

Title: Nascent Insurrections: Why Some Militant Groups Engage in Sustained Armed Conflicts

Author(s): Michael Shkolnik, Norman Paterson School of International Affairs (NPSIA), Carleton University

Contact: michaelshkolnik77@gmail.com ; michael.shkolnik@carleton.ca

WP Number: 17-06

Research Question:

Why do some militant groups engage in sustained armed conflicts while other groups do not?

Importance:

Data on terrorism and civil wars point to a sharp increase in militant activity worldwide in recent years. Militant groups that launch sustained military operations gain more influence, recruitment, and fundraising capabilities while further weakening the target state. As the Islamic State loses its core territorial stronghold in Syria and Iraq, strategic planners are trying to assess which militant groups may emerge as serious threats in future insurgencies. It is far easier for states to prevent a nascent insurrection from developing than defeating a matured militant organization or full-fledged insurgency.

Research Findings:

Quantitative regression analysis of 246 prominent militant groups from 1970-2007 shows that, in general, religious militant organizations operating in less competitive environments are associated with a higher likelihood of engaging in sustained armed conflicts. Challenging conventional wisdom, groups with relatively less centralized command and control (hub-spoke) are slightly more likely to engage in sustained armed conflict than the most hierarchically structured organizations. Results suggest that a nascent insurrection featuring one primary militant group is 72% more likely to engage in a sustained campaign of attrition than militant groups operating in more competitive environments. Roughly 90% of groups that engage in sustained armed conflicts are also the most dominant militant group in their environment when the group successfully challenges the target state. Overall, my model shows that organizational characteristics are better predictors of sustained armed conflicts than measures of group capabilities, diverging from current explanations of insurgency onset or outcomes.

Implications:

Posing a serious challenge to a regime is not necessarily a function of how powerful or capable a group may seem – it's about the external competitive environment and internal capacity to effectively mobilize resources and sustain armed hostilities against regime forces. Pressuring groups to de-centralize from bureaucracies to hub-spoke structures may encourage escalations from more autonomous units or cells. Pushing groups to an all-channel structure could produce more desirable results. From a counterterrorism perspective, these findings suggest that targeting units that are hard to replace may be a more effective strategy than solely focusing on disrupting centralized chains of command. Findings related to competitive environments suggests dominant groups may engage in some form of rival consolidation prior to engaging in campaigns of sustained attrition against the target state. These nuances should be especially important for strategic planners seeking to sow rifts not only within militant organizations, but between them as well, taking unintended consequences into account.