House Armed Services Committee Hearing
"What is the State of Islamic Extremism: Key Trends, Challenges and Implications for U.S. Policy"

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Chairman Thornberry, Ranking Member Smith, and esteemed members of the committee, I would like to thank you on behalf of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, known as START, [1] for inviting us to speak with you today. I've been asked to reflect on the state of Islamic Extremism, one year and one week after testifying before this same body on nearly the same topic. In the intervening 53 weeks, we have seen the dramatic rise of an erstwhile al-Qa'ida affiliate, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), declare a Caliphate and eclipse al-Qa'ida and its associated movement (AQAM) on the world stage. The trend lines are alarming; we are seeing considerable year-on-year increases in both the number of terrorist attacks and fatalities due to terrorism. Furthermore, theoretical work and empirical work in the terrorism studies field suggests that competition among terrorist groups, or outbidding, is one of the most important predictors of increased group lethality over time.[2, 3] In this testimony, therefore, I will provide an update on global terrorism trends, and will focus on the implications of the current competition between AQAM and ISIL.
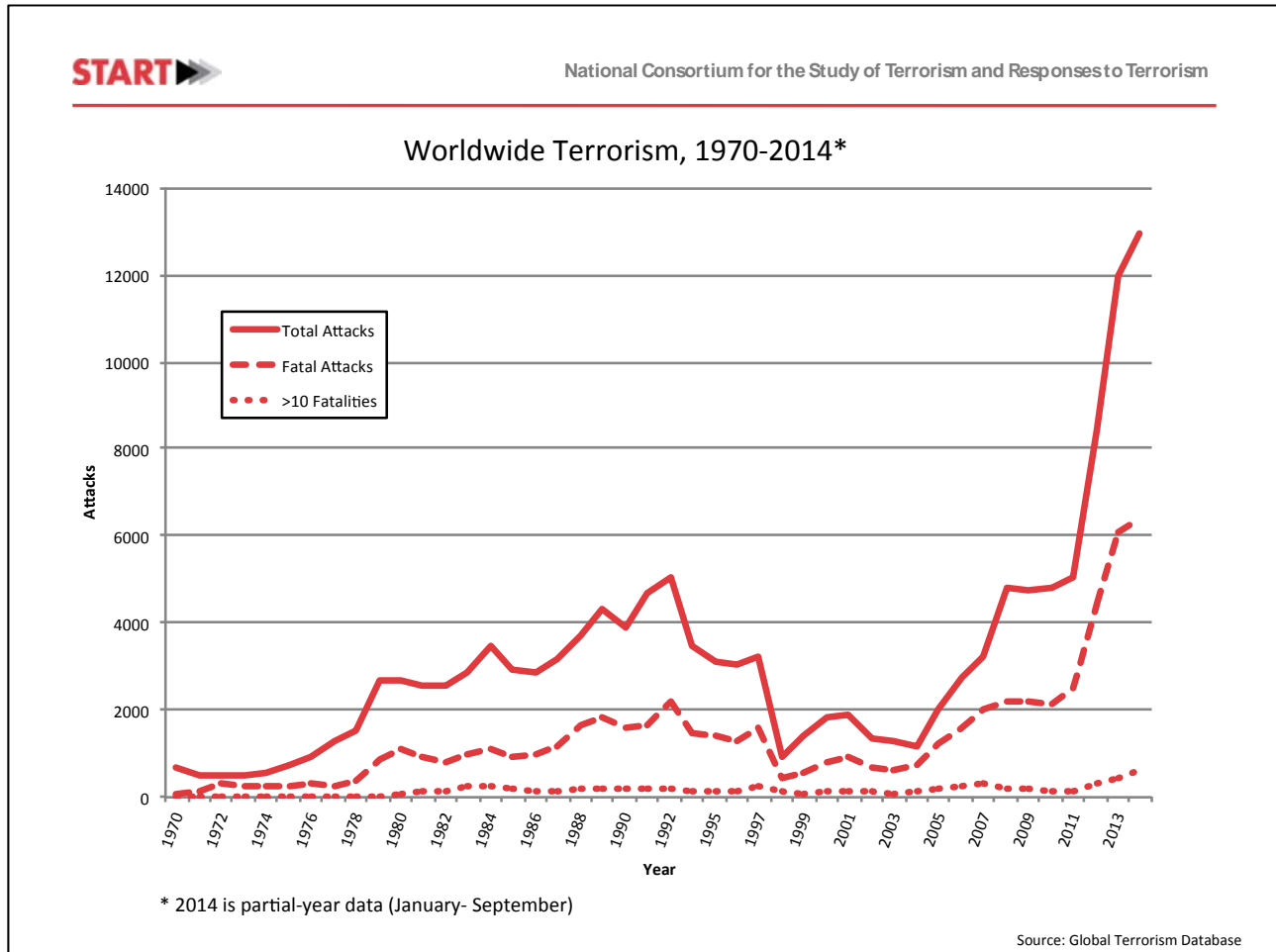
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[1] START is based at the University of Maryland and supported in part by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Directorate Office of University Programs through a Center of Excellence grant. START uses state-of-the-art theories, methods and data from the social and behavioral sciences to improve understanding of the origins, dynamics and social and psychological impacts of terrorism. This testimony reflects the opinions of the author, and not those of the Department of Homeland Security or any other office of the United States Government that has funded START research.

[2] For a theoretical discussion of outbidding, in which groups demonstrate their resolve through greater levels of violence in order to win support, see: Kydd, Andrew H., and Barbara F. Walter. "The Strategies of Terrorism." *International Security* 31, no. 1 (Summer 2006): 49-80.

[3] For empirical work examining the impacts of rivalries and collaboration, among other factors, on terrorist group dynamics, see: Asal, Victor, and R. Karl Rethemeyer. 2008. "The Nature of the Beast: Terrorist Organizational Characteristics and Organizational Lethality." *Journal of Politics*, 70(2): 437-449. and;
Asal, Victor, Gary Ackerman, and R. Karl Rethemeyer. 2012. Connections Can Be Toxic: Terrorist Organizational Factors and the Pursuit of CBRN Weapons *Studies in Terrorism and Conflict* 35:229–254.

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STUDY OF TERRORISM AND RESPONSES TO TERRORISM

Data

In 2013, the most recent year for which START has released a complete set of global terrorism data, just over 11,500 terrorist attacks killed approximately 22,000 people.[4]

START ▶▶   National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism

Worldwide Terrorism, 1970-2014*

* 2014 is partial-year data (January- September)

Source: Global Terrorism Database

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[4] START defines an act of terrorism as follows in the Global Terrorism Database: "the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation."

Given the varying definitions of terrorism and to provide flexibility for those who use GTD for different analytical and operational purposes, an incident must meet five of six criteria to be included in the GTD. Specifically, START includes incidents that meet three mandatory criteria (the act was intentional, the act involved the use or threat of violence, and the perpetrator(s) of the act was a sub-national actor) and then two of the three following additional criteria:

1. The violent act was aimed at attaining a political, economic, religious, or social goal;
2. The violent act included evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to a larger audience (or audiences) other than the immediate victims; and
3. The violent act was outside the precepts of International Humanitarian Law insofar as it targeted non-combatants.

Preliminary data for the first nine months of 2014 overtake those numbers handedly; between January 1st and September 30th nearly 13,000 terrorist attacks killed more than 31,000 people. When START releases the full Global Terrorism Database (GTD) dataset for 2014, we anticipate it will include over 15,000 terrorist attacks, a vast increase from 2013, which was already the most lethal and active year for global terrorism in the dataset, which dates back to 1970.[5,6]

The geographic distribution of terrorist attacks and fatalities is not uniform, nor are all terrorist groups equally responsible for terrorist violence. Instead, only a handful of countries suffer a plurality of global attacks, and a handful of groups bear an overwhelming responsibility for attacks and fatalities.

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[5] It is critical to note that beginning with 2012 data collection, START made several important changes to the GTD collection methodology, improving the efficiency and comprehensiveness of the process. As a result of these improvements, a direct comparison between 2011 and 2012 likely overstates the increase in total attacks and fatalities worldwide during this time period. However, analysis of the data indicates that this increase began before the shift in data collection methodology and has continued after the shift in the data collection methodology. The alarming spike in terrorist activity and lethality over the last several years is a real phenomenon, even when accounting for the possibility of methodological artifacts

[6] I am indebted to Erin Miller, Michael Jensen and the entire Global Terrorism Database team, as well as primary investigators Gary LaFree and Laura Dugan (University of Maryland) for the rigor and objectivity undergirding this terrorism incident data.

Terrorist Attacks by Month, 2012-2014

Source: Global Terrorism Database
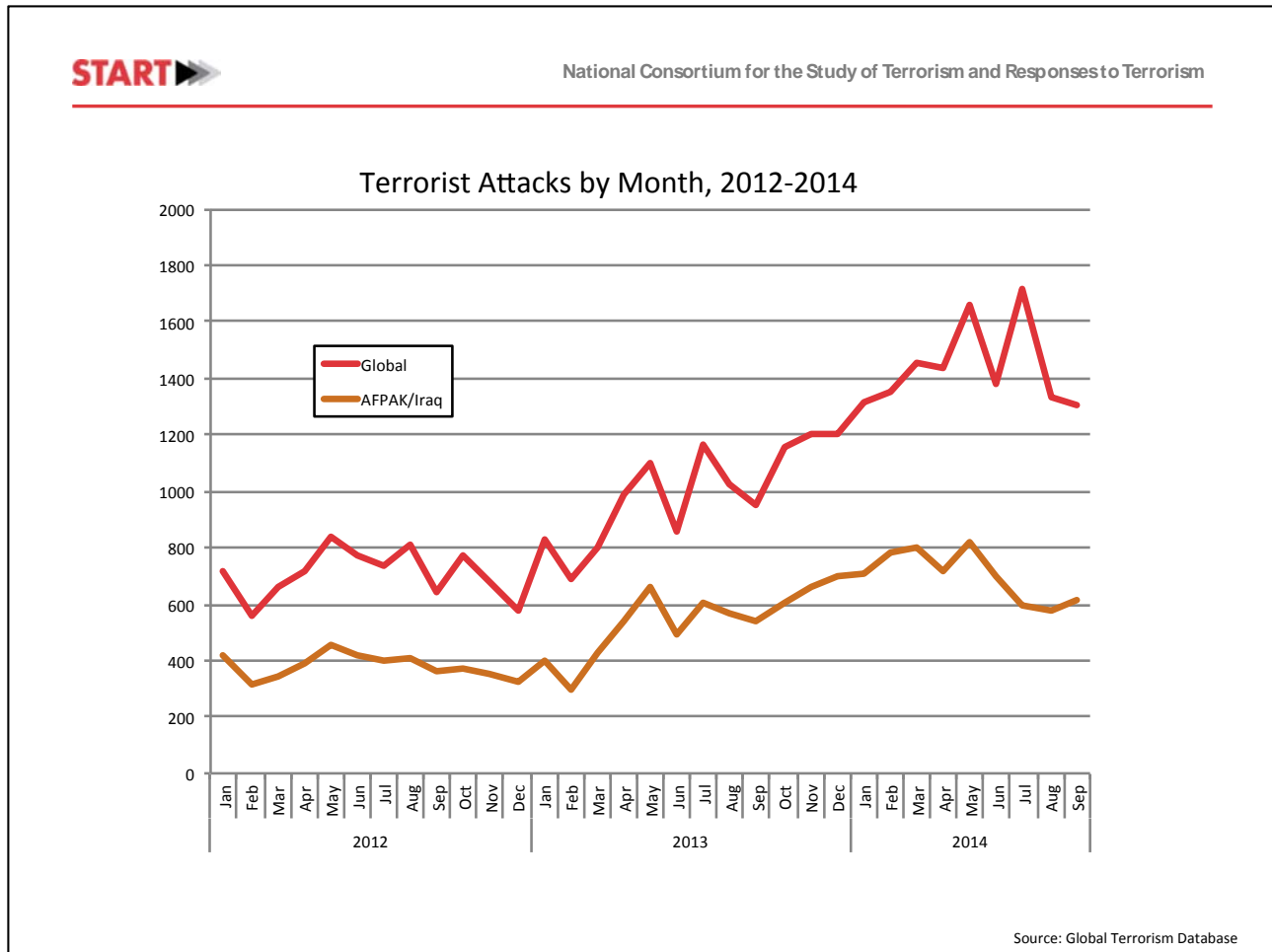
Approximately 50% of the terrorist attacks and 47% of fatalities in the first nine months of 2014 occurred in just three countries – Iraq (approx. 3200 attacks/8950 fatalities), Pakistan (approx. 1705 attacks, 1690 fatalities), and Afghanistan (approx. 1410 attacks/4300 fatalities). Aside from the immediate human costs, terrorist violence is polarizing and often forces individuals to "pick a side." In countries where terrorism crowds out nonviolent activism, civilians often have little choice but to align with extremist organizations out of concerns for self-preservation. This is one mechanism in which extremist ideologies and groups can gain sway over larger swathes of society.

Based on data from the last several years, it is clear that groups generally associated with al-Qa'ida remain the most lethal groups in the world, and it is their violence that has driven global increases in activity and lethality. According to preliminary data from the first nine months of 2014, seven of the ten most lethal terrorist groups include ISIL, Boko Haram, the Taliban, al-Shabaab, al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula, Tehriki-Taliban Pakistan, and Jabhat al-Nusra.

Given this reality, it is even more alarming to note that ISIL conducted more attacks than any other terrorist group, including all other groups associated with AQAM in the first nine months of 2014. If we count ISIL attacks among a representation of AQAM attacks by month, and then present ISIL attacks alone on the same graph, we see the oversized contribution that ISIL has made to the violent output from these various violent jihadist organizations.[7] It is therefore essential to understand the implications of the ideological, operational, and strategic differences that manifest in this greater level of terrorist violence.

Source: Global Terrorism Database

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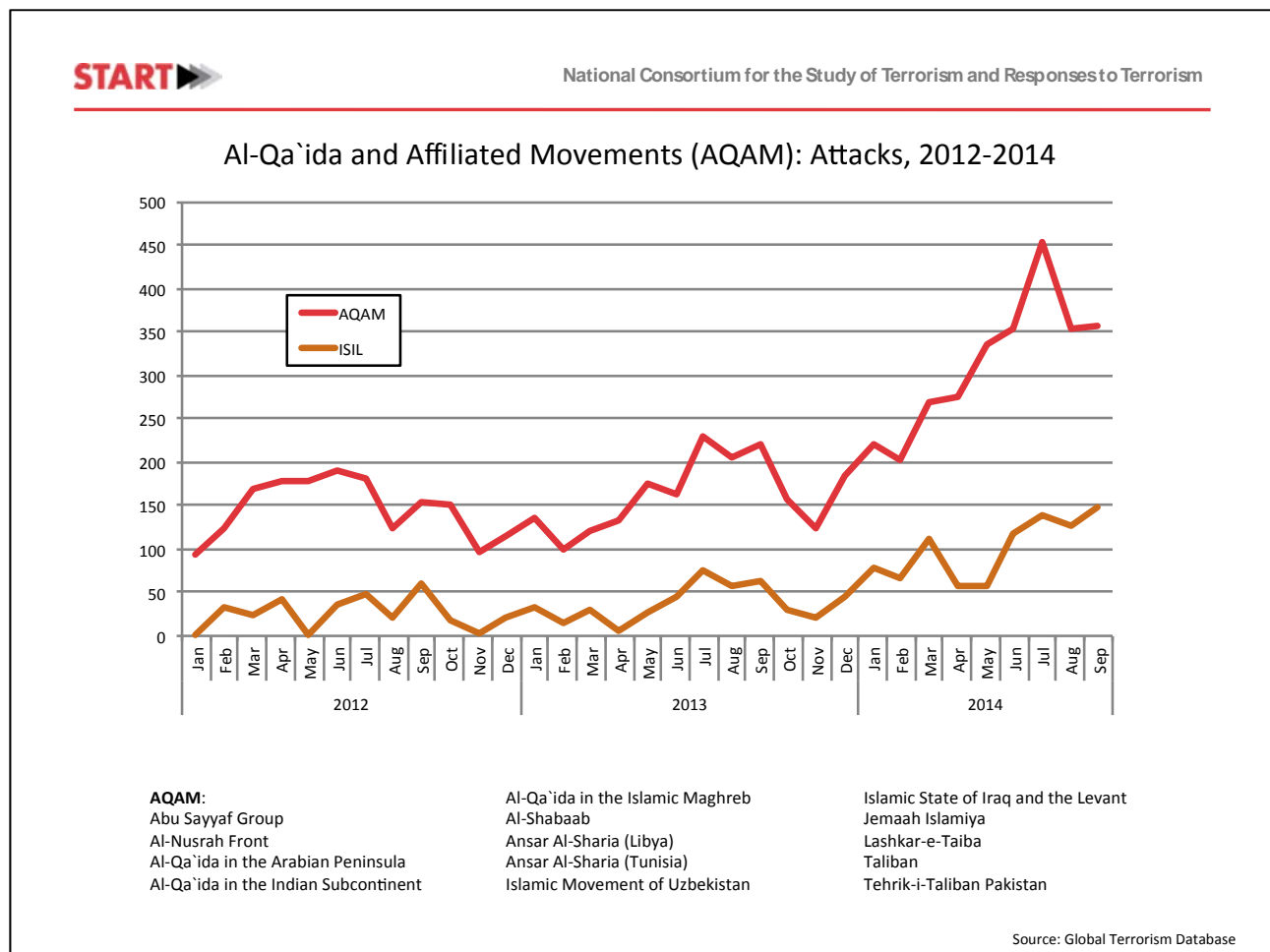
[7] The connection between Boko Haram and al-Qa'ida is not well established in open source literature. While Boko Haram espouses similar justifications for their use of terrorist violence, we have erred on the side of caution in this analysis and excluded them from AQAM. Including Boko Haram would not change the general argument made here: that ISIL was responsible for approximately one-third of terrorist attacks attributed to AQAM in the first nine months of 2014. Due to the high number of fatalities associated with Boko Haram attacks, however, their inclusion would lower the percentage of fatalities attributed to ISIL within AQAM.

Analysis[8]

Given the rise of ISIL and the potential for competition between it and AQAM, I would like to compare and contrast their respective vision for the Caliphate, their operations, and their strategy. I argue that ISIL and AQAM are not merely two sides of the same coin. The differences between them have significant implications for the Muslim world and for U.S. policy.

Vision for the Caliphate

For al-Qa'ida senior leadership, "the Caliphate" is a master-frame that it dangles well out in front of violent Islamist groups the world-over, hoping to align their otherwise dispersed and diverse violent campaigns on azimuths that converge in the triumphant, albeit distant, future. The Caliphate is a conceptual destination; a grandiose victory that signals the onset of global conquest in which all of the world's territories will be governed by al-Qa'ida's interpretation of Islam.

For ISIL, by comparison, it is the reality of an extant Caliphate and its associated obligations that will purify Islam, rally dispersed actors to make the *hijra*, and ready Muslims for the apocalyptic military battle with the West in the Levant. The Caliphate's growth in size and strength is seen as the means to the end of a final decisive military confrontation with the West. Where al-Qa'ida and its associated movement summons fighters to active jihadist fronts, Caliph Ibrahim called upon doctors, jurists and engineers to build the institutions of the Caliphate. Primed by the online discourse of the last ten years, aided by person-to-person social media interactions and inspired by ISIL's advances on the ground, foreign fighters have flowed into Iraq and Syria at an alarming rate.

Part of ISIL's appeal to foreign fighters is its physical control of territory in the Levant, its aura of invincibility stemming from its successful summer military

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[8] The author is indebted to Ryan Pereira, who greatly informed this comparative analysis of al-Qa'ida and ISIL for a recently released Department of Defense white paper, "Multi-Method Assessment of ISIL," December 2014, Strategic Level Assessment Periodic Publication, available at https://drive.google.com/file/d/0Bz3bazlO0zAEdC1ES1gtTW5iNE0/view.

offensive in Iraq, and the doctrine of "remaining and expanding." It is in this context that policymakers should view local insurgent groups' pledges of *baya't* to the Caliphate. In accepting the jihadists' pledges of allegiance and expanding the Caliphate's *wilayats* to the Sinai and North Africa, and most recently to Afghanistan-Pakistan, ISIL is cementing its successes in the eyes of its sympathizers. To these supporters, the Caliphate is not a static institution. It is predestined to expand and attain global domination. While the Caliphate aspires to global domination, its leadership is motivated by a worldview informed by the Prophet Muhammad's military successes against his tribal enemies. Just as the Prophet was able to overcome military defeats and survive assassination attempts, so too, will the Caliphate continue its global expansion in the light of the U.S.-led coalition's campaign against ISIL.

Operations

Al-Qa'ida's kinetic operations target the "far enemy," the West, above all other targets. Viewing their organization as the vanguard of the jihadist movement, al-Qa'ida seeks to use spectacular, mass-casualty terrorist attacks to incite a heavy-handed military response from Western governments. These state responses would seemingly evidence the War on Islam that al-Qa'ida portrays in its propaganda, thereby polarizing the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds and enabling the jihadists to mobilize resources for a civilizational conflict. Al-Qa'ida strategist, Abu Bakr Naji, famously referred to this process as "awakening the masses." For al-Qa'ida's provocation to be effective, foreign governments must play their scripted roles in this cycle of violence, hence al-Qa'ida's preference for sensational attacks that are politically difficult for Western nation-states to ignore.

Before, during and after the Sunni awakening in Iraq, al-Qa'ida senior leadership discouraged Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's internecine violence in favor of attacks against the occupying forces. In recent years and in various countries, amorphous front groups with names like Ansar al-Sharia have worked alongside of other Sunni jihadists and insurgents, many with divergent ideological orientations. These front

organizations are designed to provide basic social services to local populations and to engage in da'wa, the promulgation of their religious ideology. For al-Qa'ida, it is not yet time to purify Islam by force.

By contrast, ISIL has thus far opted to deter full-scale Western intervention in Iraq and Syria while engaging in aggressive internecine violence to purge local challengers. When President Obama deployed U.S. military advisors to Iraq, ISIL threatened that #CalamityWillBefallUS via Twitter should the U.S. escalate its involvement in the fight. In response to U.S. airstrikes, ISIL released videos of the murders of journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff. While limited intervention may serve to bolster the legitimacy and recruitment efforts of ISIL, as it can weather such a storm, baiting a large-scale intervention is not yet in their best interests.

Instead of the far enemy, ISIL's military operations have focused on attacking competitors in their midst who do not submit to their ideological and organizational primacy, and seizing the resources necessary to build the institutions of the Caliphate. Operations are not only used to seize important border crossings, dams, and oil fields or to weaken competing militias in territorial strongholds, but also to purify Islam by force, using brutal public executions and amputations to intimidate and deter potential rivals.[9]

The Caliphate's construction is predicated upon the rigid enforcement of ISIL's interpretation of Islamic law in strongholds like the city of Raqqa in Syria and Mosul

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[9] When the Albu Nimr Tribe in Heet challenged ISIL, hundreds of its tribal members, including women and children were tortured and brutally executed. When the Albu Nimr requested assistance from the Abadi Administration in Baghdad, the government sent a drone to photograph the unfolding catastrophe but never sent military reinforcements or aerial support. To Sunni tribal groups like the Albu Nimr and the Shaitat Tribe in Deir Izzour, Syria that have challenged ISIL's ruthless worldview, their failure to receive external assistance simply reinforces their beliefs that the United States, the Assad regime, and the government in Baghdad are advancing the *Safavids'* interests and allowing Sunnis to be murdered, either under the pretext of a U.S.-led air campaign against "terrorism" or by ISIL's puritanical fighters. This plays into ISIL's operations plan. To the extent that local Sunni resistance against ISIL is not supported, local insurgents have less reason to challenge ISIL for their eventual fate is predetermined: the rape of their women, the plundering of their property, and mass public executions.

in Iraq. Unlike al-Qa'ida's more accommodating stance in the post Arab-Spring world, which resembles Abu Bakr Naji's guidance for "managing savagery" in the early stages of a security vacuum, ISIL has continued the practices of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who attacked the Shia, secularists, non-violent Islamist parties, and Sunni-tribesmen that did not subordinate themselves to al-Qa'ida in Iraq. These practices reflect Naji's later guidance for how to deal with "other gangs and parties" in the later stages of a security vacuum. Naji argues, "We must drag everyone into the battle in order to give life to those who deserve to live and destroy those who deserve to be destroyed."

Strategy

Al-Qa'ida is waging a protracted war of attrition against the West, specifically aiming to bleed the United States. Given the failure of local terrorist groups to overthrow their respective apostate regimes in the 1980s and 1990s, al-Qa'ida senior leadership reasoned that American support was the apostate regimes' "center of gravity." If they were able to attrite the American economic, military, or political will to remain engaged in the Muslim world, local jihadists could overpower the apostates. To wage this war of attrition, al-Qa'ida aims to reorient the violence of militant organizations and individuals in various locations around the world, refocusing their wrath on far-enemy targets like Western embassies, businesses and tourist destinations within their own states. Al-Qa'ida's operations focus on the far-enemy because they need the U.S. to respond militarily in as many locations as possible, overextending itself and spending precious resources, all the while generating greater levels of anti-American sentiment from local Muslim populations in return, until continued U.S. engagement in the Muslim world becomes prohibitive. By inserting itself into various active fronts around the world, al-Qa'ida has spread its anti-Western ideology and brought with it its tactical and targeting preferences.

ISIL is not currently waging a strategy of attrition, but one of escalation. It is using its military superiority to eliminate or subjugate rival insurgent groups and non-violent communities in Iraq and Syria that could eventually pose a threat to the

authority ISIL seeks to impose. Instead of inviting Muslim vs. Western violence and banking on that conflict to polarize communities and mobilize resources, it is benefiting from the resources already being mobilized by the sectarian polarization that is taking place in Iraq, Syria and beyond, which it actively seeks to exacerbate. ISIL is willing and able to use extreme violence to carve out control at the expense of its rivals, and then to consolidate its hold on the resources pouring into the conflict.

Given this comparison, ISIL's relative appeal can be distilled into five points.

1. Sectarianism: Whereas al-Qa'ida's "far-enemy" strategy relies on provocation to polarize and mobilize the masses, ISIL is ratcheting up already elevated levels of sectarian tension in the post Arab-Spring world and benefitting from the resulting resource mobilization. The continued presence of the Assad regime in Syria serves as a more salient rallying cry for ISIL than for AQAM, and broad anti-Assad sentiment in Sunni majority countries helps to dampen those governments' responses to ISIL.

2. Righteousness: While al-Qa'ida emphasizes the importance of doctrine in its rhetoric, ISIL has evidenced a fervent desire to enforce an uncompromising interpretation of Islamic law through its actions.

3. Obligation: Al-Qa'ida relies on an abstract argument – that Islam is under attack everywhere – to convince Muslims that it is their individual duty to defend Islam everywhere, obfuscating offensive tactics with notions of defensive jihad. ISIL has established a physical Caliphate, and with it, the pragmatic obligation to defend the Caliphate and build its institutions.

4. Strength: Al-Qa'ida is a cautious and nomadic terrorist organization that has shied away from equating terrain with success, trying instead to reorient extant militant groups from the periphery of their respective conflicts in a slow war of attrition with the West. ISIL, by comparison, appears decisive, confident, and contemporary as they opportunistically seize terrain, antagonize their enemies, and publicize their exploits.

5. Urgency: ISIL sees the Caliphate as the means to the final apocalyptic battle between Muslims and the non-Muslim world. For those ideologically

inclined individuals, it is essential to participate in ISIL's campaign now, before the opportunity passes. Without the Caliphate, al-Qa'ida's call to arms lacks the same urgency.

Implications

If sectarian conflict continues to offer greater means for insurgents to mobilize resources and destabilize apostate regimes than al-Qa'ida's far-enemy centered war of attrition, the model presented by ISIL will supplant that of al-Qa'ida. As sectarian tensions remain high, ISIL and aligned jihadist groups will foster and exploit those tensions. ISIL veterans will travel to new fronts outside of Iraq and Syria, bringing their escalation strategy with them and severing regional ties more successfully than al-Qa'ida operations to date. Left unchecked, this contagion effect runs the risk of inciting a sectarian civil war in the Muslim world, and in that calamitous process, advancing al-Qa'ida's strategy of attrition against the West. The West will be relegated to the role of observer, poorly positioned to take any meaningful action to protect itself or others.

If ISIL's Caliphate project fails, however, their presence on the fringe of the radical spectrum may serve to make al-Qa'ida and its associated movement look more legitimate by comparison. This fringe effect could benefit al-Qa'ida in two ways.

First, as the international security community hones in on ISIL it could result in increased freedom of maneuver for al-Qa'ida in the short-term, the very time when the crisis of legitimacy brought on by ISIL has created a tremendous incentive for al-Qa'ida to conduct a successful attack against the West. The U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan and ongoing instability in the Pakistani tribal belts may provide the requisite safe-haven for al-Qa'ida to hatch such an attack. Perhaps ironically, the presence of large numbers of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria drawn in by ISIL and other organizations may also provide al-Qa'ida with an opportunity to turn one or more of these individuals around to attack the West, as is the alleged mission of the Khorasan group within Jabhat al-Nusra. Second, an al-Qa'ida organization perceived

to be more legitimate, discerning and focused on the "true enemies of Islam" may secure greater funding and popular support in the long-term.

In either case, it is essential that any U.S. strategy prioritizes working with Sunni nations and communities to marginalize violent Sunni extremists. To do this, the U.S. must find a way to ease sectarian tensions and earn the trust of our Sunni partners, allowing them to focus their attention on marginalizing groups like ISIL and AQAM.