

Leadership Targeting and Militant Alliance Breakdown

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Abstract

Existing research finds that cooperation between militant groups is common and contributes to both capabilities and lethality. Comparatively little is known, however, about how militant alliances are maintained and how they break apart. We argue that leaders are critical to sustaining alliances between militant groups. As a consequence, organizational disruption in the form of leadership targeting can lead to the breakdown of militant alliances. To test this argument, we pair original data on militant alliances with data on leadership targeting to reveal that decapitating an organization's leader, and particularly its founder, increases the probability that an organization's alliances terminate. We find that leadership decapitation spurs alliance termination by incapacitating targeted groups, stoking fear among allies, and inducing preference divergence between targeted groups and allies over strategy.

Supplementary material for this article is available in an appendix in the online edition. Replication files are available in the JOP Data Archive on Dataverse (<http://thedata.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/jop>).

Questions surrounding how and why groups and countries cooperate represent some of the broadest and most enduring issues motivating the study of international politics. Militant groups, like countries and firms, also consider questions of when and how to cooperate—and when that cooperation should end. Existing research on cooperation between militant groups shows that alliances can increase longevity (Price 2012, 2018; Phillips 2014), mitigate capability deficits (Byman 2014; Moghadam 2017; Bacon 2018b), enhance lethality (Asal and Rethemeyer 2008), and facilitate the adoption of new tactics (Asal, Ackerman, and Rethemeyer 2012). However, just as in research on alliances between countries and companies, how and why militant group cooperation stops remains comparatively understudied.¹ This inattention is surprising given the extent to which policymakers prioritize disrupting militant cooperation.

Understanding why and how militant group cooperation ends is an important question for broader theories of cooperation, but the dearth of research on the breakdown of militant alliances stems from both empirical and theoretical challenges. Until now, there has been no global, time-series data capable of comprehensively characterizing if alliances had terminated, not to mention why.² Moreover, the most commonly cited drivers of militant alliance formation, external threat and shared ideology,³ offer little as predictors of termination because they vary little over time. Thus, while their presence or absence may help explain the emergence of cooperation, they cannot explain its durability. To address the former challenge, we introduce new data on all cooperative relationships between violent, non-state actors from 1950 to 2016, enabling us to test the determinants of their termination. Regarding the latter challenge, we theorize that militant leaders help cultivate capabilities and trust, both of which are key for alliance durability. Focusing on organizational disruption in the form of unplanned leadership turnover, and especially targeting, we argue that leadership removal can degrade militant cooperation and induce alliance breakdown.

By way of illustration, consider the alliance between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and Sendero Luminoso (SL). For nearly two decades, FARC and SL, two of Latin America's most formidable militant groups, shared territorial havens, training materials,

¹For partial exceptions see Bencherif and Campana (2017); Bacon (2018a, 357); Mir (2018, 55); Bacon and Arsenault (2019). These authors identify inter-organizational mistrust and mismanagement as the impetuses for alliance termination.

²Though Bapat and Bond (2012) and Asal and Rethemeyer (2008) represent foundational efforts.

³On these as drivers see Christia (2012); Bacon (2018a, 2018b); Mir (2018, 54); Gade et. al. (2019).

weapons, and coca trafficking networks (El Mundo 2010). Time, effort, and risk went into building and maintaining this cooperation, but in late 2011, the alliance suddenly collapsed. This was surprising given the importance of the relationship to both groups' survival in the face of decades-long Colombian and Peruvian counterinsurgency campaigns. What happened? The abrupt split between FARC and Sendero Luminoso was precipitated by a decapitation campaign against FARC and SL leaders. A raid on November 4, 2011 killed Alfonso Cano, FARC's top commander (Forero 2011). This was followed in short order by the capture of SL Lieutenant Comrade Artemio, dealing a critical blow to one of the organization's most active factions, and cementing the collapse of the alliance (Stone 2012). These operations were honed by intelligence captured in earlier raids against FARC Secretariat members Raúl Reyes and Mono Jojoy (Markey 2010). This is not an isolated example. The sustained, US-led leadership targeting campaign against al-Qaeda (AQ), which culminated in Osama bin Laden's death, led to the breakdown of the relationship between AQ and allied Pakistani groups like the Haqqani Network (Mir 2018; Mir and Moore 2019).

These examples demonstrate a more general phenomenon. Militant leaders are critical for cultivating capabilities, controlling behavior, and sustaining the trust that undergirds alliances. Leadership removal, especially via decapitation, can reduce capabilities or collapse groups and undermine inter-organizational trust, triggering splits. By eliminating leaders who play a central role in alliance management, decapitation strategies drive militant alliance termination.

To contribute to our understanding of inter-group cooperation by establishing the effect of leadership targeting on alliance breakdown, we rely on a multi-pronged research strategy. First, we demonstrate an association between leadership targeting and alliance termination. This relationship is strongest when a targeted group's founder is killed. Evidence from a marginal structural model supports a causal interpretation of these results. Our statistical tests also suggest that decapitation can trigger alliance termination by inducing inter-organizational splits, even when targeted groups are not destroyed outright. Second, we turn to causal process observation (CPO) of 51 cases to better understand the mechanisms underpinning our quantitative results. This analysis highlights four mechanisms through which unplanned leadership removal, and particularly targeting, can trigger militant alliance termination: 1) weakening or collapsing targeted groups (making cooperation impossible); 2) raising fears about operational security (making cooperation riskier);

3) eliminating personal ties between leaders (making cooperation more difficult to sustain); and
4) inducing command-and-control problems, which drive preference divergence between targeted groups and allies over strategy and tactics (making cooperation less appealing).

Overall, the results from our statistical tests and cases show that the association between leadership targeting and militant alliance termination emerges mostly because targeting degrades capabilities, exacerbates inter-organizational suspicions, and creates preference divergence, all of which hinder targeted groups' abilities and incentives to sustain alliances. More broadly, this paper offers the first empirical examination of the causes of militant alliance termination, and presents the first evidence that leadership targeting can trigger militant alliance breakdown. By deepening our understanding of how and why militant alliances breakdown, we contribute both to policy and theory. For policymakers, understanding how militant cooperation can be disrupted is of central importance because militant alliances contribute substantially to the threat posed by non-state groups. Breaking militant alliances is a key counterinsurgent task. As noted in the US's 2003 National Strategy for Combating Terrorism: "The interconnected nature of terrorist organizations necessitates that we pursue them... to ensure that all linkages between the strong and the weak organizations are broken, leaving each of them isolated, exposed, and vulnerable to defeat." Understanding the effects of leadership targeting also bears critically on debates over the consequences of UAV proliferation. Our findings suggest targeting militant leaders may contribute to alliance termination, even when decapitation does not eliminate groups outright.

Understanding Militant Cooperation

Like states, militant organizations have two primary and interrelated motivations guiding alliance behavior. First, groups ally to pool capabilities in the face of common threats (Byman 2014; Bacon 2018a, 2018b). Second, groups tend to ally with organizations that share attributes, most notably ideologies and adversaries, and are hence viewed as like-minded and trustworthy (Bacon 2018a, 2018b; Gade et. al. 2019). Regardless of motivation, however, militant cooperation is believed to enhance allied groups' capabilities. For instance, alliance ties enhance lethality (Asal and Rethemeyer 2008), particularly when they involve well-connected "hubs" in alliance networks (Horowitz and Potter 2014). Alliances can also contribute to the diffusion of tactics (Asal, Acker-

man, and Rethemeyer 2012), help groups manage organizational deficits (Byman 2014; Moghadam 2017; Bacon 2018b), and increase groups' longevity (Price 2012, 2018; Phillips 2014). Given these benefits, many analysts prioritize degrading militant cooperation. As Bacon and Arsenault (2019, 231) note, "Groups with allies pose the greatest counterterrorism threat today and understanding what sustains or disrupts these relationships is thus of paramount importance."

Despite the benefits that alliances can provide to participating organizations, their formation and maintenance can be difficult. Militant groups interested in cooperation face a commitment problem because each side has incentives to renege on its obligations in the face of repression (Bapat and Bond 2012). Militancy is an inherently risky enterprise, so armed groups tend to have short time horizons and discount the future (Weinstein 2007).⁴ While states can solve such challenges by creating institutions, militant groups have few means to secure third-party enforcement or punish defectors due to their clandestine nature. What little institutionalization and monitoring is possible tends to increase security risks (Shapiro 2013; Bacon 2017).

While rarer conditions like shared state sponsorship can help enforce cooperation (Bapat and Bond 2012; Popovic 2018), mutual trust is the more common means by which organizations sustain partnerships (Bacon 2018b). When trust exists between groups, shared interests and identity coalesce in a self-reinforcing cycle, rendering substantive cooperation likely. On the other hand, cooperation without trust is likely to break down. Understanding militant cooperation then requires understanding how inter-group trust is formed and sustained. We argue leadership plays an important role in this process.

Militant Leaders as Alliance Managers

The leaders of militant organizations play a critical role in motivating sacrifice, organizing collective action, and providing operational direction (Shapiro 2013; Freeman 2014). Leaders impact ideology and recruitment (Ingram 2016), propaganda, internal security (Shapiro 2013), and organizational longevity (Price 2018). However, while existing work indicates that militant leaders significantly impact the function of organizations, comparatively little has been done to

⁴Indeed, 50% of all terrorist groups survive less than a year (Phillips 2019).

explore their role in maintaining alliances between militant groups.⁵ This is surprising because leader-level variation in ideology, experience, and charisma are known to affect alliance politics among states (Byman and Pollack 2001). Building on this intuition, we argue that leaders are instrumental in sustaining cooperation between militant organizations.

What role do the leaders of militant organizations play in cooperation? We posit that leaders can leverage their expertise, reputations, and personal relationships to augment group capabilities and build and sustain inter-organizational trust. By cultivating capabilities and trust, leaders ensure militant groups become and remain attractive partners. Three specific alliance management functions stand out.

First, the established linkage between leadership and capabilities directly influences alliance maintenance (Freeman 2014). Because leaders are often integral to capabilities—generating operational plans, guiding strategic direction, and advising on tactical choices—they help make their organizations attractive to potential partners. Indeed, even the anticipatory effects of targeted strikes can reduce groups' operational capabilities by driving leaders underground, constraining their ability to communicate with allies, plan attacks, and recruit fighters (Mir and Moore 2019). In turn, operational setbacks make organizations less attractive alliance partners (Asal and Rethemeyer 2008; Christia 2012). To illustrate, consider the 1999 split between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Apo's Revenge Hawks. Following the capture of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999, Apo's Revenge Hawks rejected the post-capture PKK as too operationally constrained and conciliatory. Without Öcalan, who had been instrumental in operational planning, Apo's Revenge Hawks felt the PKK would no longer be willing or able to fulfill its material alliance commitments, such as providing arms or attack plans.

Second, leaders can draw on their reputations and relationships to reinforce alliances. In the low information environment in which militants operate, reputations are vital for screening potential and existing allies for reliability, skill, and ideological purity. For groups initiating ties, prior relations between leaders can provide foundational goodwill. As alliances mature, these same connections can help groups sustain trust, particularly as repression increases. As Bacon (2018b,

⁵For partial exceptions see Byman (2014); Bacon (2018b). Bacon and Arsenault (2019) also argue that charismatic, competent leadership is needed to manage alliances.

53) notes, “[p]ersonal relationships among leaders or key individuals, especially those tasked with implementing cooperation, can be particularly valuable for organizational trust-building.”

Again, anecdotal accounts are illustrative. In Mali, relationships between Islamists and separatists, such as the alliance between Ansar Dine and the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), were brokered through leaders’ ties (Bencherif and Campana 2017, 122). There, personal reputations were the building blocks for inter-organizational trust because they helped leaders bridge ethno-clan divides in Malian society. Another example is the relationship between the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group’s (LIFG) and the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria (GIA). During the 1980s, North African jihadists flocked to Afghanistan, where bin Laden’s camps were a meeting-ground for future jihadist leaders. When the Soviet occupation ended in 1989, Libyan and Algerian veterans of the Afghan conflict found refuge in Sudan and began to organize as LIFG and GIA respectively (Bacon 2018b, 139). As the groups expanded, their leaders drew on personal reputations to sustain cooperation. For example, members of the LIFG Shura Council knew GIA commanders Chouakri Abdelkader and Rachid Ramda from their time in Afghanistan. As one LIFG operative explained, “We had contact with dozens of them [GIA] in Afghanistan... Most of them had a reputation for their love of jihad and spirit of self-sacrifice...” (Tawil 2011, 54-55). In turn, trust was easier to cultivate because LIFG and GIA leaders recognized their ideological compatibility. More broadly, the friendships forged in training camps underpinned the expansion of al-Qaeda’s affiliate network (Sageman 2004).

Third, personal connections between leaders allow for information-sharing and coordination at lower cost. For militant groups contemplating or engaged in cooperation, aligning beliefs and behaviors about ideology, strategy, and tactics are crucial to developing and maintaining trust (Bacon 2018a, 357). Personal linkages between militant leaders ease the process of coordinating these beliefs and preferences and smoothing over differences. Moreover, leaders can manage potentially ill-disciplined subordinates who might otherwise engage in acts that could strain alliance ties.

For example, consider the relationship between AQ and al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Strain on the alliance stemmed from differences in the groups’ beliefs and behaviors regarding target prioritization, civilian victimization, the timing of declared statehood, and the extent of intergroup consultation (Bacon and Arsenault 2019). Personal linkages between AQ’s leaders and Abu Musab

al-Zarqawi, the leader of AQI, helped to temporarily smooth over these tensions. For example, bin Laden's top deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, appealed to his friendship with Zarqawi while exhorting the latter to curtail civilian victimization, beginning his redress: "Dear brother, God Almighty knows how much I miss meeting with you... if I could find a way to you, I would not delay a day, God willing."⁶ After Zarqawi's death in an American airstrike in 2006, this personal relationship disappeared, laying bare fundamental differences in strategic preferences between AQ and AQI, culminating in the termination of the relationship.

In sum, militant leaders are central to the formation and maintenance of inter-organizational cooperation. Leaders hold expertise that directly augments group capabilities. The effect of leaders on capabilities is important for alliance management because more capable groups are more attractive and reliable allies. Further, and perhaps more importantly, leaders help build and sustain trust because their reputations and personal ties represent a form of militant social capital, providing foundational goodwill and making it easier for groups to screen potential partners and coordinate beliefs, tactics, and strategies.⁷ These factors contribute to alliance cohesion and durability.

How Leadership Targeting Disrupts Militant Alliances

States commonly target militant leaders precisely because they are so critical to militant organizations (Price 2018; Jordan 2019). Evidence indicates that decapitation can impede militants' production of violence (Johnston 2012; Ryckman 2017), and induce shifts in militant command structures (Jordan 2014) and processes (Mir 2018). Our theory posits that militant leaders are also central to alliances. An implication is that unplanned leadership turnover may degrade capabilities and trust, and thereby disrupt militant cooperation.⁸ We focus on unplanned leadership turnover in the form of leadership targeting, a particularly common and severe form of unplanned turnover, but this argument applies to all instances where leaders are unexpectedly removed.

***H*₁: Leadership targeting increases the probability of militant alliance termination.**

⁶West Point, Combating Terrorism Center ("Zawahiri's Letter to Zarqawi").

⁷None of these consequences of leadership are specific to militant groups. Indeed, a large literature shows that leaders have similar consequences on organizational performance and cooperation in firms (Weisbach 1988).

⁸This argument parallels the notion that changes in domestic institutions can induce states not fulfill their alliance obligations (Leeds and Savun 2007).

Founding leaders play uniquely important roles in militant cooperation. Because of their role in group creation, founders disproportionately influence groups' strategies, tactics, and ideologies (Freeman 2014). In terms of alliance management, founders are more likely to have personal ties to other group's leaders from the pre-formation period, and are more likely to accrue reputations for ideological credibility or military skill because of their central position in the high-risk mobilization required for militant group creation (Abrahms and Potter 2015, 316). Cronin's (2009) finding that martyrdom effects are greatest for founding leaders is illustrative. Given their unparalleled centrality in intra- and inter-group dynamics, the decapitation of founding leaders should have the greatest effect on alliance termination.

H₂: The effect of leadership targeting on militant alliance termination is greatest when founding leaders are targeted.

Our theory identifies two primary ways leaders contribute to alliance management: by bolstering capabilities and by leveraging personal ties. These different contributions of militant leaders to alliance management suggest different ways decapitation can trigger alliance breakdown. Two specific types of decapitation-driven alliance termination stand out: targeted group collapse and inter-organizational splits.

First, decapitation can trigger the collapse of targeted groups (Price 2012, 2018). In this case, targeted groups are unable to survive leadership removal. When groups collapse outright, their alliances are terminated by default—a group cannot hold alliances if it ceases to exist. By eliminating leaders who contribute inspiration, operational capabilities, and strategic guidance, targeting can cause groups to dissolve, spurring termination of these groups' alliances. Evidence that decapitation reduces the incidence and lethality of targeted groups' attacks (Johnston 2012) and forces militants into dormancy (Ryckman 2017) is consistent with this mechanism.

H₃: Leadership targeting increases the probability of militant alliance termination by inducing targeted group collapse.

But, more often than not, decapitation fails to collapse targeted groups outright (Jordan 2014, 2019). In fact, some research finds that targeting can backfire by making leaders into martyrs, publicizing a targeted group's cause, and spurring recruitment (Cronin 2009, 14-15; Tominaga

2018). Decapitation may also drive groups to bureaucratize (Jordan 2014) or fracture, creating new factions that escalate violence (Cronin 2009, 26; Perkoski 2019). However, our theory suggests that even when leadership targeting fails to terminate a group's alliances by destroying the group, it may trigger organizations to cease their cooperation due to heightened security concerns or declines in capacity that impinge on the ability to deliver on alliance expectations.

H₄: Leadership targeting increases the probability of militant alliance termination by inducing inter-organizational splits.

Empirical Strategy

To the best of our knowledge, this paper offers the first test of the relationship between leadership targeting and militant alliance termination.⁹ Our empirical strategy proceeds in two steps. We first demonstrate a correlation between leadership targeting and alliance breakdown using new data from the Militant Group Alliances and Relationships (MGAR) dataset (Blair et. al. 2020). Robustness tests and a marginal structural model with inverse probability of treatment weights confirm these findings. We then turn to causal process observation (CPO), a qualitative process tracing method, to explore the mechanisms linking leadership targeting and alliance termination.

The Militant Group Alliances and Relationships (MGAR) dataset provides the most comprehensive global, time-series data on cooperation between militant groups available. Specifically, MGAR codes the network of relationships among 2,613 militant groups between 1950 and 2016, which amounts to 11,836 alliance-years. For each relationship, MGAR details the content of cooperation, including how closely linked the involved groups were and whether the groups exchanged materiel, training, territory, operational support, and/or finances. Additional details on the MGAR coding scheme and data are available in the data appendix and Blair et. al. (2020).

The sample of militant groups included in our analysis comes from Price (2012, 2018), who compiles data on 207 terrorist groups across all conflicts and regions from 1970 to 2008. For each group-year, the data code whether the group in question experienced leadership turnover. The

⁹Mir (2018) and Bacon and Arsenault (2019) link decapitation to alliance rifts in individual cases. Tominaga (2018) studies whether decapitation affects attack patterns of targeted groups' allies, but not whether decapitation affects alliances themselves.

data record 204 leadership decapitations and 95 other incidents of leader exit—through natural death, expulsion, or resignation. Critically, not all groups in Price’s data experience any instance of leadership removal. The only inclusion criterion for groups in Price’s data is that a group must have carried out at least four attacks, including at least one fatal attack. This criterion means that weak, short-lived groups are excluded from our analyses.¹⁰

Pairing original data from MGAR with Price’s (2012, 2018) data on leadership targeting yields our sample, which includes all alliance dyad-years from MGAR that involve one of the organizations identified in Price’s data. The unit-of-analysis is the directed dyad-year. Combined, our data cover all alliances involving a group in Price’s data for all years from 1971 to 2009.¹¹ Because we employ directed tests, we do not require that allied groups are also in Price’s data.

The primary dependent variable is *termination*, a dichotomous indicator for when a dyad that was allied ceases to be. To test hypotheses 3 and 4, we distinguish between termination as a result of *group collapse* and termination as a result of an *inter-organizational split*. Termination due to group collapse occurs when an alliance ends because a constituent group ceases to exist. Inter-organizational splits occur when two groups, neither of which have collapsed outright, were allied in year $t - 1$, but not in year t . MGAR records information on the time-series content of alliances, in order to reveal granular changes in those relationships. We code termination when either group in a relationship ceases to exist, when the two groups have an open alliance rupture (i.e. evidence of an alliance in year $t - 1$ and a falling out in year t), or when two groups have alliance discontinuation (i.e. evidence of an alliance in year $t - 1$ and not in year t or any subsequent year $t + n$).

In total, our data contain 272 incidents of leadership decapitation and 429 alliance terminations, with 50 terminations due to group collapse and 379 terminations due to inter-organizational split. Our main independent variable is *leadership decapitation*, an indicator from Price, which takes a value of 1 if a given militant group experienced the loss of a leader to a state-initiated operation in year $t-1$, and 0 otherwise. We estimate separate models for leadership decapitation, which combines targeted kills and captures, as well as for leadership killing, leadership capture, founding leader decapitation, founding leader killing, and founding leader capture. To further test

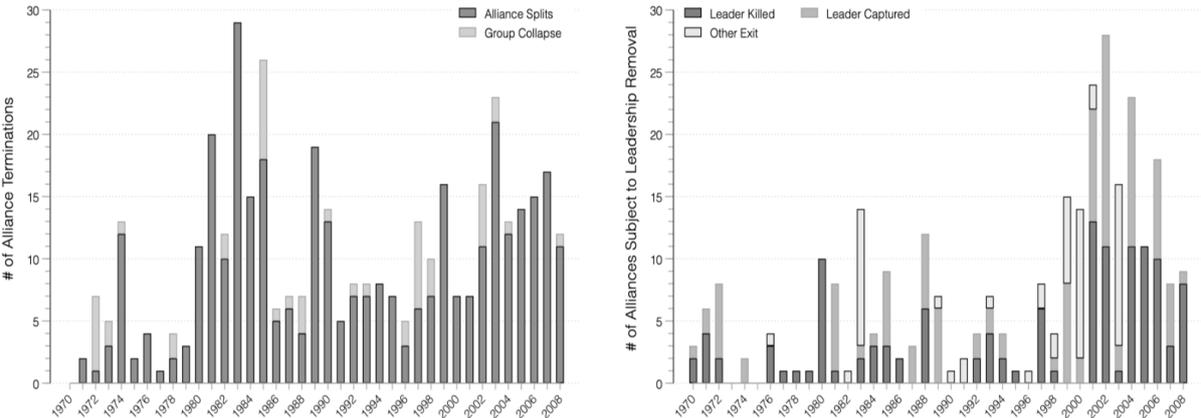
¹⁰Excluding weaker groups makes a hard test for alliance termination insofar as capable groups are more desirable allies.

¹¹Price codes leadership decapitations between 1970 and 2008, so focusing on the period from 1971 to 2009 allows us to estimate the effect of leadership decapitation lagged one-year on alliance breakdown.

the mechanisms underlying alliance termination, we also estimate some models using measures for non-decapitation leadership removals. These “other exits” include situations when leaders are expelled from their groups, mutually break away, or die of natural causes.

Figure 1 graphically summarizes our data. In the left panel we depict all alliance breakdowns over time, and in the right panel we depict all leadership removals over time. The figure reveals several descriptive patterns. Both alliance terminations and leadership removals are bimodally distributed, with peaks in the early-mid 1980s and the early-mid 2000s. These periods correspond with the late Cold War and the early years of the War on Terror, both periods in which militant cooperation was widespread and states grew increasingly coercive in their attempts to degrade cooperation. Figure 1 also clarifies that inter-organizational splits have been the dominant form of alliance termination over time.

Figure 1: Incidents of Alliance Breakdown and Leadership Removal Over Time



Note: The left panel depicts the number of alliance terminations by type over time. The right panel depicts the number of leadership removals by type over time.

Covariates

Our statistical models control for a variety of factors likely to be confounded with decapitation and alliance termination. We account for the ages of each group in a dyad, as well as the difference in their ages because older groups tend to be more institutionalized and bureaucratized, and therefore more resilient in the face of leadership targeting (Freeman 2014; Jordan 2019). Group capabilities have similarly important effects on alliance dynamics (Christia 2012; Gade et al. 2019). To measure intra-alliance capability symmetry we focus on the ratio of group 1’s attacks to the number of combined attacks within the alliance according to data from the Global Terrorism

Database (GTD).¹² We also control for whether two groups share an ideology, which tends to make cooperation more durable; whether two groups share a state sponsor, since sponsors can enforce cooperation (Bapat and Bond 2012; Popovic 2018); and the number of new alliances each group in the dyad formed in the prior year, which may indicate the level of reliance on alliances overall.

Our models also address various potentially confounding features of the countries in which the organizations in a given dyad are based. We account for inter-capital distance (logged) between the two countries in which the militant groups are based to address the possibility that proximity impacts cooperation.¹³ Groups based near one another may find cooperation easier because the costs and attendant risks of interacting are lower, but these groups may also succumb to outbidding dynamics (Bloom 2005). Likewise, we control for the population (logged) and GDP per capita (logged) of the countries in which each militant group is based. To capture the links between regime type and terrorism, we include the Polity 2 score of each country in the dyad. All covariates are lagged one year to mitigate temporal confounding. A full description of our covariates is provided in the appendix (Table A.1), along with summary statistics (Table A.2).

Estimation

We are interested in modeling the effect of leadership targeting on the time to militant alliance termination and therefore rely on hazard models in our primary estimations. While not widely recognized in the literature, repeated failures are common in the data. Many militant groups terminate alliances only to re-ally with former partners in the future. For instance, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) first allied from 1968 to 1973. PLO-PFLP cooperation broke down in 1974, when the PFLP joined the Rejectionist Front in opposition to the PLO's adoption of the "Ten Point Plan." Nevertheless, the PLO-PFLP alliance reemerged in 1981, when the PFLP re-joined the PLO Executive Committee. The PLO-PFLP alliance terminated a second time in 1999, amid lingering debate over the merits

¹²The capability ratio = $\frac{(\text{Group 1 Attacks} + 1)}{((\text{Group 1 Attacks} + 1) + (\text{Group 2 Attacks} + 1))}$. At least one group in every dyad is in the GTD because Price (2012, 2018) only included groups in GTD. Attack counts for both groups in a dyad are lagged one-year and transformed by adding one to avoid dropping dyad-years in which both groups are in GTD, but neither conducts an attack. Our capability ratio measure ranges from 0.002, indicating Group 1 is much weaker than Group 2, to 0.998, indicating Group 1 is much stronger than Group 2. Data from MGAR and GTD are merged using unique group identifiers from TORG and MGAR.

¹³This variable takes a value of 0 if groups are based in the same country.

of conciliation with Israel. Repeated terminations occur in about 2.4% of dyads in our data; one dyad, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak Muivah faction (NSCN-IM) and the Achik National Volunteer Council (ANVC), experienced five alliance terminations.

In traditional hazard modeling approaches, event times are assumed to be conditionally independent. This assumption is unlikely to hold in our framework for two reasons. First, event dependence means the risk of failure is correlated within units. The clustering of terminations among dyads mean previous failures raise the risk of future failures. Second, unobserved heterogeneity across dyads makes some more susceptible to termination. Our covariates control for some of this heterogeneity, but it is unlikely that we can control for all factors that affect the risk of alliance termination.

Given the dual threats of event dependence and unit heterogeneity, we employ a conditional frailty gap-time Cox estimator (Box-Steffensmeier, De Boef, and Joyce 2007). The conditional frailty model stratifies the risk set by the number of failures a dyad has experienced to control for event dependence, and includes frailty terms, or dyad random effects, to absorb heterogeneity. The estimator uses gap-time because we are interested in modeling the time since the last failure. Because we employ the conditional frailty gap-time *Cox* estimator in our primary models, we make no additional parametric assumptions about the shape of the underlying hazard function. In the appendix (Section A.3), we provide a fuller discussion of our estimator. Our core results are substantively identical when we use alternate models, including competing risks, parametric survival models, and logistic regression.

The hazard in our framework can be written as follows (Box-Steffensmeier, De Boef, and Joyce 2007, 242):

$$\lambda_{u,s}(t) = \lambda_{0s}(t - t_{s-1})e^{\beta(\text{Leadership Decapitation}_{u,s}) + \theta(X_{u,s}) + \gamma_u}$$

where u indexes allied militant dyads and s denotes the cumulative number of alliance breakdowns within the dyad, which stratifies the risk set. λ_{0s} is the baseline hazard rate and $(t - t_{s-1})$ specifies a gap time formulation, where the hazard is the risk of failure for alliance breakdown s since the occurrence of alliance breakdown $s - 1$. β gives the ratio of the instantaneous probability of failure when group 1 in dyad u faces leadership decapitation divided by the instantaneous probability of

failure when group 1 in dyad u does not face leadership decapitation. θ are estimates from a vector of covariates, and γ_u are gamma-distributed, dyad-specific frailty terms. In all models, we cluster standard errors by dyad and use Efron's method for ties. For simplicity, we report standardized coefficients rather than hazard ratios.

Causal Process Observation

Our quantitative tests are also bolstered by qualitative evidence from causal process observation (CPO). CPO is a method of inductively tracing causal mechanisms that is particularly amenable to pairing with large- n quantitative work (Brady, Collier, and Seawright 2006). In particular, this approach entails taking all cases of alliance termination after leadership targeting in our data, conducting within-case analysis to identify and code termination mechanisms, and aggregating across the sample. Within-case studies of all 30 instances of decapitation-precipitated alliance termination in our data hone our understanding of the process linking leadership targeting and alliance termination. This is appropriate because CPO requires analyzing mechanisms within cases, and then extrapolating to the population. As explained below, to address potential selection on the dependent variable, we also analyze an additional 21 cases that do not involve decapitation-precipitated alliance termination, reinforcing our confidence in the results. CPO is particularly appropriate because our theory outlines a number of reasons we expect an association between leadership targeting and militant alliance termination, but our empirical data limit the feasibility of more fine-grained mechanism tests. Given the violent and clandestine nature of militant groups, it is likely impossible that one could gather sufficiently fine-grained time-series data to statistically distinguish between the specific mechanisms our CPO permits us to delineate.

Quantitative Results

Turning to our empirical analysis, we find robust support for hypothesis 1. Leadership decapitation is positively correlated with militant alliance termination. We argue above that by removing leaders, who contribute to capabilities and trust, and hence serve key alliance management roles, decapitation increases the probability of alliance breakdown. As a preliminary test, cross-tabulations presented in Table 1 indicate that alliance terminations occur disproportionately when

one group in an alliance has experienced leadership decapitation in the past year.

Table 1: Cross-Tabulations of Militant Alliance Termination and Leadership Targeting

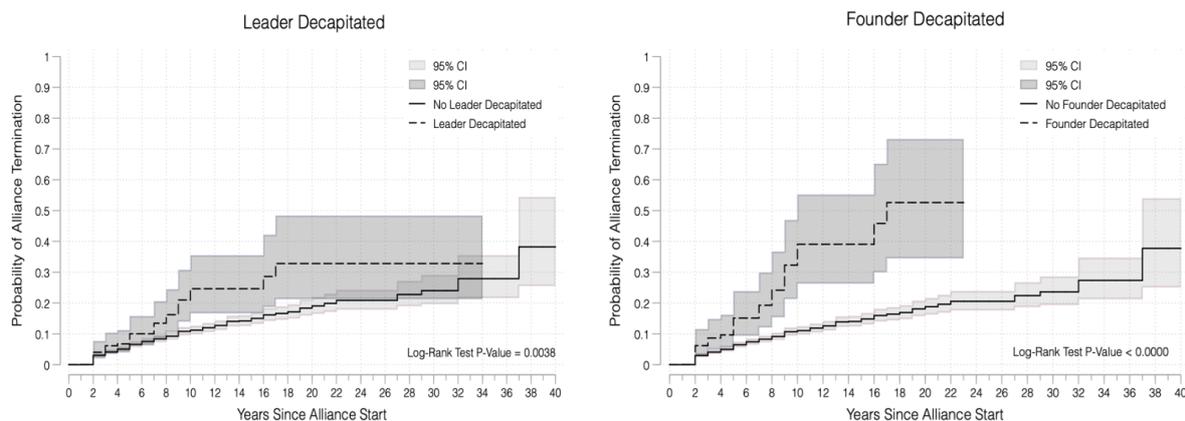
	Total Cases	Cases With Decapitation (Prior Year)	Cases With Decapitation (Prior 3 Years)
Alliance Terminations	429	30 (7%) Chi ² P-Value = 0.027	57 (13.3%) Chi ² P-Value = 0.141
Group Collapse	50	1 (2%) Chi ² P-Value = 0.447	5 (10%) Chi ² P-Value = 0.912
Inter-organizational Split	379	29 (7.7%) Chi ² P-Value = 0.010	52 (13.7%) Chi ² P-Value = 0.132

Figure 2 presents Kaplan-Meier failure plots and associated p-values from log-rank tests. These plots and corresponding tests offer another preliminary, model-free way to assess our hypotheses. The plots depict the probability of militant alliance termination as a function of time, comparing dyads that do and do not experience leader or founder decapitation.¹⁴ Statistically significant p-values from the log-rank tests indicate we can reject the null hypothesis of equality of the survival distributions. Groups whose leaders, and especially founding leaders, are decapitated in targeted operations are significantly more likely to terminate alliances than groups whose leaders are not decapitated. According to the log-rank tests, any leadership targeting is associated with nearly 12 additional incidents of alliance termination than expected under an equal survival distribution. Founder targeting is associated with about 17 additional incidents of alliance termination. This preliminary evidence helps build confidence in our core argument. However, while suggestive, the differences observed in Table 1 and Figure 2 could be driven by omitted variables, such as group capabilities or ideology.

Table 2 presents a more complete test of our hypotheses. The dependent variable in all models is an indicator for alliance termination. In column 1 we focus on the effect of decapitation generally, in columns 2 and 4 we focus on decapitation of founding leaders, and in columns 3 and 4 we focus on decapitation of non-founding leaders. Columns 5 through 7 disaggregate decapitation into targeted killing and capture of any leader. Similarly, columns 8 through 10 disaggregate decapitation into targeted killing and capture of founding leaders. All models include dyad-level frailty terms (i.e. dyad random effects) and stratify by the cumulative number of dyadic alliance

¹⁴Figure A.4 contains comparable plots for targeted leader and founder killing and capture.

Figure 2: Kaplan-Meier Failure Plots By Leadership Decapitation (Top Panel) and Founder Decapitation (Bottom Panel)



Note: The figure shows Kaplan-Meier failure plots for any leadership targeting (left panel) and founding leader targeting (right panel). Associated p-values from a log-rank test of equality of the survival distribution are in the bottom right corners. Dashed lines denote the failure curve when the respective targeting variable is equal to 1. Solid lines denote the failure curve when the respective targeting variable is equal to 0.

terminations, allowing the baseline hazard rate to vary across values of this variable. Exponentiating each coefficient gives the multiplicative effect of the variable on the outcome holding other covariates constant.

Across all models, we find that the probability of militant alliance breakdown is greater following leadership targeting. Exponentiating the coefficients from columns 1 and 4, our best-fitting models, highlight the substantive magnitude of the effects. When any leader of a militant group is decapitated (column 1), the probability of alliance termination is approximately 38% greater.¹⁵ Based on estimates from column 4, the probability of alliance termination is approximately 39% greater when a founding leader is targeted and 32% greater when a non-founding leader is targeted. These results comport with our expectations that leadership targeting increases the likelihood of militant alliance termination (hypothesis 1) and that this effect is strongest when founding leaders are targeted (hypothesis 2). This finding also helps contextualize Tominaga’s (2018) conclusion that the effects of decapitation can ripple through alliance networks.

While we did not explicitly hypothesize about whether targeted killing or capture would have a larger effect on the probability of alliance breakdown, results in columns 6 through 10 shed light on this question. These results suggest that both killing and capturing leaders can make

¹⁵Because $e^{0.321} \approx 1.378$.

alliance termination more likely. While analyses of decapitation's effects on group longevity and operations offer mixed evidence on the efficacy of kill versus capture strategies (Johnston 2012; Tominaga 2018; Jordan 2019), our results suggest that the various means of leadership targeting have roughly comparable effects on alliance termination.¹⁶

A number of other covariates in our models are also substantively important and shed light on existing theories of militant cooperation. For instance, past work suggests that allies that share an ideology will often find it easier to sustain cooperation in the face of repression (Gade et. al. 2019). Large, precisely estimated negative coefficients across the shared ideology term are consistent with this view. Results from column 1 suggest the probability of alliance termination is 41% lower for dyads that share an ideology than for those that do not. Coefficients on group age, likewise, suggest that when allied groups are older they are less likely to experience termination, corroborating an implication of Jordan's (2014) work. The risk of alliance termination is greater, however, when the age difference (Freeman 2014) and intercapital distance (Bacon 2018b, 52) between allied groups are greater. Finally, we see no effect of shared state sponsorship on the probability of alliance termination. This suggests shared sponsorship is more important for alliance formation (Bapat and Bond 2012) than alliance durability.

Group Collapse versus Inter-organizational Split

While the results in Table 2 provide support for hypotheses 1 and 2, these models do not permit us to distinguish between the two types of alliance termination—group collapse (hypothesis 3) and inter-organizational split (hypothesis 4)—outlined above. To determine whether the effect of leadership targeting on militant alliance termination is driven by terminations resulting from group collapse or inter-organizational split, in Table 3 we re-estimate our core models from columns 1 through 4 of Table 2.¹⁷ Our dependent variables in Table 3 are separate indicators for termination by targeted group collapse and termination by inter-organizational split. There are no instances of termination by targeted group collapse after non-founding leaders are targeted, so this term is omitted from our models of targeted group collapse.

Results yield support for hypothesis 4, but not hypothesis 3. The effect of decapitation on

¹⁶Coefficients on capture are significant at the 10% level in columns 9 ($p = 0.055$) and 10 ($p = 0.063$).

¹⁷Full results are available in Table A.5.

Table 2: Conditional Frailty Models of Alliance Termination

	Any Leader	Founding Leader	Non-Founding Leader	Any Leader	Any Leader			Founding Leader		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
Any Leader Decapitated t_{-1}	0.321** (0.119)									
Founder Decapitated t_{-1}		0.319** (0.124)		0.326** (0.125)						
Non-Founder Decapitated t_{-1}			0.224 (0.139)	0.280* (0.139)						
Targeted Killing t_{-1}					0.311* (0.149)		0.314* (0.151)	0.310* (0.145)		0.312* (0.147)
Targeted Capture t_{-1}						0.330* (0.136)	0.335* (0.140)		0.336 (0.175)	0.338 (0.181)
Dyadic Age Difference	0.022* (0.010)	0.022* (0.010)	0.021* (0.009)	0.022* (0.010)	0.022* (0.010)	0.021* (0.009)	0.022* (0.010)	0.022* (0.010)	0.021* (0.009)	0.022* (0.010)
Age (Group 1)	-0.026** (0.009)									
Age (Group 2)	-0.017* (0.008)									
Shared Ideology	-0.341** (0.118)	-0.340** (0.117)	-0.323** (0.114)	-0.341** (0.117)	-0.326** (0.115)	-0.336** (0.116)	-0.342** (0.118)	-0.327** (0.115)	-0.334** (0.116)	-0.340** (0.118)
Shared State Sponsor	0.019 (0.131)	0.034 (0.136)	-0.005 (0.130)	0.022 (0.136)	0.020 (0.133)	0.003 (0.128)	0.019 (0.133)	0.020 (0.133)	0.019 (0.131)	0.034 (0.135)
Capability Ratio	-0.043 (0.121)	-0.050 (0.120)	-0.053 (0.118)	-0.043 (0.121)	-0.036 (0.123)	-0.066 (0.118)	-0.043 (0.125)	-0.040 (0.122)	-0.070 (0.120)	-0.051 (0.125)
New Alliances (Group 1)	-0.032 (0.037)	-0.034 (0.037)	-0.037 (0.037)	-0.032 (0.037)	-0.034 (0.037)	-0.036 (0.037)	-0.032 (0.037)	-0.035 (0.037)	-0.037 (0.037)	-0.034 (0.037)
New Alliances (Group 2)	-0.027 (0.033)	-0.025 (0.033)	-0.023 (0.031)	-0.026 (0.033)	-0.030 (0.033)	-0.019 (0.031)	-0.026 (0.033)	-0.028 (0.033)	-0.019 (0.031)	-0.025 (0.033)
Intercapital Distance	0.038* (0.017)	0.038* (0.018)	0.035* (0.017)	0.038* (0.017)	0.038* (0.018)	0.035* (0.017)	0.037* (0.018)	0.039* (0.018)	0.035* (0.017)	0.038* (0.018)
Population (Group 1)	0.072* (0.028)	0.075** (0.029)	0.073* (0.028)	0.072* (0.028)	0.069* (0.028)	0.077** (0.029)	0.072* (0.028)	0.072* (0.028)	0.078** (0.029)	0.075** (0.029)
Population (Group 2)	0.058* (0.030)	0.058 (0.030)	0.061* (0.030)	0.058* (0.030)	0.062* (0.031)	0.056 (0.030)	0.058 (0.031)	0.062* (0.031)	0.057 (0.030)	0.058 (0.030)
GDP/Capita (Group 1)	0.050 (0.082)	0.052 (0.082)	0.058 (0.079)	0.050 (0.082)	0.050 (0.081)	0.059 (0.080)	0.050 (0.083)	0.051 (0.081)	0.059 (0.080)	0.052 (0.082)
GDP/Capita (Group 2)	0.035 (0.084)	0.038 (0.084)	0.033 (0.082)	0.035 (0.084)	0.036 (0.083)	0.034 (0.083)	0.035 (0.085)	0.036 (0.083)	0.037 (0.082)	0.038 (0.084)
Polity 2 (Group 1)	-0.008 (0.008)	-0.009 (0.008)	-0.009 (0.008)	-0.008 (0.008)	-0.008 (0.008)	-0.010 (0.008)	-0.008 (0.008)	-0.008 (0.008)	-0.010 (0.008)	-0.009 (0.008)
Polity 2 (Group 2)	-0.007 (0.009)	-0.007 (0.009)	-0.007 (0.009)	-0.007 (0.009)	-0.006 (0.009)	-0.007 (0.009)	-0.007 (0.009)	-0.006 (0.009)	-0.008 (0.010)	-0.007 (0.010)
Cold War	-0.271* (0.112)	-0.266* (0.111)	-0.233* (0.103)	-0.271* (0.112)	-0.254* (0.109)	-0.245* (0.104)	-0.271* (0.112)	-0.252* (0.108)	-0.244* (0.104)	-0.267* (0.111)
Post 9/11	-0.368** (0.134)	-0.368** (0.134)	-0.362** (0.133)	-0.368** (0.134)	-0.363** (0.134)	-0.366** (0.133)	-0.368** (0.135)	-0.363** (0.133)	-0.366** (0.133)	-0.368** (0.135)
Log-Likelihood	-698.302	-698.362	-698.822	-698.300	-698.505	-698.664	-698.301	-698.520	-698.705	-698.361
AIC	1432.387	1432.504	1432.676	1434.379	1432.489	1432.538	1434.380	1432.514	1432.618	1434.497
Observations	2680	2680	2680	2680	2680	2680	2680	2680	2680	2680

Note: ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$; robust standard errors clustered by dyad are in parentheses; the table displays standardized coefficients rather than hazard ratios; models are stratified by the number of alliance terminations a dyad has experienced; frailty terms for dyad are included in all models; Efron's method is used for ties; time-variant covariates are lagged one year.

alliance termination is driven by inter-organizational splits. In columns 13 through 16, we see positive, statistically significant effects of all types of decapitation (any leader, founding leader, and non-founding leader) on militant alliance breakdown via inter-organizational split.¹⁸ In line with hypothesis 2, the effect of decapitation on inter-organizational split is greatest when founding leaders are targeted. In contrast, coefficients on the decapitation terms are smaller in magnitude and imprecisely estimated in columns 11 and 12, which capture the effect of leadership targeting on militant alliance breakdown via targeted group collapse. Large standard errors in these columns suggest the models are under-powered. Still, the positive direction of the coefficient on founder decapitation in column 12 is in line with our theoretical expectations and Price's (2018) findings.

Table 3: Termination by Targeted Group Collapse versus Inter-Organizational Split

	Termination by Targeted Group Collapse		Termination by Inter-Organizational Split			
	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)	(15)	(16)
Any Leader Decapitated t_{-1}	-0.173 (1.057)		0.324** (0.119)			
Founder Decapitated t_{-1}		0.357 (1.059)		0.320* (0.124)		0.328** (0.126)
Non-Founder Decapitated t_{-1}					0.245 (0.142)	0.300* (0.140)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Log-Likelihood	-98.439	-98.401	-625.665	-625.735	-626.175	-625.664
AIC	228.878	228.802	1287.330	1287.469	1288.133	1289.329
Observations	2680	2680	2680	2680	2680	2680

Note: ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$; robust standard errors clustered by dyad are in parentheses; the table displays standardized coefficients rather than hazard ratios; models in columns 11 and 12 are stratified by shared ideology and shared sponsorship; models in columns 13 through 16 are stratified by the number of inter-organizational splits a dyad has experienced; frailty terms for dyad are included in all models; Efron's method is used for ties; time-variant covariates are lagged one year.

As a robustness check, in Table A.7 we consider the effect of leadership targeting with a competing risks estimator. Competing risks occur when an event of interest (militant alliance termination) has two or more causes (group collapse and inter-organizational split).¹⁹ Promisingly, results from competing risks models also show that decapitation, especially of founding leaders, is associated with an increased probability of termination by inter-organizational split.

¹⁸The coefficient for non-founder decapitation in column 15 is significant at the 10% level ($p = 0.084$).

¹⁹Further details about our competing risks approach are provided in Figure A.6.

Overall, these results indicate that decapitation disrupts inter-organizational cohesion and trust, even beyond the immediate effect decapitation has on targeted groups' capabilities. More importantly, these results imply that merely assessing the effect of leadership targeting on targeted groups' longevity and operations will understate the broader role of decapitation in undermining militant cooperation. Even if leadership targeting fails to collapse militant groups outright, targeting sows mistrust and affects militant alliances by inducing splits between groups.

Leadership Targeting as a Dynamic Process

State campaigns against militant groups are fundamentally dynamic. Governments and militant organizations gather intelligence, conduct attacks, and suffer setbacks over the course of a conflict. Current operations by each affect future operations by the other. As Tominaga (2019) shows, this dynamism renders single-shot analyses of leadership targeting plagued by an omitted variables-posttreatment bias dilemma.²⁰ Failing to account for factors like past attacks by a targeted group introduces omitted variables bias because past attacks factor into states' decisions about targeting; but controlling for past attacks produces posttreatment bias because militant attacks are affected by prior operations, and perhaps earlier targeted strikes. Specifying a lag on our decapitation variables and covariates fails to resolve this problem.

To address endogeneity concerns, we re-estimate our core specifications using a semi-parametric marginal structural model (MSM).²¹ The MSM is fitted in two stages. First, we estimate the probability that a group experiences its observed treatment history—its history of decapitation—and use these estimates to construct inverse probability of treatment weights (IPTW). Then, we re-estimate the effect of leadership targeting on alliance termination with IPTW from the first-stage. In this way, inverse probability weighting controls for time-dependent confounding (Blackwell 2013). Further details about construction of the weights are reported in Table A.8, while Figure A.9 presents a diagnostic test showing the weights are well-behaved.

In Table 4 we report results from the MSM.²² Specifically, we re-estimate models from Table

²⁰Blackwell (2013) offers a general survey of this problem. Tominaga (2019, 872) formalizes the problem in the decapitation context.

²¹This follows Tominaga's (2019) approach.

²²Full results are available in Table A.10.

Table 4: IPTW Models of Alliance Termination

	Any Leader	Founding Leader	Non-Founding Leader	Any Leader	Any Leader			Founding Leader		
	(17)	(18)	(19)	(20)	(21)	(22)	(23)	(24)	(25)	(26)
Any Leader Decapitated t_{-1}	0.287 (0.317)									
Founder Decapitated t_{-1}		0.745* (0.313)		0.723* (0.313)						
Non-Founder Decapitated t_{-1}			-1.430 (0.774)	-1.385 (0.769)						
Targeted Killing t_{-1}					0.427 (0.407)		0.429 (0.407)	0.989* (0.422)		0.971* (0.422)
Targeted Capture t_{-1}						0.144 (0.446)	0.150 (0.446)		0.534 (0.468)	0.507 (0.468)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
IPTW	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Log-Likelihood	-698.302	-698.362	-698.822	-698.300	-698.505	-698.664	-698.301	-698.520	-698.705	-698.361
AIC	2400.317	2394.775	2397.112	2392.401	2399.991	2401.498	2401.638	2395.611	2399.785	2395.551
Observations	1989	1989	1989	1989	1989	1989	1989	1989	1989	1989

Note: ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$; robust standard errors clustered by dyad are in parentheses; the table displays standardized coefficients rather than hazard ratios; IPTW and frailty terms for dyad are included in all models; Efron's method is used for ties; time-variant covariates are lagged one year.

2 using stabilized IPTW.²³ Results from the MSM generally support our hypotheses. In column 17, the effect of any decapitation is large and positive as expected, though imprecisely estimated. However, in columns 18 and 20 we see that the effect of decapitating founding leaders remains large, positive, and statistically significant. Taking estimates from column 20, targeting a group's founding leader increases the probability of alliance termination approximately 106%. In columns 24 through 26 we see that this positive effect of founder decapitation is largest for targeted killings of founding leaders. Coefficients on targeted capture of founding leaders (columns 25 and 26) are in the expected direction but are less precisely estimated ($p = 0.25$ and $p = 0.28$ respectively). Substantively identical findings emerge when we separately consider termination by group collapse versus inter-organizational split (Table A.11), yielding further support for hypothesis 3.

In sum, targeting militant groups' founders increases the probability of alliance termination, and especially inter-organizational splits. These results build further support for hypotheses 1 and 2. Specifically regarding the influence of founding leaders, the MSM suggests that founders are uniquely important for militant cooperation. This finding corroborates other evidence that founders

²³The only difference between models in Tables 2 and 4 is that the latter include IPTW but do not stratify by the number of terminations a dyad has experienced; the former are stratified to address event dependence. In Table 4, IPTW implicitly account for dependence.

exert disproportionate influence in militant organizations (Cronin 2009; Freeman 2014).²⁴

Unplanned Leadership Turnover and Co-Leaders: Additional Implications

Two additional implications of our argument are testable, and provide further support for our theoretical logic. First, though we highlight leadership targeting because it is a particularly common and severe form of organizational disruption, our theory about the role of militant leaders in alliance management suggests that all forms of unanticipated leadership removal should be associated with a greater probability of alliance termination. Whenever a leader unexpectedly exits—for instance, through death by natural causes—it should be more difficult for militant groups to sustain cooperation. Using Price’s (2012, 2018) data, which codes leader exits by voluntary resignation, expulsion, or death by natural causes, we test this theoretical implication. In Figure A.12 we show that all forms of unplanned leadership removal—targeted killing, targeted capture, natural death, and expulsion—are associated with a positive and statistically significant increase in the probability of militant alliance termination. By contrast, no cases of alliance termination occur in the year following voluntary resignation. When militant leaders voluntarily resign their posts with the mutual consent of their groups, allies whose relationships exiting leaders coordinated are likely to have prior notice, easing post-exit alliance management. In mutual exits, mistrust is also less likely to emerge between allies because the leadership turnover was not violent, reducing the impact of turnover on command and control. These intuitive results comport with the theory we outline.

A second implication of our theory concerns organizational leadership structures. Whereas some groups create structures that privilege a single leader, other groups build distributed leadership institutions like shura councils, which allow for multiple, co-existing leaders. Groups with single leaders should be more likely to have their alliances terminate in the wake of leadership targeting as these are the groups for which alliance management is most likely to be personalistic, and for which post-decapitation degradation should be most severe. By contrast, groups with multiple leaders should be better insulated from decapitation because even if one leader is eliminated, another is available to help retain command and control and reassure allies. To test this

²⁴The null effect of targeting non-founding leaders could also owe to the fact that groups with non-founding leaders have already experienced leader turnover from a founder to a non-founder. These groups and their alliances may in turn be better equipped for weathering future unplanned leadership turnovers because institutional succession mechanisms are in place.

implication, we interact our turnover measures with a variable indicating whether groups have co-leadership structures (Price 2012). As expected, results from these models (Figures A.13 and A.14), suggest that unplanned turnover is only associated with alliance termination for groups that lack co-leadership structures.

Robustness

Though evidence from the MSM supports a causal interpretation of our results, several other empirical issues warrant attention. First, our primary specifications use a semi-parametric Cox estimator. To ensure the robustness of our results to assumptions about the distribution of the hazard, we repeat our analyses using unweighted and IPTW parametric survival models and logistic regressions. Parametric survival and logistic models (Figure A.15 and Table A.16) yield substantively similar results. Second, we show that our core results hold when controlling for a variety of additional factors associated with alliance durability and states' capabilities (Figures A.17 - A.19). Third, the process through which leadership targeting leads to militant alliance termination could take several years to unfold. We believe our choice of a one-year lag in the main models is appropriate because the effects of leadership targeting typically unfold quickly (Price 2012; 2018). Nevertheless, we re-estimate our models replacing a one-year lagged decapitation indicator with an indicator that takes a value of 1 if a militant group experienced leadership targeting in the prior three years, and 0 otherwise. The results (Table A.20) show that changing the lag does not undermine our results. Moreover, the smaller magnitudes of the coefficients in our three-year models suggest a stronger association between leadership targeting and alliance termination in the narrower one-year lagged window on which we focus. Finally, our results hold when we iteratively exclude each decapitated group (Figure A.21) and each base country that pursued decapitation (Figure A.22).

Qualitative Evidence

Our quantitative tests paint a clear picture. Leadership targeting, especially killings of founding leaders, is associated with militant alliance breakdown. We posit that this effect reflects the role of leaders in alliance management. However, these tests are limited in the extent to which they can shed light on the mechanisms driving alliance termination. To address this, we turn to causal

process observation (CPO), a qualitative, within-case process-tracing method, to understand the mechanisms underlying the effect of decapitation on alliance termination.

Using CPO, we process-traced and coded all 30 cases of decapitation-driven alliance termination in our data. Findings from our analysis of the 30 cases are summarized in Table 5 below. The appendix (Section A.23) contains narratives for all 30 cases. We also analyzed 6 cases of alliance breakdown caused by non-decapitation leader exits and 15 cases of non-breakdown involving targeted groups with co-leadership structures. Consistent with our quantitative results, non-decapitation unplanned exits also spur alliance termination, while co-leadership structures ease tensions after decapitation.²⁵ Four distinct mechanisms emerge from the CPO. Leadership targeting may:

1. weaken or collapse targeted groups (making cooperation impossible);
2. raise fears about operational security (making cooperation riskier);
3. eliminate personal ties between leaders (making cooperation more difficult to sustain); and
4. induce command-and-control problems, which drive preference divergence between targeted groups and allies over strategy and tactics (making cooperation less appealing).

Before we describe the sample-wide results of our process tracing exercise, we turn to four detailed case studies. Each case highlights one of the four mechanisms underpinning the effect of leadership targeting on alliance termination as revealed by our CPO.

Mechanism 1: Targeted Group Incapacitation

The first way that leadership targeting can induce alliance termination is through the severe degradation of the targeted group. As referenced above, when a group is targeted in a decapitation strike, its capabilities are reduced. In the extreme, the targeted group may cease to exist, forcing an end to its alliances by default (Price 2012, 2018). But even when decapitation does not induce outright collapse, its capability-reducing effects can make targeted groups less attractive as alliance partners. After a group is targeted, it simply has less to provide. Resources that could be shared with allies must be diverted for revamping internal security procedures, rebuilding recruitment networks, and re-incentivizing cadres to sustain the armed struggle (Mir 2018). Even the mere

²⁵See Sections A.24 and A.25.

Table 5: Aggregate Results of the Causal Process Observation

Targeted Group	Allied Group	Year	Decapitation Type	Incapacitation	Increased Fears	Personal Connections	Preference Divergence
Action Directe	Baader-Meinhof Group	1988	Founder Captured	1			
Al Qaeda in Iraq	1920 Revolution Brigades	2007	Founder Killed		2		1
Armed Forces of National Resistance (FARN)	Central American Revolutionary Workers Party (PRTC)	1981	Founder Killed			2	1
Armed Forces of National Resistance (FARN)	Dirección Revolucionaria Unificada	1981	Founder Killed			2	1
Armed Forces of National Resistance (FARN)	Dirección Revolucionaria Unificada	1981	Founder Killed			2	1
Armed Islamic Group (GIA)	Islamic State Movement	1995	Founder Killed		2	3	1
Armed Proletarian Nuclei (NAP)	Red Brigades (BR)	1978	Founder Killed	1			
Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA)	Abu Nidal Organization (ANO)	1989	Founder Killed	2		1	
Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA)	Japanese Red Army (JRA)	1989	Founder Killed	1		2	
Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA)	Communist Labour Party of Turkey (TKEP)	1989	Founder Killed	1			
Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA)	Turkish Worker's and Peasant's Liberation Army (TIKKO)	1989	Founder Killed	1	2		
Basque Fatherland and Freedom (ETA)	Red Brigades (BR)	1989	Founder Captured		1	2	
Basque Fatherland and Freedom (ETA)	Red Brigades Fighting Communist Party (BR-PCC)	1989	Founder Captured		1	2	
Cinchoneros	Central American Revolutionary Workers Party (PRTC)	1984	Founder Killed	1	2		
Jemaah Islamiya (JI)	Al-Badr	2005	Founder Captured	1		2	3
Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM)	Mujahideen Islam Pattani	2002	Founder Captured			1	
Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)	Apo's Youth Revenge Brigades	2000	Founder Captured				1
Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)	Kurdistan National Liberation Front (ERNK)	2000	Founder Captured		1		
Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)	Nationalist Kurdish Revenge Teams	2000	Founder Captured				1
Lorenzo Zelaya Revolutionary Front (LZRF)	Morazanist Front for the Liberation of Honduras (FMLH)	1984	Founder Captured	2	1		
Lorenzo Zelaya Revolutionary Front (LZRF)	United Revolutionary Coordinating Board	1984	Founder Captured	2	1		
Marxist-Leninist Armed Propaganda Unit (MLAPU)	Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA)	1981	Founder Killed	1			
Marxist-Leninist Armed Propaganda Unit (MLAPU)	Baader-Meinhof Group	1981	Founder Killed	1			
Marxist-Leninist Armed Propaganda Unit (MLAPU)	People's Liberation Army (THKO)	1981	Founder Killed	1	2		
Marxist-Leninist Armed Propaganda Unit (MLAPU)	Red Brigades (BR)	1981	Founder Killed	1			
Marxist-Leninist Armed Propaganda Unit (MLAPU)	Turkish People's Liberation Front (THKP-C)	1981	Founder Killed	1	2		
Montoneros	Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN)	1980	Leader Killed	2	1		
Red Brigades (BR)	Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA)	1982	Leader Captured	1			2
Red Hand Defenders	Protestant Volunteer Force	2000	Founder Captured	3	1		2
Turkish People's Liberation Front (THKP-C)	Dev Genc	1973	Founder Killed	1			2

Numbers under each mechanism are a 1 to 4 ranking of the importance of the mechanism in the case, with 1 indicating most important and 4 indicating least important. We do not assign a number if the mechanism was wholly irrelevant in the case.

threat of decapitation can drive leaders underground, hampering their abilities to plan and execute operations, and coordinate with allies (Mir and Moore 2019). Since desirable alliance partners are those that enhance the odds of military success, groups whose capabilities are in decline are less valuable and thus are more likely to suffer abrogation.²⁶ In the trade-off between risk and reward at the heart of militant cooperation, leadership targeting reduces the potential rewards for the non-targeted ally by impinging on the targeted group's capabilities, while increasing the risks.

The termination of the alliance between the Armed Proletarian Nuclei (NAP) and the Red Brigades (BR) is illustrative. NAP emerged in Naples, Italy in 1973, and was devoted to a variety of far-left causes, with a particular focus on the abolition of prisons. Like NAP, BR was a far-left Italian group formed in 1970. NAP and BR first allied in 1976, launching a series of joint attacks in Pisa, Rome, Naples, and Florence (“Terrorism and Security: the Italian Experience” 1984, 14). Cooperation between the groups was substantive—NAP provided BR motivated fighters and an operational base in southern Italy in return for access to the BR's supply network and tactical expertise. However, the NAP-BR alliance quickly broke down after Italian police action decimated NAP, culminating with the death of NAP leader Antonio Lo Musico in Rome on July 1, 1977 (Gnosis Rivista Italiana di Intelligence 2006). NAP-BR cooperation immediately waned as NAP's resource and security deficits grew in the second half of 1977. In the months that followed, at least 39 NAP safehouses were raided, eliminating the group's operational capacity through the arrest of its fighters and the seizure of its weaponry (“Terrorism and Security: the Italian Experience” 1984, 20). NAP ceased to exist by mid-1978, and surviving elements were folded into BR. In sum, leadership decapitation incapacitated the Armed Proletarian Nuclei such that it could no longer sustain cooperation with the Red Brigades because it was no longer able to fulfill its alliance role, or even to survive.

Mechanism 2: Operational Security Fears

The second way leadership decapitation can spur alliance termination is by increasing operational security risks, especially for a targeted group's allies. Decapitation can make it riskier for groups allied to a targeted group to sustain ties going forward. Decapitation compounds concern

²⁶Leeds and Savun (2007, 1121) demonstrate this in the interstate context.

among allied groups about operational security practices in the targeted group. In turn, mistrust develops as allies grow doubtful about the secrecy with which the targeted group holds the details of their partnership. If a group is disrupted by counterterror pressure, its allies become vulnerable to the possibility that the counterterrorist state will uncover intelligence that makes the ally less secure. The closer the alliance, the more intelligence each will hold about the other, and hence the greater the risks to one if the other is targeted (Shapiro 2013). To illustrate, recall the FARC-SL alliance. Intelligence on cooperation between FARC and SL was seized in raids on FARC leaders between 2008 and 2011; subsequently, the intelligence Colombian forces gathered aided Peruvian forces in capturing SL commander Comrade Artemio (Markey 2010; Stone 2012). The FARC-SL alliance breakdown was precipitated in part by mistrust within SL about FARC's internal security practices, and the integrity of the groups' cooperative ventures.

Apart from spurring mistrust over intra-alliance security, leadership targeting can also cause alliance termination by raising fears among allies that they will attract the counterterrorist state's attention. When one leader is eliminated, the counterterrorist may extend its campaign to the affiliates of the targeted organization. For instance, while the U.S. drone program first concentrated on al-Qaeda and the Taliban, the scope of U.S. strikes expanded to include various Pakistan-based factions allied with al-Qaeda and the Taliban, like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. The expanding scope of the drone campaign exacerbated tensions between these allies leading some factions to rebuke al-Qaeda (Mir 2018, 70, 76).²⁷ The risk of a group being targeted following the decapitation of its ally is greatest within alliances between groups in the same theater. In this case, it takes minimal additional effort for the counterterrorist state to expand its targeting scope. However, even when two groups are geographically separated, a non-targeted group may fear drawing the counterterrorist's ire when its ally is decapitated.

The history of the alliance between Montoneros and the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) illustrates this mechanism. Montoneros was an Argentine leftist group formed in 1969, while the FSLN was a leftist group formed in 1960 and based in Nicaragua. Cooperation between the organizations developed in 1974, following an Argentine military crackdown on Montoneros.

²⁷al-Qaeda also became warier of its allies, especially the Haqqani Network, after suffering a number of drone strikes, due to fears that the Haqqani leadership was too close to Pakistani intelligence.

At this time, units of Montoneros, the Special Infantry Troops, found refuge among the FSLN, who were waging insurgency against Nicaragua's Somoza regime. In return for sanctuary, Montoneros provided logistical support to the FSLN. In particular, Montoneros leader Horacio Mendizabal oversaw the training of Sandinista frogmen, while his troops funneled arms from Cuba and El Salvador to Sandinistas in Nicaragua. Montoneros teams also fought alongside the FSLN in Nicaragua, while Argentine intelligence agents embedded with Somoza's National Guard hunted Montoneros militants in the FSLN ranks (Dickey 1987, 54-55). After the FSLN toppled the Somoza regime in 1979, Montoneros planned a return to Argentina, and dispatched cadres from the exiled cells to organize unrest. Mendizabal's units were tasked with attacks on infrastructure and junta officials. In September 1979, Mendizabal and his forces entered Argentina, but were intercepted and met heavy resistance. Mendizabal was killed in battle with Argentine forces on September 19, 1979 (Central Intelligence Agency 1979). Following his death, the remaining Montoneros cadres desperately sought refuge. However, the FSLN, which now controlled Nicaragua, refused to uphold the previous alliance arrangement. In particular, the FSLN feared that sustaining the alliance with Montoneros after Mendizabal's death would cause the Argentine junta to escalate support for the Contras, a right-wing group aided by Argentine intelligence to counter the FSLN after Somoza was toppled. As the Argentine military hunted the remaining Montoneros forces in Argentina, the threat of increased Argentine aid to the Contras cemented the termination of the Montoneros-FSLN alliance.

Mechanism 3: Disintegration of Personal Ties

A third way leadership targeting can cause the breakdown of militant alliances is through the disintegration of personal ties between groups. As discussed above, militant alliances are often predicated on stocks of mutual trust among leaders forged through past interactions. These personal relationships are valuable because they provide information about each group's operational and ideological proclivities, and thereby create reputational bases for cooperation. However, alliances forged on these terms are also particularly vulnerable to termination in the wake of decapitation.

The case of the alliance between the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) and the Abu Nidal Organization (ANO) shows how leadership decapitation can fracture

cooperation based on personal ties. ASALA was founded by Hagop Hagopian in Beirut in 1975. Hagopian had resided in Lebanon since 1967, and was active in the Palestinian resistance, joining the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) in 1967 (Hyland 1991, 25-26). By 1974, Hagopian was a “personal friend” of Sabri Banna, better known as Abu Nidal, a Palestinian militant who was expelled from the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in the early 1970s (Hyland 1991, 47-48).²⁸ When Hagopian formed ASALA in 1975, his group was a natural ally of Abu Nidal’s group, the ANO. Ties between ASALA and ANO deepened further in 1982, when the Israeli invasion of Lebanon forced both groups from Beirut. In exchange for financing, training, and sanctuary in the Bekaa Valley, ASALA provided ANO with European safehouses. Hagopian ruled ASALA personalistically, contributing to ASALA’s alliance with ANO being predicated on Hagopian’s relationship with Abu Nidal. Because authority in ASALA was centered around “[Hagopian’s] impulses and whims,” there were scant opportunities for trust to develop between the groups on other bases (Hyland 1991, 36, 47-48). Consequently, after Hagopian was assassinated in Athens, Greece on April 28, 1988, ties between ASALA and ANO were severed. Absent Hagopian, ANO had little trust in the remnants of ASALA, with whom ANO members had few, if any, other connections.

Mechanism 4: Preference Divergence

The final mechanism linking leadership targeting and alliance breakdown involves preference divergence between a targeted group and its allies. Most often, strategic preference divergence centers around civilian victimization or negotiation. Within militant groups, differences in preferences over civilian targeting and conciliation often derive from individual members’ positions within the organization (Weinstein 2007; Shapiro 2013). In particular, foot-soldiers tend to prefer higher levels of civilian victimization and more radical strategies than leaders. Leaders are more likely to hold long time-horizons and to understand the strategically counterproductive effects of civilian victimization, making them warier of engaging in it. In negotiation scenarios, leaders can also better preserve their power and resources. By contrast, foot-soldiers have fewer resources, making them more likely to strike softer, civilian targets, which are cheaper to attack and

²⁸Hagopian’s friendship with Abu Nidal led PLO operatives to pass photos of Hagopian to French intelligence.

offer greater opportunities for loot (Abrahms and Mierau 2017). Foot-soldiers' reduced abilities to secure privileges during negotiation also leads to their general preference against conciliation.

These dynamics imply that by degrading principal control, leadership decapitation gives lower-ranking militants greater tactical control, driving greater civilian victimization and extreme position-taking (Abrahms and Potter 2015). The procedures targeted groups take to improve internal security in the wake of decapitation are also likely to further degrade the control subsequent leaders wield over foot-soldiers (Shapiro 2013, 114-130). Thus, leadership decapitation is likely to induce a targeted group to engage in more civilian victimization, and to empower anti-conciliation factions. In turn, alliance termination results if allies oppose these changes.

Consider the split between al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and the 1920 Revolution Brigades. Under Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, AQI became a central actor in the insurgency after the U.S. invasion. The 1920 Revolution Brigades was a Sunni nationalist comprised of elements of Saddam Hussein's disbanded Iraqi army. From 2003 to 2006, AQI and the 1920 Revolution Brigades exchanged statements of support and cooperated loosely against the occupation. In January 2006, confronted with escalating U.S. pressure, AQI sought a merger of Sunni groups in Iraq under the Mujahideen Shura Council (MSC), led by Zarqawi. However, on June 7, 2006, Zarqawi was killed in an American airstrike. In the following months, AQI sought a larger merger of militant groups into the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). At the same time, AQI escalated its campaign to stoke sectarian tensions and intimidate the tribes in Anbar Province, engaging in a spate of attacks on civilians (Fishman 2006).

Following Zarqawi's death, AQI demanded loyalty from the 1920 Revolution Brigades. The Brigades balked, blaming civilian victimization perpetrated by AQI for their refusal to integrate under ISI. As a Brigades spokesman explained in April 2007, "As for fighting to kick [U.S. forces] and those collaborating with them out of the country, we support [AQI/ISI] in this regard... However, we are against [their policy] of killing civilians, bombings, indiscriminate attacks, and attacks on the mujahedin groups in the country" (Ridolfo 2007). More broadly, while both AQI and the 1920 Revolution Brigades rejected American intervention, the 1920 Revolution Brigades were relatively more willing to negotiate with the Iraqi government. The AQI alliance with the 1920 Revolution Brigades collapsed due to preference divergence over civilian victimization and conciliation, when the latter refused to pledge loyalty to the former.

Aggregate Results of the CPO

Overall, the CPO shows that incapacitation of the targeted group is the dominant cause of termination in the wake of decapitation. This mechanism is the primary driver of termination in about 47% (14 of 30) of our cases, and is a relevant factor in 63% (19 of 30) of our cases. Incapacitation is also the most likely mechanism to occur in isolation—it is the sole breakdown mechanism in 6 cases. This result echoes Johnston’s (2012) finding that leadership targeting severely degrades groups’ operational capabilities. Initially, this conclusion may seem at odds with our quantitative results, which do not suggest that targeting significantly increases the likelihood of alliance breakdown by targeted group collapse. However, outright collapse is the maximal form of incapacitation, and as such represents a high threshold, particularly because forced collapse is relatively rare. Incapacitation short of collapse is indistinguishable in statistical tests relying on group termination as the outcome. This, however, is a reflection of available data rather than reality—scholars lack time-series, cross-organizational data on less severe forms of incapacitation. Evidence from the CPO reveals that the capability-reducing effects of decapitation are important even when targeting does not eliminate groups outright. Importantly, this result also contextualizes Ryckman’s (2017) finding that targeting can cause targeted group inactivity even if it does not directly eliminate groups.

Apart from the incapacitation of the targeted groups, leadership targeting also induces alliance termination by stoking fears among allies of targeted groups about their security, and by exacerbating preference divergence between targeted groups and their allies. These mechanisms are the primary cause of termination in about 23% of our cases. Overall, operational security fears are relevant in 43% (13 of 30) cases, while preference divergence is relevant in about 37% (11 of 30) cases. These results help contextualize our finding that inter-organizational splits—which are often a product of mistrust—are a primary mode of alliance termination after decapitation.

Conclusion

Unplanned leadership turnover plays a central role in the demise of cooperation between militant organizations. Decapitating an organization’s founder leads to a substantial increase in the likelihood that an organization’s alliances terminate. Leadership targeting increases the prob-

ability of alliance termination because it degrades targeted groups' abilities to meet their material obligations to allies; because it generates risks, making allies of targeted groups fearful that they too will be targeted; and because it induces preference divergence between targeted groups and their allies over civilian victimization and conciliation. Leadership targeting plays a critical role in spurring inter-organizational splits, in which allied groups fall out, though neither collapses completely. These findings lend nuance to debates over the efficacy of decapitation. Null effects on termination via group collapse are more consistent with Jordan's (2019) findings than those of Price (2018). However, our results also reveal that targeted group incapacitation is an important consequence of decapitation, as Price (2018) argues, even if targeting is insufficient to spur outright collapse. This result suggests the need for more fine-grained quantitative measures of incapacitation than group longevity, and helps contextualize evidence that targeting can reduce militants' production of violence (Johnston 2012; Ryckman 2017), even if groups survive decapitation.

Above all, these findings matter for academic and policy debates about leadership targeting, and the importance of leaders in generating and sustaining cooperation. Unplanned leadership turnover, and especially leadership decapitation, negatively impacts militant cooperation. As such, decapitation can be an effective instrument for degrading alliances between militant groups. Decision-makers must account for the effects of decapitation on non-targeted groups because these effects ripple through militant networks. Future research should consider how other forms of state pressure affect militant alliance durability, as well as differences in the causes and consequences of alliance terminations resulting from group collapse versus inter-organizational splits.

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