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Veterans, Novices, and Patterns of Rebel Recruitment

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ABSTRACT
Why, and when, do insurgent groups prioritize the recruitment of experienced, veteran fighters? While many studies focus on the obvious benefits of veteran fighters to armed organizations, we show that they also bear serious costs and only fulfill some of an insurgent's wide-ranging needs. We argue that insurgent recruitment practices are dynamic and closely linked to evolving organizational needs. We contend that veterans are most needed during what we call operational junctures. These occur when insurgents are building or re-building their organization, transitioning to new modes of warfare, and competing with rivals for dominance. Outside of these junctures, and once insurgents accomplish their goals, they tend to recruit less experienced combatants who can be molded to fulfill less urgent organizational needs. We illustrate our argument by means of a case study of al Qaeda in Iraq and its successor, the Islamic State.

The Islamic State (IS) is one of the most militarily successful rebel groups in recent history. They managed to "[fight] more like an army than most insurgent groups, holding territory and coordinating operations across large areas."[1] Some have argued that a key reason for IS' success was the experience of its members—combatants who served in state militaries, insurgents who survived the American-led surge, and fighters who honed their craft over years of service in al Qaeda and elsewhere.[2] Owing to their obvious utility, one might expect insurgents to predominantly recruit experienced fighters. Yet, their recruitment practices are surprisingly varied, and at different times, the Islamic State prioritized foreigners, novices, and civilians with a diverse range of skills. An IS leader even once said: "We have given up on [adults], we care about the new generation,"[3] younger recruits who lacked military experience altogether.

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[1]Barak Barfi, "The Military Doctrine of the Islamic State and the Limits of Ba'athist Influence," *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 2 (2016): 18–22.

[2]Liz Sly, "The Hidden Hand behind the Islamic State Militants? Saddam Hussein's," *Washington Post*, 4 April 2015; Shane Harris, "The Re-Baathification of Iraq," *Foreign Policy*, August 2014, https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/08/21/the-re-baathification-of-iraq/.

[3]Zeina Karam and Bram Janssen, "In an ISIS Training Camp, Children Practice Beheading on Dolls," *Haaretz*, 20 July 2015, https://www.haaretz.com/2015-07-20/ty-article/in-an-isis-training-camp-children-practice-beheading-on-dolls/0000017f-f456-d887-a7ff-fcf6f6660000.

When will insurgent groups focus on recruiting experienced fighters with military skill? We suggest that while there are clear benefits to veteran fighters, they also introduce notable challenges for organizations. Experienced fighters are also not universally useful across all stages of development and adaptation. Insurgents must therefore weigh the costs and benefits of recruiting such fighters, like their military know-how and their questionable loyalty.[4] As a result, we expect insurgents to prioritize recruiting veterans during operational junctures: when organizations are faced with an urgent need to adapt or recover. This occurs when groups are initially building or re-building after significant battlefield losses, when pursuing major tactical changes, and when facing acute competition with other armed groups for local superiority. During these periods, the necessity of shifting operational approaches pushes organizations to recruit instrumentally for combat skills above all other needs. The particular organizational needs at these junctures also shape the types of experience insurgents will seek out (e.g. expertise in certain tactics, strategies, or combat proficiencies) and where they recruit from (e.g. other groups or the general population). To illustrate this argument, we conduct case studies of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and its successor, IS. Drawing upon a wide range of primary and secondary documents, we show that operational junctures do, in fact, compel insurgents to rapidly adjust their recruitment practices.

This research makes several contributions. While some contend that experienced fighters are universally desired by insurgent groups, we show there are drawbacks to both trained veterans and inexperienced novices, and insurgent leaders consider these tradeoffs when designing their recruitment strategies. Relatedly, this variation underscores the instrumentality of insurgent recruitment. Insurgents do not only observe recruits along a single dimension, nor is their interest in a given dimension constant or necessarily linked to the conflict environment. While we focus on combat skills, this calculus no doubt extends to other areas of expertise, such as social media, administration, engineering, and medicine.

Finally, our focus on operational junctures demonstrates that insurgents exercise agency in both shaping and responding to conflict processes. These are moments when insurgents may fundamentally transform to survive or rapidly expand. It is likely that recruitment practices are only one facet of organizational change that takes place at these critical moments.[5] Moreover, how organizations approach these junctures sheds

[4]Bernd Beber and Christopher Blattman, "The Logic of Child Soldiering and Coercion," *International Organization* 67, no. 1 (January 2013): 65–104, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818312000409.

[5]Paul Staniland, "Whither ISIS? Insights from Insurgent Responses to Decline," *Washington Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (August 2017): 29–43, https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2017.1370328.

light on their underlying goals, how they balance political and military affairs, and their capacity to adapt at other moments, such as peace negotiations and post-conflict governance.

We begin by surveying the benefits and challenges of veteran fighters to insurgent organizations. With this in mind, we develop a theory of why and when groups should instrumentally embrace combat veterans. Our theory yields specific predictions about when groups will recruit these particular fighters. We demonstrate the theory's mechanics by evaluating the recruitment practices of AQI and, later, IS. This critical case provides strong support for our theory and a clear illustration of the link between combat needs and recruitment practices more generally.

Insurgent Recruitment Practices and Preferences

Whether terrorists, rebels, militias, or insurgents, recruitment is a core function of almost all armed groups. We focus on insurgent organizations, and we use this term interchangeably with armed groups, rebels, or militant organizations. While these groups commonly gain new members voluntarily or through alliances and mergers, this is rarely sufficient to meet their full operational needs, especially when those needs are urgent and groups lack the widespread recognition that might attract new members. Virtually all organizations therefore construct and operate intentional (and sometimes forceful) recruitment strategies to gain new members. We are interested in explaining variation in this particular component of their recruitment practices.

Insurgents need recruits to employ force in pursuit of their military and political objectives. With more fighters at their disposal, insurgents can engage more targets and do so with greater strength. This need remains pressing throughout a group's existence as sustained combat operations require insurgents to replace fallen fighters. The Taliban, for instance, constantly recruited to replenish the fighters they lost to American and Afghan forces.[6] Failing to replace these individuals can precipitate organizational decline. Beyond this practical requirement, consistent and effective recruitment also serves symbolic purposes. Insurgents commonly operate in a crowded marketplace where multiple groups compete for a limited pool of potential fighters.[7] A large membership demonstrates organizational prestige and relative superiority, serving a variety of intra- and extra-organizational purposes.[8]

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[6]Antonio Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 2001-2018* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

[7]Mia Bloom, "Palestinian Suicide Bombing: Public Support, Market Share, and Outbidding," *Political Science Quarterly* 119, no. 1 (2004).

[8]Fotini Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

While insurgents need new members, many factors shape which individuals they ultimately recruit. Some of these are relatively fixed. For one, insurgents face daunting resource constraints that limit how many people they can identify, recruit, vet, indoctrinate, and integrate.[9] For another, insurgents care about recruits' commitment. Acting as principals, they desire agents who will follow orders and not defect, desert, or otherwise underperform.[10] While groups conceptualize commitment differently, they are interested in weeding out opportunistic joiners, spies, or informants. Failing to do so can be disastrous.

At the same time, insurgents must sometimes compromise their most basic interests to ensure they have sufficient membership.[11] Facing imminent defeat will compel insurgents to recruit fighters of almost any quality, often by threats of violence. Such coercion, however, tends to dampen commitment and motivation.[12] Insurgents similarly adjust recruitment practices to acquire particular skills. When groups develop, as Bloom notes, they acquire a greater need for expertise. They must learn to create and disseminate propaganda, raise and track finances, and provide social, governmental, and judicial services to those living under their control. This means selecting recruits based on criteria such as education or training.[13]

While insurgents require many skill sets, capable fighters are fundamental to the success of any rebel movement.[14] Insurgents should therefore have an interest in attracting recruits who previously engaged in or were trained in organized armed combat—what we call experienced fighters, or more simply, veterans.[15] While military experience can endow potential recruits with many different skills, we are specifically interested in those with combat skills. This ranges from weapons expertise to operational planning, indoctrination and training, and strategy formulation. Insurgents may very well need information about logistics, financing, intelligence, and other military matters, but they may need these skills at different

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[9]Mia Bloom, "Constructing Expertise: Terrorist Recruitment and 'Talent Spotting' in the PIRA, Al Qaeda, and ISIS," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 7 (July 2017): 606.

[10]Scott Gates, "Recruitment and Allegiance: The Microfoundations of Civil War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46, no. 1 (2002): 111–30.

[11]Jeremy Weinstein, "Resources and the Information Problem in Rebel Recruitment," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49, no. 4 (August 2005): 598–624, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002705277802.

[12]Kristine Eck, "Coercion in Rebel Recruitment," *Security Studies* 23, no. 2 (2014): 364–98, 365.

[13]Bloom, "Constructing Expertise," 606.

[14]Daniel Byman, Peter Chalk, Bruce Hoffman, William Rosenau, and David Brannan, *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements* (RAND Corporation, 2001).

[15]This will sometimes overlap with the related, though distinct, concept of foreign fighters, most definitions of which are agnostic about previous experience. See, for instance: Kristin M. Bakke, "Help Wanted?: The Mixed Record of Foreign Fighters in Domestic Insurgencies," *International Security* 38, no. 4 (2014): 150–87.

points in time. We use the terms experienced, skilled, and veteran interchangeably, as well as inexperienced, unskilled, and novice.

There are two common ways for individuals to gain combat experience. First, they can serve in the armed forces of a state. Military defectors with state training have contributed to insurgent capacity in numerous cases.[16] In 2013, for instance, a senior commander in the Afghan Special Forces defected with weapons and equipment.[17] Similarly, the Rassemblement des Forces pour le Changement in Chad was composed almost entirely of defectors from the state's elite Republican Guard, endowing the group with substantial capability.[18] Second, recruits can gain combat skills after serving with other armed groups.[19] Hezbollah, for instance, was formed by defecting Lebanese fighters from groups like Amal and subsequently enticed other defectors through coordinated propaganda campaigns.[20] Similar processes were apparent in Iraq during the US troop surge that began in 2007. The Naqshbandi Army (also known as the Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order, or JRTN) recruited battle-ready fighters from various Sunni insurgent groups.[21]

Benefits and Challenges of Experienced Fighters

Many groups have developed sophisticated strategies to identify and entice individuals with combat skills, including the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), al Qaeda, the Irish Republican Army (IRA), the Basque separatist group ETA, and even present-day white nationalists in the United States and Europe. Combat veterans were reportedly critical to the successes of these groups and many more across North Africa, Chechnya, Kashmir, China, Bosnia, and the Philippines.[22] Yet, the empirical record also shows how insurgents eschew experienced fighters to recruit principally for other qualities. For instance, groups like Jabhat al-Nusra have employed recruitment strategies that flexibly shift between various

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[16]Owen Bowcott, "Paratroooper Who Joined IRA Freed After Sentence," *The Irish Times*, 8 November 1996, https://www.irishtimes.com/news/paratroooper-who-joined-ira-freed-after-sentence-1.103816; "Fighting Boko Haram in Chad: Beyond Military Measures," Africa Report (International Crisis Group, March 2017).

[17]Mohammad Anwar, "Afghan Special Forces Commander Defects with Guns to Insurgents," *Reuters*, 20 October 2013.

[18]"Armed Conflicts Report—Chad" (Waterloo, ON, Canada: Project Ploughshares, January 2009).

[19]Steven Windisch, Michael K. Logan, and Gina Scott Ligon, "Headhunting Among Extremist Organizations: An Empirical Assessment of Talent Spotting," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12, no. 2 (2018): 44–62.

[20]Eitan Azani, "The Hybrid Terrorist Organization: Hezbollah as a Case Study," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 11 (2013): 899–916.

[21]Michael Knights, "The JRTN Movement and Iraq's Next Insurgency," *CTC Sentinel* 4, no. 7 (2011): 1–6.

[22]Bloom, "Palestinian"; Martha Crenshaw, "Mapping Militants," 2018, http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/.

ideological traits regardless of military skill.[23] Others, such as the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), seek out teenage boys absent any fighting experience whatsoever.[24] This was also true for Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and Mozambique's Renamo, who sometimes favored unskilled civilians.[25] What are the benefits and challenges of recruiting veteran fighters and when will insurgents seek them out?

Benefits of Veteran Fighters

Experienced fighters offer obvious benefits to insurgent organizations. We identify three in particular: they can be quickly deployed, they often bring new skills, and they can disseminate their knowledge as trainers.

First, for many armed organizations, initial procedures to integrate new recruits begin with ideological indoctrination and combat training.[26] While the need for indoctrination might not covary with fighting experience, veteran fighters typically need less combat training.[27] Their combat experience signals that they are relatively reliable soldiers. Conversely, it is common for recruits lacking military experience to be wholly unnerved by combat.[28] As a result, organizations assign inexperienced fighters to relatively simple tasks and delay their deployment.[29] Skilled fighters, however, are a force multiplier and can be rapidly integrated into ongoing operations. And with more experienced fighters, groups may need fewer training camps that are vulnerable to detection and airstrikes.[30] While they may still require ideological indoctrination, this can be done more covertly.

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[23]Holger Albrecht, "Saints and Warriors: Strategic Choice in Rebel Recruitment in the Syrian Civil War," *Civil Wars* 24, no. 4 (2 October 2022): 387–410, https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2022.2125722.

[24]Beber and Blattman, "The Logic of Child Soldiering and Coercion"; See also, Roos Haer and Tobias Böhmelt, "The Impact of Child Soldiers on Rebel Groups' Fighting Capacities, the Impact of Child Soldiers on Rebel Groups' Fighting Capacities," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 33, no. 2 (1 April 2016): 153–73. https://doi.org/10.1177/0738894215570424.

[25]Scott Gates, "Membership Matters: Coerced Recruits and Rebel Allegiance," *Journal of Peace Research* 54, no. 5 (1 September 2017): 674–86. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343317722700.

[26]Kristine Eck, "Coercion in Rebel Recruitment."

[27]Alec Worsnop, "Rebels Fire and Maneuver Too: How Military Cadres Sustain Guerrilla Warfare," Working Paper (University of Maryland, 2019); Truls Hallberg Tønnessen, "Training on a Battlefield: Iraq as a Training Ground for Global Jihadis," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20, no. 4 (2008): 544; Christopher E. Goscha, "Belated Asian Allies: The Technical and Military Contributions of Japanese Deserters, (1945–50)," in *A Companion to the Vietnam War*, ed. Marilyn B. Young and Robert Buzzanco (Blackwell Publishing Company, 2006), 37–64.

[28]S. L. A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000).

[29]Barak Mendelsohn, "Foreign Fighters—Recent Trends," *Orbis* 55, no. 2 (2011): 189–202, 195–96.

[30]Mendelsohn, "Foreign Fighters—Recent Trends," 198.

Second, veteran fighters possess skills and experiences that can help insurgents implement new strategies, operations, and tactics. During the 1980s and 1990s, experienced fighters from Afghanistan brought specialized skills to many groups throughout Africa and the Middle East. Al-Shabaab, specifically, benefited from what their veterans had learned about suicide attacks, roadside bombings, kidnapings, and assassinations.[31] More recently, experienced Chechen fighters reportedly made the Syrian insurgency more effective.[32]

Third, veterans can also serve as valuable trainers who prepare novices and share their specialized knowledge.[33] This was the case when the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) requested veteran fighters who "would serve as trainers and mid-level commanders rather than as rank-and-file fighters" to handle an influx of untrained fighters from Europe.[34] Similarly, Giustozzi finds that foreign-trained advisors was core to the Taliban's military development. Interviewed Taliban combatants "eagerly recognized the contribution of these advisers to improving the (once very poor) proficiency of Taliban fighters."[35]

Challenges of Veteran Fighters

Existing research is optimistic when examining veteran fighters.[36] In reality, they display some important downsides as well. Since it is well established that insurgents carefully evaluate their recruits to make informed decisions during recruitment, we expect these costs to be meaningful.

First, attracting veteran fighters often requires costly adjustments to recruitment strategies.[37] Since they often come from outside organizations' social and political networks and have experienced combat, appealing to them should require meaningfully different messaging and more targeted, resource-intensive recruitment tactics.[38] Japan's Aum Shinrikyo went to

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[31]Shinn David, "Al-Shabaab's Foreign Threat to Somali," *Orbis* 55, no. 2 (2011): 203–15.

[32]Neil Hauer, "Chechen and North Caucasian Militants in Syria," *Atlantic Council* 18 (2018).

[33]Eric Keels, Jay Benson, and Michael Widmeier, "Teaching from Experience: Foreign Training and Rebel Success in Civil War," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 38, no. 6 (2021): 696–717.

[34]Sahak Martin and Girish Gupta, "Islamic State Seizes New Afghan Foothold After Luring Taliban Defectors," *Reuters*, 1 December 2017.

[35]Antonio Giustozzi, "The Taliban's Adaptation 2002-11: A Case of Evolution?," *Cliodynamics* 3, no. 1 (2012): 113.

[36]One notable exception is Beber and Blattman who observe that recruiting child fighters is sometimes even less costly than adults even though children bring fewer skills. Beber and Blattman, "Logic."

[37]Bloom, "Constructing Expertise."

[38]David Malet, "Why Foreign Fighters?: Historical Perspectives and Solutions," *Orbis* 54, no. 1 (1 January 2010): 97–114, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2009.10.007; V. Boganitov and A. Nacev, "Understanding Terrorist Motivation with an Emphasis on ISIS Recruitment Methods," in *Countering Terrorist Activities in*

great lengths to recruit individuals with particular skillsets, spending significant time and resources on each one. In 1992, they conducted specialized talent spotting, paying upward of USD$10,000 to access the personal information of 30,000 graduates.[39] Likewise, al Qaeda had to devise a slower and more personalized recruitment method that "systematically targeted returnees from Afghanistan" in the late 1990s.[40] This contrasts with how inexperienced jihadis are often targeted en masse through cheaper and less-directed methods like social media outreach, lectures at mosques, and radio programs.[41]

Second, once veterans are recruited, organizations face the high costs of paying them. Skilled fighters usually demand greater compensation. In the Southern Lebanese Army, for instance, salaries during the early 2000s began at USD$8,800 with bonuses for each additional year of experience.[42] Such schemes are not uncommon and can strain group finances.[43] For example, during a period of financial hardship, Boko Haram found itself unable to pay some of its fighters' salaries and defections soon occurred.[44]

Third, experienced fighters are often difficult to integrate and re-socialize. While they have demonstrated their willingness to fight—a major challenge for military socialization—these members received their socialization and experience elsewhere.[45] These experiences and entrenched norms might make it difficult for veterans to accept new operating procedures, strategies, and command hierarchies.[46] As Tamil organizations in Sri Lanka competed

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Cyberspace, ed. M. Bogdanoski and Z. Minchev (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2018), 87–88; Bloom, "Constructing Expertise," 604.

[39]Samuel T. Hunter, Neil D. Shortland, Matthew P. Crayne, and Gina S. Ligon. "Recruitment and Selection in Violent Extremist Organizations: Exploring What Industrial and Organizational Psychology Might Contribute," *American Psychologist* 72, no. 3 (2017): 242.

[40]Thomas Hegghammer, "Terrorist Recruitment and Radicalization in Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Policy* 13, no. 4 (2006): 52.

[41]Sharon Curcio, "Generational Differences in Waging Jihad," *Military Review* 85, no. 4 (2005): 84.

[42]Paul J. Tompkins, Jr. and Chuck Crosset, "Assessing Revolutionary and Insurgent Strategies: Casebook on Insurgency and Revolutionary Warfare, Volume II: 1962–2009" (United States Army Special Operations Command; Johns Hopkins University, 2012).

[43]Patrick B. Johnston, Jacob Shapiro, Howard Shatz, Benjamin Bahney, Danielle Jung, Patrick Ryan, and Jonathan Wallace, *Foundations of the Islamic State: Management, Money, and Terror in Iraq, 2005-2010* (Rand Corporation, 2016).

[44]United Nations Security Council, "Fourth Report of the Secretary-General on the Threat Posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to International Peace and Security and the Range of United Nations Efforts in Support of Member States in Countering the Threat" (United Nations, February 2017).

[45]Amelia Hoover Green, *The Commander's Dilemma: Violence and Restraint in Wartime* (Cornell University Press, 2018).

[46]On this point, an influx of veteran fighters could also upend a group's internal balance of power. E.g. Henning Tamm, "Rebel Leaders, Internal Rivals, and External Resources: How State Sponsors Affect Insurgent Cohesion," *International Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (2016): 599–610; Ben Rich and Dara Conduit,

with each other throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, for instance, the movement of high-ranking members between these groups—who all thought they knew best—generated internal feuds.[47] These dynamics are exacerbated when experienced fighters join from outside the conflict zone. As Bakke notes, foreign fighters might "weaken domestic insurgencies by introducing new ideas regarding their objectives and how these struggles should be waged."[48] The Afghan Taliban faced these issues when foreign fighters from Pakistan fought without taking into account local concerns.[49] Likewise, at the outset of the First Indochina War, the Viet Minh struggled to integrate Japanese recruits whose advice did not match the technical and tactical needs of the Vietnamese forces, meaning that their experience could not "be applied magically in Vietnam."[50] In contrast, novices do not bring such combat predilections, making them easier to indoctrinate.

Finally, veteran fighters maintain complex allegiances to the individuals with whom they fought and, at times, depended upon. While leaders may not have to worry about their willingness or ability to fight, they might have to worry about their long-term commitment.[51] Mosinger finds that in Nicaragua, preexisting networks that connected fighters to particular leaders commonly introduced defection and dissension in the Sandinista National Liberation Front and its splinters, disrupting group cohesion and operations.[52] While most recruits have overlapping allegiances, this is inherently more likely with veteran fighters because of their prior combat experience and the unit cohesion they develop in battle. A solution to these problems might be integration and assimilation procedures, but these programs are neither easy nor guaranteed to work.[53]

"The Impact of Jihadist Foreign Fighters on Indigenous Secular-Nationalist Causes: Contrasting Chechnya and Syria," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 2 (2015): 113–31; Christopher Blattman and Bernd Beber, "The Industrial Organization of Rebellion: The Logic of Forced Labor and Child Soldiering," Working Paper (New York University; Yale University, July 2011).

[47]Muttukrishna Sarvananthan, "'Terrorism'or 'Liberation?' Towards a Distinction: A Case Study of the Armed Struggle of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12, no. 2 (2018): 5.

[48]Bakke, "Help Wanted?," 153.

[49]Theo Farrell and Antonio Giustozzi, "The Taliban at War: Inside the Helmand Insurgency, 2004–2012," *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2013): 857.

[50]Christopher E. Goscha, "Building Force: Asian Origins of Twentieth-Century Military Science in Vietnam (1905-54)," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 34, no. 3 (2003): 549–50.

[51]Theodore McLauchlin, *Desertion: Trust and Mistrust in Civil Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020). Evan Perkoski, "Internal Politics and the Fragmentation of Armed Groups," *International Studies Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (2019): 876–89.

[52]"Balance of Loyalties: Explaining Rebel Factional Struggles in the Nicaraguan Revolution," *Security Studies* 28, no. 5 (2019): 935–75.

[53]Conventional militaries with significantly more resources commonly face similar problems and even then, find it challenging. For example, Uzi Ben-Shalom, Zeev Lehrer, and Eyal Ben-Ari, "Cohesion During

Operational Junctures and the Recruitment of Experienced Fighters

Veteran fighters are valuable to armed groups, so why do insurgents focus their recruitment efforts on combat veterans at some points but not others? We contend that insurgents will prioritize the recruitment of military veterans when they face urgent combat needs. We call these moments operational junctures. We highlight three in particular: when groups initially build or re-build their organizations after significant loss; when they must make urgent tactical or strategic adaptations, such as transitioning from guerrilla to more conventional forms of maneuver warfare; and during periods of intense peer competition. These operational junctures can sometimes overlap, and we explore the implications of this in our case study. When they do overlap, we rely on our predictions about the type of combat experience insurgents will seek out to disentangle the junctures.

We review each of these operational junctures more carefully in the following pages and make predictions about the specific type of combat experience needed at each one, offering even more observable implications to illustrate our theory. For example, we suggest that the tradeoffs are more complicated for groups that are building or re-building. While these groups need combat skills, they also face the challenge of ensuring that they have a committed core to build upon. In these cases, we should see organizations trying especially hard to recruit military veterans who also show some ideological or organizational commitment.

Before proceeding, there are two scope conditions bounding this argument. First, we are interested in periods during which organizations are engaged in sustained, intentional efforts to recruit skilled fighters rather than one-off recruitment of particular individuals or when recruits join on their own accord. Second, our theory yields predictions about when insurgents will engage in such recruitment efforts but not whether they will succeed. Success may hinge on the characteristics of the conflict, the availability of veterans, the costs of specific recruits, available resources, and so on. The supply side is undoubtedly an important piece of the puzzle that we return to in the conclusion.

Building a Base

Insurgents should seek out veteran fighters when they must build or rebuild their core fighting capacity. When organizations face an imminent need to

Military Operations: A Field Study on Combat Units in the Al-Aqsa Intifada," *Armed Forces & Society* 32, no. 1 (2005): 63–79; David R. Segal, Brian J. Reed, and David E. Rohall, "Constabulary Attitudes of National Guard and Regular Soldiers in the U.S. Army," *Armed Forces & Society* 24, no. 4 (1998): 535–48.

generate force, veterans can directly contribute to battlefield operations and help to train larger groups of novices. There are two moments when this should occur: at the beginning of the conflict and following significant battlefield losses.

At the start of a conflict, insurgent groups are highly vulnerable.[54] They are often poorly institutionalized and do not begin as capable armed forces. Even if they maintain a strong social base or form with highly committed fighters, this does not equate to military know-how.[55] As a result, nascent insurgents are commonly playing catch up to reach base levels of fighting capacity.[56] Failing to get up to speed and create a stable core of effective fighters can easily result in defeat. By contrast, those with more skilled fighters are more likely to survive these unbalanced early encounters—a process that has been coined "combat Darwinism."[57] This was the case with Hezbollah: as DeVore and Stähli find, the group's success was only possible because of the veteran Amal and Palestinian operatives they were able to recruit early on.[58] As a result, the period after their formation is a key juncture for insurgent groups where they either generate the foundation to compete or are overcome by the state's greater capacity.[59]

Insurgents face similarly dire prospects after significant, strategic losses. Such losses include cases of near-defeat and the widespread removal of skilled cadre.[60] These are not mere defeats during operations or battles but existential threats to organization survival. They will subsequently need to build and rebuild a core of experienced fighters who can contribute skills and train new recruits. This was the case after the Provisional Irish Republican Army's near implosion in 1976 which forced it to refocus away from mass recruitment toward skilled fighters.[61]

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[54]Janet I. Lewis, *How Insurgency Begins: Rebel Group Formation in Uganda and Beyond* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[55]Alec Worsnop, "Organization and Community: The Determinants of Insurgent Military Effectiveness" (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2016).

[56]Paul Staniland, "Organizing Insurgency: Networks, Resources, and Rebellion in South Asia," *International Security* 37, no. 1 (2012): 154.

[57]Ahmed Hashim, "Chapter Four: Organisation, Targeting, Operational Art and Tactics," *The Adelphi Papers* 48, no. 402 (2008): 43–52.

[58]Marc R. DeVore and Armin B. Stähli, "Explaining Hezbollah's Effectiveness: Internal and External Determinants of the Rise of Violent Non-State Actors," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no. 2 (2015): 331–57, 350.

[59]Lewis, *How Insurgency Begins*, 38.

[60]Christopher W. Blair, Michael C. Horowitz, and Philip B. K. Potter, "Leadership Targeting and Militant Alliance Breakdown," *The Journal of Politics* 84, no. 2 (2022): 923–43.

[61]Paul D. Kenny, "Structural Integrity and Cohesion in Insurgent Organizations: Evidence from Protracted Conflicts in Ireland and Burma," *International Studies Review* 12, no. 4 (2010): 545; Paul Gill and John Horgan, "Who Were the Volunteers? The Shifting Sociological and Operational Profile of 1240 Provisional Irish Republican Army Members," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 25, no. 3 (2013): 443.

In both formation and recovery, we predict that insurgent organizations should seek recruits with preexisting combat experience who can help get them up to speed.[62] While groups may be reluctant to fill their ranks with outsiders and veterans of other conflicts, these individuals can ultimately play a fundamental role in future force generation.[63] Colombia's FARC, for instance, sought out recruits from the state's military during their initial organizational formation and with great success.[64]

Because these are fledgling organizations, however, this tradeoff should be particularly hard. Since they do not have mature institutions to socialize and integrate fighters, taking on uncommitted but skilled recruits can be challenging. Thus, we expect that these types of organizations will endeavor to recruit skilled fighters who also demonstrate some commitment to the organization.

As groups institutionalize procedures to integrate new fighters, and as other members gain combat experience and training of their own, they should begin to rely less on outside combat veterans and refocus their recruitment efforts. This was observed when the Taliban relied on combat veterans to rebuild their military structure before shifting to recruiting local Afghans en masse and using their experienced fighters as trainers.[65]

Importantly, there are cases where we do not expect this mechanism to operate. When organizations are initially forged around a core of experienced fighters—such as defectors from a state military or an insurgent splinter group—we should not observe them expanding their base of skilled fighters as an initial priority. We should also not observe the recruitment of veterans when organizations receive significant support from states who can lend advisers and offer training. This was apparent in the rise of certain Sunni insurgent groups in Iraq that were founded by former Baathists whose time in the Iraqi armed forces generated military skills and martial networks.[66] We would expect their recruitment patterns to be distinct.

Transitioning to New Modes of Warfare

Researchers find that organizations commonly seek support from outside sources when constrained by their existing expertise.[67] Insurgent organi-

[62]Daniel Byman et al., *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements* (Rand Corporation, 2001), 92.

[63]Bloom, "Constructing Expertise."

[64]Francisco Gutierrez Sanin, "The Dilemmas of Recruitment: The Colombian Case," in *Understanding Collective Political Violence* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2012), 175–95.

[65]Farrell and Giustozzi, "Taliban at War," 857.

[66]Tønnessen, "Training," 546.

[67]Ashutosh Varshney, "Ethnic Conflict and Civil Society: India and Beyond," *World Politics* 53, no. 3 (2001): 362–98; E. La Ferrara and A. Alesina, "Ethnic Diversity and Economic Performance," *Journal of Economic*

zations are no different and will seek out expertise instrumentally to drive major tactical changes. This is perhaps most obvious in strategic alliance-making that is often motivated by technical shortcomings.[68] The Viet Minh in Vietnam, for instance, relied on embedded Chinese advisors to aid their transition to movement warfare after 1950. Yet, directly recruiting experienced fighters should be less risky than sustained cooperative linkages that, historically, have posed security risks.[69] For instance, owing to the close cooperation between the Armed Forces of Colombia and Sendero Luminoso, state forces were able to capture leaders of both groups after a successful raid on a military base of the Colombian guerrillas.[70]

Insurgents should, therefore, seek out experienced fighters who possess skills and experience they lack but presently desire. The role of Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in disseminating suicide tactics reveals precisely how the flow of experienced fighters can help transmit capabilities.[71] A similar pattern was evident in Iraq while groups pursued new capabilities. To this end, JRTN, one of the more capable insurgent groups in Iraq, seconded knowledgeable members to other Sunni groups.[72] In each of these cases, insurgent groups sought out veteran fighters specifically during operational junctures, and these fighters were instrumental to the development of new skills and modes of warfare.

We would expect to see organizations that are transitioning to new tactics—and particularly complex tactics—seeking out experienced fighters. While insurgents should be able to manage small-scale changes on their own, outside expertise is likely needed for major tactical shifts that might include a pivot toward larger, conventional operations. Unlike in the previous set of operational junctures, however, generic combat experience should be insufficient: insurgents should seek out veterans with the combat expertise they specifically need. Once a given expertise is acquired,

Literature 43, no. 3 (2005): 762–800; I. Janis, *Groupthink*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982); Andrea Prat, "Should a Team Be Homogeneous?" *European Economic Review* 46, no. 7 (2002): 1187–207; Chad Serena, *It Takes More Than a Network: The Iraqi Insurgency and Organizational Adaptation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Security Studies, 2014); Hunter et al., "Recruitment."

[68]Michael C. Horowitz and Philip B. K. Potter, "Allying to Kill: Terrorist Intergroup Cooperation and the Consequences for Lethality," 204; Christopher W. Blair, Erica Chenoweth, Michael C. Horowitz, Evan Perkoski, and Philip B. K. Potter, "Honor among Thieves: Understanding Rhetorical and Material Cooperation among Violent Nonstate Actors," *International Organization* 76, no. 1 (2022): 164–203; Michael C. Horowitz, Evan Perkoski, and Philip B. K. Potter, "Tactical Diversity in Militant Violence," *International Organization* 72, no. 1 (2018): 139–71.

[69]Christopher Blair et al., "Honor among Thieves: Understanding Rhetorical and Material Cooperation among Militant Groups," *International Organization* 76, no. 1 (2022): 164–203.

[70]Patrick Markey, "Colombia Kills Top FARC Rebel Commander in Raid," *Reuters*, 23 September 2010.

[71]Horowitz and Potter, "Allying to Kill."

[72]Knights, "JRTN Movement."

insurgents should shift to recruiting for other priorities and for novices whose development, indoctrination, and training they can control from the outset.

This was the case with the Taliban when it sought to acquire suicide bombing capabilities. One Taliban leader recounted that "Arab and Iraqi mujaheddin began visiting us, transferring the latest IED [improvised explosive device] technology and suicide-bomber tactics they had learned in the Iraqi resistance during combat with U.S. forces." After the Taliban had built up this capacity, however, it no longer prioritized recruiting experts. By 2010, they were less numerous and served as advisors and specialists embedded in existing Taliban units.[73]

Direct Competition

Competition between insurgents sometimes supersedes their conflict against the state. Even within generally unified rebel movements, individual insurgent organizations seek to distinguish themselves, pursuing hegemony and maximizing access to human and material resources.[74] This competition is a notable operational moment for organizations: they must transition from tactics used against state forces to those against other insurgent groups. Failing to overcome their insurgent adversaries can contribute to their decline.[75]

While in competition with comparable groups, insurgents are likely to poach their competitors' skilled and, therefore, most valued fighters. These are situations where competing insurgent groups are reasonably institutionalized, have similar capabilities, and recruit from similar population bases. Stealing a group's experienced fighters drains them of expertise, trainers, and fighting capacity.[76] Poaching an adversary's experienced fighters can also reveal valuable information about their operations, including how they plan, acquire funds, and identify and recruit fighters. This is critical to states engaged in counterinsurgency and it should be no less useful to other insurgents who can use this information to launch more effective attacks, to take over their sources of funding, or share it with

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[73]Giustozzi, "Taliban's Adaptation," 113.

[74]Peter Krause, "The Structure of Success: How the Internal Distribution of Power Drives Armed Group Behavior and National Movement Effectiveness," *International Security* 38, no. 3 (January 2014): 72–116, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00148; Christia, *Alliance*; Mia M. Bloom, "Palestinian Suicide Bombing: Public Support, Market Share, and Outbidding," *Political Science Quarterly* 119, no. 1 (2004): 61–88.

[75]Christia, *Alliance*.

[76]Hunter et al., "Recruitment."

counterinsurgents.[77] This was precisely the case in Sri Lanka when groups formerly part of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) used their knowledge to attack the LTTE. As the spokesman of one of these splinter groups said, "Wherever their camps are, we will search and attack them. We know the Tiger strategy because we were once part of the Tigers."[78]

We expect insurgents to implement this poaching recruitment strategy in competitive, fragmented battle spaces. This should be most likely in conflict zones where insurgents exhibit roughly equal strength because all parties will seek advantages as they attempt to maximize their gains by forming a minimum winning coalition. When groups are equally matched, direct violence is likely to be costly and uncertain, prompting insurgents to compete through other means—namely, poaching. In Afghanistan, for instance, competing organizations in the 1980s actively recruited skilled fighters away from their equally matched competitors while ignoring weaker ones.[79]

When there are power asymmetries, we do not expect veteran poaching to occur. Stronger organizations have few incentives to incur the costs of integrating skilled recruits from competing organizations. Instead, such groups will likely use force to attack weaker groups that do not pledge allegiance.[80] Once again, this was apparent in Sri Lanka. Veteran poaching was common until the LTTE gained dominance. Once it gained superior military power, it shifted toward "a campaign of brutal intra-ethnic violence to debilitate its competitor."[81] Similarly, at the start of the First Indochina War in Vietnam, the Viet Minh devoted resources toward recruiting members away from competing nationalist organizations.[82] However, as the Viet Minh became the leader of the nascent resistance to the French, it shifted its strategy of targeting competing resistance organizations.[83]

Finally, during these periods of poaching veterans, we expect insurgents to seek combat experience specifically from the groups they are competing

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[77]Eli Berman, Jacob Shapiro, and Joseph H. Felter, "Can Hearts and Minds Be Bought? The Economics of Counterinsurgency in Iraq," *Journal of Political Economy* 119, no. 4 (2011): 766–819.

[78]"Tamil Tigers Killed by Rival Group," *Al Jazeera*, 27 June 2006.

[79]Christia, *Alliance*, chap. 5.

[80]Kristin M. Bakke, Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, and Lee J. M. Seymour, "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion, and Infighting in Civil Wars," *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 2 (2012): 265–83.

[81]Charles W. Mahoney, "Splinters and Schisms: Rebel Group Fragmentation and the Durability of Insurgencies," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 2 (February 2020): 356.

[82]Christopher E. Goscha, *Vietnam: Un État Né de la Guerre 1945-1954* (Paris: Colin, 2011), Chap. 3; William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), Chap. 6.

[83]François Guillemot, "Autopsy of a Massacre: On a Political Purge in the Early Days of the Indochina War (Nam Bo 1947)," *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 9, no. 2 (December 2010): 225–65.

against. They should also be less concerned with the type of expertise that veterans maintain since their aim is to drain their competitors of capacity and skill. Simultaneously, they should be uninterested in poaching inexperienced fighters who will require costly training and indoctrination with few of the benefits of veterans. This was the case in the 2000s when the Special Groups in Iraq offered monetary incentives to military leaders from Shiite competitors in Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM), like Qais al-Khazali, to defect.[84]

Research Design and Observable Implications

Our theory predicts that insurgents will prioritize the recruitment of veteran fighters during operational junctures. Depending on the type of juncture they are facing, the types of skilled recruits they pursue will vary. Once their needs are met, they should refocus their recruitment to meet other organizational needs. The core observable implications of the theory are summarized in Table 1.

To flesh out these observable implications and to probe the applicability of our theoretical mechanisms, we conduct case studies of the Islamic State (IS) and its progenitor, al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). This approach has two notable benefits. First, examining variation in the recruitment patterns of AQI and IS over time allows us to hold constant—to a reasonable extent—many factors that might drive variation in recruitment. This includes ideology, underlying social networks, geographic areas of operation, ethnic divisions and similarities, and so on. Second, AQI/IS is a critical case. The swift rise of this organization—from relative obscurity to vanguard of the jihadist movement in nearly a decade—not only presents an interesting puzzle but also makes it important to understand. Many observers also contend that experienced fighters were critical to their operational and strategic success. This case, consequently, provides a foundational building-block for understanding why and when organizations recruit skilled fighters, but also how states might prevent this in the future.

Our case studies of AQI and IS draw upon a wide range of internal documents, media accounts, governmental reports, and academic and NGO investigations to evaluate the extent to which AQI/IS engaged in sustained, intentional efforts to recruit experienced fighters. We take effort to include as many local and primary sources as possible. Methodologically, we employ a combination of congruence methods and process tracing to

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[84]Michael Knights, "The Evolution of Iran's Special Groups in Iraq," *CTC Sentinel* 3, no. 11–12 (2010): 12-16.

Table 1. Observable implications.

Periods of operational stability		
Organizations will prioritize non-combat needs		
Operational critical junctures		
Building and re-building	Tactical adaptation	Peer competition
Prioritize recruits with any combat experience from state and non-state actors	Prioritize recruits with specific expertise such as movement warfare or bomb-making	Prioritize recruits from competing rebel organizations, not former fighters, foreign rebels, or state militaries

exhibit the theory's observable implications.[85] Using congruence, we assess the extent to which AQI and IS were recruiting veteran fighters during operational junctures and then turning away from veterans once those needs were met. Using process tracing, we explore whether AQI and IS' recruitment of veteran fighters was in fact motivated by their organizational needs as we contend.

Recruitment Cycles of AQI and IS

AQI developed from Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's Jama'at al-Tawhid wa'al-Jihad (JTJ). Zarqawi embraced radical Islam in the late 1980s, traveling from his home country of Jordan to Afghanistan before being imprisoned in Jordan until 1999. Upon his release, he returned to Afghanistan where, with al Qaeda's support, he formed JTJ and established training camps in the western province of Herat. Zarqawi and his followers embraced a hardline Salafist ideology and carried out attacks against a range of targets. With the US invasion in 2003, Zarqawi relocated to Iraq, bringing with him fighters and organizational infrastructure. A year later, in 2004, senior members of AQ extended an invitation for JTJ to join them. Zarqawi agreed, and AQI was born. Eventually, AQI's ambitions put it at odds with the leaders of AQ. After its expansion into Syria, attempted merger with al-Nusra Front, and name change to the Islamic State (IS), AQI was expelled from AQ in 2014 and became independent under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.[86]

From its inception, captured documents show that AQI carefully traced the expertise and experience of its recruits.[87] These documents also reveal

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[85]Andrew Bennett and Alexander L. George, *Process Tracing in Case Study Research* (Washington, DC: MacArthur Program on Case Studies, 1997).

[86]Colin P Clarke, *After the Caliphate: The Islamic State & the Future Terrorist Diaspora* (John Wiley & Sons, 2019); Ahmed S. Hashim, "The Islamic State: From Al-Qaeda Affiliate to Caliphate," *Middle East Policy* 21, no. 4 (2014): 69–83; William McCants and William Faizi McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (Macmillan, 2015).

[87]See, for example, Harmony Document: NMEC-2007-657674 and Harmony Document: NMEC-2007-657796.

that skilled fighters were not cheap: members without experience tended to earn about 50 euros per month, but skilled fighters could earn up to 1,500.[88] While it is difficult to get precise estimates, one cache of captured documents from 2013 to 2014 reveals that fewer than 4% of incoming recruits had previously engaged in jihad, suggesting that experience was not widespread.[89]

Observers agree that veteran fighters were especially critical to IS' ability to overrun large parts of Iraq and Syria.[90] This sort of success, that borders on conventional operations, is rare for insurgents. While useful, veteran fighters were not without their costs. For instance, there were often political and military disagreements between AQI leaders and experienced recruits. Zarqawi was aware of these challenges. Doubting their commitment, he viewed his alliance with former Baathists not as a happy marriage but as a tactical necessity.[91] This had the perhaps unintended effect of making it even more difficult to fully integrate experienced fighters into the organization, who tended to mostly organize and interact with each other.[92]

With Zarqawi's death in 2006, and growing leadership losses due to the Sons of Iraq tribal militias, AQI and then IS became more dependent on experienced Baathists to refill their ranks. Yet, fundamental ideological disagreements persisted. This sometimes resulted in actual conflict, like in Mosul in 2014 where a gunfight between Baathists and other fighters left 17 dead.[93] Some analysts even speculated that Baathist fully turned against IS from the inside, noting that "it is reasonable to surmise that the ex-Baathists flying the ISIS flag today are covertly working to undermine ISIS's caliphate and eventually achieve their own political goals."[94] While it is indisputable that these disagreements have serious consequences for insurgent organizations, we nonetheless find that AQI and IS actively recruited experienced fighters during operational junctures.

[88]"Top ISIS Leaders Revealed," *Al Arabiya English*, 13 February 2014, https://english.alarabiya.net/News/2014/02/13/Exclusive-Top-ISIS-leaders-revealed.

[89]Abdullah bin Khaled Al-Saud, "Saudi Foreign Fighters: Analysis of Leaked Islamic State Entry Documents" (ICSR, King's College London, 2019).

[90]Ben Hubbard and Eric Schmitt, "Military Skill and Terrorist Technique Fuel Success of ISIS," *The New York Times*, 28 August 2014.

[91]Sly, "Hidden Hand."

[92]Harris, "Re-Baathification."

[93]Rod Nordland, "Sunnis in Iraq Make Some Gains in Fighting in the North and West," *The New York Times*, 21 June 2014.

[94]Malcolm W. Nance, "ISIS Forces That Now Control Ramadi Are Ex-Baathist Saddam Loyalists," *The Intercept*, June 2015.
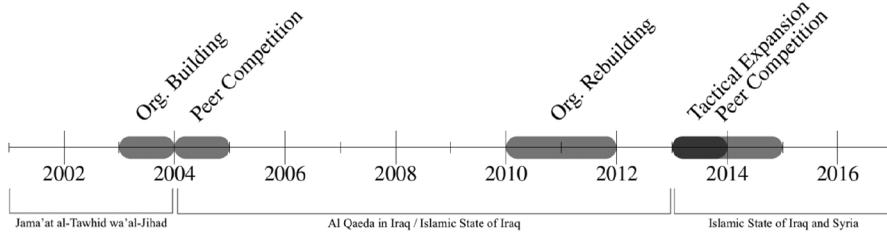
Figure 1. Timeline of AQI/IS/ISIS operational junctures. Abbreviations: AQI, al Qaeda in Iraq; IS, Islamic State; ISIS, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

Operational Junctures of AQI and IS

Our first task in the case study is to identify AQI/IS' operational junctures. We rely on existing sources to identify these periods ex ante. They are summarized in Figure 1 and described more fully in the following pages. First, in terms of organization building and rebuilding, we examine the period from 2003 to 2004, after AQI relocated from Afghanistan with only a handful of fighters; and again from 2010 to 2012 after AQI/IS was decimated by a combination of US, Iraqi, and local forces during the Sunni Awakening and US troop surge. Second, in terms of tactical expansion, experts agree that AQI/IS embarked on a fundamental transformation from asymmetric tactics to movement warfare between 2013 and 2014. Third, researchers identify two points when AQI/IS was engaged in particularly acute peer competition: from 2004 to 2005 when a host of native Iraqi insurgent groups organized to fight the American invasion and crowded the marketplace for recruits; and later from 2013 to 2015 after it was expelled from al Qaeda, sparking a global competition for control of the jihadist movement.

Interestingly, we find that IS simultaneously experienced acute competition and tactical expansion around 2014. This is a useful opportunity to track the theoretical implications of operational junctures because such overlapping periods are perhaps common during competitive civil wars with fragmented oppositions. Accordingly, in this section we especially home in on our theory's implications regarding the types of military skill that groups will seek and the sources of veteran fighters to better disentangle the influence of these overlapping junctures.

Al Qaeda in Iraq

AQI demonstrated notable variation in who they recruited. Despite their performance on the battlefield, they were not characterized by a sole cadre of skilled veterans. As a RAND analysis observes, "If ISI desired members with education and battle experience, why did it accept so many uneducated

and inexperienced foreigners?"[95] Our use of operational junctures helps to untangle why they focused on different types of recruits over time.

Building a Base

We expect AQI to systematically recruit combat veterans with a wide range of military skill when building their organization. We contend that JTG, which would later become AQI, was focused on organization building soon after it entered Iraq. With only a small group of mainly foreign fighters, Zarqawi's organization desperately needed to develop.[96] This was clear in a letter he wrote from 2003: "What has prevented us from going public is that we have been waiting until we have weight on the ground and finish preparing integrated structures capable of bearing the consequences of going public so that we appear in strength and do not suffer a reversal."[97]

Ultimately, Zarqawi's ambitious plans hinged on military capabilities.[98] As Zarqawi wrote to al Qaeda central in 2004, the absence of skilled fighters "makes training the green newcomers like wearing bonds and shackles."[99] Given this shortfall, a top priority for AQI was recruiting skilled fighters.[100] Since the fledgling organization needed all skillsets, they sought fighters with wide-ranging combat experience. This included intelligence collection and analysis, infantry tactics, military training, and internal security, among others.[101] While some directly engaged in battlefield operations, others became valuable trainers and instructors.[102] Veteran fighters also contributed knowledge of smuggling networks, particularly between Iraq and Syria, as well as relationships to other foreigners and

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[95] Johnston et al., *Foundations*, 125.

[96] M. J. Kirdar, "Al Qaeda in Iraq," AQAM Futures Project Case Study Series (Homeland Security & Counterterrorism Program: Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2011).

[97] February 2004 Coalition Provisional Authority English translation of terrorist Musab al Zarqawi letter obtained by United States Government in Iraq, https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/rls/31694.htm.

[98] Colin P. Clarke, *After the Caliphate: The Islamic State & the Future Terrorist Diaspora* (John Wiley & Sons, 2019).

[99] February 2004 Coalition Provisional Authority English translation of terrorist Musab al Zarqawi letter obtained by United States Government in Iraq, https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/rls/31694.htm.

[100] Craig Whiteside, "A Pedigree of Terror: The Myth of the Ba'athist Influence in the Islamic State Movement," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 3 (2017): 4.

[101] Isabel Coles and Ned Parker, "How Saddam's Fighters Help Islamic State Rule," *Reuters*, December 11, 2015, https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/mideast-crisis-iraq-islamicstate/.

[102] Tønnessen, "Training," 546.

even to some Iraqi Islamists.[103] This allowed Zarqawi to amass significant caches of weapons and fighters early on that aided the group's development.[104]

There is clear evidence that AQI recognized the important tradeoff between skill and commitment, just as we would expect from a nascent organization. While Zarqawi recruited skilled fighters, he also evaluated their potential commitment to the group to the extent that he could. Zarqawi did this, at first, by recruiting foreign military veterans who he believed were more committed than local Iraqis. While Zarqawi did eventually recruit Iraqis to fill military gaps, he showed a clear preference for foreigners. Notwithstanding, he observed in early 2004 that skilled foreigners "continue to be negligible as compared to the enormity of the expected battle."[105]

There were several reasons why Iraqis fighters were less desirable than foreign fighters. First, most Iraqis had military training that ran counter to how Zarqawi wanted to operate. Iraqi soldiers tended to have conventional military training that was low-risk (i.e., less prone to casualties) whereas Zarqawi envisioned more high-risk operations. This created doubts about their willingness to follow orders. As Zarqawi observed while communicating to al Qaeda central:

> Jihad here unfortunately [takes the form of] mines planted, rockets launched, and mortars shelling from afar. The Iraqi brothers still prefer safety and returning to the arms of their wives, where nothing frightens them. Sometimes the groups have boasted among themselves that not one of them has been killed or captured. We have told them in our many sessions with them that safety and victory are incompatible, that the tree of triumph and empowerment cannot grow tall and lofty without blood and defiance of death.[106]

Illustrative of this was AQI's persistent challenge to convince Iraqis to become suicide bombers. One study found that AQI did not employ any Iraqi suicide bombers, but in another, 56% of foreign recruits were reportedly willing to take on suicide missions themselves.[107] Thus, while Iraqi

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[103]Whiteside, "Pedigree."

[104]Sly, "Hidden Hand"; Christopher Blair, "Border Control and Insurgent Tactics," Working Paper (University of Pennsylvania, June 2020).

[105]February 2004 Coalition Provisional Authority English translation of terrorist Musab al Zarqawi letter obtained by United States Government in Iraq, https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/rls/31694.htm.

[106]"Zarqawi Letter. February 2004 Coalition Provisional Authority English translation of terrorist Musab al Zarqawi letter obtained by United States Government in Iraq." US Department of State, https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/rls/31694.htm.

[107]Johnston et al., *Foundations*, 121; Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler, "Then and Now: Comparing the Flow of Foreign Fighters to AQI and the Islamic State" (Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, December 2016), 21.

soldiers were objectively qualified, skilled fighters, the legacy of their conventional training complicated their assimilation into Zarqawi's insurgent organization.

Second, Iraqi fighters tended to have ideological predispositions—once again linked to the indoctrination and structure of the Iraqi army under Saddam Hussein—that made their integration difficult. This was because, at least at the outset, former Iraqi soldiers tended to be more nationalist than religious, just like Hussein himself. He reportedly cultivated this mindset intentionally, with many of his speeches even "[attacking] Islamists as the "two-faced men of religion."[108] Illustratively, many of the former Iraqi soldiers who joined IS early on had actually been expelled from the army because of their religious convictions. Zarqawi viewed their expulsion as evidence of ideological alignment with AQI.[109]

While AQI's overwhelming interest in experienced fighters is what we expect, so too was its subsequent shift toward unskilled fighters who were needed to fill its ranks.[110] While AQI initially needed recruits with military experience, there was less of a need for these fighters as the organization matured.[111] Rather than continuing to seek out skilled fighters, it shifted to inexperienced foreigners and used its cadre of veterans to train them. This is a striking recruitment shift given the major challenges that came with these foreign novices—notably their inability to blend into Iraqi society and their lack of local knowledge. AQI recruited foreign fighters throughout 2006 and 2007, even though those fighters posed distinct operational and strategic risks.[112] Notably, this shift toward unskilled foreigners only occurred once a solid core of veteran fighters had been developed.

Peer Competition

We expect AQI to systematically recruit experienced fighters, principally by poaching them from equally-matched peers, during periods of acute competition. AQI experienced such a period between 2004 and 2005 when a host of native Iraqi insurgent groups organized to fight the American

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[108]Samuel Helfont and Michael Brill, "Saddam's ISIS?," *Foreign Affairs*, 12 January 2016, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/iraq/saddams-isis.

[109]Truls H. Tønnessen, "Heirs of Zarqawi or Saddam? The Relationship between al-Qaida in Iraq and the Islamic State," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (21 July 2015): 53, http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/443.

[110]Johnston et al., *Foundations*, 122.

[111]Whiteside, "Pedigree," 8.

[112]Johnston et al., *Foundations*, 130.

invasion and crowded the marketplace for recruits. This is reflected in data from the Global Terrorism Database: each year from 2000 to 2003, only two or three groups conducted attacks in Iraq. The number of active groups rose to 19 in 2004, all of which were competing against AQI for funding, recruits, and notoriety. While AQI initially cooperated with these groups, it quickly transitioned to openly poaching some of their members.

As 2005 began, AQI entered a period of more intense competitive consolidation vis-à-vis other nationalist, tribal, and Islamist Sunni groups.[113] Despite his skepticism of Iraqi veterans, Zarqawi led a push during this time to recruit former regime elements (FREs) from competitors. AQI was particularly effective at this task since it had recently joined al Qaeda, bringing additional notoriety and resources.[114] AQI was ultimately able to poach a large number of FREs from the Islamic Army in Iraq, 1920 Revolutions Brigade, and Jaysh Muhammad.[115] In fact, in response to the strength of this push, Atiya Abd al-Rahman, a high-level leader in al Qaeda, counseled Zarqawi to stop insisting that Sunni rebels leave other jihadist groups for AQI.[116]

This approach weakened AQI's competitors, taking their best fighters and absorbing their illicit tribal trading networks.[117] Here, part of AQI's strategy was to offer better pay, which it could do thanks to AQ's financial support.[118] As a whole, this "AQI financing model" was effective in subverting the influence of many tribes.[119] This comports with the broader strategic logic of subversive recruitment during intense competition.

In part due to its strategy of poaching skilled fighters, by mid-2005 AQI became the dominant Sunni insurgent group in Iraq. We expect that this shift in power should have reduced AQIs incentives to poach fighters, leading it instead to attack other groups. This is precisely what we observe: as Khan and Whiteside elaborate, after its explosive growth through 2006,

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[113]Khan and Whiteside, "State Accompli," 7.

[114]Aaron Y. Zelin, "The War Between ISIS and Al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy* 20, no. 1 (2014): 1–11. For original, see Harmon.

[115]"Study of the Insurgency in Anbar Province, Iraq," Marine Corps Intelligence Activity (13 June 2007), Chapter 5.

[116]William McCants and William Faizi McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (Macmillan, 2015), 14. For original, see Atiyah's Letter to Zarqawi, https://ctc.westpoint.edu/harmony-program/atiyahs-letter-to-zarqawi-original-language-2/.

[117]Benjamin Bahney et al., *An Economic Analysis of the Financial Records of Al-Qa'ida in Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010), 39; See also, M. J. Kirdar, "Al Qaeda in Iraq," AQAM Futures Project Case Study Series (Homeland Security & Counterterrorism Program: Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2011), 7.

[118]Bahney et al., *An Economic Analysis of the Financial Records of Al-Qa'ida in Iraq*, 55.

[119]Ibid., 39; See also, Kirdar, "Al Qaeda in Iraq," 7.

AQI presented "its rivals with a fait accompli—a proto-caliphate requiring allegiance from all—and marked the beginning of a long coercive phase of consolidation."[120] This was a major shift from Zarqawi's prior strategy. Likewise, a US Marine Corps analysis corroborates this shift at the expected moment:

> This very deliberate AQI campaign against rival insurgent groups began shortly after national elections in December 2005, when nationalist insurgent groups cooperated to prevent AQI from disrupting polling throughout al-Anbar. Faced with this blatant challenge to their hegemony, AQI destroyed the Anbar People's Council of Mohammed Mahmoud Latif through a highly efficient and comprehensive assassination campaign, thereby eliminating the sole rival nexus of insurgent leadership in al-Anbar. Following this calculated purge, AQI cunningly employed their greater financial resources, superior organization, proven leadership, and brutal tactics to consolidate their hold on most other nationalist insurgent cells in al-Anbar.[121]

The Islamic State

AQI declared itself the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in 2006 when it proclaimed that "[We have] reached the end of a stage of jihad and the start of a new one, in which we lay the first cornerstone of the Islamic Caliphate project and revive the glory of religion."[122] While this transition was, in reality, a superficial name change, it signaled the group's desire to consolidate control and expand its ambitions. This moment of potential ascendancy was fleeting, however. The US troop surge and Sunni Awakening, which began only a year later in 2007, decimated the group's cadre of skilled fighters. According to some, they lost nearly 80% of their commanders and two of their top leaders within just a few years.[123] A core set of leaders soon embarked on a process of rebuilding their tattered organization. With their foundation reestablished, they expanded into ungoverned territory in Syria. They were subsequently expelled from al Qaeda for failing to follow strategic guidance, precipitating intense competition throughout the Middle East and beyond.

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[120]Khan and Whiteside, "State Accompli," 14; See also, Austin Long, "Whack-a-Mole or Coup de Grace? Institutionalization and Leadership Targeting in Iraq and Afghanistan," *Security Studies* 23, no. 3 (July 3, 2014): 471–512.

[121]United States Marine Corps, "State of the Insurgency in Al-Anbar," I MEF G-2, p. 2, http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/documents/marines_iraq_document_020707.pdf.

[122]Quoted in Evan Perkoski, *Divided, Not Conquered: How Rebels Fracture and Splinters Behave* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 158.

[123]Brian Fishman, *The Master Plan: ISIS, Al Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory* (Yale University Press, 2016), 148.

Across this period, IS followed a pattern of varied recruitment that responded to its strategic situation. After a period of rebuilding its core of veteran fighters, seeking soldiers with any and all military skill, IS transitioned to recruiting fighters with specific experience in maneuver warfare, a skill its units lacked. As it rose to prominence and renewed its competition with other insurgents, it refocused on poaching skilled fighters directly from its foes. While these recruits were important to weakening its peers, IS perpetually struggled to integrate these skilled fighters, underscoring an inherent cost of these recruitment practices. Taken together, we find evidence that IS' recruitment efforts were even more nuanced than AQI and that their practices starkly shifted during operational junctures.

Organization Rebuilding

As noted earlier, IS was nearly destroyed by the US counterinsurgent campaign and the success of the Sunni Awakening. By June 2010, US forces reportedly killed 34 of the top 42 leaders, and as described by General Raymond Odierno of the US Army, "They're clearly now attempting to reorganize themselves."[124] With rebuilding as the clear priority, our theory expects that al-Baghdadi would refocus his recruitment effort on skilled fighters to replace his group's deficit in military experience with wide-ranging expertise from diverse sources.

A clear indicator of IS' interest in regaining experienced fighters is their notorious "Breaking the Walls" campaign, a concerted series of prison breaks from 2012 to 2013 that occurred just as they were facing this operational juncture.[125] Around this time, tens of thousands of Sunni fighters were held in prisons across Iraq. IS recognized the potential of these inmates to reconstitute a cadre of experienced AQI fighters.[126] Accordingly, in his first speech as emir, al-Baghdadi announced the Breaking the Walls campaign as a "new stage" of re-building that put the "highest priority" on "releasing the Muslim captive everywhere."[127] Many Breaking the Walls operations were ultimately successful, freeing capable

[124]Quoted in, Perkoski, *Divided, Not Conquered*, 160.

[125]Jessica Lewis, "Al-Qaeda in Iraq Resurgent, Part I," Middle East Security Report (Institute for the Study of War, October 2014); Hashim, "The Islamic State."

[126]Jessica Lewis, "AQI's 'Soldiers' Harvest' Campaign," Backgrounder (Institute for the Study of War, 19 October 2013), https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Backgrounder_SoldiersHarvest.pdf.

[127]Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "Allah Will Not Allow Except That His Light Should Be Perfected" (Fursan Al-Balagh Media, 21 July 2012), https://web.archive.org/web/20150204132230/https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/shaykh-abc5ab-bakr-al-e1b8a5ussaync4ab-al-qurayshc4ab-al-baghdc481dc4ab-22but-god-will-not-allow-except-that-his-light-should-be22-en.pdf.

and experienced fighters who were "potent force multipliers and recruiters."[128] IS did not rebuild by focusing on unskilled manpower but instead expended meaningful time, resources, and risk to reestablish their cadre of experienced fighters before all else.

Furthermore, because it was rebuilding, our theory anticipates that IS would be interested in a wide array of military skills. This is precisely what we observed during the Breaking the Walls campaign and other operations between 2010 and 2012. During the campaign, for instance, IS not only released and reintegrated their own former fighters, but they welcomed captive Baathist soldiers, fighters from other organizations, and even those who joined the Sunni awakening against them.[129] Demonstrating their urgent need for skill despite obvious concerns about the commitment of those who had joined the Awakening, al-Baghdadi extended the offer to repent to those who "were misled by chieftains and members of our tribes and thus sided with the ranks of the Crusader United States and became servants and stooges of the Safavid government."[130] Beyond imprisoned Iraqi fighters, IS redoubled its efforts to recruit experienced fighters from conflicts spanning Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere.[131] IS made a concerted effort to improve their talent scouting of foreign fighters compared to the approach of AQI.[132]

There were still costs to recruiting experienced fighters that IS had to accept. Veterans with experience in post-2003 operations were paid more than others.[133] The Baathist officers were also sometimes a hindrance. While some learned useful insurgent skills from fighting the Americans in years past, others clung to old ideas and routines. Baathist doctrine

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[128]Aaron Zelin, "Revisiting the Islamic State's 2011-2014 Reemergence: Lessons for the Future" (The Washington Institute, 18 December 2017), https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/revisiting-islamic-states-2011-2014-reemergence-lessons-future. See also, Jessica Lewis, "Al-Qaeda in Iraq Resurgent, Part I," Middle East Security Report, Middle East Security Report (Institute for the Study of War, October 2014), http://www.understandingwar.org/report/al-qaeda-iraq-resurgent-part-ii.

[129]Craig Whiteside, "Nine Bullets for the Traitors, One for the Enemy: The Slogans and Strategy behind the Islamic State's Campaign to Defeat the Sunni Awakening (2016-2017)," ICCT Research Paper (International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, September 2018), https://icct.nl/publication/nine-bullets-for-the-traitors-one-for-the-enemy-the-slogans-and-strategy-behind-the-islamic-states-campaign-to-defeat-the-sunni-awakening-2006-2017/.

[130]Quoted in Craig Whiteside, "War, Interrupted, Part I: The Roots of the Jihadist Resurgence in Iraq," *War on the Rocks*, 5 November 2014, https://warontherocks.com/2014/11/war-interrupted-part-i-the-roots-of-the-jihadist-resurgence-in-iraq/.

[131]Dodwell et al., "Then and Now."

[132]Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler, *The Caliphate's Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Foreign Fighter Paper Trail* (West Point, NY: Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, 2016), 18.

[133]Aymenn Al-Tamimi, "A Caliphate under Strain: The Documentary Evidence," *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 4 (2016): 1–8.

was ultimately at odds with the core IS tactics, such as dynamic and fast-moving operations, because Iraqi soldiers were accustomed to highly coordinated maneuvers with more fighters and support.[134] Many of these fighters also undermined cohesion by expressing doubt about the brutality of IS's tactics.[135] While they took issue with mass executions, public beheadings, and other forms of indiscriminate violence, IS was nonetheless willing to work with them because of their urgent need for military skill.[136]

Tactical Changes and Group Competition

After IS successfully regained its footing between 2010 and 2012, it shifted gears toward two new priorities: dominating the insurgent landscape and operationally evolving. In terms of their operations, they aspired to maneuver warfare with larger-unit operations that were necessary to take and hold territory. This was abundantly clear in the first issue of their *Dabiq* magazine in 2014. This foretold the group's progression from destabilizing the *taghut* [tyrannical] regimes to a phase of *tamkin [consolidation]* involving "more complex attacks of a larger scale… which were meant to pave the way for the claiming of territory."[137] These sorts of operations were unknown to most of their fighters and this transition would not be easy. Defeating even a semi-effective state force and then maintaining territorial control required a different set of skills.

To acquire these new skills, IS did not form new alliances but leveraged its recruitment practices. As we expect, rather than casting a broad net for experienced fighters in general, they sought the specific skills they needed. Chechen Islamists fighting in nearby Syria were one of their targets. Many were combat veterans who, prior to fighting Assad, fought against Russia and received training from the United States and other western nations. As Levy lays out, the Chechens brought experience with conventional operations against state militaries designed to take and hold territory, just as IS needed.[138] IS therefore went to lengths to lure these fighters into their organization.

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[134]Ido Levy, "Soldiers of End-Times Assessing the Military Effectiveness of the Islamic State," Policy Focus (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 2021), 147, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/soldiers-end-times-assessing-military-effectiveness-islamic-state.

[135]Liz Sly, "Hidden Hand"; Harris, "Re-Baathification."

[136]Whiteside, "Pedigree," 2–18, Saddam's Ex-Officer: We've Played Key Role in Helping Militants," *NPR News*, 19 June 2014.

[137]Dabiq, July 2014, p. 37–38.

[138]Ido Levy, "Soldiers of End-Times," 148.

Omar al-Shishani offers an illustrative example. A Chechen, he was well-trained as a member of the Georgian Special Forces. One Georgian official said "We trained him well, and we had lots of help from America…. In fact, the only reason he didn't go to Iraq to fight alongside America was that we needed his skills here in Georgia."[139] A fellow combatant who fought alongside him in the Georgian military recounted his battlefield prowess in the 2008 conflict with Russia: "He was a magnificent fighter and one of the best men I have ever known…. He controlled the forward positions and called in the artillery on the Russians."[140] Once al-Shishani moved to Syria in 2012, he amassed a capable group of Chechen recruits and launched many large-scale, successful operations.[141]

IS observed al-Shishani's success and, unsurprisingly, worked to win him over, dedicating time and resources courting him. After joining IS, he was rewarded with a prominent position in the military leadership.[142] Not long after IS wooed Shishani, he led an operation to capture the Menagh air base in Aleppo Province, a goal that had eluded IS several times in the previous two years.[143] Al-Shishani is illustrative of a larger pattern in which IS actively recruited Russian-speaking jihadists.[144] The collection of expert military operators like al-Shishani provided IS new-found capacity and made possible their transition to mobile warfare.[145]

Apart from Chechens, IS sought out almost any fighters from Syria who had experience in semi-conventional operations.[146] Part of their strategy to reach these fighters was to open a Syrian front under the guise of a new group, Jabhat al-Nusra. This group engaged an array of Syrian fighters—even some Syrian officers who defected from Assad's regime—to combine their technical knowledge with some of IS' traditional tactical

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[139]Mitchell Prothero, "U.S. Training Helped Mold Top Islamic State Military Commander," *McClatchy Washington Bureau*, 15 September 2015, https://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article35322882.html.

[140]Ibid.

[141]Ibid.

[142]Kyle Orton, "Profiles of Islamic State Leaders" (The Henry Jackson Society, 2016), 40–41, https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/IS-leaders-report.pdf.

[143]Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, "Abu Omar al Shishani Killed South of Mosul, Islamic State Says," *Long War Journal*, 13 July 2016, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/07/abu-omar-al-shishani-killed-south-of-mosul-islamic-state-says.php; Prothero, "U.S. Training Helped Mold Top Islamic State Military Commander."

[144]Levy, "Soldiers," 151.

[145]Craig Whiteside, "New Masters of Revolutionary Warfare: The Islamic State Movement (2002–2016)," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, no. 4 (2016): 12.

[146]Anas Elallame, Arm Shabanian, Craig Whiteside, and Moorthy Muthuswamy, "The Islamic State's Department of Soldiers," ISIS Files (George Washington University: Program on Extremism, April 2021), 7.

approaches. Timur Mahauri is demonstrative of this broader network of fighters developing new tactics. Similar to al-Shishani, he fought in the first and second Chechen wars, Ossetia, and the Georgian Special Operations. In an extended interview with Mironova, he describes how

> When we came to Syria in 2012, people had weapons but did not know how to conduct operations. They had no knowledge of strategy or tactics. We were teaching them, showed them how to do ambushes … the most basic things. We started taking enemy tanks because, before, local fighters did not have any. They only had old weapons, so often we had to repair them. Slowly we started taking enemy bases, checkpoints and getting better weapons … I was working with a local general who defected from the regime. The fighters knew how to use weapons, so we started working on more sophisticated operations.[147]

While his organization, Ajnad al-Kavkaz, never joined al-Nusra, they did work together closely. This collaboration endowed a large set of fighters with semi-conventional experience.[148]

IS created al-Nusra to extend into Syria and to benefit its operational transformation, challenges soon emerged that propelled it into a period of intense peer competition and a new operational juncture. IS officially expanded into Syria in 2013. It renamed itself the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (or Syria; ISIS), announced its merger with Jabhat al-Nusra, and took ownership of their now skilled fighters. Both al Qaeda central and al-Nusra disavowed the unilateral acquisition, sparking an intense bout of competition.

In periods of such intense competition, we would expect ISIS to undermine its rivals by trying to poach their experienced fighters. There is strong evidence that this occurred soon after the rupture. In fact, fearing the rise of an independent Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Baghdadi dispatched one of his key deputies, Haji Bakr, to Syria with the express mission to win the allegiance of fighters from al-Nusra and other Syrian jihadists.[149] These fighters were seen as key to preventing any further rise by al-Nusra and supporting IS's ongoing goal of transitioning to new modes of warfare.[150]

Simultaneously, and with Bakr's lead, ISIS waged an intentional campaign to lure experienced fighters away from other competitors as well, like Jaish

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[147]Vera Mironova, *From Freedom Fighters to Jihadists: Human Resources of Non State Armed Groups* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 137.

[148]Levy, "Soldiers," 153.

[149]Charles Lister, "Profiling Jabhat Al-Nusra," Analysis Paper, The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World (Washington, DC: Brookings, July 2016), 13.

[150]Elallame et al., "Islamic State's Department," 7–8.

al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar.[151] In one IS-produced video featuring an experienced former fighter who had left al-Nusra, the message was simple: "Leave Nusra, Join IS."[152] This effort proved to be successful. Over the coming months, waves of fighters from al-Nusra and several other Jihadist groups defected to fight alongside ISIS.[153]

Competition intensified once ISIS was expelled from AQ in 2014.[154] This rupture created a head-to-head contest to lead the global jihadist movement. As our theory expects, a central facet of their competition was the poaching of experienced fighters. ISIS did not merely try to strengthen its own hand by recruiting these fighters from any source, but instead, the group aimed to disrupt al Qaeda by poaching commanders who did not agree with AQ central.[155] But since AQ and ISIS had operations that extended well beyond Iraq, this competition became global. ISIS sought to poach commanders and veterans from AQ affiliates in northwest Africa and from al-Shabab in Somalia.[156] It also sought AQ fighters in Yemen, Nigeria, and Egypt, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia.[157] ISIS even managed to poach a few high-level AQ commanders like Mamun al-Hatim early in their rivalry.[158] Observers described this strategy as "an effort to chip away at the al Qaeda affiliate's strength."[159]

While ISIS benefited from many of the veterans that they managed to glean from AQ and al-Nusra, they introduced a range of organizational challenges. Veterans' varying backgrounds instigated internal divisions as they generally insisted on serving alongside their compatriots. This

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[151]Hauer, "Chechen."

[152]Joanna Paraszczuk, "'Leave Nusra, Join IS,' Uzbek Militant Urges in New IS Video," *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, 20 June 2015, https://www.rferl.org/a/islamic-state-video-urges-uzbeks-others-to-leave-al-nusra-front/27082876.html.

[153]Levy, "Soldiers," 161; See, also, Dodwell, Milton, and Rassler, "Then and Now," 12.

[154]AQI used the name "Islamic State in Iraq" to refer to its political wing before the split.

[155]Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: The Islamic State's Ideological Campaign Against Al-Qaeda" (FDD's Long War Journal, May 2020).

[156]Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Scrambles to Contain Growing ISIS Threat in Libya," *The New York Times*, February 21, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/22/world/africa/us-scrambles-to-contain-growing-isis-threat-in-libya.html; Drew Hinshaw and Katarina Hoije, "Terror Rift Fueled Mali Attacks," *Wall Street Journal*, November 22, 2015, https://www.wsj.com/articles/terror-rift-fueled-mali-attacks-1448242771.

[157]Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda Uses ISIS to Try to Present Itself as Respectable, Even Moderate" (Foundation for Defense of Democracies, February 2015); Gerard van Bohemen, "Seventeenth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2161 (2014) Concerning Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities" (United Nations Security Council, June 2015); Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Jason Fritz, Bridget Moreng, and Nathaniel Barr, "Islamic State vs. Al Qaeda: Strategic Dimensions of a Patricidal Conflict" (New America, December 2015).

[158]Cole Bunzel, "Battlefield Yemen: The Islamic State's Challenge to AQAP," *Jihadica*.

[159]Gartenstein-Ross et al., "Islamic State."

generated conflicts over how ISIS distributed resources and granted pro-motions.[160] Mironova finds that the divisions introduced by "Chechen kinship" became problematic. One fighter relayed to her that he did "not want to participate in this Chechen Mafia like back home."[161]

To address this problem, ISIS was once again forced to expend signif-icant effort in socializing and indoctrinating their experienced fighters, especially Baathists who had not participated in the fighting from 2003 to 2007.[162] ISIS also relented to internal pressure and allowed the creation of segregated units. However, these units proved to be troubling and reportedly disrupted ISIS's command and control. Informal communications and distinct leadership channels emerged as veterans from foreign conflicts employed force on their own and according to their own designs. Illustratively, al-Shishani, the aforementioned Chechen veteran, was referred to as "Abu Meat" by some IS members because he relied on tactics that used unskilled non-Chechens as "cannon fodder."[163] Relatedly, some skilled recruits from North Africa held different views on Islam and were opposed to false flag missions, wherein IS fighters wore Iraqi or Syrian uniforms, or objected to how ISIS handled suicide missions. This led ISIS to launch a costly re-organization meant to better integrate veterans from different backgrounds and to create mixed units.[164]

Transition Away from Skilled Fighters

After a spree of major victories in 2014 and once ISIS had made headway in establishing itself among observers both locally and globally, we would expect their recruitment priorities to shift away from experienced fighters to fulfill other organizational needs. A major shift did indeed occur, and the group reoriented toward training a new, large cadre of novices who were relatively unskilled and recruited more indiscriminately.[165]

Researchers agree that, around 2015, ISIS became much less selective, accepting anyone regardless of what they brought to the organization. This indiscriminate approach led to an enormous influx of fighters from Iraq,

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[160]Levy, "Soldiers," 41.

[161]Mironova, *From Freedom*, 154.

[162]Anne Speckhard and Ahmet S. Yayla, "Eyewitness Accounts from Recent Defectors from Islamic State: Why They Joined, What They Saw, Why They Quit," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 6 (December 2015).

[163]Eric Schmitt and Michael S. Schmidt, "Omar the Chechen, a Senior Leader in ISIS, Dies After U.S. Airstrike," *The New York Times*, 15 March 2016, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/15/world/middleeast/omar-chechen-isis-killed-us-airstrike-syria.html.

[164]Mironova, *From Freedom*, 156.

[165]Dodwell et al., "Then and Now."

Syria, and a wide range of countries. It even included child fighters who lacked experience altogether.[166] There was a notable shift even among its Chechen recruits: while they provided crucial skills early on, most Chechen recruits after 2014 had no military experience. Interestingly, this recruitment pattern was in stark contrast to nearly all other groups operating in Iraq and Syria (that continued to focus on skilled fighters), suggesting that recruitment dynamics are tied to idiosyncratic organizational needs as well as conflict dynamics.[167]

As a result of their new recruitment approach, ISIS had to spend its limited resources on training unskilled conscripts who made up much of its fighting force.[168] It drew on its existing skilled veterans to lead this effort. ISIS training programs focused on realistic operations carried out by experienced combatants across the nearly 21 training camps operated at its peak.[169] While all recruits received basic infantry training, others received specific weapons or operational training based on the functional unit they were assigned to.[170] This was only possible since ISIS could draw upon the skilled veterans recruited in earlier periods, and it was ultimately critical to their battlefield success.[171]

Implications for Research and Policy

In this article we demonstrate that insurgents' recruitment practices are dynamic and closely linked to their evolving organizational needs. While many observers have focused on the appeal and the benefits of veteran fighters to armed organizations, we show how these recruits only fulfill a portion of an organization's wide-ranging needs. Accordingly, we argue that groups are not likely to consistently recruit such fighters unless facing particular challenges. We call these moments operational junctures, and they occur when insurgents must imminently adjust their tactical behavior and when the experience of veteran fighters is crucial to doing so. More specifically, this occurs when insurgents are building or re-building their

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[166]Ibid.; Andrea Michelle Morris, "Who Becomes a Foreign Fighter? Characteristics of the Islamic State's Soldiers," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 0, no. 0 (January 23, 2023): 1–19, https://doi.org/10.1080/095465 53.2022.2144730.

[167]Mironova, *From Freedom*, 147.

[168]Levy, "Soldiers," 151.

[169]Bill Roggio and Caleb Weiss, "Jihadist Training Camps in Iraq and Syria," *Long War Journal*, October 24, 2014, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/10/jihadist_training_ca.php.

[170]Hassan Hassan, "The Secret World of ISIS Training Camps Ruled by Sacred Texts and the Sword," *The Guardian*, 24 January 2015.

[171]Levy, "Soldiers," 38.

organization transitioning to new modes of warfare, and competing with rivals for dominance. Outside of these junctures, and once insurgents accomplish their tactical changes, insurgents will adjust their recruitment practices to fulfill other, less urgent organizational needs.

Our analysis of al Qaeda in Iraq and the Islamic State lends strong support to our theoretical intuition and shows how their recruitment practices responded to their changing necessities. During operational junctures, veterans were sought out. At other times, the group recruited novices, foreigners, and combatants with a variety of other skills. While much has been written about how IS used its extreme messaging to recruit fighters, this paper urges us to think more carefully about variation within those recruits. In part, what set IS apart from other groups was not its size—there are many large insurgent groups—but its ability to regenerate itself, tactically evolve, and outcompete rivals. Each of these successes is related to the recruitment and employment of veteran fighters.

This paper makes several contributions to our understanding of insurgent recruitment and points to avenues for future research. First, this research underscores how recruitment processes are more dynamic than often assumed. Like other scholars, we find that insurgents behave instrumentally, weighing their recruitment needs as conditions change and adjusting their strategies accordingly.[172] While we show how these needs are especially tied to an insurgent's combat necessities, even these are variable throughout the duration of a single conflict. Future research could examine, for instance, how nascent insurgents' military experience shapes their eventual behavior and how and whether insurgents benefit from non-combat military skills in logistics, intelligence, and so on.

Second, this paper highlights that there is much we do not know about veteran recruits despite their potential importance. For example, Seth Jones warns that such fighters could be a boon to violent extremist groups in the United States because of their valuable skills in communications, logistics, or surveillance. Yet, he continues, there is much to be learned about how and when they are recruited, what roles they may play in such groups, and why they join these organizations.[173] We find that veterans, while beneficial, are not an unalloyed good and can be a source of instability potentially manipulable by policymakers. Moreover, our case study reveals how certain military experiences might actually hinder insurgents. Some Baathist soldiers who joined IS, for instance, relied on dated military

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[172]For example, see, Eck, "Coercion in Rebel Recruitment."

[173]Seth G. Jones, "Violent Domestic Extremist Groups and the Recruitment of Veterans," Statement before the house committee on veterans' affairs, https://www.congress.gov/117/meeting/house/113968/witnesses/HHRG-117-VR00-Wstate-JonesS-20211013.pdf.

paradigms from the Iraqi army that were inoperable to insurgent organizations. Recruiting only these fighters and trying to implement these approaches could have been disastrous.

Our research offers a demand-side explanation for recruiting veteran fighters. Whether or not insurgents succeed in these efforts may depend upon a host of other factors, like the prevalence of veterans, their ability to travel to the conflict zone, and whether other organizations are competing for their allegiance. Future research should explore how veterans are successfully recruited, how messaging varies between veterans and novices, and why veterans are successfully integrated into some groups but not others.

Third, while questions remain about how and why veterans join, an implication of our research on veteran fighters is that recruitment practices can be used to anticipate changes in insurgent behavior. Policymakers can potentially anticipate imminent changes to insurgent operational routines by tracking which groups are successfully recruiting skilled fighters. For example, as the recruitment of veterans into white supremacist groups increases, tracking the rate and specific expertise of these veteran recruits could provide important information about their operational capabilities and plans.[174] Similarly, major shifts in recruitment toward other skill sets may also indicate changes in strategy. Policymakers would be wise to monitor these developments carefully and to take steps that will deny insurgents' progress.

Finally, this research reveals how human capital is closely linked to the evolution of insurgent organizations. Yet, their evolution is not necessarily linear or tied to their age, as many researchers might suggest.[175] Instead, we find that operational junctures represent evolutionary opportunities. While our research shows how insurgents are willing to fundamentally adjust their recruitment practices at these points in time, these junctures may spur other changes as well. For instance, organizational setbacks, strategic opportunities, and new competitors may each compel insurgents to fundamentally revise their organizational structures, alliances, funding sources, and so on. When initially building his organization, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi not only recruited experienced fighters, but he simultaneously allied with al Qaeda to become AQI. Future research should explore other

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[174]Gina Harkins, "Extremist Groups Are Actively Trying to Recruit Military Members, Defense Officials Say," *Military.com*, 15 January 2021, https://www.military.com/daily-news/2021/01/15/extremist-groups-are-actively-trying-recruit-military-members-defense-officials-say.html; Jones, "Violent Domestic Extremist Groups and the Recruitment of Veterans."

[175]Bloom, "Constructing Expertise"; Windisch et al., "Headhunting"; Giustozzi, "Taliban's Adaptation"; Thomas H. Johnson, "Taliban Adaptations and Innovations," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 24, no. 1 (March 2013): 3–27.