9 March 2015

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Understanding ISIS and al-Qa’ida and Potential Ways to Deal with the Two Threats

Notes:
1. Below are informal notes taken by a JHU/APL staff member at the Seminar.
2. Links to the video, audio, bulletized notes and presentation files for past seminars can be found on www.jhuapl.edu/rethinking and the JHU/APL YouTube Playlist.

The Making and Remaking of a Modern Ideology
Mr. Braniff began his talk by identifying a number of facts and statistics about terrorists and terrorist organizations, including al-Qa’ida (AQ) and Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)

- Terrorist attacks were reported recently by the Director of National Intelligence as:
  - 8,500 in 2012
  - 11,500 in 2013
  - 15,000 in 2014 – the most violence since 1970
- Trends are likely to continue and spread
  - ISIL is already sending veteran fighters into Libya
  - Boko Haram in Africa offering allegiance to the ISIL
- Terrorist groups are likely to be competing with each other
  - In-fighting might be a positive development if the groups weaken each other
  - Competition is also likely to increase lethality as each group tries to outbid the other by elevating body counts
- The number of terrorist groups is growing, and they act more often with increasing lethality
  - Of the 10 most lethal groups, 6-7 were associated with AQ
- A former AQ affiliate, AQ in Iraq, defied AQ leadership and grabbed attention among jihadists with shocking violence in Iraq and Syria under the name of the Islamic State
- AQ core carried out no attacks in the last 3 years as has been reported in the million plus news articles that Braniff’s organization, the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), reviews daily from around the world

Mr. Braniff also noted that there is a need to understand AQ’s origins and position in Islam to explain its apparent decline while violent jihadism persists in groups such as ISIL. Governments then can form policies to face the environment beyond AQ. To gather information on terrorism his organization START maintains the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), an open-source database which includes information on terrorist events around the world from 1970 through 2013.
Historical Context: The Birth of Global Jihadism

- AQ became the central militant organization because of the role played by its key members during the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s
  - They were involved in the logistical organization Maktab al-Khidamat, or the “Service Bureau” that supported the Afghan mujahidin fighters
  - In that capacity, Usama bin Ladin and his key associates networked and socialized with recruits from around the world in the training camps
  - Thousands of volunteers were exposed to the seeds of global jihadism
- AQ argued that grievances suffered by local militants around the world were not unrelated
  - All resulted from a global conspiracy against “true” Islam led by the West
  - Apostate Muslim rulers in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere acted as enablers for Western interests
- When bin Ladin failed to convince the Saudis to allow jihadist veterans to protect Mecca and Medina from Saddam’s military, AQ devised the basic narrative it has used for 20 years:
  - Saudi Royal Family denial of mujahidin help against Iraq was for the same reason that local jihadist groups elsewhere failed in their struggles with local governments
    - All these regimes were only illegitimate proxies of foreign powers
  - Each puppet regime was backed by military and economic aid from the “far-enemy” – primarily the US – for its own imperial purposes against Islam
- AQ’s grand strategy: enable/repurpose the violence of other militant actors to erode the political/economic/military will of the US to remain engaged in the Muslim world
  - Using attrition warfare, if ties between puppet-master and puppets were severed, local/regional campaigns could reestablish Islamic governance to solve local issues
  - To realize this grand-strategy, AQ exploited its relationships from the anti-Soviet jihad and inserted itself into existing violent campaigns
    - AQ provided training, financing, and propaganda support as well as engaging directly in the violence
- Increasingly intertwined histories of local, regional and global jihadist actors have had multiple consequences:
  - Most significantly, the global jihadist cause often benefited from resources mobilized for the purpose of a defensive or classical jihad
    - These defensive jihads are easier to justify politically and religiously than are the offensive jihads practiced by global jihadists
      - In Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen and Somalia, military occupations and aerial strikes into sovereign territory spurred violent mobilizations
  - Grievances of local/regional/global actors created many radicalization pathways
    - AQ’s propaganda harmonized the parochial and cosmic narratives to help conflate actions on the ground
  - Money, arms, and individual recruits were often syphoned off from relatively robust resource pipelines and reoriented towards AQ’s global cause
    - A perceived legitimacy of conflicts in the Balkans, Chechnya, Iraq, Afghanistan, Kashmir and Somalia drew foreign fighters
    - Many of those fighters did not necessarily act in the best interests of the local communities where they were fighting
  - Result: frequent tensions among jihadist factions or between the local populace and the militant actors such that AQ rarely succeeded in retaining popular support
    - AQ was unable to reorient whole jihadist groups toward their tactical and targeting preferences
AQ did often achieve partial successes by extending its operational reach beyond its organizational safe haven along the Afghan/Pakistan border
- Some key leaders of militant organizations did fully adopt AQ’s operational paradigm
- Some changed group names to reflect a formal affiliation with AQ

**Ideological Context: The Underpinnings of Global Jihadism**
- AQ is a reincarnation – the latest manifestation of a militant idea that has surfaced at moments of crisis throughout Sunni Islamic history
- AQ’s grand-strategy developed in the context of the first Gulf War and embodies a logic previously articulated but not widely accepted
- Scholars such as Ahmed Ibn Taymiyya argued in the 13th-14th century that:
  - Baghdad, seat of the caliphate, had been sacked by the Mongols because Muslims had rejected the proper, archetypal modality of Islam
  - That era was seen as the golden age that had existed under the Prophet Mohammad – a theocracy in which Islam served as the organizing principle of society
- Ibn Taymiyya diagnosed the problem through the lens of political Islam, which has provided justification for revolutionary violence that jihadists cite today
  - Half a century after the Monguls conquest, Ibn Taymiyya excommunicated the many Monguls who had converted to Islam and their proxy rulers
  - Their sin: not governing by an unadulterated interpretation of Islamic law
  - He declared they were no longer Muslim and could be violently overthrown
    - This concept upended the Sunni convention of non-violence towards Muslim rulers even if they were tyrannical or incompetent
- In the 19th and 20th centuries many sources contributed to the rise of militant Islamism:
  - Colonialism
  - The failures of nationalism, monarchism, Marxism, and pan-Arabism in the post-colonial Middle East and North Africa and similar failures in South Asia
  - The creation of the states of Israel and Pakistan
- The response to these issues was articulated by an imprisoned Egyptian named Sayyid Qutb (ed. note: leading member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s and 1960s)
  - He called for a vanguard to act upon the ideas put forward by ideologues like Ibn Taymiyya when faced with:
    - Insufficiently Islamic governance from within the Muslim world
    - Toxic foreign ideological and physical incursions from outside
- Sayyid Qutb and Ibn Taymiyya remain the foundational thought leaders of jihadist movements today
  - Vocabulary used in the current narrative comes from revivalist interpretations of Islam including:
    - Maximalist notions of tawhid (absolute monotheism) and taqlid ( emulation of the actions of the Prophet Muhammad)
    - A literalist interpretation of the Qur’an
  - Result: a universally accessible and seemingly unassailable haven for Sunni Muslims looking for alternatives to the oppressive realities provided by their current regimes

**Using History as a Guide**
- Faced with persecution by a morally bankrupt ruling class, the Prophet Muhammad emigrated in 622 from Mecca to Medina where he established the first Islamic city-state
  - In this archetypal moment the Prophet reorganized society around Islam as opposed to the bonds of kinship and tribal custom that had prevailed
Then he successfully defended his new Muslim nation and expanded the political boundaries of the Muslim empire.

- Violent organizations like AQ consider this pre-Westphalian modality of Islam instructional.
  - “True” Islam only exists when it is the primary source of governance, which today means the implementation of a fundamentalist interpretation of Islamic law that:
    - Supersedes tribe (or nationality today)
    - Is to be defended everywhere it exists
    - Is an ascendant force when it exists
  - According to this logic, in the current moment of extended crisis, Muslims are duty-bound to follow the example of the Prophet:
    - They should emigrate from places of persecution to a place where they can fight on behalf of true Islam
    - If they cannot make that journey, they are to fight where they live

- This ideological context helps to explain jihadism’s appeal beyond its embodiment in AQ.
  - Current political climates support the concept since:
    - National leaders fail to deliver economic prosperity, just governance or security
    - Foreign powers appear to prey on internal weaknesses
  - By putting an alternative political order into a religious lexicon, jihadist ideologues disassociate themselves from post-colonial era corruption and incompetence

- AQ inherited a resonant argument and has spent decades propagating it in training camps and online and its ideologues interpret this argument for current political conditions.
  - However, AQ’s continued salience as an organization is not required for this narrative to remain compelling.

**Comparing AQ’s Worldview with That of ISIL**

- ISIL’s appeal is based on a more compelling vision, operational menu, and strategy in the post-Arab Spring context relative to that of AQ and its associated movements (AQAM).
- AQAM primed the global jihadist community to mobilize while ISIL has created a destination that is inspiring, accessible and appropriate for the historical moment.

**The Caliphate**

- For AQ senior leadership “the Caliphate” is a:
  - Master-frame as it offers violent Islamist groups, hoping to align their dispersed / diverse violent campaigns that will converge in the triumphant distant future a conceptual destination
  - Grandiose victory signaling the onset of global conquest in which all of the world’s territories will be governed by AQ’s interpretation of Islam

- For ISIL “the Caliphate”:
  - Is the reality of an extant Caliphate and its associated obligations that will:
    - Purify Islam
    - Rally dispersed actors to make the hijra (the migration or journey of Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Media)
    - Ready Muslims for the apocalyptic military battle with the West in the Levant
  - Has grown in size and strength so that it can be the means to the end of a final decisive military confrontation with the West

- Where AQ and AQAM summons fighters to active jihadist fronts, Caliph Ibrahim (ISIL’s leader) called upon doctors, jurists and engineers to build the institutions of the caliphate.
  - Using 10 years of online discourse and person-to-person social media interactions and inspired by ISIL’s advances on the ground, fighters claim that “We Are All ISIS.”
Recruits join ISIL independently or from within existing Islamist political networks (i.e., Sharia4Belgium and al-Muhajiroun in European states)

- These groups eliminate ISIL’s need to establish an extensive network of on-the-ground recruiters in European and American cities

Part of ISIL’s appeal to foreign fighters is its:

- Physical control of territory in the Levant
- Aura of invincibility stemming from its successful summer military offensive in Iraq, and the doctrine of “remaining and expanding”

Policymakers should use this ISIL context to view local insurgent groups’ pledges of bay’at (allegiance) to the Caliphate

ISIL is cementing its successes in the eyes of its sympathizers by:

- Accepting the jihadists’ pledges of allegiance
- Expanding the Caliphate’s wilayats (administrative divisions, usually translated as provinces) to the Sinai and North Africa, and recently to Afghanistan and Pakistan

Bottom line: To supporters, the Caliphate is not a static institution, but is one that is predestined to expand and attain global domination

- ISIL leadership is motivated by a worldview informed by the Prophet Muhammad’s military successes against his tribal enemies
- As the Prophet overcame military defeats and survived assassination attempts, the Caliphate will continue its global expansion despite the US-led coalition’s campaign

AQ Operations

- AQ’s kinetic operations target the “far enemy” (i.e., the West) above all other targets and AQ sees itself as the vanguard of the jihad movement
  
  - Thus, AQ seeks to use spectacular, mass-casualty terror attacks to incite a heavy-handed military response from Western governments
  
  - Such state responses would provide evidence for the War on Islam that AQ portrays in its propaganda
  
  - The desired result would be the polarizing of the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds, which would enable the jihadists to mobilize resources for a civilizational conflict
  
  - AQ strategist, Abu Bakr Naji, famously calls this process “awakening the masses”

- For this to work, foreign governments must play their roles, which explains AQ’s preference for sensational attacks too politically difficult for Western nation-states to ignore
  
  - AQ senior leadership discouraged Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (mastermind behind hundreds of bombings, kidnappings and beheadings in Iraq) from internecine violence in favor of attacks against the occupying forces
  
  - In recent years and in various countries, amorphous front groups (e.g., Ansar al-Sharia) worked alongside other Sunni jihadists and insurgents, many of whom had divergent ideologies
    
    - These front organizations provide basic social services to local populations and engage in da’wa, the promulgation of their religious ideology
    
    - For AQ it is not yet time to purify Islam by force
    
    - Even attacks against the Shi’a should be moderated until the jihadists can regain Muslims’ loyalties

ISIL Operations

- By contrast to AQ, ISIL has opted to deter full-scale Western intervention in Iraq and Syria while engaging in aggressive internecine violence to purge local challengers
  
  - When President Obama deployed US military advisors to Iraq, ISIL threatened that #CalamityWillBefallUS via Twitter should the US escalate its involvement there
In response to US airstrikes, ISIL released the videos of the murders of journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff.

- Limited US/Western interventions may bolster ISIL’s legitimacy and recruitment efforts:
  - Helps only so long as its strategy of sectarian provocation continues to cripple local governments’ half-hearted attempts to address Sunni grievances in Iraq and Syria.
  - However, baiting a large-scale intervention is not in ISIL’s best interests.

- ISIL’s military operations have focused on attacking competitors in their midst who do not submit to their ideological and organizational primacy, which then allows them to:
  - Seize resources necessary to build the institutions of the Caliphate including important border crossings, dams, and oil fields.
  - Weaken competing militias in territorial strongholds.
  - Purify Islam by force, using brutal public executions and amputations to intimidate and deter potential rivals.

- The caliphate’s construction is predicated upon the rigid enforcement of ISIL’s interpretation of Islamic law in strongholds like the cities of Raqqa, Syria and Mosul, Iraq.
  - ISIL differs from AQ’s more accommodating stance in the post Arab-Spring world.
  - ISIL operations resemble those described by AQ insider Abu Bakr Naji’s guidance in his *The Management of Savagery* for the early stages of a security vacuum.

- In general, ISIL follows Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who attacked Shia /secularists/non-violent Islamist parties/Sunni-tribesmen that did not subordinate themselves to AQ in Iraq.
  - These practices reflect Naji’s later guidance for how to deal with “other gangs and parties” farther along in the management of security vacuums.
  - Naji argued, “We must drag everyone into the battle in order to give life to those who deserve to live and destroy those who deserve to be destroyed.”

**AQ Strategy**

- **Primary:** Wage a protracted war of attrition against the West, specifically aimed at bleeding the US.

- Given failures of local terrorist groups to overthrow apostate regimes in the 1980s and 90s, AQ senior leadership reasoned that US support was the apostate regimes’ “center of gravity.”
  - If they could attrite US economic, military, or political will to remain engaged in the Muslim world, local jihadists could overpower the apostates.
  - For this war of attrition, AQ aims to reorient the violence of militant organizations and individuals in various locations around the world.
    - AQ wants to refocus their wrath on far-enemy targets like Western embassies, businesses and tourist destinations within their own states.

- **AQ focuses on the far-enemy because they need the US to respond militarily in as many locations as possible in order to overextend itself and spend its resources.**
  - US operations provide the added value of generating greater levels of anti-US sentiment among local Muslim populations.

- **Bottom line:** AQ will continue its focus on the far enemy until continued US engagement in the Muslim world becomes prohibitive.

**ISIL Strategy**

- **Primary:** ISIL is not currently waging a strategy of attrition, but one of outbidding.

- ISIL uses military superiority to eliminate/subjugate rival insurgent groups/non-violent communities in Iraq/Syria that could pose a threat to the authority it seeks to impose.

- ISIL benefits from resources already being mobilized by the sectarian polarization taking place in Iraq, Syria and beyond, conflicts they actively seek to exacerbate.
Bottom line: ISIL is willing / able to use extreme violence to carve out control at the expense of its rivals, and then to consolidate its hold on the resources pouring into the conflict.

Conclusions

ISIL’s appeal compared to that of AQ can be distilled into five points:

1. Sectarianism:
   - AQ uses a “far-enemy” strategy
   - ISIL is ratcheting up already elevated levels of sectarian tension in the post Arab-Spring world and benefitting from the resulting resource mobilization

2. Righteousness:
   - AQ emphasizes the importance of doctrine
   - ISIL has shown a fervent desire to enforce an uncompromising interpretation of Islamic law through its actions

3. Obligation:
   - AQ relies on an abstract argument that Islam is under attack everywhere to convince Muslims of their duty to defend Islam everywhere
     - AQ obfuscates its offensive tactics with notions of defensive jihad
   - ISIL has established a physical Caliphate, and with it, promotes the pragmatic obligation to defend the Caliphate and build its institutions

4. Strength:
   - AQ is a cautious nomadic organization that has shied away from equating terrain with success, trying instead to reorient extant militant groups from the periphery of their respective conflicts in a slow war of attrition with the West
   - ISIL, by comparison, appears decisive, confident, and contemporary as they opportunistically seize terrain, antagonize their enemies, and publicize their exploits

5. Urgency:
   - ISIL sees the Caliphate as the means to the final apocalyptic battle between Muslims and the non-Muslim world
     - For those ideologically inclined individuals, it is essential to participate in ISIL’s campaign now, before the opportunity passes
   - Without the Caliphate, AQ’s call to arms lacks the same urgency

Implications

- ISIL’s model will supplant that of AQ if sectarian conflict proves a greater means for insurgents to mobilize resources and destabilize apostate regimes than does AQ’s far-enemy centered war of attrition
- ISIL’s dedicated foot soldiers see their efforts as favored by God because of their:
  - Rapid military successes against the “Safavids” (14th century Persians / Iranians) and their allied Shia militias
  - Success is portrayed to resemble Muhammad’s military successes after leaving Medina to conquer Mecca
- As sectarian conflicts spread, jihadist groups will foster and exploit them
  - The West will be relegated to role of observer, less frequently targeted (at least at first) but poorly positioned to take any meaningful action to protect itself or others
- Any potential US intervention is complicated by the difficulty of coordinating or resolving the competing interests and actions:
  - Of numerous external actors like Iran or Hezbollah
  - Among US Persian Gulf allies
• Sectarian violence may paralyze the West’s ability to engage in the Middle East (as it has in the Levant)
  o The Sunni-Shi’a demographic split would allow for a larger scale sectarian conflict, severing regional ties more successfully than AQ operations to date
  o If so, ISIL will also serve as an agent of change for AQ/AQAM, which will have no alternative but to evolve in potentially unforeseen ways or perish
• If ISIL’s caliphate project fails, their presence on the fringe of the radical spectrum may serve to make AQ /AQAM look more legitimate by comparison, benefiting AQ in two ways:
  o As the international security community hones in on ISIL it could result in:
    ▪ Providing AQ increased freedom of maneuver in the short-term
    ▪ Creating a tremendous incentive for AQ to conduct a successful attack against the West because of the legitimacy crisis brought on by ISIL
    ▪ Providing a safe-haven for AQ to hatch a major attack as the US withdraws from Afghanistan and instability in the Pakistani tribal belts continues
    ▪ Giving AQ the opportunity to turn around one or more of the large numbers of foreign fighters drawn in by ISIL to Iraq /Syria to attack the West
  o An AQ organization may be seen as more legitimate, discerning, focused on the “true enemies of Islam” allowing it to secure more funding and popular support in the long-term

QUESTION & ANSWER SESSION
Re: Definitions of Terror and Terrorism
• START uses definitions similar to those of DoD to maintain its Global Terrorism Database (GTD)
  o GTD grew out of the Pinkerton Global Intelligence Service notecard data set on terrorism that was digitized and is now maintained by START
• No one universally accepted definition exists for all instances
  o GTD was designed to take the different situations into account
  o To be classified as a terror attack, an incident must meet at least 5 of 6 criteria
• The whole GTD downloaded at least 400 times a month and has millions of hits each year
  o This free database is the most widely used terrorism database in the world
  o Users can filter GTD many ways, for example:
    ▪ FBI agents would have a criminal justice viewpoint
    ▪ State Department are usually less interested in military related attacks

Re: Viability of AQ
• AQ is not down and out – must be watched since it still matters
• AQ is still part of the complex overlay of local, regional, and global players who exist in the same conflict zone
  o Warriors in the area will gravitate more toward AQ or more toward local goals
  o There can be a fluid dynamic on the ground
• Fluid layers and relations don’t matter to AQ since it is working on an attrition strategy
  o AQ doesn’t need nor does it have perfect command and control
  o AQ doesn’t need to be the one pulling the trigger
• Will likely see veteran fighters from Iraq / Syria go to other places to cause trouble
  o Will still be carrying the fight against the far enemy with them
  o An attrition strategy is not as destabilizing as ISIL’s escalation strategy which is trying to create as much violence as possible to destabilize local regimes
• If have a local situation where AQ has been there for years and a new challenger comes in, competition is likely to develop causing increasing violence and destabilization
Likely to happen in many places as Iraq and Syria become less likely as the seat of the caliphate
If ISIL is challenged in Iraq and Syria, will need to look elsewhere for success

The generally accepted concept is that AQ was a corporate structure that is now decentralized
Actually, AQ was always an organization that did try to:
- Create high-profile attacks
- Change the focus of other organizations
- Inspire individuals to take up the cause
As the context changes, AQ may suppress the first and second capability so now mostly only the third capability is seen
- This in not from a lack of effort
- Changes in the security situation have frustrated some of their more corporate efforts
ISIL is likely to go down the same road – already trying to inspire lone actors and reorient other organizations to follow their focus while keeping up the fight at home

Bottom line: Expect to see more long term competition
Limited intervention in Iraq and Syria will have an effect on the narrative – show that ISIL is not invulnerable
Problem: If facing an organization willing to go to total war but US only willing to carry out limited war, then the adversary has a propaganda advantage
- Can spin the situation saying, “We withstood the best they could throw at us, but we are still here because we are righteous”

Re: ISIL and Sectarianism
In Iraq it is important to take seriously the sectarian aspects of the current conflict
Any doctrine / strategy must first deal with ISIL as an symptom of sectarianism rather than dealing with ISIL first as the main problem
ISIL is a bad actor but its ability to exacerbate an existing sectarian issue is worse
- ISIL takes a wedge issue and drives violence at it until people feel as though they must take a side
- ISIL uses mantra of terror organizations: Terrorize / Polarize / Radicalize
If ISIL can continue to foster sectarianism, then individual Sunnis and Shia will be forced to take sides whether or not they believe in ISIL’s ideology – identity politics will do the rest
Should see ISIL as a potential symptom and instigator of sectarianism, not the primary goal of any strategy – so the West needs to face the sectarianism, not just ISIL

Re: War of Words vs. War of Ideas
Scholar Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (a cleric from the Arabian Peninsula that helped establish Saudi Arabia’s current prevalent interpretation of Islam) reused earlier ideas
- Much the same as those of Ahmed Ibn Taymiyya as he watched a similar situation when the Ottoman Empire was losing territory to European powers
  - Why is Islam losing rather than growing?
  - Once again, the problem was seen to be that Islam was no longer pure, not following Islamic law
- The difference: Wahhab formed an alliance with the powerful House of Saud tribe
  - That alliance brought about the modern nation of Saudi Arabia
  - Descendants of Wahhab remain the main clerics in the country today
Saudi Royal Family has had to perform a balancing act
- Used Salafism (conservative view of Sunni Islam) in soft power diplomacy
- Allows the Wahhab clerics handle the ideology and they allow the Saudi family to have control over the holy sites of Mecca and Medina
- Result: If Bosnian Muslims need a mosque built there but can’t fund it, the Saudis will provide significant funding, but recipients must agree to use a Salafi curriculum
  - How Saudis export the conservative views of Islam
  - How Saudis win friends and influence people
- Problem: Groups like AQ are based in the Salafi ideology, but add that if you don’t agree with us, you are not a true Muslim and you should be killed— the jihadi spin
  - Based on a concept called *takfir*, the practice of violent excommunication, in which one Muslim declares someone else a non-Muslim or an apostate
  - Other Salafis maybe called “quietists” or apolitical Salafists – very conservative but not violently so
- Combatting AQ’s ideology
  - US did almost nothing because it did not want to get into the ideological debate
    - US had no credibility, would have been foolish to get involved at that level
  - US getting more active lately
    - President Obama in a speech in Egypt talked about value issues (e.g., women’s education, human rights, etc.)
      - We understand your priorities, but you need to understand our interest in these values
      - Opened a conversation but didn’t go far because of other events
  - CSCC Digital Engagement Teams
    - Stood up by the State Department’s Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications
    - Monitors online conversations in militant web forums, etc.
      - When someone quotes the Qur’an incorrectly, would respond showing how they were wrong
      - By law the US State Department must sign its messages openly
    - US had ceded that arena to militants for a decade
    - US might be able to change minds of some fence-sitters but this is really just a disruption exercise
  - Twitter campaigns – blunt instruments, not intellectual discussions
    - Focus on victims of violence
    - Point out where propaganda is wrong and provide counter narratives
    - Example: When ISIL said the Jordanian pilot killed a bunch of women and children, reported that ISIL was using a picture from Palestine
    - Messages often say that ISIL is lying to you and killing a lot of innocents
  - Global Counter Terrorism Forum
    - Has about 50 nations (26 plus the EU)
    - Works on themes such as countering violent extremism (CVE)
    - Built a non-government, brick-and-mortar research and education center called the Hedayah Center to sponsor research and train Muslim police
- White House CVE Forum discussed CVE stories
  - Brave people doing things that governments could not
    - Getting child soldiers away from harm and into safe houses
    - Governments couldn’t take such risks as bringing in fighters off the battlefield into a protective setting
  - Pakistani animated cartoon television show called the Burka Avenger
    - Created a Batman-like female character that girls can look up to
• She thumps terrorists and other bad people at night with books and pencils and a teacher during the day
  ▪ Sends out the hidden message that it is education that will get people out of the problems of terrorism and other social ills
• US CVE Hackatons
  o The idea is to get young people involved in competitions supporting CVE efforts
  o Winners are taken into business incubators where they are taught how to write business plans, etc.
    ▪ Teaches them to be entrepreneurs including access to start-up funds
    ▪ Done to address the social terrain
  o Will likely be more successful than State Department efforts
• Bottom line: All of these activities are needed but the big advances are unlikely to come from government sources, but government can support these efforts

Re: Perceptions of AQ and ISIL
• When groups like AQ go into a conflict zone, it will only take a few years before the group creates its own backlash, which will eventually stifle it
• Example: When Ethiopia invades Somalia, Al-Shabaab gets a shot in the arm but leaders are global jihadists and it is soon clear that its ideas are foreign and not helpful to Somalia
  o Get push back from locals
  o Lots of tensions between globally oriented AQ fighters and locally/tribally oriented Al-Shabaab fighters
• Not clear that the US took advantage of these divisions, which always exist
  o US did so in the Sunni Awakening and the Surge, which was a defeat for AQ in Iraq
    ▪ Only managed to regroup when the situation in Syria deteriorated
    ▪ US helped pit local Sunni tribesmen against AQ in Iraq
  o Not really the same as pitting AQ against ISIL
    ▪ Mostly financing and arming of Sunni population against violent extremists
• US needs to be aware of the radical fringe effect – when a new, more violent group arrives, it makes all the others appear more legitimate
  o Example: Qatar is trying to use an AQ affiliate in Syria to help topple Assad
    ▪ Assad is seen as Enemy #1 and this AQ affiliate is not Enemy#2, but Ally #1
    ▪ The AQ affiliate looks less extreme than ISIL but capable of projecting violence against the Assad regime
    ▪ Very dangerous to take AQ affiliates and legitimize / empower them further
  o Main concern: Not letting AQ and affiliates appear more legitimate because of competition with ISIL
    ▪ Must keep eye on sectarianism problem, which could infect the entire Muslim world, making it inhospitable to US foreign policy

Re: Utopianism
• Concept comes from jihadist interpretations of the Islamic concept of tawhid or monotheism – one of the pillars of Islam
  o AQ and others take these fundamental concepts of Islam and repurpose them for their own purposes
• Seems as though it would be impossible to go against the concept of monotheism but AQ takes it to the next level with their thinking
  o If there is only one god, then there can be only one way to worship him
  o There can only be one sovereign on earth – God
  o So can’t have two different interpretations of Islam
• Would be elevating self above the sovereignty of God, which would be a sin

• *Tawhid* gets wrapped into this concept with Islamic law
  o Problem: There is no real Islamic law – have only 1,400 years of interpretation of complicated sources: the Qur’an and the Hadith
    ▪ Hadith is record of the traditions or sayings of the Prophet Muhammad
    ▪ Many collections of Hadith – some more respected than others
    ▪ Qur’an is just a book of revelations
    ▪ Interpretations have been trying to marry the concepts of the one with the biographic elements of the other for 1,400 years
  o There are lots of interpretations of Islamic law
    ▪ Can get a fatwa (religious opinion) from one Islamic scholar and get a different one from another scholar drawing from different sources

• Sunni Islam is decentralized, which is a positive because most Sunnis can call the concept of the Caliphate bogus
  o However, 5% might be inspired by the concept
  o No pope or single leader can say what is right
  o Believers can choose a view without caring what the other 99% think

• Jihadist ideology has safety clauses embedded
  o Example: Medieval texts said that all the sects of Islam would go astray except for one whose believers will appear as Strangers to the rest of the Sunnis
    ▪ They will be the only ones with the right interpretation
  o Problem: Extremist group can say that since 99% of the Sunnis disagree with us, that proves that we are right

• Faith systems last for thousands of years because of their complexity where almost everything can be accounted for somewhere in the texts
  o ISIL takes pride in their differences – that they are Strangers in the Sunni world
  o ISIL sees the rest of the Sunni world as the problem

• There is a good chance that the Sunnis can overcome ISIL because they can't actually govern in the real world and live up to their ideology
  o But if they say brashly that they are governing by God’s law and all the others Muslims are compromising on God’s law, they will get some flow of foreign fighters
  o Such a position will be inspiring to unempowered groups