From the Editor

The Combating Terrorism Exchange begins its fifth volume with this issue. Contributors, from military personnel to academicians to policy makers, continue to send us thoughtful, thought-provoking essays that tackle the ever-changing world of terrorism from a variety of angles, as the present issue demonstrates.

Afghanistan still features prominently as a locus of jihad and a subject for analysis, but, sadly, Iraq is back in the headlines. There were many who warned that the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 would likely unleash a sectarian firestorm in that country, but few could foresee that, 12 years after the US overthrow of Saddam Hussein, internecine violence would engulf the entire region. While this issue does not include any articles on the Islamic State (aka ISIS or ISIL) per se, the radical army’s impact on other jihadist organizations and mainstream Islamic communities around the world is an undercurrent that runs through all of the articles.

The use of social media such as Twitter and YouTube to spread radical messages is a hot topic these days, and one that CTX has covered extensively, as for instance, in our special issue, “Social Media in Jihad and Counterterrorism” (Vol. 2, No. 4). Nonetheless, Captain Edval Zoto tackles the subject from a novel angle, by using the Albanian language as a unique marker to track the spread of jihadist videos via YouTube. He finds that even in Albania, which is generally pro-Western, Muslim youth are captivated by well-produced, visually exciting videos spread by ISIS supporters. “The participation of Albanians in the Syrian jihad,” Zoto suggests, “may be correlated with successful jihadist information operations online.”

As the recent attacks on Charlie Hebdo in Paris and several towns in northern Nigeria make painfully clear yet again, the dilemma of ideological seduction is one the world must resolve.

Surinder Kumar Sharma offers a brief, chilling description of the Pakistan-based jihadist organization Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT), which, he warns, may prove more dangerous to the world in the long run than ISIS. While ISIS runs amok in Syria and Iraq, demanding media attention through acts of barbarous cruelty, HuT is quietly building a global infrastructure of radicalized youth and deep-pocketed Arab support in preparation for the global Khilafat.

In the next article, Dr. Guy Duczynski, Dr. Samuel Huddleston, and Colonel Jaroslaw Jablonski describe an interactive analytical method for use on “wicked, messy problems,” such as creating sustainable Afghan security forces. This process, which aggregates and distills stakeholder knowledge rather than simply applying outside “expertise,” helps stakeholders identify realistic steps to move from a dysfunctional system to one that is reliable and sustainable.
The final feature article takes us to Nigeria, where author Muhammad Feyyaz seeks to explain the extraordinary levels of violence unleashed on that country’s population by the radical anti-Western Islamist group Boko Haram (BH). Like similar groups, BH latched on to the economic and political grievances of a marginalized population, in this case the Muslims of Nigeria’s northern states. But, Feyyaz argues, BH’s escalating violence is in direct response to brutal government crackdowns and extrajudicial killings by unregulated security forces. The solution, he concludes, must come from both sides of the conflict.

This issue’s CTAP interview is with veteran Time magazine photojournalist Robert Nickelsberg. Dr. Leo Blanken spoke with Nickelsberg about his 30-year career covering many of the most important social and political events in Central and South Asia. Some striking samples of the photographer’s work illustrate the interview.

Movie critic Dr. Kalev Sepp is back, with a look at films about prisoners of war who try to escape. From The Bridge on the River Kwai, a famous World War II film about the morality of collaboration versus survival, to director Werner Herzog’s controversial depiction of the story of POWs in the jungles of Laos in 1966 (Rescue Dawn), to the elaborate and entertaining deceptions of Argo, audiences never tire of watching captives pit their wit and will against terrifying odds in the attempt to regain their freedom.

Finally, our colleagues at the Joint Special Operations University have two new publications on offer. You can read the synopses and find links to these articles and the full JSOU archive in the Publications Announcements.

Thanks for your interest in CTX. Please send any questions and comments you may have about this or any issue of CTX to CTXeditor@GlobalECCO.org. If you have an article, a work of art or photography, a story, or any other original composition relevant to counterterrorism that you’d like to see published in our journal, please forward it to CTXsubmit@GlobalECCO.org. CTX is a quarterly, peer-reviewed journal. All submissions will be evaluated by area experts and, if accepted, professionally edited prior to publication. We especially encourage members of the military from every part of the world to send us your thoughts, ideas, and essays.

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Dr. Guy Duczynski is a former member of Booz Allen Hamilton's strategic security planning team in Canberra, Australia. He holds a PhD in operational design and campaign planning, along with master's degrees in business administration and education. A skilled facilitator in general morphological analysis, his past work includes an analysis of nanotechnology within Australia; an investigation of economic development for the indigenous people of Western Australia; a study of North Korea for planners at the Joint Information Operations Warfare Center in San Antonio, Texas; and an analysis of security in Oruzgan Province, Afghanistan, for Australia's Special Operations Command. His research interests include operational design, information operations, and planning for complex environments.

Muhammad Feyyaz is country coordinator for Pakistan's Terrorism Research Initiative (TRI) and teaches at the University of Management and Technology in Lahore, Pakistan. He holds a Master of Philosophy degree in peace and conflict studies from the National Defence University and a master's degree in war studies from Quaid-i-Azam University, both in Islamabad, Pakistan. He also earned diplomas in infantry tactics from the US Army Infantry School, Fort Benning, Georgia, and conflict management from the Modern Institute of Informatics and Management, Islamabad. Feyyaz's latest publication, "Conceptualizing Terrorism Trend Patterns in Pakistan: An Empirical Perspective," appeared in Perspectives on Terrorism 7, no. 1 (2013).

Dr. Samuel H. Huddleston is currently a senior operations research and systems analyst for the US Army. He holds PhD and MS degrees in systems engineering from the University of Virginia and a BS in mechanical engineering from the United States Military Academy, where he also served as an assistant professor. His research interests include statistical learning, agent-based simulation, crime analysis, and network analysis.

Colonel Jaroslaw Jablonski is a member of the Polish Special Forces. He joined the Polish Army in 1989 and received his commission in 1993. He served as a paratroop platoon leader and company commander, and successfully passed the selection course for the GROM (Operations Mobile Reaction Group) in 2002, where he has since served in several positions. COL Jablonski received his MA in defense analysis from the US Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) in 2009 and a PhD in information and knowledge management in 2012. COL Jablonski has a combined 19 months of deployment time to Bosnia and Kosovo, Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Afghanistan in support of the International Security Assistance Force.

Robert Nickelsberg has worked as a Time magazine contract photographer for nearly 30 years, specializing in political and cultural change in developing countries. Living in New Delhi from 1988 to 1999, Nickelsberg recorded the rise of religious extremism in South Asia. His assignments have also encompassed Iraq, Kuwait, Vietnam, Cambodia, Burma, and Indonesia. His images have appeared in publications and broadcasts that include Time, the New York Times, Newsweek, the Wall Street Journal, the Financial Times, the Guardian, Paris Match, Stern, CNN, and NBC. Nickelsberg has taught photojournalism and conflict coverage at the California Institute for Integral Studies in San Francisco. His photographs have been exhibited at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the International Center of Photography in New York, and the New America Foundation in Washington, DC. His recent book, Afghanistan: A Distant War (New York: Prestel, 2013), received the Olivier Rebbot Award in 2013 for the best reporting from abroad in books and magazines. Nickelsberg is a graduate of the University of Vermont.

Dr. Kalev I. Sepp is a senior lecturer in the Defense Analysis department at NPS. He served as deputy assistant secretary of defense for Special Operations and Counterterrorism, and was an expert member of the Baker-Hamilton Bipartisan Commission on Iraq. He co-authored Weapon of Choice: US Army Special Operations in Afghanistan (Dept. of Defense Center of Military History, 2006), and in 2009, Foreign Policy magazine named him one of "The Ten Most Influential Counterinsurgency Thinkers" in the United States. He earned a master's degree in military art and science from the US Army Command and General Staff College, and a PhD in history from Harvard University. A former US Army Special Forces officer, Sepp earned his Combat Infantryman Badge in the Salvadoran Civil War.

Surinder Kumar Sharma is currently a consultant with the noted Indian think tank, the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA). He is an expert on Pakistan-based Islamist militancy in South Asia, particularly Kashmir. He holds a graduate degree in history from Meerut University in Uttar Pradesh, India, and is fluent in Arabic and French. He writes regularly for the Times of India, Pioneer, the Tribune, the South Asia Tribune, and the Asia Times. His most recent book (with Anshuman Behera) is Militant Groups in South Asia (New Delhi: Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses and Pentagon Press, 2014). He has held a number of positions in the Indian security establishment and was decorated with an outstanding performance award by the Indian government's national security advisor.

Captain Edval Zoto, an infantryman by specialty, proudly serves in the Armed Forces of the Republic of Albania. He graduated in 2009 with a degree in strategic, political, and organizational sciences from the University of Tirun, Italy. In 2011, CPT Zoto earned an MA in European studies and diplomacy from the ISSAT Institute in Tirana, Albania, and the University of Business and International Studies in Geneva, Switzerland. He is an alumnus of the Advanced Security Studies program at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies. In 2013, he obtained an MS in special operations and terrorist operations and financing from NPS through the Combating Terrorism Fellowship Program.

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Hizb-ut-Tahrir: The New Islamic State

While the world’s attention is fixed on the activities of the dangerous and ruthless Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, or simply IS\(^1\)), there is another militant organization worthy of serious attention. Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT), or the Party of Liberation, is a radical Islamist group that, like IS, calls for the uniting of the Ummah and the return of the Caliphate.

HuT was founded in Jerusalem in 1952 by a Palestinian, Sheikh Taqiuddin al-Nabhani, with the help of Khalid al-Hassan, a founder of the militant Fatah faction of the Palestine Liberation Organization, and Assad Tamimi, a spiritual leader of the Islamic jihad movement, both of whom became important leaders of the group.\(^2\) Although at the ideological level there is much in common between HuT and IS, the dramatic growth of IS, its highly publicized atrocities, and its rapid acquisition of territory could cause its own downfall if a US-led military coalition launches a military offensive against the group. In contrast, Hizb-ut-Tahrir is a slow and steady player; it has cleverly avoided any intense global scrutiny while spreading its ideology and support base in different parts of the world. HuT, therefore, has the potential to become an even more dangerous terrorist group than IS.

IS may be trying to exploit a tendency noted by retired Major General Robert Scales in a recent Wall Street Journal article: “Western militaries fight short wars well and long wars poorly.”\(^3\) But any apparent advantage from a protracted conflict could backfire for the al Qaeda breakaway group, as one analyst pointed out: “[The] Islamic State’s fundamentals are weak, and it does not have a sustainable endgame.”\(^4\) The same analyst went on to suggest that the group is getting more credit than it deserves and that its support among the local population is fairly superficial, making the group vulnerable to external interventions. Interestingly, the majority of individuals and entities who support IS also support HuT, raising questions about whether the eventual defeat of IS could result in the end of terrorism in Asia and elsewhere.

This is where HuT’s strategy is different. With a reported presence in nearly 50 countries, it is slowly increasing its social capital by keeping away from overt acts of terrorism while luring the educated young with ideology. Headquartered in London, the group has branches in Central Asia, Europe, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia, where it has managed to garner great influence. In South Asia, HuT has a significant presence in Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Although HuT has reportedly found a foothold in India, its presence and influence have not made any significant impact. On its website, HuT claimed that it had organized a demonstration in 2010 at Batla House in Delhi in protest against Israel’s alleged atrocities.\(^5\) The demonstration, which was attended by about 1,000 people, was HuT’s last reported activity in India. HuT’s growing
presence in neighboring Bangladesh and Pakistan, however, should be a cause of concern for India and the larger global community.

The Bangladesh chapter, which started in 2001, is headed by Mohiuddin Ahmad, a professor at Dhaka University. It is important to note that the organization has been able to penetrate not only state-run educational institutions like Dhaka University, but also private establishments. It is worrisome that in Bangladesh, HuT has managed to gather the support of many intellectuals, including doctors, lawyers, and professors. HuT was officially banned in Bangladesh in 2009 for anti-state activities, apparently because of its possible involvement in the Bangladesh Rifles mutiny that took place the same year. During the mutiny, security forces arrested six HuT members who were carrying incendiary pamphlets. According to media reports, HuT had planned another mutiny in 2010 and is suspected to have been part of the foiled army coup in 2011 against Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. While there is no known case of HuT’s direct involvement in any violent activity in Bangladesh, its growing support base could become a breeding ground for extremism and terrorism.

Compared to Bangladesh, HuT has a longer history in Pakistan, where it established its base in 1990. The group remained underground until 2000, when its cadres launched a massive publicity campaign through the distribution of leaflets promoting Ummah unity and the Caliphate near mosques in Islamabad, Lahore, and Rawalpindi. HuT considers Pakistan to be a suitable place for the seat of a future Caliphate (or Khilafat) due to its geo-strategic location and its rich natural and human resources. HuT’s plans to establish an Islamic state propose three stages. The first involves educating the common people and indoctrinating the educated class; the second stage involves co-opting people who hold influential positions in the government, the military, and the civil service; and the third stage is the establishment of the Caliphate itself.

Pakistan banned HuT in 2003 after it was linked with several terror plots, including a plot to kill former President Pervez Musharraf. Media reports have since suggested that HuT has made several attempts to infiltrate the Pakistani Army in order to initiate the process of establishing a Caliphate. This suspicion was further supported by the arrests of five army officers for their HuT links. Despite the ban, the group is reportedly deepening its support among the intelligentsia and military circles.

Another interesting aspect of HuT is that while it advocates a strict interpretation of Islam, it does not oppose modern technology and makes use of the internet to spread its ideology among educated youth. This seeming paradox is further reflected in how the outfit deals with sophisticated weapons, including bombs and land mines. HuT may not be directly involved in terrorist activities, but it approves the use of violence and armed force to achieve the Caliphate. According to media reports, HuT has an armed wing called Harakat ul-Muhojirinfi Britaniya that is training its cadres in chemical, bacteriological, and biological warfare.

HuT’s global ambition and activities are bankrolled through private donations from local entrepreneurs to Islamic charity organizations. Media reports suggest that members pay 10 percent of their incomes to the group. Wealthy sheikhs from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, who embrace the pan-Islamic
agenda, also fund the outfit. This financial support is one of the reasons that HuT believes it will be able to establish the Caliphate.

It is said that HuT commands a base of over one million members worldwide. This is far higher than what IS has claimed to have. HuT has its headquarters as well as a strong base of support in the United Kingdom and is also widespread in Central Asia, particularly in Uzbekistan, in which country alone its membership is estimated to range from 7,000 to 60,000. Reports claim that Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have somewhere between 3,000 and 5,000 members each, while Kazakhstan has about 100 members. Although there are no credible estimates of the group’s strength elsewhere, it undoubtedly has some presence in a number of other Muslim countries such as Iran, Iraq, Algeria, Sudan, Yemen, and Jordan.

Given the fact that HuT already has a wide reach and is successfully inducting and radicalizing educated youth, the outfit has the potential to stage coups and uprisings against governments and regimes that it considers un-Islamic or aligned with anti-Muslim powers. HuT may well prove dangerous because it has immense influence on people, especially in the way that it legitimizes the cause to establish a Caliphate. While the world’s focus currently is on IS, it would be a grave folly to ignore the growing influence of HuT and its global agenda.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Surinder Kumar Sharma is closely associated with the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi, and is the co-author of the recently released book Militant Groups in South Asia (Pentagon Press, 2014).

NOTES

1. Also called the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). After Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared an “Islamic khilafah” encompassing northeastern Syria and northern Iraq in 2014, ISIL rebranded itself as the Islamic State.


5. Batla House, a residence in Delhi, was the site of a notorious 2008 police shootout with members of the Indian Mujahedeen.


8. Although HuT professes to use only nonviolent means to achieve its goal of establishing a Caliphate, some of its members have been involved in terrorist attacks in Pakistan and Kyrgyzstan.


No one questions that terrorists in general, and jihadists in particular, use the internet as their main propaganda tool. Not only have the quantity and quality of the information that jihadists upload evolved over time with the development of the internet, but the strategies used by such groups and individuals to spread their ideology and attract the public to their cause have also become more “tech-savvy.” Although most of us may be well aware of changes to the internet because it affects our daily lives, the ways in which terrorists match their strategies with the new opportunities that the internet offers is a topic that remains inadequately explored. The objective of the research described in this article is to identify some specific elements in the contemporary online environment that contribute to the success of jihadist information operations and internet strategies.

There have been several attempts to study jihadist internet strategies, and there is considerable research into technological products that will make it easier for security agencies to analyze data from social networking sites. The tools that are currently available consist of computer programs that track, collect, and process the data gathered through social networking sites or from the Web. These programs enable researchers and investigators to find and structure data, but they do not provide further qualitative analysis, which is left to the human operator. The data structuring and the resulting analysis itself also depend on human assumptions, which are too often based on factors deriving from incomplete research. This kind of research faces another well-known problem, which is the difficulty of identifying a limited and representative statistical sample of the environment that is to be studied. Certain aspects of the internet—indiscriminate, anonymous, borderless, and extremely fast—when combined with the rapid growth of jihadist content, make it extremely difficult to isolate a representative sample of jihadist information operations and then submit that sample to qualitative and, especially, quantitative analysis.

This study overcomes both of these problems by selecting a limited sample: the characteristics of jihadist information operations developed for the specific audience of Albanian language speakers. The singularity of the Albanian language merges the perpetrators with their prospective audience and provides a well-contained sample from which to analyze certain characteristics of jihadist information operations on social networking sites. This process of collecting and analyzing jihadist online content and network data allows us to identify specific factors that contribute to the success or failure of jihadist information operations on the internet, especially on social networking sites. The language serves as a useful limiting factor in building a consistent sample of jihadist propaganda, and Albanian words are quite easy to search and track within the social networking sites. After building a data set from an analysis of the jihadist content in Albanian, descriptive statistics, social network analysis, and visual analytics...
techniques allowed us to isolate and verify those factors that contribute to the success or failure of jihadist information operations.

The Internet and the Jihadist Enterprise

From its emergence following World War II to the present, the internet has evolved through two main phases. The first phase, which may be called the traditional internet, includes the period from about the mid-1980s, when the internet became available to the wider public, to 2005, when the first social networking sites appeared. The second phase encompasses the modern internet and the explosion of social networks, from 2005 to the present. A common pattern that characterizes both phases is the increasing number of internet users, while a distinguishing characteristic of each phase is the way in which people use the internet. Three general characteristics of the internet—its lack of barriers to access, speed of communication, and the high level of anonymity that it provides to the general user—have also made it a preferred tool for Islamist extremists.

Throughout modern history, dissident groups have resorted to acts of terrorism from a position of weakness in relation to their enemies. To succeed in their campaign, terrorists need publicity. Sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer maintains that terrorism is strongly connected with the publicity it generates, and that without an audience, terrorism would cease to exist. The need for the right kinds of publicity makes terrorists choose their targets carefully. Symbolism (e.g., taking down the World Trade Center towers) is more appealing than the direct effect of simply killing people. In this way, terrorist attacks fit media demands for sparkling audiovisual content and also attract sympathizers to the terrorists’ cause. The terrorists’ success is defined not only through their political achievements against the government (or governments, in the case of international terrorist groups) but also in terms of recruiting and logistical support, which are strongly connected with the publicity that surrounds the terrorist group. Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milelli observe that al Qaeda, for example, exists only in a “cathode mode” and that all of its operations are dependent on the media space that the group can occupy, especially the types of media that offer the greatest amount of spectacle. From this perspective, the technological development, and especially the modernization of the global media environment, have helped Osama bin Laden’s jihadist initiative succeed to the degree that its success depended on publicity. Given the poor internet access in bin Laden’s initial area of responsibility, the Arabian Peninsula, and to a lesser extent the entire Islamic world, from the 1990s to 2001 al Qaeda’s main source of publicity was Arabic and international television channels. In regard to the design of the videotapes bin Laden prepared for broadcast, Joseph Tuman notes,

Bin Laden invented a policy tailored to video clips and ads; brief speeches that were easily incorporated into prime-time news; carefully designed, simple settings; and straightforward speeches devoid of affectation or sophistication.

The public appeal for the whole jihadist struggle came from a central point, which was bin Laden. In his short appearances, bin Laden himself looked more like an object for display: a simply dressed man of few words, calm but emotionally appealing to the masses. In the less personal environment of mass media, al Qaeda’s practice of releasing videos of bin Laden first to Al Jazeera for the initial
Airing and later to other Western stations for retransmission demonstrates careful management not only of the media profile of the organization’s leader but also of the organization itself.

Al Qaeda “used abundant audiovisual, as opposed to ideological, references, which have an impact on a young Arab audience that owes its education to television rather than to the crumbling educational system” that is found in several Middle Eastern countries.10 Observations regarding jihadists’ early exploitation of audiovisual media to disseminate reports on their activities for propaganda purposes can be valuable for understanding al Qaeda’s more recent exploitation of the internet.

The number of jihadist websites still amounted to only about a dozen by the end of the 1990s. It was the 9/11 attacks on US soil that would dramatically change how al Qaeda communicated its messages, not only between itself and the wider public, but also within the organization. After the invasion of Afghanistan by US and coalition forces in late 2001, al Qaeda’s information operations went almost entirely online, due to the physical dangers of trying to produce and distribute television-ready video while under military attack. Embracing the internet for their information operations allowed the jihadists to overcome that problem, but it left them vulnerable to other difficulties. The main problem they faced was managing the flow of information to preserve their traditional hierarchical structure.

With regard to message management, the higher leadership of al Qaeda was not prepared for the anarchical mode of internet communications. Both bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leaders of the international jihad movement, believed in centralized management of the information campaign. In his essay “Knights under the Prophet’s Banner,” al-Zawahiri described three important elements that he regarded as necessary for conducting jihad: a leadership that people can trust, follow, and understand; a clear enemy to strike at; and the courage and willingness to act.11 This centralized model preferred by the elder jihadists was inevitably challenged by the younger generation of jihadist ideologues. Abu Musab al-Suri offered the main critique to the centralized model in his 2004 book The Global Islamic Resistance Call, in which he strongly maintained that indoctrination and awareness-building would not follow a centralized campaign, and introduced what has come to be called “leaderless jihad.”12 Al-Suri identified the internet as a “powerful engine for communicating with the public at large,”13 and promoted it as an inexpensive tool that might serve to overcome the difficulties associated with spreading the call for jihad through traditional media. In his recommendations regarding the building of messages, al-Suri also pointed out the need to consciously tailor the content of the message to the caste or stratum of society at which it would be directed.14 Another supporter of the leaderless jihad and an advocate of the internet jihad is Anwar al-Awlaki. In his treatise “44 Ways to Support Jihad,” which appeared in 2009, al-Awlaki asserted that the most media impact for the jihadist cause could be realized through the use of internet tools.15

The recommendations put forward by prominent jihadist ideologues are quite similar in terms of defining goals and means, but what becomes apparent is that a
well-defined media strategy is missing. That leaves ample space for other jihadists and sympathizers to use self-initiative in spreading the call to jihad.

The Nature of the Jihadist Enterprise in the Balkans

The sudden fall of communism and the breakup of the Yugoslav Federation in the early 1990s, and the transition of the Balkan states from autocratic regimes to more liberal democratic ones, allowed several factions engaged in terrorism and Islamist radicalization to conduct their “business” in the region, especially in countries with large Muslim communities. In the case of Albania, all religious activities had been banned in 1967, when the Communist regime decided religious expression was incompatible with the atheistic character of the country’s political ideology. By 1990, however, religious observance began to revive unopposed by the government, and after the fall of Albania’s Communist government in 1992, the law that banned religions was abolished. Religious communities and organizations began to flourish. Along with the national institutions that sought to manage this religious revival, many foreign religious organizations rushed in to play a role and establish their presence in the country.

As Islamic religious organizations emerged on the Albanian scene, they became aware of the lack of qualified indigenous religious leaders to drive the revival of Islam, and their immediate solution was to take an active role to address this issue. Foreign Islamic radical organizations exploited this lack by offering scholarships in Islamic studies to Albanian youth, while disseminating religious texts for free and encouraging freelancers sympathetic to radical Islamic sects to offer religious services to the public. Observers reported a similar approach in all the Balkan countries, not only in Albania.

The attitude of Albania’s governing authorities toward this growth of Islamic entities in Albania was practical. The country’s inability to attract Western aid and financing at the levels required for a smooth transition to a liberal market economy forced the Albanian authorities to be more receptive to the Islamists’ activities than they might otherwise have been, despite disagreements over these issues in Parliament and in public opinion. Given the permissive environment and weak rule of law in the newly independent countries, many of the Islamist organizations entering the Balkans became a safe haven for individuals engaged in terrorist activities. The eruption of internal conflicts, first in Bosnia (1992–1995), then in Albania (1997), Kosovo (1998–1999), and Macedonia (2001), and the resultant spread of weapons and ammunition, made those countries a preferred venue for jihadist-type engagements supported and financed primarily by radical Islamist NGOs operating in the region.

As a result of two decades of radical Islamist propaganda, viewpoints, and proselytizing, in recent years, jihadism has been flourishing in Albania, and youths from Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia are joining the ranks of Islamic terrorist organizations operating in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere. Social networking sites and the internet in general serve as these groups’ communications battle horse for disseminating information about their activities and recruiting support to their cause. The reasons behind their effectiveness (or lack thereof) are the topic of our research, which follows.
Elements of Success and Failure: Establishing the Analytic Database

Any approach to analyzing the potential success or failure of jihadist information operations on social networking sites should take into account two major influential factors: first, the recommendations made by prominent jihadist ideologues concerning the public image of the jihad, and second, the exploitation of social networking sites’ capabilities by jihadists. The jihadist ideologues’ viewpoints on information management, although mostly of a rhetorical nature, especially when related to the traditional and high-level leadership, can be framed so as to be operationalized for further analysis. Ideological divisions over the issue of organization type (centralized vs. decentralized) for the jihad do not influence how we classify ideological perspectives on the management of the information, or mediatic, jihad. Opinions of this nature have to be accepted and assumed to be complementary to each other, independent of the source.

Previous research into and analysis of the writings and public messages of prominent jihadist ideologues yielded the following four elements, which the movement’s leaders consider necessary for the conduct of a successful jihadist information operation:

**Quantity and outreach**—This twofold element appears in the recommendations of every prominent jihadist ideologue. In terms of our analysis, this element presupposes that activists should fill the internet with jihadist material through as many outlets as possible in order to reach the optimal audience.

**Networking**—Prominent jihadists recommend that spreading the call to jihad should be seen as a common effort. On this matter, al-Suri and Mohammed bin Ahmed al-Salim are the most outspoken, and both offer detailed recommendations. Framed for the purpose of this study, this element assumes that to achieve success, jihadists should actively participate in the common effort to spread radical content over the internet, provide feedback, expand their reach, and share materials through different outlets.

**Specific tailoring**—Leading jihadists suggest that successful activism on the Web requires communications to be tailored to the class and customs of their specific audience. This element presupposes that jihadist information operations will tend to match their narratives to local conditions, by exploiting local languages and symbolism and offering “solutions” to local grievances through jihad.

**Audiovisual media production standards**—Prominent jihadists recognize the power of well-produced messages. This element presupposes that higher audiovisual production and editing values plus originality improve the likelihood that a media campaign will be successful.

These four elements, described in this way, serve as a theoretical explanation of the factors for the potential success of jihadist information operations, but to be useful for analytical purposes, they need to be operationalized.
Operationalization is done through a process that takes into account the current developments and opportunities offered by the internet and, for this study in particular, social networking sites. Generally speaking, social networking sites provide users with publicly available data on the performance of other users’ postings, or other users’ activity on the site. A user may choose to remain anonymous or restrict the release of his data to third parties, but for our purposes such users have no analytical value because our object of study is focused on extroversion uses of social networking sites. Table 1 lays out the user data that can easily be obtained by visiting two major social networking sites, YouTube and Facebook, categorized according to the four elements described earlier. Such a scheme can help us measure the performance of various jihadist information operations on social media.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Network Elements</th>
<th>YouTube</th>
<th>Facebook</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quantity and Outreach</strong></td>
<td># of views</td>
<td># of status updates, photos, and videos published</td>
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<td></td>
<td># of likes</td>
<td># of likes</td>
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<td></td>
<td># of shares</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>time watched</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td># of comments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td># of videos posted by user</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Networking</strong></td>
<td>Usernames of other users who interact/respond to postings of the original user</td>
<td>Usernames of other users who interact/respond to postings of the original user</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Web addresses and hyperlinks to other websites, or other social media sites</td>
<td>Web addresses and hyperlinks to other websites, or other social media sites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organization/group/individual mentioned in postings</td>
<td>Organization/group/individual mentioned in postings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Specific Tailoring</strong></td>
<td>Language or dialect used</td>
<td>Language or dialect used</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Date of posting (to match with important local events)</td>
<td>Date of posting (to match with important local events)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Topic</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Name of user</td>
<td>Name of user</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Location of user</td>
<td>Location of user</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other data (Description section)</td>
<td>Other data (About section)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Audiovisual Exploitation</strong></td>
<td>Quality of editing</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Branding</td>
<td>Branding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Length of video</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Specific Units of Measurement for the Four Elements of Successful Jihadist Information Operations
The measurement units displayed in table 1 can be collected more or less as they appear from the Web pages of social networking sites. Some of the more subjective measurements, such as the “quality of editing” and “audiovisual quality,” may have to be coded by the researcher, for example, by assigning weight points for aspects like spelling, grammar, image sharpness, sound quality, and so on.

The collection of data for the measurements shown in table 1 provides detailed information for each jihadist information operation on those two social networking sites, but identifying factors of success or failure requires further processing. The data obtained for the quantity and outreach element are of fundamental value, not only because they can be quantified, but also because the bigger the audience, the greater the chances that the jihadist information operation being measured will be successful. This numerical measure alone does not, however, provide any qualitative analysis of the operation. By using various methods of analysis that compare the data for the quantity and outreach element with the measures of other elements, it is possible to obtain qualitative insights into the overall performance of each jihadist information operation compared to others. This approach can also reveal trends and patterns of performance based on the two major influential factors mentioned earlier: the suggestions of prominent jihadist leaders and a realistic quantitative data set extracted from the social networking sites where common jihadists and their sympathizers carry out their part in the jihad.

Building and Analyzing the Data Set

To obtain better results from our study of jihadist information operations on the internet, in addition to the theoretical and textual-historical approaches to identifying factors of success or failure, we built a data set that helped us both quantitatively and qualitatively test empirically determined factors. (Our data were collected between September and November 2013; the last update took place on 22 November 2014.) The building of a data set for this purpose brings up a few challenges, which are described briefly in the following subsections.

Where to Start?

The first decision is to choose which social networking site’s data to mine for jihadist-inspired content. We chose YouTube, which was the first major website for user-generated content, and also one of the most visited social networking sites. YouTube is widely used by jihadists and their sympathizers to spread audiovisual content intended to serve the purposes of the global jihad. YouTube is also the third most-visited website in Albania, following Facebook and Google. Although most Albanians use Facebook for social networking even more than they do YouTube, we chose YouTube because of its earlier presence in the market and its higher perceived anonymity of operation and because it is the preferred social networking platform for jihadists to conduct their information operations.

Local Language-Driven Research

Rohan Gunaratna observes that although al Qaeda operates as an international organization, its affiliates tend to operate locally and recruit from “among their own nationalities, families, and friends.” This is a quite logical way to grow an organization. In much the same way, we begin our study by focusing on jihadist information operations in the Albanian language, which is spoken almost exclusively by the Albanian populations in Albania, Kosovo, the former Yugoslav Republic.
of Macedonia, and Montenegro, and by Albanians living in other countries. No other nation in the world naturally speaks Albanian. For the purposes of this research, by looking for jihadist information operations in Albanian, we can automatically identify the target audience and obtain a highly representative sample within the global “population” of jihadist information operations.

This kind of research can begin by matching keywords in the predetermined language with the subject of the research. We used only one keyword: jihad, which in Albanian is written xhihad and is pronounced the same as in English. This small spelling change was enough to provide us with substantial results when we put it into the YouTube site’s search engine. The search engine identified 4,530 results (see figure 1). (Note that this result represents the number of times the word is found throughout the YouTube database, not the quantity of videos addressing the subject.) The word xhihad may be found within the titles of videos, in the “About” section of each video, or in the “Comments” section, and may even be part of a username as well. The number of actual videos that are of interest for our research is much smaller. In the end, only 84 videos fulfilled the requirements to be processed for data collection.

These videos show up first, of course, if the researcher applies the relevancy filter available on the YouTube search engine. The relevancy filter brings videos containing the word xhihad in their titles or usernames to the top of the results list, followed by videos in which the word xhihad is found most frequently within the video’s Web space (in the “About” and “Comments” sections). We found that the number of hits sharply decreased by the time we had made a subject-driven evaluation of the first 200 videos that appeared, and also by that point the word xhihad no longer appeared in the titles. Of course, there might be other videos dealing with the same subject that were not included in our research set, but that is not an issue of concern for our purposes. The goal of this element is to attract and influence as many users as possible. These users need first to be “pulled” into the video space, and to do so, the use of keywords within the title of the video is the most logical method. In some cases, users might have decided to unsubscribe from appearing on public searches, but this also excludes them from the scope
of our research, because the point of the research is to identify posts that are purposefully within the public sphere.

**Subject-Driven Research**

The keyword search exploits the automated services provided by social networking sites, but it also generates problems, especially with regard to the subject matter and relevancy of the results set compared to the purpose of the study. The word *jihad* has an ambiguous meaning—generally not the meaning that is promoted by al Qaeda and other violent Islamist organizations. Due to this ambiguity, the original search results might not be as accurate as needed for the purposes of analysis. At this point it is necessary to determine which videos deserve to be identified as jihadist information operations, rather than videos with an entirely different purpose.

According to Bruce Hoffman, al Qaeda’s jihadist propaganda “has three basic themes: the West is implacably hostile to Islam; the only way to address the West is in the language of violence; and jihad is the only way for true believers.”\(^{25}\)

This explanation is quite clear, but these themes do not have to occur simultaneously to characterize a communication as coming from an al Qaeda sympathizer. Since the crackdown on al Qaeda in Afghanistan, many jihadist organizations have franchised al Qaeda’s cause and methodology, and they shape their messages according to their needs, often framed carefully in a way that is more compelling to the public. A jihadist-inspired communication (information operation) may concurrently contain facts, jihadist rhetoric, religious rhetoric, religious verses, and other elements that are not likely to be considered illicit by the target audience. Jihadist content on social networking sites in the Albanian language typically does not confront the public with full-fledged al Qaeda-type propaganda, as noted by Hoffman—rather, the jihad is carefully framed and often disguised with harmless religious verses.

At this point, the researcher needs to be very careful about which content to identify as jihadist information operations. When we determined which of the videos that turned up in our initial search to include in our database, we considered whether they invoked the general themes mentioned by Hoffman, but we also took into consideration any elements that we knew were forbidden by local laws, such as inciting violence, overt discrimination, or the use of offensive language. We also categorized as jihadist information operations those videos that promoted a code of conduct condemned by local religious authorities, such as segregation and discrimination based on religious patterns, and videos that promoted important actions that went against the recommendations of the local religious leaders, such as calls to join the jihad in Syria. The recruitment of Albanians for Syria’s internal conflict, which is accomplished primarily by framing participation as a religious duty, is a salient problem nowadays in the Albanian-populated regions of the Balkans. Thus, our database also includes videos that seek the moral disengagement of the public from civic norms and their recruitment into the jihadist cause, no matter whether the videos make a direct call for violent action.

The identification and selection of useful data from the results of the initial search query might seem to be a difficult process, but it is worth pursuing because it also allows the researcher to identify YouTube channels that can be mined for further analysis. Sometimes the sifting process is very smooth.
because jihadist-inspired videos often are branded, either by the actual mention of specific terrorist organizations or because the videos carry the signature brands of known jihadist media organizations. Of course, the more familiar the researcher is with this sort of material, the easier it is to process the data set. This step follows the principles of A. Aaron Weisburd’s “artisanal approach,” and it is somewhat time-consuming, but to date there is no automated method for obtaining data of similar quality.

Creating the Data Set

Once the population of jihadist videos has been identified, it is necessary to extract data from them and develop a data set that the researcher can then analyze. The data that we collected reflect the measurement units shown in table 1, taken from YouTube. It is important to note that our research was video-based rather than channel-based. YouTube allows users to establish their own accounts, called channels, where they can post their videos. Because we searched specifically for videos that contained the word ‘jihad’ in Albanian, that is the basis of our data set. Users can, however, also research channels. The collection process requires that researchers record a significant number of data points, so we recommend setting up the measures in a spreadsheet in whatever order best fits the researcher’s needs.

Results from the Data Set Analysis

The data set we obtained through the YouTube search engine contains data from 84 videos that we identified as jihadist information operations. There may, of course, be other videos that could be identified as jihadist information operations if the search were to include other keywords in Albanian, but such a search goes beyond the purpose of this study. Our intention here is to provide an example of how research might be conducted to identify and test factors of success in jihadist information operations on social media, rather than to analyze YouTube-based jihadism in the Albanian language.

The First Element: Quantity and Outreach

The data we obtained from the collection process was quite vast and left room for different types of analysis. For the purpose of this study, we tested only the four jihadist-recommended elements of success laid out in table 1. We began by designating the element of “quantity and outreach” as an independent variable. It is fundamental to the jihadists’ success—above all, to “speak and to be heard”—independent of how they frame the message. The production and dissemination of jihadist messages not only communicate the jihadist ideology but also influence levels of recruitment and donations to the cause. In the world of social networking sites, if jihadist information operations actively reach out to as many site users as possible, then they have successfully fulfilled their mission.

To build up the data set, we represented the element of quantity and outreach in YouTube by the numerical values of views, likes, subscriptions, the length of time that individual videos were watched, shares, comments, and the overall number of videos posted by the channel (user). The number of views is the most representative of these because it is the one that is always reported, independently of the will of the channel owner (see the left column in table 2). The analysis based on this value also, however, needs to take into account the time factor.
Videos that have been online for a longer time have had more opportunity to become popular than more recent posts, so we needed to adjust these values. We therefore divided the number of views by the number of days the video had been online and derived a value that represents the views per day for each video (see the right column in table 2).

As table 2 shows, some of the videos that ranked in the top five for total number of views do not appear in the top five for views per day. The following brief descriptions of the top five most popular jihadist videos (by total number of views) are derived from the data found within the data set.

The video “***nah_1,” which ranks first for number of views and fourth for views per day, was posted in March 2013. This video shows an Albanian mujahedeen fighter in Syria among other foreign mujahedeen. In terms of its quantity and outreach measures, this video performance is above average. It is also the most watched (calculated in hours of time watched) and the most commented on (383 comments), and it contains a hyperlink that encourages the viewer to connect (and thus become further engaged) through a Facebook profile. The audiovisual quality of this highly popular video is nevertheless fairly poor.

The third- and fifth-ranked videos (***l1m_2 and ***nal_1, respectively) are quite similar to the first (***nah_1) in several ways, despite the lower number of views. Both also were quite recent when the data were recorded, and both relate to the jihad in Syria. The number of comments generated on these videos is above average. These two videos, however, have a higher audiovisual quality, and they both display the producer’s brand.

The second (***dii_3) and the fourth (***HGT_1) videos have a few differences from the other three videos. They are quite old by social media standards (dating back to March 2009 and February 2007 respectively), and they reflect a general perspective of the jihad (both were made well before the current Syrian crisis, which began in 2011). The video “***dii_3” also provides a hyperlink for the public, and it carries the brand of an Albanian-named audiovisual editing studio. The fourth video (***HGT_1) has comparatively fewer elements of success (networking, local signs, and audiovisual quality).
The ranking of videos according to the number of views per day yields a slightly different result from the ranking for total views. The three Syria-related videos from the first list are still present in the top five videos viewed per day, and the top-ranked video on this list portrays an Albanian mujahedeen calling in Albanian for viewers to join the jihad in Syria. The content of all the top five videos in this second list relates to the Syrian jihad, and in terms of the elements for success, these videos more closely follow the recommendations of prominent jihadist leaders in terms of “going local”—that is, reflecting local customs and exploiting community grievances through jihadist propaganda. The quantity and outreach measures for this group are above the average for the whole data set, and their audiovisual quality measures are near the top of the scale. All five of the videos were recent for the research period, with the oldest dating back to March 2013 and the most recent from October 2013. The quantity and outreach measure shows not only viewers’ predisposition toward videos that encourage them to join the jihad in Syria, but also that the participation of Albanians in the Syrian jihad may be correlated with successful jihadist information operations online.

Using the quantity and outreach element’s data, we used simple regression analysis to draw out further observations that substantiate the prominent jihadists’ recommendations. The data we analyzed were the number of subscriptions (in general, not to a specific video) to a channel and the number of videos posted by the channel. The number of subscriptions is actually better than the number of views as a measure of the potential success of a jihadist campaign because there are many YouTube viewers who occasionally wander onto the website and skim the content without paying a lot of attention to it. A subscriber, by contrast, is interested in the type of videos posted by a selected channel. In this case, there is a high positive correlation value of 0.72 between the two measures: the more videos that are uploaded to a channel, the higher the number of subscriptions there will be to that channel.

By increasing the number of subscribers, channels have more opportunities to tailor their messages in ways that will influence their subscribers’ opinions. As was mentioned earlier, jihadist activists on the internet do not generally declare themselves to be full-fledged Al Qaeda supporters; rather, they carefully reveal their messages within postings that include general religious narratives. The same can be said about the channels that are part of our research data set. A quick overview showed that some of these channels contain a number of videos that hardly qualify as jihadist information operations. But that, too, may be part of the jihadists’ information strategy. Some YouTube users will be attracted by general, non-militant Islamic videos and subscribe to a channel that later exposes them to jihadist propaganda videos. This exposure is essentially guaranteed because YouTube’s subscription mechanism promotes videos posted on subscribed channels to the subscriber ahead of other videos.

Another regression that verifies the quantity and outreach recommendation is one that correlates the “number of views” measure with the number of days the video has been online. Our study showed that the correlation is positive and its value is 0.24. In simple terms, the longer a video stays online, the greater the number of times it will be seen by general users. Thus, the sheer number of messages pushed out to the public is not the only factor that increases the popularity of the jihadist cause; the stable presence of the message among the public is also important. The “forever” quality of the internet makes it an excellent depository for jihadist messages.
for jihadist messages, and social networking sites make it even easier than the traditional Web to encounter those types of messages.

The Second Element: Testing the Jihadist Information Network

On the one hand, testing the second recommendation, networking for jihad, is a difficult task. On the other hand, research on the networking elements can be very profitable in terms of identifying and targeting further research elements in the data set. Network analysis also incorporates the third recommended element, the localization of the jihad.

Figure 2 shows the connections among YouTube users (the red nodes) who comment on the respective videos. The topics of the videos are distinguished by the color of the ties that connect them to the red nodes: Afghanistan/Iraq in gray; general call to jihad in dark purple; jihadist leaders in pink; Syrian conflict in green; and West vs. Islam in yellow. As mentioned earlier, this kind of imaging allows very interactive users (those who comment on two or more videos of the same topic) to be identified immediately and targeted for further research. Users may be also identified as very interactive and very competent users if they comment on two or more videos promoting different topics. Such users become a potentially interesting subject for further analysis. For example, the presence of several big clusters of red nodes linked by green ties shows that the Syrian conflict is most users’ favorite topic for comment. The red nodes located between the four “Syrian conflict” clusters represent users who have commented on two or more videos related to the Syrian conflict. These can be categorized as very interactive users. The red node that connects the green cluster to the two purple clusters represents a user who has commented on a Syrian conflict video and also on a “general call to jihad” video. This user can be identified as both very interactive and very competent, and might warrant closer scrutiny.

The sociogram presented further down in figure 3 contains some of these individuals. For the purpose of this study, there was no need to conduct further analysis on these users’ activities, but processing the networking and localization elements through social network analysis (SNA) software and methodologies would offer relative results that could be useful for further study.

The Third Element: Tailoring to the Audience

Figure 3 shows that the majority of jihadist YouTube videos (the red triangles) relevant to our study are related to subjects such as the Syrian conflict and the general call to jihad (the colored squares represent the five topics identified earlier). From an Albanian perspective, this topic-based illustration of jihadist information operations is compelling. The number of videos on the jihadist campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq remains small because Albania shares almost nothing in common with these countries, and the jihadist cause there is simply not compelling to Albanians. The same applies to videos about the West vs. Islam. Albanians in general are very pro-Western, and it is hard to change the local narratives on that perspective.
As in figure 2, the sociogram depicted by figure 3 makes it possible to identify special actors among those who posted the videos in our data set. Here, the users are channel owners (the black dots), among whom the very active ones are those who have uploaded two or more videos on the same topic. Those channel owners who have posted videos on two or more topics are considered highly competent actors and are easily spotted in the space between the topic clusters, where they connect to multiple topics. The sociogram shows that the overwhelming majority of channel owners within our data set posted only a single video; there are several owners who posted on two or three topics, but only one who posted to four, and none to all five topics.

As in figure 2, once special actors have been identified in this way, they can be subjected to further research and analysis.

The Fourth Element: The Audiovisual Effect

We tested the last recommended element, the audiovisual effect, through regression analysis, and by taking the values for total number of views and number of views per day as independent variables, while the measures for editing quality and audiovisual quality were taken as dependent variables. The results show that both sets of correlations are positive and statistically quite significant; that is, if the videos are better edited, include more local features, and are of a better audiovisual quality, the number of views and average views per day are expected to be higher.

In conclusion, our analyses clearly demonstrated that the prominent jihadist leaders’ recommendations on how to conduct effective jihadist information operations on the internet are valid and important. By contrast, operations that disregard these recommendations are more likely to result in failure (i.e., attract few viewers and fail to bring donations or recruits to the cause), especially on social networking sites.

Conclusions

Jihadists will continue to use the internet as their primary tool for conducting information operations. Their transition from the use of Web 1.0 to the use of Web 2.0 applications may be slow, but it is inevitable, because jihadists need to reach the wider public at any cost, whether they successfully influence it or not. Social networking sites have presented less tech-savvy jihadists with problems such as learning how to exploit such sites, along with the restrictions and dangers posed by counterterrorism bodies that mine the internet for information on terrorist activities. By raising their popularity scores on the Web, jihadists may attract the attention of counterterrorist researchers who are carrying out the kinds of data analysis highlighted here.

The lack of a centralized information management structure contributes to a further degradation of jihadist information operations on the Web. As the al Qaeda leadership is hunted and captured or killed, there is no sign of a
potential reestablishment of the information management structure, as it existed in the pre-9/11 era. The future of jihadist information operations belongs to lone jihadists or smaller disconnected groups of individuals. From a counterterrorist perspective, the decentralized (or leaderless) jihad presents new challenges, especially in the information management and intelligence-gathering fields. Jihadist activists on the internet may exploit the opportunities offered by the internet without any significant restrictions. Many Western commentators have suggested that the information operatives of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, aka ISIS or IS) seem to be more comfortable with social media than the group’s predecessors. But even the ISIL operatives are making mistakes quite similar to those made by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi during the US-Iraq war, such as posting a constant stream of atrocities, or showing themselves comfortably ensconced in well-kept homes as they talk about jihad. ISIL’s target audience, however, is young jihadists, who are coming from all over the world to join the fight in Syria. For this purpose, ISIL will make use of both local (Syrian and Iraqi) jihadists and international jihadists to promote the internet jihad. Linguistics plays a role here, and our model of using a keyword search to isolate a data set may help identify and analyze jihadist internet networks and the characteristics of their information operations.

The identification of elements that help ensure the success of jihadist information operations on social networking sites can provide counterterrorism specialists with a tool to distinguish important and potentially important jihadist communications from the vast amount of jihadist-inspired Web content. In this study, the four elements were tested and found to be valid. In addition to highlighting these elements of success, our research also describes a methodology that researchers and analysts can use to build their own data sets and further test the prominent jihadists’ four recommendations on the conduct of a specific information campaign. Further analysis of these four factors may serve different purposes, from the assessment of jihadist information strategies to the identification of key jihadist Web activists, who could then be closely monitored and targeted by counterterrorism forces. By assessing jihadist information strategies on the internet, counterterrorism forces may also plan and conduct counteractions that improve the collection of intelligence, rather than simply shutting these Web spaces down and compelling the jihadist propagandists to innovate.

Further Reading


CTX: Social Media in Jihad and Counterterrorism (Special Issue) 2, no. 4 (2012).


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

NOTES

1 Unless noted otherwise, in this article the word *jihad* refers to the violent or nonviolent campaign of individuals associated with al Qaeda or its proxies around the world, and their sympathizers, to promote the objectives announced by Osama bin Laden in his 1996 speech, "Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places," and his 1998 speech, "World Islamic Front for Jihad against Jews and Crusaders." In Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milélli, eds., *Al Qaeda in Its Own Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2010), 47–50, 53–56.

2 For a wide-ranging look at jihadist uses of social media, see the CTR special issue, "Social Media in Jihad and Counterterrorism" (CTR 2, no. 4, November 2012), guest edited by Dr. Dorothy Denning.

3 The term *jihadist internet strategies* as used in this study means the organized effort to conduct online media operations that will further the objectives of the jihad. The term *jihadist information operations* indicates specific media campaigns that take advantage of the combination of means and resources available online to target the public with radical messages.

4 This article was excerpted from the author’s master’s thesis, “Failure and Success of Jihadi Information Operations on the Internet” (master’s thesis, US Naval Postgraduate School, December 2013). The data therefore reflect the research he carried out in 2013, but given the nature of the analysis, the discrepancy in time does not affect the value of the findings.


7 Kepel and Milélli, *Al Qaeda in Its Own Words*, 29.

8 A cathode is the “positive” electrode from which a conventional current leaves a polarized electrical device. Kepel and Milélli are using this metaphor to imply that al Qaeda is organized largely to disseminate ideas via popular media. Ibid.


11 Ibid., 197.


13 Ibid., 192.

14 Ibid.


16 The Balkan states following the breakup of Yugoslavia are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. Greece, Turkey, and Romania are sometimes included in a broad definition of the Balkan region.


18 The same type of data can also be obtained on a case-by-case basis from other traditional websites, blogs, and other social networking sites.

19 I chose to use YouTube data because it was easy to identify, obtain, code, and process for further analysis.


21 From the Alexa website: http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/AL. The last check was conducted on 22 November 2014.


23 For other languages, this may be different. A way around that may be to search through other combinations of words recalling some specific jihadist activity, or individuals, events, places, and so on. We stayed with the *xhihad* search results because they yielded the data we were looking for.

24 The last check was conducted on 22 November 2014. See https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=xhihad&sm=12


26 During the research, we found some videos that were easy to exclude because they were not related to the jihad. For example, some Albanian users of YouTube have the given name Xhihad, and the videos uploaded by them kept appearing in our search data as relevant because of the poster’s name. We also excluded videos uploaded by national news channels, which use YouTube as a tool to upload and share video news, and also videos uploaded by well-known Albanian religious figures who were explaining concepts related to the jihad.

27 In this case, the research (the query, evaluation, and integration of data into the prepared spreadsheet) took nearly 18 hours. We spent most of that time evaluating and processing the first 200 videos out of 660 in total. The remaining videos were easy to evaluate and discard from the research. We spent no more than 15 minutes for each video that fulfilled the criteria for further processing.

28 There may be other videos that promote jihadism but do not show up in keyword searches. The purpose here is to analyze only those videos that promote the jihad and do it as publicly as possible.

29 We provided a copy of the data set to the NPS CORELab, and it may be released by request at no charge. Contact the NPS CORELab at http://www.npscorelab.com/

30 See note 3.

31 It is the most watched of the videos for which this measure was made public. Information about this measure is made available to the public at the channel owner’s discretion.

32 Visualization obtained through ORA network visualization software. This diagram represents the network of interacting users (commenters) and the videos posted by jihadist information operations. The five main video topics are colored by subject: Afghanistan/Iraq in gray; general call to jihad in dark purple; jihadist leaders in pink; Syrian conflict in green; and West vs. Islam in yellow.

33 Visualization obtained through ORA network visualization software. The triangles (red) represent the jihadist information operations (videos posted to YouTube), the squares (by color) the class of topic that the videos address, and the circles (black) are the channel owners.

34 The correlation value between the views per day and the editing quality is 0.42, and the correlation value between the views per day and the audiovisual quality is 0.27.
Sustainability of the Afghan Security Forces: A Wicked Problem

When the future arrives, it may differ wildly from the present in detail, but it will resemble the existing pattern in a few major respects. There will be only one of it—future—and each parameter of change will have a particular value; its parts will coexist within an intricate system of mediating rules ... and it will trail behind its own distinctive history. Its parts will fit together (however uneasily) and its changing patterns will show sequential consistency through time.¹

Aside from the challenges associated with establishing and maintaining security within Afghanistan, government officials are faced with the additional and equally complex task of implementing and maintaining appropriate sustainability measures over the longer term. In this paper, we explore the subject of Afghan security force sustainability using General Morphological Analysis (GMA), a method that has proven to be highly suited to the detailed analysis of wicked, messy problems. The sustainability problem in Afghanistan exhibits systemic features that conspire to cause underperformance; if an appropriate level of sustainability is to be achieved, these systems-based elements must be managed. We developed a factors-and-conditions array (called a Zwicky box) that captures the primary factors associated with sustainability; extends these factors into a range of conditions from the most favorable to the most unfavorable; specifies the current and desired (end-state) conditions; and highlights a series of planned condition changes to get from here to there.² We highlight key stages of the GMA process throughout and draw comparisons between operational design, critical vulnerabilities, asymmetry, and other military planning terms. The method we describe here does not, however, claim to replace conventional military planning processes; rather, it complements such processes and invites a deeper appreciation of the problem as a whole. Instead of offering specific solutions, our intent is to demystify the problem and inform purposeful actions that move toward resolution.

Wicked, Messy Problems: What are They?

When dealing with problems that have a large social component, planners encounter a level of complexity and interconnectedness that render conventional planning methods unsuitable. The problems are wicked and messy because they are ambiguous and (initially) opaque; they are ill-defined; they encompass strong moral, political, and professional interests;³ they involve many interrelationships, often within a nonquantifiable problem space; they react, often unexpectedly, to attempts to bring about change—they won’t keep still; and finally, there is the potential for many unintended consequences that planners must remain alert to, akin to Garrett Hardin’s observation that “we can never merely do one thing.”⁴
The first detailed account of wicked, messy problems appeared in *Policy Sciences* under the title “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning.” The authors were two urban planners who described a problem that initially appeared to be straightforward and solvable through the application of appropriate science. What they discovered, however, is that the surface problem actually concealed a host of additional subproblems that an unsuspecting planner could inadvertently stir up to magnify and enrich the initial difficulties.

Some examples of wicked, messy problems are

- Gun ownership in the United States
- Smuggling of people into Australia through Indonesia
- Japanese whaling in the Southern Ocean
- Underutilization of public transport
- Overuse of petrochemical fertilizers
- Terrorism
- Obesity

Each of these issues embodies a range of stakeholders who often have competing interests and unclear and sometimes diametrically opposed definitions of what constitutes an acceptable solution, as well as the method for achieving that solution. The problems often cross organizational and jurisdictional boundaries, thus confusing the question of who is responsible and inviting the involvement of a variety of hostile, neutral, and cooperative actors. On top of all these difficulties, their solution typically demands a change in learned, often “institutionalized” behavior. Security and law enforcement sustainability in Afghanistan shares many of these characteristics and qualifies as a wicked, messy problem of considerable complexity.

Solving Wicked Problems

We use the term *solving* here cautiously, because wicked problems are never fully solved. Through dispassionate study, however, they can yield a more favorable set of conditions associated with the area of interest. It is these potential shifts in condition from the current to the desired that the GMA method seeks to reveal. Due to the high social content of these problems, which often is the primary source of their wickedness or messiness, progress must be accompanied by changes in behavior, aside from any organizational reforms associated with the solution.

The Sustainability Problem in Afghanistan

The modern use of the term *sustainability* arose from the environmental movement of the late twentieth century and primarily indicates the preservation of biodiversity and the protection of natural resources. Ecological sustainability seeks to regulate human behavior within the four interconnected domains of ecology, economics, politics, and culture. According to the United Nations Commission on Environment and Development, “sustainability is meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

This general definition of sustainability is only partially useful for our specific area of interest. With regard to law enforcement and national security in
Afghanistan, we take sustainability to mean the following: achieving appropriate law enforcement and national security capability outcomes while remaining within the carrying capacity of the nation’s economic, human, and other resources to accommodate capability outcomes into the future. This definition recognizes that large public institutions must deliver services today and into the future and that predatory social or institutional behavior based on patronage, tribal, or other short-term gains represents another form of the “tragedy of the commons.”

Afghanistan has received approximately US$20 billion of financial and material aid in an effort to establish and maintain security. The declared US policy goal behind the provision of aid was to “prevent Afghanistan from ever again becoming a safe haven for terrorists that threaten Afghanistan, the region, and the world.” After 13 years’ expenditure of blood and treasure, the broadly accepted assessment is that these efforts have been unsuccessful. Violence and instability remain endemic, and governance is localized, fragmented, and largely tribal.

When donor nations gave (in some instances, sold) helicopters, weapons, vehicles, radios, uniforms, facilities, ammunition, computing and information management systems, and other materiel to the Afghan police and military, the donors expected (or, in some cases, simply assumed) that the Afghan security forces would develop the capacity to sustain these systems over the long term. This would ensure that entire-life support, maintenance, servicing, inspections, replacement, upgrades, training, and other essential activities would become institutionalized within the Afghan security forces to the point that Western involvement and support could be reduced and eventually discontinued. Such an outcome aligned with the general definition of sustainability and the assumption that present-day decision making is mindful of the future. Indeed, the important steps required for institutional or organizational sustainability should be independent of the equipment or logistical items the recipients are seeking to manage (sustain).

A sustainable law enforcement and security environment has failed to coalesce in Afghanistan despite all those years of effort and billions of dollars, and it has become apparent that there is a set of systemic and chronic weaknesses that combine to undermine any capability achievements. For example, one of the most vulnerable and costly items affected by this situation is a fleet of Mi-17 helicopters that provide vital force projection and mobility across the rugged terrain of Afghanistan. Experts acknowledge that few of the 30 Mi-17s that would represent full operational capability in 2017 will be airworthy within five years due to inadequate maintenance, servicing, and repair.

The systemic liabilities have been widely documented and reported:

- Corruption, ineffective program monitoring, budget shortfalls at all levels, inability to generate revenue, and limited public financial management capacity continue to plague the Afghan national government. Weak cooperation between national and subnational levels of the government hampers significant long-term sustainability and limits access to public goods.

The principal aim of this article, therefore, is to explore these factors and build an assessment framework to guide the system towards a more favorable set of conditions. The premise is that something is being sustained; in this case, we are
looking at law enforcement and national security, but it could just as easily be public health, public education, or some other major institution. If we were to substitute one for the other (take away the helicopters and so forth and replace them with doctors, nurses, and hospitals), then similar system essentials would need to remain intact and functioning.

In the case of a wicked problem like Afghan security, a sustainability model built simply on compliance and adherence to rules and regulations will fail. There are deeper motivational elements that must be brought to bear, because sustainability suggests responsible, proactive decision making, together with innovation that anticipates unintended or undesirable effects and avoids or minimizes their occurrence.

The General Morphological Analysis Process

The GMA process can be summarized as an approach that progressively deepens planners’ understanding of a problem and informs the development of purposeful actions. It is ideally suited to “structuring and analyzing the total set of relationships contained in multi-dimensional, non-quantifiable problem complexes.”12 It mirrors many of the features associated with operational design, although the method presented here offers more structure and less discourse than that promoted in the literature of operational design.13

The six steps of GMA are as follows:

**Step 1:** Compose a question that will focus stakeholders’ individual views and perceptions toward a shared orientation. This question usually begins with “What are the factors that...?”

**Step 2:** Record the factors that the stakeholders generate in answer to the question in step 1.

**Step 3:** Reduce the list to seven or fewer primary factors and then name a range of conditions that characterize each of these, from the most favorable to the least favorable, thereby creating a factors-conditions array. For planners to achieve the necessary gestalt awareness, develop a representative acronym in this step.

**Step 4:** Pair each condition with one from another factor in a systematic manner (e.g., factor 1/condition 3 + factor 2/condition 2) and then perform a pairwise comparison by judging each of the condition pairs according to their internal consistency: “Can these two conditions logically coexist?” Filter from consideration any configuration of factor-condition pairs that contains a pair that is illogical or contains inconsistencies. This step dramatically reduces the number of considered configurations to the much smaller set of conditions across all factors that could actually occur (an example follows in the next section).

**Step 5:** Agree on the current configuration (i.e., the current conditions across all factors) and the desired configuration (the desired conditions across all factors) and examine the intermediate
configurations for completeness. The intermediate configurations (sets of conditions across all factors) describe possible future states that lie between the current condition and the desired end-state. The current, intermediate, and desired configurations now describe the continuum upon which the campaign is built.

**Step 6:** Starting from the current conditions field, plot a series of incremental condition changes that shift the area of interest from where it is to where you want it to be.

### Step One: The Sustainability Question

The area of interest is “sustainability within the Afghanistan national security and law enforcement institutions.” We assume that we have assembled a group of individuals who share a concern for this subject—they do not have to be senior decision makers, but they must be stakeholders—each of whom brings his or her portion of the problem into the planning environment for consideration. If we are going to identify a shared starting point and a common orientation to the area of interest, then it is essential that we develop an appropriate opening question.

Following are some sample questions, from which only one would be selected:

- What factors influence sustainment within Afghanistan’s security and law enforcement institutions?
- What factors contribute to the successful sustainment of Afghanistan’s security and law enforcement institutions?
- What factors influence the level of successful and independent sustainment of Afghanistan’s security and law enforcement over the longer term?

It can be seen that each of the questions introduces a slightly different theme and area of focus and would, therefore, elicit a slightly different set of responses. It is vital that a single and agreed question be analyzed. For the purpose of this article, we selected the third question for our test group of stakeholders to study, because it contains the important elements of “successful and independent” and is positioned “over the longer term.”

### Step Two: Generate the Factors

After formulating the most meaningful question for sustainability, we asked our participants to take up a pen and record their answers on Post-it Notes—one answer per note, but no limit to the number of an individual’s answers. Although this stage did not directly involve Afghan nationals who are responsible for national security and law enforcement sustainability, it did comprise a group of individuals who have been central to the training, advisory, and assistance missions that are focusing on this problem. These responses (included in appendix 1) are considered valid for the purpose of setting out the method and providing illustrative content.

From the list of factors that emerged, corruption was considered by most to play a central role in compromising Afghan security and law enforcement. Indeed, corruption is endemic in Afghanistan’s governance structures and poisons all
aspects of public administration. Corruption alone, however, cannot provide a complete explanation for everything that is wrong with security sustainability in Afghanistan. Reflecting the wickedness and messiness of the problem, corruption combines with other factors, creates secondary effects, and multiplies and propagates throughout the system under investigation until the system's integrity is completely undermined.

**Step Three: Specify the Primary Factors and Develop Conditions**

A morphological array is formed by first selecting between five and seven aspects of an overall social field that the stakeholders regard as key; these are called primary factors. Then, under each factor, the participants list conditions that describe the worst possible state of that factor, the actual state, and the desired state, plus any plausible intermediate conditions. The software we used facilitates this process and sequences the condition statements for further analysis.

Although the question may generate well over 100 relevant factors (see appendix 1), the method calls for as few as five but never more than seven primary factors to serve as the dimensions of analysis. These factors should correspond to the topics that one would cover in a brief description of the system that is being studied. To arrive at the primary factors, the Post-it Notes are laid out for everyone to see and then grouped by a process of consensus according to their general topic or issue (see appendix 2). Once the sorting and grouping is complete, an overall title—the name of the factor—is assigned to each of the groups to capture the content embodied in that group. Often a single Post-it Note comment within a group conveys a meaningful title for that group.

We now have our primary factors associated with Afghanistan's security and law enforcement sustainability:

- Computing and information management systems
- Decision making
- Leadership
- Management
- Inter- and intra-agency relationships
- Capability objectives
- Integrity

Not only does this list of factors serve to guide the discussion of possible solutions, it will also provide a key reference framework against which to assess progress as improvements are implemented, and, importantly, will highlight the next logical factor to require our attention as we continually recalibrate conditions within the system under study.

The participants then describe each of these primary factors with a range of conditions, from the most favorable to the least favorable. The team chooses a few condition descriptions that together offer a crisp and nicely discriminating illustration of the overall field conditions associated with the sustainment of Afghan law enforcement and national security. The resulting Zwicky box is shown below in table 1.
Also in this step, the team assigns a memorable acronym to the project by drawing out key letters from within the factors to create a word, or meta-language, that captures the essence of the topic under investigation. As figure 1 illustrates, we selected the word DIPLOMA from key letters within the seven factors. To create this word we also had to resequence the factors, a process that incidentally helps to discourage any arbitrary or inappropriate prioritization of one factor over another.

The creation of a factors-conditions array is central to the GMA process. It provides both a shared framework of agreed principal factors and specifies the range from the most favorable conditions to the least favorable for each factor.

**Step Four: Pairwise Comparison and Filtering**

The 27 total conditions that accompany the seven factors (see table 1) present the possibility for 10,800 pair configurations ($3 \times 4 \times 3 \times 5 \times 4 \times 3 \times 5$), which is far too many to consider or analyze individually. There is, however, a smaller number of plausible configurations within this array that can be determined by filtering out all those that contain illogical or incoherent pairs. The purpose of this pairing exercise is to judge whether each pair of conditions, taken in turn, could coexist within a broader pattern describing Afghanistan’s security and law enforcement sustainability. To be plausible, participants should be able to say of each pair, *I cannot visualize a situation where these two conditions would not exist at the same time.*
The participants choose yes, no, or maybe to rate the viability of each pairing. A yes answer is fairly definite and not particularly helpful as far as reducing the total number of patterns goes; a no is the most important because it captures a group agreement that there was no internally consistent pattern in which the pair of conditions in question would fit; a maybe is ambiguous and confirms that the group has no strong opinions on whether to keep or reject this pair.

To illustrate this further, the pattern D, I, P, L, O, M, A, selected at random, would have to be scored as plausible within all of the 21 pairs below to survive this filter:

D, I, [Decision making: prompt, informed, outcome-focused; Integrity: honest and virtuous]
D, P, I, [Computing and information systems: integrated, seamless, and ubiquitous]
D, L, I, P, L, [Leadership: cautiously engaged]
D, O, I, P, L, [Capability Objectives: confused]
D, M, I, P, L, O, M, [Management: measured]

This pattern did not survive the filtering and was discarded because “prompt, informed, and outcome-focused” decision making (D) does not coincide with either “cautiously engaged” leadership (L) or “confused” capability objectives (O).

Any single pair that is deemed implausible removes the entire pattern from consideration. This filtering process across all condition pairs removes 10,667 configurations, leaving a total of 137 that were considered internally consistent across all seven factors. The surviving patterns are listed in appendix 3. This set of 137 viable pairs will include the current condition and the desired condition for each factor, because they are bounded by (and may actually be) the best and worst conditions. In a later step, the remaining internally consistent configurations will be sorted and strung together to form achievable and sequenced condition changes over time—a campaign plan.

Step Five: Current and Desired Conditions

The factors-conditions table allows stakeholders and planners to visualize both the precise specifications of the current and desired conditions and the gap or distance between the two. The current and desired conditions are shown in figure 2.
As can be seen, six of the seven factors require the conditions to be reset by only one level; the factor capability objectives requires an improvement of two levels. This is encouraging, because it suggests that the system is almost where it needs to be. The fact that all seven areas demand attention, however, also highlights the chronic and systemic weaknesses that conspire to undermine performance.

**Step Six: Developing the Campaign Plan**

Starting with the 137 DIPLOMA configurations that survived our process of elimination in step 4, we first discard the 86 configurations that were worse than the current conditions and the seven that were beyond the intended end-state. This leaves us with 42 intermediate conditions—the product of the GMA process—from which to build a campaign plan (see appendix 3).

Given the current conditions, we next ask the question: *If we were to choose one factor to try to improve, which one is the most likely to show early improvement with the least effort?* The stakeholders determine that inter- and intra-agency relationships (and the underpinning behaviors that affect them) must be reset from a condition of neutral to an improved condition of cooperative. Success in the agency factor will also be accompanied by a corresponding improvement in capability objectives from confused to ad hoc and partially shared. Figure 3 illustrates these changes.

This process identifies the next pattern in the series—D I P L O M A. This incremental improvement may also set the preconditions that make it possible to improve another condition: leadership may move from cautiously engaged to active, engaged, and aware. This process of step-by-step improvement continues until each factor achieves its desired condition. The process is illustrated in figure 4, which presents one preferred and some alternate courses of action. Starting from the current conditions at the bottom of the chart, we can choose
to first improve either leadership (left solid branch, row 1) or capability objectives and relationships (right solid branch, row 1). Figure 4 shows that five steps are required to achieve the desired end-state, but there can be more than one way to get there. When faced with this set of choices at the outset, most viewers are likely to see leadership as being pivotal to any other improvements.

In previous exercises, this campaign planning/operational design stage has triggered rich discussions of what can be made to happen and why. For example, it is not uncommon to hear a group member say something like, “A #112 pattern can’t come so soon after a #173!” where the numbers stand for whole configurations.

This orientation towards bringing about positive change is different from conventional planning in that we are identifying what “we want to make happen,” rather than what “we are going to do,” or what means and resources we might use. In conventional military planning, the means are often predetermined by the commander or decision maker, and planning staff. The GMA planning process, by contrast, continues through each incremental improvement until the factors reach their desired conditions (characterizing the optimum end-state), in this case, Afghan security forces that are reliable, capable, and sustainable.

**Conclusion: Executing the Plan**

More than most other analytical methods, the GMA process offers planners and officials a comprehensive and detailed appreciation of the wickedness and messiness of the problem with which they must grapple. It also makes clear that they must avoid superficiality in execution. Our area of interest, Afghan security, is capable of enormous variety, because of the nature of governance, communication, decision making, and other features common to Afghanistan’s public administration. Our solution set therefore must possess an equal or greater capacity for variety.

The problem **sustainability of law enforcement and national security in Afghanistan** can exhibit a variety of characteristics and behaviors. Ashby’s Law of Requisite Variety requires our instruments of national power and any other...
resources we may mobilize to possess a capacity for variety that is equal to or greater than our area of interest if we are to successfully shape and influence (reset) the existing conditions in a specified direction.

Ashby’s Law originates within General Systems Theory and primarily concerns cybernetics—information and communications. The air in the room where you are reading this article, for example, can exhibit a variety of characteristics, including temperature, humidity, and pressure, to name a few. If you want to monitor and control these factors, then your thermostats, humidifiers, and other environment control devices must possess the functionality to first detect variation and then activate the appropriate corrections. In other words, these corrective measures must possess an equal or greater capacity for variety than the area of interest they seek to influence.

What does this mean for sustainability? If we ignore, or fail to accommodate, the richness and diversity of conditions associated with sustainability in Afghanistan, along with all the less surprising but still unexpected events that may crop up, then we will experience continued disappointment, frustration, and lack of progress. The GMA process allows us to pool the knowledge and experience of experts and distill the aggregate into clear, accessible, realistic steps that, taken with an open mind and an eye to innovation, can lead to real and sustainable improvement.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Further Reading


Appendix 1: Factors Influencing Law Enforcement and National Security Sustainment

The following factors combine to influence the extent to which law enforcement and national security can be sustained. These were distilled into the seven primary factors.

- Decision making
- Computing and information management systems
- Organizational structures
- Authorities
- Logistic chains
- Warehousing
- Inventory management
- Capability objectives
- Private industry
- Consumption rates
- Operational levels
- Financial management
- Budgeting
- Security
- Transportation
- Forecasting
- Management
- Competition
- Availability of labor
- Supply and demand models
- Accountability
- Commercial practices
- Training
- Inventory management
- Item codes and tracking
- Proprietary logistics information systems
- End-to-end visibility and control
- Use of contractors
- Spares availability
- Access to upgrades
- Contract management
- Risk management
- Political over-management
- Fraud control
- Project management
- Program management
- Facility management
- Records management
- Tribalism
- Probit
- Strategic thinking
- Education
- Workforce stability
- Teamwork
- Empowerment
- Leadership
- Stewardship
- Political stability
- Economic value
- Control measures
- Fraud prevention
- Interoperability
- Technical regulatory systems
- Short-term thinking
- Dishonesty
- External interference
- Cronyism
- Nepotism
- Tenure of key appointments
- Supply and demand management
- Contract management
- Patronage
- Corruption
- Communication
- Inter- and intra-agency relationships
- Institutional cohesion
- Supporting systems
Appendix 2: Grouping of Factors

We grouped the original 67 factors into seven primary factors by placing the Post-it Notes on a wall and allowing the participants to reach consensus on how to group them.
Appendix 3: Surviving Configurations

The following list shows the configurations that remained after we removed all configurations that contained one or more illogical pairs, and those that lay outside the limits of the current and desired conditions. The current conditions are marked with (C), the desired conditions are marked with (D), and the intermediate conditions to get from the current to the desired are numbered.

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<tr>
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<th>8. $D_1 I P L_2 O M_{A_2}$ (D)</th>
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NOTES


2 Throughout the process, the authors used an operational design software program developed by Dr. Duczynski to manage all the inputs and process the data. For more information about the study described here, the GMA process, or the software, please contact Dr. Duczynski (guy.duczynski@gmail.com), COL Jablonski (jaroslaw.k.jablonski@gmail.com), or Dr. Huddleston (shh4m@virginia.edu).


7 Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons.” Hardin’s theory concerns individuals who, acting independently and rationally according to each one’s self-interest, behave contrary to the whole group’s long-term best interests by depleting some common resource. In this case, the scarce resources are the critical inputs to law enforcement and national security in Afghanistan. An interesting additional dimension is that the "tragedy" is often seen as an example of emergent behavior, the outcome of individual interactions in a complex system, which is exactly what is confronting sustainability planners in Afghanistan.


9 Sustainable law enforcement and national security is defined as a condition that exists whereby decision making is guided by capability outcomes and accommodates considerations of both effectiveness and efficiency.

10 At the time of publication, the Afghan Air Force Special Mission Wing possessed 17 Mi–17 helicopters.


12 Ritchey, “Wicked Problems.”


14 Although it would have been highly desirable to have Afghan nationals present and actively contributing, the security requirements for implementing this process during this time were prohibitive.

15 See note 2 for more information.


17 Data for all tables and figures in this study were compiled by the authors. See note 2 for more information.
Few militant organizations have gained global prominence as rapidly as Boko Haram (BH), owing to its characteristically unrestrained violence. Research on BH has therefore bourgeoned equally quickly. The Nigerian government, with support from regional states and the international community, has likewise increased its engagement in counterterrorism activities, but the violence nevertheless persists. Two conspicuous undercurrents characterize the prevailing conditions in the country. First, most research is focused on ways to resolve the conflict, which is a long-term project. Second, the state’s efforts are directed toward elimination of the violence by primarily military means. The result has been further aggression by BH and an increase in the appeal of its jihadist message, especially for youth. The fluidity of the situation on the ground, however, reveals that this is not a case for conflict resolution, nor can it be fixed by the impulsive and somewhat symptomatic approach adopted by the government. To create the space for other response strategies to take effect, the first requirements are to understand the situation and manage the spiral of violence. This study seeks to demystify the phenomenology of Boko Haram’s escalating violence and provide some clarity on a relatively unexplored aspect of Nigeria’s nascent civil war.

My primary argument is that the prevailing security conditions in northern Nigeria reflect a dynamic rooted in both the unbridled revenge killings of BH members and their affiliates by the state security apparatus and vigilante groups, and the militants’ campaign of extremist religious violence against the state and society. There is a direct and causal correlation between Nigeria’s political developments and the escalating sectarian violence, a correlation that has been under researched and therefore remains the least understood dimension of Nigeria’s conflict. This assertion challenges previous explanations, including those that link outbreaks of violence by Boko Haram directly to President Goodluck Jonathan’s election in 2011 and his reelection bid in the upcoming February 2015 election. In my view, however, politics alone cannot fully explain the chronic nature of the problem, because even if power returns to the north—Boko Haram’s base—in the future, the violence will very likely persist owing to a deeply entrenched, structural hatred of elites that permeates the ranks of BH.

This study begins with a brief history of Boko Haram’s violence. I then try to make sense of the mayhem by identifying possible patterns, cycles, and trends in the violence through an analysis of data covering the period from 1 October 2010 to 15 June 2014. The analytical framework examines four concepts that researchers have proposed to understand Nigeria’s situation: variability in the threshold of violence, time series, routine activity theory, and political developments. The time series encompasses trend analysis (the long-term movement in a series), cycles that are regular nonseasonal fluctuations, and seasonality (days of the week as well as time of the year). The seasonality component is drawn from routine activity theory. I first tested these three time-series elements to identify any peaks and patterns in the violence, and then analyzed the results in relation to major political developments to determine whether verifiable political triggers were inciting the violence.
The Pathway and Profile of Violence

The exact origins of BH remain largely in doubt. The available records suggest that Mohammed Yusuf founded BH in 2002 in the city of Maiduguri with the goal of establishing shari’a government in Borno State in northern Nigeria. The group was traced back to 1995 when it existed as a little-known Muslim youth organization called Shabaab, under the leadership of a cleric known as Abubakar Lawan. The command later shifted to Yusuf when Lawan departed for studies in Saudi Arabia. Yusuf’s charm and religious appeal were instrumental in attracting wider swaths of the region’s youth, who were disillusioned by their socioeconomic miseries. In fact, many poor families and unemployed youths from the neighboring countries of Niger, Chad, and Cameroon also enrolled in Yusuf’s religious complex, which included a mosque and a school that offered primarily ideological studies. Those who interacted with Yusuf have quoted him as saying that his goal was the establishment of an Islamic state “in Nigeria, and if possible all over the world, but through dialogue.” In January 2006, the imam was teaching approximately 3,000 students.

It is unclear what motivated Yusuf to espouse violence; there is, however, a general consensus among independent observers that violent clashes between Christians and Muslims and harsh government treatment, including pervasive police brutality, encouraged the group to radicalize. The first known attack by BH was carried out in December 2003 by roughly 100 militants, who struck multiple police stations in the state of Yobe, near the Niger border. As the sphere of its activities spread to neighboring states, BH caught the attention of Nigeria’s political leadership, who authorized military deployments against the group. After a major showdown with the military in July 2009, in which approximately 800 to 900 militants were killed, Yusuf was captured and died in police custody on 30 July. His followers regarded this as an extrajudicial killing, although the police claimed that he died trying to escape. State television footage shown to officials and journalists revealed jubilant police celebrating around his body. For rights activists and observers, “the extrajudicial killing of Yusuf in police custody was a shocking example of the brazen contempt by the Nigerian police for the rule of law.”

The 2009 massacre by the security agencies raised such alarm that the government ordered the prosecution not only of the police personnel who killed Yusuf but also the military commander of a unit that killed 42 other BH insurgents. The carnage, however, also marked the beginning of an organized, violent antistate terror campaign by BH. Over time, the group reevaluated its definition of the “legitimate” enemy and expanded its attacks beyond drive-by shootings of off-duty security officers to targeting local politicians, traditional authority figures, and Christian and eventually even Muslim civilians. Attacks by the group increased in frequency, reach, and destructiveness, especially from May 2011 onward. The most dramatic development came when BH began to use suicide bombers, starting with an attack on the Nigerian Police Force Headquarters in Abuja on 16 June 2011, which was followed by a car bombing at the UN headquarters, also in Abuja, on 26 August 2011.

Over the next two years, the violence rose to alarming levels, with attacks occurring on an almost daily basis in the northern part of the country. Some days, fatalities exceeded 100, a pattern that has continued ever since. For example, on 22 December 2011, 125 people were killed by BH in parts of Borno and Yobe.
BH’s most deadly single assault came in January 2012 when coordinated bomb and gun attacks in Kano City killed an estimated 185 people (the number claimed by BH). Similarly, on 17 September 2013, BH gunmen killed 142 people and burned dozens of homes in coordinated attacks on the town of Benisheikh in Borno State. The year 2014 was unprecedented for the intensity of the group’s violence. Approximately 3,300 people, the majority of whom were civilians, died violently in different locations across northeast Nigeria during the first six months of the year alone. More than half of the killings were carried out by members of BH, whose victims included scores of schoolchildren who were deliberately targeted by the group. The rest were killed by security forces during fighting or in retaliation for Boko Haram’s depredations. Hundreds of soldiers, members of the Civilian Joint Task Force (JTF) militia, and suspected BH fighters have also been killed in attacks and clashes in the conflict. The levels of violence in 2014 prompted Amnesty International to classify Nigeria’s fighting as a noninternational armed conflict.

These descriptions provide only a fractional view of the human tragedy suffered in Nigeria since the advent of BH-related violence. The death toll between 2001 and 2013 has been estimated at 10,000, with the greatest number by far coming since 2009. Although the estimates of total fatalities vary widely, between 2009 and 2013, this militant group alone was responsible for 2.34 percent of the more than 34,000 terrorist attacks that took place worldwide and caused 5.9 percent of fatalities. Headed by Abubakar Shekau since 2010, Boko Haram is now considered among the deadliest extremist groups in the world.

Annual Violence Threshold Variability

A total of 6,634 Nigerian civilians and security personnel (excluding the military) lost their lives in 397 violent incidents between 2010 and 2014, the period of this study (see figure 1). The intensity of the violence has been on an upward trend with each succeeding year, registering a threefold rise in the annual number of fatalities. In 2011, violence by BH was largely confined to Nigeria’s northeast; by the end of 2012, it had engulfed 14 out of the country’s 36 states, including all 12 of the states that have already adopted Islamic law and the Federal Capital Territory of Abuja. Nineteen hundred people died in BH violence during 2013; the group was responsible for an average of 12.42 reported fatalities per conflict event (compared to two per event by Somalia’s Al Shabaab in 2013). In the first half of 2014, violence reached an unprecedented level. Informed opinions about the causes of this increased intensity in BH’s terrorist activity are scant, and those who study it generally focus on the highhandedness of the Nigerian military and law enforcement agencies, without relating the violence to situational dynamics.

The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), a research group that focuses on violence on the African continent, attributes this rise in the trajectory of violence to an alteration in Boko Haram’s targeting strategy, that is, toward the discrete use of violence against noncombatants. ACLED posits that such attacks were almost entirely absent from the 2010 data, suggesting that 2011 marked an important turning point in the development of the group and its strategic and deliberate use of violence against civilians. According to ACLED, this was particularly noticeable in 2012, when high-intensity attacks on noncombatants outweighed clashes with security forces (see figure 2; the yellow dots represent civilian casualties). The tally

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Figure 1: Total Fatalities by Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>1,156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>1,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>3,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6,634</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
in figure 1 supports ACLED’s finding of an increase in violent fatalities since 2011.

Both of these figures, however, provide only a symptomatic picture and do not offer a rationale for the factors propelling the change. For example, each single year in figure 1 represents a cycle; when each year is broken into quarters, the cycle of violence even within one year appears random (figure 3). Nor is the assertion by ACLED that there has been a surge in attacks against civilians statistically substantiated. A closer scrutiny of the data reveals that, other than those who died in attacks on a pub and two churches in December 2011 and who were mostly Christians, the majority of BH’s victims were collateral and politically engaged, such as Muslim clerics or suspected government collaborators. There were two or three instances of deliberate attacks in public places that resulted in relatively few deaths, possibly carried out simply to induce fear. Aside from those instances, there is no evidence that over the course of 2011, BH regularly engaged civilian targets. While it is clear from the evidence that civilians became part of BH’s conflict strategy beginning in 2011, the erratic violence by the group indicates that its behavior was provoked by extrasystemic triggers. This is a vital aspect to understanding the phenomenology of Nigeria’s violence.

**Routine Activity and Seasonal Variation**

Many scholars have attributed a noticeable increase in crime during the summer months to the greater availability of outdoor victims due to good weather and longer daytime hours. By implication, they endorse routine activity theory by suggesting a correlation between the summer months and the first few days of the week, when there may be more opportunities to strike. Nigeria has a tropical climate with abundant sunshine throughout the year; in the country’s northern part, the weather is hot and dry most of the year, with temperatures climbing as high as 40°C (104°F), and the rainy season lasts for only three to four months (June–September). The country’s general terrain is low grassland without significant obstacles to movement. To what extent, then, do climatic seasonality and topography contribute to Nigeria’s patterns of violent activity?

As shown in figure 4, the incidence line for violent activity in Nigeria steadily rises during the first three months of the year, drops sharply during April, and
rises again until June. A curve begins to form from June onward, which reaches another apex in October. The remaining two months of the year witness substantially less violence compared to earlier months. Figures 4 and 5 demonstrate that overall the event distribution is nonsymmetrical, whereas the central tendency of the incidence of violence across months is stable at a certain level. This horizontal leveling of occurrences is illustrated by the general trend line in figure 5 and implies that the level of violence has stabilized over time, despite occasional extremes in which the number of incidents rises above 40 or falls below 21. The relative stability of the mean level of violence can be interpreted as BH’s intent to maintain its visibility, while the unusual escalations or reductions may show the group’s willingness to match violence against them with more violence, as dictated by a circumstantial dynamic. This observation strengthens the underlying notion that there is a regulated nature to Nigeria’s violence, consistent with a trigger. The relationship between continuity and magnitude is also robust; therefore, the histogram in figure 5 infers the persistence of this trend into the future.

To see whether fluctuations in the trend line of figure 4 are the result of a circumstantial dynamic, the potential impact of climate on the operational scale of violence should be examined. Local meteorologists have concluded that the expected frequency and intensity of climatic hazards due to climate change in urban areas can no longer be predicted by relying solely on historical data, local experiences, and institutional memory. Through empirical analysis, they have found instead an increased likelihood of unpredictability in climatic conditions. When considering the June–October curve in Figure 4, this finding means that climate has no significant effect on the overall level of violence. For example, other than a quiet July during 2011 or low-key violence in August and September of 2012, the rainy months have not seen any notable decline in terrorist activity. Similarly, the timing of violence does not seem to have been influenced by high floods. In fact, while Kano State was experiencing devastating floods during July 2012, violent acts were considerably curtailed there but concomitantly, more targets were hit in the states of Borno, Yobe, and Bauchi, and in Abuja. While it seems clear that climate and topography do not hinder violence, this inference does not explain the dip in violent attacks that occurs during April or the peaks during February, March, June, and October.

**Temporal Seasonality Trend and Patterns**

Nigeria observes nearly two dozen annual public holidays as a result of its sociocultural and religious diversity. The country follows the common five-day workweek with a two-day weekend. Friday, which is generally observed as a weekend day in many Muslim countries, is a working day in Nigeria. As in other countries, each day of the week in Nigeria has some cultural, mystic, or mythological significance. But it can be assumed that these rituals do not mean anything to a terrorist organization, for whom opportunity and the availability of targets should take precedence over everything else.

Figure 6 depicts violent episodes according to historical data across the days of the week. The figure shows a single peak in violence on Sunday, with Tuesday, Thursday, and Fridays sharing an identical plane. As shown, the event record
How does Nigeria’s situation compare with terrorism trends across regions? Two data sets that track incidents of terrorism across the days of the week reveal some interesting insights. The first covers terrorist events throughout the world over a period of 34 years (1974 to 2007), while the second shows prevailing security conditions in Pakistan between 2009 and 2012 (see table 1). Monday shows up as the key day for acts of terrorism in both data sets. One common explanation for this is that private citizens and government institutions—the preferred targets for acts of political terrorism—are less available on the weekend, so terrorists simply wait until Monday to attack. Consequently, Saturdays and Sundays are the least active worldwide.

Unlike the rest of the world, however, most terrorist attacks in Pakistan were carried out on Thursday, followed by Monday and Friday. In Pakistan, Thursday is traditionally the day on which large numbers of people go to shrines, while Fridays are set aside for prayers and religious observance. These days are therefore rational choices for terrorists who wish to produce mass casualties. The incidence profile reveals that Friday, far from being a day of peace, is an important day to hit a larger number of human beings at prayer time, perhaps in part because the terrorists imagine they will receive divine providence by attacking those they regard as apostate on the holy day.

In more recent years, even this trend has tended to fluctuate according to the ideology of the terrorist group involved. How does this pattern hold up for Nigeria? Over the last four years, churches were attacked by militants on more than 30 of a total 209 Sundays. It would be logical to expect the same trend for attacks against Muslims during Friday congregations. On a single Friday in December 2011, a BH bombing and shooting attack killed four Muslim worshippers in Maiduguri as they were leaving the mosque after attending Friday prayers. This attack, however, was directed primarily against a nearby military checkpoint, not the mosque. Likewise, coordinated strikes that killed at least 185, including 29 policemen, after Friday prayers on 20 January 2012 in Kano, a predominantly Muslim city, targeted the police headquarters. On two occasions, Christians were also attacked on a Friday, while unarmed Muslim village communities were targeted by BH at least 35 times on Sundays across large swaths of the country.

The spread of these attacks reveals indiscriminate targeting of civilians by Boko Haram, regardless of the victims’ religious beliefs. Another distinction is that in Nigeria, terrorist activity tends to be low on Monday but much higher on
Tuesday. This is the opposite of the trend both globally and in Pakistan, where Mondays attract greater terrorist activity compared with Tuesdays.50

The Linkages between Political Developments and Violence

The theory that the intensity of Boko Haram’s violence can best be explained in terms of a political feud is premised primarily on the argument that, while the extrajudicial killing of the leadership of the BH in 2009 may have triggered a violent confrontation with the state, the more recent severity of violence is the fallout of a fierce political battle in April 2011 that brought Goodluck Jonathan—a southern Christian member of the powerful People’s Democratic Party (PDP)—to power.51 The question is whether this political dynamic can be clearly linked with the contemporary security landscape. In Nigeria, national elections are a two-stage process: the presidential poll is followed by elections for state governors. It is intriguing to note that the north, which was gripped by devastating riots in the days after Jonathan’s election in what looked like historical north-south animosity, just a short time later returned numerous incumbent PDP governors to office. The PDP basically held its ground in the north despite the opposition.52 Nigerian analysts have suggested that northern Nigerians tend to make different calculations regarding their interests at the national level than they do at the state and local levels, implying that they are strategic in their approach. These analysts further warn that outsiders who analyze local politics need to understand the different frames of reference that people shift between when making political decisions, and to consider the different priorities that people try to balance.53 In this light, the May 2011 unrest appears unlikely to be directly connected to the agenda of the insurgency.

Similarly, some speculate that BH was a creation of some disgruntled members of President Jonathan’s ruling party, who appropriated the group to destabilize his government.54 President Jonathan himself has conceded that BH backers and sympathizers are “in the executive arm of the government; some of them are in the parliamentary/legislative arm of the government, while some are even in the legislative arm. Some are also in the armed forces, the police and other security agencies.”55 While the motivations of alleged supporters warrant close study, their activities on behalf of the rebels are unlikely to be of any serious consequence compared to other strategic developments that have produced and animated the conflict environment.

On 31 December 2011, President Jonathan declared a state of emergency in parts of Borno, Niger, Plateau, and Yobe states after a Christmas Day bomb attack by BH on Saint Theresa Catholic Church in the town of Madalla near Abuja, which killed 42 worshippers. On 1 January 2012, BH issued a three-day ultimatum to southern Nigerians to leave the north. The group then carried out a series of attacks on Christians and churches after the deadline passed.56 In a video message posted online later that month, BH leader Shekau stated, “Everyone has seen what the security personnel have done to us. Everyone has seen why we are fighting with them,” apparently referring to abuses by the special military task force that was set up by the federal government in June 2011 in Maiduguri and the deployment of hundreds of soldiers in Borno State in October 2011.58

With the imposition of emergency rule at the end of 2011, it appeared that the floodgates of violence were opened. BH carried out more attacks and killed
more people during the six months of the emergency than in all of 2010 and 2011 combined.\footnote{The coordinated bombing and gun battle against police headquarters in Kano on 20 January 2012 was one of the deadliest attacks by BH during 2012. A message from the BH on 1 February 2012 asking Kano residents to bear with the violence, in an apparent bid to show people that the sect was only trying to target the government, proved to be a farce. Civilians clearly were targeted in this period: BH carried out 31 attacks against Christians and churches; 43 against Muslim clerics, mosques, and communities; and nearly a dozen against foreigners. Even so, the police and military, who suffered over 80 attacks, remained the group’s principal focus. BH had warned in March 2012 that “all police stations and other security outfits are our targets.”} In the most horrific incident, in October 2012, BH operatives slit the throats of 26 people in a student housing area in Mubi town, in the state of Adamawa, bordering Cameroon. It is believed that the group’s attacks against police officers, Christians, and Muslims in 2012 involved those who allegedly cooperated with the government or opposed BH.\footnote{The year 2013 was especially notable because of the advent of what was, essentially, a state of civil war in northern Nigeria. Africa analyst Jacob Zenn suggested that the French-led military intervention in northern Mali in January 2013 may have indirectly revitalized BH. His comment was inspired by attacks along northeastern Borno’s borders with Niger and Cameroon from March to May 2013, which were thought to be the work of former members of Ansaru, BH, and other militant groups, who had fought with or learned from the rebels in Mali. The fact that Nigeria had been wracked by instability prior to the Malian crisis does not, however, lend credence to this hypothesis. The dynamics of the rising violence were essentially informed and shaped by domestic concerns.}

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The Civilian Joint Task Force

On 14 May 2013, President Jonathan again declared a state of emergency in the three northeastern Nigerian states of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa to curtail the activities of BH. This decree was followed by increased militarization of the troubled zones.\footnote{A state of kidnapings by BH began in May 2013; BH leader Shekau announced in a video that these were retaliation for Nigerian security forces’ taking the wives and children of group members. Both conflict events and reported fatalities increased dramatically in that month.} In June, President Jonathan declared BH and the splinter group Ansaru to be terrorist organizations, and imposed a 20-year jail sentence for their noncombatant supporters.\footnote{The defining marker in the general escalation of violence, however, was the formation of a state-sanctioned militia called the Civilian Joint Task Force (JTF), also in May 2013. This group of loosely coordinated civilians was given powers to arrest suspected BH members and hand them over to the security forces. Not only did the Borno state government hail the role being played by the Civilian JTF, but the president himself hailed the youth vigilantes as “new national heroes.” Much encouraged and supported by the military, police, and society, this group of young fighters seemed to many to be a harbinger of positive change in Nigeria’s precarious internal security situation. In reality, however, this armed civil resistance formation incited BH into direct confrontation with the general population. Concurrently with the Civilian JTF, unsanctioned vigilante groups emerged in rural communities to oppose the terrorists. In turn, BH became intensely vengeful against the vigilante groups, plunging the country into a de facto civil war. Vigilantism is also displacing the government from its constitutional obligation to preserve the state and confront its challengers.}
Another crucial episode that distinguished this violent year was the custodial deaths of more than 950 members of BH in detention facilities run by the military JTF (formed by the government in 2011) in the first six months of 2013 alone. Amnesty International claimed that prisoners were suffocated, starved, and arbitrarily executed in the army-led operation in the country’s northeast. At least 622 suspected BH collaborators were killed by the security forces on 14 March 2014. On that same day, BH militants attacked Giwa barracks in Maiduguri and freed hundreds of detainees, but, remarkably, no soldiers were reported to have died in the attack. In contrast, the soldiers who regained control of the barracks after a few hours killed more than 600 people, mainly newly freed detainees, after the fighting had ended. When seen through the lens of an attack-retaliation feedback loop, the nonlinearity of the violence thresholds in the latter half of 2013 and in 2014, against law enforcement agencies but more specifically against civilians, is at once illuminated. This backdrop helps explain the rationale underlying BH’s escalating punitive rampage—the group has often cited security forces’ abuses to justify its attacks.

Breaking into jails, detention cells, and barracks to free prisoners, sometimes on a very large scale, has remained one of BH’s signature activities over the years.

**Elusive Peace**

Peace overtures that had been initiated in August 2011 continued into 2013. The history of such efforts, however, whether by the militants or on behalf of the government, has been one of enigma and controversy. For example, there are conflicting reports about talks held by former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo with BH in September 2011. IRIN, a news service formerly under the auspices of the UN, reported that none of the demands submitted by BH to President Jonathan on 16 September 2011 were heeded, despite the fact that the militants appeared to be offering a ceasefire. These demands also included an end to the arrests and killings of BH members, payment of compensation to the families of sect members killed by security personnel, and prosecution of the policemen responsible for the death of the group’s leader, Mohammed Yusuf, in June 2009.

Iro Aghedo and Oarhe Osumah, two leading writers on Nigerian security, nevertheless seem to refute the idea that BH would offer to participate in such negotiations, noting that “even an attempt by Nigeria’s ex-president, Olusegun Obasanjo, to broker peace with the group through some family members of the slain BH leader Mohammed Yusuf was rebuffed by the sect.” Similarly, the fate of recommendations, including amnesty, by a fact-finding committee instituted by the federal government in 2011 and headed by Ambassador Usman Gaji Galtimari, is not known. BH has chosen to maintain a vengeful stance in retaliation for the slaying of Yusuf.

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The intransigence does not lie entirely with Boko Haram, however. The amnesty buzzword has been heard repeatedly in discussions of how to deal with BH up until the present time, but to no avail. Between March and August 2013, there were several botched attempts by the government to bring peace. In one instance, President Jonathan openly rejected calls for an amnesty deal for BH during a visit to Damaturu in March. In April 2013, the government convened a 26-member Committee on Dialogue and Peaceful Resolution of Security Challenges in the North, with a three-month mandate to try to convince BH to lay down its arms in exchange for a state pardon and social integration. In June, however, the president raised the stakes again by designating BH a terrorist organization. Again in July, the government declared it would form a negotiation
panel to initiate talks with BH, but in the same month, Nigeria’s minister of special duties announced he was in ceasefire negotiations with the Islamist insurgents, a claim which was promptly denied by BH. The government was reported to have rejected or discontinued negotiations with BH during the month of August. Other facilitators who tried to mediate between the two sides eventually pulled out of the process, citing insincerity on the part of the government or because BH accused the Nigerian state of bad faith. Similarly mixed signals radiated from the government during 2014. On 30 May, President Jonathan offered conditional amnesty to BH, while almost simultaneously ordering total war against the organization, seeming to justify accusations by BH that government peace offers were insincere. Boko Haram, meanwhile, has stuck with its demands for the release of all the BH members being held in various prisons for acts of terrorism, as a condition for dialogue with the government.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

This article proposes that a cause-and-effect feedback loop, exacerbated by poorly conceived political interventions, is behind the prevailing security breakdown in Nigeria. This is a dynamic that has not previously been investigated with due scientific rigor. A careful analysis of available data supports the hypothesis that Nigeria’s government and Boko Haram are trapped in an upward spiral of attack and retaliation that neither seems willing to break and that the principal underlying cause lies in the country’s political dynamics.

Generally, the anatomy of Nigeria’s violence suggests that the country presents a unique context in which BH is pursuing a deliberate path of retributive punishment. This strategy seems to have materialized from, and is sustained by, the memory of the 2009 massacre that its leadership and cadres suffered at the hands of the state security forces. BH can thus be understood as a traumatized militant structure that will continue with its violence as long as it perceives that justice is being denied.

The data also make clear that climate hazards and topographical configurations have no correlation with terrorism within the Nigerian context. Likewise, temporal seasonality with regard to the availability of targets is generally inapplicable with the exception of Sundays, which call for strong protective measures especially for the larger places of worship. The reason Christians are being discriminated against by BH appears to be a function more of politics and other events in the recent past than of the ideological leanings of BH. Muslims and Christians had peacefully coexisted in Nigeria for ages until increasingly severe economic inequality and corruption in recent decades spurred interfaith violence.

Like Sundays, Tuesdays appear to be a favored day for attacks on urban centers, but terrorist strikes against urban communities, rural areas, and the border regions of Nigeria have occurred on every day of the week. Temporal seasonality alone also fails to explain the monthly fluctuations in violence (i.e., a dip during April and peaks of violence during February, March, June, and October). When juxtaposed with political developments, however, these discontinuities not only become intelligible but reveal distinct dynamics that feed the cycles of violence.

First, there appears to be a direct and strong correlation between the declaration of an emergency and an escalation in violence. Three dynamics in particular transformed the existing environment each time an emergency was imposed: the deployment of military contingents, the indiscriminate use of lethal force, and extrajudicial (summary) executions. In effect, an organization like Boko Haram,
with a history of trauma inflicted by the security establishment, is likely to regard the display of state symbols of power as a deliberate attempt at intimidation, which then obligates violent retribution. This finding rationalizes and places in perspective the assertion by ACLED that 2011 marks an important turning point in the development of the group and its strategic and deliberate use of violence against civilians. Military operations also have an implicit but strong association with the militants’ rescue raids on prisoners’ housing. Metaphorically, prisoners act as a magnet for action and should be understood as a major point of sensitivity for BH, regardless of the location and the cost that may ensue from attempted rescues. It can be safely predicted that this trend will continue.

Second, the analysis suggests a subtle linkage between the timing of the announcement of a state of emergency and Boko Haram’s selection of a type of target. The president’s first promulgation of an emergency came soon after BH’s Christmas Day bomb attack on a Catholic church. The decree denounced the attack as religiously motivated, and BH responded by warning all southerners (mainly Christians) to leave Borno State. The frequent killing of Christians on Sundays during 2012 makes sense when viewed against this backdrop. Unlike most terrorist groups, for which military considerations (i.e., the opportunity and availability of targets) generally dictate their targeting strategy, BH appears to be driven more by politics and circumstance.

Another vivid dynamic correlating with the increased intensity of violence has been the deployment of vigilante groups since May 2013, a move that eroded the distinction between noncombatants and armed groups. State-sanctioned vigilantism enlarged BH’s targeting scope to include more civilians. An indirect effect of this development has been the expanding culture of violence in the country, with a corresponding dilution of the rule of law and government writ large. The designation of BH as a terrorist organization during May 2013 also served to heighten the mayhem.

Finally, BH has offered no actionable response to peace overtures initiated by the state and private agencies, which indicates the pervasive mistrust among the parties. There also appears to be widespread confusion in the state’s counterterrorism strategy, which is often characterized by incomprehensible backtracking and contradictions. More than lack of imagination and will, this incoherence reflects the lack of a structured state or public narrative to deal with BH, which appears to be more adept at strategic communication than the Jonathan government.

A meaningful policy response will have to isolate and disrupt these dynamics, if it is to break the cycle of retributive violence. A list that prioritizes the most essential dynamics to calm the violence must include the immediate disbandment and disarming of vigilante groups; revision of the rules of engagement for state security forces, with the aim to preserve life, coupled with stringent accountability measures; and reform of the criminal justice system so that it is transparent and upholds the ideals of the rule of law. In this regard, the release of prisoners who are being held illegally should be considered as a moral gesture. Muslim soldiers and police personnel involved in unlawful killings should be tried in the shari’a courts, with an emphasis on the “life for life” precept of Islam.

The mitigation of hatred is a time-consuming process that calls for a national effort. Two initial measures are essential. First, the state needs to institute a reconciliation program that follows five stages: (1) the conception, design, and
organization of a plan; (2) a nationwide awareness campaign; (3) implementation of the plan; (4) both an in-process and post-reconciliation process review and assessment; and (5) the initiation of midcourse corrections or a reform agenda. In order to actualize such a program, the state must develop its own peace narrative, one driven by a philosophy of concordance that politically accepts the existence of the opposing side and attempts to incorporate it into the national mainstream. An effective peace narrative should revolve around mutual respect, trust, right to life, and a sense of reconciliation rather than retributive justice, while avoiding the use of security rhetoric. Second, and to immediately place the process on a sound footing, it would be worth contemplating an official acknowledgment of regret, short of an apology, for the unlawful killings by security forces. Whether the state should make concessions to an organization labeled as terrorist at home and globally is a predicament, but one that will have to be resolved through dialogue between state and society to avoid further human loss. None of these suggestions will work unless they are accompanied by the institutionalization of anti-intimidation strategies, such as enhanced public diplomacy that explains the rationale behind security force deployments, along with the commitment to withdraw forces upon the cessation of violence, appeals for civil-military cooperation, better training for soldiers that promotes civil communication, and so on.

Bringing an end to Nigeria’s violence calls for major policy reorientations. To preserve the lives of its citizenry despite internal divisions and conflict, a state is expected not only to ensure security, but to preserve the trust of its people, upon whom it depends for its vibrancy. The policy response in Nigeria in particular demands a sense of urgency and the will to act at all levels, lest the country plunge deeper into a civil war of dangerous proportions.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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NOTES


The data sources include a timeline of Boko Haram attacks and related violence compiled by the Nairobi-based humanitarian news and analysis service IRIN (until recently, affiliated with the UN), the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), Boko Haram Fast Facts from the CNN library, and reports from Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. The research also draws on two more data sets—global patterns of terrorism and patterns of terrorism in Pakistan—to evaluate the Nigerian seasonality paradigm. The composite data set from these sources uses incidents, timelines (years, months, and days of the week), and fatalities as indicators to illuminate idiosyncrasies of violence. I plugged any gaps in the data with miscellaneous media reports and scholarly literature.

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7 Olojo, Nigeria’s Troubled North.


9 Olojo, Nigeria’s Troubled North.


15 “Islamist Leader Killed in Nigeria.” Two other extracustodial killings, on 31 July 2009, warrant notice. One victim was Baba Fugu Mohammed, the 72-year-old father-in-law of Mohammed Yusuf, who had turned himself over to police on his lawyer’s advice. The other was Alhaji Buji Foi, one of BH’s alleged financial backers and a former commissioner in the Borno state government. Both were killed by mobile police personnel inside police stations. See Human Rights Watch, Spiraling Violence.


21 Corina Simonelli, Michael Jensen, Alejandro Castro-Reina, Amy Pate, Scott Menner, and Erin Miller, Boko Haram Recent Attacks, START Background Report (College Park, MD: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism [START], May 2014): http://www.start.umd.edu/publication/boko-haram-recent-attacks

22 IRIN, “Timeline of Boko Haram Attacks.”


25 Ibid.

26 ACLED categorized Nigeria as the fourth most violent country, measured by the number of violent events, and the seventh most fatal over the course of the data set’s coverage (from 1997 through March 2013). See ACLED, Country Report: Nigeria.


28 For details, see Simonelli et al., Boko Haram Recent Attacks.


32 From data compiled by author.


34 Ibid. The yellow dots represent civilian casualties.

35 Data come from the sources outlined in note 4.

36 Nigeria Watch Database, Institut de Recherche pour le Développement, n.d.: http://www.nigeriawatch.org
This is not the case in Pakistan. This is because the weekend was shifted from Sunday to Friday during the military rule of Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988), and shifted back to Sunday again in 1997 by the government of Nawaz Sharif. For two decades, therefore, terrorist activity tended to occur on Saturday and Sunday in Pakistan. To the contrary, the second data set (2009–2012) in table 1 points towards a major shift in the selection of days for terrorist action in Pakistan. Muhammad Feyyaz, “Conceptualizing Terrorism Trend Patterns in Pakistan—An Empirical Perspective,” Perspectives on Terrorism 7, no. 1 (February 2013): 73–102; http://www.terrorismanalyists.com/pt/index.php/pt/article/view/243/html

From data compiled by author.

Hussain, “‘Terrorism in Pakistan.’”

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From data compiled by author.

Ibid. 54

Alozieuwu, “Contending Theories on Nigeria’s Security Challenge.”

Ibid. 54

Alozieuwu, “Contending Theories on Nigeria’s Security Challenge.”


International Crisis Group, Carving Violence in Nigeria (II).

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Solomon, “Counter-Terrorism in Nigeria.”

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Amnesty International, Nigeria: More Than 1,500 Killed.


Amnesty International, Nigeria: More Than 1,500 Killed.

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Mark Caldwell, “Nigeria Pushes Amnesty Plan for Islamist Militants,” Deutsche Welle, 18 April 2013: http://www.dw.de/nigeria-pushes-amnesty-plan-for-islamist-militants-1-16754470; BH leader Abubakar Shekau has insisted that the group has done nothing to require amnesty and so rejects such offers.

Agbibo, “Peace at Daggers Drawn?”

Ibid.

Ibid.


See Amnesty International, Nigeria: More Than 1,500 Killed In Armed Conflict and “Boko Haram Fast Facts.”

This proposition was presented by the author at the thematic workshop, Restorative Justice and Reconciliation as Essential Tools for Societies in Transition, on the eve of the International African Solidarity Festival, organized by Action Support Centre and held at Bosco Centre, Johannesburg, South Africa, 3 November 2012.
This interview is taken from the collection of the Combating Terrorism Archive Project (CTAP). On 16 October 2014, Dr. Leo Blanken spoke with photojournalist Robert Nickelsberg about Nickelsberg’s experiences over the past three decades working for *Time* magazine and the *New York Times*. Specializing in cultural and political change and upheaval, Nickelsberg has covered events across Asia and the Middle East. His book, *Afghanistan: A Distant War* (Prestel USA, 2013), received the Olivier Rebbot Award from the Overseas Press Club for the best reporting from abroad in books and magazines.

LEO BLANKEN: Robert Nickelsberg, we’re glad to have you here at the Naval Postgraduate School. We would like to talk to you about your career and some of the things that you’ve done in the course of your work, and also how your work relates to our missions of defense analysis and special operations in areas of conflict, in which you have a lot of experience. First of all, how did you arrive where you are professionally?

ROBERT NICKELSBERG: Well, thank you for inviting me here. I started my career as a contract photographer with *Time* magazine in Central America in the early 1980s. After that, I moved to South America and then over to Southeast Asia for a few years, from 1985 to 1987. At the end of 1987, I moved to New Delhi, India, where *Time* magazine had a bureau. From there, I covered the geographic region of South Asia: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, India, and occasionally Bhutan—essentially from the Himalayas down to the Indian Ocean. At the time, the Soviet Army had already been in Afghanistan for close to 10 years, and when I moved there, they had agreed to an exit plan. So I found the region at that very moment to be incredibly interesting. I was on a very steep learning curve at first, trying to understand not only the political dynamics but also the cultural differences and anomalies in South Asia, given the large number of countries, cultures, and religions, and the history there. Particularly with the end of the Cold War happening right in front of me, I had to get a grip on things fast—not just the local politics, but regional events as well.

BLANKEN: How do you see your profession as a photographer who is also dealing with the issues of conflict, politics, and so on? How do you see your role in observing these conflicts?

NICKELSBERG: I look at it as informed documentary style. I deal with information, timing, location, and the political and cultural environment that I put myself in. I volunteered for these locations—it’s a good thing for me that they were available. I worked with writers at *Time* magazine and the *New York Times*, which are text-driven publications. These in-depth feature articles tend to come out of volatile areas, or where things are happening very spontaneously outside...
the rule of law, which generally is something that I am attracted to. The news also tends to follow these fast-breaking stories. But given the technology at the time, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, my work was very manually driven. I had to physically deliver film to the airport or to a customs broker or somewhere, a necessity very unfamiliar to the present generation with its digital photography. So I had a lot of things to juggle, and I had to learn very quickly about what I was putting in front of my camera. I became an informed observer.

BLANKEN: As opposed to a law enforcement officer or even a soldier, in a lot of ways you not only have deep access to one conflict, but you also have the opportunity to observe many different types of situations and forms of conflict. I have noticed this in the breadth of your work, not only spatially but also temporally. For example, you just said that you were able to observe the Soviet exit from Afghanistan. In many ways, the United States today faces tough choices similar to those that the Russians faced at that time, and you have been able to observe both events. Do you have any reflections on that?

NICKELSBERG: At the time, I could see why the Soviets were going to withdraw completely, although that took a number of years, until Moscow’s financial aid to Kabul dissipated. The Soviets got their last troops out of Afghanistan in the winter of 1989, yet they remained engaged on a political level for a number of years until they saw that it was unaffordable and decided to cut their losses. Then the mujahdeens took power in 1992. I think the Soviets understood that this would happen, but again in the political environment at the time, it is hard for an army or a government to withdraw or retreat. They have to put a pretty selective spin on it for consumption, not only for the general public, but institutionally as well. As for the current American involvement and limited withdrawal, or retrograde, as it is called—speaking from my long time on the ground, I hope that we remain engaged there.

Properly engaged. I happened to be in Kabul in January of 1989 at close to 6,000 feet. It was a gray, snowy, awful day in winter. Something came up: we heard that the Americans were going to close the US embassy. There was a flag-lowering ceremony that we could go to. An Associated Press photographer and I went, and we watched the flag come down at the US embassy. It’s hard to photograph a flag coming down and capture the impact in still images. There are a number of ways you can do it—the flag being folded or whatever. But I was stricken. I could not believe this was happening.

Our embassy remained closed until September or October of 2001. For 10 years, the United States had no official presence in Afghanistan. This is complete lunacy, was my feeling. It sent a signal to the other countries in the region that they could go for it—go for the pie. Put their flag in regional or cultural areas of Afghanistan where they had an affinity, and then they’d be able to leverage their political influence. And sure enough, that happened. When Uzbekistan came in from the north, for instance, you saw Turkey align with the Uzbeks because the Uzbek language is Turkic. You certainly had Iran—in 1979, the Ayatollah Khomeini was already coming into Kabul to promote the Islamic Revolution. The Saudis were in there big time, spreading the Wahhabi doctrine through jihadis and trying to block the Iranians. The Indians and the Pakistanis had their roles, and the Chinese of course were the silent—but very well-informed—observers in the bleachers. I saw that played out not just in Kabul, but regionally.

It is essential that we learn from these... not necessarily mistakes, but blunders, I would say. How can we remain closed off from a country for 10 years and then all of a sudden be surprised that al Qaeda hatches out of the egg? Prior to 1988, it was nearly impossible to get visas from the Soviet officials to visit Kabul. They didn’t allow media, including their own, into the country. So once visas began to be issued to allow coverage of their withdrawal in May
1988, I realized I would no longer have to trek in for two or three weeks with the mujahedeen to get very rural pictures. Before this time, I had never been able to photograph Kabul or the more urban areas, or even the provincial capitals, which I needed to see. It became a new chapter after nine years of backpacking into Afghanistan from Pakistan. So I made it a goal to get as many visas as possible, to visit as often as possible. Whenever the *Time* writer was going, I certainly wanted to be along.

During the Afghan Civil War in the mid-1990s, we had access to official visas and went in. We got to see how the conflict was playing out for different factions, whether it was a neighborhood, a province, a district, a mountain range, a mountain pass, a market. It was like a three-dimensional game of chess, in which you had to be quiet and observe properly to figure out who the forces were and how they were playing one off the other. *Revenge* is a very important word among many of the cultures of South Asia and the Middle East—there are a lot of terms and keywords in that region of the world that Americans are unaware of. There is no court system. People in the provinces don’t appeal to the capital for help. Everything is decided locally, through the elders—justice, water rights, roadways, rights of way. Everything is decided locally. The provinces want very little to do with Kabul. They don’t trust officials from the central government. This was something I had to learn, and I could see applying that knowledge to rural areas of South Asia as well. People were still talking about 1947 and the historical separation after the British Empire decided to divide India into East Pakistan, India, and West Pakistan. The people were blinded by anger: the Hindus who had to leave their ancestral lands and properties in Pakistan and cross over into India, and the Muslims who had to leave India and relocate to Pakistan. The hatred, the anger, the anxiety that this caused completely blinded them to the facts: “It was a legal entity, we used to live there. Our farm was there. We lost everything.”

So all of these forces are at play in Afghanistan, and the Americans have to remain engaged. It is a learning process to comprehend how delicate things are there. There is no past in geopolitics. Modern history doesn’t exist in Afghanistan. So this is very much a challenge for soldiers, statesmen, and diplomats, and also for the aid organizations that go there. It is essential that we become more effective at being observers. Yes, Americans want to be liked and appreciated for what we do and what we have to offer, but at the same time people consider us naïve, and there is a reason for that. We seem to be the last ones to “get it.” I think that most Americans’ understanding is improving now, but we have
a situation with the withdrawal from Kabul and Afghanistan where we can’t repeat the mistakes of the past, such as when we were diverted in 2003 to go into Iraq—big mistake. That also sent a signal to the countries in the region that we weren’t serious. These political decisions will come back to haunt us, and I see that readily on the ground when I go back to the region.

BLANKEN: It sounds like even from the early days you had close contact with the people of Afghanistan, including the mujahedeen. Over the period that you have engaged with the people of Afghanistan, have you seen their attitudes, or the way that they think about the United States, change?

NICKELSBERG: The American military forces were appreciated and liked when they first got there. There were high expectations, and a lot of promises were made. But once those promises weren’t delivered, the US presence was looked at differently. Not so much the individual, but still, I have learned to maintain a certain distance from strangers until they figure out that I am not the enemy, that I am an outsider. You have to take care and observe. You don’t know, for instance, how many people a family may have lost in an explosion or in some kind of violent incident that may have involved Americans—or NATO. So I think the affinity that we Americans have with local people remains. But there is a lot of doubt now in the local population about our commitment to them, and they are worried about their future. They worry differently from how we do. They worry about four years from now, not just about today. They have daughters who have to get married in the traditional way of arranged marriages, and they worry about whether the schools will be working in four to five years or next year, not just next week. They don’t so much look at their watches—they worry seasonally—they worry about six months, 12 months, 18 months from now.

So their whole concept of the environment is different from ours, and we have to remain in sync with that. We can’t figure these things out and gain the knowledge in, say, a 24-month deployment. And even that is essentially only 18 months, because you spend the first three months orientating yourself and the last three months exiting, so you have just 18 months to accomplish anything. The Afghans who work with us are still saying, “Now, somebody else was sitting in that chair the last time I was here. You look similar, but how long are you staying here?” A handshake is a handshake, and that kind of proximity is often
essential, but commitment to engage is very important to Afghans. As for language ability, I think they understand that we are not going to learn much more than European languages, but we need to learn Farsi. We need to learn Pashto, or Urdu, or Hindi. That is essential. I think parts of the Special Forces and most military area experts understand that. While you can’t expect every corporal or private to learn a second or third language, certainly an appreciation for the customs and traditions of the place that we are going into with a gun is essential.

BLANKEN: You had extensive experience not only in Afghanistan but also in Iraq. If we can switch gears, a theme from your Afghanistan experiences is this notion that disengagement can allow things to get out of control. That provides a nice segue to Iraq. What are your thoughts on how things in Iraq have developed?

NICKELSBERG: Well, al Qaeda developed in Afghanistan, or at least flourished in Afghanistan, and what is happening in Iraq and Syria right now could easily have happened in Afghanistan. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, this was the template: I went into some of the Arab-Afghan training camps along the Pakistani-Afghan border to look for Indian Kashmiris who were being trained in these camps and then sent by the Inter-Services Intelligence—Pakistan's intelligence agency—back across Pakistan into Kashmir to fight the Indian Army. To us, Kashmir was a small, low-intensity conflict, but it was not low intensity for the region. It had quite serious ramifications, and I watched that situation evolve in 1989. I went to a training camp along the border in Khost Province, four kilometers inside Afghanistan, to interview Jalaluddin Haqqani, who was maintaining these training camps and became the primary ally for Osama bin Laden and the Arab-Afghan fighters. I was with a Pashtun BBC stringer (freelance reporter) who was also working for Time magazine, along with a few other reporters.

Haqqani didn’t care what passport I had at that point. He was welcoming. He would protect his guests as he did other Arab fighters—that is their traditional form of hospitality. He said yes, he was training the Kashmiris. In fact, I could see them. We arrived at four o’clock in the afternoon, when the men were coming back from physical exercise, and I could spot them. But yet, many others in the Arab-Islamic world were also represented at these camps, including Chinese Uyghurs. The Uyghurs were still being trained in these camps. I could tell that the Arabs and Central Asians were not going to go away in 1992, once they had control over Kabul. Haqqani was going to stay with these camps, and of course he clearly exploited his position—as head of the Zadran tribe, and of a large cross-border trade and smuggling enterprise—with the Pakistanis, who still use these camps in turn as leverage against India. What I mean is, to properly understand Afghanistan, you must understand Pakistan. To properly understand Pakistan, you must understand India. They are inseparable. To expect soldiers to understand Afghanistan without first understanding Pakistan is not only difficult but dangerous.

So I saw Iraq start to unfold in 2002. In April of that year, I was sitting in a warehouse, an old Soviet hangar, on Bagram air base in Afghanistan, showing a reporter my pictures from the previous few days. Bagram had become the main base for US and NATO forces after 2001. The reporter and I were the only ones in the hangar at the time, and the only light came from my laptop. An Arab-American came over to us, and it was clear to me right then that he was a contract worker, most likely an interpreter. He wasn’t a soldier; he was in civilian clothes. He wanted to see the pictures, so I explained to him where I had been, and then

October 1996: A Taliban mullah speaks to a crowd gathered in central Kabul after Taliban forces took control from the Rabbani government.

FEBRUARY 2001: Men carry the body of a one-year-old boy to a cemetery before a traditional Islamic burial at the Maslakh refugee camp outside Herat.
it was time for us to ask the “20 questions.” He told us he had been hired to come to Afghanistan from, I think, the Midwest, the Detroit area, where there are a lot of Arabic speakers. He was there to interrogate al Qaeda suspects who had been captured and brought into Bagram. US forces were still chasing al Qaeda in central Afghanistan. The American said, “I’m not here for long. I’m leaving.” Both the reporter and I looked at him, surprised. “You’re leaving? We just got here.” It was April 2002. American forces had only been in Afghanistan a few months, but I had already heard rumors about Iraq. We asked, “Where are you going?” He made a movement with his head: over there. He was going somewhere in the Middle East to start setting up, he told us.

My jaw dropped. If he was leaving, that meant Special Forces were leaving, and intelligence people were leaving, and that told me right there that the US commitment to Afghanistan was gone and that Washington was going to refocus on Iraq. If you think Afghanistan is complicated, Iraq, which has been around for thousands of years, is at the top of the Arab food chain. It is an incredibly complicated country; and throughout the Iran-Iraq War, Saddam Hussein had basically been inciting Iraq’s Sunnis against Shi’a Iran. This is not getting into the weeds, but into the reality of what we have today. It isn’t about oil; it is a fight between Sunnis and Shi’as. No doubt about it. And this is a serious fight. The people think with their hearts, not with their heads, when it comes to religion and ethnicity. This battle between Sunni and Shi’a is centuries old, and it is a hatred that is ongoing today, even though they are living right next to one another. When it comes time for trouble or violence, people immediately choose sides. Along with other journalist friends and diplomats I had spoken to, I was convinced that to go after Iraq and take our eye off of Afghanistan was to invite chaos, and this is where we are at today.

I happened to be with the Marine battalion that took down the statue of Saddam Hussein. I was not in the periphery—I was right there in Firdos Square in Baghdad. At three o’clock that afternoon we got orders to go there, and we watched the statue come down. There were few people there really cheering because the locals knew that this was a Saddam neighborhood. Everyone knew that this invasion was going to create chaos. Victory would be momentary, and that would be it. The so-called victory symbolized by pulling down one statue would just unleash the flood of hatred and violence and revenge, and this is what we are going through now. We essentially gave Iraq to Iran, and that is what angered the Sunni governments in the Middle East. It’s going to be very hard to put this shattered region back together. The United States needs to be a player in this region, but we are not automatically given a seat at the table in the way that we were used to, as an informed advisor. We need to remember these things when it comes to the Great Game, which I think is still being played out.  

You can see the Sunni-Shi’a divide in Pakistan and India. India has over 175 million Muslims, and they are also divided into Sunni and Shi’a. Particularly in Pakistan during the holy month of Muharram, when Shi’a parade and flagellate themselves, it is traditional for the Sunnis to stand on the sides and throw rocks or aggravate and taunt them and harass them. They learn that as little kids, this kind of back and forth between Sunni and Shi’a. Even though they are friends and classmates and neighbors, when it comes down to it, they are ready to fight each other. There is no way that the red, white, and blue way Americans have traditionally planted our flag and hoped for peace and tranquility through some kind of aid and economic development is going to matter anymore. This divide has been apparent in my lifetime since the Iranian Revolution in 1978–1979, when the Ayatollah Khomeini came in and kicked the Shah out. Since then, the Saudis, Kuwaitis, Qataris, and the Emirates have all been pushing back to make sure the people of this culture—the Shi’a and Iranian world, the Persians—have been kept in their
place. That is what the overall battle has been about, and it is still playing out in Pakistan, such as in Karachi when the Imambargah, a Shi'a mosque, recently was blown up. There is a pattern. The bombing may be only a three-paragraph piece in the local newspaper, but it is reported, and people make note of it and just deal with it. Westerners don’t know how to deal with that.

BLANKEN: You not only had experience looking at Afghanistan and the people of Iraq, but you have also intimately observed US forces, both in the field and on Parris Island, I believe, to see how our forces are selected and trained. Are they really capable of understanding the dynamics of these conflicts and the way that we employ forces, or are we demanding too much understanding of nuances — political nuances, cultural nuances—from our troops? I mean, are they capable of understanding these concepts and adjudicating them effectively?

NICKELSBERG: That’s a very good question. I think a lot is put onto the heads and shoulders of new recruits, not just to qualify for the Special Forces and get through basic training, but also to specialize once they are out of basic training and deployed. But a lot of that depends on the military and political leadership and the priorities they select. It is a very diverse world we send our soldiers into, yet everything is done in black and white in the military. There is very little gray area. Those who choose to pursue the gray areas usually go off into a specialized field or become intelligence officers or get into communications and encryption and information security. That kind of specialization is required in any military and in the public spheres as well.

There needs to be a change, for instance, in how we treat people. When the US military went into Iraq in 2003, I was with the tip of the spear, so to speak—I purposely asked for that position. The troops were going through villages, and I heard the Marines start to call the locals *hajjis*. This term is an honorific in the Islamic world. It’s someone who has made the pilgrimage—the *haji*—to Mecca. This is something that all Muslims aspire, wish, hope to do at least once in their life. *Haji* is an honorific that those who have made the journey sometimes put at the front of their names. The Marines were calling them *hajjis* in a derogatory way: “Haji, come here.” Silently I said to myself, “We are screwed.” This is going to be the way we treat Iraqis, and Iraqis are at the top of the Arabic social order. At least, they consider themselves to be. If I am going to be here, I thought, I am going to start documenting that behavior. It’s hard to take a picture of that sort of thing, but I heard it over and over and over again. The US troops would put
the head man of the village on the ground in his clean dishdasha and demand, “Where are the enemy?” But you should do just the opposite. You should wine and dine the head man and then surround and take temporary control of the village. How dared they put the head man down? They did not understand village dynamics. If you treat the head man with respect, he will treat you with respect and may even give you some information. In that part of the world, the last thing you do is put the head man on the ground to dirty him and show that much disrespect to him. I was just shocked. Even as a journalist, I knew how you take care of the elder, how you search a room full of people and immediately find the head man, if you want to get your job done. You will get what you want, but if you show any disrespect, if you go around him, that person can shut you down or make life very difficult for you.

The Americans were doing just the opposite. They were going after information in the wrong way from day one, before the statue came down. I saw no hope. I saw this insensitive behavior as a strike against us, as simple as that. Those are the things we have to learn. Men don’t touch women, for instance. When you go through a house searching for things, you have women go through the women’s belongings. The culture has to be respected. It has to be. If it’s not, you’re going to have a knife in your back as you leave the village. Disrespect will be remembered more than the water well that you just gave them. These are simple things. This is a long answer to your question, but soldiers, Marines, need to be told these things as much as they are shown how to strip a rifle and put it back together again and hit a target. Cultural awareness is essential, and it should have been included in training long ago. The Russians spoke Farsi, Pashto, and Uzbek when they went into Afghanistan. But the Russians also killed a million people in less than 10 years. That’s a lot of people to kill—over 100,000 a year. They carpet bombed, they slaughtered, and they put people up against the wall and shot them. They annihilated villages and created four to six million refugees. That is the way Russians deal with people. We have to learn something from that.

Afghans genuinely like Americans. They also want to see how much money they can fleece from us, but we freely give it away. We have to find a knowledgeable way to deal with foreign countries; we need to be able to go over there not only as diplomats, but as scholars as well. It is becoming more and more dangerous to go to the Middle East and South Asia. Part of the reason for that is our naïveté. I
once had a tour of the US embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan, and the staff were very proud to say there were 25 miles of razor wire around the place. Twenty-five miles of razor wire? Do you know how hard it is for a Pakistani to get a visa to come to America now? They have to apply, they have to take a special bus to a certain place and wait there, and if they miss that appointment they have to reapply, which takes another six months—but by that time they are pulling their hair out. And that’s just to get maybe a student visa. Pakistanis still want to come to the United States, but we make it so difficult, and we just don’t understand. Yes, there are security issues, without a doubt, but we advertise our presence in the strangest ways. How easy is it to find the Americans in a strange land? Just look for the black Chevrolet Suburban SUV going by. Those are the Americans. So that’s the RPG (rocket-propelled grenade) target. We are the only country that does that.

Lowering the American flag in Kabul in 1989 and not reappearing for 10 years, until after 9/11 occurred, was misguided and irresponsible. We risk doing the same thing today. I hope we won’t leave Afghanistan—and I don’t think we will entirely—but we can’t leave just a residual force. Our personnel have to be actively engaging with the people. It is the same with Iraq. Look at the size of the embassy we built there. How are they going to be able to keep it secure now? ISIS forces were 15 miles outside of Baghdad a few days ago. So we need to learn from the past and figure out how we can compensate for the tactical or strategic mistakes we made. I have heard people say that the 2003 invasion was most likely the biggest foreign policy blunder ever, including Vietnam. The situation in those countries is extremely complicated, and we need more people who understand the region.

BLANKEN: You mentioned earlier that you’ve also done work in South America, and even in the United States on urban gangs. To wrap things up, do you have any reflections on the general issues of violence, nonstate actors, and the problems of maintaining order in societies? You’ve seen a lot, so where do you think we go from here? Is this the end of our vision of the stable, nation-state–driven world? I know that’s a big question, but you have a really interesting perspective.

NICKELSBERG: Well, it’s a very credible question, and we could spend hours talking about it. Americans have become too risk averse, in my opinion. We are guided by technology and expect that technology will solve a lot of these problems. The amount of time kids spend in front of a computer screen versus the amount of time that they should be spending outside is worrisome. For instance, 18-year olds would rather not go out to hunt deer. That affects the deer population and how many deer we hit on the road. Our addiction to technology has crazy consequences, and people are becoming couch potatoes, on the one hand. But on the other hand, the problem is our fear and anxiety about trouble next door and our not really wanting to deal with it. I think a lot of this is reflected in the recent economic cutbacks as well. But we need to understand what goes on in our backyard and become involved. Community commitment and service to the community, such as civic action, are values that we need to instill in more children. The educational system has been hurt by economic cutbacks, and academics have become so competitive that most kids spend
their free time in the afternoon in tutorial sessions or trying to get ahead in their education.

In South Los Angeles, there is a map of the neighborhoods on the wall in the police department showing the precincts that these police work in. The map is divided into ethnic groups, and a policeman has to understand that the color of a baseball cap, such as Dodger blue or Angel red, is a signal of gang association. If there’s a shooting, the gang unit has to know who the shooter’s and victim’s girlfriends are. The police on the ground understand that kind of information, not only for their own survival, but also for how they try to keep the peace. Children are aware of those dynamics, but I have a feeling that the rest of us are not exposed to the dynamics. My overall feeling is that many people are too sheltered right now. People have a lot of knowledge from sitting at the computer, but they don’t actually physically experience these things.

There is no green space in Los Angeles, for instance. The only time many kids get out to a mountain trail is on a school trip. Believe me, they never touch soil in some parts of the inner city in Los Angeles, because if there is any land left, it’s taken over for development. So the kids have no contact with the natural world. There are risks out there, certainly, but I also think awareness of what these risks actually are should be raised more frequently. Americans certainly run into diversity—Spanish is spoken everywhere. But I’ve seen the hatred towards Muslims that arose after 9/11 in certain neighborhoods, and it is certainly on the uptick now that ISIS has been killing Westerners on tape. That has had a direct effect on certain Muslim populations around the country. We Americans just need to be more well-informed, to reach out more now, and to deliver more visas to those who want to come here and study. It’s essential that we open those channels for exchange.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

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NOTES

1 The Combating Terrorism Archive Project aims to collect and archive knowledge on strategy, operations, and tactics used by military and other security personnel from around the world in the twenty-first-century fight against global terrorism. Collectively, the individual interviews that CTAP conducts will create an oral history archive of knowledge and experience in counterterrorism for the benefit of the CT community now and in the future.

2 This interview was edited for length and clarity. Every effort was made to ensure that the meaning and intention of the participants were not altered in any way. The ideas and opinions of all participants are theirs alone and do not represent the official positions of the US Naval Postgraduate School, the US Department of Defense, the US government, or any other official entity.

3 For more on Iran’s involvement in Afghanistan, see “Iranian Support to the Afghan Resistance,” memorandum, 11 July 1985: http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB57/us7.pdf

4 East Pakistan is now Bangladesh.

5 The Haqqanis came to prominence in the 1980s, when the CIA poured vast amounts of money into the border region to prop up the local mujahedeen in their fight against the Soviet occupation. For more about Jalaluddin Haqqani and the Haqqani family’s widespread enterprises, see Lars W. Lilleby, “The Haqqani Network: Pursuing Feuds under the Guise of Jihad?” CTX 3, no. 4 (November 2013): https://globalecco.org/the-haqqani-network-pursuing-feuds-under-the-guise-of-jihad

6 Twenty Questions is the name of a guessing game, used here ironically to mean the standard set of questions fellow nationals ask one another when they meet in a foreign country.

7 This was a famous event in the third week of the US invasion, in which a battalion of Marines helped a group of Iraqis pull down a large statue of Saddam Hussein in Firdos Square in central Baghdad. For a description of the event and subsequent media coverage, see Peter Maass, “The Toppling,” New Yorker, 10 January 2011: http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/01/10/the-toppling

8 The term the Great Game refers to the geopolitical and economic rivalry between the British and Russian empires, which centered on Central and South Asia from the mid-nineteenth century up to World War I.
The "war movie" genre, typified by tales of face-to-face combat, offers an additional perspective on courage and endurance in human conflict: the prisoner-of-war (POW) film. Stories of criminals (or unjustly sentenced innocents) who are incarcerated and who escape from civil prisons are long-standing favorites in American cinema. These films include Each Dawn I Die (1939), White Heat (1949), Cool Hand Luke (1967), Papillon (1973), Escape from Alcatraz (1979), The Shawshank Redemption (1994), and The Count of Monte Cristo (the most recent adaptation released in 2002), to mention only a few. In these cases, escape itself is a crime.

Soldiers, however, are obliged by their profession to refuse surrender, evade capture, and, if captured, escape. In 1955, the United States Armed Forces formally established a Code of Conduct for its members, which specifies: "If I am captured I will continue to resist by all means available. I will make every effort to escape and aid others to escape." This principle is the central theme in some of the earliest POW movies, in which British cinema has led the way. The Wooden Horse (1950), a film about a clever ruse for tunneling out of the German Stammlager Luft III POW camp, was a commercial success when it was released. It was followed by Albert R. N. (1953), billed as "The War's Most Daring POW Escape!"; The Colditz Story (1955); The One That Got Away (1957), about a Luftwaffe pilot who repeatedly slips away from his British captors; and others. Many films of this type were based on best-selling World War II memoirs.

The success of the recent book and film Unbroken (2014)—the true-life account of an Olympic athlete-airman held by the Japanese army during World War II—calls attention to similar films about the bitter hardships inside prison camps and the bravery of those who survive and find a way out. These accounts can be useful for study by present-day military personnel, particularly members of special operations units who are sent into "denied areas": deep in hostile territory, isolated, and far from support or any ready means of returning to friendly lines. The following are a few of the best, along with some strong runners-up.

World War II

The Bridge on the River Kwai (1957) follows several storylines that begin and then reconverge at a Japanese POW camp in Siam (now Thailand). An American prisoner who senses his days are numbered escapes the camp and then evades his Japanese pursuers through trackless jungle. A British battalion that surrendered at Singapore arrives in the camp, and its commander collaborates with the Japanese to build "a proper bridge" for their supply trains. Besides aiding the enemy, he also forbids his men to attempt escapes; but he has a powerful rationale for his decisions. The moral questions
facing the POWs are complex, with no easy answers. When the movie was released, former Allied prisoners of war picketed at theaters in England and Australia, protesting that the movie underplayed Japanese cruelty and atrocities during World War II. Nevertheless, The Bridge on the River Kwai won seven Oscars, including Best Picture.

Two acclaimed American POW films set in wartime Germany are Stalag 17 (1953) and The Great Escape (1963). The tension inside the fictitious Stalag 17 POW camp grows from the realization among the imprisoned US aircrewsmen that their escape attempts are being foiled by one of their own men who has turned informer. The Great Escape is set in the same Stalag complex as The Wooden Horse and is based on a historical account of the mass escape of more than 50 Allied POWs. An interesting aspect of this film is the depiction of the secret internal organization of the prisoners, from their leadership structure to the “committees” performing functions like logistics (aka scrounging), intelligence, tunneling, and security. It is evident in both these movies that Allied aircrews in German POW camps did not suffer the same cruelties that were inflicted by the Japanese on their compatriots or, in the wars to follow, by the North Koreans, Communist Chinese, and North Vietnamese.

The Soviet Gulag

The Way Back (2010) sets a high standard for distance traveled on foot during evasion: 6,500 kilometers to freedom. Based on The Long Walk, the 1956 memoir of a Polish POW imprisoned by the Soviets during World War II, the film crisply depicts the savage Siberian Gulag (the Russian acronym for Main Administration of Corrective Labor Camps and Labor Settlements). A band of escaped prisoners—Poles, a Latvian, a Yugoslav, a Russian, and, interestingly enough, an American—walks across frozen Siberia, the burning Gobi Desert, and the stony Himalayas to haven in British India. Not everyone makes it. Well directed (by Peter Weir, of Master and Commander fame), well acted, and splendidly photographed, it underscores the central importance of the will to survive, and the fundamental human longing for freedom.

Other Gulag films include One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich (1970), from the bestselling novel by Gulag survivor Alexander Solzhenitsyn. This story is about perseverance and endurance, when escape is impossible. In As Far As My Feet Will Carry Me (2001), a German soldier captured by the Russians in 1945 is sentenced to 25 years in a Gulag camp on the Arctic Circle. He escapes, and despite speaking only a few words of Russian, journeys all the way to Iran and, finally, home. This German-made film is similar to The Way Back, but it does not have quite the same cinematic fluency and impact as Weir’s excellent work.

Vietnam

While some have questioned the accuracy of all the events portrayed in Rescue Dawn (2006), the film’s realistic depiction of US Navy Ace Skyraider pilot Dieter Dengler’s experience as a POW has won praise. During SERE training in the United States, Dengler had escaped simulated captivity twice and actually gained weight during the rigorous course—feats that earned him regard among his peers. When he was shot down
over Laos in 1966, the Pathet Lao quickly captured him and subsequently punished him for his resistance to “re-education.” He lost 93 pounds during his four months as a POW (the actors shed significant body weight for their roles). Even so, director Werner Herzog deliberately chose not to depict the worst of the physical and psychological torture their captors inflicted on the POWs. After escaping, Dengler evaded his pursuers in dense jungle for 23 days before successfully signaling a passing US Air Force Skyraider with a parachute he recovered from an expended illumination flare. There is one more rescue scene: Navy SEALs spirited Dengler from the airbase hospital where he was recovering back to his aircraft carrier and shipmates. Rescue Dawn was well received by critics, and most reviewers placed it in the top 10 movies of 2006.

There are two other Vietnam-era POW movies to consider. The experience of American POWs in the Hanoi Hilton is the subject of Hanoi Hilton (1987), a disappointment at the box office but a favorite among Vietnam veterans as a rental video. It was rereleased in 2008 in DVD format, with the addition of interviews with former POWs, including Senator John McCain. Bat-21 (1988) depicts a race between American and North Vietnamese forces to find a high-ranking US electronic warfare officer shot down over enemy territory (his call sign: Bat-21 Bravo). The movie is based on an actual search-and-rescue effort that remains controversial within the US Air Force because strike jets were diverted from supporting major operations in South Vietnam, and SAR aircraft and crewmembers were lost during the 11-day-long recovery attempt. In this regard, Bat-21 provides a basis for debate on this topic.

Denied Areas

Most E & E (escape and evasion) movies are set during large-scale conventional wars, in which the roles of combatants and prisoners of war can readily be understood through internationally accepted conventions. But what about the gray zone between peace and war, where self-proclaimed rebel governments are not actually capable of exercising the authority that a sovereign nation is expected to wield within its borders and over its own citizens?

Argo (2012) takes place in this “realm of uncertainty,” while Iran was at full boil following the ouster of the Shah by Shi’a revolutionaries in 1979. The Canadian ambassador secretly gave refuge to six US embassy staffers who avoided capture by Iranian student radicals who stormed and seized the embassy of the “Great Satan” in Tehran. Hidden in the ambassador’s home, the six Americans could see no way to get out of Iran without being discovered and arrested. Undaunted, a CIA specialist in extracting personnel from denied areas developed a plan for their rescue. After elaborate (and very entertaining) preparations, he flew to Tehran and successfully facilitated their escape. Deception was the key to success, and deceptions created by canny prisoners are highlights of almost every POW escape movie ever made. Viewers should keep in mind that the Canadian government actually conceived and managed almost the entire operation, with the CIA in a supporting role, a fact that was publicly affirmed by then-US President Jimmy Carter. But as Canadian ambassador Ken Taylor said, “I realize this is a movie, and you have to keep the audience on the edge of their
seats.” Argo succeeds as a movie—it won three Oscars, including Best Picture—and dramatically depicts the likely political, social, and security environment where special operations personnel may expect to find themselves on future missions. There may not be barbed-wire fences lit by guard-tower searchlights, prisoners tunneling with stolen spoons, or bravura face-offs between POW camp commandants and imprisoned officers who cite Geneva Convention rules. Survival, escape, resistance, and evasion in urban warfare against stateless terrorists may require a rewrite of the script of the classic prisoner-of-war film.

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NOTES


Challenges in the Asia-Pacific Theater for US and Partner Nation Special Operations Forces
by Robert Haddick
Issue Date: October 2014

Haddick discusses why USSOF and partner nation SOF in the Asia-Pacific region should prepare for expanded regional roles and responsibilities. China’s reemergence as a global power and its pursuit of its security interests have exposed increasing friction between it and its neighbors and the United States. Haddick asserts that a competitive and sustainable response to the looming security challenge in the Asia-Pacific region will include not only naval and aerospace components, but also diplomatic, information, political, and economic tools. In addition, US and coalition partners must prepare for the likelihood that the security competition in the region will eventually manifest itself in various forms of irregular and unconventional conflict. US and partner SOF will have critical roles to play in a truly competitive response to the growing security competition in the Asia-Pacific region. The goal of an effective competitive strategy will be to sustain an open-ended peacetime competition with China that successfully perpetuates the current rules-based status quo.

Islam: Ideology, Culture, and Conflict
by Roby Barrett
Issue Date: December 2014

Dr. Roby Barrett’s work in this report is more than historical scholarship; it argues for an understanding of the Islamic World, Islam’s roots, and how those roots explain the political challenges of today. He peels back the layers of Islam to reveal the pretense behind the idea of Islam as an ideology. The central theme of this monograph is that rather than being a unified community, Islam is actually an “imagined community” riven with fractures that help explain contemporary issues. This argument is broken down into three critical areas: historical conflicts within Islam, the shifting US role relative to Islam, and contemporary Islam, including radicalism and the issue of a fractured community. The insights provided by Dr. Barrett in this monograph invite the reader to rethink how we should approach the situation in the Middle East.
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