Fire, Fire, Kill: Changes in Terror Leadership

Margaret Foster*        David A. Siegel †

This version July 2, 2014.

Abstract

Personnel management at the top of terrorist groups presents a puzzle. Sub-commanders act off message reasonably often, angering powerful backers. When this happens terrorist group leaders have every incentive—and typically the means—to kill the offending sub-commander. Yet we often observe group leaders firing sub-commanders instead, despite the fact that doing so allows the sub-commanders an opportunity to provide aid to the government or start up a competing group. Why? Through a pair of simple, nested formal models we illustrate the trade-offs that lead to the decision to fire, kill, or do nothing, and specify the conditions under which firing will be observed. In particular, we highlight the important role community support plays in the group leader’s decisions. We tie all the conditions we find to substantive considerations, use case studies to illuminate the mechanisms we highlight, and offer several policy implications of the model.

*Senior Analyst, SITE Intelligence Group; E-mail: margaret@siteintelgroup.com
†Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Duke University; E-mail: david.siegel@duke.edu.
In July of 2013, a leaflet circulated through the tribal areas of Pakistan announcing that the Tehrik-e-Taliban (TTP) insurgent organization had dismissed their spokesman, Sajjad Momand. The leaflet accused Momand of jeopardizing the relationship between the Pakistani terrorist organization and one of their major backers, the Afghan Taliban. News of the incident was picked up by local and international media outlets, generating substantial commentary about whether it signaled instability in the alliance between the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban, and what impact a rupture would have on the TTP’s bloody 6-year-long insurgency against the Pakistani state. Relatively little attention focused on one of the most intriguing elements of the story: that it happened at all.

The TTP’s decision to dismiss Momand, who uses the *nome de guerre* Ehsanullah Ehsan, is puzzling because, as the main spokesman for the group, Momand likely had access to information about the TTP’s operations as well as the means to reach internationally-wanted terrorists associated with the TTP. He was regularly featured in official propaganda videos alongside then-leader Hakimullah Mehsud, suggesting direct contact with TTP leadership.\(^1\) This access had value before Mehsud’s November 2013 death: in 2010, the United States State Department announced a multi-million dollar bounty for “information leading to the location of [Hakimullah] Mehsud” (Rewards For Justice Program, 2010).\(^2\)

Alternately, rather than relieving him of his duties, the TTP could have simply killed Momand. In their years of operation, the group has demonstrated that they are willing to sow carnage, attacking not only military and civilian targets throughout Pakistan, but also individuals who threaten their operations. Online video sharing sites host graphic

---

1 See, for example, Umar Studio, “Emir Hakimullah Mehsud and Maulvi Wali ur-Rahman, may Allah Preserve Them, in a Special Interview.” Trans. SITE Intelligence Group. Distributed online on January 6, 2013. Available at ent.siteintelgroup.com. In the video, TTP leader Hakimullah Mehsud addresses a question from the interviewer asking the group to respond to accusations that Momand is a foreign intelligence agent. In response, Mehsud invited Momand to appear before the camera and demonstrate that he was also in the room during the interview, holding this up as evidence that the claim was spurious.

2 The Rewards for Justice Program even has an online form through which informants can submit tips anonymously, thus rendering defection not only a handsomely-rewarded alternative to participation in the TTPs’ insurgency, but also a course of action that could be initiated with a few mouse clicks.
footage of the TTP executing individuals who have run afoul of the group. The list of individuals executed by the TTP includes even former allies, such as Sultan Amir Tarar, a former Pakistani intelligence officer and trainer of the Afghan Taliban. A statement from the TTP, distributed online in Arabic, English, and Urdu on April 6, 2011 along with the full video of Tarar’s death, justified targeting a former ally of the jihadi movement and simultaneously articulated the TTP’s willingness to turn on former allies, branding Tarar as among “the two-faced hypocrites and mischief makers” who are a “deadly poison” to the jihadi cause. Continuing, the statement asserted that the discovery and removal of these elements is “actually the responsibility of the Taliban.” Extending their justification even to current allies, and demonstrating how a terrorist group might ideologically justify even the most brutal treatment of former compatriots, the message explained that betrayers of the group “...may be disguised as a Mujahid today, [but] there will come a time when their true identity will be revealed, Allah willing. So be careful!” Al-Qadisiyyah Media (2011).

TTP has been similarly ruthless in their treatment of other former compatriots. For example, in October 2013, a suicide bomber attacked the headquarters of Mullah Nabi Hanafi, a former TTP commander who had splintered from the group in 2009 and was reported to have defected to the government (Presse, 2013). Although Hanafi survived the October assault and at least one other similar attempt on his life, at least 15 people, including civilians, were killed in the attack (Europe, 2013b).

Yet, despite the TTP’s record of brutality, the former spokesman appears to have escaped unscathed, remaining active on social media sites through January 2014. Months after his removal, Momand resurfaced as a mouthpiece for a regional TTP branch, the Mohmand Agency. Momand’s firing is particularly notable as the TTP incurred significant costs by

---

3Excerpts of the video were released online in February 2011, with a full release produced by the TTP’s Umar Studio media wing and distributed to jihadi forums on August 6, 2011 by al-Qaeda’s Global Islamic Media Front.

4Underscoring the impression that the TTP acted under duress in removing Momand, Momand had reportedly been issuing statements without coordination or approval from the TTP leadership for some time before being dismissed (Shah, 2013). This detail suggests that the TTP’s leaders were not simply seizing a sought-after opportunity to remove Momand; if so, they had ample opportunity to do so.
removing him from his position as spokesman. Not only did the group absorb the direct loss of his capabilities, but it risked having him actively work against them as part of the government or a rival group. However, the costs of allowing him to remain in his position were also considerable. Momand jeopardized the alliance between the TTP and its Afghan Taliban backers by criticizing the Afghan Taliban’s peace effort. A translation of the TTP’s pamphlet announcing his removal explained that Momand, “has made comments that have raised the danger of divisions between the Pakistani Taliban and the Afghan Taliban...The Taliban are our foundation and (Afghan Taliban leader) Mullah Omar is our supreme leader. That is why, from today, Ehsanullah Ehsan is no longer our spokesperson” (Zahra-Malik and Mehsud 2013). Moreover, in an interview with Reuters, a TTP commander clearly articulated that the group perceived a tradeoff between Mohmand and their Afghan backers, revealing, “After Ehsan’s damaging statements, the Afghan Taliban asked us not to use its stationery or its flag....This is unacceptable for us” (Zahra-Malik and Mehsud 2013).

Sajjad Momand’s dismissal from TTP is not the only instance in which commanders or senior operatives have been dismissed by terrorist groups. The impact of firings and dismissals emerges as an undercurrent in previous analysis that otherwise emphasizes voluntary withdrawal from terrorist groups. For example, Horgan (2009, 37) reported that while “outright execution is common” terrorist groups do treat the option of firing senior operatives as a tool to manage their personnel. Notably, he observed that it is more common for operatives to be “removed from the movement against their will” than for them to voluntarily disengage by, for example, surrendering to authorities Horgan (2009, 36). He named two such examples, citing Mansour Dadullah’s removal from the Afghan Taliban and the dismissal of a former Director of Operations for IRA’s Southern Command who was “shot in the ankle and removed from his position” after approving an operation that resulted in community backlash Horgan (2009, 37).

Similarly, during the past few years, jihadi-inspired insurgent groups have fired commanders, sometimes at great cost. Early in 2012, Somali news agencies noted that a top regional commander for the Shabaab al-Mujahideen, Moallim Jinaw, was removed from his leadership
position on January 9, 2012. Following his dismissal, more than a thousand troops loyal to Jinaw followed him, significantly reducing the Shabaab’s ability to continue fighting Kenyan and African Union forces on the Somali-Kenyan border (Somalia Report 2012). Later in 2012, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb dismissed their commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar from his role as “Emir of the Sahel.” In response, Belmokhtar split from the group and created a new jihadi organization, the al-Muathameen Brigades, which went on to orchestrate a number of high profile attacks throughout 2013, including the January 16, 2013 attack on the Tigantourine gas facility that triggered a multiday hostage crisis. In August 2013, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) dismissed the leader of their Punjab wing, Asmatullah Moavia, ostensibly for overstepping his authority to respond to government offers of peace talks. In doing so, the group forewent the substantial contributions that the TTP-Punjab brought to the TTP’s abilities, including operational strength outside of the tribal regions of the country. As well, the TTP-Punjab reportedly had access to materiel and funds from Punjab, including chemicals—sourced from textile factories—used to make the explosives deployed during the September 20, 2008 bombing of the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad (Kharal 2013).

Why would a clandestine organization, such as a transnational jihadi insurgency, which is under pressure from disgruntled backers, choose to expel otherwise capable commanders or senior members? To address this question and cases such as the ones outlined above, we offer two nested, game-theoretic models. The purpose of these models is to highlight the stark choices faced by groups like the TTP: fire the commander, risking defection and some disapproval from the backer that he has alienated; kill the commander, alienating his community supporters; or do nothing, keeping the commander’s skills and his community support in the organization but risking maximal ire from the external backers. Our approach provides insights onto how intra-group conflict can result in actions that appear to reflect an

---

5The repercussions of angry backers should not be minimized. For example, on July 26, 2013, fighters from an Afghan Taliban-backed coalition of rival jihadi militant groups attacked TTP positions in Waziristan, reportedly taking revenge for past TTP transgressions.
inefficient or irrational use of the group’s resources when evaluated through the framework of their conflict against the government. As such our model complements a growing body of literature on the importance of organizational structure in understanding terrorist group behavior (e.g., [Abrahms and Potter] Forthcoming [Asal and Rethemeyer] 2008 [Chai] 1993 [Helfstein] 2009 [Shapiro] 2013 [Shapiro and Siegel] 2007, 2012).

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. We begin by elaborating on the costs of firing a terrorist group commander. Next we discuss the importance of community support for the commander in the decision to fire. Following this we present and analyze two simple nested game-theoretic models of a terrorist leader’s decision when experiencing pressure from an external backer to remove a commander. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of implications of the model for the operation of insurgencies, and particularly clandestine insurgencies that derive strength from a combination of allies, international backers, and support from the local community.

**Dangerous Choices**

Firing is costly for clandestine operations and potentially dangerous to their continued operation. Not only can reduction in leadership weaken organizations in absolute terms, but diminishing strength relative to the government or to competing militant groups can also position the group precariously within their operating environment. We argue in this section that the salience of these costs is such that it is surprising that a violent clandestine group would choose to release senior members of the organization.

On the one hand, terrorist groups are susceptible to waning due to loss of leaders, and erosion of leadership can be devastating ([Crenshaw] 1991). Removing a commander from his position within a group can disrupt the mechanisms developed by the group’s leadership to control the behavior of cadres. On the other hand, when dismissed commanders are observed to remain alive after crossing their superiors, one consequence may be to reduce other group members’ perceptions of the costs of disobeying leaders. Thus, dismissing commanders can
undermine internal discipline and cohesion within an organization in multiple ways.\(^6\)

Outside of the movement, dismissing commanders aids counterterrorism efforts by increasing the attractiveness of government policies that encourage the defection of operatives and leaders. Without access to stature or material benefits derived from participation in the group, the dismissed commander has little incentive not to defect to the government and use his knowledge or resources as leverage to extract concessions for himself. Previous governments fighting terrorism have had success with policies designed to incentivize defection, such as the Italian “repentants” law that offered freedom or reduced sentences in exchange for informing (Crenshaw, 1991, 82). Such situations present an opportunity for the government to capitalize on the operative’s dismissal and obtain information at a discount. As well, the hollowing out of group leaders advances counter-terrorism policies seeking to diminish their adversaries’ “leadership structure, command and control, organization capabilities, support networks, and infrastructure” (United States of America, 2011, 10).

Furthermore, turning to the government is not the only option available to a commander who has been released; he may decide to start up a competing group, given his often strong base of local support. While this new group need not actively oppose the commander’s former comrades, competition for resources is likely to erode the capability of the parent organization, and can lead to outcomes—such as higher levels of violence—that are counterproductive for the commander’s initial group (Bloom, 2004; Findley and Young, 2012).

Even if the clandestine group is able to confidently predict that the fired commander will not work against his former comrades, public announcements that a senior commander has been dismissed are typically interpreted as evidence of weakness. For example, writing about Momand’s removal, the New York Times asserted that the TTP’s action, “was widely seen as a sign of growing strains within the cross-border insurgency movement caused by American drone strikes and the possibility of opening peace talks with the Afghan government.”

\(^6\)It should be noted that the groups cited here are overwhelmingly drawn from jihadi insurgencies, which are well-placed to implement cooperative norms of interaction (Weinstein, 2007, 158), a feature that may help them suffer less from corrosive internal effects following a weakening of disciplinary structures.
paper cited speculation that the action was actually precipitated by a leadership struggle within the TTP, disguised as an internal discipline issue (Walsh and Khan, 2013). Similarly, Reuters speculated that the dismissal of Momand reflected weakness not only within the TTP but also for the Afghan Taliban, asserting: “any further divisions within the movement are likely to weaken the Afghan Taliban’s fight against Western forces.” (Zahra-Malik and Mehsud, 2013). The perception of weakness may be detrimental to relations between a terrorist group and the community, as well as to a group’s ability to generate funds and new recruits. Moreover, a group which is perceived to be newly weak may invite violence from other rebel movements in the area (Fjelde and Nilsson, 2012) or a renewed campaign of repression from the government. While some of these costs are also born by groups that kill commanders, most are not. Conflict is by nature dangerous, and, if done carefully, killing need not signal weakness or spur internal dissent. And of course a dead commander cannot turn or start a competing group.

We propose that leaders fire when the consequences of killing a commander are very high, and argue that the key determinant of these consequences is the strength of that commander’s community support (Berman et al., 2011). Problematic commanders can survive dismissal, being fired rather than killed, when their positions are strengthened by holding the loyalty of important community factions. We assume group leaders to be rational actors more invested in minimizing costs for their organization than in advancing the interests of the commander, and who must therefore have incentives to follow any course of action that entails substantial costs for the group in exchange for benefits to the former commander. In other words, seeking to minimize organizational costs, the leader will kill a commander absent compelling motivations to the contrary. Whether the commander is fired or the leader continues on with the status quo given such motivations depends on the strength and utility that the group has for the commander, as well as the consequences for the group if it defies its external backers.

Knowing that their chances of survival rest on the commitment and strength of their own community support, commanders are incentivized not only to work against the primary
enemies of the group, but also to seek to reinforce their own positions in relation to their comrades in arms. A commander who represents an essential link between the leadership of a clandestine organization and a critical local base of support is more likely to survive personnel changes within the organization, thus creating a strong incentive for commanders just under a group’s top leadership to attempt to tie themselves to a community. One effective way for the commander to generate support locally may be to push for decentralization of the group’s operations, and particularly of the provision of goods and services provided to a community to encourage it to support the group against the government. Conversely, leaders have an opposite incentive: tighter central control of operations and resource distribution can help tie local loyalties to the group generally, or even to the leader specifically. This not only aids the group’s leader, but also gives him a freer hand in personnel decisions. Thus, the eventuality that a clandestine insurgent group may seek to remove a commander shapes decisions made by both the commander and leader, as the commander seeks to make his position more secure and the leader strives to ensure future flexibility.

When Are Commanders Fired?

The models that we present are motivated by a version of the dilemma faced by the TTP during the summer of 2013: a senior member of the group has carried out an action, such as offending a major external backer, that threatens to cause significant negative consequences for the entire group. We presume that this action takes place before the model begins, and assume that the backer prefers that the offending member—identified as a commander in the following model—be killed, but will be partially appeased when he is at least removed from the organization.

Although there are no direct indications that the Afghan Taliban conveyed its willingness to accept Momand’s dismissal as a salve, the timing and stated reason for Momand’s firing suggests that the TTP expected the Afghan Taliban to accept the gesture. Not only did the pamphlet announcing their decision identify Momand’s statements about the Afghan Taliban’s peace talks in Doha as precipitating his departure, but the group appointed a replacement, Maqbool Orakzai, regarded as being close to the Afghan Taliban (Europe 2013a). Moreover, as we noted above, the TTP’s statements regarding Momand’s dismissal placed clear emphasis on relations with the Afghan Taliban being prioritized over Momand’s continued association with the TTP.
The group’s leader, in contrast, would prefer not to punish the commander. Not only is the commander presumably useful tactically and strategically, but he also has a measure of support from the local community, support upon which the insurgent leader relies. Thus, the leader faces a clear trade-off which the models address: conform to outside pressure to punish the commander and risk loss of community support, or mitigate punishment and risk the defection of the commander and loss of resources from the external backer.

**Actors**

The model includes three active actors: the group leader, the commander, and the community. In the background, affecting payoffs, are the government and external backers of the militant group. The leader (L), either a single entity or a group which issues decisions in concert, is treated as a unitary actor. The commander (S, for sub-commander), is a senior-level operative of the group, often one who is very close to the top leadership. Having already alienated external backers, commanders await the response of the leader. If given the opportunity to do so (i.e., he is not killed) as well as the impetus (i.e., the leader does not hew to the status quo), he chooses to pursue his own interests by either defecting to the government or continuing to fight as part of a splinter organization.

The “community” (C) actor captures external support that allows the clandestine organization to operate, for example, by aiding its ability to blend in and avoid government reprisals. The community may be tied to a commander through a number of possible ways, e.g., through familial ties shared between the community and a commander. Connections

---

8While some groups, notably the TTP, claim that they work with a Shura, or consultive, Council, others, such as the Shabaab al-Mujahideen, appear to have consolidated control with a single leader. As long as members of the leadership group have common preferences regarding minimizing costs to the group, and similar willingness to call for killings, this assumption is not strong. We feel this is typically the case given leaders’ common incentives to preserve the strength of their groups in order both to carry out ideological goals and help ensure personal safety.

9Although the assumption that the commander does nothing unless fired may seem overly deterministic, note that any commander who always preferred to act as a government informant or start a splinter group would have had plenty of opportunity to have done either before the beginning of the model. The only variation in the commander’s situation introduced by the model is the possibility of being fired or killed by the leader; if the leader takes neither action, there is no reason for the commander to change his actions.
need not be this close, though. In our model, we assume the leader and the government each provide some package of goods and services to a community to buy its support. In this case, relative community support for the leader and the government is reflective of the amount of resources that each has invested. Commanders can also buy community support by distributing resources if they have such available.

The course followed by Moktar Belmoktar, the Algerian-born former AQIM commander, provides a particularly dramatic example of a commander generating community ties in his operating environment. While spearheading the expansion of AQIM into northern Mali, Belmoktar consciously developed close local links: he married into a prominent family outside of Timbuktu and prayed at a local fundamentalist mosque (Hammer, 2013). As well, during his campaign into Mali, Belmoktar engaged in civic projects, building wells (Hammer, 2013) and distributing the proceeds of his operations through the community (Erlanger and Nossiter, 2013).

Baseline model: Fire or Kill

In the baseline model, the leader has only two options: he can decide to fire the errant commander, or he can kill him. We consider this simplified model first because it contains much of the interesting intuition relating to the choice of the leader to fire the commander with minimal complications. Only after understanding this do we consider the more realistic case of a leader who can also stick to the status quo and not respond to the external backers.

Actions

As noted, in this simplified model the insurgent leader (\( \mathcal{L} \)) has two options: kill (\( K \)) or fire (\( F \)) the commander. This decision occurs first. Next, the commander (\( S \)) acts. If killed, the commander can do nothing. If fired, the commander can either inform on the group to the

---

10 We assume that more direct connections to the community, such as marriage, effectively serve as goods valued by the community as well. We also note that the model is more general than stated in the text, in that the “community” may be other than the literal community in which the group is embedded. For example, it may be the case that there are additional backers, separate from those the commander has offended, whose support is critical for the continued operation of the group. These may also be the “community.”
government (I), or start a splinter group (0) that will compete with the original for community support. Finally, the community (C) acts. In all cases in which the commander does not start a splinter group, the community chooses between supporting the insurgent leader (SL) or not supporting the leader (SN). Not supporting the leader may involve anything from simply withdrawing support to actively aiding the government in assailing the leader’s group. If the commander does choose to start a splinter group, then the community has one additional option: support the commander (SS), which has the effect of rendering his splinter group viable.

These three decisions occur sequentially, and are summarized in the following timeline:

- L chooses K or F.
- S chooses I or O (after F only).
- C chooses SL or SN (or SS after 0).

**Payoffs**

Actors’ payoffs for the most part follow directly from our verbal description of the scenario. The leader receives $\chi_L$ should he continue to receive community support without the commander in the group. A stronger community generally provides more benefits to the leader and is more essential to the group’s functioning, giving a greater $\chi_L$. If the commander successfully starts a competing group, the leader receives 0; this competitive scenario forms the baseline utility for the leader. If the community turns its support from the group (i.e., supports no one), the leader receives $-\chi_N$. A negative value for $\chi_N$ implies that the loss of support is better than inter-group competition. A positive value implies that the loss of support is worse than competition, suggesting that the community not only withdraws support, but also provides aid to the government. The stronger the community is, the more important this aid is, and the greater $\chi_N$ will be. We treat $\chi_N$ as positive in our verbal

---

11 The 0 stands for outside option, as the model generalizes to any outside option related to the community the commander might choose to take.
descriptions of the model, but our formal results do not require this. Both $\chi_L$ and $\chi_N$ also vary with government repression. The stronger government repression is, the more necessary community support is (making $\chi_L$ larger) and the more detrimental community aid to the government is (making $\chi_N$ larger).

The leader also suffers costs due to the actions of the commander. He receives $-\sigma$ whenever the commander informs on him and $-\phi$ whenever he fires instead of kills the commander. The former is the cost of the information the commander has, and is likely to be greater the stronger is the commander. The latter is the cost of a loss of outside resources, and is greater the stronger and more necessary the external backer is to the group’s functioning. A more independent group has less need for external backers and so would suffer a smaller cost ($\phi$) for not appeasing the backers, whereas a group wholly dependent on the offended backers might suffer a cost high enough to effectively force it to kill the commander.

The commander receives $G_I$ from the government for informing; this represents the resources the government can direct to encouraging informants. It’s likely to be larger the stronger the government and the more apt the government is to use “hearts and minds” approaches as opposed to strict military force. It is also likely to increase with the strength of the commander, as stronger commanders will generally have information that is worth more to the government. The commander receives 0 if he attempts to start a splinter group but does not receive community support; this is his baseline utility. If the commander does obtain community support, he receives $\chi_S$. The stronger the community is, the greater $\chi_S$ will be for the reasons previously articulated. We can also compare the magnitudes of $\chi_L$ and $\chi_S$. The larger the former is compared to the latter, the more centralized the group is, and the less reliant it is on the commander. This effectively amounts to a weaker commander from the perspective of group functioning. The larger the latter is compared to the former, the more decentralized the group and the more reliant it is on the commander for his ties to the community, which amounts to a stronger commander from the perspective of group functioning. Finally, the commander gets $-D$ for being killed, though this payoff affects nothing in the model.
The community receives $C_L$ when it supports the leader and $C_S$ when it supports the commander. Each of these corresponds to the level of club goods the leader or commander, respectively, would provide for the community. Higher levels of club goods, which can include security or emotional attachment to the group, correlate with a strong leader or commander (who can afford club goods) and a strong community (which can demand them). Relative values of these two levels of club goods have the same interpretation as relative levels of $\chi_L$ and $\chi_S$; e.g., decentralization implies that commanders are more personally responsible for bringing club goods to the community.

If the community supports no one, then what it receives depends on its utility to the government. If it can provide useful information to the government, which occurs both when the leader kills the commander and when the commander tries to start a splinter group after being fired, the government provides the community $G_C$ in public goods. If it cannot, which occurs when the commander informs on the group and so renders community aid less valuable, the community receives nothing.\footnote{These assumptions are stark mostly for purposes of clarity and simplicity. Realistic variations in which the government provides some public goods to the community after the commander informs on the group or in which the community experiences anger upon having a favorite son (the commander) killed by the leader do not change any of the consequences of the model.} In general, higher levels of public goods from the government correlate with a stronger government more apt to use “hearts and minds” approaches and a strong community whose aid to the government is important and so elicits these public goods.

We can summarize the payoffs at all terminal histories of the game as such:
Equilibrium Behavior

This is a three stage, sequential, complete information game and we solve for the subgame perfect equilibria via backward induction, beginning with stage 3. We work through the logic of the equilibria below; the following table summarizes possible outcomes and their substantive connections.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenario</th>
<th>$U_L$</th>
<th>$U_S$</th>
<th>$U_C$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$K, \emptyset, S_L$</td>
<td>$\chi_L$</td>
<td>$-D$</td>
<td>$C_L$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$K, \emptyset, S_N$</td>
<td>$\chi_N$</td>
<td>$-D$</td>
<td>$G_C$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F, I, S_L$</td>
<td>$\chi_L - \phi - \sigma$</td>
<td>$\mathcal{G}_I$</td>
<td>$C_L$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F, I, S_N$</td>
<td>$-\chi_N - \phi - \sigma$</td>
<td>$\mathcal{G}_I$</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F, 0, S_L$</td>
<td>$\chi_L - \phi$</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>$C_L$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F, 0, S_S$</td>
<td>$-\phi$</td>
<td>$\chi_S$</td>
<td>$C_S$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F, 0, S_N$</td>
<td>$-\chi_N - \phi$</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>$\mathcal{G}_C$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Equilibrium Outcomes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Equilibrium Outcomes</th>
<th>Substantive Conditions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Commander is . . .</strong></td>
<td><strong>And . . .</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fired</td>
<td>Informs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fired</td>
<td>Starts a splinter group (or takes outside option)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Killed</td>
<td>Leader retains community support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Killed</td>
<td>Leader loses community support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In stage 3, \( C \) decides whom to support based on a simple comparison of club and public goods. In the history in which \( L \) chooses \( K \), \( C \) supports \( L \) whenever \( C_L > G_C \) and supports no one otherwise. In the history in which \( L \) chooses \( F \) and \( S \) chooses \( I \), \( C \) always supports \( L \). In the history in which \( L \) chooses \( F \) and \( S \) chooses \( O \), \( C \) supports \( L \) if \( C_L > C_S, C_L > G_C \), supports \( S \) if \( C_S > C_L, C_S > G_C \), or no one otherwise.

Moving to stage 2, \( S \) only has a decision to make in the history in which \( L \) chooses \( F \). In this case, what \( S \) does depends in part on what \( C \) does. If \( G_I > \chi_S \) then whomever \( C \) will support doesn’t matter, because \( S \) prefers to choose \( I \). If \( G_I \leq \chi_S \), then \( S \) prefers \( O \) whenever \( C \) would support \( S \) in this case, and \( I \) otherwise.

Finally, we look at stage 1. If \( C \) supports \( L \) over no one, then \( L \) achieves its highest payoff via \( K \). If \( C \) supports no one over \( L \) then what the leader prefers depends on the relative magnitude of his payoffs as well as what \( S \) and \( C \) do next. If \( S \) will choose \( O \) after \( F \), it is because \( C \) will support \( S \); in this case \( L \) compares the payoffs from killing to those arising from allowing \( S \) to go off on his own and compete for the support of \( C \). If the former is greater than the latter, which happens whenever \( -\chi_H \geq -\phi \), then \( L \) kills; otherwise \( L \) fires. If instead \( S \) will choose \( I \) after \( F \), then if the payoffs for killing exceed the payoffs from being informed upon, \( L \) kills. Therefore, if \( -\chi_H \geq \chi_L - \phi - \sigma \), \( L \) kills, and fires otherwise in this case.

Thus, in equilibrium four things can happen, as represented in the table above. One, the leader can kill the commander and continue to receive support from the community. This happens when government is an insufficient provider of public goods to overcome the insurgent group’s advantage in this area (i.e., \( G_C < C_L \)). In other words, either the leader is very strong (high \( C_L \)), or the government is weak or uninterested in less forceful approaches to counter-insurgency (low \( G_C \)). This outcome is the optimal one for the leader, as it satisfies external backers at minimal cost. All other equilibria assume that the insurgent group cannot outprovide the government without the aid of the commander (i.e., \( G_C \geq C_L \)), forcing the leader to accept a worse outcome.
Two, the leader can fire the commander who then informs on the group; the leader maintains community support in this case. This is less beneficial than maintaining support while killing the commander as it earns the ire of the external backers and provides government with potentially useful intelligence, but it does avoid the loss of the community’s support. This outcome only occurs when the government can induce a fired commander to inform either because the rewards of doing so are high compared to the strength of the commander (i.e., $\chi_S < G_I$) or the alternative of starting a splinter group is comparatively unattractive because he would not receive community support were he to do so (i.e., $C_L > C_S$ or $G_C \geq C_S$). It is also necessary that the leader prefer to fire rather than kill in this case, which only happens when the costs of the commander’s information and the ire of the external backer are relatively low and the community is relatively strong (i.e, $-\chi_N < \chi_L - \phi - \sigma$). These conditions occur more often when the community is strong (large $\chi_N$ and $\chi_L$), government puts effort into eliciting informants or aid (large $G_I$ or $G_C$), the commander is comparatively weak (small $\chi_S$, $\sigma$, and $C_S$), the external backers are comparatively weak or unimportant to the functioning of the group (small $\phi$), and the leader is comparatively strong (large $C_L$). In short, strong communities, weak commanders, and strong and independent leaders are more likely to lead to firing even when this would lead to an informant.

Three, the leader can fire the commander who then starts his own group and receives the community support that the leader has now lost. This too is less beneficial than maintaining support while killing the commander as it earns the ire of the external backers, loses community support (though this doesn’t go to the government), and creates a rival group. This outcome only occurs when the commander would want to start a splinter group after being fired ($\chi_S \geq G_I$) and would receive community support ($C_S > C_L, C_S > G_C$). It is also necessary that the leader prefer to fire rather than kill in this case, which only happens when the ire of the external backer is relatively low and the community is relatively strong (i.e, $-\chi_N < -\phi$). These conditions occur more often when the commander is comparatively strong (large $\chi_S$ and $C_S$), the leader is comparatively weak (small $C_L$), the government puts little effort into eliciting informants or aid (small $G_I$ and $G_C$), the external backers are com-
paratively weak or unimportant to the functioning of the group (small $\phi$), and community aid going to the government is costly (large $\chi_N$). In short, strong commanders, weak but independent leaders, and strong communities are more likely to lead to firing even when this would lead to a competing group.

Four, the leader can kill the commander but lose the community’s support as it instead aids the government in counter-insurgency. This happens when government provides sufficient public goods to overcome the insurgent group’s provision of club goods (i.e., $G_C \geq C_L$) but the leader is unwilling to accept either of the two previous outcomes (i.e, $-\chi_N \geq \chi_S - \phi - \sigma$ when the commander would inform or $-\chi_N \geq -\phi$ when the commander would strike out on his own). This is a very bad outcome for the leader, as not only does he lose a valued commander to assuage external backers, but he also turns the community against him and toward the government, the only time the latter happens in equilibrium. The leader is more willing to go down this route when external backers are strong (large $\phi$), the government puts effort into eliciting community aid (large $G_C$), the community is comparatively weak without the commander’s presence because the commander was necessary for community coordination or the government is ill-equipped to make use of information gleaned from a hearts-and-minds approach (small $\chi_L$ and $\chi_N$), the commander is strong (large $\sigma$, $\chi_S$), and the leader is weak (low $C_L$). In short, strong commanders, weak and dependent leaders, and communities that are weak absent the commander drive a leader to kill a commander at the cost of weakening the insurgency.

Before moving to a more complete model, we summarize the answer this model provides to the question of when a leader will fire a commander in Proposition 1 below. Its proof follows from the previous discussion.

**Proposition 1:** The leader fires the commander if and only if the leader would lose support of the community after killing the commander ($G_C \geq C_L$) and one of the following is true: (i) the commander desires to start a splinter group and and will obtain the backing of the community when doing so ($\chi_S \geq G_I$ and $C_S > C_L, C_S > G_C$), but the ire of external backers is less damaging to the leader than a strong community’s ability to damage the
insurgent group by aiding the government ($\chi_N > \phi$); or (ii) the commander informs on the group because he does not desire to start a splinter group ($\chi_S < G_I$) or would not obtain the backing of the community if he were to try ($C_L > C_S$ or $G_C \geq C_S$), but the information he shares, plus the ire of external backers, is less damaging to the leader than the net difference in payoffs arising from a supportive community and one that aids the government ($\chi_L + \chi_N > \phi + \sigma$).

**Fire, Kill, or Nothing**

The simplified model provides insight into the strategic logic that underlies a leader’s decision to fire a commander despite the risks to himself, and this logic fundamentally does not change in more complex models. However, we might think that in some of the four outcomes a leader should simply do nothing. That is, the leader should accept whatever punishment the external backers choose to dish out but otherwise maintain the status quo. We might intuitively think that this option is more relevant the stronger and more vital the commander is to the group. Here we extend the model in order to explore this idea. Rather than repeat all the earlier setup and analysis, we only detail the changes to the previous analysis entailed by adding the option for the leader to do nothing.

**Actions**

In this fuller model the actors remain the same, as do the actions of both the commander and the community. All that changes is that the insurgent group leader adds a third possible choice to do nothing, which we denote $N$. After $N$, we assume that the commander chooses to stay in the group, and so has no action to take. This may seem restrictive, but note that he chose to be in the group before he ran afoul of the external backers and for him nothing has changed after the leader has chosen to do nothing. In other words, the leader accepts all punishment from the backers and completely shields the commander in this case. After the leader does nothing the community can choose to support the leader or support no one. However, we assume that the community begins the game supporting the insurgent
group given the club goods it is able to provide with the aid of the commander; formally, $C_L + C_S > G_C$. Since nothing changes for the community after the leader does nothing, it will continue supporting the group. Thus we simplify our game slightly by assuming that the community also has no action to take after $N$.

**Payoffs**

Since we have added only one new branch that terminates immediately without further actions by the other players, we only have added one additional payoff at the new terminal history: the payoff to all players after the leader does nothing. We have already stated that the community receives $C_L + C_S$ when both leader and commander are present in the group, so this is the community’s payoff in this case. The commander continues to receive whatever payoff he had previously been receiving as a member of the group. We’ll call this $W$, though neither it nor the community’s payoff has any effect on the game.

The leader’s payoff does matter, but most of its components have already been specified. With community support, $\mathcal{L}$ receives $\chi_L$. Since the commander is retained, the leader also receives the community support that would have gone to $S$ had the commander started a successful splinter group that received community support, $\chi_S$. Though doing nothing maximizes the benefits to the leader from the community, it should arouse even more anger from the external backers than should firing, as it more explicitly signals to the backers that the leader has ignored their complaint. Further, there may be some internal dissension arising from keeping a commander that has violated the leader’s desires without penalty. We thus assume that the leader suffers an additional cost of $\Phi$ upon doing nothing over and above the cost $\phi$ he already suffers for arousing the ire of the external backers. Putting this together yields the payoffs:

$$U_L(N, \emptyset, \emptyset) = \chi_L + \chi_S - \phi - \Phi, \quad U_S(N, \emptyset, \emptyset) = W, \quad U_C(N, \emptyset, \emptyset) = C_L + C_S.$$
Equilibrium Behavior

Stages 2 and 3 are identical to those in the simpler model, and their analysis remains the same. All we need do is analyze the first stage. Specifically, we need only compare the payoff for $L$ from doing nothing to his payoff in each of the four possible equilibria in the previous model.

The following list indicates the conditions, displayed in the second column, in which a leader would choose to do nothing instead of following the equilibrium action predicted by the first column. The logic that underlies the list follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old Equilibrium Outcomes</th>
<th>Conditions Leading to Doing Nothing (i.e., Instead of old Equilibrium)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commander is ... And ...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fired</td>
<td>Strong commander, weak backers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fired</td>
<td>Strong community, strong commander, weak backers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Killed</td>
<td>Strong commander, weak backers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Killed</td>
<td>Strong community, strong commander, weak backers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

First, consider the equilibrium in which the leader kills the commander and continues to receive support from the community. The leader gets a payoff of $\chi_L$ in this case. If the leader instead chooses to do nothing, he receives $\chi_L + \chi_S - \phi - \Phi$. Thus, when the conditions are such that he can freely kill without losing support (i.e., $G_C \geq C_L$), the leader kills when $\chi_S - \phi - \Phi < 0$ and does nothing otherwise. He is therefore more apt to do nothing whenever the commander is strong (large $\chi_S$) and the external backers are weak (small $\phi, \Phi$).

Second, consider the equilibrium in which the leader fires the commander who then informs on the group. The leader receives a payoff of $\chi_L - \phi - \sigma$ in this case. If the leader
instead chooses to do nothing, he receives $\chi_L - \phi - \Phi + \chi_S$. Thus, under the conditions in which this equilibrium holds ($G_C \geq C_L$ and $-\chi_N < \chi_L - \phi - \sigma$ and at least one of $\chi_S < G_I$ or $C_L > C_S$ or $G_C \geq C_S$), the leader fires and accepts being informed upon whenever $\Phi > \sigma + \chi_S$ and does nothing otherwise. The leader is therefore more apt to do nothing whenever the commander is strong and knowledgeable (large $\chi_S, \sigma$) and the external backers are weak or would be sufficiently unhappy that the commander is not killed so that doing nothing rather than firing would only increase their ire slightly (small $\Phi$).

Third, consider the equilibrium in which the leader fires the commander who then starts his own group. The leader receives a payoff of $-\phi$ in this case. If the leader instead chooses to do nothing, he receives $\chi_L - \phi - \Phi + \chi_S$. Thus, under the conditions in which this equilibrium holds ($G_C \geq C_L$ and $-\chi_N < -\phi$ and $\chi_S \geq G_I$ and $C_S > C_L, C_S > G_C$), the leader fires and accepts the new rival whenever $\Phi > \chi_L + \chi_S$ and does nothing otherwise. The leader is therefore more apt to do nothing whenever the commander is strong (large $\chi_S$), the community is strong (large $\chi_L$, $\chi_N$), and the external backers are weak or would be sufficiently unhappy that the commander is not killed so that doing nothing rather than firing would only increase their ire slightly (small $\Phi$).

Fourth, consider the equilibrium in which the leader kills the commander and loses the community’s support. The leader receives a payoff of $-\chi_N$ in this case. If the leader instead chooses to do nothing, he receives $\chi_L - \phi - \Phi + \chi_S$. Thus, under the conditions in which this equilibrium holds ($-\chi_N \geq -\chi_L - \phi - \sigma$ when the commander would inform or $-\chi_N \geq -\phi$ when the commander would strike out on his own), the leader kills the commander and accepts the loss of community support whenever $\Phi + \phi > \chi_S + \chi_L + \chi_N$ and does nothing otherwise. The leader is therefore more apt to do nothing whenever the commander is strong (large $\chi_S$), the community is strong (large $\chi_L$, $\chi_N$), and the external backers are weak (small $\Phi, \phi$).

Putting these results together, we see that the addition of an option for the leader to do nothing reduces some of the killing and firing behavior observed in the simpler model in favor of a fifth equilibrium, in which the leader does nothing and the status quo remains in
effect. This fifth equilibrium occurs primarily when external backers cannot bring to bear significant pressure on the leader. This is a result of the relative attractiveness of the status quo which, after all, is what the leader chose for his group before the commander raised the ire of the external backers. In this context, firings are observed when the leader is stuck in the middle of two powerful forces: external backers demand some level of retribution, but the community is powerful and attached to the commander and cannot be allowed to turn to the government. Commanders also cannot be too strong, as if they are it becomes beneficial to retain them and do nothing. This suggests that we should less often observe commanders starting their own groups, since it is the stronger commander who is more likely to take that path upon being fired, while the weaker ones are more likely to inform. We put together these insights on firing in the following proposition. Its proof follows from the previous discussion.

**Proposition 2:** The leader fires the commander if and only if the leader would lose support of the community after killing the commander \((G_C \geq C_L)\) and one of the following is true: (i) the commander desires to start a splinter group and will obtain the backing of the community when doing so \((\chi_S \geq G_I\) and \(C_S > C_L, C_S > G_C\)), the ire of external backers is less damaging to the leader than a strong community’s ability to damage the insurgent group by aiding the government \((\chi_N > \phi)\), and the cost the external backers (or internal dissension) would exact on the group for not at least firing exceeds the value of keeping the commander in the group \((\Phi > \chi_L + \chi_S)\); or (ii) the commander informs on the group because he does not desire to start a splinter group \((\chi_S < G_I)\) or would not obtain the backing of the community if he were to try \((C_L > C_S\) or \(G_C \geq C_S)\), the information he shares, plus the ire of external backers, is less damaging to the leader than the net difference in payoffs arising from a supportive community and one that aids the government \((\chi_L + \chi_N > \phi + \sigma)\), and the cost the external backers (or internal dissension) would exact on the group for not at least firing exceeds the combined cost of the commander’s information sharing with the government and the loss of community support arising from the commander’s presence \((\Phi > \sigma + \chi_S)\).
Other Extensions

We can consider additional realistic extensions to the model as well, which we will talk through rather than providing a full formal analysis. As we will see, different extensions can alter the relative frequency of the model’s equilibria, but the insights of the basic model continue to hold.

First, what if the commander can simply withdraw from the field after being fired rather than informing on the group to the government or striking out on his own? This would make it possible for the leader to suggest to the external backers that he killed the commander while also making it clear to the community that he did not. We assume the leader offers a payoff, $P$, to the commander in this case to incentive him to withdraw; this $P$ is a cost to the leader. Including this option has two effects. One, any payoff (greater then $-D$) would induce a commander expecting to be killed to withdraw instead. Further, it is strictly better for a leader to make this payoff and encourage withdrawal than it is to kill the commander and lose community support. Thus, the equilibrium under which this outcome occurs vanishes. Assuming that the leader must offer something and cannot actually extract money from the offending commander, though, a leader who would keep community support would still go ahead and kill the commander in this case, as no payoff always beats any positive payoff.

Two, any commander not expecting to be killed might accept a positive payoff to withdraw instead of inform or start a splinter group. Whether or not the commander would take the payoff depends on the size of $P$ relative to what the commander would get otherwise ($W$, $G_I$, or $\chi_S$); in equilibrium, the leader would set $P$ equal to the relevant payoff of the commander. Whether or not it is worth it to buy off the commander depends on the size of this equilibrium $P$ relative to the payoff of the equilibrium that would have otherwise occurred without the withdrawal option in play. If $P$ is less than the difference between the leader’s optimal payoff ($\chi_L$) and the payoff he would receive in the equilibrium that would have otherwise occurred without the withdrawal option ($\chi_L + \chi_S - \phi - \Phi$, $\chi_L - \phi - \sigma$, or

\[13\] If the payoff for withdrawal were 0, the same as the payoff for taking the outside option without the expectation of community support, we have already seen that the commander would never withdraw.
\(-\phi\), then the leader will buy off the commander and escape the ire of the outside backers. This will happen when \(P\) is sufficiently small. As the minimum payoff needed to buy off the commander is generally increasing in the strength of the commander, the leader can offer less to weaker commanders who are worth little to the government and cannot command support of the community. Coupled with our earlier results, in the presence of a withdrawal option we would expect to see strong commanders retained as the leaders do nothing, weak commanders sent packing with a minor payout, and commanders of middling strength being fired to inform or start splinter groups, assuming such is preferable to simply killing them. In essence, the withdrawal option removes some of the weaker commanders from the group who might be fired, as well as some of the commanders from the group who might be killed.

Second, what if the leader could take revenge on a commander who informed on him? Here we have two possibilities. If the community would remain bonded to the commander after he informed, then the leader wouldn’t take revenge after being informed upon because the community would still punish the leader with a loss of support, a punishment already sufficiently bad to induce the leader not to kill the commander in the first place. So nothing would change in this case.\(^{14}\)

If instead the community would cut its ties with the commander after he informed, then the leader would be free to kill him after he informed, reducing or eliminating the penalty from the external backers. Any reduction in penalty at this point would be sufficient to induce the leader to kill, given maintained community support. Accordingly, no commander would ever inform, and a fired commander would have little recourse but to try to start

\(^{14}\)One might think that the leader could surreptitiously kill the informant and so spare himself the community’s wrath, but this is a fraught decision. Consider the removal of the leader of the TTP’s Punjab wing, Asamatullah Moavia, which occurred after the TTP claimed that he overstepped the limits of his autonomy (Kharal, 2013). Immediately after removing Moavia from his position as head of the TTP-Punjab, members of the TTP allegedly ransacked houses, offices, and “known hangouts” of the commander, in an apparent assassination attempt. The attempt failed as Moavia had already moved to an unknown location (Kharal, 2013). Oddly timed as an assassination, the actions make more sense when viewed as an effort to decapitate the TTP-Punjab wing and recapture Moavia’s contacts and supporters as affiliates for the TTP central command. However, TTP failed and the group not only lost Moavia and his resources, but also was identified as trying to assassinate him, thus incurring any penalty it may have tried to avoid by initially leaving Moavia alive. Additionally, failed assassination attempts add an aura of ineffectiveness to the group’s newly-diminished resources and thereby heighten any perception of weakness.
a splinter group. Consider the pool of possible commanders choosing the outside option in the absence of a viable inform option. For those who would have started a successful splinter group anyway, nothing would change. Those who would not have fall into three categories. Some would obtain community support for their group, and presumably only preferred informing due to a higher payout from the government. Of these, the leader will fire some, kill some, and choose to do nothing to the rest. Which the leader chooses depends on the parameters of the model, as discussed above.

Many, however, would not obtain community support, since not being able to do so was one impetus for their informing in the first place. Were this to happen the community would support no one, as any community that would support the leader in this case would also have supported the leader had he killed the commander in the first place, allowing him to have done so earlier without cost. Given this, the leader would prefer to kill a commander who would not obtain community support immediately; either way the leader would lose community support, but if he fired he would also suffer the ire of the external backers. Thus, leaders would not fire commanders who would not obtain community support, and would either kill them or do nothing. Since weaker commanders are less likely to obtain community support, this revenge option also generally reduces firing by removing some of the weaker commanders from the group who might be fired.

Third, we could put these two extensions together. In this case there would be less firing and killing thanks to no more informing and a leader who would prefer to buy off commanders rather than kill them when doing so would lose the group community support.

Discussion of Instances of Firings

The insight that terrorist leaders dismiss senior commanders when the demands imposed by backers run counter to policies required to maintain community support adds perspective to the question with which this paper opened, namely why terrorist groups occasionally fire errant commanders and, in doing so, appear to act in the interests of individual commanders instead of the group as a whole. As described in the preceding sections, in some circum-
stances, rational terrorist leaders may find that the costs of killing are greater than are the costs borne by publicly firing the commander.

The three cases below highlight instances of pitfalls that limit the ability of terrorist leaders to control commanders. In the first case, a complex network of backers constrained the TTP, in the second an underlying strategic shift enhanced the value of community support at the same time that a commander went rogue, and in the third, a commander’s actions threatened to weaken the links between a group leadership and their backers. In the first two cases, the balance of backer and community pressures described in the model provide a more complete picture of why a given commander managed to survive being fired from a group typically given to harsh discipline and retaliation. The third addresses a case in which the errant commander was able to indirectly antagonize a group’s backers.

In the case of Sajjad Momand, with whom this paper opened, our model and the coalition nature shared by both the TTP and the Afghan Taliban may shed light on why Momand’s comments resulted in such a public fallout. The TTP is beholden to many masters, and thus vulnerable to situations in which the leadership’s choices are externally constrained. Their capacity for success against the Pakistani state is predicated on local support for their day-to-day operations; on the Afghan Taliban for funding, legitimacy, and rear bases in Afghanistan; and, indirectly, on major Afghan Taliban sponsors in the Gulf. Operating within the jihadi ideological community, the TTP must also be cognizant that estranging the central leadership of al-Qaeda, a number of whose members are rumored to be located in areas where the TTP is active, may damage their ability to retain backers. This multidimensional space means that the TTP often has to juggle competing obligations, and adds to the difficulty managing their personnel. Moreover, it creates additional “community” bases, allowing the commanders to shore up their own support at the expense of group cohesion and coherence. This combination of a federated structure and multiple streams of support and resources may partially explain why well-positioned individuals can rise in the ranks, fall out of favor, and eventually return with their own power bases.

The Afghan Taliban are important backers of the Pakistani Taliban, and alienating them
cuts off a critical source of resources needed by the Pakistani group. Links to Afghanistan may have been particularly important in 2013, as Pakistani efforts to crack down on sources of external funding reportedly created a “severe financial crisis” for the TTP (Rehman 2014). Moreover, in casting aspersions on forthcoming peace negotiations, Momand’s remarks may have especially incensed the Afghan Taliban by driving a wedge between them and their own patrons, notably Qatar, not only the hosts of the 2013 negotiations, but also a backer of the Afghan Taliban (Walsh 2010).

Our model provides a tool to interpret other instances in which organizations have seemingly acted against the group’s own interests by choosing to fire senior members. For example, in 1984 the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) court-martialed and expelled Ivor Bell, a former top commander, after he and allies reportedly attempted to curtail the emerging electoral strategy of the Sinn Fein and overthrow alleged IRA leader Gerry Adams. Accused of “treachery” (Moloney 2003) and undermining the IRA leadership, Bell faced a possible death sentence (Moloney 2010, 97). Ultimately, Bell and four of his co-conspirators were dismissed from the IRA and Bell’s own life was spared after Adams intervened, being “no doubt aware of the adverse publicity and speculation that would follow the discovery of his [Bell’s] corpse in ... the customary dumping ground for such victims.” (Moloney 2003, 244-245). Evidently, at the time of Bell’s rebellion, the Sinn Fein’s move into the sphere of electoral politics heightened the Irish separatist movement’s need for community support, making it more costly to execute the disgruntled former members than to incur the security risk of releasing the plotters.

The efforts of the Afghan Taliban to counter the activities of a former official, Agha Jan Mutasim, illustrates why rogue negotiations are often given as a reason for dismissal or punishment of a senior commander. Mutasim, who served as the Afghan Taliban’s minister before 2001 and has been reportedly involved in the leadership of the Afghan Taliban’s political committee (Isby 2011, 138) was separated from the Taliban and then survived a 2011 assassination attempt (Yousafzai and Moreau 2012). He fled Afghanistan, and claims to speak as a voice for a moderate faction of the group that is eager to reach a peace deal
In response, the Afghan Taliban has released periodic statements asserting that Mutasim has been fired from the organization and emphatically affirming that he does not have the authority to speak for the Taliban. However, despite the Taliban’s strenuous disavowals, Mutasim’s continued activity and accessibility to journalists create an element of uncertainty around the intentions of the Afghan Taliban and undermine the current leadership’s ability to control the signals being ascribed to the group.

The case of Agha Jan Mutasim suggests that one of the detrimental consequences of commanders engaging in rogue negotiations is that they can threaten relationships between the central leadership and group backers. Although not as immediately challenging to the livelihood and interests of a terrorist group as when a commander directly aggravates relations with an important backer, flouting the central leadership’s stance on negotiation may still jeopardize the relationship between the leaders of a terrorist group and their backers by undermining the leadership’s ability to claim control over their organization. The ambiguity of official channels of communication introduces questions about whether the backer has chosen the wrong parties to invest their resources in, thereby encouraging the backer to reevaluate the support they’ve allocated to the group’s current leadership.

The resulting disconnect between a leader and the group’s backers may also explain why some groups respond to renegade negotiations in a way that closely reflects the situation posited in the model setup, wherein a leader faces a choice between a community-linked commander and demands from an external backer. Within the Afghan Taliban, although Agha Jan Mutasim was able to survive and escape from the country, other commanders have

---

15 In one instance of this, the Afghan Taliban issued a February 20, 2014 statement titled “Statement of Islamic Emirate regarding allegations by Agha Jan Mutasim and Dubia initiative,” posted to the Afghan Taliban’s official website, which asserts that “The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan once again declares to all parties that Agha Jan Mutasim does not hold a position in the Islamic Emirate and neither can he represent it.”

16 This ambiguity can be seen in media analysis of peace talks proposed in February 2014. Press coverage quoted not only the central leadership of the Afghan Taliban but also Mutasim, such as one article that reads: “while the Taliban’s appointed spokesman did not comment on the development, it is pertinent to mention that the groups [sic] has neither disowned nor owned Mutasim’s peace efforts in the past.” Strengthening Mutasim’s claim of legitimacy and further undermining the Afghan Taliban’s official disavowals, journalists have reported that Mutasim remains in Skype contact with Afghan-based Taliban commanders.
not been so fortunate. A second former Taliban commander, Mullah Mohammed Ismail, was accused of carrying out unauthorized peace talks and reportedly executed by Taliban hardliners in May 2012 (Dean Nelson 2012).

Implications for Policy and Responses to Counter-Insurgency Tactics

Our analysis produces insight into concerns that directly affect the operation of jihadi-affiliated insurgent groups by driving militant leaders to costly actions, such as firing commanders. Not only is an understanding of how internal and external pressures are expressed through group personnel decisions useful for parsing the actions of group leaders, but it may also be used to shape the range of opportunities open to a terrorist or insurgent leader and thus serve as a tool for counter-insurgency.

Although the examples and cases treated so far have largely been drawn from a specific category of rebel organizations—transnational jihadi-affiliated insurgencies—the underlying mechanisms are likely to be broadly applicable to clandestine groups who are dependent on both the cooperation of local communities and the backing of external allies and supporters. This convergence of circumstances, common among militant groups that are part of the global al-Qaeda movement, is likely to increase in prevalence as technology and globalization continue to enhance opportunities for information and resource sharing among covert movements.

The following section explores three implications of our analysis for 21st century insurgencies. It proceeds by exploring how the use of drones can change the backer-community calculus; assesses when, and how, a leader can use foreign fighters to press his advantage relative to commanders; and concludes by proposing a means through which the firing of commanders can predict otherwise hidden factors that may come into play during the peace process.
Consequences of Drone Strikes for Backer-Community Balance

As a concrete example of the ramifications of the intersection of technology, globalization, and insurgent tactics, consider the increasing use of drone strikes in counter-insurgency. One way to avoid drone strikes is to embed oneself in the community and surround oneself with civilians. This increases the importance of community ties, as the community must be willing to harbor the commander attempting to avoid the strikes. Drone strikes thus provide added incentives for commanders to build strong community connections, which they can do by adding to their value to the community.

Though on the surface this might seem like a purely beneficial outcome for group leaders, in that it enables their commanders to avoid counter-insurgent actions by the government, our model identifies the difficulty in which it puts the leader. Greater community ties generate commanders whose loss will be more strongly felt by the leader, and this in turn means less freedom for the leader to punish wayward commanders, and potentially more firings. In this way groups suffer from counter-insurgency not directly, but indirectly via the organizational problems the counter-insurgency generates. Groups successful in resisting counter-insurgent tactics will see less ability to secure external backers, since they can’t kill commanders with impunity, and suffer more informants and splinter groups.

Looking further, group leaders encounter related problems while structuring their groups. Specifically, the level of organizational centralization in which they choose to engage induces a trade-off. Decentralization minimizes their exposure to counter-insurgency tactics, including drone strikes, but because it inevitably entails more community attachment to commanders, it eliminates the leaders’ most preferred option of dealing with commanders who offend external backers: killing them. Centralization keeps commanders from playing too big a role in distributing goods to community supporters, reducing their strength and making them easier to remove, but also renders them less able to make use of the community to the benefit of the group. How this conflict is resolved in each group will depend on the relative importance of external backers, community support, and government strength, as identified
by our model. Attempting to resolve the conflict more favorably might even lead a jihadi leader to seek further external backing not to improve the group’s position relative to the government, as is typically assumed, but to improve his position relative to his commander and the community.

**Strength of Government and the Use of Foreign Fighters**

The reading of our model that we have presented thus far focuses on the community as the key to survival for group commanders, as it is community loyalty that constrains the choices of the leader. However, a second narrative speaks to the strength of the government: if the government is weak, there are more options open to the leader. Without a viable government alternative, the leader has less worry about the community defecting. Knowing that alienating the community will not drive away crucial support, the leader retains the option to kill commanders and either absorb any defection of the community or force the community to remain tied to the terrorist group.

If the leader knows that the community will—or must—support him because there is no credible government alternative, he can afford to invest in fighters that don’t necessarily have ties to the community, such as foreign fighters. This is an ideal case for the leader: he gets to recruit fighters that are tied to, and motivated by, his group alone. As the fighters gain experience, they can be developed into a cadre of commanders without community ties who can be disciplined with little external cost. By keeping the fighters tightly linked to the group even as they rise through the organization, the leader can ensure that these fighters remain weak enough that the “Kill” option is always open to the leader.

The Somalia-based Shabaab al-Mujahideen Movement (Shabaab) appears to have followed a similar policy in the development of foreign recruits. Using the visibility and propaganda access granted by their ties to the al-Qaeda network, the Shabaab has aggressively recruited fighters from the West, both radicalized converts and members of the international Somali diaspora. Emigrating to Somalia, these fighters—with their European and North American citizenships—may not only serve as a deterrent to drone strikes, but also can be
prevented from generating close links with the local community. Attesting to the point, one of the grievances aired by the dissident former American Shabaab commander Omar Hammami, and his sympathizers, is that the Shabaab, under Ahmed Godane, treated its foreign fighters badly, in part by isolating them. Specifically, he complained that foreign recruits were kept under very restrictive circumstances, and confined to Shabaab training camps with their passports confiscated. Being confined within the camps run by the Shabaab, foreign fighters would be unable to develop personal relationships or ties of patronage to the local community which they could then leverage into a external base of support.

**Foreshadowing Challenges to Peace**

Our model identifies a moment when group leaders are forced to reveal information about the organization and pressures on their movements that they would rather have kept private. In the model, backers demand some level of punishment of the commander, while the community must be reassured that their preferences have been addressed. Persuading both contingents that their interests are being represented likely requires that the leader broadcast his actions. This is especially the case if the backers are located at a distance and thus unable to verify the conditions on the ground, such as would be the case for international backers. In this circumstance, credibly responding to their demands for retribution against the commander could be addressed by a public announcement of the group’s actions and their consequences. This poses a dilemma for group leaders: broadcasting their actions is the best way for a leader to appease group supporters, but also releases information to the group’s opponents.

The need to send a public signal to both the backers and the community provides an opportunity for policymakers to interpret the expulsion of senior members as not only indicative of localized tensions, but also as a signal revealing information about the group’s

---

17 A private assurance to the group’s backers that the group has disciplined the errant commander would not be credible; the group leader has every incentive to claim discipline but fail to follow through, thereby sidestepping displeasure from the community while reducing the backer’s ire. The public announcement is a more costly signal.
internal structure and which supporters the leader regards as critical. By intercepting these signals policymakers can gather data about the hidden attributes of a group, and may be able to foreshadow the actors and stresses that will be at play during end-conflict negotiations. For example, firings embed information not only about what communities provide support for a group, but also point to communities that the leader believes to be critical for the group’s continued operation.

The strength in community that helps protect individual commanders also creates both internal and external stakeholders that increase the difficulty and complexity of a negotiated settlement. Our model predicts the emergence of a relatively greater number of splinter groups because it identifies a novel instance of backer-induced schism that does not arise from direct conflict between leader and commander.

This internal balancing act may have significant consequences when it comes time to negotiate a settlement. The tensions created by the internal competition for resources may shape receptivity for negotiation among individual elements within the group. Before arriving at the negotiating table, leaders of groups with multiple channels of support and obligation — such as the TTP — may find that they are constantly in search of external support, as the leadership and commanders work to bolster their own security. Thus, long-established tensions between central and local elements of a terrorist group developed during the conflict to enhance the positions of leaders and their commanders can add an unexpected complexity to the peace process by creating factions both within and outside of a terrorist group that may have sufficient strength to spoil the negotiations. Firings thus transmit valuable information about possible stumbling blocks to peace, even before negotiations have begun.

In sum, because in our model terrorist leaders only fire commanders when they are obliged to, their actions send distinct signals about the underlying structure of the organization that they are managing. As well, the fragmented model of internal operation underlying our model embeds consequences for efforts to establish peace. Along with serving as an early warning system for difficulties in the end-process, firings share information that policy makers can use to tailor their policies and more efficiently weaken a terrorist group.
Conclusion

Our model identifies a potential avenue through which two strengths of a terrorist organization, community linkages and external backers, may become liabilities. Community linkages aid organizations in operations and in resisting counter-terror and counter-insurgency, but open up additional, competing centers of power within the organizations in the form of community-linked commanders. External backers provide vital resources to the organization, but frequently want a measure of control over the organization as well. Together, the two can pull group leaders in opposite directions, tightly constraining their personnel choices in a way highlighted by our model.

Numerous substantive consequences arise from this constraint, and our model identifies several. For one, the model assists counterterrorism and counterinsurgency policy makers by exploring a heretofore unexplored instance in which structural fissures within terrorist groups are exposed to the view of outside observers. The model additionally suggests an answer for why terrorist group firings have played out in a public view, despite compelling reasons for terrorist groups to avoid sending information about their internal structure and stresses.

For another, our model speaks to the types of commanders likely to be fired and the logic underlying the firing of each type. In many of the observed cases the commander is a senior military operative who maintains and directs a wing of the organization, as is the case of Moktar Belmoktar and AQIM, Asmatullah Moavia and the TTP, and Moallim Jinaw and the Shabaab al-Mujahideen. Military commanders may have an easier time generating the contacts and support that help keep them alive, because, to be effective, they need more resources accessible to them in terms of manpower and funds for operations; these can be distributed through the community. Further, as they’ve needed to operate within a community, they would have had to create ties and associations during their tenure within the group. Finally, operationally strong commanders can engage in banditry, theft, and black market activities to increase their own resources.
Fired commanders do not necessarily need to be military leaders, though. Sajjad Momand of the TTP appears to have primarily served a media and propaganda function within the organization. A media officer such as Momand primarily has information and, potentially, contacts at the top of the organization. Because media officers likely do not have the same level of resources to distribute through a community, such firings are not likely to result in a competing group. Dismissing them and giving them the option of turning to the government helps ensure continued community support for the leader and partially mollifies external backers. As our model makes clear, however, for this to be a viable option for the leader, it must be the case that the cost of information must not be too high and the community must value the commander enough so as to curtail support to the leader should he be killed. These conditions provide further subdivisions for the types of leaders most likely to be fired.

Finally, our model advances the body of work on the internal dynamics of terrorist groups and their mechanisms of control, seeking to advance the question of why only some militant groups create “enduring war machines” (Staniland 2012). Specifically, it illustrates how different arrangements of power centers and group support may translate into different incentives for leaders of militant groups to distribute resources and discretion through their organizations. One result of these divergent incentives is that the actions they induce limit the ability of group leaders to control their commanders. The lack of control often leads to suboptimal outcomes from the perspective of the leader. A second, related result is that group leaders experience powerful tradeoffs in deciding the level of centralization in their organizations. Commanders may call for increased decentralization which will aid the group operationally, but such decentralization diminishes the leader’s control over the commander, which in turn can diminish the leader’s ability to call upon external backers for aid.

Studying the mechanisms of group cohesion and internal control may help predict how groups will respond to externally applied pressure, thus presenting an opportunity to tailor counterinsurgency policies to the specific circumstances of an organization and exploit stresses within the organization. An advantage of the approach we outline is that it suggests conclusions drawn from public firings about the power centers, external support, and
fracture lines of a militant group that are based on group actions visible and accessible to outside observers.

References


Radio Free Europe. 15 killed as Taliban attacks rival commander’s home. Available at: http://www.rferl.org/content/pakistan-taliban-attack-hafani/25125262.html, 2013b.


