THE JIHADI THREAT

ISIS, AL QAEDA, AND BEYOND

The Jihadi Threat
ISIS, al-Qaeda, and Beyond

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December 2016/January 2017

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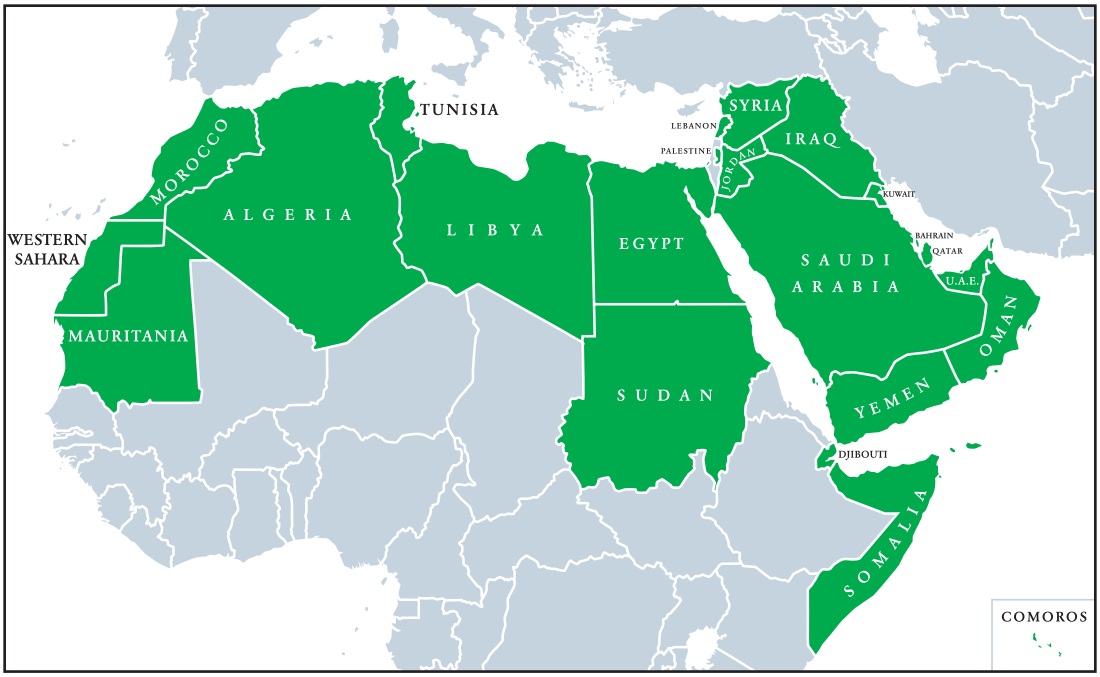

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The West failed to predict the emergence of al-Qaeda in new forms across the Middle East and North Africa. It was blindsided by the ISIS sweep across Syria and Iraq, which at least temporarily changed the map of the Middle East. Both movements have skillfully continued to evolve and proliferate—and surprise. What's next? Twenty experts from think tanks and universities across the United States explore the world's deadliest movements, their strategies, the future scenarios, and policy considerations. This report reflects their analysis and diverse views.

“If you remain steadfast, Allah will support you and grant you victory and plant your feet firmly. Know that Paradise is under the shade of the swords.”

— Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, caliph of the Islamic State

Introduction

Jihadism has evolved dramatically and traumatically since the 9/11 attacks. Movements, leaders, targets, tactics, and arenas of operation have all proliferated in ways unimagined in 2001. The international community has mobilized unprecedented force against an array of jihadis, with mixed results. The United States alone has spent trillions of dollars—in military campaigns, intelligence, law enforcement, homeland security, and diplomacy—to counter jihadism. Progress has been made; fewer than a hundred people were killed inside the United States between 2001 and late 2016—in stark contrast to the death toll on 9/11. Yet the threat endures.

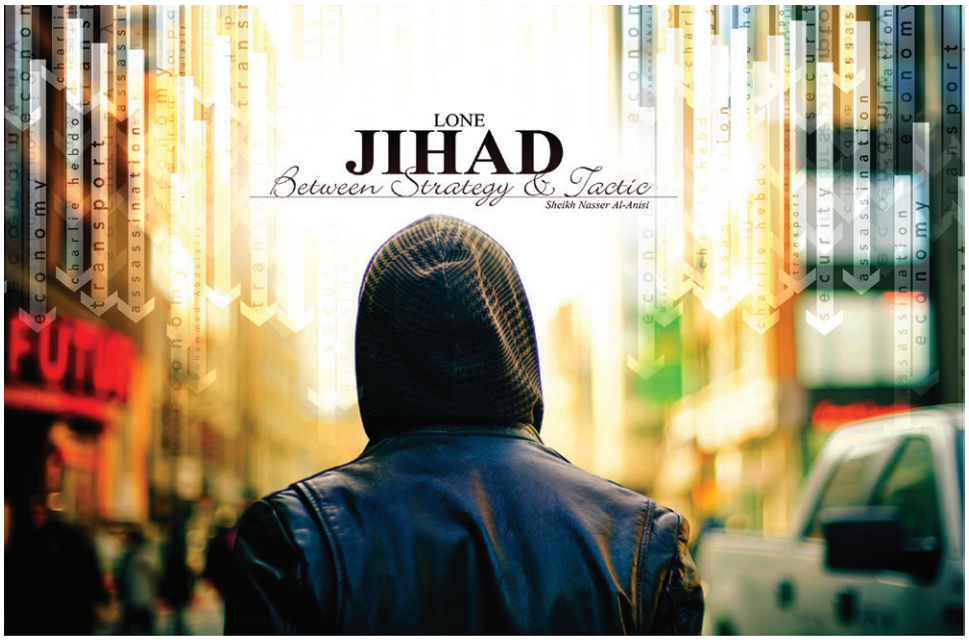
Movements, leaders, targets, tactics, and arenas of operation have all proliferated in ways unimagined in 2001.

The emergence of the Islamic State—also known as ISIS, ISIL, or Daesh—transformed the world of jihadism. After capturing large swaths of Iraq and Syria in 2014, the Islamic State attracted tens of thousands of foreigners who sought to build a new Islamic society in a modern caliphate. They included engineers, accountants, teachers, grandparents, and teenage girls, as well as fighters. They reinvigorated existing jihadist movements and galvanized a new wave of support for jihadism generally. In 2014, ISIS seemed to eclipse al-Qaeda.

But al-Qaeda, the vanguard of the global jihadist movement, is seeking to reclaim its primacy. It has built support among local jihadist groups in the Middle East, Africa, South Asia, and the Caucasus. Core leaders still provide overall directives, although they have also dispersed among affiliates. Advisors help groups define local goals and targets. Al-Qaeda has played the long game, and it may prove to be a more enduring model than the Islamic State.

Together, ISIS and al-Qaeda pose complementary threats to global security. But the jihadist spectrum is also far more diverse today than it was on 9/11. The danger is not just from this duo.

Local extremist groups are creating ever more complex variations of jihadism across the Middle East. Some invoke the global jihadist rhetoric of al-Qaeda or ISIS, while others are



Al-Qaeda's *Inspire* magazine promotes lone-wolf attacks. Image from Al-Malahem Media.

more nationalist. Some of these groups—such as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS) and Ahrar al-Sham—are "country-first" jihadists, albeit with different levels of commitment to nationalist politics. Their immediate focus has been establishing institutions within the local communities where they have thrived, even if they have networks outside or connections abroad. For this reason, disentangling local Sunni communities from country-first jihadis will prove as challenging as routing out ISIS from cities in Iraq and Syria, as the United States and its partners are doing.

Another variation is the "marbling" of jihadi groups. Local country-first groups have fluid relationships with global jihadist movements—merge or cut ties with one another as is convenient. The shifts often happen for strategic, logistical, or financial (including salary-related) reasons rather than for purely ideological ones.

Regardless of the fate of ISIS and al-Qaeda, Sunni extremist movements have proliferated at a time when governments across the region are comparatively weak or vulnerable. Traditional forms of authority are being challenged; traditional forms of national identity are being redefined. New political spaces have emerged that are beyond the control of traditional governments. As a result, the region—politically and physically—is extremely vulnerable.

Key Points

- Jihadism initially focused on overthrowing local regimes; agendas gradually expanded to include transnational or transcontinental goals. For some, the short-term focus has again moved towards local goals and strategies. Local jihadist groups have also multiplied. Jihadism now has multiple models. But ISIS and al-Qaeda remain the two major global brands.
- Since 2013, al-Qaeda and ISIS have varied little in core ideology but have adopted divergent strategies and tactics. Al-Qaeda has sometimes capitalized on ISIS tactics—and made gains in unexpected ways.
- ISIS's priority has been to destabilize regimes in order to control territory as quickly as possible. Its strategy is methodical even as its warfare has been irregular since 2009. It has created a new standard for nonstate actors and asymmetric warfare since sweeping across Syria and Iraq in 2014. But its initial strategy, as a long-term territorial project, may not be sustainable. Even if ISIS should fail this time around, a hardened core will attempt a comeback. Others may adopt its recipe too.
- The contraction of the Islamic State—the loss of part, or all, of its caliphate—may not fundamentally undermine its appeal. As an extremist organization, ISIS is likely to endure for years to come as a pure insurgency using terrorist tactics. It revolutionized mobilization of supporters and sympathizers in the West, a lasting legacy as well as a future threat.
- Al-Qaeda has overcome the critical challenges of bin Laden's death in 2011 and the rise of ISIS in 2014. It has demonstrated an ability to evolve and adapt to shifting political trends in ways beyond the control of local governments, regional forces, or the international community.
- But al-Qaeda also may look vastly different as it relies increasingly on local allies and affiliates. It already exists in a form vastly different from 2001. Al-Qaeda has invested heavily in co-opting local Islamist movements and embedding within popular uprisings—even

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as its central command has continued to issue directives. It has sought to unite these local groups to support its own objectives. In the future, al-Qaeda has the potential to be a greater jihadist threat than ISIS.

- The Nusra Front in Syria has been the most successful test of this al-Qaeda model. Since 2012, its strategy has been a form of "controlled pragmatism." Its rebranding—as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham in 2016—reflects al-Qaeda's strategy of "guided transformation." Al-Qaeda agreed to the rebranding, partly because Syrian rebels were uneasy with an al-Qaeda presence in their ranks.
- How al-Qaeda and ISIS rely on and respect popular support reflects a basic difference between them. ISIS coerces local populations while advertising to a global audience. It has created local governance. It has also targeted potential recruits around the world, with propaganda in dozens of languages weighing in on issues unique to Muslim communities in France, Russia, or elsewhere. But ISIS's message is zero-sum: you are either with ISIS, or you are an infidel. It has been prepared to act ruthlessly against those who do not share its hard-line worldview. Its tactics are coercive. In the end, it tends to act unilaterally.

  In contrast, al-Qaeda groups have focused more on local populations and local flashpoints. Al-Qaeda co-opts; it seeks local buy-in that makes the movement sustainable in the long term. Syria is a prime example: ISIS has ruled ruthlessly and killed with few restraints in its Syrian holdings. Al-Qaeda has positioned itself as an actor with higher moral ground—by building alliances with local militias and limiting collateral damage—in an incredibly brutal civil war. Al-Qaeda's long-term objective is the same as the Islamic State's: to reform society and govern it under a strict interpretation of sharia. They differ in methodology and timeline.
- ISIS is a political extremist actor, while al-Qaeda has become an extremist political actor. In other words, ISIS is more of an extremist movement with political goals. ISIS is unwilling to compromise; its behavior is unlikely to change whatever the incentives. In contrast, al-Qaeda is now more of a political organization with extremist beliefs, although that does not mean it can be co-opted.
- Both ISIS and al-Qaeda have long-term strategies to create a Salafi utopia. ISIS's core strategy is to pursue a Salafi state through continuous confrontation both within Muslim-majority countries and outside them. ISIS believes Muslims can be held to an interpretation of sharia today. It is more doctrinaire, less accommodating of non-Salafi trends. It looks on the Muslim Brotherhood founder as an infidel and at the Taliban as an infidel state. For ISIS, the means justify the ends; it has engaged in a war of attrition in Iraq and Syria.
- Al-Qaeda's strategy is more gradualist. It believes that Muslims must be educated first on sharia, that the idea of jihad must be popularized, and that Muslims must be convinced to take up arms as the only method of emancipation. It is less exclusionary. It has forged alliances and quietly entrenched itself and its ideas within local communities with the aim of eventually building a pure Salafi state.
- The two movements are rivals, despite their jihadist ideologies. They compete for dominance. They play off each other's successes and failures. ISIS portrays itself as more successful strategically than al-Qaeda. In only a few months, it seized territory and declared a

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caliphate, while al-Qaeda's achievements have been less visible since 2011. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda benefits from ISIS's violence in two ways: It has been able to exploit the instability created by ISIS. Comparatively, it appears to be the more pragmatic actor.

- The two movements have complementary effects on the global jihadi Salafist network, however. They are both exploiting disenfranchised or disillusioned Sunni youth in the Middle East and abroad. They are both undermining the existing state system and contributing to expanding wars in the region. They are both normalizing the belief that violent jihad is necessary in order to defend the Sunni community globally.
- The rivalry between ISIS and al-Qaeda does not weaken the jihadist threat; it widens its scope.

The Phases

Jihadism has evolved through multiple phases since it emerged in the late 1970s. The first phase—the inception—featured ideologues, such as Sayyid Qutb and his protégés in the Egyptian prison system, who were not all Salafi. But they all promoted the exclusivist and violent rhetoric of "takfirism," or excommunication of fellow Muslims.

A second phase—of cross-pollination—featured twin phenomena: the expulsion of Muslim Brothers from Arab states and their employment or education in Saudi Arabia or Kuwait, a process that married the theological rigor of Salafism with the political activism of the Brotherhood's Islamism. The leadership of the Brotherhood rejected Qutb's approach, however, and the mainstream Brotherhood is not now jihadist. At the same time, jihadism among other ideologies and movements was increasingly "Salafized" in the 1980s and 1990s; the use of violent tactics and the religious ideology began to merge. Many jihadists started to insist that only Salafi theology was legitimate, a position that put them at odds with the Brotherhood.

The third phase—of causation—began as Salafist activist ideas were spurred by historic events, including the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989 and the first Gulf War in 1990–91, when hundreds of thousands of American troops were based in Saudi Arabia. Both military operations involved atheists, non-Muslims, or infidels deploying in Muslim lands. During the Gulf War, the Saudi Kingdom in particular was perceived as betraying Islam, sparking a movement known as the Awakening.

What drove fighters to join Osama bin Laden and the original Arab mujahideen in Afghanistan in the late twentieth century often varies significantly from what drove people to join groups such as ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria or Iraq in the early twenty-first century. The current jihadis are now part of a third generation.

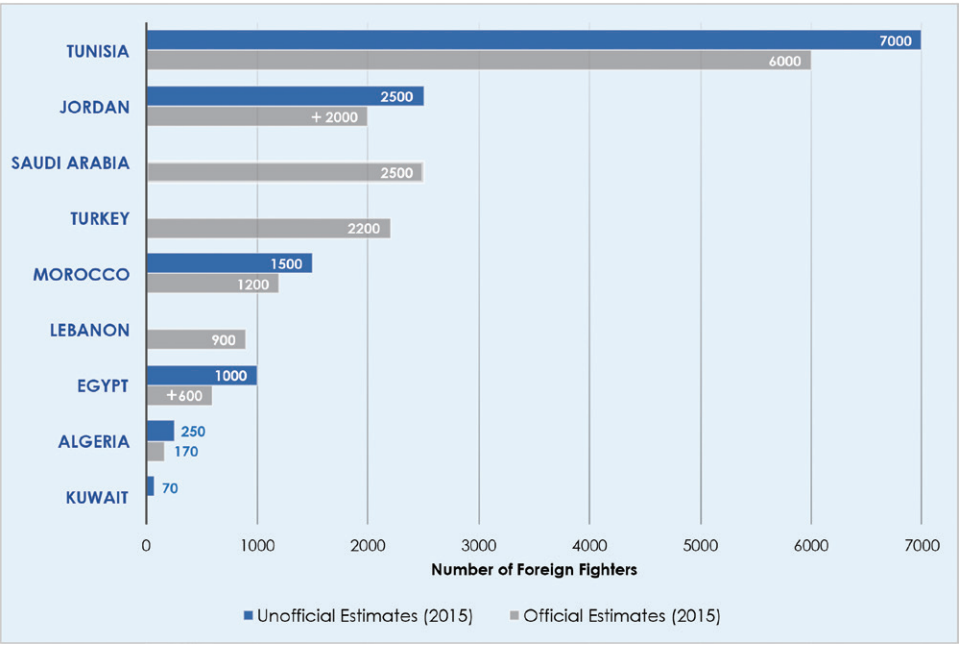
The fourth phase—of realization—featured bold attacks, such as the 9/11 spectaculars on the World Trade Center, and the emergence of jihadism as the top security threat facing the Western world. To jihadists, the attacks were a vindication of their cause and a sign that more was possible.

The fifth phase—of crossroads—occurred after the United States entered Iraq. It produced tectonic shifts in strategy, purpose, and identity among the jihadist groups—shifts that are still being witnessed.

Over time, motives and inspiration have diversified too. What drove fighters to join Osama bin Laden and the original Arab mujahideen in Afghanistan in the late twentieth century often varies significantly from what drove people to join groups such as ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria or Iraq in the early twenty-first century. The current jihadis are now part of a third generation.

The latest generation is distinct from the earlier waves in several ways. In sheer numbers, each mobilization of foreign fighters has been larger than its predecessor. The growth is now

Figure 1. Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria by Country of Origin



Source: Official estimates from respective governments. Unofficial estimates are by the Soufan Group, "Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq," December 2015.

exponential, with surviving fighters of previous generations becoming important catalysts for the next generation. The pattern suggests that any new jihadi conflict will draw greater numbers than the last. Recruitment is also likely to surge because the best recruiters of new foreign fighters are former ones.

Each mobilization of fighters has also been faster. The time required for jihadis to act or swarm to a theater of conflict has been roughly halved with each foreign fighter mobilization. The ease of global travel and the interconnectivity of social media have solved the coordination challenges for global mobilization.

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The foreign fighter pool has also diversified with each jihadi conflict. The first generation of jihadis, galvanized by Afghanistan, was predominantly from the Arabian Peninsula; its members were often referred to as "Afghan Arabs." Gulf fighters have always constituted the largest constituency among foreign fighter populations. But the Gulf fighter proportion has decreased with each mobilization. For example, more fighters joined ISIS from Tunisia than from Saudi Arabia.

The number of North Africans dramatically increased during the fight against the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq. North Africans constituted roughly a fourth of all recruits. Between 2012 and 2015, Central Asians and particularly Europeans mobilized in unprecedented numbers to join the ranks of the Islamic State—a troubling development for Western countries.

Each generation has also grown more extreme.[1] This trend is not specific to jihadi groups. From the 1970s to 1990s, Palestinian groups and Islamic extremist groups in Algeria underwent a similar process. Groups splintered; younger fighters grew impatient with the older

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generation and sought to make their own mark. Upstarts planned larger and executed more brazen attacks to outpace their forefathers. ISIS and al-Qaeda have followed a similar pattern, with the youngest fighters being ever more aggressive with each mobilization.

In the future, jihadis are likely to spread out to more locations or similar causes. Jihadism is a profession as well as a belief system. Once mobilized, a wave of foreign fighters is often difficult to demobilize. And foreign fighters who do demobilize are likely to remain an important part of the fabric of modern jihads, becoming facilitators or supporters who push the agenda forward, even if they do not join the fight itself.

Whither the Islamic State?

In the twenty-first century, the most stunning development in radical Islamist ideology was the creation of the Islamic State in 2014. ISIS is a descendent of al-Qaeda, but it has propagated an interpretation of jihadism both more urgent and aggressive than any previous group's.

ISIS emerged out of al-Qaeda in Iraq, which was founded (under a different name) in 1999 by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian militant. His movement gained momentum after the U.S. intervention in 2003. He was killed in a U.S. airstrike in 2006. Even in its early days, al-Qaeda in Iraq engaged in brutal sectarian killings that al-Qaeda opposed as theologically illegitimate or potentially alienating to Sunni populations. Whereas al-Qaeda promoted a unified Islamic front against the West, al-Qaeda in Iraq prioritized killing Shiites and others it considered apostate Muslims who deserved death.

The group rebranded as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in 2006. A joint campaign by Iraqi tribes and U.S. troops drove ISI from its strongholds between 2007 and 2011. Many core members were killed or imprisoned. In 2010, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, an Islamic scholar from Iraq, was selected as the group's second leader. He had spent ten months in U.S. detention in 2004 before being released as a "low-level" detainee.

ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Image from video posted on a militant website, AP Images. © 2016 Associated Press; used with permission.

ISI spent several years rebuilding, with a wave of growth by 2013 that was facilitated by six factors: new internal leadership; a series of prison breaks that grew its ranks and put hardened jihadis back on the battlefield; a campaign of assassinations and intimidation to degrade Iraqi Security Forces; chaos created by the uprising in neighboring Syria; multiple political failures by the Iraqi government; and the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq.

In 2013, the group changed its name to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS); the change was part of an effort to affirm control over fighters it had dispatched to Syria in 2011 and to formally expand its statehood project into Syria. Many of the fighters defied the unilateral announcement by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and instead pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda's leadership based in Pakistan and Afghanistan. A period of infighting ensued, despite efforts by al-Qaeda's leadership to mediate the growing schism. In January 2014, ISIS seized the Syrian provincial capital of Raqqa from the Nusra Front and its allies. ISIS continued to pursue its nascent statehood project despite appeals for restraint from al-Qaeda and other jihadist organizations. In February 2014, al-Qaeda's General Command severed ties with ISIS. The split has had a profound impact in the jihadi world.

In June 2014, ISIS formally announced a caliphate with its own government, economy, and army—usurping a longtime al-Qaeda goal albeit not in the same form. ISIS established a formal bureaucracy in the caliphate, with institutions based on its hard-line interpretation of Islam. By the end of 2016, the Pentagon said, between 27,000 and 31,000 foreign fighters—from eighty-six countries on five continents—had traveled to Iraq and Syria to join ISIS and other extremist groups. Other jihadists, including engineers, accountants, teachers, and families—also traveled to the caliphate. An estimated 90 percent of ISIS fighters in Iraq were of Iraqi origin. About 70 percent of ISIS fighters in Syria were of local origin, according to the Pentagon in late 2016.[2]

Strategy

ISIS seeks a war of attrition with the West in the Middle East and projects itself as the defender of Sunni Muslim communities. It has actively fomented local conflicts and sectarian tensions that work to its benefit. It has sought to present itself as the only Sunni militant group capable of fighting the government of Iraq and the only authentic jihadi group in Syria and, indeed, the world.

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ISIS's primary goal, unlike al-Qaeda's, has been capturing and directly governing territory. The first issue of ISIS's *Dabiq* magazine, published in July 2014, outlined a five-step process that includes setting up a base in a weak state, recruiting members, and fomenting local chaos. "This has always been the roadmap towards Khilafah (caliphate)," the magazine said. It criticized "other famous jihad groups"—presumably al-Qaeda—that did not prioritize capturing or ruling territory.[3] ISIS has been somewhat successful in appropriating and co-opting other groups, notably among Sunni tribal factions, forcing them to pledge *baya*—or allegiance—to Baghdadi. But it has few real alliances with other armed groups in Iraq or Syria. It has tended to act unilaterally.

In its caliphate, ISIS established court systems, schools, social services, and local governments. ISIS even had a publishing house to produce books, pamphlets, and textbooks for children. Foreign fighters occupied many administrative posts in the bureaucracy. ISIS initially attempted public outreach but also brutalized many in its own Sunni community as well as members of other sects. It engaged in mass killings of Yazidis, Shiites, and other

minorities. In 2014, an ISIS publication boasted of "targeting apostates of all different backgrounds" and "never allowing any apostate group to enjoy a moment of security."[4] ISIS beheaded prisoners and routinely posted images of their bodies on social media.

Regionally, ISIS relied heavily on projecting ruthless strength and momentum as a strategy to win over sympathizers, particularly groups associated with al-Qaeda. Ansar Beit al-Maqdis in Egypt's Sinai was among a few that declared allegiance to ISIS. But the core affiliates of rival al-Qaeda largely remained intact.

On the international stage, ISIS has carried out terrorist attacks in the West. The goal—a top priority—is to destabilize and undermine governments in Europe and the United States. ISIS has carried out mass killings at public gatherings, such as a theater and outdoor cafe in Paris in late 2015, and an airport in Brussels in early 2016. Its social media and slick publications have repeatedly appealed for lone-wolf attacks as well; they provide detailed instructions on how to construct homemade bombs and where to stab someone to ensure death.

Future

Breaking an eleven-month silence, Baghdadi released a half-hour message in November 2016 after Iraq, backed by the U.S.-led coalition, launched an offensive to recapture Mosul. He beseeched his followers in language that compared the battle over Mosul with the Prophet Muhammad's campaign, when the first generation of Muslims was also outnumbered. "Do not run away from the battle," the Islamic State leader said.

> If you remain steadfast, God will support you and grant you victory and plant your feet firmly. Know that Paradise is under the shade of the swords. Know that even if some of your commanders have been killed, God will replace them with those who are the same or better.[5]

ISIS's current model may not be sustainable, however, particularly under continued international pressure. Its bold tactics, hard-line ideology, and shocking violence initially won unprecedented territorial gains. But its early gains led to quick losses. It failed to capture any new urban centers after May 2015.

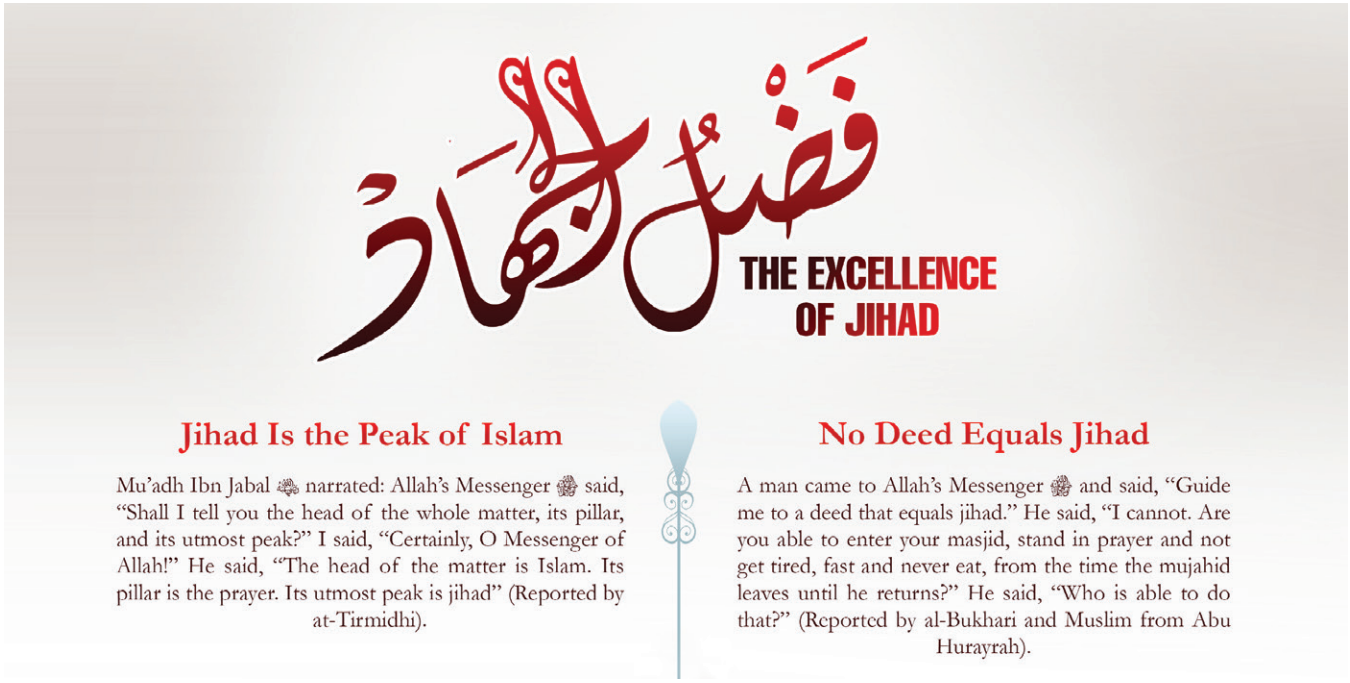
ISIS's current model may not be sustainable, however, particularly under continued international pressure. Its bold tactics, hard-line ideology, and shocking violence initially won unprecedented territorial gains. Its focus on quick results allowed it to mobilize supporters and gain momentum. But its early gains led to quick losses. It failed to capture any new urban centers after May 2015.

By the end of 2016, ISIS had lost 43 percent of its total caliphate—57 percent of its territory in Iraq and 27 percent of its territory in Syria, according to the Pentagon. ISIS lost land under the twin pressure of ground offensives—carried out by disparate forces in Iraq and Syria—and daily airstrikes by a U.S.-led coalition.[6]

ISIS lost key cities in Iraq, including Ramadi, Fallujah, and Tikrit. The loss of Mosul—which accounts for about 11 percent of Iraq's population—will eliminate all major population centers under ISIS control in Iraq. In Syria, ISIS lost Kobani, Tal Abyad, and Hasaka, as well as Manbij, a city that served as its strategic resupply route to Turkey.

For ISIS, the death toll has been staggering. A U.S. commander in Iraq estimated that 45,000 ISIS fighters had been "taken off the battlefield" by August 2016.[7] By November, the United States estimated that another 800 to 900 had been killed in the first ten days of the campaign to liberate Mosul. At least 120 senior leaders were eliminated, mostly in airstrikes, including the chief of foreign operations, deputy emirs, the minister of information, and a member of the ruling Shura Council.[8] ISIS financial assets were also depleted by airstrikes on oil facilities, oil tankers, and warehouses used to store cash.

There are at least six future scenarios for ISIS. They are not all mutually exclusive.



ISIS's *Rumiyah* magazine on jihad. Image from Al-Hayat Media Center.

First is a diminished status quo. ISIS could retain some of its territory, but with its capabilities markedly degraded. Despite loss of territory, its fighters have repeatedly demonstrated discipline, cohesion, and a willingness to fight even when outmanned, outgunned, and unable to counter the airpower of the U.S.-led coalition. The ISIS brand may still resonate because the movement originally made unprecedented territorial gains and achieved global notoriety.

Second, the caliphate could continue to contract. By the end of 2016, the Islamic State's longevity was in doubt because of growing military and financial pressure. The loss of momentum—which was a key factor thrusting ISIS into the global spotlight and allowing it to dominate the jihadist agenda for two years—exacerbated the physical loss of territory.

ISIS's brutality may also tarnish its brand. Its predecessor, al-Qaeda in Iraq, experienced a similar phenomenon in 2006. Its violence and usurpation of economic activity (through smuggling and extortion) alienated many Iraqi Sunnis in Anbar and Ninewa Provinces, who then partnered with the United States to counter the al-Qaeda affiliate.

Third, ISIS's next move may be an "*inhiyaz ila al sahra*" or a retreat into the desert, as forecast by Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, chief of external operations, before he was killed in a U.S. airstrike in August. In the summer of 2016, he insisted that ISIS could lose all its territory and still survive—and even come back stronger. The loss of territory may slow or reverse ISIS's growth. But it still has "virtual jihadism" in prolific propaganda published in dozens of languages across cyber and social media platforms.

The organization is certain to survive in altered physical form too, perhaps as a more traditional terrorist organization. Elimination of the group's territory may not fundamentally undermine its endurance. ISIS would still be able to exploit Sunni discontent and foment

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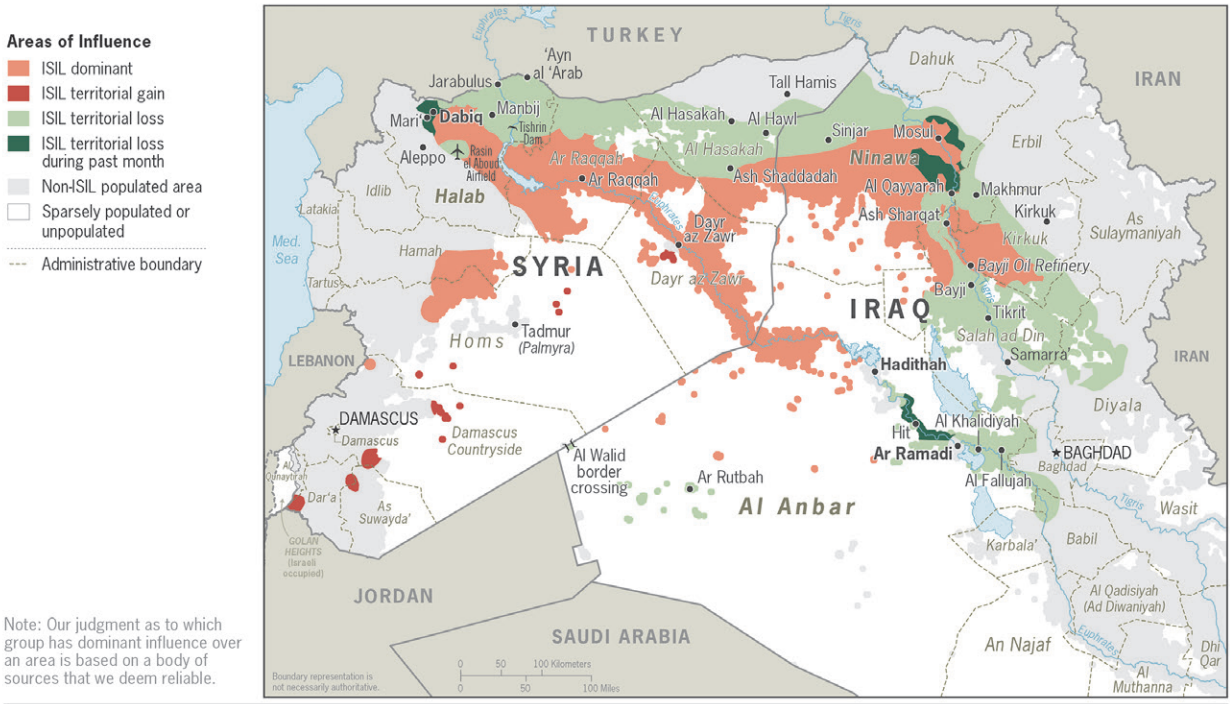
sectarian tension over the next five to ten years in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and potentially beyond. It is already showing signs that it can and will go back to the strategy favored between 2007 and 2011, when it was an insurgency destabilizing the weak Iraqi government, carrying out attacks that inflicted mass casualties, and undermining U.S. interests in the Middle East.

Indeed, the conditions in Iraq today could be more favorable for the revival of ISIS—if and when it is defeated territorially—than the conditions in 2007, when its predecessor was driven out of Iraqi towns with the help of the American surge and the local tribal uprising. The favorable conditions include deeper fractures along sectarian, social, political, and ethnic lines. Compared to 2007, the government in Baghdad is seen as dominated by sectarian politicos and ragtag Iranian-backed Shiite militias—and unresponsive to Iraq's Sunnis. ISIS

Islamic State Areas of Influence, August 2014 through October 2016



Note: Our judgment as to which group has dominant influence over an area is based on a body of sources that we deem reliable.

Source: Image by U.S. Department of Defense.

can retreat into remote areas of the desert or along river banks that would facilitate its movement, flow of arms, and operations.

Fourth, ISIS fighters could relocate, either physically or politically. They may attempt to blend back into their own societies, at least for the short term. The hardest-core fighters may remain committed to ISIS, but the disillusioned may opt to join other jihadi movements, either in Middle East theaters or in Muslim conflict zones further afield. In Syria, local jihadis forced out of Raqqa and other ISIS-held territory may consider joining Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, the al-Qaeda franchise, or other extremist militias. ISIS could also seek to expand into western Syria.

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Fifth, ISIS could shift focus beyond the Middle East. It still has global reach. In just two years, it spawned a network of affiliates and sympathizers capable of carrying out deadly attacks worldwide, including in Europe and the United States—although probably only a small subset was capable of coordinating with ISIS. At its height in 2016, dozens of armed groups on three continents had pledged allegiance to ISIS, although the Islamic State did not formally embrace them all. It had particularly active branches in Libya, Egypt, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. In 2015 and 2016, its fighters and sympathizers killed at least 1,200 people outside of its arena of operations in Iraq and Syria.

In his November 2016 message, Baghdadi specifically appealed to the caliphate's "soldiers" beyond Iraq and Syria to take their own actions in Algeria, the Arabian Peninsula, Bangladesh, the Caucasus, Egypt, Indonesia, the Khorasan region (or Afghanistan and Pakistan), Libya, the Philippines, the Sinai, Somalia, Tunisia, West Africa, and Yemen.

"Know that today you are the pillars of Islam on earth and the poles of the Caliphate in it. You have startled the nations of unbelief with your jihad, your patience, and your steadfastness," he said.

> They are striving to extinguish the light of God among you, by spreading causes of disunity and disagreement. We will not neglect, at this opportunity, to remind all our Muslim brothers that if the paths have become restricted and the routes of migration to Iraq and Syria cut off, then God has made a wide path for them to migrate to those blessed provinces to establish there a fortress of Islam.[9]

Sixth, ISIS may increasingly focus on the United States, which has led a coalition of more than 60 nations against the movement. In the third issue of *Rumiyah*, its slick online magazine, ISIS provided detailed instructions for lone-wolf attacks in the United States. The November 2016 issue recommended targeting outdoor celebrations, festivals, political rallies, and parades—and ran a photo of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade as an example.

In language that recalled the July 2016 attack in Nice, France, *Rumiyah* specifically advised,

> The method of such an attack is that a vehicle is plunged at a high speed into a large congregation of (nonbelievers), smashing their bodies with the vehicle's strong outer frame while advancing forward—crushing their heads, torsos, and limbs under the vehicle's wheels and chassis—and leaving behind a trail of carnage.[10]

List of Branches

The Islamic State views itself as a global movement with eight formal branches, divided into 37 wilayats or provinces. The movement has published or broadcast in 35 languages, including Mauritian Creole.

The Islamic State views itself as a global movement with eight formal branches, divided into 37 *wilayats* or provinces, which have pledged allegiance to the caliphate. The active provinces tend to be well organized; some communicate with each other. The movement has published or broadcast in 35 languages, including Mauritian Creole. The caliphate does not have total control over all its provinces, however. And some provinces are weak or dormant or have been crushed by the state.

ISIS fighter in Raqqa, Syria. Photograph by stringer, Reuters. © 2014 Reuters; used with permission.

The Islamic State has also cultivated looser networks of cells, operatives, and sympathizers in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the United States. Its network in Turkey facilitated the flow of fighters, weapons, resources, and even oil exports. Cells in Europe carried out terrorist spectaculars in Brussels and Paris. Sympathizers in the United States were responsible for mass shootings in California and Florida. The Islamic State's formal provinces include the following:

Yemen (eight provinces): Pledged allegiance in September–November 2014.[11]

- Aden-Abyan Province (in the southwest)
- Hadrawmat Province (in the east)
- Sana'a Province (capital) (dormant)
- Green Brigade Province (in southern Ibb and Taiz) (dormant)
- Bayda Province (in the center) (dormant)
- Shabwah Province (in the east) (dormant)
- Lahij Province (in the south) (dormant)
- Ataq Province (in the southwest) (dormant)

Saudi Arabia (three provinces): Pledged allegiance in November 2014.[12]

- Najd Province (in the center)
- Hijaz Province (in the west)
- Bahrain Province (in the east)

Algeria (one province): Formed from an al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) breakaway group known as Jund al-Khilafah; pledged allegiance in September 2014.[13]

- Al-Jaza'ir Province

Libya (three provinces): Founded in early 2014 as Islamic Youth Shura Council;[14] pledged allegiance in October 2014.[15]

- Barqa Province (Derna and Benghazi in the east)
- Tarabalus Province (around Sirte in the west)
- Fezzan Province (in the south)

Egypt (one province): Founded as Ansar Beit al-Maqdis in 2011; pledged allegiance in November 2014.[16]

- Sinai Province (in the north)

Nigeria (one province): Founded as Boko Haram (its formal title translates as "People Committed to the Prophet's Teachings for Propagation and Jihad") in 2002; pledged allegiance in March 2015;[17] since that time has splintered.

- Gharb Ifriqiyya Province (West Africa)

Caucasus (one province): Formed by Islamic Emirate of the Caucasus (IEC) defectors; pledged allegiance in June 2015.[18]

- Qawqaz Province

Afghanistan/Pakistan (one province): Breakaway formed from Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP); pledged allegiance to ISIS in January 2015.[19]

- Khorasan Province (South Asia)

Whither al-Qaeda?

Once the uncontested leader of global jihadism, al-Qaeda has been dealt two blows since 2011: its charismatic leader, Osama bin Laden, was killed by the United States in May 2011;

Al-Qaeda leaders Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. Photograph by Ho New, Reuters. © 2004 Reuters; used with permission.

and in mid-2014, it was eclipsed by ISIS and a new "caliphate." Al-Qaeda's shift away from public view may be strategic and deliberate. It has shaped global jihadism in subtle and shadowy ways in recent years, even as it faded from public view.

Al-Qaeda has evolved significantly since its formation in the 1980s. Osama bin Laden launched a formal organization, based in Afghanistan and Pakistan, out of jihadist contingents, notably from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and North Africa. Al-Qaeda was held responsible for 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania; the 2000 bombing of the USS *Cole*; and the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001. After the 9/11 attacks, U.S. forces invaded Afghanistan, weakening al-Qaeda by capturing and killing many of its core members. In a key shift, its senior leaders then dispersed globally.

After the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, al-Qaeda in Iraq, under Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, became one of the movement's most powerful affiliates. Zarqawi was killed by a U.S. airstrike in 2006; his fighters were largely routed in 2007, a turning point that tarnished al-Qaeda's global brand. The organization struggled to revive its reputation. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, based in Yemen, became the more active branch. After bin Laden's death in 2011, Ayman al-Zawahiri, an Egyptian physician, took over al-Qaeda's leadership.

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The center of gravity had already begun to shift to the affiliate groups. Proxy groups preached al-Qaeda's ideology without the liability of the al-Qaeda label. Some key figures in Afghanistan and Pakistan also moved to other arenas; at least two dozen went to Syria in a deliberate effort to exploit other theaters of conflict and also get closer to the West physically. A smaller number went to Yemen.

By 2013, U.S. officials estimated that the original al-Qaeda core had only between 50 and 100 members in Afghanistan and Pakistan, although this core has grown again since then. The core was perceived by some experts to be less active than in the past. The movement increasingly evolved into a network of formal affiliates or informal allies in the Middle

East, Africa, and Asia. Its Syrian affiliate had at least 5,000 fighters by mid-2014. By the end of 2016, it counted five formal branches. At least a dozen groups worldwide have coordinated with al-Qaeda at some point, albeit in varying degrees.[20]

Strategy

Al-Qaeda's core strategy has been progressive destabilization in phases. It has focused on achieving long-term objectives in a controlled, pragmatic way. Its goals have focused on building strength across multiple countries, gathering support from local communities, and gaining the ability to operate openly. It is playing a longer game in Syria, Iraq, and other conflict zones.

Al-Qaeda seeks to establish a global caliphate, but only as an eventual goal. In the 2000s, al-Qaeda affiliates proposed creating emirates in Yemen and Iraq as building blocks for a future caliphate. Bin Laden even endorsed the statehood bid of the Islamic State of Iraq in 2007. But he later cautioned that the time was not right and that these statelets were likely to fail. "If our state is not supported by the proper foundations . . . the enemy will easily destroy it," bin Laden wrote in 2010.[21] Controlling territory has been less important to al-Qaeda's short-term strategy than it has been for ISIS. Al-Qaeda affiliates have at times held land, sometimes in defiance of al-Qaeda central command. But they have also withdrawn—in Mali, Somalia, Yemen, and even Afghanistan—when more powerful armies or militias took it from them.

Like ISIS, al-Qaeda has had little tolerance for Shiites and other minorities, who have no place in its narrow worldview. But it views the United States and the West as greater enemies. Its leadership has warned that mass sectarian killings detract from its strategy of restraint and could alienate Muslims. In 2005, Zawahiri, then al-Qaeda's second-in-command, warned Zarqawi that attacks by al-Qaeda in Iraq on Shiite civilians "won't be acceptable to the Muslim populace, no matter how much you have tried to explain it."[22]

Zawahiri's position was reinforced when ISI was pushed back between 2007 and 2011. He tried to reassert control by issuing "General Guidelines for Jihad" in 2013 and calling for a single "united" jihad. In 2014, al-Qaeda tried to capitalize on ISIS's brutality by portraying itself as the more rational jihadist actor. It continues to propagate this narrative. Compared to the Islamic State, al-Qaeda uses violence in a way that is more politically calculated.

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Al-Qaeda appears to recognize that its brand is toxic—even among other jihadists. It has been willing to play from a distance with affiliates. It dominated jihadist coalitions in Libya that were not formal affiliates, including the Benghazi Revolutionary Shura Council and the Derna Mujahideen Shura Council. In Tunisia, Ansar al-Sharia espoused al-Qaeda's ideology but denied organizational links.

Jabhat Fateh al-Sham in Syria (originally known as the Nusra Front) is the most successful example of an al-Qaeda affiliate. Formed in 2011, and announced formally in 2012, it quickly became al-Qaeda's strongest affiliate and one of the most powerful rebel groups in Syria. In 2016, the group rebranded itself as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and claimed to have no direct ties to external groups, even though it still shared al-Qaeda's ideology and strategy—and still liaised with it.

Al-Qaeda's ambitions in Syria are not limited to JFS. It has attempted to influence other Syrian opposition movements and militias, such as Ahrar al-Sham and others under the Jaysh al-Fatah moniker. Al-Qaeda has tried to use them to popularize the jihadist worldview

Al-Qaeda's *Inspire* magazine on Jerusalem's al-Aqsa Mosque. Image from Al-Malahem Media.

and eventually unite the jihad behind a common vision, though not necessarily a common organization.

Future

There are at least four evolutionary paths for al-Qaeda. First, al-Qaeda's model is likely to endure for many years, albeit in different forms. It was the first global jihadist movement and, as such, has been the most strategically and structurally robust.

There are at least four evolutionary paths for al-Qaeda. First, al-Qaeda's model is likely to endure for many years, albeit in different forms. It was the first global jihadist movement and, as such, has been the most strategically and structurally robust. U.S. airstrikes have continued to pick off senior leaders, but al-Qaeda Central has repeatedly demonstrated the ability to fill the holes and adapt. In the November 2016 issue of *Inspire*, its online magazine in English, al-Qaeda addressed recent loses in U.S. airstrikes:

"By the killing of our brothers, we become more committed to their principles, and—by God's Will—we will continue clinging to the same course of jihad and da'wa, illuminated by their blood and paved by their torn limbs," it vowed.

> A light illuminating the path for us, and a fire that stirs us up to take revenge from the infidel nations and heads of criminals. We will never enjoy our life till we clean up our land from all oppressive infidels, till the last American soldier get[s] out from the Islamic countries and till we pull out the roots of the last American base from our wounded lands from Rabat to Jakarta.[23]

Second, al-Qaeda Central is likely to continue building alliances, embedding locally, and exploiting instability on three continents. Its strategy of staying out of the spotlight helps it endure and compete with ISIS's brand, which has emphasized the need for quick territorial gains. In the short term, al-Qaeda is likely to continue adjusting to political realities and public perception on the ground, even as its long-term goal does not differ from the Islamic State's.

Syria has been a model. In 2015, Zawahiri instructed the Nusra Front leader to

> better integrate his movement within the Syrian revolution and its people; to coordinate more closely with all Islamic groups on the ground; to contribute towards the establishment of a Syria-wide Sharia judicial court system; to use strategic areas of the country to build a sustainable Al-Qaeda power base; and to cease any activity linked to attacking the West.[24]

Instability in the Middle East is unlikely to abate anytime soon, and al-Qaeda may be able to replicate its model in Syria in other parts of the region over the next five to ten years.

Third, al-Qaeda's deliberate decentralization has limits. Al-Qaeda risks ceding control over the direction or actions of local armed groups. It could also risk losing control over its core identity in mergers with local groups and integration into local societies. It has made concessions to gain and sustain their support. The inherent tension—between al-Qaeda's global agenda and the local focus of key allies—could also dilute the movement over time. The gradual erosion of command authority could also produce small and more radical splinter groups. A bigger question is whether this strategy can actually deliver a state.

Fourth, al-Qaeda is likely to continue its terror campaign. It faces greater physical and logistical challenges today in orchestrating terrorist spectaculars. But its imagination knows no limits. Bin Ladenism survived bin Laden. As al-Qaeda stipulated in its 2013 "General Guidelines for Jihad":

> The purpose of targeting America is to exhaust her and bleed her to death, so that it meets the fate of the former Soviet Union and collapses under its own weight as a result of its military, human, and financial losses. Consequently, its grip on our lands will weaken and its allies will begin to fall one after another.[25]

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List of Affiliates

Al-Qaeda has five affiliates. All are insurgent or traditional terrorist groups that have engaged in mass-casualty attacks in their theaters of operation. They follow the statements of al-Qaeda Central, under Ayman al-Zawahiri, but implement a locally tailored strategy.

- **Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula** (AQAP)—Yemen. Formed after the merger of the Saudi and Yemeni branches of al-Qaeda, which dates back to the 1990s; announced in January 2009.[26]
- **Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb** (AQIM)—North Africa and Sahel (Algeria). Originally formed as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in 1998; publicly recognized as an al-Qaeda affiliate in September 2006.[27]
- **Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent** (AQIS)—South Asia. Formed in September 2014 from the merger of more than eleven jihadist groups in Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan;[28] aligned with al-Qaeda since its creation.
- **Al-Shabaab**—East Africa (Somalia). Formed in 2006 after breaking away from the Islamic Courts Union;[29] pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda in 2009 and formally recognized by al-Qaeda as an affiliate in 2012.
- **Jabhat Fateh al-Sham** (JFS)—Syria. Originally emerged in January 2012 as Jabhat al-Nusra; pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda in April 2013 and rebranded itself in mid-2016, claiming to no longer be an affiliate.[30]

Whither Jabhat Fateh al-Sham?

By 2016, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham in Syria (originally known as the Nusra Front) was al-Qaeda's most successful franchise. Its name means Front for the Conquest of Sham (an

Jabhat Fateh al-Sham leader Muhammad al-Julani. Image from 2016 video by Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.

area that covers more than Syria). It was formally announced in 2012, but it had roots in earlier incarnations as both al-Qaeda in Iraq (2004–06) and the Islamic State of Iraq (2006–13). It grew out of the Islamic State of Iraq's decision, in mid-2011, to send seven fighters to Syria to provide logistical support for jihadists moving from Syria to Iraq.[31] The Nusra Front was established in secret in October 2011. It was announced publicly in January 2012, after the fighters had gained sufficient logistical support inside Syria. Led by Abu Muhammad al-Julani, it quickly became one of the most active rebel groups in Syria.

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Nusra formally split from the Islamic State of Iraq in April 2013, largely over strategy. Julani reportedly refused to carry out operations ordered by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, then the ISI leader.[32] Baghdadi countered by trying to unite the two groups, under an umbrella that he renamed the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Julani opted instead to break away and reaffirm allegiance to al-Qaeda.[33] Nusra and ISIS then began competing militarily for the same turf across Syria and in Lebanon's Qalamoun Mountains.

JFS's goal does not differ from the Islamic State's, according to a leaked tape of Julani discussing its future intentions.[34] In 2014, he said that the Nusra Front—as it was then still known—would build a state based on God's "laws in every sense of the word, without compromise, complacency, equivocation, or circumvention."

By the end of 2016, JFS had up to an estimated 10,000 fighters.[35] Foreigners from Russia, Europe, and elsewhere in the Middle East made up at least 30 percent of its ranks.[36] It attracted more foreign fighters than any Syrian rebel group except ISIS.

In July 2016, the Nusra Front announced it would no longer maintain relations with groups outside Syria—at least on paper. It rebranded itself as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. Al-Qaeda fully concurred in the well-orchestrated move.

"Organizations and groups should be a tool for unity and mobilization, not division and confrontation," al-Qaeda's supreme deputy leader, Ahmed Hassan Abu al-Khair, said in a statement:

> We direct Jabhat al Nusra's central command to move forward in a way that preserves the interests of Islam and Muslims and protect[s] the jihad of the people of Syria, and we urge it to take the necessary steps in that direction. We have taken this step and call on the jihadist factions in Syria to unite around what pleases God.[37]

The name change allowed the group to maintain a relationship with al-Qaeda informally, while disavowing formal linkage when strategically convenient, and especially when it sought collaboration with groups wary of the al-Qaeda label. The shift also positioned Julani to move forward in negotiations with other opposition groups that had opposed the Nusra Front's formal ties to al-Qaeda. The talks, however, ultimately failed.

Strategy

Since 2012, JFS has applied al-Qaeda's strategy of restraint in developing alliances with other armed groups and local populations. It has two near-term goals: overthrowing Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and establishing the Salafi version of an Islamic state in Syria.[38]

By the end of 2016, JFS did not control a single piece of territory—by itself. It shared power with other Sunni opposition groups in northern Syria. At times it downplayed its extremist worldview to facilitate alliances with rebel groups dedicated to overthrowing Assad.[39] It interacted with other Islamist groups, such as Ahrar al-Sham, as well as militias under the Free Syrian Army umbrella, a loose coalition of nationalist or non-Salafi Islamists.

JFS has subjugated and forcibly tried to convert Christians and Druze. But it has used less sectarian rhetoric than ISIS.[40] It has also refrained from attacks on many (but not all) fellow Muslims to avoid alienating potential allies. In its propaganda, it has advocated creating an Islamic state with the consensus of other Islamist groups.[41]

JFS has managed to gain the support—or at least tolerance—of Syrians who may not share al-Qaeda's global vision. It attracted recruits by continuing to fight the Assad regime even during ceasefires. It drew thousands of fighters between February and May 2016,

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Jabhat Fateh al-Sham leader Muhammad al-Julani and commanders. Photograph by Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.

including during the brief ceasefire. JFS has also played off the perception among Syrians that the West is indifferent to their suffering.

JFS has been collaborative in its approach to governance.[42] It has coordinated with allies, while slowly manipulating civilians and other armed groups to accept its growing authority. It has focused on providing basic services, like food, water, and electricity, before attempting to govern more overtly. It has slowly infiltrated rebel institutions, replacing local leaders with JFS members and allies. It has also established sharia courts in the territory in which it operates—to build the reality of an emirate on the ground as a precursor to declaring one.

Future

JFS has become one of the most powerful rebel groups in Syria. It has demonstrated an ability to evaluate and adapt to changing conditions on the ground, which could contribute to its longevity. It has negotiated cooperation with other armed opposition groups in the north. Four future scenarios are possible.

First is the status quo, which means JFS remains a powerful actor in Syria but does not expand further politically or form major new alliances. It would retain its safe haven.

Second, JFS's gradual, pragmatic approach becomes more successful. Its fighters could merge with other groups and help al-Qaeda dominate Syria's armed opposition. That expansion could provide an alternative operating base for al-Qaeda's senior leaders as well as closer access to targets in Europe.[43] JFS puts al-Qaeda some 2,000 miles closer to Europe than it was in South Asia.

Third, JFS's mergers—notably with non-jihadi groups—could impact its ideological rigidity over time. A coalition could constrain extremists in JFS who share al-Qaeda's global vision, although this seems less likely than other scenarios. In 2015, Julani pledged to share power in the northern city of Idlib. "We are not looking to rule the city . . . alone without others. Consultation is the best system of governance," he said.[44] Julani also pledged to consult with allies after the war's end about "establishing an Islamic state."[45]

The fourth scenario is conflict between JFS and other armed groups if collaboration unravels. In that scenario, JFS could become even more extremist and isolated. This option could make JFS more dangerous in the immediate term by making its operations, possibly including those in the West, less constrained.

JFS also faces internal fracturing, which could present future challenges. The decision to formally split from al-Qaeda was not unanimous. Several senior Shura Council members and military commanders—some powerful within the organization—did not sign up for the rebranding of the Nusra Front as JFS.

The Drivers

Jihadism has always been produced by a confluence of factors. Some individuals are motivated to join jihadist movements by ideology, the desire for meaning and belonging, anger at the West, even wanderlust. Other conditions enable jihadism to flourish.

Jihadism has always been produced by a confluence of factors. Some individuals are motivated to join jihadist movements by ideology, the desire for meaning and belonging, anger at the West, even wanderlust. Other conditions enable jihadism to flourish. They include the volatile mix of shifting demographics, notably a surge of youth, higher literacy, and greater social aspirations intersecting with economic woes, growing unemployment, and deepening political malaise or disillusionment. The mix of personal motives and enabling conditions has become even more combustible since the Arab uprisings of 2011. These drivers of extremism are rampant in the Middle East. They differ in local contexts. Six enabling conditions are particularly pivotal today.

Scene from postrevolution Tunis, Tunisia. Photograph licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivs 2.0 Generic (CC BY-ND 2.0), https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/2.0/legalcode by Stefan de Vries, Flickr.

The Frailty of States

The first condition driving jihadism is the frailty of states across the Middle East and North Africa. Many states are weaker than they were six years ago. Four have either collapsed or come close. Others are so frayed that their long-term sustainability is in doubt. The challenges are less over democracy than over the state's ability to deliver basic services, measured by factors such as infant mortality rates, the length of time the electricity stays on, levels of available education, and jobs.

In the early twenty-first century, bad governance is widespread in the region; rampant instability has allowed extremist movements to embed politically and then exploit physically. The correlation is evident in the 2016 Fragile States Index: the four countries that deteriorated the most over the previous decade were Libya, Syria, Mali, and Yemen.[46]

Since the Arab uprisings in 2011, extremist groups such al-Qaeda and ISIS have exploited the failure of traditional states to advance their agendas. As nation-states fray, people across the region are retreating to more basic forms of identity, including sect, ethnicity, or tribe. Religious and sectarian discourse is central to the jihadi narrative. Extremist groups have presented themselves as the Sunni vanguard (or protectors) against Shiites, Alawites, Christians, and Jews.

In desperation, some countries have ceded control of governance or security to groups that do not necessarily serve long-term national interests, as Baghdad did in tapping both tribes and militias to provide security. Regionwide, similar trends have produced unintended consequences. The result has often been the rise of a political periphery, which is more dynamic or energetic than traditional centers of power in Damascus, Baghdad, or Cairo. Over the next decade, groups operating on the periphery could become even more important.

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Traditional Arab powers face their own internal crises, which jihadis may try to exploit to challenge regimes, redefine the regional order, and grow their ranks. Virtually every type of government—including the new democracy in Tunisia, the military-based government in Egypt, the fragile republic in Iraq, and dynastic rule in the Gulf—is vulnerable.

Traditional Arab powers face their own internal crises, which jihadis may try to exploit to challenge regimes, redefine the regional order, and grow their ranks. Virtually every type of government—including the new democracy in Tunisia, the military-based government in Egypt, the fragile republic in Iraq, and dynastic rule in the Gulf—is vulnerable. Two governments—in Saudi Arabia and Egypt—exemplify the dangers.

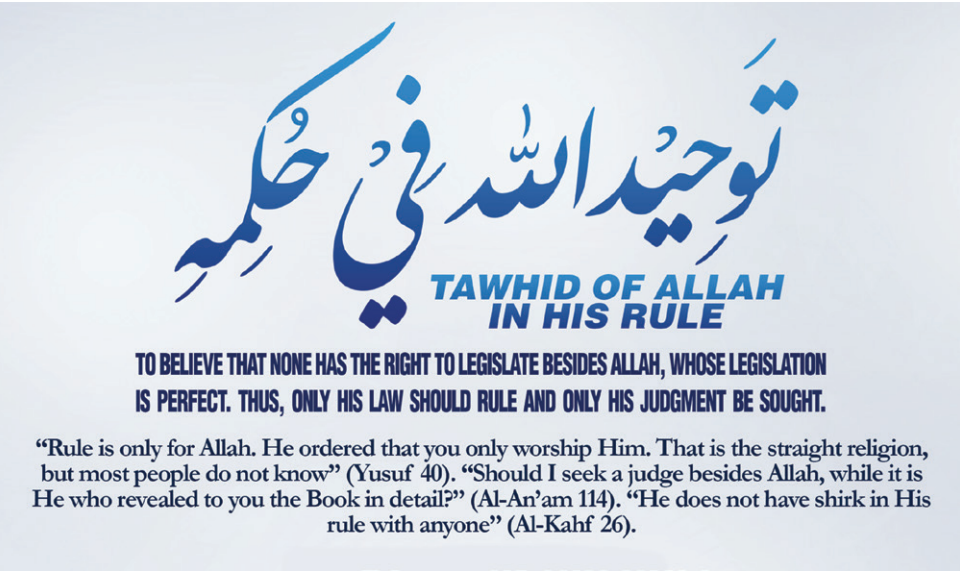
Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam, is going through an awkward transition, politically and economically, compounded by a costly war in Yemen. In the face of low oil prices, Riyadh is trying to transition away from a rentier economy, which accounts for 92 percent of revenues, under its ambitious "Vision 2030" reform plan.[47] The government is attempting to curtail its expensive cradle-to-grave welfare system at a time when 30 percent of its young are unemployed and two-thirds of its population is under 30.[48]

Young Saudis have contributed large numbers to all three generations of jihadis—at least 2,500 to the Islamic State and other violent extremist groups in Iraq and Syria, the second-largest number after Tunisia. The kingdom has also long been a patron of more fragile Arab countries; but its woes may limit its largesse and impact allies.

Egypt accounts for one-quarter of the Arab world's almost 400 million people. It is a political trendsetter for the region. But it too suffers from a youth bulge and deepening economic woes after the Tahrir Square uprising in 2011, a military coup, and the election of former field marshal Abdel Fattah el Sisi as president in 2014.

Nearly a third of Egypt's youth is unemployed; some 60 percent of its 94 million people are under 30 years old.[49] Social unrest is mounting. Egypt was shaken by more than 1,100 labor protests last year.[50] It witnessed 500 more in the first four months of 2016.[51] Egypt has spawned key ideologues, such as Sayyid Qutb, and extremist movements, from Islamic Jihad in the 1980s and 1990s to Sinai Province today.

Egyptians have figured in all three generations of jihadis. The mastermind of the 9/11 attacks, Mohamed Atta, was Egyptian. Al-Qaeda is now headed by an Egyptian physician. For almost six years, Egyptian Abu Hamza al-Muhajir was the deputy in early iterations of the Islamic State. Up to a thousand Egyptians have joined the jihad in Iraq and Syria;



ISIS's *Rumiyah* magazine on Islamic law. Image from Al-Hayat Media Center.

ISIS's *Rumiyah* magazine on Islamic law. Image from Al-Hayat Media Center.

another thousand are estimated to be members of the Sinai Province, a branch of ISIS. Egyptians also fought with branches of the Islamic State and al-Qaeda in neighboring Libya.

Ideological Upheaval

The second condition enabling jihadism is a deep ideological upheaval. Opposition across the region has been defined more and more by religion because of the failure of autocratic regimes and secular ideologies, from Arab nationalism to the Baathist socialism of Syria and Iraq. Jihadism, with its utopian goals, is an alternative—even for those who are not particularly religious.

Salafism became one of the most dynamic currents in the Middle East. The fastest-moving current is "jihadi Salafism" (al-Salafiyya al-Jihadiyya), a hybrid that married Salafism with military jihad by nonstate actors. Salafism preaches a return to the way of life in the seventh century, when the faith was founded, and emulation of the first three generations of Muslims (the Salaf, or pious predecessors of today's Muslims). It is defined by intolerance of competing theological formulations, such as Shiism.

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Saudi Arabia has been the heartland of Salafism, in the form of what is often today called Wahhabism. Many Salafis were traditionally "quietist"—meaning they skirted mainstream politics, although Wahhabism in the eighteenth century offered precedents for modern-day jihadi violence.

Jihadi Salafism took form in the 1990s, when a Saudi version of Salafism merged with the revolutionary and jihad-oriented ideology from Egypt that is associated with the late Sayyid Qutb and his radical heirs. The result is a movement that puts a premium on the political requirement of jihad and the theological purity of Salafism.

Jihadism is about using precepts of the faith to fight for a utopian Islamic state on earth. Jihadism is part of the broader Islamist trend, but it is distinguished by its firm belief that

violence is the only way to establish that utopian state. Jihadi Salafism is now more energetic than Islamism. It has also challenged traditional Islamic authority in ways that conservatives at Al-Azhar University, one of the oldest institutions of learning in the Muslim world, have not.

Two broad categories of people join ISIS, al-Qaeda, and their affiliates: One group includes religious radicals who adhere to jihadi ideologies and narratives. They have been part of the fluid jihadi Salafist movement. The other includes people who may not fully subscribe to a puritanical religious ideology but nonetheless believe in the political elements of that ideology. Their motives are often to repel regional and international influence. To them, the Muslim Brotherhood has failed; they believe peaceful forms of political Islam—or efforts to work within systems—have failed too.

In the future, jihadi Salafism is likely to increasingly draw Sunnis who feel victimized, marginalized, underrepresented, or excluded. Its promises are utopian; its supranational vision circumvents both formal structures like central governments and traditional identities like tribe, clan, or town.

In the future, jihadi Salafism is likely to increasingly draw Sunnis who feel victimized, marginalized, underrepresented, or excluded. Its promises are utopian; its supranational vision circumvents both formal structures like central governments and traditional identities like tribe, clan, or town. It fosters the illusion of an "imagined community" that will create a new homeland for people who have suffered displacement, dislocation, disillusionment, or discrimination. Its absolutist outlook and angry defiance virtually ensure confrontation and militancy. Its claim to an authentic and originalist narrative make it more compelling and more flexible in adapting to future conditions, complicating efforts to counter it.

Conflict Zones

A third enabling condition of jihadism is an environment with preexisting violence. There is a synergy between jihadism and violence, whether perpetrated by repressive regimes, militia rivalries, terrorist groups, sectarian differences, tribal tensions, criminal organizations, or foreign intervention. Jihadism exploits local tensions; it fuels and is in turned fueled by these tensions.

Violence can foster the rise of extremist groups by radicalizing organizations and individuals exposed to it. Jihadism tends to surge during periods of political tension or violence.

Destruction in Homs, Syria. Photograph by bwb-studio, iStock by Getty Images.

The emergence of strong jihadist movements, whether the Islamic State or al-Qaeda, is therefore usually predictable.

There are abundant examples where war zones provided jihadi groups with permissive environments to proselytize and recruit: Afghanistan in the 1980s; Algeria, Bosnia, and Chechnya in the 1990s; Iraq, Somalia, and Yemen in the 2000s; Syria, Libya, and Mali today. Conflict also tends to marginalize moderate political alternatives; polarization gives jihadists an advantage.

In Syria, the rise of jihadist organizations was predictable given its history. Islamist groups have opposed the Syrian government for half a century, since the rise of the secular Baath Party in 1963 and the Assad dynasty in 1970. Most Islamist opposition was banned, often brutally; in 1982 tens of thousands of Muslim Brotherhood activists were massacred in Hama. Syria was ripe for the emergence of jihadist groups following the 2011 Arab uprising; the war in neighboring Iraq facilitated their development.

The government's reaction to the protests encouraged and accelerated the growth of jihadism. As a 2016 International Crisis Group report concluded, its response included "deliberate radicalization of the crisis through cruel, publicized violence; divisive sectarian discourse, pitting the ruling Alawite and other minorities against the Sunni majority; escalating collective punishment that destroyed cities and helped displace millions; and [the] release of jailed radicals and targeting of more pragmatic opposition factions."[52]

Mali and Yemen are other countries where jihadists have exploited an existing conflict to further their own goals. In 2012, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb tapped into the political turmoil in northern Mali and worked with local Tuareg separatists to seize major cities, including Timbuktu. In 2011 and 2015, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula took advantage of Yemen's chaos to capture territory in the south.

In the future, jihadism is likely to grow because violence sparked by a host of local factors shows no signs of abating, especially in areas of weak or deteriorating governments. A basic rule of thumb: the more violence there is, the more jihadi violence there will be. Jihadi movements will continue to be fueled until the local flashpoints sparking violence are resolved. At the same time, the character of jihadism is likely to evolve as local groups adapt it to fit their needs.

A basic rule of thumb: the more violence there is, the more jihadi violence there will be. Jihadi movements will continue to be fueled until the local flashpoints sparking violence are resolved.

Foreign Intervention

A fourth condition enabling jihadism is foreign intervention that changes or challenges the political status quo. Such intervention can spark—and then spur—jihadism. Several of the most important turning points in the rise of jihadi groups have involved foreign intervention. Among the biggest:

- **The 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.** The Soviet occupation galvanized Muslims across the Islamic world to fight a superpower. It also fostered the emergence of a whole new form of jihadism, reflected in the historic treatise "Defense of the Muslim Lands" by Palestinian ideologue Abdullah Yusuf Azzam.[53] Azzam argued that all Muslims were compelled to liberate their lands occupied by foreign powers. His ideas redefined jihadism in the early 1980s, when he mentored Osama bin Laden. In 1984, bin Laden financed Azzam's establishment of a Services Office in Peshawar, Pakistan, to support Arab fighters in Afghanistan.[54] The mobilization of American, Saudi, and Pakistani support to the Afghan mujahideen fighting the Soviets further enabled the new jihadism.

- **1990–91 Gulf War.** After Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait, the United States and its allies deployed more than a half million troops in the Persian Gulf, mainly in Saudi Arabia. Bin Laden wanted to marshal Arab veterans of the Afghan jihad to defend Saudi Arabia from further aggression by Saddam Hussein, but the kingdom ignored his plan. After a half million Western forces deployed in the birthplace of Islam, led by the United States, bin Laden condemned the royal family as well as the United States. The reaction seeded al-Qaeda.[55]
- **2003 U.S. invasion in Iraq.** The U.S. decision to oust Saddam Hussein, and then keep tens of thousands of troops to prop up a new ally in Baghdad, drew extremists to a new affiliate, al-Qaeda in Iraq. It pledged to expel the world's mightiest military from the Middle East. This sequence of events in turn spurred an insurgency and the evolution of Sunni extremism in uneven phases. It fostered the conditions—aggravated by the Iraqi government's failure to develop a power-sharing formula to bring Sunnis into government—that eventually produced the Islamic State caliphate, carved from large chunks of Iraq and Syria.

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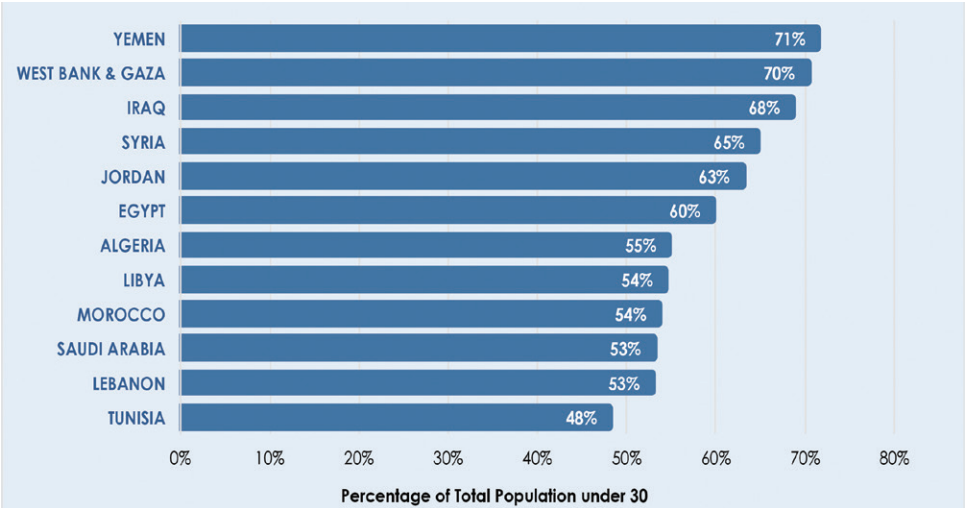
In the future, the jihadist agenda is likely to be heavily defined by where and how—and how much—the outside world intrudes. The larger the intervention, especially by the West, the greater the reaction. The formula applies whether the engagement is military or diplomatic. As in the past, jihadi groups are likely to target any foreign troops or military installations; they are likely to confront governments that are strongly backed by the West. Ironically, they will also seek to exploit the perception of Western indifference—as in the case of Syria—to recruit followers and feed their own narrative as an alternative. Perceptions will complicate policy options.

Socioeconomic Factors

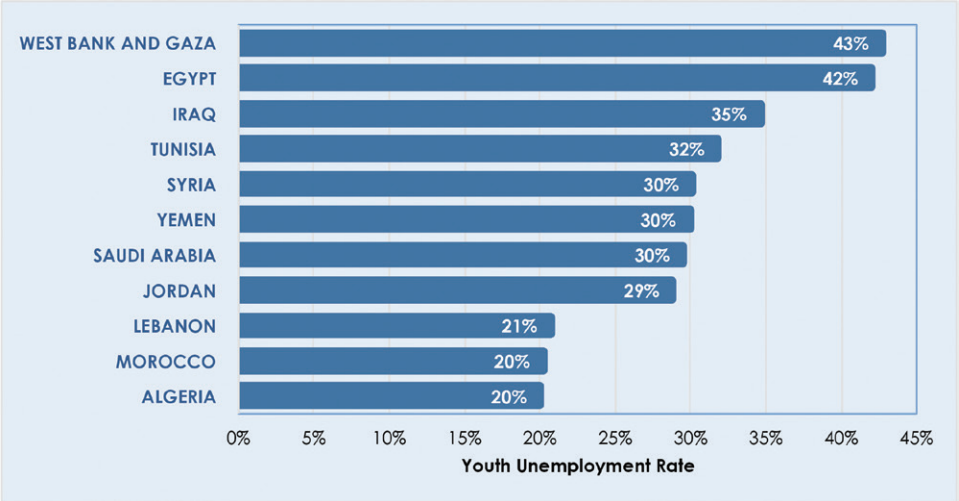
A fifth enabling condition concerns the complex confluence of factors that drives individuals to join a jihadist organization. Academic research has not found a causal relationship between

Figure 2. Population under 30 in the Middle East and North Africa



Source: World Bank, Health and Nutrition Population Statistics database, 2015.

Figure 3. Youth Unemployment in the Middle East and North Africa (ages 15–24)



Source: International Labour Organization estimates from 2014, as reported in World Bank, World Development Indicators database.

socioeconomic indicators and the rise of extremism. But conditions on the ground help create a more permissive operating environment for extremist groups. Recruiters prey on underlying grievances to rope recruits into radical causes.

Shifting demographics and youth unemployment play a role. In 2011, the year of the Arab uprisings, the Middle East and North Africa region had the world's youngest population, after sub-Saharan Africa. Half the population was under age 25, according to the Population Reference Bureau.[56] By 2015, the world's highest youth unemployment rates were in areas where jihadism had taken the deepest root—more than 28 percent in the Middle East and more than 30 percent in North Africa, the International Labour Organization reported.[57]

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Unemployment and civil war go hand in hand, although it's not clear that unemployment actually *causes* civil war. Sometimes unemployment is a societal flashpoint that contributes to civil war, while sometimes civil war produces greater unemployment.

Tunisia reflects a chronic version of the problem: Tunisian education is seriously out of step with the country's economy, which is geared towards people with secondary education or less. In 1980, Tunisians averaged only two years of schooling, according to the United Nations.[58] By 2000, the average more than doubled to 4.8 years of schooling. But nearly half of all jobs created between 2000 and 2010 were still concentrated in low-productivity sectors, according to the World Bank.[59]

Education has since improved even further due to government investment and free university tuition for anyone who passes an entrance exam. In 2011, Tunisia was spending 7.2 percent of its gross domestic product on education—more than any European or North American country except for Denmark and Iceland.[60] By 2010, Tunisians averaged 6.5 years of education. At the time of the Jasmine Revolution, in 2011, more than half of Tunisia's youth entering the job market—30,000 to 40,000 individuals—were college educated.[61] But unemployment among graduates was 32 percent. In 2015, unemployment among all youth between ages 15 and 24 was nearly 40 percent.[62]

Youth in Tunisia. Photograph © 2016 by Robin Wright.

Among the young, discontent and disillusionment have been compounded by the sense of social injustice.

Among the young, discontent and disillusionment have been compounded by the sense of social injustice. The Arab uprising in 2011 was launched by the protest of a street vendor in Sidi Bouzid after a policewoman confiscated his produce because he refused to pay yet another bribe. She demanded seven dollars, his average daily earnings. When attempts to get redress were repeatedly spurned, he set himself on fire in front of the governor's office.

Within a month, the groundswell of public anger forced a longtime dictator from power. A year later, young men in Sidi Bouzid heralded more freedom, but far fewer jobs.[63] In 2014, the lowest voter turnout for the first democratic presidential election in Tunisian history was among the young. The lowest turnout of any city was in Sidi Bouzid.

The youth bulge has proven critical in cultivating recruits for jihadist organizations. As Tunisia marked the fifth anniversary of its uprising, at least 6,000 Tunisians had departed for Syria or Iraq to join extremist movements—the highest number of foreign fighters from any country. Another 1,000 Tunisians went to Libya. The government reported that another 9,000 had been prevented from leaving the country.[64]

In the future, jihadist groups will try to further exploit socioeconomic grievances. Many governments in the Middle East and North Africa have been unable to adequately improve the quality of life, employment, or sense of opportunity; this situation may not change significantly anytime soon. A region that long depended on either oil revenue or oil-fueled aid is not likely to have sufficient resources to respond to growing public demands or needs.

Instability also hurts tourism, a primary source of income. And in a wobbly global economy, sources of international aid are also limited. "A combination of civil wars and refugee inflows, terrorist attacks, cheap oil, and subdued global economic recovery, is expected to keep average growth in the MENA [Middle East and North Africa] region around 3 percent in 2016," the World Bank projected in April 2016.[65]

The flow of refugees, a humanitarian crisis unprecedented since World War II, has further undermined stability in at least four countries. By the end of 2016, Turkey had

Living off a trash dump in Erbil, Iraq. Photograph © 2016 by Robin Wright.

taken in 2.7 million Syrians. Lebanon had absorbed more than 1 million, accounting for roughly one-quarter of its population. More than 650,000 Syrians had fled to Jordan, already home to 700,000 Palestinian and Iraqi refugees. And a quarter million Syrians went to Iraq, which was already groaning under the burden of 3.3 million of its own displaced people.[66]

ISIS has exploited the refugee crisis to infiltrate jihadis through neighboring countries as well as to the West—and the number of refugees is likely to grow, with no end in sight to the conflicts that spawned them. Deteriorating conditions and limited alternatives could create a fertile climate for jihadi recruitment.

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Technology

A sixth enabling condition of jihadism is access to technology, which has provided advantages earlier movements did not have. Extremist ideologies have always spread through social contact, whether physical or virtual. Terrorism was internationalized in the late 1960s and 1970s by advances in transportation and communications. In the twenty-first century, the huge leap in technology—through social media—has altered traditional politics by circumventing government media and control of physical space. Technology has multiplied ways to convey messages and mobilize. It has generated momentum on the ground and skewed perceptions of power globally.

Social media has also often fostered extremist voices who have had less access to large audiences in the past. Even fringe extremists can now share their identity with people they did not know existed 20 or 40 years ago. They can find each other quickly to take collective action. Incrementally, they can create a narrative for the masses.

Social media was an important tool—supplementing local networks and face-to-face content—in luring foreign fighters into Syria and Iraq by the tens of thousands. It will be a

critical survivor tool if the Islamic State deteriorates or dissolves. It has also been more subtly exploited to enable al-Qaeda's affiliates, especially since bin Laden's death.

However, terrorist groups also decline when they can't communicate with their fighters. In the 1990s, al-Qaeda failed in Somalia partly because of problems with bad infrastructure and clan politics, but also because it couldn't effectively communicate instructions to its fighters. It had a poor sense of the battlefield and couldn't move around its men or supplies. In 2006 and 2007, al-Qaeda branches in Iraq had similar problems communicating with their fighters deployed on the periphery and, as a result, lost territory, position, and manpower.

The importance of social media is likely to intensify over the next decade as Internet penetration increases. In late 2016, the Internet had 53 percent penetration in the Middle East, 29 percent penetration in Africa as a whole, and 27 percent in South Asia.[67] More broadly, increasing access to new technologies will make it easier for jihadi groups to challenge state authority.

Policy Considerations

The Muslim world is in a deep state of flux. A confluence of trends—ideological, geostrategic, sectarian, demographic, economic, and social—will shape the future of jihadism. In crafting policies to deal with jihadi movements, the United States cannot fight terrorism by simply "fighting" terrorism.

The Muslim world is in a deep state of flux. A confluence of trends—ideological, geostrategic, sectarian, demographic, economic, and social—will shape the future of jihadism. In crafting policies to deal with jihadi movements, the United States and its allies face complex challenges. They cannot fight terrorism by simply "fighting" terrorism. Military means can disrupt, but they can't permanently dismantle or reverse a trend initially spawned by deep political discontent.

The policy options involve choices that may contradict one another, allies who have conflicting priorities, and the potential for unintended, unforeseen, and costly consequences. The course charted will involve policy considerations far beyond the fate of specific movements or individual countries.

Collaboration

The United States cannot protect its interests in the region by acting alone. Combatting terrorism is costly in human capital and financial resources. Since the 1980s, confronting extremism has increasingly relied on international cooperation and coalitions—both with regional and international allies. But sustaining partnerships often involves compromises; each country has its own priorities, political realities, and strategies for protecting its interests. These can conflict.

Brokering common approaches—and building the counterterrorism capacity of partners—can get sticky. Allies have used the terrorist threat (and surely will again) to gain political support, financial resources, military equipment, or intelligence to address tangential issues that may not always be in U.S. interests.

Local Partners

To be credible, the United States will need legitimate local political partners to take the lead—politically and militarily—in stemming extremism. Those partners will need to have broad national support and security forces that are capable and loyal. The U.S. experience in Iraq between 2003 and 2011 demonstrated the dangers of supporting a leader who alienated a significant sector of society. It also showed that training and arming thousands of regular troops does not necessarily ensure a reliable or competent local partner.

Political Solutions

Terrorism is an inherently political form of violence. Counterterrorism is therefore an inherently political endeavor as well. Any counterterrorism program should be sensitive to public opinion at home, in the theater of terror, and in the wider world. Marginalizing extremism requires creating a political environment in which jihadism has less and less appeal over time. In Iraq, for example, the military has made major headway against ISIS, but the government has not brokered a basic power-sharing agreement among the country's diverse Sunni, Shiite, Kurdish, and other communities in the thirteen years since the fall of Saddam Hussein. The military campaign has repeatedly been out of sync with a political resolution. The success of the military surge in 2007 that marginalized al-Qaeda in Iraq was followed by a botched political program that only further alienated Sunnis and led to the emergence of a reinvigorated ISIS. Creating stability ultimately requires political and military simultaneity.

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Measured Response

Any policy should be wary of taking the bait from extremists. ISIS and al-Qaeda have both deliberately tried to lure the United States into a wider military confrontation—on their turf. Terrorists historically have tried to provoke adversaries into actions that are costly, messy, deadly, and, in the long-term, ineffective. Successful provocations further polarize societies, in turn helping jihadi movements recruit and rally wider support for their violent campaigns.

The Sectarian Divide

Across the Middle East, long-standing tensions between Sunnis and Shiites have deepened—in escalating phases—over the past four decades. Extremism has emerged within both sects;

ISIS fighters in Raqqa, Syria. Photograph by stringer, Reuters. © 2014 Reuters; used with permission.

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it has fed off and fueled their differences. The split plays out in three Middle East conflicts: In Iraq, Sunni discontents and extremists are pitted against the Shiite-led government in Baghdad. In Syria, Sunni rebels are fighting an Alawite government propped up by Shiites from Lebanon's Hezbollah militia and Iran. In Yemen, Zaydi Shiite rebels, the Houthis, are fighting a Sunni-majority government in a conflict that has drawn in Gulf countries on both sides.

Any policy designed to minimize extremism should address—and try to help defuse—sectarian tensions. It may also require some degree of balance so that it does not fuel a sense of vulnerability among sects—or others that emerge in their wake.

In some countries, such as Iraq, the United States underestimated the discontent among Sunnis, who account for up to 90 percent of the Arab world's 400 million people and at least 85 percent of the Muslim population globally.[68] Significant numbers of Sunni fighters have joined extremist groups—including ISIS and al-Qaeda—to protect their identities and communities and not because they adhere to an extremist ideology.

Regional Rivalries

The Middle East is badly split by political competition among its major powers, which has complicated and hindered the collaboration necessary to defeat jihadi extremism—in both its military and political forms. One major rivalry pits predominantly Shiite Iran against Sunni Saudi Arabia. The countries' differences are not, however, over religious dogma; they center instead on rival quests for regional influence. Other fluctuating rivalries have divided Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Turkey and Iran, and Turkey and the Kurds. Some of these regional rivalries are strong undercurrents in conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. The United States will be unable to craft durable long-term policies to counter jihadi violence without navigating—and mitigating—the broader causes behind these rivalries.

Human Factors

Jihadism is most prevalent in countries with serious social discord. The United States will need to be sensitive to those problems in crafting a long-term strategy and allocating financial resources. The byproducts of conflict or prolonged instability can alter the environment in ways that play to the jihadist narrative. For example, the young are often the most traumatized in crisis. A generation of children whose life experience has been shaped by war and limited access to education is particularly vulnerable to recruitment by extremists.

Social dislocation is another issue that intersects with the growth of extremism. Four Middle East wars—in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen—have produced the largest displacement of human beings, both inside their countries and beyond their borders, since World War II. This has not only created a humanitarian crisis; it has destabilized the region. Migrants and refugees thrust into unfamiliar social contexts have been cut off from traditional modes of authority, whether tribes, local governments, or a former political establishment. With limited prospects for employment or social mobility, individuals who are unmoored look for an authority, a sense of purpose, and a way to escape their harsh circumstances. Any policy should seek to contain the spread of jihadism among wider sectors by addressing social stresses and challenges of survival.

Syrian refugees in Turkey. Photograph © 2016 by Robin Wright.

Prison Problem

One of the toughest challenges will be figuring out the fate of jihadis captured on the battlefield. Prisons in the region—Sednaya in Syria, Tora in Egypt, Abu Salim in Libya, Roumieh in Lebanon, al-Ha'ir in Saudi Arabia, and Mornaguia in Tunisia—have been incubators of extremism.

All the senior leaders of ISIS passed through U.S. detention centers, notably Camp Bucca, in Iraq—including the Islamic State's Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the top propagandist and foreign operations chief Abu Mohammad al-Adnani (who was killed in a U.S. airstrike in August 2016).[69] They went in as low-level detainees and then created cells, structures, and plans in prison critical to expanding their operations and impact once they were released. The detention centers were, effectively, "prison emirates." Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay have also been lightning rods for anti-American sentiment even among Muslims who reject extremism.

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Troubled Landscape

Jihadists exploit geography. Extremists like to operate in areas that provide cover or are less accessible, whether in dense civilian neighborhoods or remote safe havens. In crafting policy, the United States should pay particular attention to the "seams" of active conflicts—the peripheries, often ungoverned or unpatrolled, that are attractive to extremist groups as logistical waypoints.

For example, ISIS was able to gain a foothold in Sirte because the city was caught between Libya's rival governments based in Tripoli and Tobruk. The Middle East map has

many other potential blind spots that could be exploited by current or future extremist groups: parts of Jordan, the Sinai, southeastern and southwestern Tunisia, southwestern Libya, eastern Yemen, southern Algeria, and northern Nigeria. As ISIS loses territory, it has fall-back positions in Abu Kamal and al-Qa'im on the Syrian-Iraqi border and in Lebanon's Qalamoun Mountains bordering Syria. Places around the Mediterranean basin are the most problematic for Western interests due to their proximity to Europe.

Physical safe havens are increasingly complemented by virtual safe havens. Social media platforms, mobile technology, and encryption provide online spaces beyond the sight and reach of law enforcement, military, and intelligence organizations.

Domestic Fallout

Policy on foreign extremist movements should be conscious of repercussions and sensitivities at home. ISIS has been particularly adept at exploiting fractures in Western societies. It has appealed to marginalized Muslim communities in France, Belgium, and other European countries to join the jihad in Syria and Iraq or carry out attacks in Europe and the United States. Its propaganda specifically outlines a strategy to destroy peaceful coexistence within diverse societies. Increased hostility towards Muslims in the United States, including refugees fleeing wars in Muslim countries, could fuel radicalization or push those who are already radicalized to act violently.

Defining the Threat Landscape

In defining the threat, policy should also differentiate among disparate currents comingling within the jihadi milieu. Not all jihadi groups are the same in terms of goals, strategies, tactics, or willingness to collaborate. Not all jihadi groups remain static in their stated goals over time. One-size policy solutions do not fit all.

The United States has yet to develop a viable policy towards groups that do not explicitly seek to harm the United States but that embrace values, goals, and practices not in U.S. interests. Violence in war zones can complicate distinctions. The wide spectrum of extremist groups can defy simple or single categorization. Opposition groups employ the guerilla tactics of rebels and the violent practices of terrorists. Many groups increasingly fall into a middle gray zone, especially "country-first" jihadis. All jihads—in the end—are at least partly local.

Ahrar al-Sham, for example, espouses a jihadi Salafist worldview, but it claims to limit its fight to war against the Assad regime in Syria. It is one of the largest armed opposition groups in Syria and has working relationships with a wide variety of actors, ranging from the U.S.-backed Free Syrian Army to the former al-Qaeda branch Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. Its ties with Turkey and Qatar add another complication for the United States in determining its status. In the past, some U.S. officials considered Ahrar al-Sham a terrorist group, while others were willing to engage with the group to help broker a diplomatic end to Syria's war.

Terrorism, a type of warfare that dates to ancient times, will never be fully eradicated. In the twenty-first century it is an instrument of asymmetric warfare increasingly popular among nonstate actors, militias, and unethical governments. The threat to the U.S. homeland is real and persistent.

Policy Realism

Terrorism, a type of warfare that dates to ancient times, will never be fully eradicated. In the twenty-first century it is an instrument of asymmetric warfare increasingly popular among nonstate actors, militias, and unethical governments. The threat to the U.S. homeland is real

and persistent. But in the fifteen years between the 9/11 attacks and late 2016, fewer than 100 people have been killed as a result of jihadi terrorism inside the United States.[70] No amount of military manpower or financial resources will be able to prevent 100 percent of attacks—by any group domestic or foreign.

The Long View

Defeating jihadi extremism and preventing its return requires a long-term policy that not only eliminates fighters but also undermines the legitimacy of violence as a means of obtaining political ends. Eliminating an extremist group physically does not defang its ideology or change the underlying circumstances that allowed the group to gain traction in the first place. Reconstruction, rehabilitation, and particularly reconciliation are just as important as any military counterterrorism campaign in building societal resilience against the appeal of extremism. Failure to carry out these steps has been a recurrent problem.

After the Soviet Union's withdrawal in 1989, the outside world did little to rebuild Afghanistan, which descended into civil war. The Taliban seized power in the mid-1990s and offered refuge to al-Qaeda. In Iraq, the al-Qaeda franchise suffered serious setbacks between 2007 and 2011 as a result of the Sunni Awakening and the U.S. military surge. But Baghdad did little to alleviate the grievances of its Sunni minority, and its inaction contributed to the reemergence of ISIS.

The United States should also look at jihadist groups as increasingly mobile transnational movements. These groups do not think in terms of international boundaries. They are purposefully trying to alter the geographic status quo.

Future Jihads

The pace of change in the Middle East is unprecedented. So is the range of possible future jihadi threats. No single analytical framework or model suffices to predict the future. Anticipating the next conflict zone—and particularly the next phase of jihadi extremism—is difficult. Extremist organizations quickly morph and adapt tactics—often faster than large bureaucracies and major armies. The reality is that jihadis may always be one step ahead.

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Acknowledgments

This report is a collaboration by 20 experts on the Middle East, Islamic extremism, and jihadism who held a series of conferences between August and November 2016. "The Jihadi Threat" reflects the broad—and often diverse—views of the coauthors. Not everyone agreed on all points, but the variety of findings, trend lines, and scenarios for the future covers the best thinking about the evolution of the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and their affiliates.

The United States Institute of Peace was the primary sponsor of this initiative, with the backing of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. Fifteen other think tanks and universities were represented in the Working Group on Extremism. The goal was always to reflect the widest expertise and the full spectrum of views.

We would like to acknowledge the enthusiastic commitment by Institute leadership, including Nancy Lindborg, President; William Taylor, Executive Vice President; and Paul Hughes, Interim Operations Chief for the Middle East and Africa. They helped define the process and provided the intellectual support and funding required to expeditiously publish the working group's findings. Robin Wright was the principal writer, and the moderator of the Extremist Working Group sessions. Garrett Nada carried more than his weight, putting in long hours to help write, organize, and design this report. We are also grateful to several officials in the United States national security community, as well as Middle East officials and analysts, for their time and insights.

The publications team at the Institute, especially Jake Harris, Peggy Archambault, and Christina Murtaugh, pulled out all stops to get this report out in a timely way. Anne Himmelfarb copyedited the text. We were very fortunate to have a strong staff, including Ali El Yassir, who handled many logistics and details, and research assistant Daniel Schnur. Nicholas Cappuccino and Hanan Yazid, researchers at the Woodrow Wilson Center, were enormously helpful to the working group. We thank them all.

The Jihadi Threat:
ISIS, al Qaeda, and Beyond

THE WEST FAILED TO PREDICT the emergence of al-Qaeda in new forms across the Middle East and North Africa. It was blindsided by the ISIS sweep across Syria and Iraq, which at least temporarily changed the map of the Middle East. Both movements have skillfully continued to evolve and proliferate—and surprise. What's next? Twenty experts from think tanks and universities across the United States explore the world's deadliest movements, their strategies, the future scenarios, and policy considerations. This report reflects their analysis and diverse views.

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