

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.*