

## Replacing the Standard Bearer

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Replacing the standard bearer: Theorising leadership transition in insurgencies

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## Abstract

The transition from one leader to the next represents a critical moment in the life cycle of insurgencies: it is a period of heightened uncertainty and vulnerability when roles and relationships are in flux. However, remarkably little scholarly attention has been paid to understanding this process. Building our case around the insurgency in Russia's North Caucasus, we address this gap by developing a typology of key tasks that new leaders must perform in order to navigate the transition period. We argue that, within insurgencies that are weakly institutionalised, leadership can most usefully be conceived of as a negotiated relationship in which both leaders and followers have agency. Successful performance of these tasks helps ensure the maintenance of this relationship and, through this, movement continuity. Therefore, this paper contributes to both the empirical literature on insurgency and our understanding of leadership and transition within rebel movements.

**Keywords:** insurgencies; leadership; North Caucasus; post-Soviet security; transition

Leaders are central to the vitality and direction of insurgent groups. They can perform critical managerial functions, such as coordinating activities, establishing organisational priorities, or directly inspiring recruits. Even where the performance of these duties is disputed, they play a critical role in shaping perceptions, which feeds into their group's ability to inspire commitment to a cause. Leaders, after all, frequently attract considerable attention because they are usually their group's most visible representatives, acting as their public faces in insurgent and mainstream media. As such, they can come to symbolise a broader set of ideas or even become almost synonymous with the group itself: Think of Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda (AQ), Abdullah Öcalan and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), or Abimael Guzmán and Sendero Luminoso. Eschewing publicity may only intensify interest and speculation, as demonstrated by media coverage of reclusive leaders such as the Taliban's Mullah Omar and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi of the Islamic State (IS). Debates around leaders are often intricately linked with discussions around the groups they lead.

If we accept that individual leaders matter to their groups, transitioning from one leader to the next warrants particular attention. Consider the logic underpinning a prominent counter-insurgency strategy, the targeted elimination of senior rebel leaders. This strategy presumes that removing leaders will disrupt the operation of groups and affect perceptions of their durability and chances of success.<sup>1</sup> For this logic to hold, leaders must perform a critical role in the groups, and their replacements should not be equally or more capable of performing that role.

<sup>1</sup>Aaron Mannes, "Testing the snake head strategy: Does killing or capturing its leaders reduce a terrorist group's activity?", *Journal of International Policy Solutions*, 9 (2008), pp. 40–9.

If neither condition is satisfied, then the targeted elimination of leaders is unlikely to have the desired effect. Therefore, our ability to assess the effectiveness of this strategy is contingent upon unpacking leadership change and how new leaders navigate the process of transition. We need to establish what critical tasks new leaders need to perform to execute their role and navigate the transition process; only then can we move to predicting or evaluating the degree to which they have been successful. While many of these tasks are common to insurgent leadership, the transition period is one where the performance of tasks assumes particular urgency, group relationships are in flux, and the perceptions of both insiders and outsiders are open to re-evaluation. It thus represents a critically important phase in the life cycle of insurgent organisations that brings broader issues into focus.

This importance is not adequately reflected in existing literature, and remarkably little attention has been paid to understanding transition in insurgent organisations. This article seeks to fill this gap by developing a typology of tasks that insurgent leaders must perform. The first section sketches an initial typology based on findings from existing literature. It defines several key terms and specifies the type of insurgency the typology will primarily focus on. It then surveys cross-disciplinary research into leadership and transitions, identifying several tasks around which to build a typology. The second section introduces the North Caucasus insurgency, explaining its origins and why it provides an ideal opportunity to study leadership transition empirically. It presents data on four sequences of leadership transition within that insurgency – including a unique archive of 89 leadership statements – and shows how we leveraged the data to refine the typology identified in the first section (see supplementary data). It also reflects on the limitations of this data and its potential implications for considering transition across contexts. The third section demonstrates the practical application of the typology, exploring how North Caucasus insurgent leaders performed each of the tasks identified and the challenges that interfered with their efforts to do so. The article concludes by summarising what can be learnt from the study of transition, identifying several avenues for deepening our understanding of the processes involved.

## Developing a typology: Existing knowledge on transition tasks

### *Defining the language of rebellion*

Before considering insights from the literature and building the typology, it is important to clarify key terms. Throughout the paper, we use ‘transition,’ ‘succession,’ and ‘leadership change’ interchangeably to refer to the process of one leader replacing another. These terms are neutral and do not embed any presumptions about the reasons driving this process. We also use ‘insurgent,’ ‘insurgencies,’ ‘rebels,’ and ‘non-state armed actors’ without meaningful distinction; like Mampilly, we use these terms to refer to armed factions that use violence to challenge the state in pursuit of political goals.<sup>2</sup> We do, however, distinguish between group/organisation, which we treat as synonyms, and movement.<sup>3</sup> Although some authors do draw a clear line between groups or organisations and movements, others use them interchangeably; there is no consensus on the difference across much of the existing literature, and the terms are often undefined.<sup>4</sup>

These terminological boundaries are often blurred. For instance, some actors, such as Ação Libertadora Nacional (ALN) in Brazil, employ organisational language – particularly of a military nature – even when the structures they supposedly reference exist only on paper. Other examples, such as the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/Army) or the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) and Sinn Féin, typically refer to their political wing as a movement and

<sup>2</sup>Zachariah Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers: Insurgent Governance and Civilian Life during War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup>We are grateful to one of the reviewers for encouraging us to recognise this distinction.

<sup>4</sup>See Paul D. Kenny, ‘Structural integrity and cohesion in insurgent organizations: Evidence from protracted conflicts in Ireland and Burma’, *International Studies Review*, 12:4 (2010), pp. 533–55; Daniel Byman, Peter Chalk, Bruce Hoffman, William Rosenau, and David Brannan, *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001).

their military wing as an army, even when there is significant overlap in personnel, as was the case with PIRA and Sinn Fein. However, sections of the literature on non-state armed actors have distinguished between groups and movements, with the latter referring to a much broader category of organisations involved in campaigns of rebellion, who may coalesce or fragment in various ways.<sup>5</sup> The leadership of coalitions and alliances is a more complex issue, and although many of the factors discussed here remain relevant, focusing on relationships transcending groups falls outside this paper's scope. To avoid confusion, we observe these terminological boundaries here.

### *Leadership and transition in non-institutionalised groups*

A further distinction that requires recognition is the degree of institutionalisation within groups. There can be considerable variation in how groups operate, and they can be organised along a spectrum of bureaucratisation and institutionalisation. At one end, groups can institutionalise to such a degree that they closely resemble the states they challenge.<sup>6</sup> This helps them coordinate beyond personal networks, efficiently manage resources, provide collective goods, and demonstrate the viability of their projects.<sup>7</sup> In such circumstances, leadership – and consequently transition – can be shaped by the institutional mechanisms and procedures that have been established to regulate it. In Weberian terms, rebel leaders can become bureaucratic figureheads whose authority predominantly stems from occupying an institutional position endowed with legal power.<sup>8</sup> We focus our attention on the other end of the spectrum.

Some insurgent organisations make only limited use of formal institutions, procedures, and practices. In such circumstances, rebel leaders are more akin to Weber's patrimonial or charismatic types, which conceive of leadership in terms of social relationships.<sup>9</sup> Relations within groups are often socially rooted, with blurred hierarchies within groups and blurred boundaries between groups and surrounding communities.<sup>10</sup> Without robust institutional mechanisms, leaders represent a group and receive 'status, prestige, and power' to further collective goals.<sup>11</sup> We can understand these relationships by recognising their negotiated nature. Followers do not unquestionably follow their superiors' demands but instead have their own interests and influence leadership and group processes through the exercise of agency.<sup>12</sup> Since leaders lack strong institutional mechanisms to compel compliance, the exercise of leadership becomes one of continual negotiation as different parties seek outcomes favouring their interests. When either party feels their interests are no longer being met, they may terminate the relationship.<sup>13</sup> Relationships are inherently unstable and highly dynamic.<sup>14</sup> The use of terms such as 'organisation' and 'group' should not, therefore, be read as presupposing rigidly defined or static boundaries.<sup>15</sup> Leadership transition warrants special attention as a period when these relations are opened up for re-evaluation

<sup>5</sup>Kristin Bakke, Kathleen Cunningham, and Lee Seymour, 'A plague of initials: Fragmentation, cohesion, and infighting in civil wars', *Perspectives on Politics*, 10:2 (2012), pp. 265–83.

<sup>6</sup>Aisha Ahmad, *Jihad & Co.: Black Markets and Islamist Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. XX.

<sup>7</sup>Jeremy Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 34–9.

<sup>8</sup>Ralph Stogdill, *Handbook of Leadership: A Survey of Theory and Research* (New York: The Free Press, 1974), p. 26.

<sup>9</sup>Stogdill, *Handbook of Leadership*, p. 26.

<sup>10</sup>David Brenner, 'Authority in rebel groups: Identity, recognition and the struggle over legitimacy', *Contemporary Politics*, 23:4 (2017), pp. 408–42.

<sup>11</sup>Alberto Melucci, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 334.

<sup>12</sup>Melucci, *Challenging Codes*, pp. 333–4; David Brenner, *Rebel Politics: A Political Sociology of Armed Struggle in Myanmar's Borderlands* (London: Cornell University Press, 2019), p. 15.

<sup>13</sup>Melucci, *Challenging Codes*, pp. 333–4.

<sup>14</sup>Klaus Schlichte, *In the Shadow of Violence: The Politics of Armed Groups* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2009), pp. 17–19.

<sup>15</sup>Some authors, such as Schlichte, have rejected these terms because of such a presupposition, emphasising the 'fuzziness of boundaries' (p. 19). However, few terms have no connotations, and we need some vocabulary to refer to these actors. It is notable that, despite rejecting the terms, Schlichte uses 'armed group' repeatedly.

and negotiations are particularly intense.<sup>16</sup> As Schlichte notes, ‘the interdependencies that constitute them [armed groups] change when any of the other relations is changing, for example when new resources become available, when somebody involved in a figuration loses a capacity, or when new agents enter a figuration.’<sup>17</sup> The transition process is complete when a critical mass of group participants accepts the terms of the new relationship and thus the claim to leadership.<sup>18</sup>

Examining organisations at the less bureaucratised end of the spectrum distinguishes this paper from much of the growing literature on rebel governance, which has tended to focus on larger-scale groups capable of contesting and exercising territorial control. This literature has made significant contributions to understanding how rebel groups operate, challenging the prevailing wisdom that war zones are de facto chaotic and the state’s absence or limited presence automatically translates into anarchy.<sup>19</sup> Yet it largely neglects the many groups around the world at the lower end of the spectrum of institutionalisation, which are not yet or are no longer capable of contesting territorial control – and the degree of institutionalisation can significantly impact the nature of coordination between actors.<sup>20</sup> These groups are often labelled ‘terrorist’ or something similar, a label we reject for much the same reason as Mampilly eschews the term ‘guerrilla’ – namely, that it refers to only one of the tactics they use.<sup>21</sup>

At the same time, this paper fits within the broader organisational shift in the study of civil wars that this work on rebel governance reflects. Parkinson demonstrates how militant organisations are far from closed systems; instead, individuals’ roles within them are shaped by their position within social networks.<sup>22</sup> Staniland similarly emphasises the importance of social networks to the subsequent organisation of insurgency.<sup>23</sup> In addition to governance writ large, authors have examined questions of rebel diplomacy, alliance formation, legitimisation, and financing.<sup>24</sup> In their review of this emerging subfield, Parkinson and Zaks draw on organisational sociology to show how organisations can be conceived of as a ‘collection of roles, linked by relations, which produce behaviours, to work towards goals within a given context’.<sup>25</sup> We contribute to this work by offering a rich, contextualised examination of how these four dimensions – roles, relations, behaviours, and goals – interact during the transition process, focusing on the hitherto-neglected less institutionalised end of the spectrum of organisations.

<sup>16</sup>Our focus on the less institutionalised end of the spectrum does not mean our typology is irrelevant to transition in highly bureaucratised organisations. Instead, we would argue that the further one moves along the spectrum, the greater analytic weight needs to be afforded to the role of institutional mechanisms. In other words, in highly bureaucratised organisations, actors can still exercise agency, but structure may become more important – meaning the typology would need to be adapted to the specific institutional environment in which that agency is being exercised.

<sup>17</sup>Schlichte, *In the Shadow of Violence*, p. 19.

<sup>18</sup>This raises the question of what constitutes a critical mass. The answer to this question will be context-specific, and addressing it falls outside the scope of this paper.

<sup>19</sup>Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers*; Ana Arjona, *Rebelocracy: Social Order in the Colombian Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>20</sup>Bakke, Cunningham and Seymour, ‘A plague of initials’, p. 269.

<sup>21</sup>Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers*, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup>Sarah E. Parkinson, ‘Organizing rebellion: Rethinking high-risk mobilization and social networks in war’, *American Political Science Review*, 107:3 (2013), pp. 418–32.

<sup>23</sup>Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

<sup>24</sup>Bridget Coggins, ‘Rebel diplomacy: Theorizing violent non-state actors’ strategic use of talk’, in Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir, and Zachariah Mampilly (eds), *Rebel Governance in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 98–118; Reyko Huang, ‘Rebel diplomacy in civil war’, *International Security*, 40:4 (2016), pp. 89–126; Fotini Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Isabelle Duyvesteyn, ‘Rebels & legitimacy: An introduction’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 28:4–5 (2017), pp. 669–85; Ahmad, *Jihad & Co.*

<sup>25</sup>Sarah E. Parkinson and Sherry Zaks, ‘Militant and rebel organization(s)’, *Comparative Politics*, 50:2 (2018), pp. 271–93 (p. 272).

**Transition: A neglected topic**

Having established definitional and conceptual parameters for the study, we can now turn to the literature to identify cross-disciplinary insights into leadership and use these to sketch an initial typology of transition tasks that new leaders must tackle. Given the recognised importance of leadership in general, what is remarkable is how limited theoretical development specific to transition has been to date. Political scientists and International Relations scholars have examined how transition in state leadership affects foreign-policy preferences and levels of domestic repression and whether leadership change can be predicted.<sup>26</sup> These studies examine highly institutionalised and overt actors, where rules are defined, and much of the transition process is externally accessible – offering limited insights into the type of groups under discussion here.

Of more obvious relevance, the issue of forced transition, i.e. leadership removal or ‘decapitation,’ has received substantial attention, mainly from within terrorism studies. Here, findings have been decidedly mixed. David and Hafez and Hatfield argue that targeted assassinations have a minimal effect on overall levels of insurgent violence.<sup>27</sup> By contrast, Kaplan, Mintz, Mishal, and Samban contend that assassinations increased recruitment to organisations and led to an increase in attacks.<sup>28</sup> Authors have sought to explain apparent contradictions in impact through reference to a variety of factors: the nature of the leader’s removal (with arrest more disruptive than killing); the level of bureaucratisation and institutionalisation within a group; whether a group is hierarchical or not; the availability of a clear successor; the ideology of the group; and the nature of the support enjoyed by the leader.<sup>29</sup> This literature, however, has focused predominantly on the degree to which leadership removal impacts operational effectiveness and levels of violence rather than on internal processes of how insurgent groups navigate the transition process. Wu, Carleton, and Davies offer a rare attempt to unpack this process, but they do so by anticipating the outcomes of a single case, AQ, after bin Laden’s death.<sup>30</sup> Bakke, Cunningham, and Seymour and Mosinger propose leadership decapitation as one of the factors affecting the balance of power within organisations and movements – alongside changing internal demographics, ideology, strategic disagreements, disciplinary mechanisms, rivalries, broader counter-insurgent strategies, battlefield losses, patron preferences, and negotiations – but neither article explores this in depth.<sup>31</sup> Within much of the literature on terrorism, civil wars, and social movements, discussions of transition are buried in empirical research and occur on the margins of studies focused elsewhere. Much richer material can therefore be found by looking beyond transition, specifically to cross-disciplinary research into leadership in general – and it is from this work that we can begin to identify the tasks and roles that leaders must perform.

<sup>26</sup>Scott Wolford, ‘Incumbents, successors, and crisis bargaining: Leadership turnover as a commitment problem’, *Journal for Peace Research*, 49:4 (2014), pp. 517–30; Michael Ward and Andreas Berger, ‘Lessons from near real-time forecasting of irregular leadership changes’, *Journal for Peace Research*, 54:2 (2017), pp. 141–56; Amanda Licht and Susan Allen, ‘Repressing for reputation: Leadership transitions, uncertainty, and the repression of domestic populations’, *Journal for Peace Research*, 55:5 (2018), pp. 582–95.

<sup>27</sup>See Stephen R. David, ‘Fatal choices: Israel’s policy of targeted killing’, *Review of International Affairs*, 2:3 (2003), pp. 138–58; Mohammed Hafez and Joseph Hatfield, ‘Do targeted assassinations work? A multivariate analysis of Israel’s controversial tactics during Al-Aqsa uprising’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 29:4 (2006), pp. 359–82.

<sup>28</sup>Edward Kaplan, Alex Mintz, Shaul Mishal, and Claudio Samban, ‘What happened to suicide bombings in Israel? Insights from a terror stock model 2005’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 28:3 (2005), pp. 225–35.

<sup>29</sup>Jenna Jordan, ‘Attacking the leader, missing the mark: Why terrorist groups survive decapitation strikes’, *International Security*, 38:4 (2014), pp. 7–38; Lisa Langdon, Alexander J. Sarapu, and Matthew Wells, ‘Targeting the leadership of terrorist and insurgent movements: Historical lessons for contemporary policy makers’, *Journal of Public and International Affairs*, 15 (2004), pp. 59–78; Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>30</sup>Edith Wu, Rebecca Carleton, and Garth Davies, ‘Discovering bin Laden’s replacement in Al-Qaeda, using social network analysis: A methodological investigation’, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 8:1 (2014), pp. 57–73.

<sup>31</sup>Bakke, Cunningham, and Seymour, ‘A plague of initials’, p. 269. Eric S. Mosinger, ‘Balance of loyalties: Explaining rebel factional struggles in the Nicaraguan revolution’, *Security Studies*, 28:5 (2019), pp. 935–75 (p. 939).

**Key transition tasks: Establishing leadership**

First, and perhaps most obviously, we see that leaders must claim and hold on to power. Leadership, after all, is an integral albeit implicit component of numerous theories offered by scholars to explain insurgent behaviour and operation. Gurr, for example, argues that 'leadership is essential if political violence is to succeed in the face of organised resistance', while Schlichte characterises it as a 'functional necessity' when organisations reach a certain size or need to exercise territorial control.<sup>32</sup> Staniland and Lyons see leadership as shaping internal group dynamics, which, in turn, affects their cohesiveness, interactions with external actors, and ability to achieve desired results.<sup>33</sup> Nor is recognition of the importance of leadership limited to violent groups: empirical studies have examined movements ranging from the transnational jihadism of AQ to rural activism in Nicaragua.<sup>34</sup> Christia contends that, at the most fundamental level, leaders' behaviour is shaped by the primary aim of holding on to power in evolving political landscapes.<sup>35</sup>

To achieve this goal, leaders need to neutralise any challenges posed by potential rivals, ensuring obedience and punishing defection.<sup>36</sup> Rebel actors often fight the existing authorities and each other, and 'horizontal fragmentation makes the leadership of armed groups prone to factional infighting and coups.'<sup>37</sup> Tamm sees internal coups originating from changes in the distribution of resources between leaders and their rivals, which affects the balance of power.<sup>38</sup> As a consequence, it can be argued that new leaders need to ensure a preferential distribution of resources in their favour. Fears of a coup can lead to paranoid behaviours and internecine strife that prioritise individual security over organisational continuity, resulting in a divergence between individual and group interests. Sendero Luminoso's Abimael Gúzman, for example, surrounded himself with female deputies who were neither prepared for nor seen as capable of replacing him.<sup>39</sup> Since the transition period is one where new leaders' power has, by definition, not yet been consolidated, the likelihood of challenge emerging at this time is potentially higher than it is for established leaders – precisely the reason that scholars such as Mosinger list leadership decapitation among their factors influencing the balance of power within organisations.<sup>40</sup> Inhibited information flows may only exacerbate the problem: in clandestine groups with limited institutionalisation, the absence of a clear successor can create a power vacuum, encouraging the emergence of impostors and rival claimants to power.

**Key transition tasks: Maintaining organisations and networks**

Existing literature also draws our attention to the organisational dimensions of rebellion, including the role of networks. Gurr claims that creating institutional infrastructure is necessary for sustaining political violence – and even smaller and weakly institutionalised groups require some form of organisation and internal processes to regulate activity and survive.<sup>41</sup> Staniland argues that the networks around insurgent leaders form the basis of institutionalisation, providing 'information, trust,

<sup>32</sup> Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (London: Paradigm Publishers, 2011), p. 291; Schlichte, *In the Shadow of Violence*, p. 176.

<sup>33</sup> Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion*, pp. 5–8; Terrence Lyons, 'The importance of winning: Victorious insurgent groups and authoritarian politics', *Comparative Politics*, 48:2 (2016), pp. 164–84 (p. 170).

<sup>34</sup> Donald Holbrook, *The Al-Qaeda Doctrine: The Framing and Evolution of the Leadership's Public Discourse* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); Anthony Pereira, 'Rural social movements in Nicaragua', in David Snow and James Jasper (eds), *Contention in Context: Political Opportunities and the Emergence of Protest* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), pp. 59–82.

<sup>35</sup> Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars*, pp. 5–7.

<sup>36</sup> Jeremy Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 12.

<sup>37</sup> Brenner, *Rebel Politics*, p. 8.

<sup>38</sup> Henning Tamm, 'Rebel leaders, internal rivals, and external resources: How state sponsors affect insurgent cohesion', *International Studies Quarterly*, 60:4 (2016), pp. 599–610 (p. 601).

<sup>39</sup> Bryan Price, 'Targeting top terrorists: How leadership decapitation contributes to counterterrorism', *International Security*, 36:4 (2012), pp. 9–46 (p. 19).

<sup>40</sup> Mosinger, 'Balance of loyalties.'

<sup>41</sup> Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, p. 291.

and shared political meanings that organizers can use to create new armed groups.<sup>42</sup> Schlichte contends that there are two pathways to institutionalising power: creating bureaucratic structures and formalising relationships, or creating patrimonial structures that build on client networks.<sup>43</sup> Both horizontal and vertical relationships impact the trajectories of resistance.<sup>44</sup> In considering transition, this compels us to assess the impact of the disruption to networks caused by the removal of leaders. As already noted, relationships within armed groups are highly dynamic, and a change in leadership can lead to their reconfiguration.<sup>45</sup> For instance, the departing leader may be a crucial node in existing networks, and individuals' structural positions may influence the choice of successor.<sup>46</sup> Alternatively, removing a leader could break the link between different parts of the network, with the circumstances surrounding that removal potentially exacerbating its negative impact. For example, when Turkish Hizbollah leader Huseyin Velioglu was killed in a special operation in March 1999, over 600,000 pages of internal documents were found that provided critical intelligence leading to the organisation's demise.<sup>47</sup> Individuals who join pre-existing insurgencies may not be able to draw on previous networks in the same way as those present at their creation. They may also belong to different networks within the organisation or affect the balance of power when they join.<sup>48</sup> Overall, new leaders face the challenge of reconstructing and reconfiguring the networks that form the organisational basis of rebellion.

### **Additional transition tasks**

These two tasks – claiming the leadership and renegotiating relationships – prompt questions about how leaders meet objectives, which, in turn, leads to the identification of further tasks. An important topic of debate around leadership concerns sources of authority. In political science, there have been efforts to rehabilitate the 'Great Men' theory of leadership, drawing attention to the importance of leaders' personalities, qualities, and abilities in shaping events – even if there is now greater recognition of the importance of context.<sup>49</sup> In the literature on terrorism and criminal groups, we also find repeated references to leaders' individual qualities and characteristics.<sup>50</sup> In such discussions, the elusive concept of charismatic leadership is never far away. Often overlapping with this is a recognition that leaders can play an important role in articulating an ideology and providing the 'doctrinal justification for violence'.<sup>51</sup> Crenshaw insists that leaders may possess 'more complex and differentiated belief structures than followers' and may derive their authority either from their ability to articulate those beliefs or the relevance of their background to the belief system.<sup>52</sup> She also suggests that second-generation leaders may be less ideological than organisation founders, pointing to a diminishing role for ideology. Price contends that 'values-based' organisations enjoy a recruitment advantage over 'profit-based' ones, while Walter argues that organisations that adhere to an extreme ideology enjoy an advantage over moderate ones.<sup>53</sup> Of course, the role of ideology

<sup>42</sup> Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion*, p. 9.

<sup>43</sup> Schlichte, *In the Shadow of Violence*, p. 23.

<sup>44</sup> Brenner, *Rebel Politics*, p. 8.

<sup>45</sup> Schlichte, *In the Shadow of Violence*, p. 19.

<sup>46</sup> Wu, Carleton, and Davies, 'Discovering bin Laden's replacement in Al-Qaeda', p. 61.

<sup>47</sup> Samih Teymur, 'A conceptual map for understanding the terrorist recruitment process: Observation and analysis of DHKP/C, PKK, and Turkish Hezbollah terrorist organizations', PhD dissertation (University of North Texas, 2007), p. 52.

<sup>48</sup> Mosinger, 'Balance of loyalties'.

<sup>49</sup> Daniel Byman and Kenneth Pollack, 'Let us now praise Great Men: Bringing the statesmen back in', *International Security*, 25:4 (2001), pp. 107–46.

<sup>50</sup> Amir Rostami, Fredrik Leinfelt, and David Brotherton, 'Understanding gang leaders: Characteristics and driving forces of street gang leaders in Sweden', *Free Inquiry in Creative Sociology*, 40:2 (2012), pp. 1–19.

<sup>51</sup> Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, p. 291.

<sup>52</sup> Martha Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism: Causes, Processes and Consequences* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 93.

<sup>53</sup> Price, 'Targeting top terrorists', p. 17; Barbara Walter, 'The extremist's advantage in civil wars', *International Security*, 42:2 (2017), pp. 7–39.



in political violence is hotly contested.<sup>54</sup> Yet even when we do not frame the discussion in explicitly ideological terms, there is widespread recognition that leaders are responsible for establishing expectations and demonstrating a commitment to a cause, generating positive social identities and neutralising threats to them, and defining and prioritising objectives.<sup>55</sup>

Translating these diverse observations into concrete tasks shows that leaders play an important role in inspiring followers and providing direction to organisations. Indeed, Brenner sees satisfaction of the social identity needs of followers as a critical source of insurgent legitimacy and leadership authority.<sup>56</sup> All leaders must perform these tasks, but they become particularly pressing for new ones.

Weinstein identifies further essential duty of leaders: responding to shocks.<sup>57</sup> The loss of a previous leader can be one of the critical shocks to which new leaders must respond, with a failure to respond adequately risking demotivating followers and engendering a sense that the organisation has lost direction.

### *Leadership beyond transition*

This discussion cannot claim to be a comprehensive account of all dimensions of rebel leadership. Indeed, discussions of the topic often lay scattered across work focused on other questions, making any claim to comprehensiveness questionable. There are also tasks that leaders must perform in the normal course of their duties that are not an obvious priority in the transition period. For example, in his discussion of leadership tasks, Melucci includes the acquisition and distribution of resources.<sup>58</sup> While this is undoubtedly important for all groups, it is not immediately apparent that it should be particularly pressing during transition. If anything, changes in resource availability are more likely to precede and even cause the transition process by disrupting the balance of power within groups – although the importance that should be attributed to resources in leadership authority is contested.<sup>59</sup> However, the question of what causes leadership change is different to that guiding this paper, and one can convincingly argue that other tasks assume much greater urgency during the transition process itself. This brief review of various literatures has enabled us to identify the tasks that appear particularly important during leadership transition within the broader life cycle of groups. We can therefore use this as the starting point for our typology, but we must first turn to our chosen cases and method to consolidate and refine the typology.

## **Refining the typology: The North Caucasus insurgency**

### *Introducing the cases*

The insurgency in Russia's North Caucasus traces its origins to the Chechen wars of 1994–6 and 1999–2002. Following the Soviet Union's collapse, tensions between a re-emerging Russia and an independence-seeking Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (Chechenskaya Respublika Ichkeria, ChRI) led to war. The ChRI secured a largely pyrrhic victory but faced extensive social, economic, and political problems, including a proliferation of paramilitary groups and a failure to settle Chechnya's legal status.<sup>60</sup> The interwar period was marked by widespread instability

<sup>54</sup>Francisco Sanín and Elisabeth Jean Wood, 'Ideology in civil war: Instrumental adoption and beyond', *Journal of Peace Research*, 51:2 (2014), pp. 213–26.

<sup>55</sup>Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*, p. 264; Brenner, 'Authority in rebel groups', p. 421; Melucci, *Challenging Codes*, pp. 339–40.

<sup>56</sup>Brenner, 'Authority in rebel groups', p. 421.

<sup>57</sup>Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*, p. 264.

<sup>58</sup>Melucci, *Challenging Codes*, pp. 339–40.

<sup>59</sup>Tamm, 'Rebel leaders, internal rivals, and external resources', p. 601; Mosinger, 'Balance of loyalties', p. 942; Brenner, 'Authority in rebel groups', p. 409.

<sup>60</sup>Ekaterina Sokirianskaia, 'State and violence in Chechnya (1997–1999)', in Anne Le Huérou, Aude Merlin, Amandine Regamey, and Elisabeth Sieca-Kozłowski (eds), *Chechnya at War and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 93–117.

and criminality, and Russia, under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, ultimately renewed the war.<sup>61</sup> Over time, in a campaign marked by considerable brutality, Russia drove the rebels from the cities and installed a pro-Kremlin administration in Chechnya.<sup>62</sup>

Meanwhile, the conflict increasingly spread to neighbouring republics due to a deliberate rebel strategy and the preferences of non-Chechen actors. An ideological shift accompanied this process of regionalisation, as a radical faction challenged for, and ultimately assumed, complete control over the insurgency. These dual processes culminated in the decision, in October 2007, to abolish the ChRI and replace it with an explicitly jihadist yet largely notional polity, the Caucasus Emirate (Imarat Kavkaz, IK). It was a watershed moment in the evolution of conflict, which formalised the victory of the insurgency's Islamist wing over nationalist separatists in its historic Chechen core and changed the rationale for armed resistance. Under the banner of the IK, the locus of the conflict shifted first to Kabardino-Balkaria and then ultimately to Dagestan, and low-level insurgency continued to plague the region. However, by late 2016, the twin pressures of sustained security-service operations and the draw of the conflict in Syria and Iraq had led to the collapse of the insurgency.

The North Caucasus insurgency, and the IK in particular, provide an excellent opportunity for examining leadership transition. Long-serving ChRI president Aslan Maskhadov's ability to resist the Islamist wing was undermined by the systematic elimination of his allies. Moreover, he enjoyed a legitimacy that his successors could not claim, and his death arguably signalled the end of the ChRI, clearing the way for the insurgency's ideological transformation.<sup>63</sup> The deaths of IK leaders occasioned further ideological shifts – albeit within the framework of jihadism – and hampered the insurgency's ability to respond to emerging domestic and institutional challenges.<sup>64</sup> As such, the IK provides an excellent example of an insurgent group that was not highly institutionalised and could no longer contest territorial control but posed a serious, sustained, and violent challenge to state authority.<sup>65</sup> For much of its existence until IS penetrated the region in 2014, the IK enjoyed an organisational monopoly across the North Caucasus. Still, it always functioned within a broader jihadist movement that comprised North Caucasian jihadism as the inner circle and the global jihadist movement as the outer one. In other words, although the IK was the only recognisable organisation in the region, jihadism in and linked to the North Caucasus was never reducible solely to the IK.

Formally, the group was organised on strictly hierarchical grounds. The basic organisational unit was the *jama'at*, or city or neighbourhood cell. Multiple *jama'ats* coalesced to form a sector, and sectors were arranged into *vilayyats*, or provinces, that largely mirrored the republics of the North Caucasus. At the apex of the organisation stood a leadership that united the different *vilayyats* under a central command. Each level of the hierarchy was led by an emir who reported to and co-constituted the leadership of the level above them; thus, the *vilayyat*-level emirs collectively formed a leadership *shura*, or council, that was responsible for decision-making under the authority of the central IK leader. Leadership was, therefore, a mixture of the collective and the individual: although the emir officially enjoyed final decision-making authority, he was supported by some or all of a *naib* (deputy), *qadi* (Shari'ah judge), military emir, and the other members of the *shura*, as well as occasional individuals with no formal rank.

Lower-ranked members of the leadership enjoyed considerable latitude in their decision-making and operations, especially because of communication and coordination

<sup>61</sup>Julie Wilhelmsen, *Russia's Securitization of Chechnya: How War Became Acceptable* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>62</sup>Emma Gilligan, *Terror in Chechnya: Russia and the Tragedy of Civilians in War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>63</sup>Ilyas Akhmadov, with Miriam Lanskoj, *The Chechen Struggle: Independence Won and Lost* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 231.

<sup>64</sup>See Mark Youngman, 'Between Caucasus and caliphate: The splintering of the North Caucasus insurgency', *Caucasus Survey*, 4:3 (2016), pp. 194–217 and Mark Youngman, 'Broader, vaguer, weaker: The evolving ideology of the Caucasus Emirate leadership', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 31:2 (2019), pp. 367–89.

<sup>65</sup>Aurélie Campana and Jean-Francois Ratelle, 'A political sociology approach to the diffusion of conflict from Chechnya to Dagestan and Ingushetia', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 37:2 (2014), pp. 115–34.

difficulties experienced in a highly hostile operating environment. To a degree, the constituent *vilayyats* of the IK functioned as distinct and mostly autonomous groups within a broader structure – which facilitates the generalisability of some of the conclusions drawn to the question of leadership transition in insurgencies – but they nevertheless accepted the central IK emir’s overarching claim of authority and strategic direction. In other words, the IK displayed some but not all of the characteristics of a movement, as defined in parts of the existing literature on insurgencies, and it often used the language of a movement, but definitionally it remained closer to an organisation.

On paper, this organisational structure meant that transition was a relatively simple affair. If no formal successor had been designated at the top of the organisation, the central *shura* decided on a replacement while, at all other levels, the emirs from the level above issued an order appointing the new leader. Groups confirmed acceptance of a leadership claim through a pledge of *bayah*, or loyalty, to the new leader. As seen in the third section, the reality was considerably different, illustrating how group participants could exercise agency to define the terms of a new relationship. Negotiations among *shura* members could be intense, and local groups sometimes appointed their own leaders, even in defiance of the preferences of their superiors.

Moreover, communication between the different tiers was often difficult or impossible; notional seniors often lacked means of compulsion, making them reliant on the consent of subordinates, and cross-*vilayyat* cooperation was limited. Some scholars have gone so far as to question the very existence of ‘a unifying actor, the Emirate, which could act to coordinate actions and activities across the region.’<sup>66</sup> While concerns about the command-and-control capabilities of the leadership are valid, this tends to overlook the significance of a broad acceptance of an overarching ideology and claim of authority and the way the existence of the IK shaped perceptions and, consequently, behaviours. Nevertheless, there was undoubtedly a large gap between the highly bureaucratised and militarised structure on paper and the exercise of leadership in practice. The IK also faced a high-capacity opponent that applied considerable counter-insurgency pressure, meaning leadership transition was a regular occurrence within the group. The IK thus provides ample opportunity to examine how relationships are renegotiated and how actors exercise agency outside of institutional channels during the transition process.

### ***Analysing leadership transition in practice***

A case-study approach allows for the intensive study of chosen cases, creating opportunities for insights available through other methods.<sup>67</sup> Our cases are four sequences of leadership transition in the IK era – one at the apex of the group, the other three from within the IK’s *vilayyats*, as shown in Table 1.

To assess transition, we collected data from various sources. Throughout its lifespan, the IK maintained a relatively stable online presence of ‘official’ and semi-official websites representing the central organisation and its regional branches.<sup>68</sup> Through a combination of daily monitoring of these resources over many years and targeted supplementary searches of video-sharing websites or online repositories, we compiled a unique corpus of leadership communiqués and other insurgency-produced material. For each leader, we concentrated on communiqués issued in the last year of a predecessor’s tenure and the first year of the new leader, enabling us to establish the context for transition and examine the critical period of flux and uncertainty while still being sufficiently narrow to focus on transition itself. Some leaders took time to announce their succession, while others did not survive this period. In total, we drew on 89 leadership statements in this analysis. We supplemented this with additional information from the corpus, reporting by a broad range

<sup>66</sup> Campana and Ratelle, ‘A political sociology approach to the diffusion of conflict’, p. 128.

<sup>67</sup> John Gerring, *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>68</sup> ‘Official’ status was usually established through edicts issued by the IK’s senior emir. Each of the regional branches of the IK ran, at different times, official websites. *Kavkazcenter* is the most famous of the North Caucasian rebel websites; its status as an official channel was ambiguous, but it served as the primary outlet for central leadership statements.

**Table 1.** Leadership sequences in the IK. Years refer to occupation of the highest leadership position in their groups. The first-named leader is considered only as a predecessor, in order to establish the context of transition.

Central leadership	Dagestan	Kabardino-Balkaria	Ingushetia
Abdul-Khalim Sadulayev 2005–6	Umar Sheykhulayev 2008–9	Anzor Astemirov 2005–10	Ali Taziyev 2006–10
Dokka Umarov 2006–13	Umlat Magomedov 2009	Asker Dzhappuyev 2010–11	Dzhamaleyl Mutaliyev 2010–13
Aliaskhab Kebekov 2014–15	Magomed Vagapov 2010	Alim Zankishiyev 2011–12	Artur Gatagazhev 2013–14
Magomed Suleymanov 2015	Israfil Validzhanov 2010–11	Timur Tatchayev 2012	Beslan Makhauri 2014–15
	Ibragimkhalil Daudov 2011–12	Ruslan Batyrbekov 2012	
	Rustam Asilderov 2012–16	Khasanbi Fakov 2012–13	

of local and federal media outlets during the time period, official and security-service statements, and court proceedings – much of it, again, obtained through routine monitoring of the insurgency that helps build a richer picture than would have been possible through post hoc searches.

We analysed this material using NVivo 11, a tool designed to aid rigorous qualitative analysis. Social movement studies' theory of framing and the methods it has given rise to influenced our approach.<sup>69</sup> We used the findings from the literature to generate a set of codes covering essential tasks. We then applied those codes to a sample of the material and adjusted the coding schema accordingly. This led to the merger of some codes, where the practical performance of tasks overlapped considerably and made meaningful disaggregation impossible, and the elimination of others, where performance of a task occurred only in an isolated case. Initially, we developed a series of sub-codes to reflect differences within tasks; however, we decided that this level of granularity did not offer clear analytic advantages, whereas a minimalist typology focuses attention on what is critical during the transition process. One challenge lay with how we treated counter-insurgent activities, which posed obstacles to the successful navigation of the transition process and established the context in which insurgent leaders performed their tasks. Initially, we coded these separately, but once we narrowed it down to those that were consistent across groups and could thus be considered 'key' challenges facing insurgent leaders, we found that these closely mirrored our already-identified tasks. Consequently, we merged the discussion of these measures into the discussion of the core tasks, helping maintain the focus on the internal processes of movements. Only one task – that of counter-insurgents imposing cumulative losses on groups – was not adequately reflected in the existing codes; consequently, we created the new task of survival to reflect this particular issue.

### *A non-sequential typology of tasks facing new insurgent leaders*

The outcome of this iterative process of refining a literature-derived set of leadership tasks and empirical application to our dataset was a typology of five key, non-sequential tasks, as illustrated in Table 2.

### *Recognising and addressing methodological limitations*

Before considering the empirical application of the typology, it is necessary to recognise its limitations and pre-empt some of the criticisms that may be levelled at it because our typology attempts

<sup>69</sup>See Robert Benford, 'An insider's critique of the social movement framing perspective', *Sociological Inquiry*, 67:4 (1997), pp. 409–30 and Holbrook, *The Al-Qaeda Doctrine*.

**Table 2.** A typology of tasks that new insurgent leaders must perform.

Task	Short description
Lay claim to the leadership	Leaders must establish themselves as new leaders and have that claim to leadership recognised by group participants.
Renegotiate relationships and (re-)establish networks	Leaders and followers need to agree on the principles underpinning their new relationship; to re-establish links between parts of the organisation that were maintained by the previous leader; and to establish new links.
Demonstrate organisational continuity and inspire participation	Leaders must persuade group participants and opponents that the cause for which they are fighting has a future and is worth mobilising for.
Establish organisational priorities	Leaders need to decide on continuity and change in the strategic direction of the organisation, or delegate authority for such a decision.
Survive	Leaders must navigate the heightened risks that come from the performance of other tasks if they are to remain in their position long enough to affect their organisations.

to address some of the issues that have plagued discussions of insurgent leadership. Staniland, for example, recognises charisma and instances where leadership changes have impacted groups in his empirical discussion, but neither individuals' qualities nor issues arising from their replacement influence the theoretical debate.<sup>70</sup> Rational-action models are commonplace but afford limited space to individual characteristics.<sup>71</sup> These widely cited approaches tend to downplay agency and fail to explain the impact of leadership change where institutional structures or networks are unaffected. Capturing these factors, however, is methodologically challenging, and the search for specific traits can quickly become circular: leaders can be considered successful because they are charismatic and charismatic because they are successful, while charisma can be seen as inherent to the individual and conferred by others.<sup>72</sup> That which can be conferred can also be denied, reinforcing the importance of followers' agency. Elsewhere, the search for qualities is often biased towards Western perspectives on leadership, and 'Great Men' theories can be as gender-biased as the label suggests. Some leaders may not have discernible characteristics or formal organisational positions but instead be 'someone who is perceived as a leader' who draws their authority from networks and relationships.<sup>73</sup>

Meanwhile, there is a widespread tendency to concentrate on leadership par excellence, cherry-picking those leaders who are regarded as pioneers or exceptionally charismatic, competent, or successful. This prejudices the debate by removing from consideration 'mediocre' or 'bad' leaders – who may be just as relevant to considerations of transition as 'good' ones. By focusing exclusively on the characteristics of successful leaders, we may ignore the many who possess the same qualities who do not become leaders and those who become leaders despite not possessing them and fail to explain why some leaders cannot transfer their authority from one environment to another. Examining processes allows us to move beyond the limitations of characteristic-focused explanations and approach leadership as a highly contextualised phenomenon.

Nevertheless, we face several challenges when evaluating transition in clandestine groups. First and foremost, data availability is critical. We have focused on our chosen sequences because daily monitoring allowed us to gather exceptionally rich data; consequently, we possess a high degree of confidence in the comprehensiveness of that data. Nevertheless, the information environment was highly constrained, and for many aspects of insurgent life in the North Caucasus, the only

<sup>70</sup> Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion*.

<sup>71</sup> Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*; Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars*.

<sup>72</sup> David Hofmann and Lorne Dawson, 'The neglected role of charismatic authority in the study of terrorist groups and radicalization', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 37:4 (2014), pp. 348–68.

<sup>73</sup> Michael DeCesare, 'Towards an interpretive approach to social movement leadership', *International Review of Modern Sociology*, 39:2 (2013), pp. 239–57 (p. 246), emphasis in original; Carl Levy, 'Charisma and social movements: Errico Malatesta and Italian anarchism', *Modern Italy*, 3:2 (1989), pp. 205–17 (pp. 207–8).

sources of information were the insurgency or the security services. Only a handful of media outlets conduct original reporting, and these outlets face significant obstacles. Researchers often have limited access to group participants for practical, ethical, and legal reasons, making it difficult to ascertain rank-and-file views in particular. When disputes emerge over leadership, the parties may have unequal access to channels to publicise their claims. Equally, leaders may choose not to communicate extensively, performing their tasks away from the public eye. Some leaders in our sequences were prolific; others maintained a low profile. We see similar practices elsewhere. Early Taliban leaders, for example, were relatively ‘invisible’, heading an ‘anti-charismatic movement’;<sup>74</sup> later factions ‘found themselves hiding, without lines of communication to one another.’<sup>75</sup> Where there are no alternative sources of information, or the interests of the parties align in keeping something from public view, important parts of the transition process may be invisible to the researcher.

Using insurgency-produced material as a primary, albeit not exclusive, data source carries obvious risks: they are hardly neutral observers. In some cases, the information in communiqués reflects actual processes; in others, there will be efforts to manage internal and external perceptions. However, researchers cannot neatly disentangle these aspects of communiqués without additional sources. Leaders may also ‘communicate’ in other ways, including through the use of violence. However, we defend the use of this material on three grounds. First, any study needs to be manageable and bounded. Including insurgent behaviour as a form of communication risks diluting the focus on transition and raises critical challenges about attribution. We do not deny the importance of behavioural aspects of leadership, but we exclude them on practical grounds. Second, insurgent leaders often ‘leak’ far more information than they intend, including around internal disputes. Popular perceptions of insurgent ‘propaganda’ can see it as highly scripted and choreographed, such as that produced by IS. However, the overwhelming majority of communiqués considered here do not fall into this category, and many statements were rambling, ad hoc affairs. As such, they often revealed information that was unfavourable to the group. The IK’s operating environment exacerbated this and forced more information out into the open: intense security-service pressure made coordination extremely difficult, and insurgents used online statements to communicate with each other and external audiences. These particulars likely vary by group, so the persuasiveness of this point will change according to the groups with which researchers are familiar – yet this emphasises the importance of studying groups in a highly contextualised manner. It also leads directly to our third and final point: we should be careful not to base understandings of insurgency exclusively on groups that are relatively accessible and to prioritise methodological purity to such a degree that some groups cannot be studied. For example, the conflicts in Colombia and Northern Ireland are among the most researched in the world and have had an outsized impact on theoretical development. But limited information availability is not just a factor affecting the researcher – it characterises the environment in which the insurgents themselves operate. There may, therefore, be critical differences between insurgencies in information-rich and information-poor environments. We risk drawing the wrong conclusions if we transplant theories developed around the study of insurgencies that are different in fundamental ways. In the North Caucasus, additional sources of information cannot be found with just a little more effort; often, these sources do not exist, will never be publicly available, or can only be obtained through significant ethical violations.

A final limitation of the study is that the nature of the conflict in the North Caucasus limits our discussion to one type of transition: that prompted by the death of the incumbent. Russian counter-insurgency was of the take-no-prisoners kind, with Ingushetian emir Ali Taziyev the only senior IK leader ever to be arrested and tried. This is significant since multiple scholars find the

<sup>74</sup>David Edwards, *Before Taliban: Genealogies of the Afghan Jihad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 294.

<sup>75</sup>Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban–Al Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan, 1970–2010* (London: Hurst & Company, 2012), p. 244.

nature of removal affects its impact.<sup>76</sup> We will reflect further on this in the discussion below and the conclusion. However, here it is worth noting that this study is informed by an interpretivist perspective that rejects positivist presumption that underlying laws and rules can form the basis for generalisation.<sup>77</sup> Any case is a priori constrained in its ability to tell us something definite about another context. Equally, the benefits from considering a broader range of cases would be offset by the loss of insights from detailed consideration of a single set of cases. In line with Lincoln and Guba's interpretivist solution to the positivist dilemma, we aim not for generalisation but for the development of 'working hypotheses', which recognise that any situation has its own unique characteristics and that transferability depends on a detailed understanding of the contexts *from* and *to* which ideas are being transferred. From this perspective, any version of our typology would require adaptation when applied to other contexts. Scholars unpersuaded by particular dimensions of the typology and the application to other groups they study should therefore embrace the need for adjustment as a feature rather than a weakness of the typology.

## Applying the typology: Transition in action

### *Task one: Lay claim to the leadership*

Perhaps the most obvious task facing aspiring leaders is to stake their claim to the leadership. Yet this task is fraught with difficulties. Success in making a claim can depend on group structure and the relative strength of rival claimants, and on the ability of other actors to impose their preferences. Transition appears to be quickest in hierarchical groups with clear chains of succession. In Kabardino-Balkaria, the local insurgency's founding leader, Anzor Astemirov, was a charismatic ideologue with considerable personal authority and theological credentials. He had overseen the transition from an overt local social movement to a clandestine one aligned with regional insurgent actors.<sup>78</sup> When Astemirov died, Asker Dzhappuyev could leverage his role as *naib* to stake his claim, despite lacking Astemirov's social standing and intellectual background.<sup>79</sup> His claim did not encounter public dissent and was strengthened by the recent death of another *naib* who would have had an equal claim.<sup>80</sup> In the insurgency's senior leadership, Dokka Umarov had risen through the ranks and occupied the ChRI vice presidency before assuming the overall presidency, much like his predecessor, Abdul-Khalim Sadulayev. In both cases, however, the acquiescence of influential figures within a much stronger movement was critical to the movement's acceptance of their claim.<sup>81</sup>

Influential or senior figures within a group may attempt to impose their leadership candidates on nominally subordinate factions. However, group members can exercise agency in choosing whether to accept this decision. As IK leader, Umarov often issued edicts designating *vilayyat* emirs. In some instances, these followed quickly after the death of a previous leader, ensuring a quick transition.<sup>82</sup> In other cases, the appointments appeared to represent little more than a confirmation of operational realities. Rustam Asilderov, for example, had previously served as a sector commander and a *naib* to the leader of the Dagestani insurgency; he used the title of acting emir

<sup>76</sup>Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*; Langdon, Sarapu, and Wells, 'Targeting the leadership of terrorist and insurgent movements', pp. 59–78; Kaplan, Mintz, Mishal, and Samban, 'What happened to suicide bombings in Israel?', pp. 225–35.

<sup>77</sup>Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba, 'The only generalization is: There is no generalization', in Roger Gomm, Martyn Hammersley, and Peter Foster (eds), *Case Study Method* (London: SAGE, 2000), pp. 27–44.

<sup>78</sup>Marat Shterin and Akhmet Yarlykapov, 'Reconsidering radicalisation and terrorism: The New Muslims movement in Kabardino-Balkaria and its path to violence', *Religion, State and Society*, 39:2–3 (2011), pp. 303–25.

<sup>79</sup>Asker Dzhappuyev, 'Address by United Vilayyat of KBK Emir Asker Dzhappuyev. Caucasus Emirate' (15 May 2010).

<sup>80</sup>Anzor Astemirov, 'Testament of Emir Seyfullakh (Anzor Astemirov), Martyr inshallah!' (21 November 2012).

<sup>81</sup>Akhmadov, *The Chechen Struggle*, p. 230; Domitilla Sagramoso, 'The radicalisation of Islamic Salafi Jamaats in the North Caucasus: Moving closer to the global jihadist movement?', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 64:3 (2002), pp. 561–95 (p. 590).

<sup>82</sup>See Dokka Umarov, 'Emir Khasan appointed emir of the Dagestani Front and governor of Dagestan Vilayyat' (1 September 2010) and Dokka Umarov, 'Regarding the appointment of the Emir of the IK Armed Forces Dagestani Front, Dagestan Vilayyat Governor' (10 May 2011).

from April 2012 but was not formally confirmed by Umarov until August.<sup>83</sup> The Dagestani insurgency also furnished several examples of local groups rejecting their leader's attempts to impose a candidate, such as the dispute in 2014 over the leadership of the Aukhovskiy *jama'at*.<sup>84</sup> Subordinates can also exercise their agency by accepting or rejecting the claims of those who seek to challenge existing leaders and bring about transition by a coup. This was most clearly seen in 2010 when a group of Chechen emirs sought to oust Umarov but found their challenge rejected by the Kabardino-Balkarian and Dagestani emirs, whose support was required to confirm their claim.<sup>85</sup>

A leadership claim appears most precarious when there is no obvious candidate or external actor to impose preferences. In this case, negotiations can be drawn out. When Umarov died in September 2013, he had not designated a successor, and the ensuing *shura* discussions dragged on for six months because of communication difficulties. As multiple leaders testified, physically convening a *shura* was often problematic for the IK. The death of a leader makes closer coordination a more compelling task than might be the case at other times, increasing the chances of senior figures attempting to meet. This illustrates how counter-insurgency measures can shape the transition process. On this occasion, the Chechen authorities tried to intervene more directly, publishing intercepted recordings of part of the negotiations.<sup>86</sup> Elsewhere, the security services in Kabardino-Balkaria were able to eliminate members of the leadership cadre in successive operations in April 2011 and September 2012 when they attempted to convene a *shura*.<sup>87</sup> In Dagestan, Asilderov claimed that two months of heavy fighting disrupted efforts to convene a *shura* to replace Vagapov.<sup>88</sup> When the meeting finally took place, it deliberately did not include all senior leaders 'for safety reasons'.<sup>89</sup> The difficulties of meeting in person created a reliance on video and audio messages exchanged via courier and the Internet, which increased the opportunities for interception and detection. This was illustrative of the so-called terrorist's dilemma identified by Shapiro, highlighting the difficulties of balancing operational security with the need for operational control.<sup>90</sup>

Uncertainty and vulnerabilities created by the lack of a clear successor raise the question of why existing leaders do not always designate replacements. At least two factors are important. First, any identified successors become a logical target for counter-insurgency operations, creating an external vulnerability. Second, heirs are potentially also an internal vulnerability and threat to the current leader. For example, the 2010 leadership challenge to Umarov centred around his recently appointed heir; it is probably no coincidence that having defeated the challenge, Umarov did not again nominate a successor.

### **Task two: Renegotiate relationships and (re-)establish networks**

If leadership is conceived of as a negotiated relationship between leaders and followers, the emergence of a new leader represents an opportunity to renegotiate that relationship. This can involve

<sup>83</sup>Dokka Umarov, 'Regarding the appointment of the Emir of the Dagestani Front, IK Dagestan Vilayyat Governor' (25 August 2012).

<sup>84</sup>Islam Muradov, 'Islam (Khasavyurt amir) – An explanation about the situation around one of the mujahideen' (15 October 2014); Abu Khafs, 'An explanation on the subject of the accusations which the so-called Khasavyurt Amir, Islam, has made against Emir Suleyman' (20 November 2014).

<sup>85</sup>Asker Dzhabbayev, 'Vilayyat KBK Governor Abdullakh Address. Caucasus Emirate' (7 August 2010); Magomed Vagapov, 'IK Qadi, Dagestan Vilayyat Emir Seyfullakh: Emir Dokku Umarov is the Only Legal Ruler' (13 August 2010).

<sup>86</sup>Kavkazpress, 'Original title unknown' (17 January 2014).

<sup>87</sup>Timur Samedov, 'Wahabbi emirs eliminated in Evreyskaya Kolonka', *Kommersant* (13 March, 2012), available at: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2026703>.

<sup>88</sup>Rustam Asilderov, 'Emir Abu Mukhammad (Acting VD Emir) and the mujahideen of VD renew their oath to IK Emir Dokku Abu Usman' (10 April 2012).

<sup>89</sup>Rustam Asilderov, 'Shura of the mujahideen of VD [Vilayyat Dagestan] under the leadership of Emir Abu Mukhammad' (19 May 2012).

<sup>90</sup>Jacob N. Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 16.



deciding whether to continue the relationship or establish new terms, as followers seek to ensure that new leaders adequately represent their interests. Following the deaths in relatively quick succession of Maskhadov and Sadulayev, both Astemirov and Vagapov corresponded with Umarov regarding the ideological direction of the group. They made their support dependent on a formal Islamisation of that ideology, and their influence was a critically important factor in Umarov's decision to proclaim the IK.<sup>91</sup> Astemirov and Vagapov could leverage their theological training abroad and independent support bases within their local networks to push this agenda. Umarov, by contrast, lacked any such background and consistently prioritised group unity over ideological rigour.<sup>92</sup> Thus, individual personalities and social capital were significant factors in maintaining group relationships through the transition period.

When Asilderov challenged Umarov's successor, Aliaskhab Kebekov, for leadership of the group – as Asilderov sought to align the group with the rising IS – Kebekov and his close ally (and ultimate successor) Magomed Suleymanov responded in the opposite way, prioritising ideological purity over unity. Kebekov and Suleymanov based their leadership on their theological rather than military credentials; neither had evident networks beyond their republic's boundaries nor demonstrated the willingness to compromise that might have helped build and maintain relationships. In the eyes of those who favoured supporting IS, neither was seen to represent their interests. Accordingly, they switched their support to Asilderov.<sup>93</sup> By contrast, the failure of the leadership challenge to Umarov in 2010 shows how failed negotiations can result in the collapse of a leadership bid. This also illustrates how the renegotiation of relationships can precede or even cause the actual transition, something most obviously seen in the case of internal coups. For instance, Mosinger argues that 'leadership disputes result from a shifting balance of loyalties within a rebel organisation', with network changes affecting individual leaders' power bases.<sup>94</sup>

Additionally, departing leaders may have linked nodes to other parts of the network, leaving new leaders to face the challenge of re-establishing links essential to a group's function. Asilderov, for example, reported that the Kabardino-Balkarian insurgency lost contact with the central leadership following the deaths of Sadulayev and influential field commander Shamil Basayev.<sup>95</sup> Negotiations over the ideological direction of the insurgency could only start once those contacts had been re-established.

When considering the nature of authority in jihadist groups and how this could differ from other ideological types, it is worth highlighting the role of *bayah*. This doctrinally mandated pledge of allegiance provides two opportunities to exercise agency. First, new leaders of factions nominally subordinate to a broader group can stake their claim to the leadership by pledging *bayah* on behalf of the group they seek to lead, thereby creating something of a *fait accompli*: superiors can only ignore or override pledges in a public manner, raising the costs of doing so. Second, subordinates can signal their acceptance of a new leader's claim by pledging *bayah* to them, and the claim's legitimacy remains in flux until they do so. Similar mechanisms for exercising agency and creating facts on the ground may exist in other types of groups. Sadulayev (2005), for example, cemented his control of the ChRI by deploying constitutional mechanisms to seize control of all aspects of the insurgent hierarchy.<sup>96</sup> However, in at least one regard, *bayah* is unique: since it is offered to individuals rather than groups, allegiances and alliances do not automatically transfer from one leader to the next. In other words, leadership transition represents a moment of flux in the life cycle of jihadist groups, when relationships are automatically opened for renegotiation.

<sup>91</sup> Anzor Astemirov, 'Emir Seyfullakh on the process of preparing the proclamation of the Caucasus Emirate' (20 November 2007).

<sup>92</sup> Akhmadov, *The Chechen Struggle*, pp. 242–5; Youngman, 'Broader, vaguer, weaker', p. 381.

<sup>93</sup> Youngman, 'Between Caucasus and caliphate', pp. 194–217.

<sup>94</sup> Mosinger, 'Balance of loyalties', p. 936.

<sup>95</sup> Astemirov, 'Emir Seyfullakh' (20 November 2007).

<sup>96</sup> Abdul-Khalim Sadulayev, 'Edict by ChRI President Abdul-Khalim Sadulayev' (16 March 2005).

The process of (re)negotiating relationships and (re-)establishing networks provides further clues about how state opponents can seek to intervene during transition. Distrust and fears of betrayal and infiltration are widespread within illegal, clandestine groups. When previous relationships are weak or missing, these problems can become aggravated, often deliberately. Security services may withhold information about the removal of a leader while capitalising on the intelligence. They may also claim that removal has compromised the networks to which the previous leader belonged. The sole detention of a senior IK leader, Taziyev, occurred days – possibly weeks or months – before it was publicly reported; by that point, he had already been transferred outside the region for interrogation.<sup>97</sup> Yevkurov then claimed that Taziyev would reveal everything, citing examples of other insurgents being ‘loquacious’ in detention and calling on rebels to surrender before it was too late.<sup>98</sup>

Meanwhile, the IK–IS schism spilt into the public domain as Kebekov was still consolidating his control over the group. The first pledge of allegiance to IS had some suspicious features that suggested security service involvement.<sup>99</sup> Therefore, the pledge can be interpreted as part of an effort to flush internal disputes into the open, which other leaders later acknowledged dragged on for some time. Insurgent leaders demonstrated an acute awareness of the dangers of authorities capitalising on internal disputes. Suleymanov, for example, warned leaders not to record accusations about other members of the insurgency, arguing ‘if they fall into the hands of the infidels, they will use them for their own purposes.’<sup>100</sup>

### **Task three: Demonstrate organisational continuity and inspire participation**

A third task facing new insurgent leaders is to demonstrate the ongoing viability of the group and inspire people to keep following it. For all the flaws of the literature on charisma and the methodological difficulties entailed in trying to account for something as intangible as inspiration, they nevertheless attempt to capture something important. Senior figures within the IK made heavy use of the concept of *fard al-ayn*, an obligation incumbent on all Muslims, in trying to mobilise audiences, while new leaders made similar recourse to this strategy.<sup>101</sup>

Although the challenge of inspiring followers is not unique to the transition process, groups are also attuned to the demotivational impact of leadership losses and recognise the need to counter it. Rhetorically, this can take the form of assertions that the struggle will continue. Dzhappuyev, for example, reported that ‘we will continue in the same direction and we have taken up the banner from the hands of our martyrs.’<sup>102</sup> Martyrdom narratives were commonplace, attempting to portray the loss of individuals as the fulfilment of a goal rather than defeat. There were repeated efforts to portray killed leaders as having fulfilled their deal with Allah and thus to be worthy of emulation. These rhetorical strategies are not unique to leadership losses but form part of the response to any setback, with martyrdom remaining a significant theme on IK websites.<sup>103</sup> They are, moreover, just as often articulated by other voices within the group as by new leaders themselves. Following the death of both leaders and rank-and-file fighters, multiple actors across the IK relied on the

<sup>97</sup> Sergey Mashkin and Nikolay Sergeev, ‘Magas found in Lefortovo’, *Kommersant* (10 June 2010), available at: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1383992>).

<sup>98</sup> Galgalyche, ‘Yu-b. Yevkurov: Until the criminal community has been fully decapitated, talking about a major success is premature’ (15 June 2010).

<sup>99</sup> Youngman, ‘Between Caucasus and caliphate’, pp. 194–217.

<sup>100</sup> Magomed Suleymanov, ‘Explanation of the situation that has developed around the Temirkhan-Shurinskiy Jamaat’ (25 November 2013).

<sup>101</sup> See Alim Zankishiyev, ‘Congratulations by KBK Vilayyat Governor on Eid al-Adha’ (6 November 2010) and Khasanbi Fakov, ‘Emir Abu Khasan reminds about the virtue of fighting on Allah’s path’ (30 May 2013).

<sup>102</sup> Dzhappuyev, ‘Address by United Vilayyat of KBK’ (15 May 2010).

<sup>103</sup> Aurélie Campana and Benjamin Ducol, ‘Voices of the “Caucasus Emirate”: Mapping and analyzing North Caucasus insurgency websites’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 27:4 (2015), pp. 679–700.

same Qur'anic verse about how the Prophet's followers did not lose heart when believers fell in battle.<sup>104</sup>

Demonstrations of group continuity can also manifest themselves through action. Since several of the leaders examined here did not issue statements, this may be an even more common strategy – although statements can be used to advertise and justify attacks. The Dagestani general leadership portrayed a series of attacks as a response by the *vilayyat*'s new leader – Magomed Vagapov, a former sector commander who simultaneously assumed the role of IK *qadi* – to the authorities' assertion that his predecessor's death signalled the forthcoming defeat of the insurgency.<sup>105</sup> Ingushetian president Yunus-bek Yevkurov and local Dagestani newspaper *Chernovik* interpreted increased violence following the removal of senior rebel leaders as attempts by remaining insurgents to demonstrate their endurance and leadership claims.<sup>106</sup> In Kabardino-Balkaria, Dzhappuyev's first statements documented several attacks and claimed that some were intended to demonstrate the authorities' impotence.<sup>107</sup> Violence in the republic did indeed spike dramatically: A senior official reported a 400 per cent increase in attacks on law-enforcement personnel in the first eight months of Dzhappuyev's tenure compared to the previous year.<sup>108</sup> Such spikes, however, are not always clearly attributable to leadership strategy. Rhetorically, Dzhappuyev articulated many of the same 'internal brakes' – understood as 'mechanisms through which members of the groups themselves contribute to establish and maintain limits upon their own violence' – as Astemirov and appeared to seek to restrain violence.<sup>109</sup> However, he lacked Astemirov's authority within the group, and the security services played an important role in escalating violence.<sup>110</sup> How patterns of insurgent activity vary during transition periods falls outside the scope of this paper but requires further investigation.

#### **Task four: Establish organisational priorities**

Embedded in our definition of insurgency is the pursuit of political goals. Logically, therefore, we might expect the leadership to play a significant role in establishing these goals and the general direction and priorities of the group. In reality, however, the performance of this task varied considerably, and it assumed importance only in certain circumstances. Several leaders under consideration did not issue any statements. This cannot be explained solely by the length of their tenure: some leaders survived for only a few months but issued multiple statements, while others were in post for much longer but rarely communicated publicly. Establishing priorities can be considered a collective function, and a leader can delegate the task to others within the group. Taziyeu, for example, was a reticent speaker but was accompanied for most of his leadership by Aleksandr Tikhomirov (Said Buryatskiy) – a charismatic convert to Islam who became a leading ideologue despite never occupying a formal role within the IK. Other leaders and insurgent actors, such as the official websites, can also perform the function, leaving leaders free to concentrate on other tasks. In Dagestan, the websites were far more active than *vilayyat* emirs in communicating a group ideology. These examples highlight the importance of viewing leadership as embedded in broader

<sup>104</sup> See, for example, Kavkazcenter, 'Jama'at Shari'at press release' (22 March 2008); Hunafa, 'Statement by Vilayyat Glalglayche (Ingushetia) mujahideen command' (27 June 2013); and Astemir Berkhamov, 'Oath to Caucasus Emirate emir Abu Mukhammad from KBK Vilayyat emir Al Bara Berkham Astemir' (6 May 2014).

<sup>105</sup> Jamaatshariat.com, 'Jama'at Shari'at press release: Apostates occupy perimeter defence' (26 July 2010).

<sup>106</sup> Glalglayche, 'Republic of Ingushetia president press conference' (1 July 2010); Islam Bulatov, 'To death – for death', *Chernovik* (9 March 2012), available at: {<https://chernovik.net/content/novosti/na-smert-za-smert>}.

<sup>107</sup> Asker Dzhappuyev, 'Address by United Vilayyat of KBK Emir Asker Dzhappuyev. Caucasus Emirate' (15 May 2010) and Asker Dzhappuyev, 'Vilayyat KBK Governor Abdullakh Address. Caucasus Emirate' (7 August 2010).

<sup>108</sup> Oleg Guseynov, 'No security', *Gazeta Yuga*, 48:874 (2 December 2010).

<sup>109</sup> Joel Busher, Donald Holbrook, and Graham Macklin, 'The internal brakes on violent escalation: A typology', *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, 11:1 (2019), pp. 3–25 (p. 3).

<sup>110</sup> Mark Youngman, 'Crossing the Rubicon: The limits of insurgent violence in Kabardino-Balkaria', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 14:6 (2020), pp. 148–63.

group activity, challenging the idea that disseminating an ideology is crucial for leaders, thereby affecting who can assume the role.<sup>111</sup>

Expectations appear to be an essential factor in determining when the performance of this task assumes importance. When a movement or its legitimacy is seen as closely linked to an individual leader, there may be question marks over the group's orientation following that leader's death – and consequently, a greater likelihood of statements asserting group goals and priorities. Similarly, if there is intense competition within a movement over its ideological direction, there may be an expectation that the new leader will clarify their position. ChRI leaders Sadulayev and Umarov faced significant contestation within the group, and both issued statements shortly after assuming leadership of the insurgency that reaffirmed existing policy.<sup>112</sup> Both, however, went on to oversee significant changes in group ideology, demonstrating the negotiated nature of leadership. In this way, new leaders cannot, from the outset, assert radically different goals unless they already have sufficient support. Kebekov, by contrast, did not initially face significant competition over the direction of the group, and there were no expectations of a dramatic shift. His lengthy early statements neither reaffirmed existing goals nor articulated new ones, despite him being a more articulate and intellectually oriented leader than Umarov. In circumstances that do not compel them, expectations of bold ideological statements are often not realised. If neither party desires nor needs to renegotiate the ideological terms of the relationship, additional explanations of priorities may be superfluous to its members.

#### *Task five: Survive*

The task of surviving is so self-evident that it is often not mentioned – indeed, in clandestine groups, it is a task that leaders and activists must perform at all times. Yet there are good reasons for explicitly highlighting it in discussions of transition. The performance of the preceding tasks is self-evidently dependent on success at this one. Moreover, it often requires opening up channels of communication or engaging in activities that increase vulnerabilities.<sup>113</sup> Chernovik, for example, reported that security services could locate Vagapov because he went online to upload a video and communicate with subordinates.<sup>114</sup> The more compelling the task within a broader group context, the more willing leaders are likely to undertake it – and a fundamental justification for focusing on transition rather than leadership writ large is that this period is one where these tasks assume greater importance. Critical to this is the recognition that insurgencies do not operate in a vacuum but face opponents continually interested in their destruction. These opponents will – or should – be particularly alert during the transition period to activities and vulnerabilities they can exploit. The targeted removal of important figures can generate new intelligence on potential successors: the security services claimed they could trace Astemirov after documents recording his travel routes were found following the death of his deputy.<sup>115</sup> Although such claims are impossible to verify, Astemirov himself provided supporting evidence, recording a final will and testament because he had to ‘move around a lot now, travel to attend meetings with different people, restore the system which our brother Omar had organised.’<sup>116</sup> Arrests, rather than detention, are also likely to produce valuable intelligence that can undermine the performance of other tasks.

On the other hand, it is worth considering the consequences of failure to perform this task: coming so soon after the loss of a previous leader, it can be incredibly, even critically, damaging to morale and undermine the broader group. In other words, repeated leadership losses can

<sup>111</sup> Wu, Carleton, and Davies, ‘Discovering bin Laden's replacement in al-Qaeda’, pp. 57–73.

<sup>112</sup> See Sadulayev, ‘Edict by ChRI President’ (16 March 2005) and Dokka Umarov, ‘Address by ChRI President Dokka Umarov’ (23 June 2006).

<sup>113</sup> Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma*.

<sup>114</sup> Artur Mamayev, ‘One more buried sword’, *Chernovik* (27 August 2010), available at: {<https://chernovik.net/content/respublika/eshchyo-odin-pohoronennyy-mech-0>}.

<sup>115</sup> Oleg Guseynov, ‘Anzor Astemirov killed’, *Gazeta Yuga*, 13:838 (1 April 2010b).

<sup>116</sup> Astemirov, ‘Testament’ (21 November 2012).

significantly impact the performance of task three. A shortcoming of several studies of leadership losses is their treatment of losses in isolation from one another rather than considering the effect of successive losses and high leadership turnover. Vagapov not only assumed the role of Dagestani emir but also replaced Astemirov as IK *qadi*. He had arguably developed a charismatic bond and strong standing with local insurgents and could claim considerable social capital, having obtained theological and military training abroad.

Although Vagapov may have had the same potential as Astemirov to exercise cross-faction influence, he ultimately lacked the opportunity – lasting only a few months in the role before he, too, was killed. The IK lost two individuals who demonstrated the ability – rare within the group – to combine military and theological leadership. This occurred when the group suffered the death of several highly influential figures, and although it survived for several more years, it arguably never recovered from this. Indeed, parts of the IK were prone to leadership by default, whereby someone assumed the leadership simply by surviving long enough to be promoted. In Kabardino-Balkaria, all five of Astemirov's successors were part of his original network; when the group sustained losses, the network contracted, and the insurgency failed to attract enough recruits to compensate. Whereas Astemirov enjoyed considerable social capital and was highly articulate, one of his successors, Alim Zankishiyev, was relatively unknown and struggled to form coherent sentences.<sup>117</sup> The final leader in the sequence was a former sector emir who had allegedly been removed from his role for passivity.<sup>118</sup> Ultimately, however, he returned to the leadership because of the lack of candidates with more than a few weeks or months of experience within the insurgency.

## Conclusion and future directions

Leaders play an essential role in representing and defining the interests of insurgent groups and shaping perceptions of their vitality and direction. Therefore, the transition from one leader to the next represents a critical period in the life cycle of groups, where uncertainties and vulnerabilities are heightened, and relationships are in flux, but how new leaders navigate this difficult period has not received sustained attention. This study has drawn insights into leadership and transition from the existing literature to establish a foundational typology of the tasks that new insurgent leaders must perform to fill this gap. Drawing on unique data on the insurgency in Russia's North Caucasus, it examined four leadership succession sequences to develop this typology and identify five tasks of paramount concern to new leaders. The analysis demonstrates that leadership is a continuous process of negotiation and that transition in clandestine groups can be studied as a distinct phenomenon.

A case-study approach offers many advantages and can be used to generate insights unavailable through more broadly focused studies. Many of the issues discussed in the paper do not relate to the activities of the IK that garnered the most public attention, and some details of the transition process only became apparent through close, regular monitoring. Nevertheless, relying on case studies also brings limitations. Leadership succession can occur in various circumstances, ranging from a leader's death, capture, or ill-health to abdication, internal coups, retirement, and planned dynastic and familial succession. The ideologies, size, and composition of insurgent groups can vary considerably, as can the capacity and approaches of their state opponents. There can be considerable differences between groups and the political, social, and cultural settings that may shape the transition process. We have focused here on one group in particular, where one cause of transition – the killing of the predecessor – dominated. Therefore, further cross-case research into the transition processes in other types of groups, movements, milieus, and circumstances is necessary to understand this critical juncture in insurgent life cycles. We thus propose this typology not as a

<sup>117</sup>Shterin and Yarlykapov, 'Reconsidering radicalisation and terrorism', pp. 303–25.

<sup>118</sup>Timur Samedov, 'Non-peaceful Mir', *Kommersant* (13 March 2012), available at: <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1890994>).

final step in understanding the transition process but as a necessary and empirically informed first step that we hope will stimulate further debate and investigation.

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