

# Purifying the Religion: An Analysis of Haram Targeting among Salafi Jihadi Groups

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global analysis.

The Islamic State (ISIS/ISIL) publicly celebrated the carnage at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida on June 12, 2016—the deadliest terrorist attack on U.S. soil since 9/11, and the deadliest mass shooting by a single gunman in U.S. history with 49 dead and over 52 injured—calling it the “best Ramadan gift”. Simultaneously, the group issued a new video inviting more lone-wolf attacks across the United States, especially in places where *haram* (i.e., forbidden or proscribed by Islamic law) activities are taking place.<sup>2</sup> Other *haram* locations, such as the twin “Sin Cities”—Las Vegas and Macau—are also on the target “wish list” of many Salafi-jihadi groups.<sup>3</sup> In early 2017, ISIS threatened to attack the European Women's Championship football match in Galgenwaard Stadium in Utrecht on July 19, 2017, causing widespread fear in the oldest religious epicenter of the Netherlands, where over 10% of the current inhabitants are Muslims.

While lone-wolf ISIS-inspired attacks have drawn a lot of attention, local jihadi groups often cause even more destruction. For example, Boko Haram-affiliated jihadis

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<sup>2</sup> Ben Hubbard, “ISIS Uses Ramadan as Calling for New Terrorist Attacks,” *New York Times*, July 3, 2016. Lone-wolf homegrown ISIS-inspired attacks are different than the group-based attacks examined here.

<sup>3</sup> The terms Salafi-jihadi and jihadi are used interchangeably in this article.

attacked a brothel on June 28, 2014, killing ten people in Nigeria's city of Bauchi.<sup>4</sup> Two weeks later, Islamic State-affiliated jihadis in Iraq attacked a brothel in Baghdad, murdering a total of 32 people.<sup>5</sup> In addition to clubs and brothels, jihadi groups have attacked other *haram* targets, such as liquor stores, pre-Islamic statues, mixed-sex schools, tourist resorts and non-*halal* restaurants. On December 7, 2013, for instance, unidentified Iraqi jihadis targeted liquor stores across the country, killing 15 people.<sup>6</sup> Boko Haram and Taliban-affiliated jihadi groups in Afghanistan have frequently used violence against schools offering mixed-sex education as a way of broadcasting their disapproval, while increasing the risk for students to attend.<sup>7</sup>

Taliban-affiliated jihadi groups have targeted popular resort areas in Afghanistan, citing “illicit fun”, and have made threats to do the same in the West on the grounds that they are *haram*.<sup>8</sup> Jihadi groups across the Middle East have also targeted non-*halal* stores and restaurants that violate Islamic dietary rules with increasing frequency.<sup>9</sup> Asbat al-Ansar, a Salafi-inspired and Al Qaeda-linked terrorist group operating in Lebanon in the mid-1990s, routinely bombed non-*halal* restaurants, liquor stores, along with nightclubs, theaters, and hostile religious leaders.<sup>10</sup> As early as in the 1980s, Mujama al Islamiya, a vigilante group established by the controversial Sheikh Akhmed Yassin in Gaza, routinely attacked liquor stores, casinos, cinemas, and restaurants selling alcohol.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Spencer, ‘Nigeria: Islamic Jihadists murder 10 and injure 10 more with bomb blast at brothel’, *Jihadi Watch*, June 28, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Iraqi Jihadists slaughter 32 at Baghdad brothel,’ *No More Cocktails*, July 14, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Spencer, ‘Sharia in action in Iraq: Islamic supremacists attack liquor stores, murdering 15 people,’ *Jihadi Watch*, December 7, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA), *Country Profiles: Afghanistan*, (New York City, NY: GCPEA, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Tom A. Peter, ‘Taliban attack Kabul resort, citing ‘illicit fun’ and alcohol,’ *Christian Science Monitor*, June 22, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Katharina Von Knop. "The female jihad: Al Qaeda's women." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30.5 (2007): 397-414.

<sup>10</sup> Country reports on terrorism 2004, U.S. Department of State: Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, Washington, D.C. 2005, April 2005: 95.

<sup>11</sup> Beverley Milton-Edwards. *Islamic politics in Palestine*. London: IB Tauris, 1999: 115.

However, *haram* targeting is not limited to the Middle East and Africa. In Russia, for example, *Kavkazskii uzel* reported that two bombs exploded in different “illicit” cafés in Khasavyurt, killing seven people in January 2011.<sup>12</sup> On August 4<sup>th</sup>, 2013, another blast occurred in a store selling alcohol in Dagestan’s capital city of Makhachkala.<sup>13</sup> One of the most infamous Dagestani jihadi groups, *Jamaat Shariat*, warned business owners that, if they do not stop their *haram* activities, “we’ll set fire to your brothels, blow up places where you do *haram*, destroy your properties and shoot at your stores and casinos, ...[and] at your saunas, where adultery is practiced.”<sup>14</sup>

Despite the attention that such attacks receive in the media, most *haram* targeting is much less violent, and not all Salafi-jihadi groups engage in *haram* targeting—indeed most do not—and that raises a crucial question. This article suggests that there is a clear logic to *haram* targeting that can be derived from Salafi-jihadi groups’ ethnic structure. *Haram*-centered violence, we posit, has the important function of uniting ethnically mixed jihadi groups by fostering a superordinate Islamic identity that is necessary for fighters to overcome collective action problems and ethnic divisions. As a result, leaders of ethnically mixed Salafi jihadi groups are more likely to encourage *haram* targeting as a means of socializing recruits from distinct ethnic backgrounds into a unified fighting force. The observable empirical implication

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<sup>12</sup> “Explosion in Khasavyurt is qualified as an act of terror” *Kavkazskiy uzel*, 27 January 2011, available at <http://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/15938/>, accessed March 24, 2017; “Three persons lost in explosion in Khasavyurt” *Kavkazskiy uzel*, 15 January 2011, available at <http://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/15871/>, accessed March 24, 2017. The majority of the attacks against *haram* targets in the North Caucasus happened between 2010 and 2014 in Dagestan.

<sup>13</sup> Dvachelovekago spitalizirovani v Makhachkaleposlevzryva v gastronome "24 chasa", *Kavkazskiyuzel*, 5 August 2013 <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/228133/> accessed March 24, 2017; “Twin bomb blasts rip through two shops in Dagestan,” *Euronews*, 31 October 2013, <http://www.euronews.com/2013/10/31/twin-bomb-blasts-rip-through-two-shops-in-dagestan> accessed March 24, 2017

<sup>14</sup> “V Dagestane rasprostranayutsa listovki s ugrozami v adres torgovtsev alkogolem i narkotikami,” *KavkazskiyUzel*, 18 May 2010, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/168958/>, accessed July 11, 2013.

of this logic is that *haram* targeting is much *more* common among ethnically mixed groups than among homogenous ones.

The article develops and tests this core proposition against alternatives using two original samples. First, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork along with roughly 200 original interviews, we developed a unique dataset of all jihadi groups and haram attacks (against liquor stores, casinos and bathhouses) in Dagestan between 2010 and 2014.<sup>15</sup> We draw on original interviews with ex-jihadi combatants in Dagestan, eyewitnesses of *haram* targeting, and members of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) and the Federal Security Service (FSB) to provide additional insight and context on the logic of *haram* targeting. Second, we created a cross-national sample covering all Salafi jihadi groups across the globe operating between 1998 and 2015, which enables us to offer the first global assessment of *haram* targeting.

We selected Russia's peripheral region of Dagestan for an in-depth study of haram targeting since it hosts numerous jihadi groups that have engaged in a large number of *haram* attacks as well as some that have done so only rarely, or not at all. Compared to many other places in the world, Dagestan witnessed a significant amount of haram targeting, especially in the years 2010-2014, and also exhibits immense internal variation among the various *jamaats* that can be used to assess the theory. Dagestan is also a multi-ethnic polity, composed of 14 major ethnic groups and more than 30 local languages, including the Russian language as its *lingua franca*. Since the early 2000s, the republic has faced an upsurge of Islamic insurgent violence, driven largely by local factors.<sup>16</sup> Following Moscow's successful counter-insurgency

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<sup>15</sup> Bathhouses (saunas) are commonly considered brothels due to the proliferation of sexual services there.

<sup>16</sup> These include corruption and clan competition for local resources, human rights abuses, religious repression, economic decline and the spillover effects of the Chechen conflicts. Campana Aurélie and Jean-François Ratelle. "A Political Sociology Approach to the Diffusion of Conflict from Chechnya to Dagestan and Ingushetia." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37.2 (2014): 115-34; Jean-François Ratelle, and Emil Aslan Souleimanov. "Retaliation in Rebellion: The Missing Link to Explaining Insurgent Violence in Dagestan." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 29.4 (2017): 573-92; Emil Souleimanov and David Siroky, Random

campaign and the emigration of hundreds of young Salafists to live under the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, the local insurgency has significantly receded.<sup>17</sup> This wave of departures underlined long-lasting religious tensions between the Russian state-sponsored form of Islam and the Salafi communities within Dagestan, often depicted by the government as extremist groups.

As a clan-based society, political and religious groups in Dagestan have to overcome cleavages and engage with multiple identities in order to pursue collective action. After the fall of the Soviet Union, one solution to these challenges was the creation of a consociational model of power-sharing that sought to “manage” ethnic and clan tensions between Avars, Dargins, Laks, Kumyks, and other less numerous ethnicities.<sup>18</sup> Overcoming conflicts and grievances among the republic’s main ethnic groups has been one of the main challenges of Dagestan’s political system. Similar difficulties can be observed inside insurgent and religious groups, where ethnic and clan-based identities have often conflicted with the need for a common identity among the fighters.

For these reasons, studying *haram* targeting in Dagestan, especially during this time period, affords an attractive opportunity to leverage original micro-level data for theory-testing. We complement this in-depth analysis with a new disaggregated global dataset on *haram* attacks among jihadi groups across the entire universe of locations where jihadi groups operated (e.g., Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Somalia, Nigeria) from 1998 to 2015.<sup>19</sup>

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or Retributive? *World Politics* (2016), 68.4: 677-712; David Siroky and Valery Dzutsati, The Empire Strikes Back: Ethnicity, Terrain, and Indiscriminate Violence in Counterinsurgencies, *Social Science Quarterly*, 96.3(2016), 807-829.

. Domitilla Sagramoso. "The Radicalisation of Islamic Salafi Jamaats in the North Caucasus" *Europe-Asia Studies* 64.3 (2012): 561-595; Marya Rozanova and Akhmet Yarlykapov. "The Islamic Religion and Cultural Diversity in Contemporary Russia: Case Study of North Caucasus Region, Dagestan." *OMNES: The Journal of Multicultural Society* 5.1 (2014): 22-47.

<sup>17</sup> Jean-François Ratelle. "North Caucasian Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: Assessing the Threat of Returnees to the Russian Federation." *Caucasus Survey* 4.3 (2016): 218-38.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Bruce Ware and Enver Kisriev, “Ethnic Parity and Democratic Pluralism in Dagestan: A Consociational Approach,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 53.1 (2001), pp. 105-131.

<sup>19</sup> See Appendix.

This serves to provide a sense of the extent to which the in-depth Dagestan results have external validity.

In the next section, we dissect the concept of *haram* and its role in Salafi-jihadi ideology, and then present our theory of *haram* targeting and its testable implications. Using new datasets, first in Dagestan and then globally, we assess all the empirical evidence in view of the theory and contextualize it using ethnographic data. The last section highlights the findings, the limitations and several future directions for research on religious violence.

### **What We Know about Salafi-jihadi Violence and *Haram***

In response to the increasing destruction caused by Salafi-jihadi organizations, scholarship on jihadi violence has grown substantially over the last decade and a half.<sup>20</sup> Whereas there was once a dearth of research, there is now an abundance of studies on different dimensions of Salafi jihadism: the pathways of individual radicalization,<sup>21</sup> motivations to join or exit jihadi

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<sup>20</sup> On jihadi organizations and radical Islamic movements, see Faisal Devji, *Landscapes of Jihad: Militancy, Morality and Modernity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); Mary Habeck, *Knowing the Enemy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Rudolph Peters, *Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2005); Bassam Tibi, *The Challenge of Fundamentalism: Political Islam and the New World Disorder* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Emmanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990);

<sup>21</sup> Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, "Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 20:3 (2008): 415-433.

groups,<sup>22</sup> the logic of jihadi-based suicide terrorism,<sup>23</sup> as well as the jihadi ideology,<sup>24</sup> networks,<sup>25</sup> financing<sup>26</sup> and— most relevant for this study—targeting.<sup>27</sup>

Previous research on terrorist targeting suggests that *religious ideology* shapes the decision to attack “soft targets” (generally understood as undefended objects and unaware civilians),<sup>28</sup> but there is no study addressing the phenomenon of jihadi violence against *haram* targets, a specific form of soft target that embodies behaviors and goods considered sinful, unlawful, and forbidden according to Salafi ideology and doctrine.<sup>29</sup> While there are many anecdotes and newspaper articles about *haram* attacks, which have periodically captured

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<sup>22</sup> Max Abrahms. “Why Terrorism Does Not Work.” *International Security* 31: 2 (2006): 42–78; cf. Erica Chenoweth, Nicholas Miller, Elizabeth McClellan, Hillel Frisch, Paul Staniland, and Max Abrahms. “What Makes Terrorists Tick.” *International Security* 33: 4 (2009): 180–202.

<sup>23</sup> Carlos Pestana Barros and Isabel Proenca, “Mixed Logit Estimation of Radical Islamic Terrorism in Europe and North America: A Comparative Study.” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49: 2 (2005): 298-314; Mario Ferrero. “Martyrdom Contracts.” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50.6 (2006): 855–877.

<sup>24</sup> Victor H. Asal, Karl Rethemeyer, Ian Anderson, Allyson Stein, Jeffrey Rizo, and Matthew Rozea, “The Softest of Targets: A Study on Terrorist Target Selection,” *Journal of Applied Security Research* 4.3 (2009): 258-278.

<sup>25</sup> Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Culvert Jones. “Assessing the Dangers of Illicit Networks: Why Al-Qaida May Be Less Threatening Than Many Think.” *International Security* 33.2 (2008): 7–44; Scott Helfstein and Dominick Wright. “Covert or Convenient? Evolution of Terror Attack Networks.” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 55: 5 (2011): 785–813; Robert F. Trager and Dessimslava P. Zagorcheva. “Deterring Terrorism: It Can Be Done.” *International Security* 30.3 (2005): 87–123.

<sup>26</sup> Jacob N. Shapiro and David A. Siegel. “Underfunding in Terrorist Organizations.” *International Studies Quarterly* 51.2 (2007): 405–29.

<sup>27</sup> We build on studies of terrorist target selection, see Charles J.M. Drake, *Terrorists' target selection*, Basingstoke: Macmillan 1998a; Charles J.M. Drake, “The role of ideology in terrorists’ target selection,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 10.2 (1998b): 53-85; Martin Libicki, Peter Chalk and Melanie Sisson, *Exploring Terrorist Targeting Preferences*, RAND, 2007; Patrick Brandt and Todd Sandler, “What Do Transnational Terrorists Target? Has It Changed? Are We Safer?,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 54.2 (2010): 214–36; Peter Toft, Arash Duero, and Arunas Bieliauskas, “Terrorist targeting and energy security,” *Energy Policy* 38.8 (2010): 4411-4421.

<sup>28</sup> Ranya Ahmed. “Terrorist ideologies and target selection,” *Journal of applied security research* 13.3 (2018): 376-390; Drake, 1998b. Gus Martin considers soft targets as places where there is “a large number of civilians gather as well as military targets that generally are not on alert (passive), and not likely to offer confrontation”. Gus Martin (2013) *Understanding terrorism* (4th ed.), Sage Publishing, 1. Roughly 70 percent of all terrorist attacks worldwide since 1968 have been against soft targets, and the trend has apparently increased over time. Both practitioners and scholars of terrorism have suggested that terrorists tend to attack the most vulnerable “soft” targets. Quoted in Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). When authorities harden previously attacked targets, terrorists pursue less protected ones (“the substitution effect”). Consistent with this logic, non-combatants are often selected as targets because of their vulnerability and the psychological impact—“the image of civilians dying can be much more powerful than the image of an attack on soldiers or police officers, since the risk of death for them is considered to be part of their job as soldiers and police.”

<sup>29</sup> James J.F. Forest, *Homeland Security: Protecting America's Targets* (Greenwood, 2006), pp. 39-41; Glenn P. McGovern, “Securitization After Terror” in *Encyclopedia of Transnational Crime and Justice* (ed. Margaret Beare), Sage, 2012, p. 371.

headlines, to the best of our knowledge there has not yet been a systematic analysis of *haram* attacks among Salafi jihadi groups, either in one region or globally.

The Salafi movement has *haram* targeting—including by violent means—engrained in its origins, and indeed emerged as such to cleanse the religion of everything inconsistent with its understanding of the Islamic dogma.<sup>30</sup> It calls for a strict and literal reading of Muslim holy texts.<sup>31</sup> Theologically, Salafis advocate the closest observance of monotheism (*tawhid*). Proponents of the Salafi doctrine refer to themselves as believers in the unity of god (*muwahhidun*), and refuse to acknowledge any other source of identity—e.g., ethnicity, class, tribe, race—than their religious identity as part of the global *umma* (the community of fellow Muslim believers). Proponents of Salafi-jihadism call for the establishment (or, revival of the state from the late Mohammad era and its successors) of an Islamic theocracy based on Islamic law (*shariah*), and emphasize the fight against infidels (*kuffar*), hypocrites (*munafiqun*), and apostates (*murtaddun*). In order to purify Islam and return it to the path of their righteous forefathers (*as-salaf as-salih*, hence the term “Salafism”), Muslims have to put an end to pre-Islamic practices (*jahiliyya*) as well as later innovations in Islam (*bid'a*). Most famously, Salafi-jihadis have emphasized the need for a “holy war” or struggle (*jihad*), which specifically targets anyone and anything that is considered *haram*.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> While Salafis and jihadis usually share the common theological tenets of Salafism, they may differ in their approach to the nature of armed jihad, or jihad by sword (*jihad bissaij*) as a duty for Muslims. Jihadis usually consider it a duty for Muslims, while Salafis may differ in their attitude. Therefore, some observers differentiate between moderate and militant Salafism, and place jihadis in the latter category. In practice, the term jihadi is commonly used to designate those involved in armed struggle; Salafi to denote a puritanical theological interpretation of Islam.

<sup>31</sup> Alexander Knysh, “Contextualizing the Salafi-Sufi Conflict (from the Northern Caucasus to Hadramawt),” *Middle Eastern Studies* 43.4 (2007): 503-530; Gabriel R. Warburg, “From Sufism to Fundamentalism: The Mahdiyya and the Wahhabiyya,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 45.4 (2009): 661-672.

<sup>32</sup> Often *jihad* is understood as an offensive military struggle for the sake of expanding the realm of Islam at the expense of the non-Islamic world (*dar al-harb*), and less frequently as a struggle for individual self-improvement (the greater jihad or *jihad al-akbar*) or as a defensive war through military struggle (*jihad al-asghar*) for the sake of the liberation of Islamic lands (*dar al-islam*). See Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. 31-70; Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Inside Jihadism: Understanding Jihadi Movements Worldwide*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2015.



As a puritanical branch of Sunni Islam, Salafism is notorious for its uncompromising stance towards *haram*, especially compared to the more relaxed attitudes of other interpretations of Sunni Islam. Islamic tradition invokes the term *haram* to describe the unlawful, immoral, and forbidden practices stipulated in the *Quran* and in the *Sunnah*.<sup>33</sup> These practices include, but are not limited to, adultery, premarital sex, mixed-sex communication (unless between close relatives), gambling, homosexuality and prostitution. They also prohibit the consumption of pork and alcohol, or any non-*halal* food. In addition to these practices uniformly deemed *haram* according to most Islamic scholars, Salafi doctrine also outlaws tobacco, music, dancing, singing and other forms of “illicit fun.”<sup>34</sup>

In other words, the Islamic juridical framework recognizes degrees of *haram*, and this shapes both how jihadis and broader society perceive these acts. Some behaviors and acts are considered *makrooh* (disliked by God), whereas others are considered explicitly *haram* (forbidden by God). Most Muslims categorize smoking, for example, as *makrooh* rather than *haram*. Within the *haram* category, these acts can be divided into major sins (*kabira*) and minor sins (*saghira*), and these can be further divided between those acts that hurt only the individual who is doing them (*zatihi*), versus *haram* acts that hurt all of society (*ghairihi*). These distinctions are not merely theoretical, but can have a tangible impact on how the *haram* act is perceived by its audience, and on its utility for the perpetrators. While it is important to understand the full scope of the concept of *haram*, it is equally crucial that it is understood differently by various Salafi-jihadi groups across cultural contexts. In Dagestani *jamaats*, *haram* is primarily centered around alcohol consumption, which represents a critical

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<sup>33</sup> The collection of teachings and practices ascribed to the life of Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>34</sup> Some other practices are deemed *haram* for Salafis, including abiding by the principles of liberal democracy, or implementing secular –and thus non-Islamic –laws.

social problem, whereas in other regions jihadis are focused on purifying the religion from other pressing issues.

Given the centrality of *haram* to Salafi ideology, and yet the massive variation in the extent to which it is actually used - it seems clear that a careful examination of the extent to which the various Salafi jihadi groups around the world actually engage in it is warranted. This study investigates why some jihadi groups use violence against places, people and practices deemed *haram*, whereas other jihadi groups refrain from it. The next section proposes a preliminary theory of haram targeting, which leads to the empirical expectation that ethnically mixed jihadi groups are much more likely to engage in *haram* attacks. We then assess this conjecture in Dagestan and globally, while considering alternative explanations, before drawing general conclusions and discussing promising directions for future research.

## **Related Literature and Theory**

“Terrorists select their targets because of their symbolic and propaganda value,” writes Martin (2014: 122). “High-profile, sentimental, or otherwise significant targets are chosen with the expectation that the target’s constituency will be moved, and that the victims’ audience will in some way suffer.”<sup>35</sup> Examples include embassies and diplomatic personnel, international symbols, symbolic buildings and sites, emblematic people, and personnel carriers.<sup>36</sup> In

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<sup>35</sup> Gus Martin, *Essentials of Terrorism: Concepts and Controversies* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2014): 122.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*; In their typology of terrorist targets, Newman and Clarke as well as Drake designate such targets as *iconic* and *symbolic* in that they are representative of a target group’s identity and strength. The 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and the failed attack on the White House are illustrative of the desire to shake the symbolic economic, military, and political foundations of American power. See U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS), *Policing Terrorism: An Executive’s Guide*, by Ronald Clarke and Graeme Newman, (National Criminal Justice Reference Service, 2008); Drake, Terrorist’s Target Selection, 10-11; Brigitte L. Nacos, “The Terrorist Calculus behind 9-11: A Model for Future Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 26.1 (2003): 1-16.

general, experts on terrorism suggest that terrorist targets are selected to “inform, educate, and ultimately rally the people behind the revolution.”<sup>37</sup>

Building on this work, other scholars have focused on the ideologies of terrorist groups and how they shape their perception of enemies, while also determining who or what is considered a legitimate target.<sup>38</sup> Asal et al. (2009) examine the role of ideology in target selection—specifically, religious ideology—and focuses on civilian targeting.<sup>39</sup> *Religious* terrorism is distinct from other kinds of terrorism because it emphasizes divine punishment and redemption,<sup>40</sup> so targets are selected because they represent “the forces of evil”. Juergensmeyer (2000) links religious violence to the targeting of “evil” civilians, objects and practices. Salafi jihadis, like other religious fundamentalists, appeal to a godly rather than to a worldly judge to legitimize their target selection.<sup>41</sup> While religious ideology fuels

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<sup>37</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008): 17.

<sup>38</sup> Drake, 1998b; Teun van Dongen, “The lengths terrorists go to: perpetrator characteristics and the complexity of jihadist terror attacks in Europe, 2004-2011,” *Behavioural Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 6: 1 (2014): 58-80; Drake, 1998a; Lisa McCartan, Andrea Masselli, Michael Rey, and Danielle Rusnak, “The logic of terrorist target choice: An examination of Chechen rebel bombings from 1997-2003,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 31.1: 60-79. Focusing on ETA, de la Calle and Sánchez-Cuence (2004) demonstrate that ethno-separatist terrorists are materially constrained by the resources they have, and ideologically inhibited by the preferences of their supporters. Luis De la Calle and Ignacio Sánchez-Cuence, “La selección de víctimas en ETA,” *Revista Española de Ciencia Política* 10 (2004): 53–79

Clarke and Newman suggest terrorists select targets that elicit positive reactions from sympathizers/followers.

<sup>39</sup> Asal et al. 2009. Ideologies serve as guides for target selection by rationalizing terrorist violence. For rational actor models of terrorism, see Dwight R. Lee, “Free Riding and Paid Riding in the Fight Against Terrorism,” *The American Economic Review* 78:2 (1998): 22-26; Todd Sandler and Walter Enders, *An Economic Perspective on Transnational Terrorism*, (2002) <https://www.diw.de/sixcms/detail.php/39116>. Accessed 20 February 2015; David Lake, “Rational extremism: Understanding terrorism in the twenty-first century,” *Dialog-IO* 1:1 (2002): 15-29; Eli Berman and David Laitin. *Hard Targets: Theory and Evidence on Suicide Attacks*. *NBER Working Paper* No. 11740, November 2005; Todd Sandler, John Tschirhart, and Jon Cauley, “A Theoretical Analysis of Transnational Terrorism,” *American Political Science Review* 77.1 (1983): 36-54. Some scholars have questioned the *worldly* rationality of *religious* terrorists. Jacob N. Shapiro, David A. Siegel, “Underfunding in Terrorist Organizations.” In: N. Memon et al (eds.) *Mathematical Methods in Counterterrorism* (Springer: New York, 2009).

<sup>40</sup> Drake, 1998b; Simon Perry and Badi Hasisi, “Rational Choice Rewards and the Jihadist Suicide Bomber,” *Criminological Theory and Terrorism* 27.1 (2015): 53-80; Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2003); Daniel S. Gressang, "Audience and Message: Assessing Terrorist WMD Potential," *Terrorism & Political Violence* 13.3 (2001): 83.

<sup>41</sup> Daniel P. Hepworth, “Analysis of Al-Qaeda Terrorist Attacks to Investigate Rational Action,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 7:2 (2013). On the role of political theology in conflict, see: John D. Carlson and Jonathan H. Ebel, eds. 2012. *From Jeremiad to Jihad: Religion, Violence, and America*. University of California Press; Bruce Lincoln. 2003. *Holy Terrors. Thinking about religion after 9/11*. Chicago: University of Chicago

*haram* targeting, and *haram* is an explicitly religious concept central to Salafi jihadism, it is also not the whole story, since we clearly observe variation in *haram* targeting among Salafi jihadi groups that share the same ideology. If more religiously oriented jihadis were more likely to engage in more *haram* targeting, and also more attracted to ethnically mixed jamaats, it might be difficult to disentangle these reasons. While we cannot think of a reason why more religiously oriented jihadists would be disproportionately drawn to ethnically mixed jamaats, we do know that, in Dagestan, some of the most religiously fundamentalist (purist) groups were mono-ethnic rather than mixed-ethnic *jamaats*, and further that these groups largely refrained from *haram* attacks.<sup>42</sup> Purist rural *jamaats* led by Salafi-jihadi icons were if anything more likely to attract religious fundamentalists. Although religious ideology is clearly important, if it were the whole story behind target selection, *haram* targeting would be far more widespread than it actually is among Salafi jihadi groups.<sup>43</sup>

In practice, *haram* violence is rare (and typically not as brutal as the events that have captured headlines), and are usually too limited in scope and intensity to defeat the opponent outright and generate substantial political change.<sup>44</sup> Instead, *haram* targets operate as largely non-verbal messages; like other forms of terrorism, the power of *haram* targeting is primarily psychological and sociological.<sup>45</sup> It both serves to send a signal to the local population and, at the same, to cohere a group of fighters from different ethnicities around a central religious objective, fostering group solidarity that will help them overcome collective action problems.

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Press; Daniel Philpott. 2007. "Explaining the Political Ambivalence of Religion." *American Political Science Review* 101/3 (August): 505-526.

<sup>42</sup> See later discussion of Gubden jamaat.

<sup>43</sup> While the total number of *haram* targets is not known, we recognize that there is a chance of there being an unequal distribution of *haram* targets, which would influence the extent of *haram* targeting. This is an important topic for future research.

<sup>44</sup> According to Abrahms 2006 (p. 56), terrorist attacks are a "coercive instrument intended to communicate to target[s]... the costs of noncompliance with their policy demands, while simultaneously seeking to undermine the resolve of the target.

<sup>45</sup> Alex Schmid, "Terrorism as Psychological Warfare," *Democracy and Security* 1: 2 (2005): 137-146.

One might wonder whether the reason some groups engage in more haram targeting is that they cannot control, monitor or sanction their rank-and-file members well. This “organizational control” approach has been used successfully to understand the use of violence<sup>46</sup> and civilian targeting, and could be applied to understanding and explaining variation in *haram* targeting. Abrahms and Potter,<sup>47</sup> for example, argue that decentralized groups face more principal-agent problems in which the rank-and-file fighters that are subordinated to weak leaders are more likely to target civilians. In this logic, targeting decisions often come from the bottom-up, sometimes in defiance of the leaders' preferences. There is, however, an important distinction between the logic of civilian targeting, which is usually a mix of strategy and pillaging, and *haram* targeting, which is almost always an intentional strategy with a very specific religious message, and rarely the result of recklessness and “bad apple” soldiers. Moreover, *haram* attacks are rare, especially compared to civilian victimization, which alas occurs in nearly all civil wars. *Haram* targeting is, of course, limited to civil wars with Muslim combatants. Further, even among such conflicts, it is further restricted to those with a Salafi-Jihadi ideology, which is a minority, and only a fraction of Salafi jihadi groups actually engage in haram targeting.

Ethnographic research with former Dagestani jihadi also indicates that the *amirs* (commanders) of *jamaats* were the principal decision-makers. According to an ex-jihadi, ordinary jihadis were usually treated as “infantry [*soldaty*], with the leadership [*nachal'stvo*] making decisions about what to do, how to do, who to kill and ally yourself with [...] how to make or spend money. Our role was auxiliary [*vspomogatel'nyi*].”<sup>48</sup> Akhmet Yarlykapov, a

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<sup>46</sup> Devorah Manekin, *Regular Soldiers, Irregular War: Violence and Restraint in the Second Intifada*, Cornell University Press, 2020.

<sup>47</sup> Max Abrahms and Philip Potter. "Explaining terrorism: Leadership deficits and militant group tactics." *International Organization* (2015) 69.2, 311-342.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with “Daud.” Carrying out these less-challenging attacks at the onset of their careers provides fresh jihadis a sense of purpose as well as confidence in their own skills, while binding them to the larger group. Just as an attack on a *haram* target cements the sense of godly purpose and group solidarity among group

reputed Russian-Dagestani anthropologist and an expert on the regional insurgency, observed this pattern across the North Caucasus jihadi groups and elsewhere. According to Yarlykapov, ordinary jihadists in Dagestan were subject to all sorts of manipulation and rarely in charge of anything else than fulfilling tasks ascribed to them by the *jamaat* leadership; “matters of importance were concentrated in the hands of *amirs*.”<sup>49</sup> The leadership of jihadi groups decided to socialize recruits using *haram* targeting, mostly in ethnically diverse *jamaats*.<sup>50</sup> In short, low-level members in jihadi groups did determine whether or which *haram* targets to attack.

Rather than religious infusion *per se* or principal-agent problems,<sup>51</sup> this article suggests that the ethnic composition of jihadi groups influenced their likelihood of using of *haram* attacks. We hypothesize that ethnically mixed jihadi groups are more likely to engage in *haram* attacks because a critical function of *haram* targeting is to help overcome conflicting ethnic and clan-based loyalties in mixed Salafi-jihadi groups, which can impede collective action in the future (for instance, if members are unwilling to hit targets where their ethnic kin reside). This is particularly true in a multi-ethnic setting.<sup>52</sup> By confronting a common enemy, we argue that leaders in jihadi groups sought to overcome the more parochial identities of their members and create a greater group solidarity. As a cohesion-building

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members, it also boosts the perpetrator's reputation outwardly vis-a-vis other jihadi groups. As a result, Jihadis are usually quick to broadcast successful targeting of *haram* entities on their webpages, since conducting attacks against symbols of non-Islamic values boosts a jihadi group's reputation within the Salafi-jihadi community by demonstrating their commitment to the common cause.

<sup>49</sup> Authors' interview with Akhmet Yarlykapov, 26 July 2020.

<sup>50</sup> Many of these attacks were part of initial rituals for new recruits to lock in complicity. Available literature corroborates these findings. See, for example, Emil A. Souleimanov, "Making Jihad or Making Money? Understanding the Transformation of Dagestan's *Jamaats* into Organised Crime Groups," *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2018), 41.4, 604-628. It is important to notice that *jamaat* leaders routinely deployed the custom of initiation violence: fresh recruits were tasked with attacks on law enforcement, which were recorded, putting jihadist “foot soldiers” in blackmailed positions and thus critically increasing their dependence on *jamaat* leaders. Authors' interview with Irina Gordiyenko, a reputable Russian journalist covering Dagestan, June 2014.

<sup>51</sup> In the discussion of Dagestan, we also consider urban-rural cleavages as an explanation, and, in the global statistical analysis, we consider the rebel group's age and strength.

<sup>52</sup> On ethnicity and collective action, see Henry Hale. *The Foundation of Ethnic Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

exercise, *haram* targeting, therefore, focused on what united the different ethnicities—Islam and the *umma*—rather than on what divided them.

Attacking *haram* sites can help cement the group by providing a sense of godly purpose, fostering solidarity among members and unifying recruits from different ethnic groups. Among the various opportunities for violence, *haram* targets foster a superordinate religious identity that transcends ethnicity while serving as a bonding experience for young fighters. Through these mechanisms, *haram* targeting can help to overcome collective action problems that are frequently greater in more diverse groups. For these reasons, we surmise, *haram* targeting is more often used as a strategy by the leadership of multi-ethnic *jamaats*.<sup>53</sup> Consistent with this logic, we hypothesize that:

*H<sub>1</sub>*: Multi-ethnic Salafi jihadi groups will be more likely than mono-ethnic ones to use *haram* targeting.

In the next section, we examine this proposition using new data and interviews from ethnographic research in Dagestan; after that, we use a new disaggregated global data set to assess its external validity.

## **Data and methods**

Using new data on all known incidents of *haram*-centered violence over a 50-month period from 17 May 2010 to 27 July 2014 in Dagestan, we systematically examine the role of ethnic

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<sup>53</sup> *Jamaat* is a term for jihadi groups widely used throughout Russia's North Caucasus and in the post-Soviet republics, but is used here to refer to Salafi jihadi groups generally.

diversity in jihadi groups in *haram* targeting. We select 2010 as the start date because it coincides with the date when *Jamaat Shariat*,<sup>54</sup> Dagestan's largest jihadi network, began disseminating leaflets across the republic, declaring war on those involved in “seeding spoiled morals and multiplying sins.”<sup>55</sup> During this 50-month period, we identified 41 distinct *haram* attacks (out of a total of 386 terrorist attacks in total),<sup>56</sup> and approximately 20 unique Salafi-jihadi groups and sub-groups. Each incident was verified in two Russian-speaking trackers of jihadi activities in Dagestan: *The Caucasian Knot (KavkazskiiUzel)*, an Internet news portal specializing in the Caucasus, and *Chernovik*, a Dagestani daily. After identifying all mentioned events, we further validated them through other media outlets (*Dagestanskaya Pravda*, *RIA Dagestan*, *Makhachkalinskije izvestiya*), together with Dagestan-based jihadi groups’ websites, such as *vdagestan.com*, *ummanews.com*, and *kavkazcenter.com*, to confirm the *haram* attack and to fill in any available details.

In addition, we also draw on numerous interviews conducted over the last 10-year period with ordinary Dagestanis living in both rural and urban areas where insurgent groups have operated. Our interviews cover a broad set of demographic groups inside Dagestan, including Soviet and post-Soviet educated Dagestanis, males and females, and various social classes, e.g., intelligentsia, religious figures, businessmen, human rights workers, journalists, manual workers, farmers, and retirees. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes and two hours and focused on the causes and dynamics of insurgent violence in Dagestan as well as

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<sup>54</sup> In contemporary Dagestan as elsewhere in the North Caucasus, *jamaat* is a term commonly used to designate local jihadi groups.

<sup>55</sup> This appeal marked the start of a campaign of *haram* attacks across Dagestan. Quoted in Emil Souleimanov, “Dagestan's Jihadists and Haram Targeting,” *Central Asian and Caucasus Analyst* 17.3 (2015): 10-13. Leaflets available upon request from authors.

<sup>56</sup> During the same period, the GTD (Global Terrorism Database) indicates that there were 386 terrorist attacks in Dagestan, which suggests that attacks against *haram targets* represent about 10% of all attacks.



ethnicity and religion. Regarding the identification of the perpetrators, we asked at least two informants from different groups to independently code each attack and its perpetrator.<sup>57</sup>

In the period from February to June 2017, we conducted an additional series of 20 follow-up interviews with our informants using various internet-based communication channels (WhatsApp, Skype, Signal, Viber, etc.). The bulk of these interviews were conducted with former jihadis from Dagestan; a minority was conducted with current jihadis from Dagestan. Experts on jihadi violence in Dagestan, including local journalists, scholars, politicians, and officers of the Dagestani Ministry of Interior and the Federal Security Service were also consulted. Interviews with former and current jihadis were conducted both inside and outside Dagestan in Istanbul, Tbilisi, and Prague, where multiple ex-combatants now live.

<sup>58</sup> Interviews were conducted in most major Dagestani cities (including Makhachkala, Kaspiysk, Derbent, Khasavyurt, Izberbash, and Buynaksk) as well as in rural areas where insurgent were active (such as Karabudakhkentsky, Gergebilsky, Gunibsky, Levashinsky, Shamilsky, Tabasaransky, and Untsukulsky districts).

To the best of our knowledge, the final dataset of *haram* attacks in Dagestan is the most complete and accurate set of *haram* terrorist incidents in a single region, validated by multiple independent sources, and with relatively detailed information regarding attacks, the perpetrators of violence, along with characteristics of each *jamaat*.

## **Ethnicity and the logic of *haram* targeting in Dagestan**

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<sup>57</sup> In cases where our informants contradicted each other regarding the *jamaat* responsible for the attack, we contacted additional informants for more information to arrive at a final coding.

<sup>58</sup> Former and current jihadis, as well as the officer of the Dagestani Ministry of Interior, consented to be interviewed on the grounds of strict confidentiality. Their identities are therefore concealed in this study, whereas the identities of scholars and journalists are disclosed.

Dagestan's rural jihadi groups largely operate on a territorial-clan (*tukhum*) basis.<sup>59</sup> Given the salience of *tukhum*-based kinship in the republic's rural areas, authorities and law enforcement are often manned by the members of the same family (or clan) as the members of locally operating jihadi groups.<sup>60</sup> Endogamy, pervasive in Dagestan's rural areas, reinforces these clan and ethnic loyalties; with Dagestan's ethnic groups numbering from a few thousand to several hundred thousand members, many co-ethnics are close or distant relatives. Moreover, against the backdrop of Dagestan's highly ethnically fractionalized society, ethnicity serves as the principal source of self-identification, with its relevance stretching well beyond established kinship ties. In their quotidian lives, individuals place enormous importance on ethnicity in general and ethnic solidarity in particular: marriage, communal life, employment, and politics all revolve around the notion of ethnicity-centered in-group solidarity.<sup>61</sup> As many Dagestanis have confessed, ethnicity is seen as an extended family mainly because in the not-too-distant past, members of the republic's ethnic groups were all relatives.<sup>62</sup>

Ethnicity has retained its significance even among regional jihadi groups, both in Dagestan and across the multiethnic North Caucasus.<sup>63</sup> Some *jamaats* are dominated by Avars and others by Kumyks, Laks, Dargins, and Lezgins, whereas other *jamaats* are ethnically

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<sup>59</sup> This holds specifically for (ethnically homogenous) jihadi groups operating in rural areas, while jihadi groups operating in urban centers are usually ethnically mixed. Souleimanov, 2018.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with prof. Akhmet Yarlykapov of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, 30 January 2015. Akhmet Yarlykapov observed that virtually everybody is someone's relative in the rural areas, so those who went to the woods [joined *jamaats*] are not eager to liquidate their relatives in the local administration and police (or *haram* attacks). The instances of killing relatives [...] became notorious just because they were so rare.

<sup>61</sup> Olga Tsapieva and Tagir Muslimov, "Etnopoliticheskaya I etnosocialnayasituatsiya v Dagestane I noveyshie konflikty," *Rossiya I musulmanskij mir*, 3.51 (2007): <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/etnopoliticheskaya-i-etnosotsialnaya-situatsiya-v-respublike-dagestan-i-noveyshie-konflikty/viewer>.

<sup>62</sup> Although clan and nationalism constitute essentially non-Islamic cleavages, known by the derogatory term of *asabiyya* (tribalism or nationalism), which are contrasted to the highly revered concept of *umma*, the one Islamic nation, religious, ethnic and *tukhum* loyalties are intertwined in Dagestani society. Virginie Collombier and Olivier Roy, eds. *Tribes and Global Jihadism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

<sup>63</sup> Tekushev, "Triumph of the Caucasus Emirate," CSIS: [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/publication/120217\\_Hahn\\_IIPER\\_52.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/120217_Hahn_IIPER_52.pdf) A similar observation holds for Chechen Salafis, culturally proximate to their Dagestani neighbors.

mixed. While targeting relatives is considered taboo in Dagestani society, killing a co-ethnic, although less extreme, is also frowned upon, due to the widespread view in Dagestan of ethnic groups as a form of extended kinship. This attitude, while pervasive throughout Dagestan, is particularly strong in the more rural areas where ethnicity is most closely interwoven with kinship and most, though certainly not all, *jamaats* tend to be monoethnic.

Rural and mono-ethnic *jamaats* sometimes do target military, civilians, and other soft targets *outside* of their areas of operations, including in major cities and other rural areas, yet, compared to urban multi-ethnic *jamaats*, rural mono-ethnic *jamaats* tended to strike against a *haram* target less frequently, even when they had the capacity and opportunity to do so.

Although *haram* businesses are more widespread in urban areas, it is important to appreciate that they also exist in rural areas, and are typically even easier to attack - since there is less security - compared to urban areas. Yet, as an empirical matter, mono-ethnic *jamaats* almost never attacked *haram* targets in their own rural areas. As an insurgent supporter from a remote village in mountainous Dagestan explained how local *haram* is mostly addressed: “in villages like this one, everyone knows everyone. Forest brothers don’t need to target “bad” Muslims; we ensure that fellow villagers respect Islam, their families, and themselves. We know who smokes, drinks or gambles. If they want to engage in sinful behaviors, they can leave and live in Makhachkala. If not, we can take care of them. They would not dare do that in public here”!<sup>64</sup>

By contrast, multi-ethnic *jamaats* do engage in a significant amount of *haram* targeting in their own backyard (mostly in cities) *and* (to a lesser extent, for some of the reasons just mentioned) in rural areas. This further underscores that the dynamics we describe in Dagestan are not as much attributable to the greater density of *haram* targets in urban areas,

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<sup>64</sup> Interview with “Sultan.”

or to other urban-rural differences, so much as they are to the ethnic composition of the *jamaat* itself, and to the leadership's decision in ethnically-mixed *jamaats* to select *haram* targets.

In our dataset, we identified 36 insurgent groups active in Dagestan during the period of our study, including 12 mono-ethnic<sup>65</sup> and 24 multi-ethnic<sup>66</sup> groups. From that population, we identified 24 *jamaats* that engaged in *haram* attacks (5 monoethnic and 19 multi-ethnic). Even accounting for the fact that there are twice as many multi-ethnic *jamaats* as mono-ethnic ones in Dagestan (24 vs. 12), multi-ethnic *jamaats* have carried out nearly four times as many attacks as mono-ethnic groups (33 versus 9 attacks, or 6.6 versus 1.8 attacks per year).

One of the key reasons for this disparity seems to be that the leaders of multiethnic urban *jamaats* were concerned with the need to overcome the strong ethnic identity among group members by fostering a uniform Salafi-jihadi identity. As one former jihadi observed, “disputes have often been conditioned by [ethnic] nationalism,”<sup>67</sup> so ethnically-mixed *jamaats* appear to have been more exposed to top-down Salafi-jihadi indoctrination for the sake of transcending dangerous ethnic divisions.<sup>68</sup> Attacking targets commonly identified as un-Islamic (e.g., *haram*) serves as one of the main ways jihadi groups overcome parochial identities for the sake of fighting a common “evil” enemy.

Some interviewees underlined how acting against what they perceived as “spoiled morals” and “anti-Islamic” behaviors helped to unite fighters of different ethnic backgrounds. “Ethnicity [*natsional'nost'*] doesn't matter,” explained one insurgent supporter, “Islam does.

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<sup>65</sup> Some of the most well-known mono-ethnic *jamaats* include the Gubdinskiy, the Karabudakhkentskiy, the Tsumadinskiy, and the Sergokalinskiy *jamaats*.

<sup>66</sup> Some of the most well-known multi-ethnic *jamaats* include the Sharia, the Khasavyurtovski, the Shamilkalinskiy (Makhachkala), the Derbentskiy, the Buynakski, the Kizlyarskiy, and Southern (Yuzhniy) *jamaats*.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with “Idris.”

<sup>68</sup> Souleimanov, “A Perfect Umma.”

Targeting ‘*them*’ unites *us* together.”<sup>69</sup> As summarized by a former jihadi, “What is against Islam is the enemy of us, Muslims. No matter whether you’re an Avar, Dargin, or Lak [...] we have to fight against the evil [*kufir* and *haram*]. It all brings us together. This is the beauty of it.”<sup>70</sup> At the same time, as emphasized by a former member of an ethnically-mixed *jamaat*, “the good thing” about attacking *haram* businesses (without casualties) was that “you would avoid [ordinary] people hating you because you specifically targeted a group of, say, Avars.”<sup>71</sup>

These small-scale and usually non-lethal attacks helped ethnically fragmented *jamaats* become more cohesive, while avoiding lethal violence, necessarily aimed against members of some of the republic’s ethnic community. Overcoming ethnic bias—and thus cementing group cohesion using the common goal of fighting evil—is a central theme in *haram* targeting. A leading figure of a formerly urban *jamaat* acknowledged that, “if you’re a Rutul [member of a small Dagestani ethnic group], you’re somewhat inclined to avoid targeting business run by another Rutul: the likelihood of them being members of your *tukhum*(*clan*) are higher. You would rather prefer targeting someone else. An Avar-run business, for example, but even if you target one of your own...at least the business is the target, and no one is killed.”<sup>72</sup>

Another former jihadist admitted that as an uncontroversial and non-lethal form of violence, *haram* targeting fostered group cohesion in that it inserted a sense of divine purpose into individual jihadis who “felt we did what was needed to be done on the path of Allah.”<sup>73</sup> After each incident of *haram* targeting, as one former jihadist put it, foot soldiers “felt friendlier [*druzhnee*] toward each other,”<sup>74</sup> underscoring the role of *haram* targeting as an instrument of cementing group cohesion and religiously-imbued group solidarity. Multi-ethnic

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<sup>69</sup> Interview with "Akhmed".

<sup>70</sup> Interview with "Daud."

<sup>71</sup> Interview with "Said."

<sup>72</sup> Interview with "Nurmagomed."

<sup>73</sup> Interview with "Akhmed."

<sup>74</sup> Interview with "Akhmed."

*jamaats* leaders often specifically selected *haram* targets from one of the key group's to break clan ties and reinforce the jihadi loyalties.

As a former jihadi recollected, “when you carry out your first ever task, and you're successful, it boosts your self-confidence incredibly. You get convinced that you're on the right (religious) path and that you're the right man.”<sup>75</sup> The “religious high” here is just as important (especially for new recruits) as group cohesion is to leaders. In many interviews, individuals underlined how acting against what they perceived as “spoiled morals” and “anti-Islamic” behaviors helped to unite fighters from different ethnic groups inside Dagestan. “Carrying my first attack showed me the righteous path and confirmed my bond with fellow brothers and what I knew about *Pure Islam*. (...) Islam transcends everything in life.”<sup>76</sup>

While former insurgents and their supporters agree in principle that Islam is superior to, and should take precedence over, clan and ethnic loyalties, the reality on the ground is often different from the established rhetoric. Ethnic favoritism (*asabiyya*) is a widely recognized problem in multiethnic Dagestan,<sup>77</sup> and it has also pervaded the republic's jihadi groups, with leaders of multiethnic *jamaats* preferring the recruitment of their ethnic kin or relegating important positions within their *jamaats* to their ethnic kin as a means of ensuring loyalty. This, too, has caused tension within *jamaats*, with members of disadvantaged ethnic groups expressing grievances over discriminatory, un-Islamic practices. In 2010, an Islamic judge of Dagestan's largest *jamaat* Shariat even issued an internal *fatwa* calling the leader of a minor *jamaat*, operating in the Khasavyurt area, to abandon ethnic favoritism or leave the jihad entirely.<sup>78</sup> In short, ethnic favoritism and bias in ethnically mixed *jamaats* is a serious

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<sup>75</sup> Interview with “Abdulla.”

<sup>76</sup> Interview with “Abdul.”

<sup>77</sup> Ware and Kisriev 2001; Souleimanov, “A perfect umma?” *Ethnicities*, 18.3 (2018), 434-453.

<sup>78</sup> Souleimanov, 2018.

issue that the leaders need to overcome if they are to be successful, and *haram* targeting is one clear and often effective means to achieve trans-ethnic group cohesion.<sup>79</sup>

The Makhachkala and Derbent *jamaats*—both ethnically-mixed *jamaats*—sought to overcome identity-based cleavages through *haram* targeting in order to create a sense of cohesion. It appears that the leaders saw *haram* targeting as a rather non-controversial means of fostering supra-ethnic religious solidarity and group cohesion, and often deployed it as a form of initiation violence to integrate new and inexperienced recruits.<sup>80</sup> By contrast, the Gubden *jamaat* was a mono-ethnic group well-known for its terrorist and insurgent activities. Its members were known for their religious fervor and their dedication for what they called “Pure Islam.”<sup>81</sup> Although they regularly targeted security forces linked to “anti-Wahhabist” activists and “moderate” clerics in Dagestan and in Russia (e.g. the 2010 Moscow Metro bombings), the mono-ethnic Gubden *jamaat* never once engaged in any *haram* targeting.<sup>82</sup>

We observe these same patterns at large in the quantitative data. First, in absolute terms, multi-ethnic groups launched more *haram* attacks than mono-ethnic outfits: 5 of the 12 mono-ethnic *jamaats* (41%) engaged in a total of 9 *haram* attacks, whereas 19 out of 24 multi-ethnic *jamaats* (79%) carried out a total of 33 attacks. Mono-ethnic *jamaats* in Dagestan

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<sup>79</sup> *Haram* targeting in Dagestan was most often used as an “educative” and non-lethal tactic rather than a punishing one. The reason behind this decision is the potential cost associated with *haram* targeting such as the risk to antagonize local supporters as well as the cost of targeting hard targets for identity-based purpose resulting in severe retaliation at the hands of law enforcement. Although the cost-benefit analysis is not part of our argument, it is central to take into consideration to understand why *jamaats* opted for non-lethal *haram* targeting to resolve their collective action problem.

<sup>80</sup> We thank a reviewer for noting an interesting parallel with the use of sexual violence as an initiation strategy for new recruits, which we mention in the conclusion. See Dara Cohen. *Sexual Violence in Civil War*, Cornell University Press, 2016.

<sup>81</sup> Such statements were often made throughout our fieldwork in rural Dagestani villages. Our interviewees discussed about the religious fervor of rural *jamaats*’ fighters including the Gubden *jamaat* and their dedication to what is described as a purified form of Islam.

<sup>82</sup> Magomedali Vagabov, leader of the Gubden *jamaat* in 2010, launched a series of suicide attacks in Dagestan and across Russia including in the Moscow Metro. See, Gordon Hahn. *The Caucasus Emirate Mujahideen: Global Jihadism in Russia’s North Caucasus and Beyond*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2014).

were responsible for only 21% of all *haram* attacks (9/42), while multi-ethnic *jamaats* conducted the remaining 79% (33/42) of the *haram* attacks.

Figure 1 also shows that multi-ethnic *jamaats* also engaged in significantly more frequent attacks (1.4) than homogeneous ethnic *jamaats* (0.8). Consistent with our ethnographic evidence, we find that ethnically mixed *jamaats* carried out the bulk of their attacks on businesses selling liquor (convenience stores, restaurants, supermarkets, grocery stores, pubs, and pharmacies). Multi-ethnic *jamaats* carried out most of *haram* targeting, and did so mostly in urban areas,<sup>83</sup> since those targets were closest, although they did occasionally attack *haram* targets in rural areas (e.g., Shamkhal, Novy Sulak, Ashaga Stal, Aknada, and Stalskoe). As a member of multi-ethnic urban *jamaat* told us “we will hit the sinners wherever they are (...) even if they are hiding outside of the city. We have resources for that. Sinners can only understand bombs and fear.”<sup>84</sup>

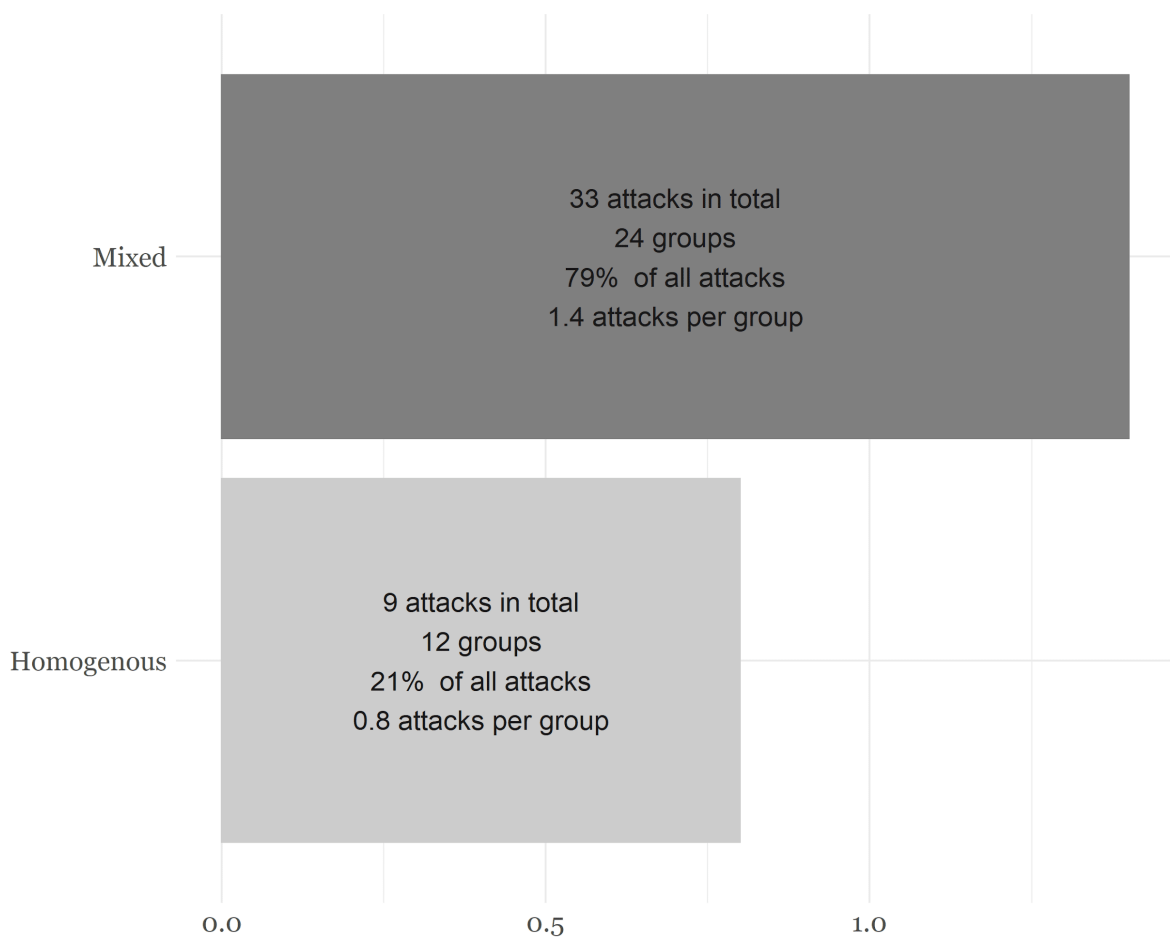
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<sup>83</sup> Although the majority of mono-ethnic *jamaats* in our dataset waged insurgent warfare across urban areas in the republic, only one of those mono-ethnic *jamaats*, the Endireyskaya *jamaat*, engaged in any significant amount of *haram* targeting. The Endireyskaya *jamaat* is composed of Kumyk fighters who are active in Khasavyurt and Kizilyur, as well as their surrounding rural areas, and committed five minor attacks against *haram* targets in urban areas (with no casualties). In spite of the fact that the *jamaat* engaged in five *haram* attacks, the vast majority of their other attacks targeted police forces, state representatives, and religious figures. Moreover, based on a discussion with an MVD officer in Dagestan, we learned that these attacks were done in partnership with the (a multi-ethnic *jamaat*).

<sup>84</sup> Interview with “Sultan.”



**Figure 1 : Haram Attacks in Dagestan by Ethnic Homogeneity of *Jamaat***



Since multi-ethnic *jamaats* are more likely to operate in city environments, they are much closer to *haram* targets (because there are more *haram* targets in cities than in villages), and this could partly explain why multi-ethnic *jamaats* are more likely to engage in *haram* targeting. While it is certainly true that multi-ethnic groups are more likely to operate in cities, and that *haram* is more prevalent in urban areas, a few caveats are in order. First, mono-ethnic village-based *jamaats* sometimes did hit targets outside of their direct vicinities, including in major cities, so the assumption that *jamaats* only hit targets in their vicinity is dubious (e.g., the Gudben *jamaat* as well as the Endireyskaya *Jamaat*). Conversely, urban *jamaats* sometimes targeted rural *haram* objects. In short, the jihadi group's proximity to more *haram*

objects did not directly correlate with the location of their targeting, since *jamaats* often engaged in *haram* targeting outside the areas in which they resided. To determine whether these results were driven by urban versus rural *jamaat* differences, we conducted a t-test for difference in means. While urban *jamaats* engaged in more *haram* attacks than their rural counterparts, this difference was not statistically significant ( $t = 1.4$ ,  $p\text{-value} = 0.17$ ). Another way to look into this issue is to examine only urban *jamaats*. Limiting the sample to urban *jamaats*, there is still significant variation in *haram* targeting, which is due largely to their ethnic structure. While the urban-rural cleavage is important to take into account, here and elsewhere, it does not change our main results or conclusions.

We also considered the possibility that a higher frequency of *haram* targeting by ethnically mixed *jamaats* was due to attracting more religious fundamentalists to their ranks. Religious fundamentalists were, if anything, more attracted to groups led by jihadi icons, which were most often headed mono-ethnic *jamaats* in rural areas.<sup>85</sup> For example, the head of the mono-ethnic rural Gubden *Jamaat*, Ibrahimhalil Daudov, was considered one of the leaders of Dagestani jihadism. A “founding co-father” of the jihadist “Caucasus Emirate” across the North Caucasus in 2007, he became the head of the all-Dagestani “*Jamaat Shariat*” in 2010. During its existence, the Gubden *Jamaat* carried out only a single attack against *haram* objects (and none while being under Daudov’s command). It was dozens of non-*haram* but brazen-faced attacks across the republic that made the group infamous and attracted many religious fundamentalists. Similarly, the leader of the mono-ethnic Levashinskiy *jamaat*, Rappani Khalilov, was also considered an important jihadi ideologue, and attracted religiously motivated recruits, but this group avoided violence against *haram* targets altogether. In spite

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<sup>85</sup> Our interviewees, however, emphasized that strangers were not welcome in tight-knit rural *jamaats*.

of harboring religious fundamentalist members and even leaders, these largely mono-ethnic *jamaats* generally avoided *haram* targeting and pursued other targets and objectives.

In short, these findings show that ethnically heterogeneous jihadi groups engage more than homogeneous ones in *haram* attacks. The qualitative evidence indicates that ethnically mixed *jamaats* did so primarily for the purpose of creating a common purpose, overcoming ethnic and tribal cleavages, especially among new recruits, and fostering a more unified fighting force capable of engaging in risky collective action.

### **Global Data on *Haram* Attacks**

To assess the argument's potential external validity and broader applicability, we created a new global cross-national data set of all *haram* attacks from 1998 to 2015. Drawing on background information in Jones (2018), Big, Allied and Dangerous (BAAD), and Crenshaw (2013), we identify 113 out of 167 (67%) Islamist groups that can be classified as Salafi (or Deobandi).<sup>86</sup> Of these 113, we find that 36 of them (or 32%) carried out one or more *haram* attacks during the observed period, for a total of 196 distinct *haram* attacks.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> We consulted the BAAD database as well as the External Actor Conflict Dataset (EACD) to identify a total of 119 Islamic militant groups that have operated in the period 1998-2015. We then drew extensively on Jones (2014, 2018), Crenshaw (2013) and a number of online books and reports to code Salafi/Deobandi groups. We also added 10 Dagestani outfits to arrive at a total of 142 Islamist militant groups. Next, we collected the data on terrorist attacks for all these groups using the GTD. We filtered these attacks by selecting "soft targets", including businesses (restaurants, bars, cafes, retail stores, bakeries, hotels and resorts), religious institutions, educational institutions, international NGOs, beach, museums, cultural centers, cultural houses, tourism travel agencies, and tourist sites. We then examined the news related to every attack using the sources reported in the GTD. Those attacks that had a clearly stated *haram* motive were coded 1 while those with no motive or instrumental motive were coded 0. Importantly, many *haram* attacks were committed by unknown perpetrators according to GTD. Given the lack of the identity of the group, we did not include these instances in our dataset.

<sup>87</sup> Most of the attacks in our data targeted girls' schools in Afghanistan, Dagestan and Pakistan (114), followed by convenience/grocery stores (23), music shops (10), liquor stores (9), Sufi shrines (9), cafes (7), mausoleums and tombs (4), restaurants (4), brothels (3), cinemas (3), barber shops (2), resorts (2), Shia mosques (2), a health center (1), van with textbooks (1), a livestock fodder manufacturer (1), nightclub (1), and a film studio (1). Three groups - Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP) in Pakistan, the Taliban in Afghanistan, Daesh in Iraq and Syria, and Boko Haram in Nigeria - were responsible for the bulk of these attacks.

To maximize comparability, we coded the ethnic composition of groups for the global data in the same way as we did for Dagestan.<sup>88</sup> Jihadi groups with two or more main ethnic groups were coded as mixed, while those with more than half of its members belonging to a single ethnic group were coded as homogenous.<sup>89</sup> In total, we identified 61 ethnically homogeneous groups (53%), 49 ethnically mixed ones (43%) and 4 that we could not discern clearly (4%).

Figure 2 shows displays these new global data, and shows that *haram* attacks are much more common among ethnically mixed than among ethnically homogeneous jihadi groups. Ethnically mixed groups were a minority of the Salafi jihadi groups, but carried out two-thirds of all *haram* attacks (66%). Of the 61 ethnically homogenous groups, 11 engaged in *haram* attacks (18%), compared to 25 of the 49 ethnically mixed groups (51%). Finally, the average mixed group carried out more than twice as many attacks (2.6) than the average homogenous group (1.1).

The two most active groups in the global data set, the Taliban and Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP), appear to illustrate this pattern. While both the Taliban and TTP share many similarities, including their cooperation and disdain for girls' school, they have different ethnic structures, thereby offering a useful way to examine the core hypothesis. The Taliban is largely composed of ethnic Pashtun tribes,<sup>90</sup> while the TTP is comprised of dozens of tribal factions as well as Arabs, Uzbeks, Afghans, Chechens and Punjabis.<sup>91</sup> Assuming an equal number of targets, our theory suggests that the TTP should conduct more attacks against *haram* targets than the Taliban, as an intentional means of building solidarity and cohesion

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<sup>88</sup> To code the ethnic composition of jihadi groups, we relied heavily on Crenshaw (2013), militant profiles portals (Global Security and Tracking Terrorism) as well as online news.

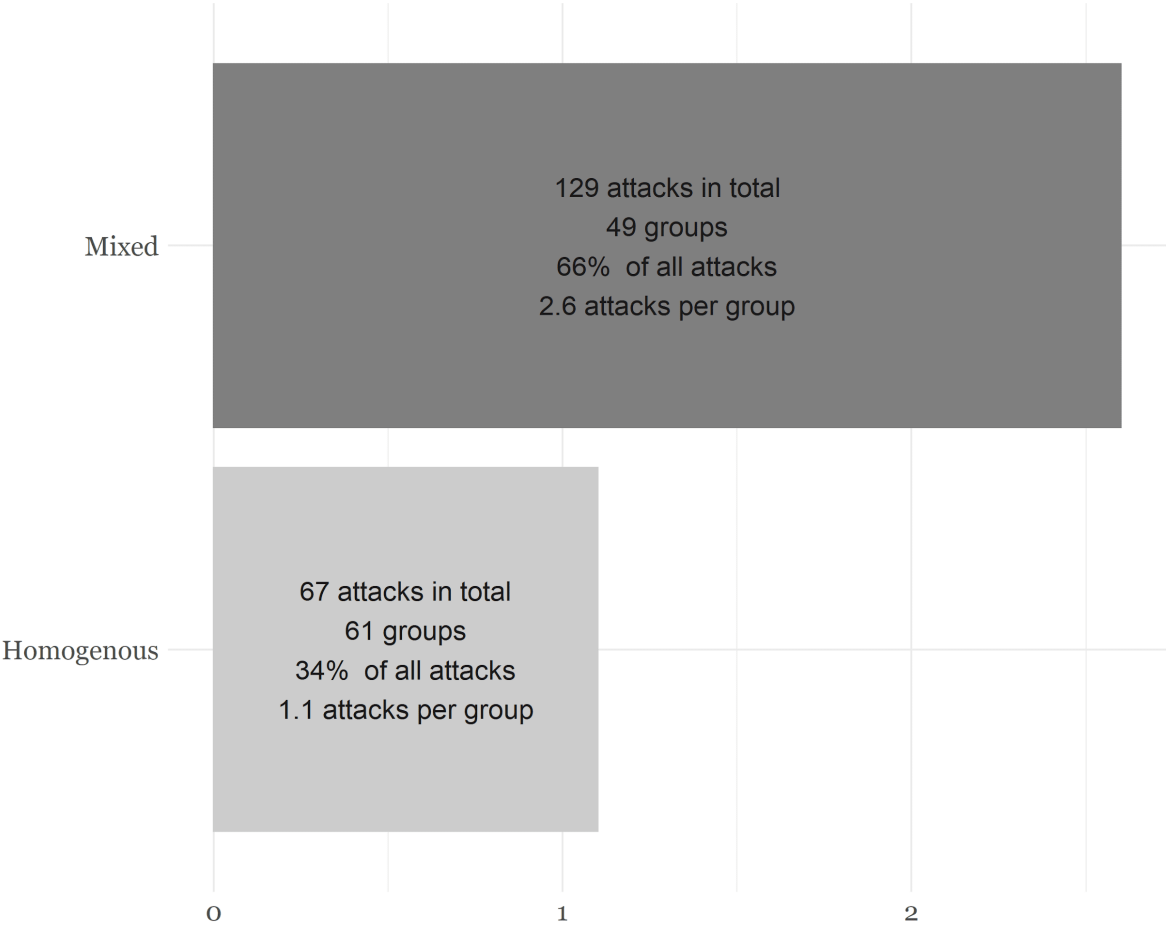
<sup>89</sup> Given that there is no available dataset on ethnic composition of terrorist groups, we often had to rely on anecdotal evidence, but our categories are also very coarse.

<sup>90</sup> Brenda Shaffer. *The Limits of Culture: Islam and Foreign Policy*. MIT Press. 2006, p. 277.

<sup>91</sup> Marta Crenshaw, 2013. Mapping Militant Organizations, source: <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/105> (accessed on 3/12/2019)

across ethnically distinct and sometime divided members. The data indeed show that TTP launched 79 *haram* attacks, whereas the Taliban launched “only”47.<sup>92</sup>

**Figure 2:** Ethnic Homogeneity and *Haram* Attacks, Global Sample (including the Dagestan sample)



Needless, taking into account rebel group characteristics aside from its ethnic composition is critical. There is some evidence that older groups become deadlier through learning and adaptation to counterterrorism, acquiring more specialized skills as they mature.

<sup>93</sup> To account for this possibility, the model estimation controls for the age of jihadi groups.<sup>94</sup>

Strength is another factor: some studies have found that weaker militant groups are more

<sup>92</sup> The Taliban and TTP haram attacks are largely focused on girl schools, which suggests a strategy of deterrence from modernization through fear. Other groups engaged in haram as a form of blackmail or taxation. While this falls outside of the scope of our article, it is open for further research.

<sup>93</sup> Bruce Hoffman. “Terrorism trends and prospects”, In: Ian Lesser, et al., *Countering the New Terrorism*. (Rand: Santa Monica, CA 1999): 7-13.

<sup>94</sup> We use the age of militant groups from the BAAD database: the number of years in existence as of 2015.

prone to target civilians due to a lack of incentives or resources to provide services to the local population,<sup>95</sup> while others find that stronger groups are more violent.<sup>96</sup> Although *haram* attacks are not aimed against civilians, weaker groups might utilize them to show that they are more radical than their competitors in anticipation that such spectacular attacks would attract new members.<sup>97</sup> Recent research suggests that Salafi-jihadist groups are also likely to modify their target selection in response to competition from other groups with similar ideology.<sup>98</sup> If this view holds, then weaker militants should be more likely to engage in *haram* attacks.<sup>99</sup> However, a different alternative mechanism suggests that more experienced militant groups are more versed in *haram* attacks.

We thus model the occurrence of *haram* attacks as a function of three covariates with a logistic regression estimator: group ethnic composition, group strength, and group age. We also account for the fact that some groups originate from the same country by clustering the robust standard errors at the state level, and include country fixed effects to account for unobserved cross-national heterogeneity.

Consistent with the theoretical expectations, and reinforcing the findings from our analysis of data from Dagestan, Figure 3 (top) shows that ethnically mixed groups are positively associated with a significantly higher probability of engaging in *haram* attacks. It also shows that rebel capabilities and group age have no statistically significant effect on the

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<sup>95</sup> Lisa Hultman. "Battle losses and rebel violence: Raising the costs for fighting." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19.2 (2007): 205-222; Reed Wood. "Rebel capability and strategic violence against civilians." *Journal of Peace Research* 47.5 (2010): 601-614; Idean Salehyan, David Siroky, and Reed Wood. "External rebel sponsorship and civilian abuse." *International Organization* 68.3 (2014): 633-661.

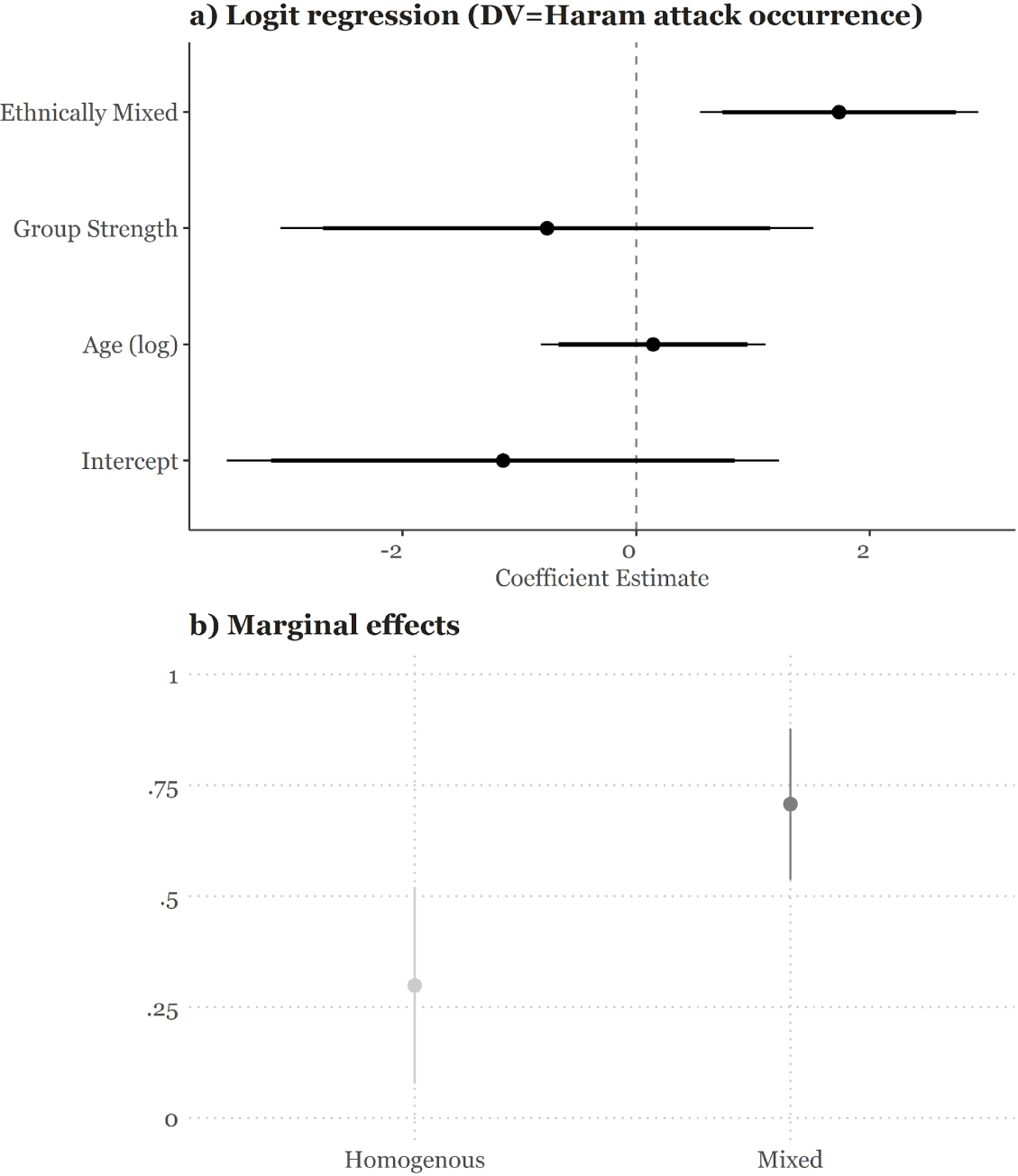
<sup>96</sup> Victor Asal and R. Karl Rethemeyer. "The nature of the beast: Organizational structures and the lethality of terrorist attacks." *The Journal of Politics* 70.2 (2008): 437-449.

<sup>97</sup> Bloom, 2005; Andrew Kydd and Barbara Walter. "The strategies of terrorism." *International Security* 31.1 (2006): 49-80.

<sup>98</sup> Megan Farrell. "The logic of transnational outbidding." *Journal of Peace Research* 57.3 (2020): 437-451.

<sup>99</sup> We measure this using the size interval of the organization's membership from the BAAD database. This covariate ranges from 0 (up to 100 members) to 1 (100-1000 members) to 2 (1000-10,000 members) and 3 (over 10,000 members). This variable is labeled "ordsize" in the BAAD database. We transform this categorical measure into binary variable with 1, 2 and 3 treated as strong militants or 1, and weak militants or 0.

**Figure 3: (Top)** Full Model of *Haram* Attacks on global sample with mean point estimates and 90% confidence intervals (thick horizontal line) and 95% confidence intervals (thin horizontal line). Robust standard errors are clustered on the state level. The model includes country fixed-effects, which are not shown here. The vertical dashed line is the line of “no effect”. The number of observations (Salafi groups) is 114. **(Bottom)** Marginal effects of ethnically mixed Salafi groups on *haram* attacks of model under (a).



likelihood of *haram* attacks, casting doubt on two possible alternative explanations while reinforcing the plausibility of the main result. Figure 3 (bottom) displays the predicted

probability of a jihadi group conducting any *haram* attacks, separately for mixed and homogeneous groups, and shows that ethnically mixed Salafi outfits were more than twice as likely to conduct *haram* attacks compared to mono-ethnic ones.

## **Conclusion**

Jihadi attacks against *haram* targets have made headlines around the world. As Salafi-jihadi groups arise in more and more theatres of conflict, a better understanding of the strategic and tactical choices behind this form of violence is warranted. With repeated threats of further attacks across the U.S. and Europe, along with the massive influx of young male migrants from Muslim countries, and European citizens returning from war and training, *haram* targeting could easily become a major security issue in Western countries in the near future.

This article examines patterns of *haram* targeting using original empirical material gathered from Dagestan and a new global data set that we compiled on *haram* attacks. In the Dagestan analysis, we relied on dozens of original interviews with ex-combatant jihadis, government officials and eyewitnesses to assess the core hypothesis both quantitatively and qualitatively. Despite adhering to a uniform Salafi-jihadi dogma and rhetoric, not all Salafi jihadi groups engage in *haram* targeting. It is mostly a phenomenon that ethnically mixed jihadi groups practice, and we conjecture that leaders of mixed groups utilize it primarily for overcoming internal parochial divisions based on ethnicity, tribe and clan by fostering a superordinate identity based on the common purpose of purifying the religion from everything un-Islamic. In a clan-based society like Dagestan, and in some parts of the Middle East, *haram* targeting serves as a ritual of initiation carried out to cement loyalty among new recruits, to overcome parochial and ethnic affiliation, and to increase the *jamaat's* cohesion.



Usually non-lethal attacks against explicitly non-Islamic targets help to boost the sense of divine purpose among newly recruited jihadis without creating a backlash among the local population.

Scholars have shown that sexual violence can create cohesion in rebel groups by separating individuals who violate such taboos from their former lives, making it harder for them to leave and reintegrate.<sup>100</sup> Among Salafi-jihadi groups, and particularly among more ethnically mixed jihadi groups, *haram* targeting serves a similar but in some ways more central social function, since it is tied to the group's ideology in a way that sexual violence usually is not. It also cuts off members from their old lives, like other violence, but it does not do so by engaging in taboo behavior. Its behavior is explicitly sanctioned by the religious ideology. Moreover, it unites different ethnic groups within the *umma*—thereby reinforcing their decision to focus on their religious identity (and subordinate, to some extent, their ethnic identity) with a sense of divine sanctioning for punishing the sinful and creating a more Islamic society. While it is certainly not the only reason for *haram* targeting, we find a consistent pattern in Dagestan and at the global level, which we hope provides a solid starting point for advancing our understanding of *haram* targeting in the future.

We have suggested that *haram* targeting is particularly enticing for ethnically mixed *jamaats* in Dagestan, for it represents a method to increase internal cohesion and boost external reputation without incurring high costs from the local population or potential retaliation from ethnically or kinship-related security forces. Yet it is important to note that the tendency of multi-ethnic *jamaats* to engage in more *haram* attacks is only the tip of this research frontier. Much progress has been made in our understanding of religious terrorism in general, and we hope to have contributed to it further through this original study of *haram*

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<sup>100</sup> Cohen 2016.

targeting, though much remains to be done to better understand its logic across different strategic settings. Further research is required, for instance, to better understand the role of the control-collaboration model in civil war as well as the importance of membership in international jihadist networks may influence the use of *haram*-based violence.