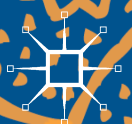
# CONFLICT, VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND DEVELOPMENT

## New Challenges, New Responses

Andrew Glazzard
Sasha Jesperson
Thomas Maguire
Emily Winterbotham



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ISBN 978-3-319-51483-3 ISBN 978-3-319-51484-0 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-51484-0

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017944546

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Cover illustration: Pattern adapted from an Indian cotton print produced in the 19th century

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

# Acknowledgements

We particularly wish to thank the Conflict, Humanitarian and Security (CHASE) department at DFID for sponsoring the research that lies behind this book and for providing valuable input and support into the development of the research and analysis. In addition to the CHASE team, we also benefited from the insights of numerous British government experts both in DFID and other departments and agencies.

We also consulted a number of experts from universities, think-tanks, charities, newspapers and international organisations. These include Mais Al Bayaa, Matt Bryden, Aaron Hall, Patrick Johnson, Shiraz Maher, Tristan McConnell, Ziya Meral and Martine Zeuthen. Cathy Haenlein helped edit the text. We also wish to thank Myriam Castello and Sneha Reddy-Tumu for their invaluable support.

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# A Note on Terminology

Some common terms used in this book are controversial or need defining. The following are the definitions preferred by the authors:

**Islamism**: any ideology which seeks to apply Islam in the political sphere. Islamism is not necessarily violent. Indeed, in many Muslim-majority countries, Islamism is actually a mainstream ideology.

***Jihad***: often inaccurately translated as 'holy war', jihad more accurately is legally sanctioned war (the legal system in question being sharia). We agree with those scholars who suggest that its equivalent in Christian/Western thought is Just War.

**Salafi-jihadism**: this is a term increasingly applied by violent extremists themselves. Equivalent terms used by others include 'global jihadism' or 'transnational jihadism'. As Salafism (q.v.), strictly speaking, refers to an apolitical worldview, Salafi-jihadism is something of a contradiction in terms. Salafi here is used by Salafi-jihadists to confer legitimacy and authenticity to their violent campaigns.

**Mujahid** (pl. *mujahidin*): one who participates in *jihad*.

**Salafist/salafism**: from the Arabic *al-salaf al-salih*, 'the pious forefathers'. Salafism means emulating the Prophet Muhammad and the early Muslims. In its most fundamental sense, Salafism is apolitical, as true Salafists reject the application of religion to politics.

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# Introduction

Islamist violent extremism is rarely absent from our front pages and television screens. In the West, we regard it mostly as a problem for us, when it visits our towns and cities in the form of transnational terrorism. But this form of violent extremism is a much bigger problem for the people who endure civil conflicts in which violent Islamists participate—countries such as Iraq, Syria, Nigeria, Pakistan and Afghanistan. How violent Islamists change conflicts, how they are changed by conflicts, and whether they are in some way new or different from other kinds of conflict actors are the questions we seek to answer in this book.

These questions are relevant to policy-makers in government and practitioners in NGOs. Governments are increasingly looking to address the drivers of violent extremism rather than merely waiting to deal with the downstream consequences. As a result, a new field of practice called 'countering violent extremism' (CVE) has come into existence. CVE is usually seen as a non-coercive, 'softer' approach to violent extremism, in contrast with counter-terrorism (CT) which relies on harder measures such as the military or criminal justice systems. Some define CVE narrowly as exclusively preventative, while others use it more loosely to include, for example, the so-called 'deradicalisation' initiatives which seek to reduce the risk from those who have already become violent extremists.

More generally, governments and aid agencies have for decades been working on conflict prevention and conflict resolution under headings such

as 'peacebuilding', 'statebuilding' and 'good governance'. The apparent spread of Islamist violent extremism in the last 25 years—and in particular the rise of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in 2013—has raised concerns that existing models for dealing with conflict may be out of date. If violent Islamists represent something new or different, then assumptions and traditional ways of working need to be re-examined.

The focus of this book is violent (Sunni) Islamists, primarily those linked to ISIL or Al Qaida, which are increasingly referred to as "Salafi-jihadists" but at its core are three country case studies which seek to compare these with other violent groups, either violent Shia Islamists or non-Islamists. The focus on violent Islamism is necessary because that is where the greatest and most urgent current threat lies and it is a threat which prompted the research commissioned by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) on which this book is based. However, we are acutely aware that there are many types of violent extremist. Even though this term is most often used (without a great deal of introspection, it has to be said) to denote violent Islamists, our comparative approach should remind readers that other motivations must not be overlooked. In Iraq and Syria, for example, Shia militias and state-sponsored paramilitaries are a major and under-exposed security problem. Underestimating other kinds of violent extremists is not just analytically wrong—it risks missing out a vital factor in designing interventions or policy responses. As we shall show, groups such as ISIL are most often a symptom of governance failures, and if the underlying factors in Iraq and Syria are not addressed, then ISIL, or successor groups, will continue to flourish. Like ISIL, Shia militias are both a symptom and a cause of the manifest governance failures in those two unhappy countries.

# PART I

# New Challenges

CHAPTER 1

# Conflict and Violent Extremism: Theories and Evidence

**Abstract** What causes violent extremism in conflict situations, and are violent Islamists a new type of conflict actor? This chapter examines ideology, identity, social networks and grievances as potential causal factors, concluding that all play important contributory roles, but violent extremism is fundamentally a symptom of failures of governance. Islamist violent extremists are often seen to be representative of a new wave of religious terrorism, but there are substantial problems with this argument: religiously motivated terrorism is not new, and some groups using a religious frame are actually fighting for territory or resources. The chapter concludes that a particular strand within Islamist extremism—Salafi-jihadism—is qualitatively different from other terrorist groups and conflict actors. What above all marks Salafi-jihadists out is their attitude to conflict, which they see as an aim in itself rather than as a means to an end.

**Keywords** Greed · Grievance · Ideology · Identity · Rationality

## Introduction

In 2004, Ahmad Fadeel al-Khalayleh, better known as Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, founder of the Al Qaida franchise that eventually mutated into the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), wrote a highly revealing letter to his nominal superior, Usama bin Ladin. Setting out his strategy for

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A. Glazzard et al., *Conflict, Violent Extremism and Development*,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-51484-0_1

turning Iraq into a haven for *jihad*, he announced that Iraq's Shia community is "the key to change": "The solution that we see, and God the Exalted knows better, is for us to drag the Shia into the battle because this is the only way to prolong the fighting between us and the infidels" (Zarqawi 2004). Zarqawi's logic was sophisticated and—in hindsight—appears to have been as effective as it was cunning. Provoking the Shia would, in turn, provoke Iraq's Sunnis to fight: "If we are able to strike them with one painful blow after another until they enter the battle, we will be able to [re] shuffle the cards. Then, no value or influence will remain to the Governing Council or even to the Americans, who will enter a second battle with the Shia. This is what we want, and, whether they like it or not, many Sunni areas will stand with the *mujahidin*". Without civil war, Iraq would become stable and democratic—forcing the *mujahidin* to leave to find another conflict-ridden or ungoverned space. But a civil war between Sunni and Shia would initiate a permanent *jihad*, in which Zarqawi—a Jordanian by birth—and his largely non-indigenous fighters would not only flourish, but become the vanguard of a new form of governance.

Zarqawi's strategy reveals something about modern Islamist terrorism which is both obvious and curiously under-researched: it has a strong but complex relationship with conflict. The extent to which ISIL is a legacy of the 2003 international war (and subsequent US-led occupation) remains controversial, but it is unarguable that ISIL is both the product of and, in its previous incarnations, the primary instigator of a series of *civil* conflicts that began in 2003 and continue to tear the country apart. Often dismissed as little more than a brutal and opportunistic thug (Stern and Berger 2015), Zarqawi's letter demonstrates a remarkably insightful grasp of the relationship between conflict, political legitimacy and governance, and the role that violent extremist organisations can play in fomenting and benefiting from wars.

Why has the relationship between conflict and violent extremism not attracted more attention? One reason is that violent extremist groups are usually studied as terrorists, and terrorism studies is a Western-oriented field. Transnational groups which threaten the West, such as Hizbollah and Al Qaida have, understandably enough, has been the focus of researchers' attention, and even when those groups are participants in civil conflicts, as both currently are in the Syrian civil war (Al Qaida in the guise of Jabhat al-Nusra), their more localised strategies and operations are of less pressing interest to academics and Western officials. Groups such as Al Shabaab and Boko Haram frequently grab headlines, but the

academic literature has remarkably little to say about them, while less newsworthy violent extremist groups in, for example, southern Thailand or the southern Philippines are even less well understood. This Western-centric optic is one limitation, but more practical problems include the hazards involved in primary research in conflict-afflicted countries, and the difficulty in identifying and gaining access to the violent extremists themselves. The academic literature on violent extremism is, as a result, partial and more theoretical (some would say speculative) than empirical. But there is at the same time much valuable, relevant and empirically rich research in the field of conflict studies on how and why civil wars are fought, so bringing together what we know from the two disciplines of terrorism studies and conflict studies should provide a fuller picture.

The principal questions of this study are how Islamist violent extremists influence and are influenced by the conflicts they fight in, and whether they are qualitatively different from other types of conflict actor. To answer that question, we need to explore first what causes violent extremism in conflict situations before examining whether Islamist violent extremists are different or new.

## Creed or Grievance? Causes of Violent Extremism in Conflicts

### *Wars of Ideas? The Importance of Ideology*

All groups which seek social or political change can be said to be ideological, if ideology is defined simply as a worldview or set of beliefs that guides individual or collective action. In looking at terrorism and violent extremism, the controversy is over the extent to which ideology can explain extremist violence. Some political scientists (e.g. Neumann 2013; Wiktorowicz and Kaltenthaler 2006) offer ideology as a causal explanation for the onset of Islamist extremist violence and its persistence: how else can we explain why some groups resort to violence while others do not? Other studies suggest that ideology sometimes follows rather than precedes violent planning and action, so that ideology should be seen as enabling rather than driving violence by “reducing the psychological costs of participation in all terrorist organisations” (Della Porta 2001). This enabling function is not unique to Islamist terrorists: Crenshaw (1981) points out that all terrorists need to cope with the recognition that they kill people by employing a belief system that protects against feelings of guilt and anxiety.

What kind of ideology are we talking about here? It is important, firstly, to separate ideologies exhorting violence from those that are merely radical. In much of the Middle East and South Asia, Islamism—a broad and diverse collection of movements whose common denominator is that Islam should be the source of law and politics—is mostly expressed politically. It is more a mainstream political current than a violent fringe (Hamid 2014). If we narrow our focus to violent Islamists, some research argues, or assumes, a distinction between nationalists, whose violence is motivated by nation or ethnicity, and ideological groups which are motivated by a worldview: according to this dichotomy, ideological terrorists seek to transform global society, often according to a religiously sourced vision of perfection, rather than establish a separate homeland. In the case of Islamist groups, according to this line of argument, those classified as "ideological" may seek to transform the world but do not seem to be motivated by any particular nationalist or ethnic identity (Fettweis 2009; Piazza 2009); nationalist groups are presumed to be seeking a political or territorial objective, such as the end of Israeli occupation in Palestine or an independent, unified Kashmir.

However, the reality is clearly more complex. The modern *jihad* movement emerged from two sources: Islamist revolutionaries in Egypt, of whom the first to emerge in the 1960s was Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966), and thinkers based in Saudi Arabia—notably the Palestinian academic Abdullah Azzam (1941–1989)—who articulated a theory of transnational *jihad* (Hegghammer 2010, 2010/11). The Egyptian theorists sought primarily to purify the Arab world, starting with their home country, and therefore necessarily subscribed to elements of nationalistic thinking. Even Ayman al-Zawahiri, now leader of Al Qaida and hence standing at the vanguard of transnational Islamism, was formerly a proponent of revolutionary jihad in the Arab heartland: his 1995 article "The Road to Jerusalem Goes Through Cairo", for instance, argued that the *mujahidin* should concentrate on near objectives before considering distant ones (Gerges 2005). Azzam's theory of transnational *jihad*, meanwhile, was founded on a concept of global Muslim identity, but it was also primarily territorial: Azzam argued that Muslim lands were under attack and therefore required a global mobilisation of fighters to defend them. Moreover, many Islamist violent groups have roots in distinctly territorial conflicts, from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the Philippines to Lashkar Tayyaba in Kashmir. As we shall show in later chapters, both Al Shabaab and Boko Haram, allied to Al Qaida and ISIL, respectively, are

far more regionally or locally focused than their globally orientated rhetoric might suggest.

This is not to say that religious ideology is merely a frame for conflicts fought for more conventional, territorial objectives. Even the most locally focused Islamist groups have a vision for a purer, more authentic religious society: Jessica Stern, for instance, argues that religiously inspired violent groups frequently begin with utopian aspirations, even if that is not often where they end: "From their perspective, they are purifying the world of injustice, cruelty, and all that is anti-human". Although such utopianism is not in itself irrational, it may be motivated or accompanied by a "spiritual calling", and many terrorists "report a kind of spiritual high or addiction related to its fulfilment" (Stern 2003).

In fact, the important distinction may not be between "political" or "nationalist" groups on the one hand and "ideological" groups on the other, as between different kinds of ideological groups. Al Qaida and ISIL), part of a movement which now self-identifies as "Salafi-jihadist", hold that both the domestic and the international political order requires transformation, and that this can only be done on the battlefield: as Shiraz Maher observes, the movement "is therefore necessarily millenarian and eschatological in nature" (Maher 2016). Although this ideology is framed in religious terms, and the choice of "Salafi" is intended to confer religious authenticity by invoking the emergence of Islam in the seventh century (Wiktorowicz 2006), Salafi-jihadism is a distinctively modern movement, emerging in the 1990s from the crucibles of civil conflicts in Algeria and Afghanistan (Moussalli 2009). The movement derived much of its theory from thinkers such as Qutb and Azzam, but combined their theories—revolutionary and transnational respectively—into a doctrine of global revolution. This synthesis was proclaimed in Usama bin Ladin's 1996 *fatwa*, "Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places", which identified the "far enemy"—the United States—as the hidden hand behind both Arab autocracy and the oppression of Muslims through conflict and occupation worldwide (Ranstorp 1998; Gerges 2005).

What "*jihad*" (literally: "struggle") actually means clearly is crucial here. Often simplistically and inaccurately conflated with terrorism, more culturally informed work recognises that *jihad*—in its primary sense of war-fighting—is a mainstream concept in Islamic jurisprudence (Hegghammer 2010/11). It is, nonetheless, a term with rich and varied meanings even within the thinking of Islamist militants. Abdullah

Azzam, for instance, articulated a notion of defensive *jihad*, which bin Ladin then turned into a doctrine of pre-emption or defence through aggression; al-Zarqawi meanwhile emphasised the importance of creating a territorial base sustained by permanent war (Kepel and Milelli 2008; Hafez 2014). Violent Islamists have, then, effectively extended the semantic scope of *jihad* beyond its traditional jurisprudential meaning of legitimate warfare—more or less equivalent to what in Christian jurisprudence is called Just War theory—in order to legitimise terrorist violence, revolutionary violence and insurgency, while promoting jihad as the "sixth pillar" of Islam or "forgotten obligation", and hence an individual rather than collective duty for Muslims (Brahimi 2010; Van de Voorde 2011). In other words, Islamist violent extremists have sought to move the boundaries of Islamic legal theory on war.

## Kith and Kin: Identity and Socialisation

This is, by any standard, an ambitious ideological project. But ideology is not the whole story. The "new wars" thesis pioneered by Kaldor (1999, 2006) proposes that conflicts "may take the guise of traditional nationalism, tribalism or religious fundamentalism", but may actually be the result of the disintegration of states and structures under the pressures of globalisation. In this thesis, nationality and ethnicity as well as religion matter more as identity labels than as systems of thought. Participants may frame conflicts in religious (and ethnic and national) terms but the conflicts are actually manifestations of some other historical force or process—which may not even be understood by participants themselves. Other studies question the salience of religion and religiously framed ideology by examining the social formation of conflict and violence. Anthropological studies, for instance, explain extremist violence as an effect of feelings of kinship, whether that kinship is real or, as with the *umma* (the global community of Muslims), imagined: as Scott Atran has put it, "people don't simply die and kill for a cause. They die and kill for each other" (Atran 2011). At the individual level, identity formation—a normal process in emotional and intellectual development—is often proposed as an important stage in radicalisation processes (Al Raffie 2013). Psychologists such as Randy Borum and John Horgan contend that social identity is important in explaining why people join militant groups or become involved in action: they do so because they see themselves as belonging to the community that the violent group

claims to represent, often in a purer or more authentic form than other groups (Borum 2004; Horgan 2014). The power of identity, including religious identity, makes it an attractive instrument for terrorist groups which then frame conflicts in religious terms even when their real goals are "control of natural resources or political power" (Stern 2003). Some scholars, however, caution that identity is complex: the same individual may identify with ethnic or national communities as well as with religious ones (Juergensmeyer 2003). In other words, religion is just one of several identity markers that ideologues and political entrepreneurs may seek to exploit in support of civil violence or terrorism (Kaldor 2006; Yadav 2010).

Using more granular data, the former CIA psychiatrist Marc Sageman also emphasises the social dimension of terrorist networks: his influential "bunch of guys" thesis proposes that those who become terrorists mostly do so through existing relationships (Sageman 2004, 2007). Psychologists, meanwhile, question the extent to which ideology is evident at an individual level among violent extremists. John Horgan's interviews with former terrorists found little evidence that they joined because of an idea, while conversely in almost every case they disengaged without abandoning their extreme views (Horgan 2009). Indeed, Horgan is among those who see a fundamental problem with the thesis that ideas lead to violence: the psychological evidence shows that the relationship between ideas and action is, in fact, weak. Ideology may, then, be more a justification or form of legitimation for violence than a motivation.

The weak relationship between ideas and action challenges one of the most widely accepted ways of thinking about violent extremism which is summed up in the term "radicalisation". The ubiquity of the term might cause us to forget that, in the context of extremist violence, it is of actually quite recent provenance, and came into vogue only after terrorist attacks in Europe in 2004 and 2005 (Sedgwick 2010). Radicalisation implies a change in belief leading to a change in behaviour, although some would suggest that it is possible to distinguish "cognitive" and "behavioural" radicalisation (Neumann 2013). The assumption, though, is that the change in belief is brought about at least in part by radical ideas—an assumption which is coming under increasing challenge even from those whose primary arena for study is Western-oriented terrorism. What is more important for our purposes is whether radicalisation theories are adequate to explain violent extremists in conflicts in Africa

and Asia. The difficulty here is the paucity of empirical studies examining terrorist recruitment in conflict situations. On the basis of the limited evidence—which in the case of Syria, Iraq, Kenya and Nigeria we examine in the following chapters—it appears that recruitment may be a better description than radicalisation in many cases. Individuals might join groups like ISIL or Boko Haram for any number of reasons, not simply because they have been indoctrinated into an extremist worldview. Force of circumstances, community self-preservation, reaction to counter-productively harsh military or security measures, trauma, displacement, and forced conscription are all plausible and non-ideological explanations for the fact that some violent extremist groups can grow quickly in conflict situations (Kilcullen 2009; Hinds 2014; Verhoeven 2009; Taarnby and Hallundbaek 2010).

A further challenge to the assumption that Islamist ideology explains Islamist violence comes from a promising but under-developed line of research focusing on extremist propaganda. One study has found that extremist worldviews, often expressed through what are loosely labelled as extremist "narratives", are actually very similar, regardless of which ideology they theoretically belong to, while utilising attitudes and beliefs that are actually quite mainstream in the societies from which they derive (Saucier et al. 2009). Such narratives typically stigmatise and stereotype enemies, exploit notions of sacredness, assert that violence is the only effective response, and often promote self-sacrifice as a worthwhile goal in itself. If violence is encouraged, enabled or mandated by similar messages irrespective of ideological orientation, the ideology itself can only play a supporting role in mobilising extremist violence. Other forces must be at work.

## Grievance and Governance

Grievance is often presented as an alternative to ideology to explain violent extremism, especially in conflict situations: political and economic grievances have, after all, been advanced as one of the primary drivers (along with greed) of civil conflicts (Gurr 1970; Collier and Hoeffler 2004). USAID, for example, identifies as drivers of violent extremism discrimination, political marginalisation, a sense of "anger at the perceived victimisation of fellow Muslims around the globe", repression of human rights, and foreign occupation (USAID 2011). The academic literature certainly supports the view that there is a strong relationship between perceived grievances and violent extremism, but the nature of

the relationship is less certain: are grievances causative, or merely used to justify and legitimise? Terrorism scholars are often sceptical about the former. Dipak Gupta, for example, finds that grievances are necessary but not sufficient to cause terrorism unless instrumentalised by charismatic individuals or “political entrepreneurs”, and social and psychological factors need to align as well (Gupta 2005). Several widely cited studies argue that terrorism is more prevalent in democracies than in authoritarian regimes, suggesting that either political freedoms or constraints on government action may actually enable terrorism (Eubank and Weinberg 1994; Li 2005). While conflict studies suggest a correlation between poverty and civil violence (Tschirgi et al. 2010; Duffield 2001), there is no consensus in terrorism studies on this point: James Piazza and Stephen Vertigans, for instance, come to opposite conclusions (Piazza 2006, 2009; Vertigans 2008).

Research in both conflict and terrorism studies, however, increasingly points to failures of governance as at least a major enabler if not a primary cause of violence (Howard 2014). The frequency of civil conflicts in Muslim-majority countries may be more an effect of the post-colonial governance failures—collapsing states, authoritarian regimes and precipitous economic decline—that have been particularly acute in parts of the Islamic world than an effect of religious ideology (Stern 2003). These conflicts in turn help explain the prevalence of violent Islamist groups. Quantitative studies show that state instability is “the most consistent predictor of country-level terrorist attacks” (Gelfand et al. 2013), and terrorists thrive in unstable conditions: both Shawn Flanigan and Alexus Grynkewich find that Islamist and non-Islamist militant groups alike are strengthened by state failures to provide basic services (Flanigan 2008; Grynkewich 2008). Governance failures may be either a severely weak state, unable to provide services for its population, or a brutally repressive one, holding the population in check through a powerful security sector (Ganiel 2014; Lind and Dowd 2015). But some states manage to be at the same time chronically weak and counter-productively forceful. As we shall show, for example, Boko Haram emerged after the Nigerian state spectacularly failed to provide for the security of the Nigerian population (Ganiel 2014), while the perceived exclusion of Sunni Arabs from the post-2003 political settlement in Iraq, and the development of an unaccountable security sector comprising Shia militias as well as brutal and corrupt conventional law enforcement agencies are widely cited as causes of the 2006–2007 civil war and the subsequent rise of ISIL (Tripp 2007; Weiss and Hassan 2015).

## Are Violent Islamists a New Type of Conflict Actor?

### *Same Old, Same Old?*

One of the most influential theories of terrorism argues that it comes in waves, each lasting around a generation. The theory, developed by the renowned political scientist David Rapoport, proposes that "religious terrorism" is terrorism's fourth wave, coming after anarchist, anti-colonial and leftist waves (Rapoport 1984, 2004). Rapoport's theory was further refined by a succession of writers who saw religiously inspired terrorism as not merely a new wave, but something substantially different from the anti-colonial or extreme left-wing terrorism that preceded it. In this thesis, "new terrorism" is not only religiously inspired but also networked (rather than controlled through hierarchies), and aims to maximise casualties (Hoffman 1999; Lesser 1999; Roy 2004; Benjamin and Simon 2002). Although it acquired significant currency in public discourse after 2001, there are significant problems with the "new terrorism" thesis (Tucker 2001; Duyvesteyn 2004). As with so many theoretical studies of the topic, the new terrorism thesis is an effect of a well-known methodological trap in social science: selecting on the dependent variable. In other words, it is possible to prove almost anything by careful selection of case studies. Thus, Neumann selects the Provisional IRA to represent "old terrorism" and Al-Qaida to represent the new variety, but a broader sweep of data would yield many counter-examples. The "new terrorism" theorists also over-emphasise aspects of their cases which support their thesis and disregard those that do not, as when Rapoport presents Sikh extremists as religious terrorists (ignoring their nationalist—separatist—aims), or Neumann overstates the IRA's hierarchical structure and understates the bureaucracy and centralised structure of "core" Al-Qaida.

The "new terrorism" thesis is on slightly stronger ground on the question of lethality. Mass-casualty attacks did not start in 2001 and Neumann demonstrates a lack of historical knowledge in claiming that anarchist terrorists sought to minimise civilian casualties. Nevertheless, empirical data do seem to show a rising trend of lethality (Hoffman 1999; Tucker 2001; Berman 2009): although this is disputed by the renowned scientist Steven Pinker, who slices the statistics to show that fatalities per 100,000 people from the 1970s to 2005 broadly decreased (Pinker 2011), he misses the upsurge in fatalities in Iraq in 2006–2007, and the later upsurges in Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia, Nigeria

and Syria, with 2014 seeing a dramatic rise in fatalities, most of which occurred in just five countries (RAND n.d.; Institute for Economics and Peace 2015). Bruce Hoffman, Eli Berman, James Piazza and Christopher Fettweis are among those who attribute this upswing to religious motivation, with the latter claiming that ideological terrorists do not seem to be constrained by rational strategic limitations in comparison with nationalists, and search for the most destructive weapons available to cause high numbers of atrocities. In this reading, religious extremist groups have different value systems, mechanisms of legitimisation and justification, concepts of morality and world-views from other kinds of violent group, and are "consequently unconstrained by the political, moral or practical constraints that may affect other terrorists", such as the need for popular support (Fettweis 2009).

However, there are other explanations for rising lethality, including the availability of technology (Gambetta 2004) and inter-group competition (Bloom 2005), neither of which necessarily involves religion. Competition can also lead to an "escalation trap" (Neumann and Smith 2007) resulting in loss of support and legitimacy as populations become exhausted or disgusted by their increasing violence. Attributing increasing lethality to religion alone may be more an artefact of recent history than a causal relationship: violent extremists are becoming more lethal, especially when they are involved in civil conflicts, and—coincidentally—many of those conflicts have violent Islamists participating in them.

The question of whether violent Islamism is new or different also assumes that we are dealing with a homogenous movement. Aggregating diverse movements, groups and activities under the single heading of terrorism is, Neumann reminds us, the "cardinal sin" of terrorism studies (Neumann 2013). However, terrorism scholars are apt to conflate the many and varied manifestations of Islamist violence into a single phenomenon. For instance, Berman (2009) conflates Hamas, Hizbollah and Al-Qaida as Islamist terrorists without acknowledging that one is Shia and the others are Sunni; that two function as active political parties and the other is dedicated to violence; that Hamas is a nationalist group focused solely on Israel/Palestine, while the others have global ambitions and reach. Other scholars are more nuanced and precise. Fawaz Gerges, for instance, recognises radical Islamism to be a highly contested arena, with ideologues competing for influence and offering sharply differentiated visions of society (Gerges 2005), while Donald Holbrook similarly cautions against over-simplification of the varied and dynamic ideological

and theoretical perspectives amongst jihadist movements (Holbrook 2014). Piazza (2009), using empirical evidence, helpfully disaggregates Islamist terrorists into "strategic groups" such as Hamas which, despite claiming to be motivated by religious aims, have similar aims to nationalist–separatist groups, and "abstract/universal" groups such as the utopian Al-Qaida and its affiliates whose use of violence is primarily expressive rather than instrumental. Perhaps most useful are those studies of specific groups, such as Stig Hansen's book on Al Shabaab, Virginia Comolli's on Boko Haram, and Charles Lister's on Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL in Syria, which provide fine-grained accounts of how each group developed in its own specific historical and socio-political milieu, and taken together provide a corrective to simplistic, totalising explanations which present Islamist violent extremism as monolithic or homogenous (Hansen 2013; Comolli 2015; Lister 2015).

The diversity of violent Islamist groups is important, as it suggests that violent Islamist groups are the product of specific, local conditions more than they are manifestations of grand, global ideologies. Indeed, Al Qaida's global ideology was crafted specifically in the 1990s to unite the otherwise disparate Islamist militants engaged in local conflicts under the banner of the "International Islamic Front against Jews and Crusaders". With Al Qaida brands proliferating in Asia and Africa after 9/11, this strategy might have seemed to have been succeeding. However, with the exception of Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al-Qaida's affiliates have stubbornly stuck or reverted to their local or regional agendas, or withered away. Al Qaida in Iraq (AQI), for instance, eventually rejected its parent organisation's instructions to desist from fomenting sectarian war in Iraq. AQI's successor ISIL went further and publicly renounced its affiliation to Al Qaida after Ayman Al-Zawahiri, Al Qaida's leader, ruled against it on an issue of allegiance (Hafez 2014). More generally, groups such as Al Shabaab and Boko Haram which have pledged allegiance to global movements—Al Qaida and ISIL, respectively—have so far failed to emerge from their regional comfort zones: their global rhetoric is at odds with their local or regional focus. This may suggest that civil conflicts exert a centripetal force on even those groups which subscribe to the theory of global *jihad*.

Furthermore, violent Islamist groups are nothing if not dynamic, as we show in some detail in our next section, and this dynamism may also be attributed to the pressures and opportunities of civil conflict. Conflict has a dynamic of its own, which can influence a group's behaviour or its ambitions—for example encouraging or forcing

the group to extend its reach beyond its original theatre of battle, as has occurred throughout the history of the *jihad* movement from the 1989–1992 civil war in Afghanistan onwards: that original conflict drew cadres of "foreign fighters" who were unable to return to their home countries when the conflict entered a new phase which did not require them and who then sought new arenas; the pattern was repeated with wars in Algeria, Bosnia, Chechnya, Iraq, Syria and Libya (Malet 2013). Groups may also find their ideologies tested in conflict, forcing evolution and adaptation: what might be called "battlefield jurisprudence" has driven change in Islamist groups. Recent civil conflicts have been the crucibles in which Salafi-jihadism emerged and mutated into the form we see today, largely a result of doctrine and jurisprudence being simultaneously required and challenged by war-fighting (Maher 2016; Lister 2015). Groups may also resort to criminal activity due to the opportunities that conflict-affected environments offer: collecting resources can become an end in itself rather than a means to pursue political ends, as has been demonstrated by Islamist movements such as the Abu Sayyaf group in the Philippines, Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Afghan Taliban (Cronin 2006; Giustozzi 2012).

## Rational Actors?

Religiously inspired terrorism is not new—the first recorded terrorists, the Sicarii in first-century Palestine, were an extreme splinter-group from a political-religious Jewish order known as the Zealots—but it is often conceived as a separate category from other forms of political violence. Religiously inspired terrorists, and Islamist extremists in particular, are often assumed to be fundamentally irrational, taking their lead from faith rather than reason, and therefore not amenable to political processes or negotiation (Smilansky 2004). Partly because of their alleged irrationality, religiously inspired terrorists are also credited with a kind of diabolical innovativeness, pioneering new methods and techniques while wreaking violence and destruction on an unprecedented scale.

By contrast, secular terrorism has long been seen by scholars as a rational choice, despite appearances to the contrary. An influential conceptualisation has (secular) terrorism as asymmetric warfare, a "form of military action carried out by rational and well-functioning people who do not have access to conventional means and who have valid political

motivation for resorting to violence"; terrorists are thus those who "lack the necessary resources to wage war in furtherance of their political goals" (Ruby 2002; see also Cooper 1976; Jenkins 1983). While the emergence of Al Qaida has put this thesis under some strain, there are grounds for thinking that even religiously inspired terrorism may be more rational than it appears. For example, leaders instrumentalise emotions and irrational beliefs in supporters or potential supporters to achieve their ends, which may be faith-based and immaterial, or pragmatic and material; either way, the method is rational. Moreover, economics—a discipline which has rationality built into its foundations—has provided theoretical models of terrorist behaviour that has reconceptualised Islamist extremists as strategic thinkers engaged in cost-benefit calculations. As one economist comments, Al Qaida's long-term goals may be "set by fervent devotion to radical religious ideology", but "in its short-term behaviour it is a rational political actor operating according to dictates of realpolitik" (Doran 2002). Wiktorowicz and Kaltenthaler (2006) also emphasise the importance of beliefs and ideology in individual utility calculations—"where individuals believe that the spiritual payoffs outweigh the negative consequences of strategies in the here and now, high-cost/risk activism is intelligible as a rational choice" if we take the content of the movement's ideology seriously. They do, however, recognise that not everyone who participates in violent Islamist groups is driven by spiritual desire, and acknowledge the important potential differences between the utility calculations of leaders and those of followers and affiliates.

One argument frequently adduced to support the irrationality of religiously inspired terrorism is its apparent preference for suicide attacks. Suicide terrorism is not in itself new—even nineteenth-century anarchists resorted to it occasionally—and in the modern age it is by no means confined to the religiously inspired, although after 2003 violent Islamists have used it more extensively and frequently than anyone else (Moghadam 2006). The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Marxist-Leninist separatists in Sri Lanka, were until the 2003 Iraq War the world's most prolific suicide attackers. But even suicide terrorism can be seen as an extreme form of the "rationality of irrationality", to use Robert Pape's formulation in his controversial study: Pape concludes that suicide terrorism is essentially a form of negotiation by a subject people seeking to regain territory. Pape's study is vulnerable to the challenge that it focuses on nationalist/separatist rather than religiously inspired violence, although Mia Bloom, engaging directly with religious

conflicts, draws a similar conclusion that suicide bombing is a tactic of "coercive bargaining". Her theory of "outbidding", derived from economics, is relevant here: groups in competition for support win "market share" through greater commitment to martyrdom (Bloom 2005). Diego Gambetta's more historically informed analysis develops five generalisations about suicide attacks: they are mounted by organisations, not individuals; they are mounted by a very wide range of groups (not just Islamists); none of the groups use suicide methods exclusively; the groups involved either have a community that supports radical action or are un-rooted, transnational movements; all are carried out by the weaker side in a conflict—although they are often used by organisations that are growing in strength, such as Hizbollah. Suicide attacks are "a weapon of last resort for some, but for others they seem a means of aggressively building up and establishing an organisation by killing *and* by dying" (Gambetta 2004). Religious motivation is conspicuous by its absence from this list, as is Islamism: Gambetta's figures, now out of date, show that only a third of suicide attacks were mounted by Islamists.

Moreover, a broad historical view reveals that self-sacrifice in many kinds of conflicts is both an ancient practice and, from the perspective of the community rather than the individual, an enormously powerful and successful one. Support for this can be derived from disciplines ranging from theology to economics to anthropology. John Wolffe, for instance, reminds us that the history of early Christianity shows that acts of self-sacrifice have "virtually unlimited communicative potential": viewed through the prism of communication theory, an act of martyrdom is almost unique in its "moral authenticity" (Wolffe and Moorhead 2014). The economist Eli Berman, meanwhile, argues that radical religious communities are sustained not only by theology but also by mutuality and sacrifice, and he views radical movements through the prism of an economic theory called the 'club model'. The requirement for members to "demonstrate their commitment to the group through some costs or painful sacrifice" weeds out 'free-riders' and increases community cohesion, so if and when such communities turn to violence they have a huge advantage over secular groups in terms of members' commitment (Berman 2009). Anthropological studies have shown that cultures promoting self-sacrifice are widespread and by no means confined to highly religious societies: by privileging the benefit of the many over the cost to the individual, cultural endorsement of martyrdom may be said to play a major role in promoting communal needs (Atran 2011).

This is not to say that irrationality is conspicuous by its absence. Two of the most eminent anthropologists to consider these questions, Mark Juergensmeyer and Scott Atran, similarly conclude that violent entrepreneurs can exploit powerful, irrational impulses for political ends: "What makes religious violence particularly savage and relentless is that its perpetrators have placed such religious images of divine struggle—cosmic war—in the service of worldly political battles. For this reason, acts of religious terror serve not only as tactics in a political strategy but also as evocations of a much larger spiritual confrontation" (Juergensmeyer 2003). Juergensmeyer's notion of 'cosmic war' is suggestive and corresponds closely with what we know of the Al Qaida and ISIL worldviews. But, again, the suggestion here that religion is necessary to framing a conflict in cosmic terms is undermined by a wealth of historical evidence which shows that even the most secular conflict may be framed in metaphysical terms as a battle between transcendental forces (good versus evil, civilisation versus hatred) (Armstrong 2015).

A major concept here is sacredness. Sacred values are a way to "authenticate society as having existence beyond the mere aggregation of its individuals and institutions" (Atran 2011). Sacred values are not, however, exclusively religious: sacredness defines what a society views as non-negotiable, and secular ideologies or movements may hold as strongly to non-negotiable values such as democracy or gender equality as much as religious ideologies hold on to creeds or dietary prohibitions; all violent groups, whether secular or religious, fight for values or rewards that are, at least initially, seen as non-negotiable (Knott 2013; Francis 2015). Sacred values inhibit rational negotiation since they include "inscrutable propositions that are immune to logic or empirical evidence" (Atran 2011). The common assumption that religious groups—including militant ones—are usually uncompromising whereas secular groups will always ultimately be prepared to negotiate may, therefore, be unfounded. Whether it derives from religion or from some other source, the important point is that parties to a conflict can invoke sacredness to make their objectives transcendent and non-negotiable. Imbued with sacred values, resources such as territory can acquire a status to make the violent competition for them uncompromising, as has been demonstrated for 70 years in Israel/Palestine (Stern 2003).

Taking this further, Salafi-jihadists may lack incentives to negotiate not because of their theological beliefs but because of their

utopian and global political ambitions (Holbrook 2014; Maher 2015). Therefore, even though there is evidence that some Islamist groups are willing to participate in negotiations and peace processes—the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the Philippines, and potentially the Taliban in Afghanistan being notable, current examples—Salafi-jihadist groups such as Al-Qaida and ISIL appear uninterested in resolving disputes or grievances using anything other than violence. There may therefore be a distinction to be drawn between groups which are nationalist or separatist and also Islamist, such as Hamas or (as we shall explore later) Ahrar al-Sham in Syria, and groups which are Islamist and "universalist" (Piazza 2009). The former may negotiate, the latter may not.

## Conclusion

Violent Islamist extremism is generally viewed as a challenge to the security of the West, but focusing on the terrorist threat to Western cities causes us to overlook what statistically is a far bigger problem: its impact on fragile and conflict-afflicted countries in Africa and Asia. In the last 15 years, less than 3% of deaths from violent extremism have occurred in the West. Over 30,000 were killed by violent extremists in 2014 (the highest ever annual death-toll), but nearly four fifths of these were in just five countries (Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Syria) (Global Terrorism Index 2015). Each of these countries endures a civil conflict of varying levels of intensity, which explains why the impact of violent extremism is distributed in this way. Islamist violent extremists are conflict actors first and Western-facing terrorists second—if at all.

The relationship between conflict and Islamist violent extremism goes much deeper than this, however. The most problematic violent Islamists—those that call themselves Salafi-jihadists—are both a symptom and a cause of civil conflicts. The Salafi-jihadist movement developed intellectually from competing interpretations of how, why and where to fight wars, and on a practical level it has been shaped by the opportunities and challenges of a succession of conflicts from Afghanistan and Algeria in the early 1990s to Syria and Iraq today. Without those conflicts, the movement would not exist in the highly destructive form we know today.

Ideology, much debated in the academic literature on violent extremism as it is in public discourse about terrorism, is clearly important. Differences in worldview, aims and strategy help account for why groups

emerge, why they sometimes split and why they choose some tactics over others. Salafi-jihadism is self-evidently an ideology, with theoreticians and propagandists behind it. But ideology alone cannot explain why individuals and communities become drawn into violent extremism. A range of other factors and processes, from the appeal of group identity to our natural human preference for social bonding, have been identified by terrorism scholars as important parts of the story. But even more nuanced accounts, which accept that violent extremism cannot be the product of ideas alone, focus on violence threatening the West and hence miss the effect of conflict dynamics. Given that most violent extremism takes place in or near a conflict zone, and most violent extremist movements have their origins in a civil conflict, it is vital to understand context and contingency. Factors that come into play when violent extremists are viewed as conflict actors rather than simply as terrorists include community self-protection, resentment at political and economic marginalisation or exclusion, gaining or preserving access to resources, and trauma. And both civil conflicts and violent extremism are, at bottom, symptoms of governance failure, of states that are either too weak, or too strong—or are a particularly toxic combination of predatory strength and institutional weakness, which characterises Syria and Iraq today.

The "new terrorism" thesis, which pre-dated 9/11 but became very much in vogue in the decade that followed, has numerous problems, only some of which we have explored here. Terrorism as a technique did not change as a result of religiously motivated extremists entering the fray in the late 1970s, or when Al Qaida emerged in the 1990s. But a critical reading of the literature does suggest that there is something distinctive about this one strain of religiously motivated extremism. Whereas many violent extremist movements are by-products of conflicts, Salafi-jihadist groups such as Al Qaida and ISIL recognise that conflict is the medium in which they thrive. From the perspective of a bin Ladin, or an al-Zarqawi, or an Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, war is a desirable aim in itself, and not just a means to an end. These groups are, then, not merely uncompromising and intractable, but have a vested interest in prolonging and aggravating the conflicts in which they are involved.

This brand of Islamist violent extremism thus offers a further challenge to conventional thinking about conflict. Recent work has more or less disproved the myth that wars are consistently fought by one side to defeat another (Keen 2012); wars achieve all sorts of benefits to their participants, and increasingly we see "new wars" or "small wars" as being about control of resources or populations as much as defeating an enemy

(Kaldor 2006). Salafi-jihadists appear, at least in theory, to be motivated even less by "winning". This suggests that some serious rethinking may be required for those with the daunting task of developing peace-building, state-building and conflict resolution strategies—something we examine in our final chapter.

However, we should also look carefully at the specific problems in front of us. There is no shortage of received wisdom and armchair expertise in this field, and we have no wish to add to the problem by creating another simplistic theory or set of sweeping generalisations. "Islamist violent extremism" is a broad label that includes a wide range of disparate groups and movements, ranging from Shia revolutionaries to popular militias to cell-based terrorist groups such as Al Qaida. Piazza's distinction between strategic and utopian groups is helpful up to a point but is, we conclude, insufficiently flexible and too simple. Nor is there an equivalence between this typology and religion: some Islamist violent extremist groups are strategic, and many non-Islamist groups are utopian. Instead, as we discuss next, a more complex typology is required.

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PART II

# Testing Theories and Evidence in Kenya, Nigeria and Syria/Iraq

Islamist violent extremism may represent a challenge to conventional thinking about conflict. But, what *is* distinctive about violent Islamist extremism in conflict situations, and what features does it share with other ideologies or movements involved in conflicts? To address this core issue, this question was tested in three country case studies: Kenya, Nigeria and Syria/Iraq. The countries were selected to enable a comprehensive comparison of a wide range of Islamist violent extremist groups and non-Islamist groups including historical and more contemporary groups, focusing particularly on how these groups engage with, interact with and influence or are influenced by conflict. The country contexts reflect a broad spectrum of conflict dynamics with each case study at a different stage or level of conflict: Kenya situated at the lowest end of the spectrum with Syria/Iraq at the highest. The varying country contexts also pose different implications for methods of intervention, as outlined in the final part of this book.

From the literature, we theorised that conflict actors in this study could be situated along a spectrum—as Piazza's (2006) helpful typology conceptualises—with strategic groups (nationalist in orientation, materialistic/political in aims, instrumentalist in tactics and recruiting rather than radicalising followers) at one end of the spectrum to "cosmic" groups (with transnational orientation, ideological aims, expressive tactics, radicalising or attracting followers through proselytisation) at the other. Figure II.1 shows this theory in schematic form.

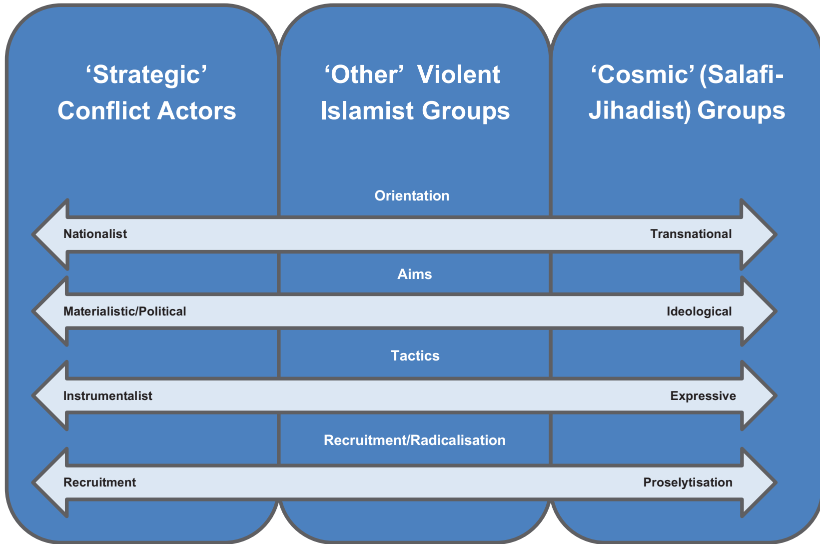


**Fig. II.1** Hypothetical Scheme of Conflict Actors

To test the theory, we analysed and compared different Islamist violent extremist groups and non-Islamist groups active in each country exploring their aims, motivations, objectives, drivers of radicalisation or recruitment, use of violence and tactics and their relationship with conflict. These case studies are discussed individually within this section, each case study composing a separate section, and following a similar structure to facilitate comparisons. Each chapter sets out the background to the conflict and the main groups involved, then examines the aims and objectives of the groups, the drivers and enablers for radicalisation and recruitment, and the tactics and methods employed by these groups including how they have influenced and responded to conflict. Table II.1 sets out the characteristics of the groups we have considered.

**Table II.1** Characteristics of Militant Groups in Syria/Iraq, Nigeria and Kenya

| | *Aims and Objectives* | *Drivers and Motivations* | *Structure and Demographic Composition* | *Tactics and Methods (especially violence)* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| ISIL | 1. Establish/ expand proto-state ("Caliphate")<br>2. Dominate other opposition groups<br>3. Project power globally<br>4. Destroy or remove non-Sunni populations from its territory | Regain Sunni Arab hegemony. Pursue "global jihad". Defend against/attack Shia and others. Absence of alternatives. Earn a wage | Sophisticated proto-state with bureaucracy, military, etc. Has overseas provinces bound to it by oath. Was set up by foreign fighters but leadership now mostly indigenous | Notorious for performative violence. Capable of sophisticated military operations; also pragmatic in withdrawal from hard-to-defend areas. Extensive use of suicide bombers |
| JaN | 1. Defeat Assad regime<br>2. Attack Western enemies<br>3. Establish emirate and govern on "Al Qaida model"<br>NB: contention between opposing factions on whether globalist or nationalist strategy is needed | Attack impious regime. Defend against opposing forces. Establish Islamic law in Syria. Pursue "global jihad" | Elaborate structure based on "Al Qaida model". Active across Syria but most successful in Aleppo and Idlib governorates. More distinctively Syrian than ISIL. Working in collaboration with other opposition groups as pragmatic (possibly short-term) measure | Extensive use of "conventional" military techniques and suicide bombings to attack regime directly and seize/hold territory in alliance with other groups<br>Plans "external operations" |

(continued)

**Table II.1** (continued)

| | *Aims and Objectives* | *Drivers and Motivations* | *Structure and Demographic Composition* | *Tactics and Methods (especially violence)* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| AaS | 1. Defeat Assad regime<br>2. Establish new state in Syria with Shariah law (but has agreed to secular constitution) | Defeat impious and brutal regime. Defend against opposing forces (including ISIL) | Has "military" and "civilian" structure. Leadership includes hardline Islamists and Syrian nationalists. Has absorbed other groups and dominates Islamic Front. Almost exclusively Syrian | Conventional military attacks. Not known to use suicide attacks |
| Shia Militias | 1. Protect Shia populations<br>2. Attack ISIL<br>3. Defend Shia hegemony in Iraq and Assad regime in Syria<br>4. Promote Iran's geopolitical interests | Protect Shias against ISIL and other Sunni groups. Loyalty to Shia religious leadership in Iraq and Iran. Earn a wage | Comprise a wide range of groups, from Hizbollah—Lebanon-based militant group and political party—to Iraqi militias that have been absorbed into the state's security forces. In Iraq have formed hashd shaabi ("popular mobilisation forces"). Leadership ranks include powerful politicians; rank-and-file reflect broad range of demographics in the region. Many if not most are backed by Iran | Tactics range from sophisticated counter-insurgency (e.g. Hizbollah) to brutal urban warfare. Widespread criminality (such as kidnapping for ransom) in Iraq |

(continued)

**Table II.1** (continued)

| | *Aims and Objectives* | *Drivers and Motivations* | *Structure and Demographic Composition* | *Tactics and Methods (especially violence)* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Boko Haram | Originally to promote a particular form of Islam and reinstate the Caliphate. Current aims:<br>1. Create an alternative to the Nigerian state, which is at times conveyed as a Caliphate<br>2. Remove Western influence in north-eastern Nigeria, particularly on the education system | Restore Caliphate, sense of injustice, absence of alternatives | Based on a franchise system with an overarching leader and subgroups that operate autonomously. Breakaway groups have also formed. Early members were clerics, students and professionals. Many fighters have signed up in response to the lack of opportunities and/or heavy-handed government responses, some are now also coerced | Initially very targeted. Attacks have broadened to include Muslim as well as Christian targets. Raids on villages have killed numerous civilians. Suicide attacks have also become common |
| MEND | 1. Expose the exploitation and oppression of Niger Delta populations linked to the oil industry<br>2. Increase the benefits from the oil industry for the region through royalties, employment, infrastructure and compensation for damage caused by oil companies | Exploitation and oppression, violent repression of protests, devastation of livelihoods by the oil industry | An umbrella group that brought together different ethnic groups. An overarching leader with many subgroups working towards the same goal | Sabotage, theft, property destruction, guerrilla warfare and kidnapping |

(continued)

**Table II.1** (continued)

| | *Aims and Objectives* | *Drivers and Motivations* | *Structure and Demographic Composition* | *Tactics and Methods (especially violence)* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Al Shabaab | 1. Push Kenyan (& AU) forces out of Somalia and remove Somali TFG<br>2. Establish Islamist state in Somalia<br>3. Destabilise Kenya's north-east and Coast to force KDF out, increase recruitment for Somalia, and expand desired state to these Muslim-majority areas of Kenya to defend Muslims and Somalis (also linked to historical grievances re: "Greater Somalia")<br>N.B. Former divisions between Somali nationalists and global jihadists | 1. Permissive enabling environment of vacuum in state security and service provision and socialisation of conflict over decades to achieve social, economic and political goals applies to all groups<br>2. Somali and Kenyan leaders supportive of Salafi-jihadist cause (but on local/regional scale)<br>3. This has influenced some followers, but inextricably tied to discrimination and marginalisation of Muslim identity in Kenya, pressure to defend fellow Muslims from repression by unrepresentative Christian Kikuyu state, lack of socio-economic opportunities, and inter-communal tensions which Al Shabaab has exploited<br>4. Sense of belonging<br>5. Moderate established Islamic elders not achieving much—youth mobilised to more extreme action | 1. Highly bureaucratic and hierarchical in Somalia in line with attempted proto-state, more cellular and networked in Kenya through underground affiliates and community movements<br>2. Exclusively Muslim, significant proportion Kenyan-Somali from north-east or Eastleigh and Swahili Muslim from Coast<br>3. Increasingly wider cross-section of Kenyan ethnic groups from across the country beyond just these core areas<br>4. No associated political movement or front | 1. In Somalia, combination of conventional military and guerrilla operations, expressive and instrumentalist violence, strategic withdrawals from hard-to-defend settlements<br>2. In Kenya, largely guerrilla tactics by roving bands in north-east and Coast who attack and withdraw to "safe havens"<br>3. Individual terrorist attacks tend to be with small arms or grenades and occasionally small IEDs<br>4. Little use of suicide attacks in Kenya yet compared to Somalia, but may be on the rise<br>5. Has killed a number of Muslims, but increasingly seeking to separate out Christians for death from Muslims as part of divisive strategy in north-east and Coast |

(continued)

**Table II.1** (continued)

| | *Aims and Objectives* | *Drivers and Motivations* | *Structure and Demographic Composition* | *Tactics and Methods (especially violence)* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| MRC | 1. Secession of Coast province from Kenya (historical grievances re: coastal autonomy)<br>2. Protection of coastal ethnic groups (including majority Muslims) from marginalisation and discrimination by "outsiders" (up-country groups and state)<br>3. Despite protection of Muslims, secular agenda and locally focused | 1. Many of the same drivers as followers of Al Shabaab and Kenyan affiliates'—especially marginalisation and lack of sense of "Kenyanness", lack of opportunities and land-use rights, and perceived interference and repression by up-country unrepresentative state<br>2. Defence of fellow community on ethnic over religious grounds features more highly<br>3. Sense of belonging | 1. Primarily political community-based movement with small (but potentially growing) militant wing<br>2. Majority Muslim, but sizeable Christian and traditional religion minorities<br>3. Almost exclusively focused on coastal ethnic groups, including Swahilis and Arabs | 1. Predominantly non-violent protests<br>2. Asymmetric attacks on security forces with small arms have caused small losses of life so far<br>3. May be training in safe haven to become more sophisticated and deadly |
| Mungiki | 1. Defend rights and traditional culture of disadvantaged members of ethnic group (Kikuyu)—historical grievances from ill-balanced post-Mau Mau conflict settlement<br>2. Redistribute wealth and opportunities from elite Kikuyu in power<br>3. Ensure survival through organised crime | 1. Sense of belonging<br>2. Mobilised to political violence by political leaders of ethnic group (Kikuyu)<br>3. Lack of socio-economic opportunities—greater gain through militia/gang<br>4. Forced participation | 1. Cellular and disaggregated with past tenuous connections to local politicians<br>2. Mainly disadvantaged Kikuyu from Nairobi slums and Rift Valley towns | 1. Unsophisticated roving swarms of attackers more akin to gang violence, using light arms and machetes but inflicting brutal individual-level violence and willingness to use mass rape and forcible circumcision as demonstrations of power<br>2. Has targeted other ethnic groups' civilians and own community's civilians as well as state representatives |

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**Table II.1** (continued)

| | *Aims and Objectives* | *Drivers and Motivations* | *Structure and Demographic Composition* | *Tactics and Methods (especially violence)* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mau Mau | 1. No uniform objectives<br>2. Reclaim land rights and accessibility for ethnic group (Kikuyu) use from "outsiders" (European settlers and state) and elite Kikuyu<br>3. Reduce marginalisation by central state and increase political inclusivity and autonomy | 1. Decreasing access to land due to outsiders domination, thus lack of opportunities for development and maturity<br>2. Discrimination by state and state repression<br>3. Sense of belonging<br>4. Moderate elders not taking action, youth more mobilised to violence<br>5. Forced participation | 1. Loose confederation of independent bands and movements<br>2. Some attempted hierarchy, but mainly cellular<br>3. Loose connection to wider political nationalist movement, but little coordination or direction<br>4. Mainly Kikuyu and related ethnic groups (Embu, Meru) from rural highlands, Rift Valley and Nairobi slums | 1. Independent bands of fighters largely uncoordinated<br>2. Operated from safe havens using light arms<br>3. Leadership attempted to keep tight control on use of violence, in terms of avoiding unnecessary civilian casualties and approving deaths of elders, but difficult with disaggregated movement<br>4. Targeted state security forces, places of economic value (farms, etc.) and fellow community (Kikuyu "loyalists") in particular—the latter tended to involve the bloodiest encounters |

CHAPTER 2

# Kenya: More Local than Global

**Abstract** The Kenyan case compares the operations and supporters of Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin (Al Shabaab) in Kenya and affiliated or sympathetic groups such as Al-Hijra—with two contemporary groups (the armed wing of the Mombasa Republic Council (MRC) and the Mungiki) as well as a historical group (the Mau Mau movement). Islamist violent extremism in Kenya cannot be understood without taking into account the dynamics in neighbouring Somalia, where Al Shabaab has been conducting an Islamist insurgency for several years. However, there are similarities in the aims, motivations and behaviour of Islamist and non-Islamist conflict groups, and the factors behind these similarities are mostly specific to Kenya.

**Keywords** Al Shabaab · Mombasa Republican Council · Mau Mau Identity · Marginalisation

## Introduction: Background to the Conflict and the Main Groups

This case study considers the Salafi-jihadist groups Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin (Al Shabaab) and its Kenyan affiliates on the one hand and, on the other, three non-Islamist violent groups active in Kenya both past and present: the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC), Mungiki and Mau Mau movement. In general, conflict in Kenya associated with

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A. Glazzard et al., *Conflict, Violent Extremism and Development*,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-51484-0_2

Islamist violent extremist groups has been more similar than different from conflict associated with non-Islamist violent extremist groups in terms of these groups' objectives, drivers and tactics.

### *Al Shabaab and Al-Hijra*

The distinctiveness of Islamist violent extremist groups in their interactions with conflict in Kenya cannot be understood without taking into account dynamics in neighbouring Somalia, where Al Shabaab has been conducting an Islamist insurgency since 2006. These dynamics have strongly influenced the aims, recruitment strategies and tactics of both Islamist violent extremist and other armed groups in Kenya, and must be carefully considered when assessing the similarities and differences between these groups.

Al Shabaab emerged as the most militant faction of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in 2006–2007, and gradually spread into north-east Kenya from the late 2000s, building upon insurgency and governance structures designed to create an Islamist state in the chaos left by the collapse of the Somali state in the early 1990s (Hansen 2013). In Kenya, domestic Islamist extremism also has a well-established recent history, dating back to the 1980s and 1990s, with strong cross-border connections to Al Shabaab, the ICU and its predecessor al Ittihad al Islamiya. In 2012, the Muslim Youth Centre officially became affiliated with Al Shabaab. Also known as Al-Hijra, the Muslim Youth Centre was formally founded in 2008 as a community organisation in Nairobi's Majengo slum. This reinforced its role as a recruiter to conflict in Somalia and signified its growing involvement in small-scale attacks within Kenya. Yet beyond this, in Kenya in general, indigenous, formalised Islamist violent extremist groups have been less common and less directly engaged in conflict than in Somalia (Oded 2000; Anzalone 2012; ICG 2012, 2014; Nzes 2014).

### *The MRC, Mungiki and Mau Mau Movement*

The MRC officially formed in 1999 as a multi-religious separatist movement in Kenya's Coast Province. It has campaigned since 2008 for the Coast's secession from Kenya, with a militant wing emerging ahead of the 2013 general election (Oded 2013; Botha 2014). Half a century earlier, the Mau Mau movement of the 1950s emerged in colonial Kenya

as a militant splinter from more moderate Kikuyu elites and Kenyan anti-colonial nationalists operating against the central state and Kikuyu "loyalists" (Anderson 2005; Branch 2009). Following independence, a legacy of unresolved issues from the Kikuyu civil war between Mau Mau peasant fighters and loyalist elites endured, the former feeling that the latter had benefited to a greater extent from the independence settlement. Since its emergence in the late 1980s, Mungiki has framed its purpose as defending the rights of disadvantaged Kikuyu against other ethnic groups and central government elites (Anderson 2002; Kagwanja 2003; Rasmussen 2010; Oloo 2010).

## Aims and Objectives of the Groups

While all of the groups under consideration emerged for different reasons, they share certain aspects in common in terms of their aims, objectives and narrative framing. The aims in Kenya of the leaders of Al Shabaab and its affiliates, while not entirely clear or explicit, appear in some respects to be influenced by a regional Salafi-jihadist agenda. This agenda has become more apparent after Kenya's military role began in Somalia in 2011 and after former Al Shabaab leader Ahmed Abdi Godane's 2013 internal purge of Somali nationalist-orientated leaders. Previously, Al Shabaab operations in Kenya's north-east and coast regions had primarily appeared to be positioned as a means to the end of supporting the group's fight for a caliphate in Somalia. Since 2011, these operations have assumed a further aim, forming part of a broader jihadist project of "liberating" surrounding Muslim lands from non-Muslim "occupation" and avenging historical injustices (Botha 2014; Anderson and McKnight 2015).

Such aims, infused as they are with religious ideology, appear to be those guiding Al Shabaab leaders such as Sheikh Ahmad Iman Ali (who since 2012 has led the group's battalion of Kenyan fighters in Somalia). The same approach appears to guide Al Shabaab's affiliate Al-Hijra, though due to the latter's highly clandestine nature its aims are difficult to determine (Anzalone 2012; Botha 2013; Nzes 2014).[1] Given this lack of clarity, it is difficult to establish whether these groups' religiously focused pronouncements are committed objectives or simply framing devices for recruitment. Either way, the religious component is significant, and religious ideology has not featured nearly as prominently in the planning or rhetoric of the leaders of the MRC, Mau Mau or Mungiki.

However, in other ways there are similarities between Islamist and non-Islamist conflict actors in Kenya. Indeed, in addition to the religiously focused ideological element, the aims of Al Shabaab and its affiliates appear to be linked to traditional power projection and the goals of gaining and holding territory, pushing an enemy army out of one's sphere of influence (in this case Kenya's army out of southern Somalia), ensuring the movement's survival by any means, and defending local communities that the movements claim to stand for (Muslims and Somalis) from state oppression. Notably, the non-Islamist conflict groups of Kenya's past and present also shared these latter two goals (Kanogo 1987; Berman and Lonsdale 1992; Anderson 2002; Kagwanja 2003).

Of particular relevance, Al Shabaab's articulated aim of carving out an area of north-east Kenya to free it from the corruption and perceived injustices inflicted by the Kenyan state chimes closely with the MRC's secessionist aims. A key difference, however, is that the MRC's autonomous end-goal is secular and founded on localised coastal identity, whereas Al Shabaab and Al-Hijra's is theocratic and based on Muslim identity. This has also influenced Al Shabaab and its affiliates' recruitment practices, which encompass more ethnic groups than the other groups examined—and greater invocation of violent jihad alongside local grievances as a means to motivate followers (Oded 2013; Botha 2014).

## Recruitment and Motivation

The prominence of protecting Islam and redressing Muslim grievances espoused in Salafi-jihadist terms in Al Shabaab's recruiting narratives is unique among conflict actors in Kenya. In particular, a small number of radical Kenyan clerics propagating such messages have been the primary recruiting channel since the mid-2000s for mobilising Kenyans to travel and fight in Somalia. What remains unclear, however, is whether followers are attracted more by this ideological rhetoric or are attracted on identity grounds by the duty to defend fellow Muslims (ICG 2012; Botha 2014, 2015).

Although not to the same level as in the recruiting narratives of Al Shabaab and affiliates, religious ideology has also infused Mau Mau and Mungiki's aims. Yet this has occurred mainly due to the extent to which religion is bound up with local Kikuyu (Christian) culture and traditions of community solidarity (Furedi 1989; Anderson 2005; Oloo 2010). Similarly, for some of the MRC's leaders and followers, Islam has been

more a marker of a marginalised coastal identity than a guiding ideology in and of itself, with both leaders and followers having Christian and traditional religious backgrounds too. Meanwhile, in contrast to the MRC, Al Shabaab's members are generally conservative in their views of Muslim exclusivity and more prone to viewing their religion as being at threat from the Kenyan government (Botha 2014, 2015). Indeed, research into Al Shabaab and the MRC (Botha 2014, 2015) found that while the latter is religiously diverse but ethnically narrow, the former is exclusively Muslim but comprises many different tribes. 87% of Al Shabaab members identified religion as their reason for joining the group, and 97% considered their religion to be under threat—suggesting that religious identity can be both a powerful attraction and motivator. But Botha's study of the MRC suggests that ethnicity may be equally powerful, depending on the situation and the cause.

However, beyond religious ideology, there are other drivers of Al Shabaab and its affiliates' recruitment practices at individual, communal and structural levels that are consistent with those that have encouraged participation in the MRC, Mungiki and Mau Mau. Indeed, across Kenya, organised crime and violence perpetrated to achieve political, social and economic goals have flourished and become normalised in a vacuum of permissibility since the late colonial era due to a failure of governance. This has been further fed by the politicisation of a range of community grievances due to the fractured nature of Kenyan politics along ethnic and religious lines, corruption and other systemic facilitators (Ndungu 2010; Oloo 2010; Kenya Transitional Justice Network 2013).[2] These grievances have included land-use rights; repressive and discriminatory state policies and actions; a lack of opportunities for youth; and ethnic or religious hostility towards a politically and economically dominant group (Berman and Lonsdale 1992; ICG 2012; Rift Valley Institute 2013; Botha 2014; Thompson 2015). These grievances, rather than ideology, may be more influential with many Kenyan followers of Al Shabaab and its affiliates (Botha 2014, 2015).

The profile of Al Shabaab and its affiliates' followers reflect these wide-ranging drivers. Somalis and Muslims from the north-east, Nairobi's slums and the coast have traditionally constituted the majority of recruits to these groups. Yet, in recent years, an increasing proportion has also come from a more diverse range of ethnic groups. This is suggestive of the influence of broader push factors within these three areas. This, in turn, has allowed Al Shabaab and its affiliates to draw

participants from across broader areas of Kenya than the more localised MRC (drawing from coastal groups), Mau Mau (attracting recruits from the central highlands and Rift Valley Kikuyu) and Mungiki (recruiting mainly from the Rift Valley and Nairobi Kikuyu) (Botha 2014).

In terms of foreign fighters, while over a thousand are believed to have fought with Al Shabaab in Somalia since the mid-2000s (in declining numbers since 2012), mainly from the Somali diaspora, far fewer are thought to have fought within Kenya (Ford 2010; Meleagrou-Hitchens et al. 2012; Pantucci 2013; Hansen 2014). Here, it is Somalis from Somalia that represent the dominant "foreign" element in Kenya, but this is not unprecedented: this has been the case since before the Shifta War (1963–1967), a secessionist conflict in northern Kenya. This less international profile is in part due to the greater intensity of conflict in Somalia than Kenya—the latter attracting fewer fighters. Yet it may also reflect the fact that Al Shabaab's propaganda has primarily purposefully focused on local Kenyan grievances and inter-communal tensions (Anzalone 2012; Botha 2013; Anderson and McKnight 2015; Human Rights Watch 2015). This reflects the exploitation of local grievances to mobilise groups to violence which has been a tradition in Kenya since before independence. The Mau Mau and Mungiki are cases in point, drawing on a patchwork of micro-level tensions in their recruitment strategies (Furedi 1989; Berman and Lonsdale 1992; Branch 2009; Oloo 2010).

## Tactics and Methods

Shifting conflict dynamics in Somalia has shaped Al Shabaab's operations in Kenya more than those of any other group. Indeed, Kenya's 2011 incursion into Somalia and battlefield successes by AMISOM forces appear to have played a large part in hastening a shift within Al Shabaab's leadership from a predominantly Somali nationalist to a more internationalist jihadist orientation. They have also hastened the group's expansion into Kenya to relieve the growing military pressure on the group at home in Somalia. This has had significant implications in terms of the tactics and operations used by the group on its new battlefield (Bruton and Williams 2014; Bryden 2014; Menkhaus 2014; Hansen 2014; Anderson and McKnight 2015).

Most significantly, in its embrace of decentralised guerrilla warfare and cellular terrorism in Kenya (unlike its more bureaucratic military operations in Somalia), Al Shabaab and its affiliates have come more closely

to resemble Mau Mau and Mungiki's loose structures and roving independent bands. This reflects the different security and conflict dynamics present in Somalia relative to those in operation in Kenya—and the adaptation required of Al Shabaab to these diverse conditions (Kanogo 1987; Berman and Lonsdale 1992; Rasmussen 2010; Marchal 2011; Hansen 2013; Nzes 2014; Lia 2015).

Meanwhile, every group in this study has engaged significantly in organised crime. Since its expansion into Kenya, Al Shabaab has depended on exploitation of criminal activities in the country, from protection rackets in Eastleigh, an ethnic Somali-majority neighbourhood in Nairobi, to the taxation of smuggled contraband in the north-east (Vilkko 2011; Keatinge 2014; Maguire and Haenlein 2015). Similarly, many Mau Mau fighters either passed through or were recruited from organised crime groups in Nairobi. Mungiki too has effectively acted as an organised crime group in a number of respects, exploiting similar protection rackets in Nairobi's slums to those run by Al Shabaab in Somalia.[3] The MRC, for its part, is believed to be linked to the rampant criminal trafficking of contraband in and around Mombasa (Anderson 2005; Branch 2009; Rasmussen 2012; Kisiangani 2012).

The human impact of each of these conflict actors is also broadly comparable in most cases. Former Al Shabaab leader Godane's greater acceptance of the "takfiri" ethos of Salafi-jihadist groups that legitimises the killing of other Muslims caused large numbers of civilian and security-force casualties in Somalia (around 4000 killed and 4000 wounded since 2007). Yet within Kenya, Al Shabaab's increasing attacks since 2008 have accounted for a lower total of 500 deaths and 1000 wounded by one estimate, with the group increasingly seeking to avoid Muslim casualties and instead predominantly targeting Christians to further stoke religious and ethnic tensions (Bryden 2014; Pate et al. 2015). Casualties at the hands of Mau Mau from 1952–1956 and Mungiki in the 2007–2008 elections violence have also been much higher than Al Shabaab's (Elkins 2005; Anderson 2005; Branch 2009; Oloo 2010). The exception is the MRC whose militant wing attacks—mainly on security forces—have been far less frequent or fatal. Its leadership contends that it remains a non-violent movement (Kisiangani 2012).

Similarities also extend to the tactics employed in the conduct of conflict by the groups under consideration. With the exception of the planning and scale of financing required for Al Shabaab's 2013 Westgate mall attack, most attacks by Al Shabaab and its affiliates in Kenya have

been similar to those conducted by non-Islamist actors in their use of small arms, grenades and small IEDs. Additionally, while Al Shabaab's use of suicide terrorism has grown increasingly commonplace since 2006 in Somalia, no successful suicide attack has yet taken place in Kenya in the same period, reflecting either a conscious choice of different tactics or a tighter security environment (Marchal 2011; Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism 2015). Journalistic sources, however, suggests the latter, reporting that attempted suicide attacks orchestrated by Al Shabaab may have increased since 2014 (Avraham 2015; Bluwstein 2015; Odula et al. 2015).

## Conclusion

Ideologically, there are clear differences between Salafi-jihadist leaders of Al Shabaab on the one hand and the aims of MRC, Mungiki and the Mau Mau movement on the other. Nevertheless, Islamist violent extremist leaders also seek traditional power objectives like control of territory. Moreover, in Kenya at least, this has not manifested in especially unique behaviour, such as significant "foreign fighter" contingents or use of suicide attacks. Historically, Mungiki and Mau Mau have indeed been more violent than Al Shabaab within Kenya.

These differences have not resulted in dissimilar recruitment narratives or motivations for followers to join. In fact, the plethora of non-religious motives for Kenyans joining Al Shabaab and its affiliates, and the instability created by the ideological gap between followers and leaders is comparable to the fragmented, heterogeneous nature of Mau Mau and Mungiki. Motives and ambitions for the MRC have generally been more homogenous. Islamist violent extremist groups in Kenya have certainly been able to recruit from a wider geographic and ethnic profile than non-Islamist violent extremist groups, but this probably reflects grievances more associated with Muslim identity rather than ideology.

Beyond a small hard core of ideologues, there may therefore be room for negotiation, disengagement and rehabilitation of both more pragmatic leaders and followers not so wedded to global jihadism as an aim itself. But, far more must be done to create the environment of trust and engagement on key issues of grievance—such as Muslim/Somali discrimination, marginalisation, land-use rights, and inter-communal tensions—before the Kenyan ranks of these Islamist violent extremist groups can

be reduced and other Kenyans dissuaded from taking their place. Thus, while interventions must take into account dynamics in Somalia in terms of Al Shabaab's leadership and fortunes there, separate measures specific to Kenya will be needed irrespectively. Even if Al Shabaab is militarily defeated as a fully fledged insurgency in south-central Somalia, in terms of mitigating Islamist violent extremist conflict in Kenya, such a victory may be "irrelevant to Kenya's ability to make a political settlement with its Somali and wider Muslim communities at home" (Anderson and McKnight 2015). Overall, the need is to create an environment of trust and engagement on key issues of grievance to tackle the recruitment base of violent Islamist groups.[4]

## Notes

1. The important point that local Kenyan Islamist extremist leaders may not have a fully articulated set of aims and strategy for achieving them through violence, but rather may be engaging expressive violence was made in conversation with DfID and FCO experts in Nairobi: Expert comments at joint DfID-FCO Workshop on Conflict and Countering Violent Extremism in Kenya, Old Admiralty Building-Nairobi, 29 September 2015.
2. Expert comments at joint DfID-FCO Workshop, 29 Sep 2015.
3. Expert comments at joint DfID-FCO Workshop, 29 Sep 2015.
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CHAPTER 3

# Nigeria: A Religious Framing of Grievances

**Abstract** The Nigeria case study compares Boko Haram with the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). Boko Haram and MEND are both violent movements that emerged from the socially and economically marginalised regions of Nigeria. Both groups attract recruits by exploiting socio-economic and political grievances, but Boko Haram's religious framing of these grievances creates space for internal divergence and contestation. Beneath the religious framing, Boko Haram is, like MEND, a response to and sustained by chronic governance failures in Nigeria. These failures will need to be addressed for Boko Haram to be neutralised. The fundamental nature of Boko Haram's challenge to the Nigerian state means that its leadership is unlikely to be prepared to negotiate on its sacred aims and values. Its lack of cohesion may however present entry points to weaken the group. Boko Haram has already suffered one significant splintering: more may be possible.

**Keywords** Nigeria · Boko Haram · Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta

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A. Glazzard et al., *Conflict, Violent Extremism and Development*,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-51484-0_3

## Introduction: Background to the Conflict and the Main Groups

Boko Haram and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) emerged in different parts of Nigeria, at different times, as the products of different circumstances.

## Boko Haram

Boko Haram—whose official name was Jamaat Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Dawah wal-Jihad ("Group of the People of the Sunnah for Proselytization and Jihad") before it was changed to Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiyyah ("West Africa Province") when it declared allegiance to ISIL—was launched as an opposition movement in Northern Nigeria in the early 2000s. Its leader Mohamed Yusuf opposed what he saw as the corruption of Nigerian society and the concentration of wealth in the hands of a small, southern Christian elite. His proposed solution was a state under Islamic law, drawing on the region's history as an "Islamic land" under the Kanem-Bornu Empire (c.1068–1900 CE) and Sokoto Caliphate (1809–1903 CE). He also drew on two very different contemporary traditions in Islam: Shiism and Salafism.

Boko Haram was originally a mostly non-violent religious revivalist group seeking to establish a purer alternative to Christian-dominated Nigerian society. However, Boko Haram was radicalised by a combination of excessive, militarised responses from the Nigerian state and internal changes, of which the most important was Abubakar Shekau's accession to the leadership after the death in police custody of the movement's founder. Under the pressure of conflict, Boko Haram became progressively more violent and indiscriminate so that it is now, along with ISIL), one of the most lethal terrorist groups in the world. It also holds sway over large areas of north-eastern Nigeria, although it has also lost territory to a multi-national regional force.

## Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND)

In contrast, MEND is a coalition fighting the perceived exploitation and oppression of Niger Delta populations linked to the public–private partnerships created to process and export oil from Nigeria (Courson 2009). It has sought to attract world attention to the environmental degradation

and underdevelopment of the Niger Delta and the lack of benefits accruing to the population from the oil economy. The contrast between the two groups is stark, but this case study compares them in order to identify how Islamist violent extremist behaviour differs from that of other violent political groups in the region, and what explains those differences.

## Aims and Objectives of the Groups

The stated aims of Boko Haram were initially firmly entrenched in ideology (defined in this study as a worldview or set of beliefs that drives individual or collective action). Boko Haram's creation was motivated by its leaders' conviction that the Nigerian state has become filled with social vices, and that "the best thing for a devout Muslim to do was to "migrate" from the morally bankrupt society to a secluded place and establish an ideal Islamic society devoid of political corruption and moral deprivation" (Onuoha 2010). Ideology is often understood to be a unifying factor, bringing people together on the basis of a shared belief. In the case of Boko Haram, however, ideology was contentious from the outset and has changed dramatically over time. In its early phases, Boko Haram was a largely non-violent group, although it became increasingly assertive in its challenge to the Nigerian state. Mohamed Yusuf promoted specific views on education, healthcare, employment and government. However, he did not live according to the principles he espoused (Onuoha 2010). Yusuf's death in police custody in 2009 following a heavy-handed government crackdown sparked a new phase in the group's evolution. This saw a more violent organisation emerge under its new leader Abubakar Shekau: from 2011, it mounted an intensive campaign of violence against the Nigerian state, winning and holding territory in the process. The shift has also been evident in the targets of attacks: Muslim communities were originally forewarned if attacks were planned in their areas, but after Yusuf's death attacks became more indiscriminate. Its change in strategy reflected a more militant ideology, reflected by its declarations of allegiance first to Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and then to ISIL. Some Boko Haram fighters have been trained in AQIM camps, and the group made an offer of weapons and other support (AFP 2012). However, despite rebranding themselves as the West African Province in mid-2015, there is no evidence of material support in either direction between Boko Haram and ISIL: some commentators argue that this was a mere rebranding designed to increase access to resources and publicity (Al Jazeera 2015).

However, Boko Haram's ideology is not only dynamic but also a factor in the fractiousness of the movement. Under Abubakar Shekau's leadership, there have been internal divisions over ideology as well as tactics, resulting in the emergence of the splinter-group Ansaru, which condemned attacks against Muslims and innocent non-Muslims and vowed to "restore the dignity of black Africans" (Sahara Reporters 2012). Although Shekau had always been part of the leadership, many of the older members saw him as too extreme (Zenn 2012). While Shekau took the group in a new direction, many remained loyal to the original aims and objectives set forth by Yusuf.

In contrast, MEND's ideology was a source of strength, giving the group a clear focus and defined and localised aims which encouraged cohesion—despite the breadth of the coalition which brought together many different ethnic groups. These remained unified by a common view of the grievances experienced in the region and a desire for equality and social justice. MEND's violent strategy was consistent with its aims, resulting in the loss of a quarter of Nigeria's daily oil exports (Courson 2009). Its political strategy was equally consistent, as it began to articulate its demands to the Nigerian government for resource control, constitutional rights and measures to mitigate social marginalisation, political repression and environmental degradation. The Nigerian response since 2006 has been to vacillate between a securitised response and the offer of amnesties (Boas 2012).

MEND's narrative is explicitly based on grievances, whereas Boko Haram has subordinated grievances to religious and cultural opposition to the state. Religion—or more accurately a religious framing of the conflict—clearly divides the two groups ideologically. What they have in common, however, is that whatever the framing, both groups responded to and seek to correct social, political and economic grievances in marginalised regions far removed from the centres of power. While Boko Haram appears to have retreated from its grievance-oriented origins, its evolution into an ultra-violent ideology—in 2014 it overtook ISIL as the world's most violent terrorist group (Institute for Economics and Peace 2015)—is also the product of governance failure, as Nigeria's excessive militarised responses, combined with its failure to respond to marginalisation of the country's north, radicalised the group (Comolli 2015).

The activities of both groups are instrumental, in that they are designed to achieve the respective motivations and aims. This suggests that both groups act rationally. However, this is not how Boko Haram has been perceived by outsiders, especially in the West, and this perception derives from

the relationship between ideology and action. The demands of MEND were supported by international advocacy concerning the damage caused by the oil industry, so their demands were seen by many as justified and their tactics as rational—even if there was strong disapproval of the latter. Many international NGOs have been outspoken about the ecological and social damage caused by oil companies and the need for reparations. Even individuals who were kidnapped by MEND reportedly understood its rationale for violence. In contrast, because Boko Haram frames its programme in religious and cultural terms, it tends to be perceived as irrational, uncompromising, or even psychopathic (Comolli 2015).

## Tactics and Methods

There are some superficial similarities between the violent behaviour of the two groups. Boko Haram's ultra-violence and religious and cultural framing of activities do not necessarily mean irrationality. Both groups embraced guerrilla warfare, attacking political targets and Nigeria's security forces, using tactics such as kidnapping and choosing symbolic targets that expressed their respective ideologies (churches and oil installations for Boko Haram and MEND, respectively) (Courson 2009). Both employed a franchise system, delegating operations to semi-autonomous sub-groups (Osumah 2013). However, such similarities conceal fundamental differences. MEND's choice of targets was more clearly instrumental: despite occasional bomb attacks in major cities, MEND mostly restricted its attacks to the oil industry and the government's supporting infrastructure in the Delta. It has generally avoided targeting civilians (although MEND mounted occasional attacks on hotels, cargo ships and fishing vessels). It did not embraced the tactic of suicide bombing.[1] Nor did it seek to acquire and hold territory.

By contrast, while Boko Haram initially targeted government forces and Christian institutions in northern Nigeria, its broadening of targets particularly after Shekau's accession in 2010 resulted in less clarity over who exactly were its enemies. For example, in May 2011 a Muslim cleric who had criticised Boko Haram's killing dozens of security agents and politicians was himself murdered. This marked the beginning of a campaign of political murders targeting Boko Haram's critics. At the same time, the group's strategic shift to seeking territorial gains led to raids on villages that resulted in substantial civilian deaths. In the same year, the group mounted its first suicide-bomb attacks, targeting the National

Police Headquarters and UN Headquarters in Abuja, presumably in emulation of Al Qaida, with which Boko Haram was then in alliance. In 2011 and 2012, around twenty suicide attacks were launched against religious (both Christian and Muslim), military and other government targets (Roggio 2012). In 2014, it mounted 36 suicide attacks (Institute for Economics and Peace 2015). From 2014, Boko Haram has also used women as suicide bombers as it has adapted to dealing with a more effective military response from Nigeria and a multi-lateral military force. This suggests a tactical pragmatism, as women in the movement had traditionally been assigned purely domestic roles in accordance with the group's strict Salafist interpretation of Islamic law (Pearson 2015).

More recently, Boko Haram has also developed its ability to maintain a sustained battle against the Nigerian armed forces. In addition to sporadic attacks and raids, it has fought against the military to gain territory and hold ground. Although it has since been pushed out of some areas by a regional military coalition, by early 2015 it controlled around 20,000 square miles of north-eastern Nigeria and was able to launch attacks into neighbouring Cameroon and Niger. In some respects, Boko Haram's violence has therefore been successful in enabling it to conquer territory, while provoking excessive security-force responses has helped it recruit in the thousands.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that its strategy or tactics are consistently sound. For example, the group does not provide any governance structures in north-eastern Nigeria, while its excesses have alienated communities. More fundamentally, it appears to have no long-term plan. What began as an attempt to enhance social welfare has mutated into an incoherent programme, and the group's shifting allegiances appear to depend on trends in violent Islamism elsewhere. For example, following its pledge of allegiance to ISIL it reasserted its aim to establish a Caliphate, yet activities to meet the needs of supporters remain a low priority.

## Recruitment and Motivation

Boko Haram is estimated by the CIA to number around 9000, but other estimates are significantly higher. Although the leadership of Boko Haram has been drawn from Islamic clerics and students, professionals and students of tertiary institutions, many recruits join for money or because of a lack of other opportunities. For instance, lookouts are recruited to report on the military presence in towns across the north and are paid 5000 naira.[2] Boko Haram has also recruited gang members

from Diffa in Niger and other towns near the Nigerian border to carry out specific acts, demonstrating a pragmatic willingness to prioritise utility over ideological purity (Fessy 2014).

Heavy-handed government responses that victimise populations have also contributed to Boko Haram's recruitment. Establishing itself as the protector of these communities and as a fighter against the oppressive authorities, Boko Haram is able to recruit from a broad base of willing individuals. In particular, Yusuf drew on the narratives of anger at the perceived Western support of the country's south and the perceived failure of the Islamic leadership in the north (Pantucci and Jesperson 2015).

In this respect, Boko Haram appears to be similar to MEND, whose constituent groups attracted individuals in protest at the socio-economic conditions in the Delta. However, the cohesion of MEND ensured that leaders and followers were essentially united and were fighting for the same goal. Boko Haram has shown significant divisions between leaders and followers as well as a high degree of diversity among the latter. Many followers are driven by grievance and may not even understand the religious ideology propagated by the leadership.[3] Not all fighters are willing participants either, as an increasing number are coerced, at least partly as a result of the group's increasing estrangement from northern Nigeria's predominantly Muslim population. While the kidnap of the Chibok girls was widely publicised, many boys are also kidnapped to become footsoldiers of Boko Haram.[4] But others are likely to have been drawn in by the group's propaganda, which has played on a range of motivations in order to draw as many into the group as possible, using not only religious appeals but also historical narratives, such as the legacy of colonialism, and deeply rooted ethnic and cultural divisions (Barkindo 2014). While MEND members agreed on their economic grievances, in Boko Haram there is variation in motivations and worldviews which means that the group is inherently unstable. Rather than coming together on the basis of shared belief, the vehicle of Boko Haram is used by different members to pursue different goals. But the leadership has consistently framed its propaganda and recruitment drives around local issues, activating the dissatisfaction deriving from neglect by central government.

In both cases, then, militancy among followers is manifested in different ways but at root is a response to deprivation and lack of access to state services as state structures are almost non-existent in many parts of northern Nigeria. As such, it is unclear how many actively support ideals such as an Islamic Caliphate.

## Conclusion

A crucial and illuminating difference between the two groups is their potential willingness to negotiate. As its participation in Nigerian politics demonstrates, MEND is a fundamentally political actor, and one whose demands could only be granted by the Nigerian state. Although its violent tactics targeted the state, its aim was to negotiate with its enemy from a position of strength. The group's political orientation thus made it a willing party in negotiations, which resulted in a successful political settlement.

While the level of support for an Islamic Caliphate across Boko Haram is unclear, repeated calls for the Caliphate present a much more fundamental challenge to the state than MEND. States are rarely willing to relinquish territory, particularly in response to extremist violent tactics, even if this is sometimes the outcome of political processes. But the ideological claims of a Caliphate challenge not just the territorial limits but the very foundations of the Nigerian state—a state whose authority cannot be recognised by Boko Haram's leaders even if it sought to compromise, as Boko Haram claims to reject its principles (including democracy) as well as its practice. In this case, it appears that there is no space for compromise.

However, the divisions within the group, particularly the different motivations of leadership and followers, mean that some factions may be more open to negotiation. This may be particularly the case with followers who are motivated by grievances, where material or political settlement may be enticing. In contrast, leaders are unlikely to consent to the kind of settlement that worked with MEND, when an amnesty was agreed that included a stipend to militants. The amnesty was linked to their demands by contributing to their economic needs and returning some of the benefits of the oil industry to the region. This may appeal to Boko Haram members frustrated at the lack of socio-economic development in northern Nigeria.

## Notes

1. As we have noted elsewhere, suicide bombing is not—as commonly believed—restricted to Islamist or even religious groups, as demonstrated by its widespread use in previous decades by groups such as the LTTE and the PKK.
2. Interview, international police liaison officer, Abuja, August 2014.

3. Expert comments at joint DfID-FCO Workshop on Conflict and Countering Violent Extremism in Nigeria, 10 Sep 2015.
4. Ibid.

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CHAPTER 4

# Iraq and Syria: Complex, Dynamic and Divided

**Abstract** The conflicts in Iraq and Syria are the result of catastrophic governance failures as repressive regimes were either removed or came under unprecedented popular pressure. Salafi-jihadist groups have thrived in these environments. This case study focuses on three Sunni Islamist groups: ISIL, Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, comparing them with each other and with Shia militant groups including the Badr Organisation in Iraq. This study clearly illustrates the finding that Salafi-jihadists are different from other conflict actors in their global ambitions, transnational participation in conflict, cosmic framing of the conflicts and record of entering these conflicts from overseas and radicalising them. In other respects, all conflict participants appear to be broadly similar and concerned with defending their constituencies, controlling populations, acquiring resources, recruiting troops and projecting their power militarily and through propaganda. Moreover, not even violent Islamist groups have the same aims or use the same tactics.

**Keywords** Iraq · Syria · Al Qaida · Islamic State (ISIL) · Jabhat al Nusra (JaN) · Ahrar al Sham (AaS) · Shia militias

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A. Glazzard et al., *Conflict, Violent Extremism and Development*,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-51484-0_4

## Introduction: Background to the Conflict and the Main Groups

The conflicts in Syria and Iraq are the result of many interlinked factors, some of which are deeply social and historical. But the proximate cause of the current conflict in Iraq was the collapse of the Iraqi state after 2003 and the subsequent failure to re-enfranchise the Sunni Arab population, while the proximate cause of the Syrian civil war was the 2011 revolution and the Syrian regime's ultra-violent response. In both cases, Salafi-jihadist extremists—Al Qaida and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)—entered the conflicts from outside, and escalated and prolonged them. An analysis of how they have done illuminates the distinctiveness of violent Islamist extremism in conflict situations.

This case study focuses on three Sunni Islamist groups: ISIL, Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN) and Ahrar al-Sham (AaS), as well as Shia militias such as the Badr Organisation. This study thus departs somewhat from the approach employed elsewhere in the project of comparing Islamist and non-Islamist groups. However, as will become clear, this is appropriate as the many Islamist groups show some important differences which are instructive and significant to the research question. A brief examination of the conflicts in Iraq and Syria, and these groups' interactions with them, is required to bring out these differences.

### *The 2003 Invasion of Iraq and Its Consequences*

The US-led invasion of Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 2003 had "regime change" as an explicit objective. The invasion was followed by a multilateral occupation, with the Coalition Provisional Authority overseeing the transition to democracy. Until 2003, Iraq had been a highly centralised state controlled by a Sunni elite, and displacing Saddam's regime militarily and then administratively plunged Iraq into chaos (Dodge 2012: 32). One of the main impacts of this was to destroy the state's capacity to govern and maintain order, and to encourage the formation of new power structures—with factions controlling ministries and militias proliferating (Tripp 2007: 277–278).

Most damaging of all was the sectarian dimension to the post-war contention. Sectarianism was not new to Iraq but, under Saddam, had usually taken the form of the brutal oppression of minorities. The occupation and attempted democratisation of Iraq overturned the Sunni hegemony on which the state was founded, stoking Sunni's fears of disenfranchisement

and a desire among Shia as well as Kurds to overturn more than eighty years of oppressive Sunni rule. Both communities saw a need to claim power through armed force, a problem exacerbated by Iran, which was deeply involved with one of the main Shia militias, the Badr Organisation.

A widespread Sunni boycott of the 2005 elections turned the Sunni community's sense of disenfranchisement into reality as Shia politicians consolidated their hold on power. Militias on all sides proliferated and grew in strength so that by 2006 "there were many more Iraqis under arms than there had been in the final years of the old regime—but they were now serving a variety of masters" (Tripp 2007: 306). Given the underlying conditions, it is likely that some form of civil war would have prevailed even if Al Qaida had not succeeded in establishing itself in Iraq in 2003.

### *Al Qaida in Iraq*

Al Qaida's first leader in Iraq was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian former criminal who discovered Salafi-Jihadism in a Jordanian prison and established a terrorist training camp in Afghanistan in 1999. After 2003, he moved to the Sunni heartlands of Iraq and began a new project which eventually acquired the name of Al Qaida in Iraq (AQI). Here he set out a vision for a new, secure base for *mujahidin*, whom he reasoned could only thrive in conditions of perpetual warfare in which they were seen as the protectors of the embattled Sunni population. "He had to devise a grand strategy to … attract internal and external support", so he recruited Arab fighters from across the MENA region to fight the Americans, the Kurds, and Iraq's Shiites: "sparking sectarian warfare become the centrepiece of his grand strategy" (Hafez 2014: 443–444).

The evidence shows that the provocation of sectarian warfare was a deliberate strategy. Al-Zarqawi told his Al Qaida superiors that the Shia were "the key to change", adding that "if we succeed in dragging them into the arena of sectarian war, it will become possible to awaken the inattentive Sunnis as they feel imminent danger" (Zarqawi 2004). From small beginnings, AQI came to dominate other Sunni Islamist groups through its control of an umbrella organisation, the Mujahidin Shura Council, and by its imitation of Al Qaida's method of suicide bombings, supplementing this with a programme of frequent, smaller-scale attacks. AQI's highpoint was 2006, after which it went into retreat as Al-Zarqawi was killed, US counter-insurgency strategy improved, and a tribal revolt removed much of AQI's support among Sunnis (Kilcullen 2009). In response, AQI turned the

Mujahidin Shura Council into a new body, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), under the leadership of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi (Weiss and Hassan 2015).

### *The Impact of the Syrian Civil War*

The conflict in Syria, which grew from localised protests in 2011 into a full-scale civil war, influenced and was influenced by the Sunni Islamist insurgency in Iraq. Bashar al-Assad's oligarchical, Alawite-dominated regime saw the 2003 invasion of Iraq as a sign of a coming existential threat, and so embarked on a largely covert policy of support for elements of the insurgency from 2003 to 2008 (Salloukh 2009; Lister 2015). Some of these networks turned on their erstwhile supporters after 2011, when two other important forces joined the fray. The first was a group of Islamist political prisoners released by the Syrian regime in 2011 in what is widely viewed as a cynical and opportunistic effort to turn its narrative that the popular uprising was a terrorist campaign into reality (Weiss and Hassan 2015; Lister 2015). The second force was a stream of foreign fighters, mostly from the Middle East and North Africa—Syria's near neighbours such as Jordan and Saudi Arabia, plus cohorts from Arab Spring countries, notably Libya and Tunisia—but with increasing numbers from Western Europe.

As the violence in Syria escalated, so the conflict became more complex, mirroring the escalation and fragmentation of the conflict in Iraq. Its drivers were political (opposition to the regime), social (opposition in socially and economically deprived areas) and sectarian (opposition to Alawite hegemony) (Balanche 2011). Assad's minoritarian regime turned to Iranian-backed irregulars—Shia militias from Iraq and Hizbollah cadres from Lebanon—as well as "*Shabiha*" ("ghost") militias to supplement the regular army. Opposing Assad were a bewildering range of local groups of resistance fighters, nationalist army veterans and transnational jihadist groups. Amongst the latter, the Syrian civil war was crucial to the rise of ISIL from the ashes of AQI and ISI, with its change in name reflecting a new sense of ambition.

## Aims, Recruitment and Tactics of the Groups

### *ISIL*

The developing chaos in Syria provided ISIL with immediate cross-border, tactical opportunities and strategic depth, allowing it to build in one state and deploy in another. The group built its first stronghold and

de facto capital in the northern Syrian city of Raqqa and, in the process of expansion, asserted and then lost control over JaN, its Syrian spearhead, and with it the support of Al Qaida's leadership. ISIL's principal aim appears clear: to expand its Caliphate—a state for "true" Muslims and a bulwark against the enemy. Its mission statement—"remaining and expanding"—appears to encapsulate this aim, while the character of the state is implicit in al-Baghdadi's division of humanity into "the camp of the Muslims and the *mujahidin*" and "the camp of the Jews, the Crusaders, their allies" (Weiss and Hassan 2015: 1).

To garner greater legitimacy than earlier failed experiments in governance, ISIL has capitalised on AQI's earlier investment in jihadist prophecy. Al-Zarqawi had emphasised in his propaganda the eschatological as well as geopolitical significance of the Levant (Filiu 2011). ISIL then gave new impetus to this apocalyptic strain within jihadism, naming its English-language magazine *Dabiq*, after the site of one of the most important battles in the prophecies. This "cosmic ideology" has enhanced ISIL's ability to recruit in Syria and Iraq, in the wider Arab region and in Western Europe through a sophisticated propaganda machine. However, the group's real aims are, we conclude, more mundane: obtaining and projecting power. There is no doubt that ISIL has learned much from Saddam Hussein's authoritarian state, and a significant element of its leadership cadres are former regime figures from the armed forces and intelligence services: its techniques have much in common with those of Saddam's "republic of fear" (Makiya 1998). This authoritarianism is evident in another of its strategic aims—to be the dominant Sunni Islamist group in Iraq and Syria, exploiting sectarian contention so as to provoke civil war and be seen as the only group able to defend Sunnis.

ISIL's response to the opportunities and challenges of the battlefield has seen it develop AQI's strategy of combining terrorist and insurgent techniques. It has recognised, for example, that inducing fear is useful not just in a political context (i.e. as terrorism) but also as a military strategy. It is notorious for its gross human rights abuses and performative violence, while broadcasting media of its brutal executions has helped it project military power and undertake audacious operations. Yet ISIL has consistently shown an ability to match tactical skill with strategic intent. This was evident in its "Breaking Down the Walls" campaign in 2012–2013, when eight prisons were attacked to liberate ISIL supporters (as well as potential recruits).

It has also shown competence in providing security and governance in the areas it controls. Its leaders have skilfully navigated Sunni culture in

Iraq and increasingly in Syria, providing security through a combination of repression, effective bureaucracy and uncompromising law enforcement (Turkmani 2015). Yet ISIL's competence goes beyond its capacity to provide security: utilities, hospitals, food distribution and other services were reported to improve rapidly in areas under its control, although more recently its service delivery appears to be creaking under the strain of international military and counter-terrorist interventions. It achieved as much as it did partly because of its willingness to retain experienced staff even if they are unwilling to declare allegiance, and partly because of its ruthless tactics of control and co-optation (Turkmani 2015).

### *JaN*

JaN began as an AQI/ISI franchise, and its leaders aimed firstly to establish an AQI presence in Syria, and then to radicalise and ultimately dominate the conflict. It is, like its estranged sibling ISIL, cosmic in ideology—although it has, to an extent, repositioned itself as a "nationalist" group (Weiss and Hassan 2015). By late 2012, it had evolved from a terrorist organisation into an insurgent group. As noted by Lister, "Two-and-a-half years later […] Jabhat al-Nusra is one of the most powerful armed groups in Syria" (Lister 2015).

JaN aspires to govern territory according to the Al Qaida model. In contrast to ISIL, the state which JaN aspires to govern is not a caliphate but a more modest emirate, i.e. a more geographically limited entity governed by an emir. It does not match ISIL's ambitions to control all aspects of military and civil activity: JaN-administered areas in Syria do not have the "police state" atmosphere of ISIL-controlled areas, although JaN does aspire to control the courts and judiciary (Turkmani 2015). Meanwhile, as Al Qaida's leader al-Zawahiri proclaimed in 2013, to ensure the long-term survival of its "safe bases", Al Qaida's franchises should focus on *maslaha* (welfare) and *mafsadah* (averting harm). This in practice means not attacking civilians, while focusing on attacking the West as its top priority (Lister 2015).

Despite this global focus, JaN has continued to target the Syrian regime with both suicide attacks and conventional armed assaults. A notable development was its move to join the Jaish al-Fatah coalition in Idlib in 2015, demonstrating a willingness to work with partners far removed from its purist ideological programme. Nevertheless, some

analysts warn that its programme remains intact: it wishes to establish territorial control in order to create a safe haven for attacking the West (Lister 2015). In terms of recruits, JaN remains more distinctively Syrian than ISIL, although it counts among its ranks a significant component of foreign fighters. Despite its origin as an offshoot of ISI, JaN's majority Syrian makeup "contributes to a crucial level of social grounding", while its "strict and highly selective foreign fighter recruitment policies have ensured an ongoing supply of high-calibre *muhajireen* [emigrants]" (Lister 2015). Meanwhile, its killing of 23 Druze civilians in the governorate and other atrocities shows that it remains committed to a highly sectarian, exclusivist vision for the future of Syria (Lister 2015).

### *AaS*

AaS is a jihadist group in a state of flux. On its foundation in late 2011, its Syrian Salafist leaders declared that the group's aim was to establish an Islamic state in Syria: one of its founder members was reported to be a veteran jihadist chosen by al-Zawahiri to mediate the dispute between ISI and JaN (Lund 2014). AaS is the prime mover behind the Islamic Front, a coalition of mostly Salafist Islamist militant groups whose rhetoric was, initially at least, nakedly sectarian. However, AaS' leadership also contains moderate Islamists and nationalists: since late 2013, AaS has modified its ideological and political outlook (Lister 2015), disavowing any ambitions to establish a Caliphate, calling for dialogue with the US, and agreeing to work with Turkey to establish a safe zone in northern Syria.

AaS has come under more pressure than most fighting groups in Syria, and as a result has changed the most. Whilst it should not be seen in Western terms as "moderate", it has had to withstand the enmity of the regime and of jihadist groups such as ISIL. Either of these could have been behind the assassination of over two dozen AaS leaders in 2014. In response, it has succeeded in absorbing small groups such as Suqour al-Sham while continuing to dominate the Islamic Front (which has also moderated its sectarian rhetoric).

AaS has, like other jihadist groups, succeeded in acquiring and governing territory, yet it has adopted an increasingly "Syrian nationalist" programme, as evidenced by its signing of a "covenant of honour" in late 2014 in which it disavowed any global jihadist pretensions. AaS's leaders now condemn ISIL and al-Qaida, but the group still belongs to the

broader *jihad* movement and its brand of revisionism is taking it back to the theories of the original global jihadist thinker, Abdullah Azzam. Ideologically, this has meant abandoning the belief that an ultra-violent vanguard is the means to Islamist revolution in favour of a broader-based, populist approach (Heller 2015). In practice, this has meant exercising restraint and fighting as narrow a range of enemies as possible.

AaS has thus been shaped by the violence of the Syrian battlefield so that it has withdrawn from its initial belief in a "cosmic" global jihadist solution. In contrast to ISIL, its battlefield jurisprudence has progressively moderated. That it has done so while maintaining its religious authenticity, albeit in a more pluralist form than other groups, shows that religion can be a dynamic force in conflict. Moreover, AaS's reformism demonstrates that Islamist militant groups can genuinely compromise on matters of principle and build partnerships.

### *Shia Militias*

Shia militias in Iraq can be broadly categorised into Sadrists deriving from the Mahdi Army, and those (including the now semi-independent Badr Organisation) deriving from the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), established in Iran during the 1980–1988 Gulf War. Both groups now seek to act independently of Iran, and to forge a distinctive "Iraqi Shia" identity, although Iran's paramilitary intelligence service, the IRGC, remains heavily involved (George 2014). At a leadership level, therefore, the aims of the Shia militias are at least partly geopolitical. Both Sadrists and SCIRI groups have aggressively asserted Shia identity, while many have been responsible for persecuting Sunni Muslim civilians.

In Syria, Hizbollah dramatically intervened to support the regime in 2013 and now has executive control of the counter-insurgency: Syria's armed opposition were making major gains until Hizbollah was mobilised. In Iraq, Shia militias are effectively in competition with the Iraqi army and appear to be winning: militias offer better weapons and more generous pay (George 2014), though they are also in competition with each other (Dodge 2012). The Shia militia movement received a major boost with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's June 2014 fatwa encouraging Shia to fight a "righteous jihad" against ISIL. Following this, many Shia militias formed into the *Hashd Shaabi*—people's militias—to combat ISIL, revealing the extent to which sectarian politics have

become entrenched in the conflict. "Not only does Daesh (ISIL) fight as Sunnis rather than Iraq is, but the Hashd is equally sectarian, fighting Daesh as Shi'as rather than Iraqis".

In conflict, the tactics of the Shia militias supports ISIL's narrative that the Iraqi government represents an existential threat to Sunnis. The militias themselves have been extensively accused of abuses and atrocities, most recently against Sunnis believed to have collaborated with ISIL (Human Rights Watch 2015). In parallel, their success in placing officials in positions of responsibility (George 2014; Dodge 2012) supports ISIL's argument that the government and its security forces are not Iraqi but Shia. More generally, we were told that posters displaying Badr Organisation leader Hadi al-Ameri and IRGC commander Qassem Suleimani can be seen in many parts of Baghdad, suggesting that they, not the elected government, are in control. Shia militias have thus used the opportunities of conflict to entrench their position as victors since 2003.

## Conclusion

One type of Islamist violent extremist group is particularly problematic: transnational jihadist groups that follow a Salafi-jihadist ideology. These groups—exemplified by Al Qaida—see conflict as an environment in which to prosper, and their involvement consistently makes those conflicts worse. In Iraq and Syria particularly, Al Qaida-linked groups have succeeded in their aim of radicalising these conflicts. They did not cause them and, without their involvement, these conflicts could still be raging. But they have made these conflicts more lethal by importing suicide attacks as a deliberate strategy. They have made them more intractable, by provoking sectarian violence on an appalling scale, capitalising on but also creating inter-communal grievances. They have sustained them through a policy of attracting foreign fighters through professional propaganda campaigns. And they have elevated them in the minds of supporters and opponents into cosmic wars by tapping into apocalyptic prophetic traditions. As a result, these conflicts are made more intractable and become further entrenched when marked by a significant sectarian dimension.

ISIL in particular is seeking to establish facts on the ground that will unalterably change the political and confessional character of the territories it controls. It has learned from previous experiments in governance

by jihadist groups in Algeria, Yemen and Somalia, and has succeeded in creating an Islamist extremist polity that will come under increasing military pressure but which, at least for now, appears viable and even robust. ISIL is not unique in being an Islamist militant group governing territory and seeking to govern more. It is unique in the extent of the territory and population it governs, and in being a merger of Islamist ideologues and (formerly secular) administrators and military officers.

However, it would be a serious mistake to assume that Islamist violent extremists are all the same. JaN, Al Qaida's franchise in Syria, has separated from its parent organisation with great (and bloody) acrimony; ISIL has disowned the Al Qaida leadership in South Asia. This shows the extent of contention, rivalry and opposition among Salafist-jihadists—and even within groups, as divisions within JaN testify. Moreover, the intellectual originators of the Salafist-jihadist movement have denounced ISIL's declaration of a Caliphate as hubristic and theologically improper. Islamist violent extremism is fragmented, contentious and diverse.

Most importantly, we must distinguish between global jihadist groups (principally ISIL and JaN) and those jihadist groups which restrict themselves to a local or regional agenda. AaS has reined in any ambition to extend its reach beyond Syria, has embraced fighters from a diversity of traditions, and increasingly sees itself as part of a broad-based popular revolution. It is far from a trustworthy partner for the West but it shows that violent Islamist groups are not necessarily uncompromising.

Nor are Islamist groups incapable of pragmatism. JaN has entered into military alliances with secular groups that do not share its aims. Even ISIL is capable of dealing with its ideological enemies (such as the Syrian government) to maintain its grip on power. Although frequently portrayed in the West as barbaric, pathological and apocalyptic, ISIL should be seen as a supremely rational actor that recognises the political and military benefits that can come from removing cultural and ethical constraints in the application of violence.

Less attention is paid to Shia militias active in both countries, such as Hizbollah in Syria and the Badr Organisation in Iraq. Both of these militias are heavily influenced by Iran and retain an Islamist revolutionary aim, drawing on a sense of global Shia identity just as Al Qaida has sought to mobilise a global Sunni identity. There is nothing inherently better or worse in Shia Islamist violent extremism than Sunni violent extremism. In some respects, ISIL and the Badr Organisation resemble each other. However, conflicts are likely to become more entrenched and

intractable when Shia and Sunni strains of violent extremism are parties to a conflict with a significant sectarian dimension.

Most Islamist militant groups have changed under the pressure of conflict, but some (notably ISIL) have become even more excessive while others (notably Ahrar al-Sham) have become more pragmatic. ISIL is not unique in its control of territory but stands out in terms of the scale of control over territory and the population. The conflicts in both countries are characterised by extraordinary complexity, in which Shia militias—some of which are also Islamist and extremely brutal—are often overlooked. ISIL in particular has sought to simplify matters by attacking rival opposition and especially jihadist groups, but there remains significant contention, especially in Syria. But the complexity shows that violent Islamist groups do not have the same aims or use the same tactics: distinctions should be drawn between those with global ambitions (ISIL, JaN) and those with more local or regional goals (AaS). Moreover, even the Salafi-jihadists are divided with respect to strategy and competition exists among them.

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PART II

# Conclusions to Part Two

The literature reviewed in our first chapter suggests a clear and predictable typology from strategic conflict actors, other violent extremist groups and cosmic, Salafi-jihadist groups, as outlined in Fig. II.1. Analysis of the three case studies reveals a much messier, more complex reality.

Figure II.2 aims to capture this complexity, albeit in a simplified way as it only includes the Sunni Islamist groups examined in the case studies. Most notably, although among Islamists the most significant and expanding utopian groups are Al Qaida and its affiliates which now self-identify as "Salafi-jihadist", even these groups do not sit neatly at the "cosmic" end of the spectrum. For example, Boko Haram and Al Shabaab have quite nationalist aims even if their rhetoric suggests that they subscribe to a transnational, Al Qaida- or ISIL-inspired ideology. In both cases, the activities of the group have remained localised despite pledges of allegiance to ISIL and Al Qaida, respectively. Some violent Islamist groups, including Salafi-jihadist ones such as ISIL and JaN, are situated very broadly on the spectrum between "strategic" and "cosmic" groups. For example, while ISIL's cosmic ideology gives it an ability to recruit, its immediate aims are more mundane and practical in terms of projecting power. This does not invalidate the distinction, but shows that the same group can be both and highlights potential entry points for conflict transformation if interventions are targeted appropriately.

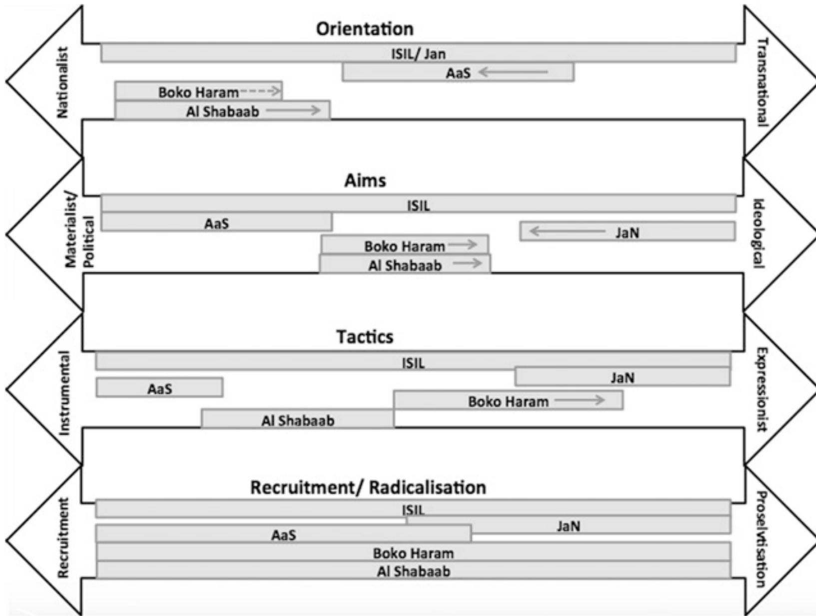


**Fig. II.2** The complexity of Sunni Islamist groups

Finally, the diagram seeks to present a dynamic picture, as groups can shift from one end of the spectrum to the other. In this, the mutating impact of the conflict itself needs to be taken into consideration as groups adapt their behaviour and ambitions to meet the changing conflict dynamics. Civil conflicts influence and impact on even those groups that subscribe to a theory of global *jihad*. Several of the groups we studied are in the process of significant change in orientation, aims, and choice of tactics with Boko Haram, for example, becoming more ideological in its aims and expressive in its tactics, and projecting a more transnational orientation, even though it remains so far exclusively West African in its operations.

All Islamist extremist groups in the three case studies emerged in a context of governance failures and draw their strength and support from genuine political, social and economic grievances. The analysis suggests that, in weak or failing states, religion (and ethnic identity) is easily instrumentalised by violent groups. Iraq again provides a powerful

illustration: even an ultra-violent and socially repressive organisation such as ISIL can attract strong popular support as it is perceived as a defender of Sunni Arab privileges and even existence against a hostile state and its violent allies. Governmental failures to provide basic services potentially create a vacuum that Islamist (and other) extremist groups can fill to build support and legitimacy which might not otherwise have been forthcoming because of their violent tactics. Governments and existing state structures lose credibility and support, as extremist groups attack the social contract between the state and the population, increasing the potential for state failure. Deficits in security and justice and the existence of predatory and oppressive security sector institutions not only create grievances but also delegitimise the state, presenting opportunities for extremist groups to enhance their legitimacy. Individuals' experiences of unfair justice systems can contribute to a perception of exclusion, and human rights abuses by security forces can help extremist groups recruit new members and build sympathy within the wider community. Current terrorist threats in Kenya have been attributed to the failure to modernise security agencies, lack of investment in intelligence and policing capabilities, corruption in security forces and poverty among their populations, while Boko Haram arose in a situation where the Nigerian state has spectacularly failed to provide for the human security of the Nigerian population.

ISIL has been highly successful at entering areas afflicted by weak governance, an active war economy and ongoing conflict with the intention of changing this situation and imposing control. This is done not for the benefit of the people but as a means to ensure longevity of its rule. ISIL seeks to impose itself as the only legitimate actor ensuring that, like a state, it has a monopoly on the use of force. Its reputation for governance, centred on security provision and delivery of basic services, is a recruiting tool not only for fighters but also for civilians to move to or remain in their areas: security and governance are the primary concern of civilian populations which are impoverished and fear for their lives.

Above all, the analysis of each case study reflects a complex reality and demonstrates that it is essential to differentiate between each conflict and between conflict actors; Islamist groups are the product of specific local contexts as much as (or perhaps more than) global ideologies. Islamist violent extremism is multi-factorial and extremely diverse: it cannot be predicted by one variable alone. For Islamist groups to develop requires an alignment of situational, social/cultural and individual factors.

Societies are changing more and faster than ever: we should therefore expect more violence as extremists seek to arrest that change or influence it to their advantage. At the same time, instability generated by forces of globalisation, as well as economic reforms demanded by donors, is blamed for causing violent extremism, and it is suggested that it is merely a historical accident that this phase of globalisation has coincided with the emergence of Islamism as the most common form of violent reaction (Sandbrook and Romano 2004). This complexity and the impact of local contexts interlinked with broader pressures of globalisation have considerable implications for intervention activity, as explored in the final chapter.

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PART III

# New Responses

CHAPTER 5

# Implications for Development, Peacebuilding and Statebuilding

**Abstract** The messiness of the orientation, aims, tactics and recruitment strategies of Islamist violent extremist groups has implications for development, peacebuilding and statebuilding. Although the role of development in conflict-affected states has long been recognised, there is a reluctance to directly engage with violent extremism. Based on the case study analysis, this chapter identifies a hierarchy of interventions. Development practitioners should work in an "IVE-sensitive" manner even when not directly addressing extremist violence. A number of other interventions can also directly target violent extremism including building or rebuilding state capacity and promoting inclusive political settlements. While these activities point to a similar response to other conflicts, ideology affects interventions and requires a detailed contextual understanding of the conflict.

**Keywords** Development · Peacebuilding · Statebuilding · Inclusive politics · Service provision

## Introduction

Understanding the behaviour of IVE groups in practice provides an opportunity to identify avenues for development actors to expand their response to conflict. Engaging with conflict is not a new area for development actors. The rise of civil conflicts with non-state actors and the

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A. Glazzard et al., *Conflict, Violent Extremism and Development*,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-51484-0_5

decline of conventional, interstate conflict resulted in the recognition that fragility and underdevelopment can contribute to conflict (Hansen 1987). Former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's frequently quoted statement that "[t]here can be no peace without economic and social development, just as development is not possible in the absence of peace" was a powerful and early articulation of the concept of peacebuilding that gained widespread acceptance in academic and political circles. Initially, however, it was claimed that development contributed to conflict prevention without adapting their activities (Uvin 2002). When conflict did break out, it was viewed as unfortunate but basically unconnected; development workers would switch with humanitarian workers and return once the conflict ended (Uvin 2002). However, this view was shattered by the Rwandan genocide. Rwanda had been widely viewed as a development success following high economic growth (Krause and Jutersonke 2005), but once the genocide began in 1994 the development community began to recognise that development assistance could reinforce social cleavages and actually cause conflict if poorly distributed (Krause and Jutersonke 2005).

Development practitioners have since become directly involved in conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction. As they began linking their initiatives to conflict, scholars have grappled with the emerging connections. Goodhand created a framework to map the contribution that development practitioners could make to conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction. The earliest approach was conceptualised "working around war", as development practitioners sought to continue their activities while avoiding direct involvement (Goodhand 2001a). "Working around war" assumed conflict to be an "impediment or negative externality that is to be avoided" (Goodhand 2001a: 61). From this perspective, development was understood to automatically contribute to peace, so that nothing additional would be required (Uvin 2002).

A different, later approach was "working in war", with development agencies acknowledging a potential relationship between development and conflict and seeking to minimise their impact, but without addressing the conflict directly: "Agencies working in areas of active violence have attempted to mitigate war-related risks and also to minimise the potential for programmes to fuel or prolong violence" (Goodhand 2006a: 264). The most recent and most proactive approach is "working on war", where development practitioners are directly engaged in peacebuilding activities (Goodhand 2006b). Conflict prevention and

resolution becomes the primary goal of development, which means that "policies and programmes must be justified in these terms", including direct peacebuilding and statebuilding initiatives (Goodhand 2001b).

These categories have been applied to the new challenges development agencies face in fragile and conflict-affected states, such as organised crime (Jesperson 2015), and they can help consider and identify what approaches are effective in addressing violent extremism, particularly the implications for conflict resolution, peacebuilding and statebuilding. As "working around" war is not especially relevant here, this paper focuses on approaches to "working in" and "working on" war.

## "Working In" War

Many responses to violent extremism are based on the assumption that development is necessary to tackle the drivers of radicalisation and recruitment. EU programming to strengthen resilience to violent extremism, for example, is based on the assumption that "addressing both the manifestations of violent extremism and the conditions conducive to violent extremism is a developmental challenge. It will require strengthening the fundamental building blocks of equitable development, human rights, governance and the rule of law" (European Union 2015). The result has been a burgeoning industry of CVE programming (Zeiger and Aly 2015). While there is no adequate measure for the effectiveness of these programmes (Chowdhury-Fink 2015), they aim to prevent involvement in violent extremist groups. This is seen to be particularly important in countries such as Kenya, where violent extremism has not yet escalated into all-out war. In this context, CVE programming can limit escalation by undermining support for violent extremist groups. However, it aims to reduce vulnerability to radicalisation and recruitment among those who are not yet involved; CVE therefore tends to address communities viewed as being "at risk", rather than the violent groups themselves. In Kenya, the direct targeting of Al Shabaab is further complicated as its main base is Somalia, and Kenyan affiliates such as Al-Hijra are underground networks in the community, which makes them difficult to identify and access.

In countries where violent extremism is part of a wider conflict, CVE strategies can theoretically play a role in addressing further radicalisation, but implementation is constrained by the security situation caused by the conflict itself. As a result, CVE interventions in conflict-afflicted countries may be displaced to neighbouring areas (such as Somaliland and

Puntland in the case of the EU's STRIVE Horn of Africa programme) or it may be ameliorative rather than preventative. Important areas of focus might include internally displaced person (IDP) camps and refugee camps, marginalised communities that may be vulnerable to radicalisation. In this context, CVE programmes may be beneficial. For example, Martin-Rayo (2011) contends that the provision of quality education in camps is essential in countering the risk of radicalisation. This form of programming fits within the "working in" category, as it engages with the potential impact development can have on conflict by seeking to prevent further involvement, but it does not directly address violent extremism as it does not engage with the groups themselves.

There are a number of other strategies that fit within this category. Particularly in countries or regions where governments have tended to rely on strong, securitised responses, such as Nigeria and Kenya, security sector reform (SSR) can promote a less violent response, and hence reduce the risk of violence increasing or recurring. As the Nigeria case demonstrates, if a government's default response is to crush dissent or target whole communities in unrefined sweeps, there is potential to spark spin-off movements that may be more violent, unpredictable and strategic than their predecessors. Violent responses by the government can also increase support for violent extremist groups. In Nigeria, atrocities committed by government forces are well publicised, with films of military killings being widely circulated. In one instance, the Nigerian military responded to a Boko Haram attack on Giwa military barracks in Maiduguri in March 2014 by killing over 600 people, including civilians with no link to Boko Haram, and dumping bodies in mass graves (Amnesty International 2014). Some experts consider such atrocities to be a key driver of support for Boko Haram which can thereby represent itself as an alternative to the government and government forces.[1] In Kenya, many in the country's more marginalised communities, especially the Somalis of the North-East Province and Swahili Muslims of the Coast, view the security forces (especially the US-trained Anti-Terrorist Police Unit) with distrust and fear. The indiscriminate hard security response to the 2014 Mpeketoni attacks in Lamu County and the "enforced disappearances" of radical Islamist clerics in Mombasa led to violent demonstrations and supported the grievance narratives promoted by Al Shabaab, building on decades of repression or neglect of these communities by the government in Nairobi.

Iraq provides a more extreme instance of the problem. After 2003, the absorption and covert infiltration of Shia militias into the Iraqi security forces meant not only that those forces lacked legitimacy in the eyes of the Sunni population, but were perceived—with justification—to be active participants in the civil conflict that raged in 2005–2007 and has been reignited by the emergence of ISIL) in 2013. With elements of the security forces acting effectively as sectarian paramilitaries, ISIL has increasingly been seen as both legitimate and necessary by some among the Sunni population. SSR is an immense challenge in Iraq, but it is necessary.

While reform of the armed forces may be beyond the remit of development agencies, O'Neill and Cockayne (2015) advocate programmes that draw on demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) principles to disengage violent extremists and reintegrate them into mainstream society. Similarly, Jones, Lynch, Marchand and Denov, and Koehler (in Zeiger and Aly 2015) examine the potential of disengaging, deradicalising and reintegrating fighters involved in violent extremism. These approaches adapt interventions designed to deal with other forms of violence, and engage with the institutions and individuals affected by violent conflict. Developed in response to the decades of civil war in the 1990s and 2000s, they have been applied to a range of conflicts, including ethnic divisions. Because they do not engage directly with violent extremist groups, they do not need to specifically focus on or respond to the impact of ideology, or the other factors that may make Islamist violent extremists different from other violent extremist groups.

## "Working On" War

To directly address violent extremism through statebuilding or peacebuilding measures requires strategies that are contextually specific and which engage with the dynamics of particular groups. The New Deal's Peacebuilding and Statebuilding Goals (PSGs) are being used in many fragile and conflict-affected states to promote peace and security, and provide a framework to consider how development agencies can directly engage with IVE groups. The first goal aims to foster inclusive political settlements. The remaining four goals—security, justice, economic foundations and revenues and services—focus on ensuring that people's basic needs are met by the state by ensuring core state functions are in place.

Beyond these goals, there is also a need to address the causes and consequences of conflict.[2]

## Legitimate and Inclusive Politics

The aim here is to include competing elites into a political settlement in order to provide a role in shaping the rules governing economic relations and resource allocation. However, with some Islamist violent groups, a negotiated political settlement is not an aspiration. Boko Haram, for instance, is opposed to the Nigerian state and seeks to create an alternative that is far removed from the current state's perceived moral and political corruptness. Although this aspiration is not necessarily within reach, it suggests that the group is not at present open to negotiation with the Nigerian state. While some elements of the group may be open to negotiation, the group's current leader, Shekau, is not and would wilfully block any attempt to negotiate.[3] Al Shabaab's aims in Kenya are to further destabilise state authority in Somalia's southern hinterland and move these areas into the orbit of an Islamist territory based to some extent on a historical "Greater Somalia" project, Somali irredentism, and local pan-Muslim sentiment. Efforts to achieve a Greater Somalia have been a source of conflict with Somalia since Kenya's independence. With the more recent overlay of Islamist extremist rhetoric and practice and Al Shabaab's base being outside Kenya, achieving a political settlement with these goals at play appears highly unlikely. In the long term, political settlements linked to Kenya's recent constitutional devolution of power to the counties may redress some grievances regarding autonomy and central state overreach if implemented in a manner that empowers local communities, thereby drawing some of the venom not only from Islamist violent groups but also others, such as the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC).

ISIL—and Al Qaida-linked groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN) have shown themselves to be even more uncompromising. These Salafi-jihadist groups—but not, importantly, others in the conflict—are distinguished by their global ambitions, transnational organisation, cosmic framing of the conflicts they are involved in, and deliberate strategy of entering those conflicts from overseas and radicalising them. They pursue an Al Qaida-inspired programme that assumes that the only language its opponents understand is force. All of these features mean that these groups are unlikely to be interested in contributing to an inclusive

political settlement and ISIL in particular has invested heavily in projecting its power and crafting a narrative that places it above and beyond conventional politics and negotiation. Although it has, in fact, frequently demonstrated a surprising degree of pragmatism (for example by covertly entering into tactical agreements with the Syrian regime), its core messages and appeal are utopian, sacred, and therefore non-negotiable.

The political settlement aspect of statebuilding is therefore exceptionally challenging in this context and any intervention is unlikely to reconcile global, Salafi-jihadist groups and their franchises. A complicating factor is the diversity even among violent Islamist groups in conflict situations and their tendency to fragment. In the Boko Haram case, there have been disagreements over core beliefs, strategy, and tactics which have resulted in splinter groups such as Ansaru. Al Shabaab in Somalia has also been host to major internal disagreements regarding similar issues since 2011. This has occurred primarily between leaders with a more Somali nationalist focus, leaders with a more global jihadist agenda and foreign fighters of both extractions, many of whom have felt increasingly mistreated and isolated. Those with a more regional jihadist orientation ostensibly succeeded in taking full control following a purge in 2013 that has led to several rival nationalist leaders disengaging, but ructions have continued since the death of emir Abdul Ahmed Godane in 2014. Not only has this had implications for Al Shabaab's more frequent and aggressive operations in Kenya, but the situation is further complicated by a poor understanding of where Al-Shabaab's several IVE affiliates are orientating themselves in this context. In Syria, ISIL has become estranged not only from its Syrian sibling but also from its Al Qaida parent. Such splits can weaken violent groups—or make them more uncompromising as groups due to inter-group competition as each splinter faction seeks to retain its followers.

However, the lack of cohesion within IVE groups may also provide an opportunity for negotiation. For example, Gerges (2005) recommended that attempts should be made to negotiate with jihadists who do not subscribe to the Al Qaida doctrine. This strategy can reduce the power of the most problematic Islamist groups by undermining their legitimacy and fragmenting the extremists' support base. This may be easier said than done: repeated attempts to bring peace to Afghanistan, including the latest attempt in the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme (APRP), failed to make any significant impact on the insurgency since the Taliban leadership strongly rejected the process meaning

it failed to gain significant traction among the wider movement. As a result, APRP frequently ended up claiming the successful reintegration of armed groups largely not related to the Taliban itself but to other armed actors, including local strongmen allied with the government, and has failed to result in any reduction in violence. However, Gerges's point is that Western states and their allies have failed to seize the opportunity of contention within the broad jihad movement: instead of separating Al Qaida from the mainstream, policy and practice have tended to see them as all manifestations of the same, unacceptable phenomenon and thereby, in some cases, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The fact that Salafi-jihadists are irreconcilable does not mean that promoting inclusive settlements to conflicts where they are active is fruitless. In fact, our analysis suggests that such efforts should be prioritised. First, these uncompromising groups partly derive their legitimacy from socio-political grievances, as in Iraq where the post-2003 settlement has failed to include meaningfully the Sunni Arab minority, and in Syria where a minoritarian government has lost the support of large parts of the Sunni Arab majority. Addressing some of the manifold problems of governance in both countries would not bring ISIL and JaN to the negotiating table but would diminish their support among the disenfranchised Sunni Arabs. Second, as we have shown, Islamist violent extremism is far from being a monolithic and stable movement, and within the broad scope of the term are groups that are, potentially, interested in political settlements. Attention should therefore be paid to breakaway groups which may perceive that they have more to gain from settlement rather than conflict, especially in the case of protracted civil conflicts in a situation of stalemate. The clearest example of an Islamist extremist group entering a political process is the MILF in the Philippines, while the Taliban in Afghanistan, which has since its foundation in the 1990s worked on a political as well as military track, has been on the verge of entering negotiations for some time, driven largely by its political leadership. However, for the time being, further fragmentation within the movement (and their success on the battlefield) appears to have caused this process to stall. Within our case studies, there are groups that are clearly Islamist, and violent, but which reject the uncompromising ideology of Al Qaida and ISIL, with Ahrar al-Sham in Syria being a particularly strong example of a group that has compromised and worked with others which do not share its ideology. In short, religion in general and Islamism in particular do not make violent groups automatically intractable. They

should not, therefore, be excluded from the negotiating table just because they are Islamists who use violence.

## Ensuring State Provision of Basic Services

This aspect of statebuilding assumes that increasing the capacity of the state to provide core functions such as security, justice, economic foundations, and revenues and services will increase trust, facilitate the provision of public services—including, crucially, law and order—and strengthen state legitimacy. This approach may have an impact on some members of violent Islamist groups that are driven to join because of grievances. Addressing historical grievances, and a state's failings to address deeply rooted marginalisation and insecurity in these places, could reduce the ability of violent Islamist groups to mobilise and retain support. More pertinently, weak states have been shown to be more vulnerable to civil war and insurgency (Tilly 2003) and also struggle to contain violent extremist threats. The collapse of state capacity in Iraq as a result of the 2003 invasion and occupation is a particularly stark example: the sudden transformation from police state to state of anarchy created the space for a wide range of violent extremist groups to flourish, from Shia militants to Al Qaida. Building or rebuilding state capacity is, we have concluded, an essential prerequisite for managing Islamist violent extremist problems. Emphasis should be put on restoring governance in opposition-controlled areas, especially those which are threatened by further Islamist extremist expansion. For Boko Haram, which is essentially two-tiered, this approach could influence the lower levels of the group. Enhanced state functions could also limit the potential of groups to exploit grievances to bolster support.

In Kenya, the vacuum created by the lack of central state legitimacy—on the grounds of identity, its repressive actions and its poor provision of security and services—has produced an enabling environment for violent Islamists in the North-East and Coast provinces but also for other extremist groups such as the MRC's militant wing and many of Kenya's organised crime groups such as Mungiki. Rectifying this governance vacuum and enabling environment is DfID's long-term goal for conflict reduction in Kenya and interventions have the potential to reduce radicalisation and recruitment if benefits accrue from constitutional devolution. However, deep-seated tensions on security remain between the national and county governments, which is likely to impede progress.[4]

The Syrian and Iraqi states have failed on such a catastrophic scale that rebuilding their institutions is likely to be a generational task, a fact which should be recognised from the outset of any efforts in this area. However, substantial progress in managing Islamist violent extremism is unlikely to be possible without effective state capabilities which are able to command assent of the majority population and of minorities. This is especially the case with the security sectors in both countries which, with their records of abuses and sectarian preferences, are currently a (major) part of the problem: they cannot be part of the solution without fundamental reform.

Improved provision of public goods and services could have a considerable impact on the ability of leaders to recruit from or gain the passive acceptance of the wider population. Part of ISIL's success has been to enter areas afflicted by weak governance, an active war economy and endemic violence in order to impose control. It seeks to impose itself as the only legitimate authority ensuring that, like a state, it has a monopoly on the use of force, while its reputation for governance, centred on security provision and delivery of basic services, is key to recruiting supporters and ensuring assent (Turkmani 2015).

If the state is incapable or unwilling to make good these shortfalls, then there may be scope for others to step in. For example, Turkmani (2015) recommends that international organisations promote economic measures, such as job-creation schemes and fuel distribution, in areas of Syria which can be reached. Interventions to promote economic security in conflict-afflicted areas have the potential to reduce or at least contain support for the most problematic violent Islamists.

## Addressing the Causes and Consequences of Conflict

In order to achieve these goals, it is essential to engage with the causes and consequences of conflict. Achieving this requires a focus on the grievances, fault-lines and opportunity seeking that underlie the conflict. Zaum et al. (2015) consider religion and religious extremism to be expressions of social-economic or political grievances and opportunity-seeking. This aligns with Kunovich and Hodson's (1999) findings in Croatia that religion is merely a social marker for economic, demographic and political forces. However, other studies dispute these findings and suggest instead that religion has the capacity to both stimulate and mobilise collective action and that restrictions on religion itself can

make significant contributions to explaining religiously motivated violence. In this analysis, religion itself can be the source of grievance (Finke and Harris 2012; Finke and Martin 2012; Dowd 2014).

However, focusing on religion as a source of grievance leading to conflict and extremism could mean missing the underlying causes and drivers of the conflict. Since there is no simple link between religious ideas and violent action—our analysis suggests that extremist violence results from a complex combination of situational factors, social enablers, political triggers and individual characteristics—the problem is seeking to understand how a situation of stable coexistence breaks down to the extent that religion (or rather religious difference) can become a threat to security, which requires an examination of the root causes and an effort to address some of the most pertinent (ESRC 2015). In Iraq, for example, the failure to include Sunni Arabs in the post-2003 political settlement generated grievances which may be religiously expressed, but are political at source.

While all of the groups examined here show a range of drivers and motivations, each group has been influenced by grievances to some extent, particularly at the lower levels. Addressing grievances will not necessarily resolve the conflict. If a group sees the state as the problem or has global and utopian aspirations, leaders and the most committed followers are unlikely to abandon their extremist programmes, which would in any case undermine their stated intent and potentially therefore their support base. However, addressing grievances may contain groups and, in time, reduce their support.

## A Role for Development

The case studies have drawn out some of the differences between Islamist violent extremist groups and other conflict participants, and also—equally importantly—the differences among Islamist violent groups. Our analysis suggests that there is scope for preventative and restorative activities that seek to limit individuals becoming drawn into violent Islamist groups, and for programmes that ameliorate the conditions created by them and hence reduce recruitment. These activities fall within Goodhand's "working in" category, where development practitioners work in an "IVE-sensitive" manner by analysing the nature of the violent extremist problem, seeking to ensure that development activities do not inadvertently increase support for violent groups, and addressing the negative impact that Islamist extremist violence has on development,

such as economic disruption in the areas they are operating in. Of course, this approach is not always possible, particularly when IVE becomes entrenched in active conflict, but we propose it as a general aim.

Direct involvement, in line with Goodhand's "working on" category, is much more difficult—but may be more productive in the long term. The most problematic Islamist groups will work to impede the core aims of statebuilding—creating inclusive political settlements, developing core state functions and responding to public expectations—because increasingly they are seeking to do the same themselves. These strategies are not, however, redundant. They can play a major role in addressing the grievances of those at the lower levels of IVE groups. However, they have limited effect with the leadership and with the most ideological followers. As we have argued, ideology does distinguish some violent Islamist groups—the Salafi-jihadists—from other types of conflict participants, and these groups will obstruct attempts to address the causes if not the consequences of conflict. However, even these most problematic groups are not monolithic and there is scope at lower levels for reconciliation through addressing grievances, while violent Islamists who reject the Al Qaida worldview may be susceptible to negotiation.

Analysis of how development actors can engage with IVE points to a hierarchy of interventions (see Fig. 5.1). The bottom layer indicates that the most significant contribution development can make is preventative, seeking to limit involvement in violent extremism by promoting good governance, human rights, development and rule of law. This overlaps with the second layer, which seeks to address both the grievances that have driven people into violent extremism, as well as the impact of violent extremism, from the violence it causes to heavy-handed government responses. Achieving effects at the top of the hierarchy is more difficult and relies on careful timing. As discussed above, negotiating with strategic groups, diminishing support for utopian groups and catching breakaway groups have the greatest potential for transformation.

As this hierarchy brings together a range of strategies that are currently applied towards conflict actors, it might suggest that there is no fundamental difference in how development actors should respond to IVE groups. However, there are important differences in how these strategies should be applied. Preventative and ameliorative strategies engage with the precursors and consequences of violent extremism, respectively, and therefore require an understanding of an intervention's social impact. Transformative strategies are much more difficult and rely on a deep,

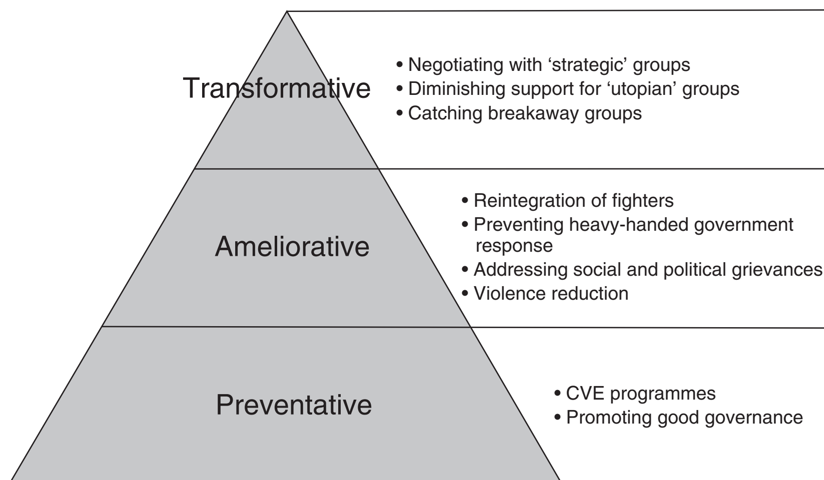


**Fig. 5.1** Hierarchy of interventions in conflicts involving violent Islamists

contextual understanding of the groups involved to identify opportunities for engagement. While this is necessary for other conflict actors also, the difference here is the need to engage with how ideology influences the aims, motivations, drivers, enablers and tactics of specific IVE groups.

State or multilateral-led ideological work—often labelled as "counter-narrative" or "counter-messaging"—may seem a striking omission from this hierarchy. Such interventions could be seen as preventative or transformative, depending on the scope of their ambition. However, we remain unconvinced by the claims made for such interventions by their proponents, not least as ideological warfare is an explicit aim of the most problematic groups, and there is a risk of unintentionally fuelling their claims to be engaged in a cosmic or global battle by engaging in this type of communication. There are other problems too, such as the credibility of governments as communicators (especially on theological issues), the trust (or lack thereof) in government messaging, the risk of amplifying and providing a platform to the extremists' propaganda, and the limited evidence of the psychological effect on individuals of such interventions.

Which intervention might be the most appropriate will depend on the specific circumstances of each case. As Kenya is not experiencing full-scale conflict, preventative programming (such as the European Union's

CVE intervention in the Horn of Africa) is likely to make sense. CVE interventions are also underway in some areas of Nigeria where the conflict is very localised. However, in areas where conflict is ongoing, ameliorative programming may be the only possibility. In Syria and Iraq, very little is possible from a development standpoint beyond waiting for and identifying opportunities for transformation. Ultimately, there is no universal pathway to resolving conflicts involving violent Islamists. The focus needs to be on identifying and maximising opportunities in each case, while ensuring coordination and coherence across all activities.

## Notes

1. Expert comments at joint DfID-FCO Workshop on Conflict and Countering Violent Extremism in Nigeria, 10 September 2015.
2. The PSGs also align with DfID's Building Peaceful States and Societies Practice Paper.
3. Expert comments at joint DfID-FCO Workshop on Conflict and Countering Violent Extremism in Nigeria, 10 September 2015.
4. Expert comments at joint DfID-FCO Workshop on Conflict and Countering Violent Extremism in Kenya, Old Admiralty Building-Nairobi, 29 Sep 2015.

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A. Glazzard et al., *Conflict, Violent Extremism and Development*,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-51484-0

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