Jihadists rarely win. Military victories by governments rarely leads to sustainable peace. Political accommodation, however, can sometimes end conflicts fought over Islamist demands.

HOW JIHADIST WARS END

By Isak Svensson

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

2016: by Islamic State (IS) in Pakistan, the revolutionary Islamist group Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) in Bangladesh, and the separatist Islamist group Harakah al-Yangin (HaY) in the Arakan region of Myanmar. Transjihadist conflicts are a more recent phenomenon, and therefore we do not yet fully know whether they are more or less likely than other conflicts to end, or whether they will tend to end in particular ways. In the last couple of years there has been an unprecedented growth in the number of transnational jihadist conflicts, driven in large part by the expansion of IS. In 2014, IS was a party to only three armed conflicts – in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria – but the following year it was involved in a total of 13.[2] In 2016, 60% of Islamist armed conflicts were fought over transnational jihadist aims extending beyond one particular nation state and centering on the establishment of a wider caliphate. In addition to these conflicts, 23% were fought over revolutionary Islamist demands and 17% over separatist Islamist demands.

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 connected, something that applies to the insurgency as well as the governments involved; and because there is no bargaining space for conflicts involving the establishment of a global caliphate. In short, because the local dynamics are 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.[3] 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.[4] 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.'[5] Another study finds that no religious terrorist group has achieved victory.[6] 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.[7]

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.[8] 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 Ahlul 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,[9] yet they do exist.[10, 11] 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.[12] 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.[13]

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.[14] 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 Bangsamaro 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 1996. 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 Bagdad regime in 2012-2013.

Ceasefire arrangements, which have included various forms of political accommo-dation 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.[15] 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.[16] 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.[17]

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[18] 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.[19] 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.

1. Svensson, I. and D. Nilsson, Disputes over the Divine: Introducing the Religion and Armed Conflict (RELAC) Data, 1975-2015. Journal of Conflict Resolution, Forthcoming.

2. Melander, E., T. Pettersson, and L. Themnér, Organized violence, 1989–2015. Journal of Peace Research, 2016. 53(5): pp. 727-742.

3. Nilsson, D. and I. Svensson, How Do Islamist Armed Conflicts End? Islamist claims and civil war outcomes, 1975-2013. Presentation at 'Risks, roots and responses: Nordic conference on research on violent extremism', 2017.

4. Melander, E.e.a., Organised violence 1989-2015. 2016.

5. Gaibulloev, K. and T. Sandler, An empirical analysis of alternative ways that terrorist groups end. Public Choice, 2014. 160(1-2): pp. 25-44.

6. Jones, S.G. and M.C. Libicki, How terrorist groups end: Lessons for countering al Qa'ida. 2008: Rand Corporation.

7. Fortna, V.P., Do Terrorists Win? Rebels' Use of Terrorism and Civil War Outcomes. International Organization, 2015. 69(3): pp. 519-556.

8. Lia, B., Understanding jihadi proto-states. Perspectives on Terrorism, 2015. 9(4).

9. Svensson, I., Fighting with Faith: Religion and Conflict Resolution in Civil Wars. Journal of Conflict Resolution 2007. 51(6): pp. 930-949.

10. Svensson, I., Ending Holy Wars: Religion and Conflict Resolution in Civil Wars. 2012, Brisbane: Unversity of Queensland Press.

11. Svensson, I. and E. Harding, How Holy Wars End: Exploring the Termination Patterns of Conflicts with Religious Dimensions in Asia. Terrorism and Political Violence, 2011. 23: pp. 133-149.

12. Sheikh, M.K., Guardians of God: Inside the Religious Mind of the Pakistani Taliban. 2016: Oxford University Press.

13. Finnbogason, D. and I. Svensson, The missing jihad: why have there been no jihadist civil wars in Southeast Asia? The Pacific Review, 2017: pp. 1-20.

14. Söderberg Kovacs, M. and S. Hatz, Rebel-to-party transformations in civil war peace processes 1975–2011. Democratization, 2016. 23(6): pp. 990-1008.

15. Nilsson, D. and I. Svensson, How Do Islamist Armed Conflicts End? Islamist claims and civil war outcomes, 1975-2013. . Presentation at 'Risks, roots and responses: Nordic conference on research on violent extremism', 2017.

16. Hafez, M.M., Armed Islamist movements and political violence in Algeria. The Middle East Journal, 2000: pp. 572-591.

17. Ashour, O., The De-Radicalisation of Jihadists: Transforming Armed Islamist Movements 2009, Routledge: London.

18. Cronin, A.K., How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns. 2009: Princeton University Press.

19. Juergensmeyer, M., How ISIS Will End. Cairo Review of Global Affairs, 2016.