



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

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FEATURE ARTICLE

The al-Mawla Files

DANIEL MILTON AND MUHAMMAD AL-`UBAYDI

WITH FURTHER INSIGHTS FROM COLE BUNZEL,
HARORO INGRAM, GINA LIGON, AND CRAIG WHITESIDE

FEATURE COMMENTARY

The Future Role of the U.S. Armed Forces in Counterterrorism

BRIAN MICHAEL JENKINS

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FROM THE EDITOR

In the September issue, it is revealed for the first time that the Islamic State's new leader, publicly identified by the U.S. government as Amir Muhammad Sa'id 'Abd-al-Rahman al-Mawla, was detained by U.S. forces in Iraq in 2008 and interrogated. The Combating Terrorism Center has made available on its website three of his declassified interrogation reports, and these are analyzed in a feature article by Daniel Milton and Muhammad al-`Ubaydi, who caution that claims made by al-Mawla while in custody are very difficult to verify. Based on their assessment of the three documents and their research, they conclude that "key assumptions about al-Mawla, notably his Turkmen ethnicity and early involvement in the insurgency in Iraq, may not be accurate. Moreover, statements made by al-Mawla, while doubtless trying to minimize his own commitment to ISI [the Islamic State of Iraq], suggest that his commitment may have been borne less of zeal than of serendipity. If true, this would suggest that something certainly changed in al-Mawla, as his later reputation suggests someone who ruthlessly pursued his ideology, even to carrying out genocide against its enemies. The TIRs [tactical interrogation reports] also show that al-Mawla, who, according to the timeline that he himself provided, appears to have quickly risen in the organization's ranks in part because of his religious training, knew much about ISI and was willing to divulge many of these details during his interrogation, potentially implicating and resulting in the death of at least one high-ranking ISI figure." The Combating Terrorism Center convened a panel of leading scholars and analysts to further discuss the three documents. Cole Bunzel, Haroro Ingram, Gina Ligon, and Craig Whiteside provided their takeaways, including on whether the revelations may hurt al-Mawla's standing within the group.

In the other cover article, Brian Michael Jenkins considers the future role of the U.S. armed forces in counterterrorism, in a sweeping examination of the changing strategic, budgetary and threat environment. He writes: "Dividing the military into near-peer warfare and counterterrorism camps makes little sense. Future wars will require U.S. commanders to orchestrate capabilities to counter an array of conventional and unconventional modes of conflict, including terrorism." Finally, as the global civil war between the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida intensifies, Mohammed Hafez outlines how a recent 'documentary' released by the Islamic State's Yemeni branch has made clearer than ever before the areas of disagreement between the groups.

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The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not of the U.S. Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or any other agency of the U.S. Government.

Cover: A stylized image of Amir Muhammad Sa'id 'Abd-al-Rahman al-Mawla, who according to the U.S. government is the current leader of the Islamic State. The original version of this photograph was included in Tactical Interrogation Reports of al-Mawla.

Stepping Out from the Shadows: The Interrogation of the Islamic State's Future Caliph

By Daniel Milton and Muhammad al-`Ubaydi

In October 2019, the Islamic State announced its new leader as Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Qurashi. The U.S. government has publicly designated and named this individual as Amir Muhammad Sa'id 'Abd-al-Rahman al-Mawla. Although a few details have emerged about al-Mawla, very little is known about his history and involvement in the Iraqi insurgency. Using three declassified interrogation reports from early 2008, when al-Mawla was detained by U.S. military forces in Iraq, this article provides more insights into his early background. This examination shows that some of the current assumptions about al-Mawla are on tenuous ground, but also provides a unique window into what al-Mawla revealed about his fellow fighters during his time in custody.

Leadership transitions in any organization can produce uncertainty and invite speculation regarding the organization's future trajectory. This dynamic is especially the case in clandestine terrorist organizations, in which the desire to publicize continuity of purpose and the qualifications of the incoming leader must be balanced with the need to maintain secrecy. For the group known as the Islamic State, this balancing act was of the utmost importance given the fact that on October 26, 2019, the group's previous leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had been killed in a raid by U.S. military forces and the overall organization was merely a shadow of what it had been during the organization's highwater mark in the summer of 2015.

Thus, when the group announced the appointment of Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Qurashi as "commander of the believers and

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The authors thank Audrey Alexander, Meghan Cumpston, Paul Cruickshank, Brian Dodwell, Kristina Hummel, Damon Mehl, Don Ressler, and a group of anonymous others for their help in bringing this article to fruition.

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caliph of the Muslims" on October 31, 2019, it had to anticipate that its new leader would be under intense scrutiny and face a series of daunting challenges in an organization that, while still maintaining the capability to carry out serious operations, was also consistently being targeted by hostile forces, both from the outside but also from the inside as well.¹ The Islamic State did not have to wait long to see the criticism come to fruition. Merely a few days following the announcement of al-Qurashi's appointment as leader of the Islamic State, essays critical of the new leader began to circulate online among verified channels of Islamic State supporters. Among other critiques, these essays attacked the relative anonymity of al-Qurashi, referring to him as the "secluded paper caliph" and "an unknown nobody."² Such critiques were deflected by other Islamic State supporters, who argued that more knowledge of al-Qurashi was neither necessary from a legal perspective nor advisable from a security one.³

This lack of information from the group, which it had previously given prior to al-Baghdadi's elevation, led to questions regarding who was actually at the head of the organization.⁴ As a result, although several sources commented on different possibilities, confirmation from the U.S. government was not immediately forthcoming.^{4 b} Then, on March 17, 2020, the U.S. government issued its perspective on the issue when it designated an individual by the name of Amir Muhammad Sa'id 'Abd-al-Rahman al-Mawla⁵ as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist, indicating that he has "succeeded [al-Baghdadi] to become the leader of ISIS."⁵ Al-Mawla had

- a Indeed, the release of a biography of al-Mawla's predecessor, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, more than a year before he claimed the mantle of the caliph, sought to outline al-Baghdadi's credentials in a way to strengthen his hold on the movement. Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter, *The ISIS Reader: Milestone Texts of the Islamic State Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020): p. 173.
- b In a report made public in January 2020, the United Nations did offer that several states believed that al-Mawla was the likely successor, although they cautioned that the information had not yet been confirmed. "Twenty-fifth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities," United Nations, December 27, 2019; Paul Cruickshank, "UN report warns ISIS is reasserting under new leader believed to be behind Yazidi genocide," CNN, January 29, 2020.
- c This article relies on al-Mawla full name as stated in both the U.S. designation announcement and the relevant field from the TIRs. However, it is important to note that in TIR B, the name of his tribe is listed as al-Slibi, not al-Mawla. This is discussed later in the article. Additionally, when describing his own picture in TIR B (Photo #1), he appears to omit the name "Amir." Because these are typed summaries of the session, it is hard to say whether this was a deliberate or accidental omission on his part, or whether the transcriber of the session made a mistake. In TIR C, which appears to be a more carefully transcribed confession of sorts, he does use the name "Amir." "Terrorist Designation of ISIS Leader Amir Muhammad Sa'id Abdal-Rahman al-Mawla," U.S. Department of State Office of the Spokesperson, March 17, 2020.



*Amir Muhammad Sa'id Abdal-Rahman al-Mawla
(Rewards for Justice)*

been one of the individuals previously tagged as a possible successor, although at least one insider suggested he was “lower in rank in the administration as well as finance and military leadership.”⁶

Operating under the assumption that al-Qurashi is al-Mawla, which the authors are highly confident he is, the purpose of this article is to introduce documents that offer a unique vantage point on the contentious issue of the history of the presumed leader of the Islamic State. The source of this distinct perspective is a small sample of typed summaries of al-Mawla’s own words while being detained and interrogated by U.S. military forces in 2008. These three summaries, known as Tactical Interrogation Reports (TIRs), provide an inside look at how al-Mawla framed his own experience in joining and participating in the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). The TIRs present a view of al-Mawla as a religious scholar^d who also demonstrated political savvy, which during the course of his interrogation appears to have included a willingness to adjust to changing circumstances, even if that required providing information about his jihadi colleagues. This article, together with the accompanying discussion in this issue featuring analysis by a group of scholars regarding these TIRs,⁷ forms an important lens through which scholars, policymakers, and practitioners can understand al-Mawla’s personality and background.

In what follows, the authors offer brief contextual comments regarding the documents that form the basis for the subsequent analysis. Because of the unique nature of these documents, which are being released by the Combating Terrorism Center,⁸ this context

is critical to understanding what they can and cannot reveal. Following this discussion, the article examines the content of the TIRs by focusing on what they reveal about al-Mawla’s own biography and what they reveal regarding his willingness to speak about his colleagues in ISI. Finally, the article concludes by discussing the importance of continued research and release of similar materials for our understanding of militant groups.

What Are Tactical Interrogation Reports?

Tactical Interrogation Reports (TIRs) are part of the paper trail the U.S. military creates when alleged enemy combatants are detained and interrogated in the course of military operations. TIRs seek to document the information that emerges during an interrogation, detailing everything from biographical information about the detainee to notes on their position within a network, and knowledge about their organization’s members and capabilities. In real time, TIRs can help inform intelligence by revealing new information, corroborating other sources, or highlighting inconsistencies among different accounts.

TIRs can be useful for the reasons detailed above, but since they are part of the detention and interrogation process in Iraq, it is vital to note some important considerations. First, the timing and conditions of TIRs matter because they pertain to when, how, and where a detainee is debriefed.^e Second, these factors can shape the outcome of the interrogation and thus, the content documented in the TIRs. Third, because of how TIRs are produced,^f what appears in the TIR should not be seen as a verbatim quote of what the detainee said, but rather as the gist of a conversation where the goal was to preserve the substance of the dialogue, but not necessarily the specific verbiage. Due to the importance of these considerations, the authors will describe the timing and conditions of al-Mawla’s

e Upon capture, detainees were generally held in local, smaller detention facilities (referred to as Temporary Holding Facilities or THF) until they could be transferred to larger facilities where most of the detainees were held (Theater Internment Facilities or TIF). In some cases, detainees might be interrogated for as long as 14 days before they had to be transferred to a TIF. After their initial screening at the TIF to determine their potential intelligence value, detainees determined to have potentially useful information would be taken into interrogation rooms by personnel from the Joint Intelligence and Debriefing Center (JIDC) and questioned regarding their own background, as well as their knowledge of militant activities and organizations. Robert M. Chesney, “Iraq and the Military Detention Debate: Firsthand Perspectives from the Other War, 2003-2010,” *Virginia Journal of International Law* 51:3 (2011): pp. 549-636. The THF sometimes consisted of multiple different facilities, known as brigade internment facilities (BIF) and division internment facilities (DIF). W. James Annestad, “The Detention and Prosecution of Insurgents and Other Non-Traditional Combatants: A Look at the Task Force 134 Process and the Future of Detainee Prosecutions,” *Army Lawyer* 72 (2007): pp. 72-81; Brian J. Bill, “Detention Operations in Iraq: A View from the Ground,” *International Law Studies* 86 (2010): pp. 411-455.

f Whether these sessions took place at a THF or TIF, interrogators would typically speak through an interpreter, who would relay questions and then convey the detainee’s answers to the interrogator. After a session was complete, a paraphrased summary of the interrogation was written up into a document known as a TIR. Although the format of TIRs may differ slightly from one detainee to the next or from one time period to the next, they each tend to contain the same types of demographic and contextual information: the detainee’s name, when the interrogation session took place, basic information regarding when the detainee was captured, the detainee’s family status, work experience, and basic biographical information. Chesney; Bill.

d The U.S. government has publicly stated that al-Mawla “was a religious scholar in ISIS’s predecessor organization.” “Amir Muhammad Sa'id Abdal-Rahman al-Mawla: Up to \$5 Million Reward,” Rewards for Justice, August 21, 2019.

TIRs, and will speak to how such factors might shape interpretation and analysis of the documents.

This article is based on an analysis of a small sample of three TIRs created during al-Mawla's interrogation when he was detained by U.S. military forces in Iraq. It is extremely important for readers to note that this article uses only three TIRs, whereas the total number of TIRs composed for al-Mawla is approximately 66.⁹ Using such a small number of documents is not optimal. However, in deciding to write this article using only three TIRs, the authors had to strike a delicate balance. The authors did not control, or play a role in, the process whereby these TIRs were selected. These documents were provided to the CTC so they could be studied and shared.

Although the authors believe that having all the TIRs available is the best approach and continue to advocate that the rest of the TIRs be released, ultimately the authors elected to continue with the analysis, recognizing that there are more TIRs that will hopefully come out and allow for additional analysis.⁸ Thus, any conclusions here are preliminary in nature and should be interpreted in that light. The three TIRs, referred to with capital letters for purposes of this article, are briefly summarized below:

TIR A – This TIR is dated January 8, 2008, and a time of 0137C.^h This TIR is the first of the three and the session it represents took place approximately two days after al-Mawla's capture. In it, al-Mawla describes some of the basic details of his reasons for joining ISI, in addition to identifying several people that he knew within ISI.

TIR B – This TIR has a date of January 25, 2008, and a time of 1430C.ⁱ TIR B reads more as an affidavit, as the language in the TIR suggests that it is being made in the presence of or written specifically for some sort of legal official. It contains brief summaries of al-Mawla's identification of approximately 20 individuals within ISI along with seven pieces of SSE (sensitive site exploitation), likely material found in his possession or in his location at the time of his detention.

TIR C – This TIR has a date of January 25, 2008, and a time of 1430C.^j It appears to be a summary of al-Mawla's early introduction and rise through the ranks of ISI in Mosul. It also contains brief synopses of several legal rulings in which al-Mawla participated and of ISI activities of which he had

knowledge.

The interpretation of these TIRs is not only contingent on their timing, but also on at least two other factors: the treatment of the detainee and the validity of statements made by the detainee in interrogation sessions.

Interrogations generally occur in adversarial conditions. The authors considered the nature of al-Mawla's interrogations before deciding to proceed with the analysis of these documents. In the specific case of al-Mawla, there are several reasons to believe that no mistreatment occurred during his detention in 2008.

First, the Abu Ghraib scandal caused significant reforms to U.S. detention policies and the treatment of prisoners in Iraq.¹⁰ In June 2008, not long after the interrogation sessions discussed in this article, a *New York Times* journalist reported after a visit to Camp Bucca and Camp Cropper that conditions there had improved, riots by prisoners were down, a system of hearings to facilitate the release of incorrectly captured individuals had been implemented, and that human rights advocates agreed that conditions generally had improved, albeit still with challenges.¹¹ Second, the revised September 2006 Army Field Manual 2-22.3 on "Human Intelligence Collector Operations," which governed interrogation rules during the time of al-Mawla's interrogation, included increased emphasis on the prohibition of the use of "cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment."¹² Thirdly, the TIRs themselves contain no indications of mistreatment or abuse. Finally, the authors sought and obtained assurances from the U.S. government that al-Mawla had not been mistreated. While not sufficient alone, these assurances, combined with the other reasons noted above, form the basis for the willingness to consider this material. However, the authors acknowledge that the use of this type of material in future research raises important moral and ethical questions that require additional attention.

Another challenge with using TIRs for analytic purposes is that it is incredibly difficult to ascertain whether what al-Mawla divulges regarding himself or ISI as an organization is true. Any interrogation is, by definition, an adversarial process where the incentives of both parties typically are not aligned toward a common outcome. The interrogator is seeking facts, while the detainee may be trying to minimize their involvement in illegal activities, distract the interrogator with lies or half-truths, and protect others within the organization. In short, neither can the truth of what is said be unreservedly accepted, nor can it be entirely discarded simply because some fabrications likely exist within the material.

While it is impossible to fully resolve this concern, there are at least two ways in which the authors attempt to mitigate it in this analysis. The first is to examine the nature of the material on its face. If a claim being made by al-Mawla seems so outlandish that it is likely false, the weight given to that statement may need to be significantly discounted. The second form of mitigation is to engage in different types of cross-checking of the material contained in the TIRs. In this regard, the fact that there is an approximately two-and-a-half-week gap between the first and last two of the three TIRs

g The authors have been informed that the remaining TIRs are under review to see if their release would have negative impacts on current operations. Author correspondence with U.S. State Department officials.

h A couple of points need to be made about the date and time. First, it reflects the time at which the interrogation session was conducted. Second, the use of the letter 'c' after the time indicates the "Charlie" time zone, of which Iraq is a part. Thus, 0137C is 1:37am local time in Iraq.

i Generally speaking, detainees could be held and questioned in the THF for up to 14 days, at which point they had to be transferred to a TIF. Thus, although it is not clear from the TIRs when al-Mawla was transferred, it is possible that TIR A occurred at the THF near his point of capture and TIRs B and C took place at the TIF. Chesney, p. 569.

j The fact that TIRs B and C both have the same time stamp suggests that multiple sessions may have been carried out at that time or that, due to the nature of the content discussed in the session, it may have been broken out into two reports. It may also simply be a clerical error.

k It would be disingenuous to suggest that no problems existed after this point at Camp Bucca. Indeed, several military personnel were accused of abuse in Camp Bucca in August 2008. "U.S. Navy: 6 sailors accused of abused detainees in Iraq," *USA Today*, August 14, 2008. Other studies found that significant changes were slow in coming and that gradual improvement eventually occurred. Jeffrey Azarva, "Is U.S. Detention Policy in Iraq Working?" *Middle East Quarterly* 19:1 (2009): pp. 5-14.

being released is helpful. If al-Mawla changed or omitted certain statements from one TIR to the next, even though he discussed similar topics, it may indicate a need to be cautious in giving credence to those statements. It could also mean that he regretted making the statements and wanted to avoid talking about them again. In addition to internal cross-checking of the TIRs themselves, the authors attempted wherever possible to verify the information provided in the TIRs with external sources, as well as through engagement with other scholars in the field.

In sum, these three TIRs contain potentially valuable information to enhance the public's understanding of al-Mawla. This is not to say that the analysis that follows is conclusive or without challenges. Such information represents only one perspective and should be considered in light of other information and material. Indeed, any type of data presents potential biases that should be mitigated to the extent possible and include the appropriate caveats. In what follows, the authors attempt to follow the approach outlined above while also seeking to examine potential insights emerging from these TIRs in an effort to better understand who al-Mawla is.

“Talking” with al-Mawla

Details about the operation resulting in al-Mawla's capture are limited, but al-Mawla's TIR does reveal that he was captured on January 6, 2008, at around 1:37am local time in Iraq.¹ The following day, a press release from U.S. Central Command noted that operations in Mosul had resulted in the capture of “a wanted individual believed to be the deputy al-Qaeda in Iraq leader for the network operating in the city.”¹³ The press release also stated that the individual had “previously served as a judge of an illegal court system involved in ordering and approving abductions and executions.”¹⁴ Although the press release does not explicitly name the individual described in the TIR used in this article, it contains several pieces of information which mirrored what al-Mawla would tell interrogators after his capture: his prior role in ISI's judicial system, his participation in kidnappings and murders, and his leadership position in Mosul.

The timing of al-Mawla's capture raises an interesting question regarding al-Mawla's biography. Some open-source reporting has claimed that al-Mawla crossed paths with future Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in Camp Bucca in 2004.¹⁵ In some cases, this overlapping time period seems to be used to buttress al-Mawla's legitimacy, suggesting that he had very early connections to the rest of the Islamic State's future leadership and formed a key part of the Camp Bucca radicalization hub.¹⁶ However, given that the TIRs list January 2008 as al-Mawla's date of detention, this chronological discrepancy raises doubts regarding al-Mawla's reported connections to the Camp Bucca network and to al-Baghdadi himself at that time. There is no certainty on this point, as there are several alternative explanations for this discrepancy in the timeline.

One is that, assuming the dates of detention for both al-Baghdadi and al-Mawla are accurate and that al-Mawla's 2008 capture was his first time being detained, these two individuals never actu-

ally crossed paths in Camp Bucca.^m Of course, it is not implausible that al-Mawla had been previously detained prior to his capture in 2008. It is not inconceivable that he was captured and placed into Camp Bucca during 2004 and met al-Baghdadi during this time. Under this scenario, al-Mawla would have to have been released at some point in time and then recaptured in 2008. However, nothing in these TIRs, either in al-Mawla's statements or in the administrative data, indicates a prior detention.ⁿ

Another possibility is that al-Baghdadi's detention timeline is incorrect, too. Under this scenario, al-Baghdadi and al-Mawla could have met in prison, but not during al-Baghdadi's only confirmed stint in prison, which began in February 2004.^o Although there has been some debate regarding when al-Baghdadi's time at Camp Bucca ended,^p in 2019, the Pentagon confirmed to a journalist that he had been released after 10 months in custody, with no indications that he was captured again.¹⁷ In sum, although it is difficult to come to any definitive conclusion, these TIRs cast doubt on the notion of an al-Baghdadi/al-Mawla relationship as a result of being jointly detained in Camp Bucca in 2004 or 2008.

Beyond details regarding the circumstances of al-Mawla's capture, the real substance of the TIRs comes from two general types of conversation conveyed in the documents. One type is information about al-Mawla's background and personal involvement with the insurgency. It is this category of information that can provide the details that are currently lacking regarding the Islamic State leader's personal characteristics and biography. The other type focused on what al-Mawla knew about ISI, both on the organizational and individual level. The interrogators' goal of pursuing this type of information would likely have been to invite al-Mawla to reveal what he knew about how ISI ran its operations and about the key individuals and personalities that made up the organization. Such information could then have been utilized to enable further military efforts against those individuals. The remainder of this article explores these two types of information.

m Aside from one account of open-source reporting, the authors are not aware of any evidence of al-Mawla being detained prior to 2008. Martin Chulov and Mohammed Rasool, “Isis founding member confirmed by spies as group's new leader,” *Guardian*, January 20, 2020.

n Perhaps this was a strategic choice on his part to prevent knowledge of his prior encounter with authorities, whether coalition forces or local security services. Al-Mawla certainly would have had incentive to hide such information.

o This capture date comes from U.S. Army detention records about al-Baghdadi that are available at the Army's Freedom of Information Act reading room. Al-Baghdadi was listed as detainee “US91Z-157911CI.”

p The issue of al-Baghdadi's time in prison has received a fair amount of press attention. Terrence McCoy, “How ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became the world's most powerful jihadist leader,” *Washington Post*, June 11, 2014; Colin Freeman, “Iraq crisis: the jihadist behind the takeover of Mosul - and how America let him go,” *Telegraph*, June 13, 2014; Aaron Y. Zelin, “Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: Islamic State's driving force,” *BBC*, July 31, 2014; Joshua Eaton, “U.S. Military Now Says ISIS Leader Was Held In Notorious Abu Ghraib Prison,” *Intercept*, August 25, 2016. Some of the debate centers around statements made by a former U.S. military officer at Camp Bucca who claims to have seen al-Baghdadi in 2009. In 2014, these claims led U.S. officials to tell ABC News that al-Baghdadi was back on the battlefield by 2006. James Gordon Meek and Lee Ferran, “ISIS Leader's Ominous New York Message in Doubt, But US Still on Edge,” *ABC News*, June 16, 2014.

1 Night raids by U.S. forces were relatively common in Iraq as a method of using the element of surprise to detain suspected militants. For one example, see Michael R. Gordon, “Night Raid in Iraq: Seeking Militants, but Also Learning the Lay of the Land,” *New York Times*, August 4, 2007.

NEW OFFER

Reward up to \$10 Million

ISIS Leader Amir Muhammad Sa'id Abdal-Rahman al-Mawla

The U.S. government is offering a reward of up to \$10 million for information leading to the identification or location of ISIS leader Al-Mawla. Also known as Hajji 'Abdallah, 'Abdul Amir Muhammad Sa'id Salbi, and Abu-'Umar al-Turkmani, al-Mawla succeeded Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the leader of ISIS following Baghdadi's death during a U.S. military operation in October 2019.

Born in Mosul, Iraq, in 1976, al-Mawla helped drive and justify ISIS's abduction, slaughter, and trafficking of thousands of Iraqi citizens in northwest Iraq.

"Hajji Abdallah"

IT IS TIME TO BRING THIS TERRORIST TO JUSTICE!

United States Department of State
Rewards for Justice

RFJ_USA

A Rewards for Justice poster with information about Amir Muhammad Sa'id Abdal-Rahman al-Mawla. (Rewards for Justice)

Al-Mawla's Background

As noted above, very little is known about al-Mawla's early life and introduction into ISI. Although the brief discussions contained in the TIRs do not completely fill in all the gaps, they do provide some insight into at least two distinct parts of al-Mawla's background: pre- and post-recruitment into ISI.

When it comes to the pre-ISI stage of his life, the TIRs shed light on the location and date of his birth. It has long been suggested that al-Mawla was born in Tal Afar. However, because Tal Afar refers to both a specific city as well as a larger region, there has always been some ambiguity regarding his birthplace. In these TIRs, al-Mawla states that he was born in Al-Muhalabiyah, Iraq, in October 1976, which would have made him 31 years old when U.S. military forces arrested him and 43 years old today (September 2020). Al-Muhalabiyah is a small town of 14,000 residents (in 2011), located in the Tal Afar district but approximately 20 miles from the actual city of Tal Afar.¹⁸ The Tal Afar region is home to an ethnically diverse population of Arabs and Turkmen, with some estimates placing the proportions in the early 2000s at 10 and 90 percent, respectively.¹⁹ Although the specific ethnic breakdown of Al-Muhalabiyah is not known with certainty, it is generally accepted to be predominantly Turkmen.²⁰

The birth of al-Mawla in Al-Muhalabiyah raises an important issue regarding his ethnicity. Indeed, whether al-Mawla is Turkmen or Arab has been a critical point of discussion in public discourse. A few sources have suggested that if al-Mawla is a Turkmen, this could pose legitimacy problems for him because the Islamic State mostly has Arabs in its senior leadership echelons.²¹ One caveat is that at least two other senior members of the group—Abu Muslim al-Turkmani, allegedly the second-in-command of the group before his death in 2015, and Abdul Rahman Mustafa al-Qaduli, a senior official in the group's "cabinet"—were both reported to have been Turkmen as well.²²

Beyond this claim, however, potentially lies a more challenging one. Several sources, including a U.N. report to the Security Council made public in January 2020 and based on the observations of several member states, suggested that his Turkmen lineage would indicate that he could not be from the Qurayshi tribe, a prerequisite to being the caliph.²³ If accurate, this claim would be incredibly damaging to al-Mawla's legitimacy, because it would suggest al-Mawla *cannot* fulfill the requirements to serve as the caliph. The implication being made is that al-Mawla's tribal lineage is exclusively Turkmen, not Arab. However, other analysts have pointed out that this is not necessarily the case and that the larger al-Mawla and constituent al-Salbi tribes may have distant connections to the Qurayshi tribe.²⁴ These competing perspectives, while holding important consequences for the legitimacy of the Islamic State leader, are difficult to resolve and it is not clear which ought to hold sway.

Aside from the birth location of al-Mawla in an area that is majority Turkmen, however, there is little in the TIRs to substantiate the claim that he is of Turkmen origin.⁴ Moreover, the only piece of tangible evidence in the TIRs contradicts this theory. In the biographical details printed at the top portion of each TIR, al-Mawla's ethnicity is indicated as Arab.²⁵ If accurate, this would represent an

q There is substantial discussion in the open source regarding potential evidence of al-Mawla's Turkmen ethnicity. Some have pointed out that an individual that is allegedly al-Mawla's brother, Adel Salbi, was at some point a member of the Iraqi Turkmen Front, a political party. Chulov and Rasool; Mina al-Lami, "Analysis: Ongoing uncertainties about identity of new Islamic State leader," BBC Monitoring, January 24, 2020; reporting by journalist Jenan Moussa on Arabic Al Aan TV. Additionally, it is interesting to note that the U.S. State Department's press release on the designation of al-Mawla lists one of his aliases as "Abu-'Umar al-Turkmani," suggesting his Turkmen origin. Caution must be ascribed to this, however, as evidence exists that the aliases used do not always reflect true origins or ethnicity. Vera Mironova and Karam Alhamad, "The Names of Jihad: A Guide to ISIS' Noms de Guerre," *Foreign Affairs*, July 14, 2017.

interesting deviation from the current understanding of al-Mawla. Of course, this may have been an intentional deception on al-Mawla's part, something that he truly believed, or simply an error by the transcriber of the TIRs in entering al-Mawla's biographical information, but none of these outcomes can be verified relying only on the TIR. Recent efforts to uncover more information about this point, however, strengthens the conclusion that al-Mawla is an Arab.²⁶

The Tal Afar region experienced significant security challenges following the 2003 invasion of U.S. and coalition forces, although there are also indications that radical groups and individuals had a presence and stoked sectarian tension there long before this point.²⁷ Unfortunately, the TIRs do not paint a clear enough timeline to know whether al-Mawla stayed in his hometown for long, moved on, or whether these years formed an important part of his evolution into a jihadi. The next date that appears in the TIRs is his time in service in the Iraq military, which occurred for approximately a year and a half from 2001-2002, when he would have been about 25 years old. Although the specific actions of al-Mawla during his military years are unknown, the TIRs note that he held the rank of private in the infantry and worked in some sort of administrative position.²⁸

That said, there is nothing remarkable or that can be easily interpreted about al-Mawla from the mere fact that he served in the Iraqi Army, as at the time, service in the Iraq military was compulsory. However, it is hard to believe that the overall condition of the Iraqi Army would not have had an impact on al-Mawla when it came to his perspective regarding the Iraqi government and the value of organizational skill and the challenges of dealing with low morale. The Iraqi Army immediately prior to this point in time was a struggling entity, with one report referring to Western intelligence estimates of a desertion rate of 20-30 percent.²⁹

The fact that al-Mawla served 18 months in the military, as opposed to a longer duration, is interesting. As already noted, military service in Iraq was compulsory for all males during the time, but the length of service required was contingent on factors such as education.³⁰ With conscription in Iraq at this time, those who did not complete high school had to serve three years in the military, those who completed high school served two years, and those who finished a college degree served 18 months.³ Thus, the fact that al-Mawla was in the Iraq Army for 18 months suggests that he had most likely graduated with a bachelor's degree prior to joining the army, although it is not referenced anywhere in the three TIRs. It is interesting to note, however, that those who elected to pursue graduate studies and successfully completed a graduate degree could do so and would only have to serve in the military for four months upon completion of their degree. The fact that al-Mawla did not appear to pursue religious graduate studies at this point in his life (which, by his own account, he eventually did later on) might suggest that it was not necessarily a desire at this time. Of course, this conclusion is merely speculative given the lack of detail presented

in the TIRs about al-Mawla's pre-Army activities.

Following his time in the military, the next significant date highlighted in al-Mawla's resume is his completion of a master's degree in Islamic Studies from the University of Mosul in January 2007. Religious knowledge is seen as essential for a caliph, as it provides him with the theological repertoire to eventually lead.³¹ Al-Baghdadi, al-Mawla's predecessor, was said to have a doctorate in Islamic jurisprudence.³² Although having a degree in religious studies is not necessarily the only way to meet the knowledge requirement, the fact that al-Mawla did have such a degree is important. Indeed, al-Mawla's religious expertise was specifically noted by at least one other senior Islamic State figure when speculating on the next leader following al-Baghdadi's death.³³

Beyond equipping him with religious credentials, al-Mawla's religious expertise also appears to have been his gateway into the group.⁴ After his graduation in January 2007, he claims that he was approached by someone named Falah to participate in ISI's religious education efforts. For his part, al-Mawla said that he decided to join the organization in February 2007. This part of al-Mawla's timeline is intriguing. By early 2007, the Iraqi insurgency was raging, with violence increasing since the bombing of the al-Askari mosque in February 2006 and with the first U.S. troops being deployed as part of the "surge" strategy.³⁴ From ISI's perspective, this period was marked with increasing challenges due to internal strife and counterterrorism pressure from both state and non-state actors.³⁵

The fact that, from his own recollection conveyed nearly two-and-a-half weeks into his detention, al-Mawla seems to have only joined after being approached by Falah suggests either a lack of vision regarding what the struggle was to become or an indifference to all that had been occurring in the several years prior to his recruitment.⁴ Indeed, the individual who preceded al-Mawla as leader of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, founded his own militant group immediately following the U.S. invasion in 2003, was imprisoned in 2004, and joined the emergent Mujahideen Shura Council when it was formed in January 2006.³⁶ Al-Mawla appears, in contrast, to have somehow avoided participation in any of these events despite being just five years younger than al-Baghdadi. The fact that he started and completed graduate studies during this time suggests his focus was not on the battlefield and that he may not have shared the same early commitment to the jihadi cause as many others during this time, including al-Baghdadi, his eventual predecessor as head of the Islamic State.

Of course, alternative interpretations might explain why al-Mawla downplays his recruitment narrative. It could be that he

r This claim that al-Mawla was a private directly contradicts a profile of him that refers to him as "a former officer in Saddam Hussein's army." See "Amir Muhammad Sa'id Abdal-Rahman al-Mawla a.k.a. Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Quraishi," Counter Extremism Project.

s It was also possible—and, indeed, was official policy—for an individual to pay money to reduce the length of mandatory service to 90 days. This could be done at any point in time during someone's service.

t One possibility which has been suggested is that perhaps al-Mawla's graduate studies were part of a long-term strategy by ISI to cultivate religiously educated individuals, either by sending them to receive such studies or simply focusing on them for recruitment purposes. Both al-Mawla and al-Baghdadi pursued higher education in religious studies in the same general timeframe, albeit at different universities (al-Mawla in Mosul and al-Baghdadi in Baghdad). Al-Mawla pursued a master's degree while al-Baghdadi completed his doctorate. Daniel Milton, "The al-Mawla TIRs: An Analytical Discussion with Cole Bunzel, Haroro Ingram, Gina Ligon, and Craig Whiteside," *CTC Sentinel* 13:9 (2020).

u Of course, it could also be that he was trying to minimize his level of commitment to the group. However, given that at this point al-Mawla was now two and a half weeks into his detention and had just finished confessing to being the leader responsible for ISI's interpretation of Islamic law in Mosul, such a minimization seems out of place. TIR C.

was trying to minimize his level of commitment to the group. Under this scenario, al-Mawla, would have been an active participant in the early insurgency in Iraq, but either deliberately hid such details during his interrogations or was not questioned in detail about his own history in the insurgency.^v However, if this were true, it would also require an explanation why al-Mawla, having confessed to being the current leader responsible for ISI's interpretation of Islamic law in Mosul and a past second-in-command for the group in the city, would still feel a need to minimize his origin story. Thus, the TIRs raise the possibility of al-Mawla as being aloof from the insurgency during its early phase, but also do not provide sufficient detail to exclude the possibility of his being deceptive on this point.

Moreover, al-Mawla's motives for joining ISI are not entirely clear in these documents either. In one of his early TIRs, which took place two days after his capture, al-Mawla makes the dubious claim that he "joined ISI in order to stop fighters attacking innocent people and was not in ISI for the money."³⁷ This same theme is not repeated (or at least was not included) in al-Mawla's narrative in a session a couple of weeks later about joining the organization, in which it seems that his initial attraction to the group stemmed from a request to teach classes to ISI members, and less from his own convictions.³⁸ This inroad due to religious classes opens the possibility that al-Mawla's attraction may have been due to the religious justification upon which the group tried to stake its claims to become a "state." This was an issue the group was discussing quite publicly in late 2006 and early 2007, at the time al-Mawla claimed to have recently received his graduate degree in Islamic studies.³⁹ These potential observations aside, it seems likely that more details about his recruitment might be present in TIRs that have not yet been made public.^w

One point regarding al-Mawla's early claims of his recruitment is worth discussing because it seems to be so out of place. In the earliest of the three TIRs, al-Mawla claims to have avoided pledging allegiance to ISI because he was a Sufi.⁴⁰ The claim that he did not pledge allegiance seems unlikely, given both his quick rise in the group and the fact that his later statements do not reference this point at all.⁴¹ Al-Mawla's claim about being a Sufi also seems absurd, as the Islamic State and its predecessor organizations branded Sufis as heretics and carried out acts of heinous violence against Sufis.⁴² However, despite its seeming falsity, even this statement made by al-Mawla in the TIR has found corroborating evidence in recent reporting.⁴³ If true, it would not only suggest that al-Mawla was uninvolved early on in ISI, but that he may have come from a background antithetical to the group's beliefs. In this case, al-Mawla either would have had to conceal this from ISI or renounce these beliefs before joining. However, these claims, both about being a Sufi and about not pledging allegiance, should be viewed cautiously, as al-Mawla does not repeat this claim in the later TIRs, even when revisiting the topic of joining the organization. The latter claim about not pledging allegiance seems particularly nonsensical given the eventual positions al-Mawla claims to have occupied in the group.

After joining the group, al-Mawla seems, according to what can



Amir Muhammad Sa'id Abdal-Rahman al-Mawla (photo from Tactical Interrogation Reports of al-Mawla)

be deduced from his own account, to have taught religious classes for only a few months before being appointed the leader of "Islamic" law (sharia) for ISI for the city of Mosul.⁴⁴ This position would have put al-Mawla at the center of several activities that extend well-beyond preaching and teaching classes, as the 'correct' interpretation of Islamic law plays a critical role in military, media, and personnel matters within the group. This begs the question: could al-Mawla, merely months into his membership in the group, really have risen so quickly up the ranks?

It is possible that he is lying about his progression in the group. Because he claimed to have been a Sufi, and given what seems to be a recruitment narrative that is more accidental than passionate, it strains credulity to think that he rapidly climbed the ranks of ISI. However, because it seems likely that he did actually end up in the ISI positions he claims to have held, this suggests the misrepresentation might be in relation to his timeline for joining. Indeed, he may have joined many months (or even years) before he claims to have done so. In this scenario, al-Mawla's story becomes much more clouded, as any timeline which suggests his interfacing with ISI prior to January 2007 would greatly undermine the rest of the narrative he posed in these TIRs. Other than the fact that the timeline seems implausible, no direct information could be identified in these TIRs to support this conclusion. And, to the contrary, recent reporting has suggested that al-Mawla may have remained a

^v Or simply did not view them as relevant to his ISI timeline because they were with an insurgent group other than ISI. Milton, "The al-Mawla TIRs: An Analytical Discussion."

^w This likelihood is suggested by one of the TIRs which starts by stating that "Detainee repeated previously reported information about his initial recruitment into ISI." TIR A.

Sufi through 2007.⁴⁵ If this is true, earlier recruitment by ISI would seem unlikely.

Of course, there are possible reasons which explain how al-Mawla could have advanced so quickly. His religious training provides one explanation, as it was something in high demand in the group. Another possibility is that he had personal relationships with the right figures, perhaps aided by the fact that he operated in Mosul, which was a critical node in the group's organization. In addition, the pressure from the Awakening councils and counterterrorism operations by the U.S. military during the mid-2000s occurred against large numbers of targets at a very high pace. For example, in August 2004, U.S. Special Operations forces conducted 18 raids against counterterrorism targets in Iraq. That number had increased to 300 a month by August 2006.⁴⁶ It was still at the rate of about 10 to 20 captures a night in mid-2008 across Iraq.⁴⁷ The fight in Mosul was particularly intense, with one report noting that during May and June 2007, "13 AQI leaders were captured or killed in Mosul."⁴⁸ Perhaps the confluence of factors, al-Mawla's religious training and high personnel turnover within ISI because of counterterrorism actions, created a path for quick ascendancy. There is some indication of quick turnover among leadership figures in the TIRs due to captures and battle deaths, but such evidence is circumstantial and does not provide conclusive answers.^x

Regardless of whether al-Mawla's timeline for rising in the group is accurate, it seems clear that he ultimately participated in a wide range of the group's functions. Such activities are discussed by al-Mawla in some detail, including the mediation of disputes with other militant groups, nomination of judges, oversight of ISI media fliers, and issuance of binding legal rulings regarding 'Islamic' law in a number of cases.⁴⁹

The latter category, legal cases in which al-Mawla was involved, are highlighted in some detail in one of his TIRs in which he appears to offer case summaries for judicial decisions that he made.⁵⁰ Although highlighting each of these cases in detail here is beyond the scope of this article, a few examples show how al-Mawla's decisions were sometimes seemingly ineffective, but also how his rulings led to real consequences for the parties involved. In one of the cases he oversaw—which involved the death of three individuals at the hands of Ansar al-Sunna, an Iraqi militant group—al-Mawla's verdict regarding Ansar al-Sunna's culpability for those deaths apparently did not sit well with the implicated group, leading to what seems to be no resolution. In two of the cases, one for an unknown individual and the other allegedly for a fellow ISI member, he orders whippings for swearing.

Several of his cases involve rulings on the amount of ransoms required to be paid in order to release individuals kidnapped by ISI. Each of these kidnapping cases seems to have a positive outcome in which the hostage returns home, and the authors of this article are left to wonder if al-Mawla is telling the truth regarding his rulings or whether he is minimizing the negative consequences of his rulings.⁵¹ This is hard to tell. In the case of Western hostages, previous research has shown ISI kidnappings quite frequently end in the hostage's murder.⁵² In the case of locals, mixed incentives seem to

result at times in death and at times in release for ransom.⁵³ Among the cases al-Mawla mentioned he was involved in, both outcomes are represented. In one, the sole case resulting in the death of the hostage, the victim was identified by al-Mawla as a member of the Iraqi Army.⁵⁴ Here, however, al-Mawla seems to distance himself from the implementation of execution as a punishment, although he seems to have been aware of the decision at the very least. In another, al-Mawla judged that a ransom payment was needed to return the individuals to their families.⁵⁵

Because of numerous personnel changes within the group (for reasons that are not always explained), al-Mawla also says he served for a time as the deputy leader for the city of Mosul. In this role, he claims that he was "second in command" in the city and says that he was aware of various ISI activities such as kidnapping, executions, assassinations, and ransoms. His discussion of his knowledge of, but never his participation in, these activities may be an attempt to downplay his involvement in any decision-making processes. While understandable for someone who is being interrogated by an adversary, al-Mawla's discussion of his activities suggests he was operationally involved to a significant level prior to his capture. Regardless of his actual level of involvement, al-Mawla clearly occupied a leadership role within an organization that carried out a large number of operations in Mosul, many of which likely harmed the very people he claimed in an earlier session he had joined the group to protect.^{56 y}

Table 1: Timeline of Major Events Presented in al-Mawla TIRs

Date	Event
October 1976	Born in Al-Muhalabiyah, Iraq
Prior to 2001	Likely completed a bachelor's degree
2001-2002	Served as a private in the Iraqi Army
January 2007	Completed a master's degree in Islamic Studies from Mosul University
February 2007	Joined the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)
March 2007	Started teaching sharia classes to ISI members
~July 2007	Appointed general sharia leader for the city of Mosul
October 2007	Appointed deputy leader for Mosul
November 2007	Reverted to general sharia leader for the city of Mosul
January 2008	Captured by coalition forces

In sum, al-Mawla's timeline (seen in Table 1) prior to his capture in January 2008, as depicted by his own statements and conveyed through these TIRs, is interesting for many reasons. First, it gives more insight into the history of an individual who is allegedly at the head of the Islamic State. Of course, while this information is essential, there are still significant gaps in his biography. If more information, details, and documents were available, it would signifi-

x For example, in one TIR, al-Mawla seems to indicate that the overall leader of ISI in Mosul changed at least twice in the space of a few months due to the individuals being captured by coalition forces. TIR B. If such churn was common in leadership positions, a quick rise may have occurred out of necessity.

y It is also interesting to note that prior CTC research demonstrated that violence perpetrated by al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI) and ISI disproportionately harmed locals, not coalition forces. Scott Helfstein, Nassir Abdullah, and Muhammad al-Obaidi, *Deadly Vanguard: A Study of al-Qa`ida's Violence Against Muslims* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2009).

cantly enhance the counterterrorism community's understanding of al-Mawla's individual path into jihad and potentially his leadership style.

Second, his self-described timeline paints a picture of him as a relative late-comer to AQI (al-Qa`ida in Iraq)/ISI specifically, but also potentially to the Iraqi insurgency more broadly. Though certainly not conclusive of his own beliefs about the insurgency, it is hard to imagine an individual who early on felt passionately about the cause staying on the sidelines for so long. Third, this personal timeline provides a glimpse of an individual who has a significant amount of leadership experience. Assuming that his timeline for joining is correct, and there are certainly valid reasons to be skeptical of it, al-Mawla played several relatively notable and involved roles in a very short period. Although such experience would undoubtedly have offered him a crash course in being a militant leader, the value of which should not be understated, it also would have made him a potential liability if he were captured. In this next section, the authors examine in more detail how al-Mawla's knowledge of the inner workings and people of the organization was discussed in some level of detail during his interrogations and may have been connected to military operations carried out against at least one prominent ISI figure.

Al-Mawla's Colleagues

One of the more intriguing facets of al-Mawla's interrogation sessions is how much information he yields regarding the individuals that may have worked in various positions within ISI. At least in part, his knowledge of so many different players speaks to his ability to cultivate support from others within the movement, but what he told the interrogators provides a window into his strategic calculations regarding his concern with his future as opposed to the future of those about whom he spoke. The matter of revealing information while in custody is not new. One of the best-known examples is that of Ayman al-Zawahiri, who, while under torture, allegedly gave up the hiding place of one of his confederates who was apprehended and executed by the Egyptian security services.⁵⁷ Later, in writing a rebuttal to a critique of him and the organization to which he belonged, al-Qa`ida, al-Zawahiri made several references to the lack of culpability those who are in prison should face for statements they make.⁵⁸

Setting aside the issue of guilt or condemnation, the authors believe that al-Mawla's conversations about his fellow fighters are worth exploring and considering because they offer researchers a window into who al-Mawla was and how he performed in his trusted role. However, the matter of categorizing this information as contained in the TIRs is far from straightforward. The declassified TIRs themselves include no unique identifiers to cross-reference individuals from one session to the next. Moreover, most of the names offered are aliases, making identifying duplicate entries difficult without further details. Unfortunately, some of the names and descriptions are less robust than others, making the issue of counting how many individuals he named challenging at best.

Despite these challenges, the authors attempted to create a list of the total number of names al-Mawla gave during these three sessions. Wherever possible, the effort sought to identify common names across all three sessions, in effect reducing the amount of possible double-counting in the authors' tally. Even with these efforts, there is some amount of uncertainty regarding the specific

number of unique names al-Mawla discussed. With those caveats, it appears that al-Mawla described or named approximately 88 individuals over the course of these three sessions. Not all of these descriptions are equal, however, as some simply refer to what he heard someone else call an individual at a meeting ("Doctor" in one case), whereas others are robust descriptions of what the individual looked like, what function they performed within ISI, and the frequency with which al-Mawla engaged with some of these individuals. For example, in 64 of the 88 cases, al-Mawla provided at least a basic description of the organizational department in which the named individual worked in ISI, including the 'Islamic' legal, military, security, media, and administrative branches.

Al-Mawla's willingness to provide detailed information on individuals is especially prevalent in one of the TIRs.⁵⁹ In it, al-Mawla appears to be giving an affidavit of some sort against several individuals, identifying them specifically as members of ISI and noting their illegal activities such as kidnapping, assassination, and attacks on coalition forces.⁶⁰ Specifically in this session alone, he testifies against no fewer than 20 individuals in front of what appears to be some sort of legal official (referred to as a "prosecutor" in the TIR).² Because the authors must rely on the TIRs alone, it is difficult to speak definitively about al-Mawla's rationale for identifying these individuals. However, the end of the TIR contains a note which says, "I wrote his statement with my hand and of my own free will without pressure or coercion." It is likely that the "his" in this statement is a transcription typo and that it should have been "this," reflecting that al-Mawla was writing these actual words. If true, that suggests a certain level of agency on al-Mawla's part regarding how much information he provided. The fact that he detailed activities and gave testimony against them suggests a willingness to offer up fellow members of the group to suit his own ends. Indeed, almost every statement from al-Mawla toward the 20 individuals carries with it the almost formulaic pronouncement "(blank) is a member of ISI."

Beyond his recollection of individual roles and names, al-Mawla also conveys the organizational structure of ISI in Mosul in some detail, going so far as to help complete a line-and-block chart that shows the names and positions of approximately 40 individuals functioning in various roles. Although all the names he provided were aliases, which may or may not ultimately have been helpful in identifying who these specific individuals were, it seems clear that such information could be used to narrow down the pool of individuals serving in certain roles and provide at least some level of corroboration if these individuals ever were captured and prosecuted. Beyond naming these individuals, however, his organizational descriptions in the form of line-and-block charts do not appear to convey much substantive information about how these respective departments functioned. Such information is gleaned more from his own descriptions of his activities and interactions than from the charts.

z The TIR does not indicate whether this was a U.S. or Iraqi official. Although not necessarily common practice, U.S. military forces would sometimes bring Iraqi judges or prosecutors in to speak with a detainee in an effort to obtain evidence that could be potentially useful at trial, as confessions made in the presence of such individuals were generally the only type of confession considered valid in judicial proceedings. The authors cannot be sure that this is what happened in this case, although it seems plausible. Annexstad, p. 78; Chesney, p. 569.

What does this tell us about al-Mawla? On the practical level, the amount of detail and seeming willingness to share information about fellow organization members suggests either a degree of nonchalance, strategic calculation, or resignation on the part of al-Mawla regarding operational security. His comments regarding the few individuals already deceased (al-Mawla identified eight of the 88 as already deceased when he was captured) presumably had little consequence for his group. However, for the individuals already in U.S. military custody (al-Mawla seemed to believe that at least 14 of the individuals discussed had already been captured by coalition or security forces) or still operating in Iraq at the time of his interrogation, al-Mawla's descriptions of their roles likely had repercussions for at least some of those individuals.^{aa}

Previous research by the CTC has relied on personnel records in the form of spreadsheets created by the Islamic State to document payments to personnel during the 2016-2017 timeframe.⁶¹ Using the full names listed at the end of one of the al-Mawla TIRs, the authors searched other CTC documents to see if these individuals appeared.^{ab} Through this process, eight individuals whose full names were identified appear to be listed both in the TIRs and also in the spreadsheet.^{ac} Seven of these individuals, based on dates of birth contained in the payment spreadsheet, would have been between the ages of 23 and 49 in 2008.^{ad} The authors must stress the fact that even though the same full names were listed in both documents, there is no way of verifying that they are the same individuals.

What is particularly interesting is that of these eight individuals, six are listed in the financial spreadsheet from 2016/2017 as being prisoners or detainees in 2016/2017. This spreadsheet represented

a period of about eight to nine years after the al-Mawla TIRs. Additionally intriguing is that fact that of those six individuals identified as being detained in 2016/2017, four were identified by al-Mawla in his TIRs as having been detained during the same time in which he was back in 2008, while the status of the other two is unclear based on al-Mawla's TIRs.

Is it possible that four of the individuals against whom al-Mawla gave statements in 2008 were still in Iraqi custody in 2016, having never been released? Several rounds of prisoner releases or amnesty took place before and after 2008 as the United States sought to figure out how to handle thousands of detainees and transferred custody of thousands to the Iraqi government. It is certainly possible that, even if these are the same individuals, they were released and recaptured at a later point. However, it is critical to note that these prisoner releases typically excluded individuals convicted of terrorism charges, assuming there was evidence of such.⁶² This raises the possibility that, perhaps in part due to al-Mawla's direct testimony against them, some ISI members may remain in prison to this day.^{ae}

In addition to the individuals discovered in the payment spreadsheet, other declassified information offers potential insight into the impact of al-Mawla's testimony. For example, a document used in a RAND study referred to a raid carried out in early 2008 by U.S. military forces against an ISI media operative named Khalid.⁶³ According to the RAND study, when Khalid was captured, he was in possession of personnel documents that named "Abu Hareth" as the ISI administrative emir during the late 2007 to early 2008 timeframe.⁶⁴ Al-Mawla named an ISI member known as Abu Harith in all three of his TIRs as occupying the same position.^{af} It is, of course, impossible to say where the information that guided U.S. military forces to Khalid came from or to attribute it to al-Mawla, but an ISI operative called Khalid is mentioned in two of al-Mawla's three TIRs as still functioning in his media role when al-Mawla was captured.⁶⁵ In one of the TIRs, a redacted reference states that al-Mawla provided a physical description of an individual he named as Khalid.⁶⁶ In another, al-Mawla claims to have carried out several meetings in this Khalid's office, suggesting he would have known this Khalid and his place of work with some familiarity.⁶⁷ This raises, but does not conclusively confirm, the possibility that the raid that led to the capture of Khalid was influenced by al-Mawla's interrogation.⁶⁸

aa The fact that a number of people named by al-Mawla are already in custody is interesting in and of itself for two reasons. One, it raises the possibility that, on some level, he was providing information of relatively less value, as those individuals were already in custody. If this was true, it may support a point raised by some of the panelists about prior training on how to deal with interrogations. Milton, "The al-Mawla TIRs: An Analytical Discussion." Of course, such information might not have been completely useless, as that information could still have been used against those individuals in their own interrogations or potential prosecutions. The second point raised by al-Mawla's knowledge of so many alleged ISI members already in detention is that perhaps he knew as many of them as well as he did because of longer relationships than those suggested in his TIRs. Although he is careful not to say that he knew any of them before joining in early 2007, the possibility that he was covering his tracks cannot be ignored. Of course, another possibility is that he simply became acquainted with them at the detention facility itself, although the details he shares consistently over the course of his TIRs casts doubt on that possibility.

ab For this search, the authors relied on the full names of individuals as listed at the end of TIR B.

ac Some of the details across these two sources, the TIRs and the payment spreadsheet, seem to corroborate that these individuals are the same. For example, not only are full names the same, but also each one of the individuals listed has an identification number in the payment spreadsheet that corresponds to the Ninawa province. Additionally, some of the individuals are described by al-Mawla as working on the left or right side of Mosul, and this also matches what appears in the Islamic State payment spreadsheet. In fairness, not all of the details are consistent: sometimes al-Mawla described an individual as working on the left or right side, whereas the payment spreadsheet had them working on the opposite site. The aliases used by al-Mawla are also not necessarily the same as those listed in the spreadsheet, although one might expect aliases to have changed.

ad One individual's estimated age was 16, which cast some doubt on whether this individual was actually the person mentioned in al-Mawla's TIRs or whether the birthdate was incorrectly entered in the payment spreadsheet.

ae The individuals who may still be in custody, ironically, appear to have remained on Islamic State payment spreadsheets through at least late 2016, suggesting their families received money from the group that is now headed by the very individual whose testimony may have played a role in keeping them in prison.

af There are slight variations in the spelling of this individual's name between the TIRs and the RAND study.

ag It is not certain he was referring to the same Khalid and Abu Harith as in the RAND study. However, the circumstantial evidence is convincing. Not only do the figures in the RAND study share the same name as the figures named by al-Mawla, but these are all figures alleged to have been in and around Mosul during this same timeframe. Additionally, the RAND study specifies that Khalid and Abu Harith occupied important roles in the media and administrative units, and al-Mawla lists the leaders of each of these units (actually drawing a line-and-block chart in the case of the media), with Khalid at the top of the Mosul media unit and [Abu] Harith at the top of the administrative unit. TIR C; Patrick B. Johnston, Jacob N. Shapiro, Howard J. Shatz, Benjamin Bahney, Danielle, F. Jung, Patrick K. Ryan, and Jonathan Wallace, *Foundations of the Islamic State: Management, Money, and Terror in Iraq, 2005-2010* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016).

In addition to Khalid, there is another interesting connection between al-Mawla and later military action against ISI. In October 2008, a raid by U.S. military forces killed Mohamed Moumou, also known as Abu Qaswara al-Maghribi, who some reports suggested was in top tier leadership of ISI at the time and overall leader of ISI's efforts in northern Iraq, including Mosul.^{ah} Other reporting at the time suggested that Abu Qaswara, also known as Abu Sara, also had some responsibility for foreign fighters coming in and out of Iraq and was a Swedish citizen.⁶⁸ For such a high-ranking individual, intelligence likely came from a variety of sources and methods. However, these TIRs also suggest that al-Mawla may have contributed in some measure to his elimination, as Abu Qaswara is one of the 20 individuals against whom al-Mawla testified.⁶⁹

In his testimony, al-Mawla notes the importance Abu Qaswara plays in the organization, the fact that his accent shows that he is not from Iraq, the important role he played in ISI administration in the region, and his role in helping individuals get medical treatment outside of Iraq, all of which are facts that have since been verified in reporting about Abu Qaswara. Perhaps most importantly, al-Mawla notes that he met Abu Qaswara on two occasions. Since the authors are working with a limited set of data, they ultimately cannot say what role this information may or may not have played in guiding the U.S. military to Abu Qaswara.^{ai} It does raise the possibility, at the very least, however, that al-Mawla did provide information that may have helped focus attention on, and ultimately lead to the death of, ISI's then second- or third-in-command, an individual lauded by the then-leader of ISI as "one of the great figures of the State."⁷⁰

Beyond whatever the discovery of these names in other files held by the Islamic State might suggest, the fact that these names appear in other documents indicates that al-Mawla was speaking, at least in part, about genuine colleagues in ISI. As an additional data point, the authors were able to locate a partial list of names of individuals transferred from the U.S. military to the Iraqi government. The list was posted by an Iraqi human rights organization online in 2012.⁷¹ At least two of the 20 individuals against whom al-Mawla provided testimony in front of some sort of legal official appear in this list. In other words, taking into account what appear to be matching names in Islamic State spreadsheets (eight individuals), on the roster of the human rights organization (two individuals), and found in other open-source reporting (one individual—Abu Qaswara), there is evidence to suggest that at least half of these individuals named in detail by al-Mawla appear to be authentic.

This section has considered what the TIRs reveal about al-Mawla's discussions of the other individuals inside ISI. Although there are clearly some gaps and it is difficult to corroborate any of the

information provided, a few pieces of information suggest that the individuals al-Mawla discussed were real. The TIRs, however, do not reveal any of al-Mawla's motivations for discussing these specific individuals, although from the line-and-block charts he outlined of ISI's structure in Mosul, he does not appear to have been sharing information only about a certain subset of individuals. Rather, he appears to have named individuals in some capacity across all levels of the organization, while describing some individuals in some detail.

Conclusion

This article has provided a brief first look at a unique set of information in an effort to help fill in some of the biographical and behavioral details regarding the individual alleged to be the head of the Islamic State: Amir Muhammad Sa'id 'Abd-al-Rahman al-Mawla. Since his appointment, several questions have been raised regarding al-Mawla and his background, yet the availability of sources has limited the ability to find answers. The information presented in this article is certainly far from perfect and not without its own challenges, but the authors believe that it can help provide partial clarity to a topic that has been shrouded in much uncertainty.

For instance, this article has suggested that key assumptions about al-Mawla, notably his Turkmen ethnicity and early involvement in the insurgency in Iraq, may not be accurate. Moreover, statements made by al-Mawla, while doubtless trying to minimize his own commitment to ISI, suggest that his commitment may have been borne less of zeal than of serendipity. If true, this would suggest that something certainly changed in al-Mawla, as his later reputation suggests someone who ruthlessly pursued his ideology, even to carrying out genocide against its enemies.^{aj} The TIRs also show that al-Mawla, who, according to the timeline that he himself provided, appears to have quickly risen in the organization's ranks in part because of his religious training, knew much about ISI and was willing to divulge many of these details during his interrogation, potentially implicating and resulting in the death of at least one high-ranking ISI figure. This information, however, should not necessarily be taken at face value. The claims made by al-Mawla while in custody are very difficult to verify, adding a critical note of caution to the findings discussed in this article.

Of course, one source that has yet to offer many details is the group itself. To date, no sort of biography has emerged from the Islamic State to fill in the blanks regarding the questions of al-Mawla's lineage, early life, or actions before and after his capture by U.S. military forces. More fundamentally, the group itself has not even acknowledged that their leader is named al-Mawla. This may be an intentional omission due to security reasons, because the group looks forward to contradicting the guesses and assumptions of others, or because on the critical issue of internal group cohesion, it sees no benefit to be gained from doing so. Of course, not showing himself may have negative tradeoffs, such as potentially limiting the

ah There is some confusion as to the specific position of Abu Qaswara in the ISI leadership hierarchy. Several have him tagged as the second-in-command in the group. Fred W. Baker III, "Coalition Forces Kill al-Qaida in Iraq's No. 2 Leader," U.S. Department of Defense, October 15, 2008; "Swedish 'al-Qaeda leader' killed in Iraq," *The Local – Sweden*, October 15, 2008; "U.S. military: Senior al Qaeda chief killed in Iraq," CNN, October 15, 2008. It is important to note, however, that the U.S. government may have incorrectly assumed that Abu Qaswara was second-in-command because of a deliberate effort by ISI to obfuscate the leadership structure. Even in this case, he was still a high-ranking figure, likely third-in-command. Kyle Orton, "Mohamed Moumou: Islamic State's Commander of the North," Kyle Orton's Blog, January 28, 2017.

ai Per reporting at the time, this operation seems to have been a targeted operation, not merely one in which Abu Qaswara was an incidental casualty. "U.S. military: Senior al Qaeda chief killed in Iraq."

aj According to the U.S. government, "As one of ISIS's most senior ideologues, al-Mawla helped drive and justify the abduction, slaughter, and trafficking of the Yazidi religious minority in northwest Iraq and also led some of the group's global terrorist operations." "Amir Muhammad Sa'id Abdal-Rahman al-Mawla Up to \$10 Million Reward," September 2, 2020; Paul Cruickshank and Tim Lister, "Baghdadi's successor likely to be Iraqi religious scholar," CNN, October 29, 2019; Paul Cruickshank, "UN report warns ISIS is reasserting under new leader believed to be behind Yazidi genocide," CNN, January 29, 2020.

appeal of the Islamic State around the world.⁷² Regardless of the ultimate reason, it is unlikely that this article will be the final word. Moreover, as more information about al-Mawla becomes available, some details, especially regarding his early life and his time spent in ISI, may need to be revised accordingly.

The 2008 Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between Iraq and the United States required that the United States provide information to Iraq on all detainees being held at that time, and that Iraq would either pursue legal avenues against them or the United States would then release them.^{ak} Under the terms of this agreement, the United States transferred custody of al-Mawla to the Iraqi government.⁷³ One question that is beyond the scope of this article, yet looms in the background, is why was al-Mawla, given the level of leadership and involvement in the insurgency to which he appears to have admitted in the three TIRs, ultimately released? The data here does not allow the authors to answer that question, although it is important to note that tens of thousands of individuals were in U.S. military custody from 2003-2011.^{al} Al-Mawla is not the first

future Islamic State leader to have been released from custody in Iraq. His predecessor, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was detained and released by U.S. forces in 2004.⁷⁴ Despite some excellent work in this area, there is a need for more research and analysis, both inside and outside government, on the subject of detention policies and the identification of future threats.⁷⁵

In the end, there is clearly more to be learned about al-Mawla, his early history, and the role that he played in ISI, but also about the path he took when released from custody by the Iraqi government. Subsequent reporting refers to him as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's deputy in the period before he succeeded him as leader and, as noted above, connects him to the genocide of Yazidis in Iraq in 2014.⁷⁶ Making a more complete set of al-Mawla's TIRs available, as well as those of other figures in the militant movement, such as occurred in the case of Shi`a Iraqi militant Qayis al-Khazali, would allow for a more conclusive and comprehensive analysis both of these organizations and the individuals who play prominent roles within them.^{am} The authors' hope is that more information will come to light to help answer these questions and enhance our understanding of terrorist groups and the individuals that lead them. **CTC**

ak According to the text of the agreement, it entered into force on January 1, 2009. "Agreement Between the United States of America and the Republic of Iraq On the Withdrawal of United States Forces from Iraq and the Organization of Their Activities during Their Temporary Presence in Iraq," November 17, 2008; Michael J. Carden, "President signs security pact with Iraq," American Forces Press Service, December 16, 2008.

al According to press reporting, the United States held approximately 22,000-26,000 individuals in detention facilities across Iraq in 2008, with Camp Bucca's capacity being approximately 18,580 individuals. When Camp Bucca closed in 2009, some reports mentioned that a total of at least as many as 100,000 individuals may have been held in custody by the United States since the beginning of military operations in 2003. Alissa J. Rubin, "U.S. military reforms its prisons in Iraq," *New York Times*, June 1, 2008; Alissa J. Rubin, "U.S. Remakes Jails in Iraq, but Gains Are at Risk," *New York Times*, June 2, 2008; Michael Christie, "U.S. military shuts largest detainee camp in Iraq," Reuters, September 17, 2009.

am Al-Khazali was a Shi`a Iraqi militant who broke away from Muqtada al-Sadr and carried out operations against U.S. and coalition soldiers. Captured in early 2007 by British military forces, al-Khazali provided a wealth of information over the course of nearly 100 different sessions. Although al-Khazali was released in 2010, his TIRs remained classified until February 2018 when they were released by the U.S. government. Bryce Loidolt, "Iranian Resources and Shi`a Militant Cohesion: Insights from the Khazali Papers," *CTC Sentinel* 12:1 (2019): pp. 21-24. Another example of the use of TIRs to understand a difficult problem can be found in previous CTC research regarding Iranian strategy in Iraq, which relied on declassified TIRs of militants fighting in Iraq to better understand facilitation routes between Iraq and Iran, as well as the intentions of Iran with regard to Iraq in the future. Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, *Iranian Strategy in Iraq: Politics and "Other Means"* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2008).

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The al-Mawla TIRs: An Analytical Discussion with Cole Bunzel, Haroro Ingram, Gina Ligon, and Craig Whiteside

By Daniel Milton

When the Combating Terrorism Center was provided with the three Tactical Interrogation Reports (TIRs) of the individual the U.S. government has identified as the leader of the Islamic State, Amir Muhammad Sa'ïd Abdal-Rahman al-Mawla, one of our goals was to get the response of experts to the documents. To facilitate such a discussion, CTC hosted a virtual discussion between Cole, Haroro, Gina, and Craig and asked them to offer some preliminary thoughts regarding the meaning and significance of the content of these documents, as well as the unanswered questions that still remain. What follows is a transcription of that conversation, which has been edited for clarity and style. Despite these edits, however, we have sought to preserve the intimate nature of the conversation, including speculative statements regarding how to interpret what the documents do and do not tell us about al-Mawla. In the end, our hope is that this conversation with these experts stimulates future research and inquiry, all while providing a modest but important increase in our knowledge of this important figure in the Islamic State.

CTC: Cole, Craig, Gina, and Haroro, it is great to have you all here to speak with CTC about these documents. Let's start with some contextual questions. As you all know, we've only got three documents of a larger population of approximately 66. What do you think we can make of just three documents? Is it possible to get insight from a limited sample? What are some of your thoughts on that in terms of the limitations, but also potentially the things that can be extracted?

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Whiteside: I've been through the TIRs a few times, and each time, I'm picking up more stuff. I'm surprised there are that many reports in general. If there's 66 that are out there, I didn't realize that detainees were interrogated that often in a place like [the U.S. Camp] Bucca [detention facility], which [had] a reputation for people just getting dumped there and being unmanageable, so it indicates to me that he was a person of interest long beyond the initial screening process.

Ligon: It's the most that we have from him, and so I think that's really important. It's also essentially in his own words, which as a psychologist and somebody who studies leadership style by how people talk, that to me is incredibly important. Using interviews and responses to interviews is an important method for those of us who assess the psychology of leadership. And so the fact that there are three at different time points actually shows some reliability because you can see some of the same speech patterns and constructs he uses across the three time periods, and really remarkable consistency in how he expresses his world views. So I personally deduced a lot out of the length and the fact that it's a primary account. It's his own words. Although these summaries are paraphrased by the compilers of the TIRs rather than verbatim, it's still the closest thing we have to his own words. The key to me is that there was no speechwriter; and his responses, whether deceptive or not, are still his words. So I think it's incredibly useful.

That said, one limitation is the date of them. It's 12 years ago, and life experiences shape how someone views the world and their place in it. To get a better sense of his leadership style, I would like to know what's happened to him since, anything of how he would perceive lessons learned. Insofar as we can deduce anything from a small set of documents and knowing the leadership position he does end up attaining, I think this is someone who does draw upon lessons and experiences that he's had, so it would be good to know what's happened to him in the intervening years.

Ingram: I'd just add to what Craig and Gina have said so far. This is an interesting collection of documents, but there's no question that there are significant limitations. These are only three of 66 or so documents, and so we're missing that larger context. I think more time is needed to track down, for example, the consequences of his informing on his terrorist colleagues, to verify the accuracy of his claims. But even just beyond that, there's a real value from a research perspective to taking this as a snapshot and placing it within the historical context for the time.

I would be interested in seeing actual transcripts as opposed to the summaries.^a That would allow you to capture the nuanc-

^a Editor's note: The Combating Terrorism Center was not provided with, nor is aware of, transcripts of al-Mawla's interrogation sessions.

es. Sometimes that exchange between interrogator and detainee is actually really important because what you can potentially do over time is track developments in the relationship between the interrogator and the individual. And you can't really see that in the summaries.

Even though this is someone being interrogated and under pressure, one of the big points we learn is that this is a man who is clearly a rat. When I was reading these summaries, it just reminded me of other snitches. The way he selectively talks up and emphasizes certain details while conveniently ignoring or downplaying others. At least in these summaries, al-Mawla largely focuses on other people and the group. Even when talking about himself, the story of his recruitment seems exaggerated in some ways, whitewashed in others, but largely a means to point to other people. Whether this is part of a master plan for senior members that get caught, the actions of a common snitch, or a bit of both, it's hard to tell, but it's all important for context. I think that that's a really important part of this collection, and that's why the transcripts would be so interesting. Even if much of what he's saying is not accurate, it's such an insight into al-Mawla. It's also important to recognize that what we see in these summaries is likely partly the result of an interrogation plan, and al-Mawla's interrogators may have latched on to signs of ego or other vulnerabilities that made him more likely to talk. I'm obviously speculating here because these summaries don't provide all these details, but the possibilities are interesting.

Aside from these types of limited insights, the real value of these documents from a research perspective will be the ongoing and future research efforts that they can help inform. In my view, it's that kind of contextual, strategic hindsight-type research that will be really interesting.

Bunzel: Obviously, it's a limited dataset here, but I still think it's extremely useful, particularly because we don't have much verified information about al-Mawla. Not that this is entirely verified, but at least it's information that comes from a verified source. I've seen, for example, reporting that he went by the name of *'ustaz*, or the professor or the teacher, and here one of his pseudonyms given in the TIRs is *Ustaz Ahmad*, so there's some corroboration for that. There has also been reporting about him having a religious educational background, and that also finds corroboration here.^b

Another interesting thing is the time lag between one of the TIRs and two of the other ones, and you can definitely see that he takes a very different approach from January 8th to January 25th 2008. In the first one, he practically distances himself from the organization, saying, 'I've never even given bay`a to anyone in the organization. Why? Because I'm a Sufi.' While we might be learning that [he] had some Sufi past, the idea that he is presenting there is that 'I am a Sufi. Therefore, I have given bay`a to a *murshid*, which is a Sufi spiritual leader. I cannot possibly give bay`a to a leader of ISI because I have bay`a to a spiritual Sufi leader.' That's nonsense, because in terms of ISI's ideology at that time, having a bay`a to a Sufi spiritual leader is a death sentence. So that seems like nonsense.

He also doesn't even acknowledge that he was a bona fide member of the group in that earlier January 2008 TIR. And then in the

second two, as we all know, he's singing quite loudly. So even though we don't know the circumstances of the interrogation—there are also different interpreters, and there is some variation of language used from one set to the other, and these are problems—having that time lag helps understand the development of his willingness to talk with interrogators.

CTC: This has been touched on in your comments, but clearly in the back of all of our minds is the question of whether al-Mawla is just putting out falsehood after falsehood. What are we to make of it all with respect to this adversarial process where potentially there are incentives to deceive or to minimize? How do you try to balance some of those things when you're looking at information like this and trying to draw out the truth?

Bunzel: At first, I was skeptical that he was giving a whole lot of valuable information away. I thought, 'these were mostly pseudonyms, so what's the big deal of saying Abu Ahmad is the administrative leader for some imaginary province?' But I think when you look more carefully, he's identifying people by name. At the end of one of these TIRs, the names are given, real names. He does seem to be ratting on people. Then I notice something interesting, which is that when it came to his brother-in-law, he completely distances his brother-in-law from the organization: 'Oh no, he's just a driver.' It's just fascinating. There was an allegation made in 2019 by an IS [Islamic State] defector that al-Mawla paid a very large sum of money to the Iraqi government for his son-in-law to be released from detention, all the while ignoring requests to seek the release of other detainees. So that struck me as interesting. There may be a pattern here of trying to protect family members at the expense of other members of the organization.

Ligon: Again, as someone who looks at leadership styles based on the psychological constructs they use, I'm actually less concerned with the factual veracity of these statements. I'm really interested in the words used to describe his relationship to others in the organization and the organizational structure. That to me gives more insight into the sense-making he uses and how he might be expected to perceive ambiguous events that happen in the future. So it's interesting to hear you all talk about the factual veracity, but for me, it's the word choices and the psychological constructs that he uses to label events and people that are really important from an organizational psychology perspective.

CTC: So even in that sense, the falsehoods or fictions are still telling in and of themselves.

Ligon: Yes. And if he was using deception, the level of detail that he gives does show a remarkable capacity for contriving information, so acknowledging Haroro's point about what happens in these interrogations and how they try to evade culpability, it is interesting to me that he gave really specific details down to acne marks on someone's face and accents. As those descriptions had stability over time, if he was not being truthful, that gives some indication to his capacity for deception. But the stability of the descriptions does point to the likelihood that he was being truthful rather than a master of deception; in addition, many of these details are verified in other reporting—he just went one step further by giving a true inside look into the organization.

^b Editor's note: Previous reporting had noted that al-Mawla graduated with training in Islamic law from the University of Mosul. Martin Chulov and Mohammed Rasool, "Isis founding member confirmed by spies as group's new leader," *Guardian*, January 20, 2020.

Whiteside: Going to Gina's point, which I think is a really good one, and also Cole's point about there being a lag between the interrogations, one question I have is how much was he getting schooled up by other detainees in the facility on what information to protect? 'Look, this is what they know. This is what you can give them in order to gain something out of it.' And that may reflect the training that they get upon joining the group, during their equivalent of basic training. If that was the case to a significant degree, it would show he's really clever and that there was some kind of organizational infrastructure that informed recruits what they could and couldn't say, what they need to do in order to get out of detention and back into the fight.

Ingram: I think the contradictions that are emerging here are a really important part of understanding this collection of documents. This idea of him giving away a whole lot of information and then dismissing his own involvement, but then in the same breath, really talking up his involvement, these are all important insights and these contradictions actually matter.

These documents again are going to raise questions about prisoner management issues. You've got someone who is, according to their own testimony, senior and connected, so why was he released? Now, my own view of this is that a lot of those hindsight discussions are by people who are not fair in their judgment. They don't actually assess that decision at that point in time with the information that was known, with that context, in those circumstances, and it's really easy a year, five years, 10 years later to say, 'oh, why did you do that? He became caliph.' That kind of retrospective judgment misses the point and isn't particularly valuable for improving practice. But in saying this, there are some important questions here about the management of not only people but information because he provides some pretty important insights into what was going on underground at the time.

CTC: Several of the comments have drawn us into this historical aspect of what's going on in Iraq at this point in time, what's going on for ISI. He claims to have joined in early 2007. He's captured in early 2008, certainly the capture date we can be confident in. What else is going on in Iraq and ISI at this time, and how does that influence how you look at this material?

Whiteside: His story seems like a pretty normal story of anyone who joins a clandestine organization, except that he's joining in early 2007. The tide's already starting to turn against the Islamic State of Iraq. But this doesn't seem to impact him at all. People are leaving the organization in large numbers. The defections to the *sahwa*^c or other resistance groups are just beginning because of the backlash against the Islamic State of Iraq around this time period. But that's not reflected in these documents much at all.

Furthermore, I find it interesting that he talks about people like Abu Umar al-Baghdadi^d who the U.S. is, halfway through this par-

ticular year, not even acknowledging exists.^e He talks about Abu Umar's speeches and the group's media's involvement in the production of the audiotapes that eventually find their way online.

Al-Mawla's story reminds me of an interview that one of the Islamic State of Iraq Shura Council members gave in 2011. He said, and I'm paraphrasing, 'most of us joined around 2007 or later,' which was after the foundation in October 2006 of the Islamic State of Iraq.¹ So al-Mawla's one of this cohort. He probably has a lot of credibility in this organization because he joined in early 2007. And he's still with the organization in January 2008 (when captured) and obviously long beyond that. Even though there's lots of questions about what he was doing before early 2007, just the fact that he officially joins the organization right before it steps off the cliff, and yet, he's still with it, gives him an "OG" factor that is a pretty interesting takeaway.

Bunzel: I found one thing that stands out is the number of people who he is identifying who are also at that time being detained and presumably interrogated. Al-Mawla is being interrogated during the surge at a time when there's clearly a lot of counterterrorism pressure on ISI. Some of the people he mentions as having been detained before him, which suggests to me that they might have ratted on him, and so perhaps he said, 'I might as well sing if they're singing.' And what's interesting is it's hard to tell whether this is all part of some sort of protocol that they have along the lines of 'The U.S. military is stupid; they're going to release you. Just say whatever you need to say to get out.' Or has he completely lost faith in the organization at this point? Everyone seems to be getting arrested. Does he believe people are ratting on him, and he thinks that the project is essentially over. He's only been involved in it for less than a year, according to his testimony. So maybe his view at this point is that this is over. Or maybe not. It's hard to say.

CTC: Absolutely. It is important to remember that these interrogations take place in 2008, and it's unlikely that he was earmarked to become the leader or a senior figure at that point. I think there are some insights in these documents about his own leadership capabilities. What do these documents tell us about his qualifications or capabilities as a leader?

Ligon: One of the things that I do is look at how they interpret the world and what that means for the organization. One of the things that Haroro touched on earlier is that al-Mawla likely has loyalty to the cause over people. In giving so many details up about other leaders and the atrocities they committed, he essentially sacrificed others and perceived them as expendable to the greater cause. This bodes really ill for gaining trust of your inner circle because such behavior might occur again. With the caveat that any picture that can be formed of him is far from in sharp focus because it is based on just three documents, I think he likely perceives people around him as a cog in the greater machine—the dispassionate way he describes others, the way he focuses on how they differ from him—hints at

c Editor's note: *Sahwa*, or Awakening, refers to the movement among local tribes in Iraq that emerged in opposition to ISI in September 2006 and played a key role in the decline of ISI's power in Iraq during 2006-2008. Brian Fishman, *Dysfunction and Decline: Lessons Learned from Inside Al-Qa'ida In Iraq* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2009).

d Editor's note: Abu Umar al-Baghdadi was leader of the Islamic State of Iraq between 2006 and 2010.

e Editor's note: For a variety of reasons, including ISI's own deceptive efforts, the identity of Abu Umar al-Baghdadi was a matter of some speculation for some time. Craig Whiteside, "Lying to Win: The Islamic State Media Department's Role in Deception Efforts," *RUSI Journal* 165:1 (2020): pp. 130-141.

“In giving so many details up about other leaders and the atrocities they committed, he essentially sacrificed others and perceived them as expendable to the greater cause.”

- Gina Ligon

how he perceives even those “closest” to him. For example, in TIR A, when he describes the leaders to whom he was charged with being a confidant and advisor, you can see the way he volleys between who was in his in-group versus not in details such as, “I knew he was from Mosul from his accent.” Then in TIR B, he states about another, “He was not an Iraqi citizen and I could tell from his accent.” In addition, the sheer magnitude of specific details to me shows he was no longer concerned with the outcome for these individuals—they were to be sacrificed for his safety and release. When you have those kind of object beliefs, once people are no longer of instrumental value to you, they’re easily disposable. It’s tough to build loyalty because of that, and you see that in some of his language.

The other piece that I thought was really interesting, and this is sort of triangulated based on where he’s from and the demographics of Al-Muhalabiyah —90 percent Turkmen to 10 percent Arab, a pretty homogeneous city—and the way that he talks about other people is very outgroupy or ‘othering,’ as you would describe it in terrorism literature. He describes people and how they are different from him. And so, fast forward to him later rising up the hierarchy in the group, this means it’s possible and perhaps likely he’s pretty insular in how he constructs his inner cadre of people who he does let get close to him.

The Islamic State has claimed it is a group for ‘everyone’ and all recruits are unified by fealty to Allah. But the problem for them with this is that he does not seem to see loyalty to the religion as a unifying construct. In the documents, he is looking at differences between people. Based on this, I think it’s possible, even likely, that this will alienate some of the people around him over time. Some will feel ‘I’m not really part of this group.’ If he has anyone in his inner circle right now who he does not perceive to be in-group to him demographically, I would bet that they’re questioning their spot in the group because people notice this kind of sentiment over time.

If he also is going to create an organization like that as well, then it would be a bit more insular and homogeneous than what we saw with this call to foreign terrorist fighters and call to Westerners to come over. From these documents, he doesn’t look like the type who is going to be an inclusive leader or building an organization that way. In thinking about what the implications for an al-Mawla-constructed ISIS could be, this person at least from these statements does not look like he’s going to be this inspirational call-to-arms, open to foreign fighters from such a variety of different countries that we saw in the past. If we do see that, it’s because he likely had a direct experience with leaders from different backgrounds that shaped his mental model about diversity in his “top management team” and organization. But in 2008, my assessment is that he will build a homogenous top circle, and anyone he perceives to differ from him will never earn his full trust.



Gina Ligon

I’ve read some think-tank pieces from people saying, ‘Oh, they’ve learned from their mistakes; they’re never going to try to recreate the same org structure,’ and based on my readout of these documents, I just don’t buy that if he’s at the top. My bias is that leaders create the image of the organization in their own, and so if this is a person who’s super hierarchical, likes chain-of-command, appreciates authority and lanes, then he’s going to recreate the same type of structure wherever he goes next. At least back at the time of these TIRs, he sees this organizational structure as a sophisticated way to control a population, assessing and controlling elites. I think we may see him continue or in some instances recreate these organizational components, including embedding sharia into various parts of the organization, as well as the conscription of the ‘judicial branch’ to gain control of and influence with the broader population. You see his recount in TIR C about his role in selecting judges and their import to the overall organizational strategy; he will remember this.

We haven’t talked about his strengths much yet, but he does look to be pretty preoccupied with assessing the health and hierarchy of organizations. For example, in TIRs A and B, he uses a lot of language about duty, authority, and what a given person was in charge of and why. Then in TIR C, after describing an effective org structure, he stated that he “did not interfere with those military members because they have a solid structure.” To him, lines of responsibility and chain of command are important, and he will likely build a comparable and rigid organization that reflects his own mental model of how the world should work.

CTC: Haroro, I know you’ve also got some thoughts on what these tell us about him as a leader, a leadership figure.

Ingram: Well, *if* the details are accurate, of course, then it suggests that he was someone who moved through the ranks pretty quickly. Again, according to his testimony, he gets picked up as a graduate in early 2007; he’s a trainer by March of that year. By July, he’s helping



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to mediate this conflict between JM and ISI.^f By the end of July, he's the general sharia official. By mid-October, he's the temporary deputy *wali*, and then by November 2007, he's back to his previous role again.^g

Some of these claims, as we said before, may be a bit of his ego at play and probably some deception, too. But, assuming that his description of his ascent up the hierarchy is broadly accurate, someone may have seen some potential in him. Or it could be that he's a sycophant. And as we all know, sycophants move rapidly through organizations, too. Al-Mawla, the sycophant, might be the line that comes out of the larger body of TIRs if and when they are released. But the chances are there was something else about him,

^f Editor's note: Although we cannot be entirely certain, this reference in the TIRs likely refers to a conflict in early 2007 that flared up between ISI and a number of other groups, including Jaysh al-Mujahidin (JM). In one episode during this conflict, ISI killed several JM members after failed negotiations. Fishman, pp. 11-13.

^g Editor's note: Both of the specific positions referenced here are relatively high positions within the Islamic State bureaucracy. The position of *wali* refers to an individual who is the head or governor of a regional province or district. Underneath the *wali*, one individual is assigned to oversee the legal courts within that system. This individual also appears to hear appeals and resolve disputes as needed. Patrick B. Johnston, Jacob N. Shapiro, Howard J. Shatz, Benjamin Bahney, Danielle F. Jung, Patrick Ryan, and Jonathan Wallace, *Foundations of the Islamic State: Management, Money, and Terror in Iraq, 2005 – 2010* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016); Mara Revkin, *The legal foundations of the Islamic State* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2016).

“There’s a lot of genealogical wizardry that goes on in these groups. If you want to find Qurashi lineage, you’re going to find it.”

- Cole Bunzel

that there was some quality about him that the organization, that people around him were impressed by to such an extent that within months, according to his telling, he is mediating a conflict that, by the sounds of it, really could have been quite destructive to the organization.

I think there is another important consideration to keep in mind. You see a lot of articles written about the cult of personality that Baghdadi supposedly had and how charismatic he was and that these leaders benefit from being charismatic. Well, the caliph, by definition, is not necessarily a charismatic figure in the strict sense of the word. The weight of his authority comes from a mix of legal-rational and traditional grounds that form the basis for their leadership and the justification for the pledge he receives. Those details are actually really important because what it means is essentially that the individual is important to the extent that they satisfy legal-rational and traditional criteria. Personality helps, but you can kind of construct that around them. So, what do you do if you're the Islamic State? You give the appointed leader a *kunya*; you make them anonymous for a bit of time; you develop and construct their image, and then strategically project it. And so we have to in a sense distinguish between the individual as he is perceived by his inner circle and peers, as Gina has spoken about and I agree with everything that she said, and the way in which the group projects the leader to the world. This all comes back to thinking about what were the qualities that were appealing about al-Mawla, and those qualities as seen by the inner circle may be quite different to the qualities that the group will want to project at some point in time, assuming he is indeed now the leader.

Bunzel: I've seen it reported that a pretty large percentage of Sunni Iraqis, Arab Iraqis claim descent from Quraysh. Whether that's true or not is really irrelevant. What matters is the perception. So maybe people from his area all think that they're Qurashi. I don't think there's a lot of skepticism out there, even among defectors who grew disaffected with the organization, about his lineage. That doesn't seem to be something that is seized upon as the thing that disqualifies him. There's a lot of genealogical wizardry that goes on in these groups. If you want to find Qurashi lineage, you're going to find it. It's all the other stuff—unscrupulousness, the brutality, that sort of thing, that disillusioned former members of the group have focused on.

One thing I think which comes across from the documents is that he's practical as a leader. It's very hard to imagine Abu Musab al-Zarqawi talking to U.S. forces with this kind of openness. I think that he's a guy who can put on a façade to get what he wants, to get to the next stage. So he's willing perhaps even to throw lower-level figures in the organization under the bus in order to keep the group or the movement alive.

The one response I would have to Haroro, and I agree with pretty much everything you said apart from this, is that the caliphate, as

classically conceived, is a *personal* institution in the sense that it's the caliph who has to meet certain criteria in order to be suitable for the caliphate and it's the caliph who receives the oath of allegiance from his subjects. They don't give an oath to the caliphate as an institution, but to the caliph himself. So there's a problem with the anonymity of the caliph as regards the caliphate claim for the Islamic State today. That being said, there's nothing in here to suggest that al-Mawla doesn't meet any of the classical qualifications for the caliphate on their face. Traditionally, those qualifications include such things as descent from Quraysh, justice, probity, soundness of body and mind, knowledge and wisdom. There's a case to be made for most these things in these documents, except for perhaps probity. He does seem to be rather untrustworthy and lacking in principle.

One question these documents raise is why isn't he giving an audio statement in the present day? That seems kind of odd. Wouldn't you want to boost the morale of followers of the Islamic State by giving a speech right after being named caliph? There is a precedent for that. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, after succeeding Abu Umar al-Baghdadi as head of the Islamic State of Iraq in 2010, didn't give an audio address for more than two years.^h But what we see from the documents is that al-Mawla's not somebody who can't deliver an audio address. Like Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, he served as a preacher in a mosque. One can assume he can give a pretty good sermon, so that's not the reason why they're keeping him away from the microphone.

Whiteside: The only thing I'll add is what he's *not*. He's not a former Baathist, contrary to some of the first media reports on him. He was a private in the Iraqi Army, he's a conscript like most Iraqis had to be at the time unless they were incapable. Military officers pretty much had to be a Baathist. But as a private, he got the military service without the 'smudge' of the Baath label on him. I think that's important to this organization for the overall leader.

Ligon: I just wanted to add something to specifically Haroro's point about him possibly being a sycophant. I think that is really insightful, too, given his deference to authority and hierarchy and the way he talked about the line-and-block charts and who reported to whom. Some leaders who focus on others' prescribed duties, appropriate behavior ascribed to a given position and place, and the importance of 'duty' are high on what is called "succorance," or the need to please those they perceive to be in authority positions in their organizations. This might result in behaviors that are ingratiating toward those he perceives he needs to influence, which could explain his somewhat unconventionally quick rise to such an important position. This mental model, if true, also has implications for needing to please others and not making mistakes—fear of failure. To the extent that the picture that is forming is accurate, I think that's going to have implications about his decision-making and some of the weaknesses that are probably going to go along with that.

^h Editor's note: Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was elevated to emir sometime after the death of Abu Umar al-Baghdadi in April 2010, but the announcement was not forthcoming until May 2010. Anthony Shadid, "Iraqi Insurgent Group Names New Leaders," *New York Times*, May 16, 2010; William McCants, "Who is Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi," BBC, March 8, 2016. His first audio speech did not come until July 2012, although he did release a written eulogy of Usama bin Ladin in May 2011. Aaron Zelin, "Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: Islamic State's driving force," BBC, July 31, 2014.

CTC: One of the things that stands out to me is that his self-described path both into and up through the organization really seems to revolve around his religious training and ability to implement decision-making in the religious realm, which I don't think is a huge surprise. Still, the role of religion seems like such a significant part of his story. What do you make of that? Is that something that stood out to you at all?

Whiteside: It did. Personally, I feel like he was being deceptive here. I wouldn't be surprised, and this is total speculation, if the group cultivated a relationship with him much earlier, maybe even paid his way through school, and they were grooming people, much like Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and other important people, to get education in key subjects at a very crazy time. In 2007, Iraq was like the apocalypse. Everything is going on; it's civil war and al-Mawla is in school and he's not fighting in the resistance. Yes, people do that. One thing I've learned is people live their normal lives in very crazy times. But it reminds me of what Aaron Zelin wrote in his recent book on Tunisian jihadists about the grooming process and education that took place before recruits were allowed to officially join the early Islamist movements.² There is some evidence that ISI worked with smaller groups during this time period that were unaffiliated, and the group patiently cultivated independents as they waited to commit. Unlike other groups, once you gave allegiance to the ISI leader, then you were a 'card-carrying member' per se, and that was a final commitment. We even have counts of official members of the early Islamic State thanks to its meticulous recordkeeping. According to one RAND study, there were approximately just under 1,000 in the Mosul area in 2009.¹ But, I think this number is a bit deceptive, that its tentacles were much broader and their grooming and recruiting activities touched a wider population. What I saw in some other documents was how invested they were in controlling university curricula, so that's an interesting aspect with regard to al-Mawla in Mosul. Anbar University in Ramadi was heavily infiltrated by the Islamic State during this same period that al-Mawla says he was recruited,¹ and this might have also been the case with Mosul University—especially the religious studies college he graduated from in January 2007.

One thing that got my attention was that he describes in the TIRs in detail the efforts the ISI are making to integrate sharia oversight into the media department. When you look at the organization charts of that period on the CTC website,³ there is no sharia position in the media wire diagram, but they're beginning to integrate it. They're already routinizing it, as Haroro calls it, in 2007, a few months after creating the Islamic State of Iraq, the fake state, the paper state, and they're integrating sharia into the other stand-alone departments. He's also talking about integrating sharia into the security force structure of the group. That's his job as Mosul's

ⁱ Editor's note: The RAND study used declassified internal documents from ISI to estimate the size of the group in Mosul from 2007 to 2009. It found that the group's membership declined over that period, from approximately 1,300 in 2007 to 990 in 2009. Johnston, Shapiro, Shatz, Bahney, Jung, Ryan, and Wallace, pp. 160-162.

^j Editor's note: The story of AQI/ISI's activities at Anbar University are covered in some detail in a document released in support of the U.S. Army's history of the Iraq War. These documents are available for download at the website of the U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center. Specially, the document titled "1007. Chapter 6" includes several sections that touch on this subject, including "AQI Domination of Anbar University" and "Ramadi Remains the Center of AQI Activity."



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sharia advisor, to vet and nominate the people that are going to work in those different areas.

It's not clear, however, if this cross-pollination, between the sharia and other sections of the group, was new or something al-Mawla just sought to downplay. Al-Mawla seems to talk about it [as] 'Well, those are the military people, and that's not my job here in the sharia section.' I don't know if that's self-serving. While complete separation would make sense from an organizational perspective—like 'those are the military people. Those are the security people, and never the two shall meet'—some of what he says seems to indicate that this is changing for the organization in 2007. This, despite the sense of acute crisis during this period.

So then I ask the question, 'why would they integrate the sharia personnel into other sections of the group?' Along the lines of what [Jacob] Shapiro writes in *The Terrorist Dilemma*,⁴ there is a focus in his discussions on the necessity of controlling violence by the organization, and it's not this hearts-and-minds stuff. Controlling violence and illegal activity becomes a large part of what he is doing in an effort to justify organizational policies to an internal audience, not necessarily an external one. In other words, he is issuing legal rulings regarding what we would consider criminal activity by members of the organization to sanctify it, not from an outside perspective, but for the benefit of those inside the group. It is an important effort to get control of their own people, who are probably not much more organized than hoodlum criminal gangs, and discipline them into funneling their efforts and activities towards the political goals of the organization. But the TIRs show that this effort is led by the religious wing of the group, by integrating the sharia

“He is issuing legal rulings regarding what we would consider criminal activity by members of the organization to sanctify it, not from an outside perspective, but for the benefit of those inside the group.”

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officials into the media, the security, finances, and military. In other words, they are using people like al-Mawla and his peer former caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, to influence all aspects of organization.

Bunzel: I think the role of his religious training and experience is certainly significant. Of course, you get no sense here of exactly what he's teaching people. He claims that he began his time with the Islamic State of Iraq as a sharia teacher, basically grooming and training sharia officials in Mosul and appointing the head officials and judges for both sides of the city. I suppose being a high-level sharia official in the organization was useful for somebody who wanted to rise quickly. It likely would have given him exposure to a lot of different parts of the organization. He was involved on both sides of Mosul in matters of justice, arbitration, settling disputes. He likely got to know a lot of people that way.

Going back to what Craig said, it's fascinating that ISI seems to be focused on the credentials of these people. Al-Mawla gets his master's degree from the University of Mosul two months before Baghdadi defends his dissertation at the University of Baghdad. What's going on there? It's very odd also in this respect, which is that ISI, according to its ideology at the time, says that public institutions in the state of Iraq are *kufri*, "unbelief." But the University of Mosul is a public institution, so what good is a university degree from the University of Mosul? It's kind of interesting. Clearly, they're not following their ideology to the letter. They seem to put a premium on the academic credentials of some of their members. I think clearly they're taking religious training very seriously. As Craig said, a big focus of theirs when it comes to religion seems to be having a sharia official at every level of the organization. They take this stuff very seriously. I think what we see here is more evidence that religion isn't just being superimposed on some preexisting network of Baathists. I certainly don't see that here.

Ligon: I think the only thing I would just echo is that a sharia official making pronouncements gives some sort of absolute authority that is difficult to refute with logic or rational persuasion. And so if he's proofing the media products and decision-making and arbitration, it's hard for others in the group to dispute if he's speaking on behalf of a higher authority. And so that is part of his influence throughout the organization. Craig, Haroro, and Charlie [Winter], in *The ISIS Reader*, did some great work to show religious training was such an important part of even military training.⁵ And now these TIRs help show how religious expertise was important in all of the organization's pursuits. If he is the arbitrator on a lot of these decisions, invoking scripture that maybe others don't know as well as he does, then he can really have some power in that organization, and it will be difficult to refute with a logic- or fact-based appeal.

To me, the significance of ideological authority is verified by his descriptions of the organizational design (i.e., ISIS ideology wasn't a department like other functional components; it was embedded in every operation).

Ingram: This is just another example of these documents opening up new research avenues that potentially are really important. For example, was al-Mawla part of any effort by the Islamic State to reach out to graduates and qualified people to help rebuild the foundations of the organization? The Islamic State's first generation, those around Zarqawi, are really important to the movement's story. But those who are part of this generation, who joined around the time of the movement's nadir, especially 2007 onwards, are perhaps most important for what followed from 2013-14 onwards. This is a question that is much bigger than al-Mawla and would help set the scene for how we understand the Islamic State's boom years. It also goes back to the point made earlier that the questions this set of documents raises are probably even more valuable, in fact, than what they reveal.

CTC: That's a great segue into the final couple questions that I wanted to ask. As you all look through these, what was most surprising to you about what they did or did not reveal? What was something that really stood out to you as significant?

Bunzel: What stood out to me is the fact that he joins the organization just a few months after the announcement of the Islamic State of Iraq and seemed to play a pretty big role in the administration of the imaginary state. A lot of the people he's talking about—*walis*, governors—this stuff didn't exist before October 2006 when they created the Islamic State of Iraq. Also, coming back to the question of him rising so quickly in the organization and whether we want to believe that or not, my sense is that it's probably true that he joined only in February 2007. He knows that if people are going to rat on him, that's what they would say about when he joined.

But I have the sense also that he's probably much more of a jihadi veteran than he's letting on. This kind of outsider university student doesn't just immediately join the Islamic State of Iraq and become deputy *wali* of Mosul in three months. It's just ridiculous. So what we don't know is his pre-history before joining the Islamic State of Iraq. What other group or groups was he involved with? That might tell us a lot about his ability to exert so much authority so quickly in the organization.

Ingram: I love the contradictions in the summaries. I think it's the most fascinating aspect for a range of reasons we've all highlighted in different ways. This idea, as Cole said, that he is in this organization so briefly and moves through so rapidly, it just seems so absurd and then you start to factor in the things that Gina spoke about, things that Craig spoke about, that there was possibly a longer relationship and a longer history there of some kind, even if it was informal, or potentially that this guy's been fighting for a while and had been involved in the organization much longer than he suggests. This might explain why he was someone that could be trusted. It would be interesting to know more about those who brought him in and facilitated his rise. I think that this is all intellectually interesting, but I also think that they're interesting from a practitioner's perspective. For people who work in HUMINT, persuasion, the STRATCOM/IO [strategic communications/information operations] areas, and psyops areas, this is potentially

really valuable stuff.

Ligon: If you triangulate a few things—his emphasis on authority and chain of command and this aggrandizement, possible sycophant behavior, seeing people as cogs in a machine and his background of selecting judges and their role in controlling a population—we might be able to hypothesize some specific early warning indicators of a growing capability. As we know from the group's history, ISIS had a history of identifying which elites to conscript toward their ends via the Security and Intelligence Council canvassing activities. Given al-Mawla's background with the important role of judges, one of the first structures he may overtake is the judicial system, rooting out those who he believes to be "unjust" or capricious in their decisions. This is someone who comes across as likely really skilled at what leadership scholars would describe as Machiavellian assessment of who holds the power in an organization or a society. And if he is indeed a sycophant and good at reading people to please them, he will be able to coopt them very early on as part of his organizational structure to control the population.

Whiteside: Brian Fishman argues that the stigma of Sunni fratricide and the declaration of the Islamic State are the key factors that turns a lot of rival Sunni groups away from it.⁶ And yet, that understanding is partially contradicted in these interrogation reports from early 2008. Al-Mawla relates his role as a broker with other groups as they try to negotiate disputes, which seems to be a pretty normal and recurring function. In other words he is engaged in an on-going effort to reduce conflict with Ansar al-Islam, the Islamic Army, and the Mujahideen Army. These relationships seem to be much more cooperative than conflictual, at least in Mosul. Al-Mawla specifically references a dispute between ISI, the Islamic Army in Iraq, and Ansar al-Sunna.^k The latter group is accused of killing three individuals they thought were Iraqi police officers, but turned out to be two ISI members and an Islamic Army man—all Sunnis.^l That's behavior that we usually attribute to the Islamic State, yet here we have a glimpse into the fact that at least one other group, Ansar al-Sunna, was potentially targeting Sunnis as well for collaboration. But if other Sunni resistance groups are doing it, then what are the differences between all of these organizations that supposedly are mad at the Islamic State for killing Sunni Iraqis and declaring an Islamic State? They're doing it as well. Once those differences water down, it begs the question why aren't they with the Islamic State?

And that's the question the Islamic State is always trying to get other people to answer in a variety of ways. Al-Mawla describes an incident that happened while he was advising the *wali* of Mosul, after four Mujahideen Army leaders defected to the Islamic State, which goes back to what Cole was saying, this is a very pivotal time. People have to make decisions about the future. These four men later reneged on joining the Islamic State due to the backlash I talked about earlier, and that is a serious violation for this group and the *wali* had them killed. According to al-Mawla's testimony from

^k Editor's note: This specific instance is discussed by al-Mawla as one of the legal cases in which he was required to issue a decision. TIR C.

^l Editor's note: The Jaysh al-Islami, or Islamic Army of Iraq, was quite possibly the largest and most influential Sunni resistance group to the occupation in 2004-2008, but it lost many of its members to the *Sahwa* in 2007 and was not much of a factor after that. An unknown number of members defected to the Islamic State during this period.



Haroro Ingram

the TIRs, it became a major leadership issue for the Islamic State's leadership, and the Mosul *wali* and his Security emir were relieved and replaced, really for following the Islamic State's own ideology. It appears that the pragmatists in the group's senior leadership understood that killing four (former) leaders of another group in Mosul was not a good thing.

This anecdote is a bit revealing about this organization, and what al-Mawla learned during this tumultuous period, during a period I don't think we understand well, about how this group eventually outlasts all the other Sunni rivals that are out there.

My last point is that it seems that Mosul was the center of gravity for the group long before we thought. In 2008, the media department is based out of Mosul, and its growing routinization reinforces what Haroro calls the "adhocratic" nature the Islamic State. The leaders might have been thinking, 'We don't have a base to put this thing (in their current situation), so we're going to put the department under Mosul.' So, they have the central media being supervised by al-Mawla—the general sharia of Mosul—and not Wilayat Nineveh or what they called "the northern region." They don't have those institutions yet. The Islamic State organization is still kind of in flux, and these important institutions are floating around, so here is al-Mawla—a city-level sharia official—and he is vetting the larger organization's media products, which I thought was surprising and rather important for someone in his position.

CTC: One of the things that's been interesting to me is the way that this type of research has a tendency to find its way into the hands of the people that it's about. If you just were looking into the crystal ball of the future, what impact do you think this could have on people who are part or supportive of the Islamic State group?

“What the documents potentially reveal is that the Islamic State has a rat problem. And it's at the top. You've essentially got the canary caliph sitting there.”

- Haroro Ingram

Ingram: In terms of impact, we should be thinking about this as *potential* impact and then how to maximize certain effects over others. A lot of what we've spoken about today has been hypothetical, trying to fill in the gaps, trying to add color to an incomplete picture. How this information is leveraged, for example by the global coalition against Daesh, is important because if Mawla sits at the top of the Islamic State organization, then what the documents potentially reveal is that the Islamic State has a rat problem. And it's at the top. You've essentially got the canary caliph sitting there. Even if the information he provided was somehow part of a plan by senior Islamic State officials—we know many of them demonstrated similar behavior when interrogated—it is still indicative of him as an individual and potentially a culture in the organization. Perhaps yet another example of the disposability of its members especially for the sake of its elites. Al-Mawla is now someone who has a documented history of giving—and even if it's only 50 percent accurate—dozens of names, which he then places into organizational charts, and then provides the names of predecessors to those positions. It will be important to find out what the consequences of that and other snitching by senior leaders were. But the image and perception it creates, I suspect, will be enough for detractors to use this information. Whether Mawla is the caliph or he's a senior leader or even if he is dead, getting some skilled people involved in this persuasion campaign and using these documents (and others) could shake trust in the Islamic State's leadership group, morale between the leaders and the middle managers, and it brings into question the judgment of those people that brought Mawla into the organization and potentially facilitated and enabled his rise. Clearly, there seems to be something about Mawla that impresses people, but I think that information like this can be a vulnerability for him and for the people who supported him, whatever his current or previous roles.

Some may say, does any of this really matter when the Islamic State's supporters will just dismiss all of this as lies? For me, that's a far too passive and defeatist attitude. After all, something which Cole and Aymenn al-Tamimi have covered in a lot of detail is the tensions within the organization, the tensions within the leadership group, those tensions within the Islamic State more broadly, and then you've got the tensions between the Islamic State and other organizations, like AQ. So, in a sense, what this information represents is potential ammunition in a persuasion battle. And you're putting that ammunition out there into an information system, and some are going to ignore it and say that it's rubbish and it's not working, some may take it and try to create blowback, but others are going to take it, and they're going to load up and fire against the Islamic State. Whether there is a role for Western voices in that exchange, probably not directly, but there is a lot that can be done behind the scenes.

In short, we absolutely shouldn't underestimate the potential of information like this, if harnessed appropriately, to really have an impact in the organization in ways that can hurt just as much as killing its members, if not more. When you erode trust, when you erode morale—especially in this strategic phase that the Islamic State movement is in right now—especially when it's clandestine, it can have a very negative impact on the group. And involved in a grinding insurgency, it can have a very negative impact on the group. If you are part of a clandestine organization, trust is a crucial factor for your survival, for rebuilding, and for recruiting. Any effort to erode trust, degrade morale, and increase uncertainty is, in my view, worthwhile so long as it is appropriately synched with other efforts and goals.

Ligon: Just one elaboration. What I have learned about this particular group is that the weight of the caliph and who is worthy of assuming that role requires that the individual be *willing* to bear it, not [be] seeking to ascend to it. But al-Mawla, from these documents, appears to have some real characteristics that are at odds with that. You don't want a self-aggrandizing [individual], you don't want a sycophant, you don't want someone who's Machiavellian, always thinking about organizational structure. To me, if people are observing him and then they see that he revealed all of this information when he thought no one was looking, it seems that it might raise some questions. If his authority and how he influences people is through that caliph designation, then he's got some real nefarious personality characteristics that I think would make that less suitable of a role for him and maybe he's not indeed 'the chosen one,' and they made a selection error, right? That's the issue.

Bunzel: My sense is that most of the people these documents would influence have already formed pretty strong opinions about the Islamic State one way or the other, and that they will likely inter-

pret what is being released here according to their priors. For a small group of defectors from the Islamic State who already believe al-Mawla—whom they call Hajji Abdullah in their documents—is an unscrupulous, tyrannical monster, this is just more evidence of that.^m It actually fits a certain narrative, which was something that Gina was getting at, that he's part of an inner circle that they call Al Baghdad, the people of Baghdad, who were very loyal to Baghdadi and who are very concerned with keeping the higher ranks of the organization in the hands of a small group of Iraqis at the expense of everyone else.

So there's a lot there to corroborate other people's priors who are already disaffected with the group. But for the most committed believers, the regular members of the group, I think this will likely be dismissed as psyops. 'It's just lies,' many will likely say. Why would they trust something that comes out of the United States military that has the appearance, from their perspective, of discrediting 'our good caliph'? So I think that's a problem.

Then there are people who are also fairly well established in the leadership of the organization or in some level of the organization who may take notice. One of them might think, 'Oh, I knew that guy that was ratted out by the caliph. That's not cool.' It could have ramifications in that regard. And then for people who are al-Qa`ida loyalists, I think it will also be more evidence, like with the group of disaffected former IS members, that the Islamic State is an unscrupulous and mafia-like organization. **CTC**

^m Editor's note: In early 2019, a group of dissident scholars in the Islamic State came to the view that the organization's leaders, including Hajji Abdullah, were tyrannical and repressive, leading them to defect. On this group's view of the Islamic State's leadership, see Cole Bunzel, "Divine Test or Divine Punishment? Explaining Islamic State Losses," *Jihadica*, March 11, 2019. For a reference to al-Hajj/Hajji Abdullah as the nefarious "deputy" of al-Baghdadi, see Cole Bunzel, "The Islamic State's Mufti on Trial: The Saga of the 'Silsila 'Ilmiyya,'" *CTC Sentinel* 11:9 (2018).

Citations

- 1 Editor's note: The interview referenced here is a press release put out by ISI fearing an interview with Abu Ubaydah Abd-al-Hakim al-Iraqi, then a member of ISI's Shura Council. Abu Ubaydah Abd-al-Hakim al-Iraqi, "Press conference with a member of the Islamic State of Iraq's Shura Council," *Jihadist Media Elite* and *Al Furqan Media*, posted on *Ana al-Muslim Network*, April 11, 2011.
- 2 Editor's note: Aaron Zelin, *Your Sons Are at Your Service: Tunisia's Missionaries of Jihad* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020): p. 32.
- 3 Editor's note: See, for example, the diagram of a media organization and the accompanying translation included in the appendix of Daniel Milton, *Communication Breakdown: Unraveling the Islamic State's Media Efforts* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2016).
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The Future Role of the U.S. Armed Forces in Counterterrorism

By Brian Michael Jenkins

Many senior officials believe that emphasis on counterterrorism for the past two decades has compromised the ability of the U.S. armed forces to perform other critical military missions and that strategic competition, *not terrorism*, must now be the primary concern. This essay provides observations on the future role of the armed forces in counterterrorism and the future role of counterterrorism forces in great power competition. It notes that it will be difficult to demote counterterrorism while terrorists still remain a threat. However, there will be a further shift to counterterrorism without counterinsurgency. Dividing the military into near-peer warfare and counterterrorism camps makes little sense. Future wars will require U.S. commanders to orchestrate capabilities to counter an array of conventional and unconventional modes of conflict, including terrorism. Reduced defense spending in the post-pandemic environment will further increase pressure to cut counterterrorism—but the savings will be modest. Shifting priorities should not mean discarding competence. The hard-won skills that result from decades of counterterrorism operations are fungible, indeed valuable to future military challenges, including great power competition. Terrorism itself is constantly evolving, demanding new approaches. The ability to rapidly adapt to changing threats is applicable to strategic competition.

For almost two decades since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the paramount mission of the U.S. security establishment has been counterterrorism—specifically, defeating the jihadi terrorist enterprise and preventing it or any terrorist organization from mounting another devastating attack on the U.S. homeland. U.S. armed forces have played a major role in this national effort and have borne much of the human cost.

In the view of many senior military officials as well as civilian critics, however, pursuit of the war on al-Qa`ida and later the Islamic State, along with their affiliates, allies, and spin-offs, has commanded too much attention and has consumed too large a share of national defense resources for far too long. As a result, the ability to perform other critical military missions and responsibilities has been compromised.

And although the operational capabilities of al-Qa`ida have been degraded, the territory seized by the Islamic State has been recaptured, and there have been no further large-scale terrorist attacks anywhere near the magnitude of 9/11, the cost in blood and treasure has been high and the results are seen by many as disappointing.

The war in Afghanistan, America's longest war, seems unlikely to end in anything resembling a traditional military victory—or even end at all. Meanwhile, circumstances have changed. New threats have emerged, causing many to argue that U.S. armed forces need to change their priorities accordingly.

The 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) summary describes a complex array of threats and challenges to U.S. national security. These include the reemergence of long-term, strategic competition as the United States is only just awakening from a period of strategic atrophy. The NDS also points to a weakening post-WWII international order and increased global disorder. It mentions new challenges to U.S. military dominance as the United States' competitive military advantage has eroded, rapid technological advancements, and the changing character of war. Its catalogue of threats includes rogue regimes with weapons of mass destruction; non-state actors including terrorists, transnational criminal organizations, cyber hackers, and others with increasingly sophisticated capabilities. Finally, it notes a U.S. homeland that is no longer a sanctuary from foreign attack.¹ Some of these concerns come from assertions that could be challenged, but the appearance of new and complex challenges over the past 20 years is undeniable.

Defense officials have called for re-balancing, meaning that while U.S. armed forces engage in counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan and the Middle East as well as other counterterrorism-related contingency operations worldwide, these missions must not erode the United States' ability to fight more conventional wars against increasingly aggressive major powers.² The second

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While the author alone is responsible for the views expressed in this essay, it benefited greatly from the thorough review and substantive suggestions provided by the CTC Sentinel's editorial team and editorial board as well as from the helpful observations and comments by others, including General (Ret) Michael P. C. Carns and a number of former Special Forces officers.

The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the perspectives of the Combating Terrorism Center, the United States Military Academy, or RAND.

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paragraph of the NDS summary goes further, stating bluntly, “Inter-state strategic competition, *not terrorism*, [emphasis added] is now the primary concern in U.S. national security.”³ The argument that the U.S. military must devote its attention to preparing for a possible shooting war with China or Russia is not new, although it is more emphatically presented in the NDS summary. It is the negative part of the phrase relating to terrorism that commands attention. It raises a series of questions.

How will the United States conduct counterterrorism during an era in which great power competition has been defined as the number-one national security priority? Will the United States be able to address both problem sets at the same time, or will concentration on near-peer threats lead to the inevitable erosion—or deliberate dismantling—of the United States’ hard-won counterterrorism experience, capabilities, and gains? What effect will the shift in priorities have on the military institution itself? What are the potential risks? What are the political consequences? It is time for a comprehensive review of the United States’ counterterrorism strategy. For reasons I will come to later in the essay, this has to be a national discussion, not exclusively a military debate.

As General Michael Nagata stated recently during a West Point Combating Terrorism Center roundtable—and I agree—it is a mistake to view decisions regarding the trade-off between defense planning and resources to great power competition or counterterrorism as a zero-sum game.⁴ This essay will argue that the United States faces a wide spectrum of threats. It is not a matter of guessing the right one. And it is not a matter of making a case for counterterrorism—that is not my purpose here. Future warfare may involve messy combinations of conflict modes (some of which may be new, such as cyber) and call upon *all* U.S. national defense resources to adapt and respond accordingly.

While the 2018 NDS is emphatic that terrorism is no longer the priority, two factors may serve as countervailing forces. Counterterrorism is events-driven. Terrorists events can command public attention and prompt public reactions that outweigh defense priorities.

The second factor, as General Nagata pointed out, is the strategic and political calculations of leadership. A president may seek to avoid military intervention, figuring that it will drag the country into a no-win, no-exit mess for which he or she will be blamed. But he or she will be criticized for projecting an image of American weakness, thereby inviting new terrorist outrages.

A president may, on the other hand, calculate that the situation demands an immediate military response or, alternatively, that withdrawal of already deployed forces brings unacceptable political risk. Or a president may reckon that his political base wants out of endless wars, regardless of the longer-term risks.

This is not to say that military strategy does not apply, or assert that the public opinion is fickle and politicians are feckless. Rather it is to note that public opinion is often divided on these strategic choices. The differences reflect deeply held philosophical views and do not change easily (although the emotive power of terrorism gives it short-term advantage). It is the absence of overwhelming consensus in favor of one or the other strategic priorities that makes strategic and political calculations so difficult and helps explain some of the reversals we have seen.

To address the future course of counterterrorism, it will be helpful to step back in time to explore how we got here. Where we are now reflects decades of events and responses—political and

“It is time for a comprehensive review of the United States’ counterterrorism strategy ... this has to be a national discussion, not exclusively a military debate.”

strategic decisions made in response to changing threats, but often reflecting past experiences. As often as it seemed necessary to use military power, avoiding the repetition of past debacles like the Vietnam War or the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq pulled equally in the opposite direction.

This essay provides a series of observations, grouped into eight sections, with implications for the role U.S. armed forces will likely play and need and ought to play in counterterrorism, based on the author’s own experience and perspective. The first section of the essay will examine the difficulties in backing away from counterterrorism while terrorists still remain a threat and withdrawal from certain conflict zones poses national security as well as political risks. That leads to the question of whether the United States can effectively suppress or at least contain terrorist groups abroad without being dragged into costly counterinsurgency campaigns and nation-building missions, which is the subject of the second section. Without attempting to predict the shape of future wars, the third section of the article argues that future near-peer contests may be very different from past military contests with major powers. Dividing military operations into *normal-war* and everything-else columns makes little sense.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on society and the economy is profound. Defense spending currently accounts for approximately half of total discretionary spending. That may not continue in the post-pandemic environment. What this means for counterterrorism budgets is discussed in the fourth section.

Shifting priorities from counterterrorism to strategic competition does not mean discarding competence. That is the subject of the fifth section, which outlines the long march away from counterinsurgency after the Vietnam War and the gradual, often reluctant, military engagement in counterterrorism operations from the late 1970s onward.

The sixth section argues that the hard-won skills that result from decades of counterterrorism operations are fungible, indeed valuable to future military challenges, including great power competition and near-peer warfare. At the same time, counterterrorism should not be seen as deriving from immutable doctrine handed down through the years. Terrorism itself, the seventh section argues, is constantly evolving, demanding new approaches and new capabilities. The ability to rapidly adapt to a changing threat landscape is a prerequisite in counterterrorism—and a more broadly applicable capability in strategic competition.

The eighth and concluding section takes us back to the original question of how the United States will conduct counterterrorism as great power competition becomes the priority mission and summarizes the final reflections. Reflection is the operative term here. What to many young men and women in today’s armed forces is almost ancient history is to my generation personal recollection. A personal perspective is unavoidable.

As noted, my comments reflect a personal perspective: My formative military experience as an officer in the 7th Special Forces Group during the intervention in the Dominican Republic and in the 5th Special Forces Group in Vietnam; my subsequent tours in Vietnam as a member of a newly created Long Range Planning Task Group; and my experience as a reserve officer (still assigned to Special Forces) admittedly influence my views.

Throughout this period, I remained deeply critical of the U.S. Army's performance in Vietnam. The Army, in my view, viewed the Vietnam War as an exotic interlude between the wars that really counted—World War II and a future conflict with Soviet forces in Europe—and therefore, it never fully embraced a counterinsurgency strategy.⁵ Instead, it remained wedded to large-scale conventional operations, which killed a lot of Viet Cong, but also killed a lot of civilians and destroyed the lives of many others. We did not protect and could not gain the allegiance of the people. The immensity of U.S. military power precluded learning many lessons along the way. After withdrawal, the Vietnam experience was all but erased.

In 1972, I initiated the RAND Corporation's research program on terrorism, believing then that it should be viewed as a new mode of conflict. Terrorism and irregular warfare have dominated my professional life since then. As terrorist violence escalated and terrorist attacks increasingly had strategic consequences, I became convinced that there was an appropriate military role in counter-terrorism—a role, not a solution.

Immediately after 9/11, I argued for a more formal declaration of war on those responsible for the attacks.⁶ The country had to mobilize for a national effort. Military force would be an essential part. The United States had already responded to terrorist attacks with military force on several occasions. The critical difference this time was that in previous cases, the United States responded to terrorist attacks with a single strike, then waited to see what terrorists or their state sponsors would do.

To me, "war" meant that the United States would not stop at one strike, but would initiate a continuing campaign aimed at destroying the organization responsible for the 9/11 attacks and bringing as many of those responsible to justice. There could be no respite for the historic core of al-Qa`ida. And if we were going to send young men—and increasingly women—into combat, they deserved an expression of national support. There was no declaration of war, but Congress' Authorization of the Use of Military Force (AUMF), and in my view, it provided a reasonable substitute. As we were to later learn, the term "war" had unforeseen consequences.

The campaign, I thought back then, would remain narrowly focused on al-Qa`ida. I had no doubt it would require a long-term effort, one possibly lasting decades. New networks would have to be created to exploit intelligence across national frontiers. The strategy would have to include political warfare, aimed at reducing the appeal of the extremists and encouraging alternative views. The goals of the war could not be accomplished unilaterally—international cooperation would be a prerequisite for success.

However, I warned against keeping a large number of American troops in Afghanistan and expressed deep skepticism about getting into nation-building. National institutions hardly existed in the country. Once al-Qa`ida had scattered, I favored the deployment of small numbers of special forces to recruit and coordinate the actions of local proxies or tribal forces to prevent al-Qa`ida from reestablishing bases in the country. This was not about winning a war, but about a relentless pursuit, continuing intelligence collec-

tion, and when required, brief military interventions. For the most part, few in the Pentagon agreed with my thinking.

The 2003 invasion of Iraq, in my (and many others') view, was a costly diversion and a strategic blunder. It distracted from the campaign in Afghanistan, significantly increased the burden on U.S. forces, and created new space for terrorist recruiting. In more recent years, I have worried that exaggerated apprehension on the part of politicians and a fearful public that sought to abolish all risk was keeping the United States engaged in perpetual wars on distant frontiers and a never-ending quest for absolute security at home. Over time, this obsession would have a corrosive effect on our political system.

My purpose here, however, is not to settle old scores, defend the role of special forces, or argue against reallocating military resources. Rather, I aim to provoke a broader discussion about the nature of future wars, the future of counterterrorism as a military mission, and the possible effects of shifting priorities.

Observation 1: It will be difficult to demote counterterrorism

Military planners cannot claim that terrorism is no longer the primary concern because the counterterrorism mission has been accomplished and terrorists are no longer a threat. The 2017 National Security Strategy,⁷ the 2018 National Counterterrorism Strategy⁸—both prepared by the current administration, and the latest Worldwide Threat Assessment, which reflects the consensus view of the U.S. intelligence community,⁹ all agree that terrorism remains a persistent threat to U.S. national security. Some analysts go further and argue that the worldwide jihadi menace—our current foe—is more dangerous than ever.¹⁰

The 'caliphate' declared and defended by the Islamic State was defeated as a territorial expression of the group, but the organization itself was not destroyed. It went underground or scattered to other jihadi fronts in Africa and South and Southeast Asia.¹¹ The operational capabilities of al-Qa`ida have been degraded, but the organization survives and has proved resilient. U.S. officials thought that al-Qa`ida fronts had been contained or that the United States was close to a strategic victory over al-Qa`ida more than once only to be disappointed by comebacks. Al-Qa`ida now waits in the wings for U.S. forces to leave Afghanistan. Whether the Taliban will keep the jihadis under control as they have promised is questionable. As a recent U.N. report points out, the senior leadership of al-Qa`ida remains in Afghanistan and relations between the Taliban and al-Qa`ida remain close.¹²

The United States currently has about 8,500 troops actively engaged in Afghanistan,¹³ approximately 5,200 in Iraq (a figure set to be reduced to 3,000 this month),¹⁴ and under 1,000 still deployed in Syria.¹⁵ These numbers do not include the thousands more stationed throughout the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia. Bringing U.S. troops home has proved difficult.

President Barack Obama wanted to end U.S. participation in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan while avoiding outright defeat, but was unable to do so. When the military situation in Afghanistan appeared to be worsening, President Obama ultimately opted to send in reinforcements, although he accompanied the decision with a schedule for the eventual departure of all U.S. troops. He was later forced to abandon this timetable.¹⁶

While campaigning for president, Donald Trump promised to pull out of the war in Afghanistan. As president, he said that he had

been persuaded that “a hasty withdrawal would create a vacuum for terrorists, including ISIS and al Qaeda,”¹⁷ and in September 2017, he too sent in additional troops.¹⁸

It has been equally difficult to walk away from the Middle East. Iraq’s refusal to sign a status of forces agreement that would protect U.S. troops in Iraq against local prosecution gave President Obama the opportunity to bring those troops home.¹⁹ However, the disengagement proved to be temporary. Two years into his administration, President Obama had to deal with rapidly evolving events resulting from the tumult that began with the so-called Arab Spring in 2011. In the months that followed the troop withdrawal, protests and armed uprisings occurred across the Arab world. Syria descended into a civil war that the jihadis exploited. Ultimately, jihadi formations dominated the rebellion while the Iraqi-led Islamic State broke with al-Qa`ida’s subsidiary and dramatically expanded its control over eastern Syria and rolled across Iraq.

The collapse of Iraqi defenses in 2014 as Islamic State forces swept east obliged the United States to renew military operations to prevent further massacres and to preclude the Islamic State from becoming a new base for terrorist operations against the West. Washington assembled an international coalition and led an ongoing air campaign, which supported ground offenses by Iraqi and U.S.-led Kurdish and Arab recruits.

President Trump’s trajectory on Syria and Iraq has been complicated as well. As a businessman in 2008, Trump expressed support for a rapid withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq, but later blamed President Obama’s premature withdrawal for creating the chaos that led to the rise of the Islamic State.²⁰ As a presidential candidate, he said in 2016 that he would send up to 30,000 more troops to defeat the Islamic State.²¹ That did not happen when President Trump took office, although the U.S.-led bombing campaign intensified and the number of drone strikes on jihadi leaders increased.²²

In late 2019, President Trump announced that the United States would immediately pull U.S. forces out of Syria, abandoning its Kurdish allies who had led the ground campaign against the Islamic State.²³ That decision was reversed and U.S. military units remained in Syria, reportedly to protect the oil fields, but the administration indicated that it was still committed to getting U.S. forces out of Iraq.²⁴ However, in January 2020, in response to anticipated Iranian action provoked by the U.S. killing of Iranian commander Qasim Soleimani, President Trump sent 3,500 additional troops to the Middle East although discussions aimed at withdrawal continue.²⁵

The policy reversals reflect events. The United States’ goal remains to remove itself from endless wars in the Middle East and Afghanistan, but defense decisions have been driven by the fear that withdrawing U.S. forces will lead to chaos in which al-Qa`ida, the Islamic State, or new jihadi entities will establish themselves and be able to launch terrorist attacks on the United States. It is the dark shadow of 9/11 that condemns the United States to perpetual fighting on distant frontiers.

Military commanders understandably want to turn their attention to what they consider to be greater threats to U.S. national security. At the same time, they do not want to ‘lose,’ and in the past, they argued for the surges in Iraq and Afghanistan and currently advise against precipitous withdrawals. Presidents want out as well, but must also calculate the political risks. A major terrorist attack on U.S. soil could be politically ruinous, especially in today’s bitter partisan atmosphere. It could also prompt demands for new military interventions. The safest political course has been to accept the

“It is the dark shadow of 9/11 that condemns the United States to perpetual fighting on distant frontiers.”

continuing military burden, kicking the can down the road, rather than risk being blamed for a new major terrorist attack or being propelled into new military adventures.

Observation 2: There will likely be a further shift to counterterrorism without counterinsurgency

Even without a shift in priorities, the U.S. military is already moving toward a more narrowly focused counterterrorism effort. Direct U.S. participation in the Afghan counterinsurgency campaign is declining as U.S. forces continue to withdraw.²⁶ Negotiations with the Taliban are intended to produce a political arrangement that ends the U.S. role in the fighting without permitting a return of al-Qa`ida or the expansion of Islamic State operations. Ensuring that al-Qa`ida does not make a comeback and that the Islamic State is not allowed to establish a base for international terrorist operations will remain the primary United States’ residual concern. The U.S.-led campaign to destroy the Islamic State territorial expression has ended, and the number of U.S. troops still in Iraq is likely to be further reduced. Counterterrorism operations, however, will continue in the Middle East and elsewhere. How did we get here?

Unfolding events after 2001, plus hubris, overreach, strategic error, and mission creep pushed the United States into large-scale counterinsurgency and nation-building missions. In the immediate shadow of 9/11, pundits were predicting that terrorists would acquire weapons of mass destruction and carry out attacks with tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands of fatalities.²⁷ Terrorism at that level approached an existential threat. Instead of the predicted vertical escalation, terrorism violence spread horizontally.

As it turned out, al-Qa`ida would not be able to pull off another 9/11-scale attack, although this was a reasonable supposition immediately after the attacks and, in my view, the driving force for immediate action against al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan. Scattering al-Qa`ida’s leaders and disrupting its operations prevented the group from mounting further large-scale operations, although they kept planning major operations and splinters of al-Qa`ida carried out attacks across the globe. Most of these occurred in Muslim majority countries (Tunisia, Indonesia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Egypt, Turkey). That produced an untold amount of suffering, but it had one positive effect. Directly threatened, governments that might otherwise have preferred to remain bystanders joined the global counterterrorist campaign. However, major terrorist attacks also occurred in Spain and the United Kingdom, and smaller-scale attacks occurred in the United States along with the continued discovery of terrorist plots. These lent credence to the continuing terrorist threat.

Meanwhile, the United States found itself dealing with escalating insurgencies in both Iraq and Afghanistan. The Iraqi resistance grew out of the chaos created by the removal of the ruling political structure, the disbandment of the Iraqi army, and the failure of the invading forces to maintain control. The deteriorating situation in

“Instead of the predicted vertical escalation, terrorism violence spread horizontally.”

Iraq diverted attention and resources from Afghanistan, allowing the Taliban to make a comeback.

It is extremely difficult to divide expenditures into counterterrorism and counterinsurgency, but counterinsurgency tends to be far costlier. Counterinsurgency operations required larger deployments of U.S. troops, which resulted in more American casualties and higher expenditures. Nor were counterinsurgency operations a domain where the U.S. armed forces could claim expertise or advantage. Coming 30 years after the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, almost all of the Vietnam veterans had retired by 2002—what the military had learned about counterinsurgency had been long forgotten and would have to be relearned at great cost.

In his superb introduction to the new “Counterinsurgency Field Manual” issued in 2006, Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl noted that “the American Army of 2003 was organized, designed, trained, and equipped to defeat another conventional army; indeed, it had no peer in that arena. It was, however, unprepared for an enemy who understood that it could not hope to defeat the U.S. Army on a conventional battlefield, and who therefore chose to wage war from the shadows.”²⁸ The insurgency that followed the U.S. invasion of Iraq provided the impetus and the classroom. By 2006, the U.S. military on the ground had a better understanding and were better prepared to deal with the situation.

With only the embryo of a new national army in Afghanistan and with the Iraqi army disbanded, the burden of fighting fell largely on the United States (and, of course, those allies willing to engage in combat). No matter how strict the rules of engagement or how careful military operations were conducted, this put U.S. soldiers in the position of killing locals—combatants but, unintentionally, bystanders as well. That would not endear them to the local population. It also contributed to jihadis recruiting locally and internationally.

There were a number of proposals to withdraw U.S. forces from both Afghanistan and Iraq. General Colin Powell’s warning—if you break it, you own it—summarized the thinking against just walking away, but an obligation to fix things was not the only concern. The security situation improved enough in Iraq to permit bringing U.S. forces home. But while the United States focused on Iraq, the situation in Afghanistan deteriorated. Toppling the Taliban and going after al-Qa`ida was a counterterrorist operation. Fear that a Taliban return would allow the return of al-Qa`ida turned it into a counterinsurgency mission. It was counterterrorism that got us into counterinsurgency; it was fear of future terrorist attacks at home that kept us there.

By the late 2000s, some, notably then Vice President Joe Biden, argued that the necessary counterterrorism mission could be separated from the undesirable counterinsurgency task.²⁹ While the prevailing thinking focused on a boots-on-the-ground strategy of nation-building and counterinsurgency aimed at defeating the Taliban, Vice President Biden argued for focusing on al-Qa`ida—defending Kabul and Kandahar instead of chasing Taliban insurgents around the country—and training Afghan soldiers to replace de-

parting Americans while avoiding nation-building.³⁰ Vice President Biden was not a dove as described in some news media accounts.³¹ He favored a continued strong American military presence, albeit with a reduced footprint, but sought to shift their role from aggressive pacification of the Afghan countryside—only the Afghan forces could do that—to a more narrowly targeted U.S. campaign, relying on drone strikes and special operations against the remnants of al-Qa`ida.³²

This was not the course taken in 2009, however. U.S. troop reductions, especially since 2013, have reduced direct U.S. involvement in counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan. The Joint Staff’s 2014 publication, *Counterterrorism*, Joint Publication 3-26, narrowed the definition of counterterrorism “to actions and activities to neutralize terrorists, their organizations, and networks,” thereby removing from the definition, “countering root causes.” It also drew a line between counterterrorism operations and “counterinsurgency, security cooperation, and stability operations.”³³ Over the past 10 years, refraining from deployments of large expeditionary forces, avoiding direct U.S. participation in counterinsurgency campaigns, confining the American role to smaller training missions, and relying mainly on special forces and precisely defined airstrikes to go after terrorist cadres have become the precepts of the military’s current and future role in counterterrorism. Despite the differences in rhetoric, there was continuity between the Obama and Trump administrations on these principles.³⁴ They will guide any future responses.

Observation 3: Future wars will likely be blended, mixed, and gray

Pentagon planners identify Russia and China as near-peer adversaries.³⁵ Both countries have large nuclear arsenals and are investing in advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence and hypersonic and cyber weapons that will dramatically change how future wars are fought.³⁶ North Korea, which has nuclear weapons and is believed to have missiles that potentially can reach the U.S. mainland,³⁷ and Iran, which has nuclear ambitions that many believe cannot be stopped as well as a large and diverse missile program, are also mentioned as regional threats or what might be called ‘near, near-peers.’^a

It is difficult for a country to predict what the next war will be like unless that country is planning a surprise attack. Then, at least, military planners may know what the opening battle might look like. That gives a potential advantage to a hypothetical Russian move into the Baltics or an assault by China on Taiwan, which would be hard to prevent and difficult to reverse without ascending to all-out war. Strategic war games simulating such scenarios do not turn out well for the West.³⁸ It is therefore understandable that the Pentagon wants to re-assert military dominance—assuming it ever existed—in order to deter war and if deterrence fails, to win a shooting war.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to question the assumptions that underlie the likelihood of wars with near-peer adversaries or the necessity to prepare for them. However, it would be a mistake to assume that wars with near-peer adversaries will be exclusive-

a Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford, an author of the National Defense Strategy, includes North Korea and Iran in the near-peer problem sets. Jim Garamone, “National Military Strategy Addresses Changing Character of War,” U.S. Department of Defense, July 12, 2019. Both countries are named along with China and Russia.

“It was counterterrorism that got us into counterinsurgency; it was fear of future terrorist attacks at home that kept us there.”

ly large-scale conventional military engagements. To say that the United States has near-peer competitors is not to say that potential wars will take the form of what are historically viewed as near-peer contests. Major war in the future will not resemble major wars in the past. The decision to refocus on peer warfare should not be driven by nostalgia, the desire for tank parades, or the bottom lines of defense contractors.

There is a tendency to divide warfare into two domains. Some senior military leaders talk about “normal war,” meaning large-scale conventional military operations, and other forms of armed conflict. These are variously described as *irregular* warfare, low intensity conflict (LIC), conflict other than war (COTW), military operations other than war (MOOTW), guerrilla warfare (GW), counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, or hybrid warfare. Political warfare, psychological warfare, information warfare, cyber warfare, and measures short of war are thrown into the mix. Although some of the entries have more precise meanings in military doctrine, other entries are generic or overlap. This is not a taxonomy. It is a catalogue of the “other”—and like all things other, these forms of conflict are considered as strange, outside, departures from the canon, and of less significance than normal war.

Creating a divide between “normal” war and other forms of armed conflict would be a mistake. Recent history suggests a more complex future. Since departing from Vietnam, a conflict that saw both conventional and unconventional operations, the United States intervened in El Salvador’s civil war, backed Contra guerrillas in Nicaragua, intervened in Lebanon where American forces increasingly became participants in the country’s civil war and targets of terrorism, landed marines in Grenada, bombed Libya in response to its backing of terrorist attacks on the United States, protected Kuwaiti ships from Iranian attacks in the Persian Gulf, and invaded Panama to arrest its president for drug trafficking.

Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 prompted an American-led mission to liberate the country—a large-scale conventional operation followed by continuing air operations aimed at enforcing a no-fly zone to protect the Kurdish minority in northern Iraq and Shi`a Muslims in the south. In 1993, the United States increased its military presence to protect U.N. operations in Somalia, found itself dragged into its internal conflicts, then withdrew from the country after a psychologically devastating loss in the battle of Mogadishu. The United States sent troops into Haiti in 1994 to ensure a peaceful turnover of power, took the lead in intervening to prevent further slaughters in Bosnia in 1995, and intervened in the Balkans again in 1999 to support Kosovo independence and prevent ethnic cleansing. In response to terrorist attacks on U.S. embassies in Africa, the United States launched a missile attack on targets in Sudan and Afghanistan in 1998.

As a candidate, President George W. Bush had criticized the Clinton administration’s multiple military interventions, but following the 9/11 attacks, launched the “Global War on Terror,” which under different names continues to this day. To prevent Saddam

Hussein from developing weapons of mass destruction, the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, thus initiating what became America’s second longest war and its most costly engagement since the Vietnam War. It was initially a successful conventional operation but was followed by a long, bloody insurgency.

Although determined to avoid further military involvement in the Middle East and North Africa, the United States under the Obama administration participated in the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime in Libya in 2011, half-heartedly supported those fighting against Syrian leader Assad, and in 2014 increasingly became involved in military operations against the Islamic State. That same year, Russia seized Crimea and sent masked Russian soldiers in unmarked uniforms—the “little green men”—to participate in Ukraine’s civil war. Also in 2014, China began building scores of bases on atolls in the South China Sea as well as a base in Djibouti.³⁹

This military history at a gallop is relevant. It underscores the observation that events, not strategic preferences, determine military operations. It should be a cautionary tale to political leaders who make the ultimate decisions about when and where to employ military force. It is also a warning to military leadership that the country faces diverse challenges to its security that cannot simply be banished from consideration.

The brief recent history also shows an assortment of military operations. Foes of the United States are diverse and have used varied means to overcome America’s perceived technological superiority and greater military might. Even near-peer adversaries have conducted their activities in ways that stop short of provoking a direct military response. And clearly the United States has struggled to craft effective responses, yet found it difficult to avoid engagements or depart from them. As former Air Force Vice Chief of Staff, General Michael Carns pointed out to me just before this article was published, “We can (and should) recognize that we face terrorism from parties who recognize that the ‘terror’ choice of political engagement is the best choice for them and the worst choice for us, given our mindset and our resultant ‘way of war’ once engaged.”

One can sympathize with those who argue that these endless distractions drain our attention and resources to the point that the United States may now be in danger of losing its military superiority, despite defense expenditures that dwarf its competitors’ combined defense budgets.^b But it also suggests that as the United States devotes itself to recovering an undeniable edge in advanced military capabilities, it will only further oblige its foes to invent ways they can obviate America’s advantage. (Israel is already in this conundrum.) Achieving overmatch will increase challenges in the gray area. To put it simply, the other forms of war are inescapable. The United States needs to examine the entire realm of warfare in the gray area.

Deterring nuclear adventurism may require maintaining an effective nuclear arsenal. Deterring conventional challenges may require acquiring and learning how to exploit the most advanced technologies to demonstrate that the United States will win any shooting war. However, tomorrow’s wars may also include adversaries exploiting vulnerabilities created by the United States’ increasing dependence on the internet, sabotaging the nation’s critical

b According to the Peter G. Peterson Foundation, the United States spends more on defense than the next 10 countries combined. “U.S. Defense Spending Compared to Other Countries,” Peter G. Peterson Foundation, May 13, 2020.



A CH-47 Chinook helicopter assigned to the Combat Aviation Brigade, 1st Armored Division prepares to land in order to extract Afghan National Army and U.S. soldiers assigned with the 1st Armored Division, and the 1st Battalion, 178th Infantry Regiment, Illinois Army National Guard following a advise-and-assist mission on September 17, 2019, in southeastern Afghanistan. (MSG Alejandro Licea/U.S. Department of Defense)

infrastructure, or crippling its space-based surveillance and communications systems. Tomorrow's wars may also take the form of grinding long-term contests that avoid open battle—special operations, proxies, detached and deniable actors. And tomorrow's wars may include a terrorist component, remotely recruited or inspired by events—can we imagine a war with Iran that does not include Hezbollah's worldwide capacity for violence?

China and Russia have also learned by watching America's experience during the past 20 years of the "Global War on Terror." They may view proxy warfare and sponsorship of terrorism as effective ways to distract American attention and divert American resources.

Future wars will require U.S. commanders not merely to fight opposing armies, but to orchestrate a broad arsenal of capabilities to counter a blended array of conventional and unconventional modes of conflict, including terrorism.

Observation 4: Competition for defense dollars will increase pressure to make cuts to counterterrorism

With priority shifting to great power competition, expenditures for counterterrorism are already coming under increasing pressure as the Pentagon looks for money to develop significant new military and supporting technologies to overmatch what the Chinese and Russians are believed to be doing. At the same time, the competition for defense dollars will intensify as the defense budget itself comes under pressure. Given the costs of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic recovery, a ballooning annual deficit (forecast to be \$3.7 trillion for fiscal year 2020), and massive national debt (currently at around \$26 trillion), it is difficult to envision continued increases

in defense spending at the level seen over the past several years.⁴⁰ Future defense budgets are likely to be flat or even trimmed.

Economists at the RAND Corporation estimated in April 2020 that contraction of the U.S. economy caused by the pandemic could reduce defense spending, if held at 3.2 percent of GDP, by \$350-600 billion over the next 10 years. This was before the surge in new cases of COVID-19 across the United States in June and July 2020 and not taking into account likely political decisions to shift government spending to other post-pandemic priorities.⁴¹

Major savings can be made by base closures or cuts to some of the big weapons acquisition programs, but these are politically protected by members of Congress who will not allow closures or cuts to certain acquisitions because of their impact on local economies and jobs. Political leaders may also see defense spending as a way to accelerate economic recovery. Under budgetary pressure, the armed forces tend to cut personnel. There were major cuts after the Vietnam War and again after the end of the Cold War. Very modest cuts occurred between 2011 and 2015. Counterterrorism operations are carried out primarily by Special Forces and Special Operations Forces, which also play a key role in near-peer contests. The question is how likely budget cuts/constraints may affect not just the forces, but the mission.

Defense budgets are Byzantine. There is no single counterterrorism budget, and it is difficult to isolate what is spent on counterterrorism. Part of the problem is agreeing upon what should be included. The broadest iterations of the total U.S. expenditures for counterterrorism include the costs of the war in Afghanistan—and the war in Iraq, since this was portrayed as part of the war on ter-

ror. Military counterterrorist expenditures would also include the costs of the campaign to destroy the Islamic State, military operations in other countries like Yemen, Somalia, and the Philippines, and the continuing military assistance missions in many countries. The broadest cost calculations also include not only the actual costs of military operations, but the long-term costs of caring for those wounded and disabled in the wars, the interest costs of fighting on borrowed money, and other indirect effects.⁴² This puts the totals well into the trillions of dollars since 9/11, and it misleadingly suggests that great savings can be saved by pivoting away from counterterrorist missions.^c

In fact, the potential savings by cutting counterterrorism expenditures in future defense budgets is likely to be relatively small. If counterterrorism expenditures are defined as the cost of military operations directed against terrorists, including special operations, drone strikes, support of proxies in conflict zones, and military training missions to build capacity in countries confronted with terrorist threats, then counterterrorism comprises only a small portion of the current \$721.5 billion defense budget.

The 2021 budget request for the Special Operations Command is approximately \$16.6 billion.⁴³ Most, but not all special operations are currently devoted to counterterrorism.

The cumulative costs of operation “Inherent Resolve,” the U.S.-led campaign against the Islamic State that began in 2014, reached \$23.5 billion by March 2018—about \$5-6 billion a year.⁴⁴ With the destruction of the Islamic State, the bombing campaign, which was the most expensive component of the operation, is over, and the savings already have been realized.

The total costs of the U.S. drone program are difficult to calculate. Drones are operated both by the Pentagon and the CIA. Accurate figures are hard to come by. In its fiscal year 2019 budget, the Department of Defense requested approximately \$9.4 billion for drones and associated technologies.⁴⁵ Another assessment put the administration’s request at \$3.4 billion for drone procurement, research, development, testing, and evaluation.⁴⁶ While the primary use of drones at present is in counterterrorism, it is widely assumed that drones will play a major role in future wars, including near-peer contests. Even if the Pentagon were to leave all counterterrorist drone strikes to the CIA, it would still be investing in drone technology.

Moreover, reductions in the number of Americans deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq and a tighter focus on counterterrorist operations could increase the reliance on air operations, including the use of drones. (The efficacy of drones as a counterterrorist weapon, their cost-effectiveness, legality, and morality versus other types of military operations continue to be matters of intense debate.)

Greater savings can theoretically be obtained by reducing the

“I realize now that the error in framing the counterterrorist campaign as war, which made sense at the time, was that it implied a finite ending, as most American wars have ended in the past.”

number of American boots on the ground. Expeditionary warfare is hugely expensive, hence the push to reduce the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan and Iraq, although U.S. military commanders, while noting that withdrawals are political decisions, warn against a premature or total withdrawal.⁴⁷ Again, U.S. troops are in Afghanistan fighting Taliban insurgents, but these counterinsurgency operations are part of a broader counterterrorism strategy aimed at preventing the return of al-Qa`ida or other dangerous jihadi groups. When it comes to a hard decision, no president yet has wanted to take the risk.

This brings us back to the fundamental underlying dilemma. Americans understandably want and expect security against terrorist attacks, and many probably believe that, with sufficient force, terrorists can be defeated once and for all and the threat of further terrorism ended. That is what going to war with al-Qa`ida or the Islamic State was about. I realize now that the error in framing the counterterrorist campaign as war, which made sense at the time, was that it implied a finite ending, as most American wars have ended in the past.

But Americans are no longer willing to pay the price if that appears to be involvement in endless, unwinnable wars. Perhaps the jihadi terrorist enterprise can ultimately be suppressed, or it may fade away, although that could take decades—generations. Or today’s terrorist campaigns may be subsumed by bigger wars or existential threats to civilization.

War fatigue does not mean, however, that public expectations of security have changed. We do not know that Americans are now more willing to accept increased risk. Military operations, in my view, have reduced the ability of our jihadi foes to launch large-scale attacks into U.S. territory from abroad, and these terrorist organizations have had only limited success in remotely inspiring homegrown jihadis to carry out attacks. But there are no equations that link military expenditures with measurable risk.

Statistically, the danger terrorism poses to any American is minuscule, but terrorism is not about statistics. It is about perceptions—fear, alarm, anger—and perceptions can be framed and manipulated. Deep divisions in American society and intense political partisanship ensure that any terrorist incident will be framed to maximize political advantage. One need only look at how Americans have handled the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the beginning of this essay, I said that the future role of the military in counterterrorism is not just a debate about strategy, but rather requires a national discussion, which we as a nation have yet to conduct. Meanwhile, the challenge to the military is to address how counterterrorism operations could be reframed to avoid terms that imply “victories” in the traditional sense.

Over the years, official documents, published articles, and public comments by active and retired military commanders and defense analysts have communicated ambiguous messages: Counterterrorism operations are essential, but military force cannot by itself

c There are multiple ways to calculate the costs of the war on terrorism, which is a higher figure than military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. For just congressional appropriations for the wars, the figure was about \$2 trillion in September 2019. See Emily M. Morgenstern, “Overseas Contingency Operations Funding: Background and Status,” Congressional Research Service, R44519, September 6, 2019. The gold standard for these calculations is Brown University’s Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs. Neta C. Crawford, “United States Budgetary Costs and Obligations of Post-9/11 Wars through FY2020: \$6.4 Trillion,” 20 Years of War. Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs, Brown University and The Frederick S. Pardee Center for the Study of the Longer-Range Future, November 13, 2019. See also Leo Shane III, “Price tag of the ‘war on terror’ will top \$6 trillion soon,” *Military Times*, November 14, 2018.

defeat terrorists or end terrorism. Reinforcements are necessary. Complete or accelerated withdrawal of U.S. forces (from Afghanistan, Iraq, or Syria) entails increased risks. Terrorism is no longer the priority; we must shift attention and resources to great power competition. All of these statements reflect specific military assessments and may be true, but the public may well be confused. The solution would be an honest national conversation about these trade-offs, but how to bring that about in the current political environment is not obvious.

Thus far, the savings from troop reductions have been disappointing. In 2011, the United States had 94,000 troops in Afghanistan at an estimated annual cost of \$107 billion. In 2019, 9,800 American troops remained in the country at an estimated annual cost of \$52 billion—a 90 percent reduction in troops resulting in a 51 percent reduction in costs.⁴⁸ Further reductions in troops levels are likely, but with proportionately less savings.

Thousands of additional U.S. troops are deployed in Africa and elsewhere, training, advising, and fighting alongside local security forces, in some places battling extremist fighters with airstrikes and ground operations with local commandos. Although the Trump administration has been critical of overseas deployments in so many countries, these are comparatively low-cost operations and can be considered good investments. Not much money can be saved by reducing them, although a constrained defense budget render them vulnerable to cuts.

It is not merely a matter of budgets. U.S. troops are in Iraq not only to help the Iraqis fight terrorists, but also to counter Iranian influence in the region.⁴⁹ U.S. counterterrorism assistance to various countries also encourages and facilitates international cooperation in sharing intelligence about terrorism. This cooperation has in the past proved vital in protecting the United States and its allies against terrorist attacks. The importance of U.S. counterterrorist capabilities and intelligence sharing was illustrated in June 2020 when French special forces killed Abdelmalek Droukdel, al-Qa`ida's longtime commander in North Africa. The United States assisted the operation by providing intelligence that located the target. France, which has 5,000 of its own troops in West Africa,⁵⁰ and the United States are cooperating in preventing jihadis from establishing new strongholds in the Sahel.

Many of the places where the United States provides counterterrorism assistance are also arenas of great power competition—for example, Africa, and the Philippines. Terrorists in these countries directly threaten their governments, which need help. Offering training and assistance enables the United States to maintain access and develop influence.

The bottom line is that reductions in counterterrorism operations will come, but—counterinsurgency costs aside—these reductions will not free up large amounts for the development of capabilities to wage near-peer warfare. And cutting too deeply will have adverse strategic effects both in protecting the United States against terrorism and achieving other strategic goals. As the commander of the U.S. Special Operations Command Africa General Dagvin R. M. Anderson noted in a recent interview in this publication, “pretty much every nation in Africa, has a concern about violent extremism and terrorism. And we bring great credibility and great value—Special Operations—to help them address that security concern. Being able to partner with them and address that security concern gives us access, gives us engagement opportunity and influence in order to then compete with these other global powers—China and Russia—to ensure we have access and the world has

access to these resources as well that are vital to our economies.”⁵¹

Observation 5: Shifting priorities should not mean discarding competence

The United States' armed forces emerged from the Vietnam War scarred and grieved. Ten years of war, a troop commitment that in 1968 reached over half a million, vastly superior weapons, the loss of 58,000 dead and 300,000 wounded (with a higher percentage of survivors than in previous conflicts suffering multiple amputations or disabling wounds that likely would have resulted in death in previous wars), the heavy toll did not bring victory.⁵² Not only had the American public turned against the war, many had turned against the military establishment itself. Returning veterans found no welcome, only scorn.

Unwilling to learn the lessons of the war, American military leaders were instead determined to never let this happen again. To ensure that it would not, the army purged itself of everything that had to do with irregular warfare. Its counterinsurgency capabilities were systematically dismantled. Counterinsurgency, which had been a major preoccupation since the early 1960s, was almost totally erased from the training curricula. Special Forces—often disparaged and resented by many senior officers—were reduced. The military went back to preparing for fighting conventional wars—almost exclusively.

Initially, U.S. armed forces saw no military role in dealing with the growing phenomenon of terrorism. Until the late 1970s, this position was understandable. The terrorist groups operating in the cities of South America, Europe, and Japan at the time, despite the Marxist orientation of most, posed little direct threat to the United States, although some of them attacked U.S. targets, including diplomats, military personnel, and corporate officials. There was little the Pentagon believed it could do other than protect U.S. military assets abroad. Otherwise, it was not seen as the Pentagon's problem, and there were good reasons to avoid involvement. In the face of public disorder and escalating terrorist violence, British troops had deployed to Northern Ireland, but the United States faced no such domestic threat and, in any case, it was not a model that the United States could or wanted to emulate. Dealing with America's own domestic terrorist groups remained a law enforcement responsibility, not a military mission.

Events in the Middle East followed a different trajectory. From the early 1970s on, Middle Eastern militants increasingly targeted Americans and some plotted terrorist attacks in the United States. In many cases, moreover, their terrorist campaigns were supported by national governments in the region—Libya, Syria, Iraq, South Yemen, Sudan, and Iran—as a mode of surrogate warfare. That changed the equation. State-sponsored terrorism became a growing U.S. national security concern, putting the option of military force on the table. The Pentagon continued to resist.

Airline hijackings, embassy seizures, and kidnappings during the late 1970s pushed the Pentagon into developing a hostage rescue capability, especially after the successful hostage rescues carried out by Israelis at Entebbe in 1976 and German commandos in Mogadishu in 1977. Unfortunately, the new U.S. force failed its first time out in April 1980 in an attempt to rescue Americans held hostage at the U.S. embassy in Tehran. The aborted operation revealed serious shortcomings in planning joint special operations.

The October 1983 bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut, in which 241 American service personnel died, was a turning point. At the direction of Secretary Caspar Weinberger, a commission led

by Admiral Robert Long was created to review the military disaster. It concluded that the military had failed to adequately address and prepare for the terrorist threat. But the commission's conclusions went beyond events in Beirut to point out that the United States, and specifically the Department of Defense, was inadequately prepared to deal with the terrorism. "It makes little sense to learn that a State or its surrogate is conducting a terrorist campaign or planning a terrorist attack," the commission observed, "and not confront that government with political or military consequences ..."⁵³

That position coincided with the views of Secretary of State George Shultz, a World War II Marine himself, who saw the use of military force as necessary to back up American diplomacy against terrorism, but still the military resisted. The argument continued through the mid-1980s. The United States eventually did employ limited military power in response to terrorist attacks on a handful of occasions as we will come to later in this essay, but it was not until 9/11 that the U.S. armed forces were given the counterterrorist mission that has occupied them since.

The current shift in priorities, explicitly downgrading terrorism, could easily slide into a repeat of the post-Vietnam dismantling of counterinsurgency capabilities. This could occur through budgeting reallocations, abandonment of advisory and support missions, or targeted reductions in force aimed at specialized units or personnel. The budget reallocations already occurring suggest they are likely to produce only modest savings. Abandoning missions and losing core competencies, in my view, should be avoided.

The shift in emphasis from counterterrorism to near-peer warfare is intended to be a makeover, not a turnover. If it is accompanied by a denigration of the counterterrorism mission this generation of U.S. military personnel have worked toward, retention could become a problem.

The Vietnam War and the wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East have affected the armed forces differently. Although 2.7 million Americans served in Vietnam (out of 9.1 million military personnel on active duty sometime during the Vietnam era) compared to 2.8 million who served in Afghanistan or Iraq between 9/11 and 2015,⁵⁴ the Vietnam experience may have had a less lasting effect on the U.S. military than the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq for a variety of reasons.

The armed forces during the Vietnam deployment were much larger. The active duty strength of the armed forces in the late 1960s was approximately 3.5 million in the late 1960s—a post-World War II peak.⁵⁵ Since 2000, the number of active duty personnel has ranged around 1.4 million. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were longer. The big buildup in Vietnam began in 1965, and by 1969, the withdrawal was underway. About a fifth of those who served in Vietnam were draftees, most of whom left the service after two years (although even in the all-volunteer force, most departures from the service occur after the first tour). Experience evaporated quickly. People serve longer in today's professional armed forces. As a result, multiple deployments to conflict zones are more common in today's armed forces. The post-9/11 personnel are also more likely to have seen actual combat. Repeated tours of duty have imposed a heavy burden on them and their families. Those who started their careers after 9/11—meaning most of the military—have yet to experience peace.

The retention issue is most critical for the Army. Army personnel (including the Regular Army, Reserve, and National Guard) account for 58 percent of the total deployed-troop years since 9/11 with the Marines, Navy, and Air Force accounting for the remaining

42 percent. There already has been considerable attrition of this deployment experience. Recent research shows that, as of 2015, soldiers accounting for 55 percent of this deployment experience no longer remain in the army. Those who served three or more tours represent an especially critical resource. As of 2015, about 40 percent of these "highly deployed" soldiers have left the military.⁵⁶ Many of those who remain seem likely to finish their full military career.⁵⁷

The career environment is critical. Many of these men and women could still be in uniform for another 10 to 20 years—a valuable source of institutional knowledge that the services should try to retain. Telling soldiers that they have spent their entire career fighting wars that the country no longer gives a damn about and that its political leaders now describe as dumb, stupid, or lost, inevitably affects morale. Veterans who saw service in Afghanistan or Iraq tend to be ambivalent about whether the wars were worth fighting.⁵⁸ Although half thought fighting in Afghanistan was worth it, only a third thought both wars were worth fighting while another third felt that neither war was worth fighting.⁵⁹ How closely this reflects the attitudes of those still on active duty is hard to say. If those who have devoted the last 10 or 20 years to counterterrorism perceive their experience and therefore themselves devalued as the military shifts its priorities to fight the 'right' wars, departures could accelerate.

If I could speak personally to each and every person currently in uniform, I would tell them, "The people of this country and its armed forces owe you more than today's polite but perfunctory 'Thank you for your service,' but instead a deep debt of gratitude for your devotion to duty and your sacrifices. The current effort to address new military challenges does not diminish your past contribution, your hard-earned military experience, or your future value to our nation's defense. These remain relevant and will be needed." That ought to be the hymn of senior military leadership, especially those setting personnel policies.

Observation 6: The need to catalogue and exploit counterterrorism skills

Those with years of military experience dealing with insurgents and terrorists in Afghanistan and the Middle East may not be the best qualified to drive armor divisions across the plains of Europe, command major naval battles in the Pacific, or engage in aerial dogfights with enemy aircraft. (We did not have these skills when we entered World War II either.) What exactly are the counterterrorist capabilities and skills that should be preserved?

Counterterrorist operations encompass a broad variety of tasks and missions. Many of the assignments fall into the category of advisory and support missions. These vary greatly from country to country, even from province to province. Small American contingents work with local military establishments to improve their effectiveness, enabling them to contain the insurgent and terrorist organizations without need for direct U.S. intervention. The American teams also provide independent assessments of the threat. The teams can assess the situation and determine when additional support might be required and what might work best. They are also a direct conduit of intelligence.

The military has also learned to enlist and work with proxies, both of which are traditional special forces missions. The United States supported the Afghan mujahideen to ultimately defeat the Soviet Union in the 1980s. In 2001, it combined Afghanistan's Northern Alliance, an irregular force, U.S. Special Forces (some on horseback), and U.S. airpower to defeat the Taliban and scat-

ter al-Qa`ida. In 2006, the United States exploited the discontent of local Sunni tribes to displace al-Qa`ida-aligned insurgents in western Iraq. In 2014, the United States assembled and supported a Kurdish and Arab ground force to recapture territory held by the Islamic State. The first of these was a part of the Cold War—a continuing contest between near peers. The others fall into the domain of counterterrorism broadly defined. All of these operations were innovative and successful. They did not bring lasting peace or produce the democratic governments that some hoped for; they did contribute to national security.

Success in these operations depends on detailed local knowledge of the physical terrain and human geography, and in some cases requires an ability to operate as isolated small units amid a civilian population filled with potential hostiles. The psychological pressure is enormous. The skills are as much diplomatic as military. Not everyone can do it well.

Special operations have changed since the 1960s when the emphasis was on the deployment of area-trained Special Forces teams that could assist local armies and recruit proxies where knowledge of language and culture were important, but that could also carry out active military operations in enemy territory. Since then, special operations have increased emphasis on kinetic operations—one-off strategic strikes by U.S. personnel as opposed to living with local forces.

The kinetic component of counterterrorism is essentially a manhunt. Continuing intelligence collection and analysis to understand the hierarchy and roles played by individual terrorist leaders is prerequisite to operations. Key figures become subjects of continuous surveillance over long periods of time to track their whereabouts at any given moment. That can lead to opportunities for a drone strike or the insertion of a specialized team, which requires its own specialized infrastructure—months of patient work culminating in a few minutes, even seconds on target. The 2011 killing of Usama bin Ladin in Abbottabad, Pakistan, is an example.

A key counterterrorism skill set that is relevant and should be honed further is the identification, mapping, and dismantlement of networks. For example, while the physical landscape and ‘actors’ are different, similar skills are needed to map out an al-Qa`ida cell in Pakistan and map out the specific activity of key vessels, state affiliated and proxy ones, utilized by China as part of its gray zone strategy in key areas of the South China Sea.

Information operations that seek to amplify or highlight fractures and inconsistencies in the ideals and behaviors of terror actors is another area where counterterrorism skills are transferable.

Rather than being a continuous, large-scale military campaign against enemy military forces, counterterrorism is a global campaign of thousands of tiny operations against an elusive foe. (The campaign against the Islamic State, which chose to defend territory, was an anomaly.) The operations are not sequential; there is no defined end-state beyond degrading and eventually disabling an organization—relentlessly pursuing its leaders and key personnel, preventing them from communicating, keeping them on the run, depriving them of an opportunity to assemble, cutting off their supply of weapons and sources of financing, discouraging their recruitment. Achieving “victory” in the traditional sense is not applicable.⁶⁰

Operations must be conducted within the constraints imposed by tight rules of engagement while protecting friendly forces and supportive populations against terrorist attack. Counterintelligence capabilities depend heavily on human skills more than on weapons

“Conventional warfare doctrine reflects weapons systems, which have long lives. The arsenal of counterterrorism is human.”

superiority, although capabilities for airstrikes and insertion are critical.

There are also deeper, critical but less obvious skills. All battle requires knowledge of the opposing forces, but none requires such detailed understanding of the enemy as counterterrorism—not just his military capabilities, but the terrorists’ political strengths, beliefs, mindset, and concepts of strategy—and the physical, social, and psychological terrain in which the terrorists operate.

In addition to leadership skills honed in combat under trying conditions, counterterrorism brings experience in dealing with complex, multi-level, and multidimensional conflict situations. Obtaining a profound understanding of the adversary, rapid exploitation of intelligence, adaptability to different situations and conditions, and the ability to develop innovative solutions are skills that are clearly fungible to near-peer warfare.

These are the readily observable parts of counterterrorism. Those involved in military operations over the last two decades no doubt will have different views of what they do and how they do it, as well as different ideas about their own skill sets. It would be useful to catalogue these, distill lessons learned, and identify best practices before memories dim and war stories take over. The objective is not to write a new counterterrorism manual, which would soon be out of date and might even inhibit creative thinking, but rather to capture a history that can inform and inspire how the United States might address future terrorist threats, which are almost certain to arise.

Those deeply involved in counterterrorism operations over the past two decades might also be able to offer very different perspectives on how the United States might fight future near-peer wars. Counterterrorist practitioners have learned, for example, that very small forces can be deadly, that large military formations, concentrations, and platforms are vulnerable, that possession of superior weapons does not guarantee military success, that military success does not always translate to political success, and that war is very much a matter of manipulating perceptions. How might these skills apply to challenges from Russia or China?

However, years of practice in dealing with insurgents and terrorists brings more than lessons learned through trial and error; it may alter how one thinks about the art of war itself. In both counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, field experience overrides doctrine. In conventional warfare, doctrine carries greater weight. We fight fewer large-scale conventional wars; therefore conventional warfare doctrine derives from wars fought in the distant past or models of unfought wars. In contrast, counterterrorism doctrine derives from continuous operations and is constantly being amended.

The last time the United States fought a conventional war against true near-peer adversaries was in the Second World War—75 years ago (although some might argue it was against the Chinese in Korea 70 years ago). It is true that the First Gulf War and the opening weeks of the Iraq War involved conventional operations,

but Iraq was a third-rate military power, hardly a near peer. While these engagements reflected the latest developments in weapons and information technologies, basic doctrine survived.

The U.S. military entered the “Global War on Terror” with no counterterrorism doctrine and virtually no experience. And as already discussed, it had deliberately all but erased its memory of counterinsurgency. What it knows now derives from experience. In the case of counterinsurgency, it had to recover its memory, but then apply it to completely different sets of circumstances. In the case of counterterrorism, it had to learn from scratch. This has great importance in the professional formation of officers and senior NCOs.

Conventional warfare doctrine reflects weapons systems, which have long lives. The arsenal of counterterrorism is human. I am using the term “conventional warfare” instead of near-peer warfare because I have already argued that future near-peer wars are likely to be multidimensional and include both conventional and unconventional components. We are likely to prepare for them from a more conventional warfare perspective. That could be a limitation.

There is no single counterterrorism or counterinsurgency experience; even a campaign in a single country often comprises a hundred little wars. Beyond specific lessons, those who have spent the better part of the last two decades in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency roles have the benefit of multiple and diverse experiences. It creates a mindset that looks at each new situation not from the standpoint of existing doctrine, but as a fresh problem to be solved. Constantly walking into new situations, they have learned to be nimble thinkers. They might, therefore, have completely novel approaches to current near-peer challenges.

Observation 7: Terrorism is changing, too

Counterterrorism is a continuously changing repertoire in response to a dynamic threat. As the terrorist threat evolves, strategy and tactics must change accordingly. The history of counterterrorism operations shows this evolution.

From the 1980s to the end of the 20th century, the United States used military power in response to state-sponsored terrorism—against Syrian and Druze positions in Lebanon in 1984 following the 1983 bombing of the American Marine barracks in Beirut, against Libya in 1986 in response to that country’s continuing support of terrorist operations against American targets, against Iranian targets in 1987 following an Iranian attack on U.S.-flagged vessels in the Persian Gulf, and against Iraq in 1993, after that country was allegedly involved in a plot to kill former President George H. W. Bush during a visit to Kuwait. These were one-off operations in retaliation for terrorist attacks and intended to support U.S. diplomatic efforts to discourage state-sponsored terrorism. In response to the bombing of the 1998 American embassies in Africa, the United States more directly targeted terrorists, albeit ineffectually. Each of these responses was different. They were limited and mostly intended to send a message rather than cause serious military damage.

Since 9/11, the United States has conducted continuous military operations against terrorist targets in Afghanistan and the Middle East, and irregularly in other parts of the world. Between 2014 and 2019, the United States conducted air operations and provided artillery support of Kurdish and Arab efforts to retake cities held by the Islamic State. Concurrent with these operations, there have been targeted killings of key terrorists. During the same time period, military forces have carried out a number of hostage rescues.

The need for this specific capability will remain.

The counterterrorist campaign since 9/11 has been intense, global in scope, but (putting aside the invasion of Iraq) focused on a narrow set of jihadi foes connected with or issuing from those responsible for the 9/11 attacks. The notion of expanding the “Global War on Terror” to include other terrorist foes—Hezbollah, for example—briefly came up during the more hubristic moments of the campaign, but efforts remained focused on those inspired by jihadi ideology. “Combating terrorism,” the term used for decades to encompass broader U.S. efforts against worldwide terrorism, continued as a parallel, but separate effort from the narrower campaign against al-Qa`ida and its jihadi spin-offs.

The jihadi threat is not the same as that confronted in 2001, and operations against other terrorist organizations are likely to be different. As a consequence of military operations and law enforcement efforts, the jihadi enterprise is now more decentralized. And it is more locally focused as its cadres and recruiters seek to establish new fronts, which they have been doing for 30 years.

No longer able to assemble and train thousands of recruits in Afghanistan, al-Qa`ida has been unable to coordinate large-scale strategic attacks at anything near the scale of 9/11. Instead, it relies on its affiliates, which are also hard pressed, and on exhortation via the internet to inspire homegrown terrorists to carry out attacks in its name.

The Islamic State was able to bring tens of thousands of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq to support its newly declared caliphate, but its leaders generally did not exhibit the same commitment that al-Qa`ida did to strategic strikes directed against the United States. The barrage of attacks in France and Belgium between 2014 and 2016 was a notable exception, though no evidence has emerged that the Islamic State’s then leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was personally involved in planning those operations in the way bin Ladin was with 9/11. However, the new leader of the Islamic State, who was previously al-Baghdadi’s deputy, led some of its global terrorist operations.⁶¹ It is not clear yet how he may alter the group’s trajectory.

The Islamic State destroyed itself in an ill-considered attempt to create a state and defend its territory in open battle against a vastly superior opponent. The caliphate, its principal achievement, ultimately became its graveyard. This implies no claim of strategic victory. The jihadi narrative remains a powerful draw to some, although there is often a myriad of personal reasons for this attraction. Both al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State survive in the shadows and are capable of comebacks, but the current threat is different from what it was.

Jihadi groups continue to wage war in South Asia, the Middle East, across the Sahel, East Africa, increasingly in Mozambique. Jihadi groups are also active in Sri Lanka and the Philippines. That al-Qa`ida, the Islamic State, or some new jihadi assemblage might set up shop in the wake of American withdrawals from Afghanistan or in new territory drives current counterterrorist concerns.

Meanwhile, the terrorist threat to the United States comes primarily from remotely inspired, but homegrown terrorists, who are less tethered to a central organization or even specific ideology. Their capabilities do not approach another 9/11, and that is progress. The worst terrorist attack in the United States since 9/11 was the 2016 shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Florida, which killed 49. This event accounts for almost half of all of the jihadi-caused fatalities on U.S. soil since 9/11. Ironically, reducing the risk of large-scale terrorism has decreased American tolerance for any risk at

all—even small-scale attacks provoke alarm and outrage at failures of security.

Other terrorist foes exist as potential threats on the horizon. Hezbollah, which has American blood on its hands from its terrorist operations in Lebanon in the 1980s and during the war in Iraq, has thousands of combatants, an impressive arsenal of rockets, and a global network engaged in drug trafficking, smuggling, money laundering, and other criminal activities. It has carried out terrorist activities in Europe, Asia, and South America.

Hezbollah has operatives in the United States as well;⁶² however, it is unlikely to take independent action against the U.S. homeland or launch an attack causing major loss of American lives. It would expose Hezbollah's patron Iran to retaliation by the United States, which would suspect (or choose to presume) that such action would not take place without Iranian approval. From Tehran's perspective, however, a small-scale terrorist attack could remind Americans of the trouble they will invite if the United States attacks Iranian interests.

A war with Iran would almost certainly provoke a sabotage and terrorism campaign carried out by the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Hezbollah adherents worldwide, and other Iranian assets including its proxies in Iraq and Yemen.⁶³ Beyond these, there currently are no other identifiable terrorist organizations that have identifiable geographic bases and global reach. State sponsors may recruit local groups to act as proxies, but again, the risk of retaliation imposes constraints.

Lockdowns and restrictions caused by the coronavirus pandemic appear to have decreased the risk of terrorist attacks in non-conflict zones, according to the United Nations, but the Islamic State has increased its activity in the Middle East and Africa since the beginning of 2020.⁶⁴ In addition to the immediate economic contraction, the pandemic may produce long-term economic stagnation. Some developing economies (those dependent on tourism or on certain commodities exports) may be particularly hard hit with increased unemployment and possible social unrest.⁶⁵

The mass destruction scenarios that terrorists imagined and officials feared in the dark days immediately after 9/11 remain very remote possibilities, although they cannot be entirely dismissed. The pandemic has renewed concerns about bioterrorism.⁶⁶ It is not that the pandemic gives terrorists new capabilities or points them to a new path they have not thought of before, but it has inspired a new cohort of political fanatics to think about how they might weaponize dangerous pathogens.⁶⁷

We can only speculate how the coronavirus pandemic might affect American attitudes toward terrorism. Will the daily deaths of thousands of Americans—an experience that will last a generation—inure Americans to the far lesser body counts caused by terrorists in the years since 9/11? Does COVID-19's higher toll end of the 9/11 era just as the carnage of World War I eclipsed the wave of anarchist terrorism that began in the 1880s? Or have the virus, the protests, the economic hardships, and the deep political divisions so scraped the nation's nerves that even a minor attack will prompt unreasoning terror and fury?

The last several years have seen a resurgence of violence by ideologically-motivated terrorists, predominantly white nationalists, but also anarchist elements. Both of these dark streams are prevalent in American and European history. They widen or narrow according to economic and social stress. They are, however, loosely organized and lack geographic bases. The violent fringes share

“Dividing the military into near-peer warfare and counterterrorism camps makes little sense. It is not either/or.”

attitudes, but individuals operate autonomously. Galaxies rather than groups, they offer no targets for military operations. While potentially very dangerous, they pose more of a societal problem for political leaders and police to solve.

State governors can utilize the National Guard when necessary to maintain public order. Federal forces have, on occasion, been deployed to assist them in dealing with riots. In my view, the U.S. armed forces should avoid involvement in dealing with domestic terrorism. The current fraught political environment guarantees that any domestic military role in responding to terrorism will awaken suspicions that the armed forces are being used as an instrument of political oppression and could discredit the military institution itself.

There have been a number of discussions over the years about expanding the definition of terrorism to include drug traffickers or other transnational organized crime groups. This may have some statutory value to federal investigators, but it could also open the way for direct U.S. military involvement. The U.S. armed forces have carried out or supported military operations against insurgents and terrorist organizations that are also directly engaged in or benefit financially from drug trafficking—for example, the insurgents in Colombia, Sendero Luminoso in Peru, the Taliban, and Hezbollah. With these exceptions, combating transnational organized crime lies beyond counterterrorism and would represent a significant expansion of the military role. It should be viewed with extreme caution.

Concluding Observation: So where do we go?

We return to our original question: How will the United States conduct counterterrorism during an era in which great power competition has been defined as the number-one national security priority? Here are some final reflections and observations:

It is not the purpose of this essay to challenge the assumptions underlying the shift in priority from counterterrorism to near-peer warfare. Russia and China along with new technological developments pose threats that must be addressed. We cannot be certain what future wars will look like. However, we can say: The United States faces a broad spectrum of military challenges—both conventional and unconventional—and will need an array of capabilities to confront multiple modes and combinations of conflict, including terrorism.

The capability of the jihadis to mount large-scale terrorist attacks in the United States has diminished, and jihadis are currently more focused on local struggles, but they are resilient and opportunistic and remain a threat. A new situation could facilitate a comeback. State sponsorship could rapidly give them additional resources. A terrorist threat remains—there are powerful arguments against dismantling or discarding the military's counterterrorist capabilities. Military operations will remain a component of counterterrorism, and counterterrorism will remain a component of military operations.

U.S. counterterrorism training to countries in rough neighbor-

hoods of the world enhances local capabilities but also creates relationships and opens access to local intelligence and augments U.S. diplomatic influence. Counterterrorism assistance is a currency.

The current shift in focus to near-peer warfare seems unlikely to replicate the military's purge of counterinsurgency after the Vietnam War. It will, however, mean less attention to counterterrorism. The war on terrorism has been the preoccupation of the military establishment since 2001—the only on-going war. A shift in mindset could result in counterterrorism being treated increasingly as a backwater.

Increasing constraints on defense budgets seem likely and will affect all plans. Counterterrorism operations will be a target of cuts, but expenditures for counterterrorism have already declined as the bombing and ground campaign to recapture territory seized by Islamic State has ended and U.S. troops are withdrawn from Afghanistan and Iraq. Further cuts to counterterrorism will produce marginal savings.

Direct U.S. involvement in counterinsurgency abroad came about as a consequence of efforts to prevent further major foreign terrorist attacks in the United States. Counterterrorism drove us into counterinsurgency. This has been costly and is now being reduced.

Large-scale American deployments will likely be avoided. Future counterterrorism operations will likely be more narrowly focused, without engaging U.S. forces in counterinsurgency operations. Whether this can be done successfully is uncertain.

We have learned from experience to rely on indigenous forces assisted by small numbers of U.S. forces and backed by U.S. airpower. The campaign to destroy the Islamic State highlights the difference. The major U.S. contribution to counterterrorism worldwide today is training, technological assistance and the provision of equipment, special operations, drone strikes, and—when necessary—U.S. airpower.

Success in protecting the homeland against terrorism from abroad derives in part from a massive intelligence effort, which, in turn, has been assisted by unprecedented sharing of intelligence among security services and law enforcement organizations worldwide. This is a major achievement that requires continued cultivation. The willingness of many countries to share vital information about terrorism will require motivating partners with continued American involvement and assistance—often military—in dealing with the terrorist threats they face. The same relationships will be valuable in dealing with great power competitors.

Dividing the military into near-peer warfare and counterterrorism camps makes little sense. It is not either/or. Future near-peer wars may well involve a counterterrorist component as well as the orchestration of capabilities in other dimensions of conflict outside of the traditional battlespace. Almost certainly, it will require the special operations capabilities that have been honed in the counterterrorist campaign.

More importantly, the experience, skills, and attitudes acquired in counterterrorism are fungible and may provide unique and creative approaches to more conventional military contests.

While the COVID-19 pandemic and domestic protests have

pushed terrorism off the top of the national news agenda, political leadership will likely remain cautious about troop withdrawals or any other visible reduction of U.S. counterterrorist capabilities, fearing that they could be blamed for any new terrorist attack. At the same time, politicians will likely be reluctant to commit U.S. forces to new deployments abroad.

Political leadership will likely be willing to continue, even intensify airstrikes and special operations to decapitate and/or place pressure on terrorist groups. There will be a willingness to strike back hard if the United States is attacked so long as it does not engage U.S. forces in another continuing campaign. Presidents in the future may prefer to retaliate with dramatic displays of force at a distance—a standoff approach to counterterrorism, which is understandable but will likely produce limited effects.

Continuing efforts to reduce the need to deploy U.S. troops by means of increasing local capabilities, advising and assisting local allies, and enlisting proxies will require traditional special forces skills—area knowledge, language, field diplomacy. It is closer to what special forces were doing in the 1960s and will be a specialized career path—not a career dead end. It provides an opportunity to utilize the vast skills of the United States' immigrant population or to offer paths to citizenship for foreigners.

Counterterrorism was never predominately military. The critics are wrong. The role of the military was always limited to what other elements of counterterrorism could not do. Military force was employed where law enforcement could not operate, where persuasion failed, where diplomacy had little effect, where government authority was hostile or non-existent.

As the terrorist threat evolves, so will counterterrorism. There are basic principles, but no fixed doctrine. The past is a guide, but each major campaign is an ad hoc response to unique circumstances. This is true for all warfare, but especially for counterterrorism operations.

Direct participation by the armed forces in counterterrorism operations has declined. Only a handful of terrorist organizations pose a direct threat to the U.S. homeland. There may be no military role at all in responding to some of the new terrorist threats on the horizon. And the armed forces should be wary of being pulled into countering domestic ideologically-driven threats.

If recent history tells us anything, it is that the role played by the U.S. military in counterterrorism was driven by events—the emergence of al-Qa`ida from a progression of events in Afghanistan including the Soviet invasion; the Iranian revolution and takeover of the American embassy; chaos in Lebanon and a bombing in Beirut; Libya's sponsorship of terrorist attacks on Americans; the 9/11 attacks; the Arab Spring; civil war in Syria; the rise of the Islamic State and collapse of the Iraqi army; the Islamic State's advertised atrocities. Most of these were surprises, although some, like the turmoil created by the U.S. invasion of Iraq, are consequences of our own making. Terrorism is the reflection of a volatile world. Events, not plans or preferences, will determine how much the United States will be able to shift or not shift resources away from counterterrorism and toward near peer competition. **CTC**

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The Crisis Within Jihadism: The Islamic State's Puritanism vs. al-Qa`ida's Populism

By Mohammed M. Hafez

The civil war raging between global jihadis is intensifying. Despite the shared ideological commitments and mutual state adversaries of al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, these dueling factions have failed to overcome the challenge of fragmentation under the stress of conflict and territorial retreat. Rather than close ranks, these salafi-jihadis have accelerated their fratricidal wars in West Africa, Yemen, and Afghanistan. They turned their attention away from near and far enemies and instead prioritized fighting the nearest enemy of all—each other. A recent Islamic State documentary, *Absolved Before Your Lord*, released by its Yemeni branch offers the clearest articulation of the differences that divide these two factions. The Islamic State represents an exclusive, uncompromising, and puritanical vision of jihadism, while al-Qa`ida has rebranded jihadism as an inclusive, pragmatic, and populist pan-Islamist movement. Five fundamental disagreements emerged from the documentary over establishing an 'Islamic' state, applying 'Islamic' law, rejecting populism, embracing sectarianism, and defending puritanism.

It is no secret that salafi-jihadism, the ideology of the deadliest Islamist organizations around the globe, is in a deep crisis. Despite its rapid growth since 2001, salafi-jihadism (henceforth referred to as jihadism) never constituted a single, unified faction.^a Instead, its ideologues and organizations often disagree about fundamental issues in the crucible of civil war.¹ Two disagreements in particular have become centrifugal, splintering jihadis into opposing camps. The first pertains to the issue of collective *takfir*—the act of Muslims declaring other Muslims to be infidels—and its byproduct of mass civilian atrocities and sectarian targeting. The second revolves around the impor-

a A recent study estimates that adherents of salafi-jihad increased by 270 percent between 2001 and 2018, numbering in 2018 between 100,000 and 230,000. As of 2018, there are at least 67 salafi-jihadi groups worldwide, a 180-percent increase from 2001. See Seth Jones, Charles Vallee, Danika Newlee, Nicholas Harrington, Clayton Sharb, and Hannah Byrne, "The Evolution of the Salafi-Jihadist Threat: Current and Future Challenges from the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, and Other Groups," Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 2018, pp. 7-9.

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tance of establishing 'Islamic' states and the application of strict sharia governance within those states, which risk alienating local populations and turning them against jihadis. These two divides constitute a factional dichotomy between puritanism and populism within jihadism.

The Islamic State has embraced puritanical extremism as its defining character. It insists that it constitutes the 'Victorious Sect' that uncompromisingly adheres to salafi orthodoxy in doctrine and practice.² It takes every opportunity to apply 'Islamic' law and expunge what it considers ritualistic innovations in its territories; rejects alliances with 'apostate' parties or states; and seeks to establish an 'Islamic' caliphate without any regard to modern norms of national sovereignty.

This puritanism is juxtaposed with the opportunistic populism of Islamist movements that supposedly tolerate public blasphemy to avoid alienating supporters; delay establishing sharia-based states and instead choose to work within the confines of civil democratic states; and make alliances with secular factions or apostate governments in the name of *realpolitik*. Jihadis have historically reserved these critiques for Muslim Brotherhood factions and Islamist nationalists like Hamas, but in recent years, the Islamic State has been accusing al-Qa`ida of populist Islamism that seeks to *win* the hearts and minds of Muslims rather than *mold* them into believers through the strict application of 'Islamic' law.³

It is in this context that on April 29, 2020, the Islamic State in Yemen, through its Wilayat Yemen Media Bureau, released a 52-minute documentary that spotlights al-Qa`ida's "journey of deviations after the so-called Arab Spring revolutions."⁴ The documentary is titled *Absolved before Your Lord (ma'aziratan ila Rabbikum)*, a reference to the Qur'anic verse 7:164.^b In the documentary, the Islamic State makes five major claims against al-Qa`ida and, in doing so, offers the clearest articulation yet of how the two rivals differ (summary in Table 1).

b In this verse, believers are asked why they continue to warn those whom God will destroy or punish harshly. They respond, in order "to be absolved [from blame] before your lord and perhaps they may fear Him." This title self-servingly suggests that the Islamic State has sufficiently warned al-Qa`ida of its errors, and therefore, it is justified in attacking al-Qa`ida's followers.

Table 1: The differences between the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida

Core Areas of Disagreement	Islamic State	Al-Qa`ida
'Islamic' states	Establishes 'Islamic' states in the territories it controls	Cautions against the formation of 'Islamic' states at the present time
'Islamic' law	Insists on establishing sharia laws within its territories	Calls for tolerance and gradualism in applying 'Islamic' law
Alliances	Rejects alliances with ideologically distant factions	Cooperates with a diverse range of political and military actors
Sectarianism	Embraces Sunni sectarianism	Deemphasizes sectarian identities
Puritanism	The Islamic State is the only jihadi faction on the pure salafi path	The Islamic State is a neo-Kharijite deviation from salafism

In the documentary, the Islamic State accuses al-Qa`ida of dithering on the critical issue of erecting an 'Islamic' state, a goal that is warranted to "harvest the fruits of jihad" and prevent non-salafis from monopolizing political power. Moreover, it is alleged that al-Qa`ida, out of concern for public opinion, refuses to apply sharia laws within the territories it controls, failing the Qur'anic imperative to "command the good and forbid vice." Instead, the documentary alleges al-Qa`ida has chosen to chase after the chimera of revolutionary populism, making alliances with apostate factions that embrace democracy, nationalism, and secularism. In this vein, it is alleged al-Qa`ida and its allies refuse to wage war on polytheists, principally Shi`a Muslims, and that they condemn the destruction of Sufi shrines. According to the documentary, to add insult to injury, al-Qa`ida defames the true monotheists of the Islamic State by labeling them Kharijites^c and kills Islamic State soldiers while it refuses to cast aspersions on polytheists, nationalists, and misguided Islamists (for example, the Muslim Brotherhood).

These Islamic State themes are not novel, but they are nonetheless significant for two reasons. First, the author assesses, based on his close tracking of Islamic State statements over the years, that this documentary is the most direct and comprehensive attack on al-Qa`ida and many of its branches to date, encompassing criticism of al-Qa`ida in Syria, Mali, Libya, Afghanistan, and Yemen in one fell swoop. It suggests that Islamic State leadership is doubling down on its branding choice despite the major setbacks it experienced with the demise of its self-proclaimed caliphate in Iraq and

Syria and the killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. It also reveals that the Islamic State is further consolidating its central authority over its regional commanders in the wilayat (provinces) by diminishing their ability to forge tactical alliances with rival jihadis in conflict theaters. Second, this latest documentary adds credence to earlier *CTC Sentinel* analysis by Tore Hamming and Hassan Hassan, both of whom highlighted the deep roots of puritanical factionalism within the jihadi movement—predating the official split between these two organizations—and predicting the expansion and endurance of factional strife in the years ahead.⁵ By claiming exclusive jihadi legitimacy in the April 2020 documentary, the Islamic State's go-it-alone strategy is intended to preclude calls for factional coexistence with al-Qa`ida. Only time will tell whether this strategy is a mistake on the part of the Islamic State or a decisive blow to its rival's diminished movement.

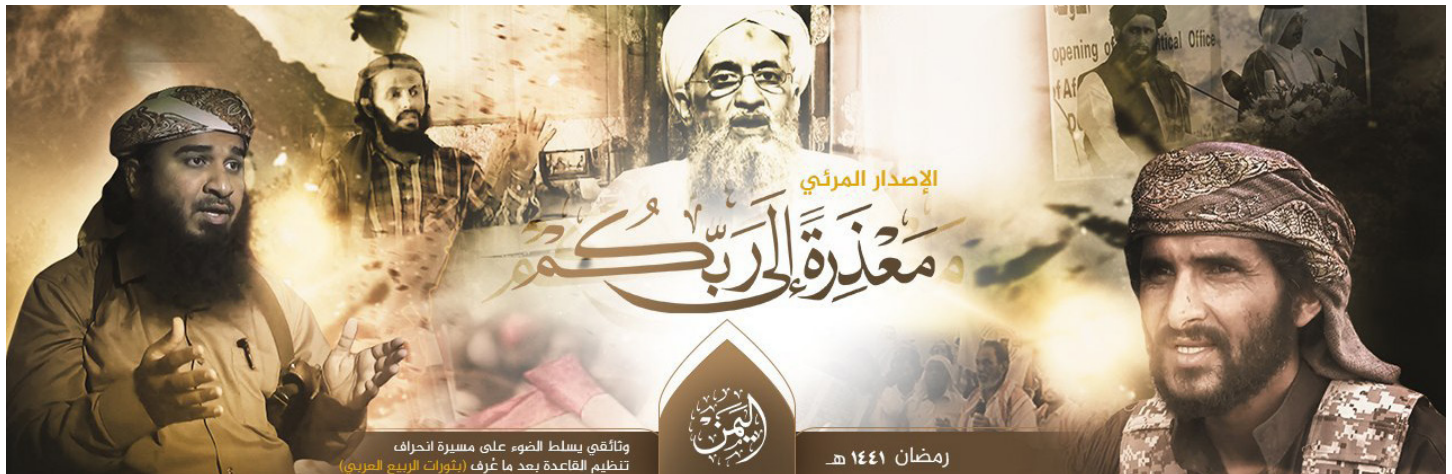
This documentary is significant for another reason. It sheds additional light on the ongoing power struggle between the Islamic State in Yemen and al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) that began in July 2018.⁶ AQAP is undergoing internal organizational struggles in light of its recent leadership turnover and because of a growing controversy over how best to handle allegations of spying within the organization. On January 29, 2020, AQAP lost its leader, Qasim al-Raymi, to a U.S. drone strike. He was replaced by Khaled Batarfi who now presides over a fragmented and substantially diminished movement due to a protracted civil war with Houthi rebels, continuous U.S. airstrikes on its leadership, and internal conflict over how best to redress its compromised organizational security.⁷

The Islamic State perceives a window of opportunity to intensify its attack on AQAP, one of the largest and most loyal followers of Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qa`ida. Earlier in 2020, the Islamic State leaked audio of AQAP members urging al-Zawahiri to mediate between AQAP factions over the issue of internal spies and collaborators. One faction has wanted an independent tribunal to adjudicate charges of spying, but this was rejected out of hand by Batarfi because, he maintained, it might reveal critical organizational security measures. The Islamic State also released the names of what it claimed were three executed AQAP members and 18 of its leaders and scholars who resigned their positions or turned themselves over to Saudi authorities.⁸ The Islamic State has had every intention to add fuel to the rumors that AQAP is infested with spies to hasten defections.

A significant part of the documentary is dedicated to a critique of AQAP. It highlights what it claims is the collaboration between AQAP leaders and the Yemeni government in their joint war on the Houthis, thus offering evidence of al-Qa`ida's supposed alliances with governments that previously killed jihadis and have no intention of ruling with 'Islamic' law. It also claims AQAP refuses to implement 'Islamic' rules in areas it controls, which it argues is evidence that al-Qa`ida places its political considerations above the religious imperative to command the good and forbid vice. The documentary further asserts that AQAP turned its territories over to local tribal councils and even socialist party officials rather than seek to install an Islamist government, which it alleges is additional proof that al-Qa`ida is too eager to give away the spoils of jihad to placate popular sentiment. The documentary concludes with testimonies of several AQAP defectors to the Islamic State in Yemen, thus encouraging others to do the same.

In the section that follows, the author offers a theoretical frame-

c Jihadis, including members of the Islamic State, are often accused of being modern day Kharijites (*khawarij al-'asr*), a reference to the historically detested sect known for its extremism and violence in Islam's formative period. Kharijites, those who secede from the community, fought Ali Bin Abi Talib, the fourth of the Rightly Guided caliphs in the Sunni tradition, and eventually assassinated him in 661 C.E. They have earned the reputation of being renegades beyond the pale. Interestingly, Islamic State scholars have accused internal rivals of being Kharijites. See Cole Bunzel, "Ideological Infighting in the Islamic State," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13:1 (2019): pp. 13-22.



Jihadi forum web banner advertising the April 2020 Islamic State documentary, Absolved Before Your Lord

work by which to analyze infighting among militant organizations that share the same ideological genealogy. Revolutionary movements from the same family tree often disagree about core conflict issues such as who are their adversaries, what are the best strategies to defeat them, and what are legitimate ways to fight them. These disagreements often yield a split between purists and pragmatists, dividing the loyalties of the broader movement between two viable alternatives. Such family feuds can be particularly threatening to militant organizations that draw their recruits and resources from the same constituent pool, resulting in a zero-sum competition between two rival factions. Next, the article illustrates this ideological dynamic by discussing how the Islamic State draws a sharp divide with all other Islamist factions by spotlighting five areas of disagreements with its closest rival, al-Qa`ida. The author concludes by discussing the implications of jihadi fragmentation for countering violent extremism, highlighting both the dangers and opportunities of the ongoing civil war within jihadism.

A Family Feud: Theorizing the al-Qa`ida-Islamic State Schism

It might be surprising to some that two organizations that embrace an identical ideology, jihadism, might clash in the name of that ideology. It is not uncommon, however, for militant organizations with shared ideological origins to compete with each other based on their degree of pragmatism vs. extremism or populism vs. vanguardism.^{9d} Factional conflicts are not confined to Islamist movements, but instead are part of a historic pattern that includes iconic rivalries such as the May 1937 clashes between Stalinists and Trotskyists during the Spanish Civil War, the Haganah and Revisionist Zionists in Palestine prior to Israel's independence (1931-1948), the Algerian National Movement and the National Liberation Front during their anti-colonial struggle against France (1954-1962), and the Sri Lankan Tamil Tigers and its four rival Tamil factions in the mid-1980s.

The process of competition between rivals can be threatening

to some factions, leading them to consider violent escalation as a response to these new threats. Competition from rivals can lead to political marginalization in the militant movement if one group is outmaneuvered. Competition can also unleash fear of internal defections. Militant leaders could see their fighters or entire brigades abandon them to join their rivals, taking away valuable territory and resources in the process. Competition can also result in betrayal. Militant groups may see their competitors negotiate with the government or switch to the government side.^e

Organizational rivals from the same ideological family tree are particularly threatening to one another because they are competing for the same constituency from which they seek recruits, funding, and safe haven. Their ideological *proximity* to each other due to their common intellectual heritage makes them credible voices to the movement's fighters, supporters, and sponsors over which they compete. Yet their ideological *distance* on key conflict issues means that their disagreements can divide their fighters, followers, and sponsors between two viable alternatives. This *proximity-distance paradox* threatens to produce defections from one's group to a rival faction and, if unchecked, can result in the marginalization of one faction in a zero-sum competition. Thus, kindred movements—as in the case of al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State—can turn to bitter enemies despite their mutual intellectual origins and shared utopian vision.

Specifically, the Islamic State-al-Qa`ida split can be analyzed along three ideological dimensions: conflict framing, conflict objectives, and conflict targeting. *Conflict framing* refers to how a faction constructs a shared understanding of the conflict in which it is an active participant. It answers the basic question: *who are we fighting against?* The classic debate among jihadis has been whether to prioritize their near enemies (local regimes) or far enemies

d Ironically, Ayman al-Zawahiri, before joining al-Qa`ida, disagreed with Egyptian Islamists on the question of populism vs. vanguardism. His rivals in the Egyptian Islamic Group favored a populist social movement approach to revolutionary change, but al-Zawahiri's Islamic Jihad insisted on a cohesive vanguard military strategy to overthrow the Egyptian regime.

e The most instructive example of this side-switching dynamic is what happened to al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI), the predecessor of the Islamic State, in 2006-2008. In that time period, many of its former insurgent and tribal allies defected to the U.S. side under the Sons of Iraq and Tribal Awakening initiatives to drive AQI out of their towns and cities. Carter Malkasian, *Illusions of Victory: The Anbar Awakening and the Rise of the Islamic State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Mohammed M. Hafez, "Al-Qa`ida Losing Ground in Iraq," *CTC Sentinel* 1:1 (2007). It should be noted that in October 2006, AQI began operating under the name the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).

(Western states).¹⁰ Al-Qa`ida, under the leadership of Usama bin Ladin, answered with the latter. However, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent rise of powerful Shi`a movements and governments led some jihadis to revert back to emphasizing threats stemming from domestic regimes and their local auxiliaries. The rise of the Islamic State of Iraq in 2006 refocused jihadism on prioritizing attacks against the near enemy, emphasizing the sectarian nature of the new Iraqi polity as opposed to the U.S. occupation of the country.^f

This reprioritization of the near enemy above the far enemy was an important source of tension between al-Qa`ida's leadership in Pakistan and its affiliate in Iraq, but did not result in a complete organizational schism at the time.¹¹ The strategic gulf widened further during the outbreak of Arab Spring revolutions that substantially weakened the repressive apparatuses of several authoritarian regimes. Jihadis appeared better positioned than ever to take advantage of state weakness to topple domestic governments and establish Islamist states in their stead.¹² The rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) was a step in that direction, but al-Qa`ida resisted the siren call of the Islamic State and advocated for strategic patience. It framed Arab revolutions as a transition phase that requires cross-coalition mobilization to ensure that entrenched political elites are removed from power and hostile states are not provided a pretext to intervene on behalf of the *ancien régime*.¹³

Conflict objectives answers the question: *what are we fighting for?* Ideologically proximate groups could still disagree about the nature of the polity they seek to establish and the scope and pace of revolutionary change, as well as its territorial limits. Both al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State aspire to a sharia-based polity in which 'Islamic' law reigns supreme and in which, from their perspective, 'Islamic' authorities, from the Sunni tradition, are given their proper place in the judiciary. Al-Qa`ida, having drawn costly lessons from failed jihads, has advocated for gradualism in implementing its vision of an 'Islamic' order. Al-Qa`ida has argued that there is little to be gained in establishing states that make glaring targets for foreign powers, or marching toward 'Islamic' governance without the support of the masses. The Islamic State, however, asserted its prerogative to carve out territory for Sunnis and establish states that rule with 'Islamic' law; anything short of that would, from their point of view, violate God's imperative to command the good and prohibit vice. The Islamic State declared a territorial caliphate without regard to other militant groups, including Islamists and salafis, that did not wish to break up their territorial states along sectarian divides nor rule them with strict sharia law.

Conflict targeting answers the question: *who can we legitimately attack?* While targeting is usually a tactical or strategic issue, it can be ideological if certain categories of people are deemed to be irredeemable enemies by the mere fact that they represent a detested out-group.¹⁴ Al-Qa`ida, true to its novel strategy of fighting the 'far enemy' and increasingly sensitive to the criticism that it kills fellow coreligionists, has in recent years sought to minimize sectarian

targeting and its associated practice of collectively anathematizing (*takfir*) non-Sunni communities.⁵ The Islamic State, conversely, insisted that it was both a religious obligation and a public good to target Shi`a communities and Sufi shrines to purge the earth of what the group views as their misguidance.

Thus, despite their shared normative commitments and mutual state adversaries, al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State have failed to overcome the challenge of factionalism that tore asunder many other ideological movements. The stress of conflict and the urgency for survival did little to bind them into a singular unified movement. In fact, beginning in 2013, they descended into fratricidal violence in multiple conflict zones, starting in Syria and extending to Libya, Yemen, and Afghanistan. For a period of time, the one exception was the relatively cooperative relationship between the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and the al-Qa`ida affiliate Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), both in the West African Sahel region. However, even there this mutually understanding between rivals, built on common origins, personal connections, and common enemies, broke down in the summer of 2019. Since July of that year, at least 300 jihadis have perished in factional wars between the ISGS and JNIM.¹⁵

The Nearest Enemy: The Islamic State Rebukes al-Qa`ida

The Islamic State's recent barrage of verbal salvos aimed at al-Qa`ida comes in the midst of protracted factional wars between their affiliated groups on several jihadi fronts, extending from the North and West African Sahel regions, Libya, and Somalia to Yemen, Syria, and Afghanistan.¹⁶ The Islamic State's aforementioned April 2020 documentary, *Absolved before Your Lord*, draws attention to these conflicts and frames them as a sharp divide between *puritanism* and *populism*. It brands the Islamic State as exclusively committed to the pure salafi creed, regardless of the cost and consequences, and presents al-Qa`ida as having deviated from the salafi way in pursuit of false revolutionary slogans and mass public support.

Establishing an 'Islamic' State and Applying 'Islamic' Law

The first two themes of the Islamic State documentary are closely integrated together. The Islamic State accuses al-Qa`ida of refusing to take up what it believes is the historic responsibility of establishing 'Islamic' states in territories it controls and applying 'Islamic' law within those states. Instead, it is claimed that al-Qa`ida has surrendered the "fruits of jihad" to ersatz Islamists who abide by notions of civil democratic states or, equally unacceptably, to popular committees composed of a mix of Islamists, secular nationalists, socialists, and tribal figures. For the Islamic State, these are forces of blasphemy and apostasy that will never permit the application of 'Islamic' law. As the documentary puts it, "they replaced one tyrant with another, and have substituted polytheists with others who are even more blasphemous toward God." According to the documentary, al-Qa`ida foolishly anticipates cooperation from these factions,

f Interestingly, a 2009 strategic document by the Islamic State of Iraq framed its targeting policy reorientation with the phrase "nine bullets plus one," meaning 90 percent of its attacks would target local adversaries while 10 percent would be dedicated to attacking U.S. forces in Iraq. The Arabic document, translated by the author, carries the title "A Strategic Plan to Strengthen the Political Position of the Islamic State of Iraq" and can be found at <https://mohammedhafez.academia.edu/research#papers>

g Al-Zawahiri, for example, issued instructions to his followers to exercise restraint toward "deviant sects" in an audio message titled "General Guidelines for Jihad," released by al-Sahab Media on September 14, 2013.

but sooner or later, it will “reap the bitter harvest” of betrayal.^h These allies will turn their guns on the jihadis as they have already demonstrated in Iraq, Syria, Mali, Libya, Egypt, and Sudan. Worse still, it asserts, al-Qa`ida excuses its blasphemy in the name of tolerance and gradualism, all while it derides the true monotheists (i.e., Islamic State members) and fights them at every juncture.

The debate over establishing ‘Islamic’ states is not new, to be sure. Jihadis have disagreed about when and where to establish ‘Islamic’ states in Algeria, Iraq, and Syria in the last three decades. Although they all share the ambition of reviving an ‘Islamic’ caliphate that unites the *ummah* (Muslim nation) across borders, not all see this goal as immediately attainable. Therefore, they disagree about the strategic priorities necessary to achieve this long-term objective.

From the broad corpus of jihadi thought, it is possible to discern three separate views on the issue of a territorial state. The first view comes from al-Qa`ida, which holds that establishing ‘Islamic’ states is not a priority under the present circumstances; indeed, it is counterproductive. Precedence should be given to supporting revolutions against entrenched regimes and depriving counterrevolutionary elites from exploiting the jihadi bogeyman to undermine popular support for these revolutions. Al-Qa`ida believes they should seize these opportunities to establish their organizational presence—even if through indirect front organizations—and offer their support and experience in consolidating revolutionary turnover.¹⁷ This strategy involves stepping back from the demand of establishing an ‘Islamic’ state and making tactical alliances with local revolutionaries, sidestepping some of their ideological differences, and refraining from controversial policies that might alienate local populations, including sectarian killings, demolishing Sufi shrines, or governing with strict sharia codes.

The second view comes from local jihadis mired in civil wars. These include the Taliban in Afghanistan and Ahrar al-Sham in Syria, to give just two examples. These groups are fighting to topple their regimes in order to establish ‘Islamic’ states within the framework of the modern nation-state. Their territorial vision is confined to their existing borders; they are not interested in abrogating their states’ territorial integrity. Thus, they generally refrain from talking about an ‘Islamic’ caliphate that promises to upend the Westphalian system of sovereign states.

The third view comes from the Islamic State. It harbors the irredentist ambition of restoring an ‘Islamic’ caliphate over territories that were divided by Western powers after the First World War (the so-called Sykes-Picot borders). The Islamic State cares little about state sovereignty, the complex political considerations of local Islamist factions, or the interests of external powers. Whereas al-Qa`ida and other Islamists seek to work hand-in-hand with their beleaguered populations in order to win their hearts and minds, the Islamic State cares little about populism and instead advances an exclusive, vanguardist vision that seeks to mold hearts and minds through the divine imperative to command the good and forbid vice.¹⁸ As a result, it seizes every opportunity to carve out a territorial state from within and across sovereign state boundaries and governs with a strict sharia code without regard to local customs and religious sensitivities.

h This reference to the “bitter harvest” is not incidental. It mocks Ayman al-Zawahiri by alluding to his earlier work of criticism against the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, *The Bitter Harvest: Sixty Years of the Muslim Brotherhood*. The Arabic book was published in the late 1980s, but the author has the version published in 1999 by the Beirut press Dar al-Bayariq.

Rejecting Unholy Alliances

According to the April 2020 Islamic State documentary, al-Qa`ida has forged unholy alliances with parties that either do not adhere to the strictures of salafism or that clearly exploit local and transnational jihadis without ever intending to advance their Islamist projects. The documentary spotlights al-Qa`ida’s alliance with the “heathenistic” Taliban despite its “clear deviations and apostasy.”ⁱ The Taliban is faulted for having, according to the Islamic State, deep ties to the “apostate” Pakistani intelligence services and for recognizing the Islamic Republic of Iran and its borders. The Taliban is also criticized for negotiating a peace deal with the United States in alleged exchange for it fighting the Islamic State.

In Syria, the Islamic State’s documentary points out that Jabhat al-Nusra, before it ever distanced itself from al-Qa`ida, had direct alliances with factions sponsored by Gulf states and Turkey, a NATO member. This cooperation, according to the documentary, does not augur well for establishing genuine ‘Islamic’ governance in the region. Similarly, in Yemen, the documentary underscores what it alleges is the direct and intimate cooperation between AQAP commanders and Yemeni government forces fighting against the Houthis under a Saudi-led coalition. These are presented as strange bedfellows more likely to result in betrayal, not an ‘Islamic’ order.

The documentary also derides Ayman al-Zawahiri as “the nation’s laughingstock” (*saafih al-umma*) after he, according to the Islamic State’s telling of events, exhibited respect for the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt before it was toppled in 2013 and appeared sympathetic to the plight of its deposed leader Mohammed Morsi. According to the Islamic State, al-Zawahiri imparted legitimacy on a faction it labels *al-ikhwan al-murtadin* (the Apostate Brotherhood), one that “harbors under its Islamic patina the *jahili* (pagan) doctrines of nationalism, patriotism, and democracy.”

Embracing Sectarianism

The Islamic State is unapologetically sectarian, viewing as its mission the annihilation of the Shi`a sect and the destruction of Sufi symbols of heresy. It rationalizes this genocidal violence under the theological aegis of collective *takfir*. In the April 2020 documentary, the Islamic State scolds al-Qa`ida for refusing to embrace sectarian targeting because doing so would alienate mass public opinion. It highlights Ayman al-Zawahiri’s prior statements in which he rejects giving priority to fighting Shi`a, excusing them on the basis of their “ignorance” and insisting that the best way to deal with them is by proselytization and socialization, not sectarian conflict. It also chides him for making an ecumenical public outreach to Coptic Christians in Egypt and calling them “our partners in this homeland.”^j Lastly, the Islamic State criticizes the Taliban for, in its telling

i The Islamic State uses the Arabic adjective *wathaniyya* to describe the Taliban, which it casts as idolatrous because of its Hanafi-Maturidi-Deobandi theology that permits Sufism and jurisprudential eclecticism. The term *wathaniyya* also mocks the Taliban’s nationalist (*wataniyya*) orientation, which confines its armed struggle to ethnic Pashtuns inside of Afghanistan.

j This criticism of al-Zawahiri dates back to 2016. In an audio message released on January 5, 2017, al-Zawahiri rebutted these charges by clarifying that what he meant by Coptic Christians being “our partners in this homeland” was a mere reference to “agriculture, trade, and money... in accordance with the laws of our sharia.” See “Al-Qaeda Chief Ayman al-Zawahiri Calls ISIS ‘Liars,’” *Al Arabiya*, January 6, 2017.

of events, protecting the Hazari Shi`a rather than killing them.^k

The killing of coreligionists poses the greatest difficulty for jihadis from an 'Islamic' jurisprudential perspective as well as a public relations standpoint. It is no surprise, therefore, that this practice has unleashed intense criticisms by other jihadis who are concerned about the permissibility of this violence and its political repercussions. The practice of *takfir*, especially the controversy over the collective anathematization of the Shi`a and Sufis, has been a major vulnerability for militant Islamists, one that they have been trying to mitigate through theological nuance. Al-Qa`ida pragmatists have argued that *takfir* must be confined to *individuals* subject to strict rules of due process. The Islamic State since its origins with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the founder of al-Qa`ida in Iraq, has insisted that collective *takfir* is permissible since jihadis are in no position to adjudicate apostasy cases individually under present circumstances.¹⁹

The Islamic State today asserts that it does not indulge public opinion when it comes to *ahkam shar'iyya* (divine judgments). It holds that certain beliefs and practices nullify a person's status as a Muslim, leaving the pious no option but to label that person an infidel unless she or he returns to the right path. Otherwise, the lives and property of an apostate are no longer sacrosanct and can be expropriated without compunction. This rule, the group believes, applies to the Shi`a and cannot be suspended under the pretext of considering public opinion.

Defending Puritanism

Al-Qa`ida and other jihadis have denounced the Islamic State as modern-day Kharijites, extremists that kill Muslims—even fellow jihadis—simply for failing to give their oath of allegiance (*bay`a*) to its organization.²⁰ These criticisms have hit a nerve with the Islamic State as evidenced by how much time and effort it gives to rebutting these claims. The Islamic State asserts exclusive jihadi legitimacy; it alone waves the banner of monotheism and defends itself against apostates and hypocrites who have coalesced against it.

According to the April 2020 Islamic State documentary, al-Qa`ida casts aspersions on the puritanical monotheists even as it refrains from uttering one derogatory word toward secularists, Shi`a, Christians, and the Muslim Brotherhood. In the name of strategic advantage, it is alleged to tolerate allies with blasphemous doctrines, no matter how egregious, but refuses to join the Islamic State, which has succeeded in capturing territory and is applying 'Islamic' law. The Islamic State documentary alleges al-Qa`ida avoids attacking polytheists (a reference to Sufis and Shi`a) by excusing their 'ignorance' while making its top priority fighting and killing the righteous soldiers of the Islamic State.

The Islamic State is adamant in rejecting the neo-Kharijite label and turns the tables on al-Qa`ida by insisting that its leaders after the death of bin Ladin and Anwar al-Awlaki, to name just two, have deviated from the salafi paradigm and compromised on core issues of creed. It argues al-Qa`ida is not fit to lead other Islamists on the battlefield because it will lead them astray. The Islamic State presents itself as exclusively legitimate because it puts jihad in the service of monotheism, not nationalism, democracy, or populism. It

insists on establishing an 'Islamic' caliphate without regard to modern international norms; it applies Islamic law with or without the approval of the masses; and it rejects alliances with non-Muslims in accordance with the principle of *wala' wal bara'* (loyalty to Islam and disavowal of infidels). It will either triumph and reap the fruits of jihad or die honorably advancing its puritanical vision.

Implications

At its point of origins, jihadism represented a clear alternative to prevailing Islamist trends, principally the non-violent activism of the Muslim Brotherhood, the territorial parochialism of Islamic nationalists, and the political quietism of salafi scholars. Adherents of salafi jihadism became the most aggressive proponents of pan-Islamic unity. Yet, paradoxically, jihadis never cohered into a united front. Instead, they became divided by new ideological, strategic, and tactical differences. Consequently, their pan-Islamist movement is once again in tatters.

Specifically, jihadis have diverged on critical issues such as collective *takfir* (excommunication of Muslims), sectarian targeting, and the importance of a sharia-governed territorial state. These disagreements produced distinct repertoires of violence among their adherents in important conflict zones such as Iraq and Syria. It also led to a violent rupture between al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, two of the most important proponents of pan-Islamist jihadism today, setting in motion intense intra-jihadi conflicts in Libya, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and most recently West Africa.

Western observers may take comfort in the fact that violent extremists are at each other's throats, but this would be the wrong implication to draw. Since 9/11, the problem of violent jihadis has grown in scale, scope, and violent magnitude—all this despite being divided and pursued by a super power, multinational coalitions, and local governments. Whereas in the past the international community was dealing with one global jihadi movement headquartered in Afghanistan, today there are two with branches that span several regions and countries. These jihadis have proven their ability to plan operations and fight their adversaries even as they are killing each other.

More ominous is the potential for terrorist outbidding by both of these organizations. It is known from numerous studies that militant organizations facing serious rivals use outbidding strategies to capture a greater share of media coverage, recruits, and financing.²¹ A faction facing the prospect of marginalization into obscurity might ratchet up violence to exhibit superior commitment to the cause, or it can engage in bold terrorist innovations like al-Qa`ida executed on 9/11 to show greater efficacy than its rivals.²² Thus, intra-factional struggle to consolidate power behind one of two competing visions of transnational jihadism should not be confused with imminent jihadi defeat. Vigilance and well-considered long-term strategies are still necessary to contain and defeat this multipronged threat.

Notwithstanding these dynamics, factional strife does not bode well for jihadi victory. Research shows that united movements are more likely to achieve their objectives than divided ones.²³ United movements are better able to harness resources against state adversaries, negotiate with a single voice, and attract external sponsors. Conversely, divided movements waste their resources fighting rivals, are vulnerable to spoilers during negotiations, and appear as lost causes to external sponsors. Factional conflicts also encourage militant defections away from the movement and toward the state, which is what happened in Algeria during the 1990s and in Iraq

^k This claim by the Islamic State is the most puzzling given the long history of victimization that the Hazaris have endured at the hands of the Taliban while in power and during their nearly two decades of insurgency in Afghanistan. See Bismellah Alizada, "What Peace Means for Afghanistan's Hazara People," Al Jazeera, September 18, 2019.

during the American occupation.²⁴ In recent years, jihadi factional strife encouraged some jihadis to side with non-Islamists in order to balance against their jihadi rivals. Interestingly, the April 2020 Islamic State documentary accuses Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qa`ida's former affiliate in Syria, of collaborating with secular nationalists to fight the soldiers of the caliphate.

In sum, the crisis within jihadism presents counterextremist forces with opportunities to discredit this movement by highlighting its internal fragmentation and ideological incoherence. It also

presents them with openings to diminish movement cohesion and encourage defections to the state. Local tribes and populations caught in the cross-fire of factional rivals can be persuaded to side with the forces of law and order to restore security and stability to their regions. Lastly, in theaters where the defeat of jihadis is not imminently attainable, counterextremist forces could encourage factional rivalries to preclude the consolidation of power behind a united movement and ensure continuous strife among what would otherwise be brothers-in-arms. **CTC**

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