

Rage Against the Regime: Terrorist Groups and the Arab Spring



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Abstract

What explains the variation in the success of Salafi-Jihadist groups in the aftermath of the Arab Spring? The Arab Spring saw an unprecedented political opportunity for non-state actors to mobilize yet Salafi-Jihadists exhibited the most variation in their capacity to do so. Using a mixed-method approach that combines case study analysis and statistical text analysis, this study identifies some of the conditions and features that made violent Salafi-Jihadist groups successful, both in terms of achieving long-held policy objectives and broad-based popularity, in the immediate aftermath of the Arab Spring. I find that Salafi-Jihadist groups that effectively produce **economic opportunities**, compete **ideologically with Islamist parties** and exhibit **internal ideological cohesion** are more successful than those who do not.

Case Study Analysis

- I process trace the behaviour of four Salafi-Jihadist groups that predominantly operate in four countries of interest – Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen and Libya. These groups are Al Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM) in Tunisia/Libya, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, Ansar Al Sharia (AST) in Tunisia and Ansar Bayt al Maqdis (ABAM) in Egypt.
- Process tracing allows us to establish causality by identifying counterfactual events and outcomes and considering the evidence in support of the hypothesis and against it.
- Using news reporting, primary source material and intelligence reports, I find **support for H1 and H2**. Among our groups of interest, **AST is most successful and ABAM and AQIM are least successful**. There is **moderate success for AQAP**.



Translation from Yemeni TV network: "Some of the continuous efforts of Ansar Al Sharia in fixing and improving roads" (Source: Joscelyn, 2016)



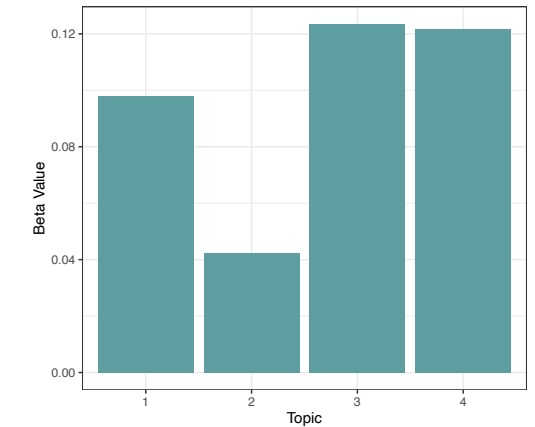
In Central Kairouan, Tunisia, supporters of Ansar Al Sharia gather for the group's annual conference (Source: Reuters, 2012)

On AST in Tunisia:
"organizing convoys (food, medical, religious), selling produce at wholesale price, repairing roads... cleaning the streets, landscaping, and planting trees, cleaning the weekly market, maintaining buildings, painting walls, visiting hospitals (providing presents and food), fixing homes, organizing blood donations, cleaning cemeteries... fixing roofs, and visiting the elderly." (Zelin 145)

On AQAP in Yemen
One resident of a town, Rada', controlled by ASY explained "I went to Al-Qaeda, and they were able to resolve the dispute. Since then, I have gone to them as an alternative to court." (Furlan, 18)

- Using the "Cohesion" dictionary, LDA estimates four prevalent topics in the text corpus. I calculate the probability that a 'cohesion' word will appear in each of the four topics. The beta values suggest the topic-word density in each topic.
- Of note are the results showing "Libyan" and "Syrian" in topics 2 and 4 suggesting **higher cohesion in Libya**.
- The results also suggest that for Salafi-Jihadists topics relating to "The People" are far less likely to be unifying in its writing compared to "Revolution." It raises an interesting point about how the people of the revolution and the revolution itself are perceived very different.

Distribution of Beta Values for the Word 'cohesion'



Terrorism and State Capacity

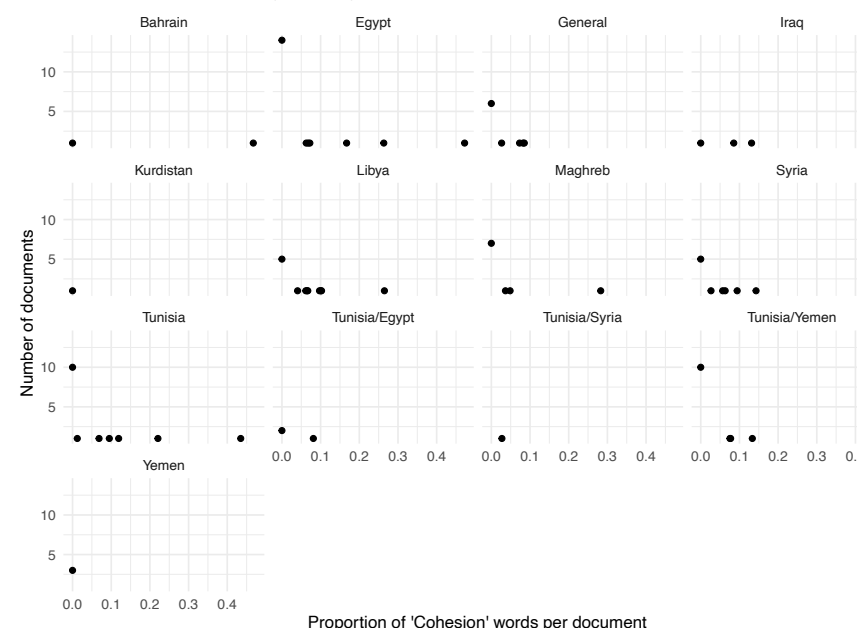
- In the weeks and months where protestors across the Middle East mobilized against the authoritarian regimes, state capacity, both coercive and extractive, began to falter. That is, the ability of the state to enforce laws, control territory, extract revenues or extend public goods (Ellermann, 2009) was preoccupied with the maintenance of the incumbent regimes.
- We saw various nonstate actors mobilize and exercise agency to capitalize on this moment towards their goals. Violent radical Salafi-jihadists did not, despite having a significant interest in doing so (Gartenstein-Ross and Vassefi, 2012).
- One AQAP leader in Yemen wrote to Osama Bin Laden saying, "If you ever wanted Sana'a, today is the day!" (Knoll, 2017)

	Variables of Interest		
	Economic Opportunities	Islamist Party Competition	Internal Ideological Cohesion
Successful	AQIM AQAP AST	AQAP AST	AQAP AST
Unsuccessful	ABAM	AQIM ABAM	AQIM ABAM

Text Analysis

- For this analysis, I collected 105 documents produced by Salafi-Jihadist between 2011 and 2012.
- I test the third mechanism of the theory using LDA in statistical text analysis. I use this method to classify Salafi-Jihadist documents and writings by the proportion of "cohesion" key words in each text. Human labelling is used to classify authorship and country association to each document.
- Most cohesive documents are in **Egypt, Bahrain, "the Maghreb" and Libya**. Some outliers also exist in Tunisia, but it is not significant. The results of this analysis are inconclusive for H3.

Cohesiveness Scores by Country



Theory

- Economic opportunities:** Building on research which finds that while there is no strong link between poverty and terrorism, there is one between high standard of living and participation in terrorism (Berebbi, 2003), the provision of economic opportunities allow Salafi-Jihadist groups to fill a material hole left by a weakened state and spread their ideas in the process.
- Islamist Party Competition:** Most literature in this area focuses on the inclusion-moderation hypothesis (Cavatorta and Merone, 2013; Clark, 2006), little attention is paid to the space where moderates and radicals may compete. An explicit competition with more moderate Islamist parties allows the Salafi-Jihadist groups to distinguish themselves ideologically and 'win over' largely dissuaded youth in rural and remote regions.
- Ideological Cohesion:** Building on the work which explores the splits within the Salafi-Jihadist community (Aalshech, 2014), the extent to which a Salafi-Jihadist group is internally ideologically cohesive matters. It influences its ability to achieve measures of success as it restricts the groups' ability to build organization and infrastructure.

Conclusion & Future Study

- Combining the case study analysis and statistical text analysis, the study finds modest support for the theory. Process-tracing analysis finds that **groups that provide economic opportunities through social service provisions found greater success in building popularity**. I also find that **groups which made efforts to distinguish themselves from other Islamists were successful in solidifying ideological principles, particularly in Tunisia**.
- The meteoric rise of the Islamic State had a highly consequential effect on Salafi-Jihadist groups which are studied. All of the groups lost membership to the IS in 2013-14.
- Statistical text analysis finds **documents written for Tunisian Salafi-Jihadists had high cohesiveness scores** but so did documents for Egypt which does not support the theory. Documents on Yemen and Libya are inconclusive.
- Future research should explore the dynamic of variation for other Salafi-Jihadist groups in different contexts, particularly non-Middle Eastern ones and non-Arab Spring ones. There may be replicability for other cases of weakened state capacity. Similar work can be done on non-Islamists, but still religious radical groups such as ethnic-based or single-issue groups.
- I would also hope to see an exploration of external state effects on the behaviour of Salafi-Jihadist groups. The concept of the "West" is a constant in reading the text corpus and so there is reason to understand if it influenced their political calculus.
- Conducting a similar textual analysis with a larger and more extensive text corpus may also improve the robustness of the LDA results.

Logic of the theory		
Level of Success of Salafi-Jihadist Group		
	High	Low
Economic Opportunities	Many opportunities; readily available; Effective provision of public goods	Few Opportunities; unavailable and ineffective
Islamist Party Competition	Identifiable competition; ideological distinction made	No competition is identified; group is not distinct from other Islamists
Ideological Cohesion	Strong internal cohesion; evidence of ideological consensus	No evidence of internal cohesion; evidence of infighting and divisions