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Abstract

In order to win the war against the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, the United States must understand the enemy. Without a clear vision of who the U.S. is fighting, the government and military will not be able to distinguish ordinary Muslims from the extraordinary extremists, will be incapable of devising effective strategies for military and political efforts, and will not know which allies can be safe partners and which need to be avoided for being too close to the extremists. While there are many reasons for a lack of understanding the enemy, one of the most important is a deep disagreement about the role that Islam plays in motivating al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. This Special Report *explores the notion that while a marginal version of Islam is the driver of extremism, it is possible to distinguish the jihadi-salafists from the majority of Muslims. A close examination of the jihadi-salafists' belief system and methodologies will help the U.S. and allied governments formulate strategies to stop their spread.*

Sixteen years after 9/11, the problem of knowing the enemy has never been more acute, and the lack of consensus around this issue has never been more debilitating, for American foreign policy.

Experts inside and outside the government have offered contradictory views that either ignore or stress the ideological and religious language used by the extremists, downplay or emphasize the insurgent character of their wars, and reject or accept linkages between groups on a global basis. Apparently, the United States is either confronting a small terrorist group located somewhere in Afghanistan and Pakistan or Iraq and Syria, who, with unknown and irrelevant motivations, wants to kill Americans—or the U.S. has a global insurgent enemy motivated by Islam that is bent on world domination. There are experts who argue that the extremists have nothing to do with Islam, and others who believe that Islam is all about extremism; there are academics who contend that the real enemy is poverty, lack of opportunity, or Israeli and American foreign policy, and some who argue that the enemy consists of the many Muslims who insist on implementing Islamic sharia law regardless of where they live.

These opposing views are preventing a consistent and effective U.S. response. A close study of the enemy will allow the U.S. to determine the true place of Islam in this fight and to decide as well whether the world is confronting terrorists or insurgents. With this definition of the enemy, the U.S. government will be able to educate the American public about the extremist views, violent methodology, and global objectives of al-Qaeda and ISIS, while honestly describing their connection to Islam. Only then will the U.S. government be able to create military and political strategies to defeat the real enemy while winning over ordinary Muslims to the cause.

Context

The clear consensus among American elites is that Islam has nothing to do with the current violence and warfare across the Middle East, nor with terrorist attacks in the United States and Western Europe. Islam, as George W. Bush famously put it, is a religion of peace, and a few thousand terrorists are attempting to hijack this otherwise nonviolent way of life, a sentiment seconded by President Barack Obama more than 10 years later.[1] Academics and progressives have been even more exclusionary, some insisting that religion is irrelevant for understanding the enemy. To focus on Islam, in this view, is to miss the clear political, social, and economic conditions that have given rise to Islamic extremism, as well as to ignore the part that the West—and America—has had in radicalizing people across the region.[2]

A small number of experts and elites, however, believe that Islam is directly connected to the current violence, and many ordinary Americans and Europeans, generally non-Muslim, though including some Muslims, have become convinced that the problem might be Islam itself. In this latter view, Islam is taken to have an intrinsic inclination toward intolerance or violence, while sharia is recognized as incompatible with liberalism and the Western project as a whole.[3]

The challenge for the United States is that these contradictory views about Islam exist simultaneously throughout the country. Either the U.S. has an enemy of 1.7 billion people or as few as several thousand; either the U.S. has very few Muslim partners for this fight or every Muslim is a potential partner; and either the U.S. is engaged in a relatively minor battle with terrorists or is confronting a global insurgency. Perhaps just as important, neither view gives the U.S. government or ordinary Americans a method for separating friend from foe based on anything other than hope or fear. Some Americans hope that Islam has nothing to do with this war, while others fear that all Muslims wish them ill. The result has been a growing anxiety about Muslim Americans and less ability to understand or deal with the chaos and violence throughout the Middle East.

But the evidence of the past 16 years shows that neither view can be absolutely right.[4] On the one hand, the extremists themselves use openly religious language to explain their violence.[5] They also have said they have just one goal, an objective based

in Islam—the creation of a "caliphate," where their specific version of sharia law will prevail, and ultimately, the submission of the entire world to their form of Islam.[6] It is also undeniable that they refuse to appeal to Hindus, Buddhists, Christian Arabs, or even Shia Muslims: Their members are exclusively Sunni Muslims.

On the other hand, the Sunni world is full of Muslims who are just as much targets for the enemy as are Americans. Far more Muslims have, in fact, been purposely killed by the extremists than non-Muslims, and it is on Muslims that al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have first forced their form of governance and sharia.[7] There are also millions of law-abiding Muslims in the West who hate extremism as much as any other part of society: men and women who have views about the U.S. and the American dream that match those of any other American.[8] Yet, attacks in the West by Muslims born and raised in Europe, the U.S., and Australia, as well as by new immigrants, show that there is an appeal made by the extremists that must be understood and countered.[9]

The U.S. needs a systematic way to allow the government, and Americans as a whole, to tell the difference between ordinary Muslims and the extraordinary extremists, one that will help to inform U.S. policy and strategies and to allay the justified concerns of all its citizens.

The first objective of knowing the enemy, then, is to determine which overall section of the Muslim world is a real threat for the U.S. If it is not Muslims as a whole, which of those violent Islamists should concern the U.S.? (The potential dangers posed by non-violent, political Islam arguably warrant a separate examination.[10])

In addition to narrowing the scope of the problem, knowing the enemy will help to settle another vital policy problem: Should the U.S. care about all the violence in the Muslim-majority world or, at the other end of the spectrum, only the violence aimed at killing Americans and attacking the U.S. and its interests?

If the insurgent groups attacking a dozen countries in the Middle East want only to overthrow local leaders and have no further design, the U.S. can safely ignore them and focus only on those terrorists who wish to kill Americans. President Obama outlined this line of thinking in a *New Yorker* interview in January 2014, when he stated that "there is a distinction between the capacity and reach of...a

network that is actively planning major terrorist plots against the homeland versus jihadists who are engaged in various local power struggles and disputes, often sectarian."[11]

But if these insurgents' plans include conquest beyond just one local leader, with objectives (however far-fetched or fantastic they might seem) such as overthrowing the international system, the U.S. must act now, even if American interests are not being directly attacked. Only understanding the enemy will allow the U.S. to choose between these starkly contrasting visions of the war.

A close study of this specific section of the Muslim world will allow the U.S. to distinguish the truly dangerous extremists from other radical Muslims—as well as from ordinary Muslims—at home and abroad. This will provide at least some guidelines for policy intended to better assess the security threat of people seeking refuge or some other immigration status. On the battlefields of Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, and elsewhere, these guidelines will help the U.S. military decide which groups must be targeted as enemies and which can be safely armed and trained as partners and allies.

It is significant, too, that knowing the enemy will deeply affect the strategic plans to take on and defeat the real threat. If there are just a few thousand terrorists that are a clear and present danger to the West, law enforcement methodologies (such as killing and capturing the enemy through the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security, or intelligence agencies) are the right way forward. If there are hundreds of thousands of insurgents belonging to the enemy camp, the U.S. and its allies must adopt broader strategies that will win over as many partners as possible and defeat the extremists using all means of national power, including the military.

History

Before delving into this difficult problem, a brief discussion of recent national security policy on knowing the enemy is necessary to show how this issue has shifted over the past 16 years. There was a steady evolution in understanding the group that carried out the 9/11 attacks during the Bush Administration, which began with the premise that the attackers were a small group of terrorists who had nothing to do with Islam.[12] Subsequent statements, including George W. Bush's speech to Congress just a few weeks after the attack, suggest that the

Administration began to see the problem as involving every terrorist group of global reach, not just al-Qaeda.[13] Gradually, over the course of the next few years, the Bush Administration acknowledged the political side to the problem and a connection to Islam. In various statements from 2004 to 2006, the President described the enemy as Islamofascists, jihadists, and Islamic radicals.[14] The objective for the "Islamic terrorists" was also simple at first: They hated the American way of life and wanted to destroy it and America. But, as views of the enemy changed, so did the war the enemy was waging. After 2005, the Bush Administration described the jihadists as determined to organize and lead a global jihad, with the end goal of creating an ideal state called the caliphate.[15]

The Obama Administration changed this view of the enemy, excluding Islam from the discussion once again. The correct term became "extremists" or "violent extremists," and there was a comparison made with right-wing or left-wing radicalism rather than with religion. After 2011, the problem set was more precisely defined as consisting of three different groups: "core al-Qaeda" located somewhere in Afghanistan or Pakistan; the al-Qaeda "affiliates" (local groups with local agendas carrying out insurgencies around the Middle East); and "adherents," who were described as individuals with no organizational connection to either the core or the affiliates.[16] The relationship between the core and the affiliates was understood to be one of inspiration and funding, rather than direct command and control, leaving just the terrorist core as the real enemy. The motivation for the extremists was not known, although the head of the CIA explicitly said that their rhetoric about a caliphate could be dismissed as mere fantasy.[17] The renewed violence after the Arab Spring did not lead to a reconsideration of these views; instead, the Islamic State was taken to be an entirely new phenomenon that required more engagement than al-Qaeda—which was said to be nearing strategic defeat.[18]

Although it has yet to release a public document on its views of the enemy, speeches and statements by the Trump Administration suggest that the official understanding of the real problem will, again, change dramatically. During the presidential campaign, Donald Trump repeatedly referred to the enemy as Islamic radicals, which might widen the definition of the problem to include Islamists as well

as jihadists.[19] President Trump's major speech on extremism in Saudi Arabia equated al-Qaeda, ISIS, Hezbollah, Hamas, and "so many others," suggesting that local and global threats would be treated in the same way.[20] There were other hints that the Administration intended to focus on ISIS as the only threat demanding military action, with al-Qaeda, as for the Obama Administration, relegated to a lesser problem.[21] The first National Security Strategy published by the Trump Administration agrees with the May speech, describing the enemy as all "jihadists," and specifically naming Hezbollah, ISIS, and al-Qaeda.[22]

All three Administrations have proposed strategies based on these understandings of the enemy. For President Bush, this meant counterterrorism (CT) and regime change at first, and then a switch to counterinsurgency (COIN) as views of the enemy widened to include their global ambitions. The Obama Administration believed that three separate strategies were needed for the three different pieces of the challenge. For the core, this meant CT and a focus on attrition (killing and capturing the terrorists); relying on partners to deal with the affiliates; and using civilian law enforcement methods to stop or arrest the adherents. The rise of ISIS changed this approach somewhat, as the U.S. was forced to re-engage in the region, but there was serious and successful resistance from the President himself to ever putting boots on the ground in Syria or Iraq.[23] The new definition of the enemy put forward by the Trump Administration suggests that, while prioritizing ISIS, it will have strategies for dealing with all violent Islamists and Salafists rather than just the jihadi-salafists. The Trump Administration's negative views of the Iraq war may mean that it, too, will resist using large numbers of ground troops to destroy either ISIS or kill and capture other radical Muslims.

This brief overview shows just how dramatically views of the enemy—and therefore policy—have shifted over the past 16 years. Yet, despite these adjustments, neither radical Islam nor the militants are on the retreat. Instead, Islamism is winning new converts around the world and the violence from the jihadists has spread to engulf far more of Africa, the Middle East, and Asia than under any other President. Terrorist attacks in Europe and the U.S. are accelerating, suggesting that, whatever one might think about past policies, none of them has been a success. Something has gone wrong with the war

against jihadi-salafists, and U.S. policy must change if the enemy is to be defeated.

Ordinary Islam and the Radicals

But unless the U.S. begins with a concept of the enemy that realistically captures his essential nature, it will be impossible to devise a successful strategy to defeat the enemy. To do so, the United States must clearly understand the relationship between Islam and the extremists, and must narrow the focus to those radicals who are the true threat to the international system. This process must start by describing the belief system of the majority of Muslims—what might be called "ordinary Islam"—and to contrast it with the ideology of the extremists. About 80 percent of all Muslims are Sunni, and the extremists are as well, so the "ordinary Islam" discussed here refers to the general belief system of most Sunni Muslims and not to any of the ideologies of Shia Islam. Ordinary Islam comes in a diverse variety of schools, practices, and beliefs: traditional in orientation, modernist, Sufi, syncretistic, or more strict in their interpretation of what God has required from believers. The main commonality among all these variations in the religion is a firm belief that there is only one god and that Mohammed is his prophet, and a more general belief in orthopraxy (correct practice) as the key to pleasing God and attaining paradise. For ordinary Muslims, this means that there is a pathway (sharia), which consists of following the example of Mohammed (his Sunna) and the revealed word of God (the Quran), which will lead to paradise. Philosophical disagreements, varying traditional customs, and arguments over the precise contours of sharia have created a wide variety of expressions of ordinary Islam, but all recognize each other as Muslims and believers.

The two main outliers to this consensus are the groups generally called the Salafists and the Islamists, which between them constitute a growing minority of Muslims.[24] Salafism, once known as Wahhabism, is the form of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia and in scattered pockets around the greater Middle East. An austere and strict form of Islam, Salafism was the result of a revival led by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, a preacher who lived from 1703 to 1792 on the Arabian Peninsula.[25] Ibn Abd al-Wahhab followed the Hanbali school, one of the four orthodox legal schools (*madhahib*) within Sunni Islam. He rediscovered the thought and writing of

Ibn Taymiyya, a 13th-century Hanbali revivalist, and determined to resurrect the earlier scholar's vision of Islam. Like Ibn Taymiyya, he would argue that Islam in his day had been corrupted by "innovations" that had to be purged from the religion. He believed as well that the form of governance followed by the Ottoman caliphate, which claimed control of Arabia at the time, was immoral and oppressive and that it was necessary to set up an authentic Islamic State to correctly practice the one true religion of God. Through an alliance and intermarriage with the Saudi family, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was able to disseminate his ideas throughout the peninsula. Salafism would later spread around the Muslim-majority world once Saudi Arabia, which adopted Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's interpretation of Islam as the kingdom's official version of the religion, discovered oil. This missionary impulse would be given further impetus after 1979 as a way to counter the dual threats from the Iranian Revolution and from radicals within the kingdom.

Ideologically, Salafism differed from ordinary Islam in a number of important ways: in its views about which version of the sharia had to be followed; about the vital concept of *tawhid*, or the oneness of God; about when it was proper to declare *takfir* on other Muslims (declaring that they have left the religion and have become infidels); about innovations in the religion (called *bida*); about Shia Islam; about Sufism; and much else. All of these pieces of Salafi ideology, and more, are discussed in greater detail below. Overall, Salafism assumes that there is just one version of Islam that is truly correct and that all other versions are deficient or, as with Shiism or Sufi Islam, just wrong.

Islamism, in contrast, developed in many different countries and many different forms, generally in reaction to European colonialism. Some of the more important variations include the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood; the thought and practice of Turkish President Recep Erdogan, and Fethullah Gülen, an Erdogan competitor currently living in the United States; and a variety of local Islamist groups in Indonesia, such as Forum Ulama Umat Islam. The common threads between Islamism's various expressions are a commitment to be more pious, to follow God's commands, and to create an Islamic state that will implement God's law in some form. Most versions of Islamism believe in political or social processes (using democratic voting processes, or persuasion through preaching, known as *dawa*) to achieve their perfect state. A minority, the jihadists, believe that only through violent jihad can they establish their paradise on earth.

The Muslim Brotherhood was the intellectual and religious incubator for Egyptian Sayyid Qutb, who joined the Brotherhood after living in the U.S. from 1948 to 1951, which led him to despise Americans and to become radicalized.[26] He rose to a leadership position, and then attempted to create a coherent and practical manifesto for social and political change. The result was a 30-volume commentary (*tafsir*) of the Quran called *In the Shade of the Quran*, which spelled out in detail his belief that liberalism, democracy, and the "Jewish-Crusaders" (Britain, America, and the Jews) were the real enemies of Islam, and that all of them had to be fought and destroyed.[27] He also argued that the Egyptian government, along with every other secular state in the Muslim world, was illegitimate because it denied the sovereignty of God (*hakimiyya*) and had to be overthrown. Not surprisingly, Qutb spent a great deal of time in Egyptian prisons for his beliefs and actions and would be executed in 1966 along with many other Brotherhood leaders. After this sobering event, the remaining Brotherhood leadership in Egypt foreswore violence, and spent the half-century (until the military coup of 2013) preaching and persuading Egyptians—peacefully—to join their cause. Other chapters of the group, formed earlier in Syria, Jordan, Palestine, and elsewhere have, however, resorted to violence on occasion to achieve their political and religious ends.

Qutb's ideology included a belief in jihad as the only way to achieve the perfect Islamic state, a rejection entirely of the West and its ways of life, a commitment to following the prophet's life course (*Sira*) as the only methodology for change, a declaration that the leadership of the Muslim community had fallen into paganism (*jahiliyya*) and therefore was no longer believing (*takfir*), and a new interpretation of God's sovereignty that justified declaring war on the Egyptian government and other Muslim leaders.[28]

Perhaps fearing for his life, Sayyid Qutb's brother Muhammad left Egypt for Saudi Arabia after Sayyid's execution. There, he and other Brotherhood members would be granted refuge and, in his case, a teaching position at King Abd al-Aziz University. Over the next two decades he helped to begin

a movement known as Sahwa (Awakening) Salafism, which would bring together the Brotherhood's ideological concepts, especially those proposed by Sayyid, and Salafism.[29] The significant distinctions of the movement were a belief that all of their prophet's way of life (Sunna) had to be strictly followed; a rejection of the West and anything associated with the infidels; and an ideology that accepted the Salafi formulation of *tawhid* while retaining Qutb's overall vision (especially his views of hakimiyya). The Saudi government has had an ambiguous relationship with the Sahwa, at times encouraging or even supporting various preachers associated with the movement, and at others detaining leaders who are viewed as threats to the state. Osama bin Laden had a more straightforward relationship: He regularly attended lectures given by Muhammad Qutb and joined Qutb's version of the Muslim Brotherhood as a young man.

Two final ingredients were, however, necessary before jihadi-salafism could become the threat that it is today: the Afghan Jihad and the work of Abdullah Azzam. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 set the stage for the radicalization of thousands of young Muslims (including Osama bin Laden) and the creation of a cadre of "global jihadists," many of whom would decide that it was absolutely obligatory to attack America. None of this might have happened without the influence and effort of Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian cleric who was teaching in Saudi Arabia when the war broke out. Profoundly influenced by the writings of Ibn Taymiyya that he encountered in the Saudi kingdom, Azzam proposed a legal ruling (fatwa) that made fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan an individual obligation (*fard ayn*) for all Muslims—men and women.[30]

This was a revolutionary declaration, and one that would have a decisive impact on the men who created al-Qaeda. The individual obligations within ordinary Islam are the five pillars of the religion that are absolutely necessary for all Muslims to fulfill and that cannot be carried out by anyone other than the individual: the declaration of faith, daily prayer, fasting, charity, and pilgrimage. By arguing that the jihad against the Soviets had become *fard ayn*, Azzam was in effect saying that any Muslim who did not join the fight, in some capacity, was an infidel doomed to hell. Azzam's religious and legal ruling also made jihad obligatory in Afghanistan, not in the nations of which these young men were citizens. The obvious conclusion was that the Muslim community was its own country, one unified by creed, not race, ethnicity, tribe, or citizenship, and one that crossed the borders and boundaries drawn by the infidels. Azzam argued that this meant that an attack on or occupation of any part of the community had to be met by resistance from the entire Muslim world, creating the religious and legal preconditions for global jihad.

Osama bin Laden would adopt this belief and add it to the Sahwa Salafism of Muhammad Qutb to create a new form of Islam, usually known as jihadi-salafism. Bin Laden was just 22 and a new graduate from King Abd al-Aziz University when Afghanistan collapsed into civil war in 1979. Shortly before the Soviets invaded the country, he traveled to Pakistan and Afghanistan, and joined the mujahideen. During the 1980s, he met Azzam, became his deputy, and helped him to facilitate travel and training for thousands of jihadi fighters in the war with the Soviets. While the two would eventually quarrel about the future direction of the global jihad, bin Laden fully accepted Azzam's basic vision and would set up al-Qaeda in 1988 as the vehicle to carry on the fight against the infidels around the world. After Azzam's mysterious death in 1989, bin Laden became the acknowledged leader of those "Afghan Arabs," who believed that the war had only just begun.

The ideology and practice of the new sect required each piece of this story: Salafism, Sayyid Qutb, the Sahwa, Abdullah Azzam, and the specific mixture of these elements brought together by bin Laden and fully accepted by his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri. The slightest variation of any of these ingredients would be rejected by al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, the premier proponents of what can best be understood as a cult. The marginal nature of the new form of sharia adopted by this cult, as well as its extremism and dedication to violence, explains why most ordinary Muslims reject its creed, religious practices, and jihadist methodologies.

But the failure of the jihad in Iraq would force al-Qaeda to rethink its ideology and methodologies. The result was a reform process that concluded that the group should have protected Sunni Muslim blood more; had been wrong to impose sharia so ruthlessly; needed to do more to set up institutions of governance; and should seek to win over Muslims to their cause, rather than using terror and violence

to force them into their ranks.[31] All these reforms were rejected by the Iraqi branch of the organization, which would split with al-Qaeda to create the Islamic State (also called the Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham). In their writing and statements, ISIS leaders have been quite clear that they believe al-Qaeda changed its original creed and methodology, citing at times specific ideological and methodological issues as the root of their disagreement with their mother organization.[32] Despite their organizational and ideological break with al-Qaeda, the two share so many similarities—in sharia practice, creed, and jihadist actions—that they have far more in common with each other than with ordinary Muslims, justifying the description of "jihadi-Salafist" for both.

No one would dispute that the jihadi-salafists—also known as "extremists"—represent a serious challenge to the world and a direct threat to the United States. Nearly every foreign terrorist plot against the U.S. in the past 20 years has emanated from men who espouse this specific ideology, and the vast majority of "lone jihadis," that is, single attackers who claim a religious motivation for their terrorism, has been associated with jihadi-Salafism.[33] In contrast, the threat posed by Islamists and Salafists is open to debate, is framed as a long-term challenge even by those most concerned by the growth of their ranks, and is not associated with the level of violence generated by the extremists. While their long-term threat to liberalism and the Western way of life is a topic worth exploring and might require government action to counter, the imminent threat presented by the jihadi-salafists requires immediate action that only the state can provide. For all these reasons, it is reasonable to conclude that the jihadi-salafists deserve special consideration and a deeper understanding than other radical Muslim groups.

Jihadi-Salafist Ideology and Practice

This brief discussion shows that the extremists follow a version of Islam that is distinct from the many forms of the religion practiced by ordinary Muslims. To be able to distinguish between jihadi-salafists and ordinary Muslims, however, a more detailed look at both their ideology and practices is in order. The textbox provides an overview of their ideological (*aqida*) and methodological (*minhaj*) distinctions. Each of the terms is significant, describing beliefs not shared by most Muslims and justifying actions that the extremists have carried out in their wars.

Aqida. By *aqida*, the extremists mean their creed or religious belief system. But *aqida* is more than just philosophical musings: The jihadi-salafist creed has real-world effects, especially on their relationship with other Muslims and on how they are conducting their wars. Each of the pieces of their *aqida* divides them from ordinary Muslims and the Islam practiced by the vast majority of the 1.7 billion member global community, but eight principles are especially distinctive: (1) their version of *tawhid*; (2) jihad as *fard ayn*; (3) al-*wala wal-bara* (alliance and disavowal); (4) the related term *takfir*; (5) an innovative take on *jahiliyya*; (6) their extremist sharia; (7) views of the caliph and caliphate; and (8) their theories about the end times.

The most important of their creedal commitments is a specific version of *tawhid*, which means "the oneness of God." The Muslim declaration of faith, especially that "there is no god but God," is the best encapsulation of this concept. The natural implication of *tawhid* is that only God should be worshipped, and that other divinities must be regarded as false idols, unworthy of human respect or worship. For the extremists, however, this core of the religion has far more significance than adherence to monotheism: Following Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Sayyid Qutb, they have concluded that *tawhid* requires a recognition of the lordship of God and his complete sovereignty (*hakimiyya*) over human affairs.[34] No one therefore has the right to legislate—to add to God's laws or subtract from them—or to refuse to obey all His commands.[35] This has led them to conclude that democracy, which imbues the people with sovereignty and creates legislatures that can write new laws at will, is a foreign religion and incompatible with Islam.[36] Ordinary Muslims reject this audacious attempt to co-opt the very foundation of their religion and do not accept this definition or its implications for democracy.

In much the same way, al-Qaeda and ISIS have attempted to appropriate the duty of jihad, which has a complex history within the Muslim community. It is an understatement to say that the concept has undergone an extraordinary evolution from the days of Mohammed's earliest mission to the 21st century: from peaceful preaching to self-defense in the face of attack to offensive warfare opening territory for God's truth and, since the 19th century, to a more internalized view of this duty. For ordinary Muslims today, the word means

Jihadi–Salafist Ideology and Methodologies

Aqida

- Tawhid requiring a rejection of democracy

- Jihad as a religious necessity (fard ayn)

- Wala wa-l-bara

- Bida

- Their extremist version of sharia

- Dawa as conversion and indoctrination of other Muslims

- Anti-madhahib: There is only one correct school of law

- Anti-ijma: The entire community has gone astray

- Anti-murjia: rejection of those who refuse to declare takfir

- Anti-mutazila: rejection of reason over revelation

- Jahiliyya

- The Taliban as true Islamic state

- Views of Shia

- Views of Sufis

- Views of Jewish people

- Views of Christians and "Crusaders"

- Views of Hindus and other non-"people of the book"

- Takfir: kufr of Muslims who do not believe as they do

- Takfir: kufr of the rulers who do not govern by their version of sharia

- Their caliph

- Their fulfillment of prophecies: Khurasan and end times

Minhaj

- Their strategy/doctrine: "The Methodology"

- Supererogatory good deeds are required, not optional

- "Proper" clothing, beard, hijab are required, not optional

- Images, television, movies are forbidden

- Music, games, and sports are forbidden

- "Dawa" to family/friends

- Al-amr bi-l-maruf wa-l-nahy an al-munkar ("commanding right and forbidding wrong" in private life)

- I'idad (preparation for jihad)

- Hisba ("commanding right and forbidding wrong" in public life)

- Engaging in jihad as a necessity for change

- Hudud/Hadd (the penalties assigned for about 10 specific sins)

- Acting on takfir: death to all "apostates"

- Suicide bombings aimed at other Muslims

- WMDs must be acquired and used

any "struggle in the cause of God," and is generally taken to signify either the individual struggle to follow God more piously, the struggle to create a more just society, or, if externalized, a military struggle to defend one's nation when attacked. The extremists believe that this is entirely wrong. In their understanding of the term, jihad means primarily fighting, and other definitions are subordinate to the need to take on and defeat the enemies of God, whether offensively or defensively. Following Abdullah Azzam, al-Qaeda and ISIS have also decided that the current global situation has made jihad an individual duty, incumbent on all believers. This, combined with their views of *tawhid* that make it obligatory for every believer to obey all of God's commands, without exception, means that they hold those Muslims who refuse to join their jihad as sinners and perhaps even as infidels. This justifies violence against ordinary Muslims and a callous disregard, especially by ISIS, for collateral damage in their terrorist or insurgent attacks.

This attitude is reinforced by a principle known as *al-wala wal-bara* (alliance and disavowal). Unlike both *tawhid* and jihad, al-*wala wa-l-bara* is not a Quranic term, nor does it have any place in the belief system of ordinary Muslims. Instead, it is the invention of a Sahwa scholar who studied under Muhammad Qutb in the 1970s.[37] "Alliance and disavowal" is used by the extremists to justify their separation from anyone, Muslim or infidel, who refuses their ideology, as well as their collaboration and friendship only with "real" believers (other jihadi-salafists

or potential recruits to the cause). This concept leads naturally to declaring other Muslims, and certainly the leaders of every Muslim nation, to be infidels (*takfir*), and creates further disregard for the welfare and safety of innocent civilians.

Because the concept of *takfir* has such significance for ordinary Muslims as well as the extremists, a brief discussion of this term is in order. Historically, converting from Islam to any other religion (or no religion) was forbidden by most versions of sharia.[38] In medieval Islamic societies, the state could declare *takfir* on these citizens, hold a hearing to determine if they had indeed converted, and punish apostates with death. Apostates also lost the right to property, to inherit, or to pass on their estates by inheritance, and were automatically divorced from their spouses. All this began to change in the 19th century, as modernist interpretations of Islam came to dominate almost the entire Muslim world. Freedom of belief and religion were embraced as reflecting the true spirit of God's revelation and Mohammed's example, leading to the creation of states that were more liberal in their interpretation of this issue as with many others.[39] While this attitude has changed somewhat over the past 30 years, as Islamists and Salafists have gained strength and following, declaring *takfir* is still a rarity in most countries and, when it does occur, is entirely a function of the state and the official judicial system.

The extremists disagree with this evolution in thought and practice and have arrogated the privilege of *takfir* to themselves. Al-Qaeda and ISIS alone

decide who is a true Muslim and who has become an apostate—and they alone are allowed to kill people or take their property in accordance with the medieval legal principles implied by this declaration. Even more important, they have liberally used this privilege to declare a majority of the community to be outside the religion. Taken together with al-*wala wal-bara*, their views of *tawhid*, and jihad, the extremist privilege of *takfir* makes the death of millions obligatory, or at least of little concern in their wars.

A radical reinterpretation of *jahiliyya* (ignorance) supports the jihadi-Salafist views of *takfir*. Mohammed and the Quran used the term to talk about the pitiable ignorance of the Arabs before God revealed His word to them. For both sources, *jahiliyya* had a negative connotation, but was mostly explanatory, showing why Arabs needed God's guidance.[40] Sayyid Qutb would alter this common understanding and profoundly influence the extremists. In his analysis of the current situation of the Muslim community, Qutb argued that *jahiliyya* was really about serving men, rather than serving God: It was therefore possible to separate this condition from a specific time and see it as descriptive of the modern Muslim world. Because of their belief in nationalism, socialism, liberalism, and other "ignorant" ideologies—and their creation of states based on these concepts—entire Muslim-majority societies had fallen back into pagan ignorance.[41] Any methodology for reform therefore had to start over, following Mohammed's precise footsteps if it would be successful and blessed by God. Al-Qaeda and ISIS agree with Qutb and have used this template for describing the status of Muslims today and for designing the methods that will be necessary to effect change. For ordinary Muslims, this is of course a gross insult, assuming that anyone who does not agree with the extremists is pagan and sinful and that he must convert to "real" Islam in order to avoid hell.

The extremists have further insulted other Muslims with their views about sharia. Influenced by both Salafism and the Sahwa, jihadi-salafists argue that there is only one version of sharia that is valid—their own, a form of religious law that has a number of unique characteristics. As just one example, this legal system commits al-Qaeda and ISIS to following every one of Mohammed's precedents, making Muslims responsible for thousands of rules that other legal schools deem "recommended" or "disliked" rather than obligatory religious duties or forbidden practices.

Their belief in one static interpretation of sharia directly contradicts the views of other Muslims, who follow many different interpretations, all of which are understood to be equally valid.[42] Although there are a large number of commonalities—what might be called Islam's Ten Commandments—there are just as many local and regional variations, each influenced by vastly different historical and legal precedents, by the consensus of local scholars, and by customary practices, local traditions, Sufism, and other variables. The result is a wide range of views about moral behavior, the right way to carry out religious rites, proper dress and hair, the place of women in society, the legality of liberalism and democracy, and much else. The extremists would end this diversity of opinion and replace it with one vision of sharia—theirs. In their ideology, other variations on God's law, and especially those associated with Sufism, Shiism, modernism, or even ancient philosophies like the Murjia, are misguidance and might damn their adherents to hell.

A related piece of jihadi-Salafist ideology is a belief that "the real believers" have a legal obligation to rid Islam of all innovations (*bida*). By this, ISIS and al-Qaeda do not mean technological change, but any additions to the religion since the time of Mohammed. But in fact, the origins of their version of Islam can be traced only to Ibn Taymiyya, in the 13th century. Extremist clerics rarely quote earlier scholars and seem to believe that moral perfection was reached around this time. This specific era coincides with a general movement within Islam to declare the "gates to independent reasoning" (*ijtihad*) closed, since many scholars believed that all important questions governing human existence had been answered. During the 19th century, a broad reform movement that included both modernists and Islamists argued that the "gates to *ijtihad*" had to be reopened in order to deal with the challenges posed by modernity and the West. The extremists agree, but want only one sort of *ijtihad*: independent reasoning that will allow them to overturn the current consensus (*ijma*) of Muslim scholars and return to a consensus reached in the 13th century as modified by Ibn Taymiyya. Any other changes to the religion, especially the liberal reinterpretation of Islam reached by consensus during and after the 19th century, are *bida* and must be rejected.

Their commitment to ending this sort of innovation in the religion explains, at least partially, the vehemence of their opposition to Shia Islam and Sufism. While Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Ibn Taymiyya expressed disapproval of both forms of Islam, especially Shiism, the Saudi state never suppressed the millions of Shia living within its borders, and Ibn Taymiyya is said to have been a member of a Sufi order (the Qadiriyya). The extremists, especially the Islamic State, are far more severe, arguing that the Shia are not actually Muslims and must convert to "real" Islam or die.[43] They also have said that the Sufis must give up their heretical practices or face punishment and even death. One of the first signs that the extremists have begun to influence a specific area of the Muslim world is the destruction of Sufi graves and sacred spots, and the suppression of Sufi practices, which occurred in many places, including Afghanistan in the 1990s, Somalia after 2006, and in Libya after the Arab Spring.

From their reading of Islamic law and the life of Mohammed, the extremists have concluded that there is just one divinely sanctioned way to unify the Muslim community and end its weaknesses: the phased re-establishment of the caliphate and the declaration of a caliph to rule all Muslims.[44] While many Muslims believe in the eventual return of these two institutions, there is little agreement about the specific form and structure of this ideal state.[45] As recent history has shown, however, both ISIS and al-Qaeda have concrete views about how the caliphate will be formed, how the caliph will be appointed, and what life in their utopia will look like. It is a hopeful sign that so many Muslims forced to live under the Islamic State's governance and form of sharia have rejected this vision of the caliphate. Al-Qaeda has a slightly different problem, since Zawahiri (like bin Laden) has sworn oaths of fealty to the successive heads of the Taliban.[46] This suggests that their ideal state would look something like Afghanistan under the Taliban, hardly a model that many other Muslims would find worth imitating.

The extremists' views of the "end times" is a final piece of their ideology that separates them from ordinary Muslims. For most Muslims, the Last Hour will occur in some distant age. Its timing is entirely under God's control and all the events predicted by Mohammed and foretold in the Quran will occur according to His will. Al-Qaeda and ISIS seem to suggest that they can bring about the Last Hour through human action—according to God's sharia, of course. Their public statements say that they have already fulfilled some prophecies and their actions show they are setting themselves up to fulfill others. Thus, both groups have declared Afghanistan and Pakistan to be "Khorasan," a region important for certain end-time prophecies. They have described themselves as the "black banners" that will return from this area to re-establish true Islam and have, in fact, adopted black flags as the insignia for their organizations because prophecy says that black banners will identify the true believers. Al-Qaeda and ISIS have claimed, too, that they are "the saved sect" and "the victorious party," groups that prophecies have said will be present during the end times and that are guaranteed paradise by God.[47] In more concrete actions, ISIS captured the town of Dabiq in Syria to be able to fight a final apocalyptic battle predicted by Mohammed, while al-Qaeda has discussed the need to create an army in Yemen that will participate in one of the last battles against the infidels.[48] While this sort of manipulation of prophecy might appeal to some Muslims, it is probable that many others find it an affront to God's free will and omnipotence (*qadar*).

Minhaj. As a whole, the ideology of the extremists clearly separates the radicals from ordinary Muslims and even the Sahwa or Salafists. The *minhaj* (methodologies and practices of the extremists) is just as unique and identifiable. Al-Qaeda and ISIS use this term to describe three very different phenomena: (1) the way of life demanded by their form of sharia, (2) the ways and means with which they are fighting their wars, and (3) an elaborate grand strategy developed by al-Qaeda in the 1990s. All are important for knowing these enemies and for distinguishing them from other radical or militant groups as well as from ordinary Muslims.

Sharia Practices. Understanding how the extremists practice sharia is important for many reasons, but one stands out above the rest: The main goal of both al-Qaeda and ISIS is to impose their narrow, jihadi-Salafist interpretation of God's will on the entire world, beginning with other Muslims. In nearly every statement to the Muslim community, the extremists avow their dedication to this legal system and in all their wars prioritize the imposition of sharia and the creation of institutions, such as religious police (*hisba*) and religious courts, to ensure that their specific interpretation of God's law

reigns supreme. Given what they have actually done in their wars, the commitment of al-Qaeda and ISIS to "establishing the religion" should not be taken as mere rhetoric or simple justification for their brutal actions: This is their real objective and one for which they are willing to give their lives. Because of this commitment, the extremists will impose their legal system even when it is counterproductive for their overall war—alienating entire populations in places like Somalia, Mali, Libya, Syria, and Iraq. They have thus been forced, in certain times and places, to use violence to compel Muslims to do their bidding, rather than winning communities over to their views through persuasion or by offering goods or services. This creates a serious weakness in their global wars, one that can and should be exploited.

There are two other important implications of this commitment to imposing sharia: It makes the extremists easily identifiable around the world and it influences their military-political strategies. There are literally hundreds of sharia practices that make jihadi-salafists stand out, from the way they pray to their striking appearance to their behavior during warfare. As with their ideology, some of these practices are shared with Salafists, the Sahwa in particular, but it is the total constellation of rules and commandments, all believed to be obligatory and thus followed as a whole, that make the extremists unique.

Many of their distinctive acts are based on their pious commitment to follow the entire Sunna of Mohammed. Because Mohammed is said to have favored hair that is cut, a closely shaved mustache, and a beard that is never trimmed at all, jihadi-salafists believe this is the only acceptable hairstyle for a true believer.[49] Clothing for men must also never cover the ankles, forcing them to roll up pants or to wear robes and tunics that are kept much shorter than is customary. This, too, follows Mohammed, who said that trailing robes were a sign of arrogance and should be avoided.[50] Even the way they must clean their teeth (with a stick known as a "siwak" rather than a toothbrush) is done in pious imitation of Mohammed and separates them from most Muslims.[51] The usual uniform for jihadi-salafists, on the other hand, is the *shalwar kameez* (a long tunic worn with loose trousers), an imitation of the Taliban rather than Mohammed. This supports their assertion that they are the "black banners" from Khorasan predicted by God to return true Islam to the community.

Women also have their proper clothing: loose and full-body covering that does not allow even the eyes to be seen completely. The burqa of Afghanistan and the abaya and niqab of the Arabian Peninsula are examples of women's clothing that the extremists find acceptable. They believe that the general rule for women is not to leave the house; accompaniment by a male protector forbidden to them sexually (a *mahram*) is obligatory if they do.

A few specific behaviors, especially in the West, are conditioned by another jihadi-Salafist sharia commitment: to never imitate the infidels.[52] A well-known example of this principle was a fatwa by a group of extremist clerics in Saudi Arabia rewriting the rules of soccer so that Muslim players would not follow the infidels even in this way.[53] Jihadi-salafists in the West, where polygamy is outlawed, will at times decide to marry multiple wives specifically to distance themselves from the infidels around them. Various extremist clerics in Britain have also encouraged breaking Western laws that do not match their version of sharia and even taking spoils (*fay*) from the infidels who live around them.[54]

Other behavior is influenced by the extremists' desire to subordinate their entire lives to jihad on the path of God, that is, to violence. Music, games, sports, and images are all forbidden—another sign of their Salafist or Sahwa heritage. But because of their absolute devotion to fighting the infidels and apostates, both al-Qaeda and ISIS have concluded that all of these sins are permissible if they serve the jihad. Warlike sports like paintball, the martial arts, or even soccer and basketball are allowed because they prepare men physically for the rigors of the battlefield. As with many other pious Muslims, they take Mohammed's prohibition on musical instruments and singing girls very seriously. ISIS in particular takes this obligation even further, as some radicals have in the past, arguing that all music is sinful and forbidden (*haram*). Both ISIS and al-Qaeda, however, encourage one specific kind of a cappella singing: the jihadist *nashid* (hymn), devoted to stirring the spirit for fighting. Neither group allows images in any form—movies, paintings, photographs, and statuary are all *haram*. The sudden decision by the Taliban in March 2001 to destroy the two irreplaceable Buddhist statues at Bamiyan in central Afghanistan, preserved for centuries by other Muslims, was made as the Afghan radicals came under the influence of jihadi-Salafism. The sole exception is the extensive use of videos

and pictures in their jihadist propaganda and *dawa* (preaching and recruitment) for the cause of jihad.

All these practices not only set the extremists apart from other Muslims, they also allow their presence and influence to be easily identified in contested regions around the globe. When an insurgent group fighting in Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Libya, Yemen, Mali, Egypt, or elsewhere suddenly decides to destroy statues, break musical instruments, blow up movie theaters, attack Sufi shrines and graves, and forbid soccer matches, this is not a random occurrence: It is a signal that they have fallen under the influence of jihadi-salafists and are being co-opted by either ISIS or al-Qaeda.

Military-Political Practices. Nor is it a coincidence that so many jihadist and militant groups engaged in these arenas have decided to adopt this particular form of Islam. During the 1990s, al-Qaeda developed a methodology known as "unifying the ranks" that was designed to co-opt ongoing jihads by converting ordinary fighting groups to their form of Islam. The concept begins with *aqida*, demanding that the leadership adopt their views on *tawhid*, jihad, and sharia, at a minimum, and then focuses on winning the groups over to their methodologies for the jihad and for the state that they hope to create in the course of the war.[55] As the extremists convince these militants that their traditional form of sharia is deficient, the locals begin to adopt the jihadi-Salafist *minhaj* and to put these new and radical views into practice in their everyday lives.[56]

Other parts of the extremists' military-political strategies are influenced by their perceived legal obligation to impose sharia. This includes one of their most important military objectives—to overthrow the apostates, that is, the rulers of every Muslim-majority country. In their ideology, the main sin committed by these leaders is not tyranny, corruption, or poor governance, but a failure to oversee the public imposition of God's law.[57] This is a capital crime, one that legitimizes rebellion against the state and the replacement of these Muslims with "real" believers, that is, men who will follow the jihadi-Salafist version of sharia and impose it on any people, Muslim and non-Muslim, under their control.

While al-Qaeda and the Islamic State share most of these methodologies, practices, and beliefs, there are certain characteristic features that al-Qaeda has adopted that separate the "mother group" from the even more extreme Islamic State. In 2008 and 2009, al-Qaeda underwent a process of reform that led the organization to decide to be more careful with Sunni Muslim lives, to impose their version of sharia more slowly, to spend more time setting up institutions for their ideal state, and to attempt to win over ordinary Muslims by providing more services.[58] The group has also adopted a distinct methodology for establishing sharia during the jihad, detailed in a public document, that begins with imposing sharia covertly, setting up religious courts, establishing religious police (*hisba*), and finally openly implementing its religious vision for the targeted country.[59]

The military and political strategies of the Islamic State have their own particular features that distinguish them from other fighting groups—including the organization that gave birth to them. Many seem to have been adopted by ISIS to show their rejection of criticism by al-Qaeda's leadership, since their actions run counter to the reform process al-Qaeda went through. They also directly contradict orders from their commanders in Khorasan about correct behavior.[60] Thus, ISIS uses horrific acts of slaughter to terrorize conquered populations into submission; imposes its version of sharia immediately, without regard for the sensibilities of the targeted population; and aggressively carries out attacks abroad. The group also has a deep commitment to Iraq and Iraqi ways rather than adopting the Afghan focus of al-Qaeda. Thus the Islamic State has chosen to emphasize local Last Hour prophecies about Dabiq and Sham—an ancient name for the territory from Palestine/Israel to Syria—rather than prioritizing Khorasan and has not adopted the Afghan shalwar kameez as its uniform. ISIS, too, has an Iraqi-style organizational structure, based on its security institution, that is unlike anything supported by al-Qaeda or other jihadist groups.[61] The Islamic State's global organization, based on its vision of a global caliphate, is naturally very different from that of al-Qaeda, using a provincial *(wilayat)* concept as its basis and acknowledging the primacy of its chosen caliph, which allows observers to easily track the spread of ISIS worldwide.

The Methodology. Underlying many jihadi-Salafist military practices is an elaborate grand strategy called the Movement's Methodology for the Prophet's Course of Life (*al-minhaj al-haraki li-l-sirat al-nabawi*). The methodology, developed during the 1990s by al-Qaeda, follows Qutb's vision: a literal recreation of the life of Mohammed from his earliest

calling to the conquest of Mecca and beyond.[62] It has, however, a modern military-political strategic gloss that clearly reflects the influence of Mao Zedong and North Vietnamese general Vo Nguyen Giap.[63] While it is uncertain how this supposedly religious group could justify using the secular concepts of infidel strategists, the result is a surprisingly innovative take on the usual Maoist guerrilla war. The methodology is in fact unique, setting the jihadi-salafists apart from other fighting groups and making it possible to identify them even in crowded battle spaces like Syria or Libya.

One of the most distinctive characteristics of the methodology is a division of jihad into four stages: (1) covert jihad, (2) strategic defense, (3) strategic equilibrium, and (4) strategic offense. During the first stage, the extremists set up a command (*imara*), carry out *dawa* (preaching and recruitment) to win over a few committed men to their cause, and create leadership cadres, gather weapons, identify territory as their safe haven, and set up training camps for their soldiers. This stage culminates with covert assassinations and terror attacks to kill off specific targets. Once the group is known to the authorities as the perpetrators of this violence and is targeted by the state, the group undertakes *hijra* (migration) to the safe haven, turns to open jihad, and begins the strategic defense of its territory.[64] This consists of the usual Maoist guerrilla warfare to exhaust the government and force it from particular parts of the country, areas where the group intends to impose its version of sharia and set up official governance.[65]

The next stage, strategic equilibrium, is perhaps the most important for differentiating al-Qaeda from other militants, including the Islamic State.[66] Having pushed the central government out of targeted regions, al-Qaeda believes that it must now set up the institutions of governance, impose its version of sharia, win over the populace to its political-religious vision, and begin preparing for higher forms of warfare. Al-Qaeda also spreads its control throughout the countryside, much like Mao and Giap, avoiding the large cities.[67] The Islamic State seems to have accepted the military logic of this methodology while rejecting the concept of "winning hearts and minds." ISIS has instead adopted a more ruthless method for seizing control—through brute force and terror, and a more simplistic vision of governance based on the security state that many of its Iraqi founders knew under Saddam Hussein.

Once al-Qaeda forces have firm control over a growing amount of territory, the methodology assumes that the central government will be forced to re-engage with the extremists, leading to the final stage, the strategic offense. Having created a regular army during equilibrium, the jihadi-salafists will now be able to confront the state on an equal footing, defeat it in battle, and seize control of the country's cities one after the other in a massive offensive designed to end with the fall of the capital.[68] This concept seems to be accepted by ISIS as well as al-Qaeda, which might explain the similarities in the battles fought by ISIS in Iraq and Syria 2014 and 2015 and by al-Qaeda (with its Taliban allies) in Afghanistan from 2014 to the present: massive offensives that swept through major cities, took entire provinces, and were aimed at Baghdad and Kabul.

The result of this entirely distinctive set of methodologies consists of military, political, and religious practices that make it possible to identify al-Qaeda and the Islamic State on a global basis, whether or not groups publicly acknowledge their affiliation with the extremists. This has become increasingly important since another practice used by al-Qaeda in particular is an attempt to deny relationships between local jihadi-Salafist groups and the central organization.[69] But if a militant group has adopted the *aqida* and *minhaj* of either extremist organization; has as its objective the creation through violence of a state governed by its distinctive set of laws; and is actively implementing its practices, beliefs, and methodologies on the battlefield—why should that group not be treated precisely like other extremists?

Policy Implications

A series of critical policy implications flow from the distinctiveness of jihadi-Salafism. Understanding the extremists will shape how the U.S. defines the enemy and determines the most significant threat confronting the homeland; how the national security apparatus designs strategies to take on and defeat this newly delimited enemy; whom the U.S. chooses as its allies and partners; how the U.S. and its allies communicate with the Muslim world; and how the U.S. military and government achieve victory in this global war.

Knowing the Enemy and the Role of Islam. Of first importance is defining who the enemy is. Every other facet of the war will flow from this crucial issue. This *Special Report* concludes that the most pressing

enemies are those who practice the distinctive set of military, political, and religious practices described above, regardless of whether they publicly acknowledge their affiliation with ISIS and al-Qaeda.

From this discussion, it is also obvious that the enemy is not all Muslims. In fact, Muslims in the greater Middle East, whether Sunni or Shia, are the first victims of the extremists, who are more akin to violent cultists than representative of the entire religion. But the fact that al-Qaeda and ISIS are also Muslim, use exclusively Islamic language to appeal to their intended audiences, recruit solely Sunni Muslims, and have set as their objectives religious goals (such as imposing their version of sharia) means that the religious foundations and appeals of the extremists cannot be ignored.

U.S. government agencies and Administrations should therefore confront the connection between Islam and the extremists head on. Through speeches and policy statements, the U.S. government should educate the American public about the extremist views, violent methodology, and global objectives of al-Qaeda and ISIS while frankly describing their connection to a marginal version of Islam. Without this sort of open discussion, the American people have been making up their own minds about the relationship between Islam and extremism, and generally coming to conclusions that either overstate or underestimate their connection.

Messaging and Allies. With this level of understanding of the religious ideology of the extremists, the entire national security apparatus, from the Department of Homeland Security to the State Department to the Department of Defense and the intelligence community, will be better positioned to win over ordinary Muslims to the fight against the extremists.

A firm grasp of the nature of jihadi-Salafism—and its specific deviations from mainstream Islam—will make it possible to sharpen U.S. messaging to counter the extremists in a real "war of ideas." Rather than fearing that the U.S. will unwittingly support the radicals in this fight, knowing the enemy deeply will allow policymakers and operators who engage in the ideological struggle to correctly identify and separate the extremists from other rebels or even from those Islamists who do not present an immediate danger to the republic.

Yet at the same time, it is important to keep in mind that the ideology of the extremists has done more to discredit al-Qaeda and ISIS than any "war of ideas" by the U.S. and its allies. By manipulating the deepest held beliefs of millions of Muslims, and imposing their moral and legal vision on believers across the greater Middle East, they have alienated the very people they hope to win to their cause. Using a greater understanding of the enemy, the U.S. government will be able to use its own ideology and methodologies against the extremists, undermining their appeal and separating them from the lifeblood of every insurgency—the people they depend upon for recruitment.

It is also vital to reiterate that knowing the enemy will grant the U.S. and its allies the ability to select partners for this fight who do not share the extremists' objectives, methodologies, and ideology. In addition, since their sharia delineates in such a precise and uncompromising way the acceptable behaviors for mankind, it is possible to see where they control territory around the world by tracking where they are forcing other Muslims to follow their distinctive version of sharia.

Fighting the Enemy. A close study of the enemy allows the U.S. to see as well that the world is not confronting mere terrorists, but a coordinated insurgency that is attempting to create a global jihad. The methodology, while imperfectly followed, and rarely to the letter, is based on a Maoist vision of warfare and the creation of a state through organized battle, not on simple terrorist attacks. Terrorism certainly plays a role in the wars being fought by al-Qaeda and ISIS, but it is a role limited to specific stages of the jihad, while guerrilla, hybrid, and even regular warfare have come to dominate in later phases of their strategic plan.

This substantiates claims by some experts that the U.S. cannot depend solely on attrition (killing and capturing terrorists) to defeat this particular enemy.[70] Terrorist groups are small, secretive, not easily able to replace members killed, unable to hold territory or impose a vision of governance, and dependent on terrorism alone to achieve their political ends. It is entirely possible to destroy these organizations through law enforcement methodologies and through attrition.[71] Insurgencies are large, publicly known, and easily able to replace members, hold territory, and impose their vision of a state on populations under their control. They may also use terrorism, but as just one tool in a spectrum of warfare that includes guerrilla, hybrid, and, eventually,

regular fighting. All these characteristics demand more than attrition as a solution, and generally require some form of counterinsurgency and military engagement. In an interview in 2010, the head of the National Counterterrorism Center said that there were probably only about 300 members of the "core" al-Qaeda leadership left, leaving little doubt that it would be possible to kill or capture this enemy and thus end the threat it poses to the U.S.[72] Yet, in August 2016, the Obama Administration released data showing that the U.S. had killed more than 2,500 al-Qaeda leaders with drone strikes, most after 2010.[73] This failure of attrition must be attributed to the important differences between terrorist groups and insurgencies, and clearly signals that the U.S., Western Europe, and the Middle East are indeed confronting an insurgency rather than mere terrorism.

This also implies that America cannot trust solely in local partners to defeat the guerrillas. Only the U.S. and some of its allies (especially Australia, Britain, and France) have the experience and training necessary to take on al-Qaeda and ISIS in a sophisticated counter-insurgency that will destroy the extremist insurgency while winning over ordinary Muslims. If the U.S. were to simply empower partners without this knowledge and experience, the result would be to achieve these partners' objectives using the forms of warfare with which they are familiar—none of which have proven effective in ending this war.

Ending the War with Victory. Is it, then, possible to win this war? A thoughtful look around the world suggests that no country or group of countries has succeeded in ending the threat posed by the jihadi-salafists in any of the battlefields in which they are currently engaged. From Nigeria to Myanmar, al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are still fighting their jihads, despite the best efforts of the international community, the U.S., Russia, Iran, France, Britain, and a series of local governments and ad hoc coalitions. Although the U.S. and its allies have made significant gains against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, al-Qaeda has taken advantage of global inattention to seize territory in Yemen, Somalia, Mali, Tunisia, Syria, and elsewhere, making this violent organization far more powerful than it was in January 2011.

While it is beyond the scope of this report to detail a military-political strategy for confronting the enemy, it is obvious that, without a clear and accurate definition of the enemy, it will be impossible to even begin writing the plans necessary to take on and defeat him. Elite disagreement over the place of Islam, global vs. local jihads, and the intrinsic nature of the threat (insurgency or terrorism) are particularly disruptive, preventing any consistent strategy from being implemented. The example of Iraq from 2003 to today is instructive: One elite faction believed that Saddam's regime was part of a global terrorism problem; another became convinced that the war that ensued after his overthrow was one instance of a coordinated global insurgency; while a third faction saw the entire Iraq War as a local issue, created by American invasion and occupation. The result was an inconsistent set of policies that overthrew Saddam but failed to replace him with capable governance; defeated the insurgency while failing to end the underlying sectarian strife; and precipitously withdrew U.S. forces, allowing ISIS to gain a foothold in the country and spread around the globe. All this might have been prevented if there had been wider agreement on the nature and threat presented by the enemy.

Conclusion

It has now been nearly 17 years since 9/11, and Americans have not achieved consensus on who precisely the enemy is. Some of this disagreement flows from internal ideological differences and the deep split within the U.S. that were highlighted by the 2016 presidential election. Unless the U.S. can overcome its divide on this particular issue, each new Administration is likely to decide that the previous one did not know what it was doing, and adopt entirely new policies that contradict and undo any gains made against the extremists. Achieving this vital agreement will require skilled leadership at the very highest levels of the U.S. government, from the President to Congress to the Secretaries of Homeland Security, Defense, State, and more. Once Americans know the enemy, successive Administrations will be able to learn from the mistakes made by previous governments and build on any successes, rather than beginning anew every four years. Until that happens, the U.S. will never defeat the extremists on the battlefield—and will doom itself to a war without end.

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Endnotes

1.   News release, "'Islam Is Peace' Says President: Remarks by the President at Islamic Center of Washington, D.C.," The White House, September 17, 2001, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010917-11.html (accessed November 16, 2017), and Steve Kroft, "President Obama: What Makes Us America," *60 Minutes*, September 28, 2014, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/president-obama-60-minutes/ (accessed November 16, 2017).

2.   Most academics would agree with this view, although only a few have been publicly vocal since 9/11. For examples, see the writing of Juan Cole, John L. Esposito, and, more recently, academics like Marc Lynch (*The Arab Uprising* and *The New Arab Wars*) and Manal Omar ("Islam is a Religion of Peace," *Foreign Policy*, November 9, 2015, http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/11/09/islam-is-a-religion-of-peace-manal-omar-debate-islamic-state/ (accessed February 9, 2018)), all of whom place far more emphasis on politics and foreign policy than religion as an explanation for the violence in the Middle East.

3.   On this attitude, see the writings of Tawfik Hamid, Robert Spencer, and Ayaan Hirsi Ali.

4.   For other experts who would agree with this understanding of the place of Islam, see the writings of Khaled Abou El-Fadl, Fawaz Gerges, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, and David Cook.

5.   This is apparent not just from public statements, which might be taken as mere justification for actions that have baser motives, but also from documents captured in Pakistan (Abbottabad), Afghanistan, Iraq, Mali, Egypt, Yemen, and Syria. These internal memos, letters, and policy statements were never meant for public consumption and still are filled with religious rhetoric and justifications for their wars.

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