

8

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

Aaron Y. Zelin**Abstract**

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.

Introduction: A Quarter Century On

Twenty-five years after al-Qaeda's attacks on New York and Washington, the global jihadi movement is at once larger, more geographically dispersed, and less central to American strategic thinking than at any point since September 11, 2001. Both halves of that sentence matter, and the tension between them is the subject of this chapter. Measured by fighters under arms, territory contested or governed, revenue generated, and media output produced, the movement in its various iterations (the Islamic State and its network of so-called provinces, al-Qaeda and its regional branches, and the constellation of aligned insurgencies around them) is demonstrably resilient. Measured by its place in the threat hierarchy of the United States and most of its allies, it has never been more marginal.

The international environment in which the movement now operates bears little resemblance to the unipolar moment it attacked in 2001. Great power competition with China, Russia's war on Ukraine, conflict with Iran, and the securitization of migration and narcotics have displaced terrorism as the organizing frame of national security. That reordering is not, in itself, irrational: jihadi groups have not conducted a directed mass-casualty attack in the United States since 9/11, and states genuinely do face more capable adversaries. And for the U.S., in particular, there is a clear challenge presented by a rising China. But the reordering has consequences. It shapes budgets, personnel systems, intelligence collection priorities, and less tangibly but no less importantly, the institutional memory of the governments and research communities that spent two decades learning the intricacies and nuances of how this movement operates.

This chapter proceeds in four parts. It first assesses the internal condition of the movement's two main organizational poles, the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, drawing on both governmental assessments and the movement's own primary sources. It then examines how the strategic deprioritization of counterterrorism has manifested concretely in the United States since 2025, across research, prevention, operational, and intelligence institutions. Third, it traces the quieter process by which institutional knowledge accumulated after 9/11 is eroding as a generation turns over. It concludes by considering what the combination of a resilient adversary and a distracted defender implies: not an imminent return to 2001, but a slowly reopening window for strategic surprise.

Internally Resilient: The Movement at Twenty-Five

The most authoritative open-source barometer of the movement's health remains the reporting of the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team. Its thirty-seventh report, issued in early 2026, described a threat landscape that has become "multipolar and complex," with both the Islamic State and al-Qaeda adapting recruitment, financing, and technology far beyond their post-9/11 profiles.¹ The headline figure is striking: al-Qaeda and its affiliates are now assessed to command roughly 25,000 potential fighters worldwide, compared with an estimated 500 operatives at the time of the 9/11 attacks, representing a fifty-fold expansion over the very period in which the United States declared the group degraded and moved on.² The Islamic State, for its part, was judged in the Secretary-General's twenty-first strategic-level report to have remained a high and adaptive threat despite sustained counterterrorism pressure, with Africa now the epicenter of its activity.³

Raw numbers, however, reveal less than organizational form and geography do. The Islamic State that exists in 2026 is not a reconstituted version of the 2014–2019 territorial caliphate, nor is it the decentralized franchise network that

al-Qaeda built in the 2000s. As I have argued elsewhere, it is a globally integrated organization, coordinated through its General Directorate of Provinces and a set of regional offices that move money, expertise, and external operations planning across theaters, meaning that no individual province pursues an independent strategy and that pressure applied in one theater can be absorbed by others.⁴

Where that pressure has been absorbed is now unambiguous: the Africanization of the Islamic State is complete. Of the 1,218 attacks the group claimed in 2025, 85 percent occurred in Africa, with Nigeria leading in attacks (368) and Somalia leading in casualties (1,734).⁵ The UN Secretary-General assessed the West Africa Province at 8,000 to 12,000 fighters, while the smaller Somalia affiliate, host to the group's *al-Karrar* regional office, has taken on outsized importance among member-states.⁶ The January 29, 2026, assault on Niamey's international airport, carried out by Hausa- and Kanuri-speaking fighters in an apparent display of Sahel–West Africa Province coordination, raised the specter of contiguous Islamic State territory spanning three states, a possibility I have been tracking since the group first took ground in Mali.⁷ A rare U.S. decapitation strike in the theater, AF-RICOM's mid-May 2026 killing of *al-Furqan* office head Abu Bilal al-Minuki, underscored how limited American attention to the theater has otherwise become.⁸

The mirror image of this African growth is contraction in the movement's historic core. The Islamic State's claimed attacks in Syria have fallen from 293 in the year before the Assad regime's collapse to 134 in the first year after it, with the group on pace for roughly 68 in 2026. It nevertheless punctuated this decline with the Mar Elias Church bombing in Damascus, the assassination of a Shia cleric in Sayyida Zainab, a car bombing in Mayadin, and the Palmyra attack that killed three American soldiers, while a pattern of unclaimed assassinations of security personnel suggests deliberate underreporting.⁹ The picture is best described as recalibration rather than resurgence.¹⁰ In Iraq, the insurgency has effectively died: sixteen claimed attacks in 2025 against 2,307 in 2019, and only three so far in 2026.¹¹ Just as consequential is the inversion of roles that made this possible: Damascus, governed by men Washington spent a decade designating, has completed its evolution into a counterterrorism partner, joining the Global Coalition after President Ahmed al-Sharaa's November 2025 White House visit. It has conducted forty-seven counter-Islamic State arrest operations since the fall of the Assad regime, with at least a dozen of them jointly with CENTCOM.¹²

Yet the year also produced the movement's greatest windfall in Syria, and it was self-inflicted by its adversaries. When the new government took over the northeast from the Syrian Democratic Forces in January 2026, CENTCOM transferred more than 5,704 male detainees to Iraq in twenty-three days, but more than 200

prisoners escaped from Shaddadi Prison, and the al-Hol camp collapsed from roughly 23,000–24,000 residents to under 3,500, dispersing some 20,000 Islamic State–affiliated women and children across Syria and beyond.¹³ I warned in 2019 that al-Hol was incubating the next Islamic State generation; the incubator has now been tipped over, its contents scattered beyond anyone’s ability to monitor.¹⁴ The group, for its part, has worked the seam in print, appealing in *al-Naba* for the defection of foreign fighters disillusioned with Damascus’s new direction.¹⁵

External operations, meanwhile, have settled into a post-territorial model that is more distributed than anything seen a decade ago.¹⁶ Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-K) deservedly drew the most attention after the January 2024 Kerman bombings that killed 94 in Iran and the March 2024 Crocus City Hall attack in Moscow that killed more than 140, followed by arrests of its Tajik network inside the United States and an Election Day plot charged in October 2024.¹⁷ The UN Monitoring Team still assesses IS-K as the most significant external threat to Europe, operating through the remote guidance of Central Asian and North Caucasian diaspora sympathizers,¹⁸ and as recently as mid-2026 Europol coordinated a week-long operation with eight European agencies and the FBI against its support networks.¹⁹ But IS-K is now the template rather than the exception. The December 14, 2025, Bondi Beach attack on a Hanukkah celebration in Sydney, which killed fifteen people and was carried out by a father-son pair who possibly trained in the Philippines the month before, was the deadliest Western attack since New Orleans and the first successful external operation likely tied to the East Asia Province. By my count, provinces in Afghanistan, Iraq, Mali, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Syria, Pakistan, Türkiye, and now the Philippines have all generated external plots.²⁰ The pipeline from the Sahel into Morocco and Spain also thickened over 2026,²¹ with joint Spanish-Moroccan disruptions in March and the dismantling in July of a ten-person cell across seven Moroccan cities, early evidence that the African provinces are beginning to generate plots pointed north. In late September 2025, Israel disrupted an Islamic State-guided bomb plot in Acre, directed by virtual planners likely operating in Syria or Türkiye. There have been forty-one Islamic State-related plots disrupted by Israel since October 7. And a striking new targeting pattern emerged over this past winter, consisting of three attacks on Chinese nationals or interests in four months across two provinces: a Kabul restaurant bombing that marked IS-K’s third strike on Chinese targets since 2021, an IS-K-linked attack on Chinese workers in Tajikistan, and the Central Africa Province’s raid on a Chinese-run mine in Congo, suggesting the movement is recalibrating its enemy hierarchy for a multipolar world faster than that world’s powers are recalibrating for the movement.²²

To understand how the organization holds this sprawl together, as well as how it wants its followers to interpret the moment, one has to read its propaganda,

which remains the connective tissue between center, province, and sympathizer. The through-line begins with spokesman Abu Hudhayfah al-Ansari's January 2024 campaign "And Kill Them Wherever You Find Them," which framed attacks on Western, Jewish, and Christian targets as retaliation for Gaza.²³ Its logic bore fruit in New Orleans on January 1, 2025, when Shamsud-Din Jabbar killed fourteen on Bourbon Street after pledging allegiance to the group,²⁴ and *al-Naba* claimed ideological authorship the following week in an editorial titled "We Were There!"²⁵

The past year has extended the pattern: *al-Naba* urged "daring attacks" on Jewish and Christian communities in Europe in response to Israel's Gaza City offensive,²⁶ later called for arson against synagogues and Passover gatherings worldwide while holding up Bondi Beach as the model,²⁷ and by June 2026 was inciting stabbings, vehicle rammings, and stadium arson against the World Cup.²⁸ Most notably, in February 2026 the group issued its first leadership address in two years, calling on Muslim youth to migrate to its branches (implicitly the African ones, whose battles foreign fighters were said to have "spearheaded") and declaring war on the al-Sharaa government, which prompted a wave of claimed Ramadan attacks.²⁹ The Africa focus doubles as a rebuke: the same messaging berates Arab audiences for choosing an easy life over jihad, effectively conceding that the movement's historic recruiting heartland has gone quiet while insisting the caravan has simply moved south. Some in the U.S. government are debating whether the actual Caliph of the Islamic State is the Somali Abdulqadir Mumin, who is one of the only remaining leaders within the group still alive from the caliphate's zenith a decade-plus ago.³⁰ Personally, I am skeptical he is the Caliph, but find him being the head of the General Directorate of Provinces as more plausible.³¹

Read closely, though, the same corpus reveals strain alongside menace. A run of sermon-like editorials urged patience and framed victory as possibly deferred to the afterlife, a form of morale management that betrays concern over wavering supporter commitment as the Taliban, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), and Damascus each demonstrate rival models of Islamist success.³² Other editorials scolded sympathizers who "make excuses" not to join, berated Muslims' worldliness and infatuation with football, and attacked moderate clerics and media narratives in a defensive bid to police who may interpret events, all signals of anxiety that the group is losing the argument within its own milieu.³³ That resilience and frustration coexist in the same newsletter is precisely the point: the organization endures, but it is working harder than ever to keep its base convinced. It does so atop an online ecosystem that has outlasted the platforms arrayed against it: a cloud-based propaganda archive, domain-hopping websites mirrored on the dark web, and experimentation with artificial intelligence by IS-K's media arm, at a moment when the major technology companies have retreated

to doing the bare minimum on terrorist content removal.³⁴

Al-Qaeda's trajectory is different in style but convergent in effect, and it is best described as bifurcation. At the center, under the unannounced *de facto* leadership of Saif al-Adel, the organization has entered a deliberately quiet phase of rebuilding its training pipelines, logistics, and financial self-sufficiency, even as the National Counterterrorism Center warned in September 2025 that it had renewed its calls for attacks on the United States and the West.³⁵ Yet the General Command's rare February 2026 statement and the murky, possibly Iran-orchestrated Ajnad Bayt al-Maquis affiliation affair the following month,³⁶ mostly underscored how peripheral the center has become to the movement it nominally leads.³⁷

The branches are another matter. On September 3, 2025, JNIM spokesman Abu Hudhayfah al-Bambari announced a blockade of fuel imports into Mali,³⁸ an act of economic warfare that strangled a capital dependent on road imports for 95 percent of its fuel, destroyed more than 300 tankers, closed the country's schools, and drove the United States and the United Kingdom to evacuate diplomatic staff.³⁹ Then, on April 25–26, 2026, JNIM launched its largest coordinated offensive since 2012 alongside the Azawad Liberation Front, killing Defense Minister Sadio Camara, striking Bamako's airport, and forcing Malian and Russian withdrawals from Kidal. This was followed by a July nationwide attack wave and the steady consolidation of taxation and dispute-resolution governance in central Mali, to the point that the Trump administration has debated U.S. strikes against the group.⁴⁰ JNIM's geographic reach also continued expanding into Benin, Togo, and, for the first time, Nigeria.⁴¹ In East Africa, al-Shabaab, the network's wealthiest affiliate, reversed most of its 2022–2023 territorial losses through its Shabelle offensive, attempted to assassinate Somalia's president, encircled Mogadishu, and in October 2025 stormed the capital's intelligence headquarters, prompting diplomats to debate whether the city's fall would look more like Kabul in 2021 or Damascus in 2024.⁴²

A final feature of the movement's current condition deserves emphasis, because it connects directly to the changed international environment: jihadi groups have learned to operate in the seams of great power competition, and their propaganda clearly demonstrates that they understand this as strategy rather than luck. Russia's Africa Corps could not break JNIM's blockade, lost an estimated fourteen personnel in a single August 2025 convoy ambush, and then abandoned Kidal, a rolling humiliation for Moscow's security-for-mining model.⁴³ Turkish drones and contractors have filled gaps in both Bamako and Mogadishu; China has now emerged as an Islamic State target;⁴⁴ and Washington's dormancy is evident in details as small as a two-year gap in Treasury designations against the Islamic State before June 2026.⁴⁵ The movement narrates all of this back to its followers.

Al-Naba's 2025 year-in-review reveled in a world on fire, casting the unraveling international order as a "precious opportunity" for jihad,⁴⁶ while its running commentary on the U.S.-Israeli war with Iran instructed Sunnis to take no side, to exploit the turmoil, and to see in the chaos vindication of the group's worldview.⁴⁷ The movement does not need to attack the West to benefit from this arrangement; it needs only to endure within it; its own texts make clear that enduring within it is exactly the plan.

Strategically Less Relevant: The Deprioritization of Counterterrorism

Against this backdrop of adversary resilience, the United States has spent the period since early 2025 systematically disassembling large parts of the counterterrorism architecture it built after 9/11, not as the result of a deliberate strategic review that weighed terrorism against other threats, but largely as a byproduct of budget-cutting campaigns, workforce purges, and the reallocation of security resources toward immigration enforcement and counternarcotics.

The research base went first. In the spring of 2025, the National Institute of Justice terminated its research portfolio on radicalization to violent extremism; the Defense Department eliminated the Minerva social science program and cut roughly \$30 million in annual funding for academic studies of extremism and disinformation; and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) defunded the University of Maryland-based START consortium's dataset tracking domestic terrorist attacks, hate crimes, and antisemitic incidents, prompting scholars who had spent careers building those partnerships to describe the field's federal research infrastructure as effectively wiped out.⁴⁸ Weeks later, DHS canceled congressionally authorized funding for its university-based Centers of Excellence, shuttering research on threats ranging from active-shooter scenarios to border security.⁴⁹ Whatever one's view of any individual grant, the aggregate effect was the elimination, within a few months, of the research foundations on which future threat assessment depends, including datasets, longitudinal studies, and trained graduate students.

The prevention infrastructure followed a similar timeline. Staff at USAID's Bureau of Conflict Prevention and Stabilization were placed on leave in February 2025; DHS's Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships lost roughly 30 percent of its approximately eighty-person staff in March, with further cuts in June; and on July 11, 2025, the State Department's Office of Countering Violent Extremism and its Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations were shuttered outright, while the countering violent extremism team at the congressionally chartered U.S. Institute of Peace was laid off the same day.⁵⁰ The department's counterterrorism bureau fared little better: specialists were dispersed to regional offices where counterterrorism competes with every other priority, and the bureau's threat prevention team was eliminated entirely.⁵¹

Operational institutions absorbed parallel blows. The Justice Department acknowledged in its own budget documents that its National Security Division faced “unprecedented personnel constraints,” with a 40 percent drop in the number of prosecutors even as caseloads grew.⁵² The FBI reassigned agents from terrorism portfolios to Latin American street gangs, border task forces, and left-wing groups.⁵³ When the war with Iran suddenly elevated the threat of state-sponsored and state-inspired attacks, some counterterrorism specialists who had been moved to immigration duty were rushed back to their old accounts. As former intelligence officers noted, this whiplash disrupts investigations in both directions because analysts who pulled off a target set for a year cannot simply resume where they left off.⁵⁴

The public-facing warning system has meanwhile gone quiet. DHS issued no National Terrorism Advisory System bulletins for months on end and, more than a year into the administration, had yet to publish an annual Homeland Threat Assessment.⁵⁵ Nor has the promised strategic framework materialized. White House counterterrorism adviser Sebastian Gorka declared a national counterterrorism strategy imminent in mid-2025 and repeated the claim through the fall, into January 2026, and beyond, only producing one in May 2026, even as a single month, March 2026, delivered a cluster of attacks and disrupted plots inside the United States that current and former officials described as a stress test of a hollowed-out system: a mass shooting at a Texas bar by a gunman wearing an Iranian-flag shirt, an improvised explosive attack in New York, a deadly campus shooting in Virginia, a vehicle-ramming at a Michigan synagogue, and an arrest over a threatened mosque attack in Ohio.⁵⁶

Running beneath these individual cuts is a definitional shift that may prove more consequential than any of them: the word “counterterrorism” itself is being repurposed. From the administration’s first weeks, counterterrorism resources and authorities were redirected toward the mass deportation campaign, with drug cartels designated as terrorist organizations and immigration enforcement framed as the homeland security mission; the attorney general publicly promised counterterrorism resources to combat vandalism of electric vehicles, while the National Counterterrorism Center was tasked with expanding into counternarcotics.⁵⁷ A term that once denoted a specific analytic discipline, with its own tradecraft, legal authorities, and accumulated expertise about Salafi-jihadi organizations, now covers whatever the political moment designates as an enemy. The dilution matters because prioritization systems run on categories: when everything urgent can be labeled terrorism, the institutions built to watch actual terrorist organizations lose both their focus and their claim on resources, and the analysts who spent careers on al-Qaeda’s succession politics or the Islamic State’s provincial finances find their skills reclassified as legacy knowledge.

The intelligence community's counterterrorism core has been restructured amid the same turbulence. In August 2025, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence announced a plan to cut nearly half of its roughly 1,850-person workforce; the National Counterterrorism Center, the institutional child of the 9/11 Commission, was directed to refocus on its core mission while simultaneously expanding into counternarcotics, reflecting the administration's treatment of drug trafficking as the paradigmatic transnational threat.⁵⁸ By mid-2026, following the resignation of Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard and the installation of a new director with no intelligence background, a new round of firings began in which NCTC was reportedly among the hardest-hit components (on top of more than 500 ODNI positions already eliminated in 2025), while the lapse of Section 702 collection authorities removed one of the community's most productive counterterrorism tools.⁵⁹

Perhaps most corrosive of all is the breakdown in the integration machinery that the post-9/11 reforms were built to guarantee. By mid-2026, Reuters reported that the CIA had stopped contributing to some ODNI-produced intelligence assessments, including those related to the Iran war, amid a year-long feud over a Gabbard-created task force that career officers accused of circumventing intelligence-sharing and declassification protocols.⁶⁰ Former senior intelligence officials warned that when the coordinating function fails, agencies retreat into stovepipes, precisely the pathology the 9/11 Commission identified as a cause of the surprise a quarter century ago.⁶¹ It is difficult to imagine a more pointed anniversary irony: the institutional lessons of September 11 being unlearned, in real time, by the very organizations created to embody them. This creates a greater risk of attacks that take the country by surprise. Even more worrisome, however, is that if another mass-casualty attack occurs, the cadre of bureaucrats, analysts, and officials who have learned from the successes and failures of the past quarter-century may no longer be in place. This could lead to assessments based on the same faulty logic and sometimes overemotional debates that shaped decision-making in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.

The Erosion of Institutional Knowledge

Budgets can be restored in a single appropriations cycle. Knowledge cannot. The deeper and slower-moving cost of the current period lies in the composition of the workforce responsible for recognizing the next inflection point in the jihadi threat, whether in government, law enforcement, or the research community.

Consider the FBI. In 2025, the bureau anticipated losing more than 5,000 employees to severance and early retirement, a cohort disproportionately composed of the agents and analysts who built its post-9/11 national security capabilities. Its leadership simultaneously moved to compress new-agent training from eigh-

teen weeks to eight and to drop the longstanding requirement of a bachelor's degree, drawing recruits focused on street crime instead from other federal law enforcement agencies. A former senior counterterrorism official described these changes as "generational destruction" of the institution.⁶² Whatever the merits of refocusing the bureau on violent crime, the arithmetic is unforgiving: complex international terrorism investigations are an apprenticeship craft, and the master craftsmen are leaving faster than apprentices can be trained (or the apprentices are being trained for something else entirely).

At the CIA, the concern is less attrition than corrosion. The agency ombudsman's annual survey of analytic integrity, described to *The Atlantic* in mid-2026, recorded a significant rise in analysts who feared that the objectivity of their work was being undermined by political influence, citing episodes such as the dismissal of two senior officers after their assessment of Venezuela's relationship to a criminal gang contradicted the administration's preferred narrative, as well as the revocation of security clearances from dozens of former officials without evidence of wrongdoing.⁶³ Politicization damages counterterrorism twice over: it distorts the product in the near term, and it drives out precisely the experienced, independent-minded officers whose pattern recognition constitutes an agency's memory.

Personnel choices send their own signals about what expertise is valued.⁶⁴ In 2026, the Pentagon placed a political appointee who had been convicted for his role in the January 6 Capitol attack into the irregular warfare and counterterrorism section of its Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict office (a roughly forty-person team whose portfolio includes hostage rescue and embassy security and in which every position requires a top-secret clearance), over the objections of career staff who questioned the precedent.⁶⁵ The individual case matters less than what it reveals about vetting norms in offices that once treated counterterrorism experience as the entry ticket.

Knowledge erosion is also visible at the very top of the enterprise, where the question of what counts as counterterrorism expertise has been answered by personality rather than pedigree. The White House's counterterrorism adviser rose not through the intelligence community, the military's special operations enterprise, or the academy, but through the post-9/11 training circuit of self-styled terrorism experts, a milieu that, as two dozen national security specialists across party lines recounted, treated counterterrorism as purely kinetic and directed against a single type of enemy, and whose battlefield claims of eliminating hundreds of "leading" militants are regarded by analysts as unverifiable or inflated given that fewer than ten figures worldwide plausibly merit the description.⁶⁶ When the arbiter of counterterrorism priorities operates by body count and spectacle, the patient, unglamorous work that actually characterizes the discipline, including network

analysis, financial tracking, liaison maintenance, and warning, loses its institutional champion.

The same generational hollowing is underway outside government. The defunded terrorism research programs did not merely produce reports; they trained the doctoral students, fellows, and junior analysts who would have staffed agencies and think tanks into the 2040s. The research director of the START consortium warned, in the wake of the DHS cancellations, that the impact on the development of the next generation of homeland security professionals would be felt for years.⁶⁷ As someone who entered this field in the shadow of 9/11, I can attest that the ecosystem that trained my cohort, including datasets to learn on, grants to fund fieldwork, and government counterparts who spoke the same analytic language, no longer exists in anything like its former shape. The rising generation of national security professionals is being formed by China, Russia, emerging technologies like artificial intelligence, and border security portfolios; to them, jihadism is a historical case study, not a lived operational problem.

Even the culture of everyday security is quietly reverting. In December 2025, U.S. airports began reintroducing programs allowing members of the non-traveling public past security checkpoints for the first time since the post-9/11 lockdown of the aviation system, a modest, TSA-vetted convenience that is defensible on its own terms, but is also a legible marker of how far the memory of why those barriers were erected has faded.⁶⁸ Institutional knowledge does not disappear in a single dramatic act. It leaks away through retirements, reassignments, canceled grants, unpublished threat assessments, and small policy reversions, each individually reasonable, until one day an organization confronts a familiar problem and discovers that no one on staff has seen it before.

Conclusion: The Return of Surprise

The situation in 2026 rhymes uncomfortably with the 1990s. Then, as now, the jihadi movement was treated as a manageable nuisance at the periphery of a strategic agenda dominated by state threats; then, as now, the movement was quietly consolidating sanctuaries, building financial autonomy, and experimenting with methods of attack while the institutions charged with watching it fought for resources and relevance. The 1998 East Africa embassy bombings and the 2000 attack on the *USS Cole* were absorbed as episodic tragedies rather than data points on a trajectory, and the 9/11 Commission ultimately concluded that the most important failure had been one “of imagination,” an inability of well-staffed institutions to take seriously an adversary that had announced its intentions repeatedly.⁶⁹ Imagination is even harder to sustain in institutions that are shedding the people who once possessed it. The analogy should not be overdrawn; today’s defensive architecture, however degraded, is vastly more capable than its 1990s

predecessor, and today's movement is more oriented toward governing territory in the Sahel and the Horn than toward spectacular transnational attacks. But the structural lesson of the pre-9/11 decade is precisely that threat and threat perception can decouple, and that the gap between them is where surprise lives.

None of this argues for re-inflating counterterrorism to its post-9/11 scale, which produced its own pathologies and opportunity costs. The realistic goal is a sustainable floor rather than another boom-and-bust cycle: preserving the National Counterterrorism Center's integrative core and the legal authorities that feed it; maintaining the handful of datasets and research programs that constitute the field's empirical memory; protecting the analytic independence that makes warning credible; and sustaining the liaison relationships (exemplified by the continued Europol-FBI operations against IS-K networks) that allow a smaller enterprise to punch above its weight. Watching the right indicators matters more than watching everything: the external operations tempo flowing out of Afghanistan, the Sahel, and Somalia; the consolidation of jihadi proto-governance in Mali and around Mogadishu; foreign fighter and finance flows between theaters; and the movement's adoption of artificial intelligence and unmanned systems.

The jihadi movement is a keeper of anniversaries. Its publications still commemorate September 11 each year as proof that patience and asymmetry can humble a superpower, and its strategists have always framed their struggle in decades, not news cycles. A quarter century on, the movement has absorbed the loss of two founding leaders, a territorial caliphate, and tens of thousands of fighters, and it is still expanding on two continents. The United States, by contrast, is dismantling its counterterrorism memory at the very moment its adversary is banking on being forgotten. The movement no longer carries the focus of the national security establishment, and in the near term it may not need to. But as we travel further from the peak of threat perception and the ranks of those who remember why that perception once existed grow thinner, the opportunity for the kind of surprise this movement has delivered before increases. Sobriety, on this anniversary, means neither alarmism nor amnesia. It means keeping watch, deliberately and affordably, on an enemy that has made a strategy of our distraction.

Dr. Aaron Y. Zelin is the Gloria and Ken Levy Senior Research Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, where he directs the Islamic State Worldwide Activity Map project. He is also a Visiting Research Scholar in the Department of Politics at Brandeis University, founder of the widely acclaimed website Jihadology, and a contributing writer for War on the Rocks' Adversarial newsletter. He is the author of the books Your Sons Are At Your Service: Tunisia's Missionaries of Jihad and The Age of Political Jihadism: A Study of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

Notes

- 1 United Nations Security Council, Thirty-Seventh Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2734 (2024) Concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities, S/2026/44, January 2026, <https://docs.un.org/en/S/2026/44>.
- 2 United Nations Security Council, Thirty-Seventh Report, S/2026/44.
- 3 United Nations Security Council, Twenty-First Report of the Secretary-General on the Threat Posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to International Peace and Security and the Range of United Nations Efforts in Support of Member States in Countering the Threat, S/2025/496, August 1, 2025, <https://docs.un.org/en/S/2025/496>.
- 4 Aaron Y. Zelin, "A Globally Integrated Islamic State," War on the Rocks, July 15, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/a-globally-integrated-islamic-state>.
- 5 Aaron Y. Zelin, "Tracking the Islamic State: Activity Trends, African Shifts, and U.S. Dormancy," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 11, 2026, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-islamic-state-activity-trends-african-shifts-and-us-dormancy>.
- 6 United Nations Security Council, Twenty-First Report, S/2025/496.
- 7 Aaron Y. Zelin and Sarah Cahn, "Exploiting a 'Vast Jihad Arena': The Islamic State Takes Territory in Mali," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/exploiting-vast-jihad-arena-islamic-state-takes-territory-mali>.
- 8 Aaron Y. Zelin, Islamic State Select Worldwide Activity Map, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, accessed July 2026, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap>.
- 9 Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Islamic State Attacks the New Syrian Government," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 19, 2025, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/islamic-state-attacks-new-syrian-government>.
- 10 Soufan Center, "Not Resurgence, but Recalibration: ISIS in Syria," June 23, 2026, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2026-june-23>.
- 11 Zelin, Islamic State Select Worldwide Activity Map.
- 12 Aaron Y. Zelin, "The New Syrian Government's Fight Against the Islamic State, Hezbollah, and Captagon," CTC Sentinel 18, no. 3 (March 2026), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-new-syrian-governments-fight-against-the-islamic-state-hezbollah-and-captagon>; Aaron Y. Zelin, "Jihadi Counterterrorism: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Versus the Islamic State," CTC Sentinel 16, no. 2 (February 2023), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/jihadi-counterterrorism-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-versus-the-islamic-state>.
- 13 Devorah Margolin, "The Collapse of Indefinite Detention in Northeast Syria: Implications Seven Years Later for Syria and Beyond," CTC Sentinel 19, no. 4 (April 2026), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-collapse-of-indefinite-detention-in-northeast-syria-implications-seven-years-later-for-syria-and-beyond>.

14 Aaron Y. Zelin, "Wilayat al-Hawl: 'Remaining' and Incubating the Next Islamic State Generation," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/wilayat-al-hawl-remaining-and-incubating-next-islamic-state-generation>.

15 See various al-Naba issues where this is a theme since the fall of the Assad regime: <https://jihadology.net/category/al-naba-newsletter>.

16 Aaron Y. Zelin, "ISKP Goes Global: External Operations from Afghanistan," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 11, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iskp-goes-global-external-operations-afghanistan>; Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Islamic State's External Operations Are More Than Just ISKP," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 26, 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/islamic-states-external-operations-are-more-just-iskp>.

17 Zelin, Islamic State Select Worldwide Activity Map.

18 Dino Krause, "The Islamic State's Khorasan Province: Terror Plots in Europe," Danish Institute for International Studies, September 2025, https://pure.diis.dk/ws/files/27802520/ISKP_terror_plots_in_Europe_DIIS_Report_2025_09.pdf.

19 Europol, "Counter-Terrorism Operation Disrupted Islamic State Khorasan Province Activities," June 18, 2026, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/news-room/news/counter-terrorism-operation-disrupted-islamic-state-khorasan-province-activities>.

20 Zelin, Islamic State Select Worldwide Activity Map.

21 Lucas Webber and Paweł Wójcik, "The Islamic State Sahel Threat Is Transnational," Foreign Policy, March 31, 2026, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2026/03/31/islamic-state-sahel-terrorism-issp-transnational-threat-mali-burkina-faso>.

22 Zelin, Islamic State Select Worldwide Activity Map.

23 Abu Hudhayfah al-Ansari, "And Kill Them Wherever You Find Them," al-Furqan Media, January 4, 2024, <https://jihadology.net/2024/01/04/new-audio-message-from-the-islamic-states-abu-%e1%b8%a5udhayfah-al-an%e1%b9%a3ari-and-kill-them-wherever-you-overtake-them>.

24 Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Digital Battlefield: How Terrorists Use the Internet and Online Networks for Recruitment and Radicalization," testimony before the U.S. House Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, March 4, 2025, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/sites/default/files/pdf/ZelinTestimony20250304-v2.pdf>.

25 Islamic State, al-Naba, no. 477, January 9, 2025, <https://jihadology.net/2025/01/09/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-newsletter-al-naba-477>.

26 Islamic State, al-Naba, no. 513, September 18, 2025, <https://jihadology.net/2025/09/18/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-newsletter-al-naba-513>.

27 Islamic State, al-Naba, no. 541, April 2, 2026, <https://jihadology.net/2026/04/02/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-newsletter-al-naba-541>.

28 Islamic State, al-Naba, no. 552, June 19, 2026, <https://jihadology.net/2026/06/18/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-newsletter-al-naba-552>.

- 29 Abu Hudhayfah al-Ansari, "The Right Course Has Become Clear From the Wrong," al-Furqan Media, February 21, 2026, <https://jihadology.net/2026/02/21/new-audio-message-from-the-islamic-states-abu-%e1%b8%a5udhayfah-al-an%e1%b9%a3ar-the-right-course-has-become-clear-from-the-wrong>.
- 30 Austin Doctor and Gina Ligon, "The Death of an Islamic State Global Leader in Africa?," CTC Sentinel 17, No. 7, August 2024, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-death-of-an-islamic-state-global-leader-in-africa>.
- 31 Zelin, "A Globally Integrated Islamic State."
- 32 Islamic State, al-Naba, no. 518, October 24, 2025, <https://jihadology.net/2025/10/23/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-newsletter-al-naba-518>; Islamic State, al-Naba, no. 556, July 16, 2026, <https://jihadology.net/2026/07/16/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-newsletter-al-naba-556>.
- 33 Islamic State, al-Naba, no. 515, October 3, 2025, <https://jihadology.net/2025/10/02/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-newsletter-al-naba-515>; Islamic State, al-Naba, no. 529, January 9, 2026, <https://jihadology.net/2026/01/08/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-newsletter-al-naba-529>; Islamic State, al-Naba, no. 535, February 19, 2026, <https://jihadology.net/2026/02/19/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-newsletter-al-naba-535>; Islamic State, al-Naba, no. 540, March 26, 2026, <https://jihadology.net/2026/03/26/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-newsletter-al-naba-540>.
- 34 Soufan Center, "Nearing the End of 2025, What Is the State of the Islamic State?," December 19, 2025, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2025-december-19>; Ben Makuch, "Trump's Counterterror Cuts Will Harm Fight Against Far Right, Experts Warn," Guardian, March 30, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/mar/30/trump-counter-terrorism-cuts>.
- 35 "Al-Qa'ida's Recent Calls to Conduct Attacks in the US Highlights Its Enduring Threat to Public Safety, National Counterterrorism Center," September 2025, https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/news_documents/NCTC-Al-Qaida-Recent-Calls-to-Conduct-Attacks-Highlights-Enduring-Threat-Sept2025.pdf.
- 36 On March 1, a new group claiming allegiance to al-Qaeda, Ajnad Bayt al-Maqdis, announced itself and is allegedly based in Iraq and Syria. It explained it was doing so in response to an al-Qaeda senior leadership statement in early February calling for a general mobilization against the American build-up in the region – even though that build-up had to do with threats from Iran. Many interpreted this as the first time Iran was truly using al-Qaeda as a proxy. There have been rumors of this possibility ever since the U.S. killed Ayman al-Zawahiri in July 2022 and Saif al-Adel, who has been based in Iran since fleeing Afghanistan following the U.S. invasion in late 2001, became the head of al-Qaeda. There have also been signs of growing relations between the Iranian proxy in Yemen, the Houthis, and the al-Qaeda branches al-Shabaab in Somalia and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen in recent years. Then on March 2, Ajnad Bayt al-Maqdis claimed responsibility for attacking the Shaddadi military base in northeast Syria, which had previously been used by the United States. However, the U.S. had withdrawn from the base more than two weeks prior, in the aftermath of the Syrian government takeover of northeast Syria from the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces in late January. Even

more bizarre is that following the Ajnad Bayt al-Maqdis claim, an IRGC proxy in Syria, the Syrian Islamic Resistance Front also claimed the attack, and then another IRGC proxy in Iraq, Kata'ib Hezbollah shared the claim from Ajnad Bayt al-Maqdis. All of this could suggest Iran is playing a shell game and also utilizing the al-Qaeda brand to try to bolster its operations against the U.S. in the current war against it. It could also highlight the possibility that al-Qaeda has truly become a pawn of Iran now. Whatever the case, it highlights yet again how far al-Qaeda has fallen over the past decade or so as a relevant actor.

37 Al-Qaeda's General Command, "So Take Warning, O People Of Vision," al-Sahab Media, February 3, 2026, <https://jihadology.net/2026/02/03/new-statement-from-al-qaidahs-general-command-so-take-warning-o-people-of-vision>; Ajnad Bayt al-Maqdis, "Announcing Alignment to al-Qaeda," March 1, 2026, <https://jihadology.net/2026/03/01/new-statement-from-ajnad-bayt-al-maqdis-announcing-alignment-to-al-qaidah>.

38 Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa-l-Muslimin, "And Never Faltered Despite Whatever Losses They Suffered," al-Zallaqah Media, September 3, 2025, <https://jihadology.net/2025/09/03/new-video-message-from-jamaat-nu%e1%b9%a3rat-al-islam-wa-l-muslimin-and-never-faltered-despite-whatever-losses-they-suffered>.

39 "Is Mali About to Fall to al-Qaeda Affiliate JNIM?" Al Jazeera, November 6, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/11/6/is-mali-about-to-fall-to-al-qaeda-affiliate-jnim>.

40 John Hudson and Rachel Chason, "Trump administration weighing military options in Mali, officials say," Washington Post, July 22, 2026, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2026/07/22/trump-administration-weighs-military-options-mali-officials-say>.

41 International Crisis Group, "Understanding JNIM's Expansion Beyond the Sahel," April 17, 2026, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/rpt/africa/sahel-west-africa/321-le-jnim-et-le-dilemme-de-lexpansion-au-dela-du-sahel>.

42 Soufan Center, "Al-Shabaab's 2025 Offensive and the Unraveling of Somalia's Federal Counterinsurgency," July 24, 2025, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2025-july-24>; Africa Center for Strategic Studies, "Somalia at Risk of Becoming a Jihadist State," November 17, 2025, <https://africacenter.org/publication/asb45en-somalia-risk-jihadist-state>.

43 "Jihadi Fighters Affiliated with al Qaeda Close In on Mali's Capital, as Instability Grows Across Sahel Region," CNN, November 2, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/11/02/africa/mali-security-fuel-shortages-intl>.

44 Mollie Saltskog and Colin Clarke, "It's China's turn to face transnational terrorism threats," Defense One, April 21, 2025, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2025/04/its-chinas-turn-face-transnational-terrorism-threats/404689>.

45 Zelin, "Tracking the Islamic State."

46 Islamic State, al-Naba, no. 528, January 2, 2026, <https://jihadology.net/2026/01/01/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-newsletter-al-naba-528>.

- 47 Islamic State, al-Naba, no. 537, March 5, 2026, <https://jihadology.net/2026/03/05/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-newsletter-al-naba-537>; Islamic State, al-Naba, no. 538, March 12, 2026, <https://jihadology.net/2026/03/12/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-newsletter-al-naba-538>.
- 48 Makuch, "Trump's Counterterror Cuts."
- 49 Anna Kramer and Violet Jira, "DOGE Cuts Off Funds to Congressionally Mandated National Security Centers," NOTUS, April 29, 2025, <https://www.notus.org/trump-white-house/doge-shutters-dhs-national-security-centers>.
- 50 Kris Inman, "Trump Administration Cuts to Terrorism Prevention Departments Could Leave Americans Exposed," Conversation, August 10, 2025, <https://theconversation.com/trump-administration-cuts-to-terrorism-prevention-departments-could-leave-americans-exposed-261630>.
- 51 Hannah Allam, "Sebastian Gorka: The Counterterrorism Czar Without a Counterterrorism Plan," ProPublica, April 21, 2026, <https://www.propublica.org/article/sebastian-gorka-trump-counterterrorism-czar-iran-terrorism>.
- 52 Allam, "Sebastian Gorka."
- 53 Makuch, "Trump's Counterterror Cuts."
- 54 Allam, "Sebastian Gorka."
- 55 Allam, "Sebastian Gorka."
- 56 Allam, "Sebastian Gorka."
- 57 Allam, "Sebastian Gorka"; Makuch, "Trump's Counterterror Cuts"; Beatrice Peterson, "Gabbard Announces Plan to Reorganize Her Agency, Cut Staff by Half," ABC News, August 20, 2025, <https://abcnews.com/Politics/gabbard-slash-director-national-intelligence-staff-50/story?id=124819630>.
- 58 Peterson, "Gabbard Announces Plan."
- 59 Katherine Doyle, Dan De Luce, and Dareh Gregorian, "Top intelligence agency begins mass firings under new Trump appointee, source says," NBC News, June 22, 2026, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/trump-administration/odni-begins-firings-under-bill-pulte-director-national-intelligence-rcna351290>.
- 60 Erin Banco and Jonathan Landay, "Exclusive: Top US Spy Agencies Feud Over Turf, Mission," Reuters, June 2, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/legal/government/top-us-spy-agencies-feud-over-turf-mission-2026-06-02>.
- 61 Banco and Landay, "Top US Spy Agencies Feud."
- 62 Devlin Barrett and Adam Goldman, "F.B.I. Plans to Lower Recruiting Standards, Alarming Agents," New York Times, August 21, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/21/us/politics/fbi-agent-recruitment-requirements-trump.html>.
- 63 Shane Harris, "CIA Officers Can Sense the Threat Within," Atlantic, July 10, 2026, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national-security/2026/07/cia-trump-intelligence-survey-gabbard/687865>.
- 64 Hannah Allam, "The Intern in Charge: Meet the 22-Year-Old Trump's Team

Picked to Lead Terrorism Prevention,” ProPublica, June 4, 2025, <https://www.propublica.org/article/trump-dhs-thomas-fugate-cp3-terrorism-prevention>; Ryan King and Josh Christenson, “DHS counterterror official hit with sugar baby accusations after angry ex claims she bilked \$40K out of him,” New York Post, April 22, 2026, <https://nypost.com/2026/04/22/us-news/dhs-counterterror-big-denies-pushing-hinge-date-to-blow-40k-in-sugar-daddy-setup-report>.

65 Tara Copp and Salvador Rizzo, “Pentagon Hires Convicted Jan. 6 Rioter for Sensitive Counterterrorism Job,” Washington Post, June 3, 2026, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2026/06/02/pentagon-hires-convicted-jan-6-rioter-sensitive-counterterrorism-job>.

66 Allam, “Sebastian Gorka.”

67 Makuch, “Trump’s Counterterror.”

68 Ashley J. DiMella, “US Airports Allow Non-Traveling Public Past Security Entrances for First Time in Decades,” New York Post, December 18, 2025, <https://nypost.com/2025/12/18/lifestyle/us-airports-allow-non-traveling-public-past-security-entrances-for-first-time-in-decades>.

69 National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States* (US Government Printing Office, 2004), 339–48.