# Armed Groups in the Middle East and Conflict Research

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**From Jihad to Politics: How Syrian Jihadis Embraced Politics**. By Jérôme Drevon. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024. 288p.

**Beyond the Lines: Social Networks and Palestinian Militant Organizations in Wartime Lebanon**. By Sarah E. Parkinson. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2023. 257p.

**Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel: Local Politics and Rebel Groups**. By Alexander Thurston. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 360p.

For much of the past fifteen years, the Middle East and North Africa have been witnessing the largest proportion of conflicts in the world. Long and bloody wars in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Libya drove the trend through the 2010s, followed by a respite in 2022 and then by another particularly brutal wave of conflict over Israel/Gaza and in Lebanon in 2023/2024. Given the prevalence of violence in the Middle East, one would expect that a sizeable part of the conflict studies scholarship draws on research from and about the region—especially as it is a hub for phenomena of broader interest to academics of civil wars such as foreign fighters, proxy wars, rebel governance, and non-state armed groups. Yet evidence suggests that publications drawing on empirical research from the region constitute less than 5% of all articles on conflicts in political science journals (Melani Cammett and Isabel Kendall, "Political Science Scholarship on the Middle East: A View from the Journals," *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 54(3), 2021). The reasons for the under-representation of Middle East scholarship in conflict research are understandable. The prevalence of war/instability makes it difficult to collect data in systematic ways, and the language skills and contextual knowledge required to compensate for this lack of standard data are in short supply among political scientists.

This makes the books reviewed in this essay all the more remarkable—all three are the product of years of challenging field research, combining ethnography and archival work. For *Beyond the Lines* (2023), Sarah Parkinson spent two years researching the roots of the resilience of left-wing Palestinian militancy after Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, living in Beirut and near Sidon while undertaking 114 life history interviews with former militants. For his part, to write *From Jihad to Politics* (2024) and make sense of why and how jihadi armed groups were able to outcompete more mainstream opposition factions during the 2011 Syrian civil war, Jérôme Drevon traveled to rebel-held North-Western Syria and met with Islamist clerics, politicians, commanders, and leaders—including Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, whose jihadi group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham overthrew Bashar al-Assad in December 2024. Finally, the scope of Alexander Thurston's research for *Jihadists in North Africa and the Sahel* (2020) is as impressive, drawing on both on-the-ground interviews in three countries and archives in Arabic and French in four others to uncover the local politics of jihadi groups. The breadth, depth, and originality of the empirical material unearthed in these books make them standard references for scholars and students of Middle Eastern and North African politics.

Yet what makes these three books important beyond their empirical contributions is how they leverage primary research in the Middle East to intervene in broader conflict studies. And, importantly for the purpose of this review, their interventions complement each other. They are part of what Paul Staniland ("The Evolution of Civil Wars Research: From Civil War to Political Violence," *Civil Wars*, 25(2–3), 2023) calls the "third wave" of conflict

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research; building on "second wave" attention to on-the-ground dynamics of violence and disaggregation of levels of analysis but in a more firmly relational perspective, investigating the ties of armed actors to wider society and how the ideological, social, and political context shapes their behavior. To explain conflict, the authors all adopt the analytical prism of the meso-level—above individuals but below the level of entire communities (see Loubna El Amine and Kevin Mazur, "Thinking About Groups in Political Science: A Case for Bringing the Meso-Level Back in," *Political Science Quarterly*, 137(2), 2022). Thurston goes furthest in justifying this choice (p. 5). He convincingly argues that to grasp the dynamics of Islamist insurgency in North Africa and the Sahel, it is most useful to concentrate not on jihadi ideologues or leaders, or broader umbrellas such as Al-Qaida or whole ethnic groups, but on the internal dynamics of local jihadi rebels, featuring field commanders whose own choices/preferences go a long way to explain conflict patterns.

The books by Parkinson, Drevon, and Thurston build on and add to the conflict studies literature on non-state armed groups (see, for instance, Kristin Bakke et al, "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion, and Infighting in Civil Wars," *Perspectives on Politics*, 10(2), 2012; Janet Lewis, *How Insurgency Begins: Rebel Group Formation in Uganda and Beyond*, 2020; Sarah Parkinson, "Organizing Rebellion: Rethinking High-Risk Mobilization and Social Networks in War," *American Political Science Review*, 107(3), 2013; Wendy Pearlman, *Violence, nonviolence, and the Palestinian national movement*, 2011; Anastasia Shesterinina and Michael Livesey, "Armed Group Formation in the Civil War: 'Movement', 'insurgent', and 'state splinter' Origins," *Review of International Studies*, 50(4), 2024; Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, 2014). Taken collectively, these books participate in the effort to open the "black box" of armed groups. Each pushes back in its own way against the assumption—often implicit, at times explicit—in some of the macro-level, quantitative work in conflict research which treats militant organizations as largely unitary and top-down actors. They do so effectively, embracing an organisationally disaggregated approach illuminating the internal traits of and even tensions within armed groups—not just for the sake of adding nuance to discussions of conflict, but because these go a long way in explaining militant/rebel behavior. In what follows, I highlight what I see as their key contributions to the study of armed groups: the role of informal politics, the organizational dynamics of ideology, and localization processes.

## Informal politics vs. official hierarchy in armed groups

The central puzzle driving Sarah Parkinson's book, *Beyond the Lines*, is how armed groups facing immense levels of repression can show resilience, reorganize, and resume their militant operations. She examines the case of nationalist and leftist Palestinian guerilla organizations including but not limited to Fatah, whose frequent commando attacks into Northern Israel during the 1970s and early 80s from bases in Southern Lebanon triggered the Israeli army's invasion of Lebanon aiming to fully dismantle this paramilitary infrastructure. Back then, many of the Palestinian militants scattered in Lebanon's 12 refugee camps entered into clandestinity to escape the violence exercised against them by Israel and its allies, from incarceration and disappearances all the way to extra-judicial killings and true massacres. They faced an additional challenge with the summer 1982 eviction from Beirut of Yassir Arafat, the leader of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) which acted as an umbrella for these armed groups—from then on, their leadership would be based in exile. These nationalist and leftist militant organizations were later overshadowed by Palestinian Islamist armed groups like Hamas but, for much of the 1980s and 90s and in spite of the challenges they faced, they were able to survive and even resume their operations.

Parkinson's broad-level answer to the puzzle of the resilience of these armed groups in the face of all the pressures they faced lies not in their shrewd leadership or some built-in plans for survival but in what she calls their "social infrastructure" (pp. 8–10; pp. 30–51). Through this term, Parkinson refers to the interactions and overlaps between the formal hierarchy of these armed groups—the leader's office, various bureaus, and the official chain of command—on which the scholarship typically focuses (for instance, see Pearlman 2011, Bakke et al. 2012) and their broader "quotidian social networks;" that is, the web of everyday ties (e.g. kinship, marriage, friendship, community) binding militants to each other and society. These everyday ties are well known to be important for processes like recruitment, but here Parkinson goes further. She shows how, in times of crises, armed groups become characterized by "social complexity" and the rise of "alternative organizational hierarchies," with entire networks gaining autonomy and at times resisting the orders of official leaders. This is an important insight, pushing back against the "organizational determinism" (p. 17) permeating a broader conflict studies literature in which too much is at times inferred from a group's formal structure or official hierarchy.

A fascinating and central example in Parkinson's narrative is the resilience of the Palestinian armed group Fatah during the War of the Camps. This was a key episode of the Lebanese civil war which, after the Israeli withdrawal from central Lebanon in 1983, witnessed the struggle for the control of the Palestinian camps between Fatah and rival pro-Syrian Lebanese and Palestinian militias in a series of battles that only ended in 1988. Parkinson zooms in on Fatah's resistance in Beirut's Palestinian camps of




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Shatila and Burj al-Barajneh and finds that, there, the roots of the armed group's resilience lay in how one of its military cadres, Ali Abu Tawq, was able to act as a broker between formal command hierarchies and the more community-based "quotidian social networks" he was embedded in and which allowed him to both recruit local fighters and mediate truces with rival factions. What makes this example even more interesting is that Ali Abu Tawq's embeddedness at one point became such that, when Yassir Arafat gave him the order to violate a truce with Fatah's rivals—something in the broader strategic interest of the group but not in that of the camp's residents—he famously became "the man who said no" (p. 116) to the PLO chairman. Parkinson uses this case to demonstrate both the role of "quotidian social networks" to explain the resilience of armed groups in times of crises and the possibility that, as they gain importance, they can overshadow the official leadership and even produce insubordination.

Linked to this is another central insight of Parkinson's research—the key role played by cadres, more than leaders or individual members, in processes of organizational survival. There is acknowledgment in the armed group's literature of the central importance of this category between the leadership and the rank-and-file, even as scholars noticeably disagree on how to define them—Daly speaking of "middle managers" and Parkinson of "meso-level officers" (see Sarah Zuckerman Daly, "The Dark Side of Power Sharing: Middle Managers and Civil War Recurrence," *Comparative Politics*, 46(3), 2014; Amelia Hoover Green, *The Commander's Dilemma: Violence and Restraint in Wartime*, 2018; Staniland, 2014). In this respect, what the latter's book adds is first of all illuminating the full range of essential functions cadres fulfil in armed groups. They are typically highly committed and skilled actors, contributing to the sophistication and embeddedness of the militant organization by running crucial noncombat functions like the delivery of services, socialization and indoctrination activities, or again intelligence and smuggling operations. Parkinson brings them into her story of "quotidian social networks," highlighting how they act as nodes or intermediaries between different kinds of ties, allowing them to manage tensions. An equally interesting, related insight is that, far from passive vehicles implementing orders from the leadership, a central narrative thread in Parkinson's account of cadres is the cleavage developing between the two; to the point that, when Fatah leaders left their exile to come back to Lebanon in the mid and late 1980s with the aim of reasserting control over the armed group in the Ain al-Helwe camp near Sidon, the cadres assassinated them (pp. 140–141). In Parkinson's story, cadres are both essential to armed groups and also have a lot of agency.

Like all work, this book has shortcomings. The first is that, instead of investigating nationalist and leftist Palestinian armed groups at large, the author might have probed more deeply into variations in ideology, organization, and levels of embeddedness. What may hold for the nationalist armed group Fatah and its mass base in the camps might not work for a smaller Marxist one like the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. A second issue has to do with the portability of the findings related to the cadres/leaders schism. While the book does a great job at engaging with the conflict studies literature, it does not as much situate the story in a broader universe of cases. It would have been useful to clarify the centrality of dynamics linked to the exile of Fatah's leadership as far from Lebanon as Tunisia in how cadres gained autonomy on the ground, in the camps—here, parallels could have been drawn with the 1980s insurgencies in Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. Lastly, although the concept of "quotidian social networks" so central to the book's arguments brings a welcome focus on the informal dynamics of armed groups, it encompasses such different types of social ties (e.g. marriage, kinship, friendship, community) that some analytical purchase is lost—neighborhood networks, for instance, have been shown to have significantly more mobilizational potential (see Roger Gould, *Insurgent Identities—Class, Community and Protest in Paris from 1848 to the Commune*, 1995; Kevin Mazur, "Networks, Informal Governance and Ethnic Violence in a Syrian City," *World Politics*, 72(3), 2020). It would have been interesting to disaggregate these types of ties and assess the relative importance that each had for different armed groups and depending on localities. These issues aside, this book is key to uncovering informal dynamics in armed groups.

## The organizational dynamics of ideology

Jérôme Drevon's book, *From Jihad to Politics*, builds on Parkinson's meso-level attention to the internal politics of armed groups but, instead of focusing on informal hierarchies, he shows how more formal organizational dynamics can shape their ideology. The central puzzle driving the book is in itself a contribution to the broader conflict studies scholarship on Islamist insurgencies, within which a key argument is that jihadi groups have an advantage over competitors because extremist ideologies allegedly bring benefits, like resource-rich transnational networks or better fighters (Vera Mironova, *From Freedom Fighters to Jihadists: The Human Resources of Non-State Armed Groups*, 2019; Barbara Walter, "The Extremist's Advantage in Civil Wars," *International Security*, 42(2), 2017). However, if this were the case, one would expect the jihadis to continuously radicalize. And yet Drevon instead finds that those who came on top of the insurgency during the 2011 Syrian civil war had engaged in ideological moderation, politicizing and becoming more mainstream (p. 5). He bases his evidence of "jihadi revisionism" on two key insurgent groups, Ahrar al-Sham and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, both of which at different moments in the




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conflict dropped meaningful markers of Salafi-jihadism and became ideologically closer to the mainstream opposition. This included cutting ties with Al-Qaeda for the latter and, in both cases, adopting the Syrian revolutionary flag, embracing the Unified Arab Code (a set of legal codes endorsed by the Arab League), and cooperating with the secular Free Syrian Army (FSA).

Drevon's answer to the puzzle of why and how these two key jihadi armed groups moderated their ideological stance as the conflict progressed lies not just in pressure from external sponsors of the Syrian insurgency, like Turkey, or in one leader's top-down decision but, instead, in their internal dynamics—these groups' "institutionalization" (pp. 7–13). Both groups embraced at once (though in slightly different ways) "internal institutionalization," by which the author means the creation of structures, rules, and processes to build and maintain cohesion, and "external institutionalization," referring to the nurturing of relations with other rebel groups, the population and foreign states. This process was itself their response to what he calls a "jihadi paradox" (p. 27) in Syria, which saw the proliferation of jihadi groups, their success over the insurgency, and then strong rivalries with each other. Ahrar al-Sham's and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's strategy in this highly competitive environment was to both create internal structures to socialize new members and channel their preferences, and to deal with external actors to leverage further connections and resources. As the latter process exposed the two groups to new ideas, information, and sources of support, a dynamic of ideological revisionism and moderation occurred, made possible by organizational cohesion. At the core, Drevon's account of "jihadi politicization" is thus fundamentally relational.

Although the author could have made it more explicit, the crux of the book's argument largely contributes to studies of the nexus between ideology and armed groups (see, for instance, Jonathan Leader-Maynard, "Ideology and Armed Conflict," *Journal of Peace Research*, 56(5), 2019; Raphaël Lefèvre, *Jihad in the City: Contentious Politics and Militant Islam in Tripoli*, 2021; Sarah Parkinson, "Practical Ideology in Militant Organizations," *World Politics*, 73(1), 2021). Here, instead of viewing the ideology of armed groups as reflecting either the instrumental embrace or the sincere adoption of certain worldviews by their leaders, it is seen as the outcome of constantly evolving organizational dynamics, a "balancing act" (p. 6) between internal and external pressures. A revealing example is that of Ahrar al-Sham. Drevon explains its transformation from Salafi-jihadism to more mainstream Islamism by going back to an internal crisis in 2014 which pushed the armed group to rebuild around clear norms and processes and a collective leadership. This triggered a contest for influence over ideology between the pragmatic political bureau and the more doctrinal religious office, with the former coming on top through ties to Turkey (pp. 103–106). The author's organizational account of ideology also complements work on the formal institutions of armed groups (see Amelia Hoover Green, "Armed Group Institutions and Combatant Socialization: Evidence from El Salvador," *Journal of Peace Research*, 54(5), 2017). It shows that, far from "cheap talk," institutions shape their ideological outlook.

At a wider level, *From Jihad to Politics* is an important step in the enterprise of de-exceptionalising the study of jihadi groups, with parallels to work highlighting similarities and differences with rebels in non-Islamist settings such as Marxist insurgents (see, for instance, Stathis Kalyvas, "Jihadi Rebels in Civil War," *Daedalus*, 147 (1), 2018; also see Thurston's book below). Drevon's account of what, if anything, makes jihadi militants special is both nuanced and sophisticated, illuminating their "interconnections" (p. 53) or the overlap of their networks (e.g. prison, religious, student, international networks) as their key feature but also emphasizing their sheer heterogeneity. They are actors who are largely divided in religious views, degree of social embeddedness, ties to external actors, and/or organizational form. In addition, jihadis are not static. Theirs is often a story of change and evolution, with contingencies empowering certain factions or figures who can transform groups from within—bringing them in a more radical trajectory, like ISIS, or the direction of the mainstream. This allows for jihadism to emerge as a meaningful category of analysis, with its specificities, but also one that needs to be disaggregated between types of groups—with, in Drevon's mind, their degree of internal and external institutionalization being a key differentiator.

While this book is likely to leave a mark on studies of armed groups for the unprecedented access it draws on and for the contributions it makes to our understanding of ideological change, like all work it also has shortcomings. The first is that the author thinks about ideological transformation through 2D lenses—a linear process to radicalization or moderation/politicization—where the reality of many instances of change is multi-dimensional, with zigzags between more and less ideological behavior. For instance, Colombia's FARC alternated between targeting civilians whom it perceived as ideological enemies and engaging in criminal activities—at some points doing both at once. A second issue has to do with the claim that in situations of strong organizational cohesion, the process of an armed group's external institutionalization leads to moderation/politicization. Here, by bringing in ties to other armed actors, the population, and foreign states, "external institutionalization" aggregates too many unrelated dynamics. An armed group can seek embeddedness in local communities but not be interested in foreign support, or vice versa. Also, nurturing ties with foreign states does not necessarily breed moderation. While the Afghan Taliban of the 1990s had the support of




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Pakistan but did not meaningfully moderate their ideology or practice, Iran's support for Hamas did not prevent the 7 October attacks. On the whole, however, this book brilliantly illuminates the organizational dynamics of ideology.

## The localization of armed groups

Alexander Thurston's book, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel* provides as powerful a case for de-exceptionalizing the study of jihadi groups as Drevon's, but in a different way. On the one hand, he shares Drevon's focus on their "political" nature, demonstrating that their leaders and members are not (just) religious zealots but people with personal ambition, driven by all kinds of rivalries with other jihadi groups and even within their own organizations. What emerges is the fascinating picture of a world of cloak-and-dagger, with Algeria's armed groups of the 1990s exposed as rife with paranoia and murders resulting from inside jobs. On the other hand, Thurston simultaneously takes a slightly different and original route to de-exceptionalizing jihadi groups by emphasizing their sheer rootedness in local communities. They are no longer the elitist vanguard organizations or networks they were decades ago but have become, he writes, "mass-based" armed groups mobilizing "thousands of fighters" and controlling "for months or years" vast territories, where they have built "proto-states" (p. 2). While the groups he studies all describe themselves as jihadis and are affiliated with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, they also channel socio-political grievances, strike alliances with non-Islamist groups, and seek to enroll local communities not driven by ideology. Thurston is therefore interested in grasping the localization of (jihadi) armed groups.

While there is a rich body of work on the transnationalization of civil wars (see Jeffrey Checkel, ed., *Transnational Dynamics of Civil War*, 2014; Stathis Kalyvas and Laia Balcells, "Internal Systems and Technologies of Rebellion: How the End of the Cold War Shaped Internal Conflict," *American Political Science Review*, 104(3), 2010), less scholarship examines the specifically local dynamics of conflicts. Much "second-" and "third-wave" meso-/micro-level work on civil wars takes localities as small-scale manifestations of broader phenomena of violence, but it is not the same as factoring in "the local" in accounts of conflicts. A growing literature illuminates the importance of local knowledge, territorial control, and social embeddedness to grasp the governance, violence, and strength of armed groups (see, for instance, Corrina Jentzsch and Abbey Steele, "Social Control in Civil Wars," *Civil Wars*, 25(2–3), 2023; Wolfram Lacher, *Libya's Fragmentation: Structure and Process in Violent Conflict*, 2020; Lefèvre, 2021; Pauline Moore, "When Do Ties Bind? Foreign Fighters, Social Embeddedness and Violence against Civilians," *Journal of Peace Research*, 56(2), 2019; Staniland 2014). Here, where Thurston's book adds is by clarifying that local dynamics are so crucial that they even shape transnational armed groups. Far from acting as delocalized roving predators, they are often "indigenes of the environments in which they operate," and "localization of their program is not merely a strategy but also a logical outgrowth of their core identities" (p. 21). His attention to how "the local" shapes jihadi armed groups leads to important insights. While in the case of 1990s Algerian jihadis, local networks/solidarities were the basis for both initial insurgent cohesion and later fractionalization (p. 30), the degree of embeddedness of Ansaroul Islam within marginalized communities in Burkina Faso and its engagement with their socio-political grievances shaped the group's vision and the "hyperlocal" nature of its violence (p. 218).

Thurston's book also goes further than stating that local dynamics are important to the point of shaping the internal politics and external behavior of transnational armed groups. Central to his study is a careful examination of the main mechanism allowing "the local" to have such a profound effect: the networks and agency of "jihadi field commanders" whose degree of embeddedness affects their local alliances, governance, and patterns of violence. The archetype of the "field commander" linking Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb with Sahelian communities is Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a veteran of the 1990s Algerian jihad who built local ties in the Sahel through marriage. This broadened and cemented his base, through which engaged in criminality and gained autonomy while staying in Al-Qaeda. Another example of a successful broker between transnational jihadi networks and local communities is Iyad Ag-Ghali, a figure of the 1990s Northern Mali rebellion with status within the Kel Adagh Tuareg confederation and whose local jihadi outfit, Ansar al-Din, promised to fight "for religion and territory," bringing tribal constituencies into its fold (p. 130). Here, a risk in Thurston's analysis would have been to essentialize entire tribes or localities, but he shows care and nuance when weaving communities into his story (p. 76).

At a broader level, this book provides a corrective to narratives on "global jihad" (see Daniel Byman, *Road Warriors: Foreign Fighters in the Armies of Jihad*, 2019; Fawaz Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global*, 2005; Glenn Robinson, *Global Jihad: A Brief History*, 2020). It complements growing work pushing back against the allegedly "global" dimension of transnational Sunni and Shia Islamist armed groups and illuminating, instead their "glocalization" or how they navigate global/local tensions (see Virginie Colombier and Olivier Roy, eds, *Tribes and Global Jihadism*, 2017; James Paterson, "Al-Qaeda as a Spatially-Oriented Movement: Interactions Between Transnational and Local Jihadism," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 2024; Jean Luc Marret, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: A 'glocal' Organization," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 31(6), 2008; Morten Valbjørn,




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Jeroen Gunning and Raphaël Lefèvre, "When Transnational Is Not Global: Dynamics of Armed Transnational Shi'a Islamist Groups," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 2024). Thurston's main contribution here is to demonstrate the agency of jihadi armed groups which are part of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's transnational network, and the largely transactional interactions which they develop with both this network and local communities. In this context, some can even be more meaningfully described as "circumstantial jihadis" than "merely pawns of Al-Qaeda" (p. 104), as the example of Ansar al-Din's constantly shifting relations with the transnational network shows (pp. 127–146), or as suggested by the 2015 split of Abu Walid al-Sahrawi who joined ISIS but, far from an extremist ideologue, was known as "a criminal, a trafficker and a bandit" (p. 200). The book puts transactional ties and agency at the heart of the nexus between local jihadis and transnational networks.

Although Thurston's *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel* is a highly enjoyable, empirically rich book to read, it would have benefited from more clarity on the notion of "field commander" around which the book revolves to explain why jihadi groups are going local. A degree of confusion persists regarding their exact place in the formal hierarchy. Are they akin to the mid-level cadres who are of interest to Parkinson as described above? Are they upper in the echelon, closer to second-tier leaders? The aforementioned example of Belmokhtar, who is the book's paradigmatic case, suggests the latter, but it is not clear. Linked to this is the meaning given to the term "commander." While it implies a focus on military activity, Thurston's book illuminates the range of other functions these figures undertake. Ansar al-Din's Ag-Ghali, for instance, is not primarily described as a brigade commander but rather as a smart politician, a tribal figure, a prominent civil servant, and a shrewd diplomat. A second issue with the book is that it could have gone further in its conceptualization and theorization of the role of "the local" in armed conflict. For instance, the author distinguishes "jihadism from above" and "jihadism from below" (p. 149, 160), which seems key to typologizing engagement with local communities, but the concepts remain underspecified. These issues aside, this work sets the tone for further research on localization processes.

## Conclusion

In a recent review of two decades of civil war research, Paul Staniland notes that the vast expansion of the field makes it "much harder to carve out distinctive contributions within a now far more established area of study," noting a "problem of saturation" (2024:198). Although this holds true for the sub-field exploring armed groups, this review essay shows how three books which are the product of years of ethnographic and archival research vigorously push the agenda forward by shedding light on important and overlooked themes such as informal politics, the organizational dynamics of ideology, and localization processes. Beyond the nuanced insights they develop through field research, Drevon's and Thurston's work illuminates the rich potential for mutually beneficial crossover between conflict studies and the literature on jihadism—jihadis may have their specificities (e.g. belief system, interconnectedness) but they are also rebel groups fighting, governing and compromising. The latter's book reveals another fertile ground for cross-pollination: scholarship on different regions of the world which, in spite of looking at similar phenomena, remain firmly siloed. Thurston's work is one of the few studies of jihadism in both Africa and the Middle East, with insights leading to new research questions, such as variation in how jihadi groups operate in rural areas in the former while they tend to be more urban in the latter region.

At a wider level, and beyond making distinct contributions to our understanding of the role of informal politics, ideology, and the importance of "the local" in armed groups and conflict at large, I see these three books as participating in the rise of two avenues of research. The first is an agenda illuminating the agency of select individuals whose organizational role, worldviews, or networks can allow them at times to shape the trajectory of armed groups. Parkinson's account of cadres and Thurston's argument about "field commanders" are examples of insightful narratives explaining why, how, and when a handful of people can affect conflicts all while showing care not to fall into "great men and women of history" traps. Here, factoring contingencies in could help paint an even analytically sharper picture by moving the cursor to particular moments of flux when these individuals become empowered. The second research program these three books participate in is the broader conversation on the local vs. transnational dimensions of political phenomena. The authors all shed light on zones of grey; tensions, ambiguities, and even outright contradictions in how armed groups manage transnational (e.g., global networks, ideology, exile) and hyperlocal (cleavages, constituencies, identity) dynamics, with unpredictable outcomes on their trajectory. As this review demonstrates, Parkinson's, Drevon's, and Thurston's work embodies the rich insights that field research on armed groups in the Middle East can bring to conflict studies.




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