander" (Gerges 2005 as cited in Bacon 2018).

Similarly, as armed groups are using norms and standards to gain status and recognition and the perception of "rightness" among great powers (McWeeney and Cunningham 2019), affiliation with the global jihadist movement can be thought of as an attempt to signal "rightness" as one of the representatives and leaders of the Islamic *Umma*.

"As for the answer to your question, why did we join Al Qaida? We say, why shouldn't we join Al Qaida? God ordered us to be united, to be allied, to cooperate and fight against the idolaters in straight lines...We are a jihadi ancestral community. We rely on legitimacy before anything else as a base of our decisions."

- Abdelmalek Droukdal, leader of al-Qaida of the Islamic Maghreb (Bacon 2018).

In sum, this discussion gives way to the second mechanism of compensation, and that is validation and recognition. The affiliation with a global jihadist network provides a form of religious validation that allows the local group to portray itself as serving higher goals. This new religious alignment increases recognition by parent or-

ganization and their audiences locally and transnationally. In addition, once affiliated, the group could benefit from incorporation into the media and propaganda devices of the global network, allowing it to reach wider audiences and feeding into the first mechanism highlighted above, shortage substitution, as new global identities transcending nationalist and subnationalist boundaries and ties would result in increased recruitment—and potentially other resources—by differentiating itself from "divisive local politics" (see Ahmad 2016).

From the above discussions pertaining to sources of domestic and international legitimacy of armed groups, I devise the following hypothesis:

H: Islamist groups with high level of local legitimacy have a lower probability of affiliation with a transnational network of jihad and vice versa.

Additional Notes on Legitimacy

The question now becomes, why would transnational hubs want to affiliate with local groups that lack legitimacy? A plausible explanation stems from the reduced principal-agent problems, which leads to two main points to consider. First, affiliates with low legitimacy would be willing to take more risks than parent organization. For instance, Abrahms, Ward, and Kennedy (2018) theorize that the former are more likely to engage in indiscriminate violence than the latter as parent organizations focus more on outcome goals, which are their stated political ends, than process goals, which are important to sustain survival. This has indeed caused tension at times, e.g., Zawahiri and Zarqawi's (AQI) disagreement over the targeting of Shia in Iraq and Boko Haram's Shekau disagreement with IS over indiscriminate violence. However, I maintain that there are also indirect benefits accrued to the parent organization as deadly attacks by affiliates allow it to signal strength while bearing less reputational costs at the same time. Hence, affiliates with low local legitimacy could be perceived as more credible to the parent organization.

Second, affiliating with low local legitimacy groups eliminates potential competition or outbidding between the parent organization and affiliates, since the latter realize they need the former for legitimacy and nonmaterial support purposes in addition to the expected material gains. Therefore, the parent organization need not worry that an affiliate would overshadow it when it comes to popular support. It then becomes rational to expect that AQ and IS would accept groups whose legitimacy is reduced.

In addition, AQ focuses on embeddedness within local struggles and dynamics (Lister 2017; Byman and Mir 2024; Clarke and Broekaert 2025). In doing so, it interferes

with existing conflicts that are often framed along revolutionary and/or nationalist lines. It is more realistic to engage with a less legitimate group than a more legitimate group, as the latter could be more resistant and reluctant to forgo their independence and local claims in a revolutionary and/or nationalist struggle. For example, the Arab Spring brought popular and legitimate Islamist regimes, and these posed challenges to al-Qaeda (Lister 2017). IS, on the other hand, prioritizes expansion and territorial control (Byman, 2015b)—regardless of legitimacy. A less legitimate group would better align with the IS agenda that seeks speedy changes and chaos before the establishment of a righteous Islamist rule (Lister 2017).⁵

Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State both accepted affiliates with low levels of domestic legitimacy. For example, it is very hard to establish that the Abu Sayyaf group (a formal IS affiliate in 2014) was gaining popular support or legitimacy grounds in the Philippines before its affiliation. Apart from having no evidence on governance capacity before 2014, the group also engaged in indiscriminate bombing, extortion, and kidnapping for ransom, activities that are more likely to negatively affect its public support levels. In fact, the group was labeled a bandit group by the Philippines government during different phases of its insurgency prior to its affiliation (Banlaoi 2010; Mapping Militants Project 2022).

Similarly, by 2009, al-Shabaab (formal AQ-affiliate in 2012) was facing considerable military setbacks and challenges to its credibility and popularity. Its failed offensive against the Transitional Federal Government triggered internal dissatisfaction and fragmentation, which was only compounded by the rise of rival groups (International Crisis Group 2010). Simultaneously, the group was alienating large sectors of the society, even in the territories it controlled, due to its harsh interpretation of Sharia and indiscriminate violence (International Crisis Group 2010).

There are also clear examples of affiliates lacking local legitimacy, even post-affiliation. In Iraq, AQI suffered increased reputational costs for its indiscriminate sectarian violence against Shi'ite Iraqis (Abrahms, Ward, and Kennedy 2018; Akcinaroglu and Evirgen 2025) to the extent that forced al-Qaeda's Zawahiri to reprimand Zarqawi in 2005. Despite their dissatisfaction with the affiliate, AQI did not break ties with AQI at that time.

Data and Research Design

The analysis relies primarily on an originally coded dependent variable on transnational affiliation combined with the Extended Data on Terrorist Groups dataset (EDTG) (Hou, Gaibullov, and Sandler 2019) and other data

⁵ Robustness checks with models separating AQ and IS affiliation are shown in the online appendix.

sources described below. The EDTG includes 760 groups that engaged in terrorist attacks during the period 1970–2016. It is linked to the groups in the Global Terrorism Database (GTD).

The EDTG includes variable for groups' ideology. This variable was mainly examined to reduce the sample to Islamist groups, whether they operate at a national or transnational level. I focus on these groups since they could potentially join global jihadist networks. Models include ninety-seven Islamist groups over the years 1998–2016. The sample starts in 1998 since that is the year when al-Qaeda began to be active transnationally, with the attacks on the US embassies in East Africa.

Main Dependent Variable

The main dependent variable is onset of affiliation seeking, a binary variable. This variable is coded using a conservative approach, taking the value of 1 only if there is evidence that the group has sought affiliation, and if such information is not available, it is referred to the date when the group pledges formal allegiance to either al-Qaeda or IS, and it becomes widely referred to as an affiliate.⁶ This is mainly a measure of sworn affiliation (Igalada and Yagüe 2021) and not simply cooperative behavior (e.g., Bacon 2017; Moghadam 2017).

I relied primarily on online news articles and academic articles along with online resources such as Mapping Militants Project and others (e.g., The CNN Wire Staff 2012; Elbagir, Cruickshank, and Tawfeeq 2015; Mapping Militants Project 2019). Once a group seeks affiliation or affiliates, it is dropped from the sample. This serves best to model the change of status, and because I am interested in the question of why groups affiliate as opposed to why groups stay affiliated. A few groups are coded 1 at the year of their inception, “born-affiliates.”⁷ However, most groups existed for years or decades before affiliating. In the final sample, there are twenty-nine groups where seeking affiliation or affiliation onset occurs and are coded as 1, accounting for 23.7 percent of the total groups examined in the sample and 2.8 percent of the group-year observations.

Key Explanatory Variables

To measure local legitimacy, I choose three main explanatory variables: social services to indicate high legiti-

⁶ Models where the variable “affiliate” is coded as 1 only at the time of actual sworn allegiance are presented in the robustness checks in the online appendix.

⁷ “Born-affiliates” are groups that are designated as affiliated groups since their inception. These include some of the Islamic State provinces that were formed in a top-bottom approach, i.e., the decision was taken by the center to extend the periphery and not from a local group to affiliate with the network, or when the affiliation was initiated by individual combats and not an existing group.

macy, as the relationship was highlighted previously (e.g., Podder 2017; McWeeney and Cunningham 2019; Loyle et al. 2019, 2021), in addition to young age and kidnapping to indicate low legitimacy.

Different examples illustrate the ways through which social service provision helps with establishing legitimacy and support bases for the armed groups. By examining Article 21 of Hamas' charter, one can find an emphasis on the importance of social solidarity and helping those in need. Through services provision, Hamas both substitutes the social contract between the Palestinians and the Palestinian Authority (PA) (Grynkewich 2008), and garners positive public perceptions (Flanigan and O'Brien 2015). Through its local government in north-western Syria, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) was providing different services after fostering an interest-based relationship with local elites, which allowed the group to achieve a de facto legitimacy (Keser and Fakhoury 2025). In addition, in Lebanon, Hezbollah was able to build an extensive network of social services to marginalized Shi'ite communities, allowing it to secure support and loyalty (Atzili 2010).⁸

Group age, in particular *young age*, is an indication of low legitimacy.

Legitimacy is the result of sustained interactions between armed groups and the population they seek to govern and control (see, e.g., Arjona 2016; Jentsch and Steele 2023). It thus follows that longevity is a crucial factor underpinning cultivated legitimacy through various routes, including governance, institutional investment, social embeddedness, and networks, all of which entail dynamic and iterative processes allowing rebels to "reposition themselves, organizationally or even ideologically" to win the civilians' support and be perceived as legitimate (Florea and Malejacq 2024).

Various examples show that groups that live longer have better chances to be perceived as legitimate. Long time horizons also allow the armed groups to tone their behavior in ways that are more appealing to civilians, hence increasing their legitimacy. Malthaner (2015) shows that with time, Hezbollah was able to adapt its risky violent tactics that cost the lives of farmers' sons in South Lebanon and reduce its attempts to impose elements of an Islamic order, which was resisted by the population. Similarly, Terpstra and Frerks (2017) show that over the years, the LTTE employed diverse propaganda and discursive strate-

gies aimed at altering the balance between coercion and legitimacy as a basis for their rule.

As for *kidnapping*, it is a proxy for criminal behavior, and it goes against lawmaking and law enforcement, which could be thought of as an extension beyond social services provision (Loyle et al. 2021). However, crimes may not be equally perceived by the local population, depending on their targets and effects. While in general crimes are considered illegal and immoral, the effects of kidnapping (or robbery, for instance) can be different from drug trafficking. Kidnapping targets individuals and the effects of which are felt more directly by the local population,⁹ as opposed to the effects of drug production or smuggling, which can be more "diffuse" (Asal, Rethemeyer, and Schoon 2019). Whether it is for financial gains, political concessions, or social control, kidnapping is a coercive tactic¹⁰ (Liu and Eisner 2024), and bears reputation and legitimacy costs.^{11, 12}

In September 2020, the FARC leadership in Colombia accepted responsibility for their engagement in kidnapping and apologized to the public, the victims, and their families (Gilbert 2022). They stated, "Kidnapping was a very serious mistake that we can only regret. It left a deep wound in the souls of those affected and mortally wounded our legitimacy and credibility" (Semena 2020 as cited in Gilbert 2022).

Social services are coded from two sources: TIOS (Heger and Jung 2017) and Big, Allied, and Dangerous (BAAD–Insurgency Dataset).¹³ Whenever the group existed in TIOS, I relied on it; when a group was not available in TIOS, I relied on BAAD. In the case of TIOS, the data ended in 2012 or 2013, so inferences were made for the missing data based on secondary research. Also, it is worthy to note that

⁹ According to Forest (2012), most victims of terrorist-related kidnappings are locals (see also Liu and Eisner 2025).

¹⁰ It is true that some forms of social service provision, including taxation and the provision of justice systems, include coercive elements as mentioned in the previous section, and indeed kidnapping and these forms of services share these coercive elements. However, it still depends on how the act is perceived within the local context, and that is based on the action/actor intent. In more cases than others, kidnapping is perceived as self-serving, while taxation and law enforcement can be seen as part of stability and deterrence mechanisms.

¹¹ By theorizing kidnapping as a form of coercive governance, Liu and Eisner (2024, 2025) show that social service provision increases the likelihood of involvement in and frequency of kidnapping. However, Asal, Rethemeyer, and Schoon (2019) provide a competing finding where they show that social service provision reduces the likelihood of kidnapping (for ransom).

¹² Abduction is one of the behaviors Weinstein (2007) considers brutal because it goes "above and beyond what is required to send a signal of the costs of defection." Kidnapping is seen as excessive, as well as predatory or extractive when done for ransom (e.g., Gilbert 2022). Other types of terrorism, even lethal attacks, are considered instrumental acts of costly signaling (e.g., Kydd and Walter 2006). Kidnapping is hence considered as a better proxy for legitimacy deficit vis-à-vis the local population than other types of funding or attacks.

¹³ I thank Victor Asal for graciously sharing the variables of the dataset.

⁸ In addition, the provision of social services can be seen as embedded in or reinforcing identity-based support relationships. While maintaining that social services provision is a form of reciprocal utilitarian power that is not directly translated into legitimacy, Malthaner (2015) shows that such governance strategies helped Hezbollah in being perceived as acting on behalf of the Shiite community and service provision became intertwined with other forms of social ties conferring legitimacy.

in the TIOS codebook, courts are included as service provision while taxation is not. It might be argued that since courts might be perceived as coercive elements of governance, they should be associated with low and not high legitimacy attribute. However, as argued above, strict courts could be perceived differently depending on the context.¹⁴ The decision of whether the group would be considered to still be providing social services was based on two criteria: (1) if it had territorial control and (2) if there was any change in the status quo, including any incurred losses. It is worth noting that these two criteria were employed to ensure the persistence of social service provision. I adopted a conservative approach where if, in the last year in TIOS, social service provision was absent, I continued to code it as absent for the subsequent years till the sample ends. If it was coded as present, my two criteria constitute most likely conditions under which the provision of these services would continue. The final dataset includes group-year observations from TIOS, BAAD–Insurgency Dataset, and my personal coding using secondary resources. In the final dataset, there are fifty-eight groups engaging in social service provision, comprising 47.5 percent of the groups and 58.8 percent of group-year observations.

Young age is a binary variable, taking a value of 1 if the group age is less than 5 years old. I use this cut-off in line with the finding maintaining that most militant groups do not live so long (Phillips 2019a).¹⁵ To code it, I rely on the variable *duration* from EDTG, which represents the years of the group existence since its formation.¹⁶ In the sample, there are eighty-eight groups that were coded as young at some point in time, comprising approximately 72 percent of the total groups, and almost 25 percent of group-year observations that are coded as young.

Kidnapping comes from the EDTG. It is a binary variable taking the value of 1 if a group engaged in kidnappings each year, according to the GTD dataset. The final sample has forty groups engaging in kidnapping, i.e., 33.7 percent of the groups and almost 10 percent of group-year observations.

Control Variables

Number of Groups (log): I control for group-level data, including number of competitors at country levels per year, which I obtain by summing number of militant groups from EDTG. I expect a positive effect of the number of competitors on affiliation based on existing literature that examined terrorist group alliances generally (e.g., Phillips

2019b) and Day (2016) in the context of Islamist groups' affiliation with IS specifically.

Number of Attacks (log): I also control for the number of attacks, obtained from EDTG as well, while expecting a positive relationship with affiliation because more lethal groups can become more alienated from their communities, which might reduce their chance of survival.

Peak Size: This variable is also obtained from EDTG. I expect a negative relationship between size and affiliation because the larger the size, the more engrained into the society the group is, and the less support and recruits it requires; hence, the less motivated it is to seek affiliation. This is the other side of the coin, saying that the larger the group size, the higher are its chances to survive (e.g., Blomberg, Gaibullov, and Sandler 2011).

Share of Transnational Attacks: This variable is obtained from EDTG. I expect a negative relationship between this variable and affiliation, as I side with the notion that groups that engage in transnational terrorism undergo a significant increase in risks facing local and international counter-terrorism governments and communities (e.g., Blomberg, Gaibullov, and Sandler 2011).

I also control for country-level attributes, including the following:

Liberal Democracy: I obtain from the V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) dataset. I theorize a negative relationship between democracy and affiliation. Democracy presents an opportunity for the local groups to exist and continue within the boundaries of the state due to the complications of the institutional constraints and the incentivizing mechanisms induced by civil liberties (see, e.g., Li 2005). Acting together, these would reduce the likelihood of affiliation.

Political Exclusion: This is an interval-scale reflecting when individuals are denied access to services or participation in public spaces based on their identity or belonging to a particular group. It varies by country and year. I expect a negative relationship between political exclusion proxy and affiliation, building on the dominant convention that exclusion would increase local terrorism (Choi and Piazza 2016; Hansen, Nemeth, and Mauslein 2020), thus reducing the motivation and likelihood for engaging in transnational terrorism.

In addition, I use the Quality of Government (QoG) dataset to control for *Ethnic Fractionalization*. According to the QoG codebook, ethnicity is defined as involving a combination of racial and linguistic characteristics. The result of this index is higher in certain instances than the commonly used ELF index (Alesina et al. 2003). Unfortunately, data is available for only the year 2000 with no variation. I expect ethnic fractionalization to be negatively associated with affiliation, based on the same previous logic rooted in notions linking different aspects

¹⁴ For robustness checks, I include an analysis where social service provision is coded in terms of health, education, and health or education from TIOS.

¹⁵ See also Rapoport (1992) and Cronin (2006).

¹⁶ For robustness checks, I also include a model with age computed as continuous duration.

Table 1. TSCS logistic regressions results of affiliation with global networks

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Social services		−1.894*** (0.667)		
Kidnapping			1.300** (0.659)	
Young age				2.845*** (0.667)
Group peak size	−0.372 (0.343)	−0.046 (0.298)	−0.453 (0.352)	0.220 (0.341)
Attacks(log)	0.152** (0.069)	0.174** (0.083)	0.077 (0.080)	0.114 (0.098)
NGroups(Log)	−0.519* (0.304)	−0.667** (0.305)	−0.504* (0.306)	−0.429 (0.301)
%Transn. attacks	0.240 (0.979)	−0.049 (1.045)	−0.082 (0.932)	0.134 (1.272)
Exclusion proxies	−2.581* (1.560)	−2.276 (1.473)	−2.479 (1.554)	−3.432** (1.715)
Ethnic frac. (2000)	−1.010 (1.294)	−0.673 (1.181)	−1.572 (1.298)	−2.091 (1.294)
Liberal democracy	−0.074 (1.923)	0.891 (1.869)	0.014 (1.952)	0.609 (1.687)
Population(log)	−0.210 (0.225)	−0.165 (0.236)	−0.195 (0.227)	−0.083 (0.218)
GDP(log)	−0.048 (0.334)	0.000 (0.331)	−0.044 (0.343)	−0.103 (0.322)
Intercept	−13.768* (7.079)	−14.416** (6.594)	−14.122* (7.260)	−17.698** (7.131)
AIC	216.432	206.380	214.331	190.482
Log likelihood	−80.216	−74.190	−78.166	−66.241
Num. obs.	1,050	1,050	1,050	1,050

*** $P < .01$; ** $P < .05$; * $P < .1$.

of marginalization and polarization to local manifestation of terrorism. I also account for *Population(log)*, obtained from QoG and *GDP per capita (log)*. These variables could have either a positive or a negative relationship with the outcome of interest. Conventionally, they represent state capacity, which would motivate and/or force militants to seek the support of transnational networks after setbacks. Alternatively, they can represent resources, which, if present to militants, in terms of recruits and state funds, would reduce the likelihood of affiliation.

Since the dependent variable is a binary variable, I employ a logistic regression model, with standard errors clustered at the group level and year fixed effects. This is the primary model since there is variation over time on most variables. I also investigate a cross-sectional analysis because some variables do not have a great deal of variation over time.

Results

Table 1 shows the results of the models that explain the affiliation of local Islamist groups with transnational networks of global jihad. The first model includes only the controls. Given the potential issues of multicollinearity that might arise from including different attribute proxies of the same concept in the same model, Model 2, Model 3, and Model 4 include the three measures of legitimacy, social services, kidnapping, and young age, respectively. Social services, in Model 2, are statistically significant and negatively associated with affiliation, showing support for the part of the hypothesis that high legitimacy is associated with lower likelihood of affiliation with transnational network of jihad. Kidnapping, in Model 3, is also statistically significant and positively associated with affiliation, reflecting that low levels of legitimacy are associated with

Table 2. Cross-sectional logistic regression results of affiliation with global networks

	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
Social services		−2.715** (1.129)		
Kidnapping			2.252** (1.106)	
Young age				18.792*** (1.088)
Attacks(log)	0.191* (0.114)	0.234* (0.133)	0.099 (0.123)	0.200 (0.138)
NGroups(Log)	0.629 (0.514)	0.541 (0.522)	0.504 (0.472)	0.548 (0.498)
Peak_Size	−0.853* (0.457)	−0.384 (0.379)	−1.030** (0.427)	−0.368 (0.408)
%Transn. attacks	−0.166 (1.015)	0.295 (1.098)	−1.426 (1.238)	−0.308 (1.040)
Exclusion proxies	−2.491 (2.049)	−2.467 (2.139)	−1.956 (1.909)	−2.532 (2.257)
Ethnic frac. (2000)	−2.001 (2.074)	−2.448 (2.160)	−1.938 (1.922)	−2.320 (2.044)
Liberal democracy	−0.725 (2.017)	0.495 (2.196)	−0.397 (1.907)	0.991 (2.189)
Population(log)	−0.413 (0.430)	−0.443 (0.402)	−0.265 (0.419)	−0.507 (0.423)
GDPPC(log)	0.115 (0.470)	−0.058 (0.454)	0.371 (0.540)	0.116 (0.494)
Intercept	7.541 (11.857)	9.336 (10.978)	2.649 (12.290)	−10.015 (11.523)
AIC	95.830	89.201	92.694	87.977
Log likelihood	−37.915	−33.601	−35.347	−32.989
Num. obs.	97	97	97	97

*** $P < .01$; ** $P < .05$; * $P < .1$.

higher likelihood of joining global jihadist networks. The same could be said with regard to Model 4 and the young age proxy.

Among controls, the number of groups is statistically significant throughout most models but shows an opposite direction from the one hypothesized by Day (2016). This reflects that this variable might be playing into the opportunity paradigm assumed for democracy, exclusion, and fractionalization. It is interesting that outbidding does not seem to lead to affiliation, despite its importance in the literature regarding other outcomes (e.g., Bloom 2004). The number of attacks is only significant in Models 1 and 2, showing a positive relationship with affiliation. This could be seen as providing partial evidence that more violent groups have a reduced chance at survival which motivate their affiliation with global networks of jihad.

These main findings are robust to multiple specifications shown in the online appendix, including the models using only bivariate models as well as the full models incorporating the three proxies simultaneously, a sample excluding the “born-affiliates,” which are groups that exist in the sample as affiliates from the first year they appear, and a more conservative coding for social services obtained from only the BAAD–Insurgency Dataset or TIOS only (health, education, and health or education) and a model with age as continuous variable. There are also model specifications with time trend and decade dummies instead of year fixed effects, as well as using casualties instead of attacks.

In another robustness check, Table 2 shows the results of the cross-sectional analysis. Models 6, 7, and 8 show consistent results with those of Table 1, with social services being negatively associated with affiliation while

kidnapping and young age show a positive association with the main outcome of interest.

In sum, from the two tables, I find support that the probability of affiliation with groups that provide social services is lower, as they enjoy higher domestic and local legitimacy. In addition, I find support that young age and kidnapping are associated with a higher probability of affiliation, as these attributes correspond to lower domestic legitimacy.

Proxy Choice and Alternative Explanations

The proxies chosen for local legitimacy (social service provision), or lack thereof (kidnapping and young age) could indicate other phenomena, which complicate empirical testing. One challenge is that they could potentially indicate group capabilities, and this suggests two competing explanations: Groups with weaker capabilities are more likely to seek out affiliation, or stronger groups are more likely to affiliate due to their attractiveness to larger networks. In this section, I explain why the proxies do not seem to indicate capacity (for the most part), and why empirically, group capacity does not seem to be related to affiliation.

When it comes to the proxies chosen, social services can be an indicator of both higher and lower capabilities and resources available for attacks and other organizational activities. On the one hand, social service provision can result in locals' dependency and compliance, improved information, and combat effectiveness¹⁷ (Terpstra and Frerks 2017; Loyle et al. 2021; Asal, Flanigan, and Szekeley 2022). Stewart (2020), however, shows that under certain conditions, rebel governance is associated with lower rebel strength. The author attributes the mixed results in their analysis and the existing literature to different explanations, including the notion that the military benefits of governance are either weak, conditional, or costly (Stewart 2020). Young age could indicate fewer capabilities and resources (e.g., Asal and Rethemeyer 2008). Kidnapping, similar to social services provision, can be an indicator of higher or lower capabilities. Some authors suggest it is a tactic employed to signal strength, (Forest 2012; Asal, Rethemeyer, and Schoon 2019; Liu and Eisner 2024). Other authors, however, suggest groups use kidnapping when they are weak—after incurring battlefield losses or when facing increased competition (Welsh 2024).

The theoretical ambiguity of these proxies—especially social services and kidnapping—with relation to capacity

suggests they are ill-suited as indicators for capability. A more reliable proxy should reflect the concept in a consistent direction. However, these proxies are much more reliable indicators of legitimacy: social services build relational ties with local populations, while kidnapping and young age erode them.

To further assess whether the legitimacy proxies seem to overlap with capabilities, I analyze the association of the proxies with more prominent indicators of group capacity: group peak size, attacks, and casualties.

Online appendix, Figure C.1 shows the correlation analysis for each of the legitimacy proxies with the indicators of group capacity. A few points stand out; first, the relationship between the legitimacy proxies and capabilities measures is not clear. Only kidnapping shows a substantial association with two capabilities attributes, *Attacks (log)* and *Casualties (log)*, but not *Peak size*. Social service provision and young age show virtually no association with capability measures, suggesting they capture a distinct concept. This ambiguity is in line with the results of Tables 1 and 2, showing a lack of robust significance for capabilities attributes, such as group size and attacks. If capabilities explained affiliation, and capabilities were behind the relationship between the proxies and affiliation, we would expect different results in the tables. Traditional capability measures like group size and attacks should be robustly significant in the models. This does not occur. Perhaps the best indicator of capability, *Peak group size*, is never statistically significant in Table 1, and inconsistently significant in Table 2. *Attacks (log)* are not consistently significant. Perhaps more interestingly, they have opposite signs: group size is negatively related, and attacks are positively related.¹⁸

Overall, capability measures are not highly correlated with the legitimacy proxies; as such, they do not seem consistently associated with affiliation. With regards to kidnapping, a better understanding of the strong correlation with two of the capabilities' attributes would be that kidnapping is associated with violence and coercion, which could reduce local legitimacy, more than it is associated with mere organizational attributes or resources. In fact, even if kidnapping helped secure more material resources, its negative implications on legitimacy cannot be overlooked. Consequently, the proxies of choice better capture a relational and dynamic construct (militants–local population), i.e., legitimacy, rather than absolute measures of militants' capabilities. Therefore, taken together, the argument conveyed by the comprehensive analysis so far, with the proxies chosen, is an argument of local legitimacy deficit, and not of resources or capabilities.

¹⁸ The lack of robust significance and the opposite relationship of the capabilities' measures consistently show up in the robustness checks of the online appendix as well.

¹⁷ For a review on the mechanisms, see Stewart (2020).

Concluding Remarks

This article investigates why some Islamist militants affiliate with transnational networks of global jihad and others do not. The argument proposed is rooted in legitimacy-seeking rationale. I maintain that local Islamist militants that have local support and are perceived as relatively legitimate would not seek affiliation as opposed to those that lack legitimacy at the local level. I measure legitimacy using three proxies: social service provision (high legitimacy), young age (low legitimacy), and kidnapping (low legitimacy).

Results suggest support for the theorized drivers of affiliation, i.e., groups that provide social services have lower chances of affiliating with transnational networks of global jihad, as they are perceived as legitimate in the eyes of the local civilians and could easily gain support at the domestic level and thus lack the incentives to join global jihad. They do not suffer from a legitimacy deficit and seek no substitution at the transnational level by affiliating with AQ or IS. I also find support for the notion that kidnapping and young age should be associated with a higher likelihood of affiliation.

Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that the proxies for legitimacy are only proxies and might indicate other attributes or causal mechanisms. Future research could explore additional proxies of legitimacy, capitalizing on a nuanced view of legitimacy. In other words, legitimacy should be understood on a continuous spectrum rather than categorical or binary conceptualization. Groups will always engage in coercive aspects along with social service provision, and it will always depend on their balance together. It thus follows that legitimacy might not be fully captured by social service provision, kidnapping, or age, especially dichotomous measures of these attributes. Different communities in different contexts may weigh things differently based on different perceptions, which results in different balance between the factors. For instance, for some, a certain level of coercion might be necessary, while for others it could simply imply repression. It is therefore a dynamic concept where strategies can shift from one end of the spectrum to the other or where different aspects overlap. This paper could thus be seen as a first step, but an important first step.

Most of the literature addressing the question of terrorist affiliation provides answers rooted in material benefits. Other work offers explanations involving ideology. While my analysis does not contradict the rationale of survival analysis dominating the literature on affiliation (Cragin et al. 2007; Bacon 2014; Byman 2015a; Weeraratne 2017), it provides a new lens, rooted in the interaction between the local militants and their surrounding audiences and contexts. It thus sheds lights on the importance of factoring the local and group-specific attributes of Islamist militancy

to understand the dynamics giving rise to global jihad, highlighting the important implication that global jihad can expand through local channels. This research aims to help devise better policy recommendations for the international community as well as for the domestic governments where affiliates are localized.

There are multiple avenues for future research. The process of affiliation can be studied with comparative cases to have a deeper understanding of the local context and the interplay between the micro-level and structural factors that trigger affiliation. Furthermore, the rhetorical aspect of the affiliation can be studied qualitatively and quantitatively to determine the major narrative frames that dominate the process of affiliation. In addition, the post-affiliation dynamics can be analyzed, in terms of attacks diversity and geographical dispersion, and compare them with the pre-affiliation attacks and geographical presence. This should give us an insight on whether affiliation is merely a verbal and symbolic act, or if it entails actual commitment. The latter distinction could serve to give insights on the level of actual threat posed by affiliation. In addition, post-affiliation legitimacy and how it continues to be contested are important to analyze. Overall, this research sheds light on an important connection between local audiences and global networks, and the literature will benefit from continued attention to this valuable topic.

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Supplementary Material

Supplementary material is available at *Journal of Global Security Studies* online.

Data Availability

Replication data will be made available and on my website upon publication.

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