

# Jihadi Rebels in Civil War

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*Abstract: In this essay, I decouple violent jihadism from both religion and terrorism and propose an alternative, nonexclusive understanding of jihadi groups as rebel groups engaged in civil wars. Arguing that jihadi groups can be profitably approached as the current species of revolutionary insurgents, I offer a comparison with an older species, the Marxist rebels of the Cold War. I point to a few significant similarities and differences between these two types of revolutionary rebels and draw some key implications, stressing the great challenges facing jihadi rebels in civil wars.*

The global spread of a militant or extremist strain of political Islam, often referred to as “jihadi” Islamism, ranks as one of the most important political developments in the post–Cold War world; it carries implications for our understanding of both the politics of global security and contemporary trends in political violence.<sup>1</sup>

Political Islam or Islamism, terms denoting the use of Islam’s religious precepts for political mobilization, takes many forms, some of which can be violent. Transnational terror is a particular form of political violence in the name of Islam that has attracted obvious attention on account of its spectacular nature. Because violent Islamists have resorted to terrorist tactics, they are often referred to and thought of exclusively as terrorists.<sup>2</sup> However, radical Islamists have also taken an active part in insurgencies: that is, a rebellion or civil war. The persistent confusion around these terms (terrorism, civil war, insurgency, and so on) has fed a tendency to subsume jihadi rebellions under the general umbrella of terrorism, or even to conflate the two as somehow equivalent or interchangeable. ISIS, for example, is considered a terrorist organization at the same time as it is engaged in an insurgency or civil war, in both Syria and Iraq. A parallel, though distinct, trend has been the inter-

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pretation of the violence undertaken by jihadi militants as uniformly “religious violence.”<sup>3</sup> However, while insurgent jihadi groups are clearly inspired by an ideology rooted in religion, they also act in ways that parallel those of nonreligious insurgent actors; their violence is often influenced by the context in which it unfolds and the influence of religion on it can be variable rather than constant.

In this essay, I decouple violent Islamism from both terrorism and religion. I am not arguing that Islamists cannot engage in terrorism or are not influenced by religion; rather, I contend that too much emphasis on terrorism and religion might conceal two critical aspects of contemporary violent jihadism: its emergence in the context of civil wars and its revolutionary dimension. Thus, I argue that jihadi groups can be approached as a particular species of insurgent actors in civil wars: namely, revolutionary insurgents. From this vantage point, they can be fruitfully compared with another well-known species of revolutionary actors, the Marxist rebels of the Cold War.

Planned and launched by Al Qaeda, the spectacular attacks against the United States in September 2001 were a watershed in the development and spread of a powerful conceptual linkage between jihadi Islamism, on the one hand, and transnational terrorism, on the other.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it can be argued that the terms *Islamic* and *terror* have become associated so strongly in mainstream political and media discourse that they have become fused in the collective consciousness of much of the Western world. However, terrorism is only one among many streams (or tactics) of violence deployed by various jihadi groups to achieve concrete political aims. Extending the term terrorism to encompass everything jihadi organizations do could perhaps be politically useful, but is very problematic from an analytical and empirical perspective.

When, in 2014, a jihadi group stemming from Syria and calling itself al-Dawla al-Islamiya fil Iraq wa al-Sham (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or more commonly ISIL, ISIS, or IS) invaded Iraq and conquered the city of Mosul along with large swaths of Iraqi territory, most observers were taken aback. The fact that this group proclaimed itself a state and sought to take over and rule territory was seen as puzzling by analysts used to dealing with the much more elusive, clandestine, and nonterritorially based Al Qaeda network. Their surprise was justified in great part by the rapidity of ISIS’s territorial push, but it nevertheless points to a key dimension of how terrorism is understood: namely, its nonterritoriality. Complicating things further, the sponsorship and/or organization of several major terrorist attacks in Western Europe, the United States, and elsewhere by ISIS suggests that territorial and nonterritorial strategies can coexist within a group’s diverse and variable repertoire of violence. Add to this mix the use of highly mediatized and shocking forms of violence (or “terror”) in the territories ruled by ISIS (such as the filmed beheadings of both foreign hostages and locals) and it is easy to understand why terrorism has emerged as a favorite descriptor of ISIS.

However, the interpretation of ISIS exclusively or primarily through the lens of terrorism comes with two significant drawbacks. First, it promotes a view of terrorism and insurgency as either totally overlapping (“ISIS is an insurgent group because it is a terrorist group”) or mutually exclusive (“ISIS cannot be compared to insurgent groups because it is a terrorist group”). In a way, this interpretation is both extremely expansive and extremely narrow; it reflects the manner in which the disciplinary fields of terrorism and civil war developed as distinct areas of inquiry. Second, this interpretation detracts from the study of ISIS and other ji-

hadi groups as insurgent (or territorial) groups and, therefore, excludes insights that can be gleaned when such groups are studied comparatively, either with each other or with non-jihadi insurgent groups.

Among the key insights of recent theorizing and research about political violence is an understanding of terrorism and insurgency as strategies that can be either complementary or independent. This perspective privileges an “actor-based” understanding of terrorism, according to which terrorist groups are seen to fully diverge from insurgent groups only when they lack the ability to occupy territory; in turn, this is the result of an extreme asymmetry of power between these groups and the state they oppose and seek to challenge. Put otherwise, when nonstate armed groups are too weak vis-à-vis the state they challenge, they may evolve into clandestine or underground organizations, lacking the ability to “liberate” and rule territory and focusing instead on the type of actions we associate with terrorism, such as bombings of soft targets and hostage-taking. Alternatively, stronger groups or those challenging more fragile states are likely to focus on the acquisition of territorial control where they can set up their own state apparatus.<sup>5</sup> Often, the same armed group might deploy both territorial and nonterritorial strategies simultaneously or successively; it may occupy territory where it is strong enough and act clandestinely (as a “terrorist group”) where it lacks such strength, either domestically or transnationally.<sup>6</sup> Once we adopt this perspective, we may qualify the association between jihadism and terrorism, which becomes a variable rather than a constant.

It follows, then, that the terms *insurgency* or *rebellion*, used here interchangeably, are expressions of a particular balance of power between an opposition armed group and the state it challenges, one that allows a sustained armed confrontation centered on the acquisition of territory and the up-

holding of territorial control.<sup>7</sup> When this armed confrontation crosses a conventional fatality threshold, it is designated in the scholarly literature as a *civil war*.<sup>8</sup>

It is now possible to proceed to the central question: how do jihadi groups involved in insurgencies, rebellions, or civil wars compare with non-jihadi rebel groups? This question calls for a final clarification: what exactly is a jihadi group?

*Jihadi Islamism* is a type of political “activism justified with primary reference to Islam.”<sup>9</sup> Islamism as a political movement should not be conflated with Islam as a religion. There is a clear distinction between the faith of Islam, on the one hand, and the “religionized politics of Islamism,” on the other; the latter employs religious symbols for political ends and, as such, constitutes a particular, narrow interpretation of Islam.<sup>10</sup> Simply put, “Islam is both a religious faith and a cultural system, but not a political ideology.”<sup>11</sup> Neither should Islamism or “political Islam” be conflated with its militant, extremist, radical, or violent versions.

Modern “militant” or “jihadi” Islamism is connected to Salafism, a religious revivalist ideology that promotes the organization of society and politics along pure religious lines and calls for a return of Islam to its roots – hence the relative popularity of the term “Islamic fundamentalism” among several Western commentators.<sup>12</sup> Salafism can be traced back to the writings of thinkers like Abu al-Ala Mawdudi (1903 – 1979), Hassan al-Banna (1906 – 1949), and especially Sayyid Qutb (1906 – 1966). It offers a comprehensive political alternative not just to liberal capitalism, but also to Western modernity altogether. Salafism fueled a wave of political activism that was initially harnessed by the Muslim Brotherhood, an Egyptian political movement founded in 1928 as a vanguard political party. Contemporary jihadi Islamism emerged in the context of the political turbulence

that characterized Egypt during the early 1980s, took off in Afghanistan in the midst of the resistance against the Soviet occupation, and acquired its global notoriety after the September 11 terrorist attacks against the United States.<sup>13</sup>

Salafism is not necessarily violent and can be apolitical.<sup>14</sup> It should, therefore, not be conflated with violent jihadism.<sup>15</sup> Salafi political parties such as Al-Nour (Party of the Light) in Egypt or the Reform Front in Tunisia have adopted a radical ideology about how society must be organized following the precepts of Islamic Sharia, but have opted, at least at times, for the peaceful pursuit of their political goals and the rejection of the use of violence, very much like Western European Communist Parties often paid lip service to the idea of a violent revolution while fully partaking in democratic politics. Hence the term jihadi refers to a subset of violent Salafists.

While it is possible to broadly paint the core ideological message of jihadi groups as radical, it is also the case that the specific contours of their ideology vary considerably. After all, the content of what an ideal “Islamic order” looks like is extensive enough to allow ample room for interpretation and creativity. For example, some of the early rebel groups that articulated an Islamist message, such as Darul Islam in Indonesia or the Taliban in Afghanistan, adopted an ultraconservative interpretation of Islam heavily indebted to local traditional practices; they lacked the kind of aggressive and expansionary radical discourse that came to characterize the most recent manifestation of jihadism, exemplified by Al Qaeda and ISIS. Some groups zigzag between radical and more moderate, largely in response to their political fortunes. For example, the Egyptian al-Gama’ al-Islamiyya at some point “reverted to a strategy of struggle against the ‘distant enemy’ (Israel), in the hope of broadening its base of support by attracting the sympathy of nation-

alists and people frustrated by the dead-end of the peace process.”<sup>16</sup> Other groups, in contrast, accentuate their radical credentials and seek to align themselves with more powerful groups elsewhere so as to gain international exposure: various groups across the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia aligned with ISIS after its military successes in 2014, most notably the Nigerian group Boko Haram.

To explore whether and how jihadi rebel groups differ (or not) from other rebel groups, I start by singling out rebel groups with jihadi features that have been active in all major civil wars, as noted in the relevant literature. The exercise yields a list of the most important groups to date (Table 1). By this count, thirty-nine jihadi rebel groups were involved in at least eighteen civil wars. This is a substantial number, both in absolute and relative terms, suggesting that the phenomenon is widespread.

In many ways, jihadi rebel groups come across as rather undistinctive when compared with other rebel groups. Ideology is a flexible political tool even for jihadi groups, and it is common for them to tailor their ideological messages to the particular circumstances they find themselves in. Despite their utopian claims, including the creation of a caliphate and the abolition of national boundaries, they often rely on nationalist and particularistic messages tailored to win popular support. Drawing from anticolonialist discourse, they typically castigate established elites as insufficiently patriotic (“apostate” in their parlance) and paint them as ineffective and corrupt. They sometimes latch onto a secessionist agenda, especially in countries with non-Muslim majorities, and can adopt the demands of a particular segment of society, often on a sectarian basis (such as the Sunni populations of Iraq and Syria). Tactical alliances with politically disenfranchised groups, such as former Ba’ath officials in Iraq, are not uncommon either.

*Jihadi Rebels in Civil War* Table 1: Jihadi Groups in Major Civil Wars

Insurgent Group	Country
Hizb-i Islami-yi Afghanistan	Afghanistan
Taliban	Afghanistan
Haqqani Network	Afghanistan
Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA)	Algeria
Takfir wa'l Hijra	Algeria
Armée Islamique du Salut (AIS)	Algeria
Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO)	Algeria
AQIM	Algeria/Mali
Bosnian mujahideen	Bosnia
Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya	Egypt
Wilayat Sinai	Egypt
Egyptian Islamic Jihad	Egypt
Darul Islam	Indonesia
Jemaah Islamiya	Indonesia
Jundallah	Iran
Ansar al-Islam	Iraq
Reformation and Jihad Front (RJF)	Iraq
ISIS	Iraq/Syria
Al-Mahdi Army (Jaysh al-Mahdi)	Iraq
Ansar al-Sharia	Libya
Libya Dawn	Libya
Al-Murabitun (merger of MUJAO and Al-Mulathameen)	Mali
Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO)	Mali
Ansar Dine	Mali
Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (Boko Haram)	Nigeria
Lashkar-e-Islam	Pakistan
Jamaat-ul-Ahrar	Pakistan
Lashkar-e-Jhangvi	Pakistan
Ansaar ul-Islam	Pakistan
Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan	Pakistan
Abu Sayyaf Group	Philippines
Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters	Philippines
Imarat Kavkaz (Caucasus Emirate)	Russia
Al Shabaab	Somalia
Hizbul Islam	Somalia
Al-Itihaad al-Islamiya (AIAI)/Islamic Courts Union	Somalia/Ethiopia (Ogaden)
Jabhat al-Nusra li al-Sham	Syria
Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (in Tajikistan: Forces of Mullo Abdullo)	Uzbekistan/Tajikistan/Kyrgyzstan
Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula	Yemen



As is the case with most rebel organizations, the creation and evolution of jihadi groups is strongly influenced by a small core of activists (a “revolutionary vanguard” in Leninist terms) who are able to set up strong organizational foundations while operating under clandestine conditions. Often, these individuals are intellectuals whose political careers span a variety of trajectories before they decide to undertake armed action. Unlike the leaders of rebel groups who are motivated primarily and purely by the capture of power for its own sake or the predation and looting of natural resources, the leaders of jihadi groups appear to be driven by strong ideological concerns. And like many other rebel organizations, jihadi groups take advantage of safe havens in neighboring countries where possible, and have benefited from their own governments’ ill-designed counter-insurgent measures, which often result in indiscriminate violence against civilians.

The Egyptian group al-Gama’al-Islamiyya provides an example of how a jihadi group can emerge and evolve. It got its start in Egyptian universities during the 1970s, growing out of student reading clubs. The permission accorded by the Egyptian government to the Muslim Brotherhood to be active on university campuses facilitated the activity of these clubs. Soon after, these students formed a group called al-Jama’al-Diniya (The Religious Group). By the mid-1970s, this group had expanded nationally, forming a nation-wide council with a well-defined, underlying organizational structure; at the same time, it remained ideologically heterogeneous and quite decentralized. The Muslim Brotherhood tried to use the group as a recruiting ground, but was not very successful; however, out of this experience grew the idea of establishing a new Islamist group, which would end up evolving into the highly centralized al-Gama’al-Islamiyya. This group

further consolidated during the post-Sadat assassination crackdown and the incarceration of several of its most active members, who were exposed to other Islamist factions in prison. Hardened by their prison experience and inspired by the writings of Sayyid Qutb, they internalized the core Salafist precepts and gradually moved toward sustained violent action, using a variety of tactics that included spectacular terrorist attacks, often against foreign tourists, as well as an insurgency, centered in Upper Egypt, which was eventually defeated by a violent counterinsurgency campaign.<sup>17</sup>

When it comes to the interpretation of jihadism as unique or exceptional, a lot rides on descriptions of gruesome acts of violence, which have acquired unprecedented prominence through the technological revolution brought by the emergence of the Internet and social media.<sup>18</sup> Without questioning the horror of that violence, it is still important to stress that there is nothing uniquely Islamic (or even jihadist) about such violence. Similar practices have been used by a variety of insurgent (and also incumbent) actors in civil wars. Likewise, terrorism is not exclusive to jihadi groups. In fact, the repertoire of violence varies considerably across rebel groups and among jihadi groups. Perhaps one type of violence that has characterized these groups is the widespread use of suicide missions; yet even this is hardly a jihadi exclusivity.<sup>19</sup>

To say that jihadi rebel groups are not exceptional across all these dimensions is not to deny the fact that they share several features that set them apart from other rebel groups. One is a geographic distinctiveness. Jihadi rebel groups operate in the Muslim world, primarily the Middle East and North Africa region as well as Central Asia, though they range as far as the Pacific Ocean, to Indonesia and the Philippines. The reason is that, unlike jihadist groups that operate clandestinely and specialize in transnational terror, rebel groups must be root-

ed in a population that is at least, in theory, sympathetic to them. There is also temporal distinctiveness: jihadi groups have become a key actor in civil wars only following the end of the Cold War. Indeed, ISIS is neither an isolated nor a very recent phenomenon. It is, rather, the latest manifestation of the rise of jihadism in the post-Cold War world. Without minimizing the diversity of these groups and without imposing an artificial or outright false organizational unity on what is a highly varied and fractious political and social movement, it is nevertheless possible to speak of a global or transnational jihadi movement.<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21</sup> Transnational ties between different groups were already present in the 1980s and 1990s, but have since grown exponentially. Jihadi activists travel from country to country in search of training and a cause to fight for. The phenomenon of foreign fighters joining ISIS in Syria is but the latest testimony to this feature.<sup>22</sup> In this respect, it is worth pointing out that Afghanistan provided the initial trigger (the key figure was Abdullah Yusuf Azzam, from the town of Jenin in the West Bank), and that Bosnia followed. According to some estimates, as many as four thousand jihadists went to Bosnia to fight, most of them hailing from Saudi Arabia or other countries of the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>23</sup>

In turn, the transnational dimension of jihadi groups points to a key feature of jihadism: its revolutionary nature.<sup>24</sup> As such, it makes a lot of sense to think of jihadi rebel groups as parts of a global, revolutionary wave. This is precisely where an exclusive focus on matters of religion and faith can prove restrictive insofar as it might point us to less than productive comparisons. Indeed, jihadi rebel groups share many similarities with their pre-

decessor in the history of transnational revolutionary movements: namely, the Marxist rebel groups of the Cold War era. Conversely, they should be distinguished from another prominent strand of civil wars, the highly disorganized, natural-resource-driven conflicts lacking any discernible ideological agenda and taking place in “bottom billion” countries.<sup>25</sup>

The Marxist insurgencies of the Cold War era can be characterized as “robust insurgencies,” in the sense that they were particularly well-suited to the demands of a type of asymmetric form of warfare, typically described as guerrilla warfare, in which the regime in place has a pronounced military advantage.<sup>26</sup> How exactly were they “robust?” In spite of considerable variation, Marxist insurgencies were characterized by common features across three dimensions: external support, beliefs, and doctrine.

First, as is well-known, the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, and their allies provided extensive material assistance to Marxist rebels, training them, sending advisors, and providing financial and military support. That was not all, however. The external support enjoyed by many (but not all) Marxist insurgencies included the role of a large, transnational social movement whose extensive network of leaders, agitators, activists, and fighters met, exchanged information, trained, and often fought in each other’s wars.

Second, this transnational network fed on and, in turn, propagated a set of revolutionary beliefs that were consequential in at least three ways. First, these beliefs were rooted in an understanding of the world that posited a credible alternative to liberal capitalism, and thus made possible the emergence and perpetuation of a political and social constellation of activities and organizations that was predicated on making this alternative a reality. This understanding of the world inspired millions of people

across the world and acted as a focal point for the coordination of individuals harboring it. When it came crashing down in 1989, it contributed to the end of the organizations that were associated with it. Second, these beliefs were important as sources of motivation for the crucial “first movers,” those individuals willing to undertake high levels of risk in collective action processes whose outcome was uncertain and who often underwent enormous suffering for their cause. They also informed a large number of activists or “cadres” who acted, if not selflessly, at least in a self-disciplined and highly motivated manner, allowing their actions to have more far-reaching consequences than would otherwise be possible. Lastly, these beliefs pointed to armed (or violent) action as a likely way to bring about political change. The examples of Cuba or Vietnam loomed large and bespoke the real possibility of bringing about revolution through military action.

The third component of robust insurgency was its distinctive military doctrine. In its simplest formulation, “revolutionary war” was seen as the optimal political method that would translate the desire for revolutionary change into its actual implementation. It was guerrilla warfare, correctly waged, rather than nonviolent contentious action or other forms of violent activity, that would produce the desired outcome. Yet guerrilla warfare was never a simple matter of warfare. Instead, it required the effective administration of “liberated territory” and the mass mobilization and sustained indoctrination of its population. Only in this way could a weaker military force hope to prevail.

This capsule description of Marxist rebels provides a template for their comparison with jihadi rebel groups. The parallels are striking, as are some crucial differences.<sup>27</sup> Clearly, it is impossible to understate the power of beliefs in the case of the jihadis. These beliefs are expressed in a variety of

documents and publications, but they also take the form of a broad range of cultural practices from poetry and music to film.<sup>28</sup> Ideology is, in other words, central to the jihadi identity, which is not to say that other motivations do not exist alongside it, from opportunism to shady criminal activities.<sup>29</sup> In fact, the collapse of Marxism as the main alternative to liberal capitalism appears to have left a gaping hole in the world of alternative ideological possibilities that Islamists have effectively exploited in the Muslim world and in Muslim enclaves in the Western world. Certainly, the widespread disillusionment caused by the failure of both Arab nationalism and socialism gave a decisive push to the rise of jihadism in the Middle East, while the material and psychological frustrations of the Muslim immigrant workers’ offspring in the West were later grafted onto this movement. This striking discontinuity has been particularly visible in the way Marxist-inspired groups such as the Palestinian Liberation Organization have been superseded by Islamist groups such as Hamas. Seen from this perspective, jihadism has become a kind of ideological focal point around which all kinds of discontented and/or marginalized elements – primarily “ascriptive” Muslims, but also converts to Islam – have coordinated. To use political scientist Olivier Roy’s apt expression, jihadism represents the Islamization of radicalism rather than (just) the radicalization of Islam.<sup>30</sup>

Without a focus on revolutionary beliefs it would be hard to make sense of the ability of jihadi rebel groups to mobilize thousands of motivated cadres, the absence of which the growth of groups such as ISIS or the construction of extensive state-like apparatuses in areas controlled by jihadi insurgents would have been impossible. These “quasi-states” or “proto-states” share many features with those built by Marxist rebels: they tend to be intensely ideological, internationalist, and expansive. Their rulers de-



vote significant resources to often effective, if harsh, governance.<sup>31</sup> In both instances, the impact of such practices can be double-edged. On the one hand, these revolutionary state-builders are able to supply public goods to the population they rule, which makes them potentially attractive to them. On the other hand, their rule is often highly interventionist, clashes with established local norms and practices, including (or especially) religiously conservative ones, and generates considerable popular opposition and resentment. In turn, this often leads to the emergence of grassroots dissident activity that can easily be harnessed by counterinsurgents to devastating effect. This was most obviously the case in Iraq, where the rise of the so-called Iraqi Awakening – Sunni tribal militias fed by local discontent with jihadi rule – led to the defeat of Al Qaeda in Iraq, but also appeared elsewhere, such as in Bosnia.<sup>32</sup>

A crucial difference between jihadi and Marxist rebels when it comes to the transnational dimension they share is the absence of external state sponsorship, including superpower sponsorship, for the former. One possible analogy for ISIS would be the Chinese Communist rebels of the interwar period who, despite occasional Soviet support, had to improvise on their own, or the Maoist rebels of the Shining Path who operated in Peru in the 1980s and early 1990s. Ideologically purist, extremely violent, and ruthless (but highly personalistic and isolated), the Shining Path was nevertheless able to face off the much stronger Peruvian state and was effectively defeated only after a long and costly counterinsurgency campaign.

The absence of external state sponsorship could well turn out to be the greatest weakness of jihadi rebel groups. It is telling that their overall record in the wars in which they are involved is dismal; their peak was probably the Taliban victory against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, and even that was won only with the direct

and pronounced backing of Pakistan. Likewise, ISIS's conquest of Mosul that stunned the world proved short-lived and its Syrian conquest has been all but reversed. In fact, something that stands out from the Marxist insurgent experience is that, despite many features that generally turned them into "high-quality" rebels, they were defeated much more often than they won victories. To put it differently, Che Guevara in Bolivia was a much more common occurrence than Che Guevara in Cuba.<sup>33</sup> There are a number of reasons why this was the case. As already pointed out, Marxist groups often alienated the local population by imposing local regimes that were too radical. Their ability to pose a credible threat against the states they fought elicited a superior counterinsurgent effort, often with considerable external support, thus leading to their defeat. This feature may explain not only the high rate of defeats experienced by Marxist groups, but also the fact that the conflicts in which they were engaged were less likely to be settled through negotiations and peacekeeping compared with other civil wars.<sup>34</sup> It is possible to surmise then that civil wars entailing jihadi groups are much less likely to be settled via negotiations and require the type of extensive peacekeeping operations that have become almost the norm in most civil wars.<sup>35</sup> In a different formulation, this comparison suggests that the military defeat of the rebels appears the most likely outcome in civil wars involving jihadi rebels.

This essay suggests that, for all the publicity surrounding them, jihadi rebels might, in the end, represent less of a threat to their opponents in civil war contexts than their older, Marxist counterparts. Indeed, on top of its lack of a powerful external sponsor, the threat posed by ISIS has mobilized a powerful international response against it. As a result, ISIS is presently on the retreat, primarily in Iraq but also in Syria. Its military defeat appears to be a matter of time.

What shall we expect if this turns out to be the case? A likely outcome is that jihadism might revert once more into a deterritorialized, clandestine network relying on transnational terrorism, a strategy that can be spectacular but tends to be much less effective at achieving tangible political goals than armed rebellion. However, as past experience suggests, the failure of many regimes in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia to respond to their citizens' expectations may, once more, create the con-

ditions for the rise of a renewed revolutionary challenge in the form of civil war. In this context, it might make sense to reflect on the dangerous implications of blocking any avenue of peaceful political mobilization for Islamists.<sup>36</sup> In its combination of a strong Salafi ideological legacy, a poorly performing authoritarian regime, and the absence of peaceful options for Islamist parties, Egypt might become once more a plausible candidate for the emergence of violent jihadi activity in the near future.

#### ENDNOTES

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- <sup>4</sup> National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011).
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- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting," *American Political Science Review* 107 (1) (2013).
- <sup>10</sup> Bassam Tibi, *Islamism and Islam* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012), 7.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.
- <sup>12</sup> Jihadists are almost always Salafi Sunnis; however, most Salafi Sunnis are not jihadists. See Quintan Wiktorowicz, "The Salafi Movement: Violence and Fragmentation of Community," in *Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop*, ed. Miriam Cooke and Bruce B. Lawrence (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

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- <sup>17</sup> Tal'at Fu'ad Qasim, Hisham Mubarak, Souhail Shadoud, and Steve Tamari, "What Does the Gama'a Islamiyya Want? An Interview with Tal'at Fu'ad Qasim," *Middle East Report* 198 (1996): 40; and Omar Ashour, *The De-Radicalization of Jihadists: Transforming Armed Islamist Movements* (London: Routledge, 2009), 45–50.
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- <sup>23</sup> Keppel, *Jihad*, 249.
- <sup>24</sup> Mitchell, "The Contradictory Effects of Ideology on Jihadist War-Fighting," 810.
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- <sup>32</sup> Mitchell, "The Contradictory Effects of Ideology on Jihadist War-Fighting," 808–809.
- <sup>33</sup> Laia Balcells and Stathis N. Kalyvas, "Revolutionary Rebels and the 'Marxist Paradox,'" unpublished paper.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> See James D. Fearon, "Civil War & the Current International System," *Dædalus* 146 (4) (Fall 2017). This would be a way to interpret the absence of negotiated settlements involving jihadi rebels that diverges from Fazal's point about religious inspiration as a source of unwillingness to negotiate: Marxist rebels were not "religionist." See Fazal, "Religionist Rebels & the Sovereignty of the Divine."

<sup>36</sup> Stathis N. Kalyvas, "Commitment Problems in Emerging Democracies: The Case of Religious Parties," *Comparative Politics* 32 (4) (2000).