TEXAS NATIONAL SECURITY REVIEW

POLICY ROUNDTABLE:

What Is the Future of the Jihadist Movement?

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Summary

With ISIL having lost the bulk of its territory in Iraq and Syria, we asked a group of experts what comes next for the jihadist movement.

1. Change or More of the Same? The Future of the Jihadist Movement

Stephen Tankel

In summer 2010, the National Intelligence Council organized a small, one-day conference with Europe-based academics to get their read on possible futures for the jihadist movement. I was one of the approximately twenty participants. Osama Bin Laden was still alive, but the core al-Qaeda organization was beginning to come under rising pressure in Pakistan as a result of increasingly intense drone strikes. Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was degraded thanks to the surge of U.S. forces and the Sunni Awakening. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was emerging as the most dangerous jihadist group in the world. We looked for trends and debated the future of the core of the al-Qaeda organization in Afghanistan and Pakistan, whether AQAP might take up the mantle of leadership and what that would augur, and who could emerge as the next bin Laden, among other things.

Today, with the core of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) increasingly squeezed in Syria and Iraq the jihadist movement may be facing an even bigger inflection point. Will al-Qaeda be able to regenerate and fill the void? Could another group — perhaps an ISIS or al-Qaeda affiliate, or maybe an independent actor — take the reins? Or might we witness the atomization of the jihadist movement after years in which ISIS and al-Qaeda became its competing lodestars? In either case, what would this mean for the long-running fault line between globalism and nationalism? And what of the 40,000-plus foreign fighters who flocked to Syria and Iraq, or the technological advances that ISIS exploited to recruit them and direct

or inspire attacks around the world?[1] To help clarify the problem, we brought together three scholar-practitioners — Kim Cragin, Josh Geltzer, and Daveed Gartenstein-Ross — to weigh in on what lies ahead for the jihadist movement and the threats its adherents pose.

Evolution of the Jihadist Movement: A Brief History

Any assessment of where the jihadist movement might go, must account for how it has evolved to date. Despite their pretensions to universalism, jihadists have often disagreed over issues such as which enemy to prioritize, where to fight, and whether it is appropriate to attack fellow Muslims. The two main currents in the jihadist movement before 9/11 were revolutionary and pan-Islamic. Revolutionaries prioritized changing the political order in their own homelands by overthrowing the ruling powers. Pan-Islamic jihadists were focused on defending the *umma* — the worldwide community of Muslims — and liberating all occupied Muslim lands.

Al-Qaeda was one of the few truly multinational jihadist groups that existed prior to 9/11. It developed its concept of global jihad while based in Sudan during the first half of the 1990s and then in Afghanistan for the latter half. Al-Qaeda's global jihadist ideology prioritized attacks against the United States as the first step in a larger plan to create the conditions for toppling apostate regimes in the Arab world.

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[1] Karen Parish, "Stopping flow of foreign fighters to ISIS 'will take years,' Army official says," *DoD News*, April 6, 2017, https://www.army.mil/article/185550/stopping_flow_of_foreign_fighters_to_isis_will_take_years_army_official_says.

Bin Laden and his inner circle believed that as long as the United States could project power into the region, it would be able to pressure Muslim countries to bend to its will and keep jihadists from toppling local regimes.[2] Driving America out of the region would enable jihadists to confront local regimes directly and inspire the youth to rise up and join these revolutions. At that point, al-Qaeda leaders believed that regimes in the Middle East and Persian Gulf would collapse.

Numerous groups expanded their enemy hierarchies after 9/11. While jihadists who had previously been pan-Islamic began pursuing revolutionary action, some revolutionary groups grafted pan-Islamic or global jihad onto their preexisting local agendas. The U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq contributed to this phenomenon, muddying the waters between pan-Islamic jihad against non-Muslim invaders and global jihad against the United States specifically.[3]

Al-Qaeda also evolved. Its leaders refined and expanded their organization's rationale for action, blending *takfiri* thought, which justifies attacking apostate Muslims, with the requirement to fight the United States and its Western allies.[4] Being more overt about its revolutionary tendencies helped al-Qaeda reduce the barriers to alliances with other organizations. This became increasingly important once al-Qaeda started adding affiliates. As a result, although bin Laden continued

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[2] John Miller, "Declaration of War Against the Americans: Interview with Osama bin Laden," *ABC News*, May 1998, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/binladen/who/interview.html.

[3] Thomas Hegghammer, "The Ideological Hybridization of Jihadi Groups," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, November 18, 2009, https://www.hudson.org/research/9866-the-ideological-hybridization-of-jihadi-groups.

[4] Leah Farrall, "How Al-Qaeda Works," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 2 (March/April 2011), https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/south-asia/2011-02-20/how-al-qaeda-works.

to prioritize the United States, al-Qaeda increasingly boasted an agenda that made less of a distinction between local and global enemies.[5]

By 2011, analysts worried more about some of al-Qaeda's affiliates, especially AQAP, than they did about the core organization, which was under significant pressure in Pakistan as a result of U.S. drone strikes. Initially, it appeared that successful political transitions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen following the Arab Spring would undermine the jihadist narrative that violence was a necessary handmaiden for revolution or that the United States was willing to prop up autocratic regimes.[6] Yet, far from being a death knell, the revolutions ushered in by the Arab Spring reinvigorated the jihadist movement. The weakening or outright removal of police states created space for mobilization in places where jihadists had previously had little room to maneuver and enabled a level of activity unforeseen hitherto.

As the Arab Spring gained steam in 2011, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who took the reins of al-Qaeda after bin Laden was killed, directed AQI to form a group and deploy it across the border into Syria.[7] Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of AQI, sent a

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[5] See for example, "Dots on the Letters, *as-Sahab*'s 2nd Interview with Sheikh Abu Yahya at-Libi, Two Years After His Deliverance from Bagram Prison," *as-Sahab*, September 9, 2007, https://scholarship.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/bitstream/handle/10066/5138/AYL20070909.pdf?sequence=3.

[6] The NATO-led intervention in Libya also showed that the West would intervene to protect Muslim civilians.

[7] William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (Kindle Edition: St. Martin's Press, 2015), 85.

contingent of battle-hardened fighters to form Jabhat al-Nusra (JN).[8] It became

one of the most effective rebel groups in the Syrian conflict. In April 2013, al-

Baghdadi issued a statement officially absorbing JN and renaming his organization

the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).[9] The move both revealed and

exacerbated a rift between the two groups. JN prioritized jihad against the Assad

regime in Syria, was willing to cooperate with other rebel groups to realize this

objective, and pursued a population-centric approach. ISIS sought to use Syria as a

launching pad for a renewed offensive in Iraq and remained committed to the old

AQI strategy of intimidation and sectarian provocation that sought to pit Sunnis

and Shiites against one another. Before long, ISIS controlled substantial territory

in Syria. These battlefield successes, combined with a mastery of social media,

helped ISIS attract the lion's share of foreign fighters in Syria.[10]

In June, four months after al-Qaeda disowned it, ISIS launched its major military

offensive in Iraq that captured the country's second largest city, Mosul. Afterward,

al-Baghdadi announced the reestablishment of the caliphate and declared himself

the leader of the *umma*.[11] Numerous jihadist groups — some of them previously

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[8] Cole Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate*: *The Ideology of the Islamic State* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2014).

[9] Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī, "Wa-bashshir al-mu'minīn," via *Jihadology*, April 9, 2013, http://jihadology.net/2013/04/09/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraqs-shaykh-abu-bakr-al-%E1%B8%A5ussayni-al-qurayshi-al-baghdadi-announcement-of-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-an/.

[10] "20,000 Foreign Fighters Flock to Syria, Iraq to Join Terrorists," *CBS News*, Feb. 10, 2015, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ap-20000-foreign-fighters-flock-to-syria-iraq-to-join-terrorists/.

[11] "Sunni Rebels Declare New Islamic Caliphate," *Al Jazeera*, June 30, 2014, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/06/isil-declares-new-islamic-caliphate-201462917326669749.html.

loyal to al-Qaeda — offered their allegiance. Although primarily focused on building its proto-state, ISIS also used the territory as a base for launching international terrorist attacks. Indeed, as Kim Cragin points out below, the group conducted more external operations — attacks conducted outside Syria, Iraq, or its 25 so-called provinces (used interchangeably with affiliates) — than the al-Qaeda network (AQN) did during a similar time period in its heyday. ISIS's ability to conduct external operations has diminished since the group lost Mosul in July 2017 and its fighters fled Raqqa, Syria the following October.[12] These losses have also called into question the wisdom of ISIS's aggressive approach, fueled speculation about whether al-Qaeda will resume the titular leadership mantel of the jihadist movement, and ignited debates about the nature of the jihadist threat in the years to come.

Looking Ahead: The Future of the Jihadist Movement

All three contributors to this roundtable point out ways in which the essence of the jihadist movement remains largely unchanged, while simultaneously identifying various factors that are shaping its ongoing evolution. Each essay has its own take on which elements will be the most critical. Four issues are worth highlighting:

1. *The Local and Geopolitical Terrain:* Analysts have worried for years about jihadists' access to ungoverned or poorly-governed territory that could be used for training, communications, and operational planning.

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[12] Quentin Sommerville and Riam Dalati, "Raqqa's Dirty Secret," *BBC News,* Nov. 13, 2017, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/raqqas_dirty_secret.

As Daveed Gartenstein-Ross observes, although ISIS has lost most of its territory in Iraq and Syria, jihadist safe havens and enclaves have grown more numerous since 9/11, especially in countries roiled by the so-called Arab Spring. Josh Geltzer also points out that the core ISIS organization is not yet defeated. Eradicating it is likely to prove challenging, in large part because of the continuing complexities of the overall dynamic in Iraq and Syria. Both authors also sound the warning about Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) — al-Qaeda's erstwhile affiliate in Syria — and the dangers that other al-Qaeda and ISIS affiliates continue to pose because of their ability to exploit both local grievances and grinding conflicts in weak states. Kim Cragin foresees no end to these ongoing conflicts. She argues the status quo is likely to remain in places where al-Qaeda or ISIS affiliates operate, with the important caveat that veteran foreign fighters will bring new tactical knowledge to these conflicts that could make regional groups even more lethal and push them towards greater brutality. Cragin contends a more dramatic impact from foreign fighters will likely be felt in many of the Muslim majority countries where ISIS and al-Qaeda do not have affiliates.

2. *Tensions in the Movement:* Scholars identified two fault lines that have defined the jihadist movement. One is between centralization and decentralization, and the other is between globalism and nationalism.[13] Just as al-Qaeda affiliates have thrived even with the core of the organization under enormous pressure, it is unlikely that the fate of ISIS

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[13] Assaf Moghadam and Brian Fishman eds., *Fault Lines in Global Jihad: Organizational, Strategic, and Ideological Fissures* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011).

affiliates rests entirely on ISIS's fortunes in Syria and Iraq. Moreover, Geltzer contends that as ISIS's core loses territorial control, it is possible that some of its affiliates will distance themselves from the central organization. Gartenstein-Ross argues forcefully that analysts should not be too eager to view such a development as evidence of decentralization within the wider movement. Despite the difficulties the core organizations of al-Qaeda and ISIS are each facing, he asserts that the *trend* within the jihadist movement has been toward centralization. Global jihadism has simultaneously continued to spread according to Gartenstein-Ross. Most groups likely will continue to fixate primarily on regional objectives, but more of them have also adopted a transnational vision and continue to engage in transnational activities even if they do not prioritize attacks against Western targets. The spread of foreign fighters, which Cragin documents, could reinforce this trend.

3. *Technology and Foreign Fighters:* According to Cragin, the most immediate threat to the West — North America, Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand — depends on foreign fighter returnees, specifically whether they are motivated and able to conduct attacks or recruit another generation of Western jihadists. As Cragin notes, foreign fighters have conducted the majority of external operations directed by ISIS leaders. Gartenstein-Ross and Geltzer zero in on how jihadists take advantage of technological advances to enable these operations. Jihadists have combined mastery of social media with the use of end-to-end encryption, which is often inaccessible to governments, to radicalize new adherents, mobilize them, and provide the kind of assistance to

remote operatives that physical terrorist networks used to provide in person.

4. *Leadership of the Movement:* All three contributors to this roundtable posit that ISIS and al-Qaeda appear poised to remain key players in the jihadist movement, even if some of their affiliates may be better positioned in the near term. Their respective leaders — al-Zawahiri of al-Qaeda and al-Baghdadi of ISIS — both lay claim to leadership of the movement. The competition is not simply organizational. Al-Qaeda leaders have criticized ISIS for splintering the movement, declaring a Caliphate that did not have staying power, and pursuing a brutal, *takfiri* strategy that has often included attacking other mujahideen (Muslim holy warriors). Al-Zawahiri lacks charisma and has struggled to motivate followers like bin Laden did, but ISIS's losses in Iraq and Syria create space for al-Qaeda to reclaim its vanguard position. As Cragin notes, al-Qaeda has taken more of a population-centric approach and sought to present itself as a less virulent alternative to ISIS. Geltzer and Gartenstein-Ross identify various developments, such as the fortunes of HTS in Syria and its relationship with al-Qaeda's core, which could influence whether al-Qaeda is successful in its bid to retake the titular mantle of the jihadist movement. Geltzer also posits that ISIS's ingenuity and pioneering use of the Internet may have paved the way for a new jihadist group to capture some of the jihadist "market share" by combining online technologies with a compelling narrative and a leadership capable of inspiring followers.

Although plenty of us who came together that summer day in 2010 noted the potential for instability in the Middle East — not exactly a bold prediction — no one foresaw the Arab revolutions that would begin months later or the effects they would have on the jihadist movement. Nor did anyone predict that, within a half decade, a former soccer enthusiast in Iraq who had done time in a U.S.-administered prison camp would command the most powerful jihadist group the world had ever seen and declare himself the leader of the Caliphate.[14] What we tried to do, and what the three authors of the following essays have done so well, is to identify the trends and factors that could inform the trajectory of the jihadist movement. Then, like now, major actors in the movement were under strain, but the fundamentals suggested the jihadist threat would not disappear any time soon.

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[14] William McCants, *The Believer: How an Introvert with a Passion for Religion and Soccer Became Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi Leader of the Islamic State* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2015).

2. The Riptide: How Foreign Fighter Returnees Could Shape the Jihadist Movement

R. Kim Cragin

"Confused." That's how one senior Turkish official recently described the attitudes of foreign terrorist fighters being held in detention centers under his purview.[15] It also seems to be an apt description of the post-territorial Islamic State (ISIL) as well as the wider jihadist movement.

To understand how the movement might evolve in the future, it's helpful to look to the past. Until the mid-1980s, jihadists often pursued their objectives — the creation of a caliphate to be governed by *sharia* (or Islamic law, strictly interpreted) — in their home countries. This changed after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Foreign fighters from around the world traveled to Afghanistan to fight against the Soviet forces and in doing so globalized the jihadist movement. Arguably, just as these "Arab Afghans" guided the jihadist movement for the past three decades, the future of the movement rests with a new generation of foreign terrorist fighters from Syria and Iraq.

Two individuals currently claim leadership over the jihadist movement: Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qaeda, and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIL. Two other individuals have also considerably influenced the direction of the movement: Abu Musab al-Suri and Abu Bakr Naji. In his book, *Call for Global Islamic*

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[15] Author interviews, Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), Ankara, Turkey, January 2018. See also R. Kim Cragin, "Foreign Fighter 'Hot Potato,'" *Lawfare*, Nov. 26, 2017, https://lawfareblog.com/foreign-fighter-hot-potato.

Resistance, al-Suri wrote that underground organizations, like al-Qaeda, had failed to mobilize Muslim populations. He also rejected open confrontation — or large-scale insurgencies — because, according to al-Suri, the United States had demonstrated its ability to succeed against the mujahideen (Islamic holy warriors) under these circumstances.[16] Al-Suri concluded that the mujahideen should combine open confrontation in a limited number of Muslim countries with a "leaderless resistance" in the West.[17] In al-Suri's vision, jihadists residing outside Muslim countries should not become foreign terrorist fighters, but rather stay home and join that leaderless resistance.[18]

Another jihadist ideologue, Muhammad Khalil al-Hakaymah, with the nom de guerre Abu Bakr Naji, articulated a contrasting strategy to al-Suri's in his book *Management of Savagery*. Naji argued that jihadists should work to instill chaos in all Muslim countries. Then, as regimes collapse, they should take control and re-establish order by imposing Islamic law.[19] In order for Naji's strategy to be successful, it requires support from all jihadists and therefore he urges those living outside Muslim countries to travel to conflict zones and become foreign terrorist fighters.

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[16] Lia Brynjar, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of al-Qa'ida Strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

[17] Brynjar, *Architect of Global Jihad*, 2008.

[18] R. Kim Cragin, "Metastases: Exploring the Impact of Foreign Fighters in Conflicts Abroad," *Journal of Strategic Studies* Vol. 1, no. 2 (November 2017).

[19] Naji Abu Bakr, *Management of Savagery: The Most Critical State Through Which the Ummah will Pass,* trans. William McCants, unpublished manuscript, 2004.

ISIL adopted components of both Naji's and al-Suri's strategies. In keeping with Naji's direction to create chaos, the group's fighters exacerbated tensions between Sunni, Shiite, and Christian populations in both Syria and Iraq. They took control of territory, city-by-city, implementing Islamic law as they went along, most notably in Raqqa and Mosul. ISIL leadership also encouraged its fighters outside Syria and Iraq — based in their so-called provinces like Libya, Egypt, and Yemen — to mimic this approach.[20] Then, following al-Suri's advice, ISIL extolled its sympathizers via social media[21] to either join the fight in Syria as foreign terrorist fighters or undertake attacks wherever possible, essentially advocating for a leaderless resistance in the West:[22]

> If the infidels have shut the door of hijrah [travel to Syria and Iraq]
> in your faces, then open the door of jihad in theirs. Make your deed a
> source of their regret. Truly, the smallest act you do in their lands is
> more beloved to us than the biggest act done here [in Syria]; it is
> more effective for us and more harmful to them. If one of you wishes

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[20] As of December 2017, ISIL had declared 25 provinces in at least 13 countries: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, Niger, Chad, Nigeria, and Cameroon. (Some dispute exists as to whether or not the southern Philippines and Bangladesh also constitute official ISIL provinces.) It should be noted that ISIL affiliates have not been able to claim and/or hold territory in all 13 of these countries.

[21] Jytte Klausen, "Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," Studies in Conflict & Terrorism Vol. 38, no. 1 (2015): 1, doi:10.1080/1057610X.2014.974948.

[22] These messages began to emerge via ISIL fighters and media personalities as early as the fall of 2015, but it became prominent in official ISIL statements in the summer of 2016. For more information see R. Kim Cragin, "The November 2015 Paris Attacks: The Impact of Foreign Fighter Returnees," *Orbis* Vol. 61, no. 2 (Spring 2017), https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/03/november-2015-paris-attacks-impact-foreign-fighter-returnees/.

and strives to reach the lands of the Islamic State, then each of us

wishes to be in your place to make examples of the crusaders, day

and night, scaring them and terrorizing them until every neighbor

fears his neighbor.[23]

This combined strategy — chaos, open confrontation, and leaderless resistance —

was successful between June 2014 and June 2017. While ISIL's territorial gains

within Iraq and Syria have been well documented, it is perhaps less well-known

that ISIL has been more aggressive in its violence against the West than al-Qaeda.

Indeed, ISIL conducted more external operations — attacks conducted outside

Syria, Iraq, or its 25 so-called provinces — from 2015 to 2017 than the al-Qaeda

network (AQN) did during a similar period from 2008 to 2010. ISIL's "inspired"

operations, which fall into the category of a leaderless resistance, make up a

significant proportion of the total number of its operations: 37 percent (or 273

external operations). Inspired attacks do not exceed those directed by ISIL

leaders, however, which make up 55 percent of the total. Further, of those external

operations directed by ISIL leaders, foreign fighter returnees conducted most of

them.[24]

All of this changed after ISIL's loss of Mosul in July 2017 and, in particular, after

ISIL fighters fled Raqqa in October 2017.[25] Not only did ISIL lose territorial control

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[23] Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, "That they Live by Proof," Statement by ISIL Spokesman, translated
and released by al-Hayat Media Center, May 22, 2016.

[24] These numbers come from a database of ISIL external operations, attacks inside ISIL provinces,
and foreign terrorist fighters maintained by the author at the National Defense University.

[25] Quentin Sommerville and Riam Dalati, "Raqqa's Dirty Secret," *BBC News,* Nov. 13, 2017,
http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/raqqas_dirty_secret.

in Iraq and Syria, but its ability to conduct external operations also diminished. Between December 2016 (the height of its influence and reach) and December 2017, the number of external operations directed, enabled, or inspired by ISIL dropped by 30 per cent.[26] Thus, like al-Qaeda's previous efforts in Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, the Philippines, and Iraq, ISIL's recent losses call its basic strategy into question.

Of course, Ayman al-Zawahiri and other al-Qaeda leaders have always disputed the wisdom of ISIL's strategy. They also have criticized Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi for splintering the jihadist movement.[27] In September 2015, for example, al-Zawahiri issued a series of speeches in which he drew distinctions between al-Qaeda and ISIL. Al-Zawahiri stipulated that (1) al-Qaeda supported ISIL fighters' efforts to attack Shi'a Muslims and secularists, but not other mujahideen; and (2) al-Qaeda supported ISIL fighters' efforts to help Muslims globally, but not if it meant encouraging defections from al-Qaeda's ranks.[28] In this context, al-Qaeda leaders have attempted to set themselves up as a less virulent alternative to ISIL, albeit also with questionable success.

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[26] These numbers come from a database of ISIL external operations, attacks inside ISIL provinces, and foreign terrorist fighters maintained by the author at the National Defense University. For more information on trends in ISIL's external operations, see R. Kim Cragin and Ari Weil, "'Virtual Planners' in the Arsenal of Islamic State External Operations," *Orbis* (forthcoming Spring 2018).

[27] Ayman al-Zawahiri, "The Islamic Spring," issued Sept. 12, 2015, translated and reposted by the SITE Intelligence Group under the title "Zawahiri Incites Lone Wolf Attacks in the U.S. and West, Urges Fighters in Syria, Iraq, to Cooperate with IS Against Enemy Alliance," Sept. 12, 2015.

[28] al-Zawahiri, "The Islamic Spring," 2015.

Both Naji and al-Suri remain influential thinkers with al-Qaeda and ISIL, as well as in the wider jihadist movement. Yet neither strategist has cracked the code on how to achieve victory. As we have seen, al-Qaeda and ISIL are at odds over the direction the movement should take. And they continue to compete with one another to lead it. This brings us back to the "confusion" personified by those foreign terrorist fighters who left Syria after the fall of Raqqa and are now languishing in Turkey's detention centers with nowhere else to go. The future of the jihadist movement likely rests in the hands of these veteran foreign terrorist fighters.

Foreign Fighters: The Past and Future Vanguard

Historically, after similar conflicts in Afghanistan and Bosnia, veteran foreign fighters have chosen to either return home or join likeminded *mujahideen* in third countries.[29] Of those who returned home, some reintegrated peacefully. But most did not.[30] They established local terrorist cells, sent resources to other *mujahideen* in ongoing conflicts, and recruited others to support the jihadist movement.[31] The Afghan veterans were integral to the expansion of al-Qaeda's network, including al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), Jemaah Islamiyya (JI) in Indonesia, and al-Qaeda in the

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[29] Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters" *International Security* Vol. 35, no. 3 (Winter 2010/11): 53-94; Evan F. Kohlmann, *Al-Qa'ida's Jihad in Europe: The Afghan-Bosnian Network* (Oxford: Berg, 2004).

[30] R. Kim Cragin, "The Challenge of Foreign Fighter Returnees," *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* Vol. 33, no. 3 (July 2017).

[31] Cragin, "The Challenge of Foreign Fighter Returnees," 2017; see also Cragin, "Metastases," 2017.

Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).[32] Veterans of the wars in Bosnia and Iraq similarly contributed to the rapid expansion of ISIL worldwide, including its recruitment of foreign fighters.[33] It is therefore likely that we will see a similar pattern with the veterans of the more recent conflicts in Syria and Iraq.

The most immediate threat posed by the jihadist movement to the West — North America, Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand — depends on the willingness and ability of these foreign fighter returnees to participate in local attacks for ISIL or al-Qaeda. The United States government has estimated that 40,000 individuals left their home countries and travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight.[34] Approximately 14,910 foreign terrorist fighters have already departed these battlefields.[35] Significant numbers have returned home through smuggling networks or have been deported by Turkey: 980 foreign fighters have returned to Tunisia; 900 to Saudi Arabia; 850 to Russia; 830 to Indonesia; 550 to France; 500 to

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[32] Cragin, "Metasteses," 2017; see also Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Jean-Pierre Filiu, "The Local and the Global Jihad of al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib," *The Middle East Journal* Vol. 63, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 213-226.

[33] Author interviews in Tunisia, Algeria, Turkey, and Jordan with security officials responsible for countering foreign fighter flows, 2016-2017; see also Cragin, "Metastases," 2017.

[34] Karen Parish, "Stopping flow of foreign fighters to ISIS 'will take years,' Army official says," DoD News, April 6, 2017,
https://www.army.mil/article/185550/stopping_flow_of_foreign_fighters_to_isis_will_take_years_army_official_says.

[35] Cragin, "Foreign Fighter 'Hot Potato,'" 2017.

Jordan; and 300 to Germany.[36] Only 36 per cent of these are in prison.[37] The rest remain a potential threat for either participating in an ISIL-directed attack locally, an al-Qaeda attack, or creating local terrorist cells of their own.

Beyond external operations in the West, some of the veteran fighters from Syria and Iraq have already relocated to other conflict zones, such as Libya, Egypt, Afghanistan, Yemen, and the southern Philippines. Tunisian security officials have noted the presence of ISIL training camps in Libya. Some of the trainers, reportedly, are foreign fighter veterans.[38] Other veteran fighters have taken on leadership positions in the so-called ISIL provinces. Bahraini national Turki al-Ban'ali reportedly moved from Mosul to Libya to take on the role of emir of ISIL in Libya.[39] Abu-Hajir al-Hashimi, the once-leader of the Islamic State-Sinai (now deceased), had been an officer in the Iraqi army before joining ISIL and eventually moving to Egypt.[40] Thus, we are already beginning to see foreign terrorist fighters depart Syria and Iraq to participate in other conflicts.

Based on historical patterns and current realities, some of these relocating foreign fighters will re-join al-Qaeda and others will attach themselves to local ISIL affiliates. We will likely witness in-fighting between al-Qaeda and ISIL factions in

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[36] These numbers come from a database of ISIL external operations, attacks inside ISIL provinces, and foreign terrorist fighters maintained by the author at the National Defense University. The information comes from official estimates released by foreign fighters' countries-of-origin, as well as fieldwork in the respective countries.

[37] Cragin, "Foreign Fighter 'Hot Potato,'" 2017.

[38] Author interviews in Tunisia with security officials, September 2017.

[39] Mohamed Benahmd, "Daqis and AQIM vie with Killings," *El Khabar,* Jan. 22, 2016.

[40] Author interviews with Egyptian officials in Washington, D.C., July 2017.

these areas of conflict for a period of time. But, given their common worldview, it is also likely that a certain degree of cooperation will exist on the ground. The veteran foreign fighters will bring new tactical knowledge to conflicts — e.g., in the use of unmanned aerial vehicles — and will push local groups toward the brutal tactics sensationalized by ISIL. But, for the most part, the status quo will remain in these ongoing conflicts.

Thus, the most dramatic shift will likely be felt beyond these conflict zones: in the West and even more so in many of the Muslim majority countries where ISIL and al-Qaeda do not have affiliates. The future of the jihadist movement in the rest of the world will not depend on al-Qaeda versus the ISIL, nor the writings of one ideologue versus another. But rather, over the next three to five years, many of these veteran foreign fighters will attempt to persuade others to join their cause. As in the past, this recruitment will take place in prisons, prayer groups, mosques, and universities. Veteran foreign fighters will continue to reach out on social media. And, as in the past, they will be successful. The question is *how* successful.

The answer will depend on the success or failure of re-integration and de-radicalization programs for the foreign fighter returnees and their families. Some countries have begun to implement such programs, but most of them are nascent, leaving the prospects of de-radicalizing veteran foreign terrorist fighters uncertain.[41] It will also depend on counter-terrorism cooperation worldwide. Interpol has begun to assist law enforcement agencies around the world in their efforts to monitor foreign terrorist fighters as they attempt to return home or

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[41] Bart Schuurman and Liesbeth van der Heide, *Foreign fighter returnees & the reintegration challenge* (Radicalization Awareness Network, 2016).

relocate to other countries.[42] But this cooperation, too, has only recently begun to accelerate in the international community, primarily due to the passage of U.N. Security Council Resolution 2396 in December 2017.[43] Other, wider factors will matter too. For example, attitudes toward and treatment of Muslim minorities in the West, as well as in other countries such as Myanmar, India, and Thailand, will be an important determinant.[44] Thus, in this wider context, the future direction of the jihadist movement over the next three to five years depends both on the behavior of foreign fighter veterans and on the global response to them in the wake of ISIL's territorial defeat today.

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[42] Interpol, "Foreign Terrorist Fighters," https://www.interpol.int/Crime-areas/Terrorism/Foreign-terrorist-fighters.

[43] *Threats to international peace and security caused by terrorist acts*, United National Security Council Resolution 2396, Dec. 21, 2017.

[44] William Marcellino, Kim Cragin, Joshua Mendelsohn et al., "Measuring the Popular Resonance of Daesh's Propaganda," *Journal of Strategic Security* Vol 10, no. 1 (March 2017), http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol10/iss1/4.

3. We Squeezed the Balloon: As ISIL Collapses, Jihadism Remains in a Growth Phase

Daveed Gartenstein-Ross

The Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIL) has rapidly imploded since the latter half of 2017, yet despite this fact, global jihadism remains a potent force. Since the Arab Spring first began in late 2010, jihadism has experienced a rapid growth phase that continues today. In addition to jihadists continuing to fight on Syria's front lines, major battlefields where these militants have recently controlled territory, or threaten to, include Afghanistan, Libya, Mali, the Philippines, Somalia, and Yemen. Despite this, ISIL's implosion has left many wondering about the future of the jihadist movement. In order to understand where it is headed, we must consider three factors: First, the geopolitical backdrop against which jihadism continues to thrive. Second, the fact that violent non-state actors are currently doing a very effective job of exploiting technological advances. And third, the present state of two major fault lines in the jihadist movement that have come to define how we understand it: centralization vs. decentralization, and globalism vs. nationalism in regional militant groups.

Similar to what happens when one squeezes a balloon, the caliphate's collapse has displaced jihadists, their ideology, and the threats they pose, into other places. Yet, though aspects of the jihadist movement continue to evolve, we should not be too quick to declare that its *essence* has changed. While defeating ISIL as a territorial entity was necessary for various pragmatic and moral reasons, it unfortunately does not signal the beginning of the end of global jihadism — a movement that is dedicated to overthrowing existing political orders and replacing them with a

transnational political Islamic entity, and that will act transnationally to advance this goal[45] — as a significant strategic threat. Indeed, even as the caliphate has fallen, global jihadism has continued to spread.

Room for Growth: The Geopolitical Context

For years, the existence of ungoverned spaces used to enable training, communications, operational planning, and other organizational functions have factored heavily in analysts' evaluation of jihadist threats. These ungoverned spaces and jihadist safe havens have increased in number since the time of the 9/11 attacks, especially in countries touched by the Arab Spring.

Even after ISIL's collapse as a territorial entity, Sunni jihadist groups continue to control a significant swath of territory in Syria. Indeed, even ISIL's collapse may end up being less devastating to the group than it initially appeared would be the case, as Turkey's invasion of the Kurdish enclave of Afrin has distracted ISIL's foes, whose attention is now focused more on fighting one another than it is on mopping up the remainder of the caliphate and preventing its resurgence.[46] While ISIL is the group we most associate with holding territory in Syria, many different jihadist groups now hold or contest areas of the country. In Libya, the government was never able to reestablish its writ after the fall of Muammar Qaddafi's regime in

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[45] This definition was formulated during a discussion with analyst Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, who suggested the basic components of how global jihadism can be defined.

[46] See Patrick Cockburn, "Inside Syria: With Its Enemies Diverted or Fighting Each Other, Isis is Making a Swift and Deadly Comeback," *The Independent* (London), March 4, 2018, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-comeback-syria-ypg-raqqa-kurdish-war-fighting-islamic-state-a8239316.html.

2011. Jihadists have predictably exploited this situation. ISIL succeeded in capturing and holding the city of Sirte for months, while other jihadist groups have experienced even more sustained success. The Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade (ASMB) and the Mujahedin Shura Council (MSC), an umbrella organization in which ASMB plays a leading role, have seized control of the eastern coastal city of Derna. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb officially endorsed the MSC in July 2015.[47] Jihadists also have significant operating space in Yemen despite the United States escalating its kinetic campaign against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. As the *New York Times* recently reported, "the threat of a terrorist attack — with the most commonly feared target a commercial airliner — emanating from the chaotic, ungoverned spaces of Yemen remains high on the government's list of terrorism concerns."[48]

Both Mali and Somalia face burgeoning jihadist-led insurgencies. In Somalia, African Union forces have already begun to reduce their numbers, bolstering the jihadist group al-Shabaab's hopes that it could again become the dominant military force in southern Somalia. In the place where the "global war on terror" first began — Afghanistan/Pakistan — not only has the Taliban been gaining ground militarily, but available evidence, including the discovery of a 30-square-mile al-Qaeda training facility near Kandahar, suggests that the Taliban has not severed its ties to

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[47] See discussion in Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb Backs Jihadists Fighting Islamic State in Derna, Libya," *Long War Journal*, July 9, 2015, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/07/al-qaeda-in-the-islamic-maghreb-backs-jihadists-fighting-islamic-state-in-derna-libya.php.

[48] Eric Schmitt and Saeed al-Batati, "The U.S. Has Pummeled Al Qaeda in Yemen. But the Threat is Barely Dented," *The New York Times*, Dec. 30, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/30/world/middleeast/yemen-al-qaeda-us-terrorism.html.

al-Qaeda.[49] ISIL has also established a foothold in Afghanistan, where it has been responsible for a string of mass-casualty terrorist attacks.[50] Although it doesn't fit the mold of other safe havens, which are typically made possible by operating in ungoverned spaces, Turkey deserves a mention here. In recent years, U.S. officials have been alarmed by Turkey's growing willingness to shelter violent jihadists, including those connected to al-Qaeda.[51]

In addition to ungoverned spaces and safe havens, jihadism has experienced significant growth in areas where it had previously been a marginal movement at best. Prior to the outbreak of the Arab Spring, analysts held that Egypt's Hosni Mubarak had defeated the country's militant Islamic groups after they overplayed their hand in the 1997 Luxor massacre.[52] Today, jihadism has powerfully reemerged, and there are more frequent attacks than ever before by militant groups like ISIL's Wilayat Sinai, including the devastating November 2017 attack

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[49] See Dan Lamothe, "'Probably the Largest' al-Qaeda Training Camp Ever Destroyed in Afghanistan," *The Washington Post*, Oct. 30, 2015,

https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/30/world/middleeast/yemen-al-qaeda-us-terrorism.html.

[50] See discussion in, for example, Krishnadev Calamur, "ISIS in Afghanistan is Like a Balloon that Won't Pop," *The Atlantic*, Dec. 28, 2017,

https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/12/afghanistan-isis/549311/.

[51] Joby Warrick, "Double Game? Even as it Battles ISIS, Turkey Gives Other Extremists Shelter," *The Washington Post*, July 10, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/double-game-even-as-it-battles-isis-turkey-gives-other-extremists-shelter/2016/07/10/8d6ce040-4053-11e6-a66f-aa6c1883b6b1_story.html?utm_term=.53e6be64a1f6.

[52] See discussion in Hassanein Tawfik Ibrahim, "The Rise and Fall of Militant Islamic Groups in Egypt," in Klejda Mulaj ed., *Violent Non-State Actors in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

on a Sufi mosque in northern Sinai that claimed over 300 lives.[53] In countries like Tunisia and Jordan, jihadism has moved from an afterthought to a first-order strategic concern. Meanwhile, the jihadist resurgence from South to Southeast Asia — most dramatically underscored last year by the months-long capture of the Philippine city of Marawi by a regional ISIL affiliate — represents a reversal of one of the major success stories of the post-9/11 era.

Early Adopters: Taking Advantage of Technology

Jihadists' ability to leverage technological advances, especially in the communications space, is another reason that their movement remains strong. Technology has historically had an ambiguous impact on sub-state violence. On the one hand, states can leverage new advances, including for surveillance purposes and gathering information from local populations.[54] On the other hand, militant groups can capitalize on these same platforms. Many key recent advances appear to, on the whole, favor jihadists. The world has witnessed breakthroughs across so many spheres, including social media and encrypted end-to-end

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[53] Declan Walsh and Nour Youssef, "Militants Kill 305 at Sufi Mosque in Egypt's Deadliest Terrorist Attack," *The New York Times*, Nov. 24, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/24/world/middleeast/mosque-attack-egypt.html.

[54] One of the most important studies on this issue, by political scientists Jacob Shapiro and Nils Weidmann, used micro-level data from Iraq to compare trends in cellphone network penetration with insurgent violence. The trends in declining violence that Shapiro and Weidmann found suggested to them "that cellphone coverage reduces insurgent violence largely because it enhances voluntary information flow from noncombatants to counterinsurgents by reducing the risks of informing." Jacob N. Shapiro and Nils B. Weidmann, "Is the Phone Mightier Than the Sword?: Cellphones and Insurgent Violence in Iraq," *International Organization* 69:2 (March 2015), 271.

communication, that exploiting new advances has seemingly proven easier for those who would use these technologies for the more straightforward task of destruction than for those who want to use them to protect.

An early sign of jihadists' growing ability to take advantage of new technologies was the way ISIL combined a deft exploitation of social media with breakthroughs in DIY video production techniques to craft slick and effective propaganda that helped drive a record number of foreign fighters to the Syria-Iraq theater.[55] The suspension of pro-ISIL social media accounts by service providers later reduced, but did not eliminate, the yield that ISIL received from this platform.[56] By the time states caught up, ISIL had already found other creative ways to exploit new technologies. For example, the post-Edward Snowden boom in end-to-end encryption allowed ISIL to craft digital methods of providing the same assistances to remote operatives that physical terrorist networks once provided in person.[57]

Over the past few years, Syria-based ISIL operatives have found recruits online, spurred them to action, and have played an intimate role in the conceptualization,

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[55] See discussion in J.M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan, The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2015), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/isis_twitter_census_berger_morgan.pdf.

[56] J.M. Berger and Heather Perez, The Islamic State's Diminishing Returns on Twitter: How Suspensions Are Limiting the Social Networks of English-Speaking ISIS Supporters (Washington, DC: George Washington University, 2016), https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/Berger_Occasional Paper.pdf.

[57] Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Madeleine Blackman, "ISIL's Virtual Planners: A Critical Terrorist Innovation," *War on the Rocks*, Jan. 4, 2017, https://warontherocks.com/2017/01/isils-virtual-planners-a-critical-terrorist-innovation/.

target selection, timing, and execution of attacks. They have also used encrypted communication platforms to assist in bomb-making techniques. Virtual planners have even helped operatives who got cold feet, literally coaching them right up until the moment they blew themselves up. In a July 2016 suicide bombing outside a concert in Ansbach, Germany, attacker Mohammad Daleel told the virtual planner with whom he was communicating that he found the security measures outside the concert daunting. The *Long War Journal* reports their ensuing conversation:

> The unnamed operative told Daleel … to look for an appropriate place to put his bomb and then try to "disappear into the crowd." The jihadist egged Daleel on, saying the asylum-seeker should "break through police cordons," run away and "do it."
>
> "Pray for me," Daleel wrote at one point. "You do not know what is happening with me right now," Daleel typed, in an apparent moment of doubt.
>
> "Forget the festival and go over to the restaurant," the handler responded. "Hey man, what is going on with you? Even if just two people were killed, I would do it. Trust in Allah and walk straight up to the restaurant."[58]

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[58] Thomas Joscelyn, "Terror Plots in Germany, France Were 'Remote-Controlled' by Islamic State Operatives," *Long War Journal*, Sep. 24, 2016, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/09/terror-plots-in-germany-france-were-remote-controlled-by-islamic-state-operatives.php.

And that is what Daleel did. He walked into a wine bar and blew himself up, injuring 15 people. Had Daleel not been communicating with a virtual planner up until the moment of the attack, his fears and uncertainty very likely would have prevented him from completing his terrorist mission.

The virtual planner model has helped transform lone attackers, relying solely on the internet for inspiration, guidance, and planning, from the bungling wannabes of a decade ago into something much more dangerous.[59] The operatives who are recruited and coached by virtual planners have been seamlessly incorporated into jihadist groups' global strategy in a way that "lone wolves" never were before.

There are also technological advances that jihadist groups haven't yet employed in Western countries, but that they have already begun using in Iraq and Syria. In January 2017, researchers from West Point's Combating Terrorism Center and Harvard University's Belfer Center published an article examining documents discovered by the Iraqi military that shed light on ISIL's program for developing and enhancing its unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) capabilities.[60] They found that ISIL had "a formal, institutionalized, and resourced drone unit as early as 2015," and that the group was already planning on using UAVs in an offensive capacity at that time.

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[59] For a good synopsis of the ineffectiveness of DIY terrorism a decade ago, see Emily Hunt, "Virtual Incompetence," *Weekly Standard*, Aug. 17, 2006, http://www.weeklystandard.com/virtual-incompetence/article/13724.

[60] Don Rassler, Muhammad al-'Ubaydi and Vera Mironovo, "The Islamic State's Drone Documents: Management, Acquisitions, and DIY Tradecraft," *CTC Sentinel*, Jan. 31, 2017, https://www.scribd.com/document/341828738/CTC-Perspectives-The-Islamic-States-Drone-Documents-Management-Acquisitions-and-DIY-Tradecraft-ctc-usma-Edu.

And ISIL did indeed use UAVs for military purposes. *BuzzFeed*'s Mike Giglio did some of the most valuable embedded reporting from Iraq on the campaign to push ISIL from its territorial stronghold. In a report published in June 2017, he graphically described ISIL's use of UAVs against Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Force fighters with whom he was embedded:

> ISIS drones swarm overhead as the battalion's convoy pushes into the outskirts of western Mosul the next morning. One after another they drop grenades, wreaking havoc as soldiers fire their weapons wildly into the sky. From one of the Humvees, I watch as the battalion's portly cook makes his lunch rounds in an armored truck, driving up and down the convoy to deliver Styrofoam boxes of food. The drones track him, dropping grenades as soldiers gather to collect the boxes. They are remotely piloted by militants who weave in and out of civilian neighborhoods on motorbikes to take cover from airstrikes. ISIS also uses the video feeds on the drones to coordinate mortars and car bombs. On the front lines, its fighters are standing their ground, and soldiers at the head of the convoy can hear them shouting, "Allahu Akbar."[61]

In January, Russian forces in Syria destroyed a swarm of 13 improvised UAVs as they approached the Khmeimim airbase and Tartus naval facility to carry out an

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[61] Mike Giglio, "Inside the Fight for Mosul," *Buzzfeed*, June 3, 2017, https://www.buzzfeed.com/mikegiglio/on-the-front-lines-of-the-fight-with-isis?utm_term=.jiawaM5Dgk - .yjVGB82YM6.

attack. Though no Russian forces were killed, this fact should not cause undue complacency. As militant groups innovate, their early attempts to try out new tactics often appear to result in failures, but they would be better understood as steps in the learning process. Moreover, the Russian investigation of the UAVs revealed their impressive range. The UAVs were "launched from a site more than 50 kilometres (31 miles) distant from their targets," and could strike a target 62 miles away.[62]

Although jihadists currently seem to be getting more out of new technologies than states do, relative to their respective capabilities, states may be able to gain the upper hand in the future. But for now, the efficacy of militant groups continues to rise, and for every new app or tech toy that we stop to admire, someone else is wondering how they can use it to wreak havoc.

Inside the Jihadist Movement: Assessing its Fault Lines

New communications technologies contribute to a general sense of interconnectedness, which is a crucial component of globalization. At the same time, this interconnectedness is highly relevant to the jihadist movement, as it fundamentally relates to two key fault lines within that movement that have defined how we understand it: centralization vs. decentralization, and globalism vs.

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[62] Peter Dockrill, "First-Ever Drone Swarm Attack Has Struck Russian Military Bases, Sources Claim," *Science Alert*, Jan. 11, 2018, https://www.sciencealert.com/swarm-home-made-drones-strike-military-base-first-attack-kind-russia-uavs.

localism.[63] In the past, analysts have been too eager to discern trends toward decentralization and localism that, if true, would work to America's advantage.[64] Similar perceptions have arisen from some recent high-profile internal disputes involving core al-Qaeda members, as well as the fall of ISIL's territorial caliphate. But caution is warranted before concluding that the essence of the jihadist movement has now definitively shifted toward a decentralized or locally-focused entity.

Centralization vs. Decentralization

Analysts have consistently tended to underestimate the role of senior leadership in providing strategic direction to jihadist groups, leading them to conclude that these groups are highly decentralized. Before ISIL's rise as an independent entity, al-Qaeda — as the world's preeminent transnational jihadist group — stood at the center of this debate. Its senior leadership was generally underestimated, in part, because al-Qaeda does not fit scholars' top-down leadership model.[65] When ISIL essentially controlled its own state, it better accorded with this model. It remains to be seen, however, how analysts will assess the relevance of ISIL's core

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[63] For an earlier treatment of this topic, see Assaf Moghadam and Brian Fishman eds., *Fault Lines in Global Jihad: Organizational, Strategic, and Ideological Fissures* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011).

[64] See, for example, the discussion in Bruce Hoffman, "Al Qaeda's Uncertain Future," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36 (2013), 635-38, in which Hoffman documents at length what can only be described as a kneejerk analytic tendency to see al-Qaeda's senior leadership as marginalized and irrelevant.

[65] For a perceptive account of al-Qaeda's organizational structure, and how the innovation process for terrorist attacks relates to both top-down and bottom-up organizational dynamics, see Assaf Moghadam, "How Al Qaeda Innovates," *Security Studies* 22 (2013), 466-97.

leadership to its affiliates now that the group has lost most of its territory. Another reason that analysts may have a tendency to view the jihadist movement as decentralized is that state officials frequently disparage or downplay the role of jihadist groups' senior leadership — either as part of information operations (IO) campaigns or due to sincere belief — dismissing them as irrelevant, disconnected, unable to communicate, and the like. These official portrayals have an impact on scholarly and analytic perceptions of organizational dynamics.[66]

For al-Qaeda, although it has evolved somewhat over time, the group's current organizational structure reflects the strategic vision of its founders. From the outset, al-Qaeda adopted an organizational design wherein the group's senior leadership outlined a strategic course, empowered mid-level commanders to execute the strategy as they saw fit, and even encouraged "terrorist entrepreneurs" to pitch them on new plots. This latter characteristic spurred scholar Bruce Hoffman to note that bin Laden often "operated as a venture capitalist" in his running of al-Qaeda.[67] This concept of "centralization of decision

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[66] See Hoffman, "Al Qaeda's Uncertain Future," 638-40. Hoffman dissects a prominent report published by West Point's Combating Terrorism Center (CTC), which accompanied the U.S. government's release of the first 17 documents taken from Osama bin Laden's hideout in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Nelly Lahoud et al., Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Laden Sidelined? (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2012), https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB410/docs/UBLDocument16.pdf. Hoffman notes that not only were CTC's full-throated proclamations that bin Laden was of marginal relevance to al-Qaeda affiliates based on only a thin slice of the full Abbottabad cache of materials, but worse, it contradicted previous assessments of the materials, and other available evidence.

[67] Bruce Hoffman, "Rethinking Terrorism and Counterterrorism Since 9/11," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 25 (Sep.-Oct. 2002), 309.

and decentralization of execution," as it has been described,[68] remains relevant today, and indeed, has enabled al-Qaeda to maintain organizational and strategic coherence even in the face of considerable challenges, both external and internal. But al-Qaeda's decision to adopt new affiliates created an organizational challenge in terms of maintaining strategic coherence that did not exist at the group's founding. Although the implications of these new affiliates are discussed below, it is worth stating here that the foundational principle of centralization of decision and decentralization of execution would prove important in incorporating them into the group's broader organizational plans.

Even in times of great duress, al-Qaeda has always viewed some form of leadership over the jihadist movement as essential, so as not to leave the movement rudderless. Even when al-Qaeda was at its nadir in November 2002 — when the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan had displaced it from the safe haven it previously enjoyed, and when U.S.-led kinetic operations were constantly taking important al-Qaeda leaders off the battlefield — the organization rejected Abu Musab al-Suri's proposal to move to a leaderless model of jihad.[69]

Of course, the fact that it sees itself as a centralized organization does not mean that al-Qaeda's senior leadership is influential throughout the network in practice. Since 9/11, two specific obstacles to al-Qaeda's senior leadership maintaining

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[68] See Peter Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of al Qaeda's Leader* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 253 (quoting Nasser al-Bahri); Khalid al-Hammadi, "The Inside Story of al-Qaeda, Part 4," *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, March 22, 2005.

[69] "The Frightening Evolution of al-Qaida," *Dateline NBC*, June 24, 2005, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/8307333/ns/dateline_nbc/t/frightening-evolution-al-qaida/ - .WrAlF63MxTY.

strategic coherence have arisen. First, the group has expanded geographically, taking on new affiliates at the same time that its senior leadership has remained targeted and thus constrained. Second, these affiliates have grown financially independent of al-Qaeda's leadership, making loyalty and allegiance important tools by which al-Qaeda Central attempts to maintain organizational and strategic cohesion. Al-Qaeda's leaders have built enduring relationships with jihadists across the globe over the decades. These personal relationships — which are often solidified on the battlefield, or through marriage and extended family networks — serve as a binding force, and as a buffer against disobedience.

Allegiance to the organization's brand and mission serves as another crucial source of organizational cohesion — and also provides al-Qaeda Central with *indirect* coercive power, because jihadist groups that defect or clash with al-Qaeda's leadership may be unable to benefit from relationships with al-Qaeda-aligned regional jihadist groups. For example, both al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and al-Shabaab in Somalia helped to bolster Boko Haram organizationally when the Nigerian government cracked down on the insurgent group in 2009. Boko Haram's later defection to ISIL in 2015 may have impeded its ability to be succored by al-Qaeda-aligned jihadist organizations when a four-country offensive targeted the Nigerian jihadist group beginning that year.

Al-Qaeda is not the only transnational jihadist organization to face internal challenges. Before losing its Syria/Iraq territorial stronghold, ISIL operated in a highly centralized fashion, similar to al-Qaeda in pre-9/11 Afghanistan. The evidence about ISIL's relations with its affiliates across the globe is less robust than the information about how it governed in its caliphate territory. But it is clear that the organization possessed the means to wield some coercive power over

those groups, including the ability to provide or withhold funding, and to authorize or withdraw the right of these affiliates to associate themselves with its soaring brand. But ISIL's decline as a territorial entity will challenge its ability to maintain a strategically coherent organization. This raises two key questions when it comes to the relevance of ISIL's core leadership. First, have the group's leaders taken the necessary preparations to ensure that affiliates fit into their strategic plans, even as the caliphate itself drastically declines? Second, will key affiliates defect from the organization, risking a spiral of defections and weakening ISIL Core's ability to maintain control?

It remains to be seen what will come of the organizational challenges that both al-Qaeda and ISIL currently confront. Yet the current difficulties that confront both groups do not change the fact that the discernible trend within the jihadist movement over the past 20 years has been toward centralization rather than decentralization. Many jihadist groups fighting in conflicts in Chechnya, Nigeria, the Philippines, Somalia, and elsewhere were previously only loosely connected to transnational jihadism as an organizational matter. Today, these regional groups are overtly aligned with transnational ones. Conversely, there are no jihadist theaters where local, independent groups have supplanted transnational jihadists militarily. As previously alluded to, new communications technologies have accelerated the trend toward centralization by allowing greater interconnectedness. Conversely, new communications platforms also allow a multiplicity of voices to be heard where once messaging could be more tightly controlled.

Global vs. National Focus

A second fault line runs between globally focused jihadist movements and nationalist jihadist movements. Global and local agendas and strategies have existed simultaneously within the jihadist movement for years, sometimes clashing with one another. Yet, if we zoom out of the particulars of current controversies and instead examine the broad sweep of the movement, we can see an overall trend toward globalism rather than nationalism among jihadist groups, just as we see a trend toward centralization. For example, an increasing number of jihadist groups act in accordance with their professed transnational vision when the opportunity arises, by aiding jihadists whose primary focus is outside their own theater. This has been true in the relationship among Boko Haram, AQIM, and al-Shabaab. It can also be seen in the jihadist foreign fighters who leave their homes for far-flung theaters where they lack any real connection to local dynamics.

A "global focus" should not be conflated, as is sometimes the case, with whether a given group is trying to attack Western countries at the moment. Rather, when determining whether a group is globally focused, it is more relevant to look for the combination of a transnational vision and transnational activities, rather than simply gauging whether it prioritizes Western targets. When al-Qaeda embraced a "far-enemy" focused military strategy in the 1990s, it was motivated by the assessment that Islamists could only topple local regimes and establish Islamic emirates if they first crippled the West, or forced Western disengagement from the Middle East and North Africa. Otherwise, al-Qaeda strategists thought, Western states would step in, provide military, economic, and intelligence support, and prevent these "near enemy" regimes from falling. The far-enemy strategy was thus a means to an end, rather than an unalterable commitment to prioritizing attacks

against the West. Furthermore, there is zero evidence that since adding affiliates, al-Qaeda's senior leadership disapproved of the local objectives of AQIM, al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent. Indeed, for any transnational jihadist group's senior leadership, it is vital that local branches are tailored to concerns, grievances, and aspirations that resonate in that theater, even as their activities fit into the mother group's broader ambitions.

The events of the Arab Spring shifted jihadists' calculus, as it demonstrated that Western states would not necessarily step in to save autocratic regimes. Indeed, in the case of Libya, Western governments actually intervened to topple Qaddafi. ISIL's ability to control significant territory for years despite foolishly making enemies at every turn further underscored new opportunities for jihadists in the region.[70] It would be in the United States' interest if regional groups eschewed all aspects of a global jihadist agenda and instead focused on local conflicts in places like Yemen or Somalia. But we should not overestimate our ability to bring this about, nor should we assume that jihadist groups, left to their own devises, will naturally choose to focus exclusively on local agendas.

The increasingly globalized world we inhabit outside the jihadist context, the diffusion of secure communications technology, and greater adoption of a pan-Islamic identity across multiple regions all support the trend toward a global focus, even as regional groups also tailor their strategies and activities to local

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[70] See my discussion of ISIL's over-eagerness to make enemies in Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "The Islamic State's Vulnerability," *War on the Rocks*, Sep. 17, 2014, https://warontherocks.com/2014/09/the-islamic-states-vulnerability/.

preferences. Writing about the "ideological hybridization" of jihadist organizations in 2009, Thomas Hegghammer observed that "the distinction between near enemy and far enemy groups seems less and less relevant." The process of ideological hybridization, Hegghammer concluded, had "the result that the enemy hierarchies of many jihadist groups are becoming more unclear or heterogeneous than they used to be."[71] Hegghammer's hybridization thesis still has significant explanatory power today.

Conclusion

The collapse of ISIL's caliphate was an important achievement for numerous reasons. ISIL was using the territory it controlled to plan large-scale terrorist attacks across the world, was brutalizing the population under its yoke, openly boasted of how it had instituted sex slavery, and adopted genocidal policies toward the Yazidis and other religious minorities. The fact that it no longer controls its own state is a positive development. Yet ISIL Core, although still an important player, does not represent the jihadist movement as a whole. At key inflection points like this one, the majority of analysts have sometimes misread the movement's future direction.[72] When the Arab Spring began, many assessed that the revolutions would likely harm the jihadist movement. Likewise, analysts overestimated the likelihood that ISIL, once it split from al-Qaeda, would attract major al-Qaeda branches into its orbit. Today, ISIL's precipitous decline should be

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[71] Thomas Hegghammer, "The Ideological Hybridization of Jihadi Groups," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Nov. 18, 2009, https://www.hudson.org/research/9866-the-ideological-hybridization-of-jihadi-groups.

[72] See discussion in Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "Interpreting Al Qaeda," *Foreign Policy*, Jan. 6, 2014, http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/01/06/interpreting-al-qaeda/.

understood in the context of a larger movement that remains dynamic, adaptable, and dangerous, and that has significantly grown in strength since the Arab Spring revolutions.

If Western countries are to turn ISIL's territorial defeat into a lasting strategic success, their leaders must correctly interpret where the movement goes from here. Three factors are helping to define its future and enable its resiliency and lethality: a geopolitical environment favorable to jihadist groups, technological advances they can leverage, and a trend toward centralization and a global focus. Together, these factors help to explain why, almost 17 years after the 9/11 attacks, "victory" in the War on Terror — or even a path to or concept of victory — remains elusive.

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4. ISIL, al-Qaeda, and What Goes Viral Next:

Why Tomorrow's Jihadist Movement Might not Look so

Different from Today's

Joshua Geltzer

Since the summer of 2014, when the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) swept across Syria and into Iraq, the group's core, with its expansive territorial safe haven and legions of fighters, has generally been considered the world's preeminent jihadist terrorist threat.[73] This remained the case even as longer-simmering jihadist threats — such as those posed by al-Qaeda in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region and by al-Shabaab in East Africa — persisted and evolved, and as the global jihadist movement grew more complex and varied.[74]

It is too soon to declare the threat posed by ISIL's core a thing of the past.[75] But the group has lost and continues to lose much of the territory that it once controlled in Syria and Iraq.[76] That territorial control not only provided time and

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[73] See, for example, Nick Rasmussen, "Opening Remarks," May, 3, 2017, Center for a New American Security, New Terrorism Threats and Counterterrorism Strategies Conference, https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/news_documents/CNASopeningremarks.pdf.

[74] See United States Institute of Peace, "The Jihadi Threat: ISIS, Al Qaeda and Beyond," Dec. 12, 2016, https://www.usip.org/publications/2016/12/jihadi-threat-isis-al-qaeda-and-beyond.

[75] See Joshua A. Geltzer, "The Perils of a Post-ISIS Middle East," *The Atlantic*, Dec. 27, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/12/middle-east-isis-syria-kurds-iran-iraq-turkey-trump/549227/

[76] Associated Press, "A Caliphate No More—All the Land ISIS Has Lost in the Past Year," Nov. 9, 2017, http://www.businessinsider.com/isis-is-on-the-run-caliphate-land-lost-2017-11.

space for plotting terrorist attacks in the region and beyond,[77] but also fueled the group's global messaging, which in turn filled its ranks with foreign fighters and incited violence by those who never travelled to Syria or Iraq and instead opted to remain at home, attacking those whom the group deemed its enemies.

With the core of ISIL increasingly squeezed in Syria and Iraq and debates rising about whether al-Qaeda can leverage this opportunity to retake market share, what lies ahead for the various strands of the jihadist movement and the threats they pose? Geographically, Syria is likely to remain a major focus: ISIL is still a threat there, and al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate has sown the seeds of a long-term threat with which the West has yet to grapple sufficiently. Organizationally, ISIL and al-Qaeda appear poised to remain key players, even if their affiliates — for ISIL, in places like Libya and Egypt; for al-Qaeda, in locations like Syria and Yemen — may prove better situated to continue the fight than either organization's embattled core. On the technological front, ISIL has shown the way for other jihadists who might rise to present their own global threats via the Internet.

Mission Still Not Accomplished: ISIL's Core Isn't Defeated Yet

As tempting as it may be to treat ISIL's core as defeated and focus instead on other terrorist threats, it is simply too soon to declare "mission accomplished" in Iraq and Syria. To be sure, ISIL is losing geography, fighters, and resources as the

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[77] See Rukmini Callimachi, "Not 'Lone Wolves' After All: How ISIS Guides World's Terror Plots From Afar," *New York Times*, Feb. 4, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/04/world/asia/isis-messaging-app-terror-plot.html.

U.S.-led coalition's campaign against it continues and even appears to be accelerating.[78]

But, as I recently suggested elsewhere, the last mile of defeating a terrorist group can be the hardest one, a lesson the United States learned all too well from the lingering remnants of ISIL's predecessor, al-Qaeda in Iraq.[79] ISIL is down but not out, especially in Syria where it remains a more robust fighting force than in Iraq. The group is estimated to retain thousands of fighters, and the area in which those fighters appear to be making their next stand — the Euphrates River Valley — will likely challenge the reach of the Counter-ISIL Coalition, given the lack of a previous ground presence there, the possibility of greater sympathy and even support for ISIL among the local population, and the continuing complexities of the overall dynamic in Syria, including rising tensions between Turkey and the Kurds.[80]

This dynamic includes a number of dissonant elements: an Assad regime that has an opportunity to reassert control over an increasing swath of the country, a patron regime in Moscow that wants to see a return on the investment it made by backing the Assad regime, a government in Tehran that seeks to be more assertive regionally while also coping with increasingly vocal discontent at home, and subnational Syrian actors, like the Kurds, who are aiming for at least a greater

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[78] See Andrew Exum, "What Trump Got Right in Foreign Policy in 2017," *The Atlantic*, Jan. 4, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/01/trump-foreign-policy/549671/.

[79] Geltzer, "Perils."

[80] See Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt, "Officials Eye Euphrates River Valley as Last Stand for ISIS," *New York Times*, Aug. 31, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/31/us/politics/isis-military-us-iraq-syria-euphrates.html.

degree of autonomy in Syria when it emerges from the devastating conflict that continues there. In addition, Washington's own approach to these and other key actors (like Baghdad and Erbil) has involved the deliberate perpetuation of strategic ambiguities that have enabled crucial progress in the fight against ISIL but are ultimately unsustainable.[81] Truly *defeating* a terrorist group is hard enough under the best of circumstances. In this tremendously challenging scenario, it is all the more difficult. So, for the moment, ISIL's core remains a formidable piece of the overall jihadist picture, and one unlikely to be eradicated imminently given the enduring complexities surrounding counterterrorism efforts against the group.

The challenges presented by ISIL extend beyond the shrinking but persistent and still formidable remnants of its core in Syria and Iraq. The group lays claim to officially recognized affiliates as well as less formally acknowledged networks worldwide.[82] ISIL-Libya, which once exerted such control over the coastal city of Sirte that it could hold flag-waving parades down its major boulevards, is among its most lethal affiliates.[83] Another is ISIL-Sinai, which is believed responsible for bringing down Metrojet Flight 9268 in October 2015, killing 224 in the deadliest bombing of a civil airliner since Pan Am Flight 103 exploded above Lockerbie in

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[81] Geltzer, "Perils."

[82] See Bardia Rahmani and Andrea Tanco, "ISIS's Growing Caliphate: Profiles of Affiliates," The Wilson Center, Feb. 19, 2016, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/isiss-growing-caliphate-profiles-affiliates.

[83] "ISIS Militants Parade Through Sirte, Libya," *ABC News*, Feb. 18, 2015, http://abcnews.go.com/International/photos/photo-isis-militants-parade-sirte-libya-photos-released-29079454.

1988.[84] It is simply too soon to project reliably the trajectories of these and other ISIL affiliates. ISIL-Libya, for example, appears largely cleared from Sirte, thanks in part to U.S. air power, but the group is assessed to retain hundreds of fighters elsewhere in the country.[85] Meanwhile, ISIL-Sinai is thought to be responsible for killing more than 300 worshippers at a mosque in November 2017 in the affiliate's deadliest attack yet.[86] Whether these particular ISIL affiliates are waxing or waning depends in part on the counterterrorism pressure that they will face in coming months and years. Regardless, neither affiliate appears likely to recede swiftly, and each might well prove to remain on the rise.

Overall, while ISIL has attempted to provide some coherence to its global organization, it seems unlikely that the fates of the group's affiliates will entirely stand or fall with ISIL's trajectory in Syria and Iraq. From West Africa to Southeast Asia, ISIL affiliates have worked assiduously to build redundancies into the group's overall system, such that many individual affiliates have their own local leadership, recruiting pipeline, and operational networks.[87] Success has been uneven. But at

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[84] See Bethan McKernan, "ISIS in Egypt: What Is Their Presence in Sinai and Have They Previously Claimed Terror Attacks in the Region?," *Independent*, Nov. 24, 2017, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-egypt-sinai-terror-attack-presence-claim-map-insurgency-explained-who-are-they-a8073866.html.

[85] Eric Schmitt, "17 ISIS Fighters Reported Killed as U.S. Ends Lull in Libya Airstrikes," *New York Times*, Sep. 24, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/24/us/politics/libya-military-strike-isis.html.

[86] Tim Lister, "Why the Massacre of Muslims in Sinai Was Too Extreme for al Qaeda," *CNN*, Nov. 27, 2017, https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/27/middleeast/egypt-sinai-attack-isis-al-qaeda/index.html.

[87] See, for example, Rukmini Callimachi and Eric Schmitt, "Manchester Bomber Met With ISIS Unit in Libya, Officials Say," *New York Times*, June 3, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/03/world/middleeast/manchester-bombing-salman-abedi-islamic-state-libya.html.

least some of ISIL's affiliates will continue, for the foreseeable future, to pose a threat to carry out attacks, galvanize followers, and even seize new territory no matter how the group's core is faring. Indeed, the prominence of these affiliates may be set to rise, as the organization as a whole attempts to compensate for setbacks in Syria and Iraq by boosting the prominence of ISIL's presence elsewhere. That may mean not only augmented messaging focused on ISIL outside Syria and Iraq but also increased violence, as those outposts attempt to sustain the group's relevance through terrorist attacks and potentially through the establishment of new safe havens.

It is also possible that, as ISIL's core loses territorial control, certain ISIL affiliates will distance themselves from the central organization. This may be particularly appealing for the affiliates whose existence predated ISIL's formation, such as the portion of Boko Haram that became ISIL's West African affiliate.[88] For such affiliates to splinter from the global ISIL organization could weaken them or at least create opportunities for counterterrorism forces to make gains against them, thanks to reduced financing, renunciations by discontented members, and general strategic and tactical drift. At the same time, for those affiliates that can turn to regionally focused grievances and exploit them effectively, there is the possibility of gaining traction and strength. It is further possible that Washington would no longer see them as a Western problem, thus leading the United States to lose focus

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[88] See Phil Stewart, "Boko Haram Fracturing Over Islamic State Ties, U.S. General Warns," *Reuters*, June 21, 2016, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-nigeria-boko-haram/boko-haram-fracturing-over-islamic-state-ties-u-s-general-warns-idUSKCN0Z72WT.

on the threat that they pose — a seriously shortsighted and potentially dangerous miscalculation.[89]

One can also imagine, with its territory in Syria and Iraq shrinking, ISIL becoming even less centralized of an organization than it already is. Characterizing a terrorist group's level of centralization is susceptible to oversimplification. For example, while ISIL's Internet-based messaging has certain central themes that are repeated in languages worldwide, its operational direction over the tactics of specific terrorist attacks is famously decentralized. That said, overall one might expect ISIL's core in Syria and Iraq to become increasingly focused on simply surviving and thus decreasingly able to align global messaging, seed leaders for new affiliates and networks, and otherwise provide general direction to the group's far-flung pockets of fighters. That, in turn, may lead ISIL affiliates to experiment with new attack tactics, new ways of interacting with local populations, and new messaging themes — perhaps even finding success that is then ripe for emulation and replication across ISIL's other affiliates.

Al-Qaeda: Laying the Foundations for a Resurgent Threat

ISIL is not the only serious terrorist threat emanating from Syria today. Al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria — now calling itself Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) — may continue to rebrand itself periodically and to spar publicly with al-Qaeda's overall leader

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[89] See generally Jennie M. Easterly and Joshua A. Geltzer, "More Die in Bathtubs than in Terrorism. It's Still Worth Spending Billions to Fight it," *CNN*, May 21, 2017,

https://www.cnn.com/2017/05/21/opinions/deadly-bathtub-compared-to-terrorism-opinion-geltzer-easterly/index.html.

Ayman al-Zawahiri,[90] but its essence remains unchanging:[91] It is a jihadist terrorist organization committed to using violence to pursue "a transnational jihadi project."[92]

HTS — which, to reiterate, should be understood at its core as "al-Qaeda in Syria," regardless of what its relationship to al-Zawahiri happens to be at the moment — is increasingly marked by more than just its violent ambition. The group has consolidated control in Idlib Province and swelled its ranks.[93] Meanwhile, the continuing multisided violence, humanitarian catastrophe, and lack of governance in huge swaths of Syria have limited the counterterrorism pressure being applied on the group. This combination of enjoying a physical safe haven, boasting sizable numbers, and facing minimal governmental pressure have produced for HTS a literal "Qaeda" or "base" of the type that Osama bin Laden once worked assiduously to establish in Afghanistan, only to see it lost to the United States-led military campaign launched in the wake of 9/11.

HTS appears to be exhibiting both greater strategic patience and greater tactical patience than bin Laden. Strategically, it is insinuating itself for the long haul in the

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[90] See Daniel L. Byman, "An al-Qaeda Setback in Syria?," *Lawfare*, Dec. 6, 2017, https://www.lawfareblog.com/al-qaeda-setback-syria.

[91] Colin P. Clarke, "Al Qaeda in Syria Can Change Its Name, But Not Its Stripes," *The Cipher Brief*, March 23, 2017, https://www.rand.org/blog/2017/03/al-qaeda-in-syria-can-change-its-name-but-not-its-stripes.html.

[92] Charles Lister, "Al Qaeda Is Starting to Swallow the Syrian Opposition," *Foreign Policy*, March 15, 2017, http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/15/al-qaeda-is-swallowing-the-syrian-opposition/.

[93] See, for example, Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Jihadist Group Cements Control of Syria's Idlib Province: Rebels," *Reuters*, July 23, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-rebels-idlib/jihadist-group-cements-control-of-syrias-idlib-province-rebels-idUSKBN1A80T1.

Syrian population and local power structures. Tactically, the group appears to be looking toward large-scale terrorist attacks in the West once those become feasible — *when* that would be remains uncertain and deeply worrisome — rather than prioritizing smaller-scale operations, like ISIL has done, that are more readily achievable. But, if HTS is not yet the preeminent global terrorist threat today, then it might well be tomorrow. With ISIL losing literal and figurative ground in Syria, HTS may be poised to gain ground elsewhere in the country and to take advantage of having a safe haven essentially on the shores of the Mediterranean to pose a terrorist threat stretching into Europe and beyond.

While HTS's fundamental commitment to the basic jihadist agenda is clear, the precise balance among the group's long-term priorities is less so. For example, it is unclear how the group's aims within Syria will be prioritized in relation to its objectives in the broader region as well as globally. How HTS strikes that balance is likely to determine how quickly the group uses — and thus risks — the base that it has built in Syria in service of pursuing terrorist attacks elsewhere. It may also affect its role within the broader al-Qaeda organization. If HTS seeks to exercise leadership over that global organization, then it may need to find ways to reverse its recent acrimony with al-Zawahiri.[94] In contrast, if the group is satisfied with a near-term focus on Syria, then there may be little urgency in reestablishing harmony across al-Qaeda's various franchises. Either way, policymakers in the United States and elsewhere would be wise to regard the threat posed by HTS — with its safe haven and potentially widespread global credibility among jihadists — as urgent.

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[94] See Byman, "Setback."

Outside of Syria, al-Qaeda's affiliates continue to pose serious threats, especially those in areas rife with ongoing conflict and lacking in credible governance. That is especially true of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). As outgoing National Counterterrorism Center Director Nick Rasmussen recently commented, Yemen "continues to be one of the most frustrating theaters in our work right now."[95] Much as for HTS in Syria, the continuing violence and lack of effective governance in Yemen allow AQAP physical and political space to plot attacks, recruit fighters, and stockpile resources.[96] Making things even more complicated, nowhere are the lines between allegiance to al-Qaeda and allegiance to ISIL more blurred than in Yemen,[97] suggesting that, should ISIL wane in global popularity with the loss of territory in Syria and Iraq, AQAP may stand to gain recruits from ISIL defectors. So, too, does al-Qaeda's affiliate in East Africa, al-Shabaab, which was reportedly behind Somalia's worst terrorist attack ever in October 2017, which killed more than 500 people.[98] And al-Qaeda continues to fester elsewhere as well, from Mali to India. The draw of al-Qaeda to jihadists never fully waned, even as ISIL surged to prominence. And should that surge be reversed as ISIL suffers continued setbacks in the heartland of its self-declared caliphate, al-Qaeda stands to gain from those whose allegiance could easily be reversed.

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[95] Eric Schmitt and Saeed al-Batati, "The U.S. Has Pummeled Al Qaeda in Yemen. But the Threat Is Barely Dented," *New York Times*, Dec. 30, 2017,

https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/30/world/middleeast/yemen-al-qaeda-us-terrorism.html.

[96] See Yara Bayoumy et al., "How Saudi Arabia's War in Yemen Has Made Al Qaeda Stronger—and Richer," *Reuters*, Apr. 8, 2016, https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/yemen-aqap/.

[97] See Matthew Levitt, "Terrorist 'Frenemies,'" *Politico*, Jan. 16, 2015,

https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/01/isil-terrorist-frenemies-114342.

[98] Jason Burke, "Mogadishu Truck Bomb: 500 Casualties in Somalia's Worst Terrorist Attack," *The Guardian*, Oct. 16, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/15/truck-bomb-mogadishu-kills-people-somalia.

While al-Qaeda's senior leadership, presumed to be in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, appears largely isolated and focused primarily on survival,[99] al-Zawahiri and other top figures retain meaningful resonance for key influencers among al-Qaeda's global followers and therefore represent their own continuing threat.[100] Even as other al-Qaeda affiliates, such as AQAP and HTS, have moved toward slicker Internet-disseminated messaging, al-Zawahiri has tended to circulate videos generally reminiscent of those that bin Laden used to share a decade ago, with al-Zawahiri generally speaking in a monotone while gazing, unmoving, at the camera.[101] Nonetheless, the fundamental credibility that al-Zawahiri and other al-Qaeda figures maintain with segments of the jihadist population means that a resurgence in their prominence remains conceivable, especially if they were to adopt a fresher approach to crafting and disseminating their communications.

ISIL 2.0

So far, this discussion of the global jihadist threat landscape has had a familiar ring. After all, ISIL and al-Qaeda are the household names of jihadism. It is

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[99] See Robert Windrem and William M. Arkin, "Why Hasn't the U.S. Killed Bin Laden's Wingman Ayman al-Zawahiri," *NBC News*, May 17, 2016, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/why-hasn-t-u-s-kill-bin-laden-s-wingman-n574986.

[100] See Thomas Joscelyn, "Ayman al Zawahiri Argues Jihadists Can't Deceive America," *Long War Journal*, Oct. 5, 2017, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/10/analysis-ayman-al-zawahiri-argues-jihadists-cant-deceive-america.php.

[101] See, for example, Thomas Joscelyn, "Ayman al Zawahiri Honors 2 Slain Jihadis in New Video," *Long War Journal*, Jan. 17, 2017, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/01/ayman-al-zawahiri-honors-2-slain-jihadis-in-new-video.php.

precisely because those groups have been so successful, not just at establishing their own "brands" but also at coopting local groups from Syria to Nigeria to the Philippines, that ISIL and al-Qaeda, in rather different ways, have become the overwhelmingly dominant franchises of what, beneath the surface, is a multifaceted and complicated jihadist movement.[102] Their dominance of the jihadist marketplace has made it hard for "start-up" groups with similarly global, rather than merely local, ambition to gain comparative traction. If one such group does gain traction, it tends to get quickly targeted by the behemoths — either for cooption or for elimination.

Nevertheless, ISIL's ingenuity has demonstrated to other nascent groups where opportunity does exist to capture some of the jihadist "market share": through the Internet. While its claim to a physical caliphate helped ISIL to grab attention and gain adherents since its 2014 surge, that message gained swift global traction because of the group's sophisticated use of social media, file-upload sites, and other modern communications platforms to radicalize and mobilize followers worldwide. That means, on the one hand, that, despite the increasing efforts of technology companies to police their platforms,[103] ISIL will retain something of a virtual safe haven even as its physical safe haven in Syria and Iraq shrinks,

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[102] There is the intriguing possibility that these two jihadist behemoths might in coming years seek to merge, or more accurately to re-merge, perhaps beginning in a location such as Yemen where the line between them is porous or Syria where the pressure against ISIL has been fierce and sustained. See Bruce Hoffman, "The Coming ISIS-al Qaeda Merger," *Foreign Affairs*, March 29, 2016, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-03-29/coming-isis-al-qaeda-merger.

[103] See John Mannes, "Facebook, Microsoft, YouTube, and Twitter Form Global Internet Forum To Counter Terrorism," *TechCrunch*, June 26, 2017, https://techcrunch.com/2017/06/26/facebook-microsoft-youtube-and-twitter-form-global-internet-forum-to-counter-terrorism/.

allowing the group's followers a platform to attempt to maintain relevance and exhort violence. But it also means that, because of ISIL's online pioneering, a new jihadist group — what some have called "ISIS 2.0"[104]— would not need the distribution chain and seed capital normally required to challenge two dominant corporate giants. Instead, that distribution chain already exists in the form of the Internet, and exploiting it in the name of terrorist violence requires little seed capital, as it is available essentially free of charge. What matters more is having a compelling narrative and a leadership capable of inspiring followers based on that narrative.

As my former colleague Jen Easterly and I have argued elsewhere, ISIL used the Internet to cultivate a false sense of belonging to a community centered around the group's purported caliphate. Indeed, rather than mobilizing "lone wolves" as is often suggested, ISIL actually did the opposite: It made vulnerable and disaffected individuals feel that they were *not* alone because they were part of ISIL's global community.[105] That sense of connection, initiated through deliberately accessible and even ostentatious online recruitment materials, is particularly dangerous in an era in which those who respond to it can then be shifted to communications platforms using end-to-end encryption *in*accessible to governments. It is on those platforms that later stages of radicalization and even operational plotting can ensue.[106]

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[104] See, for example, Michael E. O'Hanlon and Sara Allawi, "How To Avoid an ISIS 2.0 in Iraq," *The National Interest*, Nov. 18, 2017, http://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-avoid-isis-20-iraq-23259.

[105] Jen Easterly and Joshua A. Geltzer, "The Islamic State and the End of Lone-Wolf Terrorism," *Foreign Policy*, May 23, 2017, http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/23/the-islamic-state-and-the-end-of-lone-wolf-terrorism/.

[106] See Callimachi, "Not 'Lone Wolves.'".

For ISIL, a claim to a physical caliphate that could be marketed online with videos, photographs, and firsthand narratives was at the core of that sense of community with which the group energized the global jihadist movement and seized momentum within it. Generating a movement of that magnitude was no easy feat. It required first articulating an all-consuming worldview, barbaric as it was, and then making that worldview feel both real and compelling to those scattered around the world but potentially drawn to it. Still, there is no reason to think that laying claim to a physical caliphate is the only type of jihadist message that can be carefully cultivated, assiduously marketed, and, ultimately, go viral.

Predicting what the next jihadist messaging campaign to go viral might be is ultimately impossible. Maybe that campaign could depend on a resurgence of familiar types of jihadist activity in the physical world, from the establishment of a new purported caliphate to a series of global terrorist attacks. Or it might instead become truly digitized by relying on offensive cyber operations to wreak havoc on computer systems or physical entities like power plants and electric grids, along the way energizing the global following needed to power ISIL 2.0.[107] Revitalizing a new wave of jihadism through those sorts of cyberattacks, which would be relatively unprecedented for jihadists despite years of warnings,[108] presents a particularly concerning scenario, and one to which U.S. and other policymakers

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[107] Levi Maxey, "When Terrorists Learn How to Hack," *The Cipher Brief*, Dec. 3, 2017, http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/23/the-islamic-state-and-the-end-of-lone-wolf-terrorism/.

[108] See, for example, Thomas H. Kean and Lee H. Hamilton, "Today's Rising Terrorist Threat and the Danger to the United States: Reflections on the Tenth Anniversary of *The 9/11 Commission Report*," *The Bipartisan Policy Center*, July 23, 2014, http://bipartisanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/default/files/files/ BPC 9-11 Commission.pdf.

should be paying urgent attention. Regardless of what form it takes, somewhere a young jihadist may already be sitting in front of his or her computer screen, concocting the germ of a messaging campaign that, under the right circumstances, could gain traction. If such a campaign catches fire online, its creator will have ISIL to thank for demonstrating how to revive and refine jihadism for the digital age.

Conclusion

Across two administrations in Washington, one Democratic and one Republican, the U.S.-led coalition's campaign against ISIL has featured a number of key elements:[109] a commitment to American leadership, including a major role for the U.S. Military, novel partnerships with state and sub-state actors on the ground, the involvement of a diverse set of coalition countries offering different types of capabilities to the campaign and collectively contributing to the credibility of the effort, and an attempt to minimize noncombatant casualties, even if that effort has at times fallen short in tragic ways.[110] This approach incorporated lessons learned from U.S. counterterrorism efforts since 9/11, while also adapting to the new roles that technology and the distinct features of the Syrian conflict were playing in the terrorist and counterterrorist dynamic emerging in Syria and Iraq.

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[109] Brian McKeon, "Trump's 'Secret Plan' to Defeat ISIS Looks a Lot Like Obama's," *Foreign Policy*, May 31, 2017, http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/31/trumps-secret-plan-to-defeat-isis-looks-a-lot-like-obamas/.

[110] See Azmat Khan and Anand Gopal, "The Uncounted," *The New York Times Magazine*, Nov. 16, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/11/16/magazine/uncounted-civilian-casualties-iraq-airstrikes.html.

Tomorrow's jihadist terrorism will not, of course, be identical to today's. ISIL and al-Qaeda, while dominating the jihadist movement, are themselves changing, and whoever may surge next to prominence in the jihadist movement's leadership will bring still more changes to that movement. For policymakers charged with protecting the United States and U.S. interests against jihadist threats, the key will be to learn the right lessons from today's counterterrorism efforts, while being prepared to adapt to tomorrow's new challenges. That will require adapting, in particular, to the ever-changing role of technology, from social media sites where terrorist recruitment videos can be disseminated, to end-to-end encrypted platforms on which terrorist plots can be hatched without government awareness, to the next potential wave of technologically enabled terrorist activity, such as offensive cyber operations that cause damage in the physical world. The ways in which ISIL and al-Qaeda continue to evolve and the potential for new actors to use technology in novel ways for terrorist recruitment and incitement will shape the contours of jihadism in the years to come.

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