



Road to the Caliphate

THE SALAFI-JIHADI MOVEMENT'S STRENGTHS

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JUNE 2019



CRITICAL THREATS

A M E R I C A N E N T E R P R I S E I N S T I T U T E

Executive Summary

The US and its military partners in Iraq and Syria have stamped out the last remnants of the Islamic State's so-called Caliphate. But warnings already echo that the Islamic State remains a threat both to Syrians and Iraqis and to Westerners. The Taliban remains powerful in Afghanistan, where it hosts and enables al Qaeda—and where the Islamic State has also established a foothold. Al Qaeda's network globally has expanded, especially in western Africa and northwestern Syria. America's failure to defeat the Salafi-jihadi movement, of which al Qaeda and the Islamic State are only two parts, despite 18 years of concerted effort results from its misdefinition of the threat, failure to identify the correct center of gravity, and failure to focus efforts on the proper critical vulnerability over the long term.

The enemy is the Salafi-jihadi movement itself, not the specific elements of it threatening attacks against the US and Europe at any given moment. US policy and the American legal framework have defined the enemy as those specific individuals and groups engaged in enabling and directing terror attacks against American or Western interests. This narrowing of the definition of the enemy misses the broader ideological movement of which the Islamic State, al Qaeda, and other such named groups are a part—a movement that shares a unified objective in violently imposing its vision for Islam on Muslims and then, eventually, worldwide.

The Salafi-jihadi movement's grand strategic center of gravity is its ideology. The ideology is the source of resilience that allows the movement to recover from defeats and reconstitute time and again. It has existed in its current form since at least the 1960s and in some form since the early days of Islam. The Salafi-jihadi ideology draws on the Salafi trend in Islam, which is the belief that Muslims should return to the practice of Islam in the early years of the

religion, and a jihadi conviction that it is obligatory on all Muslims to use armed force to achieve this.

However, the US cannot successfully attack or defeat this ideology. The vast majority of Muslims have rejected the ideology and do so repeatedly, demonstrated whenever the vanguard seeks to enter new areas. Circumstances drive them to tolerate the ideology over the short term for survival. Further empowering mainstream voices will not affect the calculations of communities that perceive the vanguard's support as the only way to protect their future.

A self-defined vanguard leads the Salafi-jihadi movement. This vanguard is more expansive than the list of senior leaders and other high-value individuals that US counterterrorism policy targets. A mass of actual and potential recruits and fellow travelers constitutes the broader movement. The members of the vanguard adhere to the Salafi-jihadi ideology. They are both internally oriented to ensure that they remain on the true path of Islam and externally oriented to spread Islam and reunify the Muslim community. They understand that they must inspire and lead a broader movement, which includes those who have not yet accepted their message, in order to overthrow the current regimes and eventually reinstate the Caliphate. The vanguard's ability to lead a movement larger than the number of ideological adherents is critical to its success.

This vanguard is the proper target of American efforts because it propagates the Salafi-jihadi ideology, which acts as the movement's grand strategic center of gravity. However, the vanguard itself is too large and dispersed for US direct-action operations to destroy or even meaningfully disrupt it over the long term. External counterarguments to the Salafi-jihadi ideology will not influence members of the vanguard, and so it is impossible to reduce the vanguard by seeking to change minds. Eliminating the vanguard is

likewise impossible. The US has not sought to do this globally and has not been able to do it locally, even in theaters such as Iraq or Afghanistan where the US sustained a high tempo of operations to degrade the local vanguard. The center of gravity at the grand strategic level is therefore not vulnerable to attack. The US must find a new point of attack.

The center of gravity at the strategic level is the vanguard's connection with local populations that transforms it from an isolated and ineffective elite into the leadership of a large and dangerous movement. The vanguard builds this relationship with Sunni communities by providing them with security, justice, basic goods, or services or through other means. "Healthy" communities have rejected the vanguard's attempts to develop ties repeatedly—even within fragile states. Yet these communities fall prey to the vanguard's efforts when they come under stress due to exogenous conditions. The vanguard thus requires a local presence within the communities and the ability to respond to local dynamics in order to exploit the opportunities that arise as a community weakens.

The US can successfully attack the Salafi-jihadi movement's connection to a community indirectly because the requirement to retain the connection forms critical vulnerabilities within the Salafi-jihadi movement that are dependent on the community's own conditions and decisions. Local conditions, particularly in the security collapse and governance breakdown that followed the 2011 Arab Spring, created entry points for the Salafi-jihadi vanguard to penetrate communities. The current round of state

weakening (and possible collapse) in Algeria and Sudan may create new opportunities for the vanguard. The absence of other viable alternatives for communities as they seek to defend themselves or protect their futures has made these communities more likely to tolerate the presence of Salafi-jihadis. These vulnerabilities are where American counterterrorism strategy should focus.

US and partner efforts to attack the vanguard's relationship with communities have succeeded in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Somalia until focus shifts away from these efforts. Those efforts required a large American military force in Iraq, a smaller one in Afghanistan, and a very limited US footprint in Yemen. Progress against the vanguard in Somalia, although more limited, occurred with virtually no US boots on the ground. Identifying the movement's connection to the population as the critical vulnerability around which to build American counterterrorism strategy is thus not a call for the massive deployment of American military power everywhere.

Successful American counterterrorism strategy requires a constant, long-term focus on breaking the connection between the Salafi-jihadi vanguard and the population. The specific implementations of this strategy will vary widely in approach and in the required resources from area to area. But a sound strategy with the correct focus will not require or benefit from deploying large numbers of American troops or vast amounts of aid dollars. It is a sustainable strategy and the only one that might lead to success where the current approach falls short.

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Premature declarations of victory characterize the American fight against groups such as the Islamic State and al Qaeda. President Donald Trump announced that the Islamic State in Syria would be “gone by tonight,” pointing to the remaining speck of red on an assessment of Islamic State territory in March 2019, and President Barack Obama asserted that Osama bin Laden’s death was “the most significant achievement to date” against al Qaeda in May 2011.¹ These declarations, politically motivated as they were, portray an understanding that the war on terror will end once the United States defeats certain groups. American efforts against certain groups or targeting of individuals, such as Osama bin Laden or now Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, affect only a fraction of the full threat, which is the Salafi-jihadi movement.² This movement has expanded rapidly since 2011 and persists beyond the rise and fall of groups or any imminent threat it poses to the United States.³ The relationships that the Salafi-jihadi movement has built with local Sunni communities serve as its strength.

The Salafi-jihadi movement is the collection of individuals, groups, and organizations operating in pursuit of shared overall goals. Salafi-jihadi ideology coheres this movement and defines its objectives. This ideology combines the Salafi trend within Islam—the return of religious practices to the days of early Islam—and a jihadi belief that the use of armed force is incumbent on Muslims to restore this practice within Muslim lands and then to spread it globally. The modern movement sprang from the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s and has since evolved in form and practice. It has adapted

to changing circumstances to better penetrate and eventually transform local Sunni communities under Salafi governance.⁴ These adaptations have enabled the Salafi-jihadi movement to strengthen by better positioning it to build bridges to Sunni populations.

US counterterrorism operations have not had lasting effects. Groups that were defeated, such as al Qaeda in Iraq, have reconstituted in more dangerous forms. Al Qaeda seems able to emerge and threaten from new territory after the US has targeted it in other places. The US has not adopted an approach that applies pressure to the Salafi-jihadi movement globally. Instead, it has gone after the nodes that seem most threatening at any given moment: al Qaeda in Afghanistan, then Iraq, then Yemen, then the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria—all the while eliminating high-value individuals as they surfaced. Indeed, the US has played a global and unwinnable game of whack-a-mole.

American efforts focus on reducing the terrorism threat from the Salafi-jihadi movement. Yet the Salafi-jihadi movement threatens not just violence, but a complete revolution in the international order if successful. It seeks to reorder the Muslim world under its vision of Islam and governance and then expand into the West. The vision was laughable 20 years ago, and it remains highly implausible today. Yet the convergence of efforts among bad global actors—including Russia, China, and even Iran—has weakened the international order as the US and Europe look inward. These conditions have created opportunities for the Salafi-jihadi movement to advance its objectives in places where any success

seemed impossible previously. The US must therefore transform its approach in face of the new reality.

Understanding the enemy is fundamental to crafting a strategy to counter it effectively. The deficiencies in America's counterterrorism strategy stem from the characterization of the enemy as a terrorist group, which defines Salafi-jihadi groups by only one of the activities that they undertake to achieve their objectives. The October 2018 National Counterterrorism Strategy outlines a strategy that "pursues terrorist threats to their source" using all available means.⁵ The efforts prescribed in this strategy target the terrorist capabilities of the Salafi-jihadi movement through military, financial, and political pressure on individuals, groups, and threat networks. It also emphasizes the development of partners' counterterrorism capabilities. Terrorism is a tactic that the Salafi-jihadi movement uses to pursue its long-term objectives. Terrorism remains the Salafi-jihadi movement's primary threat to the West, but Salafi-jihadi efforts to erase Western influence over the Muslim world and to break the current governments also challenge Western interests.

Center-of-gravity analysis, an analytical methodology drawn from the intelligence community, provides a framework to identify and evaluate the strengths and vulnerabilities of the Salafi-jihadi movement as a whole. The enemy, the Salafi-jihadi movement, is evaluated according to four key characteristics of any organization: critical capabilities, critical requirements, critical vulnerabilities, and center(s) of gravity. These characteristics and the analytical process for identifying them are described in more detail below. The center-of-gravity analysis assesses vulnerabilities of the Salafi-jihadi movement, which a successful strategy to counter the movement could attack or exploit.

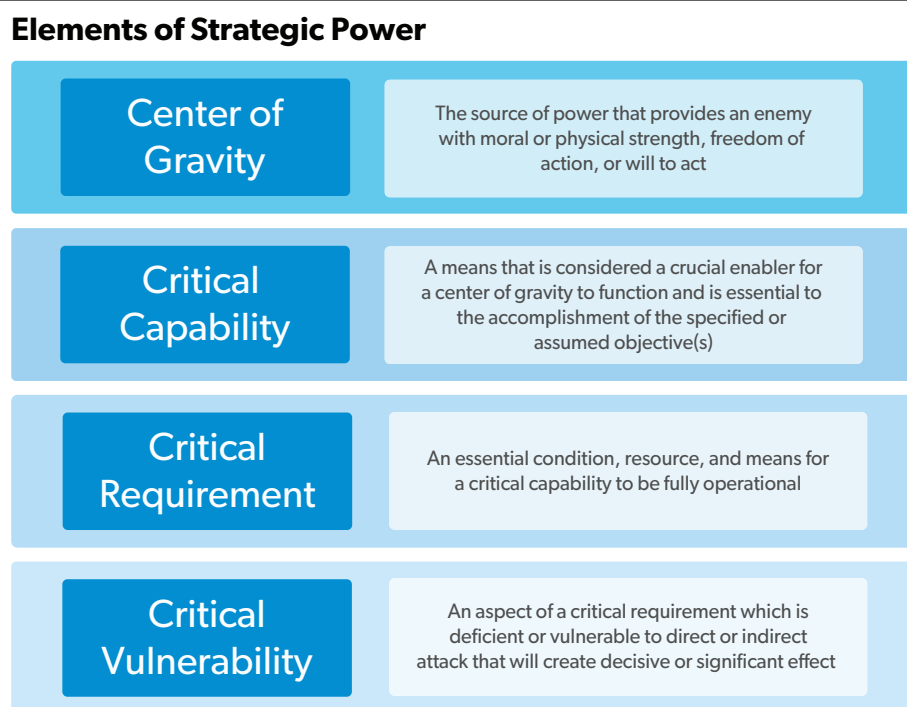
The Salafi-jihadi movement's strategic center of gravity is its relationship with Sunni communities. This relationship is the means by which the Salafi-jihadi movement intends to impose its version of Islamic governance on Muslims. The relationship, which varies extensively across different communities, is the source of the Salafi-jihadi movement's strength today.

What Is a Center-of-Gravity Analysis?

The idea of applying the center-of-gravity concept from the field of physics to military strategy first appeared in the works of Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz. He theorized how militaries engaged in war could develop a strategy to achieve their objective, which is the defeat of the enemy. To this end, Clausewitz explored characteristics of war and those fighting wars. In *On War*, Clausewitz wrote that the theorist (strategist) must keep the dominant characteristics of both belligerents in mind: "Out of these characteristics a certain center of gravity develops, the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends. That is the point against which all our energies should be directed."⁶ Acting against an enemy's centers of gravity would have nonlinear effects on the strength of the enemy.

The US military adapted Clausewitz's understanding of a center of gravity into a doctrinal approach to understand the elements of strategic power. According to US military planning doctrine, a "center of gravity" is "the source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act." (See Figure 1.) A center of gravity is always linked to the adversary's efforts to achieve an objective. A "critical capability" is a primary ability essential to accomplishing that objective. Identifying these critical capabilities generates a list of "critical requirements": the essential conditions, resources, or means for a critical capability to operate fully. Finally, critical vulnerabilities are derived from the critical requirements. A "critical vulnerability" is an aspect of a critical requirement that is deficient or vulnerable to attack. Attacking critical vulnerabilities will generate decisive or significant effects on the enemy.⁷

The center-of-gravity analytical framework aids in developing a strategy to weaken or defeat an enemy across the levels of war. (See Table 1.) The grand strategic level of war is where the highest order of coordination and direction occurs. Planning and support for the achievement of the grand strategic objectives occur at the strategic level of war. Campaigns to achieve strategic objectives, which in turn support the

Figure 1. Center of Gravity in US Military Doctrine

Source: Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Planning*, Joint Publication 5-0, June 16, 2017, GL-6 and GL-7, http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp5_0_20171606.pdf.

Table 1. Levels of War

Levels of War <i>Centers of gravity exist at every level of war.</i>	
Grand Strategic	Coordination and direction of all resources toward strategic political objectives
Strategic	Planning and conduct of efforts to secure grand strategic objectives
Operational	Campaigns planned, conducted, and sustained to accomplish strategic objectives
Tactical	Battles and engagements planned and executed to accomplish operational objectives

Source: Author.

grand strategic objectives, are conducted at the operational level of war. Finally, the engagements that support campaign objectives are at the tactical level of war. Attacking the grand strategic center of gravity has the greatest effect on the enemy as it touches on all aspects of the enemy's planning and operations.

Attacking at the operational or tactical levels by comparison has a more limited impact.

The framework helps identify the efforts that will have the most significant effect against an enemy and ultimately lead to its defeat. Most centers of gravity are not vulnerable to direct attack, which is why

the framework provides a method to identify critical vulnerabilities. Exploiting or attacking an enemy's critical vulnerabilities to weaken, neutralize, defeat, or destroy a valid center of gravity should cause the enemy to change its course of action or prevent it from achieving its objective. Centers of gravity can shift, creating a requirement to reevaluate the enemy's center of gravity regularly.⁸

Clausewitz's theory allows for multiple centers of gravity, but seeks to simplify these centers of gravity into one whenever possible. The idea is that these multiple centers of gravity form a system, for which

there is again a single center of gravity. A mobile is a system that has multiple centers of gravity in it, but a singular point from which the entire system hangs. Breaking the mobile—destroying the center of gravity—does not destroy the parts of the mobile, all of which might continue to function separately. US military planning accounts for this, too, and recognizes that though there might be a single center of gravity within a system, destroying it in certain ways could splinter the enemy and create a larger challenge.

A core problem with US counterterrorism strategy hitherto is that it has misidentified the enemy's

Center-of-Gravity Analyses

Multiple center-of-gravity studies analyze al Qaeda, the Islamic State, other groups, and what was known historically as “al Qaeda and associated movements.” These studies provide a glimpse back in time into different analytical framings and assessments of parts of the Salafi-jihadi movement. The US legal framework for counterterrorism provides valuable context for understanding how these studies defined the enemy. Actors had to meet certain legal requirements for counterterrorism authorities to come into play. Thus, nearly all the studies start with a premise that they are analyzing a terrorist organization, which invariably drives the focus of the analysis toward understanding the terror attack capabilities, the infrastructure required for these attacks, and what drives the organization. They have largely missed the organization's role in a broader movement for which terrorism is a minor effort. Some ignore the local activities of groups in shaping governance or dismiss these activities as merely creating a sanctuary as a base for future terror attacks.

Early studies identified al Qaeda's “radical Islamist ideology” as the center of gravity.⁹ The 2006 *National Military Strategic Plan for the War on Terrorism*, a strategy released by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, also identified the extremist

ideology as the enemy's strategic center of gravity and argued “removing [the ideology] is key to creating a global antiterrorist environment.”¹⁰ The critical capability derived from this assessment was the ideological adherents' ability to recruit, indoctrinate, and train new operatives (to conduct terror attacks). Other studies identified specific individuals, such as Osama bin Laden or Abu Bakr al Baghdadi and members of their inner circles, as the center of gravity or critical capability.¹¹ The common thread through the studies was the inability to destroy the ideology itself and the requirement, then, to remove the means for its propagation. Many of the recommendations, therefore, focused on the military options to defeat the groups.

Most center-of-gravity studies available focus on specific groups or networks. These studies parcel out parts of a network in order to analyze it, not recognizing the existence of a broader system. Nearly all focus on the terrorist capabilities of the groups and the military threat that they pose. The studies perceive soft-power efforts as recruitment efforts rather than attempts to penetrate local communities. The recommended counterstrategies seek to deny operational capabilities to recruit, hold terrain, and conduct attacks while discrediting the ideology.¹²

center of gravity. The strategy has focused on attacking a component that is not vulnerable to destruction while leaving the actual center of gravity and critical vulnerabilities largely untouched. In certain theaters such as Iraq or Afghanistan the US disrupted the Salafi-jihadi movement's operational campaigns by focusing on the specific groups active in the theater. US counterterrorism strategy since 2001 has effectively defined the Salafi-jihadi movement as a collection of groups, the center of gravity as those groups' abilities to plan and conduct mass-casualty attacks against the West, a critical requirement as the sanctuaries from which to do so, and the critical vulnerability as the leadership and cadre of experts needed to plan and conduct those attacks.¹³ US actions have focused therefore on eliminating terrorist sanctuaries and identifying, locating, and killing those leaders and experts. The US intelligence community and military are now incredibly effective at removing these individuals from the battlefield. A shift to also counter the ideology through countering violent extremism or terrorism prevention measures is also underway as the initial approach fell short of delivering lasting effects. Contemporary center-of-gravity studies provide an analytical basis for changing the US approach. (See sidebar "Center-of-Gravity Analyses.") Yet the Salafi-jihadi movement is stronger and more widespread today than it has ever been, a fact that demands a reexamination of the doctrinal basis for American efforts.

End Goal: What Does the Enemy Seek?

The framing of both the problem and the enemy within US strategy and policy has been wrong. Yet this framing echoes throughout American officials' statements. The US defines the aims of al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and others as killing Americans because the US stands in the way of them imposing their ideology.¹⁴ Therefore, the US must block these groups' ability to conduct mass-casualty attacks—their most dangerous capability from a current national security standpoint—and also work to prevent the spread of their ideology. Yet two key misconceptions about

what the Salafi-jihadi movement and the various factions that comprise it seek have riddled US intelligence assessments of the enemy and led to ineffective strategies against it.

The first misconception is about the enemy itself: US policy defined the enemy down into a list of individuals and organizations that met certain legal requirements in order to generate a discrete set of actors against which to act. The concept of a "core" al Qaeda group, for example, stems from this and created a subset of al Qaeda members for the US military and intelligence services to target even as al Qaeda affiliates expanded in the 2000s. The involvement of al Qaeda leaders and operatives in terror attacks targeting the US from Yemen expanded the targeted list. The 2014 addition of the Islamic State to this subset continued along the same line of thinking as senior Islamic State operatives developed terror attack networks and encouraged followers to conduct individual attacks in their home countries. Terrorism is the problem, so those groups that engage or support acts of terrorism against the United States and its partners are the enemy. The seemingly never-ending expansion of the groups and individuals on this list has led to a sense that the US will be engaged in a perennial game of whack-a-mole until it can hand responsibility off to effective local partners.

The second misconception is about the grand strategic objective of these groups and the movement writ large and about how the groups will pursue these objectives. These objectives are not to kill as many Americans or Westerners as possible. They are also not to become the biggest and baddest terrorist organizations for the sake of fighting jihad and recruiting others into their ranks. The violent struggle in which these groups engage, particularly the struggle that affects Americans, is only a supporting line of effort for these groups. They have resourced it and pursued it accordingly. A shift away from emphasizing these attacks does not imply that the groups are not achieving their strategic operational objectives. A narrow counterterrorism strategy against these groups thus affects only a subset of their efforts and does not seek to prevent the movement from achieving its current objectives.

The net result of these misconceptions is a troubled approach that has yielded partial success in protecting Americans from additional terror attacks but that has no definitive end in sight, despite the assertions of successive US presidents. Misidentifying the center of gravity and the strategic objectives of groups yields a strategy that will not defeat or destroy Salafi-jihadi groups permanently, especially so long as the broader movement can reconstitute them or form new groups. The adopted counterterrorism approach, even when broadened to include non-kinetic efforts to prevent radicalization, assumes sustained pressure on these groups indefinitely since they will not be defeated or destroyed. The chosen metrics to evaluate effectiveness—generally cited as attempted attacks against the US or even partners and terrain controlled—are misleading because they assume conducting attacks or holding terrain are the main efforts when they are not. The approach marginalizes the Salafi-jihadi movement's penetration into new communities absent direct threats, which incentivizes the movement to prioritize further insinuating itself into communities over threatening the West. Ultimately, the US approach will not prevent the movement from pursuing its own strategic objectives, which, if realized, could be far more devastating to the US than a terror attack.

The Salafi-jihadi movement seeks above all else to impose its interpretation of Islam worldwide. This grand strategic objective informs the Salafi-jihadi movement's strategic objectives, which include imposing its form of Islam on the Muslim world and eventually defeating the West. Salafi-jihadi leaders identified key tasks in order to accomplish these objectives such as overthrowing the so-called apostate regimes in the Muslim world, establishing the primacy of shari'a in new emirates, and removing Western influence and the corruption it has caused within Muslim societies. They have divided the world into theaters and, below that, operational regions.¹⁵ Global leaders may not have direct command and control over all regions, but they shape regional and local actions to fit into their grand strategic approach under the Prophetic Method.¹⁶

Taking the Salafi-jihadi movement's goal of imposing its will over the entire world and the implied strategic and operational objectives and tasks that derive from this goal yields an entirely different approach to countering this enemy. Terror attacks against the United States and its partners must still be managed and minimized. The US must sustain its current counterterrorism operations to keep Americans safe. But reducing the threat of an attack is separate from eliminating the Salafi-jihadi threat. The Salafi-jihadi movement threatens to transform parts of the Muslim world—with a vision to expanding this to the whole Muslim world and then beyond—under its interpretation of Islam and revolutionize the international order. The United States needs a strategy beyond counterterrorism to strike at the source of the Salafi-jihadi movement's strength.

Salafi-Jihadi Movement Center-of-Gravity Analysis

This center-of-gravity analysis seeks to identify the strategic strengths and weaknesses of the Salafi-jihadi movement as a whole. It focuses on the global movement rather than the specific components of the Salafi-jihadi movement, such as the al Qaeda network and the Islamic State, in order to identify the grand strategic and strategic centers of gravity rather than operational centers of gravity. The defeat of specific Salafi-jihadi groups affects the movement's ability to operate in pursuit of its overall objectives but will not prevent other parts of the movement from continuing their efforts or the reconstitution of a new global group to fill the gap. The grand strategic and strategic levels include the body of Salafi-jihadists across groups and theaters who have collectively led and advanced the movement.

Centers of Gravity. Understanding the enemy as the Salafi-jihadi *movement* rather than as an *organization* or a *network*, or even a *complex system*, challenges the center-of-gravity framework. The center-of-gravity concept hinges on the idea of identifying a singular hub (or multiple hubs in the case of a system)

The Salafi-Jihadi Vanguard

Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian theologian, wrote *Milestones*, a political manifesto that laid out a plan and call to action for Salafi-jihadists to restore Islam and the *umma* in the early 1960s.¹⁷ Qutb explained that he wrote the book for those who would form a vanguard—the true believers who would act to save first lapsed Muslims and then the world from ignorance. The concept of the vanguard included the use of armed force—not political argument—to spread Islam. This vanguard, according to Qutb, would need to separate itself from society and eventually wage jihad to return Islam to society. Qutb’s arguments resounded through Salafi-jihadi thinking and have formed a central concept for the global Salafi-jihadi movement.¹⁸

Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian Islamic scholar credited as the father of the global Salafi-jihadi movement, continued to develop Qutb’s concept of a vanguard in his works. He starts a key essay, “The Solid Base,” with the sentence: “Every principle must be supported by a vanguard, which clears a path for itself toward society, at the price of vast efforts and sacrifices.”¹⁹ The vanguard forms the “solid base of the society we hope to create.” Azzam argues that “long education in doctrine” is the core foundation in building an Islamic society because a “society cannot be founded without a movement . . . forged in the fire of trials.” The pioneering vanguard must receive the education in order to remain true to their original principles, for without, men “quickly become gangs.” For Azzam and his contemporary Osama bin Laden, the time for jihad had begun in Afghanistan in the 1980s, and building and supporting this vanguard as the base (*al Qaeda* in Arabic) were paramount. Azzam had already argued

that jihad in Afghanistan was an obligation on every individual Muslim.²⁰ They established the Afghan Services Bureau (*maktab al khidimat*) to fundraise and recruit. Many members of the Afghan Services Bureau would join Osama bin Laden’s new organization, al Qaeda, shortly after its founding.

Osama bin Laden transformed the vanguard into reality. Al Qaeda became the base of true believers who would wage jihad globally in the name of Islam.²¹ Azzam had envisioned building the true Islamic society in Afghanistan after the mujahideen had vanquished the Soviets and then expanding the fight to other Muslim lands under attack. Bin Laden did not reject this vision, but prioritized the more global vision of Egyptian Islamist Ayman al Zawahiri to expand the fight to all Muslim governments. Bin Laden thus focused on building the Afghan Arabs,²² the foreign fighters in Afghanistan, into a vanguard force that would inspire and support revolutions across Muslim lands, especially in the Arab world. Zawahiri describes these men as those who “develop an understanding based on shari’ah of the enemies of Islam” on the Afghanistan battlefield and in the training camps.²³ They were the vanguard.

Today, the vanguard of the Salafi-jihadi movement includes the Afghan Arabs who remain on the battlefield, Salafi-jihadi ideologues and their followers, and new generations of Salafi-jihadis. A cadre joined the vanguard in the context of the Iraq war, and a second cadre joined during the post-2011 conflicts in Iraq and Syria. Additionally, Afghan Arabs in other theaters—such as Yemen, East Africa, the Maghreb and Sahel, Egypt, Caucasus, the Kashmir region, and other parts of South and Southeast Asia—have recruited and developed additional vanguard members.

around which the entire adversary system revolves. A movement contains multiple organizations, informal and formal networks and relationships, and all of the complexities that human beings can create in parts that do not necessarily have physical or even

cyber connections. It is, by definition, something that is not finite like a system, which has clear edges and bounds, nor is it the same set of human beings over time. How, then, can a movement have a center of gravity?

Salafi-jihadi leaders and core members of the movement do not self-define as a movement. They define as a vanguard force that must maintain ideological purity. (See sidebar “The Salafi-Jihadi Vanguard.”) The vanguard, which Egyptian theologian Sayyid Qutb discussed at length in his seminal work *Milestones*, is comprised of true believers who, like those who knew and followed the Prophet Mohammed, must spread and defend this Islam. These Salafi-jihadi adherents persist over time, though varying greatly in number and influence. They are both internally oriented as a vanguard component to ensure that they remain on the true path of Islam and externally oriented to spread their Islam and reunify the *umma* (Muslim community). This external focus is what expands the Salafi-jihadi movement globally as the vanguard attracts groups and organizations to its cause that do not share the same ideological beliefs or even long-term objectives.

Ideology. The Salafi-jihadi ideology is the grand strategic center of gravity for the vanguard and, by extension, for the Salafi-jihadi movement. It serves as a rallying cry for Sunni who perceive injustices in the Muslim world, attribute these to the degradation of Islam and Muslim society, and seek to restore greatness through a purity of practice. But more powerfully, the ideology has unified the purpose of geographically dispersed individuals, groups, and organizations and has enabled the vanguard to form and re-form over time even after incredible losses. Salafi-jihadi ideology is the source of the vanguard’s resilience and cannot itself be destroyed. The ideology’s exposition in historical religious texts guarantees that, similar to other ideologies, such as communism, Salafi-jihadism will persist independent of its individual adherents. The vanguard’s ability to reconstitute as such ensures its longevity.

The outright rejection of the Salafi-jihadi ideology by the majority of Sunni Muslims prohibits its mainstreaming. Qutb argued that ignorance of Islam is what leads to this rejection. Qutb and other Salafi-jihadists do not seek, however, to convert all Muslims to their form of Islam through preaching (*da’wa*). The continued existence of society outside of Islam makes this

a futile endeavor in their belief. Rather, Qutb writes: “The foremost duty of Islam in this world is to depose *jahiliyyah*²⁴ (ignorance of Allah’s guidance) from the leadership of man, and to take the leadership into its own hands and enforce the particular way of life which is its permanent feature.”²⁵ In other words, the vanguard must work to destroy all current forms of government and power—including the West—and then establish Islam as the only principle for society. Qutb explains that people may reject Islam initially, but even the first generation during the time of the Prophet Mohammed rejected his call and then answered it. The Salafi-jihadi vanguard seeks to penetrate communities to begin exposing lapsed Muslims to the true faith in the belief that over time Muslims will accept the Salafi-jihadi practice of Islam.

The movement’s primary objective is to impose its form of Islamic governance over Muslims, or more simply, to reinstate the Caliphate. The Caliphate’s restoration is the consequence of the movement’s victory in enforcing Islam globally and not the means to achieve this victory.²⁶ This objective clearly identifies the enforcement of the correct *practice* of Islam as a key output to lead eventually to the adoption of the correct *belief* of Islam. Muslims may not initially need to understand or accept the ideology of the Salafi-jihadis, but they must live as a united *umma* under its governance. Such an objective defines the external focus of the vanguard as seizing power through a revolutionary and insurgent movement. The first step to mobilizing a population is to implant members of the vanguard within that population.

History has proven that the ideology and presence of a vanguard alone are *insufficient* to achieve the objectives of the Salafi-jihadi movement. A militant splinter from the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, the Fighting Vanguard (*al tali’a al muqatila*), sought to overthrow Hafez al Assad and his Baathist regime in the late 1970s and early 1980s.²⁷ A brief partnership with the Muslim Brotherhood ended after the 1982 Hama uprising, and Assad regime security forces eradicated Fighting Vanguard members from Syria.²⁸ The ideology was not a powerful enough draw to attract the necessary support for the vanguard to

succeed in its endeavor. The vanguard remained an isolated network that the state security apparatus could readily eliminate without significant backlash. Similar stories of failure exist in North Africa in the 1990s and elsewhere.

Relationship with Sunni Communities. The Salafi-jihadi movement's relationship with Sunni communities is the source of strength that empowers the vanguard to be able to enforce its will. The relationship is the movement's center of gravity at the strategic level of war. It provides access to the community and the initial opening to develop popular support for the movement's strategic objectives. The vanguard must be actively building relationships with Sunni Muslims to unify the *umma*. Only with broad popular support can the vanguard overthrow the "apostate" regimes and then, eventually, the West. The vanguard's power comes from the strength of the relationships it develops, not solely from its size, capabilities, or ideological conviction. These relationships become the key to enabling the movement to achieve its objective of imposing Islam on the community.²⁹

Salafi-jihadi leaders identified developing and preserving a relationship with Sunni communities as critical. Ayman al Zawahiri, the current leader of al Qaeda, believes that the isolation of the Egyptian vanguard from the everyday Egyptian first made it irrelevant and then ultimately led to its defeat by the end of the 1990s. Zawahiri's group, the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, lost popular support, and Egyptian security forces imprisoned those who did not flee. Zawahiri writes in his seminal work published in late 2001, *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*, "[The jihad movement] must guard against isolating itself from its community in an elitist battle against the authorities."³⁰ Such a battle is precisely the experience of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad. Zawahiri sharpens this point in a 2005 letter to the late al Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu Musab al Zarqawi, "The strongest weapon which the mujahedeen enjoy . . . is the popular support from the Muslim masses in Iraq, and the surrounding Muslim countries."³¹ Zawahiri feared that Zarqawi's actions would destroy the Salafi-jihadi movement's relationship with the Iraq Sunni and isolate the group,

enabling Iraqi and American security forces to track it down as the Egyptians had done to him. Zawahiri proved correct. (See sidebar "Abu Musab al Zarqawi vs. Ayman al Zawahiri.")

The vanguard relies heavily on non-ideological means to gain acceptance and build support within various communities. Its relationships have run along transactional lines, exchanging the provision of goods or services for the ability to operate in certain areas. Al Qaeda provided teachers or dug water wells in parts of rural Yemen, for example, in exchange for local acceptance of its presence.³² The vanguard has also used coercive measures to gain access to communities. Zarqawi's group and later the Islamic State threatened wholesale slaughter of those who rejected their presence in Iraq and eastern Syria. One of the most effective means to build a relationship has been by providing support to threatened communities. Syrian communities backed Salafi-jihadi groups that fought in their defense against the Assad regime.

The ability of the Salafi-jihadi movement to build relationships with communities has been incredibly constrained under "normal" conditions. The Yemeni vanguard had only marginal success in a country where it faced little threat from security forces and could interface freely with local communities. Its failure to build more than small pockets of support through the 2000s is notable in the fragile state as it remained a small, isolated group within Yemeni society.³³ A shift in fortunes occurred when conditions changed, which then facilitated relationships. The 2011 breakdown of the Yemeni state enabled al Qaeda to establish governance in parts of southern Yemen. But it was the 2015 mobilization of Sunni communities in the civil war that enabled al Qaeda to expand rapidly.³⁴

Changing conditions—primarily the outbreak of conflict, collapse of governance, or deepening of grievances—in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Egypt, Mali, and beyond also proved to be the catalyst for the Salafi-jihadi movement's efforts to develop local relationships. The communities that came under stress became vulnerable. The vanguard preyed on these vulnerabilities to build initial relationships and then used those relationships to eventually increase the community's dependence on the vanguard. The

Salafi-jihadi movement has strengthened because conditions continue to favor its expansion through new ties to communities. Salafi-jihadi leaders such as al Qaeda's Ayman al Zawahiri maintain their focus on these relationships even as estimates for the number of Salafi-jihadi fighters continue to rise.³⁵

Attacking the vanguard directly might appeal to planners because it is theoretically targetable directly through military, political, and economic means—a set of individuals, organizations, and networks comprise the vanguard. The resources required to annihilate the vanguard, however, seem to be at an unachievable scale, even with the cooperation of European and other partners. Eliminating the vanguard would effectively neutralize the ideology itself because the active perpetuation of the ideology requires a global network of adherents and the means to recruit new believers.

Nor has US counterterrorism strategy pursued the destruction of the vanguard over the past decade. It has focused instead on identifying and disrupting cells planning attacks against the US or its allies and on killing the portion of the vanguard often referred to as al Qaeda senior leadership (AQL). But the US has not recently sought to identify and eliminate the entire global vanguard, which is much larger and more dispersed than AQL. Nor should it do so because of the impossibility of the task.

Some have advocated attacking the ideology itself to defeat the Salafi-jihadi movement. This approach will also fail. The vast majority of Sunni Muslims already reject the ideology, a fact demonstrated repeatedly whenever elements of the vanguard attempt to build mass support in a new area. The essence of a vanguard is that it is a small community of true believers who will not be influenced by external counterarguments. Efforts to reduce radicalization in mosques and madrassas are important because they can shrink the pool from which the vanguard can draw—but those efforts will never eliminate that pool.

Therefore, the grand strategic center of gravity of the movement is not vulnerable to direct attack. The vanguard itself is not vulnerable to destruction and may not even be defeatable in the technical military sense—the US and its partners are not likely ever to deprive the vanguard entirely of the will or ability to

continue to fight. We must therefore find a new point of attack that offers some prospect of defeating the movement.

The Salafi-jihadi movement's strategic center of gravity, its relationship with Sunni communities, is the correct point of attack. The following analysis focuses on the center of gravity at the strategic level. (See Figure 2.)

Critical Capabilities. The Salafi-jihadi movement has a set of capabilities essential to accomplishing its strategic objective. These critical capabilities include the provision of components of governance or security. They are the means by which the Salafi-jihadi movement builds or deepens its relationships with Sunni communities.

Local conditions shape the opportunities for the Salafi-jihadi movement to act. Stable but weak governance areas are less susceptible than new areas with weak governance. Strong states or the near-total absence of governance are more difficult for Salafi-jihadi groups to penetrate because strong governance contributes to a community's resilience, whereas the absence of governance creates a high barrier to entry in beginning to provide any governance. The rapid degradation of conditions in the aftermath of the Arab Spring opened opportunities for the movement to expand through the development of local relationships.

Provision of Governance Components. The Salafi-jihadi movement seeks to build local ties by meeting those basic needs of a community—security, dispute resolution and justice, basic goods, education, and so forth—that a central, regional, or local government is failing to provide, actively depriving the community of, or attacking. To gain access to a community, it offers components of governance that include establishing courts, delivering humanitarian assistance, and providing other services and goods. Once the vanguard has access to a community, it begins to establish itself in other spheres of governance by gaining control over resources or local infrastructure and institutions and creates a situation such that submitting to its governance is perceived as the best option

for the community. For the most vulnerable populations, something is better than nothing.

The Salafi-jihadi movement has refined its provision of governance components by sharing lessons learned across groups and theaters. This capability varies geographically based in part on the maturity of the vanguard and the local conditions as well as the local expectations for the sophistication of governance. A vanguard that is established in an area is best positioned to identify gaps or weaknesses. Corrupt court systems, for example, offer the movement an opportunity to establish an alternative justice or dispute resolution system. The Salafi-jihadi movement established itself in Somalia through the Islamic Courts Union, and al Shabaab continues to provide judges for locals seeking arbitration that are a preferred alternative to the Somali government courts.³⁶ Providing other services or basic goods such as fuel and water has also been part of Salafi-jihadi governance efforts.

The local provision of governance components is a means that supports both of the Salafi-jihadi movement's grand strategic and strategic centers of gravity. Capturing governance is a key task for imposing the Salafi-jihadi vision of Islam on Muslims. The ideology without the capability to impose it on others would be self-contained only within the vanguard.

Providing governance components creates incremental leverage points for the vanguard over Sunni communities as the ties between the vanguard and the community strengthen. The initial relationship and especially a phased expansion of the components of governance that the Salafi-jihadi movement provides eventually enable it to enforce its will either through direct governance or through indirect influence over the forms of legitimate local governance. Salafi-jihadi groups generally do not demand that locals accept their ideology at first. They work to make communities dependent on them and to gain control of key parts of governance structures before starting to bring the ideology to bear—by which time it is often too late for the community to resist.

Fielding Capable Military Force. Over the past decade, the Salafi-jihadi movement has increasingly used the

resonance of communal defense or defense of the Sunni as a way to gain the trust of local communities. The outbreak of local conflicts within Sunni Muslim populations created opportunities for the Salafi-jihadi movement to use its military capabilities as a means to develop local relationships. The Salafi-jihadi movement offers in defense of Sunni communities its ability to generate military organizations and to plan and execute strategic campaigns. Fielding a capable military is an essential means for the Salafi-jihadi movement to enter into communities, though as with governance, the way in which this occurs varies.

The vanguard invested early in developing a military force as a critical capability to bring about imposing its ideology on Muslims through the overthrow of Muslim governments. Its understanding of how to use this capability has changed over the years. Egyptian theologian Sayyid Qutb noted that jihad would be required for the defense of the Islamic movement led by the vanguard—a defensive force to prevent the state from eliminating it—but that ultimately, the movement would use force to remove the obstacles that prevented the establishment of Allah's rule on earth.³⁷ For Qutb, the movement would require a force to wage an offensive war against the various regimes in order to establish Islamic rule. Yet the vanguard's first successes did not occur until years later, when Abdullah Azzam, the father of modern Salafi-jihadism, called for a defensive jihad in Afghanistan against the Soviets. The call resonated, and the modern movement was born. Azzam saw the opportunity to train Muslim forces to fight for Islam first in Afghanistan and then expand the fight outward.

Azzam and Osama bin Laden teamed up to build this cadre of fighting forces. The cadre became known as the Afghan Arabs, the Arab Muslims who fought with the *mujahideen* against the Soviets in Afghanistan and were brought into the new vanguard as trained soldiers. These fighters (not all of whom were Arab) were indoctrinated with Salafi-jihadi ideology as part of their military training. Osama bin Laden envisioned his Afghan Arabs coopting Islamist (not Salafi-jihadi) insurgencies in North Africa and elsewhere to establish polities governed under shari'a, similar to what the Afghan Taliban achieved.

Afghan Arabs fought on the latest fronts for jihad—Bosnia, Chechnya, Somalia, and others—and eventually in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. The Salafi-jihadi movement's fighting force developed on the battlefields, gaining new expertise and experience that it put toward supporting Sunni communities.

The vanguard has been successful in expanding the Salafi-jihadi movement when it acts in defense of Sunni communities. The vanguard won in Afghanistan once the US and others pulled out after the defeat of the Soviets and eventually established the Taliban state. It expanded over the course of the Bosnian and Chechen wars, defending Muslims again. Abu Musab al Zarqawi created the requirement for the defense of the Sunnis in Iraq, which is how al Qaeda originally strengthened. (See sidebar "Abu Musab al Zarqawi vs. Ayman al Zawahiri.") And al Shabaab strengthened defending Somalis against the Ethiopian invasion. These same dynamics came into play again in Syria, parts of Yemen, and elsewhere. Today in the Sahel, the Salafi-jihadi vanguard has stoked conditions such that certain communities are now under threat, which created the opportunity for Salafi-jihadi groups to step up in defense of those communities. Threats to Sunni communities—real or perceived—have enabled the Salafi-jihadi movement to provide the forces for their defense.

The Salafi-jihadi movement's military force is not supposed to be able to achieve the movement's objectives of overthrowing Muslim governments and then imposing its vision alone. Its trained vanguard with military capabilities remains oriented on assisting local Sunni communities in their own revolts. The vanguard has a range of conventional and unconventional capabilities, along with planning cells and military leaders that can provide command and control for a force. It has included non-Salafi-jihadi elements into these forces, such as the former Baathists in al Qaeda in Iraq and then the Islamic State. The vanguard also provides training to local forces that share common near-term objectives or interests, which means that targeting this force is at times an affront to the local community it is assisting. The Syrian opposition perceived US air strikes targeting al Qaeda's "Khorasan Group" as hurting their own fight

against the Assad regime because those Salafi-jihadis were providing support to the opposition (and the absence of such far-reaching support from any Western powers).

Critical Requirements. The Salafi-jihadi movement requires a strategic methodology, a local understanding of and adaptability to changing dynamics, acceptance by locals, and the ability to spread its narrative for it to be able to build a relationship with communities by providing governance components and military support. The groups and organizations within the Salafi-jihadi movement share the additional requirements at the operational level—such as organizational infrastructure, access to networks, and resources (e.g., recruits, finances, weapons, and basic goods)—that all these groups and organizations require to function.

Strategic Methodology (Minhaj). The Salafi-jihadi movement's strategic methodology, or *minhaj*,³⁸ prescribes religious, political, and military practices that vary based on the conditions and provide left and right limits of action for adherents. This conditions-based methodology directly informs how the vanguard operates in theaters—the operational objectives that the local vanguard should pursue—and also helps protect the reputation of the Salafi-jihadi movement by justifying practices (rightly or wrongly) through religious argument. The vanguard does not follow this methodology perfectly and has also refined the methodology, drawing on experience to improve over time. The split between the al Qaeda and the Islamic State ideologies, both forms of Salafi-jihadism, shows in their adopted methodology.

The strategic methodology analogizes the way by which the Prophet Mohammed and his followers received and spread Islam into a phased approach. The Prophet began by forming his own vanguard of true believers and strengthened it covertly. He then faced threats from the authorities and began to act in defense of the religion. Next, he openly built a Muslim community, and finally, he led an offensive campaign against the authorities that ended in victory. Each stage has a set of key tasks that must

be accomplished before advancing to the next, and the methodology also provides examples of how to achieve these key tasks. For example, the Prophet Mohammed used mediation and arbitration to build his own reputation within the Medina communities, and the vanguard uses such means today to the same effect. The methodology provides a guide for how to gain popular support as the Prophet did, bring a community under his protection, and then impose shari'a. Following the identified phases in this methodology helps prevent the vanguard from overreaching and potentially breaking the bond with local communities. The question of whether the conditions are present to advance to the next phase resounds in Salafi-jihadi literature—and al Qaeda's and the Islamic State's answer to this question resulted in some of the differences observed today.

The Salafi-jihadi movement has also applied this *minhaj* to its operational practices. A key concept in understanding how the movement operates is *tawhid*, unifying the ranks.³⁹ The idea is to unify Muslim forces' efforts in common cause for a greater aim than factional politics. Fissures within armed Islamist movements in the 1990s weakened the movements as security forces exploited these differences. An emphasis on unity also pulls non-Salafi-jihadi elements into the ranks, including some non-Islamist elements, with the intent of bringing these elements more permanently into the movement over time. Salafi-jihadi figures raise this concept when factional differences among Islamist groups in Syria challenge the overall cohesion of those forces.

Access to Local Sunni Communities. Local Sunni communities have the option to reject outreach efforts from the Salafi-jihadi movement and deny the vanguard access. Healthy communities have done so historically, keeping the vanguard isolated from the masses. For the Salafi-jihadi vanguard to provide any governance components or other offerings, the community must tolerate or accept the vanguard itself. The vanguard requires physical access to the communities through a ground presence in order to be able to assess the local conditions and respond to changing dynamics. Changes in local conditions,

often driven by developments outside the actions of Salafi-jihadis, have affected communities' treatment of Salafi-jihadi outreach. Conditions that have weakened Sunni communities or made them desperate for support increase the likelihood that these communities will grant Salafi-jihadis certain access or be more tolerant of the extreme Salafi-jihadi ideology than the communities would be normally.

The breakdown of governance and spread of conflict that occurred in the post-Arab Spring years set just these conditions in the Arab world. At the tactical level, the release or breakout of Salafi-jihadi detainees from prisons in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq reestablished the presence of vanguard members among Sunni communities.⁴⁰ Recovered al Qaeda correspondences show a steady stream of reporting on local conditions and active assessments of opportunities to engage communities or establish local groups in order to have access to the communities.⁴¹

The outbreak of conflict in Libya, Syria, and Yemen that imperiled Sunni communities created opportunities for Salafi-jihadis to step in to support those communities and portray themselves as the communities' defenders. In Iraq, Sunni protesters tolerated the emergence of the black flag—a symbol Iraqis link to al Qaeda—at protests over Baghdad's marginalization of the Sunni in late 2013 and early 2014, a harbinger of the Islamic State's future strength.⁴² These conditions created opportunities for Salafi-jihadi groups that had been previously rejected by communities to gain access to them, be tolerated by them, and in some cases be accepted.

The Tuareg revolt in northern Mali and subsequent local insurgencies, which have spread into central Mali and spilled across the borders into Burkina Faso and Niger, created conditions in the Sahel that have led communities to accept the Salafi-jihadi presence. Iyad ag Ghali, a local powerbroker who had helped lead multiple previous Tuareg rebellions, established Ansar al Din, which came to dominate the 2012 insurgency with support from al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and splinter groups. Likewise, the leaders of newer Salafi-jihadi groups in central Mali and Burkina Faso were each drawn from

the local community, vetted on the battlefield, and then given external support for their new groups.⁴³ This local face helped the groups gain initial entry into communities. The collection of Salafi-jihadi groups in the Sahel, which have ties to both al Qaeda and the Islamic State, has adapted to evolving conflict and retains access to communities as defenders against both state security forces and competing interest groups, and the Salafi-jihadi groups have deftly played identity politics to expand from an initial base in northern Mali into central Mali, and then into parts of Niger and Burkina Faso. The Sahelian Salafi-jihadi vanguard has benefited from conditions that opened communities up to allowing groups local access as better alternatives than the state or other perceived competitor groups.

Communities have stopped accepting the presence of Salafi-jihadis when conditions have worsened because of their presence or when a better alternative has arisen. The vanguard's experience in Egypt in the 1990s is a critical example (and a foundational experience for Salafi-jihadi leadership) whereby Salafi-jihadi terror attacks created conditions unacceptable to the Sunni community. The murder of civilians led Egyptians to reject the Salafi-jihadi vanguard and its message. The result was the flight of vanguard members from the country after a mass roundup. Communities have also stopped accepting the presence of Salafi-jihadis when they impose costs on the community or expose the community to unnecessary risks. The threat of airstrikes, for example, has factored into communities' calculations of whether to accept the presence of Salafi-jihadis. Ansar al Sharia, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's insurgent arm, had established control in parts of southern Yemen as the state collapsed in 2011. But local popular militias ousted Ansar al Sharia from populated areas in 2012 with Yemeni government and popular support.⁴⁴

Ability to Understand and Respond to Local Dynamics. The vanguard must be able to understand and adapt to changes in the local environment in order to protect and strengthen its relationship by first identifying and then responding to the community's needs.

These needs, as noted previously, range from dispute resolution or justice issues to basic goods and services to security. Shifts in conditions might create new needs on the ground or exacerbate already existing needs. Individuals within communities, whether they are openly identified as members of the Salafi-jihadi movement or not, inform the vanguard of these needs and then seek to facilitate addressing them. They are not always correct, and the vanguard has failed to respond properly either by missing the need itself or by responding in a manner that a community deems unacceptable. Such failures do not prevent the vanguard from seeking to rectify its actions if possible in the new environment, attempting to repair the relationship through an alternative method, or shaping the environment with the intent to regain access to the community.

The vanguard also uses its ability to understand and respond to local dynamics to shape the environment. Such shaping may include promoting local Salafi-jihadi powerbrokers or others who may be sympathetic or at minimum apathetic to the Salafi-jihadi cause. It may also include the use of targeted violence to mobilize communities in order to increase the community's need for security assistance; late al Qaeda leader Abu Musab al Zarqawi's strategy in Iraq, implemented against the advice of al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri, proved incredibly effective at pulling in a broad band of possible partners for al Qaeda against the US and Iraqi security forces and Shi'a militias (see sidebar "Abu Musab al Zarqawi vs. Ayman al Zawahiri"). Additionally, local understanding informs how the vanguard prioritizes gaining control or influence over local institutions or resources.

Significantly, the vanguard tailors its local narratives to shape the information environment as a means of building or strengthening its ties to communities.⁴⁵ The groups use members drawn from the local community to give a local voice to their message in order to further the image of the group's local roots. These narratives seek to contrast the Salafi-jihadi vanguard with local or national corrupted institutions or actors that have broken promises to the community. They cast local grievances in terms that are generally congruent with the Salafi-jihadi ideology and use touch

Abu Musab al Zarqawi vs. Ayman al Zawahiri

Key ideological differences between the late al Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu Musab al Zarqawi and al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri have shaped the development of the Islamic State, as the successor organization to al Qaeda in Iraq, and al Qaeda's operational strategies, even as both pursue the same overall objectives.⁴⁶ These differences include whether supporting or participating in a democracy—even local democracy—is a sin; whether violent jihad is required over *da'wa* (preaching); and whether true Muslims include those who refuse to follow a specific interpretation of shari'a and all Shi'a (*takfirism*).⁴⁷

Zarqawi believed that participation in or even tolerance of any form of governance beyond that which shari'a supports was wrong. Armed force was required to compel observance of shari'a, and preaching would never invoke an Islamist-inspired uprising against the government. (He was right.) And he believed that anyone who did not immediately answer the call to "true" Islam was not a Muslim, regardless of whether they identified as such.

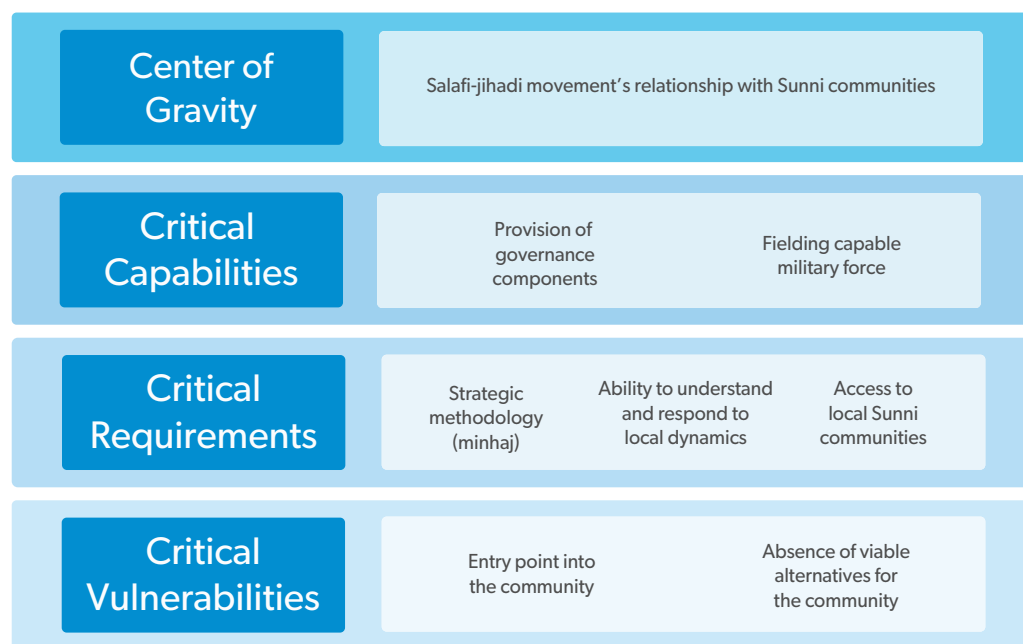
Zarqawi's approach—now adapted further under Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi—emphasized full and immediate adoption of shari'a and that all who opposed this were enemies. Notably, Zarqawi prioritized the "near" war, the war against Arab Muslim regimes, over al Qaeda's "far" war against the West. He denigrated the Iraqi Sunni in a 2004 letter back to al Qaeda senior leadership, describing the masses as a silent majority, the sheikhs as "doomed to perdition," and the fighters as inexperienced and afraid of death.⁴⁸ He then

set about mobilizing the Sunni by creating an existential threat to them through the instigation of a full-blown sectarian war in Iraq. He sanctioned the use of coercive and oppressive measures to ensure loyalty, which shifted popular support against him over time. Zarqawi also built a small Islamic state, what he called the Islamic State of Iraq, which controlled significant parts of Iraq's Anbar province until the 2007 Anbar Awakening. Baghdadi's Islamic State, declared originally in Iraq and al Sham, follows this strategy with an even more extremist interpretation.

Zawahiri's approach—which informs how al Qaeda affiliates operate globally—emphasized developing and retaining a relationship with the Sunni masses in order to educate them in the way of Islam while weakening the West's influence. Zawahiri rebuked Zarqawi for actions that would, and did, alienate the Sunni in Iraq in a 2005 letter.⁴⁹ Over the years, al Qaeda leadership has identified key conditions and a gradualist approach to building shari'a-based governance in Muslim-majority regions. These include ensuring that local powerbrokers—tribal leaders or elders—supported al Qaeda, and all discussions of building such support imply a lengthy timeline.⁵⁰ Al Qaeda also focuses on its preaching and slowly implementing shari'a, accepting an interim phase during which local customs prevail over shari'a in order to reduce backlash. Additionally, al Qaeda tolerates and cooperates with Sunni Muslims who do not adhere to its ideology, as well as Iran, in efforts against common near enemies and the far enemy (the West).⁵¹

points of historic greatness relatable to the community in order to call for action to restore autonomy and power (under Islam). Ultimately, the narratives cast the Salafi-jihadi movement as a defender of the community from injustices or physical attacks and other actors as exploitive or two-faced.

Critical Vulnerabilities. Denying the Salafi-jihadi movement access to local communities or the ability to respond to local conditions will disrupt its pursuit of its objectives in a certain space for a period of time. These two critical requirements open the Salafi-jihadi movement up to two vulnerabilities:

Figure 2. Salafi-Jihadi Movement's Strategic Sources of Strength

Source: Author's application of Carl von Clausewitz's theory.

gaining an entry point into a community in order to have access and another actor outmaneuvering and competing with Salafi-jihadi-led efforts at the local level. Both directly affect the Salafi-jihadi movement's ability to strengthen its relationships with the local Sunni communities. Healthy communities have historically been immune to penetration by the Salafi-jihadi movement, and in most cases, the movement loses when competing with other actors. Efforts to counter the Salafi-jihadi movement must focus on denying the vanguard the ability to strengthen the community by identifying potential entry points and competing at the local level with what the vanguard offers the community.

Entry Point into the Community. Developments external to the actions of the Salafi-jihadi movement have enabled the vanguard to gain entry into a community in most cases. These events include the spread of conflict, such as the civil wars and violent uprisings that came in the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring;

the mobilization of communities over grievances, such as Mali in 2012; the breakdown of services or other basic community requirements; and repeated failures on the part of a government to fill these requirements. Arguably, members of the Salafi-jihadi vanguard helped set conditions in central Mali among the Fulani, which then enabled the vanguard to gain support among that local community. In this case, key external conditions—the historical marginalization of the Fulani by the Malian state and a perceived threat from the Malian security forces to members of the community—were also present. The vanguard's efforts likely would not have succeeded without these conditions.

The Salafi-jihadi vanguard tailors its approach to penetrating vulnerable communities, and the US must tailor its approach to preventing and countering that penetration. By no means are all aggrieved, marginalized, or undergoverned Sunni communities vulnerable to Salafi-jihadi intervention. Those that are, however, present varying kinds and degrees

of vulnerabilities. It is neither necessary nor appropriate to devise a strategy to defeat the Salafi-jihadi movement that redresses all grievances, eliminates all threats, and provides good governance to all Sunni communities around the world. The US must rather identify the specific conditions in each potentially vulnerable community that might create true opportunities for the Salafi-jihadi movement to exploit and develop targeted approaches to close those vulnerabilities.

The vanguard has had difficulty in penetrating “healthy” Sunni communities. The population generally rejects the extremist views of the vanguard. Healthy communities in this sense are those that have some form of acceptable governance, are not mobilized to violence by grievances, and do not perceive an existential threat that might compel the community to set aside ideological differences for short-term salvation. These communities may be aggrieved, underserved, or unlikely to observe a change in their overall status or power. But grievances, governance gaps, and absence of opportunity are not sufficient by themselves to give Salafi-jihadi groups entry to communities. If they were, the Salafi-jihadi movement would probably have strengthened in Yemen, Mali, and elsewhere long before the current day. Changes in the prevailing conditions, as poor as they were, were what created the necessary entry points for the vanguard to build its local relationships.

The strengthening of the Salafi-jihadi movement is due largely to the rapid deterioration of conditions since 2011, which have created entry points into communities. Specifically, these entry points can be characterized generally as requirements the communities must fill in order to exist: self-defense, dispute resolution, and service provision. Rapid, small-scale interventions that identify when these entry points open up and seek to close them by addressing the surrounding conditions or providing an alternative that could help inoculate communities against the Salafi-jihadi movement. Early identification of deteriorating conditions and action to forestall the creation of enabling conditions for the Salafi-jihadi movement should be more sustainable than the cost of reacting to changes on the ground.

Absence of Viable Alternatives for the Community. Sunni communities are more likely to tolerate the presence of Salafi-jihadis when they have no other viable or acceptable alternative. Historically, Sunni have marginalized and sidelined the Salafi-jihadi movement because of its extreme views. The movement’s transformation into adapting to ground conditions and making itself more appealing at the local level has better enabled it to insinuate itself into communities, though it is not clear that this transformation has in fact changed communities’ calculus when facing alternatives. Competing options for external support for the community could block Salafi-jihadi efforts to expand influence or could cause the community to begin rejecting the Salafi-jihadi movement.

Sunni communities that the Salafi-jihadi movement has penetrated are not lost, nor should their populations be seen as core members of the vanguard. These communities remain open to alternatives to the Salafi-jihadi movement. The foreignness of the Salafi-jihadi ideology—which is even more extreme than that of the conservative Wahhabi trend and which the vanguard *must* begin to impose in order to achieve its objective—creates friction within Sunni communities that see their way of life as fundamentally altered under this new regime. These points of friction, as the vanguard seeks to mold the society into something new, are ripe for exploitation if an alternative to the vanguard surfaces. The 2006 Anbar Awakening shows a penetrated community rejecting the Salafi-jihadi vanguard when the US shifted its strategy to compete for the community.

Competing for the community—outmaneuvering the vanguard in delivering governance components, defense, or other key local requirements—does not mean winning the “hearts and minds” of the people. It simply means providing them with an alternative and the opportunity to reject the Salafi-jihadi presence. State or nonstate actors that are not perceived by the community as an enemy can compete for the community by identifying the means by which the vanguard has entered it and offering the community an alternative. They do not need to engage in “nation-building” or pump in vast amounts of resources, but need only perform better than the

Salafi-jihadi vanguard itself. The level required for competition, especially early in the efforts to penetrate communities, is not very advanced.

Implications for a Counterstrategy

Any successful strategy to counter the Salafi-jihadi movement must target the strategic vulnerabilities within the movement. The current US counterterrorism approach has achieved temporary victories against parts of the movement but has not weakened it overall. The shortcoming of this approach is its focus on the operational-level requirements and vulnerabilities of specific organizations or networks within the movement rather than the entirety of the movement. Denying the global networks and organizations key pieces of terrain and access to funds and disrupting recruitment and radicalization affects operations in only the short term and does not prevent their return. Attacking the ideology itself—by discrediting the cherry-picked scriptural references and empowering other Sunni voices—will not destroy it nor the vanguard. A new push to improve counter-messaging efforts against the Salafi-jihadi narratives by amplifying the voices of those who do and can contest the religious arguments is unlikely to have strategic effects on the strength of this movement. Importantly, the US and its partners' efforts target the enemy itself, but are not oriented on breaking the enemy's strategic sources of strength.

The Trump administration has begun to outline an evolution in fighting the Islamic State, al Qaeda, and other Salafi-jihadi groups in its "preventing terrorism" approach. The approach, similar to the Obama administration's countering violent extremism efforts, focuses on preventing the radicalization and recruitment of individuals to Salafi-jihadi groups. The efforts are to combat the harmful and virulent Salafi-jihadi ideology. Specifically, the Trump administration seeks to improve the means available to the US and its partners to identify radicalization paths and provide off-ramps for radicalizing individuals. The US has also increased efforts to prevent the spread of the ideology, recruitment, and financing by engaging with

technology companies to reduce access to online platforms for these activities, as well as increasing civil society's role in counter-radicalization efforts.

Such an approach may slow the growth of the vanguard as it disrupts the necessary recruitment and indoctrination cycle of incorporating new members. It will certainly limit the foreign fighter flows to Salafi-jihadi groups in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia as the US and partners focus on disrupting the radicalization process and providing off-ramps and on interdicting individuals seeking to travel to join these groups. The effort will probably reduce the specific threat that foreign fighters pose—the use of their passports to return home for an attack. It will not destroy the ideology.

The inability to destroy the ideology or prevent the return of a new vanguard does not necessarily mean that this is an enemy the US cannot defeat. The ideology has existed in some form since the first generation of successors to the Prophet Mohammad and in its most recent incarnation since Qutb's writings in the 1960s. Its success in penetrating Sunni communities has varied considerably over that period, as has the threat it posed to the US and its allies and even to local Muslim governments. There is no reason to assess that a sound strategy could not relegate the ideology to a fringe threat once again and keep it there for a long time, even if the ideas themselves can never be unthought.

The ideology plays an important role in cohering the global movement, providing a strategic doctrine, and building resilience to targeting. The vanguard is able to reconstitute time and again because of its ideology. Annihilating the vanguard, if possible, would also destroy the Salafi-Jihadi movement, though only until the vanguard re-forms. The ideology is what drives the vanguard, but it is not what strengthened the Salafi-jihadi movement. That has been the vanguard's efforts to penetrate Sunni communities and build local relationships.

Developing such relationships with Sunni communities has been a primary effort for the Salafi-jihadi vanguard. The vanguard cannot achieve its objectives without a broader movement. It is dependent, in fact, on the movement to strengthen its positions globally

and advance its aims. The movement is equally dependent on the operational vanguard to drive it. The interaction between the vanguard and populations to mobilize them as cobelligerents and to shape the forms of governance has strengthened the global Salafi-jihadi movement. Breaking the relationships the vanguard has formed with Sunni communities and preventing the vanguard from building new ones would significantly weaken the Salafi-jihadi movement.

The US must transform its approach in order to sever the relationships with Sunni communities. Specifically, the US must abandon defining this enemy by its terrorism traits and instead observe its full expanse. A counterterrorism-based strategy will ultimately fall short of what is required and will prove less sustainable than it appears initially. Instead, the US should work with local and regional partners to prevent the Salafi-jihadi vanguard from being able to enter a community and compete within the community. The entry points are products of the local conditions as the survival or future of a community is put to question. Improving local conditions, such as resolving underlying conflicts and grievances, limits the ability of the Salafi-jihadi vanguard to penetrate

communities. Focusing on ameliorating the conditions will support sustainable, durable outcomes from these interventions. Partners can also help provide an alternative to the Salafi-jihadi vanguard, whether it be assistance programming or securing the community from outside attacks. These efforts are inherently complex and carry a risk of failure, but they are what will attack the true vulnerabilities of the Salafi-jihadi movement and have strategic-level effects.

Adapting the US approach to target the strengths of global movement rather than the groups that operationalize the movement should start to yield more lasting results. The vanguard has focused on building local relationships and expanding into local communities. Severing these relationships will take time and effort, as will addressing the conditions that enabled these relationships to develop. It might be impossible to destroy the ideology and eliminate the vanguard. But it is not impossible to destroy the Salafi-jihadi movement if the US orients against the movement's strategic weaknesses. The fight against the Salafi-jihadi movement will be long, but it will not be forever.

About the Author

Katherine Zimmerman is a research fellow at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) and the research manager for AEI's Critical Threats Project. As AEI's senior analyst studying terrorist groups, she focuses on the global al Qaeda network and covers the Salafi-jihadi movement and related trends in the Middle East and Africa. She also specializes in al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Yemen, al Shabaab in Somalia, and al Qaeda in the Sahel.

She has testified before Congress about the threats to US national security interests emanating from al Qaeda and its network. She has also briefed members of Congress, their staff, and US military, diplomatic, and intelligence community personnel. Her analyses have been widely published, including in CNN.com, *Foreign Affairs*, FoxNews.com, the *Hill*, Huffington Post, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post*. She is a member of the RESOLVE Network Research Advisory Council, improving the quality of research and findings on violent extremism for policymakers, practitioners, and academics around the world.

Note from the Author

The arguments in this report are made from an adaptation of a traditional center-of-gravity analysis in order to understand the strategic strengths and weaknesses of the Salafi-jihadi movement. The intent is to support the development of a global strategy to counter the Salafi-jihadi movement. I have based my assessment of the Salafi-jihadi movement's objectives, means, and methods on my own previous research and on the body of research on Salafi-jihadism, the Islamic State, al Qaeda, Boko Haram, the Taliban, and other groups. This center-of-gravity analysis does not delve into the operational level for the Salafi-jihadi movement as it bears similarities globally but has distinct regional applications due to the local conditions.

I am extremely interested in continuing to refine my assessments as I develop a set of recommendations to counter the global Salafi-jihadi movement. Please reach out to me at Katherine.Zimmerman@aei.org if you have feedback, comments, or helpful critiques of the analysis published here.

Acknowledgments

I owe thanks to many who have generously spent their time critiquing early drafts and ideas and am deeply grateful to all those who supported me in this effort. The conclusions in this report are my own but are better for the contributions of many others.

Thank you to Mary Habeck, Dan Byman, and those who offered me private feedback as I began to develop the concepts put forward in this report. The research teams at the Institute for the Study of War and the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute contributed to my understanding of the enemy and its current operations. I am specifically indebted to the al Qaeda team analysts Emily Estelle, Maher Farrukh, and James Barnett for all that they do. Thank you to all those who have participated in previous working groups related to this effort and to those who have facilitated my engagements with various parts of the US government, military, and intelligence community.

Thank you to those who have helped make this report a reality. Caroline Goodson has made the publication process easy, for which I owe her deep thanks. Thank you to my fall and spring research interns, Cole Riggan and Joseph Howard, who have devoted countless hours to tedious tasks. Thank you to Luke Strange for his continued support and to the AEI communications team for helping share my work.

Finally, thank you, Danielle Pletka, for giving me the opportunity to pursue this research effort and to Frederick W. Kagan for his ongoing mentorship and encouragement.

Glossary of Terms⁵²

Caliphate. Islamic polity headed by the leader of the entire Muslim community and the religious successor to the Prophet. The Prophet reportedly prophesied the return of the Caliphate after a period of darkness.

center of gravity. The source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act.

critical capability. A means that is considered a crucial enabler for a center of gravity to function as such and is essential to the accomplishment of the specified or assumed objective(s).

critical requirement. An essential condition, resource, and means for a critical capability to be fully operational.

critical vulnerability. An aspect of a critical requirement which is deficient or vulnerable to direct or indirect attack that will create decisive or significant effects.

da'wa. Preaching and missionary work to share Islam.

jahiliyya. Used here as understood by Sayyid Qutb: the state of ignorance of Allah's divine guidance through man claiming the divine right to legislate.

More commonly, the ignorance of Islam in the world before the Prophet Mohammed.

jihad. Used here to connote violent acts in the way of Allah.

Salafi. An orthodox Sunni Muslim who believes that Muslims must return to the fundamentals of the religion contained entirely and completely within the Quran and the hadith.

Salafi-jihadi base or vanguard. The physical network of people, groups, and organizations that subscribe to Salafi-jihadi ideology and operate in pursuit of shared overall goals.

Salafi-jihadi movement. The ideological movement that holds that it is a religious obligation for individual Muslims to use armed force to establish a true Muslim state governed under a Salafi interpretation of shari'a.

shari'a. Islamic religious law.

takfir. The practice of labeling other Muslims as apostates.

umma. The Muslim community or nation.

Notes

1. Donald J. Trump, "Remarks by President Trump Before Marine One Departure," White House, March 20, 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-marine-one-departure-34/>; and Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on Osama Bin Laden," White House, May 2, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/02/remarks-president-osama-bin-laden>.
2. Katherine Zimmerman, *America's Real Enemy: The Salafi-Jihadi Movement*, Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, July 18, 2017, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/americas-real-enemy-the-salafi-jihadi-movement>.
3. Katherine Zimmerman, "The Salafi-Jihadist Movement Is Winning," RealClearWorld, February 12, 2019, https://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2019/02/12/the_salafi-jihadist_movement_is_winning_112964.html.
4. Katherine Zimmerman, *Terrorism, Tactics, and Transformation: The West vs the Salafi-Jihadi Movement*, Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, November 15, 2018, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/reports/terrorism-tactics-and-transformation-the-west-vs-the-salafi-jihadi-movement>.
5. White House, *National Strategy for Counterterrorism*, October 2018, https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/news_documents/NSCT.pdf.
6. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (1832; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), book 8, chap. 4.
7. US military doctrinal definitions adapted from Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Planning*, Joint Publication 5-0, June 16, 2017, GL-6 and GL-7, http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp5_o_20171606.pdf.
8. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Planning*, 128. The conclusions, while critically important to the planning process itself, must be tempered with continuous evaluations because derived centers of gravity and critical vulnerabilities are subject to change at any time during the campaign or operation.
9. Many such studies exist. See, for example, James Reilly, "A Strategic Level Center of Gravity Analysis on the Global War on Terrorism," US Army War College, April 9, 2002, <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=984>; John L. Haberkern, "The Global War on Terrorism: Ideology as Its Strategic Center of Gravity," US Army War College, May 3, 2004, <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=451308>; and Joseph P. Schweitzer, "Al-Qaeda: Center of Gravity and Decisive Points," US Army War College, April 7, 2003, <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/army-usawc/schweitzer.pdf>.
10. Peter Pace, "National Military Strategic Plan for the War on Terrorism," US Department of Defense, February 1, 2006, <https://archive.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/2006-01-25-Strategic-Plan.pdf>.
11. See, for example, Schweitzer, "Al-Qaeda: Center of Gravity and Decisive Points"; and Daniel J. Smith, Kelley Jeter, and Odin Westgaard, "Three Approaches to Center of Gravity Analysis: The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant," *Joint Force Quarterly* 78 (July 2015): 129–36, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/JFQ/Joint-Force-Quarterly-78/Article/607722/three-approaches-to-center-of-gravity-analysis-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-th/>.
12. See, for example, Jay P. Aldea, "The Effect of bin Laden's Death and Arab Spring on Al Qaeda's Operational Center of Gravity," US Naval War College, May 4, 2012, <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=722897>.
13. See as examples the 2003 National Strategy for Combating Terrorism ("The United States and its partners will defeat terrorist organizations of global reach by attacking their sanctuaries; leadership; command, control, and communications; material support; and finances") and the 2011 National Strategy for Counterterrorism ("We are bringing targeted force to bear on al-Qa'ida at a time when its ideology is also under extreme pressure"). George W. Bush, "National Strategy for Combating Terrorism," February 2003, https://www.cia.gov/news-information/cia-the-war-on-terrorism/Counter_Terrorism_Strategy.pdf; and White House, "National Strategy for Counterterrorism," June 28, 2011, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/counterterrorism_strategy.pdf.
14. George W. Bush, "Transcript of President Bush's Speech at the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention," *New York Times*, August 22, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/22/washington/w23policytext.html>; and John O. Brennan, "A New Approach to

Safeguarding Americans,” White House, August 6, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/realitycheck/the-press-office/remarks-john-brennan-center-strategic-and-international-studies>.

15. See the Islamic State’s and al Qaeda’s understanding of the regions in Mary Habeck, “Understanding ISIS and al Qaeda,” Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, September 10, 2018, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/understanding-isis-and-al-qaeda>.

16. Habeck, “Understanding ISIS and al Qaeda.”

17. Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones* [*Ma’alim fi al-Tariq*] (Egypt: Kazi Publications, 1964).

18. Sayyid Qutb has had incredible influence as a theorist on Salafi-jihadism. William McCants, Jarret Brachman, and Joseph Felter, *Militant Ideology Atlas: Research Compendium*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, November 2006, <https://ctc.usma.edu/militant-ideology-atlas/>.

19. Abdullah Azzam, *The Solid Base* (1988), translated excerpts, in *Al Qaeda in Its Own Words*, edited by Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milelli (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

20. Thomas Hegghammer, “Abdullah Azzam, the Imam of Jihad,” in Kepel and Milelli, *Al Qaeda in Its Own Words*.

21. The primacy of waging jihad is captured in al Qaeda’s founding charter document. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, “Al Qa’ida Constitutional Charter,” <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/al-qaida-constitutional-charter-original-language-2/>.

22. In the words of Ayman al Zawahiri: “The name ‘Arab Afghans’ is a tendentious description because these mujahideen have never been solely Arab, but mujahideen from all parts of the Islamic world, though the Arabs have been a distinctive element in this group.” Ayman al Zawahiri, *Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner*, translated excerpts, in Laura Mansfield, *His Own Words: A Translation of the Writings of Dr. Ayman al Zawahiri* (United States: TLG Publications, 2006).

23. Zawahiri, *Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner*.

24. *Jahiliyya* is a concept developed by Sayyid Qutb as the state of ignorance of Allah’s divine guidance, and Qutb argues that today *jahiliyya* is the rebellion against Allah’s sovereignty through man claiming the “right to create values, to legislate rules of collective behavior, and to choose any way of life.” Qutb, *Milestones*.

25. Qutb, *Milestones*, chap. 10.

26. Abu Mohammed al Adnani’s announcement of the establishment of a caliphate in June 2014 with Abu Bakr al Baghdadi as its caliph changed the Salafi-jihadi discourse over the Caliphate as the Islamic State changed the Caliphate into a *means* of achieving victory rather than the result of it. It is not yet clear what the destruction of this entity in the ensuing years has done to the discourse. Al Qaeda and those who rejected the Islamic State’s caliphate, however, argued that certain conditions must be met first. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb issued a joint statement in November 2015 rejecting the Islamic State’s caliphate.

27. Aron Lund, “The Syrian Brotherhood: On the Sidelines,” Middle East Institute, September 24, 2013, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/syrian-brotherhood-sidelines>; and Raphaël Lefèvre, “The Syrian Brotherhood’s Armed Struggle,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 14, 2012, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2012/12/14/syrian-brotherhood-s-armed-struggle-pub-50380>.

28. Raphaël Lefèvre, “No More ‘Hama Rules,’” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 19, 2016, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/64609?lang=en>.

29. Zimmerman, *America’s Real Enemy*.

30. Zawahiri, *Knights Under a Prophet’s Banner*.

31. Ayman al Zawahiri, “Zawahiri’s Letter to Zarqawi,” Combating Terrorism Center, July 9, 2005, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/zawahiris-letter-to-zarqawi-english-translation-2>.

32. Gregory D. Johnsen, *The Last Refuge: Yemen, Al-Qaeda, and America’s War in Arabia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012).

33. Gabriel Koehler-Derrick, ed., *A False Foundation? AQAP, Tribes and Ungoverned Spaces in Yemen*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, September 2011, <https://ctc.usma.edu/a-false-foundation-aqap-tribes-and-ungoverned-spaces-in-yemen/>.

34. Katherine Zimmerman, “AQAP: A Resurgent Threat,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, September 2015, <https://ctc.usma.edu/aqap-a-resurgent-threat/>.

35. For estimates of the number of foreign fighters, see Seth G. Jones et al., *The Evolution of the Salafi-Jihadist Threat: Current and Future Challenges from the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and Other Groups*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 20, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/evolution-salafi-jihadist-threat>.

36. The Somali Federal Government has had to crack down on citizens traveling to al Shabaab-controlled areas to put their case in front of an al Shabaab court. Garowe Online, “Somalia: People Warned Against Seeking Justice in al-Shabaab Courts,” December 30, 2018, <https://www.garoweonline.com/en/news/somalia/somalia-people-warned-against-seeking-justice-in-al-shabaab-courts>.

37. Qutb, *Milestones*, chap. 4.

38. For an excellent exposition of this methodology, see Mary Habeck, “The U.S. Must Identify Jihadi-Salafists Through Their Ideology, Practices, and Methodology—and Isolate Them,” Heritage Foundation, July 9, 2018, https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2018-07/SR-200_web_o.pdf.

39. The Islamic State demands immediate adherence to its ideology in this process, something that al Qaeda and other Salafi-jihadi groups have not demanded.

40. Tunisian Seifallah Ben Hassine (Abu Iyadh al Tunisi) received amnesty in March 2011 along with many others in Tunisia. He founded the al Qaeda-linked Ansar al Sharia in Tunisia in late April 2011. Mohamed Jamal Abu Ahmed was released from an Egyptian prison in 2011 and reconnected with al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula leadership, establishing what became known as the Jamal Network in Egypt. Additionally, Mohamed, the brother of al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri, was released from an Egyptian prison in March 2011, rearrested, tried on terrorism charges, and acquitted. Libyan Mohammed al Zahawi, connected to the 2012 attack on the US consulate in Benghazi, was released from Abu Salim prison in 2011. Syrian President Bashar al Assad released Salafi-jihadis in 2011 in order to radicalize the uprising against him. Many of those released later assumed leadership positions in the Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham and in Jabhat al Nusra in Syria. Prominent among them was Abu Khalid al Suri, who was a former envoy for Osama bin Laden and a senior al Qaeda member active in Syria until his death. Aaron Y. Zelin, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, and Andrew Lebovich, “Al-Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb’s Tunisia Strategy,” *CTC Sentinel*, July 2013, <https://ctc.usma.edu/al-qaida-in-the-islamic-maghrebs-tunisia-strategy/>; Katherine Zimmerman, “AQAP’s Role in the al Qaeda Network,” testimony before the Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, Committee on Homeland Security, US House of Representatives, September 18, 2013, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/testimony-aqaps-role-in-the-al-qaeda-network>; Emily Estelle and Katherine Zimmerman, “Backgrounder: Fighting Forces in Libya,” Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, March 3, 2016, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/backgrounder-fighting-forces-in-libya>; Richard Spencer, “Four Jihadists, One Prison: All Released by Assad and All Now Dead,” *Telegraph*, May 11, 2016, <http://s.telegraph.co.uk/graphics/projects/isis-jihad-syria-assad-islamic/index.html>; and Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Aaron Zelin, “How the Arab Spring’s Prisoner Releases Have Helped the Jihadi Cause,” *Atlantic*, October 11, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/10/how-the-arab-springs-prisoner-releases-have-helped-the-jihadi-cause/263469/>.

41. Multiple references to the travel of members of the Salafi-jihadi vanguard to Libya are made throughout the correspondence recovered in May 2011 in Abbottabad, Pakistan, for example.

42. Jessica Lewis, “Black Flags over Fallujah,” *Weekly Standard*, January 20, 2014, <https://www.weeklystandard.com/jessica-lewis/black-flags-over-fallujah>.

43. A former Ansar al Din Fulani commander stood up the Macina Liberation Front, which has led a secondary insurgency against the state using the Malian Fulani identity. Similarly, a Burkinabe Fulani Ansar al Din commander established Ansar al Islam across the Malian border in Burkina Faso.

44. Abdul Latif al Sayyed, a local leader in Abyan, commanded a militia that ousted Ansar al Sharia from the area in 2012. Ansar al Sharia’s February 2012 crucifixion of a man helped spur local rejection of the group, which previously had provided security and mechanisms for local dispute resolution. Sasha Gordon, “Abyani Tribes and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen,” Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, July 25, 2012, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/abyani-tribes-and-al-qaeda-in-the-arabian-peninsula-in-yemen>.

45. The Salafi-jihadi movement remains focused on enabling and strengthening its relationships with Sunni communities as a strategic requirement above the operational requirement of building numbers. An ongoing effort to attract new members, vet and indoctrinate them, and develop them into members of the vanguard certainly exists. Countering the recruitment process has tactical or

operational effects on the specific individuals and groups involved in the process, which is why countermessaging or disruption operations have not significantly affected the Salafi-jihadi movement.

46. Katherine Zimmerman, “Competing Jihad: The Islamic State and al Qaeda,” Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, September 1, 2014, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/competing-jihad-the-islamic-state-and-al-qaeda>.

47. Mary Habeck, “Assessing the ISIS—al-Qaeda Split: Introduction,” INSITE Blog on Terrorism and Extremism, June 18, 2014, <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/blog/index.php/categories/jihad/entry/193-assessing-the-isis-al-qaeda-split-the-origins-of-the-dispute-1>.

48. Abu Musab al Zarqawi, “Zarqawi Letter,” trans. Coalition Provisional Authority, US Department of State, February 2004, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/rls/31694.htm>.

49. Zawahiri, “Zawahiri’s Letter to Zarqawi.”

50. Examples include a July 2012 letter from al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb leader Abu Musab Abdul Wadud (Abdelmalek Droukdel) to the leadership of Ansar al Din in Timbuktu, Mali. Abu Musab Abdul Wadud, “General Directives Related to the Islamic Jihad Project of the Azawad,” July 20, 2012, http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20131006-mali-vade-mecum-droukdel-mali-aqmi-terrorisme-al-qaida-sanguinaire#Lire_le_document.

51. Such cooperation is acceptable so long as the cooperation does not weaken the overall strength of the Salafi-jihadi group and allows the Salafi-jihadis to retain freedom of action. Ayman al Zawahiri warned (Syrian) groups about overreliance on external support, however, in a February 2019 statement, “The Way of Salvation.”

52. Definitions of military terms taken from Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Planning*, GL-6 and GL-7.

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The Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute seeks to inform and educate policymakers, the intelligence and military communities, and all interested citizens who need to understand the nuance and scale of threats to America's security. The project conducts intelligence analysis on unclassified information to produce continuous assessments of threats to the US and our allies. It develops these assessments into concrete plans for action using best practices drawn from the US military, intelligence community, and diplomatic corps. It provides the executive branch, Congress, the media, and the general public its assessments and recommendations on a nonpartisan basis. Like AEI, Critical Threats accepts no money from the American government or any foreign government.

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Cover image: ALEPPO, SY - FEBRUARY 13, 2013: Prolonged civil war is giving extremist factions such as the Islamist Jabhat al-Nusra many opportunities to win hearts and minds. (Paul Watson/Toronto Star via Getty Images)

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