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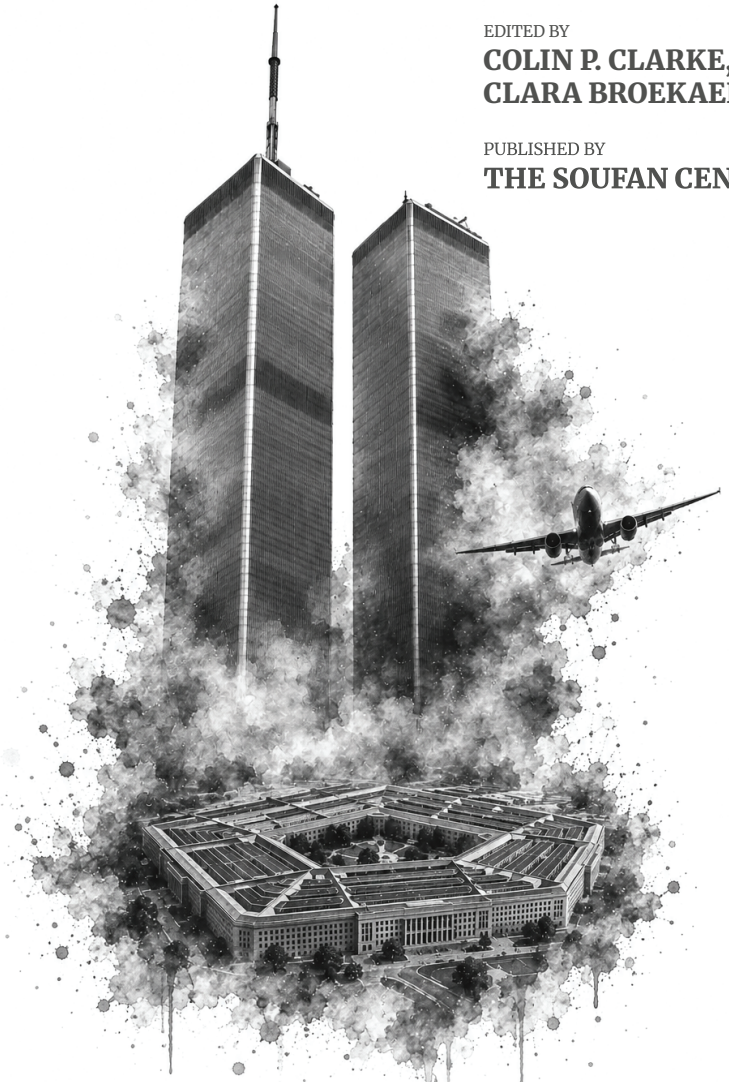

25 YEARS AFTER

9/11

THE FUTURE OF THE GLOBAL JIHADI MOVEMENT

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Preface

For many Americans, especially those not born yet or too young to remember, the events of September 11, 2001, may seem of historical interest only, the way some Americans recall the Vietnam War. But for those of us who lived through it and its aftermath, the attacks remain indelibly etched in our minds, like a fever dream that never breaks.

In a sense, 9/11 is the day that never truly ended. The long tail of that tragic day—and the road it set America, and indeed the rest of the world, upon—holds lessons we still don't fully grasp.

The chapters that follow in this edited volume tell the story of what has happened since: to us and to the range of groups that comprise the global jihadi movement. The chapters, researched and written by some of the world's leading terrorism experts, describe the movement's scope, offshoots, and far-flung affiliates, which have succeeded using classic *Management of Savagery* tactics, fomenting local conflicts and exploiting them to gain military control and political influence in their home territories.

On 9/11, al-Qaeda boasted a total force of approximately 400 men under arms, about three-quarters of these militants based in Afghanistan. Today, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) estimates a total strength of between 15,000 and 28,000 worldwide—a figure that does not include 12,000 to 18,000 members of the Islamic State and its affiliates. The power of al-Qaeda and Islamic State is not a byproduct of its leadership, finance, or the control of territory. Rather, their strength is derived from the resonance of their narrative, which is rather simple: the West is waging an epochal war against Islam itself, facilitated by corrupt leaders in Muslim countries. As such, al-Qaeda, Islamic State, and their allies and acolytes continue to exhort their followers that the only way to fight back is through violent militancy.

The nature of the threat continues to evolve with the proliferation of decentralized terrorist groups, online radicalization, domestic militancy, and technological advances. With each passing day, there are growing concerns that the U.S. national security apparatus has fallen behind the curve in developing countermeasures against the malicious use of new technologies like drones and artificial intelligence—ironically, technologies that other parts of the U.S. government have been at the forefront of developing.

The United States has made many missteps over the past two and a half decades in response to 9/11. At various points, we have confused vengeance with security, impunity with strength, and callousness with patriotism. Our conduct in the Middle East has at times been hubristic, and sometimes directly worked at cross purposes to the objectives we sought to fulfill. Whether through strategic errors like the invasion of Iraq, or through moral failings like the use of enhanced interrogation techniques, America has inadvertently served Osama bin Laden's ends more than its own by engaging in actions that departed from important norms, values, and practices. Such actions have at once damaged American credibility abroad and eroded trust at home.

As longstanding allies drift, or in some cases are pushed, further from the American orbit, the world moves closer to bin Laden's dystopian dream: the collapse of the U.S.-led international order. Jihadis openly cheerlead the unraveling of the international order. But all is not lost. As the world grows more chaotic, it is more important than ever to maintain working relationships with foreign governments and treat our longstanding allies—many of whom stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the United States throughout the Global War on Terror—with respect and dignity.

The United States has long been viewed as a beacon to the rest of the world. The country has a tradition of self-correction and a deep willingness, however imper-

fectly, to confront our own failures rather than deny them.

The American spirit is defined by the willingness of ordinary people to rise to extraordinary moments with courage, integrity, compassion, and a sense of duty greater than themselves. Twenty-five years ago, in one of our nation's darkest hours, we witnessed that spirit at its finest—not only in extraordinary acts of bravery, but in the unity, selflessness, and humanity of Americans who stepped forward for one another.

The enduring strength of our nation is not simply its power, but its people and what we are willing to do for one another. Institutions change. Governments come and go. The challenges facing the nation evolve. But that spirit—the belief that service matters, that character matters, and that each generation carries a responsibility to those who come after it—endures.

That is why we undertook this humble production: to remember what happened, to preserve the lessons learned, and to pass them on to the generations that follow. Because remembering the past is not about living in it—it is about doing everything we can to ensure its darkest chapters are never repeated.

May God bless and protect all those who serve, and may God bless the American people.

Ali Soufan

Introduction
The Future of Jihadi Terrorism

Colin P. Clarke and Clara Broekaert

Introduction

In May 2026, the White House released the long-awaited U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy, the first since 2018.[1] Some of the threat priorities it describes, along with the proposed methods to respond to them, would be unrecognizable to a policymaker, analyst, or counterterrorism practitioner who served on the front lines of the Global War on Terrorism in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Cartels and transnational criminal gangs, newly designated as foreign terrorist organizations, top the list of terrorism threats. The legacy jihadi groups — those organizations that defined and arguably monopolized American security policy after 9/11 — are listed second and are narrowed to a small handful of groups judged capable of external operations against the U.S. homeland and interests abroad. Far-left groups are also included in the top three priorities.

The 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy already hinted at the new position of terrorism in the threat hierarchy, eclipsed by other national security priorities deemed more pressing, including hemispheric security and the pacing threat posed by Chinese military modernization.[2] To a reader of official government documentation regarding the terrorism threat landscape twenty-five years after 9/11, it would appear that the story that began with the attacks has largely concluded and that jihadism no longer presents an urgent and lethal threat to the West.

The official record of the terrorism threat has, unfortunately, not always been the most accurate of inventories. More than once, the threat as understood at senior levels of the U.S. government was incongruous with what the available evidence supported. Other times, faulty assessments were based on incomplete intelligence. At times, the threat was understood but not fully heeded, as exemplified by the "Bin Ladin Determined to Strike in US" memo that was part of the President's Daily Brief just a month prior to 9/11.[3] The 9/11 case is the most scrutinized instance of this failure, but an earlier episode is equally instructive. On August 7, 1998, al-Qaeda conducted twin bombings against the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, killing more than 220 people and wounding more than 4,000. The official record of the national security apparatus, however, shows that in the

years leading up to the attack, other priorities were more prominently discussed.

The 1997 National Security Strategy made only sparse mention of terrorism, and when doing so, focused primarily on state sponsorship of terrorism and offered as an example of America's decisiveness to counter terrorism, the 1993 missile strike on Iraqi intelligence headquarters in retaliation for the attempted assassination of former President George H.W. Bush.[4] Afghanistan appeared in the document, not as the place Osama bin Laden had moved to a year prior in 1996 after being expelled from Sudan following U.S. pressure, but as a hotbed of illegal drugs. Neither bin Laden's name nor al-Qaeda's appears at all.

In 1997, thirty foreign terrorist organizations were designated, only seven of which were Sunni Islamist; incredulously, al-Qaeda was not among them.[5] This was not for lack of awareness, including by the country's top brass: then-FBI Director Louis Freeh stated in January 1998 that "loosely affiliated extremists–characterized by the World Trade Center bombers and rogue terrorists such as Ramzi Ahmed Yousef… may pose the most urgent threat to the United States at this time because their membership is relatively unknown to law enforcement, and because they can exploit the mobility that emerging technology and a loose organizational structure offer."[6] Later, the Accountability Review Boards would state that although there was no tactical warning or intelligence for the East Africa bombings, "both the intelligence and policy communities relied excessively on tactical intelligence to determine the level of potential terrorist threats to posts worldwide."[7]

The genesis of this volume follows that particular finding: we have an imperative to examine the jihadi landscape rigorously, including at the strategic level, to minimize our errors in perception and, consequently, our assessment of the terrorist threat. Our contribution was to assemble some of the top experts on terrorism from across the globe and ask them to assess jihadi terrorism as it stands today. Further, we asked that their assessments go beyond tactical analysis to derive what this means for future threats, reinterrogating the conventional wisdom and prior assumptions along the way. The chapters range widely, from drone adoption by non-state actors to the analytical mistakes made in the aftermath of 9/11 to the diversification of political violence and extremism online.

The chapters query different theaters, affiliates, and periods of the Global War on Terrorism, but still a common throughline emerges: the jihadi movement has continued to adapt, expand, and, worryingly, has been able to absorb new capabilities and technologies in a period in which it has plummeted down the West's list of priorities. The distance between the perception of the threat and the threat as it operates is thus also the subject of this book.

The Threat Environment

A quarter century after the attacks, the movement that Osama bin Laden helped create and unleash as a global maelstrom presents something of a contradiction. Measured by fighters, territory governed or held, operations executed, revenue generated, and geographic reach, it remains resilient. However, measured by its place in the broader hierarchy of threats facing the United States and its allies, it has become deprioritized, despite that resilience. The movement survived the elimination of its founding generation by dispersing into networks of affiliates, and the two weakened, but resilient, central organizations, Islamic State and al-Qaeda, are still contesting one another in various theaters.[8] Neither has launched an attack in the West on the scale of 9/11. Yet at the same time, neither intra-jihadi rivalry nor a quarter century of counterterrorism has slowed the growth of the movement at what was once considered the periphery.

Without a doubt, the clearest change in the threat environment has been the movement's geographic shift. The movement's center of gravity is currently anchored in sub-Saharan Africa, which regionally has become the epicenter of deaths attributed to terrorism.[9] Somalia, peripheral on the day of the 9/11 attacks and considered a jihadi backwater, has become a strategic hub for both al-Qaeda and Islamic State. Al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda's strongest affiliate, now governs much of the country's south and has successfully blunted and even counteracted the Somali federal government's pressure campaign against it. Islamic State in Somalia counts only a few hundred fighters, yet its *al-Karrar* office, a central node in the Islamic State's global network, bankrolls affiliates across the continent and helped finance the attack at Abbey Gate in Kabul's international airport during the American withdrawal in 2021. Tricia Bacon's chapter in this volume shows that some of the interventions intended to prevent Somalia from becoming such a hub eventually receded and accelerated the rise of the groups they feared. The Sahel region, meanwhile, has become the movement's deadliest theater, with various authors in this volume warning of potential transnational and regional ramifications if left unaddressed.

The center of gravity of terrorism moving elsewhere should not be interpreted as future terrorist threats targeting the U.S. and its allies diminishing altogether. Put simply, it merely suggests that rather than just al-Qaeda and Islamic State Central, threats could emerge from the periphery, even if local affiliates are assessed as driven by more parochial concerns than the global jihad that consumed bin Laden's agenda. As Brian Michael Jenkins notes in his chapter, although many jihadi groups are focused on local objectives, they remain adaptive and highly opportunistic. New threats could manifest as the result of two affiliates working together to bridge capabilities – think al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, for example. Additionally, as Amira Jadoon's contribution to this volume shows,

"localization is reversible." Even if certain groups currently present as national or regional threats does not mean they cannot become transnational in the future.

In the evolution of the jihadi movement over the twenty-five years since 9/11, the counterterrorism enterprise and the categories developed to assess, describe, and counter terrorist threats sometimes no longer fit the operational environment. The volume shows, for example, a threat environment in which, under certain conditions, cooperation can take place across sectarian lines that the movement's own doctrine forbids, including between al-Shabaab and the Yemen-based Houthis, part of Iran's Axis of Resistance. Perhaps most glaring of all, Shia Iran has offered safe haven to Saif al-Adel, the de facto leader of Sunni jihadi al-Qaeda, for many years.

Multiple chapters also grapple with the increasing entanglement of terrorism with state rivalry and conflict. In 2021, the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan restored the original jihadi haven but now hosts an eclectic militant ecosystem that shapes interstate conflict rather than merely exploiting existing conflict. State and militant dynamics in South Asia can thus no longer be analyzed in isolation, as argued by Jadoon in her contribution to the volume, which explores in depth the range of jihadi groups operating across Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The most worrisome and perhaps globally consequential manifestation of the mismatch between the legacy categories the counterterrorism community has devised and the current threat landscape has come from outside the movement altogether. The October 7 attacks were carried out by Hamas, a group embedded in Iran's proxy network but set off a chain reaction that eventually produced regional war and continues to have global reverberations as of this writing. Subsequent Israeli violence in Gaza and the West Bank also directly fed into the narratives of both Islamic State and al-Qaeda. Assaf Moghadam presents the attack in his chapter as evidence that the boundaries around which the post-9/11 enterprise was built, including terrorism, insurgency, and interstate war, are now eroding.

Technological capability is diffusing at the same time, making for an even more volatile threat environment in which jihadis operate. The United States' near-monopoly on some of the most effective kinetic tools to target terrorist groups has dissipated with the democratization of myriad technologies. Drones for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), as well as armed drones used to conduct targeted strikes, have moved from being a hallmark state capability to a tool used by various terrorist groups, including Hamas as part of its combined arms attack on October 7.

This lowering of barriers to entry in this space is having, and will continue to have, significant implications globally. In their contribution to this edited volume, Peter

Bergen and David Sterman argue that rather than solely focusing on the particular capabilities that drones provide, the strategic rationale and political context of drone adoption by violent non-state actors also help explain uptake. Don Rassler, whose chapter revisits the 9/11 Commission report's chapter on "Foresight—and Hindsight," similarly heeds commercial technology already in the hands of lone actors and small cells that augment attack complexity, and warns of the potential future creative blending of different types of commercial technologies in new, unexpected ways. This is particularly concerning in a threat environment that no longer revolves around Islamic State Central and al-Qaeda Central, and that sees far more inspired plots than directed ones.

The threat environment as thoroughly described throughout this volume's chapters diverges from the sections of the U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy addressing Salafi-jihadi groups at times. While it identifies Somalia as one of the African regions confronting terrorism and where subsequent U.S. strikes have been conducted, its targeting logic is based on a logic of "brief, high intensity" campaigns against "the top five Islamist terror groups that have the intent and capabilities to execute External Operations against the United States."[10] This is thus a metric that prioritizes each group by its perceived reach to the U.S. homeland. Bacon's chapter in this volume, however, shows that even when an Islamic State affiliate has been reduced to a few hundred fighters and has never struck the United States directly, it can still serve as a linchpin and crucial logistical node in an organization's capabilities and resources. Airstrikes have been launched at a steady operational tempo, but Bacon's argument is that airpower "cannot substitute for the instruments that convert tactical pressure into strategic effect," which includes "a capable local force, a state consistently able to provide core functions for its citizens, and a mediator to reconcile the political divisions and focus attention on the two-pronged threat."

A more significant divergence in threat perception between the U.S. National Security Strategy and this volume lies in the position of terrorism vis-à-vis great power competition. In Jadoon's chapter, it becomes clear that terrorism and great power competition have become inextricably linked and impossible to disaggregate in South Asia, where militant groups spark interstate rivalry, as demonstrated by the India-Pakistan crisis of May 2025, the Pakistan-Taliban conflict, and competition over Balochistan's mineral resources. Similarly, Aaron Zelin points out that jihadi groups have learned to operate in the seams and margins of great power competition and understand this as a legitimate strategy. *Al-Naba*, Islamic State's weekly, has narrated the unraveling of the international order as a feast of opportunities. Bergen and Sterman, in their drone-focused chapter, show that armed drone capabilities have moved from Chinese and Iranian supply chains to the hands of non-state and state actors alike.

The U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy broadly generalizes all "deradicalization" programs as pretexts for the misuse of counterterrorism powers. Non-kinetic responses to terrorist threats are eschewed entirely in the document, even as ideology is described as the center of gravity for terrorist groups. Still, a recurring theme throughout the chapters of this edited volume is concern over the counterterrorism apparatus writ large being reduced to a shell of its former self, the intelligence community redirected toward other competing priorities, the prevention infrastructure that was developed during the Global War on Terrorism dismantled, and opportunities to train the next generation of scholars and practitioners defunded, deterring smart, enterprising, and patriotic young people from entering the field in the first place. Such a myopic approach will inevitably come back to haunt us. As Daniel Byman points out in his contribution charting the analytic mistakes made in the years after the 9/11 attacks, a more suitable strategy may be one that "combines sustained intelligence and law-enforcement pressure, limited military tools against genuine havens, and a clear-eyed appreciation of terrorist weaknesses."

Overview

Brian Michael Jenkins opens this volume with what he calls a "pencil sketch," but in reality, presents a sweeping historical narrative of the Global War on Terrorism, not as a detached observer but as someone who was deeply intertwined with it from before it even started. His chapter shows the mistakes made and successes achieved by the United States in the quarter century after the 9/11 attacks. But perhaps most importantly, the chapter serves as a reminder of what happened and why – essential, since almost half of U.S. citizens today were not yet born or too young to remember that September day. As Jenkins argues, "It is our responsibility not just to remember the fallen, but to provide a narrative of why, what we did in response, and how—now a quarter century later—we reflect upon that history."

Subsequently, Daniel Byman revisits the years after the 9/11 attacks and examines the analytical errors made in interpreting their impact. His examination looks at the treatment of 9/11 as a harbinger of further attacks rather than an outlier; the trivialization of what sustained counterterrorism pressure could accomplish; the false assumption that every ungoverned space bred the next Afghanistan; the neglect of the jihadi movement's internal rivalries in threat assessments; and hubris about U.S. capacity to remake other societies. He concludes that "looking forward, the central lesson is not complacency but calibration."

Don Rassler returns to the 9/11 Commission Report and reopens the "Foresight—and Hindsight" chapter to ask what a contemporary version of that document might contain. He distills the lessons of the "sine wave" that has governed the terrorist threat and counterterrorism over the past twenty-five years, then looks ahead, surveying whether the United States is currently positioned to anticipate

what comes next in the domain of terrorism. He finds that "the past two and a half decades have also taught us to expect jihadi threat evolution and some surprises," and that it remains "important that the United States not become complacent and that it maintains, and continues to create space for, efforts that look beyond known terror threats and patterns of behavior." The current contraction of counterterrorism resources, as the threat landscape is notably diffuse and varied, has put the U.S. and its allies in a worse position to anticipate the threat.

Tricia Bacon's chapter examines Somalia's transition from a "backwater" to one of its centers of gravity by assessing the state and capabilities of Islamic State in Somalia and the al-Qaeda affiliate al-Shabaab, both worth watching for different reasons. Al-Shabaab now "carries the al-Qaeda banner on its own terms as a self-sufficient affiliate that bolsters the network rather than a subordinate sustained by it," and serves as a parallel state in parts of the country pulling in millions of dollars of revenue each year and providing basic services. Islamic State in Somalia, meanwhile, has been severely degraded and counts only a few hundred fighters, yet its *al-Karrar* office remains a fulcrum of Islamic State's global enterprise, especially its Africa operations.

Amira Jadoon's chapter lays out that the next strategic surprise in South Asia will not stem from a single militant organization but will more likely arise from the convergence of interstate conflict and militant movements embroiled in contest and collision. In her analysis, the Pakistan-Taliban war, the porous Pakistan-Iran border, the India-Pakistan crisis of May 2025, and great power competition over Balochistan's critical minerals have created myriad opportunities for groups to exploit, clash, converge, and evolve. Anticipating what comes next, she concludes, "requires analytical categories that treat state and militant behavior as endogenous to each other, rather than as separate tracks."

Assaf Moghadam turns to the changing character of political violence. His chapter identifies four trends that crystallized over the years between September 11, 2001, and October 7, 2023, and that have now converged to form a new reality: the diversification of political violence, the blurring of boundaries among its forms, the convergence of intrastate and interstate conflict, and the growing resemblance between state and non-state ways of war. While some of these trends are not entirely new, they now converge as epitomized by the Hamas attacks of October 7, which set off a regional war. Importantly, based on this changing character of political violence, Moghadam argues that "some existing organizing frameworks that currently guide U.S. strategy, including counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and even great power competition, are worthy of reevaluation." Indeed, "U.S. policy should be driven by frameworks that emphasize capabilities and behavior: how actors fight, rather than how we label them."

Peter Bergen and David Sterman trace back the use of drones from a near-American monopoly to a technology now in the hands of different types of state and non-state actors, as the platforms have become a cheap and accessible good. As their case studies demonstrate, the rationale and political conditions that led to armed drone adoption can vary greatly. By showing these different adoption patterns, they show that "failure to accurately assess the protean nature of terrorist and other threats involving drones could open the United States and its partners up to significant surprise attacks."

Aaron Y. Zelin closes the volume with the thesis that the jihadi movement today, despite ongoing counterterrorism pressure, has remained internally resilient even as Western governments have strategically deprioritized it. He traces Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and their affiliates expanding steadily while receding from the threat perceptions of many countries. Zelin argues that these groups have learned to take advantage of great power competition, finding opportunities in the unraveling of the international order. At the same time, he describes in detail the disassembly of the counterterrorism architecture and the erosion of institutional memory as the old guard of counterterrorism experts retires and institutions are dismantled in favor of other national security priorities. Indeed, as Zelin observes, "budgets can be restored in a single appropriations cycle. Knowledge cannot." He concludes by making the case for a "sustainable floor" rather than another "boom-and-bust cycle."

The 2026 U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy and the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy will one day perhaps be approached with the same puzzled interest that terrorism analysts may sense today when looking at the 1997 Strategy. How did the threat perception and a metastasizing terrorist threat diverge this much? The chapters that follow measure the threat, at a moment it can still inform policy rather than explain a surprise post hoc.

Colin P. Clarke is the Executive Director of The Soufan Center, where his research focuses on transnational terrorism, geopolitics, and international security.

Clara Broekaert is a Research Analyst at The Soufan Center. She studies terrorism and conflict.

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1

A Brief Introduction to the Global War on Terrorism

Brian Michael Jenkins

Abstract

For Americans, the war between al-Qaeda and the United States began on September 11, 2001. This chapter is about what happened on that morning 25 years ago and the long war that followed. The Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) was a sprawling conflict of overlapping campaigns on a mosaic of battlefields. Operations involved different combinations of allies, newly-fielded national armies, and local non-state actors. The U.S. started with narrow objectives, which quickly broadened into a mission to re-create societies, build nations, and re-order the world. Initial military operations were successful but were followed by protracted conflicts. As public support declined, priority shifted to getting out. Clearly, the terrorist campaign would make no distinction between the frontline and the home front. Defending the homeland would be part of the GWOT. The primary objective of America's response to 9/11 was to prevent further large-scale attacks on U.S. soil. By that criterion alone, the effort may be considered a success. Many factors account for the inability of al-Qaeda and its jihadi successors to carry out further large-scale attacks in the U.S., even as they were able to do so elsewhere. Security and surveillance increased. Watch lists were created. Improved intelligence collection, analysis, and sharing enabled authorities to foil more than 80 percent of the jihadi terrorist plots. Nonetheless, the threat remains. Jihadis are currently focused on local insurgencies but are always opportunistic.

The Beginning

The phone rang shortly before 6:00 a.m. California time. The urgent voice on the line commanded, "Turn on your television — now!" I did so and watched as smoke rose from the World Trade Center's North Tower.

"What do you think?" the voice asked.

"Terrorism," I responded. "There will be more."

Moments later, I watched the second plane slice into the South Tower. Terrorists with these capabilities thought in multiples. Synchronized hijackings, multiple bombings of aircraft, and near-simultaneous attacks on embassies in different cities demonstrated prowess. Terrorism is performative violence.

A half-hour later, a third jet crashed into the Pentagon. Then, just after 10 a.m. on the East Coast, the newscaster announced that a fourth plane had crashed into a field in Pennsylvania. I thought there might be six planes — half the number of commercial airliners jihadis planned to sabotage in a 1995 plot, Operation Bojinka, uncovered in the Philippines. We later learned that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed's plan called for five planes, but he was short a pilot.

An Idea on Terrorists' Minds for Decades

September 11 was a brilliant sunny day on the East Coast. It had to be. For the plan to succeed, the pilots had to see the targets on the horizon. Immediately after 9/11, some U.S. officials said that no one could have predicted such an event, but 9/11 did not come out of the blue. The 9/11 Commission labeled the 9/11 attacks "a failure of imagination." The failure was *ours*, not the terrorists'. The scenario had been on their minds for decades.

In a 1983 interview on national television, I noted that "there have been cases in the past in which hijackers threatened to crash airliners into major buildings."[1] It happened in a 1972 domestic hijacking. The hijackers — not terrorists, but ordinary criminals — threatened to shoot the pilots and crash the plane into the nuclear facilities at Oak Ridge, Tennessee.[2] It was this episode that persuaded the U.S. government to mandate 100 percent passenger screening. In a 1977 incident, a hijacker shot the pilot and co-pilot, causing the plane to crash.[3]

At a 1989 International Conference on Aviation Security in Herzliya, Israel, I raised this specter again. "The nightmare of governments is that suicidal terrorists will hijack a commercial airliner and, by killing or replacing its crew, crash into a city or some vital facility."[4] I mentioned the scenario again in 1996 testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee. By then, more plots had been uncovered.[5]

In 1987, a former employee of the airline shot the pilot, co-pilot, and likely himself on a commercial flight in California, causing the plane to go into a steep dive, crashing and killing all on board.[6] In 1993, an FBI informant reported that Islamist terrorists had contemplated flying a hijacked airliner into the American embassy

in Egypt.[7] In April 1994, an off-duty pilot riding as a passenger on a cargo flight attacked the flight crew and attempted to crash the plane into the FedEx headquarters in Memphis.[8] In December 1994, Islamist extremists who hijacked an Air France jet in Algiers were reportedly overheard talking in the cockpit about crashing the plane into a landmark in Paris.[9]

In October 1996, U.S. intelligence reportedly received information that Iranian extremists planned to hijack a Japanese airliner and crash it into Tel Aviv. Another intelligence source reported in August 1998 that Arab terrorists planned to fly an explosives-laden plane into the World Trade Center.[10] And in September, U.S. intelligence received information that bin Laden was planning to fly an explosives-filled plane into a U.S. airport.[11]

A report in November 1998 indicated that an Islamist terrorist group planned to crash a plane into a government ceremony at Kemal Atatürk's tomb in Türkiye.[12] And in June 2001, Egyptian intelligence reportedly intercepted a communication from bin Laden indicating he wanted to carry out an attack involving an explosives-filled airplane targeting world leaders at the G8 Summit in Genoa, Italy.[13] The reported plots generally were dismissed as far-fetched, which they were, but even if aspirational, they were evidence, even as a series of unconnected data points, that terrorists were thinking about the scenario.

According to the 9/11 Commission Report, in late 1998, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed accepted Osama bin Laden's invitation to join al-Qaeda. Sometime in early 1999, bin Laden told him the "planes operation" to crash multiple hijacked airliners was a go.[14]

Thousands Were Saved

The U.S. did not foil the 9/11 plot, but the World Trade Center was better prepared thanks to the mitigation measures put in place after the 1993 bombing of the Center. In retrospect, that incident turned out to be a blessing. Immediately after the bombing, Kroll Associates, a private investigative and security consulting firm, was asked by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey to help implement new security measures.

I was charged with leading a "red team" analysis of potential future threat scenarios. We avoided probabilistic predictions, but divided the scenarios into three distinct categories: more likely, low-casualty events; less likely, deadlier events; and unlikely, but still possible events that could threaten the integrity of the structure. The first scenario in this third set was a plane crashing into one of the towers. In 1945, after all, a B-25 bomber flying in a thick fog accidentally crashed into the

Empire State Building.[15]

Charlie Maikish, the Director and CEO of the World Trade Center at the time of the 1993 bombing, demanded that the security specialists, engineers, and architects develop a response for whatever the red team produced. The security people pushed back on the plane crash scenario — the World Trade Center could hardly mount missile batteries on the roofs of the towers.

Maikish was adamant. The World Trade Center might **not** be able to prevent a plane from crashing into one of the towers, but at least it could do a better job getting people out of harm's way than it did in the '93 bombing. In that case, it took more than seven hours to evacuate the building as people groped their way down through the pitch-black, smoke-filled stairwells. They emerged from the structure, many looking like coal miners coming off of a long shift. Most of the thousand injuries were from smoke inhalation.[16]

Emergency lighting was installed. Fluorescent tape marked the handrails. The stairwells were positively pressurized to keep smoke out. Most important, in my view, tenants of the towers designated evacuation marshals who were required to conduct regular evacuation drills involving all employees.[17] People did not have to descend to the lobby from the 95th floor as they did in February 1993. They walked down a couple of flights, then took the elevator back to work.

Initially, we had no idea how many had been killed when the towers collapsed on 9/11. No one counted them as they fled. At that time in the morning, the towers normally would have had 15,000 to 20,000 occupants. The actual number was estimated to be 17,400. Officials grimly requested 11,000 body bags.[18] But as more survivors were safely located in hospitals or at home in the days that followed, the anticipated death toll steadily dropped. By September 14, the number of missing individuals had been reduced to approximately 5,000. It then rose as reports accumulated, peaking near 6,900 in late September, before falling below 5,000 in early October and to about 3,900 by late November. It was not until mid-2002 that it dropped below 2,800. The final death toll at the World Trade Center was 2,753: 2,192 were occupants of the towers, 147 were passengers and crew of the two hijacked airliners, and 414 were emergency responders, including 343 firefighters, 23 NYPD officers, and 37 Port Authority Police and others who rushed into the building to save people. Almost every person below the floors where the airplanes struck the towers escaped. Tragically, those above were cut off and died. Images of trapped occupants desperately jumping to their certain death are forever etched in Americans' collective memory.

The South Tower collapsed much faster than the North Tower, which was hit first,

because the South Tower was struck at a much lower floor and thus buckled under the greater structural weight above the point of impact. Remarkably, approximately 15,000 people successfully evacuated the North Tower in less than one hour and 42 minutes after it had been hit, and the South Tower in just 73 minutes after the first plane hit the North Tower — an extraordinary achievement, due in no small measure to the insistence of the World Trade Center Director. The number of Americans killed on 9/11 exceeded that of Pearl Harbor. Not since the battles of the Civil War had the country seen this scale of bloodshed on American soil. We knew it was terrorism, but this was war.

No More Than a Pencil Sketch

The Soufan Center asked me to write a brief history of the conflict that began 25 years ago on September 11, 2001 — a daunting task. Given the complexity of the subject and limitations of space, this essay can be no more than a pencil sketch of histories written or yet to be.

The Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) is a sprawling conflict of overlapping campaigns on a mosaic of battlefields over the last quarter century. It defies a tidy chronology. Military operations against al-Qaeda and the Taliban began in Afghanistan and lasted until a disastrous withdrawal 20 years later. Meanwhile, the U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003, withdrew eight years later, but returned in 2014 to conduct operations against a new jihadi challenge. That campaign spread into Syria and destroyed the Islamic State's proto-state in March 2019. The full U.S. withdrawal from Syria was completed in April 2026, and U.S. troops are set to leave Iraq by the end of September 2026. During this period, military operations were also conducted against jihadi organizations in peripheral theaters in Pakistan, the Philippines, Somalia, Yemen, the Sahel, and Central Africa.

Operations involved different combinations of allies, including NATO and other countries fighting together in Afghanistan, the "Coalition of the Willing" in Iraq, and U.S.-led coalition forces in Operation Inherent Resolve against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Over time, newly formed national armies in Afghanistan and Iraq gradually assumed a larger share of the fighting. Local non-state forces also participated, including the Northern Alliance and Eastern Alliance in Afghanistan, the Sunni tribesmen of the Awakening Councils ("Sons of Iraq") and later the Kurdish Peshmerga in Iraq, and the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian Democratic Forces in Syria. Initial military operations were successful in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, but in both cases, toppling the government was followed by intensifying insurgencies. There were some large-scale urban battles against Iraqi insurgents in 2004 and Islamic State between 2014 and 2018, but most of the

fighting involved thousands of smaller tactical engagements.

There are excellent histories of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Syria's civil war, the rise and fall of al-Qaeda, the emergence of Islamic State and destruction of its caliphate, and the struggles in Southeast Asia and Africa. But the Global War on Terrorism has yet to find its Thucydides. The ancient Greek historian, who had served as an Athenian general during the Peloponnesian War, chronicled the complex diplomacy, battles, and political maneuvers of the first 20 years of the 27-year conflict between alliances led by Athens and Sparta.[19] The war continued for another seven years after his death.

A number of authors have given us the first volumes of a complete history of the Global War on Terrorism.[20] There is also a vast literature of personal accounts by Presidents Bush and Obama, members of their cabinets and advisers, the generals who commanded the forces, journalists, scholars, and soldiers.

It will take decades for the history offices of the U.S. armed forces to replicate the massive official histories of World War II — the Army's history runs to 79 volumes, the Navy history produced 15 volumes, and the Air Force seven volumes.[21] An excellent start has been made by E. J. Degen and Mark Reardon in *Modern War in an Ancient Land*, which relies heavily on oral history.[22]

The other side in the Global War on Terrorism has not produced memoirs in the traditional sense, but the leaders of al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and its successors issued hundreds of public declarations, strategic documents, and other texts, which reflect mindsets, operational doctrines, and assessments of the situation. However, the fact that nearly all of al-Qaeda's and Islamic State's leaders were killed in the conflict means that we will not see firsthand reflections like those written by German or Japanese military leaders after World War II or Viet Cong and Democratic Republic of Vietnam leaders after the Vietnam War.

I do not claim to be a detached observer. This commentary includes personal recollections reflecting decades of research and involvement in security issues and policy-related research.

What Was the War About?

For Americans, the war between al-Qaeda and the United States began precisely at 8:46 a.m. Eastern Daylight Time when the first plane struck the World Trade Center, but the attack did not come out of a brilliant blue sky. For bin Laden, the "clashing of swords began centuries ago" and would continue "until Judgment Day."[23]

What was the war about? It may seem like an odd question to the veterans of military campaigns, the intelligence services, homeland security, and other government offices, federal investigators and local law enforcement, as well as the analysts and researchers who have spent the past quarter century fighting against those responsible for the 9/11 attacks, their successors, affiliates, and self-proclaimed acolytes.

But on this 25th anniversary of 9/11, a generation will have passed. Nearly 40 percent of America's population today were not yet born or are too young to possess any personal memory of what happened that day and how it profoundly changed our nation. The image of the collapsing towers remains with us, but the reasons are already enveloped by the mists of time. It is our responsibility not just to remember the fallen, but to provide a narrative of why, what we did in response, and how — now a quarter century later — we reflect upon that history.

From its perspective, al-Qaeda declared war on August 23, 1996, when Osama bin Laden issued a lengthy screed entitled "Declaration of Jihad Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holiest Sites."[24] Jihadis reject modern country names as artificial constructs — to bin Laden, the description meant Saudi Arabia. The declaration defined the enemy variously as the "infidels," "the Jewish-Christian alliance," "Jewish-Crusaders," or "America and its allies." In his view, the war was a response to a centuries-long history of aggression that inflicted massacres, bloodshed, tribulations, injustice, iniquity, oppression, and suffering on Muslims, culminating in what bin Laden saw as the worst catastrophe inflicted upon the Muslims since the death of the Prophet — the American military occupation of the land of the two holiest sites in Islam.

American soldiers had arrived in Saudi Arabia in 1990 following Iraq's annexation of Kuwait to protect the Kingdom against a feared Iraqi invasion. This incensed bin Laden, who had offered to defend the Kingdom with his own army of mujahideen veterans of the Afghan resistance. Arab fighters, bin Laden claimed, had achieved an historic victory by driving Soviet forces out of Afghanistan. American infidels now had to be expelled from the Arabian Peninsula by whatever means necessary. As bin Laden declared, "Terrorizing you [Americans], while you are carrying arms on our land, is legitimate, reasonable, and morally demanded duty."[25]

"Terrorizing" meant large-scale bombings, initially of military targets but then broadened to include both military personnel and civilians. In the Declaration, bin Laden pointed to the explosions in Riyadh and Khobar as warning signs of

the destructive torrent the Saudi kingdom would face. The first was a reference to al-Qaeda's 1995 bombing of an American military assistance office in Riyadh, killing seven, including five Americans.[26] This is believed to have been the opening shot of al-Qaeda's terrorist campaign. Khobar referred to the 1996 bombing of Khobar Towers, a building housing U.S. Air Force personnel, 19 of whom were killed and 498 injured in the attack. It was not an al-Qaeda operation, but was carried out by Saudi Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed rival of al-Qaeda.

In February 1998, the 'World Islamic Front' issued another declaration of war.[27] Signed by bin Laden and jihadi leaders from Egypt, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, this declaration broadened the scope of the war by specifically calling for "the killing of Americans and their allies, civilians and military," to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem and the holy places in Saudi Arabia, and end American military aggression in Iraq, which was then under U.S. sanctions.[28] The February declaration was followed in August by simultaneous suicide attacks on American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, killing a total of 224 people and injuring 4,500. In 1999, authorities thwarted an ambitious multi-part terrorist plot to carry out attacks in three countries timed to coincide with the 2000 millennium.[29]

In October 2000, al-Qaeda operatives rammed an explosives-filled boat into the side of the *USS Cole,* an American destroyer at anchor in Aden, killing 17 Americans and nearly sinking the vessel. An investigation of the attack on the *Cole* revealed that the same terrorists had attempted to bomb the *USS The Sullivans* in January 2000, but their boat immediately sank under the weight of the explosives. The explosives were recovered and reused in the attack on the *Cole*.[30] Like other commissions before it, the commission reviewing the attack pointed to intelligence failures and recommended prioritizing resources for the collection and analysis against the terrorist threat.[31] By that time, preparations for the 9/11 attacks were well underway.

This Time Was Different

To most Americans, the 9/11 attacks made the case for war. No further provocation was necessary — al-Qaeda had to be destroyed. Not punished. *Destroyed.* A network news producer and friend whom I knew as a gentle liberal soul told me it was time to bomb some Arab cities to make the point, "terrorism will not go unpunished." I was surprised at the source of the comment, but not the tenor of the sentiment — emotions ran high. I had in mind colder calculations for a relentless pursuit that would transform al-Qaeda from a terrorist threat to an object lesson.

In response to previous terrorist attacks and plots, the U.S. had carried out retaliatory attacks — against Libya in 1986,[32] against Iran in 1987,[33] against Iraq in

1993,[34] and against al-Qaeda in 1998.[35] But those were one-off attacks. Terrorists or state actors would carry out an attack. We would respond, then wait. In an essay published on September 16, 2001, I argued: "this time it is different."[36]

Immediate action was required to disrupt any further attacks already in the pipeline, capture or kill al-Qaeda's leaders and disperse their followers, dismantle the organization, and degrade its operational capabilities. That would require a national effort. Most importantly, it could not be another one-time attack — it had to be a continuing and fully-resourced campaign. And if the U.S. was going to send young men and women into battle, it owed them the official support of the nation expressed through its elected representatives — a declaration of war or its equivalent.

Declarations of war were generally reserved for war against state actors—the last time the U.S. formally declared war was during World War II. But the U.S. had a long history of congressional authorizations to use military force. In 1802, Congress authorized President Jefferson to conduct military operations against the pirates of Tripoli. In 1815, President Madison was authorized to conduct military operations against the pirates of Algiers, and in 1819, President Monroe was authorized to suppress pirates in the Caribbean.[37]

Twentieth-century authorizations included military operations to protect Formosa (Taiwan) in 1955, to deal with Communist aggression in the Middle East in 1957, to support South Vietnam in 1964, to keep American forces in Lebanon in 1983, and to conduct military operations against Iraq in 1991.[38]

The Initial Counterattack

President Bush first used the term "war on terrorism" in remarks on September 16, 2001.[39] In his subsequent address to Congress, he spoke about the "war on terror."[40] The "Global War on Terrorism" or GWOT became the official name soon after. The president envisaged the term "war" as encompassing more than military action. It included intelligence efforts, diplomacy, military operations, law enforcement, as well as other measures to improve domestic security and resiliency.

Stopping al-Qaeda was the most urgent imperative. Events moved swiftly. Congress quickly authorized the president to use military force. In a speech to Congress and the nation nine days after 9/11, President Bush delivered an ultimatum demanding that the Taliban immediately hand over the leaders of al-Qaeda and every terrorist in their support structure — or "share their fate."[41] When the Taliban refused, military operations commenced on October 7 with U.S. bombing al-Qaeda and Taliban targets while ground forces of the Northern Alliance — a

coalition of local Afghan militias already at war with bin Laden — assisted by CIA officers and U.S. and British Special Forces, advanced on the ground.

Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, fell on November 13. Kandahar, Afghanistan's second largest city and a Taliban stronghold, surrendered on December 6. The most serious loss suffered by al-Qaeda was not territory, but the death or capture of senior leaders.[42] In the first six months of the American offensive, al-Qaeda lost 16 of its 25 key leaders.[43] Bin Laden himself escaped to a hideout in Pakistan, where for the next ten years he continued to communicate with al-Qaeda operatives and allies around the world. In Afghanistan, the Taliban and remnants of al-Qaeda continued to fight as insurgents against American forces who deployed to Afghanistan in early 2002.

The scale of the 9/11 attacks horrified the world. It was not simply America's problem. The citizens of 90 countries died in the assault. Al-Qaeda posed a threat to all nations. This gave momentum to U.S. diplomatic efforts. For the first time since its creation in 1949, NATO invoked Article 5 of the treaty, which declared that an attack on one member was an attack on all. Other countries offered immediate assistance. A legal superstructure was already in place.

The U.S. had been leading a global project to combat international terrorism since the late 1960s. That effort included international diplomacy to construct a corpus of international treaties to outlaw specific terrorist tactics and targeting, increase intelligence sharing, and provide military and police training and assistance to improve counterterrorist capabilities abroad.

The GWOT did not replace efforts to combat the broader phenomenon of terrorism. The GWOT focused specifically on those responsible for the 9/11 attacks and those who supported or protected them. Combating international terrorism and the more narrowly defined GWOT would continue concurrently. However, the GWOT quickly grew in scope and ambition.

The U.S. also moved expeditiously to disrupt al-Qaeda's sophisticated financial network. Terrorist operations themselves comprised only a small percentage of al-Qaeda's expenditures — the 9/11 attacks cost an estimated $400,000 to $500,000.[44] The support apparatus and logistical infrastructure accounted for the larger share. In 2001, the organization had an estimated budget of $30 million a year to operate its training camps, acquire weapons, and support operatives abroad.[45] Reducing that would subsequently attenuate al-Qaeda's ability to continue its terrorist campaign. By the end of October 2001, the U.S. had frozen nearly $100 million in assets belonging to individuals or entities connected with al-Qaeda.[46]

The biggest achievement, however, was the creation of a global counterterrorism intelligence network. This extended beyond America's traditional allies to include other countries that did not routinely share information with the U.S. Al-Qaeda incentivized the exchange. In the months following 9/11, relying on still active operatives, alumni of its training camps, and jihadi allies, the group carried out attacks in India, Indonesia, Kenya, Kuwait, Morocco, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and Yemen. The attacks prompted local crackdowns and greater international cooperation.

The continuing manhunt and closer scrutiny of communications, transfers of funds, and movements of people made al-Qaeda's operating environment more hostile, gradually eroding the group's capabilities. At the same time, however, the list of enemies and targets expanded.

The List of Terrorist Foes Soon Expanded

The GWOT officially targeted al-Qaeda and those who carried out the 9/11 attacks, aided, or harbored them. In his September 20, 2001, speech before Congress, President Bush declared, "Our war on terror begins with al-Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated."[47] He likely meant groups that had assisted or could assist al-Qaeda.

Intelligence estimates assessed that by 9/11, al-Qaeda had trained as many as 20,000 recruits from more than 50 countries.[48] Thousands had already returned before the U.S. launched its counterattack in Afghanistan. Thousands more scattered after the attack. Tracking them down to prevent further terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda's jihadi allies would by itself require a massive, coordinated global campaign.

In his 2002 State of the Union address four months after the 9/11 attacks, President Bush introduced the term "Axis of Evil" to describe three governments suspected of sponsoring terrorism and seeking weapons of mass destruction—Iraq, Iran, and North Korea.[49] This broadened the scope of the GWOT from a campaign targeting al-Qaeda to a much more ambitious effort targeting state actors as well as terrorist groups.

Then, in a meeting I attended at the United States Institute of Peace in Washington, D.C. in September 2002, the Deputy Secretary of State was asked if Hezbollah would also be a target in the GWOT. He responded that Hezbollah had American blood on its hands and would eventually be targeted. "We will take all of the terrorist groups down, one after another." His comment expanded the

GWOT beyond al-Qaeda. Hezbollah was not a Salafi-jihadi group or an ally of Salafi-jihadis. Did he really mean *all* terrorist groups? I wrote in my notes, "We are looking at a very long war."

The list of foes grew through acquisition and spread of the jihadi enterprise. In the first decade after 9/11, the U.S. added 23 groups. Another 30 were added in the following decade.[50] Some were groups espousing jihadi ideology active in other countries whose cooperation the U.S. sought in sharing intelligence. Others were affiliates or progeny of al-Qaeda or emerged during the resistance to U.S. operations in Iraq. Still others were groups in Africa and Asia pledging allegiance to Islamic State, which emerged during the Syrian civil war.

Between 2018 and 2020, the U.S. conducted counterterrorism operations in 85 countries, which dropped to 78 countries between 2021 and 2023.[51] Missions include direct combat and air and drone strikes, special operations, counter-insurrection assistance, support for local irregular forces, military training exercises, and intelligence sharing. This count does not include CIA paramilitary operations.

Driven by Fear

Between the emergence of terrorism as an international phenomenon in the late 1960s and 9/11, contemporary terrorism had escalated by two orders of magnitude. The worst incidents in the 1970s caused tens of fatalities. This ascended to hundreds in the 1980s. On September 11, 2001, fatalities ascended to the thousands. Authorities and analysts extrapolated 9/11 to future terrorist attacks in which tens — even hundreds — of thousands might die.[52]

Casualties on this scale could be achieved only with biological or nuclear weapons. The linkage between terrorists and weapons of mass destruction was not new. Robert Oppenheimer, the director of Los Alamos in World War II, worried that non-state actors might someday fabricate a nuclear device.[53] The Clinton administration worried aloud about "bioterrorism."[54] The National Commission on Terrorism (the Bremer Commission) in 2000 recommended that "the government must do more to prepare for" a "terrorist attack involving a biological agent, deadly chemicals, or nuclear or radiological material."[55] Two other national commissions that began work in 1999, the Deutch Commission and Gilmore Commission, both voiced similar concerns.[56] In June 2002, the president went further and, in a speech at West Point, warned that the U.S. would take preemptive military action against terrorists and hostile states developing weapons of mass destruction before they could attack.[57] The "Bush Doctrine," as it came to be called, laid the ground for the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

The 9/11 attacks fundamentally altered assessments of plausibility. Concerns became presumptions. Suspicions would be treated as certainties. No scenario could be dismissed as far-fetched.[58] The foreboding atmosphere had a profound effect on policy.

U.S. intelligence knew by 1998 that bin Laden had tried to acquire uranium for nuclear weapons.[59] Material at al-Qaeda training camps overrun in Afghanistan indicated al-Qaeda experiments in chemical and biological weapons and interest in nuclear weapons, although upon close examination they also indicated that al-Qaeda had neither the ingredients nor the know-how to fabricate a nuclear device.[60] An intelligence informant provided alarming information in October 2001 that al-Qaeda had a Russian nuclear bomb hidden in New York City — it turned out to be false.[61] At the same time, authorities were attempting to identify the source of letters contaminated with deadly anthrax being sent to a media target in Florida and senators in Washington. The FBI's investigation did not identify the sole suspect until 2008.[62]

The 9/11 attacks and subsequent events led to Vice President Cheney's so-called "One Percent Doctrine," which argued that if there was even a one percent chance that terrorists had acquired weapons of mass destruction, the U.S. must act as if it were a certainty.[63]

The Invasion of Iraq

Within days of the 9/11 attacks, officials in the Bush administration began pushing to invade Iraq. President Bush himself in November 2001 reportedly told Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld to get General Tommy Franks, the commander-in-chief of the U.S. Central Command, looking at the military requirements for removing Saddam Hussein.[64] Rumsfeld relayed the request to Franks even as he was in the middle of directing military operations against al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

With the deployment of additional U.S. and allied forces in 2002 and the first steps toward the creation of a new national Afghan army, the situation in Afghanistan appeared to be under control, although low-level guerrilla activity continued. U.S. attention and resources shifted to Iraq.

The Bush administration portrayed the U.S. intervention in Iraq as part of the GWOT, although Iraq had no actual connection to al-Qaeda or the 9/11 attacks. The principal reason for military operations against Iraq was U.S. suspicion that Iraq was actively engaged in developing weapons of mass destruction, but the evidence was mixed, and in some cases, simply wrong. Unlike the case with Af-

ghanistan, there was less domestic and international support for what seemed to be a war of choice instead of necessity.

The U.S., supported by a coalition of the willing, including Australia, the UK, and recent NATO member Poland, invaded Iraq on March 20, 2003. Along with these four, six other nations — the Czech Republic, Denmark, Hungary, Italy, Spain, and Portugal — signed the "letter of eight" endorsing the invasion but not committing troops. U.S. forces reached Baghdad in just 19 days, and by the end of April, major combat operations were over. However, widespread looting soon followed. The disbanding of the Iraqi army and purging of Iraqi government employees in May put hundreds of thousands of Iraqi soldiers—armed but unemployed—loose on the streets. An organized insurgency began almost immediately.

The U.S. Army's planners had argued for a larger initial ground force, not to defeat the Iraqi army but to maintain control of the country after the fall of its government.[65] That was rejected — some in the U.S. government had been led to believe, by Iraqi proponents of the invasion, that U.S. troops would be welcomed as liberators and that most U.S. forces would be home by summer. As a result, the U.S. went in with a smaller force than the army recommended. Even with preplanned reinforcements, it was unable to maintain control of the situation, which steadily deteriorated into a complex sectarian civil war between Shia militias and Sunni insurgents.

Initially, the insurgents were mainly secular nationalists; however, reinforced by foreign fighters and funding from abroad as well as ransoms from local kidnappings, Sunni extremists led by Jordanian street thug Abu Musab al-Zarqawi increasingly dominated the resistance. [66] In 2004, Zarqawi pledged his allegiance to al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) targeted Iraq's Shia community, the occupation forces, and foreigners, but it also treated Iraqi Sunnis with extreme brutality. [67] The unprotected Sunni population also had virtually no defenses against the Shia militias, backed by Iran.

By 2006, the situation was desperate, with the country collapsing into chaos. The U.S. was able to locate and kill Zarqawi with an airstrike in June. Later in the year, it began arming Sunni volunteers led by tribal leaders in Anbar Province who had turned against AQI. The Sons of Iraq program commanded more than 60,000 Iraqis on contract and 12,000 volunteers in 2007.[68] To support the Iraqi security forces, the U.S. sent in a further 30,000 troops in early 2007.

Getting Out of Iraq

Arming the Sunni tribes and the American troop surge altered the military bal-

ance in Iraq and reduced the violence, allowing the U.S. to quickly return to the pre-surge level. The Obama administration, which took office in January 2009, continued the withdrawals. By 2011, the U.S. troop level was down to 47,000, less than a third of its high point in early 2008.[69]

According to the original status of forces agreement (SOFA) that provided immunity to American military personnel in Iraq, the withdrawal of U.S. forces was to be completed by 2011. There had been some discussions about leaving a residual force of 5,000 American military personnel in Iraq, but Iraq's parliament refused to extend the SOFA.[70] The reasons were complicated. The security situation had improved. Iraq's economy had recovered. It fielded an army of nearly 300,000 and a police force of more than 300,000. Another factor was that eight years of violence and what the Iraqis saw as military occupation had not endeared the American military to the Iraqi people — it rarely does. Instead of applying pressure to force Baghdad into a new agreement, President Obama took advantage of the impasse to withdraw all remaining forces.

This American withdrawal, however, also deprived the United States of leverage over the government it had brought to power. The United States had hoped to see an end to sectarian divisions. Instead of integrating the Sunni volunteers into the regular army, Iraq's Shia-dominated government viewed them as a security threat to the country's Shia majority.

The government kept none of its promised reforms. Corruption increased. Competent military commanders were replaced by cronies of the prime minister. Corrupt officers put 50,000 ghost soldiers on the army's payroll, sold vital military supplies, and mistreated their own men.[71] These failures would become significant when the Islamic State returned to Iraq in 2014.

The Fall of Afghanistan

While the U.S. was preoccupied with Iraq between 2003 and 2007, the Taliban had made a steady comeback. By 2008, nearly 80,000 U.S., NATO, and other foreign military troops were deployed in Afghanistan.[72] They served under two commands devoted to counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and nation-building missions. The forces did not suffice to prevent the situation from deteriorating dramatically in 2008, which saw a sharp increase in Taliban attacks and expanding control over the countryside.

Washington was actively reviewing the situation in 2008, but President Bush held off making decisions that would commit the incoming Obama administration to a specific course of action. President Obama himself viewed Afghanistan as the *good* war that had been neglected compared to the costlier war in Iraq, from which he favored U.S. withdrawal. The situation demanded action.

The war in Iraq had drawn resources away from the worsening situation in Afghanistan. To prevent the Taliban from regaining power, Obama immediately agreed to send another 17,000 troops to Afghanistan to stabilize the situation. Later in 2009, the president agreed to raise the troop level again to nearly 100,000 troops, roughly double the 2008 level, but at the same time he directed that they be used primarily to train and support the Afghan National Security Forces and that their withdrawal would begin in 2011.[73]

Obama also wanted to replace bombing with greater reliance on special operations and targeted killings, especially via drone strikes, which increased significantly during his presidency. The effort culminated in May 2011 with the killing of Osama bin Laden at his hideout in Abbottabad, Pakistan. The death of the man who ordered the 9/11 attacks was viewed as the achievement of a major goal in the GWOT, a symbolic turning point that enabled the U.S. to start withdrawals. Force levels came down fast, and by the end of 2014, fewer than 11,000 U.S. forces remained in Afghanistan to train Afghan forces and conduct special counterterrorist operations. The president had hoped to have the remaining troops out by the end of 2015, but the security situation, which remained perilous, persuaded him to keep approximately 8,400 troops in Afghanistan, leaving his successor to make the final decision.

Donald Trump campaigned in 2016 on a promise to end the *forever* wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Ending the wars meant getting Americans out. In 2018, President Trump appointed Zalmay Khalilzad as the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, instructing him to negotiate the withdrawal of the remaining American forces. Khalilzad was a seasoned hand in the region. Born in Afghanistan, he came to the U.S. as a high school exchange student and went on to earn his doctorate at the University of Chicago.[74] From 2003 to 2009, he served as the American ambassador to Afghanistan, Iraq, and then the UN.

The negotiations took place in Doha, Qatar. As Khalilzad later described it, his mission

"was to find a diplomatic solution that brings an end to America's longest war; reduces the burden on the U.S. military and U.S. taxpayers; provides the best chance for a

sovereign…Afghanistan at peace with itself and…respectful of the human rights of all its citizens; and ensures terrorists can never again use Afghan soil to threaten the security of the United States and our allies."[75]

The priority clearly was getting out. As Khalilzad himself said, "his mandate was based on the assumption that there is no viable path to military victory in Afghanistan."[76] Public support had declined. In 2002, shortly after the start of the war, 83 percent of Americans said they approved of the military campaign. By 2018, 39 percent of all Americans thought the initial decision had been wrong, and nearly half thought that the U.S. had mostly failed in achieving its goals.[77]

This paralleled the trajectory of Americans who had turned against the Vietnam War. At the time of the Tonkin Resolution in 1964, 85 percent of Americans supported the decision.[78] By 1968, 46 percent of Americans thought that sending troops to Vietnam had been a mistake.

Fearing that the long war on terrorism had compromised the ability of the U.S. armed forces to perform other critical military missions, the U.S. military also wanted to refocus its efforts. As the 2018 National Defense Strategy said, "Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security."[79] Counterterrorism missions in the form of training foreign capabilities through security cooperation, special operations, and targeted killings would continue. But the counterinsurgency component that had put American troops on the ground to wage protracted war against Taliban and Iraqi resistance fighters was done.[80]

An agreement was ultimately reached between the Taliban and the U.S. However, no officials of the Afghan government had been present at the negotiations as the Taliban refused to sit down with representatives of what they regarded as a puppet regime. Ambassador Khalilzad said that he shuttled between Doha and Kabul to keep Afghan officials informed and that they agreed to every point. Nonetheless, their exclusion from direct participation in the talks and the existence of secret clauses fomented uncertainty and suspicion, which may have contributed to the Afghan government's rapid collapse in August 2021.

Signed in February 2020, the Doha agreement listed four obligations: the U.S. would withdraw its troops. During the withdrawal, the Taliban would refrain from attacking U.S. forces and major cities while the U.S. would refrain from offensive strikes against the Taliban. The Taliban and the Afghan government would directly negotiate a permanent ceasefire and permanent political arrangement. The Taliban also promised that postwar Afghanistan would respect human rights and not become a launching pad for renewed terrorist attacks on the U.S. [81]

Critics of the agreement included General John Allen, who led U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan from 2011 to 2013. He considered the Taliban untrustworthy, unwilling to abandon a rigid ideology incompatible with human rights, and incapable of maintaining the internal discipline necessary to implement any agreement. He doubted that even if they wanted to, Taliban leaders could control violence by their own forces. The immediate release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners — another provision of the agreement — would, in his view, only lead to increased violence.[82] Others in the U.S. saw the agreement as the best Washington could get after two decades of military and political failure.

The Taliban claims it technically abided by the agreement, even though the Taliban regime, once back in power, allowed al-Qaeda to remain in Afghanistan, including Ayman al-Zawahiri, bin Laden's successor. Although al-Zawahiri continued to provide strategic direction to al-Qaeda, there is no evidence that he planned or directed any specific terrorist attacks. The Taliban ceased targeting Americans after the agreement but escalated its attacks on Afghan forces. The group rejected any dialogue with the Afghan government, although it did conduct secret negotiations with Afghan commanders, offering money, promise of safe passage, and other incentives to ensure their surrender during its final offensive. After its takeover of the country in August 2021, the group claimed that it alone would decide how to govern and what laws to pass.

Neither President Trump, who wanted an exit from Afghanistan, nor President Biden, who had opposed U.S. counterinsurgency and state-building strategies and the 2009 troop surge, responded to the Taliban's evasions. The hard fact was that 20 years after 9/11, 70 percent of Americans opposed the continuation of U.S. involvement in the war.[83] U.S. intelligence officials estimated that the Afghan National Security Forces could defend the country for up to two years following a U.S. exit. As the Taliban advanced, this was revised down to between six and twelve months.[84] No one pretended that this was anything other than abandonment. Getting out of Afghanistan clearly took precedence over guaranteeing the country's future.

The estimates of how long the Afghan government might survive without American backup paralleled the cynical "decent interval" calculated by President Nixon and Henry Kissinger as the minimum time required between the final withdrawal of American forces from South Vietnam and the Communist takeover of the country to avoid being blamed for the defeat.[85] The U.S. withdrew in 1973. Communist forces marched into Saigon two years and three months later.

In my view, the U.S. estimate of Afghanistan's lasting power was optimistic. It

was based on counting troops and hardware while ignoring the dynamics of military collapse. The importance of the 2,500 U.S. troops remaining in Afghanistan in 2021 was more psychological than military. The announcement of America's departure persuaded many in Afghanistan's government that the U.S. had secretly agreed to betray them — the same phenomenon had occurred in Vietnam.

The advance deals between the Taliban and Afghan commanders would also come into effect. In these circumstances, Afghanistan's thousands of soldiers would make individual decisions about how best to secure their own survival and save their families.

The Arab Spring Gave New Life to al-Qaeda

The U.S. Department of Defense stopped using the term "Global War on Terrorism" in 2009.[86] Henceforth, any military operations against terrorists would be called "Overseas Contingency Operations."

In a 2013 speech at the National Defense University, President Obama described a continuing but changing terrorist threat: "Lethal yet less capable al-Qaeda affiliates, threats to diplomatic facilities and businesses abroad, homegrown extremists," something closer to "the types of attacks we faced before 9/11." The U.S. had to redefine its effort "not as a boundless 'global war on terror,' but as a series of persistent, targeted efforts to dismantle specific networks of violent extremists that threaten America."[87]

The president predicted that al-Qaeda Central was on its way to defeat and that Afghanistan would assume responsibility for its own security. He invited Congress to repeal the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) and reiterated his commitment to closing down the detention center at Guantanamo Bay. He declared that the U.S. had to "strengthen the opposition in Syria, while isolating extremist elements." [88] Events did not follow the president's preferred trajectory. Al-Qaeda Central, albeit greatly diminished, survives in an Afghanistan ruled by the Taliban. Congress refused to close down Guantanamo. Neither did it repeal the 2001 AUMF, which was used by the administration just fifteen months later as authorization to permit bombing Islamic State, a dangerous extremist element that emerged during Syria's civil war.

The civil war evolved from the Arab Spring, a wave of popular protest movements that swept across the Arab world in 2011. In al-Qaeda's view of the world, Allah, not man, is the author of events. It is the role of strategists to align themselves with God's will. Bin Laden's successor sent a message to followers praising the uprisings while claiming that al-Qaeda's 9/11 attacks weakened the U.S., compel-

ling it to abandon its autocratic allies in the Middle East. In other words, it was a victory for the jihadis.

The protests toppled the governments of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, although the power vacuum predictably led to chaos, civil war, and continuing partition in Libya and Yemen. Brutal suppression by Syria's government turned the protests into a bloody civil war that would kill half a million people and displace more than half the country's population.

Jihadi extremists soon dominated what had started as a secular rebellion. Two of the groups were rival offshoots of AQI: Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Recognizing an opportunity in the growing rebellion against the Assad regime, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of AQI, dispatched a group of its fighters from Iraq to Syria in 2011 to establish a local branch, which became Jabhat al-Nusra. As the conflict intensified, Baghdadi claimed authority over Jabhat al-Nusra, but al-Nusra was determined to maintain its independence and resisted the merger. At times, the two groups cooperated, but soon fought each other, splitting the global jihadi universe into an al-Qaeda faction and an Islamic State faction.[89]

After an offensive that saw ISIS sweep across Syria and Iraq, where it drew on Sunni hostility to an oppressive and corrupt Shia regime, al-Baghdadi proclaimed the return of the Islamic caliphate. The military victories won by the group and proclamations of a caliphate caused great excitement among Muslims worldwide. Tens of thousands flocked to Syria from dozens of different countries to build and defend the new entity. Distant groups proclaimed their allegiance.

Its victories and savagery, however, alarmed the rest of the world. Western countries that had supported the Syrian rebellion in order to remove the Assad regime saw ISIS as a greater threat, especially after it massacred thousands of Yazidis in northern Iraq while abducting thousands of Yazidi women and girls to serve as sexual slaves.

In 2014, the U.S. assembled a broad coalition that eventually grew to more than 80 nations to begin a military campaign to destroy the group. In addition to Iraqi forces, the U.S., as it did in Afghanistan, also recruited locals, including Kurds and Arab tribesmen, for the ground campaign. They were assisted by 7,000 to 8,000 U.S. troops on the ground and by a massive bombing campaign that involved tens of thousands of sorties. Meanwhile, other nations participated in training Iraqi forces. Retaking the cities and towns held by ISIS took nearly five years, with its last stronghold, the village of Baghuz, falling in March 2019, ending the caliphate.

Although the territory held by ISIS has been recovered, the military operation is not expected to completely wind down until late in 2026. However, U.S. counterterrorism operations, including targeted strikes, continue against al-Qaeda and IS-affiliated groups in Africa and elsewhere.

Nor did the fall of Baghuz end the fighting in Syria. The campaign rarely targeted al-Nusra, which became the most effective challenge to the Assad government. (A separate group of senior al-Qaeda operatives in al-Nusra-controlled territory in Syria called the Khorasan Group, which remained dedicated to attacking Western interests abroad, was targeted when intelligence indicated a possible attack on U.S. targets.)

Al-Nusra rebranded itself and renounced its allegiance to al-Qaeda in 2016. It was an indication that it did not share al-Qaeda's strategy of prioritizing attacks on the "far enemy," but would focus its efforts on bringing down the Assad regime. The separation also facilitated the group's ability to create coalitions with smaller non-jihadi rebel factions. In 2017, it created *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS), meaning Assembly for the Liberation of al-Sham (the traditional name for Greater Syria). Instead of a caliphate, HTS created the Syrian Salvation Government.

HTS consolidated its control by absorbing additional factions while crushing hardline rivals. Instead of Islamic State's harsh religious rule, HTS aimed for more secular, technocratic governance. In November 2024, HTS assembled an even broader military alliance that launched an offensive against the Assad regime, entering Damascus within weeks. A U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization thereby achieved what had been the original objective behind U.S. support for the Syrian insurgency at the start of the rebellion: toppling the Assad regime.

The situation was further complicated by fighting between the new Syrian government led by HTS and the U.S.-supported Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces, an umbrella the U.S. helped assemble in 2015 around the existing People's Protection Units (YPG) militia. Recognizing the new reality, the U.S. delisted HTS as a terrorist group in July 2025. On November 10, 2025, the new president of Syria — and former leader of an al-Qaeda affiliate for whom the U.S. had once offered a $10 million bounty — shook hands with President Trump at the White House. In January 2026, the U.S. ended its relationship with the Syrian Democratic Forces, which had suffered 11,000 dead and 21,000 wounded during the long campaign against ISIS. Henry Kissinger, who once said "America has no permanent friends or enemies, only interests," would appreciate the irony.

The Home Front

The 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center and the 9/11 attacks drove home the point that the jihadi terrorist campaign against the U.S. would make no distinction between the frontline and the home front, between combatants and civilians. U.S. military and civilian targets could be attacked abroad or on U.S. soil. Although many Americans found the term foreign-sounding, even menacing, defending the *homeland* would be part of the GWOT.

The 1993 bombing was inspired from abroad. The conspiracy included domestic operatives assisted by a foreign instructor. The 9/11 attacks involved terrorist operatives from abroad who had been in the U.S. for more than a year, attending flying schools, reconnoitering airports, conducting test runs; 13 more individuals had spent as long as four and a half months in the country without anyone being discovered. The terrorists had help from locals, although the helpers may not have known about their plot. How many more terrorists might already be in the country?

It is easy in retrospect to describe these concerns as exaggerated, but at the time, the available evidence supported the alarm. Had there been prediction markets at the time, the smart money would be on another major attack.

The realization that Zacarias Moussaoui, who had been identified as a suspect even before 9/11, was most likely part of a planned second wave of attacks, and the attempted sabotage of a commercial airliner flying inbound from France by the so-called Shoe Bomber, a British jihadi named Richard Reid, suggested that the terrorists were still coming at us. Discoveries of laboratories in al-Qaeda training camps raised the specter of attacks involving chemical or biological weapons.

Surveillance tapes found in the rubble of a house in Afghanistan in December indicated that jihadis were planning an attack at a metro station in Singapore aimed at killing U.S. sailors. As the U.S. and other countries intensified surveillance and arrests, numerous plots were discovered, adding to the alarms.

Even if al-Qaeda was prevented from carrying out another 9/11-scale operation, further attacks in the U.S. would shake an already anxious nation, creating national crises, increasing pressure on the government for more extreme responses, provoking private vengeance, or even threatening basic American values and institutions.

New York had its own set of concerns. After the 1993 bombing and 9/11, a third terrorist attack could undermine the city's position as a global financial center. New York-headquartered corporations were already relocating functions and employees to ensure continuity of operations in case another attack occurred. What

was prudent practice could quickly become a panic-driven exodus. This concern drove the NYPD to set up its own intelligence and counterterrorist operations while the federal government and the FBI reorganized to counter the new threat.

The Government Response

To emphasize a point mentioned earlier, the president envisaged the term "war" to include *intelligence, law enforcement and other measures to improve domestic security and resiliency.* Clearly, intelligence had failed. New structures and procedures had to be created. Barriers that prevented information sharing had to be re-examined. As indicated by the parade of initials below, 9/11 changed the landscape of domestic security. Going forward, the aim was prevention through intelligence.

Fearful that it might lose its counterterrorism function to some new domestic intelligence entity – some in Congress thought about creating the equivalent of the British MI5 – the FBI shifted its priorities from traditional reactive policing to prevention through intelligence. It organized a new National Security Branch to deal with counterintelligence and counterterrorism, added an analysis branch, increased its foreign language capabilities, and deployed Field Intelligence Groups to all of its field offices.

To ensure coordination at the federal level, it embedded FBI agents within the newly established National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), which was created to bring together and ensure the dissemination of all information related to terrorism. To ensure coordination with local law enforcement, the FBI expanded its Joint Terrorism Task Forces with local police. Operationally, the Bureau would become more intelligence-driven.

The U.S. has more than 18,000 police departments. Terrorism became a priority for law enforcement nationwide, but only a few could support dedicated counterterrorist units. Given its special circumstances of protecting the country's financial center as well as the UN, and mindful that New York City had been the city most frequently targeted by terrorists in the past, the NYPD assigned a thousand officers to its new intelligence and counterterrorist divisions. To assist in the collection of intelligence and facilitate information sharing with the federal government and among local police departments and different local entities, state and local governments created fusion centers. Many followed the prototype created by the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department years before 9/11.

The biggest change at the federal level was the creation of the Department of Homeland Security. Intended to improve coordination in preventing terrorism,

protecting the nation's borders and vital infrastructure, and responding effectively to man-made or natural disasters. It brought together 22 federal agencies, creating the third largest federal government entity.

The Department of Homeland Security was never intended to be a domestic intelligence agency like the UK's MI5 or a national gendarmerie. Apart from the responsibilities of some of its specific entities, it would not collect intelligence, nor would it operate as a federal law enforcement agency. Still, the creation of a huge, centralized entity that has immense capacity and broad authorities that touch us in every way raised some questions in my mind. Of greatest concern are the consequences of the assertion by some that the department's specialized operational arms and array of authorities are fungible, that is, the specific authorities granted to specific entities can be combined, and agents from all can be assembled to create a kind of Homeland Security super force.

In the panic that followed 9/11, there were some initial actions perceived as excesses. The report by the Department of Justice's Inspector General was extremely critical of the FBI's mass roundup of 762 non-citizens, mainly immigrants from Arab, Muslim, and South Asian countries on minor immigration charges and their prolonged detention as high-interest terrorist suspects. Some were held for months. Most were deported or agreed to leave the country voluntarily. None were found to have any connections with terrorism.[90]

A second was the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS) that required military-age non-citizen males from Arab or Muslim-majority countries (plus North Korea) to register, be photographed, fingerprinted, and interviewed. They also had to keep officials informed of their locations, plans, and any changes to them. Approximately 80,000 individuals were registered.[91] Thousands were deported. Despite claims by some federal officials, none were ever convicted of terrorism-related crimes, although proponents of the 2001 roundup and NSEERS program can argue that both programs reduced the reservoir of potential terrorists and acted as a deterrent to others.

The loss of its training camps, scattering of its fighters, and greater surveillance of communications and the movement of operatives and money gradually degraded al-Qaeda's operational capabilities. By the late 2000s, terrorist attacks outside of the conflict zones in Afghanistan and Iraq were declining. To maintain operational momentum and relevance, al-Qaeda had to alter its recruiting methods.[92]

Instead of inviting volunteers to travel to Afghanistan, al-Qaeda inspired them to carry out attacks where they were by whatever means.[93] In 2010, it began publishing *Inspire,* a slick online magazine that appealed to male teens and twenty-some-

things. It combined religious exhortation with calls to action, offering practical instruction on how to improvise explosive devices, carry out vehicle ramming attacks, and other low-level attacks.[94] The messaging clearly resonated with jihadi sympathizers.

The leader of a plot to carry out suicide bombings on New York's subways, the U.S. Army major who killed 13 fellow soldiers and wounded 32 others in a mass shooting at Fort Hood, Texas in November 2009, and the so-called Underwear Bomber who attempted unsuccessfully to bring down an airliner flying to the U.S. in December of that year, were reportedly inspired by Anwar al-Awlaki, an American born and educated jihadi who left the U.S. and communicated from Yemen. He and Samir Khan, the creator of *Inspire* and also a U.S. citizen, were killed by a U.S. drone strike in 2011.

Although clues were missed in the cases mentioned above, remote recruiting created new challenges for U.S. intelligence. Unless internet monitoring intercepted online communications, it was more difficult to pick up plots. And in many cases, the plotter, a homegrown violent extremist, was simply inspired without any two-way contact. However, remote recruiting was low-yield ore. Al-Qaeda could create a virtual army online, but it remained virtual. Self-selectors were often troubled individuals seeking ideologies as conveyors of their personal discontents. Their arrest posed no direct threat to the terrorist organization — they knew, therefore could reveal, nothing. But their capabilities were low, and there were not enough of them to create the impression of a high-level threat.

The Balance Sheet

Most Americans are pragmatists and want to see the balance sheet. What did the GWOT cost? What did the country gain?

The primary objective of America's response to 9/11 was to prevent further large-scale attacks on U.S. soil. By that criterion alone, the effort may be considered a success.

In building a fortress, it is difficult to say which stone is the most important. Many factors account for the inability of al-Qaeda and its jihadi successors to carry out further large-scale attacks in the U.S., even as they were able to do so elsewhere, including in Europe. In the five years following the 9/11 attacks, al-Qaeda and its allies carried out 33 terrorist attacks worldwide, causing 1,147 deaths and wounding thousands.

During the same period, the U.S. experienced two incidents: a shooting in 2002 at

the Los Angeles Airport, killing two, and a vehicle ramming attack at the University of North Carolina with no fatalities in 2006. Neither perpetrator had any connections with al-Qaeda, although the driver of the vehicle said he was an admirer of Mohamed Atta, the leader of the 9/11 attacks.

The rapid scattering of al-Qaeda fighters in the autumn of 2001 certainly weakened the group, as did the capture or killing of key al-Qaeda leaders and other high-value targets during the invasion of Afghanistan. Continued operations targeting al-Qaeda leadership, and counterterrorist clampdowns elsewhere in the world further degraded al-Qaeda's operational capabilities.

Intelligence collection and sharing vastly improved internationally and domestically. Information came from foreign intelligence services, local informants, members of the public, jihadis boasting on the internet, or monitoring of foreign communications. Leads helped facilitate FBI and police undercover operations. Many of these techniques raised civil liberties concerns. Authorities, however, were able to foil more than 80 percent of the jihadi terrorist plots in the U.S.[95] While it is true that some of the plots were aspirational and, absent a police sting, would not have occurred anyway, some certainly would have.

Scrutiny of international financial transactions increased. Security around potential targets was hardened, although terrorists generally attacked easily accessible, "softer" targets.

Border and entry controls were enhanced in order to prevent suspected terrorists from entering the country. Research in 2017 showed that nearly half of those arrested in the U.S. carrying out or plotting jihadi terrorist attacks were born in the U.S., and most of those who came to the U.S. from other countries arrived as children and apparently radicalized here.[96] Community programs to detect and prevent individual radicalization were implemented in later years, but their effectiveness is difficult to assess.

An often-overlooked factor is that American Muslims, despite understandable resentment resulting from being targets of suspicion, remained unreceptive to the violent ideologies promoted by al-Qaeda and Islamic State. Out of an estimated American Muslim population of four million people, a total of 142 people were arrested between 2001 and 2020 for plotting or carrying out terrorist attacks in the U.S. — an average of fewer than eight per year.[97]

In the 25 years since 9/11, jihadis killed approximately 120 people in the U.S.—

fewer than five a year. That prediction would have been welcome in late 2001. Many of the investigations that enabled the FBI and police to discover terrorist plots began with tips from the Muslim community.[98]

Although prompt military action in 2001 undoubtedly disrupted al-Qaeda's terrorist campaign, it is more difficult to assess America's continuing military involvement in Afghanistan. So long as U.S. forces remained, al-Qaeda could not recover its base.

The 20-year conflict required a major investment in American troops, resulted in the deaths of more than 2,456 service members, 1,144 allied military personnel, and 3,923 U.S. civilian officials, contractors, and aid workers; more than 20,000 Americans were wounded.[99] The mission ended in failure. The human rights advances gained during the intervention, especially for women and girls, have been reversed by the Taliban.

The war in Iraq may be even more difficult to evaluate. It ended the reign of a brutal tyrant and long-time foe of the United States. It did not find weapons of mass destruction, but it can be argued that it prevented a dangerous regime from developing them. Unlike Afghanistan, it left behind a government that, although corrupt and fragile, survives, while the country remains divided along ethnic and sectarian lines and is challenged by pro-Iranian militias.

U.S. military intervention from 2003 to 2011 and again since 2014 to a scheduled end in 2026 has been a costlier undertaking than Afghanistan: 4,488 American service members along with more than 300 allied personnel were killed, and more than 32,000 American service members were wounded.

Calculations done by Brown University — which includes direct and indirect costs — indicate the war on terrorism cost the United States $8 trillion.[100] Nearly a million were killed, including U.S., allied, local government military personnel, insurgents and terrorists, and civilians, who, it is important to remember, were killed by both sides.

America did not start the war. Its departure has not ended the fighting. The Twin Towers have fallen, but bin Laden's visions of America's collapse, of awakening a global movement, of uniting Muslims worldwide in armed and spiritual jihad to embrace a violent fundamentalist ideology have not been realized. The jihadis themselves remain divided, focused, for the time being at least, on local insurgencies, but always adaptive and opportunistic. The threat remains.

The U.S. also started with narrow objectives, which, in typical American fashion,

quickly broadened into an American mission to clear out all evil, re-create societies, build nations, and re-order the world. These were discarded during the long march through the forever wars. At the end, we simply wanted to get out. And Americans remain deeply divided, understandably anxious about their future, and in a dark mood.

United in Resolve

This chapter is about what happened on that sunny morning 25 years ago and what happened during the long war that followed. It is written with hard-nosed realism but also, hopefully, with respect.

Remembering those who fell on that day and in the years that followed, offers everyone an opportunity to reflect, to review America's history, reach out to fellow citizens, remind ourselves who we are and what we can be, and together renew our commitment to the values and draw strength from the courage of those who fought 250 years ago — and those of every generation that have faced perilous times since.

On 9/11 and in the months that followed that fateful day, Americans were stricken with grief but put aside differences, demonstrated remarkable resilience, and resolved to prevail. Converting national will to national strategy proved complicated. We made mistakes, drifted from our long-term objectives, costs mounted, and domestic divisions reappeared—wars are not fairy tales with happy endings. But America recovered, rebuilt, and emerged stronger than its foes. And we can prevail going forward if we remain united in our purpose and resolve.

Brian Michael Jenkins, a former soldier in the U.S. Special Forces, initiated the country's first national research program on terrorism and irregular warfare at the RAND Corporation in 1972 and continues to write on the topic as an independent analyst. His most recent publication is "Red Teaming Hamas' Options," CTC Sentinel 19, no. 1 (January 2026).

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2

Misunderstanding 9/11: Analytic Mistakes in the Aftermath of the Attack

Daniel Byman

Abstract

Twenty-five years after 9/11, the United States has succeeded in preventing another mass-casualty jihadi attack on the homeland, but the 9/11 attacks continue to shape American counterterrorism policy and threat perception. This essay argues that U.S. officials and many analysts made five major mistakes in interpreting 9/11: treating it as a harbinger of more catastrophic attacks rather than an exceptional event; underestimating the ability of sustained counterterrorism pressure to degrade terrorist organizations; misunderstanding the unusual value of pre-9/11 Afghanistan as a safe haven; overlooking rivalries and divisions within the jihadi movement; and overestimating America's capacity to transform foreign societies in the name of counterterrorism. These errors encouraged costly overreaction, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan, while obscuring more sustainable ways to manage terrorism. The central lesson is not complacency but calibration: terrorism remains a real and persistent danger, but U.S. policy should focus on intelligence, law enforcement, limited military pressure against genuine havens, and a clear-eyed understanding of terrorist weaknesses rather than expansive efforts to remake the Middle East.

Introduction

On September 11, 2001, the United States confronted the terrible consequences of terrorism when al-Qaeda killed 2,977 people in four coordinated attacks. Twenty-five years later, the United States is still responding to these attacks, continuing a global intelligence campaign against al-Qaeda and related successor groups like the Islamic State, conducting military strikes to limit terrorist safe havens, and maintaining vigilant homeland security measures. Indeed, the memory of 9/11 is still so powerful that all post-attack U.S. presidents used the threat of terrorism to justify their policies. Today, the Trump administration invokes the terrorism label in broader and broader ways in order to justify a tough response to immigration, narcotics trafficking, and political protest, among other issues.[1]

In many ways, the U.S. response was highly effective. The al-Qaeda core has not conducted an attack in the United States or Europe for over a decade. Terrorists have not obtained chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear (CBRN) weapons, despite many fears that 9/11 was a harbinger of even deadlier forms of violence.[2] For most Americans, the fear of terrorism they felt after 9/11 has diminished, and other concerns, such as great power competition and the economy, have increased. When asked about international terrorism specifically, nine in ten people viewed it as a critical threat in 2002. Polling from 2026 indicated that government and poor leadership were the top concerns of respondents (29 percent), followed by immigration (20 percent) and the economy (11 percent); terrorism was not listed among the concerns.[3] Indeed, the 2025 National Security Strategy largely ignored traditional terrorism concerns.[4]

Despite these successes, the jihadi terrorism threat has not gone away and deserves at least a mention in U.S. strategy documents. In addition, other dangers also preoccupy counterterrorism professionals, such as increasing right-wing and left-wing terrorism and the newly termed (but not new) nihilistic violent extremism threat. Given how the 9/11 legacy dominates thinking on terrorism and counterterrorism institutions, it is important to recognize mistakes the United States and much of the analytic community made in the years following the 9/11 attacks. These mistakes should inform the U.S. and allied response to future terrorist attacks.

With the full benefit of hindsight, important mistakes include:

1. Treating 9/11 as a harbinger of more dangerous attacks rather than a one-off, exceptional attack.
2. Underestimating how a powerful counterterrorism campaign can diminish the threat.
3. Failing to recognize the distinct nature of the pre-9/11 al-Qaeda haven in Afghanistan.
4. Underestimating divisions within the jihadi camp.
5. Overestimating the ability of the United States to change societies and politics in other parts of the world, notably the greater Middle East.

9/11 as an Outlier

In 2002, the political scientist John Mueller, who at the time had not done extensive work on terrorism, published what he called "a provocation," contending that the 9/11 attacks, contrary to the near-universal wisdom of the time, might be an outlier in terms of casualties rather than a sign of things to come.[5] Many experts were warning of al-Qaeda's and terrorism's growing lethality, with fears of CBRN attacks repeatedly raised. Harvard University's Graham Allison warned

in 2004 of a better than 50 percent chance that, within ten years, terrorists "will detonate a nuclear bomb in the United States," while other experts warned of a "new terrorism" that did not fit older models.[6] Mueller, however, pointed out that some earth-shattering events, perhaps most notably the use of nuclear weapons at the end of World War II, were not repeated, despite widespread fears at the time.

The Bush administration embraced the view that al-Qaeda posed an existential threat, and its belief that the next 9/11 could occur tomorrow shaped its aggressive counterterrorism policies. In his 2002 State of the Union Address, President Bush stated, "Time is not on our side. I will not wait on events, while dangers gather. I will not stand by, as peril draws closer and closer. The United States of America will not permit the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons… Our war on terror is well begun, but it is only begun… We can't stop short. If we stop now – leaving terror camps intact and terror states unchecked -- our sense of security would be false and temporary."[7] Journalist Ron Suskind labeled this the "one percent doctrine," after a quote from Vice President Dick Cheney: "If there's a 1 percent chance that Pakistani scientists are helping al-Qaeda build or develop a nuclear weapon, we have to treat it as a certainty in terms of our response. It's not about our analysis…It's about our response."[8]

This view that more terrorist attacks were coming seemed borne out, as the United States, Europe, and the West more broadly saw repeated strikes in the years that followed 9/11. These included the 2004 Madrid train bombings, the 2005 London bombings, the series of 2015 Paris attacks, the 2016 Brussels bombings, the 2016 Nice truck attack, the 2017 Manchester Arena bombing, the 2017 London Bridge attack, and the 2025 Bondi Beach shooting in Australia.[9] However, none of these came close to the scale of 9/11, of course. Although the Madrid, London, Brussels, and Paris attacks were orchestrated from havens abroad, from a narrower U.S. perspective, the problem became inspired, lone-wolf attacks more than ones directly orchestrated by al-Qaeda leaders operating from overseas havens like 9/11. The worst attack by a jihadi on U.S. soil, the 2016 attack on the Pulse nightclub in Florida that killed 49 people, was an inspired attack.

Although inspired attacks have killed and continue to kill Americans (the last such significant attack occurred on New Year's Day 2025, when an Islamic State-inspired attacker killed 14 people),[10] in general, they are less lethal than those involving trained, directed terrorists. Inspired individuals are more likely to be discovered in their plotting and fail in their attack even when not disrupted. In addition, they often pursue low-level targets, such as crowds of ordinary people, rather than the highly symbolic, high-impact targets such as U.S. embassies and bases that al-Qaeda favors. These attacks, however, continue to have a psycho-

logical impact.

The persistence of al-Qaeda and later Islamic State-linked plots further muddied the threat picture. Both groups directed and inspired plots in Europe, the United States, and other parts of the world that were disrupted or failed due to good luck on the part of the counterterrorists. Some of these, such as al-Qaeda's 2006 plan to bomb seven transatlantic flights, would have produced casualties on a scale of 9/11, while the persistence of numerous lesser plots showed a continuing danger that left counterterrorism officials concerned even as terrorism faded from daily discourse.[11] Plots, however, also show counterterrorism success as well as continued terrorist intentions, and officials understandably focused on the potential threat without recognizing their own effectiveness in disrupting them.

In terms of overall lethality, the bigger danger turned out to be jihadi involvement in civil wars and insurgencies. In Iraq, Libya, Mali, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, Yemen, and other countries, jihadi groups became major players in civil wars, contributing to large death tolls and making it more difficult to resolve the wars through negotiations. Although at times some of these groups have attempted international external operations, most of their focus has been local. This danger is less a homeland security issue than a broader threat to U.S. interests.

The Power of Counterterrorism

One of the biggest omissions from terrorism analysis was a proper assessment of the effectiveness of U.S. and allied counterterrorism in the overall net assessment of the terrorist threat. U.S. officials and outside experts (myself included) often warned about the continued or growing terrorist threat, citing factors such as the continued haven al-Qaeda enjoyed in Pakistan after 9/11, the emotive power of the 2003 Iraq War, the chaos unleashed by the 2011 Arab Spring, and the continued economic and political grievances of many Muslims, among other factors. Then-FBI Director Robert Mueller stated before the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States in 2004 that "today's terrorists operate seamlessly across borders and continents, aided by sophisticated communications technologies; they finance their operations with elaborate funding schemes; and they patiently and methodically plan and prepare their attacks."[12]

Mueller's warning was true, but at the same time, counterterrorism grew by leaps and bounds. After 9/11, the United States stepped up intelligence cooperation against al-Qaeda, with security services around the world increasing their collection on and operations against the group.[13] The result was a tremendous disruption of jihadi travel, fundraising, and planning – much of which, before 9/11, they could do with little interference. Shortly after 9/11, Ayman al-Zawahiri lamented, "the entire world became a CIA office."[14]

In addition to orchestrating global intelligence cooperation, the United States overthrew the Taliban government, ending the unprecedented safe haven there, and, over time, aggressively used drones to target terrorist leaders and key operators. Such attacks removed key leaders and, even when not successful, forced al-Qaeda leaders to hide and avoid communication, both of which made them less able to run a global terrorist organization.[15]

Homeland defense, too, improved. Both the FBI and the newly created Department of Homeland Security made countering jihadi terrorism a priority after 9/11. At times, this resulted in investigations of plots that probably would never have come to fruition, but by erring on the side of counterterrorism, it made it far harder for jihadis to enter and operate in the United States. For example, in the Newburgh Four case, the judge noted that the men had never seriously contemplated the plot, and an analysis by the Brennan Center found that the FBI informant inspired, provoked, planned, financed, and otherwise played a major role in the crime.[16] In the 2006 Liberty City case, the FBI arrested a group of men who thought they were scamming al-Qaeda out of money to save their construction business by claiming they would use the money to conduct a terrorist attack, but they were really part of an FBI sting operation.[17]

The Unusual Nature of the Safe Haven in Afghanistan

The haven in Afghanistan was a tremendous source of strength for al-Qaeda, enabling the group to build a mini-army. The 9/11 Commission Report found that "the alliance with the Taliban provided al-Qaeda a sanctuary in which to train and indoctrinate fighters and terrorists, import weapons, forge ties with other jihad groups and leaders, and plot and staff terrorist schemes."[18] The CIA estimated that al-Qaeda trained perhaps 10,000 volunteers in camps in Afghanistan, where their instruction included not only the use of small arms but also advanced classes on counterintelligence, bomb-making, and other advanced skills.[19] Because the group did not have to focus on its immediate survival, it could dedicate resources to improving and learning. Those trained also gained tacit knowledge, learning from one another in person in ways that a virtual environment could not replicate.[20]

In addition to the skills learned, the classes also enabled al-Qaeda to build networks among the volunteers that it would later tap for terrorist operations and support for insurgencies in the Muslim world. Finally, the training camps were a place for indoctrination, where al-Qaeda could take recruits motivated by different causes – anger at repressive governments at home, a desire to fight foreign occupiers in Chechnya and Kashmir, anti-Israel sentiment, and many other grievances – and explain that the U.S.-led plot against the Muslim world was the source of all these different problems.

When the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 turned into chaos, and after Libya, Syria, and Yemen devolved into civil wars following the 2011 Arab Spring, the haven question arose again. In some places, notably Syria, jihadi terrorist groups attracted huge numbers of volunteers and used the war zone to launch attacks in the West.[21] In Africa today, the haven question is relevant in Somalia and in parts of West Africa, especially the Sahel, where jihadis are running rampant.[22]

Yet Afghanistan proved a far better haven for terrorists than these more limited ones for several reasons. First, Afghanistan in the late 1990s had a useful mix of war and peace. On the eve of 9/11, the Taliban controlled roughly 90 percent of the country, which meant the various jihadi camps could operate far from the fighting with a high degree of security. In other civil war havens, however, the demands of the civil war left little room for extra-regional operations, and foreign fighters often proved negative.[23]

Second, al-Qaeda ran some of the camps in Afghanistan (though not all).[24] Osama bin Laden's group had global aspirations and a strong anti-U.S. agenda, while several future jihadi arenas had locally focused groups.

Third, and perhaps most important, counterterrorism evolved. Before 9/11, terrorist havens were no-go zones, while after 9/11, the United States would bomb them regularly, targeting leaders and key operatives. The United States also provided (with mixed degrees of success) security assistance to governments and local warlords to fight area jihadis.[25] Travel to and from the camps became monitored, and individuals who tried to become foreign fighters were often more likely to be caught and arrested than those who stayed at home.[26]

The results show the change. As Bruce Hoffman notes, most of the major jihadi plots in the years before and after 9/11 were linked to Afghanistan and Pakistan.[27] In contrast, the Iraqi civil war produced zero terrorist attacks against the United States or Europe.[28] Syria was somewhere in between: the Islamic State attacks on Paris and Brussels in 2015 and 2016 were directed from the haven with volunteers who came and went from Syria, but the majority of Islamic State attacks in the West were homegrown, and the haven did not produce a large number of attacks comparable to the number of volunteers it attracted.

Al-Qaeda has some presence in Afghanistan following the fall of the U.S.-backed government and the Taliban takeover in 2021. The Taliban appear to be letting senior leaders and others live under their protection, and there are reports of training camps restarting.[29] However, in contrast to the 1990s, U.S. counterterrorism is active – in 2022, the United States killed al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul. Much of the Taliban's and perhaps al-Qaeda's effort is on supporting militants in Pakistan. Nevertheless, there have not been reports of plots in the

United States or Europe emanating from al-Qaeda's Afghanistan training camps.[30]

The Islamic State's branch in Afghanistan, the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K), has conducted external operations, including mass casualty attacks in Iran and Russia as well as several plots in Europe.[31] The United States provided warning to Moscow and Tehran of these attacks and helped disrupt the European plots, suggesting considerable U.S. intelligence capabilities against the group. Most importantly, IS-K does not have a haven in Afghanistan—the Taliban is a fierce opponent of the group and conducts aggressive counterterrorism.[32]

Jihadi Rivalries

Jihadis also have numerous rivalries within the broader movement that greatly weaken its overall effectiveness. Both before and after 9/11, these feuds turned murderous. Before 9/11, Egyptian groups like the Islamic Group and the Egyptian Islamic Jihad were often at each other's throats. Jihadis tried to murder bin Laden in Sudan, and fellow extremists were probably behind the murder of Abdallah Azzam, the leading ideologue of the anti-Soviet jihad.[33]

In the months after 9/11, anger at al-Qaeda within the jihadi community exploded. Jihadi strategist Abu Musab al-Suri bitterly noted the 9/11 attacks cast "jihadists into a fiery furnace…. A hellfire which consumed most of their leaders, fighters, and bases."[34] As jihad in Iraq moved to center stage, questions over whether to prioritize the fight against Iraqi Shias or the United States, the level of violence against civilians, and other core strategic and tactical issues proved too much for the al-Qaeda leadership to manage, despite numerous attempts to rein in their Iraqi branch.[35]

This infighting reached its peak with the emergence of the Islamic State. In 2013, what was the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda imploded, with its members choosing between loyalty to Zawahiri's al-Qaeda core and the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. In the years that followed, in Syria and in other parts of the Muslim world, jihadis grasping the Islamic State banner fought or competed with those proclaiming their loyalty to al-Qaeda.[36]

Such infighting led to a lack of common purpose. Some jihadis focused on local regimes, others on the United States and Western countries, others on Shia or other non-Sunni Muslim communities, while still others became more bandits and criminals rather than committed jihadis. Approaches to the group that addressed whether they had a "near" versus "far" enemy focus missed that both the local and international targets themselves varied considerably, often within groups as well as between them.

The United States, however, often lumped together the many strains of the global

jihadi movement. In the months after 9/11, the distinctions among different groups seemed to matter little, especially when their recruiting, training, and fundraising efforts often overlapped. For example, many – but not all – members of some Egyptian groups focused on local enemies, while some of their members joined with al-Qaeda.[37] The result, however, was an often-mistaken assumption that groups with more local ambitions sought to attack the United States. This, in turn, often led the United States to respond to every perceived provocation and threat, increasing its military efforts abroad and working with an array of authoritarian governments, many of which faced local but not global jihadis. After 9/11, the United States gave Russia rhetorical and diplomatic support by folding elements of the Chechen war into the U.S. counterterrorism framework even though the most active Chechen groups at the time, including those that had foreign fighters, operated independently of al-Qaeda.[38]

The Difficulty of Changing Societies and Politics

After 9/11, the United States embraced the idea that ending the terrorist threat required reshaping the Muslim world, particularly the Middle East. In both Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States initially sought to defeat the Taliban and Saddam Hussein regimes, respectively, with limited forces while putting in place democratic systems.[39] Eventually, the United States provided more resources for these efforts, deploying massive numbers of troops and spending trillions of dollars. During its peak, there were about 160,000 U.S. troops in Iraq in 2007 and 100,000 in Afghanistan in 2011, although one constant challenge for the United States for much of this time was the competition for resources between the two theaters.[40] From 2003 to 2012, the United States spent $61 billion on reconstruction projects in Iraq, some of which were criticized for being wasteful or ineffective.[41]

U.S. efforts in Afghanistan did not endure, with the Taliban gaining power after a grinding insurgency; the U.S. regime change effort in Iraq was more lasting and has scored some successes, such as regular elections, but in general, the country's political system has numerous flaws.[42] This limited success came at a huge price, both financially and in terms of dead and wounded. The United States lost 4,506 service members with 32,291 more wounded during Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation New Dawn.[43] Hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians also died during the years of the U.S. occupation and its immediate aftermath.[44]

In addition to this cost, the U.S. campaign in Iraq further exacerbated the terrorism problem. The collapse of governance there after the 2003 fall of the regime and growing anger at the United States and the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad led to the emergence of multiple insurgencies in the Sunni community, some of which coalesced to become al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which in turn morphed into the Islamic State – one of the deadliest modern terrorist groups.

In general, the United States learned that it is easier to destroy than create. Removing the Taliban and Saddam Hussein proved relatively easy from a military point of view, but foreign-imposed regime change did not work well for building a new government that was stable and pro-American.[45]

Lessons of Mistakes for Counterterrorism Today

These five mistakes, among others, have implications for counterterrorism today. One is the danger of hyping the threat: terrorism is a very real concern, but it is wrong to assume that terrorists will always escalate their violence or that they are, in general, highly skilled.[46] Indeed, the number of individuals who are able to operate internationally and conduct attacks on guarded targets like civil aviation or military bases is relatively small.[47]

Another lesson concerns the need to consistently resource counterterrorism. The threat of terrorism often rises or falls based on external events, and different kinds of terrorism (right-wing, left-wing, jihadi, etc.) have posed different threats in the post-9/11 era, with right-wing terrorism in particular being the most lethal form of terrorism to the U.S. homeland, but with left-wing violence rising in recent years.[48] Because it takes years to develop expertise and to ensure strong community relations vital to success, counterterrorism resources should not simply follow the threat, as threats can change suddenly and expertise, unlike troops, cannot be surged.

Just as it is important to keep in mind terrorists' strengths, it is also important to recognize and, ideally, exploit their many weaknesses. In particular, the jihadi movement is highly divided and prone to infighting. For its entire history, much of its energy has been devoted to infighting, and this makes the movement, as a whole, weaker.

Similarly, it is important to keep pressure on potential jihadi havens, working with local governments, gathering human and signals intelligence, and using drones to strike at terrorist operatives. At the same time, however, not every haven is the next 1990s Afghanistan – indeed, that is the exception, not the rule. Limited engagement through supporting local forces and standoff attacks can weaken terrorist groups and disrupt their activities at a sustainable cost.

Finally, a degree of humility about what the United States can accomplish is vital. The shock of 9/11 and its staggering death toll created an understandable desire to end the terrorism threat once and for all. Such a satisfying and complete solution, unfortunately, is unrealistic. The United States, however, has shown that it can reduce the terrorist threat to the U.S. homeland without the need to reform the Middle East or otherwise engage in costly counterterrorism measures.

Looking forward, the central lesson is not complacency but calibration. Terrorism will remain a persistent security problem, but it is unlikely to disappear entirely or to follow a simple trajectory of escalation. Effective policy, therefore, requires maintaining the capabilities that have constrained terrorist groups while avoiding costly overreactions—particularly large-scale efforts to remake foreign societies in the name of counterterrorism. A strategy that combines sustained intelligence and law-enforcement pressure, limited military tools against genuine havens, and a clear-eyed appreciation of terrorist weaknesses offers the best prospect for keeping the threat manageable. The experience since 9/11 shows that the United States cannot eliminate terrorism altogether, but it can prevent it from becoming the defining security challenge it once appeared to be.

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3

Foresight and Hindsight Twenty-Five Years after 9/11

Don Rassler

Abstract

The 25th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks is a time to reflect on the events of that fateful day, what we have learned, and how things have evolved for jihadi terror networks and counterterror efforts since. This chapter revisits chapter 11 of *The 9/11 Commission Report* — "Foresight—and Hindsight" — and provides a fresh view of what a new version of that chapter would look like 25 years later. When viewed in hindsight, the duality of the threat and counterterrorism response stands out as a cross-cutting feature, as the past 25 years have been characterized by sine waves of activity, 'highs' and 'lows' including strategic missteps and failures, and 'wins' and 'losses' from both contestants. The United States' ability to foresee is being shaped by similar dualities: less attention and resources for counterterrorism means that the United States and its partners need to prioritize specific jihadi and other threats more, and narrow what remains in scope, but the diverse conglomeration of threat types that exist today is stretching capacity, creating blind spots, and eroding the ability of the United States to not only understand the present, but also to look ahead and foresee the threats of tomorrow. To minimize surprise during this period, it is important that the United States 'mind the gaps' and practically invest in efforts that look beyond threats that are 'known' to those that 'may be' or are emerging.

Introduction

The 9/11 memorial at Ground Zero in New York is a living legacy to the tragic events of that day. Its primary purpose is to help us, and future generations, to reflect and remember — to 'never forget.' The empty footprints of the World Trade Center buildings remind us of the towering skyscrapers that once stood, while the names that surround it are a reminder of the towering cost — 2,977 lives lost, the victims that al-Qaeda killed. The pools and the calming flow of water connect sound, touch, and sight, allowing those visiting in the present to reflect on the past

and what transpired, while the trees, open air, and the shiny tower of One World Trade remind us of how things have healed and evolved since.

It is an understatement to say that the 25th anniversary of 9/11 is a moment that requires deep reflection, and there are many ways to reflect, including visiting the Memorial Museum, listening to stories, and reading the history of the events that led to that day. *The 9/11 Commission Report*, which documented what happened, how it happened, and the mistakes, failures, and missed opportunities that led to 9/11, stands out in this regard. It is a principal resource that also deserves reflection. This chapter revisits that seminal report and leverages the idea behind chapter 11 — "Foresight—and Hindsight" — to provide a fresh assessment of what a new version of that chapter would look like 25 years after 9/11. Like that original chapter, this chapter seeks to identify key lessons from the past two and a half decades that can be learned with the benefit of hindsight and discuss how the United States is presently postured to foresee future jihadi and other terror threats.

Hindsight: Key Takeaways from Jihadi Terrorism and Counterterrorism since 9/11

This section looks back on the evolution of Sunni Islamist terrorism and counterterrorism efforts to mitigate principal jihadi terror networks and related threats over the past 25 years from a strategic lens. It leverages hindsight — "the ability to understand an event or situation only after it has happened"[1] — to identify important lessons and high-level takeaways from the contest between counterterrorism forces and networks such as al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and other similarly minded extremists. Identifying these takeaways and learning from them is important as they can help the United States and its partners to avoid missteps, evolve, and forge a more sustainable counterterrorism path in the years ahead.

One of the most important takeaways is the persistence of Salafi-jihadi-motivated terrorism, even if there have been important changes in the nature of the threat since 9/11. On the 20th anniversary of 9/11, Michael Morell, the former Deputy Director at the Central Intelligence Agency, described the history of al-Qaeda- and Islamic State-linked terror as "sort of a sine wave"[2] that follows a pattern: "They get very dangerous, you degrade them, they weaken, you take your eye off them, and they rebound."[3]

During the post-9/11 era, the most significant 'rebound' occurred after the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, when less pressure and attention were placed on al-Qaeda's regional affiliate, which used the time and maneuver space to rebuild and intensify its operations.[4] After making a formal break with al-Qaeda and rebranding itself as Islamic State, the leaders of that prior affiliate went on to lead a movement that controlled large swathes of Iraq and Syria, created a self-described

'caliphate,' successfully recruited more than 40,000 foreign terrorist fighters from over 80 countries, developed a global network of more than a dozen formal affiliates, and successfully launched many, if not the most, number of devastating international terrorist attacks since 9/11. It then took the United States and its partners, principally the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and other members of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS (D-ISIS), years of effort involving considerable investment and local loss of life to defeat Islamic State militarily.

While what the Islamic State was able to achieve during the 2014–2017 period may be a 'one-off' event, the organization's ability to rebuild and transform itself from what was once a decimated al-Qaeda affiliate to a powerful, never-before-seen terror movement within the span of several years remains a cautionary tale about the will, resilience, and regenerative power of jihadi networks. The lesson: even when networks like al-Qaeda and Islamic State are on the back foot, looking away can be costly. One can hope that the United States and the international community will continue to remember that lesson, as there are clear parallels to the present day. That is important because, as Michael Morell also noted five years ago, that pattern of reemergence is not going to stop: "I think we're going to see this for quite some period of time. I think my children's generation and my grandchildren's generation are still going to be dealing with this issue."[5] It would be nice to believe that Morell is wrong, but one unfortunately does not need to look far to see other nodes of the same jihadi ecosystem, such as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP), which have been able to not only persist but thrive as they seize and dominate sizable areas of terrain, threaten local regimes, and enhance their capabilities. It is also not a stretch to imagine how al-Shabaab, JNIM, or ISSP could evolve into broader regional or transnational problems in the near future.

The post-9/11 period has also reinforced the interactive nature of terrorism – how terrorism is an ongoing competition between extremists and counterterrorism forces, a contest where the actions of each 'player' matter and can influence not just an opposing player's next 'move' but the future trajectory of the 'game.' For example, as the al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) example above illustrates, if an experienced jihadi terror network is given space to rebuild, the problem will likely get worse absent some form of counterterrorism pressure. Thus, when it comes to the future of jihadi terrorism, a lot depends on how the United States and its partners respond, or do not respond, and in what ways, to the threat. As Benjamin Franklin quipped more than 250 years ago: "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."[6] That same idea holds for counterterrorism.

The record of achievements for both sides in the contest has been mixed, as there are ways in which both sides won and lost. Using leadership decapitation and other kinetic methods, driven by exquisite intelligence, the United States and its

partners have attrited the strategic capabilities and capacities of al-Qaeda and Islamic State and fractured their ability to operate efficiently as global movements, a considerable win. Further, while successful jihadi terror attacks in the United States and other Western countries have caused casualties, and there have been other close calls, the United States has also prevented a strategic 9/11-style event from occurring in the U.S. homeland. As noted by Bruce Hoffman, "This is a towering achievement."[7] But the two and a half decades since 9/11 have also shown how the United States and its allies can win countless tactical battles but still lose strategically. After two decades of war, the Afghan Taliban was able to reclaim power in Afghanistan, and despite enormous investment in time, blood, and treasure, Iraq teeters toward instability and broader Iranian influence. Further, although degraded, al-Qaeda and Islamic State still exist, and in some areas, such as the Sahel, the power and influence of their local affiliates are growing, a dynamic that highlights both the limits of counterterrorism efforts and the ongoing, dispersed resonance of jihadi ideas and organizations.

Lessons can also be learned from how the 'players' approached the contest. For example, overreach and adherence to values and principles tested jihadi groups and governments combating them over the past 25 years. Since the opposing sides have different principles, these dynamics have manifested in different ways. For al-Qaeda, this started early, as the acceptability of the 9/11 attacks proved controversial even amongst some of the group's most senior members, some of whom opposed the operation.[8] The decision by al-Qaeda's leadership to formally align itself with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and AQI, which embraced gruesome tactics, ignited widespread sectarian violence (especially against Shias), and had a more cavalier attitude toward violence against other Sunni Muslims, also proved costly to al-Qaeda's brand and standing amongst sympathizers and supporters.[9] The network's long-standing partnership with and reliance on Iran has also undermined the group's credibility in jihadi circles, which has led to arguments that the network cannot be trusted, a vulnerability that rivals like Islamic State have weaponized.[10] The fact that the individual — Saif al-Adel — who is widely believed to be the current leader of al-Qaeda, a movement that fashions itself as the vanguard to protect Sunni Muslims, spent more than 20 years living in Iran,[11] and may still be in the country, illustrates the legitimacy bind the group finds itself in.

While different, the United States faced its own set of overreach and value-oriented challenges. The decision to invade Iraq played into the hands of the narrative that al-Qaeda wanted to cultivate: the United States was an occupying force that oppresses Muslims. This inflamed the threat and led to the creation of a front that became exceptionally costly, deadly, and time-consuming. The venture also distracted the United States from its central objective: to destroy core al-Qaeda and bring members of the network to justice, most of whom resided in the Afghan-

istan and Pakistan area, or nearby Iran. Mission creep and the expansion from more limited counterterrorism objectives to quixotic goals such as democracy and state-building in Iraq and Afghanistan,[12] while well-intentioned, muddled purpose and end states, leading to America's longest war. Some of the methods used by the United States during the Global War on Terrorism, such as torture[13] and bulk metadata collection,[14] also proved costly as they undermined public trust[15] and enhanced global opposition, including serving as recruitment enablers for jihadi groups.[16] The United States appears to have learned from these missteps, but it is important that it continues to remember them, especially as time passes.

Since 9/11, significant terrorist events have been rare. But the past 25 years also serve as a reminder of the role terrorism can play as a 'spoiler' — how single acts of terror can have an outsized impact and strategically shape world events.[17] Key incidents that stand out in this regard include the December 2001 terror attack against India's Parliament, which brought India and Pakistan — two nuclear-armed nations — to the brink of war[18] at a time when the United States needed Islamabad's assistance to 'catch' al-Qaeda members fleeing across the Afghan border; the 2006 bombing of the al-Askari (Golden Dome) mosque in Samarra, Iraq, which dramatically escalated sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shias;[19] and Hamas' attack against Israel on October 7, 2023, an operation that killed more than 1,200, ignited regional war, and is also believed to have 'spoiled' the normalization of ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia.[20] These outlier events highlight the importance of timing, symbolic targets, and the disruptive power of a single act of terrorism.

Strategic breakthrough innovations during the post-9/11 period have also been rare, but there have been near misses, analytical failures, and surprises that have highlighted that counterterrorism forces were not as prepared as they arguably should have been. The attempt by al-Qaeda operative Richard Reid to detonate an explosive device hidden in his shoe during a transatlantic flight in December 2001 failed due to his inability to successfully ignite the fuse and passenger intervention.[21] It was a close call. Nearly five years later, good investigative police work in the United Kingdom and counterterrorism cooperation led to the disruption of an al-Qaeda-linked terror cell that planned to detonate liquid explosives hidden in plastic soda bottles on several transatlantic flights.[22] But another close call that targeted commercial aviation soon followed in December 2009, when an individual trained by al-Qaeda's affiliate in Yemen — al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) — attempted to ignite a bomb concealed in his underwear on a plane over Detroit. When asked about the failed plot, a senior intelligence analyst noted how, when it came to AQAP at the time, the U.S. intelligence community "had assumptions about how a terror group operates. It was a major analytic failure."[23] This individual added: "What we missed was the intent piece. AQAP looked at

the time like a regional threat."[24] Similar analytic failures led to Hamas not being viewed as a broader threat prior to October 7, 2023.[25]

The successful downing of Metrojet Flight 9268 over Egypt in 2015, an attack claimed by the Islamic State's Sinai affiliate that killed 224 people,[26] is a reminder of how terror groups revisit prior failed methods, and how failures highlight future dangers.[27] For example, it is largely believed that the bomb that took down the Metrojet plane was created using the same general concept as the disrupted 2006 transatlantic airline plot, whereby liquid explosives were smuggled onto the plane in a beverage can that was then detonated.[28]

There have also been failures to anticipate the future direction of terror threats. The Islamic State's weaponization of commercial drones is an important case in this regard. The counterterrorism community generally failed to 'see' drones as an operational opportunity area for terrorists, and to anticipate that networks such as Islamic State would likely weaponize drones. This is despite the presence of a considerable amount of evidence that existed prior to the creation of the Islamic State's caliphate in 2014 of terror group interest in, and experimentation with, remotely controlled aircraft and later drones.[29] This included some clear indicators, such as a plot disrupted in the United States in 2011 during which the perpetrator wanted to fly explosive-laden remote-control planes into the Pentagon to inflict harm.[30] Due to these types of indicators, the development of weaponized drones by Islamic State should not have come as a surprise, but it was a surprise that left the United States and its local partners generally flat-footed in their ability to respond and mitigate the threat during a critical period.

Given the accessibility of all sorts of commercial tech today, the Islamic State drone weaponization case is a cautionary lesson about the importance of functional threat tracing and how terror networks will continue their efforts to creatively use commercial items they can acquire. The power of artificial intelligence (AI) to help everyday citizens to navigate complex problems and technical challenges makes this lesson even more important. Collectively, these cases serve as a reminder that, even during periods of resource constraints, governments must continue investing in red teaming, studying failures and near misses, and maintaining a strategic forecasting capability that looks beyond known threats to new ones.

Even though strategic innovation has been rare, jihadi adaptation has been a steady fixture over the past 25 years. These adaptations have taken place across a range of areas from tactical innovations to operational methods and organizational changes. For example, a consistent feature of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars was the ongoing, stepwise innovations that terror networks made to IEDs, which necessitated considerable resources and the creation of a combat support organization (the Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization,

JIEDDO) to mitigate and counter.[31] On the operational front, the proliferation of suicide bombing generally enhanced the lethality and psychological impact of jihadi operations.[32] The operational concept that guided Lashkar-e-Tayyiba's (LeT) devastating 2008 terror attack on Mumbai showed how dispersion can be used to distract, confuse, and overwhelm local security forces in an urban environment.[33] Additionally, Islamic State's adoption of its virtual 'advise and assist' method, whereby it inspires and enables radicalized individuals to conduct attacks in foreign countries on its behalf, has proven a clever way for the network to overcome operational challenges.[34] Similarly, the Islamic State's more recent organizational shift in leadership to individuals based in Africa[35] highlights how the movement has been trying to navigate around counterterrorism pressure placed on core movement cadre in the Levant, likely as a form of resilience. These examples speak to a determined and adaptive jihadi threat ecosystem that remains 'on the hunt' for tactical, operational, and organizational gains, even if minor. They should not be overlooked, as even "small incremental efficiencies can compound into large-scale effects over time."[36]

The last 25 years have reinforced that although counterterrorism can be a unilateral endeavor, it fundamentally requires a team. For example, in 2019 D-ISIS consisted of 79 members, and while some nations and entities carried much larger shares of the burden to militarily defeat Islamic State than others, the campaign was effective because it involved inputs, collaboration, and forms of pressure from the broader D-ISIS team to stem the movement's momentum and degrade it. The expansion of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism's membership in 2017 from four founding members to more than 40 members in mid-2026[37] speaks to both how social media, communications, and tech platforms have become an even more important and ever-present front line of the counterterrorism fight *and* to the team dynamics of counterterrorism today.

Deep levels of bilateral collaboration, such as that between the United States and the United Kingdom, which involved intelligence sharing from both nations, proved important in identifying and disrupting a considerable number of jihadi terror plots. Front-line partnerships, such as the one between the SDF and the United States, did even more of the hard, field-based work to degrade Islamic State and al-Qaeda in key areas. As nations around the globe deprioritize terrorism, it is important that the team nature of counterterrorism endures and meaningful collaboration is preserved, as the varied inputs that cooperation generates help nations to understand threats, identify and pursue new leads, and engage in proactive and preventative counterterrorism actions.

At the same time, a related lesson from the past 25 years is that while counterterrorism partnerships have been essential to the degradation of Islamic State and al-Qaeda, some alliances have been 'messy' and involved navigating through dif-

ficult tradeoffs. Pakistan represents a central case. For years, Pakistan helped the United States to capture high-profile al-Qaeda suspects[38] and to kill other mid-level and senior leaders of the groups and affiliated movements such as the Pakistani Taliban through targeted drone strikes.[39] But there were also limits to what Islamabad was willing to do. While Pakistan was a nominal ally and counterterrorism partner, it also engaged in behavior that was directly hostile to the United States and that actively undermined U.S. efforts and goals in Afghanistan. This included Pakistan's decades-long support for the Afghan Taliban and for entities such as the Haqqani network, which it sheltered and operationally enabled.[40] In that way, during the Global War on Terrorism, Pakistan functioned both as a U.S. ally and as an indirect enemy. The evolution of the United States' relationship with the Afghan Taliban and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) also highlights tradeoffs and dualities, and how the longer-term sustainable management of jihadi terrorism requires prioritizing threats, becoming more comfortable with pragmatism, embracing uncomfortable ties, and collaborating with former enemies where and when there are common interests.

Foresight and the 'New' and Evolving Environment

The ability to foresee — to 'see' or "know about something before it happens"[41] — has always been tricky in the context of terrorism. This is because terrorist networks have incentives to hide and obscure their operational plans: they want to avoid detection and be successful.[42] Surprise is also often a goal. As a result, counterterrorism elements usually only see various signs, indicators, or parts of the puzzle, if they see those at all. Since they often do not have or understand the complete picture, they need to discern its contours from fragments and add more color and detail as additional information becomes available. This complicates the ability to accurately foresee what might happen next.

Another complicating factor is that the ability to foresee is not just an analytical issue; it is shaped by broader environmental dynamics. For example, as the 9/11 Commission outlined more than 20 years ago, there were four failures that led to the attacks on September 11 — failures in imagination, policy, capabilities, and management. This section therefore first takes stock of the counterterrorism environment and key trends shaping the terrorism and counterterrorism landscapes, as these dynamics help set the conditions for how well the United States and its allies can foresee and anticipate how jihadi terrorism and other forms of terrorism may evolve. This includes a discussion of new 'walls' and gaps that have emerged, or appear in danger of emerging, as a result of changes in the environment. These gaps deserve attention and focus, as they could challenge the United States' ability to effectively put the puzzle pieces of information together to prevent surprise and to identify, understand, and foresee future evolutions in the jihadi threat. It concludes with a short discussion about the failure to imagine.

Prior to 9/11, terrorism was not a key priority.[43] Then, after that tragic day, counterterrorism remained the leading U.S. national security priority for more than 15 years. But since 2018, terrorism, recognized at the time as a "persistent condition," [44] has become an increasingly less important priority for the United States government across different administrations. Given the strategic pacing threat posed by China, that makes sense. The level of emphasis that the United States places on counterterrorism is reflected in national strategy documents. For example, the most recent National Security Strategy, released in 2025, does not explicitly identify counterterrorism as a priority; instead, it is more vaguely described in the latest U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy, released in 2026, as "a core part of the national security mission."[45] In practice, for the United States, this has meant that counterterrorism has received less attention and resources for nearly a decade. That shift in focus and resources has led to changes across the U.S. counterterrorism enterprise, with both positive and negative effects. It has made the U.S. counterterrorism community leaner, more efficient, and more focused, but it has also stretched the community and pushed the United States to accept more terrorism risk, which has led to some close calls and left little room for error.[46]

The reduction in U.S. strategic focus on counterterrorism is not an isolated phenomenon; it has taken place against a backdrop where counterterrorism has also become less of a priority for many other nations worldwide, especially Western partners.[47] The broader collective shift in attention and resources has had, and will continue to have, a compounding effect on the ability of the United States and its longstanding counterterrorism partners to monitor terrorism. The potential impact, or cost, of those cuts and risk calculations has started to come into view. For example, prior to the Islamic State-inspired Bondi Beach attack in December 2025, the "deadliest jihadi terror attack in Australia's history,"[48] the country's "intelligence agencies slashed funding for counterterrorism to its lowest proportion since September 11, 2001."[49] That is an important warning sign about the costs and longer-term tail of divestment in counterterrorism.

To help manage the moment, the United States has placed greater emphasis on terror threat prioritization.[50] That makes sense during an era of more constrained resources, but it also carries downside risks, as with fewer people and less attention focused on terrorism generally, and jihadi terrorism specifically, it makes it more possible, and arguably more likely, that the United States may miss threats posed by terror networks that either are not in primary focus or that operate at the edges of that focus. The overall reduction in partners' focus on terrorism makes the challenge even harder. Over the next several years, this will be a primary foresight challenge the United States will need to navigate, as a more narrowed focus can leave America and its partners more open to terror surprises from other quarters.

The problem is that many quarters require monitoring these days. Compared to ten years ago, the terrorism and extremism landscapes are more geographically diffused, organizationally complex, and demographically distributed. This has enhanced the complexity of what — the type, form, and motivational aspects of — terrorism investigators need to monitor, the regional areas they need to cover, and the responses involved — all of which require specialized forms of expertise. For example, today the counterterrorism community needs to maintain focus on legacy (but resilient) jihadi threats; a collection of Iranian supported or enabled terror groups that represent their own ecosystem and who have opportunistically sought to collaborate with criminal networks to attack; a mixed domestic extremism environment, including memetic chain violence; the designation of more than 25 cartels, transnational criminal organizations, and gangs as Foreign Terrorist Organizations over the past year; and the early stages of what appears may be a coming wave of anti-technology extremism.[51] It must also contend with a terror threat that has shifted to "individual actors versus just the highly organized, hierarchical groups . . . which are harder to detect and deter."[52] This conglomeration of threat types is a compounding trend that stretches capacity and appears poised to strain the United States' ability not just to understand the present — given the voluminous amount of data available — but also to look ahead, because there is so much to look at today.

Another puzzle the counterterrorism community needs to manage is that information and technology environments are amplifying these dynamics, as they have broadened access to extremist content and individuals' ability to engage with it, interact with formal terror entities, and acquire usable technical knowledge. This has impacted participatory dynamics,[53] decentralized counterterrorism investigations, and elongated the tail of terrorism, as youth radicalization has evolved into even more of a problem than it was in the past, especially in Western nations.[54] The development of nihilistic violent extremism (NVE), the Com network, and 764 provide an important case in point. When asked about the threat posed by 764, the former Special Agent in Charge of New York's Counterterrorism Division and Joint Terrorism Task Force noted: "It's pervasive. We have 764 investigations in 50 states. And I don't know that we could say 10 years ago we had ISIS investigations in 50 states."[55] Six years of Com network arrest data compiled by Marc-André Argentino and Angus Lindsay distills the point even more, as they documented "295 Com Network-linked offenders across 33 countries."[56] Their data also showed "that for the 229 individuals out of 295 for whom their age is known, the median age is 19 years old."[57] A key factor that makes dealing with the NVE threat ecosystem tricky is that not only are the drivers multifaceted, but responses require multifaceted inputs and different forms of expertise that span "counterterrorism, child protection, online harm reduction, trauma-informed practice, and cross-jurisdictional cooperation."[58] So, there aren't easy solutions.

Inadequate content moderation and enforcement of terms of service by social media companies further complicate the challenge and management of this violence pathway.[59]

Evolving forms of convergence also highlight new dangers that lurk and require monitoring and focus. This includes adversarial convergence, embodied by different forms of cooperation between non-state groups and between a state and a non-state group, which is creating "opportunities for terror groups to enhance or diversify their capabilities."[60] Prominent examples of this type of teaming include collaboration between the Houthis, AQAP, and al-Shabaab; the Houthis and commercial tech suppliers in China; Iran leveraging criminal proxies to execute terror attacks;[61] and Russia's leveraging of disinformation and intermediary individuals to conduct hybrid incidents in Europe.[62] Tech convergence, the ways in which extremists can creatively blend different types of commercial tech, is another 'watch out' form of convergence. For example, an examination of the terrorism implications emerging out of the Russia-Ukraine war highlights how ongoing advancements in commercial tech continue to lower the barriers to entry for terrorists and extremists to get access to speed, range, and scale as capabilities.[63] Over the next decade, it seems predictable that tech convergence and terrorism are only going to intensify. It is not clear that the U.S. counterterrorism community is prepared for the future that lies ahead.

As the United States navigates how to respond and manage these types of challenges and posture itself to effectively 'foresee', it is important to remember two central findings from the 9/11 Commission. The first is how the "combination of an overwhelming number of priorities, flat budgets, an outmoded structure, and bureaucratic rivalries" in the intelligence community pre-9/11 "resulted in an insufficient response" to the new challenge posed by al-Qaeda.[64] The second is how "the wall" — the legal and procedural barriers that separated intelligence gathering from criminal law enforcement — hindered the sharing of critical data and prevented the United States from being able to "connect the dots" in advance of the attack.[65]

When it comes to transnational terrorism, the United States is in a very different place than it was on September 10, 2001. However, there is a danger that the reduction in counterterrorism emphasis and resources has had at least a partial re-siloing effect, whereby different U.S. government entities have drawn in more. A senior U.S. counterterrorism practitioner interviewed by *CTC Sentinel* in 2024 expressed concerns about this issue, noting:

> Frankly, I am really surprised how siloed up we've become again, and how often [we] have to fight for information. I was disheartened to see how we've fallen back on pre-9/11 ways. A lot of what's going on today is in different reporting channels [and information may be held separately]. You know, it's not like anybody's doing it on purpose. It's just organizations — that's what we do. We close up. We try to hold what's near and dear to us.[66]

The irony is that the complexity of the environment and the diminishment of counterterrorism resources suggest that the opposite should be taking place: more effective and meaningful integration and collaboration across the U.S. and global counterterrorism communities, not less, and certainly not re-siloing. While prioritization and focus on core terrorism threats are essential at this time, the mixed and evolving nature of the terrorism threat environment also means that emphasis should be placed on efforts that look across and beyond priority threats, that rigorously challenge assumptions, and that explore indicators not just focused on known threats, but on potential or emerging ones as well. The United States needs to ensure that its prioritized focus on specific terror networks — a source of strength — does not become an underbelly liability. Without care, it could.

To avoid, or at least minimize, that type of outcome and the space for surprise, it is important that the U.S. counterterrorism community 'mind the gaps' so seams do not evolve into becoming new 'walls' or barriers to the United States being able to connect the dots and 'foresee.' There are several gaps that arguably deserve specific attention and may need tightening. The first is academic collaboration. It is unlikely that academic research will help counterterrorism forces find and fix a future high-value terrorism target, but academics have skills and expertise that — while always valuable — are exceptionally important at this moment. They bring context, methodological training, and they have the luxury, space, and time to pull back and deep dive on various questions — and not just on known, 'shiny' objects. It is a capacity and orientation that, if harnessed well, can help the counterterrorism community in various ways. This includes identifying trends and outlier cases, paying high-level attention to the evolution of threat networks of lesser concern, wargaming, leveraging 'best in breed' academic work to inform and refine counterterrorism frameworks and approaches, and conducting independent assessments. After 9/11, public-academic collaboration brought rigor and insight to the counterterrorism fight, and it is important that the United States not lose that capability or let what has been valuable atrophy.

Since 9/11, counterterrorism has evolved into a form of currency for the United States, built on trust and demonstrated capability. In various countries, that cur-

rency has enabled U.S. access and placement, and in other places, that trust has facilitated the steady sharing of sensitive information about terrorism and other national security issues. This includes longer-term strategic alliances, typified by the Five Eyes (FVEY) intelligence-sharing partnership between the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, which has also been built on trust and has been critical to effective Western counterterrorism efforts over the past 25 years. But trust can be fickle — it takes a long time to build, yet it can be lost rather quickly.[67] Therefore, as the United States works to reset relations with various partners around the globe and makes changes to the inner workings of U.S. intelligence and what it does with sensitive intelligence, it should do so with care, as there are signs of partner strain, concerns about the politicization of intelligence,[68] and that some countries have tightened intelligence cooperation and may share less.[69] This could impact and hinder the counterterrorism fight.

Another seam that requires attention is public and private collaboration, as there is a danger that organizational instincts to 'draw in' during a period of constrained resources could lead to the creation of public and private silos of expertise and excellence. This would arguably be a big mistake, as a case can be made that the next chapter of U.S. counterterrorism is going to emerge from, and be driven by, tighter forms of public-private teaming. Teaming in this area has evolved so much since 9/11 that it may be easy to believe it is 'good' and 'covered.' And in many ways, it may be. But there are also areas where public-private teaming is likely not optimized, being lackluster or nonexistent. For example, it is not clear how much analytical teaming there has been between social media and technology companies such as Meta, Google, and Discord, which sit on an enormous amount of user data, and government agencies, which have access to other large sources of data, to understand and develop better dynamic indicators for individuals or small groups that radicalize and/or mobilize. Both spheres engage in and have a stake in that type of work,[70] but how much they are learning from one another, and the level of meaningful, practical exchange between them — especially when the exchange is not oriented around a specific inquiry or a subpoena — are not well understood.

The division between academic and operational communities of practice that focus on individual-based terrorism and those that focus on network or group-based ones is another seam that deserves focus. "Indeed, one of the most interesting takeaways" from a study of terrorism risk approaches that the author led "was the dividing line that exists between individual and group or network-based terrorism risk approaches, and how the instruments that have been developed to model and evaluate the risks posed by individuals are not only more developed — they also appear to be better evaluated."[71] The same study found that there is an opportunity for those focused on network-level risk "to learn from the methodological rigor

and evaluation culture that has grown around individual-based instruments," including "clearer factor definitions, explicit rating guidance, calibration exercises, and structured feedback loops."[72] Since terrorism today is "jointly produced by networks, local opportunity structures, and individual trajectories" it makes sense that assessment approaches "reflect that fact rather than relegating these domains to separate silos."[73]

A final seam that merits attention is a longstanding and ever-present one in the United States — the divide between foreign and domestic forms of intelligence, a construct that legally guides how U.S. agencies approach international and domestic terrorism and who can do what. That distinction exists for good reasons. But that dividing line has always posed challenges — it was, after all, the primary U.S. government seam that led to 9/11.[74]

The U.S. government made big changes to manage that issue after 9/11, including creating the Office of the Director of National Intelligence and the National Counterterrorism Center to integrate all forms of intelligence and serve as a bridge between foreign and domestic intelligence.[75] But a core challenge is that "the superstructure of that security architecture today is either fraying, being dismantled, or falling into disrepair."[76] Further, over the past 25 years, changes in the information environment have increasingly blurred the line between international and domestic, making it hard to discern where and when different U.S. agencies have ownership, when they should be involved in a case or investigation, or when they should be given access to certain types of intelligence. For example, the primary modus operandi that Islamic State has used for the past decade to attack the United States is by inspiring, enabling, and, when possible, directing acts of terror conducted by radicalized individuals in the United States.[77] Islamic State has primarily done so by using technology that was either developed by U.S. companies or that involves data or signals that are hosted and transferred by U.S. entities. The problem *and* Islamic State's method cross the 'foreign' and 'domestic' line that guides U.S. approaches; other terror threats, from NVE to Iranian terror threats, bound across that distinction as well.

The challenges and gap areas discussed in this section highlight how changes in the environment are: 1) affecting the posture and ability of the United States to look beyond jihadi and other types of terror threats that are 'known' and currently exist as priorities and 2) constraining the United States' capacity and ability to foresee. After 25 years of battling jihadi terror threats and considerably degrading the capability of key networks, it is tempting, even seductive, to believe that the United States has jihadi terrorism 'in check.' In many ways, that statement may be true, but the past two and a half decades have also taught us to expect jihadi threat

evolution and some surprises. It is important that the United States avoid becoming complacent and that it maintains, and continues to create space for, efforts that look beyond known terror threats and patterns of behavior.

There were multiple, integrated failures that led to 9/11, but the "most important failure was one of imagination."[78] Thus, as the United States navigates the moment and prepares for what the next decade of jihadi and other types of terrorism may look like, it should make sure that attempts to foresee rely upon key trends as a 'mirror' to look ahead, at least as a foundational course of action, so it can anticipate how terror threats may evolve. By taking this approach, the core emphasis could be placed on four primary areas. The first is the potential for different types of terror threat streams to blend or intersect in unique ways. For example, by the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) own account, nihilistic violent extremism, as typified by a network such as 764, is a "pervasive" problem, and one that is having an outsized effect on youth in the United States and other countries.[79] Iran has a deep history of trying to leverage criminal networks as partners to operationalize attacks in the United States and Europe. Is it not that unrealistic for Iran — a country that has suffered leadership losses from U.S. actions and still desires revenge — or another hostile state to see an opportunity in the NVE ecosystem and for it to try to leverage personas and tech to shape the direction of some forms of that type of violence to suit its own objectives?

A second area that deserves close focus is peripheral terror network 'breakouts.' These types of breakouts can manifest in different ways, such as Hamas upending assumptions and doing more than governments anticipated it would prior to October 7, 2023. Since that attack, there has been some evidence that suggests that Hamas, or elements of Hamas, may be looking to conduct operations much further afield.[80] A breakout could also include groups that shift from a regional orientation to a more transnational or global one. This includes the case of AQAP discussed earlier, and debates about groups such as LeT, especially after its devastating attack in Mumbai in 2008,[81] as well as al-Shabaab,[82] Islamic State Somalia (IS-S),[83] and ISSP.[84] Harakat Ashab al-Yamin al-Islamia (HAYI) attacks and plots in Europe similarly highlight how Iranian-aligned Iraqi militia groups and networks, or related splinters, may be interested in moving in these types of directions too,[85] even if only to facilitate retribution, rather than a sustained campaign. In the view of the author, the Houthis are also a 'watchout' in this regard.

The third is new capability development and/or the creative, convergent use of technology, which can affect, empower, or provide advantage to a broad array of extremists, beyond those in primary focus. When viewed in a more traditional way, this could include a new capability that would enable a legacy group like al-Qaeda or Islamic State to smuggle an explosive compound onto a commercial airliner. Or it could include innovative use of a single commercial system, or mul-

tiple systems, that are creatively combined. For instance, in March 2025, Conflict Armament Research documented the discovery of parts of a Chinese commercial hydrogen fuel cell system recovered from a Houthi vessel.[86] The discovery was concerning because hydrogen fuel cell systems as a powering method are quieter and more stealthy than gas engines, and they can also extend the range of unmanned systems, which could enhance the Houthis' ability to attack from the air, on land, or at sea, and to engage in surprise. Like the public, terror networks around the globe have also been utilizing and experimenting with artificial intelligence, and it seems likely that AI will enable capability development in various areas. It requires monitoring and creative thinking about potential future operational use cases.

The fourth area that deserves attention is the trend in the United States, Europe, and other places with acts of terrorism being conducted by individuals and small cells.[87] These types of plots and attacks, especially 'lone actor' events, are "often difficult to detect and disrupt because of the individualized nature of the radicalization process and use of simple attack methods" [88] such as the use of "bladed weapons, firearms, vehicle ramming, or arson."[89] But it is important that the often simple and low complexity nature of these types of incidents not lead governments and security professionals into a false sense of security, as the "growing availability of modern technology continued to lower the barriers to carrying out sophisticated attacks, even by lone actors or small cells."[90] Future black swan events are a potential threat across all types of terror threats, including those executed by individuals, as technological advances create opportunities for a talented outlier individual to use or creatively blend different types of commercial technology in sinister, new, unexpected, and potentially catastrophic ways.

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Notes

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4

Somalia's Evolution from the Periphery to the Epicenter

Tricia Bacon

Abstract

Twenty-five years after 9/11, Somalia has become the one country where both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State sustain affiliates essential to their global networks. Al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda's strongest affiliate, has built a durable parallel state across much of southern Somalia—administering courts, taxation, and security—while operating as a capable hybrid force and a transnational terrorist threat. The Islamic State in Somalia, by contrast, is militarily marginal but globally consequential. Its *al-Karrar* office functions as a financial and leadership hub for the Islamic State's African and worldwide network. This chapter traces how early counterterrorism interventions backfired, empowering the militants they targeted, and examines the two affiliate groups' capabilities, alliances, and rivalry. It concludes that the current trajectory—al-Shabaab's entrenchment and the Islamic State in Somalia's global importance—will be increasingly difficult to reverse in the face of an incoherent U.S. policy and political dysfunction in Somalia.

Introduction

A quarter-century after the September 11 attacks, Somalia has become something it was not on that day: a focal point in the jihadi movement. It is the one country where both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State—still jockeying to lead the movement, despite the weakness of the core organizations—maintain affiliates critical to their respective networks' viability. Al-Qaeda's strongest affiliate, al-Shabaab, governs much of southern Somalia as a parallel state while terrorizing the region and cooperating across sectarian lines.[1] In the northeast, Islamic State's "province," though militarily marginal within Somalia, houses an important financial hub and a leader who manages its global affiliate network.[2]

Somalia's central place in the jihadi movement is thus the story not of simply one important jihadi group but of two. But in 2001, jihadism was marginal in Somalia. At several early critical junctures post-9/11, counterterrorism interventions backfired, empowering the very extremists they were meant to suppress.

The chapter proceeds in four parts. The first traces Somalia's passage from the movement's periphery toward its center, from the al-Qaeda operatives who sheltered there after the 2002 Mombasa attacks to the invasion that midwifed al-Shabaab. The second explains al-Shabaab today: a parallel state, a capable hybrid force, and an increasingly connected actor whose reach extends even to the Houthis, held together by its Amniyat intelligence wing and sustained by the political dysfunction of its adversaries. The third turns to the Islamic State in Somalia (IS-S) and the *al-Karrar* hub that made a marginal faction consequential. The conclusion cautions that the dangerous trajectory in Somalia is becoming increasingly difficult to change.

A Jihadi Backwater

At the time of the 9/11 attacks in 2001, Somalia was largely irrelevant for the Sunni jihadi movement. Yet the Horn of Africa was once an important al-Qaeda theater.[3] The group was headquartered in Sudan from 1992 to 1996.[4] It launched its opening salvo against the United States with the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam.[5] In the early 1990s, al-Qaeda sent advisors to assist al-Ittihad al-Islami (AIAI), a Somali Islamist group, amid the state's collapse. They played a limited role opposing the U.S.-led famine-relief intervention but found the environment—and their Somali counterparts—difficult, and most left by 1994.[6] AIAI then fractured over whether conditions were ripe for jihad or required more proselytization, leaving the jihadi movement in Somalia adrift.[7]

After al-Qaeda relocated to Afghanistan, a small but experienced East African cell remained.[8] In November 2002, it carried out the first major post-9/11 al-Qaeda attack: a hotel bombing in Mombasa and an attempted missile strike on an Israeli airliner.[9] The attacks triggered an intense U.S. manhunt that the operatives evaded by fleeing from Kenya into Somalia, still languishing as a failed state.[10] The Somalis who sheltered them would later become central to al-Shabaab's formation.[11] But at the time they were a loose network with a shared jihadi orientation, lacking a command structure, recognized leadership, or public support.[12]

The jihadi threat from Somalia was thus real but limited: a small cell of veteran East African al-Qaeda operatives sheltered by dozens of Somali supporters in Mogadishu.[13] The United States feared the failed state would become another terrorist sanctuary.[14] Yet it was reluctant to re-engage, having experienced an intervention there that began as famine relief and ended with U.S. service members' bodies dragged through the streets.[15] Lacking a viable government to work with, it partnered with local warlords—despite their record of violence, abuse, and extortion—to conduct snatch-and-grab operations on its behalf.[16]

Meanwhile, seismic changes were afoot. A 2004 international attempt to create a

government—roughly the fourteenth to date—produced the Transitional Federal Government.[17] But it could not enter the capital and decamped to Baidoa under Ethiopian protection.[18] In Mogadishu, the informal Sharia courts that had served since the state's collapse as a rump provider of justice gained traction and united as the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), a godsend for a population desperate for security.[19]

For the United States, however, the ICU raised the specter of another Taliban willing to shelter al-Qaeda.[20] The Somalis protecting al-Qaeda operatives were indeed embedded in the ICU's militias, sometimes referred to as "the Youths," or al-Shabaab. To forestall that outcome, Washington pushed its warlord partners—longtime rivals—to unite against the ICU. But the ploy backfired: the ICU routed them and gained control of Mogadishu, and the al-Shabaab extremists gained influence based on their battlefield prowess.[21]

The ICU then swept south, taking large swaths of territory except Baidoa, where the Transitional Federal Government remained with its Ethiopian protectors.[22] Extremists in the ICU agitated for confrontation. When they got their wish in a U.S.-backed Ethiopian invasion, the ICU's military defeat was rapid and complete. Rather than face a superior military, "the Youths" dispersed as Ethiopian forces marched into Mogadishu unopposed. But Ethiopia's presence soon provoked opposition, both nationalist resistance to occupation by Somalia's perennial adversary as well as jihadi hostility—both from Somalis and foreign fighters—to a "Christian-Crusader" conquest. Al-Shabaab exploited both sentiments to re-emerge and lead the insurgency, now as an independent organization unencumbered by the ICU.[23]

U.S. tactics against a limited but real threat repeatedly miscarried: tainted warlord partners bred mistrust, their defeat empowered the extremist faction within the ICU, and Ethiopia's decisive victory inadvertently ushered in al-Shabaab's rise. Undoubtedly, al-Shabaab benefited from a collapsed state, discredited warlords, and the ICU's rise. But the counterterrorism missteps supplied an accelerant that turned a latent threat into a unified insurgency.

Twenty-five years after 9/11, what began as a small network sheltering fleeing al-Qaeda operatives has become a state within a state, while a breakaway faction became a linchpin of the Islamic State's network. In other words, Somalia went from a backwater to a focal point of the jihadi movement.

Al-Shabaab: A Parallel State, Insurgent Army, Terrorist Network

Today al-Shabaab is a full-fledged shadow government, insurgent army, and terrorist organization. It is not only al-Qaeda's strongest affiliate but arguably the

strongest Sunni jihadi organization in the world, based on the combination of its institutional sophistication, territorial control, size, financial self-sufficiency, and operational capability.[24]

Al-Shabaab's aim is to overthrow the Somali Federal Government (SFG) and establish an Islamic state spanning Somalia and the Somali-majority areas of neighboring countries.[25] Its primary adversaries are therefore the SFG and its backers—the African Union (AU) force and troop-contributing countries, Türkiye, and the United States. It also acts as a largely regional terrorist organization, sometimes linking its actions to al-Qaeda's broader ambitions and framing its attacks as advancing al-Qaeda's agenda.

Al-Shabaab as a Parallel State

Al-Shabaab's greatest asset is not military but political. For over fifteen years it has run a parallel shadow government across multiple dimensions: justice, through Sharia courts; security, through police, an army, and an intelligence service; finance, through a taxation system; and a modest welfare apparatus that remains after the humanitarian system's collapse. Its authority rests on neither consent nor coercion alone but on a shifting combination of the two—providing services in some domains, using violent compulsion in others, and hardening or softening as the group's fortunes change. Its shadow government institutions allow the group to credibly present itself as an alternative to a corrupt, dysfunctional SFG.

Al-Shabaab administers a shadow government replete with ministries, offices, and provincial governors that rivals—and in key respects outperforms—the Somali government.[26] Most importantly, it provides what civilians need most: order, justice, and security. It offers predictable order to those who comply and imposes violence on those who do not, a recipe for widespread acquiescence to its rule.

It controls much of rural southern Somalia as the uncontested de facto government.[27] In fact, it administers more territory than any other Sunni jihadi organization.[28] Moreover, its administration is the most institutionalized and longest-standing of its kind, dating back to 2009.[29]

The group's rule is oppressive, and its over-reliance on coercion has provoked uprisings. In 2022, communities in central Somalia rebelled, particularly against its demands that clans surrender children to its indoctrination centers.[30] Local militias backed by government forces seized long-held al-Shabaab territory. But then the government faltered, and in 2025 al-Shabaab was able to reverse the SFG's most significant operational gains in a decade through battlefield success, negotiations, non-aggression pacts, and a "softening" of harsher policies.[31]

But such rebellions have been the exception. Al-Shabaab's harsh but predictable

order is genuinely valuable for a population that has known mostly conflict, insecurity, and state failure. It suppresses the inter-clan conflicts that destabilize Somalia,[32] and crime and banditry are limited in its territory. Its police, *al-hisba*, enforce order and the group's moral code through harsh, often public *hudud* punishments, including floggings, amputations, and stonings rarely seen before in Somali society.[33]

Al-Shabaab's courts are essential to its legitimacy. Its qadi courts handle criminal cases, civil complaints, and, importantly, land disputes.[34] Their professed basis is Sharia law, a departure from the customary clan law (*xeer*) that long dominated Somali jurisprudence.[35] Al-Shabaab's interpretation of Sharia is extreme by any standard.[36] Yet many in the Sunni-majority population regard Sharia as legitimate and value the courts' relative freedom from the clan bias that defines the government system.

Importantly, the courts' influence extends beyond al-Shabaab's territory. They can summon individuals in government-controlled areas, with a credible threat of violence for non-compliance. But civilians and even government officials also cross over voluntarily to have disputes mediated faster and less corruptly. Notably, disputants abide by the rulings.[37]

Al-Shabaab's parallel relief system is another pillar of its shadow state—real but small in absolute terms. It provides some pastoralist and drought support: adjudicating disputes over grazing and water, returning tax revenue and foodstuffs to the hardest-hit, and redistributing livestock to herders who have lost their animals.[38] But its relief has also been episodic and self-interested.[39] It operates rudimentary health posts and a parallel education system, though the latter often serves as a recruitment pipeline.[40] At the same time, it obstructs rival services, such as restricting traditional schools, hindering and taxing humanitarian NGOs, and blocking some public health initiatives.[41]

But the collapse of the international humanitarian system in 2025—driven by U.S. cuts, particularly the dismantling of USAID, and compounded by reduced contributions from other donors—handed al-Shabaab a strategic dividend.[42] Not because it can substitute for that system; it cannot. Rather, al-Shabaab had spent years arguing that international aid was a foreign tool that failed to deliver, and the system's dismantling effectively confirmed that narrative.[43] The propaganda value is enormous. The group can portray itself as a provider, albeit small-scale in practice, as the international system fails the population.

Finally, al-Shabaab runs a taxation bureaucracy that fully funds its activities, with estimates of up to $200 million annually.[44] Unlike many militant groups, it generates all its funds internally. It issues receipts, sets standard rates for commodities,

and legitimizes collection in religious terms such as *zakat* and *ushr*. Though coercion underpins compliance, it has arguably entered into a reciprocal fiscal contract with the population it taxes, while the foreign aid-dependent SFG has not.[45] Moreover, it not only taxes its own areas but levies collections at road checkpoints and in government-held areas. It possesses state-level revenue and capacity for resource extraction.

Nonetheless, civilians' relationship to al-Shabaab's shadow government is less loyalty than pragmatic acceptance. They use its courts because they work, pay its taxes because they must, and comply with its order because the alternative is violence.

Al-Shabaab as a Hybrid Force

Beyond its civilian administration, al-Shabaab is a hybrid force capable across the spectrum of violence: conventional battles, insurgency, terrorism, and assassinations. Despite the AU mission, investment in the Somali National Army, and years of U.S. airstrikes, al-Shabaab fields an estimated 7,000–12,000 fighters through its military wing, the Jabhat.[46] Fighters are organized into regional and special units with defined areas of responsibility.[47] Each unit carries its own weapons, improvised explosive device (IED) specialists, medics, communications, transport, and media.[48]

Its high-profile terrorism can obscure that, for much of the past decade, most al-Shabaab-linked violence and fatalities have come from battles.[49] The group can now fight as a "conventional insurgent," massing hundreds of fighters to overrun fortified AU or Somali bases. Typically, a suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED) breaches the perimeter, then infantry waves kill and capture personnel and seize weapons and vehicles before withdrawing ahead of airstrikes.[50] Consequently, it ranked among the four deadliest terrorist groups in the world from 2007 to 2025, and more AU forces have died in Somalia than in any other modern peace operation.[51]

Al-Shabaab's most important weapon is the improvised explosive device. IEDs are the leading cause of Somali army casualties and key to its assaults, mass-casualty urban attacks, and assassinations.[52] It conducted roughly 600 IED attacks between January and September 2025 alone, killing or wounding around 1,500 people.[53] Its IED capability is indigenous and self-sustaining, with sporadic infusions of expertise from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).[54]

It also acts as a terrorist organization in government-held areas and the region. In Somalia, it frequently uses a VBIED to breach a target, followed by armed attackers and a second IED timed for first responders.[55] Its largest such attacks

have struck Mogadishu, most notably the October 2017 Zoobe truck bombing that killed at least 500.[56] The group seeks to manage domestic opposition to its large-scale terrorist attacks by declining to claim indiscriminate bombings like Zoobe while claiming, and religiously justifying, attacks it can frame as striking the government, security forces, foreign troops, or those that support them.[57]

Al-Shabaab's attacks beyond Somalia are often a coercive strategy aimed at the countries that sustain the African Union mission. Its first attack outside Somalia, the July 2010 bombings of World Cup crowds in Kampala, followed this logic explicitly. Its spokesman tied it to Uganda's role in the AU force, warning that "if they do not take out their AMISOM troops from Somalia, blasts will continue."[58] The strategy has extended to Kenya, which sent its army into Somalia in 2011. After the 2013 Westgate siege, al-Shabaab pledged, "Remove your forces from our country and peace will come."[59] However, al-Shabaab has achieved little through these attacks. The 2010 attacks, for example, only hardened Kampala's commitment.[60]

Beyond Westgate, al-Shabaab has waged a sustained campaign against Kenya, striking Garissa University in 2015 and the DusitD2 complex in Nairobi in 2019, anointing Jaysh al-Ayman as its affiliate there, and executing a cross-border campaign of roadside bombs, ambushes of security forces, and targeted killings.[61] It has tried to open a comparable front in Ethiopia with far less success: its affiliate there, Jaysh al-Usra, never moved from aspiration to operations. Its 2022 incursion of roughly 2,000 fighters was al-Shabaab's largest operation outside Somalia. Though Ethiopian forces claimed they repelled it, UN experts warned that as many as 1,000 fighters may remain.[62]

Al-Shabaab's enmity also extends to the United States in the region. It treats American forces and interests in Somalia and the broader Horn of Africa as targets in their own right, repeatedly assaulting U.S.-used facilities inside Somalia, including the Baledogle airfield in September 2019, and overrunning Manda Bay, a Kenyan base hosting American personnel, in January 2020, killing three Americans.[63]

Al-Shabaab's intent towards the United States homeland, though, defies simple conclusions and is full of contradictions. In a 2015 video, it named the Mall of America as a target.[64] In a 2019 message, the group's emir called the American public complicit in its government's wars and thereby a legitimate target for retaliation.[65] Most notably, in a plot disrupted in 2019, al-Shabaab directed an operative to train as a pilot in the Philippines and fly an airliner into the Bank of America Plaza in Atlanta.[66] The Justice Department placed the plot within an "al Qaeda-driven campaign," namely the "Jerusalem Will Never Be Judaized" banner under which al-Shabaab had also claimed the 2019 DusitD2 attack and which

al-Qaeda's leadership promoted across its affiliates.[67] Notably, the plot copied al-Qaeda's 9/11 modus operandi, not al-Shabaab's established repertoire. But a 9/11-style strike on the homeland stretched beyond the group's capability. At the same time, for an operation involving a wholly new tactic well beyond its traditional area of operations, al-Shabaab committed a single operative. Whether this choice was for operational security or as a limited investment is unclear, but either way, it did not reflect a resourced homeland-focused effort.

But homeland capability can fall on the other end of the spectrum: a group can acquire homeland reach opportunistically, when a suitable operative falls into its hands, as the Pakistani Taliban did in 2010 with the naturalized American operative who attempted an attack on Times Square.[68] Al-Shabaab has held that raw material—dozens of Western passport-holders, among them Americans Omar Hammami and Jehad Mustafa—yet it deployed them in the Somali theater rather than sending them home.[69] At the same time, the group had unexploited opportunities to build homeland capability in its earlier years. It had recruitment and fundraising networks both in and beyond the Somali-American community in the United States. But these fed the war in Somalia rather than being translated into attack capability.[70]

The balance therefore points to a limited homeland threat, even as al-Shabaab's willingness to kill Americans in East Africa clearly persists. Its violence is largely driven by the war in Somalia and those countries that support the Somali government. The group has prioritized that effort over building a capability to strike the U.S. homeland.[71]

The Amniyat: Al-Shabaab's Backbone

Underpinning al-Shabaab's unity, coercive capacity, and much of its terrorist violence is its shadowy intelligence and security service, the Amniyat, an entity so central that Sinkó and Besenyő argued that "if it did not exist, there would be no al-Shabaab."[72] Reporting directly to the emir, it has led the targeting of defectors and internal rivals, notably during the purges in 2013 and 2015.[73]

The Amniyat has deeply penetrated Somali society and institutions—the intelligence service, government ministries, even AU forces—with roughly 30 percent of Mogadishu's police believed compromised.[74] It operates pervasive informant networks in government-controlled areas.[75] Its surveillance even turns inward, monitoring al-Shabaab's tax collectors and auditors for corruption and hunting for spies.[76]

It is the enforcement arm that gives al-Shabaab's parallel state its coercive power. The Amniyat underpins the group's taxation by gathering the intelligence used to

set assessments and by punishing non-payers.[77] It also enforces court summons and rulings by detaining, imprisoning, and killing those who resist or defy the courts.[78] The result is a population, and an organization, kept compliant less by persuasion than by the Amniyat's omnipresent reputation and credible threats of punishment.[79]

The Amniyat is also al-Shabaab's instrument of targeted violence.[80] Its assassination unit—estimated at 500 to 1,000 members—runs a systematic campaign against officials, security officers, parliamentarians, clan elders, dissenting clerics, and journalists, concentrated in Mogadishu.[81] Its reach nearly touched the state's apex: in March 2025 it detonated a bomb inside Villa Somalia's fortified perimeter as President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's convoy departed, killing bodyguards and civilians but narrowly missing him.[82] The Amniyat also plans the group's most complex attacks and directs external operations.[83] Its lethal capacity has readily survived the loss of even the group's emir.[84]

Al-Shabaab's Relations

Al-Shabaab was born with al-Qaeda ties, though it became a public affiliate only in 2012. Its affiliation remains stable and secure. Admittedly, al-Shabaab draws few material benefits from the relationship at this juncture. If anything, it supports al-Qaeda's efforts beyond Somalia rather than the inverse.[85] What binds it is identity, history, and ideology—reinforced by cooperation with AQAP. It still promotes its affiliation by amplifying al-Qaeda Central's messaging, claiming operations under banners such as "Jerusalem Will Never Be Judaized"; publicly saluting other affiliates, like when its spokesman congratulated Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) in the Sahel on its gains; and perhaps even by plotting attacks against the U.S. homeland, like the disrupted effort in 2019.[86] In practice, al-Shabaab now carries the al-Qaeda banner on its own terms as a self-sufficient affiliate that bolsters the network rather than a subordinate sustained by it.

That durability is also reflected in what al-Shabaab has declined to do. It violently rejected the Islamic State's 2014–15 attempt to draw it away. When Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)—a group that had broken from al-Qaeda—toppled the Assad regime in December 2024, al-Shabaab's media celebrated its fall and praised the victors' battlefield prowess. But it directed that praise generally to "the Sunni forces" of Syria rather than to HTS by name and withheld any explicit endorsement of Ahmed al-Sharaa and his organization.[87] In other words, it praised the outcome but not the model, showing no inclination to follow HTS in trading the al-Qaeda tie for the promise of international legitimacy. Having turned down both the Islamic State's outreach and HTS's "Syria model," al-Shabaab's affiliation with al-Qaeda looks less like a legacy it might outgrow than a commitment it has

repeatedly chosen to keep.

Importantly, its alliance runs not only to al-Qaeda Central in South Asia but equally, if not more, to the closer AQAP in Yemen, which has supplied specialized IED capability and training. That cooperation persisted even as its direct links to al-Qaeda Central weakened with leadership losses.[88] The clearest instance was the 2016 Daallo Airlines bombing, in which a laptop packed with explosives—a product of AQAP's bomb-concealment expertise—detonated aboard a flight out of Mogadishu.[89]

More surprising is al-Shabaab's collaboration with Ansar Allah, better known as the Houthis, in recent years.[90] Cooperation between the Houthis—a Shia movement in the Iran-backed Axis of Resistance—and al-Shabaab is transactional yet enduring and substantive, including weapons transfers and instruction, notably on drones. Houthi trainers have deployed to al-Shabaab's stronghold in Jilib and sent multiple weapons shipments, and roughly 400 al-Shabaab fighters have cycled through Houthi camps in Yemen.[91] Al-Shabaab has acquired platforms and training and uses drones for surveillance, but there have been no confirmed lethal deployments to date.[92]

The nexus matters less for any specific technology transfer than for what the cooperation represents. It straddles the Bab al-Mandeb, through which a substantial share of global commerce passes, and constitutes sustained collaboration between al-Qaeda's strongest affiliate and the most capable member of the Iran-aligned bloc.[93] Notably, Israel's recognition of Somaliland in 2025—as the first state to do so—gave the two a common enemy on their doorstep.[94]

Al-Shabaab as the Beneficiary of Political Dysfunction

Above all, al-Shabaab thrives because Somali political elites fight one another rather than it—especially now. The Hassan Sheikh Mohamud administration is at odds with Puntland, which has effectively withdrawn from the federal system, and with Jubaland, whose leader has been in open defiance for over two years. It is also mired in a constitutional dispute over federal authority and the one-person-one-vote question. Together, these have produced the most fractured federal-state environment in more than a decade.[95] The strategic gift to al-Shabaab is substantial. Al-Shabaab need not defeat the Somali state militarily. It only needs the federal government and member states to fail to combine their security efforts: an outcome the current environment delivers in spades.

The Islamic State in Somalia

Al-Shabaab has long been Somalia's most unified actor, thanks in part to the Amniyat's brutal suppression of challengers. But even the Amniyat could not

prevent one defection. IS-S formed in October 2015 when Abdulqadir Mumin, an al-Shabaab ideologue commanding roughly 300 fighters in Puntland's Golis Mountains, defected with a few dozen followers and pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.[96] The Amniyat crushed would-be Islamic State supporters farther south, but Mumin's faction lay beyond its reach.

IS-S has never meaningfully threatened al-Shabaab's dominance. Its importance does not derive from the threat it poses within Somalia but from its role in Islamic State's global network. It is a source of funding and leadership at a moment when Islamic State desperately needs both. It presents a paradox: a militarily minor rival that is financially and organizationally significant far beyond Somalia.

A Militarily Minor Rival

Compared with al-Shabaab's institutions, size, and capabilities, IS-S is unremarkable. At its peak it fielded around 1,600 fighters, including a sizeable influx of foreigners—Ethiopians, Moroccans, Tanzanians, and even Syrians and Yemenis—though its multilingual propaganda, especially in Horn of Africa languages, gives it disproportionate reach.[97] At its nadir, it had as few as 100, with its Somali membership concentrated around Mumin's clan, the Ali Salebaan, in stark contrast to al-Shabaab's multi-clan membership.[98] It has never held or governed territory, nor seriously tried to.

Its violence is likewise dwarfed by al-Shabaab's. Apart from a brief, symbolic seizure of the northern port of Qandala in 2016, IS-S operations have consisted mostly of assassinations and IED attacks. Its violence escalated with Puntland's 2024 offensive. As the campaign began, it mounted complex assaults on Puntland forces, including a pre-emptive strike by foreign fighters in December 2024 and counterattacks in February 2025 in its primary base, the Cal Miskaad mountains. It then lost ground and reverted to roadside bombings.[99] Notably, it has not staged the mass-casualty attacks on civilians that al-Shabaab routinely inflicts.[100]

An Internationally Consequential Node

But to assess IS-S by its threat to Somalia is to miss its significance. It hosts the Islamic State's *al-Karrar* office, a regional General Directorate of Provinces hub and a financial clearinghouse for the network's African and global affiliates.[101] Importantly, Africa is now Islamic State's most viable theater: its share of global Islamic State attacks hit a record 86 percent in the first quarter of 2026, up from 49 percent in 2024 and 79 percent in 2025.[102]

Like al-Shabaab, IS-S generates revenue through extortion, chiefly around Bosaso. It generated at least $70,000 a month in 2018–19, $100,000 by late 2022, and as much as $360,000 by mid-2024, making it Islamic State's "primary reve-

nue generator."[103] *Al-Karrar* routes funds to affiliates in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mozambique, and beyond. In 2019–2020, for instance, it moved roughly $400,000 by *hawala* from Somalia to South Africa, later dispersed across Uganda, the United Arab Emirates, Tanzania, Mozambique, and Kenya.[104] As of early 2023, it was sending some $25,000 a month in cryptocurrency to the Islamic State's affiliate in Afghanistan.[105]

This money has translated into violence. *Al-Karrar* helped finance Islamic State's 2021 bombings in Uganda.[106] Its resources supported the Islamic State Khorasan Province's (IS-K) August 2021 suicide bombing at Kabul airport's Abbey Gate, which killed thirteen American service members and roughly 170 Afghans.[107]

IS-S and *al-Karrar* have gained increased stature as Islamic State Central in Syria grapples with a leadership vacuum.[108] The current leader, Abu Hafs al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, is the fifth "caliph" since the caliphate's declaration. Islamic State doctrine holds that the caliph must descend from the Prophet Muhammad's Quraysh tribe, and every publicly named caliph since al-Baghdadi has carried the al-Qurashi nisba. To abandon it would weaken the group's claim to be the "legitimate" Islamic state against rivals like al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and HTS.[109]

But al-Hashimi's identity is unknown, resulting in speculation about whether he is in fact Abdulqadir Mumin and/or located in Somalia. Speculation that Mumin is in fact the Islamic State caliph runs into a fundamental problem: Mumin is not Qurayshi, which would make his appointment unacceptable to a significant part of the network.[110]

More plausibly, amid Islamic State's leadership deficit, Mumin has taken on a larger role managing the network as head of the General Directorate of Provinces and of *al-Karrar*: a role arguably more important than the "caliph's" in the current environment.[111] Among the few senior Islamic State leaders to survive the past decade, Mumin has also been increasingly featured in propaganda, which matters at a time when Islamic State lacks compelling leadership figures.[112]

The Puntland Offensive and its Implications

In December 2024, Puntland's forces launched Operation Hillaac, a sustained ground offensive against the Islamic State's stronghold in the Cal Miskaad range of Bari.[113] Backed by U.S. and Emirati airstrikes, Puntland's offensive cleared the Togjaceel valley, overran the group's caves, and captured the headquarters of its emir.[114] Puntland reported some nine hundred militants killed and foreign fighters captured from at least seven countries.[115] Senior IS-S commanders have also been captured or surrendered. It was an unambiguous success, notably undertaken by Puntland forces without SFG help.

Yet a lesson of the past twenty-five years is that no single offensive, however well executed, can destroy such a group. Two to three hundred fighters remain, Mumin and his deputy survived, and the group has adapted into mobile cells hidden in the range's caves.[116] Its global significance, moreover, will outlast its battlefield losses: the *al-Karrar* hub that channels money was not dismantled by losses on the ground.[117]

Unfortunately, one beneficiary of IS-S's reversal is al-Shabaab. As Puntland forces ground IS-S down, al-Shabaab moved to fill the vacuum, pushing hundreds of fighters toward the Galgala area near Bosaso.[118] A comparable effort against al-Shabaab presence in Puntland would likely prove even harder, especially as tensions with the SFG increasingly distract Puntland.

Conclusion

A quarter-century after September 11, Somalia sits near the center of a movement it was once peripheral to. Over the past decade Somalia alone has suffered nearly as many jihadi–linked deaths as the entire Sahel region.[119] But Somalia's centrality rests on more than bloodshed: it is the one country that concentrates two critical affiliates, through two different logics. The first, al-Shabaab, grew from a small, covert network into a parallel state and al-Qaeda's strongest affiliate. For over fifteen years it has administered territory, taxed populations, and adjudicated disputes, while using violence to silence those that oppose it both in Somalia and in the broader region. But the primary threat is not that al-Shabaab will overrun Mogadishu. Federal forces with partner support can likely hold the capital. It is that al-Shabaab is winning the longer competition for state-like capacity and authority—not its citizens' allegiance so much as their compliance and reliance—and the gap is widening in ways that will be increasingly hard to reverse.

The second, the Islamic State in Somalia, matters for nearly the opposite reason. Militarily marginal and now degraded by Operation Hillaac, it punches far above its weight through *al-Karrar*, a clearinghouse that has bankrolled Islamic State affiliates and whose importance grew as Africa became Islamic State's most active theater. Its emir, Mumin, is now one of the most consequential figures in Islamic State's depleted leadership. Consequently, Puntland's offensive may have changed less than it appears: Mumin survived, the cells dispersed, the financing hub endured, and al-Shabaab moved to exploit its rival's retreat.

U.S. airstrikes confirm Somalia's importance. Even as the administration deprioritizes "legacy" jihadi groups and preaches a "light footprint" in Africa, its counterterrorism strategy singles out Somalia as a theater of resurgent threat.[120] It has backed that judgment with force: Somalia has become one of the most intensely struck locations of President Trump's second term, with at least 132

airstrikes against both groups in 2025 alone.[121] That exceeds the combined counterterrorism strikes of the Bush, Obama, and Biden administrations, and makes Somalia second only to Yemen among nations targeted since Trump returned to the White House.[122] The airstrike tempo continues into 2026, now more focused on al-Shabaab.

Yet the escalating air campaign sits atop a policy that is otherwise incoherent. Washington is simultaneously defunding the partners needed to contain, if not weaken, al-Shabaab—the AU force, the UN office that sustains it, and the Danab special forces unit built to fight al-Shabaab.[123] Washington has also curtailed the humanitarian aid that competes with the group's provision of relief and invested little to ease the political feuding that both al-Shabaab and IS-S exploit.[124] Airpower cannot substitute for the instruments that convert tactical pressure into strategic effect: a capable local force, a state consistently able to provide core functions for its citizens, and a mediator to reconcile the political divisions and focus attention on the two-pronged threat. The result is less a strategy than a set of countervailing impulses, and it is unlikely to weaken al-Shabaab strategically or to keep the Islamic State from recovering from its setbacks.

Airstrikes can kill al-Shabaab's fighters and scatter the Islamic State's, but they cannot dismantle a shadow government, drain a financial hub, or repair the political dysfunction. Unless Somalia's leaders stop fighting one another long enough to offer their citizens the order and justice al-Shabaab already provides—and to deny the Islamic State the space in which it entrenches—the next twenty-five years risk resembling the last.

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5

Convergence and Collision: How Interstate Rivalries Are Reshaping South Asia's Militant Ecosystem

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Abstract
The next strategic surprise in South Asia is likely to emerge not from a single militant organization but from the interlinkages between interstate conflict and militant movements that are simultaneously converging and competing. Pakistan is waging open war against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan while battling resurgent insurgencies, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Baloch separatist groups, and at the same time managing tensions with India and absorbing the fallout of the Iran war. Balochistan's critical mineral deposits, meanwhile, have transformed the volatile province into a theater of great power competition. Within this operating environment, militant groups are finding opportunities to cooperate, clash, and evolve in novel ways, creating a fluid and unpredictable attack landscape. 25 years after 9/11, the region where the Global War on Terrorism began emerges as a threat landscape that is more crowded and more localized, yet it is arguably reproducing the very conditions that enable transnational terrorism. This chapter argues that the overlapping dynamics of interstate conflict, jihadi convergence, ideological competition, and weak cross-border governance demand a fundamental rethinking of how we anticipate and prevent future threats.

Introduction

South Asia, specifically the Afghanistan-Pakistan corridor, has long been perceived as one of the world's most terrorism-affected regions, hosting a diverse number of militant groups. While some are transnational in nature, such as al-Qaeda, including its local affiliate al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), and the Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-K), others are more locally oriented, such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA). Although these groups receive considerable scholarly and policy attention, far less attention is dedicated to how interstate relations in the region create exploitable conditions that facilitate their adaptation, long-term survival,

and resistance to traditional counterterrorism efforts.

The region's militant landscape is made significantly more dangerous by volatile interstate rivalries and growing geopolitical competition. India and Pakistan, two nuclear-armed countries and bitter adversaries, remain entangled in a dangerous, deeply entrenched rivalry, most recently illustrated by the May 2025 crisis, which was marked by heavy use of disinformation. Pakistan and Afghanistan have also engaged in direct hostilities and conflict, driven in part by the TTP's safe havens in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the region is dealing with the fallout from conflict involving Iran, as the war's impact spills across borders. At the same time, the region, especially Pakistan's Balochistan province, is intensifying as a site of global competition between China and the U.S. over critical minerals. Though Pakistan has gained hard-fought experience in counterterrorism, given its role as a key partner in the Global War on Terrorism, it remains plagued by two potent insurgencies and surging terrorism against its security personnel and citizens.

The destabilizing effects of interstate rivalries and tensions, alongside the issue of abandoned U.S. weapons in Afghanistan being accessed by violent non-state actors, are reshaping the regional militant ecosystem in ways that challenge conventional threat categories. The TTP and AQIS appear to be drawing closer through shared propaganda networks, operational cooperation, and the recruitment of foreign fighters, and collaboration could prove to be an effective force multiplier for both groups. IS-K and its Pakistan-based networks have continued their sectarian targeting, competing with the TTP and Baloch militants, while recruiting across borders and vilifying regional state actors. Baloch insurgent organizations, meanwhile, have sought to capitalize on the state's repressive practices by sustaining their anti-extractive narrative and broadening their appeal to women and educated Baloch civilians. The latter's escalating campaign of economic warfare extends not only to Chinese investment but potentially to any foreign investor in Balochistan.

This chapter argues that the interaction of interstate conflict, jihadi cooperation, ideological competition, and weak cross-border governance is producing a fluid and unpredictable threat environment, one that requires policymakers to think beyond group-centric approaches. Rather than assessing organizations in isolation, where siloing distorts and underestimates the distinctive nature of the threat, the region's landscape should be understood as an interactive ecosystem, one in which interstate conflict and realignments directly shape militant behavior and contribute to a panoply of security challenges.

The Interstate Rivalries That Create an Opportunity-Generating Environment

The Pakistan-Taliban War

One of the most consequential crises in the region is the ongoing conflict between Pakistan and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan run by the Taliban regime. Since the U.S. withdrawal in August 2021, Pakistan has oscillated between negotiations, coercion, and intermittent airstrikes.[1] However, tensions escalated in February 2026, when a wave of attacks inside Pakistan linked to Afghanistan-based groups prompted Islamabad's declaration of an "open war" with strikes on targets within Afghanistan.[2] Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA), a group that has operated both independently and under the TTP umbrella, attacked Pakistani security personnel in Karachi in June 2026 and triggered another round of Pakistani cross-border action in the Paktia, Paktika, and Kunar provinces of Afghanistan.[3] The June cycle underlines the logic of the Pakistan-Taliban war: each attack inside Pakistan is now framed as either Afghan-based or Indian-sponsored,[4] and each Pakistani strike triggers a further round of Kabul denials and cross-border escalation. Although the two countries have repeatedly engaged in mediation, this has failed to produce any meaningful results thus far.

The Pakistan-Iran Border

While Pakistan's latest role as mediator in the 2026 U.S.-Iran conflict has earned it some diplomatic capital, the underlying relationship remains structurally tense, shaped by a porous border, with cross-border smuggling of fuel and opiates, and cross-directional militant infiltration.

These tensions were evident in January 2024, when Iran struck Jaysh al-Adl positions in Pakistani Balochistan, and Pakistan retaliated against Baloch militant targets in Iran's Sistan and Balochistan province.[5] Part of the underlying tension is structural: the over 500-mile-long border runs through mountainous terrain that neither state has historically been able to effectively police, and each accuses the other of tolerating militant sanctuaries. Iran views Jaysh al-Adl, the Sunni Baloch militant group that regularly targets Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) personnel in Zahedan and across Sistan and Balochistan, as operating from Pakistani soil.[6] Pakistan, in turn, accuses Baloch militants of using the Iranian side of the border as a refuge from which to launch cross-border attacks into Balochistan. Further, a sectarian dimension — Sunni-majority Baloch communities on one side and a Shia Iranian state on the other — reinforces the mutual suspicion.

The war in Iran has complicated the picture further by weakening Iranian state coverage of the frontier at precisely the moment Pakistan's militant problem is expanding. This means that Pakistan's mediator role sits on top of an unresolved security frontier, creating greater space for militant groups to operate across the border.[7]

The Pakistan-India Conflict

The most severe crisis between the two nuclear-armed states in over two decades unfolded across April and May 2025 as Indian strikes deep into Pakistan prompted retaliatory Pakistani drone and missile attacks. India's suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty, a 1960 agreement that establishes a framework for utilizing the waters of the Indus River system and had held through every previous war between the two states, as well as widespread disinformation, further exacerbated the confrontation.[8]

The crisis was triggered by a terrorist attack: on April 22, militants killed 26 tourists, most of them Hindu, in Pahalgam in Indian-administered Kashmir.[9] India attributed the attack to Pakistan-based militant groups, specifically to "The Resistance Front," an alleged front for Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT), and responded forcefully by launching Operation Sindoor on nine sites inside Pakistan that Indian officials described as infrastructure linked to Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) and LeT. Pakistan retaliated with Operation Bunyan-um-Marsoos; four days of missile, drone, and artillery exchanges which ultimately ended in a ceasefire, though the underlying disputes over Kashmir and Pakistan-based militancy remain unresolved.[10] The potential for future violence seems inevitable, and escalation between nuclear-armed enemies could lead to disaster on the Subcontinent.

India continues to view Pakistan's tolerance of anti-India militant groups as the root cause of the crisis, and Pakistan continues to view Indian rule in Kashmir as the root cause of the militancy. Pakistan has also adopted a broader narrative strategy toward its domestic insurgencies.[11] In July 2024, the government formally labeled the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan "Fitna al-Khawarij" (Sedition of the Kharijites), rooting the label in early Islamic history and seeking to sever the group's claim to jihadi legitimacy by branding it a theological deviation from mainstream Islam. In May 2025, it designated Baloch militant groups "Fitna al-Hindustan," framing the insurgency as an extension of Indian hostility rather than a domestic political conflict. Both movements adapted in response: the TTP has increasingly invoked Pashtun anti-colonial resistance, while Baloch groups emphasized resource extraction, enforced disappearances, and women's honor.[12] State framing has thus become an important input into the evolution of militant propaganda.

Critical Minerals as Opportunity Multiplier

The U.S.-Pakistan critical minerals partnership has internationalized Balochistan's economic geography in a way that has direct consequences for militant target selection. In late 2025, Pakistan and the United States deepened critical minerals cooperation through new agreements, and in February 2026, Washington announced $1.3 billion in financing for Reko Diq.[13] The Trump administration's personal relationship with Field Marshal Asim Munir, Pakistan's Chief of Defense Forces (CDF), has further reinforced this alignment.[14]

This partnership, however, has arguably elevated the province from a domestic security theater into an active front for great power resource politics, creating new opportunities for Baloch militant organizations, which have long targeted economic infrastructure. The insurgency was already trending toward economic-infrastructure targeting; the critical minerals partnership has increased both the potential strategic value and visibility of such attacks.[15] The pressure is already visible on the Chinese side. In June 2026, the Chinese state-run operator of the Saindak copper-gold mine formally warned Pakistan's government that operations could cease within a month, pointing to attacks on transportation routes which have made conditions "increasingly hazardous."[16] The Baloch insurgency is not the only threat vector to Chinese interests, however; Islamic State propaganda has progressively normalized China as a routinized enemy, with IS-K emerging as the movement's anti-China vanguard.[17]

The Militant Ecosystem

The militant ecosystem operating across the Afghanistan-Pakistan corridor sorts into four categorical clusters that share an operational space without sharing ideology.

One transnational jihadi cluster is the Islamic State network, which operates through two regional affiliates: IS-K and the Islamic State Pakistan Province (ISPP), the latter of which now accounts for a growing share of attacks claimed inside Pakistan. Formally announced by Islamic State Central in January 2015 as Wilayat Khorasan, IS-K was established in part from defections from existing militant organizations, drawing on disaffected TTP and Taliban commanders, while leveraging operational partnerships with groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ).[18] After 2021, IS-K expanded beyond Afghanistan and Pakistan, launching attacks in Uzbekistan, Iran, and Russia. Although leadership losses and Taliban pressure later constrained the group, two major suicide bombings in Kabul and

Islamabad in early 2026 showed that it remained capable of high-profile violence.[19] The second transnational organization is al-Qaeda's local affiliate, AQIS, formed in September 2014 when al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri announced the establishment of a dedicated South Asian affiliate.[20] Its founding emir, Asim Umar, was killed in September 2019 and succeeded by Osama Mahmood. Since the Taliban takeover, the group has deliberately maintained a more subtle operational profile in Afghanistan, seemingly to shield the Taliban from political fallout, focusing instead on propaganda and creating unity within the fragmented jihadi landscape.[21] Some evidence suggests that AQIS has extended its influence through the recently formed Ittehad-ul-Mujahideen Pakistan (IUM) coalition[22], bringing together Lashkar-e-Islam, the Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group, alongside Harkat Inqilab-e-Islami Pakistan (the latter appeared as a new organization that emerged in March 2025).[23]

The line between al-Qaeda core and AQIS inside Afghanistan has become increasingly blurry. According to UN monitoring reports, al-Qaeda maintains safe houses and training camps across several Afghan provinces, but its role is largely limited to providing training, logistical support, and ideological guidance to various groups, with senior commanders (as well as AQIS's emir Osama Mahmood) living and operating from Kabul. Since al-Zawahiri's killing in Kabul in July 2022, al-Qaeda appears to exist as more of a protected leadership hub, with AQIS serving as its operational and media arm — one that, as discussed below, is increasingly used to graft al-Qaeda's global anti-American agenda onto local conflicts. In practice, al-Qaeda core and AQIS are better understood as a single network sustained by shared Taliban and Haqqani patronage than as distinct organizations.

One of the two active insurgencies inside Pakistan is a Baloch ethnonationalist insurgency that has progressed from rural guerrilla operations to coordinated multi-district offensives, led by the BLA and the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF), with multiple other factions operating jointly under the Baloch Raji Ajoi Sangar (BRAS) banner.[24] The other active and rapidly expanding insurgency in the region is the TTP, initially formed in 2007, whose main violent campaign is concentrated in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan's restless and rugged northwest frontier province, but has also been expanding into Balochistan, South Punjab, rural Sindh, and Gilgit-Baltistan.[25] A breakaway TTP faction, JuA, had maintained a hedging position between TTP and IUM, though it recently declared its independence (discussed further below).[26]

Cluster / Group	Acronym	Description
Transnational Islamic State network		
Islamic State Khorasan Province	**IS-K**	Older jihadi affiliate headquartered across the Afghan border; Al-Azaim media wing; running a sustained theological campaign against Afghan Taliban leadership.
Islamic State Pakistan Province	**ISPP**	Distinct provincial designation with a growing share of claims in Islamic State central media; Nida-e-Haq Urdu output; recent signaling of Punjab expansion.
Al-Qaeda-aligned network		
Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent	**AQIS**	Global jihadi actor; *Nawa-e-Ghazwa-e-Hind* magazine; urban educated-youth recruitment focus, particularly in Karachi.
Ittehad-ul- Mujahideen Pakistan	**IUM**	AQ-aligned coalition announced April 2025; second-most active jihadi actor after TTP; suicide-attack tempo concentrated in North and South Waziristan, Khyber, Hangu, and Bannu.
Lashkar-e-Islam	**LI**	Local jihadi under the IUM umbrella; Al-Saif Media; visibly dominant in IUM operational imagery in Khyber district.
Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group	**HGB**	Local jihadi under the IUM umbrella; Saut ul-Ummat media; active in North Waziristan and Bannu.
Inqilab-e-Islami Pakistan	**IIP**	Anti-state jihadi and IUM's most prolific propaganda arm; recent signaling of recruitment into Pakistan-administered Kashmir.
Baloch ethnonationalist insurgency		
Balochistan Liberation Army	**BLA**	Lead separatist actor; Majeed Brigade suicide unit; QAHR drone unit; sustained targeting of economic infrastructure, foreign personnel, and CPEC.
Balochistan Liberation Front	**BLF**	Separatist parallel to BLA; Saddo Operational Battalion (suicide squad); bilingual *Asper* magazine; first female suicide bomber deployed December 2025.
Baloch Raji Ajoi Sangar	**BRAS**	Baloch umbrella coalition (BLA, BLF, BRG, SRA); periodic National Army of Balochistan announcements.
TTP-centered jihadi ecosystem		
Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan	**TTP**	Largest active jihadi campaign; Umar Media; concentrated in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa with expanding reach into Balochistan, South Punjab, rural Sindh, and Gilgit-Baltistan; layered Pashtun anti-colonial framing over jihadi identity.
Jamaat ul-Ahrar	**JuA**	TTP breakaway faction; weekly *Al Fajr* newspaper; maintains a hedging position between TTP and IUM; recent editorials have featured BLA-associated content.

Taken together, these four clusters constitute a somewhat interactive system: ideologically distinct actors that draw on the same enabling conditions, often competing for the same recruits, and exploiting the same gaps in state capacity and interstate tensions.

The Opportunity Space

Throughout South Asia, interstate conflict and geopolitical competition have created a shared opportunity structure for militant groups. Across the region, states routinely externalize domestic security threats: Pakistan blames Afghan sanctuaries and Indian sponsorship; the Taliban portrays militancy as a Pakistani and/or Western project, frequently attributing IS-K to Pakistan;[27] India attributes attacks to Pakistan-based groups; and Pakistan and Iran accuse each other of harboring Baloch militants.

These competing narratives divert attention from local grievances and prevent meaningful cross-border cooperation, offering militant groups greater room to operate. In Balochistan, geopolitical competition over critical minerals and increasingly coercive state responses have further blurred the line between counterterrorism and the suppression of dissent, reinforcing recruitment for terrorist groups. Together, these pressures are producing two distinct dynamics across the militant landscape. On one hand, groups are converging through mergers, shared recruitment networks, and tactical and ideological alignment. On the other hand, they are colliding through fragmentation, rivalry, and competitive outbidding.

Consolidation through Formal Mergers

One of the clearest forms of militant convergence is organizational consolidation through mergers and absorption. Since July 2020, the TTP has been implementing an expansion-through-absorption strategy under Emir Noor Wali Mehsud, announcing back-to-back mergers with various factions, al-Qaeda-linked networks, and former splinter groups like JuA. While Mehsud's more decentralized structure allowed merging factions to retain a degree of internal autonomy, the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan post-2021 enabled TTP militants previously embedded in the Taliban campaign to redirect their efforts toward the Pakistani state.

While estimates vary, independent counts of TTP's mergers now surpass 100, reaching 105 by mid-June 2026.[28] Some of this expansion now extends to Balochistan. TTP's Balochistan expansion began with the June 2022 merger of Aslam Baloch's group from Noshki, followed by Mazar Baloch's group from the Makran

coastline in December 2022, and the Akram Baloch (Qalat) and Asim Baloch (Quetta) groups on the same day in April 2023, culminating in the Khattab pledge from Makran on June 14, 2026.[29] Other merger geographies have pushed TTP into Punjab.[30]

TTP's ultimate goals are to expel the Pakistani state from the former tribal areas and replace the existing order with its own interpretation of an Islamic system. While it remains far from achieving these ends, its intermediary goal, to transform itself from a terrorist campaign into a substantial and durable insurgency, appears well supported by its mergers. Each absorbed group brings local networks and recruitment pools, not only reinforcing and extending TTP's capability and reach but also fragmenting the state's law-enforcement response. By most observable measures, the strategy is working: the Global Terrorism Index identified TTP as one of the fastest-growing terrorist groups in the world, with attributed deaths rising about 90 percent in 2024 compared to the previous year.[31] By 2026, however, the TTP's Pakistan consolidation campaign was being challenged by JuA, which pursued its own pledges and mergers across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan before formally separating from the TTP in July (discussed further below).

On the ethnonationalist side, consolidation has proceeded through coalitions rather than absorption. BRAS was formed in 2018 as an umbrella of the BLA, BLF, Baloch Republican Guards, and Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army. In March 2025, the coalition announced a unified military command under the banner of a "Baloch National Army" with joint operational tempo scaling through 2025 and 2026.[32] The criminalization of peaceful advocacy, culminating in the June 2026 anti-terrorism conviction of Baloch Yakjehti Committee leader Mahrang Baloch, has closed off the political channel for Baloch grievances, which is likely accelerating recruitment[33], a trend already visible in the insurgency's broadening demographic base of educated youth and women.

On the jihadi side, the most consequential consolidation of the past year is the IUM, announced in April 2025 as a coalition of Lashkar-e-Islam, the Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group, and Harkat Inqilab-e-Islami Pakistan.[34] By early 2026, IUM had emerged as the most active jihadi faction in Pakistan after TTP, with a suicide-attack tempo concentrated in North and South Waziristan, Khyber, Hangu, and Bannu. The May 9, 2026 Fatah Khel checkpost attack in Bannu, claimed by IUM and killing 15 Khyber Pakhtunkhwa policemen, was the deadliest single police loss of the year.[35]

Institutional Cross-Pollination: Personnel Pipelines and Transnational Recruitment

A second form of convergence is institutional cross-pollination through shared personnel and transnational recruitment networks. The appointment of Chaudhry Muneebur Rehman Jutt in 2023, a former al-Qaeda as-Sahab propagandist, as director of TTP's Umar Media, with Naveed-ul-Hassan Yousafzai as his deputy, has provided the institutional spine of the TTP-AQIS alignment.[36] By 2025, Bangla-language AQIS-affiliated accounts were amplifying TTP content on Telegram and Chirpwire, and TTP recruitment of Bangladeshi nationals proceeded in the same period.[37] An emerging recruitment pipeline was drawing Bangladeshi nationals into the TTP and allied networks, including IUM Pakistan.[38]

The transnational personnel pipeline of the TTP-AQIS axis appears to sit at the convergence of three conditions. The Afghan safe haven established after the Taliban's 2021 takeover supplies the physical space; the Pakistan-Taliban war has likely entrenched that sanctuary rather than threatened it, as the TTP's value as leverage against Islamabad gives Kabul reason to preserve it; and UN reporting through 2025 and 2026 suggests a tiered permissiveness in which the TTP receives active support, while AQIS appears to be tolerated on condition of discretion. Where these conditions intersect, cross-border recruitment machinery of this kind becomes sustainable. The axis, in other words, does not merely reflect the interstate environment. It appears to be protected by it.

At present, the TTP-AQIS axis remains regionally focused, though for different reasons on each side. The TTP's legitimacy rests on framing its war as an indigenous Pakistani struggle, whereas externally directed attacks would invite unwanted international scrutiny. AQIS, by contrast, carries al-Qaeda's transnational agenda but lacks demonstrated capability and has deliberately minimized its operational profile since 2021. This is consistent with the broader erosion of the far-enemy doctrine in practice, as affiliates prioritize local wars and organizational survival over transnational attacks.[39] However, this localization is reversible: the axis's transnational recruitment (Bangladeshi nationals, fighters from Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Arab states) is building capabilities that could outlast its currently regional ambitions.

Doctrinal versus Tactical Alignment

Alongside these intra-jihadi convergence patterns, in early 2026, JuA's weekly newspaper *Al Fajr* began featuring BLA-associated content, cutting across the traditional ideological boundaries that separate jihadi and Baloch separatist movements.[40] Concurrently, *Al Fajr* reported JuA's own expansion into Balochistan,

alongside its own absorption of new groups in Bajaur and Mardan in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Although there is no evidence of formal operational cooperation, JuA's amplification of Baloch militant content marks an unusual form of propaganda convergence across otherwise distinct militant movements.

The editorial-layer signal has a kinetic counterpart on the ground. According to some accounts, there has been evidence of tactical cooperation between TTP factions and the BLA in some areas of Balochistan.[41] The alliance appears to be concentrated in Pashtun–Baloch mixed-population areas**,** particularly the corridor near Ziarat, Harnai, and Sibi, where BLA operations extend into districts with mixed populations. Some sources report that the BLA has previously requested training from the TTP.[42]

A related form of rhetorical convergence appears in the June 2026 edition of AQIS's flagship magazine, *Nawa-e-Ghazwa-e-Hind*. The issue's editorial argues that the Pakistani state has abandoned mujahideen and Muslims at every historic inflection point, from the 1948-49 Kashmir war to the post-9/11 Kashmir jihad, framing Kashmir as the next Gaza-like theater of Pakistani state repression.[43] Notably, the editorial uses Balochistan as a rhetorical precedent for what it argues is now happening in Kashmir, stating that "this same scene was replayed in Balochistan and today it is being replayed in Azad Kashmir." The notable element here is AQIS's incorporation of Pakistan's policies in Balochistan into its broader doctrinal case against the state's legitimacy.[44]

More broadly, AQIS's *Nawa-e-Ghazwa-e-Hind* progressively broadened its threat narrative during 2025 and 2026. The February 2026 issue warned that the "American crusade" would eventually target Pakistan and Türkiye, while the April issue offered theological justification for violence claimed by IUM.[45] By May 2026, the magazine's opening editorial was explicitly calling for greater operational coordination among jihadi groups, pointing to cooperation among IUM-aligned factions as a model. This alignment rests on a shared portrayal of Pakistan as a proxy of the United States, a narrative that intensified after Islamabad joined the Board of Peace (related to the war in Gaza) and mediated during the United States–Iran crisis. Convergence is also visible in propaganda production: TTP's tribute videos and magazine designs increasingly resemble AQIS's visual style, including a video honoring TTP militants and a redesigned publication, *Mujallah Taliban,* modeled on *Nawa-e-Ghazwa-e-Hind*.

Overall, AQIS appears to be reframing TTP's local agenda as part of its global fight against the United States, and, as such, rebuilding its regional relevance

through narrative guidance rather than direct operations. Operationally, the May 2026 editorial's call for greater coordination is a development worth watching closely: if the convergence already visible in propaganda extends to joint operations, the distinction between these organizations may matter less than the ecosystem they jointly sustain.

Beyond rhetorical and tactical convergence, AQIS's treatment of IUM increasingly suggests a deeper form of organizational alignment. The clearest single indicator of this is that AQIS is now treating IUM as one of its global jihadi fronts on par with its African affiliates (at least in its propaganda). The June-July 2026 issue of *Nawa-e-Ghazwa-e-Hind*, the Urdu AQIS flagship magazine, includes a review of global jihadi front operations for February through April 2026, and features IUM's violent campaign in Pakistan, in an infographic (depicting 217 killed, 23 attacks, 26 *istishhadi* operations, 11 improvised explosion device (IED) strikes, and additional shelling and drone claims) alongside al-Shabaab in Somalia and Kenya and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.[46] It is the closest AQIS has come in public record to treating a Pakistan-based militant coalition as a front of the al-Qaeda global network, and perhaps one of the strongest indicators that the AQIS-IUM alignment traced has moved into structural incorporation.

Convergence in Women's Recruitment: Two Architectures, One Demographic Broadening

The convergence logic extends to women's recruitment, which both jihadi and separatist actors now treat as a strategic priority, though through categorically different architectures. On the jihadi side, groups frame participation in jihad as a religious obligation. Since 2023, TTP has released a steady stream of magazines targeting women: rather than urging direct combat participation, the messaging emphasizes ideological indoctrination, community influence, and social media activism.[47] Similarly, IS-K's *Voice of Khurasan* regularly places gendered appeals toward women, defining them primarily as wives, mothers, ideological educators, and supporters of jihad responsible for raising future fighters and preserving the ideological integrity of the community.[48]

Conversely, Baloch insurgent organizations have built women's mobilization around political grievances related to state repression and narratives of empowerment. Additionally, the BLA has shifted to mass mobilization of women across combat units, incorporating them into *existing* elite formations such as the BLA's Majeed Brigade and BLF's new Saddo Operational Battalion.[49] Since 2022, at least five BLA/BLF women have carried out suicide attacks.[50]

Collision: Clashes, Fragmentation, and Competitive Dynamics

The same interstate environment that has produced the convergence dynamics of the previous section is producing, in parallel, a distinct set of competitive dynamics which can at times lead to clashes, fragmentation, or outbidding behavior.

The Islamic State-versus-Rest Axis

One key fault line of the current landscape is not necessarily jihadi-versus-ethnonationalist but Islamic-State-versus-the-rest, which has included clashes between IS-K and Baloch insurgents, a theological rhetorical warfare between IS-K and the Afghan Taliban, and the Afghan Taliban striking alleged IS-K hideouts located on Pakistani territory.[51] Over recent years, IS-K has also started to heavily criticize both TTP and Baloch insurgents.

One recent single-event illustration of the fragmentation axis was the assassination of Sheikh Idrees in April 2026, a senior Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam – Fazl (JUI-F) cleric, which was claimed by the Islamic State.[52] TTP, AQIS, IUM, and JuA each condemned the killing and attributed it to Pakistani security agencies.[53] While the Pakistan-Taliban war has pushed TTP, AQIS, and IUM into a tighter cross-organizational alignment framed around the "Pakistan as U.S. proxy" narrative, it has left IS-K as the only major jihadi actor operationally hostile to both the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani state.[54]

In addition to targeting the Pakistani state and its aligned religious scholars using the standard jihadi delegitimization vocabulary of tyranny and apostasy, IS-K/ISPP frames the Afghan Taliban as "puppets" of Pakistan, attacking their engagement with non-Muslim states, including Russia and China.[55] In May 2026, al-Azaim released "The Creed of Mullah Hibatullah," an 80-page Pashto-language booklet denouncing Taliban supreme leader Hibatullah Akhundzada as "cunning and deceitful."[56] Additionally, IS-K refers to the TTP as "pseudo-Islamic," dismissing it as heretical, a Pakistani nationalist militia fighting for territorial control rather than for true jihad. This framing was fully articulated in a Pashto-language book, *Answer to the Council of Tehreek*, released by IS-K's al-Azaim Media Foundation in November 2024.[57] By early 2026, this rhetorical war had begun spilling into direct kinetic confrontation. In February 2026, IS and TTP fighters were reportedly directly clashing in Orakzai district, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, killing three IS militants and one TTP commander.[58] A month later, in March 2026, IS-K and TTP fighters exchanged fire in Orakzai district again, with clashes continuing into mid 2026.[59]

The collision between IS-K and the Baloch cluster escalated from ideological competition into direct kinetic hostility in early 2025. Both organizations oper-

ate in the same border corridor where Iranian and Pakistani governance remains weak, and both compete for the same recruitment pool. In March 2025, the BLA staged a pre-emptive raid on IS-K camps near Mastung, killing 30 IS-K fighters, collapsing the tacit non-interference arrangement the two organizations had previously maintained. IS-K responded in late May 2025 with a 36-minute video that formally declared war on Baloch nationalist organizations, calling their fighters "secular infidels."[60] In October 2025, al-Azaim released a trilingual (English, Arabic, Russian) poster titled "Blood for Blood" accusing the Afghan Taliban and Baloch separatists of conspiring with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence to stage-manage IS-K fighter deaths in Karachi and Mastung. The poster vowed revenge against "the apostate Taliban, Baloch nationalists, and the apostate government of Pakistan," placing three otherwise-unaligned enemies within a single IS-K threat frame.[61]

The Islamic State-versus-the-rest axis maps directly onto this chapter's interstate frame. The Pakistan-Taliban war has isolated IS-K as the only major jihadi actor hostile to both Kabul and Islamabad, while TTP, AQIS, and IUM converge around the "Pakistan as U.S. proxy" narrative. The Pakistan-Iran border porosity produces the ungoverned corridor in which IS-K and Baloch fighters kinetically clash. And the July 2026 Afghan Taliban airstrikes on alleged IS-K hideouts inside Pakistan express the same fault line in interstate kinetic form. Interstate reconfiguration, in short, is not merely the backdrop against which the Islamic State-versus-the-rest fault line has hardened; it is one of the conditions producing it.

At present, demonstrated external-operations capability remains concentrated in IS-K, and the collision dynamics described above are part of what sustains it. In a crowded field of locally focused rivals, attacks beyond the region are one way a group can differentiate itself from the rest, outbid rivals, and appeal to a more diverse cross-border militant recruitment pool.[62]

More consequential than any single group's external operations capability, however, may be the operational environment itself. Each interstate rivalry contributes to an environment arguably conducive to transnational terrorism: weakened governance along borders, eroded counterterrorism cooperation, accusations of state sponsorship of militant groups, and access to safe havens. In other words, the structural preconditions are re-assembling, even if the violence they enable currently points inward.

Intra-Cluster Rivalries and the Risk of Outbidding

In a militant landscape as saturated as the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, intra-group competition is structurally inevitable. Inside the TTP cluster, rivalry over recruits and, potentially, legitimacy has produced visible rifts: for example, JuA's initial claim of the November 11, 2025 Islamabad Judicial Complex bombing, subsequently denied by commander Sarbakaf Mohmand, was the most public flashpoint, culminating in JuA's formal separation from TTP in July 2026.[63] In its statement, JuA accused the TTP leadership of betrayal, alleging that its earlier commitment to organizational unity had resulted in the deaths of senior JuA members.[64] This is indicative of internal fractures within the TTP, highlighting leadership disputes, mistrust, and unresolved issues despite previous efforts at organizational consolidation.

Within the Baloch insurgency, collision dynamics have surfaced more quietly. The BRAS umbrella has certainly enabled coordination, but it has also enabled competition between BLA and BLF as both organizations chase the same demographic base for recruitment, including women and educated urban graduates. The Saddo Operational Battalion, launched by the BLF in December 2025, for example, introduced a dedicated BLF suicide-squad capability that operates in parallel to, and in some respects in competition with, the BLA's Majeed Brigade.[65] In the same month of December 2025, which saw the BLF deploy its first female suicide bomber at Nokundi, the BLA was foiled in its attempt to deploy a teenage schoolgirl as a suicide bomber in Karachi.[66] The analytical concern here is more about outbidding behavior. When multiple organizations compete for the same recruits, media attention, and operational relevance, they push toward more extreme tactics. Intra-cluster competition thus raises rather than lowers the ecosystem's baseline threat level.

Conclusion

The Afghanistan-Pakistan militant ecosystem is likely to continue being shaped by interstate rivalries as militants adapt and exploit opportunities. The Pakistan-Taliban war, the Pakistan-Iran border weaknesses, the 2025 India-Pakistan crisis, alongside great power competition in Balochistan between the United States and China have all collectively produced an opportunity structure that interacts with the evolving militant infrastructure in the region. The overall environment has accelerated convergence, such as TTP-AQIS alignment, the IUM coalition, and the TTP-JuA-Baloch crossover, as well as collision, primarily with IS-K. However, intra-group competitors are also likely to engage in outbidding behavior, potentially adopting more extreme tactics. For groups whose ambitions are not

distinctly local, most notably IS-K, outbidding can also extend to external operations, as demonstrated by the Kerman bombings in Iran and the Crocus City Hall attack in Moscow in 2024. While AQIS has not demonstrated external operations capability, its reframing of Pakistan's campaign against the TTP as part of an American-led war represents an attempt to reactivate global jihadi narratives — its current focus for now.

25 years after 9/11, the Afghanistan-Pakistan corridor remains one of the most dangerous places in the world. The condition that defined September 2001, i.e., an al-Qaeda leadership hosted by a Taliban regime, appears to have been restored after the expenditure of immense monetary and human costs. However, the nature of the threat has changed.

The threat is no longer a single organization plotting attacks against a distant enemy, but a crowded ecosystem of militant groups, with their violence directed largely, but not exclusively, towards local and regional actors. Yet as this chapter has argued, the region's interstate rivalries are reproducing the conditions under which transnational terrorism has historically flourished.
The frameworks built in the post-9/11 era that tend to center on discrete organizations and treat counterterrorism in isolation from geopolitics are poorly suited to this landscape.

Interstate reconfiguration, however, can no longer be viewed only as the backdrop to these militant dynamics; rather, it contributes to them. Anticipating the region's next threat phase requires analytical categories that treat state and militant behavior as endogenous to each other, rather than as separate tracks.

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6

From 9/11 to 10/7: Trends in Terrorism, Political Violence, and Armed Conflict

Assaf Moghadam

Abstract

The Hamas-led attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, was the deadliest and most consequential terrorist attack since September 11, 2001. This chapter examines several key trends in terrorism, political violence, and armed conflict that have crystallized over the two decades separating 9/11 and 10/7. It identifies four interrelated developments: (1) the diversification of political violence; (2) the blurring of boundaries between different forms of political violence; (3) the convergence of intrastate and interstate conflict dynamics; and (4) the growing similarity between state and non-state approaches to warfare. The October 7 attack and the conflicts it spawned exemplify each of these trends, thereby serving as a useful analytical lens through which to understand the evolving character of contemporary conflict. The chapter concludes by considering the implications of these developments for both academic research and policy.

Introduction[1]

The attacks of September 11, 2001, were an event of devastating human consequence for thousands of immediate victims and for hundreds of thousands of people whose lives were affected by post-9/11 conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and elsewhere. The attacks of October 7, 2023, like 9/11, had enormous immediate costs, as well as second-order effects brought on by several conflicts that ensued in the years following the attacks. Both attacks were significant in the annals of modern terrorism, having heralded fundamentally new trends not only for the practice and study of terrorism and counterterrorism, but for political violence and armed conflict more broadly.[2]

The purpose of this chapter is to examine how the trajectory of terrorism, political violence, and armed conflict has evolved in the period since 9/11 and to the current post-10/7 era. Specifically, this chapter will highlight four key trends in terrorism, political violence, and armed conflict that have crystallized over the course of the first quarter of the 21st century, and that are well illustrated in the

attacks of 10/7 and the conflicts that they spawned: (1) the diversification of political violence; (2) the blurring of boundaries between different forms of political violence; (3) the convergence of intrastate and interstate conflict dynamics; and (4) the growing similarity between state and non-state approaches to warfare. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the implications of these trends for research on terrorism and political violence, as well as for policy.

The October 7 attacks offer a useful analytical lens through which to examine contemporary trends in political violence and armed conflict for at least two reasons. The first is the enormous scale of human suffering that resulted from the October 7 attacks and the ensuing conflicts. As a direct result of the attacks, approximately 1,200 people were killed on October 7.[3] The overwhelming majority of victims were Israelis, although approximately 70 nationalities were represented among the dead.[4] The subsequent wars in Gaza and Lebanon claimed tens of thousands of additional lives, Israeli soldiers and civilians, as well as Palestinian and Lebanese militants and civilians. Second, the October 7 attacks serve as a useful analytical reference point because they were not an isolated incident but part of a broader violent campaign that triggered a prolonged regional security crisis. The attacks involved coordination with other Palestinian militant groups, Iran and its proxies including Lebanese Hezbollah, the Houthis in Yemen, and Iraqi Shia militia groups, and ultimately expanded into a wider conflict that included repeated direct military confrontations between Israel and Iran, including a joint U.S.-Israeli military campaign directed against the Islamic Republic that began on February 28, 2026.[5]

Four Key Trends in Terrorism, Political Violence, and Armed Conflict

This section will describe four key trends in terrorism, political violence, and armed conflict that have gained increased prominence in the 25 years since the attacks of September 11, 2001, and are dominant trends today, as will be illustrated by the October 7, 2023 attacks, and related conflicts. Before turning to the four trends, several caveats are in order: the four trends identified in this chapter are not the only important trends in armed conflict today. The present discussion focuses on macro trends and highlights some over others. For example, important technological developments affecting conflict and warfighting, such as automatic target recognition, have been excluded from analysis in this chapter.[6] Secondly, this chapter does not argue that any of the four trends are entirely new. All four have emerged gradually, over time. Some have long predated the 9/11 attacks. What is new and important, however, is that all four trends have accelerated in the period under review; operate simultaneously; and create new and complex synergies with implications for both research and counterterrorism policy.

Trend One: The Diversification of Political Violence

The first trend is the diversification of political violence. This section illustrates this by relying on examples related to terrorism—a prominent form of political violence.[7] Specifically, there are three aspects of terrorism that showcase the relevance of this trend: the perpetrators of terrorism, the motivations for terrorism, and terrorist tactics.

Contemporary acts of terrorism are often carried out not only by one type of actor such as the classic 'terrorist group,' but instead by a broad spectrum of perpetrators, including lone attackers, informal networks, formal militant organizations, as well as states.[8] This increasingly diverse array of actors engages in dynamic relationships that run the gamut from cooperation to competition and conflict. Today's complex relationships include cross-sectarian collaboration, such as between the Houthis and al-Qaeda affiliates al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Cooperation also occurs among ideologically like-minded groups that compete at the strategic level but find areas of collaboration at the more tactical level, such as tacit border arrangements between al-Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates in the Maghreb.[9] Some contemporary actors incorporate different forms of organizations within their overall structure. The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), for example, coexisted as a formal organization and a proto-state at the height of its power, but also relied on informal networks to carry out terrorist attacks, and at later stages in its life cycle sought to inspire lone actors.

Political violence has also become more diversified in terms of the motivations for violence. In contemporary manifestations of terrorism, it is at times difficult to identify a single ideological driver of violence. In today's violent landscape, threats from a range of ideological traditions, such as jihadism, the far right, and the far left, coincide and at times synergize. Furthermore, terrorism scholars have noted a growing ideological cross-pollination and convergence among some of these ideologies, resulting in intersectional threats that terrorism scholars have described with a variety of terms, including salad bar ideologies, fringe fluidity, the horseshoe theory, composite violent extremism, and fused extremism, among others.[10] Such crossover ideologies have produced novel threats such as "White Jihad," the convergence between elements of far right and jihadi ideologies.[11] The motivations for terrorism have further expanded in the sense that some terrorists appear to be entirely agnostic in terms of their ideology. The growing threat of violence by incels, an online subculture of self-identified "involuntary celibates" who blame their situation on women and feminism, is instructive in this respect, as self-described incels seem to shed classic political ideologies such as nationalism, religion, or various left-wing beliefs altogether in favor of a more personalized and 'selfish' worldview.[12]

Third, the diversification of political violence can also be seen in the realm of tactics. In recent years, the modalities of terrorist violence have expanded, creating a much broader spectrum of ways in which terrorism is employed and propagated. On one extreme of that spectrum, terrorist violence has taken on forms of what Jessica Stern and J. M. Berger have referred to as "ultraviolence."[13] These tactics include extremely brutal forms of violence that are perhaps best exemplified by some of the barbaric methods used by ISIS, e.g., enslavement and ensuing sexual violence, beheadings, and extremely cruel forms of torture.[14] At the same time, and on the opposite end of the spectrum, manifestations of terrorism—as well as of support for terrorism—have become more mainstream. Recent years have seen growing attempts to politically mainstream even the most objectionable groups. This trend was well portrayed in 2023, when TikTok users "discovered" Osama bin Laden's "letter to America," with many expressing sympathies for its criticism of the United States.[15]

The October 7 attacks illustrate the above trend in the diversification of political violence well. In terms of the perpetrators, for example, Hamas exemplifies a complex, diverse organization that functions at one and the same time as a terrorist group, an army, an insurgency, a social movement, a criminal organization, and a proto-state. The October 7 attacks also illustrate the complex set of relationships between contemporary militant actors described above. While Hamas is the group responsible for the attacks, the attack included a collaboration with other groups, such as the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.[16] Hezbollah, among other Iranian proxies, joined in on the attacks on October 8, 2023, when it began firing rockets and artillery shells on towns and villages in northern Israel.

As far as the motivations for violence are concerned, the response to the October 7 attacks has reflected a broad, cross-ideological level of support from actors associated with Palestinian nationalism, jihadism, the far left, and far right, among others. The attacks and the subsequent conflicts have undoubtedly enhanced the popularity of anti-Zionist ideology. On the face of it, anti-Zionism presents itself as an anti-Israeli worldview but, upon closer inspection, it frequently exposes classic antisemitic tropes. The virulently militant animosity of some anti-Zionists has resulted in a large uptick in anti-Jewish hate crimes, including a rise in physical violence against members of the Jewish community at large. Some of these expressions and sentiments became manifest as early as October 8 (and even during the attack on October 7 itself)—weeks before the Israel Defense Forces entered Gaza to start the military campaign against Hamas—suggesting that these reactions do not always embody genuine, objective criticism of Israeli policies.[17]

Finally, as far as the discussion of tactics is concerned, the October 7 attacks reflect the broadening spectrum of violence. The attacks featured both well-documented examples of ultraviolence, as well as widespread, concerted efforts to

present the attack as a legitimate act of resistance against an allegedly "genocidal" state.[18]

Trend Two: Boundary Blurring in Political Violence

A second trend in armed conflict is the growing blurring of boundaries between different forms of political violence. Scholars of terrorism, civil wars, peace and conflict studies, and related disciplines have noted a growing trend whereby forms of political violence that have been previously treated as largely distinct phenomena and separate analytical categories are becoming increasingly intertwined.[19] For example, scholars of terrorism, guerrilla, insurgency, and civil wars have traditionally explored these forms of political violence separately, often drawing sharp distinctions between them. The working assumption of most scholars of political violence has been that certain conflicts, as well as the militant groups that had a stake in these conflicts, could be neatly separated into certain categories such as civil wars, insurgency, terrorism, or into separate organizational categories such as insurgent movement, guerrilla organization, or terrorist group. The academic study of these subjects rested on these problematic assumptions. Scholars of terrorism, for example, did not tend to regularly follow academic research from neighboring disciplines, cite publications, or regularly meet colleagues from these disciplines at academic conferences.[20] These distinctions, however, are becoming increasingly artificial as the boundaries between these forms of political violence are dissolving. Many contemporary conflicts feature not just one of these types of political violence, but several. Militant organizations—and states, for that matter—do not have to limit themselves to the use of a single mode of violence, be it terrorism, guerrilla, or other forms, but use various forms simultaneously.[21]

Here too, the October 7 attacks serve as a useful example of this trend by which different forms of political violence appear to increasingly merge. The October 7 attacks targeted both civilian communities and military infrastructure, with attackers storming more than 20 Israeli communities in the Gaza Envelope and simultaneously killing a significant number of military personnel, who were approximately one-third of the first day's victims.[22] The storming of the Nahal Oz outpost of the Israel Defense Forces resulted in the death of over 50 soldiers (including 16 female surveillance soldiers), the kidnapping of 10 others to Gaza, and the temporary occupation of the outpost by members of Hamas' Al-Qassam Brigades and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad's Saraya al-Quds Brigades.[23] In other words, October 7 was a combined terrorist and guerrilla attack, pitting Hamas against the Israeli Defense Forces in a battle akin to how insurgencies are battling counterinsurgents.

Trend Three: The Convergence of Intrastate and Interstate Dynamics

A third discernible trend in contemporary armed conflict is the growing convergence of intrastate and interstate conflict dynamics. The renowned Peace Research Institute Oslo and Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) dataset, which collects global conflict data covering the post-World War II era, shows that over time, the number of what it calls internationalized intrastate conflicts has been rising. According to UCDP, internationalized intrastate conflicts are armed conflicts between a government and a non-government actor in which one or both sides receive active troop support from external states.[24] While the UCDP data show that such internationalized intrastate conflicts have been present for at least 65 years, they also show a sharp uptick in these armed conflicts around 2003. The data also indicate that these types of conflicts, which essentially combine traditional civil war dynamics with aspects of interstate wars, have become the dominant form of conflict today.

Most of these conflicts appear to take the form of proxy wars—wars in which at least one party delegates the fighting to a proxy. Proxy wars are the most important mechanism by which internal and international wars converge into one conflict. A cursory look at the Middle East reveals how prevalent proxy conflicts are. Conflict in recent years in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Libya invariably contained important elements of proxy wars. It is all the more interesting, then, that the UCDP's coding of "internationalized intrastate wars" may not even capture all types of foreign interference by external powers in internal wars, possibly even excluding some proxy wars. Contrary to the UCDP's coding definition of internationalized intrastate wars, most descriptions of proxy wars do not strictly require that state sponsors provide actual troops to the conflict.[25] Iran's support of the Houthis, for example, consists of training and weapons. As a result of how it defines internationalized intrastate conflicts, the UCDP likely undercounts the true prevalence of contemporary proxy conflicts.

As far as the convergence between intrastate and interstate conflict dynamics is concerned, the October 7 attack and the resulting conflicts again serve as a useful illustrative case for the relevance of this trend. Most of the adversaries Israel battled on October 7 and in its aftermath were Iranian proxies or groups supported by Iran, starting with Hamas itself, and including Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Iranian client groups in Iraq and Syria.[26] The October 7 attacks and subsequent conflicts, in other words, are clear examples of the contemporary convergence of intrastate and interstate conflict dynamics.

Trend Four: Growing Similarity Between State and Non-state Approaches to Warfare

The fourth trend is the growing alignment of state and non-state approaches to warfare. Like the other three trends mentioned, this trend is well exemplified by

the October 7 attack and the ensuing conflicts, even though it is not new.[27] At both the tactical and strategic levels of warfare, it is increasingly clear that violent non-state actors (VNSAs) and state actors share similarities in how they wage war. As the examples below taken from the current conflict in the Middle East suggest, VNSAs such as Hamas and Hezbollah employ some military methods that evoke those that have been traditionally ascribed to state actors. Simultaneously, state actors such as Iran employ methods of warfighting that resemble those traditionally employed by VNSAs.

VNSAs are generally assumed to fight using asymmetric means, availing themselves of means of indirect warfare. They are widely known to avoid direct confrontations on the battlefield, put a premium on hiding, rely on hit-and-run attacks and asymmetric tactics such as improvised explosive devices, terrorism, assassinations, or kidnappings. They also tend to avoid wearing uniforms or identifying insignia, in an effort to try to blend in with civilian populations. Some VNSAs will deliberately store arms and ammunition on, in, near, or below civilian infrastructure. It is often assumed that VNSAs do not seek to hold territory at any price. These methods are usually contrasted to those of state actors, who are believed to follow a more conventional style of warfare.[28]

Hamas and Hezbollah have, of course, employed military methods and operations that are typical of VNSAs—including attacks against civilians, kidnappings, as well as avoiding concentrations of their forces, instead opting for more dispersed styles of organization and operations. But some of their tactics, operations, and strategies have been similar to those used by states.

At the tactical level, for example, Hamas and especially Hezbollah have displayed combined arms warfare, which is considered a hallmark of traditional state warfare. Hamas has successfully coordinated the use of drones with indirect fire of rockets and mortars, as well as with ground assaults, and has also combined the use of engineering units (who have directed the building of tunnels and the breaching of barriers) alongside 'infantry.'[29] Hezbollah has, as early as 2006, integrated the use of anti-tank guided missiles with infantry units in prepared positions.[30] Some of Hamas and Hezbollah's tactics resemble small unit combined-arms warfare more than the traditional hit-and-run ambushes or other isolated tactics used by insurgents.

Both Hamas and Hezbollah have also used fortified defensive systems and built hardened bunkers complete with underground command centers and logistics hubs—defensive systems that are typically associated with state militaries.[31] Other state-level capabilities employed by both groups include precision-guided weapons, unmanned aerial vehicles for reconnaissance and attack, and coordinated rocket salvos.

At the strategic level, Hezbollah established and deployed a deterrence posture vis-à-vis Israel, at least until the pager operation in 2024. Hezbollah also employed high-stakes signaling and escalation management of the sort usually reserved for states and certainly beyond mere "resistance" warfare. Finally, both Hezbollah and Hamas developed an industrial-scale capacity to wage missile and rocket warfare designed to overwhelm Israel's missile defenses. Such artillery doctrine is a hallmark of state militaries.

While the examples of Hamas and Hezbollah suggest that at least some VNSAs conduct military operations in a way that resembles state warfare, a look at Iran's approach to warfighting—and especially its reaction to the joint U.S.-Israeli attack that began on February 28, 2026—suggests strong similarities in substance and style to non-state approaches to warfare. To be clear, in contending with the U.S.-Israeli attack in 2026, Iran employed capabilities that one would expect of a state actor, including the deployment of missiles, the use of economic leverage, as well as the coordination of operations across multiple theaters. At the same time, Iran deployed means and methods such as dispersion, indirect pressure, and attrition that are more in line with the logic of non-state and guerrilla actors. In addition, its overall approach to the conflict seemed to involve an attempt to turn a contest of firepower into a contest of wills, thereby shifting the battlefield from a theater in which the Islamic Republic has a relative disadvantage to one in which the Iranians have a relative advantage.

Iran's mosaic defense doctrine directly supports this strategy of winning by not losing. Based on the recognition that Iran's conventional forces are no match for its militarily superior foes, the mosaic defense strategy seeks to distribute military capabilities across smaller, dispersed, semi-autonomous units.[32] The dispersal includes different military forces in Iran itself, regular armed forces (Artesh), the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and the Basij militia, as well as proxy forces across the Middle East. The resulting decentralization creates resilience and redundancy, rendering it far more difficult for Tehran's adversaries to neutralize it.

The strategy optimizes the Islamic Republic toward waging a war of endurance rather than seeking a quick victory—an idea very reminiscent of insurgents, who traditionally believe that time is on their side, and who understand that as the weaker forces pitted against stronger enemies, they win by not losing, while their enemies lose by not winning.

To be sure, Tehran employs some tools that are unmistakably associated with state warfare, such as the use of ballistic missiles and coordinated attacks across multiple targets. And yet, the way these state-like tools are used follows a logic that is more reminiscent of how VNSAs wage warfare. The use of ballistic mis-

siles, for example, is not designed for tactical domination, but to impose costs on the enemy, signal the ability to continue warfare over an extended period of time, and to raise costs for third parties (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan, etc.) in an effort to expand the conflict geographically, and push these countries to pressure the United States to end the war.

At a minimum, Iran's approach to warfare is evidence of a hybrid strategy often used by insurgencies, which frequently expand violence horizontally (e.g., by escalating towards ever more indiscriminate attacks), and whose campaigns identify the adversary's political will (or lack thereof), rather than the enemy's military capability, as the center of gravity.[33] According to this playbook, the goal is not to defeat the enemy on the battlefield, but to make war unsustainable for the enemy.

Threatening strategic chokepoints like the Strait of Hormuz or the Bab al-Mandeb serves the same goals. Such courses of action expand the war beyond single fronts and link the local fighting to global economic consequences. Time becomes the central weapon in a war of endurance, where outlasting the opponent politically and economically becomes the main objective.

Implications

The trends described above paint a picture in which, 25 years after the attacks of 9/11, the traditional boundaries among terrorism, armed conflict, and political violence are steadily eroding.[34] If the defining feature of contemporary conflict is the erosion of both physical and conceptual boundaries, then both scholarship and policy—which are still largely organized around those boundaries—are increasingly misaligned with reality. This implies that academics should reconsider existing categories, methods, and subfield divides, while policy analysts and policymakers should rethink existing institutions, authorities, and strategic frameworks.

As far as academic research is concerned, the convergence between different forms of political violence calls for more interdisciplinary research between scholars of terrorism, insurgency, guerrilla, and civil war, as has been argued elsewhere.[35] Similarly, the convergence of intrastate and interstate conflict dynamics suggests that some subfield divisions will become harder to sustain, such as, for instance, the divide between civil war studies and the study of war in general.

Scholars should also rethink whether the core typologies and units of analysis used in most existing datasets may require a reconceptualization. If categories like terrorism, insurgency, and civil war are blurring, then the foundations of some of our existing datasets might be shaky. Existing typologies and datasets often focus on groups as units of analysis.[36] This approach is less suited to consider the broader dynamics and processes that connect groups outlined in this chapter. If violence is more heterogeneous and hybridized, then approaches that focus on

ecosystems of violence rather than discrete actors have greater promise. Such approaches would be able to better capture trends such as coalitions, collaboration, competition, or subcontracting between groups.[37]

As far as policy analysis and policymaking are concerned, the findings in this chapter suggest that some existing organizing frameworks that currently guide U.S. strategy, including counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and even great power competition, are worthy of reevaluation. If U.S. policy responses better reflected the reality of armed conflict, then policies that are less category-driven and more agnostic to specific actor types would seem prudent. Rather than responding to threats under labels such as counterterrorism or counterinsurgency, U.S. policy should be driven by frameworks that emphasize capabilities and behavior: how actors fight, rather than how we label them. Organizing policy responses around concepts such as irregular warfare or information warfare would seem more sensible than clinging to counterterrorism or counterinsurgency. A focus on capabilities and behavioral frameworks would also enable policymakers to distance themselves from outdated views of conflict and warfare that neatly bifurcate it into peace and war. With most conflicts stuck in liminal gray spaces between war and peace, policymakers should find frameworks that reflect these complexities, likely resulting in more realistic responses.

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Notes

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7

How Non-State Groups Are Reshaping Warfare and Terrorism with Armed Drones

Peter Bergen and David Sterman

Abstract

Twenty-five years after the first military drone strike, drone warfare is becoming more varied, and as a result, the risk of strategic surprise by a terrorist group or by other non-state actors has grown exponentially. Once the near-sole province of the United States in its counterterrorism wars, drones are now used by states and non-state actors to advance a variety of strategies. To avoid strategic surprise, analysts must carefully examine the political and strategic context in which drones are used. Through an examination of the spread of drone technology and of drone use by private contractors in Haiti, by the Taliban, and by Hamas and other groups during the October 7, 2023, attacks on Israel and in their aftermath, this chapter explores the growing complexity of drone warfare and underlines how a better understanding of that landscape may help avoid strategic surprises from violent non-state actors.

Introduction

On September 11, 2001, nineteen hijackers, whose leadership approved the plot from Afghanistan, killed almost three thousand people. Al-Qaeda's attack generated its power partly through operational surprise, combining the use of a low-technology weapon – knives – and one of the most intimate and direct methods of using manpower for violence – a suicide attack – to turn jet planes into weapons capable of the deadliest terrorist attack in history.

The United States responded to the attack with its own innovation: armed drones. This innovation was, in many ways, the opposite of al-Qaeda's. It was high-tech, relying on decades of advances in weapon guidance, aviation, microchips, satellite communication, and other technologies to combine a new set of capabilities into a single platform with a highly lethal result, giving new precision to high-value targeting and decapitation strikes.[1] Perhaps foremost among these capabilities was the ability of drones to allow their operators to direct them while remaining

far from the battlefield and the prospect of physical harm.

Over the quarter-century since the 9/11 attacks, drone warfare has spread globally and grown more diverse. Today, drones are used by various states, violent non-state actors, and by states and non-state actors working together. At the same time, the precise, targeted operations that defined the United States' first use of armed drones have given way to a greater variety of strategic applications by state and non-state actors.

To keep pace with this increasingly complex environment and reduce the risk of surprise from a terrorist attack or other hostile operation using armed drones, analysis must move beyond counting and categorizing incidents to examine how groups use different types of drones to pursue distinct strategic objectives. Tabulating and verifying non-state drone attacks serve an important purpose, grounding analysis on a topic riddled with uncertainty over the veracity of reported incidents and difficulties inherent in proper attribution. However, as the number of groups using drones expands, along with the diversity of platforms labeled as drones, the need to compare different contexts and strategic logic also grows.

This chapter provides a review of how and why so many states and groups have turned to drone warfare and what this may portend for future terrorist attacks. It then provides an initial exploration of three cases—Haiti, the Taliban, and Hamas—and what they suggest about the need for comparative analysis if strategic surprise is to be avoided.[2]

The Rise of the Modern Drone Age

On October 7, 2001, the first evening of the U.S. war in Afghanistan, an American Predator drone hunted for Mullah Omar, the Taliban's elusive leader. As the drone circled above a compound believed to be a mosque, the team operating it, located thousands of miles away in the United States, waited. Even though they believed Mullah Omar to be inside, mosques were off limits in terms of U.S. rules of engagement. In an effort to flush him out of the compound, the Predator fired a Hellfire missile at a nearby vehicle.[3] The strike inaugurated a new era of drone warfare. As one of the members of the team observing the Predator strike would rightly comment: "the face of aerial warfare had just changed forever."[4]

The United States and others had already experimented with various unmanned military technologies long before this strike. That history dates back to early innovations in land and sea mines, torpedoes, and observation balloons.[5] However, the 2001 strike was unprecedented because it combined navigational, surveillance, and strike capabilities into a single unmanned aerial platform that could be operated from thousands of miles away. Drones and the possibilities unearthed by

this combination of capabilities would become a defining feature of the war on terror. In turn, the war on terror would become synonymous with the public's understanding of armed drones.[6]

For the United States, this combination of capabilities was useful in an era when it sought to conduct targeted operations against terrorists while limiting the risk of American casualties and political fallout that could come from deploying large numbers of ground forces.

It took years for other states to embrace armed drones, as the barriers to entry were initially quite high. First, they needed to develop or obtain the technology. Second, many countries did not share the strategic logic underlying the United States' turn to drones. They opposed, or were at least wary of, the targeted killing campaigns that drones were well suited for. The United States too had previously criticized Israel's practice of conducting such targeted killing operations, and in the wake of the first U.S. drone strike in Yemen in 2002, Sweden's foreign minister referred to it as "a summary execution that violates human rights."[7] When the United Kingdom acknowledged it had conducted a lethal drone strike in Syria in 2015, it prompted concern and calls from a cross-party committee for "urgent clarification" of the legal theories underlying the strike.[8]

Despite these concerns, the number of states deploying armed drones greatly expanded.[9] The United Kingdom and France eventually conducted strikes as part of their participation in the post-9/11 counterterrorism wars.[10] By early 2015, evidence suggested that Nigeria was using a Chinese drone model to conduct strikes against the terrorist group Boko Haram.[11] In September 2015, Pakistan conducted its first drone strike, using a *Burraq* drone, a fixed-wing model with striking similarity to China's CH-3 drone model, which in turn is similar to America's Predator drone.[12]

Meanwhile, a new strategic logic began to take hold. Rather than enabling the precise use of military force in targeted killing campaigns – while avoiding the casualties and political costs that typically accompany large-scale military deployments – drones promised states a cheap way to mass firepower in wars that were already costly in both human and financial terms.[13] This new strategic logic led to the development of different kinds of drones, often sacrificing capabilities such as navigation and survivability to minimize costs.[14] This logic has been most prominently observed in the war in Ukraine, as well as conflicts in Sudan and Ethiopia.

The proliferation of armed drone capabilities has not been restricted solely to states. Some violent non-state actors have used armed drones in close collaboration with states – Iran and its proxies being a central example. Even before the U.S.–Iran war in 2026, these drone strikes had proven deadly. In January 2024,

the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, an umbrella group of Iranian-backed Shia militias, attacked the Tower 22 base in Jordan, killing three American soldiers. At the time, it was the deadliest attack on U.S. troops since the August 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan.[15] Between the fall of 2023 and the fall of 2025, before Iran closed the Strait of Hormuz, Iran's Houthi allies demonstrated that drones could hold economic chokepoints hostage via attacks on shipping lanes and critical economic infrastructure.[16] The Houthis also used cross-border drone strikes to deter regional states and coerce them into reducing their military operations in Yemen, highlighting their use of drones in sophisticated propaganda and media products.[17]

For other violent non-state actors, drones provide an entry into the aerial domain and its attendant tactical benefits. For example, beginning in 2016, the use of retrofitted commercial quadcopters by the Islamic State in Iraq posed new tactical challenges for U.S. and partner forces, forcing them to deal with threats from the air.[18] The Islamic State's use of drones also aided the group's propaganda effort and, in particular, its propagandistic claim that it had all the capabilities that came with state status.[19]

The growing threat is hardly restricted to war zones. The United States and Western Europe are increasingly wrestling with the challenges posed by drone technology's democratization of violence, allowing small groups of individuals to engage in outsized acts of violence and attack previously difficult-to-strike targets. On June 16, 2026, the United States charged five men with plotting an attack on attendees of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) Freedom 250 event held at the White House. The U.S. alleged that the men discussed using drones rigged with explosives to initiate the attack.[20] While it remains unclear whether the men could have successfully executed the plot — they did not actually possess the drones or explosives — the incident demonstrates the interest of individuals in using drones to commit violence.[21] Likewise, the men who plotted to attack a Taylor Swift concert in Austria in August 2024 discussed whether and how they might use weaponized drones as part of their foiled plot.[22]

Basil Hassan, a U.S.-designated terrorist and Islamic State external operations plotter linked to various plots, including a 2017 plot to bring down an airplane flying out of Sydney, Australia, was also allegedly part of the group's drone procurement network.[23] Mohammad Baqer al-Saadi – an alleged senior operative linked to Kata'ib Hezbollah and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force (IRGC-QF), charged by the United States with coordinating attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets in the West through a front organization known as Harakat Ashab al-Yamin al-Islamia – was also reportedly involved in Iraqi militias' Iranian-linked drone procurement efforts.[24]

The potential for terrorist attacks involving drones is likely to grow, as interest in

and access to the technology continues to spread. The Department of Homeland Security reported 145 incursions into restricted airspace during the 2026 World Cup.[25] Drone incursions have caused disruptions over airports, military bases, and other critical infrastructure in Europe, and some states see them as an integral component of Russian hybrid war strategy.[26] While the U.S. homeland might face a lower risk from some strategic tactics employed by armed drones used by larger non-state groups in conflict zones, it still remains susceptible to other forms. It would be a mistake to assume the U.S. is immune to violence from armed drones, even if such an attack is more likely to be launched by individuals or small groups than more established terrorist groups. Still, during the early weeks of the war with Iran, an FBI memo surfaced that warned about Iran seeking to launch drone attacks against the West Coast of the United States, perhaps with Mexican cartels as a go-between.[27]

Haiti's Drone Campaign

On September 20, 2025, a drone exploded in the Simon Pelé neighborhood of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, where children had gathered. It was targeting Albert Steevenson (alias "Djouma"), the leader of the Simon Pelé gang that controlled the densely populated neighborhood; he was scheduled to distribute gifts on his birthday. The explosion killed at least ten people who were not members of the targeted gang, including nine children.[28]

The strike was part of a campaign of drone strikes initiated by the Haitian government in March 2025 to target gangs that posed a severe threat to the government's survival.[29] Given the scale of the threat and worried that its own security services were weak, Haiti turned to the private military contractor Vectus Global, a firm linked to Erik Prince – known for his role in founding the military contracting firm Blackwater – to carry out operations against the gangs, including by using weaponized quadcopters.[30]

According to Human Rights Watch, the ensuing campaign killed more than 1,200 people in 141 operations over the course of less than a year, although collecting verified data on violence in Haiti is challenging.[31] The scope and sudden emergence of the Haitian campaign hold lessons for those who seek to analyze the potential for new and unexpected drone threats. Moreover, the reasons for the campaign's reliance on Vectus Global, a private military contractor, could potentially shed light on the broader use of drones by state and non-state actors, including their potential to be used by terrorist groups.

Why Did Haiti Adopt Drones?

Haiti's embrace of drone warfare holds important lessons for analysts tasked with

weighing where and when a state or violent non-state actor may deploy armed drones. It is tempting to view Haiti's drone campaign as just another step on the path of inevitable technological diffusion. However, such interpretation holds little analytical value for explaining where and when drone threats are most likely to emerge. As Jacquelyn Schneider and Julia Macdonald argue in their study of the United States' adoption of unmanned capabilities, political and bureaucratic pressures can create inertia that advocates of unmanned technology must overcome.[32]

The Haitian case exhibits internal political and bureaucratic barriers. Haiti opted to hire external private contractors to wage its drone campaign because it felt that it was unable to rely on its own forces without the risk of tipping off gang leaders, as a senior Haitian official told the *New York Times*.[33] The campaign also arose because Haiti's prime minister was dissatisfied with police performance, suggesting that if Haiti's security forces had performed more effectively, its government would not have felt a need to adopt drones.[34] As the drone campaign accelerated, it raised questions about its legality and the humanitarian cost; such concerns may also have deterred an earlier deployment of drone strikes.

Haiti's government implemented drone warfare due to the serious threat posed by gangs, and officials have consistently highlighted this gravity to counter criticisms of the drone campaign.[35] A Haitian government official told the International Crisis Group that "the first drone strikes were a last resort after gangs seized a large part of the Delmas commune in the capital and security forces appeared unable to halt their advance upon the offices of the presidential council and the prime minister."[36] A state or group that uses armed drones is often seen as a sign of strength, but in some cases the decision to adopt drones may actually indicate that a state or group perceives itself to be in a position of weakness. In these cases, the adopter views armed drone adoption as a force multiplier that can help narrow the asymmetric gap between itself and its adversary, but whether it does so depends on a variety of contextual factors.

Understanding the political and strategic context that gave rise to the strikes in Haiti is essential to understanding the campaign's conduct and constraints. Because the campaign emerged as a response to the limited capabilities of Haiti's police, the drone strikes lacked strong coordination with the police forces, which are required to retake territory.[37] As a result, Haiti's strikes have largely taken the form of a targeted campaign aimed at killing gang leaders and stalling forward movement by gangs.[38] The lack of coordination has been widely criticized by security analysts. T.X. Hammes, a fellow at the National Defense University, told the *New York Times,* "You have to have a strategy," adding, "Taking drones and killing people is not a strategy."[39]

State and Non-State Actors in the Haitian Drone Campaign

Haiti's drone campaign is indicative of how entangled states and non-state actors have become in today's drone warfare and should serve as a warning against analyzing trends in non-state use of drones in isolation from trends in state use of drones. Though initially the campaign appears to be a case of a state using armed drones, labeling it a state campaign presents an analytical error. The drone strikes were, as described above, reportedly conducted by a task force that combined Haitian police and security officers with the private military contractor Vectus Global because the Haitian government doubted its own ability to effectively wage such a campaign.[40]

Haiti is not the only location where private contractors, themselves operating at the blurry edge of state and non-state actors, have played a role in the diffusion of weaponized drone technology. For example, Russia's Wagner Group, a private military contractor (PMC), provided training courses on the use of weaponized drones across various areas of operation, including in Madagascar.[41] Might such contractors play a critical role in enabling otherwise unprepared states or even other non-state actors to rapidly develop a dangerous drone capability?

This question may apply more broadly than just to PMCs. The role of non-state actors in helping to diffuse weaponized drone technology looms large in U.S. national security debates. There are numerous allegations that Yemen's Houthi rebels, backed by Iran, have provided armed drone capabilities to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and to Islamic State in Somalia, as well as al-Qaeda's Somali affiliate, al-Shabaab.[42] Concerns about such technological transfer contributed to an unprecedented escalation of U.S. air and drone strikes in Somalia and possibly to a series of covert American strikes in Yemen.[43]

In his 2021 book *Nonstate Warfare*, Stephen Biddle cautions that there is no sharp division between states and non-state actors in terms of either capabilities or style of warfare.[44] Haiti's drone campaign provides precisely such caution against assumptions of a sharp break. Haiti's campaign used quadcopters rigged with explosives.[45] These drones are not high-end fixed-wing drones, such as the Predator and Reaper drones used in U.S. counterterrorism wars, nor are they cheaper fixed-wing one-way-attack drones like Iran's *Shahed*. Instead, Haiti's weaponized quadcopters are the kind of technology used by a variety of non-state actors to conduct drone attacks, from Mexico's cartels to the Islamic State, which used them in Iraq and Syria.[46] Although a Haiti-scale campaign inside the United States is unlikely, more isolated attacks that look similar to those in Haiti are not beyond the capabilities that lone actors or small cells, including some based in the U.S., could achieve, as interest in and access to armed drones spreads.

Haiti has fewer material capabilities than many non-state actors, including the gangs it is fighting. A September 2023 United Nations panel of experts report

noted that "firepower [of the gangs] exceeds that of the Haitian national police, the only remaining operational security agency in the country, which does not have enough capacity to fight the gangs."[47] The size of Haiti's security services is smaller than the size of many non-state groups that have used weaponized drones, including the Islamic State at its height and the Houthis in Yemen.[48] According to a former mission planning officer for the United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti, the strikes "are not the moves of a strong government or a robust state security apparatus."[49]

Haiti's experience raises broader questions about the determinants of drone warfare. Is the ability to conduct drone operations at scale primarily a function of statehood, or do political context, strategic objectives, and material resources better explain variation across both state and non-state actors in how they deploy drones? Identifying and assessing the factors that produce these different results could advance our understanding of contemporary drone warfare.

The Taliban's Drones

A quarter century after the U.S. attempted to kill Mullah Omar in a drone strike, U.S. drone strikes in Afghanistan and Pakistan have come to an end, barring exceptional cases such as the over-the-horizon strike that killed al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul in July 2022.[50] However, as the U.S. prepared to withdraw from Afghanistan in 2020–2021, the Taliban began to use weaponized drones in strikes targeting key rival power brokers in Afghanistan such as the governor of Kunduz province.[51] Determining an exact count of the Taliban's drone strikes is difficult amid a cloud of false imagery, rumor, and propaganda, but evidence suggests its drone use was initially limited.[52] According to one estimate, the Taliban conducted seven drone attacks during this period.[53] Drawing on interviews with members of a Taliban drone unit, Fazelminallah Qazizai, an Afghan journalist, describes a limited operation involving mostly a single unit that targeted specific anti-Taliban Afghans.[54]

In 2025, four years after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, a growing Pakistani Taliban insurgency began to use weaponized quadcopters, with reports of hundreds of attacks in northwestern Pakistan in 2025.[55] In January 2026, Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry, Director General of Pakistan's Inter-Services Public Relations, stated that almost one in ten terrorist incidents in Pakistan in 2025 involved quadcopter drones.[56] In February 2026, frustrated by the growing insurgency, Pakistan conducted air strikes in Afghanistan and declared "open war" on the Taliban, accusing them of supporting insurgents in Pakistan.[57] The Taliban responded by launching drones at multiple targets in Pakistan.[58]

The Taliban's strikes marked a new pattern. Unlike 2020–2021, the strikes were

not inside Afghanistan, but instead, cross-border attacks into Pakistani territory. The targets were not specific individuals but rather military targets in general. Together, these differences indicate that the Taliban's recent drone usage is based on a different strategic approach compared to their initial strikes. It now focuses on creating a deterrent relationship rather than primarily targeting and killing.

Finally, the platforms used in the strikes may have been different. Exact details of the drone platforms used by the Afghan Taliban remain murky. Still, images circulating on social media suggest that some of the incidents may have involved retrofitted commercially available quadcopter drones, in addition to specially designed fixed-wing, non-commercial drones.[59] Though not equivalent to the professional models used by the U.S. in its campaigns in Afghanistan and Pakistan, these platforms may point to an evolution in how the Taliban intends to use its drones compared to its early experimentation with quadcopters. Similarly, the Islamic State, though known for its use of quadcopters, also appears to have been interested in developing fixed-wing drones for their greater range, even at the cost of the ability to hover over a target as a quadcopter can.[60]

The Taliban's relatively limited use of armed drones in 2020–2021 might simply have been early experimentation. However, it might also be explained by factors like the financial cost of acquiring drones (as well as logistical hurdles) or the limitations on drone operations imposed by rural and mountainous terrain.[61] Another explanation may be that the stakes of the conflict for the Taliban in 2020–2021 were quite low, providing little impetus to overcome inertia in adopting a new technology. It was a period of looming Taliban total victory, or, at worst, a negotiated power-sharing agreement on terms highly favorable to the Taliban. President Trump had already negotiated a withdrawal deal very favorable to the Taliban in the Doha Agreement.[62] Even after losing the 2020 election, Trump ordered a rapid U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.[63] Any question about whether the U.S. would maintain a small force in the country was conclusively answered when President Biden announced his intent to follow through with the full withdrawal under Trump's agreement with the Taliban.[64] Withdrawal aside, the U.S. had largely operated from an assumption that it was not going to defeat the Taliban on the battlefield since the end of the 2010 surge of American troops into Afghanistan.[65]

Given this context, the Taliban likely lacked incentives to make weaponized drones a major component of its military strategy. If anything, a significant display of capability could be counterproductive, encouraging greater resistance to the Taliban or even American reengagement. Qazizai notes that the Taliban's drone unit was assembled because "U.S. military operations were winding down, and the Taliban leadership knew that continuing to launch suicide attacks against Afghan forces risked angering the population."[66] This generated interest in the

precision that drones offered, resulting from their combination of loitering surveillance capabilities and strike capability. But it also meant that a large-scale strike campaign would simply replicate the issues related to suicide bombing.

According to one of Qazizai's Taliban interviewees, a planned strike against U.S. troops in Kunduz was called off when, following a drone sighting, the U.S. complained to the Taliban's political office in Qatar, leading to the Taliban's leadership ordering a halt to the operation.[67] While Qazizai frames this reported canceled operation as a rare case of the leadership's interference in the drone unit's activities, the unit formed in an environment in which the Taliban exerted strict control over drone strikes. According to Qazizai, while fighters "were free to use basic civilian drones for surveillance," weaponized drones were restricted to a single unit closely monitored by the leadership.[68] The only significant exception was the Haqqani network, which "was allowed to carry out the occasional uncoordinated drone attack in the south and east of the country using equipment it acquired independently."[69]

This approach – targeted operations while seeking to avoid the political costs of larger operations – resembles the strategic logic that underlay the U.S. counterterrorism drone campaigns. Comparing the Taliban's campaign of targeted strikes with the broader literature on states' use of drones for targeted killing may yield insights into the relationship between state and non-state drone use and the efficacy of targeted killing.[70]

Similar to Haiti's drone strikes, the Taliban's 2020–2021 drone strikes appear to have targeted enemy leaders. However, Haiti's campaign arose in the context of a severe threat to the government, whereas the Taliban's use of drone strikes emerged in a period of limited threat to the Taliban, a difference that may help to explain the Taliban's more limited use of strikes.

If the context of the pending U.S. withdrawal contributed to the low level of early Taliban drone adoption, might the interaction of internal political dynamics and strategic context help explain the seemingly widespread use of drones in 2025 by the Pakistani Taliban and the Afghan Taliban's launching of drones into Pakistan? These are critical questions. Neither the Afghan nor Pakistani Taliban can expect the Pakistani government to simply withdraw from the region as the U.S. did, increasing the stakes of these conflicts relative to the later stages of the Afghanistan war. Prior Pakistani military operations have dealt major blows to the Pakistani Taliban, so the Pakistani Taliban might rightly see its situation as having severe or even existential stakes despite its growth in the years since the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan.[71]

It is less likely that Pakistan would mount a sustained ground campaign into Afghanistan capable of toppling its Taliban rulers, and Pakistan has so far relied

mainly on airstrikes. But a larger operation cannot be entirely ruled out, and even within its limitations Pakistan is able to impose high costs on the Taliban in Afghanistan.[72] This may explain why the Afghan Taliban adopted a strategy where drone strikes seem to be tied to an effort to coerce and negotiate with the Pakistani government. These cross-border strikes into Pakistan may invite useful comparison with the Houthis' similar use of drone strikes against Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates when these countries and their proxy forces were at war in Yemen against the Houthis.[73] It may also push the Taliban further toward cheap fixed-wing munitions rather than quadcopters as the drone platform most useful for its strategic position.

The Taliban's use of drones, at least as far as can be gleaned from the limited and disputed evidence available, points to how a group's strategic context and internal politics can shape its use of drones, and how a group's drone strategy can change over time.

Hamas's Drones on October 7 and the Regional Drone Conflagration

At 6:20 a.m. on October 7, 2023, 22 years to the day after the United States' first drone strike in Afghanistan, the Palestinian terror group Hamas launched a barrage of rockets, drones, and other munitions at Israel from Gaza.[74] The barrage helped pave the way for a ground invasion that killed around 1,200 people and resulted in the taking of around 250 people hostage; the invasion's ramifications would reshape the balance of power in the Middle East.

Importantly, Hamas's use of drones on October 7 reflected a different strategic logic: drones were used as part of a combined arms operation to enable a larger ground invasion. Footage of the October 7 attack showed more than 100 explosions involving remotely operated drones that targeted watchtowers dividing Gaza from Israel, while drones were involved in four out of five attacks on Israeli defense posts that were caught on video.[75] As researcher James Page has argued, the use of drones as part of such a combined arms attack was novel among non-state actors, although as the scholars Austin Doctor and James Walsh have noted, the Islamic State's use of drones also showcased elements of a combined arms approach.[76] The combined arms character of Hamas's use of drones provides an important caution about the dangers of an overfocus on tallying drone strike incidents without examining the political and strategic context of non-state drone warfare. Israel understood that Hamas had developed drone capabilities and had targeted its drone development from when it was still "nascent," as Page notes, but such general awareness did not equate to a useful understanding of the actual threat that manifested.[77]

The combined-arms character of the attack also emphasized the emergence of a

strategic approach in which the value of drones lay in factors beyond their ability to reduce one's own casualties while conducting discrete, targeted operations. Hamas's leader, Yahya Sinwar, does not appear to have been concerned with limiting casualties on his own 33.[78]

As Michael Milshtein, who formerly headed the Department for Palestinian Affairs in Israel's Military Intelligence, put it, "We knew about the drones, we knew about booby traps, we knew about cyberattacks and the marine forces. The surprise was the coordination between all those systems."[79] In this context, simply tracking incidents of armed drone use would not necessarily warn of the coming threat. Moreover, an overfocus on tracking the number of incidents might have been counterproductive, given reports that Hamas avoided initiating major violent incidents as part of a strategic deception campaign that played off Israeli assumptions that Hamas was deterred.[80]

It is also worth examining whether surprise about the coordination of drones with other tactics was justified given the novelty. Of note, in 2014, T.X. Hammes warned that technological advances, including in drone warfare, might presage the collapse of Israel's Gaza strategy, due to its recalibration of the balance of offense and defense.[81] Hammes's warning did not predict that Hamas would breach Israel's defenses with a ground invasion, nor did it get everything about Hamas's trajectory correct.[82] It did, however, contain an important line: "Hamas' demonstrated ability to obtain new technology in spite of the blockade indicates it will be able to field and use such weapons. The key question is whether they will have the ingenuity to do so."[83] There was also evidence prior to October 7 of Houthi use of armed drones during ground offensives in Yemen and of Houthi tactical innovation in combining drone attacks on defense systems with rocket and missile fire to enhance their effectiveness.[84]

An emphasis on the novelty of Hamas's attack reveals the limits of an exclusive non-state actor focus to understand drone adoption. Indeed, the 2020 war between Azerbaijan and Armenia as well as the war in Ukraine had already prompted discussion of how states were integrating drones into combined arms operations.[85] Still, general warnings about the impact of technological change are not the same as a specific warning that Hamas could breach Israel's defensive line. Still, there were trends that might have encouraged greater attention to the risk of a breach, especially in the context of warnings about Hamas's interest in breaching the line and increased Hamas activity along the Israeli border.[86]

In the wake of the October 7 attack, Israel's devastating invasion of Gaza restricted Hamas's ability to use drones. However, Hamas's attack helped spark a regional drone conflagration with a surge in non-state drone attacks in the year after October 7 led by Hezbollah, Iraqi Shia militias, and the Houthis, all members

of Iran's regional proxy network. The number of drone attacks in the Middle East in the year following October 7 was seven times higher than in the previous year, according to one database.[87] The vast majority of these strikes appear to follow a logic of coercive negotiation, a distinct approach from Hamas's use of drones for combined arms warfare, and an illustration of how drones can be used for diverse purposes in warfare and as tools of terror. This may have reflected a view among Iran and its proxies that while supporting Hamas was important in principle, a full-on confrontation with Israel of the kind Hamas launched would not succeed, a position suggested by at least some captured Hamas documents.[88]

Hezbollah's use of armed drones in Lebanon in 2026 also merits further examination. Hezbollah has utilized first-person view (FPV) drones to great effect, conducting deadly strikes both in Israel and against Israeli forces in Lebanon, reaping both direct military and propaganda benefits.[89] These strikes have often been interpreted as part of a guerrilla strategy aimed at inflicting pain in the pursuit of coercing Israel. The *Guardian* wrote: "The use of the FPV drone also befits Hezbollah's return to its guerrilla roots, raising the cost of occupation after it failed to stop the Israeli military entering its southern Lebanese heartland in the last war."[90] Yet Hezbollah has not always conformed to a guerrilla, attritional approach or a terrorist strategy of coercive violence, also directly confronting Israeli forces.[91] Israel has claimed that Hezbollah documents show plans for an attack on northern Israel similar to October 7.[92] As drones shift the balance of power in Lebanon, analysts should be cautious about assuming their main purpose is or will remain coercive, rather than a tool for waging combined arms warfare.

Conclusion

As an increasing number of states and non-state actors integrate drones into warfare, the diversity of actors using drones and the strategies they employ will grow. This will heighten the complexity facing analysts, but it will also afford new opportunities for comparative analysis, both between different groups and in tracking how specific groups' drone strategies change over time. To understand the new age of drone warfare, analysts will need to dedicate greater attention to the political and strategic contexts in which drones are used and not get bogged down in the mere quantitative tracking of drone strike incidents, important as that is. Failure to accurately assess the protean nature of terrorist and other threats involving drones could open the United States and its partners up to significant surprise attacks. Indeed, in the case of Israel, it already has, with region-altering consequences that continue to unfold today.

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8

The Fate of Global Jihadism Today: Internally Resilient, Strategically Deprioritized

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Abstract

A quarter century after al-Qaeda's 9/11 attacks, the global jihadi movement looks very different today than it did then. It is also operating in a very different international environment, with great power competition as the preeminent lens through which security is framed. Therefore, even if the movement's various iterations and competing groups remain active in different parts of the world, they no longer command the national security establishment's focus. This changed dynamic allows jihadi groups to move through the seams between conflicts and take advantage of the differing strategic interests of competing middle and global powers. While many in the counterterrorism community retain institutional knowledge of lessons learned after 9/11, that knowledge is likely to erode over time as resources are reallocated toward other security challenges and a younger generation— with minimal experience studying and understanding the global jihadi movement— fills the ranks of government and research institutions. The opportunity for the movement to achieve surprise could return as we move further and further from its peak threat perception.

Introduction: A Quarter Century On

Twenty-five years after al-Qaeda's attacks on New York and Washington, the global jihadi movement is at once larger, more geographically dispersed, and less central to American strategic thinking than at any point since September 11, 2001. Both halves of that sentence matter, and the tension between them is the subject of this chapter. Measured by fighters under arms, territory contested or governed, revenue generated, and media output produced, the movement in its various iterations (the Islamic State and its network of so-called provinces, al-Qaeda and its regional branches, and the constellation of aligned insurgencies around them) is demonstrably resilient. Measured by its place in the threat hierarchy of the United States and most of its allies, it has never been more marginal.

The international environment in which the movement now operates bears little resemblance to the unipolar moment it attacked in 2001. Great power competition with China, Russia's war on Ukraine, conflict with Iran, and the securitization of migration and narcotics have displaced terrorism as the organizing frame of national security. That reordering is not, in itself, irrational: jihadi groups have not conducted a directed mass-casualty attack in the United States since 9/11, and states genuinely do face more capable adversaries. And for the U.S., in particular, there is a clear challenge presented by a rising China. But the reordering has consequences. It shapes budgets, personnel systems, intelligence collection priorities, and less tangibly but no less importantly, the institutional memory of the governments and research communities that spent two decades learning the intricacies and nuances of how this movement operates.

This chapter proceeds in four parts. It first assesses the internal condition of the movement's two main organizational poles, the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, drawing on both governmental assessments and the movement's own primary sources. It then examines how the strategic deprioritization of counterterrorism has manifested concretely in the United States since 2025, across research, prevention, operational, and intelligence institutions. Third, it traces the quieter process by which institutional knowledge accumulated after 9/11 is eroding as a generation turns over. It concludes by considering what the combination of a resilient adversary and a distracted defender implies: not an imminent return to 2001, but a slowly reopening window for strategic surprise.

Internally Resilient: The Movement at Twenty-Five

The most authoritative open-source barometer of the movement's health remains the reporting of the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team. Its thirty-seventh report, issued in early 2026, described a threat landscape that has become "multipolar and complex," with both the Islamic State and al-Qaeda adapting recruitment, financing, and technology far beyond their post-9/11 profiles.[1] The headline figure is striking: al-Qaeda and its affiliates are now assessed to command roughly 25,000 potential fighters worldwide, compared with an estimated 500 operatives at the time of the 9/11 attacks, representing a fifty-fold expansion over the very period in which the United States declared the group degraded and moved on.[2] The Islamic State, for its part, was judged in the Secretary-General's twenty-first strategic-level report to have remained a high and adaptive threat despite sustained counterterrorism pressure, with Africa now the epicenter of its activity.[3]

Raw numbers, however, reveal less than organizational form and geography do. The Islamic State that exists in 2026 is not a reconstituted version of the 2014–2019 territorial caliphate, nor is it the decentralized franchise network that

al-Qaeda built in the 2000s. As I have argued elsewhere, it is a globally integrated organization, coordinated through its General Directorate of Provinces and a set of regional offices that move money, expertise, and external operations planning across theaters, meaning that no individual province pursues an independent strategy and that pressure applied in one theater can be absorbed by others.[4]

Where that pressure has been absorbed is now unambiguous: the Africanization of the Islamic State is complete. Of the 1,218 attacks the group claimed in 2025, 85 percent occurred in Africa, with Nigeria leading in attacks (368) and Somalia leading in casualties (1,734).[5] The UN Secretary-General assessed the West Africa Province at 8,000 to 12,000 fighters, while the smaller Somalia affiliate, host to the group's *al-Karrar* regional office, has taken on outsized importance among member-states.[6] The January 29, 2026, assault on Niamey's international airport, carried out by Hausa- and Kanuri-speaking fighters in an apparent display of Sahel–West Africa Province coordination, raised the specter of contiguous Islamic State territory spanning three states, a possibility I have been tracking since the group first took ground in Mali.[7] A rare U.S. decapitation strike in the theater, AFRICOM's mid-May 2026 killing of *al-Furqan* office head Abu Bilal al-Minuki, underscored how limited American attention to the theater has otherwise become.[8]

The mirror image of this African growth is contraction in the movement's historic core. The Islamic State's claimed attacks in Syria have fallen from 293 in the year before the Assad regime's collapse to 134 in the first year after it, with the group on pace for roughly 68 in 2026. It nevertheless punctuated this decline with the Mar Elias Church bombing in Damascus, the assassination of a Shia cleric in Sayyida Zainab, a car bombing in Mayadin, and the Palmyra attack that killed three American soldiers, while a pattern of unclaimed assassinations of security personnel suggests deliberate underreporting.[9] The picture is best described as recalibration rather than resurgence.[10] In Iraq, the insurgency has effectively died: sixteen claimed attacks in 2025 against 2,307 in 2019, and only three so far in 2026.[11] Just as consequential is the inversion of roles that made this possible: Damascus, governed by men Washington spent a decade designating, has completed its evolution into a counterterrorism partner, joining the Global Coalition after President Ahmed al-Sharaa's November 2025 White House visit. It has conducted forty-seven counter-Islamic State arrest operations since the fall of the Assad regime, with at least a dozen of them jointly with CENTCOM.[12]

Yet the year also produced the movement's greatest windfall in Syria, and it was self-inflicted by its adversaries. When the new government took over the northeast from the Syrian Democratic Forces in January 2026, CENTCOM transferred more than 5,704 male detainees to Iraq in twenty-three days, but more than 200

prisoners escaped from Shaddadi Prison, and the al-Hol camp collapsed from roughly 23,000–24,000 residents to under 3,500, dispersing some 20,000 Islamic State–affiliated women and children across Syria and beyond.[13] I warned in 2019 that al-Hol was incubating the next Islamic State generation; the incubator has now been tipped over, its contents scattered beyond anyone's ability to monitor.[14] The group, for its part, has worked the seam in print, appealing in *al-Naba* for the defection of foreign fighters disillusioned with Damascus's new direction.[15]

External operations, meanwhile, have settled into a post-territorial model that is more distributed than anything seen a decade ago.[16] Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-K) deservedly drew the most attention after the January 2024 Kerman bombings that killed 94 in Iran and the March 2024 Crocus City Hall attack in Moscow that killed more than 140, followed by arrests of its Tajik network inside the United States and an Election Day plot charged in October 2024.[17] The UN Monitoring Team still assesses IS-K as the most significant external threat to Europe, operating through the remote guidance of Central Asian and North Caucasian diaspora sympathizers,[18] and as recently as mid-2026 Europol coordinated a week-long operation with eight European agencies and the FBI against its support networks.[19] But IS-K is now the template rather than the exception. The December 14, 2025, Bondi Beach attack on a Hanukkah celebration in Sydney, which killed fifteen people and was carried out by a father-son pair who possibly trained in the Philippines the month before, was the deadliest Western attack since New Orleans and the first successful external operation likely tied to the East Asia Province. By my count, provinces in Afghanistan, Iraq, Mali, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Syria, Pakistan, Türkiye, and now the Philippines have all generated external plots.[20] The pipeline from the Sahel into Morocco and Spain also thickened over 2026,[21] with joint Spanish-Moroccan disruptions in March and the dismantling in July of a ten-person cell across seven Moroccan cities, early evidence that the African provinces are beginning to generate plots pointed north. In late September 2025, Israel disrupted an Islamic State-guided bomb plot in Acre, directed by virtual planners likely operating in Syria or Türkiye. There have been forty-one Islamic State-related plots disrupted by Israel since October 7. And a striking new targeting pattern emerged over this past winter, consisting of three attacks on Chinese nationals or interests in four months across two provinces: a Kabul restaurant bombing that marked IS-K's third strike on Chinese targets since 2021, an IS-K-linked attack on Chinese workers in Tajikistan, and the Central Africa Province's raid on a Chinese-run mine in Congo, suggesting the movement is recalibrating its enemy hierarchy for a multipolar world faster than that world's powers are recalibrating for the movement.[22]

To understand how the organization holds this sprawl together, as well as how it wants its followers to interpret the moment, one has to read its propaganda,

which remains the connective tissue between center, province, and sympathizer. The through-line begins with spokesman Abu Hudhayfah al-Ansari's January 2024 campaign "And Kill Them Wherever You Find Them," which framed attacks on Western, Jewish, and Christian targets as retaliation for Gaza.[23] Its logic bore fruit in New Orleans on January 1, 2025, when Shamsud-Din Jabbar killed fourteen on Bourbon Street after pledging allegiance to the group,[24] and *al-Naba* claimed ideological authorship the following week in an editorial titled "We Were There!"[25]

The past year has extended the pattern: *al-Naba* urged "daring attacks" on Jewish and Christian communities in Europe in response to Israel's Gaza City offensive,[26] later called for arson against synagogues and Passover gatherings worldwide while holding up Bondi Beach as the model,[27] and by June 2026 was inciting stabbings, vehicle rammings, and stadium arson against the World Cup.[28] Most notably, in February 2026 the group issued its first leadership address in two years, calling on Muslim youth to migrate to its branches (implicitly the African ones, whose battles foreign fighters were said to have "spearheaded") and declaring war on the al-Sharaa government, which prompted a wave of claimed Ramadan attacks.[29] The Africa focus doubles as a rebuke: the same messaging berates Arab audiences for choosing an easy life over jihad, effectively conceding that the movement's historic recruiting heartland has gone quiet while insisting the caravan has simply moved south. Some in the U.S. government are debating whether the actual Caliph of the Islamic State is the Somali Abdulqadir Mumin, who is one of the only remaining leaders within the group still alive from the caliphate's zenith a decade-plus ago.[30] Personally, I am skeptical he is the Caliph, but find him being the head of the General Directorate of Provinces as more plausible.[31]

Read closely, though, the same corpus reveals strain alongside menace. A run of sermon-like editorials urged patience and framed victory as possibly deferred to the afterlife, a form of morale management that betrays concern over wavering supporter commitment as the Taliban, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), and Damascus each demonstrate rival models of Islamist success.[32] Other editorials scolded sympathizers who "make excuses" not to join, berated Muslims' worldliness and infatuation with football, and attacked moderate clerics and media narratives in a defensive bid to police who may interpret events, all signals of anxiety that the group is losing the argument within its own milieu.[33] That resilience and frustration coexist in the same newsletter is precisely the point: the organization endures, but it is working harder than ever to keep its base convinced. It does so atop an online ecosystem that has outlasted the platforms arrayed against it: a cloud-based propaganda archive, domain-hopping websites mirrored on the dark web, and experimentation with artificial intelligence by IS-K's media arm, at a moment when the major technology companies have retreated

to doing the bare minimum on terrorist content removal.[34]

Al-Qaeda's trajectory is different in style but convergent in effect, and it is best described as bifurcation. At the center, under the unannounced de facto leadership of Saif al-Adel, the organization has entered a deliberately quiet phase of rebuilding its training pipelines, logistics, and financial self-sufficiency, even as the National Counterterrorism Center warned in September 2025 that it had renewed its calls for attacks on the United States and the West.[35] Yet the General Command's rare February 2026 statement and the murky, possibly Iran-orchestrated Ajnad Bayt al-Maqdis affiliation affair the following month,[36] mostly underscored how peripheral the center has become to the movement it nominally leads.[37]

The branches are another matter. On September 3, 2025, JNIM spokesman Abu Hudhayfah al-Bambari announced a blockade of fuel imports into Mali,[38] an act of economic warfare that strangled a capital dependent on road imports for 95 percent of its fuel, destroyed more than 300 tankers, closed the country's schools, and drove the United States and the United Kingdom to evacuate diplomatic staff.[39] Then, on April 25–26, 2026, JNIM launched its largest coordinated offensive since 2012 alongside the Azawad Liberation Front, killing Defense Minister Sadio Camara, striking Bamako's airport, and forcing Malian and Russian withdrawals from Kidal. This was followed by a July nationwide attack wave and the steady consolidation of taxation and dispute-resolution governance in central Mali, to the point that the Trump administration has debated U.S. strikes against the group.[40] JNIM's geographic reach also continued expanding into Benin, Togo, and, for the first time, Nigeria.[41] In East Africa, al-Shabaab, the network's wealthiest affiliate, reversed most of its 2022–2023 territorial losses through its Shabelle offensive, attempted to assassinate Somalia's president, encircled Mogadishu, and in October 2025 stormed the capital's intelligence headquarters, prompting diplomats to debate whether the city's fall would look more like Kabul in 2021 or Damascus in 2024.[42]

A final feature of the movement's current condition deserves emphasis, because it connects directly to the changed international environment: jihadi groups have learned to operate in the seams of great power competition, and their propaganda clearly demonstrates that they understand this as strategy rather than luck. Russia's Africa Corps could not break JNIM's blockade, lost an estimated fourteen personnel in a single August 2025 convoy ambush, and then abandoned Kidal, a rolling humiliation for Moscow's security-for-mining model.[43] Turkish drones and contractors have filled gaps in both Bamako and Mogadishu; China has now emerged as an Islamic State target;[44] and Washington's dormancy is evident in details as small as a two-year gap in Treasury designations against the Islamic State before June 2026.[45] The movement narrates all of this back to its followers.

Al-Naba's 2025 year-in-review reveled in a world on fire, casting the unraveling international order as a "precious opportunity" for jihad,[46] while its running commentary on the U.S.-Israeli war with Iran instructed Sunnis to take no side, to exploit the turmoil, and to see in the chaos vindication of the group's worldview.[47] The movement does not need to attack the West to benefit from this arrangement; it needs only to endure within it; its own texts make clear that enduring within it is exactly the plan.

Strategically Less Relevant: The Deprioritization of Counterterrorism

Against this backdrop of adversary resilience, the United States has spent the period since early 2025 systematically disassembling large parts of the counterterrorism architecture it built after 9/11, not as the result of a deliberate strategic review that weighed terrorism against other threats, but largely as a byproduct of budget-cutting campaigns, workforce purges, and the reallocation of security resources toward immigration enforcement and counternarcotics.

The research base went first. In the spring of 2025, the National Institute of Justice terminated its research portfolio on radicalization to violent extremism; the Defense Department eliminated the Minerva social science program and cut roughly $30 million in annual funding for academic studies of extremism and disinformation; and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) defunded the University of Maryland-based START consortium's dataset tracking domestic terrorist attacks, hate crimes, and antisemitic incidents, prompting scholars who had spent careers building those partnerships to describe the field's federal research infrastructure as effectively wiped out.[48] Weeks later, DHS canceled congressionally authorized funding for its university-based Centers of Excellence, shuttering research on threats ranging from active-shooter scenarios to border security.[49] Whatever one's view of any individual grant, the aggregate effect was the elimination, within a few months, of the research foundations on which future threat assessment depends, including datasets, longitudinal studies, and trained graduate students.

The prevention infrastructure followed a similar timeline. Staff at USAID's Bureau of Conflict Prevention and Stabilization were placed on leave in February 2025; DHS's Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships lost roughly 30 percent of its approximately eighty-person staff in March, with further cuts in June; and on July 11, 2025, the State Department's Office of Countering Violent Extremism and its Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations were shuttered outright, while the countering violent extremism team at the congressionally chartered U.S. Institute of Peace was laid off the same day.[50] The department's counterterrorism bureau fared little better: specialists were dispersed to regional offices where counterterrorism competes with every other priority, and the bureau's threat prevention team was eliminated entirely.[51]

Operational institutions absorbed parallel blows. The Justice Department acknowledged in its own budget documents that its National Security Division faced "unprecedented personnel constraints," with a 40 percent drop in the number of prosecutors even as caseloads grew.[52] The FBI reassigned agents from terrorism portfolios to Latin American street gangs, border task forces, and left-wing groups.[53] When the war with Iran suddenly elevated the threat of state-sponsored and state-inspired attacks, some counterterrorism specialists who had been moved to immigration duty were rushed back to their old accounts. As former intelligence officers noted, this whiplash disrupts investigations in both directions because analysts who pulled off a target set for a year cannot simply resume where they left off.[54]

The public-facing warning system has meanwhile gone quiet. DHS issued no National Terrorism Advisory System bulletins for months on end and, more than a year into the administration, had yet to publish an annual Homeland Threat Assessment.[55] Nor has the promised strategic framework materialized. White House counterterrorism adviser Sebastian Gorka declared a national counterterrorism strategy imminent in mid-2025 and repeated the claim through the fall, into January 2026, and beyond, only producing one in May 2026, even as a single month, March 2026, delivered a cluster of attacks and disrupted plots inside the United States that current and former officials described as a stress test of a hollowed-out system: a mass shooting at a Texas bar by a gunman wearing an Iranian-flag shirt, an improvised explosive attack in New York, a deadly campus shooting in Virginia, a vehicle-ramming at a Michigan synagogue, and an arrest over a threatened mosque attack in Ohio.[56]

Running beneath these individual cuts is a definitional shift that may prove more consequential than any of them: the word "counterterrorism" itself is being repurposed. From the administration's first weeks, counterterrorism resources and authorities were redirected toward the mass deportation campaign, with drug cartels designated as terrorist organizations and immigration enforcement framed as the homeland security mission; the attorney general publicly promised counterterrorism resources to combat vandalism of electric vehicles, while the National Counterterrorism Center was tasked with expanding into counternarcotics.[57] A term that once denoted a specific analytic discipline, with its own tradecraft, legal authorities, and accumulated expertise about Salafi-jihadi organizations, now covers whatever the political moment designates as an enemy. The dilution matters because prioritization systems run on categories: when everything urgent can be labeled terrorism, the institutions built to watch actual terrorist organizations lose both their focus and their claim on resources, and the analysts who spent careers on al-Qaeda's succession politics or the Islamic State's provincial finances find their skills reclassified as legacy knowledge.

The intelligence community's counterterrorism core has been restructured amid the same turbulence. In August 2025, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence announced a plan to cut nearly half of its roughly 1,850-person workforce; the National Counterterrorism Center, the institutional child of the 9/11 Commission, was directed to refocus on its core mission while simultaneously expanding into counternarcotics, reflecting the administration's treatment of drug trafficking as the paradigmatic transnational threat.[58] By mid-2026, following the resignation of Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard and the installation of a new director with no intelligence background, a new round of firings began in which NCTC was reportedly among the hardest-hit components (on top of more than 500 ODNI positions already eliminated in 2025), while the lapse of Section 702 collection authorities removed one of the community's most productive counterterrorism tools.[59]

Perhaps most corrosive of all is the breakdown in the integration machinery that the post-9/11 reforms were built to guarantee. By mid-2026, Reuters reported that the CIA had stopped contributing to some ODNI-produced intelligence assessments, including those related to the Iran war, amid a year-long feud over a Gabbard-created task force that career officers accused of circumventing intelligence-sharing and declassification protocols.[60] Former senior intelligence officials warned that when the coordinating function fails, agencies retreat into stovepipes, precisely the pathology the 9/11 Commission identified as a cause of the surprise a quarter century ago.[61] It is difficult to imagine a more pointed anniversary irony: the institutional lessons of September 11 being unlearned, in real time, by the very organizations created to embody them. This creates a greater risk of attacks that take the country by surprise. Even more worrisome, however, is that if another mass-casualty attack occurs, the cadre of bureaucrats, analysts, and officials who have learned from the successes and failures of the past quarter-century may no longer be in place. This could lead to assessments based on the same faulty logic and sometimes overemotional debates that shaped decision-making in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.

The Erosion of Institutional Knowledge

Budgets can be restored in a single appropriations cycle. Knowledge cannot. The deeper and slower-moving cost of the current period lies in the composition of the workforce responsible for recognizing the next inflection point in the jihadi threat, whether in government, law enforcement, or the research community.

Consider the FBI. In 2025, the bureau anticipated losing more than 5,000 employees to severance and early retirement, a cohort disproportionately composed of the agents and analysts who built its post-9/11 national security capabilities. Its leadership simultaneously moved to compress new-agent training from eigh-

teen weeks to eight and to drop the longstanding requirement of a bachelor's degree, drawing recruits focused on street crime instead from other federal law enforcement agencies. A former senior counterterrorism official described these changes as "generational destruction" of the institution.[62] Whatever the merits of refocusing the bureau on violent crime, the arithmetic is unforgiving: complex international terrorism investigations are an apprenticeship craft, and the master craftsmen are leaving faster than apprentices can be trained (or the apprentices are being trained for something else entirely).

At the CIA, the concern is less attrition than corrosion. The agency ombudsman's annual survey of analytic integrity, described to *The Atlantic* in mid-2026, recorded a significant rise in analysts who feared that the objectivity of their work was being undermined by political influence, citing episodes such as the dismissal of two senior officers after their assessment of Venezuela's relationship to a criminal gang contradicted the administration's preferred narrative, as well as the revocation of security clearances from dozens of former officials without evidence of wrongdoing.[63] Politicization damages counterterrorism twice over: it distorts the product in the near term, and it drives out precisely the experienced, independent-minded officers whose pattern recognition constitutes an agency's memory.

Personnel choices send their own signals about what expertise is valued.[64] In 2026, the Pentagon placed a political appointee who had been convicted for his role in the January 6 Capitol attack into the irregular warfare and counterterrorism section of its Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict office (a roughly forty-person team whose portfolio includes hostage rescue and embassy security and in which every position requires a top-secret clearance), over the objections of career staff who questioned the precedent.[65] The individual case matters less than what it reveals about vetting norms in offices that once treated counterterrorism experience as the entry ticket.

Knowledge erosion is also visible at the very top of the enterprise, where the question of what counts as counterterrorism expertise has been answered by personality rather than pedigree. The White House's counterterrorism adviser rose not through the intelligence community, the military's special operations enterprise, or the academy, but through the post-9/11 training circuit of self-styled terrorism experts, a milieu that, as two dozen national security specialists across party lines recounted, treated counterterrorism as purely kinetic and directed against a single type of enemy, and whose battlefield claims of eliminating hundreds of "leading" militants are regarded by analysts as unverifiable or inflated given that fewer than ten figures worldwide plausibly merit the description.[66] When the arbiter of counterterrorism priorities operates by body count and spectacle, the patient, unglamorous work that actually characterizes the discipline, including network

analysis, financial tracking, liaison maintenance, and warning, loses its institutional champion.

The same generational hollowing is underway outside government. The defunded terrorism research programs did not merely produce reports; they trained the doctoral students, fellows, and junior analysts who would have staffed agencies and think tanks into the 2040s. The research director of the START consortium warned, in the wake of the DHS cancellations, that the impact on the development of the next generation of homeland security professionals would be felt for years.[67] As someone who entered this field in the shadow of 9/11, I can attest that the ecosystem that trained my cohort, including datasets to learn on, grants to fund fieldwork, and government counterparts who spoke the same analytic language, no longer exists in anything like its former shape. The rising generation of national security professionals is being formed by China, Russia, emerging technologies like artificial intelligence, and border security portfolios; to them, jihadism is a historical case study, not a lived operational problem.

Even the culture of everyday security is quietly reverting. In December 2025, U.S. airports began reintroducing programs allowing members of the non-traveling public past security checkpoints for the first time since the post-9/11 lockdown of the aviation system, a modest, TSA-vetted convenience that is defensible on its own terms, but is also a legible marker of how far the memory of why those barriers were erected has faded.[68] Institutional knowledge does not disappear in a single dramatic act. It leaks away through retirements, reassignments, canceled grants, unpublished threat assessments, and small policy reversions, each individually reasonable, until one day an organization confronts a familiar problem and discovers that no one on staff has seen it before.

Conclusion: The Return of Surprise

The situation in 2026 rhymes uncomfortably with the 1990s. Then, as now, the jihadi movement was treated as a manageable nuisance at the periphery of a strategic agenda dominated by state threats; then, as now, the movement was quietly consolidating sanctuaries, building financial autonomy, and experimenting with methods of attack while the institutions charged with watching it fought for resources and relevance. The 1998 East Africa embassy bombings and the 2000 attack on the *USS Cole* were absorbed as episodic tragedies rather than data points on a trajectory, and the 9/11 Commission ultimately concluded that the most important failure had been one "of imagination," an inability of well-staffed institutions to take seriously an adversary that had announced its intentions repeatedly.[69] Imagination is even harder to sustain in institutions that are shedding the people who once possessed it. The analogy should not be overdrawn; today's defensive architecture, however degraded, is vastly more capable than its 1990s

predecessor, and today's movement is more oriented toward governing territory in the Sahel and the Horn than toward spectacular transnational attacks. But the structural lesson of the pre-9/11 decade is precisely that threat and threat perception can decouple, and that the gap between them is where surprise lives.

None of this argues for re-inflating counterterrorism to its post-9/11 scale, which produced its own pathologies and opportunity costs. The realistic goal is a sustainable floor rather than another boom-and-bust cycle: preserving the National Counterterrorism Center's integrative core and the legal authorities that feed it; maintaining the handful of datasets and research programs that constitute the field's empirical memory; protecting the analytic independence that makes warning credible; and sustaining the liaison relationships (exemplified by the continued Europol-FBI operations against IS-K networks) that allow a smaller enterprise to punch above its weight. Watching the right indicators matters more than watching everything: the external operations tempo flowing out of Afghanistan, the Sahel, and Somalia; the consolidation of jihadi proto-governance in Mali and around Mogadishu; foreign fighter and finance flows between theaters; and the movement's adoption of artificial intelligence and unmanned systems.

The jihadi movement is a keeper of anniversaries. Its publications still commemorate September 11 each year as proof that patience and asymmetry can humble a superpower, and its strategists have always framed their struggle in decades, not news cycles. A quarter century on, the movement has absorbed the loss of two founding leaders, a territorial caliphate, and tens of thousands of fighters, and it is still expanding on two continents. The United States, by contrast, is dismantling its counterterrorism memory at the very moment its adversary is banking on being forgotten. The movement no longer carries the focus of the national security establishment, and in the near term it may not need to. But as we travel further from the peak of threat perception and the ranks of those who remember why that perception once existed grow thinner, the opportunity for the kind of surprise this movement has delivered before increases. Sobriety, on this anniversary, means neither alarmism nor amnesia. It means keeping watch, deliberately and affordably, on an enemy that has made a strategy of our distraction.

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more bizarre is that following the Ajnad Bayt al-Maqdis claim, an IRGC proxy in Syria, the Syrian Islamic Resistance Front also claimed the attack, and then another IRGC proxy in Iraq, Kata'ib Hezbollah shared the claim from Ajnad Bayt al-Maqdis. All of this could suggest Iran is playing a shell game and also utilizing the al-Qaeda brand to try to bolster its operations against the U.S. in the current war against it. It could also highlight the possibility that al-Qaeda has truly become a pawn of Iran now. Whatever the case, it highlights yet again how far al-Qaeda has fallen over the past decade or so as a relevant actor.

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ABOUT THE VOLUME

Twenty-five years after the September 11 attacks, the global jihadi movement has outlived its founders, its caliphate, and most of the forecasts made about its impending demise. The movement that has its roots in the Middle East and South Asia now increasingly threatens Africa, where some al-Qaeda affiliates govern large swaths of territory and where Islamic State Somalia Province has become a financial hub bankrolling operations on the continent and further afield. Capabilities that once belonged only to advanced militaries engaged in counterterrorism operations a decade ago are now in the hands of terrorists, insurgents, and homegrown violent extremists. Over that same period, jihadi terrorism has slipped down the threat rankings of the governments that once organized their security and foreign policy almost entirely around it. This book brings together nine of the field's leading scholars and analysts to assess the movement on the evidence: where it has grown, where it has adapted, what the post-9/11 era got wrong, and what the current retreat from counterterrorism is likely to cost.

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