

# Growth Trap: Grassroots-Driven Transformation of Militant Organizations

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When and how do recruitment windfalls strengthen militant organizations while redirecting their strategy and tactics? Drawing on the literature on militant socialization and management, I propose a mechanism of grassroots-driven organizational change that is broadly applicable when leaders balance short-term survival with long-term mission focus. I argue that a growth trap dynamic occurs when upward-driving internal pressures caused by incomplete socialization become codified into group operation through delegation and decentralization. In combination, these can transform the revealed strategic priorities and operational focus of militant organizations. I illustrate the insight via a case study of the evolution of al-Qaeda in Yemen during the 2010s and outline how recruitment shocks and a changing social context can change the self-presentation of even a group with a significant investment in an ideological identity.

Keywords: Militant groups, substate violence, organizational dynamics, Yemen

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## Introduction

*We in the PLF [Palestinian Liberation Front]... felt as if we were caught, as the old Arabic saying goes, between a hammer and an anvil: the hammer was the conventional [Chairman's] policy and the anvil the newly born struggle of the Palestinian fedayeen—*  
Shafiq Al-Hout, *My Life in the PLO*

In the mid-1960s, the founders of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) faced a dilemma. They wanted to create an umbrella organization for the Palestinian national movement. However, militancy had become more popular than the leftist Nasserite ideology preferred by the PLO's Executive Committee. Even worse, members of the Executive Committee believed that the *fedayeen* militant groups were rushing into a confrontation with Israel that the Palestinian nationalist movement was not ready for and which would likely result in a serious setback for the Palestinian cause. As PLO co-founder, Shafiq Al-Hout recounted in his memoir, the Executive Committee tried to unify the Palestinian movements without adopting the aggressive agenda of the militant groups. Initially, the Chairman, Ahmed al-Shuqayri, "tried to absorb the inter-Palestinian problems by forming a new Executive Committee, which was intended to bring the two generations—the traditional bureaucratic one and the young revolutionary one which was keen on initiating new practices—and to be capable of absorbing the factions that were still refusing to participate".<sup>1</sup> Within two years, however, the al-Shuqayri and the old guard were forced to yield to the more extreme preferences of the younger members.<sup>2</sup>

A decade later and half a world away, pragmatic commanders of Arab battalions participating in the Soviet-Afghan and Afghan Civil Wars found themselves with a windfall of Salafi recruits from Arab countries. The commanders quickly realized that these new members were impatient with training and strategic restraint. Instead, seeking excitement and

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<sup>1</sup>Al-Hout 2011, p. 53.

<sup>2</sup>Al-Hout 2011, p. 54.

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martyrdom, the young Arab fighters agitated for rapid engagement in battle, heedless of their preparation—or lack thereof—or of the long-term objectives of the groups that they had joined.<sup>3</sup> The volunteers created problems within their host groups, in part by being violently opposed to the non-Salafis who dominated the local communities. However, despite their indifference to strategy and propensity to redirect operations towards sectarian violence, it was important for the militias to placate the new Arab fighters because the fighters were also conduits for donations from foreign backers. They thereby developed a “very high” influence on the Afghan militias.<sup>4</sup> The frustrated, but indispensable, recruits drove a radicalization of the Afghan Arab jihadi movements as group leaders attempted to placate their demands for action and ideological stringency, a cycle that occurred both with Abdullah Azzam’s Services Bureau<sup>5</sup> and, later, with the militants that coalesced around Usama bin Laden.<sup>6</sup>

In both vignettes above, recruitment opportunities that promised to improve the capacity, resources, personnel, and resilience of a militant group also brought internal pressures that redirected the organization away from its original long-term goals. Such operational and strategic transformation initiated and driven by recruits can be found in numerous organizational histories, including those of organizations co-opted to serve strategic objectives and constituents outside their previous goals and base.

This dynamic represents a theoretical and empirical puzzle. A mature literature underscores that violent armed conflict actors are sophisticated organizations<sup>7</sup> whose leaders are mindful of selection effects,<sup>8</sup> strategic in their recruitment,<sup>9</sup> canny in their use of management tools

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<sup>3</sup>Hamid and Farrall 2015; Hegghammer 2020.

<sup>4</sup>Hamid and Farrall 2015, p. 51.

<sup>5</sup>Hegghammer 2020.

<sup>6</sup>Hamid and Farrall 2015.

<sup>7</sup>Crenshaw 1987; Parkinson and Zaks 2018; Shapiro, Foster, and Siegel forthcoming.

<sup>8</sup>De Mesquita 2005; Gates 2002; Hanson 2020; Hegghammer 2013.

<sup>9</sup>Beber, Blattman, et al. 2010; Forney 2015; Humphreys and Weinstein 2006; Schram 2019.

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and socialization programs,<sup>10</sup> and responsive to local political dynamics.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, historical patterns of recruit-driven redirection highlight an important gap in our understanding of the dynamics and trajectory of armed conflict actors.<sup>12</sup> In particular, these patterns raise the question of how recruitment windfalls redirect the strategy and tactics of violent organizations. The answer has implications for understanding and predicting unexpected conflict pathways, as well as for using likely internal divides to tailor counter-insurgency and peace-building policies.

This manuscript argues that opportunities for rapid expansion can strengthen an organization in the short run but introduce downstream internal pressure to satisfy the priorities of new personnel and new constituencies. I identify this dynamic as the *growth trap*: when reinforcing an organization's strength initiates a process of organizational and operational realignment that advances the preferences of the recruits and redirects operations away from previous strategic and tactical preferences.

I contribute to a growing body of scholarship that examines the challenges that violent organizations face as they grow. I extend and generalize this literature by identifying an underexplored mechanism of organizational management—accommodation—and highlight its downstream consequences of this mechanism. In doing so, I bring together several threads in scholarship on the organizational behavior of armed conflict actors, drawing implications and expectations from existing research on recruitment and selection, socialization, and management and delegation. This work particularly complements scholarship that closely examines the consequences of recruitment inflows on militant group cohesion and constituent relations.<sup>13</sup>

This article proceeds in two parts: first, I outline a general mechanism of bottom-up orga-

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<sup>10</sup>Checkel 2017; Gates 2017; Gutiérrez and Giustozzi 2010; Gutiérrez 2012; Shapiro and Siegel 2012; Tamm 2016; Sanín and Wood 2014.

<sup>11</sup>Ahmad 2017; Parkinson and Zaks 2018; Wood 2003; Wood 2008.

<sup>12</sup>Conversely, a literature on social movements emphasizes the agency of recruits, but tends to downplay the role of leaders in shaping the development of an organization (*i.e.* Campbell (2005) and Morris and Staggborg (2004)).

<sup>13</sup>Notably, Hanson 2020; Kenny 2010; Mosinger 2018

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nizational transformation via accommodation of the preferences of a base, focusing on how the process influences militant revolutionary organizations. These groups face a particularly stark tradeoff in that integration with local communities provides resources and protection but can undermine broader goals by leaving the organization beholden to parochial interests that may be orthogonal to previously articulated organizational goals. I connect these processes to insights and themes in the existing literature on the dynamics and organization of armed conflict actors (a.k.a. “militant groups”).

I develop observable implications of the growth trap logic through a case study of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). As an exploration of the mechanism of the growth trap dynamic, I focus on a case expected to be typical of the expected process.<sup>14</sup> I select AQAP because it illustrates a trajectory of an organization with a longstanding investment in a very specific presentation and strategy that is nevertheless induced to expand into a new recruitment base whose interests diverge from the AQAP’s original framing. I combine an analysis of AQAP’s self-presentation with trends in their operational focus to show that the militant group progressively moved away from engagement with the state and more towards engagement in regional sectarian conflict and conflict with local power brokers.

The section concludes by analyzing English translations of over 800 pieces of propaganda released by AQAP and direct precursors from 2004 through 2016, a period in which the group was expanding into an increasingly-complex local security context.<sup>15</sup> The AQAP case illustrates how shocks in the operating context and recruiting profile of an ideologically-directed militant organization can be followed by changes in self-presentation, even in the presence of explicit strategic directives.

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<sup>14</sup>Seawright and Gerring 2008.

<sup>15</sup>The text analysis was conducted using English translations. The existence of an accessible corpus of professional translations for these texts allowed for more straightforward research design that is accessible to a larger number of readers, although at the cost of nuance and depth present in the original Arabic documents.

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## Literature Review: Managing Preference Divergences

Scholars have extensively studied the processes and institutions that keep violent militant groups operating both clandestinely and overtly. In particular, the management and human resource strategies of these violent groups have been scrutinized to answer questions such as how violent group leaders convince or coerce their followers to put their lives on the line and mobilize and participate in violence.<sup>16</sup> The management challenges of militant groups extend beyond the need to mobilize fighters willing to die for a cause; rank and file must be managed and motivated to act for the *right* cause, namely, the strategic and tactical objectives preferred by the top of the organization. Thus, the mobilization, organization, and management of violent organizations have provided a rich source of theoretical questions for scholars to pursue. The following section reviews the state of the literature on three dimensions that are relevant to the growth trap mechanism: recruitment and selection; management tools to reduce principal-agent divergence; and techniques to limit organizational exit.

Scholars have addressed many facets of the challenge of mobilizing fighters willing to sacrifice for an organization's goals. One strand of research focuses on the systems created by militant groups to maintain focus on a coherent outcome or set of political goals. These policies start with selecting high-quality recruits: selection and screening mechanisms typically constitute an important part of the rebel leadership toolkit to shape a high-quality membership that is as aligned as possible with the existing preferences of the leadership.<sup>17</sup>

After solving the problem of recruitment and mobilization, commanders of militant organizations must overcome principal-agent problems. Scholars have dedicated attention to the top-down management policies, such as controlling flows of resources;<sup>18</sup> implementing harsh disciplinary consequences;<sup>19</sup> socializing fighters to the preferences of commanders;<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Lichbach 1998; Regan and Norton 2005.

<sup>17</sup>De Mesquita 2005; Forney 2015; Hegghammer 2013; Salehyan 2010; Weinstein 2005.

<sup>18</sup>Lidow 2011.

<sup>19</sup>Shapiro 2013.

<sup>20</sup>Hoover Green 2016.

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and, when possible, using combining all three of these strategies into an all-encompassing organizational environment.<sup>21</sup> Of particular interest to the argument I present below, an emerging strand in the literature analyzes how expansion and success can act as a driver of internal fragmentation and require additional top-down management techniques. This scholarship finds, perhaps counterintuitively, that periods of success and expansion can disrupt the operations of militant organizations by introducing a lack of agreement over which constituencies the organization should prioritize and incentivizing factions to break away from the original group.<sup>22</sup>

Taken as a whole, the literature on the management and operation of violent militant organizations emphasizes that armed conflict actors have many of the same challenges as non-violent organizations. However, the solutions to these challenges are often shaped by the specific context in which violent organizations operate. The literature has emphasized top-down techniques used by militant groups to encourage cohesion as well as structural features that either reinforce or undermine management. In the following section, I ask what happens when, due to circumstance or choice, militant commanders lack many of these tools. I highlight how both managerial decisions and contextual factors can magnify the effects of the growth trap, and outline expectations for when and where observers should find the growth trap in operation.

## **Theoretical Contribution and Empirical Implications**

The central observation of this manuscript is that when resource-constrained organizations grow quickly, their short-term gains in strength may come at the cost of long-term mission focus. Many of the mechanisms that armed groups have developed to attract, indoctrinate, and keep recruits can become fragile in the presence of an influx of new members. The resulting within-organization divergence creates pressure for three general trajectories: top-down

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<sup>21</sup>Mironova 2019.

<sup>22</sup>Mosinger 2019; Perkoski 2019; Woldemariam 2018.



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discipline, schism and fragmentation, or accommodation to the new preferences. I focus on the last of these trajectories, introducing four mechanisms through which armed organizations may shift their strategies due to bottom-up pressures. I derive empirical expectations for when these mechanisms may lead to the breakdown of organizational socialization and adoption of the preferences of a new constituency. I conclude with a discussion of scope conditions and with an illustrative vignette that summarizes the mechanisms at work.

The leverage that allows recruits to exert upward pressure on their leadership comes at several levels. First, a reduced ability, or desire, to limit the inflow of new members undermines the organization's socialization and objective-alignment capacity. These members bring local preferences and grievances into the organization. Second, the possibility that these members may exit along with the skills and resources that made them attractive creates pressure to accommodate the grassroots preferences, at least temporarily. Third, grassroots preferences and accommodation manifest in tactical operations, aided by decentralization and delegation which provide more autonomy to commanders and militant managers who are in close contact with rank-and-file.

The mechanisms suggest a series of hypotheses to test empirical predictions of the accommodation theory and, in particular, to detangle accommodation from observationally-similar outcomes, such as organizationally-driven strategic adaptation.

#### Mechanism: Inflow and Socialization

When leaders cannot, or do not want to, limit recruitment, they lose some of their most vital managerial tools. Large inflows discourage leaders from implementing the selection tools emphasized by existing research. Furthermore, a large cohort reduces the ability of the organization to focus on any member and thus diffuses socialization capacity. The combination of many recruits and limited ability to socialize them increases the chance that the new recruits will retain strong ties among themselves and with external communities. Both success and desperation can pressure leaders to relax their selection criteria, and if the

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organization exceeds their socializing capacity, they may be obliged to accommodate new preferences.

This condition gives rise to the first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: *Strategic accommodation will be greater when recruitment inflow is larger, relative to the organization's pre-existing socialization capacity.*

### Threat of Exit

Accommodation leading to group transformation can occur when the leader's interest in retaining their recruits is such that they are willing to compromise other goals or best practices to keep the recruits from leaving. In order to have the internal leverage to force the inclusion of their goals, the rank and file must be able to credibly exit if the organization does not accommodate their priorities. Similarly, the leader must be invested in keeping the recruits. Finally, the threat of exit must be credible.

In general, leaders have good reason to be concerned about the possibility of critical recruits and units leaving their group: exit, including defection and fragmentation, is a common feature of organizational histories.<sup>23</sup> From the question of how violent group leaders retain conscripted foot soldiers, scholars have found that militant commanders strategically change their interactions with local communities, such as forcing fighters to commit atrocities, to limit member perceptions that exit is a viable option.<sup>24</sup> Other violent militant groups threaten punishment for desertion.<sup>25</sup>

If an organization can restrict exit options, then the rank and file lose their leverage to be able to induce accommodation via the threat of exit. These produce the second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2 *Strategic accommodation is more pronounced when members from the desired constituency have more options for exit.*

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<sup>23</sup>Bakke, Cunningham, and Seymour 2012; McLauchlin 2010; Seymour 2014; Pearlman and Cunningham 2012; Perkoski 2019.

<sup>24</sup>Cohen 2017; Gates 2017; Souleimanov, Aliyev, and Ratelle 2018.

<sup>25</sup>Sawyer and Andrews 2020.

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## Structure

Accommodation can take two forms: through leader adoption and acquiescence to the preferences of the base or through upward diffusion, mediated by middle-level commanders and to which leaders become reconciled. Absent specific and credible documentation of leader preferences, it is difficult to observe which is in effect. Therefore, the section addresses how delegation should influence bottom-up transformation is agnostic about effects of delegation in general.

Analysis of militant groups has emphasized that organizational structure can influence the ability of an organization to create a structure that operates according to the appearance (if not reality) of a cohesive preference structure. This line of research into the effects of organizational structure on cohesion often identifies pathways to breakdown created by initial organizational structure as well as the dampening/magnifying effect of delegation and decentralization.<sup>26</sup> Scholars have found that internal training and formalized decision-making processes can combat the tendency toward devolution, particularly after major shocks.<sup>27</sup> Control of resources has also been identified as a powerful tool for encouraging centralization, and thus top-down influence. Existing scholarship highlights, unsurprisingly, that when resources are distributed at the leader's discretion, the organizational result is to reinforce top-down control structures and encourage centralization. Conversely, resources arriving at a mid-level/factional level will encourage commander autonomy, which can induce fragmentation and leadership change.<sup>28</sup>

Scholarship has emphasized that militant recruits bring not only their own resources, but also connections to a larger social context.<sup>29</sup> These ties limit the ability of group leaders to shift recruits' preexisting preferences.<sup>30</sup> Research has found that strong relational ties can make fighters and commanders more willing to disobey instructions, and that loyalty of

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<sup>26</sup>Staniland 2014.

<sup>27</sup>Johnston 2012; Jordan 2009; Jordan 2014.

<sup>28</sup>Doctor 2020; Doctor and Willingham 2020; Lidow 2016; Sinno 2010; Tamm 2016.

<sup>29</sup>Parkinson 2013.

<sup>30</sup>Manekin 2017; Mosinger 2017.

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rank-and-file will tend to remain with their proximate leaders.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, the mechanisms of the accommodation process predict different processes depending on group structure. Militant groups with dense vertical ties and a strong internal hierarchy should experience accommodation primarily as a form of top-down decision-making by group leaders. Conversely, if a militant leader directs from a distance—as many armed group leaders ultimately do—we can expect the local commanders’ preferences to begin to supersede those of the leadership if and when there are divergences. As the local rank-and-file begin to move through local command, the overtaking of local preferences should accelerate as regional leaders implement their preferences with little oversight from remote leadership. Knowing that they are removed from their regional commanders, leaders rely on either material inducements or consent to motivate and direct their commanders.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, a decentralized organization can more quickly develop local ties and variations in process, which introduce a pathway for the inclusion of local and grassroots preferences.

Hypothesis 3a: *Organizations with a strong internal hierarchy will experience top-down, leader-directed, accommodation.*

Hypothesis 3b: *Organizations with a decentralized operating structure with experience accommodation from the middle of the organization.*

### Scope Conditions

The mechanisms outlined above suggest scope conditions for the growth trap mechanism. First, and most fundamentally, both the existing organization and the new base must have specific strategic preferences that are, on some level, substitutes. There must have a point from which to accommodate and a direction to accommodate towards. As a counter-example, consider the pandering argument proposed by Thaler 2022: militant groups seeking primarily to destabilize a particular setting can accomplish disruptive goals despite deep frustrations among their grassroots when an organization’s promises turn out to be false; however, it

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<sup>31</sup>Christia 2012; Hundman and Parkinson 2019.

<sup>32</sup>Lidow 2016.

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is much more difficult to build a specific outcome when there is internal resentment over discrepancies between stated and real objectives.

Secondly, the accommodation mechanisms describe pragmatic responses to managerial stresses rather than a planned pivot. A leader or organization seeking to adapt to changing circumstances to better appeal or compete in a field of militant entrepreneurs may pivot their organization's strategic goals without experiencing the growth trap described here.

### Conclusion and Vignette

In summary, recruitment from a new constituency can be simultaneously vital and dangerous. An influx of members and their social connections bring strength, resilience, and resources. However, recruits are the future of an organization. Yet, recruits gain the leverage to transform their new organizations when losing recruits is catastrophic. Without the manpower, resources, and networks of grassroots members, the organization will cease to make forward progress. Ideally, the existing socialization infrastructure can incorporate the recruits. However, socialization sometimes fails, particularly when faced with a large or densely connected cohort. When this happens, the organization can experience pressure to accommodate the preferences of their recruits.

Mustfa Hamid, an advisor and jihadi strategist involved in the early years of al-Qaeda, illustrated the interplay of these two mechanisms in an observation about how worry over losing recruits can induce leaders to grant self-defeating concessions to rank-and-file members. Reflecting on the quality of Arab foreign fighters in Usama bin Laden's Afghan camps in the late 1980s, Hamid observed that trainees would lobby bin Laden to reduce the intensity of the camp. Hamid noted: "...discipline was a serious issue but [trainers] Abu Ubaydah and Abu Hafs did a very good job under difficult circumstances. They tried to control the youth and train them in the severe way that creates discipline. Then the youth would go to Abu Abdullah [bin Laden] and he would be gentle with them, perhaps because he feared they

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might leave— and the work of Abu Ubaydah and Abu Hafs became harder”.<sup>33</sup> As a result, the trainees were “woefully unprepared” for a critical May 1987 battle and were ultimately saved by luck and the intervention of local allies.<sup>34</sup>

When there are tight control mechanisms and powerful internal institutions, training and monitoring procedures can reorient the preferences of the membership base towards those of the leadership. Socialization failures are magnified if leaders find themselves recruiting from already-cohesive populations<sup>35</sup> or if the operating context promotes decentralization and strong middle-level leadership.<sup>36</sup> This risk of co-optation might even deter an ambitious leader from seizing the opportunity to strengthen their personnel, as Hansen 2018 describes Somalia’s Shabaab al-Mujahideen militant group as doing when rebuffing a 2008-2009 attempt by the Marehaan clan to co-opt the jihadi group by sending large numbers of clansmen to infiltrate the organization.<sup>37</sup>

## **Case: Transnational Jihadism and Local Conflict Participation in the Gulf**

In the remainder of this manuscript, I explore the logic of the accommodation mechanism in a domain in which a transnational revolutionary ideology collided with more parochial local interests. I focus on al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the local Yemeni wing of the transnational al-Qaeda jihadi movement, as the organization fulfills many of the criteria for where we would expect to see the growth trap in effect and thus operates as a typical case, intended to “illustrates the contents of the theory and demonstrates... plausibility”.<sup>38</sup> This

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<sup>33</sup>Hamid and Farrall 2015, p. 99.

<sup>34</sup>Hamid and Farrall 2015, p. 100.

<sup>35</sup>Hundman and Parkinson 2019; Manekin 2017.

<sup>36</sup>Lidow 2016; Tamm 2016.

<sup>37</sup>At the same time, the Shabaab has long “recruited from youth ...with a nationalistclanist motivation for joining the organization”, which has steadily eroded the appeal of globalist rhetoric within the movement (Hansen 2013, pp. 94–95).

<sup>38</sup>Gerring and Cojocar 2016, p. 405.

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analysis triangulates from several sources of data.

I use qualitative sources, including captured al-Qaeda documents, to trace the evolution of AQAP and AQAP precursors from 2004 through 2016, focusing first on the existence of a fundamental ideological incompatibility between the group’s initial strategic outlook and their eventual recruits. I then turn to event data to present observable outcomes via the proportion of AQAP operations participating in dyads against the Yemeni State, a Shia conflict actor (Ansarullah), and tribal political leaders (Forces of Hadi), as well as within-jihadi conflict against the Islamic State. Finally, I quantitatively analyze the group’s changing self-presentation based on an original dataset of almost 875 translated public statements made by AQAP from June 18, 2004 through September 18, 2016.<sup>39</sup>

I supplement this primary-source dataset with multiple sources of secondary source reporting. For information on larger trends in the conflict as well as details about the motivations and frustrations of conflict actors, I draw on English-language reporting by close observers of the Yemeni conflicts and on translated memoirs from conflict participants. To develop a broad overview of AQAP’s strategic involvement, I use data on violent events in the Yemeni civil war collected by the UCDP Armed Conflict Dataset.<sup>40</sup> Finally, to determine if there is an appreciable difference in how local observers perceived the activities of AQAP and their local spin-off, I employ machine learning algorithms to evaluate a corpus of 566 articles reporting on the activity of AQAP, the local spin-off, Ansar al-Shariah, and a rival sectarian militia (Houthi insurgency).

### Case Selection and Expectations

AQAP fits the criteria of the growth trap. The organization spent several of its early years

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<sup>39</sup>The corpus includes content from both the current—*i.e.* post-2006— AQAP and a predecessor organization of the same name that is occasionally referred to as al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia. AQAP is a direct successor to the Saudi Arabian-based “AQAP”, and the Yemen-based AQAP leadership actively sought to present the organizations as linked entities. Therefore, I allow the AQAP corpus to accommodate both the current Yemeni-based AQAP and the earlier Saudi-based “AQAP” as this permits examination of the impact of the upswing in drone casualties in 2009 and 2010.

<sup>40</sup>Davies, Petterson, and Öberg 2022.

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trying to recruit and retain local fighters before experiencing a large inflow from the local tribal communities. Under intense security pressure due to the American War on Terror, AQAP operated as a decentralized militant group with decreasing ability to invest in central training programs. These two attributes can be expected to reduce socialization capacity relative to their recruitment (Hypothesis 1) and increase the group's propensity for accommodation driven by mid-level commanders (Hypothesis 3b). As in other conflict zones, AQAP's strategists and commanders contend with labor mobility (Hypothesis 2). In particular, counterinsurgency campaigns have tried to deplete AQAP by encouraging desertion and defection of fighters and tribal allies, while local reporting attests that fighters have transitioned between AQAP and tribal militias.<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, although the case lacks specific attestation of internal debate and considerations—as would be ideal to focus on the precise moment of organizational accommodation and acquiescence to the divergent preferences of the rank-and-file—several structural features of the case make it amenable to tracing the process of a militant group absorbing the preferences of their base. The first attribute is that as a member of the transnational jihadi movement, AQAP has extensively articulated strategic objectives. Second, during the period in focus, Yemen sat at the intersection of American-led counter-terrorism efforts, the 2011 Arab Spring, and an internationalized proxy civil war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This has generated close interest in the motivations of Yemeni combatants, allowing documenting instances of preference divergences that are difficult to obtain in most current conflicts. Third, the complexity of the conflict allowed AQAP a degree of flexibility in its operations. For large periods, the Yemeni state was extremely weak, thus the group may have unusual latitude in choosing where and how to allocate their efforts.

Finally, I leverage a number of distinctive attributes of AQAP's operation to differentiate the bottom-up accommodation pathway from the main alternative explanation of top-down strategic adaptation. First, top-down strategic advice from al-Qaeda's central leadership to

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<sup>41</sup>Kendall 2018b; Kendall 2018a; Michael, Wilson, and Leath 2018.



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AQAP leaders clearly and explicitly directed the group to avoid becoming locally co-opted. Second, AQAP seized, administered, and then lost territory in the Abyan Governorate in 2011. This produces an identifiable moment in which an organization that was looking for opportunities to strategically adapt to local preferences could have pivoted their self-presentation. Moreover, the conquest and loss of Abyan provides a moment in which AQAP contracted, thus introducing variation. Third, for several years, the group founded and attempted to maintain an arms-length local spin-off. The local spin-off, Ansar al-Shariah, provides a point to benchmark AQAP's messaging and branding against a related entity that was designed to appeal to local preferences and priorities. Both of these attributes permit the research design to partially overcome limitations of access to internal deliberations.

The main observable outcome of interest is a shift in the operation and self-presentation of AQAP, from a transnationally-focused jihadi militant group seeking social and political revolution to a militant group more narrowly focused on sectarian conflict in Yemen. An internal reorientation towards the interest of the interests of the new rank and file should manifest as a move away from contesting the state towards contesting alternative local power centers. We can expect to see this outcome empirically changing the composition of conflict events away from conflict dyads against state forces and towards conflict dyads with other non-state actors that are active in the tribal hinterlands of Yemen. The shift should also be reflected in how AQAP presents its activities, via decreasing rhetorical themes emphasizing al-Qaeda's original transnational revolutionary agenda and an increase in content referring to local operations and local political dynamics. Failing to see these transitions would suggest that AQAP has been able to retain the original organizational focus despite a context in which the growth trap mechanism would expect the original organization to be particularly disadvantaged.

### **AQAP Growth and Origins of Preference Divergence**

Observers of Yemen have identified two trends as accelerating AQAP's ability to recruit local supporters. In the following section, I outline the organization's rapid growth, drawing on

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American security assessments of the organization’s strength. I then turn to reporting by Yemen experts to describe how not only did AQAP grow in absolute numbers, but the inflow was driven by two distinct mechanisms: local Sunni tribes seeking revenge for collateral damage from drone strikes and local Sunni tribes attempting to oppose the expansion of a rival sectarian militia.<sup>42</sup> Both motivations have been featured in contemporaneous reporting from Yemen that contain descriptions of recruit motivations and priorities that diverge substantially from the transnational revolutionary ideology of al-Qaeda.

In 2009, the United States Department of State estimated that AQAP’s membership was approximately 200-300.<sup>43</sup> At the time, AQAP had difficulty recruiting within Yemen’s Sunni tribal communities. The organization’s attempts to integrate themselves into the tribal areas of Marib and al-Jawf were being rebuffed. Moreover, they failed to generate support through dispute resolution, intermarriage, or the provision of public services.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, interviews with Yemen’s Sunni tribes in 2008 and 2009 suggested that AQAP’s recruitment base was concentrated in urban centers— particularly Sanaa and Taiz—rather than among tribal communities.<sup>45</sup> By 2010, the Department of State’s estimate of AQAP’s membership had barely changed, remaining at a “few hundred”.<sup>46</sup> From 2010 onwards, domestic instability and international military engagements created an opportunity for AQAP to make inroads into Sunni tribes that had previously eluded their efforts.<sup>47</sup> Once they were able to recruit from the tribal communities, AQAP experienced a dramatic personnel inflow and steadily gained strength in the tribal regions. Estimates of their membership spiked dramatically, jumping to “few thousand members” in 2011, about a thousand in 2013 and 2014, and then again to as many as “four thousand members” in 2015 and 2016.<sup>48</sup>

### Recruitment and Heterogeneous Preferences

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<sup>42</sup>Batal alShishani 2010.

<sup>43</sup>Johnsen 2012.

<sup>44</sup>Koehler-Derrick (ed) 2011.

<sup>45</sup>Koehler-Derrick (ed) 2011, p. 138.

<sup>46</sup>Bureau of Counterterrorism 2011.

<sup>47</sup>Abdul-Ahad 2015.

<sup>48</sup>Bureau of Counterterrorism 2012; Bureau of Counterterrorism 2015, p. 395.

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Anger over drone strikes and sectarian polarization after the rise of the Houthi movement account for much of the rise.<sup>49</sup> As reflections of local security concerns, each of these motivators can be expected to introduce members into AQAP with local rather than global preferences. One powerful accelerant for AQAP's ability to recruit from among existing tribal communities in Yemen has been desire for revenge against the United States and Yemeni government for collateral damage from American drone strikes.<sup>50</sup> By alienating the population, drone operations are reported to have had the effect of drawing otherwise-pragmatic tribes closer to the jihadi militant group.<sup>51</sup> A Yemeni journalist with ties to AQAP likewise noted that revenge drove Yemenis closer to AQAP, writing that "hundreds of families are seeking revenge from the U.S. so they deal with that by joining al Qaeda."<sup>52</sup>

For example, the brother of a man killed in a strike described how drone strikes quickly changed local receptiveness to AQAP among communities with little previous engagement or affinity for the jihadi group's appeals. He noted that "In our area there was never anyone linked to al Qaeda. After the strike, everyone in the area started listening to al Qaeda types, exchanging videos on mobile phones."<sup>53</sup> This dynamic underlies the broader logic described in Kilcullen (2009), who traced how transnational revolutionary movements embedded themselves within local communities.

Fighters motivated to join AQAP for revenge add needed local strength to the militant group. However, recruits that join in response to threats to their local interests and identities may also have no particular ideological affinity for the movement.<sup>54</sup> Thus, AQAP must then undertake the process of socializing the new members to adopt the jihadi ideology.

One might expect that the failure of the state to control much of Yemen's territory should benefit AQAP's indoctrination efforts, as the group has been able to hold territory. However,

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<sup>49</sup>Bayoumy 2013; Kendall 2018a; Campbell 2015; Worth 2015; Hubbard 2015; Michael, Wilson, and Leath 2018.

<sup>50</sup>Bayoumy 2013; Kendall 2018a.

<sup>51</sup>Mothana 2012.

<sup>52</sup>Bayoumy 2013.

<sup>53</sup>Bayoumy 2013.

<sup>54</sup>Johnsen 2013; Schubiger 2018.

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anecdotes from Yemen suggest that the group has difficulty indoctrinating and controlling the behavior of new members.<sup>55</sup> One explanation may be that pressure from the American drone campaign has limited AQAP's ability to move trainers around the country<sup>56</sup> at the same time that local communities are joining for revenge. The effect of a base expansion and restricted ability to indoctrinate has led to situations such as one reported in 2013 in which an AQAP commander in the south-east of the country was complaining that his fighters were so insufficiently ideologically motivated that they neglected basic religious obligations.<sup>57</sup> Another downstream effect of expanded membership but weak leadership and central socializing infrastructure can be seen in the writing of a former judge in AQAP's Shari'a court in Taiz, Sheikh Abu al-Bara'. In a 2018 series of lectures about jihadist corruption, Al-Bara' complained about a rise in shady financial dealings and criminality within AQAP's ranks.<sup>58</sup> In her overview of organizational challenges faced by an evolving al-Qaeda in Yemen, Kendall (2018a) notes that operational advice and organizational polemics issued to both official and unofficial AQAP-supporting channels create "[an] overall impression is of a broad Salafi-jihadi melting pot now beset with organizational difficulties, in-fighting, and controversial links to organized crime."

The second trend accelerating AQAP's ability to recruit in Yemen is the rise of a Shia Zaidi insurgency associated with the Houthi movement. As with drone strikes, the Houthi insurgency allowed al-Qaeda to better integrate with the local tribes, notably by playing on Southern tribal fears of northern military aggression.<sup>59</sup> By making sectarian identity increasingly salient, the Shia insurgency drove the Sunni tribes closer to the Sunni jihadi AQAP.<sup>60</sup> By mid-2015, reporting from Yemen indicated that AQAP was able to use the Houthi threat to Sunni interests to forge the tribal alliances that eluded them in 2009 (Hubbard 2015;

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<sup>55</sup>Kendall 2018a.

<sup>56</sup>Bayoumy 2013.

<sup>57</sup>Muslimi 2014.

<sup>58</sup>Kendall 2018a.

<sup>59</sup>Kendall 2018a.

<sup>60</sup>Campbell 2015; Worth 2015; Hubbard 2015.

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Al-Batati and Fahim 2015). At the same time, Yemeni and Saudi military preoccupation with the Houthi uprising deflected state resources, thereby allowing AQAP to expand their territorial reach.<sup>61</sup> In these areas, AQAP has sought to publicize social service provision and pragmatic governance to reinforce support among the communities that they control.<sup>62</sup>

Summarizing the new accessibility to the tribes that AQAP enjoyed, a Sunni militiaman observed: “Even if al-Qaeda and I have disagreements, if we are fighting in the same trench against the Houthis, he is my brother.”<sup>63</sup> Likewise, speaking to the *Associated Press*, an AQAP commander characterized Houthi frontlines as extremely fertile recruiting grounds, writing that the war against the Houthi militias is so amenable to Sunni recruitment that “if we send 20 [men], we come back with 100.”<sup>64</sup>

These quotes directly contrast with letters from al-Qaeda Central to AQAP’s leadership feature strategic advice about avoiding local co-optation. One such instruction, believed to be written by al-Qaeda strategist Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, directed al-Qaeda’s Yemeni front to be wary of becoming co-opted by local political concerns. The author reminded the Yemeni leaders that without training and careful monitoring, local grievances would prevail, writing “...it is very important to remind all of our brothers about it with a note to the new generation, who joined the jihad road and were not advised about this issue. Thus, they conduct separate operations rather than concentrating on the main objective [the external enemy, *i.e.* the US]...”<sup>65</sup> The author pointedly warned the Yemeni al-Qaeda leaders of the dangers of being locally co-opted, as “...many jihadist groups did not succeed in gaining their objective because they concentrated on their internal enemy.”<sup>66</sup>

### **Dyad Analysis: Changes in AQAP Operational Profile**

The previous section identified a recruitment influx into AQAP driven by anger and resent-

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<sup>61</sup>Yara Bayoumy and Ghobari 2016.

<sup>62</sup>Yara Bayoumy and Ghobari 2016.

<sup>63</sup>Worth 2015.

<sup>64</sup>Michael, Wilson, and Leath 2018.

<sup>65</sup>al-Qaeda strategist 2006-2011, p. 6.

<sup>66</sup>al-Qaeda strategist 2006-2011, p. 11.

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ment over drone strike and sectarian polarization, and drew upon reporting and analysis by local observers to conclude that the two forces resulted in grassroots fighters without a strong preexisting commitment to the jihadi ideological cause. In the next section, I turn to an original analysis of AQAP's activity and self-presentation to assess whether there has been a corresponding shift in self-presentation by the organization. A trend in AQAP's activity and media releases emphasizing local operations would be consistent with the expectations of the growth trap mechanism.

I first assess broad trends in AQAP's strategic focus. Rather than focus on tactics, such as type of operation, which may be particularly responsive to short-term considerations and opportunities, I look at the broader strategic picture of their pattern of engagement. The underlying assumption of this analysis is that, broadly speaking, when faced with a multifaceted civil conflict, actors must decide how to allocate their resources. An organization seeking to change the political system of a state would be expected to keep the state as their central target, thus making most of their conflict dyads between the group and state forces. Conversely, an organization that is being co-opted would be expected to participate in conflict dyads that represent the interests of the influential faction. The expectation from the accommodation process is that the inflow of rural Yemeni Sunni tribal fighters will have redirected AQAP's activities towards contesting alternative power centers in lands important to their tribal base. In this case, the AQAP would be expected to engage in fewer conflictual dyads with the state and more with other sectarian and tribal actors who represent alternative local power bases.

I use the UCDP conflict dataset to characterize AQAP's activity patterns from 2009 to 2019. The data is collected from version 22.1 of the UCDP Armed Conflict Dataset, which aggregates media reporting of violent events around the world.<sup>67</sup> Figure 1 depicts the evolution of conflict dyads in the Yemen conflict that AQAP has participated in. The trajectory of the conflict is notable: in 2015 Ansarullah (more commonly known as the Houthi in-

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<sup>67</sup>Davies, Pettersson, and Öberg 2022.

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surgency) took control of the government of Yemen and forces loyal to the former Sunni President of Yemen, Abdrabuh Mansur Hadi became a non-state actor. After 2015, the AQAP-Government of Yemen (lightest gray) bar represents a continuation of the AQAP-Ansarullah conflict dyad (darkest gray). After Hadi was driven from government, AQAP shifted the bulk of their operations from targeting the Hadi state to targeting the military forces loyal to Hadi, a shift that suggest the organization has shifted their focus away from trying to advance an Islamist revolution via the overthrow of regional governments and towards engaging with a specific Yemeni power-center. Modeling AQAP activity data from 2015 to 2020, the ACLED research team came to a similar conclusion, describing a “pragmatic” militant group using tribal grievances to retrench and expand.<sup>68</sup>

[Figure 1 here]

Although activity patterns are suggestive of organizational preferences, motivations other than shifting strategic focus and priorities may shift the operational focus and tempo of a militant organization. In the next section, I combine the high-level behavioral patterns with a close focus on changing themes in how AQAP presents itself in material intended to rally supporters and present itself as maintaining forward momentum. I computationally analyze the corpus of communiqués by using a Structural Topic Model to summarize changes in latent topics within the corpus.<sup>69</sup> The STM is well suited to addressing trends over time as it incorporates document-level metadata (such as date) as a covariate related to topic prevalence. Existing work has applied the STM to a variety of corpora similarly comprised of short and moderate-length documents,<sup>70</sup> such as open-ended surveys,<sup>71</sup> social media messages,<sup>72</sup> and deepweb forum posts.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>68</sup>Carboni and Sulz 2020.

<sup>69</sup>Roberts, Stewart, and Tingley 2014.

<sup>70</sup>Roberts et al. 2014.

<sup>71</sup>Tingley 2017.

<sup>72</sup>Bail 2016.

<sup>73</sup>Munksgaard and Demant 2016.

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## Text Analysis: Changes in AQAP Self-Presentation

This section presents selected results from three Structural Topic Models estimated on AQAP and al-Qaeda Central propaganda releases, showing a general localizing trend in AQAP’s self-presentation.<sup>74</sup> The analysis interprets rising prevalence of Yemen-specific topics and decreases in transnational and pan-jihadi topics as suggestive of an influential parochial base.

The analysis was conducted on a corpus of 875 documents released by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula from June 18, 2004 through September 18, 2016.<sup>75</sup> The corpus consists of English translations of documents originally released in Arabic and, occasionally, the original text of English-language releases.<sup>76</sup> These documents were collected and translated by the SITE Intelligence Group, a private research organization that collects and translates jihadi media.<sup>77</sup> As no official universal archive of AQAP’s releases exists in the public domain, the corpus is necessarily a sample of the releases. However, as the SITE Intelligence Group is an internationally-focused monitoring organization, any systematic selection effects should bias the results against finding increased local self-presentation because bias could be expected to prioritize documents intended for an international audience which should then carry an internationalist message.

Official releases are an attractive source of information about changing organizational priorities because, within ideological and stylistic constraints, these documents provide a forum on

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<sup>74</sup>The Supplemental Information provides information about text processing and a fuller characterization of the results.

<sup>75</sup>The corpus includes content from both the current—*i.e.* post-2006— AQAP and a predecessor organization of the same name that is occasionally referred to as al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia. AQAP is a direct successor to the Saudi Arabian-based “AQAP”, and the Yemen-based AQAP leadership actively sought to present the organizations as linked entities. Therefore, I allow the AQAP corpus to accommodate both the current Yemeni-based AQAP and the earlier Saudi-based “AQAP” as this permits examination of the impact of the upswing in drone casualties in 2009 and 2010.

<sup>76</sup>A very small portion of the documents, such as individual articles from *Inspire Magazine*, were distributed in English.

<sup>77</sup>SITE Intelligence Group translations are advantageous for this project, as the company maintains near real-time coverage of prominent online distribution sites and has internal procedures to ensure consistent translation in style and tone.



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which an organization can choose how to frame their self-presentation. Using propaganda releases does embed the assumption that these releases are capturing the messaging that AQAP wishes to release. Although this assumption may be challenging in many contexts, al-Qaeda’s online distribution networks have historically maintained very close oversight and control of officially-branded propaganda. Moreover, in captured documents, Nassir al-Wuhayshi—AQAP’s leader until his death June 2015—advised a counterpart to tightly control who is permitted to speak on behalf of an insurgency, adding “We restricted the statements and appearances of our brothers and emirs, allowing only those we deemed fit.”<sup>78</sup>

As well, the technological environment makes propaganda documents an appealing source for analysis: since 2011, online platforms have been a “major means of communication” within Yemen.<sup>79</sup> This implies that media distributed online can be consumed by domestic as well as international audiences. The two-level audience can be expected to discourage AQAP from strategically differentiating their online signaling from their local self-presentation. Readers may worry that even if online platforms are important for communication in the country, Yemen’s relatively low internet penetration rate may imply that AQAP’s online propaganda is not intended for a domestic audience. If this is the case, it should likewise bias the results against findings in support of the bottom-up localizing hypothesis.<sup>80</sup>

The first model addresses the question of the direction of convergence in third-party reporting about the activities of AQAP and Ansar al-Shariah, their local spin-off. Comparing AQAP and Ansar al-Shariah is illustrative, as Ansar al-Shariah is widely understood to be “one and the same as AQAP.”<sup>81</sup> However, AQAP has released material under the label of Ansar al-Shariah when they want to present a local front, thereby implying that AQAP attempted to differentiate their own branding from that of a purely local organization. The bottom-

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<sup>78</sup>al-Wuhayshi 2012a.

<sup>79</sup>Carapico 2014, p. 33.

<sup>80</sup>One may be concerned that a strategic actor could use in-person networks to signal which documents are intended for local versus international audiences. However, the difficult information and security environment in Yemen makes it risky to rely on a bifurcated media strategy.

<sup>81</sup>Kendall 2018a.

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up transformation mechanism described above predicts that an influx of local recruits, and the progressive accommodations that those recruits are able to extract, should drive AQAP to adopt increasingly local priorities. Thus, convergence in third-party media coverage of AQAP and Ansar al-Shariah should be driven by changes in AQAP, despite AQAP's evident interest in separating the messaging. If, as argued above, self-presentation broadly reflects true priorities, changes in AQAP's focus should manifest in the topic model identifying an increased prevalence of themes relating to domestic fissures, such as the Houthi-Sunni civil war, and a decline of transnational themes.

Although general trends alone are unable to directly test the predictions of the bottom-up transformation mechanism, relative differences in the proportions of themes can indicate the general plausibility of the argument. In the case of Yemen, the theory predicts that increased access to local recruits should drive AQAP to adopt an increasingly localized agenda. This outcome is notable because it directly contravenes al-Qaeda Central's strategic and tactical advice to remain focused on the transnational conflict and to avoid becoming enmeshed and co-opted by local concerns.

I model attention within the AQAP corpus via an 18-topic structural topic model.<sup>82</sup> Figure 3 presents high-level summaries of the topics via their FREX words, which are words or tokens that are associated with the topic but relatively unlikely elsewhere in the corpus. I then cluster the topics into four thematic groupings: locally-focused war reports, discussions about and threats of clandestine operations, topics promoting transnational jihadi sentiments and goals, and jihadi-associated descriptors.

Figure 2 shows the proportion of the entire corpus of communiqués is expected to be assigned to each of the fifteen substantively interesting topics.<sup>83</sup> As the figure indicates, when the entire corpus is taken together without any disaggregation by document release date, the two

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<sup>82</sup>For discussion of model specification, see page 17 of the Supplemental Information.

<sup>83</sup>The three remaining topics are specific to the construction of the documents themselves

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most common topics are related to the Houthi militias and terms that describe local targets and operations. From there, a number of topics that associate words around ideological and tactical themes are each expected to feature in about 10% of the total documents.

[Figure 2 about here]

[ Figure 3 about here]

The relative frequency of topics specifically about Yemen provide the first place to look for evidence of a local trend in AQAP’s messaging. As several of the thematic clusters identified by the model relate to facets of AQAP’s activities in Yemen—including discussion of Houthi militants, activities in Southern Yemen, castigation of the Yemeni government, and descriptions of local operations— combining the estimated prevalence of each Yemen-centric topic gives an easily-visualized overview of the changing salience of local concerns in AQAP propaganda output. Figure 4 depicts the expected document-level topic proportion for the “Local Conflict” cluster. The cluster is characterized by words that refer to specific local operations, geography, and political jurisdictions. Indeed, documents representative of this topic are often battlefield communiqués issued to claim local territorial control. Even the most transnational of the topics, the “US in Yemen” topic, emphasizes political events in the country. Thus, document space dedicated to each of the “Local Conflict” topics reflects a prioritization of domestic Yemeni issues over transnational themes. Furthermore, a localizing trend is underscored by looking at changes in the expected prevalence of the four topics that speak to a transnational jihadi sentiment. These topics refer to regional power centers, notably the government and security apparatus of Saudi Arabia, and social concerns that are typical of the transnational jihadi movement. Taken together, the prevalence of and relate to videography, habitual sign-off terms, and transcript production.

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these four topics begins to decline from a peak in late 2012, as AQAP’s propaganda becomes increasingly focus on the local Yemeni civil war. Readers might be concerned that the inverse relationships between topic proportion allocated to the “transnational” and “local conflicts” are simply mechanical. Although the total prevalence assigned to all topics in the model does sum to one, and thus increased attention to one topic necessarily means less attention to others, the “transnational” and “local conflicts” clusters never exceed an expected topic percentage of 75% of any given document. Moreover, the mean expected topic proportions dedicated to the two topics is 45%. Thus, the two topics could co-exist if desired by AQAP’s propagandists.

[[Figure 4 about here]

## **Alternative Explanations**

The results presented above are generally consistent with the theory’s expectation that an influx of local fighters generated internal pressure on AQAP to focus on local issues. However, a number of alternative explanations could account for the localizing pattern. The most notable of these explanations is that localization was a top-down strategic response rather than a bottom-up process of accommodation. The possibility of top-down strategic localization is significant, because not only does it fundamentally challenge the accommodation theory, but the observable implications are the same as for the accommodation process.

### Localization as a Top-down Strategic Pivot

The most direct route for top-down strategic transformation would be for AQAP’s leaders to have decided on a strategic change towards localization. Unfortunately, the opacity of organizational decision-making makes it particularly difficult to adjudicate between directed top-down change and gradual bottom-up accommodation, as doing so requires access to the inner workings of a secretive organization. However, AQAP’s control and subsequent loss of

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territory in the Abyan Governorate in 2011 provides a rare window in which top leaders of the organization created documents illuminating their strategic thinking.

In 2013, the *Associated Press* discovered a cache of documents left by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb in Timbuktu, Mali. Among the documents discovered by the *Associated Press* were a pair of letters from “Abu Basir,” a nom de guerre of Nassir al-Wuhayshi, to his counterpart in North Africa, the leader of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. The letters, which are dated from May and August 2012, feature al-Wuhayshi analyzing AQAP’s administration of the population of Abyan and transmitting advice for AQIM’s future governance. Although the comparison is not perfect— the documents relate to governing rather than internal management— they do provide a rare window into private strategic reflections. We can augment the insight from these documents with a focusing on AQAP’s activities and messaging around 2011 and thus use the group’s behavior during and after controlling territory in Abyan to develop observable implications from the counterfactual in which AQAP’s localizing trend was a top-down strategic decision.

In recounting AQAP’s strategy for interacting with the population, al-Wuhayshi consistently presented a model of behavioral change that can be described as accommodation-to-radicalization. The first letter described a gradualist approach, accommodating on “un-Islamic” behaviors until the group can introduce and train the local population.<sup>84</sup> He reiterates the point several times, writing “We have to first stop the great sins, and then move gradually to the lesser and lesser ones” and “our opinion in the beginning was to postpone the issue [of corporeal punishments during wartime]”.<sup>85</sup> Importantly, al-Wuhayshi’s letters urge a policy of temporary leniency until such time as the jihadi administrators have had time to indoctrinate the local community, rather than a logic of adapting to local preferences in order to gain strength by becoming more palatable to the communities.

The sense that AQAP leaders intended for accommodation to local priorities to be tem-

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<sup>84</sup>al-Wuhayshi 2012a.

<sup>85</sup>al-Wuhayshi 2012a.

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porary is echoed in the ratio of local to transnational topic proportions during and after 2011. While in control of Abyan, in 2011, AQAP's communiqués take on a pronounced local theme, as seen in the rise of the local clusters in Figure 4. However, shortly after relinquishing their physical control of the governorate, AQAP retrenches into a transnational jihadi self-presentation. Notably, the largest bump in transnational content comes in 2013, the year after al-Wuhayshi's letter to AQIM and thus after AQAP had arrived at their lessons from the failure to govern and retain Abyan. The impression of a more hardline retrenchment rather than a pivot towards local preferences is echoed in al-Wuhayshi's second letter, in which he observes that having to withdraw from Abyan and the resulting increase in local security instability "gave us a rare opportunity for guerrilla warfare and liquidations [assassinations]."<sup>86</sup> This contrasts with a presentation consistent with the top-down story, which could, for example, emphasize learning the strategic lesson that integrating local priorities allowed for a more resilient presence.

Thus, AQAP's attempt to seize territory in Abyan Governorate in 2011 produces a specific moment of variation in localizing behavior and rhetoric. When in control of the southern governorate, AQAP attempted to administer the territory using their religious credentials as the basis for governance and political legitimacy Al-Ganad, Katheri, and Johnsen 2020, but concluded that they would need a gradualist approach in the future. The failure of their initial governance experiment, the lessons that AQAP itself seems to have taken from the experience, and AQAP's subsequent rhetorical tilt away from local themes all point away from the alternative explanation of top-down adoption of local preferences.

#### AQAP Was Following Broader Jihadi Trends

A second alternative explanation could be that AQAP was simply following broader forces among the transnational jihadi community. One possible counter-narrative to the bottom-up transformation argument maintains that the change in al-Qaeda's leadership may have triggered a wider ideological shift that filtered to local branches, and that Awlaki's death

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<sup>86</sup>al-Wuhayshi 2012b.

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amplified the effect in Yemen. This argument would undermine the argument that AQAP was divided between the preferences of their base and the explicit instructions of al-Qaeda Central. Indeed, if al-Qaeda’s central strategists changed their advice to local branches, changes in AQAP’s self-presentation would not be informative about the grassroots transformation theory. Unfortunately, there are fewer captured strategic documents that directly attest to the strategic thinking of al-Qaeda’s leaders in the second half of the data window. However, during this time, al-Qaeda Central leaders, particularly Emir Ayman al-Zawahiri, issued extensive public commentary and strategic advice for responding to regional upheavals such as the Arab Spring, the Syrian Civil War, and the al-Qaeda-Islamic State factional conflict. Thus, one can analyze communiqués released by AQAP compared to those released by al-Qaeda’s central propaganda mouthpiece, as-Sahab. This analysis indicates that as AQAP became more locally-focused, their messages increasingly diverge from propaganda released by al-Qaeda’s central leadership.<sup>87</sup>

## Limitations and Future Directions

After closely studying the activities and communications of one organization, readers may wonder whether the “growth trap” dynamic generalizes beyond the unique context of a local franchise of a transnational violent movement. The distinctive transnational and hierarchical structure of al-Qaeda and its local wings may lead readers to suspect that the expansion-transformation dynamic is more a story about the adaption of a transnational ideology to a local context than it is about organizational pressure following from growth. Moreover, although AQAP presents a typical case in which to expect many of the theoretical drivers of the growth trap to be operative, lack of access to documentation about the inner workings of the group itself limits our ability to compare possible alternative explanations.

To address these worries, the following section expands the aperture to introduce the trajec-

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<sup>87</sup>Details of the different trajectories of AQAP and As-Sahab communiqués are available in the Appendix.

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tory of three additional militant groups that have been subject to upward-driving pressure to change strategic focus. Drawing on existing scholarship, I identify three very different contexts in which organizations exhausted their socialization capacity, incorporated recruits with divergent preferences, and subsequently became redirected to the preferences of the new base. The vignettes are selected to span geographic location, time frames, and ideological background. Details on identification and selection are featured in the Supplemental Appendix

The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in Nicaragua illustrates how external community shocks can initiate bottom-up transformations. As Mosinger (2017) details, in 1967 and 1972, “grievance-triggering focus event[s]” motivated new constituencies to regard the FSLN as a viable avenue through which to express anti-state grievances. In 1967, the violent repression of a demonstration mobilized radical student organizations. Five years later, in 1972, government mismanagement of relief efforts after the Managua earthquake mobilized Christian activists. Recruits from the new constituencies then flocked to the FSLN and created new internal factions and external bases.<sup>88</sup> Following both recruitment shocks, the FSLN was riven by internal power struggles as the new members sought to advance their preferences within the group.

In 1968, the Palestine Liberation Organization claimed credit for fighting the Israeli Army to a stalemate in Karameh, Jordan. Reaping the rewards of a symbolic victory, the movement quickly gained thousands of new Palestinian and Arab recruits.<sup>89</sup> However, this bounty rapidly turned toxic, as the new manpower quickly exceeded the PLO’s absorption capacity, and the new fighters began abusing their host population in Jordan.<sup>90</sup> This abuse exacerbated tensions between the PLO and their Jordanian and Lebanese hosts, undermining the Executive Committee’s strategic goal to remain on good terms with their sponsors.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup>Mosinger 2017, p. 210.

<sup>89</sup>Sharif 2009.

<sup>90</sup>Szekely 2017.

<sup>91</sup>Szekely 2017.



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Seven years later, in 1975, a founder of the Eritrean Liberation Front (Jebha), Said Hussein, returned to the group after nine years in prison only to discover his organization transformed. A nationalist group formerly dominated by conservative highland Muslims, the Jebha militia had been molded by an influx of Christians after Ethiopian crackdowns in 1974 and 1975. Indeed, after one crackdown, the number of prospective members so exceeded Jebha's absorption capacity that the group asked potential members to remain home until camp space opened.<sup>92</sup> The new members, largely drawn from lowland Christian communities, quickly began pushing for Jebha to adopt a Marxist ideology anathema to the founders' socially conservative inclinations.<sup>93</sup>

The FSLN, PLO, and ELF represent a set of positive cases where scholars have independently observed a rapid growth to transformation dynamics. These give us initial support to the expectation that the growth trap mechanism is indeed one that affects militant groups in a variety of contexts and circumstances. Additional work can fully establish the scope of the phenomenon as well as the counter-strategies that allow some militant groups to resist the dynamic outlined here.

## Conclusion

For many organizations, recruits are the future. Not only do new members bring manpower and material, but they can introduce new strategic priorities and internal constituencies. These priorities can eventually push the organization into directions that the leadership does not want. This process, a personnel-driven resource curse, has been described as a human resources challenge by militant leaders in a wide variety of contexts.

The paper has presented a novel theoretical insight into organizational change, via a theory of grassroots-driven, bottom-up organizational transformation. This insight has consequences for domains beyond the militant context presented here: it suggests that what appears to

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<sup>92</sup>Woldemariam 2016, p. 155.

<sup>93</sup>Woldemariam 2018, p. 111.

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be a process that brings in strength and resources can create internal strains. Such strains introduce a vector through which internal fissures, reduced operational efficacy, and schism can sap capacity.<sup>94</sup> By presenting a theory of grassroots-driven organizational change that unifies the experiences of many militant groups, this paper outlines the contexts and processes in which recruitment shocks lead to change. This theory can inform scholars and practitioners to similar underlying contexts among groups experiencing the structural characteristics that precede grassroots- transformation. By identifying structural similarities, analysts can draw on a range of cases to generate predictions about the trajectory of a particular organization that may be experiencing grassroots-driven transformation.

This manuscript makes a twofold methodological contribution for research in information-poor settings. First, it suggests a method for treating the text of news reports as a readily-accessible source of feature-rich data about the tactical and strategic goals of a local actor. Secondly, it uses multiple methods and data sources to triangulate insights into the behavior of actors that would otherwise be difficult to systematically characterize. In overlapping distinct methods and data, the empirical approach builds confidence in the absence of a ground truth against which to compare the findings.

Thus far, the research has focused primarily on the organizational consequences of rapid expansion, the *what* component of the dynamic. Future work can expand on the *when* and the *why*. One future avenue of work can leverage the development of organizational datasets<sup>95</sup> and recent strategies to computationally quantifying periods of change in armed conflict actors.<sup>96</sup> Together these data sources can shed light on the organizational and contextual conditions that send some groups on the path to bottom-up change while other organizations remain stable despite similar periods of expansion. Another avenue of future research can focus on leader motivations for rapid expansion into new constituencies. In doing so, it

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<sup>94</sup>Pearlman and Cunningham 2012; Bakke, Cunningham, and Seymour 2012; Bueno de Mesquita 2008; Bloom 2004.

<sup>95</sup>*e.g.*, Acosta 2019; Birnir et al. 2018; Braithwaite and Cunningham 2020

<sup>96</sup>Foster 2022.

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can illuminate a puzzle at the heart of the expansion-transformation dynamic: if a rational, forward-looking leader should be able to anticipate downstream pressures, why undergo an expansion that may invite transformation? Ideally, organizations recruit only those members that are already in alignment with their goals or when they can socialize or incentivize new agents into conformity.<sup>97</sup> Additional work focusing on the specific calculations and constraints faced by militant leaders can advance our understanding of the ways in which managerial decisions interact with organizational and contextual factors to shape the evolution of armed conflict.

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<sup>97</sup>Laffont and Martimort 2009.

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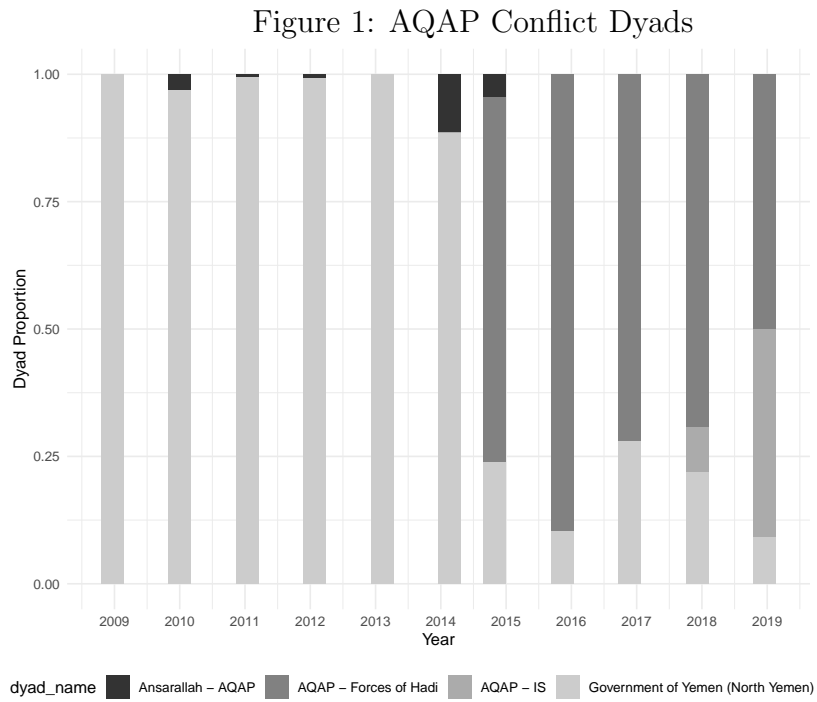


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## Figures

**Top Topics Model 1**  
**AQAP Corpus With Day Covariates**

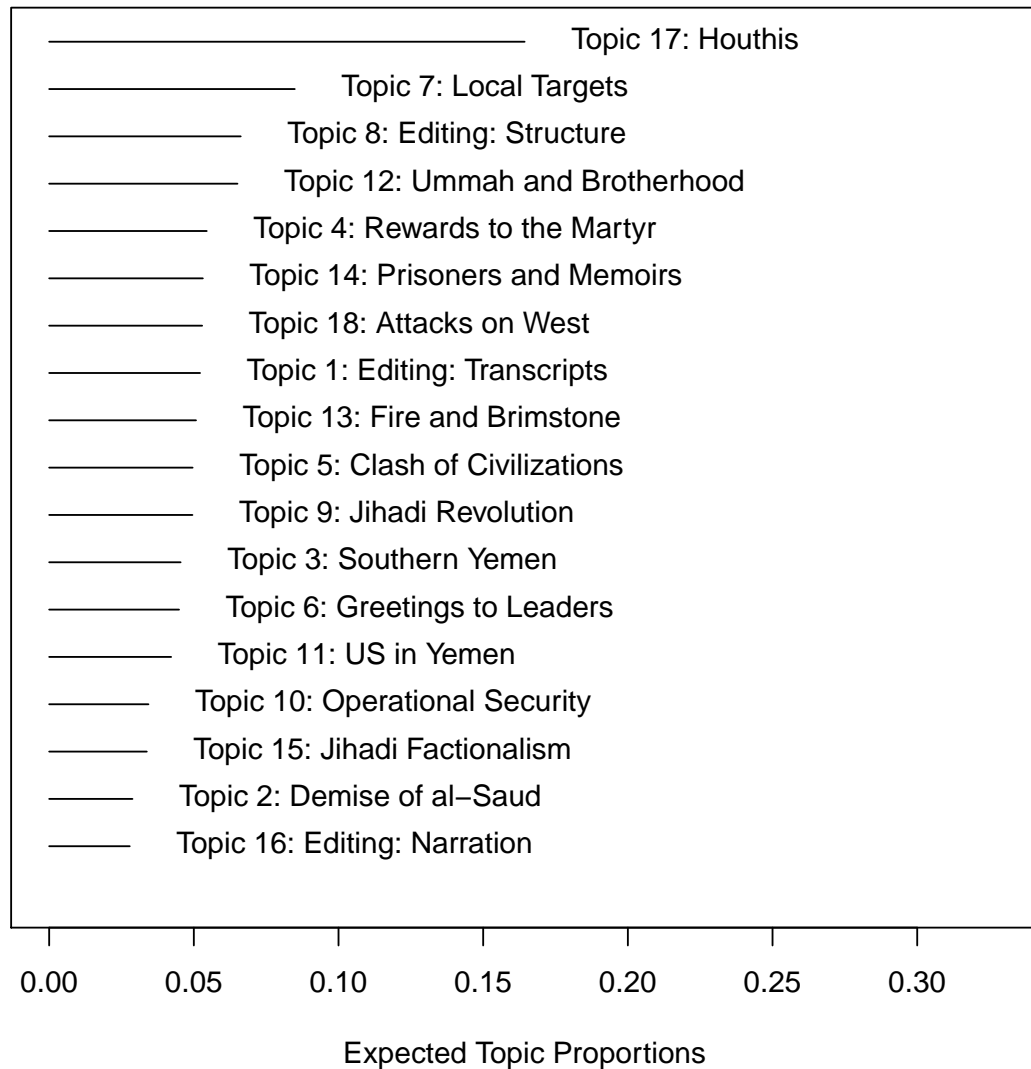
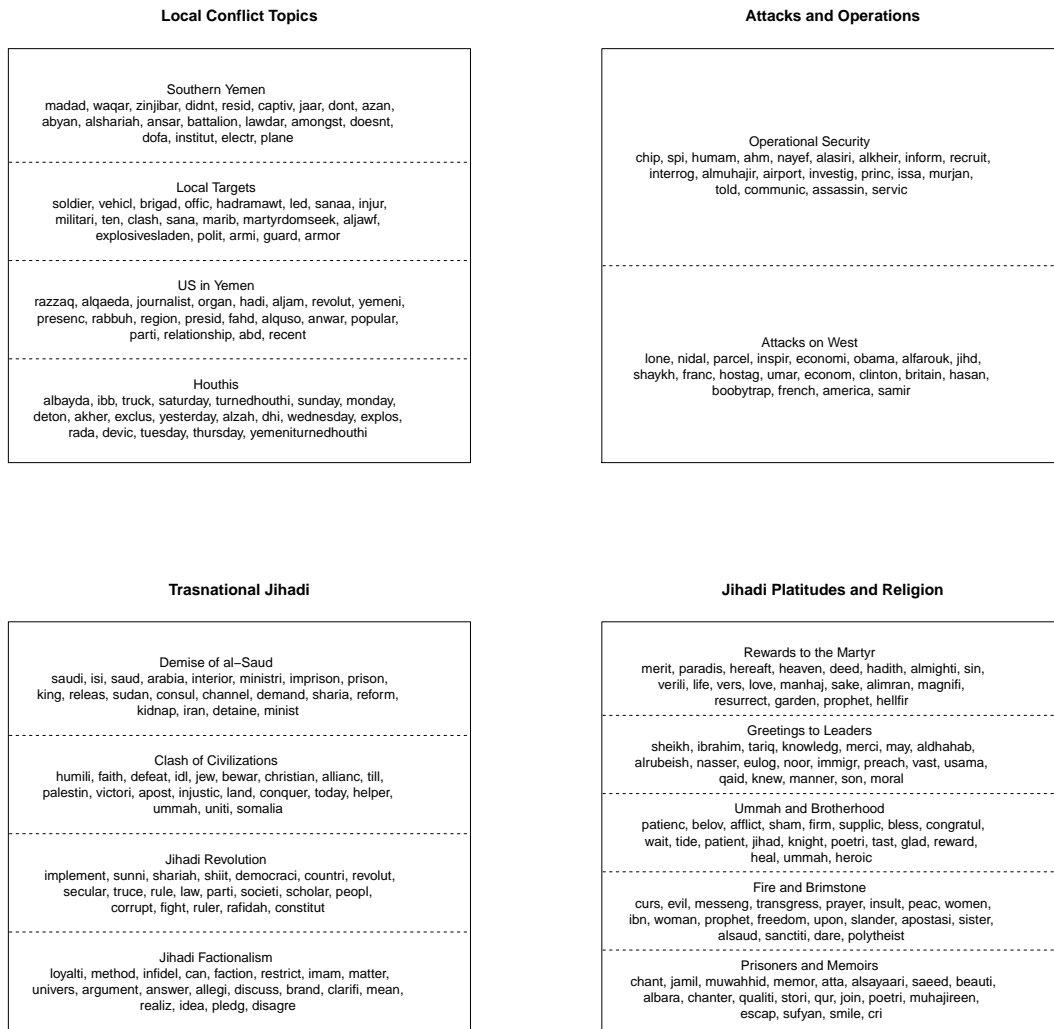


Figure 2: Estimated Topic Proportions in al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula Corpus

Figure 3: Groupings of Substantive Topics in General Trends Model



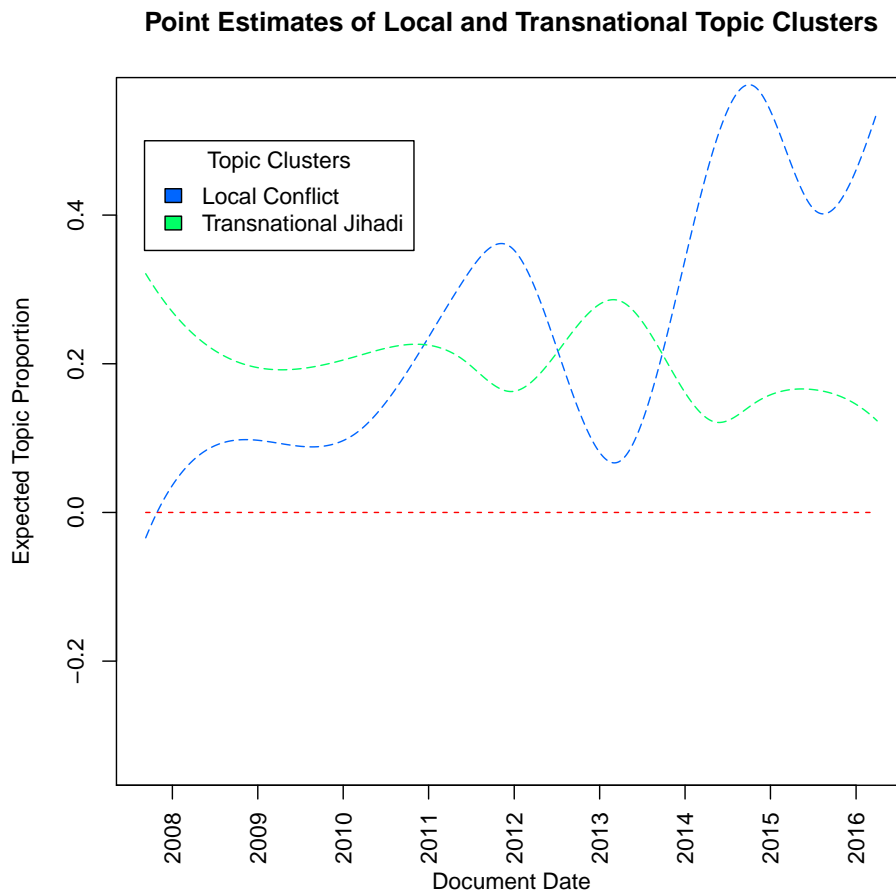


Figure 4: Changes over time to attention dedicated to local and transnational themes