## Background - the US Prevention Practitioners Network

Over the course of the next two years, the McCain Institute, with support from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) and a steering committee of violence prevention and social safety experts, will develop and engage a US practitioners network for individuals working in **targeted violence and terrorism prevention (TVTP)**. The aim of this is not only to connect practitioners across the US with one another, but also to build their capacity and the efficacy of their programs through a series of workshops that cover both theoretical and practical elements of delivering prevention and intervention initiatives. This information pack is for the second workshop in a four-part mini-series about the targeted violence and terrorism **threat landscape in the US**.

## Why is the threat landscape an important topic?

To be able to address targeted violence and terrorism in an informed and appropriate manner, practitioners must first develop a conceptual understanding of the phenomena, particularly of the dominant narratives, movements and figures that make up the domestic threat landscape. The McCain Institute and ISD are therefore hosting a series of workshops to equip participants and members of the emerging Practitioners Network with this understanding. Reflecting the National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism, which was released in June 2021 and identifies racially or ethnically motivated violent extremism (REMVE) and anti-government violence as primary threats, the first workshop in this mini-series addressed white supremacist and militia violent extremism, and was followed by a second workshop on Incel and misogynist violent extremism. This information pack is for the third workshop in the threat landscape series, which covers **internationally-inspired terrorism**. This will be followed by a workshop on the role of dis- and misinformation in targeted violence.

## What is the purpose of this document?

These read-ahead materials provide an overview of internationally-inspired terrorism in the US, and is informed by both desk-based and ethnographic research. This document does not seek to provide an exhaustive and microscopic deep-dive into the dynamic and ever-evolving threat of internationally-inspired terrorism. Rather, it provides entry-level insight into the threat historically and key contemporary narratives that underpin related movements, which may help practitioners as they incorporate TVTP into their work. This information pack provides:
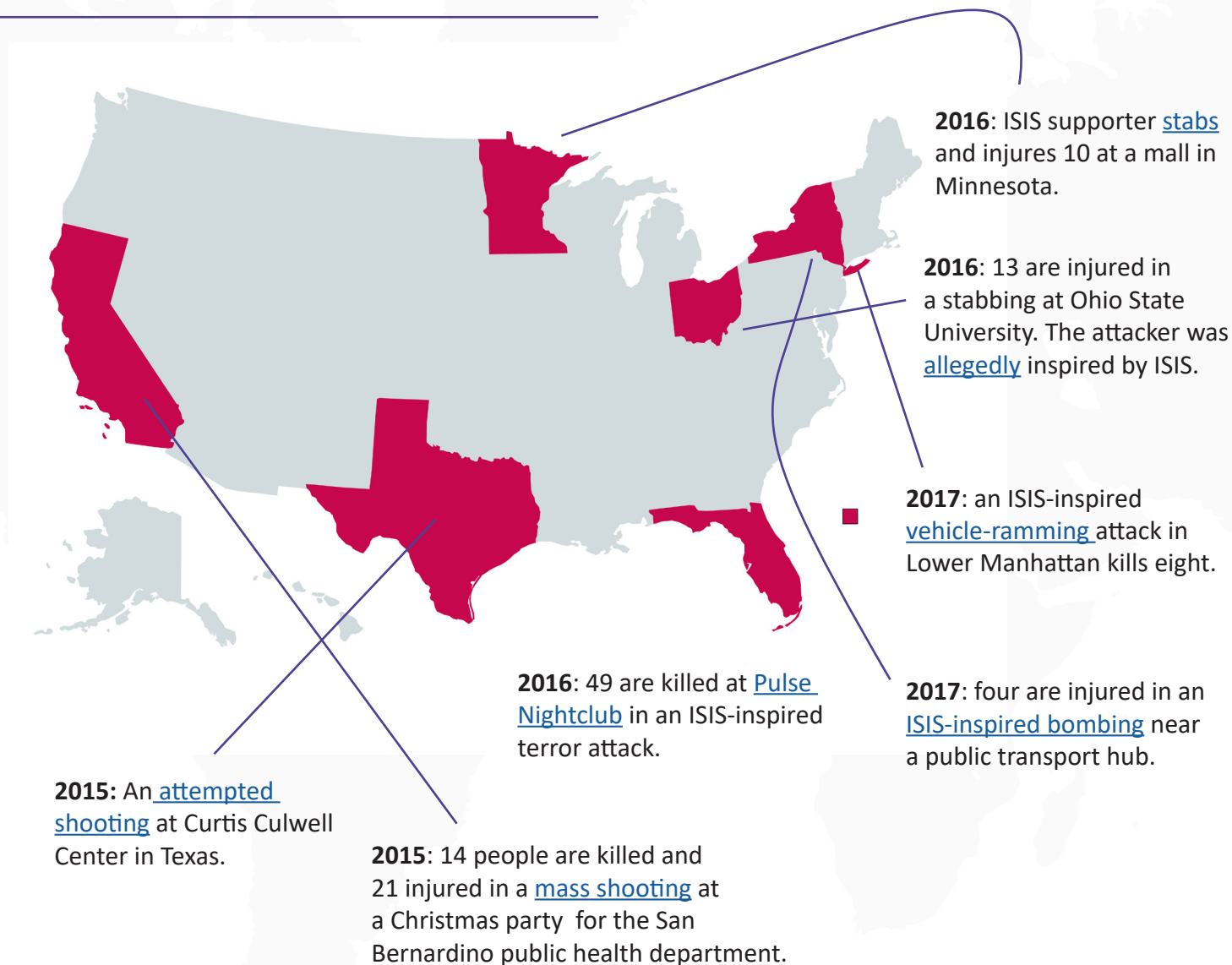
- a definitional introduction to international terrorism;
- an overview of different, related groups and a run-through of prevalent narratives;
- an overview of the threat online;
- other considerations, including prison radicalization and the rehabilitation of foreign fighters;
- a glossary of related ideologues and groups;
- further reading recommendations.

Documents like this one are provided ahead of every workshop. Past documents and workshop recordings can be found here. For any inquiries, please contact the McCain Institute or ISD.

# Background

The Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) defines international terrorism as "violent, criminal acts committed by individuals and/or groups who are inspired by, or associated with, designated foreign terrorist organizations or nations (state-sponsored)." In the US, this threat has come predominantly from violent groups like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Following the overview provided below, this section briefly describes these two groups, as well as noting important considerations about the increasingly post-organizational scope of the threat.

## The threat - examples of attacks since 2014:

**2016**: ISIS supporter stabs and injures 10 at a mall in Minnesota.

**2016**: 13 are injured in a stabbing at Ohio State University. The attacker was allegedly inspired by ISIS.

**2017**: an ISIS-inspired vehicle-ramming attack in Lower Manhattan kills eight.

**2017**: four are injured in an ISIS-inspired bombing near a public transport hub.

**2016**: 49 are killed at Pulse Nightclub in an ISIS-inspired terror attack.

**2015:** An attempted shooting at Curtis Culwell Center in Texas.

**2015**: 14 people are killed and 21 injured in a mass shooting at a Christmas party for the San Bernardino public health department.

| 970+ | 520+ | 240+ | 23 |
|------|------|------|----|
| International terrorism cases since 2011 | Charged with material support, the most common charge by far | American foreign fighters | Attacks in the US since 2014 |

## Al-Qaeda

Considered the "original" international terrorist threat, Al-Qaeda was [founded](#) by Osama Bin Laden in the late 1980s. The group largely emerged and drew its recruitment, financial and training resources from the Afghan Mujahideen, whom were fighting the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan until Soviet withdrawal in 1989. While the group was involved in acts of terror and operated a largely successful recruitment drive from the early 1990s onwards, its global notoriety was fueled by Bin Laden's declaration of war on the US in 1996. The group's membership increased further in the aftermath of its attacks in the US on September 11, 2001, when ["several groups either emerged or reoriented themselves to pledge allegiance to Bin Laden"](#). Despite Bin Laden's death in 2011, Al-Qaeda remains one of the largest terrorist groups in the world, with affiliate branches in the Middle East, Africa, Southeast Asia and more. It has, however, largely delegated operational responsibility and decision-making from its core leadership to its regional branches. Whereas Al-Qaeda in the lead up to and years immediately following 9/11 was extremely hierarchical, with Bin Laden as the clear leader and international "face" of the group, Ayman al-Zawahiri's succession refocused the group's core leadership. Beyond its previous outward-looking emphasis on attacking the US and Europe, regional affiliates have been encouraged to exploit local grievances and bolster recruitment efforts, while the group's central leadership has focused on re-branding Al-Qaeda as a "less violent" version of the Islamic State. However, with the Taliban's recent victories in Afghanistan, there is [concern the group will only be emboldened](#) to revive its operations in the country and scale its activity globally.

**Related figures**: Osama Bin Laden, Abdullah Azzam, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Samir Khan
**Related American ideologues:** Anwar al-Awlaki, Samir Khan
**Related official [propaganda outlets](#) (past and present):** Inspire (AQAP), As-Sahab Establishment for Media Production, Al-Fajr Media Center, Al-Andalus Establishment for Media Production (AQIM), Al-Fida Network
**Estimated Al-Qaeda-related terrorism cases in the US:** [166](#)
**Estimated American foreign fighters:** [50](#)

*Al-Qaeda's strategic shift since Bin Laden's death points to the changing nature of the targeted violence threat landscape. Even within specific sub-groups, organizational operations and strategy are likely to diverge if leadership changes or external circumstances require it.*

*Zawahiri's strategic shift from anti-Western violence to the expansion of the group's regional affiliates coincided with the rise of ISIS (see page 5), both of which diverted international attention and counter-terrorism resources from Al-Qaeda to ISIS.*

*There is danger, however, with prioritizing resources and responses primarily according to which group is most publicly active at a given time. Exclusively group-based responses ignore the broader violent extremist ecosystem on- and offline, and that individuals' formal affiliation with, and membership of, specific groups is increasingly ambiguous.*

## Al-Shabaab

Al-Shabaab, which translates from Arabic as "the youth," is an affiliate organization of Al-Qaeda. The group is based in Somalia and primarily active within the country, but has carried out recruitment and attacks in neighboring countries like Kenya. Bearing similarity to ISIS's state-building efforts (see page 5), the group seeks to overthrow the Somalian government and to implement their violent, puritanical interpretation of Islamic governance.

The group is considered a successor to al-Ittihad al-Islami (AIAI), a militant organization that was highly active in the 1990s and funded, in part, by Bin Laden. In 2004, several of AIAI's more extreme members joined a coalition to form the Islamic Courts Union (ICU). Al-Shabaab served as the ICU's military wing with Aden Hashi Ayro as its first leader. Despite the ICU disbanding in 2006, Al-Shabaab has remained active and has become increasingly violent, carrying out attacks against local and international targets. Upon Ayro's death in 2008, leadership past to Ahmed Abdi Godane (also known as Mukthar Abu Zubeyr), who posited Al-Shabaab's goals and activities as part of Al-Qaeda's global jihad. The group's affiliation with Al-Qaeda only increased in the years following, with Al-Qaeda members joining Al-Shabaab's leadership and Al-Shabaab leveraging its affiliation to recruit foreign fighters. In 2012, Al-Qaeda's Al-Zawahiri formally announced affiliation with Al-Shabaab and, like Al-Qaeda, the group has maintained a regional focus rather than carrying out operations and attacks in Europe and the US, for example. The group is responsible for several high-profile attacks in East Africa, including:

- a bombing in the Ugandan capital of Kampala in 2010, which killed 74;
- an attack on a university in Garissa County, Kenya, which killed 148;
- truck bombings in Mogadishu, Somalia in 2017 and 2019, which collectively killed almost 600.

Today, the group is led by Ahmed Umar, also known as Abu Ubaidah. While the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) mostly pushed Al-Shabaab out of Mogadishu in its offensive against the group from 2011 to 2014, the group continues to pose a significant security threat in East Africa. In the US, the threat comes predominantly from Al-Shabaab's evidenced ability to recruit US citizens to their cause - between 2007-2008, **some 30+ US citizens are thought to have traveled to Somalia to join Al-Shabaab\***, for example.

**Related figures**: Aden Hashi Ayro, Ahmed Abdi Godane, Ahmed Umar
**Related American figures:** Zachary Chesser
**Related official propaganda outlets (past and present):** Al-Kata'ib Media
**Estimated Al-Shabaab-related terrorism cases in the US:** 54
**Estimated American foreign fighters:** 30+

\*Foreign fighters are not unique to Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabaab or ISIS. Indeed, **American foreign fighters have been associated with more than 30 foreign groups.**

## Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

Also referred to as ISIL, Daesh and IS, ISIS has been the focus of global counterterrorism efforts since it captured major cities of Syria and Iraq in 2014, after which its then-leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced a new Islamic "Caliphate". ISIS is believed to have emerged from Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which was founded in 2004 when its founder and leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, pledged allegiance to Bin Laden. Baghdadi's establishment of the "Caliphate" prompted citizens from countries around the globe to migrate to ISIS-held territory, some of whom traveled to join the group's military operations, others of whom simply wanted to live under the "Caliphate" or were taken there against their will or without informed consent (e.g. children).

The scale of the foreign terrorist fighter (FTF) phenomenon that was spurred by ISIS's successes in Syria remains a significant security challenge. More than 60 US citizens are thought to have traveled to ISIS territory, of which only 19 are known to have returned to the US, and the remainder are either dead, unaccounted for or remain in refugee camps in Syria, Turkey and elsewhere.

ISIS's influence in the US also takes shape beyond FTFs and terrorist plots. Internet and communications technology (ICT) are core to ISIS's recruitment and mobilization strategies, for example. Since its founding, and catalyzed by Baghdadi's declaration of the "Caliphate", ISIS operatives have used social media to encourage Westerners to migrate to ISIS territory or to perform acts of violence on the group's behalf. Official propaganda by the group has been circulated across digital spaces ranging from Telegram to Facebook. Today, the threat from ISIS in the US comes predominantly from the group's persistent and extensive online presence. Official and unofficial ISIS support networks can be found across the Internet, on mainstream social media platforms, forums, bespoke websites and direct-messaging applications. ISD's analysis of ISIS's biggest known digital repository, which contains over 94,000 pieces of violent extremist content, reveals that 30% of its visitors between March and May 2021 had US addresses, highlighting the prevalence and popularity of the group and its propaganda amongst violent extremists in the US.

In parallel to Al-Qaeda's potential response to the Taliban's recent success in Afghanistan, experts have expressed concern over the implications of the Taliban's expansion on ISIS's regional "Khorasan province" (ISIS-K), particularly that the ISIS affiliate will exploit the situation in Afghanistan to sow sectarian discord and carry out acts of violence.

**Related figures:** Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani
**Related official propaganda outlets (past and present):** al-Furqan, Dabiq, Rumiyah, Al-Hayat Media Center, Al-I'tisam, Al-Bayan Radio
**Related American ideologues:** Ahmad Musa Jibril, Ahmad Abousamra
**Estimated number FTFs:** 62+
**Estimated ISIS-related criminal cases in the US:** 230 since March 2014
**Affiliated attacks in the US:** 16 between 2014 and 2019

*For more on the media outlets of Al-Qaeda, ISIS and Al-Shabaab, see the US Department of Homeland Security's factsheet.*

## Post - Organizational Considerations:

While an understanding of relevant foreign terrorist organizations is important, a sole focus on group-based analysis neglects contemporary trends that suggest the threat from international terrorism is becoming increasingly post-organizational in nature. Internationally-inspired terrorism and other forms of targeted violence are manifesting less in strict group-based structures that have clear hierarchy and operational leadership, for example, and are increasingly taking the shape of looser networks affiliated primarily by certain ideological convictions rather than allegiance to specific groups.

This shift in the threat landscape is perhaps best evidenced in and catalyzed by the phenomena of "lone actor" attacks, where large-scale operations that are planned by a terrorist group's leadership and carried out by designated operatives are being supplanted by smaller-scale but potentially more frequent attacks carried out by individual actors not formally affiliated nor directed by a specific group. High profile examples of internationally-inspired lone actor attacks in the US include the Pulse nightclub shooting that took nearly 50 lives in Florida in June 2016, and a vehicle-ramming attack that killed eight in New York in 2017. Both attacks were carried out by individuals who seemingly had no formal affiliation with ISIS, but whose (online) behavior suggests they were inspired, at least in part, by ISIS. In fact, 21 out of 23 internationally-inspired attacks in the US between 2014 and 2019 were "undertaken by individuals or small groups unconnected with formal networks".

Post-organizational developments of the threat have also been fueled by online ecosystems. While social media companies have had relative success in removing official ISIS and Al-Qaeda content from platforms, including through a cross-industry "hashing" database of terrorist propaganda, there is still a considerable "gray zone" of Salafi-jihadist ideological material that falls foul of platform terms of service, but slips through the gaps due to enforcement primarily focused on "organizational" material.

> *"Unlike the identifiable threats we have faced from hierarchically-organized groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS, the new emerging groups of individuals are devoid of the command-and-control apparatuses that counterterrorism practitioners typically seek to disrupt."*
> *- Bruce Hoffman and Colin Clarke*

**Implications for response:** The rapid evolution of the targeted violence threat landscape and its increasingly post-organizational nature bears considerable implications for TVTP. Among others, it means that traditional proscription-based responses don't account for cases where there is no explicit affiliation or allegiance with a named group or structure. Further, defining and identifying terrorist content online draws, at least partly, from national or international designations of proscribed terrorist groups. Content moderation may therefore be more difficult in instances where there is no clear connection with a proscribed group, even more so if there is also no accompanying incitement to violence or other explicit threat to personal or public safety. These challenges translate to targeted violence interventions, namely in how practitioners think about risk and needs assessment. Determining whether or not an individual is being radicalized (or is already radicalized) may prove more difficult in the absence of a connection with known organizations or in the absence of (online) behavior suggesting the consumption and/or distribution of branded violent extremist content.

Specific ideological convictions differ from group to group and individual to individual. However, **Salafi-jihadist***  foreign terrorist organizations like ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabaab and their supporters generally embrace the following narratives:

**Violent "out-grouping":**
Just like other types of targeted violence and terrorism, violent Salafi-jihadists posit the superiority of an "in-group" (in this case those that abide by their understanding of Islamic identity and practice) over an "out-group**"**. This plays out on- and offline, with groups like ISIS and the Taliban regularly carrying out attacks against Shi'a Muslims and non-Islamic faith communities, while affiliates and supporters online may refer to those they deem to be part of the "out-group" with dehumanizing terms like "filth". The following identities are particularly targeted with violent rhetoric:

- **Muslim minority groups** - International terrorist groups like ISIS purport a singular and exclusive understanding of Islamic identity. Anything that falls out of that narrow scope is subject to abuse and "takfir", or the practice of excommunication / declaring one an apostate. In correspondence with ISIS's belief that violence against non-Muslims is justified, "takfir" is exploited by groups like ISIS as a means to incite or justify violence against communities they deem to be apostates.
- **Other faith communities** - Much like REMVE rhetoric, ISIS's and other international terrorist discourse often entails antisemitism, where Jewish communities are stereotyped as "crusaders" that facilitate Western intervention in the Middle East. These narratives therefore draw on the same antisemitic tropes employed by REMVE groups, particularly conspiracy theories that accuse Jewish people of controlling global political and financial agendas.
- **LGBTQ+** - International terrorist groups like ISIS may present LGBTQ+ identities as corruptive, "imported" Western influences. In some cases, they may point to increased public acceptance and celebration of LGBTQ+ (e.g. pride months) as signs of an oncoming apocalypse.

**The "far enemy" versus the "near enemy":**
Under Bin Laden, Al-Qaeda's strategic priorities lay predominantly with fighting the "far enemy", namely the US and to some extent, Europe. Al-Qaeda propaganda was therefore rife with anti-Western discourse that justified violence as a necessary means to defend against a) Western presence and activity in Muslim-majority countries and b) the perceived oppression of and injustices against Muslims in Europe and the US. Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda's outward focus on the "far enemy" was, at the time, a marked shift from traditional extremist focuses on toppling local regimes (or the "near enemy") they deemed to be illegitimate.

> *Anti-Western narratives may refer to the US and European nations as "crusader" states or "imperialists".*
> *-*
> *"Near enemy" strategies tend to accuse local governments of apostasy and justify their violent overthrow on the basis of their perceived illegitimacy.*

*Salafi-jihadism believes in the implementation of puritanical interpretations of Islamic governance achieved specifically through a violent understanding of jihad. For more on Salafi-jihadism, read Dr. Shiraz Maher's "Salafi-Jihadism: the History of an Idea".

ISIS, on the other hand, initially focused on the "near enemy", specifically on overthrowing "apostate" Middle Eastern governance structures in its efforts to build the "Caliphate". However, as it territorially consolidated and later suffered losses, ISIS propaganda and directives then turned to the West, urging US- and Europe-based supporters to mount attacks domestically rather than attempting travel to what little territory ISIS still controlled.

**Anti-secularism:**

Violent extremists affiliated with or supportive of international terrorist groups like ISIS generally perceive secular and democratic rule to be illegitimate because they do not implement their interpretations of Islamic law. This was particularly fundamental to ISIS's ideology, manifested in its strategic focus on **state-building** and narratives that posit the necessity of a "Caliphate" as a means for implementing what they perceive to be proper Islamic governance.

**Anti-liberalism:**

Corresponding with anti-secular and anti-Western narratives, affiliates and supporters of groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda generally understand liberalism to be comprised of immoral Western values that only corrupt or erode "proper" societal norms and religious practice.

**Glorification of armed operations:**

Among other propaganda tactics, ISIS is known for producing Hollywood-style videos, or videos that resemble role-playing games like Call of Duty, to glorify their offensive campaigns and broader, militia operations. This "show of force" through displaying military tactics and resource is not new nor unique to ISIS - Al Qaeda, Al Shabaab and other foreign terrorist organizations often display weaponry in video broadcasts. ISIS, however, was particularly effective at lionizing and "hero-isizing" its members, publishing carefully crafted videos that appeal to senses of adventure and purpose.

**Gendered narratives:**

ISIS in particular has proven apt at disseminating gendered narratives that seek to recruit women to their cause. These include:

- **A rejection of Western feminism:**
  Tying in with narratives that claim liberalism is a Western-centric ideology that teaches immoral values, gendered narratives posit feminism as Western-oriented and therefore exclusionary of non-Western communities. Related narratives may point to feminist perceptions of women's rights and freedoms as teaching corrupt values that actually do women harm in the long-term. These narratives find success especially when they appeal to feelings of social exclusion and discrimination, where Western liberalism and feminism are blamed (at least in part) for instances of discrimination faced by minority women in Europe and the US. In contrast, a "Caliphate" is presented by ISIS as a safe place of sisterhood, agency and "true" female empowerment.

- **The importance of women in state-building efforts:**
  Among ISIS's gendered narratives were calls for women to migrate to the "Caliphate" to help birth and raise the next generation of ISIS fighters. While some women that joined were indeed restricted

Created for the US Prevention Practitioners Network by *the Institute for Strategic Dialogue* (ISD) and the *McCain Institute.*

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(or restricted themselves) to household roles, there is a commonly-held misconception that women who joined ISIS played no role in the "Caliphate" beyond that. On the contrary, women were also involved in implementing ISIS's ideology in the "Caliphate", with the all-women "al-Khansaa Brigade" serving as morality police specifically on women's dress and character. Women were also involved in recruitment, with some operating online forums to propagate and convince others to join.

# Digital Presence

Violent extremist groups have extensive presences online, using social networking platforms, direct-messaging applications and bespoke sites to post and distribute propaganda. ISD researchers have uncovered 24 stand-alone sites affiliated with international terrorist groups and/or ideology, for example, as well as a digital ISIS cache of over 94,000 pieces of content. Additionally, there are 53 operational semi- and non-official support groups of ISIS on the open web, operating in 15 different languages. Overall, ISD has found four overarching avenues through which affiliates and supporters communicate and share content online:

- **Stand-alone platforms/websites:** Platforms and websites either developed by supporters, support groups, or official media arms of extremist groups that host and share extremist propaganda.
- **Digital archives:** Archives host both legacy and new material produced by the various arms of extremist groups.
- **Social media networks:** Extremists often cluster in social media communities on mainstream, niche and fringe platforms online.
- **Encrypted and open-source messaging applications:** these include applications such as Telegram and RocketChat.

These avenues are used for various purposes, including networking; hosting, sharing and reformulating propaganda; mobilizing activity and resources, including funds; coordinating cyber campaigns, among others. For example, ISD uncovered instances of pro-ISIS networks comment "bombing" by posting links to violent content in comment sections of mainstream pages, disseminating propaganda with potentially wide exposure. ISIS supporters have also been known to **hijack trending hashtags**, in order to maximize reach and exposure to their content.

The digital presence of foreign terrorist organizations and their supporters is exacerbated by the tactics they use to successfully circumvent content moderation. While this "evasion toolbox" adapts as needed to responses from tech. companies, law enforcement and other public safety stakeholders, current key evasion tactics include:

- **Two-step verification hacking:** Using online phone numbers to hack and take control of social media accounts.
- **Content cloaking:** Blurring, adjusting, or covering up existing terrorist branding on content.
- **Broken text-posting:** Creating posts that use spacing or other special characters between letters in specific words to evade automated keyword detection.
- **Account hoarding:** Hijacking numerous accounts to stave off the effect of de-platforming.
- **Comment content:** Using comment spaces as means to post links, videos and other violent extremist material.

**In practice - examples of platform usage:**

Provided are examples of how violent Salafi-jihadists have used different platforms, circumvented their moderation policies and exploited Internet culture to distribute propaganda, network and mobilize others online.

**Telegram** - **networking and recruitment:**
Previously dubbed ISIS's "app of choice", Telegram has been used by ISIS to distribute propaganda, network, and to radicalize, recruit and mobilize - the app allegedly played a role in the recruitment and mobilization of the perpetrators of the Christmas market terror attacks in Berlin in 2016, for example. The group and its supporters operated relatively freely on Telegram until Europol's 2019 counter-campaigns saw an estimated 65% of ISIS-affiliated channels removed from the app. At the time, many of those effected by de-platforming turned to fringe apps like Rocket Chat and Tam Tam. Since then, ISIS supporter networks have resurged on the platform, exposing potential inconsistencies and gaps in existing moderation and take-down approaches.

**Facebook** - **propaganda pipelines:**
Through ethnographic monitoring, ISD researchers tracked, analyzed and dissected the behaviors of a network of pro-ISIS Facebook accounts which branded itself the Fuouaris Upload across the platform. Of 288 pro-ISIS accounts discovered during this monitoring — many of whom had followings in the thousands — a third (90 accounts) were controlled by one user named Luqmen Ben Tachafin, which comprised the core of the network. Between April and May 2020, the network shared at least 50 pieces of pro-ISIS video content that had collectively garnered more than 34,000 views.
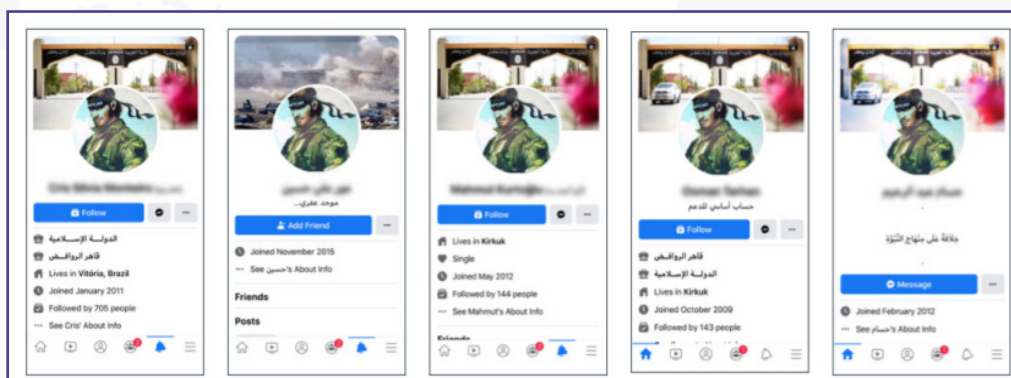


Accounts from the Fuouaris Upload network. Account hoarding gives users back-up accounts to continue posting should their primary accounts be subject to take-down.

**SoundCloud** - **hosting legacy audio content:**
SoundCloud is used by pro-ISIS supporters to host and share terrorist content by ideologues and propagandists like Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani (ISIS's former spokesperson). ISD found 18 accounts on SoundCloud that shared at least 91 pieces of ISIS audio content, and then used Facebook to signpost users to each piece of content, while also instructing his Facebook networks to visit the SoundCloud content. This demonstrates how different platforms are used for different purposes, as well as the multi-faceted nature of the extremist threat landscape online. This goes beyond linking to content - pro-ISIS networks also signpost from public social media platforms (e.g. Instagram) to private, "invite-only" chat servers on applications like Discord.

## Looking ahead - new generations of content online*:

The extensive and sophisticated use of digital platforms is further reflected in a merging of traditional ISIS and Al-Qaeda propaganda with contemporary visual Internet culture. "Chan culture" especially is increasingly adopted to visualize support for ISIS specifically or related ideologies more broadly, resulting in a new generation of extremist content that draws its inspiration from video game and other online communities. This fusion of content can be seen in:

- the emergence of **propaganda memes** that imply support for ISIS or related ideologies. As a form of image-based communication, memes convey meaning through association rather than explicit argument (as we see in text-based communication) and are subsequently more ambiguous at face value. This ambiguity allows for such content to evade moderation and take-down, and presents a less direct introduction to extremist ideology, which can serve as a gateway to more violent content.
- the co-option of **"chan slang" (terminology predominantly found in fringe imageboard forum 4chan)**, including terms like "chad" and "based". This is used to celebrate renowned international terrorists of the past, who are posited as examples of "alpha males". In contrast, men of today are positioned as effeminate, weak and sensitive. As with REMVE, Salafi-jihadist violent extremism incorporates toxic understandings of masculinity and projects binary understandings of gender.
- **"pilling language"**, or language used by fringe communities online to refer to specific ideological convictions. Salafi-jihadist violent extremists may refer to themselves as "jihadpilled".
- **gamification**, where pro-ISIS supporters come together on online games like Minecraft to digitally recreate the "Caliphate".



Examples of the "meme-ification" of ISIS (and related) propaganda. The leftmost figure shows co-option of the popular REMVE "Pepe the Frog" meme. The rightmost figure deploys ISIS's anti-LGBTQ+ hate using the "Yes Chad" meme.

### Implications:

Ultimately, traditional extremist content, which can rely heavily on lengthy, academic-style sermons and "fatwas", is being supplemented with highly-visual, meme-style content that condenses specific ideological convictions into a format that is much faster to consume. It is also less explicit in its harm and therefore prone to being misinterpreted as mainstream content by content moderators. Finally, it reflects and appeals to the Internet culture of young people online, particularly those already on fringe platforms. Visualization particularly as memes, and gamification can also normalize or lessen the gravity of violent extremist narratives, in turn serving as a gateway to more extreme content.

‼️ **\* ISD will be releasing research on the next generation of violent extremist mobilization in October 2021.**

# Other considerations

In addition to the narratives and on- and offline activities of foreign terrorist organizations and their supporters, there are other factors of the threat landscape that practitioners should bear in mind as they incorporate TVTP into their work:

**Prison radicalization:**
Prison radicalization, or the process of adopting increasingly dangerous and violent ideas while in a correctional facility, is considered "a major factor in how the threat of terrorism will unfold over the next decade." Concerns about prison radicalization entered the forefront of counterterrorism discussion in the aftermath of the spate of ISIS-affiliated terror attacks in Europe, where several of the perpetrators had pre-existing criminal backgrounds. The issue largely derives from a lack of targeted ideological rehabilitation in prisons. Those convicted of violent extremism-related offenses therefore carry out their prison sentences without programming to address their ideological convictions. Close contact with other inmates, in turn, provides them the opportunity to radicalize and recruit others to their cause or to connect with like-minded individuals. Prisons can therefore compound radicalization, serving to cement pre-existing violent extremist ideological convictions.

Concerns about prison radicalization are exacerbated by the dozens of individuals convicted of terrorism-related offenses that are slated to leave the US Bureau of Prisons (BOP) system in the next two years. Like their predecessors, most of these individuals will not have received formal programming to rehabilitate and "de-radicalize" them. This risks recidivism - evidenced in past cases like that of John Georgelas, who was convicted of committing cybercrimes on behalf of foreign terrorist organizations, served 34 months in federal prison, only to travel to Syria after to become a leading ISIS propagandist. In addition, should the US repatriate more individuals, those that are sentenced with prison time will need programming to ready them for reintegration post-release, further underscoring the urgent need for this programming to be put in place at scale.

For more on the rehabilitation of individuals serving prison time for terrorism-related offenses, see the TerRa Toolkit's manual for prison officers and the Council of Europe's Handbook for Prison and Probation Services Regarding Radicalization and Violent Extremism.

> *"As countries around the world have painstakingly realized, prisons can be a prime location for terrorists to proselytize their ideologies and recruit fellow inmates. The 'revolving door' nature of prison offers terrorists a continuous supply of potential new recruits to radicalize. Regrettably, this challenge is only likely to grow as countries seek to detect, prosecute and detain thousands of FTFs from Iraq, Syria and other conflict zones."*
>
> *-*
>
> *Interpol*

**Post-organizational digital activity:**

There are several considerations for TVTP practitioners that arise out of the current landscape and trends in its trajectory. As mentioned, the post-organizational nature of the threat bears implications for how easy it is to identify the level of risk. Formal or evidenced affiliation with known members of groups like ISIS or Al-Qaeda makes for a clearer delineation of whether an intervention is required. In the absence of such affiliation, it may prove more difficult to determine the "level" of radicalization and risk. The increasing use of **coded language and imagery** bears similar challenges - bitesize audiovisual content lowers the barrier for entry into violent extremist ideology because it relays the propaganda in a more accessible, easier and faster-to-consume format than the more traditional, lengthy sermon- and "fatwa"-style videos posted by extremist ideologues of the past. Further, these new types of content are often posted by anonymous users whose support for groups like ISIS may not be explicit at first glance of their profile, especially for unfamiliar consumers. This, again, can serve as a "mainstreaming" of violent extremism, while the implicitness of the content helps it circumvent content moderation and take-down policies.

**Rehabilitation and reintegration of FTFs:**

In addition, the FTF phenomena spurred by international terrorism poses important questions about resources and capacity for supporting rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R) programming. Those returning from ISIS-held territory carry unique risks and may require intensive support upon return. Children in particular may be prone to PTSD following exposure to ISIS's violent way of life. On the other hand, extreme violence may be normalized for children that went through ISIS's education curriculum, which included lessons on weaponry and lessons that taught ISIS's violent out-grouping. Equally, for children that are repatriated, the journey back to the US and the change in environment can serve as stress factors that exacerbate their trauma. This is further compounded by difficulties with gathering evidence about the role(s) a given individual played for ISIS, if any. While this is important to understand the crimes committed and subsequent charges required, it is also essential to help inform the types of programming needed upon an individual's return.

In sum, FTFs and their families have very specific needs and their rehabilitation requires the appropriate human-rights oriented infrastructure to be in place. This includes ensuring communities are prepared and equipped to "accept" returnees - given the stigma of criminality broadly but especially terrorism-related criminality, communities may reject the returnees that are trying to reintegrate. This can be detrimental to their broader R&R processes, as it may isolate returnees or reaffirm past "push factors" that drove them to groups like ISIS in the first place. R&R programs must therefore consider conducting community-level work to ensure given communities are prepared and resourced to support returnees. TVTP practitioners, particularly those that are well-connected at the local-level, are well-placed to drive this engagement.

**International REMVE terrorist organizations:**

In 2020, the US designated members of the [Russian Imperial Movement](#) as "specially designated global terrorists", making it the first REMVE group to entail such a designation. While this is ["primarily a sanctions-related designation"](#) as opposed to the more loaded designation of "foreign terrorist organization", it marks an important step in the recognition of the global threat of white supremacy. The group has [reportedly](#) held meetings in the US and has offered to hold paramilitary training for American white supremacists, speaking to the emerging transnationalism of the white supremacist threat landscape.

# Glossary of Ideologues, Key Terms, Figures and Groups

This page lists prominent figures, groups and concepts related to the threat landscape of international Salafi-jihadist terrorism. The lists provided should not be taken as exhaustive.

**Prominent Ideologues and Propagandists** (A - Z by first name):

- **Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi** - former leader of ISIS. Declared the "Caliphate" in 2014 and himself as "Caliph".

- **Abu Musab al-Zarqawi** - founder of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. Deployed violent anti-Shi'a operations despite Al-Qaeda leadership instructing him not to.

- **Abdullah Azzam** - one of the leading figures in the Afghan Mujahideen's fight against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Azzam was a mentor of Bin Laden and is known for his "alteration of jihad as a collective obligation" incumbent on all Muslims.

- **Abdullah Faisal** - a hate preacher known to incite violence against religious "others". Faisal has been called "one of the most prolific recruiters" for international terrorism globally.

- **Ahmad Musa Jibril** - American propagandist affiliated with ISIS.

- **Anwar al-Awlaki** - American citizen affiliated with AQAP and its propaganda magazine, Inspire. Awlaki is credited with revolutionizing extremist propaganda online and is considered to be the foremost English-speaking recruiter for international terrorism. Although he died in 2011, his content is still circulated widely.

- **Ayman al-Zawahiri** - Bin Laden's successor as leader of Al-Qaeda. He refocused Al-Qaeda's strategy on the "near enemy", encouraging the group's regional branches to appeal to regional grievances to recruit and deploy operations locally.

- **John Georgelas (Yahya al-Bahrumi) -** American ISIS propagandist that served time in 2006 for hacking websites on behalf of international terrorist groups.

- **Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani -** former spokesperson for ISIS.

- **Osama Bin Laden** - former leader and founder of Al-Qaeda. Bin Laden was focused heavily on fighting the "far enemy" and thus declared war on the US in 1996.

- **Samir Khan** - American citizen affiliated with AQAP, Al-Awlaki and *Inspire* magazine.

# Glossary of Ideologues, Key Terms, Figures and Groups

**Prominent Foreign Terrorist Organizations** (A-Z)[*]:

- **Al-Shabaab** - An affiliate of Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabaab is a terrorist group based in Somalia. The group has some traction in diaspora communities but has been less successful with recruitment than ISIS. The group seeks to overthrow the Somalian government.

- **Al Qaeda (AQ)** - founded in the late 1980s by Osama Bin Laden, the group originally focused outwardly on fighting what it deemed its greatest enemy, the US. Since Bin Laden's death, however, the group has focused more on expanding its regional branches. These include, among others:
  - AQAP - Al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula
  - AQIM - Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
  - AQIS - Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent

- **Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS, ISIL, IS, "Daesh")** - the focus of counterterrorism strategy and operations since 2014. Beyond the violence it commits, the group is known for its state-building efforts and highly effective social media strategies and extensive supporter networks across the Internet. The group has multiple formal and informal regional affiliates, including:
  - ISIS-K / ISIS-KP - Islamic State in the Khorasan Province
  - ISIS-GS - Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
  - ISIS Philippines
  - ISIS-DRC - Islamic State in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

- **Taliban** - founded in 1994 in the context of the Afghan Civil War, the Taliban seek to implement their interpretation of Shari'ah in Afghanistan. In the aftermath of US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, the group swiftly reemerged and captured much of the country.

**Related Terminology:**

International terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabaab and ISIS exploit and manipulate specific theological concepts to justify their operations and recruit others. The following are examples of the concepts being co-opted by violent Salafi-jihadist groups. These terms are by no means indicative of harm by themselves - they must be understood in the wider context within which these are used.

- **Jihad** - Salafi-jihadists exploit this term (which means "to struggle") to justify armed operations against specific targets. "Mujahid" refers to someone engaging in "jihad".
- **Shari'ah** - Salafi-jihadist groups with state-building strategies seek to overthrow what they deem to be illegitimate regimes in order to implement their puritanical understandings of Shari'ah, or Islamic law.
- **"Al wala' w'al bara'"** - meaning "loyalty and disavowal", this concept is exploited to encourage the abandonment of anything (physical and otherwise) that doesn't strictly abide by Salafi-jihadist understandings of religion and morality.
- **Takfir** - referring to excommunication or declaring someone to be an apostate. This is used by Salafi-jihadists to justify violence against specific communities.

**\* For a full list, click here.**

# Further Reading

In addition to the sources hyperlinked to throughout this information pack, we recommended the following resources.

**General:**

The Cloud Caliphate: Archiving the Islamic State in Real Time by Moustafa Ayad (Institute for Strategic Dialogue), Amarnath Amarasingam (ISD) and Audrey Alexander (Program on Extremism)

The Fuouaris Upload by Moustafa Ayad at ISD

Terrorism in America after 9/11 by New America

Homegrown: ISIS in America by Seamus Hughes and Alexander

Incitement: Anwar al-Awlaki's Western Jihad by Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens

Violent Extremism in America: Interviews with Former Extremists and Their Families on Radicalization and Deradicalization by RAND

Radicalization in Custody: Towards Data-Driven Terrorism Prevention in the United States Federal Correctional Facilities by Bennett Clifford for the Program on Extremism

Rethinking Transnational Terrorism: An Integrated Approach by Martha Crenshaw for the United States Institute of Peace (USIP)

Returning Foreign Fighters and the Reintegration Imperative by USIP

The Challenge of Foreign Fighters: Repatriating and Prosecuting ISIS Detainees by Vera Miranova for the Middle East Institute

**Tools and Databases:**

Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States by the US Department of Homeland Security.

Homegrown Violent Extremist Mobilization Indicators – 2019 Edition by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence

Global Terrorism Database by The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism at the University of Maryland

Women, Girls and Islamist Extremism by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue

Trial and Terror by The Intercept

Management of Violent Extremist Prisoners and the Prevention of Radicalization to Violence in Prisons by the UN Office for Drugs and Crime

Mapping Militants by the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University

ISIS in America by the Program on Extremism