Articles

Transnational Jihadism: A Conflict to Be Resolved, a Movement to Implode or an Ideology to Be Countered?

by Mona Kanwal Sheikh and Dino Krause

Abstract

Over the course of two-decades-long counterterrorism campaigns in various parts of the world, al-Qaeda and—since 2014—the Islamic State have proven capable of adjusting to setbacks and surviving as transnationally operating organizations. Their continued resilience against counterterrorism efforts underscores the importance of identifying nonviolent containment strategies and furthering academic thinking on 1) resolving conflicts that involve jihadists, 2) strengthening resilience to avoid transnationalization dynamics, and 3) containing the ideological resonance of transnational jihadists. This introduction carves out the key questions that different strands of the literature on containment-related thinking have put on the contemporary research agenda. It identifies three approaches to study transnational jihadism that the contributions to this special issue illuminate further, namely studying transnational jihadism as a particular type of conflict, as a distinct form of organization, or as an ideology or theology with specific content.

Keywords: Transnational jihadism, conflict resolution, peace negotiations, religion, containment

Introduction

This Special Issue of Perspectives on Terrorism examines how the phenomenon of transnational jihadism challenges the ways in which academia and practitioners think about conflict resolution, containment and counter-narratives in the face of extremist ideologies. The ambition is to pull together existing approaches, but also to stimulate novel thinking on the de-escalation and containment of armed conflicts that involve actors who can be considered to form part of the transnational jihadist movement. The contributions to this Special Issue approach transnational jihadism from different perspectives: as a term covering a particular form of conflict, a type of movement or organization, or a particular ideology. Looking at transnational jihadism as a form of conflict implies paying particular attention to the conflict constellation that jihadist actors are part of, including the actions and reactions of opposing or competing parties. Looking at transnational jihadism as a particular type of insurgent group means paying attention to the way they function. For example, local armed groups may pledge allegiance to al-Qaeda (AQ) or the so-called Islamic State (IS) and become integrated into their organizational networks, potentially including the transfer of foreign fighters, ideologues and weapons. Finally, understanding transnational jihadism as a particular form of ideology requires paying attention to the content of the theological or strategic interpretations propagated by key leaders and ideologues. What we ideologically associate with transnational jihadism is a "doctrine" propagating the defense of "the entire Islamic world against the imminent military threat posed by the US and the West," but also the ambition of creating a transnational caliphate, challenging the Westphalian system of nation-states.[1]

The transnational jihadist movement currently has two main organizational manifestations: AQ and IS. Despite disagreeing over a number of ideological and strategical issues, these organizations share some common, defining traits.[2] They both have a cross-border appeal, their demands transgress the nation-state, they react against external interventions and call for Muslim autonomy, and they resemble network-like organizations. These movements perceive jihad—in terms of an armed struggle—to be a (neglected) duty incumbent upon all Muslims, regardless of their national affiliation.[3] AQ was created in the late 1980s as a local recruitment bureau for foreign militants, who were taking part in the mujahideen resistance movement against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. IS emerged as the Iraqi branch of AQ in the aftermath of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, later developing into a separate expansionist movement that took territorial control of large parts of Syria and Iraq. Though deprived of its self-declared caliphate since 2019, IS remains active, both across Syria and Iraq and in other world regions, much like AQ.

Throughout the past twenty years, the dominating strategy to address the jihadist threat has been through military means. Data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) shows that in 11 of the 25 states located

in Africa, the Middle East, or Asia, which experienced organized violence with AQ- or IS-affiliated groups throughout 2020, the respective governments received, or had been receiving, external military support in the form of troop provisions throughout the past ten years.[4] In the short run, the military superiority of the intervening powers has often resulted in tactical successes. For example, in 2001, the US-led intervention of Afghanistan resulted in the expulsion of the Taliban from Kabul within a few weeks.[5] In northern Mali, in 2013, the proclaimed Emirate of Azawad was dissolved after a French military intervention upon request from the Malian government. And in Syria and Iraq, by March 2019, the Islamic State had been expelled from all notable towns it once controlled.[6] However, in all three cases, the jihadists recovered from these early setbacks. In Afghanistan, most recently, the Taliban seized power in August 2021. In Mali, after a decrease in levels of violence following upon the French intervention in 2013, the number of fatalities resulting from violence between the state and (primarily jihadist) insurgent groups has increased every year since 2016.[7] Lastly, in Iraq and Syria, IS managed to adapt to the loss of its self-declared caliphate by morphing back from a proto-state governing millions of civilians into an insurgent group operating predominantly through targeted assassinations, roadside bombings, and suicide attacks.[8] During 2020, AQ and IS were engaged in organized violence in no fewer than 28 countries.[9] Overall, the continued resilience shown by both AQ and IS demonstrates that despite some limited successes gained through these military counterterrorism approaches, jihadists have proven capable of adjusting and re-emerging.

It has been argued that rather than containing the phenomenon, the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) appears to have worsened some of the conditions that had initially given rise to the growth of violent jihadism. As argued by Lia, "[b]y and large, the counterterrorism campaign has been counterproductive."[10] In particular, high levels of civilian casualties caused by counterterrorism operations have allowed "jihadi propagandists to convince their audiences that they are witnessing a war on Islam."[11] In a similar vein, Kalyvas describes how "ill-designed counterinsurgent measures" have benefitted jihadist ideologues in their quest for legitimacy.[12] In some regional contexts, jihadists have also sought to establish bonds with ethnic groups exposed to high levels of state repression. For example, in the Sahel region, some governments have resorted to ethnic self-defense militias in their fight against jihadists. However, these militias have become engaged in ethnically motivated human rights violations and mass killings, thereby further driving recruitment into the jihadists' ranks. [13] On a supra-regional level, military interventions conducted in the context of the GWOT have often led to a dispersal of foreign fighters toward their home countries or toward new battlefields, thus leading to further transnationalization.[14] Against the backdrop of these various challenges associated with military responses to the jihadist threat, in this Special Issue, we aim to contribute to existing research by furthering perspectives that might lead to nonviolent containment strategies in the context of transnational jihadist violence.

Linkages Between Resilience, Resonance, and Resolution

If transnational jihadism is viewed as a form of conflict, it requires resolution in the sense of addressing the dynamics of the conflict and the grievances or incompatibilities of the involved parties. If it is seen as a form of movement with the capacity to tap into different conflict zones, then strengthening of the societal resilience is pivotal. And finally, the thinking that follows from approaching the phenomenon as a particular form of ideology prompts us to think in terms of understanding why it has resonance.

The transnational jihadist movement as such has proven to exhibit a high degree of resilience in the sense that despite massive counterterrorism efforts, armed conflicts with this type of non-state actor have grown in frequency in recent decades, whereas other types of religiously shaped conflicts have become less common. [15] From a conflict-resolution perspective, recent research shows that conflicts with transnationally oriented jihadist groups are significantly less likely to see the onset of peace negotiations.[16] An additional layer of resilience arises from the fact that even in contexts where consolidated insurgencies are not feasible, AQ and IS have successfully mobilized individuals to carry out terrorist attacks in the form of a "leaderless jihad".[17]

The apparent resilience against military defeat and the seeming intractability of transnational jihadist insurgencies raises the question: what can explain its continued resonance among parts of the civilian populations

in the areas in which it operates? In this context, resonance means the ability of jihadists to mobilize support, primarily through the recruitment of fighters, but also in other ways, such as by attracting covert support from private donors. Existing literature on radicalization, conflict extension or transnationalization have provided valuable insights to explain why jihadist groups are resilient and find resonance.

While this Special Issue focuses on the other side of the equation (de-escalation, containment, resolution), there is an obvious link between the reasons behind the successful expansion of the transnational jihadist movement and those factors contributing to the prevention or limitation of such dynamics.

There has been a tendency among many social scientists studying religious violence to dismiss religion as a central explanatory factor. As recently criticized by Dawson, "most researchers partially acknowledge its causal role, yet they persistently minimize its overall significance by categorizing the religious motivational claims made by religious terrorists as nothing more than propaganda."[18] On the other hand, scholars specializing in transnational jihadism have long carved out how differences in their religious worldviews have shaped the strategic competition between AQ and IS as the two rivaling transnational actors.[19] Yet, in spite of such differences, both organizations frame their transnational insurgencies in religious terms and share the long-term goal of establishing a global caliphate.[20] Their narratives view religion as being under attack by both domestic and foreign actors. At the same time, the religious framing does not imply that religion is always the key factor in determining why civilians support or join a jihadist insurgency. Rather, part of their resonance among local populations may be explained by the transnational jihadists' ability to successfully adjust their tactics in different conflicts to particular local conditions. In some contexts, recruitment might occur through the targeting of socioeconomically disadvantaged parts of the population, whereas in other contexts, followers may hail from well-educated university circles.[21] Both AQ and IS have further tapped into tribal and ethnically shaped conflict dynamics, sometimes seemingly acting as a protecting force, while at other times offering opportunities for personal redemption.[22] Moreover, the existing literature points toward political indignation over incumbent regimes—perceived as unjust or repressive—as another key factor.[23]

The observed association between repression and political exclusion, on the one hand, and jihadist militancy, on the other hand, has given rise to a growing number of studies looking into the potentially containing effects of political inclusion on jihadism. Concretely, these studies have investigated whether including Islamist political actors in democratic multiparty politics may not only lead to the ideological moderation of these actors themselves, but simultaneously undermine public support for jihadism.[24] Regarding this "inclusion-moderation" debate, studies have found mixed evidence, identifying processes toward both moderation and further radicalization.[25] However, several group-, country-, or region-specific case studies have highlighted the potentially containing effect of Islamist political inclusion on jihadism.[26]

Other strands of the literature have stressed the organizational traits of the transnational jihadist movement to explain its resilience.[27] This includes the flexibility with which the regional branches of AQ and IS operate. Since many of these groups had existed as more or less coherent organizations prior to formalizing their alliance with AQ or IS, they have also been able to draw upon existing recruitment networks.[28]

Finally, previous research on transnational rebellion has shown that groups with access to operational bases outside the territory of the incumbent government tend to be more resilient.[29] AQ and IS appear to have taken the concept of transnational rebellion to a different level, as their organizational networks not only span across single state borders, but rather across continents.[30] In contrast to rebel groups that explicitly seek to topple a government, reach territorial autonomy, or secession for their ethnic group, AQ and IS have thus proven substantially more flexible in terms of where they operate.[31]

In line with these findings, recent research also shows that locally contained Islamist armed conflicts, that is, those fought over revolutionary or separatist incompatibilities, are neither more nor less likely to see the onset of negotiation. In contrast to this, transnational Islamist conflicts are significantly less likely to be negotiated.[32] Hence transnationalism in itself appears to render armed conflicts more intractable. In fact, to this date there is no case of a peace agreement signed by officially AQ- or IS-affiliated groups, despite occasional cease-

fires or negotiated prisoner releases. In contrast, Islamist rebel groups that signed peace agreements typically have had a more nationally oriented agenda, including the Afghan Taliban, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines, the Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM) in Indonesia, or Islamist factions within the United Tajik Opposition (UTO).[33]

One of the difficulties in negotiating with transnational jihadist groups lies in the jihadists' far-ranging, maximalist claims. They tend to reject the legitimacy of nation-state borders and democratic politics, while clashing with internationally established human-rights norms. There is also a strategic dimension to it: if a rebel group views itself as involved in a transnational struggle, aiming for the creation of a global caliphate, why would it decide to lay down arms in return for political power that only applies in a delimited territory? In this regard, transnational jihadism challenges conventional logics of political negotiations.[34]

Moreover, both governments and transnational jihadists face potential audience costs when considering whether to enter negotiations. From the government's perspective, negotiating with internationally proscribed terrorist groups not only entails the risk of undermining support from the electorate, but may also be opposed by their international partners.[35] On the other hand, transnational jihadists are involved in a global competition over strategic and ideological dominance. In such a context, negotiations with "apostate" governments may easily be perceived as a sign of weakness or abandoning the "right" path. For instance, IS has fiercely condemned the Taliban for their peace agreement with the US.[36]

There are, however, some notable differences when it comes to how AQ, IS and their respective affiliate groups are positioning themselves regarding the issue of negotiations. Over two decades of global counterterrorism, AQ has lost a substantial number of high-ranking leaders while simultaneously facing increasing obstacles trying to communicate with its affiliates around the world. To respond to these challenges, its leadership embarked on a strategy of localization that granted more autonomy to its affiliated groups. This approach is different than the one embraced by the IS, which has adopted a more "hands-on approach to globalism."[37] In this regard, AQ's localized strategy appears to have undermined the grip of its central leadership over the respective affiliate groups, epitomized by its Syrian affiliate Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham breaking its ties with the organization in 2016.[38] Against this backdrop, it is noteworthy that in 2020, AQ's Sahelian branch Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) announced its readiness to enter peace negotiations with the Malian Government, if France were to retract all its forces from the region.[39] Further, in Burkina Faso, reports emerged about clandestine peace negotiations between the Burkinabe Government and JNIM.[40] The case of JNIM brings the question of AQ's control over its affiliate groups to the forefront yet again. While there are no comparable examples of IS-affiliated groups, it remains an open question whether the organization will undergo similar challenges in the future.

Are Transnational Jihadist Actors Exceptional?

Why should we limit our attention to this particular actor category, instead of looking at all religiously defined actors or transnational insurgencies more generally? An ongoing scholarly debate revolves around the question to what extent Islamist and/or jihadist insurgencies are exceptional.[41] In this regard, the debate resembles the exceptionalism debate about the Middle East in the International Relations (IR) discipline.[42] One could, however, similarly ask to what degree it is the counterterrorism responses to jihadist conflicts that have been exceptional, hence contributing to difficulties in "resolving" jihadist conflicts.[43]

Can jihadist conflicts be contained with traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, or do state actors need to rethink, adjust or invent new forms of containment in the face of an exceptional type of movement? To what degree can jihadist groups be compared to other types of actors in insurgencies? On the one hand, it is crucial to acknowledge the many similarities between transnational jihadism and other types of religious extremism, which scholars in the field of religion and conflict have carved out.[44] Moreover, as alluded to earlier, transnational jihadists often adopt the same recruitment tactics as other contemporary rebels, drawing upon ethnic tensions, socioeconomic exclusion, or political repression. However, we argue that the transnational jihadist movement shares a particular combination of traits, which might set it apart from both other contemporary

rebel groups and transnational movements in the past. Our assumption is that these traits might have implications for thinking about conflict resolution, containment and countering.

Firstly, the religious dimension of the transnational jihadist movement sets it apart from the leftist insurgencies of the 20th century, despite the fact that they also share similarities such as being fought along a transnational, group-based narrative of defensive mobilization.[45] Besides the fact that the historical context was different from today's age of globalization and technological development, we know from previous research that religiously defined incompatibilities have a special ability to transform local grievances into transnational ones. [46] In the field of IR, scholars have also found that religiously defined conflicts were longer lasting and hence more difficult to resolve than nonreligious conflicts.[47] Theoretically, this has been explained, amongst other approaches, through the concept of "cosmic wars", a term coined by Mark Juergensmeyer to describe situations in which the conflict issues have been elevated to higher ground—"the sacred drama".[48]

Secondly, the transnational jihadist movement contains an organizational dimension that makes conflict resolution more complicated. As already observed by Kilcullen, the transnational jihadist movement has no single operational center of gravity, as AQ and IS are affiliated with groups in several regional contexts at the same time.[49] This continues to be unparalleled among other contemporary rebel groups. Such "transnationalization" processes even accelerated when AQ and—from 2014 onwards—IS intensified their "branching-out" strategies, entering new conflict arenas across different continents.[50] As observed by Lia, this has allowed the transnational jihadist movement to become de facto immune against a complete military defeat, as the simultaneous presence in multiple battlefields allows the movement to strategically adapt to setbacks—an advantage that no other contemporary rebel movement enjoys to a comparable extent.[51] It is thus less likely that conflicts with these groups ever reach, what Zartman, one of the grand thinkers in the field of conflict research, coined as a "mutually hurting stalemate"—the point of exhaustion that comes before mediation.[52] Moreover, the findings generated by previous research on negotiating the conditions for peace on a national level may not apply if transnational jihadists are involved, at least not as long as the unique transnational relationships at play are considered sufficient.[53]

Thirdly, and related to the second aspect, transnational jihadist conflicts are more intractable than other forms of armed conflict, which sets them apart even from other types of non-transnational Islamist insurgencies.[54] There are substantial ideological obstacles for negotiation to be found both on the rebels' and the governments' side. As outlined earlier, the Islamic State is known to oppose any form of negotiation with what it deems "apostate" governments, while AQ-affiliated groups have occasionally signaled openness for negotiations. In turn, many governments strictly oppose negotiations with groups that are affiliated with organizations such as the Islamic State or AQ. The prevailing approach to deal with transnational jihadist groups such as IS and AQ has instead been a repressive one, centered on counterterrorism paradigms and involving military solutions.

These observations bring the following question to the forefront, which we hope to spark a discussion of with this Special Issue: how should we think about containment in the context of transnational jihadism? If we look at existing ways of understanding transnational jihadism, then it is distinguished by its ability to attract foreign fighters—either from neighboring countries or from other regions.[55] It also implies organizational collaboration between local jihadist rebel groups and the core organizations of AQ or IS. Moreover, conflicts with transnational jihadist rebel groups have often attracted external military interventions from other states or non-state actors in support of, or against, at least one of the warring parties. Finally, the demands formulated by transnational jihadists transcend national borders, which implies that they ideologically represent a challenge to the Westphalian nation-state system and thus to deference to national sovereignty.[56]

Within the field of Peace and Conflict Studies, interest in the role of religion in armed conflicts had already grown considerably for some time.[57] Only more recently, however, have scholars in the discipline begun to pay greater attention to the particular phenomenon of jihadist rebel groups.[58] In this volume, we seek to contribute to this nascent literature by revisiting some of the already well-established theoretical approaches to study processes of conflict resolution and ask to what extent they apply to this particular type of conflict. The issue hence speaks to the broader literature on the granting of autonomy rights to rebel groups, rebel-to-party

transformations, and bargaining theory.[59] Additionally, we broaden the scope of containment-related thinking by including contributions about the de-securitization of "macro-level" jihadist conflicts. In doing so, we engage with the containment tradition of counter-narratives, raising questions of the "practicalities" of ending cosmic wars, and how to de-link local conflicts from larger-scale conflict constellations. With this, we also hope to identify novel, theoretical and empirical avenues that can help understand how the transnational jihadist phenomenon might be more successfully curbed in the future.

The Contributions

The contributions in this Special Issue represent different takes on how to advance our thinking on the containment of transnational jihadism. At the same time, they use different terminologies that represent or display different dimensions of the question. Resolving, imploding, transforming, refuting, managing, or localizing are all terms that deal with ways to overcome the threat posed by transnational jihadism, but stressing different aspects of the phenomenon. In this Special Issue, the authors understand transnational jihadism as a particular form of conflict-constellation, as an escalated form of conflict, as a movement-type, as a particular ideological package, or as an individual trajectory. These differences we want to highlight in order to bring out the manifold dimensions in the thinking about addressing challenges posed by transnational jihadism.

In the first contribution, **Emy Matesan** treats transnational jihadism as a movement-type, highlighting the difficulties that arise from its nature as a hybrid between a local and global movement. Puzzled by the question of whether jihadist groups are particularly conflict prone, or resilient due to their transnational ideology, Matesan evaluates how different aspects of their transnationalism affect the prospects of conflict termination and disengagement from violence. She explores three potential vulnerabilities that can arise from a tension between local mobilization and transnational goals: localization, fragmentation and public backlash. Importantly, her article considers both the advantages and disadvantages of transnational Islamist groups, whereas many studies tend to focus only on the former. Hence, her study shows that the case of the Indonesian group Jemaah Islamiyah and its links to AQ have provided both challenges to, but also opportunities for, de-escalation.

In a similar vein—focusing on transnational jihadism as a particular organizational constellation—**Dino Krause** disaggregates the transnationalism of jihadist rebel groups. His study focuses on two dimensions of "transnationalization" with potential impacts on the willingness of AQ- and IS-affiliated groups to enter negotiations: transnational operations and transnational recruitment. The analysis is based on 20 groups affiliated to either of the two global organizations in the period between 2018–20, showing that only a minority of them has both operated transnationally and employed substantial numbers of foreign fighters during this period. With respect to their operational reach and their recruitment patterns, the study thus challenges their perception as inherently transnational groups, calling instead for a more careful exploration of potential negotiation channels.

Mark Juergensmeyer's article can be viewed as a contribution to the "exceptionalism" debate mentioned in the pages above, as he looks at how three different types of rebel groups came to an end—the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in Mindanao in the Philippines, and the Sikh separatist Khalistan movement in India's Punjab. His findings suggest that in all three cases, the fact that the groups lost resonance over time contributed decisively to a process of internal destabilization. External military force can limit and weaken a movement and provide the coup de grâce that destroys it, but as Juergensmeyer claims, "most movements have been dead before they were destroyed." Across the cases, two further factors contributing to the implosion of the groups stand out: infighting and the opportunities for nonviolent alternatives. His contribution points in the direction of treating the transnational jihadist movement as yet another type of rebellion, bearing similarities with other insurgencies driven by religious and even nationalist worldviews.

The fourth contribution studies transnational jihad as an ideology and focuses on how the resonance of the transnational jihadist movement may be reduced—doing so not from a perspective where counternarratives are seen as a government tool, but by dissecting internal dynamics among the competing jihadist groups. **Saer el-Jaichi** and **Joshua Sabih** zoom in on internal processes of change within the Salafi-jihadi movement.

Concretely, their study explores the refutation of militant jihad in revisionist readings by two former Salafi-jihadi ideologues, known under the aliases Dr. Fadl (Sayyed Imam al-Sharif) and Abu Hafs (Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab Rafiqi). The authors show how these two ideologues combated jihadism through a restorative approach, based on content analysis of Islamic sources. In this regard, according to the authors, the religious arguments brought forth by Dr. Fadl and Abu Hafs underscore the central role that religiously founded arguments can play in curbing armed jihad in general and the practice of excommunication (takfir) in particular. As they conclude, "the religious argument (…) and its ethical philosophy [focus] on the preemptive and deterrent aspects in the reconciliation process, and in so doing [emphasize] ideological change as a key to behavioral change."

In the final contribution, **Mona Kanwal Sheikh** and **Isak Svensson** make a case for investigating transnational jihad as a form of conflict. They examine the two practice-oriented fields of Conflict Resolution Research (CRR) and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) frameworks in order to gain insights on the management of transnational jihadism. Based on a review of the field of Conflict Resolution Research, they pose the question how CVE frameworks may enhance existing Conflict Resolution approaches in the context of transnational jihadism. Their article emphasizes the importance of creating more interaction between research on disengagement and research on conflict transformation, as well as between literatures on conflict extension and on the globalization of jihad. The authors invite future researchers to more systematically examine the exceptionality of transnational jihadism, both as a worldview and as a reflection of macro-securitization.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

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