



# The Strategic Logic of Large Militant Alliance Networks

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## Abstract

Ideological and operational credibility are essential to the success of transnational terrorist organizations. We demonstrate that militant groups can leverage large alliance networks to bolster their ideological and operational reputations. Organizations can draw on operational capabilities and successes to build international networks that bolster their ideological credibility. Conversely, organizations with reputations for ideological authority can lend it to affiliates, who offer reach into active conflicts, bolstering claims to operational capacity. This logic of comparative advantage suggests that militant alliances can be a strategic response to underlying material or ideological deficits. We illustrate these dynamics through data-driven case studies of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State's cooperative networks.

## Resumen

La credibilidad, tanto ideológica como operativa, es esencial para el éxito de las organizaciones terroristas transnacionales. Demostramos que los grupos militantes pueden aprovechar las grandes redes de alianzas para reforzar su reputación ideológica y operativa. Las organizaciones pueden aprovechar sus capacidades y éxitos operativos para crear redes internacionales que refuercen su credibilidad ideológica. A la inversa, las organizaciones con una reputación de autoridad ideológica pueden otorgársela a sus afiliados, que ofrecen acceso a los conflictos activos, reforzando las pretensiones de capacidad operativa. Esta lógica de ventaja comparativa sugiere que las alianzas militantes pueden ser una respuesta estratégica a los déficits materiales o ideológicos subyacentes. Ilustramos estas dinámicas a través de estudios de casos basados en datos sobre las redes de cooperación de Al Qaeda y el Estado Islámico.

## Résumé

Les crédibilités idéologique et opérationnelle sont essentielles au succès des organisations terroristes transnationales. Nous démontrons que les groupes militants peuvent exploiter les grands réseaux d'alliances pour renforcer leurs réputations idéologique et opérationnelle. Les organisations peuvent se fonder sur leurs capacités et réussites opérationnelles pour bâtir des réseaux internationaux qui renforcent leur crédibilité idéologique. À l'inverse, les organisations à la réputation d'autorité idéologique peuvent en faire profiter des associés, qui leur proposent une influence dans des conflits en cours, renforçant ainsi des revendications de capacité opérationnelle. Cette logique d'avantage comparatif suggère que les alliances militantes puissent constituer une réponse stratégique au contenu sous-jacent ou aux défauts idéologiques. Nous illustrons ces dynamiques au moyen d'études de cas fondées sur les données des réseaux de coopération d'Al-Quaïda et de l'État islamique.

**Keywords:** terrorism, alliance, cooperation, network

**Palabras clave:** terrorismo, alianza, cooperación, redes

**mots-clés:** terrorisme, alliance, coopération, réseau

## Introduction

Transnational terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS) are outliers among militant groups, and their rise has challenged many long-standing orthodoxies about how such organizations behave.<sup>1</sup> Among the most prominent of their many departures from the standard militant playbook has been their penchant for building global alliance networks. While this strategy is historically anomalous, the reality that the world has twice confronted expansive networks of militant cooperation in the past three decades indicates the need for a more systematic understanding of the strategic logic that motivates them.<sup>2</sup>

The alliance networks that developed around AQ and IS are particularly puzzling because a substantial number of the relationships within them were rhetorical, meaning that little in terms of money, weapons, personnel, training, or sanctuary was exchanged. Conventional wisdom suggests that militant alliances are primarily a vector for material exchange (Asal and Rethemeyer 2008; Christia 2012; Horowitz and Potter 2014). Extensive immaterial cooperation between AQ, IS, and their respective affiliates defies this wisdom, and indicates a need for improved understanding of the function these relationships perform for the organizations involved. Moreover, because they are potentially costly for reputation and security, these relationships cannot be easily dismissed

- 1 For example, AQ's transnational structure and decision to attack the "far enemy" were innovations in their own right. IS reveled in brutality—although conventional wisdom holds that indiscriminate violence often inhibits political success—and it tenaciously held territory—although doing so makes militants vulnerable to repression.
- 2 Our focus is on *global* networks of militant cooperation built around *transnational* militant groups with expansive political aspirations. That is, our argument is about groups that aim to wield influence across multiple countries, with a broader goal of advancing a universal movement or ideology. Although militant groups have cooperated across borders throughout history, the rise of large-scale, transnational alliances is a more modern phenomenon, aided by globalization and technology (Cronin 2019; Blair et al. 2022a).

as insignificant (Byman 2014; Bacon 2018). So, what strategic logic drove AQ and IS to build large alliance networks?

To this question, we posit a theory rooted in comparative advantage. Ideologically motivated militant organizations with expansive political aspirations can leverage alliances to maximize their ideological and operational credibility. To achieve their objectives, transnational organizations must offer an ideology or worldview that inspires support, and the operational capacity to deliver on that vision. However, these requirements do not always coincide; in fact, they may be in tension, as the realities of the battlefield can require compromises to ideological purity (Walter 2017; Hafez 2019; Cold-Ravnkilde and Ba 2022; Drevon and Haenni 2022). Alliances offer a remedy for this problem.

Militant organizations with sophisticated operational capabilities can translate reputations for effective violence into international relationships. By attracting allies, they demonstrate the allure of their worldview, and thereby bolster the credibility of their cause. Conversely, groups with well-developed ideologies and (claims to) moral authority can draw on this ideological credibility to forge international relationships that extend their reach into ongoing conflicts. In so doing, ideologically credible organizations can leverage their ideological prestige to enhance their operational capabilities and renown, and expand their role in regional and global conflicts. The strategic interplay between these forms of organizational currency—operational and ideological—has significant implications for militant groups' resilience and success. Building transnational ties can help organizations circumvent attempts by counterterrorists and non-state competitors to weaken them. In other words, cooperative relationships emerge from militant groups' efforts to address points of comparative vulnerability, and in so doing, increase their durability. Even in the absence of material exchange, alliances can enhance capacity by conferring and fostering credibility.

We illustrate this argument using a multipronged strategy, which draws on new data from the Militant Group Alliances and Relationships (MGAR) project (Blair et al. 2022a).<sup>3</sup> After exploring descriptive patterns in the content of AQ and IS alliances, we assess the logic

of our argument in more detail in case studies of AQ and IS.<sup>4</sup> For AQ, the formula underpinning cooperation was an exchange of surplus ideological credibility and established extremist Salafist religious credentials for reach—through affiliates—into local conflicts. In this exchange, AQ’s local affiliates offered the core group greater operational capacity, while AQ core provided combat-capable partners with access to the financial and related assets it could confer by virtue of its ideological authority. In the case of IS, precisely the opposite dynamic unfolded. IS’s core leadership mobilized an operationally sophisticated fighting force, but required a network of affiliates to legitimate its caliphal claims. In both cases, the formation of large alliance networks was motivated by a desire to compensate for comparative organizational weaknesses by leveraging comparative organizational strengths.

These findings have significant implications for theory and policy. The dominant strands of the literature on militant cooperation (Asal and Rethemeyer 2008; Horowitz and Potter 2014; Bacon 2018; Thurston 2020), as well as the operating assumptions of policymakers, view alliances as a clear signal of organizational strength, vitality, and attractiveness. The findings we present here indicate that in a minority of cases, but some of the most important ones, alliances are an observable signal of challenges that organizations are seeking to overcome.<sup>5</sup> If organizational vulnerabilities can be intuited from alliance patterns, counterterrorists can better tailor strategies to leverage or exacerbate those weaknesses.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. In the second section, we survey existing scholarship on the logic of militant relationships. Next, in the third section, we outline our theory, which emphasizes the roles of ideological and operational credibility in the formation of cooperative militant networks. In the empirical sections of the paper, we offer suggestive evidence for our argument based on descriptive data analyses (fourth section), and case studies of IS (fifth section) and AQ (sixth section). The final section concludes by highlighting contributions and policy implications of our theory.

## The Logic of Militant Relationships

Militant groups around the world frequently engage in cooperation and competition. The sheer breadth of interorganizational ties belies the notion that militants primarily operate in isolation to preserve internal security (Balcells, Chen and Pischedda 2022; Blair et al. 2022a). Rather, violent, non-state actors operate in a rich, networked environment. Globalization has enhanced the ability of these groups to transact relationships over time (Cronin 2019). In turn, intergroup relationships bear critically on a range of conflict processes, including militant formation and emergence (Staniland 2014; Lewis 2020), durability (Byman 2014; Phillips 2014), lethality (Asal and Rethemeyer 2008; Horowitz and Potter 2014), tactics (Mendelsohn 2021; Jadoon 2022), and resilience to counterterror pressure (Bacon 2018; Blair, Horowitz, and Potter 2022b). Yet, these benefits of cooperation also confront a drawback. Relationships between militant groups expose transacting partners to security risks (Shapiro 2013; Bacon 2017), heightening incentives to renege on past commitments (Bapat and Bond 2012; McLaughlin and Pearlman 2012).

To understand how militant organizations overcome commitment problems and form relationships, existing research points to two main logics of cooperation. First, alliance formation may reflect short-term material considerations and balance-of-power dynamics. Christia (2012) shows that factions in Afghanistan and Bosnia repeatedly pursued transnational relationships to balance against stronger opposition movements. Similarly, side switching may be driven by a materialist logic, as factions pursue immediate payoffs in the form of support offered by patrons and sponsors (Seymour 2014; Thurston 2020; Elias 2022), or as they defect to the state for protection against hegemonic bids launched by rival rebel groups (Staniland 2012).<sup>6</sup> Evidence that government repression mobilizes rebel cooperation (Balduino and Diall 2020; Ibrahim and Akbarzadeh 2020), which devolves to infighting absent common threats (Woldemariam 2018; Pischedda 2020), is also consistent with this balancing logic.

A second perspective emphasizes the importance of institutions and ideology for militant relationships. Together, these factors help promote intergroup trust and commitment. Centralized institutions can help mitigate nascent conflicts between rebel factions by facilitating enforcement (Bakke, Cunningham, and Seymour 2012). State sponsors play a similar role, monitoring and

3 Additional details and the MGAR codebook are available in the online appendix.

4 Our research design extends a qualitative tradition that pairs process tracing and descriptive data analysis (Mahoney 2010).

5 This finding echoes recent work by Moghadam and Wyss (2020, 123), who also point out that non-state groups may use alliances “to address their organizational shortcomings.”

6 Side switching might also help militant leaders maintain internal control against challengers from within a movement (Pearlman 2009; Best and Bapat 2018).

compelling cooperation between clients (Bapat and Bond 2012). Perhaps the most important driver of militant alliances is shared ideology (Gade et al. 2019; Maynard 2019).<sup>7</sup> Blair et al. (2022a) argue that shared ideology promotes intergroup trust through four mechanisms: lengthening the shadow of the future; facilitating monitoring through a community of adherents; facilitating enforcement through common authority structures; and fostering common values and ideals. Mutual trust, in turn, is integral to alliance durability in the face of repression.

As these strands of the literature suggest, both material and ideological considerations may motivate alliance formation. The starting point for our theoretical intervention is the insight that operational capabilities and ideological congruence play interdependent roles in militant cooperation. The prevailing focus on these factors in isolation risks neglecting their important interconnection. We specifically argue that a comparative advantage logic underpins the formation of large militant alliance networks. Groups with substantial operational capabilities may share their material endowments with alliance partners in exchange for the ideological credibility required to claim leadership of a global movement. Likewise, groups with substantial ideological capital and moral authority may confer these on affiliates in exchange for operational capabilities and reach into local and regional conflicts, another requirement of leading militant groups. Appreciating the comparative advantage logic underpinning the construction of large alliance networks requires recognizing the importance of both operational and ideological credibility for major militant groups at the center of these global networks.

Before elaborating this argument, we clarify several key concepts and outline scope conditions for our argument. Our focus is on *ideologically driven* militant organizations with *expansive political aspirations*. Following Sanin and Wood (2014, 214), we define an ideology as a “more or less systematic set of ideas that includes the identification of a referent group (a class, ethnic, or other social group), an enunciation of the grievances or challenges that the group confronts, the identification of objectives on behalf of that group (political change—or defense against its threat), and a (perhaps vaguely defined) program of action.” In short,

7 Shared ideology is generally regarded as more important than shared ethnicity for cooperation. Co-ethnic militant groups are prone to infighting over hegemony within a movement (Balcells, Chen, and Pischedda 2022). Nevertheless, co-religionist groups may also succumb to fratricide (Hafez 2020).

ideologies have a clearly defined political constituency. Groups with “expansive political aspirations” are those whose political goals are transnational. Organizations that merely seek regime change in or secession from one country do not hold “expansive” aspirations. Rather, our focus is on movements that claim a broader (and perhaps universal) political objective.<sup>8</sup>

We argue that the networks these groups craft are based on two forms of organizational capital—operational and ideological credibility. Credibility refers to common recognition of a group’s capacity for delivering on a promise. Hence, operational credibility represents a widespread belief that a group can perpetrate quantitatively numerous and qualitatively sophisticated attacks. Ideological credibility captures the recognition that a group commands influence and holds recognized moral authority among (an important subset of) a given ideology’s adherents and clerical elites.<sup>9</sup>

### The Roles of Operational and Ideological Credibility

Ideologically driven militant organizations with expansive political aspirations must be both credible to their political constituencies and capable enough to wage campaigns of violence transnationally. Ideological shortcomings can drive failures to inspire and recruit (Costalli and Ruggeri 2015; Walter 2017), while operational deficiencies limit the ability to produce violence against state actors, ultimately hampering political relevance. Organizations, however, vary dramatically in their endowments of these goods. Few have excesses in both, but groups can leverage a comparative advantage in one area to compensate for relative deficits in the other.<sup>10</sup> Committing to militancy is inherently risky, and

8 We believe that in many cases, a comparative advantage logic is relevant for understanding alliances between groups with smaller-scale political goals. However, we focus on groups with “expansive” aspirations and global alliance networks because of the unique threat these networks pose, and because ideologically motivated groups with “expansive” aspirations represent a particularly virulent and common technology of rebellion (Webber et al. 2020).

9 This is not to say that the core of an ideology (e.g., religion) is supportive of violence, but rather that institutions and figures around the periphery can wittingly or unwittingly be repurposed in support of violent extremism.

10 There are groups that are prominent exceptions with both ideological and operational clout, such as Hamas,

the willingness to tolerate that risk stems largely from the belief that an organization or movement represents an attractive worldview worthy of sacrifice (Benford and Snow 2000; Page, Challita, and Harris 2011; Walter 2017). An ideologically compelling organization can invoke “sacred values” that draw recruits and convert them into “devoted actors” (Atran and Axelrod 2008). In this way, organizations can extend their reach and resolve commitment problems among adherents.

Ideological purity, however, is often at odds with the compromises demanded by actual militant violence, in which adaptation and survival take precedence over orthodoxy. Ideologically constituted groups are often outcompeted by opportunistic, operationally capable rebels (Weinstein 2007). At the same time, terrorist leaders typically struggle to balance the need for individuals devoted to the cause with a need for individuals who have the skills to undertake violence (Shapiro 2013). However, successful acts of violence are precisely where operational capacity is honed. The planning and execution of actual attacks generates tactical competence, while simultaneously demonstrating a group’s capability and relevance. Operational credibility, then, can arise from association with successful attacks that inflict damage and casualties on targets.<sup>11</sup>

Examples of the strategic use of international alliances for ideological credibility abound. For instance, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) separated itself from a sea of rivals—and the corresponding competition for recruits and resources—by establishing ties with leftist groups from Japan, Western Europe, and elsewhere in the Middle East. These relationships bolstered the PFLP’s ideological credentials by linking it to anti-imperialist forces around the world (Cubert 1997; Bacon 2018). Likewise in Chechnya, insurgent groups strategically adopted an “Islamist” framing of the conflict against Russia in the 1990s in part to forge relationships with global jihadist organizations, which bolstered their ideological clout and yielded an influx of foreign fighters (Bakke 2014). The same strategy has emerged in other contexts. The International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War and

Islamist organizations in the 1980s deliberately reframed their respective movements and struggles to tap into transnational networks and attract fighters from abroad to their respective causes (Hegghammer 2010).

Historically, ethnonationalist organizations have been key incubators for operational credibility due to their ability to leverage preexisting networks as sources of competent and skilled recruits and followers (Piazza 2018). For precisely this reason, transnational Salafi jihadist organizations have sought to mobilize and co-opt ethnically based affiliates (Ahmad 2016), who offer reach into local and regional conflicts and maintain robust capabilities to perpetrate violence (Svensson and Nilsson 2022). However, by virtue of their local grievances, ethnonationalist organizations have generally been less central in the global ideological networks of their day—whether nineteenth-century anarchists, twentieth-century Marxists, or twenty-first-century Islamists.

The case of Yemen is instructive. There, AQ exploited Bedouin tribal politics to gain a stronger local foothold during the civil war (Moghadam and Wyss 2020). Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) organized tribal militias into a broader fighting force, Ansar al-Sharia, which it used to seize several major towns from 2011 to 2016 (International Crisis Group 2017). The benefit of affiliation with AQ for the militias was access to AQ’s ideological currency, which inflected the local struggle with broader religious meaning. AQ representatives noted this shift, explaining “We are as one with the tribes like never before. We are not al-Qaeda now. Together we are the Sunni army” (quoted in International Crisis Group 2017). Similar dynamics have unfolded in Somalia, Mali, Chechnya, and Pakistan, where powerful, ethnically based organizations have allied with ideologically credible transnational militant groups seeking operational capacity in local and regional conflicts (Byman 2014; Clausen 2022).

In contrast to organizations with a surplus of operational capacity, organizations that invest primarily in ideology often lack practical skills in the conduct of violence that lead to operational credibility. Subsequently, these ideologically credible groups may face obstacles in generating the prestige that comes from planning and executing major attacks (Weinstein 2007; Shapiro 2013). The inability of AQ to perpetrate any major attack on the territory of a Western state since 2005 has limited its appeal, particularly in the face of the spectacular rise of IS, which leveraged impressive operational capabilities to fuel its ascent (Byman and Mir 2022).

Italy offers another example. The Red Brigades (BR), a communist group formed in 1970, typifies an organization relatively better endowed ideologically than

but these fall outside the scope of the groups we consider because they do not have expansive (i.e., transnational) political aspirations.

11 This definition is adapted from that outlined in Jackson and Frelinger (2009, 3–4). We note that this definition is tactical rather than strategic. This is because operational credibility is primarily about tactical success—strategic success for a militant group would entail achievement of its overall aims.

operationally. BR's leaders used their reputation as "the standard-bearers of the Marxist-Leninist Communist movement" to attract allies capable of supplying BR the operational capital it otherwise lacked (Sundquist 2010, 57). Throughout the early 1970s, the BR allied with more operationally capable leftist groups such as Action Directe, the Baader-Meinhof Gang, and the Armed Proletarian Nuclei, translating BR's ideological capital into an enhanced operational footprint. Indeed, BR columns across Italy often pursued "absorption of local subversive groups" with capabilities for violence, but who were in need of the Marxist credentials that BR affiliation could confer (*Terrorism and Security: The Italian Experience* 1984, 13).

The implication is that while both ideological and operational credibility are essential for organizational success, there are structural reasons why organizations tend to be *relatively* better endowed with one than the other. Importantly, our theory is about relative, not absolute, endowments of ideological and operational capital. Some groups, such as AQ and IS, are highly capable and well developed, holding ample ideological and operational currency in absolute terms. Relative surpluses and deficits of ideological and operational credibility, however, influence groups' network-building activities.

An essential challenge for transnational militant organizations, then, is to marry these competing requirements. We posit that militant groups leverage relationships with other organizations to accomplish this goal and "balance the books." Groups with ideological credibility can bestow it on operationally capable partners through alliances, and thereby reach into ongoing conflicts to claim a role via the actions of affiliates. Groups with operational credibility can leverage their tactical and material advantages into international networks that they can then point to as a source of ideological authority and appeal.

This theory of militant cooperation as a process of organizational maintenance supplements rather than replaces models of cooperation as a vector for material support (e.g., Asal and Rethemeyer 2008) or the spread of ideological worldviews (e.g., Balcells, Chen, and Pischedda 2022; Cold-Ravnikilde and Ba 2022). Many groups build transactional relationships based on the exchange of cash, weapons, and operational know-how (Thurston 2020). We argue that operational and ideological credibility are important intangible currencies that are traded alongside weapons, money, and fighters (Blair et al. 2022a). Elaborating this comparative advantage logic with respect to large alliance networks helps bridge the canonical literature on the material value of militant alliances (Asal and Rethemeyer 2008;

Bapat and Bond 2012; Bacon 2018) with more recent work on how social ties and informal support networks (Staniland 2014; Breslawski 2021; Parkinson 2021) also provide functional value and resiliency for militant organizations.

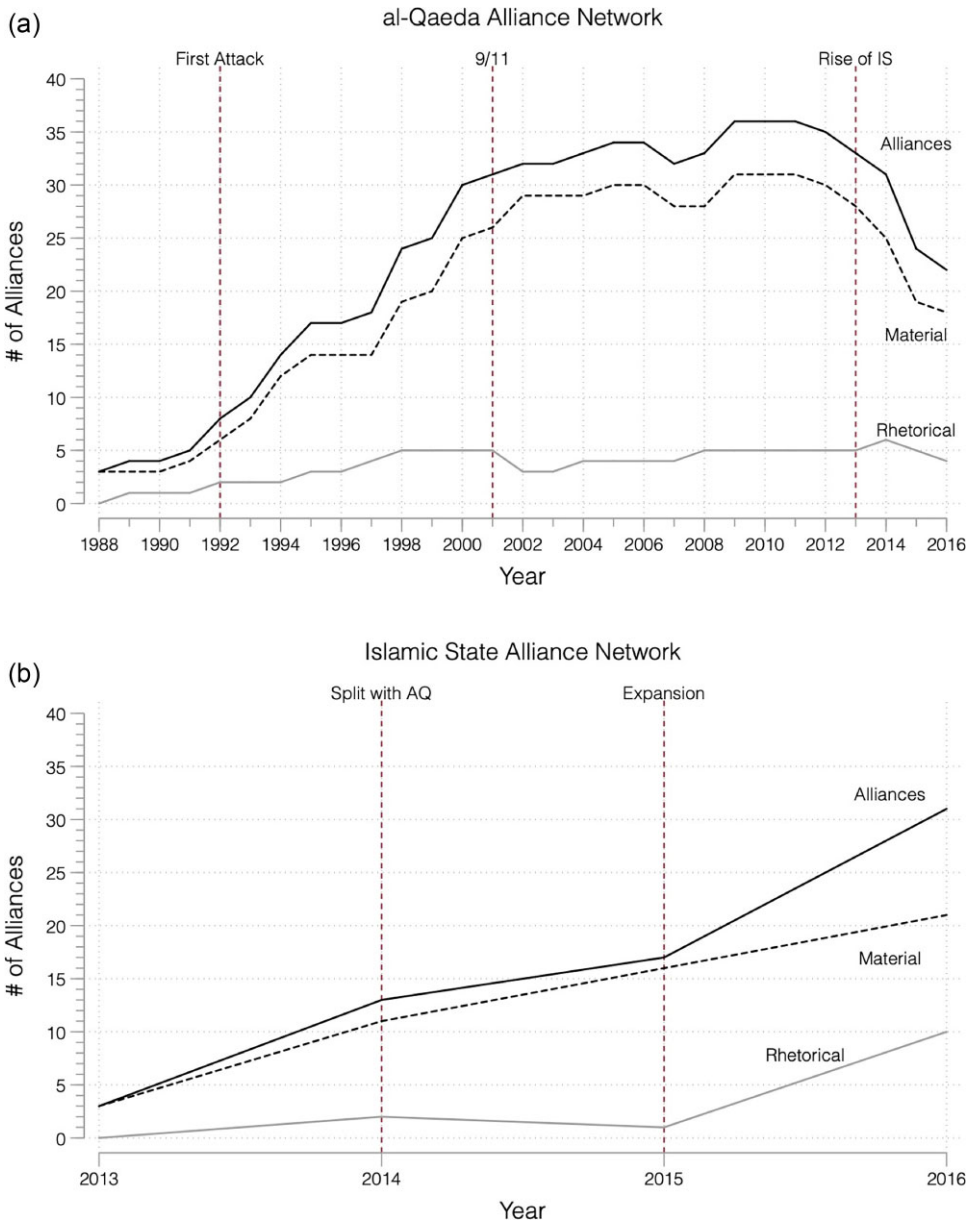
## Assessing the Al-Qaeda and Islamic State Networks

To demonstrate the strategic underpinnings of militant alliance formation, we begin by assessing new data on the AQ and IS alliance networks from the MGAR project, which provides comprehensive global, time-series data on cooperation between militant groups (Blair et al. 2022a).<sup>12</sup>

Figure 1 disaggregates the network of relationships around AQ and IS, and classifies those relationships into two types: material and rhetorical. For each cooperative dyad year, MGAR codes whether the relationship included operational (e.g., shared membership, joint operations, tactical advising), material (i.e., arms transfers), territorial (e.g., shared bases), training, or financial support (i.e., cash transfers). These distinctions in the data allow us to isolate material from purely rhetorical cooperation. Material alliances are those in which at least one of the following—operational, material, territorial, training, or financial support—is exchanged. Rhetorical alliances are defined as those in which groups are cooperative, but none of these forms of physical support is exchanged.

AQ (figure 1, top panel) had substantial ideological credibility but lacked the operational reach to match its ambitions after the September 11, 2001 attacks. In response, AQ drew on its ideological capital and authority to entice affiliates and then supplement their resources, thereby extending its reach and preserving its standing. In contrast, IS pursued a network-building strategy to bolster its caliphal claim. In particular, IS (figure 1, bottom panel) leveraged its operational credibility to manufacture a network of international relationships that bolstered its ideological capital, particularly after its break with AQ.

- 12 The total MGAR dataset codes the network of relationships among 2,613 militant groups between 1950 and 2016. For each relationship, we detail the content of cooperation, including how closely linked the involved groups were and whether the groups exchanged material, training, territory, operational support, and/or finances. Figures A.1 through A.3 in the online appendix highlight descriptive trends evident in the MGAR data. Section A.2 and table A.1 provide additional details and summary statistics.



**Figure 1.** Comparing the AQ and IS alliance networks. *Note:* Data come from the MGAR dataset (Blair et al. 2022a). Material alliances are those in which operational, material, territorial, training, or financial support is exchanged. Rhetorical alliances are those in which pledges of support or loyalty, but no material, are exchanged.

Several notable points emerge from figure 1. First, there is clear evidence of replacement, with AQ’s relationships declining starkly in number in 2013, just as the IS network arose. Second, for AQ, material support drove the major growth in its relational network. In contrast, the growth in total IS alliances is driven by a mix of material and rhetorical relationships, but primar-

ily the latter from 2015 onward. While this might seem counterintuitive, this distinction flows from the objective of the relationships. IS merely needed to demonstrate the existence of relationships in order to legitimate its core ideological claim of a global caliphate (Ingram, Whiteside, and Winter 2020).

**Table 1.** Expected differences in AQ versus IS alliance networks

	Variable	Prediction	Logic
13	Shared ideology	IS (AQ) allies more (less) with groups that share its ideology.	IS (AQ) allies more (less) with groups that share its ideology, and so can confer ideological credibility. AQ is freer to ally with ideologically disparate groups because it is already ideologically credible.
	Relative capacity	IS (AQ) is more (less) capable than its allies.	IS (AQ) allies with less (more) capable allies because it holds a comparative tactical advantage (deficit).
	Operational support	IS (AQ) provides more (less) operational support.	IS (AQ) provides more (less) operational support—for example, tactical advice and battlefield coordination—because it holds a comparative tactical advantage (deficit).
	Material support	IS (AQ) provides more (less) material support.	IS (AQ) provides more (less) material support—for example, weapons—because it holds a comparative tactical advantage (deficit).
	Territorial support	IS (AQ) provides less (more) territorial support.	IS (AQ) provides less (more) territorial support because it holds a comparative deficit (advantage) in local control. Local control is enhanced by ideological credibility in the eyes of local populaces and power brokers.
	Financial support	IS (AQ) provides less (more) financial support.	IS (AQ) provides less (more) financial support because it holds a comparative ideological deficit (advantage). Ideological credibility is central to fundraising in international jihadist circles.
	Training support	IS (AQ) provides less (more) training support.	IS (AQ) provides less (more) training support because it holds a comparative deficit (advantage) in local control. Local control is enhanced by ideological credibility in the eyes of local populaces and power brokers.

AQ, in contrast, needed its partners to remain operationally successful in order to sustain its reach into local conflicts. Consequently, AQ was incentivized to invest in its partners' material capabilities through training and financing, while bestowing its substantial ideological clout.

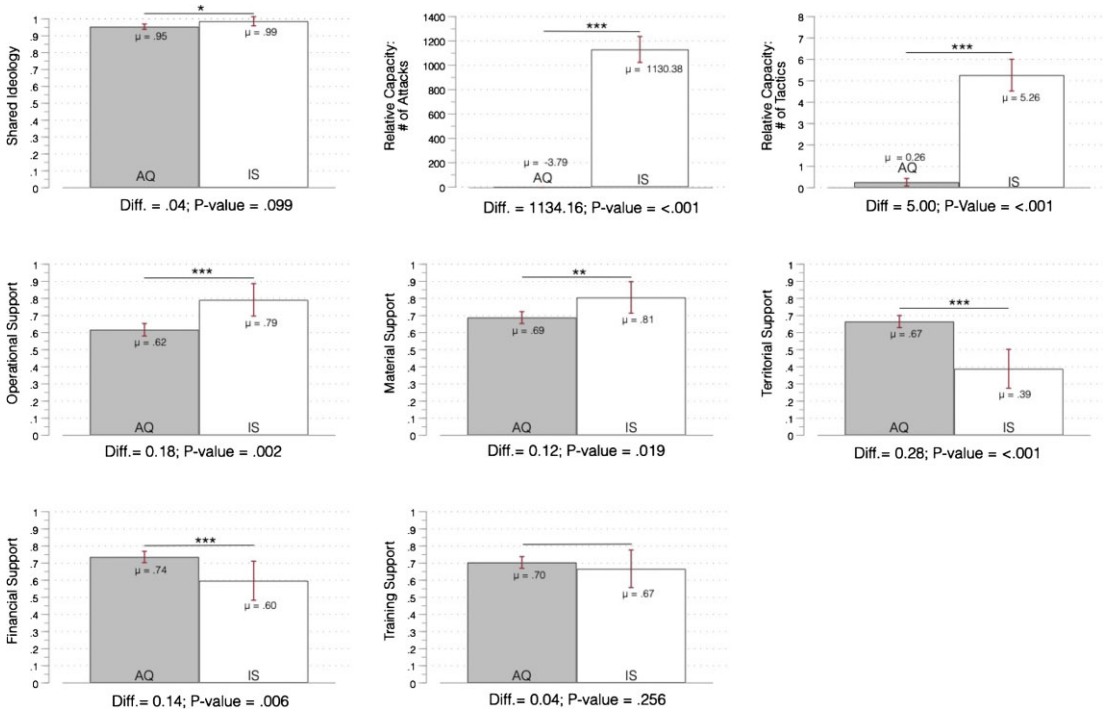
A more structured difference-in-means analysis comparing the content of AQ and IS alliances clarifies the nature of the relationships introduced in [figure 1](#). Our argument is that AQ and IS constructed their alliance networks by leveraging organizational strengths to rectify organizational deficits. In this stylized telling, IS was operationally strong but ideologically weaker, while AQ was ideologically robust but operationally constrained. Hence, we anticipate that IS is more likely than AQ to ally with groups that share its ideology and so can symbolically confer ideological credibility. Likewise, IS should be more likely than AQ to form alliances with less capable groups, which can benefit relatively more from its operational portfolio. AQ, in contrast, should be more likely to ally with organizations that are more operationally capable than those favored by the IS. AQ should also, however, be more likely to supplement its partners' capabilities with further investments, such

as safe haven and financing, which it can provide—by virtue of its ideological renown—to increase its partners' combat capacities. We outline the expectations for the comparisons more precisely in [table 1](#).

Focusing on the alliance networks established by IS and AQ, results presented in [figure 2](#) provide evidence consistent with our theoretical expectations. First, both IS and AQ overwhelmingly allied with other organizations that shared their Salafist ideology. However, relative to AQ, IS's partners were about 4 percentage points more likely to be Sunni Islamists than AQ's partners. Whereas AQ also cooperated with prominent leftist groups such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and Shining Path, virtually all of IS's allies were Salafist groups on whom IS relied to bolster its caliphal ideology. These findings suggest, as we argue, that IS sought affiliates that could provide ideological currency, but were relatively less operationally capable and could gain from IS's expertise in this domain. In contrast, AQ sought capable affiliates to bolster its operational reach and reputation.

Second, [figure 2](#) reveals large differences between AQ and IS in relative capacity vis-à-vis allies. The logic of our comparative advantage theory posits that IS was





**Figure 2.** Types of support exchanged between AQ, IS, and their alliance partners. *Note:* Results are from a series of t-tests comparing AQ and IS alliances along eight dimensions. Absolute differences-in-means and one-tailed p-values are reported. Bars are 95 percent confidence intervals. Group means ( $\mu$ ) are reported in each column. p-values assess the difference-in-means using the theoretically predicted direction of the difference from table 1.

operationally capable, and exchanged its combat expertise and reputation for ideological allegiance, whereas AQ was more operationally constrained, and so relied on allies for reach into local conflicts. We find that IS conducted 1,130 more attacks than its allies on average each year. In contrast, AQ conducted about four fewer attacks than its allies on average each year. Similarly, whereas AQ perpetrated about the same number of tactics as its allies, IS operated with substantially greater tactical diversity, launching attacks with five more distinct tactics on average than its allies in a given year. These results accord with our broader intuition that opposite dynamics undergird the expansion of the AQ and IS alliance networks, with IS representing an operationally capable group and AQ representing a group with a relative operational deficit.

Finally, in figure 2, we also explore the content of AQ and IS’s alliances with partner militant organizations. Examining what was exchanged between these core groups and their affiliates helps reveal the broader nature of cooperation within AQ and IS’s alliance networks. Compared to AQ, the IS was about 18 percentage points more likely to exchange operational support (e.g.,

battlefield plans and tactical advising) with its allies, and about 12 percentage points more likely to offer material support, including direct operational advising and material (e.g., explosives and arms). These results accord with the logic outlined in table 1, which anticipates that IS will offer greater combat assistance to its affiliates than AQ because of its operational credibility.

However, AQ also had resources to offer by virtue of its ideological credibility. In particular, AQ’s leadership cadre included a number of well-known clerics with prominent religious credentials—namely the established reputation of personal struggle against the West dating back to the Soviet war in Afghanistan (Wright 2006). Consequently, AQ held a high-profile position in Salafist clerical networks, and leveraged these networks to solicit major financial and logistical support from Salafist donors around the world (Byman 2013; Baylouny and Mullins 2018). An implication of our comparative advantage theory is that AQ should use the resources that its ideological credibility confers to attract and maintain operationally capable partners, making them more operationally effective where feasible. Figure 2 also offers evidence of this dynamic.

We find that AQ is 14 percentage points more likely to offer financial support and 28 percentage points more likely to offer territorial support to its allies than IS. Relative to IS, AQ is also 4 percent more likely to offer training to its partners, although this difference is not statistically significant. Overall, these findings provide general, descriptive support for the comparative advantage logic we assert. IS was significantly more likely to provide operational and material support to its allies, while AQ was more likely to provide territorial haven and financial support, which it held by virtue of its ideological clout.

### Alternative Explanations

These patterns are difficult to reconcile with alternative explanations for alliance formation. For instance, theories of militant cooperation that focus merely on alliances as a vector for material exchange offer no predictions about heterogeneity in the *content* of militant alliances (Asal and Rethemeyer 2008; Horowitz and Potter 2014). From this perspective, it is unclear why AQ and IS provided different forms of support to their alliance partners. For instance, although IS was, at its height, perhaps the richest militant organization in history (Baylouny and Mullins 2018), cash was the form of material support it provided to its partners second-to-least frequently. The primary reason for this was that IS channeled its monetary assets into combat operations, including capital-intensive suicide and drone operations and compensation to fighters (Levy 2021). In contrast, AQ, by virtue of its central position within radical Salafist ideological circles, commanded an expansive network of donors and hawala lenders. In other words, AQ leveraged its central ideological position to raise funds it offered partners in exchange for operational capabilities. As Byman (2014) explains:

al-Qaeda often used money to influence and shape the cause of potential allies. For much of its history, al-Qaeda has been flush with cash by jihadist group standards. Bin Ladin used this capital to support like-minded fighters, assist the overall cause, and forge alliances with different groups. In addition to its own reserves, al-Qaeda had access to an extended network of donors, primarily Arabs from the Persian Gulf states, who funded a variety of jihadist causes. An endorsement from al-Qaeda served to help other groups attract funding from this important set of benefactors.” (Byman 2014, 459–60)

Patterns in the content of cooperation within the AQ and IS alliance networks are also difficult to reconcile with perspectives on alliance formation focused solely on ideological commonality (Gade et al. 2019). For

instance, more than 5 percent of AQ’s alliances were with non-Salafi jihadist organizations, including a long-running link to FARC, with whom AQ cooperated to facilitate illicit smuggling between Latin America, West Africa, and Europe. This partnership was only possible because AQ had substantial ideological credibility, and so could afford cooperation with a broader range of groups, including non-co-ideologues.<sup>13</sup>

In the remainder of the paper, we turn from this data-driven illustration to in-depth case studies of the IS and AQ alliance networks (Mahoney 2010). These cases indicate that the empirical patterns identified above represent a broader phenomenon whereby large militant organizations leverage alliances to strengthen the operational and ideological dimensions of credibility.

### The Islamic State’s Global Alliance Network

Beginning in 2013 and 2014, the IS developed relationships with dozens of militant organizations around the globe. The emergence of this network concerned counterterrorism officials, with many worrying that it indicated mounting capacity and appeal.<sup>14</sup> We argue instead that while IS was clearly highly capable and ideologically attractive in this period, the imperative for alliance formation arose from the need to preempt specific ideological vulnerabilities following its rift with AQ in 2014. In this sense, IS leveraged its operational strengths to build relationships that would inoculate it against AQ counter-messaging, enabling it to maintain its pipeline of external support. This strategy had the additional advantage of bolstering the most distinctive aspects of IS’s ideology.

Given the organization’s clear success in global recruiting and the extent to which, for a period, it supplanted AQ as the preeminent global terrorist organization, some might chafe at the characterization of IS as in any way ideologically deficient. Three points apply. First, as we have noted, our theory hinges on

13 Indeed, AQ’s ideological credibility enabled it to withstand admonishments leveled by other jihadist groups, including IS’s predecessor organization, the Islamic State of Iraq, over its ties to secular, nationalist groups (Harmony Program: AFGP-2002-601693).

14 The Defense Intelligence Agency, for example, noted in its February 2015 Worldwide Threat Assessment that “With affiliates in Algeria, Egypt, and Libya, the group is beginning to assemble a growing international footprint that includes ungoverned and under-governed areas. Similarly, the flow of foreign fighters into, and out of, Syria and Iraq—many of whom are aligned with ISIL, is troubling.”

comparative advantage, rather than actual or absolute weakness. Second, as we will discuss in more detail, there were important differences between elite and mass reactions to the IS's nascent ideology. Third, IS's vulnerabilities were potential rather than actual, as the organization successfully mitigated them—in part through international alliances. Moreover, experts widely agree that ideological credibility was a struggle for IS, and that the group's ideology was consistently manipulated for strategic gain in support of its tactical advantages. For example, *Khatib (2015, 14–15)* notes, “[t]he Islamic State has appropriated the ideology of al-Qaeda, but ideology is not the group's primary purpose; it is a tool to acquire power and money. The group does not follow any particular Islamic *marjaiya* (religious reference) and rejects the four sects of Islam. Instead, it continuously interprets sharia in ways that justify its actions.”

To better understand IS's ideological vulnerabilities, it is important to revisit its origins. Although IS quickly rose to prominence, its early success did not arise from optimal design. To the contrary, IS emerged from foundational struggles that left it internally fractured, locally alienated, ideologically isolated, and heavily reliant on foreign support (*Ingram, Whiteside, and Winter 2020; Levy 2021*). The network of international relationships that IS developed was designed to compensate for these deficits by providing the ideological credibility the group needed to continue recruiting globally.

A full history of IS's rise is beyond the scope of this article, but a brief overview suffices for our argument.<sup>15</sup> The organization first emerged in Jordan's prisons in the 1990s as *Bayat al-Imam*—a product of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi's clerical authority and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's brutality. Upon his release in a 1999 amnesty, Zarqawi went to Afghanistan, where he was given refuge but held at arm's length by Osama bin Laden.<sup>16</sup> Following the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Zarqawi's embryonic organization, then called *al-Tawhid wal-Jihad*, fled to northern Iraq.

After the US invasion of Iraq, the renamed al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) became a central actor in the bloody insurgency. The group's role in that struggle reached its apex with the establishment of the Mujahideen Shura Council in January 2006, bringing together AQI and other insurgent groups. The organization rebranded as Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) in October 2006, but the Anbar Awakening in 2007, coupled with mounting AQ criticism of the organization's indiscriminate bloodletting, drove it to the brink of extinction. Nevertheless, ISI survived, reconstituted itself under new leadership during the Syrian civil war, and grew rapidly (*Kirdar 2011, 4–6*). In February 2014, AQ formally severed ties with the group after disputes over tactics and territorial expansion, as well as violence between IS and the Nusra Front, AQ's recognized Syrian affiliate (*Fishman 2016*).

This cursory history reveals two vulnerabilities linked to ideological credibility: heterogeneous leadership and outsider status. Due to its origins, IS was unusually reliant on recruiting foreign fighters to mitigate these challenges, and the organization's break with AQ in 2014 threatened it with ideological isolation, potentially undercutting IS's transnational recruitment networks. The need for sustained ideological credibility motivated IS to manufacture a network of international relationships to provide the religious currency it needed to marshal external support.<sup>17</sup> Affiliates became an unimpeachable physical testament to IS's centrality in the global jihadist movement.

IS's leadership was a product of the chaotic environment in which it reorganized in the aftermath of the 2007 Anbar Awakening. As it resurrected, the organization took all-comers. The result was an eclectic mix of jihadists, clerics, and insurgents with varied local, ethnic, and sectarian motivations—including remnants of the toppled Iraqi regime. The post-2003 de-Ba'athification of Iraq pushed many nationalists into the company of Islamist groups, providing precedent for the eventual integration of this element into IS (*Levy 2021*).<sup>18</sup> While

15 For extensive studies of the organization's history and evolution, see *McCants (2015), Warrick (2015), and Fishman (2016)*.

16 *Kirdar (2011)* notes that “[b]in Laden, wary that Jordanian intelligence had infiltrated the released prisoners, was suspicious of Zarqawi...the al-Qaeda leader was taken aback by Zarqawi's unabashed criticism of al-Qaeda's support for the Taliban's 'un-Islamic' fight against the Northern Alliance and disapproved of Zarqawi's 'swagger,' his tattooed hand, and his intense hatred of Shiites.”

17 According to the then Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, at least 38,200 foreign fighters traveled to Syria and Iraq to join the IS since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War.

18 Even prior to this, military Ba'athists had some exposure to Salafism. Saddam Hussein's “Faith Campaign,” enacted in 1993, Islamized the regime. According to *Rayburn (2014)* “as they [Iraqi officers] encountered Salafi teachings, many became more loyal to Salafism than to Saddam.” This set up the conditions for the conversion of Ba'athist officers to be, at minimum, opportunistic collaborators with the jihadists and in some cases jihadist leaders themselves (e.g., *Haji Bakr*).

Zarqawi was hesitant to include former Iraqi officers in his inner circle for fear of undercutting the ideological credibility of the organization (Knights and Mello 2015, 2), his successors (Abu Omar and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi) purposely targeted former officers to increase military capacity (Sly 2015). Thus, while these individuals were key to IS's operational capacity, they were viewed with suspicion.

Some of these ex-Ba'athists rose to high levels within IS. For instance, Haji Bakr, a former intelligence officer in Saddam's regime, headed the IS military council. Similarly, Abu Muslim al Afari al-Turkmani, a former colonel in Saddam's military intelligence corps, was Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's chief deputy in Iraq until August 2015.<sup>19</sup> As a former Syrian member of IS noted, "all the decision makers are Iraqi, and most of them are former Iraqi officers [ex-Ba'athists]. . . The Iraqi officers are in command, and they make the tactics and the battle plans" (Sly 2015).

This is not, however, simply a story of high-level Ba'athist military officers, of whom there were inevitably relatively few. Much of the locally recruited rank-and-file of IS were also more tied to the group by its operational capabilities than its ideological tenets. These "secular" elements contributed significantly to military effectiveness, but the inclusion of individuals more motivated by nationalist grievances than Salafism was also an organizational vulnerability.<sup>20</sup>

This weakness was always well recognized in the circles that mattered. Before their split, for instance, AQ invested heavily in building IS's ideological capital, assigning Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, an esteemed cleric, to "support and defend the Islamic State of Iraq . . . to refute the suspicions that rose about it [due to its association with secularists and its heavy-handed tactics]" (Fishman 2016). After the split with AQ, a widely shared Twitter

post declared IS to be "A Caliphate in Accordance with the Ba'athist Model" (McCants 2015, 127).

Part of what made this organizational fissure so difficult to resolve was that, while the nationalists' and jihadists' short- and medium-term interests coincided, their end goals diverged. And even when the former nationalists fully bought into the ideological cause, it was difficult for the organization to screen the committed from the opportunistic (Forney 2015). A fighter in the then IS-allied Naqshbandi Army, headed by Saddam's former Vice President Izzat Al-Douri, said in 2014 that "we are fighting now with Daesh, but we will protect Iraq from their religious ideas" (Arango 2014). Ahmed Hashim, an expert on the Iraqi insurgency, stated that "it's a tactical alliance. . . A lot of these Ba'athists are not interested in ISIS running Iraq. . . A lot of them view the jihadists with this Leninist mind-set that they're useful idiots who we [ex-Ba'athists] can use to rise to power" (Sly 2015).

IS leadership was clearly cognizant of these challenges as it developed its approach toward alliances. For example, the increased pressure on Mosul in September 2016 led IS to purge former regime military officers and others deemed more closely associated with Iraq than the caliphate: "[t]hey know that they still might have connections to some people in the military, and they are afraid that they will cooperate with the army or turn against them" (Morris and Salim 2016).

Because the upper echelons of IS were occupied by this fraught combination of nationalist and jihadist elements, the group was unusually reliant on pliable recruits from outside to smooth over the differences (Knights and Mello 2015; Schram 2019).<sup>21</sup> The prioritization of ideological credibility, and the use of alliances to bolster it, was driven in large part by the need to keep the flow of foreign fighters going.<sup>22</sup>

Foreign fighters filled four key functions. First, they were reliable foot soldiers for military operations.

19 The list goes on: Abu Ayman al-Iraqi, also killed in a US airstrike, was a Colonel in Iraqi Air Force intelligence and was believed to have been an IS military council member. Abu Ahmad al Alwani, a member of the IS military council, was an officer in Saddam's army. Abdulla Ahmad al Mishhadani, another former Iraqi officer, was in charge of foreign fighters and suicide bombers for IS. Abu Ali al Anbari, another holdover from the Hussein regime, sat on the IS Shura council and headed its Security and Intelligence Council.

20 Under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's leadership, IS also began breaking Sunni prisoners, including ex-Ba'athists, out of Iraqi jails in order to fill their middle ranks, an approach that rebuilt the organization's numbers and short-term strength.

21 In particular, Schram argues that when foreign fighters are paired with local fighters, their teams can self-manage agency problems because of the different actors' heterogeneous preferences.

22 The centrality of foreigners to the organization is underscored by the prominent role they played in Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's 2014 speech declaring the "caliphate": "Therefore, rush O Muslims to your state. Yes, it is your state. Rush, because Syria is not for the Syrians, and Iraq is not for the Iraqis. O Muslims everywhere, whoever is capable of performing hijrah to the Islamic State, then let him do so, because hijrah to the land of Islam is obligatory."

Second, their presence demonstrated the viability of the “caliphate” project.<sup>23</sup> Third, as long as the ranks were swelling with international recruits, the divergent interests of the factions within the organization could be managed. However, as the example of Mosul suggests, while the divisions within the organization were manageable in success, they were considerably less so in the face of setbacks that threatened the flow of foreign support (Schram 2019).

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, flows of foreign fighters, and attendant battlefield successes, became an integral facet of IS’s jurisprudential claim to ideological authority. As outlined in IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s 2013 Declaration of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham, organizational success reflected divine grace, so battlefield triumphs made supporting IS a religious duty for local people in Iraq and Syria, as well as for the global Islamic community:

We send a glad tiding to the Islamic Ummah ... Alhamdulillah and support and success is from Him, so I say seeking assistance from Allah Almighty: Ascending from a lower level to a higher level is from the graces of Allah Almighty on the Jihadi groups, and it is a proof for their blessed work, as decline and retreat is a proof for a malady, we seek refuge with Allah. this ascending is only thought by who is given by Allah Almighty farsightedness and knowledge of public interests and what the Ummah is waiting [for] from the mujahidin for the sake Allah Almighty.” (Ingram, Whiteside, and Winter 2020, 149–54)

As this passage reveals, IS’s strategy to build its ideological credibility was largely predicated on its operational talents (e.g., battlefield and recruiting successes), which its clerics argued was evidence of divine favor. Indeed, a propaganda video released shortly after Baghdadi’s 2013 speech also “highlighted [IS’s] spectrum of politico-military activities and the legitimacy of its manhaj [methodology] . . . showcasing a diverse spectrum of ISIS activities across Syria and Iraq, from tribal engagements and rule of law activities to military operations” (Ingram, Whiteside, and Winter 2020, 160). IS’s ideological credibility, then, was clearly bound up in its own ability to conduct operations and attract support from affiliates and fighters abroad.

The importance of these fighters, and the need to maintain the credibility required to continue to attract them, was heightened by IS’s outsider status in Syria. With origins in Jordan and a circuitous path to Iraq

and Syria, IS was alien to the territories in which it primarily operated. Yet, the independent element of IS’s ideology—the establishment of the caliphate—was fundamentally territorial. Because it lacked local roots, IS’s challenges took on the hue of those that typically bedevil occupiers. Indeed, IS went so far as to use settler tactics in areas it conquered, placing foreigners in abandoned homes to lay claim to territory (Khatib 2015; Levy 2021).

IS’s behavior toward other organizations in Syria both reflected and contributed to its outsider status. Early in the Syrian conflict, more secular elements of the armed opposition welcomed the aid of jihadist groups, including IS, in their quest to depose Bashar al-Assad. However, IS quickly wore out its welcome. Open conflict erupted in January 2014 when IS clashed with Free Syrian Army units around Aleppo. Notably for our theory, the fighting was not primarily along religious/secular fault lines so much as local/foreign ones, as more indigenous armed groups sought to expel IS from Syria (Drevon and Haenni 2022).

This outsider status also extended to the broader population. IS drew a substantial number of local recruits, but generally through a mix of coercion and deprivation. Former residents of IS-controlled areas noted that “most of the [local] people who work for the Islamic State do so out of economic desperation. . . In places where the cost of food has skyrocketed and where many people are living on little more than bread and rice, some men have concluded that becoming an Islamic State warrior is the only way to provide for their family. . . ‘They were pushed into Daesh by hunger’” (Sullivan 2015). Foreign fighters not only served as foot soldiers in their own right, but also provided the strength to force otherwise reluctant locals to bandwagon.

Recruiting the foreigners needed to manage structural vulnerabilities required that IS be highly ideologically attractive. Until 2014, the organization was able to rely on a combination of its operational success and Internet propaganda to maintain its ideological credibility. However, the complete schism with the AQ leadership, and the counter-messaging that accompanied it, threatened to expose preexisting weaknesses and leave IS ideologically discredited in the eyes of potential international supporters. To preserve its standing, IS therefore needed to confront AQ for supremacy in the global jihadist community (Lister 2015; Mendelsohn 2016). Above all, IS attempted this by promoting its “caliphate.” By developing a web of “provinces” through international affiliates, IS could bolster its ideological credibility, preempt AQ efforts to diminish it, and maintain the flow of foreign fighters that it required.

23 The ideological contributions of foreign fighters are also described in Bakke (2014).

IS's need for a global network was acute because, despite outward signs of its ascendance, the group faced a critical challenge to its ideological position. While the organization began its existence in Jordan with Maqdisi's relatively unadulterated version of the AQ-style Salafism, over time the group drifted outside the jihadist mainstream. This process began with the start of the group's rift with AQ core during the Iraqi insurgency. AQI's mounting brutality, which it used to set itself apart in a crowded theater, drove Maqdisi to break with Zarqawi and disavow the organization, pushing ordinary Iraqis away from the group, and leading even AQ to chide its excesses (Harmony Program). This tension culminated in a series of disagreements between Zarqawi and AQ's leadership over the brutal targeting of Shia and moderate Sunni civilians.

AQI reintegrated somewhat with AQ leadership after Zarqawi's death in 2006, but the rebranding as ISI, the first iteration of the group under the name "Islamic State," led to renewed tensions. The transition to ISI was an attempt to distance the group from AQI's brutal reputation and better compete in the local insurgency, but it challenged AQ's preferences regarding territorial control. This illustrates the dueling tensions that the organization faced; addressing its geographic isolation led AQI to distance itself from AQ by branding as ISI, but this in turn contributed to its ideological isolation.

The caliphate claim also irked leading jihadist intellectuals. Thinkers such as Hamid al-Ali argued that ISI had broken Islamic law with the declaration because a state must be able to govern (McCants 2015). Clerics with authority in conservative circles echoed these critiques. For example, Ahmad al-Raysouni argued that "declaring a caliphate is a mere dream, whether it's from a legitimacy point of view, or a reality point of view." Reflecting another popular refrain about unity, a Saudi mufti, Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al-Sheikh, described ISI as "khawarij," or "those who make cleavages between Muslims."

In separate letters, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada al-Filistini, prominent jihadist intellectuals, attacked IS and Baghdadi for declaring a "caliphate." According to Abu Qatada, "there exists no emir firmly established such that he should be treated as the caliph." Notably, IS's response to these intellectual heavyweights with credibility in the militant community came from a relatively obscure 40-year-old cleric, Umar Mahdi Zaydan.

AQ leadership shared these concerns, but worried even more about the strategic implications, anticipating that a premature declaration would prompt greater state repression. At first, however, AQ kept these critiques out of the public sphere, chastising ISI leadership privately

and distancing itself from the organization, but keeping them within the fold in order to maintain an operational presence in the Iraqi insurgency (Fishman 2016).

IS's move into Syria exacerbated tensions further. In 2014, ISI declared Jabhat al Nusra (JN), the recognized Syrian affiliate of AQ, a Syrian branch of their own organization, and adopted the name "Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham" (ISIS). The leader of JN, Abu Mohammad al-Julani, appealed to Zawahiri, who ruled that ISIS should be abolished and that Baghdadi should confine his group's activities to Iraq. Baghdadi, however, dismissed Zawahiri's ruling, taking control of 80 percent of JN's foreign fighters (Abdul-Ahad 2013). Further attempts at reconciliation failed, and AQ renounced any connection with the group that became IS.<sup>24</sup> This presented a potent challenge. While IS remained undeniably popular among the population of potential foreign fighters in the short term, ideological isolation from the broader jihadist community represented a longer-term risk. Indeed, evidence suggests that pro-AQ clerical challenges degraded IS's ability to recruit Syrian and Gulf State jihadists after the AQ split (Lister 2015). Moreover, as work by Weinstein (2007) implies, while IS's early operational successes were likely to attract opportunistic but less devout foreigners, IS risked long-term capability deficits unless it cultivated the ideological capital that would allow it to recruit committed and disciplined fighters. IS planners recognized the need to screen recruits and "hold all leaders and soldiers accountable for dereliction" (Harmony Program: NMEC-2007-612449).<sup>25</sup>

- 24 While the focus here is on the way in which IS addressed the schism, the break was a much bigger risk for AQ in terms of operational credibility. This was in large part because AQ, much diminished by this time, lacked comparative advantages to leverage in competition with IS. The eschatology, sectarianism, and state creation espoused by IS were always rejected by AQ, but they were popular among the rank-and-file.
- 25 The difficulty of screening recruits was evident in the earlier ISI period too. In a letter to bin Laden in 2010, one Iraqi liaison wrote "there w[as] considerable variation between people and those individuals who pledged the allegiance...great figures with high quality have emerged, and also some figures have emerged did not benefit any groups by their affiliation, yet some kind of bragging and boasting appeared by joining...some of them have abused the money to varying degrees...what is the way to impeach [opportunistic followers], so as not to increase the friends of desire and greed and seclude those friends of religion and morals?" (Harmony Program: SOCOM- 2012-000006).

The final rift with AQ was a catalyzing moment for IS. Despite the organization's shocking level of operational success in Iraq and Syria, open conflict with AQ represented a new front in the competition for ideological dominance. What had been a behind-the-scenes contest threatened to burst into the open. A key component of IS's response was to rapidly assemble ties with other militant groups to compete with AQ's long-standing affiliate network (Moghadam and Wyss 2020; Thurston 2020).

The extent to which this undertaking was a strategic response is clear from the organization's starkly different behavior before the full break with AQ. Prior to the AQ-IS split, a few organizations, such as Ansar al-Islam, independently tied themselves to IS or its precursors. IS, however, tended to downplay or discourage these relationships, in part to avoid exacerbating tensions with AQ. To have done otherwise would have been highly provocative, precisely because of the strong signals of organizational independence and ideological appeal sent by alliance formation. Thus, until it broke, the IS/AQ detente suppressed any independent alliance formation by the IS.<sup>26</sup>

Given mounting tensions over IS's engagement in Syria and confrontation with JN, and the drumbeat of criticism from jihadist ideologues, it was clear that the declaration of a "caliphate" would precipitate a final break with AQ, spurring competition for the top spot in the global jihadist hierarchy. It should have come as no surprise then that when Abu Muhammad al-Adnani announced the "Islamic State" and a "caliphate" under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the call was centered on the demand for allegiance from global jihadist organizations:

We clarify to the Muslims that with this declaration of khilafah, it is incumbent upon all Muslims to pledge allegiance to the khalifah Ibrahim and support him (may Allah preserve him). The legality of all emirates, groups, states, and organizations, becomes null by the expansion of the khilafah's authority and arrival of its troops to their areas. "It is not permissible for anyone who believes in Allah to sleep with-out considering as his leader whoever conquers them by the sword until he becomes khal'ifah and is called Am'ir ul-Mu'minin (the leader of the believers), whether this leader is righteous or sinful" (SITE Intelligence Group, 2014)

Likewise, in another 2014 speech, al-Adnani praised "[the mujahidin brothers] in Palestine, Yemen, Syria,

26 IS sought to absorb rather than ally with a number of groups in Iraq prior to the split. These attempts often backfired, prompting violent clashes between AQI/ISI and other Sunni Rejectionist groups.

Iraq, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Burma, Nigeria, Somalia, Afghanistan, Indonesia, India, China, the Caucasus, and elsewhere," and specifically referenced the ideological clout conferred by IS alliances with local militants in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen, extolling their cooperation as evidence that IS should "[c]arry on upon this path, for it is the correct path" (quoted in Ingram, Whiteside, and Winter 2020, 178–86).

IS did not seek relationships so much as insist on them, but while the rhetoric is framed as a demand for allegiance the group had little means by which to compel compliance from organizations outside Iraq and Syria. Moreover, it is precisely these distant relationships that did the most to boost IS's ideological credibility. As we argue, in many cases, IS was able to "buy" relationships to demonstrate global reach, exchanging tactical and operational advice and assistance, and above all its reputation for attack success, for rhetorical alliances and the ideological credibility they conferred.

For example, members of Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM), based in the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt, met with IS in 2014, shortly after the break with AQ. ABM sought weapons, tactical advice, and financing in return for allegiance. IS agreed, and ABM received substantial operational support that helped it increase the sophistication and lethality of its attacks, including a large-scale, coordinated assault on Egyptian security forces on July 1, 2015 (Levy 2021, 183–86).

IS's relationship with Boko Haram, cemented in March 2015, shared a similar dynamic. Boko Haram pledged allegiance to Baghdadi, giving it claim to global reach. In turn, Boko Haram received operational assistance (Zenn 2020). General David Rodriguez of US Africa Command noted that Boko Haram's use of roadside bombs and suicide bombings evolved after the alliance (Barnes 2015). Experts also noticed more polish in Boko Haram's propaganda.

Relationships with ABM and Boko Haram were part of a much larger initiative. Seeking to bolster the outward appearance of the "caliphate," and by extension its ideological project, IS strategically sought affiliates to construct "wilayats" (provinces). Over the course of 2014–2015, the organization recruited dozens of allies and created twenty-one wilayats from Central Africa to the Caucasus to Southeast Asia.

Although IS's relationships with ABM and Boko Haram had material elements (albeit fairly limited in the latter case), many were purely rhetorical. Nonetheless, these rhetorical relationships carried significant value for IS by burnishing the organization's ideological credibility globally. Levy (2021, 199) makes this point explicitly:

“baya to IS carries important ideological and strategic expectations for military conventionalization. Because IS claims it is the Caliphate restored, any organization that wants the Islamic State’s recognition must show it can help defend, expand, and govern its empire.” Reputation and ideological clout garnered through alliances were especially important for sustaining foreign recruitment (Berger and Stern 2015). In sum, to compete with AQ and preempt a corresponding challenge to its ideological credibility, IS leveraged its operational capabilities to build an international alliance network that provided the group with much-needed ideological currency. IS affiliates received notoriety and tactical know-how by attaching themselves to the infamous IS brand, helping them outcompete local rivals, raise funds, and rectify material deficits (Clausen 2022; Jadoon 2022). In turn, the growing network of affiliations bestowed ideological credibility on IS’s caliphate-building project. While IS received comparatively little (and in many cases nothing) by way of material support from peripheral partners, alliances allowed IS to garner the ideological capital it required.

### Al-Qaeda’s Global Alliance Network

AQ grew out of Osama bin Laden’s efforts to assist Arabs who sought to travel to Afghanistan to fight against the Soviets. By 1985, these efforts had produced training camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan for jihadists coming from around the world to fight. While this was an important function, it was one of support—the organization provided training and logistics rather than strategy and ideology. This organizational and physical infrastructure, however, proved adaptable. After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, bin Laden transformed AQ into an independent, ideologically driven organization, establishing a centralized leadership and providing financing and training for terrorist attacks (Mohamedou 2007; Mendelsohn 2016).<sup>27</sup>

Upon shifting back to Afghanistan from Sudan in 1996, bin Laden made a decisive strategic decision to wage global jihad. Breaking from the traditional jihadist emphasis on local struggle against pro-Western Arab regimes such as Egypt and Jordan, AQ espoused a transnational jihadist agenda that called for concerted attacks against the “far enemy” (i.e., the United States) (Gerges 2005; Wright 2006). Osama bin Laden had the necessary funding, but lacked the manpower needed to wage this global struggle and attract followers to the cause. To this end, he formed a partnership with Ayman

al-Zawahiri and the latter’s organization, Tanzim al-Jihad, drawing Zawahiri’s fellow Egyptian jihadists into the AQ fold. Together, bin Laden and al-Zawahiri formed the core of the AQ leadership (Sageman 2004). Using finances from bin Laden and ideological credibility from Zawahiri and his followers, AQ established itself as the de facto global jihadist leader, in terms of both operations and ideology, by launching a series of high-profile attacks against Western targets during the second half of the 1990s.

As a result of its global orientation and origin among itinerant jihadists, AQ lacked the natural constituency enjoyed by ethnonationalist militant organizations. By consequence, as counterterrorist pressure increased, AQ’s operational tempo reduced substantially. And, much like the nationalist–Islamist fissure in IS, tensions between Egyptians and non-Egyptians within AQ led to infighting (Gerges 2005, 140–43).

To compensate for these weaknesses, the organization utilized its global brand and ideological capital to gain a credible presence in ongoing fights around the world. Local and regional wars animated the global jihadist community AQ sought to represent (Wright 2006), and its broad ideological credibility helped AQ recruit local partners across otherwise insurmountable tribal and ethnic divides (Ahmad 2016). Moghadam and Wyss (2020, 133) explain the logic of this strategy: “armed nonstate actors need local support—or at the very least, local acquiescence—to ensure their survival, but often face a local population that is mistrustful of their intentions. They frequently face inherent limitations and commitment problems in their effort to draw support from the broader population nonstate sponsors will identify and work through proxies as a preferred solution to address these shortcomings.”

Building transnational ties was relatively straightforward in the 1990s, and AQ employed the tactic enthusiastically to extend its operational reach. During this time, AQ was able to maintain its physical infrastructure and centralized leadership, and therefore could leverage its training camps to maintain its centrality in the global jihadist network (Mohamedou 2007; Blair, Horowitz, and Potter 2022b). AQ generally supplemented these relationships by providing financial support (from ideologically motivated donors) for affiliates’ operations (Byman 2014). With the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, however, the group lost its safe haven and experienced significant damage to its operational capabilities. The result was that interorganizational alliances became both harder to maintain and even more important to the vitality of the organization. In other words, the alliance-building strategy took on greater urgency as increased

27 A full history of AQ is beyond the scope of the article. See Gerges (2005) and Wright (2006) for overviews.



US and international military pressure choked off the flow of fighters to AQ's training camps. Its network gave AQ global operational reach and made the movement durable against external attacks, as it leveraged its ideological credibility to wage a global jihad.

Mir (2018) describes the seriousness of the operational setbacks that faced AQ core in the years following the US invasion of Afghanistan, particularly as the US drone campaign escalated. As he notes, “[al-Qaeda] was struggling to maintain its global and local operational activities, scrapping a ‘dozen plans’ for attacks in this period.” Operational pressures in turn saw AQ lose bases, safe houses, and fighters. AQ commander Sheikh Attiya wrote to bin Laden,

We are facing difficulties due to the grave shortages in personnel in some cadres [in Pakistan and Afghanistan]” (Mir 2018, 70). Without operational capabilities, however, al-Qaeda's entire campaign, which centered around global jihad against the “far-enemy,” was in peril.

Rather than imploding and disintegrating after the 2001 setback, AQ worked to supplement its operational credibility using its existing network of affiliates and growing it where possible. This strategy saw AQ rely increasingly on organizations with little direct connection to AQ core to carry out attacks inspired by or in the name of the original group (Hoffman 2004). AQ's increasingly valuable global “brand” allowed it to exploit its ideological capital in order to rebuild its operational capacity through the growth of entities such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Although what was left of the original AQ organization played little direct role in these affiliates' day-to-day operations, affiliates sustained AQ's relevance in the context of the global jihadi movement.

AQ's strategy in the Sahel exemplifies this dynamic. In Mali, AQ coopted local Tuareg, Arab, and Fulani factions, bridging important ethnic divisions through its broader Islamist framing (Cold-Ravnkilde and Ba 2022), while using local connections to claim operational reach in important Sahelian battlegrounds (Thurston 2020). Of particular importance was the chance offered by operations in the Sahel to strike at French, American, and United Nations (UN) targets in the region. In Algeria, AQ also crafted alliances with local cells, exchanging ideological currency and attendant fiscal resources for local operational capacity. One AQ liaison in Algeria highlighted this directly: “Things are steadily improving: morale is rising, support is growing, and military activity has been improving recently. Every week there is a bombing, an encounter or ambushes. Overall, based on

what I have been seeing, there is a resurgence. [but we seek] badly needed money for good-quality weapons to counter these menacing helicopters” (Harmony Program: SOCOM-2012-0000011).

Similarly, AQ's pursuit of alliances in Yemen facilitated its campaign to claim operational credibility. There, the role of AQ's ideological credibility was on full display. As a high-ranking AQ commander explained to a Yemeni associate, “[AQ's] opinion is to appoint scholars and tribal shaykhs to accomplish a practical truce among them, which will help the stability of Yemen. Therefore, the people of Yemen will continue supporting the mujahidin. The government will be responsible for the war, not us, and it will show the people that we are careful in keeping the Islamic Ummah united and the Muslims safe on the basis of peace” (Harmony Program: SOCOM-2012-0000016). In short, AQ would leverage its recognized ideological authority (through clerics) to bridge tribal divides. In turn, AQ could organize allied tribal militias into a broader fighting force, which it used to seize territory (International Crisis Group 2017). Apart from conferring operational credibility for attacks against the Saleh regime in Yemen, AQ's locally rooted affiliates also afforded the core group a chance “to conduct operations inside America,” and to pursue “the closing of the American counterintelligence offices, expelling all American security and military forces in Yemen, and preventing the Americans from violating the sovereignty of Yemen. . . .” (Harmony Program: SOCOM-2012-0000016).

AQ's international networks continued to grow through 2010 despite the tremendous stress on the organization—an indication of both their importance and the investment made in them (Mendelsohn 2016).<sup>28</sup> Mohamedou (2007, 62) describes this strategy as aimed at “the proliferation of mini-al-Qaedas, groups that would be connected loosely to a ‘mother al-Qaeda’ (al-Qaeda al Oum), but which would be independent and viable enough to act on their own within a regional context.” Mohamedou also notes that the operational emphasis on this strategy was a direct result of the loss of the group's “centralized sanctuary” in Afghanistan. Byman (2014, 448) concurs, pointing to the operational value of affiliates for AQ core: “affiliate groups offer a greater ability to conduct attacks in their home countries and regions, thus the specialization, scope, and scale

28 Growth in the network in this period was not as rapid as it had been in the 1990s when AQ enjoyed various safe havens, but the fact that there was growth at all rather than retrenchment is a testament to the priority AQ placed on these relationships.

benefits that the al-Qaeda core would otherwise lack. Affiliates have hundreds or even thousands of fighters under arms, provide ties to local communities, offer knowledge of terrain (both physical and human), and are otherwise better able to fight and operate. As a result, al-Qaeda is able to raise its banner in several important theaters where it would otherwise find it difficult to operate.” Mendelsohn (2016) likewise argues that this branching-out strategy was a result of internal tension, and, importantly, a stepped-up American campaign against AQ that diminished its operational capabilities.

This story, of course, dovetails with that of IS. As we noted, bin Laden had long been wary of Zarqawi’s bloodthirstiness, and, in particular, his goal of stoking sectarian conflict. However, despite suspicions and disapproval, AQ accepted Zarqawi’s organization, AQI, into the fold as an affiliate. The reason is illuminating: “al-Qaeda had just mounted a disastrous terror campaign in Saudi Arabia and was desperate for a role in the growing Sunni insurgency in Iraq” (McCants 2015).

In its relationship with AQI, AQ sought to address its diminished operational capacity by forging an alliance in a prominent conflict, leveraging its ideological credibility to compensate for material deficits. In the short term, the strategy worked. According to the envoy who negotiated the relationship between AQ and Zarqawi, “[d]onations to al-Qaeda’s coffers had dried up as bin Laden’s top men were killed or captured. Now [after the AQI affiliation] private money is once again flooding in. bin Laden himself is looking more confident and relaxed” (quoted in Yousafzai 2005). Another high-level AQ commander agreed, arguing that expanding combat capacity in Iraq was central to the core group’s strategic success: “[w]e need to concentrate our jihad efforts in areas where the conditions are ideal for us to fight. Iraq and Afghanistan are two good examples. We need to fight in areas where we can gain points toward the creation of the Caliphate-based state. A state which has the essential foundations to function and defend itself” (Harmony Program: SOCOM-2012-0000017).

The strategic aim was clear. AQ’s involvement—through affiliates—in conflicts throughout the Muslim world was designed to embroil the United States in a destructive war of attrition:

To break away from America’s hegemony, we need to involve America in a war of attrition. The war must be enduring, however. The goal is to weaken America until it can no longer interfere in Muslims affairs. Once the American enemy has been defeated, our next step would be targeting the region’s leaders who had been the pillars of support for that American

hegemony. These are the same leaders who not only abandoned the Islamic Law, but also helped America extend its hegemony all over the Muslim land. Once those leaders have been defeated, God willing our next step will be building our Muslim state.” (Harmony Program: SOCOM-2012-0000017)

Of course, absent operational capabilities, no amount of ideological credibility could help AQ achieve this goal. The need for local partners who could engage in combat operations drove AQ to overlook the fact that Zarqawi had different ideas about targeting, the role of public opinion, and the timing of statehood. Immediate gains for AQ’s operational credibility outweighed the foreseeable costs that affiliating with AQI would bring.

In both Iraq and elsewhere, AQ was able to adapt to changing circumstances by leveraging its international networks to maintain recruits, resources, and weapons, but most importantly its operational credibility and reputation for violence. The ability to draw on this strategy—leveraging ideological surpluses to address operational deficits—has played an important role in the organization’s remarkable resilience. Even with the death of bin Laden, the loss of dozens of top commanders, its retreat from Afghanistan, and the rise of IS, AQ’s global network allows it to continually draw on its ideological strengths to make up for deficits in operational capacity, and in so doing, to remain central in transnational terror networks despite significant setbacks (Byman 2014; Mendelsohn 2016; Moghadam 2017).

## Conclusion

It is essential for both theoretical and practical reasons to consider militant organizations’ alliance networks holistically. As groups pursue their political objectives, they attempt to strategically manage the interplay between and strengths and weaknesses within their *internal* (between members), *local* (between the organization and other organizations or civilian populations in the same area), and *international* (between the organization and other organizations transnationally) relationships. Alliances are one way in which this occurs. However, the way in which alliances are leveraged can vary dramatically from organization to organization, based on their endowments and needs. We outline a comparative advantage theory of militant alliance formation, which highlights the roles of ideological and operational credibility as important currencies of exchange. We argue that groups with sophisticated operational capabilities can leverage this strength to attract allies who can confer ideological credibility, while groups with ideological clout and

authority can use this resource to extend their reach through local, combat-capable affiliates. We provide evidence of this dynamic through descriptive data analysis and case studies of the IS and AQ. IS was able to build ties to shore up the ideological credibility of its caliphate project, while AQ used a network of relationships to bolster its operational capabilities and claim influence in important local and regional wars.

These findings help clarify otherwise puzzling behaviors by organizations such as IS, and recast them in a more strategic light. Observers have long noted the seemingly counterproductive behaviors of IS, particularly in terms of territorial expansion and brutality. Our answer is that groups sometimes have little choice because basic structural problems in their internal and regional networks drive them toward expansionist and exhibitionist behaviors in order to sustain themselves. IS's operational credibility was its primary asset, and helped it cultivate global support for its ultimate ideological project.

Our findings also speak to a larger puzzle: why do militant organizations form international relationships at all? Prior research tells us that surprisingly little in terms of weapons, resources, or fighters actually moves through most international relationships between militant organizations (Blair et al. 2022a), yet transnational ties are common despite the potential costs in organizational security, reputation, and autonomy (Shapiro 2013; Bacon 2018). Our argument suggests that the answer to this puzzle is that international relationships can serve as a conduit for "trade" in ideological or operational credibility, which, in turn, can mitigate organizational vulnerabilities. In such alliances, pure material goods such as manpower or financing may be partially or wholly absent, yet such ties can still be crucial to an organization's quest for survival and relevance.

These findings have important policy implications. At present, there is a tendency among security experts to treat militants' international networks as a signal of organizational strength, but orthogonal to the actual fight against the organization (Byman 2014). The conventional thinking is that if an organization is diminished, then its relationships will fade away as an immediate consequence. However, relationships between militant organizations are not necessarily a sign of organizational strength. Rather, alliances are a mechanism for remedying vulnerabilities. If counterterrorists can surmise an organization's vulnerabilities by analyzing its alliance networks, valuable counterterrorism resources can be better allocated to exacerbate those vulnerabilities and break militant alliances (Blair, Horowitz, and Potter 2022b). More broadly, prioritizing the disruption of militant groups' relationships can exacerbate the problems

that spurred alliance formation in the first place, thereby diminishing participant groups.

This reality was borne out in the case of IS. While diminishing AQ's global position was a decades-long project, state actors were better equipped for more traditional missions that target IS's areas of comparative advantage: material, resources, and operational success. As a result, IS was relatively more vulnerable to conventional military operations, and therefore more fragile as a hub of the international jihadist terror network.

Several avenues for future research remain. This analysis has focused on international militant alliances from the strategic perspective of the "hub" initiator. Future work should consider the impact of these relationships on local allies as well as the incentives and disincentives of those organizations for agreeing to them (Clausen 2022). As we have noted in passing in our cases, in some instances these relationships yield real benefits for affiliates in terms of reputation and capabilities. However, the historical record points to a minority of instances where transnational ties diminish the ally, such as with Boko Haram in Nigeria, which split following its alliance with IS. Understanding the circumstances under which such relationships are likely to benefit or harm the ally would complement the brush-clearing work we have done here.

## Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available at the *Journal of Global Security Studies* data archive.

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