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# Militant Splinter Groups and the Use of Violence

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## Abstract

Existing research portrays militant splinter groups as more violent than their parent organizations due to factors like more extreme preferences or capacity-building needs. Though widely held, the assumption that splinters are particularly violent has not been systematically tested. In this paper, we develop and test an alternative explanation for splinter behavior. We argue splinter groups often appear less violent than their parents due to an underlying selection effect. Splinters break away where there are large organizational barriers to internally address a faction's grievances. These barriers tend to exist in well-organized parents that are also capable of high levels of violence. Splinter groups lack this established organizational infrastructure, resulting in lower levels of relative violence. We test this logic with an original dataset on parent and splinter groups and a pair of comparative case studies. We find that splinters are less violent than parent organizations, challenging conventional wisdom.

## Keywords

civil wars, civilian casualties, conflict, internal armed conflict, international security, terrorism, terrorist cells

Militant splinter groups have violent reputations.<sup>1</sup> Existing work portrays splinter groups as relatively more violent than their parent organizations for several reasons. The 'spoiler' argument suggests splinter groups possess more extreme preferences over

the use of force and are thus “more committed to violence” ([Olson Lounsbery and Cook 2011](#), 75). In civil wars, these groups pose a “genuine threat to peace” because of their relative resolve and unwillingness to disarm ([Plank 2017](#), 176).<sup>2</sup> Additional arguments grounded in ‘outbidding’ and ‘resource-building’ logics hold that splinter groups may be more likely to use violence, especially against civilians, as a means of competing in crowded conflict environments and overcoming resource constraints.<sup>3</sup> Overall, the conventional wisdom paints splinters as “often more violent than the ‘mother’ organization, as they respond to the imperative to demonstrate their existence and signal their dissent” ([Cronin 2009](#), 68).

However, there is little systematic evidence that splinters are more violent than their parent organizations. In this article, we develop and test an alternative theory of splinter group behavior. We argue that splinter groups do not form at random. Given the start-up costs associated with forming a new group, factions prefer not to splinter unless other options for redress – i.e., compromising with or ousting the group leader – are likely to fail. We argue that this is most likely to be the case in militant organizations with centralized control structures.<sup>4</sup>

This selection effect impacts splinter violence. Parent groups with centralized control structures tend to be more established, larger, and more skilled in waging sustained and violent campaigns ([Asal and Phillips 2018](#); [Heger et al. 2012](#)). In contrast, splinters, especially new ones, are often less capable; these comparative organizational deficiencies make it difficult to match the scale, scope, and lethality of their parents’ behavior. In other words, if splinters typically emerge from the most violent militant organizations, then we should expect them on average to be relatively *less* violent than their parents.

We adopt a multi-method approach to test this argument. First, we employ new cross-national data on militant organizations which identifies twice as many splinter groups as existing datasets ([Malone 2022](#)). We match 277 splinters to their parents and estimate differences in violent behavior. We show that splinter groups carry out fewer violent attacks than parent organizations. These results hold across different types of violence, conflict environments, and group ages, suggesting splinters rarely surpass

parents' violent records.

To further explore our proposed mechanism, we conduct a comparative case study of two splinters from Indonesian militant organization Jemaah Islamiyya (JI). For each splinter, we examine the internal processes that led to its formation and influenced its propensity to use violence. We find evidence that JI's centralized control structures created high internal barriers to co-option and thus made splintering more attractive to group members. We also find that splinter behavior was constrained by relative organizational capacity; although JI's splinters were highly motivated to commit violence, they could not match their parent's organizational strength and rate of attacks. This paper makes an important contribution to the study of terrorism and civil war by interrogating a long-standing assumption about the violent behavior of splinter groups. Our results challenge existing beliefs that splinter violence is driven by more extreme desires to use violence or the need to overcome competition and resource constraints.

By showcasing important differences among splinter and parent organizations, this paper reinforces the need for more research on organizational traits and their impact on conflict dynamics. Additionally, our findings advance a growing body of research on the consequences of fragmentation and splintering (e.g., [Bakke et al. 2012](#); [Cunningham 2013](#); [Cunningham et al. 2012](#); [Christia 2012](#); [Perkoski 2022](#)). We show that the selection into splintering drives certain types of splinter groups to emerge more frequently than others, a process that impacts the strength and nature of veto players in ongoing civil wars.

## **Existing Explanations of Splintering and Violence**

In this article, we examine whether splinter groups carry out more acts of political violence than parent organizations.<sup>5</sup> While 'splintering' goes by several other names in existing work, including fragmentation<sup>6</sup> and factionalization,<sup>7</sup> we use 'splintering' to distinguish the organizational process of interest in this analysis (i.e., a faction breaking off from a preexisting militant group) from broader fragmentation processes, such as divisions within armed movements ([Cunningham 2011](#)).

Armed groups often experience discord and internal conflict ([Christia 2012](#); [Morrison 2017](#)). This conflict is typically driven by disagreements between group

members over the organization's strategy, tactics, or internal distribution of power (Asal et al. 2012; Doctor 2020; Perkoski 2019, 2022; Otto 2018; Tamm 2016). Motivated to challenge these policies, group members with shared beliefs may organize internally as factions (Perkoski 2019, 2022). Under certain conditions, a faction may splinter from the parent organization to form a new group that is more closely aligned with the faction's preferences (Morrison 2017).

Once splinters form, existing work predicts they should be relatively more violent than their parent organizations for three reasons. First, the 'spoiler' logic holds that splinters are likely to possess more extreme preferences over the use of force. Compared to their parent organizations, splinters are more committed to fighting and thus more willing to employ violence to achieve their desired ends (Bueno De Mesquita 2008; Olson Lounsbury and Cook 2011; Plank 2017; Rudloff and Findley 2016).<sup>8</sup> In the context of peace agreements, extremist splinter factions break away to keep fighting and use violence to undercut negotiations and introduce uncertainty into the settlement process (Kydd and Walter 2002; Stedman 1997).

Second, the 'outbidding' logic holds splinters use more violence to compete in crowded conflicts. In states with multiple armed groups, splinters find themselves in a 'dual contest' with both government forces and other violent organizations (Cunningham et al. 2012). An armed group may use violence – often against civilians – to draw attention to itself and 'outbid' other groups for more resources, recruits, and leverage (Bloom 2005; Crenshaw 1981; Kydd and Walter 2006). Splinter groups in particular are likely to employ violence to "demonstrate their existence and signal their dissent," behaving in ways that produce more violence than their parent organizations (Cronin 2009, 68).

A third related mechanism suggests splinter groups are likely to use violence against civilians for 'resource-building' purposes. Upon formation, splinters often lack the same resources as their parent organizations. Splinters may suffer from a "liability of newness" that makes them particularly vulnerable to external threats, including the threat posed by their own parent (Mahoney 2020; Stinchcombe 1965). New splinters may struggle to compete with other established groups for resources, especially in crowded conflict environments. To survive, splinters can adopt low-cost resource-building practices, such as child recruitment (Faulkner and Doctor 2021). Splinters can

also use lethal violence against civilians as a tool to control and extract necessary organizational resources from the local population ([Wood, 2014](#); [Wood et al. 2012](#)).

These existing arguments hold that splinters are uniquely motivated to carry out significant violence, whether by extreme preferences, crowded conflict environments, or resource constraints. Though widely accepted, these arguments have not been systematically tested. Further, these theories do not account for how the internal dynamics driving splintering may influence group behavior. We address these limitations by developing and testing a theory about how selection processes shape splinters' relative capacity to conduct violence.

### **Selection Effects in Splinter Formation**

Splinter groups do not form at random. Rather, factions choose to break away from parent organizations under a certain set of conditions. We argue that this selection into splintering results in the formation of splinters that tend to be organizationally weaker and less capable of violence than their parents.

### ***Costs and Benefits of Splintering***

When internal disagreements arise between a faction of group members and the group leader, the faction chooses from at least three courses of potential action: (1) do nothing and remain subservient to the current leader; (2) co-opt the leader and potentially take control of the organization; and (3) leave the organization and establish a new splinter group ([Christia 2012](#); [Hirschman 1970](#); [Perkoski 2019, 2022](#); [Woldemariam 2018](#)).<sup>9</sup>

Among these options, the decision to splinter is one of the riskiest and most difficult to execute. New splinters must invest significant time and resources into recreating the structures required to recruit and manage personnel, plan operations, and execute attacks.<sup>10</sup> These rebuilding costs are heightened in multi-actor environments due to competition from other armed groups ([Cunningham et al. 2012](#); [Fjelde and Nilsson 2018](#)). In particular, parent groups pose a direct threat to splinters and can “use their superior military strength to attack splinter groups perceived to be challengers for recruits and resources” ([Mahoney 2020](#), 349).

Given these costs and risks, group members may prefer to internally address their grievances by co-opting group leadership rather than breaking away. A faction can try to reach a compromise with the leader or replace him with someone more amenable to their demands. If successful, the faction achieves its aims without having to pay the high start-up costs of leaving to form a new group. Driven by this cost-benefit calculation, group members often make a “change attempt” in the existing organization before splintering (Perkoski 2019, 2022).

Splintering becomes more attractive when co-option is likely to fail. Leaders may be unwilling to make concessions and are often difficult to replace.<sup>11</sup> We argue that co-option is particularly difficult in organizations with centralized control structures. These groups have central institutions that set and implement organizational policy. A ‘top-tier’ leader maintains primary authority over these institutions and wields organizational decision-making power over mid-level commanders and low-level group members (Joo and Mukherjee 2021; Sinno 2008; Staniland 2014). A leader with this type of command over an organization can maintain an internal distribution of power and resources in his favor, making coups and challenges to his leadership more difficult (Mosinger 2019; Tamm 2016). Moreover, leaders can make use of their control over the organization’s resources and structures to extinguish coup threats through purging, counter-balancing, and further centralization of authority. In so doing, these leaders create large organizational barriers to bottom-up challenges. Because change attempts are less likely, the leader also has little incentive to compromise or try to accommodate threatening factions. Given these barriers to internal reform, a faction may perceive splintering as a more viable way to address its grievances. Consequently, we expect splinters to form from parent organizations with strong centralized control structures.

### ***Motives for Violence***

These selection pressures have consequences for the violent behavior of splinter groups. Conventional wisdom argues that splinter groups should be more motivated to use violence than their parents, driven by more extreme preferences, competition with other groups, and the need to build resources. However, our selection story challenges these assertions.

Splinter groups are often no more motivated to use violence than other types of armed groups. While preferences for the use of violence can motivate a faction to splinter, not all splinters are inherently more extremist.<sup>12</sup> Rather, some splinters are *less* committed to violence than their parents. For example, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat splintered from the Armed Islamic Group in order to utilize less violence against civilians in the Algerian Civil War. In Mali, Ansar Dine members splintered in 2013 to form the Islamic Movement of Azawad in order to moderate their aims and enter negotiations with the government.

Further, many other splinters form for reasons unrelated to the use of violence ([Perkoski 2022](#)). The Democratic Karen Buddhist Army in Myanmar splintered from the Karen National Union over tensions concerning the mistreatment of Buddhists in the group. In Afghanistan, Hizb Islami splintered into two prominent factions led by Hekmatyar Gulbuddin and Maulawi Khalis due to leadership disagreements. The People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka splintered from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam over a dispute ignited by a group member's relationship with a woman. In short, splinters form for a variety of reasons, many of which are unconnected to extremist preferences. It should not be assumed that a group possesses a greater commitment to use violence just because it formed by splintering.

Moreover, splinters may not be more motivated to engage in outbidding or resource- building tactics than other groups. The outbidding logic predicts crowded conflict environments incentivize more violence. However, these pressures to commit violence do not uniquely influence splinter behavior; other militant groups in these environments also face incentives to employ violence in competition for resources and political relevance. Parent organizations in particular may see new splinters as a direct competitor and use violence to weaken or eliminate them ([Mahoney 2020](#)).

We also do not expect splinters to be more likely to engage in resource-seeking violence. If splintering is risky, then rational militants will only break away when they believe they will succeed. This requires possessing a baseline level of capabilities or cohesion to survive. Empirically, newly-formed splinters have high levels of experience and cohesion compared to other armed groups ([Otto 2018](#); [Perkoski 2022](#)). Splinters are more likely to be composed of group members with fighting experience and



technical knowledge about how to secure valuable resources, such as weapons and recruits. Further, the factions that tend to break away may already possess preexisting levels of trust and shared preferences over the particular policy that drove them to organize in the first place. This cohesion can improve their ability to fight and use resources efficiently. Overall, these baseline capabilities can mitigate splinters' incentives to use indiscriminate violence as a resource-building tool.

### ***Implications for Splinter Violence***

Overall, the splinter formation process does not necessarily produce militant groups highly motivated to use violence. Rather, we argue that a selection effect leads to the emergence of relatively less capable – and less violent – breakaway groups.

According to our theory, splinter groups are most likely to emerge from parent organizations that are difficult to internally co-opt. The parent groups with the greatest barriers to co-option are those with leaders that possess centralized control over the organization's decision-making and operations. Existing research shows groups with these characteristics also tend to be more effective and capable of carrying out “big, complex strikes that require coordination” (Stern and Modi 2010). These groups are more likely to use violence, and this violence tends to be more lethal (Asal and Phillips 2018; Heger et al. 2012).<sup>13</sup> If parents represent some of the most prolific perpetrators of violence, then a new splinter group is unlikely to meet or exceed its parent's violent activities.<sup>14</sup> As a result, we expect that splinter groups will engage in less violence than parent organizations.

Hypothesis 1: Splinter groups, on average, conduct fewer attacks than parent organizations.

We expect this prediction to hold as long as a parent does not deliberately restrict its use of violence. If a parent signs a peace agreement, its voluntarily disarmament or demobilization can make a splinter appear more violent. We take this possibility into account in our main analysis and control for the signing of a peace agreement by a given parent or splinter group.

Further, we do not expect splinter groups to conduct more indiscriminate violence than parents. The resource-building and outbidding logics suggest splinters may engage

in more indiscriminate violence as a means of competing with other groups and building organizational strength. Because splinters are often endowed with some baseline capabilities and cohesion, they may not have incentives to use indiscriminate violence as a resource-building tool. Moreover, if outbidding dynamics push splinters to target civilians, then parent groups operating in the same crowded conflict environment should face these same incentives to attack indiscriminately. Thus, we hypothesize that splinters will be no more likely to target civilians than parent organizations.

Hypothesis 2: Splinter groups, on average, do not engage in more indiscriminate attacks than parent organizations.

Finally, we expect these predictions to hold at different stages in a splinter’s campaign. We argue that an immediate capabilities gap between parent and splinter groups limits relative splinter violence. It is difficult for splinters to close this gap even as they age. A splinter may amass more capabilities over time, but it can be challenging for splinters to outpace their parents’ resource acquisition efforts. If a parent organization also continues to survive and operate, splinters must compete with these already established groups to secure resources. Splinters may struggle to differentiate themselves and siphon off support from a parent due to their perceived liabilities and inexperience. As a result, we expect that splinter groups will be consistently less violent than parent organizations, even as they age.

Hypothesis 3: Conditional on age, splinter groups conduct fewer attacks than parent organizations.

Overall, our arguments generate several observable implications that contrast with the conventional wisdom ([Table 1](#)).

Table 1. Predictions About Splinter Groups and the Use of Violence. Mechanism

	Prediction for Splinter Behavior Relative to Parent
Selection effect	Less violence
Spoiler	More violence, particularly when parent involved in a peace agreement
Outbidding	More (indiscriminate) violence in multi-actor environments
Resource-building	More indiscriminate violence, particularly when new

## Measuring Splinter Violence

Testing the above hypotheses requires data on splinter groups and their parent organizations. We use the Armed Group Dataset (AGD), which records organizational information for more than 1,200 armed groups operating in over 120 countries between 1970 and 2012 (Malone 2022).<sup>15</sup> This dataset includes rebel groups, terrorist groups, and anti-government militias; it excludes social movements, pro-government militias, criminal organizations, lone actors, and apolitical entities.<sup>16</sup> The unit of observation is the armed group-country-year, meaning there is one entry in the dataset for each year and for each country in which the group is active. A group enters the dataset in the year that it is formed.<sup>17</sup> A group exits the dataset when it has been non-violent for 3 years.

We use the AGD over other existing datasets – such as the Foundational Origins of Rebel Group Emergence (FORGE) dataset<sup>18</sup> and the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) Actor Dataset<sup>19</sup> – because it enables us to study a more diverse set of militant groups. While both UCDP and FORGE measure splintering, these datasets rely on strict inclusion criteria. A militant group must participate in at least 25 battle deaths in a given year to enter into the dataset. Existing large-N studies of splintering that draw on these data thus exclude militant groups that are not sufficiently violent, focusing only on the ‘rebel groups’ active enough to reach civil war thresholds (e.g., Doctor 2020; Duursma and Fliervoet 2020; Rudloff and Findley 2016).

The AGD offers two distinct advantages over UCDP-based datasets. First, UCDP’s exclusive focus on violent rebel groups can create significant sampling bias. Many armed groups conduct attacks, but only a small proportion ever become violent enough to reach civil war. The groups that are lethal enough to do so are often the largest and strongest militant organizations in a given country (Lewis 2020). Studying just this subset of sufficiently violent rebel groups could impact our results in two ways. On one level, it could cause us to underestimate rates of splintering by omitting less violent parent or splinter organizations from our focus. Second, it could bias estimates of the splinter-violence relationship by including only the most violent splinter actors.

A second major advantage of using the AGD is that it allows for greater generalizability of our results. Splintering processes are not unique to rebel groups. The motives and opportunities driving splintering can apply to a wide range of militant actors,

including terrorist groups and anti-government militias that operate outside the context of civil war. By employing the AGD over rebel group-based datasets, we have the capacity to comment on patterns of splintering and militant violence beyond civil war settings.

### ***Identifying Splinters***

We identify a splinter as an armed group that forms by breaking off from an existing militant organization. The AGD records several distinct processes of militant group formation using a variety of open-source materials. Following the taxonomy and coding procedures established in the FORGE rebel group data, we code how groups organize and form ([Braithwaite and Cunningham 2019](#)). An armed group can be a new and independent organization (e.g., Al Qaeda) or it can be related to a preexisting organizational entity. The latter may include, for example, a splinter from an existing parent organization (e.g., Philippines' Abu Sayyaf Group), a merger of existing non-state organizations (e.g., Guatemala's Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity), a political party that militarizes (e.g., Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front), or a militia that politicizes (e.g., Iraq's Diyala Salvation Council). Since the AGD also includes FORGE rebel groups, we compare a random sample of our formation codings against FORGE to help externally validate our results.<sup>20</sup> Though the AGD replicates codings already found in FORGE, its added value comes from coding and identifying a significant number of splinters among the population of less violent militant organizations operating outside the context of civil war.

[Table 2](#) summarizes the different group formation processes captured in the AGD. We identify 331 splinters in our population. We research each splinter to identify its parent group. Through these efforts, we match 277 splinters to another violent armed group in the AGD. Among the 277 splinters we match, nearly 63% are excluded from the UCDP data ([Table 3](#)). In 37% of cases, either the parent or the splinter is included in UCDP but not both. These differences illustrate the magnitude of potential sampling bias in existing approaches. Restricting to only parent-splinter group pairs included in the UCDP data would omit approximately two-thirds of splintering cases. This could bias results and undercut both the internal and external validity of our findings.

Since we want to make comparisons between parent and splinter behavior, we focus

our analysis to groups that are either parents or splinters. All other groups are dropped.<sup>21</sup> Our principal explanatory variable measures the effect of being a splinter child organization (CHILD), as opposed to a parent group, on resulting levels of violence. This is an indicator variable that takes a value of one if the group formed by splintering and zero otherwise.

Table 2. Types of Group Formation.

Type	Number of Groups
New	1131 (66.4%)
Splinter	331 (19.4%)
Political party militarizes	99 (5.8%)
Merger	88 (5.2%)
Militia politicizes	55 (3.2%)

Table 3. Matching AGD Parent-Splinter Pairs to UCDP Rebel Groups.

Parent Group		Included in UCDP	Excluded from UCDP
		Splinter group	Included in UCDP 90 (32.5%)
	Excluded from UCDP	91 (32.9%)	83 (30.0%)

## **Measuring Violence**

To compare the violent behavior of parents and splinters, we create two dependent variables using incident data from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD). The GTD defines an act of political violence as the “use of illegal force and violence by a non- state actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation” (START 2018). Since the AGD includes militant groups outside of civil war, we cannot measure violent behaviors with datasets that only record rebel group violence like the UCDP Battle-Related Deaths dataset (Pettersson and Öberg 2020) or the Terrorism in Armed Conflict (TAC) dataset (Fortna et al. 2022). Although there are limitations to the GTD, it represents one of the most comprehensive event-level datasets, covering thousands of incidents of low-level political violence that often fall below conventional battle death thresholds for civil war.

The first outcome variable measures a group’s overall violence propensity; it is a count of how many GTD incidents a group conducts in a given year. These incidents includes bombings, armed assaults, assassinations, hijackings, robberies, or infrastructure attacks and can target civilians, military, government, or infrastructure.<sup>22</sup> To match the GTD data to the AGD, we compile a list of group aliases from the TORG and TAC datasets. We then research the 277 parent-splinter pairs in the AGD data to connect them to these aliases. We successfully find matches for both parents and splinter groups in 198 pairs.<sup>23</sup> We find that 191 of these pairs include a parent and splinter that carry out attacks in the same country, enabling us to compare their behavior while controlling for country-level factors that may affect levels of violence. For each matched group in these 191 pairs, we create a variable that counts the number of attacks perpetrated by that group in its country of operation every year that it is active between 1970–2012. In total, we match 27,805 unique GTD incidents to the 305 groups in these 191 parent-splinter pairs. This attack count variable aims to test Hypotheses 1 and 3, which hold that splinters will be less violent than parent organizations.

The second dependent variable captures a group’s use of indiscriminate violence. It measures the proportion of a group’s GTD attacks against noncombatant targets, such as individual civilians, businesses (e.g., hotels), transportation, and other soft targets. We construct a continuous dependent variable by dividing the number of civilian-

targeted attacks by a group's total number of attacks. The resulting value is a proportion of how much indiscriminate violence the group uses, ranging between zero (all combatant targets) and one (all non-combatant targets). Since this measure relies on at least one attack being carried out by the group, it drops observation years in which a group conducts zero attacks.

### **Measuring Motives**

To test the conventional wisdom against our selection effect story, we operationalize several measures consistent with the spoiler, outbidding, and resource-building logics. Summary statistics for these variables are in [Table 4](#).

Table 4. Summary Statistics.

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min.	Media	Max
Outcome				n	.	
Number of attacks	7385	3.77	21.44	0		794
Variables						
Proportion of indiscriminate attacks	1900	0.53	0.38	0	0	1
Explanatory						
Parent peace agreement (t-1)	6996	0.00	0.07	0	0	1
Variables						
Splinter peace agreement (t-1)	6996	0.01	0.09	0	0	1
Number of groups (t-1)	7278	23.56	21.38		17	92
Group age	7385	17.22	14.59		13	87

### **Spoiler Logic.**

The spoiler logic predicts splinter groups will be more violent than parent organizations, particularly in the context of peace agreements. To test this, we use information from the UCDP Peace Agreement dataset, which records the onset of different peace agreements between rebel actors and state governments from 1975 to 2019 ([Pettersson et al. 2019](#)). Using this data, we create two measures to assess the potential for

spoiler violence. The first is a binary variable that captures whether a splinter's parent organization committed to a peace agreement in the previous year (PARENTAGREEMENT<sub>T-1</sub>). The second measure is a binary variable that captures whether a splinter child committed to a peace agreement the previous year (CHILD AGREEMENT<sub>T-1</sub>). The spoiler logic would expect that a parent peace agreement should increase a splinter's motive for violence.

### ***Outbidding Logic.***

The outbidding logic suggests that, as the number of existing militant organizations increases, a splinter group is more likely to use violence to compete against and 'outbid' other active groups. To assess this mechanism, we use the AGD to create a variable that captures the log number of armed groups operating in a given country in the previous year (LN NUMGROUPS<sub>T-1</sub>). A log transformation minimizes the effect of extreme values on splinter violence since some larger countries, like India, may have upwards of 40 militant groups active in any given year.

### ***Resource-Building Logic.***

The resource-building logic holds that splinter groups will carry out more indiscriminate violence to make up for organizational weaknesses and build resources. Splinters may be particularly prone to use this type of violence in their first years of operation as they work to amass the capabilities to launch a viable campaign. In testing whether splinters engage in more resource-building violence, we control for group age. We do this to assess whether the 'newness' of splinter groups is unique and drives them to engage in more resource-building violence compared to their parent groups at the same age. Our organizational age variable (AGE) comes from the AGD. We also include a squared age term to capture non-linear trends ([Asal and Rethemeyer 2008](#)).

### ***Controls.***

We include a series of country-level control variables that may correlate with both the presence of splinter groups and higher levels of violence. We add a measure of



GDP per capita because weaker states are more likely to experience political violence (Fearon and Laitin 2003). We also include two measures of regime type – anocracy and democracy – using the Polity 5 dataset because violence may also be more likely to occur in non-autocratic regimes (Asal and Rethemeyer 2008). In the Appendix, we include other group-level controls such as political aims, ideology, and state sponsorship, but the results do not change.

## **Quantitative Evidence**

Are splinter groups more violent than parent organizations? We adopt several approaches to answering this question, starting with a descriptive analysis and a series of regressions.

### ***Comparing Violence Within Parent-Splinter Dyads***

We first examine differences in violent behavior across parent-splinter pairs. In Figure 1, we compare the violence committed by a splinter group to that of its parent organization at the same age. The figure plots the difference in means for our two outcome variables for each of the 191 parent-splinter dyads. Negative point estimates mean that the parent is more violent at a given age; positive point estimates mean the splinter is more violent.

The negative point estimates in Figure 1a suggest that splinters carry out fewer attacks compared to their parent organizations at the same age, and this effect persists even as splinters grow older. In Figure 1b, the point estimates center largely around zero, indicating that there may not be a difference in the use of indiscriminate violence by splinters and parents. Overall, these plots suggest splinters do not engage in more violence than their parent organizations.

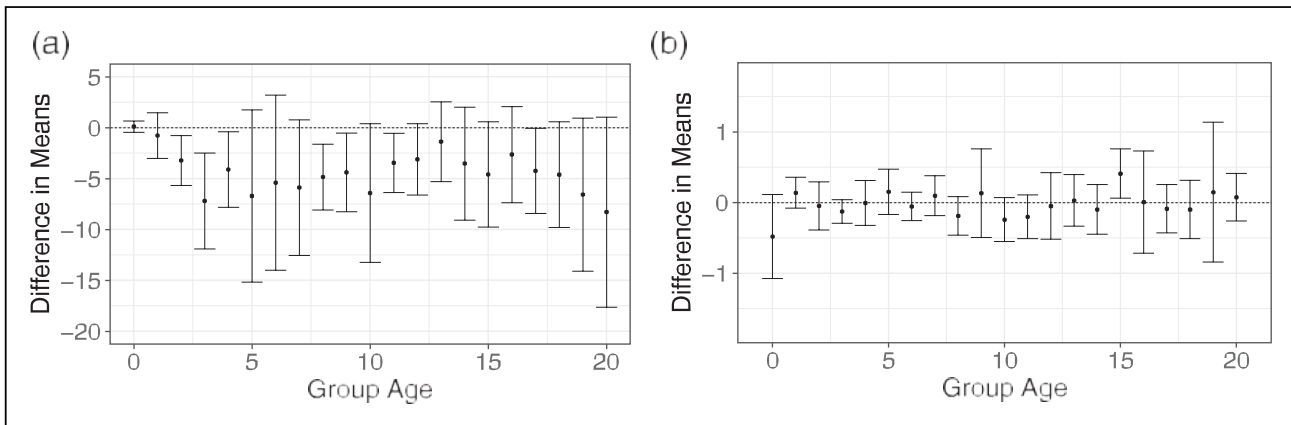


Figure 1. Comparison of parent-splinter militant violence. 95% confidence interval estimated with paired t-test of parent and splinter levels of violence. (a) Number of attacks. (b) Proportion of Indiscriminate Attacks.

### **Testing Overall Levels of Violence**

We next use a series of negative binomial models to estimate the effect of splinter child status on a group's expected number of attacks. In all models, we include a lagged dependent variable and use standard errors clustered by armed group. Given, the data's time-series cross-sectional structure, we add year fixed effects to control for global shocks that could affect group capabilities, such as the dissolution of the Soviet Union and country fixed effects to control for time-invariant factors. Country fixed effects also allow us to compare relative violence among parents and splinters operating within the same country.<sup>24</sup>

The results are in [Table 5](#). The main comparison is whether splinter groups conduct more annual attacks than parent organizations. In Model 1, the coefficient for CHILD tells us the difference in the expected log count of attacks between a splinter and a parent group is -0.40. We exponentiate this estimate to transform it into a more easily interpretable incident rate ratio. All else equal, the estimate suggests splinter child groups perpetrate approximately 33% fewer attacks than parent groups.

Models 2 and 3 add several explanatory variables to help adjudicate the conventional wisdom. The spoiler logic predicts a positive and significant relationship between a parent's participation in a peace agreement and levels of splinter violence. Our

results challenge this expectation. We find no consistent uptick in violence in the year following a parent's commitment to a peace agreement. In Models 3, 4, and 5, there may even be a slight decrease in violence in the year after a parent peace agreement. To better understand this result, we compare the behavior of parents and their splinters in the 26 instances in our data of a parent signing a peace agreement. We find that six of the 26 agreements lasted for 1 year or less and thus would likely have little restraining effect on parent behavior. In the [Appendix](#), we drop these six agreements, and the coefficient on parent agreement is no longer statistically significant.<sup>25</sup>

The outbidding logic predicts a positive and significant relationship between militant violence and the number of active armed groups. Consistent with this expectation, the variable measuring the number of armed groups is positive and significant. In Model 3, if the number of groups active in a country were to double, then we would expect a group to carry out approximately twice as many attacks. Finally, the resource-building logic may predict that newer groups will be more violent. The negative coefficient on AGE suggests that the number of attacks decreases as age increases, providing some evidence for a resource-building argument.

Are splinter groups in particular prone to engage in more violence because of outbidding or resource-building pressures? To test this, we add an interaction term between CHILD and LN NUMGROUPS (Model 4) and CHILD and AGE (Model 5). In Model 4, the interaction coefficient is positive and significant at the 0.10 level. Despite this positive coefficient, the marginal effect of CHILD is negative for all values of LN NUMGROUPS in the data.<sup>26</sup> The interaction coefficient for age is small and insignificant. Splinters commit fewer attacks than parent organizations, even as they age. Overall, these findings challenge conventional assumptions about the violent nature of splinter groups.

### ***Testing Indiscriminate Violence***

Even if splinters conduct fewer attacks than parent organizations, these groups may engage in more indiscriminate modes of violence. Resource-building arguments – and some outbidding arguments – suggest that splinters may disproportionately target civilians to amass resources and coerce the local population to provide support.

However, our selection effect story argues that splinters will typically have some baseline cohesion and capabilities, which mitigates the need to use indiscriminate violence for resource-building. We test this expectation by comparing rates of indiscriminate violence across splinter and parent groups. We use a linear regression with country and year fixed effects, the same controls used in the first set of tests, and standard errors clustered at the group level.

Table 5. Comparison of Parent-Splinter Child Violence. A Negative Binomial Model Examining the Relationship Between Splinter Child Status and Levels of Violence.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
CHILD	-0.40* (0.23)	-0.72*** (0.23)	-0.77*** (0.24)	-1.64*** (0.55)	-0.95*** (0.26)
PARENT AGREEMENT <sub>T-1</sub>		-0.35 (0.35)	-0.70* (0.37)	-0.66* (0.39)	-0.70** (0.36)
CHILD AGREEMENT <sub>T-1</sub>		-0.41* (0.23)	-0.23 (0.23)	-0.25 (0.23)	-0.25 (0.23)
LN NUMGROUPS <sub>T-1</sub>		0.97*** (0.17)	1.05*** (0.19)	0.94*** (0.20)	1.03*** (0.19)
AGE <sub>t</sub>		-0.05*** (0.02)	-0.05*** (0.02)	-0.05*** (0.02)	-0.06*** (0.02)
AGE <sup>2</sup>		0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00* (0.00)	0.00* (0.00)
CHILD × LN NUMGROUPS <sub>T-1</sub>				0.28* (0.16)	
CHILD × AGE <sub>t</sub>					0.01 (0.01)
LN GDPCAP <sub>T-1</sub>			-0.65* (0.38)	-0.74* (0.39)	-0.67* (0.38)
DEM <sub>T-1</sub>			-0.47* (0.28)	-0.44 (0.28)	-0.47* (0.28)
ANOC <sub>T-1</sub>			-0.05 (0.20)	-0.07 (0.20)	-0.04 (0.20)
Lagged DV	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Country FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Year FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
AIC	17,159.232	16,990.536	14,877.581	14,869.988	14,877.14
BIC	17,854.036	17,719.239	15,584.136	15,583.209	15,590.361
Log Likelihood	-8477.616	-8388.268	-7332.791	-7327.994	-7331.57
Deviance	4005.42	3987.515	3478.019	3484.95	3478.133
Num. obs.	6713	6703	5800	5800	5800

\* $p < 0.1$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

The results are in Table 6. In Models 1, 2, and 3, the coefficient on splinter child status is negative but substantively small and statistically insignificant. Model 4 and 5 examine how outbidding and aging affect splinter behavior in particular. In Model 4, the splinter child variable grows in magnitude becomes statistically significant. The positive interaction coefficient suggests that the difference between parent and splinter violence will diminish as the number of groups increases. However, in most conflict environments captured in the data, splinters carry out lower rates of indiscriminate violence than parents.<sup>27</sup> In Model 5, there does not appear to be a splinter specific effect for age.

Overall, we find that splinter groups conduct fewer or roughly the same proportion

of indiscriminate attacks as parent organizations. These results challenge the assumption that splinter groups may be particularly prone to engage in indiscriminate violence because of their resource constraints.

### **Robustness Checks and Heterogeneity Analysis**

In the [Appendix](#), we conduct additional robustness checks of these results. We examine several alternative modes of violence as our outcome variable, including sexual violence and the forced recruitment of child soldiers ([Table 7](#)). Additionally, we test whether splinter groups are more likely to conduct lethal attacks or reach civil war levels of violence. Across these different outcome variables, we find no evidence that splinters are more violent than parents. In many of our tests, splinters are *less* violent. We also employ a series of alternate modeling specifications, including linear time trends, linear probability models, and pooled estimation techniques. We add group-level controls like state sponsorship, ideology, and political aims. Through this battery of tests, the results show splinter groups are no more violent than parent organizations.

Table 6. Comparison of Parent-Splinter Child Indiscriminate Violence. A Linear Model Examining Whether Splinter Children Engage in a Higher Proportion of Indiscriminate

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
<b>Attacks.</b>					
CHILD	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.22*** (0.08)	0.01 (0.05)
PARENT AGREEMENT <sub>T-1</sub>		0.11 (0.11)	0.10 (0.12)	0.11 (0.13)	0.10 (0.12)
CHILD AGREEMENT <sub>T-1</sub>		0.03 (0.06)	0.03 (0.06)	0.03 (0.06)	0.03 (0.06)
LN NUMGROUPS <sub>T-1</sub>		0.04 (0.03)	0.07* (0.04)	0.05 (0.04)	0.07* (0.04)
AGE <sub>t</sub>		0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
AGE <sup>2</sup>		0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00** (0.00)
CHILD × LN NUMGROUPS <sub>T-1</sub>				0.06** (0.03)	
CHILD × AGE <sub>t</sub>					0.00 (0.00)
LN GDPCAP <sub>T-1</sub>			-0.03 (0.10)	-0.04 (0.09)	-0.03 (0.09)
DEM <sub>T-1</sub>			-0.03 (0.06)	-0.02 (0.06)	-0.03 (0.06)
ANOC <sub>T-1</sub>			-0.05 (0.05)	-0.05 (0.05)	-0.05 (0.05)
Country FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Year FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
R <sup>2</sup>	0.121	0.138	0.137	0.141	0.139
† Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.072	0.085	0.077	0.08	0.078
Num. obs.	1900	1827	1589	1589	1589

\*p < 0.1, \*\*p < 0.05, \*\*\*p < 0.01.

Finally, we assess potential heterogeneity and selection effects by looking at the conflict environments in which splinters form. These checks include comparing splinters and parents that form during and after the Cold War; splinters and parents that operate in countries with varying conflict legacies; and splinters and parents active in UCDP civil war years. Our main results hold in these different contexts.

Table 7. Effect of Splinter Child Status on Alternative Types of Violence. Partial Results Using Alternate Dependent Variables. See Appendix for Full Results.

Dependent Variable	Splinter Child Coefficient	Model
Sexual violence	0.37	Logistic regression with Firth bias reduction
Child soldier recruitment	-0.61***	Logistic regression with Firth bias reduction

Civil war violence	-0.58*	Logistic regression
Number of lethal attacks	-0.68***	Negative binomial regression

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## Qualitative Evidence

Our analysis so far suggests that splinters are overall less violent – or, in the case of indiscriminate attacks, just as violent – compared to parent organizations. While these results align with our theoretical expectations, they do not directly test its underlying mechanism. Our selection effect argument holds that splinters form when other means of resolving internal disputes are not viable. Specifically, we argue that militants view splintering more favorably when the costs of co-opting group leadership are high due, in part, to strong, centralized control structures.

Based on this logic, our selection story makes two predictions. First, splinters will tend to break away from some of the most capable (and most lethal) parent groups. As a result, splinters will appear relatively less violent. Second, because factions choose when to leave, we expect to see splinter groups form with some baseline level of organizational capacity and cohesion. While splinters will still be relatively weaker than their parents, they will not be so weak that they must depend on resource-building violence to develop group capabilities and cohesion.

We adopt a qualitative approach to examine this mechanism and its impact of the violent behavior of splinters in two comparative cases. Using case studies allows us to trace intra-group dynamics over time to determine why splintering occurred and what factors affected subsequent organizational behavior. Moreover, this approach also enables us to assess group motivations that would otherwise be difficult to measure, such as extremist preferences.

We select a pair of cases using a matching technique introduced by [Nielsen \(2016\)](#). These cases are selected by an unsupervised computer algorithm to be “most different” splinters when they first breakaway relative to their parent organization’s violent behavior. In other words, the splinters should be similar across all dimensions except whether they were more or less violent than their parent upon formation. Based on this matching process, we investigate two parent-splinter dyads in Indonesia. One splinter, Mujahideen Kompak, is relatively more violent than its parent organization

Jemaah Islamiyya (JI) upon its formation, while the Al Qaeda in the Malay Archipelago (AQAM) splinter is relatively less violent.<sup>28</sup>

Since both groups emerged from the same parent organization, in the same country, and around the same time period, this matched approach mitigates several potential sources of bias which could influence splinter behavior. Any observable differences in violent behavior should be principally driven by unmatched differences in the splinters' organizational traits, such as group capacity or extreme goals. This allows us to compare the plausibility of existing explanations for splinter violence against ours. If our selection story is correct, we should expect to see high barriers to co-option within JI and the emergence of two splinter groups that are relatively less organizationally capable than their parent.

### ***Jl's Organizational Structure and Barriers to Co-Option***

Jemaah Islamiyya (JI) was a jihadist center-seeking group in Indonesia that formed as late as 1993. JI's goal was to establish a transnational Islamic state encompassing the territory of Indonesia, Malaysia, southern Thailand, Singapore, Brunei, and the southern Philippines ([Mapping Militant Organizations 2018](#)). In 1996, a JI committee of clerics authored the "General Guide for the Struggle of Al-Jama'ah Al-Islamiyah"—also known as Pedoman Umum Perjuangan Al-Jama'ah Al-Islamiyah (PUPJI)—to guide senior leadership ([Pavlova 2007](#)). PUPJI served as both a general manifesto of the group's aims as well as an operational handbook. It formally codified the group's organizational design by establishing a hierarchical command and control structure to set policies, manage JI recruits, and oversee operations.

PUPJI argued that, for JI to achieve its aims, it needed both a Qiy'adah Rosyidah (core group of leaders) as well as a Qoi'dah Sholabah (solid base of supporters) ([Pavlova 2007](#)). The group's leaders organized into a Central Executive Committee, which oversaw operational planning and implemented a "top-down decision-making process" to set group policy ([Baker 2005](#)). The Central Committee oversaw four different mantiqis (regional divisions) and delegated commands to field coordinators within each mantiqi ([ICG 2002](#); [Pavlova 2007](#)). Mantiqi I and IV managed fund-raising operations in Malaysia, Singapore, and Australia ([Harris-Hogan and Zammit 2014](#)).



Mantiqi II was in charge of organizing attacks throughout Indonesia (Baker 2005; Harris-Hogan and Zammit 2014). Mantiqi III oversaw training and recruitment in Indonesia and the Philippines. While each division had specialized duties, the Central Committee tasked all units to develop sufficient military capabilities to conduct attacks. This meant that each mantiqi invested in developing a baseline capacity for violence.

Overall, JI was a “tightly structured” and “rigid” organization (ICG 2002, 3; Harris-Hogan and Zammit 2014, 319). High levels of operational control from a centralized leadership allowed the group to coordinate sophisticated attacks, such as the 2000 Christmas Eve bombings where JI militants planted bombs at 38 sites across the islands of Java and Sumatra (Gordon and Lindo 2011). Our theoretical argument suggests that splinters form when other means of resolving internal grievances are not viable. We find evidence that JI’s centralized leadership made co-option more difficult in two ways. First, JI’s multiple regional branches created barriers to collective action by counter-balancing internal factions against each other. The group operated across multiple Indonesian islands and across multiple countries, which hindered intermantiqi communication. Second, the group’s centralized control structures gave the leadership control over organizational resources. The leadership oversaw and directed the distribution of resources among the different factions of the group, controlling the flow of operational resources, recruits, and finances. This centralized authority over resources gave the leadership the power to shape faction behavior by providing or withholding necessary resources. If one faction was becoming problematic for leadership, JI’s Executive Committee could exercise its centralized control to dampen that faction’s capabilities and influence.

In this environment, internal change attempts were difficult to organize and unlikely to succeed. The leadership’s strong central control over organizational resources and its counterbalanced regional structure hampered factions’ ability to coordinate an effective challenge. As a result, if a preference disagreement arose, factions may have viewed splintering as a more viable option than challenging the group leadership.

### ***Divisions within JI and Subsequent Splintering***

Divisions within JI began to emerge in the early 2000s. In 2001, the faction which

specialized in training and equipping JI recruits splintered to form Mujahideen Kompak. This faction broke away because of disagreements over JI's bureaucratic operations and "different approaches to capacity-building" ([ICG 2004](#), i). More specifically, Kompak members believed that JI spent too long educating new recruits about its overarching religious philosophy and solidifying support for the movement before training them to fight. Kompak leadership thought these indoctrination efforts were unnecessary investments; recruits joined the group already sufficiently motivated to fight. One interpretation of this splintering event might be that Kompak militants broke away from JI because they were more motivated to use violence. However, JI and Kompak shared similar preferences on the utility of violence. Both agreed that violent attacks were necessary to achieve group objectives. Rather, the split was driven by a disagreement over the optimal recruitment and training strategy to build Qoi'dah Sholabah (a solid base of supporters). Kompak members believed that the JI leadership's strategy was inefficient and could be rectified.

In 2003, a second JI faction composed of Mantiqi I members broke away to form Al Qaeda in the Malay Archipelago (AQMA). Though JI had pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda, Mantiqi I members believed JI was too moderate and cautious in its use of violence. Prior to the split, the leader of the breakaway faction, Noordin Mohammed Top, repeatedly clashed with JI leadership over the morality of targeting civilians. Faction members interpreted Al Qaeda's 1998 fatwa as legitimating increased attacks against noncombatants, while JI leadership disagreed with this understanding ([ICG 2004](#), i; [Johnson 2016](#), 9). In other words, AQMA harbored more extreme preferences than JI. Faction members splintered believing that the use of violence against civilians was necessary and appropriate to achieve their desired ends ([Pavlova 2007](#)). After formation, Mujahideen Kompak and AQMA remained much smaller than JI ([Table 8](#)). Sources suggest that JI membership ranged from several hundred to several thousand, with 3,000 members at its peak in 2012 ([Mapping Militant Organizations 2018](#)). [Jones and Libicki \(2008\)](#) classify Mujahideen Kompak's group size in the "100s" at an unknown date; they do not code AQMA, possibly because it was too small.<sup>29</sup> While JI principally operated on the densely populated island of Java (population 145 million), Mujahideen Kompak operated on the relatively smaller island of Bali

(population 4.3 million).<sup>30</sup> AQMA's faction operated in Sumatra (population 58 million). These different geographic bases may have constrained the splinters' respective abilities to recruit beyond a certain size. A smaller area of operation in Bali and Sumatra may have also limited the potential number of targets to attack.

**Table 8.** Jemaah Islamiyya and Two Splinters.

Group	Jemaah Islamiyya	Mujahideen Kompak	Al Qaeda in the Malay Archipelago
Years active	1993-Current	2001–2005	2003–2009
Cause of splinter	N/A	Disagreements over training and recruitment strategies	Disagreements over use of violence and noncombatant targeting
Size estimates	1000s	100s	10s
Average number of attacks per year	3.95	0.6	0.71
Average proportion of civilian-targeted attacks	0.66	1	0.75

*Note:* This table draws on the data used in our analysis and thus does not include post-2012 violence by JI.

### ***Explaining Splinter Behavior***

Our matching approach compares two new splinters that are similar across many dimensions but differed in their initial levels of violence. Immediately after breaking away from JI in 2001, Mujahideen Kompak bombed a church in Jakarta. Though the bomb detonated during a crowded church service, there were no casualties (START 2018). Because JI was regrouping after the 2000 Christmas Eve bombings, it conducted few attacks in 2001. Consistent with conventional wisdom, it would appear that Mujahideen Kompak was more violent than its parent organization. However, JI was much more violent in the years preceding and after the split. Even as Mujahideen Kompak gained operational experience, its violent behavior never surpassed JI again. In 2002, JI resumed operations and carried out a series of suicide bombings in Bali that killed 204 people. JI continued to conduct highly destructive attacks through 2005, resulting in hundreds of casualties (START 2018). In contrast, Mujahideen Kompak declined after its initial wave of violence, carrying out its last known attack in 2005 (Jones and Libicki

2008).

While Mujahideen Kompak was initially more violent than JI, AQMA was less violent. This is surprising because it is inconsistent with the expectations of the spoiler logic; AQMA's relative extremism and commitment to attacking civilians would predict more violence. After splintering in 2003, AQMA carried out a bombing of the JW Marriott Hotel in Jakarta, resulting in 15 fatalities ([START 2018](#)). Though the bombing made international news, it was AQMA's only attack that year compared to several high profile JI attacks. By 2004, JI began to inform on AQMA members to Indonesian police; this led to AQMA arrests and a decline in its operational capacity ([Gordon and Lindo 2011](#)). AQMA carried out one of its last known attacks in 2009, using suicide bombers to target the JW Marriott Hotel in Jakarta again ([Mapping Militant Organizations 2018](#)). After Indonesian police killed AQMA's leader and several members in 2009, the group disappeared.

Overall, these two splinters consistently engaged in fewer attacks than JI. While Mujahideen Kompak was more violent in the year of its formation, its activities were soon overshadowed by JI's resumption of violence. Similarly, while AQMA carried out one high profile bombing, the group never surpassed JI's tempo of attacks. The behavior of JI's splinters challenges existing explanations of splinter violence. Mujahideen Kompak was seemingly more violent than JI at its formation, but this behavior was not driven by extreme preferences or resource-building needs. Rather, Mujahideen Kompak only appeared more violent because JI temporarily and purposely restrained its operational activities as it regrouped. In contrast, AQMA exhibited more extreme preferences over the use of violence than JI but engaged in fewer attacks due to its limited capacity.

We suggest the behavior of Mujahideen Kompak and AQMA also challenges assumptions about splinter incentives to use indiscriminate violence. Both Mujahideen Kompak and AQMA drew members from distinct mantiqi who had trained together, held similar preferences, and developed the capacity to conduct attacks. These splinters had relatively high levels of cohesion that allowed them to execute sophisticated attacks on crowded churches and hotels – something a weaker, resource-seeking group might struggle to accomplish. Although AQMA targeted tourists at the Marriott Hotel in 2003,

its choice to attack civilians did not seem driven by a need to extract resources from the local population. Rather, AQMA saw noncombatants as legitimate targets under its interpretation of Al Qaeda's 1998 fatwa.

Instead, the behaviors of Mujahideen Kompak and AQMA seem to be more consistent with the selection effect story. JI's organizational structure created high barriers to internal reform and leadership challenges. When disagreements over JI's policy arose, both factions elected to splinter rather than remain within the organization. Though Mujahideen Kompak and AQMA were somewhat capable groups, they could not match JI's organizational strength. JI was a large, well-developed group with a centralized process of decision-making and control. Its different regional branches specialized in certain types and areas of operations, making the group more effective and efficient in conducting violence. In contrast, AQMA and Mujahideen Kompak were much smaller. These splinters lacked the resources, membership, and transnational connections to match the well-developed organizational engine that oversaw JI's operations. Despite a strong motivation to commit violence, it was difficult to conduct attacks on par with the relatively stronger JI.

## **Conclusion**

Do splinter groups behave differently from their parent organizations? Existing scholarship argues that splinters have a unique motivation to use violence. This work holds that splinter groups are driven to commit violence by a range of factors, including extreme preferences, organizational needs, and crowded conflict environments. Though popular among scholars, these assertions have never been systematically tested.

In this article, we develop a theory of splinter group emergence that emphasizes how selection into splintering impacts violent behavior. We argue that splinter groups often engage in less violence than their parent organizations because they are less capable of doing so. Using an original dataset, we find that splinter groups carry out fewer attacks than parent groups. These results hold across a variety of different violence measures and scenarios. To evaluate the mechanism underpinning our selection argument, we conduct a comparative case study of two splinters that formed from Jemaah Islamiyya (JI). Case evidence shows the splinters that emerged from JI

were relatively weaker and unable to match JI's levels of violence. Consistent with a selection story, the splinters' propensity to use violence appears shaped by their relative capacity.

These findings challenge a long-standing claim about the nature and behavior of splinter groups. Our findings also emphasize the need to theoretically and empirically account for selection effects in the emergence of armed groups. As more data on armed groups become available, future work should consider how organizational and environmental circumstances shape the formation and attributes of militant groups.

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## Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## Notes

1. We define splinter groups as armed groups that form by breaking off from an existing militant organization. For ease of reference, we refer to this existing group as the ‘parent’ organization.
2. See [Stedman \(1997\)](#); [Kydd and Walter \(2002\)](#); [Bueno De Mesquita \(2008\)](#). This spoiler logic principally conceptualizes extremism as a preference for violence over non-violence. A smaller subset treats extremism as a willingness to use force against noncombatants.
3. See [Crenshaw \(1981\)](#); [Bloom \(2005\)](#); [Kydd and Walter \(2006\)](#); [Cronin \(2009\)](#).
4. This argument builds on work by [Tamm \(2016\)](#) and [Mosinger \(2019\)](#), which argues that variation in internal power structures drives leadership disputes and organizational fragmentation.
5. We focus on political violence because it is the emphasis of much of the literature with which we are engaging. In the [Appendix](#), we also test whether splinters are more likely to engage in alternative forms of violence, including sexual violence and the recruitment of child soldiers.
6. For example, [Woldemariam \(2018\)](#).
7. For example, [Lidow \(2016\)](#).
8. For example, [Bueno De Mesquita \(2008\)](#) argues that moderate splinters are “uncommon” and presumes splinter groups are more extreme as a scope condition.
9. As an extension of (3), individual members can defect from the group. Due to data and space limitations, this paper focuses on faction-level, rather than individual-level, behavior.
10. Faced with these pressures, splinter groups are more likely to recruit child soldiers as a low-cost method of amassing new group members ([Faulkner and Doctor 2021](#)).
11. Data from [Cunningham and Sawyer \(2019\)](#) suggest that leaders are rarely replaced

by group members. 63 of 329 armed group leaders (19%) in the dataset were chosen for office through elections or selection by a group of cadres.

12. [Perkoski \(2022\)](#) describes the assumption that splintering is driven by extreme preferences as the “most widely held myth about organizational splintering” (16).
13. A group’s violent activity is also affected by other organizational traits, such as foreign fighter members or the strength of internal institutions ([Doctor and Willingham 2020](#); [Hoover Green 2018](#)). While these traits may interact with organizational centralization, we lack the space and fine-grained data to analyze their effects in this paper.
14. There are cases that contradict this argument. For example, the splintering of Boko Haram into Shekau’s faction and the Islamic State-West African Province generated a highly capable and violent splinter. While these stronger splinters exist, many splinters are smaller, weaker, and less likely to survive than their parents ([Mahoney 2020](#)).
15. We use the version of the AGD updated in January 2023.
16. See the [Appendix](#) for details on the population of actors, selection criteria, and coding procedures.
17. If a group’s formation date is missing in the data (i.e., there was not enough information to code it), we use the year of its first violent attack as coded by the AGD.
18. See [Braithwaite and Cunningham \(2019\)](#)
19. See [Pettersson and Oberg \(2020\)](#)
20. For example, both AGD and FORGE code the Moro Islamic Liberation Front as a splinter of an existing organization and the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front as a political party that turns violent.
21. This means that only two types of groups are included in our analysis: (1) groups that splintered at least once in their lifetimes (i.e., parents), and (2) groups that formed by splintering (i.e., splinters).
22. In the [Appendix](#), we examine different types of GTD incidents (e.g., lethal attacks, civilian-targeted attacks) but find no major difference.
23. Attack data is coded as missing for parent or splinter groups not in the GTD. If either a parent or splinter is missing attack data, the pair is dropped from our analysis.
24. In many cases, we are able to directly compare splinter children to their parent



groups since splinters are relatively rare. When there are multiple splinters and parents operating in the same country and year, our estimates are pooled across parents and splinters.

25. Further details are in the [Appendix](#).
26. For the marginal effect to become positive, LN NUMGROUPS would need to be greater than or equal to 5.86 – which is approximately 349 groups – a value that is much larger than the maximum of 92 groups in the data.
27. For the marginal effect of CHILD to become positive when CHILD is equal to one, LN NUMGROUPS would need to be greater than or equal to 3.66, which is approximately 39 groups. Only six of the 62 countries included in the data ever have more than 39 groups active in a given year.
28. See the [Appendix](#) for more details on case selection procedures.
29. Based on news reporting of AQMA, we estimate it had tens of members.
30. Bali was also predominantly Hindu, which may have hampered the Islamic group's recruitment efforts.

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