Report Part Title: Civil War, Transnational Terrorism, and Military Intervention

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A local militia member patrols the hills in Afghanistan's Nangarhar Province, where the Afghan branch of the Islamic State had its stronghold, on February 15, 2019. (Photo by Jim Huylebroek/New York Times)

Civil War, Transnational Terrorism, and Military Intervention

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Civil war, transnational terrorism, and foreign military intervention have been studied separately but are rarely considered in combination. The connections between and among terrorism, civil war, and military intervention are complex, and the points of overlap do not fit neatly into simple causal models. Yet understanding how these issues interconnect matters to American and international security. Far-away violence and disorder can undermine the security of the American homeland.[1] Governments need an integrated approach to appraising the threat of violent jihadist extremism, one that takes into account complexity, contingency, and unintended consequences.

Such an integrated approach should help in explaining these phenomena in a few different ways. First, it helps explain the staying power of the jihadist call for a pan-Islamic identity to defend Muslims against Western aggression. Civil wars and third-party interventions in local conflicts are propaganda assets in modern information warfare and help justify transnational terrorism. Second, it reveals how civil war and state weakness create opportunities for nonstate actors to establish operational bases and

DEFINITION OF TERMS

A few terms used in this report bear defining. **Civil wars** are considered to be violent intrastate conflicts that pit a government against nonstate challengers, whether the latter are separatists motivated by ethnic or minority nationalist grievances, revolutionaries aiming to displace ruling elites, transnational Salafi jihadist networks, or a mix. Civil wars often take the form of insurgencies that aim to mobilize the population against the government rather than conventional warfare in which armies engage each other.

Terrorism manifests in attacks against civilians and against highly symbolic and emotionally resonant targets, such as a mosque, a commuter railway, or a government building. Such attacks are intended to maximize shock. **Transnational terrorism** involves actions in which victims, perpetrators, and sites of violence represent different states and nationalities. Transnational terrorist attacks may be initiated by local actors against foreign targets in the geographic conflict space, or by radicalized local residents or transnational networks against targets outside the combat zone. These features of actor and location distinguish transnational terrorism from terrorism carried out by local parties *within* civil wars, which is not unusual.[a]

These various categories of civil war and terrorism are not exclusive: civil war insurgents can simultaneously be transnational terrorists.[b]

Military intervention by outside states or international institutions such as the African Union, the European Union, NATO, or the United Nations ranges from providing limited security and informational assistance to embattled local governments to full-scale military deployment and occupation by ground forces. In between are airstrikes, special operations, and the provision of weapons and matériel, training, and other forms of on-the-ground assistance by outside troops.

Notes
a. One of the first studies is Stathis N. Kalyvas, "The Paradox of Terrorism in Civil War," *Journal of Ethics* 8 (2004): 97–138. A recent review can be found in Jessica A. Stanton, "Terrorism, Civil War, and Insurgency," in *Oxford Handbook on Terrorism*, ed. Erica Chenoweth, Andreas Gofas, Richard English, and Stathis Kalyvas (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).
b. Martha Crenshaw, "Transnational Jihadism & Civil Wars," *Daedalus* 146, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 59–70.

acquire material resources, which makes them more threatening and may provoke third-party military intervention. Foreign military intervention can in turn precipitate both civil war and transnational terrorism. And third, it helps clarify the nexus of civil war and transnational terrorism: civil wars furnish openings for transnational terrorist networks to exploit local struggles, thus extending the global reach of violent jihadism.

The information surfaced by an integrated framework suggests two immediate follow-on questions. First, what is the likely outcome of a civil war in which extremists are players? Do the extremists win? Second, does foreign military intervention lead to the escalation of transnational terrorism? Since the events of September 11, 2001, and the advent of the US-initiated "war on terrorism," the United States has relied extensively on military

force to defeat terrorism, but such a response often becomes part of the problem, not the solution. Having a clear path to answering these questions would benefit the United States and its security partners.

THE POWER OF EXTREMIST IDEOLOGY AND MESSAGING

The current threat of transnational terrorism, represented in the main today by jihadism, can be seen as insurgency on a global scale, a violent campaign aimed at influencing a worldwide audience and encouraging followers through the use of modern communications technology. The message is disseminated worldwide through the use of both conventional media and social media, which the Islamic State (IS) has proved particularly adept at exploiting.[2] The Rand Corporation has identified recruitment as the major goal of carefully targeted information campaigns conducted by IS, which is a form of "political warfare" practiced by both states and nonstates. The term was coined at the outset of the Cold War to describe nonkinetic actions short of war, such as "gray-zone" or "hybrid" tactics. In political warfare, the information war may be as important as battlefield conflict is to conventional warfare. Even when states possess vastly superior military power, nonstate armed groups can succeed in the battle of ideas.[3]

The response of the United States to jihadist propaganda has tended to focus on how and to whom the message is transmitted. One key approach is to try to block or restrict access to communication platforms, which range from social media to encrypted channels such as Telegram. A second approach is to immunize or protect the recipients of the message to make them less susceptible to its appeal. Many initiatives designed to counter violent extremism are thus centered on preventing radicalization and enhancing societal resilience. There have also been attempts to construct competing counternarratives in what is recognized to be a battle of ideas, although these have not shown great success.

These measures are not unreasonable, but American counterterrorism and counterextremism policies must also take into account the facts underlying the narrative. Without powerful content based on contemporary reality, messages would not resonate so strongly with audiences. Efforts to rein in extremists' use of the internet, limit online propaganda, and prevent individual radicalization risk overlooking the reality on which such propaganda is based.

Certainly control of messaging allows jihadists to interpret the facts in a way favorable to their cause, but even if distorted the interpretation cannot be delinked from what is happening on the ground. Groups like IS can draw on the images and rhetoric of battlefield conflict to arouse sympathy for their cause and try to establish legitimacy, mobilize popular support, recruit fighters and suicide bombers for local struggles, and inspire the residents of enemy territory to turn to "homegrown" terrorism. A military response to terrorism and insurgency, especially when undertaken by third-party countries intervening in local conflicts, can be even more fruitfully leveraged to sustain the ideological narrative and make it actual, credible, persuasive, and urgent.[4] The threat to identity, the messaging reinforces, can be defined as now, not in the distant future, and very real, not imagined. The "war" is not metaphorical.

Framing the use of violent extremism as a way to uphold a pan-Islamist identity—which includes coming to the defense of Muslims worldwide and establishing systems of governance based on Islam—helps explain the staying power of ideas that provide immediate motivation for acting on beliefs. The 1980s civil war in Afghanistan not only gave al-Qaeda its start as an organization, it also helped launch the narrative of a religious obligation to come to the defense of a threatened Sunni Muslim community. This idea was initially propagated by the Palestinian cleric Abdullah Azzam, a mentor to Osama bin Laden. The emotional appeal to a shared identity—which at the time was not opposed by the United States and its allies since it was directed against their Cold War adversary, the Soviet Union—carries a potent message of in-group versus out-group and of an encompassing community in which every Muslim can find a place.

Extremist messaging also reinforces the call to action in support of a pan-Islamist identity by evoking sympathy for suffering, in conjunction with anger and outrage, especially if accounts stress Western inaction when Muslims are victims.

Subsequent civil wars in Bosnia and Chechnya in the 1990s similarly reinforced the narrative of a pan-Islamist identity under attack that originated in Afghanistan. Jihadist propagandists used the same discourse and communication tactics to do so. An analysis by Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty of the legacy of the wars in Chechnya stressed extremists' early recognition of the importance of broadcasting images and communiqués from a war zone, well before such propaganda expertise emerged in Iraq, Yemen, and Syria, and their influence on a new wave of fighters. Moore and Tumelty noted that

> although a small number of *jihadi* videos had been shot in Bosnia, the filming of military operations in Chechnya and their widespread dissemination on CDs and the Internet in the second half of the 1990s provided potent propaganda for a second generation of *jihadis* in Europe and the Middle East.[5]

The filming of operations was apparently insisted on by Emir Khattab, the nom de guerre of a Saudi-born jihadist who arrived in Chechnya from the battlefields of Afghanistan and Tajikistan after the Russo-Chechen war escalated in 1994 and 1995.

Extremist messaging also reinforces the call to action in support of a pan-Islamist identity by evoking sympathy for suffering, in conjunction with anger and outrage, especially if accounts stress Western inaction when Muslims are victims. For example, a statement by bin Laden in November 2001 emphasized the suffering of Muslims and indifference on the part of the international community, referring to Russian attacks in Chechnya and children slaughtered in the war in Bosnia when nominally under the protection of the United Nations.[6] More recently, Sunnis worldwide were outraged by the international community's decision to adopt a bystander role in the face of atrocities perpetrated by the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria.[7]

EXTREMIST MESSAGING AND THE TRANSNATIONAL MOBILIZATION OF FIGHTERS
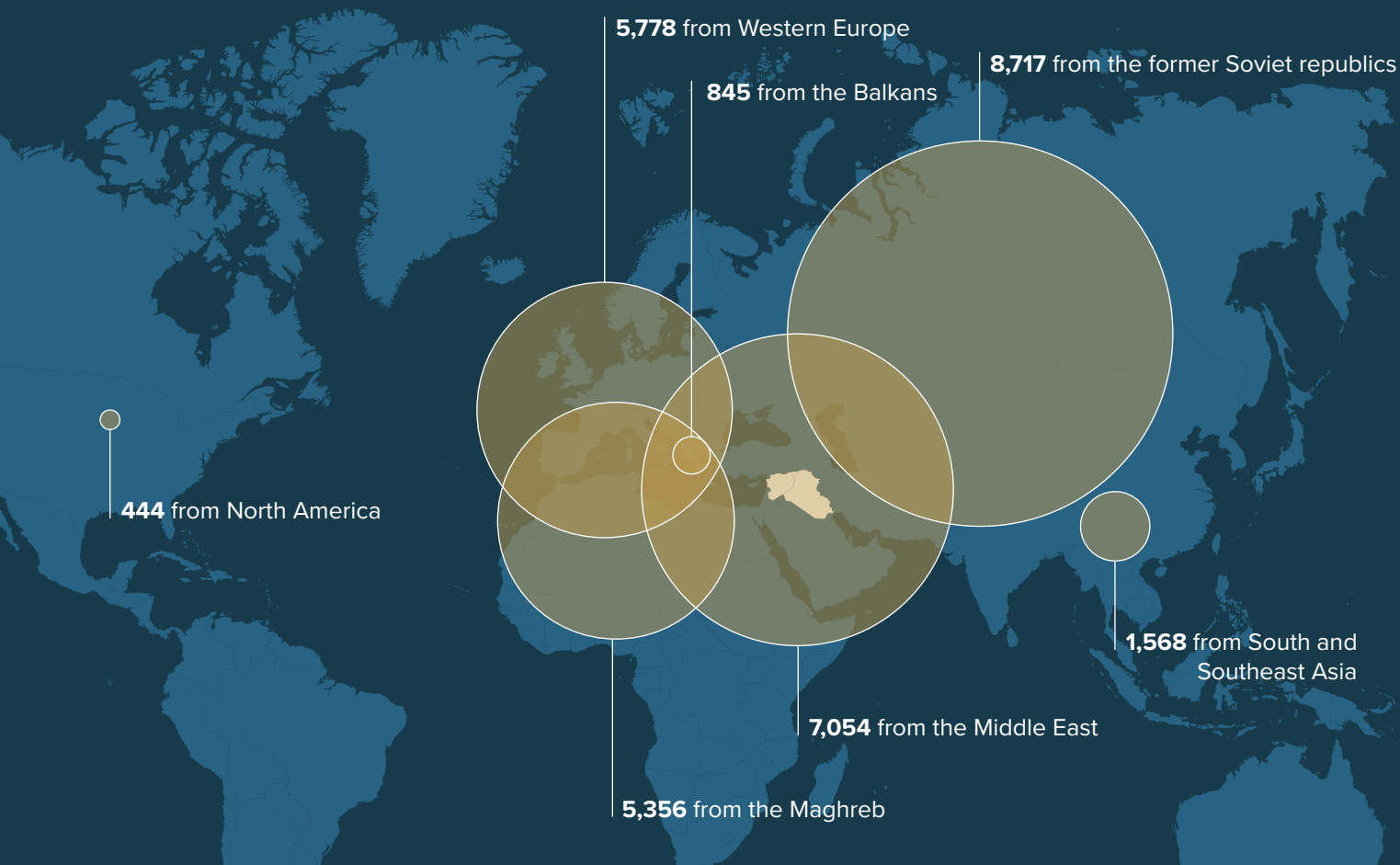
The jihadist narrative of defending a pan-Islamist identity against threats is also a motivating factor in the "foreign fighter" phenomenon—foreign volunteers traveling to civil war zones to engage in jihad.[8] From the perspective of the holistic framework proposed in this report, civil wars are a necessary condition for the mobilization of foreign fighters. Veterans of civil wars are credible and persuasive recruiters into terrorist networks and are often featured in jihadist propaganda.[9]

The attraction of the conflict raging in Afghanistan in the 1980s for foreign fighters is well established, and some states, such as Saudi Arabia, were not displeased to encourage the departure of troublesome domestic extremists. Subsequent civil wars, especially those that drew the intervention of non-Muslim occupying forces, created opportunities for the engagement of successive generations of foreign volunteers from around the world. Two of the 9/11 hijackers were members of the "Mujahideen Battalion" in Bosnia—"the heart of Europe," according to bin Laden—from 1992 to 1996. Notable jihadists Suraqah al-Andalusi (a Briton who was killed fighting for the Taliban in Afghanistan in November 2001) and Omar Sheikh (who kidnapped and killed American journalist Daniel Pearl in Pakistan in 2002) were inspired by videos of the war in Bosnia.[10] In turn, Suraqah al-Andalusi's death inspired Mohammad Sidique Khan, one of the suicide bombers who killed fifty-six people on July 7, 2005, in central London.

The 2011 civil war in Syria precipitated a dramatic escalation in the number of foreign fighters, who arrived in the tens of thousands from at least seventy countries (see figure 1). As the war winds down, the question of how to treat former fighters and their families has posed a major problem for their home states and for

Figure 1. Foreign Fighters in the Syrian and Iraqi Civil Wars

In the mid-2010s, Syria and Iraq were destinations for the potentially the largest mobilization of foreign fighters in modern history. Estimates range from 30,000 to as many as 42,000. In the estimate below, nearly a third of the approximately 30,000 fighters traveled to Syria and Iraq from the former Soviet Republics.[a]

5,778 from Western Europe

845 from the Balkans

8,717 from the former Soviet republics

444 from North America

1,568 from South and Southeast Asia

7,054 from the Middle East

5,356 from the Maghreb

ESTIMATES OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN PAST CONFLICTS[b]

Soviet-Afghan War (1979–89) No consensus, but estimates range from 10,000 to 35,000

Bosnian War (1992–95) 500 to 5,000, with most estimates in the 1,000 to 2,000 range

First Chechen War (1994–96) 200 to 300

Second Chechen War (1999–2000) 700

Notes

a. Richard Barrett, "Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees," Soufan Center, October 2017.

b. Maria Galperin Donnelly, Thomas M. Sanderson, and Zack Fellman, "Case Studies in History: Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Chechnya," Foreign Fighter Project, Center for Strategic and International Studies.

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Civil wars abroad, especially when accompanied by foreign military intervention, also contribute to inspiring "homegrown" terrorism in the countries from which foreign fighters originate—attacks against and within the individual's home country.

the international community. Are former volunteers likely to return to terrorism and extremism, or has their ideological commitment waned? Some veterans of the civil wars in Iraq and especially Syria have been implicated in attacks in France, Belgium, and Indonesia.[11] Even if returning foreign fighters are genuinely repentant, will their home publics accept them? If they are not allowed to return, what will happen?

This problem is especially acute for weak states struggling to consolidate their own legitimacy and facing an internal extremist threat, such as Tunisia, the source of a disproportionately large number of fighters who made their way to Syria. How to treat former fighters, whether foreign or not, is also a critical issue in Iraq, where the punitive treatment meted out not only to captured IS members but also to their dependents is likely to provoke Sunni anger and increase support for IS, which has recouped significant strength in Iraq since the collapse of the caliphate and continues its worldwide recruitment efforts.[12]

As the above reference to the July 2005 London bombings indicates, civil wars abroad, especially when accompanied by foreign military intervention, also contribute to inspiring homegrown terrorism in the countries from which foreign fighters originate—attacks against and within the individual's home country. Choosing to attack at home to exact punishment or obtain revenge is often a substitute for going abroad to fight.[13]

It has become more common for terrorism within Western countries to be fueled through online propaganda, leading to apparent "self-radicalization," rather than being organized and directed by specific extremist groups.[14] In 2003, the invasion and occupation of Iraq was a potent source of what could be called motivational spillover, and social psychologists have proposed that anger over Western foreign policies continues to drive radicalization and legitimize terrorist attacks in the West.[15] Most plots and attacks in the United States since 9/11 fall into the category of self-directed, homegrown terrorism, including the Boston Marathon bombings in 2013, the San Bernardino shootings in 2015, and the Orlando nightclub shooting the following year.[16]

Though ideological or religious appeal does not by itself explain the threat of transnational terrorism or the flow of volunteers to fight in civil wars abroad, it does appear to be a necessary element. Indeed, the mobilization of sizable numbers of foreign fighters to travel to conflict zones often is organized through local social networks of like-minded individuals. Al-Qaeda records seized in Iraq showed that in 2006 and 2007 many of the volunteers from abroad belonged to tight-knit social groups and were signed up by the same recruiter.[17] They might have gone to the same high school, belonged to the same sports club or gym, or shared friends and relatives. They volunteered together, not individually.