

Beyond Counterterrorism: Defeating the Salafi-Jihadi Movement



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Some label counterterrorism operations the key to keeping America safe. Others call them endless wars. But nearly two decades after 9/11, the reality is that al Qaeda, ISIS, and related groups have more territory, more fighters, and more capabilities. They pose a greater threat to the United States than they did 20 years ago. Americans may feel safe, but the truth is that we are losing these wars. The time has come to dump the existing US counterterrorism strategy and focus on how to win the fight, long term, for good.

What's the problem? On the surface counterterrorism policy appears to be working. Military operations by the US and its partners have denied al Qaeda and the Islamic State control over large areas of territory and populations, removing safe havens from places such as Afghanistan, Mali, and Yemen and eliminating the Islamic State's physical caliphate in Iraq and Syria. Individuals and networks behind the terror attacks have been targeted and eliminated thanks to intelligence, military capabilities, and drone strikes.

But al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and other like-minded groups are part of the broader Salafi-jihadi movement—an ideological movement that seeks the destruction of the world order, and the West along with it, as it works to impose its form of governance on the Muslim world and then the globe. The movement has adapted to counterterrorism pressure, expanded, and learned effective ways to control and prey on vulnerable communities. Today, al Qaeda, ISIS, and its cohort flourish underground, providing the very things that corrupt and broken governments throughout Africa, Asia, and the Middle East cannot or will not. The Salafi-jihadi movement is in effect governing wide swaths of territory, positioning itself for the next phase of battle.

Winning the “forever war” means downgrading the counterterrorism fight and subjugating hard power to soft power. We will never kill every Salafi-jihadi. We will never win an ideological battle against the movement's hard core. We must deny them the territory they have arrogated to themselves: vulnerable communities throughout the Sunni world. There will always be a need for the sharp tip of the spear to battle the core; but it is the people of the Sunni world that give oxygen to the extremists. They must be the target of the next phase—the last phase—of the forever wars.

In her final report on counterterrorism and the Salafi-jihadi movement, AEI Resident Fellow Katherine Zimmerman offers observations and key recommendations.

- Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and other like-minded groups are part of the Salafi-jihadi movement, which seeks to destroy the world order. Terrorism is a means to this end. But the majority of the Salafi-jihadi movement now focuses on strengthening its relationships with local Sunni communities, from which it draws its strategic strength.
- Winning today means adopting a strategy that will weaken the Salafi-jihadi movement, instead of just focusing on the terrorism threat. The US must reframe its approach to defeat al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and other groups.
- With the help of partners, the US must sever the ties of the Salafi-jihadi movement to local Sunni communities. America and its allies must offer these communities a viable alternative to these terror groups.

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