

Expansion or Failure?
Patterns of Transnational
Jihadist Conflict

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Jihadist Conflict

PhD Dissertation

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Preface

When I took up my Bachelor's studies in Political Science at the University of Mannheim, Germany, in August 2011, the peaceful protests of the Arab Spring had only recently begun – but in Syria they were already transitioning into an outright armed conflict. At this point, I was following these developments with great interest, but still grappled to fully comprehend the complexity of the various armed factions fighting for power. While jihadist groups played a marginal role in the initial months of the Syrian Civil War, the situation began to change in 2012, when Jabhat al-Nusra emerged on the scene and started to develop into the most militarily powerful anti-Assad group. Moreover, from 2013 onwards, the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS), led by Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi, began to formally establish its presence in Syria, leading to a bloody intra-jihadi conflict with Jabhat al-Nusra. ISIS seized control of Raqqa in January 2014, before al-Baghdadi proclaimed a caliphate from the al-Nouri Mosque in Mosul, Iraq, less than six months later.

The rise of jihadism in the Syrian Civil War coincided and interacted with developments in Germany that began to draw my attention in May 2012, when a large-scale protest of approximately 500 Salafists in the former capital city of Bonn was dominating the national news headlines. The demonstration escalated violently and resulted in the stabbing of two police officers and the detainment of several dozen participants. One of those who were detained that day was Denis Cuspert, also known by his rapper alias 'Deso Dogg', who would soon thereafter emigrate to Syria and turn into the most infamous German foreign fighter embedded with ISIS. In addition to Cuspert, numerous other Salafists who were present at the Bonn protest would later travel to Iraq and Syria as foreign fighters. I was deeply puzzled as I observed the growing outflow of foreign fighters – in total, it is estimated that around 1,000 Germans joined ISIS between 2013 and 2019 – and the seeming helplessness of German authorities in their attempts to prevent it. I was also stunned by the fact that, for several years, German ISIS sympathizers were able to carry out massive Quran distribution campaigns across Germany, which were not outlawed until 2016. I remember a feeling of unease as I walked past one of their stands in the city center of Mannheim in the summer of 2015, knowing that various figures associated with the Quran distributions had been linked to ISIS, which by that time had already burnt alive the Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh and was carrying out a genocide against Iraq's Yazidi population, while publishing countless other atrocities in its affiliated media channels.

The developments in Iraq and Syria contributed to strengthening my interest in the wider topic of peace and conflict research, but also in the issue of

jihadism more specifically. At the same time, my primary regional interest still lay in Latin America, where I had spent extended periods of time for various internships. During my Master's in Peace and Conflict Studies at Uppsala University's Department of Peace and Conflict Research from 2015-17, the threat of jihadist violence started to come increasingly close to my own physical surroundings. In November 2015, just days after the devastating attacks carried out by an ISIS cell in Paris, an international friendly football match between Germany and the Netherlands in my hometown of Hannover was cancelled at the last minute due to a suspected terrorist threat. Later, the ISIS-claimed attacks in Berlin (2016), where I had lived for three months earlier that year, or in Stockholm (2017), only a few kilometers away from where I was studying, made the jihadist threat feel particularly close. In the summer of the European football championship in France in 2016, while I was watching the semi-final in front of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, a mass panic suddenly broke out. Thousands of people were wildly running towards the emergency exits, while heavily armed police officers looked clueless about what was going on. I lost sight of all my friends, climbed over a fence and ran into a nearby restaurant, where I hid in the toilets for several minutes. Ultimately, the police announced that a firecracker in the crowd had caused the panic and that there was no further danger. Still, I remember the summer of 2016 as a time when the feeling of threat and fear had begun to trickle into European societies.

While such events were terrifying, they increased my interest in the phenomenon of transnational jihadism. Why were thousands of foreign fighters willing to fight with a group in Iraq and Syria, and why were they willing to kill innocent civilians in their home countries? And what were the linkages between jihadist groups that were operating in Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia at the same time, calling themselves al-Qaeda or ISIS affiliates? These were some of the questions that went through my mind around that time, but I still knew very little about the answers to them. It was in the fall of 2017, after finishing my Master's studies in Uppsala, that I finally got the chance to dig into some of these questions on a professional level. Isak Svensson, Professor at Uppsala University's Department of Peace and Conflict Research whose course on mediation I had attended during my Master's studies, was looking for a research assistant on his project 'Resolving Jihadist Conflicts'. Initially, I was hired on a sub-project that sought to understand why local jihadist groups sometimes transnationalized their struggle by joining al-Qaeda or IS. Compared to various other sub-projects that we pursued during my employment, this question seemed especially puzzling. We knew very clearly what we wanted to study but struggled to find a feasible methodological approach. Ultimately, we changed the angle and Isak encouraged me to keep this question in mind for a potential PhD project.

That opportunity then arose in the summer of 2019, when Mona Kanwal Sheikh was hiring a PhD student within her new research project ‘Transnational Jihad’, located at the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) and funded by the European Research Council (ERC). After being selected for the position, I started my PhD in Copenhagen in September 2019. The project as a whole set out to find answers to the question of why transnational jihadist organizations are able to tap into local conflict dynamics and escalate violence. Each of the three researchers that together have formed the core of the project – Mona Kanwal Sheikh, Saer el-Jaichi, and I – approached this question from different angles. My particular contribution and, hence, the contribution of this dissertation to the larger ERC project lies both in its peace-and-conflict-specific angle and in its attempt to identify larger patterns that hold across different conflict zones.

While my primary affiliation was with DIIS throughout these past three years, I was also affiliated with other research institutions. From the start of my PhD project until December 2021, I was affiliated with the Political Science Department at Copenhagen University, and from December 2021 until August 2022, with the Political Science Department at Aarhus University. In addition, in January and February 2021 I spent two months as a visiting PhD student at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). My PhD dissertation is titled ‘Expansion or Failure? Patterns of Transnational Jihadist Conflicts’. It comprises the present summary report along with three self-contained essays:

1. Krause, Dino. “Armed Conflicts With al-Qaeda and the Islamic State: The Role of Repression and State Capacity.” Under review (Revised and Resubmitted to Journal of Conflict Resolution)
2. Krause, Dino (2022). "Failed Transnationalization? The Challenges Faced by al-Qaeda and IS in South Asia." This article has been published by Taylor & Francis in Studies in Conflict and Terrorism on 07 April 2022, available online: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1057610X.2022.2058347?tab=permissions&scroll=top>.
3. Krause, Dino (2022). "How Transnational is “Transnational”? Foreign Fighter Recruitment and Transnational Operations among Affiliates of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State." This article has been published by the Terrorism Research Initiative (TRI) and the Institute of Security and Global Affairs (ISGA) in Perspectives on Terrorism in Volume 16(1): 23-37, available online: <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2022/issue-1/kraus.pdf>.

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First and foremost, I want to thank the European Research Council (ERC) for generously funding this PhD project, and the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) for hosting it. Being a PhD student at DIIS has been beneficial for a number of reasons. Besides the fact that the institute offered an excellent research environment filled with bright and impressive scholars, it also offered invaluable financial and organizational support on numerous fronts, including financing three years of intensive Arabic language training, which was valuable for writing this dissertation and will be even more useful in the future.

Over the course of these past three years, I have felt very privileged because of the support I received from my supervisors, Mona Kanwal Sheikh, Morten Valbjørn and Karen Lund Pedersen. Thank you, Mona, for hiring me in the first place and for being an inspiration not only as a researcher but also as an academic mentor. I appreciate that however busy your own schedule was, you always found time to sit down, read through my work and provide sharp feedback. You have been an absolutely crucial source of constant support over these last years. I can already congratulate your future PhD students, because having you as a supervisor is a true privilege. Morten, thank you for joining this PhD project at a later, but nonetheless crucial, stage. At first I was not sure whether changing to a different university less than one year before the end of my PhD would be a wise decision. However, your constant efforts to improve this dissertation and your excellent feedback made all the effort worthwhile in the end. Karen, I am highly grateful for your support as my supervisor during the first year of writing this dissertation. While it was a shame that your change to DIIS meant that I needed a new university-based supervisor, it is a pleasure to now have you as a colleague.

In addition to Mona, I also want to thank Saer and Telli as the other two core members of our ERC project. Saer, thank you for very valuable feedback whenever I needed someone to explain the finer nuances of jihadists' use of theological sources to me. Telli, thank you for all the support you provided to our joint work. Because of our ERC project meetings, I always looked forward to coming into the office on Monday mornings, even though that is usually not my favourite time of the week. Working together with you and Mona was not only intellectually stimulating, but also a lot of fun.

Another person who has been crucial for this PhD project is Isak Svensson. Isak, I consider you both an academic role model and a mentor. It was thanks to your decision to hire me as a research assistant that I was able to follow my

interest in the wider topic of jihadism on a professional level. Most importantly, your willingness to collaborate and to give credit to the work of your research assistants is exemplary and helps young scholars to develop careers as researchers. I also want to thank the other core group members of my former ‘Resolving Jihadist Conflicts’ project based at Uppsala University’s Department of Peace and Conflict Research. Desirée Nilsson and Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs, thanks for having provided great feedback at different stages of my PhD. You are both impressive scholars and I have learnt a lot from working together with you over the years. Thank you also to the other project members, especially Luís Martínez Lorenzo and Matthew Bamber, for having commented on my work during our different jointly organized workshops. I am also grateful to Hanne Fjelde who, when supervising my Master thesis in Uppsala, was the very first person who encouraged me to pursue an academic career, something I had never seriously considered up to that point.

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At DIIS, I received critical and constructive feedback from many people, especially from the members of our Global Security research unit. A special thank you goes to Trine Villumsen Berling for being a very engaged and supportive unit leader, and to Stefano Guzzini for organizing both demanding and insightful research seminars. Thank you to the PhD group at DIIS, especially to the ‘Shut-up-and-write’ group that met on Fridays: Ahlam Chemlali, Alberte Bové Rud, Karmen Tornius, Lis Kayser and Sarah Seddig. Also, Sarah: thanks not only for all your contributions to our PhD-group, but also for having become a great friend and for your constant support, both on a professional and a personal level. Of course, some non-researchers at DIIS were of great help too during these past three years. Thank you Sylvia Nalubwama and Mette Koch for administratively supporting our project and for explaining to me about a dozen times how RejsUd works. Thank you Lola Bentsen and Nadia Alanti not only for your contract-related support, but also for your personal commitment to make sure we all got as healthy as possible through the pandemic.

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my dissertation. At Copenhagen University, I am particularly grateful for comments on my work from Lene Holm-Pedersen, Lene Hansen and the PhD-group, especially from my former office buddies Frederik Kjøller Larsen and Jeppe Vierø, not only for a lot of useful feedback but also for a lot of fun in the office.

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On a more personal note, I remember that when I started my PhD in the fall of 2019, I was told that writing a dissertation would essentially be like an emotional rollercoaster, and that it could be lonely from time to time. What I did not anticipate was the outbreak of a global pandemic, lockdowns, and being separated from family and friends for almost one and a half years. Nonetheless, writing this dissertation was made a lot easier thanks to their support, even if only via phone or video calls. Mama, thank you for the unconditional love and support not only these past three years but over the past three decades, I feel incredibly lucky to have you in my life. Thank you Karo for always being the big sister I could look up to and for helping me navigate academia whenever I was struggling. Papa, although you left us way too early, the curiosity for the world that you instilled in us children from the youngest age onwards has been very formative.

I am further grateful for being able to count on a group of such fantastic friends. Thank you to my Berlin crew, Benny, Connie, David and Mara, for days and nights full of dancing, discussing, hiking and, most of all, laughing. You are the best. Thank you Edin and Lukas for always being there for me, even when you were going through some rough times yourselves. Karl, thank you for having become such a great and important friend, life at Möllan would only be half as much fun if you weren't around. Thanks also to Gustav and Marco for all your support, especially last year during the spring when I

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1. Introduction

The Puzzle

In October and November 2021, the Ugandan capital of Kampala was hit by a series of armed attacks. On 7 October, a bomb exploded at a police station in the Kawempe area, injuring several police officers and causing material damages (al-Lami 2021). Later that month, on 23 October, a nail bomb detonated at a restaurant located on the city's outskirts, killing a 20-year-old waitress and leaving three critically injured (Mersie 2021). Less than a month later, on 16 November, three suicide bombers detonated themselves, two at the Kampala Central Police Station and one in front of the parliament building, causing altogether three casualties and leaving 36 injured (Lister et al. 2021).

Besides the tragic deaths and injuries of several people, these events were noteworthy for another reason: they were the first attacks carried out on Ugandan soil that were claimed by the so-called Islamic State (IS)¹ (O'Farrell 2021). Concretely, the attackers belonged to an armed group that had been formed in the mid-1990s in Uganda, long known as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). In 2003, this group relocated from Uganda to the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Since pledging allegiance to IS in 2019, it operated as one of two constituent groups forming the Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP) (Candland et al. 2021). The other ISCAP constituent group was created in July of that same year (2019), when Ansar al-Sunna, a local rebel group in Mozambique's northeastern Cabo Delgado province, pledged allegiance to IS (Morier-Genoud 2020, 1).²

¹ Throughout this dissertation, I use the term 'Islamic State' or 'IS' to designate the Islamic State as a transnational organization, including its various affiliate groups. I use the term 'Islamic State in Iraq and Sham' or 'ISIS' when speaking specifically about the group's organizational core based in Iraq and Syria. For semantic purposes, I sometimes use the term 'IS core' synonymously. Finally, when speaking about individual affiliate groups, I use their respective names as specified by IS in its propaganda outputs.

² In May 2022, IS used, for the first time, the designation 'Mozambique Province' in a claim of responsibility for an attack carried out by its Mozambique-based affiliate group (Site Intelligence Group 2022). This designation was also used in subsequent attack claims and thus, at the time of writing, IS appears to have abandoned its previously applied dual approach with regard to ISCAP. ISCAP is thus now synonymous with the organization's DRC-based affiliate group.

The emergence of ISCAP illustrates a pattern that has been observed in different parts of the world over the past two decades: local rebel groups give up their former organizational identities and pledge allegiance to a transnational jihadist organization. As early as the 1990s, al-Qaeda had begun to establish a global network through which it collaborated with local rebel groups in places as diverse as Algeria, Ethiopia or the Philippines. However, it was only in the years following the 9/11 attacks that the organization began to formalize some of these affiliations, by adopting a ‘branching out strategy’ (Mendelsohn 2015, 1). When IS emerged as al-Qaeda’s transnational rival in 2014, it followed a similar approach, establishing dozens of ‘provinces’ (*wilayat*) in different parts of the world. To capture these integration processes, in this dissertation I apply the term ‘transnationalization’, which was coined by Harpviken (2012, 203) to describe ‘the process by which non-state groups integrate with transnational actors’.

Today, al-Qaeda and IS constitute a global security threat: between 2010 and 2020, the share of the world’s intrastate conflicts involving rebel groups that were affiliated with either of these two organizations increased from 12.5% to 33%. I refer to intrastate conflicts with this particular actor constellation as ‘transnational jihadist conflicts’.³ As regards the question of who constitutes an ‘affiliate’, I build on the definition provided by Melander, Pettersson, and Themnér (2016), who define a non-state actor to be a direct al-Qaeda or IS affiliate if its leadership has publicly pledged allegiance to the transnational organization, and if the latter has accepted that pledge of allegiance.⁴ In 2020, over half of the world’s twenty most intensive intrastate conflicts were transnational jihadist conflicts.⁵ Figure 1 below illustrates the

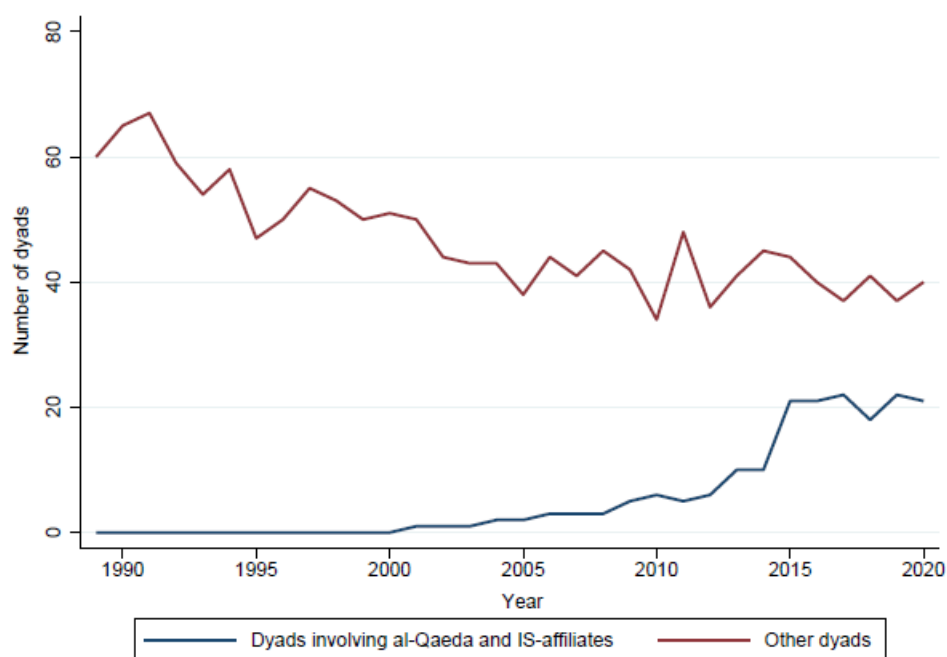
³ The same term is also used in a recent study by Svensson and Nilsson (2022).

⁴ I follow the Uppsala Conflict Data Program’s (UCDP) definition of a ‘state-based armed conflict’ as ‘a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year’ (UCDP 2022). In this dissertation I focus on intrastate and internationalized intrastate conflicts; that is, state-based armed conflicts in which the government of a state is fighting against a non-state actor, thus excluding interstate conflicts fought exclusively between governments. Transnational jihadist conflicts are thus intrastate conflicts in which the non-state party is affiliated with al-Qaeda or IS through an open pledge of allegiance that has been acknowledged by the central organization’s leadership.

⁵ Author’s own calculations based on the Uppsala Conflict Data Program’s (UCDP) Dyadic Dataset (version 21.1) (Harbom, Melander, and Wallensteen 2008) and the UCDP’s Battle-Related Deaths Dataset (version 21.1) (Davies, Pettersson, and Öberg

spread of this type of conflict over recent decades. As is clear from the graph, the number of intrastate conflicts *not* involving direct al-Qaeda or IS affiliates has in fact *decreased* since the end of the Cold War. However, at the same time, these two organizations have managed to establish a presence in an increasing number of conflicts. Even the loss of IS’s self-declared caliphate in 2019 was not followed by a major decrease in the number of transnational jihadist conflicts.

Figure 1: al-Qaeda and IS involvement in civil wars, 1989-2020



The growing spread of transnational jihadist conflict reflects two types of dynamics. First, transnationalization – the formal integration of local rebel groups into al-Qaeda’s and IS’s organizational networks – is apparently highly attractive for both local armed groups and al-Qaeda and IS as transnational organizations: since the mid-2000s, a growing number of transnationalization processes have taken place and new affiliate groups have been announced. Even after IS lost its caliphate in 2019, the organization’s affiliate groups renewed their allegiance, while local armed groups in the DRC and Mozambique were newly integrated into its network. Besides this *expansion* dynamic, the second pattern reflected in Figure 1 regards the *resilience* of transnational jihadist conflicts once they have erupted. While some groups are by now largely considered to have been militarily defeated, such as IS’s affiliates in Algeria or Bangladesh, many affiliate groups have proven remarkably

2022). The numbers are based on both conflict categories 3 (intrastate conflicts) and 4 (internationalized intrastate conflicts).

resilient in the wake of fierce counterterrorism pressure and maintained their operations. Indeed, in a recent study, Nilsson and Svensson (2021) show empirically that ‘Islamist’ civil wars are significantly less likely to be terminated than other types of armed conflicts.⁶ Importantly, the resilience of these conflicts must not only be seen from a military perspective, but also from a conflict resolution angle. Once transnational jihadist conflicts are ongoing, they become seemingly immune to conflict resolution. While some conflicts were militarily terminated, there is not a single such conflict dyad that has seen the onset of peace negotiations. At first sight, these dynamics may hardly seem surprising, but I argue that they both reveal puzzling questions that existing research has examined insufficiently to date.

As regards the *expansion* dynamic, the growing spread of transnational jihadist conflict obfuscates a considerable number of non-cases in which exactly this outcome cannot be observed. For example, it is easily forgotten that IS also declared provinces in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, which, despite carrying out a few devastating acts of one-sided violence against civilians, did not become involved in armed conflicts with the respective governments. The same holds for al-Qaeda’s attempts to gain a foothold in the wider South Asian region – that is, beyond Afghanistan and Pakistan – which have remained largely unsuccessful, despite the declaration of its al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) branch (Roul 2020). In several cases, al-Qaeda and IS have faced obstacles because local rebel groups refused to join the transnational jihadist cause. For example, both al-Qaeda and IS have tried to exploit the genocidal repression of Myanmar’s Muslim Rohingya minority, consistently citing their suffering in their propaganda outlets. However, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), for several years the leading insurgent group in the region, has rejected any linkages to the two organizations (Fair 2018). In Palestine, Hamas has long considered al-Qaeda primarily as a threat, rather than a potential ally (Mendelsohn 2009). These are only a few examples of a longer list of cases in which the two leading transnational jihadist organizations and their overtures to local populations, including organized militants, appear to

⁶ The authors’ analysis is temporally restricted to the timeframe 1975-2013 and thus does not include IS-affiliated groups. Moreover, their definition of Islamist civil wars also includes various unaffiliated Islamist groups such as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) as well as several Shi’a Islamist groups. Therefore, the findings cannot be immediately transferred to the concept of transnational jihadist conflicts as applied in this dissertation. However, given that only six of the 26 state-based conflict dyads involving IS affiliates that the UCDP lists since 2014 had been terminated by 2020 (or been inactive for at least three years), it appears likely that the overall pattern would also hold if it were to be restricted exclusively to transnational jihadist conflicts.

have fallen on deaf ears. Why do al-Qaeda and IS so often manage to destabilize countries, sometimes entire regions, but at other times remain fully absent or announce affiliate groups that fail to initiate sustained insurgencies? These are puzzling questions, not least because some commonly cited explanatory factors have played out differently across various contexts. For example, one common explanation has been that al-Qaeda and IS are particularly successful in recruiting among socio-economically disadvantaged Sunni Muslim populations. An example for such a case would be – again – Mozambique, where the marginalization of its Muslim minority has been cited as an important driver of jihadist recruitment (Hanlon 2018). However, a marginalized Muslim minority can also be found in southern Thailand, where neither al-Qaeda nor IS have thus far played a role (ICG 2017; see also Finnbogason and Svensson 2018). In other countries, jihadists have drawn their support from middle- and upper-class university circles where students joined out of religious motivation, rather than socio-economic exclusion. Here, Bangladesh serves as a case in point (Bashar 2015, 19).

As regards the second dynamic, I argue that the *resilience* of this type of conflict with regard to the absence of peace negotiations is also puzzling. Despite the mutual high costs incurred by both governments and jihadist affiliate groups, there has not been a single case in which peace negotiations between these actors have taken place. On one hand, as mentioned previously, governments struggle to militarily defeat transnational jihadist groups on the battlefield. On the other hand, to date, neither al-Qaeda nor IS nor any of their affiliate groups has achieved a single military victory over a government, despite temporal and territorially limited successes in places such as Iraq and Syria, Mali or Yemen.⁷ The fact that despite these high costs on both sides, transnational jihadist conflict appears immune to conflict resolution raises the question of possible explanations. In many cases, major obstacles against negotiations are to be found on the side of the government, because the incumbent leaders fear political repercussions from voters opposing negotiations with declared terrorist groups (Toros 2008), as well as because their international partners may oppose such steps (Le Point Afrique 2020; Site Intelligence Group 2020). But even where governments *are* willing to negotiate, it is often argued that the transnational features of al-Qaeda- and IS-affiliated rebel

⁷ I here follow a well-established definition that views rebel victories as cases in which the government is either militarily ousted from power or succumbs to the rebels by capitulation (Kreutz 2021, 4). Note that the Taliban, who ousted the Afghan government in August 2021, have publicly rejected all links with al-Qaeda and are thus not openly affiliated with the organization. This is notwithstanding the continued links between the two entities (for a discussion, see Mir 2021; Hoffman 2022).

groups render them unavailable for negotiations. Ideologically, al-Qaeda's and IS's far-ranging and uncompromising goal of creating a global caliphate appears to run counter to the well-established notion that for conflict resolution, the involved parties must be willing to consider compromises as part of a negotiated solution (Nilsson and Svensson 2020, 396). However, there are important reasons to not dismiss the possibility of negotiations simply due to the transnational jihadist ideology propagated by al-Qaeda, IS and their affiliates. Ideologies are anything but fixed; rather, they change and evolve over time. Cases such as al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya (JI) in Egypt (Drevon 2015, 516-17) or Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria (Drevon and Haenni 2021) illustrate that transnationally oriented (and/or affiliated) jihadist groups can re-examine their previously held views and steer in different directions, thereby becoming potentially available for dialogue and negotiation. Moreover, while there is substantial disagreement over how exactly transnational jihadist ideology matters for al-Qaeda- and IS-affiliated groups, few scholars would disagree that these insurgencies are also driven, at least to some extent, by a variety of non-ideological factors. For instance, several case studies have emphasized the relevance of clan rivalries (Hansen 2014, 2; Jadoon, Jahanbani, and Willis 2020) as well as ethnic and political grievances (ICG 2016, ii; Thurston 2020) as drivers of transnational jihadist conflicts. If affiliate groups' insurgencies are indeed motivated by both ideological and non-ideological concerns, and if one assumes that these groups can revise their ideologies, it appears unlikely that their transnational jihadist agendas alone would constitute a sufficient explanation for their seeming unavailability for negotiations.

Aside from transnational jihadist ideology, previous research has raised other transnational aspects as explanations of the resilience of transnational jihadist conflicts. For instance, it has been argued that because their support base is located outside the immediate conflict theater and therefore not exposed to the costs of war, transnational jihadists can recruit foreign fighters and therefore prolong their armed struggles (Toft and Zhukov 2015, 223). It has also been emphasized that the ability of jihadists to access safe havens in neighbouring countries can complicate intelligence gathering (Byman 2013), thereby creating a bargaining environment characterized by a lack of information about the rebels (Salehyan 2009, 48), which complicates the onset of negotiations. However, these arguments have not been empirically tested with regard to transnational jihadist conflict. This lack of empirical evidence about the various transnational elements characterizing al-Qaeda's and IS's local affiliate groups leaves a number of unanswered questions. Hence, the extent to which the various transnational features of jihadist affiliate groups really prevent them from being available for peace negotiations remains an open question.

Developing a Research Question

Thus, this dissertation is concerned with two types of dynamics that are crucial in order to understand the evolution of transnational jihadist conflicts. The first of these regards the variation in the *expansion* of this type of conflict to new countries; the second regards the *resilience* of these conflicts against peace negotiations once the conflicts have broken out. Both these dynamics are puzzling, as outlined above, and, as I will argue later, have thus far been insufficiently addressed through previous research. What appears certain is that to understand the evolution of transnational jihadist conflicts, which, by definition, involve both locally rooted and transnationally operating actors, one must take both local and transnational dynamics into account. On the local level, this regards the interplay between incumbent governments and state institutions, the civilian population and local armed groups. The local armed groups in this regard include both al-Qaeda's and IS's local affiliate groups as well as a plethora of other militants that may act as competitors to these transnationally affiliated groups. On the transnational level, the interests of al-Qaeda's and IS's own organizational core must be taken into account, as well as foreign fighter flows and other transnational support channels providing resources to local groups. I expect that by taking seriously both local and transnational dynamics, this dissertation contributes to bridging the sometimes polarized 'local versus global' debate (Warner et al. 2021, 30) that reflects scholarly disagreements about the significance of transnational factors as drivers of conflicts with jihadist affiliate groups vis-à-vis local conflict drivers.

Based on these considerations, the overarching research question that constitutes the point of departure for this dissertation is: *How does the interplay of local and transnational dynamics shape the evolution of transnational jihadist conflict?*

As outlined in the discussion above, I consider the term 'evolution' to imply both the *expansion* of transnational jihadist conflict and its *resilience* over time. I therefore formulate two sub-questions that reflect the dual focus on these two processes. Because the overarching research question is rather broad, the three papers included in this dissertation focus on either of the two sub-questions, instead of addressing the main research question directly. The first sub-question seeks to identify explanations for the variance in the *expansion* patterns of transnational jihadist conflict. Hence, it is formulated as follows: *What factors can explain the variation in the expansion of transnational jihadist conflict to new countries?*

In turn, the second sub-question focuses on the *resilience* of transnational jihadist conflicts. As was outlined earlier, it has commonly been argued that

al-Qaeda- and IS-affiliated groups are less available for peace negotiations due to their transnational features. Yet to what extent these groups in fact constitute primarily local or transnational phenomena remains a debated issue among scholars. Therefore, the second sub-question addresses the resilience of these conflicts through the lens of the transnationalization of al-Qaeda's and IS's affiliate groups. It is thus formulated as follows: *To what extent can the resilience of transnational jihadist conflict against peace negotiations be explained through the transnationalization of the involved affiliate groups?*

Importantly, this second question is exploratory in the sense that it seeks to examine a potential explanation for a phenomenon that is characterized by a lack of variation. The reason is that, to date, no peace negotiations with al-Qaeda- or IS-affiliated groups have taken place, at least not officially. The lack of variation on the dependent variable therefore poses some limitations with regard to what conclusions can be drawn from the analysis. Still, by exploring the degree of variation along the independent variable – transnationalization – across a large sample of transnational jihadist affiliate groups, this dissertation can illuminate whether transnationalization may potentially serve as a sufficient, or quasi-sufficient, explanation for the lack of peace negotiations.

It must further be highlighted that, on a more general level, this dissertation seeks to identify trends and patterns across a larger number of cases, rather than to add even further to the already rich case-based literature about transnational jihadist conflicts, individual jihadist groups, jihadism in certain countries or individual jihadist ideologues. The goal is not to arrive at silver bullet explanations that will apply to every case, but rather to identify patterns that hold when examined across a multitude of cases. Moreover, this dissertation is concerned with al-Qaeda and IS as transnational, *Sunni* jihadist organizations that propagate a particular type of Islamist ideology. This implies that groups adhering to various other forms of Islamism are not at the immediate center of this dissertation. This includes, for example, Muslim Brotherhood-inspired groups (Lynch 2010) as well as Shi'a Islamists (for a discussion, see Valbjørn and Gunning 2021). In Section 3 of this summary report, I provide a more elaborate definition of the concepts of jihadism, Islamism and related terms.

Al-Qaeda and IS: Different, yet similar

Before proceeding to the next section of this summary report, a short discussion is warranted about the underlying motivation to aggregate both al-Qaeda- and IS-affiliated groups into the concept of 'transnational jihadist conflict' which lies at the core of this dissertation.

In recent years, a growing number of studies have analysed the rivalry between al-Qaeda and IS that resulted in various armed confrontations between their respective affiliate groups, for example in Mali, Somalia or Yemen.⁸ Scholars have pointed towards substantial differences in how the two organizations position themselves with regard to the excommunication of fellow Muslims (*takfir*), the appropriate style of governance, the degree of pragmatism employed when forming alliances with other groups, and the brutality employed against both civilians and military opponents as well as the public display of that violence. It is well-documented that al-Qaeda has opposed IS's far-ranging application of *takfir*, especially against Shi'a Muslims (Bunzel 2021), as well as IS's deliberate targeting of Muslim civilians in its attacks and its brutal display of executions (Gerges 2016, 232). Al-Qaeda's approach to governance has evolved from an initially more repressive one towards a mission of winning hearts and minds, a strategy markedly different from IS's more brutal and repressive approach (Hamming 2020, 31). Moreover, while IS demands subjugation from all other armed groups operating in the same areas, al-Qaeda applies a more pragmatic approach and is open to tactical alliances with other rebel groups (Hafez 2020, 40-41). Notwithstanding these significant differences between the two organizations, there are still a number of striking similarities both in the way they view the world and in their organizational strategies. I argue that if one zooms out and compares al-Qaeda, IS and their local affiliate groups to other contemporary rebel groups, they stand out primarily in terms of their similarities, rather than their differences.

First, despite disagreement over who has the legitimate authority to declare the caliphate as well as where and when it should be declared (Bunzel 2015, 22, 27-28; 2021), both al-Qaeda and IS share this long-term goal, namely the creation of a global caliphate governed by their respective interpretations of Sharia-based law (Zelin 2021b). Their shared view that only an authority with a divine, godly mandate enjoys political legitimacy is further derived to a large extent from the same intellectual sources. At the core of these writings are the works of the 18th-century scholar Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and the Egyptian ideologue Sayyid Qutb, who was executed by the Egyptian government in 1966 (Sheikh and el-Jaichi 2022, 13). Their far-ranging, global agenda sets them and their local affiliate groups apart from other contemporary rebel groups fighting for revolutionary or separatist goals.

Second, despite their disagreements over how to treat Shi'a and other non-Sunni Muslim communities, al-Qaeda and IS adopt a narrative that centres around the same three main enemies: the 'crusading' US-led Western nation-

⁸ For a recent in-depth analysis of the al-Qaeda-IS rivalry, see Hamming (2022).

states; the ‘zionists’, meaning Israel and the world’s Jews; and ‘apostate’ Muslims, including secular Muslim governments (Moghadam 2017, 71-72).

Third, because their shared long-term goal of creating a global caliphate transcends the capabilities of their own organizational cores, both al-Qaeda and IS have had to adopt a strategy of ‘franchising’ (Mendelsohn 2015, 2), relying on local affiliate groups in order to militarily confront governments in different countries (see also Bacon 2018, 43). There are no other contemporary rebel organizations that maintain a similar network of affiliated groups on a global scale.

Fourth, there are considerable overlaps in the territorial expansion of both organizations. Although the total number of IS’s declared ‘provinces’ exceeds al-Qaeda’s number of affiliate groups, in all countries that experienced armed conflict with al-Qaeda-affiliated rebel groups, IS became active as well, namely in Algeria, Mali and Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Somalia, Syria and Yemen. Moreover, even where such conflicts are absent, al-Qaeda and IS often strive for expansion to the same areas. For instance, both organizations have invested considerable efforts into increasing their roles in the Kashmir region and Myanmar, albeit rather unsuccessfully. These latter cases are taken up in greater depth in Paper 2 of this dissertation.

Overall, against the backdrop of these arguments, and given that the goal of this dissertation is to identify broader trends across individual cases, I expect that a more aggregated approach of grouping al-Qaeda and IS within the same overarching concept of ‘transnational jihadist conflict’ is appropriate. At the same time, within the limitations of the particular research designs applied in the papers that comprise this dissertation, I also engage with these intra-jihadist rivalries, especially in Paper 2, which deals with the South Asian region. Having outlined the larger puzzle motivating this dissertation, the research questions and some key differences and similarities between al-Qaeda and IS, the following paragraphs provide brief overviews of the respective papers included in this dissertation.

Presenting the three papers

Paper 1

The first paper of this dissertation is concerned with the *emergence* of transnational jihadist conflict. It provides the first large-N analysis of this phenomenon, focusing on all states in Africa and Asia, covering the timeframe 2002–2018. Theoretically, it is argued that higher levels of state repression and states’ military capabilities should impact the preferences of local groups re-

garding AQ and IS as potential transnational partners, increasing the likelihood of a ‘transnationalization’ and, hence, the emergence of transnational jihadist conflict. On the other hand, it is hypothesized that increases in bureaucratic state capacity should reduce the risk of this type of conflict. Empirically, it uses data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) to conduct a series of penalized logistic regressions that yield support for the hypotheses regarding state repression and bureaucratic capacity, whereas the hypothesis about military state capacity is not confirmed. The findings point towards the importance of bureaucratic capacity-building as well as the potentially adverse consequences of excessively repressive counterterrorism strategies.

Paper 2

Similar to Paper 1, this study is concerned with the *emergence* of transnational jihadist conflict, but it approaches the issue from a different angle. Analysing existing databases across three types of organized violence, I show that in South Asia, outside of Afghanistan and Pakistan, levels of violence associated with al-Qaeda and IS have remained lower than in other world regions. I argue that these other South Asian countries – Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, Myanmar and Sri Lanka – constitute a puzzling non-case, as they share a set of characteristics commonly associated with jihadist violence. The study identifies several potential explanations for the observed scarcity of violence related to al-Qaeda and IS in the region. It is argued that in the case of IS, the group’s anti-Deobandi stance has reduced its pool of affiliation partners. Moreover, the availability of other support channels is found to have limited local groups’ demand for support from al-Qaeda and IS. Lastly, higher levels of democracy have allowed for the formation of political parties, which have targeted similar population segments as al-Qaeda and IS, thereby constituting a source of competition.

Paper 3

The third paper included in this dissertation focuses on the *resilience* of transnational jihadist conflict. It takes its point of departure in the observation that, to date, there have been no instances of peace negotiations with armed groups affiliated with al-Qaeda or the Islamic State. Previous research has highlighted their transnational demands and their status as transnational organizations as major obstacles. Yet these groups are also deeply embedded within local conflict configurations. The paper posits that to explore prospects for future negotiations with these groups, one must obtain a better understanding of how they function on the ground. A descriptive empirical analysis is provided of two dimensions of ‘transnationalization’ that should both have an impact

on jihadist affiliate groups' willingness to enter negotiations: transnational operations and transnational recruitment. The analysis of a sample of twenty jihadist affiliate groups reveals substantial variation regarding both variables. The results have relevance for both researchers and policymakers seeking to identify nonviolent containment strategies in armed conflicts with rebel groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and IS.

The remainder of this report is structured as follows. The following section situates the dissertation vis-à-vis the existing literature, carving out the central research gaps that it aims to fill. The third section defines central concepts and specifies theoretical assumptions that cut across the three papers. This is followed by an overview of the employed data and the methodological approach before, in the fifth section, the findings from the three papers are presented, organized along the two sub-questions they cover. The sixth section contains a critical discussion of limitations and ethical challenges. Last, a concluding section discusses how the dissertation's overall research question can be answered based on the obtained findings.

2. Situating the Dissertation

This dissertation speaks to two larger strands of literatures that, despite substantial thematical overlaps, have had only limited interaction. The first strand is from the empirical peace and conflict literature, in particular the existing research about religion and civil war. In recent years, a small sub-literature has emerged in this field which has zoomed in on the role of Islamist rebel groups. However, it has only recently begun to take the distinctive characteristics of al-Qaeda, IS and their local affiliates into account. The second strand to which the dissertation contributes is the existing literature about transnational jihadism. Contributions to this body of scholarly work have come from a variety of traditions, especially history, military studies, regional studies and terrorism studies. In contrast to the empirical peace and conflict literature, this body of literature has paid more attention to al-Qaeda and IS, but it is characterized by a scarcity of large-N studies that would allow for scrutinizing the external validity of some of the arguments it has generated primarily through case-based approaches. Insights obtained on a large-N basis are also important as they can provide valuable knowledge for policymakers in countries that are trying to prevent the expansion of al-Qaeda or IS into their territories. Therefore, this dissertation aims to bridge these two strands of literature, combining a predominantly large-N methodological approach that is common in empirical peace and conflict research with a focus on al-Qaeda, IS and their affiliate groups that has been more frequently addressed in jihadism studies. The following two sections carve out some of the most relevant contributions that fall within these distinct sub-literatures and identify the key research gaps that this dissertation seeks to fill.

Empirical peace and conflict literature

The overall research question addressed by this dissertation aims at enhancing our understanding of the evolution of transnational jihadist conflict. It sets out to analyse two types of dynamics that are characteristic of this type of conflict: its expansion to new countries as well as its resilience against peace negotiations. As regards the issue of expansion – that is, the emergence of new incidences of transnational jihadist conflict – existing research about conflict onset provides a first anchor point in the existing literature. Peace and conflict scholars have studied for decades which factors influence the likelihood of civil war onset. These have ranged from natural resources (Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Ali and Cederman 2022), socioeconomic inequality (Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013; Kuhn and Weidmann 2015), gender inequality

(Caprioli 2005; Melander 2005; Schaftenaar 2017), state capacity (Fjelde and De Soysa 2009; Koren and Sarbahi 2018), state repression (Young 2013) and ethnic heterogeneity (Fearon and Laitin 2003; Denny and Walter 2014) to geographical features such as mountainous terrain (Linke et al. 2017; Carter, Shaver, and Wright 2019).

Interestingly, for a considerable amount of time, the role of religion received only limited attention from peace and conflict scholars, and the broader international relations literature as such. As noted by Fox (2001, 55-56), the foundations of this lack of attention date back to the 1950s and 1960s, when the emerging IR discipline was shaped by the belief that modernization processes would render religion as a cause of war largely irrelevant. Nonetheless, over the past two decades, a growing literature has emerged that has indeed studied the linkages between religion and armed conflict onset. These studies have identified diverging effects of religion, which has been found to potentially both increase and decrease the risk of armed conflict. This has been coined '[t]he ambivalence of the sacred' (Appleby 1999). Generally speaking, as highlighted by Svensson (2018, 4-5), the effects of religion 'are conditional, probabilistic, and multi-variate', as they interact with economic, political and strategic as well as psychological and emotional factors. A good example of such interactions is provided in a study by Basedau, Pfeiffer, and Vüllers (2016), who find that some religious factors are indeed linked to armed conflict onset, for example when there are overlaps between religious (and other) group identities, religious groups' grievances and calls for violence by religious leaders. In a similar approach, Bernauer (2016) proposes a multidimensional model for how civil war can be predicted through the religious, ethnic and class-based transnational links of domestically excluded societal groups. Scholars have also explored whether some religious groups are more likely to initiate religiously motivated rebellions than others. While Bormann, Cederman, and Vogt (2017) find no evidence that Muslim groups are more conflict-prone than others, Toft (2021) shows that whereas religion appears to motivate rebellions among Arab Muslims, Christian rebels are primarily motivated along secular lines, at least after 1990. At the same time, work by Juergensmeyer (2003) underscores that the potential for religiously motivated violence is present in all of the world's major religions and is by no means exclusive to Islam. In general, these studies clearly document the potential of religion to lead to violence, but they also highlight the need for nuanced, multi-dimensional explanations. Work by Isaacs (2016) further provides evidence for endogeneity, showing that once levels of violence increase, religious rhetoric is increasingly used as well.

A related body of literature has examined the effects of religion on ongoing conflicts. These works are particularly relevant with regard to the second main

focus of this dissertation, the seeming resilience of transnational jihadist conflict against conflict resolution. In his book about the possibilities for conflict resolution in religiously shaped conflicts, Svensson (2013, 175-176) shows that once the incompatibilities between the involved parties are framed in religious terms, and especially if the parties ascribe high importance to them, the likelihood of a negotiated settlement decreases. However, he also identifies various exceptions to the rule, where religious incompatibilities could in fact be resolved through compromises or concessions. In line with Svensson's findings, a recent study by Deitch (2020) finds religious conflicts to last longer than non-religious conflicts and to be less likely to end peacefully. Various explanations have been brought forward by scholars to explain why religious conflicts are less likely to be resolved. For example, work by Hassner (2003, 2009) illustrates the problems that may arise due to the indivisibility of sacred spaces that bear importance to at least two conflict parties. Horowitz (2009, 163) emphasizes how religion is able 'to infuse believers with a certainty of purpose' and thus 'can make war a good in itself, rather than a means to an end', thereby leading to more enduring conflicts. In a similar vein, Juergensmeyer (2003, 157) coined the concept of 'cosmic war' whose 'absolutism (...) makes compromise unlikely, and those who suggest a negotiated settlement are as excoriated as the enemy'. In sum, existing research within the field of peace and conflict studies has shed light upon the relationship between religion and armed conflict onset as well as between religion and conflict resolution. Yet these existing findings may not be directly applicable to conflicts with al-Qaeda and IS affiliates, for two main reasons.

First, 'conflict onset', as predominantly operationalized in the large-N studies in the field of peace and conflict research, is typically understood as the year in which an armed confrontation over a stated incompatibility between the government of a state and a non-state actor results in at least 25 battle-related deaths for the first time. Accordingly, most of the theoretical arguments that were developed to explain conflict onset focus on what motivates local rebels to take up arms in the first place. However, al-Qaeda and IS have rarely built new local affiliates from scratch (Byman 2014, 454). Rather, as mentioned previously, their preferred *modus operandi* has been to find local armed groups and then integrate them into their organizational networks. Whether or not these local groups have already reached the 25 battle deaths threshold at the time of their pledge of allegiance to the transnational organization may vary, but their decision to take up arms has normally occurred prior to the pledge of allegiance. Against this backdrop, insights from the literature on conflict onset could help explain the emergence of Boko Haram as an insurgent group in the late 2000s in northern Nigeria, but to understand

why its leadership pledged allegiance to IS in 2015, different explanations would be needed.

Related to this is a second characteristic that sets conflicts with al-Qaeda, IS and their local affiliates apart from other types of civil wars. Theoretical frameworks used by peace and conflict scholars to explain both armed conflict *onset* and conflict *resolution* have usually focused on the incompatibilities between the government of a state on one side and a rebel group on the other side (see, for instance, Cunningham 2016, 309-11). However, in armed conflicts with jihadist affiliate groups, there is a third key player involved, namely the transnational jihadist organization – that is, al-Qaeda or IS. To understand the evolution of transnational jihadist conflict, the interplay of these three actors must therefore be taken into account. This triangular constellation implies that transnational jihadist conflict is likely to be driven by different dynamics than those at play in the emergence and resolution of other types of armed conflict.

Despite these distinct characteristics, existing peace and conflict research has, with few exceptions, not conceptualized civil wars with transnational jihadist groups as a distinct type of conflict. This is notwithstanding the fact that, following the evolution of IS into a transnational actor in 2014, peace and conflict scholars have indeed acknowledged the linkages between local groups and al-Qaeda and IS as something exceptional. For instance, as highlighted by Melander, Pettersson, and Themnér (2016, 732), the two organizations have neither achieved any military victories according to common standards in the field nor signed any peace agreements. And with regard to the organizational linkages that connect al-Qaeda, IS and their dozens of affiliate groups around the world, Pettersson and Öberg (2020, 8) conclude that ‘there is nothing similar in recent history’, although the authors describe similarities to some transnational leftist insurgent movements during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Conflicts involving IS were also found to be fought at higher levels of intensity and to be overall more complex, often resulting in internal fractionalization processes (Rustad, Tollefsen, and Gates 2019).

Nonetheless, many of the few existing studies by peace and conflict scholars covering these groups still do not explicitly distinguish al-Qaeda and IS from other Islamist rebels. At the same time, it is noteworthy that most of these works underline the rebels’ transnational linkages as a distinct characteristic. As argued by Kalyvas (2018, 42), ‘[a] key feature that sets jihadi groups apart from many other rebel groups is their transnational dimension: they are part of a broader transnational social movement’. Toft and Zhukov (2015, 225) argue that because Islamist rebel groups have a transnational support base, which is not directly exposed to government repression, the latter does not impact them in the same way as nationalist rebels. However, their

argument does not further distinguish between different degrees of transnational support enjoyed by, for example, Islamists fighting for territorial autonomy and those committed to transnational *jihad*. Similarly, in their large-N analysis of recurrence patterns in civil wars, Nilsson and Svensson (2021) find Islamist conflicts – defined as conflicts with rebels that ‘advocate an increased role of Islam in the society or the state’ (Svensson and Nilsson 2018, 1132) – to be more likely to recur once they have ended than other conflicts. Theoretically, the authors explain their findings through the rebels’ transnational ideologies and support structures, but do not further account for variations between more nationally and more transnationally oriented Islamist groups. In two other recent large-N studies, the authors do make this distinction, finding *transnational* Islamist conflicts to be less likely to experience peace negotiations (Nilsson and Svensson 2020) and al-Qaeda and IS to be systematically mobilizing upon ethnic identity cleavages (Svensson and Nilsson 2022). The latter study is an important exception insofar as it explores large-N patterns of conflicts involving al-Qaeda- and IS-affiliated groups, which also lies at the centre of the present dissertation. However, it does not examine how the role of ethnic mobilization interacts with other potential explanatory variables.

In sum, the existing peace and conflict literature on Islamist rebel groups suggests that these conflicts are different from non-Islamist conflicts, and more recent studies provide evidence for significant differences between transnational jihadist conflicts and conflicts with other, non-transnational Islamist groups. Yet given the nascent status of the subject in the empirical peace and conflict literature, gaps remain both with regard to the onset of and the prospects for conflict resolution in transnational jihadist conflicts. As noted by Crenshaw (2017, 60), ‘it is still rare to find systematic academic studies of the linkages between civil war, jihadism, domestic terrorism, transnational terrorism, and foreign fighter recruitment’. By studying transnational jihadist conflict through a large-N approach across different countries and regions, this dissertation addresses a gap that continues to exist in the empirical peace and conflict literature. Because conflicts with al-Qaeda and IS have only recently started to be conceptualized as different from other types of civil wars, their distinct characteristics – especially the fact that they usually emerge out of already ongoing insurgencies as well as their triangular actor constellation – require additional research both with regard to their emergence and their later resolution. The present dissertation addresses this gap by investigating the evolution of these conflicts, covering their very onset in the first place as well as their prospects for conflict resolution. Importantly, some of these questions have been addressed previously, albeit to varying degrees, by scholars specialized in the analysis of transnational jihadism. However, as the following section outlines, that body of literature lacks the large-N approach that is

common in the empirical peace and conflict literature, leaving some questions unanswered with regard to the external validity of existing explanations.

Literature on transnational jihadism

Academic research about transnational jihadism has been produced by scholars from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, focusing on different aspects related to jihadism. It would go beyond the scope of this summary report to try to provide a comprehensive overview of all these different strands.⁹ Instead, I limit this part of the literature review to two broader strands. I start by providing an overview of the literature about transnational jihadist *ideology* and its historical evolution over time. I carve out a gap that results from this body of literature not having systematically studied the resonance of jihadist ideology across different local contexts, contributing to the current so-called ‘local versus global’ debate (Warner et al. 2021, 30), which revolves around the question of whether jihadist affiliate groups are best understood as local or transnational phenomena. Further, I provide an overview of the academic literature about cooperation between local and transnational jihadist groups, which comes close to this dissertation’s overall research question but has yet to empirically test the external validity of many of its obtained findings.

To begin with, literature about jihadist ideology, and especially its historical evolution over time, has provided profound insights into transnational jihadist thought and its different shapes. Some of these works have drawn an arc from the imperial age all the way to today’s Islamic State (IS) movement (Turner 2014), whereas other scholars have focused on more recent developments following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (Gerges 2005; Maher 2016; Robinson 2020), the US invasion of Iraq (Hegghammer 2006; Gerges 2016) or the Arab Spring (Lia 2016). Particularly the issue of martyrdom and how Salafi-jihadist thought was increasingly used to legitimize suicide attacks has received considerable attention in the literature (Hafez 2007; Moghadam 2008a). In this regard, Moghadam (2008b, 76) emphasized that although Salafi-jihadist ideology was not the sole explanation behind the rise in suicide attacks, it still played an important role, as it helped reduce attackers’ fears and reservations against the perpetration of such attacks. By the mid-2000s, scholars further began to explore the emerging doctrinal tensions between

⁹ For example, two important sub-strands of literature that are not the immediate focus of this dissertation regard research about ‘jihadi culture’ (Ramsay 2013; Hegghammer 2017; Qvotrup Jensen, Fuglsang Larsen, and Sandberg 2021) and research about jihadist propaganda (Ingram 2017; Krona and Pennington 2019; Andersen and Sandberg 2020; Lakomy 2021).

Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's Iraq-based, al-Qaeda-affiliated group and the central al-Qaeda organization around Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri (Brisard and Martinez 2005; Steinberg 2005, 2009). After Zarqawi's death and his group's later transformation into the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS), several further works explored the group's religious underpinnings (Ingram, Whiteside, and Winter 2020), especially its ideological conflict with al-Qaeda and their disagreements over the issue of *takfir* (Bunzel 2015; Hassan 2016; Hafez 2020; Lounnas 2021). However, there is not only a rich literature about the historical evolution of transnational jihadist ideology as such, or al-Qaeda and IS as entire movements, but also about the role of ideology for jihadist rebel groups in various parts of the world. Notable examples include the work by Zenn, Barkindo, and Heras (2013) about Boko Haram's ideological evolution, Sheikh's (2016) analysis of the Pakistani Taliban's religious worldview, Hansen's (2014) tracing of al-Shabaab's history and ideology and, more recently, a study by Cold-Ravnkilde and Ba (2022) about intra-jihadist ideological conflict between al-Qaeda- and IS-affiliated rebels in Mali.

Rather than engaging in macro-level analyses of transnational jihadism's ideological and historical evolution, or the trajectory of single rebel groups, other authors have delved into the writings of particular influential jihadist ideologues, including Sayyid Qutb (El-Jaichi 2021), Abul A'la Maududi (Jackson 2010; Sheikh 2021), Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (Lahoud 2009; Wage-makers 2012) and Ayman al-Zawahiri (Holbrook 2018). Some of these works have been written in a more biographical style, for example Lia's (2007) analysis of the life of Abu Mus'ab al-Suri or Hegghammer's (2020) recent book about the Palestinian ideologue Abdallah Azzam. As highlighted by Sheikh and el-Jaichi (2022, 21), these latter types of studies have tended to pay greater attention to 'endogenous microlevel factors and less to macrolevel shifts in global politics that enable jihadi groups to recruit and radicalize new members'.

Overall, the body of literature outlined above has provided foundational insights that have enabled a better understanding of al-Qaeda and IS and how their religiously shaped ideologies have influenced their behaviour. It has also examined the impact of historic events such as the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan that same year, the US-led invasion of Afghanistan following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and the Arab Spring in 2011. However, one thing that has not systematically been studied is to what extent transnational jihadist conflicts around the world have been driven by ideological motives vis-à-vis other explanatory factors. The lack of large-N studies is one crucial reason why there is currently so much disagreement among scholars engaged in the so-called 'local versus

global' debate (Warner et al. 2021, 30). As outlined by Warner et al., predominantly area specialists have been sceptical of the significance of transnational jihadist ideology and transnational group affiliations as factors driving local insurgencies waged by jihadist affiliate groups, instead highlighting local and primarily non-ideological explanatory factors. For example, socio-economic deprivation has often been mentioned as the primary driver of these conflicts, in direct opposition to transnational jihadist ideology and group affiliations (see, for instance, Matfess 2016; Hanlon 2018). Other authors have even argued that 'extremist' rebel group leaders choose their ideologies in a mostly instrumental fashion, depending on what ideology best fits local conditions (Walter 2017, 10). The scepticism regarding ideology as an explanatory factor has also led to a broader questioning of 'an international security framework primarily defined in terms of its global Islamist character' (Volpi 2010, 154). However, while 'it is tempting to dismiss the role of Islam in these insurgencies' (Byman 2013, 354), 'ignoring the distinct characteristics of *Salafi-jihadists* would be disastrous' (p. 368).¹⁰ Recently, this often polarized discussion has increasingly been tempered by authors who instead tried to formulate more nuanced arguments, acknowledging the relevance of both local and non-ideological drivers as well as the relevance of jihadist ideology and the transnational linkages between local groups and al-Qaeda and IS (Hansen 2019, 5-6, quoted in Warner et al. 2021, 30; Bencherif 2021). While warning against reducing these insurgencies to their religious dimensions (Gunning and Jackson 2011), these scholars have tended to acknowledge ideology as one explanatory factor, while still highlighting the continued importance of different types of other variables, for instance the struggle for ethnic empowerment (Thurston 2020, 147-50). In a similar vein, calls have been formulated for greater scholarly efforts to overcome the 'analytical gap between micro-level studies researching Jihadism in a specific, local context, and macro-level studies conducting research into the Jihadist movement and its ideology on a global scale' (Aae 2018, 80).

The present dissertation speaks to both core questions raised in the above debate. On one hand, this regards the question of to what extent jihadist expansion processes are driven by ideological and/or other factors. On the other

¹⁰ There is not only disagreement among scholars regarding the cross-case significance of ideology in transnationalization processes, but also with regard to individual cases of affiliate groups. For a prominent example, which is also referred to by Warner et al. (2021, 30), see the exchange about the role played by al-Qaeda in Boko Haram's insurgency. This exchange started with an article by Zenn (2017) and involved a response by Higazi et al. (2018), as well as a follow-up article by Zenn (2018).

hand, it regards the discussions about whether transnational group affiliations do in fact have any meaningful impacts at all, or whether they are mere publicity stunts. With respect to the first of these issues, although the chosen large- and medium-N-based methodology does not allow for *measuring* the finer nuances of jihadist ideology, this dissertation's Paper 1 measures the influence of a range of political, socioeconomic and sociodemographic (including religious) factors on the emergence of transnational jihadist conflict. Without seeking to provide silver bullet explanations, this is an important first step in order to identify trends and patterns that hold across different conflict zones. The second paper further zooms in on a sample of five South Asian countries and comparatively investigates – covering both ideological and non-ideological explanatory factors – why al-Qaeda and IS struggled to gain a foothold in this region. As regards the second source of scholarly disagreement – that is, the question of whether, and if so, how, a transnational affiliation actually matters – Paper 3 of this dissertation contributes by empirically investigating the degree of 'transnationalization' of a total of 20 jihadist affiliate groups across two dimensions of transnationalization (transnational recruitment and transnational operations), building upon work by Harpviken (2012).

In doing so, I draw upon another body of existing research, namely the literature about cooperation between local rebel groups and al-Qaeda and IS as transnational organizations. This literature grew out of a larger strand of research that dealt with the phenomenon of cooperation between terrorist groups (Karmon 2005) and external sponsorship of terrorist groups more broadly (Byman 2001). The work of Byman has been particularly influential in connecting that literature with the field of jihadism studies, as he was among the first authors to systematically analyse factors associated with the emergence of al-Qaeda's first affiliate groups in places such as Algeria, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. In these studies, Byman argues that local groups are driven by a range of needs, including access to weapons, training and publicity. Importantly, he highlights al-Qaeda's own motivations as well, such as getting access to local fighters, but also its own organizational survival and the need to remain relevant. Byman also outlines a number of problems and risks associated with such affiliation choices, ranging from preference divergence to shirking by the local group or damages to the global al-Qaeda brand due to military losses (Byman 2012, 2014). Theoretically, while Byman draws upon business and organizational theory in order to explain al-Qaeda's affiliation choices (Byman 2014, 437-441), he does not deny the relevance of ideology. As he argues, '[f]or al-Qaeda, shared ideas and identities are important elements of its affiliation strategy and are a necessary condition for affiliation' (452). The acknowledgment of ideology as a relevant factor, while at the same time perceiving al-Qaeda and its local affiliates as largely rational actors, is

also characteristic of Mendelsohn's (2015) work about what he coins 'franchising' (2) choices made by al-Qaeda. While Byman and Mendelsohn both argue in favour of limiting the analysis to formal affiliation processes (Byman 2014, 434; Mendelsohn 2015, 14) – that is, cases in which local rebel groups have pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda – Moghadam (2017) proposes a more nuanced conceptualization. He distinguishes between 'high-end' and 'low-end' (5) terrorist cooperation, which he then further disentangles into different categories. In a similar vein, Bacon (2018, 6) underscores the importance of distinguishing between more and less formalized cooperation, as well as between short- and long-term cooperation. In turn, similar to Byman and Mendelsohn, Bacon acknowledges the 'strong correlation between [...] shared ideology and alliances', but claims that ideology is not a causal factor, rather arguing that alliance behaviour is primarily driven by organizational dynamics (4).

In addition to these more encompassing works, which have drawn upon evidence from a range of comparative case studies, there exists a multitude of further studies that have analysed transnationalization processes in particular countries. However, many of these studies are authored by area specialists who did not link them to the aforementioned works about jihadist group cooperation more broadly (see, for instance, Youngman 2016; Weeraratne and Recker 2018; Morier-Genoud 2020). Moreover, jihadism scholars have produced several in-depth studies of particular transnationalization processes, for instance about the ADF's transnationalization into ISCAP (Candland et al. 2021), the rise of Islamic State's Khorasan Province (ISKP) (Sheikh 2017; Giustozzi 2018), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's expansion into the Sahel (Weiss 2022) or IS's growth in Southeast Asia (Jadoon, Jahanbani, and Willis 2020). The work of Warner et al. (2021) provides a notable exception insofar as the authors study a total of nine transnationalization processes on the African continent. Empirically, although limited to IS, their work is one of the most encompassing attempts to arrive at cross-case trends driving the emergence of transnational jihadist conflict.

Despite their conceptual and empirical contributions, the abovementioned studies leave some important gaps. First, similar to the existing literature about jihadist ideology, their conclusions are primarily drawn from case-based, in-depth studies of individual conflicts and transnationalization processes. The implication arising from this reliance on case studies is that we lack insights about the wider trends and patterns characterizing the evolution of transnational jihadist conflict in different parts of the world. Second, a majority of the more encompassing and foundational contributions to the field were written at a time when IS had either not yet emerged as a transnational actor or had just recently begun its campaign of transnationalization. This means that large parts of their core arguments were based on al-Qaeda rather

than IS, a point also noted by Aae (2018, 85) and Warner et al. (2021, 31). In fact, these two gaps are related, insofar as there were simply too few al-Qaeda-related formal affiliation processes prior to the emergence of IS to be able to study them through large- or medium-N approaches. This is not to disregard a number of quantitative studies on terrorist group cooperation more broadly, although these have not zoomed in on al-Qaeda or IS specifically (Bapat and Bond 2012; Asal et al. 2016; Phillips 2019). Third, another gap in jihadism research arises from the fact that the vast majority of empirical findings about transnationalization processes leading to the emergence of transnational jihadist conflict have been obtained by zooming in on cases where such transnationalization did actually take place. In turn, much less attention has been paid to non-cases. Exceptions include the work by Nesser and Gråtrud (2019) on why IS remained relatively unsuccessful in Jordan, IS's struggles to grow in the Kashmir region (Siyech 2018) or Mendelsohn's analysis of al-Qaeda's inability to establish ties with Palestinian militants (Mendelsohn 2009). However, these works have rarely spoken to each other, but more often had a case-based focus, seeking to understand what prevented transnational jihadist conflict in a particular country. This latter point is also highlighted by Finnbogason and Svensson (2018, 97) in their study about the absence of jihadist civil wars in Southeast Asia. By studying what factors prevent successful transnationalization processes and thus the emergence of transnational jihadist conflict, this dissertation aims to address this gap, while also incentivizing future research to pay greater attention to such non-cases. After all, as highlighted by (Staniland 2021, 529), 'identifying non-onset cases lays the basis for more systematic future testing across contexts'.

In sum, by combining a predominantly large-N methodology that is common in the empirical peace and conflict literature with the insights produced by scholars specialized in jihadism studies, this dissertation aims at creating synergies between these two strands of existing literature. As regards the empirical peace and conflict literature, it addresses the research gap that lies in the scarcity of studies that conceptualize and empirically investigate al-Qaeda, IS and their local affiliate groups as a distinct type of non-state actor. Previous findings obtained about the onset, escalation and resolution of civil wars more generally may thus not apply to transnational jihadist conflicts. In contrast, the literature about transnational jihadism lacks the large- and medium-N approaches common in the peace and conflict literature, which allow scholars to arrive at findings that go beyond individual countries or rebel groups. While existing research in this field has offered a great depth of empirical insights about conflicts involving al-Qaeda, IS and their local affiliates, few empirical attempts have been made to test their external validity beyond individual cases.

Having outlined the contribution of this dissertation to the existing literature, the following section lays out some central definitions and theoretical assumptions that guide the three constituent papers.

3. Definitions and theoretical point of departure

The three papers in this dissertation approach the overall research question from different angles, but they share the same definitions of some central concepts. They also build upon a common set of theoretical assumptions. Thus, the goal of this section is to lay out the most relevant of these definitions, as well as to carve out some central theoretical assumptions guiding the analysis throughout the three papers.

Transnational jihadism

From the outset, it must be reiterated that this dissertation is concerned with the phenomenon of transnational *Sunni* jihadism. This is important to emphasize, as the term ‘jihadism’ is often used synonymously with its Sunni manifestation, disregarding the phenomenon of *Shi’a* jihadism.¹¹ The Sunni-centrism in the broader study of Islamism has been critically discussed in studies by Lynch III (2008) and, more recently, Valbjørn and Gunning (2021). However, because this dissertation aims at understanding the factors driving armed conflicts that involve al-Qaeda and IS, and because these two organizations mobilize exclusively among Sunni Muslims, Shi’a jihadist actors are not at the direct centre of this dissertation.

Even a rather narrow focus only on transnational Sunni jihadism does not imply that one would be able to study a homogenous type of movement, or a unipolar ideology. As outlined by Crenshaw (2017, 59), ‘[Sunni] Jihadism [...] is neither unitary nor monolithic’, but rather ‘contains competing power centers and divergent ideological orthodoxies’. The heterogeneity of the concept and the lack of a widely agreed-upon definition have contributed to considerable confusion in public debates, with terms such as ‘Muslim’, ‘Islamic’, ‘Islamist’ and ‘jihadist’ still frequently conflated. To begin with, it is therefore necessary to outline the definition of transnational (Sunni) jihadism that is employed throughout this dissertation. The term ‘jihadism’ itself has its root in the Arabic root verb *jahada*, which can be loosely translated as ‘struggle’ or ‘strive for’. Broadly speaking, *jihad* carries two larger sets of meanings: one of them implying an externally directed, violent fight (*al-qital*) and the other one implying a primarily self-directed, non-violent struggle for a more pious life (*jihad al-nafs* or *jihad al-akbar*) (Maher 2016, 32). It is the former, violent

¹¹ For a discussion of how the term ‘jihad’ has been used by Iran-backed Shi’a militias in Syria, see Smyth (2015, 3-21).

connotation of jihad that is characteristic of both al-Qaeda's and IS's interpretation of the term, and thus lies at the core of this dissertation. Overall, I define transnational jihadism as an ideology that propagates a violent struggle on a global scale to liberate Sunni Muslim populations from non-Muslim or allegedly apostate Muslim governments, with the larger goal of creating a global Islamic caliphate.¹² This definition closely builds upon those employed by Hegghammer (2006) and a widely cited report by the International Crisis Group (2005). It also implies an ideological hostility of transnational jihadists against the West; that is, the US and its allies, including Israel.

While al-Qaeda and IS disagree over a number of issues, as outlined in Section 1, their interpretation of jihad is characterized by some common themes, which are derived from the same core set of textual sources. Some of them are worth highlighting in order to provide a better understanding of how these organizations perceive the world around them. Transnational jihadists hold the view that only an authority with a divine mandate directly from God has the legitimate right to govern (*la hukm illa li-llah*). As emphasized by Sheikh and el-Jaichi (2022), three intellectual sources that can be considered particularly foundational for transnational jihadists are the writings of ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792) and Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966). Ibn Taymiyya has been described as the 'father of Islamic fundamentalism' (Krawietz 2014, cited in Sheikh and el-Jaichi 2022, 15) due to his advocacy for the principle of *tawhid* (oneness and unity of God) and rejection of beliefs and practices considered un-Islamic. Al-Wahhab, building upon Taymiyya's arguments, developed the doctrine of *al-wala wa'l bara'* ('loyalty and disavowal'), which calls upon all 'true' Muslims to disassociate themselves from anything considered to be un-Islamic and to follow God's laws as the only source of legitimacy. This has contributed decisively to the creation of new in- and out-group perceptions, connecting transnational jihadists across nation-state borders and thus strengthening the perception of a global *umma* (16). Qutb, in turn, was particularly influential by virtue of developing the concept of *hakimiyya* ('sovereignty'), which he presented in his book *Milestones on the Road*. In it, Qutb calls for a de-territorialized armed struggle in order to restore God's sovereignty over a world that he views to be in a state of *jahiliyya* ('ignorance') wherever man-made laws are governing peoples' lives. Qutb's vision was to replace the system of *jahiliyya* with one of *hakimiyya*, in which God's laws are to replace those made by men (El-Jaichi 2021). The work of Qutb, who was executed by the Egyptian government in 1966, further served

¹² As mentioned in Section 1, al-Qaeda and IS have disagreed about *when* such a caliphate should be declared, with al-Qaeda having opposed what it perceived to be a hastened and unjustified decision by IS to proclaim a caliphate in 2014.

as a reference point for other scholars such as Muhammad Abd al-Salam al-Faraj, who is particularly known for his book *The Neglected Duty* in which he declares violent jihad to be a duty for every Muslim in the world (al-Tamimi 2019). Today, particularly Qutb's writings are considered foundational for the rise of transnational jihadism in its current manifestations, as they helped legitimize violence against a range of alleged domestic and international enemies of Islam (Springer, Regens, and Edger 2009, 10).

It was, however, not until the 1980s, following upon the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, that the ideas outlined by al-Faraj and Qutb found new resonance among foreign ideologues and activists who had travelled to support the cause of the *mujahideen* anti-Soviet resistance movement. A central figure in this regard was the Palestinian Abdallah Azzam, who belonged to a Qutbist faction within the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, from where he had been expelled due to his criticism of the government (Hegghammer 2020, 103). Azzam promoted a view of jihad as a duty (*fard 'ayn*) incumbent upon every Muslim as an individual, not only those being directly affected by a foreign occupying force (Sheikh and el-Jaichi 2022, 14). He based this call upon the argument that Islam was under existential threat in Afghanistan, thereby legitimizing a *defensive* jihad that, moreover, would not have to be sanctioned by an *amir*, given the absence of support from Arab state leaders, which Azzam attributed to their alleged lack of Islamic education (Maher 2016, 37-38). The understanding of jihad as an individual duty, independent of where a person lived, was crucial in driving the flow of the so-called Arab Afghans who became foreign fighters in Afghanistan. Later, it would also be used by IS in calling upon Muslims to join its proclaimed caliphate in Iraq and Syria.

Importantly, it was not only transnational jihadist ideology that underwent an evolution during the Afghan jihad. Organizationally, al-Qaeda emerged between 1987 and 1988 (the exact date is disputed), created under the leadership of Osama bin Laden, as an entity to coordinate the influx of foreign fighters into Afghanistan (Hegghammer 2020, 352-54). Still, despite bin Laden's and al-Qaeda's jihadist ideology and the recruitment of foreign fighters, the main focus still lay on targeting the 'near enemy' – that is, secular governments in Muslim countries. This also holds for Abdallah Azzam, today considered at best an observer of the emerging al-Qaeda structures in the late 1980s rather than a co-founder, who continued to view the liberation of Palestine as his primary objective, but believed that Afghanistan provided a more viable, short-term opportunity for waging jihad (Kepel 2018, 68).

The 1990s then saw a period of major reorientation, which led to the emergence of transnational jihadism in its current form. After the collapse of Afghanistan's pro-Soviet government in 1992, scores of foreign fighters returned to other battlefields such as Algeria, Bosnia, Chechnya or Egypt, where they

supported ongoing Islamist insurgencies. Yet these local insurgencies against secular Muslim regimes were soon struggling to achieve lasting impacts and began to lose popular support. In 1998, bin Laden and al-Zawahiri issued their declaration of war against the United States and its allies, framing it as ‘a duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it’ (Springer, Regens, and Edger 2009, 15). The crucial change lay in the call for a *global* struggle against the United States and the West. Bin Laden and his allies argued that locally contained Islamist insurgencies in places such as Egypt or Palestine were bound to fail as long as these regimes received support from the United States and its allies. The struggle against these declared enemies of Islam was portrayed as a task for the entire Islamic world, thereby breaking the boundaries between different ongoing Islamist insurgencies. Gerges (2005, 25) emphasizes that al-Qaeda’s decision to shift its focus from the ‘near enemy’ towards the United States and its allies as the ‘far enemy’ was to a large extent driven by the realization of the failures of the insurgencies in Algeria, Chechnya and Egypt, as well as the political exclusion of the Islamists in Bosnia in the 1995 Dayton Agreement. According to Gerges, by targeting the United States and its allies, al-Qaeda’s leaders were hoping to ‘stop the revolutionary ship from sinking’ (25). Soon after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 that followed upon the 9/11 attacks and deprived al-Qaeda of its safe haven in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda began its ‘branching out strategy’ (Mendelsohn 2015, 1). The formalization of the organization’s transnational network of affiliated groups also involved the announcement of an Iraqi affiliate group led by Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi in 2004. It was this group that would later develop into the so-called Islamic State (IS), al-Qaeda’s contemporary transnational jihadist rival.¹³

Other strands of Islamism

Al-Qaeda’s call for a global jihad began to set it apart from a range of other Islamist armed groups that continued to prioritize their revolutionary struggles against local regimes or their fights for separatist goals. Therefore, within the broader category of ‘Islamism’, I distinguish transnational jihadism, both as an ideology as well as al-Qaeda and IS as its two main organizational manifestations, from other types of militant Islamism. There are, on one hand, revolutionary Islamists whose struggle is primarily directed at secular regimes in Muslim countries, and on the other hand, separatists (or ‘irredentists’)

¹³ For an extended discussion of al-Qaeda in Iraq’s (AQI) transformation into IS, see Bunzel (2015).

fighting for the liberation of lands that are considered occupied by non-Muslims (ICG 2005, i).¹⁴ An example of the revolutionary category of militant Islamism is al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya, an Egyptian group that carried out a campaign of violence throughout the 1990s, seeking to overthrow the government of Hosni Mubarak. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which fought for independence for the Muslim population living on the island of Mindanao in the Philippines and signed a peace agreement with the Philippine Government in 2014, constitutes an example of a separatist Islamist group.

It is further crucial to emphasize that militant Islamism (including transnational jihadism), despite the widespread attention it has attracted, constitutes an exception within the predominantly *non-violent* category of Islamism as such. The non-violent types of Islamism can be broadly categorized into two groups, the first of which is *political* Islamism, as represented by Islamist political parties. Many of these parties have been ideologically inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood, such as the AKP party of Turkish President Recep Erdogan, or the Justice and Development Party (PJD) in Morocco, which held government power for almost the entire past decade (2011-21) (ICG 2005, i). But there have also been notable cases of Salafi political parties, for example in Egypt during the short, two-year spell of political opening that followed the toppling of the Mubarak regime in 2011 (Drevon 2015). What links these parties together is that, through political participation, they seek to ensure a stronger influence of Islam in the political and societal spheres. I distinguish these Islamist political parties from other parties that, rather than advocating for an Islamization of society and the state, primarily use Islam as an identity marker to mobilize Muslims among the electorate. I refer to these parties as 'Islamic'. An example, which is briefly discussed in Paper 2, is the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress Party (SLMC), which abandoned its earlier Islamist positions and has since focused on defending the interests of Sri Lanka's Muslim minority more broadly. The second, broader category of non-violent Islamism is characterized by its *missionary* focus (*da'wa*), but it is not the immediate focus of this dissertation (ICG 2005, i).

Despite ideological overlaps, non-violent Islamism should not be misunderstood as a precursor to militant Islamism. Rather, there are sharp disagreements between those advocating for violence and those maintaining a non-

¹⁴ While the distinction between these three strands of militant Islamism – transnational, revolutionary and separatist – has been adopted in a range of studies, there is some variation as to whether revolutionary and separatist groups are referred to as 'Islamist' (as done by Hegghammer 2006) or 'jihadist' (as done by ICG 2005). In this dissertation, I refer to these non-transnationally oriented groups as 'Islamist'.

violent focus. For example, prior to the Arab Spring in 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood was identified as ‘one of the major challenges to the Salafi-jihadist movement globally’ (Lynch 2010, 467). Al-Qaeda and IS have, in turn, accused non-violent Islamists of compromising their values by agreeing to participate in democratic systems and compete in elections (al-Zawahiri 2018; Unknown author 2021).

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that many of the categorizations outlined above are not fixed. Rather, political parties as well as armed groups have shifted their positioning over time. Moreover, there have been different streams within single groups or parties, often resulting in the break-away of certain factions to rival groups or parties. Most importantly, al-Qaeda and IS-affiliated groups have often grown out of local Islamist insurgent groups that had initially adopted a revolutionary or separatist focus. Only after some time did these groups then adopt a transnational jihadist orientation. The North Caucasus insurgency provides a case in point, as it underwent various stages over time, evolving from an initially largely secular, nationalist group into a separatist-Islamist movement, and, lastly, IS’s so-called Caucasus Province (Garner 2013; Youngman 2016). In other cases, Islamist rebel groups have laid down arms and transformed into Islamist political parties. For example, the above-mentioned al-Jama’a al-Islamiyya in Egypt declared a unilateral ceasefire in 1997 and later stepped onto the political stage after Egypt’s political opening in the aftermath of the Arab Spring in 2011 (Drevon 2015).

To understand the dynamics driving transnational jihadist conflict, attention must be paid to the interplay of a broader range of actors. Most centrally, this regards other Islamist armed groups, but it may also be necessary to explore the role of Islamist and Islamic political parties, as they could compete with al-Qaeda and IS over support from similar target populations. The latter is relevant with respect to Paper 2 of this dissertation, which examines the role of political parties in various South Asian countries as a potential factor obstructing the growth of al-Qaeda and IS.

Transnationalization

The research objective of this dissertation is to identify dynamics that can explain the emergence and the resilience of transnational jihadist conflicts; that is, armed conflicts involving groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and IS. It was argued previously that one central characteristic that distinguishes these conflicts from other conflicts is the involvement of local groups that have become integrated with transnational organizations. Therefore, to explain the dynamics of transnational jihadist conflict, it is necessary to pay close attention to

these integration processes and their implications.¹⁵ For example, in some cases ‘integration’ might denote a rhetorical oath of allegiance but without more substantial operational collaboration between the transnational umbrella organization and the local group, whereas in other cases the collaboration might also lead to more directly observable changes on the ground. This dissertation, however, is not only interested in the degree of organizational integration between local and global organizations. While organizational integration is an almost necessary condition¹⁶ for transnational jihadist conflicts to emerge, it is by no means sufficient, as illustrated through various cases of announced jihadist affiliate groups that never managed to initiate armed conflicts, for example IS’s Bahrain province.

In the existing literature on terrorist group cooperation, a multitude of terms have been used to describe cases where non-state armed groups decide to join forces in one way or another, ranging from ‘coalitions’ (Karmon 2005, 7), ‘alliances’ (Bacon 2018, 6; Phillips 2019, 997) and ‘cooperation’ (Phillips 2014; Moghadam 2017, 17) to ‘cooperative engagements’ (Bond 2010, iii) or ‘interdependencies’ (Akcinaroglu 2012, 879). However, since the main focus in this dissertation is not to explain the organizational integration between armed groups, but rather the dynamics driving the emergence and resilience of transnational jihadist conflict, my conceptual understanding of the term ‘transnationalization’ reflects an interest in two closely related processes: a) the emergence of new incidences of transnational jihadist conflicts, and b) the process of integration between local groups and al-Qaeda and IS. The term ‘transnationalization’ is useful as it can capture both types of processes. In previous research it has been used, on one hand, to describe processes of ‘conflict extension’ (Sheikh 2022, 2) and, on the other hand, to capture ‘the process

¹⁵ For a discussion around the possible implications of such integration processes, see Sheikh and Andersen (2017, 15-16).

¹⁶ As highlighted by Byman, AQAP’s first attempt to establish a presence in Saudi Arabia was the only time it tried to build a new affiliate group ‘largely from scratch’ (Byman 2014, 454). All of al-Qaeda’s other affiliate groups were created through integration with pre-existing, local armed groups. Similarly, as regards IS, the organization has almost always built upon at least small cores or pre-established networks of local militants. One case in which the role played by IS’s own core militants was particularly significant when setting up a new affiliate group was Libya, where both Libyan and foreign fighters that had been embedded with ISIS subsequently travelled to Libya to establish the group’s local affiliate group. However, even this group was not built up fully ‘from scratch’, as the ISIS returnees were able to establish ties with defecting local Ansar al-Sharia fighters, which allowed them to build upon pre-existing organizational structures (Zelin 2018, 8).

by which non-state groups integrate with transnational actors' (Harpviken 2012, 203).

Harpviken's group-centred understanding of transnationalization is further multidimensional, as he distinguishes integration on four key dimensions: 'organization' (1), 'resource mobilization' (2), 'tactical repertoire' (3) and 'ideological framing' (4) (203). This dissertation's Paper 3 is closely in line with this approach, as it investigates the degree of transnationalization of al-Qaeda's and IS's affiliate groups based on whether they recruit transnationally ('organization') and whether they operate across state borders ('tactical repertoire'). The latter aspect, regarding transnational operations, illustrates the interrelatedness between the dual meanings of transnationalization applied in this dissertation: when armed groups operate transnationally, this may not only be an indication of their degree of organizational transnationalization – it may also lead to the emergence of new transnational jihadist conflict dyads; that is, conflict extension. Breaking up the organizational dimension of transnationalization is also helpful because it allows one to account for the fact that local affiliate groups may, despite their organizational affiliation, 'retain substantial independent agency' (Clausen 2022, 1) along a number of dimensions.

Similar to Paper 3, the second paper of this dissertation uses the term 'transnationalization' to describe the formal integration between local armed groups and al-Qaeda and IS as transnational actors, but it also takes note of the fact that despite some cases of such organizational transnationalization in South Asia, these have rarely led to the emergence of transnational jihadist conflict. Paper 1, in turn, adopts a conflict-centred understanding of transnationalization in order to describe the emergence of new instances of transnational jihadist conflict, assuming that for this type of conflict to emerge, the organizational integration with local groups is a necessary precondition.

In parts of the jihadism literature, the terms 'transnational' and 'global' are used synonymously to describe the *modus operandi* of al-Qaeda and IS as organizations that maintain a presence in various countries around the world. Yet these terms can also bear different meanings. For example, studies about the phenomenon of transnational rebellion more broadly have defined such rebellions as insurgencies in which individual groups have access to a safe haven in a neighbouring country, but they do not require that such groups are operating on a regional, let alone global, level (Salehyan 2007, 2009). The Colombian FARC, for instance, has been conceptualized as a case of a transnational rebel group because it was able to maintain a safe haven in Venezuela (Martínez 2017). In turn, what jihadism scholars have argued is that al-Qaeda's and IS's distinctiveness consists in their activities on a *global* level, as they operate not only across single borders, but rather across different regions and continents (Kilcullen 2005; Lia 2016, 83). At the same time, as Paper 3 of

this dissertation empirically carves out, there is substantial variance between different affiliate groups' *degrees* of organizational transnationalization, for example with regard to the extent to which they recruit or operate transnationally themselves.

In brief, it can be summarized that 'transnationalization', as applied in this dissertation, is a multidimensional concept that has relevance both on a conflict level and on a group level. Group-level processes of transnationalization are an (almost) necessary precondition for transnationalization to take place at the conflict level, but they are by no means a sufficient condition.

Armed Conflict and Terrorism

To understand the wider expansion of al-Qaeda and IS, it is further crucial to define the particular type of violence that emanates from these organizations. Armed conflict and terrorism had long tended to be studied in separation, by scholars from different academic sub-communities. More recently, a growing number of researchers have started to pay greater attention to the fact that many actors in armed conflicts use terrorist tactics and that many terrorist actors are also involved in armed conflicts (Polo and Gleditsch 2016, 815). Hence, the two phenomena are by no means exclusive. Al-Qaeda and IS are perhaps some of the most prominent examples of this intertwinement. But what distinguishes attacks that are carried out as part of an armed conflict from attacks that can be considered 'terrorist'? What constitutes an armed conflict is overall largely agreed upon by peace and conflict scholars. The most widely applied definition, which I also use in this dissertation, is offered by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), which defines an armed conflict as 'a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year' (UCDP 2022). Because al-Qaeda and IS are non-state actors, I limit my attention to what the UCDP defines as 'internal armed conflict' – that is, armed conflicts in which at least one party is a non-state actor (ibid.).¹⁷ Throughout this dissertation, I simply use the term 'armed conflict' when speaking of internal armed conflicts. Moreover, I use the terms 'armed conflict' and 'civil war' interchangeably. Overall, what is distinct about the concept

¹⁷ Some internal armed conflicts can further be defined as 'internationalized' internal armed conflicts, because at least one external state has militarily intervened on either of the two conflict parties' sides (UCDP 2022). This has occurred quite frequently in conflicts involving al-Qaeda and IS, for example in Syria, where both Russia and Iran intervened militarily on the side of the Assad regime.

of armed conflict as such is its dyadic nature: there have to be two parties and there needs to be a mutually stated (verbal or written) incompatibility.¹⁸

While at least two armed parties are thus needed for an armed conflict, the same is not the case when it comes to terrorism, which is in itself a disputed concept. It has been well-documented how governments misuse the term to discredit political opponents or to justify violent transgressions in their attempts to suppress insurgent groups or even non-violent opposition movements (Toros 2008). Further, certain negative implications for nonviolent conflict resolution have been highlighted, for example with regard to the terror-listing of insurgent groups, which can create legal obstacles to entering peace negotiations (Haspeslagh 2013). What is further lacking is a clear definition of the concept of 'terrorism'. A 2005 study identified more than 200 different definitions of the term (Schmid and Jongman 2005, cited in Polo and Gleditsch 2016, 816). Still, there are some central overlaps between many of these definitions: according to Polo and Gleditsch (2016, 816), most existing definitions of terrorism view it 'as a specific tactic where non-state actors target opponents indirectly rather than through direct conventional attacks'. The key difference from conventional acts of violence perpetrated in civil wars is that 'the immediate targets or victims are typically non-combatants, and each individual victim is normally less important than the purpose of conveying a message to the intended audience' (ibid.). This definition also comes close to the concept of 'one-sided violence', defined by the UCDP as 'the deliberate use of armed force by the government of a state or by a formally organised group against civilians which results in at least 25 deaths in a year' (UCDP 2022). The main difference here is that the UCDP definition also includes governments as potential perpetrators of one-sided violence. But with regard to non-state actors such as al-Qaeda and IS, it is conceptually very close to Polo and Gleditsch's definition of terrorism. Throughout this dissertation, I stick with the UCDP definition and use the term 'one-sided violence', but nonetheless draw upon various insights coming from the wider terrorism literature as well.

Why are these conceptual distinctions so important? The main goal of this dissertation is to identify trends and patterns in transnational jihadist conflicts across various conflict zones. It is thus necessary to find ways to measure the emergence and resilience of transnational jihadist conflicts over time. For this task, precise definitions are indispensable. Importantly, I conceptualize transnational jihadist conflict as involving local rebel groups that have pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda or IS. Thus, inherent to this definition is the

¹⁸ For an extended discussion of how this dyadic perspective established in the peace and conflict discipline can contribute to the study of jihadism, see Sheikh and Svensson (2022, 61-62).

presence of a local non-state actor that consists of a number of more or less organized rebels. Although acts of one-sided violence (or ‘terrorist attacks’) are often carried out by organized rebel groups that are simultaneously involved in civil wars, this is not always the case: Europe experienced a campaign of one-sided violence claimed by IS from 2014 onwards, but not a single armed conflict according to the UCDP definition. Rather, many of these attacks were carried out by individual militants, or small cells of IS sympathizers, for whose attacks the central organization claimed responsibility in hindsight. Only in a minority of cases, such as the 2015 Paris attacks, did the attackers travel from Syria to Europe to carry out the attacks. Therefore, despite the common overlap between the phenomena of armed conflict and one-sided violence, they may be driven by different causal mechanisms, which requires a careful distinction.

Against this backdrop, the main analytical focus of this dissertation lies on al-Qaeda, IS and their local affiliates as insurgent groups involved in armed conflicts with local governments. This is also the reason why al-Qaeda’s and IS’s activities in Europe or North America are not addressed in greater depth in this dissertation. At the same time, the acts of one-sided violence perpetrated by local al-Qaeda and IS affiliates are taken into account to shed further light on the local affiliates’ overall operational activities, albeit to varying degrees across the three papers.

Theoretical assumptions

Before introducing the data and the empirical strategy chosen to address the research question guiding this dissertation, it is necessary to acknowledge a few fundamental theoretical premises upon which this dissertation relies.

First, I assume that something can be gained from comparing transnational jihadist conflicts across different local contexts. This is not to disregard the fact that in many ways, each of these conflicts shares some unique features. A local rebel group in Mali is exposed to a different geographical and cultural context than, for instance, a group in the Philippines. At the same time, there are also important commonalities between the various cases of transnational jihadist conflict: they all involve local Islamist groups that, at some point, decided to take up arms to fight their governments and become a part of al-Qaeda or IS. In turn, the latter chose to invest at least some resources in these local contexts, considering them relevant targets for organizational expansion. This suggests that, despite differences in the history of the particular local context, its unique ethnic composition and distinct geographical contexts, there should be a reason for why transnational jihadist conflict emerges in some

cases but not in others. Likewise, the fact that none of these conflicts has experienced the onset of peace negotiations indicates that they share particular features that allow for meaningful cross-case comparisons. While it is impossible to find even two conflicts that would share the same characteristics across the *full* range of potential explanatory factors, they most likely share similarities on at least some dimensions. The goal of this dissertation is precisely to identify these similarities and to study whether some of them share explanatory power across a larger number of cases. For this purpose, this dissertation studies both *local* and *transnational* explanatory factors. Thus, theoretically, this dissertation is situated between the highly localized approaches that sometimes tend to downplay the importance of transnational actors and those focusing more strongly on the global jihadist movement as a whole. Rather, it approaches these conflicts as ‘glocal’ phenomena (Bencherif 2021), acknowledging that the particular weight of transnational influences varies between different conflicts.

Second, I assume that both local rebel group leaders as well as al-Qaeda and IS are behaving in largely rational ways. This is an important claim which requires further elaboration. The notion of al-Qaeda and IS as irrational villains has to a large extent been shaped by the vicious brutality employed by these groups and their killing of thousands of innocent civilians. ISIS even took al-Qaeda’s former brutality to new levels when it established its self-declared caliphate in 2014. As emphasized by Gerges (2016, 232), ‘ISIS’s spectacle of ritualized violence and its display of viciousness and savagery differ qualitatively from those of al-Qaeda Central, as it revels in sadistic war crimes and builds a totalitarian reign of terror’. However, Lia (2015, 38) reminds us that ‘[w]hat may appear as erratic behavior by jihadi groups according to classical insurgency theories may in fact be strategic adaptation to a globalized world where the old parameters of success are no longer valid’. In line with insurgency scholar John Mackinlay, Lia argues that one key to understanding the ‘ultra-radical’ (ibid.) behaviour of these jihadists lies in the fact that they communicate to a transnational audience living outside their areas of governance. Even if individual jihadist proto-states are crushed after some time, they have ideally, from the jihadists’ point of view, served to mobilize the larger target audience consisting of diaspora networks, online sympathizers and influential ideologues. ISIS’s brutality appears even less arbitrary if one considers the group’s enormous bureaucratic complexity, which it established at the same time as it was carrying out its atrocities. This also involved the establishment of a sophisticated legal framework, which the group used to legitimize its violence, but which, paradoxically, also constrained its violence in numerous ways. As highlighted by Revkin (2016), who has studied the legal foundations of ISIS’s caliphate in depth, ‘[a]ccording to the Islamic State, violence is

only legitimate when justified by law'. The organization's court system, which dealt not only with religious transgressions but also with a range of modern-day offences such as traffic violations or tax fraud, repeatedly executed its own judges if they deviated from the group's official legal guidelines (Revkin 2016, 26).

While the scope and complexity of ISIS's bureaucratic and legal system stood out from previous jihadist attempts at governance, the same overall pattern could also be observed during al-Qaeda's governance in the so-called Islamic Emirate of Azawad in Mali (2012-13) and al-Mukalla, Yemen (2015-16). Similar to ISIS's state-building project, among the first measures taken by al-Qaeda's local affiliates was the establishment of legal courts (Revkin 2016, 6). Contrary to ISIS, between these two episodes of governance, al-Qaeda underwent a process of internal debates and reorientation, trying to learn from its former mistakes. Retrieved letters written by former al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) leader Abu Mus'ab Abd al-Wadud (also known as Abd al-Malik Droukdel) documented his critique of the group's governance in Mali for its overly repressive strategy, advising a softer approach for future governance projects (Associated Press 2013). Subsequently, when al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) began to govern in the Yemeni port town of al-Mukalla, it adopted a much more careful approach in dealing with the local population (Al-Ganad, al-Katheri, and Johnsen 2020). Overall, these insights illustrate that al-Qaeda and IS behave largely rationally, albeit within the contours of their radical, religiously shaped ideologies.

The next section presents the empirical strategy chosen to address the overarching research question through the two sub-questions which are addressed in the three papers. It also introduces the conflict data provided by the UCDP, which is used as the primary data source across all three papers. Both advantages and some methodological limitations arising from this approach are discussed, including vis-à-vis other datasets.

4. Data and Methodological Approach

Overall methodological approach

To begin with, this dissertation comprises three papers, which together address the main overarching research question: *How does the interplay of local and transnational dynamics shape the evolution of transnational jihadist conflict?* As laid out in Section 1 of this summary report, two sub-questions are also specified, which together relate to different elements of this larger main research question. Table 1 below contains an overview of the overarching research question and the two sub-questions, as well as which of the three papers address them. Paper 1 and Paper 2 both address the first sub-question, but from different angles: while Paper 1 focuses on measuring factors associated with the *emergence* of this type of conflict, Paper 2 focuses on a particular region characterized by the *absence* of it. Both studies therefore complement each other. Paper 3, in turn, is concerned with the resilience of transnational jihadist conflict against peace negotiations. Rather than investigating why these conflicts emerge in some places but not in others (as is the main focus of the first two papers), it zooms in only on those cases in which these conflicts have already started. Concretely, it investigates to what extent the fact that jihadist affiliate groups have never entered peace negotiations can be explained through their distinct transnational features. It studies local affiliate groups' variance in their degree of transnationalization once they have joined al-Qaeda or IS and, based on this analysis, provides a tentative outlook for whether there might be realistic avenues for future peace negotiations with some of these affiliate groups.

Table 1: Research questions and corresponding papers

Overarching research question	How does the interaction between local and transnational dynamics shape the evolution of transnational jihadist conflict?	
Sub-questions	1: What factors can explain the variation in the expansion of transnational jihadist conflict to new countries?	2: To what extent can the resilience of transnational jihadist conflict against peace negotiations be explained through the transnationalization of the involved affiliate groups?
Addressed in Papers	1, 2	3

Methodological approaches in the three papers

The overarching goal of this dissertation is to identify mechanisms that can improve our understanding of the evolution of transnational jihadist conflict. It aims at identifying patterns *across* individual conflicts, as the scarcity of large-N studies was identified as a main gap in the existing literature. For this purpose, it is necessary to take a broad sample of transnational jihadist conflicts into account and to study the phenomenon beyond individual countries and conflicts. At the same time, because they address different sub-research questions, the dissertation's three papers are also conducted at different levels of analysis, employing different methodological approaches. The first study takes a large-N methodological approach and is conducted at the *country-year* level of analysis, covering a total sample of over 100 countries in Africa and Asia, over a time span of nearly two decades (2002-2018). The main statistical models in this study contain between 1,500 and 1,700 country-year observations. Controlling for a range of potentially confounding variables, the paper investigates the relationship between three main, state-level predictors (state repression as well as bureaucratic and military state capacity) and the likelihood of transnational jihadist conflict emergence. The focus in this paper is thus exclusively on transnational jihadist *conflict*. Other types of organized violence in which al-Qaeda and IS have been involved – that is, non-state conflict¹⁹ and one-sided violence – are not taken into consideration.

The second paper takes a narrower perspective and, instead of studying a larger set of countries, zooms in on South Asia as a particular *region*. The study starts by providing a descriptive statistical analysis that assesses the degree to which al-Qaeda and IS have been involved in various forms of organized violence (intrastate armed conflict, non-state conflict and one-sided violence) in a total of five South Asian countries. This analysis is based on the UCDP's Georeferenced Events Dataset (GED) (Sundberg and Melander 2013). Thus, rather than only examining the degree to which they have been involved in transnational jihadist *conflict*, as in Paper 1, I here also assess their (non-)involvement in two further types of organized violence. This is done primarily to be able to make a more nuanced argument as to whether they may have tactically employed one type of organized violence (for example one-sided violence) over the other (armed conflict). I further back up this analysis by consulting the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) in a second analytical stage. The concordant findings from these statistical analyses then provide the puzzle

¹⁹ I follow the UCDP's definition of non-state conflict as "the use of armed force between two organized armed groups, neither of which is the government of a state, which results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in a year" (Sundberg, Eck, and Kreutz 2012; Pettersson 2022, 4).

that motivates the remainder of the study, which seeks to explain why al-Qaeda and IS have claimed so few attacks in these countries, across all three categories of organized violence, relative to other world regions. This second part of Paper 2 builds entirely on secondary sources; that is, policy reports, peer-reviewed articles and books as well as news articles. These sources in turn rely almost exclusively on qualitative, in-depth research about Islamist militancy in Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, the Maldives and Sri Lanka. Paper 2 therefore contains a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, even though it does not employ a mixed methods approach in the strict sense of the term.

The goal of Paper 3 is to examine to what extent the resilience of transnational jihadist conflicts against peace negotiations can be explained through the transnational features of al-Qaeda's and IS's affiliate groups. The study builds upon Harpviken's (2012, 203) conceptualization of 'transnationalization', which he defines as the process of integration between a local group and a transnational actor. As mentioned previously, according to Harpviken, transnationalization can occur on four dimensions: 'organization' (1), 'resource mobilization' (2), 'tactical repertoire' (3) and 'ideological framing' (4) (ibid.). While it would be ideal to empirically examine all of these dimensions, two of them are excluded from the analysis in Paper 3. First, as regards resource mobilization, there is a lack of publicly available data about the transfer of money, weapons or other resources between al-Qaeda, IS and their respective affiliate groups. Therefore, a cross-case examination of this dimension of transnationalization is not feasible. Second, a similar problem exists with regard to ideological framing, as there is no data source currently available that would offer a coherent categorization of the degree of ideological transnationalization of different jihadist affiliate groups. One possibility for arriving at more nuanced categorizations with respect to ideological transnationalization would be to trace group statements, propaganda material and other forms of communication by these groups in order to find out whether some of them are more committed to transnational or local issues. Such an endeavour constitutes a promising avenue for future research but reaches beyond the scope of this dissertation. Against this backdrop, Paper 3 is limited to an empirical analysis of (1) tactical repertoire and (2) organization. In terms of tactical repertoire, the study investigates to what extent these groups operate transnationally. This is achieved through conducting a descriptive statistical analysis based on the GED dataset, collecting information on all instances of organized violence attributed to each of the twenty affiliate groups. Again, as in Paper 2, I thus broaden the statistical analysis beyond the category of transnational jihadist conflict to also include non-state conflicts and one-sided violence. In this case, this is done because even if a group is not involved in armed conflicts

in more than one country, it may still have operational networks across state borders that may be reflected through acts of one-sided violence or involvement in non-state conflict. If such networks exist, they would likely influence the prospects for peace negotiations. In a second step, as regards ‘organization’, I compile new data about the recruitment of foreign fighters across the investigated affiliate groups, based on a range of secondary sources. This data collection is exclusively based on qualitative material such as policy reports and newspaper articles as well as peer-reviewed works.

Overall, an advantage of the methodological approach employed across the three papers lies in the combination of statistical analyses and the thorough incorporation of secondary sources, the majority of which are in turn based on qualitative research. Because the main goal of this dissertation lies in identifying trends across individual cases of transnational jihadist conflict, an overly strong focus on individual groups or countries would be of little use. Moreover, as outlined previously, the jihadism literature is already rich in in-depth analyses of individual transnationalization processes and transnational jihadist conflicts. However, developing theoretical arguments and combining them with a large-N approach in a way that is not out of touch with the reality on the ground requires paying close attention to the existing body of in-depth research about al-Qaeda, IS and their transnational networks of affiliated groups. This combination of a large-N approach that nonetheless engages with in-depth qualitative literature is relatively rare in the wider field of jihadism studies and hopefully provides a useful avenue for future research.

Bridging the ‘local versus transnational’ divide

A central element of the methodological approach that cuts across the three papers regards the combination of local and transnational dynamics: the main, overarching research question aims at finding an answer as to how the ‘interplay of local and transnational dynamics’ shapes the evolution of transnational jihadist conflict. To arrive at an answer to this question, it is thus necessary to avoid an overly strong reliance on either only local or only transnational explanations. As outlined in Section 3, such approaches have been common in parts of the existing literature, leading to the so-called ‘local versus global’ debate. One main goal of this dissertation is therefore to bridge this scholarly divide by analysing both local and transnational dynamics. But how is this done concretely?

To begin with, as outlined previously, I conceptualize transnational jihadist conflicts as intrastate conflicts fought between the government of a state and a non-state party that has pledged allegiance to either al-Qaeda or IS. Following a strictly dyadic understanding of conflict that is common in the

peace and conflict literature, one would focus on two main actors involved in these conflicts, namely the government side and the local jihadist affiliate group fighting against it. Alternatively, as for example is done by the UCDP with respect to IS-affiliated groups, rather than treating affiliate groups as autonomous actors, one could view them simply as extensions of the central organization.²⁰ However, in transnational jihadist conflicts, this dyadic model is not fully suitable because of the linkages between the local affiliate groups and the transnational organization. These actors cannot be treated as if they were fully unrelated to each other, but it must also be recognized that a significant degree of operational autonomy remains with the local group. As emphasized earlier, the existing peace and conflict literature has paid insufficient attention to this particular trait of these conflicts, a shortcoming that this dissertation seeks to overcome. In other words, transnational jihadist conflicts are fought between local governments (sometimes with additional military support from external states) and local jihadist groups that are in turn linked to al-Qaeda or IS as transnational actors. This implies that to explain the emergence and resilience of these conflicts, one has to take into account factors that together reflect the interplay between a) the local governments, b) the local affiliate groups, and c) al-Qaeda and IS as transnational organizations. These three actors, in turn, are influenced themselves by their internal makeups, their local surroundings and their transnational environments. While it would go far beyond the scope of a single dissertation to provide a full analysis of all factors that could potentially influence the behaviour of these three types of actors, this dissertation still zooms in on a variety of potential explanatory variables, some of which are locally rooted and some of which span across state borders.

In Paper 1, I present a theoretical argument as to why changes in state repression and state capacity should impact the likelihood of transnational jihadist conflict to emerge. On one hand, the theoretical argument considers the internal decision-making amongst al-Qaeda's and IS's core leaderships. For instance, I claim that these *transnational* organizations should be particularly interested in areas where states are repressing Sunni Muslim populations. On the other hand, I develop an argument as to how *local* armed groups should be impacted by changes in state repression as well, thereby affecting their cost-benefit calculus regarding whether to consider a pledge of allegiance to a transnational jihadist organization. By theorizing about cost-benefit calculations amongst not only al-Qaeda and IS core but also the local armed groups, this paper thus provides a theoretical linkage between the local and the trans-

²⁰ Note that the UCDP's actor IDs for IS core are identical to those of its affiliate groups, whereas al-Qaeda's official branches are assigned separate actor IDs.

national. Moreover, although the main explanatory variables – state repression and state capacity – are local, the statistical analysis also measures to what extent the likelihood of transnational jihadist conflict is impacted by ongoing armed conflicts in neighbouring states, thereby integrating a transnational factor into the statistical analysis.

As mentioned above, Paper 2 sets out by showing that both al-Qaeda and IS core as transnational actors have sought to gain a foothold in various South Asian countries, but that their local influence on the ground, measured in terms of events of organized violence, has in fact remained limited. In order to explain this puzzling finding, the regional focus of this paper allows me to pay particular attention to transnational dynamics. For example, I analyse to what extent local Islamist armed groups may have had access to transnational support networks other than al-Qaeda and IS, and whether this could have rendered a formal affiliation with the latter unnecessary. On the local level, the paper also explores the importance of democratic political channels for Islamist parties, which have competed in domestic politics in Bangladesh, India, the Maldives and Sri Lanka. A transnational dimension is explored as well in this regard, namely with respect to the transnationally operating socio-political movement Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), which has established political parties in various countries throughout the region. The paper further investigates to what extent al-Qaeda and IS core's transnational jihadist ideology may have clashed with the ideological profiles of local Islamist rebel groups.

While al-Qaeda and IS core can be considered transnational actors, both because of their ideologies and their organizational set-ups, their local affiliate groups typically grow out of local insurgencies, which raises the question of how to best perceive of these groups once they have pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda or IS. This question is analysed in greater depth in Paper 3, which empirically studies the degree of transnationalization among a total of 20 of al-Qaeda's and IS's affiliate groups. Concretely, it investigates to what extent these local jihadist affiliate groups can be considered 'transnational', besides their organizational affiliation with al-Qaeda and IS, with regard to a) their militant activity across state borders and b) their recruitment of foreign fighters. The study thus attempts to arrive at a more nuanced and empirically founded understanding of these groups, speaking to the 'local versus global' debate that has evolved in recent years.

Focusing on violence

This dissertation focuses on large-N patterns in the emergence of transnational jihadist conflict and its resilience over time. Given that the degree of

violence – a minimum of 25 battle-related fatalities per calendar year – is inherent to the definition of transnational jihadist conflict, it also constitutes a key feature distinguishing cases of transnational jihadist conflict from non-cases. But even beyond this, violence as such plays a huge role for both al-Qaeda and IS. Ideologically, their understanding of jihad views violence as an individual duty and thus as a goal in itself, whereas other rebel groups may employ it only in order to fulfil their political goals. Moreover, violence is also crucial for these two organizations from a strategic point of view because it is in their interest to claim high numbers of attacks, as they find themselves in a competition over support from the same transnational jihadist audience. Claiming many as well as devastating attacks allows both organizations to project an image of strength to their respective target audiences. The fact that al-Qaeda and IS themselves provide meticulous attack counts from their local affiliate groups in their monthly bulletins reflects how much importance they ascribe to these armed activities. With regard to IS, it has been argued that the group uses violence not only as a form of terror, but also as ‘an integral element of a state project and a visual manifestation of an alternative political order’ (Friis 2018, 243). While IS has indeed stood out in terms of the brutality displayed in its propaganda videos, al-Qaeda also maintains a range of affiliated media channels that regularly publish battlefield videos, reports and numeric overviews of recent military incursions. Overall, it is thus clear that violence is not only a neat indicator of al-Qaeda’s and IS’s strength because it is more easily measurable than other indicators, but also because we can assume that where no such violence takes place, it is typically because these organizations are either absent, too weak or at least too cautious to carry out sustained campaigns of organized violence.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that violence is not the only way through which al-Qaeda and IS can exert influence. Another dimension of ‘success’ or ‘influence’ would be, for instance, the recruitment of foreign fighters. An example are the Maldives, a country that never experienced an armed conflict, according to the definition applied in this dissertation, with either an al-Qaeda or IS affiliate, but that exported a particularly high number of foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria (Zahir 2019). Other scholarly works have focused on the issue of rebel governance, which both al-Qaeda and IS have tried to implement in a variety of locations (Lia 2015). However, although these phenomena often occur in the context of transnational jihadist conflict, they are conceptually different and may thus be explained through different causal pathways. For example, as illustrated through the Maldivian example but also through the case of Europe, foreign fighters can be recruited from relatively stable, peaceful countries that have never experienced transnational jihadist conflict. And as regards rebel governance, there are various cases

where al-Qaeda and IS have been involved in armed conflicts, but not been capable of or willing to engage in rebel governance, at least not beyond a rudimentary level. When studying al-Qaeda's and IS's expansion and resilience over time, conceptual clarity is thus of central importance in order to be able to draw meaningful conclusions. Even within the category of organized violence, as was outlined in Section 2, one has to distinguish between different types of violence, especially one-sided violence against civilians, or 'terrorism', and armed conflict.

Data sources

Following from the discussion above, it is thus necessary to, first, employ data that provides information about the extent of al-Qaeda's and IS's involvement in armed conflicts. Second, that data should ideally be as consistent as possible across individual conflicts, given the goal of this dissertation to identify larger patterns, which requires a high degree of conceptual validity. The very definition of transnational jihadist conflict that was carved out in Section 1 builds upon the UCDP's definition of intrastate conflict. Against this backdrop, it appears reasonable to employ armed conflict data provided by the UCDP as the main data source, as it closely matches the employed definition of transnational jihadist conflict. Still, some reflections on this decision are warranted, not least because a range of alternative data sources exist that might be used instead. Besides the UCDP, the Armed Conflict Location Events Dataset (ACLED) constitutes another leading source with regard to large-N armed conflict data. Moreover, the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) is often used in large-N studies about terrorism. It is worthwhile to briefly motivate the decision to primarily rely on data from the UCDP rather than from these other sources.

The central reason for this decision lies in the UCDP's clear distinction between different types of organized violence. Specifically, it distinguishes between interstate conflict (which is less relevant for the purpose of this dissertation), intrastate conflict (which lies at the core of this dissertation), non-state conflict and one-sided violence against civilians. The UCDP not only publishes separate, aggregated datasets for state-based conflicts (including both inter- and intrastate conflict), non-state conflict and one-sided violence, but also the Georeferenced Events Dataset (GED), which is coded at the event level and contains events belonging to all categories of organized violence. What is crucial about this approach is that it allows for isolating events belonging to transnational jihadist conflicts from other types of violence that al-Qaeda and IS might be involved in, particularly one-sided violence against ci-

vilians. Neither ACLED nor GTD allow for making such distinctions. Moreover, neither of these data sources provides a definition of what constitutes an armed conflict in the first place. With regard to ACLED, Eck (2012, 127) notes that it is sometimes impossible to clearly define whether an event should be attributed to an ongoing armed conflict or not. Similarly, scholars have criticized the GTD because it does not provide criteria to distinguish terrorist attacks from violent actions that form part of an ongoing armed conflict (McCann 2020, 18).

Importantly, this is not to disregard some highly valuable features of these other datasets. For example, as shown by Eck (2012, 128-29), ACLED has the advantage of incorporating a much larger number of events, which can be particularly useful when conducting sub-national analyses within a single country. It also contains a range of non-violent events, whereas the UCDP's data is limited to violent events only. Similar to ACLED, the GTD has a much broader (yet somewhat unclearly defined) policy when it comes to including events. For example, the GTD contains attacks claimed by a much wider range of Islamist and transnational jihadist groups than is covered in the UCDP's datasets. In Paper 2 of this dissertation, I use the GTD for a complementary analysis in order to verify some preliminary findings obtained through the GED dataset. Indeed, that analysis yields information on dozens of Islamist groups in the region that were not included in the GED.²¹ Nonetheless, with the particular goal of this dissertation in mind – that is, to study armed conflict patterns across a larger set of cases – the UCDP's high degree of conceptual validity across cases is well-suited, while the exclusive focus on violent events is in line with the particular goal of this dissertation.

In the following section, I present a relatively concise summary of the findings from the three constituent papers, which are discussed in greater depth within the individual papers. A more general answer to the overall research question is provided in the Conclusion (Section 7).

²¹ For an overview of these groups, see Paper 2, Table A2, Appendix.

5. Findings

Sub-question 1: What factors can explain the variation in the expansion of transnational jihadist conflict to new countries?

Local factors

In their quest for territorial expansion, al-Qaeda and IS thrive upon a particular set of local conditions that can contribute to the emergence of transnational jihadist conflict. This dissertation provides novel empirical evidence regarding some of these factors.

To begin with, al-Qaeda and IS are more likely to become involved in transnational jihadist conflicts where the state is incapable of or unwilling to appropriately manage both legitimate and potentially violent political dissent. Three domestic, state-level factors are investigated in Papers 1 and 2 in this regard.

First, higher degrees of state repression, conceptualized in this dissertation as ‘violations of basic human rights to the physical integrity of the person by agents of the state within the territorial boundaries of the state in question’ (Gibney et al. 2019, 1), are found to significantly correlate with a higher likelihood of the emergence of new incidences of transnational jihadist conflict. The analysis thus suggests that when states repress their citizens to a disproportionate degree, there is a risk of backfire, as al-Qaeda and IS can exploit the situation for their own gains. Second, bureaucratic capacity matters: states with a greater ability to ‘collect and manage information on potential dissidents’ (Hendrix and Young 2014, 336) are less likely to experience this particular type of conflict. Third, political openness, conceptualized as whether the state allows Islamist or Islamic political parties to compete in democratic politics, is identified as an important factor in the South Asian context, where neither al-Qaeda nor IS have managed to gain a foothold thus far, at least not in terms of initiating and maintaining transnational jihadist conflicts. While the findings regarding state repression and bureaucratic state capacity are obtained on a large-N basis and thus have a high degree of external validity, the finding about political openness is not empirically tested beyond the South Asian context. Some additional comments are further warranted to illustrate the finer nuances around these findings, as well as to situate them in relation to the findings obtained in previous research.

State repression

The statistical evidence linking higher degrees of state repression with a heightened likelihood of new incidences of transnational jihadist conflict is robust across various model specifications, but its substantive strength is relatively marginal. Concretely, the analysis finds that a one-unit increase on the five-unit Political Terror Scale (PTS), which is employed to measure state repression, is associated with a 1% increase in the likelihood of transnational jihadist conflict to emerge. At the same time, an interpretation of this percentage score must be seen in light of the *overall* very low likelihood of transnational jihadist conflict, which only occurred in 2% of the total number of country-year observations in the dataset. Still, even compared to other explanatory variables, the effect of state repression is relatively limited. For instance, the effect of bureaucratic state capacity, which is discussed further below, is almost five times larger than that of state repression. Nonetheless, the effect is still statistically significant across a wide range of alternative model specifications, providing at least a 95% confidence level to reject the null hypothesis of no significant association. What is further important to highlight is the endogeneity of the observed relationship. Not only are higher levels of state repression associated with a higher likelihood of an emergence of transnational jihadist conflict, but the reverse is true as well. A so-called Granger causality test, the finer details of which are discussed in Paper 1, shows that once transnational jihadist conflict has emerged, states become significantly more repressive. This finding points towards a dangerous dynamic: not only are repressive states more likely to experience transnational jihadist conflict, but once this type of conflict is ongoing, they tend to resort to repressive means to deal with the situation, thereby contributing to a potentially vicious cycle in which state repression and transnational jihadist conflict fuel each other.

Importantly, the argument about counterproductive effects of state repression on transnational jihadism as such is not entirely novel. For example, area experts for the Sahel region have documented how governments committing human rights violations in their attempts to quell the spread of transnational jihadist conflicts further destabilized the situation (ICG 2020, 14; Pellerin 2020). The large-N-based findings are novel, however, in the sense that they are able to show trends across individual conflicts. This is particularly relevant with regard to state repression, because previous case-based research from other regions sometimes observed an opposite dynamic; that is, one of state repression seemingly *containing* jihadism, for instance in China or Saudi Arabia (see, for instance, Sheikh and Andersen 2017, 20). Being able

to show that, on a global level, repressive states are less rather than more successful in containing the jihadist threat is therefore a key insight for the field of jihadism studies.

Even in large-N-based studies conducted by peace and conflict scholars, it was previously shown that state repression increases the risk of conflict onset (see, for instance, Young 2013), or is at least ineffective in containing ongoing insurgencies (Sullivan 2014). Moreover, backfiring effects of visible torture (Daxecker 2017), human rights violations more broadly (Feldmann and Perälä 2004; Walsh and Piazza 2010; Piazza 2017) and political exclusion (Li 2005) on the incidence of *terrorism* have been well-documented. In relation to this body of research, the novelty of this dissertation's finding about state repression lies in its narrow focus on the emergence of al-Qaeda and IS in armed conflicts. As outlined earlier, their transnationalization processes follow patterns that are distinct from how conflict onset is typically conceptualized and measured. Rather than explaining why local rebels take up arms in the first place, the finding shows how repression affects the decision-making calculus of both pre-established local insurgents and al-Qaeda/IS as transnational actors, as these two types of actors need to perceive a transnationalization as beneficial in order for transnational jihadist conflict to occur.

Bureaucratic state capacity

While excessive state repression thus appears counterproductive as a strategy to prevent transnational jihadist conflict, the large-N statistical analysis in Paper 1 finds that higher degrees of bureaucratic capacity are significantly associated with a *decreased* likelihood of transnational jihadist conflict. Concretely, a one-unit increase on the World Bank's Government Effectiveness scale, employed as a proxy, is associated with an approximate decrease of 5% in the likelihood of al-Qaeda or IS becoming active as conflict parties. The finding is significant throughout all main statistical models, once control variables are added, with a 99% degree of confidence to reject the null hypothesis of no significant association between the two variables. This effect is further found to be nonlinear, with increases in bureaucratic capacity having a stronger effect along lower values of the variable, compared to relatively minor effects when states have already reached a medium-to-high level of bureaucratic capacity. In other words, in the least bureaucratically capable states, even modest improvements can significantly reduce the likelihood of transnational jihadist conflicts, but this effect decreases with growing bureaucratic capacity. An earlier study by Hendrix (2011) found bureaucratic state capacity to have a deterrent effect upon armed conflict onset, while a later study by Hendrix and Young (2014) arrived at similar results with regard to terrorism.

Yet these studies did not differ between jihadist and other types of militant actors. More recently, Hegghammer (2021, 1) argued that ‘the steadily growing coercive power of the technocratic state’ works to disincentivize would-be terrorists, causing the latter to remain in the shadows in order to avoid detention. He notes that even during its most expansive phase in the post-2014 years, IS never set up a European branch because it knew that such an endeavour would be futile due to the states’ bureaucratic capacities. The findings from this dissertation with regard to bureaucratic state capacity generally support Hegghammer’s arguments, which had not yet been tested on a quantitative level. Yet they also offer additional insights. In particular, both Europe and North America – two continents that stand out in terms of the bureaucratic capacities of their governments – were excluded from the analysis in Paper 1, which in turn implies that had they been included, the finding regarding bureaucratic state capacity would likely have been even stronger. Thus, even amongst a restricted sample of only African and Asian states, and even when that sample is reduced to states with a minimum share of Sunni Muslims of 5% among the total population (which is one of the robustness checks in Paper 1), bureaucratic state capacity has a significant deterrent effect on the likelihood of transnational jihadist conflict.

Political openness

A third factor that directly relates to the role played by states in contributing to, or preventing, transnational jihadist conflict is the degree of political openness. Paper 2 explores to what extent the availability of political channels for Islamist and Islamic political parties may have obstructed al-Qaeda’s and IS’s growth in the wider South Asian region. The analysis leads to the conclusion that these political channels have indeed created difficulties for al-Qaeda and IS. With the exception of Myanmar, Islamist and Islamic political parties have been integrated in the political systems of Bangladesh, India, the Maldives and Sri Lanka, allowing for a non-violent alternative to voice grievances similar to those capitalized upon by al-Qaeda and IS in other world regions. In particular, the case of Bangladesh points towards a linkage between political openness and transnational jihadist conflict, albeit in reverse order: the rise of IS between 2016-17 – the only spell of transnational jihadist conflict in the investigated countries – followed shortly upon a crackdown against the leading Islamist political party, including the execution of several of its leaders by the government (ICG 2018, 25; Islam and Islam 2018, 352; Parvez 2019). Therefore, overall these findings seem to support the argument previously voiced by scholars that creating political channels for Islamist actors may indeed help undermine the ability of jihadists to mobilize support (Lynch 2010; Bitter and

Frazer 2016; Macdonald 2016; Finnbogason and Svensson 2018). At the same time, however, most scholars also acknowledge a range of potentially negative effects of including Islamist parties in the political system, as these parties may themselves work to undermine democratic and human rights norms. Most of the more empirical works on the subject that looked beyond single cases have generated mixed results, finding support for both moderation and radicalization tendencies among these parties once they entered the political arena (Hamzawy and Ottaway 2009, 42; Dalacoura 2011, 181-82; Krause and Söderberg Kovacs forthcoming). In his discussion of the Muslim Brotherhood's political involvement, Lynch (2010, 480) summarized these debates under the label 'Firewall or [...] Conveyor Belt?'²²

Moreover, Islamist political involvement may fail to mitigate support for transnational jihadism if it occurs in political systems that suffer from corruption or authoritarian governments. For instance, Paper 2 discusses the fact that although the Maldives had a Muslim Brotherhood-inspired president for three decades (1978-2008) and even today has several conservative Islamic and Islamist parties present on the political scene, the country had one of the highest per capita rates of departing foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria. Therefore, what matters most is likely not the presence of Islamists in the political landscape per se, but rather to what extent civilians perceive these actors as legitimate and trustworthy agents of change. The Maldives, long plagued by rigged elections and high levels of corruption, illustrate how transnational jihadists can successfully present themselves as an alternative when political parties lack trust amongst society (Bateman 2019).

An important question regards the generalizability of these findings about political openness from the South Asian context to other world regions. Can we assume, based on the findings from Bangladesh, India, the Maldives and Sri Lanka, that including Islamist and Islamic parties into the political system reduces the risk of transnational jihadist conflicts? While the sample is too small to arrive at a conclusion with absolute certainty, the findings are in line with what previous studies have observed in other regional contexts. For example, scholars have drawn a line between the 2013 military coup in Egypt, which ended a two-year spell of political openness towards various Islamist political parties, and the subsequent rise of IS's Sinai province (Gold 2016, 8); the integration of Islamist parties and the absence of jihadist civil wars in

²² For further reading on particular cases of Islamist political participation, and on the extent to which these parties became more moderate or radical, see the works by al-Anani and Malik (2013) and Drevon (2015) on the Egyptian context, and Yilmaz (2009) on the case of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan.

Southeast Asia (Finnbogason and Svensson 2018); and the co-optation of Islamists in Jordan and the absence of jihadist violence (Nesser and Gråtrud 2019). However, in the absence of large-N studies on the subject, which is due to the lack of a more encompassing data source about different types of political representation of Islamist and/or Islamic political parties, it remains to be seen whether these findings hold when controlling for various potentially confounding variables.

Religion

While these three factors all directly relate to the state and its institutional makeup, the statistical analysis in Paper 1 offers insights about an additional local factor, namely the religious composition of a country. As additional control variables, the regression models in Paper 1 also include measurements of the share of both Shi'a and Sunni Muslims among the overall population. The variable measuring the share of Shi'a Muslims among the total population turns out to correlate positively and highly significantly with an increased likelihood of transnational jihadist conflict. In fact, the substantive effect of this variable is the strongest among all included predictor variables in the main model, with a one-unit increase in the logged variable being associated with an increase in the likelihood of transnational jihadist conflict by 5.4 percentage points. The effect remains robust across a range of alternative model specifications. Still, the finding must be treated with some caution, given the differences in how al-Qaeda and IS position themselves vis-à-vis Shi'a Muslims, but also due to recent developments in the global expansion of transnational jihadist conflict. Firstly, while al-Qaeda has traditionally adopted a more pragmatic stance and opposed IS's *takfiri* approach, IS has actively mobilized against Shi'a Muslims, carrying out sectarian mass atrocities in countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan or Syria. Herein lies one of the limitations of Paper 1, as it does not contain separate analyses to explain the emergence of transnational jihadist conflict only in relation to al-Qaeda, or IS, respectively. The main reason is that there are simply too few cases of transnational jihadist conflicts involving al-Qaeda-affiliated groups to be suitable for a large-N regression analysis. Secondly, recent expansion of IS into the DRC and Mozambique, two countries without significant Shi'a Muslim minorities, were not yet included in the analyses because they occurred after 2018. Still, they illustrate that while the presence of Shi'a Muslim minorities appears to facilitate IS's mobilization strategy, it is by no means a necessary factor.

The second finding about the religious composition of a country concerns the share of *Sunni* Muslims among the overall population. In the main regres-

sion models in Paper 1, this variable is positive and highly significant, indicating that al-Qaeda and IS are more likely to emerge as conflict parties in countries with larger Sunni Muslim populations. This finding is not surprising insofar as both groups exclusively mobilize among Sunni Muslims. However, once all countries whose overall populations contain less than 5% Sunni Muslims are excluded from the analysis (Paper 1, Table A.3, Appendix), the variable is no longer significant. In other words, al-Qaeda and IS clearly benefit from the presence of at least sizeable Sunni Muslim minorities to be able to tap into ongoing conflicts. Yet it is less relevant how large their overall share amongst the overall population is. Again, IS's recent expansion into the DRC and Mozambique, both of which are Christian-majority countries, but also its operations in the Philippines, show that transnational jihadism finds traction in non-Muslim-majority countries with Sunni Muslim minorities just as well as in Sunni Muslim-majority countries.

Military state capacity

Lastly, a discussion about one particular *non*-finding is warranted. Whereas the regression analyses in Paper 1 provide evidence for significant associations between state repression and bureaucratic state capacity and the likelihood of transnational jihadist conflict, no such association is identified with regard to military state capacity. The latter is measured through data from the Correlates of War (COW) National Material Capabilities (NMC) dataset (Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey 1972). Concretely, I use a logged version of their Composite Index of National Capability (CINC) score, which aggregates six different components of states' capabilities to wage war. The proposed theoretical argument expects higher levels of military capacity to backfire, by pushing local Islamist militants towards seeking external support from al-Qaeda or IS, thereby increasing the likelihood of transnational jihadist conflict. However, no empirical support for this hypothesized relationship is detected. At the same time, no significant effect in the opposite direction is detected either; that is, that higher military capacity *decreases* the risk of transnational jihadist conflict. The lack of a significant relationship persists despite controlling for other ongoing armed conflicts both within the same country and in its neighbouring countries, as well as a variety of other potentially confounding variables that may influence the degree of military capacity. What can explain this non-finding? Does military state capacity simply not matter at all? This is unlikely. Rather, it is important to emphasize that Paper 1 measures the emergence of new transnational jihadist conflict dyads, but it does not follow these conflicts over time. Therefore, while military state capacity is found to be insignificant as a predictor of the emergence of this type of conflict, it could still

matter over the course of ongoing conflicts. For instance, it is possible that one would indeed find a relationship between the *intensity* and/or the *duration* of transnational jihadist conflicts and military state capacity. If one takes a closer look at the eight militarily most capable countries (based on their CINC scores) experiencing transnational jihadist conflict that are included in the analyses in Paper 1, it is notable that in the majority of them, these conflicts either ended due to inactivity (Bangladesh, Iran, Saudi-Arabia, Turkey), or decreased strongly in intensity (Egypt, Pakistan, Russia). Only in Nigeria have the jihadists been able to grow in strength, despite the presence of a strong military opponent. Yet these dynamics are not at the centre of this dissertation, which is concerned with a) the emergence of transnational jihadist conflict and b) its resilience against peace negotiations in particular, and not its resilience against military defeat. Therefore, whether and how exactly military state capacity affects ongoing conflicts with transnational jihadist groups is a question that future research should examine separately.

Transnational factors

Spill-over dynamics

While the main focus in the large-N study in Paper 1 lies on state-related, local factors, the analysis also accounts for the presence of transnational jihadist conflicts in neighbouring countries. The underlying rationale is that there is case-based evidence from a variety of regional contexts in which al-Qaeda- or IS-related groups expanded their presence across state borders. Some particularly well-known examples include IS core's expansion from Iraq into Syria from 2012 onwards, as well as AQIM's evolution from Algeria southwards into Mali and later into Burkina Faso, where it established linkages with local militant groups. Moreover, jihadist affiliate groups may benefit from the ability to exchange fighters, money or weapons with allied affiliate groups across state borders. Indeed, the descriptive pattern appears to support a broader trend: in 27 (out of 33 in total) cases of transnational jihadist conflict which are included in the sample used for the data analysis in Paper 1, this type of conflict was ongoing in at least one neighbouring country. This shows that transnational jihadist conflict clusters in particular areas. Once economic development (measured as GDP per capita) is controlled for, the variable measuring 'neighbouring transnational jihadist conflict' is indeed highly significant (Paper 1, Table 2). This finding, however, is sensitive to model specifications: when only countries with a minimum of 5% Sunni Muslims among the total population are included (Table A.3, Appendix), the observed effect is both substantively very small and statistically insignificant. Overall, the findings in this regard are thus inconclusive. A possible explanation for this may be that

the variable only picks up transnational jihadist conflict in neighbouring countries, but not the extent to which jihadist networks may be operating at lower levels of activity, or outside the conceptual frame of an armed conflict. For instance, the rise of IS in the Philippines was also facilitated through the recruitment of foreign fighters from pro-IS networks in neighbouring Indonesia (Jadoon, Jahanbani, and Willis 2020). Yet the UCDP data employed for the analysis in Paper 1 does not list an armed conflict in Indonesia with al-Qaeda or IS, despite the fact that the country has had a highly active jihadist scene for a long time (Sheikh 2019, 48). In other words, whatever happens in a neighbouring country below the level of an armed conflict is not picked up by the variable used for the analyses in Paper 1, which may contribute to the inconclusive finding.

Alternative sources of external support

Paper 2 investigates another transnational factor which is found to have played a role in obstructing the growth of al-Qaeda and IS in the wider South Asian region. Concretely, the study investigates to what extent local Islamist militant groups in the region have received material and operational support from external actors other than al-Qaeda and IS. Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), a Pakistani jihadist non-state group, is identified as a crucial actor with a network spanning across several of the investigated countries, especially the disputed Jammu and Kashmir region in India as well as in Bangladesh. The study discusses how LeT managed to strengthen its influence upon various local Islamist armed groups in the region. It is concluded that the availability of the LeT-led transnational support network in turn decreased the potential benefits that local groups could have drawn from joining al-Qaeda or IS, despite ideological affinities in many cases. It is also important to add that Pakistan was not the only alleged state-related sponsor of jihadist militancy in the region: in Bangladesh, such support also occurred domestically, as the militant youth wing of the leading Islamist party in the mid-2000s, Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (BJI), served as a recruitment pool for the local jihadist rebel group Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) (ICG 2010, 5). The insights from Paper 2 thus complement the findings about spill-over processes in transnational jihadist conflict from Paper 1: it is not only al-Qaeda and IS that can pose a risk for neighbouring states once they become involved in armed conflicts – rather, governments may themselves contribute to the destabilization of their neighbouring countries by supporting jihadist groups across borders. As highlighted by Mendelsohn (2020), who explores the role of Syrian state support for jihadist groups, such state-related sources of support for jihadists

continue to be a highly underexplored subject in contemporary jihadism research.²³

Ideology

Paper 2 further investigates the role of ideology as an explanatory factor. For transnational jihadist conflict to emerge, al-Qaeda and IS have to tie in with local groups. At the same time, they are highly ideologically driven organizations that often accuse each other of having deviated from the ‘true path’ of jihad (on this issue, see Hafez 2020). Therefore, they should be less likely to become affiliated with local groups that deviate too far from their own ideological narratives. While Bacon (2018, 4) rightly warns against treating ideological affinity as a sufficient explanatory factor, I follow Mendelsohn (2015, 99), who argues that a ‘basic ideological compatibility’ should be seen as a necessary condition for affiliation between local groups and transnational jihadist organizations to emerge. Paper 2 therefore examines whether a lack of such compatibility might explain the near complete absence of transnational jihadist conflict in the examined countries. The case of ARSA, which has claimed to fight for the rights of the Muslim Rohingya minority in Myanmar, shows that a lack of ideological proximity can indeed prevent local groups from joining forces with al-Qaeda and IS. While ARSA rejected an Islamist framing of its insurgency altogether, the case resembles other instances of both Islamist and Muslim identity-based insurgencies with strong ethnic components that have resisted attempts at transnationalization, including in the wider Southeast Asian region such as the Patani rebels in Southern Thailand or the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

The analysis further shows that IS’s hostility towards Deobandi Islamism, which is the dominant ideology propagated by militant Islamist groups in the investigated countries, greatly decreased the group’s pool of potential affiliation partners. However, al-Qaeda was equally unable to initiate or become involved in armed conflicts in the region, despite having a very different approach vis-à-vis Deobandi Islamists in comparison to IS. Al-Qaeda has not only collaborated with Deobandi Islamist groups, but in fact pledged allegiance to the Taliban and also appointed Deobandi Islamists in high-level leadership positions within its own organization (Roul 2020, 9). Hence, a potential lack of ideological affinity is unlikely to explain al-Qaeda’s problems in

²³ For some notable exceptions, see the discussion by Skare (2021, 185-90; 228) on Iranian support for Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), Mir and Clarke’s (2021) analysis of Iran’s relationship with al-Qaeda and the work by Tankel (2014, 47-66) on the linkages between Pakistan’s intelligence apparatuses and various jihadist groups in the region.

the region. Overall, these findings largely confirm the arguments previously raised by Bacon and Mendelsohn that ideological affinity matters as a necessary condition, but one that is by no means sufficient in leading to transnationalization processes.

Sub-question 2: To what extent can the resilience of transnational jihadist conflict against peace negotiations be explained through the transnationalization of the involved affiliate groups?

The second sub-question of the dissertation is addressed in Paper 3, which examines to what extent the transnationalization of al-Qaeda's and IS's affiliate groups can explain the resilience of transnational jihadist conflicts against peace negotiations. Building upon Harpviken's (2012) conceptualization of 'transnationalization', the study empirically investigates to what extent al-Qaeda's and IS's affiliate groups (1) operate themselves transnationally and (2) recruit foreign fighters. The obtained results point towards substantial variation along both variables of interest. They show that although both transnational operations and recruitment can indeed pose significant challenges to future peace negotiations, they are unlikely to constitute sufficient explanations. Instead, the transnationalization of jihadist affiliate groups must be carefully evaluated on a case-by-case basis, including a distinction between different dimensions of transnationalization. For this purpose, future research should seek to shed light upon the other dimensions of transnationalization not covered by Paper 3 – resource mobilization and ideological framing – in order to identify avenues towards future peace negotiations.

Transnational operations

To begin with, only six of the 20 affiliate groups active between 2018-2020 were involved in organized violence (intrastate conflict, non-state conflict and/or organized violence) in at least two countries within the same calendar year. Five of these six groups operate on the African continent: Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa'l Muslimeen/JNIM, which has been active in Mali and Burkina Faso, Islamic State in the Greater Sahara/ISGS (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Benin), Islamic State West Africa Province/ISWAP (Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad,

Niger), al-Shabaab (Somalia, Kenya) and Islamic State Mozambique (Mozambique, Tanzania).²⁴ The only transnationally operating affiliate group outside Africa is Islamic State's Khorasan Province (ISKP), which has been involved in organized violence in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In addition, four other affiliate groups that once operated transnationally were confined to a single country in recent years. This is the case for IS's Najd Province, which was active in Saudi Arabia between 2015-2016 and also claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing in Kuwait in 2015; al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, which was previously active in various Northern and Western African countries but is today confined to Algeria, after its southern factions merged with various Sahelian insurgent groups to form JNIM; IS Libya (formerly also active in Tunisia) as well as HTS, which renounced its affiliation with al-Qaeda in 2016 and also abandoned its previous operations in Lebanon in 2017. In contrast to these groups, there are various affiliates whose operations never reached beyond the borders of their particular 'home' state. These include groups that are still active such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), IS Philippines (officially called 'Islamic State East Asia Province') and IS's Sinai province, but also some minor groups that are now considered to be largely militarily defeated such as IS's provinces in Algeria and Bangladesh.

How should these findings about operational transnationalization be interpreted with regard to the lack of peace negotiations in transnational jihadist conflicts? Several affiliate groups, even at their operational peak, never transnationalized their operations beyond the borders of the states in which they were operating. In some cases, this may indeed indicate that the group in question pursues a more local agenda, despite its transnational affiliation, but in other cases the operational non-transnationalization may be due to geographical or tactical constraints. For instance, cross-border expansion for IS Sinai is infeasible because of Israel's high degree of border securitization. Although Paper 3 does not further explore the underlying reasons for the presence or absence of operational transnationalization, the results certainly show that some commonly raised obstacles to negotiations, for example the information-poor bargaining environment resulting from rebel groups' access to cross-border safe havens, cannot explain the lack of negotiations in at least these particular conflicts.

In turn, the situation looks different with regard to those affiliate groups that *are* operating transnationally. Here, operational transnationalization appears to complicate the prospects for peace negotiations. For instance, the fact

²⁴ Note that the 2021 attacks in Uganda that were claimed by ISCAP, as mentioned in the Introduction, do not feature in the analysis in Paper 3, whose timeframe ends in 2020.

that JNIM and ISGS are involved in armed conflicts not only in Mali but also in neighbouring Burkina Faso implies that the onset of peace negotiations would require coordination between these governments, which raises challenges because of their different degrees of willingness to engage in negotiations with jihadists (on this issue, see ICG 2021, 2). Moreover, recent military coups both in Mali (2021) and Burkina Faso (2022) have led to renewed tensions between these governments and their regional partners, complicating for example mutual intelligence sharing and border policing, which would be necessary to help reduce some of the uncertainties standing in the way of peace negotiations. Similar problems also exist beyond the West Africa region, for example in Somalia where the al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Shabaab continue to destabilize the country, but also some areas in the eastern parts of neighbouring Kenya. Similar to the situation in Burkina Faso and Mali, peace negotiations with al-Shabaab would have to be coordinated with neighbouring countries in which al-Shabaab maintains an active operational presence (Kenya), and also where it carried out attacks in the past (Ethiopia). Yet these governments currently oppose steps towards dialogue and negotiation with al-Shabaab (ICG 2022, ii).

Therefore, overall, the following two conclusions can be drawn from the findings in Paper 3 with respect to operational transnationalization. First, there are a number of conflicts in which the rebels never transnationalized their operations. Rather, these groups have remained confined within the borders of a single country. While this may have happened for a variety of reasons, it implies that the lack of peace negotiations in these conflicts cannot be explained by the rebels' access to external safe havens. Governments in these countries should carefully explore the option of dialogue for the future, as the jihadists' operational confinement may force some of them to consider alternatives to armed struggle. Second, however, case-based evidence from those cases in which the affiliate groups *are* operating transnationally suggests that once operational transnationalization takes place, the avenue towards negotiations becomes more complicated. The higher the number of countries on whose territories the jihadists are operating, the greater the challenges with regard to mutual border policing and intelligence sharing. While the latter may be overcome in some cases, as for example in Mozambique and Tanzania, where governments are closely collaborating in the joint fight against the jihadists, an additional set of obstacles relates to the growing number of governments that would have to agree upon an eventual decision to enter negotiations with the jihadists.

Transnational recruitment

Similar to transnational operations, the transnational recruitment of foreign fighters varies substantially between jihadist affiliate groups. The findings from Paper 3 allow for sub-dividing the studied affiliate groups into three broad categories. First, there are groups such as IS Sinai, AQAP and IS Yemen, or IS Caucasus for whom it is difficult to find evidence of any foreign fighters at all. Their fighters rather tend to hail from the same societies in which they operate. Clearly, these groups do not enjoy the advantage of being able to draw upon a steady pool of recruits from foreign countries, which would render them more capable of weathering sustained battlefield losses than other rebel groups. Moreover, because their fighters come from the same environment in which they are operating, they might be easier to reintegrate into society, should the respective governments seek to explore possibilities for negotiations in the future. What is further noticeable is the seeming lack of transnationalization along both dimensions studied in Paper 3 which characterizes these groups: they not only do not seem to systematically recruit foreign fighters, but also do not operate transnationally themselves. Although the paper does not further explore the interrelatedness between these two factors, it is likely that they are linked to each other, as an operational presence in new countries would typically also offer new recruitment opportunities. Nonetheless, while their lack of transnationalization on both dimensions should make these groups, at least in theory, more susceptible to negotiations, the fact that they also lack the operational strength of other jihadist affiliate groups means that their opponent governments may be less likely to feel sufficiently pressured to be willing to enter negotiations. In sum, with regard to the second sub-question of this dissertation, it appears clear that foreign fighters are not the main obstacle standing in the way of peace negotiations in these particular conflicts.

The second category of affiliate groups *do* recruit transnationally, but this recruitment primarily occurs between neighbouring countries and is, moreover, strongly characterized by shared ethnicity. The issue of co-ethnicity is relevant to highlight insofar as one of the dominant definitions of foreign fighters, proposed by Hegghammer (2010), only views those combatants who lack ethnic ties to the group they are fighting with to be foreign fighters. This constellation of transnational, co-ethnic recruitment that primarily occurs between neighbouring countries is characteristic for the Western African affiliate groups such as JNIM and ISGS (both of which systematically recruit among ethnic Fulani communities), but also al-Shabaab and IS Somalia, who recruit ethnic Somali from various countries bordering Somalia. On one hand, these groups strategically benefit from the ability to draw upon a widened pool

of recruits, which allows them to remain resilient in the fight against their local opponents. In this regard, their transnational recruitment poses challenges with respect to the issue of peace negotiations, as it lowers their costs of fighting and thus increases the threshold for ending up in what Zartman (2015, 479) defined as a ‘mutually hurting stalemate’, seen as a necessary condition for the onset of peace negotiations. On the other hand, however, another commonly raised obstacle to negotiations that has been linked with the presence of foreign fighters, namely the difficulties of integrating them into a host society that is hostile towards their presence, is likely less relevant in the case of shared ethnicity. Previous research has shown that local communities tend to hold particularly negative views against foreign fighters if they perceive the latter as alien to their local customs (Moore 2019). In turn, foreign fighters from far-away battlefields may see no prospects for themselves in a post-conflict scenario without linguistic or family ties to local communities. Yet where fighters hail from the same ethnic communities, such problems are likely to be less acute and should therefore not necessarily stand in the way of peace negotiations.

Last, there are some affiliate groups whose recruitment of foreign fighters transcends shared ethnicity and, in many cases, also goes beyond their direct environments in terms of neighbouring countries. One such case is IS’s DRC-based affiliate group, ISCAP. The group has recruited an unknown number of fighters from various East and Southeast African countries, including Kenya, Mozambique, Somalia and South Africa. Its former ISCAP twin group which now operates as IS Mozambique has recruited fighters not only from Tanzania, which directly borders the northeastern Cabo Delgado province in which the group has its strongholds, but also from Uganda and South Africa, although Tanzanians clearly make up the largest contingent of foreigners. Other affiliate groups that have recruited larger contingents of foreign fighters from non-neighbouring countries and without direct ethnic ties to the host countries are IS Libya, ISKP and IS Philippines, although it is difficult to estimate just how many of these foreigners remain embedded with the groups after substantial battlefield losses in recent years. At the same time, it is important to highlight that all of the groups mentioned here still recruit most of their fighters from local communities, and even the majority of foreign fighters hail from neighbouring countries. Therefore, these groups are not inherently ‘foreign’ but remain embedded within local communities. Still, the presence within their ranks of larger groups of foreign fighters who lack ties to the host population is likely to pose challenges should local governments wish to explore the possibility of peace negotiations in the future.

6. Critical Discussion

A study that seeks to illuminate larger, cross-case patterns in transnational jihadist conflicts faces a number of challenges, both conceptually and methodologically. While it is not possible to address all of them, the following section takes up some particularly relevant issues and explains how I have sought to address these challenges throughout the three articles. Subsequently, a section follows that discusses ethical considerations in relation to the dissertation's methodology, my role as a researcher and some of the obtained findings.

Limitations

Studying the evolution of transnational jihadist conflict from a large- and medium-N angle necessarily implies sacrificing a certain degree of depth. To be able to arrive at general findings that span across local and regional contexts, which was the goal of this dissertation, it is necessary to climb up the ladder of abstraction and to give up some degree of nuance. For instance, this dissertation has conceptualized transnational jihadist conflicts as intrastate conflicts in which the non-state party has become integrated into the organizational network of al-Qaeda or IS through a public pledge of allegiance. The decision to aggregate al-Qaeda- and IS-affiliated rebel groups into this larger concept was described in the Introduction, but it is still relevant to bear in mind that at least Paper 1 does not account for potential differences in the affiliation choices between these two organizations. Paper 2, in turn, discusses in greater depth the varying ideologies of these groups and how this has affected their relationship with local groups in various South Asian countries.

Limiting the concept of transnational jihadist conflict exclusively to groups that have openly become integrated into al-Qaeda's or IS's network further implies that cases of unaffiliated local groups that may still closely collaborate with transnational organizations are left out. One such example is Ansar al-Sharia (Libya), which never pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda but maintained close relationships with several of the organization's affiliated groups (Stanford University 2022). Since the main goal of this dissertation is to arrive at broader trends across a larger number of cases, in order to be able to also study the emergence of conflicts with *unofficial* affiliate groups, it would have been necessary to establish a clear threshold based on which these groups could be distinguished from other Islamist rebel groups. However, this would almost certainly lead to somewhat arbitrary coding decisions. It would further be complicated to obtain reliable cross-case data about group characteristics that would allow for making such coding decisions. Thus, an open pledge of

allegiance is still by far the most reliable indication of a linkage between local groups and transnational jihadist organizations, which is why this dissertation applies this more restricted definition.

At the same time, even among officially affiliated groups, the nature of the relationship between a local affiliate group and a transnational organization can vary in terms of its form and depth. Moghadam (2017, 5), for example, distinguishes four different types of cooperation between terrorist groups in order to account for such differences. While in Paper 1 it would have been possible – at least in theory – to split up transnational jihadist conflicts according to different degrees of cooperation between local groups and transnational jihadist organizations, this would not only have greatly reduced the number of observations for each separate analysis, it would have also posed major challenges in terms of how to justify the codification. Still, an attempt in this direction is made in Paper 3, which does break up the category of transnational jihadist conflicts by examining the degree of transnationalization across a sample of 20 jihadist affiliate groups. It thus manages to add some degree of nuance to the more aggregated analysis in Paper 1.

There is further an important distinction between identifying statistical correlations and establishing causality. This is relevant in the case of Paper 1, which statistically examines the correlates of new incidences of transnational jihadist conflict. One limitation of this methodological approach is that while the statistical results show significant correlations, they do not allow for establishing causality between the variables of interest. For example, even though it is possible to say with a substantial degree of confidence that highly repressive states have an elevated risk of seeing the emergence of transnational jihadist conflict, controlling for a variety of potential confounding variables, the statistical analysis cannot test whether this correlation is indeed explained through the proposed theoretical mechanism. To enhance the degree of confidence in the proposed theoretical argument and the obtained finding, Paper 1 contains two short case discussions about the linkages between state repression and transnational jihadist conflict in the North Caucasus and about the links between bureaucratic state capacity and the *absence* of transnational jihadist conflict in Morocco.

Directly related to this is another challenge: when interpreting the findings from Paper 1, it must be kept in mind that although the theoretical argument assumes a situation in which pre-existing local groups are faced with the decision of whether to pledge allegiance to al-Qaeda or IS, the reality on the ground sometimes looks different. In particular, transnational jihadist conflict can also occur through spill-over processes. In these cases, rather than entering a new country by linking up with a locally established group, al-Qaeda or

IS initiate new conflict dyads by expanding an existing affiliate group's operations into cross-border territory (as in the cases of the transnationally operating groups that are discussed in Paper 3). For instance, the emergence of IS in Niger was a result of the expansion of ISGS from its stronghold in eastern Mali across the Nigerien border. Such spill-over processes have also caused the emergence of transnational jihadist conflict dyads in other places, for example in Tanzania, where IS Mozambique's operations have occasionally led to attacks and armed confrontations across the border. However, the UCDP data employed for the analyses in Paper 1 does not allow for systematically distinguishing between conflict dyads that result from such spill-over processes and those that do not. This shortcoming is partially addressed by including a control variable that accounts for the presence of Islamist armed conflicts in neighbouring countries, but it must still be acknowledged that the proposed theoretical argument does not apply to the same extent in each of the 31 cases of transnational jihadist conflict emergence which are studied in Paper 1. However, parts of the proposed theoretical argument will likely apply in cases of spill-over as well. For example, ISGS' expansion into Niger was to a large extent possible because the group managed to exploit the state's incapacity to provide security for ethnic Fulani communities living in the border region (Cocks and Lewis 2017). A state with higher bureaucratic capacities may not only have managed to resolve the preceding conflicts between Fulani and Tuareg herders, but possibly also prevented the infiltration of ISGS through better border policing and intelligence gathering.

Another limitation that arises from the chosen research designs in Papers 1 and 2 lies in countries being the main unit of analysis: the studies allow for drawing the conclusion that certain state-level variables such as repression and political openness are related to changes in the risk of transnational jihadist conflict, but the analyses do not further explore sub-national variations at greater depth. Particularly in geographically larger countries such as India or Russia, transnational jihadist conflict is contained in specific areas where the state has behaved differently and has had different capacities than in other parts of the country. In other cases, such as Libya, the central state's authority may be limited to a few large cities. Different sub-national dynamics may also help explain why we sometimes observe different outcomes in the transnationalization choices of local rebel groups that are operating within the same countries. For example, with an analysis at the country level, we cannot explain why some Syrian jihadist groups did not become affiliated with al-Qaeda or IS while others did. To explore such dynamics, sub-national variation with regard to battle intensity, the number of rivaling groups operating in a particular area, different geographic conditions or the proximity to international borders may be explored.

On a more general level, a limitation that must be kept in mind across all three papers regards the conceptualization of rebel groups as somewhat unitary actors. In reality, these groups have competing internal power centres, rivalling sub-factions and faction leaders that may deviate from the group's overall ideological or strategical positioning. Being aware of the internal fractionalization of many of these groups also has implications for how to think about both the emergence and the resilience of these conflicts. For instance, on several occasions it was sub-groups of pre-existing local groups that pledged allegiance to IS in the post-2014 period, rather than the top leadership of a local rebel group. This became evident when dissident factions of various al-Qaeda affiliates abandoned their respective groups and created new IS provinces, for example in Algeria, Mali and Somalia. In turn, as regards the resilience of transnational jihadist conflicts, even if certain affiliate group factions may be hostile towards the idea of peace negotiations, this may not be the case with regard to other factions. Still, conducting an analysis of not only all cases of transnational jihadist conflict and of all affiliated groups, but also of each sub-faction of every single affiliate group, would transcend the scope of a single research project.

Moreover, while this dissertation has placed a particular focus on various state-level explanatory factors such as political openness, state repression and state capacity, more research on the meso level is needed to explore how group-specific factors such as intra-group fractionalization, leadership losses or manpower may help explain transnationalization dynamics. Yet there is a major lack of reliable and up-to-date large-N data about such group-specific factors that would allow for measuring how they relate to the emergence of transnational jihadist conflict. Jihadist groups are particularly difficult subjects to study because of the high degree of secrecy surrounding them, which complicates the obtaining of reliable information. However, being able to examine these factors quantitatively would be especially relevant in light of the fact that factors such as state repression and state capacity typically change rather slowly. Thus, while these state-level factors appear to matter for the overall risk of transnational jihadist conflict, they may not be able to explain the particular *timing* of the emergence of this type of conflict, an issue that is discussed in greater depth in Paper 1.

Ethical considerations

This dissertation has raised a number of ethical issues that warrant discussion. Baele et al. distinguish between three larger sets of 'risks and associated dilemmas' (2018, 6) faced by scholars in the wider field of security studies. The first of these relates to ethical challenges arising from the *researcher's* own

position in the data-gathering process, such as potentially putting their physical security at risk during fieldwork as well as potential psychological harm caused by dealing with potentially traumatizing information. The second main set of challenges identified by the authors relates to the *subjects* about whom the research is conducted, again both with respect to their physical safety and their psychological well-being. Third, the researchers mention *findings*-related ethical challenges as an issue that is too rarely discussed. According to them, challenges may arise due to the malevolent use of research findings, particularly by conflict parties and other political actors with stakes in a particular armed conflict. Before addressing these different aspects and relating them to this dissertation, I start by reflecting on the implications of the fact that I did not conduct fieldwork or other interview-based data gathering for this project.

A dissertation without fieldwork

There are different reasons for why research for this dissertation was entirely based on statistical analyses of pre-existing datasets and the use of previous findings from peer-reviewed studies, policy reports, newspaper articles and a number of other sources. The first reason was a decision by the European Research Council (ERC) as the funding organization of the larger research project of which this dissertation's research was a part ('Transnational Jihad – Explaining Escalation and Containment'). Prior to the start of my PhD-related research project, the ERC took the decision that fieldwork in high-risk countries, in combination with the sensitive nature of the topic of jihadism, was unfeasible within the frame of the larger ERC-funded project. As a result, none of the affiliated scholars within this project have been able to conduct fieldwork since the start of the project in 2019, which thus also included any research related to the present dissertation. However, even without this decision, there is a second reason why I would argue fieldwork was at least not necessary for the purpose of this dissertation. Across the three papers, this study aimed to fill a research gap in the existing literature about transnational jihadism, which consists in the lack of studies that look at larger patterns across individual conflict zones. In turn, the goal of fieldwork is typically to illuminate the processes in a particular local or national context at a greater depth than is possible through research that is based on secondary material. However, collecting primary data with regard to each of the dozens of cases of transnational jihadist conflicts studied in this dissertation would have been unfeasible. This is not to disregard the fact that selective fieldwork could have helped to illustrate (or test) some of the obtained findings, in a similar but

more substantiated fashion to the two short case discussions at the end of Paper 1.

The lack of fieldwork also contains an ethical dimension. Ultimately, what are the costs of *not* including the voices and lived experiences of those populations that have to live with the realities of transnational jihadist conflicts on a daily basis? Additionally, what are the risks of misinterpreting jihadist rebel groups when one has never directly spoken to their members? Sluka (2020, 248), somewhat provocatively, even argues that ‘the *ethics of not doing fieldwork on violence* is a greater issue than the ethics of researcher risk’ and that what he perceives as exaggerated concerns with researcher safety ultimately reflect an ‘ongoing global process of imperialism’ (ibid.). While I disagree with the extent of Sluka’s downplaying of researcher safety as a valid concern for not carrying out fieldwork,²⁵ it is certain that the field of jihadism studies would benefit from more fieldwork, and thus an ability to include local perspectives to a greater extent, in the future. Souleimanov (2018, 1) emphasizes that jihadism research suffers from a scarcity of both quantitative and ethnographic work. This dissertation has been able to address the former of these gaps, but significant obstacles remain with regard to the latter: while some notable examples exist of researchers having conducted interview-based fieldwork with more nationally oriented jihadist groups (Sheikh 2016; Drevon and Haenni 2022), to conduct interviews with an al-Qaeda- or IS-affiliated group in the field is often unfeasible due to the immediate risk of kidnapping. Still, there are various other ways meaningful fieldwork can benefit the future study of transnational jihadism, including interviews with imprisoned or former jihadist militants, as well as survey- or interview-based fieldwork with civilians in conflict-affected societies (but outside the areas controlled by jihadists).²⁶ To partially account for the lack of self-conducted fieldwork, I have paid particular attention to and incorporated findings from previous studies where such research was in fact conducted. Examples include various fieldwork-based reports from the International Crisis Group (ICG), but also from na-

²⁵ In their discussion of ‘research-related trauma’, Loyle and Simoni (2017, 144) argue that ‘[p]rofessions involving work in difficult settings (e.g. [academics]) often promote attitudes of self-reliance and machismo’ and that ‘a culture of self-neglect [...] and denial of personal needs contribute to furthering the impacts of trauma’.

²⁶ The work by Mironova (2020) would fall somewhere between these categories, as she has conducted fieldwork amongst women living in Syria’s al-Hol prison camp, which, although technically a prison, allows for entire sections to be informally controlled by IS-affiliated women’s networks. Recently, some large-N surveys have further been conducted amongst civilians in Mosul about their life under ISIS (Revkin 2018; Svensson et al. 2022).

tional news media and other fieldwork-based peer-reviewed studies, for example the work by Thurston (2020) on transnational jihadism in the Sahel region, which are cited throughout all three papers in this dissertation.

It is further important to highlight that at the start of my PhD project I did in fact have a plan to gather interview-based expertise, although outside of the high-risk countries exposed to jihadist conflicts. The idea was to include a research stay in Washington, D.C. and to conduct expert interviews with people who had particular insights about negotiations or failed negotiation attempts with jihadist groups in order to shed further light upon this second aspect of the dissertation; that is, the resilience of transnational jihadist conflicts. At that point, an informal agreement with a leading research institution in the D.C. area also existed. Yet this research stay was eventually cancelled in the spring of 2020 due to the emerging COVID-19 pandemic. As an alternative, I began a research stay with the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) in January 2021, where I was planning to meet with a range of Norwegian experts who had insights about, or who had been involved in, negotiation attempts with jihadist groups. Yet, again, a renewed COVID-related lockdown that closed large parts of public life during the first months of 2021 meant that I was unable to meet and interact with any would-be interviewees during my research stay. With growing time pressures and publication deadlines, I eventually found myself forced to abandon any plans for expert interviews.

Ethical challenges for the researcher and the subjects

To return to Baele et al.'s first core aspect of ethical challenges – the researcher's own position in the data-gathering process – the authors also discuss the researcher's own psychological well-being. Even without direct, fieldwork-related exposure to armed conflicts, Loyle and Simoni argue that having to read through human rights group reports or dealing with large amounts of data on brutal crimes and abuse can contribute to what they label 'research-related trauma' (Loyle and Simoni 2017, 141). Over the course of the three years during which this dissertation was written, I followed jihadist propaganda published by al-Qaeda- and IS-affiliated news outlets on an almost daily basis. There was clearly a learning process in the sense that I quickly began to limit my consumption of their propaganda videos, as much as possible, at least to those parts that did not contain executions. Still, even only reading about these atrocities regularly or seeing screenshots of soon-to-be executed prisoners can have harmful consequences. At the same time, PhD students have been identified as a high-risk group when it comes to research-related trauma, as exposure to violent topics may coincide with an already strained situation due to the dissertation constituting their first major solo work as a researcher and

the various challenges associated with this (Loyle and Simoni 2017, 142). To confront these challenges, Loyle and Simoni present a number of suggestions, some of which have been key for my own journey during this PhD project as well. Perhaps most importantly, maintaining a healthy work-life balance has helped to gain distance from the grim everyday news coming from jihadist conflicts around the world. For instance, I noticed that my desire to read about jihadism, listen to podcasts or watch documentaries in my spare time decreased considerably during certain periods, relative to when I took up this PhD position initially. An invaluable aspect for me lay in maintaining close personal relationships with friends and family, but also with my colleagues within the ‘Transjihad’ research project. Our weekly team meetings, but also the many informal talks with the other team members over lunch or during regular working hours, were very helpful because they provided an opportunity to share thoughts and reflections about various ongoing developments related to jihadism. What I further perceived as helpful was my previous experience with having to handle particularly brutal content during an internship with International Crisis Group’s Latin America head office in Bogotá, where I monitored news about the Mexican Drug War on a daily basis. During that time I was able to develop coping strategies that were certainly helpful during this PhD as well.

A somewhat different but related challenge regards how the consumption of news and data about jihadist violence might have biased my own way of thinking about these groups. The broader issue of how repeated exposure to violent content may bias the ability of researchers to analyse data is also addressed by Loyle and Simoni (2017, 143). In the context of jihadism research, consuming a great deal of gruesome content produced by jihadists and their affiliated media channels implies a risk of falling into the trap of subconsciously ‘villainizing’²⁷ these groups. Throughout my research, I have tried to remain critical against too generalized assumptions about these actors. Even prior to taking up my PhD in 2019, I was employed for over a year and half at Uppsala University within a research project about conflict resolution in jihadist conflicts. This experience was quite formative, not only because it seriously engaged with whether and how jihadist groups could be negotiated with, but also because I was able to attain a solid knowledge of the broader sample of jihadist groups, ranging from more pragmatic groups that seemed to behave largely similar to other insurgents to groups such as ISIS on the other extreme.

²⁷ This term was originally coined by Spector (2003) to describe the ‘demonizing and dehumanizing’ of non-state groups (cited in Haspeslagh 2021, 364).

The second main category of problems outlined by Baele et al. regards the individual subjects being studied, specifically in terms of the potentially harmful (both physical and psychological) impacts that the conducted research may have on them. Yet, in the absence of fieldwork carried out for this dissertation, there are no individual study participants who may suffer any direct or indirect harm as the result of their participation in an interview, survey or other form of data-gathering process. Moreover, no interviews or other forms of interventions with violent and/or political actors were undertaken that could potentially lead to a problematic overrepresentation of power-holders and cementation of power dynamics, an issue discussed by Baele et al. (2018, 14), drawing upon the work by Goodhand (2000) and Zwi et al. (2006).

Still, one major ethical challenge that relates to the individuals and groups studied in this dissertation lies in the question of how to label them appropriately, and how they are portrayed more generally. In Section 3 (sub-section ‘Armed Conflict and Terrorism’) I discussed some of the problems with regard to the use of the term ‘terrorist’ when labelling armed groups that engage in acts of one-sided violence. From an ethical perspective, what is especially relevant is the common misuse of the term by governments in order to delegitimize the claims formulated by insurgents, but also the obstacles for conflict resolution associated with it, for example because would-be mediators are prevented from offering their services to the conflict parties. Further, the term is generally associated with non-state actors, which steers away the focus from acts of one-sided violence perpetrated by states. I have sought to circumvent these challenges by avoiding the use of terms derived from ‘terrorism’ as much as possible, but the very fact that this dissertation has placed strong emphasis on the violence carried out by these non-state groups is not without ethical challenges either. While the violent activities of groups affiliated with al-Qaeda or IS are clearly at the centre of attention in this dissertation, their involvement in rebel governance or charitable activities is only briefly touched upon. Leaving aside questions about the underlying motivations of such activities, it must be acknowledged that some of these groups are respected by parts of the population living under their regime, for example because they provide public services that the central government is unwilling or incapable of providing (see, for instance, Marchal 2019). It is therefore necessary to acknowledge that many, even if not all, transnational jihadist groups are multidimensional phenomena that also manage to attract support among parts of the local populations.

Ethical challenges related to the findings

The third set of problems outlined by Baele et al. regards the potential misuse of research findings. To begin with, the research question addressed in this dissertation aims at arriving at a better understanding of what factors drive the evolution of transnational jihadist conflict. More specifically, the three papers have zoomed in both on factors that influence the risk of this type of conflict as well as those that could explain its resilience against peace negotiations. The obtained findings should ideally be relevant both for the academic community dealing with questions around armed conflicts with al-Qaeda- and IS-affiliated groups, and for policymakers working on related issues. However, inherent to scholarly research on these issues is the problem that it may attract an additional audience: the jihadists themselves. These organizations publish their own monthly magazines, where they frequently quote reports from international media, policy reports, blog posts and even peer-reviewed works from well-known jihadism scholars. For instance, in the 9th volume of ISIS's *Dabiq* magazine, an unknown author provided extensive quotes from various articles published by scholars in outlets such as the Carnegie Endowment, Foreign Affairs, Small Wars and the Wall Street Journal. The article used arguments by these scholars, including the well-known al-Qaeda expert Barak Mendelsohn, who suggested exploring dialogue with al-Qaeda's then-affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, as indications of a conspiracy between the United States and al-Qaeda against ISIS (Unknown author 2015). On the other hand, al-Qaeda has on several occasions referred to the work of the RAND corporation, for example in the person of AQIS leader Asim Umar in an Urdu-language audio message released on the occasion of the Eid al-Fitr in 2018, where he criticized RAND's alleged propagation of a moderated Islam (Umar 2018). There is thus a risk of some of the findings presented in this dissertation being misread as a type of 'manual' for how transnational jihadist organizations could be more successful. For instance, these organizations should be interested in identifying areas that are particularly likely to offer fruitful terrain for organizational expansion. Research, including this dissertation, seeks to do the very same, but with the opposite goal of identifying at-risk countries and regions, in order to better understand how such jihadist expansion processes could be prevented in the future. Ultimately, this is a dilemma that cannot easily be resolved. The goal of publishing policy-relevant research that offers perspectives on how to prevent this particular type of conflict, in line with the goal of making that research publicly available to the various target audiences,

leaves room for actors who may seek to use the same research for other purposes. The only alternative would be academic self-censorship, which itself would bring substantial costs.²⁸

However, just as transnational jihadists may be interested in research findings about transnationalization processes for their own organizational survival and expansion, there is also a risk for misuse by governments. This is especially relevant with regard to the finding from Paper 1 about bureaucratic capacity, which showed that governments that are more capable of collecting and gathering information about their citizens have a statistically significant reduced likelihood of experiencing transnational jihadist conflict. Clearly, one can think of a variety of countries that have used their bureaucratic capacity to prevent terrorism, but in so doing have systematically violated not only privacy but also human rights of various kinds, with China being perhaps the most drastic recent example. Two aspects, however, speak against misinterpreting the finding along these lines. First, the findings from Paper 1 also show that highly repressive states have a *higher* likelihood of experiencing transnational jihadist conflict, despite some seemingly successful outliers such as China. And second, the effect of increasing bureaucratic capacity is curvilinear and decreases for states that have already reached a medium-to-high degree of bureaucratic capacity. Hence, what the finding indicates is that a certain minimum degree of bureaucratic capacity is highly useful for states in terms of preventing the risk of this type of conflict, but they do not need to transform into repressive machineries that systematically violate the physical integrity rights of their citizens. Still, on a more general level, an important ethical challenge lies in the fact that governments are not always ‘good’ and are often responsible for a significant part of the destructiveness that we observe in transnational jihadist conflicts. This becomes particularly problematic in countries that have long been regarded as partners of ‘the West’ in the fight against transnational jihadism, for example in Mali, where state security forces were recently accused of having perpetrated a massacre of hundreds of civilians (Dzhemal 2022). How such dilemmas can be resolved is an important question that future research should investigate at greater depth. Still, aside from the finding regarding bureaucratic capacity, this dissertation has provided empirical evidence for the potentially counterproductive effects of excessive repression, whereas political openness towards Islamists and Islamic political parties may offer a promising avenue to be explored by governments.

²⁸ On this issue, see also the discussion by Zelin (2021a).

7. Conclusion

The findings from the three papers, which zoomed in on the dissertation's two sub-questions, allow us to arrive at some general conclusions in order to answer the main research question guiding this dissertation: *How does the interplay of local and transnational dynamics shape the evolution of transnational jihadist conflict?* The findings illustrate the hybrid nature of this particular type of armed conflict as a 'glocal' phenomenon, whose evolution is shaped by a plethora of local and transnational factors at different phases of the conflict. An important contribution thus lies in the combined study of both local and transnational explanatory factors and the attempt to overcome the 'local versus global' debate that revolves around the question of whether to understand the evolution of conflicts with al-Qaeda's and IS's affiliate groups as primarily locally or globally driven. Ultimately, one main finding of this dissertation, which cuts across all three independent papers, is that these conflicts are neither purely local nor transnational. To understand why they occur in some countries but not in others, one has to look at the interplay between a range of actors, most centrally the state and its institutions, the civilian population, local rebels who may be considering whether to transnationalize their struggles, and al-Qaeda and IS as transnational organizations that consider whether to invest resources in a local context. Moreover, neighbouring states can play a key role. When they fail to contain ongoing conflicts on their own territories, there is a risk of cross-border spill-over. They may also more or less inadvertently contribute to the destabilization of their neighbours when they fail to prevent the cross-border flow of foreign fighters towards transnational jihadist affiliate groups. All of these actors have agency and the power to influence the dynamics of transnational jihadist conflicts.

More specifically, this dissertation has found the *expansion* of transnational jihadist conflict to new countries to be facilitated in the context of a set of particular local conditions. These include high degrees of state repression and low bureaucratic state capacity, but also the presence of sizeable Sunni Muslim and Shi'a Muslim populations. Moreover, excessive state repression does not only increase the risk of transnational jihadist conflict. When the latter has started, it also makes states behave more repressively, thereby contributing to a potentially vicious cycle of violence in which the jihadists can capitalize upon the state's repressive behaviour, and vice versa. Although Paper 1, which investigated the role of state repression, focused on the expansion of transnational jihadist conflict and not on its resilience against peace negotiations, the endogenous relationship between transnational jihadist conflict and state repression can be expected to complicate avenues towards peace as well.

If the state and its agents arbitrarily arrest and abuse innocent citizens, the jihadists will be more capable of mobilizing support, drawing upon local populations' need for protection, their grievances or their desires for revenge. They will be less likely to perceive a mutually hurting stalemate, and may respond with even more violence, which would in turn radicalize the stance of those supporting the state. These dynamics are likely to provide obstacles to potential peace negotiations. As regards the effects of bureaucratic state capacity, the findings show that even small improvements can substantially reduce the risk of transnational jihadist conflict, but that this effect decreases in strength once states have reached a medium level of bureaucratic capacity. Findings that were obtained in Paper 2 and that were based on a sample of five South Asian states further suggest that opening up political channels for Islamist and Islamic political parties may obstruct the emergence of transnational jihadist conflict. Yet the study also raised some caveats, for example that Islamist parties may themselves have negative effects upon the political system, but also that political channels must be perceived as viable by the population, and that they may still fail to avoid the attraction of transnational jihadist ideology if political leaders are perceived as corrupt. Moreover, although the findings speak to those obtained in earlier case-based and region-specific studies, their generalizability remains to be tested on a large-N level.

Aside from these domestic state-level factors, a variable that directly links both the local and the transnational dimension regards the extent to which the ideologies of al-Qaeda and IS match with the ideological profiles of local rebel groups. Al-Qaeda's and IS's ideologies can open up avenues of expansion for them but may also limit their opportunities. Paper 2 discussed how the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), a leading insurgent group in Myanmar, refused to frame its struggle in Islamist terms altogether, thereby complicating al-Qaeda's and IS's abilities to tap into the plight of the Rohingya Muslim minority. The study also showed how IS's anti-Deobandi, *takfiri* approach limited its potential to find affiliation partners in South Asia, a region where Deobandism has been a central part of the militant Islamist landscape for decades. On the other hand, despite al-Qaeda's non-*takfiri* and more pragmatic approach vis-à-vis different Islamist strands, it did not manage to gain a stronger role in the region, which shows that shared ideology likely matters as a condition for transnational jihadist conflict to emerge, but that it is not a sufficient explanatory factor. The study of South Asia further illustrates that al-Qaeda and IS are not the only potential providers of external support for local Islamist militant groups. In South Asia, they have had to compete with a network dominated by the transnationally active Lashkar-e-Taiba. Where local groups already enjoy substantial funding and other material support from abroad, they are likely to be more hesitant to pledge allegiance to al-Qaeda or

IS. This finding is in line with the conclusions drawn by Warner et al. (2021, 30), who show that most African IS affiliates were indeed hoping for material support when pledging allegiance to the organization, even though such support often never materialized. At the same time, it is crucial to emphasize that although external support from other sources for local Islamist rebel groups may reduce the risk of transnational jihadist conflict, it is likely to be destabilizing in other ways, especially where external *governments* are supporting Islamist rebel groups, a still-understudied subject.

While these insights can help to arrive at a better understanding of how to prevent transnational jihadist conflicts from occurring, this dissertation also shed light upon the evolution of these conflicts once they have erupted. Specifically, it zoomed in on the relationship between jihadist affiliate groups' degree of transnationalization and the obstacles to peace negotiations with these groups. The findings document substantial variation both in terms of the degree to which al-Qaeda's and IS's affiliate groups a) operate transnationally and b) recruit foreign fighters. Several affiliate groups have neither operated nor recruited transnationally to a significant extent, which means that the lack of peace negotiations in these conflicts cannot solely be explained through transnationalization along these two dimensions. However, it is still possible and, in some cases, likely that the transnational jihadist ideology of these groups would provide serious obstacles to peace negotiations. In turn, in several other conflicts, affiliate groups are indeed operating and/or recruiting transnationally, and in many cases both at the same time. Where groups operate transnationally, several governments need to simultaneously come to the conclusion that peace negotiations are a worthwhile strategy to pursue, something that is often not possible due to the highly polarizing nature of the issue, illustrated for example by the different attitudes towards negotiations held by, respectively, the Burkinabe and the Malian governments with regard to JNIM, or the Kenyan and Somali governments with regard to al-Shabaab. In turn, the issue of foreign fighter recruitment appears somewhat more complicated. Although many affiliate groups do indeed systematically recruit fighters from other countries, the bulk of that recruitment occurs between neighbouring countries and is often based on co-ethnicity. While co-ethnicity could alleviate some problems otherwise arising from foreign fighters being perceived as alien to the culture by local populations, which would present problems on the road towards peace negotiations, the fact that these groups can respond to battlefield losses by recruiting new fighters from abroad means that they are less likely to perceive a mutually hurting stalemate.

Implications for future research

This dissertation opens up several new avenues for research on transnational jihadist conflicts. First, further scholarly efforts are needed with regard to the particular *timing* of transnationalization processes. While the first two papers identified a number of structural factors influencing the likelihood of transnational jihadist conflict, they did not investigate what ultimately triggers local group leaders to pledge allegiance at a specific point in time, or why the transnational organizations sometimes wait for years until they acknowledge such a pledge. It is possible that some of the answers to these questions may be found on the meso level, for instance in internal fractionalization processes, defections, leadership decapitations or similar events. These are aspects that future research could explore at greater depth, by adopting group-level, large-N research designs, although some of the data would have to be generated first. Still, promising anchor points in the literature already exist, for instance Jordan's (2020) large-N work on the effects of leadership decapitation upon a variety of armed groups, including transnational jihadist groups.

Second, this dissertation invites additional research into patterns of battle-related escalation and containment within ongoing conflicts over time. For example, local rebel groups may be more prone to seek external support from al-Qaeda or IS in times of an escalation of violence in their battle-related confrontation with the state, or when they are facing pressure from other non-state opponents. While the large-N analysis in Paper 1 controlled for ongoing conflicts, it did not further explore the effects of different degrees of intensity. Peace and conflict scholars have made significant theoretical and empirical advances in the large-N study of such dynamics, which offer useful avenues for exploring the developments in transnational jihadist conflicts as well as those armed conflicts that may precede their emergence (see, for instance, Chaudoin, Peskowitz, and Stanton 2017). While peace negotiations remain out of sight in many transnational jihadist conflicts, it would still be highly important to understand how ongoing conflicts can at least be contained or de-escalated in terms of their intensity.

Third, another promising avenue for future research lies in the large-N analysis of the ideological profiles of both jihadist affiliate groups and other Islamist rebels. As was mentioned earlier, ideological framing constitutes one of the two dimensions of transnationalization that were not addressed in Paper 3. However, many of these groups regularly produce propaganda material in audio, visual and textual form, which can be analysed in terms of particular wording, displayed content or the degree to which religious references are used vis-à-vis non-religious issues. Such an effort could allow scholars to arrive at important findings as to whether certain affiliate groups may prioritize

some issues over others, which would be relevant when exploring avenues towards peace negotiations with some of these groups in the future. It would also be useful to systematically compare the ideological framing used by groups both before and after their affiliation with a transnational organization in order to understand the impacts of a transnational affiliation upon these groups' framing. There exists a considerable literature of scholars specialized in analysing jihadist propaganda material, although these studies have typically focused on individual propaganda outlets (Colas 2017; Ingram 2017) or the propaganda material produced by particular groups over time (Krona and Pennington 2019; Parvez 2019; Andersen and Sandberg 2020; Singam 2020; Lakomy 2021). In turn, the other dimension of transnationalization that was left out in Paper 3, resource mobilization, will be highly difficult to study within the foreseeable future. The reason is the lack of data, at least on a large-N level, about how these groups finance themselves, or send weapons to each other, due to the high secrecy surrounding such transfers. At the moment, such dynamics may at best be studied based on individual cases.

Finally, it could be easier to develop further insights about another variable that was addressed in this dissertation, namely political openness. Paper 2 studied this issue within the South Asian context, but it would be useful to conduct a large-N analysis of all countries with significant Muslim populations and to measure the representation of Islamist and Islamic political parties in national and/or regional parliaments. This would then allow for examining, potentially both on sub-national and national levels, whether regions or countries in which such parties are represented are less likely to experience transnational jihadist conflict. Alternatively, it could also be studied how ongoing conflicts are affected when Islamists attain political representation. Such a data compilation, however, is challenging due to the heterogeneity of electoral systems, parliamentary quotas and, not least, the powers that parliaments hold vis-à-vis the executive and judicial branches of different countries. The work of Kurzman and Türkoğlu (2015), which contains a compilation of Islamic parties across various Muslim-majority countries, provides a promising starting point in this regard.

Policy Implications

Aside from contributing to the academic literature about transnational jihadist conflicts, this dissertation has produced a number of policy-relevant findings. These insights can help identify strategies to curb the expansion of transnational jihadist conflict and are further relevant for exploring future avenues towards their non-violent resolution. First, this dissertation shows that

excessive state repression carries a risk of backfiring. States that systematically violate the physical integrity rights of the population, such as through extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests or torture have a significantly heightened risk of experiencing the emergence of transnational jihadist conflict. This finding is particularly relevant because the analysis in Paper 1 also showed that once al-Qaeda and IS become involved in conflicts, governments become more repressive and resort to the above-mentioned means. There is thus a risk of a vicious cycle in which repressive transgressions from the state and attacks committed by jihadists fuel each other and lead to an escalation of violence. Therefore, governments that seek to prevent transnational jihadist conflict should consider how such measures may push already disadvantaged societal groups into the hands of jihadists.

Second, investments in bureaucratic capacity are important in order to prevent al-Qaeda and IS from gaining ground. Especially in states that lack the most basic capabilities to collect and process information about their citizens, even modest improvements can significantly reduce the risk of new incidences of conflict with al-Qaeda- or IS-affiliated groups. Bureaucratic capacity-building should further be considered as a tool in order to contain a variety of spill-over effects that may render transnational jihadist conflicts more resilient against peace negotiations. These spill-over effects can occur through the transnational recruitment of foreign fighters, or the operational expansion of affiliate groups into new countries. Bureaucratic capacity-building can help enable states to prevent such cross-border dynamics, for example through improved border policing and intelligence gathering.

Third, governments should consider whether offering avenues for political participation to non-violent Islamist movements and/or Islamic political actors could help reduce the traction of transnational jihadists. This dissertation's findings based on the South Asian context (as well as a range of previous scholarly studies) point in this direction, but they remain to be tested on a large-N level. Moreover, the effects of such measures are likely to depend on the extent to which the political system as such is transparent enough to be perceived as a credible alternative by the wider population. On the other hand, the political inclusion of Islamists is associated with a range of risks and potentially negative consequences that must be factored in. When allowed to compete in democratic politics, Islamists may use their freedom to spread religiously intolerant views and work towards a backsliding of LGBTQ and women's rights (Krause and Söderberg Kovacs forthcoming). They may also seek to discredit Islamic or secular Muslim actors with more inclusive and liberal views (Sheikh 2019, 44). To date, there is therefore no clear-cut, empirically founded answer to the question of whether Islamist political participation works as a 'firewall' or a 'conveyor belt' (Lynch 2010, 480).

Fourth, although dialogue with jihadist affiliate groups presents a variety of challenges, it should not be ruled out simply because of these groups' linkages to al-Qaeda or IS. A number of these groups neither operate transnationally themselves nor recruit foreign fighters systematically. While these groups may still oppose negotiations on ideological grounds, governments should at least make serious efforts to find out whether that is actually the case. Still, even the prospects for negotiations with groups that do recruit and/or operate transnationally should be explored, although particular challenges arise in these cases. Where the jihadists are operating in multiple countries at once, states first need to reach common ground on the issue of negotiations amongst themselves before meaningful advances with transnational jihadists are likely to be feasible. Moreover, where jihadist groups maintain a steady influx of foreign fighters, they may be less likely to arrive in a situation where they perceive a mutually hurting stalemate. On the other hand, the bulk of foreign fighter flows occurs between neighbouring countries, often based on co-ethnicity, which offers better prospects for re-integrating some of these combatants relative to contexts where foreign fighters lack any ties to the host population.

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Summary

This dissertation, which consists of this summary report together with three self-contained papers, investigates the evolution of transnational jihadist conflict – that is, intrastate armed conflicts involving non-state groups linked to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS). Although the empirical peace and conflict literature has long studied both the causes of armed conflicts and possible ways to resolve them, it has largely neglected transnational jihadist conflicts as a distinct type of conflict. I argue that this neglect is problematic, as these conflicts bear several distinctive characteristics. In turn, scholarly literature more specifically focused on jihadism has generated profound insights into the transnational jihadist movement as such, and into al-Qaeda and IS as specific organizations as well as their local affiliate groups. Yet this literature has lacked the large-N approach typical in the peace and conflict literature, leaving some questions unanswered with regard to the external validity of some of the findings it has produced through case-based research designs.

The present dissertation seeks to fill this gap by bridging the empirical peace and conflict literature and the field of jihadism studies in order to generate insights about both the emergence and the resilience of transnational jihadist conflicts on a large-N level. In doing so, it generates several important findings. As regards the question of *emergence*, transnational jihadist conflicts are found to be more likely to take place in contexts of highly repressive states. On the other hand, higher levels of bureaucratic state capacity are found to obstruct the ability of al-Qaeda and IS to establish themselves as conflict parties. Moreover, a regional study of South Asia finds that political openness can provide local populations with nonviolent alternatives to express grievances, thereby complicating the rise of al-Qaeda and IS. The study of South Asia further shows that when local Islamist groups already make use of external support channels other than al-Qaeda and IS, these latter organizations may appear less attractive as affiliation partners. As regards the question of *resilience*, the dissertation shows that foreign fighter recruitment and transnational operations, often mentioned as key obstacles for conflict resolution, are not sufficient in explaining the lack of negotiations in transnational jihadist conflicts. Rather, a high degree of variation along both variables is identified amongst a sample of 20 jihadist affiliate groups, suggesting that some of these conflicts may offer avenues for peace negotiations in the future.

Dansk resumé

Denne afhandling, som består af denne sammenfattende rapport og tre selvstændige artikler, har undersøgt udviklingen af transnationale jihadistiske konflikter, dvs. væbnede konflikter inden for staten, der involverer ikke-statslige grupper med tilknytning til al-Qaeda og Islamisk Stat (IS). Selv om den empiriske freds- og konfliktlitteratur længe har undersøgt både årsagerne til væbnede konflikter og mulige måder at løse dem på, har den i vid udstrækning negligeret transnationale jihadistiske konflikter som en særskilt konflikttype. Jeg hævder, at denne negligeret er problematisk, da disse konflikter har flere særlige karakteristika. Til gengæld har den videnskabelige litteratur, der er mere specifikt fokuseret på jihadisme, skabt dybtgående indsigt i den transnationale jihadistiske bevægelse som sådan, og med al-Qaeda og IS som specifikke organisationer samt deres lokale affilierede grupper. Denne litteratur har dog ikke haft den kvantitative tilgang, der er typisk for freds- og konfliktlitteraturen, hvilket har efterladt nogle spørgsmål ubesvarede med hensyn til den eksterne gyldighed af nogle af de resultater, der er fremkommet gennem case-baserede forskningsdesigns.

Denne afhandling har forsøgt at udfylde dette tomrum ved at bygge bro mellem den empiriske freds- og konfliktlitteratur og jihadismestudier for at skabe indsigt i både fremkomsten og modstandsdygtigheden af transnationale jihadistiske konflikter på et globalt niveau. Dermed har den skabt flere vigtige resultater. Hvad angår spørgsmålet om opståen, viser det sig, at transnationale jihadistiske konflikter er mere tilbøjelige til at finde sted i kontekster med stærkt undertrykkende stater. På den anden side viser det sig, at en højere grad af bureaukratisk statskapacitet hindrer al-Qaeda og IS i at etablere sig som konfliktparter. Desuden viser en regional undersøgelse af Sydasien, at politisk åbenhed kan give lokalbefolkningerne ikkevoldelige alternativer til at udtrykke deres klager, og dermed vanskeliggøre al-Qaeda og IS' fremkomst. Undersøgelsen af Sydasien viser endvidere, at når lokale islamistiske grupper allerede råder over andre eksterne støttekanaler end al-Qaeda og IS, kan sidstnævnte organisationer virke mindre attraktive som tilslutningspartnere. Hvad angår spørgsmålet om modstandsdygtighed, viser afhandlingen, at rekruttering af udenlandske krigere og transnationale operationer, der ofte nævnes som centrale hindringer for konfliktløsning, ikke er tilstrækkelige til at forklare manglen på forhandlinger i transnationale jihadistiske konflikter. I stedet identificeres der en høj grad af variation i forhold til begge variabler blandt et udsnit af 20 jihadistiske affilierede grupper, hvilket tyder på, at nogle af disse konflikter kan åbne mulighed for fredsforhandlinger i fremtiden.