Inside the Lions' Den: Ideological Differentiation in the Palestinian Militant Landscape

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Abstract

This dissertation deals with the impact of ideological differentiation on intra-field rebel competition. Existing research on rebel competition focuses on violent forms of rivalry. However, many armed groups deploy non-violent strategies to gain popularity, recruits, and patron support rather than fighting against contenders. One example is the Lions' Den, a Palestinian armed group that emerged in 2022 in Nablus. This dissertation explores to what extent ideological differentiation helped the Lions' Den to successfully compete against established armed groups in the West Bank. This is achieved through an in-depth case study using process-tracing. Thereby, a causal mechanism is developed to track the effect of ideological differentiation on competitive success using empirical evidence from Telegram channels, semi-structured expert interviews, and media sources. The findings show that the Lions' Den differentiated itself ideologically from competing militant groups by adopting a cross-factional stance. Moreover, the evidence indicates that this differentiation allowed the group to gain popularity across political camps, mobilise recruits from various parties, and attract support from otherwise opposing patrons. Thus, ideological differentiation was a decisive factor in the Lions' Den's success. In contrast, alternative explanations such as outbidding, kinship ties, use of social media, and general political trends do not fully account for the rise of the group. These findings imply that cross-factional movements have the potential to overcome existing fault lines in the Palestinian militant landscape. They further corroborate claims that Israel's securitised approach to militant groups in the West Bank is short-sighted and counterproductive. For further studies, it is recommended to conduct field research and interviews with members of militant groups and political parties to increase the quality of data. Moreover, the role of social media in the recent uprising of Palestinian armed groups could be explored. Lastly, it is recommended to refine and abstract the causal mechanism to make it applicable for other cases and advance research on ideological differentiation.

Keywords: *ideological differentiation, intra-field rebel competition, Palestinian armed groups, the Lions' Den.*

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning	Description
AMB	Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades	Fatah-affiliated armed group
DFLP	Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine	Secular Marxist-Leninist political and militant organisation
PA	Palestinian Authority	Fatah-controlled government body exercising partial control over the West Bank
PFLP	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine	Secular Marxist-Leninist, revolutionary socialist, pan-Arab political and militant organisation
PIJ	Palestinian Islamic Jihad	Palestinian Islamist paramilitary organisation
PLO	Palestinian Liberation Organisation	Nationalist political and (formerly) militant organisation with the goal to establish a Palestinian state
PSR	Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research	Independent non-profit think tank working on Palestinian domestic politics, foreign policy, and public opinion polls and surveys

1 Introduction

The West Bank currently experiences an uptick in violence that has not been seen for almost two decades. 2022 was the deadliest year since the Second Intifada, counting at least 156 Palestinian and 6 Israeli fatalities (B'Tselem, 2023). This year is expectedly going to exceed this number. The town of Nablus thereby emerged as a hotspot of violence (OCHA, 2023). Intensified Israeli targeted killings and increased settler attacks on civilians contributed to the rise in fatalities around the area (Mustafa, 2023). At the same time, the northern West Bank underwent a proliferation of Palestinian armed groups. Especially the Lions' Den – an emergent militant cell in Nablus – attracted widespread attention. The group claimed responsibility for several assaults on Israeli soldiers and settlements. Concurrently, it gained popularity and managed to mobilise the masses like no other armed actor in the past 25 years (Al-Bazz, 2023). Initially, the Lions' Den was believed to be soon eliminated by Israeli forces. In addition, new groups in the Palestinian militant landscape usually face suspicion by the population, making it hard to hold their ground in the face of well-established competitors (Baroud, 2022c). Against all odds, the Lions' Den survived and developed into one of the main insurgents in the West Bank. However, there is no comprehensive explanation for the group's success despite the significant attention it received.

1.1 Background and Research Problem

This research contributes to the existing scholarship on rebel rivalry and strategies of armed groups to manage competition for financial, material, and human resources. Most studies in this field focus on violent forms of competition such as infighting, intimidation, and outbidding (see Hafez, 2020; Kydd and Walter, 2006; Bloom, 2004). In contrast, non-violent strategies of competition receive less attention in the literature on intra-field rivalry in general and on Palestinian armed groups specifically. Consequently, more subtle forms of competition are overlooked. The rise of the Lions' Den is a prime example for such non-violent competition. To the author's knowledge, no clashes occurred between the group and fellow militants in the northern West Bank. Moreover, the Lions' Den was mostly involved in defensive operations rather than spectacular attacks to outbid its rivals

(Mustafa, 2023). Therefore, violence-centred theories cannot account for its popularity and success.

However, recent literature challenges the prevailing assumption that rebels mainly compete by violence (see e.g. Schwab, 2021). One possible alternative explanation for the success of non-state armed actors against their rivals is *ideological differentiation*. Accordingly, rebels seek to increase their share of resources by distancing themselves ideologically from competitors (Schwab, 2023, p. 3). This was observed in a study by Tokdemir et al. (2021), showing that rebels adapt to intense competition by changing their brand. The theory draws on similar concepts in economics and the social movement literature (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). However, there is a lack of case studies examining how ideological differentiation plays out in armed rebellion. Thus, it is uncertain whether and to what extent it contributes to competitive success. To date, Schwab (2023) is the only scholar to conduct a qualitative case study on the topic. While she contributes to a better understanding of what ideological differentiation entails, she does not provide evidence for a causal link between differentiation and success. Considering this tenuous body of scholarship, the need for in-depth studies to address the gaps and pave the way for further research is evident.

The Lions' Den constitutes a promising case when it comes to ideological differentiation. As mentioned above, there is no evidence of infighting and other forms of violent competition in the early days of the group. Rather, there are various claims that the group is ideologically different from previously existing armed actors (see Shikaki, 2023). Baroud (2022a) even claims that the Lions' Den is part of a paradigm shift. However, it is unclear whether such unique ideological position accounts for the group's success. Moreover, alternative explanations such as its extensive use of social media are yet to be explored systematically. Thus, the Lions' Den itself as well as the concept of ideological differentiation are worth of study.

1.2 Research Objective and Outline

This thesis seeks to fill the above-mentioned gaps and offer timely insights into an ongoing issue. The overall aim is to explore to what extent ideological differentiation explains the success of the Lions' Den in the face of competing armed groups. Specifically, the objectives of this research are to:

1. Analyse how the ideology of the Lions' Den differs from the ideologies of established armed groups in the West Bank.
2. Evaluate to what extent ideological differentiation helped the Lions' Den to generate popular support, mobilise recruits, and attract patron support.
3. Explore alternative explanations that might account for the group's success.

The first objective aims to test the initial claims that the Lions' Den underwent ideological differentiation. Moreover, it allows to identify ideological features that are unique to the group and thus paves the way for the next steps. The second objective lies at the core of this study. It seeks to identify a causal link between ideological differentiation and the success of the Lions' Den in terms of popularity, recruitment, and patron support. The third objective is to examine alternative explanations that might account for the success of the group. This allows to critically review the findings and assess competing hypotheses. The three objectives are addressed through a single case study using the method of process-tracing to gain an in-depth understanding of the concept of ideological differentiation and its causal effects in the case of the Lions' Den.

The thesis consists of overall six chapters. Following the introduction, the relevant literature on rebel competition including research on causes and strategies of competition, the role of ideology in armed conflict, and the concept of ideological differentiation is reviewed. Moreover, existing studies on the Palestinian militant landscape are presented and research gaps are highlighted. In the next chapter, the research design, data collection, analytical framework, and limitations of this study are outlined. Afterwards, a case-specific causal mechanism of ideological differentiation is conceptualised. The following empirical section tests this mechanism in the case of the Lions' Den and explores alternative explanations. The last chapter summarises the findings, highlights its implications, and points to potential future avenues for research in this area.

2 Literature Review

This chapter introduces the theoretical framework of the thesis and provides a critical review of the relevant literature and research gaps. First, the research on rebel rivalry and strategies for competition between armed groups are presented. Second, the concepts of ideology in the civil war literature are discussed and

scholarly work on ideological differentiation is explored. Third, existing research on the Palestinian militant landscape focusing on competition between armed groups is presented. Lastly, the research gaps are summarised and the need for empirical studies in the field is highlighted.

2.1 Intra-Field Rebel Competition

The literature on civil war and ethnic violence long focused on the relation between state and rebels, conceptualising non-state actors involved in conflict as unitary (Cunningham, Bakke and Seymour, 2012, p. 68). This led to a neglect of "the complex reality of multiple, sometimes competing rebel groups" (Fjelde and Nilsson, 2012, p. 606). More recently however, scholars increasingly acknowledged that insurgencies such as separatist disputes are rarely dyadic but exhibit "complex and ambiguous processes that lead to important shifts and realignments within and between identity groups" (Kalyvas, 2003, p. 475). In fact, there are numerous examples of inter-rebel competition in contemporary conflicts, for instance the fighting between Tamil Tiger and its rivals, clashes between Kashmiri insurgent groups, and competing jihadi groups in the Levant or the Sahel (Pischedda, 2018, p. 138). The following two chapters discuss the main literature on inter-rebel rivalry and rebel strategies to face competitors.

2.1.1 Objectives and the Conflict Market: Why Rebels Fight Each Other

It is widely acknowledged that non-state armed actors are engaged in two struggles simultaneously (Schwab, 2021, p. 4; Phillips, 2019, p. 999). Krause (2013b) for example distinguishes between strategic and organisational goals that rebels pursue. While strategic goals take the form of public goods benefitting the whole insurgency such as regime change or autonomy, organisational goals refer to private goods that are exclusively made available to members of the own rebel group (Krause, 2013b, p. 261). A similar idea is brought forward by Cunningham, Bakke and Seymour (2012). Specifically focusing on disputes of self-determination, they argue that separatist groups engage in two contests at the same time. One with the state to achieve collective objectives, and one with other factions over private goods that are not publicly shared (Cunningham, Bakke and Seymour, 2012, p. 72).

At first glance, rebel groups could be considered allies as their strategic goals like the liberation of the same minority or the fight against the same government often coincide (Pischedda, 2018, p. 139; Phillips, 2015, p. 63). Thus, competition might appear irrational since it undermines the strategic goal of rebel groups (Van Um, 2012, p. 2). Rather than fighting the state together, rivals weaken each other, minimising the chance of defeating the state. However, scholars found that especially rebels that have much in common compete. This corroborates McCarthy and Zald's (1977) research on social movements arguing that competition occurs rather between those groups that "offer the most similar products, not between those for which competition in goal accomplishment produces conflict" (p. 1234). Such competitions are called intra-field or co-ethnic rivalries in civil war literature (Pischedda, 2018; Hafez, 2020). Intra-field rebel groups are consequently understood as groups whose strategic objectives refer to the same population and whose members stem from this population (Pischedda, 2018, p. 140). Intra-field contests have been observed in various contexts, for instance among Catholics in Northern Ireland, various Palestinian armed groups, the Tamils, and the Kurds (Phillips, 2019, p. 999).

While the strategic goal is often portrayed as the actual reason for rebellion, the organisational goals are tied to the groups' fundamental concern of survival (Conrad and Greene, 2015, p. 547). Consequently, terrorist organisations must balance their long-term goals with the need of self-preservation (Crenshaw, 1985). According to McCarthy and Zald (1977), political enterprises "operate as though organizational survival were the primary goal" (p. 1226) once they are formed. The same can be said about insurgent movements. To achieve their organisational goals and secure their survival, insurgents need to increase or maintain their political relevance and access to resources (Cunningham, Bakke and Seymour, 2012, p. 72). Besides responding to existential concerns, political relevance and resources also increase rebel groups' prospects of achieving and shaping strategic goals (Fjelde and Nilsson, 2012, p. 607). The best way to secure organisational and strategic goals is to convince individuals and groups to join or support the cause (Conrad and Greene, 2015, p. 547). In the case of intra-field rebels however, the target audience of the various insurgent factions is the same (Tokdemir et al., 2021, p. 733). In other words, intra-field rebels have overlapping and competing ambitions when it comes

to representing and mobilising the same communities (Lilja and Hultman, 2011, p. 178-179). Consequently, they "tend to see each other as direct competitors, posing obstacles to their goals and even representing existential threats" (Pischedda, 2018, p. 147).

This competition for survival is further aggravated by scarcity of political and material resources that can be distributed among insurgents. This is not only because the various co-ethnic groups claim to represent the same constituency or social base (Fjelde and Nilsson, 2012, p. 608). As Lichbach (1994) explains, the challenge of limited resources is especially severe when it comes to mobilising collective action (p. 391). Resource scarcity is further aggravated upon the entry of new insurgent groups (Wood and Kathman, 2015, p. 168). New actors thereby must make greater effort to gain access to the contested constituent market and its resources in the face of established groups (Young and Dugan, 2014, p. 4).

Existing scholarship sought to classify resources in various ways. Fjelde and Nilsson (2012, p. 609) for instance suggested a distinction between lootable natural resources and resources that can be mobilised through social and ideological ties based on the ways of acquisition. Weinstein (2006, pp. 47-49) differentiates between economic endowments and social endowments such as solidarity and moral commitment which help to overcome the collective action problem. In this thesis, resources will be looked at from the perspective of the 'providers', distinguishing between three categories: popular support, violent mobilisation, and patron support.

Popular support

The role that popular support plays in insurgencies is undisputed (see e.g. Paul, 2009, p. 113). Informed by the Olsonian collective action problem, the literature on rebellion often portrays the role of individuals as twofold: participation or non-participation (Petersen, 2001, p. 8). In reality, individual involvement can take many different variations on a continuum from more passive to more active forms (Lichbach 1994, p. 17). On the passive end, civilians might simply tolerate the operations of a rebel group in their community (Paul, 2009, p. 118). More active participation includes the provision of shelter, cover, or material supplies such as food and weapons to combatants (Wood, 2008, p. 543). The population can further

support groups with intelligence and a communication network (Byman, 1998, p. 157). This is particularly relevant given the information asymmetry between civilians and rebels (Kalyvas, 2012, p. 660). Lastly, individuals may support a group indirectly "through feelings or expressions" (Hoffman, 2010, p. 617). This should not be underestimated since it represents a source of political power. While insurgents might be able to secure economic endowments without popular support – for example through coercion or looting – popular support is indispensable when it comes to social endowments (Weinstein, 2006, p. 171). As popular support takes various forms, so does the absence of popular support ranging from sufferance to active resistance against a rebel group (Weinstein, 2006, p. 163). In the following, popular support signifies behavioural support, which goes beyond the attitudinal support a constituency provides (Lilja, 2009, p. 308).

Violent mobilisation/recruitment

The most active form of support by civilians is violent mobilisation. Without recruitment, terrorist groups are not capable of acting (Byman, 1998, p. 157). Violent mobilisation describes the actual act of taking up weapons and engaging in armed conflict and is distinct from popular support in three ways. First, the resource that is offered through violent mobilisation is manpower in contrast to material or immaterial support by the broader population (Paul, 2009, p. 117). Second, while popular support does not require to give up a job and leave behind normal life in society, this is often required by recruits who commit full time to an armed group (Lilja, 2009, p. 309). Third, violent mobilisation involves a higher risk than other forms of civilian support to armed groups. Because of the extraordinary level of commitment required for violent mobilisation and the distinct role of recruits in insurgencies, violent mobilisation is considered a separate type of support in this thesis.

Patron/external support

Various researchers highlight patron support as a substantial resource for rebel groups, helping them to survive and maintain themselves (see e.g. Jenkins, 1983, p. 533; Carter, 2012, p. 129). Like popular support, patron support may entail a wide range of activities. For example, external actors might provide funding used to compensate operatives and their families, buy weapons, or "engage in philanthropic

activities" (Bloom, 2005, p. 78). Patron support might also comprise material supplies such as armament, or services like logistics, training and even a territory as safe haven (Weinstein, 2006, p. 46; Carter, 2012, p. 129). The patron support category might include a wide array of different providers, such as diaspora communities, charities, criminal networks, states, and other rebel groups (Phillips, 2019, p. 1002; Paul, 2009, p. 120). The relationship between rebel groups and their external supporters can be conceptualised as one between principal and agent. First, an external actor must be willing to provide support to a rebel group (Salehyan, Gleditsch and Cunningham, 2011, p. 711). Usually, foreign patrons support an insurgent because it pursues similar goals. However, patrons might risk agency slack when actions and behaviour of the supported group divert from desired objectives. Second, the rebel group must be willing to accept external support from their principal. While rebels seek to maximise resources to advance their objectives, accepting patron support might also lead to a loss of autonomy as the sponsor imposes conditions or seeks to enforce their own agenda (Salehyan, Gleditsch and Cunningham, 2011, p. 716).

Any armed group that faces competition from intra-field rebel groups must think about ways to secure the above-described forms of support (Schwab, 2023, p. 5). The following chapter presents some of the most discussed strategies rebels might deploy in their pursuit to dominate the conflict market.

2.1.2 Strategies of Competition: How Rebels Fight Each Other

Many scholars have argued that rebel groups are politically rational actors that select from a range of strategies based on cost-benefit calculations (Conrad and Greene, 2015, p. 547). When it comes to intra-rebel competition, researchers have identified a variety of available options to gain support and thus defeat rivals (Kalyvas, 2012, p. 660). Kydd and Walter (2006, p. 59) for example mention intimidation, spoiling, and outbidding as possible strategies. Hafez (2020, p. 606) lists four forms of competitive factionalism: balancing, spoiling, defecting, and outbidding. Lastly, Schwab (2023) differentiates between strategies to outperform competitors such as outbidding, and strategies that aim at eliminating rivals such as infighting. Most research thereby focuses on violent forms of competition, arguing that competition for support and resources motivates some form of violence

(Wood and Kathman, 2015, p. 168). In the following, three of the most researched violent forms of competition are described before considering non-violent strategies.

Infighting

The most direct way of competing with co-ethnic rivals is through direct military confrontation. This so-called infighting or rebel fratricide aims at considerably weakening or eliminating the competitor (Pischedda, 2018, p. 151; Schulhofer-Wohl, 2020, p. 405). By weakening other groups, rebels can solidify their own position to the point of gaining hegemony among intra-field rebels (Van Um, 2012, p. 2). In the case of eliminating a rival, the surviving group may be able to absorb the rival's constituency, members, and extract resources that were previously controlled by its competitor (Pischedda, 2018, p. 147). Despite these prospects, rebels might refrain from directly fighting competitors because it often comes at high cost of lives and resources (Hafez, 2020, p. 604). Moreover, the incumbent regime might take advantage of such rivalries by deploying a 'divide and conquer' strategy. Nevertheless, infighting is a widespread form of competition which emerges when intra-field rival factions "perceive their irreconcilable ideological divides as a major threat to their factional survival" (Hafez, 2020, p. 605).

Intimidation

In contrast to infighting, intimidation is a form of violent competition that does not involve direct fighting between rival factions. Instead, rebel groups target civilians by punishing disobedience and support for other groups (Kydd and Walter, 2006, p. 51). Thereby, the group demonstrates its ability to control and the government's incapability to stop them. At the same time, it prevents dissent and might acquire scarce resources (Wood, 2014, p. 463). The decision to engage in violence against civilians might reduce broader popular support (Findley and Young, 2012) and lead third parties to withdraw their funding (Salehyan, Gleditsch and Cunningham, 2011, p. 714). Therefore, the strategy of intimidation might overall lead to less favourable conflict outcomes for rebels (Tokdemir et al., 2021, p. 723). However, Wood (2014) points out that "popular sympathy is seldom a sufficient condition for mobilisation" (p. 466), thus lowering the bar to target civilians.

Violent Outbidding

The concept of outbidding follows the idea that competition leads to an increased use of violence by rebel groups to distinguish themselves from rivals (Conrad and Greene, 2015, p. 546). It was first analysed in the context of Palestinian armed groups who according to Bloom (2005) used suicide bombing as a tactic to "gain credibility and outperform rivals" (p. 95). Later, the concept was extended to other forms of violence such as spectacular or casualty intensive attacks (Wood and Kathman, 2015, p. 168). These increasingly violent activities should "demonstrate unmatched commitment to the cause [and] show superior capabilities" (Hafez, Gabbay and Gade, 2021, p. 6). Thereby, rebels might seek to present themselves as the group which can best advocate for the interests of a constituency and achieve the strategic objectives of rebellion (Hafez, 2020, 607). If successful, scholars argue that outbidding can increase the access to resources, recruits, and support by foreign patrons (Polo and Gleditsch, 2016, p. 820). However, outbidding also claims high numbers of casualties among groups and the population and may thus decrease the popularity of insurgents.

Non-violent strategies

Even though research on intra-field competition focused on violent strategies, recent literature increasingly challenged the prevailing assumption that violence – whether directed against civilians, rivals, or the enemy – is the sole solution to competition (Schwab, 2023, p. 4). Van Ulm (2012) for instance notes that "low levels of inter-group violence do not necessarily mean that disputes have not arisen among militants" (p. 8) as most insurgents seldom cross the threshold of fighting competitors. Schwab (2021, p. 1) further argues that violent rivalry might not be a group's first choice when it faces existential threats from the state or when its military capabilities are limited. Moreover, dependency on the benevolence of the local constituency to achieve their objectives can incentivise groups to adopt non-violent strategies (Lilja, 2009, p. 306; Wood, 2014, p. 461). One non-violent strategy is balancing whereby rebel groups frequently switch sides to build opportunistic alliances and "minimum winning coalitions" (Hafez, 2020, p. 607). Another strategy to gain support over other insurgents is the engagement in philanthropic activities or the provision of public goods (Hafez, Gabbay and Gade, 2021, p. 6). This helps to generate popular legitimacy, attract new members, and incentivise collaboration

(p. 13). Especially groups that depend on the local population might pursue such a strategy (Tokdemir et al., 2021, p. 732). Besides, Sandal (2021) discussed the idea of religious outbidding whereby groups seek to undermine claims of rivals that identify "with the same broad political and/or religious ideology or identity" (p. 6). Thereby, rebel groups gain legitimacy and consolidate their position as representant of the constituency (p. 2). The following chapter explores another, understudied non-violent strategy for intra-field competition.

2.2 Ideology and Competition

The role of ideology in literature on armed conflict has fallen out of fashion and received a lot of scepticism (Costalli and Ruggeri, 2015, p. 119). This is partly because researchers adopt a narrow, superficial conceptualisation of ideology that fails to explain the various phenomena under study (Youngman, 2019). However, this chapter shows that "neglecting ideology would leave major war-related phenomena unexplained" (Sanín and Wood, 2014, p. 214). First, the concept of ideology is defined, its features are presented, and its impact on behaviour in armed conflict is discussed. Then, the concept of ideological differentiation is introduced.

2.2.1 Ideology in Armed Conflicts and Insurgencies

Armed conflict literature offers a wide range of meanings of the term 'ideology'. For some time, the concept was primarily applied to the fanatical ideas of Islamic terrorist movements (Snow and Byrd, 2007, p. 119). However, such monolithic applications of the concept tend to homogenise rebel movements and ignore the ideological variety of groups. In contrast to this narrow view, Ugarriza and Craig (2012) define ideology as "a set of political beliefs that promotes a particular way of understanding the world and shapes relations between members of a group and outsiders" (p. 450). Similarly, Sanín and Wood (2014) understand ideology as "a more or less systematic set of ideas that includes the identification of a referent group […], an enunciation of the grievances or challenges that the group confronts […], and a (perhaps vaguely defined) program of action" (p. 215). While such wide definitions are often criticised to make ideology an all-encompassing phenomenon, they recognise that ideology can co-exist with other ideational concepts such as norms, identities, and frames (Maynard, 2019, p. 637). Moreover, they acknowledge that ideology can appear in various configurations and intensities. In

the following, the broader definition of ideology with its above-described diagnostic, identity-building, and programmatic features is adopted.

Berti (2019, p. 515) points out that ideologies can serve armed groups as a means to communicate, build legitimacy, justify actions, and generate support. Moreover, Sanín and Wood (2014, p. 218) suggest that "many groups adopt a working ideology […] to structure hierarchical and horizontal relations between members" (p. 218). This might suggest a purely instrumental view on ideology. However, as will be shown below, ideology might also be adopted out of genuine belief or sincere commitment (Maynard, 2019, p. 635). In fact, adherents of the same ideology can range from individuals that genuinely support the ideas to people or groups that use ideology as an instrument.

While ideologies are often assumed to be coherent, intrusive, and static (Tokdemir et al., 2021, p. 732), proponents of the wider conceptualisation of ideology have come to different conclusions. First, the extent to which ideologies are defined can vary. For instance, Snow (2004, p. 400) argues that ideologies range on a spectrum from rigidly designed programs to loosely associated sets of values. Similarly, Moro (2017, p. 945) observed that ideologies vary in degree of specification from abstract to more concrete meanings (p. 945). Therefore, Schubiger and Zelina (2017) suggest that research on armed groups should not only focus on more institutionalised and pervasive cases of ideology but also take into account "seemingly weak manifestations of ideology" (p. 949) or groups that appear to have a non-ideological character. Second, although ideologies might become more rigid over time and as organisations grow, they are generally not fixed (Nussio, 2017, p. 945). Rather, Schwab (2023, p. 5) argues that actors actively adapt new ideological positions. This might be in response to other actors or to "strike the balance between core tenets and the realities […] in daily routine" (Moro, 2017, p. 945).

Although recent scholarship highlights the importance of ideology to make sense of insurgent behaviour, few scholars have shed light on the causal mechanisms that lead from ideology to behaviour in the context of armed conflict. Traditionally, literature differentiates between weak accounts of ideology which suggest that individuals or groups adopt ideologies instrumentally, and strong accounts of ideology which rest on the idea that ideologies are adopted out of conviction and

commitment (Sanín and Wood, 2014, p. 218-220). Maynard (2019) deviates from this dual conception and developed four cognitive mechanisms on "a continuum encompassing various forms of ideological influence" (p. 369) on behaviour. The first two mechanisms explain how people's behaviour is influenced through internalisation while the second two mechanisms show how individuals or actors react to structural opportunities regardless of their actual beliefs (Maynard, 2019, pp. 639-641). First, individuals' decision-making can be shaped by sincere *commitment* to or intrinsic resonance of certain ideas. As Staniland (2015, p. 778) notes, such commitment can be far from fanatical and irrational but still affects behaviour. Second, individuals might *adopt* ideological positions without intrinsic commitment when they are associated with identities or beliefs they hold (Maynard, 2019, p. 640). One example might be close friendship ties to individuals who joined a certain movement, or links to the own cultural heritage (Atran, 2008, p. 6). Third, ideologies can influence behaviour due to *conformity* effects (Maynard, 2019, p. 641). This can be explained with peer pressure or other social influences that individuals are subject to. Fourth, individuals or groups might be incentivised to *instrumentalise* an ideology because they expect certain benefits from it (Maynard, 2019, p. 642). Instrumentalising actors not only include political elites but also "followers [who seek to] advance careers or private agendas, and clients [who] may exploit patron's ideologies as a mechanism of soliciting support" (Maynard, 2019, p. 642).

In practice, commitment, adoption, conformity, and instrumentalisation cannot always be clearly distinguished and ideologies probably influence the behaviour of individuals through a mixture of these mechanisms. This is what makes ideologies such a powerful tool as it allows to attract a variety of actors into "programs of collective action […] and generate effects that may be disproportionate to levels of highly committed belief" (Maynard, 2019, p. 643). One way of exploiting the power of ideology in intra-field competition is through differentiation as discussed in the following chapter.

2.2.2 Ideological Differentiation

Differentiation is a common strategy used by businesses to stand out among competitors that penetrate the same market (Conrad and Greene, 2015, p. 548).

To supersede rivals, firms may distinguish their brands, goods, or services and carve out a niche (Sharp and Dawes, 2001, p. 739). By selling highly specialised or unique products with maximum difference from competing offers, a company can charge higher prices. At the same time, it may outperform competitors by gaining the loyalty of customers and reduce their sensitivity to price shocks (Hastings and Shapiro, 2013; Hatch and Schultz, 2003). Moreover, specialised products are more likely to increase consumer satisfaction and thus create a competitive advantage (Katz, 1984). The same logic can be applied beyond market economy. For instance, McCarthy and Zald (1977, p. 1234) drew on the idea of product differentiation to explain how social movements compete with direct rivals. Later, Lichbach (1995) described how new dissidents break the monopoly of existing dissidents by differentiating themselves ideologically. Furthermore, Della Porta and Diani (2006, p. 37) claim that collective action can be facilitated when the concerning social group is distinct from other social groups. Most recently, Tokdemir et al. (2021) and Schwab (2023) introduced the idea of ideological differentiation to the field of rebel competition. They argue that – like companies seek control over a larger market share – rebel groups compete to increase their share of resources in the 'conflict market' by carving out a niche and offering unique products. The product rebels offer to prospective supporters and members is their specific ideological configuration.

Schwab (2023) defines ideological differentiation as "a process by which actors move away from positions of others in a social system through communication and/or behaviour" (p. 5). This concurs with the above-described understanding of ideology as a flexible concept. By moving away from others' ideological stance through discourse or action, a rebel group adopts objectives, reference groups, or strategies that are distinct from rivals (Tokdemir et al., 2021, p. 734). Schwab (2023, p. 5) imagines the process of differentiation to occur along a continuum with radical ideologies on one end and moderate ideologies on the other end. Thereby, moving towards the more radical end of the continuum follows a logic similar to outbidding whereby groups adopt more extreme tactics to stand out (see Bloom, 2004).

A group successfully differentiated itself when it took "the largest possible distance [from its competitors and created a] polarised ideological space" (Schwab, 2023, p. 5). The greater the ideological distance from other groups, the harder it is to replace

a group. However, if the ideological ends of the continuum are already occupied, a group might also moderate its positions to fill a niche. In practice, successful differentiation means that the group's public support, recruitment, and external support are "less sensitive to the group's [actual] achievement of its goals" (Conrad and Greene, 2015, p. 549). Thus, setbacks such as temporary weakness, the death of leadership figures, or state crackdowns have less impact on a rebel group due to the resilience and brand loyalty of supporters (Tokdemir et al., 2021, p. 734). Ideally, this translates into the expansion or consolidation of the rebel group in the long-term (Schwab, 2023, p. 5). Ideological differentiation might however coincide with wider changes in the 'conflict market' or be accompanied by other strategies making it difficult to distinguish its success from parallel developments.

Although the idea of ideological differentiation is not new, there is little empirical studies on the subject in the context of rebel competition. Hafez, Gabbay and Gade (2021, p. 6) mention rivalling Shiite militias of the Popular Mobilisation Forces as one example of ideological differentiation. Moreover, they explain that Daesh successfully attracted funding and recruits from all over the world by insisting on its extreme Salafi-jihadi positions (Hafez, Gabbay and Gade, 2021, p. 6). Tokdemir et al. (2021) conducted a quantitative study demonstrating that rebels adapt to intense competition "by moving in the ideological and demand space to make a brand for themselves" (p. 751). The most thorough case study on the topic was conducted by Schwab (2023) who examined differentiation in Islamist insurgencies along territorial and socio-political dimensions. She explored how ideological differentiation enabled Ahrar al-Sham to emerge as a winner of the competition with the overpowering Daesh in Syria. However, none of the above studies explored the underlying processes of ideological differentiation.

2.3 The Palestinian Militant Landscape

Considering the recent surge of militancy in the West Bank, Palestinian armed groups represent a promising case for the study of intra-field competition and ideological differentiation. As explained in the previous chapters, intra-field competition is particularly intense when many armed groups compete for the same constituency, when resources are scarce, and when new actors emerge. All these conditions apply to the current situation in the West Bank. To prepare the ground

for the case study, this chapter provides an overview of the main Palestinian armed groups and reviews the existing literature on competition between Palestinian militias.

2.3.1 Overview of Palestinian Armed Groups

Palestinian militancy dates to the British mandate when Arab nationalists carried out attacks against British forces and Jewish settlements in Palestine (De Búrca, 2014, p. 93). Since the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, the Palestinian political and militant landscape constantly evolved with actors using both political violence and diplomatic means. Nowadays, albeit not always formally integrated in the organisation, most Palestinian political parties have armed wings. In the following, the main armed groups currently active in the West Bank that existed prior to 2021 are introduced.

Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades/Fatah

The Palestinian National Liberation Movement (Fatah) emerged as a politico-military movement in 1959 (Dana, 2019, p. 44). Several militias such as Al-Fahd al-Aswad (The Black Panther) and the Fatah Hawks originated from the movement since the 1960s (Cheong, 2012, p. 39). This allowed Fatah to use both political violence and diplomatic means at the same time. However, after the party dominated the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), it dedicated more efforts to diplomatic activities and once the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority (PA) established its own security forces, the group's armed wings became mostly redundant (Dana, 2019, p. 45; Cheong, 2012, p. 39). Nevertheless, during the Second Intifada, Fatah's armed cells were revived leading to the establishment of the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades (AMB) (Bloom, 2004, p. 78). This new formation was used to mobilise the public and curb the rise of Islamist movements, in particular Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) (Frisch, 2005, p. 391). However, most AMB cells soon distanced themselves from the Fatah-PA leadership (Bloom, 2004, p. 78). Consequently, the AMB groups that remain in the West Bank have an ambiguous relation to Fatah. They usually do not operate under central command and are independent of the party's official agenda (ITIC, 2022b, p. 9). Yet, some Fatah representatives publicly support the armed resistance and in particular local Fatah branches maintain good connections with AMB cells (ECFR, 2023). After

keeping a low profile during the past decade, AMB experienced a revival since May 2021 (ITIC, 2022b, p. 3).

Al-Quds Brigades/Palestinian Islamic Jihad

The Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and its military wing the al-Quds Brigades was formed in between 1979 and 1980. The emergence of the group is said to be inspired by the Iranian Revolution and is viewed as a counterbalance to the rapprochement between the PLO and Israel (Bloom, 2004, p. 78; Dunning, 2015, p. 288). The PIJ is unambitious when it comes to the Palestinian political system and focuses its efforts on the armed struggle. Framing its fight against Israel as a "religiously mandated war" (Bartal, 2022, p. 4), the group introduced the notion of jihad to the Palestinian armed resistance. When its main Islamist contender Hamas rose to political power in the 2000s, the popular support for PIJ decreased (Bartal, 2022, p. 6). However, the group remained dedicated to the fight against Israel and continued to refuse participation in politics (Skare, 2021, p. 2). Although it never reached the strength of Hamas, the PIJ continues to be a relevant actor in the Palestinian militant landscape. Since 2021, the al-Quds Brigades rose to new strength and established a stronghold in Jenin under the umbrella of the Jenin Brigades (ECFR, 2023; ITIC, 2022a, p. 1).

Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades/Hamas

The Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) was formed in 1987 as a Palestinian politico-militant offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood (Bloom, 2004, p. 76). The group is understood to have emerged as part of a generational rebellion against the old guard of the Muslim Brotherhood (Awad, 2022, p. 42). Hamas was committed to the fight against Zionism and sought to strengthen its profile as an armed resistance group (Dunning, 2015, p. 291). At the same time, it gained political support by the Gulf states who were looking for alternatives to the PLO which backed Iraq's invasion of Kuwait (Hussein, 2021, p. 88). During the First Intifada, Hamas established the Izz Eddin al-Qassam Brigades in the West Bank. Being opposed to the Oslo Accords, Hamas conducted spectacular operations during the Second Intifada leading to a significant increase in popular support. Consequently, the group won the 2006 elections for the Palestinian legislative against Fatah (Hussein, 2021, p. 90). Following a clash between the two parties, Hamas took over Gaza

Strip in 2007 where it remains in power to date. Despite being a governing party, the al-Qassam Brigades remain active in Gaza (Legrain, 2012, p. 187) and recently regained foothold in the West Bank.

Besides these three main actors, there are several smaller militant groups in the West Bank, for example the Abu Ali Mustapha Brigades. The armed wing of the PFLP was long on decline but stepped up its activities since 2021 (Dana, 2019, p. 49; Truzman, 2021). In addition, the Mujahideen Brigades and the Nasser Saleh al-Din Brigades maintain a presence in the West Bank, in particular in Jenin (ECFR, 2023). More recently, newly emerged groups and Gaza-based militias seek to establish a foothold in the northern West Bank. This is addressed in more detail in the following chapters.

2.3.2 Contested Spaces in the Palestinian Resistance

Even though many studies touch upon the relations between Palestinian armed groups, only a few scholars focus on the competition between factions. This chapter presents a history of the rivalries in the Palestinian militant landscape.

Research on Palestinian intra-field competition goes back as far as the 1960s when the PLO was founded. Despite its proclaimed aim to bring about Arab unity, it was highly fragmented from the outset. According to Pearlman (2008) and Krause (2013a), especially smaller factions used violence to secure their survival, maintain influence on the political developments, and spoil decisions that were not in their interest. One example is Fatah, which was the weakest group in the PLO at that time. Fatah chose to go beyond revolutionary rhetoric and conducted military operations against Israel (Krause, 2013a, p. 88). Thereby, the group managed to generate popular support, gain strength, and successfully outbid rival groups. This provoked a chain-ganging effect with other Palestinian groups launching similar attacks to avoid being sidelined (Krause, 2013a, p. 90). Krause (2013a) observes a similar dynamic after 1967 when Fatah engaged in violence to outbid other groups and spoil political decisions (p. 92). Especially during the Battle of Karameh, Fatah stood out and could attract disproportionate amounts of new recruits and funding (Krause, 2013a, p. 94).

Later, when Fatah established itself as the leading party in the PLO in the 1970s, Pearlman (2008, p. 86) describes how the group faced competition from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), and the PFLP – General Command. As the PLO adopted increasingly moderate positions and sought international recognition, smaller factions feared for their political survival (p. 91-92). Because they could not challenge Fatah politically, these groups turned to military operations to spoil diplomatic efforts (Pearlman, 2008, p. 87). Thereby, some factions managed to preserve their constituencies and even "obtain[ed] support from radical Arabic states" (Pearlman, 2008, p. 93). Krause (2013a, p. 95) further explains how the PFLP engaged in qualitative outbidding as Fatah's power in the PLO grew. The group opted for external operations such as hijacking of airplanes, attacks on Israel embassies, and military operations in Jordan. Under pressure to show equal commitment to resistance, Fatah ultimately joined the campaign against the Jordanian regime, leading to the Black September (Krause, 2013a, p. 97). During the same period, Van Um (2012) observed direct military confrontations between Palestinian groups. For instance, the PFLP - General Command carried out an attack in West Beirut killing more than 200 people including PFLP members. Similarly, competition between Fatah and its splinter group led by Abu Nidal escalated into infighting in the 1970s (Van Um, 2012, p. 8).

In the 1980s, PIJ and Hamas emerged and joined the competition for popular support (Dunning, 2015, p. 291). Pearlman (2008, p. 101) argues that the two groups viewed the Oslo peace process as an existential threat and carried out attacks to spoil the negotiations and attain popular support. Similarly, Krause (2013a, p. 100) explains that Hamas, PFLP and PIJ sought to spoil the Oslo process through attacks. Bloom (2004) points out that in particular PIJs spectacular operations "lent credence to the Islamic movement [and] embarrassed Arafat and Hamas" (p. 78). Moreover, she notes that besides spoiling, Hamas also directly threatened PLO leaders to prevent further peace negotiations (Bloom, 2004, p. 76). After the Oslo Accords, the armed struggle of Hamas and PIJ against Israel continued and led to clashes with the Fatah-led PLO (Bartal, 2022, p. 6). Awad (2022, p. 57) even argues that Hamas sought to undermine the functioning of the PA through bombings.

Most scholarship dealing with competition between Palestinian armed groups focuses on the Second Intifada, which is often cited as a prime example of outbidding (Hafez, Gabbay and Gade, 2021, p. 6). The most prominent study is by Bloom (2004) who challenges the conventional view on suicide bombings as spoilers of the peace process (p. 62). Rather, she argues that the surge in bombings after November 2000 are indicators for the intense competition between armed groups (Bloom, 2004, p. 66). According to Bloom, the spectacular bombings "whipped up nationalist fervor and swelled the ranks of Islamic Jihad and Hamas" (p. 71). Especially Hamas – which accounted for about 40% of successful suicide attacks - "positioned itself at the vanguard of Palestinian armed resistance (Dunning, 2015, p. 292). However, also other groups such as the Fatah-affiliated AMB, the DFLP, and the PFLP engaged in suicide bombings (Bloom, 2004, p. 73). Each of the groups thereby claimed that it is "leading the path of Jihad and resistance and martyrdom" (Bloom, 2004, p. 75).

Lastly, when Hamas claimed electoral victory and took over control of the Gaza Strip in 2007, fighting broke out between Hamas and Fatah-affiliated militant groups claiming in total over 60 lives (Samuel and Rajiv, 2007, p. 843). Since then, the Fatah-led PA controls the West Bank while Hamas holds the Gaza Strip. Following this spatial separation of the two main political contenders, militant activity and competition between factions reduced substantially (Mustafa, 2023). This is also reflected in the literature on Palestinian armed groups, which almost exclusively focuses on empirical cases in the 2000s or earlier. However, since 2021 the West Bank experiences a revival of old groups including the PIJ and AMB. Besides, Gaza-based groups such as the Nasser Saleh al-Din Brigade sought entry to the West Bank, and new cells and groups like the Lions' Den emerged (Truzman, 2022e). Especially the case of the Lions' Den is striking considering the substantial popular support it generated and the astonishing number of new recruits it mobilised (Baroud, 2022a). Many journalists and experts labelled the group as a 'new phenomenon' and it seemed like the Lions' Den filled a longstanding gap in the militant landscape of the West Bank. However, to the author's knowledge no study has yet attempted to explain the recent surge of militants in the West Bank and in particular the success of the Lions' Den.

2.4 Critical Review and Research Gaps

The literature review shows that the body of research on intra-field competition between rebel groups has grown significantly in recent years. While civil wars have long been conceptualised as a dyadic conflict between state and insurgents, scholars now increasingly recognise the complex, sometimes competitive relationships between rebel groups. However, most research emphasises the violent character of competition. This also applies to studies on Palestinian armed groups, many of which explore violent rivalries characterised by infighting, spoiling, and outbidding. Meanwhile, non-violent forms of competition find less attention in the literature on intra-field rivalry in general and Palestinian militias specifically. Especially the role of ideology remains neglected, partly due to the prevalence of a narrow understanding of the concept. Among the few studies addressing the strategic role of ideology is Sandal's (2021) research on religious outbidding which explores how insurgents instrumentalise ideology to undermine rivals. The only scholars focusing specifically on ideological differentiation are Tokdemir et al. (2021) and Schwab (2023). By pointing to the link between rebel competition and ideological shifts, they pave the way for further studies. However, both papers fall short of empirically tracing the actual effect of ideological differentiation on competitive success of a group. Moreover, the only qualitative, in-depth case study by Schwab (2023) focuses on Islamist armed groups, leading to the question whether the concept is also applicable to other contexts such as independence movements or nationalist rebel groups.

The previous chapter also shed light on two distinct gaps in the research on Palestinian armed groups and in particular the recent surge of militant groups in the West Bank. First, there is a population gap. The existing body of research is rich in empirical cases from the 2000s or earlier. However, the militant landscape underwent significant changes in recent years and newly established groups such as the Lions' Den and its ideology remain unexplored. Second, there is a practical-knowledge gap. As explained in the introduction, the surprising surge of the Lions' Den raises questions as to how it established itself among competitors. Usually, new groups in the Palestinian context face suspicion due to fear of foreign intrusion and thus struggle to establish a large supporter base (Baroud, 2022b). Considering the limited military capabilities of the Lions' Den, violent forms of competition fail to

fully account for its success. This raises the question as to whether other factors such as ideology played a role.

By exploring to what extent ideological differentiation explains the success of the Lions' Den in the face of competing armed groups, this study addresses the above-mentioned population and practical-knowledge gaps regarding emergent Palestinian militias as well as the lack of research on ideological differentiation in general. The research is guided by three objectives:

1. Analyse how the ideology of the Lions' Den differs from the ideologies of established armed groups in the West Bank.
2. Evaluate to what extent ideological differentiation helped the Lions' Den to generate popular support, mobilise recruits, and attract patron support.
3. Explore alternative explanations that might account for the group's success.

The first objective addresses the population gap regarding newly established Palestinian armed groups and in particular the Lions' Den. The second objective takes the research one step further by looking into the case-specific process linking ideological differentiation with competitive success. This responds to the general lack of in-depth case studies on ideological differentiation, provides a first application of the concept to nationalist armed groups, and develops a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms. The third objective considers alternative interpretations of the data to critically review the findings and contribute to an informed response to the practical-knowledge gap. The following chapter outlines the research design and methods used to respond to each of the research questions.

3 Research Design and Methodology

This study explores what role ideological differentiation played in the Lions' Den's competitive success through a single case study design. More specifically, process-tracing is used to analyse the effect of ideological differentiation on popular support, recruitment, and patron support. In this chapter, the rationale for the chosen research design is presented, the data collection methods are described, and the framework for data analysis is detailed before addressing potential limitations and ethical considerations.

3.1 Research Design

To achieve the research objectives outlined in the previous chapter, this thesis is designed as a single case study. Gerring (2004) defines a case study as "an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units" (p. 342). According to this definition, case studies are used to examine one specific case in detail. However, Burnham et al. (2008) note that single case studies do not allow to make inferences beyond the case because they "are unique and not a representative sample" (p. 64) of the whole population. Similarly, Stake (1995, p. 4) explains that the primary purpose of case studies is to understand the case under investigation, not other cases. To nonetheless produce findings that are relevant beyond the case, Burnham at al. (2008, p. 64) writes that a strong theoretical dimension could be incorporated.

Using Gerring's (2004) terms, this thesis aims to study the single unit of the Lions' Den as an example of a larger population of armed groups that use ideological differentiation to compete with their rivals. To gain a thorough understanding of the underlying processes at work and craft a solid explanation for the outcome within this specific case, the research should be designed in a way that allows to go in depth. At the same time, the theoretical framework of ideological differentiation is placed at the centre of the study to render the research relevant for scholars exploring the same phenomenon. However, this study is not concerned with making generalisations. Consequently, a case study design is considered the most suitable approach to this thesis. It serves as the framework to accommodate other research methods which are outlined below.

3.2 Data Collection

Researching a conflict that is still ongoing comes with several challenges regarding data collection. Due to the clandestine nature of insurgent groups, the volatile context, and the contested information space, access to reliable, high-quality data is limited. Besides, acquiring first-hand insights by individuals involved in armed group activities comes with ethical concerns, not to mention that – in the case of the Lions' Den – the gunmen are constantly at risk of being arrested or killed. Lastly, the security situation makes field visits under university regulations impossible. Therefore, the research makes use of six different types of sources to triangulate

data and increase the validity of its findings. Emphasis is put on the quality of data rather than the quantity.

First, secondary data is collected from previous studies on the ideology of established Palestinian armed groups. Literature is searched on Google Scholar and selected using the following key words: *Hamas; al-Qassam Brigades; Al-Aqsa Marytrs' Brigades; Palestinian Islamic Jihad; ideology*. Because ideology is flexible and can change over time (see Nussio, 2017, p. 945), more recent articles are favoured over older literature. The data from the articles are extracted using the following categories: problem definition, objective, proposed solution, religion, and relations to other factions.

Second, secondary data on recent developments and accounts of events by individuals are collected from selected English-language media outlets. These include *al-Jazeera*, *Mondoweiss*, and *Middle East Eye*. The articles are sampled using the following key words on Google Search: *Lions' Den; Palestine; armed groups; militias; West Bank; Nablus; armed resistance*. The main criterium for the inclusion of an article is whether it contains first-hand data such as interviews or reports from field visits. To respond to potential reporting bias, data is triangulated with other news sources. Given the limited media coverage of the topic, in total less than 40 articles are sampled.

Third, secondary data on security developments and news on the Palestinian militant landscape is collected from Twitter using its advanced search function. In particular, the accounts of expert on militant groups at FDD's Long War Journal Joe Truzman (*@JoeTruzman*) and Palestinian journalist Younis Tirawi (*@ytirawi*) are used because they provide regular updates and exclusive insights on the topic. The data collected on Twitter is triangulated with media reports and primary data.

Fourth, secondary data about public opinions is collected from the quarterly public opinion polls published by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR). The PSR is an independent, non-profit think tank that has been conducting opinion polls in the Palestinian territories and Israel since the mid-1990s.

Fifth, primary data about the ideologies of armed groups and their communication on current developments is collected from their websites and official social media accounts. While videos of militant groups were widely shared on TikTok and

Instagram, Telegram remained the main information channel for the Lions' Den and other groups. Telegram data is collected amongst other channels from *@areennabluss*, *@katibanabulus*, *@qassambrigades*, and *@sarayaps*. The messages are translated from Arabic to English using Google Translate. Necessary operational security measures including access through virtual private networks and covert accounts are taken.

Lastly, data is sampled through semi-structured, qualitative interviews with experts and journalists. Because of ethical concerns, interviews are not conducted with individuals directly involved in militant activities. Nevertheless, collecting data through expert interviews allows to complement the evidence with further inside-knowledge and incorporate different perspectives. Interview participants are selected using snowballing and non-probabilistic sampling. To qualify as an expert, the candidates must exhibit a proven record of knowledge or unique insights into the topic. This could be for example in form of academic publications, articles, or interviews. The interviews follow a semi-structured design to ease cross-comparison while leaving room for the participants to address further issues. The themes and questions are derived from the literature review (see appendix A for the interview guide). Interviews are conducted in English via Microsoft Teams and transcribed using the intelligent verbatim transcription method.

The data is collected only until March 2023. Interviews are conducted between March and April 2023. Events and developments after this point in time are not taken into account in the analysis.

3.3 Analytical Framework: Process-Tracing

The research is concerned with whether ideological differentiation effects popular support, mobilisation, and patron support for the Lions' Den. In other words, this research investigates whether there is a causal link between ideological differentiation and successful competition. Causality in social science is often understood "as patterns of regular empirical association" (Beach and Pedersen, 2013, p. 23) and finds its application in quantitative studies. This thesis however adopts a mechanismic, deterministic understanding of causality which is more concerned with the process itself by which causal forces are transmitted and

produce a specific outcome irrespective of the regularity of this association (Beach and Pedersen, 2013, p. 25).

One way to investigate causality in its mechanismic sense is through process-tracing, a method that aims at uncovering causal mechanisms. Causal mechanisms are thereby defined as "systems of interlocking parts that transmit causal powers/forces between a cause […] to an outcome" (Beach, 2018, p. 703). According to this understanding, a mechanism can be disaggregated into a series of parts which are connected by a causal logic. The task of process-tracing is to make explicit each part of the chain and identify mechanismic evidence that demonstrates a connection between the single parts (Beach, 2016, p. 645). The method can be applied to test or build theories about causal mechanisms. However, this study does not aim to make generalisations about the underlying causal mechanism of ideological differentiation beyond the case under investigation. Therefore, explaining-outcome process-tracing is used. The goal of this process-tracing variant is to "craft a minimally sufficient explanation of a particular outcome" (Beach and Pedersen, 2013, p. 18), in this case the success of the Lions' Den. Unlike in theory-centred variants of the method, the causal mechanism includes case-specific parts. In the following, it is described how the analytical framework of process-tracing is applied in this study.

Theorising the causal mechanism

Before engaging in-depth with the collected data, the causal mechanism is theorised. First, potential mechanisms are derived from the existing scholarship. The concepts discussed in the literature review serve as a starting point. Each part of the mechanism consists of an entity and an activity (Beach, 2016, p. 465). Second, the drafted mechanism is reconceptualised drawing on initial findings about the Lions' Den. It is important to note that these two stages are performed in an iterative rather than consecutive manner (see Beach and Pedersen, 2013, p. 19). This is because outcome-explaining mechanisms must be informed by the modalities of the case itself. The final mechanism contains conceptualisations about how its single parts are linked, details the observable measures for each step, and describes the types of evidence that are used (Beach and Pedersen, 2013, p. 99).

Testing the mechanism

Once the causal mechanism is theorised, it is tested using the available evidence. As chapter 4 outlines, the mechanism in this study consists of two parts. The first part tests ideological differentiation and thus responds to the first research objective. The data is analysed using structured focused comparison. The second part tests the causal effect of ideological differentiation on popular support, recruitment, and patron support through a series of straw-in-the-wind, hoop, and smoking-gun tests (see Collier, 2011, p. 825) and thus responds to the second research objective. Moreover, it is assessed whether the available evidence is trustworthy (Beach, 2016, p. 470). The tests are complemented with counterfactual reasoning to explore whether the causal traces can be found absent the ideological differentiation.

Assessing alternative explanations

Lastly, alternative explanations for the outcome – meaning the success of the group – are assessed. This responds to the third research objective. Thereby, hypotheses derived from the expert interviews are discussed in light of the available evidence. This serves to test whether the alternative explanations have "greater congruence or consistency with the outcome" (Beach and Pedersen, 2013, p. 91).

3.4 Limitations and Ethical Concerns

The choice of research design does not come without limitations. As mentioned above, the results of this single case study cannot be generalised. However, considering the lack of research on underlying processes of ideological differentiation, generalisability is sacrificed for depth of study. Validity and reliability of the study are nevertheless achieved through rigorous process-tracing and by triangulating data from a diverse range of sources.

Moreover, there are a few limitations regarding the data collection besides the above-mentioned issue of accessibility of conflict data. Firstly, some key documents such as the Telegram channels of armed groups are originally written in Arabic. Since the researcher does not fluently speak Arabic, electronic translation software (Google Translate) is used to double-check translations. Thereby, nuances might get lost in translation. In addition, only English-language news sources are used

which might introduce a reporting bias (Van der Windt and Humphreys, 2014, p. 749). As a mitigation measure, special attention is paid to local media outlets that publish in English. Lastly, the Lions' Den is a newly established group which has not been studied yet. The research therefore relies entirely on information that is publicly available, and the insights shared by experts through interviews. Because of ethical concerns, research cannot be conducted with militants and other individuals directly linked to the group.

Furthermore, using the method of process-tracing comes with a few limitations. To conduct process-tracing, very detailed knowledge of the case is required (Mahoney, 2015, p. 202). Beach and Pedersen (2013) note that "only provisional conclusions are possible in case there is insufficient information available on the causal chain" (p. 76). This dependency on available empirical data poses a serious challenge when applying the method to a contemporary issue (Tannenwald, 2015, p. 221; Vennesson, 2008, p. 237). Considering the information gaps on internal dynamics of the Lions' Den, findings of this study might only be provisional. To strengthen the validity of the findings, alternative explanations are discussed. Moreover, to increase the reliability of the findings, each step of the process is rigorously traced and documented in detail, allowing for later rectification when new evidence emerges.

Lastly, conducting semi-structured interviews about an ongoing conflict comes with ethical concerns. The sample includes experts which are based in a politically unstable area. Moreover, journalists faced increased scrutiny by the Palestinian authorities when critically reporting about the government in the past (Al-Khateeb, 2022, p. 6). To protect participants, personal data is de-identified and stored separately from research data. Participants are only mentioned by name if they explicitly consented to being named. In addition, the interview includes questions related to armed conflict. This might cause emotional distress if traumatic memories surface during the conversation. To mitigate this risk, participants are only asked about their professional views and not personal experiences. When participants show signs of emotional distress, the interview is interrupted and the participant is referred to support organisations.

4 Hypothetical Causal Mechanism

This study develops a hypothetical mechanism to test to what extent ideological differentiation accounts for the Lions' Den's success in competing with other Palestinian armed groups in the West Bank for popular support, recruitments, and external support. This mechanism combines systemic, theoretical considerations and case-specific modalities (see Beach and Pedersen, 2013, p. 156). First, the scope conditions of the mechanism are presented. Then, the two steps of the causal mechanism are explained by detailing their conceptual basis, the observable manifestations for each step, and the types of evidence used to measure the prediction.

4.1 Scope Conditions

The scope conditions – i.e., the causal condition and the outcome – describe the context in which a theorised mechanism is expected to operate (Beach and Pedersen, 2013, p. 54). The causal condition of the mechanism is *competition among armed groups*. Competition is thereby understood in the sense of intra-field rivalries, whereby multiple armed actors aim for the same strategic goal and compete for the same resources and constituencies. The outcome of the process is *successful competition*. Rebel groups compete successfully if they survive and ideally grow in strength, meaning that they not only ensure organisational goals but also increase the chances of achieving strategic goals. Conrad & Greene (2015, p. 547) state that survival and chances of achieving long-term strategic goals are associated with increasing recruitment and support. Similarly, Schwab (2023) argues that successful competition through ideological differentiation "should be associated with (more) external recognition or support, recruits, and/or civilian support" (p. 5). In the following, these three factors are adopted as measures of successful competition. To enable a rigorous process-tracing, the causal mechanism treats each of these measures separately.

4.2 Part 1: Ideological Differentiation

Conceptualisation: In the first step, it is hypothesised that the Lions' Den (entity) differentiates its ideology (activity) from other armed groups in the West Bank. According to Schwab (2023), ideological differentiation means moving away "from

the position of others in a social system through communication and/or behaviour" (p. 5). However, new actors such as the Lions' Den might directly adopt an alternative ideology catering the interests of a specific constituency instead of moving away from previous positions (see Tokdemir et al., 2021, p. 734). As explained in the literature review, ideological differentiation is usually associated with adopting a narrower stance and thus occupying a niche in the ideological landscape. Therefore, differentiation is said to lead to the creation of a "polarized ideological space" (Schwab, 2023, p. 5). Besides polarisation, this thesis argues that effects of ideological differentiation can equally be achieved by widening one's position, i.e. by rendering the ideology more inclusive rather than exclusive. However, for this strategy to succeed, this more inclusive stance must be innovative and unique to make it distinct from competitors. Adopting a more inclusive ideology is thought to be effective because it allows access to a larger constituency, potential recruitment pool, and a wider range of patrons. Consequently, it can be expected that the Lions' Den differentiates its ideology from other armed groups in the West Bank by adopting positions that are most distant from other groups' ideologies and/or by adopting positions that are more inclusive and unique at the same time.

Predicted evidence/observable manifestations: It is expected that the Lions' Den communicates its ideological stance through statements, especially via the official Telegram channel of the group and at public speeches during its rallies in Nablus. Moreover, since an ideological position can be communicated through behaviour as well, the group might underpin its stance through symbolic actions, for example during rallies or at funerals of its late fighters. By contrasting the ideology of the Lions' Den with the ideologies of other main groups – namely al-Qassam Brigades, al-Quds Brigades, and AMB – it can be tested whether it is most distant or unique.

Types of evidence: Ideological differentiation can be measured using account evidence from the Telegram channel of the group. Moreover, account evidence might be found in media reports containing interviews with members of the group or information about events of the group. Lastly, expert interviews might provide account evidence of statements and actions of the group.

4.3 Part 2: Support

In this second part of the mechanism, it is hypothesised that the audience (entity) reacts to the ideological differentiation by supporting (activity) the Lions' Den. This step discerns the causal energy that logically leads from part one to part two (Beach and Pedersen, 2013, p. 29). In the literature review, it is argued that rebels receive support from the population, recruits, and patrons. Consequently, this step of the mechanism differentiates between these three types of actors. Moreover, the empirical section will show that one unique characteristic of the Lions' Den is its cross-factional ideology and in particular the attempt to bridge the deep rift between Fatah and Hamas. Therefore, the case-specific parts of the mechanism focus on this aspect.

Part 2a: Popular support

Conceptualisation: In this branch, the public (entity) supports (activity) the Lions' Den following its ideological differentiation. Based on Maynard (2019), we can conceptualise four ways by which individuals might act upon an ideology: commitment, adoption, conformity, and instrumentalisation. All four ways might apply to adherer of the Lions' Den. For instance, individuals might support the group because they are genuinely convinced of the cross-factional ideology, because they have close social ties to members of the group and thus identify with the Lions' Den, because they feel pressured by the community to conform with local resistance groups, or because they expect an elevated status from supporting armed struggle. Since the four above-described mechanisms are mostly cognitive processes of perception and decision-making (Maynard, 2019, p. 639), it is difficult to find direct observable manifestations. However, whether based on sincere conviction or external pressures, the result of acting in support of the group is the same. Therefore, this part of the mechanism focuses on the result of the decision to support, i.e., on expressions support. To test whether this was caused by ideological differentiation, a link to the case-specific ideological configuration of the Lions' Den needs to be established. Considering that the cross-factional stance of the group makes it accessible to individuals from all political factions, a link between ideology and popular support can be assumed when individuals from different, opposing political factions are seen supporting the group. Because the Lions' Den is the only group that does not embrace or reject other factions, cross-factional

popular support would allow to infer that the ideology is the cause for this support. In contrast, other groups like the al-Qassam Brigades and Fatah-affiliated militants are not expected to rally supporters from the opposing political camp because they are ideologically exclusive.

Predicted evidence/observable manifestations: As explained in the literature review, support can take many different forms. Support of clandestine nature such as providing shelter is difficult to observe. Thus, this mechanism focuses mainly on public expressions of support through behaviour. First, it is expected to see individuals from opposing political factions – especially from Hamas and Fatah – participating in Lions' Den rallies, campaigns, or funerals. This can be observed when for example flags and banners of their respective faction are shown at these events. Second, it is expected to see popular support for the Lions' Den in the strongholds of both camps, i.e. the more Fatah-aligned north of the West Bank, and the Hamas-leaning south and Gaza. Third, it is expected to see statistical evidence of support from individuals affiliated with both political camps.

Types of evidence: Popular support can be measured using account evidence in media reports or expert interviews about public events. Moreover, pattern evidence from public opinion polls can be used to measure the distribution of support for the Lions' Den across political factions and locations.

Part 2b: Mobilisation

Conceptualisation: In this branch, potential recruits (entity) from various political backgrounds mobilise (activity) into the Lions' Den. Similar to the public support branch, the only way to identify a causal link between ideological differentiation is by looking at ideological features of the Lions' Den that are observable in the mobilisation pattern. Traditionally, Palestinian armed groups in the West Bank and their members are affiliated with a certain political faction such as Hamas, Fatah, PIJ or PFLP. For example, a person who is closely affiliated with Hamas – whether because of social ties or political convictions – would rather join the al-Qassam Brigades than the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades (Skare, 2022, p. 91). This is not to say that there are no exceptions (Truzman, 2023a), or that the various groups have not been cooperating. For instance, the Jenin Battalion is a conglomeration of groups with a joint command centre. However, the contributing militias maintain their own

identities and affiliations. The Lions' Den is different in that it rejects party affiliation, allowing the group to access a wider pool of potential recruits (Mustafa, 2023). Thus, evidence of a significant number of Lions' Den fighters stemming from different factions would indicate a causal link between ideological differentiation and increased mobilisation into the group. In contrast, other major groups are not expected to exhibit significant cross-factional membership.

Predicted evidence/observable manifestations: This part is most difficult to observe because of the clandestine nature of violent mobilisation. However, it can be expected that the identities of current and former Lions' Den fighters who were previously known to be affiliated with Hamas, PIJ, and Fatah are revealed following arrests and at funerals.

Types of evidence: Recruitment can be measured using account evidence about the identity of fighters from media reports, social media and expert interviews.

Part 2c: Patron support

Conceptualisation: In this branch, external actors (entity) directly or indirectly support or tolerate (activity) the Lions' Den. Following Maynard (2019), there are two possible ways ideological differentiation could lead other groups and entities to support the Lions' Den: conformity and instrumentalisation. For instance, Fatah or PA bodies might not oppose the Lions' Den despite its threat to the stability of Fatah governance because of the overwhelming popular support for the group. Rejecting the group could be politically costly because the Lions' Den is ideologically not opposed to Fatah. Other actors such as Hamas might have incentives to instrumentalise the ideology because they expect to benefit from its ideological appeal (Wendt, 1999, p. 42). Moreover, the ability of the Lions' Den to destabilise the West Bank and undermine the PA provide further reasons for Hamas and alike to support the group. This is more so true given that the group is not opposed to Hamas. However, without insights into internal decision-making processes of these actors, the motives to support the Lions' Den can hardly be identified. Therefore, a link to the case-specific ideological characteristics of the Lions' Den must be established to test whether ideological differentiation is the cause for support. Given the openness of the ideology to both political camps, this link can be said to be present if the support stems from both Hamas and affiliated actors as well as Fatah

and the PA. At the same time, other more exclusive groups are not expected to receive direct and indirect support from opposing patrons.

Predicted evidence/observable manifestations: Like popular support, patron support can take the form of statements as well as material, logistical or financial support. Thus, it can be expected to see Hamas, PIJ, Hezbollah and affiliated actors on one hand and Fatah and the PA on the other hand to issue statements of support to the group. Moreover, it is expected to see Hamas, PIJ or Hezbollah divert resources in form of logistics, finances, trainings, or weapons to the Lions' Den. At the same time, the PA and Fatah officials are expected to tolerate the group's activities by giving it the freedom to act and not arresting fighters.

Types of evidence: Patron support can be measured using account evidence from media reports and expert interviews. Discursive support can be further measured using account evidence from official channels of the actors and media reports containing interviews and statements of representatives of the parties.

Table 1 summarises the scope condition and each step including the branches of the causal mechanism. A more detailed overview of the steps including observable manifestations and types of evidence can be found in appendix B.

Causal condition: Intra-field competition	**Part 1: Ideological differentiation**	**Part 2: Support**	**Outcome: Successful competition**
The Lions' Den competes with other Palestinian armed groups in the West Bank for limited resources →	<u>The Lions' Den</u> *differentiates* its ideology from competing armed groups →	(a) <u>Individuals</u> from opposing factions *support* the Lions' Den (b) <u>Recruits</u> from opposing factions *join* the Lions' Den (c) <u>Patrons</u> from opposing factions *support* the Lions' Den →	The Lions' Den is successful in attracting popular support, recruits, and patron support

Table 1: Hypothesised causal mechanism for ideological differentiation of the Lions' Den. Note: Entities are underlined and activities are in italics (based on Beach, 2016, p. 468).

5 Empirical Section

The Lions' Den is a Palestinian armed group based in the old city of Nablus in the northern West Bank. Its origins can be traced back to the Nablus Brigade, an armed group that started in early 2022 and was modelled after the multi-factional Jenin Battalion (Barghouti and Patel, 2022). Some of its members split from the local Fatah hub while others were said to be aligned with PIJ (Farsang, 2022). After Israel killed three militants on 8 February 2022, the group started blocking the entrance for settlers to the Joseph's tomb in Nablus and gradually gained sympathies in the neighbourhood (Marshoud, 2023). When its most prominent member Ibrahim al-Nabulsi – also called the Lion of Nablus – was killed in August, a new Telegram channel was created announcing the Lions' Den (Barghouti and Patel, 2022). On 2 September 2022, the Lions' Den made its first public appearance in Nablus and declared its charter. In the following two months, the group was involved in more than 1,000 operations, killed two Israeli soldiers, and wounded 91 (Ibrahim, 2022). At the same time, the group was able to garner widespread support in the Palestinian society, became the pivot of armed struggle in the West Bank, and led many experts to proclaim a new era of Palestinian armed resistance.

One possible explanation as to why the group became so successful is its ideological differentiation. Many observers noted the inclusive and cross-factional character of the Lions' Den. This might have allowed the group to set itself apart from competitors and access a wider constituency, pool of recruits, and potential patrons. To explore this hypothesis, the causal mechanism developed in the previous chapter is tested. First, the scope conditions of the mechanism are established. Second, it is examined to what extent the Lions' Den differentiated itself from its competitors. Third, the impact of this ideological differentiation on the success of the group is assessed. Lastly, alternative explanations for the success are discussed.

5.1 Scope Conditions

For the causal mechanism to apply to the case study, the scope conditions outlined in chapter 4 must apply. In the following, evidence for the presence of these conditions is presented.

5.1.1 Competition Between Armed Groups in the West Bank

First, there should be evidence of competition between armed groups in the West Bank. Competition is present when multiple armed groups compete to represent the same community and might be further intensified by the entry of new actors contesting for support (Pischedda, 2018, p. 140).

The West Bank experienced a resurge of armed groups since 2021. As outlined in the literature review, there is evidence of the PIJ, Hamas, and AMB cells being established in different locations across the West Bank such as Jenin, Nablus, Tulkarem, Jaba'a, Tubas, and Jericho (al-Bazz, 2023). Moreover, Gaza-based groups such as the al-Nasser Salah al-Din Brigades and Mujahideen Brigades sought to establish a foothold in the West Bank since September 2022 (Truzman, 2023b; Truzman, 2022d). Besides, mostly decentralised new cells emerged adding to the high density of armed actors. In Nablus specifically, there is the Balata Battalion, the Fatah-affiliated Asker Battalion, the Nablus PIJ, Fatah Tanzeem militants, and the Lions' Den (Tirawi, 2022b; Tirawi, 2023j; Adra, 2022). However, not only the increasing number of armed groups contributes to an intensified competition in the West Bank. For instance, the incursions and targeted killings of Israeli forces especially in Jenin and Nablus significantly weaken the capacities of militias and lead to a constant need for new recruits to survive. Moreover, especially new groups struggle to garner support because the population is wary of new cells being implanted from external actors (Baroud, 2022c). Al-Bazz (2023) describes for example how shop owners in the city centre were first sceptical when the Lions' Den emerged. In addition, people might oppose armed struggle based on their individual cost-benefit calculations (Shikaki, 2023). In particular, the traumatic experiences of the Second Intifada and the following security chaos that led to a proliferation of vigilante groups, rape, pillage, racketeering, and ultimately the breakdown of society are still alive in the memories of the people (Mustafa, 2023). Lastly, since the demilitarisation of the West Bank, the PA is engaged in continuous efforts to clamp down on every other faction but Fatah insofar it still maintains control (Al-Bazz, 2023).

Consequently, even though currently there is strong cooperation between militants in the norther West Bank such as in the Jenin Battalion, established and nascent groups find themselves in a race to claim representation of the same constituency.

This becomes for example evident in the utilisation of social media, where groups compete to win viewers and eventually new recruits (Shikaki, 2023). Moreover, Fatah member Mohammad al-Sabag explains, the success of armed factions is measured "[b]y the number of martyrs and […] prisoners they have" (Abdulrahim and Yazbek, 2022). This leads to a contest to claim most martyrs as the case of Hisham Abu Naise in Jenin shows. After PIJ draped its black flag over the body of his deceased son, he was asked by a Fatah representative: "Do you want to keep him Islamic Jihad or do you want him to be Fatah?" (Abdulrahim and Yazbek, 2022). Similarly, when Ahmed Shehadeh was killed in November 2022 in Nablus, the Lions' Den brought a headband and flag to the hospital and led the funeral procession while Fatah set up the mourning hall. Another example showing that groups are vying for support is their engagement in philanthropic activities such as the distribution of sweets by the Lions' Den and other factions at the start of Ramadan (Tirawi, 2023i). Lastly, Fatah banned the printing of posters or necklaces with the logo of the Lions' Den in Nablus, threatening to otherwise close the printing shops. According to Al-Bazz (2023), this shows that Fatah – which has been the dominant party in Nablus for years – fears to lose popular support.

The evidence presented above demonstrates that the militant groups in the West Bank – even though refraining from direct confrontations – are still engaging in a fierce competition to remain relevant and establish dominance.

5.1.2 Successful Competition of the Lions' Den

The second scope condition is successful competition. Success is thereby measured in terms of popular support, recruits, and patron support. In the case of the Lions' Den, there is evidence that despite the fierce competition and obstacles towards armed mobilisation, it managed to attract support in all three fields.

Popular support

There are numerous signs in Nablus testifying to the popularity of the Lions' Den. Photographs of late fighters are spread all around the centre, shops sell Lions' Den logos and amulets, and songs about the group sound from cafés in the neighbourhood (Kingsley and Yazbek, 2023). Moreover, people salute in front of fighters' memorials, visit the places where they lived, and children memorise their

names (Al-Bazz, 2023). According to a Fatah spokesperson in Nablus, the funeral of five Lions' Den fighters in October 2022 "was one of the biggest seen in Palestine in years" (Barghouti and Patel, 2022). The success on social media speaks for the group's popularity, too. The official Telegram channel of the Lions' Den surpasses with over 250,000 followers by far other militants active on the same platform since years. This widespread support is also reflected in the public opinion polls from the last quarter of 2022, which show that armed groups such as the Lions' Den reach by far more support than traditional political factions (PSR, 2022, p. 3). Besides merely expressing support, large parts of the Palestinian society also followed the group's calls to action. For instance, the prompt for a general strike in October 2022 was widely implemented although traditional parties did not support it (Al-Masri, 2022). Palestinian writer Munir Shafiq commented the developments as follows: "What has caught my attention here is the public's position. If a protest takes place in Nablus and another person gets killed, the streets get full of people immediately and they'll act" (Al-Jazeera World, 2023). Similarly, a shopkeeper in Nablus states that the Lions' Den has "taken over the public consciousness in a way that is unprecedented" (Barghouti and Patel, 2022). This is not to say that there is no opposition. Mustafa (2023) for example notes that people risk being denounced collaborators if they openly criticise the group. However, the above evidence shows that the popular support and collective action the Lions' Den manages to garner exceeds competing groups by far.

Recruitment

Given the clandestine nature of militant activity, it is more difficult to establish evidence of successful mobilisation without speaking directly to fighters. Moreover, Mustafa (2023) claims that as much as the Lions' Den garnered symbolic support, the group itself is still containable. According to various estimates, the Lions' Den is currently the second largest militia in the West Bank. It reached between 60 and 100 members at its peak and currently counts 10 to 30 fighters (Al-Bazz, 2023; Mustafa, 2023). Remarkably, the group temporarily branched out with cells being established in Jenin, Huwara, and Hebron (Baroud, 2022c; Wright, 2023). The numbers of people arrested or killed who were affiliated with the Lions' Den give further indication about the group size. For example, as of 8 November 2022, 13 fighters surrendered to the Palestinian security services (Abu Amer, 2022). The

group itself issued a statement on 23 February 2023 saying that nearly 50 new fighters joined within a day after it said that the door is open for new recruits (@areennabluss, 2023c). Regardless of the actual number of fighters, the estimates show that the group managed to survive, successfully recruit members, and establish itself as one of the biggest militant groups in the West Bank despite periods of strong pressure by PA and Israeli arrests and targeted killings.

Patron support

When it comes to evidence for patron support, it is widely assumed that the Lions' Den receives financial and material support from various sides. For instance, according to a PA security source, Hamas and PIJ provide the group with money to buy weapons (Toameh, 2022). Mustafa (2023) says that there is also a possibility that the group receives funds by Iran through PIJ. Although these claims have yet to be substantiated, there is some evidence indicating that the group successfully attracted external support. For instance, Baroud (2022d) observes that the fighters were significantly better equipped on a rally on 9 December 2022 compared to earlier appearances. Moreover, Frantzman and Ahronheim (2022) explain that there was a substantial increase in market value of ammunition and weapons as Israeli forces contain smuggling activities. For example, the cost of M-16 bullets which the Lions' Den uses rose from 3 to 30 shekels. The prices for a M-16 itself ranges between $30,000 and $40,000. Dozens of members of the Lions' Den can be seen carrying such weapons on their rallies. Moreover, a Lions' Den fighter posted a picture of ammunition worth 300,000 shekel on social media (Tirawi, 2023k). As Al-Bazz (2023) notes, these military capabilities are minimal compared to Israel. However, they indicate that the group successfully attracted funding by patrons.

Overall, it can be concluded that the Lions' Den was successful in generating massive popular support, managed to continuously mobilise recruits even during setbacks, and gained access to external funding and support.

5.2 Ideological Differentiation of the Lions' Den

The causal mechanism developed in chapter 4 suggests that in a first step, the Lions' Den differentiated its ideology from other armed groups in the West Bank.

Given that the Lions' Den is a new group, differentiation is henceforth understood as filling an existing gap in the ideological landscape rather than moving away from a previous position. To test this part of the mechanism, public statements of the Lions' Den are compared with the ideology of the AMB, al-Qassam Brigades, and al-Quds Brigades. These three factions represent the established militant groups, have a relatively strong presence in the West Bank, and are thus main competitors of the Lions' Den. The comparison focuses on three categories. First, the problem-definition, objective, and proposed solution of each group is explored to capture the diagnostic and programmatic features of their ideologies. Moreover, considering the importance of Islam in the recent history of Palestinian resistance (Baumgarten, 2005, p. 26), the role of religion in the programs is compared. Lastly, the positioning of the groups in relation to intra-field competitors is analysed. The latter two categories help to capture identity-building elements of the ideologies.

In the case of Hamas (al-Qassam Brigades) and PIJ (al-Quds Brigades), the ideology of the military wing is usually synonymous to the political faction and thus people associate the armed groups with the official program of the parties. In the case of Fatah and AMB, the military wing often deviates from the official stance of the party leading to conflicting statements and a certain duality (Al-Tahhan, 2022a). This is made explicit where applicable. The Lions' Den, in contrast to the other groups, does not have a clear political vision (Al-Bazz, 2023). However, the literature review highlighted that ideology varies from ratified programs to loose sets of ideas. The Telegram channel of the Lions' Den thus provides the ideal source to filter these ideas because it serves as main channel of communication. Moreover, the actions of the groups are taken into account since ideology also manifests itself in behaviour.

5.2.1 Problem-Definition, Objective, and Proposed Solution

Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades/Fatah

In 2002 shortly after its foundation, the AMB made an announcement declaring: "Oh Zionists, depart from our land because we will not stop as long as there is a rapacious Occupier *[sic]*" (Frisch, 2005, p. 401). This shows that the main grievance which the military wing of Fatah confronts, and which legitimises its existence is the Israeli presence on Palestinian territory. The declared objective of AMB's struggle

is thus to root out and eliminate Israel (Frisch, 2005, p. 401). This objective is "grounded in the idea of Palestinian's right to an independent and sovereign state (Awad, 2022, p. 47). A recent communication on Telegram by the AMB cell in Nablus reaffirms this goal, explaining that "the brutal Israel occupation […] will not enjoy security until the sons of our patient Palestinian people enjoy it" (@katibanabulus, 2023a). Another statement in May 2023 reads: "our bullets will hit many, many of its soldiers, killing and injuring them" (@katibanabulus, 2023c). This demonstrates that – while Fatah under the leadership of Mahmoud Abbas does not advocate for violent means – its military wing deviates from the official position and considers armed revolution as an inevitable method to liberate their country.

Al-Qassam Brigades/Hamas

In the preamble of its updated principles from May 2017, Hamas makes it clear that it views Israel as a "racist, anti-human and colonial Zionist project" (Hamas, 2017) which seized the land of Palestine. From the movement's point of view, this is problematic because Palestine is considered *waqf* meaning that it is consecrated to Muslims (Awad, 2022, p. 47). Hamas's declared aim is thus "to liberate the land and confront the Zionist project" (Article 1) and establish at state based on Islamic principles. Article 2 thereby makes clear that Hamas considers Palestine to extend from the river Jordan to the Mediterranean. At the heart of the liberation struggle is armed resistance (Article 25). The movement opposes previous agreements such as the Oslo Accords (Article 21). However, Hamas's ideology is more malleable than Orientalist depictions make it seem like (Dunning, 2015, p. 285). For instance, it engages in negotiations with Israel and is not fundamentally opposed to long-term ceasefires (Bartal, 2022, p. 8). Moreover, it accepts the PLO as a national framework for the Palestinian people (Article 29). Nevertheless, its military wing Al-Qassam Brigades remains committed to the armed struggle.

Al-Quds Brigades/PIJ

Like the AMB, the PIJ has no constitution. However, the group published a series of pamphlets in the 1990s which communicate its ideology (Bartal, 2022, p. 12). Like Hamas, the PIJ considers the land of Palestine as *waqf* (Bartal, 2022, p. 5). However, in contrast to the other groups, the PIJ also "negates the possibility of any Jewish presence at all in Palestine, even within 1948 boundaries" (Bartal, 2022, p.

12). Rather, it aims for the destruction of Israel to establish a state based on *sharia law*. Inspired by the Iranian Revolution, PIJ considered its struggle to contribute to establishing a caliphate across the region (Bartal, 2022, p. 4). To achieve this goal, PIJ pioneered the thought of *jihad* – a religiously mandated war – against Israel. Until today, the group refuses to talk to Israel, rejects any agreements reached with Israel, and focuses on fighting its opponent militarily.

Lions' Den

The messages shared in the official Telegram channel show that – like the established militant groups – the Lions' Den sees the fundamental problem and reason for its existence in fighting the "brutal Israeli occupation" (@areennabluss, 2022d) who is "the enemy of [their] religion" (@areennabluss, 2022e), whose settlers "have been let loose and frolic" (@areennabluss, 2022g), and who wages a war against their men, women, and children (@areennabluss, 2022i). In a statement in January 2023, the group proclaimed: "Our message to you, oh children of Zion, is that there is no place for you on our land, no temple, not even a place to bury your dead. Go back to where you all came from" (@areennabluss, 2023b). What the militants claim to be their land becomes clear when looking at their logo, which features a map of Mandatory Palestine. Moreover, the Lions' Den makes it very clear that its ultimate goal is to eradicate Israel "so that the children of Judaism know that the land of milk and honey […] will be blood and fragments of flesh flying from their bodies" (@areennabluss, 2023b). However, one fighter of the Lions' Den explains in an interview that this goal might only be achieved in the far future: "It's about sending a message [to Israel] that we will not sit idly by […] We know we can't liberate Palestine now, but we will leave this to the next generation" (Al-Tahhan, 2022b). Instead, the Lions' Den sees its purpose in igniting a 'volcano of resistance' (@areennabluss, 2022g). Like the established groups, the Lions' Den affirms that the only way to achieve its goals is through armed struggle: "This enemy knows only one language, which is the language of fire and gunpowder" (@areennabluss, 2022f). To put pressure on the PA – which according to the Lions' Den supports Israel – the group also appeals to the population to engage in civil disobedience such as after the arrest of its fighter Musab Shtayyeh or for a general strike on 27 January 2023 (@areennabluss, 2023a).

5.2.2 Role of Religion

Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades/Fatah

In contrast to most Palestinian leftist factions and the PLO, which was formed based on a secular constitution, Fatah never was a purely secular movement (Dunning, 2015, p. 289). Instead, many of its members endorsed a synthesis of Palestinian nationalism and Islam, some even supported the formation of the PIJ, and founder Yasser Arafat regularly quoted from the Quran in his speeches (Frisch, 2005, p. 394). However, rather than assigning Islam a substantive role, Fatah used religious belief and rhetoric as a mobilising tool (Frisch, 2005, p. 397). Similarly, the statements of AMB were replete of Islamic symbols and references to the Quran. In fact, AMB is viewed as an attempt to counter the rise of Islamic resistance movements and "to respond to religious convictions prevalent in Palestinian society" (Frisch, 2005, p. 391). Until today, communications of the AMB are infused with religious rhetoric. For example, after two AMB fighters died in May 2023, the Telegram channel of AMB Nablus issued a statement saying that "this path is the path of jihad and martyrdom […] the path of precedence to God's heavens" (@katibanabulus, 2023b). Thus, even though Islam is not part of the official program of Fatah, the rhetoric of AMB does not differ significantly from its Islamist counterparts.

Al-Qassam Brigades/Hamas

The charter of Hamas (2007) clearly states that Islam is an integral part of its program (Article 1). As a member of the political bureau explains, "Hamas is a national Islamic movement […] nationalism means al-Quds and al-Aqsa, so there is no difference [between Islamist and nationalist]" (Dunning, 2015, p. 291). Consequently, the movement draws its legitimacy from the Quran and bases its polity on *sharia law* (Frisch, 2005, p. 397). Moreover, Hamas considers Palestine to be *waqf* which is reflected in its aim to retrieve the homelands so that "the voice of the muezzin may reemerge from its mosques to proclaim the establishment of the state of Islam" (Article 9). The statements of the al-Qassam Brigades on Telegram mirror this rhetoric, addressing its followers as "sons of our Arab and Islamic nation" (@qassambriagdes, 2023). Like the official program of Hamas, the messages of the al-Qassam Brigades make clear that the struggle for Palestine is

a religious duty. For example, after four of its fighters were killed in Jenin, a statement said that these martyrs offered "their lives and blood cheaply for the sake of God" and pledged "to God Almighty that [they] will continue the path that they took with their blood until God writes for us victory and liberation" (@qassambrigades, 2023).

Al-Quds Brigades/PIJ

Like Hamas, Islam plays of central role in the program of PIJ. In fact, the group was inspired by the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the Islamic Republic of Iran has been its main supporter (Bartal, 2022, p. 13). Consequently, the PIJ pictures the future state of Palestine as a sharia state. In contrast to the strong nationalist focus of Hamas, PIJ was especially in its early years influenced by pan-Islamism and considered the Palestinian struggle as part of a greater Islamic revolution (Bartal, 2022, p. 11). Despite its ties to Shiism, PIJ remained a Sunni organisation and removed at times members who converted to Shia Islam (Bartal, 2022, p. 21). Like PIJ itself, the armed wing al-Quds Brigades considers its struggle against Israel as a religiously mandated war. The Telegram channel of its Jenin branch for example calls to "move forward in the path of jihad" (@sarayajnein, 2022). Similarly, the official channel of the al-Quds Brigades proclaims: "Praise be to God, the Lord of the Worlds […] who conquers with terror the dens of the unjust aggressors" (@sarayaps, 2023).

Lions' Den

Similar to AMB, the Lions' Den's communications are replete of religious rhetoric. Most of the messages in the Telegram channel start with "In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful" (@areennabluss, 2022k). Moreover, right at the centre of the group's logo is the Dome of the Rock – a nationalist but also religious symbol. However, Dunning (2015, p. 289) notes that the use of Islamic narratives and rhetoric does not necessarily indicate that a group is religious by nature. Instead, the religious narrative might have an instrumental use given that the fighters are regularly confronted with death. In fact, one Lions' Den fighter said in an interview with Al-Jazeera (2023): "We know that […] martyrdom chose the youth of this country". Consequently, the group makes use of religious promises to give its struggle meaning beyond this life. For example, when commemorating a late

fighter who was supposed to get married soon, the group congratulated him to his 72 wives from among the purest virgins that are awaiting him (@areennabluss, 2022a). Another message in the Telegram channel reads: “We ask the Lord Almighty to shower him with His mercy and dwell him in His spacious gardens with the prophets” (@areennabluss, 2022c). Overall, because the Lions’ Den has no official charter, it is difficult to determine the exact role of religion in its ideology. Considering the group’s links to Fatah, it could be argued that the use of religion might be more instrumental than programmatic. However, the original leadership has been either killed or arrested and new recruits constantly join the group, making it vulnerable to potential influence of religiously fundamentalist ideas.

5.2.3 Relation to Other Factions

Especially since 2021, Palestinian armed groups in the West Bank cooperate closely with each other. However, this should not obscure the sometimes deeply rooted rivalries between factions on a political level which can also impact their armed wings.

Established factions

Of the established factions, PIJ is the only one that is not active on a political level. Neither is the PIJ part of the PLO, nor has it officially recognised the PA as a representative body of Palestinians (Bartal, 2022, p. 12). It further does not commit to the Oslo Accords, or any ceasefires agreed on with Israel. Thus, the PIJ can be viewed as coexisting with the current Palestinian political system. Given the ideological proximity with Hamas and its abstention in the political field, PIJ and Hamas have friendly relations. Their cooperation in the Joint Operations Room in Gaza is proof of this (see @sarayaps, 2023). However, while cooperating with the AMB on a local level in the West Bank, the PIJ is heavily critical of the Fatah and PA leadership and seeks its abolition (ECFR, 2023). Because the PA is controlled by Fatah, the al-Quds Brigades only operate underground and in areas where the PA is weak such as in Jenin.

Like the PIJ, Hamas boycotted the PA in the 1990s and presented itself as an alternative to the PLO (Awad, 2022, p. 57). Moreover, the movement rejects the Oslo Accords negotiated by the PLO. Nevertheless, Hamas participated in national

elections and claimed victory in 2006 (Bartal, 2022, p. 6). Fatah did not admit its defeat which led to a deep rift between the two parties. Despite reconciliation efforts, this split remains until today and translated to the militant landscape. For example, the Fatah militant offshoot Tanzeem attacked four Hamas members near Hebron in April 2023 (Tirawi, 2023l). Like the al-Quds Brigades, the al-Qassam Brigades only operate underground or in areas where the PA lost control.

The AMB find themselves in a somewhat ambiguous position. Being part of the armed struggle, they often cooperate closely with groups who are otherwise rivals of Fatah including the al-Quds and al-Qassam Brigades (@sarayajnein, 2022). Nevertheless, occasional clashes between the factions occur as the above-mentioned example shows. Affiliated with the governing party of the West Bank, the revived AMB cells enjoy relative privileges and protection in contrast to its Islamist counterparts (Shikaki, 2023). At the same time, the AMB also experiences opposition from those elements of Fatah and the PA who reject armed struggle, in particular the strand which is close to PA President Mahmoud Abbas (Mustafa, 2023).

Lions' Den

The Lions' Den sought to overcome the deep friction and separation into two camps. Already on the group's first public appearance, the spokesman saluted "those who have walked in the footsteps of Yasser and Yassin and Abu Ali Mustafa and Shikaki" (Barghouti and Patel, 2022). These are the founding fathers of Fatah, Hamas, the PFLP, and the PIJ. In another statement in September 2022, the Lions' Den explained that it is a unitary resistance group which is not affiliated with any faction and does not have any political agendas (@areennabluss, 2022b). In the same message, the group pledged to "remain free resistance fighters, with guns with their correct compass, which is the occupation wherever it is". Two weeks later, the group reaffirmed that it is "not driven by partisan interests, neither here nor there" and added that "it has no disagreement with the [Palestinian] security services" (@areennabluss, 2022j). To underline its non-confrontational stance towards the PA, the Lions' Den explains that its fighter Musab Shtayyeh did not resist when he was arrested by the Palestinian security forces (Al-Jazeera World, 2023). Even though the PA tried to dissolve the group by bribing its recruits, the Lions' Den maintained its defensive stance and even called the public not to offend

former militants who surrendered to the PA (@areennabluss, 2022m). Moreover, a Lion's Den fighter explains in an interview with Al-Jazeera (2023): "Whoever decides to join the Lions' Den […] shouldn't receive instructions from any [political] party". Thus, the group not only refuses to align itself with other factions, but also are its members expected to act free of partisan interests. This makes clear that the Lions' Den is more than simply an umbrella group. Symbolic actions by the group support this stance. For instance, the late fighter Ibrahim al-Nabulsi refused that his body would be covered in the flag of Fatah and chose a Palestinian flag instead (Hearst, 2022).

Jenin Brigades

The Jenin Brigades, which were founded in 2021, are often considered to be part of a new resistance movement operating beyond traditional factions. Some claim that their model has inspired the Lions' Den. It is true that the Jenin Brigades – although primarily affiliated with the PIJ – have fighters from different factions including Fatah, Hamas and PFLP (The Mondoweiss Podcast, 2023). However, there is a significant difference between the Lions' Den and the Jenin Brigades. As a member of the latter says, "[t]he factions help each other […] in the field we are all brothers and our weapons are pointed at one enemy" (Al-Jazeera World, 2023). Senior member of the PIJ Akram al-Ajouri further explains that "[t]here's great harmony between Fatah's AMB and PIJ's al-Quds Brigades" (Al-Jazeera World, 2023). These statements exemplify that the Jenin Brigades are viewed as an umbrella organisation which eases cooperation between factions. However, unlike the Lions' Den which claims to surmount factional separation, the Jenin Brigade still distinguishes between the different armed groups that assemble for a common goal. This is to say, while the Lions' Den is cross-factional, the Jenin Brigades are multi-factional. Therefore, despite their relative strength, the Jenin Brigades are not considered an armed faction in its own right in this analysis.

5.2.4 Filling the Market Niche

The comparative analysis (see summary in table 2) shows that the Lions' Den does not differ substantially from other groups when it comes to its problem-definition and proposed solution. Like its competitors, the group's purpose is to free what was once Mandatory Palestine of Israel. The suggested means is armed struggle. Unlike

the established armed factions, the Lions' Den does not have a clear objective as to how a future Palestine should look like. Thus, the Lions' Den did not differentiate itself when it comes to the diagnostic and programmatic elements of its ideology. Similarly, the group is not significantly different from the main armed actors regarding the role of religion in its ideology. In fact, it is yet to be seen whether religion will play a more instrumental or programmatic role. However, the group deviates from al-Qassam Brigades, al-Quds Brigades, and the AMB when it comes to describing its relations to other factions. While all established armed groups are directly or indirectly involved in factional divisions, the Lions' Den repeatedly emphasised that it considers itself to be cross-factional and operates beyond the rift in the Palestinian political and military landscape. Such a position might not be unprecedented in the history of Palestinian armed resistance. For example, residents in Nablus compare the Lions' Den with the Night's Guard which was active during the Second Intifada (Mustafa, 2023). However, the Lions' Den is the only cross-factional group that is currently active in the West Bank.

	Al-Qassam Brigades	**Al-Quds Brigades**	**Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades**	**Lions' Den**
Problem-definition	Zionism/ occupation	Zionism/ occupation	Zionism/ occupation	Zionism/ occupation
Objective	Liberation and Palestinian state with strong Islamic role	Liberation and Palestinian state based on sharia law	Liberation and independent Palestinian state	Liberation
Proposed solution	Armed struggle	Armed struggle	Armed struggle	Armed struggle
Role of religion	Programmatic	Programmatic	Instrumental	Instrumental?
Intra-field relations	Opposed to Fatah and the PLO, supportive of PA as political construct	Opposed to PLO, PA, and its elite (Fatah)	Implicitly opposed to Fatah elite, political rival to Hamas and PIJ	Cross-factional, inclusive of members from all parties

Table 2: Ideological similarities and differences between Palestinian armed groups.

The Lions' Den thereby not only carved out a niche and offered a unique selling point. By rendering the identity-building element of its ideology more inclusive and

associating itself with the so-called 'popular cradle' (see Abu-Jildeh, 2022), the group managed to take the largest possible distance from factional competitors and address at the same time a significantly larger audience. Consequently, the expected evidence for the first step of the causal mechanism is present.

5.3 Support for the Lions' Den

The previous chapter showed that the Lions' Den carved out an ideological niche in the Palestinian militant landscape by presenting itself as cross-factional and inclusive. This chapter tests the second part of the causal mechanism, analysing to what extent this ideological differentiation effected popular support, recruitment, and patron support. Because the main fault line runs between Hamas and Fatah, the analysis focuses mainly on whether the inclusiveness of the Lions' Den helped to bridge this split and attract support from both camps.

5.3.1 Popular Support

According to the hypothesised mechanism, it is expected to see individuals from opposing political factions demonstrating support for the Lions' Den. Moreover, support should stem from locations that are traditionally a stronghold of Fatah as well as locations where Hamas is popular. Lastly, there might be statistical evidence of support from both camps for the Lions' Den.

Support by individuals from opposing political factions

There are numerous examples of Fatah affiliates showing support for the Lions' Den. For instance, on the funeral of Lions' Den member Ahmed Amjad Shehadeh, multiple flags of Fatah could be seen (ITIC, 2022c). Moreover, individuals such as the Fatah activist Majed Tabilah publicly embraced the group (Tirawi, 2023f). At the same time, there are examples of Hamas affiliates supporting the Lions' Den. One of the most prominent instances is a young man who raised the banner of the militant group together with a Hamas flag on an archway at the al-Aqsa compound in March 2023 (Truzman, 2023d). More importantly however, the Lions' Den was able to rally both Hamas and Fatah supporters at the same occasion. One prominent example is the funeral of five killed fighters on 25 October 2022. A picture shared in the report by Rosenfeld and Al-Bazz (2022) shows a participant of the rally waving the emblem of Fatah. Another image from the same event shows the

flags of Hamas and PIJ in the background (see Ziv, 2022). Similarly, on a Lions' Den rally in Ni'lin near Ramallah on 12 March 2023, supporters from both rivalling political factions were present. A video shared by Younis Tirawi (2023g) on Twitter shows people carrying flags of the Lions' Den and Fatah, the prevalent party in Ramallah. However, there are also numerous participants with flags from Hamas, the al-Qassam Brigades, and even the PIJ.

This is not to say that events of the Lions' Den are the only occasion where people from different factions come together. For example, during a Fatah march at Birzeit University on 14 November 2022, pictures of Hamas figures were showcased together with AMB flags and Lions' Den badges (Tirawi, 2022a). However, considering the hype around cross-factional resistance at that time, the decision to show prominent Hamas members was likely inspired by the ideology of the Lions' Den. Generally, it is uncommon for members of Hamas and Fatah to join rallies of the opposing faction and showcase their factional affiliation. In contrast, the above evidence indicates that it is a frequent occurrence to see affiliates from opposing factions rallying together for the Lions' Den.

Support in strongholds of both political camps

Although the support for both Hamas and Fatah is generally on decline, Shikaki (2023) explains that people in the north of the West Bank are traditionally more aligned with Fatah and the PA while Hamas is more prominent in the central and southern parts like Hebron and Bethlehem. Moreover, residents of Gaza are more supportive of Hamas than Fatah (PSR, 2022, p. 3). Based on the evidence, the Lions' Den was able to equally mobilise the public in places that are considered Fatah and Hamas strongholds respectively. For example, during the closure of Nablus in October 2022, the group called Palestinians to come to the rooftops at exactly half past midnight: "We want the last sound we hear to be your voices and the sound of your takbeers [God is the Greatest]" (@areennabluss, 2022l). Within 30 minutes, not only residents of Nablus but also Ramallah, Jericho, and Hebron heeded the call (Barghouti and Patel, 2023). Similarly, thousands of people took to the streets in February 2023 to pledge loyalty to the group in Fatah strongholds like Ramallah, Nablus, and Jericho as well as in Hamas strongholds such as Hebron and Bethlehem (Mondoweiss, 2023b). Moreover, there is significant evidence of the group's popularity in Gaza. For example, symbols of the group were displayed on

a rally and people carried photos of Lions' Den's fighters (The Palestine Chronicle, 2022a). Another video shows youth with Lions' Den bandanas in the Gaza Strip engaging in some sort of military training (Truzman, 2022h). Overall, neither Fatah nor Hamas affiliated armed groups have been able to muster such widespread support since the First Intifada (Mondoweiss, 2023b), and more importantly across the strongholds of both camps since the split in 2007.

Statistical evidence

To date, no polls allow to draw definite conclusion regarding the political affiliation of those who are supportive of the Lions' Den. However, a poll conducted between 7 and 10 December 2022 shows that 84% of respondents in Gaza and 65% in the West Bank support "the formation of armed groups, such as the Lions' Den" (PSR, 2022, p. 3). Among supporters of Fatah, 66% gave a positive response compared to 87% of Hamas supporters and 78% of supporters of third parties. In a later poll conducted in March 2023, 71% in Gaza and 66% in the West Bank responded to be supportive of groups like the Lions' Den (PSR, 2023, p. 3). These numbers show that the support for newly established groups that bridge the political divide is high across different locations and opposing factions.

To summarise, the predicted evidence for support by individuals from opposing parties and support in strongholds of opposing political camps could be identified. Direct statistical evidence could not be found. However, the existing polls do not contradict with the expected manifestations of the mechanisms. Consequently, the evidence supports the claim that ideological differentiation led to increased popular support.

5.3.2 Recruitment

According to the causal mechanism, it is expected to see individuals from different political camps join the group and fight under the same banner. The media has often claimed that the Lions' Den consists of fighters from several factions (see Kingsley and Yazbek, 2023; Al-Bazz, 2022). In the following, a selection of fighters is examined to test this claim.

Factional background of Lions' Den fighters

The most prominent fighters of the Lions' Den are its founding members Mohammed al-Azizi and Abdel Rahman Souboh. Both were affiliated with Fatah and following their death in July 2022, they were claimed by the AMB (Barghouti and Patel, 2022). Besides, other well-known fighters were affiliated with Fatah before joining the Lions' Den. Ibrahim al-Nabulsi's father Alaa al-Nabulsi was a senior intelligence officer in the PA (Kingsley, 2022). Oday al-Azizi and Mohammed Tubilia were themselves members of the Palestinian security forces, the latter served as senior lieutenant (Tirawi, 2023b). Mahmoud al-Banna had no links to the security forces. However, he was commonly called 'hawk' referring to the Fatah Hawks, a Fatah-affiliated militant group in the 1980s (Baruch, 2023). Lastly, late commander of the Lions' Den Wadee al-Hawah was close to Fatah Tanzeem according to various sources (Tirawi, 2023j).

Besides its Fatah-affiliates, the Lions' Den also exhibits a range of members from other factions. The most prominent among them is Musab Shtayyeh who was arrested by the Palestinian security forces on 20 September 2022. It is widely known that the 30-year-old was a commander within the al-Qassam Brigades before joining the Lions' Den (Toameh, 2022). Al-Bazz (2023) even suggests that Shtayyeh was assigned by Hamas to fund and organise the Lions' Den. A recent raid of Shtayyeh's home further showed that the family is in possession of Hamas banners and flags (Middle East Monitor, 2023). Another Hamas-affiliate in the group is Suleiman Imran. After his arrest on 5 October 2022, Hamas hailed the fighter (Truzman, 2022b) while at the same time the Lions' Den claimed in its official Telegram channel that he belonged to the group (@areennabluss, 2022h). Moreover, Saed al-Kuni who was killed in October 2022 is said to have had links to Hamas (Baroud, 2022b).

Apart from Hamas, there were some PFLP-affiliates in the rows of the Lions' Den, the most prominent being Tamer al-Kilani who was killed by an explosive device in October 2022 (Tirawi, 2023a). He previously defected from the PA's presidential guard and was – according to a statement of the PFLP – a member of the Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades at a younger age (Al-Jazeera, 2022; Al-Tahhan, 2022b). There is also evidence that Mohammed Tabanja was affiliated with the PFLP (Baruch, 2023, Tirawi 2023a). Lastly, Tamer Alsabee who was arrested in January 2023 is

said to have been affiliated with PFLP (Tirawi, 2023a). In addition, a Lions' Den fighter claimed in an interview with the New York Times that their group included members with PIJ background (Kingsley, 2022). For example, Mohammed Juneidi posed in front of a PIJ flag and called himself a "son of saraya" – the al-Quds Brigades – shortly before his death (Mondoweiss, 2023a; Tirawi, 2023c; Tirawi, 2023d). On his funeral procession, he wore bandanas of both, the Lions' Den and PIJ (Truzman, 2023c). Lastly, a fighter called Ahmed Kharaz who was arrested by the Israeli forces in early December 2022 fought under the umbrella of the Lions' Den but was also associated with the Gaza-based Mujahideen Brigades (Truzman, 2022i).

Reliability of the evidence and the mechanism

Not all the above-described affiliations are sufficiently substantiated (see appendix C for an overview of the evidence and the reliability of sources). This is particularly the case for evidence based on mourning statements or flags used during funerals. In the West Bank, multiple factions often claim the same fighters in a 'race for martyrs' (see chapter 5.1). However, most of the evidence could be triangulated and thus classified as reliable in above table. Moreover, several members from a non-Fatah background such as Shtayyeh or al-Kilani were high-ranking commanders. This shows that the group did not only tolerate fighters with different backgrounds but was indeed factional at its core. Overall, the cases exemplify the wide range of different backgrounds the members of the Lions' Den stem from.

Nevertheless, it is questionable whether this sufficiently supports the claim that ideological differentiation helped to attract more recruits. The research has shown that membership of armed groups in the West Bank is more fluid than the factional rivalries suggest. Al-Bazz (2023) explains for example that Hamas-affiliates do not have the option to join al-Qassam Brigades because there is no Hamas cell in Nablus. Therefore, they simply join the group closest to them. Consequently, while the predicted evidence could be identified, the findings suggest that this branch of the mechanism should be reconceptualised to establish a causal link. In particular, more reliable and first-hand evidence such as interviews with fighters might provide further insights whether and how ideology might have helped mobilisation into the Lions' Den.

5.3.3 Patron Support

According to the hypothesised mechanism, it is expected to see factions that are usually opposed to each other making statements embracing the Lions' Den. Moreover, it is expected to see opposing factions supporting the group with material and funds or by tolerating its activities. Again, the focus is set on Hamas and the PA or Fatah which make up the two main rivalling camps. In the past, groups have become the playball of either of these factions, making it nearly impossible to serve the agenda and enjoy the goodwill of both sides.

Statements of patrons and external actors

Hamas almost routinely lauds the Lions' Den and its operations or praises its martyrs. For example, on 11 October 2022, after the Lions' Den carried out an attack in Shavei Shomron and killed one Israeli soldier, Hamas's spokesman Hazem Qassem hailed: "The Lions' Den marks a new heroism by targeting the soldiers of the occupation […] This escalating act of resistance […] is capable of resolving the battle for the benefits of our people" (Falastin Alan, 2022). Qassem thereby clearly recognised the value of the group in arousing unrest in the West Bank and advancing the fight against Israel. In another statement on 25 October 2022 after two Lions' Den fighters were killed, the chairman of the Hamas Political Bureau Ismail Haniyeh said that "Nablus draws the path of dignity and pride with the blood of martyrs […] There are great things coming from Nablus" (Middle East Monitor, 2022). These two examples demonstrate that Hamas unequivocally backed the Lions' Den since its early days. Besides, the group also received statements of support from Hezbollah, which routinely published their announcements in its online channels, and Iran. For example, Ayatollah Khamenei lauded the group in a tweet saying that "Oslo Palestine turned into Palestine of the Lions' Den" (Khamenei, 2023).

On the other hand, there is significant evidence of PA and Fatah officials expressing sympathies for the group. For example, major-general Adnan Dmiri said in an interview in March 2023: "The Palestinian security forces' standpoint regarding the Lions' Den is clear. They are defending themselves. We tell the Lions' Den: 'Who ever tries to harm you, attack them'" (Tirawi, 2023h). Similarly, the PA governor of Nablus Ibrahim Ramadan explained: "We like them, yes. We support them, yes"

(Kingsley and Yazbek, 2023). However, he continued saying that the group needed to stop. Moreover, in another statement, Ramadan accused the mothers of Lions' Den fighters of "sending their sons to commit suicide" (Baroud, 2022b). Therefore, Ramadan explained that the PA is "trying to dismantle this phenomenon in a peaceful way" (Rosenberg and Al-Bazz, 2022). This shows that the PA neither completely rejected the Lions' Den, nor did it embrace the group. Instead, it sought to strike a balance between recognising the fighters as respectable patriots which the PA seeks to protect and communicating that there is a red line which the Lions' Den should not cross.

Evidence of financial and material support or tolerance

There have been numerous claims that the Lions' Den received financing from Hamas, but also groups such as the PIJ, PFLP, and indirectly Hezbollah and Iran (see Al-Masri, 2022; Truzman, 2022b). Even though the equipment of the group leaves little doubt that it receives financial aid, substantial proof as to the origin of funds has yet to be established. However, there are several traces that points towards Hamas as one important patron of the group. Not only did Hamas voice support as shown above. It also appears like the movement adorns itself with the achievements of the Lions' Den. For instance, Hamas organised a military march in Gaza titled 'The Lions' Den' on its 35th anniversary (The Palestine Chronicle, 2022b). During this parade, members of the al-Qassam Brigade were marching with Lions' Den flags, wore it insignias, and carried pictures of its late fighters (Truzman, 2023a). Moreover, Hamas erected a billboard in Gaza showcasing martyrs of the Lions' Den (Truzman, 2022f). These unusual sights can be interpreted as a claim by Hamas to have a share in the Lions' Den's success. Another trace pointing to financial support by Hamas is Musab Shtayyeh. According to Al-Bazz (2023), Hamas might have used Shtayyeh as a channel to provide funding to the group. There are also reports about Shtayyeh promising residents of Nablus that Hamas would fund the reconstruction of their houses if they would get destroyed by Israeli forces (Al-Bazz, 2023). Other sources claim that the flow of funding to the Lions' Den had been constant until Musab Shtayyeh was arrested (Farsang, 2022). In fact, major-general Adnan Dmiri explained that the PA arrested Shtayyeh exactly because he had 1.25 million JOD in his possession (Tirawi, 2023h). Likewise, Israel accused Hamas to have provided the group $1 million through Shtayyeh to

purchase weapons (Abu Amer, 2022). Lastly, and most importantly, a voice message attributed to Ibrahim al-Nabulsi was published in summer 2022. In this message, the late fighter explicitly thanked Hamas for its support (Truzman, 2022c; Tirawi, 2022c). Altogether, this selection of evidence strongly suggest that Hamas funded the Lions' Den.

When it comes to the PA, support for the group is less direct. Being the de jure-authority in the West Bank, the PA as such has no interest in strengthening militant groups. Al-Bazz (2023) explains that in the past 20 years, groups affiliated with Hamas and PIJ have been eliminated quickly by the PA and Israel. The fact that the Lions' Den was able to establish such a strong presence in Nablus might thus be linked to a certain benevolence or at least hesitance on behalf of Fatah to confront the group. For example, Kingsley (2022) reports how 60 masked fighters of the Lions' Den held a rally while PA police officers were several blocks away. According to an Israeli military official, "[t]he PA has the manpower, the ammunition and the arms [but] they don't have the will" (McNeil, 2022). Instead, the PA chose to quietly negotiate with members of the group to surrender in return for economic incentives, amnesty, and jobs. For example, Wadee al-Hawah was promised a salary of $6,000, a position with the Palestinian security forces, and a fully funded house and car (Al-Tahhan, 2022b). According to Barghouti and Patel (2022), these negotiations remind of deals that the PA struck with Fatah-affiliated armed groups after the Second Intifada. Emphasising that the decision to give up arms is voluntary, the PA governor of Nablus said: "This is a peaceful process. We never violently detain anyone" (Al-Bazz, 2022). Moreover, he justified this approach by implying that it is for the security of the fighters: "I offered to protect them as much as we can, and there could be a solution with the other side [Israel] regarding them" (Joffre, 2023). This is not to say that the PA did not forcefully arrest members of the group. The case of Musab Shtayyeh for example was widely discussed. Moreover, the PA arrested a range of Lions' Den fighters and even members of the Palestinian security forces with close connections to the group (Rosenberg and Al-Bazz, 2022). However, several videos show that Lions' Den operatives under 'protective custody' such as Mohammed Tabanja and Mahmoud al-Banna were treated well (Tirawi, 2023e; Truzman, 2022g). Thus, compared to other armed groups and especially those affiliated with Hamas, the Lions' Den was handled with kid gloves. Shikaki

(2023) further explains that the PA would find it easier to crack down on Hamas than groups that are not siding with the opposite camp in the domestic split. For example, shortly after the Jenin Batallion was established, the PA security forces confiscated weapons and detained suspects in an extensive raid (ITIC, 2022a, p. 10). Similarly, the PA arrested 200 activists of Hamas in 36 hours before its anniversary in December 2022 (Tirawi, 2023b). Meanwhile, the 'neutral' Lions' Den but also a Fatah-affiliated armed group in Ramallah could emerge and openly hold rallies.

Overall, there is evidence of supportive comments about the Lions' Den from both political camps, albeit at times reluctantly on the side of the PA. This shows that the Lions' Den attracted the benevolence of Hamas and made it difficult for the PA to confront the group verbally in a way it usually does with Hamas affiliates. Moreover, the above evidence demonstrates that the Lions' Den likely received funds from Hamas and other Islamist factions while at the same time, the PA largely tolerated the group and granted it more freedom to act and expand than it does with other non-affiliates in the West Bank. Consequently, a causal link between the Lions' Den's ideological differentiation and patron support is established.

5.4 Alternative Explanations

In the previous chapter, the evidence of ideological differentiation as main success-factor for the Lions' Den was explored. This chapter discusses alternative explanations based on the data collected, namely violent outbidding, kinship and social ties, social media, and general political trends. It is shown that, while these factors might have contributed to the outcome, they fail to account for all facets of the Lions' Den's success.

5.4.1 Violent Outbidding

The literature review has presented several studies arguing that outbidding played a role in competition between Palestinian armed groups in the past. Similarly, commentators and experts claimed that the Lions' Den adopted an outbidding strategy to gain prominence. According to Dekel (2022, p. 1), the group was responsible for most of the shooting incidents between September and October 2022. Moreover, its operations are known to be particularly bold and thus helped

the Lions' Den to gain traction vis-à-vis its rivals (ITIC, 2022, p. 2). Likewise, Mondoweiss (2023b) explained that "[p]olitical legitimacy […] is not to be found in summit halls and security deals but rather sprouts from the barrel to a rifle when pointed at the coloniser". This view is supported by testimonies of citizens. A shop owner in Nablus said for instance that "[f]ollowing the killing of an Israeli soldier and the siege of Nablus, things have completely changed [and] people felt that [the Lions' Den] were real resistance men" (Al-Bazz, 2022). Another resident of Nablus stated that "[t]he continuation of the assassinations may attract the young generation and encourage them to join" (Al-Bazz, 2022). Soon enough, other groups like the Jenin Battalion entered the race for popular support and stepped up their operations (ITIC, 2022b, p. 3).

However, even though the daring tactics and many fatalities of the group helped to gain attention and enthuse parts of the population, the outbidding theory exhibits two main gaps in accounting for the success of the Lions' Den. First, it does not explain how the group's popularity further rose in late 2022 during a period when the Lions' Den largely disappeared from the surface. Second and more importantly, while Hamas or PIJ have evident interest in supporting a surging resistance group to destabilise the West Bank, the outbidding theory does not explain why the Lions' Den was for a long time tolerated by the PA. Rather, the offensive operations and numerous Israeli incursions against the group exposed the PA's weakness and should have provoked a more rigorous outrooting of the group.

5.4.2 Kinship and Social Ties

Another possible explanation for the popular support, successful mobilisation and tolerance by the PA are kinship and social ties of the Lions' Den. First, Al-Bazz (2023) explains that the group is deeply embedded in the community in Nablus and that most of its members are friends or neighbours of the residents. He further elaborates that the fighters gained reputation because they were not fighting for their personal interest but the Palestinian cause. This is particularly evident in the person of Ibrahim al-Nabulsi. As Barghouti (2022) writes, he grew up in the streets of Nablus, was well-known and loved in his community, and ultimately became a role model and legend for many. But also other fighters of the Lions' Den stem from local families and were well-respected. A shopkeeper in Nablus says: "This group

is clean. They are honourable and good young men. We know them" (Al-Bazz, 2022). Another resident explains: "These are our sons, our brothers, our boys […] They represent trustworthiness and honor, they have made us proud" (Barghouti and Patel, 2022). According to these testimonies, the local embeddedness of the fighters helped the Lions' Den to gain trust and support of the residents of Nablus.

Second, the social ties of the Lions' Den might have helped to mobilise potential recruits. The mother of late Lions' Den fighter Hussam Aslim explained that it was the killing of Ibrahim al-Nabulsi that led him to join the group (Marshoud, 2023). In an interview with Al-Jazeera (2023), another fighter confirms that members of the Lions' Den are "all friends from the same city. We knew each other before the idea of founding this group came to light".

Third, many fighters of the Lions' Den had close links to the PA and its security services. For instance, Ibrahim al-Nablusi was the son of an intelligence officer in the PA while other fighters served themselves in the security forces. Because of these kinship ties to Fatah, the PA, and its agencies, Kingsley and Yazbek (2023) claim that the PA refrained from rigorously rooting out the group. According to security expert Ibrahim Dalalsha, "[t]here are manifestations of deep internal problems within Fatah" (Kingsley, 2022). Wary of aggravating this internal crisis, the PA was reluctant to intervene against militants with social ties to Fatah. In addition, since Nablus is originally a Fatah stronghold, members of the PA fear to act against the group because they might face retributions against themselves or family members living in Nablus (Mustafa, 2023).

However, there are also other groups which did not achieve the same extent of success as the Lions' Den despite having close relations to the PA and despite being similarly home-grown and rooted in the local community. One example is the Balata Battalion, which stems from a refugee camp where family linkages and community relations are much stronger (Shikaki, 2023). Moreover, these pre-existing social ties cannot explain how the group gained popular support beyond Nablus and why it received funding by Hamas and other anti-PA actors.

5.4.3 Use of Social Media

Another argument that is frequently brought forward to explain the success of the Lions' Den is its use of social media (see Kingsley and Yazbek, 2023; Truzman,

2022a). The group set up its official channel on Telegram on 27 August 2022 and reached over 100,000 followers within one week (Farsang, 2022). With currently over 250,000 members in the channel, the Lions' Den surpasses by far the al-Qassam Brigades, the al-Quds Brigades, and other militant groups. The Telegram channel was used to release official statements and share videos of attacks on settlers and Israeli soldiers. Moreover, videos of the Lions' Den were widely shared on other platforms such as TikTok (Barghouti, 2022b). According to Israeli major-general Eitan Dangot, the Lions' Den introduced "a new element and that's awareness. This group uses its knowledge of social networks. They make TikTok videos and give interviews before, after and even in the middle of their operations" (Al-Jazeera World, 2023). Shikaki (2023) further explains that the use of social media mobilises especially youth and kids which seek to emulate the fighters and join the Lions' Den after watching spectacular videos of attacks. Moreover, the popularity of the Lions' Den on social media might have attracted patron support by groups who seek to militarily confront Israel and destabilise the West Bank. However, the extensive use of and success on social media does not explain how the group could create a constituency encompassing all political factions and fails to account for the backing it received by the PA.

5.4.4 General Political Trends

Lastly, the rise of the Lions' Den is often linked to contextual factors and general trends. First, the level of discontent among the Palestinian population with the PA and Israel has been growing (Shikaki, 2023). For example, a senior Palestinian official said: "The street doesn't trust us anymore. We lost them and they view us as an extension of Israel working to serve and preserve its security" (Al-Kassim, 2022). The discontent is particularly high in areas where people live under dire economic living standards such as refugee camps (Mustafa, 2023). Consequently, the popular support for armed resistance reached its peak since 2005 and is almost comparable to the years of the Second Intifada (Shikaki, 2023).

Contributing to this discontent are increasingly aggressive policies of Israel towards Palestinians in the West Bank, further fuelling the support for armed groups. Already under the Bennet-Lapid coalition, house demolitions, settler violence, and settlement expansions increased compared to the previous government (Heast,

2022). Moreover, Israel's security measures became more offensive and were again stepped up with the latest extreme right-wing government (Mustafa, 2023). This resulted in a much greater number of casualties compared to previous years (Shikaki, 2023). Especially the numerous Israeli targeted killings led to the desire for revenge among Palestinians (Farsang, 2022). Thus, a fighter of the Jenin Brigade justifies the militantism as follows: "We protect ourselves, they [Israel] don't differentiate, [they] kill whoever is in front of them" (Al-Jazeera Close Up, 2023).

Besides, the gradual erosion of PA institutions and subsequent political vacuum in the West Bank created opportunities for insurgent groups to grow (Al-Masri, 2022). This is linked to several factors. First, the PA receives less international funding as donors become increasingly disillusioned with the widespread nepotism (International Crisis Group, 2023). Second, the PA suffers from an internal power struggle over the succession of President Mahmoud Abbas (Mustafa, 2023). These divisions within Fatah significantly weaken the PA capacities and fuel the establishment of patronage networks and armed groups to cement the power of political and security elites. This is also reflected in the flourishing illicit arms trade in the West Bank. With the PA lacking democratic legitimacy and full coercive capacity, rooting out popular armed groups becomes uncontainable (Mustafa, 2023). Part of the broader trend is also the new generation of youth who does not recall the bloody scenes of the Second Intifada. Consequently, they are highly motivated and not afraid to confront the Israel forces (Farsang, 2022). Older generations in contrast vividly remember the breakdown of society and security chaos after the Second Intifada (Mustafa, 2023). Lastly, unlike in the past, actors such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad are no longer focused on protecting their organisation and building their own infrastructure (Shikaki, 2023). Therefore, they have more capacities to support other groups by investing resources such as training, money, and arms.

However, while all the above-mentioned factors certainly facilitated the establishment of armed groups in the West Bank in general, they cannot explain why the Lions' Den was able to assemble a disproportionately large number of supporters in comparison to other groups.

6 Conclusion

The overall aim of this research was to explore to what extent ideological differentiation explains the success of the Lions' Den in the face of competing armed groups in the West Bank. Three research objectives contributed to this goal. First, the ideology of the Lions' Den was compared to established armed groups. Second, the impact of its ideology on popular support, violent mobilisation, and patron support was traced. Lastly, alternative explanations where discussed. This chapter revisits these research objectives by summarising the findings and highlighting the main contributions of this study. Moreover, recommendations for further research and implications of the findings are presented.

6.1 Summary of Findings and Contribution to Knowledge

The first research objective was to compare the ideology of the Lions' Den to other established armed groups and identify similarities and differences. The comparative analysis demonstrated that the ideology of the Lions' Den offers a similar problem-definition and proposed solution as the al-Qassam Brigades, al-Quds Brigades, and AMB. Though, in contrast to established factions, the Lions' Den does not state a clear overall objective, leaving the question what happens after Israel is defeated unanswered. Regarding religion, the groups exhibit slight variations in that the Lions' Den and AMB instrumentalise Islam while al-Qassam Brigades and al-Quds Brigades give it a programmatic role. However, all groups equally deploy extensive religious rhetoric in their communications. The main ideological difference between the Lions' Den and its competitors concerns the positioning towards political factions. While all established groups are to some extent involved in factional divisions, the Lions' Den clearly takes a cross-factional stance. The group thereby manages to carve out a niche and offer a unique selling point to its audience. Thus, it can be concluded that sufficient evidence for the ideological differentiation of the Lions' Den was found.

The second research objective was to evaluate to what extent this ideological difference helped the Lions' Den to gain popular support, mobilise recruits, and generate patron support. Regarding popular support, there is satisfactory evidence that the unique ideological features of the group played a role in increasing its popularity by attracting supporters beyond factional divides in the political

landscape. Moreover, the evidence indicates that the ideology of the Lions' Den gave the group access to a wider recruitment base. However, the analysis also revealed limitations in the conceptualised mechanism and the need for more reliable, first-hand data. This is further addressed in the next chapter. Lastly, there is sufficient evidence that the ideological differentiation allowed the Lions' Den to attract support from Hamas and its allies on one hand, and to enjoy partial impunity by the PA on the other hand.

The third research objective sought to consider alternative explanations for the success of the Lions' Den. Particular attention was paid to violent outbidding, kinship, social media, and general trends. The findings show that although these factors might have partially contributed to popular support, increased violent mobilisation, and patrons' willingness to provide supplies, they do not offer a comprehensive explanation across these categories. The outbidding theory and use of social media do not account for the tolerance of Lions' Den activities by the PA. Furthermore, kinship ties fail to explain how the Lions' Den spread beyond Nablus and across political divides. Lastly, the general trends reveal conditions that facilitated the rise of armed groups in general but do not explain why the Lions' Den was more successful than other militias.

Overall, this study supports the claim that ideological differentiation was a substantial if not decisive factor leading to the success of the Lions' Den. It thereby contributed to knowledge in three ways. First, it is the first research attempting to trace the causal effects of ideological differentiation to draw a conclusion regarding its impact on the competitive success of an armed group. Second, this research is the first to examine in detail the competition between Palestinian armed groups after the Second Intifada and thus addressed a population gap. Third, the findings of this study respond to the practical-knowledge gap on current developments in the Palestinian militant landscape by offering a thorough explanation for the rise of the Lions' Den in light of established groups.

6.2 Recommendations and Implications

This study paves the way for further research on the Lions' Den and on ideological differentiation in general. Moreover, the evidence presented in this thesis points to several case-specific implications.

Recommendations for Further Research

As previously mentioned, the data was collected between January and April 2023 when the West Bank experienced high levels of violence. Because a field visit was not possible, expert interviews and secondary sources such as media reports are the main data sources, making the findings susceptible to reporting bias. It is therefore recommended to collect further data by speaking directly to residents of Nablus, figures in political parties, and members of the Lions' Den once the security situation permits field studies. This would increase the validity of the findings and respond to the issue of quality of data collected during an active conflict.

Second, it is recommended to draw on interviews with people who were directly involved in armed groups to give more insights into individual incentives to support and join the Lions' Den. In particular, this would help to refine the part of the mechanism dealing with mobilisation of militants into the Lions' Den by identifying underlying motivations of recruits. Moreover, speaking directly to officials from Hamas, Fatah, and the PA would allow to include internal organisational processes that led patrons to provide support to the group into the mechanism. Such fine-grained data would further help to decipher more abstract and thus generic mechanisms which could be applied to other cases.

Third, even though social media does not explain all facets of the Lions' Den's success, its role was repeatedly highlighted by experts. So far, no study exists that explores the role of social media in the recent surge of Palestinian militant groups. However, the topic is particularly relevant considering the geographic barriers within the West Bank which represents a barrier for militants to operate and mobilise the masses. Therefore, further research is recommended to explore how platforms such as TikTok helped the Lions' Den to gain popularity beyond Nablus and how the group's use of social media differs from competing militias.

Case-Specific Implications

Besides these suggestions for further research, there are a few case-specific implications that can be derived from the evidence. First, the findings on popular support strongly suggest that the cross-factional ideology of the Lions' Den could serve as a model for success beyond the realm of armed struggle. The analysis has shown that the Lions' Den was able to garner widespread support across the

West Bank and irrespective of individuals' political affiliation and location. It is thus a legitimate conclusion that the group – if it was to expand into politics and participate in elections – might be able to politically compete with Hamas and Fatah (see Shikaki, 2023).

Second, the analysis of Lions' Den fighters found that the group is composed of members from a wide range of factions. The research further demonstrated that the group constantly loses members including its leadership and in turn recruits new fighters. Because of this high fluctuation, the balance of factional interests within the group might easily shift. It would thus not be surprising if one of the established armed factions such as Hamas or PIJ increasingly exerts influence on the Lions' Den and hijacks the group for its own purposes.

At the same time, the findings of this study suggest that the polarisation of the Palestinian political and militant landscape is not insuperable. The persistence of the Lions' Den still needs to be proven. However, if Hamas, PIJ or Fatah do not succeed to gain control over the Lions' Den, other groups might follow its model of non-alignment. This could render the main political camps increasingly irrelevant and advance the diversification of the militant landscape.

Lastly, the wide popular support for the cross-factional ideology found in this study highlights that Israel's current securitised policy towards militant groups is counter-productive, short-sighted, and unfit to bring about a sustainable solution to the violence in the West Bank. The ability to unite the masses for its purpose stresses the fact that the Lions' Den is not merely a radicalised, short-lived militant cell which can be eradicated through targeted killings and arrests. Their ideology struck a chord with the public regardless of their background and is likely to continue to resound. Consequently, if there is a real interest in putting an end to the surge of militants, both the Israeli and Palestinian authorities should first address the underlying political and economic causes and put an end to the perpetual suffering of Palestinians.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Generic Interview Guide

General developments in the West Bank

- What is the background of the increased activity of armed resistance groups since 2022 and the continuing high levels of violence in the West Bank?

Palestinian militant landscape

- Which armed groups have been active in the West Bank before 2022?
- How are the relations between these groups? What is the population's perception of the armed resistance?
- How do groups generate popular support, mobilise recruits, and attract external support?
- How does the population, political factions, and armed groups usually react to the emergence of new cells?

The Lions' Den

- What are the main characteristics of the Lions' Den and what distinguishes it from established armed groups?
- How do you explain the rise and persistence of the group in face of competing factions and increased Israeli operations?

Popular support for the Lions' Den

- What does the public think about the group? Did popular opinion about the group change over time?
- How do you explain the group's popularity in Nablus and beyond?
- Is there opposition to the group among the population?

Mobilisation into the Lions' Den

- How would you describe the pool of recruits of the group? How does the group attract prospective recruits?
- Why do people choose to join the Lions' Den rather than an established armed resistance group?
- How do you explain that fighters affiliated with rivalling factions join the same group?

Patron support for the Lions' Den

- How is the relationship between the Lions' Den and other armed groups?
- Does the Lions' Den receive support from Palestinian factions? Do other groups leverage the Lions' Den?
- How is the relationship between the Palestinian Authority and the Lions' Den?

Appendix B: Detailed Hypothetical Causal Mechanism

Conceptualisation	Observable manifestation	Types of evidence
(1) The Lions' Den (actor) differentiates its ideology (activity) from other armed groups in the West Bank by distancing itself ideologically from other groups and/or adopting more inclusive but unique positions	Expect to see ideological differentiation in official statements and public speeches as well as symbolic actions of the Lions' Den	Measured using account evidence from the Lions' Den's Telegram channel, expert interviews, and media reports
(2a) The individuals from opposing political factions (actor) support (activity) the Lions' Den	Expect to see (a) flags and banners from opposing factions at events of the Lions' Den, (b) support for the group in strongholds of both opposing political camps (c) statistical evidence of support from affiliates of both political camps	Measured using (a) account evidence in media reports and interviews (b) account evidence in media reports and interviews (c) pattern evidence from public opinion polls
(2b) Potential recruits from opposing political factions (actor) mobilise (activity) into the Lions' Den	Expect to see identities of fighters from opposing factions being revealed	Measured using account evidence in media reports, social media, and expert interviews
(2c) Groups and organisations from both political camps (actor) support (activity) the Lions' Den	Expect to see (a) statements from actors of both camps expressing support for the Lions' Den (b) provision of resources for or tolerance of activities of the Lions' Den from both political camps	Measured using (a) account evidence from official channels of the actors and media reports (b) account evidence from media reports and expert interviews

Table 3: Conceptualisation, observable manifestation, and types of evidence of the causal mechanism.

Appendix C: Evidence of Fighters' Affiliation and Reliability of Sources

Name	Background	Evidence	Reliability
Abdel Rahman Souboh	Fatah	Mourning statement by AMB, no competing claims	high
Ahmed Kharaz	Mujahideen Brigades	Claimed by Mujahideen Brigades	medium
Ibrahim al-Nabulsi	Fatah	Father worked with the PASF, mourning statement by AMB, no competing claims	high
Mahmoud al-Banna	Fatah	Called 'hawk' referring to the Fatah Hawks, no competing claims	high
Mohammed al-Azizi	Fatah	Mourning statement by AMB, no competing claims	high
Mohammed Juneidi Abu Baker	PIJ	Posed in front of a PIJ photo, called himself "son of saraya"	high
Mohammed Tabanja	PFLP	Known as former head of the Ali Abu Mustafa Brigades, no competing claims	high
Mohammed Tubilia	Fatah	Worked with the PASF	high
Musab Shtayyeh	Hamas	Hamas banners at home, no competing claims	high
Oday al-Azizi	Fatah	Worked with the PASF, no competing claims	high
Saed al-Kuni	Hamas	Claimed by Hamas, competing claims	low
Suleiman Imran	Hamas	Claimed by Hamas	medium
Tamer al-Kilani	PFLP	Claimed by the PFLP, no competing claims	high
Tamer Alsabee	PFLP	No competing claims, based on one online source	medium
Wadee al-Hawah	Fatah	Links to Fatah Tanzeem in Nablus, based on one online source	medium

Table 4: Evidence of Lions' Den fighters' political affiliation and reliability of sources.