

The Fate of Global Jihadism Today: Internally Resilient, Strategically Deprioritized

by [Aaron Y. Zelin \(/experts/aaron-y-zelin\)](/experts/aaron-y-zelin)

September 2026

Also published in Soufan Center

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Aaron Y. Zelin \(/experts/aaron-y-zelin\)](/experts/aaron-y-zelin)

Aaron Y. Zelin is the Gloria and Ken Levy Senior Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, where his research focuses on Sunni Arab jihadist groups in North Africa and Syria, foreign fighting, and online jihadism.



Articles & Testimony

Although America's defensive and preventive mechanisms are much stronger today, the global jihadist situation in 2026 is uncomfortably similar to the 1990s, when the movement was treated as a manageable nuisance even as it quietly consolidated sanctuaries, built financial autonomy, and experimented with new methods of attack.

The following is an excerpt from a chapter published in the Soufan Center report [25 Years After 9/11: The Future Of The Global Jihadi Movement \(https://thesoufancenter.org/25-years-after-9-11-the-future-of-the-global-jihadi-movement/\)](https://thesoufancenter.org/25-years-after-9-11-the-future-of-the-global-jihadi-movement/). To read the full chapter, download the PDF on this page.

A quarter century after al-Qaeda's 9/11 attacks, the global jihadi movement looks very different today than it did then. It is also operating in a very different international environment, with great power competition as the preeminent lens through which security is framed. Therefore, even if the movement's various iterations and competing groups remain active in different parts of the world, they no longer command the national security establishment's focus. This changed dynamic allows jihadi groups to move through the seams between conflicts and take advantage of the differing strategic interests of competing middle and global powers. While many in the counterterrorism community retain institutional knowledge of lessons learned after 9/11, that knowledge is likely to erode over time as resources are reallocated toward other security challenges and a younger generation— with minimal experience studying and understanding the global jihadi movement— fills the ranks of government and research institutions. The opportunity for the movement to achieve surprise could return as we move further and further from its peak threat perception... ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[25 Years After 9/11: NCTC Directors Assess Progress and Remaining Challenges](#)

Sep 8, 2026



Christine Abizaid,
Matt Olsen,
Nicholas Rasmussen

[\(/policy-analysis/25-years-after-911-nctc-directors-assess-progress-and-remaining-challenges\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi AI Ambitions Create a U.S. Opening](#)

Sep 4, 2026



Elizabeth Dent

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-ai-ambitions-create-us-opening\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[The Case for a Stalemate With Iran](#)

Sep 3, 2026



James Jeffrey

[\(/policy-analysis/case-stalemate-iran\)](#)

TOPICS

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)