As Islamic State is pushed back in Iraq and Syria, it pops up in parts of Asia, the Sahel and North and East Africa. At the same time, al-Qaeda is still present and actively involved in jihadist activities across different regions. This book addresses why and how the transnational Jihadi movements Islamic State and al-Qaeda are expanding. The book analyses four cases in four different regions: Bangladesh, where the jihadist movements have recently emerged and are expected to further expand from. Lebanon, where Islamic State might become more active. Burkina Faso, where the effects of military intervention in Mali have spilled over. And finally Saudi Arabia, a case that has been insufficiently explored, in spite of it being widely seen as the birthplace of extremist ideology. Among the patterns of dispersal of transnational jihadism that these cases display are military interventions by external powers, lack of the rule of law and a polarized political climate. Sectarian rivalry on the other hand does not in itself increase the probability of transnational jihadism gaining a foothold. The book concludes by turning to the experiences from peace and conflict studies, exploring what we know about how jihadi conflicts are brought to an end. Taken together the contribution of this book is to offer a coherent understanding of why al-Qaeda and Islamic State are emerging forcefully in some places and not in others.
EXPANDING JIHAD
How al-Qaeda and Islamic State find new battlefields

Manni Crone
Mona Kanwal Sheikh
Lars Erslev Andersen
Maria-Louise Clausen
Isak Svensson
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Expanding jihad

HOW AL-QAEDA AND ISLAMIC STATE FIND NEW BATTLEFIELDS

ABSTRACT

What are the circumstances under which al-Qaeda (AQ) and Islamic State (IS) are able to establish themselves in new places? This book aims to increase our understanding of the dynamics that are leading both movements to expand. It analyses four cases in four different regions in order to shed light on the circumstances under which AQ and IS emerge in new places. It looks at the case of Bangladesh where the two transnational jihadi movements have recently appeared and are expected to continue operating, as well as the case of Lebanon where one might expect IS to become more active than is currently the case. In addition, the book explores the case of Burkina Faso, which experiences a spill-over effect from the military intervention in neighboring Mali. Finally, a case that has been insufficiently explored, in spite of it being known as the birthplace of extremist ideology and violent jihadists, namely Saudi Arabia.

In assessing each case, the book describes the local conditions, which have been significant for AQ and IS either managing or failing to establish a strong presence. It also covers the regional dynamics that have led to the opening of new chapters or movements of jihadists across borders. Finally, the book analyses the emergence of AQ and IS by looking at the significance of the more global dynamics that are...
prompting the expansion of jihad into new battlefields. One of the main purposes of the book is to determine whether there are any common traits or lessons to be learned from the different cases. The last chapter poses a reverse but related question to the rest of the contributions by turning to the lessons learned from peace and conflict studies, asking what we know about how jihadi movements end.

This book complements previous DIIS research on this topic, most recently published in Splittelsen i global jihad: kampen mellem IS og al-Qaeda (DIIS 2016), and published in English in the 2017 special issue of Connections, (vol. 16, no. 1): Disunity in Global Jihad. The special issue covers developments in Iraq and Syria, Afghanistan and Pakistan, Yemen, North Africa and the Sahel, as well as the former Soviet Union.
Military intervention by the West, political unrest and lack of the rule of law are mechanisms which, when overlapping, enhance the probability of al-Qaeda and Islamic State gaining a foothold.
combat troops from Iraq, the sectarian policy of the Shia-based government in Baghdad prevented it from embracing a political solution incorporating all Iraqis, particularly the Sunni Muslims in the country. Instead it fertilized the ground for Salafi jihadists to reorganize and form an army of insurgency under the banner of IS.1

The links between Western-led interventions and the pattern of dispersal of transnational jihadism is also clear today. According to a 2016 report on global terrorism (GTI), IS-affiliated groups had already carried out attacks in 28 countries in 2015, only one year after the US renewed its war of engagement in a chaotic Iraq.1 Today IS has moved from being a regional movement operating in Iraq and Syria back in 2014 to becoming a global movement in 2017, having taken responsibility for attacks in Manchester in 2017, Brussels and Berlin in 2016 and Paris in 2015, as well as announced the establishment of Islamic State provinces and local governors in various countries. Al-Qaeda, on the other hand, has increasingly become ‘regionalized’, not least by engaging in local conflicts in the areas where it is active, such as the Fulani jihadism in central Mali, the fight against the Indian army in Kashmir and the Rohingya insurgency in western Myanmar. Though the West is still its primary enemy, attacks in the West have largely been replaced by attacks on Westerners in the regions where AQ is active, and its declared range of enemies has simultaneously become broader due to its involvement in these local conflicts and insurgencies. Hence, AQ and IS, the two transnational Salafi jihadi networks that, for at least two decades, have been leading a Sunni Muslim-based insurgency throughout the greater Middle East from Africa to Asia and jihadist terrorism in Europe, seem to have undergone two different transformations. While AQ in its mode of operation has gone from a global to a series of regional organizations, since the US-initiated the war against IS in August 2014 the latter has steadily gone from being a regional to a global player. Ideologically and rhetorically, however, both movements use language that underscores their global relevance and ambitions.

AQ AND IS: FORMERLY CONNECTED, NOW RIVALS

The most active group in the early resistance in Iraq following the toppling of Saddam Hussein was Jamaat al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad, which emerged under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Al-Zarqawi was known for his extremism and brutality, made evident by the gruesome videos in which hostages were decapitated and through his group’s systematic attempt to stir up civil war between Sunni and Shia Muslims, for example, by bombing Shia Muslim mosques and holy sites. Today, al-Zarqawi is considered a role model and a martyr by many jihadists and is admired by IS, having taken on the same role and status as Osama bin Laden did in AQ. Even though AQ leaders have strongly criticized al-Zarqawi’s attacks on Shia Muslims and would have preferred him to concentrate all his efforts on fighting the Americans and the collaborationist Iraqi government, in October 2004 al-Zarqawi’s group officially became part of the AQ network under the title of the al-Qaeda Jihad Committee in Mesopotamia. The group remained part of AQ even after 7 June 2006, when al-Zarqawi was killed by American forces in a targeted killing north of the city of Baquba in Iraq. Violence in Iraq escalated constantly and rapidly during this period, especially in Anbar province and around Fallujah, the hub of AQI’s (al-Qaeda in Iraq’s) insurgency. After Jamaat al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad joined forces with five other jihadist groups, it changed its name to Islamic State in Iraq (ISI).

Together with other groups headed by former officers in Saddam Hussein’s army, ISI formed an alliance, furious at having been marginalized from political power, first by the US-led invasion from 2003 and onwards, and then by the Iraqi Prime Minister at the time, Nuri al-Maliki, who systematically kept Sunni Muslims out of political power. The Iraqi tribes that helped the US with its counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy from 2007 were primarily interested in acquiring security and influence over the Baghdad government, but as the Americans had implemented the strategy without ensuring the loyalty of the Nuri al-Maliki government, the situation was turned upside down when the US withdrew its combat troops at the end of 2011. Influenced by Iran and his Shia Muslim power base in Iraq, Maliki pursued sectarian policies that prevented Sunni Muslims from having influence in the country. The result was an escalation of violence, with AQI/ISI regaining its strength and merging with other groups led by former officers in Saddam Hussein’s army. Thus AQI/ISI were back in the game after a period in 2007-8 when US counterinsurgency operations had managed to reduce violence considerably in Anbar province.2 The two movements systematically built themselves up, for example, by infiltrating power structures in cities in Anbar province and in Mosul and by starting a campaign of terror aimed at prisons, through which hundreds of AQ members were released. The goal of AQI/ISI was to regain power in Iraq and to establish an Islamic state, and from 2012 the group constantly increased in strength.
While AQI/ISI was regaining its strength in Iraq, a civil war broke out in Syria. In only a few months, the situation changed from more or less peaceful demonstrations to violent insurgencies. In Iraq, AQI/ISI decided to open a Syrian front and to take part in the Syrian uprising, and in January 2012 the new Syrian wing of AQI/ISI was officially proclaimed under the name Jabhat al-Nusra (the al-Nusra Front). The group quickly became a strong organization which attracted foreign fighters from the Gulf, Yemen, North Africa, the US and Europe, including Denmark. Within a short time, Jabhat al-Nusra became one of the strongest and most important militias in the Syrian opposition.

Jabhat al-Nusra’s success was an increasing cause of annoyance for AQI/ISI’s leaders, who insisted on being in control of a Sunni jihadi insurgency aimed at establishing an Islamic state in the Levant. In 2013 AQI/ISI proclaimed the launch of Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, names chosen to replace AQI/ISI and Jabhat al-Nusra and to stress that Baghdadi was also the commander of the latter. When al-Nusra rejected this move, in February 2014 the AQ leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, excluded ISIL, the later IS, from the network. Following the break with al-Qaeda, ISIL/IS engaged in open war with the entire Syrian opposition, including the al-Nusra Front. The fight against al-Assad was not the only reason for this expansion into Syria, but the objective was to counteract the weakening of what became known as Islamic State in June 2014. The overall objective of IS was to complete a broad Sunni Muslim-based revolution in order to establish a caliphate in the Levant. After IS’s occupation of Mosul in June 2014 and the attacks on Iraqi Kurdistan, the US responded by initiating a military campaign against it. This campaign, supported by more than forty states, will probably succeed in expelling IS from its strongholds in Iraq and Syria, while simultaneously making it look more actively for other battlegrounds in competition with AQ.

HOW HAVE THESE MOVEMENTS EXPANDED?

The particular aim of this book is to understand what kinds of factors – local, regional and global – these transnational jihadi movements tap into when expanding their presence. It is important to understand the dynamics on each level in order to develop both preventive and countering strategies that are responsive to the complexity of local, regional and global explanations.

Covering different cases, each chapter analyses the conditions under which AQ and IS establish themselves in new places.

Four cases in four different regions are covered:

- Lebanon, where one might expect IS, at least, to be more active than is currently the case.
- Burkina Faso, where, among other things, military intervention in Mali has had a spill-over effect on one of its neighboring countries.
- Bangladesh, where both AQ and IS have recently appeared and are expected to continue operating.
- Saudi Arabia, a case that has been insufficiently explored, in spite of it being a birthplace of extremist ideology and a great ‘exporter’ of militant jihadists to other battlefields, such as Yemen.

The four cases are situated on the fringes of world attention, but due to ongoing developments, they each have the potential to become new centers of gravity for transnational jihadism and to teach us something about what might prevent these two movements from expanding further. Since our focus is on why these movements are expanding, it is relevant to look at places where they are in the process of establishing a presence. In assessing each case, the authors describe the local conditions that have been significant for AQ and IS either managing or failing to establish a strong presence. The studies also look at the regional and global dynamics that have led to the opening of new chapters or stimulated the movement of jihadists across borders. The book complements previous DIIS research on the topic, which, however, was focused more on the rivalry between the two movements. The most recent studies cover, among others, developments in Iraq and Syria, Afghanistan and Pakistan, Yemen, North Africa and the Sahel, and the former Soviet Union.

What does it imply to say that AQ or IS has established ‘a presence’?

It is not obvious what a connection with AQ or IS means: attending an AQ training camp, meeting an AQ trainer, or simply being inspired by AQ ideology? The same fuzziness applies to determining when the two movements can actually be said to have a presence in a country or region: when a local movement makes a pledge of allegiance (bayah), when the central leadership and its communications declare their presence in a given country or region, or only when the central leadership provides training, funding, logistics, points out targets etc.?
The most concrete way of establishing a presence is obviously through the control of territory. The control of large territories marks a substantial difference between AQ and IS: AQ never controlled large territories, although it tried to do so in Anbar province in Iraq following the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003, and regional AQ groups have had intermittent control of smaller territories in, for example, Syria and Yemen. In contrast, from its start in 2006, IS had as its declared goal the establishment of an Islamic state first in Iraq, then in Syria, culminating in the ambition to create a Caliphate ‘from China to Rome’. IS also managed to capture vast areas of Anbar province, northern Iraq, with Mosul as its most important city, and parts of Syria, including the city of Raqqa. This prompts the question of whether, besides continuing to fight in Iraq and Syria, IS would be able to establish itself in controlled areas on new battlefields, as it has already managed to do to an extent in Libya and is trying to do in South Asia. One of the more alarming questions is whether IS would be able not only to involve itself in jihad and insurgencies in conflict zones, as AQ does, but also manage to capture and control new territories. The cases in this book reveal three patterns that all cover more modest degrees of ‘presence’ that can nonetheless involve the taking over of cities or villages, provided that the dynamics that lead to their establishment are reinforced.

- Local jihadists or movements reach out to a strong brand and thus try to provide greater impetus to their case, for instance, through a pledge of allegiance to Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, the IS spiritual leader. Often the references are abstract, unstable and fluctuating, hence the local movements do not display a high degree of ideological commitment to any of the transnational jihadist movements. Indeed, they can shift their allegiances from one to the other, as we have seen, for instance, with Boko Haram, which changed from being a AQ affiliate to aligning itself with IS; the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, active in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which also has ‘worked with’ both; and local jihadist networks in both Mali and Bangladesh.

- The leadership of the central or regional movement opens up a new chapter and moves strategically and ideologically in a given direction, driven by, for instance, their apocalyptic vision or strategic interest in gaining territory where they can organize, train and mobilize new recruits or funding (see the bullet point on ‘Strategic decision-making and ideological fulfilment’ in the section below). Bangladesh is a good example, where, for instance, IS has claimed a strategic interest in sandwiching India between guerrilla activities from both sides, namely Afghanistan/Pakistan and Bangladesh.

- The local and transnational jihadist movements are drawn together by their overlapping interests, such as the call or struggle for a Sharia-based state or the ‘defense of downtrodden Muslims’. This, for instance, was the case when al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) tapped into the conflict between secular forces and Islamism in Bangladesh. The two movements can use each other, but the central leadership might not be involved in, for instance, the identification of concrete targets, while the local movement may have no objection to the transnational jihadist movement claiming responsibility for an attack that was identified and carried out without its direct support.

IDENTIFYING ‘POP-UP MECHANISMS’

While each chapter in this book outlines the specific context of each country, some common patterns in the ‘pop-up mechanisms’ across the cases can be identified. The interplay or overlap between these mechanisms in a particular region enhances the probability of AQ/IS gaining a foothold.

- Military interventions by the West in a given region/country (Afghanistan, Syria/Iraq, Mali and Libya) have had the effect of dispersing these movements. As already noted, after the US-led intervention, AQ went from being active in Afghanistan to having strong branches in, for instance, North Africa (AQIM), the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and South Asia (AQIS). In these places, the regional movements made alliances with local jihadist groups such as al-Shabaab in Somalia and Boko Haram in the Sahel, while the latter started affiliating themselves with the AQ umbrella. The aftermath of the Iraq intervention in 2003 gave rise to al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which later split into one faction that remained faithful to the AQ agenda and another that wanted to establish an Islamic caliphate in the Levant (ISIL). Thus, with the renewed Western-led military campaigns in Iraq from 2014 and in Syria later the same year, IS went from being a movement fighting in the interests of Sunni Muslim Arabs in Iraq and attracting foreign fighters to Iraq/Syria to encouraging their Western sympathizers to carry out attacks in their home countries. Western interventions are not, of course, the only factor in disseminating jihadist networks: the development of jihadism is also rooted in local conditions, and as an integrated part of their ideology and modus operandi, their expansion into new battlefields is significant. However, the experience of the US intervention in Afghanistan during the 1980s and the many engagements that have followed clearly...
indicates that Western military interventions, whether in form of wars or special operations, facilitate more than containing the spread of jihadism. As Christopher Davidson documented in his book Shadow Wars, this finding also proved valid for the European Great Powers’ covert operations in the Middle East after the Second World War.4

Both AQ and IS are attracted to countries where there is political unrest and a polarized political climate. In Bangladesh, for instance, a domestic war crimes tribunal handed down the death penalty to collaborators with the Pakistani Army in the independence war of 1971, among them the leaders of Jamaate-Islami, the largest Islamist party in the country. The clashes this caused ‘invited’ militant jihadism on to the Bangladeshi stage. In Burkina Faso, the end of the 27-year regime of President Blaise Compaoré moved the country into a new security situation that allowed jihadism to flourish.

The lack of the rule of law is another factor likely to increase political polarization, as is the case not only in Burkina Faso, but also in the tribal areas of Pakistan, where, until very recently, the Taliban and al-Qaeda have had space to organize, take control, undertake service provision etc. Anti-Shia movements and cleavages are particularly exploited by IS sympathizers, while AQ choses cases where Muslims ‘as such’ are under attack from secular bloggers, Buddhist militants, ethnic nationalists etc. In Saudi Arabia political differences are repressed by an autocratic and repressive regime, and the lack of political rivalry can partly explain why neither AQ or IS have managed to establish a successful presence there, in spite of the regime being demonized by both movements. In this case the repressive autocracy is more likely to export jihadists to other places, as when Saudis travel to Yemen or Afghanistan.

Neighboring unrest or foreign intervention in nearby countries increases the risk of regional spill-overs of jihadism. As the chapter on Burkina Faso shows, foreign interference by NATO, France and the UN in Libya (2011) and Mali (2013) has fueled a growing insurgency which has spilled over into Burkina Faso. Similarly, the international intervention in Afghanistan and the US drone campaign in the tribal areas of Pakistan from 2004 onwards have had repercussions in the form of the appearance of Islamic State in Afpak (i.e. the Islamic State of Khorasan), while the involvement of Bangladeshi jihadists in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria have fostered operational ties with both AQ and IS, which can be exploited when they return home. Lebanon, on the other hand, has until now avoided spill-overs of jihadism due to specific reasons described in the chapter on Lebanon below.

Strategic decision-making and ideological fulfilment on the part of the central leadership is another aspect of the situation. In September 2014 Ayman Al-Zawahiri announced the presence of al-Qaeda on the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), its aim being to operate in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Since then AQ has had a presence in these countries, and we have seen an increase in AQ-related terrorist attacks in South Asia. The establishment of the new Afghan-Pakistani IS faction was also announced by its central spokesman, Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani, from one of IS’s headquarters in Syria, indicating the leadership’s strategic and ideological interests. Adding to this, the ideological materials published by IS especially suggest that the movement has a particular interest in taking over territory in both Afghanistan and India, bordered respectively by Pakistan and Bangladesh, where IS has already established a presence. This forms part of IS’s apocalyptic vision of where the final battles will take place, namely in so-called Hind and Khorasan, which cover, among other areas, present-day India and Afghanistan.

Another factor are the symbolically strong mobilizations that fit into the narrative of a systematic attack on Islam by infidel forces. This refers both to cases where Muslims are in fact persecuted or vulnerable, as also reflected in human rights reports, such as the Rohinga Muslims, Muslims in Indian-held Kashmir etc., or cases where there is military interference by foreign forces in Muslim majority countries. AQ especially has established its presence on the basis that it is an ‘international solidarity movement for downtrodden Muslims’, in line with its narrative of Islam being under systematic attack. IS, on the other hand, taps into local and regional conflicts to which there is a sectarian dimension (note that the movements that pledge allegiance to IS also often have a sectarian agenda) or where they have an interest in gaining territory to establish provinces for its global caliphate.

What, then, do Saudi Arabia and Lebanon have that countries like Bangladesh and Burkina Faso do not? Both Saudi Arabia (the guardian of Islam’s holy places, which IS claims is run by apostates) and Lebanon (from which one of IS’s arch-enemies, the Shia Hezbollah movement, operates) are obvious battlefields for IS and AQ, and yet they have not managed to carry out a notable numbers of attacks or establish a forceful presence there. What we learn from the comparison is the following:
Lebanon has one of the strongest economies in the region, and oil has made Saudi Arabia wealthy. In both countries AQ and IS have not successfully gained a foothold. Burkina Faso, by contrast, is one of the world’s poorest countries, and although Bangladesh is developing rapidly, millions of people, especially in rural areas, still live under the poverty line. **Hence, socio-economic development and stability can prevent transnational jihadi movements from establishing their presence.**

Saudi Arabia is also one of the most repressive regimes in the world, with an efficient security sector, which, as the chapter on Saudi Arabia shows, has managed to prevent both AQ and IS from establishing a strong presence there. **The fact that authoritarian states can handle the threat of transnational jihadism better shows that stability (and successful counterterrorism efforts) must often be contrasted with the rule of law and respect for human rights.**

In Lebanon, not even foreign attempts to boost Shia-Sunni conflicts have led to an organized IS or AQ presence. At the same time, the case of Bangladesh, with its homogenous Sunni Muslim population and no noteworthy Sunni-Shia clashes, have attracted both IS and AQ. **Hence, sectarian rivalry and differences between Shia and Sunni Muslims do not in themselves increase the probability of transnational jihadism gaining a foothold.**

The aim of this book is to deepen our understanding of the factors that lead to the expansion of transnational jihadism, as well as the exact combination of factors that might increase our ability to predict when and why AQ or IS open up new chapters or declare the existence of new provinces. Such insights have the potential to contribute to developing better policies and initiatives in order to prevent these movements from gaining new footholds in new areas. The concluding chapter of the book takes stock of what we know about the end of jihadism, asking what peace and conflict research teach us about how jihadi movements end. It is important to include the broader view of jihadist conflicts in order to detect and learn from trends in de-escalation mechanisms.

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1 The history of IS and AQ has been documented in detail in scholarly publications, including recently by DIIS. See, for example, Lars Erslev Andersen, ‘The Mole and the Mallet: Islamic State and al-Qaeda in the ‘Thirty Years’ War’ in the Middle East’, Connections (Garmisch-Partenkirchen), 16:1, 7-24, 28 February 2017.


4 Christopher Davidson, Shadow Wars: The Secret Struggle for the Middle East (London 2017).
The fact that Burkina Faso has been spared jihadist terrorism until recently does not imply that jihadist groups were not present before, merely that they did not carry out attacks in the country.

Since the end of the 1990s, Mali has been a hub for militant groups (jihadists, Tuareg nationalists etc.). In 2012, this situation reached a peak with the establishment of an al-Qaeda emirate in the northern part of Mali and subsequently military intervention by French and Chadian forces to reestablish Mali’s territorial integrity. In contrast, neighboring Burkina Faso did not have any significant experience of jihadist terrorism at this time. However, in 2017, the International Crisis Group warned that ‘The EU and its member states should pay more attention to Burkina Faso, which faces a real threat from armed groups’. Since 2015, this country in the Sahel region, one of the poorest in the world, has witnessed a series of terrorist attacks causing nearly hundred deaths. In January 2016, the AQ-affiliated group al-Murabitoon, under the leadership of the notorious jihadist, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, perpetrated two attacks in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso’s capital, killing thirty. In August 2017, a new attack in the capital killed eighteen. Moreover, since 2015, a wave of attacks in the northern part of the country, in the border area between Mali and Niger, has also targeted state functionaries like the police, soldiers and gendarmes.

Two jihadist groups in the making have claimed responsibility for the recent wave of attacks in the north of the country: Islamic State in the greater Sahara (ISGS), and the first home-grown jihadist group in Burkina, Ansarul Islam. ISGS was established in 2015, when Adnan Abu Walid Sahraoui split from the AQ group Murabitoon and declared allegiance to Islamic State (IS). Ansarul Islam, which initially had ties to some AQ groups in Mali, is an even more recent creation. The group appeared on the jihadi scene in December 2016, when it claimed responsibility for an attack on a...
gendarmerie in the northern part of Burkina. Yet why has Burkina Faso fallen victim to jihadist terrorism all of a sudden? Why are new jihadist groups emerging or choosing to operate in Burkina Faso?

This book examines the preconditions for the establishment, consolidation and resilience of jihadist groups, in respect of which Burkina forms an interesting case. In contrast to neighboring Mali, where the regional AQ group, AQIM, has been active for decades, jihadi extremism in Burkina is both more limited and more recent. The case of Burkina therefore allows us to study the emergence of extremist groups in greater depth. A comparison with Mali will also allow us to raise the question of why extremism was formerly absent from Burkina, while it flourished in Mali.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE GROUPS OPERATING IN BURKINA: AQ, IS OR LOCAL MILITANCY?

Before considering the local, regional and international preconditions that enabled jihadist terrorism to emerge in Burkina, it is useful to provide a brief overview of the groups that now operate in the country. The fact that Burkina has been spared jihadist terrorism until recently does not imply that jihadist groups were not present in Burkina before, merely that they did not carry out attacks in the country.

Ansarul Islam: AQ agenda or ethnic grievances?

Burkina’s first home-grown jihadist group, Ansarul Islam, originated in the far north of the country, emerging in December 2016, when it claimed responsibility for an attack close to the Malian border that cost the life of twelve Burkinabe soldiers. The group has made it a priority to target the Burkinabe state in the guise of police, soldiers, gendarmes and teachers, but it has also attacked civilians it considers informers.

The emir of Ansarul Islam, Ibrahim Malam Dicko, is an ethnic Peul or Fulani, who in 2012 set up a mosque in the northern city of Djibo (Soum Province). The following year, he went to Mali with some of his talibés (students), but was arrested by French soldiers serving with Operation Serval in northern Mali (Tessalit). Apparently, the small group from Burkina was trying to join the AQ-linked group Ansar Dine, one of the jihadist groups that had established an emirate in northern Mali in 2012. After two years in a prison run by the French intelligence service, the DGSE, Malam returned to Burkina Faso, where he established a local militant group, Ansarul Islam.

After his stay in Mali, his political agenda changed. In line with a Fulani jihadist group in Mali, the Macina Liberation Front (MLF), which is close to Ansar Dine, he now aimed to reestablish the nineteenth-century Fulani jihadist kingdom of Macina. This transnational political project implied that the Burkinabe state was considered an occupying power that should be expelled from the north.
Ansarul Islam is a label often adopted by groups with links to AQ, and the Burkinabe group emerged in close contact with the AQ nebula in Mali – more precisely the Tuareg jihadis in Ansar Dine and the Peul jihadis in the Macina Liberation Front (MLF). Yet, despite Ansarul’s links to these AQ groups, its political project is closer to the MLF’s ethnic project based around Peul/Fulani grievances than to AQ’s global project. Recently, there have been rumors on the internet that Ansarul Islam was unhappy that MLF had joined the AQ umbrella organization and was therefore considering pledging its allegiance to IS.

Islamic State in the Greater Sahara: the fragile emergence of IS in the Sahel
The relative absence of the Burkinabe state in the northern part of the country has allowed the IS affiliate, Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), to expand its area of operations from Mali into Burkina and Niger. ISGS is a curious phenomenon in a region that is otherwise dominated by AQIM and local AQ allies such as Ansar Dine, Murabitoon and the MLF. Compared to the cohesiveness and operational capacity of the AQ groups in the Sahel, the presence of IS is marginal. In 2015 Boko Haram pledged allegiance to Baghdadi to become IS’s West Africa Province, but its area of influence lies south of the Sahel, in countries such as Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon and southern Niger. In the Sahel strictly speaking, ISGS is the only IS-affiliated group.

ISGS appeared in May 2015, when Adnan Abu Walid Sahraoui, then a senior leader of Murabitoon, pledged allegiance to Islamic State, probably due to a personal falling out with Murabitoon’s emir, Belmokhtar. The next day, Belmokhtar published an official denial, emphasizing that Sahraoui’s pledge (bay’a) was individual and did not involve Mourabitoon as such; the group was still loyal to Zawahiri and AQ. Subsequently, Sahraoui – a former Polisario-fighter – defected with other IS sympathizers to form Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISMS), which later morphed into Islamic State in the Greater Sahara. For a while, IS central did not recognize ISGS, and it was uncertain to what extent the group had any real existence. Yet in the second part of 2016, it suddenly became more active. In September and October, the group perpetrated several attacks, including two in northern Burkina on a police station and one in Niger on a gendarme. True to his past as a Polisario fighter, Sahraoui has also issued threatening statements against ‘the occupying state’ of Morocco, which clearly demonstrates that, in the Sahel, the adoption of the IS denomination is easily compatible with other local agendas. In October 2016, after ISGS had perpetrated several attacks, IS’s official news agency, Amaq, released an official statement showing pictures of Sahraoui pledging allegiance to Baghdadi. At a moment when the Caliphate was coming under pressure in Iraq, Syria and Libya, this belated recognition of ISGS can be seen as an attempt to show that IS is still alive and kicking and still capable of expanding into new areas.

The AQIM nebula
The most devastating and sophisticated attack in Burkina, however, was the January 2016 attacks in the very center of the capital, Ouagadougou, which were carried out by the AQ group Murabitoon and bore the mark of the group’s emir, Mokhtar Belmokhtar. Belmokhtar had been in Afghanistan in the 1990s and had stayed loyal to Zawahiri and AQ central through thick and thin. In the aftermath of the French intervention in 2013, Murabitoon undertook a series of revenge attacks against foreign targets in the region. After an attack on a gas facility in southern Algeria, it perpetrated further attacks over a vast area: in Mali’s capital, Bamako, in Burkina’s capital, Ouagadougou, and in the coastal state of Côte d’Ivoire. Murabitoon has mainly attacked Western targets, as illustrated by the attack in Ouagadougou on a hotel and a café with foreign clientele. However, its emir, Belmokhtar, was apparently killed in a French airstrike at the end of November 2016. Belmokhtar has often been reported dead but had so far been able to escape death and therefore acquired the nickname ‘the uncatchable’. This time, however, his death was confirmed by both American and French officials.

Nonetheless, Murabitoon is part of a larger formation of AQIM groups based in neighboring Mali. On 2 March 2017, three AQ-affiliated groups, Murabitoon, Ansar Dine and AQIM’s Sahara branch, announced their merger into a new joint AQ group with the label NIM (Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen). Subsequently, the MLF (Macina Liberation Front) joined this AQ umbrella organization. Today, NIM is without compare the most potent group in the Sahel. Its primary area of action is Mali, where the group is currently orchestrating a rising insurgency. Their main targets are France and the French presence in the region, but also the UN MINUSMA force. They have also at several occasions threatened Burkina due to its cooperation with France’s Operation Barkhane, and a large number of NIM attacks are taking place on the border between Mali and Burkina. It is very likely that NIM was implied in the attack in Burkina Faso’s capital in August 2017.

Local factors: a new political context
Apart from the two attacks in the capital in January 2016 and August 2017, the recent wave of terrorism in Burkina is unfolding exclusively in the far north of the country, in the border areas with Mali and Niger. This recent jihadist activity has appeared at a point in time when the country has already entered a period of political...
turmoil, implying a reconfiguration of routinized security structures. In September 2014, a popular uprising put an end to the 27-year regime of Blaise Compaoré. After a failed coup in September 2015, which tried to preserve some of the powers of the former regime, the head of the presidential guard, Diendéré, who was also in charge of national intelligence, was imprisoned.

Hence, the end of Compaoré’s regime went hand in hand with a breakdown in how state security, including the management of terrorism, had worked for decades.¹ In the Compaoré era, state officials negotiated with local jihadist groups and the smuggling networks that were allowed to transit through the northern part of the country (and take foreign hostages), as long as they did not target the state and paid a ‘tax’ to government officials. Jihadist groups are involved in lucrative smuggling networks in the Sahara, and they distribute money along the way, not only to tribal and religious leaders, but also to various state officials, such as the police, border guards and high state officials, including members of the ruling elite.

However, when the French army moved into Mali in 2013 and the head of Burkina’s national security agency, Diendéré was imprisoned, the policy of striking deals with terrorists came to an end. Instead, the French launched the Operation Barkhane and set up a regional antiterrorist structure, the G5 Sahel², to partner the French anti-terrorist efforts that were part of Barkhane. Moreover, the special forces attached to Operation Barkhane are located in Burkina’s capital. Hence, Burkina’s way of dealing with jihadist groups changed from acting as a regional broker that tolerated and negotiated with terrorists and smuggling networks to become a member of an anti-terrorism coalition that included the former colonial power, France.

As the central government and the understaffed and poorly paid army scaled down their presence in rural areas in the north, they allowed jihadists such as Ansarul Islam to fill the security vacuum. In one of the poorest countries in the world, the state is able to provide neither social services – justice and education – nor security. Problems related to a minimal state presence are particularly acute in the north. Moreover, Burkina is a multi-religious country of Muslims, Christians and animists, the Muslim population mainly living in the north. With the weakening of the state’s presence in the north, ethnic and religious grievances among Muslims, who are under-represented in the political elite of the country, are fuelled. Muslims have long been frustrated at the discrepancy between their numbers and their low representation in the political elite and the civil service. According to a contested census, they represent about 60 per cent of the population, Christians 25 per cent and animists 15 per cent.¹¹

REGIONAL SPILLOVER FROM THE CRISIS IN MALI

Burkina: a convenient target

The appearance of active terrorist groups in Burkina Faso is also largely a spillover effect of the ongoing crisis in Mali. A strictly national focus would hardly make any sense when it comes to considering militant groups in the Sahel. Borders in the region are porous, and extremist groups move freely across them to carry out attacks, hide, or pursue their transnational smuggling activities (drugs, cigarettes, arms, humans). This transnational condition implies that events in one country have immediate impacts in the neighboring countries. When the French army intervened in Mali in 2013, AQIM fighters with long-standing guerilla experience soon made a tactical withdrawal into neighboring countries that could provide them with a sanctuary or a corridor, for instance, northern Burkina.

All the terrorist groups that are active in Burkina have close connections with Mali: either they come from Mali (Murabitoon, ISGS), or they are inspired by jihadist groups in Mali (Ansarul Islam). Murabitoon and ISGS each had their own interests in targeting Burkina. Murabitoon’s attack on Ouagadougou in 2016 was a show of force, part of series of attacks conceived to demonstrate that, although expelled from their territorial base in northern Mali, they still had the capacity to perpetrate revenge attacks against the ‘filthy French crusaders’ and other foreigners, even in the heart of capital cities like Bamako and Ouagadougou.¹² The case of ISGS is different. As a new and probably also relatively small IS group in an area that is entirely dominated by AQ, ISGS probably had to prove its existence and capacity in order to be recognized by IS central. In that respect, the northern part of Burkina, from which the Burkinabe state is largely absent, appears to be a convenient target.

The rise of Fulani militancy

Ansarul Islam, the first home-grown Burkinabe jihadist group, emerged in close contact with the vibrant jihadi scene in Mali, in particular the AQ-linked groups Ansar Dine and the Macina Liberation Front (MLF). It is characteristic of these groups that they mix AQ’s global jihadist agenda with local ethnic grievances. When Ansarul Islam’s emir, Malam Dicko, returned to Burkina after two years in Mali, he not only embraced the cause of jihad, but also the MLF’s project to reestablish the renowned Fulani jihadist kingdom in northern Burkina.
Once the jihadists had been expelled from their emirate in northern Mali, the central part of the country witnessed a rise in Peul/Fulani militancy. Political efforts had concentrated on improving the situation in the north, including that of the Tuareg, while the grievances of the Fulani population in the center were largely ignored. The 2015 peace deal, which was intended to bring reconciliation and better services to the north, did not include the central part of the country. Moreover, when state security forces returned to the center after the French intervention in 2013, they committed abuses, in particular against the nomadic Fulani. These abuses, as well as violent interethnic competition over access to land, led some of the population to seek protection or justice from local militias, including jihadist groups. The MLF thrived on these grievances. Ansarul Islam can to a large extent be considered an offshoot of the MLF in Mali. The fact that the Fulani population of approximately twenty million people is a largely nomadic population living across the Sahel makes the project of reestablishing the Macina kingdom inherently transnational.

INTERNATIONAL FACTORS

Foreign intervention in Libya and Mali

Various waves of foreign interference in the region by NATO, France and the UN have thoroughly reshaped the security dynamics of the Sahel region and are currently fueling a growing insurgency in Mali, which is spilling over into Burkina. The establishment of an AQ emirate in the northern part of Mali in 2012 was to some extent an unintended consequence of the 2011 NATO-led intervention in Libya. The overthrow of Gaddafi in 2011 forced many Tuareg fighters who had enrolled in Gaddafi’s army to flee back to Mali and Niger. This sudden return of unemployed, but heavily armed Tuareg soldiers contributed to igniting a Tuareg revolt in Mali, which, after a coup d’état in the capital, enabled various AQIM affiliates to establish a breakaway AQ emirate in northern Mali.

When the French army intervened in Mali in January 2013, they succeeded in killing and expelling a large number of jihadists from the north. Yet this short-term success is currently evolving into a long-term destabilization in the form of an expanding insurgency paid and organized by the new AQ umbrella organization, NIM. France’s Operation Barkhane has not only reconfigured traditional ways of dealing with terrorists in the Sahel, it is also increasingly perceived as a foreign intervention by the local population.

Although some ‘high-value individuals’ (HVIs) in the former Malian emirate have been ‘neutralized’, the AQ groups have demonstrated a never failing capacity of resilience. Confronted with counterterrorist operations in Mali, AQIM-affiliated groups have adopted a strategy of cohesion and unification to counter the foreign military presence. As already mentioned, four AQ-affiliated groups formally merged in March 2017 to form the Nusrat al-Islam was Muslimeen (NIM) under the leadership of Ansar Dine’s emir, Iyad Ag Ghaly, a Malian Tuareg with longstanding political and militant experience. In contrast to Murabitoon’s attacks, which deliberately targeted foreign civilians, the new AQ-linked umbrella organization NIM is fighting a sustained insurgency that primarily targets military units: the UN stabilization force, MINUSMA, the troops in Operation Barkhane and national armies.

Local manifestations of global jihad?

The international level also plays into the evolution of Islamist militancy in Mali through the general evolution of the global Islamist movement and, more recently, the ups-and-downs of Islamic State and al-Qaeda. The jihadist groups that have emerged in Burkina recently are somehow local manifestations of global jihadist networks. Yet what does it mean to be an AQ or IS group in Burkina Faso? Is it a top-down process, whereby AQ or IS central have deliberately decided to expand into Burkina, or is it a bottom-up process, whereby a local group profits from using the ‘brand’ of a global terrorist group? Or is it a mixture of the two?

In the case of Burkina, the situation varies. The regional AQ group, AQIM, as well as its offspring, Murabitoon, are experienced AQ groups with longstanding, personal ties to AQ’s leadership. In 2006, the Algerian terrorist group GSPC – AQIM’s predecessor – was officially recognized by AQ central as an official AQ affiliate, and ever since their loyalty to AQ central has been flawless. Confronted with the rise of Islamic State, AQIM has published statements that repeat Zawahiri’s criticisms of IS verbatim, and AQIM groups in the Sahel have followed Zawahiri’s request to unite instead of splitting up. Similarly, the 2015 Ouagadougou attack was performed in accordance with AQ’s official line, targeting a hotel where the French (occupiers of Muslim land) and other foreigners resided, while ostensibly seeking to spare Muslim lives.

In contrast, ISGS looks more like a local group that has a short-term interest in linking up with a global jihadist group. When the ISGS leader Sahraoui pledged allegiance to Baghdadi in 2015, IS was on the rise and a serious competitor to AQ, from which Sahraoui wanted to distance himself. His move from AQ to IS was not
necessarily due to ideological disagreement, but supposedly to a personal conflict with Murabitoon’s former emir, Belmokhtar. A year afterwards, in October 2016, it was IS central that came under pressure in Iraq, Syria and Libya and that therefore had an interest, after one and a half years, in recognizing ISGS’s pledge, although the group did not obtain the official denomination of a ‘province’ as Boko Haram had done.

Finally, Ansarul Islam has appeared cooperating with some of the groups from the AQIM nebula in Mali, and the very label ‘Ansarul Islam’ is often adopted precisely by AQ groups. Yet the groups from which Ansarul has taken inspiration also have a pronounced local and ethnic profile: the Tuareg jihadist group, Ansar Dine, and the Fulani jihadis from the Macina Liberation Front. Although close to these AQ groups, Ansarul’s ideology and targets appear to be more ad hoc and pragmatic than just dogmatically following AQ’s ideology. Recently, it was reported that Ansarul Islam planned to pledge allegiance to IS. Apparently, its leader, Malam Dicko, was unhappy with the decision of MFL leader Amadou Kouffa – Malam’s former mentor – formally to join the new AQ umbrella organization, NIM and had initiated a rapprochement with ISGS. Shortly after these internet-based rumors, French troops in Operation Barkhane and Burkina soldiers cracked down on the group in the border area between Burkina and Mali and killed, among others, Malam Dicko’s brother. These events might have prevented or postponed Ansarul’s IS pledge from materializing. Yet, the evolution of the group indicates that, with the notable exception of AQIM, AQ and IS alliances in the Sahel are loose and unstable, depending on strategic interests and short-term advantages, if not on personal relationships and antagonisms.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has provided an overview of the different jihadist groups operating in Burkina Faso and has tried to identify the local, regional and international factors that have made possible the recent rise of jihadist activity in this country. The question that one could ask in conclusion is to what extent the international context has had any real impact in terms of boosting or hampering local and regional groups, or whether the international influence is merely wrapping up local and regional dynamics in international garb. The recent appearance of Islamist militancy in Burkina is first and foremost a spillover effect of the conflict in Mali. Yet as this conflict is inherently transnational and enabled by the international presence in the region, I suggest that the recent rise of Islamist militancy in Burkina was made possible by a specific mixture of local, regional and international factors interacting in a specific security configuration. The present chapter has identified some of these factors.

If we slightly change the angle to consider the political agendas of the jihadist groups that are now operating in Burkina, these appear to be increasingly local and regional rather than international. Ansarul Islam, for instance, wants to restore the Fulani kingdom of Macina and therefore targets the Burkinabe state. Similarly, the new AQ umbrella group, NIM, based in Mali, is striving to drive out the foreign occupiers of Muslim land and ultimately reinstall Islamic rule in Mali and neighboring countries. So far, the group has not declared an intention to commit attacks in Europe, for instance. Although the international military presence in the region is fueling the rise of jihadist militancy, the jihadist groups in question increasingly have a regional and local scope, with casual references to global jihad intermingling with the local, ethnic agendas of peoples like the Fulani and Tuareg.

2 Macina Liberation Front and Ansar Dine.
3 Peul and Fulani are synonyms. The Fulani, an estimated 25 million people, range across several countries in West Africa, including Mali and Burkina Faso.
5 Except for former Boko Haram (now Islamic State in West Africa), which has started expanding into Cameroon and the southern part of Niger.
10 Burkina, Mali, Niger, Mauretania and Chad.
In recent years, Bangladesh has become a theater for terrorist attacks claimed by both al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS) movement. The increasing violence linked to these transnational jihadist movements in Bangladesh did not draw much of the world’s attention until July 2016, when a café, the Holey Artisan Bakery, in Dhaka’s diplomatic zone was struck by a spectacular and well-organized attack claimed by Islamic State: 29 people were killed, most of them foreigners.

AQ-related violence in Bangladesh both surfaced and peaked during 2014-15, coinciding with the establishment of a new branch of AQ organized from Pakistan. In September 2014 Ayman al-Zawahiri, who is believed to operate from Pakistan, announced the presence of al-Qaeda on the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), or al-Qaeda Bar-i-Sagheer in its local designation. The AQ leader, who is also one of the few survivors of the core group of AQ’s central leadership, stated that AQIS had been established in order to operate in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Yet, as I will show, AQ managed to enter into Bangladesh not only as a regional spill-over from Pakistan, but because local events and factors influence how this transnational jihadi movement expands and moves into new territory.

Bangladesh is an interesting case in this regard because, unlike countries such as Mali, Afghanistan, Syria or Iraq, it has not experienced Western military intervention. What factors, then, explain the fertile ground the two movements found in the country when, in other contexts, they have used resistance to foreign intervention and the Western military presence as relatively successful arguments for mobilization?
This chapter illuminates the dynamics behind the entry of AQ and IS on to the Bangladeshi stage, first by outlining the characteristics of the two movements as they exist in the country, and secondly by outlining relevant factors domestically, regionally and internationally. The chapter has been written on the basis of interviews conducted during a short field trip to Dhaka, but it also draws on previous DIIS research on the topic, reports from think tanks and human rights organizations, and an analysis of the two movements’ recruitment and communication materials.

WHO ARE AL-QAEDA AND THE ISLAMIC STATE IN BANGLADESH?

Before we go into the analysis of the dynamics that facilitate the presence of these transnational jihadist movements, the question of who they are in the specific Bangladeshi context deserves attention. There have long been ties between the core leadership of AQ and Islamist movements in Bangladesh. Some would even say that the links between the core of AQ and particular Bangladeshi jihadist movements have been particularly close. When Osama Bin Laden published his much-circulated call to global jihad in 1998, declaring war on the West in a ‘Jihad against Jews and Crusaders’, one of the five signatories was the Bangladeshi Fazlur Rahman, who signed as the Amir of the Jihad Movement in Bangladesh.

Bangladeshi movements have also been connected to AQ through the Bangladeshi mujahedeen, who took part in the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in the late 1980s, where they developed operational links with al-Qaeda. One of the Islamist movements that has been active in the country historically, periodically resorting to violence, is Harakat ul-Jihad-I-Islami/Bangladesh (HUJI-B), established by returnees from the 1980s Afghan war, allegedly with al-Qaeda funding.

Today, a new group has emerged, which is considered to be the main AQ group in Bangladesh, namely the Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT). Due to the government having banned it, it also operates as Ansar al-Islam. ABT appeared in 2013 as an online network with much of its early membership made up of students at a private university affordable for the Bangladeshi upper class, specifically the North-South University in Dhaka. The group was inspired by its militant Salafi sister organization, Ansar al-Islam in Iraq, which also has ties to AQ. ABT began referring to itself as the Bangladeshi wing of AQIS from mid-2015. AQIS has encouraged attacks in
IS claimed its first attack in Bangladesh only a year after the Caliphate was proclaimed in Mosul, when an Italian aid worker was shot in Dhaka. In examining the IS movement in Bangladesh, it is unclear if the central IS in Syria and Iraq has any direct control over operations inside Bangladesh. However, we do know that IS has taken responsibility for local attacks carried out by a new generation of another local movement, Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), sometimes designated the ‘New JMB’ following a government crackdown on its predecessor. The JMB dates back to 1998 and in recent times was responsible for a countrywide series of explosions in August 2005, as well as suicide attacks against government officials. Another movement that has carried out attacks claimed by Islamic State is Jund al-Tawheed wal Khilafah (JTK), which is also believed to have recruited a number of Bangladeshi nationals, particularly followers of the New JMB, to fight in Syria. 7

To date no official pledge of allegiance has been recorded by any of these movements. However, shortly after Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed the Caliphate in Syria and Iraq, a group of Bangladeshi nationals pledged allegiance (bayat) to IS and vowed to organize Bengali Muslims under the leadership of al-Baghdadi. 8 Who they were is still unknown.

Another way in which Bangladesh has experienced the influx of Islamic State is through the large number of British nationals of Bengali origin who have joined Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Some of them were arrested in Dhaka for recruiting for Islamic State.

If one looks at the communication and recruitment materials published by Islamic State and the fact that the publications that are coming out are increasingly being published in the local language, Bengali, as well, there is no doubt that Bangladesh has become a state in which the movement wants to signal its presence. In November 2015, one of its magazines stated that it had nominated a leader to take control of operations in Bangladesh. The movement addresses Muslims in Bangladesh (and the rest of Bengal in India) through their magazines and communication materials in order to recruit them. 9 Overall the communication materials give the impression that Islamic State has an organized presence of ‘soldiers’ in Bangladesh. In particular, three rationales for IS expansion into Bangladesh stand out. One has to do with IS ambitions to take over India or, in their own language, to ‘liberate’ the area. A presence in Bangladesh linked to their presence in Afghanistan and Pakistan will “facilitate performing guerrilla attacks from both sides”. 10

Another of their stated rationales relates to Burma, their ambition to initiate jihad there being based on atrocities committed against Muslims (more on this below). Finally, their sectarian agenda is very clear when it comes to their targeting of Christians, Ahmadiyya Muslims, Shia Muslims and particularly Hindus. Hence, in an interview with Dabiq magazine, the Amir of their operations in Bangladesh states that, “...We believe shari’ah in Bengal won’t be achieved until the local Hindus are targeted in mass numbers”. 11

SPECIAL TRAITS OF AQ/IS IN BANGLADESH

Though Bangladesh is a developing country, it is worth noting that it is not only individuals from the poorer sections of society or the religious seminaries who are attracted to the IS’s ideology. In fact, it was a well-off private university student who had returned to Bangladesh after studying in Canada who organized the spectacular attack on the Holey Artisan Bakery. The authorities therefore see radical ideas as something that has intruded from the outside, especially from the West, or more specifically the diaspora, that is, those who were either born in the West or have studied there. A major component of the debate on radicalization and counter-terrorism in Bangladesh is the role of cyberspace, since, among other things, the current cycle of violence started among university students inspired by the online propaganda of the transnational jihadist movements. One of the concerns is whether further access to technology and, with it, exposure to extremist ideology, along with the rapid development of the country, will increase transnational jihadist activity there.

Another interesting observation in the case of Bangladesh is that, until now, AQ (ABT/Ansar al-Islam) has primarily targeted selected bloggers seen as representatives of a secular culture and ‘anti-Islam’ voices in the country. Bloggers who have been critical of how Muslims apply the tradition of the Prophet have been targeted in particular, accused of defaming Islam. These targets have been encouraged by the AQIS leadership, which is prepared to adopt a more localized...
Some analysts find that the increasingly authoritarian government in power, in combination with a marginalized opposition, including the JeI, creates a fertile ground for extremism. Since the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, the political climate in the country has been characterized by a tension between secular forces (who are considered leftists) and forces that wanted a Sharia-based Islamic state. The latter camp, which has not been particularly influential, is organized into Jamaate Islami (JeI) in line with their sectarian agenda, and foreigners. Yet the segment that both AQ and IS appeal to does not differ as much as in Afghanistan, where Islamic State constitutes an entirely different front than the alliance between AQ and the Taliban. The support structures between the two movements appear to be much more blurred in Bangladesh.

A final trait worth noting when it comes to the special traits of IS and AQ in Bangladesh is that the attacks that have been carried out on Bangladeshi soil – with the exception of the attack on the Holey Artisan Bakery – have not been so advanced. While the IS attacks have involved guns or smaller bombs (traced to Indian manufacturers), the AQ-related attacks have been carried out using machetes and knives. This could indicate that AQ in Bangladesh is a bottom-up movement, with a lesser degree of planning behind it, while the IS attacks are more organized according to the sectarian IS ideology. This challenges the picture that AQ provides training, funding, leadership and facilities for its affiliates, while affiliation to Islamic State ‘only’ requires a pledge of allegiance. If it turns out that IS’s entrance on to the Bangladeshi stage is more calculated and well-organized than ‘just’ being a case of local movements taking advantage of the IS brand, one might anticipate their limited success. At least the IS idea of the apocalypse might now have difficulties in gaining widespread backing in a rapidly developing country like Bangladesh, where overall living conditions are being steadily improved.

WHAT ATTRACTS TRANSNATIONAL JIHADISM TO BANGLADESH

Since the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, the political climate in the country has been characterized by a tension between secular forces (who are considered leftists) and forces that wanted a Sharia-based Islamic state. The latter camp, which has not been particularly influential, is organized into Jamaate Islami (JeI) in Bangladesh, and to begin with was not in favor of independence from Pakistan. Some analysts find that the increasingly authoritarian government in power, in combination with a marginalized opposition, including the JeI, creates a fertile ground for extremism.

However, in another view, party political rivalry in contemporary Bangladeshi politics and attempts to win over religiously conservative sections of society have bolstered initiatives to accommodate JeI into that society as well. The present government, for instance, has accepted a one billion dollar gift from Saudi Arabia, thereby allowing Wahhabi ideology to become entrenched in Bangladesh through the countrywide establishment of mosques. At the same time the present government, which is led by a secular party, has recognized degrees awarded in religious seminaries (from the Qwami madrassas) as being equivalent to a graduate degree. Such initiatives are criticized for opening up a space for the more conservative streams of Islam, even though the link to violent outcomes is blurred. A somewhat similar concern relates to the high number of migrant workers who travel back and forth between Bangladesh and the Gulf or countries like Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. The interpretation of Islam in the Gulf is more conservative and literalist than the interpretative traditions prevalent in Bangladesh, and Bangladeshis migrants living in Singapore and Malaysia have been directly linked to the ABT/AQ in trying to recruit members to commit acts of violence back home. The radicalization debate in Bangladesh is also tied up to the diaspora living in Canada, Australia and the UK, as investigations have been able to trace communications between AQ in Bangladesh and Europe.

The current cycle of violence is more directly connected to local events. It started with the secular Shahbagh protest movement, which was formed during the domestic war trials in 2013. The protesters wanted capital punishment for Islamists who had collaborated with Pakistan during the War of Liberation. The situation escalated, and the old cleavage between secular and religiously conservative forces surfaced, aggravated by the methods the security forces used to handle the anger from the Islamist side. AQ intervened in this conflict by releasing a video in which Aymen al-Zawahiri called on Muslims in Bangladesh to oppose the ‘onslaught against Islam’. While 2013 represented a turning point that led to an escalation of the conflict in Bangladesh, AQ has tried to boost those voices that wish for a sharia-based Islamic state in the country. At the same time, AQ and IS have both been pursuing an agenda in relation to the Rohingya Muslims, who are suffering grave human rights violations in Myanmar and have been the target of Buddhist nationalist militancy in that country. Bangladesh has over half a million Rohingya refugees in the southeastern district of Cox’s Bazaar, with among the unregistered refugees some who have led an armed insurgency in Myanmar.
For both the AQ and IS, the Rohinga refugees form a potential base for recruitment, and the jihadist narrative about Islam being attacked by wrong- or non-believers is finding traction with them.

THE SPILL-OVER OF REGIONAL AND GLOBAL UNREST

It is worth noting that Bangladesh was proclaimed a province of Islamic State at the same time as the Philippines. Very recently (May 2017) a group that had pledged allegiance to IS took control of the city of Marawi in the southern Philippines. In 2016, Southeast Asian militants fighting for Islamic State in Syria released a video urging their countrymen to join the cause in the southern Philippines or launch attacks at home, rather than attempting to travel to Syria. The situation in the Philippines and neighboring Myanmar adds to the explanation of why IS and AQ have been able to establish a presence in Asia, and it also taps into the conflicts in Bangladesh.

In Indian-held Kashmir, AQIS has been particularly active in supporting violent uprisings in response to the Indian army’s violations in parts of Kashmir. The 4096-kilometer border between India and Bangladesh makes spill-over militancy easy. Yet, a shared border is not necessarily a precondition for the establishment of IS/AQ activity in Bangladesh. The aftermath of the US MOAB strikes in Afghanistan in April 2017 revealed that most of the IS militants who were killed were from Pakistan, India, the Philippines and Bangladesh. Hence the presence of IS-related violence can be explained by local militants travelling abroad to join a cause and then returning, interpreting local matters in the same light as in the battlefield they have just left, or by local movements lifting local conflicts to the level of these transnational jihadist movements in order to win support, logistical, financial, moral or otherwise.

While regional dynamics and influences have explanatory power when it comes to the question of how AQ and IS establish new branches or, more indirectly, establish a presence through local movements, global developments are also significant. One dimension of this is that Bangladesh has experienced an unfortunate link between terrorist plots and immigrant students, as already mentioned. But the success or failure of AQ and IS in other regions can also influence their development in the Asian context. With IS being pushed back militarily in Syria and Iraq, some of the weight of its efforts has moved to Afghanistan and Pakistan, where it has established the IS chapter of Khorasan and is increasingly taking responsibility for attacks in the former country. Developments in Bangladesh and the Philippines are increasingly stressing the importance of South Asia for both AQ- and IS-related movements.

SO WHY BANGLADESH?

Ghazwa-e-Hind (the Battle of India) is part of the apocalyptic imagery embraced by both AQIS and IS. The idea comes from a hadith saying of the Prophet predicting a great battle over India in the final days. Hind at the time of the Prophet Muhammad referred to a very large area covering Pakistan, Kashmir, India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, the Maldives, Sri Lanka and Myanmar, meaning that the presence of these movements in Bangladesh can also be interpreted in this light.

When IS announced the establishment of its Khorasan chapter in Afghanistan, the movement referred to a similar imagery of a final battle that would take place in the historic Khorasan (covering Afghanistan, among other areas). To what extent this kind of imagery determines the direction in which the transnational jihadist movements move, with in this case their focus on South Asia, is hard to say with accuracy, but clearly the imagery works well with political realities on the ground, such as the tensions between religious and secular parties, the atrocities committed against Muslims in Myanmar or Kashmir and local rallies in favor of a Sharia-based state.

So did AQ and IS find Bangladesh, or was it really the other way around? Did it all start with Bangladeshi diehards travelling to Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan, or is jihadist violence the reverse of the coin in a rapidly developing economy where the influx of information technology is providing an increased segment of society with access to jihadist propaganda online? Is the jihadist expansion a ‘mere’ reflection of regional spill-over from conflicts in neighboring countries, or is it a strategic move by the core ideologues and strategists of AQ and IS to expand in the direction of Asia? If we look at the case of Bangladesh, we see that it is not these either/or questions that can lead us to the appropriate answer. Rather, it is the exact constellation of factors which has explanatory power, both the fact that IS/AQ has an ideological interest in Asia and the specific Bangladeshi context (where the conditions for IS/AQ to operate are fertile), added to factors of globalization (access to propaganda, movement of jihadists across borders etc.). If we plot the above explanations as concentric circles, I suggest that it is the overlap that brings us closest to understanding why transnational jihadist movements become active some places more than others.
1. An AQIS spokesman later highlighted that the main objectives of AQIS are to combat the American presence, establish Islamic law in South Asia, bring an end to the occupation of Muslim countries and defend an Afghanistan under the now deceased Mullah Omar.


3. I want to thank Daniel Finnbogason (Department of Peace and Conflict Research) at Uppsala University for helpful input before my fieldwork. I also thank the Danish Embassy in Dhaka as well as the researchers and think tanks who took out time to meet me, particularly the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS), Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS), and the Institute of Conflict, Law and Development Studies (ICLDS).


6. Bangladesh was featured in Resurgence (fall 2014).


9. Dabiq, 18 November 2015. Bangladesh has been featured in Dabiq, issues 12 and 14.


14. E.g. Shafqat Munir, Into the void: political impasse threatens Bangladesh’s peace, Jane’s Intelligence Review Vol. 27, no. 8, pp. 20-25.


Looking at the map, Lebanon seems to be an obvious candidate as a site for IS to focus its military operations on after it is finally expelled from Raqqa and Mosul: Lebanon is located very close to IS battlefields in Iraq and Syria; IS and other Salafi jihadists are known to have connections with networks and groups inside Lebanon, especially in the northern Tripoli area and in the Ain al-Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp in Saida; in Arsal province and in the Bekaa Valley there are weekly reports of clashes between IS and AQ on one side and Hizbollah and the Lebanese army on the other. One day before the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015, two bombs exploded in the Burj al-Baratnah Palestinian refugee camp in South Beirut close to the Hizbollah-controlled Dahiya district of Beirut. A series of lesser terrorist attacks, including suicide bombings, have also been reported. The Lebanese Hizbollah militia is very active in giving military support to the Bashar al-Assad regime and has been involved in military operations against IS and AQ inside Syria for years. It is well known that, despite the increased border controls that Lebanon introduced in 2013 as a reaction to the refugee crisis, the border is not secure, with a lot of smuggling traffic to and from Syria. Ever since the war in Syria broke out there have been worries in Lebanon about it spilling over, which in the worst-case scenario could throw the tiny state into a new civil war like the one that ended in 1990 after fifteen years of fighting. Another significant issue is that Lebanon has probably received more than one and a half million Syrian refugees since the Syrian conflict started, causing a lot of pressure on the country’s infrastructure, labor markets, education...
sector and economy, and thus having an enormous impact on Lebanese society. It is questionable, though, whether the challenges concerning socio-economic problems are actually rooted in the refugee crisis as claimed by Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri, e.g. in a speech at a donor conference in Brussels in May 2017. Employing political rhetoric very much like that used by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in negotiations on refugees with the EU, al-Hariri threatened the EU that if investments in Lebanon’s infrastructure were not increased, the refugees would end up elsewhere (than Lebanon). Hariri said: ‘If the international community does not invest in our country, we will be obliged to take steps so that they (the refugees – ed.) find another place.’ He called for the international community to invest $10-$12 billion in Lebanese infrastructure over the next seven years.

However, the fact is that the funds for the necessary investments in Lebanon have already been raised by the elite networks in Lebanon and that a certain share of every foreign investment in the Lebanese economy ends up in the pockets of politicians due to the widespread corruption in the country. Hence, the reality is that the elite actually benefits from the refugee crisis, while the socio-economic problems in Lebanese society and among the Lebanese middle class and poor, including Palestinians, are exacerbated by the crisis and especially by the way the government avoids necessary political and economic reforms that could ease the situation and bring down corruption. As clearly indicated by the broad popular support enjoyed by grassroots organization such as You Stink during a major garbage crisis in 2015 (when more than 100,000 demonstrators gathered in downtown Beirut) and Beirut Madinati (‘My Beirut’) during municipal elections in Spring 2016, there is increasing discontent with the government among the people in Lebanon; discontent that is more related to social challenges than to security issues and the threat from jihadism.

However, there is obviously a danger of IS cadres who have been forced out of Iraq and Syria trying to establish a new stronghold in Lebanon. This would pose a serious threat to Lebanon and its stability, disastrously fanning the refugee crisis, with horrific consequences for the refugees and neighboring states, renewing the pressure on the EU’s borders, increasing the life-threatening traffic across the Mediterranean Sea and making Lebanon the focus of an even more intense Sunni-Shia conflict.

Although, as mentioned, we have seen terrorism in Lebanon, and although there are ongoing heavy battles with IS and AQ fighters in some areas, to some extent the violence and IS activity in the country is much less than might be expected. Two questions come to mind: will Lebanon become a new battlefield for IS after Mosul and Raqqa, and does Lebanon have the resilience to counter intensified IS activity? In order to answer these questions, we will take a closer look at the development of Salafi jihadism in Lebanon, which also could give us some indications of how vulnerable Lebanon would be if faced with increased IS activities.

LEBANON FIRST

Up to 2005 in Lebanon, sectarianism was contained but certainly not eliminated. Strong control by Syria, the distressing memories of the civil war that ended in 1990 and the deep-rooted resistance of the Lebanese people to any conflicts that might ultimately trigger a new civil war reduced the level of sectarianism. From time to time conflicts between, for example, the charismatic Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, leader of the Sunni Muslims, and Hizbollah and Amal came close to sectarianism, only to be immediately contained. Rafiq Hariri, the most influential leader after the civil war, always emphasised that Lebanon was a nation: in his rhetoric the reconstruction of Lebanon was a project for the Lebanese people as a whole. However, one of the most serious conflicts before 2005 was over the relationship with Syria: Hizbollah and Amal were and still are strong supporters of Syria and the
al-Assad regime, while Hariri and the Christian parties were critical and increasingly wanted to reduce Syrian influence and ultimately ensure Lebanon’s complete independence from Syria. This conflict between the Hariri bloc and Syria is seen by many as the cause of Hariri’s assassination by Syrian intelligence and/or Hizbollah.

Ironically, the withdrawal of Syrian military forces in spring 2005 after diplomatic interventions from France and USA, leading to UN Security Council Resolution 1559 in September 2004 ordering Syria out of Lebanon, caused sectarianism to flare up again in Lebanon. The events of 2005 changed the structure of the political landscape in the country. These changes were triggered by the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, a flamboyant businessman with enormous assets earned in Saudi Arabia. He came to power as prime minister for the first time in 1992 by launching an ambitious plan to rebuild the country after the civil war, including its infrastructure and the downtown area of the capital, Beirut. Although Hariri’s relations with Syria were bad, Syria continued to be involved in Lebanese politics and to control significant aspects of it. However, Hariri’s murder mobilized the Lebanese to go out on the streets demanding reforms and the withdrawal of Syrian forces. The international community reacted by insisting on the UN Security Resolution being implemented. Together with the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanese territory, it also demanded the disarming of Hizbollah. Hizbollah reacted by organizing a large demonstration on March 8 in support of Syria and rejecting the resolution, in particular the demand to disarm, and on March 14, a month after Hariri’s death, hundreds of thousands of Lebanese rallied in central Beirut under the slogan ‘Freedom, Sovereignty, Independence’. While Syria finally pulled its troops out, Hizbollah did not disarm. The outcome of the event was the formation of two main blocs in Lebanese politics called after the days of the respective demonstrations: the March 8th bloc, comprising Hizbollah, Amal and the Free Patriotic Movement, a Maronite Christian group headed by Michel Aoun; and the March 14th bloc, headed by the Sunni Muslim Saad al-Hariri, son of the murdered prime minister, leader of the Future Movement, and supported by the Lebanese Forces (LF) and the Druze Progressive Socialist Party.

Up to 2005 the Sunni Muslim community was divided into many blocs. Some, especially in the north in Tripoli, were under the patronage of Syria, which controlled the city as well as the border area. The Sunnis did not line up behind the al-Assad regime, but subscribed to a more pan-Arab and pan-Islamic discourse. In the large-scale demonstrations on March 14 they now rallied behind Saad al-Hariri under the slogan ‘Lebanon First’. The consequence was a united Sunni Muslim bloc behind Saad al-Hariri and an increasing confrontation with Hizbollah. Assassinations of Sunni Muslim leaders continued in the years that followed, to which Hariri reacted by building up his own security force, not as a militia, which he realized would never be strong enough to counter Hizbollah, but a security network for his own and his network’s protection. In this effort he included Sunni Muslim Islamic leaders and groups who were widely seen as extremists, facilitating their routes into Lebanese politics by pardoning some who were in prison, channeling money to the groups in the north especially and placing a number of people known for their rather extremist views on the payroll.4

SALAFI JIHADIST NETWORKS IN LEBANON

One year after the outbreak of the civil war in Lebanon, Syria invaded in 1976. Syrian military forces remained in Lebanon after the peace settlement in 1990 until they were forced to withdraw by the international community in 2005. The Syrian de facto occupation made it possible for the Syrian regime to impose major influence on Lebanese politics. Syrian intelligence agencies exploited the opportunities to manipulate groups and networks, including jihadists inside Lebanon, to promote Syria’s interests.

The presence of Syria in Lebanon, especially in the north, thus made it impossible for Sunni Muslim communities to be established there as political entities with institutions and influence on Lebanese politics: instead they were squeezed in a power struggle between Syria’s manipulations, which included violence, deportations and repression, and the Lebanese government with support from Saudi Arabia, which placed informants in the area in order to gather intelligence on both Lebanese–Saudi links between Salafis from the two countries and Syria’s activities. Many from the Tripoli area migrated to and from Saudi Arabia, where they became influenced by Wahhabism, and both Tripoli and Saudi Arabia wished to control this traffic. Syria suppressed Salafist networks by arresting many of their members and transferring them to prisons in Syria, either the Saydnaya or the so-called Palestinian Branch in Damascus, where they were interrogated and tortured. Some were recruited by Syrian intelligence and were sent back to the Tripoli area to infiltrate Sunni groups and instigate violence, thus forcing the Lebanese to crack down on the Sunnis and encouraging the international community to legitimate the Syrian presence in the area. Devoid of political influence and exposed to strong repression by the Lebanese government and intelligence, as well as Syria, smaller clandestine

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Salafi jihadist networks or groups with links to diasporas in Australia and Denmark and to supporters in the Palestinian refugee camps all over Lebanon emerged to organize occasional attacks on the Lebanese and Syrian authorities and on Western and US targets like a McDonalds restaurant in Jounieh in 2003. In particular, supporters and jihadist leaders hiding in the Palestinian camps in the north, the Nahr al-Barad and Baddawi camps, and the Ain al-Hilweh camp in the south were active in organizing Salafi jihadist networks. Some of them had been influenced by the founder of the Islamic State in Iraq, the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who, before the Iraq war, had already established the Jund al-Islam group, which developed a network all over the Levant. Syrian intelligence tried to manipulate these networks, and in the first years of the Iraq war especially, thousands of jihadists travelled into Iraq from Syrian territory and increasingly from Lebanon in 2006 with the knowledge or active help of Syrian intelligence.9

When the US counterinsurgency campaign under the leadership of the US General David Petraeus forced al-Qaeda and Islamic State in Iraq out of Anbar Province in 2007, they ended up in Syria, some in jails, while others were sent to northern Lebanon to infiltrate the Salafi jihadist networks here. When Syria was forced to withdraw from Lebanon in May 2005, it left the north of the country in a power vacuum, which the Saad a-Hariri government tried to exploit in order to gain more support in the area and to control it, thus providing more space for Salafi preachers. At the same time, Syria deployed jihadists especially from Saydnaya prison and the Palestinian Branch in Damascus to Lebanon, where they set up the Fatah al-Islam group in Nahr al-Barad camp, which clashed with the Lebanese army in 2007. These jihadists had long had connections with other networks inside Lebanon, especially in Ain al-Hilweh camp in Saida in the south. Here jihadist Palestinians opposed to both the Palestinian Fatah group, whom they considered traitors due to their negotiations with Israel, and to Syria, as well as Hizbollah, offered shelter and a safe haven to the Salafi jihadists from the north, as well as those from Iraq, Syria, Jordan and the diasporas in the West, especially Denmark and Australia. Today, thanks to an old agreement between the Palestinians and Lebanon, security inside the camps is still the responsibility of the Palestinian factions, which means that the Lebanese security forces, including Hizbollah, control the routes into and out of the camps, but generally avoid going any further. One result of this agreement is that the more radical Palestinian groups are sometimes able to control areas inside the camps where they hide other Salafi jihadists from the authorities. This situation still applies in Ain al-Hilweh, where approximately one quarter of the camp is controlled by jihadist groups, which from time to time causes clashes both inside the camp and with the Lebanese army, the latest having occurred in the spring of 2017. Both Hizbollah and the Lebanese army and security forces are reluctant to enter the camp because they want to avoid a new massacre like that which happened in Nahr al-Barad in 2007, which they consider highly likely if they were to invade.

The withdrawal of Syria in 2005, al-Hariri’s politics, the support of the US, the unresolved Palestinian conflict and the continued manipulations of Syrian intelligence in Lebanon have thus provided room for a more visible and active Salafi presence in Lebanon, including jihadist groups that have caused militant activism and terrorism, though mostly in the more remote areas of Lebanon. Today, the Salafi jihadist groups are active in fighting the Lebanese army and Hizbollah in the Arsal area, which is connected to strongholds in Syria, and from time to time in the Bekaa Valley and around the mountains in Qalamoun. There was heavy fighting during the summer of 2017. First, Hizbollah and the Lebanese army attacked in the Arsal area, recapturing territory from jihadists from the AQ-affiliated former al-Nusra Front in particular, who had held positions in the Arsal area for many years. Secondly, during August, the Lebanese attacked ISIS in the northern part of the Bekaa Valley around Ras Baalbek and the Qalamoun mountains, with heavy losses on both sides, although there are big differences between the figures for casualties and dead reported in the propaganda from ISIS and the Lebanese security forces.

**AGGRAVATING THE SUNNI–SHIA CONFLICT**

At the same time, the US changed its policies in the Middle East after the disastrous developments in Iraq that had turned into a civil war. Insurgent groups and an increasingly stronger al-Qaeda presence in Anbar province in Iraq, supported by thousands of foreign fighters traveling to Iraq through Syria, turned the ‘the Sunni Triangle’ – the area between the cities of Tikrit, Ramadi and Baghdad, including the center of AQ activities, Fallujah – into a stronghold, which increasingly attacked US troops and organized terrorism in the government-controlled areas of Iraq. At the same time it had become clear that Iran had acquired tremendous influence in Iraq, including on the government. In an interview with the newspaper Al-Sharq al-Awsat, the Jordanian King talked about a threatening ‘Shia crescent’, also quoted in Jordan Times of 25 January 2006. The King accused Iran of being a threat to the Arab Middle East. Later the same year the Summer War between the Iran-supported
and Shia Muslim party Hizbollah in Lebanon and Israel broke out, and yet more commentators in the US began talking about Iran as a threat to the conservative Sunni Muslim monarchies in the Arab Middle East, Israel and the new Middle East order the US intended to establish in the region by initiating the Iraq war. Later the same year George W. Bush’s Republicans lost the mid-term elections due to growing discontent with the Iraq war. He fired his Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who was replaced by the experienced Cold War warrior and former CIA Director Robert Gates. Together with Secretary of State Condi Rice, a new strategy in the Middle East was drawn up, which prioritized containing Iran and the fight against what was labeled ‘Radical Islam’.

Together with Saudi Arabia and Israel (and other Sunni Muslim states), the aim of the strategy was to confront and contain Iran, which, after the toppling of Saddam Hussein and the emergence of a Shia Muslim-based government in Baghdad, had increased its influence in the Arab Middle East, causing great concern to both the conservative Sunni Muslim states and Israel, as well as the US. The new strategy was to roll back Iran by supporting Sunni Muslim groups and states and confronting Iran and Hizbollah. This change actually boosted what was seen as the Sunni–Shia conflict, in which the rivalry between Iran on the one hand and Saudi Arabia on the other made Lebanon a hotspot for the conflict. The US and Saudi Arabia supported the Sunni bloc in Lebanon with huge amounts of money and weapons and the training of the security forces, to which Hizbollah and Iran reacted in a still more confrontational fashion. A senior CIA officer said in an interview with The New Yorker in 2007 about US support to the Sunni bloc: ‘We are in a program to enhance the Sunni capability to resist Shiite influence, and we’re spreading the money around as much as we can’. The problem was that such money ‘always gets in more pockets than you think it will’. ‘In this process, we’re financing a lot of bad guys with some serious potential unintended consequences. We don’t have the ability to determine and get pay vouchers signed by the people we like and avoid the people we don’t like. It’s a very high-risk venture’.

One ramification of the events in 2005 was thus a build-up of Salafi jihadist networks and groups in Lebanon and a much more sectarian-based rivalry between the Sunnis and the Shias. Syria continued trying to acquire influence in Lebanon by sending support to the Alawites in the north, as well as returning jihadists from Iraq to infiltrate the Fatah-Isam group, especially in the Nahr al-Barad Palestinian refugee camp outside Tripoli. Tensions were raised both between these groups and nationally, that is, between the Sunni Muslim government and Hizbollah. This culminated when, in May 2008, Hizbollah launched a military operation to take over the Sunni Muslim-dominated areas of West Beirut and de facto placed Saad al-Harrir under house arrest in his own residence in Hamra in Beirut. Hence Hariir’s attempt to weaken Hizbollah by strengthening the Sunni Muslim constituencies in Lebanon and demanding that Hizbollah disarm had failed. This was a clear demonstration of power by Hizbollah that showed that its militia was stronger than the Lebanese army and that it had no intention whatsoever of handing in its weapons, as demanded by the Sunnis and the international community. An agreement was reached in Doha in Qatar, and a unity government was formed. From then on it was clear to the Sunnis that they could neither beat nor control Hizbollah, nor rule without its consent. Instead Hizbollah co-opted the army and increased its political influence in the government, while the Sunni leaders became busy containing and distancing themselves from the Salafi jihadist networks they had supported and provided political space for.

To sum up, the rise of Salafi jihadist networks in Lebanon from 2005 to 2008 was due to a new sectarian policy instigated by Sunni political leaders in Lebanon in response to the new political situation created by the withdrawal of Syrian troops. The Syrian withdrawal left a power vacuum, especially in northern Lebanon, and it precipitated support from Saudi Arabia as well as from the US in a strategy to confront Iran and Hizbollah. Up to 2005, the Sunni Muslims in the Tripoli area were controlled by Syria as well as pro-Syrian elements in the Lebanese government and state, leaving them suppressed and marginalized. They were denied political representation and the right to develop political institutions. The power vacuum after the Syrian withdrawal and the attempts to create a united Sunni Muslim bloc behind the Future Movement thus, probably unintentionally, provided space for the jihadists to operate in this period.

**MANIPULATING SUNNI JIHADIST NETWORKS**

In 2007, the year before the confrontation with Hizbollah, the Syrian-facilitated infiltration of jihadists into the Nahr al-Bared camp had led to tragic and brutal clashes between Fatah-Isam and the Lebanese Army, with more than four hundred civilians being killed and the camp being totally destroyed. Some of the
jihadists escaped to the south, where they hide themselves in the Ain al-Hilweh camp in Saida. This is the biggest Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon and is known for housing some of the more radical Islamic groups in its northwest quarter. Former jihadi fighters from Iraq have infiltrated these groups, and violence in the camp flares up on a regular basis, most recently in the spring of 2017. The Lebanese army and Hizbollah are keen to avoid a repetition of the tragic events in Nahr al-Barad, which would presumably be the outcome if the Lebanese security forces were to enter the camp. Instead they guard the entrance to the camp, leaving containment of the jihadist groups within it to the Palestinians’ own security forces.9

A NEW CONSENSUS ON NATIONAL SECURITY

While the sectarian confrontations between the Sunni and Shia blocs in Lebanon were triggered by the events of 2005, since the fighting in 2008 the two main blocs in Lebanon have been keen to work together to contain them. Since then the two blocs have coordinated on security matters. In the north a heavy military campaign by the Lebanese army, creating hundreds of dead and forcing thousands to flee the area, eliminated most of the opposition groups. An agreement has been reached between the Alawites and the Sunni Muslim groups, and the area is heavily policed by the Lebanese security forces, resulting in a significant decrease in violence and an increase in dissatisfaction among the citizens because of increasing social problems.10 In the Bekaa Valley and the border areas, Hizbollah, the Lebanese army and military intelligence cooperate in keeping jihadists from both AQ and IS out, while in the south Hizbollah and Amal are in control, and in Saida they work together with the Lebanese army in containing violence from Ain al-Hilweh.

The outcome of the 2008 crisis is thus close cooperation within the Lebanese government and the state security apparatus. All leaders in the two dominant blocs in Lebanese national policy seem to have reached a consensus that the only way to avoid a devastating conflict with the risk of a new civil war is to work closely together in controlling and containing militant opposition, including from AQ and IS. If the state or the government is threatened, the leaders of the dominant parties in the two blocs get together and cooperate to counter the threat, whether from violent extremism, political violence or external activities, for example, from AQ or IS jihadists, but also from political opposition outside the parties forming the government. Examples of the latter include the grassroots Beirut Midanati movement, which scored some success in the municipality elections in May 2016 on a program to fight corruption and promote the green development of Beirut, and the You Stink movement, which organized major demonstrations during the garbage crisis in 2015 to demand better management from the government. As they both posed a political threat to the government, Hizbollah, Amal, the Christian parties and the Future Movement got together and, using both legal and illegal measures, succeeded in keeping the grassroots out of politics.11

Given the state of Lebanese politics generally, the emergence of a consensus across the government parties when it comes to national security could seem to be in some contradiction with the ongoing political paralysis that prevails when it comes to reforms, the economy, infrastructure and social affairs. Studying the political news in Lebanon is like reading never-ending repetitions of disagreements on the same issues. This is because all parties want their share of the cake, and none will give up what they already have, which makes Lebanon a very weak state when it comes to dealing with the enormous problems that face Lebanese society, whether that means the refugee crisis, poverty, infrastructural problems or social affairs. In all these matters Lebanese society is left on its own, with no help or assistance from the state, but managing thanks to the support of the international donor community, which has been the main actor in helping the refugees and in developing the health and education sectors. Lebanon is thus characterized by strong state security coupled with a huge gulf between state and society when it comes to all challenges other than security, challenges that are left to civil society and the people themselves to manage.

This also applies to the problems of security in the Palestinian camps. The threat of AQ and IS infiltrating the camps is real, and the Lebanese security forces and military intelligence are on high alert in order to counter it. But the problem is much more complex and nuanced than how it is often depicted in the international media and in foreign-policy circles and think tanks. Here the picture is that AQ and IS are infiltrating the Palestinian camps in order to recruit fighters for their wars in Syria and Iraq, as well as to conduct terrorism inside Lebanon and target Hizbollah, which is supporting the Bashar al-Assad regime and is heavily involved in fighting the Islamist militias in Syria. Ain al-Hilweh camp in particular has been at the center of this narrative as a nest for hatching jihadists and terrorists.12 Actually some of the perpetrators behind the terror attack in Hizbollah-controlled south Beirut in November 2015 were Syrians affiliated to IS hiding in the Burj al-Barajneh camp and in the Christian quarter of Beirut. Several confrontations between Syrian jihadists and the army have taken place in the Arsal area, the Bekaa Valley and on the border with Syria. Security
around the border is today very tight, and the Lebanese army is working closely with military intelligence and Hizbollah in order to prevent the Syrian war from spilling over into Lebanon. However, the poor both inside and outside the camps are being recruited by IS, which offers them money to become fighters and thus be able to feed their families.

Hizbollah, which is working closely with Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, is very active in mediating between the different Palestinian factions, of which there are more than thirty in the camps. The camps are often described as ‘no-go areas’ where all kind of militant groups can emerge and recruit supporters, but the reality is that the Palestinian political factions are constantly in dialogue and mediating in order to avoid internal confrontations with the militants or conflicts with the army, which is also playing its part in these ongoing attempts to prevent violence among these groups. It is also important to stress that the vast majority of Palestinians in the camps reject militancy and violence as tools for obtaining social and political improvements. Although AQ and IS have a certain presence in Lebanon and its camps, the Palestinian Islamic groups, the secular groups and Hizbollah are working to keep them out and thus avoid the Syrian civil war from spilling over into Lebanon. Even the Shia–Sunni conflict and sectarianism are being contained in the Palestinian camps. Most of the violence is related to the ongoing socio-economic deprivation in the Palestinian refugee camps. Thus the biggest threat of violence and destabilization in Lebanon does not stem from the Salafi jihadists – although they do, of course, pose a degree of threat – but from socio-economic problems in the Palestinian camps and Palestinian informal gatherings, as well as the increasing problems of handling the Syrian refugees, who increasingly face greater challenges in respect of their living conditions and whose numbers are on the rise. Not the least of problems is the virtual lack of a Lebanese state when it comes to the political problems facing Lebanese society, especially in respect of social affairs.

CONCLUSION

All groups and parties in Lebanon work closely together in order to contain IS and AQ and if possible keep them out of Lebanon. However, heavy fighting with jihadists in Arsal, the Qalamoun Mountains and the upper Bekaa Valley took place during the summer 2017, with many casualties on both sides. There is, of course, a risk that these battles could give IS a stronger position in Lebanon and trigger militant confrontation between the main blocs, but so far they have strengthened cooperation between Hizbollah and the Lebanese army. Hence, it would be quite difficult for IS to establish itself in Lebanon and take over territories there, because of the close security cooperation within the government, whose most powerful leaders represent all confessional communities. On the other hand, the social problems Lebanese society faces are growing fast and are now also affecting the middle classes. This could challenge the security state with the risk of Lebanon falling apart. Further, if Lebanon became directly involved in the Syrian war, for example, through a US-supported Israeli attack in south Lebanon – which commentators sees as a real possibility, given the Trump administration’s rallying behind Israel and Saudi Arabia in a new confrontational US policy towards Iran and Hizbollah, very much like those the George W. Bush administration initiated in 2005 and especially 2006 – this could, of course, speed up the problems that face Lebanese society today and thus threaten Lebanon with the risk of becoming fragmented. This in its turn would open up new battlefields which IS and QA could take advantage of.

Thus, the biggest threat to Lebanon today does not stem from Salafi jihadist networks but from the growing divisions between the state and society that leave all social challenges to be managed by Lebanese society itself or by international donors, while the Lebanese state elite grows richer and still more eager to grab more of the cake for themselves – their primary motivation for agreeing a national security consensus. Denying influence to important groups such as the Palestinians and the marginalized Sunni Muslim groups, as well as increasing still further the equality gap in Lebanese society is, as we have seen in Iraq and Syria, a very dangerous game that could lead to social unrest and the mobilization of a Lebanese insurgency supported by the still more desperate Palestinians.
4 Lebanon’s Politics: The Sunni Community and Hariri’s Future Current, Middle East Report no. 96, May 2010.
7 This development is described in detail in ‘Postscript – After Lebanon: A New Cold War in the Middle East’ in Lars Erslev Andersen: Innocence Lost: Islamism and the Battle over Values and World Order (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark 2007): 169-178.
8 Seymour M. Hersh, ‘The Redirection: Is the Administration’s new policy benefitting our enemies in the war on terrorism?’ The New Yorker, 5 March 2007. Looking at the present Trump administration’s resumption of the Saudi Arabia – Israel – US alliance in confronting Iran and Hizbollah as it was spilled out during president Trump’s visit to Saudi Arabia in May 2017, the article by Hersh from 2007 has acquired a new and peculiar actuality.
11 Based on personal interviews during field study in Beirut, spring 2017.
12 Rougier (2007) op. cit.
13 Nicolas Dot-Poullard: Between Radicalization and Mediation Processes: A Political Mapping of Palestinian Refugee Camps in Lebanon, Civil Society Knowledge Center, Lebanon Support, October 2015.
It might seem strange to include a chapter on Saudi Arabia in a volume on how and why IS and AQ are expanding, since it is for many the birthplace of extremist ideology and a stimulus for jihadist violence. However, this chapter does not focus on the role of Saudi Arabia in relation to jihadist violence around the world, but instead seeks to show how al-Qaeda and Islamic State have sought to expand within Saudi Arabia and why both organizations have so far had limited success in challenging the Saudi regime. As early as the 1990s, Osama bin Laden, a Saudi national, attacked the Saudi Arabian regime for having replaced Sharia law with ‘infidel laws’ and allowing the ‘crusader forces’, that is, the Americans, to have a military presence in the Arabian Peninsula (referring to Saudi Arabia).\(^1\) Al-Qaeda’s main aim in Saudi Arabia was and remains expelling the Americans, but gradually, from the early 2000s, it became more hostile to the Saudi regime as well. Recently, the son of Osama bin Laden, Hamza bin Laden, described the regime as ‘the agents of the Americans’ and encouraged all Muslims in the Arabian Peninsula to participate in the liberation of the Holy Land.\(^2\) Similarly, the leader of Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, espoused a strong anti-Saudi narrative from the outset. In 2014, as he announced the expansion of Islamic State to Saudi Arabia, he not only encouraged attacks on the Shia and ‘the crusaders’, but also the Saudi regime and its soldiers.\(^3\) Subsequently, IS has especially targeted the Shia, but it has also carried out targeted attacks on Saudi security personnel. The most significant IS attack took place in July 2016, when IS carried out a coordinated triple suicide bombing in three cities, targeting a Shia mosque, the American consulate in Jeddah and the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina. The latter is considered one of the holiest sites in Islam and has

**The struggle for Islam’s heartland:**

**THE CASE OF SAUDI ARABIA**

By Maria-Louise Clausen

Saudi Arabia is the second largest contributor of foreign fighters. But the repressive security apparatus makes it difficult for Islamic State and al-Qaeda to operate, and has until now kept Saudi Arabia from turning into a substantial theatre for jihad.
immense symbolic importance, as reflected in the monarch’s title as the ‘Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques’. Thus, the attack, which claimed the lives of four security guards, was probably meant to expose the weakness of the Saudi security apparatus and rattle the regime. Hence, although limited in the total number of casualties (in the two other attacks only the assailants were killed), these attacks were feared as indicating that IS had a much more developed organizational structure within Saudi Arabia than had hitherto been realized.

The Saudi Arabian case therefore deserves more attention than it is currently receiving. Not only is Saudi Arabia a regional great power that controls immense oil reserves and the two most holy cities in Islam, Mecca and Medina. It is also a state built on an alliance between a repressive monarchy and the Wahhabi religious establishment, thus making its position as heir to the first Islamic state a key element in its own self-perception. It is widely seen as the exporter of an extremist ideology, and Saudis have been heavily involved in Islamist violence around the world for decades. Yet, Saudi Arabia itself has remained relatively exempt from large-scale Islamist violence. It is thus a case of a state that has been targeted by jihadist groups and where the Islamist message has an audience, but where groups like AQ and IS have had limited success in building a strong organizational structure within it. This chapter seeks to shed light on this paradox.⁴

ISLAMIST VIOLENCE WITHIN SAUDI ARABIA:
A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF AQ AND IS ACTIVITIES

In 1996, Osama bin Laden issued a call for jihad in Saudi Arabia prompted by the continued presence of American troops on the Arabian Peninsula following the 1990-1991 Iraq war. For him the American soldiers constituted an occupation of the Holy Land in direct conflict with the religious imperative to uphold Islamic monotheism on the Arabian Peninsula.⁵ Initially the strategy focused on the expulsion of the Americans, but gradually the theme of regime change became more explicit. In 2003 bin Laden activated a surprisingly well-integrated al-Qaeda network that managed to rattle the Saudi regime. The campaign lasted for years and resulted in more than three hundred deaths. It was primarily driven by Saudis who had become radicalized under the influence of bin Laden in Afghanistan. The police crackdown was harsh, leaving Saudi Islamists in competition for recruits and money. In this context, it proved easier to recruit for the more attractive jihadist theater of Iraq.⁶ Consequently, AQ was unable to replenish its network, as the Saudi security apparatus took out the key operatives. Thus, by 2006 the AQ organization had been decimated and was left without a leader.⁷ This facilitated the merger between AQ in Saudi Arabia and AQ in Yemen to form al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), proclaimed by Nasir al-Wuhayshi, a Yemeni and former close associate of bin Laden, in 2009.⁸ AQAP’s center of operations is in Yemen, and there has been limited activity inside Saudi Arabia except for a few attacks, mainly in the border region with Yemen. The most notable exception was the 2009 assassination attempt on Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, a senior member of Saudi Arabia’s ruling family and head of the kingdom’s counterterrorism operations. The attack was committed by a Saudi national, Abdullah Hassan Tali al-Asiri, a well-known AQ terrorist who was granted a private meeting with the prince under the pretext of wanting to defect from AQ, but instead detonated a bomb that was, by all accounts, hidden inside his body.⁹ I will return to the relationship between Yemen and Saudi Arabia below.
Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi formally announced IS’s presence in Saudi Arabia in November 2014 when he accepted a pledge of loyalty from ‘fighters within Saudi Arabia’. These did not seem to represent any local movements or developed organizational structures. There are no credible estimates of the number of fighters, but IS itself refers to ‘lone knights in the Arabian Peninsula’. Likewise, videos and tweets proclaiming the intention of targeting the Saudi regime are often authored by Saudis outside Saudi Arabia. This indicates the existence of a limited structure within the country, more limited than suggested by the 1600 alleged IS supporters the Saudi regime claims to have arrested, a point I will return to. However, IS has formally established three provinces inside Saudi Arabia, Najd in the center, Hijaz in the west and Bahrain in the east (not to be confused with the state of Bahrain). These provinces are fictions in the sense that IS does not control any territory in Saudi Arabia. However, it is clear that there has been an increase in terrorist activity since 2014, which, in its choice of targets, follows Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s original call to ‘Deal with the rafidah [referring to the Shia] first, wherever you find them, then Al Salūl [a derogatory term for the Saudi regime] and their soldiers before the Crusaders and their bases’. Thus, there have been several attacks on Shia mosques, such as the 22 May 2015 attack on the Shia al-Imam Ali mosque, where more than twenty worshippers were killed, and an attack only a week later in Dammam, both in eastern Saudi Arabia. Moreover, several attacks took place targeting Shias in southern Saudi Arabia, but since 2015 there have been few mass casualty attacks, excluding the July 2016 attack already mentioned. Instead, there has been an increase in assassinations targeting security personnel. It is worth mentioning that the Saudi security forces regularly report that plots have been foiled, suggesting that there are individuals willing to commit attacks who lack the capacity to do so without being identified by the Saudi security forces. This strategy of carrying out the most deadly attacks on the Shia community differs from the strategy of al-Qaeda, which was mainly focused on Western interests and only secondarily on the Saudi regime, whereas Shias were not considered key targets at all.

**DOMESTIC FACTORS: THE REPRESSIVE ISLAMIC STATE**

Saudi Arabia has a unique position in jihadist thinking as the site where the creed of the first Islamic State emerged, the result of a meeting between an adept ruler, Muhammad ibn Saud, and the preacher Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the eighteenth century. This alliance between the house of Saud and the Wahhabi religious establishment continues to be the backbone of the Saudi state, which, in the words of the current King Salman, represents the purest model of an Islamic state. IS likewise claims to model itself on the first Islamic state, thus drawing on concepts and ideas that are well known within Wahhabism, but it also argues that the so-called palace scholars of the Saudi regime have degenerated into kufr (apostasy) and that ‘the ‘hukm of Allah’ to them is whatever the Saudi governmental ministries have deemed acceptable’. This should be seen against the backdrop of the regime’s efforts to undercut the claims of IS and AQ that they have superior religious legitimacy. This effort has included a 2014 declaration by the Saudi Grand Mufti that all efforts to combat al-Qaeda and Islamic State were required and allowed. However, IS sees itself as espousing a truer version of Wahhabism, the current Saudi religious establishment having offended against key tenets of al-Wahhab’s teachings, most notably through Saudi cooperation with the crusaders against IS and by allowing an American presence on the Arabian Peninsula. In this sense, IS describes Saudi Arabia as a failed version of an Islamic State where politics have taken precedence over religion. This proximity between IS and Wahhabi beliefs has led to claims that Saudi Arabia has played a role in the emergence of IS. It can also be used to suggest that Saudi Arabia should provide a fertile ground for IS. Indeed, there are indications that the Saudi population are amongst the more supportive of the IS ideology, but precise numbers are hard to come by.

Another key aspect of IS’s criticisms of the Saudi regime is the latter’s acceptance of the Shia minority, who make up 10-15% of Saudi Arabia’s population. Although the regime in principle accepts its obligation to protect the Shia, the Shia are subject to religiously inspired prejudice, with some Saudi clerics going so far as to label them apostates. IS has sought to benefit from this precarious relationship between Sunni and Shia in Saudi Arabia by attacking the Saudi regime for allowing the Shia to remain on the Arabian Peninsula, arguing that the Muslim public will rally ‘around the Islamic State since it defends them against the Rāfidah. This is what frightens Āl Salūl and the rulers of the Arabian Peninsula and makes their thrones tremble.’ At the same time, IS has hit the Shia particularly hard, as already mentioned. The inability of the Saudi regime to protect the Shia has nurtured the sentiment among some Shia that the regime is less concerned about attacks against them. The result has been increased sectarian tensions and some instability in the Eastern Province, where the Shia are a majority, something that was further exacerbated by the execution of Nimr al-Nimr. Thus, the Shia question represents an exposed flank for the regime, which IS has exploited with some success.
DOMESTIC FACTORS: THE AUTHORITARIAN STATE

The Saudi state is highly repressive, and the Saudi regime allocates substantial resources to its repressive security apparatus in the name of counterterrorism, including the training of Special Forces with the assistance of Western partners such as the UK and the US. The regime has given the security apparatus wide-ranging tools to combat terrorism, including the possibility of detaining individuals for years without proper trial. Several thousands of these detainees have undergone prison-based militant-rehabilitation programs or spent time in the kingdom’s terrorist rehabilitation center. Saudi Arabia is also known for being one of the countries that execute the largest number of prisoners, as shown by the mass execution of 47 men in January 2016 on terrorism charges. Forty-three of these men were executed because of terrorism offenses related to the AQ offensive in the 2000s, and four were Shia, the most famous being Nimr al-Nimr.

In 2014, the regime implemented a new, strict counterterrorism law that has been criticized for being so extensive that it criminalizes not only violent extremism, but all forms of dissent or criticism of the regime. Indeed, human rights organizations argue that it has been used to target opposition to the Saudi regime in general. Examples include more liberal voices, such as the highly publicized example of the blogger, Raif Badawi, who was sentenced to ten years in prison and 1000 lashes for insulting Islam. The Saudi regime has a long tradition of repressing oppositional forces. For example, it designated the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization in 2014, apparently a response to the increased political importance of the Muslim Brotherhood in the context of the Arab Spring. Thus, because of the very wide definition of terrorism used by the Saudi regime, it is hard to discern how many of the arrests on terrorism charges that actually involve potentially violent radicals. In particular, it could be argued that the regime needs to show that it is effective in thwarting imminent attacks and the threat from AQ and IS so that it can continue to justify its repressive measures in general.

Nonetheless, the use of force is combined with a focus on ‘softer’ tools. This includes attention to stopping the streams of funds from individuals inside Saudi Arabia to AQ and IS by closing loopholes, especially in the charitable and financial sectors. Moreover, Saudi Arabia has created exit strategies for militants, including amnesties lasting several months, semi-official mediation initiatives by religious figures and a prisoner re-education program. The Saudi de-radicalization program is controversial, but it has had the side effect of helping the Saudi regime frame itself as a rational and pragmatic bulwark against the chaos and violence that IS and AQ represent. Although there might be support among substantial parts of the Saudi population for the ideologies of IS and AQ, there is limited readiness to commit to turning Saudi Arabia into a substantial theater for jihad. Instead, Saudis have played a substantial role in theaters of jihad in neighboring countries, as discussed in the next section.

EXPLOITING AND AVOIDING REGIONAL SPILL-OVER

Saudi Arabia borders some of the most violent theaters of jihad, including Iraq and Yemen, suggesting that it is at risk of spill-over effects from these conflicts. However, the regional context seems to have had a more complex influence on the ability of AQ and IS to establish a presence in the country. Overall, it can be argued that the repressive security apparatus in Saudi Arabia increases the cost of operating inside the country, whereas the chaos and state failure of Syria, Iraq and Yemen provide more hospitable theaters for both organizations. Additionally, both organizations seem to have found it easier to recruit Saudis to fight in Iraq and Syria, as these countries provide a more direct theater for fighting the ‘crusaders’ and protecting Sunni Muslims. Indeed, as IS expanded its presence in Syria and Iraq and was able to take over large swathes of land, the Saudi regime was criticized for making little attempt to prevent Saudi nationals from going to Syria especially to fight Assad. It is estimated that approximately 2,500 Saudis have joined IS, making Saudi Arabia the second largest contributor of foreign fighters following Tunisia. Although this may have limited jihadist violence inside Saudi Arabia in the short term, the Saudi regime now fears that it will see an influx of battle-hardened fighters returning from Iraq and Syria as IS is defeated. These fighters might pose a substantial threat similar to that which al-Qaeda operatives posed when they returned from Afghanistan and successfully rattled the regime from 2003 and onwards. The Saudi regime has gradually recognized this danger and, for example, it imposed a ban on travel to Syria in 2015. Combatants returning from Syria now face jail sentences if identified.

AQAP is an interesting case in a regional perspective, as it is the result of a merger of two distinct AQ organizations. However, there is no doubt that the center of operations is in Yemen. The more or less complete disintegration of the Yemeni state following the Houthi takeover and the subsequent Saudi-led military intervention from March 2015 has allowed AQAP to build and strengthen its presence in especially the southern and southeastern parts of Yemen. Originally, Yemen itself
seems to have enjoyed little importance in the eyes of AQ's central leadership, who instead have focused on its strategic location, its abundance of hardened fighters and its ability to serve as an operational safe haven. In announcing the merger of AQ in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, al-Shihri, the then deputy of AQAP and a Saudi, referred to Yemen as the ‘land of provision and preparation’, the goal actually being to attack Saudi Arabia and liberate its two holiest sites.\textsuperscript{25} More recently, Hamza bin Laden repeated this narrative by encouraging Muslims in Saudi Arabia to join ‘their brothers, the mujahdeen in Yemen of faith and wisdom, to gain the necessary experience’.\textsuperscript{27} Interestingly, this call can be interpreted as an indirect admission of limited AQ capacity within in Saudi Arabia. However, the border between Saudi Arabia and Yemen is notoriously porous, making it possible for Yemeni-based mujahedin to organize in Yemen and then travel to Saudi Arabia, something that Saudi Arabia is seeking to curtail by building a physical barrier on the border. The relationship between IS in Yemen and IS in Saudi Arabia is less formalized.\textsuperscript{29} However, interestingly IS in Yemen is supposedly led by a Saudi national, Abu Bilal al-Harbi, a.k.a Nasser al-Ghaydani. IS has sought to exploit the growing sectarian tension related to the Houthi insurgency, especially by attacking AQAP for being weak and having failed in defeating the Houthis.\textsuperscript{30} Yet, by all accounts AQAP remains by far the most potent jihadist organization in Yemen.

CHALLENGES AHEAD FOR THE SAUDI STATE: OPPORTUNITIES FOR IS AND AQ?

Although there were minor demonstrations in 2011-2012, Saudi Arabia has largely been exempt from the large-scale protests that have unsettled other Arab regimes, something which is often linked to the ability of oil dollars to buy acquiescence from the population. However, there are indications that Saudi Arabia might be heading towards more turbulent times because of two issues that deserve special attention. First, the Saudi economy has been deteriorating, leading to a record deficit in 2015 of 15% of GDP. The low oil price in particular has put a strain on the Saudi finances that has been exacerbated by the billions of dollars spend on the war in Yemen, as well as support to buy loyalty or prop up allies in the region. As a consequence the regime has implemented some economic reforms, and more are set to follow, but declining public subsidies might in themselves lead to increased political instability. Secondly, although the succession from King Abdullah to the current King Salman went smoothly in 2015, there are indications that the scene is set for more serious political infighting that could unsettle the regime.\textsuperscript{30} The succession produced a period of uncertainty, something that IS sought to exploit by initiating a social media campaign celebrating the death of the king and issuing threats against the kingdom in 2015. The fact that King Salman was born in 1935 and appears physically weak accentuates the question of elite infighting. First it seemed that Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, the person viewed as the main architect of the Saudi counterterrorism program since 2003, would be the first third-generation king, as he was appointed deputy crown prince in 2015. However, he was replaced by King Salman’s son, Mohammed bin Salman, in June 2017. Mohammed bin Salman is only in his thirties, but he has already made his mark as the main architect of the war in Yemen, in addition to having promoted a drastic economic reform program, Vision 2030.

CONCLUSION

Both al-Qaeda and Islamic State have declared overthrowing the Saudi state to be an explicit aim. However, as this chapter has shown, both organizations have found it difficult to establish a strong and permanent presence inside Saudi Arabia. This chapter has pointed especially to the strength of the Saudi state and its repressive security apparatus as an explanation. Although the pure repressiveness and all-consuming presence of the security apparatus is key, as it has made jihad inside Saudi Arabia costly and difficult, it is also worth mentioning that the violent theaters of jihad in Syria and Iraq especially have proved more attractive to jihadists, thus making it rational to travel outside Saudi Arabia to engage in jihad. One aspect of this is the simple fact that even organizations such as IS and AQ depend on local support to flourish. The Saudi population, although seemingly displaying some support for the ideology of IS and AQ, seems far more willing to support jihad abroad than risk fomenting chaos inside Saudi Arabia. Here the Saudi regime certainly fears that the Saudi fighters who are returning from Syria and Iraq as IS continues to lose territory will take the fight to Saudi Arabia as AQ fighters did when they returned from Afghanistan in the 2000s.

Both IS and AQ challenge the legitimacy of the Saudi regime. The controversial July 2016 IS attack on the mosque in Medina has been explained as an attempt by IS to undermine trust in the Saudi regime by displaying its inability to protect the most holy sites in Islam.\textsuperscript{31} This article has focused especially on two factors that AQ and IS have sought to exploit in order to unsettle the Saudi regime. The first is the latter’s cooperation with the US. The notion that the presence of US troops in Saudi Arabia constitutes a defilement of the Holy Land and a de facto occupation is widely shared far beyond those who support IS and AQ. Secondly, there is the precarious position...
of the Shia, who have been especially targeted by IS. The growing discontent in the Eastern Province among Shias who have long been marginalized in Saudi Arabia, in combination with increased official fears of Iranian influence, might lead to increased sectarian tensions that could benefit IS especially. In conclusion, the Saudi regime has so far been able to contain both IS and AQ through its use of an extensive repressive security apparatus, but as the Saudi regime faces economic constraints and increased political unrest on several fronts, it is not a given that this will continue.

1 Osama Bin Laden, Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Sanctuaries, 23 August 1996.
2 Hamza Usama bin Laden, ‘Dominion of the Best of the Ummah in the Uprising of the People of the Sacred House’ (Episode 1), 17 August 2016.
3 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Even If the Disbelievers Despise Such, al-Furqan Media Foundation, 13 November 2014.
4 This question has been raised by Thomas Hegghammer, who, taking his point of departure in the relatively quiet 1980s and 1990s in relation to Islamist violence in Saudi Arabia, asks why al-Qaeda successfully launched a campaign in 2003 and not before (Hegghammer, T., Jihad in Saudi Arabia: violence and pan-Islamism since 1979 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
5 Ibid: 104.
7 Hegghammer 2010
8 The deputy leader was a Saudi national and former Guantanamo detainee, Said al-Shihri. Subsequently, a video was released entitled ‘From here we begin and in Jerusalem we will meet’, featuring Nasir al-Wuhayshi, Said al-Shihri, Qasim al-Raymi and Muhammad al-Awfi (two Saudis and two Yemenis). The two Saudis, al-Shihri and al-Awfi, had both graduated from the Saudi rehabilitation program after being released from Guantanamo Bay. In a twist of events, al-Awfi somehow ended up back in Saudi Arabia a month later, either having been arrested and extradited to Saudi Arabia or having himself left Yemen to take advantage of a Saudi amnesty for those voluntarily leaving AQ.
9 In Failed Strike on Saudi Prince: A New Fear of Al-Qaeda’s Tactics, Washington Post, 7 October 2009 available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/10/06/ AP2009100603711.html. The bomb was made by the brother of the suicide bomber, Ibrahim Hassan Tall al-Asiri.
10 Dabiq 13, 8.
11 Farhat, Roger S., Saudi Arabia in the cross-hairs of Islamic State, 5 May 2015.
14 There have been some attacks targeting foreigners, including one on 22 November 2014 where a Danish citizen was shot and wounded in Riyadh. Islamic State claimed the attack.
15 Bunzel 2016, 5.
16 Dabiq, 13, 7. See also Bunzel 2016, 3.
18 Here Ibn abd al-Wahhab is quoted as having said that one of the ten greatest nullifiers of Islam was backing the non-Muslims against the Muslims (Dabiq 13, 7). The injunction by Prophet Muhammad that ‘Two religions must not remain together in the Arabian Peninsula’ is also mentioned (Dabiq 9, 25-26).
20 One issue of Dabiq featured a picture of what looks like Mahmoud Ahmadinejad walking around the Kaaba in Mecca with the caption ‘The tidings of Al Saúl allow the Râfidhah to enter the most sacred sites of the Muslims.’ (Dabiq 13, 12).
21 Dabiq, 9, 56.
27 Hamza Bin Laden Incites Saudis to Overthrow Regime, train with AQAP August 17, 2016.
28 In Dabiq, it has been suggested that the proximity between Saudi Arabia and Yemen could facilitate cooperation between IS operatives in the two countries, but the point is not expanded further (Dabiq, 5, 26).
29 IS attacked AQAP for having allowed the Houthis to take control of Sanaa, arguing that they would not have allowed this (see, for example, Dabiq issues 5 and 6).
31 Saudi authorities reported thwarting a plot to attack the mosque in Mecca this June. The suspect blew himself up as he was targeted by security forces, available at http://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/24/saudi-security-foils-terror-plot-targeting-mecca-grand-mosque
Every war must end. This is the title of a classic book by Charles Iklé (1971), expressing a basic reality of the world of conflict in a nutshell. Conflicts do end, though some later than others. This reality is important to recognize when discussing the emergence, transformation, and internationalization of armed conflicts. Thus, even what has become the most common type of contemporary armed conflict, that is, when insurgents proclaim explicit Islamist aspirations to fight to create an entity that transcends the current nation-state (and nation-state system) – what we may call ‘transnational jihadist conflicts’ – will end. Al-Qaeda and IS are the two main organizations, or networks, in this context.

However, even if we can predict that conflicts will end, it is less evident how they will end. And this, of course, is the key question. How conflicts are brought to an end will determine whether they are revived in the future, whether they will be transformed into new, even more serious forms of violence, and whether the underlying causes for the original conflict outbreak will be addressed.

Armed conflicts involving actors with self-defined Islamist aims represent the most common form of political violence in the world today. In 2016, using updated information from the dataset presented in Svensson and Nilsson,1 we can see that 32 out of a total of 54 intrastate armed conflicts were fought between governments and rebel groups in which, at the outset of their armed struggle, the rebels had raised explicit demands relating to religious issues. Of the 32, 30 involved self-defined Islamist demands. In fact, three new Islamist conflicts were initiated in

1. By Isak Svensson

HOW JIHADIST WARS END
In this chapter, I discuss how conflicts over Islamist aspirations end. Thus, I go beyond transnational jihadist conflicts to examine self-defined Islamist conflicts more broadly. In particular, I give examples of empirical trajectories of the termination of conflicts. What do we know about how these conflicts end? Three conclusions can be drawn thus far. The first two are:

1. Jihadists rarely win.
2. Military victories by governments often do not lead to sustainable peace.

Since decisive victories by either governments or insurgents seem to have difficulties in terminating conflicts and are often not associated with sustainable peace, it is important to examine other forms of termination. This leads to the last conclusion, namely:

3. That political accommodation can sometimes end conflicts fought over Islamist demands.

Political accommodation is extremely difficult to achieve in any type of armed conflict. However, in conflicts involving transnational jihadist movements so far, this has proved to be non-existent. There are several possible reasons for this. Transnational jihadist conflicts are difficult to settle since they appeal to a pool of potential recruits beyond a particular conflict setting; because the transnational aspects increase the uncertainties concerning capabilities and interests, thus enhancing the risks of commitment problems; because local conflicts become extended into regional or even global interactions, settlements will be hard to achieve. Thus, one conclusion to be drawn, which I will come back to at the end of the chapter, is the need to disaggregate the different dimensions of transnational jihadism in order to deal with political grievances that have national solutions. A prerequisite for negotiations and others forms of political settlement therefore seems to be to transform the transnational aspects of a conflict into a focus on its underlying context.

We now know something about how religiously defined conflicts can be settled. Yet, as a starting point, it is also important to recognize that research into the causes of Islamist conflicts, as well as the strategic, military approach to these types of conflicts, has been very uneven. Moreover, such research has, unfortunately, largely neglected the insights from the decades of studies on conflict resolution. Thus, to a large extent, there is still a major lacuna in research when it comes to the termination and end-dynamics of religiously defined conflicts in general, and Islamist and trans-jihadist conflicts in particular. This is one of the underlying motivations for an international research project I am heading, entitled Resolving Jihadist Conflicts?, which examines the extent to which conflict resolution is applicable to conflicts fought over Islamist claims. The research project is continuing and will come to an end in 2020.

CONCLUSION 1: JIHADIST CONFLICTS DO NOT END IN VICTORY FOR THE REBELS

So far, transnational jihadist or Islamist militant groups in general have tended not to be able to win conflicts on the battlefield. In a recently conducted global overview, we could not find any examples of military victories by trans-jihadist rebel groups. Victories by nationalist-Islamist insurgencies have occurred, although they are rare. For example, the Taliban movement, with its revolutionary Islamist claims, was able to topple the Afghan government in 1996. Yet, transnational jihadist movements have not been able to pursue their goals successfully on the battlefield. This finding supports what has been pointed out earlier by previous research, highlighting that transnational jihadists tend not to win militarily. Other research, utilizing different data sources, reaches similar conclusions, for example, showing that ‘relative to religious fundamentalists, terrorist groups formed around three other ideologies — nationalist/separatist (henceforth, nationalist), left wing, and right wing — are more...
likely to join the political process or achieve victory. Another study finds that no religious terrorist group has achieved victory. Moreover, rebel groups in civil wars that use terrorism as a tactic tend to have fewer chances of winning compared to rebel groups that do not. However, rebel groups that use terrorist tactics also tend to last longer, as this may be a strategy for organizational survival.

In those cases where militant jihadist groups have been able to take control of a territory and proclaim Islamist proto-states, their reigns have generally been short. GIA in Algeria was able to maintain its ‘liberated zones’ for less than two years (1993-1995); the so-called ‘Islamic Emirate of Azawad’ in northern Mali existed for only one and half years (mid-2012-January 2013); in Yemen, the ‘Islamic Emirate of Abyan’, created by the al-Qaeda group AQAP, only existed for little more than a year (2011-2012); and the ‘Caucasus Emirate’ declared in North Caucasus in October 2007 did not last longer than one month. The longest lasting jihadist state-formation project in the contemporary period thus far is the Taliban movement’s takeover of power in 1996, through which it established the ‘Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan’ until it was overthrown by the US-backed Northern Alliance in 2001; it thus lasted five years altogether.

Thus, insurgents who take up arms under the banner of Islam (or any other religion for that matter) have largely failed to reach their goals. In particular, groups with transnational jihadist agendas have not been able to win militarily.

CONCLUSION 2: SOMETIMES JIHADIST CONFLICTS END IN SHORT-TERM VICTORY FOR GOVERNMENTS, ONLY TO RESURFACE

Governments have been able to defeat militant Islamist groups in several instances. Yet, military victories by the government side have not led to unambiguous success. There are some obvious examples of military victories. Saudi Arabia won decisively against the radical JSM group, which occupied Mecca in 1979. That same year an uprising based mostly in the Syrian city of Hama and initiated by the Muslim Brotherhood was completely crushed in the Hama massacre of 1982, carried out by the regime of Bashar al-Assad’s father, Hafez al-Assad. In 2004 Nigeria defeated the Ahlu Sunnah Jamaa (‘Followers of the Prophet’), an armed uprising (2003-2004) aspiring to create an Islamic state in the northern part of the country. However, the military victories of these different governments have not made their problems disappear: although Saudi Arabia has been able to stave off jihadist conflict within its borders, the country has exported a large part of its jihadist problem to other conflicts and countries; Syria saw a new uprising in 2011, which escalated into a sectarian civil war; and in Nigeria a more radical group, Boko Haram, surfaced in 2011. Thus, what may seem to be decisive military victories, overcoming insurgencies by eliminating their ability to carry on fighting, often do not make religious militancy disappear but rather leads to it transforming itself into new manifestations or spreading to other conflict regions.

Decline and defeat are often followed by the transformation of a conflict into new manifestations. There are three discernable ways through which former jihadist state-formation projects have bounced back despite losing territorial control:

- Strategic shifts.
- Organizational shifts.
- New state-formation projects.

In the first case, the rebel organization continues to exist but changes its strategy. The Taliban had territorial control over Afghanistan in 1996-2001, but when the group was defeated by the US-led intervention launched in 2001 and lost control of Kabul, it continued to function as an insurgency, coming back in greater strength more recently. Al-Shabaab has taken control of major parts of Somalia since 2007, but as the group has been pushed back from most of the cities it previously controlled, it has increasingly reverted to traditional insurgency tactics instead.

In the second case, such groups have more or less ceased to exist after being defeated, but their operatives, weapons and resources have been passed on to new groups. This applies, for example, to GIA in Algeria, which proclaimed an Islamic state in 1993 in the territory it conquered within the framework of the Algerian Civil War. This self-proclaimed state-formation project fell in 1995, and a few years later GIA had become virtually inactive in Algeria, though its resources, both human and material, were transferred to another regional jihadist group (the GSPC group) and then later to AQIM, which continued to operate beyond Algeria. The residues of violent conflict can contribute to renewed conflict long after a conflict has ended. The return to violence may take a long time, even generations. In Indonesia from 1949 to 1962, the Islamist group Darul Islam established its ‘Islamic State of Indonesia’, but ceased to exist after 1962. However, senior members of the organization fled from Indonesia, only to regroup many years later and assume the leadership of a new radical Islamist group in Indonesia, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), which is most famous for the attacks it carried out against holiday-makers in Bali in 2002 (an event that has been called ‘Australia’s 9/11’).
In the third case, there are examples of organizations that made fresh attempts to establish caliphates. This applies to Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) from 2006 to 2008, the organizational predecessor of today’s IS. ISI was severely weakened, though not fully defeated, around 2011, but it managed to re-locate itself in the midst of the Syrian civil war, where it gained a foothold. This also applies to AQAP and its local affiliate Ansar al-Sharia, which proclaimed the ‘Islamic Emirate of Abyan’ in Yemen in 2011. The emirate fell in 2012, but the groups involved bounced back and recreated an Islamic proto-state in southern Yemen between 2015 and 2016 in the context of the country’s ongoing civil war.

What these cases illustrate, therefore, is that, even if one succeeds in a military campaign in the short term, there is a risk that the problem will recur, sometimes in an even worse form. As we are witnessing the downfall of IS and its proclaimed caliphate in Iraq and Syria, it is important to realize that short-term military victories do not necessarily lead to a durable peace.

CONCLUSION 3: PROCESSES OF POLITICAL ACCOMMODATION EXIST THROUGH WHICH ISLAMIST CONFLICTS HAVE BEEN BROUGHT TO END

Peace agreements are rare in armed conflicts in which the parties have framed their demands in the form of religious aspirations, yet they do exist. In particular, peace agreements have been reached with groups fighting over separatist Islamist claims, including between the government of the Philippines and MILF (in 2011, as well as the comprehensive agreement in 2014) and the government of Indonesia and the Aceh rebels (GAM) in 2005. In both cases, autonomy, including in the religious sphere, has been granted in creative ways in order to find peaceful solutions to intractable conflicts. The comprehensive agreement reached between the Philippine government and MILF in 2014 stipulates the creation of a Bangsamoro Autonomous Region (BAR) in Mindanao. Importantly, the government has been open to the prospect of sharia law being applied to Muslims living in this new political entity. To apply territorial autonomy to religious affairs as well is therefore an interesting approach with the potential to create conditions for the resolution of conflicts framed in religious terms. Another example is the peace deal of 2008 between the Pakistani government and the Pakistani Taliban movement, which included implementation of sharia law in the Swat region, as well as the establishment of a local Islamic university. However, this agreement has not been honored by either side and has never been implemented as stipulated.

Another form of political accommodation is to open up the democratic space for Islamist demands. In a recent study written together with my colleague Daniel Finnbogason, I have argued that the opening up of a political space may be one reason why Southeast Asia has been able to curb the most excessive forms of jihadist violence.

In numerous armed conflicts, the termination of violence has not implied that all the grievances that may have led to the original conflict breaking out were managed. Instead there was a change in how these grievances were channeled: through a political process rather than through violence. Armed conflicts can end through the transformation of violent groups into political parties. In the broader perspective of Islamist militancy, this is not uncommon: movements associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, including Hamas in Palestine, have organized themselves into political parties functioning in parallel with armed struggles. Nationalist-Islamist movements such as MILF in the Philippines and GAM in Indonesia have created political parties that can act in their respective territories of Bangsamoro and Aceh. IRP in Tajikistan is the most notable example of an Islamist group fighting for regime change that decided to transform itself into a political party through a peace agreement in 1995.

The fact that the popular base was not conducive to militant Islamism and that the opposition, consisting of both Islamists and nationalists, was able to form a united front against the regime created the conditions in which this transformation could occur. In general, peace agreements are rare in Islamist conflicts, but they can and do happen.

Negotiations that open up possibilities for transformations into political parties can be a function of fundamental changes within conflicts, for example, changes in the roles of actors once the main aspirations have been achieved (victory), or when their inability to continue armed conflicts is unlikely to lead to any further advances (failure). The al-Mahdi Army, under the leadership of preacher Muqtada al-Sadr, transformed itself into a political party, the Iraqi National Alliance Party, and joined the political process once its main objective – the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq – had materialized. At the other end of the spectrum, the Mujahideen movement in Iraq (MEK) demobilised as part of a ceasefire agreement once their Iraq base had been taken over by the American invasion in 2003. Such transformations may not be fully completed, however: political parties with armed militias have remained a constant phenomenon in Iraq.
Another group, the Islamic Army in Iraq (IAI), was created as a reaction to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. When the US withdrew in 2011, the IAI demobilized and created a political wing, the Sunni Popular Front. Before that, in May 2007, it had launched the Reformation and Jihad Front (RJF) together with Ansar al-Sunnah Shariah and the Mujahideen Army. Furthermore, in November 2007 it created the Political Council of the Iraqi Resistance (PCIR), which also included Hamas Iraq and the Islamic Front for the Iraqi Resistance (JAMI). The IAI demobilization of 2011 was not permanent, however, as the group returned to the battlefield at the end of 2013 and beginning of 2014. Yet, the 2011-2014 period saw an interesting temporal de-escalation when the IAI began acting politically (although not by participating in elections). It also coordinated protests against the Baghdad regime in 2012-2013.

Ceasefire arrangements, which have included various forms of political accommodation and created the conditions for ideological re-orientations, have occurred in several Islamist conflicts, including the AIS in Algeria in 1997 and al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya in Egypt the same year. Overall, whereas conflicts fought over Islamist demands have been less associated with peace agreements than other conflicts, no such difference in the general empirical pattern is discernable: conflicts with Islamist groups are neither more nor less likely than others to end in ceasefires. The AIS declared a unilateral ceasefire on 21 September 1997, attempting to distance itself from the more radical Islamists, whose violence against civilians had tarnished the reputation of Islamist movements generally and risked removing its own legitimacy, and its former fighters were then granted freedom from prosecution through a general amnesty declared by the regime in 1999. Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya also declared a unilateral ceasefire in 1997, after decades of fighting the Egyptian regime in an effort to establish an Islamic state. This ceasefire later set the stage for a de-radicalization process, as a part of which the group's leaders dismantled their armed units and published an extensive collection of literature providing theological and instrumental arguments for the de-legitimization of violence. As in the Algerian case, amnesty conditions were laid down in return for al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya's renunciation of violence.

Another form of political accommodation is power-sharing. In Somalia, one conflict defined in Islamist terms ended through political accommodation, but it did not bring about a lasting peace. Yet, the Djibouti agreement created a power-sharing deal which brought the former leaders of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) into the political warmth and made it possible to reinforce Islamic Sharia legislation as the country’s foundational legal code. This was a move to make concessions to some Islamist militants and take the argument out of the hands of the most radical movements, such as al-Shabaab, which continued to fight.

We have not (yet) seen any transnational jihadist conflict ending through a peace settlement and political legalization. There could be several reasons for this. To some extent it can be explained by the ideological cleavage between jihadists and their opponents: agreements are rejected in principle, and thus compromises are not possible. Whereas some revolutionary and separatist Islamist militant groups have shown an interest in creating political structures to replace or work in tandem with military strategies, transnational jihadist groups have largely rejected democracy as a feasible and legitimate model for managing grievances. Yet, it is also important to try to discern what is mere rhetoric – in the rhetoric of groups fighting out of other conflict ideologies too, compromises are rejected – from what is substance. It is also important to recognize that those who have been labeled radicals, fanatics or terrorists have become partners in peace settlements further down the road. Other explanations for why we have not seen any peace deals with transnational jihadist groups is that the international organizational design of transnational jihadist groups, their transnational constituency, makes them less cost-sensitive to local concerns, as well as providing them with a wider pool of potential recruits. This decreases the chances of stalemate and war fatigue, thus making the incentive structure for compromises different than in the case of other sorts of armed groups.

CONCLUSIONS

Is it possible to end transnational jihadist conflicts, and if so how? Military victories may strike most observers as the most obvious answer, but they do not necessarily lead to long-term peace. Whereas religious aspirations (and Islamist ones in particular) are often perceived as intransigent beyond the scope of rational compromises, it is important to recognize that political solutions exist that can be applied in this context, such as establishing regional autonomy, including in religious issues, power-sharing, transformation into political parties (allowing groups with Islamist aspirations to compete through the ballot box rather than the battlefield) and ideological re-orientation. Yet, it is important to recognize that several of the political processes sketched out above are probably conditional on the fact that
These conflicts broke loose from the transnational jihadist framework before solutions could be found. We have seen in this book how local conflicts in Muslim countries can become internationalized. Whether such processes can be reversed – i.e. re-localized – and transformed so that they concern local dynamics rather than global battles is still an open question. Distinguishing between the core and the periphery of the jihadist movement, Cronin has suggested that, although it may be pointless to negotiate with the core of the jihadist groups, it is possible to find negotiated settlements that address local grievances by paying close attention to the variations in goals and groups. IS, for example, is a phenomenon that has merged together three different types of movements: a religious apocalyptic movement, a transnational movement of foreign fighters, and a Sunni movement of empowerment. As for the latter, its underlying concerns can be addressed through different types of institutional accommodation creating a greater sense of security and political influence.

As the other chapters in this book have shown in more detail, what were originally local disputes can be transformed and utilized as part of a larger global campaign, with the explicit aim of creating religiously based state formations that go beyond ethnic boundaries and existing state borders, a process that can be labeled trans-jihadization. In some sense, religious militants can be seen as parasitizing on local grievances and domestic disputes by drawing these into a global dynamic and grander ideological battle. In other words, conflicts that started out with particular and context-specific demands and aspirations are transformed, through their organizational and ideological ties, into broader dynamics. Reversing this process would require disaggregating transnational jihadist conflicts into their local components, implying that actors who are interested in sustainable peace must pay closer attention to some of the underlying local grievances that may have triggered the conflict. The attempts of transnational jihadists to globalize the struggle can be countered by attempts to contextualize it.

Even though IS has lost territorial control in countries such as Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Nigeria, it is too early to discount the transjihadist movement. As recent events in Europe have tragically shown, IS can continue to work through individuals associated with or inspired by its vision, through one-sided violent attacks against civilians around the world. This may even risk their increase in frequency, as the organization seeks to compensate for its defeat in its core territories in order to demonstrate its continued existence and relevance. Individuals may also continue to be inspired, for different motives, to conduct attacks in the organization’s name. The underlying ideology that motivated the formation of IS remains, and many of the structural problems underlying the emergence of IS, including the marginalization of the Sunni Muslim populations of Iraq and Syria, are still largely unchanged, and may in some instances even have worsened. The other key representative of the transnational jihadist movement, al-Qaeda, cannot be discounted either, as it has grown in strength in recent years (mainly through its AQAP and AQIM branches and Jabhat al-Fatah al-Sham affiliate, formerly Jabhat al-Nusrah, in Syria). Thus, the priority must be placed on finding new ways to address, manage and terminate conflicts that are also being fought in the name of religion in a way that leads to durable and sustainable peace.

**BIOGRAPHY**


**Maria-Louise Clausen** is a postdoctoral fellow at the Danish Institute for International Studies. Her current work focuses on Islamic State as an ideational challenge to the state-based international system, especially investigating how Islamic State utilizes religious and cultural references to present itself as a more legitimate alternative to the nation state. Her recent publications include ‘State-building in Fragile States: Strategies of Embedment’ (Politica, 2016), and ‘Islamic State in Yemen: A Rival to al-Qaeda?’ (Connections, 16:1, 2017).


Coverillustration:
Elbohly

Elbohly is a street artist who works in the space between graffiti and calligraphy. His art displays the colourful culture of North Africa and the Arab world, street culture from Denmark and spiritual dimensions of life. Calligraffitti such as this is an artform born in the Middle East and rapidly spreading all over the globe. Combining the traditional anchor of calligraphy and the postmodern notion of a global village, it allows a remix of culture and a hybridity of past rituals and traditions with contemporary art and expressions.

Elbohly has created this work for the cover of ‘Expanding Jihad’ based on one of his graffiti works in the streets of Copenhagen. He is born and raised in Tripoli, Libya, and based in Copenhagen, Denmark.