Introduction

Map 1 Northwest Africa

Mass-based jihadist[1] organizations trouble different parts of the world, including areas in North Africa and the Sahel, the geographical zone

[1] I use the term "jihadism" to designate various movements that have arisen since the 1980s. These movements talk about jihad in ideological terms that break with the mainstream Sunni tradition's restrictions on how jihads should be conducted.

this book covers. These organizations mobilize hundreds or even thousands of fighters. Some control territory for months or years, building "proto-states."[2]

As large organizations, they are not merely "terrorist groups" or "networks."[3] Rather, they are insurgencies and multi-dimensional bureaucracies.[4] They sometimes use terrorism, including against remote targets, but their primary context is fighting in civil wars.[5] These organizations all theoretically belong to the "global jihadist movement," but their strategic vision is largely local and regional – as, in fact, al-Qa'ida's vision was during its own formative period.[6]

Large jihadist organizations are political actors. They are political not merely in the sense that they fight in wars and have radical visions of politics. They also participate in local, national, and regional politics, and not just through intimidation but also through the management of strategic relationships. They negotiate with power-brokers, build alliances, and respond to the demands of constituencies. They are, meanwhile, prone to politicking within their own ranks. Like

For example, contemporary jihadists often endorse violence against civilians. All jihadist movements reject constitution-based political orders, considering them a usurpation of God's legislative prerogatives, and these movements advocate the violent overthrow of existing states.

[2] Brynjar Lia, "Understanding Jihadi Proto-States," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9:4 (2015): www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/441/html.

[3] Studying how terrorist groups are organized gives limited insight into how jihadist groups function when they become larger entities. One of the best studies of terrorist organizations, for example, focuses on "small organizations operating somewhat secretly without the power to take and hold territory." See Jacob Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 2.

[4] Vera Mironova, *From Freedom Fighters to Jihadists: Human Resources of Non State Armed Groups* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). Mironova argues, "The groups that are the best organized internally, have less corruption, and provide more for their members become the most popular with fighters" (3). There is much to recommend this argument, but it applies only partially in northwest Africa, where both recruitment to jihadist organizations and schisms within jihadist coalitions are heavily shaped by social networks, relationships between field commanders and their superiors, and sheer contingency. I develop these arguments later.

[5] Stathis Kalyvas, "Jihadi Rebels in Civil War," *Daedalus* 147:1 (Winter 2018): 36–47,38.

[6] Anne Stenersen, *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 2. Isabelle Duyvesteyn has also argued that al-Qa'ida's "concerns can be seen as highly national and territorial." See her "How New Is the New Terrorism?" *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 27:5 (2004): 439–454, 444.

other rebel organizations, jihadist movements "are coalitions that depend on cooperation among differentiated, heterogeneous units."[7] The negotiations, rivalries, and conflicts between those units represent another kind of jihadist politics.

This book concentrates on jihadist politics in a triple sense, examining the politics within jihadist organizations, jihadists' engagement with the politics that surrounds them, and the interaction between these internal and external political arenas. I develop a theoretical vocabulary to describe jihadist politics. This vocabulary covers both internal political dynamics and external political postures.

To understand these forms of jihadist politics, we need to think beyond Western security paradigms. Western policymakers and analysts overwhelmingly view jihadism in terms of 9/11, assuming that jihadism is important in relation to the threat it might pose to Western soil and Western interests. Critiquing this type of analysis, Mohammed-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou comments, "The dominant existing literature … portrays the [Islamic State] primarily as an apocalyptic religious entity bent solely on destroying the West … Focus on the group's extreme violence and its alienating discourse has prevented deeper examination of the political and social conditions behind its rise."[8] The political dimensions of many other jihadist groups are under-analyzed as well. As Darryl Li has commented, "Without rendering legible the political nature of jihadi projects, [terrorism studies'] focus on doctrine becomes deterministic; its analysis of propaganda tends toward voyeurism; its study of tactics redounds to incoherent moralism; and its focus on individual motivations is atomistic."[9] The political nature of jihadist projects encompasses not just their stated demands for the overthrow of existing states and the remaking of local and global orders but also their intrinsically political modes of day-to-day operation.

Many analysts prioritize either macro-level or micro-level analysis of jihadism, leaving crucial political dimensions unaddressed. Macro-level studies concentrate on the visions of ideologues and the arcs of

[7] Michael Woldemariam, *Insurgent Fragmentation in the Horn of Africa: Rebellion and Its Discontents* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 6.
[8] Mohammed-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou, *A Theory of ISIS: Political Violence and the Transformation of the Global Order* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 1–2.
[9] Darryl Li, "A Jihadism Anti-primer," *Middle East Report* 276 (Fall 2015), www.merip.org/mer/mer276/jihadism-anti-primer.

organizations. The downside of that approach is that analysts often treat organizations as unitary actors (groups that think and move as one) and assume that well-known personalities speak for entire organizations.[10] It is a mistake, however, to treat any participant in a civil war as a unitary actor, because of the frequent gaps in aims and worldview between the leadership and the rank-and-file, or because of the frequently observed variation within a single organization on key questions and priorities.[11]

Micro-level studies of jihadism often focus on the radicalization of individual fighters, especially "homegrown terrorists" in the West and "foreign fighters" in the Middle East.[12] Yet considerable evidence suggests that people join armed organizations not as individuals but as representatives and members of groups, responding to ways that "actors within social structures, within which potential participants are embedded, collectively frame the threat posed by civil war."[13] The careers of top leaders and foreign fighters give relatively limited insight into the political forces that mobilize masses of local recruits.[14]

Western security paradigms are deeply resistant to thinking of jihadism as a form of legible politics, based on the flawed but influential assumption that taking jihadist politics seriously gives jihadists moral legitimacy. It is easier, when discussing jihadism, to speak in terms of

[10] Many of these studies are extremely useful. A sampling of the best work would include Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al Qaeda Strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Joas Wagemakers, *A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015); Michael W. S. Ryan, *Decoding Al-Qaeda's Strategy: The Deep Battle against America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); and Brian Fishman, *The Master Plan: ISIS, al-Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).

[11] Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 10.

[12] See, for example, Peter Neumann, *Radicalized: New Jihadists and the Threat to the West* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016).

[13] Anastasia Shesterinina, "Collective Threat Framing and Mobilization in Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 110:3 (August 2016): 411–427, 411.

[14] The role of foreign fighters in shaping organizational trajectories has been exaggerated. For a convincing argument that foreign fighters have a limited impact, see Tricia Bacon and Daisy Muibu, "The Domestication of Al-Shabaab," *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 10:3 (July–September 2019): 279–305.

pathologies than in terms of politics. Western policymakers and analysts often talk about "radicalization" and "extremism" as forces more akin to mass psychosis or individual deviance than as political processes; individual fighters are seen as fanatics to be killed, or as patients to be cured, rather than as socially embedded political actors.[15] If one studies the jihadist leader in isolation from his political environment, or the individual fighter without reference to the "complex webs of direct or mediated exchanges" that connect him to other people,[16] there is a risk of losing sight of the drivers of jihadists' successes and failures. Implicitly running through much of both the macro- and micro-level analysis of jihadism is the question "why do they hate us?" But the answers to that question are of limited value in answering the very different and more important question "why do jihadists accrue power in certain (wartime) contexts?"

I confront these conceptual problems by applying the *meso* level of analysis to particular organizations. An organization that may look from a macro level like an "al-Qa'ida affiliate," more or less interchangeable with other "affiliates," appears politically dynamic at the *meso* level. And micro-level studies often struggle to capture the context in which individual fighters operate. For these reasons, the *meso* or "commander-level" plane of analysis is vital for understanding jihadist politics – just as *meso*-level analysis is important to the study of conflict generally. In civil wars,[17] genocides, and other conflicts, "meso-level actors shape the process of violence."[18] The *meso*-level analysis here explores how jihadist field commanders navigate questions of politics.

Other assumptions that merit questioning have to do with how jihadist hierarchies function. Some analysts insist that jihadist field commanders merely follow orders; such analysts say that it is the

[15] It is not just with the study of jihadism that politics is de-emphasized. As Jacob Mundy comments, "Civil war, terrorism, and genocide . . . have been increasingly theorized and studied in depoliticized ways that flatten late warfare's historical, geographical, and ideational contours." See Mundy, *Imaginative Geographies of Algerian Violence: Conflict Science, Conflict Management, Antipolitics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 9.

[16] Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 137.

[17] Fotini Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 29–31.

[18] Evgeny Finkel and Scott Straus, "Macro, Meso, and Micro Research on Genocide: Gains, Shortcomings, and Future Areas of Inquiry," *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 7:1 (2012): 56–67, 59.

central leaderships of al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State who pull the strings in local conflicts around the world.[19] But the field commander is not, and by function of the demands placed on him cannot be, a mere conduit for the global vision of the mother organization. Politics has different meanings and applications for the locally or regionally minded field commander than for the global ideologue. Field commanders participate directly in military actions, have sustained face-to-face interactions with fighters, and broker the local arrangements that facilitate crucial initiatives such as hostage releases, governance, recruitment, and coalition-building. The fighters in mass-based jihadist organizations, moreover, are not typically operatives recruited for one spectacular attack but rather members of a wartime coalition. Field commanders, then, are essential for understanding how jihadist politics actually works.

I argue in this book that the jihadist field commander is a political entrepreneur who routinely confronts political problems for which jihadist doctrine does not provide readymade solutions. Jihadist field commanders generate diverse solutions to these problems, many of which appear to be congruent with jihadist doctrine in the eyes of the commanders and their constituencies; yet the very diversity of the solutions undertaken indicates that jihadist politics is a field of contestation and improvisation rather than a mechanical application of doctrine. Meanwhile, in his external relations the jihadist field commander possesses distinctive resources, including his status as the representative of an organization that is formally anathema (that is, blacklisted by states and the United Nations). Harnessing his ostensible pariah status, the jihadist field commander can nevertheless work to build and manage a coalition that is not just militarily but also politically and economically successful.

[19] See Bruce Hoffman, "Al Qaeda's Resurrection," Council on Foreign Relations Expert Brief, March 6, 2018, www.cfr.org/expert-brief/al-qaedas-resurrection; and Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Nathaniel Barr, "How al-Qaeda Survived the Islamic State Challenge," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, March 1, 2017, www.hudson.org/research/12788-how-al-qaeda-survived-the-islamic-state-challenge. Other analysts evaluate al-Qa'ida's record much more critically. See Daniel Byman, "Judging al-Qaeda's Record, Parts I and II," Lawfare, June 27 and 28, 2017, available at www.lawfareblog.com/judging-al-qaedas-record-part-i-organization-decline and https://www.lawfareblog.com/judging-al-qaedas-record-part-ii-why-has-al-qaeda-declined.

The jihadist field commander achieves his greatest success when the distinctive promise he offers, namely that of a counter-order, meets the needs of multiple local constituencies; it is then that the potential for a wide-ranging coalition appears, with one foot in the partly-realized jihadist counter-order and another foot still in the existing order. These coalitions and their political projects are highly unstable and vulnerable: Jihadist counter-orders can gain momentum with astonishing rapidity, but can crumble just as quickly – often due to a combination of infighting and overreach as well as the impact of the wider context, including state policies, other actors' calculations, and the positioning of rival jihadist groups. Through an analysis of these dynamics, the book aims to contribute to the study of jihadism, and also more broadly to the study of civil wars, political violence, and the trajectory of Muslim politics around the world.

Jihadist Exceptionalism, and Anathematization as a Strategic Resource

Insights drawn from political scientists' studies of conventional rebels help in explaining *meso*-level jihadist politics, and will be used throughout the book. Yet I am not convinced by political science literature that portrays jihadist leaders as cynics who calmly shop for ideologies in a supposed free market of ideas, selecting whatever best suits their material interests at a particular moment. I do not agree that the language of religion is just "cheap talk."[20] Nor do I think that because jihadists' "violence is often influenced by the context in which it unfolds and the influence of religion on it can be variable rather than constant," one should "decouple violent Islamism [sic] from … religion."[21] There is a widespread assumption in political science that rebels generally or jihadists specifically are nothing more than survival-oriented rational actors. Yet there is a mass of empirical evidence that contradicts that assumption and points to more complicated, and often religiously inflected, decision-making processes among jihadists.

[20] Barbara Walter, "The Extremist's Advantage in Civil Wars," *International Security* 42:2 (Fall 2017): 7–39, 10.

[21] Kalyvas, "Jihadi Rebels," 37. To explain my use of "[sic]," the phrase "violent Islamism," despite wide currency, is a misnomer. Jihadism is not an extreme manifestation of Islamism but a fundamentally different project.

Perhaps in a small way, this book can even contribute to a mode of political science that is comfortable acknowledging the heavy doses of idiosyncracy, contingency, and unevenly applied ideology that shape human events, none of which are reducible to rules-bounded games played by ruthlessly rational actors.

Is is not possible, in fact, that "rational believers"[22] and "devoted actors"[23] often believe what they say? Jihadists largely appear willing to accept the consequences of their stated beliefs, rendering their talk far from "cheap." As Aisha Ahmad shows, mastering the markers and vocabularies of piety and political Islam takes time and effort. Discussing the *mujahideen* in 1980s Afghanistan, she writes, "In this cloak-and-dagger world, these arduous baseline metrics of piety [such as praying at dawn] made it labor-intensive for a nonbeliever to convincingly fake camaraderie with the mujahideen … Islam became a critical shortcut for establishing trust."[24] Given the costs and benefits of demonstrating piety, it seems plausible that a jihadist could be *both* a committed ideologue and a shrewd political actor.

At the *meso* level, religiosity intertwines with politics, facilitating experimentation and improvisation. Even if the theological–ideological tenets of Salafi-jihadism remain consistent across locales,[25] the events that confront jihadist field commanders are idiosyncratic and unpredictable. The field commander manages (or mismanages) a set of relationships that are inherently in tension; the interests of young fighters, religious hardliners, and more flexible allies are not the same. The field commander's decisions require religiously inflected explanation and legitimation, whether in advance, in the moment, or after the fact. In religious terms, the successful field commander is often one who can tell a compelling story about his violence.

[22] Masooda Bano, *The Rational Believer: Choices and Decisions in the Madrasas of Pakistan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).
[23] Scott Atran, "The Devoted Actor: Unconditional Commitment and Intractable Conflict across Cultures," *Current Anthropology* 57:13 (June 2016): S192–S203.
[24] Aisha Ahmad, *Jihad & Co.: Black Markets and Islamist Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 54.
[25] For a compelling intellectual history, see Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). See also my "Algeria's GIA: The First Major Armed Group to Fully Subordinate Salafism in Jihadism," *Islamic Law and Society* 24 (2017): 412–436.

This storytelling involves more than just the elaboration of "jihadi culture" through poetry and displays of pietistic emotion.[26] Rather, as jihadists develop their own "antipolitics" centered on a rejection of existing orders, they confront a need to express political claims, messages, and decisions without using the language of conventional politics. They deploy "shari'a politics," in the sense of "orient[ing] and legitimat[ing] their actions with reference to some representation of God's commands."[27] Islamic theology and law furnish the language of jihadist politics,[28] which only becomes comprehensible through a critical reading of jihadists' religious statements.

Aside from the particularities of jihadists' doctrines, there are other ways in which jihadist politics is exceptional in the context of rebellion and insurgency – but specifying what this exceptionalism consists of is difficult. As Li puts it, "The challenge is how to understand the distinctiveness of jihadi groups without lapsing into an all-too-often racialized exceptionalism."[29] One criterion by which jihadists are distinct is the degree to which they are anathematized – blacklisted or excluded from mainstream politics – within national and global political orders. One effect of blacklisting is that jihadists do not necessarily expect or even hope to win wars on any conventional political timeline or through conventional political bargaining. The social science mantra that rebels hope to maximize "wartime returns as anticipated in the political power sharing of the postconflict state,"[30] or even make money through the rebellion itself,[31] is hard to sustain when it comes to the very risky business of jihadism. Anathematization makes it extremely unlikely that jihadists will, *qua jihadists*, receive any

[26] Thomas Hegghammer, ed., *Jihadi Culture: The Art and Social Practices of Militant Islamists* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
[27] Robert Hefner, "Introduction: Shari'a Politics – Law and Society in the Modern Muslim World" in *Shari'a Politics: Islamic Law and Society in the Modern World*, edited by Robert Hefner, 1–54 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 10.
[28] See Daniel Lav, *Radical Islam and the Revival of Medieval Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
[29] Li, "Jihadist Anti-Primer." [30] Christia, *Alliance Formation*, 5.
[31] See Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers* 56 (2004): 563–595, 563–564.

post-conflict "returns"; and aggressive manhunts for top jihadists make wartime profits hard to enjoy.

At the same time, anathematization is a resource for jihadists. They can play on their ambiguous political position (blacklisted and therefore "outside" politics, but simultaneously enmeshed in the political fields that surround them) to offer resources to allies. Whether those allies are businesspersons, religious leaders, tribal shaykhs, or even state authorities, jihadists' partners find advantages in having one foot in the shadows and the other in the light – just as jihadists find advantages in having their allies subtly represent jihadist interests at negotiating tables and in the mainstream political arena (or the economic arena, which is crucial although not the main focus of this book). The question then becomes how different parties within jihadist coalitions tolerate, benefit from, and perpetuate the "wartime political orders" that jihadists help create.[32] In short, jihadists are different from conventional rebels partly because both their enemies and their allies treat them as different.

Jihadists are also distinct from conventional rebels and even from revolutionaries in the degree to which the counter-order they offer differs from existing orders. One RAND Corporation report states that "so far, no state or bloc of states has tried to establish a clearly defined counter-order since the end of the Cold War."[33] This is perhaps too sweeping, but the basic sentiment is correct. Not just states but also most conventional rebels do not offer truly revolutionary counter-orders. Part of the challenge of analyzing jihadist politics, however, is that jihadists often simultaneously construct counter-orders while tacitly adapting to existing orders, especially the "wartime political orders" mentioned previously. The analytical challenge, stated differently, has to do with determining when to exceptionalize jihadists and when to de-exceptionalize them.

[32] On the concept of "wartime political orders," where evolving conditions and relationships provide occasions for various kinds of deal-making, see Paul Staniland, "States, Insurgents, and Wartime Political Orders," *Perspectives on Politics* 10:2 (June 2012): 243–264.

[33] Michael Mazarr et al., *Measuring the Health of the Liberal International Order* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017), 148.