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A report of the
CSIS Transnational
Threats Project



The Evolution of the Salafi-Jihadist Threat

**Current and Future Challenges
from the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda,
and Other Groups**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite the Islamic State's loss of territory in Iraq and Syria, an increasingly diffuse Salafi-jihadist movement is far from defeated. This report constructs a data set of groups and fighters from 1980 to 2018 and identifies several trends:

- The number of Salafi-jihadists in 2018 declined somewhat from a high in 2016, but is still at near-peak levels since 1980. To put this into historical perspective, the high estimate of fighters in 2018 is 270 percent greater than in 2001 when the 9/11 attacks occurred.
- The regions with the largest number of fighters are the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia. Other regions, such as Southeast Asia, have fewer fighters.
- The countries with the highest number of fighters are Syria (between 43,650 and 70,550 fighters), Afghanistan (between 27,000 and 64,060), Pakistan (between 17,900 and 39,540), Iraq (between 10,000 and 15,000), Nigeria (between 3,450 and 6,900), and Somalia (between 3,095 and 7,240).
- There were 67 Salafi-jihadist groups across the globe in 2018, tied with 2016 for the highest level since 1980. This reflected a 180 percent increase in the number of groups from 2001 to 2018.
- There were approximately 44 groups other than the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and their direct affiliates in 2018. This total, which included organizations like Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and Lashkar-e-Taiba, accounted for roughly 67 percent of all groups.
- Attack data indicates that there are still high levels of violence in Syria and Iraq from Salafi-jihadist groups, along with significant violence in such countries and regions as Yemen from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the Sahel from Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, Nigeria from Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa, Afghanistan from the Taliban and other groups, and Somalia from al-Shabaab.

These findings suggest that there is a large pool of Salafi-jihadist and allied fighters willing and able to use violence to achieve their goals. Not all of these groups are plotting attacks against the United States or oth-

er Western countries. Some have only local interests. Even so, these trends are nevertheless disturbing. While the number of attacks recently in the United States has been relatively low, the terrorism threat has been higher in Europe. Examples include the November 2015 Paris attack (which killed 130 and wounded 368 people), the July 2016 Nice attack (which killed 86 and wounded 434), the May 2017 Manchester bombing (which killed 22 and injured 139), the June 2017 London Bridge attack (which killed 8 and wounded 48), the August 2017 Barcelona attack (which killed 24 and wounded over 150), and the March 2018 Carcassonne and Trèbes, France attacks (which killed 4 and wounded 15). European officials have also disrupted major terrorist plots. In September 2018, for example, the Netherlands foiled "very advanced" plans for a large-multi-site terrorist attack and arrested seven suspects inspired by the Islamic State.¹ Terrorist attacks in the West have increasingly involved simple tactics, such as vehicles used to kill pedestrians, rudimentary improvised explosive devices, knives, swords, small arms, and blunt objects like hammers.

The global laydown of Salafi-jihadists is increasingly decentralized among four types: the Islamic State and its provinces, al-Qaeda and its affiliates, other Salafi-jihadist and allied groups, and inspired networks and individuals. Most of the attacks in the West are coming from the last type—the inspired networks and individuals. In addition, there is significant competition between and within these categories, including between the two largest movements: the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. Competition is particularly intense in battlefields like Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Afghanistan. There is also substantial fluidity within and between these categories. Individual fighters and supporters often move between groups or networks depending on factors like changes in leaders, effectiveness of leaders, fluctuations in outside support, and changes in territorial control. In many countries, such as Syria and Libya, the fluid nature of jihadist activity suggests that it is often more useful to highlight jihadist "networks" than it is to analyze them as formal "groups."

Looking toward the future, there are several developments worth monitoring. First, the rapid development of commercial technology will likely provide an opportunity for Salafi-jihadists—along with other terrorist organizations and criminal enterprises—to

improve their capabilities. Key areas include: drones (especially armed drones), social media services, artificial intelligence, encrypted communications, virtual currencies, the Dark Web, offensive cyber capabilities, and weapons of mass destruction. Salafi-jihadist networks will likely try to utilize these evolving platforms and systems to distribute propaganda, raise funds, recruit new members, conduct disinformation campaigns, and plan and orchestrate attacks.

Second, while the United States and allied governments have weakened some groups like the Islamic State, many of the underlying causes of terrorism have not been adequately addressed. An important—perhaps the most important—component of Western policy should be helping regimes that are facing terrorism improve governance and deal more effectively with economic, sectarian, and other grievances that have been manipulated by Salafi-jihadist groups. Policymakers need to better understand the specific political and other factors that allowed groups like the Islamic State and al-Qaeda to establish a foothold and to focus U.S. diplomatic and development efforts on better addressing them. In Iraq, for example, Sunni Arab disenfranchisement has been among the most important causes of instability and an important source of recruits for the Islamic State. Current military efforts to undermine Islamic State territorial control in such cities as Fallujah, Ramadi, and Mosul have so far done little to ameliorate local grievances, such as anger at the slow pace of reconstruction and the presence of Shi'a militias among the Sunni population. In Libya, improving national and local governance is essential to undermine Salafi-jihadist groups in the long run.

Third, U.S. and other Western actions in Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East could serve as a boon for Salafi-jihadists at a time when Washington has shifted its national security priorities from counterterrorism to state threats like Russia and China. A U.S. decision to withdraw most counterterrorism forces from Africa would be risky. While French forces remain active in Francophone Africa, Salafi-jihadist groups might be able to take advantage of the U.S. withdrawal by surging in several areas like the Sahel, North Africa, and West Africa. In addition, a deteriorating situation in Afghanistan could trigger a resurgence of Salafi-jihadist activity in South Asia. A Taliban military victory in Afghanistan, if it were to occur, would be viewed by

Salafi-jihadists as a major triumph against the United States, much like the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 was a source of inspiration and recruitment for al-Qaeda.

Every U.S. president since 9/11 has tried to move away from counterterrorism in some capacity, and it is no different today. Americans should understand that terrorism won't end, even though the terrorism threat may ebb and flow over time. Balancing national security priorities in today's world needs to happen gradually. For the United States, the challenge is not that U.S. officials are devoting attention and resources to dealing with state adversaries like Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea. These countries present legitimate threats to the United States at home and abroad. Rather, the mistake would be declaring victory over terrorism too quickly and, as a result, shifting too many resources and too much attention away from terrorist groups when the threat remains significant.

CHAPTER 01

INTRODUCTION

With the collapse of the Islamic State’s so-called caliphate in Iraq and Syria, there is a critical need to assess the current state and future evolution of Salafi-jihadist groups. U.S. strategy documents like the *National Security Strategy* note that the United States has “crushed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terrorists on the battlefields of Syria and Iraq, and will continue pursuing them until they are destroyed.”¹ In addition, the unclassified portion of the *National Defense Strategy* outlined a move from counterterrorism measures against non-state actors like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State to security and economic competition with states like China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea.²

Some policymakers and scholars have argued that al-Qaeda is in significant decline.³ As one assessment of al-Qaeda’s efforts in Syria concluded, “al-Qa’ida’s prospects for success have faced existential challenges in recent years. Now, al-Qa’ida’s claim to command any Syrian affiliate stands on the thinnest of foundations, if any at all.”⁴

Other experts argue that the terrorist threat is negligible. Robert Malley and Jon Finer argue that U.S. policymakers and Washington’s “militarized counterterrorism culture” have hyped the threat. The result is that “the United States has been engaged in a seemingly endless confrontation with a metastasizing set of militant groups” and the country “has become captive to a national security paradigm that ends up magnifying the very fears from which it was born.”⁵ Other skeptics, like John Mueller, have argued that the terrorist threat to the United States is overstated and that “almost no terrorists exist in the United States and few have the means or the inclination to strike from abroad.”⁶ Mueller contends, for example, that the number of people killed by terrorists outside of war zones after 9/11 was lower than the number of people that drowned in bathtubs in the United States.⁷

Finally, a 2018 survey of foreign policy experts conducted by the magazine *Foreign Affairs* found that 57 percent of the respondents believed that U.S. foreign policy focused too much on counterterrorism over the past decade, with smaller percentages that were neutral (10 percent) or disagreed (33 percent). Those who

believed that the United States had focused too much on counterterrorism made arguments such as:

“The United States has imposed upon itself countless opportunity costs in pursuing objectives that are unwinnable at the marginal cost it is willing to pay. This has undermined our security rather than bolstered it...Enough is enough,” C. Christine Fair, Georgetown University.

“The U.S. military has focused on counterterrorism operations, training and developing its force for a specific challenge along the conflict spectrum that is much more likely, albeit much less consequential, than the challenge posed by great power competitors such as China,” Mara Karlin, Johns Hopkins University.

“While there is certainly a terrorist threat, the severity of that threat is greatly overrated, which causes the United States to pursue policies that exacerbate the problem,” John Mearsheimer, University of Chicago.

“The U.S. focus on counter-terrorism has come at the expense of policy toward major powers, particularly Russia and China. There has been a modest doctrinal shift recently but there is still a very long way to go,” Thomas Wright, Brookings Institution.⁸

On the other hand, some analysts contend that the Islamic State could resurge if it can effectively go underground, foster sectarianism, take advantage of local grievances, and wage an insurgency in countries like Iraq and Syria.⁹ Others argue that al-Qaeda has moderated its brand, attempted to hide its ties to its affiliates, limited violence against civilians, and established close relationships with local groups in order to appear more locally-focused and superficially unconcerned with a global jihadist agenda.¹⁰ One assessment concluded that “While the self-proclaimed Islamic State has dominated the headlines and preoccupied national security officials for the past four years, al-Qaeda has been quietly rebuilding.”¹¹

With such differing views, how should we make sense of the evolving terrorist landscape?

RESEARCH DESIGN

This report examines past, present, and future trends of Salafi-jihadists. It asks three sets of questions. First, how should we characterize the global Salafi-jihadist movement today? What are the goals, organizational structures, strategies, tactics, size, capabilities, and geographic locations of key groups? Second, how might the Salafi-jihadist landscape evolve in the future in such areas as social media, artificial intelligence, drones, and encrypted communications? Third, based on answers to these questions, what are the most important policy implications for the United States? After all, the Trump Administration has shifted from a post-9/11 emphasis on counterterrorism against non-state groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State to a focus on competition between state adversaries. As the *National Defense Strategy* notes, “Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security.”¹²

This report utilized a mixture of qualitative and quantitative information, as well as trips to West Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. To answer the first set of questions, the research team compiled and analyzed thousands of primary source documents, including the writings, statements, and internal memorandums of Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and other Salafi-jihadist leaders. The research team also examined primary source documents from such locations as the Harmony Database at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point and the SITE Intelligence Group.¹³ In addition, the research team constructed a data set that included information on such variables as the number of Salafi-jihadist groups, number of fighters, number of attacks, and location of groups and fighters. It used data from multiple sources, such as the Global Terrorism Database at the University of Maryland, Jane’s Terrorism and Insurgency Centre, and Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED).¹⁴

To answer the second set of questions, the research team analyzed commercial and other developments in such areas as drone technology, artificial intelligence, cryptography, virtual currencies, and offensive cyber capabilities with an eye toward what terrorists might be able to utilize.

To answer the third set of questions, the research team examined U.S. strategy and counterterrorism

documents. The team gathered information from interviews conducted with current and former government officials from the United States and allied countries, Congressional members and staffers, and subject matter experts.

DEFINITIONS

The report focuses on a particular strand of extremist Sunni Islam: Salafi-jihadist groups and individuals. It defines a group or individual as Salafi-jihadist based on two criteria. First, the group or individual emphasizes the importance of returning to a “pure” Islam, that of the Salaf, the pious ancestors. Second, the group or individual believes that violent jihad is *fard ‘ayn* (a personal religious duty).¹⁵ *Fard ‘ayn* includes tasks every Muslim is required to perform, such as *zakat* (almsgiving), *hajj* (the pilgrimage to Mecca), *salat* (daily prayers), *sawm* (fasting during Ramada), and the *shahada* (accepting Muhammad as God’s messenger).¹⁶ Jihad is not one of these five pillars. It is, instead, a collective duty (*fard kifaya*) under certain circumstances. A *fard kifaya* is an act that is obligatory for the Muslim community collectively. However, if it is sufficiently carried out by some members of the Muslim community, then other Muslims do not have to perform it (for example, the prayer performed at a Muslim burial).¹⁷ Still, most Salafi-jihadists consider violent jihad an individual duty, or *fard ‘ayn*.¹⁸ Ayman al-Zawahiri, among others, emphasized both Salafism and armed jihad.¹⁹

This report focuses on Salafi-jihadist groups and individuals for several reasons. First, they represent a threat to the United States and its allies, since most Salafi-jihadist groups consider America an enemy. Second, many Salafi-jihadist groups are willing to kill civilians in ways that terrorist groups have historically eschewed. Brian Jenkins wrote in the 1970s that “terrorists want a lot of people watching, not a lot of people dead,” a statement he later amended with the rise of organizations like al-Qaeda that wanted a lot of people watching and a lot of people dead.²⁰ Salafi-jihadists are willing to kill large numbers of civilians that they consider apostates, including Muslims, making the potential for wanton destruction particularly acute. Third,

the Islamic State and al-Qaeda are Salafi-jihadists. To be clear, most Salafi-jihadist groups are not members or affiliates of the Islamic State or al-Qaeda (that is, their leaders have not sworn *bay'ah* (allegiance) to Islamic State or al-Qaeda leaders). Nevertheless, many have been willing to cooperate with al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, or their affiliates when it suits them—or have been inspired by their ideology.²¹

Consequently, this analysis does not examine all Islamist groups (those organizations attempting to build an Islamic state).²² It does not analyze, for example, the Muslim Brotherhood, which is a pan-Islamic social movement established by the Islamic scholar and schoolteacher Hassan al-Banna. Nor does it focus on militant Shi'a groups, such as Hezbollah (though Chapter 4 does highlight Hezbollah's use of technologies and systems like drones). Some of these groups pose a threat to the United States, its allies, and its interests abroad. But the religious views of these terrorist groups are different from—and often at odds with—Salafi-jihadists. Still, the policy implications outlined at the end of this report are broadly applicable to a wide range of terrorist and insurgent groups, not just Salafi-jihadists.²³

We did, however, make one exception. The report includes data on extremist Deobandi groups, particularly ones like the Afghan Taliban that developed a relationship with Salafi-jihadist groups. Deobandism is a school of thought whose name comes from the Dar ul-Ulum madrassa (Islamic school) in 1867 in Deoband, India, north of Delhi. Deobandism follows a Salafist model and seeks to emulate the life and times of the Prophet Muhammad. It holds that a Muslim's primary obligation and loyalty are to his religion, and loyalty to country is always secondary. Some Deobandis also believe that they have a sacred right and obligation to wage jihad to protect the Muslims of any country. In addition, some Salafi-jihadist groups like al-Qaeda have established close relations with Deobandi groups like the Afghan Taliban. Al-Qaeda leaders like Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri have even sworn *bay'ah* to Taliban leaders, highlighting their bonds. In June 2016, for example, al-Zawahiri pledged his allegiance to newly-appointed Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhundzada after the death of Akhundzada's predecessor, Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour. "I as the Emir of the Qaedat al-Jihad," Zawahiri remarked in an audio

message, "give you our pledge of allegiance, renewing the method of Sheikh Usama, may Allah have mercy on him, in calling upon the Muslim Ummah [worldwide community of Muslims] to support the Islamic Emirate and pledge allegiance to it."²⁴

OUTLINE OF THE REPORT

The rest of this report is divided into four additional chapters. Chapter Two examines key trends in the global Salafi-jihadist landscape, such as the number of groups and fighters. Chapter Three assesses the state of al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, allied groups, and inspired individuals and networks. Chapter Four analyzes several areas that Salafi-jihadists may leverage in the future, such as drones, social media, artificial intelligence, encrypted communications, virtual currencies, the Dark Web, offensive cyber capabilities, and weapons of mass destruction. Chapter Five outlines policy implications for the United States.

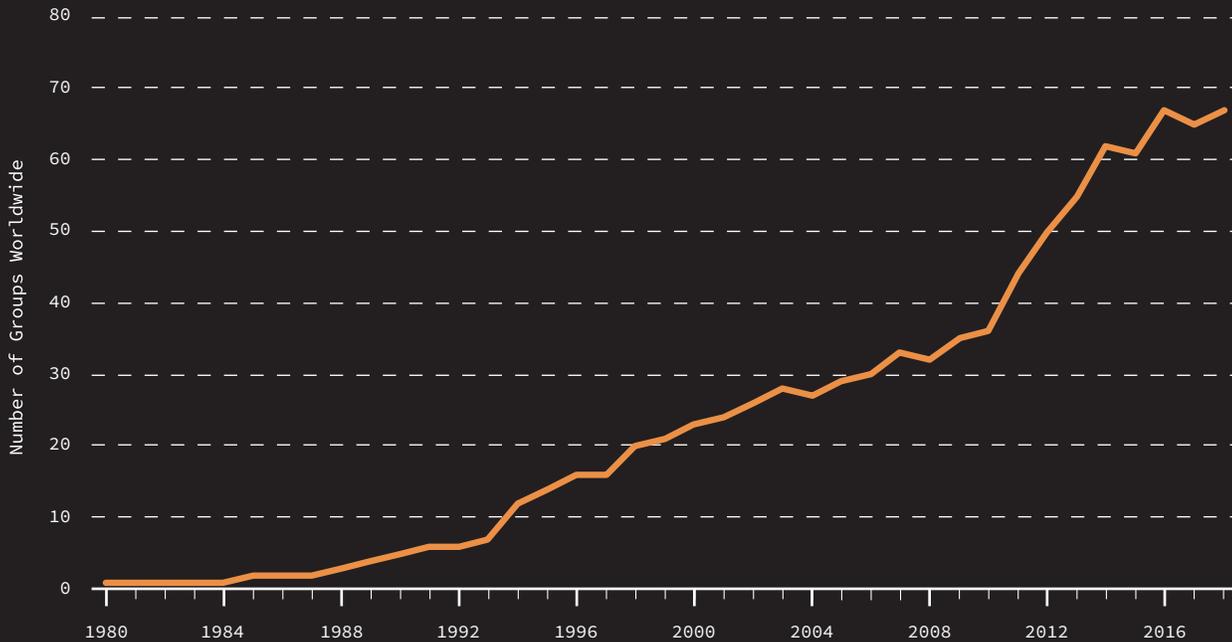
CHAPTER 02

**THE
EVOLVING
LANDSCAPE**

6
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THE
EVOLUTION
OF THE
SALAFI-
JIHADIST
THREAT

FIGURE 2.1
Number of Salafi-Jihadist and Allied Groups, 1980–2018



This chapter examines trends in the Salafi-jihadist landscape.¹ The analysis in this chapter indicates that there is still a significant pool of Salafi-jihadists and substantial violence across the globe from Salafi-jihadist groups and networks.

The chapter is divided into four sections. The first examines the number of groups and investigates trends in those numbers since 1980. The second section analyzes the number of Salafi-jihadist fighters since 1980. The third assesses the geographic scope of Salafi-jihadist activity. The fourth section provides brief conclusions about Salafi-jihadist trends.

NUMBER OF GROUPS

We compiled a data set of Salafi-jihadist and allied groups from 1980 to 2018, and then totaled the number of active groups operating each year.² As explained in Chapter 1, we defined a group as Salafi-jihadist based on

two criteria: (1) it emphasizes the importance of returning to a “pure” Islam, that of the Salaf (the first three generations of Muslims, beginning with the Prophet Muhammad and his companions), and (2) the group believes that violent jihad is a religious duty. We also included extremist Deobandi groups, such as the Afghan Taliban, which have developed a relationship with Salafi-jihadist groups. Each data point on the y-axis represents the number of groups that were active that year.

The current number of active groups is at the highest level over the past 40 years, as noted in Figure 2.1. This finding is significant since 1980 marked the era when foreign fighters like Abdullah Azzam—and eventually Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri—flocked to Pakistan and Afghanistan to fight the Soviets and support the Afghan mujahideen.³

As highlighted in Figure 2.1, there was a slight increase in the number of groups during the 1990s and 2000s, but a significant jump in the slope of the line beginning around 2011. Most of the new groups in 2011 were in the Middle East and Africa, particularly in countries affected by the Arab Spring like Syria and

Libya. Those uprisings, which began in 2011, contributed to the weakening of governments in numerous countries utilized by Salafi-jihadists.⁴

By 2018, the regions with the highest number of groups were the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia—with particularly high numbers in such countries as Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Some examples of these groups include Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, the Islamic State, and Ahrar al-Sham in Syria; the Benghazi Defense Companies, Islamic State Libya, and Shura Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries in Libya; and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, Islamic State Khorasan, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, and Lashkar-e-Taiba in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Based on this data, the leveling off in the curve may have been due to several factors. First, there was not a major new battlefield that attracted Salafi-jihadists. Between 2011 and 2016, for example, the rise in the number of groups occurred in countries that faced burgeoning wars, like Syria, Libya, and Iraq. In Syria, the Assad regime confronted a growing insurgency that began in 2011. In Libya, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries—led by the United States, United Kingdom, and France—overthrew the government of Muammar al-Qaddafi, which subsequently became a sanctuary for Salafi-jihadist groups. In Iraq, the United States withdrew its military forces from the country in 2011 and, four years later, faced a blitzkrieg by Islamic State and allied forces. Recently, though, there have been no major new wars that have attracted large numbers of Salafi-jihadist and allied groups. Second, several of the major battlefields, such as Iraq and Syria,

have likely seen a decline in the number of Salafi-jihadist groups because local governments have successfully taken back territory with the help of outside assistance.

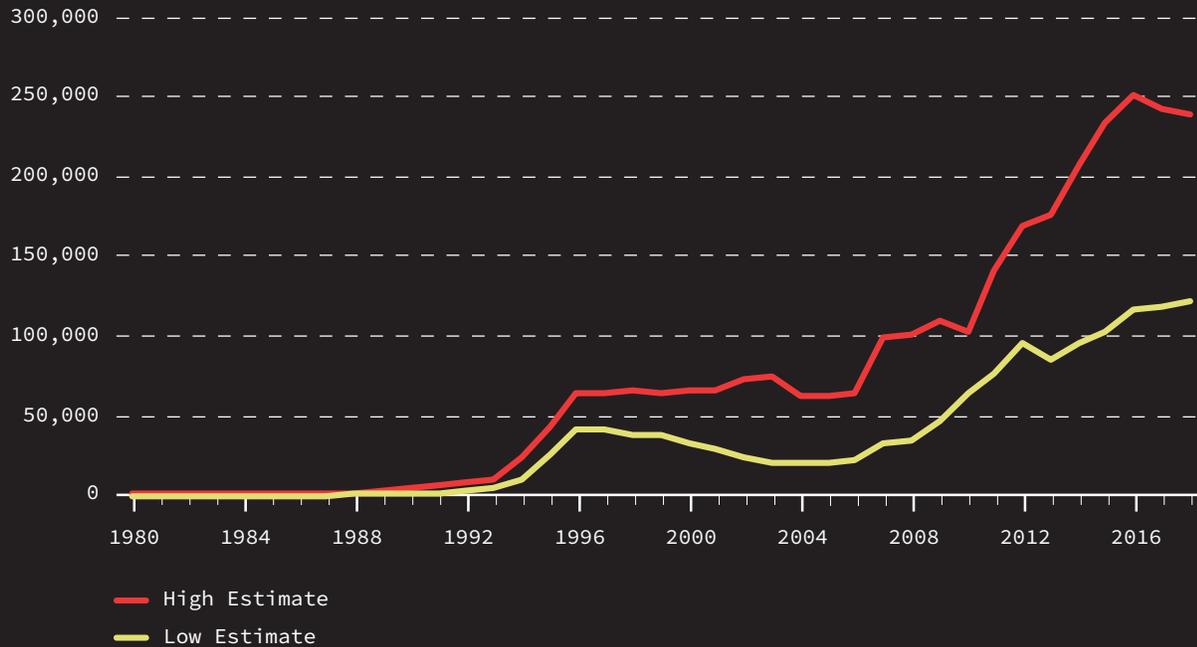
NUMBER OF FIGHTERS

To get an estimate of the number of Salafi-jihadist and allied fighters, we compiled a data set of fighters from 1980 to 2018 and then totaled the number of active fighters operating each year. We did not attempt to estimate the broader number of Salafi-jihadist supporters, since we could find no reliable estimates of individuals that provided part-time logistical help, funding, intelligence, or other aid. Calculating the number of Salafi-jihadist fighters is still challenging. Groups do not provide public estimates of their numbers, and their numbers can vary considerably over the course of a group’s life. In fact, some groups may not have precise estimates of their own fighters because of significant fluctuations in numbers and bureaucratic challenges. Additionally, information on numbers of fighters varies from source to source.

Consequently, we included high and low estimates for the number of Salafi-jihadists and allied fighters by year. We used a range of sources to calculate high and low estimates, such as: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), Jane’s Terrorism and Insurgency Intelligence Center Database, the U.S. Department of State’s “Foreign Terrorist Organizations List (FTOs),” United Nations reports (such as “Twenty-second Report of the Analytical Support and

“The current number of active groups is at the **highest level** over the past 40 years.”

FIGURE 2.2
Estimated Number of Active Salafi-Jihadist Fighters, 1980–2018



Sanctions Monitoring Team,” July 27, 2018), Stanford University’s “Mapping Militant Organizations,” and interviews with experts from the U.S. and other governments.⁵ We attempted to reconcile differences in estimates by examining the sources of data, conducting field visits to most of these regions, and interviewing government and non-government experts. We used high and low estimates with the assumption that the actual numbers each year were somewhere between the extremes.

As Figure 2.2 highlights, the number of Salafi-jihadist and allied fighters began to level off in 2016 following a significant rise starting around 2011. Still, the number of fighters in 2018—between 100,000 and 230,000—is among the highest estimate in the past 40 years. This data suggests that there is still a virtually unprecedented pool of Salafi-jihadist and allied fighters, even with the Islamic State’s decline in territorial control. The regions with the largest number of fighters are the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia. The countries with the largest number of Salafi-jihadist fighters are Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The largest groups in these countries are Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (Syria), the Taliban

(Afghanistan), Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (Pakistan), and the Islamic State (Iraq and Syria). Much like with the number of Salafi-jihadist groups, the decrease in numbers may be caused by such factors as the absence of a major new battlefield and military successes against several groups, such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE AND VIOLENCE

For the location of Salafi-jihadists, we mapped out the areas where Salafi-jihadist and allied fighters are located across the globe. As Figure 2.3 highlights, the regions with the largest number of fighters are the Middle East and North Africa, South and Central Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Other regions—such as Europe and East Asia and the Pacific—have smaller numbers of fighters.

Figure 2.4 includes estimates of Salafi-jihadist and allied groups for several key countries. The existence of groups like Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, the Islamic State, and Ahrar al-Sham (which is part of the National Liberation

FIGURE 2.3
Salafi-Jihadist Fighters by Region, 2018

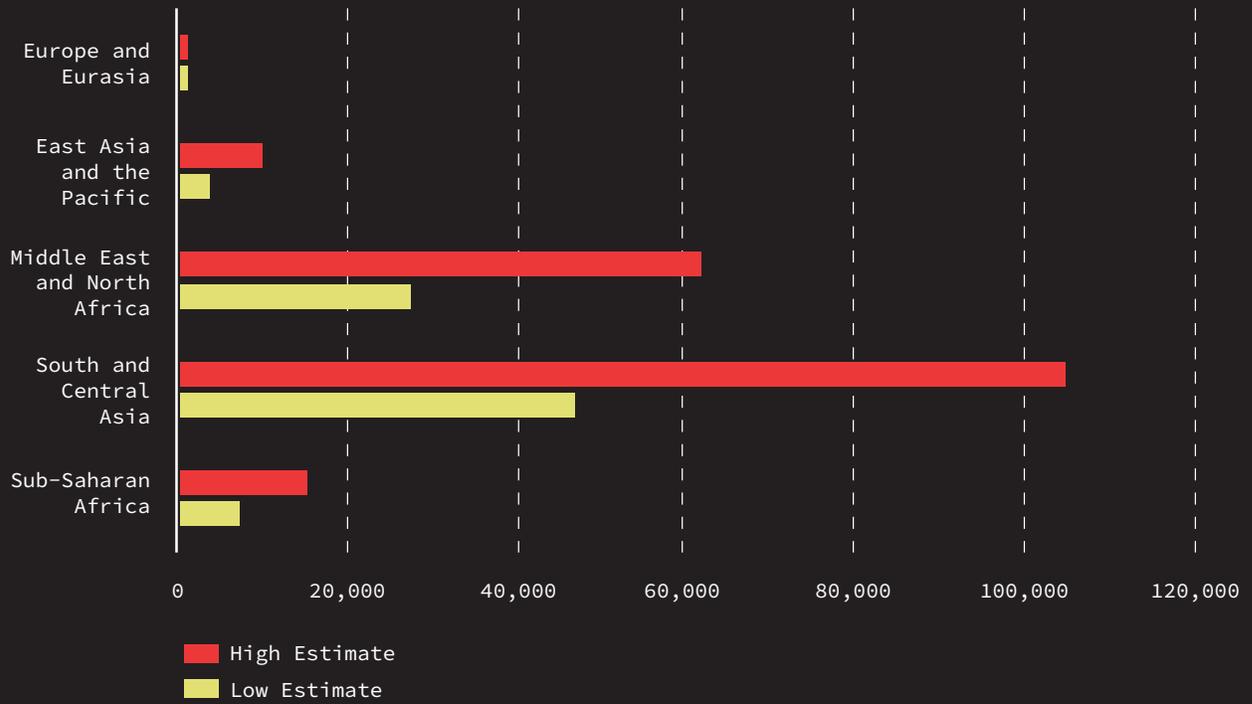
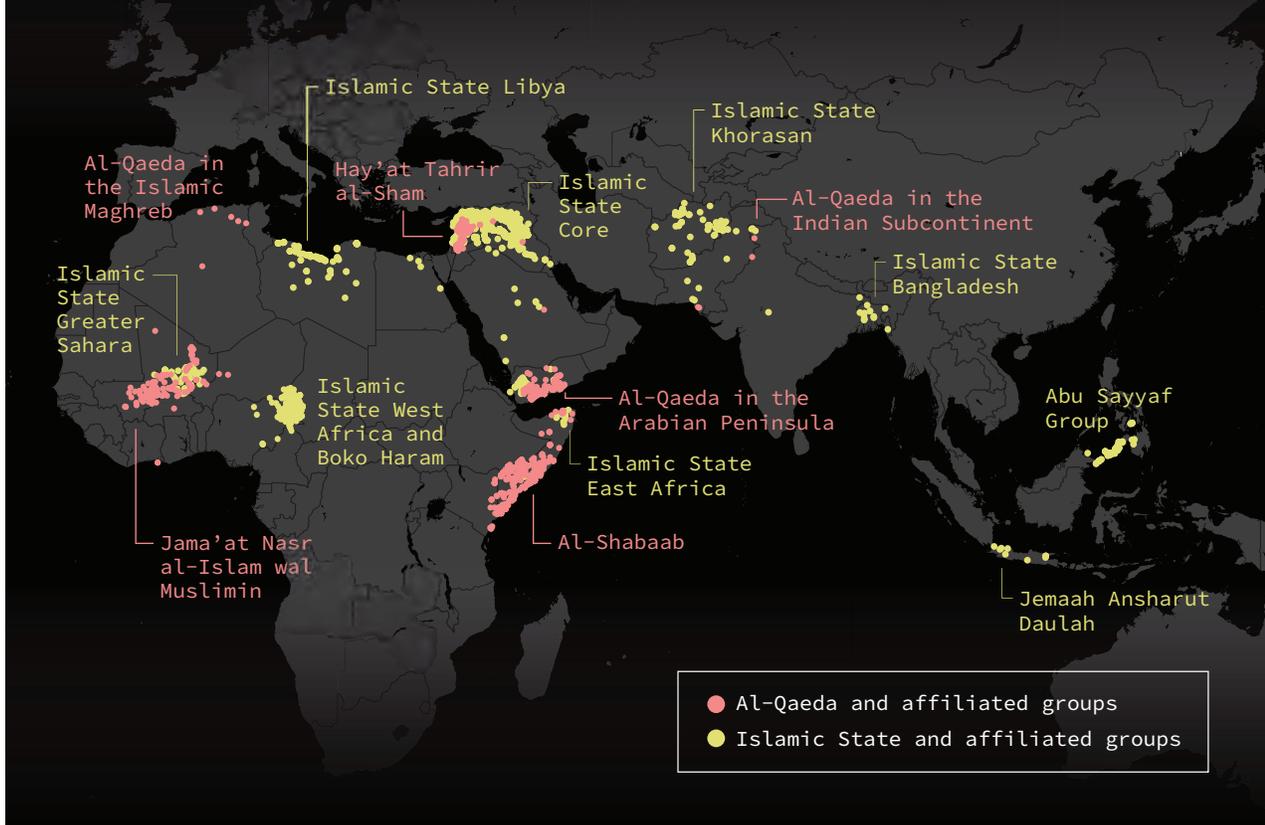


FIGURE 2.4
Estimated Number of Salafi-Jihadist Fighters
in Select Countries, 2018

Country	Low Estimate	High Estimate
Afghanistan	27,000	64,060
Iraq	10,000	15,000
Libya	4,900	9,900
Mali	1,350	3,160
Nigeria	3,450	6,900
Pakistan	17,900	39,540
Philippines	920	2,550
Somalia	3,095	7,240
Syria	43,650	70,550
Yemen	2,300	3,500

FIGURE 2.5

Map of Islamic State and Al-Qaeda Violent Activity, 2016–2018



Front) indicate that Syria likely has the highest estimates on the table. In Afghanistan, the large number of Taliban fighters and smaller numbers of fighters from groups like the Islamic State Khorasan and al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent cause the country to have the second highest estimates. Pakistan also has a significant number of fighters from groups like Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and Lashkar-e-Taiba, followed by Iraq with the Islamic State. Several countries—such as Mali, Yemen, and the Philippines—have comparatively smaller numbers.

Violence levels also remain substantial. Figure 2.5 maps the locations of Islamic State and al-Qaeda attacks in parts of Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia from 2016 to 2018. It indicates high levels of continuing violence in Syria and Iraq, along with violence in southwestern Yemen from the activity of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, in central Mali from Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wa al Muslimeen, in northeastern Nigeria from Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa, and in Somalia and eastern Kenya from al-Shabaab.

CONCLUSIONS

The data compiled in this chapter indicates that there are still high numbers of Salafi-jihadist fighters and groups. The number of Salafi-jihadist fighters worldwide in 2018 decreased somewhat from peak levels in 2016. The slight decline may be due to the absence of new battlefields and successful U.S. and allied counterterrorism campaigns against Salafi-jihadist groups in countries like Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq. However, the estimate of fighters—with a high of 230,000 fighters—remains concerning. The number of Salafi-jihadist groups operating across the globe in 2016 reached an all-time high (67 groups). It then slightly decreased in 2017 (65 groups) and increased again in 2018 (67 groups). Like in 2016, these numbers are once again at all-time highs. In addition, Salafi-jihadists are still killing large numbers of people, though mainly in “near enemy” countries rather than in the West. These trends suggest that the United States and other countries will continue to face a large, fluid pool of Salafi-jihadists for the foreseeable future.

CHAPTER 03

**THE
ISLAMIC
STATE,
AL-QAEDA,
AND OTHER
GROUPS
AND
NETWORKS**

The global laydown of Salafi-jihadists is increasingly decentralized among four types: the Islamic State and its provinces, al-Qaeda and its affiliates, other Salafi-jihadist and allied groups, and inspired networks and individuals.

The research team compiled and analyzed thousands of primary source documents, including the writings, statements, and internal memorandums of Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and other Salafi-jihadist officials. These documents included official publications like *Inspire*, *Dabiq*, and *Rumiyah*; statements from official news sources like al-Qaeda’s As-Sahab Media Foundation and the Islamic State’s ‘Amaq News Agency; and primary source documents from the Harmony Database at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point and other sources.¹

The analysis in this chapter highlights at least two notable trends. First, there is significant competition between and within categories, including between the two largest movements: the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. Competition is particularly intense in battlefields, such as Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Afghanistan. Second, there is substantial fluidity within and between these categories. Individual fighters and supporters often move between groups or networks depending on factors like changes in leaders, effectiveness of leaders, fluctuations in outside support, and changes in territorial control. In many countries, such as Syria and Libya, the fluid nature of jihadist activity suggests that it is often more useful to highlight jihadist pools and networks than it is to confine them to formal groups.

ISLAMIC STATE

Despite the Islamic State’s loss of virtually all its territory in Iraq and Syria, the movement’s primary goal remains establishing a pan-Islamic caliphate that extends from the Middle East into Africa, Europe, and Asia. The Islamic State aims to rule through the enforcement of an extreme interpretation of sharia, or Islamic law, not through government structures that operate under “the laws of men.”² As Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi explained: “Raise your head high, for today—by Allah’s grace—you have a state and

“Individual fighters and supporters often move between groups or networks depending on factors like changes in leaders, effectiveness of leaders, fluctuations in outside support, and changes in territorial control.”

Khilafah [Caliphate], which will return your dignity, might, rights, and leadership. It is a state where the Arab and non-Arab, the white man and black man, the easterner and westerner are all brothers.”³ For Islamic State leaders, the choice for each individual is straightforward: “In reality, there are only two religions. There is the religion of Allah, which is Islam, and then the religion of anything else, which is *kufir* [disbelief].”⁴

There are several characteristics about the Islamic State that have allowed it to continue operations across multiple regions, despite the group’s loss of territory and the relentless targeting of it by the United States and other governments.

First, the Islamic State’s organizational structure is fairly decentralized. Local provinces have substantial autonomy to run daily operations, allowing them to continue operating in spite of setbacks in Syria and Iraq. In addition to the core in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State established formal provinces, or *wilayat*, in such countries as Yemen (in 2014), Libya (2014), Egypt (2014), Saudi Arabia (2014), Algeria (2014), the Caucasus (2015), Niger (2015), Afghanistan and Pakistan (2015), and Nigeria (2015) that pledged to Islamic State leader Baghdadi.⁵ And Baghdadi, in turn, formally accepted their pledges.⁶ More recently, the Islamic State has reshuffled its formal *wilayat* system. Islamic State documents seized by U.S. forces, Iraqi forces, and civilians in Iraq and Syria illustrate how its leaders translated theological views into practice.⁷ In the Iraqi city of Mosul, for example, Islamic State leaders developed a bureaucratic organizational structure that attempted to provide services—such as water, electricity, health care, and education—to the local population, but under the banner of an extreme interpretation of Islam.

Second, the Islamic State’s provinces are financially self-sufficient, ensuring that they don’t require significant funding from the core areas of Iraq and Syria. Provinces finance their operations locally from taxation, extortion, and other sources of revenue such as smuggling and kidnapping.⁸ The Islamic State West Africa, for example, finances itself through local extortion, livestock rustling, Islamic donations like *zakat*, kidnapping, and commercial businesses.⁹

In Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State raised funds by taxing agricultural products like wheat, goods sold at markets, material transported on roads, companies, and households. In some areas of Iraq, for instance, house-

“With its decline in territorial control, Islamic State leaders have shifted from governing territory to developing a long-term ideological agenda and engaging in propaganda, fund-raising, recruitment, and communication on social media and other forums.”

holds were taxed 2,000 dinars per month (less than \$2) for garbage collection, 10,000 dinars (approximately \$8) for each 10 amperes of electricity, and 10,000 dinars for municipal water.¹⁰ The Islamic State's morality police, or *hisba*, prevented most females from working, shut down legal departments (since disputes were supposed to be settled according to God's law alone), prohibited men from shaving, regulated the length and material of female clothing, fined women who didn't properly cover themselves, and prohibited an assortment of actions—such as plucking eyebrows, raising pigeons, playing cards, and playing music. The Islamic State also seized property from non-Sunni populations. A 27-page manual, titled “The Caliphate on the Path of the Prophecy” explained that the Islamic State would confiscate the property of every “Shi'a, Christian, Nusayri and Yazidi based on a lawful order issued directly by the Ministry of Justice.”¹¹

Third, the Islamic State has established a “virtual caliphate” across countries and continents by communicating through social media and encrypted communications. This development has allowed Islamic State provinces, networks, and inspired individuals to share information, engage in propaganda, recruit operatives, and exchange tactics with each other across great distances. With its decline in territorial control, Islamic State leaders have shifted from governing territory to developing a long-term ideological agenda and engaging in propaganda, fund-raising, recruitment, and communication on social media and other forums.¹² Islamic State propaganda defines the movement as much by what it opposes as what it supports. Perhaps its most significant adversary remains the West, which Islamic leaders have decried as corrupt and immoral. As one article in the Islamic State publication *Dabiq* explained, “We hate you because your secular, liberal societies permit the very things that Allah has prohibited while banning many of the things He has permitted.” It continued that “your secular liberalism has led you to tolerate and even support ‘gay rights,’ to allow alcohol, drugs, fornication, gambling, and usury to become widespread, and to encourage the people to mock those who denounce these filthy sins and vices.”¹³

In addition to the West, Islamic State leaders have criticized al-Qaeda, its main Salafi-jihadist competitor, as guilty of apostasy (or the conscious abandonment

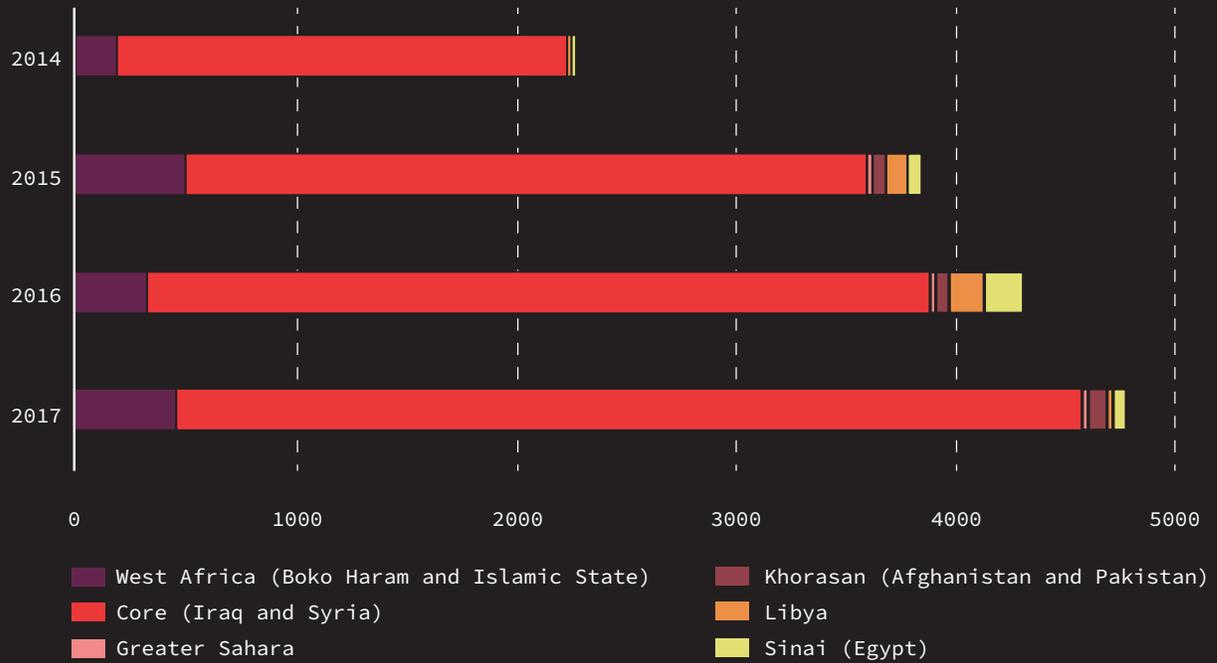
of Islam) for cooperating with non-jihadist groups, supporting nationalist causes, failing to sufficiently target Shi'a, and occasionally cooperating with governments like Pakistan and Iran.¹⁴ “May Allah expose the hypocrisy, duplicity, and deviance of the jihad claimants,” one Islamic State article concluded.¹⁵ Groups that are true to Islam, its leaders argue, should wage war against *every* non-believer. Cooperation with them is never permissible.¹⁶ As one Islamic State article summarized, “According to the allies of al-Qa'idah in Syria, it is more important to unify upon nationalism and revolution than to divide for the sake of tawhid [the principle of the oneness of God] and the truth.”¹⁷ Islamic State leaders also criticized al-Qaeda members and their allies in Afghanistan, particularly the Taliban, for allegedly elevating nationalism over Islam:

*In Khurasan, al-Qa'idah is with the Taliban factions who announced their adoption of nationalism and resistance towards wala and bara [loyalty and disavowal], lied to the Ummah by attributing their deviant declarations to the deceased Mulla Umar, and shamelessly flaunted their brotherhood with the apostate tawaghit [those who worship apart from Allah] and the Rafidah [defectors from Islam, particularly Shi'a]. In India, they are the allies of the nationalist Kashmir factions whose advances and withdrawals are only by the order of the apostate Pakistani army. In North Africa they are the allies of the Libyan factions who partook in the religion of democracy in the name of 'Islam.'*¹⁸

The Islamic State continues to be among the most virulently anti-Shi'a of any Salafi-jihadist group.¹⁹ Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi denounced Shi'a as apostates and encouraged violent jihad against them: “I direct my call to all the Muslim youth and men all over the world, and call them to make Hijrah [migration, based on the Prophet Muhammad's move from Mecca to Medina] to us to consolidate the pillars of the State of Islam and perform Jihad against the . . . Shiites.”²⁰ Islamic State leaders have also criticized the Muslim Brotherhood, or Ikhwan, for multiple alleged sins—including participating in democratic elections.²¹

Fourth, the Islamic State has increasingly shifted from conventional to guerrilla warfare and terrorism. Figure 3.1 highlights the number of Islamic State attacks by province from 2014 to 2017, which grew each

FIGURE 3.1
Attacks Per Islamic State Affiliate, 2014–2017²¹



year. The core area of Iraq and Syria has been the most violent, though several other provinces—the Islamic State West Africa and Boko Haram in Nigeria, the Islamic State Sinai, and the Islamic State Khorasan in Afghanistan and Pakistan—have also been active. In addition, the Islamic State will likely continue to inspire and direct attacks in the West. In 2017, for example, individuals linked to the Islamic State were involved in a major plot to plant a bomb on an Etihad Airways flight departing Sydney, Australia.

The rest of this section summarizes Islamic State activity in several areas: Libya, Egypt, Afghanistan and Pakistan, West Africa, and Greater Sahara. In addition to these locations, the Islamic State also has direct or indirect relations with groups, networks, and individuals in such countries as Somalia, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Turkey.²³

ISLAMIC STATE LIBYA: The Islamic State Libya is led by Abdul Qadr al-Najdi, who assumed this position after the death of Wassim Najm Abd Zayd al-Zubaydi in a U.S. airstrike.²⁴ The group’s emergence

began in 2014 in areas like Derna.²⁵ Fighters from the al-Battar Brigade in northern Syria returned to Libya to establish the Islamic Youth Shura Council. They rejected public institutions as “tyrannical governance” and vowed to establish Islamic courts to adjudicate disputes.²⁶ The group deployed militants at the ports and let fighters patrol the city.²⁷ Following a visit by envoys from the Islamic State in Syria, the group pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and became the Islamic State Libya.²⁸ In one of the first areas that Islamic State Libya fighters conquered—al-Nawfaliyah in the Sirte Basin—the group destroyed alcohol and stashes of “sorcery materials” before distributing *da’wah* (proselytization) leaflets. In Derna, the Islamic State Libya publicly burned CDs and cigarettes, arguing that music and smoking were *haram*.²⁹ But since the group needed competent technocrats, Islamic State leaders did not execute local government officials and police officers. Instead, most workers needed to repent in the mosque and embrace the caliphate to retain a job in the new administration. At its peak from 2015 to 2016,

the group was most active in northern Libya, specifically around Sirte, Tripoli, Benghazi, and Derna.³⁰

But after 2016, the Islamic State Libya faced significant territorial setbacks and has largely been displaced from northern Libya.³¹ It has little territorial control within the country, though its cells retain some freedom of movement and are largely consolidated in Libya's southern and central desert.³² Some individuals linked to the Islamic State Libya have aided external operations. For example, Salman Abedi had contact with an individual apparently affiliated with the Islamic State Libya prior to killing 22 individuals at an Ariana Grande concert in Manchester, UK on May 22, 2017.³³ Anis Amri, who drove a truck into a Berlin Christmas market in December 2016 that killed 12 people and injured nearly 50 others, was allegedly in contact with an Islamic State operative in Libya named Meher.³⁴

Although the group's activity has slowed since its peak in 2016, Libya's ongoing civil war and fragile makeup present a potential opportunity for the Islamic State to resurge following its losses, with some evidence of fighter influx from the caliphate's core territory in Iraq and Syria.³⁵ According to a U.S. Africa Command official, the Islamic State's "ability to destabilize Libya's internal security remains an ongoing threat to local forces and Western regional targets."³⁶ The Islamic State Libya has cells today in the north around Sirte and Jufrah; west around Tripoli, Misrata, and Sabratah; in the south around Ghat and Al Uwainat; and in the east around Ajdabiya and Derna.³⁷

ISLAMIC STATE SINAI: The Islamic State Sinai is led by Muhammad al-Isawi, more commonly known as Abu Usama al-Masri, who assumed leadership following the death of Abu Du'a al-Ansari in August 2016.³⁸ The group is predominantly active in the northern Sinai Peninsula, and has previously enjoyed control over small portions of territory like the town of Sheikh Zuweid. The Islamic State also maintains an operational presence in the Nile Valley in Egypt.³⁹ However, the group has faced stark setbacks in controlling territory over the past two years, and its operational tempo has slowed drastically.⁴⁰ It has, however, continued to conduct attacks. On November 24, 2017, the Islamic State Sinai carried out the country's deadliest terror attack, killing 305 Sufi Muslims in Bir al-Abed, Sinai.⁴¹ Islamic State operatives have also conducted attacks around Cairo, Alexandria, and the southern Sinai Peninsula, including two simultane-

ous bombings in Alexandria and Tanta that killed roughly 45 individuals on Palm Sunday in April 2017.⁴² Moreover, the Islamic State Sinai downed a passenger airplane headed from Sharm El Sheikh to St. Petersburg, Russia via a concealed explosive, killing all 224 passengers.⁴³

But the group has suffered from fraying alliances with local tribes, infighting, Egyptian military operations in the Sinai, and Israeli airstrikes.⁴⁴ In 2018, for example, Egyptian forces launched "Operation Sinai 2018" and killed one of the group's leaders, Abu Jaafar al-Maqdesi. Still, the Islamic State Sinai continues to remain a threat to both civilian and military targets, warning that it will escalate attacks on "the apostates and the combatant Crusaders from among tourists and others."⁴⁵ The Sinai's mountainous terrain is helpful for freedom of movement, and Palestinians and Bedouin Arabs that compose much of the population in northern Sinai have an uneasy relationship with the government.

ISLAMIC STATE KHORASAN: The Islamic State Khorasan is primarily composed of former members of the Afghan Taliban and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan.⁴⁶ Islamic State leaders have called this land "Wilayat Khorasan," a reference to the historical region that encompassed parts of Iran, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.⁴⁷ In late 2014, the Islamic State in Syria sent representatives to Pakistan to meet with several local militants, including some Tehreek-e-Taliban leaders. Around the same time, Pakistan officials began receiving reports of pro-Islamic State leaflets in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. Hafiz Saeed Khan, former chief of the Tehreek-e-Taliban's Orakzai branch, agreed to become the leader of the Islamic State's South Asia branch. His deputy was Abdul Rauf Khadim, an Alizai tribesman from Helmand Province who had defected from the Afghan Taliban.⁴⁸ A key component of the Islamic State's campaign was utilizing Saeed and Khadim's established networks to recruit fighters in eastern and southern Afghanistan. Saeed was particularly helpful in developing the Islamic State's footprint in Pakistan's tribal areas and nearby Afghan border provinces (such as Konar and Nangarhar, where some TTP operatives fled following Pakistan military operations in 2014). Khadim was helpful in developing the Islamic State's network in Baluchistan Province of Pakistan and southern and western Afghan provinces, such as Helmand, Farah, and Zabol.⁴⁹

Although the group has been targeted by U.S. and Afghan forces, it continues to conduct attacks in the region. The United States killed Islamic State Khorasan leader Abu Sayed Orakzai in August 2018 and one of his predecessors, Abu Sayed, in July 2017.⁵⁰ Prior to that, the United States killed leader Abdul Hasib in April 2017 and Hasib's predecessor in July 2016.⁵¹ The group operates primarily along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border in, for example, the southern districts of Nangarhar Province, though it has cells in other areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁵² While the Islamic State Khorasan's operational tempo has slowed from 2017, it continues to carry out sophisticated attacks.⁵³ On April 22, 2018, for example, Islamic State operatives conducted a suicide bombing attack at a registration facility in Kabul, which killed approximately 60 people. The group also orchestrated a double suicide bombing on an Afghan intelligence facility that same month, which killed over 50 individuals.⁵⁴ In July 2018, the Islamic State Khorasan carried out a suicide bombing targeting an election rally in Baluchistan, killing roughly 128 people.⁵⁵

ISLAMIC STATE WEST AFRICA: The Islamic State West Africa is led by Abu Musab al-Barnawi, whose group is sometimes referred to as the "al-Barnawi faction." Abubakar Shekau oversees a separate bloc that is sometimes referred to as the "Shekau faction."⁵⁶ In March 2015, the Salafi-jihadist group Boko Haram, which roughly translates as "Western education is forbidden," pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and changed its name to the Islamic State West Africa. In 2016, Islamic State leaders in Syria and Iraq endorsed a schism within the organization, siding against Shekau and in favor of al-Barnawi. In August 2016, an Islamic State newsletter published an interview with al-Barnawi that broke with Shekau and discouraged violence against Muslim civilians. Implicitly criticizing Shekau and his support for needless violence, al-Barnawi remarked that "the [Islamic] State has forbidden targeting the mass of people who belong to Islam, and it is innocent of that action."⁵⁷ Al-Barnawi then explained that the group would focus on targeting Christians and the Nigerian state.⁵⁸

The Islamic State West Africa was responsible for over 400 attacks from March 2015—the month of its pledge—until the end of that year. Of those attacks, roughly three-quarters took place in Nigeria. Other at-

tacks occurred in Cameroon, Chad, and Niger.⁵⁹ Most of the attacks outside Nigeria were in border areas, though the Islamic State West Africa also orchestrated a bombing in N'Djamena, Chad, killing 37 people in June 2015. The group lost significant territorial control following the commencement of Nigerian and allied military operations in 2016, and its forces retreated to the Mandara Mountains along the Nigeria-Cameroon border. Today, the Islamic State West Africa primarily operates in Nigeria's northern Borno state, but also conducts operations in Chad and Niger. Abubakar Shekau's faction conducts most of its operations in the southern Borno state and in the Sambisa forest.⁶⁰

ISLAMIC STATE GREATER SAHARA: The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara is led by Adnan Abu Walid Sahrawi, who pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in May 2015. In October 2016, the Islamic State's central leadership accepted Sahrawi's pledge.⁶¹ Prior to this, Abu Walid al-Sahrawi was the leader of the al-Qaeda offshoot al-Murabitoon and, before then, of the Movement for Unity and Jihad (MUJAO). The Islamic State Greater Sahara does not control territory, though it retains some freedom of movement in the border region of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. The group regularly targets Tuareg militias, French soldiers, Niger Gendarmerie forces, and Burkina Faso security services. One of its most notable attacks was the ambush on October 4, 2017, against a joint U.S.-Nigerien patrol near Tongo Tongo, Niger, which killed four U.S. Green Berets and five Nigerien soldiers.⁶² The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara increased its operational tempo in 2018, with roughly four times as many attacks in the first half of 2018 as in all of 2017.⁶³ The group's number of core members remains small, though it regularly attempts to co-opt local villagers that may be sympathetic to the Islamic State's ideology and have "unresolved ethnic and other grievances."⁶⁴

AL-QAEDA

Al-Qaeda's leadership remains largely in Pakistan and Afghanistan, with some senior members likely in Iran, such as Saif al-Adel and Muhammad al-Masri. That said, it has affiliates in Yemen, Syria, Somalia, and several other countries. Much like the Islamic State,

al-Qaeda leaders seek to establish a pan-Islamic caliphate. They aim to topple governments in the Middle East (the near enemy, or *al-Adou al-Qareeb*) and to fight the United States and its allies (the far enemy, or *al-Adou al-Baeed*) who support foreign governments.⁶⁵ Al-Qaeda today can be characterized by several developments, which have allowed the movement to continue despite U.S. and allied targeting.

First, al-Qaeda leaders have focused on joining local insurgencies rather than trying to usurp them. In some cases, as with the Afghan Taliban, al-Qaeda leaders have pledged to local groups—a step that local Islamic State commanders have generally eschewed. Additionally, al-Qaeda has made a concerted effort to appear more indigenous and work through local actors that do not harbor their brand name. Al-Qaeda attempted to hide its affiliation with its former Syrian affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra—named the “Support Front” to appear inherently indigenous and concerned with the wishes of Syrians. Jabhat al-Nusra’s subsequent rebrands—into Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham—are more evidence of this strategy. In other cases, al-Qaeda fighters have established close relations—and even inter-married—with local tribes, sub-tribes, and clans. Examples include al-Qaeda relations with southern tribes and clans in Yemen through Ansar al-Sharia; Pashtun tribes in Afghanistan and Pakistan; and Isaaq, Darod, Hawiye, and other clans in Somalia. As one al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula leader remarked, “We are as one with the [Sunni] tribes like never before. We are not al-Qaeda now. Together we are the Sunni army.”⁶⁶

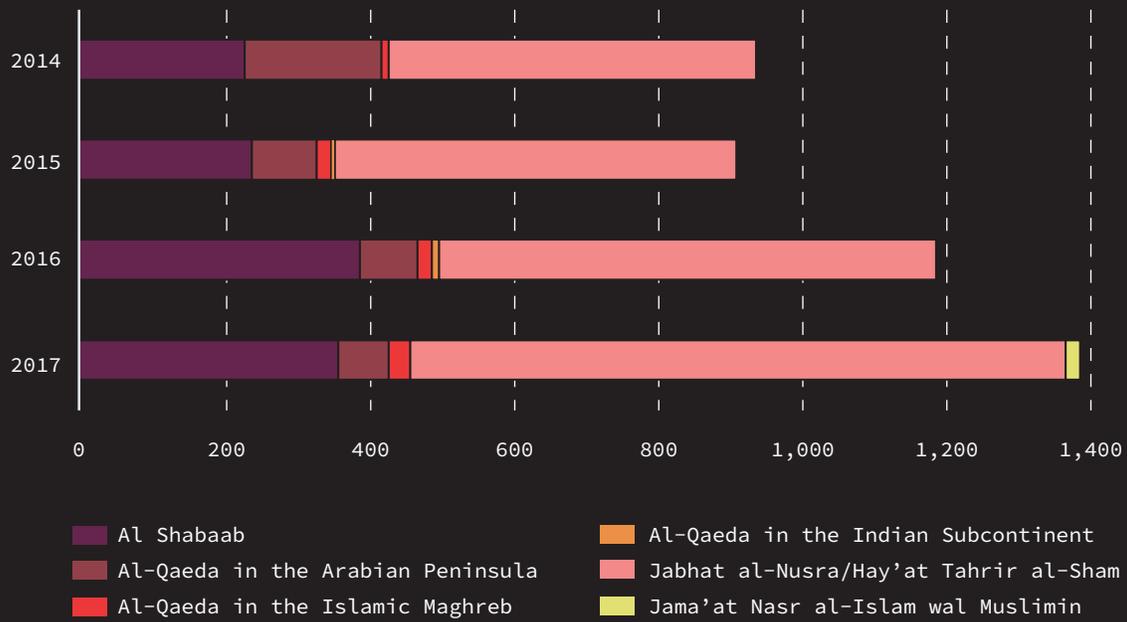
Second, al-Qaeda has been reluctant to fight too many enemies at the same time, unlike most Islamic State leaders. As al-Zawahiri explained, “Avoid meddling with Christian, Sikh and Hindu communities living in Muslim lands. If they transgress, then a response proportionate to the transgression should suffice.”⁶⁷ For al-Zawahiri, a key issue is whether local religious, ethnic, or other groups have conducted attacks against al-Qaeda. “Generally, avoid fighting or targeting those who have not raised arms against us or aided in any such hostile act and maintain focus primarily on the Crusader Alliance and then upon their local surrogates,” he explained.⁶⁸ This restraint also extended to other Muslims, such as Shi’a and Sufis.⁶⁹ Additionally, al-Qaeda’s attempt to become a “moderate alterna-

tive” to the Islamic State has seen it loosen the stringency of its sharia practices, emphasizing a gradualist approach towards teaching locals ways of Islamic governance and not rushing to implement its extreme version of sharia law. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb’s leader compared Mali’s citizens to infants, stating that “if we really want it to stand on its own two feet in this world full of enemies waiting to pounce, we must ease its burden, take it by the hand, help it and support it until it stands,” instead of engaging in “wrong policies” by applying sharia with “extreme speed.”⁷⁰

Third, al-Qaeda leaders have attempted to leverage social media and other forums, though they have not been as technically savvy or influential as the Islamic State. Still, al-Qaeda has released information via its main media arm, as-Sahab Media Foundation, including videos on YouTube, Dailymotion, Vimeo, and other video platforms; messages on social media forums like Telegram, Facebook, and Twitter; announcements on websites; and pro-al-Qaeda media units in the West (such as the French media unit al-Kifah). Al-Qaeda affiliates also have media arms, such as al-Shabaab’s Shahada News Agency and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula’s al-Malahem Media Foundation. For al-Qaeda leaders, an important goal is educating Muslims across the world about the United States and allied regimes, as well as inspiring Muslims to fight the United States. “As far as the propagational work is concerned,” al-Zawahiri remarked in his *General Guidelines for Jihad*, “it aims to create awareness in the Ummah regarding the threat posed by the Crusader onslaught, clarify the true meaning of Tawheed [the principle of the oneness of God] in the sense that the rule and sovereignty belongs to Allah alone, and stress upon the importance of brotherhood based on Islam and the unity of all Muslims lands.”⁷¹

Fourth, al-Qaeda has focused on fighting near enemy governments, rather than far enemy governments like the United States—at least for now. Still, al-Qaeda leaders consider the United States the main enemy. Strategically, this means that al-Qaeda aims to tie U.S. forces down in multiple countries and raise costs by killing U.S. soldiers and other government officials. As al-Zawahiri explained: “The purposes of targeting America is to exhaust her and bleed her to death, so that it meets the fate of the former Soviet Union and collapses under its own weight as a result of its military, human and fi-

FIGURE 3.2
Attacks Per Al-Qaeda Affiliate, 2014–2017⁷⁴



financial losses. Consequently, its grip on our lands will weaken and its allies will begin to fall one after another.”⁷² Operationally and tactically, al-Qaeda still aims to conduct external operations against the United States and other Western countries, as al-Zawahiri acknowledged: “The military work firstly targets the head of (international) disbelief, America and its ally Israel, and secondly its local allies that rule our countries.”⁷³

Still, al-Qaeda violence is focused for the moment on local regimes. Figure 3.2 highlights the number of al-Qaeda attacks by overseas affiliates. There are several broad trends. To begin with, al-Qaeda has been particularly active in Syria and Somalia, where its affiliates have been directly engaged in combat. In other

countries, such as Afghanistan, al-Qaeda has relied on allies like the Taliban to conduct the majority of fighting. Second, al-Qaeda violence has declined somewhat in several countries, such as Yemen and Algeria. Third, al-Qaeda’s overall violence levels remain high. In 2017, al-Qaeda conducted the most attacks of any year in the last five years. Most of this violence involved groups formally or loosely associated with al-Qaeda in Somalia and Syria. The increase in violence by groups in Syria, such as Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, was likely due to their struggles against Assad’s military advances in western and northwestern parts of the country.

With the Islamic State facing serious challenges in Iraq, Syria, and other locations, al-Qaeda has attempt-

“Still, al-Qaeda leaders consider the United States the main enemy.”

ed to resurge. We now turn to several groups that are—or have been—affiliated with al-Qaeda: Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and al-Shabaab. In addition to these affiliates, al-Qaeda has direct and indirect relationships with groups, networks, and individuals in such countries as Turkey, Libya, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Russia, and Egypt.⁷⁵ In Libya, for example, al-Qaeda has cells in such areas as Derna, Benghazi, and Ajdabiya.⁷⁶

JABHAT AL-NUSRA (JN) / HAY’AT TAHRIR AL-SHAM (HTS): Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham is currently led by Muhammad al-Jolani, the former leader of Jabhat al-Nusra and onetime confidant of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The U.S. Department of State recently designated Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham as an affiliate of al-Qaeda, though there are significant debates about the group’s relationship with al-Qaeda’s core leadership.⁷⁷ Although there have been notable tensions between Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham and al-Qaeda, there are likely opportunities for rapprochement.⁷⁸

Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham is now principally located in Syria’s Idlib province, though it has enjoyed an operational presence in Syria’s Aleppo, Hama, Dera’a, and Damascus Provinces. In 2018, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham suffered several setbacks, such as disavowal by al-Qaeda’s central leadership, large-scale losses of territory, faltering local support, assassinations of key leaders, and significant defections in its ranks.⁷⁹ Although Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham is locally focused, the group’s predecessor, Jabhat al-Nusra, provided sanctuary to operatives that plotted attacks in the West, like Muhsin al-Fadli and Abdul Mohsen Abdullah Ibrahim al-Sharikh.

A group of hardline individuals that defected from Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, such as Abu Humam al-Shami, formed a new group in 2018, Tanzim Huras al Deen, that had close relations with al-Qaeda. There have also been other groups in Syria affiliated with al-Qaeda, such as Jama’at Ansar al-Furqan bi Bilad al-Sham, which was composed of al-Qaeda veterans and committed to “reviving the Caliphate ... through jihad and preparation.”⁸⁰

Moving forward, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham’s future is uncertain. Turkey has pressured the group to dissolve and join a larger Turkish-backed opposition coalition,

though Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham leaders have remarked that “matters relating to the organizational structure of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham are non-negotiable.”⁸¹ The group also faces an assault by the Syrian regime and its allies, including Russia, in Idlib. Finally, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham has numerous competitors among the Syrian opposition, including from the National Liberation Front in Syria (which includes groups like Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Ahrar, Suqour al-Sham, and Nour al-Din al-Zenki).

JAMA’AT NASR AL-ISLAM WAL MUSLIMIN (JNIM): This group is led by the former leader of Ansar al-Din, Iyad Ag Ghaly, a longtime leader of Mali’s Tuareg uprising. Other notable members of the group include Djamel Okacha (aka Yahya Abu Al Hamma), the former emir of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb’s Sahara branch; Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the former emir of Murabitoun; and Mohamed Koufa, the former emir of Ansar al-Din.⁸²

JNIM is predominantly active in Mali, but also conducts operations in Niger and Burkina Faso. It has publicly stated that its primary enemy is “France, who has been the historical enemy of the Muslims in this part of the Muslim world.”⁸³ JNIM conducted an attack on France’s embassy in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso on March 3, 2018. It also orchestrated an attack in April 2018 on a French and UN base in Timbuktu, Mali with mortars, small arms, and car bombs that injured seven French soldiers.⁸⁴ Although JNIM has come under increased pressure by French forces who routinely carry out special operations raids as a part of Operation Barkhane, JNIM continues to conduct attacks throughout the Sahel.⁸⁵

AL-QAEDA IN THE ISLAMIC MAGHREB (AQIM): Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb is led by Abdelmalek Droukdal, a longtime member and commander in the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat who is known for his extensive expertise in explosive manufacturing. The group has historically been most active in targeting police, military, and civilian targets in Algeria, though it has also conducted operations in countries like Tunisia, Mali, Niger, and the Ivory Coast. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and its factions have also conducted attacks against multinational companies, including against natural gas fields and oil installations belonging to British Petroleum and Norwegian-based Statoil.⁸⁶ Al-Qaeda in the Islam-

ic Maghreb released a statement in 2018 calling for individuals to “boycott all Western companies and foundations—and on top of them the French—that operate in the Islamic Maghreb, from Libya to Mauritania.” It also warned these institutions “to be extremely careful in every way to avoid subjecting themselves to the expected horror.”⁸⁷ Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb has carried out roughly a half dozen attacks since the beginning of 2017 and has largely been overshadowed by JNIM.⁸⁸ Still, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb likely remains a future threat through its Uqba bin Nafi Battalion in Tunisia and its cell structures in Algeria.⁸⁹

AL-QAEDA IN THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT (AQIS): Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent is led by Asim Umar, a longtime scholar and orator who studied at the Dar-ul-Uloom seminary in Deoband, India.⁹⁰ The group aims to be operationally present in the “entire Indian subcontinent.”⁹¹ One of its most notorious attacks was its 2014 attempt to use Pakistan Navy personnel to commandeer Pakistani naval vessels against American and Indian naval ships in Karachi.⁹² In Afghanistan, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent has supported the Afghan Taliban, fighting “shoulder to shoulder with the mujahideen of the emirate.”⁹³ This strategy of supporting the Taliban may mask its daily activity, since its fighters appear to be more involved in clandestinely supporting Afghan insurgent groups than in conducting high-profile attacks. Its main goal remains “strengthening the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, defending it, and bringing stability to it.”⁹⁴

AL-QAEDA IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA (AQAP): Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is currently led by Qasim al-Remy, the group’s former military commander. Al-Remy was appointed as overall leader after the death of Nasir al-Wuhayshi, who was killed in a U.S. drone strike in 2015. The group is now predominantly active in Yemen’s south and southeast, and regularly carries out operations against Yemeni security services, Houthi convoys, and Saudi- and Emirati-backed security forces. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has emeshed itself within Yemeni tribal factions and works with a variety of local groups to gain support. In 2016, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula faced a serious setback when it was pushed out of the Yemeni city Mukalla, depriving it of millions of dollars in revenue.⁹⁵

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has historically retained an active external operations capability. In

December 2009, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who had worked with the U.S.-Yemeni al-Qaeda operative Anwar al-Awlaki, attempted to detonate an improvised explosive device on Northwest Airlines flight 253 en route from Amsterdam, Netherlands to Detroit, Michigan. The bomb had been sown into his underwear but failed to explode. Still, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula leaders bragged that Abdulmutallab had “penetrated all modern and sophisticated technology and devices and security barriers in airports of the world,” which dispelled the “myth of the American and international intelligence.”⁹⁶ The group also attempted to target other U.S.-bound airliners, as well as the U.S. and British ambassadors to Yemen.⁹⁷

Moving forward, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula will likely face challenges. As one of its leaders remarked, the organization suffers from “a lack of capabilities, a lack of resources, and the unawareness of Muslims to the danger of this campaign of the enemies and the media distortion of the objectives of the mujahideen.”⁹⁸ Several senior leaders and field commanders were also killed—such as bombmaker Ibrahim al-Asiri in 2017—and the group’s external operational tempo has slowed.⁹⁹ Still, weak governance in Yemen and a bloody civil war may be sufficient for the group to retain its base of operations, which is still strong in such areas as the city of Mukalla and in parts of Shabwah, Ma’rib, Bayda’, and Abyan governorates. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula also has substantial capabilities, such as improvised explosive devices, multiple rocket launchers (such as the BM-21 and Grad-P), surface-to-air missiles (such as the SA-7 and SA-9), anti-aircraft autocannons (such as the ZU-23), mortars, mechanized infantry combat vehicles, and anti-tank missiles.¹⁰⁰

AL-SHABAAB: Al-Shabaab is led by Ahmad Umar, who assumed the position of overall leader on September 5, 2014, after the death of Abdi Godane from a U.S. air strike. The group primarily operates in central and southern Somalia, though it also has a presence in Somalia’s north and in neighboring countries like Kenya. Al-Shabaab’s attacks have focused on local forces, such as the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and Somali security forces.

Al-Shabaab’s primary tactics have included bombings, assassinations, and ambushes. For example, an al-Shabaab operative detonated a laptop bomb on a Daal-

lo Airlines flight headed from Mogadishu to Djibouti on February 2, 2016.¹⁰¹ Al-Shabaab has also targeted universities, malls, and other civilian targets in Kenya and Somalia. In October 2017, an al-Shabaab operative detonated a truck bomb in Mogadishu that killed roughly 300 individuals, marking the deadliest attack in the group's history.¹⁰² In June 2018, al-Shabaab orchestrated an ambush in Jamaame, Somalia, killing a U.S. special operations forces soldier and wounding four others.¹⁰³ A year earlier, al-Shabaab militants killed a U.S. Navy SEAL, Kyle Milliken, west of Mogadishu.¹⁰⁴ The absence of a strong and effective government in Somalia—including in southern and central parts of the country—suggest that al-Shabaab will continue to pose a threat in the country for the foreseeable future.

OTHER GROUPS

The next category of Salafi-jihadists are groups that have not pledged bay'ah to al-Qaeda or the Islamic State. But they either adhere to Salafism and violent jihad, or they have compatible ideologies and cooperate directly or indirectly with al-Qaeda or the Islamic State. These groups remain independent and pursue their own goals, but may work with the Islamic State or al-Qaeda for specific operations or training purposes when their interests converge. There is a substantial number of allied Salafi-jihadist groups across Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and other locations. In 2018, there were approximately 44 groups other than the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and their affiliates. This accounted for roughly 67 percent of all groups. In 2015, the percentage of groups other than the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and their affiliates stood at roughly 68 percent. Prior to the Arab Spring in 2010, the 28 Salafi-jihadist groups other than al-Qaeda and their affiliates accounted for roughly 90 percent of all groups. Most Salafi-jihadi groups have not been formal affiliates of al-Qaeda or the Islamic State, though the percentage of groups that have become formal affiliates of the Islamic State or al-Qaeda has risen since 2010.

Al-Qaeda's strategy following the Arab Spring involved incorporating a number of these non-affiliated groups into its global agenda. Al-Qaeda's leadership made a concerted effort to hide its affiliation with

“In 2018, there were approximately 44 Salafi-jihadist groups other than the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and their affiliates.”

Salafi-jihadi groups across the globe to avoid bringing international scrutiny to these organizations. For example, Osama bin Laden initially advised al-Shabaab to avoid publicly announcing its allegiance to al-Qaeda's central command and warned that if al-Shabaab's bay'ah was "declared and out in the open, it would have the enemies escalate their anger and mobilize against" the group.¹⁰⁵ Additionally, Ayman al-Zawahiri attempted to hide Jabhat al-Nusra's connections with core al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda core also worked with Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia and Libya.¹⁰⁶ Thus, al-Qaeda's global footprint may be larger than the numbers of its official affiliates suggest.

Among the most influential groups are Ahrar al-Sham, Afghan Taliban, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, and Lashkar-e-Taiba. While there are several other groups that have not pledged bay'ah to al-Qaeda or the Islamic State, these represent some of the most significant ones.

AHRAR AL-SHAM / NATIONAL LIBERATION FRONT: Ahrar al-Sham is currently led by Jaber al-Bashar and has traditionally been one of the Syrian opposition's largest and most powerful groups. Ahrar al-Sham subscribes to a nationally focused Salafi-jihadist agenda. It seeks to "liberate Syria from the foreign intruders" and from Assad's "tyrant and oppressive regime" by using "Shura to make the people at fault accountable and to implement justice, so there is nothing or nobody above the laws of Allah."¹⁰⁷ For large portions of the Syrian conflict, Ahrar al-Sham worked directly with al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra. It also harbored members of al-Qaeda within its ranks. For example, Ayman al-Zawahiri embedded senior official Abu Khalid al-Suri within Ahrar al-Sham to improve its relationship with Jabhat al-Nusra.¹⁰⁸ The group has been historically active in Syria's eastern provinces, though it is now largely isolated in Idlib and Aleppo Provinces.

In 2018, Ahrar al-Sham allied with Islamist group Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki under the name Jabhat Tahrir al-Souriya. In August 2018, Jabhat Tahrir al-Souriya merged with the National Liberation Front (NLF), with Turkey's support, along with Jaysh al-Ahrar and Suqour al-Sham.¹⁰⁹ The Syrian regime's military offensive in northwestern Syria may weaken Ahrar al-Sham and its allied organizations and, at the very least, will likely increase the possibility of further

"For large portions of the Syrian conflict, Ahrar al-Sham worked directly with al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra."

splintering among Syrian rebels.

AFGHAN TALIBAN: The Taliban was founded as a Deobandi organization in 1994. Just two years after its creation, Mullah Muhammad Omar led the movement—which began as a small group of students in southern Kandahar—to seize control of Kabul. Over time, several Taliban leaders established close relations with Osama bin Laden and other al-Qaeda members. The Taliban allowed al-Qaeda to operate training camps in Afghanistan, from which al-Qaeda eventually launched the 9/11 attacks in the United States.¹¹⁰ The United States ousted the Taliban in 2001 when the group refused to surrender Osama bin Laden and the perpetrators of the 9/11 attack. Since then, the Taliban has been waging an insurgency against the U.S.-backed Afghan government. Today, the Taliban, led by Haibatullah Akhundzada, aims to expel the United States and other foreign forces from Afghanistan, overthrow the “illegitimate” Afghan government, and reestablish an Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan.¹¹¹ The Taliban has expanded control in rural areas of Afghanistan and retained a relationship with al-Qaeda core and al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent. One example of this relationship is al-Qaeda’s decision to pledge bay’ah to successive Taliban leaders, including Haibatullah Akhundzada.¹¹² In the future, Taliban battlefield successes will almost certainly help al-Qaeda reconstitute itself. As a 2018 United Nations report concluded:

Al-Qaida still maintains a presence in South Asia. It adapts to the local environment, trying to embed itself into local struggles and communities. It is closely allied with the Taliban. According to one Member State, although ISIL poses an immediate threat, Al-Qaida is the “intellectually stronger group” and remains a longer-term threat. Some members of the Al-Qaida core, including Aiman al-Zawahiri and Hamza bin Laden, are reported to be in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas.¹¹³

TEHREEK-E-TALIBAN PAKISTAN (TTP): The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan is an umbrella organization under which various Islamist militant groups united in December 2007. From its inception, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan developed links with al-Qaeda, and began to adopt its operational goals and tactics. In 2010, Faisal Shahzad drove his Nissan Pathfinder into Times Square, New York City, which was filled

with explosives. Shahzad attempted to detonate the homemade bomb, but it malfunctioned. He had been trained in a Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan camp in North Waziristan.¹¹⁴

By 2010, key Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan leaders like Hakimullah Mehsud and Qari Hussein had established a working relationship with al-Qaeda’s chief operating officer Atiyah abd al-Rahman al-Libi, religious leader Abu Yahya al-Libi, and military operational leader Ilyas Kashmiri. A U.S. intelligence assessment acknowledged that some Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan leaders “are receptive to this message and increasingly are adopting al-Qa’ida’s anti-Western rhetoric and agenda.”¹¹⁵ Al-Qaeda leaders benefitted from the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan’s safe haven in Mehsud tribal areas of Pakistan. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, in turn, benefited from al-Qaeda’s training and explosives expertise to build bombs and execute attacks, as well as its global terrorist links to raise funds. In a few cases, they cooperated in conducting terrorist attacks in Pakistan cities.¹¹⁶ In 2018, the group suffered additional setbacks, including the death of its latest leader, Mullah Fazlullah, and further fissures. Fazlullah was replaced by Noor Wali Mehsud.

LASHKAR-E-TAIBA (LeT): Established in the 1980s in Pakistan by Hafiz Saeed, a former professor and anti-Soviet fighter educated in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, Lashkar-e-Taiba is an Islamic fundamentalist organization devoted to liberating Indian-controlled Kashmir through violent means and placing all of Kashmir in Pakistan. After September 11, 2001, Lashkar-e-Taiba developed a more robust global presence that focused on fund-raising overseas, proselytizing, and occasionally conducting operations. Lashkar-e-Taiba members subscribe to the Ahle Hadith school of Islamic thought, a strict Sunni sect with similarities to the Salafist views of al-Qaeda leaders. Pakistan’s spy agency, the Directorate of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), has long provided Lashkar-e-Taiba with money, arms, and training. One of Lashkar-e-Taiba’s most sophisticated attacks was in 2008, when militants launched coordinated attacks across Mumbai targeting Hindus and foreigners, which killed over 17 people and wounding hundreds more.¹¹⁷

Some Lashkar-e-Taiba and al-Qaeda officials developed a strong bond dating back to the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan. After the U.S.-backed overthrow of the

Taliban regime, some Lashkar-e-Taiba officials aided al-Qaeda operatives fleeing into Pakistan in 2001 and 2002. In March 2002, for instance, U.S. and Pakistani security forces captured al-Qaeda operative Abu Zubaydah at a Lashkar-e-Taiba safe house in Faisalabad, Pakistan.¹¹⁸ Today, Lashkar-e-Taiba retains a notable presence in Pakistan and South Asia, as well as a support network outside the region. In July 2018, the U.S. Treasury Department froze the assets of three Lashkar-e-Taiba operatives—Hameed ul Hassan, Abdul Jabbar, and Abdul Rehman al-Dakhil—for “collecting, transporting and distributing funds to support this terrorist group and provide salaries to extremists.”¹¹⁹ With continuing support from the Pakistan government and ongoing tensions between New Delhi and Islamabad over Kashmir, Lashkar-e-Taiba will remain a large and active militant group.

INSPIRED NETWORKS AND INDIVIDUALS

The last category are informal networks and individuals that are motivated by the ideology of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State but are not organized as veritable groups. They don’t have a clear organizational structure or group name. There is little or no contact with al-Qaeda or Islamic State leaders, but they are inspired by Salafi-jihadi ideology and outraged by perceived oppression of Muslims in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, and other countries. They tend to be motivated by a hatred of the West and its allied regimes in the Middle East. Without direct support, these networks tend to be amateurish, though they can occasionally be lethal. Many of the Salafi-jihadist plots and attacks in the West have been by inspired individuals and networks.

In the UK, for example, the Islamic extremist incidents in 2017 were all inspired attacks. On March 22, British-born Khalid Masood, a convert to Islam, drove a sports utility vehicle into pedestrians crossing Westminster Bridge in London, killing three people. Masood then took two carving knives out of his vehicle and stabbed police officer Keith Palmer, killing him outside of Parliament. On May 22, British-born Salman Abedi detonated an improvised explosive device in the foyer of Manchester Arena and

killed 22 people; 10 of them were under 20 years old. Abedi had recently returned from Libya. On June 3, three men—Khuram Butt (British), Rachid Redouane (Moroccan), and Youssef Zaghba (Italian and Moroccan)—drove a van into London Bridge, killing two people. They then jumped out of the van and killed six more people using large knives. On September 15, an 18-year old Iraqi asylum seeker named Ahmed Hassan detonated a bomb using triacetone triperoxide (TATP) on a District line train at Parsons Green Underground station in London. Thirty people were treated for burn and other injuries.¹²⁰

The same was true in numerous other attacks, such as December 2016 in Berlin, April 2017 in Stockholm, June 2017 in Paris, August 2017 again in Paris, and August 2017 in Barcelona. As the European Union’s Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, or Europol, summarized in 2018, “recent attacks in Europe have, for the main part, been committed by lone individuals who have not been to a conflict zone—but who may have been inspired by terrorist propaganda and/or the extremist narrative, as well as by other successful attacks worldwide.”¹²¹

CONCLUSIONS

As this chapter highlights, the global Salafi-jihadist landscape is decentralized among four types: the Islamic State and its provinces; al-Qaeda and its affiliates; other Salafi-jihadist and related groups; and inspired networks and individuals. Chapter 5 will address some future challenges—such as weak governances in parts of Africa, the Middle East, and Asia—which may allow these groups and networks to persist and potentially resurge. There are at least three additional conclusions from the analysis in this chapter.

First, there is significant competition between and within categories, including between the two largest movements: the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. They have repeatedly clashed over ideology, vied for recruits, and tried to take advantage of each other’s vulnerabilities and losses. In Afghanistan, the Taliban, which has a relationship with al-Qaeda, has clashed with Islamic State Khorasan fighters in eastern and southern areas of the country. Competition among Salafi-jihadists has

been particularly intense in battlefields like Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Afghanistan, where the breakdown of law and order has created a “security dilemma.”¹²² In these countries, weak or collapsed government creates a situation of emerging anarchy in which local actors are dependent upon themselves for security and must therefore maintain and perhaps expand their military capabilities. These steps can threaten others, who react by building their own capabilities, creating hostility, mistrust, and an arms build-up.¹²³ While many groups and networks may share a long-term desire to establish a pan-Islamic caliphate and may emphasize the importance of unity among the *ummah*, there has been substantial friction about such issues as command-and-control arrangements, control of resources, the excommunication of other Muslims, the role of Shi’a, civilian casualties, and how much to focus on the near enemy (*al-Adou al-Qareeb*) or the far enemy (*al-Adou al-Baeed*).

Second, there is substantial fluidity between and within these categories. Individual fighters and supporters often move between groups or networks depending on factors like changes in leaders, effectiveness of leaders, fluctuations in outside support, and changes in territorial control. Syria is a useful example. The constant rebranding, fissures between jihadists, splintering, defections, and creation of new groups indicates that there is a pool of jihadists that were willing to alter their affiliations and organizational structures based on changing leaders, popular support, foreign assistance, and the state of local wars—all of which rapidly evolve. While policymakers and analysts often find it easier to categorize terrorists and insurgents by groups, the fluid nature of the jihadist landscape suggests that it is also important to look at evolving micro-level networks.¹²⁴

Third, Salafi-jihadist groups and networks have not been defeated—far from it. Despite some significant setbacks, groups and networks continue to plot and conduct attacks in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, Europe, Australia, and North America. As a 2018 United Nations assessment concluded, the Islamic State “rallied in early 2018,” and many of its fighters were able to “melt back into the local population and stay there, while others may lie low in certain neighbouring States.” The same holds true with al-Qaeda, which “showed its resilience in the Syrian Arab Republic.”

The report continued that “Al-Qaida and its affiliates remain stronger than [the Islamic State] in Yemen, Somalia and parts of West Africa, while its alliance with the Taliban and other terrorist groups in Afghanistan remains firm despite rivalry from the local [Islamic State] affiliate.”¹²⁵

CHAPTER 04

**FUTURE
DEVELOPMENTS**

The rapid development of commercial technology provides an opportunity for Salafi-jihadists—along with other terrorist organizations and criminal enterprises—to improve their capabilities. For example, virtually all Salafi-jihadists, and many of their supporters, possess smart phones, even in battlefields like Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Afghanistan. These developments are also useful for governments that utilize them to develop improved capabilities for defending against cyber attacks and unmanned vehicles, penetrating encrypted communications, conducting offensive cyber operations, and monitoring terrorist use of social media and other platforms for communicating and moving money.

This chapter examines eight areas: drones, including armed drones; social media services; artificial intelligence; encrypted communications; virtual currencies; the Dark Web; offensive cyber capabilities; and weapons of mass destruction. This list is not exhaustive, but represents important emerging areas that Salafi-jihadist networks may attempt to leverage in the future to facilitate propaganda, raise funds, recruit new members, conduct disinformation campaigns, or perpetrate attacks. In exploring these developments, we analyzed trends in commercial technology, assessed historical Salafi-jihadist and other terrorist activity, and estimated what might—and might not—be possible.

DRONES

Over the past decade, Salafi-jihadist groups have increasingly used unmanned vehicles, or “drones,” for a variety of functions from collecting intelligence to striking targets. Drones—ground, air, or sea—decrease the human and capital cost of military operations, can be relatively cheap and easily accessible, and can even be constructed by capable individuals. State and non-state actors use drones in a variety of ways, such as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); close air support; and targeted strikes.¹ In addition to ISR and targeting, non-state actors have used drone footage for propaganda purposes, including attracting recruits and fund-raising. Terrorist groups like al-Qae-

da and the Islamic State have utilized drones and will likely continue to augment their unmanned capabilities in the future. As FBI Director Christopher Wray concluded: “The FBI assesses that, given their retail availability, lack of verified identification requirement to procure, general ease of use, and prior use overseas, [unmanned aircraft systems] *will be used to facilitate an attack in the United States* against a vulnerable target, such as a mass gathering.”²

One of the first non-state actors to pioneer drone technology was not a Salafi-jihadist organization, but rather the Shi’a group Hezbollah. In 2004, Hezbollah deployed an Iranian-made Mirsad-1 military-grade surveillance drone into Israeli airspace.³ In 2012, Hezbollah used drones to surveil Israel’s nuclear weapons program inside Israeli territory.⁴ Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State followed Hezbollah’s lead. In November 2012, Rezwan Ferdaus was sentenced to 17 years in U.S. federal prison for supporting al-Qaeda and planning a terrorist attack against the Pentagon and U.S. Capitol using one or more jet-powered, remoted-controlled aircraft filled with explosives.⁵ In 2016, the Islamic State posted aerial reconnaissance footage of al-Tabqa Airbase in Syria, later precipitating in a ground assault.⁶ The footage not only improved the Islamic State’s situational awareness prior to the assault, but also served as recruitment material. To that end, the Islamic State has frequently posted drone footage on its social media accounts. Other groups in Syria, such as Ahrar al-Sham and Jund al-Aqsa in Syria, have also posted drone footage on social media platforms.

In 2014, Hezbollah also became the first non-state group to use armed drones when it launched a strike against al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, killing 20 of the group’s fighters.⁷ Hezbollah has access to several airbases in Syria with short runways that make manned aircraft difficult to launch, but are ideal for drones. The availability of these airbases make Hezbollah’s Iranian-acquired drones, which can fire advanced explosives like cluster bombs, even more dangerous.

The Islamic State also made significant strides in drone usage. In 2017, for example, the Islamic State orchestrated between 60 and over 100 attacks per month from aerial drones in Iraq and Syria.⁸ According to a Syrian Democratic Force soldier near Raqqa, “two to three drones rotate everyday here. They target our logistics lines and our ammunition depots. So far this

morning, we have been bombed three times. By the end of the day, they will have targeted us 15 to 16 times. They do this every day.”⁹

The commercialization of drone technology has allowed the Islamic State to purchase cheap drones like quadcopters. The Islamic State has dropped small grenades on enemy forces using improvised bomb tubes. In January 2017, Iraqi forces shot down grenade-launching and mortar-dropping drones in their fight for Mosul.¹⁰ The Islamic State also incorporated drone technology into improvised explosive devices, strapping bombs and cameras to commercially-acquired drones and landing them in enemy territory.¹¹ In 2017, an Islamic State drone landed in Erbil, Iraq. When Kurdish and French forces approached to investigate, the drone exploded, killing two and wounding two others.¹²

In addition to purchasing drones, non-state actors have begun to manufacture their own. In December 2014, Hamas uploaded photos of what it claimed to be locally-made drones in the Gaza Strip.¹³ Iraqi forces also uncovered an Islamic State drone factory in June 2017 that included partially-built drones.¹⁴ While this capability is nascent, its use appears to be growing. Groups that don’t yet have drone capability can still benefit from the technology. Some groups, such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Afghan Taliban, have attempted to hack into drones. Figure 4.2 highlights some terrorist groups—including Shi’a groups—with drone programs.

Several developments may make drones more lethal and easily accessible to Salafi-jihadist groups and other non-state actors in the future. The first is the

increasing commercialization of drones. Consumer sales of drones are expected to reach 16 million by 2020.¹⁵ As the Islamic State, Hezbollah, and other groups have demonstrated, these drones are cheap and can be weaponized. Groups may seek to deploy these drones outside their traditional areas of operation and potentially use them in external operations. In 2013, a political protester flew a drone within feet of German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Defense Minister Thomas Maiziere before it crashed.¹⁶ In 2014, multiple drones were spotted over French nuclear power plants.¹⁷ In 2018, Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro escaped an assassination attempt while giving a speech after two armed drones detonated before reaching his position.¹⁸

Second, there are advances in 3D-printing technology, though some of this technology may be too advanced for some Salafi-jihadist groups. Researchers at the University of Virginia were able to 3D-print a drone using off-the-shelf parts. Engineers at the University of Sheffield developed a 3D-printed drone that could be constructed and put together in under 24 hours. As one report concluded based on the University of Sheffield experiment, “If a nonstate actor group acquired the blueprint and 10 printers, it could print 10 per day and 300 per month at a cost of \$2,700 plus the cost of the printers.”¹⁹

A third development is drone swarming. A drone “swarm” is a group of drones launched simultaneously, but often controlled by a single human operator. These drones can increase surveillance or maximize the deadliness of an assault and can also operate autonomously.²⁰

Fourth, while non-state actors have mainly used unmanned aerial vehicles, Salafi-jihadist groups could acquire other types of unmanned vehicles—such as land and maritime ones. These drones could be used to collect intelligence or conduct attacks. In January 2017, for example, Houthi rebels in Yemen



Islamic State drone used for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance against Syrian Democratic Forces.

DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

FIGURE 4.2

Example of Terrorist Groups with Drone Programs²¹

Group	Location Drones Have Been Used	Year First Acquired	Hacked into Drones	Used for Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance	Dropped Explosives
Hezbollah	Israel, Syria, Lebanon	2004	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hamas	Israel and Palestinian Territory	2012	No	Yes	Yes
Palestinian Islamic Jihad	Israel and Palestinian Territory	2011	Yes	No	No
Taliban	Afghanistan, Pakistan	2016	No	Yes	No
Islamic State	Syria, Iraq	2014	No	Yes	Yes
Houthis	Yemen	2016	No	Yes	Yes
Boko Haram	Nigeria, Cameroon	2017	No	Yes	No
Shi'a Groups in Iraq and Syria	Iraq, Syria	2015	Yes	Yes	Yes
Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula	Yemen	2016	No	Yes	No
Jabhat al-Nusra/Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham	Syria	2014	No	Yes	No
Jund al-Aqsa	Syria	2016	No	Yes	No
Faylaq al-Sham	Syria	2016	No	Yes	No
Ahrar al-Sham	Syria	2016	No	Yes	No

used a remote-controlled boat to strike a Saudi naval ship in the Red Sea.²² Hamas has apparently developed advanced maritime weaponry.²³ These types of capabilities could allow groups to attack naval targets like ships in novel ways. In general, drones of any type—air, land, and maritime—will likely be attractive to Salafi-jihadists because of their potential for lethality and increased access to targets.

SOCIAL MEDIA SERVICES

Over the past several years, Salafi-jihadists have been remarkably successful at using social media. The Islamic State has been most effective in emphasizing the importance of, and utilizing, social media. As one Islamic State defector noted, “The media people are more important than the soldiers...Their monthly income is higher. They have better cars. They have the power to encourage those inside to fight and the power

to bring more recruits to the Islamic State.”²⁴ In addition to the Islamic State, other Salafi-jihadist organizations like al-Qaeda have used social media for a wide range of purposes, such as recruitment, radicalization, intimidation, financing, and messaging to members and the public.

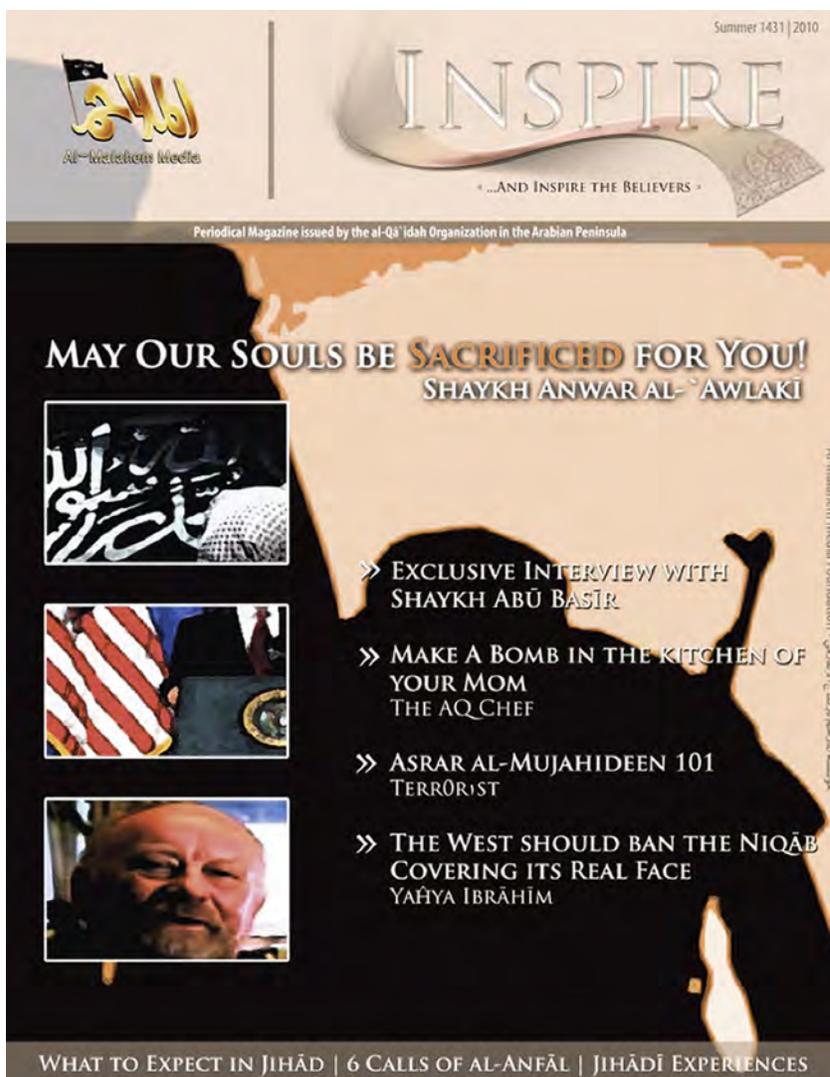
When the Islamic State pushed into Iraq in 2014, its leaders choreographed a social media campaign to promote their cause, complete with a smartphone app. They organized this campaign under the hashtag #AllEyesOnISIS to maximize the probability that algorithms would promote it. As one assessment concluded, “Soon #AllEyesOnISIS had achieved its online goal. It became the top-trending hashtag on Arabic Twitter, filling the screens of millions of users across the Middle East.”²⁵ The Islamic State has also published digital magazines with names such as *Dabiq*, *Dar al-Islam*, and *Rumiyah* to broadcast their ideolo-

gy and battlefield successes. These magazines contain pictures of Islamic State social services, utopian living conditions, and inspirational articles urging individuals to immigrate to the caliphate or to conduct activities in their home countries. Al-Qaeda also attempted to recruit using its magazine *Inspire*. Both groups have also used a variety of other means to recruit individuals, such as high-quality videos of fighters in training camps, drone footage, and audio and video speeches from their leadership.

Salafi-jihadist networks have also used social media to encourage or plot attacks, producing content that instructs individuals on how to carry out operations. For example, Uzbek national Sayfullo Saipov, who drove his truck into a crowd in New York City and killed 8 people in 2017, was inspired by the 90 Islamic State propaganda videos found on his phone. The New York Police Department investigation found that

Saipov “followed almost exactly to a ‘T’ the instructions that ISIS put on its social media channels.”²⁶ Moreover, the Tsarnaev brothers followed instructions in an *Inspire* magazine article, “Make a Bomb in the Kitchen of Your Mom,” to carry out the 2013 Boston bombings.²⁷ Networks in Libya have used Facebook to post maps and geolocated coordinates to facilitate attacks. As one user who went by the handle Narjis Ly wrote: “From the traffic light at Wadi al Rabi, it is exactly 18 kilometers to the runway, which means it can be targeted by a 130 mm artillery. The coordinates are attached in the photo below.”²⁸

In addition, Salafi-jihadist networks have utilized social media to intimidate adversaries by posting videos and photographs of bombings, beheadings, and public executions. They have also attempted to use social media for financing purposes. In some cases, Salafi-jihadist financiers have asked for money on social media platforms and encouraged individuals to do-



The cover of *Inspire* magazine’s issue on how to construct a homemade bomb.

nate. In others, networks have established front organizations and directed their followers to transfer money. In December 2017, a Kuwaiti national with ties to al-Qaeda attempted to raise money from his 1.7 million followers on Instagram.²⁹ Finally, Salafi-jihadist networks have used social media platforms to provide their followers updates on strategic decisions, the acquisition of other groups under their fold, and battlefield updates—sometimes live—as with the al-Shabaab attack on Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya. Overall, Salafi-jihadist groups have used several types of social media services.

TWITTER: The Islamic State has used Twitter to release messages from its leadership, facilitate recruitment, intimidate adversaries, and communicate with each other.³⁰ The Islamic State’s al-I’tisam page, for example, had more than 50,000 followers and served as the Islamic State’s information authority before it was taken down in June 2014.³¹ The group also maintained several local pages dedicated to winning over Iraqis and Syrians. The Anbar and Nineveh province pages, for example, had 50,000 followers, while the Diyala province had around 12,000 followers at one point.³² Twitter also allows individuals to show their support for Islamic State activities. For example, the Billion Muslim Campaign to Support the Islamic State—a group that rallies support for the Islamic State—generated 22,000 posts in just four days after launching its hashtag #AllEyesOnISIS.³³ However, Twitter became more effective at taking down online jihadist propaganda and malign content. As a result, the Islamic State and other jihadists migrated to different platforms, such as Friendica, Diaspora, and Telegram, while also maintaining their Twitter presence.

FRIENDICA: In July 2014, al-Battar media, a group dedicated to promoting Islamic State propaganda, announced that “Al-‘Itisaam Media Foundation and the al-Hayat Center decided to stop publishing on Twitter temporarily and we ask you to disseminate the following links to the official pages on Friendica.”³⁴ Shortly after the announcement, the Islamic State established three new pages on Friendica—open source software for a distributed social network—and encouraged its Twitter followers to switch to the platform. Friendica described itself as a social media platform that allows for “seamless wall-to-wall posts and remote comments, even across different network nodes,” and “bi-

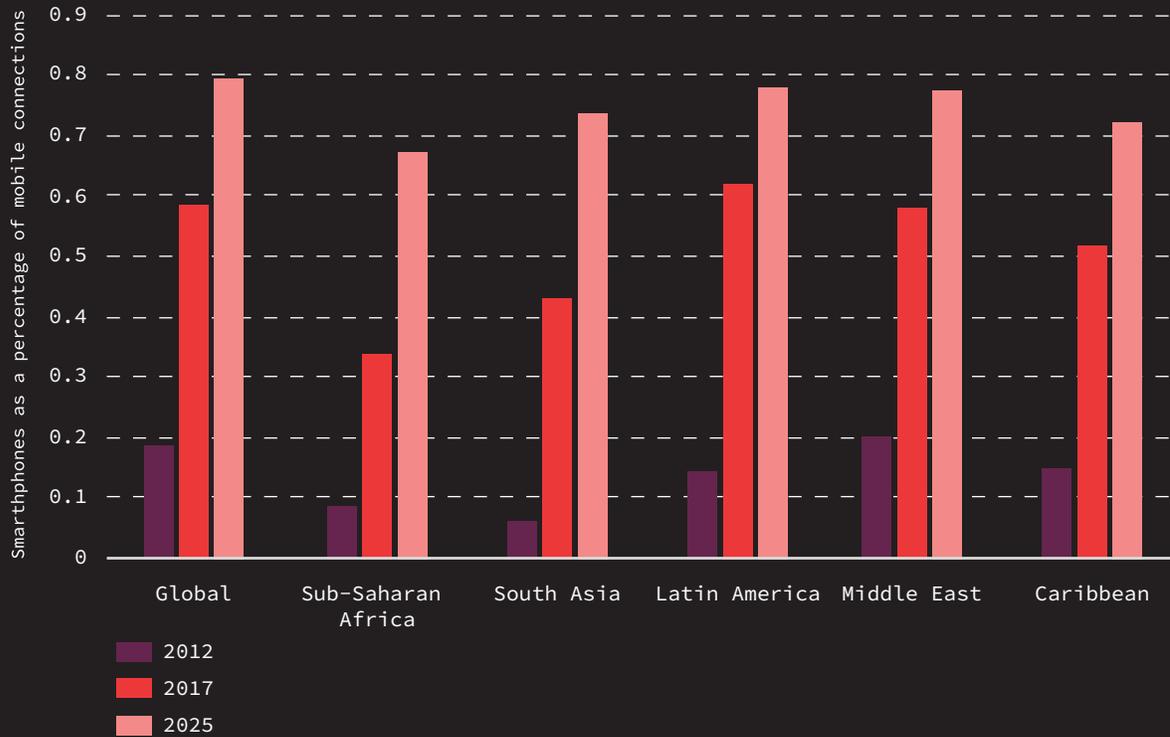
directionally (reading and posting)” to Twitter, App.net, GNU Social, and other services.³⁵ The Islamic State’s Friendica accounts contained statements from the Islamic State leadership, speeches, and religious recitations. Al-Hayat, the Islamic State media group focused on recruiting Westerners, released English and other European language propaganda videos on the platform.³⁶ As Islamic State-linked accounts were taken down or disrupted, the group briefly migrated to other platforms such as Diaspora and Quitter.³⁷

TELEGRAM: Since 2015, Telegram has been the “app of choice” for many Salafi-jihadists. The Islamic State made the transition following Twitter’s crackdown on its accounts. Between 2015 and 2016, Twitter removed 360,000 terrorist-related accounts.³⁸ In addition to its encrypted technology, which allows members to communicate privately, Telegram has thousands of public channels. In short, Telegram allows Salafi-jihadists to perform multiple levels of communications, from private to public, in one place. Telegram even features a self-destruct timer that allows messages to permanently disappear after a stipulated period. The application has low barriers to entry compared to other services and holds policies that make it much harder for an individual to be barred from the application. Information often starts in Telegram and then moves to Twitter and Facebook.³⁹ Groups such as Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, the Islamic State, Hezbollah, Hamas, and al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent maintain their own channels on Telegram.

In the future, Salafi-jihadist groups will likely migrate to new platforms and services to disseminate their messages. Many of these companies may not be Western-based like Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, but might instead move around—with servers in undisclosed locations—to evade law enforcement and intelligence agencies.

Figure 4.4 highlights the percentage of global and regional smartphone adoptions in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and the Caribbean. It shows that smartphones will likely become more available in emerging markets, many of which have significant numbers of Salafi-jihadists. As one assessment concludes: “Although affordability is still a barrier, the increased availability of basic smartphones, thriving second-hand markets and the emergence of device financing schemes are all helping to

FIGURE 4.4
Global and Regional Smartphone Adoption⁴¹



make it easier to access and own a smartphone.”⁴⁰ By 2025, 67 percent of mobile connections in Sub-Saharan Africa may be smartphones, along with 73.5 percent in South Asia and 77.4 percent in the Middle East. While virtually all Salafi-jihadists likely have access to smart phones and the Internet today, most of their supporters will as well.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Artificial intelligence presents another area that Salafi-jihadist networks may seek to exploit in the future, though some groups and networks may lack the technological sophistication and resources to pursue complex applications of machine learning. U.S. Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats noted in the

2018 *Worldwide Threat Assessment* that “the widespread proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI)—the field of computer science encompassing systems that seek to imitate aspects of human cognition by learning and making decisions based on accumulated knowledge—is likely to prompt new national security concerns.” The statement continued that “existing machine learning technology, for example, could enable high degrees of automation in labor-intensive activities such as satellite imagery analysis and cyber defense.”⁴²

Artificial intelligence is the ability of a machine to imitate intelligent human behavior.⁴³ To do this, it frequently involves the use of algorithms that assess a situation and automatically determine a response. There has been only limited evidence that Salafi-jihadist networks have experimented with artificial intelligence—at least at present—but there have been some examples of interest. In December 2018, for in-

stance, UK authorities arrested two Iraqi asylum-seekers—Andy Samy Star and Farhad Salah—for planning an Islamic State-inspired bomb attack in the United Kingdom that used driverless vehicles and devices that they had constructed and tested. As Salah remarked on Facebook shortly before his arrest: “My only attempt is to find a way to carry out martyrdom operation with cars without driver. Everything is perfect only the programme is left.”⁴⁴

There are several ways in which hackers, international criminal networks, and other actors—including Salafi-jihadists—may use artificial intelligence for malicious means. As one assessment concluded, “since many of the cutting-edge artificial intelligence projects are open source and publicly available, it may well be possible to build makeshift lethal autonomous weapons systems that are nearly as good as state-of-the-art systems but at a fraction of the cost.”⁴⁵

As discussed previously in this chapter, Salafi-jihadist may seek to develop or use artificial intelligence-enabled automated vehicles—ground, sea, or air. Self-driving vehicles may be used for a variety of malicious purposes. For example, Salafi-jihadist groups could use artificial intelligence-enabled vehicles to carry out car-ramming attacks—like the attack in Nice, France in July 2016—and operations using vehicle born improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs).⁴⁶ Furthermore, Salafi-jihadist networks could adopt drone swarming techniques. As discussed earlier, drone swarms involve a group or individual dispatching several small unmanned systems that allow them to operate autonomously once deployed. These swarms can conduct such tasks as obstacle avoidance and “target-following technologies.”⁴⁷

Salafi-jihadist networks may also attempt to use artificial intelligence-empowered social engineering.⁴⁸ For example, chatbots can be used to enhance online radicalization.⁴⁹ Much like companies offer customer support via chatbots, Salafi-jihadist groups and networks could mimic these practices to enhance recruiting measures and reach a broader audience with far less work and fewer resources. As one report concludes, the “automated natural language and multimedia production will allow artificial intelligence systems to produce messages to be targeted at those most susceptible to them,” and “allow groups to target precisely the right message at precisely the right

time in order to maximize persuasive potential.”⁵⁰ Salafi-jihadist networks could also use artificial intelligence-enabled means to impersonate emails from trusted contacts and “generate custom malicious websites/emails/links.”⁵¹ These could be used to achieve greater ends, including blackmail, extortion, kidnapping, and other measures.⁵²

ENCRYPTED COMMUNICATIONS

Cryptographic technologies, such as encrypted communication, present an opportunity for terrorist groups to conduct increasingly sophisticated activity. Illicit actors have exploited these technologies in the past to avoid detection and will likely continue to do so in the future. Underpinning these technologies is cryptography. Cryptography is the art of writing or solving codes. Individuals can store and transmit data in a form that only those for whom the data is intended can process and read it. Cryptography includes several functions: privacy (ensures that only the intended receiver can read the message); authentication (ensures the identity of the receiver); non-repudiation (ensures the sender really sent the message); and key exchange (the method by which cryptographic keys are shared between sender and receiver).

Plaintext, or unencrypted data, is encrypted into ciphertext, which is then decrypted back into plaintext. The encryption and decryption of the cipher text is based on the type of cryptography scheme being employed. Public key cryptography is a fundamental cryptography scheme for message security. When two parties want to communicate, they are given a private key and a public key. The public key is visible to anyone. The private key and public key are mathematically linked through a shared primary number. To send a secret message, the sender directs a message to the receiver, using the receiver’s public key to encrypt the message. Since the receiver alone has access to their private key, only they can open the message. The sender and receiver do not need to exchange keys, nor do they need to rely on a middleman for distribution. The U.S. government and allies initially sought to keep strong public-key encryption devices out of the public domain, classifying it as a “munition” in 1976. With

the rise of the personal computer, however, strong public-key encryption could no longer be kept under control and was moved to the commerce control list in 1996. Today, public-key encryption is ubiquitous.

Encrypted communication platforms use cryptographic technology to give two parties the capability to communicate privately. Cryptographic technologies make it difficult for third parties, including law enforcement agencies, to penetrate an encrypted conversation. Rather than being sent as plain text, encrypted messages scramble the message as a long series of digits—known as a message digest—that can only be unscrambled by the receiver. Once the message is unscrambled it cannot be unlocked again.

Encrypted messaging services pose a notable issue for law enforcement and intelligence agencies.⁵³ The use of encrypted communication services by illicit organizations for both internal and external communication is likely to increase as commercial technology improves. Salafi-jihadist networks have utilized encrypted communication apps such as Telegram, WhatsApp, Surespot, and Signal. These apps provide end-to-end encryption. Many of the companies that make them have resisted cooperation with governments to create “back doors” or “front doors” that would enable government agencies to access the content. Other encrypted communication apps include Wickr, Kik, and ChatSecure. Besides messaging apps, encrypted email services have emerged as a viable means for secure communication. The email service Protonmail, for example, is gaining popularity among extremists. Terrorists are also able to communicate securely through Dark Web platforms.

There are numerous examples of Salafi-jihadist and other terrorist groups using encrypted communications platforms. In 2007, al-Qaeda released an encryption tool named “Asrar al Mujahideen,” or Mujahideen Secrets, developed by senior al-Qaeda operative Younes al-Mauretani. Al-Qaeda later released an updated version of the software, which was used in 2009 by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula cleric Anwar al-Awlaki to communicate with operatives in the West.⁵⁴ Then, in 2010, al-Qaeda-linked operatives in Germany encrypted their communications using Mujahideen Secrets.⁵⁵ Similarly, between 2014 and 2015, Junaid Hussain, a British Islamic State operative and member of a group nicknamed “Legion”

by the FBI, was a prolific user of the encryption messaging app Surespot. He provided Islamic State sympathizers in the United Kingdom with bomb-making tips and encouraged them to carry out attacks.⁵⁶ The perpetrators of the November 2015 Paris attacks used encryption to communicate with each other. Messaging services WhatsApp and Telegram were found on the phones of the suspects.⁵⁷ In August 2015, The Islamic State released a 15-page guide titled “Sécurité Informatique” in its French online magazine *Dar al-Islam*, highlighting the importance of secure communications for the group. It taught users how to connect to the Tor network to hide Internet addresses and locations, encrypt emails, and perform other functions.⁵⁸

Several trends are worth monitoring in the future. First, Salafi-jihadist networks will likely utilize encrypted communication platforms that offer high levels of instant, private, and anonymous communication. They may use encrypted communications apps that collect as little user information as possible (often referred to as “metadata”) to further complicate counterterrorism efforts. Salafi-jihadists may also leverage encrypted messaging platforms that utilize public source-code. This means that the public can examine the code underlying the platform and ensure that intelligence agencies have not inserted backdoors.

Second, Salafi-jihadists will likely try to replicate and improve upon techniques and methods used by transnational criminal organizations.⁵⁹ In March 2018, the FBI and international partners dismantled an international criminal communication service known as Phantom Secure. Phantom Secure was a Canada-based criminal enterprise that provided secure communications to high-level drug traffickers and other criminals. The group purchased smartphones, removed all the typical functionality—such as calling, texting, Internet, and GPS—and installed an encrypted email system so the phones could only communicate with each other.⁶⁰ The data on a given phone was automatically destroyed if the owner was arrested. The FBI estimated that most of Phantom Secure’s 10,000 to 20,000 users were top-level leaders of transnational criminal organizations in the United States and other countries. As Phantom Secure demonstrates, transnational criminal organizations have successfully used technological advancements to evade law enforcement and allow for communication

by building a platform tailored towards clandestine operations in poorly-governed and developed states.

Third, terrorists will likely use encrypted communication platforms produced outside the West. If intelligence agencies can access messages on popular platforms such as WhatsApp, terrorists will likely seek encrypted communication platforms produced and maintained in poorly governed locations—including the Middle East, North Africa, East Africa, and the Sahel.

Fourth, Salafi-jihadist networks could build their own encrypted communication platforms because software code for encryption is widely available in the public domain. Terrorists could use that software code to create their own software with the encryption features they want. They could also purchase their own software from organized criminal groups or build the software themselves.

VIRTUAL CURRENCIES

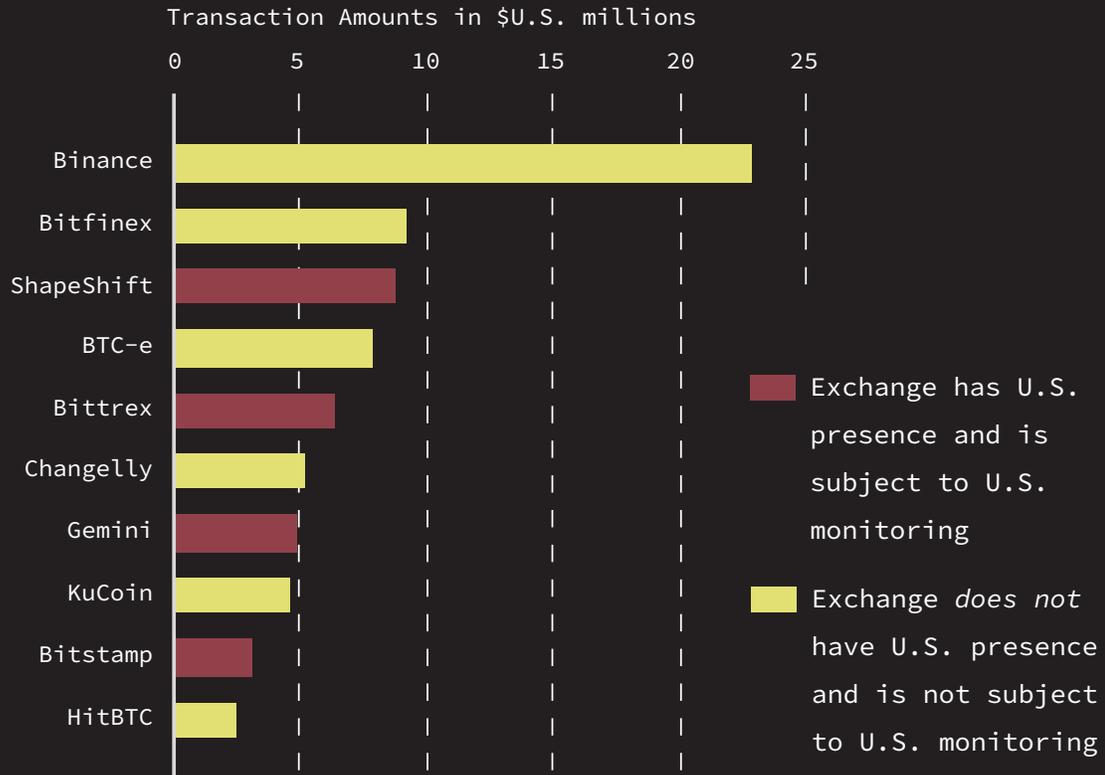
A virtual currency is a digital representation of value accepted by individuals as a means of payment and can be transferred, stored, or traded electronically. Virtual currencies allow for near-instant transfer of capital around the world without making use of traditional financial institutions such as banks. They offer cheaper, faster, private, and potentially more secure transactions.

Many virtual currencies, such as Bitcoin, operate without a central authority (such as a bank) because they are built on a public-ledger infrastructure, known as a blockchain, spread across computers. With virtual currencies, cryptography is primarily used for two purposes: to secure the identity of the sender and ensure that past records of transactions cannot be tampered with. Each computer on the network verifies the authenticity of previous transactions. This shared and publicly available database of transactions limits fraud and eliminates the need for institutions such as banks to verify transactions. Many virtual currencies, particularly cryptocurrencies, provide anonymity for both the sender and receiver. Cryptocurrencies encrypt each transaction, and the sender and receiver are identified only by a string of numbers. Salafi-jihadist groups could use cryptocurrencies to solicit donations, purchase or

“Salafi-jihadists will likely try to replicate and improve upon techniques and methods used by transnational criminal organizations.”

FIGURE 4.5

Top Cryptocurrency Exchanges by Laundered Funds Received⁷¹



sell weapons through the Dark Web, and move funds globally. As one U.S. government report concluded, “the possibility exists that terrorist groups may use these new payment systems (VCs) to transfer funds in the United States to terrorist groups and their supporters located outside of the United States.”⁶¹

The use of virtual currencies by Salafi-jihadist and other terrorist groups has been limited, but there are some exceptions.⁶² The media wing of the Mujahideen Shura Council, a U.S.-designated terrorist organization whose leadership supports the Islamic State, posted infographics on Twitter with QR codes (two-dimensional barcodes that are readable by smartphones) linked to a Bitcoin address.⁶³ In an Internet message, an individual named “Abu Ahmed al-Raqqā” asked Islamic State supporters to send funds using Bitcoin so the Islamic

State could continue to expand the caliphate.⁶⁴ In a PDF posted on a Wordpress blog, an Islamic State supporter outlined how to use Bitcoin.⁶⁵ A Virginia teen, Ali Shukri Amin, was charged with providing material support to the Islamic State. As the U.S. Department of Justice concluded, “Amin, who used the Twitter handle @Amreek-iwitnes, provided instruction on how to use Bitcoin, a virtual currency, to mask the provision of funds to ISIL, as well as facilitation to ISIL supporters seeking to travel to Syria to fight with ISIL.”⁶⁶ In January 2017, Islamic militants based in the Middle East used Bitcoin and online-payment services such as PayPal to fund activities in Indonesia.⁶⁷ In June 2018, the editorial staff behind the German-language jihadi magazine “Kybernetiq” requested contributions through cryptocurrencies Bitcoin and Monero, providing encrypted contact information.⁶⁸

Salafi-jihadists could use virtual currencies that offer increased anonymity through data masking. Though popular virtual currencies such as Bitcoin conceal the identities of the parties in each transaction, the transaction itself is recorded on the blockchain. As a result, balances and transaction history can be traced to the Bitcoin address of the user. Still, terrorists may seek virtual currencies with digital wallets that not only hide the identity behind an address, but also obfuscate the transaction itself so that the transaction history cannot be traced. This extra level of data masking may become increasingly attractive for Salafi-jihadists and others who seek greater anonymity. A range of cryptocurrency exchanges—such as Binance, Bitfinex, BTC-e, Changelly, KuCoin, and HitBTC—operate in plain view with limited government policing, allowing users to engage in increasingly anonymous transactions. Figure 4.5 highlights the top exchanges by funds received, according to a Wall Street Journal investigation that traced funds from potentially criminal cryptocurrency wallets.⁶⁹ In addition, some cryptocurrencies—such as Monero and Zcash—are more difficult for law enforcement and intelligence agencies to monitor, because they provide users with enhanced privacy and anonymity features.⁷⁰

Yet there are several reasons why virtual currencies may be more difficult and less appealing than paper- or commodity-based options for Salafi-jihadist networks. First, most terrorist networks lack the skills and technological capabilities necessary to deploy a virtual currency or—even more challenging—to develop a virtual currency from scratch. This is because many terrorist groups operate in areas with poor infrastructure and low penetration of modern technical and telecommunication tools. Second, users' trust in new currencies is often low, making them less likely—at least initially—to try options like virtual currencies. But this suspicion of virtual currencies could erode as populations become more familiar with them.⁷² Third, virtual currencies have come under stress. Bitcoin and other digital currencies lost 70 percent of their value in 2018 after surging in 2017, making some users and potential users less likely to turn to them.⁷³

DARK WEB

The World Wide Web consists of multiple layers. Layer one is called the surface web, also known as the clear web. The “surface web” is the portion of the web that is readily available to the public and searchable through standard search engines like Google. The next layer is called the “deep web” and constitutes the part of the Internet that cannot be indexed by traditional search platforms. The reasons why a website may not be indexed vary. Some may require login credentials and others may be intentionally unlinked. This layer hosts content such as some online banking services, medical records, and membership-only databases. The third layer of the web is the “Dark Web.” It represents sections of the web that are intentionally hidden and require specific software packages to navigate, such as Tor or I2P. The Dark Web is designed to provide anonymity to its users through encryption technology. Entry points to the Dark Web can be found on the surface web, which makes the Dark Web more accessible to the public than the deep web.⁷⁴

The Dark Web generally consists of two types of markets. Cryptomarkets host multiple sellers or “vendors,” provide participants with anonymity, and aggregate and display customer feedback ratings and comments.⁷⁵ Cryptomarkets usually facilitate trust through an escrow service and dispute arbitration.⁷⁶ On the other hand, single vendor markets are set up by a vendor to host sales for that vendor alone. These vendors sell directly to customers without the third-party services provided on cryptomarkets.⁷⁷

Though the Dark Web has some legitimate and legal functions, it has attracted numerous illicit actors because it provides a means to anonymously conduct illegal activities.⁷⁸ Marketplaces on the Dark Web include drugs, weapons, consumer data such as stolen credit card information, child pornography, hacking services, and other illegal activities. The Dark Web provides a platform for a number of terrorist activities, including communication, propaganda, fundraising through cryptocurrencies, and the acquisition of weapons and other illicit goods.⁷⁹ As a report by the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, or Europol, concluded, “While the extent to which extremist groups currently use cyber techniques to conduct attacks appears to be limited, the availabil-

ity of cybercrime tools and services, and illicit commodities (including firearms) on the Darknet, provide ample opportunities for this situation to change.”⁸⁰

There is a growing body of evidence of the extent to which terrorists have used the Dark Web. After the 2015 Paris attacks, the Islamic State announced that the Isdarat website, which archived the group’s propaganda literature, would be moved to the Dark Web due to increasing pressure on surface web sites.⁸¹ In July 2016, an attacker killed several people in Munich, Germany using a gun he purchased on the Dark Web.⁸² In June 2017, the UN’s disarmament chief warned that terrorists and non-state actors were using the Dark Web to seek tools to make and deliver weapons of mass destruction.⁸³

Additionally, limited external communications have been carried out on the Dark Web by terrorists.⁸⁴ In 2013, for example, the United States intercepted encrypted communication between al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and Nasir al-Wuhaysi, the head of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula at the time. It was later discovered that this communication occurred over the Dark Web. This was possible because the Dark Web supplies chat rooms hosted on Tor like Onion-Chat and The Hub, as well as personal messenger tools like Ricochet and Tor Messenger.

Terrorist and criminal use of the Dark Web has been monitored by governments. U.S. law enforcement took down the then-largest online marketplace for illicit goods, Silk Road, and arrested its administrator in 2013 following a two-year law enforcement investigation.⁸⁵ In May 2017, the U.S. Department of Justice outlined how four men used Dark Web cryptomarkets to sell firearms across the globe. Using the pseudonyms “CherryFlavor” and “Worldwide Arms,” the group shipped over 50 parcels containing firearms that were purchased on the cryptomarkets Utopia and Black Market Reloaded (BMR).⁸⁶ On July 20, 2017, the U.S. Department of Justice announced the seizure of two largest criminal marketplaces on the Internet, AlphaBay and Hansa Market. Around this time, there were over 250,000 listings for illegal drugs and toxic chemicals on AlphaBay, and over 100,000 listings for stolen and fraudulent identification documents, access devices, counterfeit goods, malware and other computer hacking tools, firearms, and fraudulent services.⁸⁷

“In July 2016,
an attacker
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Munich, Germany
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purchased on
the Dark Web.”

In the future, Salafi-jihadists and other terrorists may use the Dark Web to purchase illicit goods, such as weapons or bomb-making material; store and maintain archives of Salafi-jihadist propaganda and other recruiting material that can be shared; and pursue fundraising ventures through the sale of drugs, antiquities, and other goods. Terrorists could also initiate cryptocurrency transfers through Dark Web platforms as an extra layer of security. This transfer of capital and goods through the Dark Web could also work in reverse. Terrorists could facilitate the transfer of capitals or weapons to inspired individuals abroad through the Dark Web. Finally, terrorists might use the Dark Web to access technical information, such as information to build drones or chemical and biological weapons.

OFFENSIVE CYBER CAPABILITIES

Cyber operations offer a relatively inexpensive way for terrorists to conduct destabilizing activities, though there will likely be substantial variation in the technological sophistication of Salafi-jihadist groups. As one U.S. intelligence assessment concluded, “Given their current capabilities, cyber operations by terrorist groups most likely would result in personally identifiable information (PII) disclosures, website defacements, and denial-of-service attacks against poorly protected networks.”⁸⁸ Al-Qaeda has called upon cyber-savvy supporters to attack U.S. critical information systems.⁸⁹ Groups such as the Islamic State and Hamas have also capitalized on emerging cyber technologies, attempted to exploit vulnerable systems to gather information, and disrupted Internet activity.

The Islamic State has been particularly adept at cyber operations. Several hacker teams have conducted cyber operations directly or indirectly for the Islamic State, such as the Cyber Caliphate Army, Ghost Caliphate Section, Kalachnikov E-Security, and Sons of the Caliphate Arms. These groups united in April 2016 to form the United Cyber Caliphate, led by Hussain al-Britani, a British hacker who travelled to Syria and was later killed in a drone strike.⁹⁰ Between December 2016 and January 2017, two pro-Islamic State cyber accounts experimented with distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks.⁹¹

The United Cyber Caliphate claimed credit for seven DDoS attacks in December 2016. Another pro-ISIS group launched a DDoS tool, named “Caliphate Cannon,” that prioritized military, economic, and education targets.⁹² The United Cyber Caliphate also claimed responsibility for other operations, including defacing U.S. government websites, re-directing people looking for local school webpages to a video supporting the Islamic State, hacking hundreds of Facebook and Twitter accounts, defacing Indonesian government websites, and disrupting hundreds of websites in Asia.⁹³

Other terrorist groups have improved their cyber capabilities. Hamas hacked into the phones of hundreds of Israeli soldiers using dating and World Cup apps, allowing them to gather sensitive information about Israeli military bases around the Gaza Strip. The apps allowed malicious codes to be planted in certain smartphones, enabling Hamas to access pictures, phone numbers, and email addresses of Israeli soldiers posted close to the border.⁹⁴

Future offensive cyber activities will likely increase in sophistication. Salafi-jihadists may attempt to purchase and download hacking tools from publicly-available sources. Salafi-jihadists may also use deep web forums as training grounds to improve hacking skills. Also, destructive hacker technology leaked into the public domain will likely help terrorist groups build their cyber capabilities. In March 2017, Wikileaks released a series of documents, called Vault 7, containing approximately 9,000 files that detailed the activities and capabilities of the CIA’s Center for Cyber Intelligence.⁹⁵ These types of security leaks will be beneficial for terrorists, criminals, and state adversaries—including Salafi-jihadists.

WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

Salafi-jihadist networks have long been interested in biological, chemical, radiological, and even nuclear weapons—however difficult some of these may be to produce. U.S. President Barack Obama argued in 2016 that while progress had been made in securing weapons of mass destruction, “the danger of a terrorist group obtaining and using a nuclear weapon [remained] one

of the greatest threats to global security.”⁹⁶ However, chemical and biological threats may be more significant. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula manufactured ricin, collecting and acquiring large quantities of castor beans to “secretly concoct batches of the poison, pack them around small explosives, and then try to explode them in contained spaces, like a shopping mall, an airport or a subway station.”⁹⁷ An issue of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula’s magazine *Inspire* included a section urging “brothers with degrees in microbiology or chemistry” to “develop weapon of mass destruction,” while boasting that “poisonous gases such as nerve gas are not out of reach for the chemist and require simple equipment.”⁹⁸

In June 2018, German authorities arrested Sief Allah Hammami in Cologne, Germany, for procuring components to make ricin. The Tunisian man had successfully produced ricin by using instructions posted to the Internet by the Islamic State and was planning on using the material in an upcoming attack.⁹⁹ He had stockpiled 84.3 milligrams of the deadly toxin, as well as bomb-making components.¹⁰⁰ In 2018, an Islamic State-linked group released a video that provided advice on how to acquire certain forms of bacteria and where to deploy the toxins for greatest impact in the West.¹⁰¹ In October 2018, the FBI arrested William Clyde Allen III, a Navy veteran living in Utah, for allegedly sending envelopes to senior Department of Defense officials that

contained raw materials for ricin.¹⁰² Allen was not motivated by the Islamic State or al-Qaeda, but his plot nevertheless highlights the threat of an attack.

Despite these efforts, there will likely be challenges to obtaining or developing some types of weapons of mass destruction. The limited availability of nuclear material and technological sophistication remain barriers to development, much like they are for state actors. But there have been some terrorist and criminal attempts to purchase nuclear or radiological material. In 2015, for example, the FBI arrested a smuggler of Cesium 137 who attempted to sell the material to a member of the Islamic State in Moldova, who later turned out to be an undercover FBI informant.¹⁰³ In 2013, another FBI informant bought highly-enriched uranium that could be used in a dirty bomb from a smuggler in Moldova.¹⁰⁴

Groups like the Islamic State have expressed interest in acquiring biological weapons. In 2014, for instance, Syrian rebels uncovered an Islamic State laptop that instructed operatives “on the preparation and use of biological weapons. The laptop also contained safety instructions for the development of microbes in order to protect Islamic State technicians from exposure.”¹⁰⁵ In addition, Salafi-jihadist groups like the Islamic State and al-Qaeda have used chemical weapons.¹⁰⁶ The Islamic State has conducted chemical attacks with sulfur mustard and chlorine. As one U.S.



© Iraqi forces decontaminate areas in Taza where the Islamic State used mustard gas.

MARWAN IBRAHIM/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

intelligence assessment concluded, “we assess [the Islamic State] has used chemical weapons in numerous other attacks in Iraq and Syria.”¹⁰⁷ In response, the U.S. Departments of State and Treasury have sanctioned some Islamic State members involved in chemical weapons programs.¹⁰⁸ In addition, the U.S. military has conducted raids and drone strikes against Islamic State chemical specialists—such as Abu Malik, who had previously worked at Saddam Hussein’s Muthana chemical weapon production facility.¹⁰⁹

Modernization efforts in such industries as materials science, pharmaceuticals, and mechanical engineering may increase the interest in weapons of mass destruction. According to one assessment, “A variety of technological trends, from miniaturization of manufacturing and turn-key systems to rapid prototyping and marginal cost reproduction—e.g. 3-D printing—could facilitate the production of WMD.”¹¹⁰ Moving forward, it will be important for governments to monitor illicit chemical and biological markets and to work with companies like Microsoft and Facebook to identify and remove do-it-yourself manuals for weapons of mass production.

CONCLUSIONS

Salafi-jihadist and other terrorist groups will likely continue to leverage rapidly-evolving commercial technology and material to conduct attacks, spread propaganda, organize, communicate, recruit, and inspire followers. In some areas, such as drones, networks will likely improve their ability to conduct attacks with armed air, maritime, and ground vehicles. In other areas, such as cyber-attacks, they may conduct crude—though still disruptive—campaigns like defacing websites and orchestrating denial-of-service attacks against websites. More broadly, technological developments have helped to improve terrorist operations and tactics, supporting what MIT professor Eric von Hippel called “democratizing innovation.”¹¹¹ Groups and networks have innovated—and will likely continue to innovate—because of the improving quality of computer software and hardware, commercial technology, better access to easy-to-use tools, and information from the Internet and other sources. Most groups will also continue to utilize traditional means

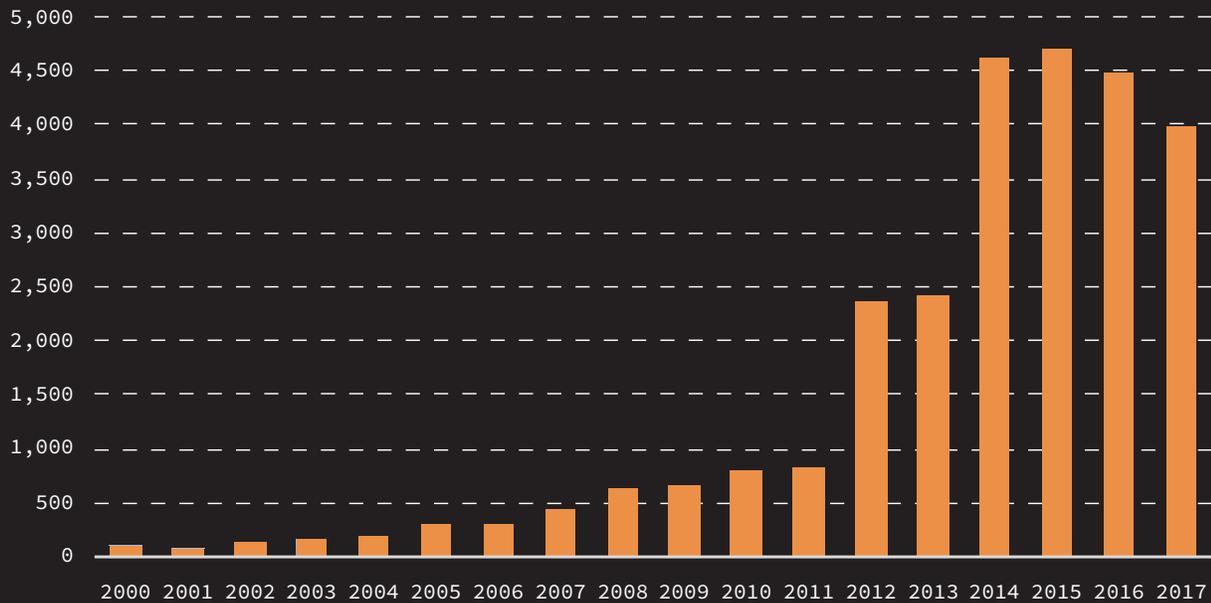
to conduct propaganda, raise money, recruit new members, and perpetrate attacks.

These future developments will make it important for governments and the private sector to continue developing the capabilities to defend against cyber-attacks, protect against unmanned vehicles, penetrate encrypted communications, conduct offensive cyber operations, monitor terrorist use of virtual currencies, and collect information on terrorist use of social media and other platforms.

CHAPTER 05

IMPLICATIONS

FIGURE 5.1
Attacks by Jihadist Groups per Year⁴



While it is sensible for countries like the United States to rebalance its resources to compete with state adversaries like China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran, the terrorism threat remains notable. Neither the Islamic State nor al-Qaeda have been defeated. More importantly, there are—and will likely continue to be—a large pool of Salafi-jihadists across the globe that present a threat to Western countries and their allies.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first contends that the threat from Salafi-jihadists will likely continue. The second section highlights several factors that might increase—or decrease—the terrorism threat. They include weak governance, persistent grievances, and other factors like the withdrawal of Western military forces from key battlefields or another round of the Arab Spring. And the third section provides a brief conclusion.

A CONTINUING THREAT

There is substantial evidence that the terrorism threat will likely remain serious for the foreseeable future.

GLOBAL TERRORISM: Terrorist activity is high across the world and likely to stay high for the foreseeable future. The number of deaths from terrorism has come down slightly from peak levels in 2014, but continue to be at near-peak levels. There is a similar trend with the number of terrorism incidents, which also remains at near-peak levels.¹ Most of the deaths from terrorism are occurring in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan, but these attacks are perpetrated by groups like the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, which also target the U.S. homeland and its forces overseas. In the West, the terrorism threat has been particularly high in Europe. The European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation concluded in 2018 that “there has been an increase in the frequency of jihadist attacks” in Europe, which “cause more deaths and casualties than any other terrorist attacks.”² The

tactics of terrorists varied considerably and included vehicles used to kill pedestrians, rudimentary improvised explosive devices, knives, swords, small arms, and blunt objects like hammers.³

SALAFI-JIHADISTS: The threat from Salafi-jihadist groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State will also remain serious.⁵ The number of Salafi-jihadist groups today is at the highest recorded level since 1980. To put this into perspective, there are nearly three times as many Salafi-jihadist groups today than when the 9/11 attacks occurred in 2001. The number of Salafi-jihadist and allied fighters worldwide in 2018 is still among the highest estimates since 1980.⁶ In addition, there are still tens of thousands of foreign fighters from Europe, Africa, Asia, and North America in Syria and Iraq. Roughly a thousand of them from 50 countries have been detained in Syria and are currently being held by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces in facilities like Ainissa in Syria.⁷ Some of these fighters have already been released; others will likely be released in the future.

A growing number of the detained fighters' home nations don't want to bring them back for prosecution. For example, two UK prisoners held at the Kobane facility, El Shafee Elsheikh and Alexandra Kotey, were allegedly Islamic State members involved in torturing Western hostages. They were referred to as the "Beatles" for their British accents. The UK government stripped them of their citizenship and refused to extradite them to the United Kingdom. In addition, the United Kingdom requested that U.S. government not seek

the death penalty against them and insisted that the United States prosecute the two in a civilian court rather than taking them to the U.S. facility at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.⁸ These trends suggest that the United States and other countries will continue to face a large pool of Salafi-jihadists for the foreseeable future.

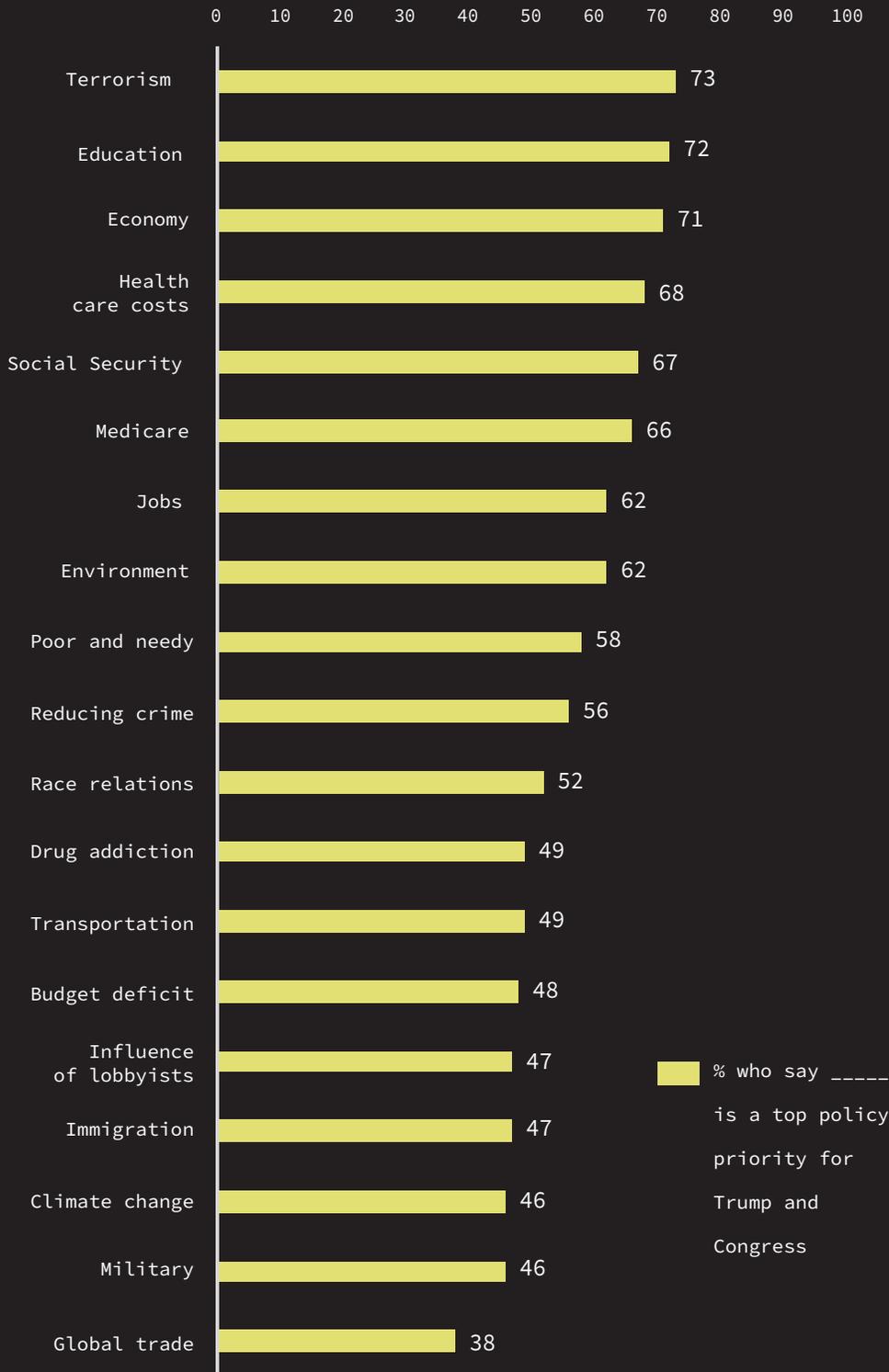
Despite the Islamic State's loss of territory, the group boasts fighters across multiple continents, with particularly large numbers in Iraq and Syria.⁹ In Iraq, the Islamic State has re-established its clandestine intelligence network in parts of provinces like Anbar, Diyala, Kirkuk, and Salahuddin, as well as conducted a growing number of attacks against government officials, tribal elders, village chiefs, and infrastructure targets like oil pipelines and electricity infrastructure.¹⁰ The Islamic State Khorasan Province has conducted a number of attacks in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, including a July 2018 strike in the Pakistan province of Balochistan that killed at least 159 people.¹¹ In July 2018, the Islamic State launched a series of attacks in the southern Syrian province of Sweida, killing more than 200 people via a mix of suicide bombings and raids.¹²

Al-Qaeda also retains fighters in such countries as Syria, Somalia, and Yemen.¹³ Al-Qaeda operatives led by leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, have focused on joining local insurgencies rather than trying to usurp them. In some cases, as with the Afghan Taliban, al-Qaeda leaders have pledged bay'ah to local groups. In addition, al-Qaeda has focused its energy and resources on fighting near enemy governments like the Assad regime, rather than far enemy governments like the

“In Iraq, the Islamic State has re-established its clandestine intelligence network in parts of provinces like Anbar, Diyala, Kirkuk, and Salahuddin.”

FIGURE 5.2

Terrorism and Other Policy Priorities for the U.S. Public, 2018²⁵



United States for now. But al-Qaeda leaders consider the United States the main enemy and still desire to conduct external operations against the United States and other Western countries.

THREAT TO THE UNITED STATES: The threat level in the United States will likely remain significant. The FBI has active investigations of individuals inspired by the Islamic State in *every state* in the United States.¹⁴ The FBI arrested approximately 110 individuals in the United States in fiscal year 2017 for international terrorism and over 80 individuals in fiscal year 2018.¹⁵ The number of arrests has been highest in states like California, Arizona, Minnesota, Texas, New York, and Florida.¹⁶ Counterterrorism investigations in the United States have become particularly challenging for at least three reasons: many of the extremists are lone actors; they are inspired by Salafi-jihadist ideology, rather than being recruited by identifiable members of a group like al-Qaeda or the Islamic State; and they aren't necessarily talking about their plans on cellphones, in e-mails, or in meetings with known extremists.

In addition, the vast majority of those arrested have been U.S. citizens or permanent residents, not refugees or asylum seekers.¹⁷ One of the most recent terrorist plots was led by Demetrius Nathaniel Pitts, a U.S. citizen, who was charged with attempting to provide material support to al-Qaeda. He was arrested after plotting a July 4, 2018 attack in Cleveland and scouting locations to kill scores of civilians. As Pitts remarked, "I'm trying to figure out something that would shake [Americans] up on the 4th of July... What would hit them at their core? Blow up in the [sic], have a bomb blow up in the 4th of July parade."¹⁸ In addition, since 2011 over 200 Americans have traveled to Syria and Iraq to participate in the conflicts, many of whom have not returned to the United States. A few Americans, like Ibraheem Musaibli from Dearborn, Michigan, have been prosecuted in the United States.¹⁹

Americans also remain deeply concerned about terrorism. As Figure 5.2 highlights, a 2018 national survey found that defending against terrorism was the highest priority among Americans, followed by other issues like education, the economy, and health care.²⁰ Some skeptics consider these public sentiments irrational or uninformed.²¹ As one analysis contended, "The fact is that many U.S. political leaders, members of the media, consultants, and academics play a role in hyping the

threat. Together, they form what might be described as a counterterrorism industrial complex—one that, deliberately or not, and for a variety of reasons, fuels the cycle of fear and overreaction."²² Yet this view ignores the reality that states like China, Russia, and even Iran are unlikely to conduct significant physical attacks in the U.S. homeland, at least for the foreseeable future. Their ability to conduct cyber operations, information warfare, and other activities present a threat to the United States, as U.S. intelligence officials have warned.²³ And a war with China, Russia, North Korea, or Iran—however unlikely—would be devastating.²⁴ But terrorists like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have the capability and the intention to conduct attacks against civilian targets in the United States.

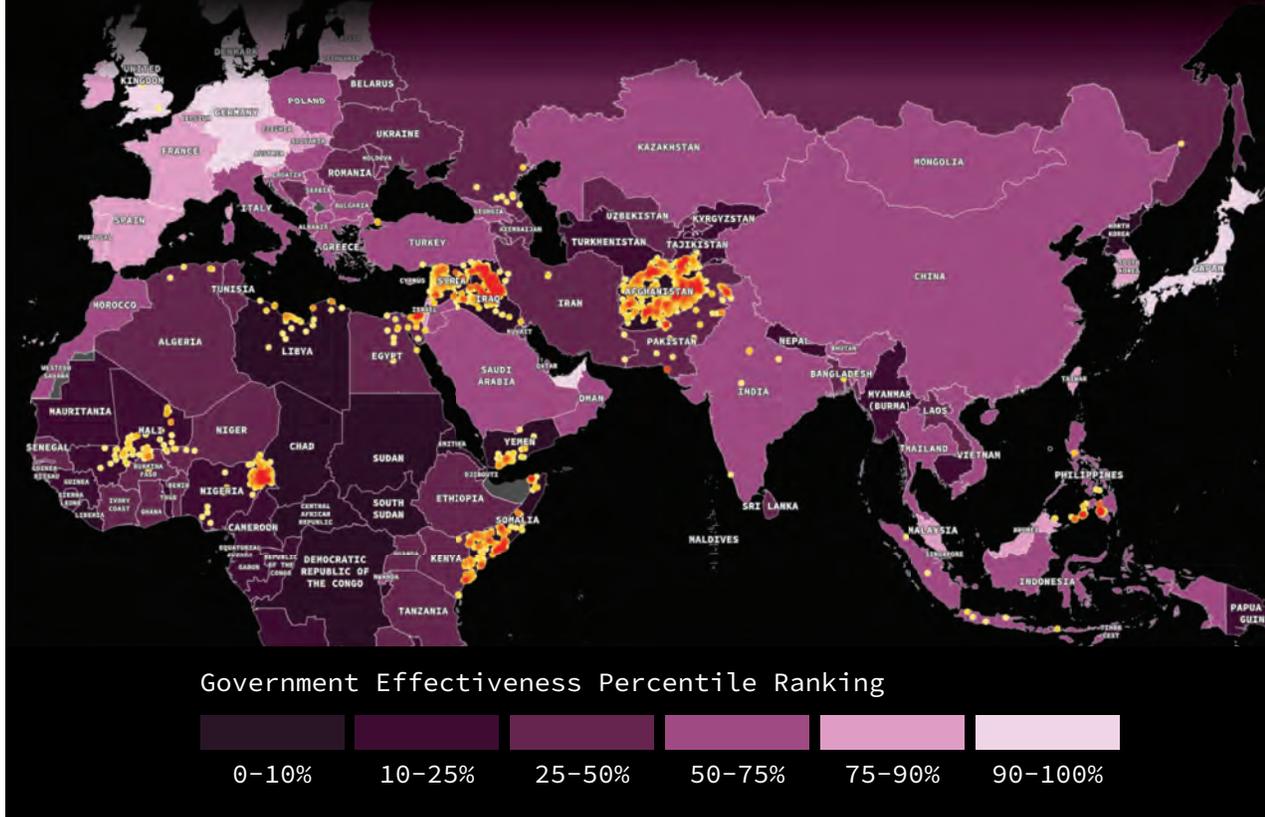
FACTORS THAT COULD IMPACT THE THREAT

Over the next several years, at least three sets of factors could increase—or decrease—the terrorism threat. They include weak governance, the persistence of grievances, and miscellaneous factors like the withdrawal of Western forces from key battlefields or another round of the Arab Spring.

WEAK GOVERNANCE: While the United States and allied governments have weakened some groups like the Islamic State, many of the underlying causes have not been adequately addressed. Weak governance persists in areas affected by Salafi-jihadist groups. A fragile state with weak or ineffective governing institutions increases the probability that terrorist and insurgent groups will be able to establish a sanctuary.²⁶ In these countries, the state's security forces may be badly financed and equipped, organizationally inept, corrupt, politically divided, and poorly informed about events at the local level.²⁷

Figure 5.3 highlights two issues: terrorist attacks and other violent activity perpetrated by al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and their affiliates and provinces (based on data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED)); and government effectiveness (based on the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators). It shows that most of the countries impacted by al-Qaeda, the Islamic State,

FIGURE 5.3
Government Effectiveness and Jihadist Activity, 2017



and their affiliates—such as Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, Libya, Mali, Nigeria, and Somalia—are at or near the bottom 10 percent of countries worldwide in terms of government effectiveness. Most are also in the bottom 10 percent of countries worldwide in other governance indicators, such as control of corruption.²⁸ Based on such poor governance indicators, it is difficult to see how terrorism and insurgency will end in the foreseeable future.

GRIEVANCES: An important component of U.S. and allied policy should be to help regimes deal more effectively with economic, sectarian, and other grievances that have been manipulated by the Islamic State and other Salafi-jihadist groups. Charismatic leaders can use religious or other types of rhetoric to turn grievances into a catalyst for organizing rebellion, which can recruit new members and re-energize those that are already loyal to them. After all, Salafi-jihadist leaders generally view themselves as agents of change. To do this, leaders need an effective political campaign to highlight

grievances and a narrative to convince locals to participate in the struggle. This campaign requires denouncing the current government, providing a counter-narrative, and explaining how they will govern when they come to power. Policymakers need to better understand the *specific* political and other factors that allowed the Islamic State to establish a foothold and then focus diplomatic and development efforts on better addressing them.

In Iraq, for example, Sunni Arab disenfranchisement has been a major grievance and a reason why the Islamic State has made recent inroads in Anbar and other provinces. An important component of U.S. policy in Iraq should involve encouraging implementation of an Iraqi government reconciliation plan that directly addresses collective Sunni Arab grievances.

In Afghanistan, better and less corrupt governance is important to counter the Islamic State–Khorasan Province, the Taliban, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, and other groups. Washington’s most important political priority in Afghanistan should be to focus

U.S. efforts on working with the Afghan government and political elites to improve governance and support the 2019 presidential elections. U.S. diplomats could play an important role in helping broker a compromise on electoral reform and providing financial aid and technical support so that relatively free and fair elections can occur.

OTHER FACTORS: In addition to weak governance and grievances, several factors may impact the rise—or decline—of the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and other Salafi-jihadist groups and networks. First, the withdrawal of U.S. or other Western military forces—particularly special operations forces and air power—from Salafi-jihadist battlefields could contribute to a resurgence of Salafi-jihadist groups. Examples include the withdrawal of U.S. or other Western forces from Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Mali, Niger, or Somalia. The U.S. has also conducted strikes in such countries as Yemen and Libya against Salafi-jihadist groups. U.S. actions in these countries, however limited, have served as a check against al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and other terrorist organizations. The U.S. and Soviet exit from Afghanistan in the late 1980s and early 1990s contributed to the country’s further deterioration and the rise of the Taliban and al-Qaeda. The U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 contributed to a resurgence of al-Qaeda, the rise of the Islamic State, and the spread of extremist ideology across the region. Moving forward, U.S. organizations like Joint Special Operations Command will likely be more important to target Salafi-jihadist groups across the globe as U.S. national security priorities shift to China and Russia.

Second, another round of the Arab Spring or the collapse of one or more governments in the Arab world might allow the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, or other Salafi-jihadists to strengthen. Instability in some countries (such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, or Egypt) or continuing war in others (such as Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, or Somalia) could provide Salafi-jihadists groups with key sanctuaries.

Third, events that highlight the oppression of Muslims by Western governments could increase the possibility of a resurgence by Salafi-jihadist groups. In 2004, the U.S. television show *60 Minutes II* broke a story involving abuse and humiliation of Iraqi inmates by U.S. soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison. The uncensored Abu Ghraib photographs appeared on jihadist websites and were used for recruitment purposes. A similar atrocity

could be used by Salafi-jihadist groups for propaganda. In addition, the United States or other Western countries could over-react to a terrorist attack on their soil and implement domestic policies that broadly target Muslims and create a perception of a “war against Islam.” Such a development could increase radicalization and recruitment for Salafi-jihadist groups.

CONCLUSION

Every U.S. president since 9/11 has tried to move away from counterterrorism in some capacity. During the first year of the George W. Bush administration most U.S. officials were only sporadically concerned with terrorism despite alarming intelligence reports. In the words of George Tenet, “the system was blinking red.”²⁹ But as the *9/11 Commission Report* ultimately concluded:

*In sum, the domestic agencies never mobilized in response to the threat. They did not have direction, and did not have a plan to institute. The borders were not hardened. Transportation systems were not fortified. Electronic surveillance was not targeted against a domestic threat. State and local law enforcement were not marshaled to augment the FBI’s efforts. The public was not warned. The terrorists exploited deep institutional failings within our government.*³⁰

President Barack Obama then ran for office on a campaign platform designed, in part, to get the United States out of wars in countries like Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2011, President Obama oversaw the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq and declared an “end” to the war, only to order U.S. troops back into the country in 2014 following the Islamic State’s move into western and northern Iraq.³¹ President Obama also expanded U.S. drone strikes against terrorists in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, Iraq, and Libya. President Donald Trump and other officials argued that the United States “crushed” and “eradicated” the Islamic State by 2018 and threatened to withdraw U.S. counterterrorism forces from Syria.³² Americans should understand now that terrorism won’t end, though the terrorism threat may ebb and

flow over time. It should come as little surprise that the U.S. military is conducting counterterrorism activities in 76 countries overseas. However, only a minority of these activities are combat missions. The majority are efforts to build the capacity of partner nations. U.S. military activity includes one or more of the following in those 76 countries: conducting air and drone strikes (7 countries), deploying combat troops (15 countries), constructing or retaining military bases (44 countries), and building the capacity of partners to conduct counterterrorism and other actions (58 countries).³³

Developing national security is more an art than a science, especially when trying to prioritize among a range of important issues. A high school student experimenting with weights on a scale finds that taking off mass from one side too quickly—or adding too much mass to the other side—will cause the scale to lose its balance. Indeed, balancing U.S. national security priorities in today’s world needs to happen gradually. The challenge is not that U.S. officials are devoting attention to deal with state adversaries like Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea. These countries present legitimate threats to the United States at home and abroad. Rather, the mistake would be declaring victory too quickly against terrorism—and then shifting too many resources and too much attention away when the threat remains significant. A significant withdrawal of U.S. special operations forces, intelligence operatives, intelligence resources, and development and diplomatic experts for counterterrorism in key areas of Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia would be unnecessarily risky.

SALAFI-JIHADIST AND ALLIED GROUPS

NAME OF GROUP	BASE OF OPERATIONS	REGION	YEARS
Abdullah Azzam Brigades (Yusuf al Uyayri Battalions)	Saudi Arabia	Middle East and North Africa	2009–present
Abdullah Azzam Brigades (Ziyad al-Jarrah Battalions)	Lebanon	Middle East and North Africa	2009–present
Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG)(Islamic State)	Philippines	East Asia and the Pacific	1991–present
Aden Abyan Islamic Army (AAIA)	Yemen	Middle East and North Africa	1994–2003
Ahl al-Kahf	Tanzania	Sub-Saharan Africa	2016–present
Ahrar al-Sham	Syria	Middle East and North Africa	2011–present
Al Ittihad Al Islamiya (AIAI)	Somalia, Ethiopia	Sub-Saharan Africa	1994–2002
Al Qa'ida Core	Pakistan	South and Central Asia	1988–present
Al Qa'ida in Aceh (aka Tanzim al Qa'ida Indonesia for Serambi Makkah)	Indonesia	East Asia and the Pacific	2009–2012
Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula	Yemen	Middle East and North Africa	2009–present
Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula	Saudi Arabia	Middle East and North Africa	2002–2009
Al Qa'ida in the Indian Subcontinent	Afghanistan, Pakistan	South and Central Asia	2014–present
Al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM, formerly GSPC)	Algeria, Tunisia, Libya	Middle East and North Africa	1998–present
Al Takfir wal al-Hijrah	Israel (Gaza), Egypt (Sinai)	Middle East and North Africa	2011–present
Al-Mulathamun (Mohktar Belmohktar)	Mali, Libya, Algeria	Sub-Saharan Africa	2012–2013

Al-Murabitun (Mohktar Belmohktar)	Mali, Libya, Algeria	Sub-Saharan Africa	2013–2017
Ansar al Furqan	Iran	Middle East and North Africa	2013–present
Ansar al-Din	Mali	Sub-Saharan Africa	2011–2017
Ansar al-Islam	Iraq	Middle East and North Africa	2001–2014
Alliance for Re-liberation of Somalia- Union of Islamic Courts (ARS/UIC)	Somalia, Eritrea	Sub-Saharan Africa	2006–2009
Ansar al-Sharia Egypt	Egypt	Middle East and North Africa	2012–present
Ansar al-Sharia Libya	Libya	Middle East and North Africa	2012–present
Ansar al-Sharia Mali	Mali	Sub-Saharan Africa	2012–2013
Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia	Tunisia	Middle East and North Africa	2011–present
Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis	Egypt	Middle East and North Africa	2011–2014
Ansar al Tawhid	Syria	Middle East and North Africa	2017–present
Ansaru	Nigeria	Sub-Saharan Africa	2012–present
Asbat al-Ansar (AAA)	Lebanon	Middle East and North Africa	1994–present
Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF, aka BIFM)	Philippines	East Asia and the Pacific	2010–present
Benghazi Defense Companies	Libya	Middle East and North Africa	2016–present
Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (BRSC)	Libya	Middle East and North Africa	2014–present
Bitar Battalion	Libya	Middle East and North Africa	2013–present

Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (Basayev faction)	Russia (Chechnya)	Europe and Eurasia	1994–2007
Darnah Mujahideen Shura Council (DMSC)	Libya	Middle East and North Africa	2014–present
East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM, aka Turkestan Islamic Party)	China (Xinjang)	East Asia and the Pacific	1988–present
Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ)	Egypt	Middle East and North Africa	1978–2001
Green Battalion	Syria	Middle East and North Africa	2013–2014
Haqqani Network	Pakistan	South and Central Asia	1994–present
al-Shabaab	Somalia	Sub-Saharan Africa	2002–present
Harakat al-Shuuda'a al Islamiyah (aka Islamic Martyr's Movement, IMM)	Libya	Middle East and North Africa	1996–2007
Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham	Syria	Middle East and North Africa	2017–present
Hizbul al Islam	Somalia	Sub-Saharan Africa	2009–2010
Imarat Kavkaz	Russia (Chechnya)	Europe and Eurasia	2007–present
Indian Mujahedeen (Islamic State)	India	South and Central Asia	2005–present
Islamic Jihad Union (aka Islamic Jihad Group) (Taliban- linked)	Uzbekistan, Afghanistan	South and Central Asia	2002–present
Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)	Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan	South and Central Asia	1998–present
Islamic State Algeria (formerly known as Jund al-Khilafah)	Algeria	Middle East and North Africa	2014–present
Islamic State Bangladesh	Bangladesh	South and Central Asia	2016–present
Islamic State Caucasus Province	Russia (Chechnya)	Central Asia	2015–present

Islamic State in East Africa	Somalia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania	Sub-Saharan Africa	2016–present
Islamic State in the Greater Sahara	Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger	Sub-Saharan Africa	2015–present
Islamic State Khorasan Province	Afghanistan, Pakistan	South and Central Asia	2015–present
Islamic State Libya	Libya	Middle East and North Africa	2014–present
Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)	Iraq, Syria	Middle East and North Africa	2004–present
Islamic State Philippines Ansar al-Khalifa Philippines	Philippines	East Asia and the Pacific	2014–present
Islamic State Saudi Arabia	Saudi Arabia	Middle East and North Africa	2014–present
Islamic State Sinai (formerly Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis)	Egypt	Middle East and North Africa	2014–present
Islamic State West Africa (Barnawi Faction)	Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, Chad	Sub-Saharan Africa	2015–present
Boko Haram (Shekau’s Faction)	Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, Chad	Sub-Saharan Africa	2003–present
Islamic State Yemen	Yemen	Middle East and North Africa	2014–present
Jabhat Ansar al Din	Syria	Middle East and North Africa	2014–present
Jabhat al-Nusra	Syria	Middle East and North Africa	2011–2017
Jaish al-Islam (aka Tawhid and Jihad Brigades, Gaza)	Israel (Gaza), Egypt (Sinai)	Middle East and North Africa	2005–present
Jaysh al Muhajireen wal Ansar	Syria	Middle East and North Africa	2012–2015
Jaish al-Ummah (JaU)	Israel (Gaza)	Middle East and North Africa	2007–present
Jaish Muhammad fi Bilad al-Sham	Syria	Middle East and North Africa	2013–2016

Jaish-e-Muhammad	India (Jammu and Kashmir)	South and Central Asia	2000–present
Jamaat al-Ahrar	Pakistan	South and Central Asia	2014–present
Jamaat Ansarullah (JA)	Tajikistan	South and Central Asia	2010–present
Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimeen (JNIM)	West Africa (Algeria, Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso)	Sub-Saharan Africa	2017–present
Jaysh al-Islam	Syria	Middle East and North Africa	2011–present
Jaysh al-Ahrar	Syria	Middle East and North Africa	2016–present
Jaysh ul-Adl	Iran	Middle East and North Africa	2013–present
Jemaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT)	Indonesia	East Asia and the Pacific	2008–present
Jemaah Islamiya (JI)	Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore	East Asia and the Pacific	1993–present
Jondullah	Pakistan	South and Central Asia	2003–present
Jund al-Aqsa	Syria	Middle East and North Africa	2013–2017
Jund al-Sham	Lebanon, Syria, Israel (Gaza), Qatar, Afghanistan	Middle East and North Africa	1999–2008
Jundallah	Iran	Middle East and North Africa	2003–2011
Khalifa Islamiya Mindanao (KIM, or Maute Group)	Philippines	East Asia and the Pacific	2013–present
Lashkar-e-Jhangvi	Pakistan (Balochistan)	South and Central Asia	1996–present
Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT, aka Mansoorian)	Pakistan (Kashmir)	South and Central Asia	1990–present

Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG)	Libya	Middle East and North Africa	1995–2011
Liwa al-Aqsa (splinter of Jund al Aqsa)	Syria	Middle East and North Africa	2017–present
Liwa al-Haq	Syria	Middle East and North Africa	2012–2014
Liwa al-Tawhid	Syria	Middle East and North Africa	2012–2014
Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (GICM)	Morocco, Western Europe	Middle East and North Africa	1998–present
Movement for Tawhid and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO)	Mali	Sub-Saharan Africa	2011–2013
Muhammad Jamal Network (MJN)	Egypt	Middle East and North Africa	2011–2013
Mujahideen Shura Council of the Environs in Jerusalem (MSC)	Israel (Gaza), Egypt (Sinai)	Middle East and North Africa	2011–present
Muslim Defense International	Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda	Sub-Saharan Africa	2016–present
Salafia Jihadia (As-Sirat al Moustaqim)	Morocco	Middle East and North Africa	1995–2012
Taliban (Afghanistan)	Afghanistan	South and Central Asia	1994–present
Tanzim Huras Al Deen	Syria	Middle East and North Africa	2018–present
Tawhid wal Jihad	Iraq	Middle East and North Africa	1998–2004
Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan	Pakistan	South and Central Asia	2007–present
Tunisian Combatant Group (TCG)	Tunisia, Western Europe	Middle East and North Africa	2000–2011

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Endnotes

Executive Summary

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Chapter 05

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