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Why Greater American-Russian Counter-ISIL Cooperation is Needed

Blake Bassett

Russia’s late-September expansion of military operations in Syria has called into question the efficacy of the US-led counter-Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) coalition, increased the risk to American personnel, and undermined America’s image and influence in the region. Russia’s expansion has also exacerbated sectarian tensions—as Sunni states have accused Russia of expanding Iranian influence at their expense—and has raised the risks of escalation. To mitigate these concerns and speed the demise of ISIL, Washington should boost its cooperation with Moscow to defeat the Islamic State. The best option for doing this is to invite Russia to join the international counter-ISIL coalition or form a new coalition under the auspices of the United Nations. Joining forces would bolster the available firepower to combat ISIL and disrupt Moscow’s competing narrative and the perception that it is allied only with Shia states. Given ISIL’s expansion of terror attacks against both the West and Russian interests, now is the time for the White House and Kremlin to set aside their differences to defeat ISIL.

In late September 2015, Russia expanded its military support to the Syrian regime, launching airstrikes and deploying military equipment and advisers to support regime offensives. The

move, which came as a shock to the international community, represented a significant shift in Russian policy, which previously had been limited to materiel and diplomatic support. This shift has raised concerns among some in Washington who view the Russian expansion as a threat to US interests in the region. For instance, the Obama administration has argued that Russian operations have compromised the US-led international mission against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), accusing Moscow of attacking US-backed moderate Sunni opposition members and interfering with US air operations.²

Washington’s allies in the Middle East have also expressed concern over Russia’s entrance into the conflict. Like the US, regional Sunni states have accused Moscow of targeting Sunni opposition groups in Syria in an attempt to extend the life of the Assad regime.³ Furthermore, many of the region’s Sunnis view Russia’s military expansion and support for the Iranian-backed Assad regime as tantamount to spreading Iran’s regional power at their expense. Fear of Iranian expansion has further polarized the conflict along sectarian lines, causing Sunni states to


³ Ibid.
redouble efforts to support Sunni opposition groups in Syria battling the Assad regime and its Iranian proxies.\(^4\)

Regional states have also expressed concern over the uncoordinated nature of Russian operations. They have accused Moscow of violating their airspace with unannounced air sorties and cruise missile strikes.\(^5\) However, no government has been more vehemently opposed to such excursions than Ankara, which in late November shot down a Russian bomber that had strayed into its airspace.\(^6\) In response to the incident, Russia issued recriminations against Ankara and enacted sweeping economic sanctions against Turkey.\(^7\) In addition to raising tensions between the countries, the attack has increased tensions between Russia and NATO, especially following NATO’s affirmation of Turkey’s right to self-protection.\(^8\) While it appears that Russia and Turkey will stop short of a

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military confrontation for now, the incident has produced an environment for further escalation. However, such undesirable outcomes are not inevitable and can be avoided if appropriate measures are taken.

This paper, which follows in four parts, highlights the implications of Russia’s intervention in the Syrian conflict, specifically on US influence in the Middle East and Washington’s counter-ISIL mission. It also provides recommendations for minimizing the impact of the Russian intervention and hastening the defeat of the Islamic State. To set the stage for the analysis, the first section details the build-up and expansion of Russian military operations in Syria. The second section explores Moscow’s intervention calculus and argues that the move was a rational decision aimed at protecting its strategic interests in the region, bolstering its international influence, and undermining US influence. The section also explains how Russia’s intervention was predicated on legitimate security concerns surrounding the spread of terrorism in the region. The third section explores the implications of the Russian intervention, both on the US and its counter-ISIL mission, as well as on regional stability more broadly. This section argues that the Russian intervention has undermined the credibility of the US-led international coalition and American influence in the region; threatened the safety of US military personnel operating in the region; increased the risk of unintended escalation; exacerbated sectarian fissures between the region’s Sunni and Shia populations; and has prolonged the conflict. The final section posits that the competition between Russia and the US is exacerbating the consequences of the Russian intervention and argues that greater cooperation between the two powers will be needed to undo the damage, as well as defeat ISIL. The section argues that inviting Russia to join the international counter-ISIL coalition—or joining forces
with Russia to form a UN coalition—would eliminate the current US-Russian competition that is harming American interests in the region and speed the demise of ISIL.

I. Russia Goes All-In

Russia began expanding its military presence in Syria as early as July 2015, and rapidly accelerated its build-up through mid-September, deploying rotary and fixed-wing aircraft, main battle tanks, and armored personnel carriers to al-Assad International Airport in Syria’s western Latakia Province.\(^9\) Signaling that Russia also intended to deploy ground forces to Syria, Moscow delivered prefabricated housing for over 1,000 personnel and a portable aircraft control tower to the airbase.\(^10\) Despite these warning signs, Russia shocked the international community when it launched an air campaign in Syria on September 30, 2015, just one day after Russian President Vladimir Putin met with US President Barack Obama on the fringes of the United Nations General Assembly meeting in New York. Despite objections from Washington and the international community, Russia increased its ground presence and military operations in Syria throughout September and November, deploying additional aircraft and materiel and directly supporting regime offensives in Aleppo and Hama.\(^11\)


\(^10\) Ibid.

Following the initiation of airstrikes, Washington and its allies have accused Russia of mostly targeting moderate opposition elements—including those backed by the US—in order to prop up the Assad regime, a claim Russia has refuted.\textsuperscript{12} For instance, in an early November Congressional hearing, Anne Patterson, the administration’s top US diplomat in the Middle East, claimed that 85\% -90\% of Russian airstrikes have not targeted ISIL elements. Instead, she insisted that Russian airstrikes have instead targeted the moderate opposition and caused a mass exodus of refugees seeking reprieve from the Russian airstrikes.\textsuperscript{13}

In addition to expanding military operations in Syria, Moscow simultaneously has increased its outreach to potential regional partners in order to facilitate its operations in the region. In late September 2015, Moscow established a ‘quadrilateral’ intelligence synchronization cell in Baghdad.\textsuperscript{14} Moscow has claimed that the quad cell—which is comprised of Iraqi, Iranian, Syrian, and Russian military representatives—is limited to coordinating operations in Syria, and that it has no plans for operations in Iraq unless such support is officially


requested by the Iraqi government.\textsuperscript{15} However, such assurances have done little to assuage the concerns of those in Washington who fear that an expanded Russian military presence in Iraq would interfere with the US campaign against ISIL and potentially dilute American influence in the country by giving Baghdad an alternative to US support.\textsuperscript{16}

Moscow has also extended support to the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds, both of which are key allies in the US fight against ISIL. For instance, in early October, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov claimed that Moscow was sending arms to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) through Baghdad and asserted that Kurdish representatives were present in the Russian-led intelligence fusion cell in Baghdad, a claim the KRG has denied.\textsuperscript{17} Moreover, just weeks later in Syria, Moscow announced plans to provide direct military assistance to the Syrian Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG), Washington’s most reliable ground partner in Syria, again raising concerns in Washington over Russian interference with its trusted counter-ISIL allies.\textsuperscript{18}


Russian interference in Iraq, the Obama administration probably worries that Russian interference with the YPG would interfere with coalition-backed YPG operations and dampen US influence with the group, particularly by challenging Washington’s role as the group’s main supplier of military support.

Russia has also purportedly offered to extend military support to moderate Syrian opposition elements fighting ISIL, including those backed by the United States, urging opposition forces to strike a truce with the Syrian government to fight against ISIL. Moscow claims it has been in daily contact with elements of the moderate Syrian opposition since late October, including elements from the National Coordination Committee and the Syrian National Coalition, and has purportedly expresses a willingness to provide aerial support to opposition elements fighting against the Islamic State. Moreover, Russian officials claim to be using intelligence provided by the Syrian opposition to strike ISIL targets, including the Kweires Airbase in northern Syria. Russian allegations of coordination with the Syrian opposition likely are overstated, however, having been overshadowed in recent weeks by a devastating Russian air campaign that has caused scores of Syrian opposition and civilian casualties.


II. Moscow’s Intervention Calculus

As previously noted, Russia’s intervention in Syria came as a surprise to many in Washington and the international community. In response to the expansion of Russian military operations, policymakers questioned how the international community missed the signs of an impending Russian intervention and wondered why the Kremlin decided to intervene so abruptly. Such questions underscore fundamental misunderstandings of Russia’s intentions among Washington’s elite, as well as the country’s role in the region and the broader international community. Russia’s intervention is founded on several critical interests and should have not come as a surprise. In fact, what is truly surprising is that its intervention in the conflict took so long, given a multitude of Russian interests in the region.

First and foremost, Russia’s foray in Syria can be explained by a desire to reclaim its place as one of the great powers in the region and its reputation as a great world power. Prior to the end of the Cold War, Russia was a prominent player in the Middle East, yielding great influence over the states in the region. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, however, Moscow has been unable to project power in the Middle East and provide the same level of support to its regional allies as it did during the Soviet Union. Thus, over the past few decades, Russia has seen its influence in the region contract, while that of the United States had expanded. Putin’s aggressive, revisionist foreign policy agenda in recent years—most notably the Russian seizure of Crimea and support for Eastern Ukrainian separatists—has made clear his aspirations to return Russia to

its place as a world superpower. Thus, it should come as no surprise that, following the rapid deterioration of the Syrian regime after several defeats and stalled offensives this past summer, Putin would sweep in to prop up the Assad regime to save Russia’s last bastion of influence in the region.

Some analysts and scholars have also argued that Russia’s intervention can be explained by Moscow’s strategic military interests in Syria, namely Moscow’s determination to retain its access to the Mediterranean naval base at Tartus, which it has leased from the Syrian regime since 1971. In addition to its strategic location in the Mediterranean, the naval facility is one of two Russian ‘warm-water’ ports—the other being Sevastopol in Crimea—which remain free of sea-ice and thus ensure the year-round functionality of the Russian navy. Some analysts have argued that Russia’s interest in Tartus is overstated because the facility lacks the command and control capabilities needed to direct operations in the region. Though, one need only look back to the Soviet Union naval posture during the Cold War—at its apex of power—to appreciate the importance of Tartus to Russian policymakers with revisionist aspirations. For instance, prior to the fall of the Soviet Union, the Soviet Navy enjoyed access to warm water ports in Egypt, Libya, Yugoslavia, and Algeria, using them to sustain global naval operations.

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Putin’s actions in Iraq and Syria can also be explained as an attempt to undermine Washington’s influence in the region by presenting an alternative to the American order in the Middle East at a time when regional confidence in Washington is at its lowest point in over fifty years. Indeed, Russian support in lieu of assistance from Washington presents an attractive alternative to those in the region—such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt—who view US resolve as waning, as well as to countries that are frustrated with the slowness and inconsistency of American military aid and Washington’s stringent end-use restrictions. Moreover, after over a year-and-a-half of fighting ISIL, Moscow’s intervention has also underscored the US-led coalition’s inability to end the conflict against ISIL in a timely manner, probably further eroding Washington’s credibility and image of military superiority in the region and beyond.

Russian activity in the Middle East may also be an attempt by Moscow to deflect attention away from mounting domestic issues. Plummeting oil prices and US sanctions in response to Russia’s incursion into Ukraine have seriously hurt Russia’s economy. For example, in the span of just one year, the ruble has depreciated by over 50%, capital flight has tripled to over $150 billion, and inflation has skyrocketed to nearly 10%. Moreover, economists project that the Russian economy will have contracted by over 3% in 2015, portending even greater economic setbacks for years to come. Public opinion polls


27 Ibid.
seem to indicate that Russia’s military intervention in Syria has served as a distraction from such ills. Despite the dismal economic forecast, Putin’s approval ratings skyrocketed to a record high of nearly 90% just days after Russian airstrikes began in Syria, with a separate poll indicating that over 70% of the Russian population approves of the strikes.28

Given the bleak state of the Russian economy, Moscow’s intervention can also be viewed as an attempt to safeguard its economic interests in the region. In 2010, Russia signed a $10 billion deal with Iran, Iraq, and Syria to construct a natural gas pipeline—which is scheduled to open between 2016 and 2017 and traverses currently ISIL-controlled territory—connecting Iran’s South Pars field to Europe.29 Retaking the territory through which the pipeline traverses is a likely requisite for competition of the project, giving Moscow an added incentive to defeat the group. In addition to being an important source of revenue, the deal also gives Russia physical control of the pipeline, enabling Moscow to retain its influence on gas exports to Europe.30 Moreover, Russia’s state-owned Gazprom also has significant oil holdings in Iraq, including a 30 percent stake in the Badra oil field, which has an estimated geological reserve

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Indeed, Lavrov’s concerns are warranted given the surge in Russian foreign fighters joining jihadist groups in Iraq and Syria over the past year. As of early 2015, at least 1,500 ethnic Russians had joined the ranks of jihadist groups—most of which have joined ISIL—in Syria and Iraq, according to a database maintained by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, though Mr. Putin claims that number is as high as 5,000-7,000.\footnote{Mollayev, Arsen, and Valdimir Isachenkov. "Islamic State on Recruitment Spree in Russia’s North Caucasus." Global News. October 28, 2015. Accessed November 01, 2015.}

Nevertheless,
even when using modest estimates, the only countries that have produced more foreign fighters than Russia are Saudi Arabia (1,500-2,500), Tunisia (1,500-3,000), and Jordan (∼2,000).  

Moscow is concerned that these fighters will return home to spread their extremist ideology and conduct terrorist attacks, a fear echoed in late October by Putin, who told reporters that Russia “can’t allow… [foreign fighters] to use the experience they have… gained in Syria back at home.”

Moscow’s fears of spillover are well founded in light of a significant increase in terrorist attacks in Russia over the last decade. According to the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, nearly 1,900 terrorist attacks occurred in Russia between 1991 and 2012—resulting in more than 3,800 deaths and the taking of over 7,200 hostages—placing Russia seventh on the list of countries with the most terrorist attacks and terrorism-related deaths.

Moreover, just over a week after ISIL’s affiliate in Egypt—the
Islamic State in the Sinai (formerly Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis)—bombed a Russian airliner over the Sinai, which killed all 224 aboard, ISIL central released a video threatening additional attacks in Russia, “very soon” in retribution for Russian airstrikes in Syria.\(^{37}\)

### III. Power Begs to be Countered: Implications of Russian-American Counter-ISIL Competition

Russia’s expansion of military operations in Iraq and Syria has further destabilized the region and exacerbated sectarian tensions. Many of the region’s Sunnis have denounced the Russian intervention and consider Moscow’s support of Shia groups in the region—as well as its strikes against moderate Sunni elements in Syria—as an effort to prolong the Assad regime and expand Iran’s influence at their expense. Tensions have been particularly high between Turkey’s Sunni-dominated government and Russia, who Ankara has accused of striking Sunni Turkomen in northern Syria and violating its airspace to support the Syrian regime’s operations in the north.\(^{38}\) Following weeks of unapproved overflights and other provocative behavior—including the illumination and jamming of early


warning and detection radars—the Turkish military downed a Russian bomber in late November.\textsuperscript{39}

Moreover, Qatar and Saudi Arabia have contemplated conducting airstrikes against the Syrian regime in response to Russian airstrikes against the moderate opposition, a move that would serve to aggravate the sectarian fragmentation of the conflict.\textsuperscript{40} For example, just days after Russian airstrikes began, dozens of conservative Saudi clerics renewed calls for jihad against the Syrian government and its allies, calling for Arab and Muslim countries to “give all moral, material, political and military” support to the holy warriors of Syria, claiming that these warriors “…are defending the whole Islamic nation.”\textsuperscript{41} Senior clerics also urged Sunnis to “trust and support” these warriors, reasoning that the region would see the “turn of one Sunni country after another” to Shia rule if the Sunni opposition in Syria were defeated.\textsuperscript{42}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}


\bibitem{42} Ibid.
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Russia’s military activities in Iraq and Syria have also called into question the credibility of the US counter-ISIL coalition, which critics have argued has produced little, if any, results over the past year. Just weeks after US Central Command commander General Lloyd Austin told Congress that the administration’s train and equip program had produced only a handful of active fighters, Russian airstrikes began pounding US-backed opponents of the Assad regime, no doubt adding insult to injury.\(^43\) Even more, the size and scope of the Russian intervention in Syria, as well as the rapidity and brutality with which it has been executed, has in many cases overshadowed the international coalition’s military efforts, leading some to question the sincerity and utility of Western military operation.

Nowhere are sentiments of Russian military superiority clearer than in Iraq, where the Shia population has praised Russian military operations—while openly denouncing those of the US—and has even accused Washington of supporting ISIL.\(^44\) Ibrahim Bahr al-Ulum, an Iraqi parliamentarian, underscored such sentiments in November when he said, “What the people


in the street care about is how to get Daesh out of Iraq,” using an Arabic name for ISIL, “[and] now they feel Russia is more serious than the United States.” Russia’s expanded influence in Iraq is also seen at the local level, highlighted by President Putin’s surge in popularity among Iraq’s Shia population. Photoshopped images of “Sheikh Putin” dressed in traditional southern tribal garb have become some of the most popular images on Iraqi Shia social media pages, and even adorn public spaces in Shia neighborhoods. This outpouring of public support for Russia has placed significant pressure on Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to seek Russian assistance, in lieu of US support. For instance, in late October, parliamentarians from Iraq’s Shia ruling alliance sent a formal request to Abadi asking him to authorize Russian military operations in Iraq. And while as of mid-January Abadi has yet to authorize such a request, it is unclear how long he will be able to keep his political rivals at bay.

In addition to harming America’s credibility, uncoordinated Russian military operations pose a direct physical threat to US personnel in the region and increase the risk of escalation and miscalculation between Russian and American forces operating in Syria. While US and Russian officials are reportedly in contact to avoid run-ins in Syria, the Pentagon has acknowledged several instances in which Russian aircraft have

46 Ibid.

As mentioned previously, the fear of unintended escalation between the various actors in Syria became a reality in late November with the Turkish downing of a Russian bomber. The aircraft was shot down over northern Syria, killing both pilots aboard.\footnote{Gutteridge, Nick, and Leda Reynolds. "WATCH: Syria Rebels Launch Rocket Attack on Rescue Helicopter Which 'KILLS Russian Marine'" Express. November 25, 2015.} Ankara claimed it issued at least ten warnings before
shooting the plane down. However, Moscow has refuted such claims, asserting that the aircraft never crossed into Turkish airspace. Russia has even accused Turkey of shooting down the bomber to protect its oil trade with the Islamic State. Russia has responded to the attack with harsh recriminations of its own and expansive sanctions against Turkey, restricting the import of Turkish goods, barring new Turkish construction activities, and even removing Turkish products from supermarket shelves. While the incident has stopped short of Russian military retaliation against Ankara for now, tensions remain high, especially following Washington and NATO’s public affirmation of Turkey’s right to defend itself.

IV. Time For Russian-American Counter-ISIL Cooperation

In order to mitigate the negative impacts of Russian intervention in Syria, hasten the defeat of ISIL, and bring about

53 Ibid.
a political solution to the crisis, Washington should invite the Russians to join the international coalition against ISIL. The longer that the US and Russia conduct uncoordinated operations in the same area, the greater the chance of miscalculation and human error, which could result in miscalculation and unintended escalation of force. In contrast, coordinated operations would decrease the risk to US personnel in the region, bolster the US-led coalition’s counter-ISIL efforts, and lessen the burden on the United States. A coordinated military effort in pursuit of common operational goals would also compound combat power and thus multiply battlefield effects.

For instance, unlike the US coalition, conventional Russian military assets are on the ground in Syria, including main battle tanks, fixed and rotary-wing aircraft, combat advisers, artillery, and rocket launchers. This would add a critical ground component to the coalition’s fight in Syria, a capability it severely lacks. As things currently stand, ISIL is able to hide from coalition airstrikes by obscuring their positions and moving under the cover of night. Having coalition personnel and weapons on the ground to coordinate fires, vet targets, and

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assault ISIL positions would limit the group’s freedom of movement and provide a huge boost to the US campaign.

Welcoming Russia to the US coalition would also create a unified narrative against ISIL. As mentioned above, Russia’s entrance into the conflict has created a competing narrative that has undermined Washington’s, calling into question the efficacy of the international coalition and American commitment. As Russia continues to use aggressive military tactics and sophisticated capabilities against ISIL, pressure will undoubtedly mount on Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi and others in the region to partner with the Russians to leverage their combat power. Such an outcome would be detrimental to Washington’s influence in the region, which relies heavily on military aid—and its perception of military superiority—as a lever for influencing regimes in the region. While it is true that many states would prefer American military support—given the prestige and sophistication of US combat systems—giving them a choice is risky business. Joining forces with Russia, on the other hand, would remove the decision to choose and, more importantly, eliminate the current competition between the countries, which regional states are using to play Washington and Moscow off the other to maximize support from both sides.

Welcoming Russia into the coalition would also disband Moscow’s coalition and with it the perception that it is supporting an expansion of Iranian influence in the region at the expense of Sunni states. And while it is unlikely that Putin would cut ties with the Assad regime to join the international coalition, bringing Russia into the fold would automatically place it into an alliance with the region’s Sunni states, forcing Moscow to balance the interests of its allied Shia and Sunni partners.

Those opposed to Russian-US cooperation will undoubtedly argue that Washington and Moscow’s goals are
irreconcilable, pointing to Russian support of the Assad regime, its partnership with Iran, and its airstrikes against the moderate Syrian opposition. While such concerns are relevant, they do not overshadow the shared interests both countries have in defeating ISIL, combatting international terrorism, and stabilizing the region. Indeed, history tells us that Moscow and Washington have been able to work together when their interests align. For example, in 2001, Russia provided intelligence support to assist the US government in overthrowing the Taliban in Afghanistan. As former Russian foreign minister, Igor Ivanov, explained, Moscow’s support for that operation was driven by its desire to route out extremist groups in the region, a goal shared by the US government: “We wanted an antiterrorist international coalition like the anti-Nazi coalition.”

Moreover, instead of furthering American interests, isolating Russia from the coalition has incentivized Russia to act counter to US interests. For instance, without appropriate channels to ensure accountability, Moscow has been able to blame “accidental” strikes against the US-backed opposition on Washington’s failure to share intelligence. For instance, in late November, Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, hinted that Washington’s refusal to coordinate counterterrorism operations in Syria may be to blame for Russian strikes against the opposition: “We are ready to back the patriotic opposition, including the so-called Free Syrian Army, with our air support. However, Washington is refusing to inform us of the locations

of the terrorists and where the opposition is based.” Bringing Russia into the fold would give Russia the benefit of superior US intelligence on the locations of ISIL and moderate opposition elements and would thus removing such excuses. It would also provide the added benefit of giving the US greater visibility on Russian activities. With greater visibility would come increased scrutiny of Russian military actions, giving Moscow an incentive to focus on ISIL targets, instead of targeting the moderate opposition.

Though, Moscow almost certainly would refuse to limit its strikes on ISIL targets if doing so meant hastening the fall of the Assad regime and with it Russia’s remaining foothold of power in the region. Accordingly, in order to get the Russian’s to join the coalition, Washington likely will need to reassure the Kremlin that it will have a stake in the future of Syria. To do this, the White House must officially ditch its “Assad Must Go Now” precondition to a political settlement. This does not mean, however, that the administration need support Assad staying in power, but instead recognizes that the ISIL threat must be vanquished before a political transition can take hold, as any new government would almost certainly fail to both rebuild Syria’s governing institution and defeat the Islamic State. In late December press conference at the UN, Secretary Kerry indicated the Obama administration was indeed willing to set aside its maximalist demands for Assad’s immediate ouster: “We began to really come to the reality that this demand [for Assad’s immediate removal] was in fact prolonging the war, creating greater agony and suffering, and not getting us anywhere but in a stalemate. And so it was important not to put

the cart before the horse and require a determination about a penultimate issue before you begin to get to the table.”

This tonal shift is a good first step in reassuring Moscow, though it must also be followed up with action, including making the Syrian regime a full participant in the negotiation process, a stipulation that Washington appears willing to entertain.

However, even if the Obama administration sets aside preconditions and welcomes Syria to the negotiating table, Moscow likely would be reluctant to fall in line behind the US in the current international counter-ISIL coalition, as doing so may make it appear that Moscow is bending to Washington’s power. Accordingly, building off the unanimously approved UN Security Council resolution for ending the conflict—an agreement that calls for a general ceasefire and provides a roadmap for a political transition—the White House should put forth a resolution calling for a unified UN military coalition to fight the Islamic State. Similar to the coalition that was assembled during the Korean War under UNSC resolution 84, a UN counter-ISIL coalition would include all key stakeholders in the conflict. Moscow likely would be open to joining an UN-sanctioned coalition, especially if was treated as an equal and given joint command responsibilities with the United States. Indeed, Putin’s statement at the United Nations General Assembly in late September signaled his desire to join forces with the international community to fight ISIL, calling for “a
genuinely broad international coalition” to fight the group. He also suggested that a UNSC resolution be passed to “coordinate” military efforts against the Islamic State.⁶³

In addition to arguments that US and Russian goals are irreconcilable, opponents of US-Russian cooperation have argued that cooperation would be counterproductive because it risks losing the support of regional allies who are opposed to Russian actions in the region. However, there is a growing consensus amongst regional states that Russia’s intervention is not all bad. Baghdad and the Iraqi Kurds have expressed a desire for greater cooperation between Russia and the West, believing that it would hasten ISIL’s defeat. Moreover, even the Sunni Hashemite Regime in Jordan has publicly agreed to coordinate military operations with Russia in southern Syria.⁶⁴ And while Saudi Arabia and Turkey likely still oppose cooperation, potential planned meetings between Russia and Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud signal that there may be common ground between the two.⁶⁵ Alleviating

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Turkey’s concerns will undoubtedly be more difficult, however, especially given the recent air incident and historical tensions between the two. Nevertheless, Ankara, which has experienced an uptick in ISIL attacks, has a vested interest in hastening the defeat of ISIL and mending its diplomatic and economic relations with Moscow. Thus, Turkish concerns may be assuaged if Moscow’s entrance into the coalition was contingent on Russia focusing its operations on ISIL, instead of the moderate opposition, ceasing its support of the YPG, and normalizing trade and diplomatic ties with Ankara.

Though, given Russia’s recent expansion of sanctions against Turkey in late December, assuaging Turkish concerns likely is not at the top of Putin’s list of priorities. Nevertheless, Putin has signaled that he is open to greater cooperation with non-traditional partners to eradicate the ISIL threat, which could even include Turkey. He has also indicated a willingness to limit attacks against moderate opposition elements, a major sticking point for Ankara. Nevertheless, the shared interest of combating ISIL likely will not, in itself, undo the damage caused by Ankara’s late November downing of the Russian bomber. Accordingly, the US must flex its diplomatic muscle to mend ties between Ankara and Moscow. Instead of vocalizing its support for Turkey’s right to protect itself, which


added insult to injury, Washington must emphasize the need for reconciliation. Insisting that Russia acknowledge its violations of Turkish airspace and pressing Ankara to submit an official apology would be a good first step in restarting healthy relations between the two countries.

While inviting Russia to join the coalition and mediating the dispute between Ankara and Moscow are necessary steps to bring stability to the region and defeat the Islamic State, such measures are insufficient. Washington must also convince the Sunni opposition that its interests—namely the removal of the Assad regime—are better served through supporting international mediation, a monumental task given the international community’s failure to deliver at Geneva I and II. Washington must also convince the opposition that helping the coalition fight ISIL will it achieve a transitional government more quickly than fighting the Syrian regime. This too likely will be a difficult hurdle, but it can be achieved if the international community fully commits to the UN transition plan.

Some opposition groups likely would also demand the cessation of Russian strikes against them in exchange for supporting the coalition’s anti-ISIL ambitions, especially if the opposition were to agree to support a coalition that included Russia. This hurdle is not insurmountable, however. Indeed, Russian support for opposition elements—as previously mentioned with the case of air support to opposition fighters near Kweires Airbase in northern Syria—indicates that there are at least some groups that would not reject cooperating with Russia.  

Moreover, the recently passed UNSC resolution addressing the Syrian conflict could provide the opposition with the necessary reassurances to get them onboard. Passed in mid-December, the resolution calls for a cease-fire so that the regime and opposition can “engage in formal negotiations on a political transition process… with a target of early January 2016 for the initialization of talks.” The resolution notes that the ceasefire will not apply to offensive and defensive actions against terrorist elements, such as ISIL. This stipulation, which was agreed to by Russia, would require Moscow to halt its strikes against the moderate opposition, a development that may make the opposition less hostile to Russian membership in the international coalition. Before reconciliation between the opposition and Russia can take place, however, Russia must cease striking the moderate opposition. Although, before that can happen, the UN Security Council must reach concurrence on which opposition groups are considered terrorist organizations, a key area of departure, according to UN officials.


70 Ibid.


Such disagreements underscore the need for greater cooperation between all parties involved in the conflict. Forming a joint UN military coalition to fight ISIL would help settle such disagreements by standardizing military rules of engagement (‘ROE’) that clearly identify specific groups of enemy combatants. It would also establish clear collateral damage estimates (‘CDE’) — a calculation that judges the threshold for acceptable risk to non-combatants before an airstrike can occur — likely reducing the likelihood of civilian casualties. A joint coalition would also put authority for clearing airstrikes under a single, unified command, requiring all members to approve strikes, lessening the likelihood of accidental Russian strikes against the opposition.

**Conclusion**

The rivalry between the United States and Russia in Iraq and Syria is starting to look a lot like the Cold War competitions of years past, with both sides seeking to undermine the other in order to gain the upper hand. As was often the case then, today’s competition is unlikely to be advantageous for either side and will end up doing more harm than good. The competition between the countries has created a volatile scenario where neither side is able to fully achieve its objectives of defeating ISIL and bringing a modicum of stability in the region. Moreover, the rivalry has led to miscalculations that have heightened tensions to dangerous levels between Russia on one hand, and Turkey and NATO on the other. While Washington is engaged in efforts to deescalate tensions between the countries, it is unclear whether such steps
will prove fruitful in the face of Turkish defiance.\textsuperscript{73} For example, Ankara has refused to apologize for shooting down Russia’s bomber and instead has seized the opportunity to move closer to Western Europe, much to the chagrin of the Russians.\textsuperscript{74}

Russia is unlikely to take such developments lightly, however. Putin’s efforts to limit the expansion of NATO and the EU in Eastern Europe indicate that Moscow, more often than not, lashes out when it feels cornered or when its vital interests are jeopardized.\textsuperscript{75} Accordingly, it would be naive to expect Russia to back down in Syria, where it has deployed a significant military force to protect its last bastion of influence in the region. Therefore, it would be counterproductive for the US to pursue policies that ignore Russian interests in the fight against ISIL, especially those that assume short-term or minimal Russian involvement. Instead, Washington must come to terms with the reality of continued Russian presence and also recognize that, under such circumstances, it cannot achieve victory against ISIL on its own. Instead, the administration will have to work with Russia and other major stakeholders in the conflict if it hopes to succeed. Before this can be done,


however, Washington must first place defeating ISIL above settling scores with Putin.

While making amends will not be easy, it is important to note that history is full of examples where shared threats forged unlikely alliances. During World War II, Hitler’s quest for world domination drove the US into an alliance with Stalin, a move that would have seemed implausible prior to the war. Moreover, even at the height of the Cold War, the Soviet Union and Washington showed a willingness to cooperate in limited counterterrorism engagement.\(^\text{76}\) Now is the time for such cooperation in the face of the ISIL threat. Indeed, the early December ISIL-inspired attack in San Bernardino, which killed 14 Americans and wounded several others, should serve as a sobering reminder that new approaches are needed to address the evolving and expanding ISIL threat.\(^\text{77}\) Now is time for the US to realize that the enemies of ISIL—including and especially Russia—could and should be Washington’s friends.

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Secret Evidence and its Legalities in an Evolving World of Intelligence and Cybersecurity

Donna Artusy

The use of secret intelligence and secret evidence are necessary to ensuring national security. The intersection of these facets with international law is somewhat ambiguous and must be further clarified to ensure its proper use. This will have critical impact over the cyber domain, both US and UK intelligence agencies, and the use of legal doctrine. This paper argues that the use of secret evidence and secret intelligence is essential under certain circumstances and has great potential for further incorporation in the legal system, whether it is through the legal channels or through more informal practices.

The use of secret evidence and its interaction with international law brings about the duality of upholding legal integrity while still maintaining the protection of a state. This essay will focus on three systems that will face this concern: the Budapest Convention as it relates to the law of cybercrime; the Investigatory Power Tribunal in the United Kingdom; and the Venona Project and its respective cases. This paper will argue that the use of secret evidence and secret intelligence is essential in certain circumstances and has great potential for further incorporation in the legal system, whether it is through the legal channels or through more informal practices.

It is important to make the distinction between secret evidence and secret intelligence; both can be used in legal proceedings and in less official channels. For the purposes of
this paper, secret evidence is defined as “[evidence] where it is put forward by one party and used by the court, but is not ultimately disclosed to the other party." The Secret Intelligence Service defines secret intelligence as “information acquired against the wishes and generally without the knowledge of the originators or possessors. Sources are kept secret from readers as are the techniques used to acquire the information. Secret intelligence provides privileged insights not available openly.”

The use of secret evidence in trials can present a problem in court cases because when evidence is not made public, there are often concerns of potential human rights violations. These concerns, in turn, raise the question of upholding the protection of the individual against the protection of the greater good of national security. Secret Intelligence: A Reader notes, “Recognizing the difference between law enforcement and intelligence objectives is especially important in terrorism investigations — both to protect civil liberties and to ensure effective investigations.” This applies especially in the Diplock Courts of Northern Ireland, which held trials without a jury and dealt mostly with terrorism cases.

The prioritization between protection of human rights and terrorism is difficult. The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) considered this matter when it determined that “An exception to a right guaranteed under the [European]
Convention [on Human Rights] must be narrowly interpreted. It [ECtHR] added that: ‘Powers of the secret surveillance of citizens, characterizing as they do the police state, are tolerable only in so far as strictly necessary for safeguarding the democratic institutions.’”5 “Individuals have rights, but these rights are limited by collective needs and the latter may be more pressing in certain circumstances...This does not mean, however, that the State is free to do as it wishes...there are also limits on its freedom...”6

This paper will examine the three aforementioned institutions that represent this duality in the context of secret evidence and secret intelligence. Specifically, it will examine the Budapest Convention in connection with cybercrime and its use of secret intelligence; the Investigatory Powers Tribunal, which represents the use of both secret evidence and secret intelligence; and the Venona Project, as it represents both secret evidence and intelligence. The cases are outlined by tracing the historical evolution of secret evidence and intelligence within the timeframe of 1943-present. The legal issues relating to intelligence and security have not been as thoroughly examined as other guiding policies such as legislation and can be interpreted in very subjective and tenuous manners: “...legal framework for security intelligence is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for democratic oversight. Therefore, the standards to be established for oversight must include not just the legality but also the broader issue of propriety involving consideration of ethical and human rights issues.”7

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The Budapest Convention

One of the emerging legal treaties in the realm of cybercrime is the Budapest Convention. Formally known as the Convention of Cybercrime, the Convention is the only multinational agreement thus far that specifically addresses cybercrime. Its purpose is to create an agreed upon set of norms that:

Recognizes] the need for co-operation between states and private industry in combating cybercrime and the need to protect legitimate interests in the use and development of information technologies.

The Convention has been ratified or acceded to by 47 states, including the United States in 2006. This demonstrates a desire for international cooperation, but there is a great need for participation from more states. For example, other supranational institutions such as the International Criminal Court has jurisdiction over the 123 parties to the Rome

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11 There is the Additional Protocol to the Convention on Cybercrime, concerning the criminalization of act of a racist and xenophobic nature committed through computer systems put into effect as of March 2006, but inclusive of only 14 signatory states and 24 ratifications, not including the US or the UK. This represents a gap between a desire for universality and the lack of its practical application. Council of Europe website, Protocole additionnel à la Convention sur la cybercriminalité, relatif à l’incrimination d’actes de nature raciste et xenophobe commis par le biais de systèmes informatiques. Available at http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/FR/Treaties/Html/189.htm.
Statute,\textsuperscript{12} while the International Court of Justice maintains all 193 members of the UN under its jurisdiction.\textsuperscript{13} The European Court of Human Rights has 47 member states.\textsuperscript{14} Despite the participation of states in the Budapest Convention, implementation has proven problematic. Issues of enforcement jurisdiction\textsuperscript{15} bring about the difficult question of where individuals can be tried and application of either local law or whether extradition must take place.\textsuperscript{16} Individual countries have enacted their own statewide legislation on the issue of cybercrime,\textsuperscript{17} but the lack of universality needs to be ameliorated. There is unrealized potential in the realm of cybercrime, as many parties to the treaty have not reached sufficient consensus to materialize further results.

\textsuperscript{12} Cour Pénale International: À Propos de la Cour, LA CPI en coup d’oeil. Available online at https://www.icc-cpi.int/fr_menus/icc/about%20the%20court/icc%20at%20a%20glance/Pages/icc%20at%20a%20glance.aspx.
\textsuperscript{13} Charter of the United Nations, Chapter XIV: The International Court of Justice, Article 92-93. Available at http://www.icj-cij.org/documents/index.php?p1=4&p2=1#Chapter14. It should be noted that I do not mean to imply that quantity overrides quality regarding participation, but this is meant to make a distinction among the participatory states in the Convention as compared to supranational courts. It also calls into question further jurisdictional issues and why facets of the Budapest Convention were not included as amendments to the United Nations charter, but that is beyond the scope of this paper.
\textsuperscript{14} Conseil de l’Europe: Adhésion de l’Union européenne, Available at http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/standardsetting/hrpolicy/Accession/default_fr.asp.
\textsuperscript{15} Clough, page 413.
\textsuperscript{16} For the purposes of this paper, further details on jurisdictional claims will not be addressed, but should be noted that this holds significant impact in hearing cases. Clough, pages 414-416 for more information.
In cases involving cybercrime, secret evidence plays a crucial role, but it is difficult to classify secret evidence gathered as admissible in a court case for many reasons, especially that of plausible deniability. This is further complicated by the fact that cybercrime itself is difficult to prosecute given legal issues again pertaining to jurisdiction, attribution, and the ‘absence of capable guardians.’

This means there are certain members of individual communities that look for questionable ‘red flag’ activities. On a more global scale, it is very difficult to have such protective provisions, and thus a ‘guardian’ is a very scarce resource. Although a definition of cyber terrorism has not yet been agreed upon under the auspices of cybercrime, the “international community recognizes terrorism as a threat to international peace and security.” Information gathered in the cyber domain can be somewhat ambiguous — the concern of hearsay brings about the question of the validity of evidence. This matter is further complicated by the international community’s inability to determine the responsible party of a cybercrime—there is debate as to whether cyber warfare is considered actual and if the Laws of Armed Conflict (LOAC) apply. Finally, the intricacies concerning the role of state versus non-state actors further confounds this matter, which again poses jurisdictional questions.

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19 Clough, 7.
20 Ibid, 8.
21 Jeffrey Carr, Inside Cyber Warfare (Sebastopol: O’Reily Media, Inc., 2012), 64.
23 Reveron, 76.
24 Carr, 52-56.
An attack in the context of cyber warfare is also not clearly defined: if the attack manifests itself in kinetic form or if it causes “disruption,” some scholars argue this constitutes sufficient grounds for a military response.\textsuperscript{25} There are also claims that such attacks may be considered violations under Article 2(4) of the UN Charter, which constitutes an infringement of “territorial integrity”\textsuperscript{26} and thus can provide grounds for retaliation. In the context of a military response, there is further debate about what actions can be taken to prevent an attack. Indeed, scholars do not entirely agree on the definition of cyberspace, let alone cyber warfare.\textsuperscript{27} Some posit that cyber attacks have not met the criteria of acts of war and thus cyber warfare has never occurred.\textsuperscript{28} This is, however, an unreasonable and far too literal interpretation of war in the context of cybercrime. The concept of cybercrime as an ever-changing landscape that is difficult to both define and predict must be embraced. Indeed, cybercrime has the “critical potential...to undermine national security while bypassing traditional national defense frameworks.”\textsuperscript{29} It is therefore of utmost importance to take preventative measures to reduce the threat of an attack. The need for prevention again raises the need to examine the use of secret evidence that may be gathered in the name of combating cybercrime. Does revealing the acquired data pose a threat to national security, either by disclosing actual information or perhaps by revealing the way

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid, 279.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid, 278.
\textsuperscript{28} Thomas Rid, “Cyber War Will not Take Place.” Journal of Strategic Studies, King’s College London. October 5, 2011. pgs. 9-11.
in which information was acquired? At what point is the acquisition of intelligence considered justified and at what point is it a violation?

As the nascent field of cybercrime continues to expand, these questions will need to be answered. Occam’s razor would posit that national security should take precedence over the rights of the individual in such a case because there is inherent danger in not infringing upon certain rights. In fact, the right to privacy is considered a “qualified” right, meaning that under the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) it can be suspended in individual cases without a state being considered in violation of the ECHR.\textsuperscript{30} Since the field is in some of its most formative years, scholars argue for an achievable balance among security intelligence, legality, ethics, and overall compliance with human rights.\textsuperscript{31}

Although there are many confounding variables that are inherent to cybercrime, it is an area that has a great deal of potential in the realm of legalities. From sorting out the most fundamental issues pertaining to determining jurisdiction to understanding the limits and reaches of using secret evidence and potentially secret intelligence, cyber attacks and cybercrime are in need of further examination and refinement.

The Investigatory Powers Tribunal

The Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act of 2000 established the Investigatory Powers Tribunal the same year.\textsuperscript{32} The Tribunal

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid, 88-90.
specifically oversees cases related to surveillance in the UK as it relates to MI-5, MI-6, and the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ). Thus far, the Tribunal has heard many cases, but only a few have been released to the public. These cases deal mainly with more sensitive material, often times kept secret for the sake of national security. The Tribunal sets forth the idea that the evidence it uses may be kept secret under the provisions of confidentiality, such that:

The Tribunal is ... restricted in what it can disclose during the course of its investigations. The rules state that no information or documents provided to the Tribunal, or the fact that they have been provided, can be disclosed. This is an essential component of the protection of the most secret of Government material. The Tribunal is therefore limited to only assuring complainants that an investigation is still ongoing.

One such case where secret evidence played a crucial role was Vincent C. Frank-Steiner v. The Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) (IPT/06/81). In this case, Vincent Frank-Steiner, who alleged that his uncle had been a spy for the UK during the Cold War, requested secret information. Frank-Steiner also claimed the secrecy of information was in violation of the ECHR. Many often make the case that human rights have

36 Vincent C. Frank-Steiner v. The Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) (IPT/06/81), §1, page 2.
37 Ibid. §8, i.
been violated in cases such as this. The Tribunal overruled Frank-Steiner’s allegations, but in many instances, the human rights claim has validity. Secret evidence used in a trial or for the purposes of secret intelligence is valuable, but its use and application is extremely subjective to the case at hand. Contrary to the Frank-Steiner’s allegations, the Tribunal posited that the default for disclosing information is to retain information unless its disclosure is necessary to the protection of the state:

It is wholly clear on that analysis, which we accept, and which makes entire sense of the statutory scheme, that the provisions do not say that the power to disclose information or, indeed, the power to obtain information, shall only be exercised if it is not contrary to the interests of national security. It provides that the power of obtaining and disclosing information is only exercisable if it is necessary in the interests of national security (or one of the other permitted purposes).  

The Tribunal chose to err on the side of caution by not disclosing secret evidence. Often times, since the Tribunal hears cases pertaining to surveillance, secret intelligence is involved, but the Tribunal will most likely not reveal that fact. The interests of national security indeed often take precedence over the publication of information in such cases. The secret evidence used in this case was not disclosed on the grounds of protection of national security. Another facet of this case was the

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38 Ibid, §9-12.
40 Ibid, 24.
“neither confirm nor deny” policy (NCND), which is essentially self-explanatory. The Tribunal will neither confirm nor deny evidence it may (or may not) have, pertaining to a certain case. This process is fully compliant and indeed authorized under the UK’s Freedom of Information Act. Ultimately, if a complainant is unhappy with the final ruling by the Tribunal, the case may be appealed (where applicable) to the ECtHR. The scope of the proceedings of appealing to the ECtHR is beyond that of this paper, but it should be noted that the ECtHR is one of the only courts among the supranational institutions in Europe that sets precedent and binding decisions.

The Venona Project

The Venona Project began in 1943 and continued into the heat of the Cold War. Some of the most famous cases that took place included the conviction of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, Alger Hiss, and Guy Burgess. The Project’s interception and subsequent decryption of Soviet messages to spies within the US presents the necessary case of trumping the protection of national interests over the rights of the individual. Through the

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interception of such messages, Venona Project cryptologists were able to garner evidence that indicted individuals of treasonous activity. In many cases, this was done through informal means, thus evidence acquired through Venona was not necessarily admissible in a court of law.\textsuperscript{46} The use of secret evidence in such cases played a crucial role in the trial that ensued for the Rosenbergs. Some scholars argue that had certain information not been kept secret during the Rosenberg trial, Ethel Rosenberg may have been viewed as a mere accomplice to her husband.\textsuperscript{47} From this arises the problem of using secret intelligence as secret evidence and thereby preventing the defense from having access to that evidence in certain cases.

The dilemma of where the evidence can and should be used plays a crucial role in how legal proceedings can occur. Of course, the Venona Project was an exceptional occurrence, but it represents both the dangers (lack of disclosure) and benefits (conviction of guilty parties) that secret evidence may bring about. It is only years later that the declassification of documents decrypted through Venona have been released. However, even now, there are many names that have never been disclosed.\textsuperscript{48} In the interests of protecting national security, there are some situations that mandate secrecy and the retention of certain pieces of secret evidence collected through various channels. As it is unknown exactly what is being kept secret, it is difficult to assess how pertinent such information from the Venona Project may be.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid, 149.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid, 13-17.
\textsuperscript{48} James Gannon, \textit{Stealing Secrets, Telling Lies: How Spies and Codebreakers Helped Shape the Twentieth Century} (Dulles: Brassey’s, Inc., 2001), Ch. 14.
Recommendations

Overall, the use of secret intelligence and secret evidence in the legal realm involves many complexities that still need to be clarified by legal mandate. The principles established through the Budapest Convention against cybercrime appear to hold the greatest potential that may go beyond the deontological approach to law with regard to secret evidence in improving its efficacy. Although there has been significant improvement in legal proceedings and governmental oversight in North America and Europe since the Venona Project, governmental bodies such as the Investigatory Powers Tribunal (IPT) still have room for improvement in their approach. The nature of this institution in particular raises a question of whether secret law is, in fact, inherently detrimental. Is the very idea of a legal action taking place in secret problematic? This is not meant to advocate the use of laws in secrecy, but calls into question whether law can even be effective if there are, for example, secret treaties, agreements, trials, etc. The law, if kept shrouded in secrecy, is, in theory, upheld by principles of ethics. In practicality, however, the legal system is as flawed as other governmental or intergovernmental institutions. Thus, to the extent that legal proceedings can be made public, they should be. The exception to this is provided in the aforementioned reasons of protecting national security. As this is such an important claim, extreme caution must be used when assessing the validity of such a declaration.

49 Gill, Security Intelligence, 85.
51 Ibid, 204-207.
“There is little evidence that increased security can be achieved by reducing the legality and propriety with which security intelligence is conducted,” says Kutz.\footnote{Gill, 178.} This statement accurately represents the shift in the treatment of secret evidence and intelligence over the past several decades. There has been an increase in oversight away from a Venona Project-style approach to evidence and the dissolution of the Diplock Courts. Today’s IPT and Budapest Convention both seek to further define the scope and limits of law as it relates to the relatively new field of surveillance and cybercrime, respectively. Determining the balance between legal boundaries and the need to prioritize national security is also an evolving concept; it is necessary to more clearly define security for the greater good, and prioritize the governmental approach to upholding both principles. Without this necessary step, deciding what actions to take concerning a case or investigation at the Tribunal will become nearly impossible.

It is clear, with regard to cybercrime, what needs to be done: a comprehensive understanding of the intent of the crime and its jurisdictional boundaries must be established, and appropriate policy must be adopted. It is also worthwhile to examine why the Budapest Convention did not simply become an amendment to either the UN Charter or the Rome Statute, thereby potentially evoking more state support. This further brings about the question of the priority of other nations (not discussed here) regarding cybercrime. Of course, developing states will not necessarily prioritize cybercrime if it does not affect them, but the prevention and defensive approach to cybercrime will prove useful in the future. By avoiding and taking pre-emptive measures to deter cybercrime, states must
bear the burden of maximizing their security and maintaining clearer provisions on prosecuting cybercrime cases. Through more clearly defined methods of enforcement,\textsuperscript{53} cybercrime prevention can become more effective. This is not to say it will be a perfect approach, but it will certainly improve the field of study and real world application of laws and policy; it “...still requires consideration of whether an equivalent law can be found in each jurisdiction, and can still present an obstacle.”\textsuperscript{54}

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\textsuperscript{53} Clough, 415.
\textsuperscript{54} Clough, 416 (as referenced by Clough: R. v. Bow Street Magistrates Court and Alison, ex part Government of the United States of America [2000] 2 AC 216.)
Realism, World War I, and the US-China Relationship

Abigail Casey

This paper examines the outbreak of World War I through a neoclassical realist lens, which deviates from classical realism by arguing that while the international structure creates systemic incentives and constraints on states, these systemic drivers interact with unit-level variables to determine state behavior. Neoclassical realism is applied to the outbreak of World War I to make the argument that while the disrupted balance of power in early twentieth century Europe provided the context for major interstate conflict, it was the dominance of offensive military doctrines and skewed civil-military relations (the key unit-level intervening variables) that sparked global war in 1914. The paper then applies conclusions drawn from the prewar situation in 1914 to today’s evolving and often tense relationship between the United States and China. It argues that it would be a mistake to view China as a threat to international security based solely on its rise in relative power. Such an analysis should focus more on key unit-level variables, especially China’s offensive military doctrine and its civil-military relations.

It is difficult, and perhaps inadvisable, to propose any one reason or cause as solely responsible for the outbreak of any war. Most theories that attempt to explain the advent of World War I, for example, fail to address causes at more than one level. Individuals do not act in a vacuum, and neither do states, so explanations for war that reside only in the individual or
state level are bound to be incomplete. At the same time, structural realist theories that purport that the entirety of state behavior can be explained as rational, calculated reactions to the international power structure ignore a vast amount of compelling evidence at the other levels.

This paper will approach the complicated question of what caused World War I through the lens of a specific and less common variant of realist theory—neoclassical realism, which allows for the consideration of causes at multiple levels of analysis. Rather than ignore the significant contributions of conventional paradigms such as constructivism, liberalism, and institutionalism, neoclassical realism incorporates them into a holistic assessment of state behavior and conflict. The key significance of neoclassical realism is its ability to synthesize the salient pieces of these approaches into a single, nuanced paradigm. This paper will then apply the insights of a neoclassical realist evaluation of the start of World War I to the current US-China relationship, arguing that it is essential to identify and develop a full understanding of the key unit-level variables that will influence how China responds to its rise in power.

The paper begins with a brief overview of neoclassical realism, primarily drawing upon Gideon Rose’s review of several seminal pieces on the paradigm, “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy.” It will then use this lens to evaluate the outbreak of World War I, arguing that the dominance of offensive military doctrines (the ‘cult of the offensive’) and skewed civil-military relations in Europe were the key unit-level intervening variables. These interacted with shifts in the balance of power to cause the security dilemma that resulted in World War I. Germany is used as a case study to examine these unit-level variables: Germany was arguably most affected by the cult of the offensive, and its civil-military
relations were out of balance in the years before 1914. A brief comparison of the explanation for World War I that is typically advanced by defensive realists to this paper’s argument then follows. Finally, a neoclassical realist lens is applied to evaluate the current US-China relationship, showing that the prevailing realist interpretation of the threat posed by China is overly simplistic and incomplete.

**Why Neoclassical Realism**

Neoclassical realism is more nuanced than classical realism and the various flavors of neorealism. It agrees with classical realism’s basic tenet that the anarchic international system and relative power capabilities establish the basic parameters of a country’s foreign policy.¹ However, it differs from other schools of realism in that it explicitly incorporates internal variables into any assessment of a state’s behavior or prediction of future behavior.² Neoclassical realism thus rejects John Mearsheimer’s concept of states as ‘black box’ units, because the characteristics of a state and the perceptions of its leaders necessarily impact state actions. Neoclassical realism also rejects the concept, favored by offensive realism, that all states possess an inherent, insatiable desire for hegemony. Instead, neoclassical realism contends that while structural factors provide certain incentives to state actors and limit their menu of options, these systemic pressures must then be “translated through unit-level intervening variables,” such as the domestic political context and leaders perceptions of the state’s interests.³

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² Ibid.
³ Ibid, 152.
These unit-level variables influence how a state interprets and acts on the pressures and incentives the international system exerts on it. Neoclassical realism denies the direct link between structural factors and state behavior, as perpetuated by other variants of realism. It is, therefore, necessary to evaluate the intervening unit-level characteristics of each state to understand their behavior.

Neoclassical realism is the best lens through which to examine World War I because it allows us to appreciate the significant roles of both the international power structure and the characteristics and perceptions of key belligerents. Britain’s relative decline and Germany’s relative growth following unification in 1871 disrupted the balance of power and led to the development of restrictive alliances. However, structural theories that make reference to shifts in balances of power cannot adequately explain why an alliance system designed to prevent conflict resulted in a massive war. The answer lies in the ‘cult of the offensive’ that predominated most military doctrines in the years prior to 1914, as pursued by military institutions unconstrained by effective civil-military relationships. The combination of this offensive bias and the excessive influence of military and militarist organizations on diplomacy represent the key unit-level intervening variables that influenced how each state perceived and acted on systemic pressures. The mistaken predisposition towards the offensive interacted with each state’s security needs (as dictated by their relative material power and position in the international system) to cause certain states to believe their security could only be ensured through aggressive or expansionist behavior. This touched off a security dilemma on the European continent that would lead to war.
A Neoclassical Realist Explanation for World War I

Firstly, it is important to understand where the cult of the offensive came from and why it played such an influential role in the outbreak of World War I. The belief that an offensive military strategy was advantageous in the years preceding the war was erroneous—military technology actually favored a defensive strategy.\(^4\) Despite this, each of the major continental powers favored an offensive strategy and created offensive war plans, which Jack Snyder argues was a major cause of the war. The result was a spiraling security dilemma that encouraged at least some states to view “preventive aggression” as their only option for survival.\(^5\)

There are two compelling explanations for why the cult of the offensive thoroughly permeated the perceptions and foreign policies of states. The first is that leaders relied on historical analogy, a cognitive mechanism to help them define the nature of the international system and assess the stakes.\(^6\) According to Robert Jervis, state leaders were influenced by the Bismarckian wars, which were quick, successful, and favored the offensive.\(^7\) They mistakenly projected this past evidence of the advantage of offensive strategies onto future military engagements, even though military technology had changed.

The second explanation for the offensive bias is the self-interested inclination of military organizations to promote an

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\(^5\) Ibid.


offensive doctrine and their increased capability to do so during this time. According to Snyder, all militaries have at least a moderate preference for the offensive doctrine because it better serves their institutional interests. States that buy into an offensive doctrine will devote more money and resources to their militaries. A related theory is that militaries, as large and complex organizations, develop a strong organizational culture that shapes the behavior of individuals within it. Once the organization has started on a path towards its prosperity, the inertia and transaction costs of change become prohibitively high for individuals to challenge.

What made this particular time period more susceptible to the cult of the offensive was the state of civil-military relations. Snyder argues that although the exact nature of civil-military relations varied from country to country, “in each case strategic policymaking was skewed by a pathological pattern of civil-military relations that allowed or encouraged the military” to use offensive doctrines to address institutional problems. This could be due either to a lack of civilian control over the military or to an unhealthy degree of conflict between civilian and military institutions. For example, the military in France had an abnormal amount of power by 1914. Parliamentary bodies in Russia and Germany were quite new and fairly limited in their ability to exert control or oversight over their militaries. The cult of the offensive was perhaps most pronounced, and civil-military relations perhaps most skewed, in the nation that became arguably the leading engine of the war: Germany.

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8 Snyder, “The Cult of the Offensive in 1914,” 122.
Germany and the Cult of the Offensive

On a structural level, Germany’s status as a rising power inevitably contributed to an increase in its ambitions, as realism would suggest. Furthermore, because Germany was growing in relative power, other states were more alarmed by its offensive strategy than they would be by a less powerful state, which had significant implications for the development of the security dilemma. Germany’s increase in relative power therefore created the potential for conflict. However, this is not the entire story.

Germany’s relative power status in the international system alone did not make it a jingoistic state. Germany may have experienced an increase in relative power starting in the late 1800s, but contrary to the stance of offensive realism, this did not make its overtly aggressive behavior inevitable. For a full explanation of Germany’s militarist and expansionist behavior, we must look to the unit level. Unit-level variables determine how a state will perceive and react to incentives and pressures provided by changes in the international system. To understand why a more powerful Germany adopted the specific strategies it did, we thus need to understand the interests of various influential institutions, the personalities of key decision-makers, and the relationships between the two.

As previously noted, multiple organizations and individuals were promoting an offensive doctrine in Europe in the years before World War I; this was especially prevalent in Germany. In addition to the German military’s advancement of the offensive doctrine, various virulently nationalistic groups exerted pressure on the civilian leadership. They believed that

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11 Rose, “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy,” 167.
Germany’s problems could only be solved by a “dramatic act of national self-assertion even at the risk of war.”

This perception is a good example of the prevailing belief, encouraged by the offensive bias, that ‘preventive aggression’ was a state’s only option for security. By 1912, the German Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg was besieged by various sectors of society clamoring for more aggressive policies.

In addition, the cult of the offensive in Germany in the years preceding the war was amplified by Kaiser Wilhelm’s militaristic and nationalist views. The Kaiser was the champion of the German naval buildup, a move that Britain perceived as an existential threat and pushed them to begin an arms buildup. Kaiser Wilhelm’s apparent predisposition for aggressive and expansionist behavior even influenced public opinion on foreign policy and war. According to one comprehensive study of the origins of World War I, the building of the German navy actually created a “body of nationalist opinion” and an “aggressive imperialist rhetoric” among the public.

The primacy of offensive strategies in German war planning prior to World War I was largely a reflection of the professional interests of the General Staff, not civilian foreign policy goals. The General Staff’s ‘all or nothing’ war plan, rooted in offensive military doctrine, hindered the civilian leadership’s attempts at a strategy of brinksmanship. German war planning would eventually constrain the options available to diplomats. Instead of political goals shaping and restraining military means, the goals of military institutions were shaping Germany’s political options. German Chancellor von Bulow

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13 Ibid,144.
14 Snyder, “The Cult of the Offensive in 1914,” 123.
perhaps best illustrates this in his reaction to the Schlieffen Plan, an offensive military campaign. Unperturbed, he remarked that if the Chief of Staff “believes such a measure to be necessary, then it is the obligation of diplomacy to adjust to it and prepare for it in every possible way.”\(^5\)

Germany’s civil-military relations in the prewar period were especially skewed. The German Reichstag had limited powers, and an attempt to challenge the military in 1913 only demonstrated its impotence and inability to control the military establishment.\(^6\) Furthermore, the final civilian authority and decision-maker, Kaiser Wilhelm, was particularly militaristic and predisposed towards the view that Germany needed to expand and obtain colonial holdings in order to maintain great power status. His self-perception as a great military leader made him especially susceptible to the agendas of his military institutions and badly skewed the civil-military balance in the government. As the July crisis intensified, diplomats were increasingly kept out of the loop as military planners charged forward. The Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister is reported to have asked in exasperation: “Who actually rules in Berlin, Bethmann or Moltke [Chief of German General Staff]?”\(^7\)

**The Impact of the Cult of the Offensive on the Alliance System**

It is clear that the restrictive alliance system in place prior to the outbreak of World War I made it possible for a relatively trivial and localized issue to erupt into continental war. While the urge to power-balance through alliance agreements was a result of

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\(^5\) Ibid, 126.
\(^7\) Ibid, 26.
the relative power shifts in a multipolar system, the nature of these alliances was determined by the importance placed on the offensive doctrine. The offensive bias led to the creation of tight, constrictive alliances in the prewar period in two ways.

Firstly, leaders were influenced by another incorrectly applied historical analogy taken from the Franco-Prussian war. In the war’s early stages, Napoleon III believed he would have ample time to recruit Austria as an ally. However, the offense had the advantage and the Prussians achieved a quick, decisive victory before Napoleon had the chance to woo Austria. Policymakers in the pre-World War I era drew the conclusion that it was important to secure tight alliances during peacetime in order to safeguard against this danger.  

Secondly, as the neoclassical realist scholar Thomas Christensen argues, in multipolar systems states will seek tight prewar alliances if leaders believe both that the offensive is advantageous and if the enemy attacks first their existential security will be threatened.  

Once war seemed to be in the immediate future and with offensive-minded doctrines dominating perceptions, there was immense pressure to take offensive action to preempt the enemy. As Jervis warns, when the offense has the advantage, states’ reactions to international tension will increase the chance of war. For example, Austria-Hungary believed that aggression against Serbia was the only way for it to safeguard its national security.

When the crisis began to heat up, offensive doctrines caused both sides to believe that whichever acted first would

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obtain a substantial military advantage and that this advantage could potentially be decisive. The result was that even if neither side wanted war, the pressures of the perceived advantage of the offensive created an intense urge to strike first, and a fear that if any state hesitated, it would fall prey to others’ aggression. On July 25, Germany was pushing for the immediate commencement of Austrian military operations against Serbia because any delay was seen as a great danger.\(^{21}\) The intense time pressures associated with an offensive doctrine contributed to states’ reluctance to realistically consider the diplomatic overtures initiated by Britain. The July crisis in 1914 is a classic example of a spiraling security dilemma in which the costs of cooperating (not mobilizing) if the other side defected (launched preemptive strike) were unbearably high.

**In Defense of Neoclassical Realism**

Neoclassical realism has been accused of being “vague” or “indeterminate” because it attempts to incorporate elements from other popular paradigms into an explanation of state behavior.\(^{22}\) The argument is made that neoclassical realism might not even belong within the realist paradigm. I maintain that neoclassical realism is surely a variant of realism because it emphasizes that the pressures and incentives exerted on states by the anarchic international structure are the primary drivers of state behavior. However, neoclassical realism makes a critical deviation by arguing that states are not hostages to their position in the international system. In this sense, neoclassical

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realism is a significant departure from realist theory in that it provides an explicit space for the consideration of state-level factors.

Neoclassical realism is a significant and distinct contribution to international relations theory because it finds a coherent way to integrate the salient factors of more than one paradigm. Incorporating elements from more than one theory to examine state behavior is not a bad thing, although it does frustrate scholars who would like to simplify state behavior into easily digestible, parsimonious models. Those who accuse neoclassical realism of overcomplicating the analysis of foreign policy do not fully appreciate the overly complicated nature of foreign affairs.

Neoclassical realism offers a more nuanced, multi-step approach to international relations theory. While it is perhaps not as parsimonious as the more established and conventional paradigms, neoclassical realism does offer a roadmap to use when approaching complicated foreign policy issues. Neoclassical realism advocates beginning with an examination of structural-level motivators, as these are the primary drivers of behavior. It is then necessary to look at the unit-level variables that influence how a state will interpret its situation and make foreign policy decisions.

The argument this paper offers to explain the cause of World War I would appear to be similar to the argument proposed by defensive realism for the outbreak of the war. Both recognize structural factors as primary. Both place importance on the significant role of the security dilemma, which was prompted by the cult of the offensive. However, defensive realism, like all other varieties of realism, has very little room for any consideration of unit-level differences. Defensive realism cannot adequately explain why states where civilian leadership had more control over its armed forces, such as Italy,
were less susceptible to the cult of the offensive in the prewar period. If states behaved as defensive realism predicts they will often do—seeking security through cooperative threat reduction—then there should not have been a war.

Robert Jervis, a defensive realist, admits that his paradigm cannot explain why war did not erupt in the numerous international crises preceding World War I.\(^2^3\) These crises were arguably over matters more important to the great powers than the assassination of the Archduke of Austria-Hungary but did not lead to continental war. Defensive realism is unable to explain why war did not occur in 1905, 1908, or 1911, but did occur in 1914. This is because defensive realism does not adequately appreciate unit-level characteristics such as the influence of identity and values on behavior and leaders’ perceptions of state interests.

The Application of Neoclassical Realism to the US-China Relationship

This examination of the causes of World War I holds clear lessons for the evolving and often tense relationship between the United States and China. As neoclassical realism suggests, we must begin by considering the international power structure and the resulting structural incentives and constraints on both China and the United States. In terms of economic and military strength, the United States is clearly the world’s most powerful country. However, while the United States’ absolute power may remain the same or even grow in coming years, there is potential for its power relative to other states to decrease. China has enjoyed a recent boost in relative power, and is probably

the country best positioned to challenge the United States’ status in the international system.\footnote{Robert J. Art, “The United States and the Rise of China: Implications for the Long Haul,” \textit{Political Science Quarterly} 125 no. 3 (2010), 359.} The increase in relative power of one state means that the reigning world power necessarily experiences a relative decline. In this sense, the current power structure does resemble the pre-World War I situation—a rising state with the potential for expansive growth causes the reigning world power to feel threatened and sets the stage for a tense relationship.

But as with the case of World War I, it would be a mistake to leave an analysis of China at the structural level. To be fair, neoclassical realism does predict that a country’s ambition will grow as its relative power grows. However, this does not doom the world to a scenario where China uses military aggression in an attempt to snatch regional or global hegemony. China and the United States are not predetermined to engage in a showdown that sparks a regional or global conflagration. It is too simplistic to suggest that because its relative power is increasing China will inevitably become militaristic and revisionist, or that the United States will respond with preventive aggression to a perceived threat to its hegemony. Systemic incentives and pressures inevitably influence foreign policy, but they do not determine it. Policymakers and analysts must examine unit-level intervening variables in order to gain some idea of how either country might handle these systemic incentives and pressures.

It is essential to identify and examine the key unit-level intervening variables that will have an impact on China’s behavior in the East Asia region and beyond. I suggest that
these key variables include China’s civil-military relations and its leaders’ perceptions of external threats. Therefore, policymakers and analysts must develop an understanding of the current relationship of the military and key military leaders to the civilian leadership in China, as well as the historical Chinese pattern of civil-military relations. It would also be useful to examine the influence of national identity and values on past state behavior.

The advent of nuclear weapons does not detract from the value of applying conclusions drawn from the pre-World War I era to today’s geopolitical realities. In fact, due to the second-strike capabilities of both the United States and China, nuclear weapons serve to enhance the value of a defensive strategy. Yet according to Snyder, even though military technology still favors defensive strategies (largely due to nuclear weapons), superpowers continue to adopt offensive military doctrines.25 This penchant for offensive strategies is demonstrated to some extent in the current military doctrines of both China and the United States. As demonstrated by the pressures created by the prevalence of the offensive doctrine in 1914, whether a state adheres to an offensive or defensive military doctrine (and whether or not this doctrine prevails in other states) can be an important indicator of its behavior. China recently revealed a new strategic doctrine, which it christened “Active Defense.” Contrary to the name, the strategy described in the document seems to favor the offensive—for example, calling for increased cyber warfare capabilities and a greater naval presence.26

There are some interesting similarities between pre-World War I Europe and contemporary East Asia. Like the European structure prior to World War I, East Asia is multi-polar. Many realists contend multi-polarity is an inherently unstable distribution of power. There is also a complex system of alliances present in East Asia that extend beyond the region and have the potential to touch off a globalized conflict. The United States has close relations with Vietnam, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea. In a recent poll, 60% of Americans said that the rise of China made it more important for the US to tighten its relationship with Japan.\textsuperscript{27} In its new defense white paper, China places value on improving its relationship with Russia, a state that has found itself increasingly at odds with US objectives.

Gideon Rose offers the prescient advice that an analyst trying to understand any particular case needs to consider the “full complexity of the casual chain” that connects a state’s relative power status to its foreign policy decisions.\textsuperscript{28} It would be a mistake to assume the worst about China solely because it is growing in relative power. At the same time, it would be foolish to ignore its fairly militaristic outlook, rapidly growing military capabilities, and likely cyber attacks on private companies based in the United States. However, in the new white paper, China also expresses a desire to “strengthen mutual trust, prevent risks and manage crises” with the United States and outlines several methods of doing so.\textsuperscript{29} The desire to communicate and mitigate the development of an arms buildup


\textsuperscript{28} Rose, “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy,” 165.

\textsuperscript{29} Gady, “China to Embrace New 'Active Defense' Strategy.”
or security dilemma in East Asia is positive and is a clear departure from Germany’s behavior prior to World War I.

**Conclusion**

The neoclassical realist approach to wars of the past and tensions of the present places a premium on considering unit-level characteristics along with structural realities. Neoclassical realism accepts the anarchic international system as the primary driver of state behavior because states are ultimately guided by a need to ensure their security. However, states interact with the significant pressures of the anarchic system in very different ways—China today is not necessarily Germany in 1914. With increasing relative power, states do adopt expanded interests. But the key factor emphasized by neoclassical realism is *how* a state will choose to pursue those interests, and that is determined by unit-level characteristics such as a state’s values, institutions, political system, and leadership.

Neoclassical realism embodies the spirit of ‘analytical eclecticism’ compellingly advocated by Peter Katzenstein and Nobuo Okawara in “Japan, Asian-Pacific Security, and the Case for Analytical Eclecticism.” Katzenstein and Okawara argue that “styles of analysis that focus exclusively on material capabilities, institutional efficiencies, or norms and identities overlook key aspects of the evidence.” 30 Neoclassical realism’s ability to incorporate multiple styles of analysis to maximize explanatory power while emphasizing the significant role structural drivers play in state behavior is valuable when considering the current Asian security environment.

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Neoclassical realism throws out the concept of structural determinacy, and we need to do the same when looking at the future of United States-China relations and future Chinese behavior. China could decide to pursue expanded influence and markets and ensure national security through an aggressive military strategy. It could just as easily pursue those objectives through greater economic cooperation and participation in international institutions. China’s changing position in the international system undeniably brings with it strong pressures and incentives. But the path China chooses to respond to these pressures and incentives is not predetermined by its relative power status. It is crucial that US policymakers do not narrow the menu of possible paths open to Chinese leaders by assuming that a state’s behavior is hostage to its position in the anarchic international system.

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The Russian Counterinsurgency Campaign in Chechnya During the Second War and Chechenizatsia

David Sidamonidze

This paper discusses the Russian counterinsurgency efforts in Chechnya. It analyzes the precursor of insurgency in the Northern Caucasus region, the counterinsurgency campaign during the Second Chechen War, as well as and the strategy of Chechenizatsisa as a continuation of the Russian COIN. It identifies the Russian successes and the failures in dealing with the insurgency in the North Caucasus through the so-called counterterrorism campaign.

The Caucasus has been a source of instability for the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the Russian Federation for over two centuries. In their continuous strive for independence and self-determination, the success of the insurgency in the North Caucasus has varied from complete autonomy during Mountainous Republic of the Northern Caucasus and Chechen Republic of Ichkeria to the Kremlin appointed Akhmad Kadyrov’s regime in the aftermath of the Second Chechen War. Although in 2009 Moscow declared the end of anti-terrorist campaign in the Southern provinces of the Russian Federation, the insurgency has been able to adjust to the emerging challenges and re-shape its nature.¹ As a result of territorial

proximity of the North Caucasus to the Middle East and Afghanistan, the region has become one of the centers for religious extremism and a recruiting source for international terrorism. Currently, as identified by the Kremlin, the government has control of the region with only small faction of the insurgency surviving by fleeing to the Middle East and joining the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant.

The paper will discuss the Russian counterinsurgency campaign in Chechnya during the Second Chechen War as well as the pacification efforts starting in 2001, also known as “Chechenizatsya.” It will analyze both strategic and tactical level successes and failures of the campaign as well as the major challenges that the military and special services encountered throughout the war. In the end, the paper will identify whether the Russian counterinsurgency campaign was a success or a failure for the short-term and long-term objectives.

**Various Groups in the Caucasus**

In order to conceptualize the nature of the Caucasian insurgency it is paramount to discuss the composition, diversity, and the peculiarity of the Caucasus that enabled the local population to carry on the struggle for two hundred years. The area, which is roughly the size of Rhode Island, harbors more than 50 separate peoples of various ethnicities speaking different languages and practicing multiple religions. Over centuries, the groups have established ethnic kinship through intermarriages and assimilation processes. The strong connection with homeland has always been part of the local

culture. The population has engaged in historical campaigns for the right of self-determination. Religion also became an integral part of the history as early as 14th century when Islam was introduced in the region and became a fundamental part of the culture through *adat law* by assimilating religious practices with the customary laws. As a result, the local population developed a strong sentiment towards preserving the way of life, honoring history and ancestors, and challenging any attempts of foreign rule and influence.

**Insurgency in the North Caucasus**

To put the current struggle in perspective, it is important to briefly mention the history of the Caucasus insurgency. Often times, the Second Chechen War is described as direct continuation of the First War. Both of these conflicts are strongly affected by the history of Russian and Soviet brutality that in many ways have shaped the insurgency leading into the Second Chechen War.

Starting in the early 1800s, the Russian Empire began its campaign in the Northern Caucasus in an attempt to subjugate the mountain people and expand its territorial borders. Under the command of a notorious General, Alexei Yermolov, the imperial army started to use violent tactics to impose Russian rule in the ungoverned territories of the Southern Caucasus. Since the local population, primarily Chechen and Dagestani, refused to give in to the Russian rule the various groups and clans of the Northern Caucasus united under *gazavat*, a holy war against Russian Orthodox invasion.² General Yermolov, as the new governor and the chief administrator of the Caucasus

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assumed the main objective to either eliminate the local population or drive them up into the mountains where it would be hard to survive the winter.

Much has been written about Yermolov’s legacy: that he permanently set the savage tone for all future Russian-Chechen conflict: that by forcing the Chechens back up into the mountains he retarded the very “civilization” process that he sought to bring the region by forcing the chechens to revert to their clan-based society, instead of progressing to a more feudal system that may have allowed more opportunities for societal integration; that by coercing behavior through fear for so long and with such vigor, he made the Chechens immune to the fear of death; that by forcing the Chechens to band together and search for an ideology that would facilitate the integration of disparate clans, Yermolov was the one that was responsible for the rise of fundamentalist Islam and its subsequent dominance in the region.  

Throughout the 1800s the Russian Empire continued subjugating the various tribes of the North Caucasus through its anti-insurgency campaign. Despite the resistance from the united Muslim front of the North Caucasus, the Russian Empire was able to establish its rule. After the 1918 revolutions and the establishment of the Communist rule in Russia, the North Caucasus went through a short period of independence until 1920 when the Soviet rule once again incorporated the region in the Russian domain. Through systematic process of colonization, elimination, and transportation of local

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population, the Communist regime was able to establish control over the ungoverned region. In 1944, due to an attempted insurgency of Chechen and Ingush people with the support of the Nazi Germany, the entire population of Chechnya and Ingushetia was deported to Central Asia. They were able to return back only 13 years later, upon Nikita Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, similarly to other ethnic groups in the region, Chechnya declared its independence and elected a former Soviet Air Force General, Dzhokhar Dudaev, as its new leader and president. Regardless of Moscow’s continuous attempts to topple the independent government and return the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria under Federal control, the strong support from the Chechen population enabled Dudaev to repel the attacks from the internal troops dispatched from Moscow. As a result, in 1994 Russian force launched a ground attack accompanied by artillery fire and aerial bombardment of Grozny, the capital of Chechnya. The Chechen insurgents resorted to guerilla warfare and terrorist tactics attempting to coerce the Russian public and leadership. With the poor performance of the Russian troops on the ground, the upcoming elections in Moscow, and the strong dissatisfaction of the Russian population with the war, in 1996 Boris Yeltsin ordered an end to the Chechen campaign and both belligerents signed the Khasav-Yurt Accord. This marked the end of the First

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Chechen War and the beginning of the short-lived Chechen Republic of Ichkeria.

**Second Chechen War**

One of the major theoretical frameworks through which Russia envisions its security outlook is the domino principle. According to the contemporary version of the domino theory, if Russia loses control over its strategic territories, the rest of the Federation would crumble as a result of multiethnic and multiconfessional composition. Russia has over 185 ethnic groups, with many governing themselves as autonomous republics. “Indeed, he (Vladimir Putin) has frequently reiterated his belief, beginning in November 1999, in the domino theory that if Chechnya fell, whole provinces would continue to fall, threatening the integrity of the Russian state,” according to Blank.⁷ The theory was primarily applied to the extremist factions in the Northern Caucasus and as a result played a paramount role in the cause of the Second Chechen War.

The official reasons identified by Moscow for resuming hostilities in the Caucasus and starting the Second Chechen War are the invasion of the separatists in Dagestan and the threat to the national security as a result of terrorist attacks. Although some conspiracy theorists allude that both events were executed by the Russian special services to bolster Vladimir Putin’s approval ratings for the upcoming elections, the events did gain substantial traction that resulted in the public support for decisive action.⁸

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⁸ Shaefer, *The Insurgency in Chechnya*, 185.
During the First Chechen War, a majority of the North Caucasus widely adhered to more fundamental interpretation of Islam also known as Sufism. By declaring a *jihad* against the Russian Federation, Chechens invited foreign fighters from the Middle East (particularly those from Afghanistan who fought against the Soviet invasion) who introduced Wahhabism. Wahhabists were able to popularize the Chechen insurgency internationally, raise funds from supporters in the Middle East, and recruit a greater portion of the population. After the end of the war, while traditional Sufists were trying to establish government control in Chechnya, the various factions supporting Wahhabists had the objective of uniting the Muslim people of the Caucasus in fight against Russia. As a result, in 1998, a village in Dagestan declared independence and engaged in a campaign of recruiting supporters against the Russian colonial rule. By early 1999, foreign volunteers were joining Dagestani and Chechen Wahhabists and increasing material support. Believing that the Russian military was planning an invasion in Chechnya, the competing blocs united under the same cause and started the preparations for the upcoming attack. A majority of the separatists believed that the survival of the insurgency heavily depended on the Dagestani involvement in the future hostilities. As a result, approximately 2,000 fighters entered Dagestan in an attempt to unite the neighboring villages with Chechnya.9 These events, in conjunction with the Moscow apartment bombings, accelerated Russian plans to reinvade Chechnya and provided justification that would resonate with the Russian people.

Once the Russians began the ground attack, they advanced through the southern part of Chechnya quickly. Learning from the hard lessons of the First Chechen War, they were also able to create an alliance with Akhmad Kadyrov, chief mufti of Chechnya, who publically called for Chechens not to resist. By creating a pro-Russian faction, the Russian military was also able to incorporate local Chechen troops into their army that would provide them with more credibility among the local population and, most importantly, with intelligence regarding the separatists and the local terrain. Following the heavy bombings, the Russian military continued advancing through the central valley that would drive the separatists into the mountains.\(^\text{10}\) The military demonstrated that it had learned and applied many lessons from the previous invasion. The army moved methodically through the terrain, conducting artillery preparations before deploying infantry units. Through better staff planning and improved communications equipment, they were able improve air-ground coordination while utilizing the local forces to obtain the intelligence regarding the location of the combatants.\(^\text{11}\)

At an operational level, however, besides bringing in more troops and not trying for the ‘quick win,’ there was very little about this method of ‘destroy, clear, move on’ that was different from historical marches through the valley—an enemy-centric, purely military operation designed to minimize federal casualties while enforcing or coercing civilian compliance. The Russians moved into position and gave ultimatums to the civilians to

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\(^\text{10}\) Ibid., 41.

\(^\text{11}\) Shaefer, *The Insurgency in Chechnya*, 188.
surrender, if they didn’t, the Russians employed heavy artillery and air assets to reduce the structures.\footnote{Ibid.}

By early December, Russian troops and Chechen militia surrounded the capital. Following significant artillery and aviation bombardment, the troops conducted military operations on urban terrain that they had practiced prior to the invasion. The military advanced their positions only after establishing a strong presence in the area. In January, the insurgents mounted attacks in an attempt to retake Grozny. As a result of a surprise attack, Russian troops suffered severe casualties. However, the Chechens were also losing a considerable amount of combatants and were failing to replenish their ranks. Eventually, after series of negotiations, the Russian special services organized an evacuation operation where they would give the insurgents safe passage to leave the territory. However, the special services double-crossed Chechens by informing artillery units of their positions and opening heavy fire and destroying the villages along the safe passage route to deny them secure location. Some of the insurgents were able to reach the mountainous areas from where they would engage in guerilla warfare.

In late February, the military declared the conclusion of the counterinsurgency campaign. Various special service counterterrorist units pursued the remaining combatant factions. After his election as president in 2000, Vladimir Putin appointed Akhmad Kadyrov as the head of the Chechen government. Through Putin’s support during the elections, he became the president of Chechnya and started the process of ‘Chechenizatsya’.

\footnote{Ibid.}
Kadirov assumed the responsibility of fighting radicalism and promoting Federal rule in the region. The substantial funds allocated from Moscow were used to rebuild the devastated country and provide humanitarian assistance to the refugees.

The Russian success during the Second War was not due to a new development in the counterinsurgency techniques. It was a result of proper urban warfare operations that the military achieved by revisiting the Red Army doctrine of WWII.\textsuperscript{13} However, even with the old doctrine, proper training and coordination and the vital intelligence from the local militia, the Russian troops had substantial problems during the military campaign. The army failed to secure the rear areas after advancing while the insurgents were able to keep their supply lines open. As a result, the military units often times had to retreat back and reestablish their positions which resulted in additional casualties. Due to the lack of professionalism among the enlisted and non-commissioned personnel and complacency among the officers it was hard to maintain order. As a result, Russian troops engaged in mass killings and torturing of prisoners, looting and pillaging of the local villages, and raping women. “This unprofessionalism and corruption is a big part of the reason that the insurgency continues on this day. Insurgencies will not stop until the people believe that they have more to fear from the insurgents than they do from the government,” Schaefer points out.\textsuperscript{14} Although a substantial portion of the insurgents has migrated to Syria to fight for the Islamic State, some experts believe that the fighters will return to the North Caucasus with more

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 194.
experience and support destabilizing the Russian presence in the region.  

Chechenizatsya

After imposing a trusted regime in Chechnya, considerable autonomy was granted to the Republic. The major security apparatus was entrusted to Akhmad Kadyrov’s son Ramzan Kadyrov. The paramilitary police unit, also known as Kadirovtsi, was trained and equipped by the Russian special services. It became the major venue through which the new regime started “building peace,” namely, prosecuting political opponents and ensuring that the extremist factions did not return to Chechnya. As a former mufti, Akhmad Kadyrov had substantial support from the population that allowed him to create a political platform for his policies. He received significant aid from Russia, international organizations, and Chechen Diasporas to start rebuilding Grozny and other war torn territories. As a result of Chechenizatsia and considerable freedom from Moscow, Putin enabled Kadirov’s regime to create a degree of collective self-determination that mitigated the sentiment of the Russian colonial rule and instilled more trust in the Chechen ruling elite. 

In May 2004, an attack carried out by a female suicide bomber killed Akhmad Kadyrov. His son, 27-year-old Ramzan, was too young to run for presidency, but as the head of the Chechen special service, he became the de facto ruler.

In 2007 after turning 30 he was elected as the new President. Similar to his father, the younger Kadyrov received extensive aid from Moscow through which he was able to rebuild the major infrastructure in Chechnya.\(^\text{17}\) His paramilitary units received substantial assistance and training from Russian special services making them proficient in antiterrorism operations. Similar to Putin, Ramzan Kadyrov created a cult of his personality by adopting the image of the omnipotent president capable of doing everything for the prosperity of Chechnya and the security of Russia.

However, Kadyrov has used brutal tactics in combating the supporters of extremism that has undermined the rule of law and the role of civil society in Chechnya. The regime is described as severely corrupt with political elite pocketing large portions of the international aid. To date, there are numerous allegations regarding human rights violations, illegal detainment, torture and assassinations that have helped to sustain the insurgency.\(^\text{18}\) “For the vast majority of the Chechen people, Kadyrov’s presidency is little more than a regime of fear and oppression, with no way out and no avenues to seek justice for the daily crimes against civilians”\(^\text{19}\)

Nonetheless, Chechenizatsia has secured the Southern border of the Russian Federation with majority of the extremist factions fleeing to neighboring Dagestan and Ingushetia. Through the “illiberal peacebuilding”, the regime


\(^{18}\) Ibid.

\(^{19}\) John Russell, "Ramzan Kadyrov's "illiberal" Peace in Chechnya." *Chechnya at War and beyond*, 135.
has been able to prevent violent conflicts, establish social institutions, unite the population under a common, pro-Russian identity and rebuild the society. “No matter how illiberal or unsustainable in the long term the peace established in Chechnya by Kadirov, thanks to the political and financial support of successive Russian administrations, it must be perceived as a welcome relief from the horrors of war and internal conflict endured by Chechens over those two decades.”

**Russian COIN**

Although identifying the actual COIN doctrine of the Chechen campaign is difficult since the campaign architects disclosed no official information, analyzing the initial planning and execution through the lens of the strategies identified by Robert Shaefer will enable us to create a perspective regarding Russian COIN doctrine. With the major goal of fully integrating Chechnya within the Russian Federation, Moscow adopted two strategies: an intense campaign through information warfare to increase the popular support of the counterterrorism operation nationally and internationally; and an enemy-centric approach through coercion and “changing minds” campaign. 21 Shaefer identifies the following 7 COIN strategies used by Kremlin:

1. A “shaping operation” to physically disrupt the government of Chechen Republic of Ichkeria.

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20 Ibid., 136.
21 Shaefer, The Insurgency in Chechnya, 197.
2. An information operation (IO) campaign to gain and maintain Russian national will by framing the situation as one of national survival.
3. Disrupt external support of Chechnya
4. Carry out a direct action against Chechen insurgents, targeting the combatants through improved methods of urban warfare, military coordination and training.
5. Create international support for Russia and justify actions as a counterterrorism operation within the Russian borders, necessary to reinstate government control.
6. Through Chechenizatsia phase, gain support of the Chechen population by framing the insurgents as enemies of Chechnya and Russia.
7. And the latest addition, after the insurgents employed terrorist tactics, was the adoption of a defensive counterterrorism strategy to prevent the loss of the support from the Russian population as well as physically targeting of the rogue individuals.  

These strategies create a conceptual framework for analyzing the Russian COIN and identifying certain metrics that can help us define whether the campaign is a success or a failure. A discussion of how successful Russia was at following through with their objectives of reinstating government control and creating a lasting peace through the enemy-centric warfare and extensive IO campaign follows in the next section.

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22 Ibid., 201.
Physically disrupting the government of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria

The Kremlin adopted this strategy during the interwar period following the Khasav-Yurt Accord in 1996. According to the agreement, Russia would aid Chechens in rebuilding major government infrastructure and social institutions and help Chechnya in their recovery. In reality, Russia placed Chechnya in an economic stranglehold, limiting any interaction with neighboring regions and de-legitimizing the local government by promoting instability through special services. In late 1999, in combination with disrupting the local control, Russia also employed an aggressive IO campaign that would reshape the nature of the conflict from “Russians vs. Chechens” to “Salafists vs. Wahhabists.” Moscow was able to achieve this by separating the “good Chechens,” who were dedicated to protecting Chechen identity and culture within the Russian Federation, from “bad Chechens,” who were radicalized by the foreign Wahhabi elements and were a threat to Chechen identity and national security. As a result of the “changing minds” campaign, Russia was able to portray itself as a lesser of two evils and gain the support of non-radicalized Chechen population.

IO campaign for “hearts and minds” of the Russian people

Looking at the Russian COIN campaign through the perspective of other major COIN operations enables us to see the main difference between the Russian and the Western approaches. Western COIN proposes a more population-

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23 Ibid.
centric approach where physical security is one of the key requirements for success. Through providing security and basic needs, it becomes possible to win the “hearts and minds” of the local population who will eventually deny the insurgents freedom of operation. On the other hand, the Russian approach identifies gaining and maintaining national will as one of the top priorities. Although this may be the direct result of the growing political instability and the upcoming political elections of 2000, Kremlin identified properly the necessity to build the Russian will to fight after the devastation and the bloodshed of the First Chechen War.

In the aftermath of the Moscow apartment bombings and invasion of Dagestan, the Kremlin was able to effectively illustrate a threat to the average Russian, emphasizing the need for a decisive action against international terrorists. By emphasizing the lawlessness and the international nature of the terrorists, Russia was able to gain support from the various factions since it was the responsibility of the legitimate government in Moscow to ensure the security of Russian citizens.24

Disrupt external support

In the aftermath of the First War, there was a substantial presence of international press and humanitarian aid groups. However, aid workers began to be targeted by the insurgents. Various Chechen groups abducted international workers and demanded ransoms. As a result, it became too dangerous for international workers to continue their presence in the region and by 1998, a majority of them left. By the Second War,

24 Ariel Cohen, Russia's Counterinsurgency in North Caucasus, 54.
there was no international presence and as humanitarian aid groups and the press requested access to Chechnya they were refused by the Russian government. As a result, for the most part, Russia was able to prevent any media coverage of the ongoing events during the Second War, effectively promoting the rhetoric Kremlin deemed necessary.\textsuperscript{25}

By keeping the insurgents in isolation and utilizing the special services, Moscow was successful at shutting off the flow of weapons, fighters, cash and significantly hampering the international recruitment capabilities. The success achieved through disrupting external support played a paramount role in blockading the insurgents in Chechnya.

\textit{Direct Action}

By identifying the insurgents as terrorist and the counterinsurgency campaign as counterterrorism operations, Moscow was able to legitimize the use of the military forces. After suffering devastating losses and loosing popular support, the military especially the General Staff, became more averse to direct action. The army raised constitutional concerns, since the function of the military was to secure international borders, thus dealing with Chechen insurgency was the prerogative of the internal troops. However, by branding the insurgents as international terrorists who threaten Russian national security, Moscow brought the fight into the military realm, forcing the army to take the lead. Through disrupting the Chechen government and preventing relations with the international community, Russians were able to isolate the insurgency and weaken popular support in

\textsuperscript{25} Shaefer, \textit{The Insurgency in Chechnya}, 205.
Chechnya. As a result of direct action, they were able to physically destroy enemy combatants or deny them safe heaven by forcing to relocate in the neighboring regions.

Create International support for Russia

Disrupting external support for Chechnya was a defensive measure that entailed isolating the insurgents in their struggle against Moscow. On the other hand, creating international support for Russia “sought to fill the void by increasing the Russian presence in the geopolitical spheres, making it more difficult for the Chechens to get aid from foreign governments because those governments would not want to disrupt their new and improved relations with Russia.”26 The Kremlin was able to utilize two international threats, communism and terrorism, to quell the critical voices raised over its campaign. Yeltsin’s weak government and low approval ratings made the collapse of the new regime and return of Communist party to power a real possibility.27 Thus the threat of the revival of the Cold War and later the international campaign against terrorism lead by the United States enabled Russia to have considerable freedom and receive less criticism from the international community. Later, throughout the campaign Russia even started collaborating with the United States, Turkey and Iran regarding the terrorist issues that elevated its international prestige and portrayed it as a growing power.

26 Ibid., 206.
Gaining the support of the Chechen population

During the initial stages of the Russian campaign, the “hearts and minds” strategy through security was a low priority to Russia. Contrary to the core tenant of the Western COIN, Moscow chose to use brute force against the insurgents resulting in high civilian casualties and refugees. As suggested by Robert Shaefer, the lack of capacity building was the result of the lack of professionalism and blatant disregard for the law by Russian soldiers. However, Russia was able to use the sectarian differences between the local Sufis and foreign radical Wahhabism to reshape the Chechen struggle from insurgency to civil war. Although the Kremlin never changed the enemy-centric approach, through Chechenizatsia, Russia started the capacity building through a pro-Moscow regime that increased government legitimacy and cooperation with the local forces. During the Second War, Russia had a clear strategy and timeline that enabled it to break the population’s will to fight and reshape the nature of the conflict by vesting power in local religious authority and legitimizing the Kremlin’s presence.

Counterterrorism

After the 1999 invasion, the Chechen insurgents reverted to guerilla warfare. After realizing that with overwhelming Russian force and a local pro-Moscow militia in Chechnya, even guerilla tactics were futile. Some radicalized factions resorted to a terrorism campaign against the Russian population. The only viable option was to break the people’s

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will to support the campaign by promoting terror and fear among the population, thus breaking the special bond that the Putin administration was able to create through IO campaign. As a result, in late 2003, an additional counterterrorism strategy was added to the Russian COIN that would prevent the erosion of the national will.

On September 1, 2004, over 1,300 children, parents, and teachers were taken into hostage in Beslan by Chechen terrorists. They demanded immediate withdrawal of the Russian troops from Chechnya and the restoration of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. Within 2 days, the Russian Spetsnaz mounted an offensive using gas attacks, light infantry units, and tanks. The result was more than 1,000 injured with over 400 dead. 186 of them were children. Although brutal and inhumane, Russia demonstrated that it will not give in to terrorist threats and the attacks will be futile in effecting the national will. The Russian government was able to demonstrate an iron will by refusing to negotiate with terrorist and making the attacks useless. The counterterrorist campaign conducted by the Russian special services enabled Russia to devastate the manpower and resources necessary to conduct terrorism and brought even more popularity to Russian and Chechen governments.

Other COIN strategies

Throughout the COIN campaign, Russia also used various individual tactics as a part of the overall plan to end insurgency and terrorism. After establishing a foothold in Chechnya and forcing the insurgents to go underground,

29 Ibid., 214.
Moscow gave free reign to Kadirovtsy and tasked the special services to carry out high value target assassinations. High-level FSB officials have declared in open statements that they intended to track down and eliminate terrorists in and outside of Russia. Russian and Chechen forces have eliminated high value targets in Grozny, Moscow, Dubai, Vienna and other places. Although there are no official statements linking the assassinations to special services, often times a signature FSB weapon, a gold-plated pistol, is used. Through this tactic, Russia is able to intimidate and instill fear among the enemies operating underground in Russia or living outside of its borders.

Throughout the Chechenizatsia period, Russia extensively used comprehensive information operations to reshape the narrative in favor of the greater counterinsurgency efforts. The Kremlin, based on the Chechen ideological ground, dubbed the surviving extremist factions as foreign terrorists, marginalizing them from any particular region. They created the image of ideological extremists who are trying to destabilize not only Chechnya but also Russia. This complemented the already existing narrative that Chechnya was now part of Russia and would support it in the counterterrorism campaign. Every public statement was cautiously drafted not to include terms such as separatists and insurgents. Russia imposed a strict control over the flow of information and only government approved press representatives were allowed to broadcast Chechen news. During the Beslan school hostage crisis, no detailed information regarding the terrorists or captives was reported. After the operation the press broadcasted that majority of the

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perpetrators were international terrorist from Arabian countries. The detailed analysis in 2008 exposed that there was only one international terrorist and the rest of them were homegrown. The IO campaign enabled Kremlin to promote the rhetoric of conformity and support of the government in the North Caucasus, especially Chechnya. This was directed not only towards Chechen people but also towards Russian public to create the image of Russian prosperity and success in Chechnya.

**Conclusion**

Analyzing the Russian counterinsurgency efforts during the Second War through the perspective of overall Chechen insurgency demonstrates that Moscow was effective at reestablishing Federal control in the region, eliminating major forces of the radicalized separatists, and at least temporarily changing the minds of the Chechen population. Through a combination of IO campaign and conventional military methods, Russia was able to swiftly take control of the region and methodically implement “illiberal peace.” Chechenizatsia allowed the local pro-Russian regime to change the nature of the conflict from insurgency to civil disobedience and terrorism. This meant that Moscow was successful at promoting a new Chechen identity that included Chechnya as part of the Russian Federation. The Kremlin was able to succeed with its brutal methods by leveraging the popular support from Russia and the fact that Chechen population was devastated from the ongoing insurgency and was looking for peace and stability.

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31 Ibid., 230.
Kadyrov’s regime was able to use the Federal funds to restore essential services, develop infrastructure, create jobs and establish civil control. Through Kadyrov’s government, Russia demonstrated that Chechnya could live in peace if they abandoned secessionist movement.

However, the COIN campaign has promoted peace through fear and repression that does not address the long-term grievances of the insurgents or the neutral population. The brutal tactics utilized by Kadirov’s special police instills and perpetuates an antagonizing attitude among the people towards the Russian and Chechen regimes, enabling the insurgency to survive. Political assassinations and persecutions, government corruption, and most importantly the absence of rule of law are some of the few examples that promote the animosity among the Chechens. Although in the short term Russia was successful at achieving its goal in Chechnya, nothing significant has been done to promote long-term stability and address the core issues of the insurgency. By promoting government corruption and an authoritarian regime, Moscow has been failing at the population-centric approach. On the other hand, Kadyrov’s regime and the intimidation tactics has become the only guarantor of peace in the region. Moscow has been merely replicating the government structure established in the Kremlin since it would be unfeasible to promote pluralism and liberal democracy in Chechnya when the rest of the Russia is not ready for it.

As identified by Moscow and Grozny, the counterterrorism campaign was successful and created a lasting effect in the short-term. However, the cost of this success was high. Thousands of casualties, hundreds of thousands refugees, censorship and strict control of the information flow was the price that Chechens had to pay for the “illiberal peace” promoted through pro-Moscow regime. From the Russian
government’s perspective, due to the high strategic importance of Chechnya, the ends justify the means. However, from the Western perspective the counterinsurgency campaign was only successful at establishing an authoritarian regime that would be able to contain Chechen sentiment only in the near future. 33

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33 Ariel Cohen, *Russia's Counterinsurgency in North Caucasus*, 69.
Atlanticist Drift: French Security Policy After de Gaulle

Daniel Lim

Since the end of the Charles de Gaulle era, no French president has sought to completely erase the Gaullist legacy. Indeed, each leader has, in his own way, maintained Gaullist priorities. At the same time, France has progressively shed its hostility to NATO and has accepted a permanent American role in Europe’s security architecture. In addition, France has become a key actor in European integration and a leading advocate for a defense identity embedded within the EU. France has never abandoned its long search for grandeur, but the end of the Cold War has forced France to come to terms with its status as a second-tier power that benefits from active commitment to NATO and the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) identity within the EU. French security policy today is best described as modified Gaullism, a balance between traditional strategic autonomy and transatlantic cooperation aimed at maintaining French influence in European security.

Among twentieth century European statesmen, few rival Charles de Gaulle in terms of lasting legacy and influence. More than forty years after his death, the wartime leader of the Free French and first president of the Fifth Republic remains a “universal myth” both in France and the Western world.¹ The values and beliefs embodied by the general exert a strong

influence on France that is still evident to this day. Obsessed with the grandeur of the French nation, de Gaulle believed that France had a timeless destiny to fulfill as a great power in both Europe and the wider world. Grandeur, in French history, is indelibly linked to the exploits of legends such as Louis XIV in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and Napoleon Bonaparte in the nineteenth, leaders who exerted geopolitical dominance in Europe. It was some semblance of this past glory that de Gaulle sought to recapture during his years in power. He saw the Cold War’s antagonistic, bipolar system as inherently dangerous, leaving the world susceptible to nuclear holocaust, and viewed with disdain the hegemonic ambitions of both the USSR and the United States. In de Gaulle’s view, only a more equitable dispersion of power—one based on the nation-state rather than ideological camps—could maintain the careful balance needed for international stability. Consequently, de Gaulle developed a foreign policy grounded in national independence, distrust of the United States, and French leadership in managing European security and promoting East-West detente. The general’s staunchly Europeanist worldview resented American influence on the continent, rejecting the Atlanticist perspective represented most clearly by NATO. The rupture with the United States reached its nadir in 1966, when de Gaulle announced the withdrawal of French forces from NATO’s integrated military command.

Since the end of the de Gaulle era, no French president has sought to completely erase the Gaullist legacy, and indeed each leader has, in his own way, maintained Gaullist priorities. At the same time, France has progressively shed its hostility to NATO and accepted a permanent American role in Europe’s security architecture. In addition, France has become a key actor in European integration and a leading advocate for a defense identity embedded within the EU. France has never
abandoned its long search for grandeur, but the end of the Cold War has forced France to come to terms with its status as a second-tier power that benefits from active commitment to NATO and the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) identity within the EU. French security policy today is best described as modified Gaullism, as it balances traditional strategic autonomy with transatlantic cooperation in order to maintain French influence in European security. Instead of eschewing existing institutions, France works within them as multipliers of French power.

The gradual evolution from hardline Gaullism to a more Atlanticist version is evident in multiple chapters of French security policy over the past half century: the Franco-American rapprochement of de Gaulle’s immediate successors, François Mitterrand’s pragmatic cooperation with NATO and commitment to an EU security identity, Jacques Chirac’s support for NATO action in Bosnia, and Nicholas Sarkozy’s landmark decision to return to NATO’s integrated military command.

**De Gaulle: A General’s Legacy**

We must, of course, begin with a discussion of de Gaulle himself. It is difficult to understate de Gaulle’s importance in the history of modern France. After a brief period as head of France’s postwar transitional government, the general largely retreated from public life before his triumphant return as president of the Fifth Republic in 1958, a position he would maintain until his resignation in 1969. His eleven years in power were marked by stalwart opposition to American designs for a transatlantic order that would bind Europe to the United
States.² Obsessed with countering American influence, the
general exploited his position as a “third force” in the Cold War
and attempted to lead Europe out of the two-bloc system. De
Gaulle pursued French grandeur by emphasizing the country’s
sovereignty, leading him to design alternate security structures,
the tripartite directorate and the Fouchet Plan, as replacements
for NATO and the burgeoning European Community (EC). This
hostility towards both NATO and European integration
will provide a key point of contrast when we discuss
Mitterrand, Chirac, and Sarkozy. We will now look at three
case studies of Gaullist purism: the French departure from
NATO’s military command, the Fouchet Plan proposal, and the

De Gaulle’s strained relationship with NATO is legendary
in both French and English-speaking circles. A persistent critic
of the Alliance, the general assailed NATO as a tool of Anglo-
Saxon domination in Europe. Indeed, in 1958 the United States
and Great Britain controlled twelve of the thirteen major
commands in NATO, leaving only one for France.³ Nuclear
cooperation between the United States and Great Britain
likewise excluded France. The two-power directorate at the
head of NATO provoked resentment on the part of de Gaulle,
who believed that the Anglo-American “special partnership”
denied France its rightful place as a great power. While de
Gaulle is best remembered for his decisive break with the
Alliance in 1966, the split was in fact preceded by the general’s
attempts to replace NATO. His “tripartite directorate,”
proposed in 1958, envisioned a three-power management of
international security in which the United States, Great Britain,

² Sebastian Reyn, Atlantis Lost: The American Experience with de Gaulle, 1958-
and France would each be responsible for different geographic areas around the world. This expansive vision of global security would have essentially downgraded NATO to the status of a mere “European branch” within the larger directorate. French influence would be enhanced, increasing her stature, while the dominance of the United States would be constrained. De Gaulle sought to reshuffle the world towards geopolitical balance between multiple nation-states, an arrangement that he saw as more conducive to international peace than the antagonistic, ideological blocs led by the US and the USSR.

Unsurprisingly, both Eisenhower and Kennedy rejected the tripartite idea, a move that only confirmed de Gaulle’s suspicion of American hegemony. In the general’s view, the Americans were both imperious and untrustworthy. In the event of war with the USSR, de Gaulle questioned the American willingness to extend its nuclear umbrella to France. De Gaulle also feared that the Anglo-Saxons might needlessly provoke an armed conflict and thus turn France into a devastated battleground between the two superpowers. For this reason, the general chose to prohibit the stationing of NATO nuclear weapons on French soil in 1959. In 1963, de Gaulle announced France’s intention to produce an independent arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons. NATO’s doctrine of “flexible response,” announced in 1961 by the Kennedy administration, seemingly accepted the idea of conventional warfare on the European continent. De Gaulle considered this new concept to be an existential threat to France, confirming

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5 Reyn, Atlantis Lost, 43.
7 Ibid., 54.
even further the need for the republic to maintain a credible force de frappe that could be unleashed on Moscow without NATO approval. 8 Kennedy’s ill-fated proposal for a “multinational nuclear force” (MLF) represented the final affront for de Gaulle. The MLF, a centerpiece of Kennedy’s “grand design” for transatlantic cooperation, proposed a sea-based nuclear arsenal under integrated NATO control. 9 De Gaulle perceived this idea as yet another American plot to restrict France’s strategic autonomy by replacing national nuclear forces in Europe. 10

The American rejection of the tripartite directorate, combined with the increasing divergence in nuclear doctrine between France and NATO, led de Gaulle to make his fateful decision in March 1966 to withdraw from the Alliance’s integrated military command. 11 Henceforth, all French forces would remain outside of the Allied Command Europe (ACE) military structures falling under Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE). Moreover, NATO forces would not be authorized on French soil. The Franco-NATO split is the singular decision for which de Gaulle is best remembered in the United States, leading to much speculation as to his motivations. It is important to point out that de Gaulle did not seriously call into question France’s loyalty to NATO in the event of a Soviet invasion. Indeed, France and NATO signed the Ailleret-Lemnitzer Accords on 22 August 1967. This agreement outlined close cooperation and unified decision-making between the two sides should the USSR attack

8 Lellouche, L’Allié Indocile, 47.
9 Reyn, Atlantis Lost, 131.
11 Védrine, 3.
Notably, the Accords did not cover joint coordination on nuclear weapons, as the nuclear issue was for de Gaulle the most important factor leading to the Franco-NATO split. The purely symbolic significance of France’s withdrawal should also not be understated. The grandeur of France required some separation from the Anglo-Saxon fold, even if the general had no intention of revoking the Atlantic Charter. Finally, distancing France from NATO placed the republic in a better position to both mold an alternative European security architecture and pursue a separate détente with the Soviet Union.

In parallel to de Gaulle’s estrangement and eventual split from NATO, the general sought to engineer a separate security design for Europe. This design, known as the Fouchet Plan, was Gaullist to the core in its preference for intergovernmental cooperation. De Gaulle viewed with intense skepticism the growing supranational tendencies of the European Community. The general’s worldview elevated the nation-state as the prime actor in world affairs and the main building block for a more powerful, independent Europe. The Fouchet Plan, proposed in 1961-1962, envisioned a political and security union of six continental countries that would “respect the identity of the people of each member state.” De Gaulle’s grand design for Europe sought to supplant both the supranational integration of the European Community and the Atlanticist bent of NATO. It is for the latter reason, in particular, that Germany refused to support it. Bonn had no desire to sacrifice its relationship with Washington in order to yield to the general’s vision.

12 Lellouche, L’Allié Indocile, 82.
13 Reyn, Atlantis Lost, 270.
14 Lellouche, L’Allié Indocile, 50.
Moreover, Great Britain, Belgium, and the Netherlands all voiced opposition to the Fouchet Plan. Brussels and The Hague, in particular, feared being dominated by a Franco-German power axis in a newly confederated Europe. Great Britain and the United States viewed de Gaulle’s efforts as an attempt to purge Western Europe of Anglo-American influence and scuttle the dream of European integration.

De Gaulle confirmed these suspicions by vetoing Great Britain’s 1963 bid for membership in the Common Market. The Fouchet Plan embodied the general’s desire to create a “French-led Europe” that would allow the continent to pull itself away from the US orbit. Only a confederated Europe under French leadership, in the general’s view, could chart a course out of the Cold War once it had repudiated the East-West antagonism symbolized by NATO. Although the Fouchet Plan failed as a viable model for a new European order, de Gaulle did succeed in keeping the dream of a Franco-German partnership alive through the landmark Élysée Treaty of 1963 and its provisions concerning defense cooperation. Henceforth, French designs for a strategically autonomous Europe would hinge on the German partnership, a link that would become critically important during the Mitterrand presidency.

The failure of the Fouchet Plan revealed the limitations of de Gaulle’s attempts to pry Europe away from NATO and American influence. The general thus chose to forge ahead with his own unilateral actions, namely the 1966 split with NATO

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16 Reyn, Atlantis Lost, 111.
17 Martin, General de Gaulle’s Cold War, 19.
and the Franco-Soviet rapprochement of 1964-1968. De Gaulle, convinced that nation-states would ultimately outlive the Cold War ideological split, considered Russia to be a viable partner in constructing his dream of “Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals.”

French efforts to improve relations with the USSR began in January 1964 with the signing of a five-year bilateral trade accord. De Gaulle’s detente strategy reached its nadir with his landmark visit to Moscow in July 1966 and his public evocation of the historic Franco-Russian friendship. De Gaulle hoped to forge a new pan-European security structure, one in which the Kremlin would permit the reunification of Germany and the independence of satellite states in exchange for the departure of American troops from Europe.

The general followed up his Moscow visit with subsequent tours to Warsaw in 1967 and Bucharest in 1968, both governments that he “mistakenly hoped would soon leave the Soviet bloc.” De Gaulle even hailed the reformist efforts of Alexander Dubcek’s Czechoslovakia as a sign of an imminent thaw in the Cold War.

The rolling of Soviet tanks into Prague on 20 August 1968 effectively shattered the dream of ideological reform in the eastern bloc. De Gaulle emerged from this ghastly event with a new understanding of the limits of detente and the brutality of the Brezhnev Doctrine. France’s role as an interlocutor between the two blocs could not, at least in the short term, resolve the bitter bipolarity of the Cold War. France could neither change Soviet behavior nor convince other European countries to distance themselves from the American-led

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21 Reyn, Atlantis Lost, 255.
22 Martin, General de Gaulle’s Cold War, 107.
23 Gordon, A Certain Idea of France, 188.
24 Judt, Postwar, 446.
25 Reyn, Atlantis Lost, 326.
Alliance. East-West detente only succeeded in winding down the Cold War in the 1980s with the Helsinki Process and the pressure for reform within the Soviet Union itself.

De Gaulle resigned his presidency in 1969 and retreated to private life, passing away the following year. In terms of achieving his objectives, de Gaulle succeeded in asserting French independence through his departure from NATO’s integrated military command and his development of an autonomous nuclear deterrent. De Gaulle’s opposition to American influence in Europe restored France’s pride in itself and helped to promote the grandeur of the republic. His policy of balance between the two blocs forced both the United States and other European countries to take French interests into account. Nevertheless, de Gaulle failed to transform Europe into an independent “third force” in the Cold War, as he encountered stiff resistance in advocating the tripartite directorate and the Fouchet Plan as substitutes for NATO and the EC. The irony is that the general sacrificed influence over Europe in his single-minded pursuit of French independence. The dream of a French-led European security architecture could not be achieved by marginalizing existing institutions. In order to achieve grandeur, France would need to acknowledge the limits of her geopolitical power, accept the transatlantic partnership with the United States and NATO, and work for a European defense identity embedded within the EC.

The lessons of the Gaullist era were not lost on the general’s successors. Following de Gaulle’s departure, one can trace a progressive evolution in French security policy: from France’s attempt to pioneer a “third pole” in the Cold War to closer cooperation with the United States and NATO, from obsession with sovereignty to support for European integration, from rigid Gaullism to a more flexible version of the doctrine. The presidency of Georges Pompidou (1969-1974) was marked
by a clear pragmatism towards NATO, a policy that permitted enhanced Franco-NATO military planning while asserting France’s decision-making autonomy. Pompidou also expressed a more favorable view of European integration than de Gaulle, approving Great Britain’s entry into the Common Market in 1973. However, it is not until the presidency of Valéry Giscard d’Estaing (1974-1981) that one can detect a decisive shift away from pure Gaullism. Giscard affirmed the importance of the Alliance and altered France’s strategic doctrine to accept both flexible response and the commitment of conventional forces to defend Germany. He also downplayed the importance of creating a European defense identity, as he judged the level of European political integration at the time to be insufficient for such a project. The warming of relations between France and NATO occurred at a time of worsening East-West tensions, marked most prominently by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Giscard’s rapprochement with the United States leads us directly to Mitterrand.

**Mitterrand: Towards a New European Order**

The long presidency of François Mitterrand (1981-1995) occurred at a time of rapid change in the world’s geopolitical order. Mitterrand led France through the Euromissile crisis of the early 1980s, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the reunification of Germany in 1990, the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the steady advancement of European

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26 Lellouche, L’Allié Indocile, 94.
28 Ibid., 84.
29 Lellouche, L’Allié Indocile, 100.
integration culminating in the 1993 Treaty of Maastricht. Like de Gaulle, Mitterrand questioned the American commitment to Europe’s defense and attempted to forge an alternative security system with German help. This new defense architecture, however, would be firmly embedded within the emerging European Union and would not directly challenge NATO.

Mitterrand maintained a nuanced attitude towards NATO during his fourteen years in office, accepting the Alliance as a crucial counterweight to Soviet aggression while questioning its relevance in the post-Cold War order. Mitterrand’s attitude can thus be positioned somewhere between de Gaulle’s open hostility to NATO and the more intense Franco-NATO cooperation under Jacques Chirac. In the 1960s he had opposed de Gaulle’s decision to withdraw from the integrated military command, and under his leadership the partnership between France and NATO functioned better than it had under any of his predecessors. 30 This trend is particularly apparent in the early 1980s. Mitterrand supported the US deployment of medium-range nuclear missiles in Europe and committed French forces to joint NATO exercises. 31 France’s proclamation of Alliance solidarity, most eloquently expressed in Mitterrand’s landmark speech before the German Bundestag in January 1983, occurred at a time of renewed East-West tensions. 32 Mitterrand’s more Atlanticist turn also sought to counter a possible slide to geopolitical neutralism in West Germany (FGR). 33 With the Soviet deployment of SS-20 intermediate range missiles, France saw the strategic anchor

30 Ibid., 108.
32 Frédéric Bozo, Mitterrand, the End of the Cold War, and German Unification, (New York: Bergahn Books, 2009), 3.
33 Lellouche, L’Allié Indocile, 110.
provided by NATO, and by implication the American nuclear umbrella, as essential for European security.

Mitterrand’s rapprochement with NATO occurred in parallel with a similar warming of relations with West Germany. Indeed, the Franco-German partnership between Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl became an essential element in France’s evolving security outlook. Joint maneuvers involving 150,000 French and German troops took place in 1986, and the following year the two countries fielded a joint Franco-German brigade. The leaders signed an additional protocol to the 1963 Élysee Treaty in 1988, establishing a Franco-German Defense and Security Council. In addition, Mitterrand and Kohl both worked to revitalize the Western European Union (WEU), a largely moribund defense alliance dating to 1954. French and German efforts during the pre-Maastricht discussions in 1991 proposed that the WEU be incorporated into the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). These initiatives functioned as the first steps towards a definitive European defense identity, even if they remained largely symbolic in practical terms.

In addition to security cooperation, Mitterrand also successfully lobbied Kohl to accept the idea of a European Monetary Union.

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36 Bozo, Mitterrand, 315.
37 Védrine, 13.
38 Bozo, Mitterrand, 53.
rapprochement as a way to anchor the FGR into the European integration process, both countering Soviet influence and achieving the perennial French goal of constraining German power. Like de Gaulle, Mitterrand saw Germany as the essential partner in developing a strategically autonomous Europe. Unlike de Gaulle, however, Mitterrand continued to affirm the importance of NATO.\(^{39}\) As a result, Kohl felt no obligation to make a geopolitical choice between Paris and Washington, a choice that Konrad Adenauer had decisively resolved in the 1960s in favor of the latter.

The Franco-German link continued to crystallize with the rapid thawing of the Cold War. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the end of the two-bloc system, the longstanding Gaullist dream of a Europeanist defense architecture seemed to be attainable. With the Treaty of Maastricht, the EU adopted a CFSP that would delegate defense matters to the WEU, essentially conforming to Franco-German wishes. A declaration attached to the WEU also stated that the WEU would be “NATO’s reinforced pillar,” thus subordinating the WEU to the Alliance.\(^{40}\) NATO, for its part, permitted the use of its forces for WEU missions.\(^{41}\) Mitterrand maintained the Gaullist concern about excess American dominance in European affairs, an influence that received new impetus from Secretary of State James Baker’s “New Atlanticism” initiative.\(^{42}\) Paris responded coolly to Baker’s idea of an expanded, non-military role for NATO, but nevertheless accepted the WEU-NATO link as acceptable. The Maastricht process also outlined that responsibility for CFSP would remain

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 67.
\(^{40}\) Merlinger, EU Security Policy, 196.
\(^{41}\) Wells, “From Euromissiles,” 300.
\(^{42}\) Bozo, Mitterrand, 145.
in the hands of the European Council, the intergovernmental branch of the EU. This framework conformed in some respects to what de Gaulle had originally designed with the Fouchet Plan: a system of security cooperation that preserved the sovereignty of each state and restrained the more supranational aspects of European integration. Mitterrand thus maintained pursuit of Gaullist goals without seeking to undermine NATO or the EU, coming to the conclusion that “in order to be more European tomorrow it [was] necessary to be more Atlanticist today.”

Herein lies a key step in the crystallization of a more flexible Gaullism: a desire to boost French grandeur by operating within, rather than without, existing institutions. Maastricht envisioned the future establishment of a European defense identity, one even more robust than the WEU arrangement, thus revitalizing France’s hopes for a more strategically autonomous Europe. As we shall see, these ambitions ultimately led to the CSDP established in 1999 and formalized in the 2009 Treaty of Lisbon.

If modified Gaullism is evident in Mitterrand’s design for Europe’s defense identity, it is also clear in his attitude towards the Soviet Union and the United States in the last decade of the Cold War. Like de Gaulle, Mitterrand sought to boost French grandeur as an influential diplomatic actor. Unlike de Gaulle, however, Mitterrand maintained Western solidarity and his rapprochement with the USSR played a constructive role in the thawing of the Cold War. As noted above, Soviet aggression in the early 1980s moved France and the United States closer together. With the coming to power of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985, Paris saw an opportunity to at last achieve an exit from the two-bloc system. Mitterrand acted as a crucial intermediary

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43 Merlinger, EU Security Policy, 196.
for Gorbachev and Reagan (and later Bush), urging his American counterparts to trust Gorbachev as a genuine reformer. While de Gaulle’s rapprochement with the Soviets in the 1960s can be considered a premature and even naive attempt at resolving the Cold War, Mitterrand’s active diplomacy in the 1980s facilitated East-West detente and reinforced Gorbachev’s internal reform efforts. Mitterrand accomplished this intermediary role, moreover, without attempting to lead Europe in a “third pole” separate from the Americans. Mitterrand publicly supported Reagan’s 1987 INF Treaty, going against the objections of his conservative prime minister, Jacques Chirac. The Élysee also joined with Washington and Bonn in expressing cautious support for a united Germany within NATO, although Mitterrand took steps to ensure that this would not overshadow the broader goal of a united Germany’s integration into the EC.

Mitterrand realized the longstanding Gaullist goal of transcending the ideological rift of the Cold War, but did so as a clear member of the American-led side. Mitterrand thus gave shape to a more Atlanticist version of Gaullism. Consequently, Mitterrand functions as a definitive bridge between de Gaulle and France’s three most recent leaders: Chirac, Sarkozy, and Hollande. Mitterrand’s rapprochement with NATO sought to shore up the Alliance against renewed Soviet aggression in the early 1980s. At the same time, Mitterrand reinforced the Franco-German partnership as a way to develop a new European security order, one that would naturally be led by France. Mitterrand viewed long-term American commitment to Europe with a degree of skepticism, particularly with the end of

44 Bozo, Mitterrand, 35.
46 Bozo, Mitterrand, 214.
the Cold War, but wisely concluded that NATO could not be sidelined in the pursuit of a Europeanist vision for regional security. From Mitterrand onward, France would not question the importance of NATO or the need to embed Europe’s security identity within the EU. France’s European partners would not tolerate any attempt by Paris to undermine either of these two institutions. Moreover, the grandeur of France would gain nothing from pure Gaullism and its single-minded obsession with countering American influence. Modified Gaullism, in fact, offered France the most realistic path towards maintaining her influence in European security. This realization became clear during the Mitterrand era with a careful balance between Atlanticism and Europeanism. Gaullism would become even more Atlanticist under Chirac, paving the way for the more openly pro-American presidencies of Sarkozy and Hollande.

Chirac: NATO’s New Relevance

Jacques Chirac’s arrival at the Élysee coincided with a worsening of the Bosnian Civil War and an increasingly lively debate amongst NATO partners regarding the question of intervention. A mere two months after assuming the presidency, in July 1995, Bosnian Serb forces massacred 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys in the Srebrenica refugee camp. At the same time, the successful resolution of the Cold War raised the question of NATO expansion into newly liberated countries in Central and Eastern Europe. These parallel developments allowed NATO to achieve new relevance in an age in which the definitive conventional threat against the West had disappeared. Departing from Gaullism, Chirac’s France supported NATO’s expanded vision of European security in both Bosnia and the post-Soviet space. Chirac even engaged in
substantive discussions involving the possibility of returning France to NATO’s integrated military command. Modified Gaullism, under Chirac, envisioned a closer Franco-American partnership with the realization that Europe was not yet ready to handle its own security.

The Bosnian Civil War, precipitated by the breakup of Yugoslavia and the self-declared independence of Slovenia and Croatia in 1991, rapidly descended into the most serious European security crisis since World War II. With the realization of crimes against civilians being committed in Bosnia, France approved the deployment of its peacekeepers under the banner of the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) in 1992.\(^{47}\) Bill Clinton, fighting isolationist tendencies at home, pushed for limited NATO involvement with Operation Deny Flight in April 1993. The escalation of the conflict in 1993 led France to provide aircraft to NATO’s integrated military command in support of UNPROFOR.\(^{48}\) For the first time since 1966, French forces operated under NATO command. By the time Chirac arrived at the Élysee, however, the ineffectiveness of outside intervention had already become clear with the Srebrenica massacre. Ripping the West for its impotence, Chirac “stunned his European partners by openly blaming the Serbs, calling them ‘barbarians.’”\(^{49}\) Chirac aggressively lobbied for massive NATO intervention, ultimately convincing Clinton of the need to apply the full weight of America’s military might to end Serbian atrocities.

\(^{47}\) Alex Macleod, “French policy toward the war in the former Yugoslavia: a bid for international leadership,” International Journal 52.2 (1997), 251.


Operation Deliberate Force began in earnest on 30 August 1995 after the Serbian attack on the Sarajevo market two days earlier.\(^5^0\) In conjunction with the deployment of a Franco-British Rapid Reaction Force (RRF) and gains by Croatian and Bosniak forces, NATO’s air campaign destroyed the Bosnian Serb war machine and paved the way for the Dayton Accords.

Throughout the Bosnian crisis, neither the CFSP nor its defensive arm, the WEU, played a significant role in resolving the conflict. The EC failed to achieve common ground on how to approach the breakup of Yugoslavia.\(^5^1\) More importantly, the WEU’s irrelevance in the final military solution in Bosnia reinforced Chirac’s growing belief that a credible European defense identity could not exist apart from NATO.\(^5^2\) Deemphasizing the WEU, Chirac instead saw a European pillar within NATO as a more viable alternative.\(^5^3\) This realization also caused him to change his views on NATO expansion. Previously, Chirac had opposed expansion on Gaullist grounds, fearing that new accessions from Central and Eastern Europe would be stalwartly pro-American and thus increase American hegemony over the Alliance. In an abrupt about-face, Chirac backed Romania’s accession and advocated for an expansion plan even more extensive than that envisioned by Clinton.\(^5^4\) Chirac’s support for NATO enlargement in 1994 occurred alongside unprecedented levels of Franco-NATO cooperation.

\(^{50}\) Judt, Postwar, 678.
\(^{51}\) Macleod, “French policy,” 245.
\(^{53}\) Lellouche, L’Allié Indocile, 144.
\(^{54}\) Szabo, “Chapter 14: Enlarging NATO,” 343.
including (in 1995) the first NATO exercise on French soil in thirty years.\textsuperscript{55}

The Élysee even began substantive discussions with Washington concerning the possibility of France’s full return to NATO’s integrated military command. After the Bosnia experience, Chirac concluded that it would be irrational for France to participate in NATO military operations while remaining outside of SHAPE. The Élysee demanded two preconditions for France’s return. First, Chirac requested a “double chain of command” in which a European deputy to the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) would be able to activate the European command structure in the event of American non-participation in an operation.\textsuperscript{56} Second, Chirac envisioned an overhauled NATO in which there would be an “Europeanization” of the Alliance’s regional commands, giving France control of Allied Forces Southern Europe (AFSOUTH) based in Naples.\textsuperscript{57} The Pentagon, however, rejected both proposals.

In addition to operational difficulties posed by a double chain of command, the idea of the US Sixth Fleet falling under French command represented a red line for Washington.\textsuperscript{58} Chirac’s NATO reform plan contained clear Gaullist goals, including a decidedly Europeanist view of the Alliance that would grant European countries more strategic influence. The Americans reacted negatively to this vision, and even other European allies showed little enthusiasm for it. In short, Chirac’s version of Gaullism was sufficiently Atlanticist to countenance NATO involvement in Bosnia and enlargement to

\textsuperscript{55} Lellouche, L’Allié Indocile, 146.
\textsuperscript{56} Védrine, 4.
\textsuperscript{57} Lellouche, L’Allié Indocile, 150.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 153.
the east, but ultimately too Europeanist to achieve reintegration. As we shall see, Sarkozy’s successful reintegration in 2009 occurred along more Atlanticist lines.

Chirac’s failure motivated France to seek Europe’s strategic autonomy through EU channels. Notably, the Franco-British Summit at Saint Malo on 4 December 1998 released a joint declaration calling for a “progressive framing of a common defense policy in the framework of CFSP.” Saint Malo set the stage for EU action on a more robust defense identity, leading to the formation of the CSDP in 1999 and effectively rendering the WEU defunct. The United States displayed a tepid reaction to the CSDP, expressing concern that the institution might eventually supplant NATO and push the Americans out of Europe’s defense architecture. Ultimately, the EU and NATO achieved a cooperative framework with the Berlin Plus arrangement in 2002, allowing the CSDP to take advantage of NATO command structures. In an echo of Mitterrand’s acquiescence to the WEU-NATO link, Paris once more found itself embedding an emerging European defense identity within the NATO fold. Chirac could not ignore the fact that key partners, notably the UK and Germany, wanted a firm commitment to the transatlantic bond. The lesson of the Chirac years is that France, in pursuit of strategic influence, would need to find a way to return to SHAPE and the ACE commands in a manner acceptable to both the United States and the rest of Europe.

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59 Ibid., 154.
Sarkozy: Return to the Fold

The election of Nicholas Sarkozy in 2007 signaled the renewal of the transatlantic partnership between France and the United States. The two nations disagreed bitterly over the Iraq War in 2003, leading Chirac to assume the mantle of Gaullism by proclaiming the need for “multipolarity” and a reduction of American influence in the world.\(^2\) Eager to repair the relationship, Sarkozy wasted no time in burnishing his credentials as unabashedly pro-American. Speaking before the US Congress in November 2007, Sarkozy declared: “I want to be your friend, your ally, and your partner.”\(^3\) Derisive commentators in France even went so far as to label him Sarko l’américain. The Sarkozy presidency represented a decisive move towards Atlanticism with France’s formal reintegration with SHAPE. While Sarkozy continued the efforts of Mitterrand and Chirac in reinforcing a defense identity within the EU, he ultimately concluded, particularly after the Libya crisis in 2011, that the CSDP would not be more than a junior partner to NATO.

At a March 2009 conference in Paris, Sarkozy announced France’s return to full membership in NATO with much fanfare.\(^4\) Citing the need to protect French sovereignty, Sarkozy dismissed Gaullist criticism of his decision by pointing out that “we cannot risk the lives of our soldiers without taking


part in the planning.” Sarkozy came to the same conclusion as that of Chirac prior to the latter’s failed attempt at reintegration. France, as a key contributor to NATO operations, actually deprived itself of strategic influence by refusing to assume full participation in SHAPE. Complete integration into the military command would grant France the ability to plan NATO missions, and French officers would be able to interact with their allies as full colleagues. The United States, for its part, had by the 2000s became more favorably disposed towards a stronger European security identity in NATO. Sarkozy thus easily obtained two important concessions from the Alliance, securing French control of Supreme Allied Command Transformation (ACT) in Norfolk and Allied Joint Command in Lisbon. Chirac’s 1997 failure arose due to both Europeanist intransigence on the part of France and Atlanticist rigidity on the part of the Americans. In 2009, both sides were closer to a compromise, and Sarkozy’s move was calibrated in a way that reassured France’s allies. While Sarkozy’s decision represented a clear break from de Gaulle, he took great care to reassure his country that French sovereignty would be protected, that no French soldier would serve in a NATO mission without a decision from the Élysee, and that France would remain an “independent ally” of the United States. By boosting French influence in NATO while simultaneously asserting independence, Sarkozy paid homage to the Gaullist principles

necessary to achieve support from a skeptical French political class.

Sarkozy’s Atlanticism also empowered the longstanding French goal of achieving a European defense identity within the EU. Conscious of the Atlanticist bent of states in Central and Eastern Europe, France’s reintegration confirmed her loyalty to the Alliance and dispelled suspicions that Paris sought a European defense apart from NATO. Sarkozy used his newly acquired political capital to call for a strengthening of the CSDP.\footnote{Howorth, “Symposium: Sarkozy,” 209.} At the same time, Sarkozy acknowledged the CSDP as primarily a way of increasing the EU’s institutional capacity to handle nontraditional, low-intensity security challenges.\footnote{Mazzucelli, “Changing Partners at Fifty?” 130.} A newly invigorated NATO with France back in the fold would remain the supreme locus of European security, while the CSDP would play second fiddle to the Alliance with stabilization missions such as EUFOR Althea in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Sarkozy’s version of Gaullism thus had more of an Atlanticist flavor than that of Mitterrand, who predicted the post-Cold War decline of NATO and saw the EU as the long-term vehicle with which to anchor European security. The inadequacy of the CSDP in the face of the Libyan crisis in 2011 further reinforced the emerging French view that only NATO has the capacity to undertake high-intensity missions. Conscious of both her declining geopolitical position and the difficulty of transforming the EU into a powerful security actor, France under Sarkozy committed to the transatlantic partnership in a manner that would have been unthinkable under de Gaulle.
Conclusion

The François Hollande presidency has confirmed the Atlanticist drift of French security policy. An increasingly complex set of security crises, to include a metastasizing jihadist threat in Syria-Iraq and Russian intervention in Ukraine, has moved France and the United States even closer together. Working in concert with Berlin and Washington (and at times bowing to peer pressure), Hollande has cancelled the sale of Mistral warships to Moscow, played a key role in both rounds of the Minsk negotiations aimed at pacifying Ukraine, and backed sanctions against Russia in the wake of the Crimean annexation.

The Hollande-commissioned Védrine Report in 2012 recommended that France remain within NATO’s integrated military command and the president has shown no interest in reversing his predecessor’s decision. With respect to the CSDP, Hollande has demonstrated continuity with Sarkozy by emphasizing the CSDP’s role as a civil-military toolbox for stabilization and peacekeeping missions. Lack of a common strategic vision across the EU has watered down France’s enthusiasm for the CSDP as a robust defense actor, causing “a clear departure from the traditional ambitious French position on the EU as a potential military alter ego...to NATO.”

Clearly, the Mitterrand-Kohl groundwork established in the late 1980s through the WEU has failed to achieve the results that

France once envisioned. The fractious EU has not shown the appetite for high-intensity conflict abroad or territorial defense at home. By contrast, NATO retains the decisive advantage of US power and leadership, giving the Alliance a clear agenda and set of capabilities around which to rally its members. For this reason, NATO and the Franco-American partnership – rather than CSDP – retain paramount importance for French security today, and this is unlikely to change in the near future.

And what of the continuing influence of Gaullism in French security policy? France began the Fifth Republic in 1958 with de Gaulle at the helm, a man whose grandiose visions of French independence and world leadership perceived US hegemony as a threat. The general saw Europe’s future as an autonomous confederation of nation-states, naturally led by the grandest nation of them all: France. France’s sacred destiny would even permit her to transcend the antagonistic, two-bloc system and bring about an end to the Cold War. Alas, de Gaulle realized only one aspect of his vision, asserting French sovereignty with his 1966 withdrawal from NATO’s integrated military command. The tripartite directorate and the Fouchet Plan floundered in the face of stiff opposition from both the United States and other European countries, while the rapprochement with the Soviets came to a bitter end with the suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968. De Gaulle’s single-minded pursuit of national grandeur scorned NATO and the EC, the very institutions that, in the decades to follow, would enable French leadership in European security. Indeed, Franco-American cooperation within NATO acted as a multiplier of French power, playing a key role in resolving the Cold War under Mitterrand, settling the Bosnian crisis under Chirac, and enabling the Libyan intervention under Sarkozy. De Gaulle could not have foreseen that, seventy years after its creation, the Alliance would assume such vital significance for France. Nor
could he have predicted that the Europeanist dream of European security would lead only to the CSDP’s modest stabilization missions; important work, no doubt, but hardly a replacement for NATO.

To be sure, the Gaullist stamp on French security policy continues to leave its mark, whether it be Chirac’s call for multipolarity in the wake of the Iraq war or Sarkozy’s opposition to US efforts at extending NATO Membership Action Plans to Ukraine and Georgia. In the defense of her interests, France will not hesitate to put the necessary daylight between her policy preferences and those of the US. Nevertheless, France has embraced a new, Atlanticist version of Gaullism. The doctrine has been refined over the decades, taking shape under Mitterrand’s Cold War solidarity with the US and continuing with warming transatlantic ties under Chirac and, especially, Sarkozy and Hollande. NATO itself has in many ways conformed to French wishes, placing ACT in French hands and solidifying nuclear deterrence, the centerpiece of French security, as a key component of the 2010 Strategic Concept. France today retains its status as a middle-power whose grandeur is best achieved within, rather than without, NATO and the EU.

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The Islamic State’s Social Media and Recruitment Strategy: Papering Over a Flimsy Caliphate

Ryan Pereira

The Islamic State’s (IS) precipitous rise has generated intense American interest in the group’s online social media and recruitment strategy. This is to be expected: IS-related mobilization in the United States, while not as large in other Western states, has been unprecedented. US authorities claim that some 250 Americans have heeded the Islamic State’s call and attempted to make *hijra* (emigrate) to its “caliphate” in Syria and Iraq.¹ In recent years, the group has inspired a handful of “homegrown” jihadists. FBI Director James Comey has spoken of “hundreds, maybe thousands” of IS sympathizers within the country, and admitted that the agency is running over 900 active investigations against homegrown violent extremists in all fifty states.² In 2015, the government arrested 56 suspected IS supporters, the most terrorism arrests in a single

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year since 2001. In almost all of these cases, social media played a critical role in the individuals’ radicalization.

The Islamic State’s unprecedented success in mobilizing American foreign fighters and inspiring homegrown terrorism lies in the appeal of its narrative, and the reach and effectiveness of its online network of supporters. While the Islamic State’s online support networks are resilient and adaptive, the group’s appeal is based upon an unsustainable “winner’s message.” As such, efforts to counter the Islamic State’s messaging should focus on piercing this narrative of invincibility and continual expansion. This report will outline the Islamic State’s official media apparatus, describe the group’s social media and online recruitment strategies, explain why it is difficult and possibly counter-productive for social media companies to further degrade IS’ online networks of supporters, analyze IS’ “winner’s narrative,” demonstrate how IS has successfully leveraged the mainstream media to create the illusion of continuous success, and discuss ways that the US government can diminish the Islamic State’s success in mobilizing foreign fighters and inspiring homegrown terrorist attacks.

**Islamic State’s Official Media Apparatus**

The Islamic State devotes significant resources to producing high-quality, professional propaganda using a variety of

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Since June 29, 2014, the group has regularly produced a range of Arabic-language propagandistic material including daily radio and text bulletins, audio-recordings, photographic essays glamorizing military and civilian life, anāshīd (religiously-sanctioned a capella music), and short videos. While the vast majority of the organization’s official propaganda is only released in Arabic, unaffiliated, pro-Islamic State outlets such as al-Battar Media Foundation regularly translate and redistribute IS’ content for English-speaking audiences. The group also produces magazines tailored to readers who are not fluent in Arabic, including the English-language Dabiq, the French-language Dar al-Islam, the Turkish-language Constantinople, and the Russian-language Istok. While al-Qaeda and Affiliated Movements (AQAM) also produce propaganda for a wide range of audiences, including English-speaking sympathizers, the Islamic State’s efforts have been much more prolific. IS has captured the attention of Western media organizations and the public in a way that al-Qaeda never achieved.

Within the Islamic State’s broader media apparatus are a number of media wings. The group’s central propaganda video branches, al-Itisam Media, al-Furqan Media, and al-Hayat Media, produce less regular but more prominent propaganda videos. The organization also runs the A’maq News Agency, al-Ajnand, which produces audio recordings, and the al-Bayan Radio Station, which documents the organization’s ongoing military operations. According to a graphic published by a pro-

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6 Zelin, “Picture It or It Didn’t Happen.”
IS supporter, the organization’s various *wilayats* (provinces) all maintain media teams that work independently from one another but are supervised by the Islamic State’s main media house.⁹

Over the past two years, the organization’s media output has become increasingly decentralized. In 2013, the organization released all of its propaganda through its main media branch al-Furqan Media,¹⁰ but today the bulk of its official releases are coming from its various *wilayats*. Throughout 2015, Islamic State *wilayats* produced a stunning amount of propaganda, including 710 videos, 14,523 images and 1787 photo essays depicting military training, battlefield successes, and civilian life in the “caliphate.”¹¹ In contrast, al-Furqan and the other central propaganda branches released several dozen audio messages and videos.

The decentralization of IS’ media production not only demonstrates the organization’s geographic expansion beyond Syria and Iraq but also the growth of its affiliates’ technical capabilities. For example, after Boko Haram’s leader Abubakar Shekau pledged *bay’a* (religious oath of allegiance) to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the new *wilayat’s* media strategy became much more professionalized. Since joining the ‘caliphate,’ *wilayat* West Africa’s videos have become “more slickly crafted than the group’s standard grainy offerings, with professionally designed graphics and opening sequences.”¹²

IS media operatives appear to be assisting, or at least indirectly influencing, the Islamic State’s *wilayats* in their

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⁹ Joscelyn, “Graphic promotes.”  
¹⁰ Ibid.  
¹¹ Joscelyn, “Graphic promotes.”  
propaganda and communication efforts. Although this is difficult to prove because of these jihadist groups’ clandestine nature, the various wilayats’ propaganda and statements are remarkably consistent in their branding, suggesting that some level of coordination is indeed occurring. This enables the organization to project a unified message, which makes IS appear more legitimate to potential supporters, and reinforces the group’s narrative that it is no longer confined to Syria and Iraq but is in fact ‘remaining and expanding.’

The Role of Propaganda in Radicalization and Recruitment

By saturating the online jihadist marketplace of ideas with official content, the Islamic State produces an abundance of raw material that can help to deepen and accelerate individuals’ radicalization and recruitment. This propaganda is not intended to implant new ideas, but rather compounds and crystallizes individuals’ previously held-sympathies. The Islamic State’s ‘enlisters’ use this propagandistic material to provide potential recruits with fresh new ‘evidence’ to convince them that the “caliphate” is ‘remaining and expanding’ and that sympathizers should participate in this historical undertaking.

The Islamic State’s prolific dissemination of propaganda not only catalyzes sympathizers’ interest in and dependence on the material but also has the potential to launch sympathizers into active roles on social media. Accompanying each new

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13 Joscelyn, “Graphic promotes.”
official release, IS ‘fan-boys’ create a wealth of new material including comedic memes, reordered video montages, poems, posters and essays aimed at further spreading the organization’s narrative. One such ‘jihobbyist’ Ahlam al-Nasr, better known as “the Poetess of the Islamic State” has become a burgeoning jihadist celebrity. Her poems celebrating the group’s military triumphs and governance efforts are circulated widely within jihadists’ social networks.16

While IS propagandists cannot directly influence ‘fan-boys’ final media products, the group is able to encourage the production of a stream of unofficial but on message content by releasing a plethora of raw material on social media. Unaffiliated but sympathetic media outlets like Tarjumān al-Asāwīrī, al-Nuṣra al-Muqaddisiyya (“Palestinian Support”), Mu’assasat al-Khilāfa (“Caliphate Foundation”) and al-Jabha al-‘I’lāmiyya l-Nuṣrat al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya (“Media Front for the Support of the Islamic State”) draw upon the Islamic State’s official content and statements in their own releases extolling the “caliphate.”17 By flooding the online marketplace of ideas with new content, ‘jihobbyists’ expand the reach of IS’ narrative and reinforce the perception that IS has eclipsed al-Qaeda in the battle for jihadists’ ‘hearts and minds.’

The Islamic State’s Reach and Effectiveness on Social Media Platforms

Much of the Islamic State’s success in flooding social media with propaganda can be attributed to a group of about 3,000

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17 Winter, “The Virtual ‘Caliphate.’”
highly active and influential disseminators. While not always officially appointed, these prolific Twitter users “referred to in (Islamic State) social media strategy documents as the mujtahidūn or “the industrious ones,” act as the vehicles by which the Islamic State’s predetermined, carefully branded version of events is spread. These mujtahidūn may not tweet every day, but when they do, they post a tremendous amount of IS propaganda in a very short period of time. As JM Berger and Jonathon Morgan explained, “Short, prolonged bursts of activity cause hashtags to trend, resulting in third-party aggregation and insertion of tweeted content into search results.”

Whenever IS propagandists release new content or “breaking” news, disseminators, both human users and bots, retweet the propaganda using preselected hashtags such as #AllEyesOnISIS and #CalamityWillBefallUS. Before Twitter began aggressively suspending pro-IS accounts in September 2014, disseminators were able to hijack completely unrelated trending topics. For instance, during the 2014 football world cup IS disseminators attached hashtags like #Brazil_2014 to the group’s propaganda. By hijacking trending topics, disseminators made the Islamic State’s propaganda easily accessible on every Twitter user’s home page. Mainstream media organizations then spread this propaganda further, writing stories about some of the Islamic State’s content and even republishing gruesome tweets such as one picture showing

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an Iraqi police officer’s severed head with the caption, “This is our ball… it is made of skin #WorldCup #WorldCup2014.”\textsuperscript{22} With only some 46,000 pro-IS Twitter users active at the time,\textsuperscript{23} these disseminators’ activism was critical in cultivating the impression that the Islamic State was much more popular and powerful than it actually was.

By reinforcing this illusion of strength, the disseminators are potentially able to increase IS sympathizers’ cognitive dissonance, causing them to feel as if others are participating in a historic, once-in-a-lifetime undertaking while they continue to live hypocritical existences in \textit{Dar al-Kufr}, enthusiastically consuming IS propaganda at home while still fraternizing with the infidels every day. Sympathizers’ belief that they are missing out on an unprecedented opportunity creates a sense of urgency. It also might help to accelerate these individuals’ radicalization, push them deeper into IS networks, and eventually cause them to take direct action; through social media activism, homegrown terrorist attacks, or \textit{hijra}—in support of the “caliphate.”

Because the passive consumption of propaganda can only take the typical radicalization process so far, the Islamic State’s online recruitment strategy relies upon scores on dedicated users who maintain a high level of availability online. These so-called “enlisters” respond to sympathizers’ queries, shower prospective recruits with attention, and act as an echo chamber, reinforcing and deepening radicals’ previously held sympathies and providing a steady drumbeat of incitement to action.


\textsuperscript{23} Berger and Morgan, “The ISIS Twitter Census.”
Sometimes referred to as “grooming,” specialized teams of IS recruiters operate around the clock, interacting on an individual-level with prospective recruits and deepening their commitment to the Islamic State’s ideology. In the case of “Alex,” a 23-year old IS sympathizer from Washington, several dozen IS supporters spent “thousands of hours engaging her over more than six months.” Recruiters patiently answered her questions about religion, sent her extremist literature justifying polygamy and even showered her with chocolates and money.24 As Alex became deeper involved in IS social networks and more committed to its radical worldview, recruiters began telling her that it was a sin to live among non-believers and encouraged her to make *hijra* to “a Muslim land” where she would be provided with a good husband and comfortable life.25 While Alex’s grandparents alerted the FBI to her sympathies and confiscated her smart phone and computer at night, she continued to communicate with her IS enlister.

Although each individual’s radicalization and enlistment is unique, there are several distinct elements common to all cases of American recruitment. In general, IS recruiters follow potential targets from their first contact with the group, through careful pruning of their social networks, before culminating a call to action on behalf of the Islamic State. These stages will be explained in greater detail below.


25 Callimachi, “ISIS and the Lonely Young American.”
First Contact

Before the Islamic State can groom potential recruits, the group’s recruiters must first make contact with the target. In some cases, contact is initiated by curious IS sympathizers. Often curiosity-seekers’ initial interest in the Islamic State is sparked by mainstream media coverage rather than the group’s prolific social media output. For instance, the aforementioned IS sympathizer “Alex” first contacted IS supporters on Twitter after watching CNN coverage of James Foley’s beheading and feeling “struck by a horrified curiosity.” IS recruiters quickly began answering her questions and “grooming” her to emigrate to the “caliphate.”

In other cases, the Islamic State’s recruiters seek out potential targets and initiate contact. Islamic State recruiters follow both violent extremist and mainstream Muslim networks on social media, seeking out sympathetic individuals and potential recruits.

Additionally, IS supporters and recruiters follow social media accounts that are radical but not overtly violent. For instance, many IS sympathizers follow the UK-based CAGE organization, an advocacy group founded by a former Guantanamo detainee. The group has advocated controversial cases, including one on behalf of Aafia Siddiqui, a Muslim prisoner commonly referred to as “Lady al-Qaeda.” While not overtly violent, the organization has been linked to terrorists like radical cleric Anwar al-Awlaki and Mohammed Emwazi,

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26 Callimachi, “ISIS and the Lonely Young American,”
27 Berger, “Tailored Online Interventions.”
28 Ibid.
better known as “Jihadi John.”  

Islamic State supporters also follow British accounts associated with the now-banned al-Muhajiroun network. The organization has called for a global caliphate and has reportedly been linked to approximately half of the terrorist attacks planned or carried out in the U.K. and abroad.

Islamic State recruiters also follow English-language networks that are frequented by extremist Muslim Americans. These include Authentic Tauheed, the Islamic Thinker’s Society, an advocacy group based out of New York, and the Islamic Awakening message board. IS recruiters are able to identify potential targets by monitoring these social networks and searching through the content and comments that potential sympathizers have posted, such as individuals expressing anti-American views or pro-IS sentiments.

Once initial contact is established, the Islamic State’s response varies based upon the target. In some instances, IS supporters simply answer inquires about Islam, while in others, foreign fighters clarify users’ misperceptions about IS and provide information about life in its “caliphate.” While the recruiters’ interactions with each target are unique, all interventions are tailored to establish a rapport with these sympathizers and bring them deeper into the Islamic State’s fold.

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30 Berger

31 Raffaello Pantucci, “*We Love Death as You Love Life:* Britain’s Suburban Mujahedeen” (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2013).

32 Berger, “Tailored Online Interventions.”
Create an Insular Network

Once initial contact is established, Islamic State recruiters and supporters quickly swarm targets to create an insular micro-community around the sympathizer. Recruiters make themselves readily available around the clock, allowing near-constant contact as the relationship progresses.

Gradually, Islamic State supporters and recruiters begin encouraging targets to isolate themselves from non-IS supporters. A recruiter’s objective is to limit the targets’ exposure to alternative points of view, deepen their commitment to IS’ ideology, and increase their sense of alienation in the West. Islamic State recruiters often invoke *al-walaa wal-barra* (“loyalty to Muslims and disavowal of non-Muslims”) when arguing that non-Muslims are not to be trusted or befriended. Pro-IS users also warn about interacting with moderate Muslim religious leaders living in the West, frequently deriding them as “coconuts,” insinuating that these individuals are brown on the outside but white on the inside.

Anti-Islamic State activists on social media also reinforce IS recruiters’ assertion that true, devout Muslims will never be accepted in the West. These users often engage directly with individuals expressing sympathy towards the Islamic State or its radical worldview. For instance, when Elton Simpson expressed unhappiness over a “Draw Mohammed” contest being held in Garland, Texas, anti-Muslim activists began “trolling” his Twitter account. Two days later, Simpson and an accomplice, Nadir Soofi, drove from Arizona to Garland,

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33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Vidino and Hughes, “ISIS in America.”
36 Berger, “Tailored Online Interventions.”
tweeting their bay’a to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, before dying in a brief shootout with armed security guards. Although it is unlikely that these activists’ “trolling” was the sole reason that the duo went ahead with the attack, it may have exacerbated their shared feelings of isolation and contributed to their radicalization.

“Going Dark”

As recruiters and targets begin to develop a closer relationship, the former often encourage targets to shift to private communication channels. This enables IS supporters to provide sympathizers with detailed advice about making hijra or conducting homegrown attacks without alerting authorities. Although some of these conversations take place using the direct messaging function on Twitter or other social media platforms, IS recruiters typically favor messaging applications with strong encryption such as WhatsApp, Kik, Surespot, and Telegram.

Call to Action

At some point in the relationship, IS recruiters or supporters will attempt to pinpoint the action that a target is most willing to perform and encourage him or her to act. In some cases, IS supporters simply exhort sympathizers to perform social media activism on the group’s behalf by retweeting IS propaganda and favorable news stories.

In other cases, IS supporters and recruiters encourage other forms of direct action, including hijra to the Islamic State. The

37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
Islamic State views itself as a generational state-building project with a need for both fighters and professionals. IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has framed hijra as wajib ‘ayni (an individual obligation), explaining, “We make a special call to the scholars, fuqaha’ (experts on Islamic jurisprudence), and callers, especially the judges, as well as people with military, administrative, and service expertise, and medical doctors and engineers of all different specializations and fields.” 39

The Islamic State’s online supporters and recruiters have been instrumental in providing both advice and logistical support to Americans attempting to make hijra to Syria. In one known case, 19-year old engineering student Mohammed Hamzah Khan befriended a man known as Abu Qaqa on Twitter. 40 US authorities allege that Qaqa provided Khan with the phone number of an IS supporter who would help smuggle Khan and his siblings into Syria upon landing in Turkey. At the same time, Khan’s 17-year old sister, using the Twitter handle “Umm Bara” was communicating with an English-speaking IS fighter who had gained infamy after compiling a “de facto travel guide” for would-be recruits. 41 When authorities searched the siblings’ home they found a detailed guide to crossing the Turkish border, contact information for smugglers working with IS, and hand-written farewell letters addressed to their parents. 42

Since some IS sympathizers determine that hijra is not an option, IS online recruiters and supporters also emphasize the importance of carrying out terrorist attacks at home. In some cases, this takes the form of undirected tweets urging or

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40 Vidino and Hughes, “ISIS in America.”
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
threatening homegrown terrorism. For instance, one IS supporter tweeted, “Ok so they’re talkin so mch abt 7/7. Bidhnillah we’ll cont. to hit ‘em til every day becomes an event to remember 1/1, 2/2 etc. #sevenseven.”\(^{43}\) Another pro-IS user wrote, “To those who cannot make #Hijrah Strike from within, it doesn’t matter how you do it. Use a bomb. A gun. A knife. A Car or a big rock #Islamic State.”\(^{44}\) In another case, a prominent Somali-American, English-speaking propagandist Mohammed Abdullahi Hassan tweeted about the “Draw Mohammed” Garland event with an explicit call to arms, “The brothers from the Charlie Hebdo attack did their part. It’s time for the brothers in the #US to do their part.”\(^{45}\)

In other cases, IS recruiters and supporters are directly reaching out to targets on an individual level and encouraging them to commit these terrorist attacks. FBI director James Comey testified that IS recruiters and supporters are in contact with approximately 21,000 English-speaking Twitter followers, bombarding them with incitements to violence. Comey explained, “There is a device, almost a devil on their shoulders, all day long saying, ‘Kill, kill, kill, kill.’”\(^{46}\)

Although the details remain somewhat unclear, IS recruiters and supporters appear to have played a direct role in encouraging Elton Simpson and Nadir Soofi to commit the failed Garland terrorist attack. In the months before the incident, Simpson became actively involved in the community of US-based IS sympathizers on Twitter and reportedly made

\(^{43}\) Berger, “Tailored Online Interventions.”

\(^{44}\) Ibid.


\(^{46}\) Vidino and Hughes, “ISIS in America.”
contact with a well-known foreign fighter, Abu Hussain al-Britani.⁴⁷ It also appears that Simpson responded to Mohammed Abdullahi Hassan’s aforementioned call to arms, publicly asking him to “direct message” him in the days before the attack.⁴⁸

**The Islamic State: Social Network Resilience**

Although Twitter began aggressively taking down IS’ official media account, al-‘I’tisam in September 2014, this has not prevented the organization from widely spreading its message online. When Twitter suspended one of the Islamic State’s main distribution units, propagandists would simply create another official account with a new Twitter handle using a variation on the previous name. The remaining official accounts would then ‘shout out’ or tweet out the new handle whenever the suspended account was recreated and back online. This provided an authentication mechanism that has enabled IS sympathizers and disseminators to identify newly created official accounts and continue spreading the organization’s propaganda.

Another coping mechanism that the Islamic State has used to maintain control over the flow of information on Twitter is to simply have its official propagandists create their own personal accounts.⁴⁹ Whenever Twitter identifies and suspends these smaller accounts, propagandists simply regenerate the accounts, allowing the group to continue uploading content to the Internet.

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⁴⁷Ibid.
⁴⁸Ibid.
Many of the Islamic State’s newer “official” accounts have strong privacy settings, allowing some of them to fly under the radar. Only a small, selective group of known IS supporters are permitted to follow these accounts and read their tweets. The official propagandists then rely upon these trusted IS supporters to disseminate the propaganda to the Islamic State’s wider network of social media sympathizers.

The Islamic State’s online community also relies on “shout out” accounts to ensure the survival of its network of disseminators and supporters. “Shout out” accounts are a unique innovation to the Islamic State’s social media network. These accounts primarily introduce new, pro-IS accounts and promote previously suspended users’ new accounts, allowing them to quickly regain their previous Twitter followers. One such account, Baqiya Shoutouts, explains that its purpose is to reconnect “the ikhwa with the Baqiya Family” and tells pro-IS users, “Ask for a shoutout. RT (retweet) & support our troops back from suspension. By Allah it makes a difference.” While these “shout out” accounts rarely tweet official content or propaganda, they tend to have the largest followings among IS users and thus play a critical role in the resilience of IS’ social networks.

“Shout out” accounts have also boosted network resilience by compiling and sharing extensive lists of individuals who frequently “troll” and flag pro-IS Twitter users. When the Islamic State’s supporters create new accounts, many rely on these detailed lists to identify and block those users that

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50 Berger and Morgan, “The ISIS Twitter Census.”
51 Vidino and Hughes, “ISIS in America.”
53 Vidino and Hughes, “ISIS in America.”
54 Ibid.
typically bring pro-IS accounts to Twitter’s attention. Although it is unclear who exactly complies these lists, they help IS disseminators and supporters to extend their new accounts’ lifespans.

Even when Twitter suspends pro-IS users there is little evidence that these suspensions dissuade users from returning to social media. Instead, IS supporters view these takedowns as a “badge of honor and a means by which an aspirant can bolster his or her legitimacy.” Suspended users typically recreate new accounts within hours, posting an image of the Twitter notification of suspension to prove that they are the owner of the previous account, and asking fellow IS sympathizers for “shout outs.”

The Limits and Negative Consequence of Twitter Suspensions

Twitter has had significant success in limiting the reach of IS propaganda since it began aggressively suspending pro-IS accounts one and a half years ago. JM Berger and Jonathon Morgan noted that we no longer see “images of beheaded hostages flooding unrelated hashtags or turning up in unrelated search results. We also did not see ISIS hashtags trend or aggregate widely.” Today, ordinary Twitter users’ news feeds are no longer inundated with the Islamic State’s gruesome propaganda.

However, there are limits to what Twitter’s suspensions can accomplish. Although Twitter’s aggressive “takedown” campaign has degraded IS social networks, it is still fairly easy for IS sympathizers and curious individuals to find IS

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55 Vidino and Hughes, “ISIS in America,” 24.
propaganda. Additionally, these suspensions may be causing negative, unintended consequences. As Twitter began suspending the most visible IS accounts, the network became more internally focused. Perhaps because IS sympathizers wanted to lower their signatures in order to extend the tenure of their Twitter accounts, they began following and interacting with other IS supporters while largely avoiding interactions with people outside the narrow network of IS supporters.

There are several potential downsides to this development. First, IS supporters’ increasing insularity limits sympathizers’ exposure to out-of-network relationships and alternative points of view that might potentially act as moderating or de-radicalizing influences. As JM Berger and Jonathon Morgan cautioned, “When we segregate members of ISIS social networks, we are, to some extent, also closing off potential exit ramps.” The increasing segregation of these social networks exacerbates social media’s “echo chamber” effect. Without exposure to dissenting points of view, IS supporters are bombarded with a constant stream of IS propaganda and incitement. IS sympathizers’ repeat interactions with other supporters might accelerate these individuals’ radicalization and eventually push them to undertake direct action on behalf of the Islamic State.

While there are limits to what suspensions can accomplish, the Islamic State’s appeal is rooted in an unsustainable “winner’s narrative.” If the US government and other stakeholders can pierce the Islamic State’s message of invincibility and continual expansion, they might be able to reduce the flow of volunteers and foreign fighters.

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57 Vidino and Hughes, “ISIS in America.”
The Islamic State’s Winner’s Narrative

The central theme of the Islamic State’s messaging strategy is that the organization is incredibly powerful and constantly expanding. The group’s slogan, baqiya wa tatamaddad means “remaining and expanding” and demonstrates the importance of maintaining the perception that the group is continually progressing and gaining strength.

An Arabic-language article by IS supporter Sheikh Abu Sulayman al-Jahbadi sheds light on IS’ messaging strategy. Al-Jahbadi explained, “The caliphate showed the crimes of the coalition and the rawafid (rejectionists); however it was always featured with retaliatory attacks… This is intended to reflect the absence of weakness...”

There are different themes that the Islamic State uses to reinforce this “winner’s narrative.” Among the most prominent are the group’s military victories against Islam’s enemies, the organization’s successful governance and hisba efforts, and its apocalyptic utopianism. IS portrays itself as triumphant, effective, pious, and uncompromising while its enemies are framed as unjust apostates and infidels.

Military

IS uses derogatory language to dehumanize and delegitimize its military opponents and to present itself as the defenders of

61 Zelin, “Picture It or It Didn’t Happen” and Winter, “The Virtual ‘Caliphate.’”
Sunni lives, rights, and property. Some of these disparaging terms include *al-sahwat al-murtaddin* (the apostate awakening), in reference to IS’ Sunni opponents; ‘B.K.K.’ *al-murtaddin* (P.K.K. apostates); *tanzim al-nusayri* (the Alwawite regime); *junud al-taghut* (the tyrant’s soldiers), in reference to General Hiftar and his allies in Libya; *jaysh al-safawi* (the Safavid Army), a negative term for the Iraqi Security Forces; *al-ahzab al-kurdiyya al-ilhadiyya* (the atheistic Kurdish parties); and *al-hashd al-rafidi* (the rejectionist committees), a euphemism for the Shia Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq. By dehumanizing its opponents and casting them as the enemies of Islam, the Islamic State justifies extreme violence and brutality against them.

The Islamic State also attempts to portray its opponents as pawns in the Crusader’s global war on Islam. In the video “Healing of the Believers’ Chests,” IS shows the immolation of Jordanian pilot Muadh al-Kasabeh. The Islamic State included footage of King Abdullah II embracing President Obama before showing coalition airstrikes and images of children dying on the streets of Syria. A June 2015 video from the Islamic State’s Nineveh Province provides another example of this victimization narrative. It opens with scenes of an IS fighter handling a child’s disembodied arm before three groups of alleged ‘spies’ are brutally executed. After the Islamic State highlights its opponents’ attacks on ‘innocent’ Sunni Muslims, it makes sure to liquidate them. This juxtaposition of victimhood and retributive violence drives home the message.

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62 Zelin, “Picture It or It Didn’t Happen,” 90.
64 Winter, “The Virutal ‘Caliphate.’”
that Sunni Muslims are being targeted and that the Islamic State is the only entity willing and able to defend them.

When discussing its military operations and capabilities, the Islamic State projects an image of continual progress and expansion. For instance, a propaganda video released by A’maq on April 18th explained that the Islamic State’s fighters were making “continued progress...in parts of the Baiji Oil Refinery.” Its propagandists frequently highlight the “war booty,” including tanks, heavy weapons, and ammunition, that the Islamic State’s fighters looted from vanquished enemies. All of this propaganda reinforces the message that the Islamic State is triumphant and predestined to succeed.

The Islamic State’s depiction of its military activities is also intended to reinforce the idea that the group is a legitimate state with a real army. Its propagandists regularly depict training camps and elaborate military parades featuring tanks, artillery guns, and armored vehicles. The Islamic State also emphasizes the multi-generational nature of its struggle, frequently depicting ashbal (“lion cubs”) being indoctrinated and trained at camps like the Farouq Academy For Cubs. The message is implicit: the Islamic State’s cadre of loyal, fearsome children will continue fighting the Crusaders and apostates until final victory is achieved.

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65 Zelin, “Picture It or It Didn’t Happen.”
Governance and Hisba

The main narratives that IS advances when discussing its governance and hisba activities is that the State is highly competent and impartial and its fighters administer swift, impartial justice. IS advertises its competence by demonstrating that it is committed to public works. Videos regularly show the construction of public markets, the opening of new schools, and engineers repairing infrastructure damaged by coalition airstrikes.68 The message is clear: the Islamic State builds, its enemies destroy.

One way that IS demonstrates its impartiality is with its propaganda depicting tribal elders swearing allegiance to the Islamic State.69 This is a way to show that the Islamic State takes tribal interests into consideration as well as reinforcing the image that the group is expanding by incorporating new actors into its governance system.

IS highlights its hisba activity to prove that it is living up to its claims to be “a Caliphate in Accordance with the Prophetic Method.” The group’s propaganda frequently shows its hisba patrols burning cigarettes, marijuana, hookahs, alcohol, and other “immoral” products. This is in addition to IS meting out corporal and capital punishments against thieves, apostates, and “sodomites.”70 The hisba teams are also regularly shown destroying Shia and Sufi shrines, closing shops during prayers, and making sure that food and products being sold in the souq aren’t counterfeit or spoiled.

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68 Zelin, “Picture It or It Didn’t Happen.”
70 Zelin, “Picture It or It Didn’t Happen.”
Apocalyptic Utopianism

IS aims to show normalcy within the “caliphate” in spite of the ongoing war. For instance, on April 21, 2015 Wilayat Halab published a collection of photos showing continued business.\textsuperscript{71} In a video “Services of the Subjects #1” the group interviewed a resident praising the comfortable living conditions and encouraging others to come enjoy the stability and security within the “caliphate.”\textsuperscript{72} IS photographic essays regularly feature fishing trips, fighters relaxing beneath shaded trees, children playing in the streets, and beautiful flowers and flourishing agriculture.\textsuperscript{73}

IS also emphasizes its role in bringing about the nearing apocalypse in order to increase sympathizers’ sense of urgency. The group’s English-language magazine \textit{Dabiq} is filled with references to the Armageddon. In IS’ English-language video “No Respite,” the narrator taunts the US-led coalition, telling them, “Bring it on! Your numbers only increase us in faith” before predicting “the flames of war will finally burn you on the hills of death.” The message is simple: The Islamic State is destined to succeed. Pledge \textit{bay’a} now or face an eternity in Hell.

Leveraging the Media

The Islamic State has taken strategic communications by a jihadist group to an entirely new level with its tightly

\textsuperscript{71} Zelin, “Picture It or It Didn’t Happen.”
\textsuperscript{72} The Islamic State, “Services of the Subjects #1,” \textit{Wilayat Ninawa Media Office}, April 18, 2015, accessed November, 5 2015.
\textsuperscript{73} Winter, “The Virtual ‘Caliphate.’
choreographed, “Hollywood quality” films\(^{74}\) that reflect a deep understanding of how to catch Western media’s attention. When media organizations rebroadcast and write stories about IS’ gruesome propaganda and its state-building efforts, they reinforce the “winner’s message” that IS seeks to cultivate.

IS has taken advantage of media organizations’ fixation with the group’s propaganda to obscure its losses. For instance, IS allegedly killed Muadh al-Kasabeh in early January, but the group did not release the film “Healing of the Believers’ Chests” until February 3,\(^{75}\) roughly a week after its high-profile loss in Kobani.\(^{76}\) Mainstream media organizations immediately began covering the barbaric execution, helping IS to divert attention from its embarrassing battlefield defeat in northern Syria.

IS has also leveraged mainstream media coverage to exaggerate the organization’s strength. A clear example of IS’ tendency to embellish occurred in Africa. In October 2014, a relatively small group of militants in Derna, Libya pledged \(bay’a\) to the Islamic State and declared that they had established an emirate in the city. Soon after the militants’ pledge, IS flooded social media with visual evidence of the “expansion” into Libya, including a video showing a parade of militants


waving IS black flags as they drove down Derna’s main street. This show of force led numerous media organizations and respected counter-terrorism analysts to report IS’ control of the city as an objective fact. In reality, control of Derna was divided between a number of different militants, and al-Qaeda-linked jihadists eventually expelled Islamic State militants from the city.

After lying about its control of Derna, IS issued a false claim of responsibility for the March 18 attack on the Bardo Museum in Tunis. Tunisian authorities eventually attributed it to the al-Qaeda-linked Katibat Uqba ibn Nafi. Although the Tunisian government eventually disproved IS’ claim of responsibility, the media had already given the Islamic State credit. These initial headlines, published days after Boko Haram’s March 7 pledge of bay’a, furthered the perception that IS was growing stronger.

One reason why the media often repeats IS’ exaggerated claims is because the Islamic State tries to impose a ‘media blackout’ on the areas under its control, making it difficult for independent outlets to get a clear picture of developments on the ground. In Derna, for instance, social media penetration is relatively low and it is too dangerous for most journalists to

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77 Gartenstein-Ross, “Jihad 2.0.”
80 Gartenstein-Ross, “Jihad 2.0.”
visit the city. In Syria, the Islamic State has executed reporters and hunted down activist groups like Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently (RBSS), even finding and murdering RBSS members living in exile in Turkey. By monopolizing the flow of information from IS-held territories, the group is able to deceive and manipulate Western media organizations.

The Islamic State has become heavily dependent on the continued success of its messaging, but the group’s “winner’s narrative” is vulnerable to disruption. Surrounded by hostile enemies on all fronts, IS has already lost roughly 14% of the territory it held in January 2015. With a range of opponents, from powerful nations like the United States, Russia, and France, to shadowy vigilante groups in IS-controlled cities, the group’s battlefield momentum has likely been irreversibly stalled.

Anecdotal reports suggest that the Islamic State’s governance efforts in Syria and Iraq are already failing. These governance failures will only become more pronounced as the group loses additional sources of revenue. The US-led coalition’s increasingly aggressive campaign against the group’s oil tankers will further constrain IS’ profits from oil sales. In addition, IS’ loss of control over populations in Syria and Iraq will diminish its earnings from taxation and extortion.

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81 Ibid.
Even the group’s prolific propaganda machine has taken a hit in recent months. After increasing throughout the first half of the year, the amount of visual content that IS has released has declined since July 2015. The quality of the releases has also declined. Cori E. Dauber, a specialist on visual communication, argues that the videos released by IS’ wilayats are of a lower quality than they were earlier this year. Videos from al-Hayat continue to be high quality, but these are less frequent than the wilayats’ releases. Furthermore, JM Berger claims that the group’s online social network has become less cohesive in recent months.

It is possible that IS’ recent military and personnel losses explain the decline in the group’s media apparatus. The US government knows of a number of IS media operatives who have been killed in recent months including Junaid Hussain, Ahmad Abousamra, Mohammed Emwazi and Denis Cuspert. Furthermore, IS’ loss of territory in northern Raqqa, Bayji, and Sinjar may be forcing the group to divert more resources and time to fighting enemies rather than boosting media output.

Accelerating the Islamic State’s Decline

While the Islamic State’s winner’s narrative is unsustainable, there are several steps that the US government can and should

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86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
89 Zelin, “The Decline in Islamic State.”
take to accelerate the group’s decline. For starters, the government should work to disprove the falsehoods and exaggerations that underlie the group’s narrative. This means investigating IS’ claims, publicizing its lies, and providing regular reports about the group’s battlefield losses and governance failures.

Because IS sympathizers are unlikely to view the US government as a credible source of information, the government should outsource this reporting to other actors. One way to accomplish this would be for intelligence agencies to distribute regular fact sheets to members of the media so that they can compare United States’ and Islamic State’s claims instead of just simply regurgitating IS’ propaganda.90

The US government should also draw attention to counter-narratives emanating from IS-held territories. Non-violent activists like Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently regularly report on the Islamic State’s military setbacks, its fighters’ abuse of local populations, and the group’s governance failures. The government should also consider partnering with IS defectors to de-romanticize “jihadi cool” or global jihadists’ successful rebranding of the movement into something fashionable to young Westerners through social media, rap music videos, glossy magazines, and propaganda films. This counter-messaging should highlight Western foreign fighters’ complaints about being mistreated by local fighters, forced to perform menial tasks like cleaning toilets and washing dishes, and living without electricity, clear water, and access to medical care.91

90 Gartenstein Ross, “Jihad 2.0.”
91 John Hall, “European ISIS Fighters Who Are Seen As Cannon Fodder By Their Commanders Desperately Try to Prove Their Worth By Committing The Most
The government should encourage private companies to elevate these existing counter-narratives. Public officials should solicit help to establish an initiative similar to Google’s Network Against Violent Extremism.\(^9^2\) The idea would be to lobby social media companies to establish a global network of Westerners who defected from IS and Sunni Muslims who survived its attacks and wish to share their experiences. The government should frame social media companies’ participation in the initiative as a way to discredit allegations that they have not done enough to prevent terrorists from using their platforms to communicate, proselytize, and incite violence.

To have any hope of influencing sympathetic fence sitters, activists must produce material that can compete with IS’ high-definition, flashy propaganda videos. The Department of State can organize competitions and provide grants for startup companies who design the most compelling music videos, short films, or comedic skits challenging IS narratives. The intelligence community can help these companies to identify and connect with defectors and survivors so that they have a larger platform to broadcast counter-narratives.

Congress should also consider creating and funding a mentoring initiative similar to the United Kingdom’s Channel program.\(^9^3\) If the police or FBI identify Americans professing support for IS or redistributing the group’s propaganda on social media, the authorities would alert the individual of the

\(^{93}\) For a more detailed discussion of how this might be implemented see Ryan Pereira, “Channeling: The United Kingdom’s Approach to CVE- A Plan Americans Deserve But will Never Receive,” Small Wars Journal, August 5, 2015.
potential criminal consequences of his or her actions and offer them the opportunity to enter a tailored intervention program similar to anti-gang initiatives already in place in large US cities. If the individual agrees to participate, he or she would receive an ideological mentor whom they can talk to around the clock. The sympathizer would also receive a support package tailored to his or her unique motivations for supporting IS; potential services might include but are not limited to anger management, mental health treatment, substance abuse interventions, job training, housing support, and theological and peer mentoring.  

Conclusion: The Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and the Future of Global Jihadism

IS’ swift rise has changed the way that American policymakers and analysts think about jihadists’ strategic communication capabilities. The Islamic State, with its “Hollywood style” videos, its skillful dissemination of propaganda on social media platforms like Twitter, and its success in attracting Western media coverage, has been able to mobilize unprecedented levels of support. A recent report by George Washington University’s Program on Extremism found that IS has some 300 active Twitter supporters in the United States while several thousand US residents are passively consuming its propaganda. IS recruiters have convinced some 250 Americans to leave behind their comfortable lives and make hijra to the “caliphate” in Syria and Iraq. And in recent years, the Islamic State has

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95 Vidino and Hughes, “ISIS in America.”
successfully encouraged sympathizers to carry out attacks wherever they live with whatever weapons they can find. Recent “homegrown” jihadists like Elton Simpson, Nadir Soofi, Tashfeen Malik, and Syed Rizwan Farook all pledged bay’a to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi rather than professing support for al-Qaeda and its reclusive leader. At the moment, IS has undoubtedly eclipsed al-Qaeda in the battle for jihadists’ hearts and minds.

However, despite IS’ successful messaging and recruitment efforts, the organization has weaknesses that the overall global jihadist movement does not. The Islamic State’s appeal is rooted in an unsustainable “winner’s narrative.” As the “caliphate” loses additional territory and its governance failures accrue, it will be more difficult for the group’s propagandists to project an image of strength, expansion, and triumphalism. The US-led coalition’s military successes against IS will shatter the narrative that IS seeks to cultivate. The Islamic State’s flawed strategy ensures its eventual downfall, but there are steps that the US government can and should take to undermine IS’ strategic communications and recruitment campaigns.

In order to puncture IS’ claim to be in possession of continuous momentum, the US government should draw attention to IS’ military and governance failures. Because IS sympathizers are unlikely to view US agencies like the State Department as reliable sources of information, the government should focus on elevating existing counter-narratives. In order to compete with the Islamic State’s slick messaging campaign, the US government should also solicit private corporations’ involvement.

While undermining the Islamic State’s “winner’s narrative” will gradually diminish its attractiveness to potential recruits, an intervention program similar to the U.K.’s “Channel” would allow the F.B.I. to apportion its limited resources towards the
more serious cases while local mentors and service providers focused on providing less radicalized IS sympathizers alternative pathways to violence. With over 900 active F.B.I. investigations against suspected IS sympathizers, the scale of the homegrown terrorism threat may be too significant for the government to deal with it exclusively as a law enforcement issue.

Because of the Islamic State’s inability to pick and choose its battles, it faces a growing list of powerful enemies committed to its destruction. Although the international community is committed to reversing the Islamic State’s territorial gains, outside actors are unlikely to agree ways to end the continuing instability in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen.

As the Islamic State and its affiliates lose territory, insurgent groups like Jabhat al-Nusrah and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula will be well positioned to take advantage of the ongoing sectarianism and instability. By intertwining within Sunni insurgencies and lending their military skills to causes that are popular with local populations, al-Qaeda affiliates have been able to rebrand themselves as Sunni populations’ defenders.96

While the Islamic State is attracting international attention al-Qaeda’s affiliates are establishing durable roots in liberated territories and discreetly expanding existing safe havens from which al-Qaeda’s senior leadership can plot attacks against the “far enemy.” Regardless of whether future terrorist attacks against the United States and her Western allies are directed or simply inspired by global jihadists, the past few years should clearly disabuse the notion that instability and violence can

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simply be “contained” within the Middle East and North Africa.

The Islamic State has taken strategic communications by a jihadist group to an entirely new level, but al-Qaeda and other jihadists will eventually be able to replicate IS’ social media and recruitment successes. The new generation of jihadist propagandists is largely ‘digital natives’ who grew up producing and sharing digital content and interacting with peers on social media platforms. By taking advantage of the wide range, quality, and availability of today’s digital equipment such as HD cameras, editing software, and special effects libraries, other groups will attempt to mimic the Islamic State’s propaganda efforts. These groups will exploit the ubiquity of social media platforms to disseminate their propaganda and “groom” potential recruits. Global jihadists will continue to reach and inspire sympathizers in a way that they never could have several years ago. The Islamic State is already on the decline, but jihadists’ strategic communications capabilities are indeed “remaining and expanding.

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