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

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Maria Amjad* Mark Berlin† Sara Daub‡ Ilayda B. Onder§

Joshua Fawcett Weiner¶

Abstract

Recent research has explored how militant leaders' backgrounds shape their decision-making while in power. However, existing studies primarily focus on leaders of rebel groups participating in civil wars, overlooking smaller, yet lethal and influential, armed groups that operate outside civil war contexts. To address this gap, we introduce the Jihadist Leaders Dataset (JLD), which provides original, systematic data on the backgrounds and pre-war experiences of 238 leaders from 110 jihadist organizations. The dataset covers organizations operating across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East between 1976 and 2023, capturing a broad range of actors that are central to contemporary conflicts. Drawing on Arabic, English, French, German, Turkish, and Urdu sources, we document biographical information on 31 leader-level variables, offering the potential for analyzing how jihadist leaders' prior experiences shape their preferences and the behavior of the groups they command. We detail our data collection procedures and present descriptive statistics before illustrating the JLD's utility through a quantitative analysis of the leader-level determinants of suicide bombings. The JLD advances research on militant leaders, jihadist actors, and the role of individual decision-makers in shaping conflict processes.

Keywords: leaders, rebel organizations, jihadist groups, suicide bombing, terrorism

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*Lecturer, Leiden University. maria.amjad@edu.unige.it.

†Corresponding Author, Postdoctoral Associate, Princeton University. markberlin@princeton.edu.

‡Research Fellow, Hertie School. s.daub@phd.hertie-school.org.

§Assistant Professor, Texas A&M University. ilaydaonder@tamu.edu.

¶Postdoctoral Fellow, Radboud University. joshua.weiner@ru.nl.

Introduction

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was formed in 2009 under the leadership of Nasir al-Wuhayshi. Born in 1976, al-Wuhayshi graduated from a private religious institute in Yemen before leaving in 1998 for Afghanistan, where he joined al-Qaeda and became 'nearly inseparable' from Osama bin Laden (Johnsen, 2012). After the 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, Iranian security forces captured al-Wuhayshi and extradited him to Yemen. In prison, he 'organized his comrades and won their allegiance' before escaping in 2006 and building al-Qaeda's branch in Yemen (Radman & al-Sabri, 2023).

Abu Bakar Ba'asyir followed a different path to leadership. Born in 1938 in East Java, Ba'asyir graduated from al-Irsyad University and quickly became 'one of the most influential jihadi ideologues' in Southeast Asia (BBC, 2021). After being imprisoned by the Suharto regime, he fled to Malaysia in 1985 alongside Abdullah Sungkar (Jones, 2005). In 1993, Ba'asyir co-founded Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and eventually succeeded Sungkar as its leader, serving as JI's commander until his arrest following the 2002 Bali bombings. In his seventies, Ba'asyir formed another violent group—Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid—in 2008 and later reportedly pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS) while in prison (BBC, 2021).

Militant leaders come in different 'types' (Bacon & Grimm, 2022). Recent research has investigated how variation in militant leaders' backgrounds affects organizational behavior and key conflict outcomes (Doctor, 2020; Acosta et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2022; Doctor et al., 2024). Critically, this scholarship extends structural and organizational-level explanations by integrating decision-makers into theories and empirical analyses of conflict dynamics. To date, however, existing studies have primarily focused on leaders of rebel organizations, often limiting analysis to the largest and most violent groups in civil wars. Scholars have highlighted the need to broaden the scope of analysis to encompass a wider range of violent non-state actors (Conrad et al., 2023). Analyzing variation across a broader universe of armed groups is key for understanding the full range of militant leaders, their behavior, and the dynamics of both historical and contemporary conflicts.

Building on these insights, we developed the Jihadist Leaders Dataset (JLD), which provides original data on the biographical attributes of 238 leaders from 110 jihadist organizations. We conceptualize jihadist organizations as an ideological subset of armed groups—non-state actors that use violence to achieve organizational objectives—rather than narrowly categorizing them as terrorist or rebel groups[1]. Adopting this approach allows us to explore variation among a broad range of leaders of jihadist organizations operating across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East between 1976 and 2023. Drawing on Arabic, English, French, German, Turkish, and Urdu sources, the JLD contains information on 31 leader-level variables, providing new insights into how militant leaders' backgrounds and prior experiences shape their decision-making while in power.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we discuss the need for additional studies on armed group leaders in conflict research. We then introduce the JLD, delineating the dataset's scope, variables, and coding procedures. Next, we outline descriptive statistics from the JLD and demonstrate the dataset's utility through an empirical examination of the leader-level determinants of a group's use

[1]We use the terms militant leaders, armed group leaders, and jihadist leaders interchangeably.

of suicide bombings. We conclude by discussing multiple avenues of future research.

Why A New Dataset on Militant Leaders?

Scholars often use organizational-level theories to explain armed group behavior and various conflict outcomes. The development of numerous cross-national datasets has advanced this research, allowing for systematic examination of armed group formation (Braithwaite & Cunningham, 2020), competition (Conrad et al., 2023), reputation-building strategies (Tokdemir & Akcinaroglu, 2016), and recruitment practices (Soules, 2023). These datasets underscore the value of organizational-level explanations in conflict research, offering crucial insights into why, when, and how armed groups behave.

While organizational-level theories are central to conflict research, militant leaders also affect conflicts across the world. Indeed, armed group leaders 'can yield enormous power and influence over all aspects of their organizations' (Price, 2012: 16). As Bacon and Arsenault (2019: 232) state: '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.' Outside their organizations, militant leaders also impact broader political developments. Analysts described Hezbollah's former leader, Hassan Nasrallah, as 'one of the most powerful figures in the region' before his 2024 death (Nasser & Deeb, 2024). Recognizing these dynamics, recent research has incorporated militant leaders into conflict research (Lutmar & Terris, 2019; Cunningham & Sawyer, 2019; Ortiz, 2024).

One prominent way scholars have studied militant leaders is by focusing on how individuals' backgrounds inform their decision-making while in power. For example, rebel leaders' pre-war military experiences may impact organizations' propensity to fragment (Doctor, 2020) and their use of terrorism (Doctor et al., 2024). Additionally, the Rebel Organization Leaders (ROLE) database shows that leaders' age, education, combat experience, and foreign experience influence their battlefield success and ability to attract external funding (Huang et al., 2022; Silverman et al., 2024). This emphasis on militant leaders' backgrounds aligns with established theories on social movements and foreign policy, which examine how biographical attributes impact individuals' participation in collective action (McAdam, 1989) and state leaders' decision-making in international politics (Goemans et al., 2009; Yarhi-Milo et al., 2018).

However, existing conflict research predominantly focuses on leaders of large rebel organizations operating in civil war contexts. This excludes leaders of smaller, yet lethal and influential, armed groups participating in civil wars as well as organizations operating outside civil war contexts. Kreiman (2025: 497-498) critiques this narrow focus, arguing that due to '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 particular groups can bias findings on why and when organizations adopt specific tactics, form external alliances, or fragment (Malone, 2022). Additionally, many existing datasets on rebel leaders end in 2013 or earlier. This temporal scope limits understanding of how militant leaders have affected conflicts over the previous decade.

We advance current research on rebel leaders by collecting data on armed group leaders that operate within and outside civil war contexts, with a specific focus on the jihadist movement. Numerous studies shed light on how influential figures like Osama bin Laden, Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, and Abdullah Azzam have shaped the jihadist movement (Hegghammer, 2020; Zelin, 2023). However, quantitative information on jihadist leaders is lacking. Mirroring recent datasets on rebel leaders (Doctor, 2020; Acosta et al., 2022), the JLD adopts a leader-centered approach that allows for systematic comparison across organizations and regions. While jihadist organizations operate in varied contexts, they share overlapping ideological beliefs, face common challenges, and routinely cooperate and compete across borders (Farrell, 2020). Understanding the behavior of jihadist organizations remains a pressing concern, with Pettersson and Öberg (2020: 604) finding that 'jihadist groups have either driven or had a major impact on the trends in all categories of violence' in recent years.

Coding Jihadist Leaders

The JLD relies on multiple core 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. Consistent with other datasets, the JLD focuses on organizations with formal leadership structures, excluding autonomous cells since they typically lack distinct, codable leadership independent of broader organizations. Additionally, we refer to jihadist organizations as Islamist groups that justify the use of violence to achieve organizational goals (Nielsen, 2017; Ahmad, 2019)[2]. The broad definition includes both Sunni and Shia armed groups, advancing recent calls for greater comparisons of Sunni and Shia organizations (Valbjørn et al., 2024).

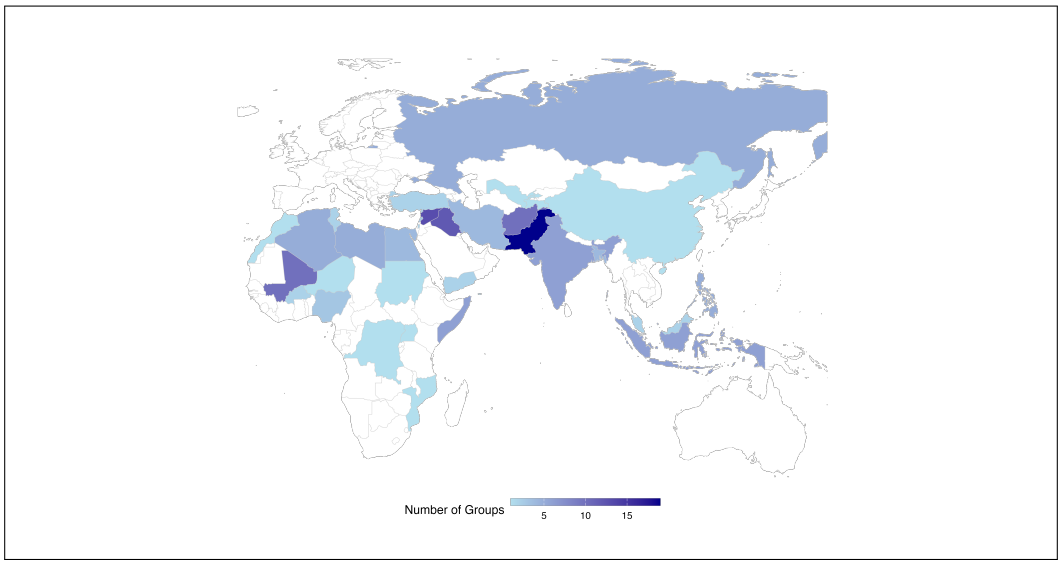
We gathered a list of jihadist organizations from existing conflict databases, including the Armed Group Dataset (AGD) (Malone, 2022), Mapping Militants Project (MMP) (Crenshaw, 2010), and Big, Allied and Dangerous Database (BAAD) (Asal & Rethemeyer, 2015). We supplemented group names from these datasets with recent cross-national research on violence conducted by jihadist organizations (Brzezinski, 2023)[3]. This process yielded 110 unique jihadist groups operating in 33 countries across Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa between 1976 and 2023 (Map 1)[4]. Due to differences in the spelling of group names across datasets, the JLD contains an Organizational Directory that standardizes group

[2]By Islamist, we mean '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' (Ahmad, 2019: 85).

[3]Brzezinski's (2023) sample of groups includes all Sunni jihadist groups in the Global Terrorism Database that were responsible for a minimum of ten fatalities.

[4]Of these groups, 79 appear in the MMP, 69 in the AGD, 44 in BAAD. Twelve groups are not found in MMP, AGD, or BAAD but are documented in either Brzezinski's dataset or the Global Terrorism Database (GTD).

names and maps them to their corresponding spellings in multiple databases[5].



Map 1: Jihadist Groups' Base of Operations

Coding the top leaders of each organization, the JLD contains novel information on 238 leaders and data on 1,829 leadership years (see Appendix 2 and Appendix 3 for the full lists of leader names). The JLD includes information on leaders' educational and occupational background, country of origin, military experience, method of entry to and exit from leadership, and international experiences. The JLD also contains data on leaders' time in Afghanistan, previous rebel leadership experience, and time in prison[6]. These experiences are critical for understanding an individual's social network, trajectory into militancy, and reputation within the jihadist movement (Nielsen, 2017; Stenersen, 2017). We also coded whether leaders pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda or IS to better understand militant alliance dynamics. Finally, we incorporated group-level variables to capture an organization's ideological orientation (e.g., Salafi-Jihadist, Deobandi, or Shia) and whether it pursues strategic or universalist goals (Piazza, 2009).

We compiled information on jihadist leaders from a diverse array of sources. This includes: scholarly books and articles; think tank reports; local and international media outlets identified through Internet searches and Boolean search strategies on Nexis Uni; official terrorist designation and sanction lists produced by different states and the United Nations; court records; and organizational profiles in conflict databases. Scholars have raised concerns over the lack of language diversity in conflict research (Raleigh et al., 2023). To reduce bias and overcome issues surrounding data gathered solely through English-language materials, we consulted sources in Arabic, French, German, Turkish, and Urdu, uncovering key details about individuals with limited coverage in English sources. For each leader, the JLD contains brief, fully-cited biographies, increasing transparency of coding decisions and providing a repository of sources for future research on militant

[5]This includes the MMP, AGD, BAAD, GTD, Database on Suicide Attacks (DSAT) (Pape et al., 2021), Violent Non-State Actor Rivalry Dataset (Conrad et al., 2023), and Brzezinski (2023).

[6]See codebook in Appendix 1.

leaders.

Like other large-N datasets, the JLD has limitations. First, while the JLD provides complete coverage of top organizational leaders, it does not capture every influential actor, such as prominent ideologues or charismatic subcommanders, within the broader jihadist movement. Specifically, figures who exercised influence without holding the highest formal title are excluded. This is a common challenge in leader-level datasets, where formal leadership roles are prioritized over informal or clandestine influence. Additionally, we recognize that our list of organizations does not capture the entire universe of jihadist organizations.

There are also limitations surrounding missingness. Consistent with prior leader-level datasets such as ROLE, levels of missingness vary across variables in the JLD. Leaders' prominence, tenure length, and the timing of their leadership can further shape variation in data availability. We employed a conservative coding strategy aligned with recent data collection practices on armed groups (Conrad et al., 2023), coding a variable as present or absent only when clear and verifiable information was available. When such evidence was lacking, we recorded the variable as missing rather than inferring an absence. While it is likely that, for many biographical variables, missingness often signals the absence of the trait—since such characteristics are typically well reported when present—we left these cases missing when no verifiable information was available to provide future users of the JLD flexibility in how they handle uncertainty[7]. Overall, we encourage future users of the JLD to be mindful of these uneven data patterns when drawing inferences from the dataset.

Despite these limitations, the JLD provides novel insight into the leaders of jihadist groups operating across multiple regions over multiple decades. The following section introduces the dataset in greater depth, highlighting descriptive patterns among jihadist leaders.

Jihadist Leader Backgrounds

Jihadist leaders come from various backgrounds and bring disparate experiences with them when they take power[8]. To highlight the differences between jihadist leaders and other militant leaders, we compare the JLD with the ROLE dataset on rebel leaders (see Appendix 8). Seventeen percent of rebel groups (N=74) in ROLE, which includes data through 2011, were Islamist organizations. Compared to ROLE, the JLD contains data on more than three times the number of unique militant Islamist leaders. Expanding the universe of jihadist leaders through the inclusion of additional groups reveals notable differences and similarities between jihadist leaders and the broader population of rebel leaders, some of whom are jihadists.

Prior experience organizing violence can significantly shape the behavior of state and armed group leaders. Experience in a state military, involvement in armed groups, and prior combat exposure influence individuals' lives and future actions (Horowitz & Stam, 2014; Hegele, 2024). 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

[7]See discussion in Appendix 1, 4, and 7.

[8]Approximately two-thirds of leaders operate within their countries of citizenship, and nearly half of those with known ethnicity belong to minority groups in their country of operation.

leadership[9].

Table 1 reveals that only 9 percent of jihadist leaders in the JLD have formal military experience before becoming leaders. However, a majority of leaders have prior involvement in armed conflict, with 56 percent having previously been members of another armed group and 50 percent having engaged in combat before becoming leaders. Compared to non-Islamist leaders in the ROLE dataset, jihadist leaders exhibit notably lower rates of military experience; 27 percent of non-Islamist ROLE leaders and 18 percent of Islamist ROLE leaders have formal military backgrounds (Acosta et al., 2022). Aside from a few exceptions, such as Hassan Hattab of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, jihadist leaders stand out for having less formal military experience than both Islamist and non-Islamist rebel leaders documented in ROLE.

Variable	**Count** *Yes*	**Count** *No*	**Count** *Missing*	**Count** *Not Applicable*	**Percent** *Yes*	**Percent** *No*	**Percent** *Missing*	**Percent** *Yes (Known Cases)*
Founder	108	130	0	0	0.45	0.55	0	0.45
Pledged to al-Qaeda	19	216	3	0	0.08	0.91	0.01	0.08
Pledged to IS	22	206	10	0	0.09	0.87	0.04	0.10
Arrested	22	160	15	41	0.09	0.67	0.06	0.12
Killed	119	63	15	41	0.50	0.26	0.06	0.65
Time in Afghanistan	77	94	67	0	0.32	0.39	0.28	0.45
Rebel Experience	133	36	69	0	0.56	0.15	0.29	0.79
Combat Experience	120	40	78	0	0.50	0.17	0.33	0.75
Time in Prison	60	81	97	0	0.25	0.34	0.41	0.43
Military Experience	22	114	102	0	0.09	0.48	0.43	0.16
Religious Education	95	40	103	0	0.40	0.17	0.43	0.70

Table 1. Leader Descriptive Statistics

Education plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' life trajectories. The JLD distinguishes between two key types of education: level of education, ranging from primary schooling to graduate-level education; and religious education, including madrassa training, Quranic schooling, Islamic university enrollment, and degrees in Islamic studies. While some jihadist leaders attained graduate education, such as Abd al-Qadir Ibn Abd al-Aziz, Habib Rizieq Shihab, Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, Syed Salahuddin, and Azam Tariq, only 39 percent of JLD leaders attended college, compared to 50 percent of non-Islamist leaders and 51 percent of Islamist leaders in ROLE (Appendix 8). Moreover, 40 percent of JLD leaders received some form of religious education before assuming leadership.

Jihadist leaders also exhibit interesting trends in when and how they enter and exit their positions. On average, jihadist leaders come to power before reaching 40 years of age (38.93 years), comparable to the average age of entry for non-Islamist leaders (41.74 years) and Islamist leaders (39.16 years) in the ROLE dataset. Incoming jihadist leaders range from 20 to 74 years old, as shown in Figure 1, with most ascending to power in their thirties and forties. However, jihadist leaders tend to have longer leadership tenures than their counterparts in ROLE. The average tenure for JLD leaders is 7.75 years, exceeding both non-Islamist leaders (5.06 years) and Islamist leaders (5.72 years) in ROLE. Some jihadist leaders, such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Salih İzzet Erdiş, held power for over four decades, while others, like Abdelmalek Gouri, held power for less than a

[9]These binary variables are not mutually exclusive.

year.

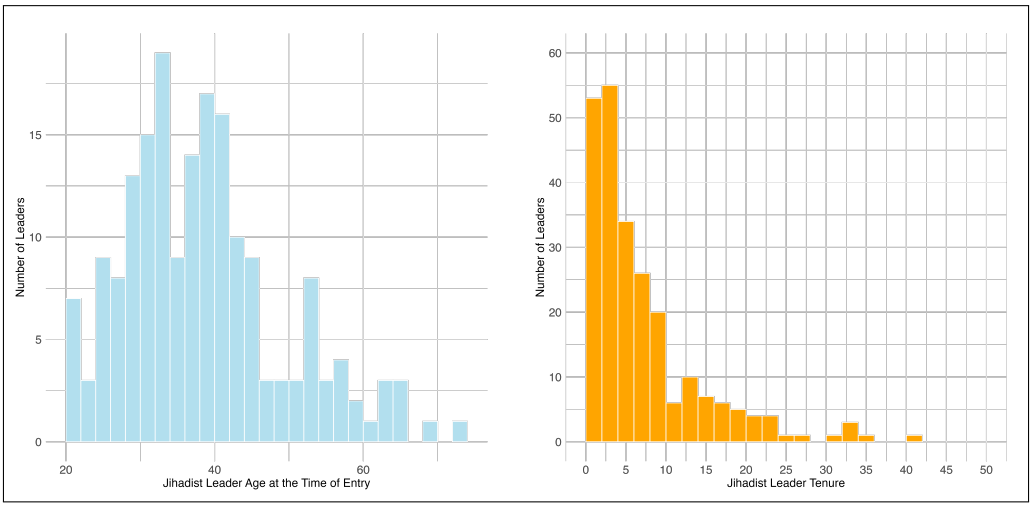


Figure 1. Distribution of Jihadist Leader Age at the Time of Entry and Leader Tenure

There is also variation in how leaders come to power. Founding leaders play a critical role in establishing organizational tactics, framing, and resource mobilization strategies (Bacon & Grimm, 2022). For their part, successor leaders face numerous challenges in maintaining power after the departure of founding leaders (Mendelsohn, 2024). In the JLD, 45 percent of jihadist leaders are founding leaders, while the rest succeeded the founder. Compared to other rebel leaders, jihadist leaders are more likely to be founders. In the ROLE dataset, only 34 percent of non-Islamist leaders are founders (Appendix 8).

Jihadist leaders frequently exited leadership violently. While 50 percent of leaders died in power, 9 percent exited after being arrested. Of those who died in office, 37 percent were killed by state forces, which is similar to the 35 percent of Islamist leaders who died in the ROLE dataset; however, both are substantially higher than non-Islamist (15 percent) leaders killed in the ROLE dataset (Appendix 8). The United States alone accounts for 32 percent of all documented killings of jihadist leaders, followed by Russia, Algeria, Egypt, France, the Philippines, Israel, and Nigeria. The JLD reveals that states employ specific methods to target jihadist leaders: 42 percent of those killed by state forces died in airstrikes or drone attacks, while 36 percent were killed during active firefights. A peaceful exit is rare for jihadist leaders: only 22 of the 238 leaders in the JLD resigned or stepped down after completing a set term. Natural deaths are similarly uncommon. While 94 leaders in the ROLE dataset died of natural causes, this was only the case for 11 leaders in the JLD.

Another significant life experience documented by the JLD is leaders' time spent in prison. Incarceration can intensify grievances against the state, potentially leading them to fight more fervently upon release than those who have never been imprisoned (Huff, 2024). Time in prison may also be advantageous for strategizing, building networks, and exchanging ideas with fellow inmates (Mironova, 2019). The JLD shows that 26 percent of jihadist leaders, including Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Masood Azhar, and Jamil Mukulu, were imprisoned before assuming leadership.

While the ROLE dataset catalogs leaders' experiences abroad, the JLD specifically records lead-

ers' experiences in Afghanistan. Time in Afghanistan fighting against the Soviet Union or living under Taliban rule provided future leaders with firsthand knowledge of insurgent tactics, guerrilla warfare, and logistics while connecting them to global militant networks (Stenersen, 2017). Over 32 percent of jihadist leaders, such as Qasim al-Raymi, Seifullah bin Hussein, Abd al-Ghaffar al-Duwadi, and Abdul Aziz al-Qatari, spent time in Afghanistan. By documenting leaders' backgrounds, the JLD allows for systematic exploration of how various experiences influence leaders' decision-making and, in turn, group behavior.

Empirical Demonstration: Suicide Attacks

Suicide attacks are among the most lethal tools in an armed group's arsenal. Organizational-level theories remain central to explaining why and when groups adopt this tactic. Various factors, such as competition with rivals (Farrell, 2020) and organizational capacity (Horowitz, 2010), influence organizations' use of suicide bombings. An organization's ideological beliefs may also play a role, with the spread of the jihadist movement being noted as a key factor in the proliferation of suicide attacks (Moghadam, 2009). However, variation in the use of suicide attacks—both between jihadist organizations and within the same group over time—remains poorly understood. This highlights the need to consider factors beyond organizational-level characteristics, including the role of individual leaders.

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 GTD because of its more comprehensive coverage. We matched the attacks recorded in DSAT with the groups commanded by the leaders in the JLD 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 238 leaders and resulting in 1,625 leader-year observations.

Leaders' Backgrounds and Experiences in Rebellion

To examine the impact of jihadist leaders' 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 before 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 these factors, we employ three measures: 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. For example, leaders who pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda may have been influenced by the organization's violent strategies and tactics, making them more likely to emulate al-Qaeda's behavior. 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 to identify associations between leader characteristics and the use of suicide attacks. 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 adds demographic variables. Model 4 is the fully specified model that adds group-level controls for organizational ideology and U.S. Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) designation status. All four models incorporate country- and year-fixed effects; full model results are in Appendix 6.

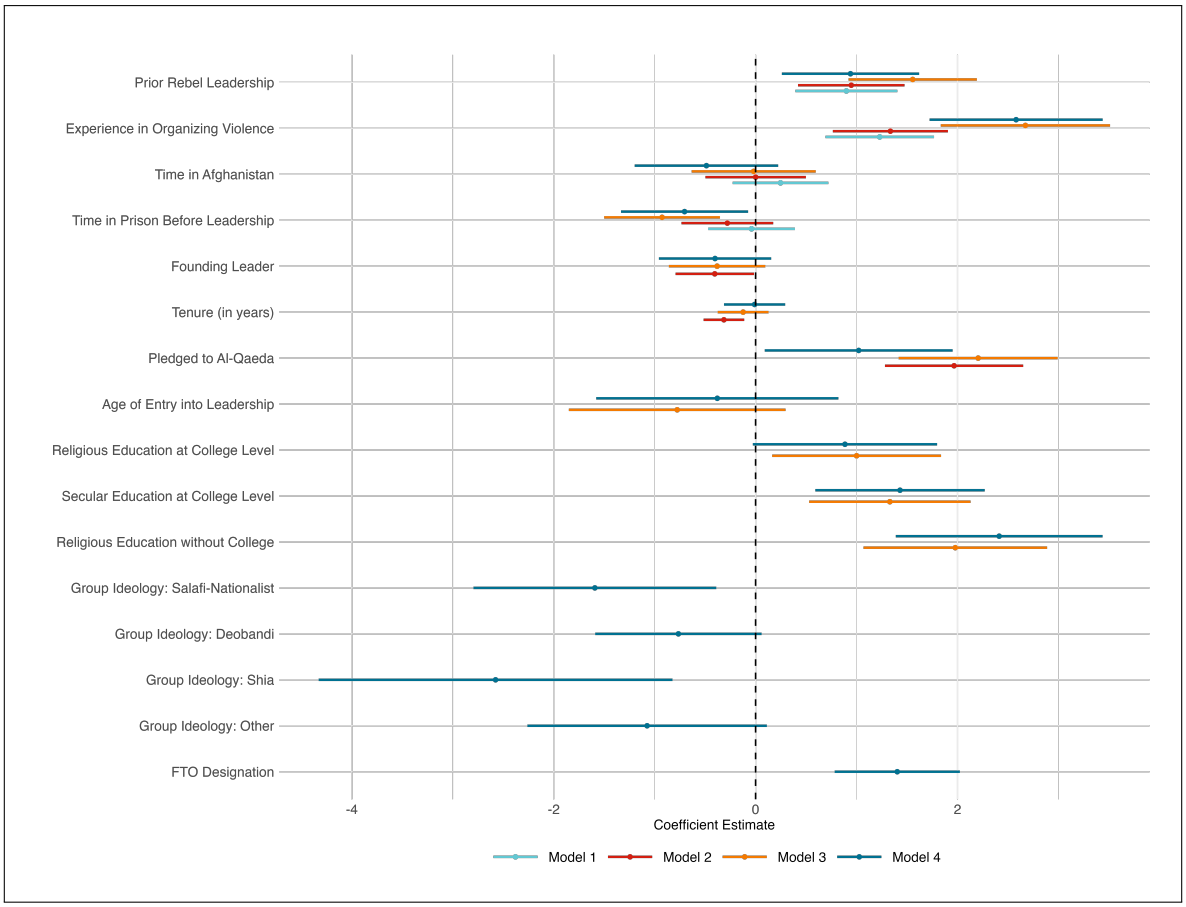


Figure 2. Jihadist Leaders and Suicide Attacks, Coefficient Plot
Models include country and year fixed effects. The sample spans 1976–2019, with 110 groups, 238 leaders, and 1,625 leader-years. 95% confidence intervals are shown. The reference level for leader education is Secular Education without College. The reference level for group ideology is Salafi-Jihadist.

Since our research design does not allow us to make causal claims, we limit our discussion of results to statistical associations, which should not be interpreted as definitive causal relationships. While country- and year-fixed effects help mitigate confounding, concerns about omitted variable bias remain. Reverse causality—such as past use of suicide terrorism influencing leader selection—and contagion, where groups imitate one another's tactical choices, are still important threats to inference.

Overall, we find that certain leader-level characteristics are associated with the use of suicide attacks. Across different models, leaders' prior rebel leadership and experience organizing violence, such as combat experience, as well as whether they pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda emerge as statistically significant positive predictors of their groups' use of suicide attacks in a given year. These associations persist after accounting for country- and year-fixed effects and additional group-level controls, suggesting that leader backgrounds may shape tactical patterns even when broader contextual factors are considered.

Leaders with prior experience in Afghanistan may have a higher propensity for extreme violence. Likewise, radicalization processes within prison may lead them to adopt more extreme tactics after taking power. However, the results for both prior time in Afghanistan and prison experience are mixed, as neither is consistently statistically significant. Similarly, we find mixed results regarding the associations between founding leaders or leadership tenure and suicide attack usage. Although the coefficients for founding leader and leadership tenure are negative, they never reach conventional levels of statistical significance.

Turning to the demographic variables, we do not detect a statistically significant association between a leader's age of entry into leadership on groups' use of suicide attacks. However, leaders' educational backgrounds are statistically significant predictors. Compared to secularly educated leaders without a college degree, both religiously educated leaders (with or without a college degree) and secularly educated leaders with college degrees are found to be statistically more likely to sanction suicide attacks. At the group level, we also find that ideology is associated with the use of suicide attacks. For instance, Shia and Deobandi groups are statistically less likely to engage in suicide attacks compared to Salafi-jihadist groups with transnational goals.

Conclusion

Moving forward, scholars can leverage this dataset to investigate additional ways that leaders shape organizational and conflict dynamics. For instance, leadership disputes often drive organizational fragmentation (Perkoski, 2022), with successor leaders struggling to maintain group cohesion after the founder's death (Mendelson, 2024). Yet, systematic evidence on why certain leaders are more effective at preventing splintering remains limited. This constitutes one area where the JLD can provide valuable insights. Furthermore, the JLD provides new opportunities for building on research surrounding the effects of leadership decapitation on armed group resilience and tactics (Jordan, 2014). The JLD offers original data on the fates of jihadist leaders, including whether they were killed, arrested, or removed by rivals, as well as information on the method and perpetrator of leadership decapitation. This leader-level information opens new avenues for understanding

variation in organizational responses to leadership targeting.

Similarly, the JLD provides avenues for new research on militant alliances. While existing studies highlight the importance of leaders in fostering cooperation between armed groups (Blair et al., 2022), little is known about the leader-level characteristics associated with inter-group cooperation, such as pledges of allegiance to al-Qaeda and IS. Moreover, the JLD allows scholars to continue exploring debates surrounding potential links between individuals' education levels, religious schooling, and decisions to engage in violence (Andrabi et al., 2009). By providing detailed data on the backgrounds and life experiences of 238 leaders of 110 jihadist organizations operating across multiple regions, the JLD enables future research to continue exploring the role of leadership in shaping organizational behavior and conflict dynamics.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have no known conflicts of interest.

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Data Availability Statement

The dataset, codebook, and codes for the empirical analysis, along with the online Appendix, are available at `https://www.prio.org/jpr/datasets/`. All analyses were conducted using R. Leader narratives, supplementary materials, and updates to the JLD are available at `https://www.markberlin2.com/jihadist-leaders-dataset.html`.

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