

# The Next Salafi-Jihadi Wave: Capabilities, Resources, and Opportunity

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## Key Points

- US national security policy is locked in a crisis-response cycle that tends to react to threats after they have emerged and treats intertwined developments as separate and sequential. The US response to the Salafi-jihadi movement has often been reactive and disaggregated.
- Counterterrorism efforts largely disrupted only the most visible parts of the Salafi-jihadi threat while masking the long-term danger: the growth of the Salafi-jihadi movement's support base amid conflict and poor governance. As counterterrorism efforts fall away, the movement is gaining capabilities and resources that will shape regional security trends and raise the likelihood of more frequent and severe global terror attacks.
- Defeating the Salafi-jihadi movement requires a fundamental shift toward a proactive approach that is not focused on military instruments and prioritizes reducing Salafi-jihadi groups' overall capabilities and resources. The US should undertake this policy shift while taking steps to mitigate the most serious near-term Salafi-jihadi threats.

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A new jihadist wave is the last thing Western policymakers want to recognize or prepare for. The Russian and Chinese challenges are pressing. The unsatisfying ends to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq fuel a desire to significantly limit, if not eliminate, US involvement in the security of the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia. But Americans face a more serious terror threat than they realize. The global Salafi-jihadi movement, led by al Qaeda and the Islamic State, has not faded into irrelevancy but has grown greatly in manpower, wealth, capability, and geographical extent and is stronger by some measures than it has ever been.

Policymakers have gotten used to the Salafi-jihadi movement's existence, so it is worth considering how they would react to learning about it for the first time. A determinedly anti-American global movement with an apocalyptic ideology and the stated aim of bringing war to American soil has been building networks and support bases across Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia for over 40 years. This movement connects people, ideas, money, and expertise across continents. It has steadily spread to new regions while stubbornly persisting and even strengthening in its core terrain, despite constant if limited battering from the world's most advanced militaries.

The movement's flashiest endeavors—spectacular terror attacks and a border-crossing caliphate—are in a lull that the largely temporary effects of counterterrorism pressure only partly explain. Deliberate adaptation is also at play; Salafi-jihadi leaders have learned to eschew direct attacks on the US and European homelands, on the whole, to avoid drawing attention to their successes in putting down deep roots in many countries. But they have not given up their aim—toppling and replacing states across the Muslim world—or their willingness to use terror attacks to achieve their ends.

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## The Salafi-jihadi movement will benefit from the rise of great-power competition and conflict.

The Salafi-jihadi movement will benefit from the rise of great-power competition and conflict. Jihadists claim to provide a form of governance. Brutal and extreme though they are, they can deliver some order amid chaos, particularly in environments in which the state is inept or predatory, allowing jihadists to install themselves over vulnerable populations at the point of a gun. Jihadists will have plenty of opportunity amid the wave of disorder sweeping Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, which increasingly high-stakes geopolitical competition will exacerbate.

US disengagement from the Middle East and Africa has already opened competitive space for global and middle powers. Proxy competitions have already prolonged and worsened conflicts in which jihadists are active.<sup>1</sup> Russia's invasion of Ukraine will intensify these trends by raising global food and gas prices in already fragile or poorly governed states, encouraging foreign fighters' mobilization,<sup>2</sup> and making the cash-strapped Russian state more desperate to extract resources from other parts of the world. The Salafi-jihadi movement will not wither away as Western attention shifts to other concerns. It will continue to grow.

US policy has for many years been locked in a crisis-response cycle, reacting to threats once they have already emerged. Over the past two decades, the US government has disaggregated threats and

sought to manage them sequentially: small or lone-wolf attacks in the United States; resurgent Salafi-jihadi groups across Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia; government collapse in these regions; and mass migration refugee crises driven by conflict and climate change. These problems range from manageable to inconsequential in the establishment worldview. But this approach fails to recognize the cumulative weight of these interconnected developments and the *major* threat they represent in combination.

This compounding effect—intertwined crises fueling each other—will confront the US with an even more disordered and hostile geopolitical environment. Discussion of great-power and near-peer competition tends to paper over the environments in which this competition often unfolds: the strategically located or resource-rich weak states beset by other crises. The Salafi-jihadi movement will likely thrive as regional conditions shift in its favor, with weak states struggling and global powers focusing on each other. The jihadist threat is entwined with the trajectory of whole regions home to hundreds of millions. Whether these areas trend toward good governance or bad has far-reaching implications for global security and prosperity. And an empowered Salafi-jihadi movement will not spare the West. A renewed Salafi-jihadi global terror campaign—even if it does not reach the anomalous threshold set by the 9/11 attacks—would reshape Western foreign policy priorities again.

The coming years will more likely see the Salafi-jihadi movement's renewal than its decline or vanquishing. Historians will view this period as a relative calm before a storm and a missed opportunity to act proactively against the next wave of a known danger.

## The Salafi-jihadi Movement's Opportunity

The Salafi-jihadi movement strengthens in conditions of conflict and poor governance. Salafi-jihadi ideology is fundamentally unpopular, but Salafi-jihadi groups have latched onto mobilized, aggrieved, and vulnerable populations, particularly those facing existential threats.<sup>3</sup> The Islamic State of Iraq

exemplifies a group that capitalized on and encouraged societal breakdown—especially sectarian conflict—to rebuild an insurgent base.<sup>4</sup>

This pattern of failed governance leading to vulnerable populations needing protection plays out again and again. Al Shabaab arose out of Somalia's civil war, gaining its initial backing by capitalizing on backlash to the Ethiopian intervention and then outcompeting the weak and ineffective Somali state.<sup>5</sup> The Arab Spring revolutions provided several such opportunities. Syrian dictator Bashar al Assad prioritized targeting his moderate opponents, intentionally leaving jihadists to cast themselves as his most viable challengers.<sup>6</sup> This bid to discredit any opposition to Assad's rule empowered the Salafi-jihadi movement. Tunisian and Libyan jihadists seized on revolutions and their chaotic aftermath to stoke social movements, provide public services, recruit and train fighters for the Syrian war, and form local terror networks.<sup>7</sup> The particulars vary, but the pattern holds.

Salafi-jihadi groups have many opportunities to further entrench themselves or even expand in the world today. Many Arab Spring crises remain unresolved. Assad remains in power in Syria but with many enclaves out of his control, his Russian backers preoccupied, and a renewed Islamic State insurgency possibly gathering.<sup>8</sup> Overlapping conflicts simmer in Yemen, where a much-weakened al Qaeda retains a haven.<sup>9</sup> Factions still compete for control of Libya, leaving gaps that the Salafi-jihadi movement can fill. The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan is a major boon to the global movement and reopens that haven to al Qaeda.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, Salafi-jihadi groups are stepping up their activities in neighboring Pakistan.<sup>11</sup> The most notable proliferation of Salafi-jihadi groups has occurred in sub-Saharan Africa in recent years. Jihadist groups are gaining adherents and havens in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Mozambique and extending their West African networks through Burkina Faso and Mali into several Gulf of Guinea states.

Counterterrorism efforts that disrupted only the most visible parts of the Salafi-jihadi threat while masking the long-term danger are now falling away. These efforts have focused on targeting senior leaders and disrupting attack-planning networks for many years. But the efforts have never been enough to permanently defeat Salafi-jihadi

insurgencies because they attack only part of the Salafi-jihadi movement and not the base that allows it to regenerate.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, military efforts against these groups can reclaim territory but have only temporary effects, given the West's reluctance to commit to long-term state-building and the inherent challenges in that task. Half-hearted and time-bound efforts to build governance can leave behind conditions in which insurgencies re-form<sup>13</sup> or settle into an uneasy stalemate in which jihadists become the de facto government for parts of a country.<sup>14</sup>

The Salafi-jihadi threat has largely vanished from Westerners', and particularly Americans', consciousness, because Salafi-jihadi groups have adapted to counterterrorism pressure by focusing on their local goals. The al Qaeda network has shifted its strategy over the past decade to capitalize on anti-government mobilizations and adapt to counterterrorism pressure, resulting in keeping a relatively low profile while advancing toward its local objectives.<sup>15</sup>

The Islamic State has also executed a shift in approach in terror attacks in the West that disguises the importance of its own regional safe havens and partially offsets its loss of the territorial caliphate in Iraq and Syria. Surpassing prior al Qaeda efforts, the Islamic State leveraged the internet<sup>16</sup> to step up the use of far-flung attackers with limited contact with online handlers while embracing less-coordinated attacks, such as individual car rammings and stabbings.<sup>17</sup> This shift away from directed attacks<sup>18</sup> reflects the greater vulnerability of more-elaborate plans—such as the coordinated bombings that both al Qaeda and the Islamic State have carried out—to more sophisticated homeland-defense methods.

The overall reduction in major terror attacks in the West and recognition that counterterrorism efforts can disrupt but not eliminate jihadist attack planning have led to debates over whether US counterterrorism posture is “good enough.”<sup>19</sup> (This report considers “major terror attacks” as multiple- or mass-casualty events that, because of either their individual severity or their frequency, have a lasting negative effect on the public's view of its own security.) Fear of becoming embroiled in regional conflicts and recognition of the difficulty of changing the conditions that feed insurgency have

fueled this debate. But this debate is now irrelevant, because the US and general Western counterterrorism postures are unraveling.

Western states are rolling up or downsizing their counterterrorism missions out of a combination of re-prioritization, fatigue, and frustration with their lack of progress toward objectives. The US is realigning its national security budget and priorities toward near-peer adversaries, a move that can be seen as an overdue effort to make up for years of neglect during the global war on terror.

The reality of the strategic competition challenge does not negate the persistent Salafi-jihadi threat, however, and the nature of many recent changes in counterterrorism posture comes from other pressures, not progress toward objectives. Counterterrorism and military efforts against Salafi-jihadi groups were meant to create time and space to address the underlying conflicts and governance problems or at minimum train partners that can then take on responsibility for containing the threat.

Missions are ending without meeting these goals or setting any conditions to sustain pressure on undefeated Salafi-jihadi groups, however. For example, the Somali and Malian governments are demonstrably unable to defeat their Salafi-jihadi insurgencies and in many ways are still seeding fertile ground for jihadists.<sup>20</sup> The US repositioning from Somalia in January 2021 led the commander of US Africa Command (AFRICOM) to say in March 2022 that the counter-al Shabaab effort is “marching in place at best” and “may be backsliding.”<sup>21</sup> In Mali, the French hastily pulled forces out of the country after a decade-long effort because of a fallout with the postcoup government.<sup>22</sup> While acknowledging that mission’s many shortcomings,<sup>23</sup> the situation has already begun to deteriorate, with Malian troops accompanied by Russian Wagner Group personnel committing abuses that are now fueling an intensified Salafi-jihadi insurgency.<sup>24</sup>

Other emergent counterterrorism players cannot fill the void left by departing Western militaries. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) made undeniable gains against al Qaeda in Yemen but now faces a more pressing Houthi threat.<sup>25</sup> Emirati regional security efforts have been counterproductive in other cases, including the UAE’s backing of

a warlord’s attempted takeover in Libya, its support for the military coup in Sudan, and its contributions to political dysfunction in Somalia.<sup>26</sup> Turkey, with one of the region’s largest militaries, is also not well equipped to quell the Salafi-jihadi movement because of its serious economic problems and other security concerns in neighboring countries.<sup>27</sup>

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Russia was never seriously countering the Salafi-jihadi movement in the Middle East and Africa, despite its claims. Russian forces in Syria prioritized targeting the moderate opposition in support of Assad’s efforts to destroy any credible force the world could support against him.<sup>28</sup> They interfered with US-led counter-Islamic State efforts rather than assisting them. And the atrocities and war crimes Russian forces committed and abetted, including Assad’s repeated use of chemical weapons, drove further radicalization.

The pullback of Russian forces from around the world following Russia’s disastrous invasion of Ukraine is, in this respect, a net positive. It will also be destabilizing in some areas, however, and may give Salafi-jihadi groups a chance to take advantage as other actors rush to build a new post-Russia pseudo-equilibrium. The most serious follow-on effect will probably be in Syria, where Russia may lose or reduce its ability to prop up the Assad regime. A weakened Assad without Russian backing is even less able to quell jihadist insurgencies, including the Islamic State’s rebuilding, in the country.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, Russian mercenaries deployed to Mali, with the French withdrawal, may leave and not even help provide regime security—though given the massacres they are alleged to have committed, their absence may also be a net positive.<sup>30</sup>

The remaining Western counterterrorism footprint is fragile. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan was a self-inflicted wound that disregarded the danger of a Salafi-jihadi resurgence and handed



jihadists an ideological and practical victory. The “over-the-horizon” counterterrorism operations that are meant to keep pressure on the Salafi-jihadi threat in Afghanistan and elsewhere will not likely live up to expectations, despite some successes.<sup>31</sup> An over-the-horizon approach will be particularly challenging in Africa given AFRICOM’s resource constraints and the continent’s sheer size. Modest US deployments in Syria and Iraq, intended to help partners prevent the Islamic State’s resurgence, appear secure for now.<sup>32</sup> These efforts remain vulnerable to turbulent political and security dynamics in theater, however, and the political pressures created by the “forever war” political discourse in the US, which tends to lump effective and limited counterterrorism efforts—such as the US partnership with the Syrian Democratic Forces—with the large-scale counterinsurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>33</sup>

The overall decline in counterterrorism pressure paired with persistent or worsening governance conditions means the Salafi-jihadi movement could pursue its objectives with less oversight and pressure than it has for the past two decades. That observation would be less concerning if the Salafi-jihadi terror threat were fading away and jihadist groups were transforming and abandoning their transnational terror goals. Unfortunately, they are not.

## Gaining Capabilities and Resources

The Salafi-jihadi movement is gaining capabilities and resources that will shape regional security trends while raising the threat of large-scale renewed global terrorism over time. The whole Salafi-jihadi movement—not just individual groups—is maturing and growing more dangerous. The number of countries facing Salafi-jihadi insurgencies ballooned from just four in January 2011 to more than 20 today.<sup>34</sup> The movement is building up material and human resources. The Islamic State has \$25–\$50 million in the bank, though it is struggling to meet its expenses without controlling territory.<sup>35</sup> Al Shabaab, whose moneymaking efforts include a large taxation and extortion scheme in Somalia, pulls in \$15 million monthly.<sup>36</sup> The jihadist groups that have entrenched themselves in local

conflicts are setting conditions to stay for generations, including by taking over schools and indoctrinating children.

The movement is greater than the sum of its parts; individual groups that do not themselves possess advanced attack capabilities can contribute to the network as a whole. This contribution may be territorial—allowing leaders or cells to operate from its haven as the Taliban did for al Qaeda in the 1990s. Some Salafi-jihadi groups become force multipliers that help other affiliates become more effective by supplying expertise and training. The Islamic State has used this model when, for example, it deployed an experienced and specialized unit from Syria to Libya to build the group’s branch there.<sup>37</sup> Islamic State trainers have also helped professionalize its branches in Mozambique, Nigeria, and Uganda.<sup>38</sup>

Groups with limited fighting power may also be force multipliers by playing a coordinating role. For example, the Islamic State’s branch in Somalia is a relatively small group but has been a key node for setting up the Islamic State’s growing network in eastern and central Africa.<sup>39</sup> The Islamic State has used these advise-and-assist efforts to build a robust network of external provinces<sup>40</sup> that have bolstered the organization even as it has faced losses in its core terrain and among senior leadership.<sup>41</sup> Finally, Salafi-jihadi groups may support the broader network with funding rather than taking the lead in external attacks. Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb—long known as al Qaeda’s richest affiliate from its kidnapping and smuggling schemes in the Sahel—helped seed affiliates in Libya and train foreign fighters to send to Syria, for example.<sup>42</sup>

Jihadists might also luck into new capabilities because of technological innovations that make them more likely to overcome current defenses. All nonstate armed actors, including Salafi-jihadis, are poised to benefit from the ongoing democratization of technologies with the potential for violence. Salafi-jihadi groups have demonstrated a capacity for battlefield innovation<sup>43</sup> and incorporating lessons learned from other nonideologically aligned groups and innocent hobbyists, particularly with modifying commercial drones.<sup>44</sup> A Salafi-jihadi group that learns how to combine even a simple and readily available biological or chemical

agent with a drone attack could have disproportionate psychological effects on a domestic population, for example. The continued vulnerability of individuals and critical infrastructure to cyberattack opens another avenue for possible Salafi-jihadi attacks in the future.

## Global Goals Remain

Salafi-jihadi groups will use the relaxation of counterterrorism pressure and their growing safe havens to prepare and conduct global plots once again. They will most likely retain their intent to target the West and will aim their growing capabilities toward this goal as counterterrorism pressure lifts.

This assessment is difficult to make because external attacks are a double-edged sword for Salafi-jihadi groups. They have many incentives to pursue them, as this section identifies. But major external terror attacks also create the political will for interventions to disrupt and destroy Salafi-jihadi governance projects, and Salafi-jihadi leaders now have ample evidence of external attack plotting that backfired and delayed their progress toward governance and territorial control objectives. The question is whether the movement will assimilate lessons learned and permanently eschew external attacks or whether it will repeat past strategic errors and incur damage to its havens and governing projects. There is enough evidence to assess with low-to-medium confidence that Salafi-jihadi groups will pursue major terror attacks in the coming years.

The Salafi-jihadi movement has not stopped international attack plotting even though major attacks in the West have reduced since the Islamic State's peak in 2014–15. Al Qaeda's branch in Yemen organized a multiyear plot to infiltrate a Saudi pilot trainee into an American military facility, where he killed three American servicemen in 2019.<sup>45</sup> Al Shabaab sent an operative abroad to undergo pilot training and plot a 9/11-style attack in 2019 as well.<sup>46</sup> Individual attackers inspired by Salafi-jihadi propaganda, but not directed by Salafi-jihadi groups, constitute the majority of attempted and achieved terror attacks in the US and Europe in recent years.<sup>47</sup> Coordinated attack plots have clearly reduced, likely because of counterterrorism pressure that has severely degraded

key threat nodes—for example, al Qaeda and Islamic State cells in Syria and al Qaeda's branch in Yemen. The global COVID-19 pandemic also “disrupted terrorist travel, financing, and operations” and caused Salafi-jihadi groups to emphasize online and information campaigns.<sup>48</sup>

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Past patterns indicate that the proliferation of locally focused Salafi-jihadi groups will increase the global terror threat over time. Every Salafi-jihadi group that has conducted an international attack began with a local focus, starting with al Qaeda's birth in the Soviet-Afghan war. Jihadists have repeatedly used their havens to gain resources and capabilities to support the global movement or pursue the “glory” of global terror attacks themselves.

Sometimes this capability building is deliberate, particularly in foreign fighter-heavy organizations. Al Qaeda's growth in Afghanistan is the classic case: Osama bin Laden used al Qaeda's havens in Afghanistan and elsewhere to build training camps and prepare for transnational terror attacks, including the 9/11 attack. Al Qaeda, which largely comprised foreigners, not local Afghans, had played only a minor role in driving the Soviets out of Afghanistan, but the conflict allowed it to establish itself there. After the victory, al Qaeda's members neither focused on Afghan matters nor returned home. Instead, they broadened their focus and leveraged their attachment to the Afghan mujahideen to set conditions for ever more dramatic operations, first in the Middle East and then in the US and Europe.

The Islamic State's core group—also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham—likewise emerged from local and regional conflicts in Iraq and Syria before adopting a global posture. The Islamic State's predecessor initiated external attack efforts, focusing on neighboring states but also targeting Europe.<sup>49</sup> The Islamic State later expanded

this effort, after declaring its caliphate, by redeploying foreign fighters home to coordinate attacks on European capitals.<sup>50</sup> The group also built up to its global ambitions, starting with its expansion into Syria before expanding to a global model and cultivating branches around the world.

Other groups have supported transnational attacks with varying degrees of opportunism, such as al Qaeda's branch in Yemen, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). AQAP developed advanced explosives to attack its regional adversary Saudi Arabia but readily turned to global terror when a willing attacker presented himself in 2009.<sup>51</sup> Only a technical malfunction prevented the group from bringing down an airliner over Detroit, Michigan, on Christmas Day that year. AQAP's approach to external attacks became increasingly deliberate over time, and it hosted one of al Qaeda's primary external attack nodes. Another more opportunistic case is the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which provided explosives training to a willing attacker whose attempt to detonate a bomb in Times Square in 2010 matched the TTP's desire to raise its international profile.<sup>52</sup>

Ideological, bureaucratic, and organizational factors push Salafi-jihadis toward transnational terror attacks. Salafi-jihadi ideology obligates individuals to wage war to advance and defend Islam.<sup>53</sup> The movement's leaders define the West as the "far enemy" that props up apostate regimes in the Muslim world.<sup>54</sup> Bin Laden justified attacking Western civilians as retaliation for the killing of Muslim civilians<sup>55</sup> and classified the citizens of democracies as legitimate targets because they are responsible for choosing their governments.<sup>56</sup> Terror attacks are therefore embedded in the Salafi-jihadi way of war. Blaming the West is also a core rationalization for Salafi-jihadi ideology's widespread unpopularity among Muslims. Jihadists have historically turned to transnational attacks to project strength when they suffer setbacks in their local campaigns.<sup>57</sup>

Some Salafi-jihadi groups have pursued global jihadi affiliations and transnational attacks even at the expense of their local goals. Bin Laden discouraged al Shabaab's formal affiliation with al Qaeda out of concern that the affiliation would prevent donors from responding to the humanitarian crisis

in Somalia and building al Shabaab's local credibility in the process.<sup>58</sup> Al Shabaab nonetheless sought out and developed transnational terror techniques—ultimately with the al Qaeda network's recognition and support—and has begun actively plotting to target international aviation.

Intra-jihadist competition encourages external attacks as a way for groups to demonstrate their commitment to prospective recruits and financial backers. Competition pushes groups to "outbid" each other by demonstrating legitimacy and tactical prowess,<sup>59</sup> and terror attacks have become a primary means for outbidding.<sup>60</sup> Al Qaeda and the Islamic State are competing to be the ideological vanguard of the Salafi-jihadi movement. These groups pursue the same end state but have different interpretations of timing, phasing, and permissibility of certain actions (including their level of tolerance for killing Muslim civilians).<sup>61</sup> The Islamic State tends to contrast itself with al Qaeda by emphasizing its purity and brutality. This distinction is visible in the Islamic State's response to the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan. The Islamic State has criticized the Taliban for its willingness to negotiate with the United States, while al Qaeda and its affiliates have praised the Taliban and view its success as the validation of a strategically patient and somewhat more flexible approach.<sup>62</sup>

Some groups in the Salafi-jihadi movement have always been locally focused, to be sure, and others have become so. Al Qaeda's branch in Mali has expanded its footprint in recent years, even since ending a campaign of terror attacks on regional capitals,<sup>63</sup> likely due to a combination of counterterrorism pressure<sup>64</sup> and the group's shifting strategy.<sup>65</sup> Other groups have chosen to renounce global objectives, at least for a time, for tactical advantage. Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) in Syria, for example, broke away from al Qaeda and declared its local focus in pursuit of comparative advantage in the Syrian civil war.<sup>66</sup> HTS has not shown an inclination to prepare or conduct external attacks since making that break. The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), for another example, renounced its global jihadi ideology in 2009 under heavy pressure from the Libyan government.<sup>67</sup>

These groups' rejection of global attacks, temporary or permanent, has not transformed or under-

mined the Salafi-jihadi movement writ large, however. Sometimes their rejection does not even transform the movement in their immediate vicinity. The LIFG's renunciation of global attacks effectively ended the group as an organization, but parts of its human network seeded other globally oriented Salafi-jihadi groups.<sup>68</sup> Localized Salafi-jihadi groups may still provide funding, training, and havens to more globally focused networks. Alternately, if a group's decision to localize is divisive,<sup>69</sup> the members who disapprove of abandoning global goals do not disappear but rather fold into the existing global Salafi-jihadi network. One group's decision to localize can also encourage its rivals to become more extreme.<sup>70</sup> The existence of locally focused groups therefore does not mean that the Salafi-jihadi movement writ large, or other individual groups, will abandon their pursuit of transnational terror attacks.

## Policy Implications and Recommendations

Better strategies and methods for countering the Salafi-jihadi movement are possible. The problem to solve is that the counterterrorism policy the United States has been pursuing for two decades is missing the window of opportunity to prevent groups from forming or taking root in the first place. Groups, once formed, can develop capabilities that make them resilient, such as providing local governance or forging functional ties with other parts of the Salafi-jihadi network. They gradually become more effective at working toward their local goals and capable of more-devastating attacks abroad.

This crisis-response trap must end. Responding to these threats once they have clearly emerged is more expensive and dangerous because the groups are then already entrenched and capable. Once there is a Salafi-jihadi group on the ground, policy can only mitigate the problem; history suggests that permanently defeating an established Salafi-jihadi group and changing conditions so that it cannot return is extremely difficult. The policy should focus on preventing such groups from taking root in the first place.

The policy community is averse to expending resources on a new counter-Salafi-jihadi strategy

for many reasons. The Iraq and Afghanistan counterinsurgency experience looms large. Well-founded concerns about US preparation for great-power competition and conflict compound the general desire to avoid being drawn back into local conflicts and state-building efforts. Unfortunately, the US needs to be able to meet new geopolitical challenges while improving its approach to the Salafi-jihadi threat—not just because both threat categories are real but because they overlap and reinforce each other.<sup>71</sup> Done well, US investment in countering the Salafi-jihadi movement will not only reduce direct jihadist threats but also yield strategic benefits in global power competition.<sup>72</sup>

Although an avoidance strategy may be more politically palatable, it will fail. The requirement is a fundamental shift toward a proactive approach that is not focused on military instruments. Direct military involvement may still be required in some cases in which Salafi-jihadi groups have sufficient control of terrain and resources. The proactive shift also requires creating a new framework for evaluating Salafi-jihadi groups, proto-groups, and the environments in which they can emerge and then prioritizing among them.

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The US government should prioritize reducing the Salafi-jihadi movement's overall capabilities and resources.

The US government should prioritize reducing the Salafi-jihadi movement's overall capabilities and resources. This strategy will still include a counterterrorism component to dismantle active terror threat networks. But an enduring reduction in the Salafi-jihadi threat—and ultimately a reduced need for counterterrorism—requires suppressing and ultimately reducing the capability of the larger movement and its support base. Shifting to focus on denying groups' capabilities and resources will likely prioritize action in areas now free of significant counterterrorism operations, even if they are not free of Salafi-jihadi groups. But this is not a call for constant US military intervention or global nation-building. It is, on the contrary, a call for developing a new way to rigorously prioritize



among many developing and potential threats before they require drastic operations.

An effective counter-Salafi-jihadi strategy will require a shift away from counterterrorism thinking. Counterterrorism policy and its legal authorities are organized around groups' intent and active plotting to target the US and focused on identifying the discrete groups and networks that facilitate, plan, and execute terrorist attacks. This policy is necessary to address existing threats but insufficient to prevent new threats from emerging. Salafi-jihadi groups start as local phenomena. While they may profess global goals, it takes time before they can and will pursue transnational attack plotting. This means that the counterterrorism apparatus as structured cannot—and is not designed to—reliably preempt the growth of Salafi-jihadi groups that will ultimately seek to attack the US until their global intent has fully emerged and the group has begun to develop capabilities.

The US should aim to stop groups from developing most dangerous capabilities, but this means identifying which groups are on the most dangerous path before they get there. There is precedent in the field of net assessment for focusing on capability rather than intent in long-term assessments. Changes in intent can occur much more rapidly than changes in capability can, and they are much more difficult to detect.

Policymakers should also weigh potential external terror threats without allowing them to solely determine when to put resources against the Salafi-jihadi movement. Nigeria's Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWA) has yet to attempt an attack on the US or Europe—unlike Somalia's al Shabaab. But ISWA threatens the stability of Nigeria, which should be a major concern for the US given Nigeria's centrality for West Africa's future prosperity, security, and geopolitical alignment.

This analytical framing is of course only part of the overarching challenge in developing and implementing an effective strategy to change the conditions that lead to Salafi-jihadi insurgencies' formation, survival, and strengthening. Developing and implementing a proactive approach will obviously take time. Attempts to implement a counter-fragility framework, passed into law in 2019, face delays and bureaucratic stumbling blocks.<sup>73</sup> The even larger problem is lack of political will and the

combination of political dysfunction, competing priorities, and policy roadblocks that discourage policymakers from retooling peace-building and development programming to better target areas of emerging conflict.<sup>74</sup>

The US should implement mitigations to preserve and improve its counterterrorism efforts while the longer-term proactive policy develops and yields results. If current trends hold, the US and its Western partners will be waiting and watching relatively passively as Salafi-jihadi groups take root and expand, hoping that the blowback—in the form of toppling local governments and conducting terror attacks abroad—will not reach an unmanageable threshold. But this hoping-and-waiting strategy will fail because the Salafi-jihadi movement is not declining toward an end point. It is in a temporary phase of focusing on the near war and will become a greater threat to domestic and regional stability in the coming years.

Recognizing that counterterrorism policy will not likely change radically in the near term, however, the US and its allies and partners should take the following steps to mitigate the worst cases.

**Factor future state collapses and renewed Salafi-jihadi activity into planning.** The refocusing of limited intelligence assets toward new priorities means the US faces a heightened risk of surprise from state collapse and related Salafi-jihadi activity in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. The US government at minimum should move to preserve institutional knowledge and attempt to metabolize lessons learned from the past 20 years' counterterrorism and counterinsurgency efforts. This knowledge, which is particularly at risk because of the rapid shift to focus on Europe given the Russian invasion of Ukraine, will be necessary when the next Salafi-jihadi threat rises to the surface of US policymakers' attention.

Defense planning assumptions should also include a rapid response capability that accounts for dangerous groups obtaining high-value material or technology, a high likelihood of overlapping crises that demand simultaneous responses, and non-state actors that will seek to act during periods of high state-on-state tension. A sufficient rapid response capability will likely require additional resources, particularly given the well-documented

strain on Special Forces assets and general readiness.

**Preserve as much intelligence as possible on the Salafi-jihadi threat, act on it, and increase defenses.** These efforts are likely underway but will require continued resourcing.

- *Expand intelligence assets to maintain coverage of Salafi-jihadi havens.* Growing demand for limited intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets in theaters focused on great-power competition will likely challenge sustaining coverage of Salafi-jihadi havens. This is primarily a budgetary challenge. ISR alone is insufficient and should be paired with human intelligence and other collection efforts, including robust diplomatic engagement in countries facing jihadist insurgencies or at risk for them.
- *Continue targeted counterterrorism efforts to disrupt groups' development of high-impact capabilities.* Counterterrorism operations are still necessary, including targeting bomb makers and other "human specialists,"<sup>75</sup> such as trainers, who are disproportionately valuable to their groups' external threat capabilities. These activities require basing—a problem that will likely hamstring such efforts in Afghanistan and that coups and instability in Africa badly complicate. The US should find creative ways to continue such targeted operations, despite the handicaps of physical and political geography that will otherwise prevent it from acting even when it can identify necessary action.
- *Secure critical infrastructure and materials.* Consider the resources and locations that Salafi-jihadi groups may access directly or through other nonstate actors. The US should assist partner countries in maintaining a global inventory of and adequate security for sensitive facilities, including infectious disease labs and any facilities dealing with nuclear, radiological, or chemical material that can be weaponized at different risk thresholds. Part of this undertaking is preventive and focused on helping these facilities better secure themselves, and part of it is preparing to respond

urgently if sensitive facilities are compromised by nonstate actors.

- *Adapt counterthreat finance to new technologies and the shifting geopolitical environment.* The US and its partners have developed a sophisticated tool kit for disrupting terror and criminal networks' financial operations, though gaps remain.<sup>76</sup> Counterthreat finance efforts must continue to evolve for the availability of digital currencies and potential economic shifts related to geopolitical competition. While the relevant authorities are undoubtedly already working to meet these challenges, ongoing resourcing will be necessary.

## Conclusion

In the wake of the withdrawal from Afghanistan, government leaders have an opportunity to test their assumptions and practices and understand what went wrong—and how. One key lesson is that combating the Salafi-jihadi movement is not primarily a military exercise but requires a clearer understanding of the environment that permits such groups to flourish—and a better all-hands approach to eliminating that environment.

An approach that seeks to avert rather than mitigate risk will *prevent* Salafi-jihadi insurgencies from gaining deep roots. Nonmilitary preemption is not a core competency for the US government and requires the kind of joint assessment and cooperation that years of effort have failed to produce. But that failure does not render reform unnecessary.

The stakes are high. A major Salafi-jihadi attack campaign on US targets at home and abroad would seriously harm the country, even as it falls short of Salafi-jihadis' grandiose goals. Salafi-jihadi groups do not have a hope of defeating the West militarily—hence their reliance on asymmetric means of attack. But Salafi-jihadi activities can cross a threshold that will heighten domestic tensions, and they can intersect negatively with many other threats to US national security. They will accelerate state collapse in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, opening more arenas for armed proxy competition and stoking humanitarian crises and mass migration, causing further political unrest. The growth of the Salafi-jihadi movement

contributes more broadly to the weakening of the liberal democratic world order that is already

weakening in other ways. Continued drift is not an option.

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## About the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute

The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute seeks to inform and educate policy-makers, 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 United States and its 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, CTP accepts no money from the American government or any foreign government. CTP is directed by AEI Senior Fellow Frederick W. Kagan. Its two analytical teams focus on the threats posed by Iran and the Salafi-jihadi movement, especially in the Horn of Africa, Libya, West Africa, and Yemen.

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## About Our Technology Partners

*The conclusions and assessments in this report do not reflect the positions of our technology partners.*



Neo4j is a highly scalable native graph database that helps organizations build intelligent applications that meet today's evolving connected data challenges including fraud detection, tax evasion, situational awareness, real-time recommendations, master data management, network security, and IT operations. Global organizations such as MITRE, Walmart, the World Economic Forum, UBS, Cisco, HP, Adidas, and Lufthansa rely on Neo4j to harness the connections in their data.



Ntrepid is a mission-driven provider of cutting-edge managed attribution technology solutions that allows organizations to discreetly and safely conduct sophisticated cyber operations in the most hostile online environments. We leverage our deep experience in the national security community to anticipate our customers' needs and provide solutions before the requirements are expressed. Our heavy investment in R&D allows us to stay ahead of the rapidly changing internet landscape. Ntrepid's innovative solutions empower advanced online research, analysis, and data collection, while obscuring organizational identity and protecting your mission.



Linkurious' graph visualization software helps organizations detect and investigate insights hidden in graph data. It is used by government agencies and global companies in anti-money laundering, cybersecurity, or medical research. Linkurious makes today's complex connected data easy to understand for analysts.



BlackSky integrates a diverse set of sensors and data unparalleled in the industry to provide an unprecedented view of your world. They combine satellite imagery, social media, news and other data feeds to create timely and relevant insights. With machine learning, predictive algorithms, and natural language processing, BlackSky delivers critical geospatial insights about an area or topic of interest and synthesizes data from a wide array of sources including social media, news outlets, and radio communications.



Sayari is a search company, not a traditional data vendor. They build search products that allow users to find corporate, financial, and public records in hard-target countries. Sayari products cover emerging, frontier, and offshore markets, and include corporate registries, official gazettes, litigation, vital records, customs data, and real property. They collect, structure, normalize, enrich, and index this data, often making it searchable for the very first time.



Microsoft helps empower defense and intelligence agencies with its deep commitments to national security, trust, innovation, and compliance. With world-class security and a wide array of cloud services designed for mission success, the Microsoft Cloud offers a cloud platform designed for flexibility and scale to strengthen partnerships and alliances, create smart work environments and installations, and optimize operations to better meet mission needs and help foster a safer, more secure world.



By combining semantics with entity, path, link and social network analytics, Semantic AI adds a layer of intelligence to make rapid contextual connections throughout vast amounts of disparate data. The Semantic AI™ Platform is designed for augmented human intelligence in the Artificial Intelligence age. This adaptable investigation, analytics and intelligence environment allows users to quickly analyze situations, redirect investigative focus and dive deeply into the most relevant connections.



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