JOINT SPECIAL OPERATIONS UNIVERSITY

The Network Illusion:

How a Network-Centric Special Operations Culture Impedes Strategic Effect

Edited by Dr. Peter McCabe

Foreword by Michael Nagata

America has often developed very impressive methods of waging war and protecting strategic interests, but all too often, its senior leaders are too optimistic about how much those methods can actually accomplish. The heart of U.S. national security challenges today is an ongoing erosion of American influence globally. What the U.S. now requires is a modification of older ideas in ways appropriate for the modern age. The works contained in this edited volume are signposts of a future that America still has time to choose wherein its efforts to safeguard its people and protect its interests can be remade and reforged in ways appropriate and successful in this era of dazzling technologies and enormous global change.

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Foreword

Michael Nagata, Lieutenant General, U.S. Army, Ret.

The contents of this important work are a vivid reminder for anyone that the pursuit of U.S. national security is difficult under the best of circumstances but also a reminder of a weakness that American policy makers and leaders too frequently fall victim to: an inability to accurately or reliably understand the limitations of the capabilities and approaches that we adopt. America has often developed very impressive and sometimes even game-changing methods of waging war and/or protecting strategic interests, but all too often its senior leaders are too optimistic (or unrealistic) about how much those methods can actually accomplish.

This is something Andrew Marshall's net assessment theory of strategic thinking once illuminated. Understanding the adversary (the Red) is challenging, and understanding the environment (the Green) is also very difficult, but it is our ability to understand ourselves (the Blue)—our own choices and their consequences and our own misapprehensions, biases, and weaknesses—that is the most difficult of all. Therefore, this is the most important to get right.

The most vivid example in my military career of the challenge to "understand ourselves" came during the last two decades of my time as a special operations officer and practitioner, particularly after the events of 9/11. Over those years, there was no single phrase that my special operations colleagues and I heard more often than "attack the network." That phrase was also a vital part of perhaps the most significant revolution in U.S. military affairs of my lifetime—the adoption of network-centric targeting and exploitation that has come to dominate much of the use of military power and weaponry today. Through its adoption, the U.S. military, and by extension the U.S. Government (USG), has been able to achieve effects that were previously impossible. Attack-the-network underpinned the find-fix-finish-exploit-analyze-disseminate formula that thousands of counterterrorism (CT) and counterinsurgency practitioners and I employed with great success in damaging adversary networks across Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. In large measure, this approach has also transformed how targeting and

weapons employment have been developed and fostered across all of the military Services.

Yet, as we look back at what this approach has wrought, we cannot argue that we have substantially diminished the scope, scale, or danger that terrorism presents. Quite the contrary, during my final assignment as the Director for Strategic Operational Planning at the National Counterterrorism Center, I concluded and regularly reported to U.S. policy makers that the size and scope of terrorism globally, including within the U.S., has continued to grow despite the abundant, network-centric operations we continue to execute. We can legitimately claim to have saved tens of thousands of lives, both American and foreign citizens alike, but there is no end in sight to having to continue such efforts. Even today, we can see American policy makers, leaders, and commanders struggling, and still too often failing, to see or comprehend that our attack-the-network approach has failed to lead to any significant reduction in terrorism globally. The effects have been neither strategic nor durable.

The reasons for this CT disparity are reasonably well known today and have been the topic of frequent comment and critique by both military and civilian leaders but without significantly altering the approach of the USG. While network-centric CT approaches can save many innocent lives from physical harm, in terms of long-lasting strategic outcomes, attack-the-network only buys time and space for civilian efforts to create those durable strategic effects. It is civilian actors who are best suited for diminishing the drivers that lead human beings to terrorism because they exist in societal, economic, cultural, religious, and mental health domains. Unfortunately, any empirical examination that compares the resources that the USG lavishes on network-centric CT versus what is provided to the State Department, U.S. Agency for International Development, law enforcement, or non-governmental organizations that seek to quell the sources of extremism—or just the funding on scientific research to better understand these drivers of terrorism—leads to a single conclusion. Compared to network-centric kinetic action, the USG remains comparatively unserious about capabilities or efforts that would strategically undermine or eliminate the drivers of terrorism. Attacking the network has done a lot of tactical—even temporary strategic and operational—good, but the effects were never durable. They never last, and the problem continues to grow.

This unhappy lesson, if we are willing to learn it, has abundant application among America's ongoing efforts to contest a much larger array of national security challenges than we faced after 9/11. Most importantly, the rise of revisionist great powers and the emergence of what we today call strategic competition should be a clarion call to both practitioners and strategists alike that the U.S. cannot afford to again make the mistake of misapprehending how much value can be obtained from just modifying older, attack-the-network approaches against this new array of threats. America not only needs effective outcomes in its competition with powers like China or Russia, it needs durable outcomes. The power of America's strategic competitors and adversaries today strategically dwarf what terrorist movements are capable of, and therefore, the consequences of American failure to achieve durable success create potentially existential perils that no terrorist group can create.

This is not to suggest that all the skill the U.S., and particularly its Special Operations Forces, developed in network-centric approaches has become completely irrelevant. America's near-peer adversaries are highly proficient, and become more so every year, at effective network-centric operations in everything from cyber, to information operations, to massively networked military capabilities. The truth that it takes a network to fight a network still has significant applicability, and to the degree it is appropriate, the USG should continue to invest in and conduct network-oriented activities. But these approaches are today strategically inadequate at best.

The heart of U.S. national security challenges is today, and has been for more than a decade, an ongoing erosion of American influence globally. The reasons for this loss of influence are too voluminous to list here, but the strategic price that America is paying for this deterioration of our ability to win the confidence, trust, or affinity of populations and governments globally is growing at an alarming rate. As worried and prepared as we should be over a possible military contest with nations such as Russia or China, what I believe is fundamentally a global war over influence between America and its adversaries is the most important challenge to which we must rise. Yet, today, we are struggling to do so in too many ways.

Of course, influence in the digital age is in large measure competed for, won or lost, or strengthened or weakened in digital arenas such as social media and the abilities of societies to effectively wield unprecedented access to information, and all of this does reside and flow within various types of internet or other data networks. But attempting to apply attack-the-network

traditions here is largely inappropriate and most likely to only achieve temporary results even if some occasional tactical/operational value is achieved.

The Internet and the data pathways that undergird strategic competition and the struggle over transitory issues or ideologies are not the heart of this problem. They are not the "center of gravity." Instead, what the U.S. now requires is a modification of older ideas in ways appropriate for the modern age. Just one example is the need for the U.S. to recreate a reputation that we once had as the most generous nation on earth for those who would be our allies, and even generosity toward some who are not. This is particularly difficult to do in an era where it is expedient for American political and policy leaders to deride generosity as either wasteful or foolish, but these criticisms are undermined by human experience. Every human being experiences and remembers throughout their lifetime the value of generosity and the affection, confidence, and loyalty it can create. No one can plausibly argue that affection, confidence, or loyalty are irrelevant to America's efforts to win this ongoing war over influence we are now embroiled in.

The works contained in this compendium are signposts of a future that America still has time to choose wherein our efforts to safeguard our people and protect our interests can be remade and reforged in ways appropriate and successful in this era of dazzling technologies and enormous global change. Or, as Abraham Lincoln aptly stated more than a century ago, "The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country."

Michael Nagata, Lieutenant General, U.S. Army, Ret.

About the Authors

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Introduction

Dr. Peter McCabe, Joint Special Operations University

Instead of a network-centric orientation, the chapters in this book explore the social systems in which contemporary special operations-relevant terrorist, strategic competition, and insurgent challenges are embedded. The chapters use the social system as the unit of analysis to identify the context in which threat networks exist. Doing so brings to light strategic level opportunities for intervention to alter how relationships emerge in counterterrorism (CT), countering threat networks (CTN), counterinsurgency (COIN), and strategic competition activities.

Existing U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) joint military doctrine on CT, CTN, and COIN applies state-centric, center of gravity (COG) analysis against complex, adaptive, non-state actors. The assumption is that taking a terrorist or threat network off the battlefield by attacking its COG inherently creates space for internationally recognized governments to reassert authority over populations. In essence, joint doctrine addresses only the operational level of conflict because it ignores the often transnational, multifaceted social systems in which networks are embedded. From a complex adaptive systems perspective, enduring strategic effect has eluded the U.S. despite twenty years of precision CT and CTN activities because CT, CTN, and COIN doctrine are silent on social systems, which do not have a COG as such. Systemic adaptations encourage and enable new relationships to emerge when a network is wholly or partially disrupted, degraded, or destroyed. Strategic effect is only possible if interventions occur at the social systems level, which requires activities well beyond those recognized by operations-oriented joint military doctrine.

This edited volume is new and novel within the literature of military studies and is only lightly touched upon in political science.[1] Existing research on this topic takes the network as the unit of analysis. A small number of books and articles address networks as complex adaptive systems, but the social systems in which they exist—meaning, the structural conditions of which each network is a symptom—are generally not explored, especially within professional military education. This is a critical gap in foreign policy

and military strategy that has contributed to two decades of extraordinary tactical military success failing to translate into sustainable strategic political effect. While the current literature on this topic discusses networks and complex adaptive systems, they all make the network or organization the unit of analysis.[2] This is important for conceptualizing operations and organizational design for combatting networks but incomplete in terms of achieving sustainable strategic effect.[3]

Perhaps the most prescient analysis of the difficulty of Special Operations Forces (SOF) achieving durable strategic effect was authored by Michael Kenney in a 2008 book titled, *From Pablo to Osama: Trafficking and Terrorist Networks, Government Bureaucracies, and Competitive Adaptation*. In it, Kenney seeks to draw lessons for CT from the decades-long counter-network operations by police and interagency partners directed against similarly structured narcotrafficking organizations. He writes,

> The ultimate failure of drug enforcement and counterterrorism networks illustrates two major shortcomings with the counter-netwar perspective. First, proponents of counter-netwar often discount the inherent, sovereignty-bound nature of state enforcement networks, along with its profound implications for the way these transgovernmental bodies function. Second, and perhaps more surprising given their emphasis on the flexibility of network forms of organization, many advocates of counter-netwar do not sufficiently consider the supple nature of their illicit opponents and its implications for government efforts to destroy them … [4] Even the flattest, most fluid enforcement networks still operate within the bounds of law and bureaucratic responsibility; trafficking networks do not. For this reason, enforcement networks will remain taller, more centralized, and less agile than their illicit adversaries, and this is not likely to change, no matter what proponents of counter-netwar may wish. *The notion that it takes networks to fight networks makes an arresting sound bite, but in the real world of law enforcement and counterterrorism the concept is misleading—and potentially dangerous.* (emphasis added) [5]

Like Kenney assesses with narcotrafficking and law enforcement, there is a high probability that SOF have fallen into a professional "competency trap" whereby "acquiring competence in a particular policy or set of practices

becomes a trap when satisfaction with current efforts prevents practitioners from experimenting with other, potentially superior routines."[6] Competency traps become counterproductive when practitioners merge their expertise with tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) with their sense of professional identity.[7] Failure to achieve strategic effect from this perspective is not a problem of TTPs but of applying sufficient resources and effort to them. Kenney concludes, "If my analysis is correct, the United States will probably require much greater experience with failed supply-control strategies before its policymakers—and public—embrace policy paths less traveled." [8]

What Michael Kenney describes over a decade ago is the consequence of adopting a "counter" mindset against networks whose strength lies not in a COG but in a highly adaptive social system. In other words, to achieve durable strategic effect, SOF must consider jettisoning entrenched and ubiquitous military concepts that do not align with the actual operating environment and, more problematically, SOF's own sense of identity after twenty years of sustained combat operations. In short, this edited volume provides an explanation of how SOF entered a competency trap and offers ideas about how they can reimagine themselves in a way that melds together the countering violent extremist organization (CVEO) and emerging strategic competition missions.

To demonstrate the importance of incorporating the social system into the analysis, the book proceeds in three parts. Part I: The Network Illusion Concept establishes the foundational concepts that the remaining chapters elucidate. Since the network illusion emanates from the global war on terror and is captured by the ubiquitous phrase, "it takes a network to defeat a network," Dr. David C. Ellis presents a critique of existing counter-network joint doctrine through the lens of the higher-order social systems from which violent extremist organization (VEO) networks emerge. He concludes in chapter 1 that the choice in the early 2000s to focus at the operational level on observable network behavior consigned SOF to a forever war. Rather than VEO networks being confined to particular, bounded geographies, they actually exist as elements of a transregional, complex, adaptive social system. Modern network theory demonstrates that in multilayered, interconnected social systems, removing individual nodes (and even whole networks) still creates the opportunity for the social system to reroute around cut-points and restore previous patterns of behavior.

Part II: The Violent Extremist Social System consists of chapters 2–4 and demonstrates how Salafi Jihadi extremist organizations emerged as networks from the larger Sunni Islamist "imagined community" and social system.[9] Part II starts with the higher-order social system in chapter 2, focuses next on a specific network within the Salafi Jihadi sub-system in chapter 3, and then explores the tactical employment of the Internet to propagate the imagined community of the caliphate in chapter 4. In this way, Part II demonstrates how networks manifest within the higher-order social system and make use of the infrastructure of the social system. The implication is that, unless interventions are specifically designed to erode their influence and resilience within the higher-order social system, the nodes in the network will be able to reroute and return as described by network theory.

Chapter 2 by Dr. Ellis offers a macro view of the social system from which Salafi Jihadi groups emanate by describing the evolution of the global Islamist social system, which has resulted in a wide variety of perspectives, parties, and approaches on how to propagate the Muslim faith and establish just political orders. While only a very small portion of this movement advocates violent extremism, the overall system of Sunni Islamist social movements provides a complex adaptive infrastructure that keeps the Salafi Jihadi networks resilient even in the face of determined CVEO pressure. Ellis concludes that, instead of a "counter culture," SOF also need to develop a "nurture-network" capability to promote viable alternatives within the higher-order social systems that make Salafi Jihadi movements unappealing as solutions to localized problems. He offers Evolutionary Governance Theory as an alternative to existing joint doctrine for a nurture-network orientation.

With this broader systemic appreciation in hand, chapter 3 by Dr. Diane Zorri analyzes the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and concludes that it represents a systemic adaptation within the Salafi Jihadi sub-system. She assesses that part of the ISIS appeal was that it introduced a novel adaptation rooted in a millenarian interpretation of the Qur'an. In so doing, ISIS was able to draw upon already existing beliefs and active narratives in the Salafi Jihadi variant of the larger Sunni Islamist social system. ISIS did not create the caliphate—that construct was active and deeply embedded in the narratives and aspiration of Sunni Islamists for decades. What made ISIS attractive was the coherence with which it merged narrative, geography, and power for the Salafi Jihadi community through a millenarian interpretation.

Chapter 4 by Dr. Margaret W. Smith applies a quantitative test of the assumption that the ISIS social media campaign generated mass appeal. Previous research on white nationalist and anti-globalization extremists illustrates that social media campaigns can be driven in appearance by a small group of committed activists while the vast majority of viewers only superficially glance at or engage the material. Chapter 4 concludes Part II by presenting a tactical analysis of a messaging campaign. It utilizes data from the ISIS social media campaign to determine whether support was truly organic or simply driven by activists but made to appear as a mass phenomenon. In other words, Smith tests the degree to which ISIS represents a community or an imagination.

With this conceptual foundation, Part III transitions to future applications of the network illusion concept. Driven by the 2018 and 2022 national security strategies, the DOD is rapidly transforming the Force for both a deterrent effect and for competing for advantage below armed conflict. Special operations stand to play a significant role in the competition for advantage as this implicitly marks a return of the military to a political role in the exercise of statecraft. Whereas the military has functionally separated itself from politics since the early 1990s, with politics being the domain of diplomats and the Department of State, it is now adapting to the reality that competition below armed conflict requires non-kinetic and influence effects to heavily inform military activities. The U.S., its allies and partners, and its competitors will all leverage existing social systems to gain near- to medium-term advantage, but they will also seek out ways to leverage other social systems as circumstances change and new opportunities arise.

Chapter 5 by Dr. Christopher Marsh illustrates how the Russian Federation's government under President Vladimir Putin has restored the Russian Orthodox Church as a symbol of the country's identity. This presents both opportunity and risk for the Putin government, but appreciating how the Russian Orthodox social system operates is crucial for determining the possible avenues for influence operations. Chapter 6 by Charles N. Black concludes the volume by outlining the implications of the network illusion concept for special operations and SOF. Intervening in social systems for sustainable strategic effect requires different behaviors, analysis, and skills than those adopted by SOF for defeating networks. While it certainly does take a networked find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze, and disseminate approach to defeat a network, this is insufficient for altering the structural conditions

that make the network valuable to the population in the first place. He synthesizes the insights from chapters 1–5 and furthers the discussion on how to transform special operations to achieve a more durable strategic effect.

Endnotes

1. For an excellent application, see Anne-Marie Slaughter, *The Chessboard and the Web: Strategies of Connection in a Networked World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017). See also Philipp Pattberg and Oscar Widerberg, "Studying Global Governance as a Complex System: A Network Perspective," *International Studies Review* 22 (2020): 1019–1022.

2. For example, Philip Vos Fellman, Yaneer Bar-Yam, and Ali A. Minai, eds., *Conflict and Complexity: Countering Terrorism, Insurgency, Ethnic and Regional Violence* (New York: Springer, 2015); Michael Kenney, *From Pablo to Osama: Trafficking and Terrorist Networks, Government Bureaucracies, and Competitive Adaptation* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008); Daniel Byman, *Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Seth G. Jones, *Waging Insurgent Warfare: Lessons from the Veitcong to the Islamic State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Navid Hassanpour, *Leading from the Periphery and Network Collective Action* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Sean Lawson, *Non-linear Science and Warfare: Chaos, Complexity, and the US Military in the Information Age* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

3. For a prescient and complementary analysis, see Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

4. Kenney, *From Pablo to Osama*, 215.

5. Kenney, *From Pablo to Osama*, 216.

6. Kenney, *From Pablo to Osama*, 223.

7. Kenney, *From Pablo to Osama*, 222.

8. Kenney, *From Pablo to Osama*, 223.

9. The Sunni Islamist social system is described in this volume as a wide-ranging, diverse group of organizations and social movements whose main connecting principle is the idea that Islam should play a central role in the sociocultural and/or political aspects of Muslim societies. It is often commonly associated with the term "Political Islam," but in this case is focused only on the Sunni experience and purposefully avoids treatment of the Shi'a aspect. This conception draws upon Mir Zohair Husain, who defines Islamism as "the reawakening of interest in Islamic symbols, ideas, and ideals subsequent to a period of relative dormancy" and "the process by which Islam has become a comprehensive political ideology," in Mir Zohair Husain, *Global Islamic Politics*, 3rd ed. (New York: Longman Publishers, 2003), 52–55, 365. See also Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 20–21.

Part I: The Network Illusion Concept

Chapter 1. From Networks to Systems and the Limits of the Center of Gravity

Dr. David C. Ellis, Joint Special Operations University

The main axiom driving contemporary U.S. military counterterrorism (CT) and counterinsurgency (COIN) operations is that "it takes a network to defeat a network."[1] Joint publications on CT, COIN, countering threat networks, and special operations all explicitly direct intelligence and operational activities against terrorist organizations and networks through a combination of kinetic and non-kinetic military, interagency, and partner-nation activities.[2] Yet, many members of the military are concluding that repeated tactical- and operational-level victories against terrorist networks are not translating into durable strategic success despite extraordinary resources, dedicated training, clear doctrine, and nearly two decades of hard-won experience.[3]

Appreciating why durable strategic success eludes the U.S. in its CT campaign requires looking beyond the network-centric paradigm. U.S. Department of Defense joint publications accept the complex and adaptive nature of networks as they "change shape, increase or decrease capacity, and strive to influence and control things within the [operating environment] …"[4] However, networks are conceived of and analyzed primarily through the frame of organizational structure, resources, logistics, and operational functions.[5] While the joint publications recognize the identity context within which networks arise, identity is mainly viewed as a binding or recruitment enabler for networks, not a structure-creating mechanism in the first place.[6]

Though the network orientation represents a crucially important and hard-won intellectual transformation in the U.S. military, the thesis of this chapter is that strategic success proves elusive precisely because the network-centric perspective obscures the more abstract social systems in which networks operate.[7] All networks evolve from and navigate through higher-order social systems, but the military's preoccupation with dismantling networks precludes it from recognizing and anticipating systemic-level, complex, adaptive behavior despite the fact it recognizes that networks evince the same

behavior. Increasing comfort with network-centric concepts is an important advancement in the U.S. military's nineteenth-century warfighting model framed in terms of military mass being applied against a center of gravity (COG). Yet, the underlying assumption remains that its primary function is to kinetically degrade and destroy an enemy network's capability.[8] Consequently, the main military effort focuses primarily on countering networks to remove them from the battle space and degrading their influence over populations, which, unfortunately, discounts future adaptation at the social systems level. This chapter demonstrates the main flaw in the military's CT, COIN, and countering threat networks (CTN) doctrine: higher-order social systems have no COG.

To explore the impact of the higher-order social system on CT strategy and operations, this chapter undertakes three tasks. First, it briefly describes the evolution and adaptation of the U.S. military, especially Special Operations Forces (SOF), in confronting network-centric warfare. It next highlights the complex adaptive behaviors at the systemic level that are blurred by a network-centric perspective. Third, it provides a brief review of the basic vocabulary and concepts associated with complex adaptive systems. The chapter concludes with implications for how the U.S. military could incorporate systems perspectives and network topology approaches into its analysis to better forecast the impacts its interventions against networks are likely to have on the social systems within which they reside.

From States to Networks

Contemporary joint military planning is significantly inspired by the writings of nineteenth-century military strategist Carl von Clausewitz, whose COG concept remains a central feature in joint doctrine.[9] The revival of Clausewitzian COG analysis occurred in the late 1970s as the U.S. Army embarked upon a Cold War-oriented, European defensive strategy and quickly permeated the U.S. military establishment through joint publications.[10] Clausewitz's premise asserts the following:

> The scale of a victory's sphere of influence depends, of course, on the scale of the victory, and that in turn depends on the *size of the defeated force*. For this reason, the blow from which the broadest and most favorable repercussions can be expected will be aimed against *that area* where the greatest concentration of enemy troops

can be found; the larger the force with which the blow is struck, the surer its effect will be. This rather obvious sequence leads us to an analogy that will illustrate it more clearly—that is, the nature and effect of a center of gravity.[11]

Clausewitz wrote at a time of transition from hereditary, mercenary, and professional military command structures with forces numbering in the tens of thousands to large, mass-based, popular, or national militaries numbering in the hundreds of thousands. He recognized that social history, political institutions, fighting prowess, and physical and political resources all contributed to the strategy a country should adopt in confronting adversaries. Nevertheless, he stressed that, "Out of these characteristics a certain COG develops, the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends. That is the point against which all our energies should be directed."[12]

State-based, large-formation wars of maneuver require systematic organization and functional specialization for command and control, perpetual improvement in efficiency to gain battlefield advantage, and clear lines of authority and resourcing. Against traditional, state-based military order of battle, COG analysis is highly applicable and aided by analysis of organizational wire diagrams and assessments of critical capabilities, requirements, and vulnerabilities.[13] In this model, a hierarchical chain of command is essential for orchestrating the movement of the vast military machine toward objectives and end states. The trick is improving the speed and efficiency of information and command decisions and synchronizing the disparate elements comprising the Joint Force to quickly defeat the adversary's COG. Clausewitz concludes,

> The worst of all conditions in which a belligerent can find himself is to be utterly defenseless. Consequently, if you are to force the enemy, by making war on him, to do your bidding, you must either make him literally defenseless or at least put him in a position that makes this danger probable. It follows, then, that to overcome the enemy, or disarm him—call it what you will—must always be the aim of warfare.[14]

However, U.S. CT forces learned through hard experience that network-based adversaries confound the hierarchical, wire diagram, traditional military way of thinking. In other words, it is extraordinarily difficult to identify

a COG in a networked, cellular enemy. Figure 1 graphically compares the differences in organizational structure and operations between a traditional military structure and a networked structure.
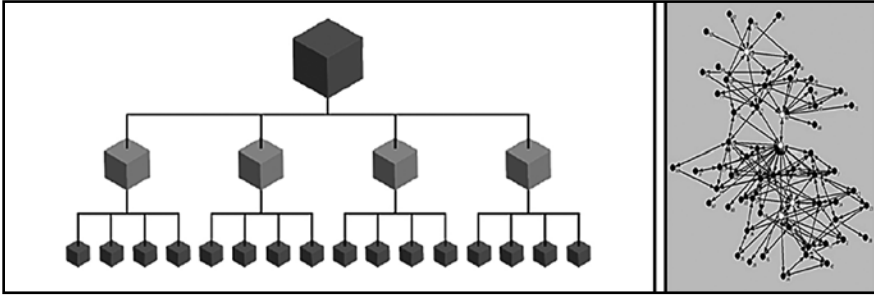

Figure 1. Comparison of a Traditional Military Hierarchical Structure and an al-Qaeda in Iraq Network Structure at a Point in Time. Source: Richard Schultz

Scholars supporting the military in the early 2000s recognized the difficulty in attacking and destroying complex adaptive social systems, so they directed CT officials toward the operational level of analysis. As Philip Vos Fellman recounts,

> Yet, getting at the root causes of terrorism is one of those things that falls into the category of irreducible complexity and ambiguity. It is, in fact, the very difficulty of the enterprise which leads us towards looking at solutions at the *mid-range* rather than proposing some system, set of techniques, or methodology which would render terrorist acts either highly predictable (and hence, theoretically avoidable) and which would allow us to dismantle terrorist organizations as soon as they form [emphasis added].[15]

At the mid-range of analysis—that is, where the nodes in the networks interact together and engage in traceable action due to operations—pattern analysis and predictive analysis become possible using a range of intelligence techniques.[16] Nodes in the networks derive from myriad interests, linking individuals together across political, identity, economic, religious, and other interests with some different functional contributions in the network (e.g., finance, logistics, recruitment, operations, etc.) and hubs at the strategic and operational levels.[17] In Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. military learned

through very hard lessons that its own hierarchical chain of command structure was too slow to effectively defeat the networked adversary. Instead, the military (SOF especially) learned that it needed to delegate operational command decisions to frontline forces while ingesting and analyzing as much data as possible to find key hubs in the network to surveil, capture, or eliminate.[18] The seminal experience in Iraq, again particularly for SOF, was that networks could be degraded and destroyed if the find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze, and disseminate cycle could move faster than the network's ability to adapt and reconstitute itself.[19]

After two decades of war, SOF's intelligence and operations have become heavily biased toward this mid-range, operational level of analysis.[20] CT, for example, is designed to "disrupt, isolate, and dismantle terrorist organizations and networks to render them incapable of striking the homeland, U.S. facilities and personnel, or U.S. interests abroad."[21] Indeed, the increase in CT operations in Iraq from approximately 18 per month to over 300 with little appreciable increase in forces, along with the exertions associated with the creation of innovative task force structures, cemented the belief that breaking networks is the path to victory.[22] For example, consider how Joint Publication 3-26, *Counterterrorism*, describes the counterterrorist defeat mechanism:

> The defeat mechanism complements the understanding achieved by a COG analysis of a problem by suggesting means to solve it… The defeat mechanism is to identify, disrupt, isolate, and dismantle terrorist organizations, plus enable host nation (HN) and partner nation (PN) CT forces that lead to the organization's defeat…This requires enduring activities targeting both a terrorist organization's operational capability and its capacity to gain and employ resources. Attacking terrorist organizations requires specifically trained and equipped CT forces, working with interagency partners and independently or with HNs and PNs.[23]

As the Department mandated to employ violence on the country's behalf, it is not at all shocking that the military would perceive its role largely in terms of disrupting, dismantling, or destroying an enemy network, and this is not the critique. Rather, the emphasis here is placed on the uncomfortable adaptation the military has managed in accommodating a CT and CTN capability with a state-on-state, large engagement, structured force rooted in COG analysis. While COG analysis for CT and CTN is acknowledged to

be more difficult than that performed for traditional military engagements,[24] it is nonetheless the baseline approach for meeting those threats.

Importantly, the CT and CTN frameworks offer the U.S. military a critical lexicon and practical tools for thinking about decentralized, complex adaptive behavior and an introductory appreciation of systems. These aspects are not trivial and certain elements of the U.S. military have become increasingly comfortable with discourse associated with nonlinearity, open systems, complexity, and decentralized systems. Nevertheless, the hard reality that widespread and repeated CT and CTN operational successes are failing to aggregate to strategic success indicates that network-centric military activities are insufficient for achieving national strategic objectives. This reality is all the harder for SOF, whose mantra is tactical action with strategic effect.

From Networks to Systems

While the network-centric orientation has arguably been most fully internalized by SOF, which are now in their twenty-first year of uninterrupted CT operations, the lesson was also internalized by conventional forces' (CF) experience with COIN in Iraq and Afghanistan.[25] Following its drawdown from Afghanistan in 2014 with the culmination of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, CF have largely moved on from COIN-based, network-oriented warfare, but new multi-domain operations, including a wicked mixture of cyber, electronic warfare, and hybrid (or gray zone) techniques, combine to reinforce the concept of networked operations and strategy. Indeed, state actors' purposeful use of non-state, proxy actors, such as Russia's reported utilization of motorcycle gangs in Ukraine and computer hackers in its hybrid warfare strategy, require continued attention to irregular networks even in strategic competition.[26]

SOF, on the other hand, never withdrew from the CT mission, nor could they since CT is specifically identified as a special operations core activity.[27] Even after the 2011 conclusion of the successful COIN campaign in Iraq involving extensive CT operations, SOF continued to face resilient terrorist networks of the Taliban in Afghanistan, Boko Haram and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in the Sahel and Sahara regions, al-Shabaab in Somalia, Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines, and later ISIS. Moreover, U.S. SOF were assigned coordinating authority responsibilities for key network-centric missions, such as countering weapons of mass destruction and countering

transregional threat organizations. Both missions reinforce a network-centric orientation similar to, or often in line with, CT activities.

Indeed, so great was the SOF community's pride in CT and CTN capability that it sparked a series of (2013–2015) internal discussions about the need to rebalance its capability away from the kinetic, direct action or surgical strike aspect of its activities and more toward the mainly non-kinetic, special warfare side.[28] SOF have participated for so long in the CT and CTN fight that many became concerned that these mission areas started to constitute the basis of the SOF identity.

But pride in the hard-won CTN capability has given way to the ephemeral character of counter-network victories. Upon nearing the completion of his book recounting the principles of success while leading the Iraq CT fight, Stanley McChrystal, General, U.S. Army, Ret. recognized the ISIS wave in 2014–2015 in Iraq, writing, "The question 'Had our success against Al Qaeda been a cruel illusion?' came immediately to mind … Instead, this latest development reinforced some of the very lessons we had drawn. The first was that the constantly changing, entirely unforgiving environment in which we all now operate denies the satisfaction of any permanent fix."[29] While the book in part stressed the idea "it takes a network to defeat a network," what McChrystal et al actually acknowledge in this passage is the impact of higher-order social systems contributing to network adaptation.

The denial of a permanent fix is caused by systemic interactions, not just individual network resilience. As Stephen Melton argues in his critique of the U.S. military's devotion to Clausewitz, COG analysis was conceived of in a time of monarchical competition utilizing large-scale military columns and formations. He asserts, "The key question in modern warfare, especially for Americans, is not how to destroy enemy armies but rather how to defeat enemy governments and then establish better governance for their populations. Modern wars are not primarily about armies and battles, they are about populations and governments."[30] Whereas in Clausewitz's world warfare was often about reshaping a monarch's behavior, modern warfare is about changes in regime, liberation, or secession where guerilla, resistance, and terrorist tactics extend attrition strategies for potentially decades.[31] In Melton's view, "… governance, not center of gravity, is a far more useful framework for modern war doctrine."[32]

Detaching COG from CT and CTN opens the mind to important considerations because it enables the reinterpretation—or a critique—of existing

doctrine. COG analysis might have relevance in the context of continuing strategic competition, but its utility for network-centric threats is in doubt. Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Planning*, obliquely acknowledges the tension:

> At the strategic level, a COG could be a military force, an alliance, political or military leaders, a set of critical capabilities or functions, or national will. At the operational level, a COG often is associated with the adversary's military capabilities—such as a powerful element of the armed forces—but could include other capabilities in the OE [operational environment]. In identifying COGs it is important to remember that irregular warfare focuses on legitimacy and influence over a population, unlike traditional warfare, which employs direct military confrontation to defeat an enemy's armed forces, destroy an enemy's war-making capacity, or seize or retain territory to force a change in an enemy's government or policies. *Therefore, during irregular warfare, the enemy and friendly COG may be the same population.* (emphasis added)[33]

While the COG in this passage is overtly described as "the population," it recognizes in the preceding sentence that the issue is one of legitimacy regarding the political environment (i.e., governance).

At best, CT and CTN approach the operational level of COG analysis because they specifically seek to disrupt, degrade, or destroy an enemy's military capability to operate (not ultimately influence, for example), the "national will" or a political alliance at the strategic level.[34] This is in part due to the treatment of networks and systems in joint publications as synonyms which uses "… the term network to distinguish threat networks from the multitude of other systems, such as an air defense system, communications system, transportation system, etc."[35] Consequently, CT and CTN focus down and in on a network to decipher relationships between nodes within a network for targeting purposes[36] but do not require a similar up and out analysis to the broader system or belief characteristics of the higher-order, strategic-level, social system. Within the context of "it takes a network to defeat a network," there is no such need.

However, even passages from Clausewitz suggest a need to think systemically. For instance, he notes the differences in COG for a single military force with a single leader versus an allied force potentially stretched out over hundreds of miles or multiple fronts. In the case of the former, the COG will

be strongest, whereas in the latter, "… unity is remote, frequently found only in mutual political interests, and even then rather precarious and imperfect; cohesion between the parts will usually be very loose, and often completely fictitious."[37] He also concludes that occupying a country weakens a military by dispersing its strength and denying it the ability to generate mass, while a focus on a single COG keeps the military coherent and potent.[38] These passages suggest that threats with a systemic nature, with multiple variants and only loose political connections, are unsuited to COG analysis. While Clausewitz argues that there are few instances where a COG cannot be identified, he recognizes the implication:

> Where this is not so, there is admittedly no alternative but to act as if there were two wars or even more, each with its own object. This assumes the existence of several independent opponents, and consequently great superiority on their part. When this is the case, to defeat the enemy is out of the question.[39]

Social systems have no COG. Rather, they are constituted by the imaginations, symbols, behaviors, and relationships formed by interacting groups of people and institutions across space and time.[40] Integrated social systems can arise where, in the assessment of noted sociologist Emile Durkheim,

a. Individual passions are regulated by shared cultural symbols;

b. individuals are attached to the social collective through rituals and mutually reinforcing gestures;

c. actions are regulated and coordinated by norms as well as legitimated political structures;

d. and inequalities are considered legitimate and correspond to the distribution of talents.[41]

Some of these factors are reinforced by powerful formal social structures that purposefully define and recreate some interpretation of the social system (e.g., governments, religions, businesses), while others are practiced and transmitted over time through family and other informal social institutions (e.g., social distancing ethics, fashion trends, or rules of etiquette).[42] Higher-order social systems permit the possibility of commitment to an idea, norm, value, deity, economic philosophy, etc., despite innumerable variations in

the representation and practice of the object. As beliefs or worldviews, they are constituted as "social kinds"—ideas and objects that only exist because people mutually agree to their properties—and the totality of the system is beyond the ability of any given person or network to comprehend. What makes them meaningful and self-replicating are the relationships that reinforce existing practices, reconstitute and acculturate new participants, and introduce adaptations over time.[43]

Networks, as the military understands them in the mid-range level of analysis, are representative of informal and formal social structures—that is, the often physically manifesting, subordinate units of a higher-order social system. It is normal for a host of reasons for higher-order social systems to change over time even absent external stressors,[44] and networks within a social system will naturally come and go even absent military campaigns against them. However, the U.S. military overtly expects military action to cause rapid and often unpredictable change in networks and their behavior. The argument here is that the main challenges for the military are (a) recognizing the difference between networks and social systems and (b) developing a lexicon for distinguishing their effects. Though the incorporation of network-centric concepts into U.S. military doctrine represents a significant step forward for how it can compete against non-state actors, it still struggles with how to think about operations in complex, adaptive, social systems in which political effects are the most important objectives to achieve with support from military means.

The Basics of Complex Adaptive Systems

All systems have three basic characteristics:

1. They are comprised of nodes whose interrelationships can generate self-organizing, regenerative rules but also potentially new and novel behaviors.

2. Each node in the system brings with it unique contextual experience and perspective (as do those observing and analyzing the system).

3. Every system of interrelationships ultimately has boundaries from other social systems, though there might be overlapping nodes.[45]

Simple systems are generally defined as having linear, predictable, and repeatable interactions that can be represented in terms of identifiable rules or laws.[46] Chemistry, physics, and engineering challenges are some of the most common examples since the interrelationships between variables can be controlled, analyzed statistically, and predictably manipulated through experimentation. Complex adaptive systems, on the other hand, are defined by non-linearity and limited predictability for which identifiable rules and expectations might hold for a period of time but that are susceptible to significant deviations and changes over time.[47] Complex adaptive systems exhibit self-organizing and self-replicating behavior, settling into what on the surface appear to be path-dependent cycles. That is, positive feedback loops maintain a pattern of interaction "rules" although innovations and perturbations at the margins always occur and bring with them the opportunity for new rules and system-wide transformation.[48]

Human-based systems are intrinsically complex, adaptive systems because they possess a characteristic that makes them especially unpredictable—people can learn, change their minds and behavior, and purposefully create new relationships and rules, which, when combined, can quickly introduce system-wide transformations.[49] Constantly changing connections and patterns of interaction among nodes and networks form a perpetual process of "emergence" whereby seemingly stable systems evolve over time. A frequent phrase in complex adaptive systems thinking is the "edge of chaos," which means that seemingly stable, pattern-replicating behaviors and rules can be disrupted by nodes in the system interacting with new nodes or environmental conditions—often described as catalysts—that create new positive (structure-creating) or negative (structure-eroding) feedback loops.[50] The edge of chaos represents the fact that social systems have both internal ordering processes and structures but also exposure to external stimuli that prompt tensions within and between nodes resulting in a need for adaptation. Seemingly stable systems have clear, self-replicating core rules but can evolve through adaptation or be surprisingly disrupted by new feedback loops. These new, positive feedback loops are often described as "basins of attraction" toward which the system's nodes begin to flow. Whatever the metaphor, the point is that human social systems do settle for periods of time around unplanned, often decentralized "rules of behavior" that make life seem predictable but that are always contingent upon the exposure of nodes to new stresses, challenges, interrelationships, and rules of behavior.[51]

In this regard, the Internet represents the most powerful catalyst for social emergence at the edge of chaos.[52] Social media, for example, exists explicitly to eliminate the frictions of time and space to link nodes with similar interests together in real time to form new, mutually reinforcing interrelationships. Whereas human networking prior to the creation of the Internet relied on newspapers, telegraph, telephone, radio, movies, and television—all of which were bound by time, geography, and language—now, network relationships and new ideas can be disseminated, tested, and refined almost instantaneously. Moreover, improvements in transportation and economic globalization impelled a degree of social interaction unimaginable even in the mid-twentieth century. In other words, it is no longer sufficient to think in terms of networks alone when redundancy across networks enables them to effectively reroute when key nodes, or even entire networks, are removed from the system.

Network Topology and Intervening in Complex Social Systems

Because of the amplification of complex system dynamics over the past few decades, network theorists utilize network topology as a way to analyze social systems. The topology refers to the patterns of interaction among nodes in a network or the networks in a system, depending on whether the level of analysis is, respectively, of an operational or strategic framing.[53] The structure of a social system has important implications on its fragility or resilience in the face of external pressure. For example, star networks and systems, which are characterized by a single central hub to which all nodes connect, can evince high degrees of efficiency because of short paths between nodes but also exhibit high fragility as a system if the central hub is eliminated. The nodes lose their connectivity to one another. Conversely, scale-free networks and systems, which are characterized by a few main hubs connected to other hubs, might not be as efficient due to the distance between nodes but more resilient to disruption because connections can be rerouted through redundant relationships even when a major hub is lost. In other words, emergence and recovery in scale-free networks and systems are more likely precisely due to the redundancy in the topology.[54] Hilton L. Root explains, "There is no center to attack since the nodes lack homogenous degree distributions and most have few connections, while a few (the hubs) have many. Should even several of the major hubs suffer deletion, the remaining highly connected

hubs will still be able to synchronize, preserving system-level stability." [55] More specifically for the purposes of this chapter, scale-free social systems have no COG, and even many star networks enjoy scale-free properties when the level of analysis drops to the operational and tactical levels.

Whether due to external shocks, such as from military intervention, or from internal dynamics, such as through emergent adaptation to new market opportunities, system topology can change over time. As networks of networks, social systems are prone to reorganization in nonlinear, unpredictable ways. [56] When they encounter positive feedback loops, emergent relationships can generate a "self-organized criticality" through which the probability of the pattern replicating becomes increasingly likely, often resulting in a disruption of previously predominant systemic patterns. When the new patterns successfully displace prior ones, a "phase transition" is said to take place in the topology of the social system. [57]

Returning for a moment to the water and flow metaphors common in Complexity Theory, phase transitions occur when populations flow to new basins of attraction and settle there for a time. The metaphor draws on the fact that water always finds its lowest settling point, flowing around—or even eroding—barriers in its way. As social systems lose utility, legitimacy, or viability, populations look for and create new opportunities for self-organization through emergent network behaviors and flow to them. In scale-free networks, the opportunities for emergent relationships and patterns are quite good and create what are described as "percolations" when they encounter positive feedback loops. Percolations are emergent networks that have meaning in their time and place but that do not have systemic-level impact. [58] However, when percolations have similar ideas, interests, or objectives, they can combine their social mass and resources to create "cascades" with systemic-level effects. Cascades generally occur rapidly as the previously unconnected percolations (e.g., social movements) merge together in a sudden burst of energy. Cascades have the capacity to cause phase transitions in the topology, especially when they achieve a degree of structural solidity and resourcing that can ensure their survival and resilience in the face of external pressure. [59]

Once a social system achieves a phase transition across a scale-free network, the likelihood of an external shock taking out a networked adversary becomes exceedingly unlikely. What network theory suggests— and hard experience in both the CT and CTN worlds validates—is that

counter-network operations can only address the operational level and redirect relationships toward new flows. For strategic effects to materialize against such adversaries, the effort must instead analyze systemic-level topology to determine why populations and resources flow to violent extremist organization (VEO) basins of attraction. Rather than a counter-network strategy, network theory would instead indicate that the emphasis should be on promoting alternate topologies that flow populations away from VEOs while still addressing the cognitive and material needs that only VEOs and their enabling networks appear to meet. Conceptualized in this way, sustainable strategic effect is an influence-oriented activity—fundamentally a social movement undertaking—that seeks to off ramp populations through more productive, alternative flows or to inoculate them by making them more resilient to their environment. This phase transition orientation would be nothing less than a paradigm change for SOF. Indeed, it would likely require moving beyond an entrenched competency trap, but it would be a move congruent with emerging complexity approaches to social science and network theory at the social systems level.

Conclusion

Contemporary U.S. military CT and CTN doctrine emphasize eliminating networks by identifying a COG against which defeat or disruption mechanisms can be employed. This perspective has been reinforced by the axiom that "it takes a network to defeat a network," which has heavily influenced the SOF identity. Unfortunately, nearly two decades of operational success has not translated into achieving strategic objectives.

This chapter asserts that the inability to achieve durable strategic effect is the result of failing to perceive the social systems within which networks operate. Reducing CT and CTN to COG analysis on specific networks fails to appreciate the complex adaptive behavior higher-order social systems can demonstrate, even in the face of persistent, devastating CT capability. While the network orientation has been an important addition to U.S. military doctrine, it is incomplete in the context of a systems-level, ideas-based conflict. In short, there is not a military solution to a strategic challenge that is sociological in nature.

The decision by scholars to focus at the mid-range level of analysis was due, correctly, to science's inability to precisely predict for CT forces terrorist

activity and their evolution. But if the demand on predicting terrorist behavior is relaxed and the emphasis is placed on the evolution of social systems, there is much that can be done at the high-range level. A phase transition strategy that (a) identifies local and regional grievances, (b) co-creates with aggrieved communities meaningful ideas on how to reconcile political differences, (c) focuses efforts on reinforcing self-organizing and self-replicating alternatives, and (d) seeks ways to connect those movements for a cascade effect could lead to dynamics that render VEO networks unattractive options.

Through network topology of the social system, it is possible to generate a much better sense of whether counter or nurture network activities are likely to have sustainable impact. At a minimum, the concept of the phase transition in social systems offers an alternative approach for dealing with complex adaptive challenges at the strategic level and moves SOF beyond the tyranny of mid-range, operational-level concepts.[60] As Michael Kenney concludes on a comparative analysis of narcotrafficking and terrorist organizational learning,

> Illicit actors often survive simply because they are less well known to law enforcers and counterterrorists who apply limited resources to groups and networks they have already identified for disruption … Yet, because drug-trafficking and terrorist systems are populated by dozens if not hundreds of illicit actors by the time law enforcers succeed in translating their force advantage into an information one, other clandestine groups have already replaced their predecessors … No matter how well law enforcers play the game, they often remain a step or more behind their adversaries.[61]

While the U.S. military has the basic concepts for such a frame already in its lexicon, it will take great effort to reorient it from a down-and-in network orientation to one that looks up-and-out toward the larger social system and the opportunities for phase-transition dynamics. This is a challenge the U.S. military generally and SOF specifically can overcome, but it will likely be years before the change can translate into systemic-level interventions and true strategic effect. But since the mid-range CTN approach consigns SOF to decades more of the fight, it is worth the attempt to shift the social system's trajectory along the way.

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Part II: The Violent Extremist Social System

Chapter 2: The Islamist Social System: Intervening for Strategic Effect Using Evolutionary Governance Theory

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All human social systems exhibit the characteristics of complex adaptive systems, and the more participants and relationships there are in a social system, the more likely it will demonstrate adaptive or emergent behavior. Whereas chapter 1 laid out the importance of intervening in the higher order social system, this is the first of three chapters that progressively demonstrates how the social systems create the context within which networks coalesce and operate, distinguish themselves from intra-system competitors (chapter 3), and recruit members (chapter 4). Since this monograph is oriented on the network illusion inherent to the counterterrorism (CT) and countering threat networks (CTN) missions, these three chapters use the higher-order Islamist social system as the example. The higher-order Islamist social system is a densely networked, resourced, global phenomenon. Moreover, many, if not most, of the key hubs in the system rely on legally sanctioned activities designed specifically to promote the welfare of Muslims while proselytizing Islamist philosophy and theology. The resilience of violent Salafi Jihadi networks in the face of punishing CT and CTN efforts can be attributed in large part to the fact that they do not have to recruit without a foundation—the social system already provides a cadre of potential recruits from which to draw.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe how the global Islamist social system lends substance to the global *ummah* as a politically oriented imagined community. More than just an identity-based network binding agent, the higher-order Islamist social system has elements designed specifically to expand the imagined community while avoiding counter-network operations by police and military elements. Moreover, it illustrates that the global Islamist system has consistently demonstrated adaptive behavior against social and environmental conditions indicative of a complex adaptive system. These conclusions lead to the implication that Special Operations Forces

(SOF) and other joint, interagency, intergovernmental, multinational, and corporate (JIIM-C) actors should bias their efforts to encourage as many elements as possible of the Islamist social system toward social movement solutions through political engagement instead of CT and CTN operations. That is, non-kinetic, influence-oriented efforts that promote a phase transition in the topology of the Islamist social system are more likely to achieve strategic success against violent extremist organizations (VEOs) than persistent CT and CTN operations.

The chapter first briefly explains the concept of the imagined community and the difficulty the military has faced formulating doctrine sufficient to address its effects in counterinsurgency (COIN), CT, and stability operations. Second, it describes the institutionalization of a global Islamist social system dating roughly to the 1970s; certainly, important movements existed prior to this, but the global, networked, resilient quality of the social system generally dates to this decade. And third, it introduces Evolutionary Governance Theory (EGT) as a framework for intervening in the higher-order, complex, adaptive social system for more sustainable strategic effect.

The Conceptual Gap

The Military's Struggle to Imagine Communities

Rapid U.S. military victories in Gulf War I (1991), Afghanistan (2001), and Gulf War II (2003) reinforced the post-Vietnam perspective that high-end technological advances in precision munitions, command and control, and intelligence production could eliminate the fog of war and deliver decisive blows against an enemy's center of gravity. This so-called revolution in military affairs impeded the development of population-centric doctrine despite the peacekeeping and stability operation experiences of the U.S. in Europe and Africa. By the time the U.S. military experienced significant insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, it was woefully short of trained forces and supporting doctrine.[1]

After more than a decade and a few stalled attempts at creating structures dedicated to sociocultural analysis, the Joint Staff issued the Joint Concept for Human Aspects of Military Operations (JC-HAMO) in late 2016. In recognizing the need for population-centric awareness but also constrained by the military's institutional resurgence of antibodies to COIN and nation-building activities, JC-HAMO warns, "The Joint Force must avoid

focusing too narrowly on the physical environment and challenges, fixating on friendly and adversary lethal capabilities, and over-relying on technology to solve problems—while failing to adequately affect the will and decision making of relevant actors."[2]

Unlike joint publications, a joint concept is not doctrine but just a recommendation on best practices. That is to say, the services and commanders can continue to employ center of gravity (COG) analysis even against mainly population-centric threats. But, as noted in chapter 1, saying the COG is "the population" says nothing because it says everything.

Joint Concept for Human Aspects of Military Operations

At a minimum, JC-HAMO creates the conversation space for introducing social systems as a concept. Similar to the relationship-based underpinnings of systems thinking,[3] it defines "human aspects" as "…the interactions among humans and between humans and the environment that influence decisions" that can be affected to change the behavior of relevant actors.[4] Relevant actors, in turn, consist of

> … individuals, groups, and populations whose behavior has the potential to substantially help or hinder the success of a particular campaign, operation, or tactical action. Relevant actors may include, depending on the particular situation, governments at the national and sub-national levels; state security forces, paramilitary groups, and militias; non-state armed groups; local political, tribal, religious, civil society, media, and business figures; diaspora communities; and global/regional intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations.[5]

While this list of relevant actors in JC-HAMO represents an improvement over most other joint publications, it is important to note that even its framing looks at such challenges in predominantly national or geographically constrained terms. While noting that failing to properly appreciate human aspects can prolong conflict, it conflates operational-level success within a state against a threat network with "strategic goals."[6] In describing the social and cultural elements of JC-HAMO, the central referent is again "a society" within a state, and there is no real reference to a social systems conception.[7]

The closest JC-HAMO gets to a higher-order social systems frame occurs when describing the potential impact of external support groups. It states the following:

> Similarly, a variety of groups—such as professional and charity organizations, labor unions, social clubs, political parties, schools, religious assemblies, and neighborhood committees—can play a role generating support or opposition to friendly forces' efforts. *Aided by technology, some of these stakeholders may exist far outside the geographic boundaries of an operation* (emphasis added).[8]

Again, it is laudable that such groups are included and that the perspective moves beyond the boundaries of a country, but JC-HAMO only does so in the context of analyzing network resilience.

Clearly, the anchor point for the U.S. military is the mid-range, physical manifestation of social systems, hence the relevance of CT and CTN doctrine. Unfortunately, two aspects of the approach of the U.S. combine to frustrate this perspective. Aspect one is that, as mentioned in chapter 1, CT and CTN only function at the operational level of war, so continuing under existing operating concepts essentially commits the U.S. to no viable path for strategic success. To achieve strategic objectives, the operational approach would require taking more individuals and networks out of the fight faster than the social system could replicate adherents to the general cause. This clearly is not happening for two fundamental reasons. First, many higher-order social systems from which networks arise are global in nature. Second, and more importantly, there are typically essential reconstituting nodes in global social systems (e.g., schools, religious institutions, charities, etc.) against which it is morally impermissible to apply military or aggressive policing power. As will be shown in chapter 3, Salafi Jihadis, for instance, can rehabilitate, reconstitute, and reengage at their choice of time and location because the higher-order social system is left unperturbed.

Aspect two is that the U.S. military now owns a significant portion of the U.S. Government's (USG) influence capability. If social systems exist as social kinds as previously asserted, then the challenge is in the cognitive realm in the battle of ideas. While many might believe the Department of State should lead the global influence mission, in resource terms, the U.S. military enjoys more personnel, capabilities, and funding. In short, as currently constituted and organized—and this can and probably should change—the USG cannot

meaningfully engage in a battle of ideas without a U.S military that appreciates how social systems manifest.

Imagined Communities and Twenty-First Century Social Systems

Anderson's Criteria

To bridge the conceptual gap between U.S. military doctrine and the higher-order social systems that affect the strategic operating environment in CT and CTN, it is proposed here that Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined community serves as a useful tool. The phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters traveling great distances to participate alongside the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq baffled many in the U.S. military and policy circles. Many concluded that ISIS simply engaged in a masterful, multiplatform media campaign. However, when viewed from the perspective of the imagined community, it is possible to think of modern media creating the mechanism for an already existing nation—one formed within the context of a social system that was over a century in the making—to move out of the imagined and virtual space to coalesce in a physical one.[9] Benedict Anderson describes the nation as

> … an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion … In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.[10]

He ascribes three essential features to the nation:

1. The nation is imagined as limited because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries beyond which lie other nations.

2. It is imagined as sovereign because the concept was born in an age in which enlightenment and revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm.

3. Finally, it is imagined as a community because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.[11]

What Anderson elucidates is the importance of the imagination in creating the nation, not the physical networks that arise within the social system. He also notes that imagined communities can exist in massive numbers so long as the members subscribe to the comradeship. In effect, territory-bound conceptions of nationhood are easy to envision in Anderson's formulation of imagined community, but it does not preclude non-territorial imagined communities from forming. Indeed, expatriates are precisely that—members of a nation located abroad.

The Roots of the Islamist Social System

How does the imagined community, then, relate to the idea of a social system? And what does this identity and ideas-based concept mean for CTN operations? In short, the potential for systemic resilience is in large part a function of the openness of the identity to new and diverse members and, therefore, more redundant connections between major hubs. Whereas ethnic and geographic communities have maximum extents to which they can incorporate new members based on, respectively, bloodline and territorial boundaries, religious and creed-based imagined communities are potentially more expansive.

As an unexpected consequence of colonialism and nationalism, local religious authorities in Islam steadily lost influence across the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries,[12] but a more universal conception began to emerge by the late twentieth century due to mechanisms of mass communication. Mir Zohair Hussain writes the following:

> Political Islam's attraction for Muslim students, teachers, and lay persons alike is nothing new. Yet Islamism during the last two decades (1980–2003) differs from the many revivals of political Islam preceding it. Islamism today lacks geographic boundaries, and its expression has been varied to an unprecedented extent … The universality of Islamism has been a significant development in international relations. The communications, transportation, and computer revolutions have shrunk the world drastically.[13]

The propagation of the Islamist social system is the consequence of many factors, but prominent among them are the following:

a. The voluntary migration of Muslims from a colonized or previously colonized country to others to seek economic or political opportunity

b. Refugee migrations from conflict zones

c. The children of such voluntary and involuntary migrants being born in other countries

d. The expansion of private religious schools, oftentimes *madrassas*

This has led to what scholars describe as the "deterritorialization" of Islam from embedded cultural practices. Detached from historical traditions mediated by ethnic and social practices, millions of second- and third-generation Muslims, constituting perhaps one-third of the total global Muslim population, have grown up without the socio-cultural reinforcement of their parents' interpretations and practices of Islam.[14] There are clear challenges for individuals who find themselves living as both ethnic and religious minorities yet natural-born citizens as defined by Western political culture. John Esposito notes the socio-political implication for the imagined community by saying, "For the foreseeable future Muslims will face the challenge of retaining their faith and identity while integrating into sometimes hostile American and European societies. Western countries offer many freedoms not available in much of the Muslim world, but the pluralism the West values so highly is being tested as never before." [15]

In the context of this social systemic development, a universalist, globalized form of Islam manifested in the form of neo-fundamentalism. Olivier Roy asserts that, whereas ethnicity and Islam were intertwined historically, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, vast numbers of Muslims became ethno-religious minorities detached from their native religious practices and political systems.[16] Consequently, religious entrepreneurs could successfully divorce Islam from those home environments and present a seemingly pure, unadulterated form to generations without any other context of interpretation other than their parents.[17] While framed in terms of recapturing the correct, historical practices of the Prophet, in reality, neo-fundamentalists had to invent an imagined ummah that never truly existed because all Islam was, to that point, mediated by local culture.[18] Roy concludes,

"Neo-fundamentalism refers to an imaginary ummah, beyond ethnicity, race, language and culture, [one] that is no longer embedded in a specific territory. Geography is as irrelevant as history. Nowhere is there a country where state and society are ruled by the true precepts of Islam." [19] Precisely because the ummah is deterritorialized and divorced from ethnic practices, neo-fundamentalism's only boundaries or borders are in the cognitive realm, namely presentation of the self and the public-facing behavioral practices of the faith.[20] In other words, just as the ummah is imaginary, so must the traditions of it be invented.[21] Additionally, international organizations, such as the Organization of the Islamic Conference among many others, helped to generate the perception of interests on behalf of Muslims globally, which reinforced the general perception or logic of speaking in terms of the universal ummah.[22]

At the same time these dynamics were forming, scholars began to note the growing phenomenon of political identities and support networks rooted in something other than the state.[23] Unsurprisingly, the global ummah is a prominent imagined community in Salafi Jihadi literature and is privileged above all other ethnic and national identities.[24] Valentine Moghadam describes the global Islamist social movement formed in the 1970s and propagated through the 1980s as a "movement of movements,"[25] with diverse political objectives, organizational forms, and norms of contestation. She writes the following:

> We may refer to a global Islamist movement even though many movements and networks within are locally or nationally based. The term 'global' describes the scale, scope, and reach of Islamism and acknowledges that many Islamists engage in cross-border communication, coordination, solidarity, and direct action. Some scholars distinguish between local and transnational Islamism, demarcating al-Qaeda from, for example, Hamas or Hezbollah.[26]

In Clausewitzian terms, the global Islamist social system as a "movement of movements" has no center of gravity precisely because, as he says, unity is remote, and cohesion between the parts is very loose.[27]

Islamist activists from the 1970s onward focused intently on creating the infrastructure for social movement propagation by meeting the material and spiritual needs of Muslims where the (often secular) state tended to fail. The "isms" of the twentieth century—capitalism, socialism, communism,

Baathism, pan-Arabism, and others—all seemed to fail and lead to authoritarianism. With secular political systems having lost credibility and become repressive of liberal political dissent, a return to religion emerged as a viable alternative, sometimes with the tacit or explicit support of secular regimes seeking to undermine Leftist revolutions.[28] At the same time, many of the same regimes adopted anti-Western positions, often due to the legacy of colonialism, and Muslim symbolism became a culturally relevant way to mobilize nationalism.[29] When established and respected religious institutions were pressed into the service of such governments, their reputations and relevance suffered among their national populations, which undermined the role of religious elites in the propagation of faith and Islamic legal traditions.[30] These larger trends in the Islamic social system created the room and rationale for neo-fundamentalists to arise, which came in the form of Wahhabi and Salafi social movements, and with them, a phase transition in the topology of the Islamist system.[31]

Wahhabism and Salafism are often linked together in the contemporary usage though they have different lineages. Wahhabism belongs to a particular school of Islamic jurisprudence, the Hanbali madhab, and it believes in the sole veneration of Allah and views any similar reverence for others, including the Prophet Muhammad, his family, or religious scholars, as heretical. In their interpretation of *sharia*, Wahhabis "demand strict and scrupulous adherence to its severe punishments for crimes and transgressions; they prohibit drinking alcohol, smoking, singing, listening to music, dancing, wearing silk, wearing ornaments of gold or silver, drawing and painting animate objects, palm reading, astrology, fortune-telling, and all forms of divination." [32] Given the socio-cultural environment in which Islam was revealed, Wahhabism bears strong resemblance to Bedouin Arab culture, which means other ethno-cultural practices are seen as inherently blasphemous.[33] Salafism, however, is not restricted to any particular madhab but is instead an ethic of Islamic practice that enjoys more widespread appeal. Salafism seeks individual spiritual purity by following those closest to the Prophet Muhammad who are noted for their "austerity, purity, and piety."[34] Since they, too, were Bedouin Arabs, there is natural overlap in the behavioral manifestation of the ideologies. Due to Salafism's wider appeal and similarities in practice, Wahhabi proselytizers often describes themselves as Salafis, and by the mid-1970s. Wahhabis virtually co-opted the term for their own purposes.[35]

Twentieth-century Islamist movements generally have their roots in the writings of Sunni scholars and activists Hassan al-Banna, Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi, and later, Sayyid Qutb and also Shi'a scholars Baqer al-Sadr, Ali Shariati, and Ruhollah Khomeini. Both Sunni and Shi'a Islamist movements have as a central tenet the idea that the antidote to the failure of secular ideologies is the resurrection of an Islamic state covering as much of the ummah as possible, irrespective of ethnic, national, or other identity boundaries.[36] It is in this context, then, that elements of the Islamist social system believe there is an obligation of Muslims to insulate themselves from their impure immediate socio-political surroundings and, when the caliphate is formed, move there and support it.[37] With an emphasis on the personal practices of piety necessary to reconstitute the caliphate, there has been a tremendous emphasis on educating the ummah on how to properly practice Islam in the face of Western and other heretical ethno-cultural practices.

As a result, Islamists formed a series of international and often transnational relationships including schools, mosques, boarding schools, clinics, service charities, banks, businesses, cultural centers, publishing houses, media production companies, and even families.[38] The development of this social system, especially its Wahhabi and Salafi components, was heavily augmented by the diffusion of Saudi Arabian funds across continents beginning in the mid-1970s but later placed in the service of the Afghan Mujahideen during the 1980s.[39]

Education has been essential to the formation of the global Islamist imagined community, and it has been in this space that neo-fundamentalist organizations have been particularly effective. As previously noted, most Muslims born into families outside the West have religious identities mediated by other ethno-cultural or even national ones. Generating or elevating the globalized Muslim identity amongst locally anchored individuals requires the perpetual effort of institutional development by Islamist activists, and they still expend significant effort proselytizing to transform Muslims' political loyalties to the global ummah. What is key to realize is that, particularly in the West, neo-fundamentalism has been forced to focus on the cultural aspects—the social presentation of self[40]—of the imagined community since there is not truly an organic ethno-religious or territorial foundation of the ummah. Olivier Roy writes the following:

The definition of Islam as a culture per se is possible only after the process of immigration has disconnected religious tenets from a given culture. This disconnection fits with Western secularism, for which a religion is defined as a mere religion separated from other sociocultural fields. After this break Islam is then re-objectified as a culture in itself and called to explain the social attitudes of Muslims (towards women, for example), under the pretext that Islam advocates living as a community.[41]

Roy concludes that the need for self-isolation and hostility toward the nations in which neo-fundamentalists find themselves is about defining virtual borders: "To bring them together means to push them to behave in similar fashion and have the same way of life." [42] Without this, there can be no identifiable imagined community—all the other standard ways to self-identify are unavailable.[43] Herein lies the intrinsic vulnerability of the entire Salafi Jihadi subsystem within the larger Islamist social system.

Madrassas, boarding schools, and mosque study circles are essential infrastructure in fomenting the global Islamist identity, and universities later became sites of Islamist proselytizing across the Muslim world and Europe.[44] Central to Islamist education is the call to restore a caliphate, last represented imperfectly by the Ottoman Empire, and for the imposition of sharia law, and there is great overlap among the various components in this social system regarding the sources of inspiration for this philosophy.[45] Strategies for achieving these outcomes differ across the "movement of movements," but even the non-violent elements of the system stress these objectives and reinforce the imagined community of the global ummah by providing tangible social services that daily demonstrate the mantra, "Islam is the solution."[46] What makes the Salafi Jihadi variant of the global Islamist social system especially problematic is that it draws upon an established, global Islamist charity system and an education system with graduates of varying levels of zeal to restore the caliphate but also enflames the desire to avenge the global ummah, which is claimed to be in a constant state of oppression by non-Muslims.[47]

To this point, the emphasis has been on the Salafi Jihadi subsystem within the larger Islamist social system. It is important to stress again that there are multiple variants of Islamism and, equally importantly, multiple variations within the Salafi Jihadi subsystem.[48] The diversity within this subsystem

is the result of multiple factors, including clear differences in ideology, the ethnic makeup of different organizations, informal hierarchies among ethnic groups, access to resources, differences in tactics, and divergent strategies.[49] Moreover, there is wide acknowledgement that Islamism broadly has an individualist orientation that seeks to propel individual initiative in defense of Islam, even in the absence of institutional or governmental support of it.[50] As a result, local conditions of interpretation, grievance, and culture mediate how Islamism manifests in any particular location. Indeed, Roy asserts it is this individualism that is integral to the formation of the imagined community. He writes, "As we shall see, most radical militants are engaged in action as individuals, cutting links with their 'natural' community (family, ethnic group and nation) to fight beyond the sphere of any real collective identity. This overemphasis on personal jihad complements the lonely situation of the militants, who do not follow their natural community, but join an imagined one."[51] It is for this reason that organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Qaeda, and ISIS have adopted franchise strategies with local affiliates adapting the metanarrative of the parent organization to unique and novel local circumstances.[52] The result of the diversity of ideologies, approaches, and networks of Islamist organizations is that ideology is essential for recruitment and the social construction of the imagined community. Salafi Jihadis as a subsystem offer a particular prescription that appeals to a small fraction of the potential recruiting pool. Assaf Moghadam and Brian Fishman conclude, "They attempt to create a new identity for their adherents by offering them membership in a global community of like-minded believers. And finally, like all ideologies, jihadis present a program of action, namely violent jihad." [53] But without this clear program of action, the organizations would dissolve against the weight of other identity layers and approaches.[54]

Quintan Wiktorowicz explains the cognitive foundations of the VEO enterprise, which are firmly rooted in a social movement strategy. He notes, "Islamic movements are heavily involved in the production of meaning and concomitant framing processes. Like many 'new social movements' driven by issues of identity, culture, and post-materialism … Islamic movements are embroiled in struggles over meaning and values."[55] What Wiktorowicz describes is the behavior of a "recreative system" whereby nodes "are capable of defining their own goals and taking measures for achieving them, thus consciously influencing their environment."[56] That is, the different nodes in the system are together viable and self-replicating due to the number

of participants, the services they provide, the resources available to them, the goals they establish, and the alliances and partnerships they form, but they nevertheless compete with one another for framing dominance and socio-political influence. As they (re)interpret their emerging contexts, the nodes introduce new ideas, generate new relationships, and behave in new, emergent ways.

The global Islamist social system bears all the hallmarks of a complex adaptive system within which individual nodes or even networks might be expendable but that displays extraordinary persistence and self-replication as a whole. Moreover, the diversity within Islamism, and even the Salafi Jihadi variant, create the potential for emergence at the edge of chaos. That is to say, different practices and approaches can become basins of attraction in different circumstances. For this reason, Moghadam and Fishman assess there to be an intrinsic resilience in the topology of this social system, noting the following:

> On the other hand, the structure of the global jihad movement and its associates offers the group a certain degree of resilience as far as the impact of these fault lines on the jihadi movement is concerned. The variety of identities, functions, geographic concentrations, and overlapping networks that make up al-Qa-'ida and its jihadi allies allows the movement to absorb divisions on one level without them necessarily affecting another, and successful exogenous pressure on one element of the organization may not matriculate to the entire entity.[57]

If this is true, efforts to eliminate the impact of Salafi Jihadi must look beyond the CT and CTN framework and more toward the recruitment and imagined community narratives regarding the ummah resonant in each geographic or cultural space. As an analogy, Roy asserts,

> Because the ummah is a reconstruction, it depends on individual choices and free association of militants committed to the same ideal. In this sense there are as many ummahs as groups pretending to embody it. The ummah here plays the role of the proletariat for Trotskyist and leftist groups of the 1960s: an imaginary and therefore silent community that gives legitimacy to the small group pretending to speak in its name.[58]

The Impact of Twenty-First Century Communications Technology

Anderson's analysis of nations and imagined communities concludes that the development of common languages, print media, common news sources, and later radio and television combined over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to reinforce the imagination of shared identities, experiences, and interests.[59] In the twentieth century, it was possible for the state to monopolize many of these forms of communication and put them in the service of creating nations even where communities were not wholly or uniformly imagined as joined. Nevertheless, it was common in the 1980s and 1990s for critics or advocates for alternate imagined communities, such as Jihadi leaders, to proselytize using books, conferences, audio cassette tapes, and later VHS tapes to disseminate messages and generate large followings across countries.[60]

In the age of the Internet, however, the situation is significantly different. As geographer and futurist Parag Khanna argues, the Internet eliminates the friction that time, space, cost, funding, and technology created in the information space during the twentieth century.[61] Virtually all of the costs and limitations of communicating were overcome by the second decade of the twenty-first century, leading to unprecedented connectivity between widely dispersed people in real time, including Islamists.[62] JC-HAMO recognizes this trend:

> Changing power relationships as a result of the increasing availability of technology. The spread of new technologies empowers people to "see more, share more, create more, and organize faster than ever before." … Transnational and virtual radicalization and recruitment by violent extremist organizations (VEOs) will become easier and more widespread. Local authorities will be hard-pressed to address popular grievances before malign actors can take advantage of the situation.[63]

By invoking the concept of "transnational and virtual radicalization and recruitment," JC-HAMO intuitively recognizes the higher-order social system, but it cannot make the cognitive leap to the possibility of a nation-in-waiting deriving from non-territorial notions of imagined community. As Ellis and Black note, "The inherent danger in the idea of the nation being an imagined community is that it is endangered by other imaginary

communities. The nation-state held the advantage for decades because the national identity was synonymous with territory and local community and was eventually enshrined in international law. In the Internet age, this advantage still holds, but is certainly more contingent."[64]

At the same time, it also offers great insight about the diverse perspectives among Muslims about the process of creating meaning within the diverse schools and practices of Islam. Gary R. Bunt, for example, explores the many different Muslim uses of the Internet as a communications medium and the diverse perspectives represented on it.[65] His research demonstrates that Islam's many different instantiations are represented on the Internet but that the ease with which new networks are formed enables new understandings and interpretations to emerge.[66] He also notes that the Internet provides an ideal medium for neo-fundamentalism.[67] His sense is that the ummah exists at some abstract level on the Internet but is a contested imagined community. He writes, "What one can state is that within this community (or interrelated network) that may be defined as an ummah, the Internet is facilitating communication that could make the ummah more cohesive; but it also represents and exposes diversity of expression and understanding, which can facilitate fractures rather than heal the divisions within Islam."[68]

At the social system level, it is inappropriate to think in terms of a COG; rather, it is more appropriate to employ the concept of a "basin of attraction." Instead of destroying or dismantling a COG—something already demonstrated to be impossible in this context—it is more productive to think in terms of new "flows" in popular beliefs and behavior to alternate basins of attraction.[69] Certainly, the resilience of the Salafi Jihadi subsystem reflects the metaphor of flows. As Michael Kenney explains,

> While the loss of Al Qaeda's state sanctuary and training camps in Afghanistan may reduce the skills of Islamic militants in the immediate future, the network's substantial body of terrorist knowledge will continue to spread within the broader Salafi extremist movement, even as government authorities press on in the campaign against terrorism … Sustained interpersonal contact among militants, whether mediated through the Internet or in face-to-face meetings, allows them to build social relations based on trust and reciprocity, while deepening their identities as Islamic holy warriors engaged in a cosmic struggle against the "crusaders and infidels."

Whether terrorists learn their tradecraft through formal instruction or direct participation, online or in battle, the diffusion of knowledge among ever widening Islamist communities of practice presents contemporary states with pressing, unresolved security challenges.[70]

The most effective interventions at this level would be rooted in a social movement orientation and seek to address the issues within the social system that make violent extremism seem appealing. Reinforcing non-violent elements within the social system requires exploring the relative strengths and weaknesses in the topology of the social system with respect to organizational strategy, resourcing, opportunity to generate political influence, micro-recruitment, and ideological framing across the local, regional, and global levels of analysis.[71] By recognizing the limitations of the COG and the irreducibility of social systems to the networks that manifest from them, SOF can make the leap toward emphasizing force development and generation concepts that bias toward the civil influence elements of the enterprise instead of the kinetically-oriented, CTN image of the SOF operator at the tip of the spear.

Fortunately, the USG has experience in social movement-oriented, nurture-network operations from its experience in the ideological battles of the Cold War. The key in this frame is moving beyond seeing terrorism as a challenge born of religion but rather as one stemming from local political, economic, and other social dynamics against which Muslim populations are struggling.[72] In 2007, a RAND study found that the network topology of non-Islamist Muslim organizations was insufficient to meet the social movement challenge of the times. The authors conclude the following:

> This asymmetry in organization and resources explains why radicals, a small minority in almost all Muslim countries, have influence disproportionate to their numbers. The imbalance between the means of radicals and moderates could also have significant consequences for the "war of ideas" underway throughout the Muslim world. The United States and other Western countries can do little to affect the outcome of this 'war of ideas' directly, as only Muslims themselves have the credibility to challenge the misuse of Islam by extremists.[73]… Liberal and moderate Muslims generally do not have the organizational tools to effectively counter the radicals. Most liberal Muslims acknowledge that there is no liberal Muslim

movement, only individuals who are often isolated and beleaguered. In the view of many moderate Muslims, the creation of moderate and liberal networks is essential to retrieve Islam from radicals. The antidote to radicalism is the very same organizational methods used by the radicals themselves—network-building and effective communications—to disseminate enlightened and moderate interpretations of Islam … The central problem is that moderates lack the financial and organizational resources to create these networks themselves; the initial impulse for their creation may require an external catalyst.[74]

In other words, there is in the larger Muslim social system a significant gap in the overall topology through which liberal, moderate, or simply non-Islamist voices can generate mass social movement and disseminate other ideologies for addressing socio-economic challenges. The Islamist component of this social system is consequently enabled in part by the absence of competition from other sources of information and ideas.[75] During the Cold War, the West found itself behind the Soviet Union in terms of youth-oriented social movements and had to begin the process of building up competing, non-Communist ones to deprive the Soviet Union of potential recruits.[76] While there was disagreement over how deeply to engage socialist organizations, it eventually relied on supporting indigenous organizations and social movements that abided by certain basic principles.[77]

Even at the time of its publication in 2007, the authors critiqued the USG for generating little in the way of a coherent strategy among the various USG efforts to foment alternative networks with common or interlocking objectives.[78] Much as during the development of non-Communist social movements during the Cold War, the authors called for

… fundamental changes to the current, symmetric strategy of engagement with the Muslim world … Instead, the United States should pursue a new policy that is asymmetric and selective. As in the Cold War, U.S. efforts should avoid the opponent's center of gravity and instead concentrate on the partners, programs, and regions where U.S. support has the greatest likelihood of impacting the war of ideas.[79]

The authors' approach sought to bolster existing networks but also to open up new channels of communication between Western and other Muslim populations—that is, to alter the network topology through the purposeful design and introduction of new basins of attraction to offer aggrieved populations alternative solutions to local problems.[80]

There is ample reason for non-Islamist or, at a minimum, non-violent Islamist networks to gain traction, not the least of which is the desire by many to live normal, fruitful, and peaceful lives.[81] The fact that one-third of the Muslim population now lives outside the ethnic and cultural contexts through which the majority practice the faith creates problems that only the Islamist networks seem poised to address.[82] This is exacerbated by the financial and organizational advantage of extremist groups and their willingness to use violence to suppress alternate voices and dominate existing religious institutions.[83] Yet, this new demographic reality means that Muslim populations will face economic, cultural, and political challenges unique and novel from their neighbors. Religion will certainly be a frame used to mobilize populations, especially in countries with democratic systems, and there must be different ways to understand and interpret religious language and symbolism.[84]

Returning for a moment to the question whether the ummah serves as a virtual nation for Salafi Jihadis, it is clear that the ummah has been socially constructed as a global, decentralized political entity awaiting a caliphate, at least among some elements of the Islamist social system. While waiting for the caliphate to materialize was a source of frustration, it also proved to be a source of resilience because it enabled adaptation across the system of like-minded Islamists, even under the pressure of extraordinary CT and CTN activities. Once ISIS proclaimed a caliphate in Syria and Iraq, it attracted tens of thousands of fighters from across Europe, many of whom had been socialized for years in the Islamist social system. While ISIS has been largely defeated in Iraq and Syria, its caliphate—even if only virtual in effect—is spread across regions, which is likely again to prove to be a source of resiliency against CT and CTN forces.

Intervening in the Islamist Social System: An Evolutionary Governance Theory Approach

In complexity theory terms, the Islamist social system is locked in a positive feedback loop, creating an ever-deeper basin of attraction due to the relative weakness of alternate (not counter), credible Muslim political structures. As a result, there is little currently in the non-Islamist social system at the structural, mid-range level to alter the flow of susceptible recruits. At the higher-order social system level, it is necessary to introduce new basins of attraction that appeal to relevant populations based on creating new flows and competing frames of the ummah in society and a globalized world.

Scholars of the global Islamist movement note that both non-violent and violence-promoting organizations compete against each other at both the identity- and issue-framing levels.[85] This means that the intrinsic diversity within the Islamist frame, along with the alternative practices and philosophies among non-Islamist Muslims more broadly, contains the channels leading to alternate basins of attraction. However, the real structural deficit can be found in the non-Islamist social system, which seems comparatively weaker in terms of resources, reach, and actions on the ground than the Islamist social system.

It is precisely because there are safeguarded Islamist social and cultural spaces that the Salafi Jihadi subsystem replicates as the imagined community of an aggrieved global ummah, and it cannot be removed from the system due to its contributions to social services and other political sensitivities. However, SOF, interagency partners, allied and partner nations, corporations, and non-governmental organizations all have resources and capabilities related to most of the social needs of relevant populations. If the Jihadi network cannot be taken off the battlefield at the midrange faster than the social system can reconstitute its forces, then the only option is to engage in the long effort to bolster imagined communities that resonate with populations in more credible ways than the solutions offered by Salafi Jihadis. How can this be done?

It is proposed here that the most promising framework for intervening in higher-order social systems can be found in a new and still emerging literature on EGT. EGT is rooted in a combination of theories regarding complexity, social systems, social constructivism, path dependency, and narrative competition stemming from a diverse group of academic disciplines

such as anthropology, public administration, communications, organization theory, management, and political philosophy.[86] Its starting point is the acceptance of complex adaptive systems and open social system dynamics. As Bob Williams and William Hummelbrunner explain,

> All living (e.g., social) systems possess an inherent paradox: the contradiction between closure (= self-referential, autonomous) and openness (= structurally linked to their context). Living systems can neither be reduced to their internal dynamics nor be completely controlled from the outside. Any attempt to overcome this paradox in a directive manner (e.g., through external force or hierarchic orders) can be ineffective beyond simple systems because such an attempt threatens the system's identity and reinforces its defensive structures. Complicated and complex systems can therefore best be influenced in an indirect manner, and external interventions are most effective when they build on their capacity for self-organization.[87]

Until the development of EGT, there was not a coherent packaging of concepts specifically oriented toward intervening at the "edge of chaos" to influence how systems evolve by "build[ing] on their capacity for self-organization."[88]

What makes this framework attractive for SOF is that it recognizes "situations in which the nation state has a dominant position, for situations in which state powers are relatively small and for situations in which older or alternative forms or association (tribes, clans, networks, merchant towns, multinational companies, international organizations) shape governance."[89] These situations very much align with the SOF operating environment, especially where SOF have been engaged in the multidecade CT and CTN fights, and the theory alludes to what are essentially JIIM-C actors. "Governance" is consequently very simply defined as "the taking of collectively binding decisions for a community in a community, by governmental and other actors." [90] Since situations and operating environments change regularly, governance is never finished or stable as such; rather, conflicts of interest and visions over the common good are inevitable among actors, irrespective of how socially or politically cohesive their identities appear on the surface.[91] In this insight, SOF finds their role in intervening in higher-order social systems as part of the larger JIIM-C—introducing new ideas, interests, discourses, and relationships at the edge of chaos in order to promote new,

positive feedback loops that transform social systemic behavior over time. Although there are elements of the Special Operations enterprise perfectly aligned with this framework, the implementation—meaning the doctrine—is not yet aligned with it.

Most pointedly, joint doctrine is still rooted in state-centric concepts of government and legitimacy instead of governance more broadly. Instead, EGT states,

> Communities, and society at large, are thus conceptualized in EGT as multiplicities (in Deleuzian terms), as conglomerates with a unity which cannot be translated into one unifying principle. It takes a narrative, the creation of a narrative, to see the unity of a community. But understanding the initial multiplicity is important, in analytic sense and in a political sense: seeing unity while forgetting it is constructed is imposing unity, and imposing identity. A community is always marked by different constructions of reality. If governance is somehow democratic, then governance arenas bring out the diversity in understandings and interests.[92]

It is in the differences that the edge of chaos can be found, and new, positive feedback loops can be co-created with local communities. But these are contextually dependent, require extraordinary sensitivity to local conditions, and a purposeful subordination of physical actions on the ground to the narratives that lead to new interpretations of interests and visions of the common good. If the locus of effort by the global Islamist social system, and Salafi Jihadis in particular, is in the propagation of an aggrieved, besieged identity through persistent narrative and influence operations, then it is necessary to introduce alternative narratives—supported by physical actions in similar but superior ways—to cause the social system to behave differently. In other words, the imagined community is precisely a discursive construct that can exist at multiple levels of community and that can be made more or less relevant depending on how empowered groups construct and control discourse, use resources to substantiate the narratives, and impose incentives and penalties to enforce their preferred boundaries of speech.[93] Through this interplay of actions on the ground and narrative interpretation, identities can change, behaviors adapt, and new interrelationships become rational and self-organizing.

SOF's role, broadly conceived, would be to serve as a temporary "reservoir" in co-creating with local communities new basins of attraction, either as a primary pathway or in support of other JIIM-C actors whose authorities and permissions place them in the lead, and then aggregating them for strategic effect. To promote social system transformation, negative feedback—in the destructuring sense—needs to be introduced. EGT notes,

> Patterns of rules and roles do not invite reflection when things work smoothly. Where there are conflicts, when power relations shift, or when actors lose legitimacy, the configurations assert themselves more fully. They become more observable, as resistance and pressure for change in certain manners and not others. For outside observers, e.g. analysts using an EGT perspective, the configurations are always there, yet always changing in a process of emergence and recursive reconstruction.[94]

In this capacity, civil reconnaissance, influence operations, information operations, humanitarian and disaster relief, and locally adapted—versus doctrinally-based—civil affairs become key SOF elements as part of larger JIIM-C-oriented integrated campaigning efforts. To the extent that CT and CTN operations are required, they play a supporting role in creating space for new reservoir interventions to purposefully create new, mutually reinforcing, self-organizing social networks. This is potentially profound for SOF because it is not just counter-network operations but nurture-network operations as well. The analytical concepts, operational planning, and tactical activities underpinning nurture-network operations would vary significantly from those used in CT, CTN, and even stability operations, but they do correspond to existing special operations roles and identity constructs.

EGT is clear that initial starting conditions matter due to structures of power and influence among the differing levels of governance. It notes the following:

> From social systems theory, we borrow the idea that human communication, and decision-making as a specialized form of communication, is self-referential. Each object, subject, action or narrative, is observed and interpreted according to the logic of the observer, relying on shared schemes of interpretation…In systems terms: they recursively produce their communications from their own

communications, by means of and in reference to earlier concepts, distinctions, and procedures (Teubner 1989) … In network terms: transformation of the network starts from the network, its elements, relations and operations.[95]

But while discourse and narrative are key to creating imagined community, it is actions on the ground that link concepts to outcomes, and this is where the global Islamist social system has been exceptionally well designed. This global social system specifically oriented itself around governance gaps within a larger metanarrative that "Islam is the solution." This is not in and of itself problematic. What is problematic is that subgroups within this social system have politicized the governance imperative with the apparently tangible interpretation of resisting active oppression by Westerners and corrupt Muslims.

If intervening at the network level is necessary for transforming the network, and through this the higher-order social system, then ground-level, community and contextually adapted, network-nurturing activities have to make the alternative networks equally tangible and part of the "common sense" within the social system. EGT asserts the following:

> Transformation of governance is thus always self-transformation, and the products of governance, as in policies, plans, laws, rules, can only make sense for the audience, for the community, if it took into account the existing context of policies, plans, laws, etc. *Only when they make sense, they can have coordinative power, and only when this is the case, governance can transform itself in the direction envisioned by the governance product.* If this is not the case, governance can either collapse, move to different arenas, or it can reproduce itself for a while on the existing set of rules and roles (Van Assche et al. 2012b). This goes on until these do not perform well anymore. (emphasis added)[96]

EGT concludes that socio-cultural constraints create path dependencies in social systems that are hard to overcome, which is why governance typically evolves over time; revolutions are possible though rarely permanent and often have to accommodate preexisting structures. But disruptions to existing governance pathways inevitably occur as new goals are introduced, resources are brought to bear, and interrelationships formed.[97] It is in this

way—in influence and engagement-oriented activities with the imagined community as a central referent—that SOF and other JIIM-C partners can intervene in the higher-order social system from which Salafi Jihadis generate their recruits and resources.

Conclusion

If Salafi Jihadi groups operating in the higher-order social system must spend their time and effort constructing an imagined community imbued with an identity of oppression in need of defense, it should be evident that this is a key vulnerability. It is thoroughly possible to offer an alternative where the imagined community can be otherwise represented and politically satisfied. Denying, degrading, and disrupting terrorist networks through social movements at the social systems level is more likely to generate sustainable strategic effect than through CT and CTN operations. CT and CTN activities simply break the pieces apart, removing some from the field, but they cannot fundamentally change the nature of the social system's topology. Within the global Islamist, complex, adaptive social system, the remaining nodes can and do find new relationships within the existing social system, reorganize, perhaps rebrand, and continue the long war of attrition.

So long as there is an unchallenged higher-order social system propagating the idea of the global ummah as a besieged nation, nonviolent networks committed to sustaining this social system, and a population receptive to this narrative based on tangible governance benefits from its adherents, there will be dedicated attempts to defend this nation. The Internet only amplifies the imagination—a factor ISIS was clearly able to exploit among a ready and waiting population of young Muslims residing as expatriates elsewhere till the caliphate took form.

Only by focusing on the higher-order social system and intervening with new basins of attraction will the systemic relationships begin to change and degrade the unassailable system that daily reconstitutes the Salafi Jihadi infrastructure. EGT provides a viable framework for conceptualizing nurture-network operations that interfere with and erode the self-organizing, path-dependent nature of the existing social system from which Salafi Jihadis draw strength. The capabilities, authorities, and relationships already exist across the JIIM-C to intervene in the system as new reservoirs of experimentation in local governance to achieve new positive feedback loops. Changes

to existing operating concepts will be necessary, but they will not be radical in nature. If the social system generating the adversary depends upon filling governance gaps and perpetually constructing the imagined community, then interventions in these areas are necessary to disrupt and transform the Salafi Jihadi social system.

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Chapter 3. The Salafist Millenarian Variant: A Study of the Islamic State

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The leaders of the Islamic State emerged from the Salafi Jihadi social sub-system, but it innovated by combining extremist and millenarian beliefs and by incorporating distinct, cult-like behaviors to distinguish it from other Salafi Jihadi organizations putatively defending the *ummah*. The purpose of this chapter is to process-trace the historical evolution of the Islamic State's ideology to better understand Salafi Jihadi millenarian beliefs within violent extremist organizations (VEOs). Using the literature on societal revolutions to examine the rise of the Islamic State and the framework of Social Movement Theory (SMT) to provide historical contextualization for its genesis, this study offers a four-part model for the integration of millenarian beliefs with VEOs. As such, it demonstrates how experimentation at the margins of the Islamist social system generated an unexpected but powerful positive feedback loop that displaced its competitors' structural advantages.

Background

The twenty-first century brought dramatic political and social upheaval across the nations of the Middle East. Several long-standing authoritarian regimes drastically weakened or completely collapsed. In their wake, competing militias, religious tyrants, and VEOs flourished. In 2011, revolts began in Tunisia and soon spread across North Africa and the Middle East. While the Arab Spring quickly brought down the political systems of Tunisia and Egypt, it led to bloody civil wars in Libya and Syria and further aggravated the delicate balance of power in Iraq.

In Syria, the uprisings began with the 2011 Arab Spring protests, by which large segments of the population expressed their dissatisfaction with the al-Assad government.[1] Peaceful protests soon turned to a full-scale armed conflict when the regime began violent and ruthless suppression of the activists.[2] In March 2011, protests in the cities of Damascus and Aleppo became the catalyst for a country-wide civil war. Meanwhile, in post-Ba'athist Iraq,

multifarious political and military factions jockeyed for leverage over the country's nascent democratic institutions. After the withdrawal of U.S. and coalition forces in 2011, Iraq's central government made few concessions to its minority parties. The turmoil in both countries allowed for an environment that became structurally conducive for major social change. In 2014, a resurgent al-Qaeda offshoot known at the time as *al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham* (or Islamic State) quickly gained both territory in Iraq and Syria and popular appeal with rebels from around the world.

A historical review of the genealogy of the Islamic State demonstrates a strictly fundamentalist interpretation of Islamic doctrine.[3] The Islamic State is clearly a religious sub-sect because of its clear deviation from the framework of the Islamic religion writ large.[4] Yet, academics, policy makers, and journalists have deliberated the true nature of the organization from its inception. While there has been no clear consensus, the organization has been referred to as a pseudo-state,[5] hybrid terrorist organization,[6] guerrilla army,[7] and territorial administrator.[8] Scholars have also identified cult-like and revolutionary characteristics of the Islamic State, which are the subject of analysis in this chapter.[9]

Revolutions

Both Syria and Iraq have experienced the basic criterion of what academics term a "revolution." While the definitions vary, foremost social scientists and leading thinkers in the field tend to merge on the notion that revolutions require "rapid, basic transformations of society's state and class structures."[10] Furthermore, the transformation of the society undergoing a revolution is generally precipitated by a "popular movement in an irregular, extra constitutional and/or violent fashion" or "a mass mobilization and regime change, but also more or less rapid and fundamental social, economic and/or cultural change, during or soon after the struggle for state power."[11] The tumultuous events in Iraq and Syria over the past decade, where masses of mobilized factions usurped the power of the central government to make fundamental societal changes, certainly meet the most accepted scholarly definitions of "revolution."

Despite the relevance, the revolutionary literature is rarely applied to twenty-first century cases of social upheaval in the Middle East. Markedly, unlike the other major revolutions of the past two centuries, instead of giving

birth to capitalist democracies, socialist autocracies, communist states, or authoritarian theocracies, the revolutions of the twenty-first century Middle East have instead given rise to VEOs. VEOs are organizations that espouse violent extremism with the crucial characteristic of groupthink, or the "belief in the inherent morality of the group."[12] The term "VEO" has been used by U.S. and foreign governments as an identifier for a wide range of radicalized groups, destructive ideologues, and terrorist entities.[13]

Likewise, the term "revolutionary Islam" is generally applied to the exportation of the 1979 Iranian revolution, not to the ongoing persistence of VEOs in places like Iraq or Syria. In contrast to the Iranian model of theocratic governance, the recent revolutions across the Middle East have generally been pursued by Sunni Muslims rejecting Western-style influence and governance in the region, thus imparting a distinct anti-colonial tone to the social upheaval.[14] As a substitute for the revolutionary rhetoric, scholars have often referred to the ideological vicissitudes across the modern Middle East as the progression of "political Islam," by which religious convictions gradually influence a state's political apparatus.[15] Instead, for the purposes of this analysis, "revolutionary Islam" refers not to the theocratic Shi'a revolutionaries in Iran who deposed the Western-backed Shah or the general trend of Islamism as described in the previous chapter but to the social change purported by VEOs that follow strict, fundamentalist interpretations of the Islamic faith.

Social Movement Theory

The striking changes across the Middle East can be further dissected through the lens of SMT. Social movements are not confined to a place or time; they are highly dynamic, complex, and rely on collective behavior.[16] The theory has its roots in the sociological work of the late nineteenth century and attempts to offer explanations for collective behavior by looking at historical patterns, social norms, and governing structures.[17] The explanations range from the contagious effect of crowd behavior to the community-wide changes in rationality that precede new social orders.[18] In particular, SMT offers a valuable framework for assessing the progression of ideology and discontent that gave rise to the Islamic State. In many ways, it is an integral part of Evolutionary Governance Theory, if not its primary engine.

In one explanation of how collective behavior foments, several conditions must be present for a social movement to take place. First, the structure of the society must be conducive for collective behavior. This structural conduciveness refers to the awareness of broad social conditions that precipitate massive change. Next, there must be structural strain in the society. "Structural strain" refers to the circumstances within the society that create extreme tension and stress. Next, there must be generalized beliefs amongst the faction within society that is taking part in the social movement. The generalized beliefs provide a narrative for why there is structural strain in the society and often spreads rapidly amongst the affected factions. Finally, there must be precipitating factors, or a catalyst that ignites the urgency for collective action.[19] Often, these precipitating factors are structural strains from a recent "rapid social change" in the society.[20] Under these conditions, individuals become a collective and take part in radical action "because they experience social dislocation in the form of social strain."[21]

Salafism

A key feature of the Middle East's most radical VEOs, including the Islamic State, is their adherence to a variant within Salafist ideology that espouses a strict, fundamentalist interpretation of the Qur'an. In this variant, adherents express their loyalty to Islam through the aggressive rejection and wholehearted disavowal of non-Islamic practices.[22] The progression of this variant within the Salafist movement can be traced through a number of prominent Islamic scholars. Notably, Salafist ideals are championed by the fourteenth century scholar and Islamic jurist Ibn Taymiyyah, and later by nineteenth and twentieth century scholars like Muhammad Abduh, Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi, and Sayyid Qutb.[23]

Ibn Taymiyyah is widely cited by modern Islamic scholars and ideologues for his views on jihad, by which he espouses violence for the purposes of upholding the principles of the Islamic faith.[24] While Ibn Taymiyyah's views were not widely accepted at the time, his work has greatly influenced the role of Salafism in modern politics, due in large part to the dissemination of Islamism in the last quarter of the twentieth century. For nineteenth century Egyptian scholar Muhammad Abduh, it was important that Muslims not only understand the Arabic of the Qur'an but also learn the vocabulary in the context of its use at the time of its revelation to the Prophet Muhammad.

Abduh argued that the seventh century was the ideal time for Islam, and while scholars may debate Islamic *hadith*[25] because the Qur'an itself is a divine revelation, it is not open for questioning or discussion.[26] Egyptian activist Hassan al-Banna suggested that living in accordance with Qur'anic scripture was best exemplified by the first generations of Muslims under the Prophet Muhammad, who are referred to as the *salaf*,[27] and hence the term "Salafist" is derived.

The twentieth century Indian scholar Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi's compositions stood as a stark contrast to the socialist and capitalist ideologies that dominated the political discourse of his era.[28] Mawdudi rejected the nationalist and sectarian nature of modern states and suggested there would be an eventual struggle between Muslims and non-Muslims culminating in "an Islamic revolution, and creation of an Islamic State."[29] Mawdudi also introduced the concept of the "new *jahiliyyah*." The term *jahiliyyah* had been used by Islamic theologians to refer to the barbaric and impious state of mankind before the Prophet Muhammad. For Mawdudi, the new jahiliyyah was the entirety of the secular and non-Muslim modern world.[30] In his view, an explicitly Islamic State would surpass the capability of all democratic or communist states, and it was Mawdudi's intent for the Islamic utopia's legitimacy to come from the will of the people.[31] By way of contrast, Egyptian scholar Sayyid Qutb took a more autocratic view on Muslim society and suggested it was the duty of jihad to restore sharia (Islamic law). Qutb interpreted jahiliyyah to be the state of all mankind after the salaf, including modern-day Muslims.[32]

Cults

Qutb's seminal work, *Ma'alim fi al-Tariq* (Signposts on the Road), which outlines his call to action against the jahiliyyah, influenced a number of radical groups across the Muslim world in the years preceding the genesis of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. One of the first VEOs to adopt Qutb's extreme variant of Salafist ideology was *Jama'at al-Muslimin* (Society of Muslims) which existed in Egypt from 1971–1978. The Egyptian media derogatorily referred to the group as *Takfir wa al-Hijra*, which described the organization's demand that other Muslim's repent for their sins (*takfir* or excommunication) and the fact that the group wanted to separate its followers from the broader society (hijra or exodus).[33] The term *takfiri* quickly passed into

colloquial Arabic to describe Muslims who denounce or accuse other Muslims of apostasy.[34] The organization's leader, Shurki Mustafa, pronounced *takfir* on the entirety of the Muslim world, with the exception of his close disciples. The organization kidnapped and murdered a former government minister who it believed to be representative of the corrupt and blasphemous nature of modern governance.[35] But it quickly disbanded after the government's execution of Mustafa in 1978.[36]

In general, cults are a group of people whose religious beliefs represent a split from other mainstream religions and sects. Much of the academic literature on cults adapts a Christian-centric continuum where a major religion is broken into denominations, sects, sub-sects, and finally cults.[37] While religions have split and changed throughout history, cults across the religious spectrum distinguish themselves by creating extreme tension for the host society.[38] Furthermore, cults are unique in that leaders tend to exert complete control over their adherents in an exclusive and self-interested manner.[39] Cults are oftentimes associated with the "search for a mystical experience, lack of structure, and presence of a charismatic leader."[40] Their members usually display excessive devotion to the leader or ideology, and the leader or ideology is unquestioningly followed by its believers.[41]

Jama'at al-Muslimin was not only one of the first modern Salafist VEO's, it was one of the first, and exceptionally notorious, Salafist VEO widely referred to as a cult.[42] The organization centered upon the authority and leadership of Mustafa, who believed himself to be a *Mufti*, or expert in Islamic jurisprudence.[43] Mustafa also believed his organization should live completely outside the jahiliyyah and create its own, pure Islamic utopia.[44] While Mustafa's ideology was despised by much of the Egyptian populace, in "Salafi circles, he became a cause célèbre, and his ideas later became influential among segments of the global Salafi jihad."[45]

Methodology

This analysis presented in this chapter started with the primary research question of: How have Salafist millenarian beliefs been integrated by violent extremist organizations? There are many studies and historical analyses on Salafism within VEOs, yet the literature on the apocalyptic and millenarian variants within the Salafist doctrine being propagated by VEOs has not fully addressed the role of collective behavior and cult identification.[46]

In the typology for collective behavior used in this study, social movements are shown to require structural conduciveness and strain, growth and spread of the belief, and finally, precipitating factors.[47] Each of these factors was present as the Islamic State gained power and territory across Syria and Iraq. This typology also provides a framework for understanding the integration of millenarian ideology into Salafist VEOs. To illustrate the manifestation and drivers of the Islamic State, this chapter employs the method of comparative historical analysis within the SMT framework.[48] The comparative historical analysis method typically focuses on "conceptualizing the kinds of factors that drive macro process of change."[49] With its focus on large-scale processes and "clues to the patterning of social life," the method's focus on temporal sequences is a natural fit for an analysis designed to answer the macro-sociological questions of how and why millenarian beliefs could be exploited by VEOs. Furthermore, as an illustrious and modern deviant case, the Islamic State exemplifies this phenomenon. It should already be apparent that the larger social system into which Salafi Jihadi networks were established was not particularly conducive to their propagation from a network topology perspective. The SMT lens provides some clues as to how such networks could reshape the connections and alter the social flows to improve their chances of survival in the Islamist topology.

Structural Conduciveness

By the early twenty-first century, the Iraqi and Syrian political and military landscapes were becoming increasing conducive towards dramatic social change as both states existed as an extreme aberration from their previous condition. In Iraq's case, there was great disaffection from Iraqis that had benefitted from the *status quo antebellum*, notably former Ba'athists, wealthy Sunni elites, and tribal leaders. A wide host of political factions, armed groups, and street militias proliferated across the country. Meanwhile, in Syria, factions inside the country became increasingly disillusioned with the Russian-backed, Alawite-dominant government in Damascus.

After the fall of Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party, many Iraqi armed factions rose up in resistance to the U.S. and coalition presence in the country. The groups included but were not limited to former Ba'athists, groups that had been marginalized under the Ba'ath party, Iranian-funded militias, and a franchise of the al-Qaeda terrorist network. Known as al-Qaeda in Iraq

(AQI), or *Dawlat al-Iraq al-Islamiyya* (Islamic State of Iraq [ISI]), the organization pledged allegiance to Osama bin Laden in return for his support and endorsement. AQI followed Salafist principles and quickly became a major threat to U.S. and coalition forces. Yet, over time, the leaders of AQI leaders also posed a direct threat to the traditional power of Iraq's tribal sheikhs and openly challenged their rulings in religious and social matters.[50] By mid–late 2005, the tribes of Iraq's majority Sunni Anbar province were in open warfare against AQI and later gained support from U.S. forces in the area.[51]

To counter the threat posed by Iraq's insurgent groups (not only AQI), the U.S. deployed a surge of forces to the region in 2006. Concurrent to the surge of U.S. forces, Sunni tribesmen in Anbar province experienced an "awakening" movement, which led the tribesmen to side with U.S. and coalition forces. These newly dubbed "Sons of Iraq" were financed by the U.S. forces and organized to fight AQI. The combination of the surge in forces, doctrinal changes, and the Sunni Awakening led to a decrease in violence and a strategic pause that enabled U.S. policy makers to negotiate (albeit not actually agree to) a status-of-forces agreement with the Iraqi government and develop a plan for complete withdrawal of U.S. forces.[52] Yet, even after the U.S. coalition withdrawal, al-Qaeda's operatives remained intent on creating an Islamic state in the region.

In Syria, the protests of the Arab Spring instigated major uprisings against the standing regime in 2011. As Assad sought to take aggressive action against protestors, droves of military officers from the Syrian Armed Forces defected and created the Free Syrian Army (FSA) with the express intent on removing the regime.[53] Concurrent to the defection of military members, Salafist guerillas organized into an anti-government front known as *Jabhat al-Nusra*. Initially created as the Syrian branch of ISI by its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the encouragement of al-Qaeda kingpin Ayman al-Zawahiri, *Jabhat al-Nusra*'s intent was to replace the Syrian government with an Islamic emirate.[54]

Structural Strain

The absence of a sitting government in Baghdad for the majority of 2010 gave rise to a renewed increase in social instability, insurgent attacks, and economic uncertainty and created a power vacuum in Iraq's outlying Sunni-Arab provinces. In the beginning of his second administration in 2010, Iraqi

Prime Minister Nouri Maliki promised the Americans he would foster a power-sharing arrangement with Sunni political participants. Once the U.S. military formally left the country in 2011, threats to Maliki's power base from within Iraq came from disenfranchised Sunnis with popular appeal, a resurgent Ba'ath party, and internal disputes with other Shi'a politicians. Partially inspired by the protests of the Arab Spring, Iraq's Sunni Arabs actively voiced their frustration with the majority Shi'a-controlled, power-sharing arrangements.[55] To counter the internal threats to his government's stability, the Maliki government appealed to the long-standing Shi'a militias to quell uprisings and jettison Sunni political players. In doing so, he aggravated large portions of Iraq's Sunni Arab population. In the face of relative deprivation, psychological distress, and political marginalization, many of Iraq's Sunni Arabs concluded that the government had become incessantly sectarian.[56]

Meanwhile, Syria's ongoing civil war morphed into much more than conflict between two major sides. By 2013, democratically oriented revolutionaries and Salafist groups inside the country were fighting alongside the anti-Assad FSA to oust the standing regime. Assad's alliances and the duplicitous nature of the FSA made U.S. and Western support to the more democratically oriented revolutionaries extremely difficult, and the power vacuum in Syria's eastern provinces became susceptible to influence from rapidly expanding Salafist factions. By early 2014, the central Syrian town of Raqqa became known as the "hotel of the revolution" where radical Salafist groups welcomed FSA rebels in search of arms and support.[57] Overtime, the conflict involved not only the Russian-backed Syrian Armed Forces and their allies fighting the FSA but also loose alliances of Sunni opposition groups, Salafist mercenaries, vacillating Kurdish armed factions, and the wayward proxies of regional hegemons. In addition to these divisions, several global and regional powers became either directly or indirectly involved in the civil war by providing support or resistance to one faction or another. These included but were not limited to Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran, Russia, Turkey, Israel, and the United States.[58]

Back in Iraq, in 2014, a group of former Ba'athists known as the *Jaysh Rikal Tariqah al-Naqsahbandi* joined forces with the ISI, which rebranded as *al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham* (the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham), reflecting its new expansionist posture.[59] The organization followed the *Salafist* tradition, looking to the doctrine set forth by al-Banna, Qutb, Mawdudi, and Abduh—returning to the foundation of the religion and the

unquestionable certainty of original Qur'anic text. Furthermore, adherents borrowed Qutb's and al-Qaeda's interpretations of jihad, whereby it is the duty of Muslims to espouse violence to restore sharia law. The organization also sought to provide security and services to sectors of the society that were marginalized by Iraq's central government. In doing so, they appealed to Iraq's tribal leaders and rural Sunnis who were prohibited from obtaining weapons in accordance with Iraq's strict counterterror law.

In February 2014, *al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham* raised its flag over government buildings in the western Iraqi city of Fallujah. A few months later, the group took complete control of Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq. Once in Mosul, the organization declared itself to be an Islamic state. From its origin, the Islamic State was, in many ways, more effective at governance than the Iraqi central government. The Islamic State had rule of law, a judicial system, as well as a monopoly on the use of force in the area it controlled.[60] Building upon its successes, the Islamic State committed not merely to outmaneuvering Baghdad's politicians but also out-governing them in the Sunni-majority areas. This represented a continuation in the evolution of Salafi Jihadi governance from the strategies of its predecessor, AQI. As the Islamic State gained territory, it not only controlled local systems, but the organization promoted the establishment of a caliphate and imposed itself as the legitimate authority in the region.[61] The Islamic State established a complete governance system in controlled regions with two branches: one that dealt with administrative structures and another that handled social services.[62] These services included law enforcement and court systems,[63] English-speaking schools,[64] and a formal, bureaucratic hierarchy of governance.[65] At its peak, the Islamic State controlled wide swathes of territory from Aleppo and Homs in eastern Syrian, to Sinjar and Kurdish areas in the north, and to villages and towns across Anbar province.

Generalized Beliefs

The Islamic State deviated from its predecessor, AQI, on several issues. Foremost, each organization differed on how it defined the nature of the "enemy." For AQI, the primary enemy was the nascent, U.S.-backed, Shi'ite-dominated government, its values, and its allies. In juxtaposition, the Islamic State took a regional approach, preferring to focus on the "near enemy" and territorial expansion.[66] The organization's core doctrine was much closer to

the generalized beliefs of the Egyptian *Jamiatt al-Islamiyya* from decades before. Like *Jamiatt al-Islamiyya*, the Islamic State purported the belief that salaf have a duty to promote a violent jihad against the jahiliyyah to restore sharia law. Furthermore, the Islamic State actively confronted any person or institution it deemed to be jahiliyyah from modern Middle Eastern political entities as well as other Muslims.

Relying on "Islamic eschatology for legitimacy and mobilization,"[67] the Islamic State's propagandists created a coherent and straightforward narrative for its cause. Transformations in technology, the internet, and social media allowed organizers to swiftly propagate the core doctrine and attract multitudes of zealous adherents. Notably, the Islamic State appealed to individuals who already desired to be citizens of the yet-to-be-founded caliphate through a calculated, deliberate, and highly successful global branding and promotion of its beliefs.[68] This effort to socially construct the caliphate online is explicitly explored next in chapter 4.

Precipitating Factors

When the U.S. departed Iraq in 2011, there was little public support on the Iraqi street for a resurgent al-Qaeda or militarized sub-state entities, yet over time, this sentiment changed. After the fall of Mosul in June 2014, the Iraqi government formalized a program under the Ministry of the Interior to integrate Iraq's majority-Shi'a militias into Iraq's security apparatus. Three months later, Islamic State militiamen overran Tikrit and murdered 1,700 young Shi'a cadets from the Tikrit Air Academy in cold blood. Ultimately, widespread support across Iraq for the popular mobilization was, in part, motivated by this atrocity. Yet, because Maliki failed to integrate Sunnis into the formal security apparatus and instead legitimized longstanding Shi'a militias, some moderates in Iraq's Sunni Arab population shifted in favor of more extremist groups.

Much of the revolutionary literature describes two factions that propel a revolution: political extremists and political moderates. Political extremists are those who, under normal circumstances, do not have a customary role in society. They operate in the fringes (like convicts and criminals). The extremists serve on the front lines of a revolution and tend to espouse exceptionally radical ideologies. Under ordinary circumstances, political moderates do not become revolutionaries, but because they cannot achieve

their objectives by working within the system, they take action outside the standing government and give support to revolutionary activity. Thus, revolutionary activity often emerges as a societal "fever" that ignites from the disaffection of the politically moderate elite class or the educated population.[69] Under these circumstances, the two unlikely allies unite. This framework aptly describes the peculiar marriage of former Ba'ath party members, Sunni tribesmen, and factions of the FSA uniting with the extremist combatants of the Islamic State.

Historical analysis suggests that once the revolutionary activity commences and the former social order dissipates, extremists and moderates will jockey for control of the new governing structures. In past revolutions, extremist factions became critical of moderating influences and took great measures to exert their control. This formula could lead to a "reign of terror" resulting from the intense power vacuum between the moderates inside the nascent governing structure and the extremist forces that helped propel the revolution.[70]

As Iraq's Sunni moderates conceded territory to the Islamic State throughout 2014, extremist forces gained more ground in the country. Despite the outward appearance of revolutionary "success," an ominous reign of terror took root inside the Islamic State. The Islamic State's reign of terror was especially troublesome given the totalistic nature of its core ideology. The extremist forces within the Islamic State delegitimized any moderate or pragmatic voices in the organization by destroying ancient historical sites, censuring opposition movements, and flaunting its power through a macabre spectacle of public executions.[71]

The Millenarian Variant

After successfully gaining territory, governance, and global notoriety, the Islamic State shifted its manifestation as a revolutionary front to that of a cult-like, millenarian terrorist organization. The organization heralded apocalyptic beliefs and a "selectively literalist interpretation of an identity narrative."[72] Studies have shown "the most dangerous cults are also fascinated by visions of the end of the world—which … cultists often believe they are instrumental in bringing about."[73] Within cultic studies, millenarianism is the belief in the coming of an ideal society, especially one brought about through revolutionary action or "the imminent expectation of the total

transformation of the world."[74] Characteristics of the millenarian variant are their adherence to totality, salvation, revolutionary rhetoric, collective organization, charismatic leadership, and a feeling of ecstasy.[75] Adherents of the millenarian variant often fail to find meaning or substance through mainstream religions.[76]

The millenarian interpretation is applicable because the Islamic State advocated a fundamental transformation in the nature of the society through revolutionary activity. While the Qur'an itself does not directly purport millenarianism, the narratives surrounding the Islamic State's apocalyptic societal transformation included verses and beliefs found in Islamic *hadith*. For instance, an oft-cited belief by the Islamic State's adherents is the Dabiq prophecy, a revelation attributed to the Prophet Muhammad that predicts the Day of Judgement will come after the Muslims defeat Rome at al-'Amaq or Dabiq (two ancient Syrian villages near the Turkish border).[77] According to the Islamic State's interpretation of the prophecy, on the Day of Judgment, eternal salvation is rendered to the virtuous while the jahiliyyah will face eternal condemnation. The Dabiq prophecy became a key recruitment mechanism, and the Islamic State's English-language magazine bore the same name.

Another characteristic of millenarian cults is that their leaders claim "god-like wisdom and power" and demand unquestioning commitment from their followers.[78] Much like Shukri Mustafa, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi provided such an example as an authoritarian leader who was both unconstrained and uncontested by his followers. Similar to other such leaders, al-Baghdadi dictated how members should think and act, and he exerted excessive control over the group.[79] By many accounts, al-Baghdadi was a charismatic leader, which is a defining trait of the millenarian variant.[80]

Finally, scholars have attributed the feeling of ecstasy to the millenarian variant, which is also seen in collective behavior as an expressive symbol of unity.[81] The feeling of ecstasy has also been used as a descriptor for understanding the collective behavior of religious congregations. Political and religious scholar Shadi Hamid uses this terminology in his description of Islamic State fighters who, by his account, were willing to die in a "blaze of religious ecstasy"[82] for the organization's goals.

Conclusion

In 2014, U.S. forces redeployed to the region in a combined military effort to counter the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Over the next several years, U.S. forces reinforced the Iraqi Armed Forces and carefully treaded against issues stemming from the interwoven nature of the alliance structure and competing security interests. For instance, because Tehran backed the Shi'a-led Iraqi government in Baghdad, the U.S. was in the awkward position of being a *de facto* ally with Iran in the war against the Islamic State. Likewise, because the Russians sought to keep al-Assad in power, the U.S. military had to cautiously deconflict its support of FSA factions and Kurdish armed groups fighting the Islamic State without creating tension with Russian forces that were backing al-Assad. Despite the complications, the U.S.-led fight against the Islamic State resulted in a major degradation of the organization.

Not only did the U.S. and coalition forces employ military power to counter the Islamic State, they actively worked to neutralize the organization's alluring narrative. Yet, perhaps one of the biggest downfalls within the Islamic State was actually one of its own doing. Foreign policy analysts Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan suggest the organization succumbed to the same "deficiency of all cultish or messianic messaging: the creation of false expectations."[83] When the apocalyptic climax foretold in the prophecies regarding Dabiq and the "Day of Judgement" never transpired, Islamic State propagandists were forced to shift their narrative.[84]

Unlike terrorist organizations, cults often cease to exist after the death of their leader. But the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in October 2019 did not eliminate the threat of Salafi Jihadi revolution. In fact, three years later, the Islamic State is once again proving to be a threat to both Iraq and Syria. And while the Islamic State has been rendered much less effective in the core territory of the caliphate, the contemporary voices of Salafist revival, most notably Qutb and Mawdudi, have created a powerful and enduring blueprint for generating societal transformation. Indeed, one of the lasting legacies of the Islamic State variant in the Salafi Jihadi social subsystem has been the perpetuation and even expansion of its emirates in the periphery. That is, the Islamic State has persisted in part because it changed its network topology to include areas where the U.S. and its allies cannot or will not easily extend its counterterrorism and countering terrorist networks capabilities, such as Afghanistan, the Sahel, and now central and southeast Africa. Until there

are major changes to the social systemic and local structural conditions that facilitate the growth of such organizations, it is highly probable that there will be another violent, extremist, and perhaps millenarian manifestation of the Salafi Jihadi ideology.

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Chapter 4. The Illusion of the Islamic State "Virtual Caliphate"

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In 1993, Howard Rheingold argued that the Internet favored the development of new, virtual communities rooted in shared values.[1] Forecasting how online communities, built and grown in the online space, could give way to tangible arrangements in the physical space, Rheingold described a virtual community as a "self-defined electronic network of interactive communication organized around a shared interest or purpose."[2] Nearly three decades later, Rheingold's predictions have materialized in a variety of ways, allowing researchers, academics, interest groups, and communities to congregate and communicate online. However, not all online spaces are used for positive purposes, and terrorist and criminal groups also congregate online, sharing and spreading extremist ideology to communities of like-minded followers. As chapters 2 and 3 demonstrate, the Islamic State (IS) was born into a world in which the ummah was already conceived by many to be a virtual imagined community, the caliphate was already a motivating symbol of the virtual ummah and defending the ummah was considered an individual duty of the righteous. For many, then, the online activities of IS and its virtual caliphate represent a dangerous manifestation of Rheingold's media-centric virtual organizations, enabled by "media and depend[ent] on social media as connective tissue."[3]

However, the notional concept of a global extremist diaspora linked by nefarious online chat rooms, secure direct-messaging platforms, and virtual servers strategically scattered around the world is simultaneously terrifying and convenient—terrifying due to the uncertainty of who subscribes to the radical apocalyptic IS ideology, where they are located, and when (or if) they may conduct a violent attack on behalf of IS. As a result, random acts of terror remain a cause of international fears and the focus of intelligence operations and law enforcement resources worldwide. The concept of a global extremist diaspora is also convenient because access to virtual data and digital breadcrumbs left behind by terrorist actors on the Internet

enables a detailing of activity, a mapping of connections, and an ability to collect critical digital forensics—all from behind the relative safety of a computer screen. Primary data may be gathered without having to conduct research in dangerous locations, increasing researchers' access to firsthand data—something terrorism studies notoriously lack.[4] Disrupting the virtual caliphate of IS continues as a stated international goal due to the uncertainty surrounding the extent to which the online community exists and the kinds of terrorist acts remote IS operatives may be capable of committing.

Yet, characterizing IS as drawing strength for its post-caliphate jihadist movement from the interconnected web of supporters scattered around the world not only oversimplifies IS but also overlooks the group's ideological history, its relationship to defeat, its antipathy towards being labeled a virtual or paper state, and its strategic vision for the future. The Center for Strategic and International Studies estimates that roughly 230,000 Salafi Jihadis existed worldwide in 2018, constituting a nearly 250 percent increase from 2001.[5] Despite slight decreases in Salafi Jihadi numbers since their peak in 2016, the resources and manpower dedicated to counterterrorism (CT) and countering threat networks efforts since 2001 have ultimately failed to reduce the number of Salafi Jihadi extremists and have instead allowed an expansion of Islamic extremism to its highest point internationally since 1980.[6] Additionally, as attack numbers rose, incidents in the West increasingly relied upon simple, non-technical tactics: driving vehicles into crowds, rudimentary explosives, and hand-held weapons such as knives, swords, small arms, and hammers.[7] International focus is zeroed in on the terrorist violence characteristic of IS, creating a narrow conception of the group and its abilities. Ultimately, placing weight and focus on the virtual caliphate of IS displaces efforts to understand IS as it currently is—an insurgency engaged in what Paul Staniland terms "armed politics,"[8] warned by key leaders to keep a low profile online—by narrowing the vision and goals IS maintains for the future to those propagated online.

This chapter begins with a discussion of IS group characteristics followed by a brief overview of the current literature on IS and its virtual caliphate. Next, IS texts, speeches, and media releases are reviewed to first understand how IS dealt with defeat in the past and, second, explain its vision for the future as revealed by IS leaders. Following the discussion of IS literature, descriptive statistics concerning social media and Internet usage among Islamist extremists are presented using the Profiles of Individuals

Radicalized in the United States (PIRUS) dataset, which contains "deidenti-fied individual-level information on the backgrounds, attributes, and radi-calization processes of over 2,200 violent and non-violent extremists … in the United States covering 1948-2018."[9] Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of history, its critical role in understanding what comes next, and why focusing on the virtual caliphate of IS is shortsighted, undermines the organization's self-awareness, and ultimately fails to account for the strategic posture, goals, and vision of IS.

Characteristics of the Islamic State

As a modern Sunni Jihadist movement, IS maintains an expressed ideology, complete with texts, and a sophisticated analysis intended to inspire follow-ers. Jessica Stern and J. M. Berger explain that "when it is expedient, [IS] indulges in religious argument, for example, to justify its capture and sale of sexual slaves … [citing] a prophecy saying that slavery will return before the end times begin."[10] IS establishes religious legitimacy for its apocalyptic or millenarian vision through its unique interpretation of the Qur'an and inspires recruits to join the fight to restore the caliphate now, instead of calling for a long generational war against the West. The movement attracts many followers with its highly sophisticated and often graphic propaganda and cunning depictions of a pure and utopian Islamic society existing in the present instead of in an idealized future. The apocalyptic ideology of IS enables the group's radical violence because "they see themselves as par-ticipating in a cosmic war between good and evil, in which ordinary moral rules do not apply."[11]

To make sense of the violent tactics of IS, it is also critical to understand what IS is. A common problem in terrorism studies is a lack of definitional boundaries around what constitutes a terrorist group or organization.[12] Con-cerning the terms "organization" and "group," this chapter uses the words synonymously. James Q. Wilson described organizations as formal, volun-tary associations with a group name and definable membership.[13] As a formal entity, IS remains noteworthy because of the violent acts perpetrated by the group and in its name, the military operations of IS in Syria to establish and maintain the caliphate, the success of the media and propaganda apparatus of IS, the group's ability to recruit and draw members from around the globe,

and the increasing activity and violence of IS affiliates as the strength of IS core suffers after the loss of the caliphate.

IS core contains IS leadership and those under direct IS control and communications, and it remains the organizational and ideological nucleus of the group centered around the physical and notional caliphate (see figure 2). Importantly, the lines between IS affiliates, adherent groups, networked adherents, and the global virtual caliphate are porous, ill-defined, and fluid. Communications, propaganda, and what IS dubs "media Jihad" play a critical role in spreading and managing the group's public and political image, message, and passive supporters. The bidirectional arrow in figure 2 represents how the virtual space crosscuts and intersects the physical space, connecting covert internal networks with overt political and public-facing networks. The relationship is, therefore, a complex of interconnected and intersecting network hubs which provides it ample opportunity within the larger Islamist social system. For example, established relationships between IS affiliates and IS core are not standardized; they remain highly informal yet mutually beneficial. However, as depicted in figure 2, the entire IS Jihadist subsystem exists within the nebulous global virtual caliphate social system, meaning that IS has thrived, in part, because of its ability to siphon off support for its mission and vision from the greater Salafi Jihadi narrative and information system.

As indicated in figure 2, IS is a complex organization of interrelated systems. The group consists of an operational and ideological nucleus and simultaneously exhibits characteristics associated with loosely organized groups (e.g., linked but operationally independent IS affiliates, the promotion of lone wolf attacks, and a willingness to take credit for remote attacks). Here, the opportunity for emergent behavior and "edge of chaos" innovation makes the network both innovative and resilient.

According to the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), as of 2018, IS included 44 active affiliates that conducted attacks in 34 different countries that year alone.[14] More groups declared their bayat,[15] or allegiance, to IS but remained inactive. Typically, as Brian J. Phillips notes, remote individuals acting alone or those solely linked to the group through social media raise questions about what constitutes membership "or if a formal group exists at all."[16] In fact, Bryan C. Price argues against including lone wolf attackers in a definition of a terrorist group.[17] IS, therefore, is a hybrid organization comprised of formal and loose ties, maintaining a multifaceted global reach,

Global Virtual Caliphate

Within the Global Caliphate, all IS associations exist. The Global Caliphate extends IS's reach beyond the physical and geographic space, linking it to followers and adherents around the globe.

Networked Adherents

IS Adherent Groups

Global Narrative
Media Jihad

IS-Affiliates

IS-Core
Organizational nucleus

(e.g. Libya: Tripoli Province, Barqa Province, Fezzan Province;
Yemen: San'a Province;
Egypt: Sanai Province;
Afghanistan: Khorasan Province;
West Africa: Boko Haram)

(Islamic fundamentalist groups that are not affiliates but, maintain a connectivity with IS-Core)

Networked Adherents are groups that are geographically further away (from IS-Core) but are inspired by IS-Core without any direct physical connection.
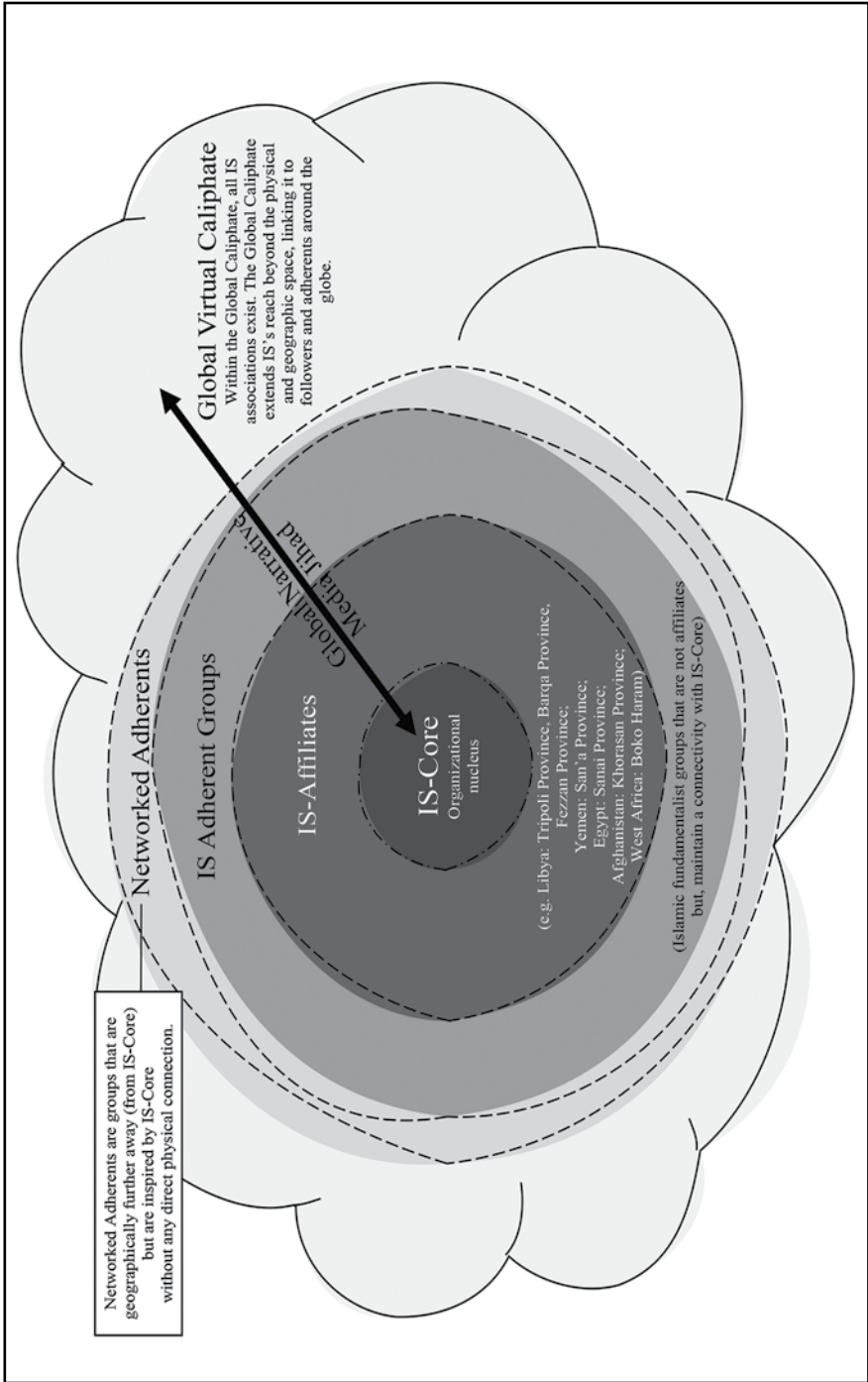
Figure 2. A System of Systems within the Virtual Global Caliphate. Source: Author

while also deriving a conventional state-like legitimacy among IS supporters from the promise of a physical caliphate. Nevertheless, to adherents of IS ideology, it does represent the ummah community as imagined, even when its territorial holdings prove to be questionable.

Engaging in statecraft, IS represents an organization that commits more than terrorism. Jessica Davis emphasizes that, like IS, most terrorist groups are not only terrorists, since members of extremist groups often engage in activities other than terrorist violence.[18] As a hybrid organization, IS has many formal political structures, holds (and loses) territory, and engages in statecraft, while simultaneously recruiting, motivating, and deploying members worldwide—both physically and virtually. The global ideological projection of IS exerts a "gravitational pull on vulnerable people around the world."[19] For several reasons, not everyone attracted to the message of IS has traveled to Iraq or Syria. But, even acting remotely, sympathizers and those who align themselves ideologically to IS contribute to the organization's goals through a variety of violent and non-violent acts that enable IS to maintain a vast virtual membership and global influence. What is crucial to understand is that, despite deriving a strong sense of place and identity from its physical caliphate, IS also maintains an ideological attraction beyond its self-proclaimed political boundaries, attracting sympathizers near and far who are willing to send money, spread propaganda, and even commit violent acts of terror on the group's behalf. The idea of the caliphate acts as an organizational nucleus, ideologically retaining virtually connected members through social media and other forms of recruitment, propaganda, and communication.[20]

Despite the military loss of its caliphate, Philip Seib stresses that unless the recruitment and propaganda efforts of IS are stymied, they will continue to attract members, and "[c]ombating terrorism is done largely through attrition, and this requires that the terrorist organizations' recruiting faucet be turned off."[21] Essentially, IS is enduring and continues to pose a significant security threat even after losing its physical caliphate due to the ability of IS to attract affiliate groups and individuals to its cause, and the general neo-fundamentalist Islamist subsystem provides a significant number of potential recruits. Additionally, with the loss of physical territory in Syria and Iraq, some IS members and their families now find themselves dispersed in refugee camps while others remain engaged online, making it critical to observe and understand how the group will adjust to its new reality.[22] Understanding IS

for what it is—a hybrid organization with both formal and informal group characteristics that relies partially on terrorist tactics to achieve political and ideological goals[23]—will foster a more inclusive assessment of current and future capabilities.

Notwithstanding recent government efforts to shift U.S. foreign policy away from CT and towards near-peer threats posed by nation-states, terrorist organizations like IS remain active and continue to pose a threat. As history dictates, the terrorist threat will inevitably ebb, flow, and shift in form and location depending on a variety of factors. According to the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 2019 saw an overall decline in IS violence and attacks (to include within Iraq), but IS influence continued to expand geographically. The monthly trends for Iraq in 2019 indicate that, despite a 53 percent decrease in attacks between 2018 and 2019, "terrorist violence persists and the rate of decline may be slowing."[24] Despite a decrease in attacks, IS extended its reach, carrying out attacks by operatives, affiliates, or unaffiliated persons who declared allegiance to IS in 31 different countries in 2019. IS added three new countries (Mozambique, the Netherlands, and Sri Lanka) to the list of nations to have experienced IS-related attacks, bringing the total number of countries around the globe that have ever experienced an IS-related terrorist attacks to 57.[25] Enduring and expanding, IS continues to shape conflict in the Middle East through dedicated attempts to shape the larger network topology.

IS and the Virtual Caliphate

In the decades since 9/11, scholars have increasingly used social network analysis (SNA) to investigate terrorism, insurgency, and terrorist violence.[26] In general, SNA has routinely been oriented towards illuminating the inner workings and structure of terrorist organizations, resulting in an emphasis on organizational and group operations.[27] Focusing on internal, intra-group networks naturally results in a body of literature identifying group leadership, key personnel, organizational roles, and how disparate persons interact, engage, and coordinate operations. Network mapping is a critical step in developing a tactical understanding of the more private and covert dynamics existing between network nodes that contribute to terrorist group outcomes (e.g., recruitment success, violence and lethality, and operational security). However, while operational insight is important, Steven T. Zech and Michael

Gabbay argue that research may be enriched by incorporating the public-facing aspect of terrorist groups: "their political face."[28] Similar to Davis's contention that terrorist groups are engaged in activities other than violence, Zech and Gabbay emphasize how extremist groups like IS "are engaged in a political competition not just with the state but often also against their fellow militants, a competition that forces them to declare themselves as a group and reveal, to a considerable extent, their aims, allies, enemies, and targets of violence."[29]

To engage in political competition, IS relies on a strategic media and information campaign that utilizes the physical and virtual spaces as reinforcing systems. The bidirectional arrow in figure 2 contends that actions in the physical space impact actions in the virtual space, and vice versa. Specifically, the causal arrow connecting activities taking place in Iraq and Syria with IS propaganda in cyberspace runs both ways and was especially prevalent when the physical caliphate existed. IS fighters on the ground captured content and created propaganda that was then refined and disseminated by those working behind a keyboard in cyberspace, helping to mobilize additional resources for IS. Thomas Zeitzoff explains that "current literature provides strong evidence that social media can raise the salience of protests and the ease with which groups can get their 'story' out" by providing groups like IS a global platform for self-promotion and propaganda.[30] Additionally, for IS and other Salafi jihadist groups, social media facilitates recruitment and operations by linking those wishing to travel to Syria with tips on the best way to enter Syria, how to plan and execute attacks from home, and operational security practices to prevent law enforcement discovery.

Within the extensive practitioner and academic literature on terrorism, much attention is also focused on IS and its relationship to the Internet—how the group uses, exploits, and proliferates its message and following online.[31] As with most technological advancements, the Internet has shaped terrorist behavior, enabling groups to spread extremist agendas and ideologies with ease.[32] Others liken IS media operations to a military offensive that enables the group to counter the global narrative of defeat, even after the collapse of its physical caliphate.[33] Experts continue to argue that the Internet and the IS virtual network expand the ability and opportunity of IS to attract recruits and generate and spread propaganda despite the loss of its physical caliphate.[34] For example, one study identified that survey respondents in the Arab

world who obtained their news online were more likely to support IS than those respondents who relied on print or television media for news updates.[35]

Other studies have focused on why Western Jihadis travel to conflict zones while others support extremist organizations from home in the West. Anita Peresin also noted how the phenomena of IS Western foreign fighters, "and the threat they pose as potential future terrorists, have been primarily analyzed focusing on the male component," undermining the time and effort IS dedicates to developing and disseminating various narratives intended to target different populations.[36] One study concluded that Jihadis are not all equally motivated to attack the West, and that, for some, the allure of becoming a foreign fighter draws them to travel to the front lines.[37] In another investigation of foreign fighters, the authors compared results from recent studies[38] and found that, in general,

> Most of the foreign fighters and aspiring foreign fighters are young people who have limited prospects, are relatively unhappy with what is happening in their lives, are looking for some greater meaning and sense of belonging, and are heavily influenced by the small groups they come into contact with as a result of their seeking some relief from their condition.[39]

In their own research, Lorne L. Dawson and Amarnath Amarasingam chose to focus on religiosity and its role in terrorist motivation by interviewing 20 foreign fighters, concluding that "terrorist activity may provide an outlet for basic existential desires that cannot find expression through legitimate channels."[40]

Another reason the virtual caliphate attracts scholarly attention relates to how the Internet enables IS to expand its recruitment strategy to Westerners, including fighters from the U.S., Australia, many European countries, and even the Caribbean.[41] Evidence shows that IS invests extensively in its media production targeting Western audiences, even going so far as to consider women and gender in its propaganda and recruitment efforts by conducting campaigns directly targeting Western women.[42] Investigating the appeal of IS propaganda to French citizens, Gilles Kepel lays blame on religious extremism while Olivier Roy proposes that IS appeals to nihilists who join IS to live out sociopathic fantasies.[43] Regardless of the exact mental and emotional processes involved in radicalization, the notion of "soft power" and how IS has bridled militant jihad's ability to appeal to those with a background in

criminal behavior and juvenile delinquency raises justified concern.[44] Of particular interest, therefore, is understanding the strategy of IS for Europe. John Turner argues that IS has focused its European propaganda efforts on the "marginalization of Muslim communities in an attempt to exacerbate socio-economic tensions and foster distrust, further driving inter-communal polarization."[45]

The online space itself, some argue, has become weaponized, and IS uses the digital battlespace to craft narratives of success and strength that have, at times, translated into successes on the ground.[46] Additionally, one study claimed that the recruiting efforts of IS are bolstered by their use of Internet chat rooms and social media sites that facilitate a stage-by-stage relational development, taking recruits through a process of relationship escalation consisting of "initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, and bonding."[47] Research also investigates how IS makes use of specific digital media platforms. For example, one study uses digital ethnography (or netnography)[48] to examine the operational role of the messaging software, Telegram, in lone wolf attacks in Europe, exposing a link between Telegram's encrypted communication channels and the dissemination of propaganda intended to encourage recruits to act as lone wolves.[49] Bennett Clifford and Helen Powell of George Washington University's Program on Extremism explain that Telegram is "an online instant messaging service popular among adherents of the Islamic State (IS) [and], remains vital to the organization's ecosystem of communications."[50] Additionally, Telegram's functional attributes, coupled with the platform's loosely enforced terms of service, creates a space for IS sympathizers to engage with like-minded supporters and content in a user-friendly medium.

Finally, as IS seeks to remain relevant, scholars have begun to focus on more than how IS delivers its message by analyzing what is being said, how it is being packaged, and who is saying it.[51] Ultimately, while social media and the virtual caliphate continue to serve as propaganda vehicles, scholars' efforts to draw conclusions about social media platforms and their relationship to radicalization or violent acts remain extremely limited.[52] Most social media messaging and posting are tightly controlled by IS media leadership, leaving individual supporters unable to freely share what they want.[53] Additionally, Western supporters tend to disseminate messages about jihadist doctrine, leading scholars to believe IS leadership creates the propaganda and then outsources its dissemination, relying on a supportive yet passive

audience to spread the information on the behalf of IS via likes, shares, and retweets.[54] Jihadist doctrine, specifically how IS ideologically roots itself in history, is therefore critically important to understanding how IS may respond to the loss of territory and what the terrorist organization intends for the future.

Ideological Roots—Why the Islamic State's Version of the Past Matters

Over the years, IS and its predecessors have compiled a rich body of ideological texts, offering insight into the inner workings of IS leadership, organizational philosophy, and ideological foci. IS used any means required to build its caliphate—including murder, torture, kidnapping, rape, and sexual enslavement. Beheadings and brutal public executions were filmed and distributed online to instill fear and awe in local and international populations alike. Colin P. Clarke emphasizes that, despite the loss of its physical caliphate, "IS as an idea, as an ideology, and as a worldview is far from over."[55] History supports Clarke's projections, and crucial to understanding how IS may proceed post-caliphate is understanding the group's past relationship with battlefield defeats and organizational setbacks.

Recently, Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter published an incredibly rich volume of original IS texts with insightful, scholarly analysis in *The ISIS Reader: Milestone Texts of the Islamic State*, a collection of key IS ideological memos and speeches translated to English (many for the first time).[56] Particularly relevant to the current operating environment in which IS finds itself, one punctuated by battlefield defeats, loss of territory, and a decline in prestige, is the "The Fallujah Memorandum," originally released between December 2009 and January 2010 when IS remained linked to al-Qaeda and referred to itself as the Islamic State Iraq (ISI). The memorandum provides a glimpse into IS military strategy at a time when the group was particularly weak.[57]

First reported on by Mark Lynch in *Foreign Policy*, the memorandum failed to generate much interest or to be taken seriously when it appeared in 2010.[58] Lynch himself remarked that he found "a resurgence of the Sunni insurgency unlikely … and [the memorandum did] little to change that assessment." However, Lynch also noted that the memorandum is refreshingly "pragmatic and analytical rather than bombastic, surprisingly frank

about what went wrong, and alarmingly creative about the Iraqi jihad's way forward."[59] In 2010, "The Fallujah Memorandum" identified a coherent and realistic strategy for how, after a series of battlefield and ideological setbacks, ISI could regroup, reform, and reenergize. Ultimately, lessons learned and identified in the memorandum provide insight into how IS may proceed and endure in the post-caliphate environment as the group is once again reduced to an insurgency.

Critically, "The Fallujah Memorandum" identifies the need of IS as an insurgency for a political strategy, recognizing that the future of an Islamic state depends on the group's ability to wield hard and soft power. Despite a Salafi Jihadi prohibition on participating in secular politics, the memorandum's initial chapter focuses on political unification rather than military might and violence—something scholars often mistakenly identify as the priority of IS. Instead, David Galula emphasizes an insurgency is more about politics than it is about armed conflict.[60] IS recognized how territorial control and the establishment of an Islamic state required a political strategy, one that extended beyond the battlefield and into every home. Planning in 2010 for the likelihood of American troop withdrawal, the memorandum identified two possible paths for Iraq's future: 1) an American proto-state "represented by the empowerment factions and the political council … in which all Iraqi factions will be represented regardless of any Islamic criteria" or 2) an Islamic one "that follows the prophet's methodology … and that cherishes Islam and is represented by ISI."[61] To achieve the latter, IS claimed that the "next war will be primarily a political and a media war," highlighting how, strategically, IS intended to weave "fear with persuasive tactics" in a Machiavellian approach to winning the hearts and minds of Iraqis and Muslims around the globe.[62]

Ultimately, IS at the time of "The Fallujah Memorandum" is best understood as an insurgency engaging in what Paul Staniland deems "armed politics."[63] Armed politics recognizes that violence is not identical to conflict and highlights how political relationships between armed groups and the state are complicated.[64] IS actions exhibit the pairing of thoughtful military engagement with a robust propaganda campaign aiming towards a political end, including a strategic effort to avoid appearing as an organization that represents only "killing people, destruction, and insecurity."[65] IS fully understood and continues to understand the decisive role of politics and how politics, not military action, determines who controls territory, underscoring

Davis's point mentioned above that terrorist groups maintain interests outside of violence and violent action.[66] However, CT and counterinsurgency operations are not principally violent competitions over territory but are instead information competitions over the hearts and minds of the civilian population caught in the middle. Controlling territory still matters, as a provision of security and other services, to help win hearts and minds, but focus must shift towards controlling narratives across physical and virtual battlespaces.

Today, IS finds itself in a similar situation as it was in 2010, making "The Fallujah Memorandum" particularly salient as an IS strategy document "focused on returning its past glory from 2006-7."[67] Operating as an insurgency again, IS will likely repeat successful tactics and focus on generating lasting jihadist symbolism through calculated media and propaganda campaigns aimed at the political unification of jihadi groups to rebuild and continue working toward an Islamic state. Violent action, as established in the memorandum, will be sporadic yet carefully tailored to the deteriorated circumstances and designed to target local, ongoing, coalition-led efforts at regime building and regional security to generate chaos and a political vacuum ripe for IS exploitation.

To wage its political war, IS has relied heavily on its skilled media and propaganda production. In April 2016, IS published a text solely dedicated to discussing the work done by their dedicated media teams, "Media Operative, You Are Also a *Mujahid*."[68] The letter emphasizes the role of media and propaganda in "the ongoing war between the forces of disbelief and the armies of faith," especially in countering the "propaganda war the Crusaders—led by America and its allies—are waging against the Islamic State today."[69] At the time, IS wanted to remind its followers of the different forms of jihad and their respective purpose, signifying that IS recognizes how jihad is more than territorial control. Nor was fighting the only way to earn the rewards of jihad; media jihad, the letter's author claims, "is no less important than the material fight against [the enemy]," and he even stresses that "verbal weapons can actually be more potent than atomic bombs."[70] The media success of IS is in part related to its ability to tailor content to specific audiences from which it recruits and to tap into the existing caliphate narratives. Clarke explains that IS not only portrays its ideology as pure and just—an ideal Islamic utopia—but also makes it appealing to "criminals and gangsters to technically minded professionals" alike.[71]

The authors of the letter also make clear that incitement to jihad "is a task for which all Muslims are responsible."[72] Media and propaganda production are particularly well suited to the task of convincing others of their need to fight and their responsibility to wage jihad. Existing caliphate narratives have long promised a physical caliphate, but IS brought the caliphate to life by curating content and sharing targeted images of life within the caliphate to inspire supporters to act on its behalf. Propaganda is more effective if based on reality. IS established a physical caliphate while the broader Islamist narrative promised a caliphate as a conceptual frame to be realized over time. Virtual renditions of the physical caliphate brought a community of like-minded individuals together online, forming a virtual caliphate. While travel to Iraq and Syria for foreign fighters is difficult and dangerous, online participation is relatively easy and may be done from the safety of home. Ultimately, Internet and social media allowed IS to quickly and cheaply tailor messaging and content to reach susceptible audiences in ways not previously possible with traditional media. Close relationships and communities formed online, allowing IS to emphasize in the letter that individuals unable to physically fight have a role in jihad, too—incite others to fight.

Interestingly, the letter fails to mention or refer to the virtual caliphate or the community of IS supporters, mostly passive, consuming IS propaganda around the globe and often helping to spread IS messaging. In "The Fallujah Memorandum," IS reacted sensitively to the notion that it only existed as a "paper state," or a state that maintained a virtual following and territory on the Internet. The authors of the memorandum care enough about the claims of IS's virtual existence that the issue is addressed up front in the memorandum's second paragraph: "The *dawla* (state, shortened version of the Islamic State) was mocked because, according to those mocking it, it was only exercising power over the internet and so only exists if the internet exists."[73]

The claim is countered by emphasizing that the same people who mocked IS for being an ethereal notion are the same people who mocked IS when it collapsed. Logically, therefore, the authors conclude, they affirm its existence. However, the passage listed above is important as it dismisses the notion of a virtual caliphate, one that Ingram et al. note was popularized in 2009 and reemerged with the declaration of the caliphate in 2014, becoming the focus of extensive academic research and public attention as discussed above.

Yet, despite dismissing the idea of the virtual caliphate in "The Fallujah Memorandum," IS recognized the international appeal of its propaganda and

capitalized on its ability to mobilize supporters around the globe to launch attacks on behalf of IS in the West. One instance occurred in September 2014 when IS spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani delivered the speech "Indeed, Your Lord is Ever Watchful," addressing the formalization of a global coalition against IS. As the U.S. and allied forces moved into Iraq, al-Adnani asked, "… will you leave the American, the Frenchman, or any of their allies to walk safely upon the earth while the armies of the crusaders strike the lands of the Muslims not differentiating between civilian and fighter?"[74]

Ingram et al. claim al-Adnani's speech represents a major shift in how IS leadership understood its role in directing the actions taken by followers living outside the Sunni communities of the Middle East.

In hindsight, al-Adnani's speech appears especially persuasive as he lists France, Australia, Canada, and America by name, all countries who experienced IS-inspired attacks within weeks or months of the speech's delivery and publication.[75] Of course, it is careless to directly correlate attacks in Western countries to al-Adnani's message, but the timing is noteworthy and emphasizes the important role senior leadership and ideological speeches may play in influencing individuals around the globe. Unlike the relationship between IS and its affiliate groups linked by geography and punctuated by local concerns, IS leadership understands that it holds a different relationship with supporters in Western countries. Unable to establish geographic footholds capable of supporting swaths of extremists in European countries or the U.S. (as IS has done with closely linked affiliates), al-Adnani appealed instead to the Western individual, asking them, "How can you enjoy life and sleep while not aiding your brothers, not casting fear into the hearts of the cross worshippers, and not responding to their strikes[76] with multitudes more?"[77]

As IS faced total battlefield defeat in March 2019, the group's official spokesperson, Abul Hasan al-Muhajir, released an audio statement titled, "He Was True to Allah and Allah Was True to Him." The statement delivers a clear message: establishing the caliphate was a defining moment in the history of contemporary Islam, but the battle continues, and IS will endure. In reality, IS is the ultimate victor. According to Muhajir, "the state of the Khilafah [Caliphate] has become a reality, the danger of which cannot be ignored or denied."[78] As coalition forces bore down on the last IS strongholds, Hassan Hassan explains that IS engaged in a strategic retreat and effectively

"melted away," returning to the rhythms of an insurgency, intent on remaining and persisting until circumstances changed.[79] In Muhajir's speech and in Baghdadi's final appearance on 29 April 2019 (he was killed six weeks after delivering the speech), themes from the "The Fallujah Memorandum" and broader Salafi Jihadi narratives are present, signifying how IS messaging relies on and reinforces the caliphate narrative consistent with the Salafi Jihadi subsystem. IS has reverted to an insurgency with a goal of disrupting and preventing any efforts to establish security or any state-led social structures required for political order in the region. IS is now focused on debilitating the enemy by engaging it in a war of attrition—the exact tactic that was emphasized in "The Fallujah Memorandum" by ISI leadership in 2010 and perpetuates the already active messaging frame in the broader Salafi Jihadi caliphate narrative.

Interestingly, Muhajir chose to underscore the theme of tactical patience in his speech by including a warning from Baghdadi, asking IS followers to abandon, avoid, and beware of communications devices.[80] The warning makes clear how the use of electronic devices and social media may give IS's enemies a tactical advantage by enabling targeting. It matters little, Muhajir says, if a task is completed more quickly with an electronic device if the result is a targeted strike against you or your fellow fighters. Baghdadi's message, however, is seemingly at odds with the high praise for its media operatives and the important role politics and propaganda play strategically for IS, as noted in the speech "Media Operative, You Are Also a *Mujahid*" discussed above. Yet, as IS morphs back into an insurgency, it becomes important to distinguish between Muhajir's two audiences: the virtual caliphate and IS operatives embedded with IS Core or an IS affiliate. Speaking in Arabic, Muhajir is primarily addressing the IS insurgent population and urging caution, leaving the virtual caliphate an important communications and propaganda mechanism for IS and its global narrative.

Online Behavior among Violent Islamic Extremists

Concern over the ability of IS to leverage social media for ongoing recruitment and propaganda purposes has spurred a large volume of research on the intersection of social media and terrorism. As mentioned above, IS employs an offensive propaganda strategy to expand and broaden their following.[81] Globally, IS uses social media and the Internet in general as a vector to

leverage the broader Salafi Jihadi social movement and, more specifically, to facilitate radicalization and mobilization via targeted propaganda campaigns intent on garnering support, sympathy, and new recruits.[82] Particularly concerning for researchers and CT practitioners is how the "flexibility and constant accessibility of the Internet … has enabled ISIS recruiters to succeed in radicalizing Western[ers], near and far, as it provides opportunities for them to communicate relatively undetected and without filters."[83] Beyond radicalization, the ability of IS to tap into broader social grievances and themes found in the more generalized Salafi and Islamist online social movements generates a system of reinforcing narratives that traverse the physical and virtual spaces, creating a more powerful message to current and potential supporters. Social media and online content also provide glimpses of the individuals behind the screen names by offering insight into a user's beliefs, fears, dreams, goals, and ideology. To better understand how IS may proceed after the loss of its physical caliphate, online behavior among extremists and trends in online usage may provide unique insights.

The PIRUS database, most recently updated with 2018 data, is a rich source of information on violent extremists, including data on social media usage habits, observations for different ideological sources of radicalization, and personal attributes like education, race, and marital status. Particularly interesting are the observations of online behavior to providing an understanding of how extremists behave online and how behaviors have changed over time and to identify trends to provide insight into future behaviors. With over 2,200 observations of violent and non-violent extremists, PIRUS includes substantial data on several extremist ideologies and characteristics. For this analysis, the data was first limited to Islamic extremist ideology, reducing the number of observations to 511. From 511 observations, PIRUS data was further reduced to limit the timeframe of analysis to 2001—2018 beginning with the year of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and ending with PIRUS's last year of available data in 2018. The final observation count, after implementing all restrictions, is 498 observations of U.S. Islamic extremists.

The Internet eschews physical definition. IS has relied on the Internet's boundless ability to build a global base, raise funds, proselytize, recruit members, and counteract criticism and counternarratives. Prior to 2010, when smart phones became ubiquitous and social media exploded, extremist groups like al-Qaeda successfully employed more traditional media

approaches very effectively. Direct contact and reliance on formal media outlets were common, and as early as 2005, Ayman al-Zwahiri acknowledged that "[w]e are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media."[84] Recognizing that traditional news outlets like Al-Jazeera provided a narrative framework to work within, al-Qaeda utilized a thematic approach to reach new supporters. Al-Qaeda tapped into median Arab thought and emotions by nesting an extremist narrative within the themes of Palestine, Iraq, and the corruption of existing regimes.[85] Working within the Al-Jazeera narrative gave credence to the al-Qaeda message among average Arabs, allowing al-Qaeda's messaging to reach wider and farther than ever before. IS learned from al-Qaeda's experience and tapped into the existing Islamist social movement and narrative to extend its reach.

Figure 3 depicts Internet radicalization and/or mobilization per year among the Islamic extremist observations in PIRUS. Among the 498 observations, 306 indicated the Internet either played a role in or was the primary means of radicalization and/or mobilization (figure 3, "Played a Known Role").
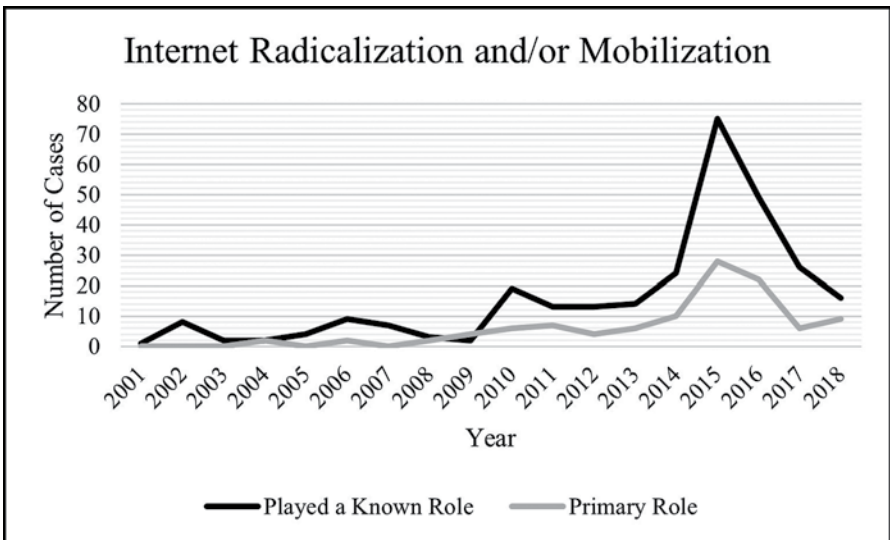

Figure 3. Internet Radicalization and/or Mobilization among Islamic Extremists. Source: Author

Of the 306 extremists whose radicalization and/or mobilization process included the Internet, 198 relied on the Internet as their primary means of radicalization and/or mobilization (figure 3, "Primary Role"), meaning their initial exposure to Islamic extremist ideology and subsequent radicalization and/or mobilization occurred online. Overall, the Internet played a role in 61 percent of radicalizations and/or mobilizations and played the primary role in radicalizing and/or mobilizing 43 percent of Islamic extremists included in the analysis. Both groups experienced sharp peaks in 2015 after years of gradual growth. In 2015, the Internet played a role in 75 persons' radicalization and/or mobilization process compared to 16 persons in 2018.

An interesting comparison to Internet-related radicalization and/or mobilization is tracking IS-related attacks overtime. Relying on GTD data for ISI and IS, figure 4 plots the number of violent attacks committed by ISI and IS over time. To interpret figure 4, attacks are used as a proxy for group strength—more attacks indicate greater group strength. While imperfect, using attacks as a proxy for strength exhibits a similar pattern for ISI/IS in the physical space as is represented in the virtual space in figure 3. Like the peaks exhibited in figure 3, figure 4 shows attacks peaking in the years 2014–2016, the years during which IS experienced the greatest success on the ground. What figure 4 suggests is a connection between the physical and virtual—what happens in both spaces is interconnected and interrelated systematically. Attacks and success in the physical space should be considered part of the system, occurring alongside events and activities in the virtual space as indicated by figure 3. Additionally, progress and victories on the ground are systematically used to generate greater support online as images of battlefield successes and the caliphate are fed into the greater IS propaganda system, generating enticing content that captures the hearts and minds of the virtual caliphate by making the physical caliphate a reality. The spikes exhibited in figure 3 and figure 4 are also evident in figure 5 and figure 7, and discussed in the following.

In addition to Internet radicalization, PIRUS includes data on social media radicalization, which is important for understanding a more targeted component of online interaction. The variable is distinct from Internet radicalization because it emphasizes user-to-user communication rather than passively watching or viewing content hosted by an online domain. Because interactions on social media remain mostly anonymous, terrorists are provided a virtual sanctuary in which to operate. Within the past few
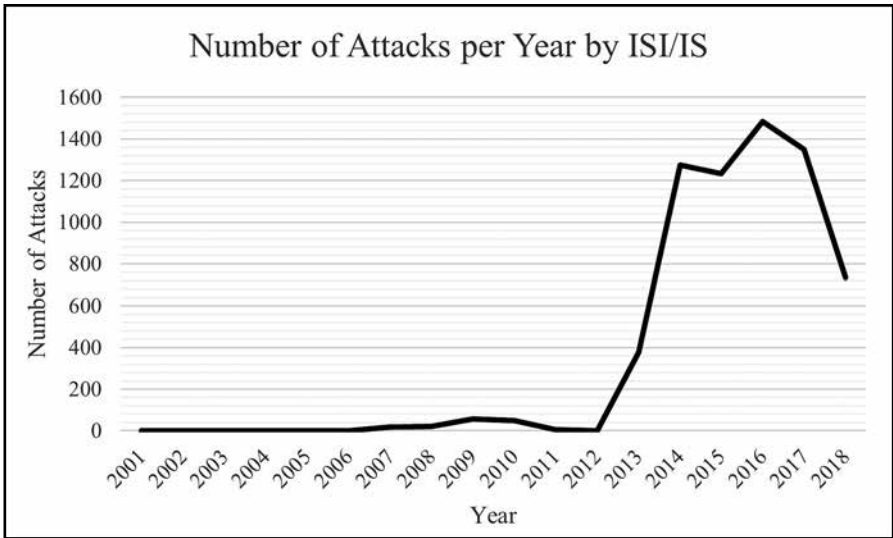
Figure 4. Number of Attacks Committed by ISI/IS Per Year as Found in Global Terrorism Database. Source: Author

years, major social media firms have attempted to clamp down on violent and extremist content on their platforms, yet it remains easy for users to establish and reconstitute accounts. For example, in March 2016, Twitter shut down over 26,000 IS-related accounts, and while it is difficult to determine how many of those accounts reemerged, IS presence on Twitter remained robust.[86] IS has also developed its own communications platforms with limited success and often relies on encrypted platforms for direct communications among supporters.

To understand social media radicalization and/or mobilization among Islamic extremists, figure 5 displays two trend lines like figure 3, indicating that social media either played a known role or primary role. Of the 498 observations, radicalization and/or mobilization occurred via social media in 214 cases (43 percent). Like figure 3, 2015 is the peak for social media playing a known role in radicalization and/or mobilization with 64 cases, while 2016 is the peak for social media playing the primary role in radicalization and/or mobilization with 20 cases. In total, during 2015 and 2016, nearly 50 percent of radicalization and/or mobilization cases occurred (106 cases). Again, comparing figure 5 to figure 4 shows how activities in the virtual space are related to and informed by what occurs in the physical space.
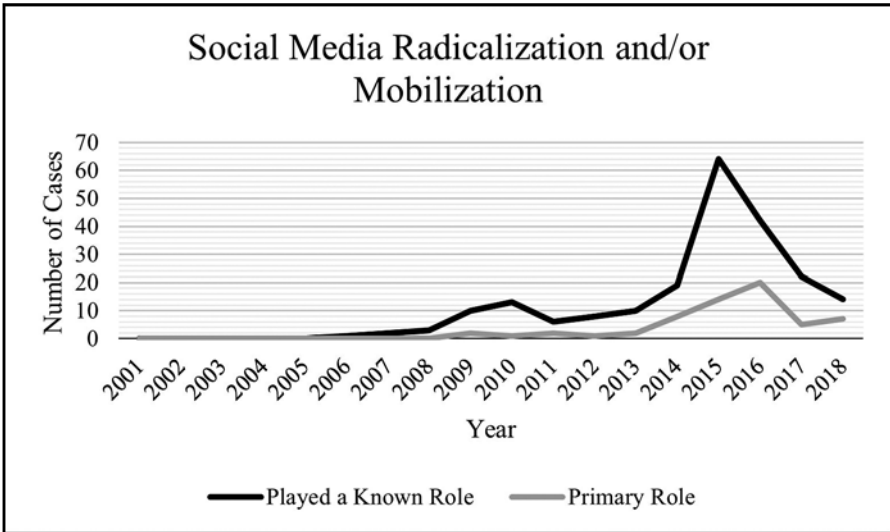
Figure 5. Social Media Radicalization and/or Mobilization among Islamic Extremists. Source: Author

Additionally, of the 214 cases of social media radicalization and/or mobilization, the frequency of social media use is known for 112, or roughly 50 percent of cases. Most often (44 cases or 33 percent), a person made "frequent" use of social media, categorized as using social media approximately one time per day (see figure 6). Cumulatively, "frequent" and "continual" social media use (defined as using social media multiple times per day) represented the majority of cases (61 of 110 cases or 55 percent).

To understand usage trends over time, "frequent" and "continual" usage cases were combined and plotted by year (see figure 7). The resulting distribution roughly follows the trends exhibited in figure 3 and figure 5 in the virtual space and figure 4 in the physical space, showing a slow rise in cases prior to 2015, peak usage in 2015, and usage tapering down after 2015, which roughly follows the pattern of events in the physical world (figure 4). Likely, the ability of IS to create a physical caliphate generated interest among online supporters—what was happening on the battlefield became important to the larger system of the virtual caliphate.

Finally, what are Islamic extremists doing online? Are they active contributors and producers of content or passive consumers? Based on PIRUS data, the most common activity for Islamic extremists is passive consumption of
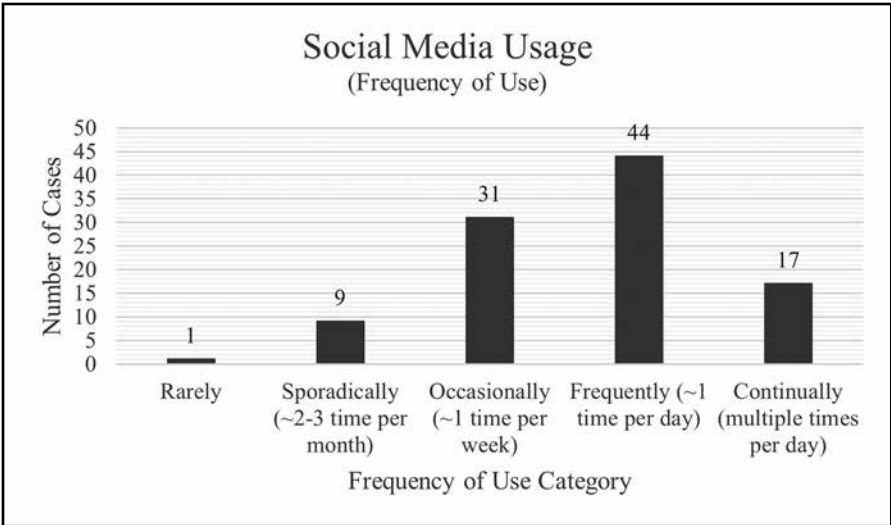
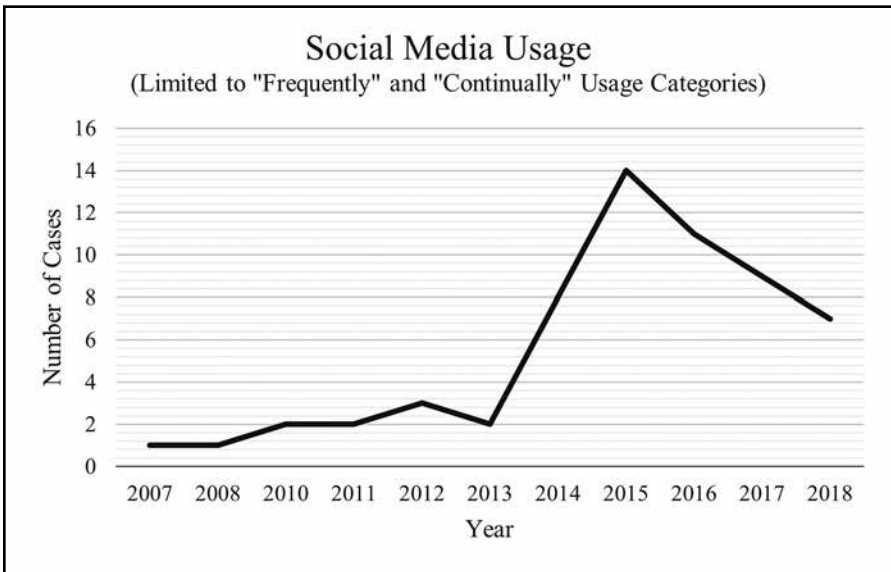Figure 6. Social Media Usage among Islamic Extremists. Source: Author

Figure 7. Social Media Use among Islamic Extremists: Limited to "Frequent" and "Continual Use." Source: Author
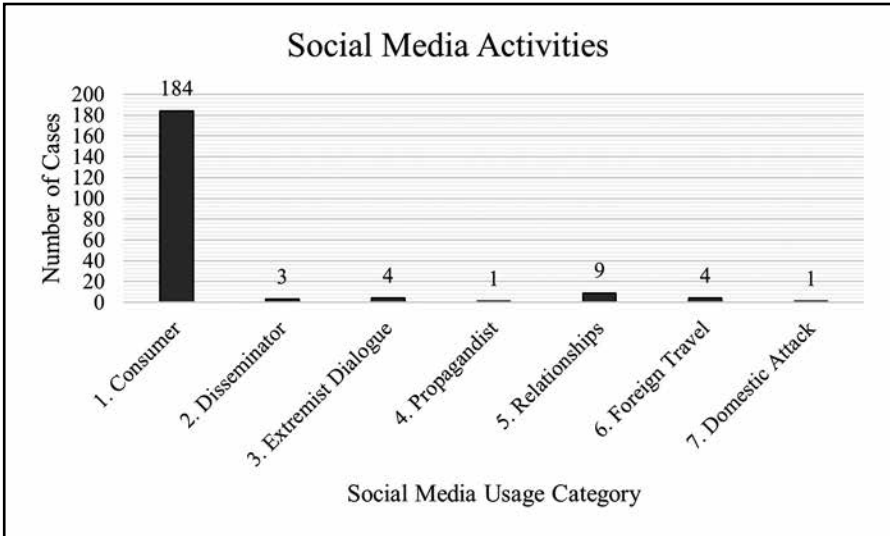
Figure 8. Social Media Activities among Islamic Extremists. Source: Author

social media content (184 cases or 86 percent of social media users, see figure 8). A single case out of 214 conducted all categories of activities, and nine cases (4 percent) used social media to directly communicate with members of an extremist group to establish a relationship or to acquire information on extremist ideology (category 5). Based on PIRUS data, Islamic extremists are primarily passive consumers of social media, not the creatives behind propaganda development and dissemination or using social media to plan and execute attacks or foreign travel.

The Social media usage categories are as follows:

Category 1. Consuming content (passive)

Category 2. Disseminating content (i.e., sharing and/or spreading existing content)

Category 3. Participating in extremist dialogue (i.e., creating unsophisticated content)

Category 4. Creating propaganda/content (e.g., creating manifestos, propaganda videos, etc.)

Category 5. Directly communicating with members of extremist group(s) to establish relationship or acquire information on extremist ideology (no communication on specific travel plans or plot)

Category 6. Directly communicating with member(s) of extremist group(s) to facilitate foreign travel

Category 7. Directly communicating with member(s) of extremist group(s) to facilitate domestic attack

Discussion: Connecting the Past with the Future

One of the more pressing questions weighing on the minds of practitioners and scholars alike is, What is the trajectory of IS? Islamic extremism—Salafi Jihadism in particular—remains, and terrorism will continue if political and cultural grievances persist and deepen. By assessing the past relationship of IS to defeat and its achievements over the past decade, it is possible to prepare for the actions of IS in the near term. Much of the international community reacted with surprise when IS emerged from the wreckage of ISI as an ideological and military force. This section combines insights from the IS texts and speeches reviewed above and the trends in Islamic extremist online and social media activity to envision the future of IS and to highlight how the CT community may better prepare for the next phase of violent Salafi Jihadism.

Importantly, IS has returned to insurgency status. As indicated by "The Fallujah Memorandum," survival for ISI in 2010 depended upon individuals receding into the background, becoming invisible, and adopting guerilla tactics. Instead of seeing guerilla tactics as a sign of weakness, it was promoted as a natural progression and a highly adaptable form of group survival that could simultaneously disrupt stability and test the allegiance of all group members: "[T]his is the universal divine way of Allah and will not change, as Allah is only testing the believers."[87] Socially, guerilla tactics disrupt everyday life and eliminate the security of everyday routines. When markets are bombed and civilians are at risk, simple tasks such as walking children to school or eating at a public restaurant become laden with uncertainty and fear. Structurally, civil services become unreliable as disruptions and lack of predictability necessarily follow seemingly random acts of violence. State functions and protections seem irrelevant as official entities are unable to reliably stop targeted insurgent tactics from harming civilians and state

officials alike. As ISI made clear in 2010, "[T]he goal of our policy is to increase the fear of injury and death within the people in the Iraqi forces … [to] minimise the desire of individuals to join them."[88] Exacerbating instability and exposing local government dysfunction will likely be key insurgent tactics as IS builds on past experiences from 2010 and attempts to "prompt people to think that choosing such a government is not the right choice."[89] Simply enduring is both an IS tactic and fundamental goal.

As noted in figure 3 and figure 5, only a few extremist cases in the early 2010s radicalized and and/or mobilized via the Internet or social media, which parallels attack activity displayed in figure 4. During its period of weakness and rebuilding, ISI strategically considered its position, noting the movement's main problem as "1) how does the weak fight the strong, and 2) how does the weak defeat the strong."[90] IS currently faces a similar situation on the ground, and as Baghdadi warned through both Muhajir's speech and his own, remaining offline and limiting the use of communication devices is a tactic IS must follow as the group recedes into the background to regroup, recalibrate, and endure. Therefore, it is not surprising to note how online trends in figure 3 and figure 5 and physical trends in figure 4 are now dropping off again after peaking between 2015 and 2016 when IS was at its strongest and conducting the most attacks. As an insurgency, remaining hidden is a key aspect of enduring. Staying "off net" and minimizing the group's overall digital footprint limits targeting and tracking opportunities. Additionally, without a physical caliphate to travel to, recruiting foreign fighters is less of a priority and may instead be a liability as travelers could draw unwanted attention to specific IS-held locations. IS is effectively back in the building and preservation phase of guerilla warfare.

However, despite receding into the shadows of Iraq and Syria, the IS brand continued to expand globally under its subsequent leader, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi. As mentioned above, IS has adopted al-Qaeda's franchising playbook and continues to gain provinces and affiliates in new countries, adding to the list of locations experiencing terrorist violence. It is not surprising that IS would adopt an al-Qaeda model as IS emerged from al-Qaeda in Iraq. Incredibly, al-Qaeda has managed to survive for nearly three decades, even after fighting two superpowers (counting involvement in the anti-Soviet jihad, much of which occurred before al-Qaeda officially declared itself a group in 1988), in large part due to the strategic depth that its franchise model affords. Swearing bayat, or allegiance, to IS immediately

bestows the IS brand on the affiliated insurgent group—even if its goals are local instead of international. IS remains feared and its tactics abhorred, and striking an alliance with IS brings credibility, resources, propaganda, and access to IS tactics, techniques, and procedures to smaller, more regionally focused groups of Islamic extremists.

Yet IS affiliates are not under direct operational control of IS core leadership. Affiliates govern themselves with little direction from IS Core, often focusing more on hometown grievances than on international goals or terrorism. In his final speech, Baghdadi carefully praised IS affiliate groups in Mali, Burkina Faso, Libya, Sri Lanka, and others to emphasize and clarify IS Core's leadership and vision. However, because IS Core provides little direct oversight to IS affiliates, direct communication with IS Core units will be sporadic and ad hoc rather than consistent and continuous. Networks are therefore loosely crafted, making it critical to understand local and regional grievances specific to IS affiliates. As part of the global social system of the Salafi Jihadi narrative, the local and regional issues important to IS affiliates are products of smaller systems that the greater IS system routinely engages with and exploits (see figure 2). Therefore, understanding regional concerns and areas of weakness will highlight advantageous targets for IS that could throw a region into unrest or instability—two situations in which IS thrives.

In the same speech, Baghdadi also acknowledged that within Iraq and Syria, "[O]ur battle today is one of attrition and struggle for the enemy… [and we] beseech Allah to bestow upon us and our brothers steadfastness, pertinence, success, and right guidance."[91] The willingness of IS to remain patient, to not see their battlefield defeats as their demise, to praise the actions of IS affiliates, and to strategically attack targets allows IS to maintain dominance over the ideological messaging and vision. Allah, Baghdadi explains, demands jihad but does not demand victory.[92] Unity and continuing to be a "thorn in the side of the Crusaders" is also jihad, and IS is well positioned to continue and achieve both.[93] Yet, based on PIRUS data, relatively few extremists do anything other than passively consume jihadist information online (see figure 8) and the number of frequent and continual social media users has declined steadily since peaking in 2015 (see figure 7). The decline in online activity should be expected—the overarching social movement and system of Salafi Jihadi narratives has tapered in response to losing the physical caliphate and IS has returned to an insurgency. As IS navigates its insurgency status and minimizes its online presence, it is likely

that Western extremists and other potential virtual recruits will continue to decline, making online tracking and detection more difficult and less relevant to activities on the ground.

The decline in online activities exhibited in figures 4 and 5 also raises questions for CT efforts and researchers: Has research and practice focused too much on understanding the virtual caliphate and not enough on regional and local issues ripe for exploitation by IS and IS affiliates? Has enough attention been focused on regions whose geography may lend itself to a new caliphate if the social and political environment supports one? As an insurgency, IS is unlikely to emphasize online campaigns and will instead seek to disrupt the local populace and regional security to create political schisms to take advantage of. Social media data is relatively easy to acquire, and it provides researchers access to extremist viewpoints, perceptions, and opinions. However, as Margaret W. Smith points out, social media data does have drawbacks, and researchers are limited in what they might learn from online posts and communications.[94] One study, for example, includes a thoughtful discussion of social media research limitations, highlighting how accounts may be operated by people pretending to be someone they are really not (e.g., a man could pretend to be woman in the online space and vice versa) and that it is often difficult to authenticate identities of account owners.[95] The latter consideration leaves open the possibility that data collected on social media for study is actually fabricated by "sock puppet" accounts with the intent of misleading readers, prompting researchers to draw false conclusions.[96] Critically, another concern is that "the chosen sample may not represent the wider population of interest as a whole," and a researcher may, therefore, draw inaccurate conclusions about IS as a whole.[97]

Focusing on the virtual caliphate presents a final concern. In 2016, Nelly Lahoud and Liam Collins argued that the international community failed to anticipate the rise of IS because it focused too closely on al-Qaeda Central, and due to political considerations in the U.S. such as the Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) signed into law after the 9/11 attacks, the CT community favored lumping Islamic extremists under the al-Qaeda umbrella instead of appreciating regional differences.[98] The AUMF allowed military force against any al-Qaeda-affiliated foreign terrorist organization (FTO) but not to non-al-Qaeda FTOs. Therefore, lumping Islamic extremist FTOs under al-Qaeda was a military enabler. Critically, ISI began as a splinter group, an al-Qaeda-affiliate, which, instead of adhering to al-Qaeda

Central's guidance, went rogue and launched its own military offensive to create a caliphate. Alienated and ostracized by al-Qaeda due to its extraordinarily violent tactics and willingness to attack fellow Muslims who failed to adhere to a strict interpretation of sharia law, ISI existed on the al-Qaeda periphery, never fully inside and never fully aligned. But, because researchers and the CT community failed to account for ISI as a distinct entity and instead focused on al-Qaeda Central, IS emerged as a surprising force. To anticipate what comes next, IS affiliate groups must be accounted for as individual entities with regional and ideological differences that can evolve at the edge of chaos.

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Part III: Preparing for the Future

Chapter 5. Russia's Cultural Statecraft: Implications for Church, State, and Society

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While in Europe, there are trends of decreasing religiosity. As Berger points out, much of the rest of the world is undergoing "desecularization" (or is rediscovering a robust religiosity that was there all along).[1] Russia is an example of this par excellence. After 70 years of forced secularization in the Soviet Union, the end of the policy of militant atheism has seen an unprecedented religious revival.[2] For instance, since 1992, the number of Orthodox churches in Russia has more than doubled, monasteries have been restored and a score of new ones opened, and even Orthodox colleges are becoming a popular facet of Russian higher education. Similar trends are underway in other Orthodox-majority countries in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, including Macedonia. What these trends indicate is a transformation in the network topology of the Orthodox Christian social system and a concurrent revival of the imagined religious community that Communist regimes once tried to suppress and, consequently, force to atrophy as a social structure and identity layer.

Not surprisingly, as Orthodoxy re-enters social and political life in these societies, it often finds itself being drawn into issues of security. This ranges from a simple connection to national pride and patriotism all the way to more nefarious combinations such as xenophobia and Islamophobia. As such, it is important to understand 1) the dominant historical patterns in Orthodox thought and practice *vis-à-vis* state security and 2) the key contemporary manifestations of these patterns and their possible implications. Given Russia's increasingly aggressive foreign policy stance over the past decade, the relationship between Russian Orthodoxy and nationalism/security is a critical area of research. Understanding the trajectory of network topology along this identity layer and the language used to mobilize members of this community could provide indicators of potential areas of exploitation by this strategic adversary.

The collapse of Communism has allowed Orthodoxy to re-emerge into all facets of Russian life, including security. Examples include the following:

a. assigning protector-saints to the Strategic Rocket Forces and individual tank battalions

b. using religious symbols in official and unofficial military/security capacities

c. constructing chapels on the premises of Russian governmental agencies

d. involving the Patriarch in the inaugural ceremonies of presidents Yeltsin, Putin, and Medvedev

While some of these acts can arguably be dismissed as mere ceremony and not very egregious violations of Russia's 1993 Constitution and 1997 religion law, other events clearly signal a dangerously close collusion between secular and sacred authority. Foremost among these is allowing the Church access to draft legislation prepared for the Duma, a move that suggests that the Russian Orthodox Church is now well entrenched and developing into a *de facto* established church. The same can be said about the powerful role that Orthodoxy—and indeed the Church itself—is playing in Russian public education, with the requirement for a course on Foundations of Orthodox Culture. Lisovskaya has referred to this process as a "clericalization" of Russian politics.[3] Such a tendency has long existed in Russia. In fact, one of Lenin's greatest criticisms of the nascent democratic institutions of the 1910s was that the clergy were "clericalizing" the Duma. Something similar is returning today, with the Russian Orthodox Church claiming the right to "review" legislation coming before the Duma.

More directly relevant to religion and security, however, is the state's prohibition of possession of certain types of religious literature, including The Watchtower and the writings of the late Turkish Islamic revivalist Said Nursi. A group was even arrested for simply carrying copies of Nursi with them, probably having come from a reading group. This resulted in a violent backlash and eventually the murder of an Orthodox priest—right in the middle of a religious service—by a group of Muslims. It seems that the government policy of restricting access to what the government considers radicalizing religious literature may be having an effect directly opposite from what was intended. It is also important to point out that a fringe minority of Orthodox

have been involved in violent acts against Muslims. Perhaps the most star-tling case is that of Artur Ryno, a young Russian student at an Orthodox icon painting school who was arrested in 2007 on 37 counts of homicide.[4] It turns out that he had spent more than a year targeting and killing members of minority ethnic groups in Moscow, mostly migrant workers from the traditionally Muslim regions of Central Asia and the Caucasus. For people such as Ryno—including members of some quasi-fascist groups associated with Russia's "skinheads"—the combination of Russian nationalism and a perverted form of Orthodox Christianity is proving lethal.[5]
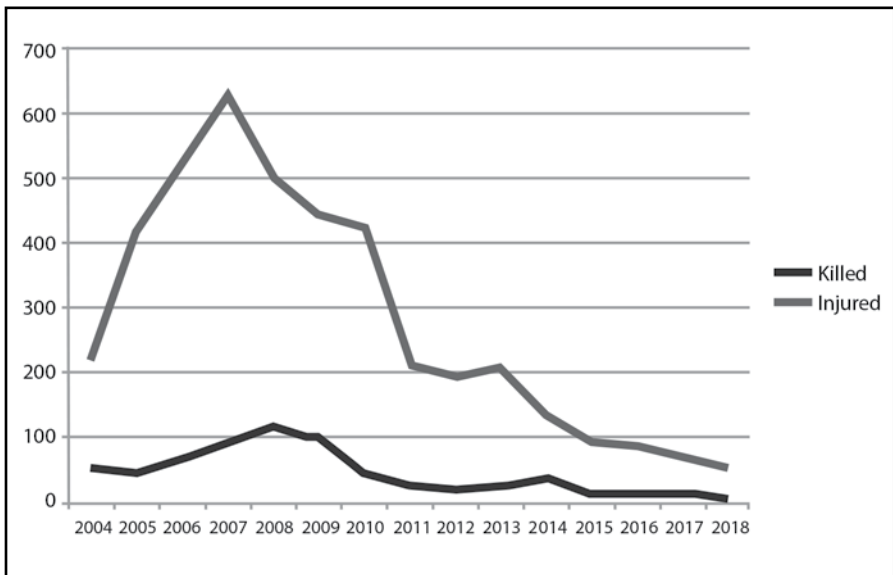

Figure 9. Casualties of Hate Crimes in Russia. Source: Sova Center

National-level data demonstrates that the case of Ryno is not an isolated one, although it is certainly one of the most horrific and extreme cases. The number of murders rose sharply in the first decade of the century but has since gradually tapered off as the Russian government improved its power and capacity. By far, Moscow is the primary locus of not only political extremism but also the violence that too often goes along with it. In 2006–2008, official statistics recorded 146 murders and 649 beatings attributed to racist and neo-Nazi groups. For Russia as a whole, the respective numbers were 248 and 1,561.[6] Since that time, Russia has seen a continual decline in

racial and ethnic hatred-based crimes (see figure 9). While Russia's leaders and much of the Russian ethnic population seek an accord with their Muslim compatriots, facts such as these make it little surprise that many Muslims themselves feel that it is little more than rhetoric and that they are second-class citizens. Finally, there is one other dimension linking Orthodoxy with security—that of the emerging concept of "spiritual security." As Payne has argued, the Russian Orthodox Church has been collaborating with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the purposes of expanding and consolidating the Russian world.[7] This is being done in the name of "spiritual security." As stated in the 2000 National Security Concept, which outlines Russia's national security strategy:

> Assurance of the Russian Federation's national security also includes protecting the cultural and spiritual-moral legacy and the historical traditions and standards of public life … There must be a state policy to maintain the population's spiritual and moral welfare … and counter the adverse impact of foreign religious organizations and missionaries.[8]
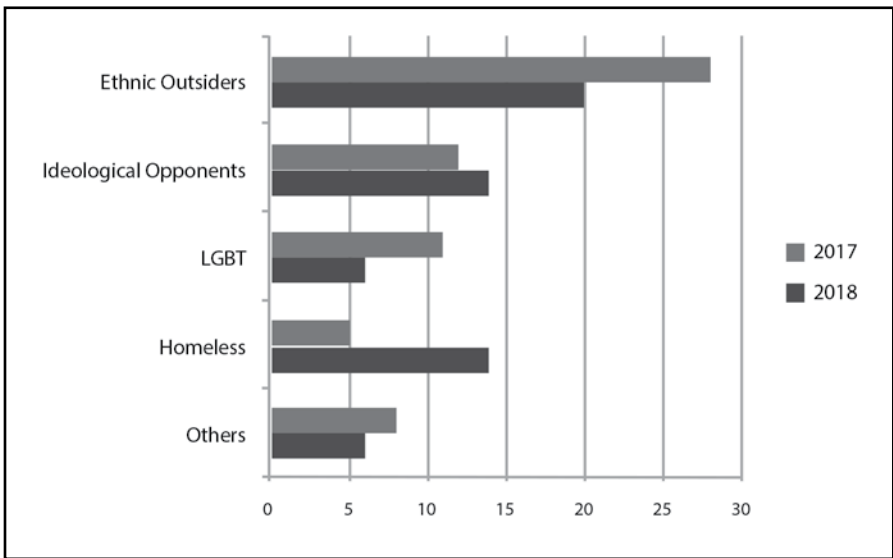

Figure 10. Hate Crimes in Russia by Type. Source: Sova Center

The idea that foreign missionaries were engaged in a "war for souls" with the Orthodox Church is not a new idea and had been clearly articulated by then-Metropolitan Kirill (now Patriarch Kirill) when, at a meeting of the World Council of Churches, he equated such activity with boxing, saying Western churches were entering Russia and competing for Orthodox souls "like boxers in a ring with their pumped-up muscles, delivering blows."[9] As Anderson phrased it, these "competitors (especially Catholics and 'sects' [Protestants]) can be depicted as threats to the religion of the nation, and thus to the nation itself."[10]

It was opinions such as these that led Russia to adopt a new law on religion in 1997, a quasi-establishment arrangement that affords special status to the "four traditional" religions of Russia—Orthodoxy, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism—while in reality, the other three are named only to deflect criticism of a single established church. Other religions, including Catholicism and various Protestant denominations, are afforded legal protections but face legal restriction on their activities. These religions are not thought of as "Russian," and therefore, their members are seen as traitors, or Judases, those who turned their back on Christ. The joining of forces of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is proving rather effective. For one, it has led to an increase in professed Orthodox belief among members of the Ministry, and according to a survey by the Institute of Sociology, this trend is apparent throughout the nation's police and security forces as well.[11] This increased level of identification, however, has not been coupled with higher rates of attendance at religious services, reportedly because the service-members have no time to attend. The Church recognized that problem, and in March 2002, it consecrated a small chapel at the Lyubyanka, the old KGB (translated in English as the Committee of State Security) headquarters and home of the current FSB, or Federal Security Bureau. During the low-key ceremony, then-Patriarch Alexey II focused his remarks on the need for concerted efforts aimed at combating the current threats posed to Russia's "spiritual security."[12] This relationship is proving effective, mostly in attempts to reunite the various churches of the Russian tradition that exist throughout the diaspora and through the reacquisition of Russian church property that had been lost during the Soviet period. They have met some success in these endeavors, especially in the reunion of the Russian Orthodox Church with the Soviet-era splinter church, the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia. The implications of such a relationship are significant. As Payne

concludes, "in order to be a world superpower once again, Russia needs an instrument that will serve as the unifying cultural factor in its self-identity. That instrument is the ROC [Russian Orthodox Church]."[13]

Putin's Orthodox Nationalist Project

Vladimir Putin is largely responsible for the close ties emerging between church and state. Building off the phenomenon of "ethnodoxy,"[14] or the idea that to be Russian means to be Orthodox, Putin has helped forge strong ties between Russian religious and national identity, melding the two into a form of nationalism—one that recombines elements of the traditional Russian imagined community that persisted despite enormous pressure by the Soviet state. This nationalism is one that sees the state as the protector of the Church and the Church as the protector of the nation's soul. The most recent survey data (January 2019) informs that nationalism is not something the people see as bad. When asked what the most acute issues facing the nation are today, the growth of nationalism and the worsening of interethnic relations was at the bottom of the list, with only five percent identifying with such concerns. The rise in the cost of living was the highest, incidentally, mentioned by 62 percent of the 1,600 respondents.[15] Interestingly, terrorism was also very low, also only being mentioned by five percent. This is despite the fact that interethnic hatred and "ideological differences" are still responsible for a significant number of murders and beatings each year (see figures 1 and 2), though the number is admittedly on the decline.

So where is the attention of Russians today? In addition to economic concerns, quite a bit of it is focused on military threats. In the same survey, 56 percent said that they believe foreign nations pose a threat to Russia (an indicator that is actually on the decline, down from 68 percent in 2014). Finally, there is great trust in the Russian military to defend the nation, with 88 percent agreeing that, in the case of an actual military threat, the Russian army could defend the nation.[16] This is a sharp increase since 2014, up from 60 percent.

So what does this all mean? Russian nationalism is not only about taking pride in ethnic Russian identity; it is highly correlated with several other beliefs and behaviors. While the number of ethnic hatred-based murders and beatings is at a low point since the 2006-2009 high point, the numbers are still considerable, and the vast majority of Russians do not see this as a

problem. Instead, they are interested in their wallets and how the economy is affecting them. Moreover, as the data presented here shows, ethnic tensions are high, and part of Russian ethnic identity includes identifying with Russian Orthodoxy. This phenomenon allows Putin to demonize others and place blame for the country's economic hardships on the shoulders of foreign powers, primarily the U.S. and the West (European Union and NATO). This makes Russian nationalism a useful tool for Putin as he seeks to carry out his grand strategy of exerting influence in the near abroad, protecting his eastern flank through a pact with China, weakening the NATO alliance, and fracturing the process of European integration.[17]

From an Evolutionary Governance Theory perspective, however, there is a dual benefit to this trend. The Orthodox Church represents a resilient social network in Russia and could either be subversive or supportive of the government. By reanimating the Orthodox identity layer in the Russian ethnic worldview, Putin has co-opted a vibrant social structure that improves the resilience of the Russian state. The network topology has improved, and Putin was able to do so by leveraging social structures and identity layers that already enjoyed a degree of legitimacy. Additionally, while the Russian ethnic identity layer has a relatively limited potential population, the Orthodox religious identity could theoretically extent beyond national boundaries and generate both access and political capital for Russian governmental interests. The opportunity for malign influence through this layer should be recognized and the Russian government's approach to working through Russian Orthodox churches outside of its own borders well understood. Given the marriage Putin has purposefully cultivated between church and state and his overt willingness to bring the Patriarch into state service, such awareness would only be prudent.

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Chapter 6: Intervening Against Systemic Level Challenges for Strategic Effect

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> Change is the law of life, and those who look only to the past and present are certain to miss the future. - John F. Kennedy[1]

An illusion is something that deceives one intellectually, "a perception of something objectively existing in such a way as to cause misinterpretation of its actual nature."[2] The preceding chapters demonstrate how a military power oriented toward defeating networks can perfect an approach that yields limited or even no strategic benefit by falling into a professional competency trap. As chapter 1 explained, dissolved networks can reform in emergent ways if the larger social system persists unchanged. When there are systemic drivers underpinning enemy networks, the illusion of success in degrading them via measures of performance (e.g., high value targets, body count, etc.) obscure more appropriate approaches for achieving national policy aims. The type of political effects required from the military should dictate the orientation, form, and methods of special operations. Today, the special operations enterprise's bureaucracy replicates what it knows—a preference toward kinetics and a counter-network theory of victory.

Famous nineteenth century essayist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, warned that the most dangerous thing is an illusion because it obfuscates the true reality.[3] The purpose of this chapter is to lift the veil and recommend interventions to overcome United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) and Special Operations Forces (SOF) enterprise cultural blinders underpinning the network illusion. To that end, this chapter discusses five persistent SOF cultural blinders:

1. counter-threat network as the SOF mission
2. SOF's "counter" culture
3. the measurement bias
4. the bias for action
5. SOF as a fungible force

This discussion is followed by ideas on how to overcome the obstacles that preclude the transformation of the USSOCOM enterprise to align with emergent twenty-first century opportunities to advance U.S. interests and parry threats against them.

Dispelling the network illusion is foundational for enabling the special operations enterprise to contribute to emergent twenty-first century security challenges that demand an integrated approach to systemic level interventions.[4] The challenge for SOF is to move from physical and network-oriented effects to systemic interventions that impact the cognitive domain. Chapters 2-4 demonstrated that higher-order social system dynamics shape the opportunity structures from which networks emerge and that innovations at the margins of a social system can, in turn, generate system transforming effects. The infinite game of competition for relative influence often occurs on the global periphery, and it centers on perception rather than on kinetic effect. Indeed, just within the Islamist social system, innovations in the Salafi and later Jihadi subsystems occurred first in the cognitive space and later in the physical world. If these chapters demonstrate anything, it is that social movements' techniques are crucial for constructing the Jihadi "imagined community" and comprise a significant portion of their efforts. SOF have the prerequisites for success against such weaknesses and could play a greater role in U.S. statecraft to sustain its security and seek advantage in a complex world, but it takes a relationship building, nurture-network paradigm to do so.

How We Got Here

History is, by necessity, a distilled interpretation of the past, and historians, therefore, can transform the mental landscapes through which the present and future are examined.[5] Historical landscapes reveal context and broaden one's experience to provide firm ground upon which to confront the future. History, even recent history, is often in tension with short-term memory.[6] Most professional western military practitioners are indoctrinated with the theory and nature of war written by Clausewitz, Jomini, Sun Tzu, and others. War is often described as a continuation of politics by others means. In the U.S., this means that war or use of military force has ultimately a political aim determined not by uniformed military generals or admirals, but by

civilian leadership that preserves the civil-military relations to best provide for American security.[7]

Military professionals do not generally learn politics beyond introductions to policy making and international relations. Rather, time is devoted to the study of the conduct of war. Clausewitz, whom nearly all professional military officers have studied, argues that military success can be made more likely through the destruction of the adversary's armed forces.[8] This idea underpins, for understandable reasons, the predominating paradigm in military culture. The propensity to orient on, prepare for, and conduct war, whether limited or total, has created a deeply engrained mindset among generations of U.S. military commanders and their staffs to eliminate the enemy from the battlefield. Unfortunately, this mindset has infiltrated SOF as well. It should be no surprise that U.S. military schools continue the indoctrination year after year, building a strong bias to toward warfighting. The U.S. joint professional military education (JPME) system, codified in the Goldwater-Nichols Act, was intended to overcome service parochialism, but it also deepens a warfighting mindset. JPME has made marked improvements over the years yet is likely now insufficient to prevent war.[9]

Following the attacks of 9/11, SOF demonstrated their strategic utility by working with international and indigenous partners to defeat the Taliban regime and eventually disrupt al-Qaeda's sanctuary in Afghanistan. The U.S. military learned that a relatively small number of Green Berets partnered with indigenous irregular forces and supported by U.S. air power could accomplish outsized results. Soon thereafter, SOF, as part of a larger joint force, engaged in the invasion and overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq and became essential to post-Baathist counterterrorism operations. SOF quickly rose in visibility and perceived value, which was followed by increased resourcing and influence. Today, the USSOCOM enterprise has grown to a force of over 70,000 with a $13 billion annual budget.[10] It is not the USSOCOM of 9/11.

Counter-Threat Network as Failed Theory of Victory

The 2018 national defense strategy takes a holistic perspective on the use of military power and offers an alternative perspective to past guidance.[11] The strategy shifts focus from preparing to win later to winning now, short of war. However, it does not explicitly offer a theory of victory, and in the

absence of one, SOF's pattern of operational activities in and out of conflict zones, strategic planning guidance, and doctrine reveals a continuing preference for countering threat networks (CTN) as a mainstay or approach to victory. A review of joint doctrine further illuminates a CTN paradigm created by two decades of conflict predominately against countering terrorist, insurgent, and malign state networks that threaten U.S. interests.[12] An unintended consequence of this paradigm is a conflation of strategy, operations, and tactics.

In the early days of the Iraq conflict, a special operations task force (SOTF) was established with the intent of defeating the newly formed al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). As described in chapter 1, this SOTF underwent a transformation from a hierarchy-centric to network-centric organization in order to outpace and destroy AQI.[13] The transformation of the SOTF marked the beginning of a larger and longer-lasting evolution in special operations force structure, operating methods, and capabilities. Ultimately, this transformation led to the creation of new mental models as new generations joined the ranks and were inculcated with a mindset that replaced the old. Although visible change is easily seen, one does not see the change of mindset except in juxtaposing new decision patterns and behaviors against older ones over time. In the short term, the change to the SOTF brought much-needed success against the AQI network, and it increased the attention paid to special operations.

In the many years of combat that followed, the broader special operations community also transformed into something new, adopting a different organizing logic that behaved differently and greatly increased effectiveness against networks. Within SOF, traditional mental models of hierarchal staff and planning processes, as well as operating tempo, were replaced by new mental models and organizational behaviors. In time, the creation and organizing logic of the find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze, and disseminate (F3EAD) model emerged and proved tactically effective in the context of the Iraq, Afghanistan, and broader countering violent extremist organization (CVEO) and CTN efforts. Today, F3EAD has become a deeply rooted mindset and the foundation for how the SOF enterprise organizes and operates beyond the tactical level. For some organizations within SOF, this is appropriate. For others, it has become a cognitive blinder and organizational constraint. For some, it has become more than a tactic.

Bartholomees writes that "the United States is developing a reputation much like Germany had in the twentieth century of being tactically and operationally superb but strategically inept," further arguing that the biggest challenge is delimiting strategic success and how to achieve it.[14] Clausewitz recognizes that war is not an "autonomous" policy aim unto itself but rather politics by other means. He further argues that the essential question is to determine the type of war and purpose for which it is to be undertaken.[15] Yet, as chapters 2-4 highlight, counterterrorism and CTN activities can only temporarily treat the symptoms of structural deficiencies in the higher-order Islamist social system. In this sense, the U.S. has failed in clearly defining its ultimate political aim, thereby undertaking a method that has not changed the system. Recent research indicates the number of Salafi Jihadis and allied fighters capable of violence has more than doubled since the war on terror began after 9/11, in part due to collateral damage from CVEO campaigns.[16] Others assert victory is based on "an assessment, not a fact or condition. It is someone's opinion or an amalgamation of opinions."[17] Special operations must be framed within a context of strategic political aims; otherwise, they become successful tactical operations with no strategic utility. Special operations and SOF must not be a panacea solution to ill-defined policy aims.

The "Counter-" Culture

In 2003, the Secretary of Defense approved the global counterterrorism campaign plan designed to achieve the strategic objective of defeating violent extremist organizations (VEOs). This was the first of several global plans that would eventually emerge to address threats that escaped the bounds of a single geographic combatant commander. With growing responsibility and authorities, then-USSOCOM Commander, General Bryan D. Brown, created the Center for Special Operations, responsible for "planning, supporting and executing special operations in the war on terrorism."[18] This is perhaps the beginning of what would become a department-wide trend of a "counter-" culture.

The Department of Defense is ultimately responsible for protecting the homeland, and in issuing the *Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning*, the Joint Staff recently introduced a number of paradigm-altering concepts to address the transition to strategic competition.[19] The resulting strategy, among many things, directs attention to counter coercion and subversion.

In particular, it highlights the necessity in competing short of armed conflict to counter a wide range of unfavorable behaviors by states, their proxies, and the perennial VEOs. The strategy recognizes that the Department is campaigning every day, meaning its vast resources must be employed in a manner to secure and advance U.S. interests short of conflict while always being prepared to fight and win.[20] This is arguably a big yet nuanced shift from the past. Although capable and well postured, the strategy does not clearly outline the role of special operations or SOF in competition below the level of armed conflict. A study on improving the understanding of special operations reveals a critical need for thought leadership to drive future innovation.[21] Chapter 5 demonstrated the importance of appreciating how strategic competitors might think about employing influence networks below armed conflict, and SOF as the main irregular warfare element in the Department should be naturally aligned with influence-oriented activities.

Yet, today, SOF are more analogous to a youth soccer team all chasing the ball with everybody on the bench begging the coach to put them in. SOF regularly adopt and pursue a "counter n" strategy, n being one among infinite threats with China, Russia, threat finance, and violent extremists being but a few. SOF are very good at conducting counter operations, but those activities may well be the wrong thing for twenty-first century challenges. Perhaps, special operations should be reoriented toward achieving strategic effects to propagate a positive image of the U.S. among particular populations to advance national influence rather than to counter an adversary. Instead of CTN, the challenge would be fomenting or amplifying social movements and connecting nascent networks in a social system that better provide utility to populations to which only VEOs and strategic adversaries are paying attention. As chapters 1-2 describe, the underlying mentality would have to change to the nurture network orientation.

The potential for outsized results from special operations in competition below armed conflict might be more beneficial if better integrated with joint, interagency, intergovernmental, multinational, and commercial (JIIM-C) partners to advance U.S. influence in areas of high national interest. Apple and Huawei are competitors, yet they pursue different strategies to gain market penetration and diversity. Their strategies are not directly oriented on their competitor; therefore, every possible market is not contested. When there are overlapping interests, they compete for influence within the buying market to gain an advantage with respect to one another and

other competitors. Special operations and SOF are well suited to this indirect approach to advancing U.S. influence by, through, and with their JIIM-C partners, while the broader joint force postures for traditional deterrence and prepares to win decisively if conflict emerges. SOF should make U.S. competitors counter their actions.

Measurement Bias

There is an extraordinary volume of data derived from operations, yet SOF typically distill and oversimplify the truly complex nature of the circumstances to more easily communicate with the chain of command. How many raids were conducted? How many enemy were killed? What is the periodicity of enemy attacks? How many hours of full motion video of the target were obtained? The "what" and "how" of measuring has become an art and an integral aspect of military operations. SOF have gained a strong predisposition to measure nearly everything because they can, which leads to a measurement bias. SOF now commonly measure things with the belief the derived statistics will bring clarity and make current conditions more understandable and predictable.[22] Big data is coming to be seen as the solution to the mountain of data collected, and while it is useful, it has its limits. The assumption is that measurements through data science will reveal new insights to enhance situational understanding to make judgements about themselves, the enemy, and the environment. It is true that statistics can be useful. Unfortunately, many SOF commanders and primary staff are not fluent in data science and tend to overvalue forecasts about the future that are based on past occurrences. SOF must be reminded that statistics are a reflection of the data collected at past moments, not an accurate reflection of the real world now. Complexity theory demonstrates the impossibility of discovering causality in open social systems, nor is it possible to account for all the factors needed for true foresight. Many factors will forever remain unknowable. And in a world in which governance and social structures evolve rapidly, reacting to or countering threats based on data science represents a risk because it yields the initiative.

In the quest to reduce uncertainty, SOF are far too often persuaded by the measurement bias and fall prey to the fallacy of predictability. On a larger scale, this same bias has contributed to invalid interpretations of victory. Think about how the system has framed the destruction of certain targets or

the killing of specific enemy leaders. The hegemony of the F3EAD mindset has overwhelmed the previous kaleidoscope of SOF tribal identities and methods. It has propagated, replicated, and become a basin of attraction given the incentives for visible and measurable results. Even Joint Publication 5.0, Joint Planning, recognizes that "Prominent among these are …the types of factors that military operations are trying to influence cannot easily be measured. This challenge sometimes leads to simplified quantification of qualitative data or 'junk arithmetic.'"[23] It is difficult to prove that hearts have been won or that the higher-order social system has transformed, while the numbers of raids, enemy killed, and networks collapsed are more tangible and easily communicated to military leaders and their political leaders.

Bias for Direct Action

The original global plan for CVEO was comprised of both a direct and indirect approach. In fact, the indirect approach was supposed to be the focus and was meant to influence the conditions that gave rise to extremism. That is, the main effort was to intervene in the higher-order social system to change how it operates, while the supporting effort was to diminish violent networks' capacity and influence. In practice, operations to capture and kill VEOs constituted the main effort and gained an inertia of their own.[24] It is the nature of military professionals to impose their will on the enemy. Moreover, "direct actions can be easily understood, and body counts are easy metrics to convince leaders, the public, and Congress that progress is made and to gain the nation's continued support."[25] This bias for direct action is interdependently linked to the measurement bias.

The touted indirect approach to CVEO never grew legs in large measure due to a combination of the complex political landscape and U.S. strategic impatience. As a consequence, there are several generations of Green Berets and other SOF conceived of and structured and trained for the more nuanced indirect approach who have atrophied in their institutional knowledge and competency. As an outgrowth of two decades of rotational combat deployments and kinetically oriented missions, SOF have a force with a preference toward the direct approach. Decorated Green Beret and former acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict, Mark Mitchell, asserts that "we are prisoners of our own experience."[26]

As one assesses the result of the bias for the direct, kinetic approach, it creates unintended incentives. For example, if a bad actor is framed as an Islamic terrorist, then SOF have authority and mandate to operate against him. The collective system seeks to brand groups or link them to the Salafi Jihadi threat. It is difficult to prove causality, but is it possible SOF's interventions push local groups to seek coalitions with external extremist actors? Are these groups really a threat to national security, demanding the resources of time, money, and lives while simultaneously ignoring other conditions? Sometimes "you have to mow the grass," but continued opportunity costs demand a change.

One of the key insights from the USSOCOM Comprehensive Review was the identification of a continuation bias to sustain deployments and operational footprints that led SOF to perpetuate suboptimal sourcing solutions for the Joint Force.[27] The USSOCOM enterprise's cumulative responses to CVEO have contributed to a culture that normalized an unsustainable force-employment cycle.[28] As the national defense strategy (NDS) highlights, SOF must make investments and divestments to transform the Force or be left with legacy systems that are irrelevant for twenty-first century challenges.[29] Put another way, SOF are beginning to confront tomorrow's challenges with yesterday's approaches. Institutional memories of the pre-9/11 force are quickly fading and contribute to the loss of core competencies and accumulated experiences essential to new missions, threats, and operating environments. The failure to sufficiently exercise the indirect approach is directly correlated with the failure to address the underlying conditions that enable the rise of extremism. Research suggests there may be as many as 230,000 Jihadis worldwide, nearly four times as many as in 2001 when the 9/11 attacks occurred.[30] Moreover, SOF consistently fail to recognize that their direct action approach is misaligned with broader geopolitical and social systems. For instance, former-Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, noted in 2009 that "Direct military force will continue to play a role in the long-term effort against terrorists and other extremists, but over the long term, the U.S. cannot kill or capture its way to victory.[31] Yet, the Enterprise continues what it knows unabated. Moreover, as SOF expands their mission space to competition below armed conflict, they must also adapt their operating approaches. Future special operations will, by design, be executed to create effects that support trusted U.S. partners' aims, which are less measurable and more likely to be delayed in response. "It will take

the patient accumulation of quiet successes over a long time to discredit and defeat extremist movements and their ideologies," as well as gain temporal advantage over a myriad of rising near-peer competitors.[32] Perhaps SOF will develop a bias for strategic patience.

SOF Are Not Fungible

There is an internal tension within USSOCOM between the necessity to meet high demands for more SOF and the capacity to meet persistent combatant command reliance on said forces. During the height of conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan, the special operations components' roles, authorities, and resourcing expanded. To sustain the scope and scale of operations required of them, the U.S. increased reliance on partner nation SOF. U.S. SOF have helped to create many allied and partner versions of themselves—designed and equipped for the direct approach. Sometimes, the answer to employing the force must be "no" rather than attempts to increase capacity.

As demand increased for SOF, and due to Force generation shortfalls, Special Forces operational detachment alphas (ODAs), SEAL platoons, and Raider teams were employed in a manner that treated them as interchangeable, as though they are the same. Beyond the Department's designation as being special and assigned to USSOCOM, they are more different than alike. In time, the common, direct approach to defeating terror and insurgent organizations reduced the difference in kinds, often eroding the core identity and skills. At the same time, they garnered and eventually mastered new skills—the art of man hunting. There is a new generation of SOF that are comfortable operating from a forward base with allies and partners to conduct kinetic actions to disrupt and destroy enemy networks in contested spaces. This same cohort is less familiar with the traditional and increasingly important missions for which their SOF components were originally created. Importantly, the more traditional missions were intended to expand the geographic and policy operating space to compete against more sophisticated near-peer adversaries.

Although the CVEO mission most aligns with U.S. Joint SOF, they, too, may have atrophied in critical capabilities and readiness due to the incessant drive to be forward and in the fight. The U.S.'s most precious and critical response forces must always be vigilant and ready to succeed at no-fail missions under uncertain and dynamic circumstances. But as highlighted in

the USSOCOM Comprehensive Review, this new mindset has consequences, some of which detract from organizational and individual readiness, but more importantly, the resilience of the Force.[33]

The typology of special operations and the diverse environments within which SOF will conduct such operations demand a portfolio of forces and capabilities that cover the wide spectrum of missions and environments. Although SOF often contribute to the same strategy and campaigns as conventional forces, it is the standard of execution and environmental conditions within which they operate that makes them different or special. Achieving and sustaining this high degree of precision requires the combination of assessing and selecting the right people, followed by rigorous training and disciplined organizational readiness programs. A poorly balanced deploy-to-dwell ratio is not helpful to this end.

The Service components have their own recruitment, assessment, selection, and training models that produce their own unique kinds of special operators. Each is created with a specific type of special operation and environment in mind, sharing some likenesses but different in kind. These "tribes" each have their own history, a predominate mission type, and dependent core competencies. Although they can perform other missions, Navy SEALs were created to conduct unilateral maritime direct action. Special Forces, on the other hand, were created to perform unconventional warfare and related tasks by and with indigenous forces. They are more different than alike.

By design, each SOF tribe has a purpose. Although there are common attributes among SOF, there are also differences. If one offers a valid argument otherwise, SOF should then gain efficiencies by the conduct of a single assessment and selection. It is likely that such a proposition will not stand because each tribe is looking for personnel with the attributes and character traits most related to their core mission. Each uniquely trained, organized, and equipped SOF formation has a primary mission and environmental focus that requires different operator attributes and skills. SOF are tailored forces made for specific and often narrow purposes. This is a good thing. SOF are not an interchangeable commodity of like kinds within the Enterprise or with conventional forces.[34]

Ways to Overcome the Professional Competency Trap

First and foremost, an organization must recognize the need for change. The USSOCOM enterprise has become riddled with self-replicating bureaucracies, generating a force that remains tactically agile and adaptive but operationally predictable and often rigid. Moreover, the bureaucracies ignore the stress on the Force despite well-meaning attempts to "preserve the force and family." Organizational agility is a cultivated capability that allows the organization to make timely, effective, and sustained change when circumstances require it. This includes the ability to appreciate the context of the current system, identify and frame both opportunities and threats, overcome obstacles, modify resourcing, and judiciously employ forces.[35]

SOF are also underpinned by invalid assumptions about international relations and by myths about their establishment during a unique WWII experience and the bipolar Cold War era. The new era will be different in many respects, so going back to history will lead to painful failure. SOF were created with the assumption that states and boundaries were inviolable, but that assumption is increasingly invalid or under significant strain in the twenty-first century. USSOCOM Commander, General Richard Clark, recently shared his views with industry that SOF are shifting their focus to align with NDS priorities and that the future is about the "cognitive domain" and less about door kicking.[36] Have SOF taken a hard look and begun actions to substantively reorganize their formations? How many direct action formations does the Enterprise really need? Does the future require more capacity for psychological operations? These are easy questions with hard answers.

To support this transition, the organization should strive to develop ambidexterity—the ability to have multiple operating systems sometimes in contradiction to one another. The tendency to focus on the crisis of the day, the urgency of daily organizational churn, and the need to support deployed operational forces all precludes significant organizational thinking to identify future opportunities and risk. There is an existing competition between current demands and the necessity to improve one's position and prepare for the future.[37] Organizational flexibility through ambidexterity provides a practical way to overcome this internal competition and contradiction. Moreover, finite capacity will require disciplined consideration for every employment. When related to military organizations, the approach must be to separate core yet competing functions into different divisions.[38]

USSOCOM demands a concerted effort to move away from a mental model and *de facto* routinized practice of treating many SOF formations as fungible. Often, a Marine Raider team and ODA are viewed as interchangeable. They are not the same. Choices must be made to create a portfolio of unique and distinct capabilities that, in the aggregate, provide what is needed. At echelon, this demands organizing operational forces with headquarters that focus on precisely delimited roles and missions. It is not sufficient to say SOF are everything the Nation needs. It is also woefully negligent to assume the innate mission focus and innovative mindset of the operator will scale and overcome flaws in organizational structure. They will not.

SOF are likely to play a significant role in the emerging competition below armed conflict with strategic adversaries. Each echelon of the enterprise has a piece to contribute, but none can do all things. Choices must be made. Some of the choices flow easily from service component identities, history, and core activity specialization. However, capabilities are not a mission. The Joint Special Operations Command is a good example of assigning a core function to a subordinate unit. At its core, it is trained, organized, and equipped for crisis response. Conversely, the service components train, organize, and equip forces that are then employed by others. Today, the force employer is the Theater Special Operations Command. Tomorrow, it might be threat- or mission-specific commands such as a competition below armed conflict-oriented command or perhaps a near-peer, adversary-oriented command. Rather than organizing according to the logic of geography, such commands would be organized based on the opportunity, threat, or mission space.

Transformation and sustained success demand the ability to create and enact what is referred to as paradoxical strategies. For USSOCOM, this strategy refers to a resourced portfolio of divergent capabilities and operating concepts that offer unique contributions to the Joint Force across a wide range of operating constraints. These strategies are paradoxical in that they are contradictory while also interrelated.[39] The more uncertainty in dynamic operating constraints—be they technology, the adversary, or even intra-Department of Defense politics—the larger and more diverse the portfolio of capabilities and operating concepts need to be. Though such an organizing concept might lead to critiques about inherent inconsistency and misperceptions regarding the misallocation of resources, diversity of capability is essential for long-term organizational success when the nature of future opportunities and threats is unknowable. A common outcome from

convergent planning processes is to ignore the contradictions, the proverbial elephants in the room, and choose a singular path forward with certainty despite the future being opaque.[40]

USSOCOM might find itself simultaneously implementing strategies A, B, and C—each different and in competition with one another. Such an approach would provide the Enterprise the greatest opportunity for success when confronting accelerated change and complexity. Or, rephrased in terms of chapter 1, SOF might experiment at the edge of chaos not knowing which strategy has the best chance of becoming a basin of attraction and generating positive feedback loops. The paradoxical approach demands leadership to manage the tendency of the bureaucracy to bring continuity and equilibrium, clarity and singularity. This approach further requires organizational leaders to recognize and engage in learning at various echelons and across functions to continually assess the efficacy of each agenda, creating a common and integrated appreciation of the context and a shared awareness of how the diverse capabilities of the Enterprise can be assembled for novel effects.[41]

What SOF Must Become

In the context of strategic competition, the Services and broader Joint Force must reframe their roles within the context of a new strategy and create new concepts that have a direct impact on development and design of SOF. This new direction will demand a divestment from the past—no matter how successfully employed—and an alignment with the future.[42] This is no easy feat considering existing operations, constrained budgets, organizational habit, and uncertain political agendas.

SOF must reframe the culture and the bureaucracies they have created over the past two decades to promote greater strategic agility and flexibility. They must be agile in their ability to sense make, to appreciate the nuanced contours of a dynamic geopolitical landscape, numerous adversaries, and the tussle inherent to U.S. foreign policy. They must be flexible enough to aggregate capabilities in form and function for a specific purpose. Imagine a future SOF team that is in fact joint. Although some parts of the Enterprise are agile, this is within a given mission and context. The bureaucracy that emerged over the past twenty years, having been built on the foundation of the CVEO war with kinetic action as the main tool, is now misaligned with the future. The USSOCOM enterprise writ large must fully embrace and

realize in practice the concept of integrated campaigning.[43] It must be able to integrate across the physical, virtual, and, ultimately, the cognitive domain. Within command and control elements, it must break the functional lanes and create new ways of doing business. It must be able to generate truly joint command and control elements, rather than poorly camouflage service 06-level formations simply called joint.

SOF must become comfortable returning to the shadows and serving as a supporting, vice supported, element of the Department. This will mean often taking a backseat to other agencies in the application of statecraft. The role and identity of SOF must consequently transform, but, with the right education, SOF can cultivate the appropriate mindset. Leaders, especially at the senior field-grade level, must redirect their attention away from the tactical fight and become students of socio-cultural dynamics; identity politics; and diplomatic, economic, cultural, and business statecraft. Colonels and captains of tomorrow must truly take an operational to low-strategic perspective and dedicate time to conduct deliberate and integrative thinking. The individual bias for action and the organizational continuation bias detract from the sophisticated thinking required for tomorrow. Together, they underpin the SOF professional competency trap discussed in the Introduction. In strategic competition, however, the USSOCOM enterprise must instead create a bias for strategic patience and a continuous questioning of the efficacy of adopted theories of success.

The modern technology environment creates enormous information about SOF, and SOF degrade their utility with each exposure. SOF will have to move away from the expeditionary deployment model to one of deploying for purpose while recognizing there is no longer sanctuary and anonymity at home. Finally, SOF must become resilient against inevitable loss yet still have the ability to continue the mission from the tactical to strategic levels. Death and loss are intrinsic to military operations, and the enemy gets a vote. A tactical tragedy does not necessarily indicate flawed design, planning, or execution—it could, but it should not be a baseline assumption. The relative size of the USSOCOM enterprise is small compared to the Services—about half the size of the Marine Corps and one-eighth of the Army. Precisely because it is not a homogenous entity, it has the building blocks to rapidly transform and become what is required for tomorrow.

Conclusion

The environment is changing so significantly that Special Operations Forces (SOF) need to adopt a mindset of transformation, not evolution, to escape the network illusion. The cognitive domain is the future landscape in which the U.S., friends, and adversaries will compete below armed conflict. As such, the message is the mission. SOF's mental models and supporting structures reinforced over 19 years of war created a network illusion that serves as an anchor against the organizational agility and flexibility required for tomorrow's challenges. New organizational processes should be better at sensing, seizing, and transforming SOF's mental and physical structures to keep pace with change.[44] These new processes should ensure coherence between institutional strategy, organizing logic, operating processes, and resource allocation.[45] These new strategies provide the platform from which to intervene to create strategic systemic effects while the habitually formed illusion fades into memory.

Alvin Toffler, the founder of American Futurism, recognized the axiom that, lest we study history, we are bound to repeat it. However, his orientation was the future—only look back to decide what to divest of. He argued that the failure to intervene to change the future means being left to endure it as a consequence of other influencers' actions.[46] SOF must move beyond the counter-network orientation to see more than the tree—the network—and instead see the whole forest—the social system. Only in this way will they become an enterprise that creates the right effect, at the right place, and at the right time to ultimately achieve systemic-level, cognitive effects. Most simply, one might say SOF need fewer lumber jacks to cut trees and more arborists to nurture the growth and development of a diverse forest. But to do so, SOF must come to terms with their professional competency trap and move past their network illusion. 🔼

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Acronyms

AQI	al-Qaeda in Iraq
AUMF	authorization for the use of military force
CF	conventional forces
COG	center of gravity
COIN	counterinsurgency
CT	counterterrorism
CTN	countering threat networks
CVEO	countering violent extremist organizations
DOD	Department of Defense
EGT	Evolutionary Governance Theory
F3EAD	find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze, and disseminate
FSA	Free Syrian Army
FTO	foreign terrorist organization
GTD	Global Terrorism Database
HN	host nation
IS	Islamic State
ISI	Islamic State of Iraq
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
JC-HAMO	Joint Concept for Human Aspects of Military Operations
JIIM-C	joint, interagency, intergovernmental, multinational, and corporate/commercial
JPME	joint professional military education
JSOU	Joint Special Operations University

NDS   National Defense Strategy

ODA   Operational Detachment Alpha

PIRUS   Profiles of Individuals Radicalized in the United States

PN   partner nation

SMT   Social Movement Theory

SNA   social network analysis

SOF   Special Operations Forces

SOTF   special operations task force

TTP   tactics, techniques, and procedures

USG   U.S. Government

USSOCOM   United States Special Operations Command

VEO   violent extremist organization