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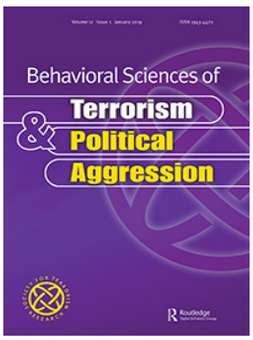

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# The internal brakes on violent escalation: a typology

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**ABSTRACT**

Most groups do less violence than they are capable of. Yet while there is now an extensive literature on the escalation of or radicalisation towards violence, particularly by 'extremist' groups or actors, and while processes of de-escalation or de-radicalisation have also received significant attention, processes of non- or limited escalation have largely gone below the analytical radar. This article contributes to current efforts to address this limitation in our understanding of the dynamics of political aggression by developing a descriptive typology of the 'internal brakes' on violent escalation: the mechanisms through which members of the groups themselves contribute to establish and maintain limits upon their own violence. We identify five underlying logics on which the internal brakes operate: strategic, moral, ego maintenance, outgroup definition, and organisational. The typology is developed and tested using three very different case studies: the transnational and UK jihadi scene from 2005 to 2016; the British extreme right during the 1990s, and the animal liberation movement in the UK from the mid-1970s until the early 2000s.

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## Introduction

Relatively few groups consistently undertake lethal violence, and few if any carry out as much violence as they appear capable of (Asal & Rethemeyer, 2008; Chermak, Freilich, & Suttmoeller, 2013; LaFree, Morris, & Dugan, 2010). It seems somewhat surprising therefore that while there has in recent decades been considerable investment in understanding how and why political violence, particularly that involving actors from 'extremist groups',[1] escalates (e.g. Alimi, Demetriou, & Bosi, 2015; Borum, 2011; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017), and while there has also been significant attention given to processes of de-escalation or de-radicalisation (e.g. Becker, 2017; Crenshaw, 1991; Cronin, 2009; Ross & Gurr, 1989), processes of non- or limited-escalation – why extremists or extremist groups don't do more violence than they do – have received far less attention (Bjørgo & Gjelsvik, 2017; Cragin, 2014; Simi & Windisch, 2018). Where they have received attention, the primary focus has tended to be primarily on the non-radicalisation of individuals

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(Cragin, 2014; Jaskoski, Wilson, & Lazareno, 2017; Knight, Woodward, & Lancaster, 2017; Simi & Windisch, 2018) rather than on group- or movement-level processes; or on identifying the differing characteristics between less and more violent organisations (Asal, Schulzke, & Pate, 2017; Chermak et al., 2013) – research which, while insightful, tells us relatively little about *how* violent escalation is inhibited.

This article makes a step towards addressing this gap in our understanding of the dynamics of political aggression. It does so by developing a descriptive typology of the 'internal brakes' on violent escalation: the mechanisms through which the members of the groups themselves inhibit their adoption or diffusion of greater violence. This is not to dismiss or downplay the importance of external constraints. Part of the explanation for non- or limited escalation will almost always lie in the way that the opportunities, capabilities and motivations to carry out greater violence are inhibited by the actions of, for example, opponents, state actors and the general public, as well as other external constraints (e.g. della Porta, 1995; Lehrke & Schomaker, 2016; Matesan, 2018; Oliver & Myers, 2002). Yet while detailed accounts of decision-making within extremist groups make clear that non- or limited escalation is also likely to be shaped by intra-group processes (e.g. Crenshaw, 1991; Shapiro, 2013), to date such internal brakes have rarely been examined systematically. The premise for this article is that developing a descriptive typology of the internal brakes on violent escalation – i.e. a typology concerned with describing and categorising such brakes, rather than one that seeks to assess their effectiveness and the conditions under which they are more or less effective – can provide researchers and analysts with a vocabulary and a set of concepts that they can then use to develop and test more complex hypotheses about how group members contribute to establish and maintain the limits on their own violence, and how this in turn contributes to wider processes of the non- or limited escalation of conflict.

To develop and test the typology, we draw on existing research on escalation, de-escalation and non-escalation of violence, and three contrasting case studies: the transnational and British jihadi scene from 2005 to 2016; the British extreme right during the 1990s, and the animal liberation movement in the UK from the mid-1970s until the early 2000s.

In what follows, we first describe how the typology was developed. We then present the typology, before reflecting on some of the limitations and challenges associated with the development and application of the typology, and considering future avenues for research.

## Development of the typology

Development of the typology occurred across three phases. The first comprised the definition of the scope and focus of the typology; the second comprised the initial assembly and coding of the case studies; and the third comprised an iterative process of typology development and refinement, using the case studies to critically interrogate the emergent typology, and drawing on the theoretical literature to refine categories within the typology.

### *Phase I: establishing the typology's scope and focus*

The initial literature review encompassed published empirical and theoretical research on social movements and contentious politics; terrorism and terrorist organisations; conflict de-escalation; and micro- and meso-level dynamics of violence and desistance. Based

on the initial literature review we defined the scope and focus of the typology in five ways.

(1) We established as the focus intra-group efforts to inhibit tactical radicalisation rather than ideological radicalisation. While ideological and tactical radicalisation sometimes intersect, the relationship between them is complex. It is therefore useful to distinguish between the two (Abrahms, 2012; Borum, 2011; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017).
(2) We defined escalation as a process relative to the group's existing action repertoire. Different forms of violence – e.g. interpersonal violence versus mass casualty attacks – might be associated with different social and emotional dynamics (Simi & Windisch, 2018). In addition, the relative scarcity of groups willing to deploy lethal force (Asal & Rethemeyer, 2008; LaFree et al., 2010) would seem to indicate that the gradient of escalation – the ease or difficulty with which people might move from one level of violence to the next – is generally steeper in the shift from serious physical harm to lethal force than, say, from fist-fights to fights using non-bladed weapons. We conceive of both as escalation, however. Whether specific brakes are more or less prominent at different levels of escalation was set up as a question for analysis.
(3) Due to considerations of observability, we adopted an analytical focus on the *practices* through which group members sought to inhibit violent escalation. This meant that intra-group rather than individual psychological processes were the main focus of attention.
(4) We excluded from our analysis developments within a movement's culture that appeared to limit violence in a way that was overwhelmingly incidental. For example, while there is some evidence that patterns of drug and alcohol consumption affect patterns of violence (Simi & Windisch, 2018), we did not consider general changes in drug and alcohol consumption an internal brake unless this was done explicitly to inhibit violence or public disorder (e.g. Busher, 2016, p. 113).
(5) Movement boundaries are notoriously difficult to define and 'who belongs' is often a source of contention among activists (Blee, 2012, pp. 52–80). As such, while we generally considered brakes 'internal' if they were applied by any actor within the broadly conceived movement, we recognised that 'internal' and 'external' are usually matters of degrees. Interactions within a faction are more 'internal' than interactions between actors in different factions of the same organisation, which are more 'internal' than interactions between actors in different organisations within the wider movement. To accommodate this, we took the position that the extent to which a brake is 'internal' is a function of the extent to which the actor(s) applying the brake (Actor A) is recognised by the actor(s) to whom the brake is being applied (Actor B) as part of their group or movement.[2]

The above resulted in a working definition of 'internal brakes on violent escalation' as:

> the practices through which actors who are recognised as group members seek either: (a) to inhibit directly the adoption or diffusion of more violent tactics by other group members; or (b) foment strategic decisions and (sub)cultural practices the logical consequences of which are to inhibit the adoption or diffusion of more violent tactics.

The objective in developing the typology then was (a) to provide a vocabulary to describe and categorise all such practices as they were identified across the three case studies and within the wider literature review; (b) organised within a structure that is theoretically coherent; and (c) with the minimum of categorical overlap.

### *Phase II: preparing and coding the case studies*

As described above, the three case studies used to develop the typology were transnational and British jihadi groups between 2001 and 2016; the British extreme right during the 1990s, and the animal liberation movement in the UK from the mid-1970s until the early 2000s. The selection of these case studies was based on a 'most-different case comparative strategy' (della Porta, 2013, pp. 25–29) with two axes of variation: ideology and the scope and scale of violence.

The jihadi case provided an example of an ostensibly religious movement that promotes and applies lethal violence, albeit some actors within the movement engaged in efforts to manage the parameters of that violence. This case study had two empirical focal points. The first was on how actors within the UK (Al-Muhajiroun and a network of friends convicted of planning acts of terrorism in 2016) responded to efforts to expand the scope of violence spearheaded by the so-called Islamic State (IS). While Al-Muhajiroun publicly embraced more radical forms of violence, within the network of friends some members began to question the validity and efficacy of tactics displayed by IS. This part of the case study uses secondary academic literature pertaining to Al-Muhajiroun in the UK, and court transcripts of private discussions online involving members of the network of friends.

Reflecting the transnational dimensions of the jihadi movement, the second empirical focal point of the case study comprised global debates within the jihadi milieu, with a focus on the Al-Qaeda leadership's efforts to instil caution about violent escalation during this period. This part of the case study is based on public statements (speeches, press releases and other media outreach) from the Al-Qaeda leadership between 2001 and 2016, and internal correspondence from within Al-Qaeda's inner circle dating from 2005, when concerns were expressed about the tactical direction taken by IS's predecessor organisation, Al-Qaeda in Iraq, and from the period immediately preceding the raid on Usama bin Ladin's compound in Pakistan in May 2011.

The extreme right case provides an example of mobilisation around a racial-nationalist ideology where, while there is significant interpersonal violence, lethal violence is rare and the period under analysis is characterised by a significant attempt to shift away from violence towards orthodox political campaigning. The specific empirical focus of the case is on the British National Party (BNP) during the 1990s as it strove to achieve electoral legitimacy whilst simultaneously struggling to contain the actions and growing influence of its own radical flank – Combat 18 (C18) – which the BNP itself had initially formed to defend the party from a direct action campaign against it by Anti-Fascist Action (AFA). While further escalation did take place within the radical flank, here too there were observable limits on violence, with actions that exceeded established parameters of 'acceptable' violence provoking intra-movement opposition, disillusionment and disengagement (Collins, 2011). Where higher levels of violence did take place, it was largely directed at targets within the movement and served to reduce the capacity of the group to prosecute violence against external rivals.

The extreme right case is based upon a survey of the secondary academic literature, extreme right publications, activist memoirs, journalistic accounts of the groups in question, contemporary newspaper reports, television documentaries, and an interview with an anti-fascist activist active during the period.

The animal liberation case study focussed on the radical flank of the animal rights movement, characterised by their willingness to use illegal forms of direct action in order to advance campaigns for animal rights, providing an example of a single issue movement. The evolution of the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) is central to this case study, as are the campaigns carried out under other organisational banners, such as the Animal Rights Militia and the Justice Department, which entailed escalation beyond established repertoires of action. While positioning itself as a nonviolent movement and exhorting activists to take all reasonable measures to avoid harm to living beings, animal liberation activists have perpetrated acts of violence, including serious property damage and intimidation, which have undoubtedly caused physical and psychological harm to human and non-human animals. Yet within this case study interpersonal violence is very rare, even when state repression significantly inhibited the availability of non- or less violent strategies of action (Ellefsen, 2016; Monaghan, 2013).

The animal liberation case study is based on secondary academic literature, journalistic accounts of the movement, contemporary media reports, television documentaries, activist memoirs, movement publications, and interviews with two former animal liberation activists, and an academic expert.

Such diverse case studies were chosen to enable us to interrogate the broad applicability of the typology – a strategy increasingly encouraged by researchers of political violence (della Porta, 2013; Freilich, Chermak, & Gruenewald, 2015). While other cases studies might cast further light on how internal brakes function and the conditions under which they are more or less effective, we assessed that, within a context of limited financial and time resources, the selected case studies provided sufficient variation for the initial development of the descriptive typology.

For each case study, primary and secondary data were initially coded for instances in which group members cautioned against escalation, sought to prevent escalation as it was unfolding, or engaged in post-hoc criticism or sanctioning of fellow activists who had participated in violent escalation. These instances were then organised into descriptive categories which were used first to develop and then to interrogate the emergent typology.

### *Phase III: developing, testing and refining the typology*

The third phase comprised an iterative process of moving between the emergent typology, the case studies and the theoretical literature in order to develop, test and refine the typology. The typology went through fifteen iterations in total. In initial iterations, potential brakes were identified by coding up from the literature review and the case studies. Instances of similar braking practices were then clustered together and described. Within each iteration we sought to limit overlap between the brake descriptions while ensuring the typology continued to encompass all relevant observed practices.

As the list of brakes expanded we organised the emergent brakes into sets, constructing a two-tier categorisation of higher-order codes, which we refer to as ‘brakes’, and

lower-order codes, which we refer to as 'sub-brakes'. Over subsequent iterations we developed, tested and refined the descriptions of the 'brakes' and 'sub-brakes' by seeking to apply these descriptions to the case study material and the relevant academic literature. We neither intended nor expected to find all of the brakes and sub-brakes in each case study, but did seek to ensure that brakes were mutually intelligible across the case studies.

Through this process, we developed a typology in which the brakes and their respective sub-brakes are organised according to the underlying logics on which they operate. We identified five logics: strategic logic, moral logic, the logic of ego maintenance, the logic of outgroup definition, and organisational logic (see below).[3] While these logics sometimes overlap with one another, we identified sufficient instances when they appeared to be distinct from or independent of one another to warrant this categorisation.

We also identified that brakes can be categorised according to their relevant proximity to the potential act of violent escalation. Here, adapting and inverting Waddington, Jones, and Critcher's (1989) analysis of the 'structuration of violence' in relation to public disorder, we developed an analysis of three levels of proximity: campaign planning; action planning, and the situational level. Due to space limitations, however, in this article we focus only on the brakes as categorised by the logics on which they work.

## The typology: internal brakes and their operating logics

In this section we set out and summarise each of the five brakes and associated sub-brakes, and the logics on which they operate. This is summarised in Figure 1.

### *Brake 1. Identification of non- or less violent strategies of action as being as or more effective than more violent alternatives (strategic logic)*

Brake 1 operates on questions about 'what works?' or 'how best can we achieve our objectives?' Strategic logics are prominent in academic and practitioner accounts of decision-making in radical, extremist or insurgent groups, challenging often-made assumptions that decision-making in such groups is overwhelmingly ideologically-driven (Dudouet, 2012, p. 102).

Violent escalation is often identified as carrying numerous risks both for the group and for individuals. Actors might therefore seek to inhibit violent escalation either by emphasising the effectiveness of less violent, and therefore less risky, strategies of action, or by emphasising the limited effectiveness and/or potentially high costs of violent escalation. The idea that violence is somehow counter-productive is often deployed. Brake 1 comprises of five sub-brakes.

#### *Brake 1a. Expressions of scepticism about their ability to beat their opponents in a violent struggle, including concerns that greater militancy will increase backlash or repression from opponents or the state towards them and their supporters.*

This was among the most frequently identified brakes in each case study. This is perhaps unsurprising: people rarely undertake physical violence if they anticipate that they will lose (Collins, 2008). In the jihadi case study, internal documents[4] revealed how leaders warned sub-commanders against expanding into new territory since this would provoke a reaction from state apparatuses that would damage the movement. In the extreme right case

| | |
|---|---|
| **Brake 1: Identification of non- or less violent strategies of action as being as or more effective than more violent alternatives (strategic logic)** | |
| Sub-brakes | 1a. Expressions of scepticism about their ability to beat their opponents in a violent struggle, including concerns that greater militancy will increase backlash or repression from opponents or the state towards them and their supporters |
| | 1b. Expressions of concern that violent escalation will undermine support for the group |
| | 1c. Attempts to build or maintain ties with strategically useful allies who are not supportive of violent escalation |
| | 1d. Identification of political opportunities that favour (re)adoption of non- or less violent strategies of action |
| | 1e. Identification of non- or less violent strategies of action that are perceived to be effective, including identification of 'sufficient' levels of violence |
| **Brake 2. Construction of moral norms and evaluations that inhibit certain forms of violence and the emotional impulses towards violence (moral logic)** | |
| Sub-brakes | 2a. Articulation and performance of general moral norms and principles that problematise certain forms of violence, require violence to be justified or enable activists to forestall on entering the 'tunnel of violence' |
| | 2b. Identification of specific groups of actors as illegitimate targets for violence |
| **Brake 3. Self-identification as a group that is either nonviolent or uses only limited forms of violence (logic of ego maintenance)** | |
| Sub-brakes | 3a. Production of group narratives that emphasise non-violence or the limited use of violence either by themselves or by those they claim have inspired their movement |
| | 3b. Disassociation from more violent groups or factions and/or association with less violent groups or factions |
| | 3c. Opportunities to achieve intra-group respect and prestige without undertaking or encouraging the use of violence at or beyond the parameters of the group's action repertoire; and/or (the threat of) sanctions for activists who advocate or undertake violence beyond established parameters |
| | 3d. Limited expectations that they will be involved in greater levels of violence |
| **Brake 4. Boundary softening in relation to putative out-groups (logic of outgroup definition)** | |
| Sub-brakes | 4a. Resistance to generalizations about their opponents |
| | 4b. Identification of segments of the public beyond their previously-imagined support base as potential converts to their cause |
| | 4c. Limited intra-movement pressure to 'burn-bridges' with social contacts outside of the movement or outside of the radical flank of the movement |
| | 4d. Expressions of reluctance to conceive of the state security forces as 'the enemy' |
| **Brake 5. Organisational developments that either (a) alter the moral and strategic equations in favour of non- or limited violence, (b) institutionalise less violent collective identities and/or processes of boundary softening, and/or (c) reduce the likelihood of unplanned violence (organisational logic)** | |
| Sub-brakes | 5a. Limited investment in capabilities to escalate violence, and development of capabilities to undertake strategies of action that either entail non- or limited violence or more controlled violence |
| | 5b. Foregrounding more modest or intermediate objectives and de-prioritising revolutionary goals |
| | 5c. Construction and maintenance of spaces in which a range of activists that includes and extends beyond the radical flank are able to freely discuss tactics and movement objectives |
| | 5d. Concerns among some group members that violent escalation will compromise their ability to shape the movement's direction and/or negatively affect their position within it |
| | 5e. Concentration of energy on targeting movement rivals, leading to reduced capability to prosecute campaigns of violence against their external enemies |

**Figure 1.** The internal brakes on violent escalation and associated sub-brakes.

study, one of the reasons why a substantial component of the movement shifted away from the use of violence in the 1990s was because they came to believe that they were unable to 'out violence' their anti-fascist opponents. In the animal liberation movement concerns about individual and collective arrest – considered both unpleasant and ultimately counter-productive – were often used to dissuade co-activists from adopting more radical strategies of action.

This brake is also prominent in other accounts of non-escalation. Simi and Windisch (2018, p. 8) for example note that some US white nationalist activists see mass casualty violence as counter-productive on the grounds that it will attract 'unwanted attention from law enforcement'.

### *Brake 1b. Expressions of concern that violent escalation will undermine support for the group*

While some groups use violence to recruit members (Ligon, Harms, & Derrick, 2015), this usually works only for a relatively small number of militants. Most groups require wider bases of support, at least some of whom are unlikely to favour high levels of violence (Marighella, 1969, p. 60). Emphasising the importance of achieving or sustaining support among these publics can therefore be deployed as a brake on violent escalation. Jihadi militants previously involved in the Algerian civil war (1991–2002), for example, used their experience to warn colleagues that a loss of public support through excessive violence would undermine their campaigns. In the extreme right case more violent forms of activism were identified by BNP activists as detrimental to their attempts to rally public support around their 'Rights for Whites' campaign that required mass participation. In the animal liberation case study the rise of a 'cult of militancy' in the early 1980s was heavily criticised by those who insisted that meaningful change required the building of a mass movement (Roberts, 1986).

Brake 1b might be particularly effective when the imagined constituencies of potential support overlap with their opponents' support base because it disincentivises target widening from their opponents to their opponents' support base (Carter, 2017). This is discussed further under Brake 4b.

In some cases Brake 1b might take the form of threats from group members themselves to abandon the group as a consequence of rising levels of violence (Zirakzadeh, 2002).

### *Brake 1c. Attempts to build or maintain ties with strategically useful allies who are not supportive of violent escalation*

The motivations to pursue or maintain these ties might be varied, including tapping in to their resource or support base; achieving a veneer of respectability or utilising these allies to protect them politically, militarily or physically from opponents. Regardless of the motivation, attempts to build such relationships can entail committing activists to limiting or reducing violence. For example, in 1980 as the African National Congress sought to build international alliances it committed to observe the Geneva Protocol relating to irregular warfare (Dudouet, 2012, p. 99).

This brake was not prevalent in jihadi or extreme right case studies. Within the animal liberation case study, there were frequent calls from moderates for collaboration and alliances across the wider animal rights movement, and radical flank actors perceived in some of the more moderate organisations a potentially valuable source of financial and logistical

support. Related braking opportunities were frequently undermined however by intra-movement tensions and the decision of some moderates to distance themselves from radical flank actors (Henshaw, 1989).

### *Brake 1d. Identification of political opportunities that favour (re)adoption of non- or less violent strategies of action*

Diminished prospects for achieving political successes encourages the adoption of more violent strategies of action (Alimi et al., 2015, pp. 24–58; Piazza, 2017). Conversely, where activists identify increased political opportunities this can alter the balance of intra-movement strategic and tactical debates in favour of non- or less-violent strategies. While this brake is conditioned by developments external to the group, what matters from the 'internal brakes' perspective is how activists interpret these political opportunities. In the extreme right case, for instance, after the BNP won a council seat in 1993, increased – though unrealistic – expectations of their political possibilities were used to advance the party's reorientation away from violence, although this simultaneously accelerated dissension within the radical flank of the movement.

### *Brake 1e. Identification of non- or less violent strategies of action that are perceived to be effective, including identification of 'sufficient' levels of violence*

Activists' identification of specific non- or less-violent strategies of action as 'successful' can serve to build support for such strategies and undermine support for violence (Matesan, 2018). For example, while part of the reason for the BNP's innovation away from violence was the realisation that they were unable to 'out-violence' their anti-fascist opponents, the ability of 'modernisers' to build support within the movement was enhanced by the identification of the potential of interventions such as their 'Rights for Whites' campaign to exploit perceived political opportunities (Copsey, 2011). In the animal liberation movement in the early 1980s, the perceived effectiveness of mass daytime 'invasions' of laboratory facilities in terms of building public support and intensifying legal and economic pressure on those laboratories quickly spawned similar actions across the country and a brief shift away from clandestine activities. The tactical shift was curtailed however when such invasions resulted in mass arrests (Nagtzaam, 2017, p. 71).

A variation on this brake is the identification of what are deemed 'sufficient' levels of violence in order to achieve their objectives. For example, activists might identify that only a relatively low level of violence is required to disrupt an opponent's event or to intimidate their opponents, and that incurring the risks of escalation beyond this level is unnecessary. Such logic can contribute to the decision to abandon violence altogether if an organisation accomplishes its goals (Crenshaw, 1996; Cronin, 2009).

## *Brake 2. Construction of moral norms and evaluations that inhibit certain forms of violence and the emotional impulses towards violence (moral logic)*

Brake 2 works on moral logic or the 'logics of appropriateness' (Matesan, 2018, p. 6), relating to questions about whether it is *right* to use violence and if so under what conditions. Moral considerations can comprise a significant barrier to participation in violence (Fiske & Rai, 2015), and where moral brakes falter, this can form a source of discomfort, shame or

remorse that might ultimately lead activists to disengage with the group (Bjørgo, 2011; Crenshaw, 1996; Simi & Windisch, 2018).

Moral logics can be articulated through formal organisational communiqués or informal interactions. They might align with and complement strategic logics, particularly where utilitarian assessments are made about how violence or nonviolence contribute to campaign outcomes. For example, calls by Al-Qaeda's leadership to limit the targeting of lethal violence to those directly involved in combat related both to strategic logics of sustainable militant campaigns and moral logics of proportionality (al-Zawahiri, 2013). However, moral logics can also contradict strategic logics. Activists might, for example, have moral qualms about violent escalation even if they perceive greater violence to be strategically expedient. Conversely, activists might assess that violence has become too costly but continue to believe in its legitimacy, giving rise to situations in which groups 'disengage from violence behaviourally' but do not 'denounce armed action or give up all military capabilities' (Clements, 2015; Matesan, 2018, p. 10). We identified two sub-brakes relating to Brake 2.

### *Brake 2a. Articulation and performance of general moral norms and principles that problematise certain forms of violence, require violence to be justified or enable activists to forestall on entering the 'tunnel of violence' (Collins, **2008**, pp. 337–369)*

General moral norms and principles might encompass, for example, the conceptualisation of violence as a tactic of last resort; conceiving of non-retaliation as virtuous; or emphasising values such as mercy and compassion. They are often articulated with reference to the group's expressed ideological worldview. Karagiannis and McCauley (2006, p. 325) for example describe how prominent actors within Hizb ut-Tahrir in Uzbekistan used theological reasoning to resist pressures to sanction violence on the grounds that violence had not been sanctioned by a suitable religious authority. Similarly, in the jihadi case study Al-Qaeda's leaders released detailed communiques setting out the 'laws of war' and the consequences for breaching these (bin Ladin, 2007, 2010).

As well as requiring violence to be justified, Brake 2a can also work by affording individuals or groups a way to avoid violence without losing face. For example, if non-retaliation is conceived of as virtuous, and restraint presented as symbolic of a movement's collective 'discipline' or an individual's 'dignity' in the face of their opponent's efforts to humiliate them (Busher, Giurlando, & Sullivan, 2018), choosing not to respond to violence with greater violence can be framed and experienced as a moral victory, thereby reducing the emotional and reputational costs of non-retaliation.

Moral reasoning is highly malleable, however. Moral norms regarding nonviolence are rarely unconditional (Fiske & Rai, 2015, pp. 35–41; Karagiannis & McCauley, 2006, p. 328), and radical flank actors might circumvent such brakes if fellow activists can be persuaded that the conditions for legitimate violence already exist. In the jihadi case study, for example, Al-Muhajiroun activists argued that the declaration of the caliphate by ISIS provided the religious authority for prosecuting a campaign of violence. Radical flank actors might also circumvent moral brakes with claims that their proposed violence responds to a higher moral order (Fiske & Rai, 2015). For example, some radical flank actors within the animal liberation movement justified the destruction of property and campaigns of intimidation on the grounds that they were responding to a higher moral obligation to prevent the imminent deaths of sentient beings (Liddick, 2013).

### *Brake 2b. Identification of specific groups of actors as illegitimate targets for violence*

Even in cases of seemingly indiscriminate violence, perpetrators usually provide some justification for the location and target of the attack. Jihadist leaders, for instance, have sought to justify 'indiscriminate' attacks by arguing that their victims are 'combatants' by proxy by virtue of their status as tax-payers or citizens of hostile regimes, and that the Prophet's armies set a legal precedent for such strategies of action with the use of weaponry and tactics that were – in principle – indiscriminate within selected boundaries, such as siege engines (al-Zawahiri, 2008). Conversely, identifying groups or individuals as illegitimate targets of violence can limit the range of actors against whom violence can 'legitimately' be used.

Designating targets as illegitimate can derive from evaluations of limited culpability or 'innocence'; whether or not they pose a threat (intersecting with Brakes 2a and 1e); or from general moral precepts, established conventions or legal distinctions e.g. prisoners of war, non-combatants etc. In the jihadi case, al-Zawahiri's (2013) 'General Guidelines for those engaging in Jihad', released as the rise of ISIS expanded the scope of indiscriminate sectarian violence within the jihadi milieu, identified swathes of people, divided by sect, religion, nationality and other criteria, who could not be targeted unless specific conditions were met. Similarly, internal movement documents revealed how the Al-Qaeda leadership identified westerners who had expressed sympathy with the group's cause as illegitimate targets for violence (bin Ladin, 2011).

Where violence is done to 'illegitimate' targets, it can damage movement morale and cohesion, and may produce moments of cognitive dissonance that ultimately lead individuals or groups of activists towards disengagement. In the extreme right case, for example, Collins (2011, p. 51) describes how participating in an attack on a group of women engendered feelings of regret and shame that contributed to his eventual exit from the scene.

### *Brake 3. Self-identification as a group that is either nonviolent or uses only limited forms of violence (logic of ego maintenance)*

Social movement scholars have long observed that activists' sense of who they are is intimately related with the evolution of their tactical repertoire (Smithey, 2009). In groups where activists identify as nonviolent or as group that use violence sparingly or as a last resort, such collective identities can inhibit violent escalation (Busher, 2018). As Asal and Rethemeyer (2008, p. 245) observe, '[s]ome organizations choose not to kill' simply because 'it does not fit with their view of themselves'.

When a group's behaviour does not align with members' self-image, it can undermine some activists' sense of their collective identity, leading to disappointment, disillusionment or even disgust (Bjørgo, 2011). In the jihadi case, chat logs from youths involved in the planning of terrorist acts in the UK revealed how the publication of graphic ISIS execution videos caused some members to recoil and question their assumption that ISIS represented a just vanguard within their movement (HM Courts and Tribunal Service, 2016). However, sudden departures from established repertoires of action can also facilitate a profound tactical reorientation among parts of the movement. For example, the 1993 killing of Dr David Gunn constituted a 'decisive break' with the US pro-life movement's previously non-violent protest repertoire and 'opened the floodgates to other violent attacks on doctors' (Kaplan, 1995, p. 128).

Processes of ego maintenance usually operate in parallel with moral and strategic logics. In most groups, members conceive of themselves as good people struggling for a noble cause; and activists often perceive strategic advantages in limiting their association with violence (Busher, 2013, 2018). Yet sometimes these logics operate more independently of one another. Activists may have no moral qualms regarding the use of a particular tactic, but yet would not adopt it themselves, perhaps because of role specification within the wider movement. Logics of ego maintenance might also obviate the requirement for moral or strategic reasoning, forestalling potentially difficult and divisive intra-movement tactical debates.

Brake 3 can be temporary, however. Activists might not envisage engaging in violence at a particular point in time, but might imagine themselves doing so in the future, under different circumstances. Furthermore, activists' self-image is dynamic, shaped by their relationships with opponents or state security forces (Alimi et al., 2015). Among Al-Muhajiroun activists, for example, their self-identification as a group not engaged in violent struggle was severely undermined by their dismissal of the 'covenant of security' it purported to respect within the UK (Connor, 2005). Brake 3 encompasses four sub-brakes.

### *Brake 3a. Production of group narratives that emphasise non-violence or the limited use of violence either by themselves or by those they claim have inspired their movement*

Activists produced group narratives that emphasise their use of non- or limited-violence in two ways. The first was to emphasise nonviolence or restraint in accounts of their own actions. Here, incidents in which activists could have done greater violence, but chose not to, were of particular rhetorical value. For instance al-Zawahiri used his eulogy of his predecessor as leader of Al-Qaeda, Usama bin Ladin, to emphasise how merciful the latter had been, sparing the lives of enemy combatants whom he could easily have ambushed (al-Zawahiri, 2011). Similarly, in the animal liberation case, activists' accounts of laboratory raids often emphasised how they had taken care to minimise the risk of harm to human or non-human animals (e.g. Mann, 2007, p. 626). Whilst such accounts are directed partly at external audiences, they also serve movement socialisation processes, shaping emergent normative orders.

Activists also constructed self-narratives as a group that uses non- or only limited-violence by situating their struggle within a longer historical tradition of non- or limited-violence. Activists in the animal liberation movement frequently drew comparisons between their campaigns and those of famous proponents of nonviolence, including Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr. Similarly, in the late 1990s and early 2000s Hizb ut-Tahrir in Uzbekistan sought to inhibit activists' adoption of violence by conceiving of their struggle as an imitation of the second phase of the progress of the Prophet Muhammad – the phase of Islamization – which, according to their particular historic interpretation, precludes the use of violence unless it is in defence of Muslim lands (Karagiannis & McCauley, 2006, pp. 325–9).

In order to undermine such brakes, some radical flank activists proffered alternative historical parallels and inspiration. In the animal liberation movement, for example, these actors criticised their fellow activists' reverence for Ghandi and emphasised historical parallels with movements such as the suffragists, who did deploy violence, albeit only within a limited repertoire.

### *Brake 3b. Disassociation from more violent groups or factions and/or association with less violent groups or factions*

Disassociation and association are often used to regulate ingroup identities (Berbrier, 2002). Disassociation from more violent groups or factions can both place pressure on those doing the disassociating to put into action their claims to be different to the groups from which they are disassociating (Busher, 2016, pp. 110–116), and accentuate concerns among those from whom they are disassociating about the costs of their actions in terms of potential loss of support (Brake 1b).

While disassociation and association might often relate to specific organisations or factions, activists might also seek to disassociate from or associate with more general categories of actors. Simi and Windisch (2018, p. 15) describe for example how some US white nationalists demurred from mass casualty violence partly because of a disjuncture between their own identification as fundamentally 'normal' people and their perception of mass casualty violence as 'sociopathic'.

In the case studies, disassociation came to prominence when cognate actors escalated violence beyond established repertoires of action. For instance Al-Qaeda leaders criticised the indiscriminate violence deployed by ISIS; senior ALF activists condemned letter-bomb campaigns by the 'Justice Department' and extreme right groups rapidly disassociated themselves from David Copeland's London nail bomb attacks in 1999. While their opponents may question the good faith of such pronouncements, they can nonetheless shape activists' understandings of the parameters of legitimate force.

### *Brake 3c. Opportunities to achieve intra-group respect and prestige without undertaking or encouraging the use violence at or beyond the parameters of the group's action repertoire; and/or (the threat of) sanctions for activists who advocate or undertake violence beyond established parameters*

Social sanctions and rewards play a fundamental role in shaping understandings of what is, and is not, acceptable within any given social context (Mead, 1934). Where violence is a source of prestige, individuals are more likely to engage in violence (Fiske & Rai, 2015, p. 285; Jaskoski et al., 2017, p. 11). Conversely, if certain forms of violence attract social sanctions, individuals are less likely to use those (Copes, Hochstetler, & Forsyth, 2013).

Relatively few examples of this brake were encountered in the case studies, although this might be a product of the source material available. The most prominent example of sanctioning within the jihadi case was the unsuccessful effort by Al-Qaeda's leaders to rein in Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, their Iraq sub-commander (al-Zawahiri, 2005; Rahman, 2005). In the animal liberation case, after an arson attack on a pub, which broke movement protocol by endangering 'innocent' lives, the ALF supporters group withheld the financial support usually offered to activists facing trial for campaign activities (Mann, 2007, p. 454). No similar attacks were carried out thereafter.

### *Brake 3d. Limited expectations that they will be involved in greater levels of violence*

Where people anticipate violence they are more likely to prepare for it and more likely to identify in the actions of opponents what they perceive to be signs of forthcoming confrontation (Malthaner, 2017). Conversely, where people do not expect violence they are less likely to prepare for it and are therefore less likely to be willing or able to undertake

violence. While these expectations are partly shaped by prior experiences, they are also based on intra-group discussions about the scale and style of violence that they plan to undertake or expect to encounter from opponents or state security forces during forthcoming actions.

In the extreme right case, even on the radical flank, there was an expectation that violent confrontation with anti-fascist opponents would involve a 'tear up' but nobody would be murdered (Lowles, 2014, p. 18). In the animal liberation case this brake can be seen operating in the way that hunt saboteurs anticipated and prepared for different levels of violent confrontation across different local hunts based on previous encounters with hunt supporters and the intra-movement circulation of anecdotes about these encounters.

### *Brake 4. Boundary softening in relation to putative out-groups (logic of out-group definition)*

Whereas boundary activation or hardening – the process whereby social interaction is increasingly focussed around essentialising us-against-them narratives – can fuel violent escalation by accentuating feelings of fear, distrust and hate, boundary softening or complexification can inhibit escalation (Alimi et al., 2015; Chirot & McCauley, 2006; Fiske & Rai, 2015; Tilly, 2004). It does this by breaking down clear 'us-versus-them' distinctions, leaving group members comparatively more 'open' to engagement with opponents, state actors and sections of the public they might previously have considered only as a pool of active or latent support for their opponents (Asal & Rethemeyer, 2008, p. 248), thereby creating new opportunities for the application of brakes based on strategic or moral logics. We identified four sub-brakes under Brake 4.

#### *Brake 4a. Resistance to generalisations about their opponents*

Resistance to generalising about their opponents can create opportunities for the application of Brakes 1b, 1c, 1e and 2b by generating more nuanced assessments about the effectiveness or appropriateness of violence. For example, it might lead to identification of potential future allies among their ostensive opponents (Karagiannis & McCauley, 2006, p. 236), or identification of some ostensive opponents as being less deserving of violence.

In the jihadi case, for example, Al-Qaeda leaders' challenging of straightforward sectarian categorisation of legitimate targets (al-Zawahiri, 2005; Rahman, 2005) created a requirement for further moral and strategic deliberation regarding targeting. In the extreme right case, distinctions made by some activists between far left militants and far left newspaper sellers precipitated a moral crisis for individuals after they attacked some of the latter (Lowles, 2014, p. 69). In the animal liberation movement, resistance to generalisation about opponents is institutionalised as part of the ALF Credo.

#### *Brake 4b. Identification of segments of the public beyond their previously-imagined support base as potential converts to their cause*

Where activists identify segments of the public beyond their own imagined support base as potential supporters, they are less likely to target them with violence or undertake indiscriminate violence (Asal & Rethemeyer, 2008, p. 248). This brake is likely to be particularly

effective when activists perceive substantial overlap between their potential support base and that of their opponents (Stanton, 2015). In the extreme right case for example both they and their anti-fascist opponents positioned themselves as the champions of the interests of the 'working class', thereby limiting opportunities for target widening beyond militants (Carter, 2017).

The extent to which activists find their views articulated within nominally mainstream discourses is likely to affect the presence and effectiveness of this brake (Busher, 2016, pp. 97–122; Kaplan, 1995). Boundary softening between activists and the 'masses' might also derive from fundamental philosophical principles e.g. about inclusivity and the importance of the movement being led by 'the people' (Crenshaw, 1996, p. 252).

### *Brake 4c. Limited intra-movement pressure to 'burn-bridges' with social contacts outside of the movement or outside of the radical flank of the movement*

Loosening or cutting ties with contacts outside the movement can facilitate processes of intense socialisation: increasing the ideological influence of the group on individual members; reducing personal obligations outside the group; and reducing the threat of being apprehended – all of which can favour radicalisation (Bjørgo, 1998, 2009; Simi & Windisch, 2018, p. 11). Limited intra-movement pressure to burn bridges can inhibit these processes, curtailing 'the distorting influences of isolation' (Ackerman, 2003, p. 145; and Knight et al., 2017, p. 8).

Groups are less likely to apply substantial pressure on members to loosen or sever their external ties when they do not identify as being strongly distinct from the broader communities from which they draw their support, or when they do not perceive a substantial infiltration risk.

### *Brake 4d. Expressed reluctance to conceive of the state security forces as 'the enemy'*

A reluctance to frame the state security forces as the enemy might relate to strategic logics. Confrontation with state security forces carries substantial risks both in terms of attracting repression and undermining public support – in most liberal democracies confrontation with the state security services is likely to alienate substantial sections of the public. It might also have ideological roots, however. For example, within much of the international extreme right scene, perception of the security forces as the enemy has been inhibited by perceptions of their underlying structural legitimacy. Here, even when state security forces are perceived to be acting unfairly, this might be bracketed out e.g. by conceiving of individual members of the security forces as acting out of duty rather than ideological conviction, or drawing distinctions between frontline law enforcement officers and the 'powers that be' (Busher, 2013).

## *Brake 5. Organisational developments that either (a) alter the moral and strategic equations in favour of non- or limited violence and/or reduce the likelihood of unplanned violence, or (b) institutionalise less violent collective identities and/or processes of boundary softening (organisational logic)*

Brake 5 relates to the processes through which organisational developments condition decision-making (see Crenshaw, 1991; Shapiro, 2013). While activists will usually have

opportunities to pursue alternate strategic pathways (Crenshaw, 1996, p. 250), most organisations are characterised by a significant degree of path dependency (Blee, 2012, pp. 35–37). As organisations, and the individuals that comprise them, plan and undertake actions, they develop relevant capabilities, forge collective identities, and acquire tactical habits and tastes, cumulatively contributing to make some future courses of action more likely than others. If a group invests in certain capabilities, they become more likely to identify and deploy tactics utilising those capabilities (Matesan, 2018), and where group protocols stipulate particular operating procedures, those procedures are more likely to be followed even when they might no longer be suitable (Allison, 1969). We identified five sub-brakes under Brake 5. It is likely that the effectiveness of Brakes 5a – 5d will be associated with the effectiveness of organisational leadership, with these brakes being least effective in organisations experiencing 'leadership deficits' (Abrahms & Potter, 2015), or that explicitly adopt strategies of leaderless resistance (Chermak et al., 2013).

### *Brake 5a. Limited investment in capabilities to escalate violence, and development of capabilities to undertake strategies of action that either entail non- or limited violence or more controlled violence*

Where there is limited investment in capabilities to escalate violence groups are unlikely to be 'particularly competent' at undertaking higher levels of violence (Asal & Rethemeyer, 2008, p. 245). Meanwhile, developing capabilities to undertake strategies of action that entail non- or limited-violence is likely to make their execution of those strategies more effective, thereby encouraging activists to see this as a viable course of action (Brake 1), in turn creating opportunities for the application of Brake 3.

Groups might also invest in their capabilities to manage violence. Where the violence relates to demonstrations, for instance, they might appoint stewards and invest in liaising with the police before and during the event; monitoring alcohol and drug use among activists; or encouraging or coaching activists not to 'over-react' to provocation by opponents or state security forces (e.g. Busher, 2013). For example, in the extreme right case study, realisation that the most serious violence usually took place during chance encounters between small groups of activists and their anti-fascist opponents led militants on both sides to try to avoid such encounters (Hann & Tilzey, 2003, p. 223).

In some instances, however, an increased ability to control their violence can generate an apparent paradox: a group might reduce the amount of violence they carry out against 'illegitimate' targets by developing capabilities that enable them to carry out more targeted and effective violence against legitimate targets (Asal, Gill, Rethemeyer, & Horgan, 2015, p. 401).

### *Brake 5b. Foregrounding more modest or intermediate objectives and de-prioritising revolutionary goals*

Where groups focus on achieving intermediate objectives (e.g. winning elections as was the case with the BNP, leading the group to de-prioritise its longer-term revolutionary objectives), they alter the strategic logics of their action, becoming more likely to seek to operate within, even if ultimately aiming to transform, existing legal and political systems. They also become more likely to contemplate alliances of convenience which, over time, might lead them to re-evaluate their relationship with some external actors, thereby giving rise to opportunities to apply Brake 4.

Such foregrounding of more modest or intermediate objectives might be inspired by pragmatic evaluation of the strategic opportunities available, as exemplified by the BNP's shift towards electoral politics in the 1990s. It might also be associated with processes of ideological restructuring. In Nepal, for example, a 'major ideological shift around 2001' resulted in Maoists moving from a position of 'seeking a communist one-party system to embracing competitive multi-party democracy', which 'reoriented their programme towards introducing a new constitution, electing a new constituent assembly, and establishing a republic' (Dudouet, 2012, p. 102).

### *Brake 5c. Construction and maintenance of spaces in which a range of activists that includes and extends beyond the radical flank are able to freely discuss tactics and movement objectives*

Such spaces might include discussion boards, forums, magazines, meetings etc. They can serve to inhibit violent escalation by helping anchor radical flank actors into wider movement cultures and expose them to reticence within the wider movement about violent escalation (Ackerman, 2003, p. 145). These spaces might not be created with the objective of inhibiting violent escalation. Within the animal liberation movement, *Arkangel* magazine was established by some of the more tactically radical members of the movement ostensibly to achieve greater cross-movement unity. However, more moderate activists repeatedly used it to challenge the adoption of more violent strategies of action and to criticise these tactics when they were deployed. In doing so they helped to maintain group norms that cast such tactics as illegitimate or inappropriate.

Such spaces are more likely to be generated and maintained where activists perceive themselves to have wider constituencies to engage with, implying potential synergies between Brake 5c and Brakes 1b, 4b and 4c.

### *Brake 5d. Concerns among some group members that violent escalation will compromise their ability to shape the movement's direction and/or negatively affect their position within it*

Any significant change in action repertoire has the potential to alter intra-movement power relations. Movement elites in particular might resist violence escalation if they perceive that escalation is likely to undermine either their position within the movement or their ability to shape it (Crenshaw, 1996, pp. 255–257). In the extreme right case, the BNP leadership identified that their investment in violent capabilities via the initial formation of C18 had not only tarnished their political capital but disrupted their organisation and weakened their own ability to control their party.

### *Brake 5e. Concentration of energy on targeting movement rivals, leading to reduced capability to prosecute campaigns of violence against their external enemies*

Intra-movement rivalries are a common feature of most movements. In some cases such rivalries can give rise to radicalisation dynamics where competing factions become engaged in processes of outbidding (De Fazio, 2014). They can, however, also act as a brake on violent escalation if the concentration of their energies upon *internal* movement rivals reduces the capacity and commitment of activists to focus their violence and aggression against *external* enemies (Simi & Windisch, 2018, p. 13). In the extreme right case,

despite pretensions as a revolutionary national socialist group, C18 became engulfed by internal feuding and score settling, its violence increasingly directed at internal targets rather than external enemies, leading to a fratricidal murder and the group itself imploding.

## Discussion and conclusions

The objective of this project was to develop a descriptive typology of the practices through which group members contribute to establish and maintain the limits of their own group's violence. In particular, we wanted to assess the possibility of developing a typology for use across movements grounded in different ideologies and characterised by very different degrees of violence.

We assess that it is possible to develop such a typology. As expected, the distribution and prominence of the brakes varied across and within the case studies. In the jihadi case, the most frequently applied brakes related to concerns about the loss of public support (Brake 1b) and to moral logics (Brake 2). In the extreme right case, brakes operating on strategic logics (Brake 1) were more evident than those that work on moral logics (Brake 2). In the animal liberation case study, we found considerably more examples of brakes that work on the logic of ego maintenance (Brake 3) than in the other cases, although disassociation from more violent groups (Brake 3b) also featured prominently in the other case studies at points when cognate groups escalated violence beyond established action repertoires. Critically, however, we were able to develop a vocabulary that worked across the three case studies and the examples drawn from the wider literature. Furthermore, by organising the typology around the underlying logics on which the brakes operate – strategic, moral, ego maintenance, outgroup definition, and organisational – the typology also enables exploration of *how* these internal brakes work and how they are sometimes undermined, in addition to capturing and categorising them.

It is important to draw attention to a number of challenges that those who seek to deploy this typology are likely to encounter, above and beyond basic data access issues. First, careful consideration is required with regards to how to interpret the presence and/or prominence of these brakes within case material. While the intense application of internal brakes might indicate that activists are unlikely to escalate violence, it might also indicate that the group's action repertoire is unstable and subject to intragroup contestation, or that the movement is undergoing a split? As such, the typology should not be read simply as a checklist.

Second, in order to achieve a workable vocabulary across the case studies, our terminology at times operates at a fairly high level of abstraction. This could make it more difficult to achieve inter-coder reliability than if we had developed a more bespoke vocabulary for each case study.

Third, if the typology is to be used to undertake cross-case comparisons, analysts should consider how their findings might be affected by different availability of source material across the case studies. It is possible that some brakes are more likely to be applied in particular types of communications e.g. more or less formal; in more or less private forums; or material that captures decision-making versus material that captures *post hoc* reflections.

Nonetheless, we would argue that the typology opens up a number of potentially profitable avenues of research and analysis. For security, intelligence and law enforcement

practitioners assessing the risk of violent escalation, it might provide a further tool with which to identify indicators of the propensity towards *and away from* particular forms of violence by specific groups. For those undertaking interventions with extremist groups, it might be used to inform assessments of how externally applied counter-measures might interact with, and sometimes undermine, internal brakes. Meanwhile, for academic researchers the typology would appear to have clear potential to enable the development and testing of hypotheses germane to a number of questions relating to the under-researched processes of non- or limited escalation. Foremost among these are questions about the conditions under which certain brakes, or configurations of brakes, are more or less likely to be effective; how the patterns and functioning of these internal brakes is affected by wider conflict dynamics and vice versa e.g. how they affect and are affected by interactions between group members and state security services, opposition groups etc; how and why the distribution of internal brakes varies across groups and what, if anything, this can tell us about their propensity for violence; and how the internal brakes on violent escalation operate at different points within waves or cycles of conflict.

## Notes

1. For the purposes of this project, we us the term 'extremist groups' to refer to those groups in which a significant proportion of members have shown a willingness to deploy or support illegal strategies of action. We intentionally adopt a broad definition as our aim is to develop a typology with applicability across a wide variety of groups. This definition might be problematic in non-democratic or narrowly-democratic states where the thresholds of illegality might be very low.
2. The role of infiltrators and informants provides an interesting example of the sometimes complex interplay between 'external' and 'internal' brakes. On the one hand such actors might be considered external. On the other hand, the fact that they are identified by group members as part of the group means that where they seek directly to inhibit violent escalation their actions function as internal brakes.
3. These logics are not ranked in any sense.
4. E.g. The Abbottabad papers and other primary sources held by The Combating Terrorism Center, West Point, (https://www.ctc.usma.edu/)

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