

A Call to Arms: How Rebel Groups Choose Their Recruitment Tactics

Abstract:

Why do some rebel groups mobilize around diverse grievances, while others organize around a narrow set of issues? Employing diverse recruitment appeals is potentially risky. On the one hand, such groups can widen their recruitment pool by appealing to broader segments of society. On the other hand, groups that represent multiple interests are often plagued by in-fighting and low cohesion, as members disagree about which issues to prioritize. Building off existing research, we contend that radical Islamist groups are more likely to draw on a diverse range of claims than other rebel organizations, as they are better able to absorb the costs, and can derive significant benefits, from doing so. This is because radical Islamist movements have the incentive and capacity to unite diverse interests through shared identity; they can use diverse grievances to promote the idea that Islam is threatened, and their frequent internationalization places them in conflict with local, regional, and international actors, widening the scope of their grievances. To analyze this argument, we leverage novel data on the recruitment practices of 232 rebel movements across the world. We find support for the hypothesis that radical Islamist groups employ more diverse ideological appeals than organizations of different ideologies.

Introduction

Some rebel groups mobilize around only a small number of grievances, while others make a diversity of types of grievance-based recruitment appeals (Soules 2023).¹ Employing diverse ideological recruitment appeals can serve as a double-edged sword for armed groups. On the one hand, organizing around a larger number of grievances can expand the pool recruits and supporters available to rebel organizations, as broader segments of the population will feel better represented (Gabbay 2008; Schwab 2023). On the other hand, armed groups that represent a diversity of interests are often plagued by lower levels of cohesion and higher levels of in-fighting and splintering, as the preferences of members are less likely to align (Khan and Whiteside 2021; Perkoski 2019).

Why are some rebel organizations more willing to take the risks associated with employing diverse recruitment appeals than others? We expect that radical Islamist rebel groups, relative to other types of armed organizations, are more likely to accept these risks and employ diverse grievance-based recruitment appeals. Radical Islamist groups are better able to reduce the costs associated with platform diversification, and derive significant benefits from doing so, for at least three reasons.

First, such groups can unite actors with diverse interests through emphasizing a shared Islamic identity (e.g., Ahmad 2016; Hegghammer 2010; Walter 2017). Second and relatedly, radical Islamist groups seek to emphasize shared identity and spur recruitment by reinforcing the idea that Islam is under threat (Wagemakers 2008). These threats are often tied into a diversity of

¹ Groups that offer material incentives typically offer only salaries or loot, while there is much greater diversity in the types of ideological appeals made by rebels (Soules 2023). This lack of diversity in *types* of material incentives is also why we do not examine variation in types of economic appeals.

grievances, as such groups argue that threats to Muslims come from a diversity of sources. Third, radical Islamist rebel movements throughout the world have increasingly internationalized their goals, pitting them against a wider set of adversaries, which often generates additional grievances (Hegghammer 2009).

To test this hypothesis, we use data from the Rebel Appeals and Incentives Dataset (RAID), which contains information on the recruitment strategies of rebel organizations that were active across the world during the period of 1989 to 2011. This includes the extent to which they rely on ideological appeals, relative to material incentives, for recruitment, as well as specific types of ideological appeals they make (Soules 2023). We find robust support for our hypothesis across a series of quantitative tests. We also conduct additional statistical tests to evaluate the mechanisms underpinning the central hypothesis.

This paper makes at least two contributions. First, we make an empirical contribution by providing the first, to our knowledge, cross-group, quantitative analysis of why rebel organizations choose to diversify their recruitment platforms. Tokdemir et al. (2021) investigate how inter-rebel competition drives groups to alter their ideological platforms, but their quantitative analysis does not address the role of recruitment specifically. Second and relatedly, ideological diversification is expected to affect the longevity and success of rebel movements (Khan and Whiteside 2021; Perkoski 2019). However, to make empirical claims about the consequences of rebel recruitment strategies, we need to understand the factors that drive recruitment practices in the first place. Thus, this paper provides evidence of the factors that systematically affect rebels' choices in recruitment strategies, which can help shape future analysis of the consequences of these practices.

We begin by reviewing the literature on the diversification of rebel group recruitment strategies. We then develop our theory explaining why radical Islamist groups are more likely than rebel organizations with other ideologies to diversify their recruitment appeals. Next, we detail our research design and present our results. Following this, we conduct additional analyses to test some of the mechanisms underpinning our core theoretical arguments. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our results.

Diversity in Recruitment Strategies

Existing scholarship has explored ideological diversity within rebel movements. Militant organizations can draw on a variety of ideological appeals in their recruitment strategies (Soules 2023). Such appeals may center on fighting for the creation of an Islamic state, ending ethnic discrimination, seeking an independent country for particular national communities, or forming a government based on Marxist ideals.

Other types of non-material appeals transcend ideological divides between militant Islamist, separatist, and left-wing rebel groups. For instance, different types of ideological groups may appeal to recruits by calling for the need to mobilize against violent government repression, exploitation of local resources, foreign military intervention, and women's rights. For instance, the left-wing, ethnonationalist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) argued for the urgency of combating foreign intervention in its founding document. In doing so, the organization stated: "The displacement and dispersion of the last twenty years have created a circumstance in which we must confront the Zionist invaders; the fate of our people and our cause and every human being in Palestine relies upon our Palestinian determination to fight the invaders in order to

preserve our dignity, and our lands and our rights” (PFLP 1967). Also highlighting the need for mobilization against external forces, the Taliban declared in 2016 that it “condemns the barbarian invasion and continuation of occupation by America and her allies in the strongest terms...leave our country, bring the occupation to an end...Otherwise the believing Afghan nation will continue their legitimate struggle under the leadership of the Islamic Emirate, until the invaders are expelled from the country like the previous ones” (Taliban 2016).

Diversification in ideological appeals is an important strategic decision made by rebel movements (Gabbay 2008; Schwab 2023). This diversification is consequential and may affect the ability of militant groups to effectively recruit and achieve long-term goals (Khan and Whiteside 2021). Indeed, mobilizing around a diversity of non-material appeals can create the perception that rebels are too diffused or fractured to be effective (Khan and Whiteside 2021). This is particularly significant as rebels often need to be able to signal commitment to specific ideological causes to gain and maintain legitimacy (Cronin-Furman and Arulthas 2021). Moreover, the resonance of recruitment appeals may be damaged by any contradiction between discourse and actual actions taken by a group (Benford and Snow 2000). Put differently, organizational recruitment strategies may be hampered if a group says it is fighting for a certain issue but then fails to follow through on its promises. Consequently, rebel groups that mobilize around a diversity of issues might have difficulty convincing potential recruits that they can credibly satisfy all the diverse interests that could be represented in the group.

However, armed groups may possess various incentives to adopt a diverse set of ideological appeals. First, drawing on a broad range of appeals can bridge gaps between different types of identities and potential recruits. Shared identity plays an essential role in the mobilization strategies of many armed movements (Weinstein 2005, 2007). Facilitating such shared connections

plays a particularly important part in organizations' use of non-material recruitment appeals, as the promises of future benefits depend heavily on the ability of rebel leaders to credibly commit to providing long-term rewards to group members. The trust associated with shared identities helps make these commitments more credible (e.g., Weinstein 2005, 2007).

Additionally, militant groups may draw on disparate types of grievances as they seek to appeal to different populations. While some militant groups primarily draw on local populations for recruits and support, other organizations attempt to speak to and gain the backing of transnational audiences. For instance, Gates and Podder (2015) find that, on average, foreign fighters in ISIS are more interested in the jihadist aims of the group while domestic combatants care more about local grievances and issues. Mobilizing around a diverse set of appeals may aid organizations in widening their pool of potential recruits, appealing to supporters (at home and abroad) who are on the fence about particular militant organizations.

Finally, armed groups may adopt local or transnational goals as they seek to achieve organizational goals. While some groups may fight for relatively minor policy change within a contemporary polity, others may strive to achieve transnational goals (Kydd and Walter 2006). As noted by Piazza (2009, 65), some groups adopt "universal" goals that are highlighted by "highly ambitious, abstract, complex, and nebulous goals that are driven primarily by ideology." Moreover, these are organizations that often "identify much larger, vague, frequently transnational and more ideologically-constructed communities on whose behalf they claim to commit attacks and audiences to whom they direct their messages by deed."

However, adopting transnational goals and operating across state borders can increase the number of enemies that militant groups are fighting against. For instance, seeking to achieve transnational objectives may pit militant groups against not only local actors but also regional

regimes and great powers in the international system. Consequently, militant groups may expand their grievances as they criticize and attribute blame to a multiplicity of actors they are fighting against.

Militant Islamist Groups and Diverse Recruitment Appeals

Relative to other types of rebel movements, militant Islamist groups may be more likely to make diverse recruitment appeals for several reasons. These reasons include: (1) incentives and ability to create an encompassing shared identity among diverse interests; (2) efforts to support the idea that Islam is under threat; and (3) increasing adoption of transnational goals that pits organizations against local, regional, and international actors. We discuss these dynamics below.

Shared Identity

First, militant Islamist groups place a strong emphasis on a shared Islamic identity that transcends tribal, clan, national, and ethnic differences. Scholars have examined how Islamist organizations' emphasis on unity through shared religious identity can aid in uniting people with diverse beliefs (Ahmad 2016; Hegghammer 2010; Walter 2017). Al-Shabaab, for instance, has sought "cohesion through the framework of Islam" in order to "transcend Somalia's historically fractious clan relationships" (Petrich 2022, 486). Moreover, Toft and Zhukov (2015) explain that while some nationalist insurgents in Chechnya reject the recruitment of non-Chechens, religiously motivated insurgents are much more likely to accept Muslim recruits from a diversity of ethnic backgrounds. In seeking to bridge divides between different communities, militant Islamist groups

can incorporate various types of grievances within their conceptualizations of a shared religious identity.

Threats to Islam

To help bolster the propagation of a shared religious identity that transcends borders, languages, and familial ties, militant Islamist groups have frequently drawn on the idea that Islam is under threat. While particular frames surrounding the threat may vary depending on the situation, time, and context, Wagemakers (2008, 4) notes that this “belief that Islam is under threat is shared by different Islamic movements and scholars across various Muslim countries.” These framing strategies are not divorced from broader public perceptions. Following the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, global surveys found that an increasing percentage of Muslims in different countries voiced the existence of serious threats to Islam (PEW 2003). Moreover, Chassman (2016) finds that while members of ISIS have a diversity of grievances, they are still united by some common grievances, such as the belief that Islam is under threat across the world.

Militant Islamist groups have linked multifaceted grievances to the idea that Islam is under threat. These grievances, ranging from exploitation of resources to external intervention and authoritarian rule, are attributed to various actors. In March 2024, for instance, al-Shabaab issued a statement surrounding the United States and its plundering of “Muslim wealth,” declaring that “the U.S. government often takes predatory measures in order to harass and persecute Muslim communities around the world and appropriate their wealth, all under the most flimsy and ludicrous pretexts” (Harakat al-Shabaab al Mujahideen 2024). In another case, Yahya Ibrahim (2015, 3), the editor of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula’s *Inspire* magazine, stated that “Muslims

continue to face the results and consequence of the fierce crusade aggression against Islam.” Consequently, Islam’s enemies had revealed “themselves in different forms of aggression: plundering Muslim wealth, occupying their lands, imprisoning their men and women, killing their scholars and the worst of all is the aggression towards the very core principles of Islam.” Additionally, Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (2021) argued that “the massacres perpetrated by the French in Mali and other African countries are too many to count...the real reason for other French invasion of Mali is hatred for that which Allah revealed, and malice for the religion of Allah and His Shari’ah.”

Internationalization of Goals

Finally, recent decades have seen the increasing “hybridization” of militant Islamist groups (Hegghammer 2009). Prior to 2003, there was often a divide between militant Islamist organizations that a) sought to overthrow local Muslim regimes to create Islamic states in particular countries and groups that b) focused on achieving global goals and combatting Western states. However, Hegghammer (2009) writes that “a process of ideological hybridization has occurred, with the result that the enemy hierarchies of many jihadist groups are becoming more unclear or heterogeneous than they used to be.”

Part of this trend within the jihadist movement entailed that previously localized groups were increasingly adopting transnational goals and discourse. For example, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which later changed its name to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in January 2007, focused solely on achieving goals within Algeria in its founding charter (Berlin 2024). Yet, the organization would increasingly adopt more regional goals, with

Abdelmalek Droukdel, the leader of the GSPC/AQIM from 2004 to 2020, claiming in 2008 that “our concern concerning the Islamic Maghreb, they are plenty. Most importantly is to secure our countries from the tentacles of these criminal regimes that betrayed their religion, and their people. Because they are all secretions of colonialism that invaded our country in the last two centuries, and enabled those regimes to govern” (New York Times 2008). The increasing heterogeneity in the hierarchies of militant Islamist groups entail that these organizations admonish the actions of a diverse set of enemies, including local, region, and international actors.

Testable Implication

This discussion is not to say that some separatist or leftist groups fail to adopt transnational goals or avoid the creation of overarching, shared identities. Rather, we contend that militant Islamist groups have more pressing incentives to adopt a greater number of grievances as they appeal to recruits in numerous states, emphasize a shared religious identity, and encapsulate various grievances under the argument that Islam is under threat. Indeed, these organizations have devoted significant amounts of resources to their propaganda efforts, producing magazines, newspapers, and videos in multiple languages (Zelin 2015; Winkler and El Damanhoury 2022). This leads to our central hypothesis that:

H1: Radical Islamist groups will employ a larger number of grievance-based recruitment appeals than rebel organizations with other ideologies.

Research Design

We employ data from the Rebel Appeals and Incentives Dataset (RAID) (Soules 2023) to test the core hypothesis. RAID contains data on the recruitment practices of 232 rebel movements that were active across the world at least at some point during the period from 1989 to 2011. The list of actors is derived from the Non-State Actor (NSA) dataset (Cunningham et al. 2013). While the main version of RAID is time invariant, it is an ideal source to use because it contains measures of the specific types of ideological appeals they employ. No other data source, to our knowledge, contains systematically collected information on the recruitment practices of rebel groups. To construct the variables in RAID, detailed qualitative narratives were written on the recruitment practices of all groups in the sample. These narratives drew on a variety of primary and secondary sources to determine both the specific types of recruitment appeals groups employed, and the relative frequency at which they depended on these appeals (Soules 2023).

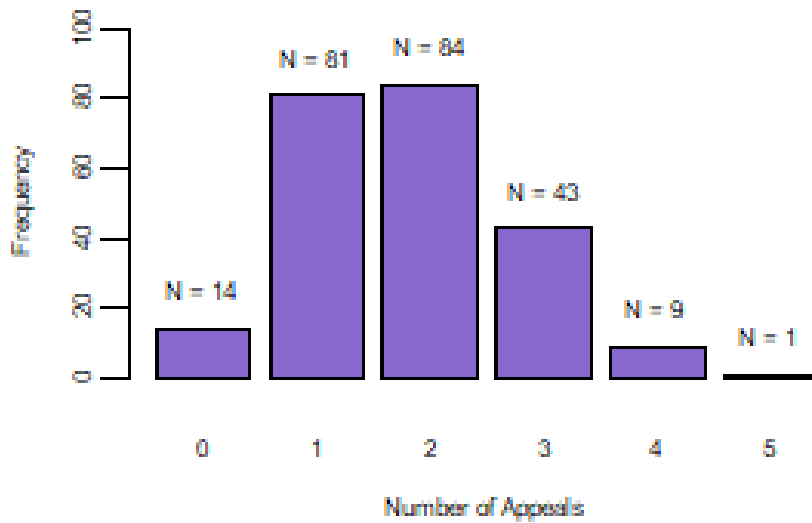
Outcome Variables

To evaluate the central hypothesis, we need a measure of the diversity of ideological appeals made by rebels. We use information in RAID to build two measures of this diversity. RAID contains measures of the specific types of ideological appeals used by groups. Specifically, it has 10 dichotomous measures of whether groups make specific types of appeals, including appeals to (1) left-wing ideologies; (2) radical Islamist ideologies; (3) other religious ideologies; (4) ethnonationalism and regional-based grievances; (5) women's rights; (6) opposition to exploitation of local resources by external actors; (7) anti-Imperialism and opposition to Western dominance; (8) opposition to foreign military intervention; (9) general anti-government grievances, and (10) a miscellaneous category of "other" appeals (Soules 2023).

These categorizations are based on the most dominant types of appeals that were present in the detailed, qualitative narratives of the recruitment practices of these groups. A few of these ideological appeals are captured in other datasets that use common typologies of rebel ideology, including whether groups are left-wing, religious, and/or ethnonationalist (e.g., Basedau et al. 2022; Braithwaite and Cunningham 2020; Polo and Gleditsch 2016; Wood and Thomas 2017). However, RAID also captures many other grievances rebels mobilize around that are not present in other datasets.

Using these data, we construct two different measures of the diversification of rebel groups' ideological recruitment appeals. First, we build a count variable of the number of individual ideological appeals made by groups. This variable ranges from 0 (as there are 14 groups in RAID that rely completely on material incentives and thus made no ideological appeals) to 5 (made by the Communist Party of the Philippines). The median number of ideological appeals made is 2, and the mean is 1.8. **Figure 1** displays the distribution of this count variable. As shown, the distribution of this variable is highly skewed. To ensure that this does not bias the results, we also build a binary measure of whether a group makes two or more ideological appeals. Approximately 59% of the groups in the sample make multiple ideological appeals, while the rest either make one or none.

Figure 1: Count of Ideological Appeals



Explanatory Variable

To evaluate the central hypothesis, we use a dichotomous measure of whether a group has a radical Islamist ideology, based on data in both the Women in Armed Rebellion Dataset (WARD) and the Foundations of Rebel Group Emergence (FORGE) dataset (Cunningham and Braithwaite 2020).²

Control Variables

We also include a variety of other covariates that could be confounding the main relationships analyzed. First, we employ a binary indicator of whether a group has secessionist aims, which is

² Specifically, our measure captures whether a group is coded as having a radical Islamist ideology in either WARD or in FORGE. As robustness checks for Hypothesis 2, we run additional models that just use the measure from WARD and others that just use the measure from FORGE, not the combined measures. We continue to find consistent support for Hypothesis 2.

based on multiple sources, including information in the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) Conflict Encyclopedia and the Non-State Actor (NSA) dataset (Cunningham et al. 2013). Second and relatedly, using data from WARD and FORGE, we include a binary indicator of whether a group has a communist or any other left-wing ideology. We do this to determine whether other rebel ideologies have similar effects to those discussed in the main theory. As will be discussed in more-depth later, we also alternate the baseline categories of group ideologies to ensure that idiosyncrasies of the main modeling choices are not driving the results.

Next, with data from RAID, we include a dichotomous measure of whether a group has a multi-ethnic membership. This variable does *not* measure whether groups explicitly mobilize around ethnic lines, but simply whether they have a multi-ethnic membership. We control for this because ethnic identity plays an important role in some militant groups' ideologies and because shared ethnic ties help shape rebel recruitment tactics (Weinstein 2005, 2007). Groups' natural resource wealth affects their recruitment tactics (Weinstein 2005, 2007). In response, we use data from the Rebel Contraband Dataset (RCD) (Walsh et al. 2018), which contains information on a variety of types of natural resources groups exploit, to create a binary indicator of whether a group exploited any natural resources during the course of its life.

Relatedly, armed groups often use funding from external actors to aid their recruitment efforts (Weinstein 2005, 2007), while groups' goals affect whether they receive external support at all (e.g., Manekin and Wood 2020). To measure this type of support, we use data from Sawyer et al. (2017) to employ a binary indicator of whether a group received any funding from external actors during its lifespan.

The longevity of rebel organizations is affected by both their recruitment tactics (Weinstein 2005, 2007) and their ideologies (e.g., Basedau et al. 2022). Thus, we also control for the maximum

age of the group. Relatedly, because the strength of rebel organizations affects the types of recruitment strategies they can employ, we also control for the NSA dataset's five-point ordinal indicator of an armed group's strength, relative to the government it is fighting. We include a binary indicator from the NSA dataset of whether a group controls territory. Territorial control is expected to affect rebels' recruitment tactics (de la Calle and Sánchez-Cuenca 2012).

Ideology affects competition between rebel organizations (e.g., Hafez 2018) and competition can shape the mobilization strategy of rebel organizations (Schwab 2023). To capture the potentially confounding effects of competition, we include a binary indicator of whether at least one other rebel group was present in the country the year the group enters in the UCDP Armed Conflict Dataset (Davies et al. 2024; Gleditsch et al. 2002). Finally, we also hold country-level factors constant. Specifically, we control for both Varieties of Democracy dataset's measure of Electoral Democracy (Coppedge et al. 2022) and a logged measure of per capita GDP using data from Fariss et al. (2022).

Results

The results are displayed in the tables below. **Table 1** presents the findings when the dependent variable is the count of number of ideological appeals made. **Table 2** displays the results when the outcome variable is a dichotomous indicator of whether a group makes two or more ideological appeals. The standard errors are clustered by the group in all models.

Table 1: Radical Islamist Groups and Diversity of Recruitment Appeals (Count DV)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Radical Islamist		0.367*** (0.0666)	0.413*** (0.0798)	0.410*** (0.0820)
Secessionist Aims	-0.138 (0.0882)		-0.0183 (0.0789)	-0.0646 (0.0859)
Left-Wing	0.0148 (0.0891)		0.156+ (0.0866)	0.138 (0.0853)
Multi-Ethnic Membership	-0.0931 (0.0807)		-0.113 (0.0763)	-0.107 (0.0766)
Natural Resource Exploitation	-0.0364 (0.0799)		0.0309 (0.0714)	-0.0405 (0.0752)
External Funding	0.123 (0.0892)		-0.0146 (0.0876)	0.0327 (0.0876)
Group Age	0.00952*** (0.00285)		0.00773** (0.00269)	0.00756** (0.00265)
Relative Rebel Strength	0.0775 (0.0539)		0.0814+ (0.0477)	0.0934+ (0.0488)
Territorial Control	-0.00212 (0.0881)		0.00740 (0.0838)	0.0662 (0.0869)
Rebel Competition	-0.0109 (0.0741)		-0.00936 (0.0688)	-0.0270 (0.0684)
Democracy Score	0.486** (0.184)			0.528** (0.186)
per capita GDP (Logged)	0.0541 (0.0901)			-0.0616 (0.0901)
Constant	0.214 (0.143)	0.500*** (0.0419)	0.251* (0.118)	0.110 (0.140)
Observations	211	232	213	211
Chi ²	32.73***	30.41***	55***	55.44***
Log Likelihood	-303.3	-334.5	-303.7	-298.7
Pseudo R-squared	0.0209	0.0160	0.0318	0.0359

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.1

Table 2: Radical Islamist Groups and Diversity of Recruitment Appeals (Binary DV)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Radical Islamist		1.570*** (0.414)	1.628*** (0.446)	1.666*** (0.501)
Secessionist Aims	-0.708 (0.452)		-0.0855 (0.386)	-0.402 (0.482)
Left-Wing	0.367 (0.469)		0.829+ (0.433)	0.757 (0.468)
Multi-Ethnic Membership	-0.153 (0.339)		-0.181 (0.335)	-0.201 (0.341)
Natural Resource Exploitation	-0.234 (0.348)		0.0189 (0.329)	-0.274 (0.353)
External Funding	0.635 (0.404)		0.120 (0.388)	0.374 (0.421)
Group Age	0.0362* (0.0170)		0.0266+ (0.0155)	0.0256 (0.0160)
Relative Rebel Strength	0.0635 (0.227)		0.0762 (0.233)	0.107 (0.228)
Territorial Control	0.113 (0.345)		0.0494 (0.347)	0.313 (0.353)
Rebel Competition	-0.224 (0.328)		-0.199 (0.334)	-0.263 (0.335)
Democracy Score	2.557** (0.983)			2.717** (1.025)
per capita GDP (Logged)	0.324 (0.422)			-0.176 (0.466)
Constant	-0.801 (0.647)	0.0880 (0.149)	-0.374 (0.587)	-1.047 (0.667)
Observations	211	232	213	211
Chi ²	17.07+	14.37***	27.47**	27.50**
Log Likelihood	-130.2	-148	-128.5	-123.1
Pseudo R-squared	0.0893	0.0575	0.110	0.139

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.1

Across all models, we see that having a radical Islamist ideology has a positive and statistically significant association with the count of ideological appeals employed by groups (**Table 2**) and the probability they make two or more appeals (**Table 3**). Said differently, we find consistent support for the argument that radical Islamist groups are more likely to employ diverse recruitment appeals. Secessionist goals have a negative but statistically insignificant association with the breadth of recruitment appeals made by groups. Left-wing ideologies have a positive association with both measures of recruitment diversity, but the association does not consistently achieve traditional levels of statistical significance. Thus, radical Islamist ideologies specifically appear to drive groups to employ more diverse ideological recruitment appeals.

I also examine the substantive effects of radical Islamist ideologies. **Figure 2** shows the marginal effects of radical Islamist ideologies on the number of ideological recruitment appeals groups employ, with all other covariates held at their means. Non-Islamist groups are predicted to make about 1.6 ideological appeals, while their radical Islamist counterparts are predicted to employ about 2.3 such appeals.

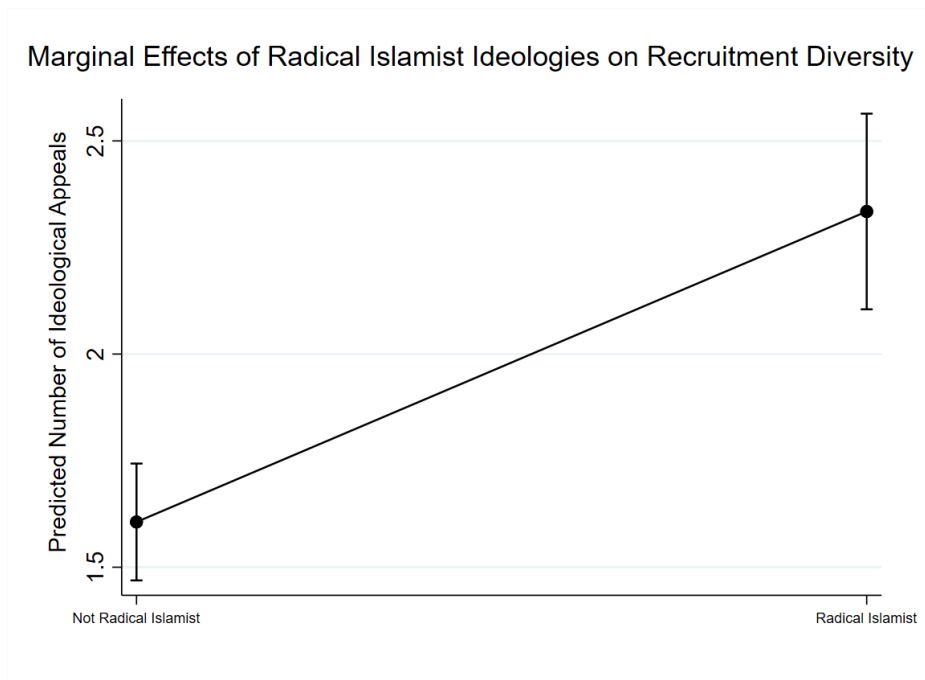


Figure 2: Marginal Effects of Secessionist Goals on Diversity in Recruitment Appeals

Unpacking the Mechanisms

In this section, we attempt to further parse out some of the proposed theoretical mechanisms. Specifically, we examine the conditions under which radical Islamist groups are most likely to employ diverse recruitment appeals. We investigate how ethnic diversity within the ranks, recruitment of foreign fighters, and variation within goals, all condition the effects of radical Islamist ideologies on the diversification of recruitment appeals.

Ethnic Diversity

A central component of the theory is that radical Islamist groups are better positioned to mobilize recruits with diverse identities and interests. To examine this notion in more depth, we analyze how ethnic diversity within the ranks of radical Islamist groups affects their recruitment tactics. Specifically, we expect that non-Islamist groups that have multi-ethnic memberships avoid

mobilizing recruits around diverse grievances because they need a clear platform around which they can unite multiple ethnic groups. However, we expect that, even when radical Islamist groups are ethnically heterogeneous, they can still successfully mobilize recruits around diverse interests because of their ability to unit recruits under a shared Islamic identity (Hegghammer 2010; Walter 2017).

To evaluate this argument, we interact the binary measure of rebel ethnic heterogeneity used in the main analysis with the dichotomous indicator of whether a group has a radical Islamist ideology. We find moderate support for this argument, as the interaction is borderline statistical significance in five of the six models ($p < 0.1$) and drops just below in one of them ($p \sim .114$). The marginal effects plot below (**Figure 3**) shows that radical Islamist groups only make a greater number of ideological appeals than their non-Islamist counterparts when the groups have ethnically heterogeneous memberships. This provides some support for the argument that radical Islamist groups are more effective at uniting recruits that have both diverse identities and interests.³

³ The results hold both we do, and do not, control for whether groups recruit foreign fighters.

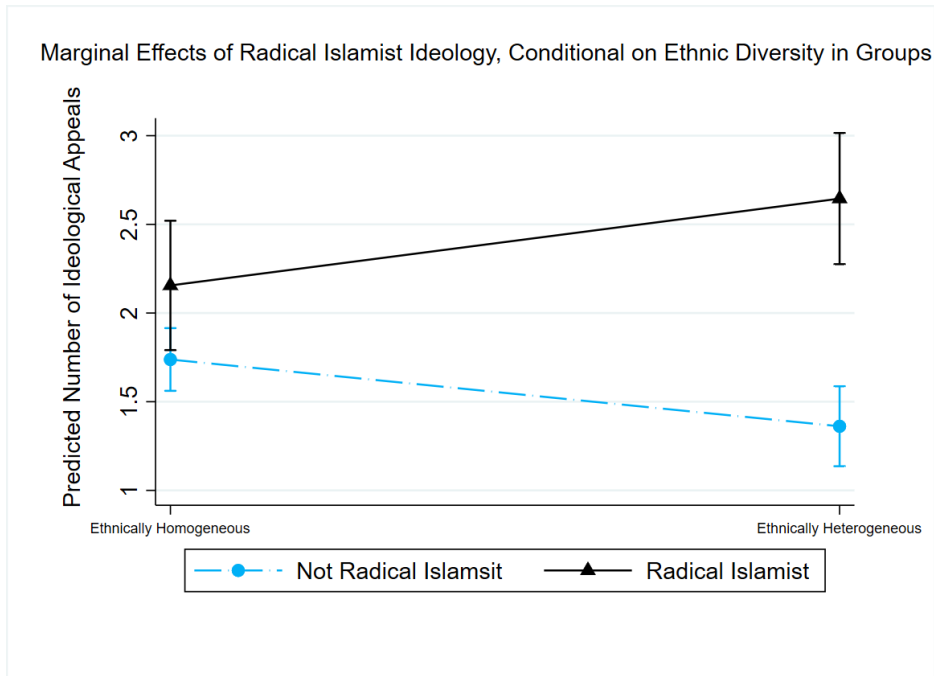


Figure 3: Marginal Effects of Radical Islamist Ideology on the Number of Ideology Appeals Employed, Conditional on the Recruitment of Ethnic Diversity in Rebel Ranks

Foreign Fighters

As discussed earlier, radical Islamist groups that recruit foreign fighters must often unite domestic and international recruits with diverse interests. This can include mobilizing domestic and foreign fighters around radical Islamist appeals and domestic combatants around more localized grievances (e.g., Gates and Podder 2015). Additionally, when groups expand their operations abroad (including mobilizing foreign fighters), they come into conflict with more regional and international adversaries, which can expand their grievances further. If this is the case, then radical Islamist groups that recruit foreign fighters should be particularly likely to mobilize around a diversity of appeals.

To assess the potential for the recruitment of foreign fighters to condition the relationship between radical Islamist ideologies and the breadth of recruitment appeals groups employ, we use Moore’s (2019) binary indicator of whether a group recruits foreign fighters in general (*not* the measure that captures the recruitment of co-ethnics specifically). We interact this variable with the dichotomous measure of whether a group has a radical Islamist ideology. We employ both measures of the dependent variable used in the main analysis. The full results are available in the online appendix. Across all models, the interactive term is positive and statistically significant. We display the marginal effects (**Figure 4**) below show that interactive relationship can be more accurately interpreted (Brambor et al. 2006).

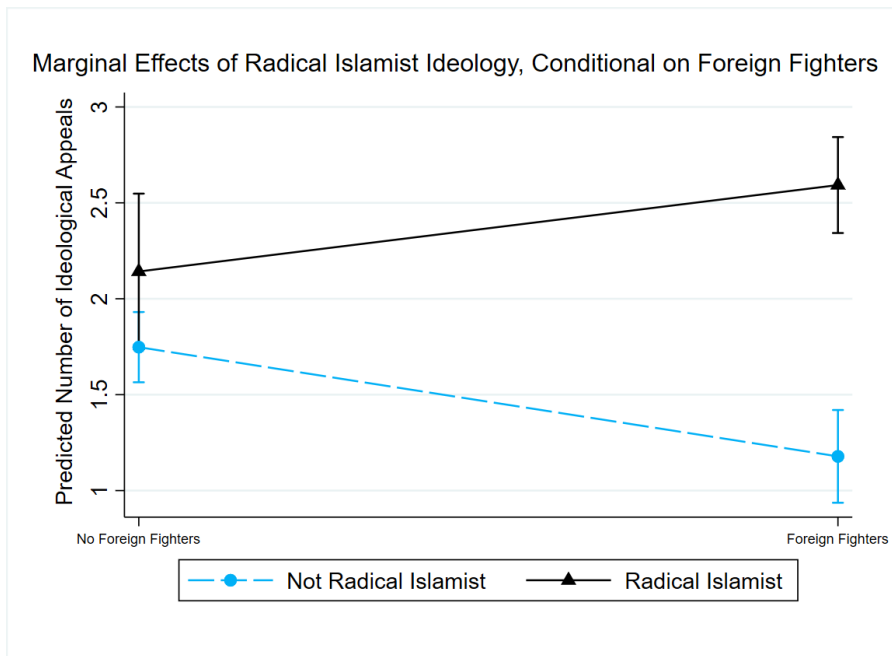


Figure 4: Marginal Effects of Radical Islamist Ideology on the Number of Ideological Appeals Employed, Conditional on the Recruitment of Foreign Fighters

As the figure shows, radical Islamist groups only become more likely to recruit a diversity of recruitment appeals when they also recruit foreign fighters. This provides support for earlier work that emphasizes the diversity of interests within radical Islamist groups that recruit foreign fighters (e.g., Bakke 2014; Gates and Podder 2015). Additionally, it also lends some evidence to the argument that radical Islamist groups that internationalize their operations will also be more likely to diversify their recruitment appeals.

Robustness Checks

We also conduct a series of robustness checks to assess the strength of the findings. These tests are detailed below.

Excluding Non-Ideological Groups

We also conduct a battery of tests to ensure that idiosyncrasies in how recruitment diversity is measured are not driving the results. To begin, we reconduct the main analysis, excluding all groups in RAID that are coded as relying exclusively on material incentives. This is to show that radical Islamist groups are more likely to make diverse recruitment appeals, even when compared only to rebel organizations that make at least some ideological appeals. Across all models, we continue to find support for the argument that radical Islamist groups employ a greater diversity of ideological recruitment appeals.

Excluding Individual Appeals

Next, to ensure that none of the individual ideological recruitment appeals is driving the results, we rerun the main analysis, each time excluding one of the nine non-Islamist recruitment appeals made by groups in RAID.⁴ Said differently, we rerun the main analysis nine separate times, each time excluding a different ideological recruitment appeal. Across all models, we continue to find consistent support that radical Islamist rebel organizations make a greater diversity of ideological recruitment appeals.

Alternative Baseline Categories

We also rerun the main tests, removing the indicator of left-wing ideologies, so that it becomes part of the baseline. Across all models, radical Islamist ideologies continue to be a strong predictor of groups making a variety of ideological recruitment appeals. Thus, across a variety of alternative tests, I continue to find robust support for both hypotheses.

Conclusion

A central question in the study of civil wars is how rebel groups mobilize recruits. However, despite its relevance, there has been little systematic, cross-rebel groups analysis of the factors that drive militant organizations to choose some recruitment strategies over others. Specifically, we examine how the ideologies and goals of rebel organizations drive both the extent to which they

⁴ We do not run analyses in which we exclude groups that make Islamist recruitment appeals, as that would exclude all the radical Islamist groups from the sample.

rely on ideological appeals, relative to material incentives, for recruitment, as well as diversity in the types of ideological appeals they employ.

Using novel data on the recruitment practices of rebel organizations, we find robust evidence that secessionist aims appear to drive groups to rely more on ideological recruitment appeals, relative to material incentives, while radical Islamist ideologies incentive groups to employ a wider range of ideological recruitment appeals. Subsequent analysis supported the argument that radical Islamist groups are particularly likely to diversify their recruitment appeals when they need to unify cadres with diverse (ethnic) identities and when they internationalize their operations.

Future work could investigate a variety of other factors that shape choices in rebel recruitment tactics. For instance, using newly released data (Acosta et al. 2023), scholars could examine how the life experiences of individual rebel leaders shape their choices in recruitment strategies. Relatedly, with data on the founding of rebel movements (Braithwaite and Cunningham 2020), researchers could analyze how rebel organizations' prewar foundations shape their mobilization practices. A variety of other factors could help mold rebel groups' recruitment practices as well.

Rebel recruitment practices are posited to affect their treatment of civilians, longevity, and success (e.g., Humphreys and Weinstein 2006; Weinstein 2005, 2007). However, to develop a better understanding of why and how recruitment strategies affect these dynamics, we must understand why rebel movements select certain recruitment tactics over others. This paper contributes to this venture by systematically analyzing how ideologies of rebel organizations shape their recruitment practices.

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