LOCALIZING GLOBAL JIHAD:

CONFRONTING SALAFI-JIHADI EXTREMISM
IN THE WAKE OF THE SAN BERNADINO ATTACKS

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Introduction

Americans greeted the death of Osama bin Laden with a mixture of pride and relief. After ten years of conflict and countless casualties, many hoped that the loss of al-Qaeda's charismatic leader would finally bring the Global War on Terror to an end. Initially the signs seemed hopeful. Decimated by drone strikes and hunted by commandos, bin Laden's successors grew more paranoid, more marginalized, and more isolated from their local allies. Senior al-Qaeda leaders disappeared. Senior officials predicted al-Qaeda's defeat. And as the Arab Spring swept across the Middle East, a growing chorus of pundits and policymakers argued that it was time for United States to declare victory and come home.

These calls proved premature. Far from destroying al-Qaeda, bin Laden's death gave birth to a new generation of terrorist and insurgent leaders. Some of these militants survived prolonged exile in Pakistan and incarceration at Guantanamo Bay. Others came of age fighting U.S. forces in Iraq and found new inspiration amidst the horrors of the Syrian Civil War. Together these experiences produced adaptive terrorist organizations that combine the practical lessons of successful insurgencies with the irrational dictates of millenarian ideology. Grounded in Sunni Arab societies and chastened by bin Laden's failures, the global *salafi-jihad* movement is now more complex, more dynamic, and ultimately more dangerous than ever before.

Confronting these challenges requires a clear view of our adversaries and the threats they pose. Beginning with the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York and Washington, and continuing through the September 11, 2012 attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya, transnational terrorist syndicates struck U.S. targets with the goal of inflicting pain, rally their followers, and undermining our will to fight. The same motives drive their efforts to plot, direct, or inspire so-called "lone wolf" attacks on U.S. soil. These circumstances reflect the immutable nature of armed conflict itself. Just as we make war on our adversaries abroad, our adversaries will make war on us here at home.

Hence the question before us is *whether* there is a threat, but rather *how* that threat manifests within western societies. The November 2015 Paris attacks demonstrate that highly motivated operatives from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) are able to cross borders, infiltrate communities, and execute brutal operations. Yet incidents like the December 2015 mass shooting in San Bernardino can prove equally deadly – event in the absence of direction,

facilitation, or participation by established terrorist organizations. The result is a spectrum of prospective threats, each with its own unique causes, characteristics, and consequences.

Successfully confronting these theses threats requires three steps. First, policy-makers must identify the characteristics that distinguish organizations like the ISIS and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Second, they must describe the processes that dive individuals to join these organizations or act on their behalf. And third, they must avoid the temptation to use religion and nationality as proxies for ideology and psychology. In short, we must discern the character of the unconventional war in which we find ourselves – not mistaking it for, or turning it into, something alien to its true nature.

Localization & Atomization

Two trends drive the evolution of the global *salafi-jihadi* movement. The first is localization. More than two decades ago, al-Qaeda and other transnational terrorist syndicates operated on the cultural and geographic periphery of the Islamic world. From Afghanistan and Bosnia to Chechnya and Somalia, these militants sought to colonize foreign societies, radicalize indigenous populations, and transform local conflicts into new front in a globalize, homogenized jihad. This strategy proved short-sighted. Restrained by cultural, linguistic, and even religious differences, veterans of the Soviet-Afghan War like Ibn al-Khattab and Ayman al-Zawahiri found themselves increasingly dependent on the local hosts.

The U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq shattered this paradigm. Within weeks, foreign fighters abandoned isolated theatres along Islam's periphery in favor of new wars in its Sunni Arab core. This migration grounded militants in more permissive environments. Rather than adapting to foreign languages and cultures, they now operated in Arabic-speaking societies with familiar tribal structures. The result was more robust and resilient organizations. Whether it is AQAP in Yemen or ISIS in Syria and Iraq, al-Qaeda's most successful successors now wage global jihad by organizing and sustaining local campaigns.

The second key trend is atomization. From the November 2009 shootings at Ft. Hood to the January 2015 massacre at the *Charlie Hebdo* headquarters in Paris, a growing number of self-styled *jihadis* now operate with few meaningful ties to a discernable terrorist syndicate. Organizations like AQAP actively encourage this phenomenon, using the online magazine

Inspire to instruct English-speaking sympathizers in basic terrorist tactics while inciting them to strike specific target sets. This approach allows AQAP to profit from the actions of unrelated parties, even when they cannot control the operation or the outcome.

ISIS leverages atomization with far greater effect. Deftly deploying print, broadcast, and social media, the organization engages sympathizers in the West through a steady stream of violent images, false premises, and easy answers. Branding is merely one element in this strategy. Instead, the goal is to surmount ISIS's conventional weakness by inspiring – and in some instances directing – armed attacks in our strategic depth. The fact that these actors have no terrorist training or ties is inconsequential. By claiming their actions, ISIS constructs a "virtual" Caliphate that exceeds the boundaries and capabilities that limit the physical one.

Localization and atomization are distinct phenomena. The former grounds organizations like ISIS in political communities with a discrete population, territory, and resources. The latter casts an "imagined communities" where individuals seek meaning and membership though a common message and mission. Yet these phenomena are also complementary. Localization gives ISIS a foundation for recruiting, radicalizing, and mobilizing supporters. Atomization, in turn, provides a reservoir of alienated individuals willing to fight and die for a cause. More than anything else, it is this unique correlation of a political community with and an imagined community that distinguishes ISIS from other transnational terrorist syndicates.

Radicalization & Mobilization

Like most terrorist and insurgent groups, ISIS engages in direct operations using its own regularly constituted forces. Some of these militants are "foreign fighters" who abandoned conflicts in other countries to participate in Iraq's Sunni insurgency and the Syrian Civil War. Others are exiles, criminals, or zealots from poorly integrated immigrant communities in the West. So it should not surprise us when ISIS operatives cross international borders and attack our allies in Turkey, France, and other countries. Their means may be unconventional, but their motives and methods are familiar.

The same is not necessary true for ISIS-inspired attacks. As the mass shooting in San Bernardino demonstrates, it is not always clear whether militants are acting on behalf of ISIS or whether ISIS is appropriating individual actions. The *Charlie Hebdo* massacre underscores this

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ambiguity, with perpetrators embracing both AQAP and ISIS even though the two organizations are competitors. Against this backdrop, understanding the pathways that lead individuals to violent jihad is more important than attributing the violence to a particular organization. This is especially true when it comes to identifying and preventing homegrown terror.

My research reveals four distinct pathways to violent jihad: indoctrination, collaboration, facilitation, and resonant effects.[1] Indoctrination occurs when individuals travel to foreign countries, join terrorist syndicates, and subsequently operate through these organizations. Some of these recruits then return to the West to conduct operations at the direction of their foreign leadership. The classic example is Mohammed Atah, who underwent extensive training at an al-Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan before September 11th. More recent examples include the perpetrators of the November 2015 Paris attacks, who fought with ISIS in Syria before returning to France and Belgium.

Collaboration, by comparison, occurs when individual receive training from terrorist organization without joining its ranks or acting on its behalf. Faisal Shazad's interaction with the Pakistani Taliban is a case in point. Driven by his opposition to the U.S. war in Afghanistan, Shazad traveled to Pakistan, learned to build bombs, and then returned to the United States to orchestrate a failed attack on tourists in Times Square. Yet unlike someone undergoing indoctrination, there is no indication that Shazad fought alongside the Pakistani Taliban or swore fealty to terrorist organization. His jihad was a personal jihad, with other terrorists playing a supporting role.

Facilitation lacks this organizational support. Instead, militants radicalize and mobilize through a relationship with a spiritual mentor. Major Nidal Hassan's email dialogue with the radical Yemeni-American cleric Anwar al-Awlaki may be one such example, with the perpetrator of the Fort Hood shootings seeking guidance on the lawfulness of killing soldiers and civilians. ISIS uses similar strategies, engaging prospective supporters through chat rooms, e-mail, and Skype. This process typically involves an assessment of the individual's piety, an evaluation of their capabilities, and a series of gradually escalating requests designed to test their loyalty. In each instance, the goal is to transform radical beliefs into violent action.

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[1] Dr. Joseph Rosen of Dartmouth Medical School first introduced the term "resonant effects" to describe individualized patterns of *salafi-jihadi* violence.

Finally, resonant effects operate without organizational structure, technical support, or spiritual mentors. Instead, militants identify with a community or cause, radicalize by consuming *salafi-jihadi* propaganda, and mobilize through their own self-directed action. This pathway is the most atomized, reflecting individual ideology and psychology rather than organizational dynamics. Notable examples include Tamerlane and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, who perpetrated the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing with no discernable assistance or guidance from foreign supporters. Such violence is the most difficult to identify and interdict, and therefore the most likely source of future terrorist attacks.

Strategic Implications

These pathways present three key lessons. First, ISIS and other transnational terrorist syndicates are inherently opportunistic. This means that they will use the tools available to them in the theatres where they operate. In Western Europe, those tools include a large population of disaffected Muslim citizens, a growing cohort of foreign fighters with European passports, and an unprecedented refugee crisis that masks the flow of hostile forces. Those conditions favour indoctrination and collaboration, with ISIS using its resources to recruit, direct, or collaborate with individual militants. They also underscore the need for governments to coordinate military intelligence, and law enforcement capabilities across international boarders. Building walls and pointing figures does little to address the threat

Second, the threats we face in the United States are more likely to arise from facilitation and resonant effects. Unlike our European allies, we do share the same proximity to conflict zones in the greater Middle East and do not confront the same intense isolation and alienation within our own Muslim population. These facts do not eliminate the threat of terrorist infiltration from abroad. Yet do they encourage us to take a deeper at the causes and consequences of radicalization here at home. So long as ISIS can reach, inspire, and occasionally direct individuals through its messaging, it will leverage home-grown jihadis to intimidate the American people and undermine our collective will to fight. This is true even if ISIS plays no direct role in the violence itself.

Third, we need to recognize that ISIS uses terrorist strikes in the West to compensate for its own weaknesses in the Middle East. Terrorism is a low-risk, high-return strategy that allows

marginal actors to reach beyond their grasp and punch above their weight. Organizations use when they lack the means to confront their adversaries directly. This means that success in one theatre may not produce security in another. The more we contain and degrade ISIS in Syria and Iraq, the more likely they are strike back in Europe and the United States. This is the immutable nature of war, not an inherent failure of U.S. policy.

These lessons do not diminish the threat. Despite its growing vulnerability, ISIS's capacity to radicalize Islamic discourse, mobilize disaffected Muslims, and inspire violent individuals still presents a clear and present danger. We cannot, and indeed should not, pretend otherwise. But ultimately we decide what to protect and how to respond. If we accept ISIS's vision of civilizational conflict, then ISIS will define the nature of the war. If we overreact to ISIS's provocations, then ISIS will be in a stronger position to catalyze and consolidate its support. And if we surrender reason and tolerance to nativism and fear, then we ultimately undermine our society's capacity to adapt and prevail.