Jihadism in the Arab World after 2011: Explaining its expansion

Abstract

The dramatic expansion of jihadism as an ideology and a global rebel movement in recent years is one of the most remarkable developments affecting the Middle East. Why has jihadism grown so much stronger since 9/11, during a time period when the major world powers spent trillions of dollars trying to combat jihadism? This brief report grapples with this issue by offering an analytical description of the evolution and the underlying drivers of jihadism with an emphasis on developments after 2011. It pays particular attention to the popular support base, the transnational character and the social embeddedness of contemporary jihadi insurgencies. The common conceptualization of jihadism as an isolated terrorist underground or a narrow apocalyptic cult of fanatics without popular support belies today’s reality. Instead, jihadism represents a global rebel movement with several territorial proto-states, a huge popular base of geographically scattered and dedicated supporters around the globe and an unprecedented capacity to rally fighters and resources to new conflict areas. This movement cannot be defeated by coercive means alone. Only when jihadism is better conceptualized, based on a willingness to accept that it represents a political insurgency brought forth by real-world grievances, can a sound strategy for stemming its continued expansion be constructed.

Introduction: A counterproductive war on terror

One of the most puzzling developments since the watershed event of 9/11 and the onset of the U.S.-led Global War on Terror (GWOT) is the remarkable expansion of the jihadi movement in the Arab world. This dramatic growth has taken place despite efforts to prevent precisely that from happening. Massive investments in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency efforts by a U.S.-led international coalition in cooperation with its regional partners have included the entire spectrum of instruments available in the state toolbox. This extensive and costly campaign notwithstanding, the past fifteen years have witnessed a remarkable growth of jihadism as a rebel ideology, as a military guerrilla force and a global terrorism menace. At the time of writing “the Islamic State” is losing territory in its heartland in Syria and Iraq and in its main regional province in Libya, but at the same time, the organization has proved capable of orchestrating an unprecedented campaign of international terrorist violence (i.e. outside Iraq and Syria), claiming more than 1,200 lives on five continents.
between September 2014 and July 2016. As for the Middle East region, a cursory look at key indicators of the strength of jihadism in the region over the past decade similarly confirms an ominous upward trend (see figure no. 4 and no.5 below).

Over the past few years, it has become brutally apparent that international efforts at combatting jihadism have been a colossal failure. Instead of sapping the military strength of the global jihadi movement, undermining its ideological appeal, shrinking its recruitment base and drying up its sources of financing, Western and Arab counterterrorism efforts have done exactly the opposite. True, individual measures and tactical campaigns have scored short-term successes, such as the U.S. military surge campaign in Iraq in the late 2000s and de-radicalization programs in Egypt in the 1990s and in Libya and Saudi Arabia in the 2000s. These intermittent advances have been undone by later developments, however. The goal of reducing jihadism from a global strategic concern to a minor security nuisance has not been achieved. By and large, the counterterrorism campaign has been counterproductive. By the wisdom of hindsight, we cannot escape the tragic conclusion that the combined effect of combating jihadism since 2001 with a primarily “kinetic” strategy – a common euphemism for lethal military force and coercion – has laid the groundwork for a recruitment bonanza for jihadi groups.

Despite repeated calls for shifting the global counterterrorism focus towards soft power and greater reliance on law enforcement methods, military means have remained the dominant method and operate at cross-purposes with efforts and countering radicalization and violent extremism. The post-2011 period has witnessed military interventions – both in their small- and large footprint manifestations – in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Mali, and many other countries. Following the formation of the initially highly secretive Joint Special Operation Command the U.S. government spearheaded an extensive campaign of targeted killing in dozens of countries around the world, amplified by its drone war which expanded beyond the AfPak-region to war theatres in Africa and the Middle East. The military campaigns were accompanied by the establishment of a global archipelago of clandestine detention facilities, where interrogation techniques were brutal, bordering on torture.

It is still too early to gauge precisely the long-term effects of the GWOT, but it is manifestly clear that the negative fallout is considerable, one of them being the spread of local versions of the GWOT. In the post-2001 era, and especially after the Arab Spring revolutions, a number of Middle Eastern states have embraced the “war on terrorism” narratives for their own purposes, intervening militarily in their neighbouring countries with the stated purpose of rooting out terrorism. Examples abound, including the ongoing Saudi-led campaign against the Houthi rebels in Yemen, the Egyptian air raids into Libya, Jordan’s bombing of ISIS targets in Syria, and not the least, Iran’s and its Lebanese ally Hizbullah’s large-scale deployment of Shiite fighting units in the Syrian civil war.

Loosing hearts and minds

As has been amply discussed elsewhere, a factor rendering the GWOT-strategy counterproductive is that military and coercive action in the name of counterterrorism frequently causes civilian casualties
and abuses, making it easy for jihadi propagandists to convince their audiences that what we are witnessing is a war on Islam. While this claim is often made, one needs to dig deeper to examine the actual effect of the GWOT on the “hearts and minds” of the average population in the Middle East. Based on available opinion polls after 2003, it seems abundantly clear that attempts at winning popular support in the battle against al-Qaida have by and large fallen on deaf ears. Numerous polls in the region show a remarkably high level of support for jihadism as can be seen from figure no. 1, 2 and 3 below. Even after the rise of ISIS, the most violent and monstrous face of contemporary jihadism, the ideology still elicits sympathy from millions of people in the region.

Although the aggregate numbers are down from very high levels of al-Qaida support in the years following the Iraq invasion in 2003\(^8\), there is still a critical, or at least a non-negligent, mass of supporters for jihadism. In several countries in the region, notably Egypt, Jordan, Palestine and Tunisia, people with “a very favourable” or “somewhat favourable opinion of al-Qaida” represent a double-digit percentage of the respondents. The sympathy for ISIS is lower, but even here one finds that between 2 and 10 percentage of the respondents in Palestine, Algeria, Mauretania, Sudan, Egypt and Morocco express “very positive” opinions about ISIS. The aggregate number of the region as a whole is three percent, while the figure is as high as seven percent when including respondents who have a “positive opinion to some extent” to the world’s most lethal jihadi organization. With an estimated 355 million inhabitants in the Middle East and North Africa, the polls below actually suggest that several million people in the region may be very supportive of ISIS and/or al-Qaida.

Lebanon is a notable exception with very low support for ISIS and al-Qaida, which suggests a connection between Sunni Muslim and Arab nationalist identity and support for jihadism. Given that sympathizers tend to be concentrated in certain city districts and regions, such high figures strongly suggest that the popular basis for jihadism is more than sufficient to allow the insurgents to operate like “a fish in the water”, a term well-known from Maoist guerrilla literature.\(^9\) That is, the level of popular support is so extensive that the local population in certain areas is willing to go to some length to aid, abet and even glorify “the mujahidin” hiding in their midst. Hence, far from being an isolated terrorist underground or an extremist fringe, hated and despised by the surrounding populations, the jihadi movement has managed to insert itself as an insurgent movement with a foothold among the masses.\(^10\)
Figure No. 1 – Public opinion on al-Qaida: The columns show the percentage of respondents expressing a “very favourable” opinion of al Qaeda” in selected Arab countries.11

Figure No. 2 – Public opinion on al-Qaida: The columns show the percentage of respondents expressing either a “very favourable” or “somewhat favorable” opinion of al Qaeda” selected Arab countries.12
The Expansion of Jihadism after 2011

The growth and proliferation of jihadi groups have been most pronounced in the aftermath of the Arab popular revolts in 2011, the subsequent Saudi-led counterrevolution campaign, and the onset of civil wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen. The regional expansion of al-Qaida affiliates in the Middle East and North Africa long predates the Arab Spring, beginning in Saudi Arabia with the formation of QAP which was active between 2003 and 2006. Other branches were formed in Iraq in 2004 (AQI, redubbed ISI in 2006, morphing later into ISIS and IS), in Algeria in 2006–7 (AQIM which quickly expanded its operation to most of North Africa) and finally in Yemen (AQAP, active since 2009).14

Jihadi rebel groups have a long history in the Middle East, and have at times represented serious challenges to incumbent regimes. A protracted Islamist rebellion shook Hafiz al-Asad’s regime in Syria from the late 1970s until 1982.15 From the late 1980s until 1997 Egyptian jihadi militants waged a low-intensity insurgency against the Mubarak regime.16 After the Algerian military coup in January 1992, a plethora of Islamist rebel groups took up arms, plunging the country into a devastating civil war, during which more than 100,000 people were killed.17 By the time of the September 11th attacks in 2001, however, jihadi militancy had retreated as a major security challenge to authoritarian regimes in the Arab world, and militant Islamist groups sought refuge elsewhere.18 It was no coincidence, therefore, that the 9/11 attacks originated not in the Middle East, but in Afghanistan, which by the end of the 1990s had become a safe haven for Islamist militants.

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During the early post-9/11 period, the U.S.-led war on terror was primarily focused on Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Iraq war in March 2003 proved a turning point, however, paving the way for the formation of the first al-Qaida branch organization in the Arab world, in a country with hardly any history of jihadi presence with the notable exception of small enclaves in the Kurdish-controlled Northern Iraq region. The subsequent creation of al-Qaida franchises in Yemen, North Africa and Somalia was more a product of a renaming and restructuring of pre-existing Islamist militant groups than the formation of entirely new organizations. Their appropriation of the al-Qaida branch name, narratives and modus operandi, albeit unevenly and not without significant local modifications, was a crucial development in that it represented a trend towards unification of militant Islamism around a global jihad agenda.

Judging by the discourse propagated by official ideologues and random sympathizers alike during the 2000s, the driving force behind this gradual embrace of AQ’s agenda and worldviews was the new geopolitical reality in the Middle East, namely the imposition of a U.S.-led military occupation of Arab and Islamic lands. Although couched in a distinctly religious language, the call for resistance against occupation was omnipresent in jihadi discourse. One may argue that it was nationalism – which historically has emerged in many different manifestations in the region, whether local, pan-Arab and pan-Islamist – that drove young people into the hands of jihadism, not religious zeal, bigotry and xenophobia. And it was this connection with nationalist sentiments that enabled the jihadi movement to expand from an underground movement to become a socially embedded insurgency.

In the aftermath of the Arab popular uprisings in 2011, the region has witnessed a sharp, but very uneven, increase in political violence. As can be seen from the tables below, data from the Global Terrorism Database show an increase in most countries, with the notable exception of Morocco and Algeria. The increase is most dramatic in countries most affected by the Arab Spring revolutions, including Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen, while the changes after 2011 have been much less pronounced in the conservative monarchies of Jordan, Morocco and Saudi-Arabia, countries which staved off the Arab street protestors with a combination of increases in welfare benefits, salary raises, coercion and promises of political reforms.

It is interesting to note that the level of violence in Tunisia, the only Arab country in which the Arab revolutions succeeded in bringing about a regime transition towards democratic rule, violence has been contained, despite the existence of a terrorist underground with support bases in neighbouring Libya. In the other Arab spring countries, where the revolutions failed to dislodge the incumbent regimes, the popular revolts have given way to protracted insurgencies accompanied with extreme counterrevolutionary repression (Egypt) or have descended into full-scale civil wars (Syria, Libya and Yemen). The overall result has been unprecedentedly high levels of violence with a significant spillover effect for neighbouring states (Lebanon, Jordan and Saudi Arabia). Even Iraq, which already had very high levels of violence in the mid- and late 2000s, experienced a post-2011 upsurge, as a byproduct of the Syrian civil war and the rise of ISIS. An exception to the overall upward trend in the region is Algeria, a country which suffered very high levels of jihadi violence in the mid-1990s, followed by a decline during the most of 2000s.
Numerical data does a poor job in conveying the full picture of the transformation of jihadism in the post-2011 era. The quantitative dimension is only a fragment of the metamorphosis of the militant Islamist presence in the region. During the Arab Spring revolutions a much more diverse landscape of jihadism emerged. No longer confined to secretive cells and shadowy networks, jihadi veterans and their sympathisers moved into the open and began operating in a variety of fields from religious proselytization (da’wa) and social charity work to street activism and neighbourhood policing as self-appointed sharia enforcers. The weakening of the incumbent Arab regimes in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Yemen created space for the jihadis to establish overt organizations with public offices, engaging in political activism, including sit-ins and public demonstrations. A number of militant Salafist groups emerged, often under the label of Ansar al-Shari’a, whose the call for armed struggle was tempered by a combination of social activism and a degree of ideological pragmatism with regards to when and where armed jihad was obligatory and prioritized. This development was most visible in Tunisia and Libya, but the subsequent banning of Ansar al-Shari’a in Tunisia led to a contraction of its social activism focus and a more explicit focus on military action. In the case of Yemen, the Ansar al-Shari’a organization was also linked to the existing al-Qaida branch organization, and served as its public face. In other words, a more diverse landscape of jihadism emerged in the immediate post-2011 period and seemed to offer the possibility of a future politicization and taming of jihadism. The prospect of such a development was not based on naïve and unrealistic assumptions. After all, the region had by 2011 already witnessed a series of successful demilitarization and/or deradicalisation initiatives in which a number of armed Islamist groups, factions and ideologues in Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Lebanon had been coopted, and in some cases also agreed to revise their radical ideological programs.
The growing involvement of jihadi groups in non-military activities after the Arab spring suggested that even al-Qaeda affiliated groups might be susceptible to a transition to civilian life. In this regard, the formation of front organizations by AQAP, one of al-Qaeda’s most important regional branch organizations, was an important development, signaling an ambition to expand from a guerrilla organization with a terrorist underground network to a political player. AQAP’s formation of Ansar al-Shari’a and its growing interaction with Yemeni society at a local level in Southern Yemen was not an isolated development. In fact, the post-2011 era witnessed the gradual transformation of many jihadi movements in the regions from terrorist underground groups to what we may term “socially embedded insurgent groups” for whom popular support was actively sought and enlisted. The courting of a popular mass base was nothing new in jihadi ideological discourse. What was new, however, was the new opportunities to practice jihadism as territorial actors and move beyond the monotonic calls of armed struggle alone. Hence, the post Arab Spring jihadi generation moved to form jihadi “emirates” or proto-states at an unprecedented scale and pace. In the five-year period between 2011 and 2016, jihadis created more territorial proto-states than they had done over the more than twenty years that had passed since al-Qaeda’s foundation in 1988. This development is part and parcel of the jihadi movement’s expansion into the civilian realm and its transformation, as alluded to above, from a terrorist underground to a socially embedded insurgency. This offers new opportunities for local jihadi groups to market themselves to local and global audiences. By controlling territory and posing as rulers, jihadi rebels from the small “Emirate of Zinjibar” in Yemen to ISIS-controlled Raqqa and Mosul make efforts at “out-governing” the incumbent regime, not simply by demonstrating diligence in imposing their extremist interpretations of Shariatic law and fighting manifestations of polytheism and unbelief. They also promote themselves in very mundane fields by enforcing public order, fighting crime, providing public services and showing off their uncorrupt bureaucratic style of governance.

The harsh reality of ISIS rule has been amply described in numerous eyewitness accounts and should not be doubted. Still, in a civil war zone any organization that can provide a minimum of safety from government attacks and the killing sprees of ethnic-sectarian militias will often gain some conditional support from the local population. In addition, jihadi rebel groups often rely heavily on external support networks which funnel funds and foreign fighters to the war zone, with ISIS being the most successful jihadi recruiter of volunteer fighters from outside the conflict area. By virtue of its success in conquering huge territories in Syria and Iraq and claiming the Caliphate for itself, ISIS has marketed itself to the global jihadi diaspora not only as the most blessed jihadi front, but also as an utopia, a virtuous Islamic state that fulfills long awaited apocalyptic visions of Islam’s final battles at the gates of Jerusalem. Drawing upon these forebodings of the end of times and its undeniable military prowess on the battlefield, ISIS has been more successfully than any other jihadi insurgent groups in magnetizing jihadi sympathizers worldwide. Over the span of only a few years, ISIS has managed to persuade tens of thousands of foreign volunteers to undertake “the obligatory hijra” (emigration) to “live in the shadow of the Caliphate” and fight with the ISIS mujahidin. This success is even more remarkable given the high casualty rate among foreign volunteers who often are deployed as cannon fodder and suicide bombers.
Figure No. 5 – The proliferation of Jihadi Proto-States in the Arab World after 2011.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Country/district</th>
<th>Time frame</th>
<th>Territorial control</th>
<th>Civilian institutions</th>
<th>Foreign fighters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AQAP – Ansar al-Shari’ah</td>
<td>Southern Yemen / Abyan Province (Zinjibar, Ja’ar, Shuqrah, etc)</td>
<td>2011-2012</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes, small numbers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AQIM – Ansar al-Dine, MUJAO</td>
<td>Northern Mali / Timbuktu, Kidal, Gao, etc</td>
<td>March 2012-2013</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes, small number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jabhat al-Nusra</td>
<td>Syria, areas mostly in North-Western (Idlib) and South-Western Syria</td>
<td>2012 –</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes, but far fewer than ISIS/IS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islamic State of Iraq and Sham / The Islamic State</td>
<td>Large parts of northern Syria and western Iraq</td>
<td>2013 –</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes, unprecedented high numbers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSSI, Ansar al-Shari’ah Libya and IS Provinces</td>
<td>Libya, Benghazi districts, Derna (2014) and in Sirte (since mid-2015)</td>
<td>2014 –</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes, very high percentage, mostly from the African continent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bayt Ansar al-Baqdis – Islamic State’s Sinai Province</td>
<td>Egypt / Sinai</td>
<td>2011 –</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes, small numbers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AQAP – Ansar al-Shari’ah, Sons of Hadramawt</td>
<td>South Yemen, incl. Mukallah, Zinjibar, Jaar</td>
<td>2015 –</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes, Civilian Council appointed</td>
<td>Yes, small number</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Underlying Causes

The debate over the remarkable expansion of jihadism in the Arab world after 2011 has centred on a range of different factors. A comprehensive discussion of these debates is outside the scope of this study, and it suffices here to survey a few of the most common explanations. The U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq at a premature time on the eve of the Arab spring, with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki exacerbating the Iraqi government’s sectarian policies and alienating the Arab Sunni constituencies in Iraq, are frequently seen as key factors behind the regeneration of Iraq’s jihadi movement after its crushing military defeats in the late 2000s. The nearly simultaneous outbreak of civil war in Syria, causing the Syrian regime to gradually withdraw forces and relinquish control over north-eastern Syria paved the way for the establishment of a Syrian foothold and sanctuary for what was then a mostly Iraqi-dominated jihadi movement.

The Collapse of Arab States

More generally, the weakening or collapse of state authorities following the Arab Spring revolutions inadvertently facilitated the growth of jihadi groups, not only in Syria, but also in North Africa and Yemen. In the Maghreb region, the collapse of the Qaddafi regime led to the looting of the government’s huge arms depots. The tragic fallout of this massive “privatization” of conventional weapons proliferating throughout the region was a dramatic upsurge in jihadi insurgent activities, most manifestly demonstrated at In Amenas in Algeria where jihadis managed to seize a well-
protected oil facility and the conquering of huge swathes of territories in northern Mali in 2012. In Yemen, embattled government forces similarly relinquished control over large swathes of territories in southern Yemen, allowing the AQAP and its supporters to consolidate and reorganize its forces. The descent of Yemen into civil war in which the deposed dictator Ali Abdullah Salih joined forces with the Houthi rebels against the new Saudi-supported regime created a situation in which jihadi insurgents avoided taking sides, focusing instead on slowly rebuilding their territorial bases in the south and winning a degree of local legitimacy through alliances with tribal groups and local civilian elites. Also in Libya, a confusingly complex civil war ensued in which the two dominant actors, the Dignity alliance led by General Heftar and the Dawn coalition based in Tripoli and Misrata, spent far more energy on fighting one another than confronting the emerging threat of ISIS-aligned outfits in Benghazi, Derna and Sirte. Similarly in Syria, the Asad regime has consistently focused its military resources against the Syrian revolutionary opposition forces, not ISIS or the Kurdish enclaves in the North-East, considering the former to be its most dangerous foe. Hence, the jihadi expansion in Syria was facilitated by what looked like a de facto Asad-ISIS alliance for much of the early phases of the Syrian civil war.

**Ambiguity about the U.S. Role in the Middle East**

A key factor underlying the rebirth of jihadism in the region was the new ambiguity surrounding the U.S. role in the Middle East under President Barack Obama. Especially in the Gulf monarchies, the ruling elite took notice of the ease by which the United States had acquiesced to and even applauded the fall of Hosni Mubarak, who after all had been a staunch U.S. ally for decades and recipient of annual multi-billion U.S. aid packages since 1970s. The nuclear deal with Iran similarly aroused Arab suspicion that the U.S. was becoming lukewarm to its Gulf Arab allies. U.S. Middle East policies had traditionally been based on three main tenets: Israel’s security, access to oil and the combating of terrorism. The Arab Uprisings and the U.S. response raised the uncomfortable specter of regime change, prompting Arab regimes to more proactively remake the region without U.S. guidance. As a result, a new forward-leaning foreign policy ensued, spearheaded by the Saudi monarchy and UAE. Two policy main agendas were paramount: the eradication of mainstream Islamism in general and the Muslim Brotherhood movement in particular as a legitimate political actor in the region, and the rallying of Arab opinion behind an aggressive policy of reasserting Sunni Arab hegemony vis-à-vis the Iranian Shiite menace. In this new game of counterrevolution and sectarian mobilization, combating jihadism was not the main priority despite repeated official protestations about the necessity to wage war on ISIS and al-Qaida. In fact, by seeking to outlaw the Muslim Brotherhood in the region and by generously funding the new military junta in Egypt from 2013 onwards, the Saudi Kingdom and its allies helped bring about the marginalization of the most potent political Islamist alternative to the jihadi movement. In their counterrevolutionary drive against the parliamentary Islamist alternative the Saudi monarchy and its UAE ally have generously funded the most repressive regime in Egypt in modern times. The effect has been as predicted. With all political channels closed, thousands of Islamist demonstrators killed and tens of thousands of political prisoners, the ranks of Egyptian jihadi groups swelled with defectors from non-violent Islamist groups.
faces the most serious jihadi insurgency in post-independence Egypt, greatly surpassing the level of violence during the simmering conflict of the early 1990s.37

*The Resilience of Transnational Insurgencies*

Another and perhaps more fundamental cause for the remarkable resilience of jihadism in the region is the very transnational nature of militant Islamist insurgencies. Unlike ethno-nationalist revolts or revolutionary struggles against national authorities, jihadis are not ideologically bound to fight only in one country or against one specific national regime. Al-Qaida’s armed struggle (its “global jihad”) is a pan-Islamist revolutionary struggle for the liberation of all Islamic lands, against a coalition of Western countries allied with Arab and Muslim client states. The entire world is a legitimate area of jihadi operations and over the past twenty five years, militant outfits sharing al-Qaida’s ideology have fought in insurgencies from Asia and the Middle East to North Africa, Sahel and East Africa. Hence, on an ideological level, what would have been a crushing military defeat for an ethno-nationalist rebel group is simply a limited and tactical setback for the jihadis. This lack of critical “points of gravity” ensures the long-term survival of the global jihadi movement despite repeated military defeats and the destruction of local groups.

True, many rebel groups falling under the jihadism label have strong local roots and are manned almost exclusively by local recruits, and the local character of rebels claiming to be global jihadis should not be underestimated.38 Still, jihadi insurgents, as opposed to local Muslim rebel groups, interact with a huge network of likeminded groups, operating under al-Qaida (or ISIS) leadership and supported by a geographically scattered network of dedicated supporters and sympathizers around the globe. Over the past decades this constituency has grown stronger in terms of its capacity to mobilize funds, operate online propaganda channels and recruit and dispatch foreign fighters. The meteoric rise in the number of foreign fighters entering ISIS battlefields in Syria and Iraq over the past few years is a case in point. Tens of thousands of volunteer combatants have been recruited from outside from many dozens countries around the world, in itself a sobering reminder of the jihadi movement’s capacity for military mobilization to its priority fronts. In sum, even though many jihadi groups are still predominantly locally staffed – ISIS in Syria, Iraq and Libya being important exceptions – their interconnectedness to this global resource bank is a vital asset endowing jihadi rebel groups with a unique resilience.

Another reason explaining the endurance gained from being a truly transnational insurgency is human resource capital in jihadi groups. Resilient jihadi groups usually benefit from a core of veterans who have fought on various war fronts over the past decades, some even having participated in Afghan war of liberation in the 1980s. This accumulated guerrilla warfare expertise is shared among jihadi groups. It has been documented and passed on via the huge and growing online library of jihadi memoirs, handbooks, audio-taped lectures and video material. Furthermore, the actual practicing of guerrilla warfare in various conflict theatres over such a protracted period also serves as a Darwinist selection process of very capable combat veterans. The case of the Iraqi front is illustrative. Having gained its first major foothold in the region in post-invasion Iraq, jihadi rebels in Iraq faced a formidable military adversary on the battlefield. By fighting a protracted insurgency campaign against
U.S. combat forces, the al-Qaida in Iraq organization, ISIS’s precursor, suffered tremendous losses and defections in the mid- and late 2000s, including top leadership decapitation. A hardened core of Iraq-based jihadis nevertheless survived and managed to reorganize their forces into a coherent organization by the end of the decade, and when fighting under the new ISIS flag, the organization proved its military prowess by scoring remarkable victories on the battlefield in 2013-15.

**Insights from Jihadi War Reporting**

In order to more fully appreciate the transnational character of the contemporary jihadi movement, this study presents new empirical evidence of the movement’s transnationality based on its war reporting. A good place to look for exploring the prioritization of jihadi movement regarding ideological and politico-military issues is the jihadi web forums (See example in Figure No. 6). They remained the primary ideological virtual arena, meeting place, and communication/propaganda channel for jihadis since the early 2000s until social media platforms, and Twitter in particular, began eroding their dominant position in 2012-13.39

*Figure No. 6 – Examples of two top-tier jihadi web forums from 2011.*

By undertaking an analysis of communiqués posted on top-tier jihadi websites between 2005 and 2013, this author finds a pattern, strikingly similar to that of global solidarity movements, in which the focus of attention for the activists’ struggle changes over time from one region to another, and good news from one front makes up for setbacks at another.

In Figure No. 7 below the annual numbers of communiqués posted on the Arabic-language Falluja jihadi web forums is listed, according the country/region of the group signing the various communiqués.40 As can be seen from the tables, Afghanistan and Iraq remained the preeminent focus of the jihadi movement until the advent of the Arab Spring in 2011, with Somalia figuring as the third most reported jihadi frontline during the same period. Not coincidentally, all three countries experienced protracted periods of full military occupation either by a U.S.-led coalition or by forces closely allied with the United States.41 The explicit focus of jihadi war reporting on insurgent activities in Muslim territories under occupation underscores again how large the theme of resistance to foreign rule looms in the jihadi movement’s ideology.
Reports from other areas of jihadi insurgent activity represent only a small fraction of numerous communiqués from Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia. Still, jihadi war reporting from Maghreb, Chechnya and the Arabian Peninsula remain present throughout the entire period, reinforcing the image of a global and truly multi-front insurgency. The absence of one single dominant front is also a notable feature, with the most active jihadi front alternating between Iraq (2005-2007, 2011), Afghanistan (2008-2010), Somalia (2012) and Syria (2013). It underscores the dynamic nature of this transnational insurgency campaign. A certain Arab ethno-centricity is perhaps discernible towards the end of the period when war reporting from the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan disappears. Instead, the statistics become increasingly dominated by war reporting by the new insurgent groups in Syria. The continued posting of large numbers of Shabaab communiqués in 2012 and 2013, shows, however, that jihadi web forum administrators continued taking keen interest in al-Qaida’s new branch organization on the African Horn even in the midst of dramatic Arab Spring events.

*Figure No. 7 – Annual numbers of communiqués posted on the Arabic-language Falluja jihadi web forums between 2007 and 2013, sorted after the primary country affiliation of the group signing/issuing the communiqué.*
Towards a Grand Coalition

The ideological basis for a transnational jihadi insurgency, as evidenced by the statistical data above, is furthermore reinforced by organizational developments throughout the 2000s towards a gradual coalescing of local and regional insurgent groups under the al-Qaida umbrella. True, there are many examples of rivalry between jihadi groups, but the idea that this intra-jihadi competition reduces the movement to an empty shell and that there is no jihadi movement is an overstatement. Examples of cooperation and mergers abound: the Egyptian Islamic Jihad’s merger with al-Qaida in 2001; the absorption of the Tawhid wa’l-Jihad Group (Zarqawi’s outfit) into al-Qaida in 2004; the Algerian GSPC’s conversion to AQIM and its transformation into a regional insurgent organization in 2006-7; the coalescing of Yemeni and Saudi jihadi militants into the AQAP outfit in 2009; the Shabaab’s formal entry into al-Qaida in 2012; and finally, the Nusra Front, one of the strongest rebel factions in Syria, confirming its status as al-Qaida’s Syria branch. A similar fusion trend under ISIS umbrella has been apparent in the post-2011 period: The absorption into ISIS of the important Ansar al-Islam organization, one of the most lethal rebel groups in Iraq throughout the 2000s; the transformation of the Egypt-based Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis group into an ISIS branch (“The Sinai Province”) in 2014; the numerous other pledges of allegiances to “Caliph Ibrahim”, ISIS’ undisputed leader, by important insurgent groups like Boko Haram based in northern Nigeria and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the latter with strongholds in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region.
Much ink has been spilt over the AQ-IS rivalry, with assessments ranging from the overly optimistic scenario of the imminent demise of jihadism as a result of this intra-jihadi civil war to the pessimistic views that this rivalry not only demonstrates the new-won vitality of contemporary jihadism, but also encourages the two rivals to constantly improve their lethal tactics in international terrorism to win new supporters. Based on what is evident so far, the ISIS challenge has not seriously shattered al-Qaida’s regional alliances. In fact, the most important regional branches have not defected to ISIS, and al-Qaida has even managed to form new regional branch organizations since 2011. Only groups with loose affiliation to al-Qaida have joined ISIS (e.g. the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Caucasus Emirate, and Boko Haram) as well as many of the smaller post-2011 jihadi newcomers. Importantly, the Afghan Taliban movement, one of al-Qaida’s most important allies since the late 1990s, has not joined ISIS, choosing instead to launch a vicious fight to root out ISIS presence in Afghanistan. While ISIS makes much out of the “Caliphate”, its proto-state in Syria and Iraq, it is worth remembering that al-Qaida, through its branches in the Arab world, has also set up and administered a number of proto-states in the post-2011 period, most evidently in Yemen and northern Mali. (In this regard, the accepted notion that “Al Qaeda has never shown much interest in taking or holding territory in order to set up an Islamic state and govern” does not hold up to scrutiny.) Similarly, ISIS managed to form only one new territorial proto-state outside Syria/Syria, limited mostly to city enclaves in Libya with a much smaller population and revenue basis compared to its mother organization.

**The Hegemonic Rebel Ideology of Our Time**

The near-term demise of jihadism as a rebel ideology or al-Qaida as an organization is clearly wholly unfounded. What the ongoing ISIS-AQ rivalry does suggest, however, is that jihadism now enjoys an unrivalled position as the most popular ideology among armed rebels in the Middle East today. This hegemonic position as an ideology for armed rebellion also extends to many Muslim-majority countries. Never before in the recent past have so many local rebel groups and militant outfits in Muslim-majority countries sought to latch on to the jihadi logo and brand name with the presumed aim to win external support and/or gain advantages vis-à-vis local competitors. The development is somewhat similar to the popularity of Marxism and Maoism among Third World rebel groups from the 1960s until the end of the Cold War. A major difference stands out, however. While Marxist rebels could count on material and ideological support from the Communist bloc, contemporary jihadism does not have the same kind of dedicated state sponsors. Instead they have to rely on shadowy private support networks. Such private sponsorship has become so much more effective today than in the past due to the combined effect of Internet connectivity, migration, and the growth of Muslim diaspora communities in high-income countries.

**Enter the Youth**

Yet another striking feature of contemporary jihadism that may help us understand the driving factors behind this transnational insurgency movement is its continued appeal among diverse audiences in the Arab world, and especially the youth, despite its deployment of increasingly brutal methods of violence. Jihadi recruits span the entire spectrum from well-educated middle class...
youth to the disenfranchised poor and born-again Muslims with a past history of street crime. Existing literature on “Muslim radicalization” is highly ambiguous regarding causes, usually offering a long menu of possible drivers spanning from political repression and feelings of humiliation to material poverty and lack of education and opportunities. Although a full discussion is outside the scope of this study, an interesting and often overlooked aspect of contemporary jihadism in the Arab world is its anti-patriarchal and anti-tribal character. This may seem an odd argument in light of the overwhelming evidence of misogynist discourse and practice by male jihadists. However, patriarchy and tribalism may also be understood as the domination of older men over young males, usually through some kind of kinship organizations or clientelist networks. Using this definition, one finds that jihadi insurgent groups are remarkably anti-patriarchal, which sets them apart from dominant political structures in the Middle East region. The jihadis not only talk, but also practice a sort of anti-patriarchalism, by allowing young people (predominantly young men) to gain positions of power and authority in their organization. This is evident from the large volume of jihadi propaganda videos shot in ISIS and al-Qaida ruled proto-states, areas where the jihadis are able to put their ideology into practice. As can be seen from Figure No. 8, offices and bureaucracies in territories ruled by jihadi rebels are often manned by men in their early twenties. This youthful expression of jihadi rule is all the more remarkable in a region in which leadership positions in politics and business are usually the preserve of old men.

Figure No. 8 – Screen grabs from video productions by ISIS Libya in 2016.
Concluding Remarks

In this brief study, we have sketched the evolution of the evolution of jihadism after the Arab Uprisings in 2011 and discussed the causes for its remarkable regional expansion since 2001 and particularly in the post-Arab Spring period. As is evident from the above discussion, one cannot avoid the conclusion that jihadism does have a critical popular support base in many Middle East countries, enabling it to operate far more freely than would have been possible had jihadism simply consisted of isolated terrorist cells that would easily be defeated through military action and state coercion. The striking resilience of contemporary jihadism is in no small measure a result of its truly transnational character and the social embeddedness of its local insurgent groups, enabling it to melt away in the face of superior military force only to regroup with renewed strength at a time and place of its own choosing.

The common conceptualization of Jihadism as a terrorist underground without popular support belies today’s reality and is a dangerous misconception. Instead, it represents a massive global rebel movement with several territorial proto-states, a huge popular base of geographically scattered and dedicated supporters around the globe and a massive capacity to rally foreign fighters and resources to new conflict areas. This movement cannot be defeated by coercive means alone. In fact, the post-2001 record of the U.S.-led War on Terror has by and large demonstrated the counterproductive effect of massive reliance of military repression and state coercion. Only when jihadism is better conceptualized, based on a willingness to accept that it represents a political insurgency brought forth by real-world grievances, can a sound strategy for stemming its continued expansion be constructed.
For an illustrative example of the counter-productive effects of the U.S.-led campaign against the jihadi movement, see e.g. Hassan Hassan, "Washington’s War on the Islamic State Is Only Making It Stronger", Foreign Policy, 16 June 2016. Retrieved from http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/06/16/washingtons-war-on-the-islamic-state-is-only-making-it-stronger-syria-iraq-libya/


Mao Zedong wrote in his treatise of guerrilla warfare: “Many people think it impossible for guerrillas to exist for long in the enemy’s rear. Such a belief reveals lack of comprehension of the relationship that should exist between the people and the troops. The farmer may be likened to water the latter to the fish who inhabit it. How may it be said that these two cannot exist together? It is only undisciplined troops who make the people their enemies and who, like the fish out of its native element cannot live.” Cited in Mao Zedong, On Guerrilla Warfare, chapter 6. Retrieved from https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/works/1937/guerrilla-warfare/ch06.htm

One indicator of the relatively broad popular support for jihadists in the region is the openness by which jihadi facilitators are operating in Jordan, a staunchly pro-Western monarchy, from which some 2,500 foreign fighters reportedly have been recruited. See “Jordan Struggles With Islamic Extremism at Home”, Wall Street Journal, 14 August 2016. Retrieved at http://www.wsj.com/articles/jordan-struggles-with-islamic-extremism-at-home-1471225840

Figures show the share of respondents choosing "very favourable" to the question “[p]lease tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable or very unfavorable opinion of al Qaeda” (in percentage). Note: unavailable data for Palestine in 2010 and 2012 for Tunisia for 2010 and 2011. Based on data published in Concerns about Islamic Extremism on the Rise in the Middle East. Pew Research Center, July 2014, p.21. Accessed from www.pewresearch.org

Figures show the aggregate share of respondents choosing “very favourable” and “somewhat favourable” to the question “[p]lease tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable or very unfavorable opinion of al Qaeda” (in percentage). Ibid.

The QAP was a Saudi-based jihadi groups, consisting of mostly Saudi Afghan veterans who fought a protracted violent campaign against the Saudi Kingdom between 2003 and 2006. AQAP is an acronym for “al-Qaida on the Arab Peninsula”, denoting a Yemen-based group formed in January 2009. AQI stands for “al-Qaida in Iraq”, and AQIM is “al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghrib”.


The data is collected from the Global Terrorism Database ([www.start.umd.edu/gtd](http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd)), the most acknowledged and comprehensive of existing open access databases on terrorism. The search criteria used for collecting data are as follows: all ambiguous cases have been excluded. Similarly, unsuccessful attacks and plots have been excluded. No attempt has been made to distinguish between jihadi and non-jihadi forms for terrorism. Since jihadi rebel groups are the major perpetrator of terrorist violence outside the civil war zones of Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen, and are also among the most dominant rebel factions in all countries with active insurgencies, the statistics are probably a relatively good mirror image of variations of jihadi violence.


U.S. support key to Ethiopia's invasion


One example of how the current anti-ISIS campaign may be counterproductive and drive Sunni Arab population back into the hands of ISIS is the recent reporting of the large-scale atrocities and abuses committed by Iraqi Shiite militias during the liberation of the ISIS-held town of Falluja in Iraq. See "Special Report: Massacre reports show U.S. inability to curb Iraq militias", *Reuters* 23 August 2016. Retrieved from http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-massacres-falluja-special-report-idUSKCN10Y1VD


In addition, during the Cold War, the U.S. gave very high priority to keeping the Soviet Union out of the Middle East.


See e. g. the warnings to the Obama Administration in this Brookings policy brief: Tamara Cofman Wittes and Daniel L Byman, "Muslim Brotherhood Radicalizes", Brookings.edu 23 January 2014. Retrieved from https://www.brookings.edu/research/muslim-brotherhood-radicalizes/


Under Usama bin Laden's leadership, al-Qaida was wary of bestowing its brand name on several local groups seeking bin Laden's approval, fearing that their disunity and lack of dedication to the global jihadi cause would harm al-Qaida's cause. See e.g. "Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Laden sidelined?" *CTC Report* 3 May 2012. Retrieved from https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/letters-from-abbottabad-bin-ladin-sidelined


The author has also used al-Hasba forum archives from the 2005-2006 period, showing similar trends with a heavy focus on the Iraqi front. Due to space limits, these data will not be presented here.


The fact that Arabic is the dominant, but not the exclusive, language used in these web fora may explain the low prioritization of the Taliban struggle. Furthermore, the Taliban organization maintains its own websites and online propaganda channels in multiple languages.


In late July 2016, JaN renamed itself as *Jabhat Path al-Sham* or "The Conquest of the Levant Front", apparently signaling a split by declaring "no affiliation to any external entity". In reality, however, al-Qaida seems to have endorsed JaN's renaming process. Their ties appear to remain strong with Jawlani heaping praise on Zawahiri and his deputy for their "blessed leadership".
This assessment is borne out of observations from several regions. For example, with regards to AQIM in West Africa, one expert assesses that “[t]he increasing frequency of AQIM attacks and their timing, which has often coincided with IS assaults, suggests the group is trying to ensure it is not out-done by the more radical agenda of IS. The Bamako attack, for example, came just 10 days after the IS Paris attacks in November 2015; and the Ouagadougou attack occurred almost immediately after IS carried out an attack in Jakarta, the group's first assault in Southeast Asia.” Cited in Jessica Moody. “Foreign Assets Under Threat: Is AQIM Preparing an In Amenas-Style Attack?” Terrorism Monitor 14, no. 14 (2016): 7-10. Retrieved from http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/TM__Vol_14_Issue_03.pdf

They include the Nusra Front (now renamed as "The Conquest of the Levant Front") and al-Qaida on the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), the latter formed in 2014.


The proto-state in northern Nigeria (see Figure No. 4) was set up by Boko Haram with minimal ISIS involvement.


