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Rethinking Transnational Terrorism AN INTEGRATED APPROACH

By Martha Crenshaw



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ABOUT THE REPORT

Drawing on an extensive review of the recent literature, this report considers the extent to which civil war and military interventions by foreign powers function as drivers of and rationales for transnational terrorism. The research was supported by the Policy, Learning, and Strategy Center at the United States Institute of Peace.

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Cover photo: Two men walk through a heavily damaged neighborhood in Raqqa, Syria, on April 4, 2019, more than a year after the city's liberation from the Islamic State. (Photo by Ivor Prickett/New York Times)

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Summary



Transnational terrorism poses a threat to all countries but is of immediate concern to the US government. After key losses of territory by insurgents and the subsequent withdrawal of US troops, forces of the self-styled Islamic State have regrouped in Iraq and are developing safe havens in war-torn Syria, accompanied by the stepped-up use of social media for recruiting and propaganda purposes.

The response of the United States and its key security partners should be coordinated not only across governments but across the agencies of a specific state. The US response, for example, should entail policy coordination of defense agencies, humanitarian aid provision, the development of effective communications strategies, a well-thought-out plan for the use of force, if needed, and advance planning of postconflict stabilization strategies.

Mounting an appropriate response requires first understanding the complex interlinkages among civil war, transnational terrorism, and weak governance. Conflicts in Mali, Chechnya, Syria, and other fragile states disrupted by civil war and facing actions from global terrorist networks suggest the different ways in which these factors may interact and the different paths to a solution, including bi- or trilateral negotiations that include extremist groups at the negotiations table. However, governments supporting weak states need not wait for critical events entailing loss of life to occur before offering multidimensional assistance.

Recognizing the conditions under which extremist threats emerge allows governments to take defensive and mitigating measures before a crisis takes shape. Patience and adopting a long view of regional developments greatly aid in assessing and responding to global jihadist threats; governments should not overpromise results or exaggerate threats.



A local militia member patrols the hills in Afghanistan's Nangarhar Province, where the Afghan branch of the Islamic State had its stronghold, on February 15, 2019. (Photo by Jim Huylebroek/New York Times)

Civil War, Transnational Terrorism, and Military Intervention

Transnational terrorism can be seen as insurgency on a global scale, a violent campaign aimed at influencing a worldwide audience and encouraging followers through the use of modern communications technology.

Civil war, transnational terrorism, and foreign military intervention have been studied separately but are rarely considered in combination. The connections between and among terrorism, civil war, and military intervention are complex, and the points of overlap do not fit neatly into simple causal models. Yet understanding how these issues interconnect matters to American and international security. Far-away violence and disorder can undermine the security of the American homeland.¹ Governments need an integrated approach to appraising the threat of violent jihadist extremism, one that takes into account complexity, contingency, and unintended consequences.

Such an integrated approach should help in explaining these phenomena in a few different ways. First, it helps explain the staying power of the jihadist call for a pan-Islamic identity to defend Muslims against Western aggression. Civil wars and third-party interventions in local conflicts are propaganda assets in modern information warfare and help justify transnational terrorism. Second, it reveals how civil war and state weakness create opportunities for nonstate actors to establish operational bases and

DEFINITION OF TERMS

A few terms used in this report bear defining. **Civil wars** are considered to be violent intrastate conflicts that pit a government against nonstate challengers, whether the latter are separatists motivated by ethnic or minority nationalist grievances, revolutionaries aiming to displace ruling elites, transnational Salafi jihadist networks, or a mix. Civil wars often take the form of insurgencies that aim to mobilize the population against the government rather than conventional warfare in which armies engage each other.

Terrorism manifests in attacks against civilians and against highly symbolic and emotionally resonant targets, such as a mosque, a commuter railway, or a government building. Such attacks are intended to maximize shock. **Transnational terrorism** involves actions in which victims, perpetrators, and sites of violence represent different states and nationalities. Transnational terrorist attacks may be initiated by local actors against foreign targets in the geographic conflict space, or by radicalized local residents or transnational networks against targets outside the combat zone. These features of actor and location distinguish transnational terrorism from terrorism carried out by local parties *within* civil wars, which is not unusual.^a

These various categories of civil war and terrorism are not exclusive: civil war insurgents can simultaneously be transnational terrorists.^b

Military intervention by outside states or international institutions such as the African Union, the European Union, NATO, or the United Nations ranges from providing limited security and informational assistance to embattled local governments to full-scale military deployment and occupation by ground forces. In between are airstrikes, special operations, and the provision of weapons and matériel, training, and other forms of on-the-ground assistance by outside troops.

Notes

- a. One of the first studies is Stathis N. Kalyvas, “The Paradox of Terrorism in Civil War,” *Journal of Ethics* 8 (2004): 97–138. A recent review can be found in Jessica A. Stanton, “Terrorism, Civil War, and Insurgency,” in *Oxford Handbook on Terrorism*, ed. Erica Chenoweth, Andreas Gofas, Richard English, and Stathis Kalyvas (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).
- b. Martha Crenshaw, “Transnational Jihadism & Civil Wars,” *Daedalus* 146, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 59–70.

acquire material resources, which makes them more threatening and may provoke third-party military intervention. Foreign military intervention can in turn precipitate both civil war and transnational terrorism. And third, it helps clarify the nexus of civil war and transnational terrorism: civil wars furnish openings for transnational terrorist networks to exploit local struggles, thus extending the global reach of violent jihadism.

The information surfaced by an integrated framework suggests two immediate follow-on questions. First, what is the likely outcome of a civil war in which extremists are players? Do the extremists win? Second, does foreign military intervention lead to the escalation of transnational terrorism? Since the events of September 11, 2001, and the advent of the US-initiated “war on terrorism,” the United States has relied extensively on military

force to defeat terrorism, but such a response often becomes part of the problem, not the solution. Having a clear path to answering these questions would benefit the United States and its security partners.

THE POWER OF EXTREMIST IDEOLOGY AND MESSAGING

The current threat of transnational terrorism, represented in the main today by jihadism, can be seen as insurgency on a global scale, a violent campaign aimed at influencing a worldwide audience and encouraging followers through the use of modern communications technology. The message is disseminated worldwide through the use of both conventional media and social media, which the Islamic State (IS) has proved particularly adept at exploiting.² The Rand Corporation has identified recruitment as the major goal of carefully targeted information campaigns conducted by IS, which is a form of “political warfare” practiced by both states and nonstates. The term was coined at the outset of the Cold War to describe nonkinetic actions short of war, such as “gray-zone” or “hybrid” tactics. In political warfare, the information war may be as important as battlefield conflict is to conventional warfare. Even when states possess vastly superior military power, nonstate armed groups can succeed in the battle of ideas.³

The response of the United States to jihadist propaganda has tended to focus on how and to whom the message is transmitted. One key approach is to try to block or restrict access to communication platforms, which range from social media to encrypted channels such as Telegram. A second approach is to immunize or protect the recipients of the message to make them less susceptible to its appeal. Many initiatives designed to counter violent extremism are thus centered on preventing radicalization and enhancing societal resilience. There have also been attempts to construct competing counternarratives in what is recognized to be a battle of ideas, although these have not shown great success.

These measures are not unreasonable, but American counterterrorism and counterextremism policies must

also take into account the facts underlying the narrative. Without powerful content based on contemporary reality, messages would not resonate so strongly with audiences. Efforts to rein in extremists’ use of the internet, limit online propaganda, and prevent individual radicalization risk overlooking the reality on which such propaganda is based.

Certainly control of messaging allows jihadists to interpret the facts in a way favorable to their cause, but even if distorted the interpretation cannot be delinked from what is happening on the ground. Groups like IS can draw on the images and rhetoric of battlefield conflict to arouse sympathy for their cause and try to establish legitimacy, mobilize popular support, recruit fighters and suicide bombers for local struggles, and inspire the residents of enemy territory to turn to “home-grown” terrorism. A military response to terrorism and insurgency, especially when undertaken by third-party countries intervening in local conflicts, can be even more fruitfully leveraged to sustain the ideological narrative and make it actual, credible, persuasive, and urgent.⁴ The threat to identity, the messaging reinforces, can be defined as now, not in the distant future, and very real, not imagined. The “war” is not metaphorical.

Framing the use of violent extremism as a way to uphold a pan-Islamist identity—which includes coming to the defense of Muslims worldwide and establishing systems of governance based on Islam—helps explain the staying power of ideas that provide immediate motivation for acting on beliefs. The 1980s civil war in Afghanistan not only gave al-Qaeda its start as an organization, it also helped launch the narrative of a religious obligation to come to the defense of a threatened Sunni Muslim community. This idea was initially propagated by the Palestinian cleric Abdullah Azzam, a mentor to Osama bin Laden. The emotional appeal to a shared identity—which at the time was not opposed by the United States and its allies since it was directed against their Cold War adversary, the Soviet Union—carries a potent message of in-group versus out-group and of an encompassing community in which every Muslim can find a place.

Extremist messaging also reinforces the call to action in support of a pan-Islamist identity by evoking sympathy for suffering, in conjunction with anger and outrage, especially if accounts stress Western inaction when Muslims are victims.

Subsequent civil wars in Bosnia and Chechnya in the 1990s similarly reinforced the narrative of a pan-Islamist identity under attack that originated in Afghanistan. Jihadist propagandists used the same discourse and communication tactics to do so. An analysis by Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty of the legacy of the wars in Chechnya stressed extremists' early recognition of the importance of broadcasting images and communiqués from a war zone, well before such propaganda expertise emerged in Iraq, Yemen, and Syria, and their influence on a new wave of fighters. Moore and Tumelty noted that

although a small number of *jihadi* videos had been shot in Bosnia, the filming of military operations in Chechnya and their widespread dissemination on CDs and the Internet in the second half of the 1990s provided potent propaganda for a second generation of *jihadis* in Europe and the Middle East.⁵

The filming of operations was apparently insisted on by Emir Khatib, the nom de guerre of a Saudi-born jihadist who arrived in Chechnya from the battlefields of Afghanistan and Tajikistan after the Russo-Chechen war escalated in 1994 and 1995.

Extremist messaging also reinforces the call to action in support of a pan-Islamist identity by evoking sympathy for suffering, in conjunction with anger and outrage, especially if accounts stress Western inaction when Muslims are victims. For example, a statement by bin Laden in November 2001 emphasized the suffering of Muslims and indifference on the part of the international community, referring to Russian attacks in Chechnya and children slaughtered in the war in Bosnia when nominally under the protection of the United Nations.⁶ More recently, Sunnis worldwide were outraged by the international community's decision to adopt a bystander role in the face of atrocities perpetrated by the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria.⁷

EXTREMIST MESSAGING AND THE TRANSNATIONAL MOBILIZATION OF FIGHTERS

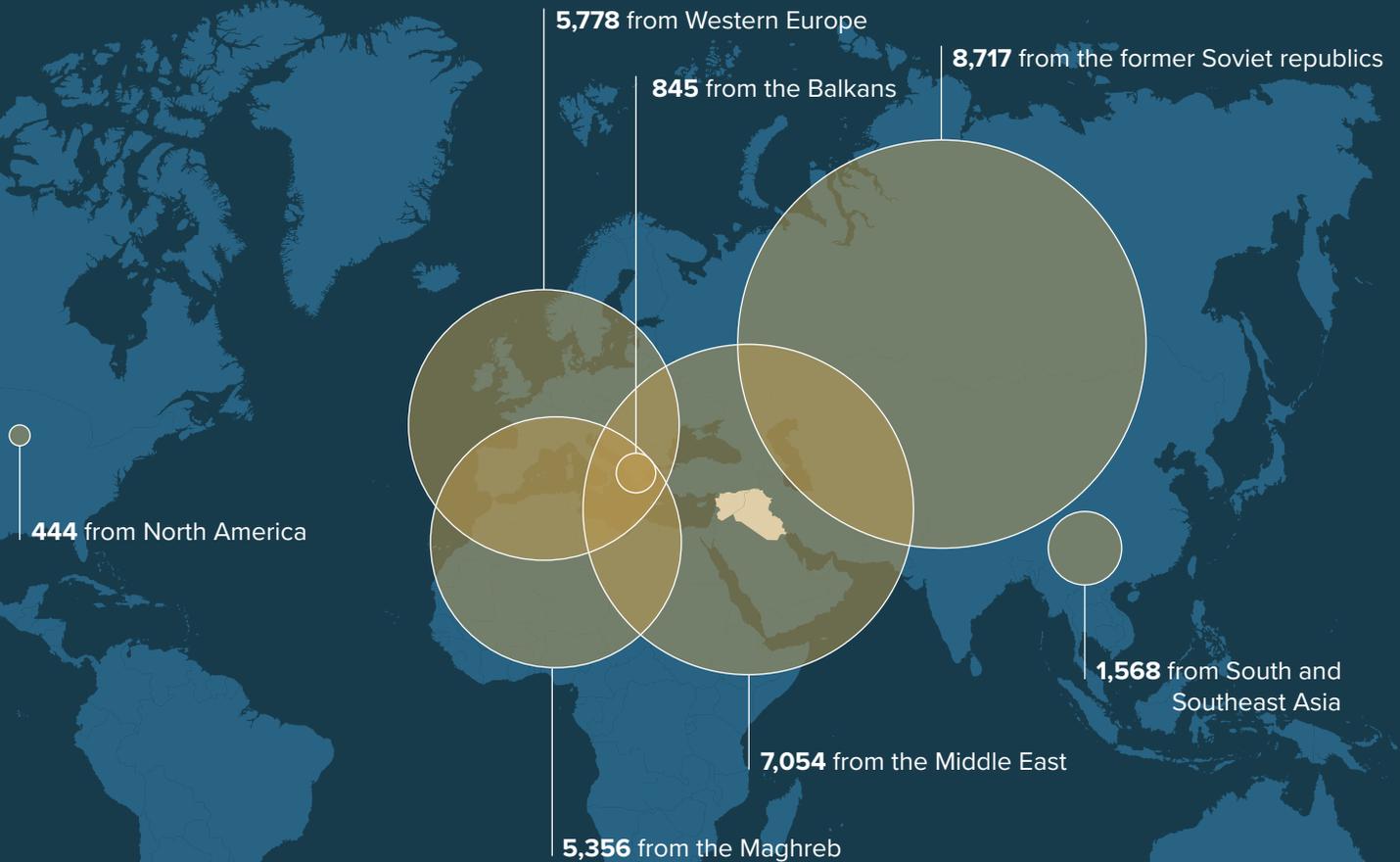
The jihadist narrative of defending a pan-Islamist identity against threats is also a motivating factor in the "foreign fighter" phenomenon—foreign volunteers traveling to civil war zones to engage in jihad.⁸ From the perspective of the holistic framework proposed in this report, civil wars are a necessary condition for the mobilization of foreign fighters. Veterans of civil wars are credible and persuasive recruiters into terrorist networks and are often featured in jihadist propaganda.⁹

The attraction of the conflict raging in Afghanistan in the 1980s for foreign fighters is well established, and some states, such as Saudi Arabia, were not displeased to encourage the departure of troublesome domestic extremists. Subsequent civil wars, especially those that drew the intervention of non-Muslim occupying forces, created opportunities for the engagement of successive generations of foreign volunteers from around the world. Two of the 9/11 hijackers were members of the "Mujahideen Battalion" in Bosnia—"the heart of Europe," according to bin Laden—from 1992 to 1996. Notable jihadists Suraqah al-Andalusi (a Briton who was killed fighting for the Taliban in Afghanistan in November 2001) and Omar Sheikh (who kidnapped and killed American journalist Daniel Pearl in Pakistan in 2002) were inspired by videos of the war in Bosnia.¹⁰ In turn, Suraqah al-Andalusi's death inspired Mohammad Sidique Khan, one of the suicide bombers who killed fifty-six people on July 7, 2005, in central London.

The 2011 civil war in Syria precipitated a dramatic escalation in the number of foreign fighters, who arrived in the tens of thousands from at least seventy countries (see figure 1). As the war winds down, the question of how to treat former fighters and their families has posed a major problem for their home states and for

Figure 1. Foreign Fighters in the Syrian and Iraqi Civil Wars

In the mid-2010s, Syria and Iraq were destinations for the potentially the largest mobilization of foreign fighters in modern history. Estimates range from 30,000 to as many as 42,000. In the estimate below, nearly a third of the approximately 30,000 fighters traveled to Syria and Iraq from the former Soviet Republics.^a



ESTIMATES OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN PAST CONFLICTS^b

Soviet-Afghan War (1979–89) No consensus, but estimates range from 10,000 to 35,000

Bosnian War (1992–95) 500 to 5,000, with most estimates in the 1,000 to 2,000 range

First Chechen War (1994–96) 200 to 300

Second Chechen War (1999–2000) 700

Notes

- Richard Barrett, "Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees," Soufan Center, October 2017.
- Maria Galperin Donnelly, Thomas M. Sanderson, and Zack Fellman, "Case Studies in History: Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Chechnya," Foreign Fighter Project, Center for Strategic and International Studies.
Includes artwork by Lucky Creative/Shutterstock

Civil wars abroad, especially when accompanied by foreign military intervention, also contribute to inspiring “homegrown” terrorism in the countries from which foreign fighters originate—attacks against and within the individual’s home country.

the international community. Are former volunteers likely to return to terrorism and extremism, or has their ideological commitment waned? Some veterans of the civil wars in Iraq and especially Syria have been implicated in attacks in France, Belgium, and Indonesia.¹¹ Even if returning foreign fighters are genuinely repentant, will their home publics accept them? If they are not allowed to return, what will happen?

This problem is especially acute for weak states struggling to consolidate their own legitimacy and facing an internal extremist threat, such as Tunisia, the source of a disproportionately large number of fighters who made their way to Syria. How to treat former fighters, whether foreign or not, is also a critical issue in Iraq, where the punitive treatment meted out not only to captured IS members but also to their dependents is likely to provoke Sunni anger and increase support for IS, which has recouped significant strength in Iraq since the collapse of the caliphate and continues its worldwide recruitment efforts.¹²

As the above reference to the July 2005 London bombings indicates, civil wars abroad, especially when accompanied by foreign military intervention, also contribute to inspiring homegrown terrorism in the countries from which foreign fighters originate—attacks against and within the individual’s home country. Choosing to attack at home to exact punishment or obtain revenge is often a substitute for going abroad to fight.¹³

It has become more common for terrorism within Western countries to be fueled through online propaganda, leading to apparent “self-radicalization,” rather than being organized and directed by specific extremist groups.¹⁴ In 2003, the invasion and occupation of Iraq was a potent source of what could be called motivational spillover, and social psychologists have proposed that anger over Western foreign policies continues to drive radicalization and legitimize terrorist attacks in the West.¹⁵ Most plots and attacks in the United States since 9/11 fall into the category of self-directed, homegrown terrorism, including the Boston Marathon bombings in 2013, the San Bernardino shootings in 2015, and the Orlando nightclub shooting the following year.¹⁶

Though ideological or religious appeal does not by itself explain the threat of transnational terrorism or the flow of volunteers to fight in civil wars abroad, it does appear to be a necessary element. Indeed, the mobilization of sizable numbers of foreign fighters to travel to conflict zones often is organized through local social networks of like-minded individuals. Al-Qaeda records seized in Iraq showed that in 2006 and 2007 many of the volunteers from abroad belonged to tight-knit social groups and were signed up by the same recruiter.¹⁷ They might have gone to the same high school, belonged to the same sports club or gym, or shared friends and relatives. They volunteered together, not individually.

Territory, Resources, and Ideological Messaging



The material side to the interaction of civil war, terrorism, and intervention—namely, control of territory and resources—reinforces the ideological dimension and provides a powerful recruitment signal. Civil wars provide transnational terrorists an opportunity to establish bases for organizing and training, though holding territory has distinct disadvantages as well.¹⁸ War settings are also propitious for acquiring weapons, equipment, money, and recruits. When insurgents build these capacities, and especially if they use fixed bases to launch transnational campaigns, local states and foreign allies are more likely to perceive them as a serious threat, leading to government repression (in the case of relatively strong states) or third-party intervention (in the case of weak states with powerful patrons), or both. Such a response increases the propaganda value of the insurgents' cause and can be used to attract new fighters.

Whether sanctuary is critical to transnational terrorism, and, if so, whether civil wars are propitious settings, are contested questions. The utility of safe havens and the most useful locations for them depend on the context. Moreover, having a base confers both costs and benefits on violent nonstate actors.

Possessing a territorial base of operations was clearly important to the emergence of a strong threat from al-Qaeda: the organization's move to Afghanistan in 1996 was the beginning of a "golden age" for it.¹⁹ With a secure safe haven, the organization could plan without interference, build out its structure, operate extensive training camps, and implement a military

education system for recruits. Al-Qaeda was able to gain a foothold and flourish in Afghanistan because the Taliban prevailed in the civil war that followed the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. The 9/11 attacks on the United States led to an American and NATO military intervention and occupation that defeated the Taliban and drove al-Qaeda's central command into Pakistan. The Afghan state proved unable to establish either security or good government, however, thus permitting the Taliban to regroup. The United States is attempting direct talks with the Taliban in an effort to end US involvement, but a key obstacle to settling the extended conflict is uncertainty over whether the Taliban can credibly commit to not providing a base for al-Qaeda or other terrorist groups. The issue is all the more critical because the Afghan state's weakness and the growth of extremist groups in Pakistan allowed both al-Qaeda and, later, IS to operate in Afghanistan.²⁰

This case also illustrates some of the liabilities of territorial bases. One is the simple fact that the adversary has a fixed address to home in on. There are concrete targets for the adversary to attack, including training camps, weapons caches, economic resources such as oil fields, and communications facilities. The militant organization must develop a defensive strategy, though staying on the offensive is usually considered the core strategy of successful guerrilla warfare or terrorism. If control of the civilian population is involved, the practical tasks of governing can be distracting and daunting. Social services must be supplied, taxes collected, and order maintained.



Newly trained al-Shabaab fighters perform military exercises in the Lafofe area south of Mogadishu, Somalia, in February 2011. (Photo by Farah Abdi Warsameh/AP)

The risks associated with a fixed base have mounted in the era of drone warfare. Since 2002, American drone strikes have increased appreciably in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and Libya. As states expand their retaliatory capabilities, a territorial sanctuary guarantees even less safety, particularly for high-profile leaders. An illustrative case is that of Anwar Al Awlaki, the propagandist for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula who was killed in Yemen by an American drone strike in 2011. Where states are torn by civil war, considerations of sovereignty are not a strong impediment to robust transnational counterterrorism efforts. In the context of high threat perceptions, the United States has proved willing to violate sovereignty, undertaking a risky raid to kill bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan, for example. So neither a territorial base in a civil war zone nor clandestine sanctuary in a relatively strong state can be counted on to provide complete security for violent nonstate actors.

The value of holding territory also diminishes if extremist groups can function without fixed bases. An analysis of al-Shabaab's activities in Somalia, for example, found that losing territory did not slow the operational tempo of the group's terrorist attacks (though, admittedly, Somalia was in such a state of collapse that militants had extraordinary freedom of movement).²¹ Conflict has racked Somalia since the late 1980s, starting with rebellion against the military dictatorship of General Siad Barre and descending into turmoil after its collapse. Al-Shabaab emerged from this chaotic environment in 2006 as an even more radical splinter group of its parent organization, the oppositionist Islamic Courts Union (ICU), which lost control of most of its territory after Ethiopia intervened on behalf of the secular government.²² The ICU itself was torn between focusing on establishing Islamic rule in Somalia and adopting a global jihadist agenda, and al-Shabaab subsequently

became an affiliate of al-Qaeda. Al-Shabaab has since been fighting both the Somali government and the African Union—mandated peacekeeping force. It is frequently targeted by American drone strikes and raids.

But perhaps it is the existence of failed and failing states in general, not civil war per se, that permits violent challengers to establish territorial bases, and with them, to provide sanctuary for terrorist groups. Perhaps holding territory is not so much a liability as it is superfluous. Transnational terrorist networks may prefer ungoverned spaces within a fragile state to dangerously violent conditions. They may prefer to conspire quietly without attracting notice. Yet failed states contribute to both civil war and terrorism—that is, state weakness is one of the conditions for civil wars. Conversely, as the political scientist Bridget Coggins has shown, civil war may explain both state failure and terrorism. In other words, civil wars are the cause of both failed states and transnational terrorism.²³

Ideological and material considerations can reinforce each other, as the example of the self-proclaimed IS caliphate shows. As a territorial project that encompassed significant portions of both Syria and Iraq and erased the boundary between the two states, the notional caliphate drew not only unprecedented numbers of fighters from around the world but also followers who wanted to live in the utopia on Earth that IS media projected. The caliphate made IS into a powerful rival to al-Qaeda in the Salafi jihadist universe and enabled its rapid global expansion through affiliates, or *wilaya*, around the world—into Egypt and elsewhere in Africa, the Caucasus, Afghanistan, and Southeast Asia. As IS became a conventional military power, it was able to point to its achievements and thus attract more recruits.

Predictably, the assets that made IS powerful also made it vulnerable. It was the establishment of territorial control—the caliphate—that catalyzed the formation of the international coalition to defeat IS. Substantial military intervention by multiple parties, including the United

States, Russia, Iran, and Turkey, would not have occurred absent IS's battlefield victories. All were united against IS even if divided between upholding the Assad regime in Syria and supporting the nonjihadist opposition. The conflicting interests of the countries in the coalition meant that once the threat from IS appeared to recede, the prospects for establishing regional stability that would prevent its resurgence were dim.

CROSS-BORDER MOVEMENTS AID THE SURVIVAL OF MILITARILY DEFEATED EXTREMIST GROUPS

The survival of IS after the territories it controlled were finally wrested back from it in 2019 underscores the difficulty of relying on military victory to defeat jihadist ambitions and prevent terrorism.²⁴ Transnational extremist groups can survive by moving across borders. Algeria's experience is instructive.

In the 1990s, Algeria was torn apart by a destructive civil war after the electoral success of an Islamist political party that threatened the regime's hold on power. Violence broke out in 1992 when the Algerian government canceled national elections that the opposition party Islamic Salvation Front was poised to win.²⁵ By the end of the decade, Algeria had suppressed the rebellion through a mix of force and accommodation, aided by the excesses of the most radical Islamists, some of whom were veterans of jihad in Afghanistan. However, in 2006 the local Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat signed on to the global al-Qaeda franchise, renaming itself al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). It is now at the center of a movement that has spread terrorism and insurgency across the Sahel region. Algeria's problem was exported to other, more vulnerable spaces.

Regional spread was possible because of the weakness of neighboring states and the porousness of their borders, as well as the transnational reach of jihadist ideology (Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, and Côte d'Ivoire are all affected)—a subject to which

this report will return. As AQIM moved into Mali, it allied with local ethnic and separatist rebels, who had long resisted the government in Bamako. Ironically, the new coalition was able to seize control of most of northern Mali in 2013, in part because an earlier peace settlement with local rebels had reduced the central government's presence.²⁶ Regime stability had been further undermined by a military coup.

The sharp escalation of the jihadist challenge to Mali provoked military intervention by France and the United Nations. However, terrorism persisted despite serious military losses inflicted on the jihadist coalition, and cross-border activities expanded. Shortly after France intervened, a branch of AQIM attacked the In Amenas gas plant in the southern desert of Algeria, killing thirty-eight civilians, most of them foreigners. Jihadist groups have attacked foreign targets not only in Mali (for example, a hotel frequented by tourists and foreign business interests in Bamako) but also in Niger (by IS in the Greater Sahara against American troops) and Burkina Faso (against the French embassy). In response to the deterioration of the regional security situation, the European Union launched the regional G5 Sahel task force. American engagement in Africa supported these missions, but the future of the US role is now in doubt.

An additional complication is that rear bases in Libya, made possible by the Libyan civil war, have aided both al-Qaeda and IS, despite American airstrikes targeting these areas.²⁷ When pressed by French conventional forces in Mali in 2013, for example, units linked to AQIM were able to retreat across the border into Libya.

FUNDING AND WEAPONS

Weapons and money are critical resources for violent nonstate actors. Terrorism is cheap compared to other violent means, but there is still a need for money and weapons, especially if transnational terrorism and insurgency are combined strategies. Consequently, cutting off terrorist financing has been a key US counterterrorism policy objective.

Civil wars tend to release flows of small arms, ammunition, and equipment, especially if turmoil follows sudden state collapse (as in Iraq or Libya). Ample supplies of small arms from Libya fueled violence in Mali, for example. In civil war settings, third-party allies of either the government or the rebels also supply weapons, with limited control over their end use. In Syria, for example, arms destined for “democratic” rebels fell into the hands of extremist groups such as the Al-Nusra Front (which evolved later into Hayat Tahrir al-Sham).

Transnational networks can also be arms suppliers. Again, Syria is a case in point: one reason for the resilience of the jihadist groups was their fighting prowess based on experience gained in Iraq and their access to weapons supplies. Nonjihadist groups depended on them to fight Assad despite ideological quarrels.²⁸ Similar considerations drove local residents to welcome jihadists in Bosnia and Chechnya in the 1990s. In effect, fighting a civil war creates a demand for resources, which transnational jihadist networks can supply.

Funding for transnational terrorism and local insurgencies also comes from criminal activities and from exploiting local populations through various forms of extortion. In civil war settings, regulation of the illicit economy is minimal. In North Africa, kidnapping for ransom has been extremely lucrative. In 2014, *New York Times* reporter Rukmini Callimachi estimated that al-Qaeda and its affiliates had taken in \$135 million in ransom payments since 2008.²⁹ Mokhtar Belmokhtar, at one time head of AQIM's southern command and subsequently the leader of the breakaway faction that organized the deadly attack on the In Amenas gas plant, was known as “Mr. Marlboro” because of his aptitude for profitable cigarette smuggling. Narcotrafficking has advantaged jihadist and separatist rebels, as well as some of the governing elite. It fuels corruption, which discredits the state and feeds into the jihadist call to overturn illegitimate and unjust secular rule.

Transnational Extremists and Local Conflicts



The existence of global terrorist networks can transform small, local conflicts through the provision of funding, arms, and fighters. Funding for groups associated with global Salafi jihadist networks—essentially a transnational terrorist organization, with world-scale, anti-Western objectives—comes from wealthy individuals around the world, especially the Gulf region; loyalty to the organization gives access to its financial resources. The influence of ideologues and financiers from global networks can shape the identity, allegiance, and practices of local militants and rebels. Not only do transnational actors intervene in local struggles, local rebels may also reach out to global organizations for support. The mutual attraction between local rebels and transnational jihadist networks is an important factor contributing to the spread of violent extremism.³⁰ The conflicts in Chechnya and Mali aptly illustrate how well-financed transnational terrorist networks can incorporate local struggles and redefine the course and nature of the conflict.

In the beginning, in the early 1990s, the Chechen struggle was largely secessionist and nationalist. Independence was the main goal. As the Soviet Union fell apart, a republic was declared in 1991; in 1994, Russia invaded. What was at stake in the conflict then shifted from the defense of a national, Chechen identity to a defense of a Muslim identity. Accordingly, in 1996, Chechnya was declared to be an Islamic state, and foreign fighters flocked to the Caucasus.

In 1999, Chechen and foreign militants invaded Dagestan, which they considered to be part of a Caucasus emirate; that invasion in turn led to a second

Russo-Chechen war. The militants also organized heavily publicized, high-casualty terrorist attacks in Russian population centers, including Moscow in 2002 and Beslan in 2004. After the events of 9/11, Russia began to characterize the war in Chechnya as part of the global war on terrorism, claiming to be defending Chechens against al-Qaeda and global Salafi jihadism. In 2002, American troops were deployed to Georgia, which was a staging ground for Chechen rebels and foreign fighters.

Analyzing the evolution of the Chechen resistance from a nationalist to a militant Islamist orientation during the 1990s, the researcher Julie Wilhelmsen observed that “a key motivation behind adopting Political Islam and Radical Islam was clearly also that willingness to commit to these ideologies paid off in financial and human resources. . . . Money can buy ideas.”³¹ Finding themselves in a position of weakness and isolation after the brutal confrontation with Russia (which included the destruction of Chechnya’s capital city, Grozny, in 1994 and 1995), Chechen leaders reached out to actors and organizations in the Middle East and Asia for resources and fighters. By welcoming, even soliciting, global Salafi jihadist assistance, the Chechen rebels only strengthened Russian resolve to crush the rebellion.³² Russia’s victory then motivated committed Chechen fighters to migrate to other conflicts abroad (they would become an important fighting force for jihadists in the Syrian civil war), thus further contributing to the diffusion of extremism.

The conflict in Mali and its diffusion into the Sahel region provides another example of how transnational

extremist networks can redefine local conflicts stemming from separatist or ethnic grievances. The terrorist organization AQIM expanded into Mali by co-opting local actors. This move led to a sharp escalation of the conflict between the state and local tribal and ethnic groups in the north that had long suffered neglect and resisted centralized control, resulting in international intervention.³³ AQIM was at the center of the March 2017 merger of jihadist and ethnic (Tuareg and Fulani) groups into a single organization known as the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims, or Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin. Its nominal leader, Iyad Ag Ghali, is a Tuareg rebel, active since the 1980s, who has pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

IMPACT OF TRANSNATIONAL GROUPS ON LOCAL GROUPS' STRATEGIES

Another unsettled question is the extent to which transnational extremist influence extends to changing local fighters' strategies and tactics. In particular, do jihadist outsiders import the idea of suicide attacks? History suggests that ideological affinity is not a necessary condition for diffusion of the practice, which can follow the logic of expediency rather than the logic of identity and martyrdom. The tactic of suicide missions spread from Shia militants (Hezbollah in Lebanon) to nationalists (the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, or LTTE, in Sri Lanka) to Palestinians (primarily Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, but also secular groups) and to al-Qaeda, and on to IS.

Suicide attacks are regarded as effective because they tend to cause more casualties, achieve ingress to heavily defended targets, and garner more publicity. And they do more: over a decade ago, the political scientist Robert Pape proposed that suicide missions are successful in driving out foreign occupiers of a different religion, so the reason for imitation may simply be that the tactic works, especially when rebels face foreign military intervention.³⁴ In Chechnya, for example, suicide attacks became prominent only after the struggle came to be framed in Salafi jihadist terms, but radical tactics were not welcomed throughout the resistance, and suicide attacks may have been as much a response to indiscriminate Russian repression as an expression of ideological conviction.³⁵

On the other hand, for some foreign fighters, the opportunity to die as a martyr is an important motive for joining civil wars abroad.³⁶ Framing suicide attacks as meaningful symbolic acts of personal martyrdom has been important not just to jihadist propaganda but as ideological justification for attacks on civilians in other conflicts, including, quite prominently, that between Israel and Palestine. Being chosen as a suicide bomber conferred elite status within the LTTE. Thus, the value of suicide missions exceeds the utilitarian and expands into the symbolic-ideological realm.



Malian soldiers patrol the town of Diabaly, in northern Mali, in January 2013. Malian and French forces had just taken control of the town from Islamist rebels. (Photo by Marco Gualazzini/New York Times)

Do Extremists Win Civil Wars?

Civil wars usually end with the military victory of one side or a negotiated settlement and peace agreement. Typically, local governments and their outside supporters exclude the possibility of negotiating with jihadist extremists, who are regarded as untrustworthy absolutists hostile to compromise. As noted earlier, Mali negotiated only with separatist groups in reaching the 2015 peace agreement. Jihadist organizations were excluded from the process despite calls by civil society leaders to include some of them. Yet the United States has entered into negotiations with the Taliban in Afghanistan, and Algeria offered amnesty to individual Islamist rebels in the 1990s civil war through a national reconciliation process. There have recently been calls to negotiate with al-Shabaab in Somalia and Boko Haram in Nigeria.³⁷

If negotiated settlements are difficult to achieve, are extremists likely to win? Is extremist ideology an advantage? On these points, the findings are mixed. Monica Duffy Toft and Yuri Zhukov conclude that militant groups linked to transnational extremist causes and employing foreign fighters are less susceptible to government coercion because they do not depend on the local population for support and are not tied to local interests. They are indifferent to the effects of indiscriminate government repression of civilians; for them, the driver is not a battle for local hearts and minds but the purity of the global cause.³⁸ The case of Chechnya indicates that the grafting of jihadism onto local conflicts causes organizational fragmentation due to disputes over goals and strategy, when rebel cohesion is important to winning. But Aisha Ahmad argues that transnational extremists are less prone to

Veterans from either winning or losing conflicts also may move on to other wars: the winners in Afghanistan went to Chechnya and the losers in Chechnya went to Syria.

factionalism than local groups, which are commonly fractured by parochial interests, commitments, and allegiances.³⁹ On the other hand, Mohammed Hafez terms jihadists “fratricidal” militants who lose civil wars because of their rigid and intolerant views and propensity for killing civilians, especially fellow Muslims condemned as apostate. They alienate supporters as a consequence.⁴⁰ Pointing to jihadist losses in civil wars in Algeria, Iraq, and Syria, Hafez disagrees with Barbara Walter, who contends that extremists have an advantage over moderates in civil wars.⁴¹ She approaches the choice of ideology as a strategic decision, thus aligning herself with the view that local groups might sign on to global jihad for reasons of expediency. She concludes that because jihadists are more effective fighters and better able to assure followers that they will not be corrupt once in power, they are able to attract moderate as well as extremist support. People want to be on the winning side regardless of ideology. Yet Page Fortna reports that in general, groups that use terrorism in the course of fighting civil wars do not win.⁴²

Are foreign fighters, who typically have adopted an extremist ideology, an asset or a liability on the battlefield for civil war rebels?⁴³ Again, the answer is not straightforward.⁴⁴ On the basis of interviews with foreign fighters in the Al-Nusra Front and IS in Syria, Vera Mironova summarizes their assets as possessing knowledge (including language and technical skills) and experience, having access to funds, being dedicated and loyal to the cause (at a minimum, they are unlikely to defect because they have nowhere to go), and propaganda value.⁴⁵ Foreign fighters are most often the executioners in beheading videos, and local populations fear them in part because language barriers make it impossible to communicate (most foreign fighters do not speak Arabic). On the negative side, the language barrier is also an obstacle to combat effectiveness. Foreign fighters’ backgrounds are hard

to screen, so they are often suspected of being spies. They may segregate themselves according to ethnic or national background, Uzbeks with Uzbeks, Tajiks with Tajiks, thus undermining unit cohesion. This compartmentalization also makes it hard for their superiors to control them and maintain discipline. They are less risk averse than local fighters, leading to disputes over strategy. In particular, foreign fighters are more likely to refuse even tactical compromise and to insist on fighting to the end. Thus, if jihadists are unlikely to win a war, the presence of foreign fighters might make civil wars longer and more intractable.⁴⁶

The consequences of who wins extend beyond the short-term outcome of the war. Some scholars have argued that jihadists on the winning side turn to transnational attacks at home (as in the attacks in Paris in 2015), but defeated foreign fighters do not, largely because few are left.⁴⁷ The proposition is that rebel victory produces an excess of foreign fighters who want to continue the struggle. The return of foreign fighters to their home countries is a pressing international concern since the numbers are high, governments disagree as to a policy solution, and many countries are at risk. Veterans from either winning or losing conflicts also may move on to other wars: the winners in Afghanistan went to Chechnya and the losers in Chechnya went to Syria. Veterans are experienced at handling weapons and explosives and are persuasive recruiters; their expertise and authentic presentation are valued. If not exactly mercenaries, they are mobile, and can move from conflict to conflict as long as there are civil wars to fight in. There is no shortage of destinations, including Libya, Yemen, Somalia, Mali and the Sahel, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, the Philippines, Myanmar, South Sudan, and Sudan.

Third-Party Interventions and Transnational Terrorism

Most analysts agree that third-party intervention to restore order increases the risk of terrorism in the aggregate, particularly suicide attacks, although accounts typically ascribe different reasons or causal mechanisms.⁴⁸ Researchers do not always distinguish between suicide attacks within the war zone (for example, against foreign occupying armies, since there is some evidence that hardening targets increases the number of suicide attacks in-theater) and transnational attacks outside the zone. In general, foreign occupation of Muslim lands gives extremists a powerful propaganda tool. Some studies find that only specific types of intervention are associated with postintervention terrorism—namely, those that are “political-strategic” in the sense of favoring one side or the other in a local conflict, aiming to replace an incumbent regime, or acquiring territory. Humanitarian interventions have not been found to trigger the same adverse reactions.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, peacekeepers and humanitarian organizations are often targeted by extremists in the civil war battlefield space. The United Nations in particular is regarded as a tool of the West: jihadist groups struck UN headquarters in Baghdad in 2003 and Algiers in 2007.⁵⁰

Out-of-theater terrorist retaliatory attacks against third parties intervening to restore order or to support an incumbent government are commonplace. For example, al-Shabaab has struck civilian targets to deadly effect in both Uganda and Kenya as retribution for military deployments in Somalia undertaken by the African Union peacekeeping force. The 2015 attack on a college in Garissa, Kenya (142 students killed), the 2013 attack on the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi, and the 2010

suicide bombing of a crowd watching the World Cup finals in Kampala, Uganda, are but three examples. The 2004 commuter train bombings in Madrid (191 killed), carried out by Islamic militants based in Spain in retaliation for the country’s support for the US invasion of Iraq, were inspired by al-Qaeda. The list is long.

In addressing this question, it should be recalled that transnational terrorism can also trigger military intervention. The war on terrorism that followed the 9/11 attacks is the most consequential example, but an earlier instance is the Reagan administration’s strike against Libya in 1986 in retaliation for a bombing in Germany.

WHEN TERRORISM FOLLOWS THIRD-PARTY INTERVENTION

When terrorism does follow intervention, what are its effects? Some scholars find that campaigns of terrorism undermine third-party resolve to stay the course in a civil war.⁵¹ Terrorism carried out against democracies seems especially likely to shake resolve.⁵² On the other hand, states might calculate that staying the course in the face of terrorist attacks helps build a reputation for resolve that may be useful in future conflicts. Rather than conceding, targeted states subscribing to this belief would then have an incentive to strike back, leading to a provocation-retaliation spiral. But even if terrorism does not successfully coerce third-party states into withdrawing from foreign interventions (since their participation may result from foreign policy commitments), nonstate actors may still believe that terrorism works, and act on that assumption.



The bombing of the US Marine barracks by Hezbollah militants was widely believed to have caused the United States to withdraw US peacekeepers from Lebanon in 1983. (Photo by Bill Foley/AP)

The history of Lebanon is relevant to understanding this dilemma. The Lebanese civil war, beginning in 1975, apparently played a role in Osama bin Laden's thinking, as he later claimed that the vision of destroying the World Trade Center towers came to him when he viewed scenes of the destruction of Beirut by Israel—a disaster that America allowed and the world ignored.⁵³ In addition, Hezbollah's record is often cited as a case of successful terrorism in that it drove the United States out. The consensus has long been that the Reagan administration withdrew American peacekeepers from the multilateral effort to resolve the Lebanese civil war because of the bombing of the US Marine barracks in 1983—one of the first suicide attacks and among the most lethal, killing 241 service members. Recently declassified archives provide grounds to contest that interpretation, however.⁵⁴ Rather than changing course, administration officials who advocated intervention from

the beginning doubled down on their support as a result of the high casualty toll, while opponents of intervention similarly deepened their initial conviction that intervening was a mistake. In fact, it was the collapse of the Lebanese National Army in early 1984 that led to the withdrawal of American peacekeeping forces.

A related question is also the subject of debate. Why did the United States not retaliate for the 1983 bombing? On the twenty-fifth anniversary of the bombing, Robert C. McFarlane, President Reagan's national security adviser, wrote that although the president approved a joint French-American air strike against Hezbollah bases, the secretary of defense aborted the mission.⁵⁵ McFarlane regarded the withdrawal of the Marines as a tragic and costly policy defeat that emboldened al-Qaeda, whose leaders learned the lesson that terrorism will not be punished and that it works.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The threat of transnational terrorism emanating from organizations such as IS and al-Qaeda cannot be managed without taking into consideration terrorism's connections to civil war and military intervention. The United States must be concerned with turmoil in the rest of the world, even if national goals no longer include spreading democratic values or exercising global leadership.

Seeing the problem comprehensively requires adopting a long-term time horizon as well as considerable patience. A strategy should be developed in advance, based on an integrated framework, rather than as a reaction to immediate crises. Recognizing the conditions under which threats emerge allows governments to take defensive and mitigating measures before a crisis arises that demands (or seems to demand) military intervention.

The immediate terrorist threat may be a manifestation of deeply rooted conflicts that are triggered in the aftermath of military interventions. Employing force has its immediate advantages, but such a response risks prolonging rather than mitigating conflict as its consequences play out over time. Military force can destroy a terrorist base, remove key leaders, and disrupt operations in the short term, but it may increase local instability and motivate transnational terrorist attacks in the longer term. An added complication is that when foreign intervention intended to retaliate for terrorism or defend a threatened government precipitates more terrorism and internal disorder, the third party finds it hard to withdraw from its commitment because the local partner cannot provide security. IS is already regrouping in Syria and Iraq following the abrupt withdrawal of US troops in October 2019.⁵⁶ The curtailment of stabilization aid and humanitarian assistance accelerates the chaotic effects of a power vacuum. US

forces are already finding it imperative to strike IS targets in Iraq, and American troops have been deployed in Afghanistan since 2001.

These insights provide the basis for several recommendations to outside powers concerned about instability in critical parts of the world, as well as their own vulnerability to transnational terrorism. The term traditionally used for such countries to a foreign conflict that pitted a local government against insurgents or rebels was “third party,” but since the 1990s third parties that assist local partners are no longer safe, as civil war rebels and transnational terrorists are increasingly the same groups. The first line of defense is prevention—but if prevention fails, coercive responses have to be considered. There must also be advance planning for postconflict stabilization and political settlement in order to prevent recurrence.

Work through partners. In most cases, third parties work through local partner governments to promote security and order. In weak states challenged by violent nonstate actors, preventive efforts mounted by foreign allies must go beyond military capacity building and providing advice on security sector reform to include promoting legitimate, accountable, and effective government institutions. The military defeat of an organization like IS will be short-lived if the conditions that produced its victories are not addressed. If poor governance is the cause of both civil war and violent extremism, or at least a permissive factor, then reducing inefficiency and corruption and increasing the state's responsiveness to citizens should be central policy goals. In the Sahel, for example, it is by no means certain that current security assistance programs can build strong partner states capable of dealing with local discontent and preventing the cross-border spread of ideological extremism.⁵⁷

Engage in comprehensive and coordinated long-term planning. For concerned outside powers, such as the United States, wishing to mitigate or contain the development of violence and terrorism in distant regions, an appropriate response will almost certainly require different policy tools to be integrated across multiple government agencies, which requires the development of a comprehensive long-term strategy. Thus, effective third-party counterterrorism efforts are likely to involve a combination of homeland defense activities, strategic communication, the provision of security assistance to local partners, development assistance, postconflict stabilization efforts, and humanitarian aid. Such a coordinated effort must be largely civilian-led and based on the development of expertise about the local context. The conflicts that come to concern outside powers are highly complex, and there is no substitute for deep knowledge and familiarity with local conditions.

Coordinating the use of policy tools across agencies is difficult, but a multifaceted, well-thought-out response is imperative. Political pushback at home against engagement is to be expected, especially as demonstrating policy effectiveness in the short term will be difficult. Modest initiatives might seem much less compelling to a legislature or electorate than military responses, but smaller, more subtle measures could produce better results than a more dramatic deployment of force or the imposition of sanctions.⁵⁸

Use military force as a last resort. The direct application of military force by outside armies in the service of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency efforts should be a last resort, and the circumstances under which it would be deployed should be defined well in advance of crisis. In fact, large-scale interventions involving large numbers of ground troops are rare, but the use of air power and special forces around the world has become increasingly common. Reliance on air power, especially drones, has led to a proliferation of American military bases, thus making the American presence highly visible and demonstrating the dependence of

the partner state on foreign support. The issue of the effectiveness of drone strikes is especially contentious. Making the process by which targets are selected more transparent would be a step toward greater accountability and legitimacy. It is also imperative to avoid civilian casualties, not only because of their possible effects on host country public opinion but also to maintain domestic public support.

Include all relevant groups in negotiations to end the conflict. Jihadist groups may rarely be capable of winning a decisive victory in a civil war. But they can keep fighting long enough and hard enough to sustain a stalemate that becomes intolerably costly, especially if it prevents a third party from withdrawing from an unpopular military commitment that increases the risk of being targeted by terrorist attacks at home. Negotiating with extremists may therefore be a viable option for conflict resolution but must be carefully tailored to the situation, based on extensive local knowledge, with due consideration of which parties should be at the negotiating table.

Mali's experience suggests a bilateral model, at least formally, arranged between the local government and its challengers. However, excluding the jihadist-linked factions made the settlement less effective. Another model, derived from Afghanistan, is a bilateral-trilateral mix, with the third party negotiating with the challenger in the first stage, in the hope that the second stage may involve direct talks between the local government and opposition forces. In practice, the distinction between bilateral and trilateral talks is blurred: France exerts substantial influence over Mali and objected to including groups linked to al-Qaeda in the negotiations.

The settlement of Algeria's civil war in the 2000s presents an alternative bilateral model, in which military defeat was combined with reconciliation measures, particularly amnesties for individual fighters rather than bargaining with the opposition as a collective entity. The granting of amnesty can be tailored to the



Following attacks by Boko Haram beginning in 2015, more than 130,000 people attempted to flee the violence along Nigeria's National Route 1 road. (Photo by Adam Ferguson/New York Times)

seriousness of the crimes an individual has committed. However, ending the war in Algeria did not prevent regional spillover or shield Algeria from occasional, highly destructive terrorist attacks launched from across the border. The conflict spread to Algeria's neighbors. The outcome in Algeria suggests that in negotiating a possible solution for Afghanistan, it is essential to consider the regional context, especially since Pakistan's position is critical to resolving the conflict. Pakistan has been a major ally of the Taliban since its inception and regards any settlement in Afghanistan as vital to its security interests. In addition, it is not clear that the US government has planned for a contingency in which

the Taliban continue to refuse to talk to an increasingly weak Afghan government. This uncertainty about future power sharing points to the need for a comprehensive long-term strategy based on a framework that links civil war, transnational terrorism, and military intervention.

Still, there are limits to what can be done to reduce the risk of transnational terrorism. Only slow, incremental progress toward this goal can be expected. Governments should neither exaggerate the threat nor overpromise results. Some strategic goals are too ambitious to be achievable, and the quick eradication of violent jihadism worldwide is one of them.

Notes

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2. Anne-Marie Slaughter and Asha C. Castleberry, "ISIS Regroup and Move Frontier of War to the Digital Realm," *Irish Examiner*, September 30, 2019, www.irishexaminer.com/breakingnews/views/analysis/isis-regroup-and-move-frontier-of-war-to-the-digital-realm-953761.html.
3. Linda Robinson et al., *Modern Political Warfare: Current Practices and Possible Responses* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corp., 2018). The report compares the capabilities of Russia, Iran, and the Islamic State (IS).
4. Although I disagree with Stewart Patrick's observation that war-torn states are not hospitable environments for transnational terrorist networks, I agree that the most important benefits they confer are probably symbolic. See Stewart Patrick, "Civil Wars & Transnational Threats: Mapping the Terrain, Assessing the Links," *Daedalus* 146, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 45–58.
5. Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty, "Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31, no. 5 (2008): 417.
6. Bruce Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden* (London: Verso, 2005), 136.
7. Robinson et al., *Modern Political Warfare*, 204.
8. Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security* 35, no. 3 (Winter 2010/11): 53–94.
9. Laurence Bindner. "Jihadists' Grievance Narratives against France," ICCT Policy Brief, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, February 23, 2018, www.icct.nl/publication/jihadists-grievance-narratives-against-france.
10. Faisal Devji, "Media and Martyrdom," chap. 4 in *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).
11. The number of veterans from Syria involved in terrorist attacks outside the region is certainly a small minority of returned foreign fighters (see United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, "The Challenge of Returning and Relocating Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Research Perspectives," March 2018, www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/CTED-Trends-Report-March-2018.pdf). They have not posed a threat to US domestic security. However, in May 2019, Indonesian authorities foiled a bomb plot and arrested seven IS sympathizers who had been in Syria (Hannah Beech and Muklita Suhartono, "Indonesia Says It Foiled Plot to Detonate Bombs via Wi-Fi," *New York Times*, May 17, 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/05/17/world/asia/indonesia-bomb-plot-wifi.html).
12. Michael Weiss, "ISIS: Resilient, Adaptable, Decentralized," *New York Review of Books*, May 16, 2019, www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/05/16/isis-resilient-adaptable-decentralized.
13. Thomas Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting," *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 1 (2013): 1–15.
14. See Petter Nesser, "Jihadism in Western Europe after the Invasion of Iraq: Tracing Motivational Influences from the Iraq War on Jihadist Terrorism in Western Europe," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29 (2006): 323–42.
15. Clark McCauley, "Explaining Homegrown Western Jihadists: The Importance of Western Foreign Policy," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 12 (2018). My own discussions with young activists in Europe confirm this view.
16. Martha Crenshaw and Gary LaFree, *Countering Terrorism* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2017).
17. Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, "Al Qaeda's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records," Harmony Project, Combating Terrorism Center, United States Military Academy, January 2, 2007, <https://ctc.usma.edu/al-qaidas-foreign-fighters-in-iraq-a-first-look-at-the-sinjar-records>, 2007. The report's summary notes that "many of the foreign fighters entering Iraq arrived with a group from their hometown, suggesting that al-Qa'ida's recruiters try to attract groups of friends simultaneously."
18. See Victor Asal, Luis de la Calle, Michael Findley, and Joseph Young, "Killing Civilians or Holding Territory? How to Think about Terrorism," *International Studies Review* 14, no. 3 (2012): 475–97.
19. Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 108–9.

20. For example, the Pakistani Taliban was responsible for directing the 2010 unsuccessful attempt to detonate a bomb in Times Square and for the 2009 attack on a CIA outpost in Khost, Afghanistan, which killed seven people.
21. James L. Regens, Nick Mould, Christopher M. Sartorius, and Jonathan O'Dell, "Effect of Foreign Military Intervention and Controlled Territory on the Operational Tempo of al-Shabaab Attacks," *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 9, nos. 1–3 (2016): 95–107.
22. See the detailed profile of Al-Shabaab on the Stanford University Center for International Security and Cooperation's Mapping Militants Project website: "Al Shabaab," mappingmilitants.cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/profiles/al-shabaab.
23. Bridget L. Coggins, "Does State Failure Cause Terrorism? An Empirical Analysis (1999–2008)," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 3 (2015): 460.
24. Iraqi forces retook Falluja in 2016. Both Mosul and the capital of the caliphate, Raqqa, fell in 2017, and IS's final stronghold in Baghuz collapsed in early 2019.
25. Recent mass protests against the Algerian regime, dominated since independence in 1962 by the military and entrenched economic elites, have reminded observers of the painful consequences of stifling peaceful dissent in 1992.
26. Alex Thurston, "Political Settlements with Jihadists in Algeria and the Sahel," West African Papers no. 18, OECD, October 2018, www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/0780622a-en.pdf.
27. The first American attack against al-Qaeda occurred in March 2018. Declan Walsh and Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Strikes Qaeda Target in Southern Libya, Expanding Shadow War There," *New York Times*, March 25, 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/03/25/world/middleeast/us-bombs-qaeda-libya.html. See also Eric Schmitt, "Under Trump, U.S. Launched 8 Airstrikes against ISIS in Libya. It Disclosed 4," *New York Times*, March 8, 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/03/08/world/africa/us-airstrikes-isis-libya.html.
28. Charles R. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (London: Hurst, 2015).
29. Rukmini Callimachi, "Paying Ransoms, Europe Bankrolls Qaeda Terror," *New York Times*, July 29, 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/07/30/world/africa/ransoming-citizens-europe-becomes-al-qaedas-patron.html.
30. See the Stanford University Mapping Militants Project's combined organizational charts/timelines outlining the evolution of al-Qaeda and IS affiliates (<https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/content/mapping-militants>).
31. Julie Wilhelmsen, "When Separatists Become Islamists: The Case of Chechnya," FFI/Rapport-2004/00445, Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, February 2004, 25, <http://rapporter.ffi.no/rapporter/2004/00445.pdf>. Wilhelmsen also concludes that the conflict in Chechnya was one of the factors that drove Russia and the West apart and blocked the adoption of democratic norms and procedures in Russia, as security concerns became paramount.
32. Global Islamism also divided the rebels, as some leaders continued to oppose the introduction of extreme jihadism, wanting only independence from Russia and preferring more moderate versions of Islam.
33. Jean-Pierre Filiu, "The Local and Global Jihad of Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib," *Middle East Journal* 63, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 213–26. See also Christopher S. Chivvis and Andrew Liepman, *North Africa's Menace: AQIM's Evolution and the U.S. Policy Response* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2013).
34. Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005).
35. Kristin M. Bakke, "Help Wanted? The Mixed Record of Foreign Fighters in Domestic Insurgencies," *International Security* 38, no. 4 (Spring 2014): 150–87. Bakke distinguishes clearly between the effects of transnational networks on framing and on tactics.
36. In 2007, over half of the foreign volunteers entering Iraq sought suicide missions, whereas by 2013–14 only 12 percent of the more than four thousand volunteers whose records were made available to the press selected martyrdom operations as opposed to simply fighting or contributing. See Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler, "The Caliphate's Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Foreign Fighter Paper Trail," Combating Terrorism Center, United States Military Academy, April 2016, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/1013551.pdf>. The records were made available by NBC News. This detail demonstrates the importance of the existence of the territorial caliphate in determining the choices of volunteers from abroad.
37. For example, see Akinola Olojo, "Time to Consider Negotiating with al-Shabaab in Somalia?," Institute for Security Studies, June 2019, www.issafrica.org/iss-today/time-to-consider-negotiating-with-al-shabaab-in-somalia; Jacob Zenn, "Confronting Jihadist Factions in Nigeria: An Antidote to Defeatism," *War on the Rocks*, July 17, 2019 www.warontherocks.com/2019/07/confronting-jihadist-factions-in-nigeria-an-antidote-to-defeatism. Also see Alex Thurston's 2018 analysis of past negotiation efforts in the Sahel region ("Political Settlements with Jihadists").
38. Monica D. Toft and Yuri M. Zhukov, "Islamists and Nationalists: Rebel Motivation and Counterinsurgency in Russia's North Caucasus," *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 2 (2015): 222–38.
39. Aisha Ahmad, "Going Global: Islamist Competition in Contemporary Civil Wars," *Security Studies* 25, no. 2 (2016): 353–84.
40. Mohammed Hafez, "Fratricidal Jihadists: Why Islamists Keep Losing Their Civil Wars," *Middle East Policy* 25, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 86–99.

41. Barbara F. Walter, "The Extremist's Advantage in Civil Wars," *International Security* 42, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 7–39.
42. Page Fortna, "Do Terrorists Win? Rebels' Use of Terrorism and Civil War Outcomes," *International Organization* 69 (2015): 519–56.
43. Bakke, "Help Wanted?"; Ben Rich and Dara Conduit, "The Impact of *Jihadist* Foreign Fighters on Indigenous Secular-Nationalist Causes: Contrasting Chechnya and Syria," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 2 (2014): 113–31.
44. As Bakke ("Help Wanted?") and Rich and Conduit ("The Impact of *Jihadist* Foreign Fighters") note with regard to Chechnya.
45. Vera Mironova, *From Freedom Fighters to Jihadists: Human Resources of Non-State Armed Groups* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).
46. Stathis N. Kalyvas, "Jihadi Rebels in Civil War," *Daedalus* 146, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 36–47.
47. Alex Braithwaite and Tiffany S. Chu, "Civil Conflicts Abroad, Foreign Fighters, and Terrorism at Home," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62, no. 8 (2018): 1636–60. Their statistical analysis covers the period 1970–2006, so it does not account for the rise of IS and civil war in Syria.
48. For example, see Seung-Whan Choi and James A. Piazza, "Foreign Military Interventions and Suicide Attacks," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61, no. 2 (2017): 271–97; Simon Collard-Wexler, Costantino Pischedda, and Michael Smith, "Do Foreign Occupations Cause Suicide Attacks?" *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 58, no. 4 (2014): 625–57.
49. James A. Piazza and Seung-Whan Choi, "International Military Interventions and Transnational Terrorist Backlash: Research Note," *International Studies Quarterly* 62 (2018): 686–95.
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Transnational terrorism poses a threat to all countries but is of immediate concern to the United States and its key security partners. Recognizing the conditions under which extremist threats emerge will allow governments to take defensive and mitigating measures before a crisis takes shape. Based on an extensive review of the recent literature, this report argues that mounting an appropriate response to transnational terrorism will first require an understanding of the complex interlinkages among civil war, transnational terrorism, and weak governance. Conflicts in Mali, Chechnya, Syria, and other fragile states disrupted by civil war and facing actions from global terrorist networks suggest the different ways in which these factors may interact and the different paths to a solution.

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