Question (V2): *What are the key factors that would impact the wave of violent extremism and ideological radicalism that affect the Sunni community?*

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 (anonymous). 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, anonymous; 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

This paper does not represent official USG policy or position.

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change its tactics, encouraging sympathizers overseas to conduct lone wolfs 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 file the void caused by the defeat of ISIL (Carreau).[1]

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)

Personal Motivations
Finally, Sunnis—particularly outside CJOA—turn towards ISIL and other extremist groups for a number of personal reasons (Everington). Theses 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.

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[1] 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 additional to bringing actors to the table to discuss a political resolution to the conflict.

V2 Response

Hassan Abbas

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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

V2 Response

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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 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.

"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."

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 Ninewah.
- 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.

V2 Response

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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 difference from violent extremism. For example, the former would include Salafist Quietists in Jordan while the latter would not.

V2 Response

Anonymous

"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 billon US aid package awarded by the Obama administration to Israel will no doubt further corrode America's credibility in the region.

V2 Response

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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 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.

Response to V2

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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

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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

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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 come of them that have consistently emerged in my research (with ARTIS international) on populations across the MENA region, and that the USG can 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.

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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

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Education

- MALD and Ph.D. from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University
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Research Interests

- Politics, Security and Religion in South Asia
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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-i-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
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.