



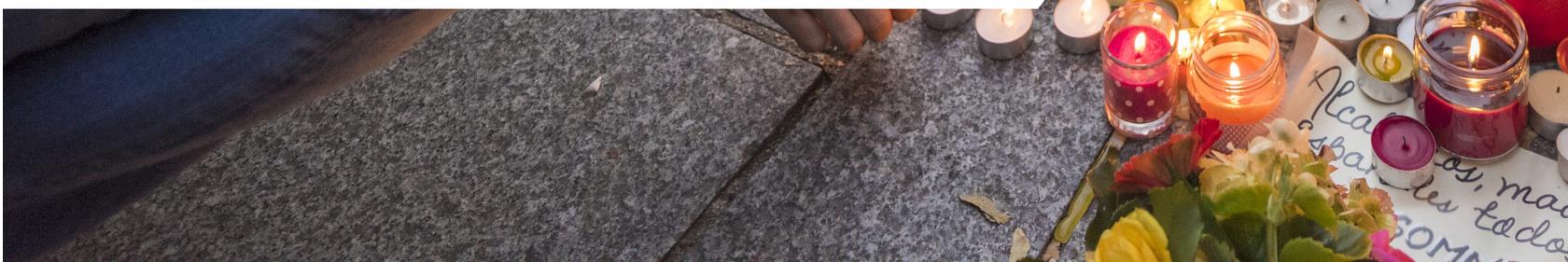
BIPARTISAN POLICY CENTER



Defeating Terrorists, Not Terrorism:

Assessing U.S. Counterterrorism Policy from 9/11 to ISIS

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Task Force on Terrorism and Ideology

Co-Chairs

Governor Thomas H. Kean

Former Chairman, 9/11 Commission; Former Governor of New Jersey

Representative Lee H. Hamilton

Former Vice Chairman, 9/11 Commission; Former Representative from Indiana

Members

Cheryl Benard

President, ARCH International

Joseph Braude

Advisor, Al-Mesbar Studies and Research Center in Dubai; Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy Research Institute

Dr. Tarek Elgawhary

President, The Coexist Foundation

John Gannon

Adjunct Professor, Center for Security Studies, Georgetown University; Former CIA Deputy Director for Intelligence and Chairman of the National Intelligence Council

Ambassador Husain Haqqani

Senior Fellow and Director for South and Central Asia, Hudson Institute; Former Ambassador of Pakistan to the United States

Bernard Haykel

Professor of Near Eastern Studies and Director, Institute for Transregional Study of the Contemporary Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia, Princeton University

Charles Hill

Brady-Johnson Distinguished Fellow in Grand Strategy at Yale University; Research Fellow of the Hoover Institution, Stanford University

Sir John Jenkins

Executive Director, International Institute for Strategic Studies Middle East; Former British Ambassador to Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Saudi Arabia

Nibras Kazimi

Author, *Syria Through Jihadist Eyes: A Perfect Enemy*

Christopher Kojm

Professor of International Affairs, Elliot School of International Affairs, The George Washington University; Former Chair of the National Intelligence Council

Kristin Lord

President and CEO, IREX

Staff

Blaise Misztal

Director of National Security

Nicholas Danforth

Senior Policy Analyst

Jessica Michek

Policy Analyst

Samuel Tadros

Contributor

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DISCLAIMER

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Letter from the Co-Chairs

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, killed nearly 3,000 innocent Americans. Thousands more Americans have died in the subsequent military campaigns and intelligence operations that have kept America safe. Sixteen years later, we pause to honor those Americans lost on 9/11 and those who have served and sacrificed to protect the American people in the years since.

In 2004, the *9/11 Commission Report* offered 41 bipartisan recommendations to secure the homeland, defeat terrorist networks, and ultimately prevail in what we termed the “generational struggle” against Islamist terrorism. Thanks to the efforts of policymakers in both parties, most of those recommendations have been implemented in whole or in part.

Overall, the U.S. government’s record on securing the homeland and taking down terrorist networks is good. The courage and skill of our military, intelligence, and law enforcement agencies have prevented another mass-casualty attack on U.S. soil. Congress created the National Counterterrorism Center and reorganized the intelligence community under a new Director of National Intelligence. Homeland security officials have closed security gaps at airports and at the border. Overseas, U.S. operations have killed Osama bin Laden and severely damaged the al Qaeda network. A U.S.-led coalition has nearly driven ISIS from Iraq and is pushing into its strongholds in Syria.

Yet despite these tactical successes, it is hard to conclude that we are winning. While we have pummeled terrorists on the battlefield, we have struggled to defeat their ideas. Unfortunately, recent evidence suggests that jihadist ideology remains attractive to many, including in the West. In 2014, ISIS’s call to jihad attracted thousands of “foreign fighters” from across the world into its ranks. Over the past year, even with the ISIS caliphate rapidly losing territory, ISIS-inspired “homegrown” terrorists have conducted attacks in Europe and the United States. As long as jihadists can replenish their ranks as fast as we can take them off the battlefield, the threat will persist.

We can, and must, do better to defeat terrorists’ ideas. Since 9/11, the United States has expended hundreds of millions of dollars on counter-radicalization and counter-messaging programs, with limited success. Indeed, basic questions remain unanswered: What role does ideology, as opposed to political, social, or economic grievances, play in driving people to terrorism? What is the relationship between Islamist terrorism and other strains of Islamist thinking? Can the United States and other non-Muslim actors meaningfully influence cultural and religious currents in the Islamic world? Which Muslim partners are most credible and effective in reducing the appeal of jihadism?

This Bipartisan Policy Center project aims to take stock of 16 years of counterterrorism struggle and make recommendations for long-term success. As in the *9/11 Commission Report*, we begin by “looking backward in order to look forward.” This paper takes stock of U.S. counterterrorism efforts since 2001, with a focus on U.S. efforts to counter extremist ideology. A future paper will make recommendations for defeating terrorists’ ideas over the long term.



Governor Tom H. Kean



Representative Lee H. Hamilton

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Executive Summary

Sixteen years after the 9/11 attacks, the United States continues to grapple with how to defeat the terrorist threat. The fight against terrorism dominated the national security agenda of the past two U.S. administrations. It will almost certainly remain among the major challenges confronting the current president.

This new Bipartisan Policy Center project springs from the conviction that it is time to assess U.S. progress in this struggle. Much as the 9/11 Commission examined how the horrendous attacks of that day occurred, it is appropriate and necessary, more than a decade and a half later, to take stock of both the state of the terrorist threat and the record of U.S. counterterrorism policies in combating that threat.

What have the significant investments the United States has made in its intelligence, military, law enforcement, and public diplomacy capabilities achieved? Has the terrorist threat diminished? Is the United States safer today than it was 16 years ago? Is the U.S. approach to counterterrorism working? Or is something different needed?

This paper provides an assessment of U.S. counterterrorism policy to date, its achievements and shortcomings, and compares them against the scale and scope of the current terrorist threat.

This paper aims to answer these questions. It provides an assessment of U.S. counterterrorism policy to date, its achievements and shortcomings, and compares them against the scale and scope of the current terrorist threat. A future study will develop recommendations for a more effective, comprehensive, and long-term counterterrorism strategy.

In the homeland, and on the battlefield, the legacy of post-9/11 counterterrorism efforts is in many respects a successful one. Prodigious efforts by intelligence agencies, law enforcement, and the military have prevented another mass-casualty attack on U.S. soil. American forces have found and killed tens of thousands of terrorists abroad. The combined efforts of the U.S. government have degraded terrorist leadership, disrupted terrorist financing, and thwarted hundreds of terrorist plots.

“ It is impossible to conclude that the enemy has been defeated. Rather, the threat of terrorism has metastasized. ”

Yet, it is impossible to conclude that the enemy has been defeated. Rather, the threat of terrorism has metastasized. Last year, terrorists launched five times as many attacks as in 2001, with terrorism afflicting more than 104 countries.¹ Terrorist groups have taken root in Europe, Africa, and Asia, in addition to the Middle East. New recruits sign up for jihad as quickly as the United States eliminates them on the field of battle. For each threat defused, another soon takes its place; for each terrorist group disrupted, another soon arises; for each terrorist killed, more eager recruits appear.

The 9/11 Commission warned that terrorism “will menace Americans and American interests long after Usama Bin Ladin and his cohorts are killed or captured.”² The Commission was right. But U.S. policy has not heeded this warning. Too often U.S. counterterrorism efforts have focused on a specific group or threat, while doing too little to prevent new generations from taking up the banner of jihad.

Even as the military defeat of the Islamic State, or ISIS, appears imminent, American policymakers must avoid the temptation of confusing the defeat of one brutal terrorist organization with victory against terrorism. Victory against Islamist terrorism cannot be achieved only through the military action, law enforcement, or even targeted messaging campaigns that have been the hallmark of bipartisan U.S. policy across three administrations now. To reduce the threat posed by terrorism to its homeland, its citizens, its interests, and the world order it has constructed, the United States will have to work to attenuate the conditions that continue to attract new recruits to the terrorist cause, including the Islamist ideology that provides jihad with its justification and objective.

Assessing the Terrorist Threat

The terrorist threat to the United States today, although diminished since 9/11, remains grave. Though degraded, both al Qaeda and ISIS remain dangerous; though better protected, the United States remains vulnerable.

The terrorist contingent has only grown since 9/11. The number of jihadis more than doubled between 2010 and 2013, according to a RAND study, as terrorist groups attract followers almost as quickly as the U.S. military can kill them.³ For example, despite estimates that U.S. forces have killed at least 60,000 ISIS fighters, the U.S. government believes the group has as almost as many members now (15,000, according to the State Department) as it did in 2014 (20,000, according to the CIA).⁴

Moreover, the past few years have witnessed an unprecedented increase in terror incidents. Last year, some 25,000 people died in roughly 11,000 terrorist attacks in 104 countries.⁵ That is over three times as many deaths and five times as many attacks (7,000 and 2,000, respectively) as were recorded in 2001.⁶ Although each of today’s terrorist acts might be smaller than the major attacks conducted over a decade earlier and although many might be happening far from the American homeland, they have nevertheless created a perception of vulnerability and fear in Western societies.

Terrorist Groups and Their Evolution

ISIS will not cease to exist with its loss of Raqqa. Even as it loses territory in Iraq and Syria, ISIS has already expanded into other geographic areas, including Libya, Afghanistan, and even Southeast Asia, and founded new “branches,” including in Nigeria. All of these could prove the seeds for new caliphates. But even without a territory to call its own, ISIS will remain a menace.

Its unprecedented use of social media for recruitment and dissemination of propaganda can be expected to continue. Foreign fighters who traveled from the West to fight with the group may return to their home countries—perhaps using civilian migration routes into Europe to disguise their true identities, as some of the perpetrators of the 2015 Paris attacks did. For some disaffected Muslims in the West who were not able to join it, moreover, the idea of the ISIS caliphate will remain an inspiration.

While overshadowed by ISIS's meteoric rise, other terrorist groups remain dangerous and continue to seek to attack the United States. Al Qaeda's nominal leader, former Osama bin Laden deputy Ayman al Zawahiri, remains at large in the Afghan-Pakistan borderlands. Hayat Tahrir al Sham, al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, remains a powerful force in that country's civil war. Al Qaeda also has affiliates in North Africa (al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) and the Indian subcontinent. The most worrying, however, is al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), a sophisticated adversary with a record of attempts to strike the U.S. homeland.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that this constellation of groups will continue to define the universe of terrorist organizations. Or that the same approach pursued by ISIS in Iraq and Syria will characterize future iterations of the terrorist threat. Ninety years ago, there was no Muslim Brotherhood; 50 years ago, there was no Jihadi Salafism; 25 years ago no al Qaeda; and five years ago no ISIS. Five years from now, new terrorist organizations will emerge, remnants of the earlier jihadi organizations will linger, and the extremists will adapt.

Indeed, jihadist thinking has never been static. Groups like al Qaeda and the Islamic State are fanatically committed to their worldview, but they have shown a remarkable ability to adapt their tactics to the circumstances in which they find themselves. As ISIS's terrestrial caliphate collapses, jihadist thinking will likely evolve in response.

ISIS imitators will likely attempt similar territory grabs in the years ahead. The idea of the caliphate, once glimpsed, will retain its allure. Others may push for a return to the al Qaeda methodology of focusing on terrorist attacks in the West. Alternatively, some jihadist groups may revert to the pre-al Qaeda methodology of targeting the "near enemy"—local regimes.

Whatever its manifestations, the next iterations of terrorism will remain a significant threat to the United States, its interests, and its partners.

U.S. Vulnerabilities at Home and Abroad

The most direct threat to the U.S. homeland is likely to continue to come from "enabled" attacks and terrorist exploitation of the internet. But the threat to U.S. national interests is not limited to terrorist activity on American soil.

As terrorist groups lose geographic sanctuaries, they have sought to strike back by urging potential followers to conduct attacks in the West. ISIS and AQAP have pioneered and perfected enabled or remote-controlled attacks. In this model, terrorist operatives use the internet to identify disaffected young people and direct them to commit attacks in their home countries in the West, often using low-tech tactics. These simple plots do not require advanced skills, funding, travel, or communications. As seen in Nice, Berlin, London, and Barcelona, a truck driven by a committed terrorist into a crowd of bystanders can kill scores of people and instill widespread fear. Such attacks offer little to no warning, meaning that there is almost no way for counterterrorism officials to stop them.

These attacks are enabled by terrorists' significant presence in cyberspace, using it for propaganda and recruiting, especially on social media. This growing significance of the internet as a medium for radicalization as well as terrorist use of encrypted communications to discreetly plot and orchestrate attacks are likely to remain the most challenging fronts in the cyberwar against terrorists. Despite jihadi threats to launch cyber attacks, their technical capabilities in this arena appear limited.

Even if the United States could prevent all terrorist activity within its homeland, however, it will never be safe so long as terrorism thrives in the rest of the world. “In the post-9/11 world, threats are defined more by the fault lines within societies than by the territorial boundaries between them,” the 9/11 Commission wrote.⁷ Because of the unprecedented interconnectedness of the world in the 21st century, new threats can emerge quickly and reach all the way across the world to menace Americans, leading the Commission to declare, “[T]he American homeland is the planet.”⁸

The danger that unchecked terrorist activity can pose to the United States is most glaringly underscored by the continued threat of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) falling into terrorist hands. The Islamic State, for example, has chemical weapons in Syria and appears to have acquired radioactive materials in Iraq.⁹ Should they succeed in using these materials to mount a WMD attack on the United States or Europe, the results would be devastating.

But even if the United States is not targeted directly, it still suffers from the spread of terrorism. Transnational jihadi terrorism is inherently expansionary—if left unchecked, it will continue to spread, eating away at the foundation of the free, open, and lawful international system and the alliances that the United States depends on for its prosperity and security. Terrorism’s toll on the U.S. homeland, on the vibrant democracies of America’s European allies, on the stability of Middle Eastern partners, and on the security of the global commons is alarming. Even when the United States is not the target, terrorism endangers and harms the United States and its interests.

Why is the Threat Still So Potent?

Even as the Islamic State’s caliphate collapses in Syria and Iraq, policymakers must confront the question of why the terrorist threat remains so potent, despite 16 years of effort by the United States and a like-minded coalition of international partners. BPC’s review of U.S. efforts in the fight against terrorism suggests several limitations in the way that U.S. counterterrorism policies have been formulated.

Mismatch Between Strategic Objectives and Tactics

Since 2001, leaders of the United States have promised victory: against al-Qaeda, against ISIS, and against terrorism itself. What is more, U.S. policymakers have realized that pursuing such a complete victory would require deploying more than just military might against the terrorist threat. Thus, successive publicly articulated U.S. strategies have developed “whole of government” approaches meant to apply “all elements” of American power to this challenge.

Yet, the reality of the tactics that the United States has been pursuing on the ground has been very different from what U.S. leaders have been telling the American people. Rather than the greater struggle against a widespread, amorphous, and ideologically motivated adversary, U.S. policymakers have focused on the much narrower and shorter-term goal of degrading whatever terror network or threat is most pressing at the moment.

This mismatch between the tactics the United States employs in fighting terrorism and the bipartisan, strategic objective that has been described to the American people creates confusion about what results to expect. The rhetoric used by policymakers of “victory” does not square with the reality of 16 years of conflict and a metastasizing threat. Worse, the longer U.S. policy pursues goals other than the form of “victory” against terrorism that it has promised, the more difficult it becomes to implement a strategy that could achieve such a victory.

Focusing on Terrorists, Not Terrorism

The United States has become exceptionally effective and ruthless in its ability to target and eliminate terrorists. And yet, this has done little to diminish the threat or stanch the flow of willing recruits to the jihadi cause. As then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld put it in a 2003 memo: “The U.S. is putting relatively little effort into a long-range plan, but we are putting a great deal of effort into trying to stop terrorists. The cost-benefit ratio is against us! Our cost is billions against the terrorists’ costs of millions.” He went on to ask: “Is our current situation such that ‘the harder we work, the behinder we get?’”¹⁰

As long as jihad maintains its overpowering appeal, even in the face of almost certain death, terrorist movements will persist. Defeating terrorism must entail weakening this magnetic attraction. For all its battlefield and intelligence successes, the United States has demonstrated little ability to degrade support for the ideology underlying jihadist terrorism.

Misunderstanding the Enemy: Organizations vs. Movement

This tendency to tailor the U.S. counterterrorist mission and objective around the most immediate terrorist threat was on display in President Barack Obama’s May 2010 National Security Strategy: “We are at war with a specific network, al Qaeda, and its terrorist affiliates who support efforts to attack the United States, our allies, and partners.”¹¹ The singular focus on al Qaeda contributed to American policymakers underestimating ISIS for too long. But neither al Qaeda nor ISIS, nor any other terrorist group worldwide, is the sole manifestation of the Hydra-headed enemy the United States seeks to defeat.

The terrorist threat confronting the United States is a broader movement. It includes groups and individuals that are unrelated to al Qaeda or the Islamic State, but are, like them, inspired by an extremist ideology that claims to represent one of the world’s greatest religions. As the 9/11 Commission argued, “[T]he United States has to help defeat an ideology, and not just a group of people.”¹²

Focusing on Means, Not Ends

U.S. counterterrorism policy has focused on the prevention of violence—those thinking about, plotting, or carrying out violent attacks—without engaging the ideological messages and narrative that justify and incite that violence.

U.S. attempts at counter-messaging have often focused on the group’s brutality, depicting ISIS beheadings and crucifixions with the stated aim of sending “a message that this is actually a squalid, worthless, dirty thing.”¹³ But it is not ISIS’s means of conquest that are the source of its strength. What its supporters endorse is the Islamic State itself, the ends its violence is meant to achieve, an end they have come to believe justifies any means. To argue with them about the validity of violence is to have lost the argument already.

The 9/11 Commission warned against this narrow focus: “The small percentage of Muslims who are fully committed to Usama Bin Ladin’s version of Islam are impervious to persuasion. It is among the large majority of Arabs and Muslims that we must encourage reform, freedom, democracy, and opportunity.”¹⁴ Focusing on the relatively small number of those who use violence ignores the larger context in which violent groups operate. What U.S. policy has lacked is an understanding of those beliefs, and the ends that terrorist groups are employing violence to achieve. Understanding the ideology—what extremist groups want and what vision they sell their followers—is crucial to a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy.

As long as the ends that terrorists seek are not challenged and discredited, their appeal will continue to persuade individuals to use violence as a means of achieving those goals.

The Gnarled Roots of Terrorism: Grievance and Ideology

An emerging understanding of radicalization identifies its locus in the combination of underlying conditions and ideology, acknowledging that both of these factors play different roles, and interact with each other.

A United States Agency for International Development (USAID) study divides the drivers of violent extremism into “push” and “pull” factors.¹⁵ While “push” factors are sources of alienation from society and disenfranchisement, such as large-scale poverty, unemployment, and government repression, “pull” factors make terrorist groups attractive. These include the lure of financial gain, a desire for community, a drive to feel important, the propaganda of a persuasive and pragmatic leader, and the honor that comes with battling a foreign adversary or for a particular ideology.

An understanding of terrorism that combines both factors recognizes the importance of conditions that make individuals vulnerable to indoctrination by extremist groups while also recognizing that people are shaped by more than their circumstances. Socioeconomic conditions are not fate; individuals have a choice in how they respond. It takes a noxious ideology that prescribes violence as the path to a better world to turn grievances into terrorism.

A Region Aggrieved

Extremism thrives amid adverse social conditions, failures in governance, and conflict. These are problems of which the Middle East has more than its fair share.

The region is experiencing a “youth bulge,” with 65 percent of the total population under the age of 30 and around 30 percent of those youth unemployed.¹⁶ This demographic fact presents a profound risk: the population most targeted by terrorist recruiters, who need young bodies on the battlefield, is the same population failed by Middle Eastern governments and therefore at greater risk of recruitment.

Middle Eastern countries are experiencing an acute crisis of governance. The modern Middle Eastern state has failed to create a sense of nationhood among its population. Rather than provide services to its population, Middle Eastern states generally distribute patronage to members of the ruling family, tribe, ethnic group or sect, while marginalizing and repressing the rest of society. The vast majority of the people of the Middle East, 83 percent, live in countries that Freedom House characterizes as not free.¹⁷

Conflict has also been prevalent in the Middle East’s modern history. Preceding the upheaval of the Arab Spring and current civil war in Syria is a long history of conflict. Arab-Israeli wars, the wave of Arab nationalism of the 50s and 60s, experiments such as the United Arab Republic, civil wars in Lebanon, Sudan and Yemen, the Iran-Iraq war, and two U.S.-led Gulf Wars have resulted in enormous bloodshed and population transfers. Such violence only begets violence and provides a breeding ground for extremism—over 90 percent of terrorist attacks occur in nations ravaged by conflict.¹⁸

The Role of Ideology

Grievances alone, however, are not sufficient to explain terrorism. Out of the hundreds of millions of people living in poverty, or in conflict zones, or under the rule of repressive governments, only a small number support terrorist groups, let alone become terrorists themselves.¹⁹ Grievances on their own are passive. They are a result of conditions that an individual is subjected to; they do not require, presuppose, or imply any sort of action by the individual herself. Another ingredient, beyond onerous socioeconomic circumstances, is necessary to spur someone to action, particularly violence.

Ideology is that ingredient. It weaponizes grievances by giving individuals an account of what is causing their suffering, a vision of a better world, and a path to achieving it. Yet, it remains poorly understood. “Ideology,” even in scholarly studies, is most often treated as synonymous with “worldview” or “belief-system,” a set of ideas that provide order and understanding to the world.

But ideology, in contrast to a worldview, is not about how things are, but how they should be. It influences not navigation of the immutable features of the real world, but action meant to change the temporary and conditional structures of society and politics. And rather than an individual belief, ideology is a shared identity.

Nor is ideology the same as religion. Where religion is charged with the preservation of a certain metaphysical arrangement of the world, ideology seeks complete transformation of the man-made social and political spheres. Where religion is focused on the sacred, ideology’s purview is purely profane, its concern solely with this earthly world.

An ideology entails belief that one’s current circumstances are not ideal—i.e., grievances—and must be changed, a diagnosis of who or what is to blame for the existence of these conditions, an alternative vision of a healed world, and the steps that need to be taken to transform this vision into reality. Critically, the ambition of ideology is not just to improve the individual’s lot in life; it demands the transformation of entirety of society and politics.

When combined with grievances, ideology, therefore, presents a totalistic political alternative to the onerous present, an alternative that demands revolutionary transformation and replaces traditional models of social identity.

Understanding Islamist Ideology

The specific ideology tied to jihadist terrorism—Islamism—plays on Middle Eastern and Muslim grievances to discredit current societies and states in favor of a transnational, revolutionary vision.

What is Islamism?

Islamism is an elusive ideology to define.²⁰ It was born out of and as a response to the crisis of modernity in the world of Islam. Prompted by the discovery of Western technological, material, and military superiority, this crisis made Muslims aware of the huge gulf that separated them from modern Europe and gave rise to the questions “what went wrong?” and, more importantly, “how can we catch up?” The crisis only intensified as the encounter with the West progressed from losses to Western armies on faraway battlefields or admiration of Western intellectual achievements to, with time, Western presence as an occupier of the very heart of the Muslim world.

The Islamist diagnosis of this crisis is that the decline in Islam's worldly fortunes is directly tied to the decay of Islamic rituals, symbols and practices in the daily lives of Muslims. Thus, the solution that Islamism champions is a simple one: a return to an earlier period of time when the Islamic world was not in decline but in ascendance by returning Islam to its rightful central place in the lives of Muslims. For Islamists, Islam is incomplete without a state. The goal of all Islamist movements is the establishment of an Islamic State, or as a leading Egyptian Salafi described it “a state that connects heaven and earth.”

By its very nature, Islamism claims not only to be a political manifestation of Islam, but *the only* possible manifestation of the religion. While Islamism exploits Islamic symbols and concepts for legitimacy, it is distinct from Islam as it is understood and practiced by the vast majority of Muslims worldwide. Islam is one of the world's great religions, worthy and deserving of respect. But Islamism rejects the diversity of thought and practice that has developed in Islamic civilizations over the centuries, and has broken from traditional Islam in matters of jurisprudence and theology. Moreover, while traditional Sunni Islam developed a certain separation between political and religious leaders, Islamism seeks to capture the state and sees the state as the principal instrument for making its vision of society possible. Indeed, Islamism requires the coercive power of the state to enact and enforce its dictates of public morality on the entirety of society.

Islamism, Violence, and the Threat to Order

Some Islamists believe that the current crisis of Islam can still be countered through non-violent means in Muslim societies, namely through religious indoctrination and Islamizing society. Others view the threat level as having reached a critical point, with violence the only possible response. In practice, however, the distinction between violent and non-violent Islamism turns out to be rather ambiguous, more a function of tactics and circumstance than of principle. Much more significant than any methodological disagreements between groups is what they share in common: a convergence of views that the world of Islam is under siege and it is the West that stands between it and the realization of its political ambitions.

Many of the founders of jihadi groups were originally members or passed through the indoctrination phase of non-violent Islamist groups. According to a recent study by The Centre on Religion and Geopolitics, for example, 51 percent of a sample of 100 jihadis had non-violent Islamist links; a quarter of those were to the Muslim Brotherhood or affiliated organizations.²¹

These close ties between different types of Islamist groups, whether violent or not, are based on their fundamental ideological alignment. No Islamist groups dispute that the solution to the crisis of the Muslim world is a return to Islam, as they understand it. No Islamist group disagrees that the West is continuously hostile to Islam. This common narrative endorsed even by non-violent groups—of dissatisfaction with and opposition to the current “fundamentally unjust, oppressive and un-godly” state of the world—is a stepping stone to the conclusion that overthrowing the current order is the only method capable of achieving the Islamist goal.²²

The conflation of religion and politics renders Islamism a totalitarian worldview that rejects the pluralism that Islamic civilization had created throughout the centuries. This vision includes anti-democratic, anti-pluralistic, authoritarian, and non-compromising views, as well as a rejection of the rule of law and individual liberty. Islamism's belief in the need for a revolutionary transformation of the modern political world, from an order based on individual liberty and composed of nation states to a totalitarian and transnational autocracy, is the fundamental challenge posed by terrorism.

Toward a Comprehensive Strategy

The United States must confront this ideology in all its forms.

The fundamental objective of U.S. policy must be the prevention of violence against its citizens and interests. But the bipartisan approach of the three most recent administrations is not sufficient to protect the United States from the metastasizing terrorist threat.

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Focusing solely on dissuading, jailing, or killing those planning to carry out violent terrorist acts has done little to stop the growth and spread of terrorism over the last decade and a half. So long as new generations continue being drawn to the cause of jihad, terrorism will plague and unsettle the world.

To prevail, the United States will need a comprehensive strategy that addresses the enemies of the United States and the ideology that encourages and sustains them, while differentiating the response to each. Such a long-term strategy would focus not on the adherents of Islamist ideology today—they can neither be dissuaded by the U.S. government, nor should it be U.S. policy to target, whether militarily or criminally, those who hold Islamist beliefs but do not act violently upon them—but the uptake of that ideology tomorrow.

The generational struggle against Islamist terrorism will come to an end only when the ambitions that motivate groups such as al Qaeda and the Islamic State return to the obscurity they richly deserve. To speed that process, the United States will have to support the conditions and values that counteract and undermine Islamism's appeal: governance, institutions, civil society, citizenship, pluralism, tolerance, and a strong separation between public and private spheres.

In their Preface to the *9/11 Commission Report*, Thomas Kean and Lee Hamilton urged policymakers to adopt “a balanced strategy for the long haul, to attack terrorists *and prevent their ranks from swelling* while at the same time protecting our country against future attacks.”²³ Thirteen years after they wrote those words, the terrorists' ideas, repugnant as they are, still attract far too many young Muslims to their ranks. It will not be easy, but the difficulty of discrediting Islamist ideology must not deter us from attempting it. BPC's next study will lay out a strategy for doing precisely that.

Introduction

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the federal government revamped many of its national security institutions to meet the terrorist threat. The new Department of Homeland Security worked to close security gaps at airports and at the border. The U.S. military and intelligence community went on the offensive against terrorists overseas. Navy SEALs found and killed Osama bin Laden in 2011. Drone strikes and other tools decimated al Qaeda's ranks. By the end of Obama's first term, officials expressed optimism that the global jihadist movement was in retreat.

Then came the Islamic State, or ISIS. Quickly seizing vast swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria, ISIS made clear its military prowess. But it was its establishment of the caliphate that transformed ISIS from a local group, one of many fighting the Syrian regime, into something larger. After the initial shock, a carefully constructed U.S.-backed coalition began to halt, and gradually reverse, ISIS's lightning advance. Today, ISIS has been defeated in Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, and allied forces are on the verge of liberating Raqqa, the Syrian capital of ISIS's so-called caliphate.

Even with the ISIS's declared caliphate under heavy military pressure, "homegrown" jihadists have conducted a wave of horrific terrorist attacks in Europe and several smaller-scale attacks in the United States. Authorities in Europe, Australia, and elsewhere remain on high alert, particularly as thousands of combat-hardened jihadists holding Western passports return from battlegrounds in the Middle East. The threat has become even more ominous as terrorists plot to deploy new technologies honed in Syria and Yemen, including armed drones and miniaturized explosives.

This continued persistence of the terrorist threat makes clear that the underlying ideology of violent Islamist extremism remains

resilient. Since 9/11, the United States has expended hundreds of millions of dollars on counter-radicalization and counter-messaging programs, with limited success in reducing terrorism's appeal. Indeed, basic questions remain unanswered: What role does ideology, as opposed to political or socioeconomic grievances, play in driving people to terrorism? What is the relationship between violent Islamist extremism and other strains of Islamist thinking? How, if at all, can the United States and other non-Muslim actors influence cultural and religious currents in the Islamic world? Which Muslim interlocutors are most credible and effective in reducing the appeal of jihadism?

The difficulty of the struggle of ideas must not deter us from waging it. The only way to ensure that what the 9/11 Commission described as a "generational struggle" against terrorism finds some ending, however distant it may be, is to discredit the terrorists' ideas. It will not be easy, as the last 16 years prove. But it is not impossible: By the end of the Cold War, communism was utterly discredited as a governing philosophy. The question for today's policymakers is how to do the same to the ideas that animate Islamist terrorists.

This project's final report will seek to answer that question. This paper illuminates the relevant background: where America finds itself after 16 years of struggle, and how it got here. First, the paper looks back at the Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations' approaches to counterterrorism and counter-radicalization. Next it assesses the current state of the threat from Islamist terrorism. On the basis of the preceding two sections, the paper examines why defeating terrorist ideology has proved so difficult. Finally, it considers the role of ideology in fueling terrorism.

Government Response

The 9/11 attacks shocked the nation. The immediate effects of the four hijackings, the destruction of the Twin Towers, and the attack on the Pentagon were massive. Most tragic was the staggering loss of life: 2,977 innocent civilians died that day. The attacks also inflicted vast economic harm, disrupting such industries as aviation, tourism, and insurance. More subtly, the attacks also introduced a sense of physical vulnerability in the homeland—something unfamiliar to Americans. That insecurity spurred profound policy changes intended to keep the country safe from future terrorist attacks. In the ensuing years, all branches of the federal government, state and local authorities, and the private sector played their part in enhancing the nation's defenses.

The George W. Bush Administration

President George W. Bush had been in office less than eight months when al Qaeda struck the U.S. homeland on 9/11. Suddenly, his administration confronted a national security crisis of a scale unseen in generations. Its first task was to ensure that there were no further catastrophic attacks looming on the horizon. The president was also called to reassure and unify a traumatized nation. Sixteen years later, the United States has not experienced another 9/11-scale attack on the homeland. The legacy of the Bush administration's policy choices continues to influence, and challenge, the U.S. response to global terrorism.

Counterterrorism Policies

The Bush administration's immediate response to 9/11—taking swift action to prevent further attacks, while striking back against the perpetrators—received substantial support from Americans across the political spectrum. Its later decision to invade Iraq,

coupled with revelations about aggressive tactics engaged in during interrogations, extra-legal communications interception programs, and harsh detention programs, splintered that consensus. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in particular continue to challenge U.S. policy today. On the other hand, historic reforms to the fragmented intelligence community and other counterterrorism programs continue to pay dividends for U.S. security more than a decade later.

The Immediate Aftermath of the Attacks

In the aftermath of 9/11, there were four broad areas of urgent action: striking back at the perpetrators of 9/11, tightening homeland security, ramping up the intelligence community and law enforcement, and cutting off funds to al Qaeda and like-minded groups.

First, the United States went on the offensive, striking back at the perpetrators of 9/11 and those who had harbored them. The immediate aims were to capture or kill the enemy, expel terrorists from Afghanistan and other geographic safe havens, and ultimately dismantle the global al Qaeda network. On September 14, 2001, three days after the attacks, Congress gave its approval to this campaign in an Authorization for Use of Military Force against those responsible for the 9/11 attacks. More than 15 years later, this law is still the basis for much of the military's counterterrorism activity.

The post-9/11 military campaign against al Qaeda fortified the intelligence- and law-enforcement-based approach to terrorism that prevailed during the 1990s. The U.S. response to 9/11 drew on all instruments of national power—military, diplomatic, intelligence, economic and financial, law enforcement, technology,

alliances, and soft power—to target terrorist networks and reduce their ability to plan, recruit, travel, raise and move money, and communicate. The United States was unmistakably at war with al Qaeda and those who supported it.

Second, the strategy called for tightening homeland security and improving the counterterrorism capabilities of the country's intelligence and law-enforcement agencies. Bush created a new Office of Homeland Security headed by former Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge. Congress also acted to boost aviation security, which failed so badly on September 11, by creating the Transportation Security Administration to replace private screeners. The number of Federal Air Marshals aboard commercial flights rose dramatically. In late 2002, Congress combined 22 existing federal agencies, including the TSA, into the Department of Homeland Security, with Ridge as its first leader. To boost information sharing, another deficiency exposed on 9/11, the Executive Branch created the Terrorist Threat Integration Center to synthesize counterterrorism intelligence and present the president with an integrated picture of the threat.

Third, the government ramped up intelligence collection and law enforcement efforts aimed at detecting terrorist plots before they came to fruition. The October 2001 USA Patriot Act provided the FBI with new intelligence-gathering and investigative tools. The “no fly list,” which lists those deemed potential threats to aviation, began a rapid expansion, ultimately rising from only 16 names before 9/11 to more than 81,000 today. On the local level, major cities created dedicated counterterrorism and intelligence units. New York City, which lost some two dozen NYPD officers, 37 Port Authority police officers, and over 300 Fire Department of New York Firefighters, authorized the New York Police Department to establish direct relationships with foreign police agencies to better share intelligence in real time. Throughout the country, soft targets were hardened, as physical barriers sprouted around federal buildings and other vulnerable sites. Regional networks of interoperable communications were established, even as the nation's first responders awaited the creation of a national interoperable network as recommended by the

9/11 Commission. Over 70 state and regional “fusion centers” were established with federal and state funding to facilitate the development and sharing of street-level suspicious activity reporting, coordinating state and local law enforcement efforts with those of the Joint Terrorism Task Forces. Average Americans were encouraged to report suspicious activity with the now-familiar mantra, “If you see something, say something.”

Fourth, the United States launched a vigorous effort to cut off funding to terrorist groups. The fight against terrorist financing took three principal forms: law enforcement, financial regulation, and international cooperation. Law enforcement agencies, led by the FBI, identified, prosecuted, and seized the assets of terrorist financiers and sham charities. On the regulatory front, the Treasury Department ensured that financial institutions collected information on and reported suspicious depositors. It also used financial sanctions to prevent international banks from transacting with designated terrorist organizations and individuals associated with them. Finally, because money flows easily across national borders, the United States expanded cross-border intelligence sharing on financial transactions. It also pressured allied countries in the Persian Gulf to prevent their citizens from donating to Sunni extremist groups, with mixed results.

Tracking the allocation of money is a good way to gauge government priorities. In the wake of 9/11, counterterrorism outlays skyrocketed as Americans came to terms with the threat. For example, within a few weeks of 9/11 the budget of the CIA's Counterterrorism Center increased 30-fold. On the home front, in October 2001 Congress enacted a \$40 billion emergency supplemental appropriation to fund counterterrorism, homeland security, and recovery from the attacks. In 2003, Congress passed the first annual Homeland Security Appropriations Act, providing nearly \$30 billion for homeland security. Overall, Congress has allocated hundreds of billions of dollars for nonmilitary counterterrorism and homeland security in the years since 9/11.

Regime Change in Afghanistan and Iraq

Within hours of the attacks, Bush convened a small group of his top foreign policy and national security advisers, a group the president would later come to call his “war council.” Bush and these advisers resolved that the United States would punish not just the perpetrators of the attacks, but also those who harbored or supported them. To do this, the United States would build up and deploy its own special military and intelligence forces and strengthen the counterterrorism capabilities of allies while compelling state sponsors of terrorism to desist or suffer severe consequences.

Military intervention to topple terror-supporting regimes became an important pillar of the Bush administration’s counterterrorism policy. The first major action was in Afghanistan. That operation’s goals were to capture or kill al Qaeda’s leadership and terrorist cadre; to oust the Taliban government, which had harbored bin Laden and his followers; and to ensure that Afghanistan could never be used as a safe haven for terrorists again. But while Afghanistan was the initial focus, al Qaeda had metastasized in other countries as well. As a result, the administration ramped up a global pursuit of al Qaeda and its affiliates in Yemen, Somalia, and other countries with ungoverned spaces where violent jihadists had taken root. The military opened a detention camp at the U.S. Naval Station at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, to hold captured terrorists.

Until late 2002, these responses had enjoyed broad, bipartisan support. The March 2003 invasion of Iraq, preceded by months of rancorous debate, fractured that consensus.

The Bush administration argued that Saddam Hussein’s regime had supported al Qaeda and therefore bore some responsibility for the 9/11 attacks. It also believed that Iraq possessed or continued to seek WMD, including nuclear weapons. (Postwar inquiries found little support for the first claim and none for the second.) Opponents of the war disputed both points and argued that continued UN inspections could adequately contain Saddam. The administration’s rationale for preemptive action became known as

the “Bush Doctrine”: In an era where terrorists armed with WMD would present a catastrophic threat, the United States reserved the right to launch first strikes against terrorist groups and the rogue states that harbored or supported them, particularly if those states might transfer WMD to terrorists.

Unfortunately, the breakdown of social order and security in Iraq after the invasion provided an opening for foreign terrorists to infiltrate the country. The most vicious was Abu Musab al Zarqawi. Bolstered by disaffected Sunni veterans of Iraq’s disbanded military, Zarqawi’s organization eventually pledged allegiance to bin Laden and became al Qaeda in Iraq. Terrorist techniques developed in Iraq, including improvised explosive devices designed to penetrate armored vehicles, later surfaced on other battlefields in the war on terror.

These overt military efforts were accompanied by a worldwide clandestine campaign against terrorist groups. On September 17, 2001, the president signed a memorandum of notification granting the CIA expansive powers to take the fight to al Qaeda around the globe.

The CIA responded quickly after 9/11, deploying its first team on the ground in Afghanistan within nine days of the attacks and multiple teams within a few weeks. Military Special Operations Forces teamed effectively with CIA operators and friendly local militias. Aided by these on-the-ground assets, the U.S. Air Force used precision-guided munitions to devastate al Qaeda and Taliban forces.

Following this rapid initial success, the administration answered the asymmetric nature of the al Qaeda threat with a sharp increase in U.S. unconventional forces, including CIA paramilitary capabilities and elite Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) operators. By the end of Bush’s second term, JSOC had a budget exceeding \$8 billion dollars. In Iraq, JSOC honed its terrorist-hunting tactics to a lethal edge, quickly processing intelligence seized in night raids to generate the next set of targets. These techniques scored a major success in the operation that killed Zarqawi in June 2006.

Bush's classified findings also permitted other, more controversial approaches. These included conducting targeted killings against known terrorists away from traditional battlefields and establishing a series of secret overseas detention centers (colloquially known as "black sites"), which could be used to hold captured terrorists incognito and free of the legal constraints applicable on U.S. soil. In a series of legal memoranda whose conclusions were reversed by both the federal courts and by future Bush and Obama Justice Department lawyers, the Justice Department concluded that captured terrorists were "enemy combatants" unprotected by the Geneva Conventions and that, by holding them at extra-territorial places like Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, the Government could place them beyond the reach of the federal courts. The DOJ also authorized the CIA to use various "enhanced interrogation techniques," including waterboarding, on the captured terrorists held at these sites. Meanwhile, armed Predator drone strikes—considered illegal by the Department of Justice under President Bill Clinton—began in late 2002 and ultimately became a central counterterrorism tool, particularly under the Obama administration.

The gloves were unquestionably off in the fight against al Qaeda. But at what price? These measures would generate enduring controversy and produce friction with U.S. allies. Equally important, their employment caused many legal experts and concerned observers in the United States to argue that, by pursuing these tactics, the government had betrayed the ideals on which the United States was founded, and was thus undermining its efforts to wage the strategic struggle of ideas.

Reorganizing the National Security Apparatus

The Bush administration and Congress also reshaped the nation's national security bureaucracy, bulking up security institutions to meet the challenge of transnational terrorism. Many of these changes were spurred by the report of the independent National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, popularly known as the 9/11 Commission. In its July 2004 Final Report, the Commission offered 41 recommendations to improve

counterterrorism, homeland security, and preparedness. Within four and a half months, Congress had enacted many of the most significant into law.

Headlining these changes was the creation of an Office of the Director of National Intelligence to lead the intelligence community. Previously, the community's 16 separate agencies were only loosely orchestrated by the Director of Central Intelligence, who was dual-hatted as the Director of the CIA. The Director of National Intelligence was intended to strengthen centralized management over the community, set national collection priorities, and promote information sharing, correcting gaps that existed before 9/11. Congress also created the National Counterterrorism Center, another Commission recommendation, to succeed the Terrorist Threat Integration Center created by Bush. The National Counterterrorism Center's responsibilities were to integrate foreign and domestic intelligence and analysis pertaining to counterterrorism, with a staff drawn from various agencies in the intelligence community.

On the law-enforcement side, the FBI created a National Security Branch to bring its counterterrorism, counterintelligence, and intelligence elements under common leadership. At the 9/11 Commission's urging, FBI Director Robert Mueller also undertook an array of workforce reforms to enhance the caliber, prestige, and morale of the FBI's analysts, an important complement to its traditional workforce of Special Agents. Improving counterterrorism intelligence sharing with state and local authorities, another important Commission recommendation, was addressed by creating intelligence Fusion Centers and enhancing the pre-existing local Joint Terrorism Task Forces to bring state and local police into the counterterrorism mission.

Congress also acted to enhance the intelligence community's ability to collect the electronic communications of terrorists and other foreign adversaries. Most notably, in 2008 Congress passed the FISA Amendments Act, including Section 702, which allows the government to collect from domestic telecommunications providers the electronic communications of non-American persons located

outside U.S. borders. Section 702 has been an effective counterterrorism tool but remains controversial, as critics argue that the scope of the collection is overly broad and infringes on the privacy of large numbers of Americans.

As the Bush presidency ended, the Taliban, which had been evicted from Afghanistan in the months following 9/11, had regrouped and was mounting operations against allied forces. “Core” al Qaeda—the Afghanistan- and Pakistan-based organization that struck the United States on 9/11—had been damaged; the military estimated that there were fewer than 100 core al Qaeda members remaining in Afghanistan and Pakistan, though offshoots had proliferated to many countries. Al Qaeda and related terrorist groups, under pressure from the United States and with shrinking geographic sanctuaries, began focusing more on radicalizing new followers over the internet rather than on building complex plots on the scale of 9/11.

Counter-Radicalization Policies

Addressing a joint session of Congress and the nation on September 20, 2001, just days after al Qaeda struck the World Trade Center and Pentagon, Bush framed the simple question that would influence his administration’s initial approach to the ideological dimension of terrorism: “Why do they hate us?” His answer was simple: “They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.”—and his administration moved quickly to begin addressing this understanding of the origins of the al Qaeda threat.²⁴

Why Do They Hate Us?

By October 2001, Bush selected former advertising executive Charlotte Beers to serve as Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy—the senior-most official in charge of direct U.S. outreach to foreign audiences—expressly to lead the effort of taking America’s message to the Muslim world. Beers, in testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in 2003, warned

that “a young generation of terrorists is being created” because of “gravely distorted, but carefully cultivated images of us—images so negative, so weird, so hostile” being delivered to millions of Muslims. As a result, “The gap between who we are and how we wish to be seen, and how we are in fact seen, is frighteningly wide.”²⁵ Based on this diagnosis, the understanding of public diplomacy that Beers brought to the role was that “We need to take the best of America to other countries, to offer who we are honestly and sincerely.” This echoed Bush’s diagnosis that the terrorists were motivated by malice toward American values and the Muslim world was indifferent to their crimes because of a fundamental misunderstanding of America, its society, and values.

This approach was enshrined in the 2003 National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, which emphasized the importance of all instruments of national power to combat terrorism. The Strategy called on the United States to diminish “underlying conditions that terrorists exploit, by fostering economic, social, and political development, market-based economies, good governance, and the rule of law,” and to use “public information initiatives to de-legitimize terrorism.”²⁶

But even before the Strategy’s publication, efforts were underway to harness the power of “public information” to fight terrorism. By early 2002, new government-created platforms were broadcasting in Arabic, Radio Sawa and al Hurra TV, with the mission to “improve America’s image in the Middle East and win the hearts and minds of the Arab people.”²⁷ But these programs were actually already in the works before the 9/11 and, although they brought American content to Muslim audiences with the hope of correcting misperceptions they might hold about the United States, they were not adequate to the new task of countering extremist ideology.

Instead, grounded in a belief in the universal appeal of American pop culture—especially in majority youth societies, like the Middle East—Radio Sawa played mostly U.S. and Arabic pop music interspersed with infrequent news segments. This format, while initially successful in gaining listeners, did more to get feet

tapping than to expose its audiences to messages that could change hearts and minds.

Al Hurra TV, on the other hand, did provide more substantive programming—with 24-hour news coverage of both regional and U.S. issues as well as programming on subjects like women, human rights, religious liberty, and freedom of expression. The station's programming, however, came under intense criticism. Many in the region believed it inherently suffered from pro-American bias and therefore had little credibility in the eyes of citizens. Al Hurra's first news director quit due to his belief that the station was simply an avenue for promoting U.S. foreign policy and had no actual intent on spreading and sharing news.²⁸ Meanwhile, critics from the right pummeled the station for its alleged “anti-American” stance, justifying such claims by pointing to interviews of former extremists and individuals who on air expressed support of the 9/11 attacks and attacks by Hamas and Hezbollah in Israel.²⁹

Al Hurra's primary problem was not its critics, but its failure to reach many viewers. In a market with over 550 Arabic-language satellite TV channels and already dominated by the likes of al Jazeera, al Hurra failed to make an impression. A 2005 poll in Iraq, for example, found that only 14 percent of viewers turned on the American government-funded channel.³⁰ And perhaps it is just as well. The failures of Sawa and al Hurra were summed up by a 2006 study of university students in five Arab countries that found their attitude toward U.S. foreign policy worsened after tuning in to the channels.³¹

Undersecretary Beers would not last long in the top public diplomacy post—less than 18 months—a problem that has plagued the office ever since. In the last 15 years, eight people have served as Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy. Without a high-level strategy to guide efforts and with constant leadership turnover, Sawa, al Hurra and other public diplomacy programs were left to develop, or flounder, on their own without a broader framework or sufficient resources.

Subsequent Under Secretaries, notably the reporter-turned-presidential counselor Karen Hughes, largely maintained Beers's understanding of the problem as one of getting Muslim audiences to better understand and appreciate the United States by “offer[ing] people across the world a positive vision of hope that is rooted in our deepest values, our belief in liberty, in justice, in opportunity, in respect for all.”³²

The Freedom Agenda

At the same time that Hughes arrived at this view, Bush increasingly saw the problem as one of freedom versus oppression. He saw it as akin to the ideological struggle of the Cold War—a war his father helped end. In his Second Inaugural Address, Bush drew a preliminary connection between totalitarian political systems and violent extremism, observing that, “For as long as whole regions of the world simmer in resentment and tyranny—prone to ideologies that feed hatred and excuse murder—violence will gather, and multiply in destructive power, and cross the most defended borders, and raise a mortal threat.”³³ He would return to this topic and refine the argument in subsequent speeches.

Later in 2005, speaking before the National Endowment for Democracy, Bush clarified that political oppression was not so much the cause of extremism as a pretext for it; the real oppressors, in his view, were the extremists themselves. “This form of radicalism,” he told the audience:

“Exploits Islam to serve a violent political vision: the establishment, by terrorism and subversion and insurgency, of a totalitarian empire that denies all political and religious freedom. . . . Like the ideology of communism, our new enemy pursues totalitarian aims. Its leaders pretend to be in an aggrieved party, representing the powerless against imperial enemies. In truth, they have endless ambitions of imperial domination, and they wish to make everyone powerless except themselves.”³⁴

This familiar totalitarian aspiration Bush saw as unnatural and unwanted by any society, because, as he stated in his Second Inaugural, “freedom is the permanent hope of mankind, the hunger in dark places, the longing of the soul.”³⁵ Yet, implicit in this formulation was an understanding that the region’s lack of political and economic modernization played some role in making groups like al Qaeda more attractive. “If the broader Middle East is left to grow in bitterness, if countries remain in misery, while radicals stir the resentments of millions, then that part of the world will be a source of endless conflict and mounting danger for our generation and the next.”³⁶ In short, if already oppressed, becoming an oppressor might be the best choice. Defeating terrorism, Bush thus concluded, required “replacing hatred and resentment with democracy and hope across the broader Middle East.”³⁷ Liberty, Bush hoped, would both remove the motivation for joining extremist movements and provide societies with an alternative, more attractive political vision.

This hope led to increased emphasis on democracy-promotion efforts. Some of these were rhetorical, putting public and private pressure on Arab leaders to carry out reforms. Bilateral aid agreements were adjusted to increase their pro-democratic content. Congress created targeted aid programs and funds, such as the Foundation for the Future and the Middle East Partnership Initiative, a State-Department led civil society program aimed at “supporting democracy builders, empowering women, inspiring youth, and fostering economic opportunity.” Those who were viewed as complying with the Freedom Agenda were rewarded—for example, with free trade agreements, in the case of Morocco and Bahrain—and those who were hostile—namely, Syria and Iran—were pressured through sanctions and other means. By 2005, funding allotted for democracy promotion had increased to over \$2 billion a year, from \$500 million in 2000.³⁸

Administration officials struggled with balancing these efforts with military means, especially as they faced a growing insurgency in Iraq. In 2005, American officials, most notably Secretary of State Rumsfeld, began consciously using the phrase “struggle against

violent extremism” instead of the “war on terror.” Gen. Richard B. Myers, then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that he had “objected to the use of the term ‘war on terrorism’ before, because if you call it a war, then you think of people in uniform as being the solution.”³⁹ Likewise, Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith said that if U.S. strategy was limited to “protecting the homeland and attacking and disrupting terrorist networks, you’re on a treadmill that is likely to get faster and faster with time” and the key to winning the war was “addressing the ideological part of the war that deals with how the terrorists recruit and indoctrinate new terrorists.”⁴⁰

Despite the attempt to shift focus away from the military solution, non-military efforts were mainly seen as a sub-strategic concept within the War on Terror, and military means continued to dominate U.S. policymaking.

Public Diplomacy 2.0

Once he had articulated this new vision and recommitted to ideological struggle against terrorism, Bush sought to change the policies and programs first established under Beers. In 2006, a new Policy Coordinating Committee for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication was formed at the National Security Council to provide White House direction and prioritization to interagency efforts designed to reach foreign publics. The Committee released the U.S. National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication that made communicating U.S. values, promoting democratization, and nurturing common values strategic objectives of all future public diplomacy.⁴¹

Simultaneously, there was high-level consideration within the administration of whether to stand up a new U.S. Information Agency, which was successful in the Cold War, and/or whether to build up moderate partners in the Muslim World. Ultimately, a new USIA was seen as too cumbersome to establish. More generally, there was a lack of consensus on what the messaging should be, if there were credible partners in the Middle East, and how to

measure success. Instead, in 2008 Bush appointed then-Chairman of the Broadcasting Board of Governors Jim Glassman to the position of Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs.

In his position, Glassman championed a new approach to public diplomacy, what he called “Public Diplomacy 2.0.” Glassman advocated a departure from the previous policy, away from improving opinion of the United States abroad and toward discrediting terrorist narratives. “In the war of ideas,” he told an audience at the New America Foundation, “our core task in 2008 is to create an environment hostile to violent extremism. We do that in two ways: by undermining extremist ideologies and by encouraging young people to follow productive paths that lead away from terrorism.”⁴²

The major principles underlining Public Diplomacy 2.0 were: that indirect efforts usually work best; that the role of the United States is to convene and facilitate; that expertise resides in the public sector; that traditional public diplomacy approaches such as educational exchanges can and have been used successfully; and that speed is essential. As part of seeing the United States as a convener and a facilitator, Glassman emphasized elevating credible indigenous voices instead of pushing solely U.S. messages. In his view, the goal of public diplomacy was not necessarily to articulate the U.S. viewpoint, but to show the process of democratic thought and “portray the image of a society that grapples with tough issues, lets millions of voices be heard, and believes that, in the end, the best ideas win.”⁴³ Leveraging emerging social media technologies and the internet was a cornerstone of this approach. The new online world, according to Glassman, was one of conversation and interaction, and it did not work in al Qaeda’s favor. It was “a marketplace of ideas, and it is no coincidence that al Qaeda blows up marketplaces.”⁴⁴

While the change to a new administration and the end of Glassman’s tenure would prevent his vision from being implemented in a systematic way, some of these principles—

especially his belief in the potential of the internet—would carry over into the next administration.

The Barack Obama Administration

During his 2008 campaign, Barack Obama appealed to many Americans’ dismay at some elements of the Bush administration’s counterterrorism program. He pledged to prohibit the CIA from using enhanced interrogation techniques on terrorist prisoners. He also committed to closing the Guantanamo prison and ending the war in Iraq, which he characterized as a distraction from the campaign against al Qaeda. On the other hand, he expressed a willingness to launch airstrikes against al Qaeda in Pakistan if that country’s government refused to address the problem. The rise of homegrown terrorism, exacerbated by social media and other new communications technologies, added a new and vexing challenge.

Counterterrorism Policies

The Obama administration’s record on fighting terrorism is full of contradictions. While largely limiting American military presence and engagement overseas, for example, pulling American troops out of Iraq, President Barack Obama nevertheless oversaw a dramatic expansion of the use of drones and special operations forces to conduct targeted killings of al Qaeda leaders and other terrorists. Although these tactics led to the elimination of bin Laden and the significant degrading of senior al Qaeda leadership and capacity, they failed to prevent the rise of the Islamic State.

Targeting Core al Qaeda and Reducing American Military Engagement Overseas

In December 2009, an al Qaeda suicide bomber struck a CIA base in eastern Afghanistan, killing seven officers and contractors. But in other ways, the threat from al Qaeda and other centralized terror networks seemed to be declining during Obama’s first term. In May 2011, Navy SEALs killed bin Laden in a raid on his compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, capping a ten-year manhunt. While bin Laden’s death did not end the al Qaeda threat, many took it to suggest that the country was drawing closer to the end of the

struggle against terrorism. In a 2013 speech at the National Defense University, Obama declared that “this war, like all wars, must end,” and announced his intention to seek repeal of the 2001 AUMF.⁴⁵ But even as core al Qaeda’s ferocity dimmed, affiliate groups spread throughout the Middle East and North Africa. To counter this emerging threat, Obama called for the United States to “shift [its] counterterrorism strategy” away from large-footprint military operations and toward targeted interventions and “more effectively partner[ing] with countries where terrorist networks seek a foothold.”⁴⁶

This shift in strategy was centered on reducing large-scale military operations and instead increasing the presence of Special Forces in small-scale military operations and improving and continuing intelligence gathering and sharing with allies in the region. In a February 2009 speech to the Marine Corps, Obama announced his intention to withdraw the remaining 146,000 troops by December 31, 2011, the agreed upon date set by the Bush administration and Iraqi government. In August 2010, Obama declared that the “American combat mission in Iraq has ended,” and later in December 2011 the withdrawal was fully complete as the last 500 combat troops left Iraq.⁴⁷

Upon taking office, Obama significantly increased troop levels in Afghanistan from 30,000 to over 100,000 by 2011, in order “to seize the initiative, while building the Afghan capacity that can allow for a responsible transition of our forces out of Afghanistan.”⁴⁸ However, the administration’s plan for withdrawal faced intense challenges from a resilient Taliban which occupied or controlled over a fifth of Afghanistan and orchestrated deadly attacks against civilians and Afghani security forces. Originally, Obama hoped to have fewer than 5,000 troops in the country by 2017, but the situation forced reform to the plans, and the president announced in 2016 that over 8,400 troops would continue operating through 2017 and possibly later.⁴⁹

Unforeseen circumstances, most specifically the rise of the Islamic State in 2014, forced the administration to abandon some of the

major promises and goals in Iraq as well. Obama sent over 5,000 troops back to Iraq to support and train the Iraqi forces and later assist in airstrikes against ISIS. These troops, as stressed by the administration, were not to become involved in combat roles, but rather simply advise and support coalition operations.

Another component of this light-footprint strategy was a stepped-up drone program, targeting terrorists outside zones of active hostility at a higher operations tempo. At the same time, the administration also rolled out new rules outlining procedures to protect civilians, requiring the government to acknowledge when civilians were killed and pay compensation, and providing for annual reports documenting the number of strikes outside war zones and the resulting civilian casualties. By decreasing the number of civilian deaths and increasing transparency around the regrettable instances in which civilians were killed, the United States not only aimed to set new international norms surrounding the use of drones, but also to deny America’s terrorist opponents a valuable propaganda tool. By the end of Obama’s second term, his administration had conducted well over 500 drone strikes, or about 10 times as many as Bush had.⁵⁰

As a tactic employed to decapitate terrorist networks’ leadership and to kill terrorists, there is no question that the expansion of drone strikes has been effective; less clear, however, is the collateral effect of the use of targeted killing on the strategic struggle of ideas. Targeted killing with drone strikes is controversial both because its legality can be questioned and because thousands of innocent civilians have been killed; the number of new terrorist recruits drawn from family members of drone strike victims is undetermined.

The Arab Spring and the Rise of ISIS

As Obama attempted to reduce the U.S. footprint in the Middle East, the Arab world was engulfed by what came to be called the Arab Spring. Sparked by a revolution in Tunisia in late 2010, people across the region began demonstrating and demanding an end to

ossified, repressive regimes. In Egypt, longtime ruler Hosni Mubarak was overthrown and replaced briefly by the Muslim Brotherhood, which was replaced in turn by military rule. With the help of NATO airpower, Libyans deposed longtime dictator Muammar Qaddafi. Unfortunately, the resulting power vacuum produced chaos, civil war, and newly ungoverned spaces hospitable to terrorist groups. In Syria, dictator Bashar al Assad violently suppressed nonviolent demonstrations against his rule. Facing a brutal regime onslaught, anti-Assad forces took up arms. The crisis degenerated into full-on civil war among an array of ethnic and religious factions, a conflict that has killed hundreds of thousands and continues to rage today. The Obama administration, hesitant to engage militarily in yet another Middle Eastern country, backed anti-Assad rebels but provided only limited support.

The collapse of public order in Syria proved a boon for the remnants of al Qaeda in Iraq, the group that had battled the United States years earlier during the post-invasion insurgency. Reborn as the Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham (ISIS), the group began conquering territory in Syria and attracting thousands of foreign fighters from Europe, the Caucasus, and even the United States. ISIS quickly spread across the desert into western Iraq, whose Sunni Arab population chafed under the rule of the Shiite-dominated Baghdad government. In June 2014, Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, fell to ISIS forces, providing the group with a bonanza of weapons and cash. ISIS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi entered Mosul and proclaimed a caliphate, creating an aura of glamour and destiny that attracted yet more foreign jihadis to join the cause.

In August 2014, ISIS brutally murdered captured American journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff, shocking and outraging Americans. In response, Obama authorized air strikes to roll back ISIS. The anti-ISIS campaign would ultimately expand to include military advisers, Special Operations Forces, and other American personnel partnering with local allies on the ground, keeping its footprint limited while enhancing the operational effectiveness of the Iraqi military, Kurdish Peshmerga militias, and other local

partners. By early 2017, ISIS had lost substantial swaths of its territory in both Iraq and Syria. The Iraqi Army, buoyed by American military advisers and close air support, expelled ISIS from Mosul, the group's last toehold in Iraq, in 2017.

Meanwhile, other failed states continued to provide sanctuary for jihadist groups. In Somalia, al Shabaab continued to attract foreign recruits, including a number of young Somali-American men from Minneapolis. In Yemen, U.S. airstrikes had taken a toll on al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), but the 2015 campaign by the Iran-supported Houthi militia unwound much of this success. The collapse of the established Yemeni government in the face of the Houthi advance plunged the country back into terrorist-friendly chaos.

Homegrown terrorism has become a major challenge for Western Europe. European citizens traveling to Syria, Yemen, and Somalia gained on the job training in weapons and bomb making, as well as links to experienced terror planners and indoctrination in radical ideology. With those skills, some foreign fighters returned to threaten their home countries. One of the Kouachi brothers who murdered twelve at the *Charlie Hebdo* newspaper in Paris on January 7, 2015 had received weapons training in Yemen. Both brothers were born and grew up in Paris.

ISIS has been especially effective at striking the West, using mass migration flows from the Middle East into Europe to enable its European-born operatives to return to their home countries without detection. ISIS operatives executed a coordinated attack at three public sites in Paris in November 2015, killing 130 people. The mastermind was a Belgian national, with several French nationals involved. The March 2016 attack on the Zaventem Airport and the subway system in Brussels, which killed 34, was also carried out by Belgian nationals. The Bastille Day attack in Nice, France, which killed 84, was executed by a French resident of Tunisian origin. A Tunisian man who had lived in Italy for a number of years and sought asylum in Germany drove a truck into a crowd at a Christmas market in Berlin in December 2016, killing 12. The Nice

and Berlin attacks were carried out by disaffected Muslims (though not particularly devout) who claimed to be inspired by ISIS but were not directed or controlled by it.

During the Obama years, homegrown terrorism plagued the United States as well. In November 2009, U.S. Army psychiatrist Major Nidal Hasan killed 13 and wounded more than 30 at Fort Hood, Texas. Born in the United States, Hasan had been in frequent contact with extremist imam Anwar al Awlaki, an American citizen who had fled to Yemen and was later killed in a drone strike. At the Boston Marathon in April 2013, two Chechen-American brothers exploded improvised explosive devices that killed three and wounded hundreds. The brothers had learned to build the bombs from AQAP's online magazine. The surviving brother told authorities that they had been motivated by their Islamist beliefs and by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In July 2015, Muhammad Abdulazez killed four Marines at a Recruitment Center in Chattanooga. The FBI concluded that Abdulazez, who was affected by substance abuse and mental instability, had been inspired by foreign terrorist organizations and propaganda.

In 2015, husband and wife Rizan Farook and Tashfeen Malik attacked a government office in San Bernardino, California, killing 14 and wounding 22. Farook was an American citizen of Pakistani descent; Malik, who was born in Pakistan, had permanent resident status. According to the FBI, the couple were inspired by foreign terrorist groups. In 2016, Omar Mateen, an American citizen of Afghan descent, murdered 49 at an Orlando nightclub, the deadliest attack by a single shooter in U.S. history. During the shooting, Mateen made a 9-1-1 call in which he swore allegiance to the leader of ISIS. He told police that he was motivated by U.S. actions in Iraq and Syria.

Changes in communications technology in the years since 9/11 created both new opportunities and new challenges for law enforcement. Mobile devices, social media, and other digital technologies now generate an enormous volume of data that can be used to identify potential terrorists, disrupt plots, map networks,

and make cases. Section 702, which enables the U.S. government to acquire the electronic communications of suspected terrorists overseas, reportedly informs more than a quarter of the NSA's reports on international terrorism.⁵¹ At the same time, the internet has proved to be an effective recruiting and radicalization tool for terrorist groups, especially ISIS, which by summer 2016 was reportedly sending 5,000 messages per month via Twitter, Instagram, and other social media outlets to over a billion potential readers. And while communications were long an operational vulnerability for terrorists, recent advances in commercially available, powerful encryption have enabled terrorists to hide the content of their communications from intelligence and law enforcement agencies.

Counter-Radicalization Policies

Obama entered office seeking to end the “War on Terror,” cautioning against what he later categorized as “loose language that appears to pose a civilizational conflict between the West and Islam, or the modern world and Islam,” which he argued made it “harder, not easier, for our friends and allies and ordinary people to resist and push back against the worst impulses inside the Muslim world.”⁵² Broadly, he thought the United States needed to change how it was viewed by large swaths of the world—particularly in the Middle East where, when he took office, public opinion of the United States was dramatically low, with only 17 percent approving of U.S. leadership, compared with a worldwide average of 32 percent.⁵³

Cairo Speech Framework

As an incoming president, Obama shared Bush's concern for the need to counter the ideas that motivated terrorism and hoped to find a more productive voice with which to speak to the Muslim world: his own. Within months of taking office, Obama delivered major foreign policy speeches first in Ankara, on his first foreign trip as president in April 2009, and then, two months later in June, at Cairo's al Azhar University. Already in Ankara, he demonstrated that, while he may share the same objective as Bush, his diagnosis

of the root causes of extremist threat and his prescription for addressing them would be quite different. While Bush saw steady progress of the human condition and “a visible direction, set by liberty,” Obama noted that “history is often tragic.”⁵⁴ Where Bush saw the political and social conditions of Arab societies as preventing them from rejecting extremism, Obama saw the lack of cooperation as resulting from “the trust that binds [us having] been strained. . . in many places where the Muslim faith is practiced.”⁵⁵

Building on this assessment of broken bonds, Obama delivered his speech in Cairo with the intent to “seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world.” To achieve that fresh start, he pledged “to speak the truth as best I can. . . rooted in my own experience.”⁵⁶ Thus, invoking his own biography and trajectory to the White House as a testament to America’s ability to overcome its historical injustices and a promise that he would correct mistakes made vis-à-vis the Muslim world, he spoke as America’s public diplomat in chief.

What Obama sought from such a new beginning was a “partnership” in which the United States and Muslims would face sources of “tension” between them together. “The first issue that we have to confront,” he told his audience in Cairo, “is violent extremism in all of its forms.” That problem, in this view, originates from individuals that “exploited. . . tensions in a small but potent minority of Muslims.” Resolving those tensions will require sidelining those individuals. “The sooner the extremists are isolated and unwelcome in Muslim communities,” Obama declared, “the sooner we will all be safer.”⁵⁷ The challenge of confronting violent extremism, therefore, is that of encouraging and empowering Muslim communities to isolate those with extreme views.

To achieve that task, Obama spent the rest of the speech focusing on sources of “tension” between the United States and Muslim world, vowing to remove them. This tension, in Obama’s narrative, had been created by the Iraq War, the lack of Israeli-Palestinian peace, and Iran’s pursuit of a nuclear weapon. He also pointed out, however, that “sweeping change brought by modernity and

globalization led many Muslims to view the West as hostile to the traditions of Islam” and pointed to differences over the value of democracy, religious freedom, and women’s rights as contributing to this tension. To alleviate such concerns, he noted that “No system of government can or should be imposed by one nation by any other.”⁵⁸ Instead, he focused on how addressing and rectifying the grievances that enabled radicalization would serve to lessen the appeal and power of extremist groups.

A focus on eliminating grievances sidelined efforts to counter terrorist ideology—particularly the elements that used Islam for their justification. To that end, the National Strategy for Counterterrorism put forth by the Obama administration described al Qaeda’s doctrine as a “fabricated legitimization of violence” and not truly Islamic, excising any discussion of Islam from national security and counterterrorism discourse.⁵⁹

Countering Violent Extremism

The Obama administration articulated the vision that would become known as Countering Violent Extremism, or CVE, in 2011, in its strategy and implementation plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism. It laid out its goals as in three areas of activity: “(1) enhancing engagement with and support to local communities that may be targeted by violent extremists; (2) building government and law enforcement expertise for preventing violent extremism; and (3) countering violent extremist propaganda while promoting our ideals.”⁶⁰

Notably, the strategy did not specify Islamist terrorism, instead sweeping in all “individuals who support or commit ideologically-motivated violence to further political goals.”⁶¹ The strategy drew criticism for being vague and nonspecific in describing the threat it was seeking to counter. Senators Joe Lieberman and Susan Collins, Chair and Ranking Member of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, argued that “[c]haracterizing the threat as ‘violent extremism’ is far too broad. This vague term is never defined and could cover a range of ideologies that, while

capable of causing harm, do not pose the preeminent threat to our national security today that Islamist extremism does.”⁶²

Spurred by the rise of ISIS and the threat posed by “lone wolf” attackers influenced by radical ideology, including attacks in Ottawa, Sydney, Paris, and Copenhagen, CVE received new momentum at a 2015 White House summit. At the summit, leaders from more than 60 countries gathered to discuss “concrete steps the United States and its partners can take to develop community-oriented approaches to counter hateful extremist ideologies that radicalize, recruit or incite to violence.”⁶³ The White House described CVE as encompassing “the preventative aspects of counterterrorism as well as interventions to undermine the attraction of extremist movements and ideologies that seek to promote violence.”⁶⁴

What CVE has meant in practice, however, remains nebulous. Extremism expert Peter Neumann observed that CVE represented a “potentially unlimited” range of activities.⁶⁵ The White House summit laid out a broad agenda for CVE, including development assistance and the provision of economic opportunities, educational opportunities, measures to empower youth and women, the resolution of protracted conflicts, community policing, and the dissemination of counter-extremist narratives.

CVE efforts attempt to assist local communities in building resilience to radicalization efforts and developing community-based interventions to steer people off the path to radicalization before any violent acts can be committed. With an emphasis on local communities, CVE shifted focus away from the sources of extremist messaging and onto the recipients—and away from the Middle East itself and onto the homeland.

Counter-Messaging and Social Media

Abroad, the Obama administration pivoted away from public diplomacy as a principle counter-radicalization tool. This was partly

in response to the identified failures of U.S. foreign programming, such as al Hurra TV and Radio Sawa, as well as due to the emergence of social media and a shift in focus from improving the image of the United States in Muslim societies to reaching out directly to those being radicalized.

To this end, in 2011 the Obama administration established the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) at the State Department with a mission to “coordinate, orient, and inform Government-wide public communications activities directed at audiences abroad and targeted against violent extremists and terrorist organizations, especially al-Qa’ida and its affiliates and adherents, with the goal of using communication tools to reduce radicalization by terrorists and extremist violence and terrorism that threaten the interests and national security of the United States.”⁶⁶

“Our goal,” said former CSCC head Ambassador Alberto Fernandez, “is not to make people love the U.S. Our goal is to make al-Qaeda look bad.”⁶⁷ To do so, CSCC mounted campaigns across social media platforms, including producing YouTube videos in multiple languages and establishing a Twitter presence where CSCC staff would go toe-to-toe with terrorist group members and supporters online. It is questionable, however, whether the CSCC achieved that goal, or even represented the right approach for tackling this challenge.

The organization’s biggest problem was the disparity between its own limited size and the gargantuan scope of the challenge with which it was presented.

CSCC operated on a budget of between \$5 million and \$6 million per year yet was charged with an immense objective.⁶⁸ Vastly outnumbered by the Islamic State and other terrorist organizations, CSCC faced a deluge of online recruiting accounts and sites, with not enough resources and capital to successfully counter the dissemination of information and propaganda. CSCC-affiliated Twitter accounts had dramatically fewer followers than their jihadist opponents, and Islamist Twitter users have used public disputes

with CSCC Twitter accounts as free publicity, further spreading their message and boosting their own follower counts.⁶⁹

Although successive heads of the CSCC adjusted how the center disseminated its messages and engaged with extremists online in attempt to deal with these challenges in funding and capacity, none ever found a workable formula.

Richard LeBaron, in his initial efforts as the first director of CSCC, sought to tailor messages narrowly to those most vulnerable to radicalization, rather than the entire Muslim community. He believed appealing to the masses reinforced the extremists' claim that the United States was in a battle against Islam and all Muslims. The content was mild in nature and sought to offer comparisons illustrating progress occurring in the Middle East to discredit the message of al Qaeda and other extremist organizations.

After the retirement of LeBaron, Alberto Fernandez brought with him a penchant for combative strategy and messaging, employing a rough and graphic take on combating ISIS. The most visible of Fernandez's efforts was the controversial 2014 "Welcome to ISIS Land" video, which mimicked the style of ISIS recruiting videos, using footage of ISIS attacks interspersed with satirical invectives to join ISIS in order to learn "useful new skills" such as "crucifying and executing Muslims."⁷⁰

While this flashy approach earned more attention, it was also met with sharp criticism due to its graphic, violent nature. Public backlash to CSCC campaigns, particularly "Welcome to ISIS Land," empowered critics of Fernandez's approach within the government, who expressed discomfort with the State Department seal being attached to this more aggressive style.

Fernandez and other experts, however, argued that the "risk-averse" and bureaucratic nature of government hampers effective counter-messaging.⁷¹ While LeBaron's tenure as CSCC head was nowhere near as controversial as Fernandez's, he, too, expressed his belief

that: "We need to give our people the space to act imaginatively in this hall of mirrors, without fear of ridicule and abrupt changes of course as they experiment and innovate. I know how hard this work is and I also know there is a legitimate role for an overt U.S. government mechanism that adopts a sharp edge to make prospective terrorists aware of the human consequences of terror."⁷²

In February 2015, Fernandez retired and was replaced by Rashad Hussain. Hussain and Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy Richard Stengel implemented a new strategy that veered away from the earlier emotional, "snarky" tone and toward a fact-based message that directly countered the supposed gains of the Islamic State.⁷³ Cautious of creating a "back-fire" effect, CSCC focused on helping other nations establish counter-messaging operations and searching for new and innovative ways to counter radical ideologies.⁷⁴

Despite experimenting with different approaches, confidence in the CSCC remained low. In 2015, the White House commissioned an external review of the CSCC, composed of Silicon Valley and New York marketing and technology experts, that questioned the direct-messaging aspects of the CSCC's mission.⁷⁵ Also in 2015, a leaked memo from Stengel offered a bleak evaluation of the anti-ISIS coalition's messaging: "When it comes to the external message, our narrative is being trumped by ISIL's. We are reactive—we think about 'counter-narratives,' not 'our narrative.'"⁷⁶

This loss of confidence in the CSCC led to a rebranding of the Center as a whole, and a reevaluation of its mission. In 2016, the CSCC was named as the Global Engagement Center and tasked with four key objectives: building partnerships with governments, NGOs, communities, and religious organizations; utilizing data analytics to better target messaging; producing collaborative content to counter the Islamic State; and acting as a liaison for numerous national security agencies operating in the information sphere.

The most significant part of the GEC's reorientation was a retreat from direct-messaging, moving away from producing English-language content and the Twitter battles that had characterized most of CSCC's existence. Instead, the GEC emphasizes promoting and establishing partnerships with foreign governments to assist in the spread of more localized messages. Recognizing that the United States may not be the best or most credible messenger on questions of extremism among Muslim audiences, the GEC partnered with local counter-messaging centers such as the UAE's Sawab Center and Malaysia's Regional Digital Counter-Messaging Communication Center.

The State Department, however, was not the only branch of the national security apparatus that set up efforts to counter extremist messaging during this time. Efforts in other parts of the government encountered very similar problems. The Department of Defense's "WebOps" program, for instance, attempted to counter ISIS's recruiting efforts by identifying specific targets that have shown a willingness to join the organization, and then establishing contact through a fake account to attempt to dissuade them. WebOps specialists, however, lacked the substantive and linguistic skills to counter terrorist recruiters. For example, supposedly Arab language-proficient contractors hired to interact with ISIS and potential ISIS recruits repeatedly made mistakes, such as referring to the "Palestinian Authority" as the "Palestinian Salad."⁷⁷ Reports suggest, moreover, that data meant to capture the success of the WebOps program might have been manipulated.⁷⁸ The operation is now under review by the House Committee on Oversight and Government and Reform.

At the same time that the Obama administration was seeking to develop and hone its counter-messaging capabilities, the Congress revisited troubled U.S. foreign programming services, such as al Hurra TV and Radio Sawa, which continued to struggle to find audiences, in an effort to make them more relevant and effective. To this end, Representatives Ed Royce (R-CA) and Eliot Engel (D-NY), the Chairman and Ranking Member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, introduced in 2014 and again in 2015 the

bipartisan "United States International Communications Reform Act," aiming to reform the Broadcasting Board of Governors, Voice of America, and other international broadcasting efforts such as the Middle East Broadcasting Networks.

The legislation attempted to improve well-documented management problems with the Broadcasting Board of Governors, but also to clarify the mission of U.S. broadcasting efforts, which is to "benefit the national security and related interests of the United States, and the safety and security of United States citizens at home and abroad."⁷⁹ "The competition of ideas is still very much alive," said Engel, and "the United States has an important role to play in facilitating the free flow of information and in sharing our values."⁸⁰ Elements of the bill appointing a single CEO and reducing the part-time board to an advisory role became law in an amendment to the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act.

The Donald Trump Administration's Approach: Early Signals

Candidate Donald Trump's approach to counterterrorism represented a partial break with the prevalent view of the Bush-era Republican Party. On one hand, he pledged to crush terrorist groups militarily and ideologically, speaking of the need to partner with America's Arab allies to "defeat terrorism and send its wicked ideology into oblivion."⁸¹ On the other, he disavowed the type of nation-building efforts that, after 15 years of hard and costly effort, produced inconclusive results in Afghanistan and Iraq. This formula appeared to resonate with many Americans, who remained concerned about terrorism but had grown distrustful of promises of Middle Eastern democratization that had accompanied the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq and the Obama administration's embrace of the "Arab Spring."

Counterterrorism Policies

Once in office, the Trump administration quickly signaled that it intended to take an aggressive approach toward targeted counterterrorism operations. A high-risk Special Forces raid in

Yemen in late January 2017, which resulted in the death of a Navy SEAL and significant civilian casualties, was an early indicator that the risk-reward calculus would be more forward leaning. The president then granted a request by the Department of Defense to deem Yemen an “area of active hostilities,” meaning that the Department could authorize lethal strikes against suspected terrorists without subjecting each operation to an interagency review. Enabled by the new policy, DOD launched an intense series of several dozen airstrikes against al Qaeda in Yemen in early March. Shortly thereafter, the administration made a similar determination deeming Somalia an “area of active hostilities.” As in Yemen, this gave the Department of Defense greater latitude to conduct airstrikes against al Shabaab, a Somalia-based affiliate of al Qaeda, without submitting each strike to interagency review. In June, the Department began using that authority to conduct airstrikes in Somalia. The expanded air campaign supports Somali forces and African Union peacekeepers on the ground, who are assisted by American advisers.

In the administration’s view, delegating greater authority to the Department of Defense will reduce political “micromanagement” of operational decisions and enable the United States to increase significantly the pressure on terrorist groups.⁸² Human-rights advocates and some former officials, however, have criticized the administration’s efforts to loosen the constraints on kinetic counterterrorism operations. In their view, whatever tactical benefits accrue from the greater pace of strikes will be outweighed by the strategic drawbacks generated by greater civilian casualties. These could include driving more young Muslims to radicalism and alienating regional partners.

Militarily, at least, the first half of 2017 witnessed significant progress in the anti-ISIS fight. In total, ISIS has lost 78 percent of its holdings in Iraq and 58 percent in Syria, compared with the peak of its reach and power in 2015, a total of 27,000 square miles of territory—8,000 of which have been reclaimed under the Trump administration.⁸³

ISIS has been routed from Mosul, the largest city in its putative caliphate and one of its last remaining toeholds in Iraq. In Syria, the Trump administration has preserved the counter-ISIS military coalition in Northwest Syria assembled by the Obama administration, but has sought to accelerate the pace of operations. In the administration’s early days, the Pentagon deployed hundreds of additional American troops to support local anti-ISIS forces. Then, in April, the White House authorized Secretary of Defense James Mattis to determine the appropriate number of American personnel needed to achieve the mission in Syria, without seeking White House approval for each increase. In order to prepare for a final move on the de facto ISIS capital, Raqqa, the administration also announced plans to arm the Syrian Democratic Forces, a predominantly Kurdish group of fighters in northern Syria viewed by Turkey as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party terrorist group. These U.S.-backed forces recently launched their final assault on Raqqa and have already recaptured much of the city.

Although the fall of first Mosul and then Raqqa will herald the symbolic end of the Islamic State’s self-declared caliphate, it will hardly be the end of ISIS. At this time, it still holds pockets of territory in both Syria—from Deir Ezzour stretching southeast along the banks of the Euphrates to Abu Kamal—and Iraq, including Hawija and Tal Afar. Moreover, the group has opened chapters around the world, from Nigeria to Malaysia.

Nor is the future of the territories liberated from ISIS clear. In Iraq, the central government, now reasserting control over Mosul, has proved unable in the past to earn the trust and allegiance of Sunnis and other ethnic groups. The role that Shiite militias, widely loathed among Iraq’s Sunnis, played in the counter-ISIS campaign will only exacerbate that challenge. In Syria, it is doubtful that the largely Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces will be able to hold newly retaken territory that is populated largely by Sunni Arabs. As with the post-9/11 initial invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, a successful war may only be a precursor to a difficult and tenuous peace.

Despite successes on the battlefields in Syria and Iraq, terrorist attacks in European cities continued apace. In March, a British citizen drove his car into a crowd on a bridge near Parliament, killing two.⁸⁴ In early April, an Uzbek national who had been rejected for residency in Sweden drove a truck into a crowd in front of a Stockholm department store, killing four.⁸⁵ In May, England was rocked by a suicide bombing in Manchester that killed 23, and another bridge attack in London in June that killed eight more.⁸⁶ A van attack in Barcelona in August killed 14, and gas canisters discovered in the rubble of a house used by the attackers as a base indicate that more attacks were planned.⁸⁷ Unfortunately, these attacks appear to be a feature of European life today. Europe remains under heightened threat, with law enforcement and intelligence agencies struggling to cope with the number of radicalized individuals in their countries.

The administration ended one noteworthy component of the Obama administration's approach in Syria: the latter's efforts to unseat President Bashar al Assad. *The Washington Post* recently reported that "President Trump has decided to end the CIA's covert program to arm and train moderate Syrian rebels battling the government of Bashar al-Assad."⁸⁸ This may reflect a determination that, given energetic Russian support, the regime's survival is assured, meaning that it will be a part of whatever postwar settlement emerges in Syria and therefore futile to contest. Shortly after this decision was apparently made, the United States and Russia brokered a cease-fire in southwest Syria, where some of the U.S.-supported groups had operated.

Finally, the administration, led by then-Secretary of Homeland Security John Kelly, took significant steps to increase aviation security in light of heightened threats posed by sophisticated miniaturized explosives being tested by the Islamic State. First, in May, the Department announced a ban on laptops and tablets in the passenger compartments of U.S.-bound flights originating from certain Middle Eastern airports. In June, Kelly announced that the United States would forego a broader laptop ban on U.S.-bound flights only if originating airports imposed new, sophisticated

screening measures to screen for explosives concealed in electronic devices. The two announcements triggered swift reactions overseas: By early July, all airports covered by the original ban had complied with the initial phase of the new DHS explosive-screening standards. Worldwide, more than 280 airports had demonstrated compliance with the first phase of the new standards.

Counter-Radicalization Policies

The Trump administration has also placed early emphasis on combating the ideological roots of Islamist terrorism. In May, the president delivered a major speech in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, laying out his vision for cooperation between the Muslim world and the West. In the speech, he noted the centrality of ideology in fueling terrorism, stating that a peaceful "future can only be achieved through defeating terrorism and the ideology that drives it." The speech also urged that "Muslim-majority countries must take the lead in combating radicalization," by taking four steps: denying terrorists safe havens within their territory, cutting off terrorists' access to funds, unequivocally condemning extremism, and spreading messages of tolerance.⁸⁹

The speech also heralded a notable geopolitical shift. The president announced that under the Trump administration, the U.S. regional strategy would be based on "Principled Realism," and would seek to "advance security through stability, not through radical disruption"—a clear reference to the instability unleashed by previous administrations' support for internal reforms, nation-building and the "Arab Spring."⁹⁰ Symbolizing that shift was the subsequent joint appearance by the president, Saudi King Salman, and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al Sisi at the opening of Saudi Arabia's new "Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology." This signaled a clear shift away from the Bush administration's focus on democracy promotion and the Obama administration's prioritization of outreach directly to Muslim societies, instead emphasizing regional stability and collaboration with longstanding, albeit autocratic allies.

Just days after the president's visit to Riyadh, six Arab states cut diplomatic ties with Qatar, a small but energy-rich Gulf state. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Bahrain charged Qatar with financing terrorism, aligning with Iran, and sowing political discord in the region through its media outlets such as Doha-based al Jazeera as well as its support for the Muslim Brotherhood. Trump at least initially appeared to support the quartet's move to punish Qatar for these supposed transgressions, perhaps because they were formulated to resonate with his administration's objectives. Indeed, early in Trump's tenure, officials were reportedly considering designating the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, but no action has yet been taken against it, due to disagreements within the administration, the complicated and decentralized nature of the Brotherhood, and the difficulty it might potentially cause with allies, such as Jordan and Turkey, who are either generally supportive of the Brotherhood or have Brotherhood-affiliated political parties represented in their governments.

A draft counterterrorism strategy leaked in May sounded similar notes. In a departure from the last Republican administration, the strategy pledged to "avoid costly, large-scale U.S. military interventions," instead taking the view that the United States should "increasingly look to partners to share the responsibility for countering terrorist groups." At the same time, the draft reiterated that the United States "will always act to disrupt, prevent and respond to terrorist attacks against our nation, our citizens, our interests overseas and our allies," including through "direct and unilateral action, if necessary." The draft also sounded a note of realism about the duration of the threat: terrorism, it acknowledged, "cannot be defeated with any sort of finality."⁹¹

Despite the administration's commitment to the fight against extremist ideology, it has yet to fully fund some of the existing programs designed for this purpose. Secretary of State Tillerson has yet to claim a total of nearly \$80 million in funds earmarked for the Global Engagement Center, \$19 million from Congress and \$60 million from the Defense Department, which will expire by the end of September if not transferred to the State Department.⁹²

The Trump administration has also looked to revise the Obama administration's approach to domestic counter-radicalization. In early February, discussion surfaced about renaming the Obama administration's Countering Violent Extremism program; the program, which had encompassed other radical ideologies as well as Islamist extremism, was to be renamed Countering Radical Islamic Extremism. Then, in May, the White House's budget proposed eliminating the \$50 million program altogether. Some welcomed the move as eliminating an ineffective program; others feared that renaming or ending the program would undermine cooperation with domestic Muslim communities.

On June 29, following a U.S. Supreme Court decision, the Trump administration restricted for 90 days travel from Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, and limited all refugee admissions from those countries for 120 days. Travelers from those countries cannot enter the United States unless they can show a bona fide relationship with a U.S. person or entity; Trump administration guidelines interpret this as including only "immediate relatives." The rationale underlying the restriction is to give the government sufficient time to thoroughly vet the applicants. Opponents argue, however, that it is both overbroad as a national security measure and harmful to America's standing in the Muslim world. The Supreme Court will revisit the issue to determine its overall legality in the fall.

Threat Assessment

The terrorist threat to the United States today, although diminished since 9/11, remains grave. Before 9/11, al Qaeda enjoyed a geographic sanctuary in Afghanistan and considerable freedom to move operatives and money around the world. Those conditions, coupled with gaps in U.S. security, allowed al Qaeda to carry out the complex 9/11 plot without detection.

Today, terrorist groups no longer enjoy the uncontested geographic sanctuary Afghanistan provided before 9/11. Terrorists now face relentless military pressure in every country where they have gathered. Their communications are surveilled by sophisticated, well-funded intelligence agencies. An intense U.S.-led effort has made it far harder for terrorist groups to use the financial system to raise and transfer money. Moving operatives across borders has become far more difficult, although the European migration crisis has created a new and vexing avenue for infiltration. Perhaps most important, the 9/11 attacks (and subsequent attacks in London, Madrid, and elsewhere) gave rise to a culture of vigilance that makes it harder, though not impossible, for terrorists to catch major powers by surprise. As a result, al Qaeda and other jihadi groups now struggle to find the breathing room to develop complex plots on the scale of 9/11.

The current terrorist threat, although not existential, remains a menace to public safety and global security; this is especially so in Europe. Instability in Iraq, Syria, and Libya has created new ungoverned spaces where terrorist groups thrive. A particular concern is homegrown terrorism committed by Muslim residents of Western countries, often inspired or enabled from afar by terrorist propagandists or facilitators. In the long term, the greatest counterterrorism challenge facing the United States is reducing the appeal of terrorists' ideology.

Terrorist Groups

The threat from the centralized al Qaeda network, with its core in the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands, has been largely superseded by regional terrorist groups: AQAP, al Shabaab—and ISIS, which emerged as the more regionally-focused Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham before declaring itself a worldwide caliphate. These groups have attracted aspiring jihadis from dozens of countries—including, most worryingly, thousands from Western Europe and many dozens from the United States.

ISIS

After ISIS's initial rapid expansion, culminating in its conquest of Mosul in 2014, an effective international response has rolled the group back dramatically. U.S. efforts to interdict ISIS funding, coupled with airstrikes against oil facilities, have hampered ISIS's ability to fund its operations. On the ground, the combination of U.S. military and paramilitary advisors and precision U.S. airpower has proved a force-multiplier for local partners: Iraqi government forces in Iraq, and a coalition of Kurdish and Sunni Arab militias in Syria.

The results have been dramatic: In 2014, ISIS had between 20,000 and 31,500 fighters; today's estimates are closer to 15,000.⁹³ As of mid-2017, ISIS has lost virtually all of its territory in Iraq. In Syria, U.S.-backed Kurdish and Sunni Arab militias, as well as Turkish troops and other Sunni groups backed by Turkey, have retaken large swaths of territory from ISIS. U.S.-backed forces recently entered Raqqa and are locked in a street-by-street fight for the de facto ISIS capital.

Despite these military setbacks, ISIS will remain a threat to Europe and the United States, in four distinct ways.

First, as ISIS's territorial control collapses, foreign fighters who traveled from the West to fight with the group may return to their home countries—perhaps using civilian migration routes into Europe to disguise their true identities, as some of the perpetrators of the 2015 Paris attacks did. In testimony before the Senate Homeland Security Committee earlier this year, then-FBI Director James Comey warned that terrorists fleeing the battlefield will create a diaspora of highly dangerous jihadists in Western Europe and possibly in the United States.⁹⁴ The National Counterterrorism Center estimates that 20,000 foreign fighters have traveled to Syria, with 3,400 coming from the West and 150 of that number from the United States.⁹⁵ Some of these battle-hardened fighters will seek to execute terrorist attacks in their home countries, as ISIS operatives did in Paris and Brussels. Due to visa waiver agreements between the United States and Europe, it is possible returning European foreign fighters may have access to U.S. targets as well.

Second, the idea of the ISIS caliphate will continue to allure some disaffected Muslims in the West. Several recent homegrown terrorists, in Europe and the United States, have been inspired by or pledged allegiance to ISIS. These include the perpetrators of the San Bernardino shooting, which killed 14; the Orlando nightclub attack, which killed 49; and the brutal truck attacks in Nice and Berlin. As ISIS loses its physical caliphate, it has put new effort into strengthening its “virtual caliphate,” the online propaganda machine it uses to direct or inspire homegrown attacks.⁹⁶ American born Anwar Awlaki, although killed several years ago in a drone strike in Yemen, lives on in his Youtube and other videos, continuing to inspire a new generation of jihadists. Much the same can be said of other ISIS recruiters.

Third, new terrorist tactics publicized by ISIS will likely resurface elsewhere. For example, ISIS has learned to weaponize inexpensive, widely available hobbyist drones. To date, ISIS has dropped small mortar shells from drones on the battlefield in Iraq and Syria, and social media is flooded with photos and videos documenting the group's drone prowess. Having flown this technology on the

battlefield, it is not a big step for ISIS to focus on how it can be used to target civilians in other countries. ISIS's objective may be to inspire lone wolves in Europe and the United States to use drones against soft targets, perhaps by dropping explosives onto a crowd at a public event.

Additionally, like al Qaeda and ISIS, jihadist groups will continue to aspire to possess weapons of mass destruction, a fact which the United States and allies should continue to guard against. In 2014, ISIS seized 40 kilograms of low-grade uranium from Mosul University, as well as the former center of Saddam Hussein's chemical weapons program, containing decayed but potentially usable chemical munitions.⁹⁷ At the same time, ISIS did not take possession of more lethal caches of Cobalt-60 in Mosul, either unaware of its presence or unable to extract it without exposure.⁹⁸ In 2017, there were reports that ISIS—which has been accused of using chemical weapons over 70 times since 2014—was gathering its chemical weapons experts in Syria, potentially preserving and increasing its ability to manufacture and use chemical weapons as it is pushed from its remaining strongholds.⁹⁹ The existence of hardened terrorists with expertise in chemical or radiological weapons will continue to pose a threat even after ISIS is defeated: If future groups are able to acquire radiological or chemical material and sufficient expertise, they may be able to manufacture “dirty bombs,” which combine radiological or chemical materials with conventional explosives.

Finally, ISIS has expanded into other geographic areas beyond its home territory in Syria and Iraq. Despite being pushed from its Libyan foothold of Sirte, there remains the risk that, if pushed out of Iraq and Syria, ISIS will be able to reconstitute itself in Libya, where it still maintains training camps and several hundred fighters, against which the United States launched airstrikes in January 2017. Fighters in ISIS's “Khorasan Province” affiliate in Afghanistan have also launched a number of bloody attacks in that country, and ISIS fighters killed more than 30 in a suicide assault on a hospital in Kabul. ISIS's affiliate in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula has

bombed a Russian passenger jet carrying more than 200 passengers, massacred dozens of Coptic Christians, and carried out sophisticated attacks on government forces. Boko Haram, one faction of which now styles itself ISIS's West African province, has killed tens of thousands in rural Nigeria and neighboring countries.

Outside of the Middle East and Africa, ISIS has rapidly gained influence in southeast Asia, providing another potential base for future operations. Both Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur, as well as other cities in Indonesia and Malaysia, have been wracked by attacks from ISIS-related groups and individuals. Most ominously, ISIS has established a worrying foothold in Mindanao, the Philippines' second largest island, where a largely Muslim population beset for decades by poverty, lawlessness, and the predations of heavily armed, roving, criminal gangs, has provided an ample and receptive pool for jihadi recruitment.

In spring 2017, one of the leading Islamist factions, Maute, violently seized Marawi, a Mindanao city of 200,000 inhabitants. Maute, now closely aligned with ISIS, has been joined by the al Qaeda-linked Abu Sayaf group, which has deep roots in the Philippines, and other Islamist factions. Leaders of these rebel forces have sworn allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi and have imposed draconian ISIS rule in whatever regions they conquer. Responding to the danger posed by the consolidation of extremist groups dedicated to ISIS, the Philippines Army has laid siege to Marawi, where dozens of civilians have been killed and thousands have fled.¹⁰⁰ Foreign fighters from Malaysia and Indonesia have joined extremist forces in Mindanao, and ISIS recruiters have urged local extremists who are unable to travel to the battlefields of Iraq and Syria to remain in the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia, to attack government authorities and institutions in their home regions.¹⁰¹ With ISIS consolidating in the Philippines, the United States, which has been assisting Philippines government forces in its battle against extremism since 2002, has reportedly been considering authorizing U.S. airstrikes against ISIS in the Philippines.¹⁰²

It is clear that ISIS is metastasizing far beyond its traditional strongholds. As the Islamic State's control and influence recede in Iraq and Syria due to the pounding it has taken from allied forces, ISIS has multiple options to establish itself elsewhere, creating a new center for global jihad.

Al Qaeda and Affiliates

While overshadowed by ISIS's meteoric rise, other terrorist groups remain dangerous and continue to seek to attack the United States. Al Qaeda's nominal leader, former bin Laden deputy Ayman al Zawahiri, remains at large in the Afghan-Pakistan borderlands. Large numbers of fighters loyal to Zawahiri have gathered in Syria; in January, a U.S. airstrike killed more than 100 al Qaeda fighters who had gathered near Aleppo. Hayat Tahrir al Sham, al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, remains a powerful force in that country's civil war. Al Qaeda also has affiliates in North Africa (al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) and the Indian Subcontinent.

The most worrying, however, is AQAP, a sophisticated adversary with a record of attempts to strike the U.S. homeland. In February 2015, Yemen's civil war forced the United States to close its embassy in Sana'a, hampering intelligence-gathering efforts against AQAP. AQAP, which already possessed sophisticated bomb-making capabilities, is continuing to refine those techniques, attempting to develop smaller, easy to conceal, non-metallic bombs that are undetectable by airport security. Once such device nearly brought down a Northwest Airlines flight over Detroit in 2009. The U.S. military has maintained an aggressive operations tempo against the group, including a night raid by U.S. Special Forces and more than 30 airstrikes over several days in early March 2017.

Similar explosives continue to pose a threat to aviation. In 2016, a terrorist snuck a laptop bomb through airport security in Mogadishu, Somalia. The explosion blew a hole in the aircraft; fortunately, the pilots were able to land safely, with the terrorist himself the only casualty. Intelligence authorities now report that ISIS and other terrorist groups have stepped up efforts to conceal

explosives in laptops and other small electronic devices. Press reports indicate that terrorists have stolen airport screening machines, which they are using to ensure that laptop bombs can evade security checkpoints. Concern about these ominous developments led the United States and western European countries to ban laptops on flights originating from 10 airports in eight Middle Eastern and African countries. That ban has since been lifted, but only after then-Secretary of Homeland Security John Kelly mandated that all originating airports for flights to the United States deploy heightened explosive-screening measures. This dramatic measure illustrates the significance of this threat in the eyes of American officials.

Recent events confirm American officials' assessment that aviation remains a top target for terrorists. In early August, ISIS plotters apparently succeeded in shipping explosive components on a cargo flight from Turkey to Australia. Fortunately, the Australia-based conspirators were arrested before they could assemble the bomb and place it on a passenger flight.

U.S. Vulnerabilities and Challenges

The United States has dramatically improved its counterterrorism, intelligence, and homeland-security capabilities in the years since 9/11. These changes have made the United States a far harder target for terrorist attacks. Nonetheless, several key challenges remain.

Homegrown Terrorists

The jihadist threat is becoming increasingly decentralized. As terrorist groups lose geographic sanctuaries, they have sought to strike back by urging potential followers to conduct attacks in the West. So-called "lone wolves" have been a problem that western security forces have confronted for more than a decade. ISIS and AQAP, however, are making the lone-wolf threat more lethal, pioneering what are known as enabled or remote-controlled attacks. In this model, terrorist operatives use the internet to

identify disaffected young people to commit attacks in their home countries in the West.

Successful attacks in the United States demonstrate the dangers of such links between homegrown terrorists and foreign jihadi expertise. The Tsarnaev brothers, who committed the Boston Marathon bombings, learned to build their homemade pressure-cooker bombs from Inspire magazine, produced by AQAP. The brothers were influenced by lectures from Anwar al Awlaki, a U.S.-born AQAP propagandist involved in several terrorist plots and later killed in a drone strike. Awlaki also inspired Fort Hood shooter Nidal Hasan, who killed 13 people in 2009.

The threat of ISIS- or AQAP-enabled attacks is compounded by their deliberate choice to emphasize the killing power of low-tech tactics, such as the mass shootings in San Bernardino and Orlando. As seen in Nice, Berlin, and Barcelona, a truck driven by a committed jihadi into a crowd of bystanders can kill scores of people and instill widespread fear. These simple plots do not require advanced skills, funding, travel, or communications. They offer little to no warning, meaning that there is almost no way for counterterrorism officials to stop them. The British security services warn that low-tech shooting plots by fighters returning from war zones are likely in the United Kingdom in the years ahead.

The Internet and Encrypted Communications

Al Qaeda, ISIS, and other terrorist groups have devoted substantial personnel and resources to exploiting the internet and social media. Terrorist groups have used cyberspace for propaganda, recruiting, and psychological warfare. To date, however, terrorist groups have not successfully used cyber means to achieve operational effects analogous to terrorist attacks in the physical world.

The most prominent terrorist uses of cyberspace have been propaganda and recruiting, especially on social media. Most prominently, ISIS has used the internet to disseminate slickly produced propaganda and to attract and radicalize new recruits.

It has also posted video clips of brutal acts to instill fear in civilian populations. During its heyday of territorial expansion, ISIS used online recruiting to lure thousands of western Muslims to its pseudo-caliphate.

Recently, terrorists have begun taking this online recruiting a step further: They have persuaded those followers to pledge allegiance remotely, encouraged them to launch attacks in their home countries, coached them as they prepare to do so, and even used the internet to connect them with weapons and explosives for the attacks. Often, in these remote-controlled attacks, those who execute the operations never know the identities, nationalities, or locations of the coach-instigators. Because the terrorists' communications tend to be encrypted, such plots are extremely difficult to detect and prevent.

ISIS has also used the internet to conduct psychological warfare against the United States. In 2015, the self-described "Islamic State Hacking Division" posted on Twitter the names, email addresses, home addresses, and phone numbers of thousands of American military personnel, and urged followers of ISIS to kill those identified. The so-called "cyber caliphate" has also hijacked and defaced the websites and social media accounts of various government and media organizations, although this type of harassment has little enduring effect.

While terrorist groups have threatened to conduct more significant cyber attacks against the West, their technical capabilities are far weaker than state adversaries like Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea. Indeed, the urgent threat from elite nation-state hackers has spurred the U.S. government and private sector to invest heavily in upgraded cybersecurity, making less-skilled terrorists' task even more difficult. For these reasons, terrorist cyber attacks, while a plausible concern, remain a remote one, less pressing than the ongoing reality of kinetic attacks with knives, guns, explosives, or vehicles.

For that reason, the most challenging fronts in the cyberwar against terrorists will likely remain encrypted communications platforms, which they use to discreetly plot and orchestrate attacks, and social media, which they use to distribute their propaganda and inspire new followers. In the United States, efforts in the wake of the San Bernardino terrorist attack by law enforcement agencies to compel encryption providers to retain the capability to decrypt messages and devices have stalled. In Europe and Australia, however, authorities continue to consider legislative measures to ensure access to encrypted communications. Most recently, UK Home Secretary Amber Rudd criticized end-to-end encryption (so-called because only the end users can decrypt messages) and called for companies to provide greater assistance to counterterrorism officials. In the meantime, metadata—information *about* the message, such as who communicated with whom, and when—can provide valuable information to authorities, even if the message's content remains encrypted.

Another promising avenue for cooperation between governments and companies is blocking extremist content. Facebook has 150 employees specifically devoted to identifying and removing terrorist content, on top of a "Community Operations" team that will comprise 7,500 moderators by next year. These human reviewers are aided by artificial-intelligence tools that can identify ISIS and al Qaeda content and remove it before any Facebook users can view it. Google recently instituted similar new measures to block extremist content on YouTube, including both artificial intelligence and expanded human review and removal.

Vulnerabilities Beyond the Homeland

While the United States has been able to significantly improve its defense of the homeland, it has not been able to prevent all attacks inspired by Islamist ideology. Even if it could, the United States will never be safe so long as terrorism thrives in the rest of the world. Not only is the globe too small today to believe that threats from abroad cannot find their way to homeland—whether by plane,

boat, or the internet—not only are U.S. interests and citizens widely dispersed around the world, meaning an attack on America need not occur in the homeland, but, more broadly, the United States has a deep and abiding interest in maintaining international order, an order that is weakened with each terrorist attack.

“ While the United States has been able to significantly improve its defense of the homeland, it has not been able to prevent all attacks inspired by Islamist ideology. Even if it could, the United States will never be safe so long as terrorism thrives in the rest of the world. ”

“In the post-9/11 world, threats are defined more by the fault lines within societies than by the territorial boundaries between them,” the 9/11 Commission wrote. Because of the unprecedented interconnectedness of the world in the 21st century, new threats can emerge quickly and reach all the way across the world to menace Americans, leading the Commission to declare “the American homeland is the planet.”¹⁰³

Terrorism Does Not Respect Borders

The extension of terrorist branches and activities pose significant risks to the United States and its allies, as geographic barriers do not always insulate America from attack. The 9/11 attacks demonstrated the destructive power of terrorism, and the ability of terrorist groups to strike from the shadows. “An organization like al Qaeda, headquartered in a country on the other side of the earth, in a region so poor that electricity or telephones were scarce,” the 9/11 Commission wrote, “could nonetheless scheme to wield weapons of unprecedented destructive power in the largest cities of the United States.”¹⁰⁴

Similarly, AQAP was able to manufacture the plans for Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the so-called “underwear bomber” who attempted to bring down Northwest Airlines Flight 253 in December 2009.

AQAP formulated the attack from Yemen, and managed to get an individual into the United States where he would carry out the attack. So long as terrorist groups find safe haven, either abetted by rogue regimes or in ungoverned territories, they will remain capable of plotting against and harming the United States.

U.S. Global Interests at Risk

But terrorists do not have to strike at the American homeland to damage American interests, or even to take American lives. The United States is a global superpower that possesses massive physical infrastructure around the world. America’s military, diplomatic, and commercial installations are vulnerable to terrorist attacks, as are the lives of the American citizens who live and work abroad. In the bombings of the U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya in 1998, over 200 people were killed, and the devastation hampered America’s ability to protect its interests in the region and carry out vital relief programs for civilians. The attack on the *USS Cole* in 2001, anchored in a Yemeni harbor, took the lives of 17 American sailors, and caused millions of dollars in damage to the naval vessel.

Beyond the direct threat to lives and security posed by terrorism, instability resulting from terrorism can also have negative effects on the world economy. Terrorist groups worldwide have historically targeted commercial interests and oil and gas production and transport, with its sprawling pipelines, is particularly difficult to defend and vulnerable to terrorist attack. In 2016, sabotage to oil pipelines—primarily carried out by ISIS or al Qaeda affiliates in Iraq and North Africa—drove global supply outages to over 3 million barrels per day, according to estimates by the Royal Bank of Canada.¹⁰⁵ Supply outages that raise oil prices have global effects—and can benefit terrorist groups, as has been the case with ISIS, that at one time had means of oil production and made money selling oil. Terrorist activity in international waterways—such as the Suez Canal, which 8 to 10 percent of global sea trade passes through—would also cause significant disruptions to global trade.

Chaos Out of Order?

Finally, while terrorists' ability to strike either homeland or U.S. global interests might not pose an existential challenge to the United States, it is nevertheless a spreading disease eating away at the foundation of the free, open, and lawful international system and the alliances that the United States depends on for its prosperity and security.

Transnational jihadi terrorism is inherently expansionary; if left unchecked, it will continue to spread. A leaked briefing by the National Counterterrorism Center in 2016 revealed that ISIS had increased its global network threefold since 2014, providing a "heat map" of ISIS activity around the world: Beyond its "core" in Syria and Iraq, the group had established official branches in Algeria, Nigeria, Libya, the Sinai Peninsula, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Caucasus area, and had "aspiring branches" in Mali, Egypt, Somalia, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and the Philippines.¹⁰⁶

But terrorism's reach extends even further than the countries in which it is able to establish a physical foothold. It is estimated that ISIS has conducted or inspired over 140 attacks in 29 countries in addition to Iraq and Syria since 2014.¹⁰⁷ Instability in the wake of ISIS' rampage across Iraq and Syria has contributed to the greatest refugee crisis since WWII: The number of refugees who have fled Syria has surpassed five million, while millions more have fled Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya.¹⁰⁸ The ongoing crisis has placed a tremendous burden on U.S. allies in the Middle East, including Turkey and Jordan, who are hosting the majority of refugees, and in Europe, which has to contend with unprecedentedly high levels of irregular migration from individuals fleeing conflict and terrorism. In 2015, the European Union received an all-time high of 1.3 million asylum applications. In 2016, the number was near the same level: 1.2 million applications.¹⁰⁹

Europe's closer proximity to the Syrian conflict and larger domestic Muslim populations has also made it more vulnerable to terrorist attacks and recruitment. Large-scale terror attacks have claimed

hundreds of lives and paralyzed European cities—the May bombing in Manchester was the 13th attack in Western Europe since 2015, followed by the deadly van attack in Barcelona in August.¹¹⁰ In 2016, Europol estimated that as many as 5,000 Europeans had traveled to terrorist training camps abroad, posing significant risk that they may return to their countries of origin, potentially using mass migration flows to do so undetected, to carry out terrorist attacks.¹¹¹

The social, political, and economic disruption terrorism is producing from Europe through the Middle East and North Africa and now stretching even into Asia significantly weakens the international order upon which U.S. prosperity and security depends. The free flow of goods, capital, people, and ideas through a secure global commons of waterways, skies, and the internet are the lifeblood and arteries of the U.S. economy. They are enabled not just by a global U.S. military presence but through a myriad of multi- and bilateral security relationships through which other countries provide their own troops, resources, and intelligence to help ensure their own safety, but also that of the United States and international system more broadly.

The United States invested blood and even more treasure in the aftermath of World War II to create this international order. And it is thanks to that initial investment that the second half of the 20th century was one of unprecedented economic growth for the United States and widespread, though certainly not universal, peace. Whether this same order, in the same configuration, remains best suited to securing U.S. interests and the well-being of American citizens in the 21st century is a legitimate and important question that has risen to political prominence with the election of Trump. However that question is resolved, the United States will be best served by maintaining or transforming the international order on its own terms. Unfortunately, that order is under severe strain because of the increased pace, scope, and brutality of terrorist groups.

Of primary concern is the fate of Europe. The recent spate of terror attacks and influx of refugees has opened up social

divisions, politically weakening the European Union, and financially burdening already struggling states. Any further stress in Europe will have direct economic and financial repercussions on the United States, undermining its objectives of boosting its own exports and convincing European partners to shoulder a larger part of the costs of the collective security guaranteed by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Nor can the instability of the Middle East be ignored. As a recent Bipartisan Policy Center review of U.S. interests in the region found, “while the strategic landscape has changed, enduring U.S. interests in the Middle East continue to demand U.S. involvement in the region. The United States still has a profound interest in supporting Middle Eastern stability to ensure the smooth functioning of the global economy, prevent the region from falling under the sway of anti-U.S. rivals, protect against the risks posed by global terrorism, stop the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and help defend U.S. allies.”¹¹²

Perhaps most important, the damage being done to the international system by terrorism is not incidental to jihadi groups’ objectives. The overthrow of the current order, as will be discussed below, is fundamental to the ideology that animates ISIS and al Qaeda alike. This is most visible in ISIS’ attempt to replace nation-states, the building block of the international system, with a transnational caliphate. But it extends further, as diplomat and scholar Charles Hill has argued, including questions of both fundamental values and geopolitics.¹¹³

The jihadist project rejects first and foremost the secular state, as well as individual liberty and human rights. It is also intensely anti-globalist, viewing trade and security cooperation between Muslim countries and the West as a sign of weakness and decline, to be reversed at all costs. The persistence of the terrorists’ ideology, therefore, will mean continued and violent assaults on the international order, no matter what it looks like, and the U.S. interests that order enables.

Terrorist-fueled instability cascades across borders and jumps across oceans. It aggravates ethno-sectarian tensions, fuels conflicts, displaces millions, and weakens governments. Terrorists target public spaces, international air travel, and cyberspace, while seeking weapons of mass destruction. Terrorism’s toll on the U.S. homeland, on the vibrant democracies of America’s European allies, on the stability of Middle Eastern partners, and on the security of the global commons is alarming. Even when the United States is not the target, terrorism is a strategic threat Americans must confront.

The Evolution of Jihadism

The Islamic State’s sudden emergence surprised many, but its violent tactics and millenarian philosophy were only the latest link in a long chain of jihadist thinking. ISIS distilled the jihadist ambition to perhaps its purest form, and pursued it with a previously unknown brutality. But al Baghdadi’s declaration of the caliphate, which captured the imagination of hundreds of thousands of Muslims, broke from previous jihadist strategy, in a reaction against al Qaeda’s perceived failure to achieve its goals. As ISIS’s terrestrial caliphate collapses, jihadist thinking will likely evolve in response.

The ISIS Innovation

Jihadist thinking has never been static. Groups like al Qaeda and the Islamic State are fanatically committed to their worldview, but they have shown a remarkable ability to adapt their tactics to the circumstances in which they find themselves. From an Islamist perspective, the ideology itself is unchangeable, but the means to achieve this result largely depend on internal and external factors. Just as the United States changed its approach to counterterrorism after 9/11, jihadis have reorganized themselves and changed their methods in response to U.S. actions.

Jihadi theoreticians have discussed both a decentralized jihadi movement and the eventual establishment of a centralized emirate for years before the rise of the Islamic State.

These arguments mirror debates that predated the founding of al Qaeda, when jihadi theoreticians debated whether the movement should target the “near enemy,” Muslim regimes, or the “faraway enemy,” Western governments.

Two theoreticians stand out for their contribution to this debate. Abu Musab al Suri, a former member of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood’s “Islamic Combat Vanguard,” was a veteran of the fight against the Syrian regime of Hafez El Assad. He was later trained by a comrade of Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood leaders Hassan al Banna and Sayyid Qutb. After living in the West for years and aiding Algerian jihadi operations, he made his way to Afghanistan, where he gave his allegiance to the Taliban’s Mullah Omar and ran a jihadi training camp in the country. He criticized the 9/11 attacks for the destruction they brought to the Islamic emirate in Afghanistan, but in late 2004 he released a 1,600-page book entitled *The Call for Global Islamic Resistance*.

Al Suri envisioned a resilient, decentralized jihadi movement that would be less vulnerable than the hierarchical al Qaeda model. This would require uniting the whole Muslim *ummah* (nation), with the aim of “spreading a Jihadist cancer to face the bad cancer of the world order.”¹¹⁴ He hoped to incite a two-front war: “solo jihadi terror” in enemy cities, coupled with territorial conquest on “open fronts.” He specifically identified ISIS’s future terrain, the Levant, as having “all the preconditions” for territorial conquest.¹¹⁵

The second significant jihadi thinker was Mohamed Khalil al Hukaymah, an Egyptian who joined the Gama’a Islamiya in the 1970s and contributed to its struggle against the Sadat and Mubarak regimes. After several prison stints, he joined al Qaeda. His most important work, *The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage Through Which the Islamic Nation Will Pass*, was released under the pen name Abu Bakr Naji in 2004.¹¹⁶ In the book, al Hukaymah attempted to articulate a detailed strategy for creating an Islamic caliphate. He advocated for a campaign of endless terror against Muslim regimes to weaken their morale and exhaust their capabilities.

After jihadis toppled those regimes, he argued for capturing territory where a security vacuum existed and winning the population’s support or toleration by providing it with security and services. These territories, which jihadis would come to govern, would then form the base for the establishment of the caliphate. Even prior to the Arab Spring, al Qaeda branches in both Yemen and Somalia would attempt to follow this prescription by engaging in nation building, but their attempts remained small in scale and on the periphery of the Arab Muslim world. The full implementation of the strategy, in the very heart of the Arab Muslim world, would have to wait for the Islamic State.

After ISIS: What Comes Next?

Today, the Islamic State’s caliphate is collapsing under sustained military pressure from the international coalition and local ground forces. It would be wrong to assume, however, either that this is the end of the terrorist threat or that the current jihadist spectrum will remain unchanged. The battlefield defeat of ISIS will not end terrorism. Ninety years ago there was no Muslim Brotherhood; 50 years ago, there was no Jihadi Salafism; 25 years ago no al Qaeda; and five years ago no ISIS. When ISIS falls, new terrorist organizations will emerge, and the extremists will adapt.

As in the previous instances, new terrorist networks will grow out of political and social challenges in the Muslim world and the failure of existing authorities to respond to them. The Islamic State’s caliphate experiment, and its failure, have only added to the incessant upheaval throughout the region. In the absence of legitimate and capable regimes, new terrorist groups will arise.

Even as new terrorist groups eclipse their predecessors, remnants of the earlier jihadi organizations will linger, causing further mayhem. Killing bin Laden and hundreds of his operatives did not end al Qaeda. Ending the Islamic State’s ability to govern territory in Mesopotamia and the Levant is unlikely to exterminate it completely in those regions or end ISIS-inspired attacks elsewhere.

The Islamic State's methodology, and parts of its network, will live on after its loss of territory. ISIS already has branches in more than a dozen countries. In three of these "provinces"—Egypt, Libya, and Nigeria—ISIS has had some measure of success. For a period of time, the Libyan branch of the Islamic State appeared to be ascendant. That branch controlled the Libyan cities of Derna and Sirte, as well as oil resources providing it with revenue. These strategic locations also provided a good jumping off point for ISIS operations targeting the West. But the once-growing stronghold in Libya has come under pressure from Western air operations and ground operations undertaken by local forces. Egypt may prove attractive as a new base of operations; ISIS has a strong presence in Sinai and growing cells in the Nile valley. Egypt's border with Israel also allows the Islamic State to play to the passions engendered by the Arab-Israeli conflict. Nigeria, where Boko Haram has killed thousands, is also worrisome as a potential base of operations for ISIS, although its distance from the center of gravity of the Muslim world makes it somewhat peripheral to the Islamist cause.

Even without territorial bases, however, ISIS will continue to inspire acts of terrorism in the West. Initially, ISIS called on followers to come to Iraq and Syria to join the fight. It then changed its message and urged adherents to conduct attacks in their home countries. Such attacks are hard to prevent; the perpetrators need cross no borders, and the means—knife, gun, vehicle, simple bomb—are easy to obtain. Encrypted communications make it easier to direct such attacks from afar, with less risk of detection by intelligence agencies.

Unfortunately, ISIS's ideological legacy will not be easy to erase. By establishing the caliphate, if only for a short period, ISIS captured the hearts and minds of many Sunni Muslims. Imitators will likely attempt similar territory grabs in the years ahead. The idea of the caliphate, once glimpsed, will retain its allure.

At the same time, the Islamic State's failure will cause some reflection within the Islamist universe. Some Islamists may push for a return to the al Qaeda methodology of focusing on terrorist attacks in the West. With thousands of Western recruits having gained battle experience in Syria and Iraq, a wave of returnees will provide a large pool of potential attackers—a group likely too large for security services to monitor.

Alternatively, some jihadist groups may revert to the pre-al Qaeda methodology of targeting the "near enemy"—local regimes. As a study by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy argues, even before the Arab Spring, al Qaeda ideologues were considering how to integrate themselves within local communities; the Arab Spring gave them an opportunity to turn this into reality, by attempting to integrate themselves into local insurgencies and conducting *dawa* activities, inviting non-Muslims to accept their particular message of Islam and instilling Islamist views in those who are already Muslim.¹¹⁷ The Nusra Front's attempt at rebranding as Jabhat Tahrir al Sham and then Hayat Tahrir al Sham is perhaps the clearest example of this potential trend.

Jihadism's strategic aims are rigid and uncompromising, but it has shown remarkable tactical flexibility. Unfortunately, this adaptability means that, as ISIS declines, the jihadist movement will evolve, finding new opportunities to gather adherents, unsettle the Middle East, and threaten the West.

Why is the Threat Still So Potent?

In 2011, there was good reason to believe that al Qaeda had suffered a mortal blow. With the organization facing intense pressure as a result of successful U.S. counterterrorism operations culminating in the operation that killed al Qaeda's leader bin Laden in May 2011 and with the prospect of democratic change in the Arabic-speaking world unleashed as the Arab Spring dawned, the appeal of al Qaeda and similar groups appeared to be evaporating. As John Brennan, then-Special Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism, argued, "Bin Laden is dead. The Al-Qaeda narrative is becoming increasingly bankrupt; there is a new wave sweeping through the Middle East right now that puts a premium on individual rights and freedom and dignity; and so Al-Qaeda, Bin Laden—old news. Now is the time to move forward."¹¹⁸

Events have proven Brennan wrong. Not only was the transition to democracy in the Arabic-speaking world unsuccessful outside of Tunisia, but the turn of the peaceful protests against the Syrian dictator to violence has galvanized the region, attracting tens of thousands to the Syrian battlefields. More important, not only was al Qaeda able to survive its founder's death, but a new group, the Islamic State, arose.

The Islamic State's declaration of the establishment of the caliphate on June 29, 2014, captivated millions worldwide. More than its military prowess, exemplified by its successful takeover of Mosul and successes on the Syrian battlefield, the establishment of the caliphate moved the group from a local group, one of many fighting the Syrian regime, into something larger. Even al Qaeda, which had carried out the most successful attack on the West on 9/11, was eclipsed by the Islamic State's appeal.

In the past three years, despite significant military defeats, the loss of significant territory and effective targeting of its leadership and ranks as a result of the international coalition's air campaign, the Islamic State has been able to survive. More important, the Islamic State's banner has attracted the allegiance of several important Jihadi groups, from Egypt's Ansar Bayt al Maqdis to Nigeria's Boko Haram. Today, the Islamic State maintains a presence in several countries, where its local affiliates have been able to survive and prosper despite endless attempts by governments to defeat them. In Egypt, the Islamic State was not only able to solidify its position in the Sinai, downing a Russian airliner, and engage the Egyptian military in a deadly war of attrition, but it has also expanded its presence beyond the Sinai Peninsula, conducting successful bombing attacks of churches across the country.

In addition, the raised banner of the caliphate has been able to attract followers across the world, not only encouraging tens of thousands to join its ranks in Iraq and Syria, but radicalizing some Muslim residents in the West unleashing a wave of attacks in Western cities, which while limited in casualty numbers, have been unprecedented in sheer scale.

As the military defeat of ISIS appears imminent, policymakers must confront the following questions: Does the defeat of a specific terrorist group constitute victory over terrorism? Why, even after the death of bin Laden and the significant strengthening of U.S. counterterrorism policy, was the Islamic State able not only to emerge but grow so strong? Why, despite 16 years of effort by the United States and a like-minded coalition of international partners, does the terrorist threat remain so potent?

The Limits of U.S. Counterterrorism Policy To Date

Across successive administrations, U.S. policy has struggled to balance the short-term demands of combating the present manifestation of the terrorist threat with a long-term strategy that aims to prevent the emergence of a next generation of terrorists. As a result, U.S. counterterrorism policy has fallen short in a number of areas: It has failed to match the tactics of counterterrorism to the strategic objectives communicated to the American public; adopted short-term tactics that focused too heavily on individual terrorists and terrorist groups at the expense of the larger movement they represent; and emphasized the means that terrorists use over the ends they seek to achieve.

Mismatch Between Strategic Objectives and Tactics

Since 2001, leaders of the United States have promised victory: against al Qaeda, against ISIS, and against terrorism itself. “Our war on terror begins with Al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated,” Bush said in 2001.¹¹⁹ In 2014 Obama declared his intent to “degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counter-terrorism strategy.”¹²⁰ Trump, in turn, came into office pledging to “unite the civilized world against Radical Islamic Terrorism, which we will eradicate completely from the face of the Earth.”¹²¹

What is more, U.S. policymakers have realized that pursuing such a complete victory would require deploying more than just military might against the terrorist threat. Thus, successive publicly articulated U.S. strategies have developed “whole of government” approaches meant to apply “all elements” of American power to this challenge. Thus, defeating violent extremist organizations, according to the 2015 National Military Strategy, requires the United States and its allies to “disrupt [violent extremist organizations] planning and operations, degrade support structures, remove leadership, interdict finances, impede the flow of foreign

fighters, counter malign influences, liberate captured territory.”¹²² The 2015 strategy also noted the importance of providing security and economic opportunities to at-risk populations, and collaborating with allies and partners in the region.

Earlier, in 2011, in the National Strategy for Counterterrorism, the Obama White House defined the U.S. goal as “a world in which al-Qa’ida is openly and widely rejected by all audiences as irrelevant to their aspirations and concerns, a world where al-Qa’ida’s ideology does not shape perceptions of world and local events, inspire violence, or serve as a recruiting tool for the group or its adherents.”¹²³

Yet, the reality of the tactics that the United States has been pursuing on the ground has been very different from what U.S. leaders have been telling the American people. Rather than the greater struggle against a widespread, amorphous, and ideologically motivated adversary, U.S. policymakers have focused policies on the much narrower and shorter-term goal of degrading whatever terror network or threat is most pressing at the moment. The Obama era counterterrorism strategy conceded as much by stressing that it would maintain “a focus on addressing the near-term challenge of preventing those individuals already on the brink from embracing al-Qa’ida ideology and resorting to violence.”¹²⁴

This mismatch between the tactics the United States employs in fighting terrorism and the bipartisan, strategic objective that has been described to the American people creates confusion about what results to expect. The rhetoric used by policymakers of “victory” does not square with the reality of 16 years of conflict and a metastasizing threat. Worse, the longer U.S. policy pursues goals other than the form of “victory” against terrorism that it has promised, the more difficult it becomes to actually pursue such a victory. As frustration mounts at the prolonged duration and high cost of a struggle that has required constant deployment of U.S. troops to faraway lands with seemingly little to show for it, the harder it becomes for U.S. leaders to ask the American people to

countenance deploying more troops or expending more resources. The promise of victory has become one of the greatest impediments to achieving it.

“ The struggle is beyond a military conflict with a specific group—it is also a struggle against an ideology that has outlasted and will continue to outlive the groups that articulate it. ”

This near-term focus has prevented successive administrations from articulating and committing to a definition of victory that extends beyond military defeat of whatever terrorist group currently most visibly holds the banner of extremist ideology. At the very least, victory requires denying extremist groups territory in which to operate, plan attacks and recruit new adherents. But the struggle is beyond a military conflict with a specific group—it is also a struggle against an ideology that has outlasted and will continue to outlive the groups that articulate it. Therefore, defining victory becomes much more difficult, but much more important. It also requires a longer-term outlook—ideologies cannot be defeated in the short-term. As in the Cold War, countering an ideology will require us to invest in programs and partnerships whose benefits might not be immediately visible. “This process,” the 9/11 Commission reasoned, “is likely to be measured in decades, not years.”¹²⁵

Focusing on Terrorists, Not Terrorism

Instead of the comprehensive strategy U.S. leaders have described as necessary to fight terrorism, the United States has largely pursued a strategy, coined by Israel in its struggle with hostile non-state entities, of “mowing the grass.” In this understanding, the goal of counterterrorism is divorced from political considerations, focused on debilitating the enemy’s ability to cause harm.¹²⁶

As former CIA Counterterrorism Center deputy Paul Pillar had already concluded before 9/11, “If there is a ‘war’ against terrorism,

it is a war that cannot be won...terrorism cannot be defeated—only reduced, attenuated, and to some degree controlled. Individual terrorists or terrorist groups sometimes are defeated; terrorism never will be. Expectations must be kept realistic.”¹²⁷

Thus, for the past 16 years, the United States has been engaged in asymmetric wars with terrorist groups. It has successfully pushed al Qaeda from its strongholds and captured or killed the majority of the group’s leaders. Since the emergence of ISIS in 2014 and its seizure of wide swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria, U.S. and coalition forces have decreased its territorial holdings substantially, and are on the verge of routing it from all its major strongholds. As described above, however, the terror threat remains grave and terrorist groups are spreading and growing, despite the success of U.S. efforts on the battlefield. Progress in defeating terrorism cannot be measured in the number of terrorist deaths.

Despite U.S. efforts, and in some measure perhaps because of them, terrorist ranks are being replenished as quickly as the military can decimate them. In 2014, the CIA estimated the Islamic State had some 20,000 members. Since then U.S. forces claim to have killed at least 60,000 ISIS fighters, but in 2016, according to the State Department, the terrorist group was still 15,000 strong.¹²⁸ It is this ability of terrorists to regroup and regenerate their ranks that makes any policy focused on killing terrorists, as Pillar observed, an unending struggle.

But even if such a policy could ensure the safety of the United States and its interests, it would be unsustainable in the long-term. The cost of combating terrorism is higher than the cost of perpetrating it. The United States has poured approximately \$4.5 trillion since 2001 into fighting the war on terror, according to estimates by the Costs of War Project, and billions more into defending against terrorist attacks.¹²⁹ Meanwhile terrorist groups can kill, cause costly damage to buildings and infrastructure, and spread fear amongst populations for relatively little money at all: A foiled attack in Germany during the World Cup in 2006 where two

men attempted to detonate bombs hidden in their suitcases on commuter trains was estimated to cost less than \$500.¹³⁰ Suicide bombing vests can cost only \$1,200, and suicide car bombs cost between \$13,000 and \$20,000—with the biggest expense being the cost of the car.¹³¹

In a 2003 memo, then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said to his advisors: “The U.S. is putting relatively little effort into a long-range plan, but we are putting a great deal of effort into trying to stop terrorists. The cost-benefit ratio is against us! Our cost is billions against the terrorists’ costs of millions.” He went on to ask: “Is our current situation such that ‘the harder we work, the behinder we get?’”¹³²

As long as jihad maintains its overpowering appeal, even in the face of almost certain death, then terrorist movements will persist. As long as the United States responds only militarily, it will merely prolong a fight that its citizens will eventually tire of supporting. Defeating terrorism must entail weakening jihad’s magnetic attraction. To do this, the United States must discredit and supplant the jihadist ideology that legitimizes and incites people to violence.

Misunderstanding the Enemy: Organization vs. Movement

The U.S. preference for mowing the grass is further compounded by an even shorter term tactical focus on the most visible and dangerous terrorist organizations, often to the detriment of new and emerging threats.

Following the 9/11 attack, for example, the United States was understandably focused on defeating al Qaeda. It focused on denying it any sanctuary to train and plan future attacks in the West, targeting its leaders, cutting its access to financial resources and dismantling its cells in the West. The United States achieved considerable success on all these fronts. Following the emergence of the Islamic State, the United States shifted the focus without broadening it. The combination of airstrikes by an international

coalition and local forces in Iraq and Syria significantly diminished the Islamic State’s territorial control as well as undermined the aura of invincibility that the group enjoyed.

While these successes deserve recognition, the terrorist enemy is by no means defeated. In fact, despite these successes, there are today more terrorist fighters, with more battle experience, and jihadist control of more territory allowing them to plan future operations against the United States and its allies, than ever before. In 2011, following the events of the Arab Spring and especially after the successful operation to kill bin Laden, a false assurance that an end to the terrorist threat was imminent set in and was proven mistaken. Today a similar sense is emerging as the Islamic State loses its control of major population centers in Iraq and Syria. This confidence is similarly misplaced.

In both cases, unrealistic expectations are the result of mistaken assumptions. These faulty assumptions were articulated in Obama’s National Security Strategy in May 2010: “We are at war with a specific network, al Qaeda, and its terrorist affiliates who support efforts to attack the United States, our allies, and partners.”¹³³ While both al Qaeda and the Islamic State are indeed important terrorist groups whose defeat is a central part of the strategy, neither of them, nor the combination of them and other terrorist groups worldwide, is the sole manifestation of the enemy the United States seeks to defeat. Al Qaeda is indeed the group that successfully conducted the largest terrorist attack against the United States, and the Islamic State, especially after its declaration of the caliphate, poses a serious threat, but neither is the only component of the enemy. As the 9/11 Commission had warned, the enemy was not merely al Qaeda but the broader ideology that inspires it and other such groups, which “will menace Americans and American interests long after Usama Bin Ladin and his cohorts are killed or captured.”¹³⁴

The terrorist threat confronting the United States is not that of one or more groups, but rather a broader movement and the ideology

that inspires it. That broader movement includes groups and individuals that are unrelated to al Qaeda or the Islamic State, but are, like them, inspired by an extremist ideology that claims to represent one of the world's greatest religions. While organizations such as al Qaeda and the Islamic State play an instrumental role in planning and executing attacks on the United States and its allies, neither of these groups is the focal point of that movement, a role that the ideology itself occupies. As the 9/11 Commission argued “in short, the United States has to help defeat an ideology, and not just a group of people.”¹³⁵

Focusing on Means, Not Ends

U.S. counterterrorism policy has been focused on the prevention of violence, stopping terrorists from plotting or carrying out attacks against the United States and its interests. As part of this mindset, jihadi attacks, which have escalated to a stunning level of brutality, are described often as “meaningless” or “senseless” acts of violence. But that is certainly not how the terrorists themselves understand their actions. For them, violence is a tool chosen for the purpose of achieving a specific end. Far from meaningless, their brutality is imbued with significance and purpose. But by focusing only on the means jihadis adopt and not on their end goal, U.S. policy has limited its response to this threat, narrowing its target—those thinking about, plotting, or carrying out violent attacks—without engaging the ideological messages and narrative that justify and incite that violence.

While a focus on the means terrorists use is a necessary element of counterterrorism policy, which is largely focused on military operations against violent groups, and using all available intelligence to detect and disrupt terrorist attacks, counter-radicalization efforts also share this focus—with less satisfactory results. ISIS counter-messaging campaigns have often focused on the group's brutality, video campaigns and direct tweets to pro-ISIS accounts depicting ISIS beheadings and crucifixions with the stated aim of “[sending] a message that this is actually a squalid, worthless, dirty thing.”¹³⁶ Also to that end, counter-messaging campaigns have attempted to de-glamorize the battlefield, showing

adverse conditions in ISIS-controlled territories in Syria and Iraq. But both of these approaches focus on ISIS' means of conquest, and not the ends their violence is meant to achieve.

As a result of the evolution of the threat toward individual, decentralized, lone wolf-style attacks, U.S. counterterrorism policy has shifted focus again to what causes a specific individual to decide to join a terrorist organization or carry out a violent terrorist act. This approach has rested on the concomitant assumption that if a common variable can be identified community members or law enforcement officials may be able to intervene earlier in the radicalization process, providing an “off-ramp” from the believed endpoint of radicalization: a terrorist attack. These attempts to identify a common set of risk factors and signifiers of radicalization may prove useful in preventing specific acts of terror, but they shift the focus onto the recipients of the terrorists' messages, rather than on the content of the messages themselves, the messages' propagators, and the ideology they represent. They therefore do not address the larger problem of eroding support for the underlying ideology. Again, short-term tactics have distracted from the need to develop a long-term strategy.

The 9/11 Commission warned against a narrow focus: “The small percentage of Muslims who are fully committed to Usama Bin Ladin's version of Islam are impervious to persuasion. It is among the large majority of Arabs and Muslims that we must encourage reform, freedom, democracy, and opportunity.”¹³⁷ Focusing on the relatively small number of those who move “from flash to bang” does not address the larger context in which violent groups operate. Terrorism thrives when larger populations—sometimes referred to as the “complicit society”—at least tacitly support the ends that violent groups seek, even if they do not support violence as a tactic. While complicit societies “will not themselves engage in terrorism or even openly approve of it, they will not turn the terrorists in. They will look the other way and provide crucial, albeit often passive, support.”¹³⁸ In addition to providing a permissive environment, they also represent the base that terrorist groups to attempt to recruit from, for they already share beliefs in common.

What U.S. policy has lacked is an understanding of those beliefs, and the ends that terrorist groups are employing violence to achieve. The United States failed to identify how ISIS was innovating, finding new and more dangerous ways to package its ideology and attract adherents, leading Obama to describe it as a “jayvee team” compared with al Qaeda, a group that it eclipsed soon after the president’s remarks.¹³⁹ Major General Michael K. Nagata, the former Special Operations commander for the United States in the Middle East, confessed in 2015: “We have not defeated the idea. We do not even understand the idea.”¹⁴⁰ Understanding the idea—what extremist groups want, and what vision they sell their followers—is crucial to a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy. As long as the ends that terrorists seek go without being engaged with and discredited, their appeal will continue, ensuring that individuals will continue to be persuaded to violence as a means of achieving them.

The Gnarled Roots of Terrorism: Understanding Radicalization

Since 2001, counterterrorism has been a growing field, with military leaders, policymakers, and scholars attempting to understand the process of radicalization and the factors that drive individuals to commit acts of terrorism. However, the literature on why people commit terrorism is at best ambiguous and at worst self-contradictory.

Often, the search for a singular explanation for radicalization led to certain factors being over-emphasized and others over-simplified. Even once researchers began to realize that no one single variable explained all cases of radicalization, debate continued about whether an individual’s grievances or their ideology were responsible for their embrace of terrorism, as if these two motivations were mutually incompatible. Only recently has a more nuanced and complicated account of radicalization emerged that recognizes the role played by both “push” and “pull” factors.

Searching for the Root

Immediately following the attacks of September 11, policymakers and researchers alike began focusing on finding the “root cause” of terrorism. Such was the purpose of an October 2001 UN General Assembly debate on an agenda item titled “Measures to Eliminate International Terrorism.”¹⁴¹ Representatives from 170 nations described what they viewed as the factors that drove individuals to perpetrate violence in the name of an extremist cause. Among the answers were oppression, political instability, poverty, illegitimacy of society, injustice, and alienation.

Similarly, Bush illustrated this single variable approach in a 2002 speech in Mexico as he stated, “We fight poverty because hope is the answer to terror. . . . We will challenge the poverty and hopelessness and lack of education and failed governments that too often allow conditions that terrorists can seize.”¹⁴² In *Social Science for Counterterrorism: Putting the Pieces Together*, Darcy M.E. Norricks proposed several such root causes for the purpose of building a terrorist profile, including: “lack of political opportunity, perceived illegitimacy of the regime, economic inequality, social instability resulting from the processes of modernization, and cultural and ideological factors, such as cultural acceptance of violence.”¹⁴³

However, attempts to empirically measure the impact of these preconditions on the likelihood of terrorist recruitment not only did not result in a consensus viewpoint but also often produced conflicting conclusions.

For example, a 2001 report published in the *Middle East Review of International Affairs* cites Dr. Jerrold Post, a political psychologist, and former State Department official Mona Yacoubian, who state that “poor, disgruntled, and culturally insulted young men” are drawn to terrorist organizations and the lure of financial and societal improvement.¹⁴⁴ Yet, a decade later, in a study on “Poverty and Support for Militant Politics: Evidence from Pakistan,” researchers found that lower-income Pakistani citizens hold

militant groups in lower regard than higher-income citizens.¹⁴⁵ Moreover, using survey data, the study's authors concluded that increasing income levels would do little to decrease support for militant organizations or discourage extremism.

As a result of the various competing explanations put forward in the literature, about all that can be concluded is that there is no one single path toward radicalization, and no single profile of a terrorist. As a team of Australian researchers conducting their own review of radicalization literature put it: "About the only thing that radicalization experts agree on is that radicalization is a process."¹⁴⁶

Grievances or Ideology?

The inability to identify a single, consistent determinant of a tendency toward terrorist activity led researchers to consider bigger categories of potential causes of radicalization. But the impulse for isolating a primary driver of terrorism still persists in this stage of literature on radicalization. However, instead of pitting individual factors, like poverty or education, against each other, these studies pit broader categories of drivers against one another: on the one hand, social, economic, and/or political conditions, broadly lumped together as grievances individuals might have about their lot in life; on the other, "ideology."

Critics of ideology fall into several camps, the most prominent of which argue that ideology cannot be a significant factor in terrorism if terrorists show a poor understanding of Islamic texts, or fall short in Islamic practices such as praying five times a day. Ali Soufan, author of *The Black Banners: The Inside Story of 9/11 and the War Against al-Qaeda*, wrote "When I first began interrogating al Qaeda members, I found that while they could quote bin Laden's sayings by heart, I knew far more of the Quran than they did—and in fact some barely knew classical Arabic, the language of both the hadith and the Quran."¹⁴⁷

Similarly to Soufan's findings on al Qaeda members, a recent study published by the United Nations Office of Counterterrorism

found that fighters for the Islamic State take a narrow view of religion as "most saw their religion in terms of justice and injustice rather than in terms of piety and spirituality."¹⁴⁸ These fighters primarily were motivated by a lack of meaning in life, with hopes of correcting the supposed injustices that were portrayed through the group's propaganda networks. Lured by false claims of wealth, a life free of oppression, a deep mission in life, and wives, individuals "claimed they did not go to Syria with the intention of becoming a terrorist, nor did they return with that purpose in mind."¹⁴⁹ What is common between terrorist groups is the use of religion as a lens in which to define the struggle, cultivating the grievances of young, lost individuals.

Former CIA officer Marc Sageman drew a similar conclusion: "My interviews with terrorists in the name of Islam showed me that they were not ideologues and, indeed, did not understand much about their ideology."¹⁵⁰ Ideology, in this definition, is not sincerely-held beliefs, it is an excuse used by terrorists to provide a veneer of legitimacy for their actions. A group of scholars from Monitor 360, which examines the role that narratives play in driving behavior, argued that many of the recruits into extremist organizations are first often criminals and thieves, and join initially because of their thirst for violence, but later accept a doctrine of faith which they proclaim as the justification for their actions.¹⁵¹

Terrorism is instead, Sageman argues, political violence carried out by a group that shares a common identity, and feels that identity is under threat—though it is unclear how a common identity does not also mean a common ideology. Sageman's description of the simple motivation that leads individuals to join terrorist groups—"the West is attacking Muslims and we are defending Muslims" and that "ideology is simply a way of defining oneself as an in-group of soldiers for Islam"—sounds more like an argument for the role of ideology rather than an indictment against it.¹⁵²

That terrorism is actually politically—not ideologically—motivated violence is another common argument. The United States Institute

of Peace, in studying the Taliban and its recruits in Afghanistan, found that a majority of those who join the Taliban do so not out of ideology, but rather because of the conditions which plague society such as hunger and poverty—with one exception.¹⁵³ The Taliban, more than any other extremist group, draws recruits because of loyalty and the desire to confront and defeat a foreign enemy who attacked the Afghan homeland. Tracing back to 1979 and the invasion by the Soviet Union, national pride and the “honor” of protecting their home is the primary driver behind the ranks of Taliban fighters. Fighting back against Western imperialism, whether military or cultural, is a motivation attributed to other members of jihadist groups as well.

John Horgan, director of the International Center for the Study of Terrorism at Pennsylvania State University, acknowledged the “bigger social, political and religious reasons people give for becoming involved” in terrorism, particularly anger over domestic policy or perceived Western aggression.¹⁵⁴ But Horgan pointed to a different reason that individuals join terrorist groups, one that seems more superficial: the glamour and excitement they offer. “Hidden behind these bigger reasons, there are also hosts of littler reasons—personal fantasy, seeking adventure, camaraderie, purpose, identity,” he said. “These lures can be very powerful, especially when you don’t necessarily have a lot else going on in your life, but terrorists rarely talk about them.”¹⁵⁵

This approach, however, appears to suffer from two conceptual failings. The first entails an assumption that it is impossible for multiple forces to be guiding individual behavior and choices simultaneously. But why must it be either grievances or ideology? Or first grievances and then ideology? There has been no demonstration in the literature that the psychology of radicalization demands a unitary explanation. Nor is there any reason to believe that these two broad categories are mutually exclusive in any way: One can have grievances and adhere to an ideology at the same time, particularly if both militate toward the same action.

More nuanced studies in this vein differentiate between the grievances that drive recruits into the arms of terrorist groups and the role of ideology in helping motivate those same recruits to actually carry out violent acts on behalf of the organization. Thus, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the authors of *The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism* agree that ideology alone is rarely an independent factor in extremism, but rather it serves as a crucial vehicle for recruitment purposes of young, struggling men who are looking for something greater in life.¹⁵⁶ They are fed a narrative, albeit fake, and taught that the ideology allows for the use of violence to achieve political, economic, or social means.

Push and Pull

Recent research has begun to address some of these shortcomings in previous studies. An emerging understanding, best demonstrated by a report published by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), lends credence both to underlying conditions and ideology in leading to radicalization, but acknowledges that both of these factors play different roles, and interact with each other.¹⁵⁷

USAID divides the drivers of violent extremism into two main camps: “push” and “pull” factors. Push factors refer to underlying conditions in societies that are believed to lead to radicalization and, ultimately, violence. They are the socioeconomic, political, or cultural grievances that help thrust vulnerable individuals onto the path of radicalization, such as poverty, illiteracy, marginalization, political and economic injustices, political oppression and infringements on basic freedoms and rights, rejection of the West, and a belief that non-violent means are insufficient to change one’s individual or broader national state. While “push” factors are sources of alienation from society and disenfranchisement, “pull” factors, in turn, are the things that make terrorist groups attractive, such as the lure of financial gain, a desire for community, a drive to feel important, the propaganda of a persuasive and pragmatic leader, the honor that comes with battling a foreign adversary or for a particular ideology.

The USAID report argues that the influence of push factors is heavily overestimated at the expense of pull factors. An emphasis on push factors, the report argued, failed to account for the fact that, out of the millions of people suffering from poverty and discrimination across the world, very few make the full transformation from grieving citizen to violent extremist, illustrating that “push” factors alone cannot account for terrorism:

“The prevailing social, political and economic environment is not what sets that smaller group apart from the larger population of which it is a component; presumably, after all, that environment is experienced by all. Instead, what distinguishes violent extremists from the rest are, to a significant extent at least, the values they embrace, the quest for an intense and exacting form of spirituality that often animates them, as well as the broader worldviews and convictions they have in common, and which typically portray violence as a logical and acceptable form of retribution for the deprivation they feel they are made to endure.”¹⁵⁸

An understanding of terrorism which combines both push and pull factors recognizes the importance of the context in which extremism occurs—the conditions that make individuals vulnerable to indoctrination by extremist groups—while also giving weight to agency: Individuals have a choice in how they respond to their grievances, of which terrorism is only one option, chosen by a small number. As the USAID report argues, “unless one recognizes the power of these values—the passions, emotions, and deep feelings of loyalty and commitment they evoke—one will fail to grasp what truly drives numerous militants into violent extremist groups.”¹⁵⁹

A picture of precisely how push and pull, grievance and passion interact can be found in a 2015 Mercy Corps report, *Youth & Consequences: Unemployment, Injustice and Violence*.¹⁶⁰ It found that joblessness and poverty are not effective predictors of young people entering into violent organizations. Feelings of injustice, wrongdoing, and anger more accurately represent the factors

driving young individuals into terrorism as one young man said about his experience with the Taliban, “I did not join the Taliban because I was poor. I joined because I was angry. Because they [the West] wronged us.”¹⁶¹ The fragility and weakness of many states produces an environment ripe with grievances that affect youth personally, generating a culture which feels abused, marginalized, and detached.

Over the last five years, due to the instability resulting from the ongoing Syrian conflict and the unmet expectations of the Arab Spring, the Middle East and North Africa specifically and Muslim majority countries in general have seen an increase in both the social, economic, and political conditions which give rise to grievances within their societies and the ease with which extremist ideology can spread over traditional and social media. Together, these developments have laid the groundwork for the continued appeal of terrorism.

A Region Aggrieved

Grievances can and do provide terrorist organizations with a susceptible population to recruit from and to exploit. Radical narratives, extremism, and, therefore, violence, thrive amid adverse social conditions, failures in governance, and persistent instability arising from decades of conflict. The Middle East has more than its share of all of these problems.

Surging Youth Populations

The nations of the Middle East and North Africa have witnessed an upending population shift over the past two decades producing a “youth bulge” that has generated a new wave of challenges for the region. Record numbers of young citizens are coming of age and entering the workforce throughout the region after experiencing conflict, modernizing societies, and an education system ill-equipped to prepare them for the future. This new trend raises the issues of economic and social development in a region plagued by ethnic and sectarian conflict and income disparity, and a major burden falls on the youngest generation to determine how they

address these problems.

Those under 30 comprise 65 percent of the population in the Middle East, the largest youth-adult ratio in the history of the region.¹⁶² Yet as the total population has increased so too have unemployment rates. Approximately 30 percent of youth find themselves unemployed, almost double the global average.¹⁶³ In Tunisia alone, a country that has seen the largest number of foreign fighters joining ISIS, over 40 percent of those aged 15 to 24 are unemployed.¹⁶⁴

In Middle Eastern societies today, the majority of jobs are found in the public sector. Such positions provide low to moderate incomes and benefits yet promise job security. However, the number of citizens entering the workforce significantly outnumbers the amount of available positions. As a result, the largest segment of the population has become marginalized, impoverished, and stuck in a perpetual state of unemployment and dissatisfaction. Many young graduates have to wait long periods, from months to years, until they are hired and begin a career, often delaying marriage and childbearing. Because of this environment, adults are living at home and dependent on families for longer periods than ever before, forgoing the social status that comes with transforming into an adult and a contributing member of society. In many countries, unemployed youth lack basic political rights, limiting their voice and say in government, further excluding over a quarter of the region's population.

These conditions help produce an atmosphere characterized by a lack of structure and purpose in which those disenfranchised citizens feel as if they are no longer represented and respected by society. These conditions present a profound risk: The population most targeted by terrorist recruiters, who need young bodies on the battlefield, is the same population failed most by Middle East governments and therefore at greatest risk of recruitment. Despite these challenges, opportunities may exist to blunt this danger, if the environment is right. To do so, young adults need access to quality education, jobs, and healthcare. They need to be

able to integrate into a society which represents them politically, and protects them economically. There needs to be a strong sense of community which provides relationships and values family ties. If these conditions can be met, the millions of youth can be transformed into a vital force in confronting extremism and violent ideology, instead of a potential liability.

Governance

At the same time as a new, and sizable, generation of Middle Eastern youth is seeking the skills and opportunities to begin meaningful adult lives, the region's century-old political order is crumbling. The Arab uprisings exposed the unmet needs and unfulfilled expectations of people in the region, but, six years later, little progress has been made in addressing this crisis of governance.

Some of the region's states have been consumed by proxy struggles for regional hegemony masquerading as civil wars. In others, the state now actively competes with non-state groups for authority and control. And in those states in the Middle East that are not failed or failing the regimes are much more likely to be focused on maintaining their power by any means necessary than on serving their citizens. And those societies are much more likely to be riven by fissures and distrust than geared toward openness and cooperation.

External factors may have contributed to these conditions: The Iraq War helped destabilize the region and exacerbate the Sunni-Shi'a divide; the Bush administration's efforts at democracy promotion undermined Middle Eastern regimes; Iran and its hegemonic designs have fueled proxy Sunni-Shi'a conflicts across the region; and the very map of the region forced onto its inhabitants by the victorious Western powers in World War One created artificial states. Yet the core crisis of the broader Middle East is an internal one; namely the failure of the post-independence states in the region to find an answer to the crisis of modernity, forge a national identity, and offer their citizens better governance.

As defined by the United Nations, governance is “the exercise of economic, political and administrative authority to manage a country’s affairs at all levels. It comprises the mechanisms, processes and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations and mediate their differences.”¹⁶⁵ Good governance is characterized by high levels of civilian participation, strong rule of law, transparency, openness, equity, accountability, and a strategic vision.

These qualities have only rarely been found in the states of the Middle East, and even less frequently in Arab nations. Particularly in the latter, as Tamara Coffman Wittes has argued, “governments maintained support by binding their populations to them through an effective mix of communal (ethnic, religious, or tribal) identity and political ideology; income from rents (that is, nontax income from natural resources or foreign assistance) that they distributed through state patronage; and effective security forces to both deter and suppress any prospect of domestic dissent.”¹⁶⁶ As long as Arab states had the financial resources, primarily from resource extraction, to continue buying loyalty and the political will to coerce those unwilling to be bought, they were able to persist.

But despite giving all outward signs of stability, this corporatist form of governance hid major weaknesses. Substituting bought loyalty for coherent national identity, particularly in authoritarian regimes, leaves society without any deep connection to its government, other than the goods or services it can provide. The modern Middle Eastern state has failed in creating a sense of nationhood among its population or a belief that the state is representative of the population and has its interests at heart. An inhabitant of those countries has little reason to believe that she is a citizen with rights, and more profoundly that the state is hers.

Moreover, government distribution of patronage has never been egalitarian in Middle Eastern states. In societies with multiple tribal, ethnic, and religious divisions, ruling is usually the domain of one family, tribe, ethnic group, sect, or religious establishment,

which tends to favor its own in sharing the spoils of the state. Thus, throughout the broader Middle East, vast areas and peoples have been deprived of state resources and controlled instead through repressive security practices.

By late 2010, these twin pillars of the Middle Eastern state—patronage and repression—came crumbling down. Poor economic performance, a slowing global economy, and the above discussed youth bulge severely strained the ability, particularly of non-oil producing states, to continue upholding the corporatist social contract. Deprived of the ability to change their fortunes and dream of a better future as a result of both the dismal state of education and the lack of social and economic mobility, people in Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere also refused to be silenced by the threat of government violence.

The 2011 Arab uprisings brought a short-lived sense of optimism that repressive authoritarian governments could be popularly overthrown and replaced with more open, transparent, and representative governance. Freedom House wrote in 2012 that “the political uprisings that swept across the Arab world over the past year represent the most significant challenge to authoritarian rule since the collapse of Soviet communism.” However, the gains that were believed to come from the so-called Arab Spring have failed to materialize for most countries save Tunisia.¹⁶⁷ Across most of the rest of the region, countries today differ little in their political rights and civil liberties rankings from 2011, before popular protests spread through the region.

Indeed, in 2017, Freedom House found that the vast majority of the people of the Middle East, 83 percent, live in countries that are characterized as not free, while 12 percent live in countries that are categorized as partly free—and only 5 percent are free.¹⁶⁸ State political parties engage in oppressive campaigns to dissuade opposition from voting, pass legislation curtailing the ability of opposition parties to form and receive funding, and constrain dissidents from speaking out, often under the threat of persecution and imprisonment. There are high levels of distrust between

government officials and the leaders of civil and social organizations, often rooted in the fear of losing power. Institutions are grounded in corruption and nepotism, failing to meet the needs of the people and instead benefit those on top of the social ladder. Election fraud and illegitimacy threaten to further erode the social and political framework that is vital to the functioning of government.

With no opportunities to build a better future for themselves and with no reason to believe the states they inhabit share their concerns, Middle Eastern youth are desperate for a change of the status quo. With states unable or unwilling to meet the needs and aspirations of their citizens, and with attempts to reform or overthrow the state structure from within ending in disappointment, extremist groups offer a different vision—one that is transnational in nature, looking to replace the failing states of the region with a utopian vision of a caliphate.

Conflict

Multiple conflicts marked the Middle East in the 20th century. They included Arab-Israeli wars, the wave of Arab nationalism of the 50s and 60s, experiments such as the United Arab Republic, civil wars in Lebanon, Sudan and Yemen, the Iran-Iraq war, and two U.S.-led Gulf wars. These conflicts resulted in enormous bloodshed and population transfers—and provided a breeding ground for extremism and violence.

First and foremost, any sort of conflict inflicts harm, dislocation, and suffering on civilian populations. By and of itself this creates the sorts of grievances that make individuals susceptible to radicalization. Any purported path to peace and stability, even if it leads through greater bloodshed, might prove appealing to those ravaged by war.

Worse, in societies wracked by conflict, violence becomes commonplace. Individuals overexposed to brutality become inured to it. The social, moral, and psychological barriers to committing

violence oneself are erased. Furthermore, individuals from war-torn states are more likely to be trained in the handling of weapons, and have greater access to weapons than those living in states without consistent conflict. These factors combined allow for extremist groups to recruit trained, aggrieved individuals who have witnessed firsthand violence and are already equipped to fight. Afghanistan has experienced continuous violence since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Mujahideen forces, including bin Laden, established extremist groups such as the Taliban and al Qaeda, attacking American troops and civilians in the years after. The initial conflict laid the groundwork for the later development of these two groups as members used their previous experiences to wage a campaign against the West.

Conflicts, and the chaos and power vacuums they create, provide a fertile environment for jihadi groups. As governments lose the ability to maintain the territorial integrity of their state, terrorists are able to exploit the resulting ungoverned spaces to form a stronghold from which they can mount attacks and attract recruits. The Islamic State took advantage of the Syrian Civil War in this manner, establishing a caliphate in northwestern Syria while Assad battled anti-government forces in Damascus and Aleppo. ISIS continued to increase its territorial expansion as the civil war raged on while also staging, planning, and executing attacks in foreign cities.

And when terrorist groups participate directly in a conflict, they can transform it into a rallying cry to attract new recruits. Various experts have described terrorism as a “glocal” phenomenon: “one in which global and local grievances mesh, mutually reinforce one another, and are presented as the two sides of a single reality: the existence of a fundamentally unjust, oppressive and un-godly order that must be destroyed.”¹⁶⁹ In this sense, local conflicts, such as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and now the civil war in Syria, can serve as a flashpoint for a global war. Scholar Olivier Roy described al Qaeda fighters as “de-territorialized,” noting that “most of the time, their country of birth, the place of radicalization, and the place of action are not the same.”¹⁷⁰

Extremists are able to graft a global narrative onto a local conflict, and draw in recruits from all over the world to fight. Thus, after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, al Qaeda in Iraq was able to seize on the narrative of local Sunni opposition to U.S. military presence and expand it to gain and recruit individuals into its ranks. No longer was the goal the simple removal of American troops but rather a broader agenda including defeating the newly-instilled Shiite government, establishing an Islamic government in Iraq, destroying Israel, and suppressing secular governments in the region. Without the greater Iraqi conflict, it can be argued that al Qaeda in Iraq would have faced a significantly more difficult environment. With the breakdown of Iraq's borders, the political and social instability, and the presence of a clear enemy in American troops, the group was able to ascend to prominence.

Lastly, conflict destroys the institutional framework of the state. It abruptly disrupts the functioning of the economy, the social structure, and the safety nets that thousands of individuals rely on for financial assistance. Unemployment skyrockets, international trade decreases, and the bonds between family, tribe, and society weaken. Without structure, a state cannot function, and if a state cannot function, individuals turn to alternative means to satisfy their needs—sometimes to extremist groups, which can act as shadow governments, supplying services that the national government is no longer able to provide.

Conflict is a vicious cycle. It gives rise to grievances, lowers barriers to extremism, provides safe havens and propaganda for terrorist groups, and further weakens governance. It is no surprise that violence begets violence. Over 90 percent of terrorist attacks occur in nations ravaged by conflict.¹⁷¹ In 2016, 75 percent of all deaths from terrorism occurred in five conflict-ridden countries: Iraq, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Syria.¹⁷² Terrorist groups thrive amid and exploit conflict.

The Role of Ideology

Out of the billions of people living in poverty, or in conflict zones, or under the rule of repressive governments, only a small number

support terrorist groups, let alone become terrorists themselves. In Pakistan, for example, some 39 percent of Pakistanis live in poverty.¹⁷³ Some 60 percent of the population is under the age 25 and unemployment among this group of youth is at 10 percent, according to official estimates, with unofficial estimates placing it much higher.¹⁷⁴ The country has been inextricably linked to and suffered from the war that has raged next door in Afghanistan for more than a decade and a half. Yet, despite having one of the highest measured levels of support for ISIS, only nine percent of Pakistanis surveyed by Pew Research Center expressed a favorable opinion of the group—far less than the number of Pakistanis who could lay claim to real and serious grievances.¹⁷⁵

Thus, a focus on grievances alone cannot explain the phenomenon of terrorism. To understand why some individuals become terrorists and others do not, it is important to look at the ideology articulated by extremist groups and held by their followers, and how it interacts with the grievances present in individuals and societies.

Defining “Ideology”

It is rare in discussions of the role that ideology might play in contributing to terrorism, even in scholarly studies, to encounter definitions of “ideology.” Its appearance in everyday language common enough to assume familiarity, perhaps, “ideology” is most often treated in discussions of radicalization as synonymous with “worldview” or “belief-system,” a set of ideas that provide order and understanding to the world.

A “worldview,” most basically understood, is exactly what the two words making up the term connote: a mental image of the physical reality one inhabits, formed on the basis of sensory and other forms of data an individual receives. At its simplest, a worldview is about the immutable stuff that makes up the real world people interact with daily. Worldviews can be spiritual, religious, metaphysical, naturalist, or deeply empiricist.

The arguments arrayed against the proposition that terrorism is

ideologically driven make perfect sense if what is meant by “ideology” is really something synonymous with “worldview.” As religions are a type of worldview, the argument that there is a worldview behind terrorism would conflate jihadism and Islam. And since such an argument would have to be based on the assumption that jihadis hold and are motivated by an Islamic worldview, that argument would be refutable by evidence that most terrorists are ignorant of the teachings of Islam.

But “ideology” is not a worldview.

“Ideology,” in contrast to a “worldview,” is not about how things are, but how they should be. It influences not navigation of the immutable features of the “real” world, but action meant to change the temporary and conditional structures of society and politics. And rather than an individual belief, ideology becomes a new form of identity, defined by a shared ambition of transforming the world.

Ideology is defined by its inflexibility and commitment to a totalistic demand for social or political transformation. Invariably, ideology manifests itself, at the very least, as a demand for action. Those that subscribe to an ideology, according to social scientist John Gerring, “do not passively accept the prevailing winds of historical change; they embrace, reject, or seek to regulate the course of history, presenting an implicit or explicit vision of the good life, the ideal world.”¹⁷⁶ If an ideology describes a better world, then ideologues believe that change must come. Whether committed to bringing about that action themselves or not, adherents of ideologies aspire to widespread transformation that would affect all, regardless of their desires.

Moreover, the political nature of the ideological quest to improve upon the conditions of the present means that it is ultimately also a social construct. Ideologues necessarily reject the social identities and political groupings of this world and define themselves in terms of the world they wish to inhabit. Ideology supplants identity. The commitment to a vision of a different world overpowers and replaces the bonds of daily life. And those who share a similar

vision become closer than anyone still mired in this failed world.

“Unless one recognizes the power of these values—the passions, emotions, and deep feelings of loyalty and commitment they evoke,” according to USAID, “one will fail to grasp what truly drives numerous militants into violent extremist groups. In many cases, what brings violent extremists together is their shared dedication to a particular vision of how society ought to be organized, and/or their strong questioning of the foundations upon which their societies are presently organized.”¹⁷⁷

“ Ideology, therefore, presents a totalistic political alternative to the present that demands revolutionary transformation and replaces traditional models of social identity. ”

Ideology, therefore, presents a totalistic political alternative to the present that demands revolutionary transformation and replaces traditional models of social identity. Armed with this understanding, it is possible to make better sense of how ideology works together with grievances to fuel jihadist violence.

Though ideology may seek to cover its bald ambition to power with the mantle of religious legitimacy and though religious concepts may heighten the revolutionary logic of ideology to apocalyptic levels, the two should not be confused. The demands of religious observance cannot be ideological in their ambition, and ideology’s demand for radical transformation in this world will always be merely profane.

Ideology and Grievance

The Obama administration, in articulating its CVE strategy, described the process of radicalization as including “the diffusion of ideologies and narratives that feed on grievances, assign blame, and legitimize the use of violence against those deemed responsible,” a definition that is focused exclusively on adjudicating the present, and on revenge.¹⁷⁸ What is lacking in that definition is

an understanding of the broader goals that motivate extremists. Scholar Edward Shils described ideologies as entailing “an aggressive alienation from the existing society.”¹⁷⁹ Accepting such an ideology, then, implies a belief that one’s current circumstances are not ideal—and that is where grievances such as the ones outlined above enter into play. The presence of underlying conditions believed to make individuals vulnerable to radicalization may not lead to radicalization absent an ideology that channels these frustrations into action. The role of ideology, therefore, is to provide an explanation for the cause of these grievances and a framework for addressing them.

That shared vision is not always specific. USAID contrasts extremist groups motivated by narrow, specific grievances—such as the IRA in Ireland, and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party in Turkey, which often are geographically confined to one country and often involve themselves in the political process—with “ideologically driven” groups. In ideologically driven groups, “their goals (e.g., restoring the caliphate, or fighting back against modernity) are hazy and/or grandiose, and seem completely disconnected from any sense of reality or the possible.”¹⁸⁰ Similarly, “Their enemies are vaguely defined as well; they may be described, for instance, as ‘Jewish-Christian crusaders,’ ‘*kufir*’ (unbelief), ‘falsehood,’ or ‘*jahiliyya*.’”¹⁸¹

That lack of specificity is a feature that adds to the appeal of broad, transnational extremist groups, rather than something that subtracts from it. A broad narrative of victimization at the hands of outside powers is able to co-opt the more specific grievances held by individuals because it is “consistent with one’s personal experience of victimization and injustice, and/or with local conditions of oppression and discrimination,” creating “a bottomless pool of passions and emotions into which extremist violent movements can tap.”¹⁸² These groups appeal to certain grievances—such as bin Laden calling for the withdrawal of American troops from Saudi Arabia—in order to attract followers, but resolving those grievances will not be enough to halt the violence that they enact.

Ideology also plays an organizational role: It is the glue that binds together a group of people, often with disparate personalities and experiences, and keeps them focused on a particular course of action. Commitment to an ideology, more than any amount of grievances, best explains the most devoted of adherents’ “persistence in the face of overwhelming odds (or, at least, despite clear military superiority by the opposing side); their frequent realization that they are unlikely to see the objectives they pursue achieved during their lifetime; as well as their readiness to undergo tremendous suffering and deprivation for the cause they embrace.”¹⁸³ But, like any other belief system, there are ranges of commitment: from an inner core that are willing to kill and die for the cause to a larger periphery that desires the same end state and at least tacitly accepts violence as a tactic toward achieving it, thus providing a permissive environment for the most extreme elements to operate in.

The following section explores the specific ideology tied to jihadist terrorism—Islamism—and how it plays on Middle Eastern and Muslim grievances to discredit current societies and states in favor of a transnational, revolutionary vision.

Understanding Islamist Ideology

The ideology espoused by jihadist groups is not one that they have invented. Rather, terrorist groups such as al Qaeda and the Islamic State have been able to utilize an already fertile ground for their claims, articulating a message that is already familiar to most Muslims, and one that is shared by groups that do not share the terrorists' violent tactics. To understand the Islamist ideology, it is important to examine its content and origins, how it differs from normative religious practice, the relationship between violent and non-violent Islamist groups, as well as the revolutionary vision Islamism promotes and how it is fundamentally at odds with the world order.

What is Islamism?

Islamism is an elusive ideology to define. As its very name suggests, the association with Islam complicates the issue. More importantly, due to the Islamist spectrum including various movements and groups that have often engaged in fierce competition with each other, scholars have struggled to come up with an all-encompassing definition. Some of the most common definitions include: political scientist Nazih Ayubi's "the doctrine or movement which contends that Islam possesses a theory of politics and the State"¹⁸⁴ and Islamism scholar Stephane Lacroix's "any formally or informally organized agent acting or wishing to act on his social and/or political environment with the purpose of bringing it into conformity with an ideal based on a particular interpretation of the dictates of Islam."¹⁸⁵

Understanding both the historical conditions which gave rise to Islamist thought and the critical distinctions between Islamism and Islam will help elucidate the contours and content of this ideology.

Islamist Narrative and Ideology

Islamism was born out of, and as a response to, twin manifestations of the crisis of modernity in the world of Islam. First, the discovery of Western technological, material, and military superiority. Despite the loss of Spain to the Reconquista, Islam maintained a false sense of its own superiority that was, at least superficially, supported by Ottoman victories in Europe leading to significant additions to Islamdom in Southeastern Europe, the sieges of Vienna in 1529 and 1683, and the spread of Islam in the Indian subcontinent. Isolated for centuries from major ideological and material developments in Europe, the Muslim world's sudden modern military encounters with the West shook it to its very foundations. The discovery of Western superiority on the battlefield would have a profound impact on the world of Islam, as Muslims became aware of the huge gulf that separated them from modern Europe and would give rise to the question of "what went wrong?" As time passed, the crisis intensified as the encounter with the West became not only intellectual, with the West held as a model for emulation, but also increasingly one with the West as an occupier at the very heart of the Muslim world.

Secondly, the crisis of modernity challenged the very foundation of the political order in the Islamic world. In response to the discovery of Western superiority, Muslim rulers such as Sultans Mahmud II (1785-1839) and Abdulmejid I (1823-1861) in the Ottoman Empire, Muhammad Ali Pasha (1769-1849) in Egypt, and Naser al Din Shah (1831-1896) in Iran, attempted to initiate reforms. These modernization efforts were often initially dependent on the importation of Western advisors and focused on the military and state apparatus. In time, these reform efforts would lead to the growth of a modernized elite, whose gaze would be fixated

northward toward Europe. Despite the initial attempt by rulers to limit the imitation of Europe to the importation of modern technologies and weapons, ideas, modes of organization and life began taking hold among the educated elite. These processes would be intensified throughout the Muslim world by foreign occupiers and would inevitably lead to a growing gap between the Islamic concepts of politics, law, and economics, and the reality in which Muslims lived as a result of their imitation of Europe.

Islamism was born as a response to the discovery of these two gaps in modern military might and political, social, and economic organization. It is hence preoccupied with finding a solution to the question of modernity and closing the gap by returning the life of Muslims to Islamic concepts.

From the perspective of Islamists, the Muslim world is subject to two forms of assault: one in the form of European colonialism and the direct occupation of Muslim land, and the other in the form of an invasion of Western practices, ideologies, and life styles that have replaced Islamic ones. The two assaults are interlinked. The decline in the worldly fortunes of Islam is directly tied to the decay of Islamic rituals, symbols, and practices in the daily lives of Muslims. As Sayyid Qutb, the preeminent theoretician of the Muslim Brotherhood, argued, “so long as Muslim society adhered to Islam it manifested no weakness and no tendency to abdicate its control of life. It was when it fell away from Islam that these things took place.”¹⁸⁶

The solution that Islamism champions is thus a simple one: a return to an earlier period of time when the Islamic world was not in decline but in ascendance by returning Islam to its rightful central place in the lives of Muslims. As the popular Muslim Brotherhood slogan declares “Islam is the Solution.” Articulating his group’s vision, the Deputy General Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, Khairat al Shater stated “restoring Islam to its all-encompassing conception; subjugating people to God; instituting the religion of God; the Islamization of life; empowering of God’s religion.”¹⁸⁷

Despite their internal divides, Islamists of all stripes share a huge common ground. As Islamism scholar Hillel Fradkin argued, all Islamists are joined together by at least three factors: “the desire to purify and thus revive Islamic life; the desire to restore the worldly fortunes of Islam; and the conviction that both can be achieved only by re-appropriating the model of Islam’s seventh-century founders, the Salaf or virtuous ancestors, who include Mohamed and his closest companions or followers.”¹⁸⁸ Common themes among Islamists according to Egyptian Islamist Ahmed Salem include:

“The rejection of secularism; belief that Islam offers an all-encompassing answer to life on earth; attempt to establish an Islamic state; the road to reform and righteousness is by returning to Islam; the Quran and Sunna are references for all actions; shari’a is the basis of all legislation; all human activity is to be judged by reference to revelation; shari’a is compulsory for individuals, society and the state; and the material state of the Muslim world is the direct result of the state of religion.”¹⁸⁹

Thus, the goal of all Islamist movements—from groups who engage in violence according to circumstances such as the Muslim Brotherhood to groups that utilize violence as the only means possible such as al Qaeda and the Islamic State—is the establishment of an Islamic State, or as a leading Egyptian Salafi described it “a state that connects heaven and earth.” While the Quran does not offer an obligatory system of government for Muslims to follow, and many Muslims have in modern times questioned the system of the caliphate, Islamists believe that such a system is the only one possible under Islam. The restoration of the caliphate and making it the most powerful worldly entity is thus the end state for all Islamists across the spectrum. For Islamists, Islam is incomplete without a state. As Hassan al Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, argued, “Islam is a doctrine and a ritual, a country and a nationality, a religion and a state, spirituality and action, a Quran, and a sword.”¹⁹⁰

Islamism Is Not Islam

In the days immediately following the 9/11 attacks, Bush gave remarks at the Islamic Center of Washington, DC, emphatically stating that “the face of terror is not the true faith of Islam. That’s not what Islam is all about. Islam is peace. These terrorists don’t represent peace. They represent evil and war.”¹⁹¹ This sentiment was echoed in the 9/11 Commission Report, in which the Commission clearly stated that “Islam is not the enemy.”¹⁹² This clarity was needed as millions of Americans came to question why the United States was attacked and who the enemy was—beyond the name of an organization that the overwhelming majority of Americans had never heard before.

But these statements, and many similar statements by American leaders and officials since, were not merely ones of political correctness, or simply reflective of an interest in separating the enemy from a religion followed by over a billion people worldwide, by millions of Americans, and which had established great civilizations that contributed to human advancement throughout history. Rather the statement captured a fundamental fact: Islamism is not Islam. As the British diplomat and student of the Middle East, Sir John Jenkins, has noted, while Islam is “a historically contingent, highly diverse and flexible hermeneutical milieu,” Islamism is “a dehistoricized and exclusionary vehicle for the construction and mobilization of new communal and adversarial political identity by vanguardist groups in pursuit of power, reserving for themselves the right to determine what Islam is.”¹⁹³

By its very nature, Islamism claims not only to be a political manifestation of Islam, but *the only* possible manifestation of the religion. And while Islamism, due to its longevity and the power of its ideological appeal, has helped shape how some Muslims understand the world and more importantly their very religion, there is no denial that Islamism is a modern phenomenon. “Despite their seemingly absolute rejection of Western values and their claims to be purely Islamic in inspiration,” according to terrorism expert Jeffrey Bale, “several Islamist leaders and

thinkers were strongly influenced by and indeed borrowed considerably from modern Western political ideologies and movements such as nationalism, communism and fascism, in particular their techniques of organization, propaganda, ideological indoctrination and mass mobilization.”¹⁹⁴

Islamism has in fact broken with traditional Islam in several important ways.

First, the Islamist spectrum has a complex relationship with the Islamic schools of jurisprudence developed by Muslim scholars throughout the centuries, and which governed the lives of Muslims. While there have been over 90 schools of legal interpretation, four came to dominate the Sunni world: Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki, and Shafi’i. These schools developed a complex interpretive methodology which was used to derive a codex of laws governing the lives of Muslims and non-Muslims living in the land of Islam, including problematic rulings concerning non-Muslims. While not developing into distinct sects like the broader Sunni-Shi’a divide, the competition and animosity between these schools had become so fierce that by the Mamluk and Ottoman periods, physical clashes occurred between their students at centers of Islamic learning such as al Azhar. State sponsorship resulted in the legal framework of many countries being governed by jurists from one school.

As a modern phenomenon in response to the crisis of modernity confronting the Muslim world, Islamism has developed different responses to the existing Islamic jurisprudence. Facing rejection by the religious establishment, which had become rigid in its adherence to inherited laws of the past, reformers such as Mohamed Abduh (1849-1905) attempted to undermine them by claiming the mantle of the earlier, formative period of Islam, that of Prophet Mohammed’s Companions and immediate followers, commonly known as *al Salaf al Salih* (“pious ancestors”). Abduh’s goal was to liberate Islam from the shackles of tradition and blind legal imitation and allow a reinterpretation of the text to harmonize it with modernity and rationality. While his end goal was certainly

laudable, transcending the schools of jurisprudence and claiming the mantle of the Salaf would allow those who followed in his footsteps, such as his student Rashid Rida (1865-1935), to utilize the approach in a more conservative and political direction. The issue would be compounded by the amalgam that happened between Abduh's line of thought and that of Mohamed ibn Abd El Wahab (1703-1792), giving birth to modern Salafism.

Salafis today, while basing many of their edicts on clearly Hanbali basis, especially as developed by Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328), and his student Ibn Qayyim al Jazwiyah (1292-1350), claim that such schools have been superseded or more accurately preceded by the Salaf, effectively casting away all forms of legal authority. On the other hand, the Muslim Brotherhood's founder, Hassan al Banna (1906-1949), whose father had insisted on educating his four children each in a different school of jurisprudence, attempted to downplay the differences between the schools, while similarly claiming the mantle of the Salaf.

Secondly, many Islamist groups reject Muslim schools of theology, both orthodox ones—Ash'ari and Maturidi—as well as heterodox ones such as Mu'tazila and Murji'ah. Besides the two historical notions of monotheism developed by Muslim jurists and theologians; monotheism of Lordship (that God is the only and perfect Creator), monotheism of Divinity (all acts of worship are exclusively directed to God and no one else), Islamists have further developed the Ahl al Hadith school formulation of the literal meaning of the concept of monotheism of the Names and Attributes (God's description in the Quran must be accepted as is and without questioning), as a cornerstone of belief. More profoundly, starting with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood theoretician Sayyid Qutb, Islamists have further developed a fourth article of monotheism; Hakimiyah (Sovereignty of God, that God is the sole legislator for mankind), making this traditional legal issue a central tenet of faith. This fourth formulation of monotheism is the most problematic as it is the basis on which Muslim rulers are declared infidels for their replacement of God's law, or Sharia, with manmade laws.

Thirdly, Islamists have broken with not only the Islam of jurists and theologians, but with Islam as it was practiced by hundreds of millions of Muslims throughout history. Islamists seek to purify Islam from the beliefs and practices that they believe were added throughout the centuries and do not reflect the core tenets of the religion itself. Islamists reject Sufi practices and rituals as un-Islamic and when given the chance have destroyed Sufi shrines, murdered Sufis and persecuted anyone who does not practice Islam as they understand it. Their rejection of Islamic traditions extends to Islamic civilization as developed throughout the centuries. The diversity of that civilization has no place in their vision for Islam.

Lastly, Islamism represents a break with traditional Islam in its view of politics and rulers. While traditional Sunni Islam offered rulers a wide deference, and developed a certain separation between political and religious leaders, Islamism seeks to capture the state and sees the state as the principal instrument for making their vision of society possible (Sheikh Nasiruddin al Albani is an exception). Islamists also want to implement through the state a single uniform code of Islamic law, whereas in traditional Islam the law was never codified and always contested and somewhat fluid and dynamic in its interpretation and application. Both the obsession with the state as the means of implementing their visions and the obsession with the law is something Islamists got from European thought, especially that of France.

The same is true with Shi'a Islamism. Formulated by Ayatollah Khomeini in the 1970s, the concept of Vilayat al Faqih ("guardianship of the jurist"), transcended classical Shi'a jurisprudence by giving Islamic jurists custodianship over the population in the absence of the Mahdi. While Shi'a ulama throughout the centuries have played an important role as custodians of religious knowledge, protectors of the Imamate tradition, and teachers of the people, traditional Shi'a thought believed that there could be no legitimate political authority pending the return of the 12th hidden Imam, Mohamed al Mahdi (969-). Vilayat al Faqih gave Shi'a jurists a political custodianship

that traditional Shi'a thought had not known. In effect, it created a political model for an absolute theocracy that is led by the Supreme Leader of Iran and to whom total obedience is required of the faithful. The present Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, fulfills this role today and it is why he is able to mobilize Shiites from across the world to political causes, such as the war in Syria today.

It is important to note, that not only is Islamism a modern phenomenon that represents a break with traditional Islam, it is also one that is rejected by hundreds of millions of Muslims worldwide who see Islamism as a distortion of their faith. More importantly, Islamism's biggest intellectual foes are often not to be found among non-Muslims, but among Muslims themselves, both scholars and intellectuals, religious and secular, who continue to challenge the ideology's core tenets and have paid a steep price for this rejection.

Obama argued in his Cairo speech that "America and Islam are not mutually exclusive."¹⁹⁵ He was right. Like any other religion, Islam encompasses a long tradition that can be, and has been interpreted by numerous scholars, to not be in competition or conflict with the modern world and its values. Indeed, throughout the Middle Ages, it was common for Muslim theologians to double as scientists, entrepreneurs, physicians, and inventors. Many of the scientific discoveries of this period, which laid the foundation for latter European advancements, were made by Islamic clergy. In addition, it was Muslim philosophers that preserved Greek philosophy, particularly the writings of Plato and Aristotle, allowing it to be rediscovered centuries later by their European counterparts.¹⁹⁶

Moreover, many Muslim theologians and thinkers have attempted to find common ground with democracy, liberalism, human rights, human dignity, and modernity itself. Intellectually, such efforts include: the Egyptian Qasim Amin's (1863-1908) call for the liberation of women; the Egyptian Sheikh Ali Abdel Raziq's (1888-1966) 1925 book, *Islam and the Foundations of Political Power*, in which he rejected the idea that Islam prescribed a specific form of government, i.e., the Caliphate; the Pakistani scholar Fazlur Rahman Malik's (1919-1988) attempt to bridge the gap between

Islam and modernity; the late Indonesian President and Islamic scholar Abdurrahman Wahid's (1940-2009) work on religious toleration; and contemporary Islamic scholars such as the American Hamza Yusuf, the Mauritanian Sheikh Abdallah bin Bayyah, and the Syrian Muhammed Shahrur.¹⁹⁷

There have also been sustained efforts to bridge the gap between modern European law and Islamic jurisprudence. Such efforts, starting around the beginning of the 20th century, were particularly important in the area of personal status laws, those laws pertaining to marriage, divorce, the disposition of property, and similar domains, which had until then been administered solely by Sharia courts. The Ottoman Law of Family Rights, adopted in 1917, was one such example of an attempt to codify laws in this area, even though it was still based on Sharia traditions. Egypt, at the end of the 19th century, formed the Committee on Personal Status Law, composed of both secular trained lawyers and religious scholars, to codify the opinions of the Sharia courts. When those courts were finally disbanded in 1955, the Code of Personal Status Law was subsumed into the national code, drafted by the secular-trained jurist 'Abd al Razzāq al Sanhūrū in 1948.¹⁹⁸

These efforts and many others offer a road forward, undertaken by Muslims themselves. They need to be acknowledged, honored, and strengthened. But while it is indeed possible to interpret Islam in ways compatible with modern values and the world order, Islamism poses a threat to both.

Islamism, Violence, and the Threat to Order

If the goal of Islamism is a return to of Islam to its central and all-encompassing place in the life of Muslims through the creation of an Islamic state, the question of how to achieve this objective is central to the movement and one of the main divisions between Islamist groups and thinkers. Some Islamists believe that the current crisis of Islam can still be countered through non-violent means in Muslim societies, namely through religious indoctrination

and Islamizing society. Others view the threat level as reaching a critical point, with violence the only possible response.

“ Much more significant than any methodological disagreements between groups is what they share in common: a convergence of views that the world of Islam is under siege and it is the West that stands between them and the realization of their political ambitions. ”

Yet, in practice, the distinction between violent and non-violent Islamism turns out to be rather ambiguous, more a function of tactics and circumstance than of principle. Much more significant than any methodological disagreements between groups is what they share in common: a convergence of views that the world of Islam is under siege and it is the West that stands between them and the realization of their political ambitions. It is this fundamental rejection of modern political values and order that makes Islamism a compelling ideology for those with grievances against the modern world and, perhaps even more so than the embrace by some its followers of violence, brings Islamism into competition with the United States and its partners.

Shades of Islamism: The Relationship Between Violent and Non-Violent Groups

The relationship between violent and non-violent Islamist groups has been a matter of scholarly and policy debates since the 9/11 attacks. On the one hand, some have argued that, given the rhetorical criticism that they hurl at each other and the acceptance by some non-violent Islamist groups of the electoral process, non-violent groups represent a moderate version and should not only be excluded from the definition of the enemy the United States is confronting, but could possibly be partners for the United States, with some going as far as suggesting that these groups are the only possible partners given that they enjoy both authenticity and credibility with the Muslim street unlike progressive Muslims and

the official religious establishments. On the other hand, some have viewed Islamism as a homogenous entity with non-violent groups utilizing double speak to camouflage their true intentions. In reality, the relationship between violent and non-violent Islamist groups is a complex one.

First, the terms violent and non-violent are themselves problematic. None of these groups prohibits the use of violence in all circumstances. Violence being merely a tactic, its use is determined by a political calculus of strength and weakness, of means and limits, and of costs and benefits. While some groups choose not to engage in violence in certain countries and at certain moments, this has not formed an ideological rejection of violence per se, but rather a shifting position dependent on local circumstances. When these circumstances change, so does the calculus for the use of violence. For example, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood had its own paramilitary wing whose actions were justified based on the group's ideology.¹⁹⁹ The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood engaged in violence during the 1980s, the al Nahda movement had a military wing which prepared for a coup in 1987, and Hamas has consistently engaged in violence. Thus, the refusal to engage in violence is tactical. It has been pursued by some Muslim Brotherhood groups at certain moments in their history, when it was necessary or beneficial to their cause. But the rejection of violence is neither intrinsic to their version of Islamism nor can it be depended upon as a constant position.

This ambiguous relationship of Islamist groups to violence is borne out through the personal and financial connections that exist between all stripes of Islamist groups.

Many of the founders of jihadi groups were originally members or passed through the indoctrination phase of non-violent Islamist groups. One of the best-known examples is that of Abdallah Azzam, a Muslim Brotherhood-influenced Islamist who was key in mobilizing for the Afghanistan Jihad in the 1980s. Azzam worked with Muslim Brothers to facilitate this mobilization and he himself eventually became one of the most prominent jihadis to this day.²⁰⁰

Empirical study backs this as well. According to a recent study by The Centre on Religion and Geopolitics, 51 percent of a sample of 100 jihadis moved between 49 different jihadi groups studied.²⁰¹ Of the same sample, “Fifty-one per cent of the jihadis profiled had non-violent Islamist links before joining violent movements. One in four had links to the Muslim Brotherhood or affiliated organizations.”²⁰² The overlap between non-violent Islamist and violent Islamist groups, and the movement of members between groups, is also a matter of historical fact. As the British government report on the Muslim Brotherhood states “Muslim Brotherhood membership has been a rite of passage for some highly dangerous people. They have acted from their foundation as incubators of individuals and groups who went on to engage in violence and terrorism.”²⁰³

The fact that would-be jihadis have splintered from the Muslim Brotherhood does not undermine but only reinforces these organizational and ideological connections. The first modern jihadi groups were founded largely by disaffected Muslim Brothers influenced by the radical writings of Muslim Brotherhood ideologue Sayyid Qutb. When they found the Brotherhood and its leadership too inept and cautious in the use of violence, they left to form their own violent groups. These early jihadis turned against their former mentors not because they found an entirely new ideology, but because they believed their former groups were not sufficiently committed to the same cause.

In addition to serving as a stop on jihadis’ pathway to radicalization, non-violent Islamist groups have contributed resources to support terrorist organizations. Funding collected by Muslim Brotherhood affiliated individuals in the Gulf has made its way to supporting jihadi operations in countries such as Afghanistan and Bosnia, and supporting Hamas.²⁰⁴ Besides financial resources, non-violent Islamist group members sometimes serve as a general support network tapped into by jihadis to facilitate travel and housing.

These close ties between different types of Islamist groups, whether violent or not, is based on their fundamental ideological

alignment. As the International Centre for Counter Terrorism—The Hague noted in its 2013 study regarding non-violent groups, “they are often part of the radical milieu which is supportive of the goals if not methods of the terrorists.”²⁰⁵ In other words, violence is not an ideology, it is merely a tactic in pursuit of an ideological ambition. And even Islamist groups which do not engage in violence share the same diagnosis of Islam’s crisis, the same desired outcome and final state, and the same intellectual tradition, including thinkers who endorse violence, as those Islamist groups that do espouse violence.

No Islamist groups dispute that the solution to the crisis of the Muslim world is a return to Islam, as they understand it. No Islamist group disagrees that the West is continuously hostile to Islam, or as Sayyid Qutb put it “those who usurp God’s authority try to silence it [Islam]. They will never tolerate it or leave it in peace. This is the permanent state of affairs which necessitates the continuity of jihad until all submission is made to God alone.”²⁰⁶

This common narrative endorsed even by non-violent groups—of dissatisfaction with and opposition to the current order that is “fundamentally unjust, oppressive and un-godly”—is a stepping stone to the conclusion that violence, rather than any other response, is the only method capable of achieving the Islamist goal.²⁰⁷ As a Washington Institute for Near East Policy study noted, “while groups like HT [Hizb al Tahrir] do not perpetrate acts of terrorism per se, they help to lay the groundwork for al Qaeda’s toxic message to take hold and for individuals to take action.”²⁰⁸ Similarly, the British government report on the Muslim Brotherhood, which formally renounced violence in the 1970s, found that nevertheless, Sayyid Qutb’s writings “have never been institutionally disowned” by the Muslim Brotherhood and “remain central to the Muslim Brotherhood’s formational curriculum” and, moreover, his ideas continue to be used to justify multiple forms of Islamist violence.²⁰⁹

In the 9/11 Commission Report, the role that the common ideological narrative plays is recognized as instrumental. “Osama

bin Laden and other Islamist terrorist leaders draw on a long tradition of extreme intolerance within one stream of Islam (a minority tradition), from at least Ibn Taimiyyah, through the founders of Wahhabism, through the Muslim Brotherhood, to Sayyid Qutb. That stream is motivated by religion and does not distinguish politics from religion, thus distorting both.”²¹⁰

Islamism and World Order

This conflation of religion and politics renders Islamism a totalitarian worldview that rejects the pluralism that Islamic civilization had created throughout the centuries. The International Centre for Counter Terrorism—The Hague argued in a March 2013 study, “extremists strive to create a homogenous society based on rigid, dogmatic, ideological tenets; they seek to make society conformist by suppressing all opposition and subjugating minorities.”²¹¹ Sir John Jenkins summed up this view thus: “Islamism is not the expression of a rediscovered spirituality” it is, instead, “a frontal assault designed to capture, secure and expand Islamist political space and eventually domination.”²¹²

Elements of this vision include anti-democratic, anti-pluralistic, authoritarian, and non-compromising views, as well as a rejection of the rule of law and individual liberty. The basic tenets of liberal democracy—pluralism, manmade laws, separation of state from religion, gender equality, religious equality, and freedom of thought are rejected. While Islamists often declare a commitment to democracy, it is often unclear what that means in practice, or if it is, as the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office noted, “purely tactical and does not reflect a fundamental belief in democratic processes and values.”²¹³ The FCO also noted cases where: “political Islamist parties have not committed to liberal values or the implementation, in power, of democratic principles. . .there has been systematic abuse, including denial of freedom of religion or belief and discrimination based on gender or sexual orientation.” Islamist doctrines, Sir John Jenkins argues, proceed “from an unexamined foundational bias toward what we should call tyranny.”²¹⁴

Not only does Islamism dismiss the application of basic tenets of liberal democracy to Muslim countries, it rejects these values and the entire Westphalian world order for which they are the basis. As Sayyid Qutb sums it up “If we look at the sources and foundations of modern ways of living, it becomes clear that the whole world is steeped in *jahiliyya* (state of ignorance).”²¹⁵ This gives Islamism’s totalitarian ambitions revolutionary scope.

As Sir John Jenkins wrote, “Islamists are by definition revolutionary. They reject most existing political systems as un-Islamic—something they claim exclusively to define. They seek to replace the secular and neo-Westphalian with a new Islamised order nationally and internationally.”²¹⁶ This assessment is supported by Islamists’ own descriptions of their beliefs and objectives. Pakistani Islamist leader Abul A’la Maududi put it thus:

“In reality Islam is a revolutionary ideology and program which seeks to alter the social order of the whole world and rebuild it in conformity with its own tenets and ideals. “Muslim” is the title of that International Revolutionary Party organized by Islam to carry into effect its revolutionary program. And “Jihad” refers to that revolutionary struggle and utmost exertion which the Islamic Party brings into play to achieve this objective. Islam wishes to destroy all States and Governments anywhere on the face of the earth which are opposed to the ideology and program of Islam regardless of the country or the Nation which rules it. The purpose of Islam is to set up a State on the basis of its own ideology and program, regardless of which Nation assumes the role of the standard bearer of Islam or the rule of which nation is undermined in the process of the establishment of an ideological Islamic State.”²¹⁷

Islamism rejects the very notion of states and borders. Yusuf al Qaradawi states “Islam treats Muslims everywhere as one nation, and it does not recognize geographical borders or [differences of] race, color, or language. It sees Muslims as one nation in Dar al Islam, united in Islamic belief and Muslim brotherhood.”²¹⁸ Writing

under the alias of Louis Attiya Allah, a jihadi thinker noted, “To you I say that, yes, al-Qa’ida does not have a political program that is compatible with the international order, simply because the international order does not recognize us as an independent Islamic state. It forces us to revolve in its orbit, to go along with its secular systems, and to be under its military control.”²¹⁹

Indeed, for Islamists the very existence of this international system is an indication of Western animosity toward Islam. The organization of Middle Eastern political life around modern concepts like the nation state is a testament to the colonizers’ subjugation of Muslims. Qutb summed up the geopolitical position of Islamism as one of necessary and impending conflict with Western states: “Islam is not merely a doctrine so it is satisfied with informing people with its doctrine. It is a methodology represented in a kinetic collective organization that marches to liberate all people. The other collectives do not allow [Islam] to organize the life of its subjects according to [Islam’s] methodology, hence Islam must remove all those regimes as obstacles to overall liberation.”²²⁰

Western enmity toward Islam is inevitable, Qutb argued, for “the Crusader spirit runs in the blood of all Occidentals. It is this that colors all their thinking, which is responsible for their imperialistic fear of the spirit of Islam and for their efforts to crush the strength of Islam. For the instincts and the interests of all Occidentals are bound up together in the crushing of that strength.” He goes on:

“When we speak of the hatred of Islam, born of Crusading spirit, which is latent in the European mind, we must not let ourselves be deceived by appearances, nor by their pretended respect for freedom of religion. They say, indeed, that Europe is not as unshakably Christian today as it was at the time of the Crusades and that there is nothing today to warrant hostility to Islam, as there was in those days. But this is entirely false and inaccurate.”²²¹

It is this belief that Islam and the West are irreconcilable, that the spread of modern political values represents a Western assault on Islamdom, and that this attack has reached a critical stage, as the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism—The Hague noted in a September 2014 study, that is the underpinning of the jihadist call to violence.²²² It is this belief in the need for a revolutionary transformation of the world, from states built around the principles of self-determination and individual liberty to a totalitarian and transnational autocracy, that is the fundamental challenge posed by terrorism. As Sir John Jenkins noted “In the end the underlying challenge that all forms of Islamism represent is not going to be resolved simply by heightened intelligence capability, armed force or increased numbers of police on the streets, necessary as they all are to detecting, investigating, preventing and deterring Islamist crime. It is at heart an ideological challenge to the modern nation state, to emerging nation states and to the neo-Westphalian state system within which such states operate.”²²³

Conclusion

The terrorist landscape has changed dramatically in the 16 years following the 9/11 attacks, but the basic threat remains: Terrorists inspired by Islamist ideology continue to pose a significant threat to the homeland and to U.S. allies across the world. Today the focus is on the Islamic State, which has eclipsed al Qaeda as the main terrorist threat to the West and to millions of Muslims across the world who reject its ideology and methodology. But the Islamic State is merely the newest face of the enemy. Underneath the shifting tactics and methodologies of terrorist organizations is a larger threat. If the United States continues to focus narrowly on the threat of today—defeating the Islamic State—it will again find itself falling behind, failing to understand the evolving threat.

“The terrorist landscape has changed dramatically in the 16 years following the 9/11 attacks, but the basic threat remains: Terrorists inspired by Islamist ideology continue to pose a significant threat to the homeland and to U.S. allies across the world.”

Despite measurable progress in keeping America safe since 9/11, the dispersion of terrorist groups and the amplification of their message through modern media continue to make counterterrorism a top-priority challenge in a “borderless” world. Staying ahead of the evolving threat—and not just “mowing the grass”—will take an unprecedented unity of effort among global partners, but the effort must be made. Policymakers should be wary of simply promising “victory,” and especially any intimation that it can be achieved quickly. “This process,” the 9/11 Commission reasoned, “is likely to be measured in decades, not years.”²²⁴

Prevailing against the broader terrorist threat will require bolstering the counterterrorism capabilities the United States has honed over the last decade-and-a-half with a concerted effort to attenuate the conditions and ideology, at home and abroad, that contribute to terrorism. Such a global threat requires a global response. To that end, the United States must not only bolster its own efforts, but also work to strengthen its cooperation with foreign governments, diplomats, intelligence services, and law enforcement. The focus of such a unified approach should include addressing both socioeconomic factors that push individuals toward jihadism and the Islamist ideology that motivates terrorists’ violence. Victory against Islamist terrorism cannot be achieved only through the military action, law enforcement, or even targeted messaging campaigns that have been the hallmark of bipartisan U.S. policy across three administrations now.

“So long as new generations continue being drawn to the cause of jihad, terrorism will plague and unsettle the world. So long as U.S. policy focuses chiefly only on preventing violence the siren song of Islamism will continue luring fresh recruits.”

So long as new generations continue being drawn to the cause of jihad, terrorism will plague and unsettle the world. So long as U.S. policy focuses chiefly only on preventing violence—eliminating terrorists on the battlefield, arresting them as they prepare their plots, or attempting to dissuade them from acting once they are already captivated by the ideology—the siren song of Islamism will continue luring fresh recruits. A comprehensive strategy is needed

that acknowledges the generational time horizon and ideological nature of this struggle.

Such a strategy must address the enemies of the United States—those who seek to harm its citizens, and its interests—and the ideology that encourages and sustains them, while differentiating the response. Enemies must be defeated, but counteracting an ideology requires a different approach. A long-term strategy would focus not on the adherents of Islamist ideology today—they can neither be dissuaded by the U.S. government, nor should it be U.S. policy to target, whether militarily or criminally, those who hold Islamist beliefs but do not act violently upon them—but the uptake of that ideology tomorrow. Nor can the appeal of an ideology be reduced through criminalization, suppression, or silencing of thought or speech. What the United States must invest in is support for competing ideas, amplification of critical voices, and promotion of the conditions in which those ideas will prove more powerful and more convincing than those of Islamism.

“The generational struggle against Islamist terrorism will come to an end only when the ambitions that motivate groups such as al Qaeda and the Islamic State return to the obscurity they richly deserve.”

The generational struggle against Islamist terrorism will come to an end only when the ambitions that motivate groups such as al Qaeda and the Islamic State return to the obscurity they richly deserve, discarded in the dustbin of history.

The alternative to Islamism is neither to be found in theology or alternative ideologies, but rather in the rejection of ideology outright. Islamism is a totalitarian project that seeks to impose its views of morality on all, the alternative is pluralism, tolerance for diversity, and a strong division between public and private spheres.

Islamism seeks to overturn the secular and liberal modern political order founded on individual rights and nation states and it should be precisely these values and institutions that the United States and its partners seek to promote in societies and countries vulnerable to extremism.

These are not simple prescriptions to fulfill. Nor can they be carried out by the United States alone. But just as, during the Cold War, the United States waged a successful struggle against Communism by recruiting other nations to its cause, reaching broad audiences, supporting civil society actors, and convincing many of the universal appeal of liberty, so too can that model and success be replicated against another totalitarian ideology with global ambitions.

“Long-term success demands the use of all elements of national power: diplomacy, intelligence, covert action, law enforcement, economic policy, foreign aid, public diplomacy, and homeland defense,” wrote the 9/11 Commission, warning: “If we favor one tool while neglecting others, we leave ourselves vulnerable and weaken our national effort.”²²⁵ Understanding the scale and scope of the threat is the first step. Transforming that understanding into a comprehensive and sustainable strategy to confront terrorism and delegitimize extremist beliefs is the next.

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