

American Foreign Policy Council

UNITED STATES

QUICK FACTS

Population: 323,995,528 (July 2016)

Area: 9,826,675 sq km

Ethnic Groups: white 79.96%, black 12.85%, Asian 4.43%, Amerindian and Alaska native 0.97%, native Hawaiian and other Pacific islander 0.18%, two or more races 1.61%

Religions: Protestant 46.5%, Roman Catholic 20.8%, Mormon 1.6%, Jehovah's Witness 0.8%, other Christian 0.9%, Jewish 1.9%, Muslim 0.9%, Buddhist 0.7%, Hindu 0.7%, other 1.8%, unaffiliated 22.8%, don't know/refused 0.6%

Government Type: Constitutional Federal Republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$18.56 trillion (estimated 2015)

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (January 2017)

OVERVIEW

Over the years and with the help of modern technologies, the nature, faces, methods, and organizational structure of threats posed by militant Islamists to the security of United States has evolved significantly. With the rise of the Islamic State in 2014, as in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the public conversation on Islam has focused on militant Islamism, specifically on the question The Atlantic magazine asked in a cover article a few months after the San Bernardino shooting: "Is America Any Safer?"²¹ The competition over the answer to that question is not simply political or tactical—it encompasses the law enforcement and national security communities, and includes tensions over data, vocabulary, and constitutionally protected civil liberties.

The threat from militant Islamists and terrorists networks like the Islamic State remains a challenge. In 2015, Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) Director James Comey told the Senate Judiciary Committee that the Islamic State remains committed to motivating people in

the United States to become killers on their behalf, as well as to sending people to the United States to launch attacks.² Addressing these threats requires a collaborative effort among a variety of stakeholders, including the United States government and Muslim civil society and community organizations, as well as inter-faith groups and organizations from across the American political spectrum.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Contemporary Islamist activity in the United States can be understood in the context of five loose conceptual groupings:

The Ikhwan-Jama'at duopoly³

The *Ikhwan-Jama'at* duopoly is the largest and most influential grouping of organized Islamist activism in the United States. In the 1950s and 1960s, Muslim Brotherhood activists fled repression in Egypt and sought refuge in Saudi Arabia. Wahhabi⁴ authorities took advantage of their organizational experience, placing them in key positions at major Islamic NGOs. With Saudi backing, these Brotherhood activists, joined by *Jama'at-e Islami*⁵ cadres, propagated Islamist thought and institutions all over the world, including the United States and the wider Western world.⁶

The structure of the U.S.-based *Ikhwan-Jama'at* duopoly can be understood on three levels: 1) a covert vanguard, 2) professional activist organizations with formalized membership schemes, and 3) the related grassroots they seek to mobilize. The vanguard consists of Brotherhood and *Jama'at* leaders in North America who hold key leadership positions in a network of overlapping activist organizations. These activist organizations are the most prominent Islamic groups in American civil society. They are influential in local, state, and national politics and have established relationships with editorial boards and news producers at media outlets throughout the country.

Internal U.S. Brotherhood records released as evidence in the terrorism financing trial of the Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development (HLF) reveal that a covert vanguard of Muslim Brotherhood activists founded and directed the most influential Muslim-American civil society groups in the United States, including the Muslim Students' Association (MSA)⁷ the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), the North American Islamic Trust (NAIT), the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) and the Muslim American Society (MAS). The Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA) similarly has been identified as a "front" for *Jama'at-i-Islami*.⁸ The public faces of these groups are professionally-led activist organizations that are concerned with civil rights, religious education, political awareness, grass-roots organization, and other seemingly benign activities.⁹ However, internal Brotherhood documents reveal another use for these organizations: promoting "the main goal of Islamic activism," which is "establishing the

nation of Islam, the rule of God in the lives of humans, making people worship their Creator and cleansing the earth from the tyrants who assault God's sovereignty, the abominators in His earth and the suppressors of His creation."¹⁰ Brotherhood officials have done so by promoting the creation of civic organizations with a covert—and occasionally an overt—political agenda, an activity described by one Brotherhood official in the 1980s as “energizing political work fronts.”¹¹ Such groups include:

The Muslim Student Association (MSA)

Founded in 1963 by Brotherhood activists at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, the MSA, or MSA National, served as a coordinating committee for Brotherhood activities during the organization's formative years in the United States. During this early era, all Brotherhood activists in the U.S. had to be active in the MSA.¹² Now a national organization, the MSA has about 150 affiliated university chapters in the United States and Canada, including numerous Ivy League affiliations.¹³ In the U.S., the MSA is divided into East Zone, Central Zone, and West Zone. It is a 501(c)4 tax exempt organization, and claims to refuse foreign funding.¹⁴

Like all member organizations of the *Ikhwan-Jama'at* duopoly, the MSA proclaims “moderation,” but public statements by MSA activists reveal an Islamist agenda and ideology. For instance, MSA officials have espoused the desire “to restore Islam to the leadership of society” and to be working toward “the reestablishment of the Islamic form of government.”¹⁵ They have likewise emphasized the importance of *dawah* (propagation of faith) as a vehicle for the spread of Islam in the United States, with the ultimate goal of making America “a Muslim country.”¹⁶

The North American Islamic Trust (NAIT)

NAIT was founded in 1973 as a *waqf* (trust) for the MSA and other Islamic institutions, including the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA).¹⁷ NAIT is a non-profit 501(c)3 organization and holds the titles to hundreds of Islamic institutions—including mosques and schools—across the U.S., making it, according to some analysts, a holding company and financial hub for various Muslim Brotherhood-tied groups in North America.¹⁸ It also manages the Iman Fund, a no-load mutual fund, and runs American Trust Publications (which publishes Islamic literature, including the works of Brotherhood luminary Yusuf al Qaradawi¹⁹) and the Islamic Book Service.²⁰ A 1987 FBI investigation of NAIT concluded that the organization supported the “Islamic Revolution.” “Their support of JIHAD (a holy war) in the U.S. has been evidenced by the financial and organizational support provided through NAIT from Middle East countries to Muslims residing in the U.S. and Canada,” it continued. The countries named as providing this support were Iran, Libya, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. “The organizational support provided by NAIT includes planning, organizing, and funding anti-U.S. and anti-Israel demonstrations, pro-PLO demonstrations and the distribution of political propaganda against U.S. policies in the Middle East

and in support of the Islamic Revolution as advocated by the [Government of Iran]. NAIT also supports the recruitment, training and funding of black Muslims in the U.S. who support the Islamic Revolution.”²¹

The Islamic Society of North America (ISNA)

ISNA, which emerged out of the MSA in 1981, was named as an unindicted co-conspirator in the Hamas financing trial against the Holy Land Foundation.²² Like NAIT, ISNA is included among the “individuals/entities who are and/or were members of the US Muslim Brotherhood.”²³ There is no evidence that ISNA currently provides material support to terrorist organizations. However, to this day, key U.S. Brotherhood activists hold leadership positions in ISNA. ISNA’s nineteen member board of directors includes the chairman of NAIT, the president of the MSA, and the heads of ISNA’s other “constituent organizations:” the Association of Muslim Scientists and Engineers, the Islamic Medical Association of North America, the Canadian Islamic Trust, Muslim Youth of North America, and the Council of Islamic Schools of North America—some of which are explicitly named as Brotherhood-allied groups in internal Brotherhood documents.²⁴

The Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA)

ICNA is the successor to the Pakistani-American organization *Halaqa Abbabe Islami*, which sought to recruit “Islamic movement oriented Urdu speaking Muslims and to strengthen the Jama’at-e-Islami Pakistan.”²⁵ In 1977, *Halaqa Abbabe Islami* formally changed its name to ICNA.²⁶ Today, ICNA holds conferences throughout the U.S. and states that “by focusing on self-development, education, outreach and social services, ICNA has cemented its place as a leading grassroots organization in the American Muslim community.”²⁷

The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)

The idea for CAIR emerged out of a 1993 meeting in Philadelphia of the Muslim Brotherhood’s Palestine Committee in the United States. Participants spoke of the need for a lobbying and public affairs group to promote the Islamist point of view in the U.S. The short-term goal was to serve as a spoiler for the Oslo Accords, but the long-term goal was to manipulate the public discourse in America on issues related to Islam and the Muslim world.²⁸ Three IAP officials founded CAIR several months later. CAIR portrays itself as a civil rights group, and has since become the most influential and pervasive Muslim civil society group in the United States.²⁹ They have been heavily involved in “sensitivity training” and other briefings on Islam and the Muslim community for U.S. law enforcement officers. However, in 2008, CAIR came under both suspicion and scrutiny as a result of the Holy Land Foundation case, in which Ghassan Elashi, the chairman of the Holy Land Foundation charity in Dallas and a board member of the Texas chapter of CAIR, was found guilty of conspiring to funnel funds to Hamas.³⁰ As a result of the revelations of the 2009 trial of the Holy Land

Foundation, the FBI ceased its cooperation with CAIR.³¹ Instead, the FBI has turned to ISNA, which has taken up the mantle of a larger role in advising and training U.S. government and military officials.³²

The Muslim American Society (MAS)

The Northern Virginia-based MAS was founded in 1993. Among its founding members was Ahmed Elkadi, who supposedly led the Brotherhood in the U.S. from 1984 to 1994.³³ Mohammad Mehdi Akef, the Supreme Guide of the global Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt from 2004 to 2010, claims to have played a role in founding MAS in a push for more “openness” in the Brotherhood’s activities in the U.S.³⁴ MAS is open about its lineage in the U.S., lauding older Brotherhood-affiliated groups such as MSA, ISNA, and NAIT.³⁵

MAS claims to promote understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims, and its mission is “to move people to strive for God consciousness, liberty, and justice, and to convey Islam with utmost clarity.”³⁶ The MAS Freedom Foundation is perhaps the most active and public part of the organization. It engages in and coordinates grassroots activism, including voter registration, civil rights work, lobbying Congress, and protesting.³⁷ Other departments include the Council of Imams (coordinated with ICNA), the National Council of Islamic Centers (also coordinated with ICNA), the Tarbiyya (religious educational) program, the dawah (propagation) program, Islamic American University, and the Muslim Youth Program.³⁸

The International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT)

Conceived at a 1977 Islamic conference in Lugano, Switzerland, IIIT was founded four years later in Pennsylvania as “a private, non-profit, academic, cultural and educational institution, concerned with general issues of Islamic thought and education.”³⁹ It is now based in Herndon, Virginia. IIIT ostensibly “promotes academic research on the methodology and philosophy of various disciplines, and gives special emphasis to the development of Islamic scholarship in contemporary social sciences.”⁴⁰ However, IIIT has been accused by the U.S. government of contributing funds to the World and Islam Studies Enterprise (WISE), which was founded to support the Palestinian Islamic Jihad terrorist organization.⁴¹ IIIT is a part of a network of companies and not-for-profit organizations based in Northern Virginia known as the SAAR Network or the Safa Group, which has been under investigation by the U.S. Justice Department since at least 2003.⁴² In May 2009, Ishaq Farhan, a trustee of IIIT, was chosen to head the Islamic Action Front—the political party of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood—a post he had held before.⁴³ Farhan had long been associated with the IAF and is said to be one of the key figures behind its formation.⁴⁴ (Since then, Farhan has been replaced as head of the IAF by Hamza Mansour.⁴⁵ Ostensibly, however, Farhan still retains an affiliation—and a position of prominence—with the organization.)

Jamaat al Fuqra

Jama'at al Fuqra (JF, Arabic for “Community of the Impoverished”) was founded in New York in 1980 by the Pakistani religious leader Sheikh Mubarak Ali Gilani.⁴⁶ JF has been described as a splinter group of *Jaish-e-Mohammad* (JeM).⁴⁷ Daniel Pearl, the late *Wall Street Journal* reporter, was on his way to interview Gilani in 2002 when he was kidnapped in Pakistan and subsequently beheaded.

In the U.S., JF is a loosely structured movement primarily composed of African-American converts to Islam. JF functions officially through Muslims of the Americas, a non-profit organization, and the International Quranic Open University.⁴⁸ JF also operates a news publication called *The Islamic Post*.⁴⁹ JF runs a network of rural compounds in New York, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Arizona, Oregon, South Carolina, California and Colorado. Members of the group were involved in a wave of violent crime and fraud—including murder and arson—in the 1980s and 1990s.⁵⁰ Some members have also been known to attack Hindu places of worship.⁵¹ Over the past decade, the group has been fairly quiet in the U.S. It received some attention in 2008 and 2009 as a result of a documentary on the group produced by the controversial Christian Action Network entitled “Homegrown Jihad.”⁵²

Hizb ut-Tahrir

Hizb ut-Tahrir in America (HTA) has been led by Middle Eastern activists who moved to the U.S. in the 1980s. For most of its history, it has met with little success in expanding its native activist base. This has been attributed to competition from other Islamist groups (mainly the Brotherhood); the limited ability of an older leadership to connect with the younger generation; and a level of paranoia and secrecy among the leadership that have limited outreach efforts, hindered online interaction, and may have turned off potential recruits.⁵³

The HTA website states that the organization’s aim is “to resume the Islamic way of life and to convey the Islamic da’wah to the world.”⁵⁴ HTA is currently well-networked and connected with the larger global presence of HuT. Their three-stage methodology for taking power is the same as that promoted by the global movement:

The First Stage: The stage of culturing to produce people who believe in the idea and the method of the Party, so that they form the Party group.

The Second Stage: The stage of interaction with the Ummah (global Muslim community), to let the Ummah embrace and carry Islam, so that the Ummah takes it up as its issue, and thus works to establish it in the affairs of life.

The Third Stage: The stage of establishing government, implementing Islam generally and comprehensively, and carrying it as a message to the world.⁵⁵

In the West, HuT seeks to foster a mass movement toward revolution, while in Muslim-majority countries it attempts to recruit members of the military for the purpose of carrying out a military coup.⁵⁶ According to one specialist, HTA “counts well-educated professionals who are influential in their communities among their members” and in recent years the group has expanded beyond their main hubs of activity in New York, Orange County (California), Chicago, and Milwaukee.⁵⁷

The jihadist-activist milieu

There are a number of small U.S.-based formal and informal groups and networks that support violent *jihad* in America and elsewhere, but do not necessarily engage in it themselves. Most of their activities are political and social in nature, consisting of provocative public statements and demonstrations. Two particularly prominent groups deserve mention in this regard.

Revolution Muslim was a New York-based *jihadist*-activist group. Founded in 2007 “to invite people to proper Islam... and command the good... while forbidding the falsehood,” RM’s mission “is to one day see the Muslims united under one Khalifah and under the commands of Allah.”⁵⁸ RM maintained an active blog and website, which serves as a forum for a dissemination of its views, proselytization, condemnation of U.S. policies, and even support for violence. In April 2014, Revolution Muslim co-founder Yousef al-Khattab was sentenced to two-and-a-half years in prison for advocating violence against the Chabad Jewish organization’s headquarters in Brooklyn.⁵⁹ Khattab posted a photograph of the building, along with a map, to Revolution Muslim’s website, and pointed out that “the man temple was always full at prayer times.” In the past, he had told his readers to “deal with” prominent Jewish leaders “directly at their homes.”⁶⁰

One of Revolution Muslim’s other co-founders was Jesse Morton. Morton was arrested in 2011 after one of his associates published the home addresses of the writers of *South Park*, after an episode of the cartoon show mocked the Prophet Muhammad. Before that time, Morton was one of the most prolific recruiters for al-Qaeda in the United States.⁶¹ After his arrest, Morton worked as informant for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and made contact with several of his former recruits.⁶² In September 2016, Morton began a job as a researcher at George Washington University’s Program on Extremism.⁶³ This affiliation, however, proved to be short-lived; Morton’s affiliation with the University was severed after he was arrested in late 2016 on drug possession and solicitation of prostitution charges.⁶⁴

Homegrown jihadist cells and networks

A number of Islamist terrorist plots in the U.S. have been thwarted or uncovered in recent years. Many of these were planned by cells of Muslims who were either born in the U.S. or lived there for many years. There were also episodes of Americans planning attacks against U.S. interests abroad and/or going to fight with foreign Islamist movements. These included:

- In May 2009, James Cromitie, David Williams, Onta Williams, and Laguerre Payen were arrested in New York and charged with conspiring to bomb synagogues in the Bronx and shoot down military aircraft at the New York Air National Guard Base at Stewart Airport in Newburgh, New York with a surface-to-air missile.⁶⁵
- David Coleman Headley (AKA Daood Gilani) of Chicago was accused of providing crucial assistance for the 2008 *Lashkar-e-Taiba* (LeT) attack in Mumbai, India. Headley allegedly attended LeT training camps in 2002 and 2003. Beginning in 2006, Headley allegedly carried out extensive surveillance of possible targets in Mumbai on behalf of LeT. He was charged with aiding and abetting the murders of six U.S. citizens who were killed in the Mumbai attack. Headley was also accused of conspiring with LeT members and Ilyas Kashmiri, the head of the Kashmiri militant group *Harakat ul Jihad al Islami* (HUJI), to carry out attacks in Denmark against *Jyllands Posten*, the newspaper that published the Mohammad cartoons that led to the 2006 Danish Cartoon Crisis. Headley allegedly carried out surveillance in Denmark for that planned attack.⁶⁶ Headley was ultimately sentenced to 35 years in prison, a relatively lenient punishment, due to his cooperation in providing intelligence on terrorist networks.⁶⁷
- Najibullah Zazi, who drove an airport shuttle bus in Denver and, before that, lived in Queens, New York, was accused of conspiring to use explosives in an attack thought to have been planned for New York City in 2009. Zazi was born in Afghanistan and raised in Pakistan. He is thought to have travelled to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas in Pakistan, where he received training from al-Qaeda.⁶⁸ Zazi pled guilty in 2010.⁶⁹
- Bryant Neal Vinas, an American convert to Islam, was charged with participating in and supporting terrorist attacks against U.S. persons and facilities in Afghanistan in 2008. He was accused of firing rockets at a U.S. military base in Afghanistan and providing “expert advice and assistance” to al-Qaeda about the New York transit system and Long Island Railroad.⁷⁰ He pled guilty to all charges in 2009.⁷¹
- Daniel P. Boyd, an American convert to Islam, was accused in 2009 of heading a seven-man North Carolina-based cell that allegedly planned to provide material support to al-Qaeda, murder, kidnap, maim and injure per-

sons in Israel and elsewhere, and kill U.S. military personnel stationed at Quantico, Virginia.⁷² Boyd pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit murder and conspiracy to provide material support to terrorists in U.S. District Court in February 2011, and subsequently cooperated with the government, providing testimony at trial against several of his co-conspirators, who were convicted that October.⁷³

- Hosam Maher Husein Smadi, a Jordanian national, was found guilty of planning to blow up the Fountain Place office complex in downtown Dallas with a vehicle bomb in 2009, and in 2010 was sentenced to twenty-four years in prison.⁷⁴ He also reportedly considered attacking a National Guard Armory and the Dallas Airport.⁷⁵
- In August 2013, a U.S. citizen and a foreign national were charged in a Miami court with providing financing and recruits to al-Qaeda and two other designated other foreign terrorist organizations. Gufran Ahmed Kauser Mohammed, a naturalized U.S. citizen born in India, and Mohamed Hussein Said, a Kenyan, were brought up on a fifteen count indictment after being arrested in Saudi Arabia and transferred to the U.S. The two men allegedly wired a total of \$96,000 to an al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, the *al Nusra Front*, and to the militant group *al Shabaab* in Somalia.⁷⁶
- There was also a “lone wolf” Islamist terrorist attack launched at Fort Hood, Texas on November 5, 2011 by Major Nidal Malik Hasan, a U.S. Army psychiatrist, who had been in regular contact with Anwar al-Awlaki, an American-born imam of Yemeni descent who served as one of al-Qaeda’s main ideologues before his death in September 2011 as a result of an American drone strike. Hasan opened fire on base, killing thirteen people and wounding 31 others. Hasan was shot multiple times, but survived.⁷⁷ In August 2013, Hasan was unanimously convicted by a jury of army officers.⁷⁸ Hasan’s defense lawyer asked the judge to spare Hasan’s life, but the request was denied and Hasan is to die by lethal injection (although a date for his execution has not been set).⁷⁹ The Department of Defense and White House have declined to classify Hasan as a terrorist, however, instead labeling the Fort Hood incident as a case of workplace violence.⁸⁰ Numerous Members of Congress have objected to this description, asserting that the attack was clearly one of “homegrown terror[ism]” and urging the U.S. government to recognize this fact.⁸¹
- In April 2013, brothers Dzhokar Tsarnaev and Tamerlane Tsarnaev planted bombs at the annual Boston Marathon road race. The resulting explosion killed three and injured more than 170.⁸² Dzhorkar was captured by police, and Tamerlane died after being shot several times and being run over by Dzhorkar in his attempt to escape.⁸³ After his capture, the surviving Tsarnaev claimed that he and his brother were motivated by extremist Islamic beliefs, but that they were not connected to any militant group in particu-

lar. He also claimed they learned to build bombs through the website of the al-Qaeda affiliate in Yemen.⁸⁴ In May 2015, a federal jury sentenced Tsarnaev to death.⁸⁵

- In December 2015, married couple Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik killed 14 people and injured 22 in San Bernardino, California. The couple was killed in a shootout with police that afternoon.⁸⁶ The Islamic State later released a statement claiming responsibility for the attack, referring to Farook and Malik as “soldiers of the caliphate,” a term used to describe its soldiers.⁸⁷
- In June 2016, Omar Mateen killed 49 people in a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida. Mateen himself was shot and killed by Orlando police.⁸⁸ During the massacre, Mateen called 911. In the recording, he identified himself, claimed responsibility for the shootings, and pledged allegiance to “Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi of the Islamic State.”⁸⁹ Mateen also called Orlando news station News 13 and claimed his actions had been motivated by loyalty to the Islamic State.⁹⁰
- In November 2016, Abdul Razak Ali Artan injured 11 people at Ohio State University before being shot by a police officer. Artan rammied a car into a crowd on campus and then stabbed several people with a butcher knife. Shortly before the attack, Artan posted angrily on Facebook about American interference in Muslim countries, referencing radical cleric Anwar al-Awlaki and lone wolf attacks.⁹¹

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

The U.S. has the most diverse Muslim population in the Western world. In 2016, the Pew Research Center estimated that 3.3 million Muslims live in the United States, equaling about 1 percent of the U.S. population.⁹² Sixty-five percent of U.S. Muslims identify themselves as Sunnis, 11 percent as Shi’a, and 24 percent as having no specific affiliation (describing themselves as “just a Muslim”).⁹³ A large proportion of Muslims in the U.S. are first generation immigrants (63 percent), and 37 percent are native-born, with 15 percent being second generation.⁹⁴ Foreign-born Muslim Americans have come from at least 77 different countries. Twenty-six percent of Muslim immigrants to the United States come from the Arab world (Middle East and North Africa), nine percent from Pakistan, seven percent from other South Asian countries (including Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Afghanistan), three percent come from Iran, five percent come from Europe, and seven percent come from Sub-Saharan Africa. One-third of all Muslim immigrants came to the U.S. during the 1990s and 40 percent have come after 2000. Over three-quarters (81 percent) of all Muslim-Americans are U.S. citizens.⁹⁵ At 30 percent, whites make up the largest proportion of Muslims in America.⁹⁶ Muslims in America, as a group, are younger than other major religious groups in the U.S.⁹⁷

Seventy percent of Muslim Americans hold very unfavorable views of al-Qaeda, and 81 percent of Muslims in the United States say that violence against civilians and suicide bombings are never justified. Furthermore, 21 percent of American Muslims believe there is either a great deal or a fair amount of support for extremism within their community. Forty-eight percent say that Muslim leaders are not doing enough to challenge extremists.⁹⁸

The fact that the most influential and well-resourced Muslim-American civil society groups are, in a very concrete sense, affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and *Jama'at-e-Islami* is not widely held knowledge. This is partially because Islamist organizations have successfully framed themselves as “moderate,” “mainstream,” and representative American Muslim religious and civil rights organizations. This has allowed them to avoid widespread public distrust and frame criticism of them as Islamophobia targeting the Muslim-American community rather than criticism of the organizations themselves.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Since 2001, the U.S. government has spent more than \$1 trillion in the fight against threats like the Islamic State and al-Qaeda.⁹⁹ These efforts, which include dismantling terrorist cells, countering terror financing, disrupting online networks, and preventing access to critical infrastructure, have helped secure the country, while also altering the nature of the threats faced.

This change is partly due to the success of global counterterrorism efforts and victories on the battlefield, which have made it more difficult, though not impossible, for violent extremists to perpetrate elaborate coordinated attacks. The shift is also attributable to innovations in technology that have facilitated communication between *jihadists* and potential violent extremists, as well as a shift in extremist messaging—from encouraging other violent extremist fighters to join the battle in Syria and Iraq, to directing them to perpetrate attacks in fighters’ home countries.¹⁰⁰

In recent years, the overwhelming focus of the U.S. government’s counterterrorism efforts has been the Islamic State. The Obama administration initially responded dismissively to the rise of the terrorist group in Iraq and Syria in 2013-2014. In an ill-fated interview with the *New Yorker*’s David Remnick in late 2013, President Obama famously referred to the organization as a “jayvee team” of terrorists.¹⁰¹ However, the Islamic State’s rapid expansion and consolidation of power—and its declaration of a “caliphate” in June 2014¹⁰²—prompted the White House to assume a more hands-on approach. In November 2014, the Administration rolled out a new counterterrorism strategy encompassing nine “lines of effort” against the Islamic State, encompassing:

1. Supporting Effective Governance in Iraq
2. Denying the Islamic State Safe-Haven
3. Building Partner Capacity
4. Enhancing Intelligence Collection on ISIL
5. Disrupting ISIL's Finances
6. Exposing ISIL's True Nature
7. Disrupting the Flow of Foreign Fighters
8. Protecting the Homeland
9. Humanitarian Support¹⁰³

Yet, with the notable exception of the so-called “line five” effort targeting the organization’s finances, the Obama administration’s strategy produced few tangible results, at least initially.¹⁰⁴ Over time, however, military operation by the U.S.-led “global coalition” against the Islamic State have succeeded in producing significant results, including the constriction of territory under ISIS control by as much as one-quarter¹⁰⁵ and slashing its revenues by as much as one-half.¹⁰⁶

Nevertheless, as of this writing, the Islamic State remains a resilient threat. An October 2016 study by the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security detailed that the group’s extensive revenue stream, which relies on black market oil and natural gas, black market commodities, antiquities, extortion, taxation, and robbery, kidnappings for ransom support from nation states in the Gulf, and emerging fundraising tactics like fraudulent financial activities, “continue to strain the U.S. Government’s ability to disrupt the group’s financial flows.”¹⁰⁷ Additionally, the organization retains the capability to strike globally. A June 2016 report by the Congressional Research Service noted that, in addition to independent cells inspired by the group’s ideology and message, the Islamic State has succeeded in fielding at least six functioning “armies” in Libya, Egypt, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Afghanistan.¹⁰⁸

The election of Donald J. Trump to the U.S. presidency in November 2016 is likely to usher in a significant change in U.S. counterterrorism policy. While still on the campaign trail, Mr. Trump spoke extensively about the need for greater military investments in the fight against the Islamic State, as well as a broader offensive against Islamic radicalism. Since taking office in January 2017, he has reiterated this commitment—most prominently in address to a joint session of Congress in February

2017.109 His administration has also issued a series of measures designed to protect the U.S. homeland and American citizens from terrorism, including an Executive Order temporarily prohibiting entry to individuals from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen,¹¹⁰ as well as tighter Transportation Security Administration regulations governing travel from ten separate foreign destinations to the United States.¹¹¹ (Notably, some of these measures—most prominently the Executive Order on Muslim immigration—have generated widespread opposition, and their constitutionality has been challenged.¹¹²) As of this writing, however, the Trump administration has not publicly unveiled a comprehensive strategy to counter the Islamic State, or to respond to the broader problem of radical Islamic ideology globally.

ENDNOTES

[1] Steven Brill, “Is America Any Safer?” *The Atlantic*, September 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/09/are-we-any-safer/492761/>

[2] “FBI says it is refocused on movement of Islamic State into the US,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 9, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/world/middle-east/la-fg-foreign-fighters-20151208-story.html>

[3] This term was coined in Kalim Siddiqui, *Stages of Islamic Revolution* (London: The Open Press, 1996). It refers to groups tied to the Muslim Brotherhood (Al-Ikhwan al-Muslimeen) and the Pakistani Islamist party, Jama’at al-Islami.

[4] Wahhabi here is understood as the Saudi brand of Salafism, which is a movement within Islam that seeks to practice Islam in the fashion of the pious ancestors – namely the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions. Wahhabism derives from Muhammad ibn abd al Wahhab, who introduced a form of Salafism to the Arabian Peninsula in alliance with the House of Saud in the early 20th Century.

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