

The post-caliphate *Salafi-jihadi* environment

143

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Introduction

In 2019, the global *Salafi-jihadi* architecture is very different from the one that emerged in September 2001, when transnational terrorism burst on to the international scene, or July 2014, when ISIL controlled more than 34,000 square miles in Syria and Iraq and thousands of young men and women were flocking to be part of its 'caliphate'.

Many of the leaders of the *Salafi-jihadi* movement are gone. Some, like Osama bin Laden and Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, have been killed, and many others have been captured or are in hiding. And yet, despite having no territory and having lost many of their leaders, both al-Qaeda and ISIL continue to pose a threat to the maintenance of international peace and security. In fact, one could argue that they pose more of a threat today, as the structure of the groups has moved from integrated to fragmented, making command and control more tenuous.



Soldiers against a sunset: iStockphoto/zabelin

In 2018, there were at least 66 *Salafi-Jihadi* groups around the world, the same number as in 2016 and three times as many as there were in 2001. The Center for Strategic and International Studies has pointed out that in 2018 there were at least 218,000 *Salafi-jihadis* and allied fighters around the world—a 270% increase.¹ These figures indicate that, despite 18 years of combat and the spending of trillions of dollars, we're nowhere near ending the jihadist threat, as the ideology continues to resonate with people.

This Strategic Insight reviews the post-caliphate *Salafi-jihadi* environment, focusing on two issues: the franchising strategy of al-Qaeda and Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the evolving threat of online messaging. I highlight a change in the threat posed by *Salafi-jihadis* to Australia; it's now less a 'top-down' threat than a 'bottom-up' one and emanates from homegrown individuals whose links with and understanding of Salafist-jihadism are minimal. Consequently, I offer three sets of recommendations for how Australia's official counterterrorism community should change its strategies.

The *Salafi-jihadi* architecture in 2019

The deaths of bin Laden, Anwar al-Awlaki, Abu Yahya al-Libi et al. created some optimism that without those leaders the jihadist group would fade from existence. However, al-Qaeda remains strong for several reasons. First, it continues to draw people into its fold (people who may be willing to commit acts of terrorism), as its ideology resonates with people. Second, under Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda retreated from the path of open violence against Western targets, opting instead to focus on building relations with entities and individuals around the world willing to buy into its ideology. As part of the strategy, al-Zawahiri sends key lieutenants to promote the al-Qaeda brand, while the core leadership focuses on the strategic goals of the group, which include investing in digital communication because al-Zawahiri has recognised the value of the digital revolution. The group uses social media and social platforms to communicate with its allies, members, supporters and sympathisers, who not only receive Salafi-jihadi literature (which includes such works as *The encyclopedia of jihad* and *The encyclopedia of hacking the Zionist and crusader websites* and its English-language online magazine, *Inspire*) but also training manuals, videos, recordings and video games. Al-Qaeda and its allies and supporters also engage in rudimentary cyberterrorist attacks that mainly involve defacing websites and spread rumours online, including by claiming responsibility for hacks such as the 2015 attack by the Tunisian Cyber Army on US Government agencies' websites.²

Al-Zawahiri's second innovation was not to demand absolute obedience and allegiance, but rather to allow groups and individuals to innovate. This development has led to a better relationship between local inhabitants (*ansar*) and foreign fighters (*muhajireen*), as there's a sense that the foreigners are there to advise and support, and not command. This is seen most clearly in Afghanistan, where there's been a tactical shift by the Taliban and al-Qaeda from focusing on US and NATO forces (which was very much the focus of al-Qaeda) to targeting Afghan security agencies and facilities (the preference of the Taliban). The goal is to create as much instability and insecurity as possible, so as to remind the locals that the Afghan state can't provide basic security. ISIL—Khorasan Province continues to attack Afghan targets, be they civilian or military.

An additional bonus for al-Qaeda is that, by giving Afghans and, increasingly, Uzbek and Uygur *Salafi-jihadis* freedom to develop their strategy and operations as long as they're working under the al-Qaeda ideology, local leaders are able to be widely recruited. The strategy also emphasises the connection between the local, the regional and the global. Of note is the important role played by ethnic Uygur *Salafi-jihadi* fighters in Syria. They're mainly located in Kobane, in Latakia Province, where they've inflicted heavy casualties on Assad's forces.³

A further example of the increasingly symbiotic relationship that's emerging between local and globalist *Salafi-jihadis* was the March 2019 audio message by Hasan Mahsum (Abu-Muhammad al-Turkestani), the founder of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement. The message, distributed through Telegram, included pictures of Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada (the current leader of the Taliban), Ayman al-Zawahiri, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and others. In his message, Mahsum called on all Muslims to support the Uygurs' cause. A month later, al-Qaeda followed the audio message with a statement released through its media arm, *as-Sahab*, expressing solidarity with the Uygurs, pledging to support the liberation of East Turkestan and raising awareness of the plight of the Uygurs.⁴

For ISIL, the situation in 2019 is more challenging. First, the group must explain why its caliphate didn't survive (al-Qaeda eschewed the idea of establishing a caliphate and it hasn't tried to impose sharia law in areas where it has influence and control, as it's in for the long game). In late April 2019, ISIL's media network, *al-Furqan*, released an 18-minute video of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. This was the first sighting of al-Baghdadi since 29 June 2014, when he appeared at Mosul's Great Mosque of al-Nuri. In the video, al-Baghdadi conceded that the caliphate is over, stating that 'The battle for Baghuz is over.' However he qualified the statement by claiming that ISIL will engage in a 'battle of attrition'. He also accepted a pledge of loyalty (*bayat*) from franchise groups in West Africa's Burkina Faso and Mali.

The video is a further indication that in the post-caliphate period ISIL is metamorphosing into a loose network composed of groups representing specific areas, such as ISIL—Sinai, ISIL—Libya, ISIL—Greater Sahara, ISIL—Southeast Asia, and so on. The underlying theme of al-Baghdadi's message was that this network doesn't need territory to continue in its campaign to restore the 7th-century caliphate and that it will inflict violence on 'the crusaders and their henchmen', which is why his reference to Sri Lanka was significant.⁵

The video has sparked a debate as to whether al-Baghdadi is relevant in the post-caliphate era, as there are serious questions about whether he commands much of an army and how many people follow him, as opposed to the ideas that ISIL represents. This may explain why he heaps lavish praise on foreign ISIL fighters, allowing him to remind his audience of the transnational nature of the group, and why he named and praised ISIL leaders from across the media, sharia and military departments of the group, including when referring to a raid that he led to avenge the loss of *wilayat al-Sham* (Levant Province).⁶

Second, ISIL must address internal dissension and divisions. It must resist the continued military campaign against its leaders and its fighters, as the 'Coalition against Daesh' is determined to destroy the group (because it can't destroy the group's ideology). As this military campaign is taking place, ISIL continues with its campaign of terror. It aims at sowing human insecurity, as it knows that people will cooperate and accept its remit if they know that not to do so would mean death. This is most common in the spaces where ISIL seems to grow, such as the Sahel, Nigeria, other parts of West Africa and the Sinai. In parts of northern Iraq liberated from ISIL, the group continues to terrorise villages, coming in the middle of the night or when the security services aren't around to execute chiefs or dissenters.⁷

In the near and long future, both groups will probably focus on franchisees, proxies and lone actors, as they're more likely to carry out the groups' agendas. We saw this in the Easter bombings in Sri Lanka, which were allegedly carried out by members of an obscure group called National Thowheeth Jama'ath, led by a Wahhabi-inspired Muslim preacher, Zaharan Hashim.⁸ In his April 2019 message, al-Baghdadi described the attacks as revenge for the loss of Baghuz. The role of franchises, proxies and lone actors is likely to become more important because leaders of al-Qaeda and ISIL recognise that they'll continue to face unrelenting pressure from the international community, which will look to capture them and their members, disrupt their communications and deny them sanctuary. However, the problem that al-Baghdadi and ISIL will face is that they'll have limited control over the franchisees, who may have agendas aimed at meeting their specific goals, as opposed to promoting that of ISIL.

Third, both al-Qaeda and ISIL will continue their online presence, as efforts to constrain it have so far been limited because of the nature of the technology. No one controls the world wide web and especially the 'dark web', so violent extremists can exploit multiple platforms and browsers, such as Telegram, Signal, Wickr and Thor, over which the security services have limited oversight, especially when groups such as Ansaru (The Vanguard for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa) or JNIM (the Group to Support Islam and Muslims) appear to control territory, allowing them to establish media outposts. Moreover, Salafi-jihadis are becoming more tech-savvy as they recognise the value of Pretty Good Privacy (PGP) software that allows for the encryption of messages and files, which can then be posted anywhere. Al-Qaeda's *Inspire*, for example, includes a public key, which means that any reader can create an encrypted message that only the publishers of the magazine can read.⁹

Fourth, both al-Qaeda and ISIL are likely to invest in and use technology aimed at causing disruption with little cost to their organisations. One suspects that they saw the turmoil that a suspected drone caused at Gatwick Airport in 2018 and may seek to capitalise on such methods in the future. ISIL has used drones in Mosul, and drones were also used in the battle for Marawi in the Philippines. Christopher Wray, the FBI Director, stated before the Senate Homeland Security Committee his view that drones 'will be used to facilitate an attack in the US against a vulnerable target, such as a mass gathering'.¹⁰

Untangling the franchising strategy

Al-Qaeda's and ISIL's franchising policy involves four configurations:

- the absorption of groups (the group becomes part of the franchise, thus losing its own identity)
- integration, whereby two or more groups merge to become one
- branching out, through which emerges a two-tier system in which the franchisor maintains control over the ideology and the shaping of the grand strategy, but the franchisee makes operational and even strategic decisions free from the control of the franchisor
- the fronting model, in which two independent groups reach an agreement to cooperate against a common enemy but maintain their independence when it comes to strategy, tactics and so on.¹¹

In the branching-out model, the franchisee may take action that the franchisor doesn't approve or support, but the franchisor has no capacity to stop the action. The classic example is Ayman al-Zawahiri chastising Abu Musab al-Zarqawi for his terror campaign against Sunni Iraqis. Another example could be the tensions that emerged between al-Baghdadi and the leader of Boko Haram, Abubakar Shekau. The Iraqi leader was unhappy with the way Shekau was carrying out the campaign in Nigeria and West Africa, which led to Shekau's ultimate removal as the emir. Nevertheless, one suspects that because ISIL and al-Qaeda are more interested in survival and the propagation of their brand they will tolerate certain actions by their franchisees.

The fronting model provides both parties with flexibility and limited liabilities when it comes to attribution but also financial support, as neither needs to provide such support to the other. This has largely been the case with al-Qaeda, as al-Zawahiri has sought to focus on spreading the ideology of the group and making connections, leading him to denounce ISIL's 'madness' and to claim that ISIL is 'exceeding the limits of extremism'.¹²

The franchising strategy allows local groups to either be absorbed by or become branches of the franchisors by assuming the name of the franchisor. For example, the Algerian-based Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat became Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, al-Tawhid wal-Jihad became Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula; Boko Haram became Islamic State in West Africa or Islamic State's West Africa Province. Through this process, the local group recognises the franchisor as its nominal head (there are obvious questions as to how much command and control the franchisor exercises over the franchisee). For al-Zawahiri, what's important is for the local actors to accept the general political and religious objectives of al-Qaeda, as opposed to him having control over the group, as he wants to dominate the franchisee's ideology and the methodology of jihad.

An important component of al-Qaeda's franchising strategy is its use of 'glocalism', in which a symbiotic relationship is developed between al-Qaeda's version of Islam and its goal of recreating the caliphate and local issues that are then elevated into being part of a global conflict.¹³ Included in this approach is a desire *not* to engage directly with the West¹⁴ but rather to create further instability in fragile states. A good example of this tactic is developments in Burkina Faso, which has seen a marked increase in extremist violence as *Salafi-jihadis* come into the country from Mali and Niger. The intention of the militants is to foster tensions between Christians and Muslims that feed off the incessant intercommunal division that's plagued the country for decades.¹⁵ We see similar actions taking place in Tunisia, Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Bangladesh and more recently in the southern Philippines, where there have been a series of bombings on Jolo Island.

The link between the glocalist agenda and recruitment is predicated on three factors:

- identifying a cocktail of motivational reasons, some personal and others societal
- a micro-level assessment, which effectively means organisation-led recruitment in which recruiters entice individuals to join (top-down recruitment), as opposed to individuals seeking a radical network to join (bottom-up recruitment)
- macro factors, which are the more generic economic, cultural and existential motivations of individuals for joining the group.¹⁶

An example of al-Qaeda's use of glocalism was al-Zawahiri's decision to send Abu-Mohammad al-Julani, a Syrian who had been involved in the Iraqi insurgency, back to Syria to set up Jabhat al-Nusra, the principal brief of which was to fight the apostate Nusayri (Alawite) regime. What al-Zawahiri was doing was recognising that there was a lot of hatred towards the Assad regime, which was painted by al-Qaeda as an apostate regime, and so it would be a fertile approach to portray fighting against it as a religious duty. Syria became exceptionally important for al-Qaeda's resurgence not only because it attracted between 10,000 and 20,000 foreign fighters to fight under its banner but also because it allowed al-Qaeda to use the conflict to train, socialise and test new tactics and weapons, including biological and chemical agents and drones, and control territory.

A second example of how al-Qaeda has exploited local issues and people's interest in conspiracies is the way it exploits evidence of abuses that the Chinese Government is committing against the Uygurs. Al-Qaeda's media wing, *as-Sahab*, has made claims of abuse ranging from preventing men from learning the Quran to prohibiting the observance of Ramadan to assertions that the government has carried out more than 30 nuclear weapons tests, leading to the deaths of more than 200,000 Uygurs.¹⁷ With this in mind, coupled with the known abuses that the government has committed against the minority Uygur population, it's unsurprising that between 5,000 and 20,000 Uygurs went to Syria to fight with either ISIL or al-Qaeda (they formed their own group, Katibat al-Ghuraba, or Katibat al Ghuraba al-Turkistan).¹⁸ One could argue that they had gone to Syria to learn how to fight and maybe they're hoping to use that experience once they're back in Xinjiang, which is why it is also useful to look at the development of Tajiki *Salafi-jihadism* (reportedly, between 1,300 and 2,000 Tajiks travelled to Syria and Iraq to join *Salafi-jihadi* groups), and the Tajik group Jamaat Ansarullah joined the ranks of Islamic State—Khorasan in 2017.¹⁹

ISIL's franchising strategy differs from al-Qaeda's in that ISIL was always about territorial control and a millenarian theology, as seen in the declaration in June 2014 of the establishment of the caliphate and the imposition of al-Baghdadi as the caliph. The implications were twofold: first, it meant that those who didn't offer fidelity were apostates who could legitimately be killed; second, it underlined the binary nature of ISIL, which divided the world between 'them' and 'us' or the 'enlightened' and the 'evildoers'. This fed into ISIL's millenary, eschatological and apocalyptic messaging. For those reasons, al-Baghdadi was able to present the conflict as one between the Sunni community in Syria and the Alawites.

ISIL described the Syrian conflict as a battle between good and evil, with the assumption that victory in Greater Syria (*Bilad al-Sham*) would aid in the resurrection of an Islamic Empire, like the ones that existed in bygone times (Damascus was the capital of the Umayyad caliphate from 661 until 750). The theological underpinning of the Islamic State of Iraq also permitted al-Baghdadi and other ISIL theologians to label minorities such as the Yazidis as spoils of war (*ghanima*) and supported the establishment of a massive criminal enterprise as ISIL confiscated property, smuggled oil, robbed banks and ransomed hostages, which fed its war chest and cemented support from locals and people from far away who travelled to join the group.²⁰

With the demise of the caliphate, ISIL's approach to attaining its goal is likely to be through widespread violence and chaos. It has built its brand on violence and the unfaltering demand of loyalty and disavowal (*al wala' wal bara'*), which in part stems from the group's more eschatological, millenary and apocalyptic identity.²¹ ISIL engages in total war, reminiscent of the Khmer Rouge, taking the view that to build an enlightened society one must destroy all that stands in the way, which is why, despite its retreat from the caliphate, ISIL continues to engage in a campaign of devastation, targeting civilians and military personnel as part of its insurgency.

Possibly because it's under so much pressure, debates are taking place within ISIL about the group's theology, tactics and goals. One debate relates to the third 'nullifier' of Islam, *takfirism* (excommunication), and will affect how widespread its use of violence will be. The division represents a split between the mainstream of ISIL and a more extremist, hardline, virulent wing that asserts that anyone who doesn't accept the ISIL remit is a *takfir* and should be killed (they argue that by not killing apostates one becomes an apostate).²² This view is supported by affiliates of ISIL such as Abubakar Shekau, the emir of Boko Haram, who want much more violence because they believe that such actions will lead state actors to use even more hard power and drive locals to support their groups, either because the locals have no choice (as otherwise they would die) or because they would hate the actions of the state. This scenario seems to be playing out in the Sinai, where the actions of the Egyptian military are alienating the locals, although it

doesn't appear at this stage that there's a mass movement to support ISIL. However, one could develop, as happened in northern Iraq, where many Sunnis who hated the Nuri al-Maliki government flocked to join Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which was to become Islamic State in Iraq.

The debate is also part of ISIL's soul-searching to explain the demise of the caliphate. Some argue that the loss was part of a 'divine test', as Abu Muhammad al-Adnani did before he was killed in 2016. Others, such as Abu Muhammad al-Husayni al-Hashimi, Abu Abd al-Malik al-Shami, and Abu al-Mundhir al-Harbi, have argued that the caliphate's demise was divine punishment (the faithful hadn't followed God's law, so God took away the caliphate). Interestingly, the focus of these scholars is on the excessive punishments that the caliphate meted out to the faithful. They argue that the leaders and the people sinned because they introduced a draconian system. Abu Mus'ab al-Sahrawi captured this sentiment when he claimed in a 2018 sermon delivered in eastern Syria that 'What has befallen us, ... what has broken our back, divided our authority, and empowered the enemies of God over us is oppression and extremism in religion.'²³

Over time, it's likely that ISIL will adopt the al-Qaeda strategy, as it will see that the slow-and-steady approach offers more potential for success (there's evidence that it's already doing so). The big question, however, will be whether ISIL will move away from expansive and indiscriminate violence (mass-casualty attacks) to more targeted attacks, which is also linked to the theological discussion within ISIL; some argue for the continued, unrelenting, indiscriminate use of violence against apostates, whereas others are seeking a more temperate approach. This is why the statement by Abu al-Hassan al-Muhajir, an ISIL spokesman, after the Christchurch massacre was significant. He didn't call on the faithful to carry out revenge attacks, opting instead to assert that the killing should inspire Muslims living in New Zealand to avenge the killings.²⁴ In other words, what Muhajir is arguing for is homegrown extremism.

It's worth noting that al-Qaeda has been more attuned to the concept of a long war, which is why its leaders adjust to new realities by, for example, being more strategic in its targeting and refusing to attack Western targets.²⁵

Where are they pursuing their franchising strategy?

Both al-Qaeda and ISIL are looking to areas where the rule of government is weak, fragile or non-existent and there's also widespread poverty, political oppression or other crises and deep local grievances that they can exploit. The focus on these types of regimes and the areas that they occupy isn't new, as it's evident that transnational terrorists have often exploited geographical, political, social and economic conditions prevailing in failed states for recruitment, planning, organising and fundraising.

And yet, it's also important to note that failed and weak states pose international terrorists several challenges. They may have no transport infrastructure, communication is likely to be hard, local actors are unlikely to accept the presence of foreign interlopers, and so on. This is why one has to discern between the different types of fragile and weak areas.

Nevertheless, al-Qaeda and ISIL link their *Salafi-jihadi* message to local grievances, provide financial rewards and promise to address corruption and the lack of basic security. This approach worked very well for the Somali Islamic Courts Union (ICU), which emerged in the mid-2000s because Somali businessmen were tired of the incessant fighting in Mogadishu; the ICU, which projected itself as being above clannism and committed to law and order, was able to bring some measure of peace to the capital and reduce the costs of doing business. Somalis supported the ICU because its judges were incorruptible, justice was meted out quickly, and judgments were enforced.

The online media strategy

The general *Salafi-jihadi* media strategy is trifurcated, as it seeks to inspire actions, communicate with the faithful, and win over new supporters, sympathisers and recruits. The messaging is targeted to appeal to specific groups within a community and shows a high level of understanding of strategic communication. ISIL makes its messaging more professional and the quality of its videos and magazines more appealing than those of al-Qaeda because it's more targeted and professional.

The messaging campaign has become more crucial in 2019 because both groups want to survive and recruit, and both recognise that states, especially Western states, have developed effective counter- and antiterrorism programs that are greatly limiting their ability to recruit new members, carry out attacks, or both. ISIL must navigate an environment in which it no longer controls territory, and that's been shown to have affected its media campaign—when the caliphate existed, each province had its own media office, staffed with camera operators and editors whose job was to produce and disseminate content.²⁶ Accordingly, the messaging emanating from ISIL and its affiliates and sympathisers is of a need to engage in terror operations aimed at undermining general security and sowing internal dissension. Included in the media strategy are calls for lone-actor activity, as seen in a January 2018 video called *Answer the call* and a series of short videos known as *Harvest of the soldiers* highlighting how many soldiers and vehicles ISIL fighters have killed or destroyed in Iraq and Syria.²⁷

ISIL operatives have shown an excellent understanding of social media and the checks and balances that have been adopted to counter their messaging. ISIL has a multiprong strategy in which its operatives set up many channels that repeat or mirror what official ISIL channels such as *A'maq* produce. This means that it's much harder to identify all the different channels used by the group to spread its messaging. One tactic used is to set up a channel that doesn't have an ISIL affiliation but merely disseminates content that ISIL approves. Once there's a substantial following, ISIL may add its logo or brand. At the same time, ISIL operatives have also designed a messaging channel that isn't meant to attract a large following, as they recognise that if the channel has more than 1,000 followers it's more likely to be shut down.²⁸ Concomitantly, ISIL is constantly testing existing and new platforms, such as Go Like, Baaz, Viber, Kik, Ask.fm and Discord to see whether they meet four criteria: security (specifically, encryption), stability, usability and audience reach.²⁹ Another method used by *Salafi-jihadis*, which isn't new but which is highly effective, is to use stolen SIM cards or foreign phone numbers to open social media accounts.

Recommendations

Quick wins

The threat to Australia's security from *Salafi-Jihadis* comes mainly through homegrown violent extremists who don't seem to have substantive connections to the global jihadist network (many don't even seem to understand the theology, confusing and conflating al-Qaeda's ideas with those of ISIL, as they rely on propogandists from both groups). It's therefore imperative that we reconsider our conceptual frameworks, and specifically the way we assess and monitor interventions that seem tailored to address either teenagers or adults, by revisiting the 2015 Counterterrorism Strategy. In other words, we need a more up-to-date counterterrorism strategy. Additionally, we need to move away from the way we interpret research on the pull and push factors behind violent extremism, which seem grounded in addressing the pre-2017 situation.

Because of change in the *Salafi-jihadi* architecture and the fact that the threat is moving towards creating instability in fragile and weak states, we need to re-evaluate our foreign aid and reconstruction budget (which is currently very low). If we're serious about preventing another Islamic State, we need to engage with the countries of the Sahel, Central Asia and South Asia, but also take more measures in Mindanao, specifically by providing development aid to secure critical infrastructure but also training for better governance, primarily in law and order (security sector reform), as those seem to be two areas where *Salafi-jihadis* get a lot of traction because their methods of law and order are less corrupt and more efficient than those of the state.

There's also a need for Australian policymakers to reassess the domestic counterterrorism architecture that has evolved since 2013, as much of the legislative agenda focuses on preventing individuals from travelling to Iraq and Syria. The demise of the caliphate and the fact that al-Qaeda no longer uses training camps in the traditional sense mean that many measures, such as the declared area offence adopted to prevent travel, need to be revisited. This would achieve two things:

- It would underline that the Australian Government is cognisant of the changing *Salafi-jihadi* architecture and is willing to remove measures that are no longer necessary.
- As the international community intends to engage in the reconstruction of the areas once controlled by Islamic State, removing the declared area offence will remove the stigma associated with those areas and permit individuals, independently of the state, to support the rebuilding efforts.

The federal government should also undertake an in-depth review, beyond the one carried out by the Independent National Security Legislation Monitor, of the terrorist-related citizenship-loss provision in the *Australian Citizenship Act 2007*. There's a need for a comparative inquiry by area specialists, legal scholars and community activists, which is likely to question the idea that citizenship revocation acts as a deterrent to those who wish to travel to join violent extremist groups, as there's no evidence that such measures work.³⁰ Also, there's already evidence that not allowing nationals to return to their countries of origin means that violent extremists will travel to weak or fragile countries from which they can and do continue to propagate their hate-based ideology. By allowing individuals to return, Australia can help in their rehabilitation and encourage their disengagement from violent extremism.

The hard yards

Since 9/11, more than 55 Australians have been convicted of terrorism-related offences. It's evident that over the past few years most of those attracted to *Salafi-jihadi* ideas were in either their teens or early 20s and often lacked proper education. More effort must go into assessing what makes this group susceptible to the ideas of violent extremists and identifying the pull and push factors that draw them into the *Salafi-jihadi* fold, especially as it seems that most have been self-radicalised. Such an approach calls for an appreciation of the 'why' and the 'how'; there's a tendency to focus only on the 'why'.

At the same time, state authorities should be willing to work with those convicted of terrorism-related offences to help dissuade others from falling prey to violent extremism and to present a counternarrative of why violent extremism doesn't work. We should encourage and support former militants to go to schools and community centres where they can interact with youth about what it was like living under Islamic State rule, what it's like to be in prison, and so on. Officials should be encouraged to read work by Amy Thornton of the Department of Crime and Security Science at University College London and others, who note that, when looking at countering and preventing violent extremism, 'We need to replace fantasy with reality ... Formers play a very important role. Only they can credibly say: Syria isn't a video game, you may end up cleaning toilets, babysitting on the front line; it's not what you're being promised.'³¹

Breaking the rules

The fact that the threat that this movement poses in Australia is more bottom-up than top-down requires a reassessment of the role played by the federal, state and territory authorities. More effort and resources need to be directed to the local and state levels, specifically to schools and community centres, so that those who have direct links to potential recruits know the signs that someone is becoming attracted to antisocial movements.³² In other words, the campaign to prevent and counter violent extremism, which should be tailored as a public health initiative as opposed to a security one, needs to be reoriented so that it's led at the local and not the national level, and with health and educational professionals taking the lead. In making this pivot, we need to distinguish between macro- and micro-threats: the Australian Government should lead in assessing and engaging with macro-threats, whereas local authorities and the states and territories should run assessments of micro-threats and programs to deal with them.

Conclusion

Al-Qaeda and ISIL are evolving; their expansion is based on a franchising, glocalist strategy aimed at exploiting areas where conflict and human insecurity are rife. Central to their success is that their ideology continues to appeal to a small cadre who believe that the way to bring about change is through terrorism. This underlines the fact that terrorism is a symptom and a by-product that exploits the disillusioned, the aggrieved and the marginalised.

If we're to root out the scourge of extremism, the international community must develop a coherent international strategy to address the ideology of extremism, and not just focus on defeating jihadist groups militarily, which seems to be what the US under Donald Trump is doing. There must be investment in infrastructure projects in places such as Iraq, Syria, the Sahel, the southern Philippines and more because, without it, *Salafi-jihadis* will aim to exploit the social, economic and political conditions in those areas to promote their brand.

Notes

- 1 The number of *Salafi-jihadi* groups and fighters comes from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Transnational Threats Project's Salafi-jihadist dataset, [online](#); Seth G Jones, 'America's counterterrorism gamble', *CSIS Briefs*, July 2018, [online](#).
- 2 Lyda Tesauro, 'The role Al Qaeda plays in cyberterrorism', *Long War Journal*, 13 August 2019, [online](#).
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- 4 Uran Botobekov, 'Central Asian jihadi groups join Taliban's 'Al-Fath Jihadi Operations'—Analysis', *Modern Diplomacy*, 18 May 2019, [online](#); Animesh Roul, 'Al-Qaeda and Islamic State reinvigorating East Turkistan jihad', *Terrorism Monitor*, 2019, 17(10), [online](#).
- 5 Jon Gambrell, Zeina Karam, 'IS leader outlines path forward for his group post-caliphate', Reuters, 2 May 2019, [online](#); Colin P Clark, 'Islamic State's latest video could have long and terrifying consequences', *Los Angeles Times*, 6 May 2019, [online](#).
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Acronyms and abbreviations

ICU	Islamic Courts Union (Somalia)
ISIL	Islamic State in Syria and the Levant
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization

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The post-caliphate *Salafi-jihadi* environment