

# SMA CENTCOM Reach-back Reports



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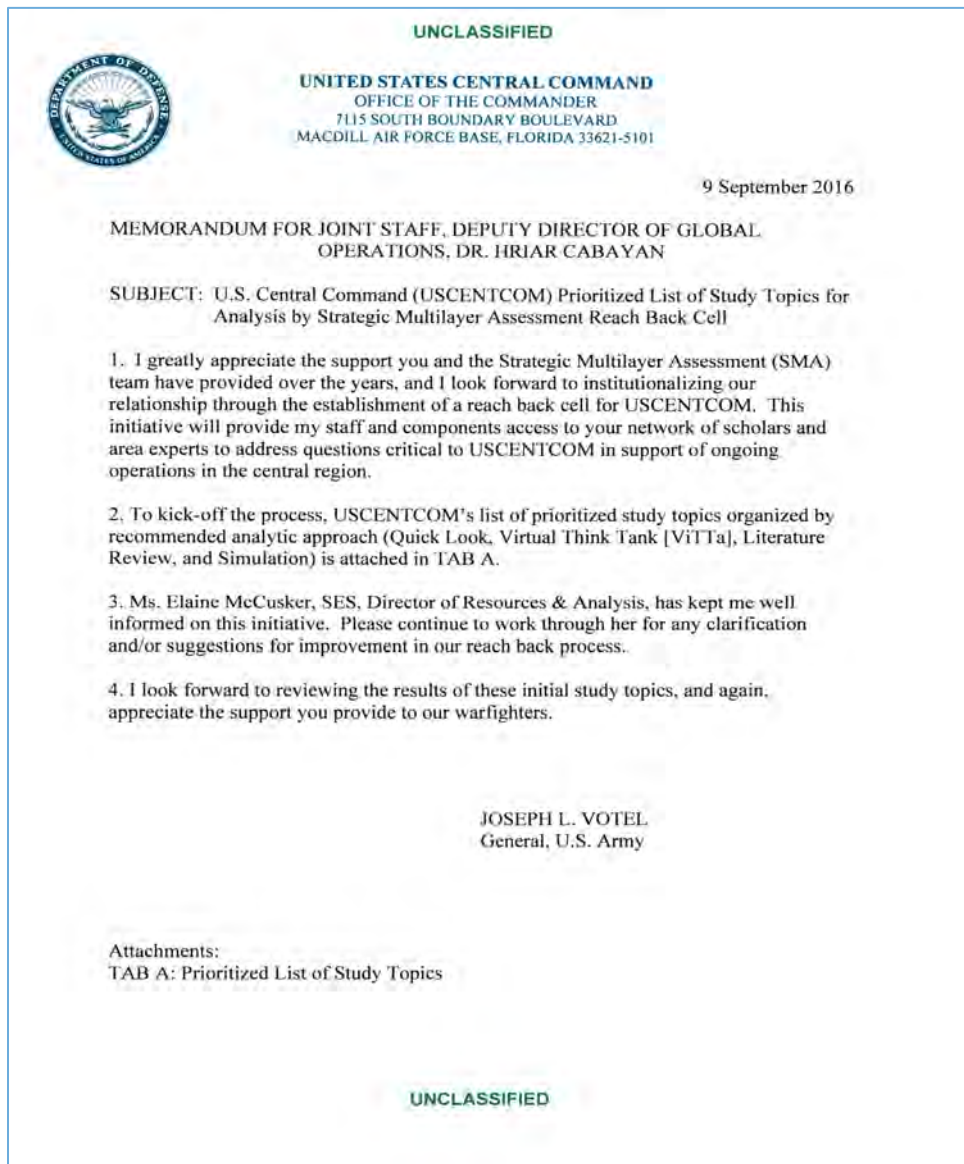
9: Coalition Views

*This is Part 5 of a 9 part series of SMA Reach back responses to questions posed by USCENTCOM. Each report contains responses to multiple questions grouped by theme.*

10 January 2017

At the request of United States Central Command (USCENTCOM), the Joint Staff, Deputy Director for Global Operations (DDGO), jointly with other elements in the JS, Services, and U.S. Government (USG) Agencies, has established a SMA virtual reach-back cell. This initiative, based on the SMA global network of scholars and area experts, is providing USCENTCOM with population based and regional expertise in support of ongoing operations in the Iraq/Syria region.

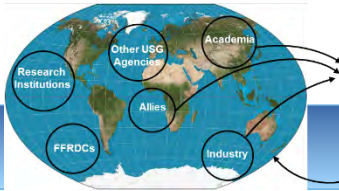
The Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment (SMA) provides planning support to Commands with complex operational imperatives requiring multi-agency, multi-disciplinary solutions that are NOT within core Service/Agency competency. Solutions and participants are sought across USG and beyond. SMA is accepted and synchronized by Joint Staff (JS/J-3/DDGO) and executed by ASD(R&E)/EC&P/RRTO.



## Responses to CENTCOM Questions

What are the key factors that would impact the wave of violent extremism and ideological radicalism that affect the Sunni community? ..... **4**

What are the correlations between the US/coalition operational and tactical actions in theater effecting terrorist activity throughout the world (i.e., external events). For example, does the loss of ISIL controlled territory or kill/capture of an ISIL high value target lead to an increase/decrease in terrorist attacks in other areas of the world? Can location, intensity, duration or timing of attacks be predicted from a model? ..... **25**



## SMA Reach-back

**Question:** *What are the key factors that would impact the wave of violent extremism and ideological radicalism that affect the Sunni community?*

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### Executive Summary

The Sunni community is not homogenous, and contributors expressed their discomfort making broad generalizations for a number of reasons. Most Sunni Arabs still consider themselves first a citizen of their respective countries with the exception of populations in the midst of conflict like Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Local customs and histories result in a different experience for Sunnis in, for example, France versus Chechnya (Olidort). Furthermore, there is no single Sunni leader (like the Pope or the Ayatollah or even a senior theologian) with religious legitimacy to assert leadership over the Sunni community (Shaikh).

However, experts attempted to broadly categorize risk factors—especially as they pertain to Sunnis inside and outside Combined Joint Operations Area (CJOA). Unfortunately, the factors most likely to impact waves of violent extremism and ideological radicalization are already well known to the DoD community.

### Conditions that Are Conducive to Radicalism and Extremism

#### *Failure of the Social Contract*

While particularly true in Iraq and Syria, it is nonetheless applicable across the all societies that when a government breaks its social contract with its people—through exclusion from government, disenfranchisement, failure to provide equitable essential services, justice, or security—unrest often follows (Abbas, Everington, Sheikh). ISIL and other extremist groups thrive in these conditions as people who are left with little-to-no legal recourse choose violence. Filling these voids or assisting governments to address these legitimate grievances may reduce underlying root causes of extremism (Olidort).

#### *Failure to Defeat ISIL*

Hammad Sheikh, visiting scholar at the Centre on the Resolution of Intractable Conflicts at Oxford University, stated “only when ISIL is defeated in the field unambiguously will the allure of Jihadi ideology

be affected.” Establishing a territorial caliphate is at the heart of ISIL’s legitimacy, so striking at that erodes the appeal and credibility of ISIL. This must be done largely by Sunni Arab forces. Atrocities by any other group will incite tribalism and feed into the narrative of jihadi groups, increasing radicalization of the wider Sunni Arab population (Sheikh).

#### *Lack of Resolution in Syria*

Atrocities committed against Sunnis in Syria struck a flint to simmering unrest in the region, allowing for the rapid rise of ISIL. The lack of resolution in Syria remains an open wound that continues to attract foreign fighters from across the globe (Olidort). “A complete resolution designed and carried out with the participation of local moderate actors would have the effect of downgrading the allure of foreign fighters and others to migrate to Syria,” Jacob Olidort, an expert on Islamist groups at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy suggested. However, as we have already begun to see, the territorial defeat of ISIL will likely force the organization to change its tactics, encouraging sympathizers overseas to conduct lone wolves against the far enemy.

#### *Lack of Unified Sunni Political Voice*

To combat extremism in CJOA, the USG could facilitate a Sunni Empowerment Campaign (Carreau). This kind of strategy would “create the strongest and most effective antidote to ISIL’s magnetism (including for local recruits and foreign fighters) and worldwide expansion (including lone wolf attacks in the west) because it will finally provide an outlet for Sunni grievances and a viable alternative to violent jihadism as protection against various forms of Shi’a oppression,” according to Bernard Carreau, Deputy Director of the Center for Complex Operations at NDU. This strategy would help build Sunni political voice in Iraq and Syria to help answer the question of who/what should fill the void caused by the defeat of ISIL (Carreau).<sup>1</sup>

#### *Perception of Expanded Shia Influence in Sunni Areas*

There is widespread belief that the USG is in alignment with Iran to expand Shia influence from Tehran to Damascus. There is certainly mistrust in the ability of the world community to use diplomacy to reach a resolution (Shaikh). While this does not fuel radicalization directly, it influences the decision calculus of Sunnis to build what they see as pragmatic alliances with Sunni jihadi groups who they believe to—at the very least—have Sunnis’ best interests and welfare in mind (Olidort).

This is good news for the Coalition as Sunnis in CJOA may be convinced to turn against ISIL and other extremist groups by appealing to the other “hats” local Sunni leaders wear, such as tribal responsibilities, members of political or commercial elite, the old guard, and other kinds of networks (Olidort, Shaikh). This opens the door to other means of engagement and trust building aside from traditional counter-messaging. In fact, resolutions to challenges facing the Sunni community must remain locally generated to have any real, lasting impact (Shaikh)

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<sup>1</sup> The response to Virtual Think Tank 1 question also suggests that the US could play an important role in bringing actors together to help unify Sunni political voice in Iraq in addition to bringing actors to the table to discuss a political resolution to the conflict.

### *Personal Motivations*

Finally, Sunnis—particularly outside CJOA—turn towards ISIL and other extremist groups for a number of personal reasons (Everington). These range from lack of employment opportunities to discrimination to search for personal meaning (Olidort, Everington, Shaikh). These motivations vary widely from person to person even within the same geographic community and are difficult to address.

## SME Input

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*What are the key factors that would impact the wave of violent extremism and ideological radicalism that affect the Sunni community?*

ANSWER: a) Transparency in local governance; b) accountable law enforcement/policing; c) quality of religious education; d) Friday sermons

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Joint Staff/J7 commissioned NDU's Center for Complex Operations to conduct a classified study that is nearing completion on the question of whether U.S. national security decision-making and strategic planning processes were effective in achieving national objectives in Syria. The research touches on all the study topics listed above. While these SMA topics are diverse enough to call for different approaches at the operational level, the findings of the research indicate that at the policy/strategic level they could potentially all be addressed by a change in OIR strategy.

### **Methods:**

The study covers the period from 2011 through early 2016. It is based on interviews of high-level and mid-level officials involved in Syria policy at the National Security Council, the Departments of State and Defense, the Agency for International Development, and the intelligence community, as well as on a review of classified and unclassified U.S. policy documents, including NSC discussion papers, military options papers, State Department reporting cables, intelligence assessments, and other intergovernmental correspondence. It draws on public policy pronouncements made by the President and senior administration officials, as well as a literature review of academic and expert outside commentary on U.S. Syria policy.

### **Results:**

#### *Realigning U.S. Policy to Accommodate Divergent Interests of Allies and Regional Rivals*

A major factor preventing the U.S from achieving its objectives in Iraq, Syria, and the C-ISIL campaign is the U.S. inability, or unwillingness, to accommodate the interests of our allies, especially Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf States, and regional stakeholders, including Russia and Iran. ISIL is not the priority of any U.S. ally nor of any U.S. regional competitor. Yet U.S. policy is largely centered on making it their

priority. Rather than continue to work at cross-purposes, there may be a way to meet our allies and regional rivals half-way while narrowing but preserving core U.S. interests in the region. One prime example is U.S. policy toward the Kurds. Extensive and deepening U.S. support for the Kurds may be providing short-term gains at the expense of long-term regional stability. Over-reliance on Kurdish forces has exacerbated far more important U.S. relations with regional allies and adversaries alike, including Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran. An equally pernicious by-product of over-reliance on the Kurds is the perception among Sunni Arabs that the U.S. is encouraging Kurdish encroachment on Sunni Arab lands, similar to Sunni perceptions that the U.S. continuously supports Shi'a regimes over Sunni regimes. The U.S. should continue to protect Kurdish populations, but it should consider significant adjustments to its support of Kurdish forces, including the Peshmerga and the YPG.

In Syria, the U.S. should consider maintaining the same policy goals but altering the strategic objectives and the strategy for achieving them. The new strategy would accept the already *de facto* sphere of influence of Russia and Iran in Syria, including the continued reign of Assad, at least for some time. If the U.S., Russia, and Iran could eventually agree to pressure Assad to step aside, the U.S. might still be prepared to accept an Alawite-dominated government, but one offering much stronger protections for Sunni populations (discussed more fully below). With respect to Iran, the U.S. would seek a quid pro quo: accept Iran's close ties and influence with Damascus but insist on no threats to Israel and no support for terrorist activities by Hezbollah. The U.S. would have considerable leverage over Iran, including vigilant enforcement of JCPOA, and a reduction in support of Kurdish forces. Iran will have an interest in maintaining JCPOA, in controlling its Kurdish population, as well as in controlling the restive Kurdish populations in both Syria and Iraq. Iran will also have an interest in degrading and defeating ISIL. The

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biggest leverage the U.S. will have over Iran would be a proposed reconfiguration of the C-ISIL campaign, complementing it with an explicit program of support to Sunni communities in Syria and Iraq, as explained below.

Turkey could become the most valuable U.S. ally in Syria and Iraq if the U.S. would simply curtail its support of the Kurds. Turkey might accept the U.S. disinclination to remove Assad in exchange for reduced U.S. support to the Kurds and perhaps even more U.S. support to Turkey in helping to degrade the PKK. The U.S. should welcome the Turkish incursion into northern Syria and could do so most effectively by reducing its support of the SDF and YPG.

#### *OIR and a Sunni Empowerment Strategy*

In addition, the U.S. could complement the C-ISIL campaign with a "Sunni Empowerment Campaign." The point would be to counter what LTG Nagata has observed is a strong perception in the region that the U.S. will support "anyone but Sunnis." The U.S. could exert considerable leverage over events in Iraq, Syria, and Iran in accordance with U.S. national interests if it were able to provide greater support to Sunnis in the region.



Such a strategy could act as a check on Iran's regional hegemony, discourage Saudi and Gulf State support of AQ and other extremist groups, check Sunni oppression by Assad in Syria, or his successor, and check Sunni oppression by Abadi and the Shi'a militias he relies on, in Iraq. *Most important, a Sunni empowerment strategy will create the strongest and most effective antidote to ISIL's magnetism (including for local recruits and foreign fighters) and worldwide expansion (including lone wolf attacks in the west) because it will finally provide an outlet for Sunni grievances and a viable alternative to violent jihadism as protection against various forms of Shi's oppression.* Current U.S. policy to "degrade and defeat ISIL" is only half-baked: U.S. policy must further answer the question "and replace it with what?" A viable Sunni empowerment strategy would answer that question.

The main elements of a Sunni Empowerment Campaign might be (details about issues such as the nature of the safe zone and types of arms to be supplied would be included in a classified annex):

- Scale back training and equipping all Kurdish forces. Reassure Sunni Arabs that the U.S. will assist them to maintain control of their traditional lands.
- In Syria, greatly expand CIA support for rebel forces, not with the intent of overthrowing Assad, but with the intent of protecting rebel-held lands from bombing raids and providing essential services and humanitarian assistance. The rebels would be advised, trained, and equipped sufficiently to cause major hardships for Assad and Iran, with the point being to force Assad into making political concessions.
- Consider establishing a safe zone around rebel-held areas, perhaps using Turkish forces, if Turkey could be persuaded to do so in exchange for U.S. reducing support to the Kurds.
- Train and equip Syrian Sunni (*not* Kurdish) militias in eastern Syria and let them fight the enemy that most oppresses them—whether Assad's forces or ISIL forces. For the current train and equip program in Syria, drop the requirement that they swear off fighting Assad and only fight ISIL, and provide close air support to protect them when they engage.
- In Iraq, continue supporting the ISF, but also institute train and equip and advise and assist programs aimed at creating an Iraqi "National Guard"—i.e., well-trained Sunni militias in al Anbar and al Ninawah.
- A U.S. Sunni Empowerment Campaign might encourage Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States to support U.S. efforts to train and equip moderate Sunni militias in Iraq and Syria and cease their support of radical groups.

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This is a wildly generalized question. Which Sunni community? In which city and country? For example, the factors that impact on the Sunni population in Aden (Yemen) are different from those that impact on Sunny populations in Raqqa. To be fair, there are similar categories but this would require outlining an entire attitudinal and behavioral methodology that is beyond the scope of this small number of paragraphs Nevertheless, a good starting point would be to consider three super-factors: personal motivations and enables, context and the perceptions/actions of the VEO in question. As a final note,

ideological radicalism is entirely different from violent extremism. For example, the former would include Salafist Quietists in Jordan while the latter would not.

Anonymous Source

“Sunni community” is a generic concept borrowed from the Islamic theological lexicon. In the aftermath of the 2003-invasion of Iraq it became a main referential framework for defining Arab citizens based on their sectarian affiliation rather than their statehood. Unfortunately, it is difficult to use this narrow framework to answer the question above, given that most Arabs still consider themselves citizens of their respective countries rather than followers of a specific sectarian group. For instance, most Algerians, Egyptians, Moroccans, Tunisians, and Libyans are Muslims and prefer to be referred to as citizens of their respective states rather than Sunnis. Although the situation may differ in countries like Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia and the GCC states, and Lebanon, still these countries are not representative of Sunnis across the Muslim world. In fact, to what extent is the Sunni community homogeneous? Who has the religious legitimacy to assert leadership over the Sunni community?

“Most Arabs still consider themselves citizens of their respective countries rather than followers of a specific sectarian group.”

Moreover, the question does not give a definition of “violent extremism” (VE), which could pose challenges for any serious analysis. Extremist groups might be motivated by religious or ideological patterns (al-Qaida, ISIL, right-wing, populist extremists in Europe and across the United States) and use the same means (i.e. violence or unacceptable behavior seeking to impose views through violence) to achieve their goals. Countering violent extremism (CVE) as is formulated in Western literature suffers from inconsistency, as it is difficult to convince Muslims to condemn and fight against what was already depicted as “Islamic” while Islamic religious scholars and institutions have unanimously declared ISIL un-Islamic and criminal. Often, ISIL quotes the Qur’an but this does not assume that such violent non-state actors (VNSA) have the normative interpretation of the scriptural texts while the “Qur’an cannot explain Bin Laden any more than the Bible can explain the Irish Republican Army” to paraphrase the French sociologist Jean-François Burgat. Various social segments in the Arab world including, Islamists and non-Islamists, civil society actors and pro-democracy activists instrumentalize Islamic narratives in their daily life. Therefore, the association of ISIL with the Muslim faith is problematic for CVE. The so-called ISIL is “Islamic” in the same way the French National Front is “French” or the German neo-Nazi National Democratic Party is “German.” No objective analysis would consider these actors to be representative of “Frenchness” or “Germanness.”

ISIL’s expansion during the last two years in Iraq and Syria mirrored the fragmentation of these countries along ethnic and sectarian lines, where people contested the centralized authority of their respective governments, especially with the feeling of being disenfranchised and excluded from state development. ISIL built its power in Sunni areas based on the sectarian disaffection of local populations and the suffering inflicted by Shi’a or Alawite majority security forces. Thus, citizens will keep contesting central authority when their basic needs are not met or when they are arbitrarily discriminated against

and mistreated. This enables VNSAs to take advantage of the situation. This context is not specific to Iraq. Even in the case of Egypt, with its relatively homogenous population, severe counter-insurgency methods --including house demolitions and population displacement in Sinai-- are creating local ISIL sympathizers. Rather than extremism per se, it is more the conditions that are conducive to such radicalism that must be scrutinized and tackled by the policymakers in these countries.

3. What long-term actions and processes should U.S. government (USG) institutions, the Coalition, and the international community examine to position ourselves against a long term ISIL threat? How can the private sector be effectively engaged by government institutions to optimize the effects needed for success?

-Working on formulating a coherent definition of VE that dissociates Islam from extremism in order to deny ISIL any religious legitimacy or ideological victory.

-Encouraging --rather than forcing-- Arab countries to develop educational systems that provide youth with the critical skills needed to better sift through and assess the information they come across both online and offline. Radical narratives should be challenged and deconstructed by acknowledged religious leaders, educated youth and legitimate policymakers.

-Helping local state institutions build trust with their citizens through accountability, rule of law, and the safeguarding of human rights. The fight against ISIL and its affiliates ought to be within the framework of law enforcement and criminal justice. This entails democratic governance of the security sector, shifting from state-security survival to citizen security and safety.

-Being realistic about the expectations of current Arab governments in identifying and alleviating the causes that gave birth to ISIL in the first place. It is beyond the existing regimes' capacities to address the socioeconomic and political conditions of their societies. To be sure, these regimes can no longer postpone tackling the roots of their citizens' grievances, which resulted in political choices pursued by these governments for decades.

It is difficult to see how the above recommendations might be implemented while the Middle East policy of the country supposed to help in their implementation (i.e., the United States) already lacks credibility and coherence. The \$37 billion US aid package awarded by the Obama administration to Israel will no doubt further corrode America's credibility in the region.

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Clearly, from the nature of the question, what is missing is an understanding is a basic understanding of who and what the Islamic State is. First, the use of ISIL indicates that whoever is using this name is seriously stuck in a paradigm over two years gone. The Islamic State was originally established in early 2003 as the Jama'at al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad (The Organization of Monotheism and Jihad or JTJ) by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. In October 2004 the name was changed to Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn (The Organization of Jihad's Base in the Country of the Two Rivers, or TQJBR). In October 2006 the name was changed again, to al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi Iraq (Islamic State of Iraq, or ISIS). At this point ISI called itself, internally, al-Dawlat, or just "the State." It was also by this point named by coalition intelligence agencies as A' Qaeda in Iraq, or AQI. In April 2013, with a final break from Al Qaeda, ISI renamed itself al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi Iraq wa al-Sham (the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Shem, which if the initials are used as an acronym is Daesh; if translated it means the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant/Syria/Damascus, thus ISIL, ISIS and ISID). Finally, on 29 June 2014, Daesh changed its name to al-Dawlat al-Islamiyya, meaning "The Islamic State" or also known as "The Caliphate."

The Islamic State is known throughout the Middle East today, except within territory it controls, as Daesh. The use of Daesh is considered by the Islamic State to be derogatory, as it considers itself as no longer an insurgency but a sovereign entity. Thus, most not under the sway of the IS prefer to use that term. Coalition forces should also adopt that term, as it is well-recognized within the Middle East. Continued use of the term ISIL is incorrect, outdated and indicative of a certain political stance. Alternatively, the use of ISIS instead of ISIL, Daesh or IS is a common term as well, readily accepted globally. However, for accuracy in understanding how Islamic State personnel refer to themselves and view themselves, the term "Islamic State" is appropriate. Each of the previously discussed terms are loaded with meaning and indicates an individuals and/or groups understanding of the cultural realities of Iraq and Syria.

Next, in my opinion, USCENTCOM is deficient in understanding the religious aspects of Islam which the Islamic State employs in spreading its message, in ruling its territory, and which it employs to justify its actions, both past, present and future. By deficient I do not mean analysts are unable to read the Quran, examine Ahadith or listen to speeches by those supporting the Islamic State. What I mean is that the analysts do not have the cultural, historical and religious context. With the Islamic State it is critical to understand where they come from in the maddhabs, how they seem to "cherry pick" Quranic statements but still retain legitimacy, and how they can justify some of the most horrific atrocities and still enjoy quiet acceptance throughout the Sunni world. Coalition analysts need to have knowledge of the concept of abrogation in reference to the Quran and Islam and coalition analysts need to have a thorough grounding in Sunni and Shia history as well as the differing ways each organize and the impacts these have on today's actions (why Al Qaeda and IS violently compete against each other, how Hezbollah impacts on the periphery, how Shia are being recruited from as far afield as Afghanistan to

fight against the IS, how the concept of “Lone Wolf” is a coalition concept versus the use of the term Jundullah by Islam).

## Factors Contributing to the appeal of Violent Extremism among Sunnis

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There are a number of geopolitical, local and circumstantial factors that impact in both direct and indirect ways how Sunni communities in the region and abroad gravitate towards violent extremism and ideological radicalism. Before describing these, the following response will first provide background on the assumptions that inform this assessment as well as those that inform the understanding of the unique appeal of ISIL and jihadist groups.

### Assumptions

Three assumptions inform this assessment about the factors pulling Sunni communities to violent extremism.

*Syria is decisive.* The first is that the type and scale of this ideological force today is intimately linked (both physically and rhetorically) to events in Syria. A complete resolution designed and carried out with the participation of local moderate actors would have the effect of downgrading the allure of foreign fighters and others to migrate to Syria, as recent reports about the dwindling numbers of foreign fighters suggest. Nonetheless, in terms of the threat posed by ISIL and other jihadist groups, this will only have the effect of forcing them to change strategy to direct and “inspire” attacks overseas as they have been doing in recent months.

“A complete resolution designed and carried out with the participation of local moderate actors would have the effect of downgrading the allure of foreign fighters and others to migrate to Syria.”

*Which Sunnis.* The second assumption (and connected with this latter point about the shifting strategy of ISIL) relates to the *kinds* of Sunni communities they will address. To begin with, there are differences between the Sunnis in Syria and Iraq from those in other countries in the Middle East and North Africa, as well as differences between Sunni communities in the Middle East from those in Europe and the United States. Moreover, there are differences within these communities in the understanding of current events – from non-violent Salafi, to jihadi, to Sufi-traditional, to recent converts. Finally, there are also local customs and histories that shape the different Sunni experiences of Muslims in, say, Chechnya from those in France – an important point to underscore in light of the foreign fighter phenomenon and the questions it raises about *whose* Sunni communities are likely to gravitate towards ISIL’s call. Moreover, in particular in the Iraqi case, it is important to ask whether these are city-based

versus countryside-based Sunnis, and whether they might have other meaningful local affiliations (tribal, social/political elite, scholarly families...) All of this means that just as the U.S. government is attuned to ISIL messaging, so too it must be attuned to which Sunni communities may be most susceptible to it.

*Why some Sunnis and not others.* The third assumption concerns *why* some Sunni communities and individuals might gravitate towards violent extremism while others may not – specifically, that while ideological similarities may be important, it is critical to not overlook the fact that many may join for a host of personal, financial and physical reasons as well. Indeed, the most likely to join because of jihadists’ ideological rigor are either the most religiously-educated or the least religiously-educated. The middle groups – those who are looking to climb social or religious ranks but who lack certain circumstances – could claim they are drawing to these groups because of ideology, but for whom in fact a host of mundane personal factors may be at play. It is also likely these “climbers,” as well as the least-educated, who would be most likely to act in spectacular ways on the group’s behalf (whether carrying out terrorist acts or becoming foreign fighters).

#### Differences between the Appeal of ISIL and that of other Jihadist Groups

*Building or breaking local ties.* It is by now well known that the unique brand of violent extremism of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is far from static, and that its appeal resonates with different cross-sections of Sunnis – both in the Middle East and abroad. Moreover, its ideological radicalism is distinct from that promoted by other Salafi-jihadist groups in the region and, as such, both pose distinct threats in both the Middle East and in the West. ISIL, which claims to be building an expansionist caliphate-state in Iraq and Syria, views itself as an *alternative to* local national interests. In turn, its message, while dependent on the need to be validated by circumstances in Syria, ultimately transcends local politics and has attracted significant numbers of foreigners interested in building utopian purist Islamic lives there (often explicitly *instead of* Syria-specific issues such as Syrian national identity). By contrast, groups like Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS) (formerly Nusra Front), Ahrar al-Sham, and other Salafi-Jihadi groups are “Syria-first” (non-expansionist, at least in the short term), embed themselves within local populations and operate through mergers with local groups, while promoting a similar purist originalist understanding of Salafi-jihadi Islam.

The takeaway for U.S. government is that these differences correspond to two distinct demographics of Sunni communities who would join these groups for different sets of ideological reasons. Most likely, it will be Syrians who will gravitate towards the Salafi-jihadism of “Syria-first” groups like JFS and Ahrar al-Sham, for both ideological but also immediate practical reasons (often these groups will promote a more gradualist approach to imposing their worldview onto society in exchange for local trust). By contrast, it is likely that non-Syrians (and in particular, as mentioned above, those from either extreme of either the most religiously purist or religiously ignorant) who would find the exclusivist and trans-regional rhetoric of ISIL appealing. By the same token, ISIL will continue targeting its payload on these groups with which it already has momentum and would outlive local Sunni pressure against it (whereas, by contrast, “Syria-first” groups depend on their links with local Sunni communities).

The remainder of this report will survey a range of factors that would make violent extremism and ideological radicalism appealing, and will note especially *whose* violent extremism (ISIL or other jihadist groups) and among *which* Sunni communities.

### Geopolitical Factors

*Regional Alliances and Syria Policy.* The decisions U.S. policymakers take concerning Syria and the region are often exploited by jihadist groups to push their narratives and could serve to validate their narratives. Among these are any signs of cooperation or accommodation of Shiite elements in their country, as well as with Iran or its proxies. Another, and more obvious issue, is any accommodation or red lines concerning Assad's actions in Syria against his population.

While these geopolitical maneuvers could foster distrust of the U.S. and its allies, the net effect is not necessarily personal radicalization. Rather, what can also occur is more pragmatic alliance building among some Sunnis with jihadist groups under their assumption that, as fellow Sunnis, only jihadi groups have the Sunnis' best interests and welfare in mind. This means that for the U.S. and its allies pulling Sunnis away from jihadi groups does not necessarily need to be an issue of ideological counter-messaging but rather of creating "counter-channels" of self-expression and self-defense. However, these measures must be undertaken with clarity and vetting of which Sunni communities gravitate towards these groups, what kinds of other links (tribal, political, etc.) they may have and the kinds of grievances they hold.

### Local Factors

*Sunnis wearing other "hats."* A deciding factor concerning whether some Sunni communities could join violent extremist groups or causes could very well be the other "hats" or affiliations they or their leaders wear. This is especially true in virtually every hot zone in the Middle East – Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya – where leaders of Sunni communities could also be heads of tribes, members of political or commercial elite, the old guard, or other kinds of networks.

For the U.S. government, the possibility that the other "hats" that leaders of Sunni groups wear could be more decisive in whether they join violent extremist causes than violent extremist cause itself means that we have many more opportunities of coopting such groups *aside from* counter-messaging or countering the ideology directly. These must be measured against the histories, grievances, strength and vulnerabilities of local institutions of social and political authority.

### Circumstantial Factors

Aside from global and local factors that determine whether Sunni communities in Iraq and Syria or beyond choose to gravitate towards violent extremism and ideological radicalism, there are also circumstantial factors or "environmental conditions" that could be altered to make violent extremism less appealing. These are factors that the U.S. government and its partners have the best chances of

controlling, especially since they have less to do with ideas themselves as with the spaces in which they thrive.

*Communication.* ISIS, and to a lesser degree other jihadist groups, have pioneered new ways of disseminating propaganda and reaching out to recruits over both social media and “dark web” communications channels. These have been the principal platforms where they distribute their propaganda magazines in different languages, as well as real-time reporting from their supporters in the region. Disruptions to the media and cyber domains could significantly impact the trust of both ISIS leadership and potential recruits of those platforms, leading to a diminishment in how and where they market their ideas. This will, however, not eliminate the group but will only significantly prevent it from having long reach around the world, potentially making foreign fighters lose interest in it. If these platforms are attacked, it is likely the group will default to a more al-Qaeda like clandestine network planning terrorist operations.

*Governance, Education and Infrastructure.* Aside from their messaging, the state-building projects of ISIS and other jihadist groups (Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham) have often filled the voids left by the former governments. Despite the harsh meting out of corporal and capital punishments, jihadist groups have strategically also been paying employees, providing basic skills and education to children (albeit tinged with their ideology), and enabling foreign fighters and their families to pursue their former professions in their territory – all of this a branding strategy on the part of jihadist groups to embed themselves within local populations and to gain their trust. Preventing these groups from filling these voids can go a significant way in terms of dissuading Sunnis from joining their cause.

#### Policy Recommendations

While there is variation in the kind of violent extremism promoted by ISIS as compared to that of “Syria-first” jihadist groups, as well as variation in why it appeals to Sunni communities and which communities it could affect, the aforementioned global, local and circumstantial factors can be significant, if not decisive, in whether any Sunni chooses to gravitate towards it. In particular, where the U.S. government has well-established strengths and history is in controlling the environmental conditions (circumstantial factors) that these groups exploit to gain immediate trust and support from local populations – this includes, first and foremost, targeting the channels of communications that these groups use to disseminate their payload in Iraq and Syria and abroad. At the same time, the U.S. government could systematically take down the trust-building through state-building that all of these groups pursue by a) targeting their infrastructure projects, b) shepherding services and livelihoods of these families in these areas, c) supporting education and employment programs to train the next generation. These and other measures would have the net effect of separating out the most direct, and therefore meaningful, factors that may drive local communities to put their trust in jihadist actors.



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This section proposes looking at both positive as well as negative impacts to the wave of extremism and ideological radicalism affecting the Sunni communities. A positive impact means a reduction in the problem and therefore, a negative impact would mean an aggravation of the problem making it more difficult to manage, let alone reduce and eventually eliminate.

First, we must understand, there is no monolithic Sunni community (beyond some basic doctrinal matters) but rather, Sunni communities at large. There is no Ayatollah or Pope or even Senior Theologian, it has the ability to be the opposite of a homogenous hierarchy. Each of these Sunni communities is affected by the local politics of their respective area(s) and situated in a larger context whereby there are even competing interests and objectives. Sunni identity can be intertwined with ethnic, tribal and national identities and approaches to these challenges must remain locally-generated to have any real, lasting effect. The factors:

1. Understanding sectarian tensions may not simply be a symptom but rather, a cause of conflict. Sunni-Shia conflict is over one thousand and four hundred years old. Although we tend to refer to “Islamic history” as a monolithic record, the reality is that the record contains Caliphates and Counter-Caliphates, coups, counter-coups, perceived legitimate rulers vs. illegitimate rulers, tribal dynasties and monarchies, all with ancient origins and long-standing histories. In fact, some of these issues pre-date Islam completely, such as the wars that saw to the end of the Sassanid Empire and the subsequent Islamization of the Persians. What we see today in Yemen, vis a vis Saudi and Iran, is perhaps a manifestation of this type of underlying, historical reality that defines many parts of this region. It would be a mistake to think these tensions can be ignored, underestimated or fully overcome in support of a greater objective. The latter was attempted in post-Saddam Iraq but quickly devolved and deteriorated into sectarian persecution, which – as we know – allowed for ISIS to gain a foothold in the Sunni areas in Iraq and eventually, in Syria as well.

2. The role of ideology cannot be understated or overestimated but it can be positively exploited for mission objectives. Sometimes, ideology is indeed a driver of violent extremism especially where only certain, revolutionary-minded Muslim literature has been consumed in the respective epistemological environment. Religious faith itself, has guided the construction of human paradigms and decision-making capabilities of humans the world over. It cannot be separated from the operating environment. Other times, ideology is only a passenger, while other psychosocial factors are the driver. These include perceived assaults on sacred values (particularly where these values are linked to the construction of identity), sense of meaning and belonging, feelings of humiliation, deprivation and hopelessness. In fact, there is an interplay between ideology and grievances, where a clear line between the two, is impossible to identify. Trauma-based upbringings, aggravate these psychosocial factors even more. The most effective way to deal with the ideological component is to amplify and encourage

Muslim theologians of repute (modern attempts at “reform” by those who have no expertise or authority, is a non-starter) to directly challenge these deviations of Islam in the language of their respective sacred values. When content is created by local and authoritative leaders, deploying those messages in an information operation capacity, reduces any potential controversy. Rather than it being two extreme positions (one, don’t touch religious scriptures or exploitation thereof or two, yes, exploit it surreptitiously), this is a true mutually-beneficial model. This is of course, easier said than done depending on where the theologian(s) live(s). In some places, speaking out means inviting ISIS assassinations. For those residing in the West, speaking out is easier and carries more weight that it comes from non-government sources. Two such examples in this regard are Shaykh Abdullah Bin Bayyah (Search String: “Outdated religious laws must be changed”) and Shaykh Muhammad Al Yaqoubi (Author, “Refuting ISIS: A Rebuttal Of Its Religious And Ideological Foundations”).

3. Lack of trust in the world community. Events in Syria have created a widely-held view that the U.S. is sacrificing the Sunni majority in Syria, for a tactical alliance with the Shia of Iran, Iraq and Syria. That Russia and its allies are able to violate international laws almost on a daily basis, deliberately target civilians, rescue personnel as well as aid convoys without any censure for all intents and purposes – as the Sunni factions see it – facilitate a Shia occupation of the Sunni areas in particularly in Syria. Taken as a whole, this lack of trust in the world community once again reinforces the notion that submitting to peaceful mechanisms of diplomacy are simply, delaying inevitable death and destruction. In the face of a perceived existential threat, the propensity to turn to violent extremism becomes much more likely than not.

4. Anti-Islam messaging in American political discourse. Political actors that reinforce and exacerbate anti-Muslim messaging serve only to compromise the efficacy of the public narrative that the fight against ISIS is actually not a war on Islam. It cannot be underestimated, how damaging it is to amplify the very same message of what groups like ISIS are saying: this is indeed a war on Islam. It truly does directly, aid and abet the adversary narrative by which it can continue to recruit disaffected young males and females to their cause.

A robust message that shows the presence of both American and non-American soldiers who also happen to be Muslim, and who are risking their lives to fight ISIS, is needed both in theater context as well as domestic American discourse. More media products in this area would be especially beneficial.

## Long-Term and Short-Term Factors

Hammad Sheikh

ARTIS

There are a host of interrelated factors that would impact Sunni radicalization and extremist violence in the Middle East. In this response, I can only highlight some of them that have consistently emerged in my research (with ARTIS international) on populations across the MENA region, and that the USG can

“The factors at play are different for local population in conflict zones (in particular, Sunni Arabs in Iraq, Libya and Syria) who are affected by the conflict without a choice, and from other populations in the Middle East (North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula), from which people willfully travel to the conflict zone to join the fight as foreign fighters.”

reasonably hope to affect through its policies and actions. The factors at play are different for local population in conflict zones (in particular, Sunni Arabs in Iraq, Libya, and Syria) who are affected by the conflict without a choice, and from other populations in the Middle East (North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula), from which people willfully travel to the conflict zones to join the as foreign fighters. In the following, I will focus on the local populations in the conflict zones only.

### Short-Term Factors

ISIL ideology and propaganda exploits religious beliefs: It proclaims to be the caliphate and uses an end-of-the world narrative, in which it claims to represent the black army, which is prophesied to defeat the armies of Rome in a last battle before the end of the world. ISIL uses this millenarian mission to justify much of its action and to argue for its legitimacy to the wider Sunni population.

However, these claims come with commitments, most importantly, the caliph has to wage war continuously and hold and extend the territory of the caliphate. Since these ideological claims are at the core of the credibility and legitimacy of the caliphate, ISIL has to be defeated completely on the battle field. This is similar to the war effort against Germany and Japan in WWII who used seductive ideologies to gain and retain popular support for their goals (e.g., Hitler as the destined leader of the German race). And just like then, General MacArthur's words apply now: "There is no substitute for victory." Only, when ISIL is defeated in the field unambiguously will the allure of Jihadi ideology be affected.

These battles should ideally be fought by units largely comprised by Sunni Arabs, for instance, a coalition of Sunni units of the Iraqi Army and militias of Sunni tribes (who have a while ago joined the war effort against ISIL). As much as we wish that war was a clean endeavor, conflicts between different groups almost always involve horrible atrocities, often motivated by a sense of payback and revenge. Such atrocities have included murder of civilian populations, rapes, and torture of captured enemies (e.g., WWII, Yugoslavian civil war, Abu Ghraib). Even with strong institutions and penalties in place, any breakdown of discipline tends to lead to atrocities. As compared to other combatants, local Sunni fighters, however, are more likely to be reminded of their own - their siblings, spouses, children, and parents - when they deal with local populations and prisoners of war, making atrocities less likely. If Shia

militia (and Shia majority army units) cannot be excluded from these battles, they could be accompanied by international advisors and observers to prevent atrocities against local Sunni Arab populations. Any atrocities by other people than Sunni Arabs will incite tribalism and feed into the narrative of jihadi militant groups (including ISIL) increasing radicalization of the wider Sunni Arab population.

Kurds have been reliable allies, have proven to be effective fighters against ISIL, and most of them are Sunnis. But they are not likely to be as effective in an effort to liberate ISIL occupied areas that they do not consider part of Kurdish territory. Our interviews with Kurdish combatants at front line positions in Northern Iraq (2015 and 2016, conducted by researcher at ARTIS international) revealed that Kurds have strong nationalistic motives for their involvement in the war effort. Kurdish fighters (Peshmerga) were willing to fight and risk their lives and families for "Kurdeity" - their term for Kurdish territory, culture, and language. But even dedicated Kurdish fighters were not willing to fight ISIL outside of Kurdish territory. All of them knew the exact borders of their territory and when asked about fighting outside of these borders, their responses ranged from a strict rejection of this idea ("I would not risk my life for this") to somewhat hesitant compliance ("Fine, but only if our leaders demand it from us").

#### Long-term Factors

The success of ISIL (and other militant groups) in Syria and Iraq is partly due to legitimate grievances of the local Sunni Arab populations. Sunni Arab populations there have lived decades under the rule of Shiite led governments, which discriminated against them and excluded them from political power and economic opportunity. In interviews with local Sunni Arabs in Iraq (2015), we found that such grievances drove the support of the idea of a new caliphate in this region, which - de facto - would be a Sunni Arab nation state ruled by Sunnis and providing safety and opportunity for them. These grievances will have to be taken seriously by the international community and addressed successfully. Otherwise, new militant groups will be able to exploit the same grievances in the future, even after a defeat of ISIL. To deny foothold to militant groups in the long term, there must be viable and credible political alternatives to militant action. Sunni Arab sovereignty - for instance, in the form of a nation state - will be necessary to create long term stability in the region. However, the international community is committed to preserving the (somewhat arbitrarily created) nation states in the region. Therefore, other political solutions that do not require a redrawing of existing nation state borders need to be explored: for instance, a devolution process similar to the one used for Kurds in the region. This process of exploring and devising political solutions has of course to involve Sunni Arab representatives (in addition representatives of other affected populations in the region), so local interests and grievances are considered, lest the past mistakes of Colonial powers are repeated.

## Author Biographies

### Hassan Abbas

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#### Education

- M.A.L.D and Ph.D. from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University
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- Master's in Political Science from Punjab University (Pakistan)

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- Politics, Security and Religion in South Asia
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- Law Enforcement and Police Reforms in Developing States

Hassan Abbas is Professor of International Security Studies and Chair of the Department of Regional and Analytical Studies at National Defense University's College of International Security Affairs (CISA). He serves as a Carnegie Fellow 2016-2017 at New America where he is focusing on a book project on Islam's internal struggles and spirituality narrated through the lens of his travels to Islam's holy sites across the world. He is also currently a Senior Advisor at Asia Society. He remained a Senior Advisor at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University (2009-2011), after having been a Research Fellow at the Center from 2005-2009. He was the Distinguished Quaid-e-Azam Chair Professor at Columbia University before joining CISA and has previously held fellowships at Harvard Law School and Asia Society in New York.

He regularly appears as an analyst on media including CNN, ABC, BBC, C-Span, Al Jazeera and GEO TV (Pakistan). His opinion pieces and research articles have been published in various leading international newspapers and academic publications. His latest book titled [\*The Taliban Revival: Violence and Extremism on the Pakistan-Afghanistan Frontier\*](#) (Yale University Press, 2014) was profiled on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* in August 2014. Abbas' earlier well acclaimed book *Pakistan's Drift into Extremism: Allah, the Army and America's War on Terror* (M E Sharpe, 2004) remains on bestseller lists in Pakistan and India. He also runs WATANDOST, a blog on Pakistan and its neighbors' related affairs. His other publications include an Asia Society report titled [\*Stabilizing Pakistan Through Police Reform\*](#) (2012) and [\*Pakistan 2020: A Vision for Building a Better Future\*](#) (Asia Society, 2011).

A detailed list of his publications is [available here](#).



**Bernard Carreau** is the Deputy Director of the Center for Complex Operations (CCO) at the National Defense University. He established and currently supervises a lessons learned program focusing on the operational and strategic effectiveness of the military and interagency teams in overseas contingency operations. He has led numerous collection and analysis teams to Afghanistan and Iraq. Mr. Carreau is the author or supervisor of recent reports related to the strategic effectiveness of special operations forces, stability operations, transitional public security, civilian stabilization capabilities, and socio-cultural intelligence analysis. He is currently completing a study on behalf of the Joint Staff/J7 on the question of whether the national security decision-making and strategic planning processes were effective in achieving U.S. national objectives in Syria. Mr. Carreau was an advisor to the Coalition Provisional Authority in Washington and Baghdad on private sector development and an advisor to the Iraqi Minister of Trade. He has a Master's degree from Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS).



**Alexis Everington** is the Director of Research for Madison Springfield, Inc. His qualifications include 15 years program management experience leading large scale, cross-functional, multi-national research & analytical programs in challenging environments including Iraq, Libya, Mexico, Syria and Yemen. Alexis advised both the Libyan opposition government during the Libyan revolution of 2011 and its immediate aftermath and most recently, the Syrian opposition military. He has also helped train several other foreign militaries and has taught at the NATO School. In addition, Alexis developed the Target Audience Analysis methodology that is currently employed across the US national security community and has been applied most recently in Afghanistan, Jordan, and Lebanon. His educational credentials include a Master of Arts from Oxford University in European and Middle Eastern Studies and his language skills include a fluency in Arabic, Spanish, French and Italian as well as a proficiency in Mandarin. Alexis is currently leading large-scale qualitative and quantitative primary research studies in Libya, Pakistan, Syria and Yemen.



**Vern Liebl** is an analyst currently sitting as the Middle East Desk Officer in the Center for Advanced Operational Cultural Learning (CAOCL). Mr. Liebl retired from the Marine Corps and has a background in intelligence, specifically focused on the Middle East and South Asia. Prior to joining CAOCL, Mr. Liebl worked with the Joint Improved Explosives Device Defeat Organization as a Cultural SME, and before that with Booz Allen Hamilton as Strategic Islamic Narrative Analyst. He has also published extensively on topics ranging from the Caliphate to Vichy French campaigns in WW2. Mr. Liebl has a Bachelors degree in political science from University of Oregon, a Masters degree in Islamic History from the University of Utah, and a second Masters degree in National Security and Strategic Studies from the Naval War College (where he graduated with “Highest Distinction” and focused on Islamic Economics).



**Jacob Olidort** is a Soref Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, where he focuses on Salafism and Islamist groups in the Middle East, and is an adjunct professor at the Elliott School of International Affairs at The George Washington University. He received his B.A. in Middle Eastern studies from Brandeis University, his A.M. in Near Eastern languages and civilizations from Harvard University, and his M.A. and Ph.D. in Near Eastern studies from Princeton University, where his work focused on the intersection between Islamic law, theology, and modern politics. Dr. Olidort has spent nearly two years in the Middle East, including a Fulbright Scholarship in the UAE and field work on Salafism in Jordan. He has given presentations and has briefed on Salafism and on countering violent extremism to various academic and policy settings. His writing has appeared in *Foreign Affairs*, the *Washington Post*, the *National Interest*, and [Lawfare](#), among other publications.

**Mubin Shaikh** is an expert on Radicalization, deradicalization, countering violent extremism (CVE), National security and Counter-terrorism. He has testified as an expert for the United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs as well as Subject Matter Expertise with NATO, the National Counterterrorism Center, Special Operations Command Central and is an external expert with its Strategic Multilayer Assessment Team. He also appears on occasion as an unpaid contributor on major media outlets such as CNN, CBC, ABC, NBC and others on matters related to extremism and terrorism.

**Hammad Sheikh** is a postdoctoral researcher at the New School for Social Research and a ARTIS research fellow. He is currently also a visiting scholar at the Centre on the Resolution of Intractable Conflicts (Oxford University). He holds a MSc in Psychology by the Free University of Berlin and a PhD in Social Psychology from the New School for Social Research (NYC). His work focuses on how people come to commit ideologically driven violence (such as terrorism). Dr. Sheikh uses a variety of scientific methods: interviews and focus groups with combatants in violent conflicts or their supporting populations, psychological experiments in the field, and advanced computer modeling. His personal background (having lived in several countries and speaking a number of languages) and his broad training in social sciences (in particular, psychology and anthropology) allow him to design and conduct research across cultures with relevant populations. He has worked with populations from geographical areas spanning from the South of the US to the North of Iraq. Dr. Sheikh's work has been published in academic journals such as Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences and Current Anthropology, has garnered interest in the press such as the Economist, and contributed to reports and briefings to the Department of Defense, the State Department, the Special Operations Command Central, and the United Nations.



**Sarah Canna** applies her open source analytic skills to regions of vital concern to US Combatant Commands, particularly the Middle East and South Asia. To help military planners understand the complex socio-cultural dynamics at play in evolving conflict situations, she developed a Virtual Think Tank (ViTTa) tool, which is designed to rapidly respond to emergent crises by pulsing NSI's extensive subject matter expert (SME) network to provide deep, customized, multidisciplinary analysis for defense and industry clients. Prior to joining NSI, she completed her Master's degree from Georgetown University in Technology and Security Studies. She holds a translation certificate in Spanish from American University and has been learning Dari for three years.





## SMA Reach-back

**Question:** What are the correlations between the US/coalition operational and tactical actions in theater effecting terrorist activity throughout the world (i.e., external events). For example, does the loss of ISIL controlled territory or kill/capture of an ISIL high value target lead to an increase/decrease in terrorist attacks in other areas of the world? Can location, intensity, duration or timing of attacks be predicted from a model?

**Contributors:** Victor Asal, SUNY Albany, Rich Davis, Artis, Neil Johnson, University of Miami, R. Karl Rethemeyer, SUNY Albany, Jen Ziemke, John Carroll University

**Editor:** Jen Ziemke, John Carroll University

**Compiler:** Sam Rhem, SRC

### Executive Summary

The contributors weigh in on this question, doing their best to read the tea leaves. If Mosul should fall, what's next? Where, when, and why?

#### Getting to the Where: Location

Jen Ziemke (John Carroll University) suspects that, in Iraq, as the primary focus otherwise shifts westward as the main front retreats toward Syria, it would be very prudent to continue to **protect the rear from attacks on cities like Kirkuk**. Regionally, continuing signs of instability in **Saudi Arabia** might place sites there at greater risk vis-a-viz some others. Due to their relative proximity to the battlefield, **Beirut, Istanbul, or Amman** continue to be at risk. **Cafes, nightclubs, & bars** in these locations are more imaginable choices than many other alternatives **because such targets would serve to both maximize casualties and send a culturally-relevant message**. Further afield, given the state of aggrieved populations in certain European suburbs, we suspect locations in Italy, France, and symbolic targets like the London Eye to continue to be at risk.

What about American targets? Victor Asal & Karl Rethemeyer (University of Albany SUNY) find that, despite the fact that “anti-Americanism is probably the most universal and widespread of attitudes,” **the relative risk to American targets is low**. However, the authors find that **VEO's are more likely to attack countries with American military bases**, and that **the risk of targeting is particularly acute when a significant number of American troops are stationed inside non-democratic countries**, suggesting that their presence “may be generating a great deal of resentment. In addition to creating a motivation, **the stationing of US troops abroad provides convenient military and civilian targets that can be killed without travelling to America.**”

## Timing is Everything: Battlefield Rhythms & Op-Tempo

Drawing from the literature on Complex Systems, Neil Johnson (University of Miami) argues that the **timing** of attacks follows reasonably well the “progress curve” (known from organizational development and learning literature). Similarly informed by a complex systems perspective, Ziemke asserts that converting conflict data into sonic landscapes for pattern analysis allows us to *hear* the battlefield rhythm and op-tempo of the conflict.

When micro-level event data (battles, massacres, ceasefires, etc.) on the 41 year long Angolan war are played over time, we learn just how *slowly* these campaigns tend to begin. Like drops of water slowly coming out of a faucet, each individual event stands out because of the silence between events. From such analysis and observation, Ziemke asserts that losing groups do not go down quietly, nor without a fight, and what begins as individual events eventually turns into a firestorm of violence. But then, and even more rapidly, the fire dies, the losing side scatters, and the storm subsides. A few chirps amidst the silence mark the end, *and the war dies in much the same way it starts, as an inverse refrain on how it began, little by little, punctuated by silences: an event here, an event there*. Adagio crescendos to an absurdist cacophony, but just as quickly, it reverts to the same Adagio in the end. **Thus, the start of the war helps to inform how it ends; it is actually the same melody, played again**, but this time in reverse.

## Severity

Neil Johnson (University of Miami) notes that the **severity** of any given attack “always seems to follow a so-called power-law distribution”, an occurrence repeatedly noted in the literature on conflicts and a feature of complex systems. This means that in every war, there are many events with relatively few casualties, but only very few events that are utterly catastrophic. Since extreme events and black swans are of heightened interest, *when* would we expect the risk of experiencing a catastrophe to be the highest?

Ziemke finds from her analysis of the Angolan war that when UNITA began to *lose*, they lashed out against civilians, and both the pace and severity of each event vastly increased. *Losing* is what accelerated the war into a new period, and a veritable cacophony of incredibly destructive events followed. It was as if an aggregation of losses on the battlefield ushered in a kind of phase transition in the war where extreme, rare events became more likely.

While in some ways ISIL strategy markedly differs from other violent groups, its tendency to lash out against civilians nevertheless may end up mirroring other quite different rebellions and insurgent organizations in history in terms of *pattern, tempo, and timing*. Consider, for example, the behavior of the RUF in Sierra Leone during their reign of terror under *Operation No Living Thing*, or UNITA’s appalling treatment of civilians during the latter half of the second Angolan war (1991-2002), or the surge in civilian deaths in Sri Lanka just before the LTTE was defeated in Sri Lanka in early 2009. Despite how different these organizations may be from one another, they share a common battlefield rhythm: when they began to *lose* the war, lose territory, and lose fighters, each group escalated their campaign to deliberately target civilians, and in increasingly grotesque ways, and even more than before.

Taken together, one might expect that if ISIL finds itself facing an imminent, existential threat to its survival, **they might commit an unimaginable mass atrocity in whatever city they are entrenched, even if this behavior risks destroying a large number of their own fighters along with everyone else. As coalition forces continue to advance, one could imagine a David Koresh-style cult-like suicidal response**, as many in their ranks might actually prefer this horrific outcome to defeat by another hand.

In the short term, as coalition forces render ever more devastating blows to ISIL, we fear that civilians in the area of operation may face even worse fortunes. However, **when we begin to see ISIL commit massive atrocities on a previously unseen scale, the horrific events themselves likely are signals of their imminent defeat.** The war (at least in the kinetic space, and in the near-term) will be nearing an end.

So what can be done to hasten ISIL's demise?

### Is targeted killing effective?

Rich Davis applies these questions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He asks whether Israel's targeted killing and apprehension program reduced the ability for *Palestinian* militants to project violence back into Israel. He finds that **targeting Hamas' militant network was effective and indeed led to a significant decline in both the number and lethality of suicide attacks by Palestinians inside Israel.** The "further up the production line" the Israeli's were able to penetrate, the better. As **new militants who lacked experience replaced** their deceased and/or imprisoned predecessors, less attacks occurred in general, and **the attacks that did occur were less lethal.** Additionally, as more and more of the network began to disintegrate, Hamas tended to allocate more resources "toward self-preservation, and less towards suicide attacks."

Implications of Davis' work applied to the Counter-ISIL campaign seem to suggest that missions targeting ISIL leadership might in the long-run lead to a decline in the ability of ISIS to project power and terrorize elsewhere, and that "the further up the production line" one was able to target, the better.

Somewhat in line with what Davis suggests, Johnston and Sarbahi also find that **"drone strikes decrease the number and lethality of terrorist attacks,"** at least in the short run. Taken together, the moral seems to be: "targeting works". However, As Victor Asal and Karl Rethemeyer point out, research on the effectiveness of leadership decapitation, in particular, is mixed. Bryan Price suggests that **leadership decapitation is only effective when applied to young groups.** As groups mature, the effectiveness of leadership decapitation diminishes altogether. So if decapitation stands a chance of influencing outcomes with respect to the VEO under consideration here, the sooner, the better, and focus on the violence production line.

However, Victor Asal and Karl Rethemeyer suggest the reduction in violence might **actually be due to the reconciliation efforts instead,** and not the targeted killings. To conclude, one should ask: Historically, how effective has the use of violence been in terms of counteracting violence? Is using violence to counteract violence better than any of the alternatives?

## SME Inputs

### US/coalition operational and tactical actions in theater effecting terrorist activity throughout the world

Victor Asal, & R. Karl Rethemeyer, University at Albany SUNY

#### Introduction

An analysis of the impact of specific actions by US/coalition operational and tactical actions in theater and how they might impact terrorist activity throughout the world is something that has not been

quantitatively analyzed with recent data and has not been analyzed broadly within the context of ISIL's behavior currently. I should note though that this kind of analysis is eminently possible and the answers that could be derived are potentially very useful for policy makers. If we look specifically at the question of the impact of leadership decapitation there is clear evidence in previous research that (a) such analysis can be done and (b) decapitation can both positively and negatively affect the behavior of violent non-state actors (VEOs). While there has not been a lot of work looking at current efforts (there is a need to increase both the scope and speed of data collection to close both coverage gaps and time lags) in the sections below we will review some of the work that has been done using existing datasets to assess the impact of (a) factors that make organizations more likely to target the United States and American citizens, (b) counter-terrorism policies in the Middle East and North Africa region on VEO behavior, and (c) the impact of targeting leaders and drone strikes on VEO behavior.

### Targeting Americans<sup>2</sup> - The impact of US troops in foreign countries

Hating America – and killing Americans – at times seems like a mandatory activity for terrorist organizations. One researcher of terrorism went so far as to argue that “it is worth stating at the beginning that despite various goals and motivations of modern terrorists, anti-Americanism is probably the most universal and widespread of attitudes. Terrorists of the extreme Right and Left, religious fundamentalists, members of radical ecological movements, and anti-globalists treat the United States as the main obstacle to realizing their ideals and dreams (Stankiewicz, 2005, 784).” When one looks at the record of domestic and international terrorists, though, only a small minority of identified organizations actually select American targets for international or transnational terrorism (MIPT, 2006). Nonetheless organizations that target the United States have had an enormous effect, resulting in two wars, the first major reorganization of the United States government since World War II, and an enormous shift in the allocation of federal and state resources (Betts, 2002, 27).

Despite this enormous redeployment of public resources, as far as we know no one has actually studied the factors that make a terrorist organization likely to attack US citizens or interests. While there has been some qualitative research on why groups might want to target the West or the United States (Cronin, 2003) and on particular groups that seek to target the US ( Laqueur, 2004), no study has focused quantitatively on features that make it more or less likely that an organization will choose to target the United States. Indeed, we have been able to find only one quantitative analysis that examines *any* factors that might increase the chances a group or individual will target the United States, its citizens, military, or economic interests (Sobek & Braithwaite, 2005). The extant qualitative literature identifies American corporate, cultural, and military presence and influence on countries as a motive factors for attacking the United States (Hoffmann, 2002; Jervis, 2003, 379). Islam and anti-globalization movements have also been suggested as key motivators for such attacks (Ajami, 2001, 4; Cronin, 2003, 34).

While not based on recent data (the analysis looks at terrorist organizational behavior from 1998-2005) work by Asal and Rethemeyer (unpublished manuscript) does examine the factors that lead

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<sup>2</sup> Note material in this section has been taken from the unpublished manuscript by Asal and Rethemeyer “Targeting America and Americans”

organizations to targets the United States or American targets abroad. While the analysis shows that organizations based in countries that have a higher level of US bilateral trade and number of McDonalds in the country (which capture cultural and economic ties to the United States) has a negative or no effect on organizational behavior, the same is not true for the stationing of US troops. Stationing US troops abroad is directly related to the behavior of terrorist organizations when it comes to targeting Americans.

Specifically when it comes to the placement of US troops in a country, the United States is often "...shoring up the stability of regimes around the world (Juergensmeyer, 2003, 183)" in the service of said status quo. Yet US efforts are often made in circumstances where the ruling regime is actively opposed by violent internal forces that are seeking to upset the status quo. One specific policy that has been identified as a goad to terrorist activity is the presence of US military forces overseas: "The mere presence of U.S. contingents overseas is an ingredient in terrorist resentment against the United States (Pillar, 2001, 61)." With more than "800 Department of Defense installations (Johnson, 2002, 25)" overseas, US military presence may be generating a great deal of resentment. In addition to creating a motivation, the stationing of US troops abroad provides convenient military and civilian targets that can be killed without traveling to America (Pillar, 2001, 69). On the other hand much of the literature on the effect of United States troops focuses on the places where America is supporting authoritarian regimes (Pape, 2005). We thus it may not be military presence by itself but presence in countries that are not democracies.

Quantitative analysis of a dataset containing information on 395 terrorist organizations active between 1998 and 2005 found a strong relationship between US troop presence in a non-democratic country and violence against US interests. When 1,000 or more US troops are stationed in a country – regardless of regime type – terrorist organizations in that country are 11.13% more likely to target US interest at home or abroad. However, 1,000 or more US troops are located in an authoritarian country the likelihood that terrorist organizations in that country will target US interests increases to 48.6%. While this finding was derived from data from 1998-2005, these results indicate that there are clear costs to stationing US troops in authoritarian regimes – though there are clearly also important needs for this given different security challenges.

### [The impact of counter terrorism policies in MENA: Carrot versus stick<sup>3</sup>](#)

Using new yearly data that spans the period 1998 to 2012 Asal, Rethemeyer and Young modeled the behavior of violent nonstate actors (VNSAs) in the Middle East. They focused on organizations in the Middle East and North Africa that had either (a) been involved in an insurgency where 25 people died in battle during at least one year over this period or (b) killed at least 10 individuals through terrorist attacks during this period. Using several statistical techniques, including network modeling, logit analysis, and hazard modeling, the analysis shows **that governments can use strategies that influence a group's level of lethality, their relationships with other groups, and how long and if these groups become especially lethal**. When modeling why some groups become highly lethal (which we define as having killed more than 100 civilians in terrorist attacks in any year or causing more than 100 battle deaths in any year), we find that:

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<sup>3</sup> Material in this section was taken from Asal, Victor, R. Karl Rethemeyer, and Joseph Young: *An Analysis of Violent Nonstate Actor Organizational Lethality and Network Co-Evolution in the Middle East and North Africa* College Park, MD: START, 2016. And modified slightly

- VNSAs are more likely to kill many civilians in one year when they control territory and when governments use violence, or what we call a *stick* strategy, against them;
- VNSAs are most likely to kill many civilians in one year when governments use a *mixed* strategy – that is, a combination of violence (*stick*) and negotiation (what we term a *carrot* strategy) as opposed to either stick or carrot alone;
- VNSAs are most likely to inflict more than 100 battle deaths in one year when they control territory, are highly connected to other VNSAs, and are large (though there is a strong relationship between size and controlling territory);
- VNSAs are less likely to inflict more than 100 battle deaths in one year when they have a formal political party.

Again, I should note that the analysis presented here focuses on a specific kind of organization in MENA and not the world. If we broaden the type of organizations examined or the geographic scope the results could change. Nonetheless, these findings suggest that empirical analysis can give us insights into the impact of government policies and that strategic choices by governments can have important impacts on VEOs behaviors.

Dugan and Chenoweth (2012) look at more disaggregated data on counterterrorism and policies specifically within the Israeli and Palestinian context from 1987-2004 and find that repressive actions are either related to subsequent increases in terrorism and conciliation is related to decreases – depending on the time frames that are examined. This again underlines the importance that the same strategies may have different impacts depending on the actors being examined (Dugan and Chenoweth are not looking only at organizations), the geographic scope and the temporal period.

#### [The impact of leadership decapitation and the use of drones](#)

An analysis of the impact of leadership decapitation of terrorist organizations by Bryan Price provides empirical support for the proposition that decapitation can alter VEO behavior, depending on the nature of the organization. Price finds that:

Contrary to this conventional wisdom, leadership decapitation significantly increases the mortality rate of terrorist groups, although the results indicate that the effect of decapitation decreases with the age of the group, even to a point where it may have no effect at all. This finding helps to explain the previously perplexing mixed record of decapitation effectiveness (Price 2012).

Note that Price draws an important distinction between overall results and the impact that such efforts will or will not have depending on the age and experience of the group: older groups are less susceptible to disruption from decapitation. This suggests that targeting decisions must take into account age and experience, among other organizational factors, when considering decapitating strikes. Price's work – like much of the work cited here should be caveated by his temporal constraints analyzing data from 1970 to 2008. In terms of organizational mortality, Jenna Jordan has found that organizational decapitation is not the most effective strategy – again especially if the organization is older and has more developed bureaucratization and communal support (Jordan 2014). We should also note that

using different data **Patrick B. Johnston has found that decapitation within the context of campaigns is likely to be more effective (2012).**

More recent work by Patrick B. Johnston and Anoop K. Sarbahi examines the impact of drone strikes on terrorism in Pakistan from 2007 to 2011. While Johnston and Sarbahi cannot test the impact of drone strikes on recruitment, they do find that in the short run drone strikes decrease the number and lethality of terrorist attacks (Johnston and Sarbahi 2016).

### Conclusion

In the paragraphs above we have identified at the strategic and operational level quantitative empirical analysis that indicates that certain kinds of policies can have both negative and positive impacts on the behavior of terrorist and insurgent organizations. Clearly not all policies have the results that are desired while some policies are having the impact that is desired. It is important that we underline the need for further research both in terms of more current data<sup>4</sup> as well as examining the impacts of such efforts both in the short term and the long term.

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<sup>4</sup> for example the Big Allied and Dangerous dataset is currently being updated and examples of the group data can be found at: <http://www.start.umd.edu/baad/database>



Stankiewicz, W. (2005). International Terrorism at Sea as a Menace to the Civilization of the 21st Century. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 48(6), 683-699.

### Rich Davis, ARTIS

In my book published earlier this year (*Hamas, Popular Support and War in the Middle East*), I wrote about the only empirical evidence that shows a relationship between a Targeted Killing/Apprehension Program and an armed group's capability to project violence. Here is the pertinent section, which is in Chapter 7 of the book published by Routledge:

#### Israeli Targeted Killing and Apprehension Program

There are two different legal standards, which define the Israeli operations to kill Palestinians engaged in militant activities against Israel. First, there are those operations, which fall into the Targeted Killing and Apprehension Program. In a series of decisions by the Israeli High Court of Justice, the legality of performing Targeted Killings has three fundamental parts: [i] < #\_edn1 >

1. A person who can be arrested is not an appropriate target for Targeted Killing;
2. A Targeted Killing cannot be a death sentence for previous acts. There must be evidence that the enemy combatant is part of the planning or execution of a future violent attack against the state; and
3. There must be sufficient care taken to minimize the risk to civilians to not be harmed in the process of the Targeted Killing.

IDF Commanders use terms like this person is part of the 'ticking infrastructure' [ii] < #\_edn2 > when making a case for who meets the threshold for planning future attacks against the state.

The second legal standard is part of a program entitled, 'Canopy of Fire'. This program allows a special unit led by a major with an intelligence officer to determine if a target in Gaza can be eliminated. The difference between the Targeted Killing Program and the Canopy of Fire, lies mainly in the level of the Palestinian operative. High-level operatives fall into the Targeted Killing protocol while the lower level operatives can be killed through the Canopy of Fire apparatus. No further definitions for what constitutes 'high' or 'low' level could be found.

Though the Targeted Killing and Apprehension Program used in the Second Intifada predates the Israeli High Court definitions described above, the operational aspects were applied similarly. According to multiple sources, it took many months for the IDF and Israeli Security Services to understand the tactical operations of the various Palestinian factions striking Israeli soldiers and civilians. With growing pressure coming from Israeli political leadership and public in mid to late 2001 the IDF and Security Services identified 500 Palestinian operatives, senior and junior, that were part of the violence campaign of the various Palestinian militant operatives. The idea was to kill or capture these operatives in order to degrade and destroy the Palestinian capacity to project violence into Israel. According to military strategists, the program essentially weakened Hamas's capacity to conduct violent acts against Israel.

A great deal of effort was spent trying to access Targeted Killing and Apprehension data from Israeli leaders. On multiple occasions, Israeli Security officials indicated that the data was classified and was therefore not available. With good fortune, two sources amenable to analysis were identified and used for this research. First, an article written by Ben Israel for a book entitled, *A Ticking Bomb: Contending*



with Suicide Attacks was used. General Ben Israel was given the classified data for use in the article. To get around the classification, Ben Israel combined killings and apprehensions into monthly numbers. It is this material that provides much deeper Israeli understanding on the impact the arrests and killings had on the resistance operations of Hamas in the Second Intifada. Second, data from Zussman [iii] < #\_edn3 > and Sharvit [iv] < #\_edn4 > provides 37 Targeted Killings during the Second Intifada identified by specific date. All 37 Targeted Killings were independently verified by the author and the dataset was utilized in the time series analysis, the findings of which will be discussed after the discussion of the Ben Israel data.

In the article written on the Targeted Prevention Program, Ben Israel argues that defeating Palestinian terrorism is about destroying the network that is part of the production line leading to attacks. Figure 7.2 demonstrates what he calls a 'Terrorism Production Line'. He argues that the further up the production line the Israelis disrupt, 'the more effective its neutralization'. He further argues, 'neutralizing, whether through arrest or Targeted Killing, 20%-30% of the participants of the production line, brings about a clear slowing of the production line and in the wake of this a clear decrease in the amount of attacks'.[v] < #\_edn5

Figure 7.1

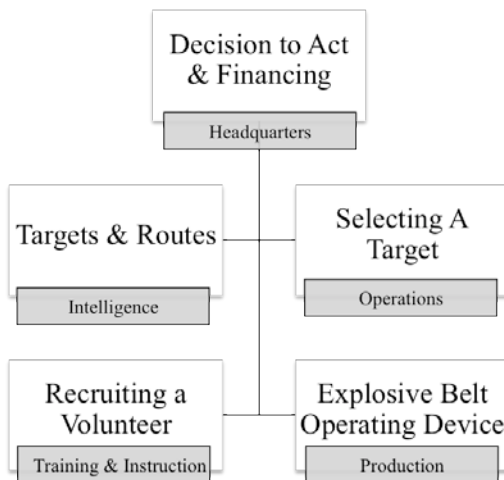
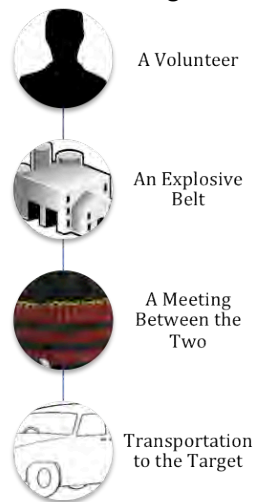


Figure 7.2



Ben Israel also argues that the fence around Gaza had an 'indisputable' role in preventing attacks coming from Gaza, even though he admits that much of the planning for the attacks on Israel was directed from Gaza and executed from the West Bank. Subsequently, he writes that according to captured militants, the existence of the new barriers in the West Bank forced Hamas operations to find ways around the barriers resulting in added warning time resulting in the increase in the percentage of preventions.

By mid-to-late 2001, the Israelis had established the list of 500 Palestinian 'operatives' that were part of the 'Suicide Bombing Production Line'. As quickly as possible, the IDF and Security Services were either arresting or killing those responsible for planning and executing the attacks against Israelis. According to Ben Israel, most of the targeted arrests and killings occurred in the West Bank and Gaza, respectively. Figure 7.3 articulates by quarter, the number of suicide attacks attempted, carried out and those that were prevented. The zenith of the number of attacks, initiated by Fatah's Al-Aqsa Martyr's Brigade, PFLP, PIJ and Hamas's al-Qassam Martyr's Brigade, occurred in the second quarter of 2003. The number of attempted and successful attacks declined from this point. Ben Israel argues that this is because the production line was severely disrupted and that replacements in the production line caused young and

inexperienced persons to be put into positions for which they were not prepared. The result, he says, was reduced effectiveness from the production line:

It is true that new militants were appointed in the place of the ones who were neutralized, but these were usually much younger and lacking in experience compared to their predecessors. In addition, as the percentage of activists that were hit (or arrested) rose, and as the thwarting/prevention approached the top of the pyramid (whose peak was the assassination of Hamas leaders Sheikh Ahmad Yassin and Abbed al-Azziz Rantisi who was appointed in his place), the organization began allocating more and more resources towards self-preservation, and less towards suicide attacks. This process, which actually began with the assassination of the head of the military arm of Hamas, Salah Shehada (in July 2002), eventually brought to drastic drop in the curve of attacks as it is reflected in the graphs [Figures 7.3 & 7.4]. [vi] < #\_edn6 > Figure 7.3

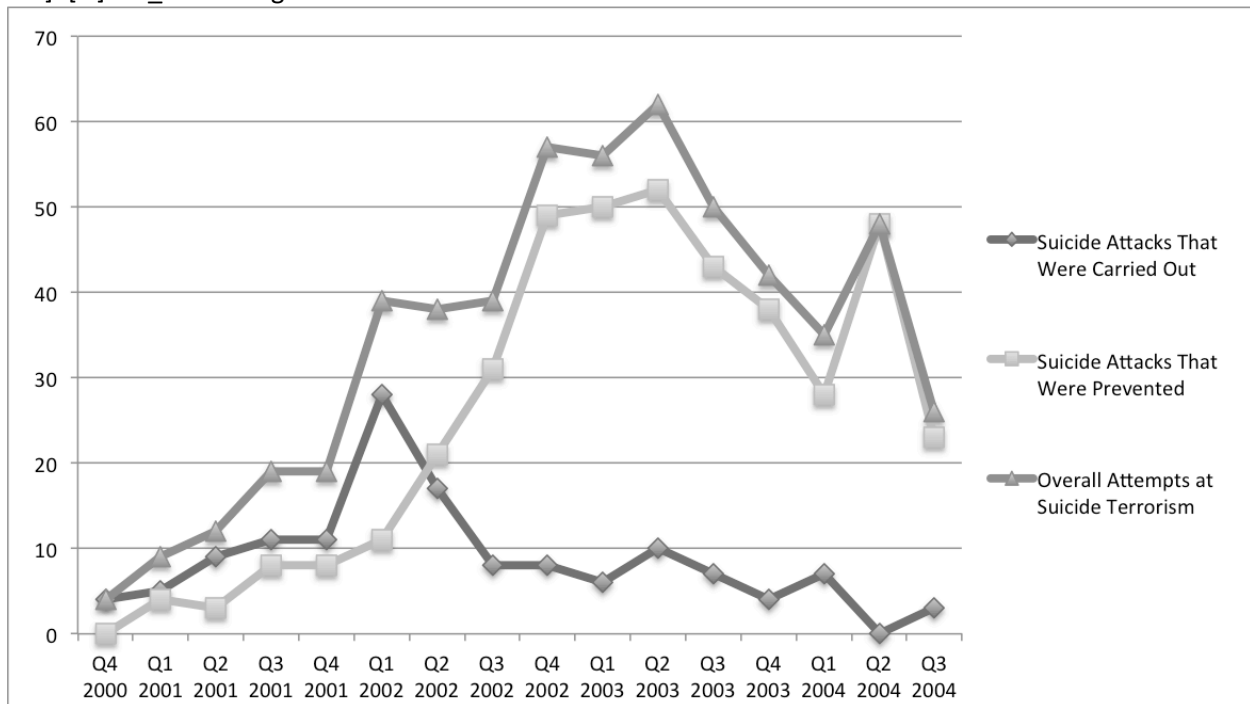


Figure 7.4

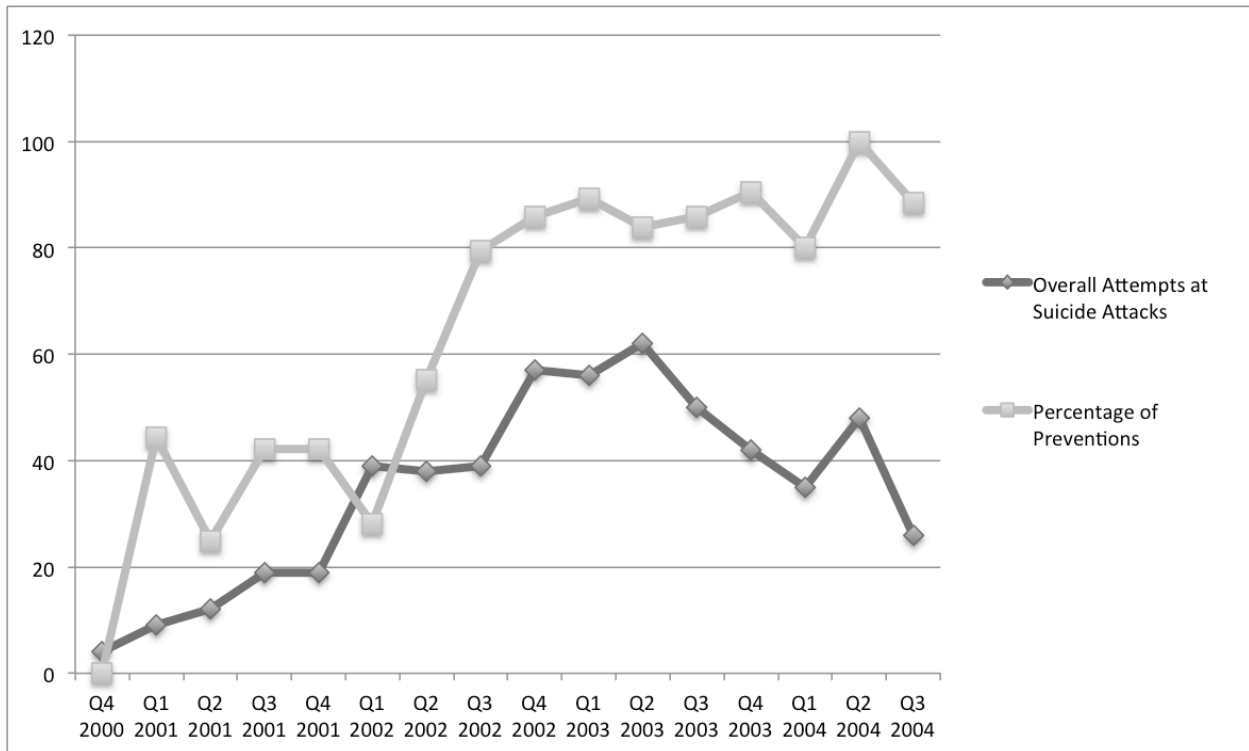
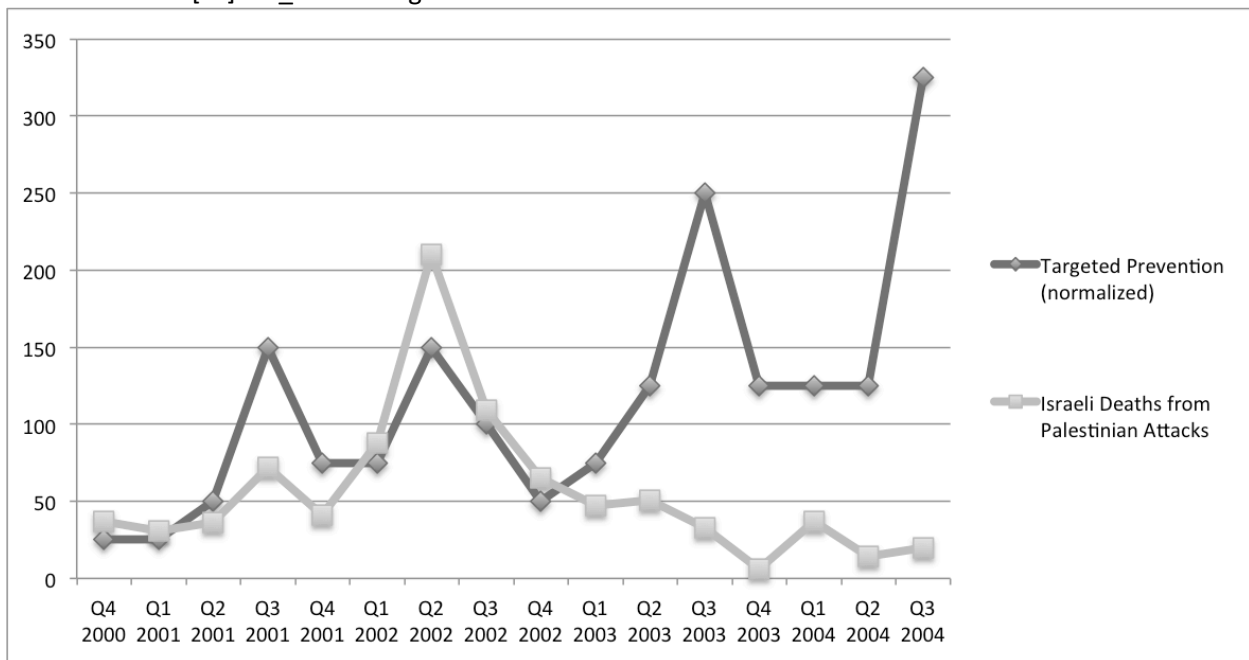


Figure 7.5 shows the targeted prevention activities by the Israelis and the total number of Israeli deaths by suicide bombings. The prevention activities combine the total number of killings and arrests into a single data point for each month of the intifada, which are reflected quarterly in the figure. The high-water mark for the number of Israeli deaths came in early 2002. Subsequently, the data shows that the frequency and lethality of the suicide bombings diminishes. It is not possible with this data to determine how many killings versus arrests were part of the program. According to the Human rights organization B'Tselem, 'the IDF assassinated 232 Palestinians between the start of the intifada and the end of October 2008'. [vii] < #\_edn7 > Figure 7.5



On 26 January 2004, a few months before his assassination, Abdel-Aziz al-Rantisi told Reuters that Hamas wanted a hudna (temporary truce) that could last, 'not more than 10 years'. [viii] < #\_edn8 > It was clear some ten months before the death of Yasser Arafat that Hamas wanted to end the intifada with the Israelis, but desired a mechanism to do so without losing support from the group's militant operatives. It is unclear whether the Targeted Prevention Program of the Israelis led to this conclusion for the Hamas or if other factors were involved, but Rantisi made it clear that the Hamas wanted a hudna. On this point Ben Israel wrote:

...We can conclude that the suicide terrorism intifada was defeated through a strategy that included first and foremost identifying the key players in the terrorism production line and neutralizing them: either through arrest (and this was only possible in Judea and Samaria), or through assassination ("targeted thwarting/prevention") in the case that their arrest was not possible (usually in the Gaza strip)...The attacks on people who planned, organized, recruited volunteers to commit suicide and coordinated the "production" of suicide terrorism is what brought about a dramatic drop in the number of attempts at suicide terrorism, and this was around a year and a half before Arafat's death.[ix] < #\_edn9 >

So, what are we to think about data on the effectiveness of the Targeted Killing program written by a former Israeli General? In an attempt to verify the conclusions reached by General Ben Israel, the author conducted a review of the Hamas violence data and spoke directly to Hamas and Palestinian leaders about the program. As evidenced in the violence dataset, the fact is that the number of Hamas attacks against Israel lessened in the latter part of 2003, coinciding with the Targeted Killing and apprehension data described by Ben Israel. Though this could have been by choice of Hamas leaders, the data does show a significant decline in the lethality of attacks after August 2003. This reveals that the potency of the dozens of attacks that occurred between August 2003 and December 2004 were less harmful, which does suggest that lesser skilled operatives were planning and/or executing the attacks. In other words, the data demonstrates that the decline in the lethality of Hamas attacks predated the fall off in Hamas attacks, further suggesting that Hamas capability to launch attacks with lethality rates seen in late 2002 and early 2003 may have been impaired through the Israeli program. It, therefore, is inconceivable, that Hamas may have had reduced militant capabilities, due to fewer operatives and lesser skilled persons, as a result of the Israeli Targeted Killing and Arrest Program. According to Ariel Merari, the Israeli program became a deterrent for the remaining Hamas leadership, particularly after two of its senior leaders (Yassin and Rantisi) were killed in early 2004.

In Cairo in September 2012, Mousa Abu Marzouk responded to questions about the impact of Targeted Killings on Hamas decision-making, including the idea that the killings influenced the group to move from the Intifada toward elective national politics. He said, 'Hamas did not change its policy based upon this. The Israelis were killing our leaders, this we came to accept as part of our cause. We saw no difference in the program from the Israelis. From 2007, the Israelis have not killed leaders from Hamas and Fatah'. We know that the Targeted Killings continued just after this interview with Marzouk, when an Israeli helicopter gunship killed Al-Jabri, head of the al-Qassam Brigades in early November 2012; this event contributed to the escalation toward Gaza War II. Even though the Israelis specifically targeted the Suicide Bombing Production Line, Marzouk suggested that it made no difference to the future policy of Hamas in regards to its resistance operations.

After discussions with many Palestinians and Israelis on this question, there was general agreement that Hamas did shift, in part, away from the intifada because of the Israeli program. This, however, is not something that any Palestinian would say on the record. Further, it makes no sense for Hamas to admit that such actions were influential in internal decision-making. In an interview after the cessation of the

intifada in 2005, Osama Hamdan said on BBC Arabic, ' Hamas has halted the suicide attacks for the benefit of the Palestinian people'. In a different off the record exchange, a Senior Hamas leader said that al-Assam stopped the suicide bombings because, 'our people were exhausted'.

At one point during the Second Intifada, Hamas put out the following statement on their website in relation to the number of assassinations the group had absorbed:

The Zionist enemy succeeded in killing many of the fighter brothers, and this is at a time when we are in dire need of every pure fighter. There is no doubt that enemy's frivolousness is one of the central factors to the enemy's success, that indeed its electronic spying helicopters do not leave Gaza's skies, the numerous eyes appointed to the mission do not know sleep and the Apache helicopters are prepared and ready with their missiles and waiting for the opportunity.

Here you are under constant surveillance twenty-four hours a day. Here you are a target for assassination every day, and even every hour.

All the fighters must consider themselves to be a target for assassination. No one should delude himself that he is not a target.

None of the brothers should arrange the times for their travels or their placement using phones, since all the telephone frequencies are captured. You are wanted and being followed.

The brothers should not use cars in order to move from place to place, since you do not know who has been appointed to follow you, and this could be a convenience store owner, your friend whose house looks onto your house, a merchant or a car that watches over your house twenty-four hours a day. If the brothers do use a car, none of the brothers should drive with more militants so that there won't be more than one brother in the car.

All the brothers should displace themselves only in emergency situations, and it is better if the movement is in narrow streets.

All of the brothers should conceal themselves during their displacement in order to obscure things, whether by wearing specific clothes, whether by changing the direction of travel, etc.[x] < #\_edn10 >  
After extensive statistical review, the Israeli Targeted Killing and Apprehension Program data sourced from Ben Israel, who sourced classified Israeli Security Services documents, provided no predictive power on the use of Hamas violence or any other Palestinian popular support measure. As described in the analysis above and through the words posted on the al-Qassam website, we can see that the program had tactical efficacy in reducing the frequency and lethality of Hamas attacks against Israel. The striking thing about this finding is that one might expect that Targeted Killings of Palestinians would predict a higher level of Support for Violence against Israelis. This, however, is not the case.

In a different analysis, the Zussman and Sharvit data was analyzed using time series tools. That data included the dates of 37 targeted killings of senior Palestinian operatives, including 21 Hamas members, by Israeli Security Forces from June 2000 to October 2008. Neither the 37 targeted killings nor the subset of Hamas targeted killings predicted Hamas use of violence or any other Palestinian popular support measure. Yet, in a 2013 article, Karen Sharvit and company asserted that the Targeted Killings of Senior Palestinians leaders, led to reprisals by Palestinian Factions, typically within two weeks. The difference in these findings is likely due to the specificity of the Sharvit analysis. They used only a

fraction of the nearly 250 Targeted Killings over the same period and looked for corresponding data about reprisals for specific acts.[xi] < #\_edn11 > The fact that Sharvit found evidence of reprisals could be attributed to the fact that their data represents the killing of only high-level operatives while the Israeli data represents all killings and arrests. Further, it is possible that Palestinian factions launched reprisals for all Targeted Killings, but it could not be seen in the time series analysis because of the length of time it took to conduct the operation. It could also be that the reprisals Sharvit discusses were merely a function of Palestinian Factions saying that a previously planned bombing was revenge for a particular Targeted Killing. This is the most likely explanation given the challenges Palestinians had in conducting operations in the face of high Israeli pressure, particularly in the West Bank.

Qualitatively, we can see that the death of individuals like Ayyash and Jabri have resulted in a form of cult-hero status within the population. In interviews with families of suicide bombers in Hebron, the iconic value of the Palestinian leaders killed by Israelis was evident. Families described how their children wanted to follow in the footsteps of those ‘martyrs’ before them, describing even lower level persons as heroes. Hamas clearly uses the Targeted Killing of their leaders and militants as a recruitment tool for future generations of fighters. Yet, analysis of the quantitative measures does not demonstrate a cause and effect or predictive capacity between Targeted Killings and any violence or popular support data.

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- [i] < #\_ednref1 > Israel High Court of Justice, 2005, HCJ 769/02, December 11.
- [ii] < #\_ednref2 > Blau, Uri, 2008, ‘License to Kill’, Haaretz, November 27.
- [iii] < #\_ednref3 > Zussman, Asaf and Noam Zussman, 2006, ‘Assassinations: Evaluating the Effectiveness of an Israeli Counterterrorism Policy Using Stock Market Data’, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 20:2:2006:193-206.
- [iv] < #\_ednref4 > Sharvit, Keren, et al., 2013, ‘The effects of Israeli Use of coercive and conciliatory tactics on Palestinians ‘use of terrorist tactics: 2000-2006’, *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, 6:1-3, 12-24.
- [v] < #\_ednref5 > Ben Israel, *Contending with Suicide Terrorism*.
- [vi] < #\_ednref6 > Ibid. 35-36.
- [vii] < #\_ednref7 > Blau, ‘License to Kill’.
- [viii] < #\_ednref8 > Tostevin 2004.
- [ix] < #\_ednref9 > Ben Israel, *Contending with Suicide Terrorism*, 37.
- [x] < #\_ednref10 > Ibid. 36.
- [xi] < #\_ednref11 > According to various NGO reports and inconsistent interview data, there were approximately 120 to 200 Targeted Killings by the Israelis during the Second Intifada. The Zussman and Sharvit dataset only represents between one-fifth and one-third of those acts.

## Neil Johnson, University of Miami

We have found that an escalation in the creation of these online VKontakte groups seems to precede an outburst of on-the-ground attacks — an important example being the attack on Kobane in 2014. So this could act as a ‘left of boom’ tool in that it requires no on-the-ground attacks to have yet happened in a region in order to work.

For scenarios where there have already been on-the-ground attacks and you are interested in predicting the severity or timing of future ones, there actually are two patterns that we have shown to be robust in published papers. The first paper “Simple Mathematical Law...” attached from 2013, discusses this, and the second was just presented at a Conference on Conflict Studies. The 2 key features are:

1. the severity of individual attacks always seems to follow a so-called power-law distribution, which is unlike the distribution of heights in a room, say, in that the 7ft, 7-ft, and 700ft person become quite likely. So an equally broad range of severities is to be expected. Moreover, all ‘David vs Goliath’ (i.e. asymmetric) conflicts seem to have the same value characterizing this power-law distribution of severities, around 2.5. In our 2013 study attached, ISIS did not exist and so is not included in the data -- but when we add it using the available data, it fits as shown in the attached diagram which also includes AQI (Al Qaeda in Iraq) etc. Here the ‘ISIS’ events are broken down according to the database, into ISI (Islamic State in Iraq) and ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant).

We show that this common pattern can be explained and reproduced precisely, in the paper. It comes from the common way in which a ‘David’ (i.e. nominally weaker but agile and adaptive) collection of fighters behaves when attacking a ‘Goliath’ state which is more powerful but typically less agile and adaptive. Knowing this, and having a precise mathematical tool that reproduces it, then allows us to run ‘what if’ scenarios for testing out the likely results of interventions etc.

2. the timing of attacks follows reasonably well the ‘progress curve’ known from organizational development and learning literature. This reflects, we believe, the agile, adaptive learning of ‘David’ versus the arguably more sluggish ‘Goliath’. (Excuse the analogy. Another one is the ‘Red Queen-Blue King’ analogy that we use in the paper attached, in which a nominally weak but agile ‘Red Queen’ is adapting and counter-adapting against a far stronger but more sluggish ‘Blue King’).

These results are the result of many years of analysis using all available datasets on such conflicts — so we are confident that any future such asymmetric conflicts will also follow these same patterns — irrespective of cause or location. I don’t want to over-promote our work, but I think it is fair to say based on the attention that all our work has received over recent years, that it is regarded as cutting-edge internationally in terms of analysis of event-level data across conflicts and terrorism.

## Adagio...crescendo... catastrophe...adagio.

Jen Ziemke, Ph.D.

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While in some ways ISIL strategy markedly differs from other violent groups, its behavior nevertheless mirrors other quite different rebellions and insurgent organizations in history in important ways. Several quite different groups seem to time their most savage attacks against civilian populations according to their fate on the battlefield. Consider, for example, the behavior of the RUF in Sierra Leone during their reign of terror under *Operation No Living Thing*, or UNITA's appalling treatment of civilians during the latter half of the second Angolan war (1991-2002), or the surge in civilian deaths in Sri Lanka just before the LTTE was defeated in Sri Lanka in early 2009. Despite how different these organizations may be from one another, they share a kind of tactical timing or battlefield rhythm: when they began to *lose* the war, lose territory, and lose fighters, each group escalates their campaign to deliberately target civilians, and in increasingly grotesque ways, and even more than before.

When a violent organization begins to **lose the war, warning signs** anticipating imminent and severe threats to civilian populations **should be flashing red** around the world, and especially for populations inside the battlespace itself.

My research on the Angolan war found the rebel group UNITA was far more likely to commit massacres and deliberately terrorize civilians *when they were losing* than at any other time period during the war. I found a strong relationship between the presence of battlefield and territorial losses in one period with deliberate civilian targeting and massacres in the next. Others have agreed that there seems to be something about *losing* a conflict that increases the likelihood that violent organizations will adopt a deliberate strategy of savagely laying waste to civilian populations.<sup>5</sup>

So if ISIL is facing a kind of imminent, existential threat to their survival, what might one anticipate would be their next move, particularly after they lose Mosul and retreat west, toward Raqqa?

When viewed as a complex system, from above, **one might imagine the group doing something utterly catastrophic to the entire city, even as this behavior risks destroying a large number of their own fighters along with everyone else.** Such atrocities might be viewed as a "gamble for resurrection" as the cornered fight harder, and nastier, than before. We expect they will lash out, possibly destroying themselves in the process, burning the whole city, gassing, or destroying everything, seemingly preferring that outcome to one that would mean defeat by another hand. Like a David Koresh-style cult, they all may go down together. If a localized heavy climax of violence occurred, of course this would itself be a signal of their imminent demise, at least as it concerns the kinetic space and in the near-term.

Also likely, however, is the scenario in which, despite ISIL's retreat from Mosul, messages fly and global networks activate, and an attack elsewhere is put into motion. But where? Of course, anywhere is always possible, and perhaps it is our lack of imagination, but we distinctly imagine certain spots to be

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<sup>5</sup> See Lisa Hultman, "Battle Losses & Rebel Violence: Raising the Costs for Fighting," *Terrorism & Political Violence*, 19:205-222: 2007. Mark McDonald. "Civilian Deaths Surge in Sri Lankan War," *The New York Times*. February 21, 2009; Jen Ziemke. "Turn and Burn: Loss Dynamics & Civilian Targeting in the Angolan War," *Journal of Economics & Politics* 20(1). December 2012.



far more likely targets than others. **We suspect heightened risk in those regional cities relatively closer to the battlefield. Nightclubs in Beirut, Istanbul, or Amman face heightened risk, particularly because such targets would serve to both maximize casualties and send a culturally-relevant message. Thus, cafes, nightclubs, & bars** in these locations are more imaginable as a choice of target to us than many other alternatives. Continuing signs of instability in Saudi Arabia might place sites there at greater risk vis-a-viz some others. And given the state of aggrieved populations in certain European suburbs, we suspect sites in Italy, France, and symbolic targets like the London Eye to round out a set of best guesses. Additionally, one should also expect that in the Iraq, coalition forces would be smart to protect the rear from attacks on cities like Kirkuk, that otherwise might catch a force off-guard who would clearly be otherwise shifting its gaze westward as the main front retreats toward Syria.

In addition, global events also will affect the CENTCOM AOR, particularly if the situation in N. Korea continues to escalate. **Should an event on the Korean Peninsula occur**, one should expect ISIL to attempt to take advantage of our seeming shift in attention and time their attacks accordingly, albeit on the other side of the world.

### Timing is Everything: Battlefield Rhythms & Op-Tempo

Converting conflict data into sonic landscapes for pattern analysis allows us to actually *hear* the battlefield rhythm and op-tempo of the conflict.

*Drip, Drip, Drip.* When micro-level event data (battles, massacres, ceasefires, etc.) on the 41-year long Angolan war are played over time, we learn just how *slowly* these campaigns tend to begin. Like drops of water slowly coming out of a faucet, each individual event is marked by a duration of silence between events. Very violent campaigns of all kinds tend to start very slowly. An event here. Pause. An event there. And it is silence that animates the space between events.

However, when groups begin to lose, losers lash out against civilians, and the pace accelerates. After you have listened to a conflict dataset for some time, you come to recognize patterns you have heard before, from other wars. And what began as a slowly dripping water faucet predictably accelerates into a cacophony of violent events, where the individual drips can no longer be heard. What is remarkable is that you can anticipate the trajectory: the familiar, accelerating pace. You can actually feel it and tap your toe to it, and when you look at someone across the room listening to the same dataset, you know they feel it too. Sonic layers of peace talks and ceasefire attempts chime like bells on the background of even more death and destruction: now a civilian train is terrorized, next another village. You learn that peace talks and ceasefires tend to make it worse in the near-term, and rainy season and dry season offensives each share their own temporal peculiarities.

From my analysis and observation, I've learned losing groups do not go down quietly, nor without a fight, and the individual drops or events turn into a firestorm of violence, but then, and even more rapidly, the fire dies, the losing side scatters, and the storm subsides. A few chirps amidst the silence mark the end, *and the war dies in much the same way it starts, as an inverse refrain on how it began, little by little, punctuated by silences: an event here, an event there.* Adagio crescendos to an absurdist cacophony, but just as quickly, it reverts back to the same Adagio in the end. **And thus the start of the war helps to inform just how it ends, it is actually the same melody, played again,** the last few chirps are the dying memory of a war that once was, but is already, in many ways, almost over.

## Coda

On January 5, during the Armed Services Committee Hearing on Cyber Threats, ADM Mike Rogers emphasized the need to improve the IC's ability to understand real-time data streams on cyber activity, stating: "The biggest frustration to me is speed, speed, speed. We have got to get faster, we've got to be more agile. And, so for me at least within my span of control, I'm constantly asking the team, what can we do to be faster and more agile?"

One answer might be to take advantage of a basic fact about human perceptualization: numerous studies on data sonification and audification have shown that ***our ears hear faster than our eyes see.***

Imagine a persistent yet pleasant audio landscape representing a real-time data stream forming the background of an analysts' working environment. Data of all kinds, including cyber traffic, are compressed and converted into a pleasant sonic landscape. The daily presence of this background "music" would passively teach any listener all kinds of different things about its patterns and structure. Analysts would come to learn what sounds normal, and what does not, and maybe even use this technique to help anticipate what comes next.

In short, the analyst would *come to know what an average day at the office sounds like*, as the familiar refrain becomes a baseline representation of average data, such that any significant changes in tone, velocity or pace would *serve as an early warning* detection system.

It would seem that in an environment where timing is nearly everything, such a low-cost and low-risk experiment would at least be worth a try.

## Biographies

### **Victor Asal**

Victor Asal (PhD University of Maryland, 2003) is Chair of the Department of Public Administration and Policy and an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University at Albany. He is also, along with R. Karl Rethemeyer, the co-director of the Project on Violent Conflict < Caution-<http://www.albany.edu/pvc/> > . Dr. Asal is affiliated with the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START < Caution-<http://www.start.umd.edu/start/> > ), a Department of Homeland Security Center of Excellence. Dr. Asal's research focuses on the choice of violence by nonstate organizational actors as well as the causes of political discrimination by states against different types of groups including, ethnic minorities, sexual minorities and women. In addition, Prof. Asal has done research on the impact of nuclear proliferation on crisis behavior and on the pedagogy of simulations. Asal has been involved in research projects funded by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, Defense Threat Reduction Agency, The Department of Homeland Security, The National Science Foundation, and The Office of Naval Research.

### **Richard Davis**

Richard Davis is the Chief Executive Officer and Co-Founder of Artis International. Artis is an interdisciplinary field-based scientific research and development institution working with various governments, NGOs, universities and private sector entities in risk management and conflict resolution and mitigation efforts across the globe through four divisions: 1) Field Based Conflict Research, 2) Energy & Natural Resources, 3) Cyber Defense and 4) Health & Medicine.

Richard holds several active appointments, which include: Founding Fellow at the Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict at the University of Oxford; Senior Research Fellow, Harris Manchester College, University of Oxford; Senior Research Associate, Centre for International Studies, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford; Professor of Practice, Arizona State University; and Member, Permanent Monitoring Panel on Terrorism, World Federation of Scientists.

Richard served at The White House as the Director of Prevention (terrorism) Policy. Prior, he was the Director of the Task Force to Prevent the Entry of Weapons of Mass Effect (framework for the prevention of the smuggling of nuclear materials) and the Director of the Academe, Policy and Research Senior Advisory Committee for two different Secretaries at the United States Department of Homeland Security.

Richard has been a Senior Policy Fellow at RTI international, a Senior Associate at the Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress, led a non-profit international development organization dedicated to the education and development of youth, including crime prevention, prevention of radicalization and conflict mitigation, and a school administrator and teacher.

Richard has authored or co-authored articles and publications on energy, international security, political violence and terrorism. He is the author of a book entitled: *Hamas, Popular Support & War in the Middle East* that was published by Routledge in February 2016.

Richard has a PhD from the London School of Economics; an MPA from Harvard University; an MA from the Naval War College; and an MA from Azusa Pacific University. He holds Baccalaureate Degrees in Finance and Social Science from Hope International University.



### **Neil Johnson**

Neil Johnson heads up a new inter-disciplinary research group in Complexity at University of Miami (Physics Dept.) looking at collective behavior and emergent properties in a wide range of real-world Complex Systems: from physical, biological and medical domains through to social and financial domains. The common feature which makes Complex Systems so hard to understand, and yet so fascinating to study, is that they all contain many interacting objects, with strong feedback from both inside and outside the system, and are typically far from equilibrium and exhibit extreme behaviors. Neil's research group is involved with interdisciplinary projects across multiple other departments and schools within the University of Miami, and other institutions both within U.S. and globally, e.g. Universidad de Los Andes in Bogota, Colombia.

Prior to coming to UM in 2007, Neil was Professor of Physics at Oxford University, having joined the faculty in 1992. He did his BA/MA at Cambridge University and his PhD at Harvard University as a Kennedy Scholar. He has published more than 200 research articles in international journals, and has published two books: "Financial Market Complexity" (Oxford University Press, 2003) and "Simply Complexity: A Clear Guide to Complexity Theory" (Oneworld Publishing, 2009). He also wrote and presented the Royal Institution Lectures in 1999 on BBC television, comprising five 1-hour lectures on "Arrows of Time".

He is joint Series Editor for the book series "Complex Systems and Inter-disciplinary Science" by World Scientific Press, and is the Physics Section Editor for the journal "Advances in Complex Systems". He is Associate Editor for "Journal of Economic Interaction and Coordination", and is an Editorial Board member of "Journal of Computational Science". He previously served as an editor of "International Journal of Theoretical and Applied Finance". He co-founded and co-directed CABDyN (Complex Agent-Based Dynamical Systems) which is Oxford University's interdisciplinary research center in Complexity Science, until leaving for Miami. He also co-directed Oxford University's interdisciplinary research center in financial complexity (OCCF).

### **R. Karl Rethemeyer**

R. Karl Rethemeyer, a graduate of Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government is currently serving as Interim Dean of Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy, University at Albany - SUNY. Rethemeyer's primary research interest is in social networks, their impact on social, political, and policy processes, and the methods used to study such networks. Through the Project on Violent Conflict < Caution-<http://www.albany.edu/pvc/> > , Dr. Rethemeyer is currently co-investigator for two projects. The first focuses on organizational terrorist networks and is funded by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), a Department of Homeland Security Center of Excellence. His work has focused on how networks affect the use of various forms of terrorism (including suicide terrorism and CBRN attacks), the lethality of terrorist organizations, the propensity of such organizations to attack soft targets, and the propensity to choose or eschew lethal violence.



### **Dr. Jen Ziemke**

Jen Ziemke, (Ph.D., Political Science, University of Wisconsin-Madison), engages national and international institutions on ideation for a diverse set of hard problems, such as how citizen reporting from live conflict events shapes the nature of the battle space in real time. She is currently exploring how multimodal data perceptualization (visual & audio) can be leveraged to help understand and peripherally monitor temporal data streams.

Jen served as Co-Founder & Co-Director of the [International Network of Crisis Mappers](#), an international community of experts, practitioners, policymakers, technologists, researchers, journalists, scholars, hackers and skilled volunteers engaged at the intersection between humanitarian crises, technology and rapid mapping. **Reuters AlertNet** named Crisis Mapping one of its **Top 20 Big Ideas** in 2011. She also managed an international conference event, the [ICCM](#), held in Manila (2016), New York (2014), Nairobi (2013), the World Bank (2012), Geneva (2011), Harvard (2010), and Cleveland (2009).

Jen has consulted with, briefed, or engaged programs within the DoD, ONR, DARPA, DIA/MINERVA, National Intelligence Council, NDU, the United Nations Office of the Secretary General, UN-OCHA, UN-SPIDER, the World Bank, US Department of State, Rockefeller Foundation, Woodrow Wilson Center, Yale, Carnegie Mellon, Rochester Institute of Technology, Notre Dame, TED & her projects have been covered in several national and international outlets, including the Voice of America, Reuters, NPR, CNN, Huffington Post, Wired, The Chronicle of Higher Education, among others.

In her role as [Associate Professor of International Relations at John Carroll University](#) she teaches courses at the intersection of research methodology, international security, international relations, and conflict processes. She serves on the Board of Directors for the [Open Geospatial Consortium](#) (OGC) & the MapStory Foundation, & is principal consultant at [Endogeneity, LLC](#).

Jen received her Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison (Political Science) and undergraduate degree from the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor. She also served as a [Crisis Mapping and Early Warning Fellow at the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative](#) (HHI) and was named a [2013 recipient of the University of Michigan's LSA Humanitarian Service Award](#), presented annually by the Dean to 3 living alumni in recognition of their work.

Jen was a Peace Corps volunteer on the Namibian side of the Angolan border from 1997-1999. She has hitchhiked 20,000 miles in over a dozen African countries and has a set of very cursory experiences drawn from short stints in several different warzones around the world.