How Transnational is "Transnational"? Foreign Fighter Recruitment and Transnational Operations among Affiliates of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State

by Dino Krause

Abstract

To this date, there are no instances of peace agreements signed by armed groups affiliated with al-Qaeda or the Islamic State (IS). Previous research has highlighted their transnational demands and their integration into a transnational organization as major obstacles. Yet, these groups are also deeply embedded within local conflict configurations. This article 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 in the period 2018–2020 reveals substantial variation regarding both variables. The results should 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.

Keywords: al-Qaeda, foreign fighters, Islamic State, jihadism, peace agreements

Introduction

Since the emergence of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State as transnational jihadist organizations, there have not been peace agreements with any of their various affiliate groups around the world. Moreover, even the onset of peace negotiations is significantly less likely, once an Islamist group formulates transnational aspirations, which is the case for all al-Qaeda and IS-affiliated groups.[1] The lack of negotiations with these groups is particularly problematic, as the transnationalization of armed conflicts tends to aggravate the use of destructive tactics, indiscriminate targeting, and overall contributes to more protracted conflicts.[2] In 2020, half of the world's twenty most intensive state-based armed conflicts involved al-Qaeda or IS-affiliated rebel groups.[3]

While negotiations with these groups may appear as a far-fetched scenario at first sight, al-Qaeda's Sahelian affiliate *Jamaʿat nusrat al-islam wal-muslimin* (JNIM) has voiced its willingness to open peace negotiations, should France retreat its military forces from the region.[4] Already in 2010, A.K. Cronin noted that while negotiations with al-Qaeda's core organization were unrealistic, this would not necessarily be the case with respect to its affiliate groups.[5] As regards IS-affiliated groups, negotiations with governments have taken place, but thus far only over more limited issues such as humanitarian aid, or hostage releases.[6] IS has accused its rivals from al-Qaeda of 'apostasy' due to the latter's alleged willingness to negotiate with governments.[7] At least in the near future, it is thus unlikely that an IS-affiliated group would enter peace negotiations with a government, as this would directly contradict its own narrative. However, does this mean that this will prevent all IS-affiliated groups from entering negotiations in the future? In 2016, al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate (HTS) broke away from the central organization, seeking to present itself as a less radical actor open for negotiations.[8] As IS's network of affiliate groups operate in a highly divergent set of conflicts, it is reasonable to pose the question whether some of these groups may undergo similar processes in the future.

In previous research, the lack of negotiations with jihadist affiliate groups has been explained through their transnational organizational setup and the far-ranging transnational goals. However, transnationalization is a multifaceted concept, comprising not only organizational affiliation and ideology, but also operational and recruitment-related aspects. To explore the prospects of future peace negotiations with these groups, this article provides an analysis of the degree of affiliate groups' transnational operations and transnational recruitment.

Previous Research

Previous research within the field of religion and conflict has shown how in so-called "cosmic wars", extra-worldly rewards can affect the decision-making calculus of the involved rebels, thereby decreasing the perceived value of laying down arms and reintegrating into society.[9] Other studies highlight the indivisibility of sacred spaces and other religiously defined incompatibilities, and the resulting difficulty to enter negotiations.[10] While these arguments are formulated with regards to religious conflicts as such, recent research on the subcategory of *Islamist* conflicts reveals a more nuanced picture: whereas nationally focused Islamist insurgencies appear to be neither more nor less likely to enter negotiations than other types of armed conflict, those in which the non-state party formulated transnational Islamist aspirations are significantly less likely to see the onset of peace negotiations.[11] As regards the involved governments, one major obstacle lies in the high audience costs faced by incumbent leaders, should they enter negotiations with an al-Qaeda or IS-affiliated group. The problem with audience costs is not restricted to jihadist affiliate groups but has rather been raised with respect to terrorist groups in general.[12] Still, it is likely to be particularly relevant in the case of affiliate groups, not least because the latter are perceived as *transnational* security threats, which may thus imply additional opposition against negotiations from the incumbent governments' international partners.[13]

But even if governments *are* willing to negotiate, how realistic are such endeavors with jihadist affiliate groups? To explain the lack of negotiations with these groups, it has been argued that their far-ranging, transnational demands diminish the bargaining space between the government and the rebel-side.[14] Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how an armed group would agree to lay down arms, while it views itself as part of a divine struggle for the creation of a global caliphate. Still, this argument may not reveal the full picture. A recent study of negotiations between the Nigerian government and Boko Haram found that even though the group transformed over time from a locally focused insurgency toward one that was closely aligned with the transnational Salafi-jihadi movement, "[a]t the heart of the conflict were still the same or similar type of grievances, and the sub-regional and global ties appeared more tactical and symbolic than substantial."[15] This relates to an ongoing scholarly debate over the centrality of transnational jihadist aspirations as driving factors of al-Qaeda or IS-affiliated rebel groups when compared to locally rooted ethnic, economic, or political grievances.[16] Scholars have emphasized that Islamist groups may join transnational organizations primarily out of tactical considerations.[17] Such cases have been described as "instrumental" coalitions between local and transnational actors.[18] Some have even argued that "extremist" ideology as such is employed by rebel leaders in a purely instrumental fashion, in order to signal strength and boost their reputation.[19] Rather than engaging in these sometimes polarized 'local vs. transnational' debates, other studies have identified a combination of local conflict drivers interacting with transnational influences, and nonreligious factors interacting with religious considerations, resulting in a mix labeled "glocal jihad".[20]

What appears certain is that there is at least some variation with regards to the centrality of transnational religious aspirations for different jihadist affiliate groups. It is thus unlikely that this factor alone could explain the lack of negotiations with these groups. Moreover, transnationalization is a multifaceted concept and groups affiliated with al-Qaeda or IS can become 'transnationalized' on different levels. To explore avenues for future conflict resolution, it is held here that more attention should be paid to how these groups actually function on the ground.

This article seeks to make two contributions to existing research. First, on a conceptual level, by applying Harpviken's framework of transnationalization to a wider sample of jihadist affiliate groups, it provides an avenue for future research for how to disaggregate this actor type.[21] In doing so, it speaks to a growing literature that has sought to move beyond the, sometimes simplistic, 'far vs. near enemy' debates regarding transnational jihadism.[22]. While the underlying motivation of this study is to explore prospects for conflict resolution, the applied framework is also well suited to explore other types of outcomes in conflicts with affiliate groups. Second, on an empirical level, this article provides new data on the transnational operations and transnational recruitment of a sample of twenty jihadist groups affiliated to al-Qaeda or IS.

Transnational Operations, Recruitment, and the Prospects for Conflict Resolution

In his study of the Afghan Taliban's links to al-Qaeda, Harpviken presents a conceptual framework through which to explore transnationalization, which he defines as "the process by which non-state groups integrate with transnational actors."[23] He investigates transnationalization along four dimensions: organization (1), resource mobilization (2), tactical repertoire (3), and ideological framing (4). As regards ideological framing, despite differences between al-Qaeda and IS, the cross-case variation along this variable is limited, as their affiliate groups all subscribe to a *transnational* jihadist agenda. With respect to resource mobilization, there is a lack of data that would allow to draw meaningful conclusions, for instance about financial flows from al-Qaeda or IS toward their affiliates. Therefore, the focus in this study is on Harpviken's categories of tactical repertoire (1) and organization (2). Regarding tactical repertoire, the article explores to what extent affiliate groups themselves carry out attacks across national borders, that is, engage in 'transnational operations'. As regards organization, the focus is on the issue of 'transnational recruitment', that is, the presence of foreign fighters within different affiliate groups. This leads to the question how these two dimensions of transnationalization—operations and recruitment—affect the prospects of conflict resolution.

First, conflicts in which insurgents operate across national borders are characterized by a particular combination of military advantages for the rebels, and an "information-poor bargaining environment" regarding the rebels' true capabilities.[24] The ability of rebels to evade state repression by slipping across the border into a neighboring state constitutes a military advantage, as states are typically constrained in their ability to conduct counterinsurgency operations beyond their own territory.[25] Rebels with this advantage should thus be less likely to end up in what Zartman has coined a "mutually hurting stalemate", a necessary condition for the onset of peace negotiations.[26] At the same time, there is an information problem, as states lack the ability to surveil and monitor the rebels' operations, with intelligence-gathering being more difficult abroad than domestically, thereby increasing the risk of bargaining failure.[27] To draw the focus back to jihadist affiliates, it appears thus reasonable to expect fewer obstacles for negotiations with groups that only operate within a single state. While it has been noted that Salafi-jihadist insurgent groups "often operate regionally and internationally", this aspect has, to the date, not been examined systematically.[28]

Similar to the argument regarding transnational operations, foreign fighters provide rebel groups with potential military advantages. They typically constitute dedicated combatants that often fight until their death. [29] While some may constitute experienced and highly skilled fighters, others may be used as suicide bombers, precisely due to their lack of experience. Still, both types of foreign fighters can be useful for jihadist affiliate groups.[30] Moreover, the availability of transnational recruitment networks lowers the costs of fighting for the rebels, as the transnational constituency does not incur the same costs as the local population.[31] While these dynamics should strengthen the rebel group, the local population may however reject the foreign fighters due to their perception as being alien to the local context, or because of their more brutal behavior vis-à-vis civilians.[32] If this is the case, a loss of public support may lead to internal group divisions, which previous research has found to be associated with higher levels of anti-civilian violence, more lengthy conflicts and reduced prospects for negotiations.[33] In both scenarios, foreign fighters would thus provide an obstacle to conflict resolution, albeit in different ways. Lastly, similar as with transnational operations, foreign fighter recruitment increases the uncertainty that states have about the rebels' capabilities, thus increasing the risk of bargaining failure.[34] Against this backdrop, it appears reasonable to assume fewer obstacles for negotiations with jihadist affiliate groups that employ lower numbers of foreign fighters.

It must be noted that this explorative study does not seek to, and cannot, empirically test the assumed association between transnationalization and the prospects for conflict resolution with jihadist affiliate groups. This is due to the lack of real-world examples of peace negotiations with al-Qaeda- or IS-affiliated groups. Rather, the goal of the analysis is to assess the transnationalization of these groups, building on the assumption that the two dimensions discussed here should play a role when it comes to the identification of those groups which may potentially be available for future peace negotiations.

Defining a Sample of Jihadist Affiliate Groups

In the following, jihadist affiliate groups are defined in line with Melander et al., based on whether an armed group has made a formal pledge of allegiance to the core leadership of al-Qaeda or IS, and whether the latter has formally accepted that pledge of allegiance.[35] The main part of the sample was constructed based on an analysis of all 'Islamist' armed groups listed in the Religion and Armed Conflict (RELAC) dataset. However, the RELAC is limited to state-based armed conflict, yet some affiliate groups have not been involved in state-based violence, but rather only in non-state conflict or in one-sided violence against civilians. To capture these groups as well, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program's (UCDP) Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED) was screened, which led to the inclusion of several additional groups.[36] Furthermore, the time period is restricted to 2018–2020. The main reason is that by adopting a broader time frame, foreign fighter recruitment would have to be measured over an extended period. This would complicate the data-gathering process as several groups have shifted their recruitment strategies over time. Still, regarding transnational operations, Figure 2 and Table 3 in the Appendix present findings obtained through a sample covering an extended time frame (2001–2020). Moreover, regarding the second factor—foreign fighter recruitment—comments were added for those groups that underwent major changes in their recruitment strategy, such as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and al-Shabaab.

Because this article focuses on *affiliated* rebel groups, the two core groups, the remnants of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and al-Qaeda's core based in Afghanistan and Pakistan, are excluded from the sample. One challenge consists in matching the actors listed as 'IS' by the UCDP, with IS's designated 'provinces' (*wilayat*). The reason is that the GED does not specify to which IS province a certain event belongs. In its heydays (2014–2017), IS's province-structure was highly disaggregated. For instance, in Libya alone, it declared three such provinces in 2014.[37] After the loss of its caliphate in 2018, the organization restructured its global network and adopted a less localized and more country-oriented province-structure.[38] Given the time frame of the present study (2018–2020), this post-2018 IS province structure to define an IS-affiliated group, is followed, albeit with some adjustments.

First, IS treats its Greater Saharan branch (ISGS) as a constituent part of its West Africa Province (ISWAP). However, ISGS and the other core part of ISWAP, which has its stronghold in northeastern Nigeria and originally became known under the name Boko Haram, not only share distinct organizational histories, but also operate autonomously and in distinct areas.[39] Here these groups are studied separately from each other. The same approach is used for IS's affiliate groups in Mozambique and in the DR Congo, which are fighting under the common banner of Islamic State's Central Africa Province (ISCAP), but remain largely autonomous actors.[40]

Contrary to these cases, IS has disaggregated its province-structure in Pakistan and India, where it designated two new provinces in 2019. Formerly, these groups' activities had been claimed under the common banner of its Khorasan Province (ISKP).[41] However, despite a few major attacks claimed by its Pakistan Province in the following months, the designation was temporarily abandoned at a later stage, only to reappear in a recent claim for an attack in Rawalpindi.[42] Such inconsistencies, and the fact that these provinces were previously subsumed under ISKP, suggest that their designation may have served tactical purposes, rather than representing more autonomous groups. Against this backdrop, the analysis focuses on ISKP and does not study the other two provinces as separate actors.

Some of the post-2018 IS-provinces are not included in the analysis due to a lack of activity. First, its Turkey Province was only publicly mentioned by IS in 2019.[43] However, the GED does not list any activity linked to IS in Turkey in the period 2018–2020. No events are further recorded during 2018–2020 for the remaining IS-provinces, namely in Saudi-Arabia (Najd Province and Hijaz Province) and in Bahrain.

Lastly, the IS-affiliated group in Sri Lanka, which carried out the so-called 'Easter bombings' in 2019, stands out from the other groups, as it was not formally designated as an IS province by the organization. Still, given the group's pledge of allegiance to IS and its acknowledgment by then IS-leader al-Baghdadi, it is included in the analysis.[44]

Transnational Operations

The following Figure 1 provides an overview of all al-Qaeda- and IS-affiliated rebel groups that, between 2018 and 2020, were involved in one of the following types of organized violence, within a single calendar year, in more than one country: a) state-based internal armed conflict; b) non-state conflict against another rebel group; c) one-sided violence against civilians. The colored dots correspond to individual events listed in the GED.

Figure 1: Transnationally Operating Affiliate Groups, 2018–2020
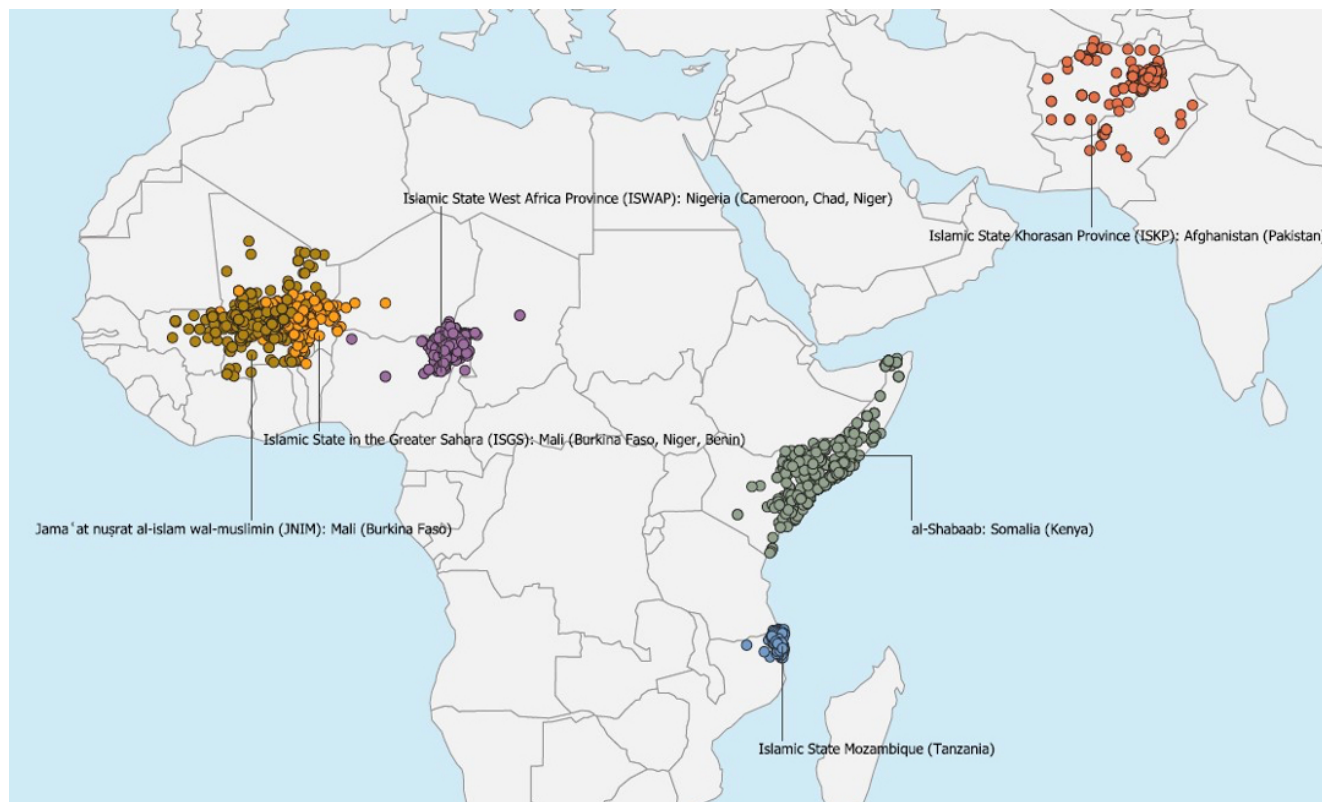
Note: Countries with second-highest and lower numbers of events are listed in brackets

Only six of the 20 affiliate groups active during the last three years operated in at least two countries within the same calendar year. Figure 2 in the Appendix illustrates that four other groups that once operated transnationally are by now confined to a single country or have become fully inactive. The latter is the case with regards to IS's Najd Province in Saudi-Arabia, which was active in 2015 and 2016 and, next to its operations in Saudi-Arabia, claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing in Kuwait in May 2015. Other previously transnationally operating groups are still active but confined to single countries. This applies to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which was active in various Northern and Western African countries, but is today confined to Algeria, after its southern factions merged with different Sahelian insurgent groups to form JNIM. IS's Libyan province had previously been able to extend its reach into neighboring Tunisia, where it orchestrated a string of attacks throughout 2016. However, in the following years, the group became constrained to Libya, where it has since faced increasing pressure from various military opponents. Similarly, HTS (which renounced its allegiance to al-Qaeda in 2016) is today only active in Syria's Idlib province after it ceased its previous operations on Lebanese soil in 2017. Among the transnationally operating groups displayed in Figure 1, Islamic State in Mozambique presents an exception insofar as its activities in Tanzania have consisted of a few isolated attacks, whereas the other transnationally operating groups have established a more consolidated presence in several countries, indicated through higher numbers of attacks.

Table 1: Non-transnationally Operating Affiliate Groups, 2018–2020

Group Name	Country	Years with Activity (based on UCDP)
AQAP	Yemen	Since 2009
AQIM	Algeria (previously also Burkina Faso, Chad, Ivory Coast, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Tunisia)	Since 2007 as 'AQIM'
Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly al-Nusra Front, today Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-HTS)	Syria (previously also Lebanon)	Since 2012
Hurras al-Din	Syria	Since 2018 (largely inactive today)
Islamic State Algeria	Algeria	2014–2020 (largely inactive today)
Islamic State Bangladesh	Bangladesh	2015–2020 (largely inactive today)
Islamic State Caucasus	Russia	Since 2014
Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP); DR Congo	DR Congo	Since 2019 (previously operating as 'Allied Democratic Forces' since 1996)
Islamic State Libya	Libya (previously also Tunisia)	Since 2014
Islamic State Philippines (East Asia Province)	Philippines	Since 2016
Islamic State Sinai	Egypt	Since 2014
Islamic State Somalia	Somalia	Since 2018
Islamic State Sri Lanka	Sri Lanka	2019 (no activity after 2019 'Easter bombings')
Islamic State Yemen	Yemen	Since 2014

Notes: 1) While the Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED) does not list transnational attacks for IS Sinai, the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) lists three incidents (2015–2017) where IS Sinai fired rockets into Israeli territory. However, this would not meet the criterion of operational transnationalization, as these attacks were still carried out from Egyptian territory; 2) the GTD further attributes a suicide bombing in Saudi-Arabia, as well as the Charlie Hebdo attack (both in 2015) and the shooting at a US Naval Air Base in Pensacola (2019) to AQAP, as the group claimed responsibility. None of these attacks are, however, listed in the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) data, possibly due to a lack of direct links between attackers and AQAP at the time of coding (aside from the claim of responsibility); 3) The GTD lists Jabha East Africa (IS Somalia) as responsible for an attack against a mosque in Mwanza (Tanzania) in 2016, but there have been conflicting reports in this regard.[45] Similarly, the GTD attributes a stabbing incident outside the US Embassy in Nairobi to the group, but the event description is rather speculative ("however, sources also suspected that Al-Shabaab may have been involved in the attack").[46]

Transnational Recruitment

Hegghammer defines foreign fighters as combatants who are noncitizens of the state in which they are fighting and who lack kinship ties to the respective armed groups.[47] In a similar vein, Chu and Braithwaite take the issue of "proximity, whether social or geographic" into account, distinguishing foreign fighters from neighboring states from those traveling greater distances, and those sharing the same ethnicity as the local combatants from those who do not. [48] In the following analysis, foreign fighters are defined as combatants lacking the citizenship of the country in which they operate. To take the aspect of proximity into account, information on fighters from neighboring countries has been separated from information on combatants coming from third countries. While it would be desirable to also examine co-ethnicity more systematically, there are data limitation issues, as the information regarding the ethnic identity of foreign fighters varies greatly between groups. Still, comments have been added if indications for systematic recruitment of co-ethnic foreign fighters were available.

Before presenting the results, some caveats must be raised. To begin with, information about foreign fighters was gathered through a variety of sources (and in different languages), including online newspaper articles, policy reports, peer-reviewed studies, and in some cases, the jihadists' own propaganda outputs. This

Table 2: Affiliate Groups and Recruitment of Foreign Fighters

Group name	Numerical estimate of foreigners	Foreign fighters from non-neighboring countries	Foreign fighters from neighboring countries
Hurras al-Din [50]	In 2019, about half of the group's 1,500–2,000 fighters estimated to be foreigners	Fighters from Europe (Germany, France, UK), North America (US), North Africa and Gulf region (Saudi-Arabia), amongst others	Fighters from various neighboring countries, especially Jordan and Turkey
ISCAP (Democratic Republic of Congo/DRC) [51]	No recent numbers available	Fighters from East- and Southeast Africa (Kenya, Mozambique, Somalia, South Africa)	Fighters from Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda
ISCAP (Mozambique) [52]	In April 2021, number of foreigners estimated "in the low hundreds" [53]	Small contingent of Ugandans; one case of a Somali fighter reported	Between May 2017–March 2018, 52 Tanzanians were prosecuted in Mozambique for links with the group; cases of South African fighters reported as well
IS Libya [54]	Hundreds of foreigners have fought with IS in Libya, but it is unclear how many remain active	Several dozen fighters from West- and East-African countries, Arabian Peninsula; small contingents from Middle East (Iraq, Palestine), and other regions (US, Europe, South Asia)	Fighters from all neighboring countries documented; highest number from Tunisia
ISKP [55]	In May 2021, Afghan government reported holding 408 foreign ISKP fighters; unclear how many are currently active and/or alive	12 detained Kyrgyz fighters and a total of 30 detained fighters from Jordan, Indonesia, Russia, India, Turkey, Bangladesh and the Maldives	According to Afghan authorities, vast majority (173 fighters) stemmed from Pakistan, but there were also 70 fighters from other neighboring countries (China, Iran, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan)
IS Philippines [56]	More than 100 foreigners reportedly joined the group even after the Marawi battle in 2017	Both from wider Southeast Asia (primarily Indonesia and Malaysia) and beyond (Arabian Peninsula, Europe, North Africa, Middle East, South Asia)	
Al-Shabaab [57]	No recent numbers available	Tanzanians make up second-largest contingent of foreigners, followed by Ugandans; foreign fighters predominantly ethnic Somalis; strong decrease of Western and Arab foreign fighters (both in number and influence) after internal power struggles (2011−13)	Since at least mid-2000s, hundreds of Kenyans (predominantly ethnic Somali) have joined the group; substantial presence also of Ethiopians (predominantly Ethiopian Somalis, but also Oromo)
AQAP [58]	In 2017, group declared to only have had five non-Yemeni fighters, for entire time frame 2012−2017	Some cases of Western foreign fighters who received training in the past, but not recently	Several Saudis among founding members, but decrease in number and influence over time
AQIM (Algeria) [59]	Unclear how many (if any) foreigners remain among Algeria-based group, after southern factions merged into JNIM		
Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly al-Nusra Front, today Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-HTS) [60]	Number and influence of foreign fighters decreased strongly after split from al-Qaeda in 2016; they are more present within HTS-allied Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) and other HTS-allied but formally independent factions		

Table 2 [continued]: Affiliate Groups and Recruitment of Foreign Fighters

Group name	Numerical estimate of foreigners	Foreign fighters from non-neighboring countries	Foreign fighters from neighboring countries
IS Yemen [61]	Unclear, but overall low number	Reports of two (unspecified) Africans among deceased fighters in 2018	Group was formerly led by a Saudi
IS Algeria [62]	Indications of two (unspecified) foreigners killed in a 2015 raid		
IS Bangladesh [63]	Key roles played by dual citizens Tamim Chowdhury (Bangladeshi-Canadian) and Saifullah Okazaki (Bangladeshi-Japanese), but no accounts of foreign fighters		
IS Caucasus [64]	No concrete numbers available	One case of a deceased Kyrgyz fighter reported	
ISGS [65]	No concrete numbers available	Several high-ranking fighters from Western Sahara, including recently killed Abou Walid al-Sahrawi	Main recruitment among ethnic Fulani in 'three-border region' (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger), which is also where ISGS itself operates
IS Sinai [66]	Unclear, if any	Earlier, unconfirmed reports about a Tunisian fighter and a Western-looking foreign fighter in a 2015 propaganda video	Earlier, unconfirmed reports about a Sudanese fighter
IS Somalia [67]	No concrete numbers available	Small number of Canadian and US fighters of Somali origin; one case of an Egyptian fighter documented	Fighters from Djibouti, Ethiopia (predominantly from Ogaden region) and Kenya; strong ethnic (Somali) component
IS Sri Lanka [68]	No reports of foreigners among group that carried out the 2019 attacks		
ISWAP [69]	No concrete numbers available	Reports of a few dozen Senegalese fighters	Group predominantly recruits in Nigeria and, to a smaller degree, other countries in which it operates (Cameroon, Chad, Niger)
JNIM [70]	No concrete numbers available		Cross-border recruitment with strong ethnic component (Katiba Macina focuses on recruiting among ethnic Fulani, similar to ISGS; remnants of al-Mourabitoun and AQIM's Sahara-based faction traditionally with stronger ethnic Arab influence, from Algeria and Mauritania)

approach allows the researcher to collect more detailed information than could be obtained through, for instance, a systematic keyword search through a single search engine for all groups. On the other hand, the comparability across groups is limited due to the differing depth and breadth of the consulted sources. It is further important to note that the impact of, for instance, a dozen foreign fighters on a group is likely to depend on the *overall* group size. However, determining the group size of each jihadist affiliate group would go beyond the scope of this article.

In some cases, the information on foreign fighters has been traced back to government statements about detained and prosecuted foreigners. There is a risk that governments exaggerate the true number of foreign fighters for political reasons. For instance, in Yemen, President Hadi claimed in 2014 that 70% of AQAP's fighters were foreigners, a statement clearly at odds with both the group's own claims and with scholarly findings.[49] To mitigate the risk of such misinformation, information provided by government-related sources (including UN Security Council reports) has been reported only in a few cases, where it was in line with the information provided by other sources. Overall, the following overview is an explorative attempt to identify the larger global patterns in foreign fighter recruitment across jihadist affiliate groups, but it does not claim to be exhaustive with regards to each group. To accomplish the latter, a more systematic and fine-grained database on the wider subject of foreign fighters would greatly benefit future research.

Similar as with regards to their operational focus, the extent of transnational recruitment of jihadist affiliate groups varies substantially. Overall, the number of groups that recruit larger numbers of fighters from non-neighboring countries is limited. Rather, the bulk of contemporary foreign fighter flows appears to occur between neighboring countries, often along ethnic lines, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. Strictly speaking, these foreign fighters would not meet the original definition proposed by Hegghammer, as they share ethnic links to the warring factions. There is further a range of groups that has employed few, or seemingly no foreign fighters at all. Some of these groups remain significant security threats, such as IS's Sinai Province, or AQAP in Yemen, whereas others have become largely inactive. Therefore, while foreign fighters are sometimes seen as an inherent feature of transnational jihadist groups, these findings indicate that this does not apply to all groups at a comparable degree.

Discussion

While jihadist affiliate groups are integrated into al-Qaeda and IS as globally operating organizations, the degree to which these affiliate groups have themselves transnationalized their operations and recruitment varies substantially. Many of these groups are strongly "regional" phenomena, both with regards to their operations and their recruitment patterns: while the majority of affiliate groups has only been active in a single country, those that have operated transnationally carried out the vast majority of attacks in neighboring countries. A similar pattern can be observed with regards to foreign fighter flows, which to a large extent occur between neighboring countries.

What does this mean for the prospects of conflict resolution? Governments seeking to explore the option of entering peace negotiations with transnationally operating jihadist affiliate groups will have to coordinate such attempts with neighboring governments. For instance, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) agreements are unlikely to last, if militants are able to maintain hidden bases across borders. While in some cases, as for instance the G5 Sahel, neighboring states have already worked together to curb jihadist cross-border activities, other neighboring states have been strategic rivals, as in the case of Afghanistan and Pakistan, which has played into the hands of the jihadists. Moreover, cooperation is also necessary to limit the flow of foreign fighters. As outlined previously, the presence of substantial numbers of foreign fighters is likely to hamper the prospects for conflict resolution attempts. Therefore, if neighboring states improve collaboration on intelligence sharing and border security, this may help to limit foreign fighter flows and thus lay the groundwork for future negotiations.

Conclusion

The present study has zoomed in on transnational operations and recruitment as two dimensions of transnationalization that are both relevant to assess affiliate groups' potential availability for negotiations. The results illustrate substantial variation among al-Qaeda's and IS's affiliate groups along both factors. Governments should therefore carefully evaluate these (and other) dimensions of transnationalization, instead of excluding beforehand the option of negotiations due to the rebels' transnational claims and their organizational affiliation alone.

Still, serious obstacles remain. On the one hand, even affiliate groups that operate and recruit locally can be highly committed to the transnational jihadist cause and therefore reject negotiations. On the other hand, governments ought to be willing to at least consider negotiating with the jihadists. Here, both audience costs vis-à-vis the electorate but also practical obstacles emanating from the terror-listing of affiliate groups constitute major hurdles. Moreover, even if jihadists signal willingness to negotiate, they may formulate too-far-ranging demands.

The present study provides different entry points for future research. An important question concerns the underlying motivations of affiliate groups for their operational or recruitment-related transnationalization (or the lack thereof). For instance, in Yemen, both IS and AQAP have only few foreign fighters in their ranks. Yet, while IS has actively sought to change this, AQAP has seen foreigners more as a liability than an asset.[71] Similarly, while some affiliate groups seek territorial, cross-border expansion, others may prefer to remain within a state's borders. Future research should examine what factors determine such choices by affiliate groups. Another important question is related to the interaction between different dimensions of transnationalization. For instance, does a growth in foreign fighter recruitment precede operational transnationalization, or is it, on the contrary, a consequence of the latter? Overall, more research on these questions is needed, as transnationalization processes continue even after IS's loss of its caliphate in 2019. Most recently, in 2021, the DRC-based faction of ISCAP claimed its first attacks in Uganda since the group's transformation into an IS-affiliate.[72]

Acknowledgments

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Appendix

Figure 2: Transnationally Operating Jihadist Affiliate Groups, 2001–2020
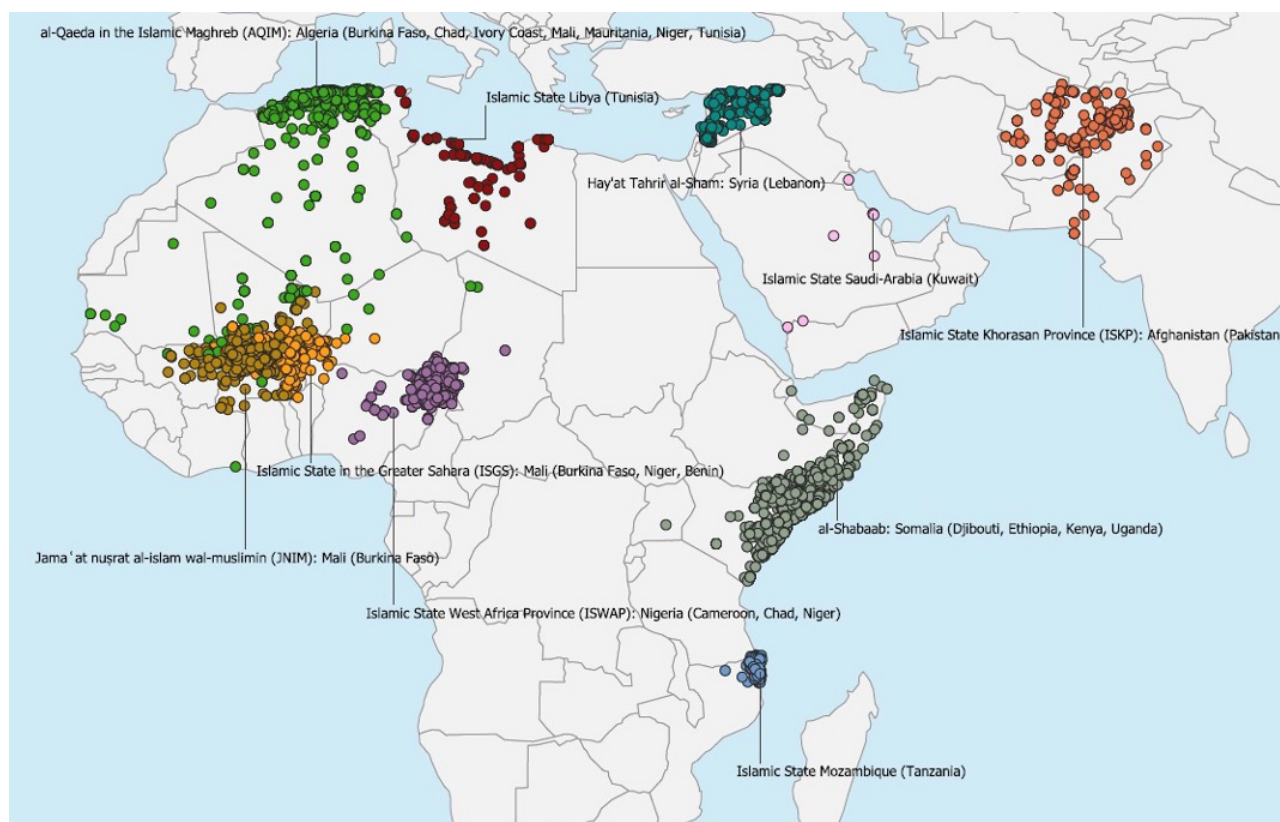

Table 3: Transnationally Operating Jihadist Affiliate Groups, 2001–2020

Group Name	Countries with Activity	Years with Transnational Activity
Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)	Algeria, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Tunisia	2009–2017
Al-Shabaab	Somalia, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda	Since 2010
Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly al-Nusra Front, today Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-HTS)	Syria, Lebanon	2013–2017
Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP)	Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Niger	Since 2014
Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)	Afghanistan, Pakistan	Since 2015
Islamic State Saudi-Arabia (Najd Province)	Saudi-Arabia, Kuwait	2015
Islamic State Libya	Libya, Tunisia	Only in 2016, otherwise limited to Libya
Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)	Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso	Since 2017
JNIM	Mali, Burkina Faso	Since 2017
Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP); Mozambique	Mozambique, Tanzania	Since 2020

Note: HTS broke away from al-Qaeda in 2016; IS's attack in Kuwait in May 2015 was claimed by its Saudi-Arabia-based Najd Province (https://theglobalobservatory.org/2015/07/kuwait-isis-terrorism-wilayat-najd/).