



# Terrorist Safe Havens and the Next ISIS

Although al-Qaeda is no longer a priority for policymakers, the organization continues to thrive. Similarly, while ISIS has lost territory in Iraq and Syria, it has spread its tentacles around the globe. As communities around the world become vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment to violent extremism, the global networks of these two organizations are likely to re-emerge unless governments engage in preventive measures in the near term. This policy brief offers a reality check on al-Qaeda and ISIS by examining the factors that enable these two transnational jihadist entities to sustain themselves. It offers the following insights:

- Underscores how “safe havens” represent a critical challenge in dealing with the most virulent strands of terrorism
- Explains how despite the recent degradation of ISIS, the jihadist threat will persist in sanctuaries around the world
- Details how Libya and the Philippines have become the latest jihadist infestations
- Recommends policy prescriptions that can help effectively deconstruct and eventually eradicate jihadist infrastructures

## Summary

### THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF SAFE HAVENS

Whether or not a terrorist organization has access to a safe haven, or something like one, is significant for the group’s growth, branding, and lethality. This is not to say that homegrown extremists cannot commit dangerous and tragic acts; they can, and do. But organizations with inflated capabilities based on the ability to convene other members, train

recruits, and claim legitimacy by holding land raises the likelihood of that group bridging the gap between small terrorist organizations and groups like ISIS. According to the U.S. Department of State:

*“A terrorist safe haven is an area of relative security exploited by terrorists to indoctrinate, recruit, coalesce, train, and regroup,*

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## ABOUT CGP

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The views expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Center for Global Policy.

*as well as prepare and support their operations. Physical safe havens are often found in under-governed territory or crossing international boundaries. Global communications and financial infrastructure, especially those created by electronic infrastructure such as the Internet, global media, and unregulated economic activity, can allow terrorists to fulfill many of the same functions without the need for a physical sanctuary. These 'virtual' havens, are highly mobile, difficult to track, and difficult to control.”<sup>1</sup>*

On the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan, for instance, a nascent al Qaeda (aka “the base”) trained and recruited so-called “Arab Afghans” from Middle Eastern countries during the 1980s. This led to the development of the skills and coordination mechanisms required for the 1998 embassy bombings and later 9/11 attacks. If the group’s infrastructure had been disparate -- with members spread across different countries -- it might have been difficult to coordinate attacks, convey skills, and share resources, as well as to hold territory that lends the group legitimacy and gives it a location to store weapons and other resources.

More recently, the key safe haven example is ISIS. Although ISIS has grown to boast global aspirants and affiliates, its genesis from al Qaeda’s affiliate in Iraq to its own, highly capable organization would

have been unlikely without the territory it seized in Iraq and Syria. ISIS’s predecessor likely can attribute part of its success to the laying of a foundation of a violent extremist organization in Iraq prior to the conflict with the United States. This allowed it to begin fighting as soon as the Americans arrived and then, after slowly spreading through permissive areas, it used geographic proximity to advance its capabilities.<sup>2</sup> ISIS used its geographic base to spread its influence in venues like prisons, unite like-minded Sunnis and spread its ideology.

Then, among other terrorist groups, it used a lack of governance in Syria to convene followers in its “capital” of Raqqa, where ISIS could set up a base equipped to attract foreign fighters for training, recruit new members, and churn out slick propaganda to promote its brand worldwide. Notably, the fall of Mosul in June 2014 and the declaration of this territory as a so-called caliphate were key to ISIS’s branding, encouraging outside fighters, and gaining funding and affiliates.

Following the declaration of the so-called caliphate, ISIS members began releasing propaganda calling for supporters worldwide to join them, such as the British jihadist who claimed, “I don’t think there’s anything better than living in the land of Khilafah” (the caliphate).<sup>3</sup> ISIS recruitment surged, exceeding the number of foreign fighters who had traveled to safe havens during

previous conflicts.<sup>4</sup> Over 40,000 foreign fighters flocked to Iraq and Syria from over 120 countries,<sup>5</sup> fully globalizing the ISIS network and skillset.

### SIGNIFICANCE OF GLOBAL TRENDS

Now, rightfully, policymakers have expressed significant concern about the return of these foreign fighters from ISIS's safe haven. According to a comprehensive study of foreign fighters from previous conflicts, one in nine returned home to commit attacks in the West.<sup>6</sup> Though these numbers are far from a majority of foreign fighters, the study could imply that more than 4,000 fighters returning from Iraq and Syria now could commit attacks in the West.

Moreover, returning foreign fighters tend to be more lethal. According to one study, approximately 46 percent of all terrorist plots in the West included at least one veteran of a foreign conflict, as did 58 percent of attacks that were actually executed, and 67 percent of attacks that included fatalities. Twenty-nine percent of plots with veterans reached execution and 16 percent caused fatalities as opposed to corresponding 18 percent and 7 percent for attacks without veterans.<sup>7</sup> Imagine the November 2015 attacks in Paris that killed more than 130 people, with 10 perpetrators, eight of whom are believed to have traveled to Syria<sup>8</sup> – but replicated with new perpetrators among the returning fighters.

ISIS has been successful in encouraging and orchestrating attacks outside of Iraq and Syria. Although they carry out a small percentage of overall attacks, homegrown extremists inspired by ISIS are difficult to stop because they are less likely to be on law enforcement's radar. ISIS affiliates outside of Iraq and Syria have perpetrated a significant number of attacks and killed an increasing number of people in recent years.<sup>9</sup> ISIS provinces have emerged in Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Nigeria, Afghanistan and Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, and Russia,<sup>10</sup> but many groups worldwide have pledged allegiance to the group.<sup>11</sup>

In some cases, these organizations were originally homegrown extremists who want to use the ISIS name for propaganda purposes. In other cases, they are former al Qaeda affiliates that have rebranded with the times or are groups in direct conflict with their al Qaeda counterparts.<sup>12</sup>

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Boko Haram in Nigeria had allied with al Qaeda, which meant it received support from the group's local branch, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. In shifting its allegiance to ISIS, Boko Haram might have seen an opportunity to maintain relevance, or perhaps the Nigerian group was counting on receiving direct

support from ISIS and calculated that al Qaeda's global influence was waning.<sup>13</sup> Since the declaration, the U.S. military has seen evidence of both attempted and direct coordination and support, such as weapons allegedly being sent from ISIS affiliates in Libya to Boko Haram;<sup>14</sup> and by some accounts, Boko Haram's attacks since the change in allegiance have been more lethal.<sup>15</sup>

By some estimates, ISIS has lost 80 percent of its territory in Iraq and Syria.<sup>16</sup> Some may contend that these losses make ISIS less of a threat - which may be true of the group in its current form, but how it manifests in other contexts will create the next jihadist threat. That the pace of ISIS-returnee attacks has been less than the most risk-averse assessments predicted is not cause for relief. ISIS within Iraq and Syria is fighting on its last legs, and launching attacks back home may require more time to plan and execute than ISIS's foreign fighters can spare right now.

Moreover, while the central ISIS entity might be less inspiring as it faces defeat on the battlefield, it could be that the fighting is delaying the spread of propaganda that would otherwise inspire returning fighters to action. The central question will be whether these same fighters - now armed with the skills and networks they gained while in the Iraq/Syria safe haven - will follow the next group like ISIS that

offers that inspiration.

### THE MAKING OF AN ISIS

Several factors made it easy and desirable for the world's jihadists to flock to ISIS. Getting to Syria was easier than traveling to safe havens in many previous conflicts, the "existence of a grassroots network" facilitated recruitment, and use of social media provided a new, mobile platform to communicate and coordinate.<sup>17</sup> The motivations to join ISIS at that time included the propagation of the idea that the so-called caliphate was an easy environment for the cause ("5-Star Jihad" as it was called), the religious appeal of the caliphate, Syria's historical significance, and ethnic and tribal sectarianism.<sup>18</sup>

While the factors that incentivized jihad in Syria were specific to that conflict, such as the atrocities committed by the Assad regime against its own people, many of the motivators that caused individuals to look for an organization like ISIS in the first place are not unique to Syria. Ethnic and religious marginalization, the need for belonging, and other social and psychological mechanisms that make extremist causes more attractive may not have changed significantly in these foreign fighters' home communities. The author found in a previous report that countries with high degrees of religious variation but low levels of ethnic and linguistic integration tend to be the most likely homelands for foreign fighters who traveled to Syria.<sup>19</sup>

Another finding of interest in that report is that Muslim-majority countries opposed to the brutality of the Assad regime saw a high rate of fighters traveling to participate in the Syria conflict, suggesting that a heightened ideological grievance also has an impact.<sup>20</sup> In the future, a location similar to Syria during the so-called caliphate's height of attractiveness could draw foreign fighters or even continue the ISIS-inspired movement worldwide, including returned foreign fighters who might have remained dormant if similar circumstances hadn't arisen.

All of this is to say that people attracted to violent extremism tend to have certain qualities as individuals, and the communities where they originate tend to have some common characteristics. Areas where those characteristics are exacerbated through weak governance or a lack of resilience are likely to be vulnerable and could become the next safe haven or source of foreign fighters.

In general, on the individual level, people who tend to become vulnerable to extremist ideologies are shaped by a combination of psychological, social/group factors, and ideological factors. They tend to feel marginalized or alienated, they feel the need to seek belonging, and they often otherwise have a grievance they feel cannot be solved through normal means.<sup>21</sup> Once exposed to an ideological cause that purports to solve those

problems, they may choose violence. Many of their home communities demonstrate gaps in resilience -- the ability to recover from stress, whether emotional, political or economic -- and governance. Indicators of such gaps are a lack of ethnic, linguistic and/or religious integration, the absence of international news sources, and a popular government condemning the driving factors of the conflict the radical group is fighting (such as the brutality of the Assad regime in the case of Syria).<sup>22</sup>

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Any community that exacerbates the factors of individual radicalization without resilience mechanisms to counter it (such as mental health services), and any country, community, or region where the governance and social factors structurally imply radicalization risk could become the headquarters for a future ISIS. Given that the ISIS and al Qaeda networks remain largely intact (even if their territories have been reduced), the same networks that facilitated the formation of ISIS or al Qaeda franchises could feed an even stronger future organization.

Many members of al Qaeda joined ISIS (or remained part of ISIS as it severed its ties with al Qaeda), and some affiliates of al Qaeda later pledged allegiance to ISIS. Now

that the same network has greater human capital, based on the ISIS foreign fighter contingent, and the ability to train and coordinate among recruiters and followers online, the “next ISIS” could be highly lethal.

And the “next ISIS” - ironically- could in fact be the return of al Qaeda. The organization has been gaining political ground and territory in Syria, re-branding itself as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and working with other violent groups in the area. This political and militaristic clout could comprise the seeds of resurgence.<sup>23</sup> An existing organization that rebrands under a new name or in a new location is a likely next phase of the jihadist threat as ISIS’s influence in Iraq and Syria wanes while the networks and risk factors remain around the world.

Critical questions for policymakers worldwide will be where the next safe haven will emerge and how to respond to it. An even greater complication is that while there are localities that demonstrate risk factors, those risks can manifest anywhere as terrorist organizations use the internet to coordinate, proselytize and train new recruits.

safe haven, and in the Philippines, there is concern about radicalization facilitating a nationwide tipping point toward state fragility. The so-called “Virtual Caliphate,” which could plant the seeds of the next ISIS anywhere in the world, is also considered in this policy brief. These cases were chosen to demonstrate that the factors that gave rise to al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan and ISIS in Iraq and Syria have the potential to create a new jihadist threat. There are many places in the world where this potential could arise, but Libya and the Philippines aptly demonstrate the types of countries facing various elements of risk.

## LIBYA

Since the fall of Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, Libya has faced a crisis of governance and stability. Without a strong central government, there is little Libyans can do to balance any community or state resilience with radicalization trends. In light of the instability in Libya and the tribal nature of the conflict, the potential for state failure is present, and the potential for ISIS to use the country as a safe haven or safe haven-like hub is significant. Libya already has a major ongoing problem with violent extremism, particularly since the 2011 revolution and July 2014 widespread outbreak of violence.

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In light of this upcoming challenge, two countries of concern - Libya and Philippines - are reviewed later in this policy brief. In Libya’s case, there is a risk of becoming the next significant

The ISIS affiliate in Libya could have between 2,000 and 6,500 members already.<sup>24</sup> According to the Counter Extremism Project, “ISIS was officially established in Libya in November

2014. Since then, the group has become the most powerful ISIS affiliate outside of Syria and Iraq as well as the most powerful extremist group operating in Libya.” Although that is a significant risk to local and global security, it cannot be ignored that ISIS is not alone: “A number of Islamist extremist groups compete with ISIS, most notably Ansar al-Sharia Libya and the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade.”<sup>25</sup> While ISIS has experienced setbacks in Libya recently – for instance, government forces pushed ISIS out of Sirte – it also has regrouped and continued to have a notable presence there.

A significant driver of the jihadist threat in Libya is the ongoing conflict, which largely breaks down along tribal lines. Libya has three governments that do not recognize each other.<sup>26</sup> According to the U.S. Department of State, the rival governments in Tripoli and Tobruk manifest as factions vying for governing power in a manner that has fueled the conflict, which is exacerbated by lack of strong institutions, porous borders, weapons proliferation, and weak law enforcement.<sup>27</sup>

While some progress has been made in the past two years in countering ISIS and related movements in Libya, the country still lacks governance and avenues for prosperity, and it still has ISIS remnants and jihadist networks. Libyans displaced by the conflict are vulnerable to tribalism and religious extremism.<sup>28</sup>

One predictor of jihadist risk is whether there is a history of violent extremism in a country – the same five countries have had the most deaths from terrorism every year since 2013<sup>29</sup> – which obviously is now the case in Libya. Additionally, the state’s weakness, tribal fractionalization, and the trauma and desire for reprisal among its people put Libya at high risk for future radicalization and, more broadly, for becoming a safe haven. In recent history, there were no deaths from terrorism in Libya until 2012, which followed the post-Gadhafi tribalist strife.<sup>30</sup>

While that risk remains high, particularly as internal governance conflict persists, Libya – for now – lacks the global clarion call the Assad regime’s actions in Syria inspired. It also does not have the breadth of territory or the religious historical significance that would allow local affiliates to declare a globally significant caliphate.

Notably, ISIS has attempted to put Libya on par with other locations as significant to its global caliphate project;<sup>31</sup> however, without additional factors to attract jihadists there, Libya is unlikely to rise to quite the level as the deeply historically significant Syria. Thus, the jihadist risk is significant but as of now, at least, Libya is not likely to become the next Syria.

### PHILIPPINES

The Philippines differs significantly

from Libya. It is not likely to be at risk of state failure, and in light of its strong national government, it likely can counter violent extremist organizations that emerge. However, the existing risk posed by groups that have evaded capture, combined with the perceived illegitimacy of the national government in some areas, could lead to a significant and sustained violent extremist presence there.

While the country as a whole is not at risk of becoming a terrorist state, the region of Mindanao has long offered safe haven to a range of violent extremist organizations, including Abu Sayyaf Group, Jemaah Islamiya, and Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), all of which have pledged allegiance to ISIS despite direct or indirect connections to al Qaeda previously. Thus, in some small areas, violent extremist organizations actually control territory, even if not as broadly as ISIS in Iraq/Syria.<sup>32</sup> That said, as opposed to a separatist group claiming territory as a political protest, the BIFF targets civilians, rejects the government peace process with BIFF's predecessor the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and has pledged allegiance to ISIS to be part of its global movement premised on targeting civilians.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the Maute Group and Abu Sayyaf Group received funding from ISIS to wage war in Marawi.<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps observing that this hub offers the potential to spread within

the Philippines, ISIS has recently targeted the area with propaganda.<sup>35</sup> The government has waged a taxing battle with ISIS affiliates in Marawi and declared martial law (as of this writing). The government thus is pushing back the influence of current violent extremist organizations but putting itself in a position to be blamed for the collateral damage and exacerbation of grievances between majority Filipinos and minority Filipino Muslims (Moro).<sup>36</sup>

With the religious minority Moro continuing to feel marginalized, and now with the Marawi conflict as a justification for government overreach, radicalization will likely continue, with the government as the ideological target. Should the government commit atrocities on par with the Assad regime, the Philippines could well become the next global jihadist focal point; however, since the Philippines lacks Syria's religious significance, it likely will not have the same appeal to foreign fighters. More likely, the government will continue to be the object of jihadists' ire as they fight for recognition for the minority. The question will be whether, like many other terrorist organizations, the BIFF and others could splinter and some members could accept peace – similar to the IRA in Ireland<sup>37</sup> and the Philippines' MILF – or whether the groups' purported ideological causes actually do extend beyond peaceful independence into something more durable.

### THE VIRTUAL CALIPHATE

Experts continue to debate whether or not ISIS has a “Virtual Caliphate.” As stated by Central Command Commander General Votel (et al.):

*“Many policymakers, intelligence analysts, and academics believe expelling the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) from Mosul and Raqqa is the key to the terrorist group’s defeat and the destruction of its self-declared caliphate. This is only partially correct. Following even a decisive defeat in Iraq and Syria, ISIL will likely retreat to a virtual safe haven – a ‘virtual caliphate’ – from which it will continue to coordinate and inspire external attacks as well as build a support base until the group has the capability to reclaim physical territory. This virtual caliphate is a distorted version of the historic Islamic caliphate: It is a stratified community of Muslims who are led by a caliph (currently Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi), aspire to participate in a state governed by sharia, and are located in the global territory of cyberspace.”<sup>38</sup>*

In other words, the online environment can provide the same circumstances as the physical environment that are conducive to the creation of a safe haven that can give a global movement or regional threat power that exceeds the sum of its original parts. ISIS’s attempts to leverage the internet include steps to “actively recruit, create,

and disseminate propaganda, and engage in hacking efforts online,”<sup>39</sup> including recruitment of further internet-using jihadists. Those attempts are “reinforced by the popular article ‘39 Ways to Serve and Participate in Jihad,’ which references waging ‘electronic jihad’ through involvement on discussion boards and efforts to hack into enemy networks.”<sup>40</sup>

These practices have put the same resources that might have been available to the lowest level of foot soldier for suicide or related attacks at the fingertips of any follower anywhere in the world. The propaganda alone is of excessive volume, coordinated but versatile, framed with competitive narratives, and frequently disseminated broadly.<sup>41</sup>

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Furthermore, groups like ISIS use the internet not only to draw in new followers, but also to help direct existing followers’ actions. In one such example researched by George Washington University, “In the case of Illinois-based Mohammad Khan and his two siblings, ISIS supporters they met online offered guidance on what to pack for their journey to the so-called caliphate and provided phone numbers belonging to local facilitators who could assist them in

crossing the border from Turkey to Syria."<sup>42</sup>

The internet is an incredibly powerful platform, but a platform nonetheless. The platform itself will never inspire the same clarion call to global jihadists that a cause – such as countering Assad's brutality – would generate. However, it offers the same level of resource pooling found in most territorial safe havens and can serve as the mechanism to facilitate such a clarion call. Thus, the internet relaxes the requirements for a vulnerable location to be used as if it were a safe haven. The Molenbeek region in Brussels, for example, sits within a vibrant and largely safe city, but as a physical location for radicalized individuals to bond with each other – coupled with the ability to be influenced by, organize through, and learn from the internet – it became a hotbed for terrorist influence that later led to the attacks in Paris and Brussels.<sup>43</sup>

### POLICY RESPONSES

As the terrorist threat has shifted toward a worldwide capacity, so our countering violent extremism (CVE) policy approaches have become comprehensive and global. At one time, countering terrorism largely entailed chasing Osama Bin Laden and al Qaeda in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Sudan. Now, any locality with weak governance and resilience can be leveraged by violent extremist organizations, and the global affiliate network is killing civilians at an increasing rate.

Our policy responses must take a more proactive, preventive approach. This next era, therefore, will require a threefold shift in priorities: a focus on preventing state fragility and lapses in resilience, broadening the focus on civilian capacity to counter ancillary support to terrorist networks, and significant investment in countering terrorism online – particularly as it relates to the prevention of propaganda and radicalization.

### FRAGILITY AND RESILIENCE

According to the Fragile States Index from the Fund for Peace, fragility can be determined from four categories: cohesion, economic, political, and social. The corresponding indicators include security, fractionalized elites, and grievances; economic decline, uneven economic development, and human flight; state legitimacy, public services, and human rights and rule of law; and demographic pressures, refugees and internally displaced persons, and external interventions into social issues.<sup>44</sup>

In the cases of Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, and now Libya, the failure to promote growth along these indicators gave way to state failure – or close to it – which provided the social conditions in which violent extremist organizations were able to create safe havens. The United Nations has recognized drivers of extremism to include lack of socioeconomic opportunity, marginalization and discrimination, poor governance and lack of rights and rule of law, prolonged

and unresolved conflicts, and radicalization in prisons. Each of these factors comprises a pillar of the U.N. action plan to prevent the manifestation of terrorism.<sup>45</sup>

Several domestic approaches address prevention in these terms. International organizations that support these approaches are on the rise, such as the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF), which receives multilateral support to fund local resilience efforts in at-risk areas of the world. Resilience is a community's capacity to counteract trauma and adapt to challenges. At the community level, resilience can reverse the trends that can lead to fragility and radicalization. By one assessment, community resilience comprises "four sets of networked resources or capacities - Economic Development, Social Capital, Information and Communication, and Community Competence" which together facilitate a "community's ability to 'bounce back' from severe stress... [or otherwise maintain] risk of delayed recovery or prolonged dysfunction."<sup>46</sup>

For example, in Libya, the civil war has created a governance vacuum in which few communities have the capacity to counter the factors that make radicalization likely, and the chaotic environment makes terrorist propaganda -- along with the economic and security offerings from terrorist organizations -- more attractive. Similarly, particular

communities in Mindanao or other at-risk areas of the Philippines have few opportunities to offer vulnerable individuals and lack credible counseling resources - and knowledge of how to access them - that could help drive at-risk individuals away from a violent path. Policymakers must prioritize - through funding, policy initiatives, and other means at their disposal - reducing state fragility and building the support networks of local communities through public health and economic mechanisms to provide them with localized strength to counter violent extremism.

**"Resilience is a community's capacity to counteract trauma and adapt to challenges. At the community level, resilience can reverse the trends that can lead to fragility and radicalization."**

### OPTIONS FOR CIVILIAN APPROACHES

The Coalition to Counter ISIS has rightfully embraced a comprehensive and global approach to countering ISIS's global reach. Rather than simply taking hard security measures within Iraq and Syria, it has also sought to change laws globally to more comprehensively criminalize support for ISIS, to counter ISIS's propaganda, and to share information with partner nations to stop ISIS recruits from crossing borders.

These mechanisms need not be specific to ISIS. As outlined in U.N. Security Council Resolution 2178, sharing information with multilateral

organizations such as Interpol, creating bilateral information sharing relationships, building community resilience and resistance to radicalization, and countering the financing of terrorism are critical to dismantling the ISIS global network. But those actions are also vital to countering affiliate organizations and inspired individuals in their home countries before they arrive in the Syria/Iraq safe haven to develop even more lethal capacities and potentially return home. These measures are monitored - and sanctions and travel bans enforced - by the United Nations and member states;<sup>47</sup> the codifying of UNSCR 2178 has led many member states to change their practices to better counter ISIS and al Qaeda.

**"Sharing information with multilateral organizations such as Interpol, creating bilateral information sharing relationships, building community resilience and resistance to radicalization, and countering the financing of terrorism are critical to dismantling the ISIS global network."**

These new practices can extend to countering and preventing the next era of violent extremist organizations. According to the Coalition to Counter ISIS, led by the United States, these mechanisms led to the creation of several centers to counter ISIS propaganda, have cut off 90 percent of ISIS's oil revenue and shut off 90 bank branches to which ISIS had access. These practices also increased the number of foreign fighters on Interpol watch lists by 400 percent, inspired the change

in laws within over 45 countries to better address the challenge of terrorism, and helped facilitate arrests in over 35 countries of potential foreign fighters.<sup>48</sup>

These approaches are necessary to counter ISIS, al Qaeda, and whatever the next terrorist threat that emerges calls itself. While significant progress has been made, these same reforms and mechanisms will need to address the types of threats emanating from Libya, the Philippines, other countries like Yemen and all of those countries at risk for becoming the next safe haven.

## INTERNET RADICALIZATION AND RECRUITMENT

The internet has emerged as a global, scalable, and rapid reaction mechanism for all terrorist organizations - not just ISIS. With the emergence of encryption and related technologies, it is even more imperative to find new and creative ways to address the online environments that mirror safe havens. While taking down content and accounts may feel cathartic, law enforcement and intelligence officials use those same sources to counter threats, and removing them could jeopardize such efforts and give terrorists the chance to spread propaganda claiming that authorities are undermining liberties.

Moreover, terrorist groups can simply move the same content to new platforms, making it more difficult

for law enforcement to track them. Simply removing terrorists' online resources is at best a merely partial answer to the challenge of online extremism and at worst a way to exacerbate the problem.

Some efforts have begun to crowd out extremist propaganda with positive messaging and use the internet as a way to reach out to at-risk individuals, thus making sure that online platforms have uses other than threats and recruitment. For example, the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism - established by Google, Facebook, and others - will exchange information on threats to internet platforms and how to counter them, provide research into how they and other platforms can prevent online radicalization, and coordinate efforts to do so.<sup>49</sup> Government efforts in this area are necessary, because private companies will never have the same strong incentives to provide a public good.

However, the governments' actions will have to be carefully tailored because governments lack credibility among many of the individuals they seek to influence. For example, the Counterterrorism Strategic Communications Center was criticized for ineffectiveness and for being out of touch. Its successor, the Global Engagement Center (GEC), may improve its approach, but its already meager funding is in question,<sup>50</sup> suggesting a dearth of scaled projects that can make an impact.<sup>51</sup>

The Global Coalition to Counter ISIS claims that ISIS propaganda is down somewhere between 15 percent and 50 percent of what it once was.<sup>52</sup> Whether that is due to counter-messaging efforts online or to the depletion of ISIS's ranks within the so-called caliphate is yet to be seen. Similarly, the Defense Department has noted that the Sawab Center - the GEC's equivalent, run out of the United Arab Emirates - is innovative and successful, but there is limited evidence to back this up. While the Center claims to have helped get 500,000 online accounts shut down, such take-down approaches are of limited benefit (as described above), and there has yet to be rigorous analysis on which accounts were taken down and what the value was of their removal.<sup>53</sup>

When implemented effectively, some strategic communications efforts have been shown to effectively counter extremist messaging;<sup>54</sup> however, such efforts are chronically underfunded, as are efforts to evaluate them. This makes it difficult to know exactly what works -- and unreasonable to already expect results. Efforts to counter online propaganda and coordination among terrorist entities must be scaled significantly and include funding to research what works best to address such challenges, so the next generation of resources builds on success.

### THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

The challenge among policymakers

is not a lack of knowledge about addressing these issues and preventing the next ISIS, but the urgency to put in place what is known to be necessary rather than what is politically palatable. Hard security measures are necessary in the near term, but those measures heal symptoms rather than causes -- and they sometimes exacerbate the causes of terrorism.

**"The challenge among policymakers is not a lack of knowledge about addressing these issues and preventing the next ISIS, but the urgency to put in place what is known to be necessary rather than what is politically palatable."**

Policymakers and CVE experts will need to better explain to their constituencies why resources must be put in place to prevent fragility,

boost resilience, take down networks, and prevent the proliferation of resources and propaganda worldwide. If they cannot, then the same elements that gave rise to al Qaeda and then ISIS will create their successor -- this time with added internet resources and a global network of returning foreign fighters that together offer the next ISIS the opportunity to be even more lethal.

While such policy and political urgency may be lacking while attacks in the West are not constantly top news items, acting now to put those resources and frameworks in place will be critical to ensuring the next wave of terrorism is not more tragic than its predecessors.

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