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Resisting Resolution: Islamist Claims and Negotiations in Intrastate Armed Conflicts

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Abstract

The prevalence of Islamist armed conflicts is an important problem of our time. One pivotal question that remains unexplored is whether conflicts fought over Islamist claims are more or less likely to be negotiated, and if so, why? This article provides the first large-N study exploring the relationship between Islamist claims and negotiations in all intrastate armed conflicts for the time period 1975–2011. We argue that the transnational dimension can serve to make some Islamist conflicts resistant to peaceful resolution attempts. Our findings show that while conflicts over Islamist claims generally are no more or less likely to see negotiations, there is significant variation within this category. When we disaggregate Islamist conflicts, we find that transnational Islamist conflicts are less likely to experience negotiations, whereas conflicts fought over separatist or revolutionary Islamist claims are no more or less likely to see negotiations.

Keywords

negotiation – armed conflict – Islamist – religion – transnational

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The prevalence of Islamist armed conflicts is an important problem of our time.[3] Out of the six most deadly armed conflicts in 2018 recorded by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), four involved at least one Islamist actor. In all of these four conflicts, the non-state actor expressed their political aspirations in religious terms related to Islam: Afghanistan (ISIS and Taliban), Somalia (al-Shabaab), and Syria (ISIS). The other two conflicts in Syria and Yemen included both secular and radical Islamist non-state actors, such as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, or Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly known as al-Nusra Front) in Syria. Although religious civil wars have occurred in all faith traditions, during recent years, Islamist armed conflicts have become increasingly common. The last time a non-Islamist religious civil war took place was in year 2009, when the government in Sri Lanka, originally demanding that Buddhism should play a leading role in the constitution of the country, defeated the secularist separatists of LTTE militarily. Since then, all religious civil wars have been fought over Islamist demands. If we broaden the empirical scope to internal armed conflicts in general and include low-intensity conflicts, we can see that Islamist armed conflicts represent, by the most recent account, the majority of all intrastate armed conflicts. In fact, 56% of all intrastate armed conflicts in 2015 were Islamist (Nilsson & Svensson 2018).

There is widespread belief that religiously defined conflicts – of which Islamist conflicts are the most prevalent – are particularly difficult to settle through negotiations. This article contributes by providing the first large-N study exploring the relationship between conflicts fought over Islamist claims and negotiations in all intrastate armed conflicts between 1975–2011. It does so by addressing the following research question: Are conflicts fought over

3 We are grateful to Daniel Finnbogason, Dino Krause and Luís Martínez Lorenzo for excellent research assistance. We also thank participants at the Annual Meeting of the Peace Science Society, University of Notre Dame, October 2016; at the Jan Tinbergen European Peace Science Conference, June 2016, and at the Folke Bernadotte Academy Research Workshop: Mediation for Prevention and Peacemaking, June 2017 for valuable feedback on previous versions. Special thanks to Govinda Clayton, Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs and Sophia Wrede. We gratefully acknowledge financial support from Riksbankens Jubileumsfond to the research project 'Resolving Jihadist Conflicts? Religion, Civil War, and Prospects for Peace' (grant no. NHS 14-1701:1). We define Islamist armed conflicts as a generic term for armed conflicts including warring actors fighting for self-proclaimed Islamist aspirations (e.g. when the warring parties themselves express their political claims in such terms). 'Armed conflict' is defined, in line with Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), as a stated incompatibility resulting in at least 25 battle-related deaths per calendar year, between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state. 'Civil war' or 'major armed conflict' is a conflict with at least 1000 battle-related deaths in a calendar year.

Islamist claims more or less likely to be negotiated, and if so, why? The conjecture that religious conflicts are difficult to settle is an idea that has received substantial empirical support. Previous works find that armed conflicts with religious dimensions are more devastating for the civilian population (Toft 2007), more intense (Nordås 2010; Pearce 2005), last longer (Horowitz 2009; Tusicisny 2004), and are less likely to be settled through negotiated agreements (Svensson 2007, 2012). Their intractability, it is often argued, is due to the absolute character of their claims (and the negative implications following from this for the chance of conflict resolution), as well as the possibility of extra-worldly rewards (for example, martyrdom) to offset ordinary cost-benefit calculations of the conflict parties.

Although there are valuable insights to gain from this explanation, we think there are two main reasons to question it. First, although extra-worldly calculations do not necessarily enter into the calculation of conflict parties in non-religious conflicts, there are nevertheless similar social mechanisms at work in nationalism, Marxism, and other revolutionary or militant ideologies, which are functionally similar to the concept of martyrdom. Second, there exist possible bargaining solutions to disputes between Islamist and secular antagonists that do not necessarily require a change in the appeal to the absolute rationale of the claims. Based on these reasons alone, we should not expect any substantial difference between Islamist conflicts in general and other types of conflicts when it comes to assessing the likelihood of negotiations.

But there are other reasons why Islamist conflicts may not result in negotiations. In this article, we propose that it is the transnational character of some Islamists claims that account for resistance to negotiations in this sub-category of conflicts. When the warring parties make transnational Islamist claims, in other words, demands that transcend state boundaries, there is less bargaining space between the parties and subsequently, negotiations to resolve those claims become less likely. This is in contrast to other Islamist armed conflicts, where the warring parties promote separatist Islamist claims or revolutionary Islamist claims. The latter tend to be more contained domestically and as such are more open to different solutions through negotiations, whereas conflicts including actors with transnational Islamist claims come with a severely reduced bargaining space due to their transnational character. This characteristic of transnational Islamist conflicts serves as a powerful obstacle to the likelihood of peace negotiations.

We provide a number of key findings regarding how armed conflicts over Islamist claims may influence negotiations. In line with our theory, we find that the type of Islamist conflict is an important determinant for negotiations. Indeed, conflicts fought over transnational Islamist claims are less likely to

experience negotiations, even after accounting for organizational and transnational factors. Yet, conflicts over *other* Islamist claims – those which concern either government power over the state as a whole, or separatist demands – are no more or less likely to see negotiations. Hence, claims fought over Islamist aspirations are thus not thwarting the possibility of negotiations everywhere and all the time, but only under specific circumstances.

Why is this study important? It represents an attempt to examine the extent to which regular conflict resolution approaches are applicable to religiously defined conflicts, notably the most prevalent form of such conflicts: those fought under the banner of Islamist aspirations. According to Hasenclever and Rittberger (2000: 650) there is "… little systematic research on the impact of religious faith on the course of conflicts. Nor is there much systematic research on adequate strategies for dealing peacefully with conflicts which include a religious dimension." To generate more knowledge about the conditions under which belligerents sit down at the table is therefore of paramount importance. Knowing more about the factors influencing negotiations is key to better understanding the intractability of religious conflicts in general. Yet, so far, there has been no attempt to scrutinize how religious factors influence the propensity for negotiations in intrastate conflicts.[4] To that end, we contribute with this study.

The article is organized as follows. First, we describe two conventional explanations of the intractability of religiously defined conflicts, which we do not find fully convincing. Thereafter, we put forth an argument proposing that Islamist claims over territory or government are not structurally different from other conflict claims per se, but that it is the transnational character of the claims in some conflicts that makes these resistant to peace negotiations. Next, we describe the research design, which includes a discussion of the data on religious aspects that we use, such as whether conflict actors are fighting for Islamist aspirations. This is followed by a presentation of our results. We study the global picture of religiously defined conflicts over Islamist political aspirations and negotiations through a statistical analysis of all intrastate armed conflicts. Lastly, we draw some concluding insights from our findings, and identify avenues for future research.

4 A possible exception is Bapat (2006), who studied the onset of negotiations, yet the empirical focus of his study is on terrorism in general, and is restricted to hostage negotiations, rather than political negotiations in religiously defined conflicts, which is our interest here. See also Spector (1998) for a discussion of general problems in negotiating with actors holding extreme views or exercising extreme behaviors. For other relevant studies on negotiations, see Bapat (2005), Cunningham & Sawyer (2019), Ogutcu-Fu (2016), and Stein (1989).

Understanding the Obstacles to Negotiations in Islamist Conflicts

Conventional thinking would lead us to expect that religiously defined conflicts, of which Islamist armed conflicts constitute a significant share, should be more difficult to resolve. Based on past research, it is possible to identify two types of explanations for the intractability of religiously defined conflicts. We first present these existing explanations and then introduce our own argument, which distinguishes between different types of Islamist armed conflicts, and proposes that those over *transnational* Islamist claims represent a particular challenge for negotiation.

Existing Explanations

First, religiously defined conflicts are – seemingly – ideologically rigid. If group ideological preferences are religiously anchored, the likelihood decreases that the leadership of such groups will be able to make adjustments, compromises and concessions. This will leave less room for negotiations. The claims to absolute truth that lay behind particular political aspirations and serve as its ultimate rationale can therefore constitute an obstacle for the opening of talks with the other side. Thus, religiously defined conflicts can be difficult to resolve because they concern absolutist claims, which imply less flexibility in terms of changing aspirations and altering bargaining positions. Appealing to religious convictions, sentiments, and epistemological frameworks may be a way for militants to mobilize support and reveal commitment to a struggle and its use of coercive conflict strategies. Indeed, parties who have claimed divine sanctions for their engagement in violent interaction at the onset of the conflict would find it difficult to motivate change from such public commitments later down the road.[5] According to Fox (2004), religious conflicts are often intractable "due to the non-bargainable nature of the motivations behind them." As argued by Horowitz (2009: 168, 170), "… religious beliefs make a higher-order claim on behavior than do claims by groups organized along purely ethnic, linguistic, or cultures lines," and therefore "religious motivations may make compromise too difficult to pursue." According to De Juan and Hasenclever (2015: 205), "conflicts framed in religious terms can easily be excluded from any peaceful conflict resolution that is based on compromise." In conflicts where rebel groups take up arms with declared Islamist goals against more secular-leaning governments, the aspirations can be very far from each other. Juergensmeyer (1994) argues

5 It should be recognized that religious rhetoric and mobilization could be a consequence rather than a cause of violence and conflict (Isaacs 2016).

that there is no compromise between the secular and religious basis for the state. Thus, the bargaining space, the room for making potential deals, is severely limited in such conflicts, and should reduce the likelihood that negotiations occur.

Yet, although there is significant value in this line of thought, we also think that it carries some fundamental problems. Importantly, these features are not unique to Islamist conflicts, nor are these necessarily found in all such conflicts. Theoretically, as well as empirically, there exist a range of possible conflict resolution mechanisms between Islamists and secular antagonists short of concessions on absolute truth claims. For example, territorial autonomy solutions can be implemented to allow for religious legislation to be the constitutional praxis, which has been done in the Philippines, Pakistan, and in the Aceh-region in Indonesia, or to restrict the application of Sharia law to only some areas of the country, as was done during the interim period in Sudan (2005–2010) (Svensson 2012; Svensson & Harding 2011). In cases such as the United Somali Congress (USC) in Somalia and the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) in Tajikistan, religious issues are indeed central to the debate and resolution attempts. Yet, the religious dimensions of the conflicts were resolved: in Somalia by adapting sharia as the basis for legislation (in an attempt to marginalize al-Shabaab), and in Tajikistan by allowing religious parties to contest in the national elections. Moreover, the legislation of religiously defined political parties can change the means of conflicts without changing the aspirations, and several Islamist armed actors have transformed or complemented their armed wings with a political party structure, including the RJF (Islamic Army of Iraq) in Iraq in 2011 as well as the al-Mahdi movement in Iraq, Hamas in Palestine, the IRP in Tajikistan, and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) in Indonesia (Söderberg Kovacs & Krause 2019). Moreover, there is a substantial variation in government favoritism of religion and various forms of constitutional arrangements are possible (Henne 2012).

A second conventional explanation concerns the costs of conflicts and the problem of extra-worldly rewards. The lower the costs for continuing violence, the less likely the parties will engage in negotiations. The afterlife awards that are commonly expected in a religiously defined conflict serve to "de-emphasize physical survival in favor of spiritual rewards" (Horowitz 2009: 168), and may thereby provide an incentive structure built on other-worldly rewards and punishments that can help to motivate a continuation of conflict and serve as obstacle to negotiations. The idea of *martyrdom*, in which the sacrifice of one's own life will be rewarded in the afterlife, is central to many religiously defined conflicts. The belief in divine sanctions implies a positive value associated with death. Wiktorowicz and Kaltenthaler suggest that "radical Islamic groups offer spiritual selective incentives to individuals who are concerned

with the hereafter" (Wiktorowicz & Kaltenthaler 2006: 295).[6] Religious beliefs, including convictions relating to rewards in a life after death or the idea of acting in front of divine audiences, can thus affect the payoff structures in conflicts. Taking into account the afterlife, incentive structures for engagement in conflicts for the Islamist armed actors may be altered, as rebels could potentially be more willing to accept losses. Thus, where secular groups can be swayed by the threat of destruction, Islamist groups may be content to sacrifice their lives (Toft 2007). Governments confronting Islamist groups may also expect to face a particularly intransigent type of actor that will lead them to downgrade the prospects for a solution through negotiations. This perception of intransigence and the subsequent discounting of the possibilities for conflict resolution may be due to premature pre-conceptions and misperceptions as formed by a 'secular bias' (Klocek 2017). It is thus possible that Islamist conflict issues are more difficult to resolve because the religiously motivated belligerents are more prepared to carry the costs of the conflicts than their secular counterparts. Hence, rewards in a life after death or the idea of acting in front of divine audiences can affect the payoff structures in conflicts. Taking into account the afterlife, incentive structures for engagement in conflicts for the Islamists armed actors may be altered, as rebels could potentially be more willing to accept losses. Thus, groups fighting over self-proclaimed Islamist aspirations may therefore be expected to be more content to sacrifice their lives than secular groups.

However, there are also reasons to question the martyrdom explanation for the intractability of Islamist conflicts. Martyrdom is not exclusive to Islamists or to other religiously defined armed actors. For example, in both the Kurdish and Tamil national movements the ideology of martyrdom (for the aspired homeland) has been influential (Bloom 2005). Even if the individual payoff for sacrifice for the sake of group survival is unique to religious motivations, in religious and nationalist conflicts alike, reputation and group benefits may help to explain willingness to carry the ultimate sacrifice. In fact, martyrdom has an important social component. Gaining the social recognition of being a martyr generates reputational benefits (and in some circumstances also material benefits, such as payments) to martyred jihadists' kin and extended family (Berman & Laitin 2006, 2008). Such reputational benefits do not hinge on expectations of individual after-worldly benefits and can therefore be applicable in many non-religiously defined conflicts as well.

6 Walter (2017) argues that there are a set of organizational and strategic advantages of using, or supporting, extremist ideologies, in particular, by offering private benefits (other-worldly rewards). Extreme ideologies can serve the purpose of overcoming free-riding and collective action problems.

For all these reasons, we question these two dominant explanations for why Islamist conflicts should be particularly difficult to solve through negotiations. Neither the ideological rigidity explanation nor the martyrdom explanation are fully convincing according to the reasoning laid out above. Still, we suggest that some types of Islamist conflicts do indeed resist resolution, but the reasons are not to be found in the explanations outlined above; rather, the explanation may be found in the reduced bargaining space potential in armed conflicts fought over transnational claims. We argue that it is not the religious dimension in general but rather certain transnational features of a subset of Islamists conflicts that can explain why parties in conflicts are not ready to come to the negotiation table.

The Transnational Dimension and Different Types of Islamist Conflicts

Our argument centers on the way transnational features of some Islamist armed conflicts may create obstacles for peace negotiations. Here we draw on the distinction between three different types of Islamist armed conflicts, namely armed conflicts fought over 1) a transnational Islamist claim, 2) a separatist Islamist claim, and 3) a revolutionary Islamist claim (Svensson & Nilsson 2018). We develop an argument which centers on the degree to which these transnational claims can be negotiated. Separatist or revolutionary Islamist claims to a larger extent tend to be domestically contained, whereas transnational claims are precisely that: transnational, going beyond state boundaries. With narratives centering on, for instance, the rejection of modernity and Western materialism, the overthrow of infidel (nominally Muslim) governments, and the reestablishment of an Islamic Caliphate governed by Sharia law, transnational Islamist conflicts are maximalist on both the government and the territorial dimension. These claims constitute systemic challenges to the status quo, as groups expressing these claims are not only aspiring to change the government of a country, including its present territorial state formation, but replace the underlying premises of governance altogether. The aspiration of a global caliphate goes beyond the existing territorially based nation-state system, as well as the authority of governance (Bunzel 2015; McCants 2015).[7] These claims affect the perceived value of victory and make

7 There might be discrepancies between the group level (the focus here) and the individual level. For example, Stern (2016: 106) notes that "ISIS claims to be aiming to change the world—to maintain and spread its so-called Caliphate. But the individuals who join the group are often mobilized by more mundane or personal factors, including the chance to be a hero, to remake themselves, or to earn a higher salary." For more on this difference, see Siebert, von Winterfeldt & John (2015).

the stakes higher than in other types of conflicts. The problem with radicalism involving extreme demands will be more severe for conflicts that include actors fighting over a transnational Islamist ideology, leading to a decreased bargaining space. In conflicts where rebel groups take up arms with declared transnational Islamist goals against more secular-leaning governments, the aspirations can be very far from each other. For example, the Islamic State (ISIS) demands radical shifts in governance as well as in territorial dimensions, fundamentally challenging the present state system as well as the underlying governance ideology of the challenged states. As stated in the magazine of ISIS: "The shade of this blessed flag will expand until it covers all eastern and western extents of the Earth, filling the world with the truth and justice of Islam and putting an end to the falsehood and tyranny" (*Dabiq* 5: 3, 12–13, 24, cited by McCants, 2015: 140). Thus, the bargaining space – the room for making potential deals – is severely limited. Although we do not think that religious demands in general are prone to rigidity, some may be more rigid than others. In particular, the transnational Islamist conflicts pose such a radical challenge to the status quo, which implies less flexibility in terms of aspirations and bargaining positions, that concessions and agreements from the onset would appear to be very unlikely. Negotiation research shows that a 'way out,' or an overall formula for resolving the conflict, is a first necessary requirement for fruitful negotiations to take place (Zartman & Berman 1982; Zartman 1995). Absent such bargaining space, we can expect the likelihood of negotiations to be reduced.

Moreover, the current dominating trans-jihadist ideology represents an ideological stream of thought that fully and comprehensively rejects openings for negotiations with opponents that do not share their ideological preferences (Hegghammer 2009, 2011). The most notable example these days, ISIS, rejects not only negotiations on strategic grounds, but for religiously dogmatic reasons. As the journalist Graeme Wood explains in his analysis of the religious basis for the group: "If the caliph consents to a longer-term peace or permanent border, he will be in error. Temporary peace treaties are renewable, but may not be applied to all enemies at once: the caliph must wage jihad at least once a year. He may not rest, or he will fall into a state of sin" (Wood 2015). Thus, the current dominating transnational Islamist ideology represents an ideological stream of thought that fully rejects openings for negotiations with opponents that do not share their ideological preferences. Such a resistance to negotiations, however, may not only be found on the rebel side, but governments may similarly reject negotiations with transnational actors demanding fundamental change to the present state system.

Taken together, we propose that conflicts including actors with transnational Islamist claims come with more limited bargaining space for possible

agreements. We expect that transnational Islamist conflicts are associated with lower chances of engagement in conflict resolution processes, specifically when it comes to negotiation. Yet, as explained earlier, we do not think that conflicts over Islamist claims with regard to either government or territory should be expected to be more difficult to negotiate, in comparison to similar conflicts without such religious claims. This leads to the following three testable propositions.

H1: Warring actors fighting over transnational Islamist claims are less likely to engage in negotiations.
H2: Warring actors fighting over revolutionary Islamist claims are no more or less likely to engage in negotiations than other warring actors fighting for government power.
H3: Warring actors fighting over separatist Islamist claims are no more or less likely to engage in negotiations than other warring actors fighting for separatism.

Research Design

Data and Dependent Variable

To examine the relationship between conflicts fought over Islamist claims and negotiations, we rely on conflict data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). Internal armed conflicts are defined as conflicts over government and/or territory between a government and one or more rebel groups that result in 25 battle-related deaths or more in a calendar year. Since the government may engage in negotiations with some rebel groups, but not others, we explore this at the dyad level, using the UCDP Dyadic Dataset v4-2016 (Harbom, Melander & Wallensteen 2008; Melander, Pettersson & Themnér 2016). Our dataset focuses on each government-rebel dyad and the unit of analysis is the dyad-year. For our dependent variable, we use data on negotiations from the online encyclopedia of the UCDP (2016). This data is available for the period 1975 to 2011, and our analysis thus focuses on this time period. Negotiations are defined as talks between two or more warring actors about one or more of the conflict issues, for example, talks about a ceasefire to end hostilities or addressing their incompatibility as such. Our dependent variable *Negotiations* is coded 1 for all years the conflict dyad engages in negotiations, if at all, and is coded 0 for all other years. Since our dependent variable is dichotomous, we rely on Logit models for our statistical analysis.

Explanatory Variables

First, to assess whether warring actors fighting over Islamist claims are more or less likely to engage in negotiations, we use data from the Religion and Armed Conflict (RELAC) dataset (Svensson & Nilsson 2018), and in particular the measure *Islamist claims,* which is coded 1 if either the government or the rebel group has self-proclaimed Islamist aspirations at the outset of the conflict; otherwise it is coded 0.[8] Examples include ISIS in Syria and Iraq, Boko Haram in Nigeria, Hamas in Palestine, GAM in Indonesia (Aceh) and the Kashmir insurgents in India, demonstrating the broad variation within the category of Islamist conflicts. While it is commonly the rebel side that is making Islamist-framed demands, in a minority of the cases the aspirations are found on the government side, and the rebels are more secular leaning (one relevant example here is Sudan People's Liberation Movement in Sudan). As it is the declaration at the onset of the conflict that determines whether a conflict is fought over an Islamist ideology, this measure does not vary over time. Ideally, we would prefer to have data on the parties' positions over time, but that does not exist at present. The data structure does nevertheless capture escalation of demands in those circumstances where there are new rebel formations that express such aspirations.

Next, to assess our hypotheses concerning different types of Islamist armed conflicts, we use novel disaggregated data on Islamist claims on the side of the insurgency. First, the variable *Transnational Islamist Claim* is coded 1 if the rebel group is fighting over Islamist claims that transcend state boundaries, and is otherwise coded 0. ISIS and Al Qaida are prominent cases. We further take into account if the rebel actors at the outset of the armed struggle have expressed *Revolutionary Islamist Claim*. This variable is coded 1 when either side has Islamist aspirations, which concern claims over government power, such as establishing Sharia law in the country as a whole, for instance, al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya in Egypt and AIS (Armée Islamique du Salut) in Algeria. We also have a measure, *Separatist Islamist Claim*, which captures whether the insurgents make claims over Islamist aspirations, but where these claims are limited to a separate territory. Examples of groups that fight over such claims include the Kashmir insurgents in India, the Patani insurgents in Southern Thailand, and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines.

8 Unless otherwise mentioned, all data concerning the religious dimensions come from Svensson & Nilsson (2018). For related definitions of Islamist armed conflicts, see Toft & Zhukov (2015).

Control Variables

We introduce a set of controls pertaining to the characteristics of the conflict that we use in our baseline models, since these are factors that can influence the likelihood of negotiations.[9] We control for *Dyad duration* and *Dyad intensity* using data from UCDP, where the first variable captures the number of years since the conflict reached 25 battle-related deaths, and the latter measures whether the conflict in a given year reaches more than 1000 battle-related deaths. Moreover, we make a distinction between conflicts fought over government or territory, where the variable *Territorial* is coded 1 if the conflict concerns a specific territory, rather than control over the government. We also control for the *Number of dyads*, since the number of rebel actors can influence the likelihood that the government engages in negotiations with one or more rebel group (Walter 2003). This measure captures the number of government-rebel dyads that are active in the conflict. To account for temporal dependence in our data, we also include *Time since Negotiations*, which counts the number of years since negotiations were held between the government and the rebel group, if at all. We also include squared and cubed terms of this variable, as proposed by Carter and Signorino (2010). Given that the observations within the conflict dyads are not strictly independent from each other, we opted to cluster the standard errors in the models on the conflict dyad.

Next, to ensure that our findings are not driven by the organizational features of these conflicts or their transnational character, we introduce a set of controls to account for this possibility. To explore if it is the organizational features of the armed conflicts that make some conflicts resist negotiations, we begin by introducing the measure *Strong rebels,* which is coded 1 if the rebel group is at parity or stronger in relation to the government, and coded 0 if the groups are weaker or much weaker than the government. *Strong central command* is a dummy variable capturing whether the rebel groups exercise a high control over their forces, and is otherwise coded 0. The last measure to capture the organizational features of the rebel groups is *Political wing*, which is coded 1 if the rebel group has a political wing. We rely on data from the Non-State Actors in Armed Conflict Dataset (NSA) for these variables (Cunningham, Gleditsch & Salehyan 2013).

We also constructed a set of variables that capture transnational links (Toft & Zhukov 2015). The variable *Transnational constituency* is coded 1 if the rebel

9 Since most of our control variables do not vary much over time, we present the results without lagging our control variables (as this otherwise generates a lot of missing observations). To ensure that this does not influence our results, we also carried out analyses where we lagged our controls (results available upon request), but all our findings remain robust.

group in question appealed to a religious, ideological or ethnic constituency in another country, and received support from that constituency. As an alternative measure to such transnational features of the rebel organization, we also created the measure *Foreign involvement*, which is coded 1 if the rebel group received major '… support or foreign fighters from external non-state actors,' or if there is a government who provided support to the rebels in the form of, for example, troops or weapons. Both these variables are coded based on information in the NSA dataset (Cunningham, Gleditsch & Salehyan 2013).

Lastly, there is also the possibility that armed actors with other aspirations, such as having a Marxist agenda, may equally resist negotiations. While this would not render our results spurious, by introducing a measure covering other political agendas, we can better understand if armed groups that have Islamist aspirations are different from other groups that have a strong ideological foundation, for example, the Maoist rebel group in Nepal. Hence, we created the measure *Leftist*, which is coded 1 if the rebel group declared that it is fighting for a leftist agenda, which thus includes Socialist and Marxist groups, and is coded 0 otherwise. Here we are basing our analysis on an updated version of a dataset created by Forsberg and Karlén (2013).[10]

Results and Analysis

We now move on to explore the theoretical propositions put forward concerning how Islamist armed conflicts, and in particular different types of such conflicts, may impact negotiations. We begin by presenting some descriptive trends and patterns. Summary statistics for all our variables are presented in Table 1.

We observe some basic patterns in our data. We note that Islamist armed conflicts are less likely to be negotiated, but negotiations do happen. As shown in Table 2, 30% (19 out of 63) of the Islamist armed conflict dyads experience negotiations at some point, whereas the corresponding figure for non-Islamist armed conflicts is 43% (131 out of 305).[11] Hence, based on these descriptive statistics alone, Islamist armed conflicts seem slightly less likely to be negotiated. However, in order to know whether this result also holds up once we

10 The original data sources that were used to create this dataset are Kalyvas & Balcell (2010); the Terrorist Organization Profiles dataset by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (2013); the Minorities at Risk Organizational Behavior Database (Asal, Pate & Wilkenfeld 2008); as well as the UCDP Encyclopedia.

11 Several dyads engage in negotiations for more than one year.

TABLE 1 Summary statistics

Variables	N	mean	sd	min	max
Negotiations	1,748	0.208	0.406	0	1
Islamist claims	1,842	0.214	0.410	0	1
Transnational Islamist claims	1,842	0.0255	0.158	0	1
Revolutionary Islamist claims	1,842	0.137	0.344	0	1
Separatist Islamist claims	1,842	0.0641	0.245	0	1
Dyad duration	1,842	4.938	6.552	0	40
Dyad intensity	1,842	0.200	0.400	0	1
Territorial	1,842	0.434	0.496	0	1
Number dyads	1,842	1.769	1.321	1	8
Years since negotiations	1,748	3.346	4.475	0	28
Years since negotiations_sq	1,748	31.21	75.95	0	784
Years since negotiations_cu	1,748	411.1	1,593	0	21,952
Strong rebels	1,807	0.0747	0.263	0	1
Strong central command	1,728	0.189	0.391	0	1
Political wing	1,830	0.394	0.489	0	1
Transnational constituency	1,717	0.376	0.484	0	1
Foreign involvement	1,842	0.627	0.484	0	1
Leftist	1,832	0.291	0.455	0	1
Religious identity	1,842	0.328	0.470	0	1

TABLE 2 Islamist claims and negotiations across conflict dyads

	Islamist claims	
	Yes (63)	*No (305)*
Negotiations	19	131
No negotiations	44	174

control for the organizational features of these conflicts or their transnational character, we need to also explore this in a multivariate statistical analysis.

The results from our multivariate statistical analysis can be found in Model 1–4, Table 3. In Table 4, we present some robustness tests of our findings, accounting for a set of organizational features, as well as transnational characteristics. We begin by exploring if armed conflicts fought over Islamist claims generally are more or less likely to result in negotiations. As shown in Model 1, Table 3, we find that the variable *Islamist claims* has no significant effect on the likelihood of negotiations, indicating that overall Islamist conflicts are no more or less likely to result in conflict resolution efforts. Hence, when focusing on Islamist conflicts as a whole, we see no evidence that these are more or less likely to experience negotiations compared to other conflicts.

Next, we explore the different sub-categories of Islamist armed conflicts. Our first hypothesis proposed that warring actors fighting over a transnational Islamist claim should be less likely to engage in negotiations. As can be seen in Model 2, Table 3, the hypothesis is supported, as such conflicts are significantly less likely to experience negotiations. Notably, we find no significant effect for the other types of Islamist armed conflicts: conflicts over a revolutionary or separatist Islamist claim are not any more or less likely to see negotiations (see Table 3, Model 3–4). Hence, Hypothesis 2 and 3 also receive support.

TABLE 3 Logit models, Islamist claims and the likelihood of negotiations

	1	2	3	4
Islamist claims	−0.186			
	(0.279)			
Transnational Islamist claims		−2.421		
		(0.847)**		
Revolutionary Islamist claims				0.110
				(0.310)
Separatist Islamist claims			−0.179	
			(0.496)	
Dyad intensity	0.302	0.297	0.567	0.175
	(0.177)+	(0.177)+	(0.368)	(0.190)
Dyad duration	0.038	0.037	−0.004	0.056
	(0.015)*	(0.015)*	(0.022)	(0.022)*

TABLE 3 Logit models, Islamist claims and the likelihood of negotiations (*cont.*)

	1	2	3	4
Territory	−0.128	−0.167		
	(0.173)	(0.172)		
Number of conflict dyads	−0.122	−0.146	−0.013	−0.160
	(0.064)+	(0.061)*	(0.161)	(0.071)*
Time since last negotiations	−0.675	−0.658	−0.655	−0.660
	(0.106)**	(0.106)**	(0.146)**	(0.141)**
Time since last negotiations_sq	0.078	0.076	0.077	0.075
	(0.019)**	(0.019)**	(0.025)**	(0.024)**
Time since last negotiations_cu	−0.003	−0.003	−0.003	−0.002
	(0.001)**	(0.001)**	(0.001)*	(0.001)*
Constant	−0.587	−0.542	−0.736	−0.642
	(0.162)**	(0.163)**	(0.294)*	(0.175)**
N	1,748	1,748	726	1,022

Note: + $p<0.1$; * $p<0.05$; ** $p<0.01$. Robust standard errors in parentheses clustered on dyad.

The effect regarding a *Transnational Islamist claim* is quite large in substantive terms. The chance of negotiations occurring in a conflict dyad reduces from 18.5% when the conflict is over claims other than transnational Islamist aspirations, to only 2.7% when the warring parties have such an ideology. While the effect is quite large, it should be noted that during the time period under study, the cases are quite few (there are in total nine conflict dyads fighting over transnational Islamist claims). The most debated case of armed conflict over Islamist transnational claims, that has not been open for negotiations, is the conflict between ISIS and the government of Syria. Its extreme state-formation ambitions (striving for the Caliphate) may be one reason why negotiations have been out of reach. To the extent that negotiations have occurred, these have been with other actors in the Syrian conflict.

Since this result could be due to the organizational features of these rebel groups, we also control for a set of organizational factors such as the strength of central command, rebel strength, and whether the group had a political wing. These results are displayed in Model 1, Table 4. While some of these factors do influence negotiations, our main finding remains robust.

TABLE 4 Logit models, alternative specifications: Islamist claims and the likelihood of negotiations

	1	2	3
Transnational Islamist claims	−2.312	−2.490	
	(0.815)**	(0.902)**	
Strong rebels	0.825		
	(0.232)**		
Strong central command	0.165		
	(0.193)		
Political wing	−0.369		
	(0.175)*		
Transnational constituency		0.253	
		(0.199)	
Foreign involvement		0.127	
		(0.184)	
Leftist			−0.285
			(0.184)
Dyad intensity	0.099	0.169	0.292
	(0.193)	(0.178)	(0.174)+
Dyad duration	0.043	0.034	0.044
	(0.014)**	(0.015)*	(0.015)**
Territory	−0.164	−0.251	−0.175
	(0.183)	(0.188)	(0.180)
Number of conflict dyads	−0.143	−0.143	−0.147
	(0.067)*	(0.064)*	(0.063)*
Time since last negotiations	−0.653	−0.647	−0.671
	(0.113)**	(0.104)**	(0.108)**
Time since last negotiations_sq	0.076	0.072	0.077
	(0.020)**	(0.017)**	(0.019)**
Time since last negotiations_cu	−0.003	−0.002	−0.003
	(0.001)**	(0.001)**	(0.001)**
Constant	−0.479	−0.616	−0.512
	(0.197)*	(0.184)**	(0.179)**
N	1,636	1,639	1,743

Note: + $p<0.1$; * $p<0.05$; ** $p<0.01$. Robust standard errors in parentheses clustered on dyad.

We similarly account for transnational features of these conflicts, by including measures that capture foreign involvement, as well as whether the rebel group appealed to a constituency (religious, ideological or ethnic) in a foreign country, and in some way received support from this constituency. Yet, as shown in Model 2, Table 4, our key finding remains the same. Even when accounting for organizational factors as well as the transnational features of conflicts, we find a significant negative relationship between transnational Islamist claims and the likelihood of negotiations. Hence, we consistently find that armed conflicts fought over a transnational Islamist claim are different from other conflicts, whereas conflicts over Islamist separatist or Islamist revolutionary claims are no more or less likely to see negotiations.

In the Islamist armed conflicts in which peace negotiations have occurred, the claims have predominately concerned a revolutionary Islamist claim or a separatist Islamist claim. For example, the Patani insurgents, who have been engaged in peace efforts led by Malaysia, were locally oriented, and their demands seem to have been oriented towards creating a separate state in Southern Thailand, rather than connecting to any transnational network (although a lot of unclarity remains over their explicit demands due to the secret nature of their organizational structures). While these conflicts may share many features with conflicts fought over transnational claims, the bargaining space should be larger and claims should thus be more feasible to bring to the negotiation table as long as they stay locally contained and do not become entangled with the transnational dimension. As noted above, to the extent that negotiations have taken place in the Syrian conflict, it has been with more domestically oriented groups such as Ahrar al-Sham and not been with groups, such as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly known as al-Nusra Front) and ISIS, which have been fighting over transnational Islamist claims.

In an effort to probe deeper into the different types of aspirations that can matter, we also explore how a leftist ideology may influence the prospects for negotiations. We think it is of interest to see if Marxist aspirations may be more or less likely to seek negotiations. To that end, we introduce a measure capturing a leftist ideology. However, we find that these conflicts are no more or less likely to see negotiations (see Model 3, Table 4).

In addition, we also explore whether it matters if the conflict actors are fighting along different religious identities, like in Northern Ireland, where the warring actors were divided into Protestants and Catholics, or as in Iraq where the dividing line has been along the Sunni and Shia divide. Yet, even when accounting for religious identity, our main findings remain robust.[12]

12 Results available upon request.

This study has examined the likelihood of negotiations. But that is admittedly just one aspect of the conflict resolution process, and the outcome of these negotiation efforts are not the focus of this study. There is clearly a need to know more about the conditions under which Islamist armed conflicts are mitigated, managed and resolved. Future research therefore needs to focus attention on the short- as well as long-term effects of negotiations, and examine other forms of conflict management of Islamist revolts. Yet, this study has taken one important step in that direction by seeking to uncover why some types of Islamist armed conflicts seem to resist conflict resolution.

Negotiation is different from, but related to, third-party mediation. A growing research field has started to explore the conditions under which mediation occurs in intrastate civil armed conflicts (Beardsley 2009; Clayton & Gleditsch 2014; Greig 2015; Melin & Svensson 2009; Touval 1993). Future research should examine the determinants of mediation in Islamist-framed conflicts. In particular, it is important to understand whether the management process tends to be different when it comes to religiously defined conflicts in comparison to other conflicts.

Conclusions

The study of religiously defined conflicts in general, and of Islamist armed conflicts in particular, has been the focus of attention in several scholarly fields, including security studies, over the last decades. However, so far, relatively little empirical research has been done from a conflict resolution perspective. This study is an attempt to address this lacuna, by examining one aspect of the conflict resolution process: why warring parties engage in negotiations. We explored if armed conflicts over Islamist claims are more or less likely than other conflicts to result in negotiations, and if there is a difference in this respect between different types of Islamist armed conflicts. We find no significant effect when focusing on all conflicts fought over Islamist claims. Yet, upon disaggregation, another pattern is revealed. In line with our theory, we find that conflicts over transnational Islamist claims are associated with a lower likelihood of negotiations. Notably, we find no such effect for conflicts fought over separatist or revolutionary Islamist aspirations. This speaks to the importance of exploring variations in this category of armed conflicts.

Overall, armed conflicts fought over transnational Islamist claims represent a category among conflicts in which negotiations are less likely to occur. Future research needs to identify how the obstacles for conflict resolution in these

conflicts can be overcome. Another key insight from this study is that most Islamist armed conflicts are as susceptible to negotiations as other types of conflicts. Indeed, conflicts over Islamist claims other than the transnational ones – those which concern either government power over the state as a whole or separatist demands – are as likely to be negotiated as their non-Islamist counterparts.

Moreover, there is clearly a need to know more about the conditions under which Islamists armed conflicts are mitigated, managed and resolved beyond negotiations. For instance, multi-track conflict resolution processes are involved in some of the conflicts studied here, and do sometimes fill the void that the absence of formal negotiations present. Future research therefore needs to focus attention on the short- and long-term effects of negotiation, as well as international mediation in Islamist armed conflicts, and additionally examine other forms of conflict resolution and management of religious revolts.

Transnational Islamists 'entrepreneurs' can be seen as freeloaders, using local grievances and domestic disputes, and drawing these into a global dynamic and grander ideological battle. Thus, local disputes can be transformed and utilized in a larger global campaign, with the explicit aim of creating religiously based state formations that transcend ethnic boundaries and existing state borders. This implies that religious conflicts that are internationalized will be harder to resolve, because the local dynamics have shifted into a regional or even global issue structure. Conflicts that started out with particular and context-specific demands and aspirations are transformed through their organizational and ideological ties and claim-making to broader dynamics, which can serve to decrease the chance for the opening of peace talks.

How to prevent transnational Islamist armed conflicts from occurring and how to effectively de-internationalize Islamist armed conflicts that have become internationalized, are key areas of research priorities for the future. In this vein, it is important to study how Islamist groups can disengage from global transnational networks and be made to re-focus on their original domestic grievances. It is also important to study how governments supported by transnational inter-governmental networks can create space for engaging constructively in conflict resolution efforts in struggles fought over Islamist terms.

To conclude, there is a large literature about why these conflicts are initiated but we know surprisingly little about how to end Islamist armed conflicts. This remains an urgent task to find answers to. Overall, by disaggregating the process of conflict resolution, as well as Islamist claims, this study has shed some initial light on the dynamics of how such conflicts may be resolved.

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