



Nineteen Years On, We Face A Resilient Islamist Threat

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Last week marked the 19th anniversary of the terrorist attacks on New York and the Pentagon that ushered in what has come to be known as the "global war on terror." The occasion provides an opportune moment to take stock of the prevailing trends in America's longstanding struggle against Islamic extremism. Unfortunately, the news is anything but encouraging.

ISIS is resurgent. A year-and-a-half after the destruction of its physical caliphate in Iraq and Syria, the world's most notorious terrorist group is showing alarming new signs of life. While the Coronavirus has dominated the news, this year has also seen a surge of Islamic State-directed violence in both Iraq and Syria, and the group is now estimated to have more than 10,000 active fighters in those countries — and thousands more embedded in various franchises abroad. The organization also retains hundreds of millions of dollars in funding from various sources, enabling it to fund global operations on an ongoing basis.

Al-Qaeda is making a comeback. In recent years, a pitched ideological competition with its onetime franchise, ISIS, has left the Bin Laden network on the back foot globally. But an overwhelming focus on the Islamic State on the part of the international community has provided al-Qaeda with the breathing room necessary to regroup and reconstitute, and it has used this time wisely. As counterterrorism experts Asfandiyar Mir and Colin P. Clarke note in *Foreign Affairs*, the group "has improved relationships with local power brokers from the Levant to the Indian subcontinent, fusing local and transnational aims in an effort to strengthen cohesiveness and broaden its support base." The results are noteworthy — and worrisome. Al-Qaeda has now "reconstituted its network in South Asia and Syria, and it appears more unified than before," Mir and Clarke lay out.

Local jihads are on the rise. At the height of its popularity nearly half-a-decade ago, close to three dozen separate radical groups made common cause with, or formally pledged allegiance to, the Islamic State. Since the collapse of the "core" caliphate, however, these factions have reverted back to their previous patterns of activity — and religious conflicts have surged in the home countries and regions where those groups are active.

Africa has been particularly hard hit in this regard. As a new study from the National Defense University notes, violent Islamist activity surged by more than 30 percent throughout Africa last year, and has spiked in particular in four distinct regions on the continent: Somalia, the Lake Chad Basin, the western Sahel, and Mozambique. That last locale represents a particular area of concern; incidents of violent Islamic activity in Mozambique have surged sevenfold in the last year, and now represent 42 percent of all Islamist violence on the continent as a whole.

Jihadi messaging, and recruitment, is resilient. The Islamic State's meteoric rise to power in 2013 and 2014 was attributable, in large part, to a sophisticated media presence that exploited digital platforms, social media and a variety of messaging applications to disseminate its ideological vision. That vision has persisted, despite the destruction of the group's physical presence. Conversations with regional officials throughout the Middle East and North Africa in recent months make clear that there has been no substantive change to patterns of recruitment, radicalization and mobilization in the broader Muslim world, despite ISIS' decline.

In fact, against the backdrop of the global coronavirus pandemic, the extremist message may be gaining more resonance than ever before. Counterterrorism experts worry that captive audiences trapped at home as a result of national lockdowns and social distancing measures now have greater opportunity (and time) to imbibe radical messaging online. At the same time, deteriorating economic conditions in countries hard hit by the pandemic could lead to social instability and provide greater fuel for extremist causes in the near future.

All of which should serve as a sobering reminder that, while America may now be pivoting toward other priorities (such as "great power competition" with China), the conflict that former CIA Director James Woolsey once termed "the long war of the 21st century" remains precisely that. It is a protracted struggle which, like it or not, the United States will be forced to fight.