



Mapping Today's Jihadi Landscape and Threat

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By Colin P. Clarke and Assaf Moghadam

Colin P. Clarke is a political scientist at the RAND Corporation, a non-resident Senior Fellow in the Program on National Security at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, and an Associate Fellow at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism–The Hague. He also teaches at the Institute for Politics and Strategy at Carnegie Mellon University.

Assaf Moghadam is the author of *Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation among Terrorist Actors* (Columbia UP, 2017). On leave from the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, he is Adjunct Associate Professor at Columbia University and holds positions at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism; Combating Terrorism Center at West Point; and the Center on National Security at Fordham Law.

Abstract: This article examines the current state of the global jihad movement and offers reflections on its likely trajectory in the foreseeable future. It concludes that while the global jihad temporarily has been set back by the relative decline of the Islamic State, the movement overall benefits from al-Qaeda's regeneration; its ongoing ideological appeal; and its structural decentralization. In the next years, the movement likely will continue to evolve from its current bipolar structure toward an increasingly multipolar entity. Furthermore, it argues that the future jihadi movement will contain a large number of jihadi actors whose relationships will span cooperative, competitive, or mixed engagements, with implications for the movement as a whole. The article highlights several challenges for counterterrorism, including dealing with a complex movement structure; radicalization; socio-political disenfranchisement; the counter-response of societies targeted by jihadist violence; and technological changes. The article concludes with an assessment that in the next two to five years, the global jihad will remain a potent, although not an existential, threat.

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The global jihad is a social movement in that it is a “conscious, concerted and sustained” effort “by ordinary people to change some aspect of their society by using extra-institutional means.”¹ The most striking and consequential extra-institutional means it has deployed is violence, and it is the quantity, quality, nature, and reach of that violence that has made the global jihad movement the preeminent terrorist threat of modern times. The movement is transnational in scope and character and—like other social movements—composed of different levels and actors, such as organizations, networks, cells, and individuals. It is held together by a common narrative according to which the Islamic community of believers—the *ummah*—continues to face a sustained and relentless military, political, cultural, and religious attack from multiple usurpers. Leading the charge on this anti-Islamic conspiracy is a three-pronged enemy composed of what jihadis refer to as Crusaders, Zionists, and Apostates.² To defend the *ummah* from this onslaught, jihadi ideology commands every “true Muslim” to defend Islam through jihad—understood by jihadis to be a predominantly military effort and one that has assumed an offensive, proactive connotation in the modern era.³ The internalization of this powerful narrative is what unites all jihadis, however tenuously at times. Disagreements and splits over strategic, tactical, and more minute ideological issues naturally occur, both between and within specific groups and organizations in the movement.⁴

The Bipolar State of Global Jihad

Since the late 1990s, when al-Qaeda began to wage an international terrorist campaign, the structure of the global jihad movement has been unipolar, with Osama bin Laden’s group serving as its nominal vanguard. By the end of 2014, the dramatic expansion of the so-called “Islamic State”—an erstwhile affiliate of al-Qaeda—challenged al-Qaeda’s leadership and restructured global jihadism into a bipolar

¹ Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper, eds., *The Social Movements Reader: Cases and Concepts*, 3rd ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 3.

² Global jihadists refer to “Crusaders” as Islam’s Western Christian enemies, led by the United States. The jihadi reference to “Zionists” encompasses both Israel and Jews at large.

“Apostates” are Muslims who have strayed from the right path, especially nominally Muslim governments who are “unislamic.” Assaf Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

³ For more extensive discussions of global jihad, see, Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Nelly Lahoud, *The Jihadis’ Path to Self-Destruction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (London: Hurst & Co, 2016).

⁴ On debates and divisions within the global jihad movement, see, Assaf Moghadam and Brian Fishman, eds., *Fault Lines in Global Jihad: Organizational, Strategic, and Ideological Fissures* (London: Routledge, 2011).

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