

# Chapter II

## Region and Radicalisation



# Contention, Escalation and Cycles of Vengeance: Reflections on the Global Threat Landscape

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## *Introduction*

Today, the radicalisation of communities along religious lines presents a significant threat not only to the security, but also to the very stability of nations all over the world. Politicians' and political parties' use of religion in politics for the sole sake of advancing their personal and political agendas is driving communal polarisation forward and often leads to the enmity between members of different religious communities within one national society (Fenwick 2016). Terrorist, extremist and exclusivist groups then can easily prey in such aroused communities, recruit and grow, and thus become the major beneficiaries of societal conflict. But also globally, the rifts between communities, furthered by the narratives and propaganda activities of terrorist, extremist and exclusivist groups, increasingly lead to the spread of violence.

A review of threats in the years 2019 and 2020 thereby demonstrates four major developments with regard to violent terrorist organisations and movements. First, the contention between Islamic State (IS) and al Qaeda, including its affiliates, and second, the subsequent reformulation of these organisations' strategies, make the spread of violence beyond the current threat theatres more likely.<sup>2</sup> Third is the rise of Extreme Right Wing (XRW) in the West (Grierson 2019) as a result of two decades of global Islamist terrorism by al Qaeda and IS. And forth come the impact of a renewed escalation of the United States of America (USA) and Iran and the further escalation of violence in the region in the course of their contention on the one hand, and on the violence between Sunni and Shia groups, including the IS, on the other hand.

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2 Gunaratna. Straits Times, 1 January 2019.

By outlining the current global threat landscape, the paper argues that the contention between organisations as well as cycles of vengeance increase the likelihood for radicalisation and violence.

*Contention between Rising Al Qaeda and Expanding IS – New Waves of Violence ahead?*

In its major realm of action, in Iraq and Syria, IS suffered a series of battlefield defeats. These have culminated in the loss of control over wide parts of IS territory. The last IS stronghold Baghuz was lost on 23 March 2019.<sup>3</sup> It was lost to the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which were assisted by an American-led coalition's airstrikes, artillery, and special forces personnel. With the depletion of the IS ranks and decapitation of its top leadership, the IS was severely weakened.

This has allowed al Qaeda-affiliated groups to take over and eclipse IS in this area. Instead of IS, today, it is an al Qaeda affiliate, Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS), which has developed into the major militant group fighting against the Assad regime.<sup>4</sup> And while IS remnants continue to attack Iraqi and Syrian forces, the bulk of the attacks are taken out by the al Qaeda-aligned groups. While the fights with IS reduced, the violence between the Assad regime, supported by the Russian forces and Iranian backed Shia militias, and its opponents will be sustained, only now as part of the fight against an al Qaeda-aligned coalition.

Even more, al Qaeda, as the precursor to of IS, holds an ideology which is not significantly different from that of IS as both seek to create a global caliphate (Glenn 2015). This might further incentivise former IS-supporters to change sides to al Qaeda, currently more successful and on the rise. Despite al Qaeda suffered some blows, too – Hamza, Osama Bin Laden's son, groomed for al Qaeda leadership, was killed in Afghanistan in 2019 – al Qaeda will continue to compete, and complement, IS in its fight for territorial control.<sup>5</sup> Much more strategic than IS, however, al Qaeda will eventually threaten governments beyond the conflict zones of Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Somalia.

As a result of its defeats and the contention with al Qaeda, IS's strategy changed from concentrating recruits in Syria and Iraq to expanding net-

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3 McKernan. The Guardian, 23 March 2019.

4 Tsurkov. NYR Daily, 27 November 2019.

5 Pengelly. The Guardian, 14 September 2019.

works and attacks globally. While IS's core in Iraq and Syria has less than 5,000 active fighters and another assumed 10,000 sleepers, an unknown number of members and fighters' family members are in custody in three dozen detention facilities (US Department of Defense 2019:2). This includes 2,000 to 3,000 Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF) from about 30 countries held by Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces and an unknown number in Iraqi and Syrian facilities. In addition to likely prison breaks, as an earlier part of its strategy, IS external operations wing is supporting their escape by bribing officials and is facilitating their return to third countries by providing funds, identity and travel documents, passage and safe haven.

As IS's branches command tens of thousands of fighters, IS's strategy is not to invite recruits any longer to Iraq and Syria. Instead, IS seeks to keep them in their homelands or sending countries for them to conduct attacks there (Pokalova 2019), or to travel to yet another theatre and fight in this third country. The extent of this strategy becomes clearer by looking at where IS has established its *wilayat* or external provinces. Located in IS *wilayat*, IS fighters live in Libya (Wilayah Barqah, Wilayah Tarabulus, and Wilayah Fizan), Algeria (Wilayah al-Jazair), Egypt (Wilayah Sinai), Yemen (Wilayah al-Yaman), and Saudi Arabia (Wilayah al-Haramayn), Afghanistan-Pakistan (Wilayah Khorasan), Northern Nigeria (Wilayah Gharb Afriqiyah), and the North Caucasus (Wilayah al-Qawqaz), East Asia (Wilayah Sharq Asia) and Central Africa (Wilayah Al-Afriqiyah Al-Wustaa) (Zelin 2020).<sup>6</sup>

Thus, since the territorial defeat in Syria in March 2019, the IS comeback-strategy has been to decentralise, recuperate and regroup. Following this strategic change, Turkey, as the gateway to Syria and Iraq, was declared a province (Wilayah Turkey) in April 2019 (Postings 2019). Moreover, Azerbaijan was declared a province in July 2019. Focusing on its eastward expansion, especially into South Asia, IS furthermore appointed an Emir, Abu Muhammed al-Bengali, for Bangladesh in April 2019. After a series of attacks in South Asia, IS declared provinces in Sri Lanka (Wilayah as Seylani)<sup>7</sup> in April 2019, India (Wilayah al-Hind) in May 2019, and Pakistan (Wilayah Pakistan), also in May 2019.

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6 Plebani. ITsTime, 7 January 2019.

7 An in-depth examination of the declaration of wilayah in Sri Lanka reveals that Wilayah As Seylani was not declared by IS central or IS Sri Lanka, but instead announced by the Sri Lankan government based on a false claim by a captured terrorist leader. However, today, the term "Wilayah As Seylani" is used in government and other publications. See "MENAFN (2019).

To avenge its losses in Iraq and Syria, IS is now directing and inspiring attacks not only against countries, which were part of the anti-IS coalition. It is increasingly targeting Westerners and non-Muslims more generally. A particular target of IS and groups relating to it are now Christians in particular. With attacks against non-Muslims, Westerners and Christians all over, the IS has enabled a first step in its fundamental transformation. The IS's restructuring strategy is aimed at transforming IS from a caliphate-building organisation to a global terrorist movement.

Exemplary for this new strategy of IS was the attack staged in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday in April 2019. The Islamist attackers targeted three churches and luxury hotels. Their suicide bombings killed 259 people, including 45 foreigners and injured about 700 more people. After a hiatus of five years, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi appeared in a video and claimed IS responsibility for the attack.<sup>8</sup> Exemplary was the Sri Lanka attack also for governments' preparedness, or better the lack thereof, for the IS's changed strategy. It is likely that unless governments reflect on the IS's strategy and disrupt its planned decentralisation, the threat posed by IS will grow globally. A lack in an appropriate response, which sets the boundaries for the spread and expansion of IS, even more might lead to further the escalation of violence.

While IS has become 'a shadow of itself' in its former strongholds, al Qaeda took advantage of the situation through the spread of its ideology, the creation of radicalising threat groups and augmentation of the number of followers worldwide. The strength of al Qaeda's core, which is led by Dr. Aymen al Zawahiri, only has a strength of less than 100 fighters based in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, al Zawahiri commands over 100,000 affiliate fighters in Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Al Qaeda expanded to Saudi Arabia (2003), Iraq (2004), Algeria (2006), and Yemen (2007), Somalia (2010), Syria (2012), and South Asia (2014) (Holbrook 2017). Today, the Afghan-Taliban remains as the strongest al Qaeda affiliate, which commands approximately 60,000 fighters (Congressional Research Service 2020:7-8). The Afghan-Taliban are currently holding out against the Afghan government, its coalition partners, and the 1,500 to 2,000 IS fighters located in Afghanistan.

The second largest al Qaeda affiliate and vanguard of the al Qaeda coalition, which commands over 10,000 fighters, is HTS in northern Syria (Soliev 2019). The HTS leader Abu Mohammad al-Julani broke away from IS, which was the forerunner of the militant group. In addition to receiv-

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8 Gettleman. New York Times, 23 April 2019.

ing support from other groups aligned to al Qaeda located in Asia, Africa and the Middle East, HTS trains other al Qaeda-affiliated groups in Iraq and Syria. On their return to their home countries, these trained, motivated and networked fighters are prepared to conduct violence. Driven by geopolitics, some anti-Assad Arab and other governments, however, continue to support the Idlib based al Qaeda aligned coalition. Like IS, al Qaeda and its affiliates pose a continuing threat to both the security of the Levant and beyond (Fitton-Brown 2020).

And al Qaeda expanded eastward, too. The al Qaeda affiliate Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) recruited at least 3,000 Uighurs, mostly from Xinjiang, China's claimed western front against terrorism (Soliev 2016). Also known as East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), the military wing of TIP trained in Pakistan-Afghanistan (Reed and Raschke 2010) and later in Iraq-Syria. The activities are, however, not limited to training alone, but these Uighur fighters are linked to both central Islamist networks. Many hundreds were killed or captured fighting alongside with al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, HTS and IS in Iraq and Syria. Uighurs travel to the Middle East transiting through Central Asia or Southeast Asia. Currently, the bulk of the Uighurs serve in the ranks of HTS. In China and overseas, motivated, skilled and networked Uighur fighters are able and willing to mount attacks.<sup>9</sup>

An extension of al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia – Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) – operates in Yemen but draws its strength from Saudis and Yemenis. With an estimated strength of 8,000 members and supporters,<sup>10</sup> it fights both the Iranian backed Houthis and IS.<sup>11</sup> AQAP mounted operations overseas including the Northwest Airlines Flight 253 in Detroit, Cargo planes bomb plot, and the notorious Charlie Hebdo shooting in Paris (Stanford University 2020). With its presence in Western states, AQAP's potential to attack increased. As such, AQAP presents a significant threat to the West.

Of the dozen al Qaeda affiliates, al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) is one of the smallest entities. The AQIS leadership is in Afghanistan, but operates in Pakistan, India, Myanmar and Bangladesh (The Soufan Center 2020). The group of about 300 fighters (Zulqurnian 2019) has recently suffered from setbacks. While both al Qaeda and IS attempted to exploit the situation in Myanmar, and shown their interest in

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9 Zulfiqar. BBC News, 18 February 2020.

10 Michael. AP News, 7 August 2018.

11 Raghavan. The Washington Post, 14 April 2019.

recruiting militants from Myanmar, their respective success was limited. Some claim that among others their ability to mobilise seems to be limited by the nationalist nature of the Rohingyas' interests involved in the conflict.<sup>12</sup>

Another branch of the militant group called al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is very strong in Libya, and to a lesser extent in the Sahel and West Africa. AQIM is engaged in active armed conflicts against the government and IS forces (The Cipher Brief 2019). Although the group has a presence in other countries in the Maghreb (North Africa), AQIM is expanding throughout Africa as a whole. Originating as the Armed Islamic Group in Algeria, AQIM's numerical strength is about 6,000 fighters and supporters.

Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) draws its strength from groups in Mali and West Africa. Also known as the al Qaeda in Mali, the 800-member group presents a sustained threat to government forces, including to the UN Peacekeepers present in the country.<sup>13</sup> The group has links to AQIM and other al Qaeda-aligned groups in Africa (Centre for Strategic and International Studies 2020).

Al Qaeda in the Sinai Peninsula (AQSP) consists of al Qaeda-aligned groups operating in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. Although the Egyptian authorities have been fighting the groups, the threat has also expanded to mainland Egypt. With a strength of a few hundred fighters and supporters, the group has built links with groups both in the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa (Ryan 2019). Their most recent attacks included the attack on the Israel-Egypt gas pipeline.<sup>14</sup>

Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen known as al Shabab wages a sustained insurgent and terrorist campaign in Somalia. In 2019, its deadliest attack included a hotel siege resulting in the death of 26 people<sup>15</sup> and the Mogadishu bombing, which claimed the lives of 85 people (Garowe Online 2019). Active in East Africa, the 8,000-member strong group pledged allegiance to al Qaeda already in 2012. A threat to Somalia's neighbours, the group maintains a support base in Kenya, and in addition mounts periodic attacks in Nairobi.

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12 Conversation between extremists in IS-affiliated Telegram groups. 14 October 2019.

13 Isilow. Anadolu Post, 27 January 2020.

14 Al-Monitor, 13 February 2020.

15 Al-Jazeera, 13 July 2019.



*Extreme Right Wing (XRW) as Response to the Global Islamist Threat*

Two decades of global terrorism by al Qaeda and IS have resulted in the emergence of the Extreme Right Wing (XRW). As a response to violent Islamism, its spread and continued terrorist campaigns, the Extreme Right Wing has built networks throughout Western countries. The threat posed by such XRW-groups, linking to white supremacists, grows with their ideology's rising appeal in the course of increasing spread and radicalisation of Islam in the West. The growing support for the XRW claims in Western societies, has incentivised some political parties to take over elements of the XRW narrative and demands. Breaking the taboo to reject the spread of Islam in the West, XRW and political parties have attracted growing support within the wider population and thus increasingly seek to capitalise on it.<sup>16</sup>

While the number and intensity of attacks are comparatively limited, there have been some essential attacks in the last year (2019). However, the attackers were not part of an organisation or elaborate networks, such as IS or al Qaeda. The most devastating attack staged by the XRW was in Christchurch (CHCH), New Zealand. A 28-year-old Australian, Brenton Tarrant, attacked the Al Noor Mosque and the Linwood Islamic Centre. In his attack on 15 March 2019, he killed 51 (Bailey 2019) and injured 49 others. A crucial feature, shared by other attackers, was that Tarrant livestreamed the first attack on Facebook.<sup>17</sup> The Christchurch assault galvanised individuals in other countries, even though they were not part of a specific organisation. Such individuals include a 19-year-old American, John Timothy Earnest. After dedicating the act to Brenton Tarrant, Earnest killed a woman and injured three, in an attack of the Chabad of Poway synagogue in Poway, California, on 27 April 2019.<sup>18</sup> Earnest attempted to livestream the shooting on Facebook but failed.

Although most of these attackers foreshadowed their intent on social media, both attackers had no known organisational links and had been very secretive before the attack. One of the earlier attacks today considered part of the XRW was the massacres carried out by the Norwegian Anders Breivik in July 2011. Soon after the CHCH attack followed the attack by a 27-year-old German, Stephan Balliet. He perpetrated the Halle synagogue shooting on 9 October 2019 and brought this *new* kind of extreme right

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16 Bonikowski. Washington Post, 2 December 2019.

17 Gunia. Time Magazine, 15 March 2019.

18 Spagat. USA Today, 19 September 2019.

violence to Germany as well.<sup>19</sup> After failing to enter the synagogue in Germany during the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur, he killed two people nearby and later injured two others. Balliet, too, attempted to and finally did stream his act online with video and audio from his action camera on his helmet.<sup>20</sup>

Particularly Muslim and Jewish communities became targets of these attacks. Based on the ideological background of the XRW spreading throughout the Western countries, it appears likely that these communities remain to be the central targets in near future. While considering themselves as defenders of the Western (white), Christian community against Islamism, their actions provide room for exploitation by the Islamist groups themselves. In the Islamist terrorist narrative, attacks by Westerners on the Muslim communities provide opportunities for Islamist groups to seek revenge against Western targets, creating a cycle of vengeance. With reciprocal radicalisation and counter-strikes, the cycle of attacks between XRW and Muslim groups is very likely to increase in 2020 (Yeo 2019). From these events, it seems, that governments should regulate the religious space.

### *Escalation in Iran?*

The conflict between the US and Iran has been ongoing, but the recent developments suggest a further violent escalation and thus the increase of violence. The United States' assassination of one of the central political figures in Iran, Major General Qassim Soleimani, in January 2020 has laid the ground for violent retaliation by diverse groups sponsored by the Iranian government.

On 2 January 2020, the US killed Soleimani in an airstrike at Baghdad International Airport in Iraq. The general had been the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) Quds Force – the military entity's overseas wing. Soleimani is considered to have been the mastermind of Iran's policy of fighting the US and Western presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, the two countries bordering Iran.<sup>21</sup>

The assassination was considered a pre-emptive strike as reflected in the Pentagon's statement that "General Soleimani was actively developing

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19 Oltermann. The Guardian, 9 October 2019.

20 Eddy. New York Times, 9 October 2019.

21 BBC News, 3 January 2020.

plans to attack American diplomats and service members in Iraq and throughout the region” adding that “General Soleimani and his Quds Force were responsible for the deaths of hundreds of American and coalition service members and the wounding of thousands more” (@WhiteHouse, 3 January 2020). The strike was authorised by US President Trump based on intelligence information, which claimed that IRGC planned to conduct operations against US targets in the Middle East. US President Trump tweeted that Soleimani was “directly and indirectly responsible for the death of millions of people” (@realDonaldTrump, 3 January 2020) and “should have been taken out many years ago!” (@realDonaldTrump, 3 January 2020). Soleimani is made responsible for providing both Iraqi and Afghan threat groups with advanced bomb-making equipment and training that made the US presence untenable in Iraq and Afghanistan, too. Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei wrote on Twitter “Martyr Soleimani is an international figure of resistance & all such people will seek revenge” (@khamenei\_ir, 3 January 2020). As Iran vowed to retaliate, the US State Department urged American citizens to leave Iraq. The revenge attacks seem however not limited to Iranian forces.<sup>22</sup> The Lebanese Hezbollah, Shia militia groups and Sunni threat groups sponsored by Iran are likely to retaliate against Western targets, especially US interests, too.

The assassination furthermore has implications for the confinement of the IS. The hostility towards Soleimani was not limited to the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia. The IS, too, had seen Soleimani as a threat. Soleimani had not only deployed the IRGC units to fight against IS, but had engaged in arming, training and financing tens of thousands of Shia militia, who would fight against and severely challenge the IS (Soufan 2018).

Even prior to the formation of IS, its predecessor groups were incessantly targeting Shia in Iraq. In response, Iran had deployed Lebanese Hezbollah, Qods Corps, Fatimion and Zeynabion Brigades to confront the threat of IS.<sup>23</sup> After IS moved from Iraq to Syria, the Assad regime was about to fall. General Soleimani had deployed over 100,000 militias into Syria to support the Assad regime. In addition to deploying the well-established Shia militia, General Soleimani trained local Shia militias to fight against IS. General Soleimani had organised these forces in Syria and then strengthened their presence in Iraq. He was since credited for defending

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22 Marquis. Reuters, 12 February 2020.

23 These Brigades were from the Shia of Parachinar in Pakistan and some Pakistanis who claim to defend the Zeynab Holy Shrine.

the Iraqi and Syrian regimes and the Shia communities in both Syria and Iraq during the conflict and is claimed to have created the ground forces to fight IS and thus to defended both communities and regimes to thwart the IS threat.<sup>24</sup> This breaking away of a strong figure in the opposition to the IS is likely to have significant impacts on the threat landscape, too.

### *Conclusion*

Overall, the paper has discussed how the outlined processes have led to an escalation of terrorist violence. Firstly, the concerted effort to defeat IS in Syria and Iraq led to two major trends, the re-emergence of al Qaeda and the global expansion of IS. Secondly, fears of Islamist terrorism have resulted in the rise of XRW movements as seen through the numerous mosque shootings. Finally, the US assassination of the Iraqi Major General Qassim Soleimani is expected to inspire more Iran-sponsored attacks against US interests in the Middle East.

This paper has outlined the current global terrorist threat landscape and identified trends which are likely to lead to an escalation of violence. This paper explored the potential surge in violence perpetrated by terrorists as a result of the dynamic political and strategic global context. Consequently, the paper argues for the following political measures. First, it points to the need to exercise force for countering terrorism proportionality. As was shown on the example of the IS-al Qaeda contention and the Islamist terrorists and those of the extreme right wing, and as is found in other cases, the excessive use of force is likely to intensify violent retaliation. Nationally, it is paramount for governments to partner community stakeholders to counter religious radicalisation and to promote psychological resilience through social cohesion (Echle et al. 2018).

Against the backdrop of a resurgent al Qaeda and an IS morphing from concentrating its forces at the Iraqi and Syrian battlefield into a transnational terrorist network, a global strategy to counter this is required. Unless the global terrorist threat is contained, isolated and eliminated, the tempo of exclusivism, extremism and terrorism is likely to increase in 2020. The cooperating world needs a new strategy to combat two deadly global movements and therewith to manage reciprocal radicalisation. While the rise of the XRW is a result of the many years of Islamist terrorism worldwide, XRW, IS and al Qaeda now mutually reinforcing each oth-

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24 Younes. Al-Jazeera, 6 January 2020.

er's mobilisation capacities. The resulting rifts in societies all over the world furthermore nurture radicalisation and the escalation into violence.

Given that IS, al Qaeda and several XRW outfits operate across borders, governments and partners need to cooperate, collaborate and build partnerships at multiple levels. As the threat is networked, the governments need to build common databases, exchange personnel, conduct joint training and operations, share experiences, expertise and resources, especially technology.

It cannot be stressed enough that governments need to overcome geopolitical interests and instead cooperate in the face of IS and al Qaeda posing a threat globally. To recall, the global command structures of al Qaeda and IS stretch from Africa to the Caucasus and from the Middle East to Asia. Both al Qaeda and IS have co-opted local groups and built capabilities to expand their influence. They continue to disseminate propaganda, raise funds and recruit. In addition to carrying out attacks in their home and neighbouring countries, they will also motivate individuals, cells and networks in Western states to carry out attacks. Although their local affiliates cooperate on occasions, the IS-al Qaeda leadership dispute compels them more to compete with each other. After the death of the incumbent leaders, however, the two ideological akin movements might work together, at least in some theatres. If there was a fusion or merger of the movements, the global threat to governments and societies would increase exponentially.

Governments should work together to address common security challenges. Instead, however, on 9 October 2019, Turkey launched Operation Peace Spring to secure its borders north of Syria and east of the Euphrates River. A sequel to Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch and Peace Spring, the aim thereby is to fight the Kurdish groups which played a pivotal role in the military defeat of IS. The US troops' withdrawal furthermore creates a vacuum, which is likely to be filled by power interested states, such as Turkey, Russia, Iran, and threat groups, IS as well as al Qaeda coalition partners, especially HTS, in the immediate-term. Herein itself lies the potential for violent escalation. If the geopolitical agendas of governments, such as Turkey, take a priority over the security concerns, opportunities for violence will arise, as IS will be enabled to reconstitute in the short- and re-emerge as a formidable threat in the mid-term. Unless governments work together to fight both a resurgent al Qaeda and a weakened IS, the threat will return with a greater vengeance.

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