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FROM THE EDITORS

Welcome to the December 2016 issue of AFPC's Defense Dossier. In this installment, we discuss the changing nature of the challenge posed by Islamism, both in the Middle East and beyond. The articles in this issue focus on a quintet of pressing issues: the ongoing war in Syria and its global implications; the future of the global war on terror; American strategic priorities and engagement in the Middle East; how to manage threats to the homeland, and; the means by which the United States and its allies can counter the Islamic State and other extremists on the "battlefield of ideas." As always, we hope you find the pages that follow both useful and informative.

Sincerely,
Ilan Berman
Chief Editor

Richard Harrison
Managing Editor

Syria as Crucible and as Fulcrum

Alberto M. Fernandez

The Syrian government's forces and its many international helpers are on a roll, and as of this writing secured their biggest military victory of the war with the fall of Aleppo in December 2016. Such a success could lead to other victories in the coming months.

The Syrian civil war will, by March 2017, be entering its sixth year. The destruction and death to date is staggering. Much of the war has been fought in heavily populated areas, like the cities of Aleppo and Homs, or some of the suburbs of Damascus. Airstrikes and shelling have frequently been indiscriminate. The loss of human life now measures in the hundreds of thousands, with one estimate putting it at almost half a million.[1] Tens of thousands of women and children have been killed.[2] 2.8 million Syrians have been physically disabled, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.[3] The country's life expectancy has declined from 70.5 in 2010 to 55.4 in 2015.[4] About half of Syria's pre-war population of 22 million has been uprooted, either made refugees or internally displaced.[5]

Not only have there been major losses to the country's industrial base and economy, but also to its unique cultural heritage, including to the old city of Aleppo and the famed ruins of Palmyra. And millions of those displaced Syrians are condemned to lives of penury with plummeting educational levels and economic prospects.

SHIFTING BATTLE LINES

With the key additions of Russian firepower and foreign Shi'ite fighters from Lebanon, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq over the past year, the Assad regime will soon be able to move beyond Aleppo and turn its full attention to slowly squeezing the large rebel enclave that encompasses most of Idlib Province in Western Syria. Like Aleppo, this is an area where rebel forces are intermixed with the rebranded al-Qaeda faction formerly known as the Al-Nusra Front (JN) and now called the Syria Conquest Front (JFS).

With Syria divided into roughly four zones of control, the one where (non-ISIS) Islamists and Free Syrian Army (FSA) rebels are to be found is the most likely to be squeezed in the near future. If the Syrian regime and its allies maintain their superiority, their slice of the Syrian pie will slowly continue to grow. Those areas controlled by Kurdish militias in Northern Syria may also grow against ISIS, but the main Kurdish faction, the YPG, faces the twin problems of expanding into non-Kurdish areas and confronting Syrian rebels backed by the Turkish army. ISIS control of its own fiefdom should continue to decrease as well, either slowly or rapidly depending on the strength of the pressure that is placed upon it.

The success of the pro-Assad coalition may continue, but the war is unlikely to fully end even if the weary and militarily stretched regime can somehow impose a semblance of its will on most of the country. There are still around 50,000 seasoned rebel fighters, safe havens in neighboring countries, foreign patrons with deep pockets, and millions living in misery in camps or exile and dreaming of revenge. In other words, all the building blocks are in place for a long insurgent struggle.[6]

Indeed, while the Syria war has been the crucible for much of the country's destruction, it has also become a testing ground, a fulcrum for extremist experimentation. It is in Syria where the "ISIS brand" was finely honed in 2013-2014, and it is where Al-Nusra is experimenting

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with the next iteration of the regional jihadist movement, a seemingly "kinder, gentler" broad front with generally like-minded groups who are not, technically, Foreign Terrorist Organizations.[7] If this model is successful in Syria, it could become the template for a new and more insidious way of doing jihad in an unraveling region where Islamism is often the principal ideological alternative to authoritarian regimes in power.

Botched Response
While the Obama administration did not cause the Syria crisis—its roots are firmly and entirely embedded in a brutal Syrian and Arab regional reality—its handling of the Syrian debacle has been nothing short of disastrous, not only for the Syrian people but for American interests in the region as well. A combination of cynicism and shallow, wishful thinking, U.S. policy has been driven almost entirely by the President and his most senior advisors in the White House, in sharp opposition to Mr. Obama's own political appointees at the Departments of State and Defense, and at the CIA.

It is always a mistake to empower one's enemy, but the Obama administration astonishingly found a way to simultaneously empower two of them. As a direct result of its policies in the region, both an aggressive Iran and a resurgent Salafi jihadist challenge, embodied by ISIS and al-Qaeda, have been emboldened.[8] It is a bitter truth that under President Obama—mostly because of his administration's approaches to Syria and Iran—respect for America in the region is at its lowest ebb in decades. Indeed, Secretary of State John Kerry has, in the waning days of the Administration, openly admitted that the 2013 Syrian red line incident "cost the U.S. significantly"

in the region.[9] But that specific debacle was only the most prominent part of a much broader regional policy failure.

In the end, whether Syria was sacrificed on the altar of better relations with Iran or for fear of repeating the supposed mistakes of Iraq under the Bush administration, or because of the President's own hubris, the damage was done. The damage was not only to Syrians, and to America's standing in the region, but also to the ability of a new White House to address the problem.

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Turning the Page
So what can be done at this very late date?

Any policy prescription on Syria must be prefaced by two obvious truths. First, whatever the United States does or does not do on Syria under a Trump administration, Bashar al-Assad is a mass murderer and war criminal. And while most focus on his horrific actions against his own people, it should never be forgotten that al-Assad is also complicit in facilitating the death of hundreds of Americans in Iraq.

That said, the new Administration is under no onus to try to impose a costly and complicated solution on a Syrian disaster not of its own making. In fact, policymakers may well decide to allow the conflict to continue to take its course. After all, past administrations have looked upon genocide in places like Rwanda and Darfur and not been spurred to action. And there is compelling reason for passivity, since the record of regime change in the region is not a heartening one. Efforts to remove tyrants in Syria, Libya, Yemen and Iraq empowered Islamists and jihadists (sometimes, as in Syria and Yemen, with the tyrants' help). Only Tunisia and Egypt are possible, partial exceptions to this iron rule.

If there is to be a shift on Syria, policymakers in the new White House should do something the Obama administration never would, and consider the problem strategically and regionally. One early mistake (of many) of the Obama era was to see Syria as a terrible, local tragedy—something to be deplored, but of little to no importance to the regional interests of the United States. This constituted a critical error. The human rights calamity in Syria does not necessarily make it our war. But Iranian ambition and ISIS expansion do. Syria is a strategic concern to us, not principally because of mass murder by Assad but because it is one place where Iranian ambition and ISIS expansion can be challenged, and to do so would draw us closer to our traditional allies in the region.

> " The United States could use the motley assortment of rebel groups fighting against both ISIS and Damascus to fashion a zone of influence that serves our own strategic interests.

Moving Forward

The United States will soon also face a very practical challenge on the ground as it increases pressure on ISIS in Eastern Syria. These areas, the countryside of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zour (ISIS Wilayat Raqqa and Al-Khayr), are keys to the organization's long-term survival (as are similar rural areas of Western Iraq across the border).[10] They are places where ISIS has bored deeply into the fabric of local tribal life. The question, then, becomes who will rule them once the ISIS "state" is overthrown. Answering it could either bring the United States into conflict with the Assad regime, or spur cooperation with it.

But there is a third way. Rather than cooperating with the brutal Assad regime against ISIS, or coming into direct conflict with the regime, Russia and Iran in Western Syria, the United States could use the motley assortment of rebel groups fighting against both ISIS and Damascus to fashion a zone of influence that serves our own strategic interests and is roughly in line with what our traditional allies prefer. American support could make territory now being liberated into an anti-ISIS and anti-Assad safe haven, giving protection to civilians and creating an area that serves as a credible Sunni Muslim alternative to ISIS in a key region. It would also provide a last opportunity for Syrian rebels to prove that they can do better than producing a slightly less awful version of ISIS or JFS as a model for governance.[11]

The merits of this third way are clear. Instead of Syria being a fulcrum where both Iran and ISIS use violence and chaos to leverage their regional ambitions, at least part of it could become a venue where the United States blunts those ambitions by supporting the building a realistic alternative to both adversaries. That, in turn, would give innocent Syrians the breathing room they desperately need, as well as turbocharge the effort to root ISIS out of the safe havens where it is preparing for the next round of a long struggle. ∎

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The Future of the Global War on Terror

Ilan Berman

Since it surged into public awareness in 2014 with its rapid, bloody takeover of parts of Iraq (and subsequently Syria), the terrorist group popularly known as the Islamic State has captivated the global imagination. The group's rapid military advances, coupled with its unbridled brutality, have made it global public enemy number one. As a result, the organization has become the near-singular focus of Western counterterrorism policy.

Of late, however, strategic setbacks suffered by the Islamic State in its rump "caliphate" of Iraq and Syria have raised the prospect that America's counterterrorism fight, at least in its current form, might soon be a thing of the past. Yet the Islamic State's decline has also raised a host of new and troubling questions about the future disposition of its franchises, competitors and ideological fellow travelers—answers to which will be essential to the success of U.S. counterterrorism policy in the years ahead.

A Crumbling Caliphate?

At the height of its power in late 2014 and early 2015, the territory of the Islamic State covered 81,000 square miles—a geographical expanse roughly equivalent to the size of the United Kingdom.[1] During this period, the terror group held sway over 8 million civilians, a population on a par with that of Switzerland.[2] It likewise generated a yearly revenue of some $1 billion in 2015, making it the best funded threat group in recorded history.[3]

Today, the Islamic State's fortunes have declined considerably. In recent months, concerted military action on the part of the United States and its Coalition allies has significantly eroded the group's territorial reach. As of this summer, British intelligence consultancy IHS estimated that ISIS had lost a quarter of its total territory (an area more or less the size of Ireland).[4] This loss of ground, coupled with an array of "soft power" strategies employed by the United States and its allies, has adversely impacted the group's political and economic fortunes. As of this summer, the Islamic State's total revenue is believed to have declined by as much as half, forcing the group to implement an array of belt-tightening measures (such as significant reductions in the salaries of its fighters).[5]

Not surprisingly, policymakers in Washington and European capitals have been quick to conclude that ISIS represents a dwindling—if not yet defunct—problem. As the Commander of U.S. Central Command, Gen. Joseph Votel (USA), noted to reporters in August, growing "pressure" on the group by U.S. and allied forces is prompting the proto-state to revert back to its more modest "terrorist-like roots."[6]

Despite these setbacks, however, the Islamic State remains a resilient and capable threat actor. An October 2016 study by the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security concluded that, despite its recent territorial losses, both the global influence and reach of the Islamic State remain potent. This is attributable to the group's extensive, and innovative, revenue stream, which relies on seven distinct pillars: black market oil and natural gas; black market commodities; antiquities; extortion, taxation, and robbery; kidnappings for ransom; support from nation states in the Gulf, and; emerging fundraising tactics like fraudulent financial activities.[7] These diverse sources, in turn, "continue to strain the U.S. Government's ability to disrupt the group's financial flows."[8]

Moreover, the Islamic State is still thinking globally. A June 2016 report by the Congressional Research Service noted that the group has succeeded in fielding at least six functioning "armies" in Libya, Egypt, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Afghanistan.[9] This, coupled with independent cells inspired by its ideology, has given the group a continuing capacity to strike globally—something

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that Western officials have acknowledged. "Our efforts have not reduced the group's terrorism capacity and global reach," CIA Director John Brennan told the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence this summer.[10]

Indeed, despite recent coalition advances, it is still possible to envision the Islamic State maintaining control of a smaller, more geographically sustainable territorial expanse that nonetheless provides it with the land, population and revenue necessary to keep itself in business well into the future. In other words, ISIS—even in diminished form—will continue to constitute a threat to Western interests for some time to come.

AFFILIATES UNMOORED

Nor will the decline of the Islamic State's current "caliphate" eliminate the threat posed by the group's extensive network of global affiliates. To date, no fewer than 34 separate radical groups have made common cause with or pledged allegiance to ISIS and its self-proclaimed *emir*, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.[11] That list includes, among others, Nigeria's militant Boko Haram movement, the radical Ansar al-Khilafah group in the Philippines, and the violent Ansar Beit al-Maqdis faction that dominates the Sinai Peninsula. Likewise, Islamic State-affiliated militants have gained a significant foothold in post-Qadhafi Libya, which has become viewed as a "second front" for the group in its war against the West.[12]

These factions, and others, will doubtless be deeply affected by the Islamic State's current path of decline in Iraq and Syria. This, however, cannot be expected to result in their dissolution. In virtually all cases (save Syria), these

organizations predate the advent of the Islamic State, and have autonomous personnel, infrastructure and operational capabilities. Indeed, for many (like Nigeria's Boko Haram), affiliation with ISIS has turned out to be more an ideological and political alignment than a genuine merger.[13]

As a result, the decline of the Islamic State could well usher in an era of diffuse, localized jihad—one in which ISIS' current and former partners, in the absence of coherent central authority, seek to promote their own radical vision on a national or regional level.

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AL-QAEDA'S LONG GAME

Significant, too, is the disposition of the Islamic State's progenitor and ideological rival, al-Qaeda. Over the past three years, the two groups have waged a pitched struggle for the hearts and minds of the world's *jihadists*. It is a contest that ISIS is widely acknowledged have won handily—at least while it was on the ascent.[14]

Less well understood is how this rise has affected al-Qaeda, in terms of both ideology and operations. Yet, as scholars like Daveed Gartenstein-Ross convincingly argue, the Bin Laden network has adapted significantly in response to the Islamic State, rebranding itself throughout the Middle East and North Africa as a more authentic and measured Islamist alternative.[15] It has also increasingly embraced the necessity of territorial control—something that its leadership eschewed in previous years as a distraction from the overriding goal of global *jihad*.[16]

> **The Bin Laden network–once believed to be on its heels–has succeeded in laying the groundwork for a long-term strategic presence as a global actor.**

The results are striking. Today, the organization holds more territory than at any time in its history. From Yemen to Syria to Afghanistan, al-Qaeda has become entrenched on large swathes of territory, exploiting empty political space in conflict zones and local aversion to the brutality of ISIS to insinuate itself with local Sunni populations. This long-term strategy, moreover, has benefited tremendously from a lack of serious attention on the part of the West, which remains preoccupied with the anti-ISIS fight. As a result, the Bin Laden network—once believed to be on its heels—has succeeded in laying the groundwork for a long-term strategic presence as a global actor.

A New Terrorist Internationale

The legacy of the Syrian civil war will play a key role in the complexion of future terrorism as well. Over the past half-decade, the struggle between the regime of Bashar al-Assad and his political opponents has steadily metamorphosed from a local conflict into a global *jihad*. Thanks to the influx of thousands of foreign extremists, the country has steadily transformed into the new Afghanistan, a training ground for today's terrorists and a crucible for a coming wave of extremism.

The historical analogy is instructive. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979—carried out by the Kremlin to prop up the country's embattled communist regime—touched off a mass mobilization of radicals throughout the Muslim world. Over the years that followed, thousands made their way to Southwest Asia to wage *jihad* against the Soviet Union. All told, experts estimate that as many as 20,000 foreign fighters joined the ranks of the Afghan mujahideen in the decade between 1979 and 1989.[17]

Over time, and through the assistance of facilitators like al-Qaeda's intellectual godfather, Abdullah Azzam, and his support network of safe houses and training camps (known as the Maktab al-Khidamat[18]), this cohort became a network of seasoned, trained and battle-hardened professionals. And once the Afghan *jihad* ended, some of its "alumni" sought out other conflicts in places like Chechnya and the Balkans, while others returned to their countries of origin and proceeded to carry out subversion on a local level. The result was that the decade of the 1990s saw the internationalization of the *jihadist* ideas and tactics that had been used to such great effect against the USSR.[19]

> **Once today's conflict draws to a close, Syria's "alumni" can be expected to return home, sparking a new wabe of global instability in the process.**

Today, the foreign fighter problem generated by ISIS and incubated by the Syrian civil war has the potential to be far more deadly. An April 2016 study by the National Bureau of Economic Research estimates that, in the two-plus years since its rise to prominence in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State has succeeded in attracting more than 31,000 recruits from countries as diverse as Tunisia, Norway and Trinidad & Tobago.[20] In other words, the Islamic State has already marshaled one-and-a-half times as many foreign fighters to its cause than were active on the battlefield during the entirety of the Afghan *jihad*. In turn, once today's conflict draws to a close, Syria's "alumni" can be expected to return home, sparking a new wave of global instability in the process.

In fact, this trend is already taking shape. In recent months, as the Islamic State has lost territory on an accelerating scale, European nations have begun to brace themselves for an influx of returnees for that conflict—and for a spike in terrorism carried out by these same actors.[21]

A Reinvigorated Iranian Threat Network

The Islamic State's status as the standard-bearer for Sunni jihadism has likewise diverted attention for the growing potential for Shi'ite radicalism, which is causally linked to the expanding capabilities and strategic ambitions of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

As a result of the nuclear deal concluded last year between Iran and the P5+1 powers (the U.S., UK, Russia, China, France and Germany), the Iranian regime has received what amounts to an enormous economic windfall in the form of some $100 billion in previously-escrowed oil revenue, reintegration into the global financial system, and an array of measures intended to stimulate post-sanctions trade. The cumulative impact of this assistance has been nothing short of transformative. Iran's economy, which was teetering on the brink of collapse in the Fall of 2013, is now on a path of sustained growth, according to international financial institutions like the IMF and World Bank.[22]

As Iran's economic fortunes have stabilized, its strategic ambitions have expanded. Over the past year-and-a-half, among many other initiatives, the Iranian regime has deepened its military footprint in Syria in support of the regime of Bashar al-Assad, redoubled its investments in assorted Shi'ite militias operating in neighboring Iraq, and provided extensive military assistance to Yemen's Houthi rebels. The cumulative effect is that Iran can now be said to be in control of four Arab capitals: Beirut, Lebanon; Damascus, Syria; Baghdad, Iraq and Sana'a, Yemen.

Tehran, moreover, is thinking bigger still. The Iranian government has invested billions of dollars in the acquisition of new military hardware from suppliers like Russia and China[23], and Iranian military officials have charted an increasingly ambitious—and aggressive—strategic agenda abroad.[24] The message is unmistakable: Tehran today is on the march.

This new activism is likely to be manifested in a surge of additional funding to proxy groups that support and promote the Islamic Republic's global vision. Indeed, even before the lifting of multilateral sanctions as a result of the nuclear deal, Iran was estimated to be spending between $3.5 billion to $16 billion annually on support for terrorism and insurgency worldwide.[25] This figure included funding for Lebanon's Hezbollah movement, Hamas in the Palestinian Territories, and a host of other militant factions in Iraq, Syria and beyond. Now that Tehran has begun to reap the monetary dividends of its nuclear arrangement with the West, these investments can be expected to become deeper still, with significant detrimental effects for regional stability in the greater Middle East.

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Beyond Sound Bites

While still on the campaign trail, President-elect Donald Trump vowed repeatedly to make the destruction of ISIS a key foreign policy priority if elected. His administration consequently can be expected to make the formulation of a new approach to radical Islam one of its cardinal tasks once it takes office in January. But as it crafts its strategy, the Trump White House is liable to find that it faces a complex and multifaceted counterterrorism challenge—one in which the fight against the Islamic State represents just one battle in a much larger war.

As such, official Washington will need to settle in for a long-term conflict. And it will need to formulate a counterterrorism strategy that is as complex, as adaptive and as wide-ranging as the forces that it seeks to confront and defeat. ■

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Rethinking American Military Intervention in the Middle East

Michael Eisenstadt

Although the American people may be weary of the Middle East's "forever wars," the vital interests of the United States require that it remain militarily engaged there. The region's vast oil and gas reserves are economically essential to key trade partners, and its role in proliferation and as an exporter of instability, violent extremism, and terrorism can only be ignored at one's own peril. Since 9/11, the United States has learned the hard way that what happens in the Middle East doesn't stay in the Middle East.

The United States, however, has not dealt very effectively with the region's security challenges in the post-9/11 era—from combating transnational terrorist networks, defeating resilient insurgencies, or the challenges of state and nation building. Its interventions (and at times, disengagement) have contributed to the emergence of weak or failed states in Iraq, Libya, and Syria, while terrorism in and emanating from the region has increased dramatically since 9/11. American policymakers need to reassess how the U.S. government thinks, organizes, and acts militarily in the region so that it can better advance American interests in a part of the world that is still of vital importance to it.[1]

This means developing a better understanding of the region's culture and politics (or, as the military refers to it, the operational environment) and particularly the workings of a "non-Westphalian" state system—in which Middle Eastern countries often meddle in each other's affairs, and bandwagon (frequently with the help of outside powers) in order to prevent foes from consolidating military successes, and to preclude the emergence of a regional hegemon.[2]

These tendencies were exacerbated by the 2010-2011 Arab uprisings and the proliferation of weak and failed states that followed in its wake, which allowed terrorist groups like the Islamic State and al-Qaeda to establish themselves in ungoverned spaces, and enabled newly activist Arab states like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar (as well as non-Arab powers like Turkey, Iran, and Russia) to intervene in conflicts throughout the region. Conflicts have become more complex and interconnected, leading to the emergence of a regional "conflict system" spanning sub-Saharan Africa to South Asia, in which arms, foreign fighters, tactics and techniques, and combatants migrate from one conflict to another, often energizing and intensifying these brushfire wars and complicating efforts to resolve these conflicts.

For this reason, U.S. policymakers should abandon "solutionism"—the quixotic and quintessentially American quest to solve the Middle East's problems—and have modest expectations of what military interventions in the region can achieve, especially against resilient terrorist and insurgent networks. Given the momentum behind the violence, most of the Middle East's conflicts cannot be solved, only managed—at least for now.

This dynamic works both ways, however, and creates opportunities for the United States to roll back the achievements of its adversaries, should it desire to do so, as there will always be embattled parties looking for foreign patrons. But the region is not self-organizing, and in order for this to happen the United States will need to work with local partners against its adversaries, just as it did vis-à-vis the Soviet Union in the Middle East in the 1970s and in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

American Failures

Inadequate understanding of the operational environment has led to policy missteps and subpar performance by the United States in a number of areas. U.S. policies toward Damascus and Tehran have created a perception that the United States is aligned with Iran and tacitly

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> "U.S. efforts to deter adversaries and assure partners have been hindered by Washington's failure to maintain the credibility of prior commitments and the perception that it is quick to abandon traditional partners and to embrace adversaries.

A New Approach

First, policymakers need to break with their binary way of thinking about "war and peace," "victory and defeat," and "regular and irregular" conflicts. This shift is essential to success in a region where the boundaries between these terms are often blurred, and where conflicts are likely to yield ambiguous outcomes. In particular, the United States has to recognize that its struggle against salafi-jihadist groups is likely to be a long-term one. Many of the most committed adherents to this ideology are in their teens and twenties, and will be around for decades to come. And while the military defeat of the Islamic State's army and the dismantling of its so-called caliphate is a necessary condition for victory, it is not sufficient. Rather, the ideology of the global salafi-jihadist movement must be discredited. The military defeat of the organizations that act in the name of this ideology is a first step in that direction. But the United States needs to understand the process by which extremist ideologies gain traction and then eventually lose their appeal, so that it may better influence this process.

supports the survival of Bashar al-Assad and his regime, providing a recruiting boon for IS and hindering the military campaign against it. U.S. efforts to deter adversaries and assure partners have been hindered by Washington's failure to maintain the credibility of prior commitments (e.g., the 2012 chemical weapons redline in Syria) and the perception that it is quick to abandon traditional partners (such as Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak) and to embrace adversaries (such as Iran and, more recently, Russia).

In its security force assistance, the United States has often ignored the cultural predilections and operational needs of its partners in trying to create militaries that are miniature replicas of the U.S. armed forces, while its Foreign Military Sales system has often been slow to respond to the urgent needs of its allies, causing them to go to other sources, such as Russia, for arms. And it has placed insufficient emphasis on information activities, which are the decisive line of operation for many of its enemies and rivals (e.g., IS, AQ, Iran, and Russia), and has done a poor job linking its information activities to its activities in the diplomatic and military arenas. As a result, it has not done enough to undermine the appeal of groups like the Islamic State, and the influence of strategic competitors such as Iran.

This assessment has a number of implications for the American "way of war," for how America employs the military instrument in the Middle East, and for its ongoing war against salafi-jihadist groups like IS and al-Qaeda.

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Second, policymakers should stop seeking tactical and technological solutions (as embodied by the Defense Department's "third offset strategy"[3]) for politically driven conflicts—such as the struggle against salafi-jihadist groups—where technology, though critical, is less important than political and cultural savvy and sound geopolitical instincts. American tactical virtuosity and high-tech wizardry, and U.S. arms transfers and verbal assurances to partners and allies, cannot offset blunders whose impacts

are regional in scope and geopolitical in scale. The beginning of wisdom is to recognize this—and to avoid geopolitical missteps like America's bungled handling of the aftermath of its 2003 invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of Libya's President Qaddafi in 2011, its disengagement from Iraq between 2011-2014—which enabled the rise of IS, and its failure to support the non-salafist opposition in Syria, which contributed to the largest jihadist mobilization in modern times.

Third, the United States needs to adopt a "light footprint"[4] approach that is robust enough to maintain momentum against the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, to deter Iran and its proxies, to bring along regional partners, and to bolster and backstop diplomacy, yet does so without entailing an unsustainable investment of blood and treasure. Such an approach can succeed only if America acts more like its adversaries—working "by, with, and through" local partners and proxies to achieve incremental gains. This means formalizing the ad hoc adjustments to America's traditional way of war made since launching its counter-IS campaign in Iraq and Syria in 2014. And it means rethinking the U.S. approach to security force assistance and to supporting irregular forces engaged in unconventional warfare campaigns. The U.S. has notable past successes in both areas, and it needs to avoid repeating its failures in training the Iraqi Security Forces and the Syrian opposition.[5] An approach that relies on local partners and proxies will ensure that America's continued involvement in the region is sustainable, and that it retains the flexibility necessary to meet military contingencies elsewhere in the world.

Fourth, to the degree that America's main adversaries—Sunni salafi-jihadist groups such as IS and al-Qaeda on the one hand, and radical Shi'ite Iran on the other—both seek to undermine the Arab state system, it is in the U.S. interest to shore up the region's remaining strong states (Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Turkey, and the Gulf States), as well as non-state actors, such as the Syrian Kurdish PYD, that can hold ground, govern in a manner acceptable to the local population, and combat extremist groups like IS and al-Qaeda. And in areas that have experienced state failure, the United States should work against further fragmentation by pursuing sustainable political arrangements between local actors aligned with U.S. interests. The chaos now roiling the region, however, derives from fundamental changes in the balance of power between governments and opposition in the region's more deeply divided societies, that are driven by globalization and technological change. Here, Washington will need to accommodate itself to a new and enduring reality: the political fragmentation and decentralization prevalent in the region today will be a permanent "new normal" for large parts of the Middle East.[6]

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Fifth, information activities are of decisive importance for IS, al-Qaeda, and Iran, and are woven into all their activities. By contrast, the United States continues to under-resource its activities in the informational space. It has generally failed to effectively leverage the lethal effects of its military operations against IS to create decisive nonlethal effects in the psychological and informational domains. And it failed to effectively challenge Tehran's nuclear narrative during the negotiations that led up to the nuclear deal with Iran in 2015, and since. The United States must devote even greater resources and effort to framing the narrative regarding the struggle with salafi-jihadist groups like IS and al-Qaeda, as well as its strategic competition with Iran. And it must keep in mind that actions speak louder than words. The yawning gap between word and action in U.S. policy (exemplified by Washington's scant support for Syrian rebels while calling for President Assad's departure, vows to "destroy" IS with an under-resourced military campaign, and unfulfilled pledges to push back against Irani-

an regional activities after concluding a nuclear deal with Tehran), has undermined its standing among both friends and adversaries. The United States doesn't just have an image problem—it has a reality problem.[7]

Finally, while the American experience in Iraq and Afghanistan has soured many on the idea of transformational agendas, there is no avoiding them—though this time without costly occupations and state building efforts—if the U.S. is to succeed in the Middle East. The United States must not only transform its own strategic culture so that it can better deal with the military and governance challenges it faces in the region, but it must work with embattled regional partners to transform the zero-sum, winner-takes-all political culture that has spawned so many of the region's conflicts. Doing so is a prerequisite to enabling the emergence of a politics of compromise, inclusion, and moderation (if not democracy). Determining how to foster such a process of organic change—at a time that America's own political culture is changing in sometimes bewildering ways—may in fact be the most difficult long-term challenge the United States faces in the region. ∎

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The Evolving Threat to the U.S. Homeland

Leisel Bogan

A year-and-a-half before the 9/11 hijackers weaponized commercial airlines and killed nearly 3,000 people on U.S. soil, an Egyptian in China, a radical webmaster in London, and several Arab militants in Afghanistan cobbled together the infrastructure needed to create a roughly-designed extremist website to advocate for "martyrdom operations" in pursuit of Salafi jihad.[1] The effort was one of al-Qaeda's early attempts to use internet technologies to spread its ideological and socio-political message across the globe.

Fourteen years later, as offshoots of al-Qaeda in Iraq morphed into the organization known as the Islamic State (or ISIS, or ISIL, or Daesh) that eventually declared a modern "caliphate" in parts of Syria and Iraq, researchers discovered at least 45,000 Twitter accounts registered to the group.[2] Two years after that, the company suspended 125,000 accounts connected to ISIL.[3] At its peak of activity in mid-2015, ISIL was producing over 700 social media products in a single month—from 20-minute videos to full-length documentaries—which included high-quality, well-produced, gruesome images of beheadings, crucifixions and other atrocities.[4]

The advancement of the Islamic State's use of information technologies is illustrative of the broader, complex evolution of the security threat to the United States posed by disparate violent extremist groups. The "extremist Islamism" threat is not monolithic, and involves Salafi jihadist groups like al-Qaeda, ISIL, and smaller Sunni organizations that emerged out of the Middle Eastern "Arab Spring" uprisings in 2011, as well as Shi'a extremists like Lebanon's Hezbollah. But what they have in common is unprecedented access to new vehicles of communication in the form of social media platforms and emerging information technologies.

Terrorism has evolved alongside technology by enabling and modernizing the capabilities of violent extremists in three critical ways. First, it has made it much easier for them to communicate, both with themselves and with support-ers around the world. Second, it has given them far greater capabilities to disseminate their message and inspire potential adherents. Finally, it has facilitated the ability of Salafi jihadi groups to spread geographically by expanding their potential audiences from local, to regional to global levels. Together, these changes have created complex dilemmas for U.S. policymakers and law enforcement—challenges that cannot be solved solely by military action. As all of the living directors of the CIA have argued at one time or another, we cannot simply "kill our way out" of the problem posed by contemporary terrorism.[5]

Since 2001, the U.S. government has spent more than $1 trillion in the fight against threats like ISIL and al-Qaeda.[6] These efforts, which include dismantling terrorist cells, countering terror financing, disrupting cybersecurity networks, and preventing access to critical infrastructure, have helped secure the United States, while altering the nature of the threats faced by the country. In her address to the Council on Foreign Relations in March of 2016, Lisa Monaco, the Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism, noted that "the threat today is… broader, more diffuse—and less predictable—than at any time since 9/11. Where we once spoke of hierarchal 'networks' and 'sleeper cells,' much of the threat today is online, distributed across the globe… terrorism today is increasingly defined by small cells or lone actors."[7]

A year earlier, on February 12, 2015, the Director of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) made a similar point before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, noting a "new level of specialization and fragmentation within the larger terrorism landscape." The change is partly due to the success of global counterterrorism efforts and victories on the battlefield, which have made it more difficult, though not impossible, for Salafi jihadists to perpetrate elaborate coordinated attacks. The change is also due to innovations in technology that have facilitated increasing communication between jihadists and potential violent extremists, and adaptive shifts in the messaging of

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these violent actors—from encouraging other jihadists to join the battle in Syria and Iraq, to directing them to perpetrate attacks in their home countries.[8]

INNOVATIONS IN COMMUNICATION

Communication platforms have amplified the messaging of violent extremism far more dramatically than when jihadists utilized basic websites fifteen years ago, in the process changing terrorist operations both strategically and tactically. The strategic messaging products of terrorist organizations have included sophisticated propaganda videos, online educational magazines, and online documentation of successes. Some jihadist websites have even popularized terrorism through video games like "Salil al-Sawarem" (the Clanging of the Swords) as a way to draw in and inspire young people.[9]

Encryption for communication platforms, meanwhile, has provided new tactical methods for terrorists to "go dark" or evade intelligence intercepts as they plan and coordinate during attacks. Groups like al-Qaeda used online encryption tools even before easily accessible, modern encrypted communication tools such as Wickr, WhatsApp and Surespot became available.[10] But technological innovation and the proliferation of communications software has made the use of such capabilities increasingly ubiquitous among extremist actors, presenting a new and daunting challenge to law enforcement authorities seeking to track them.

A BROADER APPEAL

Not only have the methods, size, and nature of the violent extremist threat to the United States changed, so too have the faces. The perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks were 19 men, 15 of whom were citizens of Saudi Arabia; none of the hijackers were American citizens, and only two of them were married. In contrast, in 2014, the perpetrators of the San Bernardino terrorist attacks that killed 14 people were a married couple, Syed Rizwan Farook, an American citizen, and his wife, Tashfeen Malik. Like the Orlando shooter in June 2016, the couple only pledged allegiance to the Islamic State; they did not receive any known material support from it or any other organized international extremist or jihadist group. In addition to a locked iPhone that launched another national debate on privacy and technology, the couple left behind a six month-old baby girl, an act that was hailed by the Islamic State on social media not as abandonment but as a noble sacrifice.[11] As RAND analyst Brian Michael Jenson testified before the Committee on House Oversight and Governmental Reform Subcommittee on National Security in 2014, "inspiration not infiltration" is the preferred tactical approach of extremist Islamists today.[12]

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Although terrorist attacks that are directed by groups like the ISIL tend to be bloodier than those that are simply inspired by them, those that are inspired are becoming more frequent.[13] French scholar Olivier Roy describes lone-wolf attacks inspired by groups like ISIL (such as the Orlando Nightclub shooter) as the "Islamization of radicalism."[14] In other words, with the rise of groups like ISIL, individuals who are on the verge of committing violent acts find inspiration and justification (as well as a sympathetic audience) for those acts in Salafi jihadism.[15]

In response to the ISIL's increasingly influential global

messaging, and its potential to inspire individuals in the United States, President Obama in 2011 outlined a counter-radicalization strategy focused on "Countering Violent Extremism."[16] The effort coordinates existing operational counterterrorism efforts and law enforcement activity with a new public "marketplace of ideas" and community outreach component. The strategic effort is intended to address all forms of radicalization and extremism, but has focused particularly on those inspired by al-Qaeda, which has led to some criticism of targeting and opaque methodology.[17]

The governmental response to violent extremism within the United States is a complex endeavor, involving law enforcement, technology companies and the private sector, national security operations, nongovernment organizations, community leaders, and constitutionally protected civil liberties, like free speech and freedom of expression. It becomes a particularly thorny issue to navigate when those issues converge online, as national debates on cybersecurity, surveillance, encryption and civil liberties have illustrated.

> " In the last fifteen years, terror attacks have become more widespread and less sophisticated.

SPREADING THE MESSAGE

In the last fifteen years, terror attacks have become more widespread and less sophisticated. From gun rampages in San Bernardino, Paris, Bangladesh, Mali and Kenya, to bomb blasts in Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq, including blasts that killed 24 Shi'a Muslims in Pakistan and 25 Coptic Christians in Egypt, to suicide bombers in Baghdad, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, the atrocities perpetrated by today's terrorists are less coordinated and less creative. This, too, is partially due to developments in social media and information technologies.

One of the most prominent examples of terrorist use of technology to overcome geographical barriers to spread Salafi jihadism in the United States is Anwar Al Awlaki, the late Yemen-based U.S. citizen cleric who inspired and communicated frequently with Major Nidal Hassan in the

United States, the Fort Hood shooter who killed 13 people in 2009. Awlaki utilized a variety of communication platforms (emails, blogs, chat rooms) to cultivate Major Hassan and to direct him to kill his fellow Americans. Today, the Islamic State utilizes online methods of recruitment more frequently than any other terrorist organization, including al-Qaeda. ISIL's online success is not just because of its social media savviness, but also because of its narrative. As the FBI's Michael Steinbach told the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee's Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations in July, "Unlike other groups, ISIL has constructed a narrative that touches on all facets of life—from career opportunities to family life to a sense of community. The message is not tailored solely to those who are overtly expressing symptoms of radicalization. It is seen by many who click through the Internet every day."[18]

FORGING A COUNTER-NARRATIVE

Despite fitful and at times frustratingly slow progress, President Obama's "whole government" counterterrorism efforts since 2014 have begun to pay dividends. The Islamic State's internet presence was disrupted by the deaths of Junaid Hussain and Siful Haque Sujan, two key leaders of its "Cyber Caliphate," in separate drone strikes in 2015. In September of this year, the group's head of propaganda, Wa'il Adil Hasan Salman al-Fayad, was also killed by a drone strike. Additionally, the Islamic State's physical presence is in decline—it has ceded 50 percent of the population it once held in Iraq, 20 percent of what it once held in Syria, many of its fighters have been killed, and it is on the verge of being driven from Mosul, one of its last major strongholds in Iraq.[19]

But despite these tactical gains, strategic problems remain. One is radicalization in the United States, which continues to experience an uptick. In 2014, the FBI arrested a dozen alleged ISIL supporters. In 2015, that number increased fivefold.[20] Salafi jihadist radicalization has also increased globally, with ISIL's co-opting of extremist groups in Yemen, Algeria, Syria, the Caucasus, Afghanistan, and Egypt.[21] To reduce ISIL from a quasi-state with a message of global appeal, the U.S. must continue to address social, economic and political factors extremists exploit, especially as they are misused online.

Additionally, as a government initiative, Countering Vio-

lent Extremism remains an underfunded mandate—one that, in large-scale terms, has not received the support it should. Our counter-messaging weakness is due in part to the fact that the U.S. government has not funneled sufficient resources into strategic messaging campaigns or social and other forms of media that could be potent in providing a countervailing narrative against violent extremists. The United States spends $1.8 billion on core Public Diplomacy efforts, of which CVE is a part, compared with $19 billion committed to cybersecurity generally.[22]

The next administration has the opportunity to invigorate our CVE approach beyond relying on kinetic measures against those who push this murderous ideology. We must engage the millions of Muslims around the world who oppose ISIS and fight them every day, increase funding to CVE efforts, and develop a broader CVE messaging strategy that counters ISIL's narrative of an oppressive West at war with Islam. In doing so, the next administration can help build and elevate a positive, proactive narrative for the United States with which to counter the corrosive but enticing message being disseminated by violent extremists. ■

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Western Technology vs. Extremism

Robert Bole

If you passed Khadiza Sultana on the street of Bethnal Green, London in 2015, you would have noted a happy, engaged and vivacious teenager. By all accounts, her family was stunned when London's Metropolitan Police counter-terrorism squad told them that Khadiza and two of her friends had successfully crossed into Syria to join the ranks of the Islamic State terrorist group.[1]

Khadiza was far from unique, however. Around the world, young men and women who have fully embraced pop culture, video games and social media have felt connected and even compelled to die for a radical movement grounded in opposition to the modern world and which sees uncompromising violence as the only solution to a world they find hostile.

Over the past two years, the success of the self-proclaimed Islamic State in using digital media to engage audiences has helped bolster its international standing, spread its uncompromising message, and drawn legions of foreign fighters to its cause. But it has also done much more, because the IS model of messaging is already becoming a template for future extremists. As such, IS represents a case study for how smart, agile actors can execute modern propaganda campaigns that confound slow-moving state opponents and enable significant advantages on and off the battlefield.

STRUGGLING TO REMAIN RELEVANT

In January of this year, speaking at a press conference in Paris, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter gave a pithy summary of the current state of play on the media front in the global war on terror. "We're having some success," Carter confessed to the assembled reporters, "but democracies are slow, and they only tell the truth. And in a message-driven Internet world, that puts you at a structural disadvantage compared to people who are nimble, agile, and lie."[2]

If anything, Carter's assessment was overly optimistic. From a strategic perspective, the Islamic State has demonstrated a significant "first-mover" advantage, connecting with its audiences early and quickly delegitimizing the U.S. response before it has even been launched. The Islamic State's successes speak to a signal shift in the media space: as the Digital Age has progressively erased previous limitations on the distribution of media, it has empowered actors who are closer to their audience and understand how social and mobile media platforms can serve as a key offensive weapon for influence.

This, in turn, has presented the U.S. government with a singular challenge. In the near term, the only truly effective strategy to counter IS messaging is by countering its use of Western communication tools—digital and social media, mobile phones and laptops. Here, the United States and its allies in the West have a massive technological advantage. But official Washington has only just begun to harness this leverage by engaging, and sometimes pressuring, Silicon Valley to identify and delete extremist social accounts, as well as helping to target at-risk audiences with an effective counter-narrative.

PRIVATIZING THE MEDIA BATTLE

The strongest voice on the role of Western technology's role in combatting extremism has been Jared Cohen, President of Jigsaw, Google's idea platform. "To wage a digital counterinsurgency, we need to understand the structure of this enemy's digital army," Cohen explained in a December 2015 oped in the Los Angeles Times. "Engaging on the digital front is integral to defeating Islamic State. Its digital operations are so extensive that the multinational coalition against Islamic State should launch a comprehensive, digital counterinsurgency."[3]

Cohen is putting his money where his mouth is. In recent months, Jigsaw, in partnership with Moonshot CVE, a British-based social data group, has created Re-

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direct, a tool that leverages Google ad targeting and data analysis of social platforms to model and identify audiences susceptible to extremist messaging. It then, like a commercial ad operation, builds a playlist of "pre-existing content, including content that wasn't created expressly for the purpose of counter-messaging," which is delivered to these at-risk audiences next to the extremist content they are consuming to attempt to nullify the "first mover" advantage of extremists. The point is to use the power of ad targeting to "redirect" people toward content that points them in a new direction.[4]

The Redirect program is not groundbreaking science. Rather, it is a repurposing of existing technology that is used by marketers and presidential candidates alike. It leverages proven—and powerful—technology targeting that's already being applied in other capacities. For example, send an email to a dozen friends and post to Facebook mentioning that you are interested in buying a new car and see how your ad environment changes.

The method is not without its critics, however. Redirect has some concerned about how this clever use of common technology can be used by commercial and governmental interests to subvert freedom of information or fully leverage the ephemeral ad format. In the words of one skeptic, "Redirect is a noble and typically clever techie initiative to help divert people away from truly appalling and vile apocalyptic nihilism, but it does nothing in itself to re-establish the credibility of mainstream views."[5] Nevertheless, on balance, the advantages of Redirect (most prominently its use of readily available technology) make it a compelling response to an opponent already adroit in its use of social media and mobile apps.

Facebook and Twitter have taken a less "whizz-bangy" approach to countering extremism. Facebook, like Google's YouTube, relies on a mix of algorithm, brute force and ample revenue to reduce hate speech online. It recently founded the Online Civil Courage Initiative in Europe and partnered with Bertelsmann, a large European media holding company, to identify and remove hate speech, including IS content. Facebook also launched "Counter Speak," an initiative that provides ad credits of up to $1,000 on Facebook to nonprofits and registered "counter speakers" whose messages confront and dilute radical online ideas. The company is also a sponsor, along with the State Department, of "Peer to Peer," a competition of college teams to create effective content to counter violent extremism run by EdVenture Partners, a nonprofit. (Full disclosure: the author was a judge for the first Peer to Peer competition.)

For Twitter, meanwhile, the problem of extremist messaging is magnitudes larger than it is for Google or Facebook. Twitter's approach has been to aggressively suspend accounts of IS members or supporters. In August 2016, Twitter suspended over 360,000 accounts, which, according to one study from the George Washington University, has been effective in diminishing activity on the platform by the Islamic State.[6] However, other studies have found that IS members send out 50 percent more tweets per day than counter-IS Twitter users, and there exist a range of identity hacks by which it is possible to bring a suspended IS user back online.[7]

LOOKING FURTHER

Yet, while these technology-driven methods have proven effective, account suspensions or redirection can only take countering extremism so far. Behind the technology stream are human beings who can adapt and employ their own technology countermeasures. Today, the greater challenge facing the United States and its allies is finding the best way to combine smart technology with effective counter narratives to fill the short-term gap that exists in our digital defenses.

Over the past year, U.S. and Western European governments have learned the limitations of their traditional approaches. The U.S. State Department initially led

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with aggressive messages that told potential recruits to "Think Again, Turn Away" from IS atrocities. While the campaign demonstrated action, it also became apparent that this messaging was ineffective because it did not build an "authentic" relationship or create a believable counter narrative that dissuaded vulnerable at-risk populations.

U.S. and regional authorities are now beginning to understand that their proper role is to support and amplify more effective messengers, providing the tools for an audience-centric response to IS propaganda. The U.S. has retooled its strategy away from direct messages and toward supporting agile community-based advocates and building similar support networks within Middle Eastern and other regional governments. Counter-IS media efforts have also improved with the injection of smarter technology and credible messengers, although there are lingering concerns about the "privatization" of countering extremism (insofar as large private sector media conglomerates do not necessarily have the same long-term interests as the U.S. or other governments).

Here, the United States is not without its advantages. Even if it cannot match the agility or the ability of extremists to engage audiences, the U.S. has significant leverage conveyed both by its economic clout and by its ability to influence the structure of societies and media environments. The core objective, however, must be to continue to reduce the salience of IS messaging and support the development of media environments—mobile, social and traditional broadcast—that are resilient to extremist messaging in the first place.

There are heartening signs that this is beginning to happen. The U.S. government, working with technology companies, is gradually adopting an agile approach that mirrors start-up culture, where smart risk is encouraged and failed approaches are noted quickly and discarded. But the pace of innovation requires a different conversation than we had just a year ago. And it requires the U.S. to continue to enhance its "enabling" role, whether by directing efforts through funding tools, regulatory mechanisms, indirect and direct pressure or persuasion.

Once this happens, we will move considerably closer to a real and robust communication strategy—one capable of countering not only the Islamic State, but likewise whatever will inevitably come after. ◼

ENDNOTES

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