

# The Long Jihad: The Boom–Bust Cycle behind Jihadist Durability

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## Abstract

One of the most frustrating features of modern jihadist insurgencies is their ability to endure and resurge, even after seeming defeats. What explains this jihadist resilience? In this paper, I present a new “boom–bust” economic theory for why jihadist groups can withstand serious losses, survive periods of decline, and then reclaim power. Using new evidence from Somalia, I demonstrate that jihadists learn how to adapt to fluctuations in their degree of territorial control, so that they can survive—and even thrive—during periods of decline. During a “boom” period, when jihadists enjoy a monopoly on force, they tax and govern as a proto-state. However, during a “bust,” when they are pushed out of power, jihadists shift their efforts to illicit business activities and insurgent warfare. When pressure abates, they again shift back to taxing and governing as a proto-state. This cyclical and long-term approach to order-making allows jihadists to adapt to changing battlefield conditions and survive serious setbacks. Jihadists establish their proto-states to varying degrees, governing in pockets and coves wherever and whenever the opportunities present themselves. They are as orderly as they can afford to be.

**Keywords:** Jihad, terrorism, organized crime, civil war, Somalia

After a year-long military campaign, in 2017, coalition forces succeeded in expelling the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) from its territorial strongholds. Yet, seasoned security experts understand that the crisis is not over. Evidence from around the world shows that when jihadists are pushed out of power, these groups transform into fluid insurgencies, using hit-and-run attacks to drain their opponents, and wait for their chance to resurge.<sup>1</sup> In Afghanistan, after the Taliban government lost power in 2002, its fighters took to the mountains and prepared for a long guerrilla-style war, while also building a powerful parallel shadow government to fill the political vac-

uum.<sup>2</sup> In Mali, after losing control over the northern Azawad region in 2012, jihadists retreated into the deserts and launched insurgent attacks on French-led UN peace-keeping forces, while secretly establishing their authority over ungoverned spaces. In Iraq, the decline and defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) movement forced jihadists to retreat into their underground networks between 2008 and 2010, while they quietly rebuilt their organization; in 2014, these jihadists resurged as the rebranded group ISIS.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, I present a new political economy theory to help explain this pattern of collapse and resurgence

1 Ivan Arreguin-Toft (2001), Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter (2006), Virginia Page Fortna (2015), and James Regens and Nick Mould (2017).

2 Daniel Sullivan (2007), Sean M. Maloney (2008), and Kentaro Hirose, Kosuke Imai, and Jason Lyall (2017).

3 Patrick Cockburn (2015), Riaz Hassan (2016), Fawaz A. Gerges (2017), and Hal Brands and Peter Feaver (2017).

of jihadist power over time.<sup>4</sup> I argue that jihadists have learned to adapt their economic strategies in response to external military pressures, so that they can survive serious setbacks and insure their political futures. Military interventions have failed to bankrupt or collapse these groups; rather, jihadists adjust to changing levels of external pressure against them, so that they withstand serious setbacks. They have learned to predict, survive, and even profit during both “boom” and “bust” phases in this cycle.

During a boom, jihadists control territory and tax and govern like a state.<sup>5</sup> When external military pressure against them increases, jihadists are pushed back and they lose this territory and tax base. During this bust period, they scramble to invest their cash assets in clandestine business investments, to save themselves from bankruptcy; they start behaving more like an insurgency than a proto-state. When this external military pressure eventually draws down, the jihadists then liquidate some of their investments to fund their return to power. They recapture territory, and tax and govern once more. This boom period continues until the next external intervention pushes them out again and the cycle continues.

Over the course of their long wars, jihadists have learned to adapt to these booms and busts and survive and thrive under these tumultuous conditions.<sup>6</sup> They

establish proto-states to varying degrees, governing in pockets and coves wherever and whenever the opportunities present themselves. When pushed back, they shift to insurgency and invest their cash assets. Along this spectrum of rebel governance, they are as orderly as they can afford. This flexible approach to money and governance makes these jihadists remarkably resilient and durable over time.

In this paper, I tackle this phenomenon at ground level, using evidence from the field to uncover the economic logic behind jihadist resilience. Delving into the empirics, I conduct a within-case comparison of the peaks and troughs of jihadist power in Somalia, where a jihadist insurgency has repeatedly surged, collapsed, and resurged since 2006. This case provides an ideal opportunity to conduct a focused comparative analysis of this jihadist boom–bust phenomenon over an extended period of time. It shows how external military pressure affected jihadist economic strategies, and subsequently jihadist governance across time and space. In so doing, the article helps uncover the economic reasons that these jihadists have managed to survive repeated reversals and then successfully reclaim power.

The reason this paper focuses exclusively on jihadists is because this type of insurgent group has been the primary target of systematic external military intervention for two decades.<sup>7</sup> What makes this theory relevant to jihadists is not their inherent ideological attributes, but rather the widespread international reaction they have elicited. Since 2002, significant and sustained international military efforts have targeted jihadist insurgents specifically. While there is nothing particularly “jihadist” about these economic survival strategies, this particular type of insurgent has had to learn how to adapt to this persistent and significant global pressure. Future researchers might wish to build on this research to see whether such patterns have also emerged among other types of armed groups engaged in asymmetric conflicts.

The paper unfolds in the following four parts. First, I present my political economy explanation of jihadist durability and outline its contributions to the literatures on rebel governance and civil war economies. Second, I put forward the research design and methodology used to evaluate my theory of jihadist resilience, as well as a discussion of my case selection, fieldwork, and ethics processes. Third, I present detailed case evidence from Somalia to evaluate my theory, using within-case analysis of the peaks and troughs of jihadist power from 2006 to 2020. Finally, I conclude with some implications for

4 While this term is fraught, for the purpose of this analysis, I define jihadists as groups that use organized violence to achieve their political goals, particularly (but not limited to) the creation of order on the basis of Islamic laws and institutions. I consider the jihadist proto-state to be a nascent political entity that features a near-monopolization of force in a territorial enclave within or across state borders, a hierarchical leadership with repressive capabilities, and rudimentary governing institutions to enforce laws.

5 For this analysis, I use the term “taxation” to refer to the coercive extraction of money from citizens by any party to the conflict. This includes both official government taxation, as well as informal rebel taxation. Both the state and rebel groups (including jihadists) have the capacity to establish a social contract with citizens living under their direct control, by exchanging taxes for services. For more on rebel governance and taxation, see Rachel Sabates-Wheeler and Philip Verwimp (2014), Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir, and Zachariah Mampilly (2015), and Mara Redlich Revkin (2020).

6 For more on jihadist outbidding and escalations of violence, see Mia M. Bloom (2004), Monica D. Toft (2013), Assaf Moghadam (2009), and Chares Demetriou (2016).

7 Elizabeth Schmidt (2013) and Daniel Byman and Will McCants (2017).

policymakers concerned with jihadist groups in multiple war theatres.

## A Theory of Jihadist Resilience

Why are jihadists able to survive serious setbacks, and even rebuild proto-states after incurring significant and sustained losses? To explain this resilience, I argue that jihadists adapt to changes in external military pressure by shifting their economic strategy, and subsequently their approach to governance. Their flexible strategy adapts to different levels of external military pressure, so that jihadists are able to withstand loss of territory and taxation revenues without going bankrupt. When external pressure against them is low, jihadists seize territory and accumulate tax revenues, like a state. When interventions against them ramp up, jihadists withdraw from territory and invest their cash resources in clandestine businesses, and then act more like an insurgency. This flexible strategy gives jihadists the ability to withstand devastating losses and continue fighting for decades.

We already know that jihadists are strategic when it comes to their military plans.<sup>8</sup> This research uncovers how jihadists have also developed adaptive economic strategies that act as an insurance policy against losses. Of course, jihadists may aspire to greater broader economic plans, such as integration into regional trade; however, when confronted with a powerful intervention, they must embrace a strategy that preserves their assets from loss and ensures their group's survival. This article uncovers one particularly important jihadist economic survival strategy, which adds to a growing body of literature on jihadist durability and adaptation.<sup>9</sup>

In so doing, this study makes a new contribution to our knowledge of modern asymmetric warfare.<sup>10</sup> From the Maoist People's War to Afghan guerrilla tactics, much has been written about the ebb and flow of insurgencies.<sup>11</sup> We know that insurgents frustrate conventional armies with surge-and-retreat tactics, ambushing and

raiding, and then blending back into communities.<sup>12</sup> In so doing, insurgents seek to drain and disrupt powerful rivals.<sup>13</sup> We also know that insurgents turn inward to rebuild strength and assets during ceasefires.<sup>14</sup> Yet, while this literature may help explain some survival and operational strategies of jihadist insurgencies, it cannot explain how jihadists who have experienced a near-total collapse of their economic endowments manage to survive these seemingly devastating losses and then suddenly resurge and thrive again.<sup>15</sup>

The economic analysis presented in this paper contrasts starkly with two conventional wisdoms about jihadist resilience. First, some researchers point to jihadists' fervent ideological motivations. Moghadam shows how the spread of Salafi-jihadist ideology contributes to the proliferation of suicide terrorism.<sup>16</sup> Walters contends that extremists succeed in civil wars because their ideologies give them a strategic advantage over more moderate groups.<sup>17</sup> Gleis argues that jihadist resilience stems from fanaticism and intransigence, which translates into a patient approach to warfare.<sup>18</sup> These studies shed needed light on how ideology affects strategic outcomes and indeed, jihadists groups are particularly zealous about their religious and political beliefs. Yet, war is costly, and cannot be fought on passions alone. Soldiers need food, trucks need fuel, and guns need bullets. Ideology alone cannot explain why jihadists that have lost considerable wealth and power are able to fund rapid and dramatic comebacks a few short years later. In many cases, ideology also remains a constant over time and, therefore, cannot explain variations in jihadist governance. This article presents new insights on jihadist economics, to help fill this gap.

Second, other scholars have rightly shown that external interventions often inadvertently provoke wider wars, giving insurgents essential local support. Lake argues that extremist groups use terrorism to provoke a retaliation, knowing that targeted communities will be dragged into a wider war.<sup>19</sup> Kilcullen reveals that local communities often join insurgents not because they share their ideologies, but because they feel threatened by

- 8 Jihadist leaders have written manifestos outlining their strategic vision. See, for example, Brynjar Lia (2009). See also Abu Bakr Naji (2006).
- 9 Aaron Brantly (2017), Adib Bencherif (2017), Charlie Winter (2017), Rashmi Singh (2017), Stig Jarle Hansen (2018), Bohumil Doboš, Martin Riegl, and Stig Jarle Hansen (2019), and Burak Bilgehan Özpek and Yavuz Yağış (2019).
- 10 Clayton Thyne (2006), Daniel Byman (2008), and Hans Martin Sieg (2014).
- 11 Mao Tse-Tung (2001) and Ali Ahmad Jalali and Grau, Lester W. (2002).

- 12 Ivan Arreguín-Toft (2001), and Jalali and Grau (2002).
- 13 Ivan Arreguín-Toft (2001).
- 14 Marika Sosnowski (2020).
- 15 Weinstein shows that resilience against economic shocks is important to rebel survival. See Jeremy M. Weinstein (2007).
- 16 Moghadam (2009).
- 17 Barbara F. Walter (2017). See also Assaf Moghadam (2008) and Barak Mendelsohn (2016).
- 18 Joshua Gleis (2011).
- 19 David A. Lake (2002).

external interventions in their home countries.<sup>20</sup> These important observations explain why ordinary civilians might be motivated to side with jihadists.<sup>21</sup> However, they do not explain why jihadists are able to resurge in places where communities deeply dislike them.<sup>22</sup> While it is certainly true that interventions produce resentment and backlash, it is also the case that local populations often despise jihadists even more. Yet in many such cases, jihadists are able to reclaim power without widespread public moral support or financial backing and even after long periods of decline. Why are these groups able to survive and resurge in the absence of local support? This research is a step toward uncovering hidden economic processes behind this phenomenon.

### Jihad in Booms and Busts

Over the past two decades, jihadists have faced serious international opposition and military action against them. Knowing that they cannot win in these asymmetric conflicts, jihadists have developed new strategies to survive—and thrive—in both booms and busts. This article outlines this boom–bust economic logic, showing how changing levels of external military pressure can affect jihadist economic strategy, and therefore resiliency, over time.

To start, I contend that when external military pressure is relatively low, jihadists will seize territory and seek to create a proto-state and collect tax revenue from denizens. However, when pressure against them inevitably mounts, the jihadists are pushed out of these valuable territories; at this time, they shift their efforts toward insurgency. As seen in [Figure 1](#), insurgency and governance exist on opposite poles of the order-making spectrum and this variable is nonbinary. In practice, jihadists neither achieve full statehood at one pole nor wholly abandon governance at the other end of this spectrum. They may govern pockets of the countryside, but focus on insurgency in the main cities. Based on conditions on the ground, jihadists typically settle on a hybrid order along this order-making spectrum. In a boom, they sway more toward governance; in a bust, they lean back toward insurgency. Changes in external military pressure determine which direction the jihadists will lean.

This dynamics is driven by a clear economic logic. Indeed, governance is expensive and insurgency is cheap. During a boom, when jihadists control large swaths of territory, they are able to forcibly tax populations and extract significant resources from citizens and businesses in their territories.<sup>23</sup> With this revenue, jihadists can build governing institutions to enforce their writ and control their subjugated populations.<sup>24</sup> The more political order and institutional capacity the jihadists create, the greater their capacity to extract taxes. This taxation–governance relationship is the foundation of the formation of the jihadist proto-state.

In contrast, during a bust, jihadists are on the defensive. They lose territory and thus revenues. Once pushed out of cities and towns, they shift to insurgency and reduce their reliance on taxation. While jihadists may still try to extract taxes from rural areas, their overall economic strategy is deeply affected by the loss of key territories. With less disposal income, jihadists let go of expensive institutions, while maintaining those modest elements of governance that they can pay for. For jihadists, war fighting does not increase taxation, but reduces it.<sup>25</sup>

This shift back to insurgency is not, however, without its own costs. Because the international community has cracked down on global terrorist financing, securing foreign moneys is difficult.<sup>26</sup> To stay in the fight, jihadists need to ensure access to local resources that are quick to coopt and easy to hide. To survive through a bust, jihadists have therefore learned to invest their accumulated cash assets in clandestine business ventures that can provide them with a steady return.

In essence, jihadists have learned to create diversified economic portfolios to mitigate risk and withstand severe losses. These portfolios include a combination of diverse and clandestine business interests that cannot only launder jihadist cash, but also pay dividends when tax revenues are low. This diversification strategy has given jihadists the ability to adapt to changes in battlefield conditions and turn a profit in both booms and busts. During a boom, jihadists aggressively extract taxes, and in a bust, they lean more on their investments.

20 David Kilcullen (2009).

21 Aisha Ahmad (2015), Monica Duffy Toft and Yuri M. Zhukov (2015), Caitriona Dowd (2015), and Jacob N. Shapiro and C. Christine Fair (2009).

22 Jihadists also face serious challenges in balancing transnational and local objectives and often fail to generate support from ordinary communities. See Aisha Ahmad (2016), and Barak Mendelsohn (2018).

23 Ahmad (2017) and Peter Mbah, Chikodiri Nwangwu, and Herbert Edeh (2017).

24 William Reno (2002), Zachariah Cherian Mampilly (2011), and Mara Revkin (2016).

25 Though beyond the scope of this particular paper, this phenomenon may shed light on a broader debate about contemporary order-making, especially given the possibility of an inverted relationship between war, tax, and state formation. See Charles Tilly (1985).

26 R. Colgate Selden (2003), Michael Jonsson and Svante Cornell (2007), and S. K. Saini (2008).

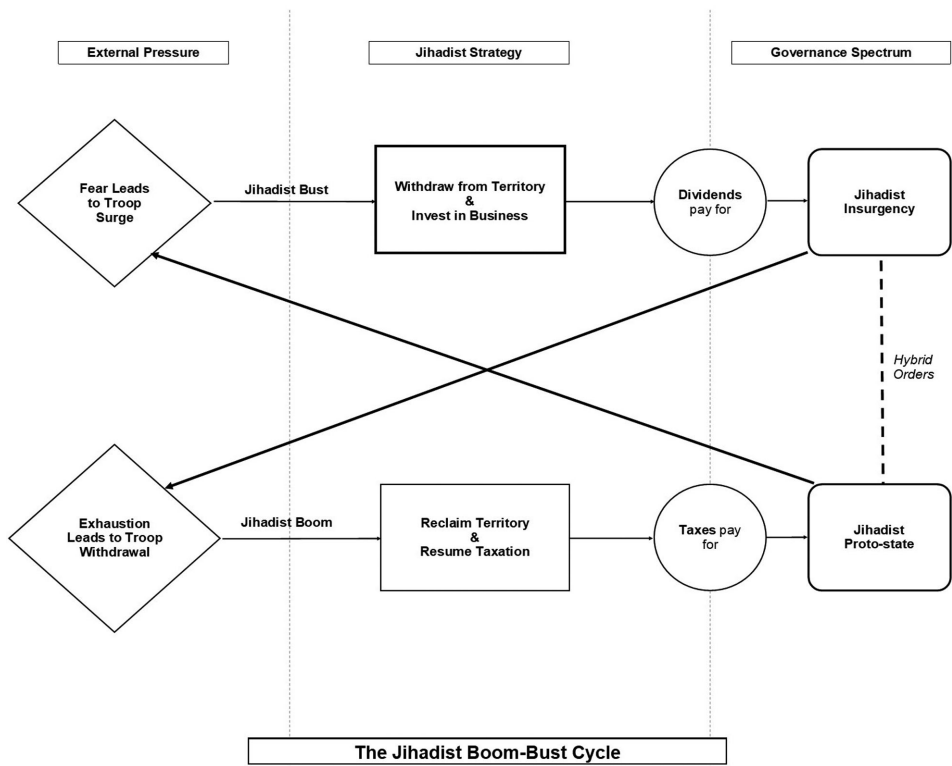


Figure 1.

In practical terms, this means that jihadists must cultivate relationships with local business partners, in order to create an economic safety net in the criminal underworld.<sup>27</sup> Of course, making sense of criminal activity in a conflict zone is a challenging endeavour, as these war economies are often a messy mix of licit and illicit activities. A businessperson might move flour and sugar along one route and cocaine and Kalashnikovs along another.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, there are many ways that jihadists can build effective partnerships with local businesses.<sup>29</sup> For example, a trader or trafficker might have the infrastructure and networks to sell to international buyers, but may need help protecting their assets along key traf-

ficking routes.<sup>30</sup> Jihadists have learned to establish these types of relationships with valuable business partners, in some cases through incentives and persuasion and others through coercion and cooption.

Building on insights from the crime–terror literature, I contend that this underground economy becomes the lifeblood of the jihad in times of financial hardship.<sup>31</sup> In a bust, jihadists lean into the criminal underworld to hide and preserve their accumulated assets. They invest their cash in a diverse portfolio of front operations that can insulate them from bankruptcy. These business fronts facilitate the movement, protection, and investment of the jihadists’ accumulated cash, and jihadists sometimes directly take over daily business operations themselves. The returns on their business investments keep jihadists afloat during the bust period, paying dividends while also protecting principal.

27 Thomas M. Sanderson (2004), Tamara Makarenko (2004), Louise I. Shelley (2014), Brian J. Phillips (2018), and Matthew Phillips and Emily Kamen (2014).  
28 Research shows that even intensely violent criminal organizations do not necessarily behave the same way that insurgent groups do and are thus a distinct category of actors. See Benjamin Lessing (2017) and Nicholas Barnes (2017).  
29 Makarenko (2004) and Svante E. Cornell (2005).

30 Robert J. Bunker (2010), Svante E. Cornell (2005), and Sergei Boeke (2016).  
31 Stathis N. Kalyvas (2015), Barnes (2017), Jonathan Goodhand (2008), Wolfram Lacher (2012), and Christina Steenkamp (2017).

During this bust period, jihadists also adopt a frugal approach to war fighting. Their strategy typically relies on cheap guerrilla or terrorist tactics designed for an asymmetric conflict.<sup>32</sup> During this phase, the jihadists' goal is to keep costs low and savings high, prudently spending resources on low-cost, high-impact attacks that can disrupt and undermine internationally backed political processes and worsen fragmentation. By ensuring that the government cannot succeed in creating stability, they maintain a vacuum of order that is necessary for their future return to power.<sup>33</sup>

Eventually, the international community grows frustrated and withdraws or scales down its support. At this moment, the jihadists are well positioned to oust their weak domestic rivals, revive their latent political project and resume political control.<sup>34</sup> During this reemergence phase of the cycle, jihadists cash in on their criminal business investments to fuel their return to power. As they enter a new boom period, jihadists liquidate some—but not all—of their business assets and spend this cash to mobilize ground forces to retake power.<sup>35</sup> With this momentum, they can reclaim territory and rebuild governing institutions. Once again, they monopolize force, create a new proto-state, and raise taxes to amass wealth. In response, the international community inevitably raises the alarm on these jihadists and again ramps up intervention against them. As Figure 1 illustrates, this cycle can repeat itself indefinitely.

Through this flexible strategy, jihadists have learned to adapt to changes in pressure, survive long-term asymmetric conflicts without dissolving or going bankrupt and maintain their latent capacity to rule over their targeted populations. Across cases, these groups have learned to tax and build proto-states in times of abundance and ease and switch to investment and insurgency in times of hardship. They lean toward either end of this order-making spectrum, as a direct response to the degree of external pressure they face.

This conceptual model makes a needed contribution to scholarship on both civil war economies and on rebel governance. First of all, my analysis builds on existing

insights from the crime–terror nexus literature, and sheds new light on how relationships between businesses and insurgent groups can affect civil war outcomes over an extended period of time.<sup>36</sup> In so doing, it helps uncover how modern jihadist groups have attained economic resilience, even after incurring serious losses. Second, this study makes a needed addition to the literature on rebel governance, in which most existing research compares why one group may govern, while another may not.<sup>37</sup> This article uses within-case comparative method to investigate why one group may govern more or less at different intervals or in different places. Through this comparison, it shows how modern jihadist groups have adapted and evolved over the course of their lengthy wars.

Given that this phenomenon has been ongoing in some regions for almost two decades, jihadists also appear to have learned from past mistakes and from the experience of other groups. In fact, there is evidence that some jihadists anticipate military interventions and prepare for collapse even when they are at the peak of their power. They diversify their economic portfolios to prepare for a forthcoming bust, well in advance of their downfall. Knowing that hard times lie ahead, they have learned to invest assets during their boom periods, in order to insulate against losses and pay dividends during a bust period. They hold on to diverse business assets to buffer against losses over the long haul. This economic strategy gives jihadists the resources to sustain an aggressive and long-term campaign, even when they appear to be in decline.

Contemporary civil wars can last for decades and jihadists have demonstrated that they are able to endure in a long fight, even under heavy pressure. Serious losses in territory and taxation revenues do not signal the death of these polities. Rather, modern jihadists have learned from past failures and discovered a safety net in the criminal underworld, which allows them to survive onslaughts and rise again.<sup>38</sup> This cyclical pattern of chaos and control can continue indefinitely.

## Methods

This research was born out of over a decade of fieldwork conducted in multiple conflict zones, including observational research, in-depth interviews, and surveys in local

32 Ivan Arreguin-Toft (2001).

33 Edward Newman and Oliver Richmond (2006), Brian Blankenship (2018), Brian Phillips (2015), Michael G. Findley and Joseph K. Young (2015), and Justin Conrad and James Igoe Walsh (2014).

34 Patricia Sullivan and Johannes Karreth (2015), Daniel Branch and Elisabeth Jean Wood (2010), and Colleen Bell and Brad Evans (2010).

35 Doboš, Riegl, and Hansen (2019), Ido Levy and Abdi Yusuf (2019), Ian Oxnevad (2016), and Patrick Blannin (2017).

36 Ahmad (2017), Shelley (2014), and Peter Andreas (2020).  
37 Mampilly (2011), James Worrall (2017), Ana Arjona (2016), and Megan A. Stewart (2018).

38 Thomas H. Johnson (2013), Calvert Jones (2006), Noriyuki Katagiri (2015), Ahmed S. Hashim (2017), and Reid Sawyer and Michael Foster (2008).



war economies. My theory emerges out of my inductive research in several war-torn countries and observation of these patterns over time. In this paper, I present a preliminary test of this new theory, using a focused within-case comparative study based on qualitative evidence from a clear case of jihadist resilience: Somalia. In the supplementary online appendix, I present two other cases to help test for external validity.

The Somalia case is especially useful for conducting an initial empirical test of my boom–bust economic theory. Despite a high degree of ethnic, religious, and linguistic homogeneity, Somalia is deeply divided by clan identities, and clan conflict has characterized the Somali Civil War since the collapse of the state in 1991. Over the course of this lengthy war, Somali jihadists have risen, collapsed, and resurged to power multiple times. Somalia has also been the target of a number of international interventions that have engaged and withdrawn numerous times. While it may be an extreme case, Somalia thus provides an excellent controlled context to examine the peaks and troughs of jihadist power, and thereby uncover these economic mechanisms over time.

In the main empirical section, I trace the emergence and evolution of jihadist power in Somalia from 2006 to 2020, with a focus on the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), Hizbul Islam, and Al-Shabaab. I present a structured, focused comparison, using within-case variation to map the rise, fall, and reemergence of jihadist power in Somalia over time. I specifically investigate how variations in external military pressure affected jihadist economic strategy and thus approach to governance. I examine the peaks and troughs of jihadist power over this time period, in order to identify how external intervention affected jihadist strategies at these critical junctures.

Turning to my analysis, I present data from interviews, observational field research, and jihadist primary source materials to examine this causal mechanism.<sup>39</sup> This research is the product of hundreds of interviews conducted over the course of a decade, including with senior political officials, powerful business elites, clan warlords, ICU officials, local policy analysts and academics, everyday merchants, and members of civil society organizations. My interview data cut across clan divisions and economic brackets and includes a large sample of powerful

political and business elites.<sup>40</sup> I also draw on my war economy data from prior field studies in Somalia, in order to evaluate jihadist taxation levels and involvement in a business and criminal activity.

Delving into the Somali case, I hone in on key phases of jihadist power, including the rise of the Islamic Courts into the ICU in 2006 and its subsequent collapse in 2007, the rise of jihadist insurgency under Al-Shabaab and Hizbul Islam in 2008, and the repeated defeats and resurgences of Al-Shabaab over the following decade. To evaluate my argument, I map the degree to which Somalia's jihadists relied more on taxation or investments at different stages in the conflict, paying close attention to how changes in external pressure affected jihadist economic strategy, and subsequently jihadist governance. In so doing, I uncover an economic logic to explain why Somalia's jihadists behaved more like an insurgency at some intervals, and more like a proto-state at others.

For this work, I rely on interview data from a wide range of key informants on jihadist taxation and criminal activity gathered through fieldwork, and supplemented by analysis of primary and secondary sources.<sup>41</sup> My interview data are confidential, were gathered through an informed consent process and were collected exclusively from within existing trust-based networks. Because of the sensitivity of this type of research, I have quoted only the least vulnerable respondents in my interview pool, and even these quotes are anonymized, with the exception of one elite who explicitly requested that his comments be on the record. In the supplementary appendix, I briefly extend my analysis to Mali and Iraq, and I present new field data from these countries.

39 Jihadist primary sources are insurgent propaganda and are best used to identify how jihadists construct their group narratives. Given that this study examines clandestine jihadist economic strategy, these primary sources cannot be used to test the hypothesis, but can provide background information about the ideological orientation of these jihadists.

40 Most nationwide companies in Somalia are based in Mogadishu. By interviewing the Mogadishu business elite, I could therefore evaluate security challenges in multiple regions where these companies do business. Moreover, approximately 30 percent of my interview respondents were businesswomen, which reflects the overall distribution in the marketplace.

41 A key informant is an expert source of information, usually a person who has intimate, anthropological insight into the target study group. They are people who are close to members of the study population, who can serve as proxies for members. I use this term to describe interviewees who, for a variety of reasons, have insider insights into the jihadist insurgency in Somalia, as well as business and economic life in the country. Because these interviews are confidential, I am careful to use this type of generalized language to categorize these respondents. Paul Lavrakas (2008).

These mini-cases reveal comparable patterns in multiple theaters, especially with respect to the way criminal business serves as a safety net for jihadists.

## The Rise, Fall, and Resurgence of Jihadist Power in Somalia

Somalia has been home to a powerful jihadist phenomenon since 2006, which has evolved and adapted in response to multiple external military interventions. At times, these jihadists controlled and governed swaths of territory and sizable populations and essentially built proto-states within the country. At other intervals, they dissolved many of their governing institutions and shifted toward insurgency. These jihadists have oscillated between proto-state and insurgency, moving back and forth along this order-making spectrum for well over a decade. This case therefore provides a unique opportunity to conduct a focused study of how variations in external military pressure have affected jihadist economic strategy, and thus governance, over time. Investigating this boom-bust cycle in Somalia provides a window into the economic logic of Al-Shabaab's resilience.

Of course, this jihadist period is only the most recent chapter in Somalia's near-thirty year history of civil war. Following the collapse of its government in 1991, a plethora of clan-based warlords rose to power in Somalia, each carving out his own private fiefdoms across the countryside.<sup>42</sup> Despite claiming to represent their clans, these warlords not only failed to protect or provide for their clan constituents, but they also extorted and abused them.<sup>43</sup> Resentment over the greed and violence of the warlords festered for over a decade. It was only in 2004 that a movement of clan-based Islamic courts emerged as a new alternative to these well-entrenched strongmen. This Islamic movement led to a new jihadist phenomenon, which has since survived multiple external interventions against it.

This story begins in the marketplace and with leading members of the Mogadishu business community. Starting in 2004, a group of frustrated business elites made the decision to increase their support for their local clan-based Islamic courts, hoping to improve security in their communities and for their businesses.<sup>44</sup> Fed up with the failures of their own clan warlords to provide even a modicum of security, businesspeople across clan lines turned to these courts to help provide some semblance of order and justice.

With this influx of financial support, the Islamic courts proved highly effective in neighborhood policing, especially against freelance thieves that had been robbing local businesses. The courts cracked down on this criminality, adjudicated disputes, and set up pockets of order.<sup>45</sup> By offering these valuable services, the Islamic courts made the failure of the warlords even more obvious. For the frustrated business class, the Islamic courts appeared to be a low-cost, high-return investment. As the courts gained in popularity, public and business opinion soon turned "against the warlords."<sup>46</sup>

Rattled by this shift, the warlords increased extortion in their turfs, hoping to shore up their own power. This meant the warlords were now charging even more, without offering any order or public services in return, which only worsened resentment against them.<sup>47</sup> By 2006, an estimated 70 percent of the business community had rallied behind the Islamic courts.<sup>48</sup> As the head of one of Mogadishu's business associations aptly stated, "For every \$100 we were forced to pay to the warlords, we could give the Islamic courts \$35 to remove them."<sup>49</sup>

At this critical juncture, the courts formally merged and the balance of power turned against the clan warlords. Starting in January 2006, the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) movement combined the support and power of

42 For this analysis, I use the term warlord to describe the leader of a substate armed group, who commands private military and political power over an enclave of territory and a population subset within the boundaries of a sovereign state. For a discussion of this term, please see [Roland Marchal \(2007\)](#).

43 A key concern raised in my interviews with respondents from a wide range of clan backgrounds was the abuse, greed, and general incompetence of warlords that were supposed to represent their constituencies. Author interviews with multiple business community respondents operating in Mogadishu, Baidoa, and Jowhar in 2009.

44 See [Ahmad \(2017\)](#); see also [Stig Jarle Hansen \(2013\)](#) and [Cedric Barnes and Harun Hassan \(2007\)](#).

45 Author interviews with ICU officials, as well as business respondents who used these services, 2009.

46 [Barnes and Hassan \(2007, 154\)](#).

47 Author interviews with multiple business respondents from across Mogadishu in 2009 and 2013.

48 This 70 percent estimate is drawn from multiple author interviews with leading members of the Mogadishu business community in 2009. Multiple respondents reported this figure as the overall estimate of business support for the ICU at this critical juncture. This figure lines up with [Hansen's \(2007\)](#) survey of the Mogadishu business community, which reports 69 percent support for the ICU. [Stig Jarle Hansen \(2007\)](#).

49 Author interview with the head of one of the largest business associations in [Mogadishu \(2009\)](#).



eleven different clan communities in Mogadishu.<sup>50</sup> Under the leadership of a cleric named Sheikh Hassan Sheikh Sharif, the ICU brought together the foot soldiers from each of the courts into one multi-clan military wing, known as *Al-Shabaab*.<sup>51</sup>

Alarmed by this new jihadist power, the old clan warlords quickly forged an alliance to hold back *Al-Shabaab* and keep control over their turfs. They failed. After a brief series of clashes, *Al-Shabaab* fighters swept away most of their rivals.<sup>52</sup> Within six months, the warlords had been defeated and the ICU had taken control of 90 percent of the countryside and succeeded in centralizing taxation, controlling and governing territory, and enforcing their laws across clan lines.<sup>53</sup> After fifteen years of continuous state failure, the ICU built a new central government.

Once in power, the ICU quickly set up a national taxation system at Mogadishu Port. This main seaport had been inaccessible and closed since the collapse of the state in 1991 and the ICU moved quickly to reopen it. This not only opened up trade, but also dramatically increased the amount of taxation the ICU could charge in the way of customs duties. Using a fixed fee for each crate, regardless of what was inside it, traders quickly became frustrated with these costs.<sup>54</sup> However, by this point, the ICU and *Al-Shabaab* had built a powerful proto-state, that had become “a force to be reckoned with,” and which the business class could not control.<sup>55</sup> During this boom phase, the ICU governed, taxed, and accumulated wealth like a state.

Meanwhile, the international community looked at the ICU with fear and suspicion, worrying that it could become a transnational terrorist threat.<sup>56</sup> Seeing the opportunity, the ousted clan warlords allied together and then worked with Somalia’s regional rival Ethiopia to raise suspicions about the ICU.<sup>57</sup> Driven by their own strategic considerations, the Ethiopians and the warlords propagated the idea that the ICU had ties to transnational terrorism.<sup>58</sup> In response to these allegations, in December

2006, the United States supported an Ethiopian invasion that swiftly led to the downfall and dissolution of the ICU and the reinstallation of the clan warlords in early 2007.<sup>59</sup>

As the clan warlords moved back into their turfs, *Al-Shabaab* entered its first major bust period. Foreign military intervention may have collapsed the ICU proto-state, but it also directly catalyzed a new jihadist insurgency led by *Al-Shabaab*.<sup>60</sup> In 2007, the jihadists declared war on the international community, the Somali government, and the clan strongmen, gaining support from local communities who opposed the Ethiopian invasion.<sup>61</sup> During this phase, *Al-Shabaab* emerged as the leading insurgency aimed at the internationally backed government. A secondary jihadist group called *Hizbul Islam* also emerged, albeit much weaker than *Al-Shabaab*.

As the insurgency surged, the foreign-sponsored Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG) proved to be another political failure. The TFG was comprised of the clan warlords, formally reinstated in 2007; however, despite trading in their fatigues for suits, these warlord-parliamentarians continued their clan clashes and blatant corruption. The TFG floundered and burned through its finances. Meanwhile, the jihadists waged a violent insurgency, while slowly reestablishing pockets of order and governance.

After two years of frustrating counterinsurgency operations, in January 2009 Ethiopia withdrew its forces from Somalia, thus taking a critical source of pressure off the jihadists. Despite the continuation of the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM), the Ethiopian withdrawal created an opportunity for the jihadists to resurge and reclaim power. Within a few months, *Al-Shabaab* had reestablished governance and territorial control in zones across southern Somalia. Moving closer to the proto-state end of the spectrum, *Al-Shabaab* once again set up robust taxation systems and enforced its rule of law over subjugated populations. *Al-Shabaab* even mocked the African Union for its limited capacity, boasting that they had kept “the crusaders and their apostate allies besieged in a tiny enclave not more than four

50 [Abdi Ismail Samatar \(2013, 170–71\).](#)

51 For a more detailed reading on *Al-Shabaab*, see [Hansen \(2013\)](#). See also, [Barnes and Hassan \(2007, 152\)](#).

52 Walter’s analysis that extremists outcompete moderates by convincing recruits they will resist corruption when in power is relevant here. See [Walter \(2017\)](#).

53 [Barnes and Hassan \(2007, 153–54\)](#).

54 Author interview with leading ICU finance official in 2009.

55 Author interview with a leading cigarette business owner in 2009.

56 [Harry Verhoeven \(2009\)](#).

57 [Abdi Ismail Samatar \(2007, 158\)](#). [Ahmad \(2017, 154\)](#).

58 Samatar notes that the UIC’s disjointed leadership led to comments from the courts that fed into Ethiopia’s propa-

ganda to the West. See [Samatar \(2007, 158\)](#) and [Afyare Abdi Elmi \(2009, 175, 179\)](#).

59 [Samatar \(2007, 160\)](#), [Barnes and Hassan \(2007, 156\)](#), and [Verhoeven \(2009, 411\)](#).

60 [Barnes and Hassan \(2007, 157\)](#) and [Verhoeven \(2009, 415\)](#).

61 Kilcullen’s analysis on intervention sparking local grievance is relevant here. See [Kilcullen \(2009\)](#). For more on this early intervention period, see [Samatar \(2013, 172\)](#), [Barnes and Hassan \(2007, 151\)](#), and [Ioan M. Lewis \(2008, 88–89\)](#).

kilometers squared.”<sup>62</sup> While AMISOM held this small but valuable enclave in Mogadishu, the jihadists now had significant control over other key areas, including lucrative ports and trade routes, as well as other large cities.

For example, Al-Shabaab controlled the port city of Kismayo along the southern coast, which provided the group with tens of millions of dollars in taxation revenue from the business community.<sup>63</sup> The jihadists also held the Afgooye corridor, 30 km outside of Mogadishu en route to Baidoa.<sup>64</sup> Along this lucrative trade route, the Islamists taxed the business community heavily and coercively. Al-Shabaab also directly participated in criminal business activities, such as charcoal smuggling.

By 2010, not only did Al-Shabaab push AMISOM back into a green zone in Mogadishu, but it also defeated and absorbed Hizbul Islam, making Al-Shabaab the sole jihadist insurgency in the country. During this boom period, Al-Shabaab dominated the Somali countryside, taxing and governing over large swaths of territory. For nearly four years, Somalia’s jihadists governed these large pockets of territory, aggressively taxing and ruling its populations, while maintaining a robust insurgency in Mogadishu to keep AMISOM at bay. As one senior Somali political leader aptly stated: “On a daily basis, what governs the decisions [of the jihadists] is the money and their political position.”<sup>65</sup>

In 2012, Al-Shabaab declared its formal merger with Al-Qaeda, a process that had been in the works since 2009.<sup>66</sup> This announcement occurred just before a new counterinsurgency operation, which has also been in a planning stage for some time, and which aimed at pushing Al-Shabaab out of its lucrative territorial holdings. In 2012, African Union and Kenyan Defence Forces collaborated on operations to route the jihadists from key areas, including the Afgooye corridor and Kismayo Port.<sup>67</sup> This operation expelled Al-Shabaab from some of its most valuable territories, and by late 2012, the jihadists had suffered a massive drop in income. However, as one respondent explained: “Al-Shabaab has the advantage of living among the people. Whenever they are pushed [out of power], they become very dormant. They lie among the people like sleeper cells.”<sup>68</sup>

While the group appeared to have been subdued during this bust period, Al-Shabaab was also actively adapting its economic strategy. Following its loss of income from Afgooye and Kismayo, Al-Shabaab let go of foot soldiers that it could no longer pay and it withdrew from cities into the countryside. Now acting less like a proto-state and more like an insurgency, the jihadists launched a series of cheap and brutal terrorist attacks in the region. In September 2013, Al-Shabaab launched a brutal terrorist attack on Westgate Shopping Mall in Kenya, in which four masked gunmen killed seventy-one people.<sup>69</sup> In April 2015, the group attacked Garissa University in eastern Kenya, rounding up 700 students and faculty.<sup>70</sup> The jihadists identified and released the Muslims and then shot 148 people, mostly Christians. Al-Shabaab also continued to strike inside Mogadishu, resulting in widespread antipathy toward the jihadists.

Despite Al-Shabaab’s decline in 2012, it did not lose all of its territory or abandon governance entirely; the group simply moved closer to the insurgent end of the order-making spectrum. Yet, because it did lose significant taxation revenues, Al-Shabaab necessarily adapted its economic strategies to prevent total collapse. Evidence from the field revealed that shortly after Al-Shabaab lost Kismayo and Afgooye, the group began to invest covertly in a number of front business operations in across Eastern and Southern Africa. “When it comes to economic resilience, they adapt, they have a flexible strategy,” explained an economist from Mogadishu who has been tracking Al-Shabaab finances for years. “Al-Shabaab is very strategic and more flexible than we realized.”<sup>71</sup>

Specifically, starting in 2012, new shopping malls and businesses began to appear in the commercial neighborhood of Eastleigh, located in the outskirts of Nairobi. The vast majority of these businesses are legitimate enterprises; researchers on the ground, however, identified a few key establishments that had been created by Al-Shabaab for the purpose of investment and money laundering.<sup>72</sup> “Al-Shabaab has a huge amount of investment both inside and outside the country,” explained a senior Somali political leader.<sup>73</sup> These investments not only provided the jihadists with a stable revenue stream throughout the bust period, but also safely hid Al-Shabaab’s

62 Al-Shabaab, *Mogadishu: The Crusaders Graveyard*, Al-Kata’ib News Network (2010). Video clip: 2:18–2:28.

63 David M. Anderson and Jacob McKnight (2015), 536–57).

64 Author observations, 2012–2013.

65 Author interview with official from Hiraan region, 2018.

66 Al-Shabaab. 2012. *The Year of Unity: 1433*. Al-Kata’ib News Network.

67 Author observations in Mogadishu and Afgooye in 2013. See also Anderson and McKnight (2015).

68 Author interview with official from Hiraan region, 2018.

69 Reuters (2013).

70 BBC (2019).

71 Author interview with an economics professor in 2018.

72 Author interviews, multiple respondents with both businesspeople and policy analysts, 2018.

73 Author interview with an official from Hiraan region in 2018.

accumulated cash assets. “It is like an insurance policy, in case you lose taxation,” explained the economist from Mogadishu. “This is a guarantee of having some money.”<sup>74</sup>

Al-Shabaab could not openly invest or participate in business. “Al-Shabaab is more sophisticated than this,” explained the economist. “They know that if they become direct partners in illicit business, it will provoke a strong response.”<sup>75</sup> Respondents also explained that the jihadists were recruiting businesspeople who had fallen on hard times, offering them a windfall and second chance if they run a front operation.<sup>76</sup> These front operations provided the jihadists with a place to store their sizeable cash assets, and get a return on their principal investments. “They do a lot of business: import business, food, clothes,” remarked the economist. “People know that [these] businesses that are Al-Shabaab’s. They are the businesses that never lose.”<sup>77</sup>

This investment strategy allowed Al-Shabaab to survive its bust in 2012 and then systematically rebuild its influence across the countryside. Between 2012 and 2017, Al-Shabaab slowly and systematically worked to reestablish power and reclaim territory, inch by inch, with the goal of building a new proto-state. During this transition period, the jihadists held onto their profitable businesses, knowing that a diversified economic portfolio would be more resilient to future shocks.

By 2018, Al-Shabaab was once again taxing and governing. During this new boom, however, Somalia’s jihadists were reportedly now able to enforce their laws in areas where they had marginal control, including imposing corporal and death penalties for serious crimes.<sup>78</sup> Even with this modicum of control, Al-Shabaab behaved more like a proto-state than a fluid insurgency, extracting taxes and governing local populations with coercive force.<sup>79</sup> “Even in small areas, like Afgooye,

outside of Al-Shabaab control, the orders must still be followed,” explained a political official from Hiraan region. “Even with 10–20 percent strength, they can enforce their laws.”<sup>80</sup>

During this new boom phase, the jihadists embraced a flexible, hybrid approach, leaning more toward governance in those areas it had more control. “In the Mudug region, they act like a government. They take taxation, they have their own courts ... you can talk to them,” explained the official. “[But] when you go further south, they act like terrorists. If you’re isolated, they’ll abuse you. If you’re in [an area bordering the government’s zone of control], they act more like a government and are more civilized.”<sup>81</sup>

Moreover, by 2018, Al-Shabaab had also learned how to extract taxes without necessarily holding territory. Multiple respondents reported that the jihadists were collecting taxes from both individuals and businesses located well outside of zone of control, even in the heart of government-controlled Mogadishu.<sup>82</sup>

According to respondents from government-controlled Mogadishu, Al-Shabaab typically extracted extortion moneys from businesses and individuals by calling them on the phone and demanding a certain amount.<sup>83</sup> “Al-Shabaab was imposing taxes on a lot of hawalas. They called it ‘khidmat’. Someone [representing Al-Shabaab] called the head of one of the hawalas [and] asked for some percentage. [The head of the hawala] asked ‘how do I know who you are?’ [The Al-Shabaab representative said] ‘Who do you know from senior Al-Shabaab from your clan? Call him and ask’. So [the hawala owner] called and person X said ‘yes, of course you must pay. This was decided by very senior people’.”<sup>84</sup>

The amounts demanded through these phone calls reveal an uncanny level of economic reconnaissance; multiple respondents alleged that the jihadists appear to have knowledge about the wealth and capability of their targets and then price their taxation rates accordingly. Al-Shabaab enforced its demands by threatening individuals with targeted assassination. Through its covert intelligence network, Al-Shabaab is able to identify and kill

74 Author interview with an economics professor in 2018.

75 Author interview with an economics professor in 2018.

76 Author interviews with multiple respondents from Mogadishu business community, 2018.

77 Author interview with an economics professor in 2018.

78 Feisal Omar (2017).

79 Notably, these laws are not always perceived negatively. “For the sympathy of the people, [Al-Shabaab] banned plastics as a harm to the environment,” the political official continued, referring to the endemic plastic bag pollution in Somalia. “The people obey it. They see the plastics as bad.” Author interview with political analyst in 2018. Many respondents have expressed that Al-Shabaab’s law enforcement, especially in punishing crimes such as theft of rape, meets a public need for order and justice.

80 Author interview with an official from Hiraan region in 2018.

81 Author interview with official from Hiraan region in 2018.

82 For a recent news report on this phenomenon: Omar Faruk and Max Bearak (2019).

83 Author interviews, multiple respondents from the Mogadishu business community, 2018.

84 A hawala is a money transfer agency. The word *khidmat* in this context means a service fee. Author interview with an official from Hiraan region in 2018.

individuals who refused to pay up, even in parts of the capital city where the government is supposedly in full control.<sup>85</sup> Across Mogadishu, many feared that a failure to pay up would result in being shot in the street by assassins.

Some respondents alleged that Al-Shabaab must have acquired new capabilities in surveillance, infiltration, or hacking of digital telecommunications networks, in order to have developed such an effective new taxation regime.<sup>86</sup> In Somalia, telecom networks are linked to money transfer companies, or *hawalas*, and are used for e-transfers of cash. These digital hawala transfers are an ordinary way of handling business, family, and personal obligations. While this study cannot confirm if or how this infiltration is happening, multiple respondents argued that Al-Shabaab appears to have gained access to the confidential banking information of citizens and businesses via telecommunications and hawala networks, for the purpose of mafia-style extortion.<sup>87</sup>

So effective was Al-Shabaab's new taxation regime that it allegedly dwarfed the government's tax capabilities. According to the President of Southwest Somalia Hassan Sheikh Aden, "They [Al-Shabaab] collect revenue like government, but they are collecting more than the government. They will take 1000 [Somali shillings in taxes] when my side [the government] will only take 100. You can even refuse to pay my 100, but you cannot refuse their 1000. They collect from Mogadishu. They collect from everywhere."<sup>88</sup> Another respondent from Mogadishu explained the same phenomenon even more plainly: "Every month what we give to Al-Shabaab is more than what we give to the government. Every hotel, every restaurant, every shop must give."<sup>89</sup>

As expected, this 2018 jihadist boom provoked yet another surge of external military intervention. Between 2019 and 2020, an escalation in US airstrikes and AMISOM and Somali National Army [SNA] ground offensives once again put the jihadists on the defensive. Al-Shabaab has incurred new losses in territory and rev-

enue. Yet, because AMISOM is working toward a 2021 withdrawal as part of its transition plan, this portends a possible future opportunity for Al-Shabaab to resurge again. Indeed, Somalia's jihadists have demonstrated that they know how to ride out bust periods and then reclaim power once external pressure against them abates.

The Somali government and the international community have been unable to compete in this long game. "It always happens that when AMISOM or the Somali National Forces [SNF] liberate any area, they do not stay permanently," explained a Somali political leader. "It happened to every area they liberated. They come and they liberate, and then they go. They come and go and come and go. So when AMISOM comes, Al-Shabaab go to the bush ... when AMISOM leaves, they come back again. This always happens. It's very common. In my village, it happened twice. AMISOM and SNF stayed almost two years. But everyone is hiding in the bush."<sup>90</sup>

Al-Shabaab appears to have developed an adaptive economic strategy that allows it to profit in both booms and busts. As a result, Somalia's jihadists have proven resilient for more than a decade of continuous war. They have learned how to adapt to waves of external military pressure without fully dissolving or going bankrupt. Despite repeatedly losing power, Al-Shabaab has shown that it can adapt, survive, and reclaim power after periods of decline.

This economic analysis sheds needed light on jihadist resilience over time, which the conventional wisdoms cannot quite explain. Of course, ideology was important to Al-Shabaab's early success against the warlords and the international intervention; however, it cannot explain why these jihadists have been able to fund repeated returns to power after significant losses in territory, taxation revenues, and popularity. Moreover, despite the fact that Al-Shabaab formally merged with Al-Qaeda in 2012, there has been no substantive change in its ideological foundations since 2008. Ideology alone cannot explain this variation in group strategy and behavior over time.

It is also true that Somalia's jihadists successfully coopted local grievances during the Ethiopian invasion. Yet it is equally true that Al-Shabaab has gravely alienated local populations in the years that followed and did not have widespread local support during their later returns to power. Yet, these jihadists have successfully resurged and reclaimed power over communities that do

85 Author interviews with multiple respondents from Mogadishu business community in 2018.

86 Author interviews in 2018. Members of the Mogadishu business community, as well as civil society actors in the region, have made these allegations. Given the limits of this study, I cannot independently verify whether or how these telecommunications networks have been compromised.

87 Sperber, Amanda (2018).

88 Author interview, President Hassan Sheikh Aden, 2018. This respondent is a leading political official, and insisted that the interview be public record.

89 Author interview with a political analyst in 2018.

90 Author interview with an official from Hiraa region in 2018. The author also directly witnessed this phenomenon in Mogadishu and Afgooye in 2013, after Al-Shabaab had allegedly been removed from the region.

not support them. By unpacking the hidden economic mechanisms behind their repeated resurgences, this research provides new insights into this frustrating, cyclical phenomenon.

## Looking Forward

This research is a step toward understanding the economic logic behind jihadist resilience in modern civil wars. Evidence from around the world shows that international military interventions have not successfully destroyed jihadist movements. Rather, this external pressure simply causes jihadists to switch strategies. They tax and rule in times of abundance and ease, shift toward investment and insurgency in times of hardship, and then return to governance and taxation when pressure against them abates. As external military pressure changes, jihadists have learned to move back and forth along this spectrum, governing only to the degree that they can afford. They evolve, but they do not die.

Through detailed within-case comparative analysis, this article uncovered how changes in external military pressure affected Al-Shabaab's economic strategy and subsequently the peaks and troughs of its power. This analytical framework may also help explain jihadist booms and busts in other cases. For example, in Mali, al-Qaida-affiliated jihadists have resurged in parts of the north, even after being ousted in a French-led 2013 international intervention. Evidence from the field suggests that these Malian jihadists had relationships with criminal networks across the Sahel, which allowed them to withstand losses in power and territory, and rebuild their power in the long run.<sup>91</sup> In Iraq, jihadist movements have repeatedly risen, collapsed, evolved, and resurged over the past fifteen years. New field research has uncovered that criminal networks in key cities may have been instrumental in the rise of ISIS and have since served as a safety net for the group during its decline. I provide a more detailed assessment of both the Mali and Iraq cases in the online supplementary appendix, as a first step in establishing external validity for my theory. Given the security threat that these countries pose, scholars and practitioners alike would benefit from more research on these new war economy dynamics.

This article also makes a contribution to the literatures on rebel governance and civil war economies.<sup>92</sup> The existing rebel governance literature offers insights into why and how some rebels tax and govern, while others

do not.<sup>93</sup> What this literature does not explain, however, is why an insurgent group may govern more or less at different intervals in the same conflict. The evidence from Somalia, and the mini-case studies in the online appendix, sheds some light on this variation.

Of course, this theory may also help to explain other types of non-jihadist insurgencies. There is nothing uniquely jihadist about any of these economic strategies. The reason that this study focuses on jihadists is not because of their inherent religious or ideological attributes, but rather because of the global response to this particular category of insurgents. Over the past twenty years, the international community has specifically targeted jihadist groups in global counterterrorism efforts. Unlike other types of rebel groups, jihadist insurgents around the world therefore have a common experience of confronting large-scale and sustained external military interventions, most of which have varied in intensity over time.

In fact, because jihadist insurgent groups have faced similar external pressures in so many countries, there appears to be a learning dynamics across multiple war theaters. For example, there is evidence that Al-Shabaab in Somalia may have learned from the organizational mistakes of Tehrik-i-Taliban-Pakistan and that ISIS may have built on public communications strategies that Al-Shabaab had adopted. This learning phenomenon may help explain why jihadist groups have demonstrated similar adaptation strategies across theaters. While beyond the scope of this particular article, these multi-theater learning dynamics are worthy of future study.

With respect to its practical application, this article offers several insights that may be useful for policymakers. First, the evidence in this paper suggests that jihadists have found a lifeline in the criminal underworld. Coordinated efforts between international police and military operations are obviously necessary to address this phenomenon. However, even with a coordinated response, disrupting an existing war economy can destroy local markets and backfire. In places like Mali, Somalia, and Afghanistan, the informal—and often illicit—economy plays a critical role in human survival. Even if communities are not directly involved in illicit activities, trickle-down effects can touch everyone from truck drivers to tea sellers. Eliminating big players can unintentionally collapse local markets and bankrupt entire communities, thus increasing support for insurgency. Any intervention aimed at the war economy must ensure communities have viable alternative livelihoods

91 Max Gallien (2020).

92 Cameron G Thies (2007), William Reno (1999), and Ahmad (2017).

93 Mampilly (2011), Worrall (2017), Arjona (2016), and Stewart (2018).



immediately; otherwise, these interventions are guaranteed to worsen insurgency in the long run.

It is also important to note that most businesspeople are not ideologues, but pragmatists. Even those that are involved with jihadists are not necessarily enamoured by their ideologies. Rather, these businesspeople often make deals with jihadists in order to protect their material interests. Too often, these business–jihadist pacts are driven by the failure by the government to provide a safe, predictable, and fair market environment. In practical terms, this means that if the intervening powers want to curtail jihadist influence, they will need to address the failures of the local government to provide an adequate environment for its citizens to earn a living.

Interventions rarely take such a nuanced approach. Too often, international actors simply pump fledgling governments with cash, rendering the state dependent on foreign moneys instead of their own populations.<sup>94</sup> Of course, foreign funds can help recipient governments pay for state institutions and salaries; however, more often this influx results in rampant corruption and looting, further collapsing public confidence.<sup>95</sup> One of the most critical areas policymakers should therefore review is the performance of local government partners and the allocation of foreign moneys. Indeed, the more corrupt and incompetent local governments are, the more jihadists can capitalize on public grievance and set the stage for a future return to power. To escape this cyclical trap, it would be wise to try to tackle these problems in the market, before they blow up on the battlefield.

## Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available at the *Journal of Global Security Studies* data archive.

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<sup>94</sup> Barnett R. Rubin (2002).

<sup>95</sup> Barnett R. Rubin (2006, 175–85), Matthew S. Winters (2010), and Nicholas Eubank (2012).

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