Commanders of the Mujahideen: Introducing the Jihadist Leaders Dataset (JLD)

Abstract

Recent political violence research has explored how militant leaders' backgrounds influence their decision-making while in power. However, existing scholarship primarily analyzes the biographical attributes of individuals in command of *rebel* organizations. This focus on rebel organizations excludes leaders of smaller yet highly lethal and influential armed groups in civil wars as well as commanders of militant organizations operating outside of civil war contexts. To help bridge this gap, we developed the Jihadist Leaders Dataset (JLD). The JLD contains novel information on 180 leaders of jihadist groups operating across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East between 1976 and 2023. Examining Arabic, English, French, German, Turkish, and Urdu language sources, we collected biographical data on numerous variables surrounding jihadist leaders' backgrounds and life experiences. In addition to outlining our research methodology and descriptive statistics on the characteristics of jihadist leaders, we demonstrate the dataset's practical value through a quantitative analysis of suicide bombings. This dataset contributes to research on militant leaders, individuals involved in conflict processes, and a prominent subset of armed groups that continue to influence conflict dynamics across multiple regions.

Introduction

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was formed in 2009 under the leadership of Nasir al-Wuhayshi. Born in 1976 in the Mukayras region of Yemen, al-Wuhayshi graduated from a private religious institute before leaving in 1998 for Afghanistan, where he would soon join al-Qaeda and become "nearly inseparable" from Osama bin Laden (Johnsen, 2012). Following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Iranian security forces captured al-Wuhayshi and extradited him to Yemen in 2003. While in prison, al-Wuhayshi "was able to organize his comrades and win their allegiance" before escaping in 2006 and subsequently building al-Qaeda's branch in Yemen (Radman & al-Sabri, 2023).

Abu Bakar Ba'asyir had a different path to leadership. Born in East Java in 1938, Ba'asyir graduated from al-Irsyad University on his path to becoming "Indonesia's best-known radical cleric." Ba'asyir later fled to Malaysia in the 1980s, working alongside Abdullah Sungkar to expand their network of religious schools. Ba'asyir helped co-found Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in 1993. While in his sixties, Ba'asyir succeeded Sungkar as head of JI following the latter's death in 1999, serving as JI's leader until his arrest following the 2002 Bali bombings (Jones, 2009. Ba'asyir would later create another violent organization – Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid – in 2008 as he entered his seventies, with the organization seeking to achieve "full victory for the struggle of the Indonesian faithful" (International Crisis Group, 2010).

Militant leaders come in different "types" (Bacon & Grimm, 2022). As demonstrated by al-Wuhayshi and Ba'asyir, leaders possess different levels of education, personal connections, rebel experiences, and other salient life experiences. Recent scholarship has investigated how variation in militant leaders' backgrounds may affect key organizational-level outcomes (Doctor, 2020; Acosta et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2022; Doctor et al., 2023). Integrating decision-makers

more extensively into theories and empirical analyses of conflict nuances and extends structural and organizational-level explanations. To date, however, existing research primarily focuses on *rebel* leaders. This emphasis on rebel organizations excludes leaders of smaller yet highly lethal and influential armed groups in civil wars, as well as commanders of militant organizations operating outside of civil war contexts (Malone, 2022). Analyzing variation across the entire distribution of militant leaders is crucial for understanding historical and contemporary conflicts as well as why, when, how, and against whom armed groups engage in certain forms of violent behavior. Additionally, current datasets on rebel leaders often stop collecting data in 2013 or earlier, limiting understanding of how militant leaders have affected contemporary conflicts.

Building on existing research, we developed the Jihadist Leaders Dataset (JLD). The JLD includes original data on the biographical attributes of jihadist leaders operating across the Middle East and North Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa from 1976 to 2023. In doing so, the JLD provides new insights into the leaders of "rebel" and "non-rebel" organizations, the latter of which are often excluded from datasets on militant leaders.[1] Utilizing Arabic, English, French, German, Turkish, and Urdu language sources, the JLD includes information on 30 leader-level variables, surpassing datasets limited to information from English language sources. Contributing to conflict scholarship, the JLD provides systematic insight into how leaders' backgrounds and prior experiences influence their decisions once they are in power.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we review existing literature on individuals in political violence research, underscoring the need for greater emphasis on leaders of non-rebel organizations. We then introduce the JLD, delineating the dataset's scope, variables of interest,

[1] We define armed groups as violent non-state actors that utilize violence to achieve organizational goals. This broad definition encompasses rebel organizations, militias, violent political parties, as well as smaller groups often described as being "terrorist" organizations (Malone, 2022). We view jihadist organizations as an ideological subset of armed groups.

and coding procedures. Next, we outline descriptive statistics from our existing sample of jihadist leaders and demonstrate the dataset's utility through an examination of the leader-level determinants of a group's employment of suicide bombings.

Why A New Dataset on Militant Leaders?

In recent decades, scholars have increasingly employed organizational-level theories to explain armed groups' behavior, exploring how factors such as group ideology, age, size, and territorial control affect various conflict outcomes. The development of numerous datasets has advanced this research, allowing for systematic examination of attributes like group formation (Lewis, 2023), popularity (Tokdemir & Akcinaroglu, 2016), origins (Braithwaite & Cunningham, 2020), recruitment strategies (Soules, 2023), and natural resource exploitation (Walsh et al., 2018). This proliferation of datasets underscores the value of organizational-level explanations in political violence research, offering crucial insights into why, when, and how armed groups behave.

While political violence research remains dominated by organizational-level theories and data collection efforts, militant leaders also affect the behavior of the organizations they command. For instance, analysts have described Hassan Nasrallah as "one of the most powerful figures in the region" (Nasser & Deeb, 2024), with his September 2024 death constituting "a revolutionary event for the Middle East" (Feltman et al., 2024). Indeed, armed group leaders "can yield enormous power and influence over all aspects of their organizations" (Price, 2012, 16). Building on this idea, Bacon and Arsenault (2019, 232) note: "With far fewer constraints than heads of state…the leader of a violent political group can have an even greater impact on that group's preferences, intentions, strategies, and by extension, its alliances." In response to such insights, recent years have witnessed significant strides in incorporating leaders into conflict research (Bacon & Grimm, 2022; Lutmar & Terris, 2019; Sawyer & Cunningham, 2019).

Relying on the premise that individuals' traits and predispositions shape their motivations and preferences, ultimately informing their approach to utilizing violence (Yarhi-Milo, 2018), scholars of political violence have started studying militant leaders by focusing on these individuals' pre-war backgrounds and life experiences. For instance, recent literature finds that rebel leaders' pre-war military experiences may impact organizations' propensity to fragment (Doctor, 2020) as well as their use of terrorist operations (Doctor et al., 2023). Additionally, the Rebel Organization Leaders (ROLE) Database shows that leaders' age, education, combat experience, and foreign experience can significantly influence their battlefield success, preference for terrorism, and ability to attract external funding (Acosta et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2022; Silverman et al., 2024). This emphasis on the importance of leaders' backgrounds aligns with established theories in the study of social movements and foreign policy surrounding how biographical attributes impact individuals' propensity to participate in collective action (McAdam, 1989; Schussman & Soule, 2005) and state leaders' decision-making in international politics (Horowitz et al., 2005; Goemans et al., 2009; Yarhi-Milo et al., 2018).

However, while making critical advancements in the study of militant leaders, existing political violence research predominantly focuses on leaders of rebel organizations. Kreiman (2024, 1-2) critiques this narrow focus, noting: "Through the reliance on arbitrary battle-death thresholds that determine the existence or not of civil wars, plenty of insurgent groups that do not reach these thresholds and that directly impact a variety of civil war dynamics, are not included in these databases." The exclusion of these groups can bias findings on why and when organizations adopt specific tactics, form external alliances, fragment, or fail (Malone, 2022). Moreover, the temporal limitation of existing datasets on militant leaders, which mostly reach until only 2013, hinders understanding of how armed group leaders have impacted conflicts in recent years.

We advance current research on rebel leaders by collecting data on leaders from both rebel and non-rebel organizations, with a specific focus on the jihadist movement. Jihadist organizations have become the dominant type of militant actor in many conflict zones (Walter, 2017). In response, a wealth of qualitative research has emerged highlighting how influential figures like Abdullah Azzam, Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi have shaped the jihadist movement in key ways (Hegghammer, 2020). Despite this extensive scholarship, there remains a notable lack of systematic quantitative data on jihadist leaders. To address this gap, the following section presents key concepts, coding procedures, and variables from the JLD.

Coding Jihadist Leaders

This dataset relies on multiple key concepts. Following Prorok (2016, 76), we define militant leaders as "the individual who exerts ultimate decision-making authority over major group policies." Individuals are coded as such if they hold the highest-ranking position within an armed group or are viewed as the key power holder and source of policy in the organization. This definition is aligned with other data collection projects on militant leaders (Acosta et al., 2022).

For this study, jihadist groups refer to non-state Islamist groups that legitimize violence to achieve organizational goals (Nielsen, 2017; Ahmad, 2019).[2] By restricting our sample to jihadist groups, we alleviate some of the bias and reduce the possibility of confounding brought on by comparing groups with radically different ideologies. If ideology influences group behavior and governance practices (Breslawski and Tucker 2022; Revkin and Wood 2021), leaders of groups with divergent ideologies may have distinct policy and strategic options at their disposal.

[2] As Ahmad (2019, 85) writes, Islamist may refer to "any substrate movement that utilizes Islamic ideas, identity, symbols, and rhetoric toward the goal of creating political order on the basis of Islamic laws, ideas, and institutions."

We gathered a list of jihadist organizations from existing conflict databases, including the Armed Group Dataset (Malone, 2022), Mapping Militants Project (Crenshaw, 2010), and Big, Allied, and Dangerous Database (Asal and Rethemeyer, 2015). We identified the top leaders of each organization, resulting in 180 unique leaders from 87 jihadist groups (see Appendix 2 and Appendix 3 for the full lists of names). Rather than confined to one region, these organizations were active in 32 different countries across Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa between 1976 and 2023 (Map 1). Overall, the JLD includes data on 1,469 *jihadist-leadership years*.

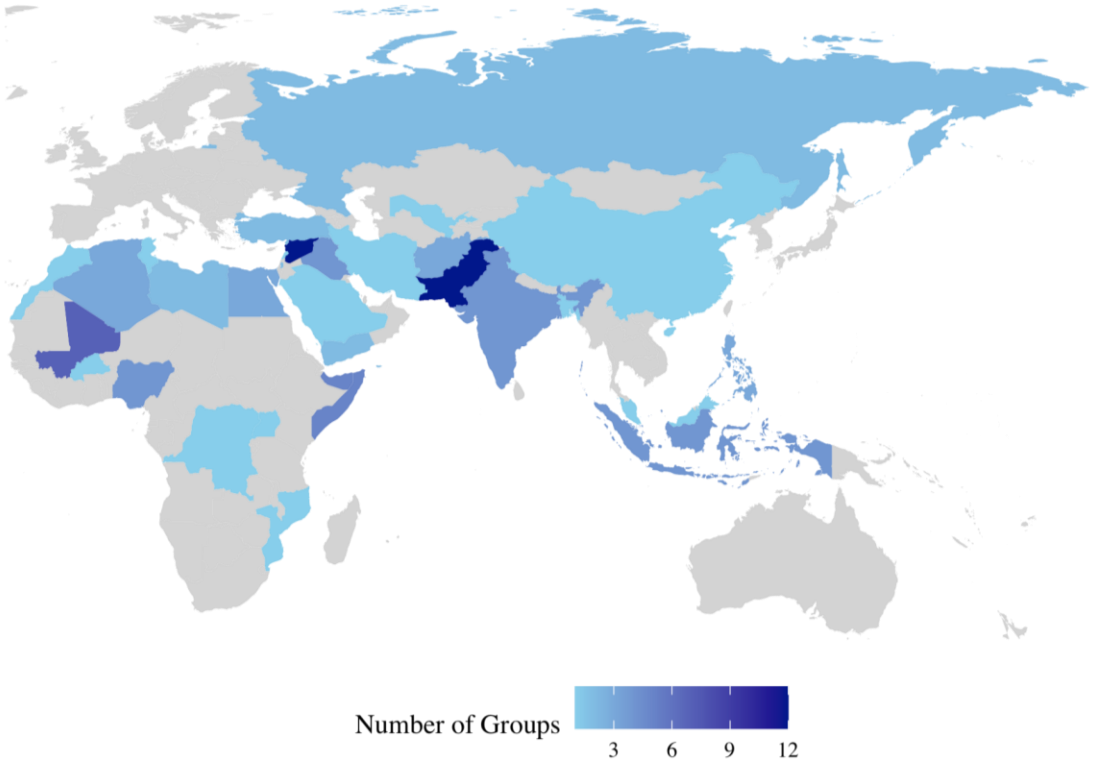
Like the ROLE dataset, JLD includes standard variables, including leaders' educational and occupational background, national citizenship, military experience, method of entry to and exit from leadership, and international experiences. Additionally, the JLD also offers unique data on leaders' time in Afghanistan, prison time pre- and post-leadership, previous rebel leadership experience, and religious education.[3] These experiences may be critical for understanding an individual's contentious social network, turn to militancy, and reputation in the broader jihadist movement (Nielsen, 2017; Stenersen, 2017). We also coded whether or not leaders had pledged their allegiance to al-Qaeda or the Islamic State (IS) to better understand the dynamics surrounding militant alliances.

Existing scholarship highlights that datasets created primarily through media articles may substantially underreport events and contain inaccuracies (Weidmann, 2015). However, incorporating additional types of sources may help to mitigate these biases (Dietrich & Eck, 2020; Shaver et al., 2023). Building on these insights, we compiled biographical information on jihadist leaders from diverse sources, including scholarly books and articles; think tank reports; local and

[3] See Appendix 1 for our codebook detailing variables and coding rules.

international media outlets (sourced through general Internet search engines and Boolean search strategies on Nexis Uni); official terrorist designation and sanction lists produced by states and the United Nations; and organizational profiles in existing conflict datasets. In addition to English language sources, we gathered information from sources in Arabic, French, German, Turkish, and Urdu to uncover details about individuals for whom information in English was limited. More detailed information on our coding protocol is included in the Appendix. The following section explores the JLD in greater depth, highlighting important descriptive statistics on jihadist leaders.

Map 1: Jihadist Groups' Base of Operations



Exploring the Backgrounds of Jihadist Leaders

Jihadist leaders come from various backgrounds and bring their disparate experiences with them when they take power. To further shed light on these characteristics and how they relate to other

militant leaders, we compare the JLD with findings from the ROLE dataset on rebel leaders. Seventeen percent of rebel groups in ROLE, which includes data through 2011, were Islamist organizations. While both datasets include the largest groups, the JLD contains data on double the number of unique Islamist groups compared to ROLE. This comparison revealed notable differences and similarities between jihadist leaders and the broader population of rebel leaders, some of whom are jihadists.

Prior experiences in organizing violence can significantly shape the behavior of state and armed group leaders. Experience in a state military, involvement in non-state armed groups, and prior combat exposure all influence individuals' lives and their future actions (Horowitz & Stam, 2014; Lupton, 2017). In the JLD, these experiences are captured by three indicators: leaders' 1) service in a state military, 2) prior membership in another armed group, and 3) prior combat experience before assuming leadership.[4]

Table 1 reveals that a small percentage of jihadist leaders in the JLD have formal military experience prior to assuming militant leadership roles (8 percent). However, approximately half the leaders have been members of another armed group (55 percent) or have actively engaged in combat (48 percent) before becoming organizational leaders. This is one area in which jihadist and rebel leaders align in terms of prior experience, although a larger proportion of leaders in the ROLE dataset previously served in the military (31 percent) (Acosta et al., 2022). Aside from a few cases, such as Hassan Hattab of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, jihadist leaders notably exhibit much lower levels of formal military experience compared to their counterparts in other rebel groups.

[4] These indicators are not mutually exclusive, for example, leaders may have served in another group and experienced combat before assuming leadership. All three variables are binary.

Table 1: Leader Descriptive Statistics

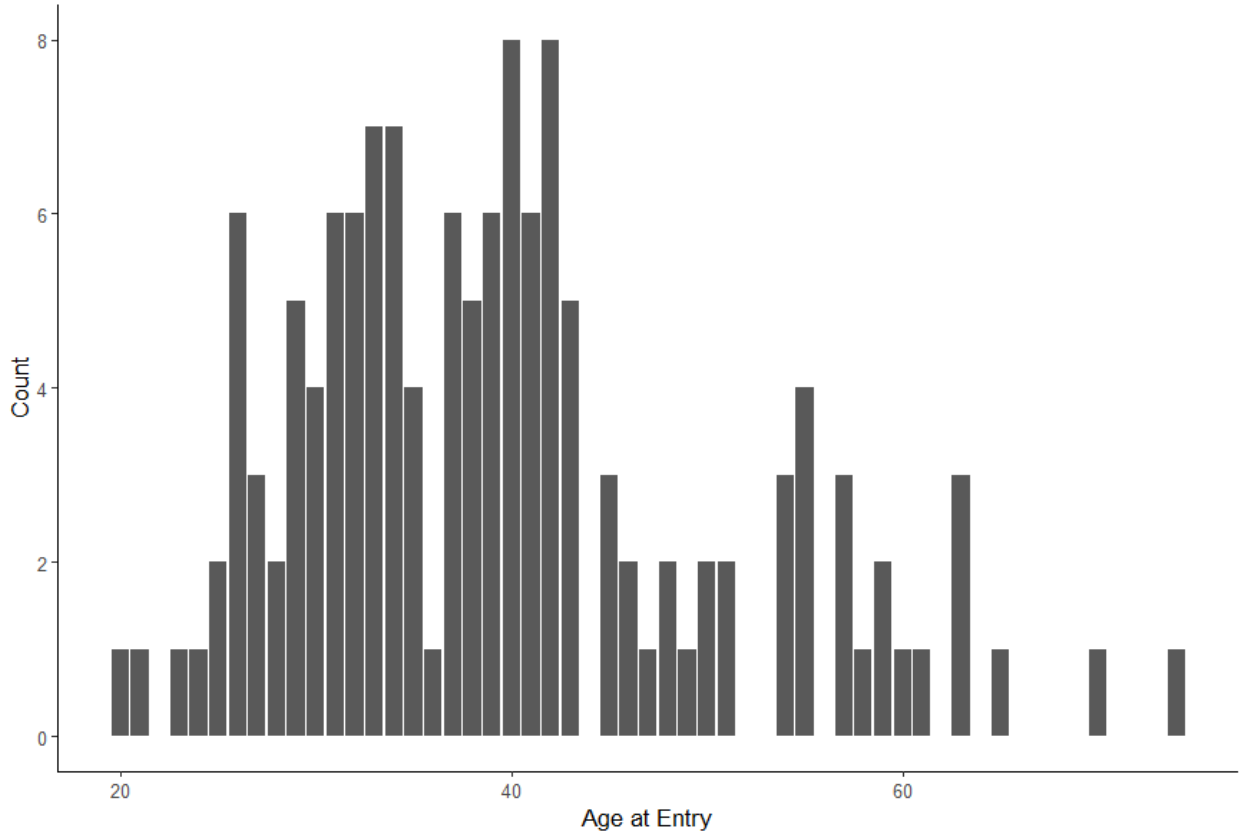
Variable	*Count: No*	*Count: Yes*	*Total*	*Percent: Yes*
Military Experience	86	14	180	7.8
Rebel Experience	24	99	180	55.0
Combat Experience	27	87	180	48.3
Religious Education	25	78	180	43.3
Founder	97	76	180	42.2
Appointed	81	92	180	51.1
Arrested	118	21	180	11.7
Death	49	90	180	50.0
Time in Afghanistan	54	68	180	37.8
Time in Prison	59	47	180	26.1
Pledged to IS	131	21	180	11.7
Pledged to al-Qaeda	133	24	180	13.3

Education also plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' experiences. Importantly, there are notable differences between the educational backgrounds of jihadist leaders and those of other rebel leaders. The JLD distinguishes between two key types of education: level of education, which ranges from primary schooling to graduate-level education, and religious education, including madrassa training, Quranic schooling, Islamic university enrollment, and degrees in Islamic studies. Notably, numerous jihadist leaders, such as Abd al-Qadir Ibn Abd al-Aziz, Habib Rizieq Shihab, Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, Syed Salahuddin, and Azam Tariq all attained graduate education. Moreover, a significant 43 percent of JLD leaders had some form of religious education before taking on leadership roles in armed groups, underscoring the importance of religious credentials within many jihadist organizations. In contrast, the ROLE dataset lacks specific data on religious education, although 5 percent of its leaders had occupations related to religion.

Jihadist leaders also exhibit interesting trends in terms of when and how they *enter* and *exit* their positions. On average, jihadist leaders come into power just before reaching 40 years old (39.6 years), which is only slightly younger than the average age of rebel leaders overall (41 years)

(Acosta et al., 2022). The ages of incoming jihadist leaders range from 20 to 74 years old, as seen in Figure 1, with the majority of the leaders ascending to power in their thirties and forties. The average *leadership tenure* for JLD leaders is 9.1 years, with some leaders, such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar of Hizb-i-Islami and Salih İzzet Erdiş of the Great Eastern Islamic Raiders Front, holding power for as long as 41 years. In contrast, Abdelmalek Gouri of Jund al-Khilafa - Algeria, was only in power for a few months before being killed.

Figure 1: Distribution of Jihadist Leader Age at the Time of Entry



In addition to tenure, accounting for how leaders assume power is crucial since founding leaders likely have more agency to shape group behavior than successor leaders (Mendelsohn 2021). Over half of the jihadist leaders (51 percent) were *appointed* to their positions, while 42 percent *founded* the groups they lead. This is markedly different from the broader population of

rebel groups, where 24 percent of leaders (16 percent of non-Islamist leaders) are appointed, and 38 percent are founders (27 percent of non-Islamist leaders) (Acosta et al., 2022). Part of this divergence is driven by the lack of broad-based elections for jihadist leaders, despite this entry method applying to some rebel leaders (Cunningham & Sawyer, 2019; Acosta et al., 2022).

Moreover, leaders' expectations about their departure from power can influence their willingness to negotiate (Ortiz, 2024; Prorok, 2016). For instance, if jihadist leaders anticipate dying in their positions, they may be more likely to take risks, reducing the likelihood of pursuing negotiated settlements compared to other armed group leaders. The JLD supports this: jihadist leaders often *exit* their roles violently, with half dying while in power and another 12 percent being arrested. For instance, Abdur Rahman of Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh, Adnan abu Walid al-Sharaoui of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, Qari Saifullah Akhtar of Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami, and Juma Namangani of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan all died in airstrikes or armed assaults conducted by state forces. Only 16 of the 180 unique leaders in the JLD resign or step down after completing a set term. While 94 leaders in the ROLE Database die of natural causes, only 9 jihadist leaders do. This discrepancy is partly due to targeted state violence, as governments, including those of the United States, France, Algeria, Egypt, Pakistan, and Israel have conducted decapitation strikes against numerous jihadist leaders.

Another significant life experience documented by the JLD is leaders' *time spent in prison*. Armed group members often face imprisonment due to their involvement in criminal and covert activities. For suspected militants, incarceration can intensify grievances against the state, potentially leading them to fight more fervently upon release compared to those who have never been imprisoned (Huff, 2023). Conversely, for dedicated fighters aiming to assume leadership roles, time in prison can be advantageous. It allows time for strategizing, building networks, and

exchanging ideas with fellow inmates (Mironova, 2019, 257-260). These accumulated grievances, expanded networks, and acquired knowledge can enhance their effectiveness as leaders. The JLD reveals that many jihadist leaders, including Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi of IS, Masood Azhar of Jaish-e-Mohammad, Jamil Mukulu of the Allied Democratic Forces, and Abu Bakar Ba'asyir of Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid, spent time in prison before rising to prominence within their organizations.

While the ROLE Dataset catalogs leaders' experiences abroad, the JLD specifically records leaders' experiences in Afghanistan, recognizing its impact on shaping jihadist leaders' attributes and skills. Exposure to the Afghan conflict provided leaders with firsthand knowledge of insurgent tactics, guerrilla warfare, and logistics and connected them to global militant networks (Gerges, 2009). Over 37 percent of jihadist leaders have spent time in Afghanistan. Indeed, future jihadist leaders like Qasim al-Raymi, Seifullah bin Hussein, Abd al-Ghaffar al-Duwadi, Tariq Azam, and Abdul Aziz al-Qatari all traveled to Afghanistan to fight, receive combat training, and build relationships before assuming leadership positions. By documenting these experiences, the JLD helps explore how jihadist networks influence leaders and, in turn, group behavior. With these details in hand, the following section explores how leadership attributes may affect jihadist organizations' use of suicide bombings.

Empirical Demonstration: Suicide Attacks

Suicide attacks are among the most lethal tools in an armed group's arsenal. A significant body of research has explored why and when militant organizations adopt this violent tactic. In doing so, researchers have found that armed groups may employ suicide bombings when they are competing with rivals for support (Bloom, 2004), fighting against occupying forces (Pape, 2003), or when they are relatively young and embedded in particular networks (Horowitz, 2010). Another strand of research points to the importance of an organization's ideological beliefs, with the spread of the

jihadist movement being noted to be a key factor in the proliferation of suicide attacks (Moghadam, 2009). Group-level theories thus remain central to research on suicide attacks. However, even among jihadist groups, which frequently use suicide attacks, variation in the use of this tactic between and within groups over time remains poorly understood. To further analyze this phenomenon, the next section demonstrates the importance of leader-level attributes in the use of suicide attacks by jihadist groups.[5]

Measuring Suicide Attacks

We utilize data from the Database on Suicide Attacks (DSAT) (Pape et al., 2021), which includes information on all suicide attacks up to 2019. We use DSAT instead of the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) because of its more comprehensive coverage (Pape et al., 2021). We matched the attacks recorded in DSAT with the groups commanded by the leaders in our dataset to create a binary measure of *suicide attack usage* by a given leader in a given year. Our analysis spans 43 years, from 1976 to 2019, covering 168 leaders and resulting in 1,290 leader-year observations.

Analyzing Leaders' Backgrounds and Experiences in Rebellion

To examine the impact of leaders' political and violent backgrounds on their sanctioning of suicide attacks, we employ four binary measures: *previous leadership experience, experience organizing violence* (e.g., whether the leader had military experience, experience as a rank-and-file fighter in a rebel organization prior to becoming the leader of the current group, or combat experience), *time spent in Afghanistan*, and *prison time before becoming a leader*.

Additionally, the role and tenure of a leader within an organization can significantly influence the group's tactics. To examine the impact of these factors, we employ three measures:

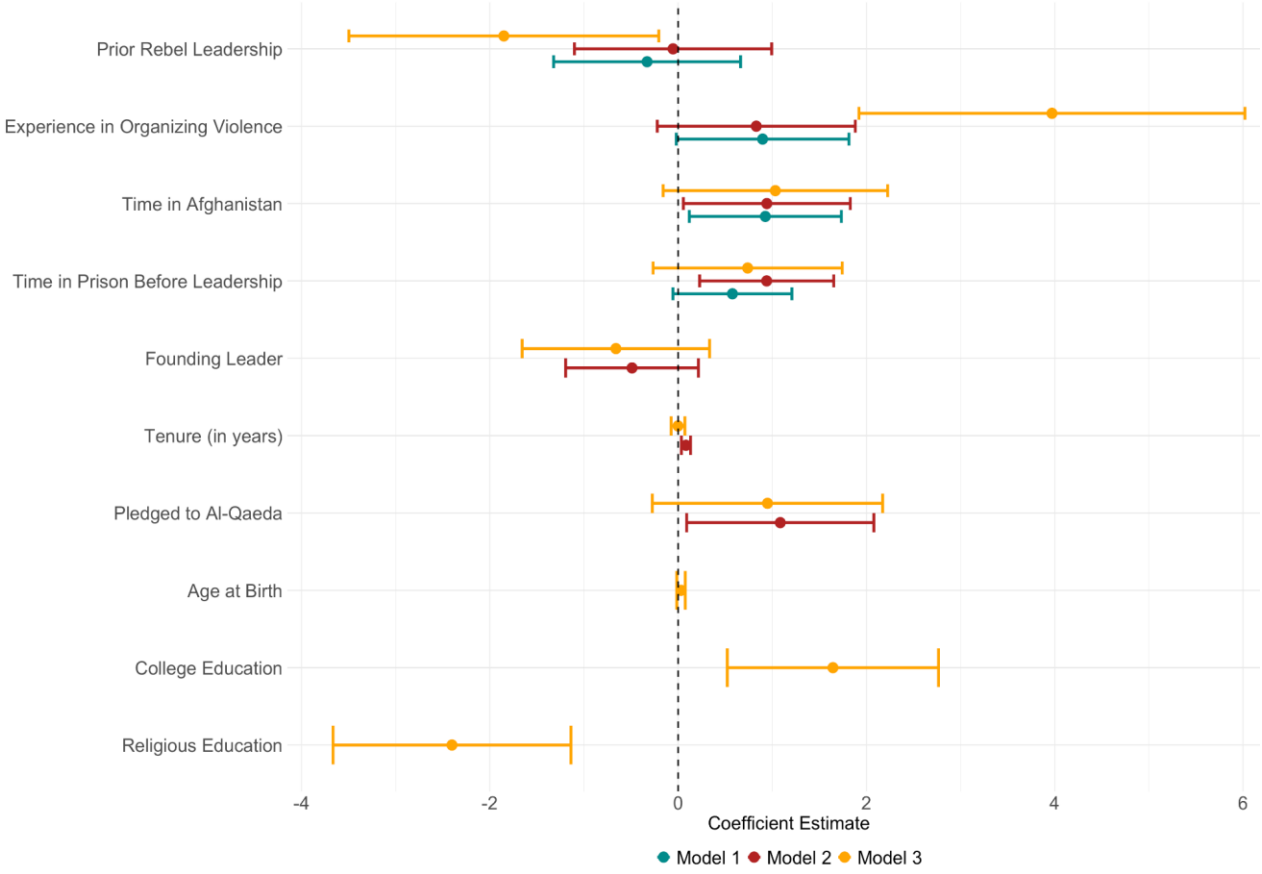
[5] While principal-agent problems have been shown to affect armed group violence (Shapiro, 2013), we believe that group leaders are much more likely to be involved in a group's decision to employ suicide attacks given the tactic's severity and relative complexity compared to other violent acts.

a binary indicator of whether the leader was the *founding leader* of the group, the duration of their *leadership tenure* (in years), and whether the leader *pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda*. Founding leaders may prioritize building and maintaining the stability of their organization due to concerns over group survival. Recognizing that extreme violence can undermine their strategic objectives by alienating potential supporters and attracting unwanted attention from powerful adversaries, they may favor strategically restrained and sustainable violent strategies over extreme forms of violence to ensure the group's longevity. Moreover, founding leaders may have a personal stake in the group's political success and reputation, leading them to avoid tactics like suicide attacks that could damage their image. On the other hand, leaders who pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda have likely been influenced by al-Qaeda's violent strategies and tactics, making them more likely to emulate the extreme forms of violence once employed by al-Qaeda (Moghadam 2009). Finally, to examine the impact of leader demographic attributes on the use of suicide attacks, we employ three variables: *leader age, college education*, and *religious education*.

Findings

Since our dependent variable—*suicide attack usage*—is binary, we use a series of logistic regression models. Our findings highlight the importance of considering leader-level attributes when examining groups' strategic and tactical choices. Figure 2 summarizes the results of the analysis of suicide attacks as a function of leader-level attributes. Model 1 includes variables related to leaders' political and violent backgrounds. Model 2 adds variables related to the leader's role and position within the organization. Model 3 is a fully extended model, including demographic variables. All three models incorporate country- and time-fixed effects, full model results are in Appendix Section 6.

Figure 2: Jihadist Leaders and Suicide Attacks, Coefficient Plot



Overall, we find evidence that leaders' political and violent backgrounds influence their sanctioning of extreme tactics such as suicide attacks. However, certain violent political experiences appear to be more influential than others. In various models, leaders' prior *experience in organizing violence*, such as combat experience, and their *time in Afghanistan* are strong, statistically significant positive predictors of their groups' use of suicide attacks in a given year. Notably, these significant effects persist even after accounting for country- and time-fixed effects, indicating that our results are not merely reflections of broader temporal and global patterns in the use of suicide attacks.

Leaders with prior experience in commanding armed groups may have a higher propensity for extreme violence. More specifically, radicalization processes that occur within prison may lead them to adopt more extreme tactics after taking power. However, our findings regarding the effects of prior *rebel leadership experience* and *time spent in prison* before becoming a leader are more mixed, as we do not consistently uncover statistically significant results for these attributes. Similarly, we find mixed results regarding the impacts of the *founding leader* role, *leadership tenure*, and the *pledge to al-Qaeda* on leaders' sanctioning of suicide attacks. Although the coefficient for the founding leader is negative, as expected, it never reaches conventional statistical significance. The coefficient for the pledge to al-Qaeda is always positive; however, it loses statistical significance once leaders' demographic attributes are accounted for.

Turning to the demographic variables, we do not detect a significant impact of *leader age* on groups' use of suicide attacks. However, leaders' educational backgrounds are significant predictors of suicide terrorism. *College-educated* jihadist leaders are more likely to sanction suicide attacks, whereas leaders who received *religious education* before becoming militant leaders are less likely to do so.

Conclusion

A burgeoning strand of literature has explored the impact of leaders on organizational behavior and conflict dynamics in recent years. To date, however, scholarship remains focused primarily on state and rebel leaders. Moreover, despite the significant amount of research on jihadist organizations over recent decades, there continues to be a lack of systematic data on the biographical attributes of jihadist leaders. The JLD provides systematic data on the backgrounds of jihadist leaders for groups operating above and below the civil war threshold.

The JLD introduces several variables not covered in existing research on rebel leaders but are crucial for understanding the decision-making within jihadist organizations. Descriptively, jihadist leaders differ in how they enter and exit power compared to the broader population of rebel leaders, with their early lives often shaped by experiences in Afghanistan and religious educational institutions. We empirically assess these trends by investigating whether specific leader-level characteristics influence the adoption of suicide attacks. Our analysis reveals that leaders' experience in organizing violence has substantial conditional effects, and time spent in Afghanistan is a particularly consistent predictor of whether a group employs suicide attacks across various contexts and periods.

Moving forward, scholars of political violence can leverage this dataset to investigate other ways leaders' early experiences and the networks they form before assuming power impact group behavior during conflict. For instance, leadership disputes often drive organizational fragmentation (Perkoski, 2022), with successor leaders often struggling to maintain group cohesion after the death of a founding leader (Mendelson, 2021). Yet, due to gaps in data availability, systematic evidence on why certain leaders are more effective at preventing organizational splintering remains scarce—an area where the JLD can provide valuable insights. Additionally, personal connections between leaders of different organizations are critical for inter-group alliance formation and cohesion (Blair et al., 2022). The JLD allows researchers to explore whether experiences such as travel to Afghanistan contribute to the formation of alliances between jihadist groups. Finally, recent research underscores that different types of leaders may have varying incentives to sanction terrorism (Doctor et al., 2023) and sexual violence (Cunningham & Sawyer, 2019). Beyond suicide bombings, the JLD can be utilized to further understand why armed groups endorse particular forms of violence under the command of disparate leaders.

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